

Lobster Clouds  
and  
Pieces of People

words by  
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## two

I'm falling through glass.

It's a perfectly flat sheet of plate glass a thousand miles in all directions.

I know it has to be a dream, because it's perfectly flat.

In the Einsteinian universe, everything exists on a curved worldline; that is, space itself is curved, and there's isn't such a thing as a perfectly rigid object. Nothing can truly be flat. But this is.

I can't tell where the horizon is, or what color it is, and that isn't at all disconcerting as I crash through the plate at a million miles a second. A million miles a second, and infinitely slowly at the same time. It's like water around me, passing in a flash and holding completely still.

I know it has to be a dream, because I can't feel a thing.

I can't feel the billions of triangles of glass shred my body like paper, because they don't.

I should be in pieces. I should be drowning in a red cloud of blood. I should have lost the ability to breathe seconds ago.

I should be all these things, but I'm not. Instead, I'm becoming lost in a collapsing, crumbling sea of glass. A crystal shower of tears.

It was Tuesday, so I was at my required weekly emergency systems test with Doctor Morgan.

Brown hair, pinned up sticky-bun-style.

She's one of those psychiatrists that would be a really nice person if she didn't have all the answers in amber bottles with childproof caps. Fluoxetine HCL, 40 mg. Thioridazine. You have to be careful with that second one. Prolonged use of thioridazine has shown to create cases of Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome. Every time I popped one, I hoped to become an unfortunate statistic. Suddenly, I wouldn't need the drugs anymore, because I'd be stuporous and vacant all the time. Life in a bubble in your head.

I told her I'd met someone. Well, I might have met someone. I wasn't really sure.

"How, David?" she asked. Black pantyhose, legs crossed.

I told her about the phone book.

"David, we talked about the phone books, remember? We agreed it wasn't productive, normal behavior. Didn't we, David?"

I said, "So what? She sounded interesting."

Perfectly round, black-rimmed prescription glasses.

I was hoping the cabinet of drugs I had at home would kick in and become side effects rather than treatments. I was hoping my creatine kinase levels would spike and I'd start pissing blood right there. Respiratory failure. Cardiac arrest. It wouldn't have been NMS; it would've

been something she wouldn't have seen coming. Rhabdomyolysis. Myoglobinuric renal failure. Anything more interesting than sitting there, explaining myself for not having done something terribly wrong.

Yes, I was listening.

"So why do you think you did it?" she asked. "What were you feeling?"

"You don't want to talk about feelings," I said. "You want to figure out the dosage I need."

Rhabdomyolysis can also be caused by overdoses of cocaine and heroin.

We'd gone over the phone books before. I had a bit of a problem, she told me. For months at that point, I was waist-deep in phone books and random phone numbers. And in reality, perhaps, I wasn't looking for conversation, but just those few seconds before the person on the other end hung up. Maybe I already knew that at that point. Maybe blind denial was keeping me from the surface.

In either case, it was all that was keeping me going. The only reason to live was a sleeping stranger.

I said, "We haven't met yet. I've just spoken to her a few times. Her name is Maura."

I told Dr. Morgan, Ph.D., that she has short, black hair that collapses around her ears. I told Dr. Morgan, Ph.D., that she never wears lipstick or other makeup not because they're made of or tested on animals—she'd prefer everything have its share of suffering and like it, she tells me—but because it takes too much time and energy to remove the stuff. So when she does wear makeup, it stays on until it wears off, often becoming just a layer of peeling paint like on some run-down tenement wall.

"It sounds like this woman might not be the best thing for you right now, David." She always used my first name. Cherry lipstick, loop earrings.

"We're here to make new discoveries—"

Shut up.

"About you as a person, and help you—"

Moron.

"Live your life as a productive—"

Idiot.

"Member—"

Retard.

"Of society. You've walked a long road, and I don't want to see you lose everything you've gained over this woman. We've talked about this, how your need to browse the phone book is stemmed from your longing for companionship. This Maura sounds very destructive."

Black, patent leather heels. The kind you fantasize about when you masturbate.

"Perhaps we can come up with another way to meet people," she told me.

"How have your meds been, David?"

I said, "Just as oppressive as ever."

Most people think psychoactive drugs make depressed or psychotic people feel good again. If you regard walking around in a dull cloud "good", then most people are right. You're unsharp; complacently muffled. Sometimes you sleep better, sometimes you have horrible dreams and never sleep entire eight-hour stretches.

"I've seen a great improvement in you since the dosage adjustment."

I had stopped taking it days ago, I was just tired from the night before. I'd been pushing my-

self harder than normal, and couldn't let my numbing meds get in the way. I didn't like feeling flat.

When I got back to the office, all I wanted to do was call Maura. I wanted to get that dirty rush as the rings counted off. She would have picked up, and I would have told her that Dr. Morgan, Ph.D., didn't think she was a good influence on me. Thought she wasn't good enough for me. Thank you, Mother.

Maura slept during the day, something I envied her for. She told me she had a night job as a telemarketer, of all things, and that she did it from her apartment. Maura wasn't selling products, though. She sold people.

Maura did polling for anyone that wanted the opinion of society's sheep. When a Presidential hopeful was planning to come through the state, his or her Director of Communications would place a phone call to Maura's employer, and Maura would get a call, and then start making her own:

Would you be in support of a ten-percent increase in defense spending over the next five years if it meant a proportionately large decrease in environmental controls and protection funding was necessary?

If the candidate for the party with which you are affiliated came out in favor of the House majority leader, a member of the traditionally opposing party, would that change your opinion of said candidate?

How many hours, approximately, of major network television do you watch in an average week: between zero and five; between six and ten; between eleven and fifteen; or more than fifteen?

That last one's the most important one. If the target demographic for your area watches an average of between six and ten hours of major network television in an average week, that might realistically equal between twenty and thirty hours in that average month. There's no reason to spend an extra sixty thousand dollars for a block of major network time nobody will watch, now is there?

But Maura liked this job for an entirely different reason than being up at night. Pollsters sit in front of a computer terminal and enter the responses they're given. Nobody's there to make sure the pollsters aren't lying, or even asking the questions they're supplied with.

"Hello, and good evening. My name is Angela." Maura never, ever gave her real name. "Before you ask, I'm not selling anything; I'm with an independent information gathering service. Would you be interested in entertaining a few short questions this evening?"

Sometimes, it took ages to find someone willing to sit there for thirty minutes.

"If your son or daughter were caught making love to the family pet, would you be: horrified; upset; mildly disturbed; or relieved?"

She loved the gasps of complete shock she'd hear.

"How large of a pile of burning children would it take to make you physically ill to look at it: a small pile of fewer than five children; a medium-sized pile of between six and fifteen children; or a large pile of sixteen or more children?"

How can anyone appreciate anything they have if they don't appreciate how terrible things can be?

"Of the following major diseases and biotoxins, which would you rather release on a crowded airliner: anthrax; the ebola virus; tuberculosis; or bubonic plague?"

If you're not part of the solution, what else could you not be a part of?

I was nothing special in *my* job.

There were a hundred people above me, and a hundred people below me. My title was irrelevant; I was irrelevant.

Maura helped me realize this. I already knew it, but before her, it was more a disliking of what I did for a living than anything more coherent.

Ring, across the room. Ring, at the filing cabinet. Ring, ring, ring, my desk.

Ring. Don't touch it.

Ring. The end of civilization is on the other end.

Ring. Snap. Rubber band.

So it was at that morning, ten minutes after we were officially within business hours, I gathered my rubber bands and marched right into my supervisor's office.

The fat little toad just sat there eating his turkey on rye while I stood there.

"Hey buddy," said my supervisor. I was his buddy. You're only someone's buddy if you're about to get the shit beaten out of you, you're in a bar with an old friend, or you're being sized up and sold to. "How's it going?"

"I'm going," I said.

"Good to hear. A healthy team is a productive team." Here's to misunderstandings.

"No," I explained, "I'm going home."

"Not feeling well, David?"

Not for a long time, I told him. "I won't be in tomorrow," I said, as flat and as drained as imaginable.

"Well, that's difficult to hear, David, with the schedule we're trying to keep. Let's see if you can try to make it in, okay?" My time is company time. I'm not paid to be sick.

I mumbled something about 'attainable goals' and 'not fucking possible'.

His eyebrow rose up just over the rim of his glasses.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I heard you right," he said.

That's when I gave him my two minutes of notice.

"What? Don't you mean *two weeks*?"

I said, "I don't want to be here that long, no."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"You," I said.

Had I said that out loud? I hoped so. It's surprisingly difficult to say what you really want to, but when you do, there's nothing like it.

I said, "I hate this place. I hate you. I hate everyone here."

"You *what*?" he replied.

I said, "I don't want to be here anymore. This is a terrible place, and I'm leaving. I despise everything here. The noise, the people, the management. You. I'm leaving, and there's nothing you can do to stop me. No stock options or profit sharing plans or high-interest retirement funds. You don't own me anymore." I remember my back teeth cracking together as I closed my mouth.

"You're some ungrateful prick, you know that, David?" He was pissed now. Finally. "All the things this company has done for you, and this is your idea of respect? This is how you repay your team? Me?"

"You're waste." I wanted to say it a dozen more times. I might have. I don't remember.

“Fine, then, get the hell out of here.” Now he was supposed to assert himself in the conversation, so it didn’t look like I was in charge of what I did.

“You make your own decisions, David. If you want to be an asshole to the people who have given you every opportunity for advancement, or go sit back at your desk and be thankful you haven’t been thrown out of here by security, that’s not my decision to make, now is it? I think I deserve an answer, as your supervisor.” Never screaming, just a manager’s *affirmative tone*.

Brown, laceless loafers. Ten-thousand-dollar grin that burns marks in the back of your neck. Crumbs of rye on his shirt.

“Well?” he said.

Your feelings of sexual inadequacy are signs of weakness.

He asked me again.

That voice, like a used car salesman.

“You make your own decisions, leave!” he yelled. He had always talked that quickly, like he was trying to hide the rust holes in the passenger-side door.

Briefcase on the sidewalk; levelheaded, mid-sized sedan in the parking lot; and me in my apartment in my bed. I needed sleep for that night.

Now, in sleep clinics, people with sleeping disorders are connected to a machine called a *polysomnograph*. Polysomnographs monitor the body for various biomedical data during the various stages of sleep. It monitors EEG, EMG, and EKG activity as well as respiratory activity, among many other electrophysical activities.

There are five stages of sleep, after waking sleep.

The first stage is simply drowsiness. In this stage, your body exhibits a fifty percent decrease in activity between wakefulness and this first stage. Eyes closed, but not asleep. This stage generally lasts no longer than ten minutes or so.

Your heart rate and body temperature decrease during the second stage, when you enter a phase of light sleep. This is similar to the kind of sleep your father was enjoying in his favorite armchair every time you came out of your room an hour after dinner. Gentle, with intermittent spikes in neuromuscular activity that might cause slight muscle twitches and relaxations in concurrence with auditory stimuli.

The last two stages before R.E.M. sleep, or rapid-eye-movement sleep, are deep stages known as *delta* or *slow-wave* sleep stages. It’s in stages three and four that your electromyogram reading will resemble the Pacific Ocean a thousand miles out. The EMG reading is a measurement of muscular electrical activity. As you get closer to R.E.M. sleep, the electrical activity, measured in waves, in your muscular system decreases in frequency. A rhythm has been established.

Any given stage, up to now, may last as long as ten or fifteen minutes. Stages two and three will actually repeat themselves, backwards, before you drop into R.E.M. sleep.

R.E.M. sleep. It’s often called paradoxical sleeping because it’s characterized by heightened encephalic activity but also muscular immobility. Your brain goes on a neurological spending spree while your body stays at home watching *Entertainment Tonight’s* latest useless gab-fest on what Ms. Celebrity wore to that party that didn’t really matter. Activity recorded by the polysomnogram’s electro-oculogram instruments skyrockets during this stage. Your eyes twitch uncontrollably, and you visit places you’ve never visited before.

This is where I kept dreaming of the shore.

Let me tell you something about cycles.

Sleeping is a cyclical process; that is, once you've gone through R.E.M. sleep, you make the trip back all over again. While your first R.E.M. sleep stage of the night might last only five or ten minutes, each time you get to the end of the cycle, the R.E.M. stage will be longer than it was the previous time. Slow-wave stages get a little shorter, R.E.M. gets a little longer.

You might complete four or five cycles in a given night. I couldn't.

It got to the point where I couldn't tell if I was choosing not to sleep for more than an hour or two, or if I was physically unable to do so. The muscle relaxers stopped working. Something about tolerances, Dr. Morgan would tell me.

Now, when your nightly sleep accrument sits at fewer than three hours for a long enough period of time, you start to notice. Things feel very different. The world has a different taste, all of a sudden.

I often wondered what Maura would have tasted like, had I been sleeping more. I wondered if there were things I was forgetting, but didn't realize it.

You begin to lose the ability to preserve memories after long periods of sleeplessness.

By the first time Maura and I actually met, I couldn't remember my first day of school. Memory loss is like that. People start to lose the major events from many years ago before they find their memory of breakfast absent.

I started to see things more clearly, even if I would lose them years down the line.

Who cared how many hours of sleep I was getting, as long as there was someone on the other end of the phone during the night?

It went on for weeks like that. I'd wake up at who-knows-what-hour and feel my entire body miss heartbeats as Maura's phone rang. That flurry behind your tongue because you knew someone *might* pick up.

"Hello?" Her slightly dented hello.

I told her to tell me about what didn't matter.

That was our special thing together. Every day, we would come up with one thing other people did that didn't matter. We wouldn't discuss it or labor over it; we just said it and moved on. Something that made everything and everyone look just as stupid and irrelevant as they really were.

"I saw a PETA member power-walking with a pair of expensive basketball shoes on today," she said.

"I can beat you," I said.

"I asked her if she was against treating animals unfairly. She said yes. I pointed at her hundred-dollar shoes and asked her if she thought the ten-year-olds forced to make those shoes for five cents an hour in a building with no air conditioning felt the same way about cute little puppies and whales that she did. I think she almost crapped her pants."

Maybe I couldn't beat that, after all.

"Now you. Tell me something that doesn't matter."

I said, "People buy carbon filters for their tap water at ten dollars a pop and litter their filtered water with ice cubes straight from the same tap."

"Interesting. Very cute and witty. Like a little Sunday comic," she said in that naturally easy tone she seemed to spill everywhere. "Did you just think of that one, or have you been sitting on it?"

I'd been sitting on it, I told her.

"Why?"

"Well, I don't know," I replied.

"What's the point of waiting? You're going to use it eventually."

I said, "We're only supposed to do one per day. I didn't want to—"

And then I got what she meant. It clicked. Everything gets used eventually. Everything dies, everything hits zero, everything breaks down. It's entropy. The universe is reaching room temperature, and there's nothing we can do about it.

I took a short breath and said, "The atoms in that lady's thighs don't give a shit if she goes power-walking three days out of the week, or if she bathes in rocky-rocky-road ice cream for an hour a night. She doesn't matter, and she doesn't even know it."

"David, I stand impressed," I heard back.

We laughed like we were in grade school.

I wish I could remember if our meeting was planned, or if the universe thought Maura and I had been apart too long, and decided to screw with us just to show us who was in charge.

I had a friend at the sleep clinic who would have no problem supplying me with the right combination to my insomnia lock, so without giving it more than a second's thought, I made an appointment to be checked out immediately.

Before I drone on and on about how whenever I wanted to go to sleep, I'd ask the assistance of a prescription bottle, let's make sure it's clear that there's nothing *wrong* with that at all. I can hear you turning your ears away now.

Drugs are bad. Drugs are bad. Keep repeating it to yourself. If you don't, you might become me. I'm wrong; terrible and depraved for what I do.

Stop right there.

Don't move. Not one inch.

Nothing is *inherently* right or wrong; if everything in our enlightened, tolerating world is subjective, then the notions of right and wrong belong completely in the time of the caveman. If, even after this fact is known to you, you still know right and wrong "in your hearts", I certainly feel . . . Well, you have my sympathies.

Maura shared this fully. She knew it like church doctrine.

If there's no right and wrong, can anything make a difference? To "make a difference" in the world, there must be a wrong to be righted; something over which something else can prevail. But if right and wrong are purely subjective, as they are, you can make all the difference you want, for the good of society, but you have to keep in mind that to those on the other side, you may have performed a great injustice.

You shouldn't feel so good about yourself, what with all the hurt you're causing.

It was pretty straightforward, really.

How many hours of sleep have you been getting over the past month?

How's your appetite and diet lately?

Any major stressors that weren't there before?

Have you had any trouble going to the bathroom?

When was the last time you had sexual intercourse?

He always asked the same questions. There was paperwork that had to be done for these sorts of things. Of course, for me to get what I wanted, I had to provide the right answers. And I always did.

Whether or not the relaxers were an addiction, this didn't concern me. It's not like it would have been an accomplishment. It doesn't take much for a man to become addicted to something. Anything can become an addiction, and anythings are a dime a dozen.

The scent of a hot dog at a baseball game. Waking up on a lazy, rainy day and sleeping an extra hour. Driving that extra five miles per hour over the speed limit. Novelty candies. The Internet. Stuffed animals.

There are people who can't reach orgasm without certain smells. The scent of a candle, for example. There are people who can't go to the gym without their workout socks. There are people who can't write without their fifty-dollar, gold-tipped pens. Addiction is everywhere. It's just that not everyone is enlightened enough to reach out with tracked-up arms and accept it.

I welcome it. It's a character attribute. It's the Barney to my Fred; the bacon to my eggs. I know I exist, because a part of me needs something else on a molecular level. Maybe *that's* right. Maybe *that's* salvation.

Redemption with a prescription pad. Listen to me. I'm beginning to sound like I feel sorry for myself. Or that you should feel sorry for me. Nothing of the sort. This is retrospection talking, now. Hindsight, twenty-twenty vision. Twenty-ten, even.

"If you put that thing on my breast, I'm going to tear your dick off through your neck," came the voice in the room next to mine. I would have laughed, but I felt something else instead.

It was like an extinguished cigarette butt smoldering in my chest.

I recognized the voice—I knew exactly who it belonged to.

I knew it like I knew the number of scars on my legs. I knew it like I knew how many states there were. I knew it like everything I could still remember.

"Dammit, I'm serious. Get that, that, whatever—"

"It's just an electrode, ma'am," came the interruption from the doctor.

"Whatever it is. I don't want it on me!" Maura was trying her hardest to make this point clear to the man.

"And it's going in the center of your chest, so we can record some readings about your heart before we go into the slumber room," he said. "Please, ma'am."

All this came through an air conditioning vent connecting my room and hers. I jumped to my feet, forgetting—or perhaps not caring about it at all—that my doctor friend would return in only a moment, and pushed the exam bed up against the wall underneath the vent. I tore the slippery paper from the bed and jumped on it, standing as tall as I could to make my head level with the connection.

I was there, and so was she. If the vent had been a phone receiver, I would have thought of ten things to say to her. As it wasn't, I was dry.

She continued to argue with the doctor. She didn't care if he put leeches on her chest; she just wanted a little excitement. Didn't want the experience to be static. Turn and cough. Legs up. Next, please.

Giving the guy a hard time was probably making her wet, knowing her. Her own mental erection.

Sometimes, people need to feel that wall in front of them. They need to hear the noise. They need to know that they're not in control, and things that will happen will happen regardless of what they do. Just like next Wednesday, you can't avoid fate. You can wear those white shoes that compliment your green housedress, but the purple sedan that clashes is still going

to scatter your plastic fingernails across the sidewalk when its driver loses consciousness from a myocardial infarction that could have been prevented had doctor's appointments been kept. Hey, sometimes you gotta go to the client's house to close the deal. You have to take care of the customer. Tell that to Anne and her pretty green housedress.

And if she doesn't learn what the front of that car feels like, then it wasn't really going to happen anyway, was it?

It's just fate's carrot, all over again. Big and phallic. Just when you thought you were home.

Anxiety, noun.

A state of uneasiness and apprehension, as about future uncertainties.

Also: *Psychiatry*. A state of apprehension, uncertainty, and fear resulting from the anticipation of a realistic or fantasized threatening event or situation, often impairing physical and psychological functioning.

I couldn't see anything through the vent, despite my efforts, so I just listened. Waited. Tried to say something back.

In the unlikely event of a water landing, pretend you thought you smelled smoke coming from the vent.

I was on my tiptoes on top of the table when the doctor eased back into the room. As if someone knew about his dirty little prescription pad. Tainted by who-knows-how-many addicts and compulsives and cheats and liars.

We say everything we need to say to get what we need. Even if it's just the perception of need, we need it. It's never about feeling *good*, it's about feeling *not-bad*. It's getting back to zero.

The Lockheed Martin SR-71A Blackbird reconnaissance plane leaks fuel through expansion joints when it's "cold"—that is, not flying and on the ground. When the plane reaches cruising altitude—usually around eighty-five thousand feet above sea level—and climbs to a comfortable mach two or three, the entire plane expands and stretches, sometimes as much as an entire foot, sealing the leaks. It's for this reason the planes often take off without full fuel tanks, being fueled during flight after the leaks have vanished.

It has to push as hard as possible just to get to normal.

Internal bodily fluids start to vaporize at sixty-three thousand feet.

The doctor closed the door just hard enough to let me know he saw me standing up there like a crazy person. I got that jittery feeling you get in your chest, that flush when someone's caught you doing something peeping toms hide video cameras to catch for *posterity*. Like the oxygen concentration of the room just changed.

In the unlikely event of a sudden cabin depressurization, oxygen masks will fall.

At fifty thousand feet, you lose consciousness instantaneously without supplemental oxygen.

I spun around and stupidly tried to explain how I thought I smelled smoke, and felt a little dizzy all of a sudden. He knew it was shit, and knew I knew he was thinking it.

*Fucking addicts. There's always a setup. I bet he's gonna want some diazepam now.*

I felt so much more free than him. Lab coat, tie. Forms and drug company reps. Little Post-It pads in the shape of heads, with the names of prescription drugs on them. Paxil. Xanax. Zithromax. The kind of words Scrabble champions are made of.

I listened to Maura's voice from the other room underneath all of the noise from mine. I imagined the face I'd never seen; the person I'd never really met before. I conjured images of Ellery Constance from high school. Three-quarter-inch-flat brown hair that ended tucked two

inches below the bottom of her ear. Cheeks pinker than Valentine's Day decorations. Eyes like blue tulips. A slightly cherubic smile.

Adrienne Companionship.

Olivia Solace.

Edith Comfort.

I could have told you the taste of each cascading flood of endorphins streaming through my brain.

I asked my friend, the doctor, what he had in the way of antidepressants. Something to drown some things out with. Just something light, for an afternoon.

Fluoxetine, 20 mg.

He left the room and went wherever he went when he did what he'd always done for me.

It's called an *enabler*.

I sprung back up to the vent and almost shouted it, I said what she'd sure to have understood, "Parents pay money to have their children's initials embroidered on the top of their backpacks for grade school, like some Fortune 500 company logo."

For that moment, I swear to you that vent was a telephone.

