

**To the consternation of modern society,
Life should be kept**

slow

and

realistic.

For Forever

In the beginning, two beings existed on this earth. They were in love. When they would look into each other's eyes they would see themselves. They could do this because it was all the truth and impossible to deny. Together, all the answers were there. There were no questions. They would sit on their planet, the only two beings that knew of another beside themselves and as themselves. They held each other so tightly they were actually one.

One day, they developed a thirst and a hunger. As one, they felt they could not live in happiness until these desires were satisfied. Together, they made the first choice and decided they had to let go of each other and themselves. So they did. They separated. One went to the water to quench a thirst; the other went to the jungle to find food. They decided to come back to each other, what was called "forever," when these needs were met.

One being went to the east, where it knew there was water. As it walked up to the bank of the sea, it felt a strange, new sensation come over it. This was loneliness, but the being did not know that then. It dropped its head to the waveless water to drink. It drank of the water, and as it lifted its head again, it saw its own reflection, something never seen before. It then knew what it looked like and felt a despair of conscious immortality. The pool immediately became restless, moving back and forth, eroding the land that held it still, pushing and pulling against its once motionless self.

The other being went to the west, where it knew it could find food. As it walked into the jungles, it felt a strange sensation come over it, the same loneliness the being that went to the east had felt. It searched the trees for food, but could only find silent doves flying low. One flew into its hands and the being killed it, something never done before. It heard a first shriek from the dying bird's beak. It felt in its hands, with the dove that it would eat, the despair of death.

After the two beings had met their desires and found a first confusion, they came back to where they had held each other, on top of the world. When they met each other, they both knew they had things they should share with each other, but both wanted something of their own, so they were quiet. Their need to be one again was so great that they grabbed for each other like they did before. They felt their confusion could be vanquished this way. They tried to push themselves into the other so forcefully that they felt the first physical pain.

Then they tried to remember who each other was. They looked into each other's eyes again and found no answers. Looking into each other, they forgot all the truth they had known and turned their heads in denial of it. So they left each other again without saying a word. The one from the West went back to the West, looking for a way to never suffer in death. The one from the East went back to the East, looking for an end to its eternal life of suffering.

Slowly both began to use their mouths and use their hands to find answers to these questions. These tools were created strictly for sharing and embracing, so the progress was slow and this was very hard for them. When they felt like the answer was very close, they would find the same lust and greed that pushed them away from each other. They might quickly turn to answer to someone, only to find nothing behind them, no one to talk to. All work would then be forgotten and they would be alone again.

This struggle became ageless. It went on into the word they had whispered to each other when they left each other for the last time. They had whispered "forever." Today, this word is all the West and the East remembers. The West thinks it was born when it killed the dove. The East thinks it was born when it saw its own reflection. Moreover, the East and the West only remember the word forever, they don't know where it came from and that they had created it together.

So they both look for the definition to this word in their own worlds to this day. They rethink all the things they had felt on their journeys, not knowing where they had come from. They never thought that there could be an end to this search for "forever." Most of the minds they have each created accepted this at birth. They learned to call it the truth, confusing another one of the undeniable things they once knew. Thus, they forgot who each other was and who they were themselves.

They have waited for forever and they always will wait forever until forever finally comes. It will come when they find themselves again, when they can turn and look in each other's eyes, their own, without feeling shame for finding a thing called self.

The Worm Lady

I was way too impassioned for fifteen. Wet dreams, unpredictable hard-ons, and those dirty thoughts my dad supported placed me in some torn place right between heaven and hell, standing on that driveway. Confusion had grown deep inside me and Sharon didn't seem to help in any way. I had watched her for years – going to Holy Cross while I went to Dewey – from quite a distance. I always watched her Sunday mornings as I went to get the worms. She walked slow motion across that newly paved parking lot; across asphalt I had once watched being laid. With her mother's silk blouse, let out two buttons too low, her breasts bobbed with each step. They moved opposite the silk, the tops peeking out, too small to jump out but too enthusiastic to just sit there. Plastic earrings. Eye shadow. Too much woman for her age; just enough girl for mine. My Sunday morning sacrilege. Her head raised high, proud, sought the church the way the church sought her. Then she entered, stepping through the oak double doors.

The worm lady lived right behind the Catholic Church and they shared a driveway. I received the worms from the side window of her house. The screen bowed out, making it impossible to see in. Brown dust and cat hairs hooked to it and swam like pale minnows in the morning air. I pounded at the frame, rattling it hard until I heard the bell ringing. There was something inside that house, something hidden beyond the fence separating it from the church, beyond the 666's written in red spray paint by foreboding school kids. I knew it had to do with Sharon. I felt the same tinge putting my hands in that house that I did waking up from a dream about her.

Fall had started to chill the air. I picked small bush leaves from the cracks in the window. Sometimes I would have to wait three or four minutes before I heard movement inside her house. I let out a little shiver and looked back to my father. I heard the crack of the bolt unstick.

Fingers slithered under the screen and slowly hitched it up a foot like an old kitchen frock. My eyes adjusted to the light as I placed my fingers on the ledge. The basin protruded right below the window and her green-veined fingers, comfortable in the soil, rooted deep as she sifted for worms. Her deaf voice grumbled earth tones, counting them out. As she handed me the writhing half-pound bag, my father yelled from the truck, impatient as always.

“Jacob, come on!”

Just pausing to see my profile through the screen, the worm lady pressed two grimy quarters into my clean, pink palm. Her fingers lingered near my hand, brushing off earth with the coins. I trotted back to the truck, looking quickly back to her house and then to the church door Sharon had just disappeared through. They were both gone so I narrowed my focus to the loose, grainy asphalt again.

“You know . . .” My dad trailed off. Whether it was about a new lure he had been experimenting with or about sex, my dad always started his little piece of wisdom this way. I never knew if I would be asked to pull a Playboy or some fishing line out of his glove compartment after a start like that.

“That worm lady . . . used to be a prostitute.”

I was shocked into listening. This was new, interesting. His lectures about sex and fishing had already become boring. My dad nodded, assured by my attention.

“Sure . . . your grandfather used to tell me about fights on her front lawn . . . ‘tween cowboys and farmer and such. They'd be fighting over women.”

“Grandpa Joe used to go to a hooker?”

“Oh no . . . a *prostitute* . . . and he never did stuff like that. He was too straight. He'd see this stuff going on when he'd go to church, next door. That church and that old woman been goin' at it for years.” He pulled up short at the last light before we headed out of town. He rolled his head back on his shoulders. The moles stuck out on his neck. I wanted to cut them off with fingernail clippers. The light turned green.

“She used to have three houses, but the church tore those down when she got old. They just waitin' for her to die so they can bulldoze the last one.”

Grandpa Joe was my mom's dad. He died a few years ago, while I was still in grade school. A month after he died, my mother left for Atlanta. She didn't really give an explanation and I really didn't want one yet. The good thing about all of it was I could stop going to church. It also meant I'd have to move in with my dad for good. It was nice living with him, but having my own bed was nice too.

Fishing that Sunday went as planned. My dad talked about the things that interested him: the new woman he was dating or the new tackle place north of town. He was intrigued by it, but his allegiance to the worm lady was too strong to even check it out.

My steps were heavy. Another dream. Another sticky morning. The first time it happened, I thought I was sick. Waking to little humps on my dad's polyester couch at six-thirty scared the shit out of me. A strange infection. The smile from Sharon that started it lingered as I paced myself slowly from dad's house to school. It was a hard time this morning, as it was every morning. Boners in gym shorts, barely five black hairs here or there, and Sharon, who had made me this way with a smile. She was in the TV room with me. She just walked through the back door. She leaned back and sat down on top of my legs as I lay on the couch, a cotton sheet separating them from her warm thighs. She dropped her head back and giggled. Her vision now seemed to tease me.

Jeff Layman had brought a dirty magazine to school again. As it finally came my way in the locker room he mumbled, cradling the fiction like a carton of eggs. "Wouldn't you like to fuck that one?" His dirty finger pressed deep between the breasts of the woman on the page, making a crescent crease. Eyes closed like she was in pain, she held her breasts in her hands like they were a burden.

"Yeah . . . sure."

I ignored it.

So school went on this way. "Nocturnal emission" from my Biology teacher, "wet dreams" from my father. "Intercourse" from my Biology teacher, "fucking" from Jeff. My dreams weren't wet. Wetness dries. I knew what sex was, with Sharon's smile in my head. Sex was love and sex was how that sheet on my couch feels over me when a breeze blows across it. So what was "fucking"? All I could think of was the whistling sighs from Jeff's snotty nose as *fuck that one* played back in my head. The pained expression of the woman laid over my image of Sharon's smiling face.

No matter how much I saw Sharon, I still pictured her the way I did in my dream. Her form was crystalline. Regardless of how many things I related to her – the worm lady and the naked women in porno mags especially – she stayed perfect. She was perfection behind all the complexities of what was at stake in my adolescent world. I would see her in a new rabbit coat in November. I could imagine goose bumps raised under her cream tights. Her face would be completely covered, with curly strands of blonde hair peaking out, barely nothing more to signify it was her but poised lips breathing our frozen air. I knew she was alive under that coat, rushing blood and excitement. By now – with barely any frustration – my father would sit in the truck as I waited on the driveway to see her walk from her father's Lincoln idling at the front steps of the Catholic Church. He knew who Sharon was, and I hadn't even mentioned her name to him.

He knew a lot of what I was going through this way. He had watched me sleep on the couch for a long time. He always mentioned to me what it was like when he was my age " . . . confused by women, yet always wanting to be near them . . . not knowing what to say . . ." rambling on and on. *Confusion . . . confusing . . . confused . . .* He would talk to me then like he was sharing, but I knew when to get serious.

As if something condonable only by my father, the Sunday would turn apologetic. Signified by the wheezing coughs and the way she struggled with the window barely sealed by frost, the worm lady was close to her end. My father knew we were the only fishers devout in her sales. Jack's Bait n'Tackle was too quick and easy. They advertised. This was a quiet vigil, meant strictly for us. The importance of buying these worms wasn't just support of her well-being. We saw the Dumpster full of frozen worms, sterile white at the tops, cast away. It was atonement; a simple way to recognize what would die when she left. First her house, old and range-weary. Then our fishing trips, forgiveness for my father's mistake fifteen years ago. Then, along with that, Sharon for me. Still, her hands stayed warm all the way through ice fishing season. There was hope in that.

"Make sure you knock hard Jacob . . . really hard." He'd always say this with so much urgency. He knew she couldn't hear well and maybe he was afraid she wouldn't come to the window some Sunday. Maybe he would have to get heroic, breaking down her door because she fell in the shower or never woke up.

I knocked, waited patiently, gave her my money and ran back to the truck.

Like clockwork. Easier each time.

My father had stopped dating. The waitresses, secretaries and grocery store managers that had shared divorcedom with him were gone. Where we lived, like he said, there were only two things to do: drink and have sex. He had given up the first after me. The second dried up every year around this time. In the winter, I never woke up late at night to a squeaky screen door being closed behind him and some

drunken lady he met at a softball game. My sleep was never ruined by lingering cheap perfume that only left after the last yelling match out by her beat-up Taurus or Civic.

Christmas was a palimomial nightmare for him. I was used to it and was kind of glad it was finally just him and us again. He has always been candid about his life but has never lived with my mother. They were never sweethearts, just young accidental fucks. Of course, that didn't stop her from asking him for money here and there. I always knew when she wrote because when I'd hand my dad the mail, he'd mutter a "shit," hold her letter up to the light and sigh. Mom very well could have been one of those waitresses he dated, if she didn't hate his guts and he hers. He'd still do anything for her, just to make me happy. That's how he was good. And that's why fishing was so important to us.

The truck was warm and water from the fish cooler sloshing in the back always created a deep calm. Steam rose from his coffee in the tray between our seats. His warped Jim Croce tapes always clicked and popped at the same places. The balance swayed evenly on these sounds and gestures, ready to fall to the floor like his box of lures sliding back and forth on the dash, caught by him on right turns, me on left. There was balance.

We pulled up to the pock marked lake. Scatterings of men sat in twos and threes searching for fish in cold holes. We walked to our own spot. Watching my dad look into the depths of the black lake within our sawed-out hole, I saw so much loneliness. Sex was pain for him; for all adults. He used to talk excitedly about women and how he loved to touch them. Now that they were gone, he was hurt. In his expression I saw Jeff's dirty finger dug into the porn star's chest, I heard the weary coughs of the worm lady humiliated into selling worms for a living, I felt the intense anguish Sharon gave me when I'd wake with my underwear stuck to my legs.

We dipped our bait into the water and waited for a bite.

The next day at school I heard some news. Waiting in gym again for the bell to ring, my Sharon's name came up.

"Yeah, my brother's dating her," Jeff Layman was saying to Will Williams. Steve Layman was two years older and Jeff's mold for idiocy. They looked exactly alike and treated the world the same way: as something for them to ruin. I knew Steve from grade school.

"He's dating Sharon White? She's *our* age!"

How did Will know her too? She was *mine*. I *discovered* her. I had to say something.

"How does your brother even know her?"

"She comes to his work all the time. She's crazy about him."

Steve Layman worked at the roller skating rink. He thought he was cool.

"Yeah, he fucked her after an all night skate."

"Fucked" and Sharon in the same sentence? I don't understand. Suddenly my head was like a dirty finger shuffling a porno mag, a fluttering of fast skin and nudity, rage and rape. I saw cotton sheets being ripped and people weeping in church pews. I saw the worm lady's window slamming down on her fingers, shredding thin skin. Sharon's laughter rang out in my head, this time dirty, vengeful, like she knew I had dreams about her. I was embarrassed. I was going to be sick.

I ran. I skipped the rest of the day of school. Nothing was making sense. No subtle nuances, just Jeff's sick world careening too quickly into mine. I could handle a push – him handing me a porno here or there – but his brother does not "fuck" *my* Sharon.

Skipping school is easier than everyone lets it out to be. I walked out the door. No one stopped me. No one even paused to look. I turned at the corner and started to run, fast. I needed to leave Layman's dirty words and dirty fingers far behind me. He was ruining me.

School wasn't far from Holy Cross. Nothing in my town was far from Holy Cross. I stepped into the far edge of the parking lot as a cloud of dust was consuming the church. An ambulance was kicking up dirt as the driver and some school kids in uniforms tried to push it out of a hole. The lights on top flashed slowly. At the worm lady's house, the back door flailed wide open. I watched as the ambulance finally escaped the hole and pulled away from her home. Halfway through the parking lot, a man in the passenger's seat of the ambulance stepped out and walked back to her house, not in any hurry. He slammed the worm lady's door closed. The sound it made seemed to resonate all the way through town. It passed right through my chest.

I tried to put Sharon's image in my head as I went to sleep every night that week. I would imagine her in winter or in her mother's silk shirt. Every image I had of her was now distant, other pictures stepping in front of her as if she was standing across a school dance from me. Her face was now smirking. It didn't hurt me like I thought. Sharp pain didn't run through to my heart. It was disappointment.

The Sunday morning after the worm lady died, I laid in my bed with no reason to rise. I had slept soundly, like I hadn't even closed my eyes. I touched myself, differently. My fingers felt new against my own skin. Sharon's smiling face didn't come to mind. I tried to ignore it. Jeff's pornos did. I had a wet dream awake. That same woman with the painful look, a woman I didn't even know, smirked at me and called me to her.

As we pulled up to Jack's Bait n'Tackle, I looked down at the pavement. It was soft and wasn't messy. Definitely done by machine. The electric doors hissed as we walked through them. My dad was ahead of me, his arms spread out, feeling for something to hold onto. He looked straight into the florescent lights and squinted. As he led me to the back of the store, a hook caught in the Velcro in my jacket and affixed itself to the carpet. The tearing sound rose in my ears, sending a strange guilt through me that ended with a huff of air passing through my lips.

The machine had the letters B – A – I – T stretched across it diagonally from corner to corner. It was immense, ending two feet above my head. As I dropped coins into the vertical slot, a shallow ring counted out the correct change. A Styrofoam cup slid into the shoot between my legs.

"We got what we came for Jacob. I don't need anything else. Let's go." My father shoved his hands deep into his coat and we walked back to the truck. A new fishing rod caught his attention on the way out of the store.

We passed the church parking lot on the way out of town. As we waited at a very slow light, my father nodded in its direction. I turned to look. People, dressed in blues and blacks from service, stood in the distance, watching a bulldozer creep across the parking lot. The bulldozer driver's hair, long down his back, the men's ties and the women's dresses all blew in the cold morning breeze.

I watched as the dozer pressed its sharpened shovel into the side of the worm lady's home. The small building seemed to give even before it was touched and made no effort to stay standing. As winds sighed under its walls and dust flew into the air, the people from the church shielded their faces and their clothes from the debris. I saw Sharon standing motionless next to her parents, through the dusty sky, like across a dance floor, grimacing at the wreckage in front of her. With the sounds of the disaster humming all around her, I heard a dirty laugh in my head again. I'm not sure if it was hers. I'm not sure if it was anyone else's.

Seeing her brought something to mind. I hadn't even heard Sharon speak before. She wasn't anyone I knew. All I knew about her was what I heard from Jeff Layman. Even if what he said wasn't true, he had put that thought in my mind. All the time I had watched her on Sunday's seemed so different. She looked straight at the dead house, a lady's house I had never even been in and never would. The church was immense behind her. I saw her wince - as if in pain - maybe some dust flew into her eye. She raised her hand to her head and began to pick at a lash. Then, she dropped her head, turned and stepped through the double oak doors.

I turned back to my father. The light was green.

"Dad."

He was still watching the scene.

"What? Oh . . ." He pressed the gas and we were driving.

We drove out of the town. I pulled the Styrofoam cup with "Jack's Bait n'Tackle" written in red on the side from the holder next to my father's coffee. Resting the cup against my chest, I opened the cover and looked inside. Curled and cleansed, wrapped into each other, dead from birth, these new worms did not move.

Belonging

Just a few weeks ago, it was announced that men and women could do away with themselves again. Anyone caught doing it before was revived and immediately put in jail. The Revivalists have been growing in numbers and an all-out-war of suicide is expected.

Finally we are getting through.

The problem has gotten so bad, whole hallways in tenements reek of decomposing corpse. Patrols walking down hallways with dead sniffing dogs were mistaking one apartment - and it's very much alive inhabitants - for the next, exhausting themselves with procedures and such a stench they would ask for retirement years early of duty.

"People tired of living," the President was quoted as saying yesterday, "should evaluate what's important in this world. You can kill yourself if you'd like, but don't expect the Revival Squad not to do their job."

He obviously doesn't understand our revolt. He doesn't have to deal with what we do. He's better off. It's not only the stench in my building that makes life harder, it's living.

Deleone, whom I truly believe in, is right. The only way to escape this world's constant tracking, taxing, and stalking by "undercover" agents, is to kill oneself.

I've pulled out my chip with pliers. They saw the current go low at the monitoring station down the block and pumped my stomach of the acid before it could destroy my intestines completely. Of course my throat and my mouth are scarred irreparably now. I am surely to die soon anyway, but every time I cough out the tube down my esophagus, the alarms sound again and someone breaks through my door. They monitor everything through that damn chip in my head.

Really, what kind of world is this when I can't even kill myself?

I've been revived four times. After the second, my skin became spongy and flaked off at the most stretched parts of my body: my knees, my elbows, my hips. It looks like a cheese shaver was slowly being pulled down at the top of my joints. It flakes and I find the skin in the cuffs of my pants and in my socks when I go to bed.

Deleone speaks to everyone, not about escape, about rebellion. Rebellion is an intrinsic guard against wrongfulness. Most rebels don't know exactly what they are rebelling against, but they know something isn't right. Since I lost my job, I've had plenty of time to figure out why we are rebelling.

Someone once asked him once if he believed in an afterlife. All he said was "the government can't follow us in death. They can't commodify souls there." He then went on to say that an afterlife is not what matters; escaping this ugly world is not what matters to him. To him it is about being free.

I want to ask him why he isn't dead yet. "Not until the end of all this," he would say. I know he would say that.

"Pointing a gun at yourself is pointing a gun at them!"

I stood in the back of the room and heard screams and cries. One woman in front just killed herself right there. I felt her absence slide through us all, sending a palling moment from one end of the room to the other. She stabbed herself with a kitchen knife. It sat four inches deep in her chest and blood filled up the bruised cavity between her breasts. Her body lay still on the building floor.

Deleone jumped down off the stage, his voice still fresh from screaming. He knelt to the floor and kissed her vacant forehead.

"Dear daughter of the revolution," he said in a loud whisper, so everyone could hear. "You did a good thing, a very good thing."

That was the first time I had seen a person die. It felt so new . . . and freeing. I went home with a buzz in my chest; replacing the feeling her dead looks left me. As I shuffled out the door, coldly contemplating everything that was going on, the Revival Squad pushed through and bent down to the dead woman.

They were going to save her life, chase down her angel as it feverishly made a break for the light. As I turned down into the night, all I saw was the woman and Deleone huddled over her like a shell.

So yeah, I can't talk now. Acid has destroyed my throat and my stomach and my mouth. My scarred lips look like they are dribbling vomit, always sitting there, almost to plop to the floor. I sit in my

bare apartment with the IV tube pumping slowly at intervals of twenty minutes. I can't even leave my house. I am chained to my home by plastic tubes. Only once my credit runs out will the monitoring station finally cut me dry, letting me live for a few days on nothing but dirty tap water and whatever dried food I have left in my cupboards.

The IV feels cool in my arm, like my wife's fingernails running down my forearms. Maybe that coolness is her set jaw and her eyes when she would do it to me, waking in the middle of the night from cancer pain. I would wake to see her silently holding in the pain with just enough refinement to stroke my sleepy arms.

That's a pain she doesn't have to feel anymore. That's a pain I carry stronger than any acid could give me. So the president could never understand my pain, her pain, and our pain.

I took my shoes off yesterday and a baby toe came rolling out oddly onto the floor. I just looked at it and shrugged.

My first attempt was poetic and ridiculous. Six months ago I was a spineless wreck. My wife had just died and I had just lost my job at the college. I swore, after walking by a Deleone protest on a playground near my house, that I had nothing to live for.

People were standing on a basketball court and a young woman was standing in front of them.

"If you can't live by your own means, don't live at all!" Her voice was raspy from yelling and aggressive from pent up emotions.

"Their ads teach you lies, their patrols enforce them, and these damn chips in our heads make sure they are doing their jobs correctly!"

As she screamed, the people around her would yell amen and repeat words back to her.

"Correctly!!!"

"Hell Yeah Lady!!!"

As I walked by, eyes attached to the scene, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. She was right. How could the world around us get so out of control? I am a human, surrounded by my same gray race, living the exact same life. How could our world get so out of control?

I was young when chips were implemented. Fifty years ago they were some theorized Brave New World invention. Science Fiction writers laughed off the idea and used it to their artistic advantage. People talked about them in fear. Even the lowliest knew it was possible. It wasn't until around '01 that chips were really starting to be considered a reality. At first they were simply to help those with chemical imbalances. Ways to stay productive. Manic-depressive? Here's a little boost of serotonin to the right place to keep you perky. No confusing drugs and no side effects. These little things just told your body what was wrong and told it to fix it. Little silicon watchdogs. Inject just a little bit of dopamine at the right time, or insulin for diabetics. Mine was put in at this time to control my attention from straying from task.

Then, fifteen years ago, it was suggested that anyone who lived off corporate credit or had any type of unattainable debt should apply for a new type of chip to help you pay your debts. Some people's credit slates were "wiped clean" at this time as well. This way the corporations could monitor your debt and take what they wanted once a month so bills wouldn't be such a hassle, piling up and being neglected. As long as your employer deposited what you earned into your account once a month, which also led to your chip, you could slowly work off your debt. Of course, if you didn't work or if you didn't make enough to pay your debts, the opposite happened. You became indentured to the little alien in your body.

Most everyone else I knew who didn't have them got them at that time. My parents even applied. I applied to have my chemical chip upgraded at this time because of the inconvenience of not having one. I would see ads of people taking groceries straight from the store, never having to stop to have their food registered. Everything was just credited to their chips. A computer deducted what they took. It made so much sense. Soon I would be the one picking up bananas on the way home and not have to see money leave my hands to pay for them.

That vision is gone. I have to wait in line longer. I never have the money I need and it seems some chips are better than others. When I try to hail an empty cab, it always avoids me, checking my account limit from a scanner on the front dash, pulling up to some man further up the block.

So, as the woman on the playground yelled, I saw a man throw a noose around the goal. I knew what she was going to do. The crowd knew as well and was ready to see her become a martyr. I quickened my pace enough to turn the corner before she put her head through the loop in the rope. I heard the crowd

yell in victory. I saw the Revival Squad pull out of the monitoring station at the end of the block as I passed.

The new president, whom Deleone despises, has created some new theory based on crime. It's the reason why Deleone is free to speak and why people can now kill themselves again. If death is the end result, there's nothing to worry about.

"Modern Science," he was quoted as saying in the paper, "has made unnecessary death a non-issue. We react to the problem and rebuild from there."

He means he doesn't have to stop the murderer from murdering. He can revive the dead person. It's less costly to do that than send a man to jail or send a suicidal person to counseling. That's all a way of the past. Why bother spending the money to stop the criminal when you can fix the crime? It seems that morality has truly become an institution in every right. If the government condones it, or doesn't see anything wrong with what you are doing, then it isn't wrong.

That is why death is Deleone's final frontier. It isn't wrong to kill yourself. But it might be unproductive.

After that walk past the playground, I decided I would be the next. I had nothing truly to live for. My wife had become a natural martyr, her cancer a gift and her death a pain I wanted to die for. I wasn't dying for the revolution, yet.

I hung myself in the bathroom. I cried myself into the extension cord noose and I smoked one last good cigarette, mumbling Mary's name under my breath, apologizing for simple fights over gifts or money.

I woke on the floor. The extension cord had snapped under my weight. The Revival Squad left dirt on the bathroom mat and ate all my bagels.

And the Revivalists aren't as weird and menacing as I thought they'd be. Most are cops who've lost their jobs, finding this one very similar to the one they just had. They're not some clown car full of idiots' type of thing. It's usually just a man and a woman team, pouring drugs and adrenaline down your throat and plucking at choice areas of your spine with electrodes.

They have a very tough job and they're not very good at it. The first time, they didn't pump enough fluids to my left leg. That's why my toes are falling off.

Dreaming back to my college years, I remember the day I decided to become an economist. It wasn't revolutionary at the time, but considering the influence money had upon our society at the time I graduated college – 2003, to be exact – it seemed like a pretty good idea. Some governing agent might pick me up to help the modern economy after years at some great private college. If that never happened, I would still have tenure. Teaching the world how to spend its money seemed very lucrative. Of course, that was before the corporate take-over of 2015, when some senator said America needed to slow down in every way and the corporate leaders disagreed in unison. After that day, and when I agreed with his assertions, my job would become some strange profession, like the word alchemist would to modern science. Only one new body in the government would decide where public money should go, and the Corporations decided who was in that body. Their control had finally reached the surface.

I had no work and a recently deceased wife. The theories and algorithms that consumed my life didn't matter anymore. Progress had finally become internal. Since the chips had been implemented into regular society, people couldn't escape their social class by stealing or making more money, by dressing some way or another, by working or not working. In some dark governing vision, modern humans had finally become who they are, inside and out. Predetermination by debt.

And yet the change was so fast. It took about twenty years – I am only sixty-two – and I am only realizing its verisimilitude after my fourth suicide attempt.

Let me put it this way: government has been taken over by media has taken over democracy. Saying what you want to say and saying what you believe is not your choice anymore. It's your duty like any other. Giving your money to your government now funds things you buy for. You are paying in every single way to make your nation-state stronger. And it is this same country that you believe in democratically that is killing you. Just being alive is killing your freedom slowly and surely. You work, adding credit to your chip. The corporation or government agency (which are the same thing) you work for

adds this money to your chip. It then takes that same money back out to pay for the things you need to survive. And it's still not enough. We have become simple vessels in a blatant way to keep the money circulating. We are human money launderers, cleaning the rich ones money of their guilt for taking it back from us.

The only way Deleone believes we can destroy the government element is to bring upon violence. Violence always leads to change. Our deaths create less strength to be used against us.

That is why the president keeps reviving us. We have become a commodity and a link he cannot do without.

Humans have theorized about the horror of future since the dawn of modern thought. Writers have seen the chips coming for centuries. Now, that very future is so close - less than a lifetime - that people are envisioning an end in their own eyes and are choosing the only thing they have power over anymore: their own lives.

I found Deleone in his same public square in the city. There weren't many people listening to him tonight and most bared the proof of having been revived at least a couple times. Baggy skin, clumps of hair missing and purplish skin made the hope in their eyes hard to hide. Some wore dark work clothes. Some wore whatever they could find or whatever would stay on their zombie fit.

I was wearing the same pajamas I had worn for days. They were the only things I could find any comfort in anymore. My skin itches and flakes and sometimes burned from slow rigor mortis. I was miserable but determined.

"What was the last thing you created?" Deleone was talking somewhere above our heads. He had some new gleam to his face I hadn't seen the last few times I watched him speak. It wasn't the same enchantment that had made me kill myself two times thinking of his presence. It was odd.

"When you look around the place where you live . . ." he looked to the ground. "Do you see anything . . . any object . . . that you can say you made, or something someone else made?"

He looked right at me. Maybe he knew who I was. Maybe he recognized me. I shivered.

"Or is your entire house full of prefabricated, impersonal items. Do you look around and see an entire room you paid for that you couldn't explain? Why did you buy all those things? Who are you supporting? Certainly it's not you that you are supporting. Certainly it's not Bob and Sherri down the block. Who the fuck is it? What money, going through that damn chip in your head, . . ."

He plucked his chip from the back of his head neck. It was well known that he pulled his out long ago with no retort from any monitoring station. They didn't want to start a riot by taking Deleone back to a clinic to have it reinstalled anyway.

". . . goes back to you? What, in this world, belongs to you?"

All my nights seem to fold together. I do remember after that speech, I went back to my home and looked through my house for something I could explain. Every item in my house, from tables I bought - too cheap to pass up - sitting against my front windows, to the fruit I bought from the grocery store last night, was from somewhere or made by someone or something I couldn't explain.

I rifled through my house to find some semblance of a past, a story linked to anything in my home. Nothing more than what a bitch that desk was to get up the stairs or how crowded the giant warehouse was when I carried those tables up to the register. Nothing came to me. Not my entire life. Nothing made by a hand I could touch, nothing made by a human I could thank or think of when looking at what they had made.

Mary made me some knit mittens one winter. Cancer had isolated her to her bed, keeping her awake and letting my guilt mount every time I fell asleep easy. She had made me something warm to wear to my early classes. They were red knit wool. Bright red. Nothing I could ever imagine myself wearing. I couldn't bear to wear them either. I never did.

I found them in my dresser, stuck to some shavings on the edge of my top plastic drawer, left behind by the machine that made it. I slid them onto my hands and cried. Nothing seemed redder than those gloves. Nothing seemed more human.

The second time I killed myself, I stabbed myself in the chest just like that woman at the auditorium. In fact, I think, it was the night I saw her that I did it. As I've said, all my days have swelled together. Her mouth open and closed with death gasps when I saw her on that floor. They made this perfect O shape and pinched closed, over and over. I left quickly after she did her act. I couldn't watch her

being caught by the Revivalists. It's the worst scene to see. I can imagine what they did to her was similar to what they did to me.

They pulled the knife from my chest, cauterized the small hole in my heart and simply shocked me back to life. I'm not exactly sure how they can bring someone that's been dead that long back to life, but they revived me and only left a notch in my breastbone from the knife and 20 stitches in my chest. I woke three days later with an inch of fluid left in the bag in the IV on my arm and a terrible headache. They must have some new patent with the devil to have such tricks worked out. I just wanted to die.

I read the paper today - the same one that announced it legal to kill yourself again - that death rates shouldn't drop, due to the miraculous improvements to the Revival Squads repertoire. I swear something is weird. How can they bring you back? Government has a pact with Satan, if there is one.

Let's see . . . rope burns from the noose, toes falling off, crooked back, 20 stitches over my irregular beating heart (it clicks against some loose bones in my chest cavity), and . . . oh yeah, acid all inside. What was number three? Yeah . . . sadness. I tried to kill myself from sadness.

I lay on my couch and imagined happiness. I imagined a humanity that hadn't escalated out of control. I imagine what Deleone calls the "pinnacle of progression."

I imagined a world where humans took things slower, coping with each new change as it came on. Imagine understanding the ramifications of the moving image before we abused it with television? Imagine philosophers feeling out the dilemma of the situation before the scientists and engineers got hold of newer and better technological versions of everything.

In pre-modern times, there was about a war a century for western civilization. That war brought on new developments slow and tediously, and people still took decades after to cope emotionally and mentally from all the changes it brought on. Now imagine all the changes that have occurred in the past one hundred and fifty years. There's too much to cope with. The pinnacle is two sided, one side being technology, the other being human sensibility. If both sides of the pinnacle aren't even, one will topple the other, ending humanity. That day on the couch, I felt the whole of progress falling down over me. Humans are too far behind, are too mentally short to hold up that other side of the pinnacle with understanding -- their only tool. Man keeps pushing himself deeper and deeper into the ground as the world he has created grows heavier and heavier upon him.

The third time I died, my heart was still weak from fluids I had been given from the stabbing. I had hung myself for my dead wife the first time just days before that. The third time I died from being overwhelmed.

I can see people walking my streets from my apartment cell. I can see most of them are in the same spot as I am. But most of them don't have the perception that I do. The world is so big and Deleone's voice is so small. There might be small radical groups down the street from me, but there aren't those same groups everywhere. This message doesn't travel far and its messenger will soon die. As I see people crossing the street in front of my house, I imagine the tethers to their head, judging and playing them, taking from them and watching them like I am doing now. I might look like a zombie, but they are the ones that live like zombies.

The fourth death was hasty. I needed to die from pain and all I had was bleach in my house. I mixed some cleaning products with it and let them burn. I was still dying when I heard the banging at my door. I clutched my wife's mittens and closed my eyes and died. I was revived seconds later. They were still here when I came to.

Death is nothing like it should be. It's nothing. There's nothing there. Still I'm determined to choose, just this last once, my own destiny. I'm going to jump from the roof tonight. 15 flights up.

Nighttime is always hardest for me. Light has started to burn my eyes, but closing them is even worse. I need to try again. It's going to be hard to do because once I pull the IV out of my arm and the tube down my throat, the Revivalists will notice my levels have dropped and will come for me again. Maybe they'll be swamped with calls and I'll get through. Goddamn, I hope.

I put my mittens on and unlocked the door to my apartment. I counted to ten and pulled out my tubes. Two flights to the roof. For a piece of hell, I sure did move. As I stepped out into the hallway, I bumped into my neighbor Jeff. He looked like hell. He was in some old jeans, dried blood smeared from

the belt line to his knees. There were stitches in his wrists and he had dried slashes on his neck. Just like me. He looked through me and ran for the stairs.

Doors opened one by one as I passed. All my neighbors began hurriedly following behind, all in different moments of rebel disarray. Old Miss Perkins was leading the way, in her bloody and yellowed nightgown. We were all focused for the roof.

The two flights of stairs were full of people. The clapping of sound echoed up to the roof door, trapped closed. I opened the door.

I was aghast. Thousands of bodies crowded the skyline, stretching across my roof and across the entire cityscape. Each person, still deep in his or her own chasm, looked over the edge a second before leaping to the ground. Autonomy in our death. Freedom from the greed we had created. People were wearing chains and bracelets and homemade gifts from friends, holding the only painting they have ever done or the only mittens they had ever knit. I stepped up to the edge of the building with so many others. We jumped. The wind of bodies passing and soaring together roared in my ears. The sense of something new flew with me.

The sirens caught my attention on the way down. They were going to have a lot of work to do.