

1.

The interview goes something like this:

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever sits me down and looks at me in a wise, fatherly way. He steeples his fingers and leans over the table and says, “Do you think you have what it takes?”

Yes, sir, I do. My résumé speaks for itself, but they always want you to do the talking.

He says, “You think you can sell like we do.”

Yes, sir.

“Because this isn’t just regular sales.”

No, sir.

“You’re not just selling some dinky little sofa. You’re selling an entire lifestyle. The P. J. Holt lifestyle, you know what I’m saying?”

I know what he’s saying because everyone’s saying it, but I just nod like Yes, sir.

“Okay,” he says, “Sell me this pen.”

This one? He nods. It’s blue and plastic, about six inches long, and, well, it’s a pen.

“Sell me this pen.”

I look at the thing for a minute. My résumé’s sitting on the table like the ugly girl at a party. The past is never enough for these people. They think they’re doing something new, but everything is a lifestyle if you sell it right.

I say, “Last week I had to deposit this check. The last check from my last job. You know, take it in and sign the back, and I looked everywhere for a pen. Couldn’t find one.”

This is all true, by the way. The best way to lie is to be honest.

“I went through my whole desk, every shelf in my kitchen, my bathroom, nothing. Entire apartment, no pen. No pencil. Not even a sharpie. Which was inconvenient, you know, but more than that, it was tragic.”

I sigh like I’m talking about a death.

“I don’t own a single pen. No paper either. If I want to write a letter, I gotta type it. How awful is that? And even then I don’t have a printer. I have to put it on your Facebook wall. Or email it. And that’d be fine, you could read it, problem solved. We live in a world now where you don’t even need to own a goddamn pen. Everything’s digital.”

I hold the pen up like it’s a sword. Get that *Mightier than* thing going. Make it feel like war. You know what I mean.

“You have no need for this pen, except if you need to sign a check. But that’s gonna be digital too soon. And you know what? That makes me mad. That makes me furious, because I see it happening everywhere. All around me, everyone’s on a smart phone. Everyone’s checking Facebook instead of living their lives. I sent my mom an email for her birthday. My own mother. It’s sick. It makes me so sick that I want to go down to the drugstore and buy a pack of ballpoints just so I can feel like a man, because that’s what a pen is these days. We’re all so stuck in technology that having a single pen is a sign of resistance. Having a pen means you’re holding onto your roots. It means you stand for something. It means you care about the kind of person you are and you’re not willing to get washed out by the rest of our sick society and that, my friend, is why you need this pen.”

I look him dead in the eye and say, “That is why you need this pen.”

This is why I'm good at my job.

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever leans back and looks at me.

"That's what they teach you at Columbia, huh?" he says. "They give you a class on this shit?"

"No, sir," I say. "We hardly used pens. Everything was digital."

When I start the next Monday, there's a fifty pack of ballpoints on my desk.

2.

Welcome to the P. J. Holt lifestyle. Est. 1954, when everyone started caring about their lifestyle instead of their lives. It's sixty years later and no one's bothered to find out what the P. J. stands for. We don't sell light bulbs, we sell light. We don't sell furniture, we sell home. We made you in our image, if you think about it, but you don't.

You just buy it.

We just sell it.

That's the circle of life, and the thing about a circle is it doesn't let you out. That's why they invented Nirvana, but even Buddhists need lights.

That's where we come in.

This is really all just a metaphor. It's all a knock-off designed to leave enough of that antique *je ne sais quoi* to evoke a mood. Scented candles. Distressed wood. You know it's all a lie, but you still want to be a part of it, because it's moody and expensive and it makes you feel real.

And all of this is really just a parable. The parable of that snake that eats itself. A metaphor for putting your head up your ass.

My dad says, "You spend your whole life hating grown-ups and then you are one."

I say, "We're all eating our own shit and handing out prizes for flavor."

The point is, the future is just recycling the past after enough people forget about it.

I'll tell you my story, and it's a true story, but I'm letting you know now that it won't get you anywhere. It's all just a metaphor for a metaphor. At the end of the day, you're still dead on the sidewalk and someone's playing Smooth Criminal while your blood leaks into the storm drain.

Figuratively, for the most part.

3.

I'm the guy in a knock-off suit who always buys your drinks at the bar. I'm the guy who's charming but doesn't win you over. I'm the guy who never calls back, and you don't want me to. If I did, it'd be an insult.

Tonight's girl is named, I don't know. She's a redhead so she thinks she's kinky. She fucks with the lights on and I can look at her. Guys like me, we watch women like TV. Girls like this are pay per view, and no one's really sure where it starts being prostitution. But I'm good with being a customer. Everything's prostitution if you think about it, but you don't. That's why I'm good at my job.

Tomorrow night, it'll be the blonde who's just a little bit fat. The next day, a skinny Korean.

No one ever tells me they like my suit, but that's the point. My suit is just an extension of my personality. I'm too cheap to really treat you right, but I know how to make a good impression. I'm selling a lifestyle.

The thing about my life is the Buddhists got it wrong. Money is happiness. Sex is happiness. Not because they're worth anything, because life sucks without them. That's the P. J. Holt lifestyle, we sell happiness. Yes, you can buy it now. You can buy salvation if you've got enough faith.

This girl's all, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God.
Oh me, I know.

What you learn about God is however much he loves you, he loves everyone else more. You're never enough for him, so you spend your life compensating. The redhead, the fat blonde, the Korean, they all know what they're getting into before they get into it. I'm yesterday's compensation. I won't be here in the morning, and then the cycle starts all over and I still don't change my suit.

What are you drinking? Two of those. What's your name? I don't care.

It's not that they fall for it. They know. They do it anyway. Nobody's lying to anyone here. It's all informed consent. I'd pass out waivers but I don't need to.

Really, who started it: the one getting fucked or the one fucking?

The thing about a circle is it doesn't start anywhere. That's what they teach you in the Girl Scouts. A circle is round, it has no end. Eternal love. Eternal salvation.

Angel was a Girl Scout before she found Michael Jackson, but we haven't gotten there yet.

4.

Tonight there's an invader at the bar. This tall guy with dreadlocks, and he's white so you know he had to really try for them. He's got Birkenstocks too. One of those striped ponchos. A seagull tattoo on his neck. Hemp. His looks says prophet, says wandering minstrel, poverty by choice. He's selling a lifestyle too, but he doesn't think about it like that.

He probably still believes in Nirvana.

There's also a knockout brunette in a fuchsia cocktail dress. I slide into the stool next to her and order a gin. I don't look at her. Let my suit do the talking, and she can't stop noticing me.

Blaine, the bartender, he knows the drill. I finish my drink and he says, "Can I get you two anything else?"

The brunette notices me some more.

She laughs and says, "Oh, we're not..." But we are, and we know it. We're already in the circle, and it goes around and around.

I look at her like I just saw her. Like it starts here, and I chuckle and say, "What are you drinking?"

It's always a Cosmo. Growing up, I didn't think people still drank those. I thought that was just on *Sex and the City*, but life is really just *Sex and the City* for girls like this and I'm Mr. Medium. Nobody ends up with me, but I still get five minutes an episode.

We're talking about work, and I let my brain shut off. I'm good at my job. I don't even have to hear her to know when to laugh. I'm just far enough away that I can see her tits and her eyes, and then there's dreadlocks in the distance. I laugh.

She says, "What?"

I look at her. Mr. Nirvana is sitting just down the bar with a hard cider.

The brunette gives me this look. "I said, I think what's happening in Syria is really sad."

Why would you say that?

And she just gives me this look, and then the perfectly tailored fuchsia dress and the heart shaped ass inside it are walking away with the drink I just bought them, and I'm left staring down the bar at Birkenstocks.

Mr. Nirvana nods at me and his dreadlocks quiver ominously.

And to me and dreadlocks, Blaine says, "Can I get you two anything else?"

Blaine's a bartender so he thinks he's a dick.

I say, "That was just strike one. I get two more this inning."

Mr. Nirvana's bouncing his head like he's grooving to our conversation. Blaine looks over my shoulder at some blondes and gives me the I Dare You face. I check them out in the mirror.

"Think I can bag at least one of those?"

Blaine says, "Five bucks says you can't."

"Let's make it more interesting," I say. "I get one, and you cover our tab. You buy my dinner."

Mr. Nirvana isn't grooving anymore.

Blaine says, "You're on."

And then Mr. Nirvana's in the stool next to me with his hand on my shoulder like he's trying to teach me something. I can see his seagull. Up close, it looks like it's missing an eye.

Mr. Nirvana, he says, "Hey man." Guys like this are always calling you man.

He says, "You shouldn't look at it that way. Women aren't possessions."

Everything's a possession. You just sell it back when you're done.

"Well, think about it," I say. "I buy them drinks, they come home with me. It's all bought and paid for."

He says, "Oh man. You gotta get away from all of that."

"What, sex?"

"Money," he says "When I was sleeping down at the pier, you know, that was the best time in my life. Having nothing really teaches you how to live. You try living for a year with nothing to your name and you'll see the world differently, man. Money can't buy you happiness."

Yes it can. I hear your *Can't Buy Me Love* bullshit. If you were a Beatle you'd be Ringo.

By the time he's done saving me, the blondes are gone, and Blaine says, "Can I get you two anything else?"

5.

The meeting goes something like this:

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever is having an absolute aneurism. A complete brain tumor. Not in the literal sense, but *literally* dying right now, you'd better believe it.

The real problem is that when you sell someone their lifestyle, you're responsible for all of it. Depression, drama, death. It doesn't matter if the house is just ugly or the neighbors are just awful, because we sell home, not furniture. We sell light, so darkness is our fault.

So even if *you're* the idiot who put the wrong kind of bulb in your Limited Edition Luminescent Faux-Crystal Father Christmas Statuette, so even if the plastic-coated electrical wire painted dark-green to match the Christmas tree only burned to a crisp because of *your* mistake, so even if it's *your* off-white and eggshell blue accented living room walls, *your* house, *your* belongings all collapsing down in a blazing inferno, it's our fault. Suddenly it's the failure of the entire P. J. Holt Lifestyle.

I think, there's a great ad campaign to be made here with the slogan "Our sales are burning up!"

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever is getting calls to go on talk shows while they play clips of a sad, photogenic family huddled outside the ruins of their house. The ruins of their lifestyle. The Esteemed Mr. Whoever is having a real hemorrhoid over this. A positive HIV test. You know, dying. Like the circle of life got unhinged.

All that really happened is that someone's house burned down. The P. J. Holt lifestyle needs to be saved, so they look to me, the talking head. Which is just so ironic that it has to be marketing.

I ask, "Did the statuette burn down too?"

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever says, "What?"

I ask, "When the house burned down, did the Limited Edition Faux-Crystal Father Christmas Statuette burn down too?"

His beard hair got singed a bit, but No. The faux-crystal isn't flammable.

I think, there's a great ad campaign to be made here with the slogan, "Survive the holidays!"

I tell him, "What we need is a real tear-jerker. Like cancer kids. We need to show how the family's come together to get past this tragedy. We need to remind people of the real meaning of Christmas. Make everyone who ever thought they needed a house feel shallow. We need to show how this is an opportunity."

And then, I look him dead in the eyes and say, "And then, we close with a picture of them gathered around the Faux-Crystal Father Christmas Statuette. The P. J. Holt Lifestyle lives on. It brings people together. It brings you home, even when you don't have one."

Some people would kill for a tragedy like this. This is why I'm good at my job.

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever, he's back to life now. I'm a miracle worker. I'm Jesus, he says, or, you know, whatever.

And I think, if all I had was a fake-crystal Santa, I wouldn't be feeling much like Christmas. If my house burned down, I'd pretty much die with it.

If this office burned down, would the whole world die with it? Definitely not. We've got the market now, but if we go down, there will be a hundred other companies selling a hundred

lifestyles to take our place. The circle would start right back up again and no one would miss us a bit. The whole thing with God is that everyone has one.

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever keeps talking and there's a little fleck of steak sauce on the corner of his mouth. I'm staring into a projected photo of this newly homeless family on the wall.

The Esteemed Mr. Whoever says, "Why couldn't it be a statue of Jesus instead?"

And then my head gets all *Can't Buy Me Love* and all I can think about is Mr. Nirvana and his dreadlocks. Having nothing really teaches you how to live. I turn him off. It's my job to tell you how to live.

It's not guilt that I'm feeling, not by a long shot. It's more like jealousy. More like competition.

I've got the whole kitten caboodle, but it won't be long before they switch the kitten out on us. Right now it's a knock-off suit, but some guys actually wear hemp. P. J. Holt sells your idea of heaven, so these guys go looking for hell. And they *like it*.

I'm having an epiphany here. An absolute moment. A positive whatever.

I can see it now.

Sitting on the sidewalk instead of a couch. Up and down with the sun, no light bulbs. You're buying a lifestyle, but it's one I didn't sell you.

But that's the thing about God. Obey him or resist him, he's still up there. You're either with him or you're against him, but you'll never be rid of him. You're only a sinner because someone's a saint.

And suddenly, being God isn't good enough. Suddenly, I want to be Satan too. I want to be everybody's ruler.

I want everyone to know we're all playing the same game, and I want everyone to know I'm winning it.

6.

There's these two guys playing checkers under the pier. Out of a possible eight, there are five and a half limbs between them. Everyone has a backpack like this is all a big camping trip.

There's a great ad campaign to be made here with the slogan, "Hard times or good times?"

I found a guitar in my closet that's missing a string. I've got an old pair of jeans and some sandals. A plaid shirt. I'm doing my best to look all Nirvana, you know, the Buddhist thing and the Kurt Cobain thing. Nobody's asked me what I'm doing here yet, so I try to look busy. I play: High E, High E, High E, B. I look soulful.

If anyone asks, my name is Venison Beam. Prophet and Wandering Minstrel.

I'm watching a one-armed guy get kinged, and then this kid is talking to me. He's got half his head shaved and a denim backpack with a peace sign on it. There's a safety pin through his eyebrow. It's amazing what people can do with office supplies if you let them get creative.

He says, "I haven't seen you around here before."

I look out across the ocean and say, "I'm not from around here."

It's not totally a lie. I live in a luxury one-bedroom six miles away but I'm looking at the same ocean.

"Welcome," he says. "I'm Spike."

Venison. Venison Beam.

He hugs me instead of shaking my hand.

And I think, this is the only place in the world where your name can be Venison and no one will question it. I don't even have to play the guitar. You buy the lifestyle.

"Let me show you around," Spike says.

Spike walks me up the parking lot and I can't tell how many of these kids are the real deal. Most guys you see on the street, you can pretty much tell how they got there. Schizophrenia, meth, Vietnam. You get the story just by looking at them. Some of those guys are here. The ones playing checkers. The skinny guy tanned to the color of a pork chop yelling at himself by the palm trees. But some of these guys are just kids. Pound puppies. They look like clones of Mr. Nirvana. Dreadlocks. Hemp. They look like me now.

Spike says he's living like this by choice, and I think, whose? But I like the smugness in it. The commodification of poverty. Spike's getting the whole *These real homeless guys would get a house in the suburbs if they could* thing going, but Spike is above all of that.

A ways down the beach, there's this blue thing sparkling. You'd almost mistake it for the ocean, if the ocean were Lycra and shaped like an hourglass. There's a whole bunch of red hair on top of it, the kind of red you only get from cheap dye. The whole effect looks kind of like a mermaid. A mermaid going, head twitch, two step, head twitch, two step.

Spike says, "That's Angel. She's schizo."

And the mermaid goes, walk, walk, walk, arms up, turn right, turn left, walk, walk, walk.

I say, "Why is she doing the Thriller dance?"

Spike says, "Angel thinks she's trapped in a Michael Jackson video."

Michael Jackson is dead.

Spike says, "Don't ever, ever tell her that."

7.

I stand under the pier and watch her. Curly red hair bouncing, blue Lycra unitard sparkling. I didn't know you could still get unitards, but the past is in fashion these days. I watch her less like television and more like a musical. I watch her until she grabs her thighs and lumber-walks up the beach, back the beach, then turns and Claws up. Hiss. Thriller's over. We survived.

No one on the sidewalk is even looking at her, like they're all so totally used to this. She sees me watching and waves.

"Was I good?" she says.

And I think, Michael Jackson is dead.

"That was great," I say.

"I'm Angel," she jogs over to me. Everything's bouncing in the Lycra suit. Nobody's hair should be that color.

"I'm Venison," I say for the second time, "Venison Beam. I'm a folk singer." This is my identity now. I have the guitar. You get the idea.

"Oh. Cool. I'm a backup dancer," she says. I wonder if either of us is lying. I wonder where the line is between delusion and identity.

"Well, Michael Jackson is a perfectionist," I say, for something to say. I look at her and all I can think is, Michael Jackson is dead. So totally dead. His coffin is rotting, that's how dead he is.

"Oh, I know," she gushes, "I should probably get back to rehearsing. Nice to meet you."

Was it?

The mermaid walks away. Two step, head twitch, two step, head twitch. I see Spike with his half-shaved half-sunburnt head. The checkers players with their not enough legs. And I realize I'm not as good at my job as I think I am. I can't sell this lifestyle. I can't be Venison Beam and I'm going to be sick and I have to get out of here. I have a home to get back to. I have the Faux-Christmas crisis. I should never listen to a white guy with dreadlocks ever again.

I sit on the corner and strum my guitar like I care. There's a bus in ten minutes. I'm sitting on the sidewalk instead of a couch, go Buddha. And then there's a shadow over me. I look up and a bald guy slows his Mercedes down and hands me five dollars.

He says, "Best of luck."

This guy who'd punch anyone in the throat who got between him and closing a deal. Who'd be the loudest guy at the bar. He'd run his Mercedes over a kid's bicycle and just check the hood for dents.

I know this guy. I'm ten years south of being this guy.

And this guy's handing me five bucks and sad smiling and saying, Best of luck.

The five is sweaty and wrinkled and it's mine now.

Best of luck.

It's like the clouds opened up and everything's choir boys and fairy dust. The Mercedes is pulling away and the guy's looking anywhere but at me, and I have five dollars in my hand. It was all so fast, so awkward, you'd almost mistake it for normal. But this, this is something else.

This is better than sex.

This is pure, unadulterated salvation.

8.

It's not the money that I'm into, it's the pity. When you're on the street, everyone assumes they have it better than you. It's the opposite of real life. You stand on a corner with a cardboard sign and everyone else feels secure about themselves. You're bringing them joy in a way.

And the best part is, I'm not even homeless.

It's a week later and I'm an addict. I find excuses to leave work early. That's just a day gig. My real calling is to stand on a freeway exit with a sign saying I'm a Vietnam vet. The way I see it, anyone stupid enough to think I was even alive for Vietnam deserves to give me five dollars.

Most of them drive right by and the ones who stop don't even read my sign. They see cardboard and they know what to do. It's programmed into the feedback loop. The circle jerk of life.

Here's a dollar.

Best of luck.

This is better than sex.

The thing is, everyone gives me money because they *really* want to see me do well. They *really* hope things turn up for me. See me at the bar and you'd pray they find prostate cancer on my next physical. On the street, all of the sudden I've had it hard enough. I deserve

better. I deserve this dollar. They all smile, and then they go home and feel grateful for what they have. They feel charitable. They feel holy.

Amen.

The ones who don't, the ones who scream at me to get a job – what they don't know is that I've got one. They go home and pat themselves on the back because they won the game and I lost. They sit on their couches and watch their TV shows about people who have it better than they do. What they don't know is that I sold them that couch. The Louis XVI-knock off chandelier with faux-gilded leaf inlay, I sold them that too. I sold their entire lifestyle. I made them in the P. J. Holt image.

My face is sunburnt and peeling and I haven't been to the bar all week. Sex isn't happiness like pity is happiness. The weeks roll by. I let my beard grow out. Buy some safety pins. Money isn't happiness like saving people is happiness. The months roll by. I get a strap for my guitar. I don't even have to play it, you still get the idea. Fooling people is happiness.

At work, they just wonder how I'm getting so tan. I tell them, put olive oil on your skin at the beach. I never say I do it and no one ever asks, so it's not a lie.

The idea is that if you want perfect skin, it's going to be painful. You want a perfect body, you have to lift a lot of heavy things and sweat it out at the gym for hours. You want a girl to go home with you, you have to buy her a lot of drinks and compliment her on everything that makes her average.

My dad says, "Everybody's nailed to something."

I say, "Everybody has a price tag."

The point is, sacrifice is just a transaction.

9.

On the first day of summer, I stop by the homeless shelter straight after work. All you have to do is be a homeless guy in a suit and everyone thinks you're a hero. You're selling them hope. The volunteer lady, she asks if I just had an interview.

I say, "Sure."

She asks what the job was.

I see a flash of red hair, and I say: "Backup dancer for Michael Jackson."

I can tell she doesn't have the heart to tell me he's dead. Everyone already assumes you're crazy, so it's okay to give them a show. You have to indulge people when you're selling a lifestyle.

The redhead from the beach is here, standing by the window, and I'm in my suit. I'm honed in on my target for the night and the circle starts up again.

She doesn't notice me.

She's staring out the window, mouthing the words to Billie Jean and doing a little two-step.

And then I remember, her name is Angel.

Angel shimmies to the right, and I start walking over. I know this gig and I'm good at my job.

Angel mouths, "The kid is not my son," and tosses her hair and I stop walking.

She shimmies to the left, and I don't know what to say. Billie Jean is not her lover, this much we know, but everything else is blank. I don't care about my suit, or my job, or anything.

Her name is Angel and I remember it. Every bad love song was written about her. Like when you drive too close to the median and you see the cars coming the other way. I want her the way you almost want them to hit you.

I walk towards her and a foot hits me in the stomach. Some skinny guy with a messed up leg is baring half a mouth of teeth at me.

“Don’t interrupt Angel when she’s rehearsing,” he says.

Lest we incur the wrath of Michael.

I sit down, but I can’t stop wanting her. People always tell me, be careful what you do. Two step. Shimmy shimmy. Red hair. I want her.

Billie Jean fades out and Angel gets quieter and quieter, and then she stands, legs apart, jazz hands out, head bent in prayer. She looks up and nobody claps. The foot guy releases me.

And I just stand there.

Angel takes her headphones out, and I just don’t say anything. My suit was the wrong move. I should have gone all Nirvana. I should have brought my guitar. I should have brought my cardboard. I’m not good at this.

Angel turns around and everything is red hair and brown eyes, and I’m thinking, one or the other of those colors has to be fake. It’s definitely the hair, but I don’t care. Fire engine red is my new favorite color.

Angel walks away from the window and then she smiles and says “Venison.”

Venison?

And I’m thinking I should go kill her a deer until I remember that Venison is me.

10.

Angel says nobody sleeps in the homeless shelters because it’s more dangerous than the street. I nod like What do I know. No one will hurt Angel on my watch. I have something to fight for now, so all of the sudden things matter to me.

Tonight’s Lycra unitard is red and gold and patterned with diamonds. It makes her look like a circus.

And I think, there’s a great pickup line to be made here that goes something something pitching my tent.

“How’s your backup dancing going?” I ask.

Angel shouldn’t back up anything. She should be the star of every show. Everything should be fire engine red, and I’m mad at the world for having other colors in it.

She says, “It’s hard.”

Because Michael Jackson is dead? But I don’t say that.

If she says he’s alive, he’s alive.

“It’s hard having to sing and dance all the time,” she says, “Sometimes I just want to sit down. But Michael always wants us to rehearse.”

You’d never think this girl was schizophrenic. I’m telling you, she’s too beautiful to call beautiful. You’d call her ugly, that’s how beautiful she is.

“You’re really good at it though,” I say.

She stamps her foot and huffs at me. What did I do wrong? When did I stop being good at this game?

Angel says, “I would be if he’d let me!”

Then she looks around all afraid like there might be someone listening.

“The thing is,” she whispers, “He doesn’t know what he wants. He keeps changing the song. Every day, it’s a different one. There’s all new choreography to memorize.”

We’re almost back to the beach now. Someone’s playing checkers by the pier. I want to take the rest of their limbs and give them to Angel in a bouquet.

I ask, “What happens when he gets to the end of every song he’s ever written?”

Angel shrugs and says, “He’ll write another.”

Sitting on the sand in my suit and her unitard, we could be any happy couple. I’m a business man. She’s a contortionist. The thing about falling in love is it makes you okay with being a footnote to everyone else.

11.

At work, I changed my desktop background to fire engine red. I learned a song on the guitar. Everyone forgot about the Christmas fiasco and we sold them some more life. I clock out at five and two-step to the door.

I meet Angel on the corner by the pier. She says Michael changed the song again and she needs a white hat. He isn’t usually so specific, but you know, the King is a perfectionist.

This is when Angel tells me about being a Girl Scout, but that was all before she met Michael. She holds my hand and tells me she likes my suit.

She’s not crazy, not really.

I’m not so sure this isn’t all just one big Michael Jackson music video. This. You know, life. He’s the King of Pop and we are his subjects. Going around and around in Never Never Land, singing the same songs, wearing the same clothes. Everyone’s trying to nail the same moves and the King always does it better.

Angel says she isn’t schizophrenic, not even close, it’s just that nobody knows what to call her.

The thrift store is full of hemp and plaid shirts. Angel walks past them like they’re not even there, and I follow her hair to the back of the store. There’s a row of hats on the wall. Those James Joyce caps. Cowboy hats. A sombrero stamped with a logo for cheap tequila. Angel moves the brim of the sombrero aside and there it is, buried underneath the rest. A white fedora with a black ribbon above the brim.

Angel says, “That one.”

I take the hat and set it on her head like a crown. Princess of Pop. Everyone in the world should bow down. We take the hat to the register and I pay for it with the crumpled bills from my Vietnam sign. Angel kisses me on the cheek. If money will make her kiss me, I want all the money in the world.

We’re halfway out the door when I realize Angel isn’t next to me anymore. She’s standing off to the side, shivering and looking at something on the wall.

“Angel?” I say. Everyone will think it’s just a pet name, but everyone doesn’t matter anymore. I don’t need any of them.

On the wall is a mannequin on a pedestal. The face is white and blank. It’s wearing a red old school military jacket with gold rope stitching across the front. Black pants. Shiny black shoes. I didn’t know mannequins had feet.

Angel is crying. She holds her white hat to her chest and sniffs while the mannequin looks at nothing.

“What do you want?” she says.

“Angel, I just wanted to know what’s wrong,” I say, but she doesn’t notice me.

“Why can’t you let me go?” she says. She’s yelling now and the store clerk is looking.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I back towards the door and Angel advances on the mannequin.

“I spend every day slaving away for you, and you won’t let me have any peace,” she screams. The store clerk is coming over. I put a hand on Angel’s shoulder and she shivers again.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone?” Before I have a chance to stop her, she rushes at the mannequin and punches it through the waist. Right in the center of the gold embroidery. The thin plastic caves in and makes the fabric dent.

“You need to leave,” the store clerk says.

I’m all, “Angel. Angel. What’s wrong? Calm down. Angel,” but she can’t stop crying. She hugs me and cries into my shoulder. I can feel the brim of the hat on my leg.

“Sir, the two of you need to leave,” the clerk says.

I pull Angel towards the door and she just screams louder.

“I hate you!” she says and spits at the mannequin.

“Out. Now,” the clerk says and pushes her into me. We stumble towards the door. Just before we’re through it, I realize the mannequin is wearing a single white glove. A sign at the base says “Michael Jackson Costume.”

I sit on the sidewalk while Angel hiccups against my shoulder. I stroke her hair and my fingers get stuck in a fire red knot.

“It was just a costume,” I say. “It’s not really him.”

Michael Jackson is dead.

“A costume?” she says. I nod and my chin hits her scalp.

“A Halloween costume, so people can try to dress like him,” I say. “That wasn’t really him.”

“But he was staring at me,” she says. She turns the hat over in her hands and sets it down at her feet.

“It wasn’t really him,” I say, “Just an imposter.”

“Are you sure?” she asks. I’m sure. I tell her Michael wouldn’t ignore her like that.

Angel starts crying again and I hold her tighter. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I was being silly.”

I shake my head until I’m lost in curls and the smell of beach. Sand, salt, cocaine, it all smells like Angel so I don’t care. She wipes her eyes with a Lycra sleeve and tries to smile. I keep my arms around her and tell her we can sit here as long as she wants. I tell her Billie Jean is not my lover, but Angel is, and she smiles.

I ask her what song Michael wants her to work on now, and she tells me it’s Smooth Criminal.

I’m going to learn every word to that song if it kills me.

After enough time, an elderly man walks by and hands us a dollar. That guy, he’s starting with the man in the mirror. You know, Be the change you want to see. Gandhi and stuff. Nirvana. I’m on radio Angel now. I see King Michael at the heart of everything.

It’s all the Kingdom of Pop.

Suddenly I want to get kicked out of everywhere. I want to fall from grace again and again. I want to show God up. I get the idea. I get why people hate couches and light bulbs. The

first step to killing the P. J. Holt lifestyle is to stop buying it, but that's not enough. You're still in the loop, but you're running it backwards. Eventually, you get back to people like me. Eventually, you get back to God, and this time you know what to look for.

It's not Nirvana we're after here, folks. It's not salvation. It's damnation. It's telling the world go to on without us. Let us rot. We'll rot at you. It's telling God we don't need to be loved. It's refusing to compensate. Letting the holes get bigger. Burning up the wires until you melt Father Christmas. Until you burn down the house. Until you burn down everything.

Hand me a dollar and I'll light it on fire.

Give me sympathy and I'll laugh in your face.

Angel says, "The only way out of the music video is if we kill Michael Jackson."

Michael Jackson is dead. Like, so dead.

But so what?

I'm having another thing right now. Absolute moment. Epiphany. Meaning of life kinda thing.

It all comes down to Michael Jackson. You know, as a metaphor.

I'll bring him back just so I can kill him again. I'll keep killing him, because the circle keeps going around and I might as well do something. I'm not sure who's more delusional, Angel or my boss. At least Angel knows she's stuck in the feedback loop. The Esteemed Mr. Whoever thinks he started it.

Even God prays to God. There's no way out.

So the best you can do is tell God to shove it. Cry for the Romans. Shit on the cross. Call sacrifice a vacation.

What I'm saying is, Angel's not crazy. She's just telling the truth with a different vocabulary. The Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of Pop, it's all killing Michael Jackson when he's already dead. It's Thriller night either way.

I tell Angel, "Let's do it."

There's three dollars and twenty-six cents in the hat. That should be enough to get started.

12.

I don't tell Angel, but I have a car. It's a silver BMW and there's a racquetball bag in the backseat. My phone hooks up to the Bluetooth automatically. I don't have any Michael Jackson on my iPod.

The problem with my car is it doesn't fit the scene. It doesn't evoke the right mood. If anything, we need a wagon. A graffiti-covered caboose. A couple of mules. Angel and me, we're wandering prophets again, heralding salvation by killing the king.

I say, "I think we need to steal a car."

Angel says, "I know just the guy."

It's a basement apartment with a sticker on the door that reads, "Willie Nelson for President."

I watch Venison tap the sticker and say, "This. This is a revolution I could get behind." Angel just chews on her fingernail and looks at the window, so I grab her hand.

The door creaks open and a hooked nose pokes through the crack. Somewhere below it there must be a mouth, but it's shrouded in shadow.

The nose says, "What do you want?"

Angel's floating brown eyes swivel back to the door.

"Angel says you can help us?" I say like it's a question. "She says you have a skill we might find useful?"

The nose draws back and says, "I have many skills. With which do you desire help?"

I pull Angel close to me and she just blinks at the door.

"Temporary automotive larceny," I say, and the door swings open. A small man stands behind it, holding a false nose up on the end of a stick.

"Angel," he says, "How are you getting on? How's Michael?"

She shivers and twists the Smooth Criminal hat around in her hands.

"That's what we're here for," she says. "We're going to find him and kill him."

The man looks at me like this is all my fault, or Venison's, and I slowly meet his gaze. I give him a look that I hope says, "Michael Jackson is dead."

He nods, and I read the hidden message in it. Michael Jackson is dead.

This is our cult.

"Well," the man says, "Come on in and have a sit down!"

He double-bolts the door behind us and we settle ourselves on a magenta futon across from a poster of Simon Cowell. He puts the false nose on a stand by the window.

"I just love Simon," the man says.

"Who doesn't?" I ask and he breaks into a broad grin. Angel's back to chewing her fingernail.

"Well, I know Angel, who might you be?"

Venison. Venison Beam. I ditched the guitar so I'm just a prophet today.

The man, he doesn't ask for more than that. The hemp sold itself.

He pulls the front of his shirt out where there might be suspenders if this were the 1940s and says, "Welp, Harold Rule is the name, stealing cars is the game."

He hands me a business card. It reads, "How to keep an idiot busy: Turn over." And on the other side, "How to keep an idiot busy: Turn over." I put it in my pocket.

"What kind of buggo are you jonesing for?" he asks.

Angel shrugs and takes her fingernail out of her mouth. "I don't think the type is that important," she says.

I'm eyeing Our Lord and Savior Simon Cowell above her head. If it came down to being ruled by Simon Cowell or Michael Jackson, I'm pretty sure I'd kill myself.

"We need to go unnoticed," I say, "We need to pass in the kinds of areas Michael might be. We should look wealthy, but not flashy."

Harold's mouth moves like he's chewing something and he smacks his lips a couple of times. The poster of Simon Cowell is where the television might be. I wonder if he just watches that at night.

Harold sucks his teeth and nods slowly.

"Alrighty," he says, "Alrighty, cats."

He stands and strolls over to the window, pushes the blinds apart and peers out. He pulls back and the blinds snap back together and the room is somehow darker.

Harold says, "BMW five series Gran Turismo, Glacier Silver or Callisto Gray, two or three years old but no older."

Angel stares at the light not coming through the window and sniffs.

"Where are we going to find something like that?" she says.

I look from the flecks of skin on her scalp to Simon Cowell on the wall to Harold's fake nose. This is the line between delusion and identity. We lie by telling the truth.

I say, "I think I know where one might be."

13.

Stealing your own car isn't the problem. It's making it look stolen.

We meet Harold the next day on the road that leads to my apartment. Harold doesn't know what he's onto, and maybe that's why he does it wrong. The car he goes for is parked in the next lot down from mine. Same model. Same color. There's a racquetball bag in the backseat.

He surveys the car, walking around and around. Me and Angel, we huddle in the shadow of the cars across the alley. We hold each other while he works.

Harold leans in and tries the handle of the car. It's locked. He tries it again, harder this time. The car insists on remaining locked.

Harold looks at us and shrugs.

The alarm blares.

Angel jumps against me and I hold her tight. Harold scurries across the alley to meet us in a huddle under the awning.

"What was that?" I say.

"That there's a car alarm," Harold says.

"You don't have anything to stop it?" I ask.

Harold's face falls.

"No," he says. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Why not?"

"Well it's not like I've ever done this before."

"What?" I say. "You said you were an expert car thief."

"I did not," Harold says, grabbing where the straps of his suspenders would be but aren't. "I said, Harold Rule is the name, stealing cars is the game."

"Then why did you agree to help us?"

Harold shrugs.

"Seemed like a nice way to spend an afternoon. I don't get out much, you see..."

I walk away. On second thought, I take Angel with me.

"Wait here," I tell her.

"Where are you going?"

We're standing just behind my apartment building, right behind my car. I look from the racquetball bag in the backseat to the courtyard to the general direction of my door.

"I'm breaking in," I say.

I turn and walk and just as I get out of reach, Angel runs up and grabs my hand. It burns in hers. It burns like the sun burns the Earth.

"Be careful," she says. She says it with her eyes. The color changes just for me.

I nod. What I mean is, I will.

With Angel's fear in me, this is a break in. I walk to my door. I pull the keys from my pocket. I breathe. I turn the lock. Smooth criminal.

The car keys, they're already on my house keys. What I need is something for Angel. Something to make her look the part. I've got my suit, but I opt for a different lifestyle. Polo shirt. Salmon-colored shorts. Loafers.

There's a blue dress hanging in my closet. Some girl left it months ago. I grab that too, for Angel. I kept it for her. It's always been for her.

I shut the door softly and walk through the courtyard holding the blue dress in my arms. Angel cocks her head at me. I fish around in my pocket for the car keys.

"I brought you this," I say. "For when we get to Michael's house. We have to dress the part."

She takes the dress and touches the fabric. She slips it on over her Lycra.

I'd cry if I could, that's how beautiful she is.

Then she kisses me. She kisses me, and it's the first time I've ever been kissed. The first time anyone's really kissed anyone, and Angel is kissing Venison Beam. She pulls back, grins, and walks away. I unlock the car.

Then we drive to Hollywood.

We don't have a gun. We don't have a plan. The ocean roars in a lilting kind of way. I tell Angel to check the iPod for Michael Jackson. I've bought every album. I bought them for her. She says she doesn't want to hear his voice today.

In the middle of downtown LA, we stop. The light's red. Like gravity stopping us from flying, the rhythm of the circle makes us pause.

There's an outdoor bar on the left. I can see it because I have the window down. There's a little group of men in polo shirts drinking beer at a table outside. Their watches dance in the light. One of them laughs at a joke another told. The other, the joke teller, he catches my eye. And I'm staring into the eyes of the Esteemed Mr. Whoever.

I feel sweat on my neck. He approaches the car.

"Well, hey there!" he says.

He does what I can only describe as clapping me on the shoulder. With the other hand, he holds an empty plastic cup.

"I'm... sorry," I say, "Do I know you?"

His head turns to Angel. I sweat some more.

"Is this your wife?"

"Maybe," I say, "Who are you?"

"What? Don't be a moron," he says. "What, don't know me without the suit?"

I blink.

"You've been working for me for the last six months."

"Oh," I say with a forced chuckle, willing the light to turn green. "You're thinking of my brother. I'm Venison. Venison Beam."

Prophet, wandering minstrel, Michael Jackson assassin, lover of earth's only Angel.

"Oh."

He takes his hand away. He didn't know I have a brother. Neither did I.

Mercifully, the light begins its slow ascent downwards to Go.

I grab the change on my dashboard. Three dollars and twenty-six cents. The bills are sweaty too. I put it in his beer cup.

"Best of luck," I say, and we drive away.

14.

The traffic is slow, like it wants to die. I don't know how to get to Michael Jackson's house, but in the end, that's not what does it.

My dad says, "You can worry about the future all you want, but it will still kick you in the nuts."

I say, Sometimes it brings you angels.

Halfway to Hollywood the road is blocked. I swear I can hear Billie Jean. Angel tenses and looks around.

"What's happening?" she says.

I shake my head like, I don't know, and I don't.

There's a crowd ahead of us, swaying and walking with candles and roses. They chant some Gregorian hymn and it still sounds like Billie Jean. I roll the window down.

It is Billie Jean.

I remember the date. It's the 25th of June. Christmas Solstice. The date rotates around like a backup dancer, spinning into something in my mind.

Michael.

The King of Pop is five years six feet under today. These are his subjects, mourning the loss of their lord.

We park at the back. I turn the car off and we climb out. My loafers are sweaty. Angel's Lycra dances like the ocean. Like light. We join the pilgrimage to Never Never Land. A sea of black shoes and single white gloves guides us up the sloping hill as the crowd chants in unison that Billie Jean is not anyone's lover, not here, and the kid is no one's son.

An old guy in a black hat carries a mirror over his shoulder. Finger painted across it in loud, black paint, it says "I'm starting with the..."

Angel, it's like she knows.

We fall into step with them. Right, left. The song's changed. Arms up. Two step, head twitch, two step, claws, fighting for our lives. We know the song, we know the dance.

The explosion is the unexpected part.

Just across the road, the big house with palm trees and bay windows has descended into a rectangle of fire. Everyone hits the ground as shrapnel screams through the air. The mirror that we're starting with, it's broken now, shattered at my feet. The sky darkens as the smoke cloud looms over the street. The house is beyond salvaging. The culprit, they'll come to find out, was the electrical wiring on the Limited Edition Luminescent Rose Quartz Summer Solstice Display. It was never the lightbulb's fault.

Remember how this is all a metaphor?

The only thing in my pocket is a ballpoint pen.

The thing that's sticking out of Angel, straight into her chest like an index finger trying to teach her a lesson, that's a piece of the rose quartz sun god. The blood isn't a metaphor, it's actual blood.

15.

Angel's heart thinks it's pumping blood to her body but it's actually giving life to the sidewalk. Me, I'm not there anymore. It looks like me in the little pieces of the broken mirror,

standing over her, mouth open, watching her bleed. It looks like me, bending over her, cradling her in my arms. It sounds like me, screaming. It must. I'm not sure. I've never heard me scream before.

The crowd around us isn't singing. They're just watching. Watching in this circle. A speaker plays Smooth Criminal and no one's bothered to turn it off.

The pen in my pocket, it's blue. It's plastic. It's holy. It's deadly. It's still a pen, but also, more. I pull it out. There's nothing I can do with it. I look at my neck in the piece of broken mirror. I put the pen to my own throat. Angel, she's not there anymore either. I imagine pushing. Punching a hole like piercing an ear. I imagine drawing a seagull on my neck.

Angel coughs a little bit of blood and I'm all there again. I'm there, in the blood. I'm with her, lying on the sidewalk.

She's dying. That is what she's doing right now.

There are cell phones out and smoke clouds and maybe someone's talking, but I don't hear it. I hear the little rattle of Angel's breath, up and down, rhythmic. The last backup dance. The star of the show.

She reaches for me and I reach back.

The song is slowing down.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

"Angel," I say. Angel, Angel, Angel. It has always been for her.

She looks at me like she's dying.

I don't have the heart to say it, but I don't have the heart to say anything else.

I cradle her head in my lap and I say, "Michael..."

But I can't. My hands are wet with her blood. Everything is red, but the Smooth Criminal hat is white. Her eyes are getting further from me now. The sunshine leaks out of them. The brown is still brown, but it's not a color anymore. Her blood, it's darker than I imagined. It's not fire engine red.

"Angel," I start again. "Michael Jackson is..."

Her mouth opens. It's barely a whisper, so faint I don't know if I heard it or not.

She says, "Dead, I know."

And now, so is she.

But when I sit down by the pier, strumming the hymns of the Kingdom of Pop on the five unbroken strings of my guitar, she sings with me. The clouds open, the sun shines, she sings with me. The clouds close, the night falls, she sings with me. We're fighting for our lives, her and me, inside this night.

Claws up.

Michael Jackson is dead.

She sings with me.