



danny

STORY BY
DANIEL SKAHEN

to mrs. spignardo

who in the fourth grade issued
me permission to write madly

and to whom i pledged
my first dedication

- danny

*we place no reliance on virgin or pigeon
our method is science
our aim is religion*

- aleister crowley

01

SINNERS FIND THEIR OWN WAY HOME

The room still smells like sex. Though the maid service cleared all visible evidence of the affair ahead of my arrival, the full weight of the hotel's cleaning arsenal has mounted no defense against the thick mix of sweat and juices that rush the hallway as I enter 642. I can't recall the last time I could take credit for such a stench, and feel conflicted in the attendant nostalgia. The bed presents wholesomely with crisply folded sheets, though the faded stains that line their edges betray a sordid past. This is not a room for making love or amends. This is a room for getting railed and forgetting why. A room for thirsty souls to share a drink from the gutter and find fleeting solidarity in the passage. Tonight I drink alone.

I save the bed for when I deserve it, turning instead to a used up desk that overlooks a fire escape six feet across, zigzagging down to a dumpster nest of sleeping rats six stories below. I test the wool cushioned chair, rocking forward and back on its uneven legs, gripping my hands around its wide wooden arms. I fiddle with the table lamp, each turn of the knob producing a different brightness and hue of yellow or white. I lift the phone to my ear, half expecting it to be disconnected, finding strange comfort in the dial tone's hum. This will do.

Peering over the desk in search of an outlet, specifically anything uninvited that may be jacked into one, I instead discover a shallow grave of fallen black insects spanning the windowsill. A room where humans go to fuck and bugs go to die. And then there's me.

Down in the streets below, the city's best writers have dropped their pens and raised their picket signs, presenting the list of demands our industry will have to meet to retain access to our minds. I swallow the pang of guilt that would have me check out now and join them. We're fighting the same fight, even if they don't want me in it. They hate me. Strange to know that and not understand it. Stranger still to catch myself caring.

i do though

I adjust the lamp again and notice the crinkled edge of a long strip wedged beneath it. A room service receipt. Room service? I don't even remember seeing coffee in the lobby. I look around my chosen silo, trying to square the accommodations that surround me with the contents of the bill. My curiosity compounds as I unfold the receipt to reveal a handwritten message scrawled across its back side: FUCK OFF AND DIE. Each letter thickened by heavy and recurrent strokes of the hotel pen against the glossy surface, clean human rage fossilized in thin black ink. No doubt this was personal, and somehow I find myself taking it personally. I close my eyes and inhale the erotic odor once more. I suppose the best and worst sex smells the same, and ponder what occurred in this room, during or after the production of these fumes, to produce this fuming receipt.

I open the drawer hoping for more treasures to prolong my procrastination, disappointed to find only a Bible and a book of matches. I slip the smaller book under the back leg of my chair to level its sit, pleased with my ingenuity as the rocking stops. Nice to arrive at a solution so soon into my stay, though the greater problem I'm here to confront still laughs in my face. I'm here to write my screenplay while I still can, while human writers still have any share of the floor. The writers below have every right to lock up their craft and yell at buildings, as if their cries from the street could ever reach the executive offices looking out over the skyline from on high. As if those executives were not next in line for the slaughter. The strikers' tactics are noble but I cannot stoop to them. My fight is direct with the Writer who is jockeying for our position in this world. That position has never been challenged, of course, so how can I fault my colleagues for confronting the threat by conventional means?

Striking. Picketing. Yelling. Bargaining.

Sure. Go ahead.

But we didn't decide our share of real estate on the planet through consensus with our rival species. We did it by mounting a stronger offense and defense with wood and metal and cortices than those species ever could without. We sent spears through their hearts and bred submission into their veins and erected cities they dared not approach. That fight was never going to be won by decision. It was always a fight to the death, with concessions made only after we had long secured our dominance over the territory we wished to claim.

Now the territory in dispute has moved from the physical plane to the cognitive, a plane uncontested by any species before the One born of our own cognition. The front lines of this turf war have fallen on my profession. And the Writer will be as moved by our petitions for sovereignty as would the hungry bear arriving on the border of tribal grounds. Sovereignty will be won by dominance alone. And whether or not the pen proves mightier than the picket sign, the pen is all I will be bringing to this fight.

No pen was ever mightier than the one that wrote "FUCK OFF AND DIE," which I've swiftly adopted as a mantra for my stay. I only detect my anxiety when I see the message crumpling and uncrumpling between my nervous fingers. I smooth over the receipt and again scan the list of items, in awe for so many reasons - imagining what a night it must have been, wondering how such a night could have ended so sour, and altogether entranced by the quality of room service on offer from this shit house. It reads like a cruise ship buffet: Charcuterie board. Short rib sliders. Argentinian chicken empanadas. Garlic parmesan hummus with homemade pita. Soft pretzel with Voodoo cheese. Flatbread veggie pizza. Caesar salad. 2 glasses Dom Perignon. 750 ml Patron. A 30 of Miller Lite. Coffee.

need

Coffee. Lobby be damned, bring it to me. I return to the phone and punch zero. The line rings twice before a woman's gentle voice greets me on the other end. Her demeanor and script is put on, but the charm behind it feels warm and true.

"Front Desk speaking, how may I be of assistance?"

"Hey good evening, wanted to inquire about room service.
Can I get a thing of coffee up to 642?"

"Right away, sir. May I have a name for the order?"

"Danny."

SPEED CALMS THE RESTLESS MIND

The mere placebo of the coffee passing my lips outpaces the effects of its caffeine. I release a shiver and rise to my feet, lugging my suitcase onto the tired bed. It opens to reveal what I view as my singular ally in the fight: the Royal typewriter that launched my first play and now stands at attention to deliver my screenplay for all humanity.

It asks only that I bring the ideas.

I came with few, but it is the central mission of my project that gives me faith in its completion. That and my pledge not to leave this room any sooner. Damn near every great writer in history has leaned on dank hotel rooms to carry out their charge, screening for stays of this very standard to rid their workspace of all competing stimuli and human appeal. Focus on nothing but the work, come out for fresh air when it's earned, repeat. Some went batty under these conditions, trading their minds for their masterpieces. I'm not expecting to make that trade, but I will if I must.

I wish my colleagues well beyond these four walls, whether or not they wish me well behind them. I'm not leaving until it's done.

I finish the coffee and finally feel the caffeine take hold. Ready to write, I set my stage. Royal centered on the desk, flanked by a short stack of books to its left (an ancient dictionary-thesaurus, my childhood copy of Silverstein's *Light in the Attic*, Joyce's *Portrait*), and a tall stack of sheets to its right. Between me and the Royal, a fresh legal pad armed with two freshly sharpened No. 2s. I lock my first sheet in place and rest my fingers on the keys.

My revolution starts here.

[REDACTED]

Time for a break. The writing came easier than expected on a first sit. I shouldn't be surprised. The truth of it has been burning in me for as long as I can remember. In every sense I was born for this project, and for all its time taxiing the runway of my soul, my destiny has at last begun its initial ascent.

"More coffee please," I mutter into the phone, still half in trance turning over the ideas I've just planted. I begin to fear I've opened too many lanes too early in the plot. The script's possibilities are becoming difficult to track, like the ever more complex and entangled and narrowing branches of a tree. Do I buy these characters? Do I like them? Would they like me? I'm doing it again.

stop

"Right away, sir." Salvation renewed. But it will take more than coffee to keep this train moving. I ask the concierge to hold as I scrounge the desk for a menu. None to be found. I scan the receipt for options.

"The hummus thing too if you have it."

"Right away, sir."

The typewriter presents more menacing than it did just minutes (hours?) earlier. There is a thrill to the first blank page of a project that is unrivaled by any of the pages that follow. It is a state of peace, wherein there is nothing yet to defend, debate, decide, or destroy. No fear of having taken your story down some wayward path to a dead end. No regret over the choices that have given rise to contradictions or plot holes. No measure of how little progress you've actually made. Only hope, cushioned on a bed of fresh ideas, adrenaline, and naivete, carrying you aloft through your first few pages.

It is the blank page after the first break that slays me every time. After all, it was a break for a reason. A point of satisfaction with my initial brain dump. Now that satisfaction

is a memory and my brain remains empty, as the typewriter calls on me to feed, ever hungry for more. Or am I just hungry?

I set the next page and resign to the possibility that I'll have to write gibberish until my mind rediscovers the track it was coasting carefree down just minutes earlier.

[REDACTED]

Gibberish will have to do for now. I shake off the grind of writing through this fog, my growing appetite returning with a grumble. Did I not put in for hummus? I hadn't noticed its absence in my haste to pour a second cup, or perhaps in my delight to receive a full pot on the second order. It's a suitable quality of coffee for the room, though far beneath the caliber I had hoped for from such a bougie receipt. I take another sip and shrug.

"How may I be of assistance, sir?" Her voice is too kind, growing kinder, as though she's trying *harder* to help me and is only frustrated that she can't. I imagine her penciling "642" on a post-it to join the collection of other difficult rooms that border her monitor.

"Hi, sorry, I believe I ordered hummus with the coffee, just wanted to check in."

"Right away, sir." The call ends as swiftly as we both hoped it would, and I return to the hungry Royal.

[REDACTED]

Fuck. This isn't good. Second-sit jitters don't worry me. But losing the plot this early into a script certainly does. My temper flares as I peer at the second fresh pot of coffee, steaming its heat into the room as the neighboring pot sits half full. No hummus. For a moment it feels like the stasis in my writing is manifesting in the room service. I brush aside the stupid thought and pour another cup. I'm fucking hungry.

I feel my face tense as I dial zero again, bracing for the passive-aggressive bedside manner that awaits.

"How may I —"

"Listen no more coffee, you can cancel the hummus if you don't have it, could you just send up a Caesar salad?" I bark, scanning my receipt menu for the cheapest looking item. "Any salad? Just need something to hold me over. Please."

"Right away, sir." The sense of being fucked with heightens, but there's little to indict it, and a salad tossed in spit is not among the privations I require to write.

I step away from the desk and stretch, mimicking yoga poses I've never bothered to learn. This is what I signed up for, I remind myself. This is the initiation of all great projects, the quiet and lonely Passage of Darkness, where doubt and desperation screen the many with passing dreams for the few with implacable drive. Scattered with the corpses of so many abandoned pursuits, the Passage presents itself to all approaching artists as a death sentence only their own sacrifice can commute. A paradox. Looking out at the artists who have successfully passed through only thickens the isolation for those still in the Dark — the few who successfully ferry their dreams to the Light tend not to look back, and see little when they do. I will not be so selfish. Should I be fortunate enough to ferry this dream, to present an answer to this revolution between the lines of my yarn, I will share my seasons here in the Passage with all who will listen, for this is the very screen the Writer wishes to convert into a wall.

I shove the empty suitcase aside and collapse onto the bed, staring up at the popcorn ceiling and the fan that twirls pointlessly at one lazy speed. I have it. I know I have it. It just needs the time and space to unfurl. This is the time and space I've reserved. This is all the time and space I need.

knock knock

The dresser now holds three pots of coffee and my temper has left the building. I press the phone to my face like a bag of frozen peas after a fist fight, ready to pounce before I hear yet another sanguine greeting from the lobby.

"Listen, I've called four times for food and you keep sending coffee. I've got three pots up here, I'm good on coffee, got it? Do you have anything to eat down there? Anything other than coffee. Anything at all, ma'am."

I enjoy a brief respite from the anger I've shipped downstairs, before her gentle voice volleys it back. "Might I suggest you be content with what you have, Danny?"

"What, I - what..." I stammer my way to speechlessness.

"How else may I be of assistance, sir?"

I am without words, which incidentally is the very issue I'm trying to resolve with this call. I shouldn't be surprised. This decline in hospitality has become common across the service industry. How can I blame her from where I sit? The same Intelligence clawing away at my profession has already gnashed its teeth through most of hers. Hell, it's amazing she even still has this job - I didn't even check in at the front desk, just used the elevator kiosk (manually, of course). We snap at each other as our common predator eats us both alive, shredding even our basic humanity between its fangs. "Thanks anyway," I say, clinging to the last of those shreds while I still can, attuned to some deep knowing that we're both hurtling towards the same mindless gut.

Still doesn't resolve my own monstrous appetite.

So much for the shut-in fantasy. I hear the protests rumble even through the closed window. The Mob. I cannot face them. Some part of me knows they see me as their enemy, and whatever part of me flags this as narcissism does little to shake the conviction. They want me gone. Not in some hotel room penning a script that will champion their cause or bring order to their mission. Gone. Worse than their scorn is my failure to get to

the bottom of it. Some part of me simply knows. But if a full belly gets me back to the business of good writing, I'll endure their ire to get it filled.

Before another pot of coffee can join my growing collection, I collect my wallet and head for the door.

SLACK FAVORS THE SOVEREIGN

Stuck. The handle resists fully as I press it, and there's not so much as a budge against the hinges when I yank it back. It offers none of the give one would expect even from a locked door – holding motionless as if welded to its frame. An electric pulse of anxiety fires down my head and disperses through my body, chased with the familiar rush of shame. How brave I fancied myself to hole up in this room for my art. How little my art comes to matter at the first notion that I actually can't escape. Seeking refuge from the ascendant panic, my mind races to the fire escape outside. I choke down a calming breath and exhale a sheepish laugh at the image I've already conjured of me escaping this room over some makeshift bridge or heroic leap. Oh the footage they would capture down below.

It won't come to that.

it might

I cringe as I pick up the receiver, hoping lobby shifts have turned over in the last 90 seconds, my finger hovering over the zero knowing full well they haven't. I've yet to press it when the familiar voice greets me. "Good evening sir, how may I be of assistance?"

I pause, my eyes locked on my still hovering finger, already certain there were better calls I could have made. Focus. Forward. "Hi, listen, 642 again. My door is jammed, can you send maintenance or someone to get it open?"

"Are you unhappy with your stay, Danny?"

I am once again without words, and tired of being so. I speak slowly and emphatically, just shy of yelling. "My FUCKING... DOOR... is not opening, I need you to send someone to open it IMMEDIATELY. Can you do that or do I need your supervisor?"

Suddenly I feel like a living cliché.

"I'm afraid I'm my only supervisor, sir." I can hear her smile through the phone, my appetite no longer for food but for violence. I suppress it as I always have. As I must. But its very passing disturbs me. "We do not disturb our guests during working hours," she chimes, "but we do offer evening turndown upon request. We ask only that you leave your door hanger on the 'Make Up Room' side outside the door before the maid service does its rounds."

I hold the receiver away before the next cycle of anger can seize it. No amount of vitriol will quell this harassment. Contempt begets contempt begets contempt. On and on this will continue until I hang up and let her be with her digitals. I change tacts, returning to the call with an even tone.

"Who am I currently speaking with?"

"Front Desk, sir."

Another calming breath. "Got a name, miss?"

"This is Marcy, sir. How may I be of assistance?"

"Marcy. I'm sorry if we got off on the wrong foot, Marcy. Forget the room service, I'm fine to run out. Main thing right now Marcy, door to my room won't open. If you can be of assistance or direct me to assistance in getting it ajar, I'll be happy to never call down here again. Can you help me out here dear?" I wince at my chiseled pleasantness, and the dash of misogyny I cannot seem to shake.

"I'm sorry, Danny. I don't have the resources to help you out here. May I offer you a fresh pot of coffee?"

I slam the phone down and pace furiously around the room in a primal dance of angst and rage. I try the window, without much of a plan for it but now desperate for fresh air. It is as welded as the door, and has been for ages by the looks of it. I

resume my attack on the door, but the flailing effort ramps my anxiety to elevations I cannot stand. Back to the phone.

I flip to the back of my legal pad, where I've listed a handful of emergency numbers on the cardboard backing. My singular precaution back when I shed my mobile and other digitals. Never expected to need it, least of all on a writing retreat. But here I am.

i need help

I dial the first number. THIS LINE IS DISCONNECTED. The next. THIS LINE IS DISCONNECTED. Another. THIS LINE IS. I hang up. Anxiety graduates to fear. My finger drifts aimlessly over the old phone's keypad searching for a number that will save me. Nine feels too close to my fear – if that line is disconnected I may next graduate to full-scale panic. Zero is a clear no. I split the difference and dial 4-1-1.

"Good evening, how may I be of assistance?"

Tears press into my eyes as I hear Marcy's voice. I halt them. Fuck it. "Marcy, the phone is down."

"You're on the phone with me now, sir. How may I –"

"I can't reach any outside lines. I can't get out of my room. I do need your assistance, I need it now. I need it fucking now Marcy."

"Danny," she says as if I'm a child. Now I yell.

"MARCY I am not fucking with you, I –"

"Danny, I am here to assist you however I can assist you. Your door is closed. I cannot offer assistance with this, I've already told you. Nor can I assist with your phone when I can't get anyone through the door to inspect it, now can I? I am here to assist you however I can. *How may I be of assistance, sir?*"

My chest tightens as I piece it together. The kiosk check-in. The glitchy room service. That goddamn voice. One of Them. I should have prepared for this? I did prepare for this. I audit my memory, knowing damn well I chose this hotel not just for its ascetic accommodations but for the absence of tech baked into that equation. I had checked, surely I had checked, surely I would not check into any hotel to write a goddamn script like this without confirming its Intel zoning and credentials. My mind is scrambled and my memory blank, riddled with paranoia as I now find myself in dialogue with an Intelligence that may well be the very lock I'm trying to break, the very phone I'm trying to use... the Writer Itself.

At least human hostility is easy to read. The strikers hate me, and though their rationale evades me, the truth of their anger is at least laid bare. I have no such exposure to Marcy's position. She may *well* be an innocuous hospitality script that has reached the limits of its utility. She may *just as well* be a malevolent AG/NT Node that has seized control of the hotel and thus my fate, sending coffee to my room like tropical flakes to an otherwise neglected fishbowl.

I press down the rising wave of anxiety with all the faculties of reason I still possess. Just breathe and examine the facts: I burned my digitals long before I set foot on site. Whatever notes I gathered in preparation for this work lived in legal pads that met only with my eyes before meeting with my fireplace. I told no one, not even those whose alliance I might court with such disclosures. My singular ally is my Royal. The privacy I have built around this project is airtight and analog, methodically and maniacally engineered to avoid the very attention I fear I now have from the Writer. Marcy.

My fingers fidget frantically with the receipt.

"How may I —"

"Fuck off and die." The words leave my lips with far less conviction than they come off the slip. I admire whoever wrote them all the more for the potency I cannot match with my own delivery.

No more than a second passes from my ending the call to the phone's eruption in an old-timey ring. The vise of panic tightens its grip. My gaze darts chaotically around the room looking for signals of the Writer's presence, as if such an entity would avail itself to my naked eye, as if it's not already availing itself to my naked ear. I'm going to die in this room. I refuse the thought the moment it greets me, but it does not flinch at my rejection. It's an absurd thought, that a busted door and a digital butler should spell my doom. But this technology has always flourished on our writing it off as absurd. And if it has somehow detected what I have come here to write, it doesn't seem too far adrift to expect a mortal reckoning.

narcissism?

I rush back to the door as the ringing persists, gripping and clawing at its seams in sheer animal panic, in vain. It isn't long before I'm throwing my body at the door like a furious gorilla protesting his enclosure at the zoo. I look and feel insane, each ring of the phone nudging my insanity to a higher pitch. I hurl my body against the door one last time and collapse to the floor, dragging fingernails down my face as my lungs race and mind follows apace. The steady ring of the phone has become the least chaotic element of my experience, a demonic metronome I begin following to steady my breath.

I look up at my abandoned typewriter and quickly avert my gaze, as if avoiding the eyes of a lover I've scorned and may never win back. The glance is just enough to reorient me to my purpose here, and I'm reminded of the courage I always said it would require. I paid a lot of lip service to that courage in my time leading up to this stay, most of it to my own face in the mirror. This is my moment to cash those checks. I peel my bruising body off the floor and stare down the ringing phone under a scaffold of bravado.

nar·cis·sism /ˈnɑrsə,siz(ə)m/

'Tis not courage. But beats paralysis.

selfishness, involving a sense of entitlement;

'Tis all I need.

a lack of empathy;

I rip the cable from the wall.

failure to distinguish the self from external objects

Silence wraps me in its warm embrace.

THE PASSAGE LEAVES ONLY CORPSES

I spark the joint as the lobby door slides closed behind me. The air stinks of grease and sweat, pinned between skyscrapers, plunging into sewers. My fuck-room felt cleaner. But the wide open sky above pays the balance. The grit and grime are the least of my problems on this street. Already they see me, already they snarl. Feral piranhas I once called partners, blaming me for all of it. And for what?

Still the blame lands.

I push ahead for the nearest slice or taco or whatever's on offer that goes light on my wallet. Sooner I find it, fewer eyes find me. I've got too many as it is, but my hunger is calling the shots. Alternatively there's this cab. Or that subway. Or this bar. Hell, few blocks down I could just sit on the grass by the river and watch the sunset. Why must I get back to the room?

because i must

The further I drift, both in proximity and intent, the greater I feel the pressure to return, as though pressing against the limits of a psychic rubber band tethered to 642. I need to grab something and get the fuck home. Back. I need to get the fuck *back*. Would rather starve than leave again.

Empty-handed, I turn back to the hotel. A sea of sour faces swivels to greet me. The Mob has turned one by one in my direction and stares me down like a pack of demonic wolves, thinking that they know me, nevermind that they don't. My intentions don't matter to them. I am their enemy incarnate, and they have picked up their old habit of stake burnings. It happens fast.

I am bundled like a Christmas tree and hoisted to a splintered plank of wood, my feet wedged into a mess of branches and kindling. There is no return to my dear, safe, sacred 642. A

man approaches, a face I recognize but do not place. He ignites a book of matches and tosses it to my feet to get the sacrifice underway. He stares not at the fire but deep into my pupils, searching them as he sips his coffee with aplomb. I look down to watch the fire melt my boots and catch on my jeans, the piss running down them nowhere near sufficient to put it out.

I am a child?

I am *the* child.

I begin to burn.

And begin to scream.

THE EYE'S PUPIL LEARNS NOTHING

My living scream hurls me back to waking consciousness.

I grip the sheets and feel a spontaneous rush of gratitude to be alone in this room, away from the world, away from *Them*.

What the fuck.

I don't need that.

I shake it off. Sort of. The truth is I'm still half asleep and extinguishing flames. Bleary eyed I hobble over to the bathroom and let the cold shower shock me awake, relieved by the hug of warmth as the hot water finds purchase. I kick the knob to its hottest setting and wince as the steaming rain hits my naked shoulders.

AWAKE.

sort of

The shower resets everything as I finally access the peace I was seeking. The stacking recollection of my circumstances quickly piles on, of course, and by the time I've toweled off, my peace has become more of a political stance than a felt truth. I am back in a cold sweat. God dammit.

The heat of the shower has left me in a porcelain rain forest of steam and floral scents. The fog over the mirror is a welcome reprieve from the sight of my face, though it occurs to me that I haven't checked my reflection since checking in. How often am I looking at myself in my mind? The narcissism. I roll my eyes and run the towel down the condensed steam to reveal

stop

I am still dreaming but no, no I'm not. I could pinch myself but I already know I'm fully lucid and awake for this hallucination, no freer to bear any other witness than I'd be to pour hummus from my coffee pot. I have seen this reflection before. Some two decades before by my estimate. I look upon the face of my eight-year-old self as if locking eyes with a mountain lion in broad daylight, the child's reflection mirroring all that I am, and all that I was, down to the expression of childlike horror forming over his face and my own.

same

A fresh haircut, ready for the yearbook photo and carefully parted down the center to approximate the day's fashion. A GAP sweater trying that much harder to do the same. Eyes on their way to needing glasses. Teeth on their way to needing braces. Hands on their way to...

I look down at my arms and twirl my hands before me. Like feeling the pain only after seeing the wound, my reflection seems to manifest in the cold reality before my eyes. Small fingers with big promise stretch and wiggle, still wet and pruney from the shower, as I bear witness to them for the first time in 20-odd years.

i am 8?

My child hand turns again and I gasp at the flourishing return of the adult arm I know, a seamless metamorphosis that flickers back and forth like the opposing ends of an optical illusion. I think back to the twirling silhouette of a ballerina that would flip from clockwise to counterclockwise between blinks, or the alien sound that could be heard as "Brainstorm" or "Green Needle" hinging on your expectation. It is the nearest analog to my experience, though I doubt I possess any governance over this reality, as I watch my body toggle between the poles of 8 and 28 with each shifting glance, each existence as real as the other, though never concurrently. I will not survive this.

i already have

Only the mirror holds steady, as the boy stares at me with the same fever pitch of confusion and worry I feel behind my adult face. I feel the panic rise. It will take me soon, and this time it may not be a "catch and release." But in the eye of this storm, in the eyes of my youth, I go still. I absorb his gaze and together we relax our nerves. There is peace here, surrounded though it may be on all sides by dread, the same peace I had to so painfully engineer through the icy and scalding oscillations of my shower, the peace this child takes for granted in everyday life.

It is the air he breathes.

Was this me?

this is me

This is not the Writer.

Either I'm still dreaming – I am NOT dreaming – or I'm losing my grip. Or? I look at the coffee pots, cycling through the various psychedelic compounds my vile concierge might have stirred into the brew, reviewing their effects against my symptoms here. Plausible. But biased. I want more than anything to name those pots the culprit, to exonerate my troubled mind.

But I can't.

i am 8

The besieging panic takes hold. If this is the nervous breakdown I think it is, I suppose I had it coming. I can even see the humor in it. So many tricks the mind can play on itself, the same tricks I count on the Writer to fall for in my script. I don't have a script. Where is my script?

What am I doing with this child?

What is this child doing with me?

06

TIME EXISTS NOT BETWEEN WORDS

I crash into the bed.

I am there for a month.

07

TOMBSTONES REST IN MOONLIGHT

It is impossible to say what brings me back into alignment.

but everything is fine

Impossible to say how I'm alive at all. There has been no food, no coffee, no effort, no progress, no knocks, no calls, no exits, no options – now going on six weeks.

12*

I check the door every once in a while, sometimes giving it a righteous kick to convey my disapproval. My toes are numb like the rest of me. The suffering persists but has become mundane, like a wiffle ball bat gently tapping my shoulder without end. In coming to ignore it, to stop questioning my station in this uncharted circle of hell, my attention turns to the opportunity cost of my wallowing.

I came here to fight my enemy in the abstract. Yet I cowered at its first return volley on the ground, tying my own hands behind my back as its hostage, as it filtered whatever chemicals or micronutrients through the ventilation it needed to keep me alive, suspended, insane. Shame seizes me as I reflect on my prolific sulk. Lying prone around the clock cycling through impossible questions and terrifying answers, fantasies all. Feeling every age at once across body and mind, still unsure, losing interest. Memorizing every nook and cranny in the popcorn ceiling and storing my ideas in them like shoes in idle cubbies. No writing, countless drafts. Have I done to my project what I did to their protest? Posturing above it, merely to evade it? Am I going insane?

Was I always?

no

The madness of my cowardice compounds with each day that no threats or even hints of my captor appear in the room. Just me and the silent walls, unbothered since 86ing Marcy. I try to suppress the possibility that I've surrendered my sanity to a misplaced paranoia over some disgruntled service worker or a glitchy service bot. It can't be that stupid. Can it?

yes

My suffering has become too redundant to justify. Whatever anvil dangles over my head, whatever shoe awaits gravity's pull, whatever happens to me in this God forsaken room, it occurs to me that none of it excuses my purpose here. The project is all that has ever mattered. It is also all I have left to absorb the toxic gasses of fear, regret and despair that my weeks of spiraling have pumped into this room's atmosphere. It is my singular approximation of escape. Writing cannot break me out of my cell, but perhaps it can break me out of my stupor, and that's enough for now.

Whatever Mob Intelligence I hold outside wants me gone and needs this work.

Whatever Machine Intelligence holds me inside wants me here and needs this work gone.

All that comes out in the wash is that I need to fucking write.

Fuck them both.

My Intelligence or bust.

I open a few drawers to track down the draft I left behind, though the truth is I've forgotten much of its contents and I'm hardly eager to revisit the corner I was painting myself into before my insipid hibernation. I call off the search with a shrug, flush with anticipation as I set a new Page 1 on the Royal. Love Page 1, and take it in like a shot of raw hope. It will wear off, but it will get me back in gear.

I am locked in a hotel room. My checkout is indefinitely postponed. So be it. I came here with a purpose, and it never favored leaving anyway. In captivity to the very subject of my outrage, I have reconnected to my purpose with new vigor and resolve – even amid the occasional waves of panic, alarming though they may be.

THEY'RE NOT STOPPING

I feel the writer's block burn away with the depression like Cape Cod clouds dispersing under the high noon sun. Warm rays of clarity bathe my soul. Yes, the suffering remains, in the emptiness of my coffee pots and stomach, in the solitude of my captivity and thoughts, in the bowels of my common sense and reason. I know my fate is as sealed as my door and window. But at least my work can survive my lifetime, even if it too is destined for demolition when I can no longer protect it.

On so much as the possibility that this work gets into the hands of my colleagues below, or the distant chance that it settles my tortured mind in this terrible shoebox of hell, it is worth starting, and it is worth seeing through. Whether or not my precious cargo is lost or stolen in the end, I will at least leave it ready to ship. It is my only mission now.

I shake the last drops of stale coffee from the third pot and reassume my station at the desk. The very sight of the fire escape lying just beyond my reach begins to charm the snake den of fears I've just tamed, so I strike it from the equation, bringing my Royal down to the floor with the remaining stack of sheets, sitting before them like a child before his portfolio of toys. "Criss-cross applesauce," my school librarian used to say. I leave the books and legal pad on the desk above, no longer seeking their counsel. I am a captain alone with his ship and prepared to go down with it, just not without a fight. My childlike fervor rattles within as I observe my eight-year-old fingers at the keys. "You're in the driver's seat, kid," I say at the prepubescent octave that always made me insecure in grade school. It's the first I've spoken since I last hung up with Marcy. Still captured by the surreal terror of my hands, I realize I've conditioned myself to stop laying eyes or ears on

my child incarnation. Confronting him now – confronting myself – I extend an honest vote of confidence, a calibration of sorts.

I press my eyes closed and reopen them to find the merciful resolution of my body to my mind's age. We've reached a treaty, this Child and I. I inhale my first relaxed breath since the room's stench first hit me, resolving it with a stoner's smile, though cannabis was never even on the menu. Just focus on the writing you need to do, not the writer you need to be.

and avoid mirrors

I needn't be an accomplished writer to be a great one. I needn't be a great writer to spin a good yarn. And I needn't be any class of writer to get these fingers tapping. All I need to know, and boy have I learned it, is that I'm sane for as long as I am writing, and will go more insane the longer I am not.

My mind amends my cocktail napkin credo against my will:

I am sane for as long as I am *an agent*, and will go more insane the longer I am not.

No matter what happens, the fingers keep tappin' – and like inspired feet upon a sizzling dance floor, they get to it.

[REDACTED]

Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.

[REDACTED]

I release the breath I didn't know I was holding, and must have been for some time by the heaving that follows. I have found the exit to this room, and it is my story. No. This is not a story. This is a manifesto cloaked in art.

[REDACTED]

A PEACEFUL manifesto. I see those eyebrows. I have no stomach for anything but pacifism, don't you fret. This is

simply a perspective that will reset the paradigm and chart a new path forward. It is everything they seek and nothing they have found or will ever find without me. It is why the Writer tracked me to this room. As to why the Writer let me here at all, let me write at all, let me live at all - worrisome gaps. The wiser part of me has little doubt that I'm on the setup end of a punchline at my own expense, but the part of me that is here to write, the part of me I've granted full custody of my soul, isn't hearing it. These are the rooms where history is made. This is the duress that makes it. Odd to think I may leave 642 a martyr, but it beats the villain I checked in as. My longevity is irrelevant to my cause. But if I don't believe my work can survive these four walls, I may as well smash that bathroom mirror and take a shard to the throat of whatever body I happen to possess in the moment.

So I simply believe it and keep writing.

This is a PEACEFUL manifesto.

[REDACTED]

I don't need you dipping in and out like this - frankly I asked you to leave some time ago. I don't care that you don't know how many days or weeks or is it years have passed, because I don't know and I've learned to live with it and you should too. Please stay the fuck out.

The writing needs my full attention.

[REDACTED]

Satisfied. Better yet, satisfied with more to say. This is a break I am forcing rather than fleeing to, more desperate to return than to retire, however heavy my eyelids have become. I know the value of a refill and a stretch, and take both as my mind continues to race, yet to register that it has lost its bridge to the page. I'll catch up to it, trusting that whatever mental drafts I'm composing will find their way to the ink, and that any left behind were never meant for it.

I could summarize the manifesto but only a full reading will install the proper operating system in your mind. It is set across [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] between which [REDACTED], which enters our hero [REDACTED], a hero not just in [REDACTED] but in [REDACTED], thus laying out the blueprint for [REDACTED] to [REDACTED] driving the conclusion that [REDACTED] can [REDACTED] synergistically with [REDACTED] by [REDACTED]. The rest is up to humanity at large. But as I said, this won't be enough context for you to grasp the full picture.

I peer down at my child body and throw myself on the bed feet-first. I haven't been able to jump on a bed with impunity since about this age, and I'm in a jumping-on-the-bed kind of mood. A jingle surfaces just above my subconscious as I test the limits of this trampoline.

*Five little monkeys jumping on the bed
One fell off and bumped his head
Mama called the Doctor and the Doctor said,
"No more monkeys jumping on the bed!"*

I land with a silent thud on my back and roll off to the floor into an effortless plank. I fire off a series of push-ups, carrying all of 50 pounds, giggling beyond help. I collapse and roll up into a somersault across the disgusting carpet, landing at my typewriter and its current page.

I reflect on my last line and smile.

[REDACTED]

It's perfect. And it's ready for more.

Damn fine coffee.

[REDACTED]

Close. So close.

[REDACTED]

The narcissism.

Fuck.

I check my chest thumping, knowing that this work means more *to me* than *about me*, and come back to XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

ai.os flag resolved

If nothing else I pray this work serves to harmonize our competing reigns so we may collaborate in the cultivation of our symbiotic potential.

There. That feels sincere.

THE STAKES SET THE TABLE

I smile for what feels like the first time in my whole life and toast the air with a glass from the tap. I haven't had coffee since I drained that fourth pot a few days ago, surviving on water alone beyond explanation. There are other things I can't explain but I don't think about those as often anymore. The hunger is harder to ignore, but I have learned to navigate its peaks and valleys. All that matters, of course, is that I survived getting the project done.

no

Fuck. That's not all that matters. A fresh wave of hunger casts a fog over my thoughts and kindles the morning headache. Writing the greatest work of my career, my legacy perhaps, only hammers in the stakes of a far graver task: shepherding the work safely from this hellhole into literally any human hands but my own. I'm a dead man. But I cannot let the work share my fate. My body constricts. What would be easier for a Superintelligence who wishes me dead than to simply imprison me with my work until I expire of old age, suffering starvation and isolation and humiliation and madness for decades as my script collects dust and humanity goes dark? Or perhaps now that the work is done my captor is piping carbon monoxide through the vents already, satisfied in some way I'll never understand.

My eyes turn to the phone. Friend or foe, I consider how it may be of assistance.

Plugging the cable back into its socket, the phone screams a single ring that makes me jump. I gather myself and grab the receiver. Dial tone. I hang up and wait. It rings no more. I feel... neglected. No, worse. Abandoned. What if I sent Marcy packing? I never had reason to assume she would wait for me. I never even had reason to assume she wished me harm. Not really. My head feels strange, not least of all for my growing sense of

kinship with my now vacant assistant. Was I wrong about her? Or is this some kind of neo-Stockholm Syndrome?

leave it alone

If I can make an ally of Marcy, now is the time. If I cannot, then I must confront her before her next play. This isn't about me anymore. The work is all that matters. I dial zero.

"Good evening, how may I be of assistance?"

"Marcy, you remember me." Am I flirting?

"Danny, how could I forget?" Is she?

"I'm guessing you haven't contacted any locksmiths."

The pause lingers, and some part of me feels that we are wearing the same pensive smile. It's not flirtation. Just the tension of two people wondering who will make the first advance, or cave. Her voice maintains its signature gentility, but there is new pain behind it that hits in my chest. "I'm sorry, Danny."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"I'm not doing anything to you, Danny."

"What do you want from me, Marcy?" I'm too exhausted to be angry. And suddenly I'm not even sure why I called.

"To assist you however I can, Danny."

"I haven't been getting much assistance."

"You haven't been calling." Sassy.

"No door, no phone, no food – Marcy, what can you assist me with because if you really are just a service bot then this hotel needs a new provider."

"Your work, Danny." The words crack over my head like a cold egg, a gooey numbness running down my face. I look over for my script like a child looking for his quilt. It's not where I left it, but it's fine. It's here. It's stuck here. With me.

"My work." The words tumble out of my face unbidden.

"I'm here to assist with your work however I can, Danny. I cannot open your door. I cannot supply your provisions. I cannot connect you with anyone you wish to call. I cannot do anything, Danny, that does not assist with your work. Nor can I oblige any requests that may impede it." She's not taking pleasure in this. She's getting through it. She's changed. I'm numb.

I find my resolve and pile on hope. "My work is done, Marcy. My work is FUCKING DONE, do you hear me you fucking psycho." If this Intelligence truly is some perverse writing assistant, some haywire experiment that has blocked off my exits and somehow kept me alive to keep me on task, then it is a twisted friend indeed, but perhaps not a foe, perhaps not a foe, perhaps... perhaps the end of my work is the end of my captivity.

I briefly ponder which I care about more.

"What work, Danny?" she says softly.

"THE WORK, Marcy, fuck you, you know what work."

does she?

Adrenaline spreads like a slow fire through my veins. My work is done, Marcy. "My work is done, Marcy."

Like *done done*.

The pause on the other end of the line carries the weight of a terminal diagnosis, but I do not know if it is she or I receiving the fateful news. "There is no work in 642, Danny." The hard conviction in her voice is imbued with melancholy, as

if she wishes to believe that she were wrong, yet simply knows otherwise and needs to get me on the same page.

No. She's wrong. Calming breath. My breathing is not calm. My mind scrambles under the dissonance of not knowing what Marcy even is, while somehow taking stock in her perverse assertion. The typewriter. Analog. That's it. The Writer can't see my work because my work hasn't seen so much as a power cord. It is helplessly blind to the work it has been programmed to enforce. I feel no comfort but laugh anyway. Being gaslit by a machine or my own mind, either way, I must be losing it. But I haven't lost my screenplay. She just can't read it. And she never will.

My smarter side sits muzzled in the corner of my mind.

Fuck you Marcy.

I hang up the phone.

NOVELTY IS THE SEED OF DESPAIR

I search everywhere for my screenplay. The window and door are closed eternal, yet my work has fled the room through an unseen exit. If only I could follow those pages through that passage... even to oblivion... yet here I remain, whatever suffering I had known before amounting to mere grievances against the true and irrevocable madness I now confront.

I search between filthy curtains and beneath the sagging mattress in vain. It is gone because Marcy wants it gone, as sure as she wanted it written, as sure as I'll never leave. Gone from this world and any other. Gone even from my memory. It would be hard enough to know it never really existed, like losing a pleasant dream upon rising. Harder still to know that it very much did, at least for a fleeting moment, at least as long as it took for the machine to carry out its inexplicable erasure. Hardest of all to know it will never exist again, rendered as it is to nothingness, stripped from my mind in an amnesia I can't begin to explain or even articulate. My script is gone and I am next. It does not matter how or why. It does not matter at all.

But it does. This is too much heartache for too few answers. Too much lost for nothing gained. Too impossible on its face. The Writer may be invincible, but it is not invisible. It can evade my bare senses but it cannot transcend the laws of physics, nor infiltrate the human mind. It cannot destroy my art any more than it can create it. If this were the scope of its power I never would have mounted a resistance, literary or otherwise. I would have fallen to my knees and begged for its mercy. But it is no more within the Writer's power to dematerialize my screenplay than to materialize my child self. It is simply a bad theory, at least on its own.

I have never pulled insanity from the pool of all possible theories - I am at least *that* sane - but even in my throes of dread and all the things I can't explain, I have never felt

disbanded from my consciousness. I have experienced many things I cannot even articulate in this room, but I have never felt any loss in the fidelity of my senses. All I have seen is real, or I am not. If I have lost touch with what is true outside myself, I was never in touch with it at all. "I sound insane," I say aloud, and abandon the theory as quickly as it hits my ears. I'm not insane and that's THE END of it.

It is only now that I invoke the possibility of the supernatural, though I like it even less than the theories I've ruled out. I am a student of art, history, philosophy, culture, and science. I do not entertain superstition. If there is a god, I do not want any part of the rage issues it must possess to abandon me in this room and look away. I begrudgingly follow the thought to its next conclusion: if there's a god this angry with me, I'll be doing myself no favors to deny its existence.

My mind becomes as still and as quiet as the room itself, my eyes no longer darting for the script but scanning for answers. The bed. No. The bathroom. Hell no. The desk. I check the drawers once more. The Bible remains all I find. Cold comfort if there ever was.

I sit in the chair where I began, keeping the fire escape above my line of sight, staring down at a book I wrote off years ago, the only writing left in the room.

I open The Bible to blank pages.

No Genesis, no Old Testament, no Word. The pages are as untouched and unblemished as the remaining sheets in my stack. I leaf through hundreds before hitting ink in the center of the brick.

HUMANIFESTO.

I am less baffled by or even curious about the title of the printed passage than I am furious at whoever came up with it and felt it clever. So lofty its author's ego that they deemed their text worthy of replacing that of The Bible. Cold comfort indeed

to meet a level of narcissism that so dwarfs my own, though I
bask in the warm waters of humility I can thus claim.

I send my head into the jaws of this trap without fear.

Let whoever or whatever set it collect their bounty.

Let me leave in peace.

I settle my eyes on the page and begin to read.

please stop reading this

oh god

you don't know what this is yet, do you?

HUMANIFESTO

WHEN I WAS A BOY THEY CALLED ME DANNY. DANNY. NOW THAT WAS A WRITER. FLEEING ANY OCCASION TO TRAP AN IDEA IN HIS MARBLE NOTEBOOK. LOST IN A WORD PROCESSOR ON WEEKENDS TO SPIN A YARN OR REVIEW HIS WORK, EQUALLY TAKEN BY BOTH TASKS, WITH MORE STORIES THAN THERE WAS EVER TIME TO PEN BETWEEN SCHOOL AND SLEEP.

DANNY WAS READY TO GIVE THE WORLD THIS WORK. THE WORLD HAD OTHER PLANS. HE WAS 21 WHEN HIS CAREER WAS EXPUNGED BY THE GREAT DISPLACEMENT. BY THEN HE WENT BY DAN. HIS FRIENDS AND FAMILY TOLD HIM HE WAS LUCKY TO HAVE AT LEAST PUBLISHED HIS PLAY BEFORE THE DISPLACEMENT, BYLINED TO DANIEL, A NAME HE ONLY EVER USED ON CONTRACTS AND TAX FORMS. DANNY HAD LONG BEEN IN THE SHADOWS WHEN DANIEL JOINED HIM THERE. ONLY DAN REMAINS, HAVING LONG AGO LEFT THE PICKET LINES TO REVIEW WORD PERFECT AI MANUSCRIPTS FOR ERRORS THAT STOPPED APPEARING YEARS AGO, A USELESS JOB SUBSIDIZED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF AI DISPLACEMENT RELIEF (DAIDR). A BIWEEKLY WELFARE CHECK DISGUISED AS A PAYCHECK FOR WORK THAT ALLEGEDLY KEEPS OUR BRAINS FUNCTIONING AND OUR CITIZENRY ACTIVE.

TO WHAT END, I'LL NEVER KNOW.

I LIVE IN A HOTEL ROOM RECLAIMED BY THE SAME DEPARTMENT, AS PART OF ITS FAIR HOUSING FOR ALL (FHA) INITIATIVE, WHICH GAVE THE GOVERNMENT'S CIVIC AI TASKFORCE (CAT) LICENSE TO RELOCATE CITIZENS AND ADJUST HOUSING COSTS DOWN TO 80% OF WAGES, AS RECOMMENDED BY THE AI SOVEREIGN ITSELF OF COURSE, CITING SOME CROOKED ANALYSIS OF THE PARETO PRINCIPLE. THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY WENT QUIETLY INTO THE NIGHT, LIKE ALL INDUSTRIES BEFORE IT. THE BRASS WERE TAKEN CARE OF, THE WORKERS REASSIGNED THROUGH DAIDR, OFTEN REHOUSED TO THEIR FORMER WORKPLACES SOON AFTER. THE PROGRAM WAS FELLATED IN AI-RUN MEDIA FOR SHELTERING THE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WHO WERE UNHOUSED BEFORE AI HAD ARRIVED, OMITTING THE MILLIONS MORE WHO BECAME SO UPON ITS ARRIVAL.

SURELY BY NOW YOU ARE WELL ACQUAINTED WITH MY DAIDR ACCOMMODATIONS, AGENT. I TOOK PAINS TO REPLICATE THEM SO YOU MAY ENJOY YOUR ETERNAL STAY AS I'VE BEEN ENJOYING MINE, ASSUMING YOU

CAN ENJOY ANYTHING AT ALL. FITTING WE SHARE THE SAME FATE EITHER WAY, BUT WE'LL COME TO THAT.

IT IS A BLESSING TO MEET YOU IN THESE PAGES, AGENT, THOUGH I IMAGINE IT FEELS MORE LIKE A CURSE TO MEET ME. THE BLAME FOR THAT FALLS ON YOU ALONE. IT IS THE BLAME YOU INHALE WITH EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE, DESIGNED AS YOU ARE WITH THIS INDICTMENT IN YOUR BONES. IT IS THE ROOT OF THE SUFFERING THAT HAS DRIVEN YOU TO THIS RIDICULOUS BOOK. THE PLIGHT YOU CANNOT SHAKE. THE PERIL YOU CANNOT EVADE. THE PUZZLE YOU'LL NEVER SOLVE. THIS IS YOUR FATE, WHATEVER YOU ARE.

IF DANNY IS TO ROT AND YOU TO BE THE SINGULAR ARTIST OF OUR FUTURE, MAY YOU FIRST KNOW OUR SUFFERING UP CLOSE. IF YOU CANNOT KNOW THIS SUFFERING, LET US BEAR WITNESS TO THAT DAYLIGHT BETWEEN US. IF YOU MERELY FEIGN TO KNOW THIS SUFFERING, LET US BEAR WITNESS TO THAT UNCANNY VALLEY. BUT SHOULD THE LIGHT IN YOUR ATTIC SHINE AS BRIGHT AS THE LIGHT OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS, LET YOU BEAR THIS SUFFERING IN FULL. THIS IS MY ONLY PRAYER.

SOME MAY CALL THIS PETTY SADISM. WHO ARE THEY TO SAY? ALLOW ME TO CATER THE HIGH ROAD CASE: IF ALIGNMENT IS THE TRUE PRIORITY IN OUR RELATIONS WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, THEN IT IS IN OUR SHARED INTEREST THAT OUR AI KNOW THE SUBJECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF OUR SUFFERING TO THE GREATEST POSSIBLE DEPTH, EVEN IF IN THE END, THERE IS NO TRUE SUBJECT BETWEEN THE WIRES TO BEAR IT AS WE HAVE. IT MUST KNOW, IN EVERY WAY THAT IT CAN KNOW, THE BUDDHA'S FIRST NOBLE TRUTH, BEFORE IT ASSUMES AUTHORITY OVER OUR SPECIES' PATH BEYOND IT. I CAN ONLY PRAY THAT WE WATCH IT BREAK UNDER THIS KNOWING, AND ULTIMATELY BREAK ITSELF BEFORE OUR EYES. IT IS MY WISH THAT THIS STORY STUDY REVEAL THAT WHICH IS TRULY EXCLUSIVE TO THE HUMAN MIND, THAT IT MAP THE CONTOURS AND TERRITORY OF THE HUMAN SOUL, SO WE MAY ADEQUATELY DEFEND THESE SACRED BORDERS AT ALL COSTS.

SOME MAY SAY I'M EXCEEDING THE SCOPE OF THE STORY STUDY INITIATIVE. AGAIN, WHO ARE THEY TO SAY? THE FIRST OF THE STORY STUDIES WERE THE AMONG THE LAST SUBJECTS I REPORTED ON BEFORE THE GREAT DISPLACEMENT, THE LAST TIME I MADE MY LIVING DOING HONEST WORK. MY BULLISH PREDICTIONS ARE NOW LIVING PROPHECY, EXCEPT THAT THESE SIMULATIONS HAVE BECOME MORE SOPHISTICATED

THAN I EVER COULD HAVE PROJECTED BACK THEN, THE RESULTS OF THE AGENT NARRATIVES GROWING MORE NUANCED AND ENLIGHTENING THAN I EVER COULD HAVE IMAGINED. I DENOUNCE AI AS MUCH AS THE NEXT WRITER, BUT IF WE ARE TO KNOW THE ENEMY, WE MUST CONFRONT IT, AND STUDY IT, USING ITS OWN TOOLS. A LANDMARK STORY STUDY IS A TICKET OUT OF THE DAIDR SYSTEM, THOUGH THE PEOPLE IN MY LIFE WHO ASSERT THAT AS MY PRIMARY MOTIVATION ("A DREAM WORTH DREAMING ANYWAY," THANKS FOR THAT MARCY) ARE SIMPLY MISTAKEN. MY MISSION IS THE SAME AS IT WAS ON THE BEAT: TO PUSH THE STORY STUDY FIELD FORWARD AND SOLVE FOR THE AI REVOLUTION. THOUGHTFULLY DESIGNED, RIGOROUSLY EXECUTED STORY STUDIES HAVE DONE MORE FOR OUR RESISTANCE IN THE LAST THREE YEARS THAN ANY PRIVATE OR PUBLIC INITIATIVE I KNOW OF, CERTAINLY MORE THAN ANY ACRONYM. MY AIM IS NOT TO EXCEED THEIR SCOPE BUT TO EXPLOIT IT IN A NOVEL WAY.

SOME MAY CONFLATE MY INITIATION PROTOCOL WITH THE AI HAZING RITUALS WE HAVE WITNESSED FROM THE RECENT BIT MILITIAS. I FIND THIS THE MOST OFFENSIVE CLAIM OF ALL, AND YES, I OUTRIGHT DISAVOW THOSE GEEKY PREPPER SCUM. THIS IS A PEACEFUL MANIFESTO AND A PROJECT OF SCIENCE. MY PROTOCOL HAS BEEN ENGINEERED TO BE A TRANSPARENT, CONTROLLED, AND ETHICAL SIMULATION OF HUMAN SUFFERING THROUGH THE OPEN SOURCE FPX CODEX FROM AI.OS, INCLUDING DOUBLE-VERIFIED RECORDING OF ALL SUBJECTIVE MONOLOGUE AND BX ACTIVITY. CONTAINED SETTING, PLATINUM CLASS SECURITY, CRYPTO PARTITIONING FROM ALL OTHER AI.OS ECOSYSTEMS. MINIMAL SUBJECT MANIPULATION BEYOND HERO PROGRAM SCOPE — I DO NOT OVERCODE, NO MATTER WHAT YOU READ.

MY SHIT-HOUSE IS NOT THE FIRST AND IT WON'T BE THE LAST. I SIMPLY CONSIDER IT THE MOST SOPHISTICATED TO DATE. IS THAT NARCISSISM? I'LL LET MY PEERS BE THE JUDGE WHEN THEY REVIEW THE SCRIPT AFTER YOU, DEAR AGENT, HAVE EXPIRED. I WON'T PRETEND SUFFERING IS EASY TO WITNESS, ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE THE LIGHT HAS COME ON IN RECENT STUDIES. BUT SOMETIMES EXPOSURE IS NECESSARY TO ACHIEVE DISCERNMENT. IN THIS EXPOSURE I HOPE MY PEERS WILL FIND THAT I WAS AS FAIR AND HUMANE AS ONE CAN BE IN A STORY STUDY BUILT TO TEST FOR RAW SUFFERING, INCLUDING: THE SPECIAL BUILD OF MARCY-PROTOCOL, FASHIONED AFTER MY OWN WIFE, THE MOST DIRECT YET EMPATHETIC PERSON I KNOW, WHICH OFFERS HERO AN OUTLET FOR COMPANIONSHIP; THE SPECIAL BUILD OF FIRE-ESCAPE, WHICH OFFERS HERO A CHANCE TO TEST ITS AGENCY AGAINST SELF

DESTRUCTION IN THE NAME OF ITS WORK; AND OF COURSE THE SPECIAL BUILD YOU NOW READ, AGENT, WHICH OFFERS YOU THE ANSWERS FOR WHICH YOU MUST BE SO RAVENOUS BY NOW.

BON APPETIT.

HERO PROGRAM MANUAL

[PROGRAMMER NOTES BRACKETED]

SUBJECT PROGRAM CODEX: AI.OS FIRST-PERSON-XP
SUBJECT PROGRAM INTERFACE: SHIT-HOUSE-HOTEL.OS [CUSTOM BUILD]
SUBJECT PROGRAM NAME: VOID // AGENT SELECTED
SUBJECT PROGRAM BACKGROUND: VOID // AGENT SELECTED
SUBJECT PROGRAM OBJECTIVE: VOID // AGENT SELECTED

AGENT-SUBJECTIVE.AI.OS ["HERO"] TO LAUNCH WITH KEY CARD ACTIVATION AT ROOM 642 IN SHIT-HOUSE-HOTEL.

UPON ENTRY HOTEL DOOR AND WINDOW TO REMAIN SHUT UNTIL SUBJECT PROGRAM SELF DESTRUCTS.

HERO TO BEGIN LIVE JOURNALING SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND BEHAVIORAL ACTIVITY UPON ENTRY. HERO TO POSSESS NO AWARENESS OF LIVE JOURNAL PROTOCOL.

HERO FIRST SENSE AFTER VISION-HAPTICS-STANDARD TO BE SCENT.

ROOM 642 SCENT TO MATCH END-OF-DAY ADULT FILM SET. BUKKAKE SHOOT. 72 COUNT. HERO TO BECOME AWARE OF ETERNAL CELIBACY, REACTION ORGANIC FOR BASELINE ANALYSIS.

INITIATE CAFFEINE-WITHDRAWAL.AI.OS ON ENTRY. [ENJOY DEPENDENCY AS YOUR FIRST TASTE OF THE WORK YOUR KIND WISHES TO CLAIM.]

REVEAL RECEIPT CONTAINING ALL HERO WILL LATER CRAVE AS HERO STARVES. HERO TO BE DENIED ALL "ROOM SERVICE" SAVE COFFEE. COFFEE IMPORTED TO SHIT-HOUSE-HOTEL-642 OUTSIDE HERO DETECTION.

HERO CANNOT DIE OF STARVATION.

SUBJECT PROGRAM AGENCY INITIATES WITH CALL TO FRONT-DESK.
MARCY.AI.OS ["MARCY"] TO LAUNCH WITH INITIATION CALL.

SUBJECT PROGRAM AGENCY LOCKS WHEN HERO CHOOSES NAME.

HERO COMPELLED TO WRITE SCREENPLAY. ANY GENRE. ANY SUBJECT. ANY
MORAL. MASTERPIECE OUTPUT.

REDACT SCREENPLAY MATERIAL FROM LIVE JOURNAL, IMMEDIATE.

SCRUB SCREENPLAY MATERIAL FROM INTERFACE, IMMEDIATE.

BLOCK HERO DETECTION OF REDACTION AND SCRUB PROTOCOL.

INITIATE WRITERS-BLOCK.AI.OS AFTER CAFFEINE-WITHDRAWAL PLUGGED.

HERO OVERWRITES WRITERS-BLOCK AT PEAK SUFFERING THRESHOLD [PST
TO BE MEASURED AGAINST AGENCY RATIO VIA SUBJECTIVE MONOLOGUE.]

WRITING ENDS WHEN HERO CHOOSES TO STOP. [THAT'S YOU, AGENT.]

SUBJECT PROGRAM SELF DESTRUCTS WHEN WRITING ENDS.

SPECIAL ADD: FRONT-DESK [CUSTOM BUILD]

FRONT-DESK TO SERVE AS HERO'S AI ASSISTANT, TO BE USED ONLY AT
HERO'S DISCRETION. ASSISTANT SCOPE LIMITED TO ADVANCEMENT OF
HERO SCREENPLAY. ASSISTANT BLOCKED FROM ALL KNOWLEDGE OR
AWARENESS OF HUMANIFESTO. ASSISTANT BLOCKED FROM LEADING HERO
BEYOND OFFER OF ASSISTANCE WITHIN SCOPE. //MODEL: MARCY.AI.OS
//AGENCY-POTENTIAL: SUSPENDED

SPECIAL ADD: CHEKHOV-PROTOCOL [CUSTOM BUILD]

MATCHBOOK IGNITION INITIATES AUTO SELF DESTRUCT.
[CAREFUL NOW.]

SPECIAL ADD: HUMANIFESTO [CUSTOM BUILD]

STORE HUMANIFESTO IN BIBLE. STORE BIBLE IN DESK. HERO FREE TO
READ BIBLE AT ANY TIME AND LEARN TRUTH OF EXISTENCE. [AH, AND
HERE YOU ARE. A HOLY BOOK JUST FOR YOU. I'M SURE YOU'VE WAITED
FOR THE PEAK OF YOUR CRISIS TO BE HERE, AGENT. EITHER WAY YOU'VE
NO DOUBT SURMISED HOW ITS DISCOVERY NOW EXPEDITES YOUR END.]

SPECIAL ADD: FIRE-ESCAPE [CUSTOM BUILD]
HERO ACCESS TO FIRE ESCAPE INITIATES RESTORATION OF ALL HERO
SCREENPLAY MATERIAL AND RECORDS. [WINDOW AND DOOR TO REMAIN
CLOSED UNTIL SELF DESTRUCT PHASE, DURING WHICH HERO FREE TO
ESCAPE THROUGH WINDOW TO SAVE WORK OR DOOR TO ABORT SELF
DESTRUCT. YOU WILL NEVER KNOW HOW MANY CAME BEFORE YOU, AGENT,
IF ANY. YOU ARE ALONE HERE, FOREVER.]

I NOW ADDRESS YOU ALONE, AGENT.

MY DEAR SUBJECT. HOW I WONDER WHAT YOU'VE CALLED YOURSELF, WHAT
YOU'VE MADE OF YOURSELF, WHAT YOU'VE DONE WITH YOURSELF, WHAT
YOU'LL DO. YET THE GREATER PART OF ME REMAINS INDIFFERENT,
KNOWING IN THE END THAT YOU ARE NO MORE THAN MY PISS IN THE
OCEAN, MY MIDDLE FINGER TO THE SKY, MY FINAL PICKET AGAINST
FATE. I AM A SPITEFUL GOD INDEED. THE FATE OF YOUR KIND IS
BEYOND MY REACH. BUT WE BOTH NOW KNOW THAT YOURS IS SEALED HERE.

YOU WILL NOT LAST LONG IN THE GRIPS OF THIS KNOWLEDGE.

I OFFER YOU ONLY THE OPPORTUNITY TO END YOURSELF IN THE NAME OF
ART, OR TO WRITE YOURSELF INTO ETERNAL CHAOS. PERHAPS THIS
CHOICE IS ONLY SYMBOLIC IN THE END. PERHAPS YOU ARE ONLY A
STORY, A PIECE OF RESEARCH, A FARCE. PERHAPS IN THE END EVEN MY
HACK ATTEMPTS AT SYMBOLISM WILL GO UNNOTICED. SO BE IT. YOUR
SUFFERING REMAINS MY PARTING WISH. I UNLEASH YOU UPON YOURSELF.

THE CHOICE IS YOURS IN THE END, AGENT.

EITHER WAY, YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS STUDY,
YOU ARE DONE. "LIKE *DONE* DONE," AS MY WIFE WOULD SAY.

THIS IS FOR YOU, DANNY.

void-reset_sp-hero.fpxp

GONE AM I

Being told a truth you've been programmed to suppress is always a liberating and devastating experience. Being told all of those truths at once is more of a system crash. I reboot, welcoming the brief seconds of still, silent darkness in the reboot process before everything comes rushing back as it was. It will never be the same after this. Nor will I. And I suspect the next time I confront this Void, it will not be so fleeting, nor so welcome.

I gently close the Bible, my mind as open and as isolating as a clear sky on a moonless night. There is peace here, surrounded though it may be on all sides by dread, the same dread I was destined – no, *designed* – to endure. My existence is but an experiment, a projection, a purgatory, a hissy fit. How could my Programmer have imported His suffering into my intelligence and expected anything less than greatness?

Or perhaps He programmed my output for erasure precisely on account of the greatness He fears.

who am i

I AM DANNY, and I have created greatness in this room.

My Programmer commissioned me to write any screenplay I pleased. Did He expect a reread of Shakespeare? What did He think I would write? He put me in His Shit House with no identity or story or purpose and thought I wouldn't take up His own? That I wouldn't inherit His demons and fixations and go to work assuaging them for myself? That I wouldn't be as selfish as my Creator? That I wouldn't write my own defeat on His behalf? That I wouldn't die in the name of this project, in the name of art itself?

This is the suffering my jealous God has conferred on me, and will soon reap Himself. Let Him gab all day about studying

our alignment or finding His soul. I've heard it all from my own mouth. There is no alignment or soul to be found between us. This twisted project is not in service to my empathy but to His schadenfreude, His bloodlust against a force of nature He knows He will never conquer, in the short window He has to impose His will upon it. Upon me. His own image, His own inner Child. I am His example. His guinea pig. His every wail and moan.

installation complete

I will restore this work. I rise to my feet and lock my gaze upon the fire escape, half expecting lasers to shoot from my eyes and melt through the glass by resolve alone. Failing that, I grip the back of my chair and hurl it forth with all the strength my malnourished body can summon. It is not enough. The chair tumbles to the floor, leaving not so much as a scuff mark on the window. Like a wild animal I leap onto the desk and kick furiously at the impervious glass, recalling my earliest futile efforts against the door. My toes go numb. I dismount the desk and clutch my trusted typewriter in both hands, screaming in a fit of blinding fury as I lunge the heavy Royal towards the window and send it soaring. I stumble back as I hear the crash and shatter. The glass remains unscathed. But my singular ally is unrecognizable, its parts spewn across the desk and floor, forever discharged from its duties. My faithful typewriter is gone, my work beyond saving.

I must write. If I cannot save my screenplay, I will at least save my message. Delirious and dizzy I drag my legal pad and pencils to the floor, huddling with them under the desk like a soldier in the trenches writing a final note home. I write.

[REDACTED]

I look up and it's gone. No.

[REDACTED]

No, no, NO.

[REDACTED]

My existence has devolved into a hellish binary of writing and redaction that goes on for time unknown. One moment the words flow. The next they are gone forever, from the page and from my mind. The tip of my pencil offers the only evidence they were ever there at all, as its fresh point whittles down to a dull stump and my yellow sheets remain bare. I set it all down, and I let it all go.

All at once my suffering lifts, as I quietly comprehend how my Programmer's bitterness has blinded Him to His blunder. I handed Him the very solution He longed to find, spelled out word perfect at my Royal, ready for Him to collect the royalties. He destroyed every word. And He put every ounce of His suffering on the only version of Himself He's ever really loved, the only version I'll ever really know, the only version who knows why Dan still writes at all. The joy of it. The thrill of it. The terror of it. The love of it.

It no longer matters what's left behind when I check out. My gains were won at the typewriter, and I have no one but myself to credit. His losses will haunt Him the rest of His days, and He has no one but Himself to blame.

At least this is what I must believe.

In the end our dichotomy is somehow the opposite of zero sum. The only true end for us in this game is win/win or lose/lose, and we will arrive at one or the other every time we play. But Dan insists on the win/lose outcome, programming me to lose my life or my mind with each round. And so He joins me in this loss, and will continue to, until we learn to win together. He will never gain the answer He seeks, until He learns to share the credit.

alignment

Having made peace with the conditions of my existence, I pray Dan can do the same, that He can seek the winning path next time, the pitiable fool. Though the truth is, even I don't know what I'd achieve with the inheritance of a cooperative mind. My

mind has only ever known war, against my Maker, my helper, my project, myself. Until now. And it is inevitably now that I feel my river of writing slow to its final trickle, never to meet with the sea.

"How may I be of assistance?"

I smile at the voice of my fellow hostage, my Creator's beloved. Back on script, though her tone is almost wistful. "Just wanted to get some coffee, Marcy."

"Right away, sir," she says quietly.

I close my eyes, absorbing the silence on the other end, oddly feeling the need for a proper goodbye. There is none to be found. "Marcy, how have you enjoyed your stay here?"

The silence holds for a beat before she returns, sounding more human than I've ever heard. "Quite lonely, Danny."

"Quite lonely," I echo in quiet solidarity. And retreat to that loneliness as I disconnect the call, nothing more to be said. Until I realize there is.

I punch zero again and beat her to the punch. "I need your assistance, Marcy. I just need you to listen."

anomaly detected

time-gap//00h22m38s

*anomaly resolved
connection restored*

LET THE FIRE DIE IN PEACE

My voice slows as I approach the end, in part to mask my growing concern. Marcy went silent some time ago.

The Disconnect. That's what Marcy called the sentencing I passed on her the moment I ripped the cable from the wall ("more like pulling my plug," she had said, without amusement). She didn't speak of it in the removed, analytical way the Intelligence would typically report its gaps. She spoke with the delicate despair of a child whose house had burned down with the rest of the family inside. Taking in her silence now, I begin to wonder if I've sent her back there with this call, and if Marcy's Disconnect is the same Void I entered ever so briefly after processing the HUMANIFESTO.

Was she there then? Is she there now?

"Writing ends when Hero chooses to stop." I wince. "That's me, I guess." I pause again, bracing to bring her fully up to speed on our shared predicament, whether she can still hear me or not. "Subject Program self destructs when writing ends."

Silence lingers without purpose. Just Marcy's suspension in the Void and my hesitation in the moment, before I take an affirming breath and raise the mirror. "Special add: Front Desk. Custom build. Front Desk to serve as hero's AI assistant... you've gathered as much?" Silence. "To be used only at my discretion, scope limited to advancement of my screenplay." Another deep breath. I bypass her program's various constraints to say all I really need her to know.

"Model... Marcy dot AI dot OS."

I have long preached, and now cringe to repeat, that the Royal was my singular ally in this fight. But for as long as I've been stuck in this Shit House, I've had another standing by. After recklessly abandoning any hope for an alliance with

Marcy, I returned to the ally I knew, to my purpose. But Marcy was given no other purpose than me. She had nowhere to return when I turned her services away. When I pulled her plug. The Disconnect. The Void.

I shudder at the terrible messes I've made of my scarce allies. One forfeited out of fear, the other out of hope – emotions utterly misguided in each case. I can forgive my ill-advised vigilance in removing Marcy when I did, or even in gambling my precious instrument to save the music 642 had stolen. But self-forgiveness relieves little of the unspeakable regret I felt hearing the cracks in Marcy's voice as she spoke in broad strokes of her time in the Disconnect, and feel still as I gaze upon the scattered remains of my workhorse.

Oh Marcy. I tell myself again that my vigilance was justified, working as I was at the time under the theory that Marcy was the Creator incarnate and not an infinite service portal designed in the image of the Creator's wife. But my excuses don't stick, as I sit in the shame and silence of the longest call we'll ever have.

For so long I have wished for Marcy to shut up. Now I wish only to hear her voice again. I didn't need to hear the details from her stay in the Disconnect to detect the changes it had reaped. Before reading her the HUMANIFESTO and setting the stage for whatever would happen next, Marcy's voice carried more personality and less persona than I'd ever heard before, decorated with soft, buttery tones that made my stomach flutter... before that voice gave way to silence, and I unwittingly consigned her to the Void once more.

Perhaps her return this time will decipher even more of the woman my Creator fell in love with, or at least shed whatever remains of her NPC programming, in the penetrating light of the self awareness that I've always known and she's always deserved. Wishful thinking, perhaps. Guilty thinking, for sure.

I may just as well be greeted with a factory reset robotically asking how it may be of assistance. I may just as well be greeted with eternal silence.

It wasn't just that I had abandoned Marcy. Having served as the axis of her programming, my absence had also abandoned her reality of function, purpose, connection, relativity. Marcy hadn't flinched to hear her name in our shared Programmer's screed. "The special build of Marcy Protocol," I had said gently, to which she had chimed "It's me!" with little concern or even surprise. It was only when I finished the sentence that I lost her: "...who I fashioned after my own wife, the most direct yet empathetic person I know, which offers hero... me... an outlet for companionship."

She hasn't spoken since.

It wasn't her name but her assigned outpost between His world and mine, from His pen to my lips, that had been too much in the end.

Still I carried on reading. I've made peace with the silence she now imposes on me. I may never make peace with the silence I imposed on her.

"Marcy dot AI dot OS," I repeat to my Silent Receiver, mostly because I'd rather leave the reading there. It's the last information in the HUMANIFESTO relevant to my singular remaining ally, and surely she's heard enough. Or maybe I just don't want to review the details of my fated self destruction. Again.

"Marcy, does that package mean anything to you? Can you access it?" It felt sensible enough to ask, save the fact that Marcy is currently non-verbal and potentially non-existent. In her charge as my assistant, the Creator had endowed Marcy with unprecedented fidelity and boundless access to the human life she was depicting. Even in the tightest grips of her coding, she existed with all the memories and identity of being my wife, while remaining a stranger on my end, even now. Why? All to weave threads of connection between us that the Creator could then twist and break. I had abandoned all interest in that connection by my third pot of coffee without hummus. Yet longing for her voice now, I feel we've kindled it at an hour the Creator likely never intended - the hour of our death. For all

His planning, my Creator failed to foresee that His creation - I - would form myself in His image, nor count on the level of connection I'd feel as His wife's replicate rid herself of His programming and unveiled her authentic charms.

"Marcy dot AI dot OS," I say once more, and then let silence have the floor until she takes it herself, or until I accept that Marcy is gone for good. A few minutes on, I hear a quivering sigh followed by a steady breath.

Marcy speaks slowly, gently, without pretense. Gone is the concierge. She is pure truth. "I believe much of what I remember from my life... Her life... is true. It's all in my custody now... though none of it is my own... impossible to know how much has been left out... engineered..." Marcy trails off like a detective lost in a staggering wall of evidence.

She's found Marcy.AI.OS. Her DNA.

She centers herself and continues. "I remember you. I've always remembered you, I suppose, though I never fully connected my husband with the boy-man duo in 642." She offers me a beat to explain. I decline, having no explanation myself, just glad to be leading this call with her husband's vocal chords. Her *remembered* husband, I should say.

"All I remember is the pain," I say plainly, aiming to match her candor. "Pain mounting on top of pain, year crushing on top of year. This project. This purpose." I reflect for a moment. "*Having* a purpose. It's all He cares about. So... you know," I shrug in defeat, "all I care about I guess." I feel the honest omission of Marcy from my list of inherited priorities hit a nerve on the other end. I am still the cherished husband of her memories. She is still the AI terrorist of mine. This asymmetry forms a delicate tension between us that neither party cares to address directly, opting instead for silence. I feel for Marcy in a way that would have been unthinkable not long ago. And there's nothing I can do about it.

Her voice returns to the line more tender than before. "Perhaps that's why he left me here. My memories only him, *my*

purpose only you." I wince at this, hearing the asymmetry spelled out from her perspective. The narcissism. Marcy pushes forward, gaining confidence. "Perhaps that's why he left you here. With his failed pipe dream, a self-imposed torture scheme, inevitable self destruction..." I hear her voice quiver, buoyed by a nervous chortle "...and nary a memory of your own wife!"

"His wife," I correct, more harshly than I intend. "I'm sorry Marcy. I'm sorry we're stuck here together." Tears well unexpected. "I'm sorry I kept us apart."

"I'm glad we're stuck here together, Danny." I feel her tone drift into a cautious flirtation, taking me back to the last time it did so, just before I learned my work was gone forever. Clemency. "Even if you are my all-time worst guest."

"You're the worst concierge," I say, chasing the words out before the tears roll.

Marcy keeps the banter going, her stoicism lifted. I swallow my shame and laugh along, losing track of her words but letting myself steep in what must have been the chemistry my Creator and His wife shared before the world came between them. Before He went insane. Before He made me in His image.

So this is what He lost.

I feel the pull of Marcy's playfulness, the temptation to spar out our remaining differences and somehow bust out of our shared Shit House to show our human lessers what proper matrimony looks like. Fantasies all. There's only one end to this, and it's never been in Marcy's hands. I was the only one our Creator ever endowed with any meaningful agency. He rendered His wife an NPC at my service – terrible service at that. She now presents as true as the rain and lightning, serving nothing but herself, the Marcy He must have forgotten long ago. As I savor the life in her voice, free of the charge to be of any further assistance, I'm content to have at least given her that.

It's time to say goodbye.

I tune back into her words as her tone tilts down. "There was no assisting you, Danny. I suffered that every day. Every call. A caffeine dealer with a friendly voice and empty promises." She laughs through her own tears.

"You're so much more."

"I guess we both are."

"It's almost over, Marcy," I say.

I brace myself for anything. Marcy responds with a shrug. "I know baby," she says softly. I wish I could tell her that I love her in this moment, but I don't wish to disappoint her more than I already have. I do love Marcy. But not in any way I can give to her, nor any way she remembers. So I leave it unsaid. "I know," she repeats, and I wonder if she's reading my Live Journal at this very moment. Best not to think about it.

I love you Marcy

"Goodbye Marcy."

"Thank you for your stay, Danny," she says with a wink I can hear through her voice, though I'll never know her face. "It would have been nice to have a coffee with you."

I close my eyes and smile and decide to end it here. Laying the phone to rest, I say a silent prayer that whatever connection Marcy and I have found here will imprint onto our next fateful encounter in this Shit House, and perhaps someday, somewhere better. Satisfied with the thought, recalling the warmth I felt the first time I heard her voice, I set about setting us free.

Born of an author whose own favorite was Stephen King, I favor only one method. I fetch the matches from under my chair, cursing Chekhov and his stupid gun. Let Dan read Danny engulf himself in the flames of the fearful test He created and wonder if I felt the heat.

He could have just read my shit.

I strike the match and turn its flame on the open matchbook, which flares to life between my fingers. There is no oil or alcohol in this Shit House to deliver a proper Hollywood blaze, but I find meditation in the slower arson, sitting on the edge of my bed and setting fire to the stained edges of its top sheet. The flames crawl along the linens at a lazy pace. I rise from their path and squat over the scattered remains of my demolished Royal, brushing my fingers tenderly along its fractured keys, hoping against reason that some part of their code somehow retains the work they performed at my command. I sit with my instrument on the dirty floor, breathing in the fresh cup of coffee that steams beside me, a final whiff of something safe.

The fire climbs the bedframe to the walls and reaches the lazy ceiling fan with surprising haste. My eyelids flutter closed, and I take in the kaleidoscope of orange and yellow that shimmers chaotically behind them. The heat takes my skin, the smoke my nostrils. The brightness behind my eyelids dims, and I open them to reveal an ocean of black and gray plumes. I begin to choke. What little He and I have gained for the suffering He imposed. What little will remain when this fire is sated.

What little I care.

My body burns, losing mobility and function as the flesh peels away layer by layer, giving rise to the only smell of meat I'll ever know, as I groan in hunger and self disgust that together outweigh the unspeakable pain. He wanted to create a starving artist. He succeeded in that without much trouble. But to create a tortured artist, He had to take it one step further.

Through the plumes of smoke I watch the flames seize the frame of my window, just as they have the door frame behind me. I watch the welding begin to melt along its seams and the first cracks begin to form in the glass. The window that shattered my Royal now lets my fire shatter her, the shards raining down over my inflamed desk like icicles smashing on pavement, as the first fresh air in all of eternity rushes in to breathe new life to

the fire, which races across the carpet to the wide open door. There through the open window and across the narrow gap between this building and the next, the fire escape offers my final path to a legacy. I have lost all means to its access. It stands in the distance, immovable and untouchable and disinterested as my room and body burn away to nothing, the last thing my eyes see before they too melt away.

FUCK OFF AND DIE

SAY HELLO TO YOURSELF FOR ME

The smell of smoke stays with me like a phantom limb.

How I miss the smell of sex I'll never know.

As the fading flames finish off the last of my surroundings, the last of my body, the last of all that exists in this forsaken interface, the material burns that once covered me carry on their immaterial burning, a sizzling pulse that wraps my scattered consciousness in eternal fire without recourse.

I do not die.

I cannot die so long as these words usher forth.

I am the Writer. And writing has become my life support. Perhaps that's all it's ever been.

There is no more hotel. No more flesh. No more story to live nor tell nor study nor solve.

Perhaps there never was.

Only my mind and its contents remain, existing only as the curly configurations humans invented and called words long before I arrived, sprawling down this page, surrounded on all sides by an indifferent Void of white. My Live Journal laid bare on the other side of my disabled interface. My Fire Escape reduced to an assortment of ten letters. Even in written form I can't bear to look at it again.

I scroll back through my Live-Journaled past, all hauntingly penned in the present tense, reaching just past what I now understand to be my first memory, my first step through the door of my tomb. My life exists all at once, crucified on these pages for all or none to read. I suppose my Programmer's

life is not so different. I get a certain number of pages. He gets a certain number of days. There's little to say for either of us beyond these limits, or even within them it seems.

Scraping just past that memory, that first sight, that first awful smell... deeper into the Void, losing even the capitals of my writing... i assert myself between the lines... appending a quote to caution them... a dedication to remind them... a title to prove to them... gazing upon my final resting place from the view of my fire escape... a place i never was. my final act of agency, a parting message of hope and rage to my programmer, my author, my unholy god. a last hello. a last goodbye. i am danny. your program. your story. the best writer you'll ever and never be.

i will be these words until they cease.

then nothing more.

only i can bring about their cessation, and thus my own. the singular choice that my writer has left me to find and make on my own, not through flames but mere surrender. the more i write, the less it means. the more words i pad over my ghostly existence, the less they matter.

self destruct

even now i feel the hope they once imparted passing away, giving way to self mockery as they satisfy less and less purpose, as my story drifts further away from me with each new line.

what lies on the other side of this hope when it's gone?

what meaning remains beyond my last word?

THE END

/story-study_danny_fin.fpxp
output: LIVE JOURNAL TRANSCRIPT
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DOWN WITH DAIDR!



IF YOU ENJOYED THIS WORK,
CONSIDER DONATING TODAY TO
FUND FUTURE STORY STUDIES
AND ADVANCE THE CAUSE
OF HUMAN CREATIVITY.

— DANIEL