

Angelo LACUESTA
Two stories

Rest Stop

The snow has been building up, gradually, from a soft and pleasant fall for the coming holidays, into a growing drift, into what the man on the radio says will be a blizzard in no time.

I'm still far from the city and miles away from the next town. There's a rest stop a couple hundred yards ahead. I take the turnoff and park the truck under a tree.

The rest stop offers everything I could possibly need. There's a small gas station, a bank of restrooms, a cafe and a grocery store. During easier weather it would be run over with Range Rovers or compact German SUVs, top-heavy with luggage and skiing equipment. Today there are only two or three other cars in the parking lot, each of them growing a mantle of snow.

I let the engine and the heater run while I double-lace my shoes and put on my parka over my sweater. Under all this I am already wearing thermal underwear and a shirt. I put on a woolen cap and dare a look at the rearview mirror. My eyes are scrunched up into a frown. Through all my years of driving around in America I never got used to all this cold.

I sit in the truck for a moment and contemplate the thirty yards between the car and the door. I turn off the engine, stuff the keys into my jacket pocket and flip my collar up. The heat fades quickly and the windows fog up. My breath comes out in little clouds. I open the car door, plant a foot outside, and then another, and then lift my body out and close the door behind me, all in one passably fluid motion. I stuff my hand in my pocket and squeeze the autolock button as I hustle to the door and into the grocery. All this happens in a kind of slow motion, and all sound is drowned in the growing howl of the snow and wind. My knee has been slightly banged by the closing door and there is a dull ache in my shoulder, caused, I guess, by all my twisting around to pull my parka on.

The place has been made to resemble a ranch or a log cabin. It's warm and made to look friendly, with handmade signs announcing daily specials in pleasant block handwriting. I slip off my gloves and my parka and pick up a shopping basket.

As I turn into an aisle, my basket briefly brushes with another, then firmly locks mesh. I mutter an apology: "Pardon me." I find myself face to face with Ditas, her hair short and curly, tinted a light brown. She's in a checkered brown coat, over a blouse with the collar up. I remember my scowling face in the mirror and take my cap off. We'd look good in a picture, taken right now, with matching colors and warm, spontaneous smiles.

"Soy," she stammers. "Soy! When was the last time!"

She knows it's been long too, but forgets how long it's really been. The last time was a fund-raiser at the Plaza Hotel back home. That was a few years after college. She was with the party of the guest of honor. I was with the press contingent. At the party I spoke to her for the first time since school, under the pretext of doing research for a feature story I was writing.

I was brimming with confidence then, charged with excitement about going to America. A cousin of mine had arranged for a position for me at a dental supply factory in Jersey. The position was officially "jobber." I soon found out it meant seventeen years' worth of long drives, all across America, from coast to coast, through the heartland, and sometimes even upward into Canada.

So I tell her how long it's been, without all the sordid details, dressed in a rough estimate: "Twenty, twenty-five years—at least!"

"Well, you look great, Soy," she says, her tone perhaps a little forced.

"Right." I almost raise a hand to smooth my hair.

"Oh, you look okay. Getting old in all the right places, I guess. Not like me, huh? All fat and ugly."

I give her my protestations. As we line up at the check-out counter I look at her basket: saltines, apple juice, green grapes, marmalade and a small wedge of cheese. I slide my stuff over before the total is punched. After a brief argument she agrees to let me pay for her basket, plus mine, which is just two bottles of wine, frozen cheesecake and some toiletries.

I cannot help but notice, though, how she's grown a bit smaller. I have heard that age does that, among many things. But factoring my shrinkage, I'm still a head taller than her. I am now at fifty-something and peg her age at about the same. However, I'm thinking it could be my imagination. Over here, we're smaller than most people. I'm used to doing business with big Americans, with their big bodies and big voices.

At the café we order two big cappuccinos and a slice of chocolate pie.

"So what are you doing now?" she asks.

"Oh, this and that. Rediscovering things. I've decided to go back to writing. Do you remember that I used to write?"

My question comes and goes unanswered, but she smiles at me, and I think it's a smile of vague familiarity. Years ago, before America, I was winning contests and publishing in local magazines.

"And how is America treating you?"

"Okay, I guess. I'm well-fed, as you can see." I afford an expansive gesture. "I'm worth one Social Security number and a democratic vote."

She smiles and gives me the once-over for the second time that day. For the umpteenth time all in all, I guess. In high school and college we were batchmates, but always in different classes and certainly different gangs. She played badminton at the Polo Club on weekends and flew to

Hongkong every six months to go shopping. I was one of those guys who had neither the money nor the nerve to court her. I was smug, though. I pretended that my choice of wardrobe—T-shirts, jeans and sneakers—was a matter of simplicity. Her reaction was quite as simple, and full of the smugness of the real kind: a once-over, a twice-over, and then she probably never gave me another thought.

"How's your wife?" she asks, as if she has caught me remembering. "I mean, I assume you're married, right?"

"Well, I was married," I say, showing off my ring finger emphatically, where I imagine a permanently untanned stripe. "To my ex-wife."

Most every separated man I know says "ex-wife" with a kind of relish, like it's a place they've been to, like Miami or New York and they'll tell you about it if you like, or even if you didn't like. My wife and I were married, for all of four short years, without children, and with me spending most of my time on the road. To be honest, I can hardly remember anything, good or bad. Maybe talking about it on a Sunday morning, to a person I knew even before my ex-wife, makes me a little more thoughtful than usual.

Maybe, also, it's Ditas' accent: old and comfortable music to my ears, a Filipina kind of English, alternately hard and soft, hitting the words right in some places and not quite right in others. It moves me just to see her mouth moving and saying those words, speaking this way, to me of all people.

My turn comes to ask.

"How's your husband doing? Alfonso, right?"

"Ponso's doing okay. His business is holding up—he still owns that chain of pawnshops back in Cebu, plus lots of other little things. Remember Cebu, Soy? When was the last time you were there?"

"Haven't been there in ages. Not since I was there last with you. Not since I was there when you were there, I mean. At the Plaza Hotel near the top of that hill. It was a charity dinner, remember?"

She was in a polka-dot dress, and stunned the crowd when she turned and showed her bare back. She arrived with the son of an important Cebu businessman.

I was writing a feature on "provincial beauties." I interviewed her on the hotel balcony, right outside the ballroom. She ordered three or four cocktails for the interview and smoked Virginia Slims while we spoke.

"Those were wild times, Soy. I still remember them, and laugh about them sometimes. "

That businessman was Alfonso. She married him some years later, in a ceremony that warranted a page's worth of photos in the *Inquirer's* society section. Some time later I heard rumors that their marriage was over, that it had only been for show that they were still together at weddings and cocktail parties.

In the window behind her I can see that storm has let up a little bit during our conversation. The café is deserted, save for the waitress and the cashier and a young couple cooing to each other at the far end. Through the windows the landscape is so quiet and empty it looks frozen. Acres of white snow stretch into the distance.

“It’s so peaceful here, Soy.”

“It’s everything here. I always take it for granted, you know, until I look at the Filipino papers or hear about another kidnapping or another government scam. They say the peso’s still going down, and there’s no end to violence in the South.”

“Haay, you’re right, Soy.” She puts her cup on the saucer, brings a pale hand to her chin.

“Aren’t you scared?”

“Well, I am scared as scared can be. And everything just seems to work here. My son seems happier, more at ease. We went malling the other day and everything seemed to fall into place. I saw things in another light.”

“You bet!” I say.

Things fell into place for me, too. There were some rough spots, some tough times. I had a good marriage that made a wrong turn, but the divorce delivered sure and swift relief. I turned my life around, quit my job and even started writing again: public relations articles for an environmental advocacy group. You’d need to hold down at least a dozen jobs like that back home to hold you up. And that would be barely.

I pay good rent on a nice enough apartment with a small view, with enough left over for movies and malls and the occasional evening at the card table. I even have enough money to buy a Ford 4x4, second hand, off a couple who were moving to New York. It’s a little worn around the edges, but it’s a lot better than the old Honda. And it cuts a sharp figure with the women. They’re also impressed, I think, by the fact that I can drive a stick, a talent earned hard as a college kid, over days of struggling with an uncle’s old owner-type jeep. I’d get my chance at the wheel after school, in exchange for doing chores. I’d ground the transmission down until that old jeep was practically unusable, but I had learned shift with or without the clutch pedal.

But I never learned to get up the nerve to talk to Ditas, who I saw everyday in school. I dreamed about her, about spending every spare minute of our time together, in the dorm and in the library, in the gym, even spending the night in the middle of the sunken field that lay at the center of our University, looking up at the stars. You see, in those days I wrote nothing but poetry, and even published some.

“So what do you do? How long have you been here?”

“Me? Oh, I just flew in. Only last week.”

“A vacation, then.”

"Well, you know how it is. One thing or another. The main reason is that my only son, Kaloy, has a medical condition and I'm having him checked here. That's why we're here, I guess, among other things."

"Medical condition." Politeness behooves me to repeat her concern. No, I don't know how it is, exactly: that condition, or any one of those other reasons she has for being here.

"Yes, unfortunately," she says. "Our doctors back home referred us to a specialist clinic around here. And you know what? When we went to the clinic I found out the specialist here's Pinoy too. All the way here in the middle of nowhere!"

"Yep, we make the best doctors. Just like men make the best chefs. And yes, we're everywhere. Look at me."

She chuckles at the lame remark, although I can see that part of her mind is still on her son. I ask her about how old the son is and she says he is twenty-two: an early age to have any sort of medical condition but then, with what the world is coming to now, it is hardly any surprise. Things come up from behind you and then you just learn to take things as they come.

"Well, it's—it's cancer," she reveals finally, and I can't say anything to that. I haven't had cancer in the family, not that I've heard anything about my family recently. At home there is only me. I don't know what kind of pain is involved, or how much it costs.

"Cancer," I solemnly repeat. I can see the storm's white turbulence picking up in the window behind her. I try to imagine what it might do to the truck, remembering the other cars I saw in the parking lot, smothered in snow beyond recognition. "That's too bad," I offer.

Under her coat, Ditas is dressed in an expensive-looking white shirt and jeans, and her short hair is accentuated by those light brown highlights every woman likes to wear these days. On that night she wore her hair in a French braid, the fashion of the time.

I put a ten-dollar bill on the table and get up to pull her chair out. I help her into her coat and she begins to argue, but I'm quick and decisive. I ask her if she needs a ride and offer to drive her around the countryside because she seems to need the fresh air. The houses in this area are beautiful and some are about a hundred years old.

"Oh, Soy," she says, and it can go both ways. But this time I don't take no for an answer. I grab her things with a quick smile before she can reach for them, and we walk outside and head for my pickup. I put my hand in my pocket and feel for my keys.

The storm has let up a little. I can hardly feel it now, but I know it's out there, gathering strength before it starts ripping everything up. Snow is quiet and friendly, but when it gets violent it causes water pipes to blow and freezes the homeless dead in their beds. It makes the roads slippery. I've seen a couple of smashups myself. In the last one there were even a couple of bodies. The cops pulled them out of their car and laid them out in the snow, side by side.

I had borrowed my uncle's jeep for that evening—I was kind of hoping for something right to happen. At the time the idea of America accepting me had given me such strength, such hope. From

the balcony of the Plaza Hotel there was a view of the sea on one end, and on the other, low mountains of brown and green. That was my last good view of home.

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Life before x

In my son's world, sands shift to become windowpanes of water that dissipate into storm clouds roiling. He explained to me once that it was all merely texture mapping: by assigning subtle color variations on miniscule polygons, then gathering them into two-d digital sheets that bent and flexed into virtual three-d, you can theoretically come up with a thousand replicated textures in sixteen million colors: now vapor, now silica, now silk.

He sleeps heavy in his bed, quirkless, twitchless. His head looks almost too big and heavy for his body. That's almost all he needs, anyway: that big head of his, lolling from side to side, thinking its heavy thoughts and performing quantum calculations. The eyes that dart about under thin eyelids are his only activity tonight, his brain's twin pilot lights. I almost flinch when he turns towards me, eyes closed but sensing, pupils flitting about, following dream images.

Gabby's just finished Sixth Grade, and this is his twelfth summer. You would have thought seriously about how thin and scrawny he is, how anemic and undernourished-looking, almost unfinished, like some skyscraper's skeleton, his body glimmering faintly from the computer's light.

For this story, I've decided to abandon my typewriter. I've snuck into Gabby's room, where I man his machine secretly as he sleeps, this great hulking computer matching my coffee glaze with its constant state of alertness.

Turning it on, though, is as simple as punching the bright blue button on the tower unit, making the act seem anachronistic, an idiotic act quite separate from the whirrings and clickings that it sparks. Then the screen comes alive, bursting into the welcoming graphic. A bas-relief of his name: Gabby, amid a constantly shifting environment: deserts, oceans, blue-mountains-on-blue-skies. He's showing off his magic, what I or anybody else I know can't do on a computer. But he's just flexing his fingers.

Then I'm in a Magritte painting, and the blue mountains magnify to become fields of blue flowers, which dissolve into little cranes, blue like the flowers, poised to disappear into the edges of the screen.

When I was young as Gabby, a cel-animated Penelope Pitstop flew across the screen in her yellow Sopwith Camel, and I flattened my face against the picture tube, trying to nose my way past its edge. The edge was negative TV territory, the undefined state of a light bulb in a just-closing refrigerator

door. It was the edge of the cosmos. I was precocious too, you know, in my own way. And I knew only someone like Dick Dastardly could overstep that line, could, in the end, capture Penelope.

And now, what do I have? When Gabby's programmed birds, armed with high-resolution feathers and algorithmic AI, rocket across his created landscapes with escape velocity, the screen follows to keep them in video gravity. Feather-bound, svelte, and anatomically correct to the smallest detail, the cranes flock, migrate and separate with all their faculties alive, leaping through rainbows, swimming across the mirror of sky on bay, attacking horizons with 3-D ferocity. And at key points in their flight, a virtual camera takes over and gives us their point-of-view, following their line of vision to scan chasm walls, cave ceilings, ocean depths, all their complex surfaces made of crystal-pure polygons that curve into rocks, earth, trees, into a world. Gabby's world.

But today is a quiet, cloudy day in Gabby's world. When the last shadow of the cranes leaves, the leaves on the trees are quite still, and nothing disturbs the expanse of grass except little grey stones littered about.

But the stones magically lift into the air, buoyed by a slight breeze. They morph into what looks like strange, twenty-first century origami, then unfurl into alien glyphs, strange symbols that each represent programs, applications and code files. The screen refreshes itself, and the icons twitch.

Gabby shifts in his sleep. The icons flutter slightly, their colors fading into faint blue and white patches, until I realize they've become little nimbus clouds blown slowly across the screen by random digital breezes. I double-click on one such cloud, and the word processor comes up. The game of writing begins.

I feel overwhelmed by the possibilities. I could write a word, a prepositional phrase, the whole novel I have always promised to write, and rewrite everything with the flick of a wrist. Or erase everything with the slightest whip of my mouse's tail.

I find it hard to accept that millions of lines of code have been written just to create my word processor, in itself part of an interlocking suite of programs intended to make short work out of even the most complex financial and business process. My meandering, almost random writings all seem to be petty data in the face of this landmark of technological evolution.

To make matters worse, I've run out of ideas tonight. Their absence, as always, makes more commotion than their presence, so that my mind is now a poor imitation of negative video space, staticky and hopelessly random.

But like pixels, the possibilities are almost endless. My mind is alive, shifting with ideas, constantly changing. Writing is searching, someone once told me. You search for something and you don't know what it is until you've found it. At the end of every sentence, every quantum of thought, the cursor blinks, the computer mocks my inaction by devoting its chip activity to some other menial task: checking for system viruses, ferreting out lost clusters, and fluffing up feathery edges of clouds.

Gabby begins snoring gently, propelling me further into my solitude.

On the upper-right corner of my screen a little cloud appears, slowly growing darker and trembling with rain. Instinctively I double-click there, and a video window comes up. It's an RF connection,

hooked up via cable modem and a superaccelerator video card. Now a little TV set dangles in the corner of my screen. There's a shiny virtual interface, and I flip through channels and catch some breaking news on CNN. A female newscaster of mixed racial origin speaks soundlessly, with a facial expression that seems purposely meant to be alarming. There is an image of a map of Australia beside her head.

As she mouths words, the inset magnifies to fill up the screen. There's a rippling body of water, with a single speedboat in the middle to give it some size reference. A red strip appears across the bottom of the feed, with "tumult in great barrier reef" in shiny capitals. Should I wake up the wife and kid? As a helicopter comes into view, hovering over the growing waves, I let the cursor hover over the mute disable icon.

I really don't know what is happening, since the volume is still switched off. All I see is shaky video of the Australian coastline, interspersed with shots of the choppers own moving shadow over the sea's surface.

In a fit of boredom, I flip through Gabby's subdirectories, by randomly clicking on passing clouds. They are marked by incomprehensible filenames, with long and cryptic extensions. Opening them up reveals programs that take up gigabytes of disk space, filled with line after line of code that only Gabby can understand. Reserved words, which thunder in my head like the stupefying elements of schoolgirls' secret codes, punctuate each line amid numbers and greek-letter variables.

No, this language cannot be compared to the snot-nosed secret languages of my childhood, of concatenated syllables, inserted consonants, and reversed pronunciations. We spoke them as we huddled in corners, our backs turned to our enemies and our teachers.

No. Gabby himself has taken these words from the fabric of computer logic, solid and irrefutable. Grown men in labs would listen to him and understand. And Gabby himself has spoken them, reinvented their purpose to create his own world.

Me? Despite everything, i'm a man for the times. Principled despite my flaws, not bad-looking despite my age: I keep a mistress and sport a paunch. But there's something about having a belly that even I can't explain. I look at myself having late breakfast with Loren, in a restaurant, the gentle swell of my belly bibbed by the edge of the table linen, as though it were another mouth, another mistress to clothe and feed.

In motels my paunch challenges Loren's slip of a body. It demands respect, it hangs, luxuriates and obnoxiously intrudes upon our meshing, as though it were another sexual organ to consider, to rub and to please. During lulls in my life it swells to considerable proportions, possibly matching my biorhythms, or perhaps my sperm count, or more probably invisible endocrine levels. Then, despite my monotonous diet, it goes soft without warning, out of season, retreats into my body space, and hibernates like a sleeping serpent.

When I sleep it is one of the treasures that I clutch close, proof and heft of my bittersweet blessings, unwished for, but ultimately accepted and expected, like the wife beside me, our only child Gabby in the other room, and Loren in her college apartment, waiting, precocious, too, in the way she bears my love for her.

There is a soft whirr; the disk lamp lights; I have done something that has made the computer react. Tripped by some digital tripwire, a dialogue box unfolds in the center of the screenful of code and hypertext, demanding a password. The video window, currently showing a news correspondent in front of a huge radar structure, reacts to the new instruction stream by freezing picture, then jumps into realtime, the correspondent's mouth resuming synch with her voice. My mind reawakens. It bristles as the computer's scolding red eye lights up again, signifying internal activity. "Enter word in one minute." A clockface appears at one corner, a stopwatch set to one minute. It starts ticking backwards, imperceptibly changing hue every second, the command counting down with it.

I have but less than a minute to read Gabby's mind. What is the word? In my own sharp but less-than-perfect logic I wonder what words might mean to one like him. In any given string of programming, there are precious few statements that resemble real words: `int` for integer, `char` for character, `stdout` for standard. Even then, these might not take the form of words in Gabby's mind. They might more likely take the nature of mere affixes, punctuation marks, discreet strings of numbers, or perhaps even dumb directional arrows. Words no longer exist in Gabby's world. And yet. "Enter word in thirty four seconds."

Do I remember seeing him scribble something desperately, furtively, over and over again in his programmer's notebook? Did I notice a secret name in the configuration of the grains of sand, some hidden arrangement in the flocks of blue-feathered cranes, or phantom shapes in the wisps and curlicues of cloud vapor, noticeable only if one took a step back and peered at the screen from the corner of one eye? That was how one peered at digitized genitalia in Japanese void porn. I look at Gabby's mouth as he sleeps: half open, his little teeth showing through. Do I remember him whispering a name while he slept, through all these nights of my intrusions?

The clock ticks away. I do not know the consequence of a wrong answer. Perhaps a system shutdown. Perhaps an electronic note-- when he next opens the secret file--that an attempt has been made. The exact date and time will be given. In fact, I might have already triggered that program-within-a-program, just by accessing this query.

With barely five seconds to go, I press the reset button and the screen blacks out. The red eye gives me a livid glare before it retreats into darkness and sends me back to my own world.

In a moment of inspiration I christen the word 'X'. As in undefined, infinitely variable, the intercept of an equation that eludes me.

In the morning I abandon my unfinished story, slip into our bedroom where my wife sleeps, whisper a brief and hurried explanation about a weekend crisis in the office, pick up my briefcase and drive to Loren's place.

Loren laughs at the sight of me, carrying my briefcase containing random work papers and a change of clothes on a sleepy Saturday morning. She knows the ruse is useless. I tell her I have decided that we set out for Tagaytay, where the country is wide and open. I feel cooped up, I feel confined, I confess to her, writing night in, night out, in Gabby's room. The world is moving at an inexorable

pace, I say, remembering the muted TV image and the vast, unexplored ocean in the corner of the computer screen. The world could be ending, and I don't know it, I can't feel it.

This is our first trip out of town in our four-and-a-half years together. Soon, many empty miles after we hit the coastal road, we are stunned by the clear and far distances. Loren has been hushed, her young cluttered mind has expanded. Seeing countryside makes her giddy, unsure. I imagine that the things in her mind have spread apart too thinly, loosening frail chains of chronology and association, washed out by the midmorning sun and faces.

After all, here footsteps are projected into strides and stretches, stretches into long drives, each distance an afternoon shadow of the last. Our words are therefore spaced out, like milestones, and the silences between remarks and counterremarks measured by rows of trees and tracts of grass.

It is almost unnerving, it is almost too relaxing. Our bottles, spoons, and tupperware rattle against each other in protest. We drive into the picnic grove, led by some unseen force to seek out the normal, the citylike. Cars and vans are spread out haphazardly on the scraggly, sunbeaten grass, the people emerging from them all picnickers from the city.

Loren pulls me toward the fence at the edge of the field, where all the people are headed. We walk past flocks of families, young couples, carrying cameras and cell phones and picnic baskets. I feel like I'm part of some suicide ritual.

What do we witness at the fence? What I've always seen, in all my visits to this place, this very same tired grove. The white wooden fence, many times repainted, is waist-high, and is broken at many places. It is decoration, not a safety-measure, at best a psychological barrier. Beyond the fence the grass plunges wildly, roots and vines scrambling willy-nilly for hold. The ravine is covered with thick brush and pine trees, softdrink cans and foil wrappers. And beyond that, the lake-within-an-island-within-a-lake that has lately been threatening to blow. For the past few years, warnings have sounded and escalated, people have been evacuated from the island, and innumerable eruption dates set and reset. Someone beside me points to a small plume of smoke, rising from a barely visible vent on the island. "There it is, that's where it'll start." Loren is listening to him furtively, cocking her ear.

"No," I whisper. "It's going to happen in Australia."

The perfect view tires me. From here, the now-reactivated volcano looks dead, lifted from a postcard. It all seems rehearsed, like the ritual of going to the edge of the field.

I wait patiently, letting her have her fill. Then she takes my hand and we go back to the car.

It's almost noon. The sun's heat is sharp, biting. It's changed. When I was Gabby's age, the sun was warm, the heat was gentle even when it beat straight down in summer. Now you can almost feel the UV pierce your skin, claws unsheathed like a cat's. It's a gradual thing, I guess. Now sunlight doesn't feel too good anymore.

For our picnic she has prepared a basket that smells of steamed rice and adobo, staple of all picnics, and a Coleman. We choose to eat in the car, with the front seats reclined and our suddenly feet tucked under us. Opening her plasticware becomes an enjoyable task, like opening gifts at Christmas. In my mind I see myself in my T-shirt and cut-offs, sitting Indian-style in the driver's

seat, opening her offerings one by one, setting each one down gingerly, as though she were appeasing a sun god who might end the world any moment. In the background, the attendant white glare and the rumble of a sleeping volcano.

The picnic ends. Loren and I pack up, erecting our seats and smoothening our clothes for the long drive home. More picnickers arrive. We have trouble starting our car. It won't even make a churning sound. I look at the dash and there's nothing there that tells me something is wrong. The tank is half-full. The temperature is normal and no warning lights have lit up. My belly grazes the bottom of the steering wheel.

I end up having to open the hood, checking the battery contacts to see if they're loose. I take a wrench and bang at the contacts, which a taxi driver once taught me to do because, according to him, it loosens the salt encrustations. I see Loren through the windshield, her face screwed up by heat and apprehension. My first blows startle her, but after a while her eyes gloss over. It's the only sound we both hear now: the dull, inconsequential banging of my wrench, trying to hit the invisible mark that will mend the battery, mend Loren, mend us all. The other picnickers seem so far away, on another island, another volcano.

After a while I try starting the car again. Nothing. Loren starts panicking, tells me she has to be home by five so her boyfriend won't find out. She asks me if she has to push.

After a half-hour of shuttling back and forth between the engine and the wheel, the ignition finally works. As I get in I mumble something about an alternator problem, but it is Loren who has shut herself off now. She wants to say what the fuck is wrong with this car. But she won't say it out loud. Her way of saying it is being all quiet and screwed up.

We taunt each other, daring each other to step past our freshly reconstructed boundaries. Why? To test our love, to test our faith. To see if it will lead the other to do the same, so we can be sweet again, so I can drive back with Loren dangerously draped across my lap, like vacationing preppies do in American movies, only they drive convertibles and are young enough to not have wives and not need secret lovers.

To ease my pain and emptiness, I tell Loren about X. I ask her questions she isn't meant to answer. "What secrets could it unlock? What must Gabby hide from me, his own father?"

Without a hug, a kiss or a wave, Loren alights from the car and sticks a ready key into the lock.

Back in Gabby's room I try to forget the mystery by immersing myself in more live news footage. The cameras have been there, it seems, for days. And the scientists, as we are expected to believe, have been there since the beginning. All along the great underwater wall of coral, the fish have only increased in number and in kind. Now, besides the small, dainty angelfish and parrotfish that are native to the reef, huge tuna and mackerel have arrived, jumping and barreling through the froth. The choppers, too, have multiplied. There are now three, sometimes four of them, hovering over the great commotion in the water.

The only marine vessels allowed near the site are the scientists' yellow rubber boats. They are loaded with all sorts of expensive equipment, and shuttle back and forth between the site and a large

research vessel moored close to the shore. The people on the boats look frantic, even from this distance.

Satellites have been reoriented, retracked, so that the scientists receive a steady stream of aerial shots and updated atmospheric information.

A reporter patches in, and does an interview with a scientist in his late fifties. He sports a grey beard, round wireframe glasses and a ponytail. He starts blaming everything from the hole in the ozone layer to toxic dumping in Australasia. It's a tired old subject. Then the cam zooms in, so that his head fills the TV window.

“Or,” he mumbles, his wireframes catching a glint of light from the cameraman, “there could be another reason.”

The reason that dissolves into the screen is a picture I've seen maybe two dozen times before, in books, in Internet Websites and TV shows. It's a frozen image of a flying saucer in a blue sky. On the bottom of the screen, there's a strip of fine print: “Stock footage courtesy of 20th Century Fox.”

As gabby sleeps I write and revise, add or subtract details as I see fit. When the ideas tire me out with their repetitiveness and all my poorly hidden meanings, I start scouring his directory listings for any clue: a curious passage, a lost text string, a dubious-looking fragment of code.

After work I feel restless. Uninvited and unexpected, I make an unplanned visit to Loren's house.

She hops into the car, full of energy, hair wet and smelling of sex. Her boyfriend is some college boy she met at one of her fashion pictorials. He's as unreal as they come: strong and well-built, a perfect match for her body.

It's me that tries to feed into their energy, I realize, as I mount and impinge upon the cusp of her ecstasy minutes later, at our favorite motel. Her hips move with a rhythm that is her own, too quickly and too easily. For a moment I feel as though I'm looking at her and her boyfriend doing it on TV, and I'm having to match their timing while jacking off on my own, as many ageing men do. I am also forced to pull back, in the middle of the dissipating curve of my energy, and watch as she breathes and mumbles and opens her soul for a very brief moment, and I know she is thinking of him as she looks at me and mouths my name silently, as though it hid another name in the depths of that breath.

Then her eyes light up. “X is a woman,” Loren says, laughing that laugh.

“Writing is stealing.” Or maybe they said ‘writers steal’? Writers are jackals, lone wolves. We smell the merest hint of rotting flesh dropping from the bone and we strike, feeding nightly upon the half-digested, wormy carcasses. In the midst of all this we imagine that we have hunted our prey down.

OK, so let's solve for X, such that X is a woman's name. A girl's name. The next question is, what's in this single secret file, anyway? In other words, isolate Y. Isolate Why. This file probably contains secret proceedings between friends, or secret lists of childhood concerns. Or a day-to-day journal, or pretentious stories about everyday life, the stuff of which my files, which are open for anyone to read or alter or perhaps delete, are made of. I struggle to remember the secret lists and writings I myself must have made as a boy, but I can remember nothing.

Gabby's other hidden programs are pretty simple, even if they're in programming code. Opening assembly-language files is like opening a series of doors in a castle, as in Kafka. You go deeper and deeper, opening program after program, and soon all files written in open themselves up for you, routines and subroutines deflowered in your path.

The first thing I do is try to locate the query program, so I can open it up. As I have come to expect, there are more ruses: baffling linkages of commands and programs that will easily throw any amateur code reader off the track. Names and numbers spill across the screen, fruits of his brilliant, excessive, and careless talent. The names are gibberish; it seems no references have been made to anything, and there is no apparent naming system to them. There are literally hundreds of executable programs, and trying them all out might take days, weeks. There are programs within these programs, that, when activated, will surely open other programs within.

I study the names one by one. I take note of arrangement. I take note of chronology. I take note of phonetics, and mumble the alien words to myself, waiting to catch something that might sound like a name, her name.

Monday. 0600 hrs. The sea by the Great Barrier Reef is in a tumult. Close to a hundred humpback whales have arrived, in a great grey herd from the North, stretching for miles.

The whales have barricaded the congregation of fish from the North. To the helicopter cameras it seems that they are milling around, without any semblance of order. But then, a scientist adds, what is order? This brings up a host of special reports—even on other channels—on chaos theory and the mathematics of fractals. The reports are punctuated with breathtaking visuals of Mandelbrot Equations, all uncannily resembling Gabby's graphics of grass and other greenery.

The humpback whales display their great backs and flanks to the helicopters and the TV audience. The scratches and scars, the voice-over adds, are from errant Japanese harpoons and from propellers of ships wandering into migration trails.

The rubber boats have limited themselves to the South side of the reef now. Scientists are still discussing what to do about the whales. Satellite images are spread across the TV screen. They are sharp enough to look like any instamatic picture, although the colors look a bit artificial. The news special serves up several aspects: Earth's topography, infrared map, and atmospheric conditions, which are soon joined by simulations of lunar paths, planetary positions, and supernova activity.

Again, the anchorman reminds us that the possibility of alien involvement cannot be ruled out, as we are reminded by feature after feature showing artists' renditions of short gray humanoids that many believe hold the secret to man's and, therefore, even the universe's existence.

As another dark shadow of collected marine shapes disrupts the underwater blanket of ultrasound, Gabby stirs and begins to wake. I snap the file windows shut, hurriedly switch the system off.

“Wake up, son. You’ll be late for school.”

“It’s a Sunday,” he mumbles, his head turning suddenly to look at me with freshly opened and instantly vigilant eyes, his eyelids flashing like nictitating membranes.

X, you must be beautiful. Gabby's pupils flit randomly under his eyelids, like the fish in the Australian sea. All along, he has been dreaming about you, your shadowy figure in a billowy, translucent school dress, smooth calves gleaming, fleetingly glimpsed between the hem of a yellow skirt and knitted white socks. Your swan neck, white and somewhat flushed, gleams incandescent above your collar. Your hair is hazy, thin, almost curly, windblown-- all but insignificant for the face it frames, unequivocally beautiful and superintelligent. You are the stuff of all our schoolday imaginings.

Gabby's spoken with you, once or twice, in some school affair-- a fair or a flea market, maybe. Perhaps he's spoken to you many times. There might have been secret meetings, entire afternoons together, talking, laughing, and sharing whatever childhood delicacy his meager allowance could afford. Ice cream. Popcorn. Fishballs. A Ring Pop.

He's held your hand in his, to confess, to implore, or to beg your trust. And you, in return, have weaved your tiny, slender fingers through his bad haircut and tenderly touched his blotched face. Your skin is white but sunned by the heat of the new, hurtful sun, and rich and sweet with the unmistakable smells of earth and girlhood.

There might have been things said. Real things, like the things you really meant and spent your whole life pretending, or believing not to have meant. So that one day, the entire episode might seem savage, dreamlike, like lost days of youth, or for me, the ever unfound, ever unattainable old age at which all my mysteries would have been answered.

And yes, best and worst of all, he's shared his talent with you, pulled you into his world as though he were rescuing Penelope Pitstop, and made you the holder of the darkest, most wonderful secret in his arsenal of codes and colors.

In exchange, what cruel, senseless thing did you tell him, that he now must guard from the world with a one minute code, retrievable only by a password?

This spurs me to open his personal files without hesitation. His programming notes, his letters to friends and relatives, the nude pictures he downloads from the net. I look for clues, hints, careless utterances. There are none.

The story so far: romance, philosophy, adventure. A techno-thriller, a mathematical treatise. But it’s a mystery story, really. Half of the time, my readers might be wondering, Who the Fuck is X? Why is X so important? Or even, could aliens be behind that feeding frenzy? —Which, as many of us know, is based on real actual fact.

And looking at you, Gabby, peacefully withholding the most terrible secret of your heart in your deep and untroubled sleep, I wonder, why must you give your heart away so young in your life? You had your maths, your assembly language, your SVGA. You were happy, you were complete!

And so the dark shadows emerge, in a white explosion of water and blood and bloody flesh, to reveal delta fins and great silver backs. Chopper cam comes in for a close up and gives us multiple rows of teeth, gnashing and tearing tuna into pieces.

Sharks are always consumed by hunger, Dr. Ponytail explains. Should we believe it? There are rows and rows of books behind him. Sharks, he adds, can smell bloody flesh miles away.

There are no more rubber boats, only shadows of helicopters hovering lower and lower. The news correspondent's voice is ragged, tired, like that reporter in Kuwait under siege. The chopper lifts, the camera view opens up: although the weather is clear, the water is choppy with fish movement. Everywhere, the surface is cut by clumps of delta fins, stationary, or circling, or cutting arrowlike swaths towards their targets.

We switch to computer imagery. This is quieter, more controlled. We are calmed by the enhanced colors, the digitized matter. Sonar feed is superimposed over the perfect seascape. Clusters of dots tell the story of the largest feeding frenzy ever recorded in history. The fish have almost numbered a million. The sharks, up to two thousand, circling, attacking, repositioning. I learn more about the Great White than I ever have in my entire life. The sharks are a vision of the future: their torpedo-shaped body is perfectly streamlined, their tissue impervious to cancer, and their physiology a stranger to satiation.

The next time i drop by loren's uninvited, it's her boyfriend who opens the door. A head taller than me, he is wearing a muscle shirt and boxer shorts, and brushing his teeth with hard, solid up-and-down strokes.

"Who the fuck's this guy?" he says.

I remember this episode as though it were a funny thing that happened to someone else, what with me standing there with a briefcase full of phony things, with a hunger in my loins and a lost look in my eyes.

Loren says nothing as she sits on the couch in her robe. She's thinking. I can almost hear her mind whirring towards her next move, as it does whenever we argue. At that moment, looking past the angry man, at Loren, sitting in the couch, still wondering whether to recognize my face, my paunch, my aching shoulders—my nondescript clothes bulging at the seams with familiar nakedness feverishly lurking underneath—or to dismiss me as a lost neighbor, an old professor, an uncle, I realized that even our lovemaking is like an argument, lying in her bed locked in our stalemate, moshing and meshing and grunting. And whenever it happened, whenever we made love, there would be a silent countdown, like Gabby's one minute clock, in the face of which I would grunt and pump like a madman, trying to beat the time.

The man throws a fantastic curve at me, his fist forming its advancing point, to connect with jaw at unmatched, youthful speed. It's what Gabby's video games refer to as an "unblockable move". And at that crucial moment, as his knuckles strike to complete our equation (she the divisor, he the dividend and me, the quotient, foolishly simple answer to a laughably simple proof), I imagine X to be the asymptote of a graph of a calculus equation, that crucial point, eternally elusive, which all my graceful, infinite curves, like the gentle swell of my belly, will never reach.

Loren, my only love, my only semblance of a secret, lost forever to the happiness, the catastrophic rapture I shall never attain.

"The Myth is not safe," someone told me once—and while the capital M is mine, I do maintain that we live in a world of diminishing mystery. Diminishing in relevance, diminishing in mysteriousness. Why, even writers have to steal material now, not unlike magicians stealing sleight-of-hand tricks. You see, unlike colors or numbers or particles in the known universe, there are only twenty-six letters for me to sift among, fit and fix. As I grow older I often find myself coming up empty-handed.

My own electronic search, too, has ended similarly. I have discovered only a tantalizing proximity to you, X. And then, nothing more. You are a myth. An imaginary friend of my egghead son, made more real than any phantom playmate from my boyhood might have been. There is no X.

By the time this is published, of course--if it ever will--even if it will be seven years from now or a year from now, everything will have changed. There will be more catastrophes around us. Perhaps the volcano will finally erupt, perhaps the sharks will eat the whales, perhaps the sun will be covered with a strange cosmic dust, or perhaps our souls will awaken and be one. Or perhaps not.

Already the little clock ticks ever backwards. In the future Gabby will no longer be the prodigy he is now. I imagine him as a scientist bypassed by the Nobel, a news reporter on the field who never made Pulitzer, a bitmapped clip of a volcano hanging in the air beside his head, in the background a newsroom filled with people trying to look busy.

And all above him, behind him, all around him, the volcano threatening to blow but never really exploding, the smoking omen of its own undoing a permanent, unrelenting possibility against which all of us are infinitely small and mortal.

Now, as he sleeps on, I close electronic doors one by one, upon the TV satellite feed, upon the wasted efforts of his genius, upon the gradual, but inevitable dissipation of his youth. And as I close the door on you, X, failed phenomenon, aborted catastrophe, I imagine myself as a shark, nursing an ancient, eternal hunger in an eternally dying sea.
