

asdfjkl;

Paul Martin

One particularly hot afternoon found me sitting in my underwear weighing whether to take a shower when, all of a sudden, nothing happened. It had been that way for months, my life. And nothing kept happening. The earth would turn a bit, my eyes would blink, the space between the objects around me would seem to expand just a smidge, as if the room were drawing a breath, and . . . niente. Time just oozed by. This nothing, dripping down from some nowhere, had gummed up the gears of the clock behind the couch, and I soaked, couchridden, in the humid air that filled the growing pauses between ticks. Those moments of restless anticipation were etching deep wrinkles into my forehead and fixing my eyebrows to a spot on my face just a bit higher than ideal. Skin lotion helped; it was better than nothing, but it wasn't *something* in the sense that I needed something. I was sure that one of these days, one of these seconds, the great shimmering vacuum of space would finally take notice of our atmosphere, and all the air and water and even the alley cats would get sucked right off the planet. And wouldn't that, at long last, be something.

"You look surprised?" asked a coworker one Monday.

"Oh, sorry, Daria. That's just my face now."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

I fought the nothing the universe offered me the only way I knew how: by giving nothing back. At my job (what even was my job?) I just kind of sat there with my fingers on the asdfjkl; keys. I never typed, or did any work whatsoever, but boy was I ready if the boss ever needed the word "flask." I think that's how the drinking started. So many days spent in readiness to type "flask."

I

1

Mixed Drinks

It began with a few bottles of the standard liquors and a book: “Mixed Drinks for Entertaining,” the first book I had cracked open in a while. For a long time, I used to spend my evenings reading—mostly fiction but also books that ran the gamut from respectable pop-science to the vaguely crackpot. I was happy to thumb through anything that might make me feel too smart for a job and life I had no real intention of leaving. As a monument to that quest for smugness, I had even converted a second bedroom into a library, lining its perimeter with mismatched and wobbly bookshelves of various heights—an incongruity born of laziness but which nicely evoked a city skyline swaying over a gentle earthquake whenever I came thumping in. But I hadn’t so much as entered the library to vacuum its carpet ever since this emptiness started roosting in the ceiling. The joy in reading, even the joy in cultivating a smug refinement, was gone. All I had managed to cultivate lately was a taste for the perfect mojito-tini.

Summer ended, forcing me to spend less time alone in my underwear and more time alone in sweats, an inconvenience I took in stride. But the whole drinking alone thing began to feel more than a little depressing. My drink bible itself seemed to mock me with its “for Entertaining” stipulation. It might have been titled “Mixed Drinks for At Least Two People, You Sad, Sad Man.” It didn’t help that I lived alone in a two-story house that never even creaked to remind me it cared.

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To cope with the loneliness, I developed a habit of calling my sister Alma each evening, usually after drink number three or so. To cope with the feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment invariably conjured up by those phone calls, I made the fourth drink extra strong. To cope with the resulting bitterness, I ate snickerdoodles. And that’s where the coping chain ended. A few words on Alma:

My sister lived and worked in Lovelock, Nevada, as Deputy Warden of Lovelock Correctional Center. She was, it had to be admitted, incredibly obliging for someone so busy. Alma would have me believe she deigned to take my drunken calls from a deep-rooted sense of familial duty. I'm certain she got a kick out of them, though, those daily reminders that she was the normal child, the one who had direction. Alma's eyes were soft, a detail that came through, somehow, all the way from Lovelock, over the sagging telephone wires, encoded in her admonishing voice. And sometimes she felt the collective plight of her overcrowded, over-sentenced wards as a metal clump hanging heavy inside her, under the white skin at the base of her neck, tugging the soft flesh of her throat to the knife's edge of a gag—though I never knew that. To me, she was metal through and through, and the only softness was in the eyes.

On the last first Thursday of the year, after the sunset had drained away gurgling in her direction, I dialed Alma as usual. I had long since worn down the numbers on the corresponding buttons, so calling my sister was a matter of hewing to the blank spaces and letting muscle memory do the rest. I always thought of it as unlocking a passage or, after a few especially strong drinks, a wormhole. This was a wormhole sort of night, and I was feeling uncommonly honest, which is to say I felt typically vulnerable and atypically lazy about hiding it.

After the customary song and dance of manufactured melodrama and trite advice aped from newspaper columns, I asked at one point, "Do you hear that, sister Alma?" holding my phone above the kitchen counter to face a dark stairwell. I half expected the question would prompt the balustrade to start singing. But the smarter half of me knew nothing interesting would happen, as nothing ever had.

"I don't hear anything."

"*Exactly.* That, right there, that's what's wrong. It's all I ever hear, Alma. I just pretend to hear other things. And then I pretend to have reactions. Everything seems so far away, the sounds and all the other senses, and I get them as information, not as sensation.

It's drowned out by this kind of throbbing fog that turns everything bleh. Because things must *happen*, right? There must be something that intercedes for me with the stuff that actually *occurs*, you know, and turns it into nothing by the time it reaches me."

"Have you—"

"I feel utterly, totally blah. Do you know what that feels like?" I paused. The line just hummed. I paused some more.

"You interrupted me," Alma said.

"I'm sorry, Alma."

"Have you tried . . . I don't know, living in the moment?"

"What?" I said flatly.

"Living in the moment. Being present. Not letting your worries or regrets overwhelm you—"

"That's what I'm saying, Alma. The moment is unbearable. I'm living in it and it sucks."

"I don't think you really are."

I could visualize the silly, meant-to-look-sagacious frown she must have been wearing.

"Are what?"

"Living in it. The present. You're living in the past, or at least some sort of . . . past-perfect tense? You're letting these feelings pile up until you can't see your way out. Anyway, you wanted my advice and there it is. You have to try taking each day as it comes. Promise me you'll try it."

"Ok." I tried to roll my eyes loudly enough for her to hear.

"Promise," she pressed.

"I promise." I ran a thumb over my lower lip, wiping off the snickerdoodle crumbs.

"Good. Goodnight then. This will work; I know it. You just need to change your headspace a bit. I love you."

I hadn't heard her say that since we were kids. I guess I did love her back.

“I love you too, Alma.”

“You sound surprised.”

“No, that’s just my face. Night.”

“I can’t see—”

And then I hung up. And then I finished my mojito-tini.

II

Zombies

It is now. A mantra for a new day, a day taken on its own terms. It is a December morning. The sun is risen but seems to be having second thoughts. I finish my eggs. They went down rubbery—I’ll cop to using too much oil—but that slight unpleasantness is behind me. *It is now.* The chair squeaks when I push back from the table. I am straining to really hear the squeak, not to know *of* the squeak but to *know* the squeak, to experience it. You could seal a man away in a squeakless room for all his life and teach him everything there is to know about squeaks—the physics of them, the pitch, all the onomatopoeias to choose from—yet he would understand less about the phenomenon than a young boy who has just heard his first good squeak. I will be that child. I decide not to put my dishes in the sink. Bigger things await. Today. Now.

Outside, the air is cool and still, and the winter sun is so soft that its rays seem almost brittle. Like big, dried out honeycomb cells. I want to take it all in, to pillage this morning for its infinite details so they might fill my gaps with substance, any substance.

I usually take the bus. But today I am as a sponge, and I don’t feel like soaking up the sensations that await me there. The cracking coughing. The hydraulics that somehow manage to fire off *inside* your head. The mud-snow sludge from travelers’ boots, which melts to form little dirty streams that trickle toward your seat at the back whenever the driver hits the gas. No, today I walk.

The sidewalk on George St., under the oaks, is all coarse salt and spangled spots of sun. I reach the George St. bridge and pause to lean on the stone railing, taking the opportunity to tighten my laces. I let my eyes trace the water's flow out to the sea, to its scrolled, glinting waves that I can just barely make out at this distance. And further out, a looming sea-green murk, settling in for a windless day, beyond which the waves become effaced into a thick curtain closed over the horizon. Brown, zeppelin-shaped fish stalk through plants in the muddy water beneath me. Two of them are on a slow collision course—until they pass straight through each other. It's probably the case that they are swimming at different depths, and the refractive index of the water has some sort of foreshortening effect. That, or ghost fish.

I finally reached that great brutalist box they call the office. *Slipping. It is now.* I finally reach that great brutalist box they call the office. Everyone is already here. Daria, Todd, What's-his-face, Jad, the boss. What joy.

The fluorescents seem to be set at an unsafely high brightness. I look down to avoid the stabbing bleh that emanates from them, but the floor is so blank and shiny that I find that unholy light reflected back up into my retina. *It is now.* The mantra is starting to sound tinged with desperation, even in my inner-monologue.

That pulsing, pounding emptiness is back, crescendoing as I near my desk. I never want to reach it; I want the path there to telescope out so that my chair and computer recede faster than I can approach them. My boots, tracking snow from outside, are squeaking on the blank, bright floor. The squeaks reach my ears as mere variations on that omnipresent, foggy pedal note—variations of a particular timbre which my brain has learned to call squeaks.

I'm forced to admit that this morning has been a failure. I haven't managed to clear out the wax in my ears. The scales have not fallen from my eyes. My spongy absorption of details consists merely of adjectives stitched from books I've abandoned halfway through. This shift in headspace isn't working. No—it *wasn't* working. Past tense. I was finished.

I reached my desk, after all. Of course I did. I sat down, placed my fingers in position, and donned that empty stare, which, on account of my too-high eyebrows, belied an utter lack of interest.

If I was being honest with myself, I knew the likely diagnosis was something like depression. But, I reflected, wiggling my butt into the swivel chair cushion, my funk seemed better described by reference to a concept I'd read about in some gluey, browning library book on consciousness: the philosophical zombie. One who seems human, who matches inputs to outputs in the expected way, but who lacks *true experience*. The key difference is that interiority of being we can never prove to others we possess. One can't even put apt words to it; the best we can do is italicize and implore that, yes, we too *really feel*. And, since I tended to feel nothing, maybe I had lost that quality that sets the beings apart from the zombies. Philosophical zombie syndrome. Easily brushed off as hypochondriasis, since it's no easier to prove the negative of having a soul.

III

Hellishly

I was under no instruction, as far as I could tell, except to sit and appear like I could hypothetically be working. I often wondered if that was a kind of American dream, and I was just being ungrateful.

I decided to try my hand at some poetry, having always heard it could be therapeutic. But I couldn't be bothered to move my fingers around the keyboard, so all I managed to write was

Asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjk
l;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfj
kl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdfjkl;asdf

I filled a whole page like that, then stared at it long enough to watch the letters lose their significance and become blotches of black cut into serifed shapes by white, squiggly lines.

They say poetry is about self-expression. By that metric, I had penned a masterpiece. What better name for my awful, bland haze than asdfjkl;? It was the exact feeling I'd been tugging along with me, distilled to an unpronounceable word without the baggage of common usage, metaphor, or homonym carried by most. And the repetition transmuted the word to a caligram of sorts, a visual approximation of the oily, heavy meaninglessness that coated object and sensation as they drew near and slid into view. I was glad to have a name for it. I could finally stop trying to eff the ineffable.

The act of naming asserts a power bidirectional in time. Once a thing is named, we do not recall it as nameless in those memories that predate the naming; the title, once accepted, attaches full stop, and our memories hasten to reconfigure themselves in accommodation. My months in frustrated anticipation retroactively became barely more manageable at the very moment the future revealed itself as something over which I had some modicum of control. I now, at least, had a title for this episode.

Asdfjkl; still hung in the air as dust, but a shifting light had revealed its translucency. And all this because of stiff, lazy fingers! My instinct was to act before the light could change again. I clutched my cell phone and hurried outside onto the street, above which the sun was still reluctantly inching upward. Newly conscious of my pulse, which wasn't pounding or racing but seemed somehow sharper than usual, I dialed up a therapist.

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Of all the people I have had occasion to really look at, Dr. Grant looked the stodgiest. And I don't mean the fattest. If physical stodginess occupies some range on the thin-to-obese continuum, Dr. Grant was stodgy to the extreme in the way that a cup of coffee can be of the absolute mediumest roast or a student can be the just-above-averagest

among her peers. His office was well lit, the walls wood-paneled. The proverbial couch was just a chair, I noted with disappointment. I saw no diplomas hanging behind Dr. Grant's desk, just a black-and-white photo of closed fists, or more likely a still from a film, with a low-res closed caption that read "Why must I suffer so hellishly for my insignificance?" It seemed an odd choice.

Faced at first with stodgy silence, I did the talking. My concerns all boiled down to that familiar, oppressive lacking. I told him about asdfjkl;, about my theories on philosophical zombie syndrome.

His eyes searched me wisely and he finally offered, "You've got . . . to get out . . . of your head," the words deep and syrupy.

All I could think was that I live in here, and how dare he.

"Now, I'm hesitant to recommend this sort of behavioral therapy . . . because disassociation is a serious thing . . . a major symptom of depression in many patients. But a bit of the old hair-of-the-dog might be just what you need, eh?" He smiled. Did he want my opinion?

No, it turned out.

"You tell me everything seems uninteresting, that nothing ever happens. We can fix that. Mmmm . . . yes, we certainly can. I want you . . . to practice seeing yourself, outside yourself. Right now you're sealed away in there, stuck inside that little noggin, su-ffer-ing." He gestured to the fists on the wall behind him.

"Now, try this. Take on a bird's-eye view, stop overthinking things, and begin to see your life as a kind of story. Because life . . . life is boring, what can I say? You aren't paying me to lie. But you know what's not boring? Oh, yes you do. Movies! Movies aren't boring, no, not even when they are. And why is that? You know, don't you, yes, you know," tauntingly. "Ok . . . I'll say it if you won't: it's the camera, you see . . . a third eye, framing everything and imbuing it with, above all else, *significance*. I want *you* . . . to *be* . . . a camera above your life!" Now he was starting to rise, steadying himself with a death grip on his

armchair arms, shouting and slurring. “Watching yourself! At a semi-wide, 45-degree angle. You will be . . . shocked! . . . at the magic! That flows!” And I was really frightened, trying to writhe my way into and through my seat so I could make for the door.

Still shouting, “Into the mundane! Yes . . . that’s your homework.” The excitement had crested now, and Dr. Grant was settling back into squishy starting position, stodgy as ever. “You can even think of it as an experiment, if you like. I’m working on an important paper, you know. All about counterintuitive techniques in CBT.”

I didn’t know if my hour was up or not, but I thanked him, head bobbing elastically, and made my exit. The walk home was short and brisk and my bewilderment must have come through in my gait. Whatever else the doctor’s advice may have been, it was, I thought, just too weirdly passionate to be ignored outright.

IV

Borealis

We find Raymond Pearce, for that was his name, sleeping in his very own queen-sized bed, wrapped in brown-and-white chevron sheets and a thick, wool comforter that was some color between British grey and American gray.

Raymond stirred and considered sleeping the Massachusetts Saturday away. But, envisioning himself as a presence floating above the bed, a detached camera zooming in to capture impending action, he flung the sheets from his body. Raymond sprang to the shower in a few leaps, whistling, because heroes should be squeaky-clean and chipper.

The hot water sputtered and gave up, so Raymond turned on the cold. He felt brave, unperturbable. Living outside himself was a kind of high. Raymond narrated the soap reddening his eye, the squeegeeing of the suds from his arm, even his own thoughts, with the enthusiasm of a sports announcer. “‘And now . . . I will turn off the water, dry myself vigorously, and commence this day of significance’, Raymond thought,” Raymond thought.

Boxers or boxer briefs? The choice seemed to *matter*, as very little had the past year. Raymond dressed his torso first, to delay the moment of decision. As he settled on a plaid button-down of muted purples, Raymond felt a wonderful, thrilling compulsion to perform for the camera, to make every movement elegant or gritty or something—any worthy adjective would do. But indecisive . . . no, indecisive was an unworthy, unbecoming one. Briefs it was.

Raymond tugged a V-neck sweater over his shirt before breakfast. He began to devise a plan for the day worthy of capture on celluloid. It should be something impulsive, he thought, savoring for a moment the irony of premeditated impulsivity. An image of Alma and of rutted sagebrush hills settled in his mind. He would go to her, unannounced. An overdue family visit. Nobody at work next week would miss him. Raymond went to check that the driveway was free of snow, which it mostly was. His car was a white Oldsmobile Alero that didn't get much use because there was nowhere to park near the office. Raymond thought a road trip would be good for the both of them. The car looked doubtfully up at him, but he would show it.

Raymond backed haltingly out of the driveway. He swung around, shifted to D, and followed Cedar St. downhill to the corner with Myrtle, where sat a thin, white chapel that could have held no more than thirty parishioners and God at once. Snow crunched under Raymond's tires. A satisfying sound. The glare on the ice crystals at the edges of his windshield was bright and brief; the patterns had melted away by the time Raymond was pulling onto the on ramp. A low tire pressure light blinked on. Screw it, Raymond thought, merging into thin traffic. Sirens flew past him, shifting down in pitch, and his car shook a little, which felt like living.

There was no need to turn on the heat; the dashboard thermometer read fifty degrees, awfully warm for that time of year, and Raymond thought he could see the snow

beneath the New England trees melting and shrinking in real time. He reached for the radio instead. Raymond caught a few syllables from a news presenter who sounded concerned—they always sound concerned—before turning all the way to the left end of the dial. He wiggled the knob, searching through the static until some music crunched through, low fi and twangy, singing “Well she looked like some kind of interstate angel//With a Butterfinger in her teeth.” Raymond raced past the edge of the signal’s radius before the song could finish and had to start fumbling at the dial again.

* * *

Raymond had left his phone on the kitchen counter, but the thought of turning back struck him as unacceptably unheroic. Besides, he still had an old GPS system suctioned to the left corner of his windshield. He punched in Lovelock, NV, which was an irresponsible thing to do since it drew his eyes away from I-95 for a moment.

Our hero made a point of barreling past the major cities and stopping only in small towns with sufficiently authentic Americana diners, where he ordered biscuits and gravy or cherry pie, sometimes both. He fell in love with a giggly, bespectacled waitress in New York, and again in Indiana, a different one. It was the wistful love that travelers feel, sometimes not for people but for places, or a solitary telephone pole leaning just right in the golden hour light. Having resolved to spend his remaining days awash in the beauty and happiness promised by the unwitting sirens behind those counters, Raymond answered the call of the open road all the same, an inevitability upon which the feeling had rested all along.

He took an exit somewhere in Iowa at 2 A.M., a move protested by the navigation system, which apparently expected him to continue toward Lovelock at all costs. Raymond missed the name of the town, but caught the name of the motel—Hillfort Inn—and the name of the thin, sleepy gentleman at the front office, which was Mike.

“It’s crazy what they’ve been saying, huh? About what’s going on,” Mike said, handing over the keys and shaking his head. Raymond brushed him off, “yes, yes”, politely. Mike could have been talking about anything; there were oh so many screwed up things going on around the world. The key fit into a doorknob, which belonged to a door, which opened up into a non-smoking room that smelled curiously like smoke.

Raymond woke in the pre-dawn blue with a scratchy throat. He squeezed into the clothes from yesterday, having, predictably, failed to plan ahead. The smoky smell followed him outside onto the gravel lot. Finding no one around, Raymond slipped his key into the drop box and drove on to Nebraska, listening to old CDs that had been getting gross in the middle console.

* * *

The Nebraska sky sure was big. Weather was something you could see coming around here, and Raymond marveled at how unlike rain the dark, hazy patches under faraway storm clouds looked. The Alero buzzed and Raymond hummed along to that vibration, sort of harmonizing with a Blood, Sweat, & Tears record set to repeat his favorite song: a souped-up cover of Tim Buckley’s “Morning Glory.”

Of all the clouds that filled his view, jostling for a bigger slice of azure, one looked a good deal darker. After a few minutes of puzzling at it, Raymond realized that it wasn’t a cloud at all, but a thick column of smoke. It seemed to draw out a dormant inkiness from the sky, leaving its immediate surroundings that much bluer. The column was ahead of him and to the right, a direction he concluded was something like west-northwest. Did fires happen in Nebraska this time of year? He accelerated past a rickety van stuffed with furniture, the first vehicle he had come across since dawn. Weird. A faint flickering of red and blue ahead became a police barricade. No matter. Raymond took the last exit available and followed the interstate westwards on a parallel state highway overdue for paving. He

turned off the navigation system, which was shouting again. A two-laner like this was better suited to a road trip movie anyway.

But it started to feel suspiciously like a disaster movie, and Raymond like a hapless extra, when he noticed no fewer than four new columns of smoke clustered together to the south, maybe five. The thermometer read eighty-nine. What the *fuck*? “Morning Glory” was spinning for the twelfth time, but it sounded faster now, like the band was playing just in front of the beats. Kind of nauseating. He interrupted the music by way of ejecting the disc in the middle of the word “fleeting.” Apt. Raymond rolled his window down a few inches, held the CD out into the warm breeze of highway relativity, and let it fall. His hand stung. Raymond pulled it back in reflexively and rolled up the window. The back of his left hand was bright red from wrist to cuticles and already starting to peel.

Something was going on, Raymond reasoned perceptively. Something to do with heat and smoke and sunburns. He switched inputs from NO CD FOUND to FM and, shaking his head in disbelief, turned on the air conditioning. Every frequency was transmitting an awful, metronomic beeping immune to counterclockwise twists of the volume knob. 88.1, 88.5, 93.1, *God*, where were the even decimals? He started to sweat. Finally, a woman’s voice came through somewhere in the low 100s. Raymond exhaled and thanked the heavens for radio news, a first for him. The road curved away from the interstate toward a dead sea of tawny farmland, and Raymond listened intently.

“So, is it the end? For that question, we’ll go to our geoscience correspondent, Jim Leslie—Jim?”

“Thanks, Kate. You know, uh, I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to that question, but it’s one many of us in the community—the geology community in particular, along with I guess astrophysics and climate science—have, well, been charged with answering an awful lot today. I think the, ah, best answer, and one that I hope our listeners take to heart, is no. Or more precisely, probably not. Yes, this is probably not the end. As you were just saying, Kate, we know this has happened before. The Earth has been through this already—we

know that from the old ceramics that Christa was just telling us about—but this time it does appear to be a little worse, a little, um, graver. Based on the . . . excuse me the, uh, most recent information.”

Over the course of the segment, Raymond gathered that something was off with the Earth’s magnetic field. The north and south poles had begun to flip polarity, warping and weakening the magnetosphere. So now the solar winds were bearing down on an atmosphere unequipped to handle them. Nobody, they repeated *nobody*, was to go outside during the day—oops, Raymond thought, eyeing the True-UV sticker on his windshield pleadingly—and related cancer deaths alone were forecasted to reduce the human population by roughly 6% over the next ten years, a number that updated constantly. Radio Kate was fixated on the death toll. She breathed heavily as she read the newest figures, sounding sad and satisfied. Radio Jim had found a silver lining in all this, which he explained excitedly. Apparently, the northern lights would be seen all across the world for at least the next couple years, starting tonight. Raymond wondered if the northern lights would need a new colloquial name.

Enough disembodied voices. He turned off the radio and focused on the scene from the perspective of a hovering camera, which pulled back into a wide shot. Raymond saw himself in a white car crawling around on a naked globe, illuminated by a harsh and hellish light.

He couldn’t exactly stop to pitch a tent, so Raymond drove on, cautiously, hunched over the steering wheel. There were only a few hours of sunlight left, and it seemed to Raymond that driving through the night was the sensible course of action. Nebraska became Colorado, with little fanfare.

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Close to the border was a Colorado town that was more grain silos than buildings. The houses looked Spanish, all reds and yellows and terra cotta roofs. The chrome phalluses

evoked the year 2000 as imagined in 1950. Raymond caught the town at the cusp of a merciful dusk, right when streetlights set to timers started coming on. A neon light caught his eye—it just said BAR, greenly. One drink sounded reasonable, hell, *necessary*. And he needed a good stretch before carrying on.

Raymond parked in front. He waited in the car until a few locals across the street began opening their doors. A new nocturnal species of primate. People started poking about town hesitantly and rushed to embrace when they caught sight of each other. Kids, dads, an old woman in a straw hat—all acting like they hadn't seen their neighbors in years. A few were wearing sunglasses in the gathering dark, just to be sure. Raymond left the car and joined a quiet winter evening masquerading as the perfect summer night. It was the exact temperature where you can't discern the border between skin and air, when walking becomes gliding and you feel boundless. Locals started making for the bar, smiling politely at Raymond as they passed. He followed. His left hand felt much better.

A shimmering streak of green cut through the air just in front of Raymond. It sent him staggering back, blinking. The filament snaked up into the night, where extra-bright stars were starting to come out. Au-ro-ra bor-e-a-lis, Raymond enunciated inwardly. A wondrous note was struck and ringing inside him, to which the whole atmosphere now tuned, up from a flat. Currents of light were giant eels twisting way up there. Seething pinks and greens spread and seeped through the sky, reflected in the car windows and distorted around the silos at the edge of town that were acting as funhouse mirrors.

Raymond drifted inside through some wide wooden doors and slumped onto a barstool. He ordered a plain old martini. Otherworldly light percolated in through uneven jalousies near the backdoor. Some warm, swinging jazz clicked on over the sound system. A regular was talking at the bowtied barman: "I heard the equator is just scorched, totally dead."

"Nah, the magnetic field is thickest down there, or that's what they're saying. It's us up here that gotta worry," a new voice cut in. Its owner and her date—a husband or

boyfriend—took the empty seats immediately to Raymond’s right. Late twenties or so. Both heads of hair were the same dirty blonde. The man was shuffling around, reluctant to accept that no more than three of his stool’s four legs would touch the ground at the same time. The woman made a small wave in Raymond’s direction, and the man, noticing the gesture, turned toward him.

“Hey—hi! You passing through? I’m Remington.” He stretched out a hand, which Raymond shook, glad that people don’t shake with the left because that would hurt like hell. “This is Alice.”

“Hey, hey. I’m Raymond. Or Ray. Passing through, yep. Nice to meet you,” Raymond mumbled roughly, the quality of words scribbled down on a cocktail napkin. “Remington. . .” Raymond turned the word over with his tongue, no longer mumbling. “You know, Remington, your name . . . it’s spelled without any of the letters your hands start on. If you’re typing, I mean. No asdfjkl, no semicolon. Not you, Alice, sorry.”

The blondes looked bemused. “Thank you?” said a smiling Remington. Alice scooted her stool over and leaned sideways.

“So, Raymond, Ray, what do you make of our town here? . . . well, I guess every town in North America is a pretty damn fine place to be tonight, yeah? But maybe not cloudy places or cities with too much light pollution,” Alice considered, trailing off.

“Didja hear the latest?” inquired Remington. Raymond raised his eyebrows and shook his head once.

“Well *apparently* . . .” Remington put his hands up and jiggled them around, “the field’s gotten so worn down at the poles that they’ve become uninhabitable.”

“Inhospitable to life,” Alice added, whispering below wide eyes.

“The Arctic atmosphere’s been torn to shreds,” Remington went on. “Can’t even breathe. Last I heard they were worried about the air leaking out through the poles from the rest of the world. How about that!”

An image of an Arctic fox came to Raymond as he sat there listening and sipping. He imagined it rigid and gleaming, glazed in moonlight, caught between gravity and a great whooshing pull from outer space. Scalloped snowbanks texture the tundra. A roiled, white sea, stuck in a strained freeze-frame. Little sugar cubes of snow break off around tufted paws and hover low in the thinning air. Paws lift, suddenly. The fox is airborne and rotating; its front legs are following the head and nose, tilting upwards. The creature seems to pause for an encore and then zooms off. It rockets silently out there and disappears in a wink.

The thought reminded Raymond of something. A dream or something dreamy that was not a dream. A muggy summer afternoon.

A young, toothy guy burst in, backed dramatically by the lightshow outside, and addressed the bar. “Boy, isn’t this something.”

Roll credits.

* * *

Raymond Pearce himself

Daria herself

Alma’s voice Alma Pearce

Dr. Grant himself

Fists on the wall Winter Light (1963) Dir. Ingmar Bergman

Crunchy song “Wine Out of the Bottle” by Will Adams

Bespectacled waitress 1 Samantha Fisher

Bespectacled waitress 2 Jessica Clarke

Mike..... Michael Marsden

“Morning Glory” by Tim Buckley, performed by Blood, Sweat & Tears

Radio Kate Kate Thompson

Radio Jim..... Jim Leslie

Warm jazz song unknown

Regular Tim

Barman Sven

Alice..... herself

Remington himself