

## **If it isn't here, then it's probably over there**

By Michael Morshed

The overhead explosions didn't stop until the sky cooked eerily silent. I couldn't move. Eyes tightly shut, I was in wonder of my lungs still breathing, my heart still beating, my mind still thinking, and found it only could mean I still was alive. My eyes held down on their lids with all their might, for they wanted no part in figuring what had just happened, and preferred the stillness of the dark to anything that may be out there. It took some serious coaxing and minor prying, but they were duped to open.

Still darkness. The walls had fallen in different sized chunks. Big and small, collapsed down on top of me. It didn't take much to get myself up. In one motion, I stood to my feet. The walls were alarmingly light. Thin light walls. Never had I felt so vulnerable. That's what I had blocking the outside? Irony came like a hammer on a nail, me the nail, the hammer hitting hard. In the wake of the blow my head hurt, and the floor below me began to crumble. Cracks splintered out in lightning bolts, my feet on their center. The floor didn't hold long, it caved in the middle, and from the second story I fell. I hardly felt worried. A plunge to my death and merely add me to the thousands of casualties that just yesterday walked the street, whom last hour were timely enough to snap a picture of themselves, and only two seconds prior to have met that somebody. It was me too. But as it would turn out, my invincibility grew. I landed head up, feet down on the living room couch. The second floor's contents emptied down all around me. The doubloons of gold, I'd prior been counting, knocked out of their chest, my bed turned over. A bit worried in my luck, my mouth stretched to the side, eyebrows rising as I looked up. No second floor, no roof. I saw grey sky on a sunny day. The white dust blew off from my hair in a wind, and a hard swallow went down.

Dark sunglasses lay on the floor unharmed next to my chair. A painting of a path through the forest, its trees marked with autumn's leaf changes, had snapped in half through its center. Poor Fred was dead. Frank's album shattered next to him. Fallen walls jumbled on the floor at all different angles. They jetted out, built up on each other in some areas, and transformed the once hospitable living room into a jagged maze. I put the sunglasses on.

The walls of the first floor still stood, though now topless. The bay window shattered, but its outline still traced around the missing glass. Stepping over the painting, I came to the window's ledge and sat down on it facing the inside. I knocked out a cigarette from its pack and gently crossed my legs. The smoke smoothed in swirls. The cigarette flicked in the right hand, and the fingers of my left moved the sunglasses up and down, wiping underneath my eyes.

Thoughts of all sorts came to me. Confusion, a trail of trouble leading down to anger, curses, those white suits with red ties, farm trucks and silos, my mom, taking pictures of trees in a field, friends, and their friends too. Everything stirred in sequence through my head, mixed into a single montage until the cigarette was done, and then they were gone too. A laugh of reconciliation or perhaps helplessness came. Dropping the

cigarette on the floor's mess, the filter smoked, and I stood up for the door. It was still hung in place. The screen was broken, though it always had been.

Nothing stood from the old woman's house across the street. It looked now just like mine. I paused in thought of Mrs. Martin. A wind hurled down Nelson Street, and brought with it sirens that rang somewhere else. I walked the short staircase to the tiny lawn, crossed the battered road, and up to what was left of her house. A previously dead tree still was there, justified in its spite against the bombs. It was maybe six feet high, and its yellowish bark twisted the trunk, only one branch grew off it, and thin twigs joined around here and there at the top of the pathetic thing.

I felt no intrusion. Unannounced, I stepped right into the house. The second floor there too was on top of the first, the plaster, the shingles, and the wood siding covering that. I kicked it all around. Not much in search of anything, but still curious. Mrs. Martin was always out peeking into our windows, but I'd never looked through hers.

Inside it smelt old, baldness was loose, contagious, and staleness was sneaking around behind me in wait of its chance. With nothing much to look at, I got bored and put my hands on my hips. Should have guessed it. I was set to leave and had one foot out the rubble when I spotted in the room's corner, safe from all which had fallen, an upright sitting typewriter. Its typers polished, and ready to be clunked. Papers scattered alongside. I stopped as it appeared to me. Scratched my neck and puckered my lips.

*"To the general,"*

I saluted. Hand from the brow.

Typing these words seated on the couch, I was quickly with nothing left to say. I mulled on a cigarette while rubbing my head for a bit, but still nothing came. I shook my fist at that sly-cat staleness. A black bird landed on the branch of that ugly, still-standing tree, and looked around just as all birds will do. I had no idea what it was looking for, but found myself staring over there too. It sung a bit and flew away. I picked the typewriter up in one hand and hopped a fallen wall. A skip to my hop, and headed out.

I was in Dover, NH. Zip code 03820. A small to nothing town. Couldn't be a problem to anyone, and it was gone now. I can't say I lived there because I don't really know what living is. I breathed there, sat there, slept there, and ate there sometimes. That's a kind of living. My age is the same as everyone else born in that same year. And though I wouldn't claim to any knowledge of anything, I know I can see when I have my eyes open. And there ahead, shortly off Nelson Street, it was clear as day to me, another survivor.

A tiny dog raging against an iron fence barked incessantly. The fence stood unharmed and kept the blowing ashes circling inside. The dog wore a pink sweater and a bow-tie in its hair to match, its button for a nose was all that could stick in-between the fence posts. My ankles quivered. The dog's ferocity grew as I came closer, his teeth began to show, and I wondered what dog could be more loyal to the ashes behind him. I stopped there, sat down on the concrete sidewalk, my new typewriter in front of me, and began to type.

*Hi,  
you don't know me,  
but  
I'm us.  
Those who are still good carin',  
still alive and free breathin', lookin' thru windows, and used to the darkness.  
Laughing at Seinfeld,  
George Costanza especially.*

*I have troubled intentions on speaking for anyone though,  
so I can barely say these words for myself.  
But I'd be happy to whisper into the ear for just a little while of any other  
wretched whose soul seems distant and wonderin'.  
Lookin' up to clouds, starin' into candles, or peekin' over fences.  
Diamond skies are pleasing and black strung out branches too.  
A horizon of colors rarely seen.  
Chipmunks crossing streets up to their own business living in a world we don't.  
Bubbling water out sump pumps startles from an underground stream,  
and its against these types of things that we so often have to lean.*

*I wear silly pants to bed and sometimes during the day.  
Mix-matched colors,  
let my toes breathe in sandals.  
Sunglasses shade my sun,  
and I let my face grow out as long as it will.  
Everything's for me, but  
I know there's more than just one me out there.*

*Pace  
back and forth across floor boards,  
and dig a hole next thing I've known  
I'm six feet deep gasping,  
Left to throw a line out, hopin' it hits something,  
and try to pull myself back up again.  
Look in a mirror and find me.*

I sat back from the typewriter. Stood up, lit a cigarette, and looked down the street. The dog had stopped barking and now scratched at its bow-tie with a paw. As I gathered the paper stack, he stared straight ahead, his ears not rising and for me, he had hardly any regard.

I decided to walk and try to find somebody. Dogs are nice, but their breath gets foul. Their loyalty first rate, but their conversation lacking, and clearly his word had already been sworn to someone else. So I left with the hope of trying to find a fresh

breath, one that could give me some news, maybe stood on two feet, maybe didn't have feet anymore, but someone who could at least help me begin putting some pieces back together. There had to be someone else, somewhere in the middle of all this, feeling like I did. Down the sidewalk, once lined by gardens, hung now brittle singes of flower. I noticed things out the corner of my eye, and a petal of mine fell too. Man was I blue.

Death hung everywhere, and snarled its gritted-tooth-grin as I passed it. It smoldered under piles of brick and wood, bent out like copper pipe snorkels, legs stuck from rubble at twisted angles, and history came to me in motion, unstuck from the picture, and whispered much closer than any long since inked word. Life was beaten out, thrown and blown as if it never held any weight at all. It was sad and felt like somebody poking me right in the stomach wherever I went. A tear fell out, but that was all that was coming. Living is so carefully cherished and rubbed so lovingly, but one can't be so stubborn as to fear what inevitably will be. It's an allotted time to await resolution, and I'd recommend it in a half-serious stumble. If you believe the next life holds an eternal heaven where you lay back, hung in a hammock to your sun, then what is it you fear? And for the others, our restless soul will finally be relieved as it turns its head around the corner to check out the other side. Either way, it comes. It was silly to think I was the first me. The first to be shook off the horse. I felt arrogant to think of this as unprecedented, and such a massive display of death to be novel. But what for that thought? Who cares about perspective? How could I be blamed for feeling so unique? Maybe I'd worry about my place later – the moment was far too filled with smells and sights, making it all too real. I'd only sit strung-out in awe and celebrate life.

I turned a corner, and ahead saw a young man with black mats through his hair busily scraping along the ground. The excitement of seeing distantly familiar human movements was more than I can convey. He was in the parking lot of an optometrist office. Half of the brick building still stood. The side adjacent to the parking lot had been hit, and the office tapered up now like stadium seating. To the man, I hurried and though still being a good distance away, could observe him to be completely entrenched in whatever it was that he was doing. Ten foot sprints, side to side he ran, stopping only to bend down, stand back up, and then scrape the ground again.

As I came closer, notes in white chalk began to appear on the black tar. I looked ahead and found the patch of open pavement to now resemble more a chalkboard than a place to park your car. Sketches of triangles and circles had arrows pointing towards math equations, logic symbols, and exclamation points. Treatises were laid down, points numbered, and transcendental deductions voiced between the cracks while prior certainties fell through them. The young philosopher's white t-shirt was a size too small, his belly protruded as he squatted with his hand rummaging through his beard, and just as I approached him, he popped up in an awakening. He started walking backwards, crouched close to the ground, reading over his work, he turned around and quickly wrote forwards again.

"That's it! It's perfect. Nothing external can ever exist! Oh, how utterly strange. Fools and their perceptions. No idea of truth!"

"What are you doing there?"

He looked up at me un-startled. His eye-whites bulged, and moved from my typewriter back up to me.

“Yes! Come here, look at this,” he lit up. I nearly came off my feet as he pulled me by the elbow.

“What’s up man?” slid out of me in surprise.

“I gotta show you this! A perfect chance that someone would be coming by. I must have that down here somewhere. But anyways, look here. Look what I have done. Systematically, through provisions of many a proof, of which I owe to knowledgeable, yet naively feeble predecessors, I have proved that all is not as it seems my friend. No, no. No longer can It be.”

“No longer can what be?”

“It!”

“It?”

“It!”

“Oh, It?”

“Yes! See, look here.”

He pointed to his symbols, stuffing me between the double crossed lines, and wedging my nose into triangles’ angles. Underlined arrows pointed the cindering office out to be the exact location of the convergence of all parallel universes. He dug into deep explanation, and I pushed my glasses down my nose.

“So it’s all about the nonads, monads, and in some cases a banana or two. That’s all that can be real?”

He responded with a nod of his head.

“Bananas, huh?” I asked.

“Hmmm, yes, bananas.”

“Do you think deer understand why we shoot them?” I quickly asked him.

“No, I don’t,” he came back just as fast.

“Yeah. Me either.”

*History would spook a deer if it knew what it was.  
It’s studied as no end, but only as the means to it.  
Continuing in a spiraling circle,  
always around and up and down.  
Great places fall, while the unsuspected rise  
to wear worn clothes.  
This is nothing new, it just is.  
I hope so sincerely that we haven’t reached our peak  
that this is all shortsighted  
and all just a blip.  
Someone’s wink,  
that’s a fine theory.  
Though looking around, it’s hard to believe.*

*But say it's not, say we got a bunch left,  
I fear us people, us who have trouble caring anything for you anymore, us who relate  
more to our equivalent across the way,  
will have trouble seeing our brothers,  
through the smoke,  
on the other side.  
Don't shine that thing in my face man  
We're just worried you're gonna get us all killed, and we don't know what for.  
We can barely stick our nose in before you slam the door on us and send a lowly  
messenger to lecture on trust, respect, and what it means to be a real patriotic. Well I  
don't think you care what it means to be a real patriotic either, and trust and respect are  
earned where I come from, they're not to be flaunted and used for trump cards.*

*Though as birds at a fallen feeder  
Our lives will continue despite you.  
The seed on the ground we will still need to gather.  
Though it may no longer be held in a nicely controlled little container, it'll still be found.  
Fly back to our trees we will.  
And think of more important things.  
After all it's March,  
And I can't decide which 12 seed will upset a 5<sup>th</sup>.*

I left the first human survivor I saw as quickly I found him. I asked him if he'd seen anyone else alive, and he told me it's all in my head anyways, and if I want to see a hundred people still alive simply close my eyes and do it.

"You might as well," he told me.

"Right," I nodded.

It didn't take long to find somebody else. A guy I'd known for awhile frantically sifted through his rubble just down the street. He was picking up things, blowing off the dust and investigating, throwing what he found into one of two piles. I reached him at the end of my banana and threw the peel over my shoulder.

"Hey Larry, good to see you're Ok. You have no idea what I just found out."

"Hey, can't talk. I'm busy," he said to me.

"Oh."

"This world is over. It's gonna rain down. It is, I can tell. All the signs are there, the corruption, the rise of evil in the world, fighting in the Middle East, the impossible packaging around CD covers, the tune of the roosters in the morning! It's all there staring us right in the face! I'm seeing it, dude. I'm getting ready for the next world, and you should too."

"The impossible what? Well, how are you getting ready for it?"

"I'm starting by burning this here pile."

I nodded and turned to the aforementioned pile. I shuffled through it, picked out a few of the CDs, a toenail clipper that'd been around, apparently nails don't grow in other worlds. A top hat wearing song-and-dance man's book entitled Spare Thoughts was another I saved from the fire. And finally, a sheriff's badge, I'd always wanted one. It sat shining on the glances of the pile. This I helped myself to, and decided it'd be later that a cutout of my face with a fake handlebar moustache would be glued to it.

"Hey, are you gonna be needing your motorcycle?" I asked pinning my shirt.

"Yeah, take it! That could never make it through anyways. Be careful though, you know what's coming. It's gonna rain, it's gonna pour, that old man he's-"

The engine started loud, I tried to yell good luck and point him to where I thought the nearest umbrella might be, but I don't think he heard me.

I rode off down street and into the wind on his old bike, my typewriter attached to the back, and a badge on me.

Two streets down the road, a block of smoke kicked out, and the bike eased to a gradual stop. I put my feet down and looked back. A flame rose up, and Larry sat cross-legged with his things for the next world laid out neatly around him. The bike fell, and I didn't stay around to look much before heading further down the road.

Basement's tops were blown off, and they now dug in like subterranean, uncovered, porches. Places you could jump down into. One such basement kept a kitchen, and it'd been turned into the open air as a hangout for any straggler to gather in. I was walking by and happened to almost fall in. Thin chairs and flimsy wood tables had been set up, and those who sat enjoyed a drink served by a most friendly homeowner. She told me to sit anywhere and I thanked her for being such a kind heart. She asked me my order.

"What exactly is in your tuna sandwich? Is it just tuna, or does it have some other stuff in it too?"

"No tuna today, sorry but the fish don't seem to want to be swimming. We found a message they left on the tank's glass last week detailing a list of provisions, demands, and grievances they've had with us. Currently, we're doing our best to provide for them, it's tough in these conditions, you'll understand, but until then, no tuna, sir."

"How terrible," I said. "Just have a coffee then, I guess."

"Sure, we got that. I should warn you though, the beans are dry, think we got them out of Alaska or something. Global warming. I can make it sizzling hot."

I said, "That'll be fine," and took a seat in the corner, threw my typewriter onto the table, and looked to the open sky.

*I'm sick of this type of livin.*

*Livin' isn't even the right word. That's not really allowed.*

*We exist somewhere in-between the world made and the one alive.*

*It's often hard to tell exactly where one starts and the other ends, but we daily just have to make decisions like that.*

*I see my TV on delay,  
My messages blocked,  
News twisted, turned, and bent any which way.  
I get angry and take exception to that.  
It's insulting down to what's the most human of me.  
You're not given the right to do that.  
You can't hold back the tuna.  
I deserve to see whatever is out there.  
If I want to fly out to Baghdad today to lounge in some desert sand,  
wear me a turban and try to get a look up a woman's chador  
then I should be able to do that.  
What makes you think I can't handle such things? You don't know me just as much as  
I don't know you.  
You're someone far away, and I'm even farther.  
We were given ears to hear what's been said, and eyes to see it.  
I was given them to work for me,  
and you don't have anything to do with that*

*Let us be humans,  
Let us talk and see one another.  
We are all blessed with something and I wanna know what he's got.*

I became unsettled in reflections on the mirror. Someone was pointing at me, saying something about the cigarette to the house owner, complaining that my coffee was more sizzling than theirs was. One of the tunas waded in its tank with a crook-eyed look at me. I threw the typewriter up to the sidewalk first, and then pulled myself to the street. A girl came to in the distance, slow walking with her hair tied back, heading right towards me. Her pale olive skin had a scar on the nose, and I could swear I'd seen her on a TV show before. I switched the typewriter into my right hand, threw down the cigarette, and looked to the sun. Shifted my sunglasses straight. I felt cool, and figured she'd like me too.

I said hello, and she stared at me eye to eye. Looking straight through me maybe, it was hard to tell when she picked up the cigarette and blew out the smoke.

"American Spirit. It's organic. I heard they give you cancer still," I paused and turned away. "This is really the only type a spirit I got though."

Forthright and right to her face, she pulled mine, and kissed me tongue in full.

"Sin upon my lips? Oh trespass sweetly urged. *But. Shit. Never* give me my sin again!" She recited the lines, pushed my face away, and left on down the road.

I picked up the cigarette, a laugh blowing out with the smoke, and I left too.

In 1828, Dover was home to the first ever strike in America by women workers of the cotton mills. Unhappy with the new stringent rules laid down, forbidding any talk during work, charging fines for showing up late, and mandating church attendance, eight

hundred women walked out of Dover Cotton Factory. To celebrate the freedom their country had written them, they paraded these same city streets with banners and flags. They beat martial music, and set off gunpowder barrels. All very manly like. When the mill's advertisement for employment opportunities got answered by the jobless masses, wages were dropped even further, and most of those who'd struck were fired and blacklisted too. The women left out in the cold, and the smoke still puffing out the mill chimney. Trampled on by everyone. And all neatly divided by a diamond encrusted blade, used next to notch once more into the fat man's belt. I'd read that once, and it somehow squeezed its way through an ear and to the forefront of my mind.

Alone and around nobody to pretend to, I felt my knees giving in, and from my very depths a wave building. Left with really no choice in the matter, I spit up and fell down. The typewriter landed in somebody's lawn. My tears wrote words I never could. They tore holes in-between dictionary entries. Gaps that words don't close, and for their fill only could one attempt to glue in the actual moment. I felt myself breaking apart, cracking at the backbone, and shattered by the weight of keeping my head up. These sorts of thoughts needed to be put away. Aside, and let room-in for sanity to take its place. There's nothing wrong with a little sanity every now and then. Those thoughts had stopped doing anything for me anyways, turned bubbling toxic, and seeped into where I keep my other things. I sat back up and waited to dry out. The sunglasses were somewhere in the fried grass, but I wasn't ready for them yet. I purposefully disconnected my eyes and stared a foot in front of me. I wasn't with the world anymore, and it felt good. Any kind of thought could come. Shakespeare in a puffy collar rambling to himself on the fringes, but still with an eye on everybody, ends of a dirt road and the starts of creeks, light blonde hairs rising in the wind down a woman's curve. Oh, so far falling. Things like this brought my mind back in from the cold woods, to a chair and fire, and away from all that scary stuff.

Belknap Street looks exactly like Atkinson. Its slope ends, and Atkinson's does too a block away. People pass out fliers in advertisement of God living between the two streets, but it's all a catch, and there's just a church there. Its sign marking the denomination was gone, and having never cared to look at it before, I couldn't tell you what it was. Churches were propped up everywhere in Dover, and staked into the ground with a steeple. At this point, the denomination didn't matter anyways, all were welcome, and a few were there. The priest was somewhere gathering up broken relics, but nobody seemed to give him much thought anyways. The patrons had pushed aside a pew, and they sat together in a circle. No church walls remained, and the stained window's glass was scattered throughout the town in the clutches of smoke. It got sucked-in with inhales of those still around to breathe it. A man no more than twenty-two in hair style, sat in the circle on a plain wooden chair. Calmly, he sung of orphans standing around firing off guns. He smiled with nods to everyone around him. His hair stood too high, wide, and up like a single ridiculous wave. In a solace tobacco trance, others on occasion smiled too. I sat with them for awhile, and all caught up in the rush of feeling like a corpse who'd just climbed out of its coffin, I sung one too.

“Hey, that’s a good song man,” the wave of hair said to me. He knew I had stolen it from him, but I didn’t care if he knew. He was a famous electric violinist, and I’d been stealing from him for years.

*There are these groups of people just so caught up in deceiving.  
Groups on all sides.  
Deceptions run prevalent, my friend, you know that.  
They’re everywhere, and those same people keep  
fanning at its flame.  
I feel the need to walk carefully, out with an eye watchin’ from my shoulder for  
any signs of a backstabbing fire.*

*Big suited men mow down deserts with sand and bodies kicking up behind them.  
Masked men behead the blindfolded.  
Satellite guided killers are ordered down onto whoever may be there.  
Sent to kill based on what some person thinks another person thinks.  
Everything built up on everyone’s own terms. Not willing to look beyond his own  
mind for even a second. These are the ones who don’t really care about life.  
About freedom.  
A world seemed gone crazy,  
and me and my friends left blank faced pondering,  
rubbing our necks, and nervously looking up.  
Stepped over, if not stepped on.*

*It comes down to just too much hate around.  
People willing to hurt anyone for whatever they need seems to be the way of the  
times. It’s the saddest thing there is to me.  
A society inflicted evil. Hate’s not a natural feeling. I believe infallibly our  
minds have no such notion to hate of which has not been implanted.  
Can they find no barrier keeping them from destroying as many people as they  
need to? They’ve hopped it. All for their own causes.  
Is there no life in somebody else?  
Whether you kill someone with a bomb, a gun, or just a silent subtle drone,  
it makes no difference.*

*Perhaps you should go settle this yourselves. Leave us out of it.  
I suggest in a far away ring.  
Take two ice cubes to have a melting race, a length of rope for lassoing, and  
perhaps a Sex and the City trivia board for the final round.  
Mr. General, we’re counting on you in that one.*

The sky had turned dark under forming clouds, and the outlook looked stormy. I thought of Larry and wondered if he’d found himself an umbrella yet. I put my glasses in

a pocket as the clouds had rumbled in and blocked the sunlight. I was to my heels again, and in need of a poncho. I ran down the hill on Locust Street. Towards the police station, the library, and some local bars. I ran fast, blew through the rain, the hill's slope pushed, and the drops splashed behind me. I jumped all those stuck cemented in themselves, over the trees that'd been uprooted, and the falling two-thousand-dollar hammers breaking up the bricks under my feet into cracked-out gaps. Buildings shook with after quakes, and drawers keeping in stashes raddled out of their slots and onto the ground to reveal secrets. A grand piano sat crumbled with its set of keys bumped off place. Black and white scattered in a jumble on the ground, the air became noticeably quiet, and I'd escaped the rain impossibly one more time.

At the white house, I stopped running, looked back at the wake and turned off the sidewalk. The air was terribly hot again, full of dust, and somebody screamed.

"You capitalist pigs! I round your Park Place, and leave only a hotel as your taxman to collect bills, souls, and, oh, your livelihood too. Don't you worry though, our accommodations are top of the line, there's an indoor pool, peanuts in the fridge," he couldn't help but laugh.

The Monopoly board was on a wood picnic table in the library's parking lot, and there wasn't a drop of water on it. Those playing used the thimble, the car, the wheelbarrow, and the cowboy atop his horse. The one who'd just bought Park Place was the cowboy, and he took a sip of his Nantucket Nectar while glancing around the table at the other competitors. His beard was just starting to come-in chunked, and the shoes he wore had slits going across them at the start of his toes, a sure indication of his favor for a bike ride. Under the table, he kept his knees twitching.

"Ahhh, the natural light my friends, let in the natural light and maybe then you'll see too."

The Chinese kid sat in a chair to the side of the picnic table, not playing the board game, his legs crossed as he reclined, hands wrapped around the back of his head. Thoughts for him were somewhere else, but he joined us once in awhile. His lip was pierced, and the spikes around his neck made it dangerous for him to try to remove his hat. "Death by fashion," he said. A chunky girl was bent over, silk screening shirts. She raised one up, yellow, a tree growing from its roots, and a green sun above. Her head was shaven, her glasses little rectangular slabs of careful glass that she squinted past. A purple tattooed squid wrapped tentacles around her elbow. She smiled to me bright, warm, and silly looking then went back to her shirt. I nodded my hello's to everyone and whispered something under the hat of the girl in pink. The shaved man with hair growing from his ears sipped his Russian tea while noting me on his cards. I tried to get some typing in as I sat with them, get some ink down on the page, but I couldn't get a word out. Everyone else was in deep conversation, and I got unwillingly sucked in. Even the Monopolizers joined now and then. We ventured to discover dark places, to discuss the uselessness of the eye, and if 'I' even existed. The chunky girl fixed her glasses, but then decided just to take them off. The shaved man had wheeled a chalkboard out in front of us, and before I could fully ponder how this random object could have been spared amongst such destruction, he threw an eraser against it.

"Go, Go! The dust is escaping! Calculate its fall!"

The girl in pink anxiously hung-on and noted every fleck of white dust she could, but still, she was unable to help herself to a few laughs of self-pity. Everyone got

distracted as a yell came from the Monopoly board came when the wheelbarrow tried to strong-arm the thimble into a property swap deal. Our attention left the dust, and I can only assume it still all fell. 'Deceiver!' we all shouted, with the exception of the silent-type, who through his long wise beard only went 'gruff'. They sent the wheelbarrow rolling directly to jail, not to pass Go, and not to collect any \$200 prize for survival and one more go around.

*I'm glad when I'm told I have no concept of money,  
happy to hear it, thank you very much.*

*Spending it on a whim, not thinking a thing about making it, or sometimes considering  
using it to clean off undesirably covered nose hairs, all seems like good sound judgment  
and proper usage to me.*

*I don't want any concept of money.*

*I want nothing to do with it for just as long as I can.*

*It's easy to see what's been set up, and everyone knows what money does,  
and how nice it is to pet it, whip it out on call, keep it clean,  
floss between Mr. Washington's wooden teeth.*

*It takes a mind that's outside for just a one half of a millionth of three 4ths a second  
to realize what we've done to money though, money's not alive to do things to us,  
and it's this I don't really want any part of. Everything turned to an investment. And if  
you're not worth the bill, or pulling its weight, you're cut off.*

*I realize people need things, like to be able to provide and give things  
and*

*things*

*things*

*things*

*it's hard to tiptoe around it when someone's always there bashing hammers at your feet  
for every last penny you got.*

*It's nothing profound, just so blatant  
in the true and for those willing,  
that things like money  
just lead us that much further away  
Right by the tips of our noses.*

I met up with this girl, she told me her name was Lindsey, but I got the feeling she wasn't telling the whole truth. I told her my name was Mark. I explained I'd recently graduated from the finest of schools with the right degree, and that once things turned around again, I was to be the richest fool there is in town. She dug it, and we hung together. A girl like Lindsey you had to take to the theatre, I knew that, so we walked pinkies hooked, and I kicked aside any debris for her along the way so she wouldn't ruin her lovely new shoes. Henry Law's amphitheatre half-shell was only a short distance

away, and its roof miraculously still stood to cover the actors of our time. A man wearing his own sheriff's badge and cowboy hat sat us urgently, and wished us eagerly to enjoy the show.

"And a fine night to you too, sir." I winked at him while shoving a dollar bill in his gun holster. He tipped us his hat just as the lights went out. Lindsey snuck one hand on my knee, and the other twisted my hair.

The show that took place was a most peculiar one. Its plot was impossible to follow, its scenes fragments, its characters hollowed out, one-dimensional images of themselves. A very crude play. It started with a military boat taking to sea from Hawaii and sailing towards Japan armed with water guns mounted to shoot down any flying things heading our way. Seemed plausible enough, but when a sea urchin brushed a hole into it, the long drawn out sink to the ocean's bottom became a little suspicious. Some people booed, some called for the sea urchin's head. Next came out Jesus and Judas in robes sitting alongside a highway curb, hatching the perfect scheme of treachery, treason, and theatrics to ensure future glory and a steady following. They broke into hysterical laughter, and Jesus playfully hit his traitor on the back. "Now that's a good one," Jesus said. They stood up, and their wooden sandals lit on fire as they exited the stage west. The actor playing Jesus made the last joke and Judas kissed his cheek before starting to giggle. Behind them, a blaze for generations to inherit burned. Interesting choice, brave director, he must keep a close eye on his neck. Mr. Bonds busted through the curtain next with a giant slugging arm wrapped around Mr. Chappelle. An actor positioned in the crowd, demanding to see more, pointed his high finger in the air saying he worked for the man, and he's here to make them both a grand. Lindsey had a tongue in my ear by then, so I missed what they said back, but everyone laughed. Just as I was rounding 2<sup>nd</sup>, the cowboy jumped back onto the stage. Putting a quick stop to the show, he scolded us all for living with such impurities and lack of any moral sense.

"Get outta here now!" He yelled. "And fill up your gas tank on the way out."

Lindsey and I split up. She found out my name wasn't Mark, that I wasn't going to be a banker, and that I really hadn't beat Shaq once in a free throw contest. No big deal. She wore a lot of make-up, and her arms were a little too hairy for my taste. We said our goodbyes through a blown out window, her still in the bed, and I climbed the ladder back to the street, lit a cigarette, wiped my forehead, and put sunglasses on for the long afternoon. One step back onto Central Avenue, and I swear no further, a man appeared in a sharp suit, the smell of his hair glue preceding his word.

"I can save yuhr life, come here, see these secrets."

"Save my life?"

"Yuus, sir, come here right this now, walk up, take a stand. Yuh look like yuh've been through a lot there lately, sonny," he said pointing straight at me the whole time.

"Yeah, I guess I have."

"Oh, and there's no bigger consoler than me. I know exactly what yuh're saying. Please admit me to sound angry, but I got a personal issue. I hate to be angry, terrible way to live yuh life, sonny, but I felt it first hand. My poor wife, fair girl, and loyal maid. She's been through so much, the poor soul. Now I got exactly what yuh need here," he shoved a book in my face. His red tie was not out of place, and his face was clean, his

spectacles without dust. “Now I love this book,” he said, “and I know yuh’d love it too. There is this pill. The red pill. Out today on the market, go to yuh local pharmacy and it’ll be there. We all saw the Super Bowl commercials. Real fancy, Ok, Ok. It claims to be the cure for every sort of sickness imaginable. Prostate cancer, brain tumors, upset stomachs, hair that grows too far out, too fast, fat person disease, even a cure for Carpal Tunnel Syndrome of the ear lobe! But what I’m telling yuh right now sonny, my good friend here, and I’m only telling yuh, I’m telling yuh this secret.” He leaned in closer to me real mechanical like, got a real serious look on his face, and whispered to me with a stale breath. “In my book right here, I tell yuh the real cure that none of these big drug companies are wanting yuh to know about. I’ll tell yuh the truth, the truth I say! Studies have shown their pill to have dangerous side-effects, and Mr. Headhoncho at the drug company has covered that all up from yuh. Yuh, the common good man. Just so he can make a buck. Now do you believe that? Me though, I’ll tell yuh what the safe pills are, the cheap ones, the easy ones, the ones that work,” he paused again for a second. “I got it all right here. Every answer, and I tell yuh, I like yuh, yuh seem like a real good person, I like it, I’ve never done this before, but I’m cutting yuh a deal today right now.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh yeah. It’s yuh lucky day. Today’s yuh day!”

“Today?” I asked looking around.

“Yes sir. \$45.99. Three monthly installments of \$15.33 if yuh like. Yuh get this book, all the answers, and a clean colon. Yuh think yuh need a good heart? How bout a clean colon!” He had a big smile on his face and held it without a word. Starting anew he continued, “I can save yuh life, come here, see these secrets. Yuus, sir, come here right this now, walk up, take a stand. Yuh look like yuh’ve been through a lot there sonny.”

The man looked suspiciously frail. I flicked his shoulder and it was clear to tell the being to be made of nothing but cardboard. Lifelike and cut-out, he stood painted, faulty and deceiving. When I walked away he didn’t follow.

I don’t usually get too hungry, but when I do, I like a solid course, sometimes just cereal will do. I felt real hungry this time. A gas station restaurant was open across the street, and a glowing sign begged its welcome.

Everyone in there looked at me as I bent down to pick up the bells that’d fallen from the top of the door. I told them I was just there for the food though, and they relaxed.

“A worthy mission or cause, my friend,” one of the men nodded. I raised my hand to him and sat down.

The boys passed me over a coffee with a doughnut.

“Now why do you think the hole is really there on these things?” A man with a solid slick back of hair asked me.

“For flavor, I’d assume,” I said and we all laughed. One guy patted my back and they all looked around smiling at each other.

“What’s the typewrite for?” The big man with a New Jersey accent asked me. His hair was thinning, big round cheeks made his nose look tiny and his face young.

“Typewriter,” his yes-man corrected.

“Who are you? Fucking Webster’s Dictionary?” The big man scowled back, turning his head only half way facing him.

“No. I just happen to have gotten into a little education myself.”

“Oh, is that right?”

“Yeah,” he said defensively and looked around to everyone at the table. He quoted, “Men are born stupid, their schooling makes them stupider, and only then are they ready for the real world. Albert Einstein said that,” the yes-man pointed his finger. “Very smart man.”

The big man’s breath too had a New Jersey accent, and he stabbed his fork down around the plate he ate from. Clinks sounded and the pasta was gathered. “So what’s it for then?” He asked pointing the fork at me.

I told them that I’d been employed as a begger-letter-writer. Composing the pleas of the squalor, who for any array of unfortunate reasons, were in need of a quick hand and a nagging message to convince the good citizens of the county to feed them. The boys re-positioned themselves in their seats and didn’t say a word. The big man stared at me and emptied the fork in his mouth. I had a bite of the hole in my doughnut, and before I knew it, they took me by the arms, threw me out the booth, and through the broken window. Landing in glass shards and empty pasta shells, the typewriter came too. I asked what I owed them for the hole, but they said it was on the house.

I sat up and turned to face the road just as the flash went off. Two men in bullet proof jackets were nervously circling around me, gnawing at me for answers, for poses and quotes. Picking off a dandelion growing through a crack in the curb, I put it in my mouth. A cameraman bent down on one knee with an eye closed, giggling at my brashness while the other propped a microphone under my chin.

“And so what’s the typewriter for?” the microphone man asked me.

“Well I use it for a headrest sometimes,” I mumbled out. “Croquet, writing fake prescriptions for people, general horseplay, the occasional-“

“OK, I think we got it Tim, let’s get out of here,” the microphone man said back to his colleague. The cameraman chewed gum with his mouth open, and paused there to smile at me with a naked eye, the camera hanging in his hand. A helicopter came in to land and picked them up to fly off to a news station to make movies and add flashy text.

I pondered them for a second, but was startled and luckily already ducking from the helicopter’s buzz, when a man’s loud voice called out ‘fore’. Golfers in carts came screeching up to me, one of the drivers jumping out while his passenger stayed glaring from his seat.

“Hey boy, you’re stuck in the middle of something here. Don’t you know a fairway when you see one?”

I looked up and down the street.

“Yeah, boy, you see?” He pushed me out of the way with little kicks to my side, and positioned himself around the ball. The man’s sweater was knit-black, and he puffed a cigar. His big ugly swing sent the ball down Central Avenue, and he held his finish as he watched it go. On the way to his cart, he looked down at me.

“Hey, ever heard of a computer, idiot?”

“Ha,” laughed someone from their cart. “Idiot.”

The knit-black sweater man pointed at his partner as he put his club back in the bag. He sat down and the whole cart tilted. The four of them drove off.

Another cart was just down the street, and I was ready to get up and jump in that one when a pleasantly dressed couple passed by me pointing, giving no thought to whisper.

“Look at him.”

“Well, why does he do that, honey?”

“He’s a crazy man, dear, been seen taking to trees, confiding in them his darkest secrets that he’d never tell anyone with a moving breath. They’re the only ones he trusts. He walks with his fingers in his ears they say. Of course he’s just sitting there now. Pathetic. Loser. Low-life. Never amount to nothing. Look, there go his fingers!”

“What do you suppose the typewriter is for? Nothing bad please, honey. Don’t say for something bad!”

“Don’t you worry,” he assured her with an arm around her waist, “he won’t do anything.”

I blinked a couple times, and before I could mutter even an excuse of a rebuke, they were gone too. Disappeared into the air just as quickly as they’d come. I looked behind me and found the gas station restaurant to not be there anymore, not a trace of it still existing. Then I was at the beach, by myself in a jacket, and it was cold. Cognizing the whims of the past few minutes was unsettling. Terrible trances of ever-changing confusion leading nowhere though seeming to be all there was, and in their time as true as senses can tell you. I realized I must be dreaming. Right there in the middle of it, I came back to life. I wasn’t hungry, knew nobody named Lindsey, and the last thing I could remember really doing was paying the bill at Park Place. Ten dollars for those peanuts.

Out of nowhere, a tiny flame crackled and an old picture turned over in its heat. I reached into the fire and picked it up. The picture was of me when I was younger. Though still dreaming, I became jealous of the boy’s smile. It wore as if there could never be anything wrong, nothing to wonder beyond. Times had changed things now, and it took work to be so young. When I actually was young, I didn’t even know it. That’s cruel, life. All I can ever want is to be like that again. The audacity and shamelessness to speak like a shaman atop his peak. Steady speeched and in one breath, the lines well known before spoken. Too much is possible in a dream, and I was suddenly leaning on a cane, white in a long beard, and my face crinkled on the top of some mountain. I had to wake up from all this.

I brought my head up and drool stuck from my mouth to the game board. A note was taped to my forehead, all the Monopoly money was in my lap, and everyone was gone. The note was from the girl in pink. It read, “Hey sleepyhead, why don’t you get a room if you wanna go to bed? Oh yeah, they blew ‘em all to smithereens. Anyways, we’re down at 131 Central Ave, party in the cemetery, it’s gonna be a real live place. Nice, huh? I thought you’d think that funny. Drinks are on you after all that money you won, bud. Where’d you learn to play so fun? Better wake-up. Better come.”

*I remember waking up from a dream one morning.  
My eyes opened normally and my senses came too.*

*I stuttered out of bed, my hair all over my head,  
and downstairs came to bacon and eggs, a coffee or a few.  
The paper read itself before I got in my car.  
Headed down and passed my local attorney-at-law.  
Drove straight by him as he stood outside shouting something to me  
'bout suing a doctor who'd miss-diagnosed a nose bleed.  
I called back to him askin' if  
there were any legal precedence  
for filing a charge against those who'd tried to end the world.  
He scratched his chin and ran back inside.  
I came to some official building, parked the car and went in.  
A curtain.  
A button.  
There to push.  
The bloated goats shuffled away by the shepard,  
and us sheep left here to graze.  
I forgot to listen for what the woman had to say. It wasn't even important.  
Her presence exceeded that, and I voted for her.  
I woke up for a second time, still in my bed, and blood on my pillow.*

“May she always rest peacefully,” were the words spoken, and we all hung our heads. The moment of silence endured long enough for the wind to blow, and the air to lift. One by one, everyone in the group exchanged glances and nods, handshakes and meek giggles. Young faces. I'd found a black suit, and was wearing it half-on, the sunglasses matched.

“Here! Here! And long live her still!” shouted a voice from behind us. We all turned to see a fellow survivor coming towards us, drunk, and with a bottle still in his hand.

“Hey! What was that, boy?” The man turned around pointing, but nobody was there behind him, and we all saw the flag he'd burned into his skin. His conscience sat on his shoulder with an arm around its pride, and a blank face security guard behind him.

The flag man took another swig and stood opposite the rest of us.

“In the name of Jackson and anyone before him, grab your coals young children, young cripples, and light your own backs up!”

My friend burst into a raspy laugh that quickly turned on him into a burdensome cigarette cough. He continued scissoring the sleeves off his t-shirt chuckling. “This guy's crazy,” he shook his head. The flag bearer gave a stern look.

A rubber band flew off the thumb of the mohawk-cut man, whose scary mustache hairs curled when he grinned, making the do-gooders of the town very nervous. The band struck the flag bearer right across the nose and out came that mischievous grin. Cliffy wore black from head to toe, rested his thumbs around big silver belt buckles, and his cracking voice told how he had once too wanted to burn something into his back. Not a flag though. Emma said she knew of plenty of cripples, but that they'd all rather go

make deals with the devil at some corner of Third Street than go back with that clown. The flag bearer became even more upset when Bill pushed forward out of nowhere to say he'd seen a movie like this before, but in the film the guy's faucet was just leaking, it wasn't going to rain, and the main character got on a skateboard instead of a motorcycle. I wrote miss-spelled phrases on cardboard and held them up behind the flag bearer as he pushed his way through us.

"Fine. You'll come crawling back again, begging when you're squalling from wherever it was you degenerate, dirt sucking, brain-deaders come from. Despicable mutts you are. Every last one a'ya! I'll be seeing ya! You and your crippled friends. All a'ya!" He took another swig and ran a hand through his hair. "See where you are without me, and if it's somewhere ya really wanna be!" He turned to leave. "Kids today, now this is what's wrong with them. No gut, no fight," he muttered to himself.

"No, that's what's wrong with the old folks today," someone behind me called back.

On the way out, the flag bearer slipped something into our drinks on the table before running off down the road, his guard scraping up our jackets behind him.

*General, I hope this finds you well, and your guard too. Just as any others, I wish you no harm, sunny days, or whichever kind of weather it is you prefer. Clouds sometimes look nice, and those jackets should fit you right for any rain. I had a friend predict the rain once. Maybe we should listen to him. Not everybody can be right all the time though.*

*Ahh, how my throat has cleared. My mind dumped. I know what happens now, and it's time I crawl back under that rock. Not much light gets in under there, and I don't have to wear sunglasses. The dirt is cold, so I save money on air conditioning.*

*These are some times we're livin' in huh? Though when are they ever not? Seems like everyone's focused on the dying, and I see it as just hardly any one person's fault. I'm waiting to hear the report on every baby that's born each day. Nothing to do, they just keep coming. That's a miracle.*

*Whew, I'm tired. Time to blow out the candle and keep the dreams on the window sill, straighten my mind. Oh, and please don't give Frank such a hard time. Listen to him maybe, his soul searching shouldn't be in vain, and if his message seems ever unclear, it may just be, in other words, please be true.*

*What a day! What a day I had! A long day!*

*It was one of those that not many would think even possible,  
you know?  
Seems a bit crazy that so much nonsense could go on in one single day.  
And it was all nonsense.  
Pure nonsense.  
You'd have to wake up before noon for all that to happen.*

I pulled the letter out of the typewriter, signed the bottom, and shot holes through it to convey its true meanings. It was going to be hard to read this. But I had faith in the truly inquisitive. And if the correct prescription lens with cracks through the glass to blur any straight view were duct taped to the properly twisted frame, of probably some puked green metallic color, and found somewhere by a staff member in the General's office, then I could rest assure he'd see what I mean.