

Title: Lonely Men and the Games They Play
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Abstract: This manuscript contains four short stories about different kinds of lonely men and the beautiful and tragic and dangerous ways they cope with that loneliness.

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Date 5/5/20 Signed Zachary Schechter

Lonely Men and the Games

They Play

A collection of short stories by Zachary Schechter

The Stranger

The man who calls himself “Captain Bill Adventure” is certainly a peculiar one in my own very humble opinion. Every morning he arrives (and I say “arrive” though I am not entirely certain that he ever actually leaves) at the port and gets up on his old wooden crate and calls for “likeminded men to join him on a quest to scour the seven seas in search of adventure.” He always wears the same ridiculous outfit which can only be described as the most over the top pirate’s costume ever thrown together. A sky blue coat with over inflated sleeves, faded gold buttons and an unexplained tear over his right breast pocket, an overtly floppy and equally blue pirate’s hat with an image of a wave in its center in place of the traditional skull and crossbones, wrinkled pants that I’m told at one point were a breath-taking white but through the years have become irreversibly dirty and a rubber cutlass that hangs in a scabbard from his hip.

In past years his calls for adventure have been largely viewed as nothing more than a joke, or at least an empty threat. Mostly due to his costume but also in no small part because of the fact that Captain Adventure didn’t even own a boat for which to sail the seven seas with. However, at some point during the past summer, mid-August I believe, somebody actually sold the captain a boat, for far more than it was actually worth so I’m told. When I asked him why he would pay such an exuberant amount for such an ordinary vessel he told me that “every captain, even a fake one, needs a ship.” He was always saying things like that, about how he wasn’t really a captain, and in his more honest moments he would even admit that his last name wasn’t really “Adventure.” I happen to know that his first name isn’t actually “Bill” either but nobody ever asks him about that.

How he paid for the boat, however, remains a mystery. I’ve heard theories of course, some more clever than others but all of them undoubtedly false. I’ve heard people say that when he was younger he was a criminal, a thief of some sort who had saved most of his ill-gotten earnings. I’ve heard others speculate that he comes from a rich family who send him money every so often in order to ensure that he never comes and visits them in search of funds. Still others claim (usually after having had too much to drink) that he has a chest of buried treasure that he uses to pay for his day to day needs. Personally, I refuse to ask him because I fear that the true answer will be much too mundane and will take away some of the intrigue that surrounds the Captain.

I think the only reason our small and mostly uneventful little town tolerates the loud and colorful Captain Adventure is because in a town where almost nothing ever happens, Captain Adventure is our “interesting story.” Something for the townsfolk to talk about when their relatives from out of town come over or when they are invited to some conference in another state or city. In recent months the captain has become something of a tourist attraction, people will frequently come down to the port and ask him questions or take pictures with him, and he always humors them, perhaps because he remains hopeful that one day, one of them will join his quest and I can’t help but feel sorry for him when wave after wave of tourists abandon him and his wooden crate and his ordinary boat. Occasionally someone who isn’t quite familiar with the captain will approach him and ask him why he does what he does and he always responds in the same way, that his heart belongs to the sea and that he is destined for a life of adventure exploring the world’s waterways. And sometimes, if the person is especially clever or especially curious they will ask him why he doesn’t just join the Navy and he will respond that he was born on a small European island and he would feel that he was betraying his homeland if he enlisted in a foreign navy. And occasionally the person would grumble “well, I’m sure your small European island has a navy too.” But Captain Adventure always pretends not to hear them and continues his endless recruitment drive atop his crate.

He doesn’t seem to be dangerous though, his sword, -as I’ve said- is made out of rubber and he never drinks. Or at least he’s never come into my tavern for a drink and I doubt he’d leave his crate and his boat to walk to a bar farther into the city. In all my years in this town I’ve only ever seen him get angry once, not when a particularly loud shop owner tried to have him arrested, not when some kids spray painted obscenities onto the side of his boat and not even when an especially mean-spirited fellow filled up his old yellowed sign-up sheet with fake names. No, the only time I’ve seen Captain Bill Adventure become truly angry was when an unknowing tourist asked him about the tear above his right breast pocket. And even then it wasn’t the type of anger where one throws things and swears loudly, but rather it was a silent fuming, and it was the only time I ever saw him leave his post. He simply picked up his old wooden crate and stormed away, without saying a word. At first I thought that would be the last time I ever saw the captain but the next morning, when I opened my tavern, there he was, standing on his crate and calling for “likeminded men to join him on a quest to scour the seven

seas in search of adventure.” But you can’t have come all the way here, just to ask me about the captain, now, what can I get you?

Marvin the Immortal

Marvin Ritholtz was, by most accounts, a terribly ordinary man. His frame was wiry, his weight average, he had brown hair that he'd kept close cropped for his entire life and his eyes were a dull blue. He stood at a grand total of six feet and three inches but his slouch made him appear shorter and unassuming. His voice was soft and his features ordinary. He had no unusual talents of which to speak, though he was good with numbers, he was not particularly smart or strong or fast and his memory was nothing of note. He was wholly unforgettable, the very picture of normal. If pressed the sole vaguely interesting thing one could say about him, the single irregular facet that set him *just* slightly apart from most men was that for all intents and purposes, Mister Marvin Ritholtz was immune to death. The one person in recorded history who could be properly be described as fully and truly, immortal.

Marvin discovered this mildly interesting aspect of himself during a truly horrid period in his life that, had everything gone according to plan, would have ended in his death. He had been laid off from his job in favor of a younger, more attractive man who was "more geared towards success." His wife, a young blonde from the South, who had married Marvin on an absentminded whim after knowing him for less than twenty-four hours, had left for a man of similar description. Jobless and alone, Marvin decided to try his hand at the stock market and, three days of unfortunate investments later, found himself nearly penniless. All of this, as one could imagine and understand, left Marvin somewhat dissatisfied with life and his continued role in it and so he made the largely ignored and inconsequential decision to kill himself. To this end, he purchased a gun from a rather shady individual in a back alley along with two or three bullets, in case, with the luck he was having, he somehow managed to miss his own brain. He then made his way over to his regular bar and used the last of his money to purchase one final round of drinks for the road. Once he had gotten himself suitably drunk, poor Marvin shuffled back to his shabby downtown apartment, whereupon he found a cordial note informing him of his eviction and that he was to make himself scarce by noon the next day. Marvin, who, of course, did not plan on being around for that tomorrow or any others, was unfazed by the note and simply stumbled inside, sidearm loaded and in hand. He briefly considered writing out a note, a final letter, a last will and testament of sorts, but after realizing he had nobody to say goodbye to or any possessions to leave to anyone, decided it would simply be quicker to skip it. So he plopped himself down in an old splintering wooden chair and placed his most recently acquired asset

against his temple. Then, with nary a tear in his eye and a smile on his face, Martin Ritholtz squeezed down on the cold metal trigger.

Marvin awoke about half an hour later, severely disappointed in the fact that he had woken up at all. He immediately tried to kill himself again, using up his extra ammunition and was dismayed to find that his heart heartily continued to beat and his brain thoughtfully continued to think. His first reaction, naturally, was that he had been scammed into purchasing a faulty weapon and a trio of faulty bullets. Two faulty knives, a faulty noose and even some faulty rat poison later, Marvin refused to give up on his dreams of death and eternal rest. However, after brushing himself off after a faulty nine story fall from the top of his apartment building, he was forced to resign himself to the fact that he would just have to go on living for the foreseeable future.

Doomed with the prospect of eternal life Marvin Ritholtz decided, after a couple of hours of sitting on the sidewalk in quiet contemplation, that the first thing he should do was create a life for himself that was worth living eternally. He began his quest by trekking up the six flights of stairs to his apartment, and grabbing anything he thought might have any value. After about ten minutes of carefully examining everything he owned he came away with an old watch passed down to him by his father and the faulty gun which he had purchased. He packed these pseudo-valuable, along with the rest of his clothing into an old, faded, floral print suitcase his wife had left behind and then exited his cramped apartment for the last time. Marvin then strode down to a local pawn shop where he able to sell off the watch and gun for a combined sum of five hundred dollars, which had surprised him as he'd never known his father to spend more than fifty dollars on anything he didn't have to. Then, with a heart hoping for new beginnings coupled with a grim determination to truly let the old Marvin Ritholtz die, Marvin boarded the first bus he could find, and then stayed with it until it reached it's last, and farthest stop, a town called Harrisburg. Old problems remained in old cities, he surmised, as the bus came to its final stop.

Over the course of the next year Marvin created a new life for himself in Harrisburg. Though it was several weeks before he could find himself a job, Marvin found it quite easy to subsist off of the five hundred dollars he had brought with him when he had first arrived, since, as he quickly discovered, he did not actually need to eat or drink to survive. While it was true that going too long without something to eat or drink gave Marvin a sort of mild discomfort, such as a rock buried in the depths of a shoe or a swift jab in the arm might cause, he found that

simply eating a slice of bread and drinking a cup of water every couple of weeks could allay even those vague hunger pains. Eventually, and somewhat ironically, Marvin found a job working in a local restaurant as a busboy. As time went on Marvin took great joy in his work and made an effort to befriend all the waiters and chefs and maitre d's that he worked beside day in and day out. These were the first friends that Marvin had had in as long as he could remember and for the first time in a long time he was truly happy.

A couple of months into his stay in Harrisburg, Marvin Ritholtz fell in love. She was one of the waitresses at his restaurant, a nice girl with red hair and green eyes and a beautiful smile that caused Marvin to fall deeper and deeper in love with her every time he saw it. After the thirtieth smile he invited her to dinner, after the four hundredth and second he asked her to marry him and after the thousandth he said "I do," and was granted permission to kiss the bride. For a time they were happy, Marvin and his bride, but as that time grew longer Marvin's wife began to notice that something was amiss. As she, and for that matter, everyone around her, grew older and began to succumb to the sands of time, her husband remained the same, a rock unfazed by the temporal sandstorm.

After the eighty thousandth and fifth smile, this one being of the nervous variety, she finally asked Marvin why it was that time seemed to have no hold on him. Why he remained forever unchanging in the face of age. Marvin, while caught off guard, answered her honestly and completely. He told her the story of a different man named Marvin Ritholtz, a man with no cause, need or will to live. A man who had been shot, stabbed, poisoned and battered and through it all had been forced to survive. A man who, no matter how many miracles had been performed for him, had not been truly saved until he had met a nice girl with red hair and green eyes and a beautiful smile that had caused him to fall deeper and deeper in love with her each and every time he saw it. After the forty thousandth and sixth, this one being of the loving variety, she told him that she would love him forever and she had but one question. Placing a hand on her stomach and smiling once more she asked him:

"Will the baby inherit your blessing?"

It took Marvin a second to register the implications and consequences of her one question. The baby? He was going to have a baby? In all his years Marvin Ritholtz never imagined that he would have a child. He wondered if he'd be a good parent. Though, he supposed, if he wasn't, he just might have the rest of eternity to figure out how to be one. But

after expressing his complete and absolute joy at the prospect of becoming a father he truthfully explained to his wife that he could have no way of knowing whether or not the child would be granted immortality as well. "I guess we won't know until the day they die," Marvin had quipped. She didn't smile at that one.

On a warm Summer morning, many months after Marvin had revealed his secret for the first time, Marvin's wife passed away. Others of a more optimistic disposition might have remembered that morning as the day a little girl, weighing seven pounds, ten ounces, was born but Marvin had never been one for optimism. He had been standing by his wife's side as the doctors informed them that she was not going to make it. Complications in the birth the doctors had mumbled apologetically. Doctors were always mumbling about "complications" Marvin had found. Their inability, or perhaps abject refusal, to be clear and straightforward was one of the reasons he despised them. Marvin had broken down in tears right then and there, never in his life had he ever truly loved someone and now he would be doomed to spend the rest of his eternity alone. His wife, to her credit, remained composed and once again had only one question, and again it was about the baby. The doctors assured her that the baby would survive but there was nothing they could do to save her. This seemed to provide her with some level of comfort and she then immediately began to work on consoling Marvin. She told Marvin that he must remain strong and he told her that without her that would be impossible. She told him, more forcefully this time, that he *needed*, and she made sure to stress the word, to be strong, not only for himself, not only for her, but for their baby. This was his chance to prove that the old Marvin Ritholtz was really gone she told him, this was when he needed to prove that he could remain the new strong and happy and loving Marvin that she had spent so many wonderful months and weeks and days with. Marvin, hearing her words, choked back a sob and nodded lamely. He would be strong, he said, or at least he would do his best to appear to be, for the sake of their child. His wife smiled and leaned back in her pillow, seemingly now content to accept the hand that fate had dealt her.

"Before you go," Marvin said meekly, taking hold of one of her now frail hands, "Leave me with something that I can keep for an eternity... So I can stay strong."

Marvin's wife turned towards her husband, her lovely husband who looked exactly the same as he had the day she had met him, the day they had been wed, and the day, so many days ago, when he had told her why he would always look this way. The only difference she silently

remarked to himself, was that he had somehow looked more nervous on their wedding day than he did now. He didn't look nervous now, only sad, crestfallen, perhaps that was the word she was looking for.

“My dear, I have always loved you, and I always will, forever, for as long as you live. You have no need to fear being alone, for I will be with you always.”

At that moment the same doctor that had acted as death's messenger only moments ago entered the room with a beacon of light and life and hope resting gently in his hands. Marvin quickly stood up and took his newborn daughter away from the white coated man and sat back down next to his wife.

“Our daughter,” Marvin said quietly as his wife's eye began to flicker, “Oh god, please don't go.”

“I will be with you always my dear,” his wife said, “And hopefully, so will our daughter, she's beautiful isn't she?”

Marvin nodded as tears began to roll down his cheeks again, “Just like you,” he said softly.

Marvin's wife smiled one last time and, with a sense of horrible and sickening finality, closed her eyes.

Marvin, in response, closed his eyes as well, perhaps to avoid seeing his wife in her current state or, perhaps, in a feeble attempt to follow her beyond this life. After a few moment of sitting silently like this Marvin stood up, and, clutching his daughter close to his chest, wordlessly walked out of the dark hospital room.

As he quickly removed himself from the place he would now forever remember as being filled with death he looked down at his sleeping daughter. She was so small, so blissfully unaware of the rush of conflicting and confusing emotions her father was experiencing at that moment. On the one hand he was crushingly and devastatingly heartbroken by the loss he had just experience but at the same time, time was confusing like that, he looked down at his daughter and he truly felt that he had never loved anybody more than he loved her.

Marvin returned to the home that he and his wife had built together and once again he cried. By now the baby had woken up and, upon seeing her father crying, began to cry as well. Marvin and baby, crying together, slowly walked through the house, the house that was so full of memories, of reminders, that his wife had left behind. The constant slow and steady movement

eventually calmed the baby who stopped crying and fell back into a peaceful and quiet sleep, safe in her father's arms. For Marvin though, every step he took through the house only brought back more and more memories and it became too much for him. So he did what he had once done a lifetime ago, he packed a few of his belongings, mostly supplies Marvin and his wife had purchased in anticipation for the baby, in an old suitcase his wife had left behind and he left.

He was good at leaving he told himself as he carried his baby and his suitcase out the door. Old problems stayed in old cities he reminded himself as he once again boarded a bus and rode it as far away as it would take him.

Marvin and baby settled into a town called Clifftown, thus named for the rather magnificent, if foreboding cliff that was located just outside the small town's borders. Upon arriving, Marvin purchased a small, one bedroom apartment for the two to live in. He saw no need for anything larger than that and he wanted to keep his daughter close by at all times. He wanted to be able to always be there for her, he didn't want her to ever be alone, though in his more somber moment he would admit to himself that he wanted to do everything he could to stave off his own feelings of loneliness as well. To that end, he forewent searching for a job in Clifftown, he'd had enough money save up to support them for the time being, and spent all of his time with his daughter, playing with her, teaching her, watching her grow. He enjoyed every single moment of it all, every smile she gave him, every laugh, even every sleepless night and dirty diaper she presented him with. He loved all of it, he loved being a parent.

While Marvin remained impassive and ageless however, his daughter continued to grow and, in what seemed like a fleeting moment to Marvin she grew from his impossibly small baby to an energetic and talkative toddler. Still Marvin loved every new experience he and his ever growing daughter shared together, he read to her and sang with her and dressed up in pretty pink princess dresses with her, he bandaged her scrapes and wiped her nose and even begrudgingly accompanied her to a doctor when she unfortunately came down with the flu. Eventually however Marvin had to admit to himself that for his daughter to truly thrive he would have to permit her to interact with other children and so on a bright and sunny Tuesday morning Marvin walked with his smiling and chattering daughter to the local pre-school. When they got to the brightly painted building, Marvin's daughter swung his arms around his neck and begged him to stay with her and with a tear in his eye he promised that he would be back soon to pick her up. He walked back to their apartment with tears rolling down his cheeks and when he reached the

empty apartment he turned around and walked around the city until it was time to pick his little girl up at the end of the school day. On the walk back together, Marvin's daughter told him all about her day and all about the other children and even presented him with a picture she had drawn of him during art time. Marvin cried tears of joy as he hung up the drawing on their refrigerator later that night. The next day after walking his daughter to school, Marvin walked into town and found himself a job stocking shelves, accepting that he would no longer have his daughter to occupy all of his time.

A few weeks later Marvin's daughter came home and sweetly asked her father if she could have a big girl bed. Marvin smiled and nodded in affirmation as he realized they would need to move into a bigger home, one with a second bedroom. Marvin found a nice two story house with a for sale sign in the yard and bought it on the spot, it seemed perfect to him. It was only a few days later when they moved in, after Marvin's daughter had said a teary goodbye to the only home she had ever known, that Marvin became aware of the only negative trait about the house: it was two blocks closer to the school than their old apartment was, meaning Marvin would have a much shorter walk with his daughter every morning.

Marvin's daughter continued to grow into a beautiful young woman that only brought Marvin more and more joy and pride every day. She did extraordinarily well in school, though art was where she clearly excelled and the walls of Marvin's and his daughter's home were quickly covered in drawings and paintings that she had produced. She made many friends, joined the volley ball team and even took up piano for a short while. Marvin, ever the loving and devoted father, doted over her constantly, hosting barbecues for her and her friends, cheering her on at every one of her volley ball matches, even learning a little piano himself so he could play with her. It wasn't long before Marvin's daughter began dating and Marvin did his best to be kind to the young men she brought home to meet him, though he very rarely seemed to truly like any of them, much to his daughter's dismay.

At Marvin's daughter's high school graduation, Marvin made sure to sit in the front row and was later recorded as being both the loudest and most excited parent in attendance. As well, as a few of her friends pointed, out the youngest looking father in the audience, something which Marvin's daughter relayed to him over breakfast the next morning. Upon hearing this Marvin sighed deeply and sank into his chair, he looked at himself in the reflection of a window behind her. He did look young, not aging will do that to you, he supposed. Marvin then took his

daughter's hand from across the table and slowly explained to her everything he knew about himself. He told her how it appeared that he would live forever, though he refused to tell her how he had first discovered this quirk in his makeup. He also took the opportunity to tell her about her mother, his wife, something which he had never done before. He told his daughter how he had first met her mother when they had worked alongside each other in a restaurant many towns away. He told her about her mother's beautiful red hair and green eyes and the wonderful smile that his daughter seemed to have inherited. He also explained to her that when his wife, her mother, had passed away he had been unable to remain in Harrisburg and how they had moved away the day she was born. When he was done she was speechless and Marvin feared that she would be angry with him for having kept all of this from her until now. Those fears were quickly allayed when his daughter stoop up and gave him a hug.

“You're not angry at me?” Marvin asked nervously.

“How could I be mad at you dad, you've been the best single father a girl could ask for... but-”

“But?”

“I'm getting to an age where it will soon be quite difficult for you to tell people you're my father and expect them to believe you.”

Marvin laughed and admired the young woman his daughter had grown into. The next day he walked into a local hair salon and had his hair dyed a distinguished silvery gray.

Marvin's daughter soon moved away to study at a prestigious art school though she and her father spoke to each other on the phone every night after classes had ended for the day. In order to fill the void left by his daughter, and to kill the time before their nightly phone call Marvin began taking up many hobbies, golf, bird watching, wood working, he even resumed learning piano though his daughter had long ago stopped taking lessons. Every night he anxiously waited by the phone for his daughter to call and tell him about her day, her friends, her classes, her teachers, her art. The phone calls were easily the highlight of his day. One night, during one of their phone calls, Marvin's daughter informed him that she had been seeing someone, a young man from a neighboring college who was studying to become an accountant. She absolutely adored him and wanted him to meet Marvin. Marvin lied and told her he would love to meet him, even offering to fly out to her school that weekend. She laughed and told him

that that would not be necessary as spring break was fast approaching and he would accompany her home then.

As the day Marvin's daughter and "the accountant," as Marvin had taken to calling him were set to arrive drew nearer, Marvin drove himself near mad trying to make the house look perfect for them. He swept and mopped and polished and made sure that all of his daughter's best works were proudly displayed on the walls of his home. When the day finally arrived, Marvin once again returned to the hair salon and had his hair dyed that distinguished silvery gray that allowed him to call himself his daughter's father. When the artificial aging was complete Marvin drove down to the airport himself two hours early to ensure that he was there to pick them up when they arrived. As soon as they did Marvin's daughter jumped into his arms and hugged him tightly, she then introduced him to the young man she had told him about and Marvin smiled as he firmly shook the accountant's hand.

Over the next few days Marvin and his daughter and the accountant spent a tremendous amount of time together and, despite his best intentions, Marvin actual began to grow rather fond of the young man his daughter had brought home. At the end of their time in Clifftown, Marvin drove his daughter and the accountant back to the airport and after hugging his daughter goodbye gave the young man a hug as well, wishing him well in his studies and with his daughter.

Two month later Marvin returned home from the golf course to see that his daughter had called the house six times while he was out. Frantically, Marvin dialed his daughter's number from memory and anxiously waited for his daughter to pick up. She never called him during the day and the fact that she had now done so six times was very worrying to him to say the least. After the phone rang several times he was directed to his daughter's answering machine and cordially invited to leave a message after the tone. Instead, Marvin slammed the phone back on the receiver and dialed again. This time his daughter picked up after two rings and Marvin breathed a massive sigh of relief. Before Marvin could say anything his daughter rapidly and enthusiastically informed him that her accountant had proposed to her and they were now engaged. Marvin was overjoyed and immediately booked the next flight out in order to take the couple out for a celebratory dinner. On the way to the airport he made two stops, one to the hair salon to have his hair dyed the distinguished silvery gray of a man who would soon be marrying off his beloved only daughter and the other to an electronics store where he bought himself a cheap cell phone, so his daughter could reach him wherever he was.

The next few months were a whirlwind of preparation for the wedding. Marvin was introduced to the accountant's parents, a charming older couple who Marvin found to be quite endearing and they in turn declared him to be an "absolutely delight," something Marvin had never been called before. He eagerly and excitedly listened as his daughter described her dream wedding and personally saw to it that everything was just as his daughter dreamed it would be. He helped her track down the perfect dress, the perfect band, the perfect hall, he even wrote and rewrote and rewrote the perfect toast, though he had not been asked to give one.

In the days leading up to the wedding date Marvin attended a lot of dinners. He went to dinner with his son-in-law-to-be where he tried to play the role of intimidating father-in-law but simply couldn't help himself from smiling throughout the entire meal. He went to dinner with the boy's parents who afterward declared him to be "even more delightful than previously thought." And, of course, he went to dinner with his daughter. For that one he wore his best suit and picked the fanciest restaurant the small town of Clifftown had to offer. Over dinner he told her how proud of her he was. He admitted to her that when he had learned his wife was pregnant he had feared that he wouldn't be a good parent but after seeing the person his daughter had become he told her that he could have been the worst parent in the world and he was still confident that she would've grown into the smart, strong, talented, beautiful and accomplished woman he now saw sitting in front of him.

"You're the best parent anyone could ask for dad," she said when he had finished.

"That's definitely true," Marvin said jokingly, "But that's only because I've been blessed with the most amazing daughter."

"Aw dad, stop it I'll cry."

"It's true."

It was true, Marvin reflected, he couldn't have hoped for anything better than the confident young woman sitting across from him just two days away from being married.

The next day Marvin tried on his wedding tuxedo for the dozenth time and practiced his toast in the mirror once more. He then tried to calm himself down to no avail, he was too excited for the wedding that would be taking place in less than twenty four hours. To steel his nerves he began pacing the house methodically looking at each of his daughter's works of art. He made it to the kitchen before he felt the cell phone in his inside jacket pocket vibrating lightly against his chest. Thinking it was his daughter he quickly pulled the device out and held it up to his ear.

“Hello?”

It wasn't his daughter, it was the accountant, the man his daughter was set to marry in less than twenty four hours time. Only now there would be no wedding, something had happened, the accountant informed him, something terrible, something irreversible. The young man could barely get the words out and the un-aging man could barely listen to them. He was in a haze now, he immediately stopped pacing and squeezed his eyes shut as the accountant explained to him what had happened.

“She was crossing the street, didn't see the truck I guess. H-he drove right through the light, hit her full on. She's... she's... she's.”

Marvin hung up the phone and opened his eyes. He was still in his kitchen though he wished he could've been anywhere else. After all, the kitchen was the one room in the house that had existed solely for the mortal people in his life, and his daughter, now more clearly mortal than ever, was the only one that ever truly mattered. He was standing in front of the refrigerator, now covered in artwork, at eye-level was a crudely drawn picture of man with black hair, an asymmetrical face and disproportional limbs, despite the admittedly poor quality, it was his favorite piece, the drawing his daughter had drawn of her daddy from her first day of school. Marvin quickly ripped the picture down from the fridge and shoved it into his pocket along with the toast he had written, and the cell phone he had bought. He then quickly moved through his house towards the front door, stopping only to unlock and open it. Then with the speed of a man who was as young as he supernaturally looked, Marvin began to run. He ran and he ran and he ran, not stopping until he reached the edge of the town.

Marvin Ritholtz looked out at the magnificent, if foreboding cliff from which the town of Clifftown had gotten its name.

“Old problems remain in old cities,” he told himself quietly as tears began to stream down his face. Then, he let out a terrible gut-wrenching scream and took off at full speed towards the cliff.

He knew it wouldn't do anything, wouldn't change anything, but as he ran he told himself there might be some chance, some way, that he could be reunited with his family, with the only people he had ever and would ever love. As he neared the end of the outcropping he screamed one more time and threw himself over the edge.

An hour later Marvin Ritholtz woke up at the bottom of the ravine, completely intact and completely alive. He cursed at the sky and then checked his pockets, everything in them, the speech, the drawing, and the phone had somehow remained intact as well. On his phone he saw that he had several missed calls from his once almost son-in-law as well as a few from each of his parents. He also saw that he had received a text message from the boy's father, expressing his sincerest condolences and offering to take care of the funeral arrangements for his daughter if Marvin didn't feel capable of doing it himself. Marvin thumbed back a simple, "Yes please," and then hurled his phone at the magnificent, if foreboding cliff, he didn't need it anymore, there was nobody alive that he wanted to talk to. He watched as the phone shattered into several pieces before turning the other way and beginning to walk. He didn't know where he was going but for now, he just knew that he needed to go.

In the years following his daughter's death, Marvin Ritholtz became something of a wanderer. He traveled from town to town and while he never again married or sired another child he still made connections, friends, neighbors, coworkers, even, at one point, a stray dog he had adopted. Time and time again though Marvin suffered through loss after loss as everyone he allowed himself to become close to ultimately succumbed to the pulls of time and passed on. During a period of somber self reflection Marvin realized that with each death it became progressively easier for him to deal with, while he still moved away after each loss, Marvin couldn't even remember the last time he had cried. Though he wasn't quite sure if that was because he was actually getting better at dealing with loss or if he was just guarding himself from becoming as close to people as he once did.

Marvin made sure he never completely sealed himself off from other people though, never becoming the man he was when he chose put three faulty bullets in his head. He wanted to be the kind of man his family would have respected, the kind of person they would have been proud to call a husband and a father. Thusly he drew his strength from the reminders he kept from the people he had loved. Every time he looked in the mirror he was met by a young-faced man with the distinguished silvery gray hair of a man who had outlived his family. Every time he reached into his right pocket he felt a crayon drawing of a loving father drawn on a young girl's first day of school, every time he reached into his left he felt a neatly folded up wedding toast, one that had never been given and one that he had not been asked to write. When he removed the folded piece of paper from his pocket, an event which occurred quite frequently as the years

went on, he always paid special attention to the last line he had written, which was both circled and highlighted. He would be the first to admit that the words were not his own, rather they had been given to him to keep for all eternity by someone whom he had loved dearly.

“My dear, I have always loved you, and I always will, forever, for as long as you live. You have no need to fear being alone, for I will be with you always.”

Marvin also drew strength from the faint hope that if he could outlive death, surely others could as well. He was no one special, no more deserving to be blessed or cursed than most anyone else and while he would never wish his curse on any man or woman alive he sometimes wished that he might, one day, find someone like him. If only to finally free himself from the terrible loneliness.

Again

There is a being with an immense amount of power. A tremendous degree. Unquantifiable really. Lots of power. I mean *he* could probably quantify it. He can do anything. “Can” being the key word here. He doesn’t really get around to doing much. All that power, all that time, all that potential for good, and nearly nothing to show for it. Such a shame. Though I guess it’s good that he hasn’t chosen to do anything *bad*. He hasn’t unleashed a plague or caused a drought or destroyed the world or anything. We’re all very grateful for that. I mean, he still *could*, the day is young. But for now, thanks. We appreciate you not wiping us all from existence. His name is Joe by the way. It doesn’t matter.

The Chair

He sits in a chair. Like everyone else. He’s relatable like that. He doesn’t *need* to sit in the chair. It’s just something he does. We can probably count on him staying in that chair for a while. He used to not sit in a chair. He used to stand and walk around. Every thousand or so years he would jump or run. But those are not every day activities for Joe. I don’t know why. Maybe he gets tired. Sometimes when I jump or run I get tired. Then, one day, Joe sat down in a chair. It took him three million years of internal debating to create that chair. So he’s probably not in any rush to stand up. It doesn’t even look like a comfortable chair. Although I guess my sense of comfort probably differs from that of an unquantifiably powerful being. But it doesn’t even have a cushion. And it only has one arm. Joe has two. It doesn’t make any sense.

The Walls

He sits in a room. He’s not one for fresh air I suppose. The room has four walls. It’s a very standard kind of room. The walls are off-white. They could have been any color. But Joe chose off-white. Or they came in off-white and he couldn’t be bothered to change them. Perhaps that’s his favorite color. Off-white. White. But off. Ever so slightly. Almost like a very light gray. Maybe he perceives it as a different color. He can probably see more colors than us. But

he's such a pro, he'd never brag about something like that. Some days the walls are closer to each other and to Joe and some days they are farther. He changes them. Some days he needs more space to sit in his chair than others. Somedays the walls close in so tight that even if he wanted to he couldn't stand. Though I suppose if he wanted to stand he'd move the walls. I don't know why he boxes himself in like that. As though the walls are giving him a hug. Maybe he just wants a hug. Or maybe I'm projecting my own feelings onto him. Maybe he's projecting his own feelings onto me. As if there was a difference. His chair can't hug him. It doesn't have enough arms.

The Crack

There is a crack in one of the walls. I can't say which one. It changes. It moves. It's weird like that. Perhaps someday it will be a window. Or maybe it already is for Joe. He can see through walls so really everything is a window for Joe. Sometimes he will close his eyes and the crack will wander across the walls. Zigzagging up and down and to and fro. Usually to and fro. Who knows why. Sometimes the crack will form different shapes. Once it spelled out the name Joe. That's how we know his name is Joe. He told us with the crack on the wall.

Joe's Cat

He has a cat. For many years he didn't have a cat. But he has one now. It's orange. It does not appear to eat anything. It seems healthy enough though. Joe doesn't play with it. He just sits in his chair. It doesn't even have a name. That's why we call it Joe's Cat. If it were my cat I would name it Gerald or Gerald the Pirate. It has a patch of black fur over one eye. It's the left one. That's why it would be a pirate. The cat spends its days walking around the room. Sometimes it flies. It's one of *those* cats. Apparently. It chases after the crack in the wall as it moves to and fro. It is a good cat. Most days it does more things than Joe has done in a million billion years. But Joe is the owner. And Gerald the Pirate is the pet. I'm told some owners have different relationships with their pets. I guess that applies to unquantifiably powerful beings and their spontaneous miracle cats. Who am I to judge.

The Scar

Joe has a scar over his left eye. He gave it to himself of course. There are not many things that can scar an unquantifiably powerful being. Joe is one of those things. He gave himself the scar. Maybe he did it to look cool. Admittedly, it does look very cool. But it's less cool since we know he gave it to himself. One day it just formed there. Right over his left eye. Cool. But not *that* cool.

Memory

There was a time when Joe was a king. Before the room with the off-white walls with the crack in one of them and the chair with too few arms. He sat on a throne. Like kings do. The throne had two arms. The proper amount. One for each of Joe's. He was the king because he could do anything. Which is a very respectable ability to have. It's the kind of quality you look for in a king. He was good to his people. He provided for them and protected them. They loved him. They would throw him parades and they would chant "Joe! Joe! Joe!" Sometimes he chants his own name to himself. While he's remembering. That's how we know his name is Joe. He chants it. Classy. He likes to remember the time he was a king. He like to remember all the times he was lots of different things. He has a lot of memories. He's lived a lot of lives. Possibly. Admittedly he is not sure if the memories are real. He can create memories that never happened. It's one of his abilities. One of the abilities that got him crowned king. Maybe. He's not sure. Joe! Joe! Joe! He likes to chant anyway. In case the memories are real.

Feelings

Joe has many feelings. More than regular humans. Unquantifiable feelings. But he has to keep an eye on them. If he doesn't watch his feelings things can happen. Good things, bad things, decidedly neutral things. Joe doesn't mind when good things happen and he is decidedly neutral about decidedly neutral things happening. He doesn't like bad things though. He's relatable like that. So he watches all of his feelings. When he feels afraid, and even sometimes unquantifiably powerful beings feel afraid, he makes himself stop. When he feels lonely he looks

off into the sky until the feeling subsides. When he feels sad he squeezes his eyes shut. One time he cried. It rained for three hundred years. Everything got very wet. When it was over he decided he didn't want everything to be wet. He turned back time and didn't cry. Which seems a tad excessive. Someone should tell Joe about towels. Joe if you're reading this, towels are strips of cloth than can dry things.

Joe's Smile

Joe has the most beautiful smile. That's why it gets its own paragraph. It is a perfect smile. When he smiles all of the crops in the world are watered. Also nobody feels pain for a year. You can do whatever you want and it doesn't hurt. Because Joe smiled. The crops always get mentioned first though. That's the one Joe knows about. He doesn't know that people stop feeling pain when he smiles. If he knew he would never stop smiling. But Joe doesn't feel pain. He doesn't understand the concept. He knows about crops though. He heard about them when he was a king.

Birthdays

Every so often Joe will have a birthday. He's relatable like that. A ginormous birthday cake will appear in the room. The cat gets very excited. Then the cake floats around the room 17,000 times. One for every time Joe feels like making it float around the room. The crack forms numbers to count out the circuits. Then the cake will burst into flames and disappear. That's the cat's favorite part. It is a strange cat. It is a strange birthday celebration. The birthdays occur seemingly at random. Not once a year like everybody else. Joe likes to be different. One year he had a birthday every day. Then one year he didn't have any at all. The longest gap between birthdays was three million years. Three lifetimes. He didn't age during that time. He actually doesn't age ever. Maybe he just likes watching cakes burst into flames. Who wouldn't. The shortest gap between birthdays was twenty-two minutes.

The Train

The train, if there even is a train, runs all the time. Well not *all* the time. There are twelve minutes in the middle of the night where it doesn't run, if it even exists. It's a different twelve minutes every night. But it's always twelve and it's always at night. The train, if there even is a train, runs just outside the room where Joe sits. It runs in a circle. Around the room. Around and around. Maybe. Joe put it there of course. If it's even there. The train, if there even is a train, makes a lot of noise. That's by design. Joe's design. He does it to drown out all the other noises in the world. For twelve minutes each night Joe hears the entire world. Any more than that is too much for him. He tries to listen because he wants to help. But there are too many noises. So he has a train. Or, at the very least, he has the noises of a train. The bells and whistles and clang-clang-clangs that would certainly suggest the presence of a train. It's a much more manageable array of noises than the whole world. One train versus the whole world. The cat doesn't mind the noise. It doesn't hear it. From the cat's perspective, there is no train. Even if there were a train, the walls are soundproof for Joe's Cat.

Jokes

Joe loves to laugh. He likes jokes. Though he doesn't hear many. He sits in a chair in a room. There are not many comedy shows there. His favorite joke goes like this: "What gets more wet as it dries... a towel." That one makes him laugh for about 372 years. Maybe 373. If he hasn't heard it in a while. See it's funny because while technically the towel is participating in the act of drying something, it itself is not getting dry. It is getting wetter. Normally when something is said to be drying it is getting dryer not wetter. But not towels. Towels are getting wetter. Hahahahaha. Joe's Cat laughs too when it hears that joke. It sounds weird when the cat laughs. Most cats don't do that. But Joe's Cat does. Because Joe loves to laugh. His name, Joe, is actually short for Jokey. That's how we know his name is Joe. It's short for Jokey.

Friends

Joe doesn't have any friends. He's relatable like that. Not to me. *I* have friends. He's relatable to people who don't have friends. The friendless. Those are Joe's people. Joe: Patron Saint of the Lonely. Oh wait, he has a cat. The cat is his friend. Never mind.

The War

Once Joe was in a war. It was a very perplexing experience for Joe. He couldn't understand anybody's motivations. Motivations are very important in a war. Without them there would be no wars. That's why Joe has never started a war. No motivation. He's relatable like that. But the other side was motivated. They wanted Joe's power. As though beating Joe in a fight would transfer his powers to them. Absurd. Joe wasn't in the mood to fight a war. He doesn't have it in him. He doesn't like fights. So the other side stopped existing. If they continued to exist, they would continue to make war. So they stopped. Sometimes Joe feels bad about preventing them from existing. So he puts them back. But they just continue the war. So Joe removes them again. The war has lasted for four thousand years from Joe's perspective. It hasn't even begun yet for his would be attackers. They've only just decided to attack him. They were going to start a fire. Joe doesn't even know where. They hadn't decided that yet. All they'd decided was that they were going to start a fire and steal Joe's power. In all honesty it was a terribly thought out plan of attack. If they had more time they might've thought of a better one. They also might not have. We'll never know. Joe won the war.

The Scam

There's a mirror that hangs on the outside of Joe's wall. Underneath the mirror there is a plaque which reads "Come one and all to see the being of unquantifiable power." Joe put it there. Joe might very well have put everything everywhere. The plaque is definitely his work. It's got his style. Plus, he signed it. That's how we know his name is Joe, he signed the plaque. If a person comes to the mirror, during the twelve minutes of the night when the train, if there even is a train, is not running, they will see a reflection of themselves. It's supposed to be inspiring. Moving. Meaningful. Relatable. Sometimes Joe tries to be relatable. He's relatable like that. People call it a scam. Which is understandable. They don't know when the train, if there even is such a thing, will start again. They're risking a lot to look in the mirror. They might get hit by a train! Nobody wants to get hit by a train. If there even is a train. If they're going to possibly be struck down by a possibly existent train they want it to be worth it. They want to see something

amazing. Something awe inspiring that they can tell tales about back home. But all they see is themselves, reflected back at them. They can see themselves anytime they want. Mirrors are a common household object. What a rip-off.

Music

Joe has never heard music. Well, ok, technically he has. He's heard everything. For twelve minutes a night he hears all the sounds of the world. Including music. But he doesn't know what music is. He has no way of differentiating it from other noise. So he doesn't know he's heard it. So has he ever really heard it? If he doesn't know what music is can he say he heard it? Who would he even say it to? The cat? The cat doesn't know what music is. It would be a nonsense conversation. It's sad though. That he's never heard music. He'd probably like it. If he knew what it was. The cat would probably be indifferent. That's just the way the cat is. He taps on his chair though. On the one arm. With his right hand. He drums a monotonous beat. It makes him feel at peace. He doesn't know why.

The Scars

His body is covered in scars. There's one over his left eye but there are others. On his arms. On his legs. Congregated at the small of his back. He gave them to himself of course. Who knows why. Maybe even he doesn't know. Every so often a new one appears. Once in a lifetime he'll get a new scar. He gives them to himself. Doesn't he? Nothing else can scar him. So it must be him.

Whistling

He whistles to himself. Every few thousand years he whistles to himself. It's a somber tune. All low notes. It makes the cat curl up next to the chair. It carries on for four years and then it stops. Joe's song. As much as it can be called a song. "Joe's note" would perhaps be a more fitting title. Or "Hymn for the Eternally Lost" or "Ballad of the Wanderer" or "The Deepest Whistle: An Experiment in Music by Joe." Or I don't know. It's not my job to come up with

song titles. “Deepest” has a double meaning. Joe’s song is full of deep meaning. Whatever deep meaning he ascribes to it. It is also the lowest possible sound.

Enough

Sometimes when Joe has had enough, he will say so. He will say or he will think or he will feel the word “enough” and then everything will stop. It starts slowly at first. First the mirror falls, and shatters. Then the plaque “Come one and all to see...” nothing. The crack goes next. It recedes into the walls, which no longer exist anyway. The train, if there ever was a train has gone, you can tell because there is no noise. Not even the cat makes a sound. You’d think it would be delighted to be outside but it isn’t. It isn’t anything. That’s when everything starts to unravel. The trees, the seas, the mountains, the fields. The weather stops as nature blinks out of existence. Then the sun fades and the moon crumbles and out and out and out into the farthest reaches of the galaxy worlds come undone. The planets, except for Jupiter, complete their final orbit around nothingness and then they too pack it in and call it an epoch. Jupiter can stay. Joe has always liked Jupiter. He used to look up into the sky and watch it. He never had a ceiling because he wanted to see Jupiter. He looked through the ceiling to see into space. Jupiter can stay because it starts with J and Joe starts with J. So there’s a connection. But even still Jupiter vanishes as well. Color and time and emotion blur together into nothingness. Memories explode and dissipate on a blank canvas like blood spattering from a fresh wound. But Joe remains, as though glued, in his chair. Then, at long last, as the remnants of a universe swirl in and around each other until they too subside, Joe stands. The chair melts away. One arm at a time. And Joe takes one last look around as a scar forms over his left eye.

Then

Joe is gone too.

But

Only for an instant. Then he’s back. Don’t worry, he’s fine.

And Again

There is a being with an immense amount of power. A tremendous degree. Unquantifiable really. Lots of power. I mean *he* could probably quantify it. He can do anything. “Can” being the key word here. He doesn’t really get around to doing much. All that power, all that time, all that potential for good, and nearly nothing to show for it. Such a shame. Though I guess it’s good that he hasn’t chosen to do anything *bad*. He hasn’t unleashed a plague or caused a drought or destroyed the world or anything. We’re all very grateful for that. I mean, he still *could*, the day is young. But for now, thanks. We appreciate you not wiping us all from existence. His name is Joe by the way. It doesn’t matter.

Rules of the Game

Bang. Smack. Pop. Bang. Smack. Pop.

Bang. The pink rubber ball hit the cold stone floor, unsettling a cloud of dust.

Smack. The ball, unwilling to let a simple floor stop it, pushed off and hurled into the wall, sending flakes of gray paint falling to the floor.

Pop. The ball -feeling no need to stay by the wall for long- arced through the air and returned to its initial starting point, the palm of one Michael Shaw, professional thief.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

Floor. Wall. Hand.

Michael Shaw was seated on the floor, with his back against the wall. A couple of inches to his left was a doorway which led to a dusty and decrepit hallway. The room he was in now was about 150 square feet overall. Small, but it wasn't like he needed a lot of space. The walls, with the exception of the one to his left were completely bare and the only thing on the floor was a tattered suitcase filled with the few possessions he owed, mostly clothes, though every so often he'd put on a pair of pants and find a priceless gemstone in one of the pockets. The room had one window, though it had been boarded up when Michael had arrived and he'd seen no reason to remove the boards. He wasn't much for idly staring out windows. Idly throwing a handball at a wall, on the other hand, was exactly the kind of activity he could get behind. It helped him think. He was doing a lot of thinking these days.

Michael Shaw was nearing his twenty fifth birthday, though his face sported some of the lines of a much older man. He had seen things, he'd say in hushed, melodramatic tones, when people asked about the creases and bags and the pockmarks that decorated his face. Seen things, done things and said things that would age any man. And he had, though his aged features were more likely due to a lack of self-care than his choice in career. His eyes remained young though. Those icy blue eyes that always had a glint of mischievousness in them. As though he was always up to something and only about thirty seconds away from being caught.

Michael Shaw considered himself to be a good thief. He'd even go as far as to say a master one. The warrant out for his arrest split the difference and referred to him as "highly skilled and potentially dangerous." Michael had laughed the first time he'd heard that. The potential was quite low. He reckoned that if he ever found himself surrounded by the police with no avenue of escape and a gun in his hand he was far more likely to just put the gun down and go

quietly than enter into a shoot-out. As far as he was concerned, If the police ever managed to find him they'd certainly earned the right to arrest him. That was just the way it went sometimes.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

But for now he was a fugitive. Living life one day at a time. Constantly hopping from dump to dump, never staying in one place for long. For now, he had taken up residence in an abandoned motel. Or maybe it had been a hotel, it was hard to tell how upscale the place had been in its hay-day. By the time Michael had arrived the place had been completely gutted. There wasn't even a toilet anywhere, much less a bed. Still it could be worse, he could be on the street, he could be dead, he could be in prison.

He was a man on the run. From the police, the FBI, a billionaire from California whose net-worth had recently taken a slight dip, and a short Mexican man who had once assaulted a hotdog vendor for putting too much mustard on a hotdog.

Marcos Russo was the closest thing Michael Shaw had to a father figure. A feared and respected figure in the criminal world, Marcos Russo had broken away from the more violent tendencies of his drug-cartel past and had established himself as something of a kingpin in the shadowy world of thieves and conmen. He had discovered Michael after the younger thief had, through fate or terrible luck, tried to pick his pocket on a crowded Manhattan street.

"Tried and succeeded," Michael would chime in whenever Marcos told the story in dingy bars or at boardroom tables.

"The first time," Marcos would retort with a grin.

For Michael, all those years ago, had made the mistake of confusing Marcos Russo for a chump. Someone who could be robbed the same way more than once. The second time Michael had tried it Marcos had caught him, and broken his wrist for his sins.

"Consider that your first lesson," the older man had grunted. "Never pick the same pocket twice."

Bang. Smack. Pop.

And thus was the beginning of Michael's tutelage at the knee of Marcos Russo, master criminal. Michael had been taught everything from lifts to cons to how to disarm a man with a single move. Marcos, and his partner in crime, Ray Donner, had taught Michael everything he ever needed to know. How to steal, how to lie, how to fight, how to survive.

Ray Donners had been in three different juvenile detention centers before his eighteenth birthday. After his third stay he'd resolved to get his life on track and, after passing his GED, went to college. He majored in computer science and was snatched up by a tech firm in Silicon Valley soon after he graduated. Eventually, as it so often happens, he became dissatisfied with his lot in life and was soon turned on to more lucrative outlets for his considerable skills by an old friend from juvie, who introduced him to Marcos Russo.

Dad and mom, Michael had called them. They were the first family he'd ever really had.

Bang. Smack.

Michael looked at his hand. No ball. Huh. Slowly, he peered up. Sure enough, his pink handball was hovering above him, in the gloved hand of a 5'10 black man.

"Hey," Michael said nonchalantly.

"Hey," the man said before tipping his hand so the ball would fall to the ground.

Bang.

Michael caught it on the first bounce.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

Michael continued throwing his ball in silence as the other man began pacing along the border of the room, taking in the small space Michael had found for himself. He didn't say anything either. For now, "hey" was enough. After all they were best friends. And for them the simple acknowledgement and greeting was all they needed. That's how it is for best friends. Even when those best friends hadn't spoken in four months. Even when one of them was consciously avoiding, even hiding from, the other.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

If Marcos and Ray were his parents, then Rodney Vickers was his brother. Around the same age but a few inches shorter, Michael had taken to referring to him as his *little* brother. Something which Rodney, mature adult that he was, hated. Rodney Vickers was a locksmith by training and a thief by necessity. He had come to Marcos with stories of a sick sister he couldn't afford to care for and Marcos had put him to work. Rodney's very first heist had been the theft of a painting from the Boston Museum of Fine Art during which his quick thinking, in the form of zapping both himself and Michael with a TAZER had saved the duo from capture by the police. From then on, Michael and Rodney had been an inseparable team. Running cons together, pulling heists, committing all manner of daring thefts.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

But there had been a falling out. And now Michael watched as Rodney stood rigidly looking over the wall to the left of the door. The only wall that wasn't bare. The wall which was decorated with maps, blueprints, photographs and diagrams all underneath multicolored cardboard paper letters which spelled out the words "Heist Wall." In particular he was examining a motivational poster Michael had hung up. The picture depicted four penguins, one tall, one short, one fat, and one emperor. The caption read "Teamwork, it takes all types."

Bang. Smack. Pop.

Rodney squinted, ignoring the sounds of the rubber ball's journey around the room. Michael had scrawled something on the poster. Labels, it seemed, for the penguins.

"Why am I the short one?" Rodney asked, finally shattering the wall of silence between them.

Michael grinned, and placed the ball by his side, "Well, you're the shortest, little brother."

"No I'm not," Rodney said, whipping around to face Michael.

Michael made a face, "You're not? I could've sworn you were."

"Ray's the shortest."

"Ray's the fat one," Michael said.

"Fair," Rodney said, "I'm taller than Marcos too."

"Marcos is the emperor," Michael said.

"Speaking of which-,"

"No."

Bang. Smack. Pop.

"Fine, it can wait," Rodney said as he turned back around to look at the heist wall. "I see you've been busy."

"Gotta keep the mind sharp," Michael said.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

"What's the target?"

"It's a safe," Michael said.

Rodney looked up at the drawing of a black box with a ridged circle in the center. The box was surrounded by a dozen or so yellow arrows all pointing towards it. The whole thing looked like it had been drawn in crayon.

“I gathered that,” Rodney said. “Is this crayon?”

“Indeed it is.”

“Why?”

Michael shrugged, “It was more fun this way.”

Rodney looked at the rest of the papers on the wall. The maps and diagrams, which Rodney had originally assumed to have been computer printed, now appeared to have been hand drawn in pencil. It was hard to see -there was only one lightbulb in the small room and by the way it was flickering it didn't have much life left in it- but Rodney could make out multiple faded marks where the artist, and these maps were nothing less than a work of art, had made mistakes and hastily rectified them. In fact, it looked like the only thing that hadn't been sketched by hand was the picture of the penguins.

“You have these memorized?” Rodney asked, tapping the pencil drawings.

“Of course,” Michael said.

Rodney nodded. It was an old trick Ray had taught them a lifetime ago. Take a complicated image, a map, a blueprint, a photograph, and copy it all by hand. The goal was twofold.

“We want you to learn patience,” Michael said, imitating the gruffness of Ray's voice almost perfectly.

“And we want you to memorize every goddamn inch of this museum,” Rodney said, similarly mimicking the hacker.

“And we want you to sit quietly for a couple of hours,” Michael said, in his own voice now.

“The secret third reason,” Rodney said smiling.

Bang.

Rodney caught the ball on the bounce and crossed the room towards Michael. It took him only three strides to cover the distance between the two of them. It was not a very large room. Rodney sat down on the floor next to Michael and leaned back against the wall, passing the handball to his old friend.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

Immediately the ball began to move again. It flew from Michael's hands, hit the dusty floor and bounced upwards until it hit the wall. The wall served only to change the ball's direction, causing it to sail through the air back towards the thieves where Rodney caught it, threw it, and repeated the cycle again.

Bang. Smack. Pop. Bang. Smack. Pop. Bang. Smack. Pop.

"How'd you find me?" Michael finally asked.

"Oh please, we've been tracking you for weeks, it was only a matter of time," Rodney asked.

"That didn't answer the question," Michael said.

"The guy at the convenience store recognized you," Rodney said.

"Tommy?"

"He said he prefers to go by Thomas," Rodney said.

"He called the police?" Michael said.

"He did his best. Ray hijacked the call."

"Shouldn't have kept calling him Tommy," Michael said.

"He prefers to go by Thomas," Rodney said simply as he caught the ball and released it again.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

"How is Ray?" Michael asked as he threw the ball towards the floor.

"He's good. Well, he's not. He *says* he's good."

"Ray's not one to talk about his feelings."

Rodney scoffed as if to say "You're one to talk," and then changed the subject.

"It smells horrible in here," Rodney said.

"That'll be my roommates," Michael said.

Rodney raised an eyebrow, "Roommates?"

"Rats," Michael said gesturing around the small room. "They live in my walls; I live in their bathroom."

Rodney laughed, "It was nice of them to let you crash here."

Michael nodded, “As far as landlords go I can’t complain. Rent is cheap, I can come and go as I please, decorate the place however I want, make as much noises as I want... Only trade-off is that they get to come in and piss everywhere. But still, it’s a good deal if you can get it.”

“What is this place anyway?” Rodney asked. “There weren’t enough letters left out front to make it out.”

Michael shrugged, “I think it was a motel at some point. Maybe an especially crappy hotel. Whatever it is it’s condemned, once the city can allocate the money for it it’s being torn down and me and my small-bladdered landlords will be looking for a new hole to squat in.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing? Moving from dump to dump?”

“The life of a fugitive,” Michael responded evenly, making sure not to betray any sense of lament for his situation.

“You don’t have to,” Rodney said. “The cops are no closer to finding you than they were before they started chasing you. We’ve got ‘em running around in circles.”

Michael caught the ball and passed it to Rodney before standing up and walking towards the heist wall.

“The cops aren’t the only people I’m running from.”

“I’ll try not to take that personally,” Rodney said as he continued throwing the ball.

“Don’t try *too* hard,” Michael said absently as he looked over his work.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

“They’ve set up a hotline,” Rodney said.

“Have they now?”

“Yeah,” Rodney said, then affecting what he imagined to be an official sounding voice, “If you see this man do not approach him, he may be dangerous. Just call the number on the screen to contact the proper authorities.”

Michael laughed.

“Marcos and I have been flooding it with calls,” Rodney said. “We’ve got the police running all over the state chasing ghosts. You’d have to literally bump into a police officer on the street for them to catch you.”

“No Ray?” Michael asked, peering over his shoulder at Rodney.

Rodney was quiet.

“They got a picture of me?” Michael said.

Rodney frowned, "You know they do."

Michael turned around and flashed a sheepish smile, "Bit of a joke. Too soon. Sorry."

He turned around again to face the maps.

"It came out well," he said.

"The picture?" Rodney asked.

"The picture."

"You look like an asshole in it," Rodney said.

Michael shrugged, "I think I just have one of those faces."

Rodney threw the ball so that it bounced off the floor and then collided with Michael's back.

Bang. Smack. Ouch!

Michael whipped around and scooped the ball off the floor. Then he walked over to the wall opposite the door, leaned against it and slid down until he was seated directly across from Rodney. He threw the ball at the floor so it would bounce only high enough to reach Rodney's hand. Rodney snatched it out of the air and threw it back.

Bang. Pop. Bang. Pop.

"What do you think?" Michael said.

"I think you're being an idiot and that you need to come home."

"I meant of my plan," Michael said pointing towards the collage on the wall next to them.

Rodney peered back up at the heist wall.

"You have the combination?"

"It's his wife's birthday with the year swapped out for the year they were married," Michael said automatically, then he added. "Isn't that sweet?"

"It's the stuff of sonnets," Rodney said. "How do you know?"

"It's the same as the combination to his car, to his house, his email and get this, even the lock to the apartment that he brings his mistress to."

Michael grinned. Rodney chuckled. For a second it was like old times. Just the two of them, staying up late, planning a heist, talking smack about the marks.

"What if he has a different combination for the safe?" Rodney said.

"He's the kind of guy who can't remember multiple strings of numbers," Michael said.

"Where's the safe kept?"

“In his office. Building in midtown, 37th floor,” Michael said, pointing up towards a hand-drawn city map with a spot circled in red crayon.

“How do you get in?” Rodney asked.

Michael didn’t respond.

Bang. Pop. Bang. Pop.

“How’s Marcos?” Michael said quietly.

“He’s not happy.”

“Is he ever?”

“He’s worried about you. We all are. Four months without so much as a ‘hi, I’m not dead.’ We only knew you hadn’t been arrested because we see your picture on the news all the time. Do you know what that does to him? To Marcos? To see you on TV all day every day?”

“You should try changing the channel.”

“I’m serious!” Rodney said, holding onto the ball.

“I’m not coming back in,” Michael said.

“It’s not safe for you to be out here,” Rodney said.

“I thought you said you guys were keeping the cops off my back,” Michael said.

“How long can we do that though? How long until somebody recognizes you or you get caught stealing something or,” he gestured around the room. “You catch some kind rat disease and die!”

“That’s not going to happen,” Michael said.

“Right because you’ve never made a mistake that resulted in your almost being arrested,” Rodney said as he picked up the ball and the game of catch resumed.

“Careful Rodders, you’ll get sarcasm everywhere,” Michael said.

“Better than rat piss... Do you even have a bed?”

“I don’t sleep much.”

“Mike...”

Bang. Pop. Bang. Pop.

“I’m fine,” Michael insisted.

“You’re a mess.”

“A *fine* mess,” Michael said running his hands through his brown hair.

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re just jealous that you don’t have beautiful hair like mine,” Michael said.

Rodney rolled his eyes yet placed a hand on his bald head.

“Stop making jokes.”

“No.”

“Why are you even doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“This heist, robbing this guy.”

“I’m a thief Rodney, it’s what I do.”

“What’s in the safe?”

“Gold.”

“*Gold?*”

“I know right?” Michael said. “The dude just keeps bars of gold in his office safe.”

“Why?” Rodney said.

“It’s part of his gimmick. He’s a lawyer. He tells people that he can defend any client no matter how much crap they’re in. He tells the younger associates at his firm that he turns crap into gold...”

“A regular Rumpelstiltskin.”

“He calls himself King Midas.”

“He does *not*,” Rodney said aghast.

“Oh he does, he waves the bar of gold at new associates and tells them that that’s what he expects of them. It’s incredibly obnoxious.”

“That’s *preposterous*,” Rodney said shaking his head.

“Yeah, so I’m gonna steal it,” Michael said.

Bang. Pop. Bang. Pop.

“How?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Secure safe within a secure office filled with lawyers in the middle of Manhattan. It’s a big job for one person.”

“You’re welcome to join me,” Michael said, a little too hopefully for his taste.

“No Mike,” Rodney said softly. “Maybe some other time, after the heat around you dies down.”

“No Rod,” Michael said sternly. “There’s no reason for that, I’m fine. I’m not going to get caught. I can *do* this.”

“But why?”

“What do you mean why?”

“Why steal this guy’s gold? What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know it might add some nice color to this place. It’s a little bit drab for my tastes.”

“Seriously Michael, why steal it? You got a buyer?”

“No.”

“Someone hire you to steal from this guy?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“Why not!” Michael said throwing the ball a little too hard.

Bang. Smack. Bang. Pop.

The ball smacked off the wall without touching Rodney, bounced back to the floor and then back into Michael’s hand.

“What do you mean why not?” Rodney said, matching Michael’s tone. “*Especially* after California.”

“Oh don’t come at me with California,” Michael said coldly. “You were there too, and so was Marcos.”

“Because we didn’t want you going off half-cocked and landing yourself in prison!” Rodney said. “We *should’ve* listened to Ray.”

“Ray can go fuck himself.”

“You don’t mean that,” Rodney said.

“Yes I do,” Michael said. “It’s his fault my picture is on every TV screen in the country.”

Rodney laughed. It was a bitter, mirthless laugh.

“It’s your fault your picture is everywhere.”

“It’s Ray’s.”

“When are you going to start taking responsibility for your own mistakes.”

Michael glared at Rodney.

“Yohan McGruber,” Rodney said.

It was a game they played sometimes. Rodney and Michael. After they'd completed a job they'd go over every detail of the heist. Every crime they committed, every trick, lie and con they'd successfully pulled off. They'd talk about the mistakes they made too. Who made them, what they were and how to avoid them. It was like a sports team going over game tape, except if everything had gone properly, there'd be no recording of what they'd done.

Only Michael had no desire to reminisce about this particular job.

"Don't."

"It seems like you need a reminder," Rodney said coldly.

Michael didn't say anything. He began passing the ball from one hand to the other.

"You're sitting by yourself at the bar of a posh little restaurant in Los Angeles-."

"*Posh*," Michael said in a mocking tone.

"A well-dressed gentleman takes the seat next to you and, being the good little conman that you are, you strike up a conversation. A fact-finding expedition as you call it. You learn that his name is Yohan McGruber and you also learn that Mr. McGruber is concerned. You see, there have been a string of burglaries in Mr. McGruber's neighborhood."

Michael smiled, "Is that so?"

"So, Mr. McGruber finds himself taking added precautions to protect himself against this dastardly thief that is plaguing his rich friends. He tells you that his home is now protected by the best security money can buy. Armed guards, cameras, alarms, sensors, locks, laser wires, the works!"

"To the point of being excessive even," Michael said as he pretended to be more interested in the ball than in Rodney's story.

"So you put in a call to your crew. Me, Marcos, Ray. You tell us that you've found a job but it's a big one, all hands on deck. We're intrigued until Ray hits you with the question."

"Why?" Michael said, remembering the phone call well.

"Because we're *thieves* Ray," Rodney said, mimicking Michael's voice.

"It's what we do," Michael said.

"But that's not good enough for Ray, he thinks you're taking too many risks, stealing for stealing's sake. He's concerned you haven't fully thought it through. He's concerned you're going to get caught."

"And I didn't," Michael said waving his hands around. "Look, no cuffs!"

“You aren’t exactly free,” Rodney said looking around the sparse room again. “I hear they have beds in prison now... Toilets too.”

“If it’s good enough for the rats...”

“You’re disgusting.”

“Your jealousy is very thinly veiled Rodney.”

“Wait, sorry, you’ve distracted me. I haven’t even gotten to the best part.”

“The part where I daringly take out the guards, magnificently maneuver myself through the laser grid, *steal* the camera footage and break into the most secure safe money can buy?”

“Marcos and I helped,” Rodney said. “But that’s not what I meant.”

Michael frowned.

“But yes, we do all that, we get to the safe, we’re nearly home free. Ray was nervous for nothing. We haven’t been caught. We’ve made off with more expensive trinkets and thingamajigs than we could ever hope to sell. We’re golden.”

“Like Midas.”

“Yes and like Midas your greed was your downfall.”

Michael gestured around the empty room, “Yep, you got me I’m overcome with a lust for material things.”

“Not monetary greed Michael. A greed for fame. A greed for notoriety. You needed McGruber to *know* who’d robbed him. You needed him to know that the very same man he bragged about his unbeatable security to is the man who is now robbing him blind. But Marcos had already destroyed the footage from the security cameras.”

“He was remarkably thorough,” Michael said.

“*Fortunately-*,”

“There’s that sarcasm again Rod,” Michael said.

“Fortunately for you, McGruber’s safe was rigged with a camera. It was set to snap a picture of whoever opened it and send it directly to McGruber’s phone.”

“I think it’s *whomever*,” Michael said, clutching the ball in his left hand.

“Now, a camera like that is effectively useless if the person opening the safe is wearing a mask, y’know, like a thief would. So we didn’t see it as a problem. All you needed to do was open the safe, take whatever was inside and then we were good to go.”

“That’s enough.”

“But that wasn’t good enough for you. Anonymity wasn’t enough for you. So what did you do?”

“I said that’s enough!”

“You took off your goddamn mask and *smiled*. You gave the camera a thumbs up! Knowing you I bet you even said ‘cheese.’”

Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack. Smack.

Rodney shut his eyes and covered his head as the ball bounced back and forth between the two walls directly above the two former best friends’ heads.

After a few moments the ball finally landed next to Rodney and he slowly looked up at Michael.

Michael was breathing heavily and staring right back at him.

“Ray could’ve deleted the picture. He could’ve gotten into McGruber’s phone and deleted the picture. He does that kind of thing all the time!” Michael said through clenched teeth.

“I know,” Rodney said. “But he chose not to. He thinks you deserve to feel the consequences of your actions.”

“Fuck Ray,” Michael said.

“Marcos agrees. He says you need to come in, take a break from the game for a bit.”

“Fuck Marcos too!” Michael said.

“Careful, remember the list.”

Michael smiled darkly. The list was Marcos Russo’s official list of causes for premature death in criminals. Crossing Marcos Russo was number two. Arrogance was number one. Police didn’t even make the top ten.

“What do you think?” Michael asked.

“About what?”

“Do you think I need to come in, Rod? Take a break? Do you think I’m being too *reckless*?”

Rodney took a second to ponder the questions.

Bang. Pop.

The game of catch had resumed.

“I think it comes down to the rules of the game,” Rodney said.

“Meaning?”

“I think that if you behave recklessly you’re going to get caught and if you get caught you need to keep your head down, lay low. As far as I’m concerned you were reckless, you were arrogant, you were *caught* and you need to take a break. You need to stop this.”

“Well then fuck you too I guess,” Michael said.

Bang. Pop. Bang. Pop. Bang. Pop.

“I never bought into that whole thing,” Michael said.

“What whole thing?”

“Ray’s whole thing.”

“Computers? Or the ponytail?”

“Needing a reason,” Michael said as he threw the ball at the floor. “Why should I need a reason to steal something. Why can’t it just be about act of stealing. About the challenge. About the *game*. Why can’t that be enough?”

Bang. Pop. Bang. Pop.

“Because what we do is dangerous Michael,” Rodney said. “If we’re going to do something, if we’re going to steal something, it needs to be worth it. We could be risking our lives.”

“So what kind of things make something like that worth it Rod? What’s worth your life?” Michael asked.

Rodney was silent.

Bang. Pop. Bang. Pop.

“A buyer? Money? I know that’s what Ray’s in it for. Money. And Marcos too I guess, though at this point I don’t think he’d be able to do anything else. He’s too old to quit. And he needs to make a living somehow. But I don’t know, money doesn’t really appeal to me all that much. I’ve never been one for things like that. Sure money’s nice but as you can see I get by fine without it. I mean yes, granted I need to eat, I have needs, but that’s what pockets are for. Any Manhattan street can be my own personal ATM all I have to do is go outside. So why rob a bank? Why take a billionaire’s toys?”

Michael fell silent as he pondered this. The ball continued moving between them.

Bang. Pop. Bang. Pop.

Rodney had the ball now.

“Of course you’ve never had to think about that Rodders. You’ve always had your reason. Your sister, I mean. You steal for her,” Michael said absently.

Bang. Pop.

The ball landed in Michael’s hand.

Rodney looked at him, there was a look in his eyes that Michael had never seen before.

“Rod?”

“Mike.”

“Are you ok?”

“I’m fine. I’m...”

Michael stared at his best friend.

“It’s Cynthia isn’t it.”

Rodney was silent.

“What happened?”

“She’s... She died Michael.”

Rodney bowed his head. Michael dropped the ball.

“What,” he said quietly.

“It was the cancer. I guess the treatment stopped working. Or it wasn’t as good as we thought. But... Yeah, she passed away.”

Michael closed his eyes. “When?”

“Five weeks, three days.”

“You should’ve told me,” Michael said. “There was a funeral right? I would’ve come. I... I could’ve been there for you little brother.”

“We couldn’t *find* you Michael. We didn’t even know where to look!” Rodney snapped.

“Hey... I’m sorry,” Michael said, rolling the ball around his palm.

“Come home Michael,” Rodney said. “It’s enough.”

“Not yet Rodney,” Michael said, turning his face away from his friend.

“*Why?*”

“Because I can’t!” Michael said. “I can’t stop. I *need* it Rodney. I need the thrill, the anticipation, the *rush* of the job!”

He was standing now, gesturing wildly towards the Heist Wall.

“Every single part of this makes me feel alive Rodney. I can’t... I don’t think I can feel alive without it. It’s all I know. Stealing is all I know. Do you know how old I was when I met Marcos? *Fifteen!* And I met him because I was robbing him. This is who I am. You can’t expect me to just... to just give it up!”

“You’re going to get yourself killed!” Rodney shouted, rising to his feet and closing the distance between himself and Michael. “You go on like this and you’re going to die!”

Michael looked him in the eye. “Maybe that’s not so bad.”

Rodney was taken aback.

Bang. Smack.

Rodney punched Michael in the face, sending him back to the floor.

“How dare you,” Rodney said.

Michael glared at him as he wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve.

“You’re better off without me Rodney,” Michael said. “Ray’s right about me, I’m reckless, I’m dangerous to have around. You’re better off without me.”

“*You’re* better off with us,” Rodney said. “We can protect you.”

Michael spit some blood from his mouth onto the floor.

“Yeah, I feel *real* protected little brother.”

“You need us Michael,” Rodney said extending his hand towards Michael.

Michael ignored it, “No I don’t.”

Rodney withdrew his hand, “That penguin poster seems to say otherwise.”

“I just think you all have really nice names,” Michael said, looking at the poster. “Just names that would fit really well for a bunch of penguins.”

“Do you think there are a lot of Hispanic penguins?” Rodney said gesturing towards the penguin labeled “Marcos”.

“They can’t all be black and white,” Michael said, grinning.

Rodney smiled in spite of himself.

“I’m not going to force you to come with me,” Rodney said as he turned away with him. “I hope this wasn’t a waste of time.”

“I think it was,” Michael said, reaching for the ball, which was resting just a few feet away from him.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Rodney said as he walked towards the door.

“Me too,” Michael said underneath his breath.

“Your lock is garbage by the way, it only took me two seconds to get past it,” Rodney called back over his shoulder.

“I didn’t even know there was a lock,” Michael said.

Rodney pulled the door open.

“I got a job,” Michael said.

Rodney stopped moving.

“When you say job...”

“I got a job as a window washer. In midtown. That’s how I found King Midas. I wash his window. I can see into his office. For weeks I’ve been watching him. I know when he takes his breaks, I know exactly where the safe is. I even know that the safe has a keypad lock, not a combination. I’ve done my research. I know his birthday, his anniversary, the day he met his mistress, every single important date or string of his numbers he could possibly have. All I need to do once I’m inside the office is dust the keypad for prints to see which numbers he’s been pressing and then match those numbers to one of those important dates and numbers to find the proper order. That’s how I’m gonna do it. It’ll be easy.”

“How are you going to get into the office?” Rodney asked without turning around.

“Window. I’ll use my lift.”

“I’m sure it’s reinforced. You can’t just break it.”

“Of course I couldn’t normally but I’ve been cutting away at that window for about a month now. Chipping away at a small section in the corner. Slowly, while I work. I can break it whenever I want now,” Michael responded.

Rodney looked over his shoulder. “Cutting away at it with what?”

“The diamond,” Michael said, almost too casually.

“McGruber’s diamond?” Rodney said, shocked.

“That’s the one. A diamond as big and as sharp as that can cut through damn near anything,” Michael said winking. “I guess there was a reason to take it after all.”

“I guess so,” Rodney said turning towards the door again.

“See Rodney, I told you. I’ve got a whole plan. I can do this!”

“Yeah,” Rodney said. “It looks like you’ve got it all figured out.”

Rodney Vickers walked out the door of the cramped and decrepit room, slamming it behind him. The force of the old door swinging shut so quickly reverberated through the room causing the lone lightbulb to finally give out, plummeting the room into darkness.

For a moment Michael Shaw sat alone. In darkness and in silence. Left to think about what had just happened. He didn't need Rodney, he decided. Or Ray or Marcos or anybody. He'd be fine on his own. He'd done it before; he'd do it again. As long as kept himself busy, he'd be fine.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

Bang. Smack. Pop.

Bang. Smack. Pop.