

even down into the comment threads, which were streams of exultant anxiety, triumphant anticipators of disaster. *All I no is that even though I dont own land or a house or much of anything, I am a stealthy bastard, and I will ensure that me and my wife and my boys live through whatever it is thats comin up the pike.*

The unemployed, under-employed, and those, like him, who were working but somehow had the ability to linger around comment columns on blogs, who kept a window open on their screen with the current indexes and oil numbers.

Been watching CNBC all day, Jim, waiting for the shit to hit the fan. Like I do everyday. Oil goes up, the stocks go down. Oil goes down, and the stocks go up, probably more than they should. We all know the fall is going to happen, but when? And then what next?

It was a problem, an addiction, and it was incredibly frustrating. Like anything else, like drugs or alcohol or sex or whatever. Everyday he got less done, or so it felt. The first two hours, and then three, he sat at his desk scrolling through these things, checking mail, reading newspapers, emptying his RSS feeds, handling the little bureaucratic problems of life – renewing magazines, booking travel tickets. Every evening, he made an empty promise to himself to just cut it off, cold turkey, the next day. Every morning, as he drove to work (shuffling podcasts and music tracks, eating his breakfast and drinking his coffee and smoking a couple of cigarettes....) he tried to build up resolve to, today at last, get things done for once. A fresh start: no email, no news, no shopping or electronic chores.

Just work, for once. But of course it never happened this way. He would in fact check mail, and the mail would contain links to follow, and once you have the browser open... He researched time-management techniques, organizational software whose trial versions he would download and test drive with dummy information for a few hours. His career was foundering – he was a mid-level creative at, perhaps, his peak. The next new idea, if it came from someone – if there were new ideas still to be had in the world – would come from someone else, someone better able to focus.

Breaking news alerts popped into his inbox, hour by hour. The dollar hits a new low. Talk with Iran have broken down. The flu outbreak in Guangdong Province as spread to Hong Kong. The teddy bear of the missing girl has been found in a garbage can in Tijuana. The illicit photos of the new anchorwoman were released on-line.

He clicked over to see the illicit photos. They were NSFW, but he did it anyway. His sex life was in shambles, in part because internet porn at night was fulfilling some needs better left unfilled, and growing new needs in him that were better not to grow. He wondered, sometimes, how much longer they would let him keep going like this. By *they*, he meant his employers, his wife – maybe even society as a whole. It was a shell game, a pyramid scheme. If only he felt like he was running it, profiting from it.

If a therapist (he wanted therapy, but his insurance didn't cover it) had asked him to draw a picture that would allegorically illustrate the state of his life, his mind, he would have drawn a book with the pages torn out of it, single pages from many books scattered all

but beyond all of that mess, there were all the messes in the world, the stuff that stared you in the face every time you turned on the computer. Your homepage: the interminable war, the terror threat, the price of oil, the fall of the dollar. What they were calling the “world food crisis” was the newest one. There were videos attached to the articles (he didn’t really read the articles, you didn’t really have to) of dark-skinned people in dusty places lining up for bread, lining up for boxes of something handed off the back of a truck by guys in army uniforms, complete with the little black berets that somehow make you think mercenary or bandit army. In one, a lanky old looking man tried to nonchalantly stroll his way up to the front of the line and when some of the women who had been waiting noticed this, they started to beat him with sticks and rocks that were strewn all over the street. The video cut out just as he fell to the ground, arms weakly trying to protect his head, his face.

This was in Haiti, or maybe it was Egypt. Surely it’s not hard to tell the two apart, light tan or dark black. But he couldn’t remember which video was which.

Segments on the tv news, which he only occasionally watched now, urged him to consider just how much more he was paying for groceries now, all of a sudden. It was because of biofuel production, the dollar weakness, the rise of China and India, they couldn’t really settle on a cause, which only made the situation seem all the more irremediable.

After one of these segments one night, he tried to reopen conversation with Laura. They weren’t really talking beyond the sheer necessities of communication. *What time will you be home tomorrow? Can you pick her up from the nursery? What should we get for dinner? Order Thai?*

“Do you really think it’s more expensive now, the groceries? I think milk might have gone up, but I never really pay attention to how much it...”

She cut him off. “What is going on with you and her?”

“What do you mean by that? With whom?”

“With *whom*? Nice, nice. With *whom* do you think?”

He knew just what she was talking about, whom she was talking about, of course. It was hard to tell if this question, and the conclusions that had provoked it, had been preoccupying for days or even weeks, ever since things had come to a head that day at the arts festival, or if somehow something had just slid into place, the gears had turned over, a banged out an epiphany, a sudden sense of what was at bottom of all of their fights and depressive conversations, all of the ambivalence that he had clearly had about her, and the ambivalence that she had put on, like a slutty dress the first night out after a divorce, in return.

On the TV the news had moved on to still images of someone’s basement, decorated in

why everything, everyday, always felt like it turned like magic into a total emergency. If it wasn't running out of gas on the way to work, it was a huge and stupid overdraft at the bank to clear up, or somebody backing a truck into the side of her house and cracking the foundation. Or it was the news reporting that there were cuts expected at the business that she worked for, or that the price of gas would be going up even more.

Yesterday, Sunday, a kid came around knocking on doors in the neighborhood. Obviously he was from somewhere else, somewhere rich and where everyone went to good colleges and had nice jobs and enough time to spend their weekends traveling to backwaters like this one knocking on doors to talk to people about a political candidate. She had just found out about the overdraft when he knocked, and about ten seconds into his speech about what candidate whoever would do for her, she started to tear up and interrupted him to yell – sort of quietly, tearfully yell – “Oh yeah, oh yeah. If he wants to help ‘people like me’ how about he figures out how to make everything not such a goddamned emergency, every single day? And the gas, and the jobs. How about that?”

He stepped backwards, a look of shock and fear on his face, like she'd either pulled a knife on him or he'd walked in on her in the bathroom at a restaurant, or both at once. He apologized for bothering her “on a hard day” and said if she wanted to look at any campaign materials she could get them on-line really easy. And then he left, and she felt bad and like, clearly, she was going crazy. She took a bath and watched some TV and started to feel a little bit better, calmer.

But now, the next morning, this morning, on her way to work, here she was again in tears and freaked out. She'd forgotten that she was almost out of gas after driving to see her mother on Saturday, and she had no cash at all and wouldn't until her pay dropped on Friday, and the credit cards she had cut up after watching a particularly inspirational episode of Oprah about *finding your inner balance through your bank balance!* She was miles from home and miles from work and the arrow was hard up against E, past E even, and it wasn't even shaking or bouncing on hills like it usually did. And then, right there on the Interstate, the engine had begun to stutter and gasp. This had never happened to her before.

She was in tears and prayers as she rolled off the next exit, trying to press neither the gas nor the break, and into a gas station that hugged the off-ramp.

She tried not to think about what came next. It would have been worthwhile to search under the seats and floormats for some change, except that she'd already done that last week when she needed to buy a pack of cigarettes, and besides, what's a dollar or two going to buy? Half a gallon? It would be hard even to put that little gas into the tank without going over. Just a single squeeze and take it out? But it was a moot point anyway.

There were a bunch of kids on their way to class at the university filling up an old Ford Explorer, but she couldn't bear the thought of their laughter and what if they said no. At the counter, where an Indian (or was he an Arab) held court, she got in line and prepared

“Guys, I think the natives might be getting a little restless...”

And it was true, when they looked up from their table strewn with empty bottles of the cheapest stuff served here (or anywhere for that matter, just \$8 a bottle for this piss) they noticed that a high-proportion of the occupants of the tables that ranged near their own were not speaking or drinking or watching the TV but simply, silently staring at them, and their goings on. They had been a bit loud, sure. And this probably wasn't a place where they belonged, what with the clothes and the fancy new phones, and a lot of other very very clear markers of difference, but still, it was menacing and fucked up.

At the closest table were a husband and wife, both overweight, him with a shaved head and a tattoo on his neck of an eagle gripping what seemed to be a cruise missile, and her with hair that was like something from one of the retro-chic shows that they'd watch, smoking up, all together in their apartments at the college. Like the show about the Milwaukee people who work in a brewery, or the hair on the mom about the black people trying to be respectable in Brooklyn, doctor dad and all. Maria worried, when she saw the looks on their faces – or lack of looks, the dead, closed, concrete expressions that they wore – that they must've heard it and understood it when Zach had said that thing, just as they were sitting down, about how they should make a new HBO show about just how *fascinating* these people's lives are.

They knew what they were getting into when they walked in. Once a month or so, this group – the kernel of which shared a place down by the swimming pools on the South Quad, and most of whom were English or Creative Writing majors – would take a bus to one of the towns that ringed the gorgeous little New England college town where they went to school. Belchertown, Athol, West Springfield. This one was a prize, though. Just at the gates of the Westover AFB, they'd had to change buses twice to get here, and even with the GPS on their phones they very nearly got totally lost.

This was starting to get unfun, now that it had turned from funny to a little scary. There were hockey sticks and old footballs and pictures of guys in uniform all over the walls of the place, and a huge gold trimmed mirror that read *Budweiser New Years 2009 – From Your Local Distributor* hung immediately opposite their table. When she looked at the rest of the place in the reflection it offered, she noticed people whispering behind their hands and pointing.

A few seconds later – they must have noticed them noticing them, or whatever – a guy came out of the bathroom at the back and stopped as he passed their table. Late middle-aged, white, muscular in a way suggestive less of weight lifting and supplements and more of hard labor in, like, a factory or car shop, he gripped the back of Zach's chair and said as if speaking to the ceiling, or maybe just to the rest of the customers in the bar:

“Nice shirt, buddy. I think I got one just like it. You were in the service too, huh? What was your unit?”

They pretended, collectively, not to know what he was talking about, but it was clear that

would catch him doing it, stop in the door of his office (for theirs was an open-door office, no knocking required or expected) and say “I know, I know, you’ve got the good view, hotshot” or “I’m going to call HR and tell them, for the sake of your productivity, that they’ve gotta shift you to a cubicle in the middle of the building away from the windows” or, when it was Georgie, who he’d passed on his way to VP and who was still feeling the smart of that, “Christ, Brendan, I know the market is down and you’re generally unfit for your job, but there’s still hope. Don’t jump yet!” Almost every time, one of these or a variation on them. It happened three or four times a day.

What made it worse is that he found his own behavior bizarre, unexplainable, and wished that he could stop doing it. But somehow, as if driven by some sort of unconscious need or a desire that some there but unfelt, he found himself over and over again pressed up close to the floor to ceiling windows that lined the south and west walls of his corner office, staring down at the street life below. They were on the 43rd floor – you could see the river through a crack between the two nearest buildings, all part of the same development. But it wasn’t the river he looked at when he stared. Only ever the street below.

And in fact, he had started doing the same thing at his apartment downtown during the few waking hours that he spent there by himself. Dinner would cool in the plastic bag that wrapped it, football games would roll themselves through exciting fourth quarters while his back was turned to it all. Last week, when his girlfriend arrived in his lobby ready for their weekly night out together, the buzzer of the intercom system sounded for two, three minutes without breaking his concentration. It was only when she called him on his cell – “Are you stuck in the bathroom or something? Preening for our date?” – that he was drawn out and back into the world inside the building and her.

Stranger still, this staring wasn’t simply a mindless or comfortable routine but actively unpleasant, as it was generally – and increasingly – accompanied by a faint but still noticeable feeling of nausea. It’d start in his eyes, a queasy pressure from the back as they swept the antheaps of people, barely discernable as individuals from this height, only to migrate up into his head and down through his throat toward his stomach. Brendan hated this feeling, and it didn’t stop when he was pulled away by his coworkers from the scenes outside, but lingered, as nausea will, for hours afterward.

What was it that pulled him there, the space between the sofas in his office, the gap beside the balcony door in his living room at home, given all that it cost him, all the physical discomfort and social awkwardness that it brought him to no clear end, no tangible benefit? The milling clumps of people, looking from up there like a dappled variety of litter, ebbing and flowing to and from the subway stairs and bus-stops by the hours – what were they to him, what did they mean? What, conscious or not, was the need or longing assuaged by the sight?

It is difficult to say whether Brendan himself knew that his tic of his had had its start the day after the first news reports broke about the discovery of HIRV in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, the morning after the night when the first horrifying images of those Chinese

in the back, the far back and left corner of the store, so that you can't simply run in and grab some and get out without moving past the displays of Doritos and Oreos and some delicious looking pre-made things for dinner. It wasn't really a hardship for her today, as she had a full list of shopping to do, but still it was the sort of thing that made you continually a little bit mad, feel slightly huckstered and abused all the time, nowadays.

Generic cheddar (though cheddar from Vermont – it's a good sign that they still name where it comes from, she supposed), generic olive oil (not a necessity, she supposed, but you could use it as salad dressing cheaper than real salad dressing, and they weren't going to stop eating salad any time soon), store-brand deodorant for her husband (he would complain when he saw it, but it was two dollars less than the SpeedStick), chicken thighs instead of prepared foods, lettuce heads instead of bagged salads – she was really making a go of this.

It cost her, among other things, a breakdown in the cereal aisle, when her little boy, Bryan, exploded into a tantrum when she brought the Marshmallow Treats down into the cart rather than the expected Lucky Charms. He didn't understand, and it was only a difference forty cents, but they had been talking about needing to work on “discipline” and “no” anyway so it felt, despite all the temptation to give in, like the time and place to take a stand. He would get to use it – it was the same cereal, just with a less fancy box and no toy buried inside.

As she waited in line for the checkout, her cart half full of the plain, generic boxes of macaroni and cheese and beige wrapped tomato sauce, the cereal her son didn't want, and baggies of each of the fruit and vegetable items on sale this week, a jumble of thoughts ran through her mind, a rolling mass of things punctuated by the soft sobs of her son who was still recovering from his disappointment a few minutes ago.

First, if first is the word, she thought that things could be far worse. Those poor people on tv in... the place where they were starving and dying for lack of drink because of the typhoon or was it the war, or was it both at once?

Second, and again, it might be wrong to think of these thoughts as taking place in a series, she got a slight, warm little kick out of the sight of all that blankly wrapped cardboard and cellophane, so familiarly unfamiliar, little geometrical models of efficiency and self-forbearance. It was like – a little like – being a settler on the frontier, or maybe making do with the pure and plain. It felt a bit like a game, like play-acting in a show. She didn't really know...

And that brings us to the third thing, which may well be the first in order of importance, as she ended with it and it was the thought that dribbled into and lingered within her consciousness for the rest of the day. It was a little bit demonic, this line – demonic in the same way that her feelings and desires felt in the months before they had conceived Bryan and she had quick smoking, cold turkey. Back then, it was like a droning monotone purr at the back of her head: *but Lisa, dear, Lisa, all the color and all of the fun, you will regret this loss, life will not be the same and then, what are you trying to*

like it would never stop raining. First it was days, and then two, three weeks without a stop. The weatherman on tv came up with all sorts of explanations that didn't make tons of sense, and seemed to come from a totally different angle each time. First it was just a huge front that had rolled up from the south. A few days later it was a stuck front from Alberta – “the sort of thing we're used to seeing in the winter, but never this late into the year.” There was one funny night when he couldn't keep El Niño and La Niña straight – he kept say La Niño and the reverse until he started laughing and couldn't stop and they had to go on to sports – which was all about rainouts, but they did it anyway.

In the last few days, it got less funny when he started talking about the chance, then the probability, that the river was going to rise over its banks. The rest of the news – other than the stuff about the Middle East that they'd spend the first five minutes on – was all about the guys out in their rain coats and boots filling sandbags downtown. It's sort of amazing that sandbags were the best solution to something that was as big, as biblical seeming, as this. Jake joked about frogs being next, and then a plague of... whatever came next, was it bats? Thursday, they saw him on the news – him there with his shovel, soaked and filling bag after bags.

She made sandwiches for the guys, and pots of coffee that she poured into a giant coffee urn she'd bought at the church sale but that she'd never thought she'd have reason to use. She also tried to keep the kids entertained with yet another day inside, another day of cartoons and crayons. Most of all, she waited for the weather report at night, wondering each afternoon if tomorrow was the night that the storm would finally break.

People started to say “global warming,” though someone else almost always was there to say “if it's so warm, why isn't this place a damn desert instead of a swamp?” Someone else would make a joke about the Chinese, who just bought the corn oil plant out on the highway, if they'd bought the weather too, so they could make more rice paddies.

But it wasn't just global warming, or even the possibility of being flooded out that was preoccupying her. Or, it was those things, of course, but there was something – something totally stupid and unhealthy and something really that she should be thankful that it was being interrupted like this, that kept her perched on the arm of the chair, waiting for the weatherman to appear again. It was something that had been happening at the playground, a place she hadn't visited since the rain had started. Something with the new guy who moved in and whose wife worked because he was a schoolteacher but they weren't hiring at the middle school, and so he was there with his kids – a boy and a girl, just like hers – everyday. There had been smiles, brushes of arm on arm, and then talk, seriously talk about life and everything, and finally, amazingly, a kiss. Two kisses – first on the cheek in laughter, and then, with her heart almost stopped, on the mouth, hard.

Some nights, laying in bed, with images of him and love and all sorts of things that didn't usually run through her mind, she'd catch the distant stroke of thunder or her husband's snore and wonder if all this wasn't maybe her fault, a plague like they joked about, except one designed to keep her away from him, or him away from her, to keep the marriage holy and all that. Fortunately, or unfortunately, she didn't believe strongly enough to

And with that, the yelling (on her part) and whining (on the part of her kids) had stopped, but the guy in the uniform – the gas mask slung on a strap over his shoulder, the emblem of the DHS prominent on the chest of his Kevlar vest – just kept on shouting.

“Listen. You know this is a damned emergency situation. You know we’re doing as well as we can for you people.”

His eyes were wild. Wild and bloodshot. It’d been a long day for him, a series of days no doubt.

“If you didn’t have so many damned children, we wouldn’t be having this conversation here and now, would me ma’am?”

They were standing together in the middle of the single room that made up the trailer home, the temporary place that they were being given – her and Macy and Argyll and Marcus and Omar, her four kids. Five of them in a room that was about 15 X 10, with no kitchen (but some pots of Sterno were coming in the supply box, she’d been told at the Informational meeting at the center of the camp.

Argyll broke the stalemate of silence that had settled over the room after his last remark.

“But momma where do we go to the bathroom?”

“There are porto-johns at the center of the camp, by the information center. That’s also where you get your water, from the cans. There’ll be showers too within a week.”

“I take baths, not showers. Momma!”

“OK. So here’s your key. Please do not let anyone else have this key, not for any reason, and it is up to you to ensure that....”

“What would they even steal, if they did get in here? Everything’s back in a big pile at the bus station in the city. That’s what they said we had to do. ‘If it don’t fit in your pockets, it ain’t comin’ with.’”

“There will be movies for the kids within a few days, and we’ll be distributing educational materials – workbooks and such – soon, maybe tomorrow depending.”

As he was heading out the door, having reshoouldered his rucksack and replaced his helmet on his head, her smallest, little Omar, spoke. It was a kind of yelp that he produced, choking back heaving sobs and a knot of fear that had pulled his inside parts together into a spinning ball.

“Our dog, mistah. When does our dog, her name is TiTi, get here?”

He turned and stared her in the eyes, the machinery of bureaucratic response (“firmly but

was silent. She hated it when he did this, when he talked like this. Above all else it was the glee in his voice as he talked about it. She could have borne it otherwise, she wanted to know about it and even to talk about it, but when he got like this – and he always got like this – it just terrified her.

“I don’t mean to be alarming, but really, really. What do you think they’ll do in places like where your mother lives. All of those places spread out over a county the size of Los Angeles. The little detached homes with their little garages and the five-mile drive to get a bottle of milk. And then there’s the financial issue, and the sub-prime mortgages....”

But it wasn’t just terror. It was a complicated form of resentment, a deep and smoldering sense that it was *so fucking easy* for him to talk about this. Talk about her mother getting upside down in her mortgage, or the fact that their son would grow up in a world suffering from a persistent and irreversible worldwide depression. He’d actually say aloud, and with a sort of demonic smirk on his face, things like *God, god, what jobs do you think there’ll be here by the time Michael grows up? Or How sad and horrible will it be to explain to him what happened to the world, and how it was before he was born, when we were kids?*

They were walking home from their weekend night out, dinner and drinks at an Italian restaurant a few blocks from their house, a stop at a bookstore to browse. He undoubtedly expected that they would have sex in less than an hour, once they’d paid and dispatched the babysitter and gotten Michael settled in bed. They always went out for dinner on Saturday night, and they always had sex once they got home.

“Do you see what I mean? What do you think she’ll do when the shit hits the fan? What is she doing now?”

“She has her house on the market. She says she wants to move back to Chicago.”

“And who, just who, do you think is going to buy that house of hers, now that there are only like a thousand of them on sale in her zip code alone, and half of those are about to be auctioned off by the banks that have foreclosed on them?”

She was silent. He lit a cigarette. She felt like smashing him in the face with her fist and walking off, leaving him on the spot to get the baby down and then chew around the internet looking for horrible stories by himself, tonight and every night forever.

“I don’t think you’re really getting how bad this thing is. Did you read the article that I sent you, the link...”

Tears began to well up behind her eyes. Her nose was burning. She could not speak.

“God you look good tonight. Thank god for nights out, thank god for Saturdays. Plus, you’re ovulating today, no? Is your thing charged up? Let’s hope Mikey cooperates this time, unlike last weekend. Do you have two twenties for Heather? If not we should stop

first real friend, first friend since she'd gotten to high school, and since she'd become a woman. When she was little, there were the kids of her street, and her cousins – there were always tons of cousins around – but this was so different. Sleeping over at her house, tucked in and with the TV on late at night in her basement family room, with the invisible misting burn of mildewing boxes filling the air, she felt like she was in love, like this is just what she'd always wanted.

And now, after her mother and father and little brother had long since gone to bed, and the house was quiet and dark, they were getting to their secrets, just like they did on sleepovers on TV.

“When did you first have it?”

She didn't want to sound like a baby, so she exaggerated a bit. “I think it was a year ago, a year and a half ago. I can't really remember.”

“When Mr. Petersen talks about it, the stuff about the sacredness of life and what it means to be a woman, the gift, like, that it is to have a baby, to be able to have a baby, it makes me, um, feel all different inside. Am I being weird?”

They were lying really close together, under a sheet printed with giant daisies. It was a cool night, November, but she had never felt so warm in her whole life. She shook her head vigorously, staring into her friend's eyes and then looking away because it felt a little weird, but she didn't know what else to say.

“It's like, do you know Bobby McShane? He went to elementary with me, and now he's at Bible too. Do you know him? I think he's in your English class.”

“In the front row. I think, yeah...” They were whispering. She didn't know what she was supposed to say.

“I have a secret about him. It's really bad, and I've never told anyone before.”

She stared down at Megan's breasts, the little lumps of them, and was thinking something that she couldn't put into words. She couldn't put anything in words, so she just nodded to her to continue.

“It's really complicated. I don't know. But when Mr. Petersen says those things about sanctity and the Promise of Life, and what is natural and rushing through us, what makes us whole and holy and all that.... I let Bobby... I think I haven't had it for a month, but it feels so right. And I should be scared. But it's stupid....”

There were tears welling in the corners of her eyes, but she was smiling dreamily too. A video came on the Christian Teen Network by the LifeBuoys, and they were singing about the love of Jesus like a great big wave that washes over her eyes and that they swim

It had always been nice to get back to the city. Once a year, almost every year, ever since he moved away to take his first real job. He'd find a way, generally in the spring, sometimes in the autumn if there was a conference on. A few times he'd had his way paid for him, though that sort of opportunity was getting rarer by the day. This time he was footing his own bill, staying at a nasty joint out in Brooklyn, a long subway ride away from Manhattan.

It was his first time back since his wife died, since the *untimely death* of his wife. In fact, it was his first time alone in the City in decades, as she'd always as a rule accompanied him on his trips here, skipping the junkets to Tulsa and Columbus but never passing up New York.

He was in a coffee place reading a newspaper someone had handed him out on the street. The *Times* as a free paper, a tabloid, down to twenty-eight pages! Mostly wire service stuff at the front under the cover of a splashy headline-and-picture cover (today: *SUPREMES BACK PREZ'S DOMESTIC DETENTION MEASURE*), what was Arts was a page of TV listings and "best choices on the web," and Sports got the last six. A full page ad for an emigration agency on the back cover.

Across the street, at the corner, one beautiful young girl ran up and hugged another beautiful young girl. He was getting old. Maybe they were sisters.

The coffee was fine. It was always a little thrill to see the array of electronic devices on show at any old Starbucks in Manhattan. Things always seemed to materialize here, hit the faux-wood tables next to latte cups and half-eaten muffins, six months or so earlier than they worked their way out to the provinces. A guy next to him was touch typing on the table itself – his phone projected a tiny laser grid on to the surface and (apparently) detected his finger movements as if he was hitting a real keyboard. His fingers made an odd drumming sound – a sound that you'd normally associate with slight psychological impairment or extreme over-caffination.

He remembered the excitement, back in the day, of the newest and best, their intermittent arrival in the hands and bags of the city's tech-fiends. After college, he'd been shocked how many people had cell-phones when he moved in to his apartment in Brooklyn – they hadn't quite gotten the towers up in western Massachusetts by the time he graduated. A guy with a table telling them outside the Henry Street stop, answering questions about broadband internet, with which Time Warner was busily wiring the neighborhood. His first ultra-light laptop, a year or two later his first Mac, a phone that could receive email, and then the iPhone and another one a few months later.

Things had started to change, he had felt even at the time, with the iPhone. All that hype playing against the increasingly bad news. The Jesus-phone, they had called it. But, as slick and sleek as it was, there was something unsettling about it, something that bothered him, if microscopically, every time he checked the screen. It was harder, back then, to put his finger on what the problem was exactly. Something, something that was thickly congealed in the plastic and aluminum of that phone, something melted into its scratch

But no one was listening. And neither was anyone reading the crawling text at the bottom of the screen, which filled in some of the details of the story.

AFFECTED WOMAN 32 YRS OLD. RESIDENT OF SAN FRANCISCO. BROUGHT TO HOSPITAL BY HUSBAND. HUSBAND CURRENTLY IN QUARANTINE. WITNESSES DESCRIBE EFFECTS AS "DEVASTATING," "DISTURBING." MORE DETAILS TO FOLLOW. GOV'T BRIEFING AT 5:30 EST.

It was already 5:45. But no one in this apartment noticed, as no one was watching, listening, waiting for the government briefing that would prove to be the first in a series of increasingly panicked communications to the public.

"Breaking News" had long, long since ceased to be a phrase that drew eyes to the screen, minds away from, say, a particularly passive-aggressive email from mom or some recreational sex on a Saturday afternoon or a nervous shuffle through cancelled checks, looking for evidence of that bill that you just know you paid a few weeks ago, couldn't possibly still be outstanding. Or, in this case, the most habitual of all marital arguments, a spiral constructed mostly of fatigue and anxiety but also of long-standing if unvoiced resentments. There was a time, shortly after the first attack way back when, when people, everyone, would become absolutely transfixed by the appearance of this graphic on the screen, the playing of the special tonal sequence that signaled its emergence. People would stop in midstride in Penn Station to watch the monitors in Hudson News, dinner-parties where the tv had inadvertently left on (or intentionally turned on) would grind to a silent, staring halt.

But the news networks had figured out the power of their newly coined phrase early, too early, and adopted the "Breaking News" for a whole panoply of news events, not restricted to terror attacks, actual or potential. Abducted girls in the suburbs, pressing celebrity gossip, manifestations of extreme weather in the heartland, presidential communiques regarding the wars. And, thus, quickly "Breaking News" had lost its electricity, its pull.

Eventually, she stopped typing, became naked, joined him on the bed. And they moved, as one does, as they always did, from impatient preliminaries, toward ardent grappling, through full body on body contact, on toward work upon specific parts and finally landed on the thing itself and the even more impatient listlessness that comes after. Is it time? Can I leave? Wipe up? Have a cigarette? Or would that be inconsiderate, abrupt, brutal? They never lasted long in what the afterglow, but dressed quickly, clicked off the tv in the other room, and headed down and out into the City for drinks and dinner.

It wasn't entirely uncommon to see people with masks on the subway. But they were taken a bit aback by the scene when they finally boarded the F train from an eerily empty platform at Bergen Street. A few of the passengers, mostly young, well-dressed, but also with a completely baffled look on their faces – as they had been seeing what was just now visible to our couple, sat in bunches, as per usual. They too were headed out for drinks or dinner, dancing eventually perhaps or a stop at a friend's place on the Lower

mean, since this is our last appointment, at least the last one their paying for, I'd keep coming if I could, but right now's not a good time for me moneywise. But since this is the last time maybe, I was thinking that I'd like to try to get some closure or something, try to put an end to the story, even if, as you keep saying, it's too early for that and that there's a lot more left for us to do..."

"There is a lot more to do. I think forcing closure, though the impulse is very understandable, could actually be harmful in circumstances like these."

Her nose was running. It had been running all day and all through the night before. It had kept her up most of the night. Usually weren't their tissues in a therapist's office? She hadn't noticed whether there had been some in here before, during their previous meetings. But today, unless they were somewhere she couldn't see, there were none to be found and so she gingerly, discrete squeezed herself off into her fingers, pausing for a few seconds before she wiped them on her right knee.

"I know what you are saying. I knew that you would say that, and I think you're right. I hope that I have shown you that I think that you are right, that it's way too early for closure. But if, as you said, there's no way for you to help me out with the insurance company to get a few more sessions – if there's "no justifying that" – then, don't you think that even more dangerous than me walking around with a false sense of closure it would be far worse for me to leave here feeling cut up and confused, as if everything's left in little tiny pieces and I have no idea how to put them back together?"

She searched the pocket of her jeans for a tissue. If this kept up, she'd either have to interrupt the conversation to search through the bottom of her crowded backpack, the dirty bottom of the bag that she always hated to touch, where broken old pens mixed with thick crumbs of cookies and sandwiches, slightly moist with coffee drips from her leaky thermos, stray tampons and somewhere, probably deepest of all, a condom that she had had in there since the start of her freshman year of college when they gave them out at an information session on STDs and sexual health.

Her therapist, Jill, shifted in her seat, flipped from left leg over right knee to right leg over left knee. Despite the snow outside, her long black and expensive-looking boots were immaculately clean and dry. Perhaps – even probably – she wore something else on her way here and then changed into these when she got to the office.

"Putting an end to a story that's not finished, Melissa, is a bit like putting a secret that's burst out of the closet right back in, or maybe it's better to say that it's like taking a great work of literature – think of your favorite novel – and cutting it in the middle and just sticking the last chapter back on there. Think of your favorite novel – what sort of effect would that have? What would it be like to read something like that?"

She wanted to say that it would feel like her damn life, that's just what it felt like, except that the chapters were mixed up, began and ended without connection to what came before, and that it had something with her parents, and the state of the world, but instead