

Lobster Clouds
and
Pieces of People

words by
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six

My head is full of caverns.

Narrow, twisting sepia channels connected by mysterious brown doors that never open.
They're hallways.

Trap doors appear in the strangest places when I'm not looking. In the wall. Slanted on the floors. Cockeyed on the ceilings.

Without sources of light, they're all lit by incandescent smolderings from odd corners. The random, gently swaying light bulb hangs from the ceiling. Each one I stumble across, like portentous monoliths hidden in plain sight, makes everything else darker. Voids on dangling wires like the eyes of hurricanes.

My dreams are scattered with these caverns and tunnels. One door opens into another identically blank hallway, and into another, and so on, for miles and miles and miles.

Paint peels at an inch per millennium and there's nothing but mold in the corners and floor joints. A hundred years of grease and smoke layer the walls.

This building scares me deeply. It has an open channel to touch my core and make me shiver from the inside like trees in wind. This is an ominous and nightmarish place from which I'm unable to escape.

Broken, deteriorated hardwood floors. They creak from all directions even when I'm not moving. And there goes another shadow across the wall which isn't mine.

I'm shaking from somewhere deep inside like a child's spinning top.

I'm awake for this part of the dream, but I can't move. I'm paralyzed.

In place. In the dark. Alone, no one to save me from the shadows or the paralysis.

I keep slipping in and out of sleep as I run through the corridors.

It has long fingers like icicles that curve inward at the tips.

I'm trying to open my eyes and get up. *Wake up. Please, I don't want to die.*

It doesn't make a sound across the floors and walls and ceilings. My heart is a shivering spring.

I sink into the dream again and I run as hard as I can.

Doors everywhere are locked, and the ones that aren't lead to still darker places I can't force myself down.

It's behind me. Looming over my shoulders between me and the light bulb swaying back and forth. I don't have a shadow, but it does, and it's a tornado around me as the light moves around.

Bent over my shoulders; bent over to fit in the hallway as if it were taller than the walls.

Leaning in on its prey, cornered and unable to move for fear of something worse than death.

The light bulb fades away, and I go with it.

There are certain things about a man that no one pays attention to.

How tall or short he is, as long as he's not a freak one way or the other.

The color of his eyes if he's wearing glasses.

Whether or not he's smiling.

No, what do people pay attention to?

The brand of clothes he's wearing.

How expensive his car probably is.

How do you know what's important anymore, I wondered. What's in your briefcase doesn't make you important. How much those shoes with the faux gold buckle cost doesn't make you important.

In the unlikely event of a terrorist hijacking, you're all screwed.

A man no one's seen before jumps out of his seat and rushes the open cockpit door with a Hechler and Koch 94-A3 semi-automatic assault rifle while everyone sits and watches with their mouths on the carpet of the cabin floor. With a one-hundred-dollar bolt re-engineering kit he bought out of the back of a survival magazine, the HK is running on full auto, and the pilot and co-pilot get a taste of it in the second-person.

Crack—

Crack—

Crack—

And they're in technicolor all over the control panel.

The "single-barrel rifle" conversion that shortened the barrel of the weapon has diminished its accuracy, but the man isn't concerned with picking ducks off of a pond.

The flight attendants don't know what to do.

So much for those crisis training courses.

Know what to do during a fire at cruising altitude. Procedures for water landings. Be aware of what to do when the forward landing gear doesn't deploy properly. Know what to do when your mind goes frozen and your body locks up in fear at the sight of the pursed lips of bullet holes in the seat next to you.

Everyone grips their seats tightly as the plane dips down.

It takes way too long to dump the fuel from the plane, so that's not an option for the man.

He hears footsteps and turns around.

Crack—

Crack—

Crack—

And the plane's only hero is suddenly just keeping the floor from getting up and running away.

A new widow screams.

This time, the man locks the door to the cockpit and chants some over-distorted half-truths about some extremist religion and his family. Prisoners in far-off lands. His people in exile. Big governments sticking their dicks in everyone else's business. The flight recorder manifesto to save his soul and get his "message" out to the world.

The severe change in elevation triggers the oxygen masks. Everyone sucks it down like mixed drinks.

The top speed of a Boeing 747 passenger airliner is six hundred four miles per hour. The thrust is generated by four forty-three-thousand-pound-thrust Pratt & Whitney J-series engines. From cruising altitude—forty-five thousand feet—that gives you about a minute before

you find out what the phrase *resistance to move* really means. Even those four elephants of engines won't keep the plane moving after it kisses over four hundred billion short tons of sea.

Think "plate glass", but with concrete instead.

You have less than a minute to think about anything you want.

Less than a minute to slide into Heaven.

The Atlantic Ocean covers seventy-six million square kilometers of the Earth's surface.

You're not thinking about whatever you were thinking about twenty seconds ago. What are you thinking about?

Not dresses that match your hair. Not shoes. Not cell phones. Not who paid for the beer last time. Not the lien on your house, and not the lease on your car. Not candy bars and trendy titanium packaging. Not your stupid, inconsiderate neighbor. You don't think about these things with the last minute of your life, because they're not important, and nothing unimportant makes it into the final cut of the end-of-your-life life-flashed-before-your-eyes reel.

Not everyone dies the instant the plane hits the water.

Most do.

Broken necks. Shattered spines. Heart attacks. Crushed rib cages.

Hope you're one of them. Pray you're annihilated by crumbling, twisting bulkheads and seats flying at you like rocket ships.

There are about three-point-five kilograms of salt in every cubic meter of water in the Atlantic Ocean.

If you aren't dead by now, you're going to know just what that tastes like.

No one noticed me when I walked into the bank.

Not a soul looked up an inch.

That's right, keep your heads in your newspapers and bank books.

Don't even look at me.

Don't bother looking up when my duffel bag gets caught in the revolving door.

Don't look at my shoes. Pay no attention to my jacket. This bag, ignore it.

And they did.

I knew Maura's dark little secrets by then, and she was figuring mine out—

Right—

About—

Now.

But it didn't matter. Like everything before, it was totally meaningless.

If I would have grabbed the teller and stuck a knife in her breast, that wouldn't have gained any attention. If I would have shot her with the sleeping security guard's gun, no one would have flinched. They only cared, only gave a damn, when I calmly walked up to the counter to close my account.

Sorry to see me leave, she said to me.

Hope I can be their customer again, I was told.

Thank you for your business. Please come again.

And everyone went back to not noticing as I left through the door with ease.

You can do anything when you're invisible.

And before that, I went unnoticed in the sky lobby on the thirtieth floor of the Knight Building.

Right below the snack court, on a crisp Monday morning.

And before that, on the street with the man in the three-piece suit.

Sometimes, when you're taught something, you're stifled at first. Might even get hurt a bit. You don't always see the value of the lesson at first, so sometimes the lesson seems stupid and pointless.

We can teach ourselves more than our teachers can show us if we try hard enough.

I excused myself as he banged past me. Actually, I ran into him on purpose. I saw him from down the street, no salvation from anyone. He looked so alone. So desperate for worth.

Black, slicked-back designer hair swimming in designer mousse.

I kept moving and heard him chatter into the phone lodged in his ear.

While small-cap stocks may generate more of a turnover on your investment, they tend to be significantly riskier than mid-caps and high-caps. Mid-caps with good market histories tend to be very attractive to potential investors—they show room for growth while showing market maturity. I thought about that snippet of “conversation” when he didn't flinch at my courteous apology. Important stuff, those markets that trade imaginary values.

“Excuse me!” I said it a little louder this time. Okay, a *lot* louder. That got his attention. There goes all that jazz about courtesy, I guess.

“Hold on, Bob, I'll call you right back,” he said to his—

Friend?

Associate?

Father?

People like that call their parents by their first names, and their children by their last. Some sort of sick corporate life inmate thing. How's it been, Frank? Eat your peas, Mr. Wallace.

“Excuse me? Buddy, you bumped into *me*.” There we go with that again.

My eyes burned from an hour and a half of sleep the night before. So much for sleeping schedules, I thought. Just when you think you've got things under control, there you are reading a dictionary at four in the morning.

Provoke, verb.

To incite anger or resentment.

Actually, I prefer: *to stir action or feeling*.

I said maybe we'd bumped into each other. If he was sorry, I was sorry. I don't usually change my story, but then, I'm a pretty non-confrontational guy.

Queue laugh track.

He started yelling at me. Phone, in his pocket. Composure, on the sidewalk.

“I'm David,” I said to him.

We're all invisible.

None of us can see each other, but we have so much to say about ourselves. Our neighbors. Majority whips who ensure strong direction in their parties by “farming the vote”. Tiny people who are important enough to complain about and critique, but not important enough to think of as human beings.

People, or as close as you can really get without getting dirt under your fingernails, anyway.

The woman at the checkout counter who asks if you have a valued customer card.

TV news anchors with painted-on smiles who don't exist from the waist down.

The cop who was nice enough to let you go with just a warning, but had the *nerve* to pull you over in the first place.

We're all see-through, broken-down versions of ourselves. Drones oblivious to every-

thing around us. Dumb bombs with the spatial awareness of goldfish.

I think of the Visible Human Project.

I think of Cold-War-era compartmentalization and conformity. Nuclear families with two-point-three children.

I think of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

And I don't know why, but it makes me think of a little black-haired girl being pulled across the highway in the rain.

I've never figured out why people keep secrets. If you really stop to think about it, the only thing secrets are good for is impeding progress. Big road blocks on the way to the future for the *good of the people*.

The rain was coming down harder by then.

Governments keep secrets from the people who appointed them. Majestic-12. Project Blue Book. The FBI has seven hundred thirty-four pages on Adolph Hitler alone, freely available through the Freedom of Information Act. But why bother releasing something like that if you're going to black out half of it? Freely available magic marker testing is more like it. Covert black-ops office supply experiments. Special Agent Papermate. I can see boxes of rubber bands and empty staplers now.

Maura's mother snagged her dress on the broken gate dragging her daughter out through it. Almost tore her shoulder off.

Secrets and lies. Deception agents. It's not Big Brother breathing down your shirt or looking over your shoulder, it's Little Brother cleaning up after himself when no one's watching. Hiding the tracks in the snow.

The giant cone of cotton candy had melted away by the time they were out of the amusement park.

"Nope. Not scared," the girl told her mother.

"That's good, honey. You can't let things scare you, or you'll never be able to do everything you want to do," her mother said. "And never believe anyone if they say they love you. You can't just believe that, because it might not be true. Don't let anyone lie to you about that. Okay?" The sharp downturn went over Maura's head.

So she nodded innocently, but her mother didn't see, and didn't pay any attention anyway—she was looking out into the thick highway traffic. Lost in whatever slope she'd slipped down.

Maybe if Maura had known—

Now they were at the median—

Maybe she would have had the courage and wits to do something. Maybe she wouldn't have been a useless kid standing around watching the cars and trucks try to hit them. She could have stopped destiny; changed the future.

Here's where the wind kicked up, and Maura saw the bruise and dry gash on the side of her mother's face behind that bell of black hair, the random wet river of hair clinging to her cheek in an attempt to hold her jaw together. I guess Daddy loved Mommy, too.

Imagine the smell of singed flesh underneath a hot iron, and a bright red triangle where a pale belly used to be. Think of punishment in the form of a hammer crushing delicate, carefully manicured fingertips. Broken ribs. Breasts marked-up from the rough texture of brick walls. Bloody lips and noses. Cuts that never heal. Leather belts and wire coat hangers.

I can see this woman at the backyard barbecue parties of neighbors, trying to explain away

her latest bruise or mark.

The cabinet door put that cut there.

I slammed my hand in the car door. That's why I'm in a cast up to my wrist. My, this is lovely potato salad. No, it was the car door.

Any pathetic excuse for being some meatbag's kicking post.

Just a reminder that all the makeup in the world can only make so much of a difference.

On weak knees, she kneeled at the muddy median and talked directly to her daughter.

"Remember the sacrifices others make for you, Maura. If they haven't made any for you, remember that, too. People only get away with what you let them get away with. They say they love you, but no one really loves anyone else. They're liars, honey. Don't let them lie to you. Do you understand?"

She brushed the hair from Maura's eyes and shook her violently. Maura just looked back blankly. Her mother asked again.

Didn't matter what the response was—the endings to these things are always the same. The car always crashes; the train always derails; the ship always capsizes. It's all downhill.

Think *gravity*, but without the predictability.

Her mother rambled some more incoherent things before marching across to the other side of the street. Maura was left behind until she had the sense to follow.

The man yelled and yelled.

I thought his head was coming off.

Better him than me, I thought. I tried my best to calm him down.

"Abnormal levels of stress have been known to cause impotency in men between the ages of—"

He reached back to hit me when what must have been his anger management classes kicked in and he just took off down the street again. No violence—no more than what was swimming under his skin, anyway—no confrontation, no release. He couldn't bring himself to be human and in the moment.

I think of pushed-down corporate politeness and courtesy.

I think I kissed a nerve when I uttered some profanities about him and his little phone friend as his back was turned, because he whipped back around almost instantly.

Come on, you're getting closer.

I threw out every disgusting, nasty remark I could think of on my feet. World, upside-down. Feeling, through the roof.

Stay with me. You're almost alive.

I told him how many volumes there were in the Oxford English Unabridged Dictionary, and somehow bent that into a remark about his probable illiteracy. Made sexually explicit comments about his wife/girlfriend/stock analyst. Told him just how silly his ear stud looked. The worthless man obviously had never heard any of it before spoken to him, so he needed it—needed to hear, and was long overdue for, painful things that were painfully obvious.

"No one talks to me like that," he said. "Do you even know who I am?"

Do you know yourself, that's a better question. No one talks to themselves anymore, but maybe if they did, they *would* know themselves. At least then people would be guaranteed someone would know them.

I pulled his arm to follow me with every word I spoke to him, every motion I made with my body. Tried to take him across a line he thought he had no business over.

And again, he walked away.

All the things I was trying to do for him, everything I could do to help him, everything I could do to try to save him, and he walked off. Fucking. Walked. Off.

I'm not worth his time, he said.

Just some crazy shithead on the street, he said.

You are what you eat. And right then, I was eating volcanoes.

The little girl followed far behind her mommy through the break in the fence.

Reeds as tall as she was, on the other side. She couldn't find her mommy over them.

Maura yelled out for her. Came the response: *rain*.

Came the response: *the terrifying scent of silence*.

Came the little girl through the crest of the tall grass onto the wet beach. She shook in skin cold from ice-water rain as she looked back and forth. An empty beach with night falling over it, save for the shadow of a single person high up on the edge of the dock.

Maybe that lady saw her mommy run by, she thought.

Maura battled the quicksand and was covered with it to her waist by the time she got to the dock. She crawled up a hill a million times her size if it was an inch, to get there.

With her feet on the first shaky plank, she called out to the silhouette.

Nothing came.

Step after step, shivering all the way, Maura fought her way down the dock.

Maura enjoyed watching people cry. After she told me what happened, I knew why. I got it. I got why the whimpers and tears of destroyed people made her insides flutter with joy. It's almost a sickness, she explained to me. Some twisted daily agenda decidedly absent from most people's day planners and personal digital assistants.

In falling down, you will be found and lifted up, and therein lies the beauty she saw. Everyone's real when they're in ruins. You'll see what you're capable of when your insides are torn out and the walls are decorated with them. Tortured and murdered, like some pathetic kidnapped child. You won't find anything closer to being complete—having nothing means having everything you could have—and you won't find anything closer to purity. Back to innocence. Back to being able to be loved. To love. To dream, to be vulnerable, to take chances.

She found her mother spilling tears into the sea at the end of the dock. A wasted excuse for a woman; a memory of a shell of a person. Imagine the car wreck. Imagine the field surgeons with scalpels and the firemen with the jaws of life.

Imagine Maura tugging on her mother's cuff, trying to get her attention.

Imagine it all came crashing down into the thrashing seas below the dock, and pretend for just an instant—a moment a millionth as long as Maura lived it—that you saw Maura's mother slip under the water after walking off the end of the dock.

"Mommy?" Fade to black.

Talk about being born with a silver spoon up in deep, Mr. Slicked-back had the entire tea set up his ass.

He whined and whined and *whined*. And in the end, he just turned and walked away.

People used to ask me what I was bothered by. I'd tell them I'd like to go back to when the first amphibian crawled onto the shore and break its neck. Actually, I'd go back in time and flick a used cigarette filter into the primordial ooze. Being unable to do that? That's a bit of a bitch, yeah.

I traced him from across the street. He moved fast, and lost me between some cars or a bus now and then, but I kept on him as we got to the intersection.

We crossed at the red light. A newspaper quickly copped from a newsstand kept me out of his sight. As if his imaginary conversation would have let him see me, anyway.

The crowd kept him from moving as quickly as he wanted, and the light hit green before either of us got across.

And as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—

I pushed him under the bus as the light turned.

I fear no evil.

The bus took off and sucked him under.

Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

And he was saved.

