NO WEAPON FORGED AGAINST YOU WILL PREVAIL

They passed a busker on the stoop of a hardware store. An elderly Asian man playing Für Elise on a saxophone. Dixon would have investigated—is anybody else dodging those feet sticking out onto the sidewalk?—but he was with Cassie and he didn't want to alarm her. He himself was acutely disturbed, considering that a stripped-down version of Für Elise was the only complete song he ever learned during two years of piano instruction as a child. And just a few days ago they had gone through the S chapter of Cassie's Sesame Street dictionary and she had asked many questions about the saxophone and its funny shape. But he let it go.

Dixon's first visit with the psychiatrist was made to coincide with Cassie's first day of grade school because he couldn't afford an hour of daycare, not comfortably. And wouldn't it be closer to two hours accounting for travel time? Not affordable comfortably or otherwise. He hadn't sold an article in weeks and the Gray Line piece stagnated even as the word count grew. Rice and beans for dinner most nights, sometimes cereal. A little water added to the milk, to stretch it out. No daycare.

Cassie chattered with happy speculation on the possibilities of this first day. Maybe the classroom would have a bunny or an ant farm. There was no timidity in her character, but Dixon worried on her behalf. Nobody would play with her at recess due to the vagaries of children. The meager lunch he packed would leave her hungry. She would forget to visit the bathroom and have an accident, earning herself some cruel nickname for the rest of her days. He reserved these notions to himself on the grounds that naming them would give them power, and so was dry-eyed and cheerful as he walked her to the bus stop. She bounced into the vehicle like she'd done it a thousand times before and was gone. Not a wave. Dixon might have allowed himself to cry

but an attractive mother was at the stop as well, waving goodbye to an equally handsome child. He paused to see if he could catch her eye, share a moment between parents: oh god they grow up fast, yes they do. But she was checking something on her phone while Dixon had no phone to check and was left surveying his surroundings as though lost. So he left.

The sun was out and humanity emerged to taste it while they could, flooding the streets with pleasant low-key bustle. Cassie gone, he became vigilant for clues. His first task was to double back and confirm that the busker remained, now playing the Star-Spangled Banner while another man stooped over to drop a bill in his cup. All-in-all this was satisfying and he turned around. The fastest route to the psychiatrist's would take him past the bus stop again, so he decided on a detour to avoid encountering the attractive mother who might already suspect him of oddness.

Five minutes later, a man with a handlebar mustache approached on a unicycle. Another red flag. Granted, a sizable cohort of bohemians in the city wore "Keep Portland Weird" t-shirts and were deliberately unconventional in their pursuits, so the unicyclist operated well within the expected range of public behavior. A red flag nonetheless. Dixon watched the man negotiate through foot traffic, right down the middle of the sidewalk although that could simply be commonplace rudeness. A middle-aged woman with arms full of shoeboxes grimaced and stepped aside to avoid him. The unicyclist squeaked and tottered past Dixon, who leaned in and sniffed hard in the man's wake. More than just a hint of Old Spice. Dixon approached the annoyed woman and shook his head, smiling. These people, he said, are stilts next? Ready to flee if her reaction was confusion or fear, but she nodded. You're late to the party, she said, I saw a guy on stilts last week, maybe the same stupid guy. So Dixon laughed and kept walking. The second false alarm of the day, was all.

There were other worries but that's fine. There always were, hence the appointment. A complete stranger yelled out Dixon's name from a storefront, but he yelled again and it wasn't even close, he was yelling *Jason,* and Jason turned out to be a man walking just behind. The yeller and Jason were old friends. To be safe, Dixon bent down and pretended to tie his shoe so as to overhear some of their conversation, which entailed being college roommates back in the day and was thoroughly banal so probably real. As he stood, an egg burst on the ground a few feet to the left. From whence? Oh goodness, said a mother to a little girl, let me hold the bag, they're falling out everywhere. Spilled groceries. Still, why a solitary egg, how does it slip alone from a carton? Can I help, asked Dixon, kneeling again at the girl's level. The mother demurred, but Dixon made as though to salvage the egg, clowning for the child. He shrugged, rubbed a bit of the yolk between his fingers. I have a little girl about your age, he told her. She doesn't like eggs either. Everyone laughed politely and he walked away. When they couldn't see him, he put a finger to his nose and sniffed, it was egg, and he tasted it, and it was egg. Broken shell but the world remained whole.

The psychiatrist's office was squeezed between a parking garage and a laundromat. There was no receptionist, just a small waiting room with folding chairs and a television playing infomercials and a sign that said Dr. Nickel will be right with you. And he was, he poked his head out of his office at exactly ten o'clock and said Dixon, nice to meet you and please come in. An electric aerated fountain fussed on his desk throughout their conversation and Dixon wondered if Dr. Nickel turned it off at the end of the day, or left it bubbling overnight to sooth the space and soak it in tranquility.

Let's get the ugly business out of the way, said the psychiatrist, and took Dixon's insurance card. It runs out in three months, said Dixon, how often can I see you until then? First

things first, said the psychiatrist, making a blurry photocopy of the card on a historic machine. Your message said schizophrenia? So Dixon told the story of his father, while the psychiatrist slowly peeled an apple and quartered it.

There may have been oblique warning signs, but Father's illness didn't manifest in an overt manner until Dixon was seven years old and so there were scenes of a sane man to recollect, if only a scattered few. A man who read the paper in the morning and participated in a bowling league every Sunday after church, worked construction and voted strictly Republican, changed his own oil. Was there a sturdier picture of staid sanity in all creation? Until he began hearing the voice from the woodpile? Well so what, it's fine when it's just the woodpile—that's once a day on the way out the door and once a day on the way back in, manageable indefinitely—but that isn't the way things work. Is it? Dixon asked his psychiatrist. It isn't the way things work. Not usually, said Dr. Nickel. Things get worse, don't they? asked Dixon. Usually, without intervention, said Dr. Nickel. Entropy, one of them thought.

And things did get worse, but it was still surprising when Dixon's father jumped in front of the semi-truck. Shattered pelvis, broken back, three weeks in intensive care before he died. Quite shocking at the time, but Dixon later read online that almost half of people with schizophrenia will attempt suicide at some point. His father was a member of the Moose Lodge, wore his hair in a crew-cut, and grilled steaks as the sole culinary pursuit of his life, so if that man could be pushed off the brink then a statistic of almost half seemed, if anything, too modest. Has that been your experience? he asked the psychiatrist. It sounds about right.

On a day-to-day basis, Dixon said, you don't realize how many improbable things you see and hear. I try to smell them. I've read that you might see something that isn't there, and you might smell something that isn't there, but you probably won't see and smell the same thing that

isn't there. The more senses involved, the better. But I've had dreams, continued Dixon. Where I saw and smelled and felt and tasted and heard. And thought nothing of it.

You may not need a psychiatrist, you may need a philosopher.

I tried, they didn't take my insurance.

The psychiatrist laughed. Well we can talk about it, he said. That's all we can do for now, but it isn't nothing. Far from it. They made an appointment for the next week of which Dr. Nickel made no record, apparently trusting either to his memory or that things would just tend to work out. A nice way to live, thought Dixon.

#

He walked home. He didn't own a car, so it seemed appropriate that he'd been commissioned by the city paper to write a freelance piece about the metro system. The Gray Line. Five million dollars over budget and three years late. The story itself was also past deadline, but as he told his editor: this problem isn't going anywhere, it is only becoming bigger with time. Run another feel-good fluff piece about rescue dogs and give me another week, I'm close. But that was two weeks ago.

Five hours until meeting Cassie at the bus stop, so he got to work. He wrote in longhand and whenever he finished he would rent a computer at the print shop and laboriously type it up, double-spaced nice and pretty. Used to be that the paper would take his script and have a secretary transcribe it, a service fallen victim to budget constraints. Like Dixon himself. On staff for a couple of years—his first job out of college—then fired fifteen months ago and sporadically employed on a piece-by-piece basis. The internet, explained his editor. Ad prices. Tight margins.

Outrageous insurance premiums. Dixon worked for four hours, and the fifth hour he smoked cigarettes and watched the clock.

Dixon picked up Cassie from the bus stop and she told him about the day. All the kids at school played with her, and her lunch was yummy, and she didn't forget about the bathroom but she didn't need to use it even once. There was neither a bunny nor an ant farm, though a hummingbird feeder did hang from a tree in the recess playground. They walked back to their studio apartment, where Dixon made rice and beans and they played Go Fish. He got out the photographs and spread them on the floor, as he did for a moment every day so Cassie would never forget what her mother had looked like.

We had a good day Laura, said Dixon. Cassie's first day of first grade. Tell mama about your favorite part of the day.

Miss Goldberg has pretty yellow hair.

Miss Goldberg's hair. And I met with the doctor. I think he's a good guy. I had a funny thought. If you're a hypochondriac about your physical health, somebody might say: don't worry, you're just being crazy. But if you're a hypochondriac about your mental health, somebody might say: don't worry, you're not crazy. I told the doctor and he laughed. Cassie is laughing too, is that funny, Cassie?

Yes.

We miss you. Goodnight Laura.

Goodnight mama.

Okay it's your turn to have the bed, get your blankets up there.

I don't mind the floor daddy.

Of course not, the floor is great. I vastly prefer the floor, and you had your turn last night. You get Sundays. I get all the other nights because I'm the adult and I choose the floor. It keeps my back straight.

Am I going to get a curvy back if I sleep on the bed? Like a saxophone?

Like the one we saw on the way to the bus stop?

I don't want a curvy back.

I promise it won't happen.

Before bed, Dixon and Cassie opened the window and traced out constellations. She knew them all by heart, but she asked: daddy, what is that one? That's the little moose, he said and she laughed. No daddy, the little bear, she said. And that one? The big pooper he said and she laughed harder. No, the big dipper, she said. And that one? That is the most beautiful of constellations, he said, my most favorite of them all. What is it, daddy? It's Cassiopeia, he said.

#

Dixon knew his father heard voices from the woodpile because every evening he observed the man halt on his way up the walk and address the stack. Sometimes calmly, sometimes with fierce violence, and sometimes it would start one way and end another. Dixon was seven, old enough to recognize a significant deviation for what it was. He asked his Aunt Patty—who watched him in the afternoons until his father came home—but she was a timorous woman with an apprehension of her stern older brother even prior to all of this, and she refused to comment.

And so he asked his father, only once because the reaction was a terrible thing. The man was visibly struck with fear, eyes wide like Cassie awakening from nightmare. Do they ask you the question, Dixon? his father asked. No daddy. Dixon now you listen to me, look me in the eyes, do they ask you the question? No daddy. And his father stared off and drummed his fingertips on the kitchen table and didn't have another bite of dinner, and Dixon put himself to bed and listened to his father's fingers rap on the table for hours to come.

His father began to mutter aloud from that point on, maybe to warn Dixon without needing to converse about it. Maybe so he could pass it off, oh I'm just thinking out loud, oh I'm remembering a show I saw. But nobody questioned him.

It's in the wood but not only there, not just the woodpile, it's in all wood, it's embedded in the very concept of wood, the very word itself, wood, it lives in the utterance and is carried from place to place in that way. It starts there in the wood but don't even worry about that, it's the least of our trouble, it has an endgame inconceivable to us. It starts with me and it ends with dust, the whole world shaken down to the dirt. We're all of a piece, don't you see, what infects one infects all, breaks down the false walls pretending to divide things. Until all is dust. But it starts with me. I have to stop it. It all begins with me and I have to stop it.

#

Two Santa Clauses on the way here, said Dixon. One Santa, sure, whatever. But two separate Santas in September?

I also saw a Santa on my way in. It's Portland, you know? There is probably some event going on.

Hate to break it to you, doc, but maybe you're schizophrenic too.

It takes one to know one, said Dr. Nickel. And anyway, as one very smart person with that disease once said: there are no schizophrenics, just people with schizophrenia. It doesn't become the definition of a person. Your father, don't think of him as a schizophrenic. He was a man who struggled with a bad disease.

Struggled and lost. And I feel I'm getting worse.

I don't know if your episodes are getting worse or not. I don't even think they're episodes, and I think you should consider moving to a more boring city. But your fear certainly grows worse. It is paralyzing you.

I have no argument with that.

Why now, Dixon? Meaning, why did you come to see me now, and not a year ago, two years ago.

I don't know. Maybe just stress, the Gray Line article keeping me up at night. I feel like I'm running out of time. I'm 24. Prime years for onset. My father was quite old for schizophrenia, he was 40. Does it mean anything? Do I wait sixteen years to get sick?

Don't wait for anything. Live your life. Let's just posit, with your family history, that you have a ten-fold chance of developing the disease. That's 10%. To compare: in your lifetime, you have a 50% chance of developing cancer. Why not worry about that? Why not worry about heart attacks? Getting hit by a car? Getting audited by the IRS?

My mother died of cancer, said Dixon. Lung. Took two years, was painful. We had a hospital bed moved into the house, and she was doped up on morphine most of the time. She died just before dad got sick. I was a kid. Saw it with my own eyes. Not afraid of it.

Fair enough. But you've got to admit, the IRS? Still scary, said the psychiatrist.

I like you doc, even though you don't take me seriously. Maybe because of that, one of them thought.

Not worried for myself, Dixon continued. I don't worry about much of anything, as a matter of course. Lost my parents to cancer and madness. Lost my wife to a drunk driver. Lost my job to the internet and tight margins. What is left to protect? Only one thing.

You're worried they'll take Cassie, said the psychiatrist.

At least I had my aunt. Cassie has no one.

There is nothing preventive we can do, not really, nothing proven. We can watch for signs. We can talk. We can start medical treatment at the earliest sign of trouble.

Not before? Things can fall apart quickly.

Not a good idea.

The medicine works?

It helps significantly. There are a lot of very functional, professional people with schizophrenia. Lawyers, doctors. Journalists.

You'll be there for me when it happens?

If it happens, I will be there.

#

Dixon made rice and beans and they played Go Fish.

We had a good day, Laura. I saw the psychiatrist again. That's visit four. Nothing to report there, but in other news I feel like I'm finally getting somewhere on the Gray Line article. Had a phone call today with an insider who might be willing to meet, give me the straight scoop

on the condition of anonymity. Maybe the break I'm looking for? And Cassie had a good day at school.

Can mama really hear us when we tell her about the day?

I don't know, probably not. But I like to imagine she can.

Could we get a TV, daddy? Cassie asked.

Where'd you get that notion? We can't afford a TV, he said, and besides it's just people trying to sell us more stuff that we also can't afford.

I want to see cartoons. I want to see Gerty the Cat.

Gerty the Cat huh. Look here, we don't need a TV. Look at me. Meow meow. Where's my ball of yarn? Where's my stinky wet food? Meow meow I'm Gerty the Cat. What are you laughing at, I'm Gerty the Cat.

You're silly. And you told mama that there is a phone and we don't even have a phone, so I think we should have a TV.

Put away the cards, honey, it's time for bed.

Dixon and Cassie opened the window and traced out constellations. They're silly aren't they, she asked. They don't look like anything. Could I pick any stars and say they look like a duck and call it The Duck?

People were trying to understand the world around them, he said. Nobody knew what a star really was, but spent a lot of time looking at them.

What if I found a circle constellation, like really a perfect round circle, so nice that it couldn't just be an accident?

Wouldn't that be something, he said. What would you call it?

I would name it after you, she said.

You would name it Dixon?

I would name it Daddy.

There are lots of daddies, he said. But she just hugged him and looked up and he saw the green flash in her eyes, felt her ribcage under his hands, heard her giggling and smelled the bubble bath on her skin, and he leaned down and kissed her forehead. And he said, Daddy it is. Let's keep an eye open for it.

#

Dixon's father was a man named Gary. He married his high school sweetheart. He was taciturn and firm but had a secret love of ice cream that wasn't secret, Dixon knew about the icebox in the garage. After Dixon's mother died, after they'd wheeled the body out to the hearse and the house sat quiet, Gary brought Dixon out to the garage with two spoons and they finished a pint of mint chocolate chip together in silence.

Gary was never a verbose man, and the majority of words he ever spoke to his son were uttered in the weeks of his decline, pressured complaints of invasion and disturbance. Surveillance through television, chemicals in milk. Worried that he couldn't distinguish whether memories were his own or somebody else's. Thoughts became untethered floating objects in a room that anybody walking through could possess by accident or intent. He was a complete human being swiftly rendered inchoate, fragmentary. Soon his whole life felt unreal, a performance on a stage but not even his own performance. I'm a spectator, he said. They make it say things and it says them. This started with me. I don't know where it ends.

In the hour before Gary jumped in front of the truck, he and Dixon watched the sun set over the Yante River pouring out to the horizon. Gary had taken him on a walk to get out of the house, somewhere they could talk and not be heard. So they stood on the bridge with traffic churning behind them, Dixon playing with a toy soldier, marching it back and forth across the railing, determined not to look at Gary because his father was crying and it was unimaginable. Gary whispered, was there no decency, he asked, no honor? He'd held up his end but even now they follow, even now they threaten his family. What will it take, what will be necessary to protect him? Dixon, look at me. No weapon forged against you will prevail. Dixon, look at me. I will do anything for you. I love you. I love you. And he stepped into the road.

#

Father saw the end of the world all around him. Dust, dirt, fire. I think about it, I wonder.

What do you wonder?

I wonder if he wasn't crazy, if he was right/

Every person who has ever spent time in the company of a severe psychosis has wondered that same thing. It's a normal response.

I wonder about that. And. I wonder about. Your little fountain, do you turn it off when you leave, or keep it on?

I guess I leave it on. I don't even notice it anymore so I forget about it does it bother you?

No. But can't stay long. I know I was late but still can't stay long. Lots of work to do, one of them thought or said/

You seem distracted today/

Didn't sleep much last night, trying to finish the article. Tried to call the paper yesterday to get an extension and they wouldn't transfer me. New receptionist doesn't know me thinks I'm somebody else. Getting worried they won't accept it now won't pay me but it isn't finished in fact I have to buy another journal when I leave here today

The article is about a new bus line asked the interrogator/about Gary?

What

Gray line? A new bus?

No the subway

they're putting in a subway I had no idea/I'm sure you didn't nothing has been written about it nothing publicly available they've drilled out all the

tunnels but it is so deep underground that nobody felt or heard anything it's been in development for decades it's miles down/a subway the man asked again/a subway and he stood to leave/wait for a minute dixon just wait