

Igor and Igor
by Mark Noonan

a long short story or a short long story or a short story long but not a long story short
(2003)
for Reilly

Part I

1.

Igor and Igor shared the same first name. The outward similarities ended there. Igor was tall and thin with wire-rimmed spectacles; whereas Igor was short and stocky with perfect twenty-fifteen vision. He could spot a baby possum from fifty yards away; an ability that aided Igor and Igor as they attempted to jump into an open boxcar without a railway inspector noticing them.

First, they hid in the underbrush like a pair of stalking cheetahs. Igor stuck up his head, looked left towards the train's engine and saw no one, only a brown paper bag blown in the air by a snort of exhaust. He peered right and noticed, fifteen boxcars from them, beside the caboose, a railway inspector inspecting the train's wheels. The inspector wore a green winter cap and carried a big black flashlight that he rarely illuminated because the sun, out in full circular glory, bathed everything in harsh gold light. Igor squinted worse than usual through his glasses and saw nothing; luckily, he trusted Igor completely.

“When he bends down again,” Igor instructed Igor, “we go.”

“Okay,” responded Igor, “you tell me when.”

It is probably necessary, even at this early stage in our story, to further delineate Igor from Igor. That said, the author is presently enjoying the confusion Igor and Igor bring to their tale. And if it confuses the reader then you are now of the same mindset as our heroes, Igor and Igor.

When the inspector dropped to one knee, his back to Igor and Igor, Igor tapped Igor on the shoulder and whispered, “Now!” which sent Igor hurdling out of the underbrush and up a small incline with Igor stuck to his heels. Their sneakers crunched through the gravel and Igor, being much taller than Igor, was able to dive almost straight into the open boxcar with only a slight jump. He landed on his chest, his long legs dangling out the open door as Igor climbed the rungs on the steel ladder. Once Igor pulled his legs inside and wiggled out of his backpack, he hooked his hands in the shoulder openings of Igor’s puffy down vest and yanked him up into the empty boxcar. Igor fell on top of Igor and they lay chest to chest, face to face for a long half-second until their breaths met, eyes met, and Igor rolled off of Igor’s lanky frame.

If someone did not know Igor and Igor and witnessed this brief tableau—Igor’s long legs inadvertently wrapped around Igor’s thick body—it might have appeared a position of coitus. Clothed coitus. But coitus nonetheless.

All readers with voracious appetites be assured that any sexual thoughts or even involuntary sexual movements—a sudden hardness down low—did not happen, and for two contextual reasons: first, they were both overcome by fear that the railway inspector noticed their graceless endeavor; and second, they were both in pain. During the fall Igor smacked his tailbone and Igor banged his left elbow on the floor. It was a direct hit on his funnybone but Igor didn’t laugh, he winced.

Once Igor untangled his legs from around Igor, and Igor was able to roll off of Igor, they breathed heavily (they had held their breaths during the action) and Igor asked Igor if he thought the inspector saw them. Igor raised his shoulders and eyebrows, indicating that he did not know.

So Igor and Igor stood, dropped their backpacks in a corner and crept over to the open boxcar door. They decided, with a series of head nods yes and no and no and yes, that because Igor had a longer neck than Igor he should stick his head out the open boxcar door and look for the inspector. Igor slowly slid the right side of his face around the open door, but as he did so Igor realized that although Igor was taller, more flexible, and all-around better physically equipped to lean out the boxcar and look for the inspector, he was also blind as a bat. As Igor inched his face out for a look (not that the look would have mattered) Igor snatched two fistfulls of Igor's wool coat and pulled him back into the empty boxcar. Igor gasped, startled by Igor's hands touching him, and then Igor and Igor fell atop each other again, this time with Igor on top of Igor. Again, this position, a depiction of clothed coitus, though reversed coitus, caused no amorous feelings to spring between Igor and Igor. Quickly, they disbanded—Igor pushed Igor off him—and stood again. They tiptoed over to the door once more and this time Igor slowly peeked his face around the open boxcar door. His eyes immediately turned into big white dinner plates, for Igor saw the inspector's wide navy blue butt not ten feet from his face. The man was bent over inspecting the track, obviously oblivious to Igor and Igor's mad dash to the boxcar.

Momentarily safe, another possible dilemma surfaced in the minds of Igor and Igor: would the inspector inspect the empty boxcar? And if so, would he inspect it with the same precision he used to inspect the train's wheels? Igor almost spoke but luckily Igor sensed his friend's mouth moving faster than his mind and stuck his hand up high over Igor's mouth. The second the hand covered his mouth Igor recognized his possible folly and the urge to speak disappeared. He nodded down to Igor's eyes, so Igor removed his hand.

The open boxcar door offered little cover for Igor and Igor. Their backs pressed to the side of the boxcar, they heard the inspector, on the other side of the wall, clear his throat. The phlegmy ease he displayed performing this loud, disgusting act proved that the inspector was a heavy smoker. The inspector then filled his lungs with a big breath of air and launched his loogy a good two dozen feet. The mucus oyster landed in the underbrush where Igor and Igor had lain. Trying to catch a glimpse of the inspector during his time of toil Igor inched his way to the opening but before he could look Igor's hand touched his shoulder and made Igor flinch. Igor and Igor looked at each other. The inspector coughed and spat again as he pushed the sliding boxcar door closed until a latch clicked. Igor and Igor grabbed hold of each other, and again, Igor placed his hand over Igor's mouth. They quietly clutched one another and listened to the inspector's boots crunch on gravel as he moved down the train to the next boxcar.

Whether Igor or Igor sighed first is irrelevant because they both breathed out more or less at the same time, allowing their tense shoulders and faces to descend and relax. Igor looked down to Igor. "That was close," he whispered. Igor held a finger to his lips. "Shhhh," he cautioned. Igor closed his mouth and nodded in agreement. They listened and heard the inspector slide the door on the next boxcar closed. It appeared for the moment that they were in the clear.

But a new problem quickly dawned on Igor and Igor. Who realized the issue first was a matter of milliseconds (a coin toss). Igor looked up at Igor, their eyes met, and Igor could tell that Igor was thinking the same thing as he: what if the door locked? Igor walked over and put his long fingers around the pull-latch. Igor followed. "Hey," whispered Igor, "what are you doing?"

"We have to check," replied Igor, "otherwise we'll be trapped." He looked down at Igor's angry face as it shifted to a pensive face and ended a placid face. Both their faces turned and looked across the boxcar to the other sliding door, still wide open.

"Okay," said Igor, "give it a pull."

“Okay.”

Igor spread his legs wide and using all the strength in his his wiry upper body he tugged the latch.

The door slid open easily, but Igor pulled with such force that the motion caught him off balance and the door continued to open. Igor immediately realized Igor’s blunder and pushed his whole body against the door, stopping it after only sliding open a couple feet. By this time Igor was back on balance and together they slid the door closed.

“Slowly,” cautioned Igor from behind.

The handle clicked shut again. The two stuck their ears to the door and listened. They heard nothing. By now the inspector was probably on the other side of the train. The other side! Igor and Igor tiptoed across the boxcar but they moved so fast that it sounded like a stampede of baby rhinos. They pressed their bodies, from shoulder to hip, against the side wall next to the door’s opening and listened for a long time without looking at each other.

“Maybe they don’t close this side,” whispered Igor.

“Shhhh,” replied Igor.

Their ears remained stuck to the wall. Still, they heard nothing. That is not altogether true, they heard some things: the wind, a distant carhorn, a dog bark. But nothing that sounded like the sound both their minds focused on: gravelly footsteps.

Igor and Igor remained in this awkward, tense position for a good ten minutes. But to them it felt much longer because neither wore a watch. To kill the time, though their minds were supposed to stay focused on gravelly footsteps, both Igor and Igor daydreamed. It was a perfect time to daydream, whether a person wanted to daydream or not.

Igor dreamed of girls. Well, one girl in particular. Okay, it was his girlfriend. And although some might find it corny or cliche that he thought of his girlfriend during this anxious moment, it is the truth of the matter. Igor tried to ignore the daydream, by both changing his thoughts and literally shaking his head, and concentrate on gravelly footsteps, but he couldn’t help it, even Igor was human. The image that stuck in his mind was of the area between his girlfriend’s shoulder and earlobe—that space of collarbone, muscle, neck. He couldn’t place when the image was from but knew it was one morning when he woke and this smooth terrain of her’s, this perfect L, was in his direct sight. For the next hour that morning, as he dozed in and out of a warm morning sleep, every time his eyes opened it was this part of her—her L—that he saw. Why faced with a moment of terror his subconscious didn’t display more lustful anatomy—her vagina, her breasts, her lips, even her stomach or elbow—worried Igor. But, his mind stayed centered on her L. He couldn’t rid his thoughts of her perfect, strange L. The image was obviously embedded deeply in his subconscious and made sense that it would return now. But it was a major distraction to one trying to focus on gravelly footsteps.

Igor, on the other hand, used this time to daydream forward, to the day ahead. He had a distinct picture in his mind of their destination. He saw a green field, an open park in the middle of a small town. The grass was a bright, shaggy green; the sky a deep blue; and the breezes warm on one’s cheeks. In this field a carnival of young people sat, danced, and sang. Small clusters gathered in circles, joined hands, and walked in a clockwise direction, everyone smiling and singing folk songs. A seated group of boys and girls took turns standing and reciting poetry. It was bad poetry but they performed it with a gusto that made the words unimportant. In another cluster young people danced to the rhythms of a young man’s bongo beats, the girls rolling their hips and gliding their hands, the boys thrusting, jumping up and down, and rolling their necks to the thumps. And in another group, half-naked girls, smelling of jasmine and cigarettes, held

hands as they spun themselves around, eyes to the sky, searching for the enlightenment of the spin. Everyone dressed in handmade clothes or big brother hand-me-downs or Salvation Army denim. Peace pipes passed around a circle. Bubbles and rose petals floated through the air. And all the girls were beautiful blondes, cute brunettes, and natural redheads—dancing topless in flowered leis and crowns and wearing philosophical East Asian tattoos.

A note of apologies, or at least explanation, from the author: you see, Igor and Igor were young men themselves, and thus still driven by the bubbling forces of the body that, when coupled with their strong imaginations, developed these sensual pictures. Igor's particular dream was not ill founded—he was promised by a former professor that their destination would be full of experiences. That Igor imagined music, dance, and provocative tattoos was not surprising. Both Igor and Igor expected great adventures when they reached their destination.

But first they had to make it out of the railyard.

Their ears still pressed to the wooden boxcar wall, the door slid abruptly closed. Igor fell back into Igor's arms and Igor held his comrade's light body against his strong chest. Before Igor let out a surprised cry, Igor slid his left hand up and smacked it over Igor's mouth, immediately pacifying Igor's reflex to speak. After the door crashed closed with a thunk and a chink, Igor and Igor heard the footsteps of big boots on gravel, the sound their minds missed approaching because of their daydreaming. The treading boots grew fainter as the inspector continued, without pause, down the train. Igor removed his hand from Igor's mouth and pushed him back up. Then Igor slipped out of his backpack straps and squatted against the back of the boxcar.

“We did it,” Igor whispered as he tapdanced around the car. “We’re safe. We pulled it off.”

The visibility in the boxcar was like autumn dusk, with warm beams of light slicing between the cracks in the wooden walls. As Igor danced, Igor watched Igor's sneakers kick up sawdust that remained visible for a few seconds after each kick, then disappeared in the shadows. Igor unzipped the small pouch on his backpack and removed a Granny Smith apple. There was one quarter-size bruise on the otherwise perfect apple. Igor opened his mouth wide and bit down around the big bruise, taking a ping pong ball-size chunk out of the apple that he spit out with great force against the side wall. The bruised piece hit the wall, stopped instantly (a shock to Igor knowing the power of his spit) and fell to the floor like an unconscious parachutist.

“What’s that?” exclaimed Igor. Igor’s chomp and ptoo stopped his tapdancing and turned his attention to Igor. “You packed an apple? Did you bring one for me?” Igor’s straight white teeth (a braces child) sliced into Mrs. Granny Smith and tore off a juicy chunk. His canines worked the sliced piece to mush as a grin surfaced around the edges of Igor’s sticky mouth.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Igor said through a mouthful.

“Well maybe I will—Whoah!”

The train lurched forward. The sudden motion surprised Igor and sent his uncentered body stumbling in a series of short, rapid-fire steps before he smacked into the back wall with his palms and chest, turned around quickly, and slid down next to Igor. Igor, of course, chuckled through his apple at Igor’s jerky movements and thought if a moment ever defined the word awkward, it was the last few seconds of Igor’s flailing existence.

The train traveled at a steady, slow pace. Igor plopped his bony butt down next to Igor and extended his long legs out on the floor. Igor sat cross-legged.

Igor exhaled a few times, catching his breath: “Well?” He looked at Igor.

“Well what?” Igor mumbled back.

“Any more apples?”

“No.” Igor took a huge bite, tearing off a sixth of the apple.

“Oh.” Igor’s head drifted center, he bit his bottom lip and stared straight ahead. “That’s cool,” he sighed. He pulled in his legs and sat cross-legged too.

Igor deliberately bit off pieces of the apple in fast succession, over emphasizing each chew and savoring the apple’s juiciness to further depress Igor. Out of the corner of his eye Igor watched Igor slouch and fidget with his hands. Igor smirked at the lowly image, then reached into the small pouch of his backpack, silently and stealthily, and pulled out another Granny Smith apple, this one a perfect unbruised specimen, that he held in front of Igor’s sad face.

“All right!” exclaimed Igor, accepting the apple. “Very cool. Thank you very much.”

“No problem. Enjoy.”

Igor spun the firm, unblemished apple around in his hands, found a suitable spot to begin devouring, placed his straight, white teeth (also a braces child) against the tight skin and bit down hard as the train jerked forward and increased speed.

2.

The train left the city, sped through the suburbs, and streaked across dense woods towards their destination. Inside the closed-up boxcar, Igor and Igor conversed to pass the time. Loud speech was necessary because of the train’s noisy wheels.

Igor: That was an excellent apple.

Igor: Yes. Very good.

Igor: Granny Smiths are my favorite.

Igor: Yes. They’re good. But I prefer Red Delicious.

Igor: Red Delicious? What are you crazy?

Igor: No.

Igor: Red Delicious have no taste. No juiciness.

Igor: Maybe you never had a good Red Delicious apple?

Igor: Maybe? But I doubt it.

After a long time, longer than any sane person would care to hear, spent debating Granny Smith versus Red Delicious, they argued the merits of Golden Delicious.

Igor: A juicy apple.

Igor: Absolutely.

The cons of Macintosh.

Igor: Too much sweetness.

Igor: How can you say that? You like juiciness.

The splendor of Braeburn apples.

Igor: Refreshing.

Igor: Truly sublime.

And the worthlessness of Fuji apples.

Igor: They’re fun to throw.

Igor: Or juggle.

Igor: That’s about it really.

Igor: Indeed.

Finally the two agreed that mangoes—fresh Hawaiian mangoes—and peaches—fresh Georgia peaches—were the greatest fruits in the whole United States.

Igor: Undoubtedly.

Igor: Without question.

And they shook hands.

The reader might still be having trouble discerning which Igor said what and which Igor replied. Perhaps this added clarification helps: you see, although Igor and Igor shared the same first name, they pronounced them differently. For example: our hero, Igor, who was smart enough to pack the apples, his name was pronounced (e gôr), with a strong E; whereas Igor, who brought no apples, was known as (i gôr), emphasis on the I. So, please commit to memory, whenever we speak of Igor who brought apples the sound you should hear in your head is E gor. And when we mean Igor who brought no apples hear I gor. Hopefully this will clear up any further confusion, especially when Igor and Igor speak in stichomythia. Instead of the author having to expound every line with, Igor with apples and Igor without apples, we can simply say Igor and Igor and the reader will know exactly whom we mean.

With phonetics out of the way, back to Igor and Igor, mid-conversation, still seated at the back of the boxcar:

Igor: Do you think the train will slow?

Igor: I hope so.

Igor: What if it doesn't?

Igor: I don't know.

Igor: What would we do?

Igor: Jump, I suppose.

Igor: We can't jump. Especially out a fast-moving train.

Igor: That's our only option really.

Igor: We could stay on the train.

Igor: And end up where?

Igor: Wherever it takes us.

Igor: That's a little too adventurous for my taste at the moment.

Igor: Well, think about it. Because I'm not jumping if this train doesn't slow down.

Igor: We'll see.

Igor: I'm not.

Igor: Okay.

Igor: Don't smirk at me. I'm not.

Igor: Fine. You're not.

Igor: That's right. I'm not.

Igor: Good. Don't.

Igor: I won't. Fine.

Punctuating the Fine, Igor grabbed his backpack—one smaller and less equipped than Igor's—unzipped the small pouch and removed a soft pack of Marlboro Mediums and a cheap lighter. He tapped out a cigarette, stuck it between his lips, and then shook out another. He held the pack with the half-exposed cigarette in front of Igor's face. Igor paused a long moment then slowly pulled out the cigarette. Igor held the lighter up and lit Igor's cigarette and then his own.

They smoked in silence.

After a few puffs they inadvertently and unknowingly exhaled smoke together. These kinds of imperceptible common physical movements were normal for Igor and Igor. They would often, without realizing it, walk in step with each other. Or seated, both cross their legs at the same time with the same legs, left over right or right over left. And, on rare occasions, they would finish each other's sentences or say the same thing at the same time. They never dwelled on these things, or even thought about them at all, for most of the time they didn't notice them. But in the back of their minds both Igor and Igor knew that such involuntary, strange occurrences meant

their souls expressed themselves on the same astral plane, in the same karass. Which was probably the main unconscious reason that they became fast friends in the first place.

They stubbed out their cigarettes simultaneously on the wooden floor. Igor stood, walked to the right-side door, the one they knew opened, and with a quick yank, unlatched and slid the door wide open. Sunshine flooded the boxcar. Igor and Igor squinted.

Igor stood. "Be careful," he cautioned.

"What's that?" Igor shouted over the noisy wheels.

"I said, Be Careful!"

"Yeah, I know." Igor showed that his left hand held the chrome handle.

The train cut through dense New England woods. The locomotive crested a hilltop, putting the boxcars on the same level as the autumn trees. Igor and Igor squinted as leaves whizzed by, a palette of vermillion, orange, green, russet, and gold. The bright sunlight combined with the quicksilver train Igor and Igor stood upon turned the colored leaves into a soft blur. It looked like an ever-changing impressionistic fall painting done by Nature on a day she forgot to wear her glasses. The kaleidoscope of soft, warm colors calmed the hearts of Igor and Igor. During the minutes inside the dark, dusty boxcar they had forgotten what their mission was in quest of in the first place: beauty. Now Nature, aided by man's steel beast, reminded them with a technicolor show only their instruments playing together could create that great adventures lay ahead.

As long as the locomotive slowed down.

Igor walked over to Igor, put his hand on his friend's bony shoulder, and together they stood in this stance a short while, two dark figures, one short, one tall, framed in a bright boxcar doorway as a wash of warm color streaked behind them. Their squints slowly disappeared. And though from inside the boxcar their sillouttes appeared black, if one stood outside the train on a magic platform that galloped alongside the tracks, one could see the vermillion in Igor and Igor's cheeks from the wind, the russet in their chapped lips, orange and green in their jackets, scarves, and hats, and their bright blue eyes, speckled with gold, peering out into the mess of color and light that gave them life.

3.

As it came upon a town Igor and Igor's train slowed considerably, though not to a crawl as Igor would have preferred, but enough that the two could jump. Or at least discuss jumping.

Igor: Maybe the train will stop.

Igor: Why would it stop?

Igor: Why wouldn't it?

Igor: We're not picking up passengers.

Igor: No. That's true.

Igor: It's not going to stop.

Igor: What if something's crossing the tracks?

Igor: Crossing the tracks? Like what?

Igor: Cattle.

Igor: Cattle? Do you really think they keep cattle around here?

Igor: What about ducks?

Igor: I don't think they have duck crossings.

Igor: But there are ducks.

Igor: Yes, there are ducks around here I'm sure.

Igor: Well...

Igor: Well what?

Igor: Maybe they stop for them.

Igor: This is ridiculous. Look: there's the train station. We're passing it. We must jump.

Igor: No. Let's wait.

Igor: We can't wait. This is our stop.

Igor: But I don't want to jump!

Igor: We have to jump.

Igor: All right. How?

Igor: How? What do you mean?

Igor: How should we jump? Land?

Igor: Just jump. Try to land on your feet and roll.

Igor: Can we jump onto grass?

Igor: Of course. We're not going to jump onto gravel.

Igor: That's good. Do you want to go first?

Igor: No.

Igor: Okay. We'll go together. How's that?

Igor: Fine.

Igor: Okay. On three. Ready?

Igor: Okay. Are we jumping on three, or is it one, two, three, then jump?

Igor: I don't know. On three, how's that?

Igor: On three is good.

Igor: Okay. Fine. Now make sure you jump out, away from the train.

Igor: I know how to jump.

Igor: I'm just saying.

Igor: Just count.

Igor: All right. Ready?

Igor: Yes!

Igor: Okay. One...Two...

Igor was thrown into Igor and they both slammed against the front of their boxcar as the train stopped abruptly.

"We've stopped!" exclaimed Igor.

"Come on," said Igor. He grabbed a fistful of Igor's wool coat and pulled him towards the open door. Igor squatted at the opening and then dismounted from the train like a gymnast completing a pummel horse routine. Igor sat at the door's opening, legs dangling, and slowly slid his butt off the boxcar. He misjudged the landing, his instincts falsely telling him that the ground was higher than it actually was, and thus landed on the gravel awkwardly and almost turned his left ankle.

Without fanfare or injury, Igor and Igor had arrived.

Igor followed Igor down a gravel embankment and into an empty grass field. The sky was blue; there were no clouds. The bright sunshine made everything—the grey bark on the oak trees, the red bricks of a rundown warehouse, each single blade of grass—all appeared in sharp, crisp focus. Every little detail of every little thing—the silver flakes in the red brick, the wisp of brown in each blade of grass, the dark lines in the grey bark, the diamond shaped holes in a chain-link fence—all throbbed with color and distinction.

"I feel like I'm tripping," announced Igor.

"It is a powerfully bright day," agreed Igor. "Now what?"

Igor panned his gaze right, back along the railroad tracks, and squinted at the small train station about two football fields away. "Let's check the train station," he said. "Maybe they have some information."

"Good idea," Igor responded, "perhaps they can relieve our consternation, or teach us about communication?"

Igor shot him a sarcastic look.

"What?" replied Igor with a slight smirk.

They tramped across the green field.

"What time is it anyway?"

The train lurched forward and moved slowly away from them. Igor slid up his sleeve and then remembered that he wore no watch. "I don't know," he said.

"Ah, good," replied Igor, "not too early, not too late."

4.

The commuter rail station consisted of two concrete platforms, inbound and outbound, and a grey building the size of a greyhound bus with rows of plastic seats mounted to steel gerters and a small Dunkin' Donuts in the corner. Outside the air smelled of freshly cut grass with a hint of the Atlantic Ocean. Inside the floors were dusty, the windows streaked with dirt, and each grey garbage can—there were three—spilled over with styrofoam cups and Croissanwich wrappers. The room smelled of cold eggs, plastic, cigarette butts, glazed donuts, and wafting over everything, the aroma of high-octane coffee. A young couple sat smoking in two bucket seats. Their clothes were dirty, their faces wrinkled, and they sat with what looked like the weight of the world on their shoulders. A homeless man picked through the metal garbage can outside. Igor accidentally stared at the man and when their eyes met the man's face returned the blank gaze of someone beyond caring about anything. It was a dangerous look, and Igor knew it, so he broke eye contact and walked inside to the Dunkin' Donuts counter where Igor was buying a small coffee.

"Do you want anything?" Igor turned and asked Igor.

"Yes. I'll have a small coffee with cream and sugar. And a blueberry muffin."

"We're out of blueberry muffins," the girl said. She was thin with greasy brown hair that she kept plastered out of her exhausted face. A strange sight, thought Igor, considering her age and that she was engulfed by coffee fumes.

"How about cranberry?" asked Igor.

The girl didn't respond, just turned, pulled a sheet of wax paper out of a box on the wall, clawed a cranberry muffin from its shelf and dumped it in a brown paper bag.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"No. That's it. Thank you," said Igor.

"Three twenty-four."

Igor handed her a twenty dollar bill. She gave him the change and Igor dumped the leftover silver in the styrofoam tip cup. Coffee in hand, Igor and Igor walked outside.

"Hold this for a minute," Igor said to Igor.

"Where are you going?"

"The bathroom," said Igor. He turned and walked back inside.

Igor walked over to the garbage can and set the coffees down atop the lid so he could eat his muffin. The homeless man was gone. A green and white taxi was parked at the curb beside him,

windows rolled down. Igor took a bite of muffin, crouched, and peeked in the taxi's front passenger window.

"Can I help you?" the cab driver asked coldly. He was a small man and appeared old but it was hard for Igor to tell because he wore a Red Sox cap, dark sunglasses, and smoked a Marlboro Red. The softpack sat on the dashboard.

"Yes," Igor began, "I was just wondering if you could tell me the best way to get downtown."

"Why don't you just hop in and I'll take you there?" The man took a drag.

"I kind of wanted to walk. I was just—nice day and all." Igor smiled.

"Head that way." The cabby pointed his thumb behind. He didn't turn around. "You'll figure it out," he mumbled.

"Okay. Great. Thanks," Igor replied. He stood up straight and stepped back to the trash bin. He picked up his small coffee, pulled off the lid, and after blowing on the steaming brown liquid, took a sip. As is sometimes the case with coffee, Igor's first sip—scalding and strong—woke him instantly to his strange surroundings. And as coffee can also do, the more sips he took, the thirstier he became, so he gulped down half the coffee in not time at all.

Igor walked out the glass double doors, a fresh bounce in his step.

"I feel so much better," he said.

"Number one or number two," asked Igor.

"Oh, number two, of course. Number one never gives me a second wind."

"No."

"But number two can change the whole outlook of one's day. Like a hot cup of coffee on a crisp fall day." He savored a long sip. "Do we know where we're going?"

"Yes. That way." Igor pointed behind them.

"North."

"Yes. I guess it's north."

"Well, let's get going. Unless you want to stay here?"

"No. You're right. Let's walk."

They walked in silence, side by side down the long drive, sipping their coffees and listening to the wind woosh through the trees, sending handfuls of leaves floating to the ground. A white van pulled in the station's drive and passed Igor and Igor. What Igor and Igor did not know was that the van was a free shuttle that ran every fifteen minutes and transported passengers from the train station to downtown Galloway. Each way took seven minutes. By foot, the route was at least a half-hour, but Igor and Igor didn't know where they were going so the walk was much longer. But they didn't mind, the cool breeze and adrenaline shot of caffeine put all their senses on high alert. Igor walked with shoulders back, taking long steps and leading with his chest like an athlete, a title he had never held. Beside him, Igor was slack jawed as he scanned the rundown factory buildings, trying to absorb every minor detail: the chipped bricks, broken or missing windows, rusted screws, discarded wood, shards of glass.

After the hard vibrating boxcar floor the walk felt like rebirth to Igor and Igor. Autumn in New England, as the trees change color, the winds a subtle combination of southern warmth and ocean cool, on a day when the temperature rests in the fifties and the sun shines full in the clear blue sky and the air still smells of grass, mingled with burnt leaves and fresh pumpkins—nowhere on earth can autumn make a man feel more alive. The power Igor and Igor felt welling within their souls was a mix of passion and blind enthusiasm only young men feel and are dumb enough to follow. The feeling can only be described as freedom. It was exactly what Igor and

Igor wanted because freedom births experience which, when passionate young men such as Igor and Igor, is what you want more than anything else in the world because it holds the possibility for something great and memorable to happen. Something worth remembering. Something worth recording. Something that leads to wisdom.

Their eyes darted around the new environment; with each blink they attempted to file away pictures in their memory banks; an impossibility, of course, except for the rare individual with photographic recall. But if Igor and Igor could record the temporary images on their retinas, this is how their litany would have bounced around:

Igor: blue sky	Igor: blue sky
Igor: chipped red brick	Igor: hubcap
Igor: broken windows	Igor: orange leaves
Igor: rusted machines	Igor: sidewalk cracks
Igor: glass shards	Igor: rusted chain
Igor: torn chain link	Igor: chalk on brick
Igor: orange leaves	Igor: crumbling brick
Igor: cracked pavement	Igor: big rusted screws
Igor: blue sky	Igor: squirrel on roof
Igor: bright sunlight	Igor: bright sunshine
Igor: big oak tree	Igor: old Buick
Igor: squirrel scurrying	Igor: shattered window
Igor: blue triple-decker	Igor: faded yellow line
Igor: faded paintjob	Igor: garbage
Igor: porch toys	Igor: paper bag
Igor: front bushes	Igor: brown leaves
Igor: yellow leaves	Igor: blue sky
Igor: windblown treetops	Igor: cool breeze
Igor: burnt leaves scent	Igor: warm sunshine
Igor: faint gasoline	Igor: grey triple-decker
Igor: woman in driveway	Igor: kids toys
Igor: falling gutter	Igor: woman by car
Igor: brown leaves	Igor: porch swing
Igor: long weeds	Igor: old Oldsmobile
Igor: blue sky	Igor: yellow leaves
Igor: blue triple decker	Igor: strong wind
Igor: warm sunshine	Igor: baseball mitt
Igor: old Oldsmobile	Igor: tennis ball
Igor: warm breeze	Igor: blue triple-decker
Igor: Igor	Igor: Igor

As their memory-shutters clicked away, and they continued walking north along a street of triple-decker houses—grey, baby blue, sunflower—Igor finally spoke:

Igor: That cabby reeked.	(blue sky)
Igor: What do you mean?	(blue sky)
Igor: Of booze.	(powerful oak)
Igor: Really?	(traffic light)
Igor: Yes. It was overpowering.	(fast car)
Igor: We'll have to be careful in this town.	(broken glass)

Igor: Yes. We must watch ourselves. (chain-link fence)
Igor: Indeed. (brown leaves)
Igor: (warm sun)
Igor: (bright sun)
Igor: (bright sun)
Igor: (warm sun)
Igor: You think this is the right way? (traffic light)
Igor: I hope so. (cars)
Igor: I thought you knew where we were going? (cheap gas)
Igor: This looks like we're heading downtown. (gasoline)
Igor: I don't know. (Jack's Gas)
Igor: Well what do you want to do? (Jack's Gas)
Igor: We could ask somebody in this gas station?

Igor and Igor stood at the corner of Main Street and McManus Avenue. A rare local gas station, Jack's Gas, was across the street. The two gas pumps were old manual types with rotating numbers like an odometer. Unleaded cost 1.09⁹ a gallon. Jack's Gas' main building housed a small office and two garages, one with its red door up, the other down. Looking through the windows Igor and Igor noticed that the office was empty so they walked over to the open garage door. Out of the darkness a mechanic appeared.

"Can I help you?" Sam said. He wore navy blue pants and a short-sleeve navy blue workshirt with a white nametag sewed over his left pectoral that read Joe. No, of course not, it read Sam. He was in his mid-thirties, well tanned with short black hair slicked back, strong black eyebrows, and two days growth of beard. He was short like Igor, but more muscular and looked like a former high school football standout. His hands were black with grease and his teeth straight and white. He was a good-looking mechanic, if that does anything for the reader's libido. He lit up a Marlboro Medium while waiting for Igor and Igor, staring at each other, to decide who would answer his question. He slid the pack back into his breast pocket.

"Yes," Igor finally responded, "we were wondering if you could point us in the direction of downtown."

"Sure," said Sam, "you see that street right there." He pointed to the street in front of Jack's Gas, the one Igor and Igor had been walking all along. "That's Main Street. Keep walking down it, you'll run right into downtown. Can't miss it."

"Thank you," said Igor.

"Are you guys looking for anything in particular?"

"Well..." Igor looked to Igor and the thought passed between them about how forthright they should be with total strangers, especially blue-collar strangers like Sam, about their ultimate destination. Igor turned and looked at Sam's face which had turned into a big grin. He found Igor and Igor, especially the serious, concerned looks on their faces, amusing.

"I'm sorry," said Igor. He smiled, realizing how foolish they looked. "We're here for the festival. The Galloway Celebrates Higgins Festival."

"Oh, yeah, they have that every year," said Sam.

"Right. Do you have any idea where we might go to find the people?"

"Hmmm." Sam took a drag. He exhaled as he spoke, sending smoke up across his face and into his eyes but it didn't seem to bother him at all. He didn't even squint. "I'd say if you head downtown you'll probably find something out down there. Someone will know. I don't really have any idea. Sorry."

“That’s okay,” said Igor.

“Yes, thanks,” added Igor.

“Good luck, guys,” said Sam.

“Yeah. You too,” said Igor.

Igor and Igor half-waved as they walked away from Jack’s Gas. Sam leaned on the garage doorframe and against the black background his face glowed from the sun scorching down on his strong, tan features. He smiled and his teeth shone bright white, then he laughed and saluted Igor and Igor with the two fingers holding his cigarette.

5.

As Igor and Igor walk down Main Street and attempt to commit their fresh surroundings to memory, the author hopes that the reader is having less trouble telling Igor and Igor apart. Hopefully, as our story continues their differences both physically and mentally will become obvious enough that when the author writes, Igor frowned, or Igor spit, the reader will immediately know that we mean Igor, or Igor. By now, the thought has probably crossed the reader’s mind, why not simply refer to Igor and Igor by their last names? It is a point well taken. The only problem is that contrary to the way many young men nowadays call each other exclusively by the last name (usually shouted, no less), Igor and Igor were the opposite. So to use their surnames would be easier for the reader but awkward and unfair to Igor and Igor. It would be like calling a lima bean simply a bean, or the Atlantic Ocean just ocean. It is unfair and misleading. Why not use their full names, thus saving us from any further confusions? Another valid thought. Alas, full names are too formal for free spirits like Igor and Igor and logically too long for the author’s liking. Middle names are completely out of the question, as are Confirmation names. And neither had a nickname that is of any use. Everyone who knew Igor and Igor called Igor Igor and Igor Igor. These are there names, for better or worse. They can’t be changed because they are their names. How would you like it if instead of Robert, the name you preferred, we all started calling you Rob or Bobby, or your full name, Robert Lipshitz, or worse yet, Lipshitz? It would probably anger you and possibly make you feel insecure, correct? Well, for the sake of Igor and Igor, two horribly insecure people already, we will stick with Igor and Igor and ask the reader’s forgiveness and perseverance. When dealing with people’s feelings this strange one must have a little faith that by story’s end Igor will mean Igor and Igor obviously only refer to Igor and not Igor.

6.

Downtown Galloway was quiet. Igor and Igor stood at the center of town, at the apex of a T formed by Appleton Street dead-ending into Main Street, and looked at each other with confused faces. They figured on a sunny Saturday afternoon people would be all over the sidewalks shopping, lunching, strolling along. Instead, Igor and Igor had a hard time finding a single person. The plate glass windows on the three and four story brick buildings displayed the names of local shops and dentists, law offices and insurance agencies, doctors and realtors, all closed on account of Saturday. The bright brick buildings and white sidewalks looked like they had recently received an airblasting facelift. Igor looked left down Main Street and even with his stellar vision he could barely make out the Mackinaw River, once the lifeforce of Galloway and reason the town was built in the first place because over a half-mile stretch the river loses thirty-six feet along a series of falls, the biggest of which, Cuyahoga Falls, measures sixteen feet. On the two corners of Main and Appleton stood a Starbucks and a Dunkin’ Donuts, and completing

the triangle, in front of Igor and Igor, was a Barnes and Noble bookstore in what appeared a former bank. Once inside, the silver vault door proved the bank theory true. Igor bit his nails and Igor rubbed his forehead; they were concerned that perhaps they mistook the professor's comment and arrived on the wrong weekend. Before Igor expressed his trepidation to Igor aloud, Igor walked up to the bookstore's checkout counter and asked Allen if their fears were true.

"No. You're right. It's this weekend," said Allen. He wore a nametag.

Igor and Igor breathed sighs of relief; Igor patted Igor reassuringly on the back.

"Would you guys like some pamphlets?" asked Allen. He had short red hair and a thin, pale face that appeared sickly, as if he had never in his life stepped into sunlight. But he was nice nonetheless.

"Sure. That would be great," said Igor.

Allen ducked under the counter and emerged holding two purple pamphlets. He handed one to each of them.

"Here you go, guys," he said.

"Thank you very much," Igor answered.

"No problem," Allen smiled. He leaned his forearms against the counter as Igor and Igor examined the pamphlets. It was obvious to Allen that Igor and Igor knew nothing about Galloway. So he waited patiently for their next question.

"Can you tell us where the Wheeler House is?" asked Igor.

"Sure I can," said Allen, rising with a grin. "It's not far at all."

7.

A permanent wooden sign on the front lawn of a white Colonial house read:

Wheeler House

1909

A Place for All

Igor: Do you think that includes us?

Igor: Of course it does. Why wouldn't it?

Igor: Are we All?

Igor: Yes, we're All. It means anyone.

Igor: But I'm not just anyone.

Igor: No. Of course you're not.

Igor: And neither are you.

Igor: I know I'm not.

Igor: Should we lower ourselves?

Igor: Lower ourselves?

Igor: Any club that would have us—

Igor: Will you come on?

Igor: —I wouldn't want to join.

Igor: Oh, shut up already.

The Wheeler House stood on a small hill like a plantation owner's home. It was two stories tall with four front pillars and a porch. The white paintjob was faded but the black shutters around the windows appeared glossy. The house was surrounded by oak trees and in the middle of the big front lawn stood a weeping willow that had no business being there. To the right, attached to the house, was a two-car garage that looked, at most, ten years old. The garage door was open and Igor and Igor saw lights on and figures inside. As they climbed the drive it became

apparent that the garage no longer sheltered cars. The walls were painted beige and crown molding wrapped around the top of the room. The artwork on the walls alternated between famous reprints—Winslow Homer's Gloucester Sunset, John Singleton Copley's Paul Revere, Jasper Johns's White Flag—and poor watercolors by local artists (or local watercolors by poor artists). Two rectangular tables were set up along the right side of the room with two older couples sitting behind them. Laid out on the table were Higgins books for sale, along with jazz CDs and tapes, and historical texts and photography books of Galloway.

A sixty-year old man in a dark blue suit walked up to Igor and Igor and, with a big smile and outstretched arms, welcomed them to the garage.

“Welcome, boys,” the skinny old man said, “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“I don’t believe we have either,” Igor said enthusiastically.

“Frank Theriault,” said the man. He shook Igor and then Igor’s hand with his strong bony fingers. Mr. Theriault was tall and thin; his shirt’s collar was at least two inches too big for his neck. And his blotchy skin stuck to the bones of his face and he appeared to wear a new pair of bright white dentures.

Igor and Igor looked at each other and a decision passed between them from the quick look. This ability to converse without words and reach a unanimous conclusion was a feat that Igor and Igor practiced often and one that should only be performed by the closest friends.

“Elhanon,” Igor said as they shook hands.

Mr. Theriault’s eyes grew wide. “Elhanon, eh? Okay.” He turned his face and handshake to Igor.

“Everybody calls me Elly,” said Igor.

“Okay, Elly. Nice to meet you. How about you, son?”

“Alastair,” said Igor, unflinching. He stared directly into Mr. Theriault’s brown eyes.

“Well, nice to meet you. Welcome, Alastair.”

“You can call me Al. Everybody does.”

“Great, Al, great. Where are you boys from?”

“Upstate,” said Igor.

“Maine,” continued Igor.

“Yes, upstate Maine,” said Igor.

“Upstate Maine? Goodness. How’d you boys get all the way down here?” Mr. Theriault folded his arms across his chest and tilted his head to the side, eager to hear the traveling tale of Elly and Al. Most people he knew were from a surrounding twenty mile radius and named Jack or Billy or Fred.

“Well,” Igor began, “first we hiked out of the woods.”

“Yes, that took a day,” said Igor.

“Two days really.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Then we hitchhiked to Portland.”

“Then hopped a train to Portsmouth.”

“Then hitched again, with a trucker heading to Cleveland with an eighteen wheeler full of zucchini.”

“That got us to Nashua.”

“And then we hitched with some college kids across the river into town this morning.”

Igor and Igor looked at each other and nodded. Then they smiled at Mr. Theriault whose eyebrows were raised in wonderment.

“That is some story, boys,” he said.

“Yes...”

“Well...”

“Yet you travel so light.”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“Well, it’s just easier that way.”

Mr. Theriault looked over Igor and Igor with a sly grin. It was hard to tell if his look revealed that he knew they were lying or if he just found them amusing.

“Anyway, boys, now you’re here. Welcome to Galloway.”

“Thank you, Mr. Theriault,” said Igor.

“Please, call me Frank. Do you think Jim liked to be called Mr. Higgins? No. No way. He was always Jim. Just Jim. To everybody. Ask around. You’ll see.”

“Can I ask you a question, sir,” said Igor.

“Frank. Call me Frank.”

“Right. Sorry. Frank. Don’t take this the wrong way but...where is everybody?”

Frank laughed. “That’s a good question.” He led Igor and Igor to the left side of the garage, to a pair of wooden double doors connected to the house. He pulled open the right door and a man’s voice spoke:

“Higgins spent this time, this free period, mulling over the array of experiences he’d just completed and organizing his thoughts in a way suitable for the commencement of a novel, a novel that would eventually become *Outside In*.”

The crowd applauded quietly.

The speaker was a sixty-year old man in a dark suit seated at a long rectangular table on a platform facing Igor, Igor, Frank, and the audience. Six other panel members sat on each side of him, old men and women alike, all dressed with a collegial air: tweed, scarves, bow ties, high-collared blouses, long flowery skirts, dark suits, khakis. Five rows of wooden folding chairs were filled with older people sitting and listening quietly to the professor speak. The room looked like a funeral home chapel and that in place of a casket there was a strange bastardization of Leonardo DaVinci’s Last Supper scene with all the apostles retirees and Jesus smelling of brylcreem. The professor propelled his serious sentences with words like conundrum, modern man, esthetic, palpable, and truth.

“They’re discussing Jim’s *Outside In*,” whispered Frank.

Igor and Igor scanned the panel and then the backs of the crowd’s heads, but they saw only grey hair, bald spots, and the sides of wrinkled faces. “There’s two seats over there, I think.”

Frank pointed to the corner. Igor and Igor looked at each other, and again without speaking they rapidly reached an agreement.

“That’s all right,” Igor whispered to Frank. They backed out of the room and Frank closed the door, cutting off the professor’s word, amalga—. Frank looked past Igor and Igor and noticed an older couple he knew entering the garage so he politely excused himself and walked over to his friends, leaving Igor and Igor standing alone under a horrendous watercolor of either the Cuyahoga Falls at night or a mudslide, thought Igor. The title card read Untitled #7.

“Well, what should we do?” said Igor gravely, the dour painting effecting his urgency.

Igor looked around the room and the thought struck him that they might as well be at a nursing home. A small wave of terror splashed his cheeks. “I don’t know but we’ve got to get out of here,” he said.

“Absolutely. Where can we go?”

“What about Jim’s grave?” Igor said desperately.

“That’ll do. Where is he buried?”

Igor and Igor pulled the purple pamphlets out of their pants pockets and searched for the information.

“It doesn’t say.”

“No it doesn’t.”

“Can I help you, boys?” A little old man walked up to Igor and Igor. He wore a beret and a leather jacket over a rainbow t-shirt. His grey beard was neatly trimmed and he wore many gold rings and a gold loop earring in his right ear.

“Sure,” Igor said quickly, “we were wondering if you could tell us where Jim is buried?”

“Whoah,” the man said. Igor had spoken as if they had thirty seconds to diffuse a bomb and the only way was by finding out exactly where Higgins was buried and teleporting there immediately. “Of course. It’s Elson Cemetery,” the man said.

“Ellison?”

“No, Elson, dear.”

“Elson.”

“Yes, Elson.”

“He’s buried in Elson Cemetery?” Igor said pointedly.

“Yes, but I always forget the exact intersection...Roger’ll know. Roger!”

Igor and Igor looked at each other.

“Yes?” a voice said from behind the book table.

“Where is Jim buried?” the man asked.

“Seventh. Between Jackson and Jefferson,” Roger replied as he walked over to them.

Igor repeated Roger’s directions out loud as if they were a secret code he must not forget.

“Why? Are you boys going there?” Roger asked.

“We were going to, yes,” said Igor. “Is that okay?”

“Sure. Are you driving?”

“No. We’re on foot,” added Igor. “Is that a problem?”

“Kind of a long walk. Come on. I’ll take you.” Roger walked out of the garage without looking back. His loafers clicked on the pavement. Roger wore blue jeans and a black Member’s Only jacket over a white t-shirt with a big caricature of Higgins’s face on his chest. He was medium build with a leathery face that had such powerful wrinkles cut across his cheeks that one almost didn’t notice his thick bifocals.

Igor and Igor looked at each other and followed him like nervous golden retriever puppies.

“You really don’t have to,” Igor said to Roger’s back.

“No problem at all. I’m Roger.” He stopped halfway down the driveway, turned, and shook Igor’s hand.

“I’m Igor,” said Igor without thinking.

“That’s good. And you are?”

“Igor,” said Igor as they shook.

“Igor and Igor,” said Roger.

“Yes.”

“That’s right.”

Roger paused a moment in thought and stared between Igor and Igor up at the weeping willow branches flopping in the breeze. Then he snapped out of the trance and said: “You boys are from Boston, right?” He looked over Igor, then turned his gaze to Igor.

“Yes,” said Igor, knowing their cover was blown.

“How’d you know that?”

“Come on,” Roger said, “time’s a wastin’.” He turned and walked down the driveway.

Without looking back he motioned, with a windmill of his arms, for Igor and Igor to follow.

8.

Roger drove a burgundy Ford Taurus with a small figurine of the Virgin Mary velcroed to the dashboard. Upon closer examination Igor realized it wasn’t Mary because the inscription at the figure’s bottom read: Our Lady of Acceleration.

“I’m a teacher,” answered Roger.

Igor had asked Roger what he did and immediately felt bad that he asked such a rude, American question.

Though the Taurus was at least ten years old Roger kept it in immaculate condition. No wrappers on the floor. No dirt on the windows. Not even dust on the dashboard. His care for the car didn’t stop Roger from driving like a Nascar racer. He gunned the engine through a street light as it turned red and then crossed a double yellow line to pass a woman in a little red Nissan he said was driving too slow.

“I teach Latin,” Roger shouted over the noise from the windows he had rolled down and the radio he turned up when Dion’s Runaround Sue came on. “At Riverview High School. Where Jim went. For forty-one years now.”

“Forty-one years!” Igor shouted from the back seat.

“That’s right,” said Roger, “did you boys take Latin?”

“No. French,” said Igor.

“German,” replied Igor.

“Yeah, it’s a dying breed, Latin. Like me. Once I go, in the next few years, I’m sure they’ll phase out the Latin program.” Roger gripped the steering wheel tightly with both hands and stared straight ahead. His right eye, behind thick glasses, twitched involuntarily and Igor wasn’t sure if this was a normal spasm or if the man was about to cry.

“Did you know Jim?” Igor said from his middle perch in the backseat.

“What’s that?” said Roger, looking in the rearview mirror at Igor.

“Did you know Jim?” Igor shouted.

“No. Not really. I mean I met him a few times in the sixties when he was living in town but I didn’t really know him.”

“He was a great writer.”

“What’s that?” Roger shouted.

“I said he was a great writer!” Igor shouted back.

“Oh, yeah. Yeah. The best. He could stand on a street corner and look all around, three hundred sixty degrees, and he could write pages upon pages about just what he saw standing there on that street corner.”

Roger drove a couple miles east of downtown. As the car crested an incline a large stone arch with black wrought iron gates appeared. The twenty foot tall gates were open, allowing the Taurus entrance. Elson was a massive flat cemetery shaded by rows of oak trees that lined the main road and then branched off to other cemetery streets. Smaller trees, maples and dogwoods, were scattered about the cemetery. Even though Igor and Igor had spent many hours wandering big cemeteries, they had never seen one with so many trees. An eight-foot high black wrought

iron fence appeared to run the entire perimeter, but Elson was too big to tell for certain. Roger turned the car left onto Eighth Street between Jefferson and Jackson.

“Jim’s right up here, on the right.” He pulled his Taurus behind two cars and a Volkswagen van. A small group of six people stood in the middle of the grass and tombstones. They hugged one another and looked down to the ground. Igor and Igor left their backpacks in the car. Igor sniffed the air and his eyes met Igor’s; Igor nodded up and down a few times in agreement. The faded VW van bore signs of aging hippies with its backdoor bumper sticker collection: a Smiley Face, Legalise It, Vote McGovern, D.A.R.E., Create Peace, N.R.A., Don’t Worry, Be Happy—along with four different college stickers in the window. The contradictory nature of the stickers made Igor think that a great mind must own the van. Roger led Igor and Igor across the grass to the group of old hippies.

“How are you folks doing?” Roger asked loudly.

“Good, man, how are you?” a man replied. He took a hit from a joint.

“I’m fine. Just fine,” said Roger.

The group huddled around Jim’s gravesite were all Roger’s age: three men, three women—three couples. The man smoking the joint had long grey hair and a grey beard. He looked in impeccable shape for his age and happily wore his shirt and leather vest open revealing a tan chest. There was something collegial in his eye, though, and Igor and Igor recognized that the man was not only book smart but wise from experience. It was obvious in the deep lines on his brow and the way he systematically yet casually smoked the joint. This was a man in control. He offered the joint to Roger.

“Thank you very much, but I’m fine,” said Roger. “Boys?”

Igor and Igor also graciously declined. Under normal circumstances both Igor and Igor would have accepted a joint but for some reason with Roger present, knowing he was a teacher, it didn’t seem right to them. Deep down they didn’t want to disappoint Roger who had been so nice to them. The bearded man sensed the strange battle between duty, want, and guilt going on inside Igor and Igor and wondered why these two boys, obviously here to see Higgins, were so nervous and unsure of themselves. This thought and the pot hitting him made the bearded man laugh. He turned with a smirk and walked back to his van as the rest of his group followed. They were done paying their respects anyway. As they departed, Higgins’ gravestone appeared. It was a flat granite gravestone that gave his dates and the epitaph He Honored Life. The stone’s design was simple: no flowers, no open books, no ivy around the edges, simply the name, dates, and eulogy. Placed around the stone were vestiges left to the life Higgins lived: flowers, a seashell, small bottles of peach schnapps, unlit cigarettes, unsharpened #2 pencils, small pieces of blank memo paper. Someone had left a page of one of his novels. A passage was underlined and across the top someone wrote, We Love You.

The teacher that he was, Roger instructed Igor and Igor about Jim’s family, his wife, Rose, and why he was buried in this plot. All things that Igor and Igor already knew, but they pretended they didn’t and listened attentively.

9.

“Have you boys seen the Higgins Memorial?” Roger asked. He turned the Taurus left out of Elson.

“No. We haven’t,” Igor said from the backseat. Igor and Igor had switched seats when they returned to the car. “We arrived in town right before you saw us. We haven’t really seen anything.”

“We saw downtown,” added Igor.

“But you didn’t see the Higgins Memorial?” asked Roger.

“No. Why? Should we have?”

“It’s right downtown. That’s all. We can go there now. It’s on my way anyway.”

Roger drove through a poor section of town with triple-deckers with aluminum siding falling off or faded paintjobs or boarded-up altogether. Some kids played soccer on a sidestreet. A group of men crowded around a car engine on another. And a very pregnant woman walked on the sidewalk, holding onto a chain-link fence for balance on another. It was hard for Igor and Igor to gain a full understanding of the true lifeforce of Galloway from these short snapshots as the car hurdled past. They had been cautioned by friends that Galloway was a rough town, full of drugs and prostitution, but they had yet to view any firsthand evidence of either.

After a few minutes of silence, Igor asked, “Are you married, Roger?”

“Forty-three years,” Roger replied.

“Forty-three years! Wow,” said Igor from the backseat.

“Yep. Forty-three years. I have a couple granddaughters almost your age.”

“Wow,” Igor said again.

“Women are something else, I’ll tell you,” Roger sighed.

“How so?” said Igor.

“How much knowledge do you have of women?” asked Roger.

“Well, I mean, I’ve dated girls. And—“

“Ever lived with a woman?”

“No. Can’t say that I have.”

“You?” Roger looked in the rearview mirror at Igor.

“I had a girlfriend for two and a half years in college but I didn’t live with her.”

“There’s a difference,” Roger began.

“I’m sure,” Igor said from the backseat.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned about women—I’ve witnessed firsthand—it is this: pull out your notebooks, you’ll want to write this down.” Igor and Igor laughed. “Here it is. Here’s how the cycle works: they start out as girls, then they become lovers, then wives, then mothers, then grandmothers, and finally they turn into old bitches, which is where my life stands currently.”

Igor and Igor laughed.

“Forty-three years is a long time,” said Igor.

“Yes it is,” replied Roger. “Have you boys thought about getting married? What are you, twenty-one, twenty-two?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Igor.

“Haven’t really considered it right now,” said Igor.

“That’s good,” Roger replied. “Don’t. You’re young. Don’t get married, until you’re at least thirty. Or thirty-five. Or forty.”

“Really? Why?” asked Igor.

“Yes. Because then you’re anchored to something and somewhere. If there’s one thing I would do differently in my life it’s that I wouldn’t have gotten married at twenty-two. So, don’t. That’s my advice at least.”

“Well taken,” said Igor.

“Because there’s so much you can do. See. If you have the opportunity to just take off—You boys have nothing holding you down, nothing holding you to one place right now. Do you?”

“No,” Igor and Igor said together.

“Then you have the opportunity to just get out there and do it. That’s the great lesson of Jim. His writing is great and all, but it’s more about the spirit he embodied of getting out there. That’s what I’d do if I was your age. When you have the strength. I’m too old now, my body’s too worn out, otherwise I’d do it. It’s a young man’s game and you’re young men.” He paused. “Sorry. I don’t mean to preach.”

“No—”

“Not at all—”

“Sometimes I get going—but it’s important to realize when you’re young that you are young and not old. Realizing it later is no fun at all.” Roger gripped the steering wheel tightly with both hands and stared straight ahead. Again, his right eye twitched involuntarily.

“You’re right,” said Igor. “You’re totally right. We are young.”

“It’s true,” Igor added. “We’re young and...young. Yes.”

Igor and Igor sank back into their seats and let Roger deal with the nostalgic thoughts passing through his mind. They drove over a small green bridge.

“How many locks are there?” asked Igor.

“That’s a tough question to answer,” said Roger. He cleared his throat. “There are about six miles of canals.”

“Oh! This is where we are,” Igor exclaimed. He realized the car was driving up Appleton Street towards the Barnes and Noble.

“Have you been down here?” Roger asked.

“Not this side,” said Igor.

“You boys should walk around town. Explore around. There’s lots of interesting little areas to check out.” Roger turned right onto Main Street and then stopped the car three blocks down at the next streetlight. “Okay, boys. Here you go.”

“What’s that?” said Igor.

“This is the Higgins Memorial right here.” Roger pointed out the window.

“Oh? O-kay?” said Igor. He and Igor opened their doors and slowly got out.

“You’re coming to the happening tonight,” Roger alluded.

“The happening?” Igor said through the open door.

“At The Riverview Social Club,” Roger said, “tonight.”

“Oh, sure. We’ll be there,” said Igor.

“Great. Then I’ll see you then.”

“Okay. Thanks, Roger,” said Igor.

“Yes. Thanks again,” said Igor.

They slammed the car doors closed and immediately Roger sped off, leaving Igor and Igor standing on the sidewalk, holding their backpacks, and staring at each other’s confused face.

They turned around and both swore.

“What is that?” asked Igor.

“It must be the Buford Mill?” replied Igor.

“Good God. It’s...”

“Enormous.”

It looked like a red brick fortress. A series of four and six story buildings with windows of many shapes and sizes, it was a giant brick rectangle with a courtyard in the middle. The only way in or out, because of the canal dug around it like a moat, was a small steel bridge between two long stretches of buildings. Dead center, presiding over everything, was a tall bell tower with

a clock. Igor and Igor studied the brick monster but quickly realized its power and size over Galloway was beyond comparison.

Igor: Well, here we are.

Igor: Yes, here we are.

Igor: Right here.

Igor: That's where we are.

They stood and stared in silence.

Igor: We have to stop.

Igor: Yes, we must.

Igor: It's like looking at the sun.

Igor: Yes, for too long is—

Igor: Unhealthy.

Igor: Yes.

Igor: Damaging.

Igor: So they say.

Igor and Igor pulled out their purple pamphlets and scanned for any useful memorial information. Anything to get their minds off the bohemian before them.

“Oh!” exclaimed Igor.

“What? What is it?”

“Read the Higgins committee,” he instructed.

Igor turned to the back of the purple pamphlet at the bottom. He searched the names, looking for something about the memorial. He looked up to Igor. “What are you talking about?”

“The president. Read the president,” said Igor.

Igor did so. “Oh!” he exclaimed.

“He’s the head of the committee. He organized the whole thing.”

“He probably figured we needed to experience downtown for ourselves, without someone to hold our hands.”

“Indeed. What a smart man. Come on. Let’s check out this memorial.”

The Higgins Memorial was a series of four ten foot tall granite columns each the corner of a square roughly fifty by fifty feet. Inside this large square was a smaller square of four medium granite columns; and at the center of both squares stood a black obelisk. Visitors wandered through the memorial’s brick ground and read passages from Higgins’ writings that were etched on both sides of the slabs. The outer square’s columns focused on Higgins’ Buddhist centered writings. The square within displayed his Catholic writings—what he was famous for—and the obelisk showed some of his lesser-known poems. Igor and Igor broke apart and explored the memorial, reading Higgins’ words (most of which they knew already) but even in the warm sunshine both were struck by how cold the structure felt, especially considering the fiery way Higgins lived and wrote. After reading all the passages, Igor laid down on a granite bench under a golden maple tree outside the memorial’s perimeter and closed his eyes. Igor stood before a column and copied a passage into his little notebook.

“Hi. Hi there,” a voice said over Igor’s shoulder. “My name’s Raymond.”

Igor turned left and was face to face with a small middle-aged man dressed head to toe in hunter green: puffy green windpants, green windbreaker, even green velcro sneakers. He ran his fingers across a small brown paper bag that held a letter or greeting card. But the first thing Igor saw were Raymond’s brown eyes, behind thick glasses, vibrating horizontally as if he constantly received a slight shock.

“Hi,” Igor answered awkwardly. He had never seen anyone’s eyes shake before. “I’m Igor.”

“Hi Igor!” said Raymond. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

“What are you writing?” asked Raymond.

“Oh, nothing. Nothing.” Igor stared at Raymond’s eyes. He couldn’t help himself, their constant shake was too strange. Raymond seemed oblivious to Igor’s stare or viewed it as welcome attention.

“Do you live around here?” asked Raymond. He looked straight into Igor’s eyes.

Embarrassed, Igor turned his gaze to Raymond’s fingers running up and down the brown bag.

“No, I don’t,” said Igor.

“I didn’t think so. I would have seen you. I live over there, down Patterson Street. Two blocks down. But not for long. I have to leave. Do you have a roommate?”

“A roommate?” Igor said confused. “Yes. I do.”

“Too bad. I need a roommate. Maybe we could all get a place together. Is that your roommate over there?” Raymond pointed to the napping Igor.

“Yes, it is,” said Igor.

“Where do you guys live?”

“We’re not from here.”

“Oh, where are you from?”

“Boston.”

“Oh, I’d like to live in Boston. Where in Boston? Do you have a house?”

“As a matter of fact, we do.”

“Is it full?”

“Yes it is.”

“Does anyone live in the basement?”

“No.”

“I could,” Raymond said eagerly.

“Yes...” said Igor.

Raymond’s wide vibrating eyes stuck Igor’s. This was a sad little man, thought Igor. Poor guy. Igor and Igor knew what happened to the great state of Massachusetts a decade earlier. They had met many people just like Raymond. Any of the hard luck towns across the state had its share of strange people. Years ago the administration in Washington at the time decided to cut back certain health care budgets and in the process closed half a dozen state mental hospitals—Franklin Hospital, Duane Asylum, Salisbury State Hospital—to name three that Igor and Igor knew. When this happened the nonviolent patients were released into the wilds of reality to fend for themselves. It was a cruel thing to do to someone like Raymond who obviously belonged in a psychiatric ward where he wouldn’t have to worry about finding a place to live. Igor felt bad for Raymond but he knew there was nothing he could do for this lost soul. The little man with the pudgy face and typewriter eyes would have to survive on his own. Unfortunately it was obvious most people, bad people, took advantage of his naivete.

“Why are you in Galloway?” Raymond asked.

Igor was lost in thought for a moment. “What was that?” he said.

“Why are you here?”

“Oh. For the Higgins Festival.”

“Oh,” Raymond answered, “who’s Higgins?”

Igor looked at Raymond; Raymond's blank face stared back. His eyes still shook, even with his face perfectly calm. "Don't you know who Higgins is?" Igor asked.

Raymond shook his head. "Did he own a mill?"

"No. No. Not at all. He was a writer. A famous writer. He wrote about Galloway, and other places. Ever hear of Outside In?"

Raymond shook his head again. "But I don't read that much." Raymond frowned and looked at his green sneakers.

"Ah, well, that's okay," Igor urged.

Raymond's downturned gaze stayed on his green sneakers.

A young couple, hand in hand, wandered past Raymond and Igor.

"Hello," the man said with a nod and a smile.

"Hi," said Igor.

Raymond looked up. "Hello there," he said.

"Is this the Higgins Memorial?" the girl asked.

"Yes, it is," Igor responded.

"I'm Denise," she said. "This is Mike."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Igor."

"My name's Raymond."

They didn't shake hands, to Igor's great satisfaction. Mike and Denise were a good-looking young couple, one blond, the other brunette. It doesn't matter which was which. They were fit, tan, and walked around the memorial, hand in hand the whole time, reading the etched passages, laughing, smiling, and teasing each other the way only young couples can.

Igor walked up to Igor and Raymond. He squinted his entire face. He had just woken up from a brief nap. "Ready to move on?" he yawned.

"Yeah. I think so," Igor responded. "This is Raymond."

"Hi, Raymond. Igor," said Igor. He shook Raymond's hand; it felt like cold dough because Raymond offered no grip.

"Your name's Igor," said Raymond.

"Yes, that's right."

"Are you two brothers?"

"No. We're not brothers," Igor said sharply. He was not a morning person.

Igor pulled him aside and quickly they discussed options among themselves.

"Where are you going?" Raymond asked.

"Uh, nowhere," Igor said. "We're going to get a drink."

"Oh." Raymond looked down at his green sneakers.

"Maybe we'll see you later, Raymond," Igor urged.

"Yeah, maybe." Raymond shuffled his sneakers from side to side.

"Okay. Are you ready?" Igor said gently to Igor, realizing the delicate situation his friend was attempting to get out of.

"If you guys know anyone who needs a roommate," said Raymond, still looking at his sneakers, "I live right down there." He pointed, eyes still focused on his sneakers. "Down Patterson Street, sixty-four Patterson Street."

"Okay, Ray, great," Igor said over his shoulder as he and Igor departed.

"It's Raymond! My name's Raymond," the little man shouted at the top of his lungs, his shaky eyes focused on Igor.

Denise grabbed Mike's flexed bicep; Igor and Igor stopped in their tracks and slowly turned back to face Raymond.

"That's all," Raymond spoke quietly into Igor's eyes, then he returned to looking down at his sneakers.

"Sorry, Raymond," said Igor. "It's Raymond."

"Sorry. It's Raymond. That's all."

"We'll see you later, Raymond," Igor said unconvincingly, knowing that they wouldn't.

"Okay," Raymond spoke quietly to himself. "See you later."

10.

Igor and Igor passed Barnes and Noble for the third time in two hours. A young man wearing a white sweat headband and a long trenchcoat walked towards them so Igor walked up to him.

"Excuse me," Igor said, "I don't mean to bother you."

"It's no trouble at all," the young man replied happily. He had thick black hair pulled back in a ponytail and bright white teeth.

"We don't know our way around here and were wondering if you could recommend a pub."

"Oh, let's see," the young man began, crossing his arms, "do you want a cooler, newer place, or an old fashioned bar?"

"Old fashioned—"

"Yeah, that's what I figured." He cupped his hand under his chin and paused a moment in thought. "You should check out the Waxler House, it's the oldest bar in town. It's a good place."

"Perfect. And where would that be?"

"Oh, it's not far at all."

The young man pointed out the directions and they parted ways.

"Cheers," said the young man.

"Good luck," replied Igor.

"Godspeed," said Igor.

Igor: Godspeed?

Igor: Yes. What?

Igor: Who says Godspeed?

Igor: I say Godspeed.

Igor: Apparently.

Igor: Do you have a problem with my Godspeed?

Igor: Yes I do.

Igor: And why is that?

Igor: You don't even know him.

Igor: So?

Igor: How can you wish someone Godspeed who you don't even know?

Igor: You've got a point.

Igor: Of course I have a point.

Igor: It's a stupid point, but a point nonetheless.

Igor: Oh, shut up.

11.

The Waxler House was a small light-blue wooden house. The bronze plaque next to the front door declared the tavern poured its first drop in 1834 and that in 1984 it was named a historical place by the Galloway Historical Society. Inside the bar everything was made of wood—the bar, the floorboards, the chairs, the tables—everything except the tin ceiling. A pulley-driven system of rubber belts connected three wooden ceiling fans together but because it was October they were not turned on. At the front windows half a dozen tables were pushed together and a large group from the Higgins Symposium at the Wheeler House (the tweed and scarves return) drank wine and beer and debated Higgins relevance to today's youth. Igor and Igor chose a table in the far corner and deposited their backpacks under it. As Igor approached the bar he heard a man from the front group emphasize the word penultimate.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked. He wiped down the bar.

"How about two Sams?" Igor said.

"Two Sams. Coming up." The bartender was an Irish-looking man in his mid-thirties with large forearms and a round face.

Igor leaned against the bar and observed the Higgins group, the only other people in the bar. Most were in their sixties, some probably seventies. All were well dressed. The glasses of Chardonnay on the table looked out of place in the blue-collar bar. The way the men spoke and argued was reasoned and concise but lacked any fire. One spoke in a quiet drone and every few sentences a few people nodded yes, yes. No one slammed down a glass, raised a fist, or shouted.

"Here you go." The bartender placed two full pints of amber lager in front of Igor. "That will be three dollars."

"A piece," said Igor.

"No. For both," the bartender corrected.

"Wow, that's—"

"Pretty cheap beer, right?"

"Yes it is." Igor handed him a five-dollar bill.

"Same price as when Higgins was here," he laughed. "Here you go, buddy."

"Thanks." Igor picked up the two glasses.

"And thank you," the bartender replied.

Igor and Igor sat in silence at their corner table for a long time. They watched the Higgins group stand cautiously, push the tables back to their proper spots, and then leave. For the next half-hour Igor and Igor didn't speak but quietly drank their beers. When they were finished, Igor, for it was his turn to buy, walked up to the bar and purchased two more pints. By the time they'd emptied their new glasses a crowd was developing. After all, it was Saturday afternoon. Five butts assumed such comfortable positions on barstools that it was obvious they were the regular crew. Middle-aged couples sat at different tables around the room. A group of old men in baseball caps and flannel shirts sat together drinking pitchers of Budweiser. At a front table was a young couple playing a covert game of footsy. They were the only people Igor and Igor's age but they were on the opposite side of the room which made it impossible to meet them. Igor returned with two more pints of Sam Adams, their third each, and after sitting back down, surveying the room, and taking a sip of beer and a drag of cigarette, he spoke:

Igor: Well...what should we do?

Igor: I don't know.

Igor: That doesn't help me.

Igor: Eat?

Igor: Are you hungry?

Igor: Yes. Aren't you?

Igor: Yes, I am. Did you see anywhere downtown?

Igor: What, to eat?

Igor: Yes.

Igor: No.

Igor: We could head across the Mackinaw.

Igor: We could. Why?

Igor: Why not?

Igor: But why?

Igor: Why not? There might be something over there.

Igor: Why don't we find out where The Riverview Social Club is and head that way?

Igor: That would work.

Igor: Go ask the bartender.

Igor: Why don't you?

Igor: Because it's your turn to go up there. Plus I want another beer.

Igor: Fine. But you'll have to wait until I'm done with mine.

Igor: Fine.

Igor: This is supposed to be a party, correct?

Igor: They bill it as a happening.

Igor: As long as there's people our age—

Igor: I would hope so.

Igor: I know.

Igor: So far our luck has been—

Igor: Mediocre at best.

Igor: Indeed.

Igor: We need some girls.

Igor: Absolutely.

Igor: And music.

Igor: Good jazz.

Igor: Yes.

Igor: And dancing.

Igor: I don't really care about dancing.

Igor: No?

Igor: No. Not at all.

Igor: I wouldn't mind dancing.

Igor: You mean like a club?

Igor: No. Dancing. Like couples. To good music.

Igor: That's okay, I suppose.

Igor: Come on. Finish your beer, I want another.

Igor: All right. Hold on. What's the rush?

Igor: You're right. I'm sorry.

Igor: Let's just relax and take our time.

Igor: Okay.

They sat in uncustomary, uncomfortable silence until Igor raised his half-full glass (or half-empty depending on your life outlook) and gulped down the remaining beer.

Igor: More libations coming up.

Igor: And directions.

Igor: Where's my notepad?

Igor: Why?

Igor: We better write this down.

12.

The full moon was out. Igor saw this as a prosperous sign, one of good things ahead. He was delighted: he skipped, he danced (odd since he said he didn't care for dancing) and he urged Igor to adopt his positive attitude. The night was young and so were they. With the full moon as their guide through the dark night they were guaranteed safety and new adventures.

Igor saw the full moon differently. In his mind a full moon was a bad omen, one of sinister creatures lurking around trees and inexplicable phenomena. The one night when crazy people went crazy and inevitably someone would be hurt or killed.

"I'll have a...number two. No. A number four. No. A two. Or a one?"

Igor's indecision irked Igor so he stepped in front of him, looked up to the big McDonald's menu board, and ordered a number two. The blond young man behind the counter wore a friendly smile but his bloodshot eyes showed someone who had worked in the grease pit all day on little sleep. Igor also ordered a number two.

"Are these together?" the boy asked.

Igor and Igor looked at each other. The long walk over the long Main Street Bridge had sobered them but the heat inside McDonalds turned their brains to mush. They hadn't eaten anything all day except the Granny Smith apples.

"Yes, yes, together. Great," said Igor. He pinched the flesh between his eyebrows.

"Would you like to supersize them?"

Igor and Igor looked at each other. This time Igor was the first to snap out of their low blood-sugar haze. He answered the boy, "Sure, sure. Go ahead. Great. Supersize away. Thank you."

Igor paid for the food while Igor studied it. A girl dropped four cheeseburgers wrapped in yellow paper on their brown tray along with two sleds of french fries, each the size of a woman's shoe. And to top it off they were each given sixty-four ounce cups for soda. The self-serve machine was to their left.

"Good Lord!" Igor exclaimed when the full contents of the meal was established on the tray. "This cup's the size of my thigh."

The boy laughed. "I know. They really are outrageous, aren't they?"

"Outrageous? They're beyond outrageous. Who needs this much soda? This thing deserves a new name. Superoutrageous."

"Or uberoutrageous," Igor mumbled through a mouthful of fries.

Sodas filled, Igor and Igor sat in a booth and quickly dispatched the cheeseburgers. For a sip of soda two hands were necessary. Even Igor, whose fingers were longer than Igor's, had to use both. Once the fries were eaten (Igor didn't want all of his so Igor happily ate Igor's remaining fries) and half the sodas drank, Igor and Igor sat back and breathed in and out a series of times, taking in full breaths and releasing full exhalations. Igor pulled out his cigarettes and lit one. He tossed the pack and lighter onto the table for Igor.

Igor: That was a bad idea.

Igor: Immensely stupid.

Igor: I don't know what we were thinking.

Igor: I feel sick.
Igor: We ate that way too quickly.
Igor: It tasted so good though.
Igor: I know. At the moment it did.
Igor: It always tastes so wonderful.
Igor: Then disaster.
Igor: Terror.
Igor: The body asks, why?
Igor: The brain has no answer.
Igor: Pleads the Fifth.
Igor: Or apologizes.
Igor: This always happens.
Igor: It does.
Igor: Never again.
Igor: No, never.
Igor: Absolutely not.
Igor: No way.
Igor: It's unhealthy.
Igor: So unhealthy.
Igor: And you never feel good afterwards.
Igor: No. Never.
Igor: But it's easy.
Igor: Yes it is.
Igor: And cheap.
Igor: Very cheap.
Igor: But stupid.
Igor: So stupid.
Igor: It would be smarter not to eat at all.
Igor: Probably.
Igor: If the only choice was to eat here or not eat at all, I'm saying it's smarter not to eat.
Igor: And I'm sure you're right.
Igor: Of course those four beers didn't help.
Igor: No, they didn't.
Igor: My heart is racing.
Igor: Mine too.
Igor: Feels like it wants to leap out of my chest.
Igor: Too much beef and cheese.
Igor: Ugh, don't say that. I feel nauseas already.
Igor: What were we thinking?
Igor: We weren't.
Igor: Obviously not.
Igor: I just want to sit here and never move.
Igor: That's fine with me. I move, I'll throw up.
Igor: You too?
Igor: Oh yes, I feel terrible. Look: I'm sweating. You'd think I just ran a marathon.
Igor: Why do we do this to ourselves?

Igor: We're men. We're stupid.
Igor: What, you think it's only a male thing?
Igor: Yes. Women aren't this stupid.
Igor: I suppose not.
Igor: They don't set out on stupid, ill-thought out adventures.
Igor: No. Not really.
Igor: Of course not. They're smarter. Much smarter than we are.
Igor: But we always do stupid things.
Igor: Exactly.
Igor: So?
Igor: So, can you picture two girls doing what we just did? Even being in this situation?
Igor: Probably not.
Igor: Probably? No way. It would never happen. They're not as stupid as we are.
Igor: But they don't risk as much as we do.
Igor: I don't know. It depends.
Igor: Of course it depends, but we're generalizing. On the whole—
Igor: You're right. On the whole girls don't risk as often as we do.
Igor: What does that say about us?
Igor: That we're stupid men.
Igor: This is true.
Igor: Speaking of stupidity, any thoughts on this evening?
Igor: What do you mean?
Igor: Well, we do have to sleep somewhere.
Igor: That's true. We'll play it by ear. Let's see who we run in to at this happening.
Igor: What do you mean?
Igor: Who knows? Hopefully we'll meet some people.
Igor: Our age?
Igor: Yes. Our age.
Igor: Girls?
Igor: Yes. Girls, hopefully.
Igor: But why would girls be going to this thing?
Igor: For the same reason we're going.
Igor: Yes, but we're stupid.
Igor: True. But this a happening. I'm sure there will be girls there. At least to witness our stupidity if nothing else.

Igor and Igor pulled drags off the remains of their cigarettes (all filter) and then stubbed them out in the red plastic ashtray. Hunched over, Igor walked to the restroom and when he returned his face was full of color and he bounced with vibrant steps. Igor wondered what wonderful drugs Igor had used to trigger this fantastic physical change. Or if his friend, little Igor, had superpowers. But then Igor told him that he had merely extricated his bowels and that he recommended, if there was even an inkling of a movement stirring in Igor's stomach, that he do the same. Igor too wanted to feel better so he used the restroom. When he emerged fifteen minutes later his color had also returned and now Igor and Igor looked ready to enjoy life.

Sixth Street was a huge hill, straight up, with triple-decker houses carved into the side, their foundations and driveways laid straight. It appeared practically impossible to drive a car in to or out of a driveway. Parked cars lined both sides of the street. They must all have their emergency brakes pulled, Igor thought but didn't say. The address on the first house was one twenty-two. The Riverview Social Club's address was two hundred twelve. Igor and Igor sighed heavily and began to climb, walking up the center of the wet blacktop street. They climbed in silence, exhaling powerfully. Fifteen minutes later, as they closed in on the summit the addresses were in the one eighties. Igor and Igor huffed their way up the last three houses, cursing the two cigarettes apiece they smoked in McDonalds. As they reached the top of the hill Igor and Igor's eyes widened and Igor muttered, "What the..."

Before them was all black.

Igor: What is this?

Igor: I think it's a reservoir.

Igor: A what?

Igor: A reservoir.

Igor: A reservoir? Why here?

Igor: That I don't know.

Igor: But...

Igor's eyes darted everywhere at once: he looked down the hill they climbed, he looked at the small brick pumphouse in front of them, he looked up at the full moon, he looked at the last house on Sixth Street, one eighty-eight.

Igor: Where's the rest of Sixth Street?

Igor: Maybe it starts up again on the other side of the reservoir?

Igor: What?

Igor: On the other side of the reservoir—

Igor: I heard what you said. That's impossible.

Igor: No it's not.

Igor: Well it's highly unlikely.

Igor: That may be.

Igor walked over to the grass and sat on a wooden picnic table (feet on bench, butt on table). Igor followed and sat next to him. They said nothing. There was nothing to say. The situation warranted a long think and both knew it. Igor pulled out his cigarettes and lit one. Without looking at him he handed the pack and lighter to Igor. Igor accepted the cigarettes and lighter without looking at Igor and held them quietly in his hands.

Igor: Aren't you going to have one?

Igor: In a minute. Yes.

Igor stared into the black abyss, angrily sucking down his cigarette. In the moonlight the water looked dark purple. The reservoir was long and wide, at least twelve football fields in size. Igor and Igor sat at a short end of its rectangle. Igor could see the trees that ran the perimeter of the three sides and the houses that sat behind them. Igor only saw the dark water and heard it lapping quietly against the shore. The far side was barely visible, even with Igor's keen vision. It was a big reservoir.

Igor: Are you going to smoke that?

Igor: All right. All right.

Igor lit a cigarette.

Igor: Better?

Igor: Yes. Thank you...Why would they put a reservoir at the top of this big hill?

Igor: Why not?

Igor: That's not an answer.

Igor: Sure it is.

Igor: It's not a productive answer.

Igor: Why not build it up here?

Igor: There's a river right there!

Igor: So?

Igor: So why would they need a reservoir?

Igor: To collect rain.

Igor: I know what a reservoir does!

Igor: Then what's the problem?

Igor: They have a river!

Igor: It's probably polluted.

Igor: Ah, (his face froze) that makes sense then.

Igor and Igor pulled simultaneous drags, then they exhaled the smoke simultaneously. Lost in so-called deep thoughts neither one noticed their synchronized smoking.

Igor: Well, what should we do?

Igor: We only have two options.

Igor: True.

Igor: Onwards or downwards.

Igor: What do you think?

Igor: I think we should—

Igor looked back down the hill and suddenly his mouth dropped open and he froze.

Igor: —wait a minute.

He rifled through his pockets.

Igor: What? What is it?

Igor: What's the address?

Igor: It's two twelve Sixth Street. That much we know.

Igor flicked his cigarette, jumped down from the picnic table and stepped into the street. He found the purple pamphlet crammed in his left pant pocket and removed it. Under the streetlight he scanned the words as if in search of winning lottery numbers.

Igor: What? What is it?

Igor: Yes! That's it!

Igor raised his arms in jubilation.

Igor: What? What?

Igor: Oh, shit.

He dropped them.

Igor: What's the problem?

Igor: Read that street sign.

Igor: Okay. Sixth Street.

Igor paused.

Igor: W. Sixth Street.

Igor: West Sixth Street!

Igor: Right.

Igor: We want Sixth Street.

Igor: Yes. But at the bottom—
Igor: It only said Sixth Street, right?
Igor: Yes.
Igor: This is West Sixth Street. Sixth Street must go the other way.
Igor: Oh, shit. But you think the numbers—
Igor: Go back up?
Igor: Yes.
Igor: I don't know, but I'll bet they do.
Igor: Shit.
Igor paused and looked at the pumphouse.
Igor: Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit. We are so stupid.
Igor: Not really. It was tricky.
Igor: No. But normal people—
Igor: Would buy a map?
Igor: Yes.
Igor: That's true. If we had a map this could've been avoided.
Igor: All right. Let's go.
Igor: Give me a smoke.
Igor: You want another cigarette?
Igor: I think I deserve one. Don't you?
Igor: Yes. Of course.

At the bottom of the hill, across Main Street, the street sign read Sixth Street. No W. The address on the first house was two.

14.

The Riverview Social Club looked like an American Legion hall. It was a white brick building with glass double doors and a full parking lot in front. Next door was a Sunoco gas station. Three blocks down Bridge Street was the Mackinaw.

Igor: I'm going to get some smokes.
Igor: I was thinking about something.
Igor: Yes?
Igor: Maybe we should get a bottle of wine.
Igor: I'm sure they have a bar in there.
Igor: No. For later.
Igor: Later?
Igor: In case we don't find people to stay with. Or girls. It's cold out.

Igor had a point and Igor knew it. The temperature hovered around fifty degrees but there was a cold breeze in the air that precursed cold temperatures.

“Are you driving?” the clerk asked. He took a large bite off a buffalo wing that looked minuscule in his thick hands. His chubby cheeks were smeared with barbecue sauce and a few drops stained his t-shirt at the point where his gut began. His large outstretched hand held Igor's change.

“No. We're walking.” Igor picked the change out of his sweaty palm.
“You're walking?” the clerk said. “Hmmm...” He pursed his lips, held the picked-clean bone between the tips of his fingers, and stared off past Igor and Igor in search of an answer.

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

“Not for me,” he tossed the bone in the trash, “but it might be for you guys.”

“There has to be a liquor store close by.” Igor tried to turn the statement into a fact.

“Well, there is one over by Shaw’s,” the clerk leaned back on his stool, “but it’s a bit of a hike.”

“It’s okay. How do we get there?”

The clerk explained the route. It was a simple route involving only three streets.

What the clerk failed to tell Igor and Igor, because he was thinking in terms of driving, was that Eighth Street was a hill comparable in size to Mt. West Sixth Street.

“Do you really need a bottle of wine?” asked Igor. His eyes followed the streetlights as they grew smaller and fainter as they rose up and up and up.

“Trust me. You’ll thank me that we have it.”

“All right,” Igor sighed, “smoke?”

“Better wait until we reach the top.”

“That’s true.”

So the weary travelers began another climb. It was a good thing Igor and Igor were young men or they wouldn’t have been able to push on physically, nor would they have had the predisposition to walk such a great distance for a lone bottle of wine. But they were young men, and as Igor and Igor themselves proved in debate, young men are nothing if not prone to acts of stupidity.

The climb was uneventful and boring. Again, Igor and Igor pushed onwards and literally upwards in silence, only their heavy breaths making sound. It was the best way. Best to endure the struggle silently. Not crack jokes or discuss the happening or debate foreign policy between the United States and Sri Lanka. Not that Igor and Igor ever did that. Climbing in silence forced Igor and Igor to focus on the task at hand. The hill before them. As any good mountain climber knows it is best not to discuss the summit until one stands upon it. Igor’s eyes fixed firmly on the sidewalk cracks before him; Igor focused on Igor’s heels, and in no time they were once again inadvertently climbing in unison like marching soldiers. By the top both had taken off their hats, unzipped their jackets, and unbuttoned their shirts, allowing the night breezes to cool their perspiring necks and chests.

“I think that’s it over there,” Igor said sarcastically. A small illuminated storefront sign read Liquor Store. Chest heaving, Igor nonetheless lit up a cigarette and offered one to Igor who initially refused then decided he wanted one before they went inside.

The liquor store was small. Along the back wall were four glass coolers stocked full of assorted beers. Wrapping around from left were shelves with sodas, mixers, and thirty packs of cheaper beer: MGD, Coors, Budweiser. Half of one small shelf was devoted to wines. The checkout counter was on the right. Up and down its racks were snacks and candies, potato chips and gums, beef jerky and breath mints. All the liquor bottles were kept along the wall behind the counter, behind the clerk, an old man smoking a cigarette and studying the lines in the sports page. Igor and Igor entered the liquor store with sharp headaches from the post-climb cigarettes. They said hello to the old man and he responded cordially, “How are you doing?” The clerk’s eyes followed Igor and Igor as they bypassed all the beer and moved straight to the wine shelf. It wasn’t everyday two young men toting backpacks walked out of the darkness into his store in search of wine. The clerk didn’t think it strange or queer (no, his thoughts were far from prejudiced), he simply found Igor and Igor amusing. Especially the way they debated with serious faces which twelve-dollar bottle of wine to purchase.

“Should we get a French or a Californian?” asked Igor.

“I don’t know. Listen to this,” said Igor. He read the back label on a Californian bottle: “The robust flavor goes wonderfully with fish, poultry, and pizza.” Igor laughed. “I don’t know much about wine but I don’t think that’s a good sign.”

“No. Definitely not,” Igor agreed. They checked every bottle on the shelf, examining labels as if they were diamond inspectors. The clerk chuckled when Igor slowly shook his head No, but Igor and Igor paid no notice, they were focused on procuring the perfect bottle for their evening.

Finally, when Igor was about to recommend a French bottle he thought looked legitimate because the label was written entirely en francaise, Igor said, “What about this one?”

“What is it?” Igor responded.

“It’s an Australian wine.”

“Australian, eh? I don’t know anything about Australian wine.” Igor didn’t know anything about any wine.

“Neither do I.” Neither did Igor.

“Should we give it a try?”

“Does it really matter?”

“No. Not really.”

“Then let’s get it.”

“Okay.”

They walked up to the clerk and put the Australian bottle on the countertop.

The old man held the bottle up to the light and turned it, squinting to examine the label. “A very good choice, sirs,” he declared as he snapped open a brown paper bag and placed the bottle inside. “An excellent year and vintage.”

Igor and Igor stared at the old man and for a long two seconds the old man held a serious face before a smile crept up the sides of his mouth until it grew into a massive grin and he burst out laughing, which quickly turned to coughing. Igor and Igor were momentarily paralyzed with shock, but once the old man said, “I’m just shittin’ you guys,” Igor and Igor’s faces also alighted with laughter.

“We don’t really know anything about wine,” said Igor.

“The way you guys were studying the stuff,” the old man laughed and coughed, “you’d think you were buying the Hope diamond.”

“Sometimes we get carried away,” said Igor.

“That’s okay. There’s no harm in it. You didn’t hurt anybody. It was just funny.” The old man picked up his cigarette from the glass ashtray and took a drag that cured his coughing instantly.

“As long as we’re amusing, that’s all that matters,” Igor joked with a big smile.

“That’s right,” the old man smiled back.

Igor bought a backup pack of cigarettes and they exited the store. The clerk’s grinning face took a drag from his cigarette and watched them cross the street and disappear into the darkness.

15.

Admission price to The Riverview Social Club was ten dollars. Igor found this exorbitant, dishonest, absurd. Then Igor reminded him that a movie cost the same and that they were guaranteed live entertainment, poetry, and cheap beer. Plus, the Higgins Committee that Roger headed had to pay for the hall rental some way. Igor’s unmotivated anger disappeared and he reluctantly agreed that the price was fair.

The room was set up like a wedding reception and dimly lit like a high school dance. White tablecloths hung over two dozen circular tables, each seating eight people comfortably. The far end of the room had a parquet dance floor with a band on twelve-inch risers. The band was dressed in tuxedos and consisted of drums, piano, upright bass, guitar, and bongos. When Igor and Igor entered, the evening's chief musical guest, a tenor saxophone player named Albert Jacobs—his toothy picture was displayed in the lobby—played a somber number as the rest of the band (bongos excluded) supported him with a quiet groove. Except for the last few tables, the room was full. Igor and Igor chose an empty table in the rear and put down their backpacks as if they were about to set up camp. But as Igor and Igor scanned the room their excited faces diminished as they realized everyone at the happening was the same age or older than their parents. The final dagger was thrust into their hope. There was nothing left to do but get drunk.

For some strange reason the bar was setup behind the band so drinkers had to walk discreetly around the musicians, trying not to interrupt the number, and then return back around them without spilling multiple drinks. Drinks were cheap: two dollars for a beer, three for mixed drinks. Igor carried two Heineken's back to their rear table. As he returned the band finished their number and the room applauded quietly and graciously.

"This is like being in a jazz methadone clinic," said Igor. He quickly threw back half his beer.

Igor: I feel like I'm at a fifty year high school reunion.

Igor: Obviously these people don't know who we are.

Igor: No. I don't think they do.

Igor: Should we tell them?

Igor: Not just yet. Keep them guessing awhile.

Igor slammed his empty bottle down on the clothed table and without asking Igor made his way to the bar where he ordered two more Heinkens and returned as Igor was finishing off his first.

"It appears we're getting drunk tonight," said Igor, accepting a fresh, cold beer.

"Absolutely," said Igor, "there's no other way to deal with this dire situation we find ourselves in. This is war."

Roger's committee dug up a former buddy of Higgins named Walter Scott who must have been eighty years old. He was thin, practically bald, and wore a shirt, tie, and jacket that were all, even the wide tie, too big for him. Igor and Igor had never heard of Scott and they were schooled in the regulars from Higgins' crew. Most of his close associates became famous in their own right anyway. But they were all dead, long ago dead. Their lifestyles didn't promote long living. Walter was the best they could do. He knew Jim, drank with Jim, even once drove to Atlantic City with Jim, but still, something about Walter's stories rang false. Igor couldn't be certain, and it might have been the four quick beers talking, but to him, and he was the more versed in Higgins lore than Igor, to him Walter's stories sounded like the stuff of bad fiction. Scott even claimed that Higgins wrote his famous short story, *Visions of Atlantis*, about one of their weekend adventures together. Igor looked incredulously at Igor and then said, louder than he meant to, "This guy's full of shit." A blue-haired lady from another table shot Igor a stern look. Igor smiled back, a big sloppy grin, and the old woman said something put-off to her husband.

Igor, on the other hand, had managed to strike up a conversation with a cute brunette at the table next to them. Miraculously, right after Igor and Igor began their second beers and right after Igor's This is War comment, a group of young people, college students, arrived and sat at the tables surrounding Igor and Igor. The girl was a small brunette with a short pixie haircut,

dressed in black stockings, a short plaid skirt, and a blouse with a denim coat over it. A blue silk scarf was tied sloppily around her neck and she had a single-stud nose ring. She was small and sexy and Igor couldn't help himself, especially after five rapid-fire beers, he had to speak with her.

Meanwhile, Walter Scott recited his own poetry and Igor was now certain Scott was full of shit because his poetry was atrocious:

The blue catapult shanghaied government
Children make whispers to the gods above
Castrated choirs work for sweet manna
The drunken lost poet cries out for love

“Oh, come on!” Igor shouted. Heads turned slowly to the back but in the dimly lit room very few people could tell the words came from Igor.

Igor's drunken attempts to woo made the brown-haired girl laugh.

“You look like someone who waterskis,” said Igor.

“What?” the girl laughed.

“Or, I'll bet you enjoy curling.”

“What?” she laughed.

“No? Okay, third time's the one. You're a psychology major who enjoys acting?”

“What?” she said. “How'd you know that? It's true.”

“Lucky guess,” said Igor. And indeed it was a drunken lucky guess. The girl was floored by Igor's comment and suddenly wanted to know everything there was to know (there wasn't much) to explore the netherworlds of Igor.

Walter Scott continued reading his poetry, trying to capture a jazzy cadence but forced to stop every few lines to clear his throat. The rage inside Igor over this (he-thought) imposter grew and made him involuntarily squeeze his empty Heineken bottle almost to the point of breaking it in his hands but he wasn't strong enough.

“No. Really? How did you know?” the girl asked again.

“I just knew,” Igor replied. “I could tell.”

“You're lying,” she laughed. “You talked to somebody. What's your name?”

“Igor,” said Igor.

“Igor? What's your real name?”

“That is my real name.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Really.” Igor's jaw muscles flashed, showing that her comment hurt his feelings.

“I didn't mean it like that. It's a cool name. I've just never met an Igor before.”

“Well that's okay,” said Igor, “there's an Igor right there.” He pointed to Igor.

“His name's Igor?” she said. “And you're Igor?”

“That's right.”

“Oh, come on?”

“What?”

“Igor and Igor?”

“It's true. Ask him.” Igor tapped Igor on the shoulder.

“What?” snapped Igor.

“Whoah,” said Igor.

“Sorry,” replied Igor.

“Excuse me,” the girl interrupted, “what's your name?”

“My name’s Igor,” said Igor.

“Really?” she asked.

“Yes, really. What’s your name?”

“Iris.”

“Iris?” said Igor, “really?”

“Yes, really,” said Iris, “why?”

“It’s just that I’ve never met anybody named Iris before.”

“Oh, come on?”

“No. Really.”

Walter Scott was still reading his pointless poetry and in the rapture of the moment Igor politely excused himself to Igor and Iris, stood up, and exclaimed, “Enough already!”

This time everyone’s eyes turned to Igor. Walter Scott continued reading, apparently not hearing Igor’s shout or choosing to ignore it. The former was probably the truth. Igor sat back down and everyone’s eyes slowly returned to Walter Scott. Iris felt a rush of adrenaline shoot up her spine from the excitement aroused by Igor and Igor.

“Where are you from?” she asked Igor, pointing to their backpacks.

“Oh, we’re from Maine,” said Igor. And so began the tale retold of Igor and Igor’s flight from the woods of Maine to visit Galloway for the festive festival. Halfway through the story, with Iris laughing and Igor’s ear still focused on Scott’s reading, two things happened and they happened very fast.

First, a young man arrived at Iris’ table and upon noticing Igor and Iris, knees touching, laughing together, the young man’s face turned red and before he could think he ran up and overturned Igor’s chair, with Igor in it, sending Igor to the floor. At this same instant, at the precise moment the red young man pounced and Igor fell to the floor, Igor’s anger also grew to proportions beyond his control, he stood (as Igor fell) and declared, “This is a Travesty!” so loud that all heads turned and finally Walter Scott stopped reciting his awful poetry and squinted into the darkness having no idea what his heckler said.

After blurting out his statement about the evening’s prize entertainment, Igor felt good about himself. He felt relieved. A sea of calm swept over his nerves. Then again, it could have been the five beers. When he turned left and noticed Igor lying on the ground, his upturned chair under him and beer spilled on his chest, Igor was at first confused about how the unfortunate picture had occurred. Igor and Igor’s eyes met and, as always, they conversed without need to speak. Igor brought his gaze up from the grounded Igor and saw standing before him, to the left of Iris, a big red Irish young man. His name was probably Murphy or Kilkenny or Hennessey. Igor ignored his racing mind. He knew with his friend on the ground that immediate action was necessary, so, with all eyes in the room staring at him, he lunged at the red young man, grabbed the front of his jacket in two clumps of fist, and pushed with all his might; but it was no use, the big red boy didn’t go down. Instead, he deftly swung Igor around and threw him onto the table behind them. But Igor wouldn’t let go of the big red boy’s chest and pulled him with him onto the white table that collapsed with a crash under their weight as the table’s occupants fled. As Igor tangoed with the big red boy, Iris screamed out, “Peter! Stop it! What are you—” but she was cut off by the smash as the table fell. Igor, stunned for a couple seconds by his awkward backwards tumble in his chair, jumped to his feet and was about to pull Peter off Igor when some of Peter’s friends, three nameless red boys smaller than Peter but bigger than Igor, grabbed Igor before he could help Igor. Luckily for Igor, they saw what had happened and were not interested in hurting Igor, merely keeping him from hurting Peter who was about to hurt Igor. During the

crash and fall on the table Igor smacked the back of his head and hurt his chest with all the weight from Peter landing on his ribcage. Igor was in quite a predicament being under the much bigger Peter and also in pain. The crash of the table momentarily stunned Peter. As he quickly regained his senses and was about to punch Igor square in the nose, two men pulled Peter off Igor and held him back. By this time the fluorescent lights were on in the back of the room. All of this should be rewritten in slow motion.

Igor and Peter flailed wildly to rid themselves of the arms holding them back. Igor didn't really want to fight Peter who was big and mean looking, he just wanted the hands all over him to let go. Igor was, however, concerned about Igor, and also mightily grateful that his friend didn't think twice about grappling with a hooligan much bigger than himself. Peter wanted to fight Igor but oddly felt no ill will at all towards Igor, and hidden deep down housed guilt for slamming him so hard against the table. After all, Peter knew, he was performing the duty of defending his friend, a noble trait, even if the friend was flirting with his girlfriend. Iris, characteristically, felt awful and slightly guilty herself. Igor and Igor, uncharacteristically, felt no guilt about anything whatsoever. Iris rushed to Peter to calm him and control him from seriously injuring Igor or Igor.

Igor slowly pulled himself up from the table, holding the back of his pounding head and feeling his chest for the bruises from Peter's knuckles. By this time everyone around the scene stood and Roger appeared. He rubbed his forehead and when he finished his face bore a pained expression from the bright light and sad situation he resided over. Peter and Igor relaxed enough to be let go. Igor stood beside the injured Igor and Iris buried herself in Peter's chest out of affection and figuring he couldn't destroy Igor if she hung from his jacket. Roger walked up to Igor and Igor and spoke quietly, avoiding eye contact because he was so disappointed. "You guys are going to have to leave," he said. "I'm sorry." Igor and Igor looked at each other and knew that there was no point arguing. It didn't matter who started the fight, they were both mixed up in it and besides, aside from Roger, no one had any idea who they were. They slowly put on their coats and picked up their backpacks. They exited to a silent room behind them, and once outside, after Igor inspected Igor's head, they sprinted down Bridge Street towards the Mackinaw without looking back.

16.

At the stone bridge Igor and Igor turned around and saw Peter and his three friends turn the corner in front of the social club and take off running towards them. Peter led the charge, running with long strides like a graceful wide receiver. Three long blocks separated them. Igor and Igor ran across the unlit bridge without looking back. One would think that because Igor's legs were much longer than Igor's that Igor would have trouble keeping up with Igor. But the opposite was true. Igor attempted to stay with Igor, but secretly he feared hands suddenly snatching his backpack and pushing him over the side and down the forty feet to the dark, quiet river. Like a man scared of heights told not to look down, Igor didn't look back. Once across they turned around and glimpsed their pursuers in the streetlight before they disappeared into the darkness of the bridge.

"What should we do?" Igor asked. His hand applied pressure to the back of his throbbing head.

"I don't know. But come on. Come on!" ordered Igor.

They ran down Bridge Street for three more blocks, their sneakers smacking the sidewalk pavement. A group—actually a gang—of African-American young men hanging out in a lit

basketball court was chatting leisurely, some shooting hoops, others sitting, but when they saw Igor and Igor, two mismatched goofy-looking white boys with backpacks sprinting noisily along the sidewalk, the entire gang of twelve stopped what they were doing and watched. Igor noticed all the eyes on them and stopped abruptly, causing Igor, looking behind for Peter, to run smack into his backpack. The gang erupted with laughter. Igor and Igor looked at each other. Then they looked over at all the eyes staring at them. Then they looked back at the Mackinaw. They walked side by side slowly, trying to ignore the gang. Igor was certain that at any moment they would gain even more pursuers.

But a strange thing happened.

“Hey! White boy, what are you guys running from?”

Igor and Igor stopped dead in their tracks, turned their heads slowly, and looked across the street. The leader of the gang, oddly the smallest man on the court, stood in front of his posse, with his hands on his waist, waiting for an answer.

“Some Nazis!” shouted Igor. He stepped into the empty street to cross.

“Nazis?” replied the leader. “What in God’s name are you talking about?”

Igor reluctantly followed Igor across the street to the gang. He looked back to the Mackinaw and saw Peter’s group reemerge into the light. Igor had no idea what Igor was thinking, but the confidence Igor snapped on the moment he replied to the leader made Igor think that maybe Igor had a plan.

Igor and Igor approached the leader and his gang. “There’s some crazy Hitler youth types after us,” explained Igor.

“And why is that?” asked the leader.

Igor looked straight at the leader and replied, dead-serious, “Because we’re black.”

The leader looked Igor in the eye and laughed, “Because you’re black,” he muttered, “crazy white boy.” But he laughed at Igor’s ridiculous statement. And his gang also laughed. Igor, however, laughed uncomfortably, his eyes glued to the approaching Peter. Igor smiled and held the leader’s eyes. Half the gang returned to shooting hoops.

“What’s the real deal, Robert?” the leader said in a mock-Caucasian tone, causing snickers from the group.

“The real deal,” Igor began, “is that we’re from out of town and these dudes you see running towards us over there, they didn’t like that fact and so now they want to kill us.” Igor was amazed at Igor’s way of balancing forceful diction with a supplicant tone. He was certain, any minute, someone was to start beating them.

“That’s no good, Robert,” the leader said.

“The name’s Igor.” Igor put out his right hand and cemented his eye contact straight at the leader’s eyes. They stood eyeball to eyeball on the same plane. The leader stared Igor down for a long four seconds then snapped his arm forward and gripped Igor’s hand.

“Tommy,” said the leader. He shook Igor’s hand. “What kind of name is Igor?”

“Yeah. I know. It’s a strange one. Listen, Tommy, could you do me a favor and let us hang out with you a minute so these morons get scared away?”

“What makes you think they’ll get scared away?”

“Tommy,” Igor pulled close to him like he was passing a secret, “look at your friends here. Any sane white person, upon coming into contact with this crew, would be terrified.” A large gang member slam dunked the basketball, with two hands, through the chain-link net.

“How come you’re not?” Tommy asked.

“I’m not sane,” Igor replied smiling. Tommy exhaled a puff of air out his nose and smiled.

Peter's group slowed to a walk when they noticed Igor and Igor and their big black posse across the street. Peter bit his bottom lip and rolled his shoulders a few times. Igor, Tommy, Igor, and the rest of the gang stood and looked across the street at Peter's small crew. Igor crossed his arms and then looked behind him to make sure the gang was not a figment of his imagination. Peter, pumped full of adrenaline from the nighttime jog, puffed his chest and then he pointed at Igor and Igor from across the street as if to issue a warning. Before Igor could speak, Tommy, insulted by Peter's brash gesture, stepped forward and yelled out, "Who you pointing at?" Peter dropped his pointing arm immediately and slowly retreated back down Bridge Street with his relieved supporters tracking close behind.

Tommy placed his hand on Igor's shoulder and whispered, "Watch this...HEY!" Tommy shouted from his gut. Peter and his friends jumped at least three feet straight up in the air and took off running towards the river. Tommy pinched Igor's shoulder and doubled-over with laughter at his prank. Igor laughed with him, enjoying the moment; Igor chuckled uncomfortably.

"It's nice to have someone I can talk to eye to eye," Tommy said to Igor.

"I know exactly how you feel," Igor replied. "Thanks for the help."

"No problem," said Tommy. He pulled Igor aside, leaving Igor in the awkward position of having eleven sets of eyes focused on his nervous face. "Let me ask you something," Tommy said. "Level with me. Mano e Mano."

"Sure," said Igor.

"How did you know we weren't going to beat the shit out of you? I'm interested. For my own reasons."

"Well," Igor began, "I didn't. But I figured we were already going to get beat up by somebody. They would have caught us eventually with our backpacks, so I figured if I came over here and leveled with you, talked to you, like a normal person, and didn't run away, and didn't show fear—wasn't arrogant—but didn't show fear, then you might help us. Which you did. And I thank you for. And if not, you could all easily destroy us, so why would you bother. It was all luck really."

"That's it?" Tommy said incredulously.

"Pretty much," said Igor. "And once I saw you, I could tell you wanted to have a chat with someone your own size and not these redwoods you've got over there."

"Fair enough, man, fair enough." Tommy laughed and shook Igor's hand with both of his, like an appreciative politician.

"Thanks again," Igor said.

"No problem," replied Tommy.

"Listen, don't take this the wrong way, but I want to give you something and it's all we've got."

Igor called Igor over and had him take off his backpack so he could remove the brown paper bag.

"Here you go," said Igor. He held out the paper bag.

"What is this?" Tommy unsheathed the gift. "A bottle of wine?"

"Unfortunately, it's all we have."

"What do you think we sit around in the bleachers sipping Bordeaux?" Tommy laughed at his own joke and his crew followed suit.

"I don't know," said Igor, "but it's all we've got and it's for saving our asses. Do whatever you want—You can give it to your girlfriend."

"All right, Igor, man, I might just do that." Tommy held the bottle up to the light and examined the label.

17.

In a renovated mill the dance club Locktender throbbed with such loud bass that Igor and Igor felt the sidewalk shake as they walked past. A line of dressed-up young people—girls in high heels, short skirts, wearing too much makeup; guys in slick Italian suits over white muscle t-shirts, gelled hair, and wearing cheap shoes—stood outside waiting for the bouncer to pull open the big red double doors and let them experience the Xanadu of drinking and jumping around. The chicken-wire windows pulsed with flashes of colored light and Igor and Igor looked at each other and walked across the street into a blue-collar bar named Mullin's.

Mullin's was in the basement of the old Sanford Mill. It was not busy so Igor and Igor positioned themselves in a corner, drank pitchers of cold Budweiser, and watched two locals play a heated game of pool as the fat bartender eyed the scene suspiciously. A drunk man with a bushy mustache lost the match by knocking in the eight ball. Upset with himself, his grinning opponent, the world, the man cocked his cue like a baseball player at bat and was about to swing at the victor whose grin immediately disappeared. Igor and Igor froze, Igor mid-sip; the bartender stopped wiping down the bar and scowled at the fight he knew was about to start. The loser spun around and swung the cue into a Schlitz mirror on the wall. The cue snapped in half and smashed the beer mirror into a hundred pieces. The mirror slid to the floor like a dead cowboy after taking two in the chest. Then the drunk man, surprised by his own stupidity, dropped the broken cue and rubbed his eyes with his hands. When the bartender approached, obviously the loser's friend, the man hugged the bartender, apologized, and said he would pay for the damages. Not presently, though, because he owed his opponent two hundred dollars already. The bartender told him to relax, sit down at the bar, and have a beer. But after handing over the two hundred bucks to the winner, the embarrassed man stumbled out of the bar. The bartender followed him outside but returned alone. The winner was nice enough to sweep up the shards. Igor got the feeling this type of scene was commonplace at Mullin's.

Igor: How did you know they wouldn't kill us?

Igor: I had a hunch.

Igor: A hunch?

Igor: Yes, a hunch.

Igor: No. It was more than a hunch.

Igor: Not really.

Igor: Yes it was.

Igor: No.

Igor: Yes, it was.

Igor: Okay. I figured a dozen black guys wouldn't waste their time beating us up.

Igor: Right, because that never happens in the real world. Are you kidding me?

Igor: Look. We got lucky. Let's not dwell on it. Our karma is good.

Igor: It's golden.

Igor: Yes. But let's move on.

Igor: How did you know they wouldn't beat us up?

Igor: I didn't! We just got lucky.

Igor: Then where did all the confidence come from?

Igor: I put on an act.

Igor: Yes you did.
Igor: That's all.
Igor: Well it was truly amazing. I'm impressed.
Igor: Thank you.
Igor: The bottle of wine was a nice touch.
Igor: You like that?
Igor: Oh, it was magnifico!
Igor: How's the head?
Igor: Eh, it's all right. My chest hurts more now.
Igor: Why's that?
Igor: Bruises from the oaf's knuckles. Where did he come from?
Igor: I don't know.
Igor: He just seemed to magically appear.
Igor: I know.
Igor: That girl was very cute.
Igor: Iris.
Igor: That's right, she was an Iris.
Igor: Yes.
Igor: You should marry that girl. It's rare to find an Iris.
Igor: It's true.
Igor: She had a great face.
Igor: Yes.
Igor: Good bone structure.
Igor: Indeed.
Igor: Lovely hair.
Igor: Absolutely.
Igor: Nice little body.
Igor: Sure.
Igor: Great hands.
Igor: Yes. You noticed her hands?
Igor: I notice everything. It will all be in my report.
Igor: Why so much anger about Walter Scott?
Igor: Oh, that asshole.
Igor: What?
Igor: Don't even bring it up. I feel my blood rising.
Igor: Why?
Igor: Did you hear the man?
Igor: Yes. Not really.
Igor: He was horrible.
Igor: He was old.
Igor: That's no excuse.
Igor: He was an old man.
Igor: That doesn't matter. If anything he should be better. All that experience.
Igor: You took it very personally.
Igor: Well...someone had to.
Igor: Plus you were drunk.

Igor: Also true.

Igor: What did you shout?

Igor: I don't remember.

Igor: This is a travesty?

Igor: Something like that.

Igor: A travesty?

Igor: Oh, shut up.

Igor and Igor finished off four pitchers of beer and in the process they fell into a toasted maze of toasts: Igor toasted Igor for his bravery at the basketball court. Igor toasted Igor for jumping in and defending him against Peter. Igor toasted Igor for picking a fine new bottle of Bordeaux (Igor and Igor found an open liquor store a few blocks away from the basketball court and purchased a new bottle of wine, a cheap Bordeaux inspired by Tommy's comment). Igor toasted Igor for castigating Walter Scott. And Igor toasted Igor for attempting a liaison with the lovely Iris. Then Igor toasted Igor for relieving him from Raymond. So Igor toasted Igor for discovering that West Sixth Street was not Sixth Street. And, of course, Igor toasted Igor for having the bold idea to embark on their adventure in the first place.

After two hours of toasting each other between long silences spent smoking or staring up at a bantamweight boxing match playing on a television hanging in the corner, Igor and Igor were obviously drunk. But they were finally relaxed. Before last call Igor sat bolt upright and, as if a lightbulb illuminated above his sweaty, red head, he realized a problem that soon faced Igor and Igor.

Igor: We don't have a corkscrew.

Igor: What's that? No. No we don't.

Igor: How will we open the bottle of wine?

Igor: We can cork it.

Igor: Cork it. What's that?

Igor: That's when you thumb the cork in.

Igor: Oh, no. We can't do that.

Igor stared groggily at Igor, surprised at the level of gravity he spoke the last sentence. "Okay?" he said.

Igor: How about the bartender?

Igor: Give it a shot.

Igor: Do you think he'd help us?

Igor: I don't see why not.

And so Igor pulled the bottle of Bordeaux out of the brown paper bag, walked up to the bar, and placed the bottle—more to the point, accidentally dropped the bottle down hard on the bar. The thump didn't surprise the bartender nearly as much as the sight of a Bordeaux on his bar.

"Can I help you?" the bartender said suspiciously.

"Yes," replied Igor, "this is a strange question, but I have a favor to ask. I was wondering if you could possibly open this bottle of wine for me. You see, we don't have a corkscrew, and we're not going to drink it here, in your bar, it's for later. But we just need to open it so that we don't have to cork it, which I really don't want to do. And it would be a great help to us, a big favor, and I'd really appreciate it. Just a quick pop is all really. That's all we need." Igor smiled.

The bartender gently tossed his rag on the bar, chewed his gum slowly, and then with his hands anchored to the bar he looked at Igor incredulously.

"Are you for real?" the bartender said.

“Excuse me?” Igor replied, still smiling.
“I think it’s time for you two to go.”
“We’re not going to drink it. We just need your assistance opening it—”
“Son, it’s time to leave. Okay?” The bartender leaned in towards Igor.
“Okay. Very good. Thank you.” Igor retreated to their table in the corner.
“What happened?” said Igor.
“No dice,” said Igor. He resheathed the Bordeaux and placed it back in his backpack.
Igor: No dice? How come?
Igor: The bartender’s a Nazi.
Igor: Really? Perhaps we should leave?
Igor: Yes. We better.
Igor: Right now?
Igor: Yes. Right now. He told me to leave.
Igor: What about me?
Igor: You too. He called us you two. It’s time to go.
Igor: You too or you two?
Igor: Both.
Igor: Well, sit down. Let’s finish the pitcher first.
Igor: He’s eyeing us.
Igor: He is?
Igor: Yes.
Igor: Okay. Then we’ll take it with us.
Igor: We can’t do that.
Igor: No. I suppose not. Well, let’s down a glass. Real quick. A final toast.
Igor: Okay. Fine.
Igor poured two full glasses, almost emptying the pitcher.
Igor: To the bartender...
Igor: Yes. The bartender.
Igor: May he live long, and die a slow and unbearable death, hopefully involving electric shock and his genitals.
Igor: Good Lord.
Igor and Igor chugged their beers in big gulps, the kind only acquired after hours of heavy drinking when all rationality is lost. Igor downed the entire twelve-ounce glass in a few glugs. Igor stopped halfway for a breather and then finished off the rest.
Igor slammed his empty glass on the table. “Shall we?”
Igor slammed down his glass. “Yes. Let us shall.”

18.

The Dairy Mart was empty. The clerk sucked a lollipop and read a dirty magazine that he lowered when the doors opened, but once he noticed it was only Igor and Igor he returned to admiring the pornographic pictures and sucking.

Igor was on a quest for two things: apple juice and peanut butter cups, two strangely paired cravings. Igor simply wanted more cigarettes and a cup of hot chocolate, but as he was paying for the smokes the clerk informed him that they didn’t have any hot cocoa, only coffee, which Igor didn’t want.

The store was east of downtown Galloway. After leaving Mullin's bar Igor and Igor debated what to do, where to go. Their reasoning (or arguing) went like this:

Igor: Where should we go?

Igor: I don't know. What do you think?

Igor: I'm not sure. What do you think?

Igor: I don't know. What's that?

Igor: I don't know. What do you think?

Igor: Um...

Igor: Why don't we...I don't know.

Igor: Let's go...

Hours of heavy drinking limited their deductive skills and a long pause ensued. Finally, Igor shouted, "Higgins!" To which Igor replied,

Igor: Should we?

Igor: Yes. Why not?

Igor: Okay.

Igor: Let's away.

Igor: Which way?

Igor: This way!

And Igor led the charge eastward out of Galloway. Unfortunately, they had no idea where they were going. Neither Igor nor Igor paid close attention to the route Roger took to Elson. They had a general notion, but on foot at night and drunk made navigating difficult. After walking a few miles out of town, a task that took close to an hour, Igor and Igor found themselves on a dark blacktop road with no streetlights and houses set far back from the street. Luckily, the Dairy Mart sign glowed like a beacon in the dark desert.

"What are you two guys up to?" the clerk asked. He handed Igor his cigarettes and change and then pushed the lollipop back in his mouth.

"Oh, we're just—" Igor cut himself off, unsure speaking about their search for a cemetery was a smart thing to discuss so late at night.

"What was that?" the clerk said. He took a big slurp of sucker and then held it in front of his mouth like a microphone, although he wasn't conscious of this. "My, you've got beautiful blue eyes."

Igor looked up into the clerk's smiling face. He was a Vietnamese young man with high cheekbones and plucked eyebrows. Their eyes met. The clerk slowly pushed the lollipop through his pursed lips.

Igor laughed at the blatantly sexual move. "Thank you," he said.

"So what is it you boys are really up to?" The clerk batted his eyes which made Igor laugh some more.

"Actually, we're kind of looking for Elson cemetery." Igor felt his cheeks flush. "Do you happen to know where it is?"

"Ooo, look at you two preppy white boys looking for a cemetery late at night."

Igor walked up with his juice and candy. "What's that?" he said.

"I know what you two are up to," the clerk said with a smirk.

"You do?" Igor said, looking at the tomato-red Igor.

"Sure," the clerk responded, "but let me tell you this, you boys ain't never had sex until you've done it in a graveyard." The clerk peered at them over his invisible glasses. "M'kay?" He took another big slurp.

Igor looked at Igor and wondered what in the world he and the clerk had been talking about before he arrived that caused such a forthright answer.

“Actually, no,” said Igor, “that’s not why we’re looking for it.”

“Sure, sure,” the clerk replied sarcastically. He held up his hands in mock defeat. “None of my business.”

“No. We’re—That’s where Higgins—I’m just.” Igor’s face was bordering on rouge it was so red. “Do you know where it is?”

“Sure thing.” The clerk sat back on his stool and pointed with the lollipop over his shoulder. “Keep walking down Montclair and there’s a big boarded up Big Wheel. Turn left at the street next to it, Richards, and keep walking and you should run right into Elson.”

“Okay. Thanks,” said Igor.

“Thank you very much,” replied Igor, accepting his change.

“Have fun, you two. It’s getting a little chilly out there. Try to keep warm,” the clerk giggled.

Igor and Igor shook their heads as they left the store.

“Well,” said Igor, “we found someone friendly.”

“Yes, and he didn’t even try to beat us up.”

19.

A small Nissan approached. Neither Igor nor Igor heard the buzzing engine until it reached the Big Wheel parking lot and then slowly pulled up alongside them. The driver rolled down his window.

“Hey, excuse me,” he said, “which way is New York City?”

Igor and Igor stopped.

The driver was a Vietnamese young man. He smiled a big, phony grin that showed his small, jagged teeth. His three passengers smoked and did not smile.

“New York?” said Igor. “I guess it’s that way.” He pointed. “It’s southeast.”

“Oh? Okay,” the driver replied. He nodded his head seriously. His passengers snickered.

Igor sensed danger when the car drove up and after Igor replied with the directions he grabbed a fistful of his friend’s wool coat and pulled him away. “Come on,” Igor said through clenched teeth. His serious tone alerted Igor that this was a bad situation that they needed to acquit immediately.

“Come on!” Igor shouted. He broke into a dead sprint as Igor followed close behind.

“Hey,” the driver laughed, “where are you going?” He drove the Nissan alongside Igor and Igor. “Where are you running to?”

Igor remained surprisingly calm and seemed to sober up immediately when he felt danger. He tried to quickly devise a plan of action to save them from violence yet again, but felt they were already beyond the point of being nice or reasoning with their visitors.

Igor wondered if the Dairy Mart clerk was all an elaborate act and that he tipped off these hoodlums to their whereabouts.

“Don’t you boys want to play?” the driver asked. “What’s wrong? We just want to play. That’s all.” Igor heard a switchblade flick open but he didn’t look in the driver’s window. He kept his eyes straight ahead. “A little late night hanky-panky? Some sucky-sucky? Come on. Boo!” the driver shouted; Igor shrieked and jumped in the air. The driver punched the accelerator and the car pushed ahead of Igor and Igor. Igor stopped running and Igor followed his lead.

“Fags!” the driver yelled out the window. The weak four-cylinder engine surged and the little Nissan disappeared down the unlit road that Igor and Igor were supposed to walk.

Igor took off running again. “Come on!” he urged Igor.

“Where are we going?”

“Just come on.”

Igor ran around the side of the Big Wheel, next to the road the Nissan disappeared down. Igor followed him onto someone’s enormous front lawn. A dark house sat far back.

Igor ran halfway back the lawn and hid behind an oak tree. He instructed Igor to do the same with one of the other half dozen oaks on the front lawn. The moonlight made it possible to see the road in front of the lawn but little else, even with Igor’s excellent vision. So he hugged close against an oak and listened for a car. Igor also hugged close to his oak and waited.

Both had quick flashbacks to the gravelly footsteps. Igor felt Susan’s L returning in his mind and smacked his forehead twice with the heel of his hand to get rid of it. But the hitting was no help, the image was stuck somewhere deep within his subconscious and knew to only appear during times of great fear. Igor tried to concentrate on hearing the Nissan’s puttering engine, but he too was a victim of his imagination. This time the thought was non-sexual, he daydreamed of his father’s face: the eyebrows were downturned and pushed together in a stern gaze. His clenched jaw muscles flared, and his face grew redder and redder and redder until it appeared about to melt or explode. Igor shook his head side to side a series of fast times and told himself to think of clouds and puppies and naked women.

After ten long minutes wrestling with their own sinister subconsciouses, having heard no cars drive by, Igor and Igor emerged from the shadows and walked down the dark road on the grass because they didn’t want to make any noise.

Sure enough, after a long straightaway the rural road revealed the cold black fence that Igor and Igor remembered surrounded Elson. Unfortunately, it was an enormous cemetery and they were at its rear. They walked around the perimeter in silence. Since the Nissan incident they had barely spoken, conscious of the quiet surroundings owned by chirping crickets.

The front gate was closed and locked with a thick chain. The eight-foot tall wrought iron fence with pointy spears on top circled the entire cemetery. That they now knew. But Igor and Igor were determined to find a way inside Elson. They followed the fenceline, searching for a bent section, an overhanging tree, or a hole they could slide under. The fence was built to guard a fortress—unclimbable, unbendable, seemingly impassable. Igor picked up a stick and ran it along the metal fenceposts as they walked, and this action—tick, tick, tick, tick—distracted him so that he almost stepped on a skunk.

“Yeow!” shrieked Igor. He jumped in the air and fell backwards into Igor.

“What? What is it?” Igor cried, sensing danger.

Igor pushed Igor back. “A skunk,” he said.

“A skunk?”

“Yes. A skunk.”

“Did it spray you?”

“I don’t know.”

Igor and Igor tilted their heads back and smelled the night air. The scent of fresh cut grass tickled their nostrils. Luckily for Igor the skunk was a baby and didn’t spray his defense mist but scurried into the cemetery, a fact that worried Igor but placed alongside the other dangers Igor and Igor had encountered that evening, he quickly forgot about the baby skunk.

They continued to follow the fence until luckily, Igor noticed an opening that looked like a strongman had pulled two bars apart allowing a wide enough space for Igor to slip through. Igor wondered how the strongman got inside; the opening was not wide enough for someone with big muscles. Igor tossed his backpack over to Igor who dropped it, and then sucked in his stomach and slowly slid his torso through, barely squeezing past.

Igor and Igor embraced each other in jubilation. They were inside. They had made it. The risk of injury by violent human hands was over. But Igor and Igor had forgotten the name of the street Higgins was buried on. Adding further trouble was that they knew Higgins' marker was a flat stone plaque on the ground. Igor and Igor walked down Jefferson Street. They knew Higgins was between Jefferson and Jackson, that much they remembered, but was it Sixth, Seventh, or Eighth Avenue? They walked down Fifth until Igor whispered, "It's not this one." So they searched Sixth, and then, by dumb luck on Seventh, Igor accidentally kicked the gifts of booze, candles, and cigarettes left atop Higgins grave.

They had arrived.

20.

Igor thumbed in the cork, it dropped and floated at the top of the bottle of Bordeaux. They lit the candles visitors had left and smoked cigarettes as they set up camp. Igor unrolled his flimsy sleeping bag and laid it out on the damp grass next to Higgins' stone. Igor removed his wool army blanket and laid it on the damp grass, directly above Higgins' wife, Rose's plot. They used their backpacks as pillows and lounged facing each other, with Higgins between them. Both anxious to recapture a buzz and feel warm, they passed the bottle back and forth and before any serious discussion began about where they were and what happened to them along the road, the bottle was empty. Igor lit a cigarette, flung half his sleeping bag across his legs, and told a story he had never told another soul. It could have been the alcohol or Higgins' body or the Dairy Mart clerk or the Nissan that scared them, but whatever it was, something stirred thoughts inside Igor that had been incubating a long time and he now wished to share.

"When I was in high school, junior year, for a few months, I had a secret affair with a sophomore, Michael Warren. It was very quiet. Very quiet. And we were very careful. Very careful. As you know there are few things worse that one can be accused of, or caught doing in high school, than homosexuality. We would sneak around, meeting in parks, or the woods, or in the stall of an old massive basement bathroom that was never used. Or in the old section of the locker room when everyone else was gone. Once or twice—twice it was—we spent time together alone in my basement. My mother had no idea. It was thrilling. It was alive. We never did anything more than jerk each other off, but we had this connection, this strength, that I've never experienced with anyone else. I've been thinking for some reason a lot about this lately, especially when I think of Susan, and our great connection. And it bothers me or intrigues me that although I enjoy spending time with her, it's not the same. And I'm not gay, I know that too now. I've gone through that period of self-doubt and come out the other end sure of who and what I am. And I'm only really attracted to women. But there's something about the strength that two men give each other, even young boys, that pull back and forth. The fight for power, I guess. I don't know what it is but I feel it with us too, and I don't say that to say I think we should start jerking each other off. It's too cold for that anyway. No, it's just the deeply male bond of true male companionship I enjoy. The battle there. The fight. I don't understand it. Which is probably why I'm talking about it. But I wanted to tell you about Mike, and how I feel. And I adore Susan, don't misunderstand me. I'm wildly attracted to her, but there's this other strange impulse that

creeps up, only with certain people, and you happen to be one of them. It is something that is beyond sexual and beyond thought and even beyond feeling. And beyond friendship. Somewhere in the mess of love and friendship is where it lies, but I can't figure it out, and I can't describe it very well either."

Igor lit another cigarette and waited for Igor to respond, but Igor did not know what to say. He could have revealed some old secret from his youth or he could have told Igor about experiences with boys that he too had growing up. But he felt trapped. No matter what he said it couldn't live up to the power of Igor's confession.

"You don't have to say anything," Igor said finally.

"No," Igor blurted, "I do. I will. I am. I'm just thinking, that's all."

There was no real awkwardness in the night air. For Igor and Igor to feel awkward around each other was impossible. No pulsing desires from under covers either. For Igor was not physically attracted to Igor, nor Igor to Igor. But they shared an uncommon bond, a bond rare among two young men. Their sensitive natures made it possible. The problem was with such a strong connection Igor and Igor searched for ways to express their true emotions to one another. With girls, where outward desire was present, there was the physical act of love, or coitus, that overtly displayed their feelings. Even in the climax of said coitus, though, they never felt the rush of adrenaline that the thrill of knowingly self-destructive male exploring stirred within their souls. The attraction of Igor to Igor and Igor to Igor was not of a physical nature—but the feelings their time spent together produced was a powerful drug. Unfortunately for them, they were in a strange position that most men felt but couldn't express or even attempt to recognize openly. It was what made them trust each other, and each other only, to embark on bold adventures that might end disastrously. Some might call it true friendship, but it went beyond simple classification and beyond simply friendship. Because the male emotional spectrum only travels so far Igor and Igor could not comprehend what they felt. Men cannot give birth, and in losing this ability they also lost the possibility to fully understand their own emotions, let alone express how they feel when the mess of friendship and love become one. This is why men dwell on death, because life is beyond their physical experience. Igor and Igor searched the stars above for a way to grasp and explain something that was beyond words, beyond sex, beyond feelings or thoughts. But what they experienced was beyond their ability to reveal as men. The irony was that they searched out experience, but the one experience they could never experience, that of creation, escaped their catalog of experiences. End of philosophical paragraph.

Igor and Igor did not kiss or jerk that night. Igor turned the conversation to a discussion of death, the great beyond, the great unknown, and left the issue of their friendship and love for another time. They debated reincarnation, examined why heaven is always thought of as above, questioned the existence of a great being, and argued over humans perhaps being merely matter and once dead, but fertilizer for the planet. And after pleading for Higgins to offer his thoughts on the circle of life, with the candles burnt out and wax spread across Higgins' stone, Igor and Igor pulled covers over their heads, curled into the fetal position, and went to sleep.

Part II

1.

The sky was glassy white. The sun peeked halfway over the eastern horizon and, hitting the oak trees, sent long dark shadows streaking across the graveyard. The russet leaves that barely hung to their branches were still. There was no morning breeze. Robins in the limbs above sang in their pattern of short warbled phrases, then paused a moment, and began again. A squirrel

hopped along the frost-covered lawn, puffs of mist rising behind him after each jump. The air smelled clean, as if all scents were washed away by the dew in the air. Across the street a big yellow Victorian house slumbered quietly, full of a full family dreaming under mounds of warm comforters. Even the family's chocolate labrador, Cody, slept under an old duvet.

Igor and Igor did not enjoy the beautiful October morning surrounding them because they woke speckled with dead leaves, involuntarily shaking from the cold. Their teeth chattered, they could see their breaths, and they couldn't stop trembling.

"Why is it so cold?" asked Igor.

"I don't know," replied Igor, "but it's freezing."

"I can't stop shaking."

"Nor...can...I."

Igor's left side was wet from sleeping on the grass. He lit a cigarette but his hands shook too much to smoke but he tried anyway. Anything was better than nothing. Anything to take the mind off shivering.

"Come on, we have to warm up," Igor urged. "You look terrible. You're bright white."

"I, I, I am?"

"Yes. We've got to find warmth."

They packed up their bedding and left the empty Bordeaux bottle for Higgins. Their flight was rapid; they didn't tell Higgins goodbye or even look back at the footprints they left in the wet grass. They marched towards the bright half-sun.

Outside Elson more houses like the yellow Victorian, with huge front lawns, sat far back from the road. A stone cutter's garage was placed perfectly across the street from Elson's open front gate. Igor and Igor stood in the center of the empty street and looked right, then left, then right, then left. Then Igor looked right and they looked at each other. They said nothing. They knew the only place to find warmth was downtown Galloway so Igor and Igor both turned left and headed west with the warm sun on the backs of their necks. Though Roger drove them downtown from Elson they didn't pay attention to the precise directions. They knew west was the way. That much they knew. And that was about all they knew.

They didn't speak during the long walk. There was nothing to say, and both knew it. Their muscles were stiff as cold wood, their hamstrings tight bands, but they couldn't feel anything as they fast-walked. All was numb. Normally walking stirs the blood and promotes warmth but Igor and Igor's cold felt embedded within their bone marrow. Likewise, a hangover should have incapacitated them but numb to everything they felt no morning-after pain.

The temperature stood at thirty-four degrees, unseasonably cold for October in Galloway. Unluckily for Igor and Igor it was the first frost of the fall season and the coldest night for all of October. But with the many strange occurrences the night before where luck dove in and saved Igor and Igor it was not surprising that finally their luck ran out.

2.

Downtown Galloway was empty. The sun was full. Igor and Igor crossed a small green bridge over the western locks. The enormous wooden doors of a lock were pushed open and water lapped the stone walls as the current flowed quietly through downtown. Walking up Appleton they saw Barnes and Noble in the distance and quickened their pace. All the shops and offices were closed. All except a place called Nick's where the red sign in the plate glass window read Open so Igor and Igor walked inside. The tiny bell attached to the door chimed as they entered. The large room had twenty-foot high ceilings and was empty of people. A waitress in

her mid-thirties walked up to them. She wore a huge smile that quickly changed to a look of horror when she saw Igor and Igor's grimacing faces.

"Breakfast?" asked Maura. She wore a name tag.

"Yes," replied Igor, "thank you."

She sat them in a booth against the wall.

"Would you like coffee?" she asked, holding out the pot.

Igor inadvertently shot her a pained, angry look; his entire left side ached as he sat.

"I'll just leave the pot," she said.

"Good idea," answered Igor.

She dropped a folded dishrag on the table and placed the pot on top. Then she quickly exited to the kitchen where she told the cook, Alvin, about their strange patrons.

The room was a former ballroom. Large strips of mirrors ran the beige walls. The floor was carpeted generic grey. Booths lined both walls and then four and two person tables filled the middle dancefloor. A rusted gold chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling and looked like it functioned but with all the gold sunshine flooding the room through the front window, no lights were turned on.

Igor and Igor placed the steaming mugs to their lips but the freshly brewed coffee was too hot to drink, even for them. Slowly, as they sat in the warm booth, the shivering subsided and the physical pains surfaced: stiff cartilage in their necks, tight hamstrings, swollen lymph nodes under their chins, chapped lips, and powerful headaches.

"Okay, boys. What can I get you?" Maura reappeared and the smile had returned to her face. She was a pretty woman, slim and peppy (it could have been the coffee) with an oval face and wide brown eyes. Igor noticed her hands were long and beautiful, eggshell white with freshly painted red nails. When Igor and Igor de-hatted and de-jacketed, they looked less intimidating and more exhausted and pathetic. Maura wanted desperately to ask what happened to them so she could relay the news to Alvin but she could tell they wanted to be left alone and thus, she didn't ask.

Igor and Igor ordered a hearty breakfast: eggs, sausages, homefries, toast, orange juice, tea, pancakes. And then after Maura left them they slid out of the booth at the same time.

Igor: No. You go.

Igor: No. It's all right. You can.

Igor: No. I insist.

Igor: You're sure?

Igor: Yes.

Igor turned to walk away.

Igor: Is it one or two?

Igor turned back.

Igor: Two. Why?

Igor: Then you better let me go first.

Igor: Fine. Go ahead.

Igor: Don't be snooty.

Igor: Snooty?

Igor: Snotty.

Igor: Snotty?

Igor: Snippy.

Igor: Snippy?

Igor: Whatever. Just go.

Igor: Thank you.

Igor sat back down and Igor walked to the rear restroom. His visit was quick.

Igor, on the other hand, took so long that when he returned to the table Igor had already eaten an egg, two sausage, and three pancakes.

“Everything all right?” Igor asked through a mouthful of homefries.

“Yes. Now it is.” Igor sank slowly into the booth.

“Well, that’s good. You feel better?”

“Yes. Much. Thank you. I highly recommend it.”

“I’m sure I will take care of it before we leave here.”

Igor and Igor ate in silence as was their custom. Once the plates were only egg yolks and pancake bits, they leaned back and lit cigarettes. The coffee pot was empty. Other patrons had entered and sat down during their long meal. On the opposite side of the room a middle-aged couple sat in a booth. Three old timers took their usual seats at the front window. And two dressed-up families entered in what appeared a pre or post-church routine. Maura sat none of these people anywhere near Igor and Igor.

Igor and Igor were in no rush to leave so they each ordered a fruit cup and shared another stack of blueberry pancakes. And another pot of coffee.

Igor looked at himself in the wall mirror.

Igor: I look horrible.

Igor: Yes. You do.

Igor: Yes. I do.

Igor: I feel better though.

Igor: Well that’s good.

Igor: What’s the plan?

Igor: What do you mean?

Igor: What should we do?

Igor: Stay or go?

Igor: We should check out the mills.

Igor: Yes, we should.

Igor: What else?

Igor: Get a drink?

Igor: Ooo, not now.

Igor: No. Of course not. In a while.

Igor: My stomach does not feel well.

Igor: Go use the bathroom.

Igor: Yes, I should.

Igor: You’ll feel much better. Believe me.

So Igor went to the bathroom and extricated the obstruction while Igor sat and smoked.

3.

Of the eleven mills along the Mackinaw only the Buford Mill, the biggest complex, still housed any power looms, and of its six brick buildings only half of one floor was devoted to the eighty-eight working looms that were the cornerstone of the Galloway Historical Park. The five mills around the lower locks had been partially or fully renovated to house offices, apartments,

storage space. The remaining five mills along the Mackinaw sat crumbling and empty, skeletons of their once majestic selves.

Igor and Igor pushed earplugs into their ears because the noise from eighty-eight looms spinning commemorative dishtowels for sale in the lobby store was mind-numbingly loud. The noise quickly proved too much for the hungover, sleep-depraved Igor and Igor and they exited the Buford floor of millstory and stepped out into the bright sunshine that pounded their temples but at least outside they could control the pain by finding shade.

They followed the riverwalk past the discarded mills that hugged the Mackinaw's shoreline. The strangest part of these neglected dinosaurs, thought Igor, was not their dying physical presences—with falling brick and broken windows—but the unnatural silence that emanated from the former cathedrals of industry.

In the front courtyard of the abandoned Lancaster Mill stood two old ladies clutching each other for support. They wore pink or beige pants, light-blue jackets, and generic white sneakers. They noticed Igor and Igor right away leaving nothing for the boys to do but walk up and say hello.

“Francine, say hello to the two boys.”

It was obvious Francine was hard of hearing but when her eyes saw Igor and Igor's boyish faces a smile bloomed across her wrinkled face.

“Hello,” said Francine.

Igor and Igor offered greetings.

“Where are you from?” the woman asked.

Igor and Igor looked at each other.

“Boston,” said Igor.

“Oh, Boston,” the woman replied, “it's so big.”

“What's that?” Francine asked.

“Boston! They're from Boston!”

“Yes it is big,” Igor answered quietly.

“Oh,” said Francine, her face lighting up with awe.

“Why are you in Galloway?”

“For the Higgins Festival.”

“Oh,” the woman said, “he was an asshole.” She spit the word.

“You knew him?” Igor perked up. It wasn't everyday he heard a grandmother swear.

“Sure. He was a drunk. Rose took such good care of him. She was a saint. But he was a maniac. A real baby.”

“Did you hang out with him often?”

“No. He wasn't very friendly to be around. Especially with his drinking buddies, which was all you ever saw him.”

“What's that?” said Francine.

“Higgins!” the woman shouted.

“Oh,” sighed Francine. “He was an asshole!”

“Tell us what you really think,” Igor said under his breath.

“What's that?” the woman replied.

“Nothing,” said Igor.

“He didn't live very long,” Igor spoke loudly.

“No. Not at all. What was it, forty-five? Forty-six?” she said.

“Forty-six. Yes.”

“He drank too much,” she said.

“It seems so.”

Francine’s eyes beamed at Igor and Igor as a long silence passed over the group. Igor and Igor looked at each other. Finally Igor said:

“Well, Galloway—”

“I—well, Francine and me—” Francine smiled. “—We used to work in this building right here.” The woman pointed to one of the smaller buildings in the courtyard, a rundown four story structure.

“You used to spin cotton?” Igor said curiously.

“No. That was long before us. But we were mill girls. We made sneakers in that building right there. By hand.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. See...” She and Francine pointed their shoes and rolled their ankles, modeling the bright white sneakers they wore. “You could get fired from one floor, walk up two floors and they’d hire you on that one. It was funny.”

“Sure.”

“But that was a long time ago. There’s no more of that anymore.”

“No,” stated Igor.

“It was wonderful,” Francine spoke loudly.

Igor and Igor didn’t know what to say to the two old women who held each other tightly and looked up at the dead brick building that once gave them simple joy and even now, years later, triggered such happy memories that they began to cry quietly. Igor and Igor didn’t ask what was wrong or offer aid for they could see that the tears were those of nostalgia for a simpler, more pleasurable past than the current world offered. Slowly, Igor and Igor walked around the women and started for the rundown mill.

“Have you been over to the museum?” the woman asked.

Igor and Igor turned back and faced her.

“No,” said Igor. “We haven’t.”

“You should. You should go. They have some Higgins memorabilia.” She dabbed her eyes with a tissue.

“Okay. We will. Thank you.”

The woman nodded, but the blank expression on her face showed her thoughts were elsewhere. Francine waved with a big smile. Then the two old ladies, supporting each other, shuffled their way back to the street. They did not look back.

4.

Igor and Igor found an unlocked door and entered the mill. The long ground level room was gutted except for rusted scaffolding in a corner, and near the busted chicken-wire windows three tin barrels that smelled of burnt wood. The place also smelled of oil, dust, and the pigeon droppings that were all over the floor. Soft-brown light shone through the dirty windows and displayed the dust Igor and Igor kicked up as they walked.

Igor: What a spooky sight.

Igor: An old dead dinosaur.

Igor: Once the symbol of prosperity.

Igor: Now a worthless heap of brick.

Igor urged Igor to join him exploring further inside but the next room was windowless and dark and Igor felt as if they were being watched by someone somewhere.

Igor: I think people live here. Squat here.

Igor: I'm sure they do. Come on.

Igor: No. I don't think that we should.

Igor: There's two of us. Don't be scared.

Down the dark hallway a large bolt or screw, something metal and heavy, fell to the concrete floor with a distant thunk.

"Come on!" urged Igor. "Let's go." He backed away from the dark room.

Igor paused a moment in the doorjamb and stared into the dark, unknown room, torn between his sense of adventure and self-preservation.

"Come on!" shouted Igor from the middle of the bright room.

Igor slowly backed away from the doorway, his eyes squinting into the darkness, his ears listening for a cough or soles scraping against concrete. For a second Igor thought he saw a male figure in a dusty overcoat slowly gliding around a corner but then he blinked his eyes a few times and realized it was only his imagination gifting an image to pacify his curiosity, because the longer he stared all he saw was black.

5.

Park ranger Glen stopped the outboard motorboat in a lock, turned off the engine and stood so the seventeen passengers could clearly see his boyish face. The brim of his Red Sox cap was sculpted into an upside down U and he dressed head to toe in tan ranger clothing with a blue windbreaker on top. Though thirty-three years old, he was still carded when he bought beer which was a rarity because he still lived with his mother. Igor and Igor sat in front of Glen in the two worst seats in the boat because they weren't seats at all but ridges in the floor. Glen smiled down at them but Igor and Igor did not smile back.

"Welcome to lock number six," said Glen. "There are over five point six miles of canals that at one time supported eleven mills along the Mackinaw and all throughout Galloway."

Heeding the old mill girl's advice, Igor and Igor trudged over to the Galloway Historical Museum in the basement of the former Merrill Mill and took in Higgins' backpack, tattered leather boots, and one of his Underwood typewriters on display behind plexiglass. Smiling in a self-satisfied way, Glen entered the museum room and explained that the free lock boat tour was leaving and all were welcome. Families and young couples lined up at the door. Igor and Igor looked at each other.

Igor: Do you feel like getting in a boat?

Igor: You know I get seasick.

Igor: It's not an oceanliner.

Igor: But it's a boat.

Igor: Through the locks is all.

Igor: You think it will be stable?

Igor: We'll be enclosed in the locks, not out on the high seas.

Igor: Enclosed? I might get claustrophobic.

Igor: Will you stop it. This will be educational. We're going.

Igor: Fine, but if I get sick or freak out—

Igor: Oh, shut up.

The lock was narrow, only twenty feet wide; the boat was twenty-one feet long, and felt small and unstable for the number of passengers it carried. A locktender above manually closed the large wooden doors behind them. He pushed the left door shut via a long wooden post, basically a square log that ran the top of the door. Then he crossed over a one-man grid bridge and pushed the right door closed. The boat rocked side to side but then settled in the center of the closed lock. As water drained and the boat lowered, Glen explained that water would drain and the boat lower. "Six whole feet!" said Glen. To Igor it felt like being let down in a coffin, but instead of dirt on both sides there were massive stone blocks stacked atop each other that formed the walls. Igor and Igor searched the faces of their fellow boaters and everyone, without exception, appeared tense. No one spoke. All listened closely, trying to block out Glen's guidebook speech about how they were dropping six whole feet, and concentrate on hearing the water exit the lock, like a bathtub draining. But, of course, that was impossible with so many gallons of water and Glen.

"This particular lock we're in right now," said Glen happily, "has an interesting history. Eleven years ago a tour boat was in this lock, all closed up, being lowered by the locktender when, for no reason, a freak occurrence of nature, a sinkhole gave way, the stone walls collapsed—each one of these stones by the way weighs a ton—and down it all went onto the little boat. Sadly, there were no survivors. Eight souls lost their lives." Glen paused and looked whimsically at the stone wall as the boat continued slowly descending.

Seventeen dumbstruck faces stared in horror at the clueless park ranger.

"What?" said Igor.

"Yes. It was a sad day for the Galloway Historical Society," Glen nodded solemnly.

The entire boat was silent.

"You're lying," said Igor.

"Lying?" Glen furrowed his brow. "No, no, no, I'm not lying. I wish I were. That's a true story."

"Why would you tell us that now?" said Igor, his cheeks turning red.

"What do you mean?" asked Glen.

Igor and Igor looked at each other.

"Look where we are!" Igor shouted. "What are you—what do you like to terrify people?"

Other voices in the boat called out, "Yeah," "What's your problem?" "That's sick." "What's wrong with you?"

"No. No," said Glen, "it's all been fixed. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare all of you. That was eleven years ago, before all the locks underwent a structural examination. That could never happen now."

A chorus of sighs deflated the tension: "Oh, it's been fixed." "Oh, okay." "Oh, makes sense." "Oh, sorry about that."

"All set!" shouted the locktender from above.

"Thanks, Phil," Glen shouted back. Glen latched his boathook onto a metal wrung on the closed lock doors behind them. This steadied the boat while Phil opened—first right, then left—the lock doors ahead. "See, folks, everything's fine. I didn't mean to startle you," said Glen. The transition of two locks becoming one was smooth. The water levels were almost exactly the same. Glen pushed his boathook against the rear doors and, like a gondola driver, guided the boat into the new lock.

"You're an ass!" shouted Igor.

The three mothers in the boat gasped. Everyone looked at Igor, including Igor.

“Well, I am sorry. I would hope you could—”

“Yes,” added Igor. “You’re a jackass!”

More gasps issued from the boat.

“There’s really no reason to swear, sirs,” said Glen. He positioned the boat in the center of the new lock.

“I want off this boat now,” Igor demanded as he stood.

“Please,” Glen urged. “That’s not possible.”

“I second the counselor’s motion,” said Igor, also standing.

“No, really, please. If you could just sit down—That’s impossible.”

“Why don’t you two boys close your traps and stop rocking the boat?” a large father demanded. Igor wondered if he meant literally the boat or their temperament, but before he could ask Igor piped up:

“Why don’t you mind your own business?”

“Okay, okay,” said Glen. “Everyone calm down please.”

Igor tried to turn around and look at the father but his legs anchored around his backpack was the only thing keeping him from falling over.

“You better watch it, son.” The father pointed a big, fat finger at Igor, as Peter had the night before.

“Or what?” Igor declared. He jutted out his chin, practically daring the man to cross the boat.

“Or I will personally throw your ass off this boat!” The man apologized quietly to his wife for swearing.

“Please do!” Igor cackled. “I want off this boat.” He turned and stared at Glen who was only three feet from his face.

“I’m sorry,” Glen pleaded, “but it’s just not allowed. If you could just sit—”

“There’s steps right there,” said Igor. He pointed to a set of stone stairs built into the wall of the new lock.

“No. Those are only for emergency use.”

“Well, Glen,” said Igor, “I think this qualifies.”

“I realize you want off this boat but if you two gentlemen could just sit back down, in a few minutes—”

Igor crossed his arms. “We want off this boat, Glen,” he said quietly.

“Good!” yelled the father. “Let them go!”

“No, sir, please,” said Glen.

“Now, Glen,” began Igor.

“I can’t—” Glen stared down at his hands and shook his head.

“You lied to us, Glen.” Igor also crossed his arms and spoke softly.

“No, I didn’t—”

“You lied to us and deceived us, Glen.”

“Look, sirs—”

“Either take us to those stairs, Glen, or we’ll jump.”

“We will,” added Igor.

“No. I can’t,” Glen whined. “It’s not allowed.”

“Go ahead! Jump, you morons,” said the father. His wife held his arm, preventing the large man from standing.

"We'll jump and then we'll sue, Glen," Igor stated quietly like a defense attorney. "We'll sue you, the museum, Galloway. We'll own this whole town all because of you not letting us—"

"Okay! Okay! Fine. Here." Glen pushed the boathook against the right wall and guided the boat, only a few feet, to the left steps. Igor and Igor snatched their backpacks and jumped out of the boat onto the stone steps. Glen breathed a sigh of relief. The father shouted, "Good riddance!" And the rest of the passengers broke into applause.

"Thanks, Glen," Igor smiled sarcastically. He and Igor ascended the steps to street level.

The boat's applause shifted from thanks that Igor and Igor were gone to claps and chants of praise for their savior, Glen.

Above the lock, Igor was filled with rage and wanted to unzip and pee on Glen's head but before he could remove his genitals Igor pulled him away from the edge and slapped him gently on the cheek.

6.

A green and white taxi pulled up next to Igor and Igor and stopped. It was the first cab they had seen since the commuter rail station the day before. The driver rolled down the passenger side window and Igor and Igor crouched and looked inside. An old man smoking a cigarette grinned back.

"You boys look like you need a ride," he said.

Igor and Igor looked at each other.

"Yes," said Igor, "I guess we do."

"I thought so," replied the man. "Hop in."

Igor jumped in the front seat and Igor assumed his center perch in the back.

"Where to?" the old man asked, taking a drag.

"Uh..." Igor stared at the hack license on the dashboard. Even his poor vision could see it clearly.

"What's that, son?"

"Igor, where are we going?" Igor asked from the back seat. His eyes also fixed on the taxi driver's license.

"I'll just start the meter while you two figure it out."

"Your name's Higgins," Igor said slowly.

"Yes it is," the man replied.

"Jim Higgins," Igor added carefully from the back seat.

"Yes. That's my name. Do I know you two?"

"Well, you're dead," Igor stated.

"Dead?" the man said incredulously. "I know I'm old, son, and I know I don't look my best today, but I'm not dead. Not yet. That much I know."

"Are We dead?" asked Igor.

"Dead? What in God's name are you two talking about? Have you been smoking the wacky tobacco?"

"No. No. Not at all."

"Do you have somewhere you want to go?"

"You didn't write Outside In?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"You're sure?"

"What are you two high on?"

“Do you know the writer, Jim Higgins? Have you ever heard of him?”

“No. I haven’t. Now, do you want to go somewhere or not?” He flicked his cigarette out the window.

Igor and Igor looked at each other.

“The commuter rail station,” said Igor.

“Fine. Thank you. Now, was that so hard?”

Igor and Igor sank back in the cab’s soft seats. From the back seat Igor stared at the side of Higgins’ head. Igor studied the mugshot on his hack license. They knew Higgins’ face. Because he became a celebrity his publisher put his face on the cover of most all his novels. His strong chin and intense, mischievous stare helped sell books. The mugshot showed the old man smiling a big, toothy smile. Even as Igor examined the old man’s actual face, it was impossible, so many decades later, to find the necessary similarities for a positive I.D.

They pulled up to the train station. Igor handed Higgins seven dollars for the four-fifty fare.

As Igor and Igor exited the taxi and closed the doors, Higgins called out “Boys!” through the open passenger window. Igor and Igor crouched and looked inside.

“Nice tip,” Higgins smiled. He slid the greenbacks in his shirt’s breast pocket. “Thanks for caring.” He held eye contact with each of them for a good full two seconds; his smile disappeared and a smirk formed around the edges of his mouth as his foot pushed down on the accelerator and the taxi pulled away and disappeared down the drive.

Igor and Igor looked at each other.

To end on an ambiguous note is ambiguous at best, but truth be told, Igor and Igor didn’t know if the cab driver was Higgins or not; but one thing they did know was that they were alive and not dead. That much was confirmed when the homeless man from the day before returned and started screaming gibberish at Igor. And so, weary from the twenty-nine hour journey, they boarded the commuter rail, lowered their seatbacks, and fell asleep before the train even left the station.