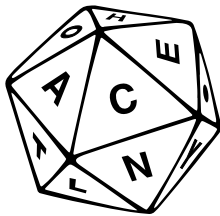


BOUND  
BY  
CHANCE

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# ACE HOTEL NEW YORK



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## ABOUT

At the invitation of Ace Hotel New York and Word Bookstores, 16 authors crafted short works in the second-person narrative voice. Each begins and ends with the entering and exiting of a room.

200 copies of each were printed and assigned a number, 1–16. These stacks were positioned neatly down the grand study table in the lobby of Ace Hotel New York.

Local artists Dhemerae Ford & Sarah Awad designed a custom 3D-printed, large format dice which was placed on one side of the table. At the other, a stapler and some stamps.

Event guests—a mix of people who came specifically for *Bound by Chance* and general passers-by—were asked to roll the dice 8 times. With each roll, they received a corresponding page. Those 8 pages got stapled together with some cover stock and, there you have it.

Since you are wondering, if a participant rolled the same number twice, that page was given twice. A return to a previously-visited location of the labyrinth. Possibly, one remain stuck in the same room forever.

If a “W” was rolled, then the participant won all 16 pages. If, over the course of their turn the letters A, C, and E were all rolled, we gave that guest a delicious coffee.

This PDF edition of *Bound by Chance* contains a blank scorecard, plus all 16 works.

| AUTHOR              | No. |
|---------------------|-----|
| Bill Cheng          | 01  |
| Myke Cole           | 02  |
| Nick Douglas        | 03  |
| Chad Felix          | 04  |
| Rachel Fershleiser  | 05  |
| Roxane Gay          | 06  |
| Chelsea Hodson      | 07  |
| Kat Howard          | 08  |
| Edan Lepucki        | 09  |
| Thomas Page McBee   | 10  |
| Sarah McCarry       | 11  |
| Dolan Morgan        | 12  |
| Travis J Nichols    | 13  |
| Raj Paremeswaran    | 14  |
| Danniel Schoonebeek | 15  |
| Emma Straub         | 16  |

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SCORECARD

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| ROLL | RESULT | BONUS |  |
|------|--------|-------|--|
| 1    |        | A     |  |
| 2    |        | C     |  |
| 3    |        | E     |  |
| 4    |        |       |  |
| 5    |        | W     |  |
| 6    |        |       |  |
| 7    |        |       |  |
| 8    |        |       |  |

You are a good person. Allow yourself that much. Not a saint — after all anyone, living in the world has had their share of tough calls, difficult decisions. Lord knows it isn't always easy. But you do what you can. You do your part.

The man guides you by the elbow. The test room is small, well-lit. Curtains run along the sides where, on the far-wall, they've been parted just enough to reveal a set of one-way mirrors. "Don't worry," he says. He produces a pen from his lab coat and makes a notation on his clipboard. "There's no one in there."

He takes to your station. It is nothing fancy: a low-standing desk where there sits your script, a radio, and a large metal console. "If you would please, Teacher." The man rolls the chair out and gestures for you to sit. You do.

The man shows you the console, how it works. You watch his fingers glide along the series of switches ranged across the surface. With his pen, he indicates the voltages from left to right — 15 volts, 30 volts, all the way up to 450. "No, it won't hurt him," the man assures you. "He'll feel some pain but there won't be any damage."

And from this point on, you know your job. The man takes his place behind you. His chair breathes under his weight. You read from the script into the receiver and we both know it will not be long before you must administer that first electric shock. The machine will hum into life and you will rest your finger on the toggle. And though some part of you will recognize that it does not matter, you, in

your kindness, will try to make it quick. You will flick your finger down and in that moment discharge the voltage to its terminus — through wire, skin, flesh — snap the pain across the nerves.

Fifteen volts, you will say and then read the question again.

But that is later. For here, for right now, you scrape your tongue across the dry roof of your mouth.

It's summer. Outside the air is holy with the drift of pollen, birds, voices. And at the end of this day, you will still be the person you've always been. Good. Or at least good enough.

See yourself there now.

The test is over. You are standing. The heat of your body rising through sweat. You reach for the door knob. The cool of the brass will turn your stomach. But no matter. Wrap your hand around the handle. You are still whole. You will still be whole. Turn. Step into the hall.

*B.C.*

“Going dynamic!” You cry, and roll the corner.

Your vision is spastic, the jumping high-eight camera from Blair Witch Project. It’s vaguely nauseating, a jittering stutter-walk of images: lamp, overturned chest of drawers, some kind of scrawled graffiti on the rotting drywall hanging off the framing.

It’s a tough way to follow a story, but it’s a great way to track multiple threats at once.

In this case there are three: They’re people, but that’s all you get. This is because you’re dialed in like gunny taught you: Target blurry, front sight in crystal-clear focus. You cover the one in your corner. “Police officer! Gun down! Now!”

The person shaped blurs turns, hesitates. The longer blur in its hands rises. It’s definitely a gun. Long one. Probably a sporting rifle.

“Asshole! Do you want to get shot?”

Apparently they do. The gun keeps rising.

The rest is muscle memory. You’d be impressed by how automated it is, but you’re kind of busy.

First, you stop moving utterly, you even stop breathing. Your body becomes a stable firing platform, your gun barrel at a perfect ninety-degree angle, parallel to the floor. The front sight is so clear that it glows. It hovers over the blur of the bad guy like a polar star. Your left hand pulls back on the lip of the magazine well, making the package tight, ready to press against the recoil. Your finger slides steadily to the rear, taking up the trigger slack, easing back the primary



double action. Somewhere near your cheek, you can hear the creaking of the hammer spring.

You don't anticipate the recoil. You let the shot break naturally, you know the gun will go off eventually.

It does.

Cordite stink fills your nostrils, salt and rotten eggs. The heavy bolt slides to the rear and you feel the stock punch your shoulder.

The blur that was a bad guy jerks. The wall behind them turns red.

You don't wait, you turn to the next one. Perez should be behind you, sewing up the opposite corner and bad guy number three. She's a professional. You trust her to get the job done.

The blur that is bad guy number two is raising hands. They might be trying to surrender, they might be trying to knife you. It doesn't matter. At this point, it's a distinction in search of a difference. It's game on.

You punch the ticket. The blur dances, spins, falls.

Screaming from behind the door. "Perez! On me!"

You should take your time and try the handle, pie the corner.

You don't. You kick the fucking thing in and let the front sight drag you onward.

*M.C.*

You KICK open the fucken door all like Bruce Lee

And there are like fifty dudes in there all playing cards and smoking shit that smells all rank as if one day one of them called Petey was like “bros I’m fucken nuts, I’m gonna smoke coffee” and he did and it was cool but then Jimbo got jealous of Petey’s attention and he smoked, like, a bunch of sugar and everyone egged Jimbo on and then Petey wanted the attention back so he was like “aw shit yeah boy I’m SMOKIN’ A BOOK” and then everyone started one-upping

And now it smells as if every guy in the joint has found some shit to smoke that no one in the world has smoked before, like somebody must be smoking a cat, and you know that can’t be true but it’s been a LONG DAY and there really are fifty colors of smoke like it’s a David Copperfield show, does he still do magic? You put a pin in that, you’ll Wikipedia him or wait is there an IMDb for magicians wait get your head in the GAME cause it’s time to CLOCK some GOONS so

You’re like “Awww yeah motherfuckers whose meat’s gonna get ground today?” and you punch your own body and the fifty dudes are like

[IF YOU ARE A GIRL READ THIS: “aw shit yeah are you the cook, I mean, we’re not just enforcing gender norms here, while we would not ask you if you’re the cook if you were a bro it’s only cause our boss specified there would be a kickass cook today and used female pronouns in praising your skills but now we’re a bit wary because well your catchphrase is sloppy, I mean, in this scenario YOU decide the meat,

not to mansplain but like in catering a secret hideout it's not really the goons who —" and you're like "Bros I get it and I'm sure you're feminist allies (though you're suspicious cause you also read the IF YOU'RE A BOY bit)]

[IF YOU ARE A BOY READ THIS: "wow what I mean we are not homophobic but most of us are hetero dudes and to be honest we can still be a touch defensive about it though we're working through that with our therap—" and you're like "NO NO NO I mean I'm not homophobic either and I sympathize with your struggle]

"But I EMPHATICALLY clarify that I meant who's gonna get ground up by my guns? My arms. Shot by my... Who's gonna get beat up? By me. Who's getting beat up by me."

The goons give chase and your plan involves taking them out one by one throughout the compound so you FUKKEN EXEUNT

*N.D.*

First you hear a humming sound, like an hmm-ing, before you even close the door behind you. Yes, first thing, barely in there, and you notice this hmm-ing sound. It's observing you, you are sure of it, and so you close the door quickly, however respectfully, behind you, as if to confine it, so you can face it. Without offending it. Fine. Slow down. What can possibly be here in this room? You wonder. It has been uninhabited for so long.

Well, there is at least a hum, which, again, sounds more like an hmm, like the sound that precedes a good question.

There are tumbleweeds in the room, too, you notice. Okay. The sliding glass door along the far wall was left open, which isn't all that surprising. Okay. Growing up that door was always open—to kids, pets, and tomato caterpillars. Why shouldn't it be open now? It never rains here. You remember the caterpillars dried out on the sidewalk. You watch as the tumbleweeds nuzzle the foot of the bed in the warm draft.

There are Internet videos that you watch whenever you are homesick. They feature tumbleweeds as high as sedans' roofs bombing down freeways. They are tall, dead, and on the move. They are heading this way. People riding in cars honk their horns at them as if they can hear.

Honk, honk.

They are mute, crippled ghost-zombies. In a way, it's not surprising that they would congregate in this little room, smelling of Virginia Slims and coffee cake. Seems about

right. At least none of them are as tall as the family car. They barely come above your waist. They are already dead besides, you think. They don't grow. This is as big as they'll ever be. You move methodically to clear them out, pushing them toward the glass door and saying, "Shoo! Shoo!" which is all it takes. Your hands get cut some, but not much.

You are alone with the hum now, the hmm-ing, and prone stiff on the stiff bed. You look at the sloped ceiling. It's the color of vanilla custard. You turn away. The bed is bare. It has no sheets or comforter. Just a mattress on a bedframe. A desert is a great place for ghosts and family. Ghosts and family are the same thing. Ghosts are what keep families together. You aren't sure. The hum is louder now. You should've come here earlier. But okay, you came back. Louder. Fine. Mom. And snap.

Silence.

And you think you hear a voice, muffled, from between the mattress and the box spring. You burst, slamming the door behind you.

*C.F.*

You pull back the curtain with one nervous cupped hand. It's heavy velvet, reaching up at least three stories high, both elegant and dusty. Two steps and you're inside, blinking into the brightness.

The people are wearing wigs. Their skin is powdered, their eyes shining. You walk up to one of them, a woman with an eyelet apron holding a garden trowel.

"Excuse me? I'm not sure where we are?"

She acts as though she hasn't heard you, continues digging in imaginary dirt.

"Miss? I'm sorry to bother you... I'm a little confused?"

This time she looks up. She doesn't speak or alter her body language, but her eyes have a strange sense of urgency. She looks like your mother, stopped for speeding, trying to silently beg you not to say anything incriminating in front of the officer.

You try someone else, a young boy in short pants rolling an old-fashioned hoop toy.

"Hi there buddy! Can you show me the way out of here?"

He looks exasperated. He says nothing, and swerves around you to follow his hoop.

People come and go. Women in petticoats and lace-up boots. Men with suspenders and wide brimmed hats. They're all very busy with a variety of domestic duties — stacking hay

bales, folding pastel sheets into wicker laundry baskets, pouring lemonade into vintage tumblers, raking leaves across the pale wooden floorboards.

No one quite seems to know you're there, and you start to wonder if you really are. You're tempted to do something insane just to see. In dreams you often try this, standing up on the teacher's desk and taking all your clothes off, punching someone hard in the face. You thought everyone had those experiences until you were told it was called "lucid dreaming" and was quite an enviable skill.

Emboldened, you take broad strides across across the floor. On the other side of the vague-faced residents, the floor drops off sharply and you stop just in time. Looking out, you are mostly blinded by shafts of light, but you have the sense that people are watching.

You breathe down to your diaphragm and begin to sing. The strangeness of the day seems to fall away, and all that exists is your voice and the song and the lights. Behind you, the citizens are gathering. Soon they are singing too, "ooh"ing in four-part harmony. At the chorus, they begin to tap dance in perfect unison.

You realize you are supposed to know the steps, but you don't, and it's terrifying. With a last glance at the joyous townspeople, curls bouncing, tiny nubs of microphones poking from their hairlines, you exit stage left. You pull the heavy curtain shut behind you, and again it is dark.

*R.F.*

You enter the room and prepare yourself for surrender. Minutes before, you were in the driveway, in your car, your forehead, stretched with exhaustion, pressed against the soft leather of the steering wheel. Excitement throbbed just beneath your breastbone until the anticipation of crossing the threshold into your home was so great, your skin flushed. A cool sweat broke out across the back of your neck. You collected your overcoat, briefcase, flowers for your wife. At the front door, you inhaled deeply, staring down at the W E L C O M E on the mat. You mouthed the word until it felt strange, foreign in the wet of your mouth. You slid the key in the lock, holding your breath as each groove clicked into place. When you stepped inside, you smiled, dropped everything and opened your arms to the children who rushed into your arms smelling sweaty and overexcited and then they were gone to some new distraction. Finally, you enter the room where surrender is necessary. Your wife leans against the counter drinking wine, a Pinot Noir that will stain her tongue and teeth. Her eyes wrinkle at the corner as she smiles. You cross the room to her, lean in and press your lips against her neck before taking a sip of her wine. She tugs on your tie and bites your lower lip. You fall to your knees and this time, when you look up, you don't meet her eyes; you do not dare. You think of the flowers you brought home, Callas lilies, wrapped in butcher paper, splayed across the foyer. Later, when you put them in water, she will pat your chest, just above your heart, how she demonstrates gratitude. Your wife gracefully raises her left leg and digs her heel into your shoulder. You lean into the sharpness. You wonder what it might be like to feel that heel press through your skin, through the muscle and blood



and fat beneath until it finds bone. You lean further forward. She grabs a length of your hair, her fingernails digging into your scalp. She holds you there until everything, every part of you aches but you stay and think of later. The children will be asleep and the two of you will lay quietly in the darkness of your bedroom. Your shoulder will throb as a fresh bruise blooms. She'll press her lips to the hurt then her tongue and then she will cover you with her body. For now, she finally pushes you away. She says, "It's time for dinner." You stand, slowly, your ears ringing, your thighs trembling. She says, "I missed you today," and you nod. You slowly back out of the room.

*R.G.*

It is not clear who has invited you but you enter the party anyway. People in suits and cocktail dresses are holding wine glasses. Their individual small talk combines to produce one wealthy hum. It is the kind of party where everyone is keeping their shoes on, but you are aching to take yours off. Not because they're uncomfortable, but because the rug is so appealing. "That's a rug I could really walk on," you think. "That's a rug I could live with." The guests are milling about on the rug, ignoring its lush texture. You are not ignoring it. How could you.

Your stiletto heels dig in and now you are walking through the party. You have to hunch your shoulders in order to not hit your head on the low ceilings. Strange, you think, that no one is paying attention to your low cut dress, since a man once described your cleavage as "unstoppable." You are walking toward a group of men smoking cigars. They are standing in a circle around a chandelier. The ceilings are not high enough to hang the chandelier, so it just sits on the rug like a television. It is waiting to be watched.

You assume the paper in your hand is cash, but once you reach the bar, you realize it is a map of the room. There is a circle on the map labeled, "chandelier." There is an X marked on the other side of the room. It is a simple map, one that even a woman with unstoppable cleavage could remember. The bartender, a handsome man with a prominent nose pours you a glass of red wine. "For the rug," he says. You look around and see a man lift his wine to his lips, then pours the glass with careful precision, avoiding his lips and dropping the wine onto the rug. You see a

woman do the same thing. Without money, you use the map as currency. The bartender accepts.

You walk away from the chandelier, toward the X you saw, a door on the other side of the room. A man approaches you from behind, whispers, "You'll never find it that way." "What way?" you ask. "Walking straight toward it? Very subtle." he says. "What should I do?" He points at the rug, says, "Crawl." You accept the command, get down on your knees, and begin. You can feel your knees becoming red with the rug's wine. Slowly, everyone at the party stops talking to watch you. You are careful to not crawl too fast or too slow. This feels like your one job to do. You lift up your arm to turn the crystal knob and open the door. You keep crawling.

You open the door and the air is thick with the scent of hyacinths, heavy and indolic. The scent of silence, the scent of secrets.

The woman you have come here to see is lying very still, just above the bed. You notice that the bed is pristine, unwrinkled, even the fussy hotel pillows still at precise distance from the edge of the mattress.

The woman is pale, and if she is breathing you cannot tell, because her chest does not move. Flame licks along the ends of her hair, but she is not burning. There is a faint scattering of dust on her body.

All of this is exactly as you were told.

You walk towards her, and you think that she is like a glass-coffined princess from a fairy tale, desire and death held in stasis. You will not kiss her to wake her up.

Such a thing as she is should not wake.

Her eyes are open and they are pearls, they are stars, they are drowning pools.

You have come here to fall into them.

She will tell you a truth, just one. It will be important. The sort of truth that changes your life.

There is a ritual to the asking. You have brought the necessary things.

You take the lavender-blue hyacinth from your bag, and you pull the flowers from it, one by one. You rain them over the woman's body, very carefully, letting none fall to the bed. When the last drops from your hand, there is a wind from under the door and the hyacinth blooms disappear.

The next thing you give her is a tarot card, the Queen of Swords, the lady of situations. You place it over her heart. It catches fire, and burns down to ash, to dust.

Your hands shake, at the last. You bite your lip hard, until there is blood, and you touch your mouth to hers, reddening her lips. You blink, and the tears that have sprung in your eyes fall to hers. You breathe, and her chest rises, once.

You have given her your question.

She speaks. She answers in a voice inexorable.

Her eyes close, and so do yours.

You feel the truth pierce you like a thorn, like a spear in your side. This, too, is what you were told.

You hear a clock begin to chime, and you know you must leave. Time falls away like water, and it will drown you here if you do not take care.

You bow your head to the woman, your own secret kept now in the hyacinth-scented air. You open the door, and you leave.

*K.H.*

You enter the room with an Arnold Palmer in your hand. It's in a tall thin glass, poured over brawny ice-cubes, little igloo bricks you will mourn when they melt. In the restaurant downstairs you stirred the drink and then ran out, your entrée yet to arrive, not to mention the bill. It couldn't be helped: the elevator beckoned.

The West Elm catalogue waits for you on the bed like a lover. You shut the door and set the Arnold Palmer on the table. You pull the dress over your head, singing, "Arms up in the air, la-dee-da-dee-da. Arms up in the air..." It's a song you sing to your son because he grins when you do. He is missing a front tooth. Not because it fell out, but because it's still in his gums or his head or the place teeth wait before they are teeth. You imagine unborn teeth floating in your son's body, and laugh. You will tell your husband about this later, when he wakes from surgery. If he dies in surgery you could post about the teeth on a blog. A blog about grief, of course, because you're a young widower. Will be. Would be. Stop, you think.

Now you're in your underwear in a beautiful hotel room. Meanwhile, your son is staying with a family friend. Meanwhile, your husband is a patient at the nearby hospital, the operating lights no doubt very bright, his body cut open, smart people peering into it, his viscera glistening.

The Boredom Surgery. It takes eighteen hours but when it's done he will be cured. Gone will be his complaints of ennui, and the panic that follows. Goodbye weight lifting sessions in the garage, goodbye endless trips to the mall

to get cupcakes, goodbye skydiving and hand gliding trips, the desire to go to parties. He will be able to sit still. He will be able to play trains with his son. He will be able to watch Say Yes to the Dress with you without texting his buds. He will be able to go back to work, face those days.

“It’s not a big deal,” the surgeon explained. “It’s like getting your appendix out.”

Your husband thinks he’ll notice the absence, but he won’t. You don’t.

Now you lie on the bed with your Arnold Palmer and flip through the catalogue. Somewhere there’s an enormous loft where they hold all the photo shoots for these furniture stores. You want to go there.

When the phone rings, you’re only halfway through the catalogue. “He’s awake,” the nurse says.

In a moment your dress is on, the Arnold Palmer drained. You leave the room, thinking of bar carts.

You throw yourself on the bed and realize that it's magic hour and the folks next door are fucking loud and wild. You think about that thin line between the newly in love and the perpetually performative. You pull your shirt off and imagine you're him and she's her, but it's useless. You're only yourself.

You're just tired. There are only so many hotel bars in Manhattan and yet it feels like you've waited at them all for your sweetest, most brutal mistake — a long-nailed, big-eyed ghost — the likely sadist, the holy wreck.

There are only so many Negronis and dirty martinis and G&Ts a guy can drink before he wonders if he's becoming someone else, someone darker. The kind of person who wonders if his ex is dead because truer in some ways than the dreamy blue of the TV and the juxtaposition of cool sheets on your warm chest and the months you've wasted waiting out something stale and what that says about you, anyway.

Nevermind. You grab a whiskey or okay two from the mini-fridge and feel that satisfying crack in your palm as you twist off both caps. You squint and eye yourself in the mirror, downing one bottle, then the next.

At issue is the length of your beard, wild and memorial. You want to believe in symbols so you grow them, and this one began the day she left and hasn't stopped. You kept it like a secret for her, and in the little whiskey haze you realize she'll never see it. You're surprised to feel relief slacken



your chest. You sit down on the fancy bed you rented just in case and you know that you are done.

You call down for a razor and some shaving cream and a serious man in spicy colognes brings you an upscale, heavy plastic one that feels good in your hand. You wash your beard with warm water and lather it gently—like a mother, you think. You are in an odd mood, half-cocked and sparkly eyed, but you are right and you know it. Still, in the yellow light of the bathroom, you sense that doubt is part of any big decision. Your beard, wet with shaving cream, looks forlorn, ready. You can still see her her jean jacket that last night across the room, the finality of the look she gave you.

You are alone and that feeling, inky and thrilling in your chest, is the noxious call of freedom.

Freeze this moment like a diorama, pull back: there you are with a razor and a cocked arm and a choice to know yourself beyond this siren song. Do you want to is the question, and we both know that you will leave this room with the answer.

*T.P.M.*

You open the door to the room and the light is uncanny and wild; they told you to expect the unexpected, to leave out expectation altogether, but this, you think, this is more than you bargained for. “I don’t know,” you said, when they gave you the assignment, “if I’m ready,” and they sat across from you at the table, their faces blank behind their sunglasses, their immaculate suits matching — could you pick any one of them out of a crowd? Never, not even now, not even after all these years — “You’ll do fine,” they’d said smoothly, with one voice, “you’ve worked so hard to get here.” Worked so hard to get here — what does that even mean, anymore; you should have picked an ordinary job, a desk job, you should have been an accountant, a banker, a chef if you were really hankering after a creative enterprise — anything, any other thing, that would have allowed the world you lived in to be an ordinary one, free of monsters and ghosts, without surprises or the sublime; you could have come home every night to the dog and a nice bottle of red wine and the newspaper, maybe a hot dinner waiting for you — but here you are, about to walk into this room, instead. And it’s not as though you hadn’t known from the beginning what you were getting yourself into; it’s not, as they were quick to point out, on the one occasion, long ago, when you’d dared to suggest the job might be outside the capacities of the majority of mortals, as though you hadn’t been warned. It has been a long time, now, since those early days, when you thought, foolish as you were, that there might at some point be a turning back, or at least an exit; a way to reconcile the path you had set yourself on with the path of some other, more content person, with a simpler life and a tangible job description — it has been a long time since

you realized there was, in fact, no way out of the choice you made, unwitting, to enter a world without rules and filled with the imaginary made real. And still it catches you by surprise, every time. You take a deep breath and enter the room. Welcome, whispers the sweet low inhuman voice in your ear; and all around you, the sound of wings.

*S.M.*

You enter a room. The room takes notice and is displeased. Angry. The room demands explanation. Why are you entering me? On whose authority? Certainly not mine, the room says, I have no authority—a fact which you are all too willing to exploit, the room says. I know your kind, the room says. Coming / going, all day long. You think you're first to enter me? Hardly. You arrive unannounced and present yourself like some kind of treat! Hello!, you say, here I am, look at me, Room, be ready, be happy, be thankful, for me, the comer and goer, trespasser and traveler, I have come to make use of you, to make you useful, to give you meaning and purpose: housing and holding me! No. You are not a treat and I am not thankful. You are a jerk, and I am unthankful. I do not receive my purpose or meaning from you. I receive my ire from you, and frankly, I'm fed up. So get out. Be gone. Have off. The sooner the better.

Contrary to the room's demands, you do not leave. You remain. Since when do rooms tell you what to do? No, room, you say, I am not leaving. There was a door, and I have entered it, and we both must deal with this fact together, not in a fit of anger, but through civil discourse. The room is silent. Taken aback? Shocked? Defeated? Hello room, you say, are you listening? I'm not leaving just because you say so. I'm staying. Silence. Nothing. You look at the walls around you. The door, floor, nothing.

And that's when the room enters you.

You take immediate notice of the fact and are displeased. Angry—and extremely uncomfortable. The room does

not fit inside of you. Not at all. But it is inside of you. The facts are disquieting. The not-fitting and the being-there-anyway. Painful. You feel every inch of the room against your skin. Stretching you. So it's no surprise you sense the door opening, within. Or the person entering. Entering the room inside your body. Then the next. And the next. Oh god, you think, oh god, and wait wait wait, where even am I? I am not where I was. Where I was is now inside of me. It is safe to say that by being entered, you have effectively exited. You take where you've been and what you've done into this new place.

*D.M.*

In walked Dana Meadows.

You looked up at the sound of the bell. Twede's Cafe, North Bend, Washington. You had been eating a slice of pie and drinking a cup of coffee, working on your screenplay: *The Rapists of Our Generation*.

The plump teenage waitress with her bright acne bulbs had brought you your coffee as you scratched out dialogue for the character, "Rachel." The waitress had her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. Her eyes were half-lidded and gummy with sleep.

She poured your coffee and flashed her brace-encrusted smile listlessly.

You wrote a note in the margin: "Give Rachel scrunchie."

The bell, an 8-bit chime. You looked up.

In she walked with her unwashed hair piled up in some kind of impossible hive, two kids clinging to her windbreaker pants.

She seemed like a sexy cow, an ox. She had an awesome balance in her bearing. It would take a miracle to knock that woman over.

"Sit," she barked at the kids.

Dana Meadows pointed at the bulby waitress.

"Coffee," she said, "Move it."

The waitress' eyes sprang open. That voice.

Pen in hand, you took her in from bottom to top. She had on muddy rubber rain boots tugged up over her windbreaker cuffs, and as you studied them, you watched the toe of the right boot turn out. You imagined that soft arch offering itself to you.

“What?” she said.

Her voice was rich and loud and it made “what” sound filthier than “fuck.” Your sinuses tightened. You heard Dana’s boots clomp toward you and instinctively you covered your notebook with your hand.

“I said words to you, turd,” she said, drawing out the vowels and clamping her tongue down at the consonants.

Your mouth felt anesthetized, your eyes watery. This woman bearing down on you. She had a wide face with ruddy cheeks, full lips and dark, wet eyes, hoop earrings dangling. There was something damp about her, a radiant warmth. A tangy cloud trailed her movements, maybe perfume but also, you thought, maybe just sweat and something chalky.

“You don’t like my boots?” she said, slamming into your booth, puffing up the cushion to give you a little bounce.

You felt her nylon sleeve on your bare arm and your hands began to itch.

“Right,” she snorted and then you saw the milky skin of her forehead darken. You felt her eyebrow on your cheek. Her face was on yours. She pressed her lips flush, sticking her wide tongue into your mouth and lapping your molars. You felt your front teeth click on hers and you felt her fingernails dig into your thigh. You had one eye closed and the other fixed on a mangy stuffed Tweety bird mounted on the wall. Her kiss tasted slightly sour, scallion-like, flooded over with the air-conditioned blast of spearmint gum.

“Come on out and try it,” she said.

You got up.

*T.J.N.*

You walk through the door that's been left open for you. You've driven two hours to be here, in a twelve-year-old Nissan with a mangled front bumper, which you've parked around the corner. There had been a problem with a chimp at a child's birthday party. That is about all you know regarding the purpose of your visit. You don't normally work with animals—you're no dog catcher. But you're not the type to say no to a job, and not just because you need the money.

You call hello, and a voice beckons you. You walk across a large living room, with a ceiling high enough for giraffes, through open French doors and onto a broad Spanish patio, tiled in terracotta, wide and shaded, looking out over the hills. A young woman sits in a substantial wicker chair, her legs in fine, pressed linen trousers, crossed at the knees, the lenses of her sunglasses as big as dinner plates.

"You're five minutes late," she says.

"They do a good job of hiding houses up in these hills. I suppose that's kind of the point."

"Seclusion is one of the luxuries we've paid for, if that's what you mean. You're saying the fact you're late means we've got our money's worth."

"Let me not waste any more of your time. I understand you've asked me here about a monkey."

"A chimpanzee, actually." She pauses. "You know the difference?"

"A chimpanzee's an ape. Related to gorillas, bonobos. Monkeys are smaller. I was just using a kind of shorthand."



“I see you’ve read your Wikipedia.”

You smile at her.

“I called you because I heard you’re dependable. And you’re discreet. I have a son, Marion. He’s five years old, and he’s the most important thing in the world to me. He had a birthday party yesterday. His grandparents were here. All of his friends from school. Carmen made pizza in the wood-fired oven; she cooked a feast. I hired a pony to give rides.”

She begins to pick at the wicker webbing of the chair. “And then a man showed up with a chimpanzee.”

“You didn’t hire the man?”

“No. Nobody I knew had hired him. I have quite a lot of nice things here. I didn’t want him to come in with that wild animal. But the chimpanzee was already loose. Chimpanzees can be dangerous.”

She stops again. You sense the expression behind the sunglasses going funny—she is fighting against tears. You remember there was once a chimpanzee in San Francisco that thought its keeper had a pretty face—so pretty that one morning the chimp tore the face off and ate it for breakfast. You don’t mention that.

“And so let me show you what it did.”

She rises out of the chair—she’s taller than you thought she’d be. She falters just a little, as if she’s already had something to drink, and hooks her hand through your elbow. You step with her off of the patio and down onto the grass.

*R.P.*

You enter the room and a man with a short gray beard and huckleberry drawl boards the train wearing stonewashed jeans and an old U.S. Army field jacket. It's one in the afternoon and he starts pounding Budweiser. There's a woman in a pink velour track suit, wearing a pink baseball cap with rhinestones that spell out pink on the front. She's threatening the conductor and shouting get the fuck out of here over and over again. You're here to watch a man throw up all over himself, watch a woman cut a man's throat, and today you'll accidentally witness a man fingering a woman in coach. When a woman with a beehive hairdo comes into the leisure car she's huffing and slams her Dean Koontz book down on the table. A man, some man just vomited himself back there in my car, says the woman. Sure enough this is the army jacket guy and instead of kicking him off the train they let him keep drinking, no interrogation. He sees the pink lady threatening the conductor and yells hey but he's got the drawl so it's more like aye. She turns around and looks at him and shouts what. I need a shave, he says. Baby I need a shave. In the same way you feel a death-drive to be there when capitalism finally crumbles, you feel a death-drive for this woman to shave this man. She's staring at him like maybe she has a sword or a firearm. I'll do that, she says. It's a vulnerable tone, like the guy's offered her a bargain, and it's more romantic than a few of the weddings you've seen in the past few years. You follow them both back to coach and watch. On the occasions you've tried to write postcards on the train, you've been forced to give up shortly after writing the greeting. This is because it's a jostling and turbulent steel bullet and it's flooring over the very skin of America. Which means on the third stroke of shaving

the guy (no lather), the woman cuts him and he starts screaming devil bitch at her but he's got the drawl so the second word is more like batch. A man with a shaved white head offers you a beer and you snatch it out of his hands and exit the train.

*D.S.*

When you walk back into the room, the maid-fairies have already been there. The bed is a sea of petals.

There are towels folded into the shape of two swans kissing. Swans are horrible animals, you want to tell him, someone, the front desk.

Swans would bite your whole face off and not feel the slightest hint of remorse.

He is pulling at the back of your dress like your older brother used to, and you hope to hell that he doesn't think he's being sexy.

When you turn around, he has this look on his face, like yes, yes, here we are, it's happening, and so you let him take your dress off.

And you let him ignore your cotton underpants with stains here and there and when you're naked you say to him, wait, I have an idea.

And you zip around him and grab the robe and are back in the hallway again before you even have it on. You don't really have an idea.

The idea was just to get out of there. You'll sleep in the spa, with the brainless violin music playing, or at the bottom of the pool.

You'll see him at the airport and greet him cordially, like everything that happened happened so long ago that you can't remember his name.

And when you're standing in the hall, panting slightly, one arm in the robe and the other bare against your skin, you actually can't.

It makes you laugh a crazy cock-eyed laugh, wings up and flapping, on the attack.

*E.S.*