Appointment with the Inferno

by Richard Polt

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The car is filling with an aroma -- pungent, inky.
I pull onto the familiar onramp.
The first few exits slip by like words out of my mouth, like giant footsteps, and evening light transfigures the warehouses and billboards.

It's the aroma of cash.
In the suburbs already, and I don't look back. The franchises are here, each one from a mold, each one borrowing its own bits of authenticity from some corporate playbook. This restaurant says French countryside, this store says gingham and rocking chairs. None of them speaks of its own place. They don't have their own place. This is nowhere -- and it's gone.

The beaten-up leather bag on the passenger seat is slightly unzipped. My two fingers can feel the stacks of bills. I insisted on $20 bills. They fit onto each other, into each other, reams of possibility -- but I'm not excited. What do I have to look forward to? Empty days, blank pages stacked like the bills. There will be a cleanliness about it, wherever I go, and maybe I feel as if I've just stepped out of a bath. Clean. Naked.

Exurbs in the twilight. Well-lit "centres" and "plazas" and traffic, people returning. Am I returning somewhere that I never knew? Maybe this is a regression to some previous life, an unre-membered childhood. Exit 134. A tractor-trailer passes me making a thunderous show; the pressure pushes me and seems to touch my chest. The exurb is gradually fading in my rear-view mirror, and I know the road ahead only from a few past trips, when I wasn't paying attention, when Erin was in the seat where the money lies.

Just go, and put everything else out of your mind. I realize I didn't have my lights on. Now I'm constantly entering a tunnel of my own light. At Exit 147 the streetlights give out and we're on our own, a stream of travelers lighting our own path forward toward our destinations, whatever they may be. Grasses undulate by the side of the Interstate. Individual specks, insects, flash above the fields and are crushed against my windshield, Exit 149.

I'm off the road. Did I make the decision? Too late, I'm on the offramp now, turning -- I'll decide this time: left -- onto a road whose name I didn't notice. There's a sign, State Route 12. Everything is different now, I haven't seen another car since I left the Interstate. You can feel the hills and feel the fields surrounding you, breathing around you, even when you can't see more than a few feet on either side of the car. I roll down the window and the cash molecules are blown out, suddenly, ruthlessly, by a blast of cold country air. Mown grass and fertilizer and leaf mold. I shiver and slow down. There is weight now -- my actions aren't easy, my breath takes an effort, and I realize that the car is hardly moving. All the motion is in the air around me. The world is moving while I stay still.

I've pulled over. I step out and take a few steps on to the field. I crouch down and grab handfuls of earth as burrs attach themselves like parasites to my socks and pants.
The motel, a Rest Lodge, rose up at the intersection of S.R. 12 and a Federal highway. There was a little colony here — the motel, a gas station or two, a convenience store. Trucks and cars gathered around the Rest Lodge like newborn pups. I'd never felt more tired.

"Welcome to Rest Lodge. How many staying tonight?" It was an automatic phrase from the woman behind the counter. You could read her kids in the lines on her face — one in the bags under her eyes, one in her forehead, one in the laugh lines at the corner of her mouth — and maybe she was thinking of them, because she sure wasn't paying attention to me. She didn't look at me when she said her welcome line. That was good.

"Just one."
"Smoking or nonsmoking?"
"Smoking."
"Can I run your credit card?"
"I'll be paying cash."
Now she glanced at me. "Okay, may I see your I.D.?"
"Er, I don't have it on me."
She was looking me full in the face now, showing no emotion. "Sir, it's a state law. Didn't you drive here?" She knew I had, there was nothing around here. People didn't walk up to the Rest Lodge. And they didn't drive without a license, not if they were good citizens and good motel customers.

"Be right back."

In the motel lot, I debated whether to move on and find some place else, or sleep in the car. Finally, exhaustion and convenience won. I walked back in and handed her my license.

"Thank you, Mr. Lazarus. Your room is 230. Elevator's down the hall."

I had my two bags, the cash and the essentials. A motel room had never looked so good. The painting above the bed showed a lighthouse on a New England coast. Waves crashed against the rocks while the lighthouse stood erect and untouched, beaming out into the night sea as I'd been shining my headlights on the interstate. Out the motel window I could make out another sea, a sea of dyeing and cropped fields, telephone poles imitating lighthouses, a few travelers on the U.S. highway imitating ships. Before falling asleep I turned off all the lights except the reading light by the twin bed, and sat watching the painting some more as I was starting to reel with sleepiness. The waves seemed to surge without crashing, to swell without breaking. The whitecaps were eternally poised on the brink of reaching the rocky shore. Inside the lighthouse, someone was pacing. You could sense him behind the cylindrical walls. The light was eternally starting to sweep across the sea, eternally about to blind me. The lighthouse keeper had set it to swivel automatically across its arc. He was pacing. He was completing and repeating his own circuit around a room. There was little in the room except one book, one log book, one notebook. In the notebook, the keeper wrote a diary. Most days were like other days, but not all days were the same. He found parallels between this day and one last fall, or an unusual winter day three years ago. He traced similarities and minute differences. The log book was for formal records. The book, the printed book, what was that? It might be a Bible. There was a table for the three volumes, a wooden chair, a cot, a sink. On the wall was a small painting that showed an inland highway, a building, fallow fields. A faint light showed in one window of the building. In that room a man sat on a bed. He looked at a painting of a lighthouse.

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Morning. I was scrubbing my numb flesh, washing off the dirt from the field where I'd knelt last night -- what was I doing? -- and I had a good appetite. With my bags over my shoulder, I strode out of the room and took the stairs down to the free breakfast. My change of clothes was a faded pair of jeans, a nondescript shirt, comfortable shoes. The breakfast room was loud, though there were only a few silent people there. The noise came from a TV tuned to a news channel. Two or three lines of text scrolled across the bottom of the screen at various rates, two people chattered, a menu at left told you what the upcoming topics of chatter were. There was something very comforting about that screen; just looking at it, without interpreting or listening to the content of the words, made you feel on top of things and part of the world. But *that* is just what I didn't want to be now. Getting away from the world: how do you do that? I asked myself as I poured the orange juice and dribbled waffle batter into the grid.

The woman from last night was refilling the Danish tray. A businessman or sales rep was shuffling through papers in a briefcase while holding a tall cup of coffee. Two guys who looked Indian or Pakistani were talking about sports, soccer, some such thing.

Just as you identify these people and categorize them, I thought, they identify *you*. They glance at you and know you: your blend-in outfit just sends the message that you want to blend in. That's significant. Your haircut, the shape of your nose, the way you hold your spine, whether you wear a wristwatch, your accent, how many bags: they're all tells. Poker players have a tell, a giveaway, a sign of uncertainty or confidence or its lack. They all have it. The good ones see it coming and know how to repress it. They turn it into a mental tell that only they can feel. Behind their dark shades, their brain is twitching. They're still giving themselves away; they're just giving themselves away to themselves. Most people reveal themselves indiscriminately to the world, and let people see things about themselves that they themselves don't know. The poker player reveals himself only to himself. But he still lets others know one thing: that he's a poker player -- and that says a lot.

Me, I want to be a poker player who doesn't play poker.

The sugar and caffeine felt good. The sun shone. I settled up with three crisp bills and got some chimes change in return. A cash transaction -- I hardly paid for things that way anymore.

As I walked to my car, I saw a familiar car pulling into the lot. Quickly I was behind my wheel. That looked like Harper's gold Escalade. Someone ran from the SUV into the motel. Suddenly my heart was racing. I tried to be inconspicuous as I left the motel lot and headed west on the state highway. Soon I was doing 85, glancing in the rear view mirror, no one behind me. Still, it seemed smart to turn at the next intersection. I headed north on a smaller, faded road that wound and twisted past fences -- then turned again onto another route, some county road that seemed almost too narrow for two vehicles to pass each other. No one was here. A few sheep watched me speed around a bend. I took a deep breath and slowed down.

For no reason, a laugh burst out of my throat. A ridiculous yell: "ki-yeeel!" And I sang a scat song in pure improvisation. I was free. Free of a plan or an obligation, nowhere I had to be today except away. I turned this way and that on the little roads, passing a couple of tractors and a pickup or two, generally choosing what I took to be northerly and westerly directions. All I wanted was more road, more bends, more little valleys to pass through, more crests of hills -- where you speed up on the uphill, not knowing what lies over the edge, and your entrails thrill as you hit the downward slope.

There was a dead raccoon by the road, burst and desiccated and disintegrating. He wasn't smart enough. He didn't see it coming. It blindsided him. It was over before he knew it. Goodbye, raccoon. Goodbye.
This was new country for me. It gradually became more than generic "countryside" and I noticed the unique configurations. A farmhouse with perfectly white paint and closely mown, bright green grass; a Swiss flag flying over it. **A rusting Checker cab in a field, llamas nearby. A pond surrounded by a tall mesh-link fence and a sign of warning that seemed to mean a lot to someone, but not to me: "CARREYS."**

These vignettes started to flow past me like dioramas. They actually felt tiny and contained, each scene a perfect little world of its own, with a crystal barrier between its reality and my eyes. My only thought was to pass from one diorama to the next, to glimpse and move on. A girl was jogging by the side of the highway — I thought that was a city habit. She constituted her own diorama, a moving scene in itself, and when she glanced at me I was surprised that she could see me. Then I realized that my car was its own diorama, that she could see into it just as much as I could see into hers. But the glass between us seemed impenetrable.

I thought I'd pull over; turn the car around; head back to the girl and see her sweaty, flushed face become a little defensive or curious; ask her where you could settle down around here and build a home for yourself; she would get in the car and guide me to a town where she'd always wanted to live. We would have seven kids and three dogs.

Something in the side pocket of my bag was asking to be taken out.

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The green girders of this little bridge feel solid and peaceful. My motor's off. Just 15 feet below, a stream is flowing gently, bringing leaves to places downstream. Pebbles on the small beach are rounded and multicolored. There's a breeze that tells me something.

The thing in my hand is competing with the breeze. It, too, has messages: 127 text messages. 330 e-mails. 38 voice mails. Each of those is a tendril extending to some tower or satellite, from there to other devices, and from those to friends. I have so many friends, all competing to see who manned can be the fastest to alert me to my many misfortunes. Some of these friends will be trying to find out whether they're next in line for my job. Other friends will want my interpretation of what happened. Others will be pointing me to sites where more is said about me. Others will be giving me heads-up and sympathies and advice. Others will be wanting me dead.

It arcs and spins in several directions, catching the sunlight, reflecting it into the stream before it sends out a few short plashes and vanishing concentric ripples.

I can hear the breeze now.

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There was a gas station where I bought road food: cured strips of beef, little pies, bags of chips, colorful drinks. I didn't want to pause for my lunch, just keep moving, so I ripped open the jerky package with my teeth and fished it out with one hand while the other navigated the valleys and crests of this landscape. Freedom, I felt, depended on constant motion. If I stopped, the air would congeal around me and encase me. I'd grow roots. Flowers would be planted in a neat bed around me, and a plaque with my scientific name would be situated at my left foot for the edification of bystanders.
But if you keep moving quickly enough that they can't remember you, they can't hold you at all. That's the stuff of prisons, I thought -- memories. Give people familiarity with you and they'll be able to identify you, pin you down in their minds. As long as your image survives in memory, you yourself aren't free. To be fluid and forgettable, you have to pass lightly and never linger. That's what the breeze and the stream had been telling me.

I can't recall seeing the lights before they were right behind me, spinning red and blue, white headlights alternating, and my hairs were standing on end. I was simultaneously aware of every object in my car, arrayed in an inventory, as I pulled over.

Maps of 3 adjoining states
License and registration
Jerky wrapper
Two jeans, three shirts, underwear, socks, gym shoes
Four pack Winston Lights
$63,400 cash
Razor, shaving cream, toothbrush, mouthwash
Wallet with 3 credit cards and a used ticket to a ball game
After I stopped and rolled my window down, the cop took his time behind me, lights still flashing, writing something or checking some screen. It seemed as if he had forgotten all about me and I could simply drive off. It was all a misunderstanding.

At the perfect moment, which of course was unpredictable, he came out and slowly ambled to my window.

"Where you going today, sir?"

"I'm just out for a drive. Probably heading back to the city in half an hour or so. Just a beautiful day."

"That so."

I handed him the license and registration. He didn't seem to look at them, just held them and chewed something, extremely slowly.

"You're not going anywhere in particular. That so."

"Yes." It was true -- I had no destination other than "elsewhere." But my "yes" felt like a lie. I tried to confine my tell to my brain.

The cop stood and chewed and took in my face and vehicle. His name was T. Pretty. There was a minuscule spot of acne on his neck, just above his collar. His nose flared once.

"You have any drugs in your vehicle, sir?"

"No." Something told me not to answer too soon or too slowly, not to say "Officer," not to ask questions.

"No drugs in the car?"

"No."

"That so."

I was silent and played his game of waiting. He suddenly turned and spit. It was as if he'd spit down my throat -- I had to swallow and felt he saw every bit of stubble on my Adam's apple squirm.

Next he was going to ask me to step out of the vehicle.

But instead, T. Pretty handed back my documents and said, "You have a nice drive, Mr. Lazarus."

He was heading back to his cruiser already. He sat doing the same mysterious activities again -- reporting or recording -- and never looked up. After a minute I started my car. I looked in the rear view mirror. I turned on my turn signal. I put the car into Drive. Gently I left the side of the road and gradually speeded up to 55 mph.
Pretty had done his job to perfection. He'd let me know they were watching me. Who they were, exactly, and exactly why they were watching, were deliberately left unclear. But my freedom was dead. I didn't take any pleasure in the hills and farmsteads anymore. I glanced at the speedometer every minute. And Pretty's flat voice — "That so." — echoed as I reconsidered my thoughts on what freedom was.

Freedom isn't movement. You move; they track your motion. They track the means you use to move, the routes you take, your velocity and acceleration. Your vehicle is documented, pinpointed, predicted. Every motion fed into the whole moving compendium of information.

And prisons aren't built out of other people's memories. Your own memories are just as powerful. Your memory of Officer Pretty, your unerasable knowledge that you're being watched and tracked — that's the most effective imprisonment. Travel as far as you can, as fast as you can, and there you are: you with your awareness that others are aware of you.

The whole car felt polluted.

Roads were getting broken up and multiplied. Middle-class housing developments started to appear. I was approaching a town.

I'd never had occasion before to visit Grandburg. Hardly grand, it was a middling town with the usual ring of Generica, featuring a shopping center christened Bypass Plaza. Closer in, you passed backwards through history; postwar brick bungalows gave way to decaying wooden-frame houses, and a few blocks of what had been minor mansions for the businessmen of Grandburg 80 or 90 years back. The central square was, as usual, focused on the county courthouse, an ornate pile from the 1880s or 1890s, I would guess. Around the courthouse, a strip of unusually depressing little shops and empty lots hoped for something. In one corner of the square was a Greyhound bus station, a tiny waiting room and an ugly rain shelter its main features.

I got out, tried to shake off Pretty's stare by walking around the square. My bags were locked in the trunk. A closer look at the shops showed that they were primarily flea markets squatting in what used to be barbershops, jewelry stores, or even banks. Or should I call them garage sales? Junk shops? They were strictly unclassifiable, and no order was imposed on any of the items in these stores. I lingered at the open doors of one nameless establishment. A great blue-green vacuum cleaner. Bottle caps in an ancient cardboard box. Baseball cards. Piles of cheap new screwdrivers made in China. Used sneakers. Wigs from the last four decades. A sign in what might have been very bad Spanish seemed to warn customers that refunds were not possible under any circumstances.

A woman with stringy, bleached hair, pulled back severely, came down the sidewalk pushing a baby carriage. She was replete with child. But in the carriage there was nothing. I guess she was prepared to give birth and give her kid a ride as soon as it was out of her. From her mouth dangled a cigarette. She shot me a look and went into the junk shop. The proprietor, a man in greasy overalls, started in on a conversation, dropping names so often that you'd think this was the liveliest social scene in America.

I needed to keep walking. The smell of the flea shop repelled me. But despite myself, I found myself thinking of a smoke and pulled out a Winston. I could feel the lining of my lungs faintly sear and cringe with the first inhalation, and then a pale imitation of a nicotine rush coursed through me, leaving me slightly clearer, slightly more calm.

Central Grandburg could only be called menacing, but at least the menace was softened by apathy and hopelessness. Shifty or shiftless men could be spotted in doorways, or in the barren windows of buildings that no one had bothered to demolish. There was something that made you decisive, something that impelled you to take a stand here in the face of the feckless decay and degradation. By the time I'd made a circuit of the square, I had come to a decision.
The glove compartment of the car held little to identify me, aside from a few documents that I removed. Bits of detritus could stay. From the coin holder I fished out a handful of quarters to scatter on the seats as bait. Under my seat I found Erin's lip balm, with accumulated dust and fibers. Every area got checked twice. Then I rolled down all the windows, left the key in the ignition, took my bags from the trunk, and headed for the Greyhound station.

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Erin is working the lip balm over her full, pale mouth. "All the partners going to be at this party?"
"I don't know, I expect so."
"How do I look?"
"Fantastic."
She's checking her cell again, even as I speak. She's said something about a report due the day after tomorrow, and there are her college friends—they can always be invoked if I ask what she's doing.
At the stop light I touch my beard, if I can call it that. It's supposed to be rugged, independent. It actually takes more grooming than a long beard or smooth skin would—keep it at an eighth of an inch all the time to send the right message. No necktie, but an expensive dress shirt pretending to be casual. It should make the right impression. I want a smoke.
"Did you forget to shave?" she says vaguely.
I'm not even going to answer this time. She ignores my explanations on purpose. At the next stop light, I take out my own cell and check the texts, giving each one a second.
The party's on the top floor of an expensive apartment building. You can see half the city from the balcony, and that's where most of the guests are milling. The smokers are flicking their ashes over the side. I watch mine drift into the summer evening air. Erin is leaning into her conversation with a new guy who holds a tall, bluish drink.
Here's Tennant. "You made it," he says, giggling as if that were an extremely clever comment. "You think you're going to get the Leigh account?"
"No."
"You don't think so? Why not? You're, like, the man of the hour around here." Giggles.
"I didn't say I wouldn't get it. I said I wasn't thinking that I would. You can't expect anything in life. You just take what comes your way." That sounds good to me. Thanks to my drink, I该怎么 myself that I believed it. It's my philosophy of life and success. tell
Harper showed up in a green-gray suit that fit him perfectly. On his arm a redhead woman in a little black dress and a dazzling necklace. Her eyes hooded, slightly shadowed, and darted from guest to guest.
"He's a partner, right?" Erin at my side. Her lips are still shiny, even smeary, from that stick of stuff. Her hair out of place. I make as if to kiss her and feel her stiffen and draw back. Tennant giggles about something. I suck the last out of the embers of my cigarette.

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The Greyhound stop is staffed by one guy, maybe sixty, who must have stopped caring about his own boredom years ago. He sells me a ticket to Philadelphia. I'm the only one here.
While I wait, I can see first one guy, then another, pause by my car across the square. Someone is trying to get up the nerve.
My car? Not anymore. It's no-man's-car, public property, nonproperty, waiting to be stolen. I take a breath, then release it, and with it release my ownership of the thing. Just another object to let go. I'm not going to miss it, no more than I miss my cell, no more than I miss the condo.

I remember the condo bedroom and Erin getting up in the middle of the night, quietly, either trying not to wake me up or pretending that she doesn't know that I'm awake.

My bus is idling outside.

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There was a smell of the bus, indefinable and omnipresent, a human smell layered out of competing exhalations and perfumes, all aged and married like the flavors of a week-old stew.

As the bus climbed through its gears and barrelled onto the highway, I watched places pass, letting myself be carried instead of taking charge. If you're part of the stream they can't see you, if you're part of the breeze they can't touch you. I was down to two bags, rocking over my seat on the luggage rack, and something felt lighter now in my chest.

We were all men on the bus. One guy, stringy hair and dark clothing, was seeing something only he could see in the back of the seat in front of him. He moved his mouth minutely, apparently repeating some comforting mantra. Another guy might have been a soldier off duty: close-cropped hair, showing no emotion, mouth tightly closed, but every few minutes he would scratch violently at his neck. There was a teenager, half scared, half hostile, wearing two T-shirts at once.

Everyone was marked, carried his history with him, like the bus carrying its smell. That was the smell: the scent of commingled pasts.

Halfway through the afternoon, I slumped against the window and entered a state of dreaming thought. I knew I was on the bus, but at the same time I could look down on the bus and map its passengers. The bus left a trail of histories, a scented slugtrail that followed the prescribed route. I knew, somehow, that the scent could be analyzed into its components, measured, filed. Numbers were assigned to each element of the scent-history, combined according to the bus's speed. With every new foot traveled, new data was generated and analyzed. Everything was sent to a central bureau of statistics, analysis, and prevention. Every bus in the United States had its own electronic watchers and its motions and smells were processed on an ongoing basis. The entire database was stored in a complex in a desert that I could see now: hermetic, nondescript, vast, a warehouse of warehouses, heat waves rising above it, fed by cables that disappeared into it. Here, the country and its movements were imaged, modeled, miniaturized, and each of us was converted into a set of ones and zeros whose trip to Philadelphia would always be stored for future reference, preserved by dry heat, dried like a specimen in a butterfly collection.

The bus had stopped.

I was sweating and my cheek was distorted where it had been resting against the glass.

We had 15 minutes here. All filed out to use the men's room, stretch our legs, buy a Coke. When I got back, a new passenger, a tall black man, had taken a seat across the aisle of the bus.

"How you doin'?" he said firmly, and extended his hand. I reached over to shake it. "Good," I said, concerned that he'd ask for a story from me. But he seemed to sense that I wasn't in the mood to tell him about myself. Instead, he started talking to me and to no one in particular, sharing his own tale, which seemed to fit him like a glove. Who knew if it was true? But just as I felt I was lying when I told the truth, Jim Allison had a clear conscience regardless of the accuracy of what he said.
Jim announced that he was from a town called New Lisbon.
"We should be passing through there, "he said, "but an hour from now, in fact. Nobody bothered nobody in New Lisbon. No, sir." He nodded knowingly as he said that and gave me a look that somehow took me into the secret—though I wasn't sure what that secret might be. Something to do with racial tolerance? It seemed to be more than that—Jim seemed to think that the highest possible human virtue was the ability to ignore your fellow humans.

"Moved out here on account of a woman, about thirteen years ago. You know what I mean." A smile provoked mine.

"Been married to that same woman ever since. You married?"

"Nope."

"I been married to that same woman... ever since." There was a great, satisfied smile across Jim's face. "Now my sister, she moved all the way to Philly. She's dying now, she's got maybe 'bout three months left. Liver cancer. So I gotta go see her. You know what I mean."

Of course, I nodded. Jim wasn't smiling, but he didn't show anxiety or distress. Most people, when faced with their own death or the death of their loved ones, seem to tell themselves that it's unjust, that something has gone very wrong. There must have been some mistake; their time hasn't come yet. But in Jim's face, there was the knowledge that death by liver cancer is only one of the many ways that things can go just as they're supposed to go for the human body. Your body swings perpetually in one cycle and balances, and succumbs to the larger cycles and balances that churn the world.
Maybe Jim was sharing my thoughts about mortality and the body, because he volunteered a fact about his own. "Me, I get epilep, so we driving. Always take the bus. Always do."

He had said his piece, and he sensed my obvious reluctance to explain my own presence on the Greyhound. He stopped talking and looked away, not rudely but in a way that communicated respect somehow. Nobody bothered nobody. Jim gazed out his window, not with approval, but with something deeper: acceptance.

I found myself envying this stranger—the way his words, his convictions, his actions, his past all fit comfortably together. I couldn't say anything like that about myself. What was I? What was my past? A series of disjointed images that trailed after me—my ghosts. A dazed-looking boy in Poloroids, dozens of very bad pencil drawings of dinosaurs. The muddy footprints I left one day on the living room rug. Fumbling teenage poetry. All the nail chippings of my life, which I imagined paired with tens of thousands of cigarette butts—marching, brides and grooms, into the sunrise. A college essay on Byron's Don Juan. Contracts, user agreements, condo association agreements, usernames and passwords, ghostly promises and debts. I'd try to fulfill some promises, wriggle out of others, pay off the debts. But, with at least the monetary debts, I had been successful. Here was another set of ghosts: all the copy I'd written, all the slogans, including a very few that promoted my name among the very few who knew their author. And around all these signs and images, the digital breadcrumb trails I left every day.
keyholes, histories, purchases, payments, searches and results. These ghosts were as real today as they'd ever been; they hovered, ready to be scanned or reconstructed or downloaded by anyone who had the knowledge to summon them.

As a whole, this ever-swelling mass of simulacra rose in my throat, trying to define me, which is to say, another me. My ghosts swarmed around me, pretending to be me.

The bus lurched off the highway and slowed down for its next stop. This town looked a little bigger than Grandbury, and more prosperous. Signs: New Lisbon Cafe. New Lisbon General Mfg. Co.

As the bus doors opened with a sigh, I got to my feet and pulled down the bags.

Jim gave me a smile and big nods, with a flash in his eyes. Possible interpretations:

"You sly devil, you, you let me talk on about New Lisbon and never let on that you were going here."

"May I compliment you on your up-to-the-minute decision? You won't regret it, friend."

"I knew you'd be getting off at this stop. I knew it way before you did. Matter of fact, that's why I got on your bus."

I gave Jim a nod and a smile back.

Nobody bothered nobody.
II

There did seem to be something distinctive about New Lisbon. As I wandered with my bags, people looked without hostility. They occasionally gave me little nods, but not once did I see that quick grimace that we call a smile, but that really means, "I'll do the social minimum -- now get out of my damn way." You could walk down a New Lisbon street as a stranger and not feel rejected. They did seem to have visitors here: couples with cameras admiring local maples, which were near their peak.

I was hungry and needed a place to stay, but I rejected the Sugar 'n' Spice Bed and Breakfast. I rejected the New Lisbon Motel a few blocks down, which was a completely impersonal box. Something between intrusive kitsch and utter soullessness would be the thing.

If I hadn't glanced down a side street, I would have missed it. On this narrow, residential street, one house had an old neon sign: "HOTEL." The sign was unlit and looked like it might date from the '30s. But it was far newer than the building itself; a three-story Victorian painted in flaking layers of blue. An extraordinary number of wires seemed to lead into this house, phone and electric and(I imagined) telegraphic. But it hardly seemed like a hub of activity. Rusty rails flanked concrete steps that led up to a huge door. If you were disabled here, you were out of luck. The front yard had overgrown and died off. The general dustiness suggested that I was wasting my time as I tried the front door, but it opened.

There were human beings in here. A traditional front desk, with pigeonholes behind it, and a man who looked up when I entered. An old woman, maybe a guest, sat in a rocker nearby. The man at the desk might have been anywhere from fifty to eighty -- his wrinkles were very soft and fine, but multiplied when you looked closely. He had the palest eyes possible, some color only nominally blue.

"Yes sir."

"I'm looking for a room for one. Not sure how long I'll be staying."

"Yes sir, sign in right here. We require one night's deposit. Pay for each night the day before." He slid over a guestbook, a huge volume that might have been created in the 19th century. It was leatherbound and ruled in fine, blue and red lines. This page was numbered 552. I wasn't prepared with a pseudonym, so I signed in a corporate or medical scrawl that could have been anything, and left the column for hometown blank. Names were running through my head, but the man didn't ask for any clarification of the signature.

"Terrorist?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are you a tourist?" he repeated more slowly.

"I'm a traveler."

That seemed to satisfy the man, who didn't find it necessary to introduce himself any more than he's insisted on a name from me. And I was pleased to notice that he hadn't asked for any form of identification.

"We've got a third-floor room available."

"Fine by me."

The squeaky stairs were overseen by icons. The Virgin Mary, Boy George, John F. Kennedy, The Last Supper, and a slicker from the '20s named Albert Tangora. Apparently, various generations of owners had made desultory attempts to decorate the place, but the latest was from the mid-eighties.

"So, when does this building date from?" I asked.

He was ready: "House built in 1892 for the Carson family, converted to a boardinghouse in 1919, hotel since 1927."

Another question occurred to me, and even though I felt as if it violated the admirable New Lisbon code of minding your own business, I asked it.
"What is the name of this hotel? I didn't spot it."
"Welcome to the Hotel Pearson."

* 

This is my room: my cell, my purification chamber, my hermit's cave. Two windows give me a good view of the gently worn houses across the street, the little grocery on the corner, the telephone poles. The glass is warped and has fine veins that can be detected only as you move. Under the windows is a wooden desk with an old wooden chair, its seat rounded to accommodate the human posterior. Reach to your right from the chair and you can touch the foot of the bed, just long enough for me, its metal frame painted white, its sheets and blankets well-launched. A rug of indeterminate color. By the door, a faded print of a simple farmer praying before cutting his loaf of bread. There seems to be ancient wallpaper under the coat of pale blue paint. A closet is surprisingly large, and here you can count four layers of wallpaper in once popular styles. Thin white curtains can be drawn across the windows. There is a tiny sink in the corner. The bathroom is down the hall. The room costs $23.78 per night, with tax. There is absolutely nothing to do here.

I lie on the bed and do exactly that. I'm hungry -- a fact that I note as I would any other. My hunger seems to be part of the furniture of room 31, like the sink or the rug. There's no need to act on it. I wonder whether you can eat hunger. At least you can taste it. Its flavor doesn't dissipate like the flavor of food. Hunger tastes like an acidic, slightly fermented version of your normal body flavor, the flavor you have tasted since you were born and no longer notice. With the space of hunger, you can notice it. Hunger makes you aware of your presence.

I haven't prayed since I was eight, but I identify with the old man in the print. He is always about to eat but never eats. Is he praying in gratitude for the bread? Or praying that he will be able to continue to savor his hunger? Why did I assume he was a farmer? Maybe his only relation to food is to anticipate it and pray in anticipation. Maybe he is a lighthouse keeper.

The old man and his bread can barely be seen now. The pale blue of the walls becomes a dark grey. With each breath, the room darkens. An unlit lightbulb hangs above. Through the warped windows comes the light of a streetlight on the corner. Then a minimal flickering and the alternating blues and reds that tint the window frame. Could it be that, miraculously, the neon sign of the Hotel Pearson has come to life?

* 

I was ravenous when I came to. Downstairs, the same old man and same old woman were there, in the same spots as the night before. I fished out some cash for another night's stay, and he took it without questions or any visible reaction.

The hotel was just half a block from the commercial street. I'd been walking down when I spotted it the day before. I resumed my walk and noted a small laundromat -- much needed -- and an even smaller restaurant, The Rooster. Outside The Rooster, a battered little vending machine sold copies of The New Lisbon Advertiser for 25¢.

The place was a greasy spoon in the purest sense, the kind of restaurant where everything is cooked short-order before your eyes on a huge griddle that gets sprayed with oil, scraped clean, spread with oil again. The cook's arms and fingers moved in a complex dance while his face stayed completely passionless.
My only thought about the old man in the picture now was that he'd better stop wasting time and eat his hunk of bread before he keeled over. The matronly waitress didn't blink when I ordered corned beef hash, two eggs over easy, two pancakes, English muffins, hash browns, and coffee. I put hot sauce on everything, even the pancakes, and had my coffee refilled five times. It was one of the best meals of my life.

The New Lisbon Advertiser mostly that, little notices from local shops and coupons from chain stores. There were classified ads for home repair services, lost pets, violin lessons, a few jobs. I noticed that the paper didn't list a web site. Smart. People had to pay their quarter if they wanted local news. There were, in fact, a few news stories: acts of the town council, a couple of kids arrested for vandalism, and predictions about the best upcoming days for viewing foliage. Were there any other "terrorists" in the Hotel Pearson? I hadn't noticed any other guest during this, the high tourism season.

The whole breakfast cost $1.25, about as much money as you could possibly spend at The Rooster. I could already see myself coming here every morning. I headed for my room to get the laundry. There was a small sign here, people who would provide for you and stay out of your way when you needed them too. New Lisbon was the place to retreat, to find yourself, to create yourself.

"So, do you have weekly rates?" I said on an impulse. "I could be staying for a while."

"$145 with tax. What was your name again?"

"Pearson." I wasn't prepared for this inquisitiveness, and had said the first name that came to mind. That made the man give me a good look for the first time since my arrival.

"Like the hotel," he stated.

"Like the hotel. Yep. Quite a coincidence, huh?" Now I was afraid he'd try to find out if we were long-lost relatives. But he seemed to anticipate this concern and headed it off:

"My name's McEarly. Pearson family sold the hotel in 1946. Thompsons owned it after them. We bought it in 1980." He looked in the direction of the old woman in the rocking chair.

"I see." I fished out the week's rent. McEarly reminded me that I'd already paid for two nights, and slowly made change while his wife just looked and imperceptibly rocked.

Back in my room, I found that I was in hurry to see the McEarlys again. I looked onto the street and repeated that my name was Pearson. I would be Tom Pearson. Tom Pearson, from Denver, taking an extended break from my successful consulting business. I had no idea what consulting was -- it was like saying that you were a general wise man and trustworthy expert. Trusty Tom Pearson, Consultant.

I sat at the desk and looked in the drawers. The second drawer down had some papers shoved toward the back. They were hotel stationery. I had no idea that little places like this ever bothered to get stationery printed up. The small sheets had a faintly moldy smell and read "HOTEL PEARSON MODERN ROOMS" in a suitably modern, sans-serif typeface. Maybe these had been printed by the Thompsons, owners from 1946 to 1980.

Something made me get out my pen. I could write a letter -- a quaint idea. Send it to Erin, with apologies. To Harper, rub his nose in it? To Hannah, with thanks? To that little bastard? To my 786 Facebook friends? If I'd had family I actually would have
have written them something. Dear Mom and Dad, Don't worry about me. I've just given up all my worldly possessions, liquidated my career and relationships, and embarked on some semi-understood program of self-realization by holing up in a godforsaken flophouse in the middle of nowhere. Wish you were here.

They would have checked the postmark and set out into the RV with mugs of soup and hot chocolate, and a straightjacket just in case. This is actually the sort of thing Dad used to worry would happen to me when I was an English major, I remembered. "You know what happens to poets? They starve in garrets. Starving artists? You know that?" It was needling, teasing, but I had always understood that he was just showing concern and love in his own way. He was proud, and mostly relieved, when I got the position at Fischer Burnham. And Mom made it long enough to see that I'd probably get engaged to Erin. Their son was all sewn up; he'd been set on a solid course like a bowling ball heading straight for the pins. It was safe to check out.

No one to write to but myself. And why not? There were ghosts to shake loose or reintegrate into my self. I wanted to comb through the remnants of my past, the memories, decide which ones to forsake and which to appropriate. A few select memories would make it to the Jim Allison stage: Jim, who took proud or at least comfortable possession of the salient facts about his life — New Lisbon, married a girl, ride buses all the time, sister with liver cancer. Just facts, not awkward trails shadowing you, not riddles, not a disguise. Facts that you knew about yourself and allowed to form part of you. I'd like to find some of those. I'd start with the facts that brought me here.

The small page that I wrote was maybe the most I'd written by hand since I was a student. I knew why: my handwriting was vile. The erratic printing of a moron. They'd tried to improve me and failed — I couldn't write cursive anymore than I could draw a perfect circle freehand, or cut someone's silhouette out of black paper, or balance a bowling pin on my nose. I had always been a word guy, not a graphics guy, and the intersection of the two — handwriting — was a grotesque thing when I tried it, as if a first grader had copied out a page by William Carlos Williams.

But that wasn't what was wrong. What was it? If I was going to sort through my memories, purify them, I needed some distance from them. I had to hold them at arm's length before I could select a few to make my own. The handwriting just shouted "me!" in the most conspicuous way, and it would have done that even if were the most elegant penmanship. My personality spilled out onto the sheet — the most awkward and uncomfortable part of my personality — and made it impossible to think. I tore the sheet into very small pieces and, for the first time, missed my laptop.

Just as I had to learn to savor my hunger before I could savor food again, I had to find distance from my own words before they could become mine again. Then my memories might become mine again. Then I might become mine again.

*
Hannah's heavy eyes are always in motion, always scanning. First, from corner to corner of the available space, as if calculating the fastest possible exit. Then from shiny bottle to shiny cocktail shaker at the open bar, and from detail to detail of my face, my body. No matter how she holds herself or what she says, her eyes are restless.

I fix her another one.
I recite more Byron.
She recites Matisyahu.
I listen to the Hasidic reggae rap and try to hold her glance when it touches the pupils of my eyes.

Tom Pearson, consultant, was soon on good if not friendly terms with Phil McArdle and Evelyn. Tom paid in advance, made no fuss, and had predictable habits. He sometimes met the other ongoing inhabitants of the Hotel Pearson: a mousy man who looked like a retired vice-principal or pharmacist; an uncommunicative young man with red cheeks who was taking some classes at the local community college; and Miss Ayres.

Miss Ayres also lived on the third floor; her room was 304, at the back of the house. The first time I saw her, she was just locking up as I came out of my own room. I could see the skin of the backs of her knees above her tall, black, high-heeled boots and below her zebra-print skirt. She was wrapped in a short fur coat and had bouncy, light blonde hair. When she turned, I saw dark eyelashes and a pert nose. She looked up and said, "Well, how do you do?" in a lightly Southern accent, a husky voice that suggested she was a fellow smoker. I reached for my Winstons and said, "Fine, and how are you? I'm Tom Pearson. I was just going out for a smoke; care to join me?"

"Oh dear, no," said Miss Ayres as she strode down the hall toward me. "I never touch a cigarette. I hear they're very bad for one's complexion." And as she approached, I made out the buckling skin of her cheeks, the lines on her pert nose. "But thank you so much for the offer," she added with a thin, raspy drawl. Miss Ayres was around sixty.

I sometimes met the other ongoing inhabitants of the Hotel Pearson, and on more evenings than not, a traveler or two would show up late at night, looking a bit taken aback by the appearance of this hotel that they'd found listed as the cheapest in town, but more than ready to sleep. I would encounter the regular and irregular guests sometimes when I left for my breakfast and paper at The Rooster, my trip to the laundromat, or my walks around the streets of New Lisbon.

From a pedestrian's perspective, the town was not small. It took a good hour to walk from one end to the other at its narrowest point, if I was striding steadily -- in my old windbreaker, cigarette in hand, testing my memory of each block and noticing new details every time. There were hills that you'd hardly notice by car, but that you felt in your calves and thighs when walking.
On the highest hill of central New Lisbon stood the Townsend Building, a surprising structure for a place of this size. It was 14 stories tall, clad in dark brown brick of an unpleasant texture, and adorned with terracotta eagles, arrows, ears of corn, lightning bolts, and personifications of Commerce and Communications. It was as if Mr. Townsend had gotten a bargain on a batch of miscellaneous leftover decorative motifs from minor New York buildings of the 1920s. Townsend had been the publisher of the Advertiser, which was still housed there, as well as mayor for a decade or two and owner of multiple properties around town. The story I heard from a waitress at a nearby cafe was that during the Depression, Townsend had converted empty offices in the building to housing for homeless men, who had to swear not to touch alcohol while staying there. Townsend would roam from floor to floor, policing his highrise hovels, while men would quickly stash their whisky behind radiators or set it on window ledges. One day in 1934, a bottle fell off a ledge and struck Townsend's bald head just as he was leaving his tower, and just before he had a chance to don a protective fedora. His heirs threw out all the residents and the cops ran them out of town.

I made it my custom to climb the fourteen stories of the Townsend every day before lunch. If you knew which doors to open, you could come out onto an unofficial observation deck. You had to make your way around vents, a water tower, and pipes before you reached an unobstructed view of the town and surrounding hills, woods, and fields. I watched the orange and brown spread through the trees day by day, like gathering bruises. The wind left my ears cold, and -- I thought -- especially sensitive to sounds when I returned to street level.

Lunch might be a gyro in a tiny joint that also sold its own hardtack candy and pretzels, or a steak sandwich in a diner, or some fruit and cheese I bought at a small grocery. I planned to try every restaurant in town except the chains. I religiously avoided all franchises, any place owned by a corporation that had nothing to do with New Lisbon but provided a ready-made look, image, product line formulated to appeal to the lowest common denominator. I'd worked for those corporations and happily accepted their money. Now I wanted to escape them and become part of a different reality, a reality so small or old that it would escape their notice -- unprofitable and obsolete. The places where I ate were typically slow, inefficient, and of uneven quality. They didn't deliver a reliable product at maximum speed, and that was the point.

After lunch I'd walk more, purging myself of fruitless thoughts, learning the town by sight and feel. There were some modern, even stylish places in town, including cute shops that appealed to tourists during this season; but there were more houses and shops that seemed straight out of the earlier twentieth century, some indefinable moment marked by poverty and war, waiting for prosperity. There was a black neighborhood where many yards seemed unkempt and fences were leaning. There was a white neighborhood where yards were paved over or taken over by rusting cars. I didn't encounter hostility, just a few stares, a few nods, some kids giggling when they saw me, as if my windbreaker were some exotic ethnic garb. On the whole, it was as Jim had said: a place to be and let be, a place that didn't harrass you and didn't preach at you.
I was starting to feel that I knew the town. It was Indian summer and I had no need for the windbreaker that Saturday. There were weekend sales in every neighborhood I visited. In the city, I used to go to estate sales once in a while, looking for vintage posters or scarves for Erin, which she'd always kiss me for and wear on that day only. But now I didn't expect to find urbane prizes of that sort, and wouldn't have had any interest if I had. I wasn't seeking out the yard sales; I gave them only half a glance as I passed by. After all, I was an ascetic, living on necessities, purified of the dross of materialism, indifferent to owning anything but myself.

Then I saw the bike. It was a semi-rusty ten-speed with a pump that fit into the frame and a capacious rack on the rear to carry a box or a sleeping bag. I found myself testing the derailleur, the pedals. In college I'd cycled everywhere, and talked with friends about a bike trip across America. The bike was stolen during my senior year, and I hadn't ridden since then -- hardly thinking about it, as I could compensate by for the loss of the bicycle by failing to care about cycling at all.

"Got a mountain bike now, don't need this one anymore," said a guy a little younger than me, wearing a concert T-shirt. "Take it away for 20 dollars." I did it.

I was walking off with the bike when I noticed a blue case and, for some reason, paused to open it. It was a portable typewriter, a stylish fifties machine with a few stains on it and plenty of dust. I hadn't touched a typewriter since I was a teenager and chose typing class in middle school to get out of woodshop.

"Make me an offer on that one." He sounded eager to see it gone. "My granny left it to me a couple years ago, I don't have no use for it. I hear people do make jewel try out of the keys." He was more than satisfied with five bucks.

I felt like a failed hermit. In two minutes I'd acquired two possessions -- heavy, complicated things. Boat anchors. And how would I get the typewriter back to the hotel together with the bike? I anticipated an awkward walk, the bike wiggling in one hand while the other was weighed down by the typewriter.

The seller was rummaging in a box. "Hang on, try this." He had two bungee cords. Threading them through the handle of the typewriter case, he wrapped them around the bike's rack and showed me that the case was held squarely on the rack. "You're all set." I carefully mounted the bike and saw that he was right. "Thanks," I said, and pedaled in the direction of the Hotel Pearson.

Why did I ever give up on cycling? I felt myself using reflexes and sinews that had been lying dormant. I stood up to pump as I climbed hills -- and realized how badly out of shape I was. I coasted down the other side and savored the warm breeze in my hair. This was the perfect medium between the artificial freedom of a car and the confines of pedestrianism.

The McEarleys made me swear I wouldn't track mud into the hotel on the tires of my bike -- they reminded me of bald Mr. Townsend -- and then watched as I carried the machine, the blue case on its rump, up to the second and then third floor. Miss Ayres was coming out in her eternal outfit and gave me a "You are so strong! Did you carry that bicycle up here all by yourself?"

There was just enough space for the bike by the bed, where I lay panting and smiling despite myself at the compliment from Miss Ayres.
I spent the next few days in some kind of ecstatic state, packing high-energy foods with me as I took the new bike on tours of New Lisbon and its surroundings. I never saw any other serious cyclists in town—just a few kids. The man who sold me the bike never showed up on his new mountain bike. It didn't seem to be a biking town. Motorcycles, yes: on my second day of touring, I got caught in the middle of a group of 25 bikers who made their hogs snort and roar around me, but otherwise didn't give me a hard time.

I also ventured beyond the city's limits. New Lisbon was on a good state highway, but it was too busy for pleasant cycling. There were narrower, winding roads leading out of town, but most had no shoulder or only a foot. I didn't particularly have a death wish. At least, I imagined, if I were going to kill myself after this life experiment, I would plunge off the Townsend Building instead of getting myself turned into roadkill.

Then I discovered the railroad. It wasn't a railroad anymore, but a railroad right of way that had been converted to a recreation trail. The tracks had been replaced by asphalt. The trail ran just a few blocks south of the center of town, where the former passenger rail station stood shuttered. A sign said that it was the property of the local historical society, but evidently they hadn't gotten around to doing anything with it. Another small sign explained that the state had funded the conversion of the railroad to recreational trail in 1989. The asphalt was cracked in places, weeds were starting to come through, but it was a quiet and smooth place to ride. That day, I must have gone ten miles out of town, following the gentle slope of the old railbed, passing streams and woods. Finally I encountered other cyclists: a team of earnest-looking men in tight cycling gear, hunched over their racing bikes. Otherwise, it was peaceful and solitary. I resolved to explore the trail the next day and find out how far it went.

On the next morning, though, a north wind came through town and brought black clouds. By nine, there was a steady rain. The recreation trail would have been a recipe for pneumonia. I was restless in room 301, doing exercises and stretching my cycling muscles. I stood on the front steps of the hotel to smoke a quick Winston until I came back in, cold and damp.

Then I remembered my other yard sale find, which I'd stashed under the bed. I took it out and set it on the desk to take my first good look at it. The typewriter was called a Selten De Luxe. Under the dust, it was finished in a particular shade of green that stirred up vague memories of pumpkin pie. Why was it that I could taste orange pie when I looked at a green typewriter? I slowly pieced together a scene, a playroom with a concrete floor painted this shade of green; wooden blocks and well-worn stuffed animals; a train set. It was the great aunt's house. We used to go there every Thanksgiving.

I worked a piece of the Hotel Pearson stationery into the typewriter, which took some experimenting with the chrome levers. I typed my name and nothing happened—the little hammers weren't reaching the paper. I collected myself and tried again, summoning memories of typing class and recalling the staccato touch you needed on these machines. Then my name appeared, in faded black ink, in a typeface that looked a little closer to book printing than the usual typewriter type I knew. My fingers had just been spoiled by the ease of computer keyboards. You had to tap, bounce, quickly poke the keys. I typed random nonsense and started to get the feel for it. When you shifted, all the hammers would move down. When you reached the end of a line, a quiet but lingering bell tone would let you know to reach for the lever at the left and push the carriage back. I made mistakes in nearly every word. The hammers got tangled and I had to pull them apart. But there was something about
the deliberateness of the writing and its difficulty that appealed to me. I also realized that I'd found a way to write without the unwelcome personality of my handwriting, and without the lurking, spying perfidy of the computer. That's how I'd come to think of the ubiquitous things: information gatherers that collected data on you while luring you with their convenience and entertainment. That's why I'd erased my laptop. Maybe I should have thrown it into the river, like my cell. But I'd deleted every file I could, written over the hard disk, run two different disk erasure programs, and set up a new password, as long as possible, before logging out for the last time. The laptop was stashed between magazines in the bathroom of the condo. Sooner or later, it would be found. But nothing on it could ever point to New Lisbon.

The typewritten page smelled faintly of mold. The print was gray, the letters such as "a" and "g" with their little circles filled in. It was a caricature of typewritten text. I read over the page. After my name, I had this:

Considering the per capita income of local municipalities we must regret to inform you that your application for reservicement of your fiduciary remission has been denied. Continue to plug away at your senseless activities, by all means, taking into account that under no circumstances will any request from you be treated otherwise than by lobbing it into the nearest incinerator.

Apparently I was channeling Kafka, or maybe this was my reaction to my recent encounter with authorities, in the crewcut incarnation of Officer Pretty. I walked downstairs with my typewritten sheet, planning to burn it. Incinerate THIS, you bastards. But the steady, uniform rain made incineration impossible. Soon the page was a sodden lump, not unlike my own shirt. I tore it, wadded it up, and tossed it into a storm drain.

Back in my room, a radiator by the desk saw to it that the rain gradually evaporated from my shirt, as the windows fogged over and I faced the machine again. I felt there were three living things in this room: me, the bike, and the typewriter. The machines lived a form of life that waited upon me, that rested until I activated their linkages and pushed their levers, but it was life nonetheless. It wasn't an imitation of human existence, like a flickering image on a TV screen, but an extension of human activity. They borrowed energy from me without draining me; they paid the energy back in the form of enhanced motions: enhanced travel, enhanced communication. Between the typewriter, the bicycle, and me there was a partnership.

I took a closer look at the writing machine. You could reverse the direction of the ribbon, and select red or black typing by means of a little lever on the side — a feature that did nothing currently, since the ribbon was all black. I didn't understand what many of the other buttons and levers were supposed to do — just that they all seemed to connect to the typewriter's mysterious guts, and all were linked to springs that brought them back into ready position after they were activated. The shape of the typewriter was very pleasing, a sculpted and streamlined shape that expressed the '50s just as did that particular shade of green. On the back of the machine there was a decal: Mfd. by Selten Industries, Inc. Made in U.S.A. By the decal there was a small metal plaque that must have been affixed by a dealer or service center here in town; Townsend Typewriters — New Lisbon.

Townsend? The man had his finger in every pie. But wouldn't this have been a business too small to bother with? I thought about it and supposed not. How many typewriters would the New Lisbon Advertiser have needed? Every government office and every business of any size would need typewriters, typewriter supplies, and typewriter repair. I supposed it could have been a decent way to make
a living in the pre-digital age. Now these things were gone the way of record stores and video rental stores — places you visited in person to buy or borrow information. I resolved that I would live pre-digitally as far as possible in this digital age. I had a good start already, paying cash, avoiding computers as much as possible. Now I pulled by a bag out of the closet and extracted three credit cards from a pocket. What were they but ways for the world to keep tabs on your desires, your virtues and vices, your location, your income? I didn't have scissors, so I laboriously bent them back and forth until I could rip them apart. Then I paid another visit to the storm drain.

*

The machine silently repeats its name as it faces me: Selten De Luxe. Selten De Luxe. Selten De Luxe. It seems to hum and vibrate subperceptibly on the desk. It waits, but not impatiently. It can wait for a generation; it already has, biding its time in its case until I stopped by the yard sale.

I make up my mind.

Taking my time with each word, I tap out a memory: my departure from the city. How the road felt, the wind, the soil at the side of the road. It feels like time travel to revisit those first halting steps into my new existence — but I realize it was less than two weeks ago. It was like stepping out of the grave — and clutching the earth to take control of it, to show it that it couldn't yet dominate my flesh. The Selten De Luxe patiently repeats its name to me, and seems to expect me to offer a name back.

I decide to call myself Lazarus.

*

I started a different routine, one that exercised my machines as much as my body. The chain, gears, and tires of the bicycle; the keys and ribbon and levers of the typewriter; and my own sinews and muscles. If it wasn't raining, I'd take the bike down for a sprint to the Townsend Building, climb the stairs as the small staff of the
Adventurer was arriving, and made my way out onto the observation deck, parking, sneezing, the test of phlegm in my mouth. I'd have a smoke, watching the cigarettes' fumes disperse in the breeze, cauterizing the capillaries in my chest, seeing the bike parked across the street, a dollar-store chain looped around its frame and a parking sign. I'd gently ride back and have hash browns, eggs, and coffee at The Rooster. Then, with my body still reeling from the ride, I would type for two hours. I liked the hotel stationery, and Mr. Early had given me a boxful that had been stored in a linen closet for as long as he could remember. The identical sheets gradually filled with faintly fumous, gray paragraphs.

When the words wouldn't come any more, I would pass out and fall into dreams that always evaporated at some moment when I knew that I'd been staring for some time at the aged, piebald broadsheet on the wall.

My afternoon rides were longer, more relaxed ventures. I'd stop at the grocery to get fruit, cheese, candy—always some new thing in the mix—and set out deliberately creating a new route. Sometimes it a few miles on the recreation trail, heading either north or south of New Lisbon, would be part of the afternoon's ride—but there weren't
enough guts to stay, so my main focus would be the streets of town. I was gradually learning every block through a brownian motion—random turns, or turns dictated by an odd or even flock of swallows or the incline of a telephone pole. If I got lost, it wouldn’t be long before more random turns or a straight shot brought me back to a familiar route—and it was getting harder and harder to lose myself.

I wore gloves now, and felt tingling chills in my throat and my ears. By the time I knew every street in New Lisbon, it would be time to retire the bike for the winter.

The street was one I’d seen once or twice before, near the eastern edge of town. There were no new developments here, nowhere for them to sprout. The town sloped toward a stream here, an overgrown creek they called the New Lisbon River, and soon after you crossed it, an impractically steep slope led into woods. There were storage facilities, some houses with tiny porches, empty lots, a few businesses. The street was narrow and the lots were small, as if they’d tried to cram in as many places as they could before they ran out of space.

When the name registered, I braked, turned, nearly tipped over. I hadn’t imagined it. Rusting chrome letters over a storefront read: TOWNSEND TYPEWRITERS.
So the building had survived into a new century, abandoned in this forsaken neighborhood. I pedaled up and saw merchandise behind the filthy window: two monstrous electric typewriters, bank of beige plastic housing some ponderous mechanism from the seventies. While these ugly things were sniffing on the premises of America's offices, I thought, a few hit-and-miss electronic contraptions were plotting to overthrow the typewriter in the next decade—an insurrection that would consign machines like this to the dump, and businesses like this one with them.

Then I saw the light in the shop—and a face observing me.

* * *

He'd been hunched over some partly disassembled machine; under a fluorescent lamp that hovered over his head like the gaunt bones of an ancient bird.

"Are you... open?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You're a typewriter shop?" I said stupidly.

"Yes."

If anything, I'd been expecting something like McEwen Senior—McEwen—- a geezer holding on to some pathetic scrap of his bygone world. But this man was about my age, his face only slightly lined, his eyes clear and uninformative. No rings on his fingers, nothing ostentatious about him, but he seemed to emanate quiet confidence, competence, knowledge.

"How can I help you?"

"I, ah, could use a new typewriter ribbon; do you carry those?"

"Yes. What machine is it for?"

"A Selten De Luxe."

Now he seemed actually interested in me for the first time since I'd stepped through the door. "A Selten. Haven't seen one of those for three years."

"Oh, yeah? Are they rare? I got it in a yard sale here in town."

He was going through some drawers now, and brought out a round metal box imprinted simply with the name of the shop and a stylized silhouette of a typewriter. "Red and black?"

"OK, sure."

"9/16ths of an inch wide, with eyelets, red and black. Four dollars. Yes, it is rare."

I knew he wanted to say more, and I wanted to hear more about the unsuspected history of my smaller mechanical minion. I waited and looked respectfully.
"Selten was the last of the small companies, the ones that tried to make it in the face of Underwood, Remington, Royal, Smith-Corona, and the big imports. They started in 1955. Were based just up the road in Benton. That's why you find them around here."

"I thought you hadn't seen one in three years."

"Right, but if this was California or Florida or Texas, you probably wouldn't ever see one of these in a lifetime of working on typewriters. They just never established a distribution network. Sold them by word of mouth and by a few traveling salesmen. A few shops carried them. This shop used to sell them. Far as I know, they went out of business in the really early '60s. Only made the one model, the De Luxe. The highest serial number I've seen is 7802."

He seemed to know the number right off the bat, as if he'd just been hunched over a Selten instead of ... an Olympia, this one said.

"You wouldn't know the serial number on yours?" he said.

"No idea."

"Wright want to bring it in sometime. I expect it could use a cleaning."

And you want to find that number, I thought.

"Sure," I said as I peeled a five out of my wallet. "I'll bring it in. So — is the shop related to Mr. Townsend? Of the Townsend Building?"

"No. It's just called that because it's at the end of town."

"Oh," I was taken aback. "Really?"

He watched me for a moment with his poker face. "I was pulling your leg. Sorry. Yeah, there's a relation. Jack Townsend's brother, Alvin, started the shop a couple of years before Jack died. It was out of the way, but nothing is that far out of the way in New Lisbon, and Alvin figured he'd save enough on rent to be able to undercut Jack on prices."

"I'm not following."

"You see, Jack Townsend had his own business machine and office supply store downtown, run by his former secretary, who we all assume was his mistress, but there's actually no proof of that. Central Office Machines. Alvin was the loser in the family and resented Jack. But with this idea, he was a winner. Here we are, and Central has been out of business for 40 years."

"A town the size of New Lisbon could actually support two typewriter stores?"

"Sure. It was a good business. There were thousands, thousands of typewriter shops in this country. Then it dwindled down to hundreds. Now it's dozens. But we're still here."

I wanted to ask how the hell it was possible to make a living at this — I didn't see any evidence of diversification here, just examples of this obsolete technology — but it seemed a bit rude.

"Good to meet you," I said, and held out my hand. "I'm Tom Pearson."

"Al Townsend. Alvin the Third."

*

I look at the machine with new respect, with a sense of curiosity I didn't have before. My attention heightened, I see details that I'd missed: the stylized "S" an inch below the typing point; the lever that (I finally figured out) sets tabulator stops, determining where the typewriter will stop when you push the red tabulator button; the complexity of the rubber feet, also stamped with that "S"; scratches, minor scars, signs of experience. The machine has been saying much more to me than its name, and I haven't been listening. What I can't find is the serial number; I look underneath the typewriter, in back, peer behind parts, and can't see anything.

I do succeed in installing a new ribbon, after several false starts and
unoriginal oaths. I wipe my fingers clean at the sink and try a few words. They're rich, dark, fresh. Defiant. The typewriter isn't just talking to me now; it's a personality, facing me, daring me to write on it. Other tools disappear when you use them, allowing you to focus purely on what you're achieving with them, but the typewriter seems to be constantly there, mediating your work, accompanying you, working across from you in some partnership or rivalry. I like this. I like the clean anonymity of the written prose, the way it exists only between the two of us—at the interface between the Selten and me.

I type out a memory.

* blonde said I wanted

The teller gave me a look when I 

"Will you be transferring it to another office of this bank?"

"No, I want to close the account and withdraw the money."

"I'll just need to see my supervisor for a minute before we make out the 
cashier's check, Mr. Lazarus."

"I don't want a check. I would like it in cash. In twenties."

"Mr. Lazarus, we're talking about ... $63,455. And eighty-seven cents."

"You don't have that cash on hand?"

"Could you hold on for just a minute?"

I had to see two different bank officials, show my I.D. three times, sign two forms, and be lectured from both officials on why a check would be far safer than carrying around this kind of cash. I started to get mad. It was my money, my purchasing power; if I wanted to convert it into bills, into pretty paper, that was my right, wasn't it? But they wanted me to keep it in fictional form; my money as numbers that would show up on screens, as an accounting quantity, as a possibility. My money as a history of transactions, indexed and analyzed for suspicious patterns. And this was the most suspicious act of all: withdrawal.

Finally I succeeded, under disapproving stares, in getting stacks of Jacksons from the vault. It felt deliciously retrograde, or criminal, to be handling the printed oblongs. I was given a private room to count the money, which I did as far as I could. Then I stacked it into my bag and came out.

"I like round numbers," I said to the 

"Teller. Keep the change."

I put $55.87 on her counter.

"No, sir, we're not allowed to accept gratuities from customers!"

"I'm not a customer anymore."

I was out on the street now, walking fast, nervously, nervily—not out of any fear, but out of an unexpected elation, as if I'd gotten away with something, as if I were a buck bolting through the woods while the explosion of the hunter's rifle was still echoing around me.

* 

I was back the next day, the typewriter in its case bungee-strapped to the back of my bike.

"Tom," he said.

"Hi, Al. Brought in the Selten."

He smiled—first I'd seen that—and accepted the case with a sort of professional reverence. He didn't open it right away, but ran his fingers over the seams. "Real leather."

"He gently opened the latch. "A green one." He just admired the color for a moment. "They also came in black, red, or blue."

Al lifted the typewriter out of its case and removed the ribbon cover. He pointed to a number stamped into the inner side: 3303. The birth certificate. A given name. An identity.
Al was inspecting the machine; he knew just where to look.

"The number 2 hammer sticks sometimes," I said, trying to be helpful. He tested it. "Mm. We call them typebars." After another silent minute, he said, "It could use service. Probably hasn't been cleaned or lubricated for twenty years. You see how the platen is hard?" He tapped a nail against the rubber roller. "That's going to make your typing less attractive and less comfortable. Type needs cleaning. I can give it a complete service and replace the platen for $100."

He looked like he was expecting resistance, but all I said, and I wasn't sure why, was, "Any chance I could watch, see how it's done?"

Now he was the one resisting. "Sorry, there are chemicals I wouldn't want to expose customers to. Can't allow people in the back. It'll be ready tomorrow at this time."

I peeked into The Back: the store seemed to extend far back into the narrow lot. Through a doorway I could dimly make out shelf after shelf of typewriters, tools, mysterious equipment. There was a scent of oil, a lemony smell, other indefinable elements. I felt like a dog looking at a steak from behind a glass door.

"Right. Ok. See you tomorrow, then."

"Can I have a phone number?"

"The Hotel Pearson. I don't know their phone."

"Good enough." Al was gathering my typewriter into his arms.

Without the typewriter my routine was interrupted, and I felt restless. It was almost warm, a sunny November day. I bought some food at a grocery down the street and headed out for a ride. Soon I found myself on the recreation path, heading south. Leaves cracked in bursts under my tires. Brrr! I hopped a little when the pavement buckled. I narrowly missed a snake that was winding across the path.

Soon I'd gone about as far as I ever went on this path. I kept on, pushing against the friction of the path and the resistance in my own legs, the rubber hissing gently against the blacktop until it hit the next clump of leaves. I leaned into the bike, pumped, shifted into the top speed.

The path occasionally crossed small roads or passed by farmhouses. Not a single cyclist came my way. Was it that cycling was so unpopular in this part of the country? Where was the guy with the mountain bike? The trail had sticks on it, pebbles, mud.

I lunched by a creek that ran for a while beside the old railroad bed. A turtle watched me from a stone. A beer can rusted poetically beside it. I'd stopped wearing a watch about a week ago, and had little idea whether it was noon or not. The rhythms of my own body were gradually becoming familiar to me: I ate when my entrails wanted to -- or I savored the hunger itself. I'd taken a good look at myself a couple of days ago in the lobby of the Townsend Building: thinner, wirier than I remembered myself to be. My cheekbones seemed to jut out a little, and it created the effect I'd used to try to bring about with my unshaven, or barely shaven stubble. Rugged. From the hairline there extended a few hairs that were gray.

I was tired enough to turn back, but wanted to push on anyway. Another hour of cycling brought me to a town. You crossed a small bridge and you were running by Main Street, a row of two-story buildings that were half shuttered, interrupted by empty lots where places used to be. Then the path pulled up by what was evidently an old train station, its paint peeling. A sign read: Benton.

It took me a moment, and then I remembered: "We're based just up the road in Benton." I found myself excited. My instinct had led me to the right place. The place where Selten typewriters were made. Really? The town couldn't have more than a couple of thousand inhabitants, tops.

Those inhabitants seemed to have an average age of 75, to judge from what I saw. Their main occupation was sitting on porches and steps, chewing tobacco.
They watched me in a very un-Lisbonite way, suspicious, not acknowledging my wave.

I wasn't going to let them discourage me from exploring this hamlet and seeing if I could figure out where the Selten might have been made. There were only a few blocks in central Benton, with meandering roads heading out from it into small valleys. I rode toward what looked like a more industrial, though hardly industrious corner of town: there were a couple of garages, a storage facility, a squat and dark building advertising "ornamental iron work." And there it was: a one-story brick facility with glass blocks and rusty metal doors, well-worn paint above the doors reading "Selten Industries." Some engine noise sounded down the street as I approached the doors and tried them. They wouldn't budge. I peered through the glass blocks and could make out a distorted scene. Long tables with piles of stuff on them. Machines. Were they actually still making anything here? Not today, anyway -- there was no one in sight.

The engine roar got louder, and my skin crawled at a sound that I realized had said, "Hey faggot!"

I couldn't move.

"Don't pretend you don't hear me, faggot, turn around, boy!"

It was three huge men on huge Harleys. One was chugging a beer. The one in front said, "Get over here, boy, don't you know when you're being spoken to?"

This couldn't be happening. Boy? I felt like a black man in the Jim Crow South. "Look, I don't want any trouble," I said, and was ashamed at how choked my voice sounded. I could see myself: skinny, aging, unprepared. The same guy who'd imagined he was "rugged" when he looked at himself in the mirror the other day.

"Boy, did you just roll your eyes at me?" shouted the leader, and they all swung off their bikes. I jumped onto mine and pushed as fast I could, practically breaking my neck as I bounced off the curb, wobbling as I heard the pounding feet after me. A rock barely missed my head.

I headed for the trail, my legs and lungs burning, sparing no effort. Pure fear flooded me when I heard the Harleys start up, roaring rage. I was on the trail -- and I was trapped. They would be on me in less than a minute.

Some thin bushes by the side of the trail were my only hope. I cased off the blacktop and into the bushes, getting scratched, and flattened myself and the bike against the ground.

The motorcycles were on the path, and they gave out their full power, like a nest of machine guns in an echo chamber, sending dust flying. The first two guys roared past me, but the third braked sharply and screamed, "Back here!"

I took off into the nearby brown meadow, expecting some deliverance despite all reason: a benevolent towie with a shotgun, Officer Pretty, a well-placed set of rabbit holes that would break all their ankles. Then the leather-gloved beef hit my shoulder. Strength and mass brought me down. Drunken abusive words began to ring in my ears as the blows began. Somehow I knew exactly what was hitting me: boots in the ribs, a fist to the side of the head. And a wad of beery saliva on my face. The pain was fierce and undeniable and rushed to exceed all words and thoughts, as parts of me were ripped and broken and crushed.

*

I was a wadded-up newspaper in the freezer.

Bent where I shouldn't be bent. Cold seeping into my joints.

The ground seemed to be on top of me, not under me. Pressing me with the weight of Jupiter.

I wanted to sleep but the pain kept waking me up.

Finally the thought came into my head that I'd freeze to death tonight if I didn't get up. And I was full of anger, not toward the biker idiots but toward the residents of Benton, who hadn't checked out the trouble, who
hadn't cared if I lived or died. And then I did hate the bikers, with an intensity that made my heart beat fiercely and pumped hot blood into my numb extremities. I finally pushed myself up, strains and aches exploding in new places, and I prayed that my legs weren't broken. They couldn't be! I could sit up. I could stand, reeling, shivering. I had a screaming headache and a sore neck. My left side was sending sparks of sharp pain that raced around my body and all ended up at the top of my head. But I could walk. It could have been worse, I thought, and just felt more anger.

They hadn't touched the bike. It was getting dark, it was cold, and my only thought was to get back to New Lisbon. The only way to do that was to ride. Every extension of my legs felt as if tiny, thin fabrics were being torn. My toes screamed for attention amidst the cacophony of pain, and notified me that they were being yanked back from frostbite and it hurt. Barely fast enough to keep from falling over, I rolled north, drawing energy from pure hate.

By the time I got back, I'd been cycling for some time in almost complete darkness, the sky lit by a nearly full moon but the path an abyss. Several times I veered off the trail, and once I'd fallen and gotten up only by drawing on some deeper reserve of survival instinct. It felt as if I'd been cycling for two days. I limped slowly to the hotel, pushing the bike or using it as a walker.

"Good Lord," said McEarly, "What happened to you?"

Mrs. McEarly was out of her chair and touching my face. "You're as cold as ice!"

"What is it?" said a soft voice coming down the stairs. Miss Ayres. I found that there were tears on my face. I was as happy to see these people as if they'd been my own family.

"Were you in an accident?"

"Did you fall on your bike? Did some car hit you?"

"Evelyn, call an ambulance."

"No!" I said. "No, I'm going to be OK. Just need some rest."

"What happened?"

"Bikers. Some bikers in Benton beat me up. It's OK. Nothing broken. Just -- cold."

I was in an armchair, now with both McEarleys, Miss Ayres, and the vice principal whose name I still hadn't learned hovering around me in a way that was somehow very gratifying. A cup of hot chocolate was pressed into my hand. It was the best, sweetest, most delicious substance in the world.

"You should see a doctor."

It was perfectly true, but I denied it until they gave up, apparently deciding that their guests had say-so over their own welfare. Nobody bothers nobody. I thanked Mrs. McEarly for the second cup of chocolate and pushed myself up.

Without a word, Miss Ayres took my arm and helped me upstairs. She was stronger than I was at this point, and I thought maybe I'd overestimated her age. "Thanks," I said, turning to my door.

"No, you don't," she said. "We're going to check you out. Come on." We were down the hall, entering her room. It was much larger than my own & cubicle, with two rooms and a private bath. There were posters, an Art Deco table, a stereo, a hot plate. We were on a small couch, and she was unbuttoning my shirt. I just let it happen, as if in a dream. Miss Ayres touched the bruises silently, pushed them to see how sharply I drew in my breath. She undressed me like a nurse and looked closely at all my injuries.
She disappeared into the bathroom as I wondered what I was doing, what she was doing, and decided to let it happen. A bath started to run and Miss Ayres came out with an antibiotic ointment that she rubbed on the bleeding places. She gave me a glass of water and four painkillers. I closed my eyes and noticed her perfume.

The bath was hot. The pills were incredibly effective, making the pain detach itself like a snakeskin and float beside me. The blankets on the couch were soft. It was dark.

*

When I woke up, the pain was back on me, but more diffuse, except for one spot where I felt sure my rib was cracked. I sunk into the couch and felt feverish.

"Honey, I've got to get to work. But you just take your time and stay here as long as you need to. You need a pill, they're right here." She laid the bottle next to the couch on a glass side table. "Be careful, though" -- she bent down close to me and whispered, "They're addictive."

"Thanks, Miss Ayres. Thanks for everything."

"It's Lauren. See you later, honey."

She made her way out -- leather skirt, heels, hair that she must have been working on for an hour.

There was also a glass of cool water by the couch, which seemed to rehydrate millions of aching cells. Maybe an hour after she left, I sat up and surveyed the colors of my body: blue, green, black, red. Drainage patterns under the skin. Yellow patches. Hardly anything looked like a healthy surface. The criminals had written on me with their fists and feet, leaving a brutal, disruptive story that it would now be my goal to erase. I showered for an hour, until my discolored skin was puffy and wrinkled, then got myself together to get some food. Before leaving, I took five pills -- no, ten -- for emergencies, and stashed them in my shirt pocket.

A north wind brought freezing rain that morning, which I hoped was hitting the bikers in the face. The town was subdued, gray, silenced, and a pill helped me to feel like my injuries were packed in cotton. Mrs. McEarly made chicken soup, which was a restorative blessing. She sternly disapproved of my going out into the rain for a cigarette, while her husband muttered that I ought to contact the police; I felt I was back at my parents' house, but without the element of fear that never completely disappeared from my relation to them. I had no fear of the McEarlys, as somehow I knew that their Lisbonite sensibilities would prevent them from bringing in the authorities or interfering with my own ways of managing my health. I told myself that the smokes were actually helping, and it was true that when the nicotine first reentered my bloodstream, it seemed to first tighten, then relax all my tissues. I pictured fresh blood replacing the old clots, the vessels repairing themselves. Soup, cigarettes, and time by my window were my healing measures. I watched the darkening street in the evenings until Lauren Ayres came home from her job at the bank, where she was senior teller.

After a suitable pause I'd knock on her door. She'd offer me a smile and a painkiller. Once I asked if she had a drink to go with it. "Honey, I don't touch the stuff. It's very bad for you, you know." So we shared hot tea, and the tea and drugs created a glowing wreath out of my pains. We'd talk about city life, shows, music, dance -- her posters featured Broadway musicals and their movie versions -- but somehow we developed a way of speaking that avoided any direct communication about our own pasts. It was always about experiences that "you" could have if "you" went to such and such a place -- never about an actual experience that either of us would admit to having. I enjoyed the conversational dance and
the ambiguity of our whole situation. There was no need to know who we were, no need to know our intentions. We both inhabited a halfway world, a space where we could encounter each other with no strings attached, a stage where we could simply let ourselves be actors.

Among the uncertainties was the question of her age, which I felt varied from moment to moment, or mood to mood. She might have been a forty-year-old with some hard times behind her, or a seventy-year-old with some facelifts behind her and very good luck. In another sense, she was ageless. You couldn't say that she dressed like a young woman, because young women would only wear this outfit if they were putting on a show; her costumes were perfect representations of the Sexy Young Thing, but because they were so perfect, it was clear that they were inventions, artificial creations, and she held herself separate from them as their creator. Their perfection also called her own gender, paradoxically, into question: the outfits said "Girl" so obviously that they were the sort of thing a transvestite would wear. Somewhere behind the persona — the clothes, the makeup, the face, the voice, the moves — Lauren was in complete control, enjoying the mask but not consumed by it, putting on the stereotype only in order to transcend it. If there were going to be a seduction here, she'd be the seducer — but that would spoil the possibility of seduction that hovered over our tea and added dimensions to our talk of parties and concerts.

The visit to Lauren's wouldn't last more than an hour. Then we'd each turn to our hot plate and have solitary dinners in our rooms.

"Mr. Pearson," McEarly called out, "You got a message. Al Townsend. Says your typewriter's ready."

I had just reached the point where I thought I might be capable of gathering some thoughts, some words that were focused and unbroken again. So the message came at a good time. Once again, I needed the typewriter. I put on a sweater and coat, and took my time walking to the east side.

"Jesus Christ."

"I got in a fight. It's all right."

Al Townsend took a good look at my face, its cuts scabbed over, its bruises fading to pale green.

"Take a look at your typewriter." He pulled it up from behind the counter. The case looked fresh and clean, its hardware shiny. Inside, the machine looked like it was fresh from the factory floor.

"Wow." I ran my fingers over the bright paint, the nickel, the new black rubber. "So you replaced the roller?"

"New platen. New rubber on the cylinder." He was pulling out a pack of paper and rolling a sheet in. "Give it a try."

It was as if the faint, moldy typing I'd done before had been something the machine had done in its sleep, in a coma, in some state of half-life. Now everything was different. The keys all felt springy and snappy; they popped up to the platen and left a rich, black mark. That black typing had already been achieved by installing a fresh ribbon, but the feel of the whole machine was new. The carriage returned whisper-quiet; the shift was easy and fast; and nothing stuck.

"It's amazing," I said, with a slightly painful grin. I counted off $100, but Townsend ignored the money and began to give me a course in using the typewriter.
"This is the carriage lock. Lock it when you're putting it away in the case, especially if it's going to be transported. Release the feed rollers so they don't develop flats. You following me?"

"Go on."
"You figured out how to set and clear the tab stops?"
"Show me."
He flicked a little lever on the side of the keyboard back and forth, set tab stops at various places, pushed the Tabulator key to make the carriage stop there, then showed me how to clear them all at once.
"The typewriter has ten bytes of memory."
"What do you mean?"
"Eighty spaces per line, eighty possible places to set a tab: yes or no. That's eighty binary digits, \textit{xxxxxx} eighty bits. A byte is eight bits, which makes ten bytes of memory. See?"
"I never took computer science. I was an English major."
"I worked in software development for ten years." He surprised me; I had assumed, somehow, that although he was a pretty young man, he had never touched modern digital technology in his life. "But you don't need to know anything about computers to get this concept. The point is that the machine can be put into a state that stays that way until you change it. That's memory. That's what the tab stops are."

He went on to show me fine details: how to adjust the carriage tension, the ease of shifting, the resistance of the keys, the height of characters. Where to oil the typewriter, where not to.
"You're putting yourself out of business."
"Really? If the escapement jams, what's the first thing you try?"
"What's an escapement?" I had a vague, ridiculous picture of Cary Grant trying to escape across the Illinois prairie, chased by a biplane.
"See? You need a typewriter repairman, just like you need a watch repairman."
"Or I just toss the watch and buy a new one." He winced and scowled. "Not that I'd ever consider doing that with this typewriter, of course," I added. "But -- I hope you don't mind if I ask--"

The door cracked open behind me. It was the mail carrier, a small woman who might have come from Vietnam or the Philippines.
"How you doing, Al?"
"Good." He looked slightly uncomfortable.
"Got a customer, I see."
"Yeah." He accepted a pile of mail -- a surprisingly large pile of what looked like personal envelopes, with a few color catalogues. I thought I saw several envelopes that had evidently been addressed to him with manual typewriters. It all went behind the counter.

Al wrapped up his lesson with some suggested products: a fine oil of firearm quality, a synthetic wax, a cleaning compound for metal parts, and a typing pad -- a thick felt oblong backed with rubber. "You might also want one of these": a vinyl typewriter cover imprinted "Townsend Typewriters, New Lisbon, Telephone BA-4453."
"These are left over from a number of years ago."
From before you were born, I thought. I had more questions, but he seemed to want to finish this transaction, so I took them all. I walked home with the Selten in its case and a bag of typewriter paraphernalia. By the time I got back to the hotel, my arms were acutely uncomfortable. I headed to Lauren's to show her the machine and maybe to —

"Come on in," she said gently and gave me a once-over. "You'll need one of these," she reassured me, as the tea kettle started to whistle.

*

Black night, the neon alternating through the curtains, the wind, the tuneless hammering of the radiator, the sweaty sheets of my bed.


These things are happening eternally in me, more regularly than the sunrise and sunset outside my hotel window, more constantly than my own breath. I can choose to hold my breath, I can't choose to stop the bikers.

Once again I'm sitting on my bed in the middle of the night, staring in the direction of the half-visible print on the wall. Old man with your bread. In your mind, a lighthouse and a lighthouse keeper. In his mind, a traveler in a motel by a stark field. In his mind, a traumatized resident of the Hotel Pearson. In his mind, old man with his bread.

I despise being traumatized. I despise being a victim. What is worse is not the fact of having been beaten by some drunken bullies — an everyday occurrence that doesn't make either them or me special — but the fact of being marked by that event. I want the event to fade as my bruises are fading, to slide away the way the remainders of pain slide away when I take a pill. It should not define me any more than I'm defined by being bitten by a mosquito. "What are my parasites to you?" — Was it Nietzsche who wrote that?

But the bikers weren't parasites; they never depended on me, not even to provide them with the pleasure of victimization (anyone would have done). They were supremely indifferent to me, and the pleasure they got consisted only in making me realize that fact, and forcing me not to be indifferent to them. Whoever cares less, whoever manages not to care about the other person, is the winner of the competition. And they won.

Once again I'm stretching, assuming yogalike poses in the middle of the night, flexing my knotted muscles and reinvigorating my joints. I hold the poses or repeat them just enough to hurt, just enough to cause myself a healthy pain that may overwrite the sick ones.

My body is a palimpsest, a reused papyrus, written horizontally and vertically, erased and reused. I want to be the primary writer, the author of the dominant marks. And I want them to last.

*

There was a small shop I'd seen in the poor white neighborhood. Samples of their handiwork were on display in photos in the window, and I'd liked them. Even the clichés were drawn well, with a sure touch.

The artist was a middle-aged woman with a thin nose, pale eyes, large cheekbones, and images flowing out from her torso onto her neck and arms — a Baroque tangle of limbs and living things.

"Here's what I want," I said, opening the typewriter case to show her the machine. "The shape of the typewriter, the main features, not the name. If you can get something like this shade of green, perfect. About five inches across, right here." I pulled up my shirt and indicated the discolored, tender area where I believed my rib was mending a crack.

She didn't raise an eyebrow at my injuries, and showed no surprise at the idea that I'd want to get tattooed directly on an area of assault. She was familiar with the logic.
"All right, let me try a sketch." She chose an angle and started to draw on a pad. Her skill was undeniable: on the first try, she captured the shape of the typewriter, and found the right perspective to make it a dramatic statement. It was just a matter of filling in the details. I told her to go ahead, and she carefully drew in the keys, the levers, until it was the perfect representation of my writing machine.

"Got a couple hours right now?" she asked.
"Yeah. Let's do it."
"You want anesthetic?"
"No." I'm sure that's what they all said. But maybe she was required to ask, or maybe it was good for business: let the customers feel even more macho.

She brought out a can of Mountain Dew for me and I lay on my side against the reclining chair; the rubbing alcohol and sweat and speed metal filled the parlor, and after she'd carefully transferred the drawing to my skin, the pain began. Multiplying pinpricks and bee stings, memories of childhood scrapes and scratches, bouncing against the dull aftermath of my beating, magnified by the sensitivity of my well-pounded flesh. I soon taught myself to observe the pain while feeling it, to name it -- "That is the pain of a tattoo" -- and in this way to master it. I felt that I was tattooing myself, that I was wielding the needle. And in effect, I was:

I'd paid the artist, I'd commissioned the image, I'd willingly submitted to the procedure. It was my work.

What is the best antidote for passive pain? Is it passive pleasure or active pain? Lauren had provided the passive pleasure -- tea, drugs, and flirtation -- and now I was trying remedy #2.

The work took about three hours. Locals came in and talked curiously to the artist as if I weren't there, as if I were just her canvas.

"What'd he want that on there for?"
"You don't see that none too often."
"He a writer or something?"
"You'd have to ask him," she always said, and they never did, so I kept my power of silence -- another form of control.

It was done: beautiful, bold, imprinted over my bruises, indelible, and throbbing. My side was ringing with overstimulation, and after I'd admired it, I was glad to have it covered by a big, soft bandage. I gave her a generous tip.

"Your first one, right?"
"Right."
"Mind my asking?"
"Like they said: I'm a writer."
"Good choice, then. Me too." And she hiked up her left pant leg to show a scroll winding around her calf, intertwined with vines, flowers, and eyes. There was a text on the scroll, but you'd have to make several circuits to get the whole thing. I read: "conceived in sin ... eternal joy ... the torn unity ... forever in tears."

"You're your own book," I said, "or your own paper."
"Paper sometimes lasts longer than skin," she said, "But it never means as much."

*

The Selten is back in the middle of my desk, centered on the pad that makes its work stable and gentle. I test the shift, the tabulator, the carriage return, repeating, repeating. I set and clear every possible tab stop. There's a smudge on the paint, and I wipe it clean, then polish the whole machine from top to bottom until it gleams. The metal needs attention:
I wipe it again and again until it reflects my room, my hands, my face. I clean off the excess oil. I re-oil the carriage rails. Clean off the excess again.

A fresh sheet of Hotel Pearson stationery rolls in. I adjust it, remove it, try again, experiment with different insertion techniques, center it perfectly in the middle of the typewriter carriage, notice a bent corner, try another sheet, readjust it.

A knock at the door.

"Hello there. How you doing? I just didn't know if you needed one of these tonight. Do you want one?"

I do, of course I do. But I'm learning to savor pain as pleasure, pain as its own anesthetic, just as you can taste hunger and feed on it.

She peels off the bandage. Bends down to admire the typewriter.

She blows on it. She kisses it.

When Lauren leaves it's black night. I don't wake up until morning.

III

Winter arrived suddenly in New Lisbon, bringing a fragile edge to the air, which felt as if it could crack. The snow was light and mobile, forming drifts and coating the carved stone of the older houses with shifting patterns of white dust.

I resisted the temptation to huddle in my room all day, and bought a new coat and boots. I'd walk about smile each day, look at the Townsend Building, and think about climbing it. Then I'd go back to the hotel, inspect myself -- the tattoo was vivid and no longer painful, the marks of my beating were almost gone -- and I'd set to work.

I was assembling memories -- not all of them, an impossible task, and not all that I could remember, but those that I chose to be meaningful. Of those, I selected some to set down in ink on stationery, filtered through the mechanism of the Selten De Luxe, suitably anonymized. And I selected a few to type only on the typewriter in my head -- a ghost of the machine, a mental machine that had formed during the tattooing session and solidified thereafter. I had hardly been aware of what was happening when the needles were drawing on my side; I focused on the pain and the ritual of overcoming my humiliation. But I was vaguely aware that each prick of the automatic needle not only injected pigment into my skin, but altered my brain by way of a nervous impulse. In some segment of my head -- I didn't know where it was exactly, or how big -- the tattooing process had formed a third typewriter, an inner writing machine. At least I felt it there more distinctly with every day, and every session at the original Selten seemed to make my brainwriter more defined, as if I could feel levers and springs and rubber in my head. This was the typewriter I used to record the subset of significant memories that didn't need to be written on paper, that shouldn't be written on paper, but that needed to be recorded. Like the tattoo artist, I was a writer now whose paper was his own body -- the most secret part of the body, the gray matter from which the words themselves flowed.

Lauren and I met in the evening when we both wanted to and when it seemed right. No plans were ever made. No promises. Our conversations were still noncommittal, impersonal, ambiguous. We still knew nothing about each other's pasts, as she never asked to read my writing and I never offered. But she did tell me something about her present, her xxx routine at work, as I encouraged her to describe a day at the bank for me -- what it was like to be a teller, how the
customers treated her, how her boss treated her. It sounded as if he treated her very well; he'd learned long ago that her persona wasn't an invitation to harassment, and now he enjoyed her without imposing.

I wasn't hiding my writing from Lauren. If she wanted to read it, she could. I'd leave her in my room while I went to the bathroom down the hall, the sheets stacked by the typewriter, and later I couldn't detect any sign that she'd taken a peek. It was, perhaps, a little disappointing. But what she and I gave each other was affection for who we were in each other's presence. There was no need to pry into our histories, as we were living in the moment. There was no need to ask who we were behind our masks: we appreciated the masks and accepted them as a legitimate part of each other.

In the meantime, the pages of Hotel Pearson stationery accumulated, and I even got a second box from McEarly, who was happy to dispose of it and seemed to enjoy the idea of a house writer -- a typist in residence. They didn't seem to get complaints about the typing from the other guests, though there was the occasional question or reminiscence ("My, that brings back memories, doesn't it?"). I generally stopped writing when the sun disappeared into the chill of the evening. I would spend some time deciding where my latest memory would fit into the stack; the order written wasn't by any means the order arranged, and chronological order had never been my intention. There were sequences, certainly, but other pages were grouped by theme or imagery. I didn't formulate a method, I didn't know what I was looking for, but I vaguely felt that I was seeking a pattern in my past, a direction, a message that I'd overlooked. It was like scanning the frames of a film to find the person or thing that appears in the background in every scene, apart from the focus of attention, telling a substory that turns out to be all-important -- or like listening for the deep rhythm in a piece of music, a beat you haven't heard because you've been paying attention to the melody, but which turns out to have been there all along. When you manage to hear it, you tell yourself, "So that's what that was."

When I'd written my scenes for the day on the metal typewriter and on the mental typewriter, and when I'd settled on a tentative order for my sheets, either I'd look for Lauren or I'd head to a small bar I'd discovered: the Granite Room. If there were granite walls here, they'd long been covered up by photos of celebrities or has-beens, by cocktail napkins, by business cards and bad jokes and miscellaneous trophies pinned up by patrons over the years. There were easily six decades of accumulated layers here, and the space seemed to shrink from one week to the next, the volume of air in the little joint gradually diminishing as new material joined the old. People seemed to want to add more every night in order to reassure themselves that they'd been there and they belonged there. It was a haphazard version of what I was doing with my writing, I supposed.

I got to know another regular, a man I remembered from the Townsend Building. He worked for the Advertiser, trying to scare up stories in a town where very little happened. Frank Holler wasn't a journalist or a reporter, he was a newspaper man; you could practically smell the newprint on him. Heavy, rumpled, foulmouthed, he drank cheap scotch at the Granite Room every night and complained about everything in his life.

"Tom! How the hell you doin'. You still writing on that typewriter?"

This was the main feature of my life so far as Frank was concerned. The word "consultant" must be so boring that it scares off even newspaper men, who get paid for prying. But using a typewriter? Now there's a story, a hook you can hang a personality on.
"Wouldn't do it any other way," I said.
"Why the hell not?" This was the same conversation we'd had since we first spoke, and we both enjoyed it. "When I got my first computer," Frank went on, "I chucked that damn thing out the window. Literally. Almost killed an old lady."
"Uh huh."
"It was a Royal," He said the name with utter disgust and took another swig of scotch. "From the Dark Ages. No correction ribbon on it, nothing. Thing made noise like you wouldn't believe. And you're worse! You're using a manual?"
"A, I don't have to depend on anyone; not the hardware companies, not the software companies, not even the electric company. B, there are no distractions: no e-mail, no Web—"
"Jesus, that's like saying you want to ride a donkey so you won't be distracted by your car stereo."
So it went, and Frank asked for a second scotch while I nursed a dark beer. My theory was that he secretly liked to hear about the technology of his youth. Or liked being the technically advanced guy, for a change. He said there was pressure from new management at the Advertiser to change the whole operation into a web site and have everyone write blogs. "I don't know a fuckin' blog from a hole in the ground. What the hell is a blog?"

The next day I'd be back at the Selten, eliciting memories, searching for their rhythms, shifting their orders.

*

I remember getting up the nerve to tell Alicia I was in love with her. She was the loveliest girl in fifth grade, and I'd been sitting next to her the whole school year but hadn't said a thing except when the teacher told us to work together. Now I'd run after her after school and stood there like a stammering moron until finally I envisioned my hero, Captain Marvel, and what he would do in this situation. He'd tell it like it was, that's what.

"Alicia, I love you."

It wasn't clear at all on what was supposed to happen next. Probably we'd kiss, and then the usual course of events would unfold, though I had no idea what was involved in that course of events. I was pretty sure that she was supposed to say either "I love you too" before the kiss, or else (but Captain Marvel told me not to expect this at all) "I hate your guts, and I always have and always will."

But Alicia just stood there and looked at me until she said, "That is a really sweet thing to say," and brushed the hair back from my forehead. Then she walked on home without turning back. I didn't know whether she loved me or hated me. She'd talked about the sweetness of my language and touched my hair. What did that mean? By midnight I'd persuaded myself that she loved me.

When I arrived at school the next day, kids I didn't even know were pointing at me and giggling. Kids I did know were cooing and making kissy-face at me, and even my so-called friends were repeating in excited voices that I'd tried to rape Alicia.

Rape, as far as I knew, meant pulling someone's clothes off. There is no way I would have done that, I protested, and my face was red. But the singsong teasing only grew.

One moment that day stood out, and still stands out -- the moment when I finally saw Alicia herself, surrounded by friends, and turned to her with the hope that she'd met the record straight, explain that whoever had spied on us had completely lied about what they saw.

What she gave me was a smile of the purest evil -- the goat of sadistic cruelty. And I realized who had lied.

*
Tennant had attached himself to me the first day I'd come to the firm. He showed me the building and giggled about who was going to be fired next if they didn't come up with the next hot meme.

Fischer Burnham was an agency that didn't think in terms of campaigns but in terms of memes -- viral images, viral ideas. You wanted to create something that would hook onto people's minds and replicate there, that would motivate them to spread it to others, until by the law of exponential growth, the product would be a household word. They'd hired me on the strength of one stupid word: "unsucks." I was the author of a script for a rapid-fire commercial for the Ten, a phone with an uninspiring name and average features. The idea was that a dazed-looking, unphotogenic guy would deliver the script incredibly fast, cramming a barrage of empty praise into twenty seconds. People would strain to understand it all, and they'd pay attention the next time the commercial showed. Somehow the actor's delivery was funniest when he said, "The Ten just unsucks." And that second got replayed, quoted, adapted, parodied as the stupidest commercial in history -- all of which was welcome attention. I had created a meme.

The partners ruled Fischer Burnham like a harem, using and elevating and burning people at will. Old Fischer and Old Burnham were still there, but they were too far gone to be highly effective bastards. The man feared most was Harper -- Jesse Harper. He could end your career at Fischer Burnham and then make sure that you never worked in advertising again, not even selling billboards in Topeka. Harper wore three-piece suits, seemed like a different one each day, and looked damn good in them. It was rumored, Tennant repeated, that his tailor was the tailor to the capo di tutti i capi -- "The boss of bosses," he translated, as if I'd never seen a mafia movie. The rumor seemed silly to me, but it was a fact that Harper handled the account of O'Bryon, Catullo, and Foster -- lawyers to the mob. Or so they were known. After a few weeks at Fischer Burnham, I came to the conclusion that "lawyers to the mob" was a perfect example of what we were supposed to create: a meme.

My Decadent phase was at its height the fall semester of my junior year at Hartwell. I was an English major dabbling in French, and had learned the phrase "fin-de-siecle." The idea that there was no future struck me as a beautiful one, with the added advantage that it gave you license to live however you wanted and treat people like dirt. All our dreams, I liked to repeat, turn to nightmares when they spoil. And I played the part, wearing ragged scarves and cultivating the dark circles under my eyes.

Karen, another English major, completely fell for me. I was her ideal of the tortured artist. Her own schtick was vampires -- a bit too cliched for me. She wore low-cut black dresses, dyed her hair black, made her skin paler with some sort of cream, and actually hid from the light.

"These people think they're going to do something with their lives," she'd say. "And they're running as fast as they can -- right over the cliff and right into the abyss."

"Which is fine with me."

"It's not fine with me. They're blocking my own path to the abyss." I always found a way to outdo her, and she always fell for it. I would win the not-caring competition, and she found it irresistible.

After a midnight movie, on a night when my roommate was out of town, Karen followed me back to my dorm room. She was short but good-looking. I'd had my fantasies about her. But now another fantasy took hold. We stopped at the door.
She leaned into me. But I drew back and summoned my best face of cruelty and indifference.

"Oh no, Karen. You won't be sucking my blood. You couldn't handle it."

And I left her in the hallway.

*

I'd told Frank Holler that with a typewriter, I didn't depend on anyone -- but while that might have been true in theory, the reality was that I returned to Townsend Typewriters at least once a week -- to buy a new ribbon, although mine was still pretty fresh; to ask about other products he sold, all meant for the care and maintenance of typewriters; to ask about typewriter history. Al was pretty friendly and would usually chat for a while, but he never invited me behind the counter. A couple of times, the mail carrier came while I was there, and both times she brought another stack of typed envelopes, which Al seemed to hide away quickly. I didn't ask about them, but had to wonder why this place wasn't as dull and uneventful as the proverbial Maytag repair shop. Then again, he didn't get too many actual customers in the store -- he just seemed to do business by mail. Once I saw him labeling a stack of several large boxes that, he told me, all contained machines he'd repaired for customers who had sent them in. It made sense -- how many typewriter users could there be in New Lisbon? I was the only one I knew. But some customers did drive in with their typewriters, traveling an hour or two to get them to town. One furtive, skinny man with a beard pushed his way in carrying a tanklike machine, an Adler with a stylized eagle on it that made me think of "1984." He wheezed as the typewriter thumped onto Al's counter. They traded just a few words, and Al said, "It'll be ready on Tuesday." "He brings it in every six months, always wants it completely cleaned. Probably the cleanest typewriter in America," he said.

The typewriter shop was my research project, and I saw myself purely as a learner, coining information from Al when he didn't seem too reluctant to share it. It didn't occur to me to try to give him any news; what could I possibly teach him? There was nothing I knew about typewriters that Al Townsend didn't, except what I'd been writing on my own. Then there was the typewriter tattooed over my ribs -- that, I thought, was too personal.

One afternoon in the shop, a backfire from a truck made me jump despite myself, and revived images of Harleys that had been bothering me less recently. A short train of thought took me to the Selten factory. I had simply been avoiding it, not on purpose but instinctively, as part of my traumatic experience in Benton.

"So," I said, "A couple of months ago I checked out the Selten building."

"The Selten building?"

"Yeah, you know, in Benton."

Al looked annoyed with himself, almost embarrassed. "I didn't know about that. I knew they were built down the road, had no idea the building was still standing. What's it used for now?"

"No idea. Might not be used for anything. It still says 'Selten Industries,' and you can see some equipment through the glass blocks. Something could be going on there."

"I'll be damned. You know I like those Seltens. They didn't spare any expense in making them -- the best materials, really good tolerance. You can see the care that went into the design, and how they had skilled hands putting them together. But I've told you that before. Anyway, just a look at the factory building would be -- well, it would be of interest, all right."

"You can find it easy enough, the place is just a village."

Al thought about it, and you could see his eyes light up as they hadn't ever before during my visits.
"Tom -- it's a beautiful afternoon, roads are good, I've got nothing I have to finish today, don't tell me that you do -- let's go down there and check it out."

This was a surprise. And I was ashamed to find myself afraid. "I, ah, don't have good memories of Benton."

"What do you mean?"

"That's where I got into that fight."

"What, with someone at the factory?"

"It had nothing to do with the factory. The building was empty. It was some bikers, some Hell's Angels or something."

Al reached into a drawer and came up with a pistol. It was shining like my Selten De Luxe after its overhaul. "I don't think we'll have any trouble. And if we do, Hell's Angels are hard to miss." I was staring at the weapon in disbelief. "Come on, Tom. We're going to Benton."

I had to guffaw at the absurdity of both my fear and Al's firearm. All right, we were going. We got into Al's van and were soon on a narrow road that passed through stands of densely packed maples, all bare now and dotted with snow. The drive only took 45 minutes. Al made a few remarks about the details of Selten, how you could find subtle differences between one specimen and the next that told you they were experimenting at the factory. I couldn't follow it, and he mostly seemed to be talking to himself.

The town seemed even smaller when you came in by van, and even more deserted now that the winter weather kept people inside. Of course there were no bikers to be seen.

The lights were on in the Selten building. The door was open.

We walked into a room crammed with old machinery, pale fluorescent lights barely illuminating it, and one bright light directly over a workbench where an old man hunched over some job.

He turned, unbent his back, and said, "This is private property. Nothing for sale. We're closed."

"Sorry, sir, the door was open," said Al. He held out his hand. "Al Townsend. This is Tom Pearson. We're not looking to buy anything, just curious about this place. See, I'm a typewriter repairman up the road in New Lisbon, and there's a typewriter that used to be made in this very building, we think, the Selten typewriter. Just came by to see if there's any history to be found here still, any of the equipment they used, stuff like that. If it's not too much trouble."

The man had shaken Al's hand, feebly, but hadn't told us his name. Implausibly, he wore a bowtie, which, like his shirt and his face, was dusty and wrinkled.

"New Lisbon. Townsend. I've heard of you. Haven't heard of you, though -- he peered at me.

"Tom Pearson, sir. A friend of Al's. And I use a Selten typewriter myself -- I'm a writer -- so that's why I came along."

"You use one, do you? Is it any good?"

"It's perfect."

"Perfect? I heard those things were pieces of junk."

"No! I use it every day. It's, what, fifty years old, and after Al gave it a good cleaning, it works like a charm. Great tool."

I felt defensive.

Then I saw what the old man had been hunched over. "Is that--?"

A sly smile spread on his face, and this time he reached out to give me a good handshake. "Oscar Selten, Junior."

The object on the workbench was a partially disassembled -- or partially assembled -- Selten De Luxe. Al and I could only sit down in wonder and wait for Oscar Selten, Junior, to tell his story. He turned up the dial on a space heater and poured himself a cup of coffee from a huge thermos, making us wait. The man had a fine sense of drama.

"The inventor of the Selten was Oscar Selten, Senior. My dad. He'd worked
for Remington for twenty years, had built up a collection of the best typewriters from around the world, and had ideas of his own. When he inherited some money and heard that a little factory was available in Benton, he left Remington and started a typewriter company of his own. This was the town he'd been born in and he'd been wanting to come back. My mother didn't want to leave Iliam, New York -- Remington headquarters -- but he dragged her here. There were patents to file, equipment to buy, special machines to be constructed just to make his ideas a reality, and he spent every waking hour on the project. It was 1953, and I was thirteen. For me, it was the best thing that ever happened. There were lots of kids in this town back then, and I made my best friends right away. Plus, Dad got me working in the factory. He trusted me, and I was good at the work."

He sipped his coffee. "Production started in 1955. We had a crew of seven: Dad, me, and five unmarried girls from the area, because Dad said girls had the best fine motor skills. Mom left us around then. He didn't seem to care much. He was completely devoted to getting the typewriter off the ground.

"The first few machines were scrapped. Alignment problems. He couldn't find a way to fix them without rebuilding the carriage. Serial number 1 got the sledgehammer treatment -- smashed to smithereens. Dad could have a temper. But it wasn't too long before we had a product we liked. Just had to find a way to get customers. Dad used to bring them around to typewriter shops in a truck, offer to split the profit and take back whatever didn't sell. He also sold direct -- put ads in little specialty magazines, Poultry Today, Modern Poet, that sort of thing. People sent in 75 bucks and had a brand new typewriter shipped to them."

"We were almost making enough to live on. Then we had the labor problems. The girls got married and didn't want to work for Dad anymore, or he wasn't happy with their work -- we kept losing them. We had a backlog of parts: Dad and me had made parts for thousands of machines, but the assembly line was lagging. We couldn't even fulfill the few orders that were coming in from the poets and poultry farmers."

"Then Dad got a commission to make gears for tractors. It was much simpler work, the profit was OK, and he got to fire everyone. That was 1959. We made parts for farm equipment until he keeled over in 1970. I hired a couple of guys and ran the place for a while -- got some contracts from GM, then Toyota. Small stuff, but enough to keep us busy. Got married. Never had any kids. Wife died in 2000. And now..."

"Now you're making Selten's from the leftover parts?" asked Al."

"Exactly. They were stored right, they were made right, they were just waiting for assembly. I started a few months after Norma died. Needed something just to keep myself busy. And I found I liked it. It made me feel connected to Dad, to my childhood, and there's a lot of satisfaction in making The Best Typewriter in the World." You could hear the capital letters."

We both agreed devoutly with the label."

"Come on back here." He opened a door and flicked a light switch. "Takes me about two weeks from start to finish to make a machine." Lined up on metal shelves, like silent soldiers, were dozens and dozens of new Selten De Luxes."

Al and I walked slowly down the aisle, in awe. Old Selten had apparently been experimenting with different colors, as there were many variations from the traditional three. There was a thin layer of dust on the typewriters, and something melancholy and surreal about them. They faced the thin sunlight from the glass blocks, like frozen prisoners in some convict army, waiting to be mobilized. Ten thousand stories could be written on these machines,
but so far their only story was the story of their invention and birth, the story that Oscar Selten, Jr. had just told us. A different and even grimmer metaphor occurred to me: they were newborns put into a cryogenic coma. And in this unheated room, the metaphor made me shiver.

Al must have been having similar thoughts. "Mr. Selten, you're not going to tell me that you build these typewriters and just let them sit here?"

"That's what I'm telling you. Like I said, not for sale."

"But they're the best typewriters in the world."

Now some bitterness came into Selten's voice. "Yep. Best typewriters in the world. And who wants typewriters? Nobody. They want computers, laptops, those iPods. Sure, some people want a typewriter to sit in the corner and type up a form once in a while, and for that they'll buy one of those damn plastic things that you throw away as soon as it breaks down. You think they would look twice at my typewriters? And I wouldn't want them doing that kind of work, anyway. No. I'm too old for marketing. It was hard enough in 1955, it's impossible now."

Selten sighed. "I don't even come in this room except to put a new one on the shelf. Then I get started on the next one. Got enough parts to keep me going, I figure, until the Alzheimer's kicks in. Then maybe I won't remember that I'm making stuff no one on this planet wants."

"So you haven't sold a single one of the typewriters you've put together?" I asked.

"Nope. Gave a couple away to Phil and Andy, two old friends I play pool with. They put 'em up on their mantelpieces and they're there every time I stop by their houses. They mean well. But they never use 'em. Really, what's the difference between that and sitting on these shelves?"

"Mr. Selten." Al spoke respectfully, confidentially. "You know I run a typewriter shop. I'm the third generation to do it. My grandfather carried Seltens in the store."

"Yeah. Don't know how you keep it up."

"But I do, Mr. Selten. There is still a market. And, Mr. Selten, nothing would give me more pleasure than helping you find users for your new machines. People who would like nothing better than to get a brand-new, high-quality manual typewriter with the legendary Selten name."

"Legendary? You lay it on thick. Hardly anyone ever heard of us."

"Oh, my customers hear about you. And now they're going to hear much more."

"What's in it for you?"

"The pleasure of being involved, sir. I would be glad to help you out."

Selten peered at Al suspiciously. "I don't trust people who do favors for pleasure. Tell me now: what's in it for you?"

Al thought. "All right, how about this: I'll sell them on commission. You set the price. And you pay me $20 commission for every machine sold."

Selten grumbled, muttered about being too old for this and not wanting to bother, but you could see the paternal dream starting to dawn on his face despite everything his reason told him. "All right, all right, you can waste your time on this if you want. But you're going to have to pay me in advance for every typewriter you take out to sell."

"How much?"

"Two hundred dollars," Selten said, and looked like he was expecting us to be scared off and leave him to his peaceful routine.

To his surprise and mine, Al took out his wallet and counted off ten hundred-dollar bills. "I'll take five as a start. You don't have cases for them, do you?"

"Er, no. No, that was a job we farmed out to another outfit in town, they're long out of business."

"That's fine, we'll just scare up some other source for cases that will fit. Tom, help me pick out five of these beauties, will you?"
Al was whistling on the drive back to New Lisbon. I'd never seen him so happy. In the back of the van were five Selten De Luxe typewriters -- blue-green, bright red, glossy black, pale blue, and pink. "The women are going to go nuts over the pink one," Al said.

"He's got to be the only human being on the planet making manual typewriters, right?"

"Nope," said Al, "There are a couple of small factories in China, sending their cheap machines to out-of-the-way places in third-world countries where electricity is still a luxury. They're plastic bodied, they work, they're nothing special. In India they were still making good, big manuals until a couple of years ago, and then the country took a leap into the 21st century. But we're taking a leap back into the 20th!"

I helped him bring the typewriters into his shop. "But how are you going to find takers for these machines? $200 is going to make people think twice, don't you think? They can buy a cheap computer for just a little more than that."

"Do you have a computer?"

"Ah, not at the moment."

"I didn't think so. You don't really need it for your consulting work, do you?"

"I'm taking a break from it, like I told you."

"Mm. Don't worry, I'll find takers for these and come back for many more."

Again I found that there was a limit to how much Al would tell me about his business -- about what went on behind the scenes, behind the desk. I thought of those stacks of letters he got. Would every letter writer want to put down $200 for a new typewriter? Somehow Al was making money. Somewhere, there was a world of typists, living between the cracks of the new millennium.

"Come around again tomorrow," said Al, "and I'll share some ideas with you. Hey, maybe you'd like one of these yourself?"

I liked that deep black one -- but I shook my head. "My old one works perfectly, thanks to you. And I'm living in close quarters right now. No space to become a typewriter collector, if there is such a thing."

"Sure, they exist," said Al. "But that's not the kind I want to buy these babies. I'm going to do just what Mr. Selten wants: I'm going to find people who'll use these machines, who'll put them to the test. And speaking of which, it's time for me to do some quality control on these. See if the old man's fingers and eyes are still up to the job."

I left him absorbed in inspecting the red Selten. He was reaching into it like a doctor or an auto mechanic, nodding, moving parts back and forth. He didn't look up as I went out into the bright, frosty afternoon.

*  

It's late, I'm tired, but I sit cross-legged on my hotel bed and watch the room swim in and out of sight, dimly and rhythmically lit by the neon sign. I wonder if I can savor my exhaustion, find refreshment in my sleeplessness, just as I can taste hunger and transmute pain into anesthetic. The old man stares down his bread, peering through his clasped hands, willing the bread to become something else -- an artwork? Maybe he's imagining what he could
sculpt maquette from that doughy mass. A tumulus, an obelisk, a lighthouse. The lighthouse keeper arranges typewriters on curved shelves that zigzag line his tower. The tower rises 14 stories into the sky. In the night, a searchlight combs the horizon, sweeps across ships that may have lost their way, identifies them and lets them drop into the trackless black. All the typewriters begin to move in unison. The lighthouse keeper assembles another, building it out of bread. The typewriters type a tale of a sailor who prays on his lonely ship. The sailor's tattoo moves in unison with the machines, the waves swell, the rhythmic writing shifts them all into each other: keeper, sailor, praying man, myself.

*I*

"I've drawn up a list," said Al.

"Oh yeah?" I said, trying to see what he was holding in his hands.

"Looks pretty long -- how many do you have on there?"

He held it to his chest. "Trade secret." He pretended to be joking, but I didn't think he was.

"All right. So how do we -- you, I mean -- sell the things?"

"Here's where you can help out. You're a consultant, right? So I'm consulting."

"Not that kind..."

"Come on, Tom, you've got some ideas here, I'm sure."

"Well, I've dealt with some people in advertising before, I guess I could come up with something."

And for the first time in months, I'm writing copy, creating a meme -- a slogan for a machine invented halfway back into the previous century.

"The Selten De Luxe: the time of the timeless typewriter has come again."

"I like it. I like it. Keep going."

*Hannah's eyes are glancing now from my eyes to my mouth, from my mouth to my eyes, and she's drinking deep from her cocktail. I'm drunk myself, and making two simultaneous efforts: not to look too obviously lecherous, and not to fall over.

I'm not sure who initiates it, but we're slipping away from the party, down a dark hall, into a bedroom. Our lips and teeth and tongues are meeting and crashing as we fall onto the bed. My hand is between her thighs. Time thickens and the air is like molasses. Through the atmosphere of sweet sludge I hear a giggle.

*I*

I arrange and rearrange the sheets on my desk. The stationery repeats its identical message. A theme comes through, a refrain, the basso ostinato of my memories: betrayal.

Moments in which I was betrayed. Moments when I betrayed others. Moments that betrayed my illusions. Pairs and circles and layers of betrayal.

*I* 

"I'm ready to start climbing the building again," I said to Lauren in the darkness.
"You're sure," she said, stroking my ribs.
"I've been sure for weeks -- I just haven't done it." The scars, the healing rib, the knotted tendons and muscles had stopped crippling me, and there was only a residual woundedness in my mind that had been stopping me from resuming my exercise.
"Good for you."
"I'm going up there tomorrow morning after breakfast."
"They say it's going to snow."
"So I'll wear a coat. It's not Everest."
"Mm. Good." Her breath was soon slower, deeper. She'd fallen asleep in my room for the first time. We barely fit in the bed. I expected I'd be awake for a while, as I wasn't in the most comfortable position but I didn't want to disturb her. I focused on a memory exercise: recalling every building, every street, between the Hotel Pearson and the Townsend Building. There were ten blocks to cover. By the time my mind reached the corner, I started to wander. I saw fields of grain waving next to New Lisbon, gradually washing over the tired streets.

In the morning, Lauren was still curled up. I didn't want to look at her face after hours of sleep, her hair crushed and bedraggled. It wasn't that I expected to like her less -- I just didn't want to violate her mask. I dressed myself, gave a last glance in her direction; she let out a humming, semiconscious goodbye; and I headed to The Rooster for coffee and some rolls.

A blackness crept over the sky and large flakes of snow started to come down. I pulled up the collar of my coat, but didn't mind the snow accumulating on my hair, gradually chilling my scalp. Saturday mornings in winter in New Lisbon were already quiet, and the snow muffled everything, creating an intimate space that I carried with me from block to block. A big boat of a car driven by a lady who could barely see over the steering wheel slowly crossed my path as I waited to cross Broadway. A teenage girl was walking a poodle; they both looked eager to get back home. But I took my time, returning to my memory game: I tried to anticipate each new shop and street a few steps before they came into view. There were mistakes, but on the whole I was surprised by how deeply this town had etched itself into my mind.

The sidewalk was slick as I climbed the gentle hill and looked up at the Townsend, its Mesopotamian and Egyptian terracotta looking out into the storm -- obscure pagan gods that were probably wondering how they had ended up in a small American town.

I could feel it -- the way I was out of shape and in need of rest after every flight, the way my injuries came back and cried out -- but I made it to the top. I opened the usual door and came out onto an unfamiliar place, the rooftop made strange by the coating of snow and the heavy flakes that now filled the air. You could make out the street only in pauses between flurries.

There was a deck chair, in an incongruous pink, dusted with snow. I brushed it off and watched the turbulence. Now everything was quiet, the snow ruled the city, with only an echo that might have been the beating of my own heart. In the blowing flakes I seemed to find patterns for an instant, signs in the static, marks of alien alphabets. After a while, everything seemed to vibrate. I realized I was shivering.

In the lobby, I ran into Frank Holler.
"Christ, what have you been doing? Why are you out today? Thought you'd be back in that room with that typewriter of yours."
"I could ask you the same question, right?"
"Fair enough. Working on a story, of course."
"Exciting new school board meeting?"
"Naw, something actually a little juicier than that. Just found out we could get a new IRS regional office here. Right here in the building."
"Really."
"Yeah, I never thought we'd get it. But we could use it. You know, floors five through ten have been empty for 15 years. It would be big news for this town."
"All right, that's good."
"See you around the Granite Room."
"See you, Frank."
I felt more winded than I wanted to, but proud of my ascent. The storm was winding down and a few rays of sunlight hit the streets of New Lisbon.
"Three years and then she's gone," said McIndoe as I came in.
The rocking chair was empty. "What?" I said. "What happened?"
"She just up and left with a couple of suitcases. Right into the snow."
"You're serious?"
"Course I'm serious. Three years here, and one day she decides that's it. Didn't say where she was going, just said she was going. And that was that."
"Phil, what can I say? I'm really sorry. So you'd only been married to Evelyn for three years?"
"Evelyn?" He frowned. "I'm talking about Miss Ayres."
I pivoted to look at the hotel door.
"Oh, she's long gone by now. Packed her bags in her car and head off through the snow... So you didn't know anything about this? I thought you two were -- friends."
I didn't respond, but headed upstairs and saw that Lauren's door was ajar. The posters, the few pieces of furniture that belonged to her, were still there, a thin costume for the room. Her clothes and cosmetics were gone, except for a pair of pantyhose and a few old tubes of this or that. The hot plate sat on the counter. You could smell her perfume. That was that. The place felt emptier than if it had been stripped of everything that had to do with her; the few remaining adornments and possessions just made it clearer that she'd left and wasn't coming back. I realized that I had been hoping for a note or sign for me. There was nothing.
I felt empty, cast down. I'd been getting used to the woman, I guessed. But had I known anything about her? Her mask, her exterior -- which I respected and enjoyed. A few stories about her daily routine. A few vague conversations about places, experiences that anyone could have had. No facts. And there had been no promises.

For the rest of the day I wrote down a full description of her and of our meetings. It was hard at first, then the words flowed and I found that I enjoyed transferring Lauren Ayres -- was that her name? -- to paper. She became a part of me this way, and there was no need to keep her physically present. I noticed things now that I hadn't paused to consider before: the one strand of hair that resisted all hairspray and even showed a dark root; the way her Southern accent sometimes had a touch of nasal twang, something vaguely Eastern; a smooth area of her fourth left finger that might once have been home to a ring.

The typewriter condensed Lauren into a series of characters, generating the genome of her acts and appearance, encoding it into symbols -- and revealing her as she hadn't been revealed before. I read my twelve pages about Lauren Ayres several times, corrected a few details, and felt I knew those pages by heart. I knew her too by heart now -- as much of her as she'd been willing to reveal to me -- and by that evening, she had been written on the typewriter in my head. Lauren, I decided, would be one of the memories that didn't
need to exist on paper. As I'd done with other typescripts, I took this one outside. I walked a few blocks through the snow. No longer muffled by the storm, the sounds of town carried far in the cold air. I waited for the right place, then found it: a weathered brick wall running along an empty lot. There were niches in the wall that suggested statues, prayers, treasures -- but all were empty. I tore my writing into minuscule pieces -- ten thousand typed characters to be rearranged by nature and chance -- and left the pile in the central niche. The wind immediately started to disperse a few pieces, to mix them with snow, to create a new story.

* on Monday afternoon.

"Taker number one," said Al as I came in the typewriter shop.

"And I thought she was a tightwad."

He held up a typed letter. I expected him to hide it behind the counter, but he passed it to me.

Dear Mr. Townsend,

Your offer comes at the perfect moment, as I do not know how much use this old Woodstock can take anymore. Please reserve a Selten De Luxe for me, the pink one if you still have it. Is there any chance that you could deliver it to me? Any day next week would be fine. Naturally I will pay all your delivery expenses.

Thanking you kindly,
Eleanor Aquino

"What did I tell you about the pink one?"
"Wow. Congratulations."
"You'll see, the old man is going to find a user for every typewriter he can build. Eleanor is a writer, a journalist -- used to write a column for a paper before it went out of business -- and she won't use anything but a typewriter. Won't even use a phone. So I'll just write back to her right now."

He rolled a sheet into the black Selten and typed faster than I ever could, but using only two fingers of each hand. From the way he touched the machine, I thought I could guess who was going to be its new owner.

* That evening, I thought I'd stop by the Granite Room. It was time to add a few twenties to my wallet.

A split second before I felt it, I seemed to know what I was going to feel: nothing. There was an empty space, a far too large space, in my bag. I pulled it out of the closet, onto my bed, and gaped at one stack of bills, a pill bottle, and a note on hotel stationery -- typed and signed with a lipstick kiss.

Idiotically, I turned back to the closet and scanned and felt everything, the shelf, the corners, my other bag, the hangers and m the pockets of my clothes. Then, my head spinning, I turned back to the note.
I'd never have the nerve to rob a bank.  
I barely have the nerve to rob a bank robber.  
I won't forget you.  
Mondays are the best days for cash, and the girl on the left is new.

It was an unintelligible haiku to me until it sank in that Lauren thought I'd stolen that money.  And I remembered how it felt, in fact, as if I were getting away with a crime as I walked away from my bank that day, carrying my savings away in pure currency.  In some way, Lauren was perfectly right about me.  And I smiled and shook my head and lifted up my eyes to the cracked ceiling.  I pointed at the old man in the print.  "What do you make of that, old man?  And where were you?  Too busy praying?"

I'd been betrayed again.

But had I been?  You can't break a promise if you never make one, and our whole relationship had been based on avoiding all commitments.  We never said we loved each other -- because we didn't.  We liked each other -- a much cleaner, simpler thing.  And I found that I still liked her -- the little I knew of her, the perceptions that had now been written into my brain.  This last event just cast those perceptions into a new shade, a new tone, but it didn't cancel them out.  Somehow it reinforced them, and I still liked Lauren.

She still liked me too: to the tune of $2000, a half bottle of painkillers, and advice on how to rob the New Lisbon First Farmers' Bank.

I took two twenties from the stack and headed for the Granite Room.

*

My hangover mixed with a general dread and the possibility of rage.
It had been some time since I'd calculated that I'd have no problem living in New Lisbon for two years on my cash.  Now I'd be lucky to make it to two months.  Now I was forced to worry about how to make a living.  It made everything seem heavier -- the gray sky, the cast iron of the radiator, the words piled up on my desk, my aching skull deposited on my pillow.

Was I going to give in to anger?  I could see it just around the corner: a fulminating rage against this old tart who'd robbed me.  That's the word she used, isn't it?  Rob.  Did it make any better that she thought I was a robber myself?  Did two wrongs make a right?

But I didn't have the energy to calculate rights and wrongs -- a process I'd often experienced as a cause of severe unhappiness -- and I didn't want to go down that path.  The fact was that I did still like Lauren, and even had to smile a pained smile of admiration for her gutsy move.  And the fact was that I wanted to break the cycle.  If I had been betrayed, then so be it -- everyone is disappointed and betrayed, no one gets out of here unscathed.  The king is betrayed behind his back, the serf is betrayed to his face, it's a world of injustice.  Get used to it.  Don't nurse resentment and become a betrayer again.

How much money did I need?  I needed the cash to stay in the Hotel Pearson: currently, the special monthly rate of $550.  No other hotel or landlord in this town or another was very likely to let me stay there without I.D. or evidence of employment.  I had my hot plate.  Potatoes, beans, rice, instant coffee.  Maybe I'd even give up cigarettes.  It would all be a further exercise in asceticism.  I could become a hunger artist and gain fame.
What was the punch line of Kafka's "A Hunger Artist"? I couldn't recall it, but was pretty sure it didn't reflect a lot of credit on the ancient craft of hunger artistry. And even a hunger artist would need to pay rent...

What was poverty like? I had never experienced it -- my parents had been comfortably middle-class, I had been marginally wealthy for a while. I got the notion that I wanted to stare poverty in the face. Maybe it would be a liberation. I sat up, lay slowly back down, gathered my forces and sat up again. I badly needed caffeine and minimal nicotine.

A good dose of both of them at The Rooster -- tomorrow I'd stop eating at restaurants -- and my blood vessels opened up a little, releasing their grip on my brain. I set out to the thrift store three blocks away.

A painfully skinny woman at the counter, with veins protruding from her forearms, and a gentle smile.

An employee: a deformed face, black skin pulled back from an eye, black teeth showing between his lips, a defiant expression that might just be the effect of an injury and might be daring me to stare.

Christmas decorations -- a whole aisle of them. Angels, Santas, plastic wreaths, Rudolphs.

Glass and ceramic bric-a-brac, imprinted with names of forgotten sites and events, decorated with mass-produced patterns calculated to be tolerable to the largest possible number of consumers.

The clothes: perfumed with a subtle mix of perspiration and cigarette smoke, yellowed, outdated.

An Oldies station played stale, nauseating leftovers of songs that someone had exposed everyone to decades ago -- the soundtrack of an involuntary childhood.

Nests of electric cords. Printers, scanners, monitors.

The books and magazines, years of National Geographics, teen Bibles, women's magazines from years ago.

The obligatory rack of LP's with the horrible colors and hairdos of an obsolete simulacrum of vitality.

Everything was on sale today, 25% off.

I felt I was about to stop breathing. The outside air came as a welcome, cool relief. I headed for the only place I imagined I could find employment.

*I*

"I thought you had a job."

"I never want to go back to it. I hated it. I've told you before. Look, I've found what I want right here: a town where you can build a life without being hassled. A simpler life. And I want to do something with my hands."

"Like fix typewriters."

"Isn't that what you chose? You used to be in computers, right?"

"Right. But this is a family business for me. I decided to take it over when my dad died. And I'm doing fine."

"Look, Al. I don't expect any long-term promises. Just give me a chance. What I've seen here is that you've got customers -- more than I'd ever have imagined -- packages coming in and out, correspondence or something, and -- frankly, you've got money. You didn't think twice about handing Selten a thousand bucks. You have a real business here. So try me out as an assistant, an apprentice, a gofer, whatever. Pay me minimum wage. And see how it works out."

"Mm hmm. Am I going to be paying Social Security and reporting your wages to the Feds?"

"That's ... can we just skip that? I'd honestly like to get away from my whole previous life, just make a clean new start. And if we could keep it
under the table ... well, I'd appreciate it."

My whole speech felt absurd and doomed. Maybe the only alternative was to
rejoin society, to become myself again, and to wait -- to see if my furies
captured me in the back of the head? If I saw it coming, it would probably be a far worse revenge. Maybe
I would leave as Lauren did, catch another bus, head off in the direction of
another city, get off at some other spot of pure contingency, and try to
make myself new again.

"All right. We can give it a try."
"Seriously?"
"Yeah, seriously. No promises, like you said. Come on, let me show
you some basics of the business."

Al was motioning me behind the counter -- to an area I'd never set foot
in before, the workshop and the back rooms that I'd imagined were full of
tools whose names I wouldn't even know. I had been admitted to the inner
sanctum.

"Thanks, Al. Thanks a lot. You won't be sorry."
He turned on some overhead lights. "In that corner's the tank. You see
the Underwood in there? Immersed in the chemicals? Take a good look."
The famous dangerous chemicals, forbidden to laymen. I went over eagerly
and looked at the large machine, stripped of its exterior panels, that rested
serenely just beneath the xxx surface.

"Now sit down," said Al, "and tell me your real name."
He was holding his gun.
"What do you--" I spluttered.
"Your real name. Now."
& I told him.
"Who do you work for?"
"I -- used to work for an advertising firm. Fischer Burnham."
"Why are you here?"
"You mean New Lisbon?"
"I really do need a job. I can't go back to Fischer Burnham. And it's worse
than that."

I started with my engagement to Erin -- daughter of a six-term congressman
and one of the richest, most "desirable" girls in the state. Once I'd started
dating Erin, I'd foolishly told myself I would be a fool to break it off.
The engagement happened after a year. The wedding was coming in less than a
year. Expectations and promises surrounded us -- and I don't think either one
of us genuinely wanted the marriage to take place. We just didn't have the
courage to say that to each other, much less to her father. I suppose I
was planning to have a typical unsatisfying marriage, lucrative career,
series of affairs, and divorce after a suitable interval, say fifteen years --
just long enough for Erin to become one of the richest but no longer xxx
most desirable women in the state. We'd have a legal battle, or our lawyers
would, and I'd still get to keep half the house and maybe even some of her
money. I hadn't yet worked out whether there'd be kids.

Was it so bad to do something, anything, to get out of that scenario?
Admittedly, I chose a dramatic method: getting caught making out with my
boss's girlfriend. And not just my boss, but a man rumored to be connected
to the mob.
Al snorted. "You are a complete screw up, aren't you?"
"I hope you believe me."
"I can smell bullshit. And this is the first time I haven't smelled any
on you since you first came in here."
"Um, thanks."
"You still need to explain why you came in here and why you're so interested
in my business."
"It -- when I found the Selten at a yard sale, I realized I needed one.
I wanted to write. Collect my thoughts. And I didn't want to do it by hand."
"Why not on a computer?"
"I'm sick of them. It's -- I can't completely explain it, but when I left,
I wasn't just leaving my old life behind, I was trying to leave behind the whole
digital world. The whole information age."
"You don't want to be tracked."
"Right, and ..."
"And what? What did the information age do to you?"
"All right." I blushed. "I told you, I was drunk, I was making out on a bed
with Harper's girlfriend, and we got caught. This little bastard from the firm,
Tennant, caught us."
"Yeah?"
"And he'd been videoing us. And he sent the video to everyone at
Fischer Burnham. And he put it on the Internet."
Al's laughter filled the room and went on considerably longer than I would
have liked.
He put down the gun. "You've come to the right place, all right. You
just don't know how right."
"What do you mean?"
"Come on. We've got to deliver a pink Selten De Luxe."

IV

Eleanor Aquino lived in a small city 50 miles from New Lisbon. Al's well-
heated van sped toward it on an underused divided highway.
I felt relieved to have confessed to Al, to be able to share my situation
with another human being. Lauren would have understood it if she'd read my
pages. But then, maybe she had -- maybe she'd read them as fiction or semi-
truth. Probably that's what some of them were. I imagined her leafing through
my ordered stack just as she'd rifled through my money bag, putting two and
two together, getting five.
"You said, 'You don't know how right.'"
"What's that?" said Al.
"That I didn't know how right I was to come to your place. What did you
mean?"
He was quiet, then began: "Who do you think the clientele is for a typewriter
shop?"
"I still don't know. Where do you find them? This woman we're going to
see is a columnist, or something? Retired columnists?"
"You're not using your imagination enough. You've been wrapped up in your
own personal screwups. You need to open your eyes and look around you."
"I'm looking around. And I see a world of efficiency. Isn't that why
typewriters were invented -- to be efficient? Now they're not the most efficient
tools for the job anymore. The world has left them behind."

"OK. Let's back up. Alvin Townsend, my grandfather, opened this store when,
as you say, typewriters were efficient technology. You had a business, you had
an office, you wanted to write professionally, you needed a typewriter. It was
taken for granted. New Lisbon, like I told you, had two shops that carried them:
Central Office Machines and Townsend Typewriters, which was the upstart, which
was started by Alvin basically to spit in the face of Jack Townsend. There was
more than enough business in town, and in the surrounding county, to support two
shops. This was the late '20s. The people liked having the choice of two
shops, I guess. There was competition. They advertised, tried to undercut each
other -- I've got a bunch of the old ads and flyers.

"Jack Townsend died in that accident, but his business went on, and so did
ours. During the war, there were no new typewriters to be had, but people brought
in their old ones to be reconditioned, rebuilt, serviced. Then there was pent-up demand, and everyone wanted a new one. This is what my dad told me.

"He took over the business in 1954. It was shortly after that that the
Selten was introduced, and we carried it. But it was never a significant part
of the business. Electric typewriters got big by then. Then the Selectric.
You know what that is, right?"

"Sure, I've seen them. The golf ball typewriters."

"Right. Everyone wanted one of those. They were the bread and butter of
the business in the '60s and '70s. Central closed around 1970 -- misedmanaged --
and we were doing better than ever. But around 1980, you started to see the
effects of the personal computer revolution. Typewriter companies that had
been around for a century started to collapse. Business dried up. Suddenly
we were out of date.

"Dad held on long enough to see the whole business go south. By 1990,
he was running the shop more as a hobby than a business. And his own son,
as you know, was a programmer. I'd moved away, I was working on Internet
protocols a couple of years before HTML was introduced. I can't say I saw
the Web coming, but I did think the Internet had a lot more potential
than what we'd seen so far."

"Why'd you come back here?"

"Wasn't happy. There was a girl -- it's a story not completely different
from yours -- but let's say I decided I was happier as a single man, and living
in a small town. My dad got really sick and I moved back to New Lisbon. The
store was closed for three years, just sat there empty. Once we got an offer
from a dry cleaner that wanted the property, and I turned him down. I realized
I didn't want it to die."

"So had your dad taught you the business?"

"When I was a kid, I used to spend hours there after school. He taught me
a lot. Now he was dying. It took a while. Between stays in the hospital and
times when he was too sick with chemo, he gave me a few more tips. I decided
to reopen the shop. That was a month before dad died."

"He must have been proud."

"He thought I was completely insane."

"Oh."

We drove in silence for a couple of minutes and then Al turned off. "I've been to her place once before, did a house call. Broken drawband
emergency. You'll like Eleanor, she is an original."
Eleanor Aquino was a spherical woman with dyed black hair and a chirpy voice. She welcomed us into her townhouse and a vast, shaggy animal came loping out of another room towards us. I flinched, but Al reached out to pat the creature on its salt-and-pepper head.

"Marcus, how you doin', buddy? Tom, this is Eleanor and Marcus, her Irish wolfhound. This is Tom Pearson. He's my assistant."

I nodded. The Selten was in my arms, and Eleanor actually squeaked when she looked at it. "It is just darling!"

She showed us her old machine — a gray, wrinkly Woodstock that looked very tired. "Al, you have done wonders for the old lady over the years, but a brand-new manual typewriter — that is just the ticket."

They sat at the kitchen table and Al showed her all the features of the Selten while she made out a check. "And so reasonable, too."

Marcus was sniffing me and deciding whether to trample me or swallow me whole. "Nice doggie," I hypothesized.

"Al," said Eleanor as they got up, "Could you take Mrs. Peabody away to the old folks' home for me? I don't want to know what happens to her — don't tell me you're gonna put her to sleep, if that's what you're gonna do. Just take her away to the rest home, will you?"

"Sure, Eleanor. Don't worry about Mrs. Peabody. She's going to go in the storeroom, and —"

"I don't wanna know. Thanks a million, Al. And good to meet you, Tom. I see Marcus has taken a shining to you."

The beast and the butterball watched us go. I was lugging Mrs. Peabody, who was considerably fatter than Pinkie, or whatever the woman was going to name her new Selten. I deposited it in the van.

"Mrs. Peabody?"

"Lots of people name their typewriters," said Al. "Eleanor used to refer to Mrs. Peabody in her columns all the time."

"You going to refurbish it?"

"That thing? Every time I've cleaned it I've been disgusted by the Irish wolfhound hair in it. It's not worth ever doing it again. But I'll keep it on the shelf as a parts machine. Nothing goes in the dumpster."

"How much room do you have back there?"

"The lot goes back farther than it looks, and there's a basement. You'd be surprised. Well, you'll see for yourself soon enough."

"Thanks, Al." I was feeling very grateful for two things: being employed and not being shot. So grateful that I was willing to carry around gray battleships befouled with dog hair.

We went to a nearby donut shop and got two huge, yeasty crullers to go. "So," I said between bites when we were back on the highway, "you were telling me about the history of your shop."

"Right. So my dad died thinking that I'd gone completely nuts to leave computers and try to bring the typewriter shop back. I had my doubts about my sanity myself. I had to go through Dad's customer lists and try to find out who'd still be interested in our services. Most people were uninterested, unreachable, or dead. A few of them were very happy to know that the shop was back in business, and I advertised around. Most days were pretty dull, though. I was living on my inheritance — Dad had been a pathological saver, never spending any money on fun, so there was enough to support me for a while — and on the few typewriter jobs that came in, and a little programming I did on the side, just to keep my mind busy. You know what happened next?"

"No," I said, like an obedient straight man.
"Business began to pick up, that's what. At first I couldn't see the reason for it, but then I started to understand. This was the nineties; most American typewriter stores had closed or had branched out to become service centers for copiers, laser printers, and so on. Every month there were fewer and fewer places that actually serviced typewriters. The big office stores sold new electronic ones, but they didn't fix them -- you were just expected to throw the damn things out when they stopped working, and buy a new one. At a certain point, the number of people who needed typewriter repair came into balance with the number of stores, and there were customers again. You might have had 5% of the original stores left, maybe less. And there were just 1% of the original customers. But if you see what I mean, as that 5% of stores dwindled down to 1%, they matched up with the customers, and the remaining stores found themselves with just as much business as they'd had in the heyday of typewriters.

"Or even more. The number of repair shops continues to dwindle. The average age of the repair guys must be about 70. And meanwhile, some younger people are discovering typewriters and want our services, so the number of users is actually going up."

"That's great to hear."

"I'm still getting around to your question about why I said you'd come to the right place. There are three classes of typewriter users."

"I'm listening."

"Group #1 includes Eleanor Aquino: people who grew up with typewriters and liked them. They didn't switch to PC's 30 years ago like everyone else, and they stubbornly stuck to their favorite old tools -- or they got a computer but still prefer to use a typewriter for some jobs. Obviously, this group is getting old."

"Right. I thought that would be your whole clientele."

"In that case I'd probably have dropped the business by now. The second group is the younger group I just mentioned -- people who grew up with computers but have chosen to adopt typewriters. They're pretty frivolous, some of them -- they use the machines as decor, or they just put them on shelves and never write with them. Some of them mix typewriter and computer technology. They connect the machines up and turn the typewriters into keyboards, or they get into typcasting."

"What's that?"

"Like broadcasting, or podcasting -- they type a blog on a typewriter. Then they scan it, or photograph it, and upload it to the Web."

"Sounds ridiculous."

"Definitely. But those are some of my best customers, so don't badmouth them in public."

"And group #3?"

"Group #3. You tell me -- 'Tom.' What is group #3?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Because you're in it, buddy. You're in it."

The van hummed along the frozen highway.

Farther in, the machines awaiting treatment. Side by side, tagged as in a morgue but not dead yet, just biding their time till the doctor can treat them. Touch them and they click, chatter, ding, jostle each other, each wanting its turn and jealous of the others.

Down narrow stairs, the basement: the parts machines, the miscellanea, the unremembered, hibernating crowd. Boxey, hulking machines dressed like funeral directors: Reliance Premier, Yost 15, Harris, Reporter's Special. Curvy, biomorphic machines with carapaces and antennae: Oliver, Hammond, Blickensderfer. Machines traded in in 1929, 1933, 1945. Each of them packed with parts to be appropriated, slowly to be dismantled, carcases providing nutrition for the living.

When I stand between the last two shelves, in the near darkness, watched by nocturnal machines, everything that surrounds me was made and used by people of another world -- people now gone, long buried, their very names and habits and garb a foreign country to us now.

*I'm not sure I'm part of any group anymore," I said peevishly.
"Of course you are. You think you're not part of a group just because you're alone? If you're a hermit, you're part of the hermits group. If you're lonely, you're part of the loneliness community."
"All right, I get it. So tell me, what community am I a part of?"
"Group #3: the Dissidents."
"What, like in China? I don't have any political agenda."
"It's not necessarily political. It means you're in rebellion against the information order."
It was strange jargon, but seemed to touch me. "Go on."
"Don't worry. I'm one of you too. It was probably the biggest reason why I got out of the computer industry, though I didn't fully understand it for a few years. I didn't have the vocabulary for it. Now I call it the information order. Some other people use those words, others don't. You make the choice. But whatever you want to call it, look around you. Everything you do and everything you express; wherever you go; whatever you buy and own; everything is recorded as information. It's digital information, which means it can be copied automatically and virtually instantaneously. What we call sending information electronically just means making a copy: the text of your e-mail is copied onto a server, copied onto other servers, finally copied onto the computer of your recipient. One message, probably dozens of copies even without any deliberate multiplication. And how many people do you think analyze that information besides the person you're writing to?"
"You're making me paranoid. I guess hundreds?"
"No, zero -- unless the information gets kicked way upstairs to someone. Which can always happen. But no, the information gets analyzed by machines. It gets run through hundreds of algorithms in a split second, scanned for anything out of the ordinary, anything sensitive, anything seditious, any indication of terrorism or dissent."
"How do you know this?"

"I read. This is the information age, 'Tom.' Information about the use of information is the most plentiful information there is. You just have to look for it. This isn't conspiracy theory, it's fact. It's not science fiction."

"OK, go on. So what happens to this information?"

"First realize the scope of what I'm saying. I'm not just talking about your e-mail. You make a phone call, the sound is digitally encoded and automatically wiretapped. Every word you say goes into a database and gets scanned by God knows how many kinds of voice recognition software. The old totalitarian regimes had to hire tens of thousands of their own citizens, or coerce them, into spying on each other and informing on each other. It was crude, it was obvious, and lots of things slipped through the cracks. Now we don't need people any more. We have machines that do the spying for us, higher machines that analyze the suspicious stuff, still higher machines on different levels, and finally it gets spit out onto the screen of someone bureaucrat who decides whether it's actionable. Usually it's not. You never know that you've been recorded and analyzed. It doesn't affect you. But it always could."

"All was deep into a favorite rant, it was clear. "Just walking down the street plugs you into the information order, especially if you're in a major city. New York City has an average of 27 video cameras per block watching the pedestrians. Software scans their faces constantly and matches them against an ever-growing database of suspects. Once in a while someone gets stopped from blowing up a crowd. Once in a while someone gets disappeared. It all goes to a central repository. The greatest library in the world."

"What are you talking about? That's a pretty old-fashioned term for the kind of thing you're describing."

"What is a library? A place where information can be stored and retrieved. Do you think the Library of Alexandria was big? The Library of Congress? They are nothing. Every day, the central library adds a thousand Libraries of Congress to its hoard. None of it disappears. It all gets processed and scanned. And it can all be called up again, any time. I'm talking about the U.S. Government's information analysis center in the Utah desert. But it's also other places -- there's redundancy. Like I said, information gets copied. Copies exist in server farms and networks everywhere. Governments coordinate some of this information. We're heading toward a global information order. You ain't seen nothin' yet."

"This sounds pretty political to me."

"I guess you could call it that in a general way, but there's no agenda for the Dissidents. They just don't want to be part of the order, and they have their own reasons for it. Some of them are Libertarians. Some are fringe elements, militias and the like. Some of them don't have any political label and don't want to change anything in the public world, but they just want to be left alone. They don't want to be watched. They want freedom. Any of this sound familiar?"

"He let me think. I watched the frozen woods, the snowdrifts by the side of the highway. Yes, it sounded familiar. And behind Theme One -- Betrayal -- I thought I heard a more subtle theme in my memories -- Information. The way that information ... betrayed you."

"And ... how does it connect to a typewriter shop in New Lisbon?"

"You tell me. You gravitated to that Selten. Why?"

"Like I said ... it was a way to write without computers but without handwriting."

"It was a way to record information without submitting to the information order."
"I guess you could put it that way."

"You put it however you want. Let's say it was a little slice of reality that the computers couldn't catch. And I bet that when you use your typewriter, you feel private in a way you haven't felt for a long time."

"That's true."

"Well, you're a member of the community of private people, then. You're not the only one. And a lot of them are finding their way to typewriters. When they do that, then they find their way to people like me. I'm And I help them find each other."

"So now you're a matchmaker?"

"I like that. Yeah, a matchmaker. Or you could call me a post office for the Dissidents. A post office and machine supplier."

We were back at the shop already. "Thanks for your help," said Al.

"I've got a backlog of machines. And other orders for the Sältenes are coming in. So come back tomorrow, OK? But right now -- you look like hell. Go to sleep." He took out a hundred and handed it to me. "You want a ride back to the hotel?"

"No," I said. "No, I'd rather stretch my legs. Thank you."

*

On the way home, I look out for video cameras. I've been initiated, inoculated, indoctrinated.

I've eaten nothing since the donuts, but I go to bed with an empty stomach, reeling from the aftereffects of the entire day. Again I sit on the covers, straining to stay upright, barely focusing on the dark room, exploring my hallucinations.

Vague night lights are glowing through the curtains. A sheen of heat from the radiator keeps out the winter. But the light comes through, a flash from a lighthouse to my own house. Lighthouse keepers illuminating each other's redoubts for a moment before their candlepower sweeps on and provides a momentary flash to travelers. Somewhere, two ships pass in the night and signal to each other. Somewhere, sometime, two stars traveling away from each other create light that will, that has, that may reach the other star, a handshake across millennia, an imagined simultaneity, a connection.

*

I'm the assistant now. The apprentice. "Tom." The co-conspirator.
The delivery boy. #487.
The index cards are kept in a locked steel cabinet. Al says there's only one of each. A document without copies is a point of friction that resists the information order, I say, trying out the jargon and a metaphor of my own. No, says Al, whatever offers friction gets swept up in the stream, like a twig in the Mississippi. You have to offer no friction at all, and the only way to do that is to get out of the water.

One thing does get copied: the list by numbers, the list of Dissidents. New numbers get added to it as connections get made by word of mouth or word of typewriter, and Al receives a new request. The list has no names, no addresses.
American male, middle aged, small town, writer, formerly city
dweller. Are memory and solitude possible anymore?

Al let me compose my own description, limited like all of them to 2 lines.
Sometimes numbers get deleted. That rectangle on the stencil is obliterated.
The wax is scraped off and no trace is left.

The mimeograph machine is loaded with a stencil, cut by typewriter with its
ribbon put out of commission. A little counter clicks with every turn of the
 crank. The mimeos are pale purple and give off heady fumes. People send in
a bill or two and they get an updated list.

I suggest that Al could invest in a photocopier.

"A photocopier? A Xerox machine? Are you serious? Do you have any idea
how those things work now? They're not just mechanical and chemical anymore.
They're scanners. Every sheet you feed into there gets digitally scanned,
and the copies are made from the digital image. The image gets stored on a
hard disk on the machine that holds terabytes. Who knows if it ever gets
deleted. Who knows how it's used, where it gets sent to. I'm personally
convinced that within a few years, everything you photocopy is going to be
uploaded to government servers and run through text recognition software,
face recognition, keyword analysis, all the rest. No way."

Apprentice Tom, chastened and educated, gets back to work removing the
body panels from an Olympia SGL.

I still don't get to handle the incoming mail.

The mechanical work is satisfying although I'm still far clumsier than Al.
The customers who come in and who get deliveries each have a story to tell or
suggest. My hotel room, my cigarettes, my greasy spoon, my trips to the
top of the Townsend Building are all still part of my life, and they're paid for.
I still have time with my own Selten to reflect.

I wonder whether #L87 will ever get his own little dissident pen pal.
I wonder whether #L87 should write to anyone on the list.

We bring Mr. Selten an order for seventeen of his machines that people
want for Christmas. He is disbelieving as always. But you can see that he
takes pride and satisfaction in this eleventh-hour success.

* 

A blizzard hits New Lisbon. Traffic stops and I stay in my warm room
all day, watching the shapes of town swell and soften under the relentless
slow white deluge. Things melt into each other, are joined by unsuspected
bridges, sink into newfound bowls of snow.

I know how to adjust each spring on the Selten now, finding the perfect
match for my fingers and speed. I clean the machine as you'd clean a gun.
Then I write, my clicks creating tiny echoes as they bounce off the windowpanes.
I remember moments that never were recorded before, that never were photographed
or described or filed — except in my mind. From these I select moments
that seem to escape the logic of revenge, the cycle of promise and betrayal.
These are the moments from which I want to build a new home.

A boy, bundled up, is making his way through the snowdrifts. I can
feel the snow working its way between the top of his boots and his pantleg. I
can feel that dampness on my shin, the accumulation of breath on my scarf, the
excitement of being out, alone, in the snow.

I write it.

*
The community of individuals, the group of dissidents, comes out of the shadows one by one.

Emmanuel Okuchee: former professor of economics at the University of Lagos. Former adjunct instructor in business ethics at State Technical College of Stroudsburg. He informs us of these facts within a minute of entering Townsend Typewriters, as if defying us to mock how far he's fallen in the world. He speaks with a precise, well-rounded diction and a deep bass. He sees the world as a network of dictatorships and ecological disasters. With him is a Hermes Baby, a rugged little grey metal typewriter that he's carried with him since his student days in Africa. He asks Al to install a new pull cord for the carriage. He's going to stay in New Lisbon until the job can be done. I recommend the Hotel Pearson. 
Al makes this job a priority and tells me that Okuchee is #34 on the List.

#229, Theodore Gross, calls in his order for a black Selten. Al asks me to deliver. I hit the road, no driver's license, making sure I don't speed. Gross lives 110 miles away in the middle of nowhere: a lovely valley serviced by a gravel road, with meandering fences and aspens by a frosty stream. Gross's hut is well-kept, a huge stack of firewood nearby. He waves me in without a word, staring at me through thick glasses. There's a vast mahogany desk with three typewriters on it. In each machine is a sheet of paper with a few words on it. Still silent, Gross hunches over the Selten, trying every key and lever. He hands me the cash, shakes my hand earnestly, never cracks a smile, closes the door.

#401, Ellen Fynsk, lives right in New Lisbon and is 17 years old. She's a regular at Al's shop, stopping by once or twice a week after school. She tells us without any resentment that she's considered a complete geek. Doesn't use Facebook or text anyone, won't touch a computer unless required to, a hands in all her work typed on an Olympia SM3. She admires the Selten and is saving up for one. Sometimes she'll buy a ribbon or a pack of carbon paper, which Al sells at cost. Sometimes she just wants to talk typewriters. Ellen has found the clothing gems at the thrift store that I'd never have the patience to identify; she creates multicolored, time-traveling outfits that could never be fashionable but are always memorable, that add sparkle and brightness to her pale face. Through the list, she's identified other teenagers around the country who want to exchange typewritten letters. I imagine her typing late into the night while others are playing video games; adorning her envelopes with vintage stamps; sending them into the slow mysteries of the postal system; dreaming of living elsewhere.

Alan Bordeaux comes into the shop to pick up his new hammer-finish blue Selten De Luxe. He's wearing a suit and tie, both baby blue. Rings on his fingers. His hair buzzed painfully short. His skin red and white in an adolescent way, even though he's over the hill. "Al, you are a godsend. I mean it. Do you understand what I mean?"
"I think so. Much appreciated, Alan."
"Have you been saved yet?"
"I wouldn't know."
"Yes, you would. Yes, you would. Here, I don't want to intrude, I'm just going to leave this brochure with you. Typed it myself."
"Thanks, Alan. I will read it." The page is typed single-spaced in red ink.

Alan is not interested in being on the list. He has no number.
Al sorts the incoming mail efficiently every day. Some envelopes contain donations, or payments for updated versions of the List. Many are addressed to List members; Al slips them into bigger envelopes and types the address, consulting the index card, always using a big, gray Royal KMM that sits by the cabinet. Some envelopes contain orders for brand new Selten De Luxes.

*

The new guest in the hotel looked familiar. It was the man on the bus, I realized; the man who'd first told me that in New Lisbon, "nobody bothered nobody." He was chatting with McEarly when I came down from breakfast on a bright morning, in the beginning of spring.

"My man!" he said, with a wide grin. "Jim Allison. How you doin'? Still here, huh?"

I shook his hand. "Tom Pearson. How are you? Hey, how is your sister?"

"She died a couple months ago. She passed. Had liver cancer."

"I'm sorry."

"It's good of you to remember, man. So you've been staying here all that time?"

"Yeah. It's been a while. But you were right about this town. It's a good place to make a life."

"What I always said."

"So what brings you back to your old hometown?"

"Business. Company sent me here to help open a new branch office. And I remembered when my aunt used to come to town and wouldn't stay with us -- said she didn't want to impose. I think she thought she was too good for our house. Well, anyway, she stayed at the Hotel Pearson. I remember running up and down these stairs when I was a boy. So I thought I'd just see if it was still in business, and it sure is! Didn't know Mr. McEarly here at the time, though. He was just telling me he bought it in 1980. This was a few years before then. Well, my wife always tells me to get exercise, so I got me a room on the third floor. Pretty one, too, with posters on the wall."

"I'm in 301 myself," I said.

"Well, we're neighbors then. And I get some exercise every time I go up there. My wife, she calls me every evening and makes sure I take my meds."

"You here long?"

"Couple months. Maybe more."

"Pretty long time to be separated from your wife."

"Mm hmm. But you know what they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder. You know what I mean?"

"I guess so. Yes, I guess it does." Jim's good-natured attitude made me want to linger and make a little more conversation, so I asked, "What company do you work for?"

"Ah ha!" he laughed. "You sure you want to know?"

"Sure."

Jim Allison leaned toward me, looked from side to side, and whispered conspiratorially.

"The Internal Revenue Service," he said.

*
When Al handed the envelope to me, it was completely unexpected.
"For me?"
"Aren't you #487?"
"I don't remember."

I do, that's you. It's addressed to you. What you do with it is your business. You can burn it if you want to, wipe your ass with it, make a paper hat."

I considered the thing intrusive, somehow. Al knew my identity, but he had never used my real name since he'd heard it, and instead had given me a job and let me into the typist underground -- so I didn't ever feel that he'd violated my privacy. But this envelope addressed only to a number, delivered to Townsend Typewriters, written on a machine by someone I didn't know, felt much more personal, like a poke in the underbelly. It was an irrational reaction, but I stuffed the envelope in my back pocket and tried to ignore it as I got back to winding ribbons onto spools. In his garage -- I'd never been invited there -- Al told me he had the equipment for inking ribbons, which he bought on huge wheels. From these he created smaller wheels, the size of dinner plates: all black, black and red, red and blue, green, brown. Using a hand-cranked device, I rolled the ribbons onto their final destinations, drawing on Al's seemingly endless store of metal typewriter spools. The smell of the ink created a slightly nostalgic memory of my cash. I hoped Lauren was buying herself a trip to a spa and a nice new wardrobe.

After dinner that evening, a light shower dripping outside my hotel room, I finally pulled out the envelope. The typing was blurrier than usual: A carbon copy.

THE REVELATION OF THE FINAL MESSAGE

Easter greetings to all who receive this. Do not destroy this paper or refold it or write upon it, for it contains information essential to the salvation of your eternal soul. The Amish 1900 revelation has returned to your prophet and will evermore return unto you. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear forso I have forsworn thereunto. Let no one speak ill of it, for it will speak ill of them. The rapture will come to pass in precisely two months when the fields grow dark with smoke and the flames consume all that the devil has wrought: devil towers that carry electric flow, machines of human hand that defy divine will. The select will be saved and the elect will be handed up to the kingdom of God, yea, for so it has been written to your own prophets.

The gibberish went on for the rest of the page. It was boilerplate Biblish mixed with anti-technological paranoia, as if an Amish preacher had gotten inspired to start a new cult. I doubted that there was really anything Amish about this, though -- as far as I knew, the Amish were among the most reasonable and collected people on the planet. Did Amish use typewriters? I supposed they could use a manual. I really didn't know.

The Revelation of the Final Message became an airplane and executed a tricky maneuver before ending its short but glorious career by crashing in the closet, at the approximate former location of my $63,400.

The message had had nothing to do with me -- it was one of those messages intended for Humanity and tailored to nobody, the kind of thing that appears as spam in your e-mail inbox and gets deleted as quickly as possible. It
hadn't even been xxx typed directly on this piece of paper, but had been multiplied the old-fashioned way, with carbon paper. I felt insulted and a little disappointed, though also pleased that my private realm had been kept inviolate.

I pulled out my own copy of the List from a drawer and wondered which of these people had sent me the screech. None of them read "Pseudo-Amish apocalyptic madman" (I felt sure it was a man, not a woman). None of them read "Lover of the words 'thereunto' and 'yea'." The List began to seem more intriguing to me -- each two-line entry like a windowshade just barely cracked open, with dark eyes just beyond the light, peering out at me.

*

In my dream I'm a telegrapher from the early 16th century, when messages were sent by colored fires from tower to tower. Blue was for good news. Red was for invasion. The telegrapher's uniform is a thick, awkward blanket with holes for my arms, and I suspect insects and rodents are making their nests in it. My gloves are stiff and made of thick, cracked leather.

At the top of my tower, in the middle of the night, I'm charged with winding the tiny music box that was a gift to the king from an Eastern emperor. My clumsy fingers can barely hold the precious mechanism. The gloves make it almost impossible to find the crank in the dark. But I do my best, and the little box does let a strangled sound escape: not a musical sound, but the chattering of a monkey. It slows down, and again I have to wind up the box, lit only by the infinity of stars that shed a faint glow on the plain.

A fire telegram, far to the north: green. A flickering flame of green -- or is it violet? I jam my hands into my pockets to try to fish out my telegrapher's guide, the code to all possible colors. I have to light my own fire as quickly as possible. The flame is more insistent. In frustration and panic, I pull the coat off and yank the gloves off. One of the gloves hits the music box, which disappears into the black field below the tower, a speck swallowed by the night. I am shivering with the cold.

The fire far away glows still brighter, and its colors are shifting now so fast that I don't have time to name them. I see that the whole tower is now consumed by burning, flickering colors, eaten alive by pulsating hues, speeded up like fast-forward maggots, pouncing on the tower until only cinders are left.

*

I hustled past Jim Allison in the hotel lobby, lugging my bike. "Cycling season is back, huh?" he grinned.

I threw him a smile and a nod, trying to convey the urgent importance of my bicycling adventure on this Saturday morning. True to form, he caught on that I didn't want to talk, and didn't buttonhole me. I would have liked to talk to him and found myself wishing that I didn't know that he worked for the IRS.

The town was damp, cool, quiet, with green shoots starting to make their way up from the winter potholes and the cracks in the sidewalk. I circled the central hills and looked up with resentment at the Townsend Building. It would have been a good time for a climb to the top.
Instead, I shot out along Third Street, dodging a delivery truck and a pickup, until I reached the northern edge of town. The main cemetery was there -- a place usually visited only by the mourning, modestly hidden behind a stone wall, passed by easily if you were in a car or truck. The paved paths of the graveyard were narrow and cracked, but navigable by bike, and I pushed myself to climb to the highest point. Panting, my old rib injury aching under my tattoo, I sat down and surveyed the gravestones and the town of New Lisbon.

The Townsend Building stood in a stodgy, solid way on top of the hill — from here, you couldn't make out the alien divinities. Lights in the central windows: the IRS was hurrying to get ready before April 15th. An unimaginatively classical bank building rose six stories, kitty corner from the Townsend. City Hall, the Masonic Hall, another bank -- Farmers' Bank, Lauren's old employer. A faded sign on a brick wall: BOOST NEW LISBON. Just a few blocks from the town center, a residential neighborhood with a scattering of pretty Victorians, bed and breakfasts, legal offices. The library could just be seen behind City Hall. In this miniature landscape, a few people crawled among the buildings miles away, but near me, no one was to be seen. I was the sole living person in the cemetery — a scrap of life amidst the concrete and granite. The woman buried a few feet away had died at age 23.

As it did sometimes — returning according to some indefinable tide — loneliness suffused me. I decided I would pick someone from the list, anyone, and send a message. But while riding back into town, I thought I needed some more immediate company and connection. I found myself stopping at the library.

A portrait of Andrew Carnegie guarded the entry hall — plump, aged, pseudo-benevolent — and the warmth of the building was welcome after the early spring chill of my ride. I'd been here a dozen times before; I liked the wooden bookshelves, the intimate but inspiring scale of a small library with high windows, the gentle decay of its century-old architectural details. I never checked anything out — that would mean showing I.D. and proof of residence — but would spend a few hours with out-of-town newspapers and magazines, reading a novel, or educating myself about some recondite subject, blissfully unconnected to my life. The fishermen of Goa. Birds of South America. The life of McKinley. My favorite source of distraction was the collection of microfilmed newspapers. I would have preferred them on paper, but probably the originals had crumbled long ago, or had been foolishly dumped once the microfilms were made. I didn't want to ask.

There were two microfilm readers, nondigital machines that were evidently of no interest to anyone but me, as I never had a partner beside me when I sank into the world revealed on the screen. The library had a nearly complete collection of The New Lisbon Independent from 1883 to 1960, when the paper evidently went out of business and the Advertiser had the town to itself. I had picked a year at random: 1926. From issue to issue, I got to know the politicians, the society ladies, the bootleggers, the entrepreneurs. The name Jack Townsend started to turn up, and by late 1926 the paper was full of news about the bold new Townsend Building, the pride of the county and symbol of regional progress. An artist's rendering surrounded the building with searchlights and made it soar into the sky.

While I was at the library, I never felt alone: children with their parents, retirees, regulars would come in to seek out what the building had to offer, and I imagined myself to be part of a community, while rarely saying more than a few words to the other patrons. The discouraging part, though, from my perspective as a Dissident, was the relative neglect of the books and the evident attraction of the computers. There was rarely a free computer, and often a line of people waiting for their turn on them. They were eager to connect to someplace other than their own; they came to the library only to get somewhere else. I couldn't claim to be completely above that mentality, not when I came there to escape into 1926 —
but they escaped in the opposite direction, into the cutting edge of the present, the most immediate available updates on the novelties of the world, developments that couldn't possibly be found in the dead, printed pages of the neglected books on the shelves.

I watched the other patrons stare at the computers and had to smirk at my own incoherence. I came here so I wouldn't feel alone, and sat reading in solitude. I looked down on the others for their addiction to the screen, and had my own addiction to the microfilm screen. So be it -- I couldn't quite explain it, but being in the library gave me a warmth and security that I needed.

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TOWNSEND BUILDING TO HOST SPARKLING GAIAS, SAYS JACK - by Mabel Owens

Jack Townsend, top booster and builder of the New Lisbon area, provided more details about the new Townsend Building in his latest interview with the Independent's social department. No cheerless house of Mammon, the Townsend is projected to serve as a gay center of conviviality. Gala events atop the structure, with views of the surrounding county in every direction, are bound to be scheduled, says Jack.

"Dance music of the finest quality," specified the local leader, "the latest moving pictures from Hollywood, and of course, delicious fruit punch," will all be part of the regular fetes. Known temperance supporter, Mr. Townsend has always been known for a regular flow of fruit punch, offered free to all customers at his businesses, and for his speeches urging stricter enforcement of the Volstead Act in our area. He added that he could guarantee that any bands playing at the Townsend would be all white and of the highest moral standards.

It sounded like the parties were guaranteed to be pretty dull. I had to copy this story, I told myself, and bring it to Frank Holler the next time I stopped by the Granite Room.

I sat back, stretched, and noticed a strange thing: an empty chair in front of a computer. Not only that, but the screen didn't show the login prompt that normally asked you to enter your library card number. It was wide open, with no one to stop me.

I was sitting in front of the machine, an old hunger suddenly raging in me: the hunger for information. I had starved myself for half a year. The ascetic practice had left me purged, clean, isolated, and ignorant. What harm could it do to peek at the wider world and the current moment?

I typed Erin's name into the search engine. Within a few seconds I saw that she hadn't wasted any time: engaged again, to some guy I'd never heard of. Good for her. I found myself feeling only a mild benevolence toward this woman I'd spent so much time with.

"Lauren Ayres." Nothing. Not a trace. Had she managed to escape the whole information order? Was she using a pseudonym? It wouldn't be surprising -- just another detail in her costume. But I wondered how she'd managed to fly under the radar.

"Selten typewriter." Another escapee from the order; there were a few references from fifty years ago, and then they disappeared. No hint that the machines were still being assembled today. Would that last?
"Townsend Typewriters." This was a surprise: in addition to several decades of small ads, there was a townsendtypewriters.com. A simple site, describing their repair services and providing a short history. There was an address, phone number, and an e-mail: info@townsendtypewriters.com.
I'd never seen AI using a computer. Then again, I'd never been to his house. And as he'd said before, you didn't have to swear off all digital devices to be a dissident. You just had to retain some area of your life that was unplugged, undocumented. It stood to reason that he'd advertise online, and that as a business owner, he couldn't stand apart from the whole modern age. Still, I'd have to ask him about this.

"Hotel Pearson." Of course there was no hotelpearson.com. A few references in local tourism guides. One review: "This place gave me the creeps. They are way behind the times. Modernize or shut the place down!!"

I'd been putting it off. My pulse quickened. Finally I did it: typed my own name.

438,220 hits.
A chill hit me. The library felt like a house of cards.

Reported seen in New Mexico ... car was found in a ditch near Grandburg ... also known as Deer in the Headlights Guy ... Harper denied any knowledge ... ex-girlfriend Hannah Allen could pose for Playboy ... suspected of financial crimes ...

The facts and factoids shot through me. Then there were the videos. Copy after copy of my befuddled face, wide-eyed, turning to stare at the little bastard. Set to music. Voiceovers. Parodies, reenactments, animated versions, comedians imitating me. Deer in the Headlights Guy.

I closed the browser window, deleted the history, logged out, stalked out of the library, red-faced. My ghosts stared after me, sitting up from their thousands of beds, gaping stupidly, laughing, aping me.

Dante couldn't have invented any more poetic justice: I had become a meme.

*

I know I've been here before: the telegraph station. After the recent disaster, it's been built up to a much greater height and equipped with handmade equipment that rings me as I stand atop the structure: coils of rope and hand-turned wheels and pulleys, latches, intricate miniature printing presses clad in finely-etched armor. As I look around me at night, I can make out many other stations in all directions of the compass, ringing the horizon, all glowing with an inner light. Steam puffs out below my feet in rhythmic bursts. Centuries must have passed, and I am the senior telegrapher.

A kind of giddy pride comes over me as I realize I'm authorized to send out messages of my own now -- not just to relay the messages of others. I flit from machine to machine, playing a frantic melody on the equipment -- a symphony of colors, sounds, temperatures, gestures. I wait to see a response from the other stations.

Finally it comes: they're all straining to reproduce my message. They succeed. And as they do so, new towers come out of the ground between us and begin to glow and rise. A third generation of towers, still more, sprouts up in the spaces left. A fourth, a fifth, and soon the entire landscape is taken over by telegraph towers, a forest, a skyline, and the stars are invisible.

*
After my vision in the library, my encounter with my multiplying ghosts, I was moody and suspicious. I sighed and fidgeted as I worked on simple repair jobs at the shop -- correcting the vertical alignment on a Quiet-Riter that someone had shipped to us, blowing out the dust from a Voss before Al did a more delicate inspection of its escapement. (I knew what that was now, but wasn't allowed to touch it.)

The mail arrived; Bonita, the mail carrier, deposited it before Al and they chatted about town politics while I scratched my neck compulsively. She moved on, and pretty soon, Al said, "Hey, '87, why don't you take a break?"

He was holding an envelope in my direction.

"What, another bulletin from the End Times?"

"I wouldn't know. From someone here in town, though."

"How can you tell?"

"It's called a postmark."

"Oh. You think it's Ellen?"

"I doubt it. She writes to teenagers. You identified yourself as middle aged on the list."

"Who else lives in New Lisbon?"

"Classified information."

"Jesus, give me a break. I've been working with you for months, right? And you're still so secretive about your file cards, your little locked cabinet. What is the big deal? Anyway, when people come into the store and they're on the list, you tell me right away, and even tell me their numbers. Right?"

Al stayed cool. "If people come into the store, it's because they want to be seen. Many don't. I've never met most people on the list. There are more than a few in the area, people who may have seen the shop or heard about it from friends, or who've even come in here, but haven't chosen to let me connect their face with their number on the list. Of course there are some in New Lisbon. And of course I have their names and addresses on the file cards. But that doesn't mean that I know them in person, and it doesn't mean they want to be known. If it's clear they want to be anonymous, I keep it that way. They've trusted me with their identity and I'm not going to spread it around."

I wasn't in any mood to be reasonable. "Screw that. You still don't trust me, do you?"

"They trust me -- that's the point. I know which ones want to be known to other Dissidents, and which ones prefer to remain just a number."

"And a postmark."

"Sure."

"And you just have the one copy of their address? Just the one stupid card in your little drawer?"

"We've talked about this. More copies means more risk. That's the danger of digital information: it gets copied too easily, too fast."

"I'm going for a walk."

"Take the afternoon off."

"Gladly."

"Angry people screw up typewriters."

I stalk from block to block, paying no attention to where I am. Shame and a million eyes make my neck burn. The disproportion between Al's list and the Internet is absurd. It leaves me flailing in limbo. In the real world, in the present age, there are countless copies and representations and imitations of me that can be copied and viewed and mocked by anyone on earth. It's monstrous. In our little backward bubble here, this backwater town, there is Al's little fantasy of a secret society, a few hundred eccentrics with their obsolete technology, playing pen pal. It's ludicrous. Between the monstrous and the ludicrous, I'm looking for a home. (Whoops, that paragraph should be in the past tense.)
I ignored the drizzle, I ignored my surroundings, and just wandered arbitrarily through town, sometimes pivoting on a heel like a mad man and heading back the way I'd come, or ducking through a brick-paved alley, as if I were trying to confuse a pack of bloodhounds. The air got chilly and dark, and I finally came into a restaurant I'd tried once or twice before, Antonelli's.

"The lasagna and a bottle of Chianti," I said when the waitresses first approached.


"I am fantastic."

"OK, then...."

The lasagna was a tightly coagulated brick of tomato-smeared semolina. I remembered that I'd ordered it last time and been just as disappointed. But I wasn't here for the food. I gulped down a glass of wine and poured a second. The cold fact sat like a block of ice in my stomach: I had thrown away my whole life, and was just biding my time with a dead-end, obsolete job until my enemies caught up with me. I had no friends, only a few acquaintances who didn't know my real name and an employer who wouldn't trust me. The chianti did its best to melt the ice block, but ended up just creating a cool, pink soup in my abdomen and an acid glow in my veins. It was already gone.

It must have taken me well over an hour to orient myself and get to the hotel. I stumbled in with my ears ringing, and imagined I heard the sound of a typewriter bell. The stairs creaked, and I heard typebars creating bursts of staccato imprints. McEarly said nothing, minded his own business.

The cigarettes I'd smoked on my meander home made my breath smell like the chemical vat at Townsend Typewriters.

I fell into bed, simply feeling angry, Praying Old Man continually beginning to spin around me, with his bread as a smaller satellite. My muscles ached more than they should have. I was hot and thirsty, but getting up for water was impossible. I pulled a crumpled envelope out, tore it, and made out a sentence by diluted streetlight and neon before I collapsed.

Dear #487,

Your self-description could very well apply to me.

V

The next morning, I sluggishly realized that I'd been conscious for hours already, in a parched and feverish state. Delusions pressed at every inch of my hypersensitive skin, a delirium such as I'd never experienced since I was a little boy. I felt very distinctly that I was wrapped across the surface of an immense lead sphere, which was just beginning to roll down a steep hill. The ball was moving just below the limit of perceptibility right now, but it was accelerating, inevitably, and nothing human could stop it. Its fate was to roll down that hill, a hill that had no valley, only an abyss. I was glued to this spherical surface, pressed to it seemingly by its gravity, and I had no muscles, only skin and bones. Sweat seeped out all over my body and made the ball slick. The slickness stuck me more firmly to it and deepened the ache that was making me moan.

A knock at the door. "Fresh linens." Evelyn McEarly came in.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Mr. Pearson, I thought -- good lord, you are sick! What
have you gotten into now?" She touched my forehead and pulled her hand back in alarm.  
"Water," I managed.  
Mrs. McEary poured me a glass from the corner sink and helped me hold it.  
"Now, we are getting you to a doctor just as soon as you can get up."  
"No doctor."  
"With your fever, you need a doctor, and that's that."  
"No doctor."  
"Stubborn men," she muttered, and disappeared. After some incalculable interval she was there again, giving me pills. "Ibuprofen. Come on." I guzzled them down with more water.  
Nothing could get me out of bed, but Evelyn checked in on me repeatedly during the day, bringing water, crackers, more pills, checking my temperature, and leaving a magazine for my entertainment: Women's Digest. The beauty shots of roasts and chocolate cakes suggested massive monuments to me -- my sense of scale was completely shot. Some ancient civilization had erected this Cake upon a great alluvial plain, and the ravages of Time could only faintly erase the noble Frosting that bore the sacred marks of the people's religion. I stared at the food again and again, fading in and out of dreams.  
The next day arrived, and I was sane enough to recognize the foulness of my bedclothes and the dank, unhealthy air in my room. I cracked open a window, shivered, dragged myself to the bathroom, dragged myself back.  
"You're looking better," said Evelyn as she brought me a bowl of soup.  
"Have some more of this." I didn't remember the first bowl.  
I finally had a moment of clear-headed rationality; I rummaged in my bag until I brought up the bottle of pills that Lauren had left for me. I toasted her with a glass of water and took two.  
It wasn't long before a delicious relaxation and sweet balm came over me. I finally felt completely free of the Sphere. The Cake shrank to its edible size. My fever started to feel like a passing unpleasantness instead of a doom.  

April 6  

Dear #467,  

Your self-description could very well apply to me. "American male, middle aged, small town, writer, formerly city dweller." I used to live in a center of culture. There was an endless menu of events -- and they all distracted me from my work. I am a novelist, as I take it you are, and I have found that less is more. I prefer to see less and be seen less. My current location in a town that most people have never heard of is an advantage, I believe. And I have found the typewriter to be a preferable instrument to the word processor. Again, less is more. I am satisfied to write by mechanical instrument and to correspond with a few like-minded individuals.  
You ask whether memory and solitude are possible anymore. I have been reflecting on the question. We know well that isolation from others is still possible, and that loneliness is quite common, even amidst a crowd. But solitude is neither isolation nor loneliness, but something rarer. It could even characterize a group, I believe, as in Garcia Marquez' One Hundred Years of Solitude. And is solitude a prerequisite for remembering? I think of Proust alone in his bed, remembering. But is there a remembrance deeper than the memory of places and events?  
You see that I am intrigued by your question. If you choose, I would be pleased to know your own answers to it or your own further questions. I wish you success in your writing.  

Sincerely,  

#503
The writing felt a little old-fashioned, a little didactic, like something one of my English professors might have said. It wasn't particularly literary. But a novelist — that was admirable, wasn't it? So there was a novelist in New Lisbon.

That was all I knew. The typing was competent, no misspellings, a standard elite typeface, 12 characters to the inch.

I rolled a sheet into my own elite typewriter and tried to reply. To my shock, my fingertips burst into pain when I hit the keys, and they made a sloppy tangle that didn't translate into anything legible on the paper. I must still be feverish. I also remembered that I was high.

When in a drugged fever, it's best to change the bedsheets on your bed, let in a fresh breeze, make coffee on the hot plate, and settle down to read an article on the top fifteen signs that menopause is approaching — and what you can do about it.

*

"Thought I might not be seeing you again."

"I'm sorry. I was mad the other day, but it had nothing to do with you. Then I got the flu or something, and I was in bed with a fever. I just got well last night."

"OK, well, there's plenty of work here. So I appreciate your return. We need to pick up another twenty Seltens. Are you up for it? You've got to go on your own, I'm trying to finish a complete overhaul for this guy who's supposed to drop by this afternoon."

"I'm up for it."

Al handed me a wad of cash: $4,000. It meant that he trusted me. "I'm really sorry about the other day," I repeated.

"Forget about it."

"So this guy -- the one who wrote to me this time -- he's a novelist and he lives in New Lisbon. You can't tell me who he is?"

"I don't know who he is. I don't know anything beyond whatever it says on the List."

"But you know his address."

"Well, yeah. But I don't think I've met any novelist. Not in person. What's his number?"

"503."

"What does the List say?"

The truth was that I'd been too dazed to consult the List. I hadn't even thought of it.

"503," read Al. "Writer, individualist, seeks intelligent discourse about the world affairs and the life of the mind."

Aside from its slightly stuffy tone -- again I thought of a professor in tweed -- the description could have applied to practically anyone on the List.

"As you know," said Al, "I haven't met most of these people, far as I know, not even most of the locals. They send in a request to join. It has to smell right to me. If it does, I type another entry on the stencil, and fill out a new index card. That's all. It's a small thing. But what we're doing, 'Tom,' what we're achieving, is ultimately something big. It's creating a space that's separate from the information order."

"I know." I was already starting to feel irritated again. "Oh, by the way, you get a lot of customers from your web site?"

He wasn't fazed. "It's a good source of business. So is word of mouth. And don't think of me as a hypocrite. Think of me as a double agent."

"Hmm. I like that. So you're a mole in the information order?"

"In a small way. Everything has to begin in a small way."
I headed out to the van with its modest black-on-white sign: TOWNSEND TYPEWRITERS, NEW LISBON. I turned to look at myself in the windows of the shop, where the beige electric monsters from the '70s still sat, guarding the building. I looked gaunt, and I couldn't see my eyes -- they were too dark. Or maybe the fluorescent lights indoors were interfering with my self-inspection.

This was my fifth trip to Benton in the van. By now, Al and I had sold more than 50% of the Seltens in the storeroom. Each trip brought some excitement, as I had come to love the atmosphere of the little factory and the act of bringing the machines into service. I no longer associated Benton with Hell's Angels; it was almost as if someone else had been their punching bag, or as if that victim were inside me, but well protected by my tattoo and my many pages of typing. It also helped that I'd swallowed one of Lauren's pills this morning.

Mr. Seltens was at his usual table, but was hacking and spitting. It took him several minutes to pull himself together, and he looked worn out.

"You all right, Mr. Seltens?"
"Hi, Tom. I'm all right. Just a cough."
"I got the flu myself at the beginning of the week. I was sick for four days. There's stuff going around."
"Yep. Back for more, huh?"
"Yes, sir. We are proud to selling them." I put the money in front of him and he counted it with care.
"Twenty typewriters," he said. "Help yourself. And you might want to take the two new ones on the top shelf."
"Oh?"

"Been experimenting a little. Bring one over."
I carefully picked up a machine from the top shelf in the storeroom, a specimen finished in paint that looked exceptionally handsome.
"Nice paint job."
"Yeah, yeah. But look at this." Seltens unlocked the carriage, slid it to the left, then pushed it to the right with the carriage return lever. I noticed the difference right away. Instead of a zipper sound, there was only the faintest whisper.

"Smooth!"
"Eh? How about that? All it took" -- he turned the machine gently onto its back, resting it on a pile of polishing cloths on his worktable -- "was a hairpin spring here and one here."

"Beautiful, Mr. Seltens."
"And I've got other ideas, too. The quiet return begins with serial number 8340. If I put everything into them that I have in mind, why, we might even need a new model designation. The Mark II." He almost coughed, but controlled it, and instead broke into a smile of satisfaction that was good to see.

The van was already stocked with dozens of cases -- black leather cases that Al had ordered from a Chinese company that made cases for musical instruments. He told me that it had taken only a month between sending them the dimensions and getting the shipment. I'd never seen the shipment arrive; it had been delivered to Al's house, and from there he loaded them into the van, one batch at a time. Now I took twenty cases into the factory, and respectfully placed the typewriters into their velvet quarters, blowing a little dust off the machines that had been sitting on the shelves for years. The last one to be packed, and the top one in my stack, was 8340.

I shook Seltens's hand and took a look around the factory; everything was meaningful here, purposive, useful. Tools for working on machines to make tools. Parts that had well-defined functions. Everything ready to hand. And at its center, a man who knew how to use the things.
April 15

Dear #503,

Thank you for your thoughtful letter.
I might as well tell you two things right away. First, we live in the same town. New Lisbon has been my adopted home since last fall. It's not a huge coincidence, I guess, since many of the people on Al Townsend's list must be locals. Do you ever come into the shop? I see that you must have joined shortly after I did. Anyway, if you like, we could meet for coffee or a beer sometime.

Second, I'm not a novelist, just the writer of my own life. I wouldn't call it autobiography, but a collection of memories, where I've been finding patterns. The patterns don't always follow chronological order, and they turn up unexpectedly. I've simply been trying to reflect on my life and discover who I am.

Your thoughts on solitude helped me realize something. For me, isolation is a prerequisite for remembering -- I need a place of my own to recall the past. But, as you said, solitude is something different from isolation. Solitude is being by yourself -- standing by yourself -- and in order to do that, you need to know yourself. So I think that remembering is a prerequisite for solitude.

Good luck with your writing. What novels have you written?

Sincerely,

I wasn't sure whether to write the name of Pearson, or Lazarus, or even my real name. Finally I settled on #487.

*

April 24

Dear #487,

Thank you for your letter written on Tax Day.

So we are both Lisbonites. I have found it to be a good place for writing and for the peace and protection that a writer needs. I do hope your experience has been much the same.

I am not much of a socializer, I'm afraid, and prefer the occasional letter in the mail to chats, which often evidence a lack of thought -- on my own part, I hasten to add. I find that I say more deliberate and deep things when I have time to plot them in advance. This is why I am an poor conversationalist.

I am glad to share the titles of some of my novels: I am the author of

Dawn in Sarajevo
Magnificent Illusion
One Against the Beast
Havana Harbor

and

The Mirror Game
You won't find them in any library, much less "online." I have never submitted my works for publication. The whole idea is a distraction. If by some miracle, a good writer finds a respectable publisher for his works, chances are still excellent that sales will be dismal, and the books will end up in a remainder bin. When I add to this truth the fact that one does not always wish to be read -- that in the end, one always writes for an audience of one -- I have never wished to enter the commercial game. I find satisfaction in creating my stories alone. The music of the typewriter is all the acknowledgment I require.

My current novel concerns events in Oklahoma City. With every new story I gain new knowledge -- natural, political, and scientific. It is a comfort amidst the disaster that is our world.

Sincerely,

#503

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After personally inspecting every Selten De Luxe, wiping off the dust and installing a fresh ribbon, Al would fit it carefully into a Chinese case. He included a mimeographed sheet of instructions that he'd written up himself, including a brief history of the Selten company and its revival. Most machines were then packed in large, sturdy cardboard boxes, surrounded by shredded newspaper -- back issues of the Advertiser -- and shipped to customers in places as far away as Alaska.

For his trouble, Al got $20 from Selten for each machine sold -- he'd provide a list of serial numbers, and in return would get some of his own currency back, or occasionally a check, made out on a Selten and signed in Mr. Selten's slow, precise hand. He also charged each buyer $20 over the $200 that he'd paid for the typewriter himself, plus, of course, the cost of shipping. Since the $20 was just about what he'd paid for the case, his real profit was only about twenty bucks per machine. It hardly seemed worthwhile.

"I don't do it for the money, you know that," he said. "I like old Selten and I've always liked his typewriters. It just gives me great satisfaction to know that they're going out into the world and being used as they ought to be."

"Sure. Me too. You've got to think, though, that you're actually losing customers. Now they have brand-new typewriters that won't give them any trouble for years, instead of old clunkers that have to be taken in for service all the time."

"Don't underestimate the value of good will. These people are grateful. And with good typewriters, they'll write more and will want more supplies and service. So I think in the long run, anything that spreads the typewriter gospel -- the appreciation for good writing machines -- is also good for my business. Which isn't hurting, anyway. I just heard about two more shops that closed their doors forever, in Raleigh, North Carolina, and in Los Angeles. Increasing demand plus less opportunity to satisfy it means more business for those of us who are still around."

It was encouraging, especially for someone who didn't currently have any prospect of employment outside a typewriter shop.

A few customers came in to pick up their Seltens in person. One was Ellen Fynsk, the teenager, who said she'd been saving up some babysitting money. She asked for a blue silk ribbon and was practically dancing when she
went out the door, cradling the case in her arms.

Elen's opposite was a skinny man with a scarred ear who came in looking hostile and wary. He was wearing old overalls and heavy boots.

"Heard you got some new typewriters."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Selten De Luxes. New old stock — assembled from the original parts. How'd you hear about us?"

"Friend."

I opened the case of a white machine and let him check it out. He was leaving fingerprints on it. "We've got lots of other colors, too."

"Don't care which one for color. I'll take this one."

He paid in old bills of various denominations. "Got an adder needs fixed. You work on them?"

"Sorry, only typewriters."

He left without another word. An adder? One of those things you crank to do math? This was truly a creature from another time.

Al came out from the back and watched the man get into his truck. "That's one who might never come back," he said, smiling. "When they don't give you their name or ask about supplies, that's almost always a giveaway. I believe some of these types never go to the same typewriter shop twice. They'll drive two days to get to a new shop, do the business they need, and never come back."

"That was the white one."

"He sure was," deadpanned Al.

*

May 5

Dear #503,

I admire your discipline and dedication, if you've written five novels only for yourself. You're right, of course: we write for ourselves, above all. Readers are a distraction. The most important words never get written down at all.

All the same, if you ever care to share one of your tales with me, I would be glad to take a look.

The typewriter does help to create solitude, I find. The fact that you're not connected to anyone or anything else when you're at the machine is helpful. Your writing doesn't get copied or shared unless you choose that.

My own machine is a Selten De Luxe, a green beauty. You may know that Townsend Typewriters currently has new Seltens for sale. I recommend them.

Sincerely,

#487

*

May 16

Dear #487,

We share a taste in typewriters as well as a vocation. My own machine is also a green Selten De Luxe, which has wholly replaced my old Smith-Corona for daily use. I do not think I have ever found such a satisfying typewriter.

I thank you for your interest in my stories. It may be that someday the world will know of me. In my vainer moments I imagine that after my death, I may be recognized as a prophet. It is an indulgent idea, I know, but it
is a fact that in Magnificent Illusion, I developed the consequences of those twin phenomena, the information age and global warming, considerably earlier than most observers had at that time.

My best regards and fond wishes for your own typed reflections.

Sincerely,

#503

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The New Lisbon Independent - January 11, 1927 - page 1

TOWNSEND TOWER TO BREAK GROUND IN RMX APRIL - by James Hauer Jr.

Jack Townsend announced yesterday that he expects a groundbreaking ceremony to take place in central New Lisbon on April 2 — the first being ruled out, as he says, "by its unfortunate connotations of foolishness." While the city had been expecting the cornerstone of its new landmark to be in place by early March, Mr. Townsend explained that a modest delay was occasioned by the difficulty of finding "trustworthy contractors and loyal labor." One of the contractors whom Mr. Townsend dismissed last week, Harold Harman of Harman Construction, attributes equal blame to Mr. Townsend's insistence on unorthodox architectural features, characterized by Mr. Harman as "screwball notions." Mr. Townsend declined to comment on Mr. Harman's evaluation.

Were they referring to those terracotta divinities that I so admired? The interior of the finished building didn't seem so strange to me. Maybe Townsend had listened to reason. How disappointing.

The Carnegie Library was well attended on this Saturday, as people came in to check out DVDs, use the Internet, cool off, or even read a book. I put away the microfilm and browsed the nonfiction shelves. A bmk volume on major events of the '90s reminded me of Clinton's libido, the rise of the Internet, and the Oklahoma City bombing. A day care center in the federal building had been in the wrong place, at the wrong time. If McVeigh hadn't been stopped by a patrolman on an unrelated matter, he might never have been caught. Utter devastation caused by one fanatic with fertilizer. And the book even provided the formula for the bomb.

It was hard to identify the disquiet in my body. Chills? Hot flashes? Was it possible for a man to go through menopause? I was fidgety, and my flesh felt irritating to my bones. In my pocket was the plastic bottle with the Rx for Lauren Ayres, its last two pills rattling as I fingered it. I'd tried to ration them, ignore them, choose other solutions, but at moments like this I kept turning back to them.

From a park bench I watched kids run and scream, grandparents fish coins and candy from their pockets, the occasional grizzled loser shuffle through the grass. Everything had a sweet glow to it. I brought my cigarette to my mouth and brushed against my unshaven chin. I'd been subject to some grizzling myself, I realized, as I placidly exhaled my fumes.

*
Dear #503,

I hope your writing is going well. It must be a project that takes a lot of hope -- writing a novel. You have to look forward to hundreds of pages and future events in your story. These days I find it easier to look only at the present, to take things day by day. I've mined my past for its main events and find fewer significant memories now. The present is easier, more available. As for the future -- I find it hard to imagine. Writing a long project would be impossible, as I have a hope deficit. Enough of that -- why do you call the information age and global warming twin phenomena? It seems to me that global warming is due to the momentum of 19th-century technology, which just keeps consuming more fuel, while the information age is coming into its own only in the 21st.

Sincerely,

#487

*

June 2

Dear #487,

Global warming and the information age -- more precisely, the juggernaut of the data collection and analysis system, which rolls ever faster -- are kindred phenomena inasmuch as they stem from the human temptation to use every available tool that is presented to us. If it is available, we employ it. We mistake an opportunity for a necessity. And once it has been employed, it does become a necessity. The momentum begins. This is the truth in the story of original sin. Once a choice has been made, a choice of this nature, it cannot be unmade -- and we all live with its consequences. Those consequences are now irreversible, barring a very dramatic intervention -- an scenario that I have explored in some of my fiction.

Speaking of global warming, I trust you are remaining cool and proceeding apace on your Selten as we approach Independence Day.

Sincerely,

#503

*

Frank Holler: novelist. Reporter by day, storyteller by night -- is the difference so big? He didn't throw any typewriter out the window; he's a technophobe at heart, and comes home at night, after some scotch, to pound out some happenings on a green Selten De Luxe.

As I watched him at the Granite Room, holding forth on the baseball season and reminding me for the nth time that he'd started out as a sportswriter, I decided it wasn't a likely scenario. The man had too much common sense, and he put all his writing energy into his little stories for the Advertiser.

The bartender: novelist. No, he didn't seem educated or imaginative enough.
Al Townsend: novelist. Or rather a prankster, a provocateur. He thought I needed some correspondence to keep me amused, or wanted to see how I'd react. Why not?

Bonita, the mail carrier: novelist.

Harper's hit man, novelist: he's moved to New Lisbon and is biding his time, playing with me, until he gets bored and decides to bump me off.

Jim Allison, novelist: mild-mannered IRS man and husband writes conspiracy novels on the side. Has some fun with his buddy down the hall, plays games with his mind.

That wasn't a believable scenario either. But something told me I was getting warmer.

*

June 11

Dear #503,

I am keeping cool, thanks to the window air conditioner that got installed in my room a week ago. This place is getting modernized — it's already up to 1960s standards. And it illustrates your point about getting addicted to an opportunity, a tool: now I can't stand it in here unless the a/c is running all the time. With the hum and rattle of the air conditioner, I add the click and ding of the typewriter. I've been wondering whether, with some imaginative filler, I could turn my life story into a novel. I suppose you have inspired me. I realized I don't have to look far forward to create a story. I've already looked back, and when I look at the present I find a sizable stack of writing. It just lacks a narrative, a narrative of my own. So I'm fictionalizing myself and creating an alter ego. Some of the intervening scenes will have to be invented. But I feel I'll like what I get in the end.

How goes your own novel? Can you share its title?

Best wishes,

#487

*

June 16

Dear #487,

I too received an air conditioner around the time you did. It is a rather pathetic little box, straining to counteract the world while contributing to its downfall. I believe less and less in half-measures and tiny countermeasures. The only solution will have to be wholly without measure.

When I approach the conclusion of a story, I tend to lose weight and become rather unkempt. I am now only a matter of weeks away from the denouement of my current project. To answer your question, I entitle it:

Appointment with the Inferno

Best regards,

#503

*
"You all right?" says Al. "You don't look so good these days."

"Just — haven't been sleeping well. It's too hot." I don't mention that I've been missing the painkillers something fierce. It's gotten to the point where I wonder if there are any briable doctors in town. But it's also true that I don't sleep well. The hotel room always seems too cold or too warm, the bed sheets are bunched and twisted, and I wake with visions of telegraph towers — my recurring dream, where the towers have now evolved into a dense urban landscape, linked by treacherous bridges, and there is some sort of neverending pursuit between similar opponents.

"Make sure you get enough liquids," says Al.

The shop itself is poorly air conditioned, and the scents of ancient typewriters, brought to life by the warmth, are seeping upwards from the basement.

"So, I was wondering about something," I say.

"Mm hmm."

"If you get something alarming from one of the Dissidents — some sign that they're planning to do something rash, some act of violence — what do you do?"

"Nothing."

"What if it looks like they might hurt innocent people?"

"That's a 'might'; it's not a reality."

"Look, I'm glad to be part of this list and all, but you've got some strange people who are part of it. Religious nutcases, white supremacists, militia people."

"Yeah. I know. Look, if you start infringing on people's liberty just because of what they could do, you've killed liberty for everyone. If you arrest them for what they say, you're an enemy of privacy and freedom. All this business about 'hate speech' and 'fighting words' is just another way to attack speech itself. And if you alert the authorities about someone just because of what they wrote — if you throw them into the information order — then what you've done is unpardonable."

"OK, I'm not throwing anyone to the authorities. I'm not too fond of the authorities myself. I was just wondering."

"It was a good question. It's cases like that that test our dedication to resisting the information order. I say it's always unforgivable to hand someone over just because of what they think. I suppose the only exception would be handing yourself over, if that's what you chose to do: turning yourself into the asylum because you realize you're losing it. Of course, crazy people never do realize they're crazy...."

I bend back over the dirty typefaces of an Olivetti Studio 44 and brush them out.

Phil McEarly: novelist.

*

June 20

Dear #503,

I'm writing from the middle of the night. The a/c is off, for a change, and I'm just letting the heat happen. My windows are open, and the neon of the hotel sign mixes with the summer steam. There's a print on my wall that is on my mind: an old man, a pious old bastard, and I feel he's looking over my shoulder. I think I'm succeeding in creating a second past for myself, a novel as autobiography, a doppelganger on paper. But I'm not sure --
I'm too hot to think clearly. Sometimes I'm not sure whether it's my Selten doing the writing, or my skin typewriter, or my brain typewriter. Sorry to ramble. Take care of yourself and don't do anything rash.

#487

*

June 25

Dear #487,

You really must take better care of yourself. I fear you've been working too hard and not getting enough sleep.

My story will conclude on Independence Day, and till then I must work feverishly so that everything can fall into place. After that, I've decided that you can read all about it.

Sincerely,

#503

*

June 27

Dear #503,

Could you please give me a little preview of how your novel is going to turn out? I'm dying to know. With such a provocative title, you must have known that you'd create curiosity in your correspondent.

We've shared quite a few thoughts over the last couple of months. I hope you'll be willing to share this little morsel, too.

Anxiously,

#487

*

"When is this heat going to stop?" I complained. "I swear sometimes, I can smell the smoke of those forest fires."

"You're imagining things," said Al. "Didn't you say you imagine you hear typewriters sometimes too?"

"Just a side effect of working here."

"Are you up to driving?"

"Of course."

"The last few machines from that batch of twenty are deliveries. Why don't you take them, and take your time to do it over the next few days. You can even keep the van. Just don't get pulled over."

"You don't have to tell me."

"Take your time. And I'll see you after the 4th of July."

"OK." I was relieved at the thought of getting out of the stuffy shop and hitting the road in the air-conditioned van. There were only four typewriters to deliver, each tagged with the name and address of its new owner. Al opened one up. "Check this out: #8340." It was the maroon machine with the quiet return.
"Saved this one for last," said Al. "I really admire what the old man did here. Let's go down there together after the 4th and see what else he's dreamed up."
"Sounds good. Oh -- did any mail come in for me?"
"Nope."
"I'll stop by every afternoon to check for it."
"You've gotten pretty fond of the List, haven't you? Don't worry, I can just swing by the hotel to drop it off if you get anything. Just do the deliveries and take a load off for a few days."
"OK ... if it's no trouble."
"Of course not."
I got going right away. The first address was in a town some miles north of New Lisbon, Lafayette. There was just one significant road heading north, Highway 22, a winding road whose grey pavement was shimmering in the heat. My mind was racing faster than the van, spinning paranoid ideas.

Lauren Ayres: novelist.

I was close to a solution. But that wasn't it.

The Selten's new owner was a nice farmer's wife, a shy woman who quietly offered me some iced tea. Their farm was just outside Lafayette, and her church was just down the street, she said. She wanted the typewriter to create a history of the church. Didn't seem like a Dissident to me. But why write the history on a typewriter? Maybe it was all she could afford? None of my business. Nobody bothers nobody. I accepted her check for $220 — delivery was free.

I looked at the other addresses. If I kept moving, they could all be delivered today — and I did want to keep moving. I turned up the a/c, full blast, and headed south again, then took a county road until I reached a cubical brick house surrounded by tall pines. The heat made me choke as I stepped out of the van. The dry grass was waving slowly in a feeble breeze. I knocked on the door.

Immediately, it opened onto darkness. There was hardly any light in the house. My eyes adjusted to see an old man standing back from the door, inspecting me.

"I've brought your new typewriter."

"Good, give it here now."

I handed the case over. The heat coming from the house was even worse than the heat of the fields. The old man took his time. "You write these instructions?"

"Yes. Well, not me personally, Mr. Townsend."

"Hmph." He fished some money out of a drawer.

"Thank you," I said.

The door slammed.

I suddenly felt tired of catering to these cranks. I had days to make these deliveries. I headed back into town. I had things to buy. A lunch to eat. A story to finish.

*  

My bits of narration fill interstices between remembered episodes — providing the cartilage at the joints of my life, expanding on promissory asterisks. Imagination steps in where memory gives out. I polish a little here, carve a little there, and sculpt an alternate identity for myself. No one knows this Me — not even I myself — and certainly not the uncountable ghosts that have been awaiting my return to the public world. My other self,
my altered identity, is a reverse voodoo doll that will serve as a magical barrier between the new me and the old. A tar baby that will absorb all the gossip and satire. A scent to throw the dogs off the trail.

I type until I'm passing out, and then I give in to my dream world. Telegraph City is densely built, each spire emitting a fiery light, each inhabited by its own keeper. Bridges without railings and tangles of wiring hang between towers. Somewhere in the cityscape is my quarry. Or is he hunting me? We are both running faster and faster, neither one sure who is supposed to catch whom.

* 

The next-to-last delivery run took me to Shand, a village 18 miles east of town. It involved a drive up the hills that bordered the New Lisbon River, past some bluffs I'd never seen before. This higher ground seemed even hotter than the valley. Shand was a gathering of houses and sheds with no apparent plan. The boundary between private and public land was unclear. Even the boundary between road and countryside was blurred, since people seemed to run their vehicles onto their yards or fields. It wasn't clear which of them were still in use, and which had just been left to rust.

After asking at a little gas station, I found my way to a mobile home which was supposedly the destination of a red Selten.

A very pretty girl came to the door, with long red hair and pale skin, in shorts and a halter top. "You must be the typewriter man."

"Sure am. Here she is, I mean, here it is."

"Ooh, let’s see, I have been waiting for it ... it's so red!"

"Yeah. It's a beauty."

"And you know what I'm going to use it for?"

"No. Tell me, what are you going to use it for?"

"Romance novels," she said, and winked.

"Oh yeah?"

A man came through a door, shirtless, unsmiling. "Leela! Baby needs changing."

Leela ran off, and the man said, "How much?"

"It's $220."

"Say what? Two twenty? Leela!" He stalked back and shut the door. I could hear shouts, mostly his. Then nothing.

Finally the man came out and handed me the cash with a glare. "Get off my fucking property."

* 

July 3rd.

No word from #503. No word from Al.

The shop van was parked down the street from the Hotel Pearson. It was time to deliver machine 8340. My head ached, and I drank three cups of coffee even though it made me sweat worse than ever.

The sky was smoggy. You could smell something that had to be the fires. South this time, halfway to Benton, and I pulled off the road onto a dirt trail, going by the mile marking that corresponded to a note on the typewriter's tag. The trail led past a large pond that looked blissfully cool. There was a house with a large porch and a woman who'd come out when she heard the van.
"Come on in." She was maybe 45, her hair pulled back in a practical style, glasses. "And you are?"
"Tom Pearson. I work at Townsend Typewriters."
"Is Al still there?"
"Oh yes."
"So business is good enough for him to have an employee, huh? That's good to know. I haven't been up there for about a year."
I took out the typewriter. She had a mess sheet of paper in right away and typed a sentence: "J.Q. Vandz struck my big fox whelp."
"That's a new one."
"You haven't seen that one? It's a pangram. Uses every letter once." She proceeded to type all the numbers and punctuation marks, tried the tabulator, and frowned. "Sure are a lot of tab stops set on this machine." The carriage jerked forward and stopped every few spaces as she hit the key. "Wait a minute..."
She noted the location of each tab stop on a scratch pad, and jotted some conversions that I couldn't understand. Then she burst out laughing.
"What?"
"Only Al!"
"What do you mean?"
"We're both old programmers. This is ASCII code. See?" She wrote out a translation of what was evidently a binary message: URMYTYPE.
Laughing in short bursts, she wrote a check and shook my hand with a smile. "Tina. Good to meet you, Tom."
"Good to meet you too." As my own talents were strictly limited to words, with a small repertoire of mechanical skills, I admired anyone who had a head for numbers and codes.
The last delivery had gone well.
I did a slow three-point turn and pointed the van in the direction of the highway. Then there was a scream.
"Hey! Get back here!" Tina was running after me, the typewriter in her hands. Her face was completely changed. "What the hell is this?"
She put the typewriter under an arm, and held up a scraggly little thing, a black insect. No, it was wiring and a little black disk.
"Why was this in the typewriter?"
"I -- have no idea. That was in the typewriter?"
"Soon as I turned it over and took a good look, I spotted it. The black paint almost covered it up, but I've got a good eye. So what's the idea?"
I was embarrassed. "Look, I'm really sorry. I've never seen one of these before. ... You know what? Selten was making improvements to the machines. Starting with this one."
"Improvement, huh? I don't know exactly what this does, but it's electronic. And I don't do electronic. Not anymore. You can have your typewriter back."
"You don't want it?"
"Jesus, Tom, you can be pretty dense, can't you? No. Can I have my check back?"
I handed it back and put the typewriter on the passenger seat. "I had no idea, really."
"Well, you better show this to Al." She was calming down a little. She handed me the spindly parasite. "And tell him his little note was cute, but he better pay closer attention to the merchandise he's pushing."
Now I felt as mad as Tina. What the hell had Selten been up to? Benton was just down the road. Time to do some investigation.
The Selten factory was closed and dark. Selten had mentioned that he lived just a five-minute walk from here, though. How far could the old man walk in five minutes? I drove the van impatiently in a rough orbit of the factory, windows down, looking for Selten or anyone who might know him. Insects, cicadas, buzzed in an irritating pulsation. Finally I spotted someone of Selten's generation, a geezer chewing on something, sitting on his porch.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for Mr. Selten?"
"What?"
"Mr. Oscar Selten. Do you know if he lives around here?"
"Right next door. Not there now, though."
"Where is he?"
"County General Hospital. New Lisbon. Been there for the last two weeks."
"What happened?"
"Esophagus."

I sped back to New Lisbon and ran into the hospital. "Oscar Selten?"
"Room 220. Sir? Are you family? Sir!"
I found Selten lying like a gray slab of meat on a bed, another empty hospital bed beside him, the whole room smelling of disinfectant. There were tubes in his veins, nose, and mouth. His eyes were closed, his breath was slow. I could see this deathbed lying empty too, in a matter of days. It was as if he were already gone.

A tear ran down my cheek.

There were two bottles on the table next to the empty bed.
"Sir!" said the receptionist as I walked out. "If you're family, there are visiting hours. Sir?"
"Just a friend."

Back at the Pearson, McEarly was trying to tell me something too. The guardians of every institution seemed to have it in for me. I ignored him and took the stairs two by two. There was Jim, coming out of his room.
I got into mine quickly. Two pills went down easy.

Things settled back into place. My pulse kept me company and I let my breath wash over me, like gentle ocean waves.

Later, as a red sunset glowed, I sat at the typewriter. I wrote all of this down, and typed a period.

*

Motorcycles.
No. Firecrackers. Fourth of July.
No let-up in the heat. There's a ban on fireworks this year. But since when do people pay attention to those bans?
The street looks busy from my window. People are feeling festive -- there's a parade today. I can see a flag perched on a streetlight at the corner, wavers limply.

I sit at the desk and let yesterday's events swim randomly through my mind. They play out in various sequences just behind the things I'm staring at: bed, granola bars, instant coffee, praying old man, bed, bike, closet, typewriter, water bottles... I don't feel like myself today. A pill will help.

A vision of Tina's angry face replays while I stare at the typewriter. There's a connection between the two. Why did old Selten rig the new typewriters with
some kind of electronics? She said she found the thing underneath the typewriter, masked by black paint. My machine is also painted black on the inside, but the paint is of course smooth, untainted by any extra device, smooth to my fingertips -- except this small projection here, a rubber covering for a screw, or ....

I move the typewriter closer to the window to get a better view. Something is there. I try picking at it, without success. My room key attacks it, pricks it off, until it's hanging from a string -- a wire. I pull, and a whole row of little wires rips loose, delicate black wires like false eyelashes, all in a string. It looks like they were attached to the universal bar, the bar that every key activates, which in turn moves the ribbon and other mechanisms.

I sit dumbly and look at the little eyelash-insect in my palm.

I feel that my typewriter is in communication with Tina's, with all other Seltens, with all other writing machines -- that it's sending me a message, telling me something, typing on my tattoo .... Can typewriters be novelists?

I shake my head for clarity, stare at the smoggy sky, pull on some clothes. I head down for some real coffee at the Rooster, pulling a Winston out of my shirt pocket.

"Morning, Mr. Pearson. You got some mail."

"Today? It's a holiday."

"Yesterday. Tried to tell you when you came home, but you just kept going up those stairs. Al Townsend brought it in for you yesterday 'round two in the afternoon."

He holds out an envelope:

#487
c/o Townsend Typewriters
New Lisbon

has

Al written "Tom Pearson" next to the typed address.

"Wait -- you know Al?"

McEarley looks surprised. "Sure. He's brought mail 'round here before."

I burst out into the muggy air and nervously light the cigarette. Its flavor mixes with the dusty scent in the atmosphere and makes me cough. I think of Mr. Selten. Esophagus. I throw the cigarette in the gutter.

July 1

Dear #487,

You are eager, all too eager, to know the denouement of Appointment with the Inferno. All will be revealed in due time. A novelist is like a poker player: he cannot show his cards before the perfect moment. I'm sure you will understand.

Amidst my preparations for the concluding scene, I have been reflecting on your proposal that memory is a prerequisite for solitude. I believe you are correct. Only when we remember our past -- who we have been -- do we know who we are today. Often the hints are in plain sight. Unfortunately, we cannot recognize the hints until we have become the person that they foreshadow.

It would be a good theme for a novel. I believe it was already the theme for "Oedipus Rex."

I wish you a most memorable Independence Day. If I may offer a word of advice: a jingoistic display is scheduled for midday that day. You would be well advised to avoid the crowds, particularly at noon sharp by the Townsend Building. If you must attend, avoid large obstacles that may block your view, such as a large white van.

Sincerely,

#503
My watch says 9:36. I run down the street, sweat while I start the engine, drive as quickly as I can past the clumps of pedestrians who are already milling about. There are more limp flags. Banners: "Welcome to New Lisbon, U.S.A." "Happy Birthday, America!"

All of Third Street is blocked off to traffic. No cars, no parking. But Fourth Street, the other side of the Townsend, has a space right by the secondary entrance to the building. I get out, jumpy, scanning the area.

Where is the little bastard? "Sincerely, #503." Who here looks sincere? Everyone does: that group of tweenage girls texting, the old couple in their Sunday best, the stray dog. The cop chewing gum. Do I tell the cop? I feel my face, bristly and oily; smell my unwashed clothes; see my haggard face in a window of the Townsend. Not credible. And the first thing they ask you is your name.

There's Frank Holler. "Frank! What are you doing here today, don't you get a holiday?"

"Tom. You look like hell. Holiday, my ass! Everyone on staff is assigned to cover the goddamn parade. Not that much happens around here, you know? This is the big event for July."

"Don't go in the building."

"What are you talking about? Best views are from the building. It's full of people every Fourth of July. And it's air conditioned. I'll get out and get a human interest story or two, but mostly I'm covering it from above. From the Advertiser offices."

"Don't go in."

"Jesus, you been drinking first thing in the morning? Ah, I'll catch you later, Tom." He gives me a dismissive wave and goes in.

I'll make a circuit of the building. Look for the clear signs of danger. Alert the cops when there's something more to talk about than a drug-swallowing loner who hasn't done his laundry.

I head up the hill toward Third Street. Al Townsend comes around the corner towards me, a briefcase on a strap over his shoulder.

"Tom! There you are. Good man. I figured you'd be here."

"Al. What are you doing here?"

"It's parade day, Tom. Isn't that why you're here?" he says with a slightly amused expression, looking me over.

"Look, Al. I've got to tell you something." I look around and speak softly. "You know what you said about turning people in just for saying things?"

"Yeah."

"That's not what I want to do. But what this guy -- #503 -- what he's been saying makes me think he's about to do something. Action -- not words. And he's going to do it right here. At noon sharp."

"Mm hmm?"

"Oklahoma City." I was whispering feverishly. "You remember Oklahoma City? Car bomb. The federal building. He wants to do it here. Right here. Today." I look from his right eye to his left. He's calm, unsurprised. As always, Al radiates a sense of quiet competence and self-control. He takes me by the arm.

"It's all right, Tom. It's going to be OK. Come on, let's go in the building."

"Are you crazy?"

"I'm not crazy. Get ahold of yourself. The best view of the streets if is from the rooftop. Right?"
"Right."
"So let's just go up and see what we can see. Nothing happens till noon, right?"
"Right." We're walking in, Al guiding me gently, and I start to breathe a little easier. The lobby is pleasantly cool, its Deco ornaments supplemented with red, white, and blue banners, people chatting happily. We take an elevator to the fourteenth floor, and make our way out onto the roof, where once again we're hit by a humid blast of unhealthy air.

It's not surprising that no one else is out here. The tar has absorbed all the morning heat; it's soft and clinging, and releases warm fumes. There's the pink deck chair I sat in during the snowfall, now rusty and unbeaten. Instead of swirling white flakes, there's this brown air and a sluggish, ominous wind from the south.

"Let's take a look," says Al calmly. He walks to the low wall around the roof and leans on it, scanning the street below. There's a fine view of Third Street: no traffic, a couple of cop cars with their lights flashing, a few people who've already set up their folding chairs and parasols. At the corner, a couple of vendors offer lemonade and pretzels.

I check my watch: 10:11.

We make the circuit of the roof, moving clockwise. Broadway; the north border of the little block that's completely occupied by the Townsend Building. Some paradegoers tramping up this hill to the parade route.

"How do we even know what he looks like?" I say. "Al, tell me seriously now: did you ever meet him?"
"Yes, I've met him."
"Seriously? Why didn't you tell me!"
"Cool down, Tom. Relax. I didn't think he wanted to be known, that's all."
"What does he look like?"
"You'll see."

"What--" I'm so frustrated that I can't even speak. I just keep making the tour of the roof edge, peering over the side, not even knowing who I'm looking for. Fourth Street, that's where I'm parked, much the same as it was when we came in. Main Street, the southern edge of the block, where I bumped into Al. Someone is selling flags, it looks like. Then we're back at Third.

10:22.

I realize something. "Ha! I didn't even tell you. It's going to be a white van. A big white van."
"I know."
"But -- wait, I know I didn't tell you. What do you mean, you know?"
"Everything's going to be all right."
"Will you stop patronizing me?" I look at him and think. "So you read the letters too. Of course. Steamed them open, glued them back shut, right? OK, it makes sense. So much for your talk about privacy, though. You read every one before you gave it to me, I guess."

He was smirking a little. "Have you seen a teakettle in the typewriter shop?"
"OK ... wait a minute. You son of a bitch!" I almost laughed. "You really had me going. What, did you think I was going to get bored if I didn't get any mail? Or just heard from revivalists, with their carbon copies of their end times rants? So -- you just took a Selten and made up #503. Am I right? Very funny. Very fucking funny. So this is April Fool's Day in July!"

Now Al looks serious again, and takes me by the arm once more. "It's not a joke, Tom."
He glances over the side of the building again, scans the street fourteen stories below. The truth slowly dawns on me. "You ... holy crap. You're really going to do it."

I tackle Al and try to bring him down onto the hot tar, but he twists free and knees me in the gut. I just can't move, can't sit up from the roof, and can't speak, no matter how hard I try. All I can do is pant and look up at him as he takes his gun out of his shoulder bag.

"Will you. Calm. Down! You're getting way ahead of yourself," he snaps. When I can talk, I say, "I always knew ... you were a nut job ... conspiracy theorist ... but didn't know ... you were a murderer."

"If I was a murderer I would have shot you already. You're jumping to conclusions."

"Did you or didn't you ... write those letters?"
"I did not."
"You're not going to bomb this building?"
"No."
"Then who is?"

He just stares at me. He's staring at me for longer than I can stand, with an expression of controlled ***** pity and contempt.
"You still don't know."
"No."
"He's a middle-aged writer. He's living alone."
"I know that."
"He lives in the Hotel Pearson."

I can't talk. What color is your Selten?"
"Green."
"How did you get here this morning?"
"I drove."
"You drove my van?"
"Yes."
"And what color is the van?"
"It's -- white."
"And what is in the back of the van?"

The sun is pounding at my head, throbbing. The tar fumes are rising. My pulse can't let me see, can't hear, can't think.
"What is in the back of that van!" he screams.
"I don't know!"

I hug my knees, put my head down, and despite the temperature I'm freezing cold. I rock myself. I cry. How can it be that I've written myself into a delusion -- a second self that I don't know? Flashes of a repressed past: a gun, an explosion, a dead guard, an overturned truck. Running, running from the cops. I killed Harper. I killed Hannah. Their blood mixes with the soil from a field by the Interstate.

I killed Lauren. Her mannequin members are buried in Benton and Lafayette and Shand.

I studied explosives at the library and packed the van with fertilizer. All these possible pasts are flashing through me like electric shocks.

"Jesus Christ." Al is reaching down to grip my hand. "Pull yourself together." He pulls out a couple of Cokes from his bag, and they're still vaguely cool. "Drink this." I do.

"You were always ***** suggestible. From the day you walked in the store. Come on, let's take another tour." He's set off on another clockwise circuit, peering over the edge.
I stumble after him. "I know ... I know what's in the van. It's empty. I swear it. Except the one typewriter, the one that L Tina gave back."

"She did?" he says while still scanning the street.

"It's on the passenger seat. The back of the van is empty. I swear it."

"Stop blubbering. You're not the goddamn bomber."

"I -- thank God. My mind has been yanked in so many directions that I can hardly form a coherent thought. Al checks his watch. I check mine. 10:42.

We go silently around the roof a couple more times.

"Wait," says Al. "Here we go." I see it too. Here it comes: a white van driving slowly up Broadway. It has to double-park. It pulls up beside a red sports car.

I am so relieved not to be the bomber that I take a deep breath and smile. Then I reflect on the fireball that's going to explode from that vehicle in -- one hour and two minutes. We watch the van steadily. Finally, someone comes out. He's bald, not very big, but it's hard to see more at this distance. He looks vaguely familiar.

"Al. Please. Who is he?"

"Elliot N. James."

"Who?"

"You've seen him many times, 'Tom.' He lives in the Hotel Pearson, room 13. Ground floor."

And now I realize who he is: the mousy vice-principal, the pharmacist, the resident whose name I never bothered to learn. "I can't believe it. Him? He's the last person I would suspect."

"That's because he does a very good job of lying low -- except he gives away too much in his letters. Elliot N. James, Nobody. He's hated the government ever since he was fired by the post office, 17 years ago. But you wouldn't know that from his behavior. Unlike some other people, he doesn't stand out like a sore thumb. He doesn't get himself beaten up by homophobic bikers. He doesn't screw ex-call girls."

"How --? Hey, he's getting away!" Elliot N. James was walking steadily away from the van, returning the way he'd come on Broadway, not once looking back.

"Don't worry. The situation's under control."

"You're ... are you working with other people?"

"Yes."

"He's going to be arrested."

"No worries."

I have a moment of clarity and anger. "So you know all these things about him -- and about me. Does this have anything to do with it?"

For once, I get a reaction from him; he raises his eyebrows when he sees the spindly device I've pulled out of my pocket.

"So, you found it? Not bad. You're getting to be a real typewriter tech."

"Tina found one in hers. That's why she handed back the typewriter. She wasn't happy about it, either."

"Hmm. She's a smart one. I tried to distract her with the tabulator. Did she notice that?"

"Yeah. Real cute."

"And then you checked yours."

"Right. I didn't mention how long it had taken me to even think of checking it. You installed this when you cleaned my typewriter for the first time?"

"Sure. I've installed it on all the Seltens that come in, and lots of other makes too. But the universal bar on Seltens is perfect for it. There are lots of them out there now, and they're providing good data."

"What does it do?"

"It's essentially a keystroke logger. Everything you write goes into its memory. There's an advanced battery, very small. The genius of it is
that it uses almost no power until it gets the satellite signal. Then there's a transmission that takes less than a second, and it just waits for the next command. These guys can probably last for at least five years."

"And all this stuff about the information order?"

"It's all true. It's just that I'm part of the order. Remember what I told you about being a double agent?"

"Son of a bitch."

"It's about saving lives. And you've done your part. You've done a good job."

"Without knowing it." I feel a blend of emotions: shame, relief, anger, fear — what are these people going to do with me now? So much for my escape from the known world. Mostly, I have to admit it, I feel some comfort that the authorities have been paying attention, that they're going to stop a mass murderer, that they've probably already arrested the vice principal, I mean, Elliot N. James.

"So who do you work for?"

"Analysts. Come on over here for a minute." Al leads me to a door that's flush with the wall of the central structure on the roof. The door is painted a drab beige, like the rest of the wall. It's around the corner from the door we used to step out onto the roof. Al brushes off a lock and takes a key out.

"Shouldn't we get out of the building? I mean, just in case." It's 11:08.

"You need to see this."

The door swings open. There's an unlit room in here, dusty and unused. As we walk in, the smoky light shows dark wood paneling, a bar, and chrome barstools. Ducts and pipes snake over things and from floor to ceiling — this is some kind of leftover space that was converted to a bar.

"Isn't it great?" says Al.

"What is it?"

"Uncle Jack's speakeasy. He had it built in."

"Teetotaler Jack Townsend?"

"He was a hypocrite, like everyone else. He was just a really loudmouthed, intolerant hypocrite. The worst kind. I don't how my Grandpa Alvin got this key, but it was handed down to Dad and then to me. Every once in a while I come up here and check it out. The key still works. Nobody else seems to know about it."

"Al — this is very cool and all, and thanks for the tour. Now let's get the hell out of here."

"In just a minute. Look, you need to see this. Look right in the corner here, look real close, and tell me what you see."

The corner is pretty far from the outside light, and there seems to be nothing there other than some pipes. I humor the man and peer at it, looking up and down.

There's a click around my wrist. I pull it and hurt myself. Al is standing back, smiling. He's handcuffed me to the pipe.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Calm down, 'Tom.' Outdoors, there are sirens. Unintelligible voices on loudspeakers. They must be clearing the area and disarming the bomb."

"Take this off!"

"Not likely. Look, I've only got ... 47 minutes to get out of here, so I'm going to make this short." He takes a laptop out of his shoulder bag, opens it up, and points the screen at me. He looks at it himself and smiles. "You just don't change, do you?"
"What is going on!"

"Whatever they're doing out there, they're not chasing Mr. James, so you can forget about that. The bomb's still going off at noon."

"Why?"

"They terminated the program, that's why. Two weeks ago. Budget cuts. No more keyloggers, no replacement batteries once these wear out, and all the data is considered automatic garbage. Not actionable. Well, they're wrong. You and I know that. This little program is one of the best deals going. You want to catch a subversive, think like a subversive. Use nondigital means. Use a typewriter. The List must have the highest quotient of dangerous nutjobs out there. And Mr. James is going to prove that to them. Then you can bet that they'll be paying attention."

"And you're letting people die just so you can keep working for these people?"

"I'm letting people die now to save lives in the future." He bends over the laptop for a moment, typing. "As for you, I've had just about enough of you. So here's some insurance just in case [redacted] Elliot's fertilizer bomb is a dud."

He's holding the laptop just out of my reach, just close enough for me to see a window that features a photo of my outraged, disbelieving face. It's an e-mail.

From: anonymous3375@remailer.com
To: erinthomason@me.com, jharper@fischerburnham.com, tips@fbi.gov, today@foxnews.com
Subject: Beer in the Headlights Guy found

He's currently in a room on the top floor of the Townsend Building in New Lisbon. Enter from the roof. The key's under a pink deck chair.

He hits Send. The window disappears. "I wonder who'll get here first."

Al stows his laptop, glances at his watch. "11:20. So long, 'Tom'."

"Hey, anyone in here?" There's a tall figure in the doorway, walking in. "We all gotta clear the building. What the--?"

It's Jim Allison. "Hey, what's going on here? Listen, I volunteered to check the roof. The fires are coming. We gotta evacuate the whole town. Tom -- is that you, my man?"

"Shut up," says Al, pointing his gun at Jim. "Damn it."

There's a beat, a moment, Al deciding whether to shoot, Jim taking it all in.

Then Jim goes down: he looks ill, his eyes roll back, he sinks to his knees and then he's twitching on the floor, convulsing.

I've grabbed a metal barstool with my free right hand. It silently swings up and over, and with all the acceleration I can create, I release it into Al's head. He collapses.

I'm handcuffed to a pipe with two unconscious men on the floor.

I work the handcuff down and squat, then stretch, and reach out to grab the cuff of Al's pants. I'm pulling as hard as I can. He's too heavy. I pull. Finally his pants pull off his waist and I can reach the pocket. Keys.

There's a small key -- and it fits the cuffs.

Al is out. I take his gun. Jim is still shaking, drooling. He wasn't faking. It's 11:24.

"Jim! Come on! We've gotta get out of here!" Slowly he slows his twitches and starts breathing more normally. "Come on, Jim! Please!" I try to drag him -- it's impossible. The man is heavy.

There's one more Coke in Al's bag. It sprays over Jim's face when I open it. I wipe more on his face, pour a little into his mouth. Not too much. 11:31.
Finally Jim is back, groaning, disoriented. "Ohh ... shit."
"Jim, you've got to stand up. We've gotta go. Now."

He doesn't talk, but fortunately does what I say, leaning on me. The smell of smoke outside is pungent. Far off, through the brown air, you can see light — lines of light on the horizon. To the mouth, to the east, to the west. We stagger into the building. It's too dark in here. The elevator button won't light up. The power's out.

Fourteen stories. I know these stairs well, but in the dark, with a man recovering from an epileptic fit, it's painfully slow. "Jim, hold on to the railing. Feel your way. And keep moving steady."

"Uh huh."

He stumbles sometimes. I stumble too. Once he falls. After an eternity, we're in the lobby. It's 11:50.

No one is here. Sirens. Smoke. Horns outside. When we're on the sidewalk, a young man in a short-sleeve dress shirt comes running. "Jim! There you are! Come on, we've got room for you!" It's a minibus with the IRS seal on it, idling on the street, its passengers looking anxious and pointing at Jim.

The young man shakes my hand. "Thanks a lot, man. We don't want to lose this guy. Hey, we'd give you a ride too, but there's zero space in here."

"It's all right. I've got a ride."

Jim is hugging me. He's still having trouble talking. He's on board, and the minibus is gone.

A police car is broadcasting a warning. "Evacuate the town. Evacuate the town. Head north. Do not head south, east, or west. Head north on Highway 22."

But as soon as I get near the edge of town in the Townsend Typewriters van, I can see that it's hopeless. Cars are jammed, honking, people running around in panic. That road wasn't designed for the entire population of New Lisbon. Or was there an accident? Is the road blocked? I make a U turn and head for the hotel.

I jump out and check my watch just before going in the open door. 12:06. You can't see the Townsend from here, but I turn in its direction. Right on cue. Flashes. A vibration that passes through bricks, ribs, skull. A fireworks show condensed into one convulsion. There are echoes throughout the streets. The deep roar of an avalanche. And a new cloud of smoke swells into the sky: thick, black, infernal.


The hotel has been evacuated.

I load my bike with my small supply of cash, the water, the food. There's my typescript: a stack of stationery, imprinted with a thousand memories. And the Selten De Luxe.

I hesitate, then stow the Selten in its case and bungee it to the back of the bike. Another awkward stumble down flights of dark stairs. We're out. I take a last look at the third-floor window. I can't see the typescript, resting silently on its desk.

*
The wind at my back carries ash. I hear tanker planes in the purple sky. My water's been drunk, converted to sweat, dissipated, and I keep pushing northward.

I imagine the ghost of a freight train following me.
I imagine the pages of memories curling, flaring up, shrinking into black veils, crawling with short-lived red worms.
I'm definitely going to quit smoking.
I imagine the typescript annihilated, but its digital ghosts persisting, multiplying, absorbed into the ocean of analysis.
I imagine my skin blistering and bursting as I lie inert, overcome, at the side of the trail, and my tattoo melts and crisps with the rest of me.
Push on.

From every tower of Telegraph City, a beacon shines — scanning, swiveling, intersecting every other light. A network of light waves, weaving a blanket of messages. The pursuers have missed each other. Maybe they prefer it that way. Maybe they can now retreat, each to his own tower, to concentrate on his own bread.

One of them has constructed a writing machine that he installs in the central sanctuary. It prints every character he commands, snatching at the paper with its insect arms, responsive to his caresses. Every night he creates a new combination, a combination unforeseen, unprecedented, never to be repeated. He reads it once, protecting it from the light, then consigns it to the ritual fire.

What did I write? Where did I write? On paper, on electrons, on skin, on mind? Whatever does not burn away is the essence of the text. Whatever survives the incineration of paper and the death of electricity will persist in memory. Whatever survives the mind will persist in body. Whatever survives the decay of the body will persist in the machine.

I imagine the Selten De Luxe after my death, the death of Al Townsend, the death of Oscar Selten, Senior and Oscar Selten, Junior, the death of humanity. It will last, not forever but more durably than myself, gently rusting until it is immobile and finally disintegrates. It carries the memory of the words written on it, distills that sequence into a potent aura that stays with it and seeps into it. After the collapse of the lighthouse, the end of the telegraph tower, the destruction of the Townsend Building, the typewriter persists, an emblem of meaning.

Why didn't I grab the pills?
The light of the evening is burning away, but I see the trail turning up ahead, entering a new landscape.
Are those embers? Or are they city lights?

THE END
This novel was written with
the following typewriters:

Remington Noiseless 7
Olivetti Lexikon 80
Royal KMM
Olympia SG1
Olivetti Studio 44

and

a Pilot Naniki
vanishing point
pen

November 28, 2010