

ANDREW ROBBINS

Three Families of Hub City

Steadfast down the steps. It was raining. “The fuck did it start raining!?” Imogen said, “and how’re we gettin’ back?”

Bonanno whipped out his keys and they dashed to his car nearby. It was facing a concrete wall. Instead of reversing, he went forward and tapped the concrete a little too hard. “Don’t think I can drive.” Imogen whipped out her phone and checked the bus schedule. There’s one in five. They stood in the rain near the car, which was also the bus stop. After ten minutes the bus approached, they waved their hands in a frenzy but it zoomed by. The couple stared with wild-eyes at the driver who, upon passing, had his index finger wagging back and forth. She threw up her arms in anger.

“I’ll call a taxi. No wait there’s one!” They grabbed hands and laughed as they ran through the rain across the grass and hailed the taxi just in time.

“Wai wai wai wai wait. I don wanna take you, geoutta here.”

The couple looked at each other confused. “What do you mean!? It’s pouring.” That is at least what they thought they said. The taxi driver heard, “whaaayou sayinnn!? Isspooring.”

“Get out you drunk people. Out!”

An unknown force pulled the couple out of the taxi. They had no inhibition to fight back. Standing in the freezing rain they realized that their house was only a ten-minute walk. She lightly slapped Signorissimo’s wet cheek for his stupidity and they skipped away. But they were going the wrong direction and almost toppled over when they turned around. A homeless man held out his hand when they passed underneath an arch. Bonanno did not acknowledge him, Imogen slapped his face again and derided him for not even offering an apology for not being able to help the man, even though he could. She dropped some cash in his hat, “I hope that wasn’t your coffee.”

“No, that’s where I keep my money.”

It was drizzling, so they walked slowly. A man dressed in ragged chinos, sneakers, and a red raincoat approached them from the mix of shadows and orange street lamps. He looked sad and imbrued. Imogen thought that she had seen him before. “Hey, buy me a flower from that man.”

“Are you kidding? They steal those from graves.”

“How do you know? Don’t be a brute.” She went and bought two red roses. “One for you Bonanno.” He put it in his back-pocket.

Imogen put her arm around him reaching to grab his butt but instead grabbed a thorn from the rose. “Ouch! Why did you put that there? Carry it in your hands like a man.”

He held it while they walked to their door, up the stairs, and to their apartment.

The house was tidy and boring. Imogen pulled Bonanno's collar and ravaged his face. "Get me warmed up." The rain had soaked her to the bone. They fell together. He was limp and filled with shame. She rolled over and let out a big sigh. Signorissimo Bonanno spat out some drunken apologies, vomited in the bathroom, and was quickly asleep. He dreamt of nothing.

Imogen was not yet sober in the morning, the alcohol fooled her into thinking her morning would be met with clear mind and body. The room shifted around her head when she opened her eyes, she closed them to fend off the nausea. Her mouth felt like she swallowed whiskey-coated cotton balls. There was water on the table next to the bed, she tried hard to drink some without moving. It was warm and disgusting, she spat it onto Signor Bonanno who was snoring and didn't notice.

Her bowels were stewing. Fighting off the shifting room, she grabbed her phone and went to the bathroom. Her eyes were bloodshot, she grunted and winced, splashed water on her face. and sat down on the toilet reading the *TheNihlingtonBoard* on her phone.

"HISTORIC BLIZZARD BATTERS THE NORTHEAST FOR TWO DAYS": *It came through Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine, starting the morning of December 27th, and lay a blanket of 48 inches in two days.*

Not much was going on in the world during the inter-holiday period. Imogen scrolled down, bullshit and more. "THE JENNERS—" She moved on.

"ONLINE DATING SITE GETS A RECORD NUMBER OF VISITS DURING HISTORIC BLIZZARD": *A new mobile dating app, which connects people through whatever, it doesn't matter, got a record number of sign-ons and messages during the two days of the blizzard. We interviewed one girl who said: 'yeah I signed on and I met a guy, we slept together.' We also interviewed the man that girl was arm-in-arm with, who said: 'yeah I signed on, I scored.' The interviewer reported that the girl was actually the same that the man had met the night before; she did not appreciate his tone and promptly broke it off with him and walked away. Afterwards the man reportedly said, 'pshh, doesn't matter anyway, I got tons of others.' He winked and walked in the opposite direction.*

"IN TENNESSEE, VANDALISM AT A PIG FARM": *At a rural pig farm in Western Tennessee, a pig farmer reported three teenagers who trespassed on his property and spray-painted several pigs and piglets. Written on one pig was: 'Please treat me well'. The farmer said, 'Those damned kids, comin' here and spraying bulls**t. I won't treat'em well if I don wanna—'*

Boring, Imogen scrolled on. She went fast and her eye caught something that made her go back, "ARTIST RARROT FOUND DROWNED IN A CAR ACCIDENT". Her heart raced, she was afraid to open it, she thought it might be a mistake, she had just texted him the other night, no, that was Christmas eve. He never texted back. It read: *On Christmas Day, authorities responded to a 911 call from a driver who reported a taxi swerving on a bridge, which then plunged into the water. When divers arrived at the scene, they found both the driver and passenger dead inside. No foul play was suspected. Once authorities were able to tow the taxi from the Long Island Sound, they identified the taxi driver Dominik*

Ambrogi as a resident of Hauppauge, New York. He is survived by his wife and three boys. The passenger was identified as Humbert Rarrot, a painter from Gawton, North Carolina—

Imogen dropped the phone and held her head, it was throbbing. She cried. She hoped it was a dream. Ten minutes later her face was a mess, hair everywhere, eyes redder than before, salt on her lips. She got up and sat back down because she had not yet cleaned. She cried and thought about impossible scenarios to have him back. Her body melted into the bed and she was a useless lump of sadness.

Bonanno was awake and had slid up next to her: spoons. Imogen was silent and stared at the phone on the table, she wanted comfort without saying why.

“What’s up, you been crying?”

She was silent.

“Is it me? Are you upset? I was really drunk Imo, I doubt that even if it had worked it woulda been any good for long.”

“My ass burns, I’m hungover, leave me alone.”

After Bonanno had fallen asleep again, she rushed back to the toilet and read the rest of the article: *Friends close to Rarrot said that he had visited them for Christmas, but was feeling bad and left suddenly. An old partner who refused to be named was the last person to see him before he left in the early morning. She declined an interview but did say that he had just been in a car accident in New Jersey the night before. We sent someone to his parents house in Gawton, NC. When asked about Humbert his mother responded: ‘Who? Oh, Humbert? We haven’t seen him in more than a decade. He never contacted us after he... left home.’ She didn’t say more on that subject. ‘What do we think about his death? Well, he’s in the Lord’s hands now. We just hope he repented for his many sins, otherwise the Lord might notta forgave him.’ The father remained silent. Humbert Rarrot was just gaining notoriety as a painter at home and abroad, having just had a showing of his latest and last collection in Paris two months ago, called: Humbert Rarrot The Ensnared Portrist. His works reportedly sold for an average of 20,000 euros a piece. Some art critics have described Rarrot’s style as part of the ‘Postexpressionistic-postmodern’ movement; more traditional critics simply called it ‘a return to Realism’. Humbert Rarrot had no children or partner. He was 31.*

The giant wooden bugs were gone and left indentions in the earth. Worms wiggled in panic, exposed to the sun for the first time. Imogen sat down on the swing and looked at the bench she used to sit on. It was lunchtime, no one was around, perhaps because of the excessive cold. The grass was brown or gone; there were wide trails leading away in opposite directions from the wooden bugs’ original spots. One led out of the park, the other to the Brera. They were no where in sight. The greek-esque statue now had both arms; the new arm was a different shade of marble than the rest.

Ivy covered the building so much that the door was difficult to find. She rang the outside bell. She hoped Cinzia was there. No one answered. After a few minutes someone came out and she slipped inside with a nonchalant *grazie* that lingered in the air.

Imogen had never been inside the family's apartment. It was on the floor above Humbert's old studio, but she wasn't sure which one it was. She chose the wrong one first.

An old bearded man with a parrot on his fingers appeared and said, "Chi sei? che vuoi?"

"Scusi ma c'è Manuela?" He pointed across the hall and slammed the door in her face.

Cinzia answered the other door. A wave of escaping heat made Imogen wince.

"Uh, hi, I'm Imogen. I was a close friend of Humbert's. I'm here—"

"—Yes, I recognize you. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to speak with your mother about something."

"About what?"

"Is she home?"

Cinzia looked Imogen up and down with a twisted brow. "Come on, she's cooking."

Inside smelled like burnt chestnuts. From behind a closed door Imogen could hear someone playing a piano. The television was showing a program about right-wing housewives and their attempts to become involved in their husbands' political careers. Cinzia motioned for Imogen to sit at the dinner table and quietly told her mother who had come. Two birdcages were next to the window, one stacked on top of the other. In the top there were two calm birds, occasionally jumping around and chirping quietly. The female's feathers were all torn off, she couldn't escape the abusive male. Three birds were in the bottom cage, they flew around wildly and chirped incessantly. Manuela emerged wiping her hands on her apron and stood before Imogen without sitting down, arms crossed.

"So, what do you have to tell me, eh... what was your name again?"

"Imogen."

"Ok, speak. Tell me why you're here?"

"Well, I don't know how much you guys know or even care." Cinzia went around to sit at the other end of the table. "But...well, about a month ago... Humbert died, in a car crash."

Cinzia and Manuela looked at each other. Manuela answered, "We knew that. It's very sad. He was...young. I feel bad about turning him away..."

"How'd you find out?"

Manuela sat down in a chair close to Imogen. "Archibald, the one who set up Humbert's shows, told us a few weeks ago. He had to take care of Humbert's earnings."

"Take care?"

"Well, they sold the works and Humbert earned about 40,000 euros. Archibald gave it to us because Humbert didn't have a will or anything."

"What're you going to do with it?"

"I don't know. Charity maybe. Any ideas?"

"Maybe some foundation that funds artists. I don't know."

They sat in silence and stared at their feet. "Who are you anyway, how did you know him?"

“We met at his show a couple years ago. We were close friends and—”

“—Whatever. Listen, Humbert left something in the apartment. Dio, he destroyed that place with his paint. Anyway, something he was writing I guess. Cinzia doesn’t want it, no one here wants it. You should take it and leave. Cinzia, take her down there.”

“Okay. Thank you. It was nice to meet you finally, I had heard so much from—”

Manuela got up, said nothing and walked away to some part of the apartment. Cinzia sat at the table and the two stared at each other. Imogen looked melancholic, Cinzia was annoyed.

The apartment still reeked of paint and indeed it was still covered in paint. There were empty wine bottles placed neatly against the wall; four easels without canvases; no other trace of Humbert’s five-year stay except for the disheveled bedsheets. On the kitchen table there was a yellow legal pad, the first page read: ‘Working: A Burdened Murmur (?): The story of my evil twin/Smerdis the magian, HR.’ On the second page was written only, ‘I first saw him two years ago, the same day I saw her.’ Humbert talked about that day many times. She flipped through the notebook, there was nothing else except a note on the last page, ‘Idea for ending: He kills me.’

Imogen turned to Cinzia who had sat down on the bed, morose and feeble. “Are you okay?”

“There was something wrong with him. You knew it, right?”

Imogen nodded.

“I just... I know it was selfish, how I treated him. But it’s justified, right? Everyone has the right to be selfish in... relationships. That’s what it is, in the end.”

Imogen was silent.

“I didn’t know what to do when he started acting, well...” She didn’t want to say it aloud. “It seemed the best idea to just leave him. I don’t know.”

“Can we go somewhere and talk? Like a cafe somewhere.”

“Why not here?”

“I can’t stay here. Please.”

“Okay. Do you want that notebook?”

Imogen ripped off the first two pages and left the rest on the table. “Only this.”

The cafe on Via dei Giardini was almost empty. They sat at the window. The branches from the trees lining the street drooped like dead flowers, they no longer crept like veins across the sky. Imogen ordered a grappa and coffee, Cinzia ordered nothing. A client stood at the bar whispering in the barista’s ear. The client drank two grappas quickly and rubbed his knee. They leered at the two women, their wanton faces were ravenous for flesh. Imogen saw this and moved her chair so that her back faced them; Cinzia saw but didn’t care.

“What was he writing about?”

“He wasn’t really writing.”

“Oh.”

“Do you remember his last paintings?”

“Sure. I was in one.”

“Right. Who was that guy?”

“Huh?” She was distracted by a dog passing by outside with a child on its back.

“The guy, the one you’re with, the one who’s in every fucking painting.”

“Oh...oh. I was with him for a while. Not anymore. He sort of disappeared.”

“What do you mean disappeared?”

“After Paris I never heard from him again. Doesn’t matter. It was going to end anyway.”

“You didn’t want to get back in contact?”

“Nah. Don’t care. Gotta move on.”

“Do you know why Humbert painted him?”

“Because he thought they looked exactly the same.”

“Did they?”

“No, of course not, not even close. Well, I mean, they’re both thin, white, blondish men around thirty. There are similarities.”

“Humbert was convinced he—”

“—I know. It’s why he...”

“I know.” They sat in silence and watched the outside world. “Did you ever talk about it?”

“Humbert and I?”

“No, you and the man.”

“No.”

“Humbert said the man stared at him and that one time on the bus—”

“—I know. I know, but without glasses... If he had looked at Humbert... It was all a coincidence.”

Imogen shook her head in disbelief. “There must be something, something that... this is all too stupid. Isn’t there something? I can’t believe that Humbert—”

“—There’s nothing. It was in his head.”

“Do you think...was he—”

“—I can’t say.” She stared out the window. “It’s funny how quickly the seasons slip away. It’s winter it’s summer. Just like...”

“Like what?”

“Sometimes life is just...”

“Just what?”

“Just... anticlimactic.” Cinzia’s long coat slid through the door as she flew from Imogen’s life forever. She walked beside the trees and touched their naked winter flesh; her coat danced in the wind.

Imogen finished her drink, dropped some coins on the table. The two lascivious men were still staring, the one was rubbing his knee more vigorously than before, she said “Fuck you” in English to them as she slid out the door.

The train to Como was virtually empty, in fact most of Italy seemed empty. There were a couple men holding flowers and cheap toys, speaking in an African language that Imogen could not place. Optimism faded in the lakes overcome by glacial fog, marks of despair tattooed her face. Answers wasted on the living; there was no chance for redemption from ignorance; she would be stuck in a life burdened by guilt. All vestiges of the past vanished like the fishing boats sailing into the void, she watched them disappear from her balcony, extinguishing all hope. No one would ever know. Hardly a person knew him at all after he escaped to Italy. The title for the 'memoir' was dumb, the idea was dumb. Trying to explain what he saw would have been impossible. She looked at the pages once more before setting them on fire, letting the ashes float into the wind.

As the indefatigable fingers of darkness engulfed the world, she moved inside and was pacing around the apartment. She was not drinking, despite having it available, there was an unease about it. The claws of vice were choking the neck of creativity. But what else to quell the imminent nothingness she felt more and more? What else would awaken her body again? A body that sank into apathy. She stopped in front of her poster-boards stuck to the wall, showing the disjointed ideas for a possible novel. Terrible, she thought while tearing them down. She flipped them to the blank side and hung them back up. His painting lingered behind her. At that hour when most were likely shrouded in the sweet darkness of sleep, when the boats had not yet returned and wintery gusts pushed the sailors to the edges of consciousness, when thoughts precariously drifted into the past and lingered on the regretful yet significant moments of life, Imogen wished to be inside her head, gliding between dreams, no longer in this world. So she got into bed and turned off the light. Her mind slipped away from time.

And time slips like slime through fingers. And the night slipped into days and back again in universal deceit. What is the winter night? It is a nocturnal meditation on staying sane, while waiting for the sun, waiting for the beautiful pain tomorrow. Winter nights begin in the morning with cellphone alarms blaring. It tells us everything we need to know: we still live, others still live, it is cold, we are insignificant, the environment is in trouble, the world is going to shit, another person died, another born into a world that no longer requires roosters, it is day for only a couple hours more, it is only a life worth living as long as summer comes again. At dusk plastic bottles rattle and tumble across the barren streets and squares. Houses are packed with cold-weather refugees, huddled around a table or fire drinking away the winter. Only an ancient old man can sit outside to watch the tumble-bottles decorate his once-pristine land; he drinks grappa, he does not have a phone; his spouse waits at home, dinner is in the oven or on the table, she waits to die, but after him, she reads the local newspaper, she does not care what happens in Milan or Rome or New York. None of it matters in the end. Their children might be near with their own children also waiting for their parents to die, caring for them and waiting. A new order fooled into continuing. And the Earth deceived all those who believed that night and day were real.

But the latter says time is a man. Making her life always full of meaning had been her goal since, well, not that long, a decade perhaps. That's what she told the latter while she waited for her new hat. She didn't need a new hat, she told him, she wanted one. Though she might never wear it. He didn't care. She was beginning to think otherwise. Sometimes the mind decides to die well before the body wants, and the body can only wither away. Her thighs were calmer now; the vibrations had grown increasingly fewer since Humbert had left. She tried him that night, but he never responded. Sometimes a phantom vibration made her excited for a ghost. She disliked texting. Now she texts no one. No reason to check the phone in the morning, only alarms to push her out of dreams. The alarm screeched endlessly that morning when he finally woke up. Imogen had taken Humbert unhinged back with her from Paris to Como, a nearly impossible task. A plane was out of the question. On the train he tried to get off at every stop, confused about why they were there and always thinking they had arrived. He also kept seeing that man in every man that sat in their compartment. He would yell at the stranger, claim he was an imposter, unable to grasp their sonder. Humbert slept for two days straight only waking to pee. Imogen lay next to him whenever she slept, stroking his hair and scared that he would wake up less sane than yesterday. When he finally woke up his mania had calmed. They stood on the balcony. It was unseasonably warm and sunny.

"Why did you never want to be with me?" he asked.

"You know why."

"I don't know why."

"Sometimes that just happens."

"What happens?"

"You want someone but someone doesn't want you back."

"It would have been good."

"No you're wrong." She hoped he wasn't about to propose. She would say no. He looked at her and she saw the tears that he wiped away before they flowed uncontrollably; he gathered himself and watched the town below.

"I'm going back to the states."

"What will you do there?"

"Not sure... you don't think you'll move back to America anytime soon?"

"No, Humbert, I can't imagine a reason why I would."

"I can."

She knew why. He left the next day. Humbert forced a kiss on her lips, she accepted hesitantly, his lips were dry, his face was salty: that was their last non-virtual interaction.

As the days moved into months and everyone's noses filled with pollen, Imogen felt more and more that she was to blame. Maybe not for his death. But for what? She couldn't figure it out. No, it wasn't her. He was selfish. What was best for her had nothing to do with him. To each their life. She had kept up with his death. Mainly discussions about his work, his style, his fame,

his legacy, if there was to be one at all. Nothing new on the details of that last night since the first article. Except someone named Azisa gave a brief interview, Imogen knew of her, but Humbert said little about that part of the past. It had been difficult, he had thought it was the worst and best decision to leave Azisa for Europe. Humbert's oldest friend from college, match made in New York City hell, a ballet of hells. Imogen knew so much but there were still holes in his last days. She should get in touch with Azisa. Those were the holes: nine years ago and six months ago. Then she could write. She would write at once.

Hello Azisa, I know this sounds strange and the rest of this email will be just as strange, I was a very close friend of Humbert's. We met here in Italy. Maybe he told you about me. I don't know. It doesn't matter. So I know everything about him, almost everything. There's something missing. You're missing. I forgot to mention: I'm a writer. The reason for this email is not to mourn. I miss him and feel a deep sadness. I thought about writing something about him, what happened here and how it ended. But there are holes of information I need to fill. You might be able to help me. What happened between you and Humbert during your relationship? I know it sounds personal. It is personal and maybe you don't want to tell me but I implore you to tell me because I would like to write something. Perhaps he is owed that, though he wouldn't care, as I'm sure you know. Please could you tell me what went on? It doesn't have to be specific, general is fine, I can make up the rest. After all, I am a fraud posing as a writer. Also can you tell me about the night Humbert arrived in Wading River? How did he get there all the way from New Jersey? And that morning before he left? Did you see him? I hope someone did. It would make me sad to know that Humbert did not interact with someone he loved before dying. I'm sorry if this is too soon, if you can't handle discussing it. I'm patient and will wait for years if needed, but please not that long. I'd like to start soon. Imogen, With Love.

That was the beginning of summer. As the pollen dissipated, the months slipped by and grew to a dryness that saw all the green turn to brown. A symphony of miseries, which everyone else enjoyed. Beach or air-conditioning: Imogen felt desire for neither. Emails came in constantly yet none of them helped to relieve her of the burden to write. Nothing from Azisa, not even a confirm receipt. She understood. Perhaps in a few months when Imogen was desperate she would try again. Kicking off sandals in the sand. Burned skin, red blisters, sand particles invaded humankind. But they laughed as time passed. The coming of fall was there lingering in their minds and they shoved it out with floods of sunlight, warm beer, exposed skin, promiscuous evenings and disappointing mornings. They were always disappointing for Imogen. No matter who was in her bed or not. She went down South and stayed there all summer. Signorissimo visited twice in the beginning. She told him not to come back, a need for space and another man, found one in town nearby, he was dirty and animalistic, she thought it might be nice, but it was always bad except a couple times. She pondered his presence sitting in a chair in the boiling sand. Fantasies of the beginning wavered through her head. Where to start? He never said much about his childhood. Best to leave that out, maybe drop a hint. The new man came out and sat in the sand. He suggested a swim; Imogen suggested he leave and never come back. Why he wondered. Because you smell, I can't stand your smell. I don't get it. That's exactly it, now go away. The sun

set behind her and the earth disappeared in front, it turned to a formless dark blue and she figured that that was the end of summer.

There were a record number of babies born in the month of September, 2017. This was due to the inexplicable condom shortage in New York City during the famous post-Christmas blizzard. Imogen threw away the phone, she didn't care. Como was still filled with people willing to spend. Summer months almost at an end. Residents scrambling to push the last cents out of the tourists. Imogen watched from below. The lake's reflection was blinding. She spat sometimes, it only went as far as she could throw her shit. Not far. Only the sidewalk below felt the wrath of that brain locked inside her imperious corpse. Ding! An email from Azisa. She didn't want to open it yet, first a drink. What time? Noon. Good enough, she poured some wine and paced around the room. She finished off the glass, poured another, then opened the email. Pleasantries, etc. Their relationship, a conference, friends, walks through Georgetown, drugs, sex, conversations, breaking away and breaking up, back together, Wading River funeral, the departure, the winter, the car accident. Everyone is dying in car accidents these days. The one way to death that hasn't had any true recourse. A tow truck guy? He thought it was snowing, when it didn't start until a day after he died. How strange, both Azisa and Imogen thought. Sorry it took so long, had to think hard to remember. She hoped she could help and looked forward to reading it, if it came out. Of course it'll come out, just have to write it.

A couple months of thinking and planning. So many of their conversations and interactions were fueled by drinking. Imogen strained to remember the details. Drinking didn't help now, it was put away until the writing began. But she grew very bored, it was hard to care when sleeping was impossible. She started smoking again. That was only a marginal help. The evenings were a haze, her brain shut down. The windows were shut as the mild autumn shifted to a brutal winter. Imogen, like many others, took refuge in the warmth of her home and bed. She gave up smoking and picked up drinking again. It was time to start writing. The first day she could not. How long had it been? She tried to remember when she really wrote anything. A year ago or so. The next night she drank and started. Writing took five months. Most days she wrote sober and drank at night. She felt like she swallowed poison for five months. As soon as the day's work was done and the evening of rereading began, Imogen had a sense that her organs were on fire. She couldn't discern what was bad or good. Every night she screamed with a pillow over her mouth, thinking that all time was wasted. She wanted to lay down in the shallow ocean. No longer in this world, she invented her own, and suffered and writhed in pain over her burning insides. The few people she talked with about it misunderstood her misfortune, they expected that writing was fun living between two worlds. It was not a hell of idleness but of anguish. Editing took two months. She stayed stoned throughout it. Only drugs could remove the beast from her stomach. The words spoke nothing to her except as an inescapable manifestation of memory. She called it *A Painted Murmur*. Vain ambitions! They were rotten for perfection.

Through networking an editor in New York agreed to read it. A month later she called Imogen for a meeting. She found the story bizarre, it had a subtle brilliance that was not so marketable. They would publish it, yes, she was excited to be working with Imogen, perhaps even beyond this project depending how it sells. It sold relatively well; reviewers were confused, surprised and enthralled. She gave interviews and did some book tours. They were unbearable. Both she and Humbert grew in name. Soon there were academic articles published about them, mainly about him. The editor called her back.

“Is there anything else you planned to write?”

“Eee.”

“Mmm. Let’s make a deal then.”

A contract employed her for at least two more novels, they wanted them in three years. What about five years? Imogen asked. Done. But she did not have an idea for another novel, so much time invested in Humbert’s life that she had not bothered to think of much else. Anxiety preyed on her health. The sophistry of purpose held her hostage. She wrote a play in couple months. She called it *Clowns teach their clownish ways*. The editor sort of liked it but she wanted prose.

“It’s good,” she said, “but theater, really? I know you have talent, don’t waste it on this.”

Imogen sent it to a NYC theater company named after a parasite and they agreed to put it on. It was about a band of clowns who give courses to actors on how to be clowns. The actors think that they are learning the acting style ‘clown’, and when they find out they are learning how to be clowns, they attempt a revolt. All the clowns carry knives in the toe of their clown shoes, They squash the revolt and spitefully kill all the actors. It received mediocre reviews: those who liked it called it brave, those who hated it called it boorish. Imogen did not see any of the sixteen shows, she stayed in Como where life had stagnated years ago. She thought about moving on, but didn’t have to think hard or long because a university in New York offered her a creative writing position for a year at least. She accepted and told Bonanno about her departure. He was hurt and begged her to stay. She didn’t care, “you’re acting pathetic,” she told him, still in bed together. The next morning they broke it off when he went back to his town. Sometimes one might wonder about such feelings of apathy, but she felt nothing at that moment, having lost her orientation to the future.

New York had never been her home. Everyday as she walked through the streets she wondered why everyone loved it so much, why did they want to live there. Her students asked why she felt this way, what is it that you don’t like?

“Nothing feels real,” she said, “everyone’s a goddamn sycophant!”

They exchanged bewildered glances and soon grew very tired of hearing these complaints, except one young woman who came up to Imogen after class one day.

“I’ve read your work and saw your play here.” She was a young public defender who wrote drama and fiction on the side; Imogen was a little attracted to her; it was mutual.

“Oh shit, what do you have to tell me then?”

“You should be more radical, it’s your obligation, remember this is a class war.”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“Come on, you do. Your stories are innocuous, they reek of a non-occhiolism, which is dangerous.

“What’s that word?”

“Look it up.”

“No tell me.”

“Like, not understanding your insignificance.”

“How do you think I should change that?”

“Get out of this city, to New Brunswick maybe, besides you’ll start to act like the rest of them here, the wealthy hedonists.”

“It’s hard not to when you inherit a trove of money from your mother, who was murdered by your father, who killed himself,” Imogen mumbled. “And what is there, in New Brunswick?”

“Rutgers. Some have called it one of the epicenters for drug and sex-slave trade on the east coast.”

This comment lingered in her mind for a couple months while she remained on the island. The idea of being more radical took hold one day when she found a homeless man dead in the middle of a busy sidewalk. Everyone was stepping over him. While she checked his pulse, several passersby knocked her over. She canceled her lease, found an attic room on a “sketchy” street in New Brunswick, and dumped the German scholar she had been dating. He asked why?

“Your pheromones, mainly.”

“It seemed to be going well, you don’t like my smell?”

“Yes, I do in fact.”

“So why? I could see myself with you far into the future.”

“That’s exactly it, our pheromones don’t mix.”

“What do you mean?”

“You like this city and the future, I need to leave both behind.”

“What?”

Her new home was a former halfway house for women on a street with a couple stash houses. All those who lived on this particular street, in the throes of mid-life, were mostly related belonging to one of the three families. Most of them carried a pistol, they would often drink beer the entire day, vodka at night, they took care of the sidewalks and exchanged pleasantries with Imogen everyday. At night they got more belligerent yelling at those who were disrespectful, and almost every weekend night it seemed a fight was always about to break out. Staring out the attic window all day did nothing to help her write another book. She liked it there. It reminded her of returning to Como by train after every daring escape from Milan. The publisher pressured Imogen for another book, she asked for more time and got it, but if she didn’t have anything by

the end of the year, they would terminate her contract. It went better than expected, she thought, as she got off the train in New Brunswick. That night she was determined to think about something to write. In front of her house was a man she had never seen, he was standing against a car with the passenger door open, hiphop music blared from the stereo. Stoned and curious, Imogen asked about the singer.

“He’s from this block, we’re all from here, born right here.” He points to the house two doors down. Imogen was silent and waited. He listened for a second and points to his stereo, “hear that? He’s talking about us as kids, growin up ya know.”

“You live around here still?”

“Nah man, in East Brunswick now, this place was a lot different then. Man, round here, that’s just what they say ya know, just the way guys talk about each other ya know? I don’t use dem words ya know, they all say that but I don’t, like never, not even bitch, not regards women ya know.”

“Mmm.”

“Anyway, I jus wanted ta come by since we all know each other, and this guy just dropped this album, it’s real good right.” Imogen nodded and bid him a goodbye.

She went upstairs and wrote down an idea in her notebook. She got absorbed in music and fell asleep on the floor. In the morning while drinking coffee Imogen read her note from the previous night. It said: something about NB, but what? Since school was out she spent much time walking and smoking around town. One brutally hot day she sat with her neighbor on his porch, he was in his 60s, born in that very house, but had multiple sclerosis and hadn’t been able to go farther than Queens in the last twenty years. He ranted on for a couple hours about the town repeating himself often and never letting Imogen get more than two words in. She had an idea. She said goodbye and rushed upstairs to write some sort of angsty prose without direction. The evening slid into midnight, the neighbor long forgotten, and Imogen had only written and rewritten one page of prose by hand. Reading it again, she realized it was sort of like poetry. It had been many years since she had done anything like that, she thought it was pretty good. The next day the neighbor was happy the weather was warm.

She explained her idea, “I want to write a poem in prose about, well, New Brunswick, about this neighborhood, from the point of view of someone like you.”

He didn’t care but said go ahead. They talked for an hour and she went back upstairs to write at night. That was her routine for the next two months. When she had finished and was editing, the daily conversations with her neighbor stopped, he felt abandoned and isolated, alone and exploited. Imogen didn’t notice and he was left to his life that would end only five years later, peacefully in destitution. Imogen finished in the fall. She called it *Hub City*.

Her editor said, “this is great, it really is excellent. But...? But it’s poetry Imogen, 40 pages, not a lot, it’s just—”

“It’s prose poetry, can you publish it or not?”

“Mmm.”

“I promise to bring you a novel the next time.”

“Okay... okay, fine, just let me talk to my boss, you know I want to do this, I do, but let me talk to him, maybe with that play you did a couple years ago, that way at least the book will be longer.”

The critics were excited that her second published work was not a worse novel than the first. They thought both the play and poem were very radical and could not wait to see what such an eccentric young writer would come up with next. Imogen had no idea, she kept telling the interviewers, and she told them little else about her life. The poem was shortlisted for the Pulitzer, she lost to a white guy's poetry collection about the woes of his privileged upbringing and later depression. Imogen decided that two years in America were enough. A feeling of monachopsis seeped over her every morning. Where to next? She read *To The Lighthouse* and decided to live on the Isle of Skye. A bad choice, she found out about three months later. The house was a lovely little cottage nestled between mountains on the southwestern coast. Too much scotch, no friends or lovers, she didn't care to even try, she had no desire for herself or anyone. She got bored, and yet she wanted to see if it got better. It did not, just more boring and unnerving.

After almost a year she called Signor Bonanno. “I wanna come home.” She laid down on the doormat.

“To what home?”

“To your home, our home.”

Silence for a minute. “I'm here.”

She didn't know what else to do. She let herself be taken back. He didn't care why she had come back and he didn't ask about America or Scotland. She had no answer anyway. Why him again? Though he was not any better or worse than anyone else, he was just there, familiar and harmless. It felt like wrapping herself in a warm blanket after spending a cold night outside. But she wondered why it didn't feel the same as before. He was cheerful and glad to have her back; she was content to not have to worry about herself for a while letting Bonanno take care of her. He knew there was something wrong, something different than years ago, he didn't want to ask her. He was afraid of the answer. She knew and let him suffer in wonder. She suffered from exulansis. For months she lay more than she stood. He tried to push her out of bed whenever he was going to party. She rolled over and stared at the wall ignoring him and all the emails from the publisher. Once she thought an email in her spam-box was from Humbert's old email, but it was just political junk-email. That would have been rather suspicious, she thought, he's dead after all. How many years now? Like six, seven? She didn't feel like counting. Imogen always hoped to hear from friends, but she didn't remember having any real friends.

The television was on while they were eating breakfast one morning. She had gotten out of bed for once, by now bored and eager to start something new. Italy had had a shuffling of prime ministers for almost thirty years and the same corrupted, richest man in Italy regained

power at the age of 87. The new party name was the same except for a preposition. As his first political order, he appointed one of his mistresses to a cabinet post; she gladly accepted; the right-wing greeted both with applause; the left remained seated with arms crossed. Imogen watched the former mistress with her bleached teeth and silicone lips. It gave her an idea. She went to Bonanno and kissed him longingly. Come on, she said, and they laid down together. Afterwards Imogen lit up a cigarette. You don't smoke cigarettes, do you? Yes, because I can't drink yet, it's too early. She sat down at her computer and started typing. A few hours later she began pouring glasses of wine.

A year later she had a first draft written and printed. She called it: *A Perfect Day for Sex and Anarchy*. It was about a thirty-year old female Italian anarchist who decided to run for Italian parliament. She colluded with her anarchist friends who helped her get elected. If elected, she intended to give a speech renouncing the position and politics at large. It was a hard campaign, she ends up victorious by a large margin. In the moment she was to renounce her seat, she instead accepts it and is corrupted by the system ending up in the bed of the prime minister. Imogen's editor found it hilarious, the boss did as well. It wasn't meant to be funny, she thought. But, we can't publish something like this, she told Imogen on the phone, Americans don't care about Italian politics. What do you mean? It's nationalized, with a universal message, perfect for whoever my readers are right? The editor thought about it and asked for a rewrite. She knew that the first draft was sloppy, but it took her months to get back in the mood. Four months after the first draft, the editor accepted the new version, which made it more universal, less Italian. It had success mainly outside of the U.S, especially in Italy. Imogen's fame grew in the months after because she refused to do any book tours or interviews. The internet went wild about her reclusive nature and witty writing. During her short trips around Europe, she longed for the days when no one knew her. Only the small Italian city on the Adriatic gave her any respite. *A Perfect Day for Sex and Anarchy* was shortlisted for the Booker. She lost. Imogen didn't care. She had enough money, too much notoriety. Her onism was overwhelming. At 34 years-old she felt almost 50. The spurious infinity. Time passed slower than ever, no longer slipping away. She didn't remember the moment it had changed.

The summer crowd vanished, littered beaches, tired proprietors, gray September rain, Imogen watched it all from the balcony day after day. Her email-unreads were interminable, fame didn't suit her. Mainly she stayed indoors, no ideas to write, no where to go. One morning she was spreading strawberry jam on her bread, the coffee had not yet kicked in. Bonanno was watching the news. *The same prime minister who had regained power three years before has died of a heart attack. He was 90.* Imogen smiled. Bonanno gasped and grabbed his left arm. Imoge— chiam—, he said before falling off his chair. They pronounced him dead before noon. Only 48, she thought, looking down at his grave. It was raining. Imogen took the long way home, which was now hers. Nothing was hers. Misfortune was her God. She laid herself down in the mud. She

dried herself in the air of crime. She played sly tricks on madness. This was her *énouement*. She buried the dead in her belly. She went south for the fall and left a month later.

The dunes were eroding. She had never felt so alone. She was trapped. Therapy is useless when you don't care about anyone, when you have no one, when they're all buried. She didn't even find a lover, she forgot how to act human. Sometimes she remembered to eat. Drinking or smoking did nothing. The gray and green blurred by her window. Rain again. Why was it always gray and rainy and empty? She wondered. Italy is supposed to be blue and sunny. What use is a beach-house when everything is black? She sat at the back of the car in a group of four seats facing each other. An old woman was asleep three rows up; a child slept underneath the seats to her left; a youngish man sat at the far end of the carriage. He seemed to be staring at her. She squinted, still unclear. Recently she had to get glasses, which she pulled out and saw clearly that it was, Humbert? He looked the same as eleven years ago on the night they met in the gallery. Clean and pink. Imogen took the glasses off and rubbed her eyes. He was still there smiling. She thought about going over. He came instead and sat down facing her. Imogen saw that it wasn't Humbert. Not even close. Strange, she couldn't recall the last time she had even thought of him. But she saw him now. She didn't recognize this man in his mid-20s, blondish, and clean. He looked out the window and back at Imogen.

She broke the silence, "Why don't you tell me... what do you want?"

"I'm sorry." He spoke American English. "But I recognize you."

"I don't know you." She turned to look out the window.

He spoke after a minute's silence. "Aren't you... well, aren't you that author, Imo—" "— Oh... Yes."

"Holy shit! I knew it, when I saw you from the other end. Wow! This is just, well I can't believe it. I love you, your stuff, ya know." She crinkled her brow and looked back outside. "You're... you're really very, um, more attractive in person." He awkwardly shifted in his seat.

"You've seen my picture?"

"Yeah, well, just on the book covers."

"You can barely see me."

"Right. Right... also on the internet."

"The internet?"

"Articles and stuff." He looked out the window.

Imogen stared at his crouch, which he covered up with crossed hands. She imagined those limbs weary and warm, his body immobile for a moment, her image on the computer screen. "So, what do you want? Do you want to know what Hub City means or some shit?"

"What, Hub City?"

"Which did you read?"

"Wait, what... sorry, read what?"

“Of my fucking books.”

A hesitant laugh. “Yeah, of course, yeah. Um, well, only the recent one. The anarchy one.”

“You don’t remember the title?”

“No. Something with perfect, right.”

Imogen stared at the green and gray blur, it made her stomach churn a bit.

“So what was Hub City, you were talking about?”

“One of my books.”

“Oh... Are you writing anything else?”

“Not that I would tell you.”

“Prossima fermata,” said an absent voice, “Chiusi-Chianciano Terme.”

“This is my stop,” he said. “Where are you headed?”

“Milan.” She looked at her ticket. It seems she had a layover in Chiusi-Chianciano Terme. “But it appears I have a layover at this stop.”

“Really!?” He sat up straighter. “For how long?”

“Wow, 19 hours.”

“Are you joking?”

“I didn’t plan well.”

He laughed nervously.

The train was coming to a stop. Imogen gathered her bags, unsure of what to do. The man came back with his bag and followed her out of the train. They stood silent on the platform. It was drizzling.

“So, I live pretty close by—”

“—Yeah, and?”

“You wanna grab a drink while you wait? I have time, and—”

“—Fine.”

“Great. There’s a bar across the street.”

Inside was a lacuna. Imogen wondered what day it was to make the town so deserted. It felt like Tuesday. But it was Thursday.

“The rain,” said the barista, “no one wants to leave their house.”

The man bought her a prosecco, a spritz for himself.

“What’s your name anyway?”

“Sebastian.”

“Sebastian... As in Dangerfield?”

“Yeah.”

“You read the book?”

“What book?”

“Oh christ. Where do you learn things?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your information, where do you get it?”

“Like, *The Niblington Board*?”

Imogen swallowed the entire glass. Sebastian’s eyes got bigger.

“What were you doing down south?”

“Really? You wanna talk about that?”

“I’m just curious. Meet a random famous writer on a random train. It’s amazing! I mean, I was just down there visiting relatives. And I see you and I’m like: is that her, it looks like her. So I looked you up and it was you. And I thought how cool it would be if you got off at my stop... and I could show you my life... and apartment.”

“Your apartment?”

“Uhh. I mean—”

“—Come on finish your drink and let’s go see your apartment, if it’s nearby.”

“Yeah, yeah, definitely,” he said stumbling, “it’s really close. You wanna... go there now, with... me?” His forehead crinkled.

“Well I can’t go there with anyone else. All I have is time.”

Sebastian looked stunned, he didn’t blink for a while. Imogen stared out the window. A couple underneath an umbrella walked by, they were not holding each other. A man dressed in ragged chinos, white sneakers, and a red rain coat stopped in front of the window, he was drenched in the stain of the living. He and Imogen were both wistful, they looked at each other until she couldn’t handle it anymore and looked back at Sebastian, who was arrogantly smiling and wantonly moving his eyebrows.

They went through the smaller streets of the center, Sebastian opened an umbrella, Imogen stayed in the rain. She was reminded of that day in Como, she imagined Humbert behind the umbrella. A strange sense of inwardness numbed her every sense. That beautiful silence, she thought while staring at the mannequin draped in rip-off brands. Sebastian broke the silence. Imogen had drifted away and he was calling to her from two buildings back, where he had stopped to open his door. He asked why, she didn’t know. The world span as they went up the stairs, it span out of her control. The apartment was bland, temporary, adorned with the typical furniture. Imogen took a lap around the edges and ended back at Sebastian whom she pulled towards the bed. She sat and he went for her lips. Imogen turned her head away.

“Oh wow. Wow, I can’t, I just can’t believe this. Ya know? I mean, just sitting on the train expecting to go home and just, do nothing, jerk... around, I guess.” He laughed quietly. “But, fate, ya know. She’s funny. Man! I can’t wait to tell my friend.” He looked at her uneasily. “I mean, I’m not going to tell people, obviously. Like, maybe this one guy. Sorry. It’s just. Wow! I slept with Imogen... actually, what is your last name again?”

“It’s no big deal. So would you shut up about it.” Imogen rolled away from him and watched the water slide down the window. She was the rain, the sadness, and the isolation. He’s

finally silent. What a joke, she thought, this was a mistake, a harmless bed for the night at least. Hear the poet think. The pain flared up, the beautiful pain that says you exist, and maybe a saner life tomorrow. Maybe she would tomorrow, at once, back on the train, write memoir again. He had forced her back into it. She had to move somewhere else, to forget, sell it all off and disappear from this life, which is not really one at all. She had to go home, the dead were buried there. She'll write about bodies and wonder would it really matter at all.