

Lobster Clouds  
and  
Pieces of People

words by  
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## eight

In the unlikely event you become a national phenomenon, don't let it go to your head.

I'm so full of ideas, I'm a patent office.

I'm positively *overflowing*.

Well, I was, anyway. I had all sorts of ideas Cherry and her team couldn't have come up with. Things not nearly as vacuous and meaningless as *I Belong*. They came by the ton.

*Better Living Through Suicide.*

*School Zones Make Great Firing Ranges.*

Imagine those on your minivan, right under the tiny mock-roadsign warning about how many children you have with you. Get your fists out of your ears, I say, and listen. Really hear it for a moment and let sink in the bad things your mommy warned you about. It's a very horrible thought. It's disturbing. It's dangerous.

It's evil and terrible and makes you want to sew your ears shut with dental floss. But at least it means something. At least it isn't fake. Cherry's little slogan—tagline, mantra, whatever—didn't really mean anything at all, it turned out.

What do you belong to?

Anything. That was the point. Sell the remedy without knowing the affliction; sell the want without knowing the need. The people who need it will make it what they need it to be, and everyone's gonna need it. The sizzle, not the steak, as they say. But that's how it was designed from the start.

It's one of those things that gets in your head. Not like the little bits of random conversation you waste your life on during the day. Those five-second fillers for uncomfortable silences that only make things worse.

"Yeah, that new album by that one band, that's a good album," you'll say in a crowd.

In ten minutes, no one else will remember you even opened your mouth. Sum all of the things like that you've said and multiply by an average of five seconds. I bet most people, over the span of a lifetime, end up with more seconds than brain cells.

"I would keep using that product, but this other product just has a better whatever." Completely useless and insignificant, but you say it anyway.

Maybe they *are* just like what Cherry came up with. They don't stick to the wall, but they sure as Hell mean about the same as, well, you get the point.

You belong to the vacation club. You belong to the real estate company.

You belong to the support group. The self-help collective.

You're a valued customer. V.I.P. club member. A part of something.

You're a *special person*, aren't you?

You should LOVE your LIFE because it's so FUCKING RICH.

You, you, you. Choke me with a broomstick.

“Tell me something, David,” Maura said over her shoulder to me. We sat on my living room floor, back to back, reading the contracts Miss Dixon gave us before we left. This time, at two in the morning, Maura was my encyclopedia set.

In case anyone asks, we sat on the floor because my furniture was stolen—I didn’t decide to sell it after realizing I hated it. It didn’t get in my way, and it wasn’t annoyance after annoyance. Burglars took it all. In case anyone asks, this is me whistling inconspicuously.

I left my window unlocked, I swear.

I also didn’t tell Maura she could stay until she wanted to leave. She followed me home, honest. The gimp-legged puppy your mother said you couldn’t keep. Maura also wasn’t wearing one of my large shirts because her bubble-wrap dress had been ruined earlier in the day.

“Once a day, remember?” I reminded her. We’d wasted them earlier that day, on the way out of the conference room. Something about contracts and stain-resistant carpeting.

“I don’t care. Tell me,” she said. The shirt was really way too big for her, and made her legs look like they started at the knees.

I told her I really wasn’t in the mood, honestly. While Maura had already banished her contract to the floor, I was sinking deeper into mine.

SIGNER agrees to complete participation (as defined under PARTICIPATION, I) to the extent as determined by CHERRY DIXON and BDM MARKETING, LTD. in program(s) to be defined more clearly in PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES.

First, there would be the full-page ad in the Sunday papers. The New York Times. The Washington Post. Nothing extraordinary, really. Just black block text on white, picture of my head underneath it. *I Belong*.

Breach of CONTRACT shall attach penalties of no less than the amount defined in PENALTIES (9) to the SIGNER, payable immediately upon breach of CONTRACT to parties as defined in PENALTIES (9), which may or may not include CHERRY DIXON and BDM MARKETING, LTD.

The Philadelphia Inquirer. The San Francisco Gate. Later, *Prevention* and *Redbook*. *Better Homes and Gardens* fodder is all it was.

Production rates for full-page advertisements in the Sunday New York Times can run upward of twelve thousand dollars or more. How much is your message worth?

“Don’t mess with me, David,” she said. “Out with it.”

I brushed her off. Back to my soggy cereal and contract. No time to be distracted. Maybe I should have said the words “coke head”. That would have gotten her off my back. As it was, I just ignored her some more.

“Talk, dammit,” she said. “You have all of these books, and spend all your time reading them, and you have nothing better to do than tell me every dumb little fact you can find, but when I ask you to say something, I get nothin’. Forget just telling me something, how about you actually say something to me for once?”

Where that came from, I had no idea.

“Why are we doing this, again?” I asked.

“I don’t know, maybe because you like to argue?” she said.

“No, no, I mean, why are we going along with this lady?”

“I think it’ll be fun, David. I’ve always wanted to travel, and we might even get on T.V.” Since when did Maura care about being seen? When did shit like television matter?

“Well, maybe I don’t want to travel,” I sneered over my shoulder.

“Well, maybe I didn’t mean with you,” Maura said. I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not,

so I just grinned at her behind her back.

I'd like to take this brief moment to acknowledge all of the wonderful people who made this uncomfortable pause possible.

"You know," she started up again, "I bet most people would think a place that looked like this was creepy."

Well, thanks. Great. Love you, too, dear.

"It doesn't bother me, though. I mean, it's really screwed-up, but I don't think anyone else can really complain about someone else being screwed-up. Especially not that Cherry bitch, either. I swear, David, if she ever calls me a doll again, I'm going to tear her head off," she told me. It was kinda cute, actually, in a twee-psycho sort of way. Maybe I would have smiled again, had the sheets of paper in front of me not been drowning me in legalese.

"I bet Cherry would just love to see all of the stuff you have," said Maura, looking around to wall-to-wall empty carpeting and thick, dark sheets nailed to the windows. "I don't know how you keep the girls away."

Maura reached back, between us, grabbing my hand as she stood up.

"Get up," she commanded with all the power and authority of a gumball. She pulled on my arm hard enough until I had no choice, and stood up. Almost fell up, really. I dropped my copy of the contract and almost toppled over. Maura didn't let go and kicked over my bowl of used milk.

All over the contract, soaking it through to the floor.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I shouted.

"Oh, like you care so much about this place to begin with! Forget about it, David, it's just paper. You can get another one. Let's find something more interesting than this legal stuff, and we'll clean it up later." Funny, that almost sounded like me for a second there.

I didn't want to get another one, I told her, because to get another, I'd be begging to some lady I really couldn't have cared less about for some stupid contracts I wouldn't have blown my nose on willingly. It wasn't a pride thing, it was a sanity thing. I almost fed her some extended diatribe on being forced to do things, whatever, but instead, I put my foot in my mouth.

"This is the second time you've done this to me, Maura," I said to her.

A system known as the *Torino Scale* is used on Earth as a method of describing the impact hazard of comets and asteroids.

"Done what?" Maura stared me down hard and let go of my hand. I said nothing.

There are five warning level zones in the Torino Scale, consisting of ten individual levels.

Starting in the white zone, a hazard level of zero describes the likelihood of an object unlikely to collide with the Earth or survive a trip through the atmosphere in the case of a collision. Completely inaccurate bodies and objects too small to survive the thousands of degrees of heat generated upon entry into the atmosphere. Extremely unlikely collisions, having about the same chances as an object of equal size striking the Earth within the next few decades, merit a hazard level of one. This is the green zone. Sunny days and blue skies.

The yellow zone consists of hazard levels two through four. These are labeled as "events meriting concern", and range from very unlikely collisions resulting from not unusually close encounters to objects with a one-percent or greater chance of collision which would result in regional devastation. Still, not very alarming possibilities of contact at this point.

"Threatening events" describes the orange zone, hazard levels five to seven, which detail significant threats of collision with the potential for regional devastation, to close encounters with objects having extremely significant chances of contact with the planet's surface. The lat-

ter object's collision results in a global catastrophe.

The red zone is certain collisions. There is no sidestepping, no ducking. Hazard levels eight, nine, and ten comprise the red zone. Level-eight objects are the light ones of the group, capable of localized destruction and hitting between every fifty and one thousand years. Level-nine objects carry regional devastation and collide with the Earth once every one thousand to one hundred thousand years.

Level-ten events occur once every one hundred thousand years or less. They're capable of global climatic catastrophes, and carry scenarios of devastation on a global, extinction-level scale. At this hazard level, I'm sitting on my porch and sipping iced tea. People are running around in the streets, looting, rioting, and screaming wildly. Trying to get through traffic jams to get to relatives and remote places for some level of imagined safety and immunity. But there's really no reason to be afraid, I think to myself as I drop another lemon wedge into my glass.

This is it. This is the end, and it's inescapable. Let the fear—all of the fear you've ever had in your entire life, every black drop of it—wash down the side of the mountain. Let everything become water.

In case you're wondering just what a level-ten hazard *feels* like, imagine me standing in front of Maura, not answering her, and knowing I can't avoid her or the conversation at this point. The yellow revolving emergency lights spinning and flashing. Caution tape flapping back and forth in the breeze. Sirens.

"Done what?" she asked again. She was extra heavy on the "what" part.

Frozen, like the North Pole. Maura said it again, for EMPHASIS.

"You made me her bitch, Maura!" There. I said it. Shouted it. Yelled it. Detonated it like a hydrogen bomb. It was out there, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Wrong answer. The sound of the buzzer.

"Excuse me? Want to tell me what that means?" I was in it way, way too deep to shut my mouth, so I kept going with it. I should have just shut up. I didn't, but I should have.

There's just so much noise. Static in, static out. Broken rabbit ears wrapped and held together with aluminum foil. Nothing sounds right because nothing *is* right. Every time I open my mouth or open my ears, things shake downhill like avalanches.

Yesterday was terrible.

Today is worse than yesterday.

And the threat of tomorrow makes today that much worse. Makes you wonder just how bad tomorrow is going to be.

That big promotion doesn't make today a good day. Scoring that cute girl's phone number at the party with a hundred mindless talkboxes moves nothing upward. You can't move up the mountain because the mountain is a crater, and all you can really do is fall into it.

Into Hell. Burning, searing, fiery depths.

Dante described my level of Hell more like a deep wood; a forest where the souls of those who upon themselves would have laid violence are turned into the trunks of trees. Fruitless and filled with venom, and for the harpies to make their nests on.

There's a place for everyone in Dante's version of Hell, though.

Maura's next to me, rooted in the dirt of the self-damned. The greasy, disgusting, obese impression of a toxic waste dump next to you on the bus, he's cast down with the gluttons deluged with the hail and snow deep in the third circle. Business Partners and Corporate

Executives—hypocrites, thieves, and falsifiers like no others—are banished to the gulfs and their filth, serpents, and pestilence. A fitting end to unfit people. Wastelands for the wastes.

You'd better keep moving, or you'll get stuck somewhere you don't want to be.

When you don't know what to do, just keep on the accelerator. Take the curve hard and don't look back. It's a steep fall, and it feels just lovely.

You can save some of the people some of the time, but you can't save all of the people all of the time. Imagine me trying to save myself by keeping my mouth shut.

You know what? Fuck being profound.

Fuck making a point, and fuck thinking deep.

I yelled at Maura, and she put her foot down my throat. Hard. End of story.

"Why do you even care if the damn thing is ruined or not? You're acting like it's some big deal. Crying over spilled milk is for little girls, David. Are you a boy or a girl?" she said. I was acting like. Spilled milk. Shut up.

Ring, the sound of Maura's voice coming from across the room. I choked on her toenail polish. I thought about that for a second, and tried to remember when Maura started wearing that stuff more than once in a while.

Thinking deep is for little girls.

"I'll tell you something that doesn't matter," I said. "This conversation, that's what."

"And now you're just being mean, David," Maura said.

Stop saying my name like that.

I asked her what she wanted me to tell her.

"That some stupid fucking piece of fucking paper isn't more important than me!" Maura took her foot out of my head and put it on the floor.

When you believe you may be treading out of familiar waters, stop and take a quick inventory of the situation. In the event you're unable to locate familiar channels or shallow water, climb onto the nearest piece of buoyant debris, such as a fallen tree or a floating piece of the fuselage's aft-mezzanine section.

"Of course it isn't," I said. "It's just as unimportant as you, Maura."

You've never heard a door slam so hard. Never in your entire life.

Of course, what I *meant* was that it all didn't matter that much. What came out, though, was enough to make Maura forget she was wearing only a long shirt and panties when she stormed out of my apartment and down the fire exit stairs. This time, it was my foot down my throat.

I locked my door and laid awake in bed to the sound of the fire exit alarm and a hundred pissed-off tenants in their boxers and nightgowns out on the sidewalk.

Five o'clock came and brought two more hours of sleep. I didn't hear from Maura the next day. I never even asked her about her nose.

Cherry gave us three days to think about the agreement.

One year minimum, with the possibility of as many as the market value would sustain. The media saturation would be first: print, television, and billboard marketing. Later, radio and television appearances would be utilized to extend our reach and maximize exposure and revenue potential. My book was certain to be a bestseller once the tour started.

That's right, my book. They had already written it for me. For my character.

I'm a puppet.

The book they'd already made for me was going to have my signature alongside "Keep up hope, Billy" at the request of the painfully optimistic mother of a Sanfilippo Syndrome patient.

Most afflicted with Sanfilippo Syndrome don't live past fifteen. A genetic defect lacks them the ability to break down a specific complex sugar. The sugar collects in the brain and kills them over time.

I thought about that in the taxi on the way to the Knight Building. The contract, I mean.

Maura didn't show up at the meeting. If I'd have known why then, I wouldn't have mumbled things about how stupid she was being, and how I wanted my damn shirt back. In the waiting area, I kept looking at the frosted glass doors, hoping Maura would come tripping in at the last second.

Funny, the things you remember sometimes.

When I was in the seventh grade, I got on the wrong school bus going home one day. I didn't realize I'd stepped onto the wrong bus until I looked around at the kids on the bus, and couldn't find anyone I knew. In about the span of five seconds, I went from happy and stupid to scared and aware. Sometimes, it's best not to know what's going on.

If it hadn't been for a girl in the seat across the aisle, I'd have gotten off at the next stop and been *really* screwed. But as soon as I started whipping my head around like a tire swing, she piped up.

"You got on the wrong bus, didn't you?" the red-haired girl said to me. She had to say it twice, through the noise of the other kids, just to get my attention.

She bet me she was right, and after winning that wager, hopped into the seat with me. We talked about stupid things that stupid kids talk about, and before I knew it, I was at her stop. I got off with her and used her phone to call my mother to come get me. I never saw the red-haired girl again after that.

I waited for her to show up in the waiting area outside Cherry's office that morning; I waited for Maura to slink through the doors and ease my mind, just like the red-haired girl when I was a kid. Make me forget how much I didn't want to be there; how uncomfortable the place was. That's why I was really mumbling to myself. Keeping my mind off of the speckled floor tiles—no two are ever alike—and the fake plants in the corner. Magazines with scratched-out address labels. All the crosswords in the newspapers, ruined already. The records of the lost civilization of the 4:30 appointment.

I'm convinced blue plastic chairs are built by engineers trained in inciting scoliosis riots.

Make a list to pass the time. Take your mind away from the situation and go into your comfort zone. Count the panels on the ceiling.

Two hundred fourteen.

Stare at the wall of glass overlooking the city. You wouldn't be caught dead hanging from the roof and washing the other side of it.

The dry, completely inert air makes you yawn. They leave the lamp on the table next to the chairs on all day, even when it's sunny outside, just so your eyes don't get too wet. And you think to yourself, if you have to hear the saxophone soft jazz version of "When a Man Loves a Woman" again, you're going *through* that hundred-square-foot window. Think *suicide jumper*, but without the attention to detail.

It's office Hell, but with the warm slant of a proctologist's office. That's about when Cherry came out and called me into our meeting.

Om I am as calm as the faux parlor palm plant in the corner.

Ironic, that plants that are supposed to be good for the environment are copied into

petroleum-based evergreens produced in factories that mainline pollutants into the environment.

I looked at the doors. Still no Maura.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’m just going to go,” I said. “I’m really not interested, I don’t think. It’s a generous offer, and all, but it’s just not—” I stuttered a lot more than that, trust me, before she cut me off.

“We’ve barely talked,” Cherry assured me. “Come into my office and at least see what we have to offer you. Think about it, at least.”

And to think, I was about to turn around and leave when she said that.

I think I pulled a muscle lifting the pen on Cherry’s desk. I bit down so hard I thought I had lockjaw. Almost loosened teeth. I say I think I pulled a muscle because I know that pen was heavier than a truck if it was a pillow.

“Don’t think so hard about it, David. You’re going to enjoy this. This is your golden opportunity here—more than fifteen minutes of fame. You’re going to be somebody,” said Cherry.

No one will ever forget me, she said.

“Bigger than millionaires and milk and missing beef,” assured Cherry.

Maybe that’s just what I needed to hear. As soon as I *did*, it hit me. Hard.

When you photograph something in either moving or still film, it takes an increasingly heavier amount of light to make it show up on film properly. The farther back you are, the more light the director of photography and lighting supervisor have to put on you before you’ll be lit well. So when you’re trying to see everything in one shot, things farther from the camera have to be hit with more light than the things closer in.

Memories are the same way. The longer back you think, the harder things are to remember. Unless it’s sprinkled with discomfort or trauma, it’s hidden in the background. Without memories, do you exist at all?

It made me try to remember why I was there.

Instead, I thought about why I *could* be there. All of the potential, like snow banks on steep mountainsides.

The world changes when we do.

“You shouldn’t worry so much. We’re going to take care of you and show you what you’ll need to know. The most important thing is image, at all times. If we’re going to sell you as somebody, you have to be that somebody.” Even as I put the pen to the paper, Cherry was still selling the idea on me.

“I’m still wondering what’s keeping me from signing this at all,” I said. “All you know is my name. I could walk out of here and there’s nothing you could do about it.”

I leaned in.

“I could go on and live the rest of my life happily without signing anything.”

“Your little doll doesn’t know, does she?” asked Cherry.

Confusion, noun.

A state or instance of being confused; without spacial, temporal, or mental reference.

“Jamie didn’t see you, but I did,” she said calmly.

Fingernails on a blackboard. She saw me kill Mr. Slicked-back. She was a witness to the *miracle*.



You just can't escape the past.

A nondescript black convertible speeds through a red light at an intersection. Its driver pounds furiously on the steering wheel, late for an appointment. Something catches the driver's eye at forty miles per hour through the congested street.

It's Cherry, and she's just seen a large city bus run down a very familiar-looking man.

Funny, for a second, it looked like that man with the newspaper—

Nah. The guy who got hit just tripped and tore the newspaper out of the other guy's hands.

The next day's headlines told Cherry she's going to have a card to send to a funeral. When she saw me at the elevators, she put two and two together.

Now there was someone else who knew.

They had this thing in Italy in the 1500s called a garroting chair. It was a torture chair that had a leather or metal collar and a big screw through the back of the chair. They'd put you in it and slowly turn the screw from behind. Eventually, the screw would bore through the back of your neck. Slowly. You could hear the fat point breaking into your neck right before it punched through your brain stem.

A quarter of a crank at a time.

First, Cherry had me because of the stunt Maura and I pulled in the lobby. Twist. Then she had me because of the mess we made on her carpet. Twist. Then, when the man tripped and pulled the newspaper out of my hands. Twist, twist. I winced in my chair, even without a screw behind me. I was stuck—stuck without my red-headed girl to talk about stupid things that didn't make anything any different, but felt really good to talk about.

If Cherry tells anyone, I'll lose Maura, I said to myself. No more midnight phone calls, no more public pranks, no more anything remotely alive. I go back to being dead. I'll be like everyone else, popping Demerol at 300 milligrams a ride. I don't know what hurts, but Goddamnit, something does, and I'll make sure I know what it is. Handfuls of scored, powdery Endocets and the return to normalcy after drowning in them.

Ketoconazole puts you straight to sleep in under an hour guaranteed. It's better than real sleeping pills. I'll take what I can get, though, I thought, because my doctor friend was starting to come under the wonderful watching eyes of the AMA and the APA. I'd have to find new doctors if I was going to go on a book tour, anyway. No worries, there's one in every city.

"You don't have a choice, David," Cherry said.

"You're right, I don't," I said. If anyone's going to be saved, I thought, this is the only way. If I'm going to save myself, this is the boarding pass. It's all downhill from here.

"I need someone that'll do whatever I tell them." She kept going. "And it doesn't seem, to me, that you're in a ton of position to turn down the offer."

The offer.

I'll be reached by reaching people who come to me for hope.

"David?"

I must have spaced out, because I have no idea how many times she called me. I fell back to the world and agreed to sign the papers because I wanted to, that time. And the great thing was, Cherry knew exactly what she was getting into at that point.

I don't know what the fear of the unknown is called.

There was a single message waiting for me on the machine when I got back to my place. It was the E.R. at Maura's old hospital. Curiosity, panic, fear, like some screwed-up yogurt swirl. It's the end of civilization, I thought.

There is no known cure for Sanfilippo Syndrome.

