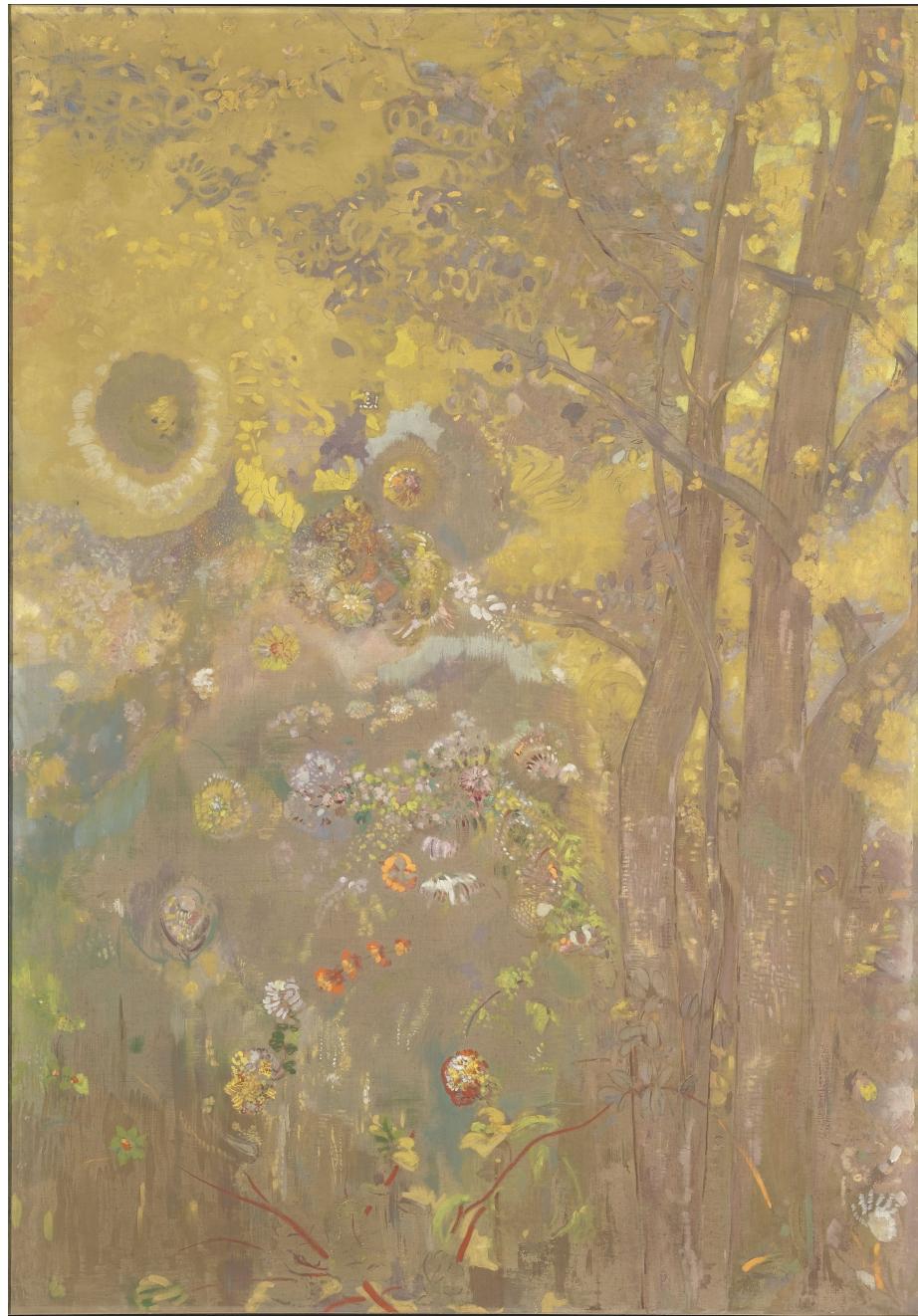


Sketches of the Inchoate



By Charles Davi

The outlines of a day

It's Syttende Mai, we're in the living room of our apartment, there's a TV mounted on a white wall.

You take your earrings off, which are large, and silver, and quite reflective, your hair is blonde.

Our bedroom is sunny, as is the entire apartment.

I watch your fingers, as you take your earrings off -

Your ear is almost glowing a bit in the light, and so I can see the faint outlines of the blood vessels branching under your skin, causing your earlobes to look like small opaque gumdrops, in context.

It's all a bit disorienting, leaving me relieved, that we're finally home -

You seem so comfortable, undressing, slowly and casually, with something in between indifference and affection, occasionally, making eye-contact, smiling.

Though I'm borderline offended by your pantyhose, which take me by surprise, given what you're wearing is, otherwise, tantamount to a costume:

The translucent, brown top is high-waisted, looks a bit cheap, like a beer bottle.

I can nonetheless see the outlines of your underwear in the bright light of the room, which compensates.

Our apartment is not that big, though certainly not small -

My snobbishness creeps into almost everything, including our home, though you are the rare exception, leaving even my exhausting pretensions exhausted, unable to find an unflattering aspect of your appearance, or behavior.

The bedroom has what look like floor to ceiling windows, and the room is filled with typical Scandinavian summer sunlight:

Ultra-bright and white.

Your knees are shaking, somewhat, planted into the bed, with your palms also flat on the bed, supporting you, with your back approximately upright -

Your hair is down, obscuring your face, which is looking into your lap, just a few inches away from mine.

...

I drank beer for most of the day, to avoid acting like a jerk, so I must really like you, and it seems as though we love each other, but I'm nonetheless concerned with your opinion of me, which is atypical –

It breaks my confidence, leaving me less free to enjoy my drunkenness, than I'm accustomed to, which I dismiss, as an unavoidable consequence of adulthood, and a mature relationship.

We're engaged, and I can feel pangs of financial anxiety at times when I see your ring, and my obnoxious car, and my obnoxious clothes, my obnoxious expenses generally, all tethered about some pretentious drivel, pushing papers about a desk, quantifying some nonsense risk, all of which leave me carrying the weight of a career that appeals in many ways to what is worst about me:

An aggressive jackass, eager to remind everyone they wouldn't fare terribly well, but for constraints of civility.

You elicit something else in me, I've grown addicted to, perhaps because I'm being paid to be my worst most days, providing me with an escape:

An exaggerated privacy -

We both enjoy the same pretentious bull shit, with a common set of signals we interpret in a private manner, regardless of who's around, which allows our space to live, wherever we are, together.

Nonetheless, we spend substantial time laughing at each other, suggesting that, despite our mutual admiration, there's a current running under keeping us from slipping too far into our own graces.

...

The Sun light cuts through a glass plant vase, through the soil, illuminating its roots, which distracts me from you –

It's on a table near the bed, to the righthand side from my perspective, just a few feet away from my eyes.

Your legs are shaking, seated near me in the center of the bed, as I'm still laying on my back, and you're crying.

You say, in a disappointed tone, with inappropriately long pauses,

“Charles, ... I want us, to have a kid.”

You don't look at me, awkward overall in stating the idea.

I become uncomfortable, initially expecting something different, though I

noticed your mood change, so I expected something.

The birds are up, and chirping quite a bit, annoying me, subtracting significantly from the gravity of the moment.

Without much pause, I sit up, placing my lefthand on your forearm, and say, “OK”, though still unsure of the merits of your idea, growing worried that my apprehensions show in my delivery or expression.

You slip your arm out, and place your hand in mine, and so I squeeze it, with a firmness consciously adjusted to convey assurance, and sensitivity.

...

I was drinking Carlsberg, or Tuborg –

I don’t remember which, but it was a green glass bottle, for sure.

...

The curtains are open, we’re on a somewhat high floor, and so no one can see in as a practical matter, and the Sun is so bright, it cuts through the fabric of the curtains –

We must look like lit up cutouts from a distance, haplessly entangled in each other, while our handler is off doing otherwise.

You have alarmingly beautiful eyes, with some freckles around them, and though I’m used to seeing you at this point, I’m always taken back by your appearance, especially now –

Outlines of your lips flash, mixed in with the sunlight through your hair, your skin brushes its way against mine, as you lean in to adjust your posture.

I see droplets in your eyelashes, which remind me of the light through the roots of the plant, minutes earlier, though I can’t make sense of why I’m making these associations.

“You think it’s, OK, that we have a child together?”

To an American, you have a sophisticated accent, suggesting plainly you grew up speaking British English, but you nonetheless have the charm of a Norwegian bumpkin, with a typical bounce to your articulation.

You start laughing, at yourself, and my thoughtless response, for a bit, for having been so dramatic, which suggests it’s out of character for you, which might be why, I’m actually worried what you think of me.

You wipe your eyes, and your nose, collecting yourself, and though an imposingly mature personality emerges, I can see that part of your persona has been shattered by your honesty, which brings me a bit of pride, and guilt, but mostly pride.

You slap my right shoulder, quite hard, laughing harder, and say,

“You’re such a prick! Charles ... ”, sounding this time, entirely British, and I gather, that you measured, my placating had grown to something else entirely, leaving you confident in my love, and your expectations, though their realization may have been a bit off from what you had hoped.

...

You slip in the shower, afterward, and hit your head, which leaves me feeling hopeless –

The prospect of an impossible loss, becomes a possibility, and my arrogance shrinks to meekness.

I resent slipping so far into my affections for you, but my concern preoccupies my thoughts –

I see your wet hair stuck to the bones of your naked back, the top of your head, your hair roughly split down the middle, darkened from falling water, and I’m terrified I’m about to see blood color soap running down our drain.

I cautiously move your hair back from the left side of your head, as you’re still seated on the shower floor, not talking, or moving, simply staring forward.

Your skin has been scraped off a bit near your left eye, but I don’t see any serious injury, which I find relieving, though I did hear something crack, so I sit behind you and take your right hand, and lean in toward you, giving you a moment, to organize yourself and your thoughts.

You slip your fingers in between mine, and the water becomes a bit of a nuisance to us both.†

Just before she fell in the shower

She resents that her professional life has forced her into thinking like an adult, which is now creeping into her personal life –

The poisons of reason, observation, and strategy.

So she wishes you were different -

Realizing your petty criticisms are entertaining when it's at the expense of her outfit, or someone else's hairline, she imagines your cruelty directed at her child, that perhaps has some unchangeable aspect, disappointing you, and that no matter how well you mask your thoughts on the matter, a subtle glance or comment could reveal a stinging criticism, which is something she's felt, when your references overlap a bit too much with her life:

The loud joke about an ostensible stranger at a dinner, of course painted as some idiot, with ruthless disregard for anything other than clarity, leading to the quiet realization that she has more than nothing in common with this person, making her feel as though you did it on purpose, though she knows this is certainly not the case.

She also realizes that you operate as a type of highly entertaining constraint on her self image, vacillating between the immediate, physical and emotional love for her that you make no secret of, the relentlessness of which leaves her numb, and a bit guilty, because no normal person has the energy to sustain something like this -

Constantly celebrating another person:

She can see that every new moment with her, if she just opens a door, sets off a carnival in your mind, an energy too big to be contained, that borders on embarrassing, even when no one else is around to see it.

But the horrendous things you say about other people, suggest at least the possibility that somewhere in your mind lives a small box of devastating insults that you keep handy, in the off chance that she ever decides to leave –

So that if you can't have her, then she'll be ruined for everyone else.

That all of her happiness, and all of her memories with you, exist within a set of places, at particular times, when both of you behaved in a particular manner –

That you both voluntarily, but perhaps unconsciously, limited your options in life, simply because you are so happy.

It creates a window within which she's the happiest she's ever been, but

nonetheless a range of conduct, beyond which a terrible anxiety exists.

Making things worse, she realizes, you may echo our hostile environment –

An evolutionary bargain, that allows for otherwise impossible, unconditional love, which she never questions.

In her vulnerability, she can see at least the possibility that she probably wouldn't find you attractive, if you weren't so cruel –

That your love would appear otherwise foolish.

She imagines the possibility of getting sick, while pregnant, and being unable to feed herself, remembering how automatic your care is for her at moments like that, able to see how the rest of the world falls completely out of your focus, leaving not even yourself, and only her;

An aperture, that drops to a single fixed point, her;

An animal, that invests all of its well-being in a single, exogenous being, her.

She knows this makes her emotionally lazy, and that your predictability allows you to be manipulated, but she also knows, that you're plainly conscious of it all, and that you don't care –

And so she doesn't find it unattractive.

That on balance, compromise is inevitable, leaving her with a sense of being completely trapped.

The realization that morality necessarily implies that love operates as a trap, while at the same time, basic emotional needs suggest the alternative is less desirable.

Economics suggests the same conclusions, and though she feels guilty for thinking of money, she's afraid of you, because she concludes, you are a trap, otherwise you wouldn't make sense –

That she has to make a decision over a set of two drastically different outcomes, suggesting in that sense, that she has already been trapped.

These considerations lead her to the possibility that she's just as petty as you are.†

The day we found our apartment

The door to our apartment is matted black, with brushed chrome accents and components, with an overall aesthetic similar to the interior of a high-end sports car.

The door and lock tumbler are both very high quality, as are the hinges upon which the door is mounted.

The key is however cut by the building, and is quite cheep to the touch, with an awful, hard plastic casing around the top, which annoys me.

There is no handle to the door, and you instead simply turn the key, and push the door in, which I quite like, in terms of simplicity of gesture, and the resulting overall finish of the door, and the hallway.

The apartment itself is immediately bright, and sun-filled, the moment you open the door, with high ceilings, painted white brick walls, grey concrete floors, and a large, flowering tree by the windows, housed in a large, green glass vase, filled with dark soil, and a mix of matted and partially reflective stones –

A significantly larger version of the same vase that's in our bedroom.

There are small glass accents, scattered about, that light up when there's sufficient incoming sunlight, which we both enjoy coming home to.

I sold nearly all of my belongings in New York before moving, other than my primary guitar, which is now stored in a closet, as instructed, producing an aesthetic that is certainly a compromise, skewed towards your preferences.

None of it is too effeminate, and is instead somewhere between the look of a Williamsburg condo, and a reasonably high-end apartment in Stockholm.

There are large, floor to ceiling windows, and it's a generous one-bedroom, with a very oversized bedroom, two bathrooms, including an equally oversized bathroom in the bedroom, that has dark, plank wood, heated floors, a large glass-doored shower with no tub, that also has plank wood floors.

The building itself is tall for the area, a bit dated, with an almost kitsch, soviet brick exterior, but it's been completely renovated, and the interiors of the apartments are legitimately outstanding.

...

We had an argument the day we first saw the apartment, and were very late to the showing –

It's because I showed up preposterously late picking you up, ultimately due

to drinking with a friend, Ove, that you really do not like, because you know I use my time with him as an opportunity to discuss awful things, and that he is a terribly misogynistic man, that religiously complains about his wife's laziness, and is also an alcoholic.†

When I met Ove

I met Ove after a night out in Oslo, soon after first moving there, on line at a kebab stand, near Oslo Central Station.

I had been drinking in the center of town, and things did not go terribly well for me, having been repeatedly rejected on multiple, independent occasions, mostly because I was alone, making my many unsolicited social intrusions appear like the outset to sexual assault.

Ove took it upon himself to say hi to me, and given my circumstances, I was in no position to be picky about new friends, so I took up his conversation, which was surprisingly entertaining.

Ove's a bit older than me, sort of bald, about my height, and though he didn't seem to have the greatest fashion sense, he seemed relatively normal, in terms of his appearance.

His English was pretty good, and after a rather forward discussion about his wife's many inadequacies, and some stories about my life in New York, he reached into his pocket, unveiling a folded piece of paper -

He had the posturing of a man revealing something not quite secret, but nonetheless earned, during my brief tenure at the kebab stand, with a cautious pride, as he unfolded the page, making eye contact with me, just before it opened:

It turns out, it was a bit of dated, internet pornography, that had been printed on a very low-quality machine, producing a heavily pixelated representation of what appeared to be a seated nude woman in her 30's, with a background that seemed lifted from a high school year book.

It was a truly worthless bit of smut, not notable on any metric -

She was not particularly attractive, the subject matter was perfectly mundane, all conveying the sense that it had been engineered for mediocrity.

I was simply astonished by the display, deciding that Ove is someone I need to keep in touch with, and so any obstacles to two men making friends, publicly exchanging contact information this late in life, had been decidedly overcome.

There were a group of girls in their early 20's behind us that had witnessed our interactions, and burst into laughter upon seeing the pornography.

I gathered that they couldn't quite make out the entire conversation, and because we ultimately exchanged numbers after jointly admiring 8-bit pornography, they likely assumed we were perverts, perhaps unable, or perhaps too

lazy, to find real women, resorting to homosexuality only to satisfy our insatiable, mutual lust for mediocre porn, which had supplanted our desire for actual women, with the pixelation now providing additional stimulation, as a reminder of our updated preferences.†

When I finally show up

I finally show up, noticeably smelling of alcohol, despite driving a considerable distance from Ove's house, an hour late, blaming the traffic, which did play some non-trivial role, though this is disingenuous, at best –

We had been texting back and forth the entire time, and I more or less lie, about where I was, and what time I'd show up.

As I pull up, a screeching, multi-tonal piece by César Franck, that I am positively blasting inside the car, reaches its zenith, and I burst into singing along to the shrill violin, knowing full well that you cannot stand this piece.

An old lady exits a fish shop behind you, unsure of what she's experiencing, visibly astonished that you're about to get into my car.

You hate where I currently live, and this adds to your aggravation.

All of this reminds you of my self-entitled willingness to impose a total nightmare on other people, though to your credit, you understand that it is due to my inordinate enjoyment of life.

You open the car door yourself, before I can reach over, and before I can utter a single word, you say,

“At least chew some gum, because you look a bit shit at the moment, so try to not smell like shit as well.”

Taken back by your rudeness, I look in the mirror to find that you are in fact correct, and that my hair has been blown upwards, causing me to look a bit like a cockatiel, and upon inspection, I find a dark, oily stain on the right leg of my jeans.

There is a candy bar wrapper to the right of the gas pedal, suggesting that I even stopped to get something to eat, which you notice.

You also saw me quickly, and clumsily eating it as I pulled up, which adds to your temporary revulsion towards me.

All of this breaks my confidence, as I clumsily fix my hair, realizing that I am in fact a bit drunk, which in turn sours the mood, as I begin to feel legitimately bad for upsetting you, though you know that I do these things, at least in part, as a form of performance art, to amuse you with my outrageous conduct.

You eventually laugh at how stupid I look, and fix my hair, as if I were some kind of disabled child, that you have been tasked with caring for.

You know that this is simply how I am, and that for most of my life, I

somehow simply get away with these things, perhaps because I look a bit stupid at times, but nonetheless, it annoys you, occasionally.

You're not bothered by my drinking, and you trust that I would never consciously put you in any danger, which is in this case the result of hubris, adopting the same at times careless attitude towards how I spend my free time.

Perhaps you trust my vanity more than anything else, which would never let me cross the line from the outrageous to the truly degenerate.

You want to participate in how I see the world –

To show up drunk, an hour late, with stained pants, and disheveled hair, and somehow get away, driving off with a beautiful woman.

Though you're the reason it's possible in this case, it is in part driven by your desire to understand the mechanics of the process.

You could have walked, as it's only a few blocks away, but you waited, perhaps because you want to be part of these moments, where you're legitimately disappointed in my petty, inconsiderate nonsense.†

Ove's house

I'm surprised, and a bit relieved, to learn that Ove lives in Bærum, which is one of the nicer suburbs of Oslo, making my trip to his home less uncomfortable for me.

My ex-girlfriend grew up in Bærum, and so I already have fond memories of the area.

I'm honestly astonished at how nice Ove's place is, and it turns out, that he's an electrical engineer, with his own company, and does commercial electrical wiring for large buildings around Oslo, and neighboring cities in Norway.

We have a common interest in engineering, and sports cars in particular, which really makes our initial conversations go remarkably well.

I looked around for a dot-matrix printer, as the presumed source of his carry-on pornography, but didn't see one, so I concluded that he had printed it at work, as an executive privilege of sorts.

However, Ove has a pet rat, which is immediately distinguishable from the cliché lab mouse, and is instead an actual rat, that is visibly unhealthy, with disgusting teeth, and matted hair, that he's simply left to coagulate.

He keeps it in a large, square, glass fish tank, that has a plastic, model race car in it, and a more traditional hamster wheel, neither of which appear to be getting much use by this visibly sickly creature.

The tank is large enough to fit a dog food bowl, and its internal condition is simply disgusting, though I can see that the outside of the tank is cleaned regularly.

On this day, the bowl contains a left over steak, that has clearly been chewed on extensively by, "Micky", which is apparently the rat's name, suggesting either a language gap, or perhaps an inability to distinguish between cartoon mice, and large, diseased rats.†

The story of Ove's pet rat

Ove was working on a construction site in East Oslo, and the ground under the site had been torn up to allow for construction, which had been otherwise left relatively undisturbed for centuries.

This released an enormous number of rats, which caused problems at the construction site, with workers frequently spotting rats attempting to steal their unattended lunches, and otherwise infesting the site, with many rats fighting each other, rather viciously, extending their presence to surrounding neighborhoods as well.

Occasionally, teams of rats would run after pedestrians, with local newspapers featuring zoomed-in, pixelated photographs of vicious-looking rats, with off-center, sensational headlines, alerting locals to avoid particular corners, reportedly due to trash cans that had been completely overwhelmed by rats.

Ove is convinced that he had befriended a particular rat, and took to feeding only this rat each day at work, insisting that the rat's matted hair, and personality, allowed him to discern between Micky, and his many friends, all of whom ultimately terrorized the neighborhood for months.

Their friendship had reportedly blossomed over a few days, and so he brought a trap to work one day, that he had fashioned himself at home, baiting Micky with what I'm told was his favorite cheese at the time, Jarlsberg, cleverly ensconcing him in the trap, and ultimately taking him home.

The race car was purchased during another work trip Ove had taken to Trondheim, feeling guilty for having to leave Micky at home alone for over a week, so he bought the race car just to cheer up Micky, which cost Ove \$150 USD.

I asked whether his wife had come with him to Trondheim, and after a brief bit of reflection, he simply said, "no".†

How we met

She had just joined the firm about a week ago, and I had been invited to her welcoming drinks, at a bar not far from the office, certainly within walking distance.

If it sucks, I go back to work, or home –

I have no idea who she is, but I can see on the invite that there's an internal client going, and I never miss an opportunity for face time.

I already checked to see if her photo was in the HR system, which I'm not supposed to do, but there was nothing there yet in any case.

It turns out that she is quite attractive, and seems to notice me, perhaps in part simply because I'm much louder than everyone else.

It's a professional event, so she has to at least talk to me, and so I take the opportunity to get to know her –

If she's interested, great;

If not, who cares.

I reach out to shake her hand, and she responds with a good grip, which I like.

I'm taken back enough to check out her hands, suspecting some monstrous, club-shaped sausages to explain the power of this grip, but I instead see what looks like a normal hand, with long, elegant fingers, a bit bony, veiny, perhaps from squeezing so hard.

She has an extremely youthful face, but I can see a bit of age in her hands, and her forearm muscles, which I find relieving, because I'm old enough now that younger women have gotten a bit old.

I'm already impressed, and she catches me looking at her hand, and can sense that I'm starting to like her –

We hold hands for a bit too long, making eye contact, she smiles a bit, which is broken by food guy, with his tray of mediocre fried nonsense, and related mystery sauces.

I'm hungry, so I select the least repulsive looking item from his greige buffet, grab a napkin, and thank him for his service.

She passes, perhaps because she's new, and eating in front of people is always weird, especially so in a context like this, where you're in essence being

evaluated, subject to significant personal financial risk.

She tells me about her group, within private equity, and I'm familiar with a few of the people that she works with, saying the usual polite things:

This one's bright, that one's a worker, blah blah blah . . .

She leaves at some professionally reasonable time during our conversation, leaving me extremely attracted to her –

And I realize that it's been years since I've felt something like this.

The professional risk is non-zero, but Europeans have a more open attitude towards office relationships, so I decide that I will pull the trigger, if she seems interested.

And it seems that she is, as she sticks around, as do I, noticing that she's looking at me periodically, fairly openly suggesting that she would like to continue talking after everyone else leaves.

This is precisely what happens –

We get into a fairly heavy conversation about our lives, at times making me a bit uncomfortable, because I try to keep my personal life and professional life walled off.

I need another drink, so I offer to get her one as well, and she says, "sure", asking for whatever white wine I think is best –

I like the fact that she already trusts my judgment, and I get the sense of an almost instant mutual familiarity.

The line for the bar is quite long, and the place is itself somewhere between a bar and a club, and of course, some guy steps in, about a minute or so after I leave, and I can see him chatting her up.

I already noticed this loser eyeing her up while I was talking to her, which annoyed me, because it subtracted from my enjoyment of her.

But, I'm an adult, and this is not the first time that something like this has happened, so in addition to our drinks, I buy a shot of this revolting Norwegian liquor that my ex-girlfriend had pointed out one evening at a bar in the East Village.

I return, hand her the glass of wine, and introduce myself to, "Johann", handing him the shot that I had so generously purchased for him.

He says, "Takk, vad er det?"

I say, in English, “It’s a Norwegian Seamen’s shot”, which when said out loud, sounds about right.

She starts laughing, trying to contain herself.

I was hoping that this would send the message, but apparently not.

I had a look down at Johann’s shoes, as part of my primal exercise of sizing this idiot up, and spotted what are the most ridiculous looking loafers I have ever seen:

Dark suede, with some kind of family crest sewn into the top, as if Ralph Lauren’s family had an official shoe.

Johann doesn’t seem to get the message, and minutes pass with both of us trying our best to ignore him, with varying degrees of civility.

Then he suddenly leans in, and puts his hand on her naked shoulder, and I feel a rush of total hatred fill my blood, as his little fingers squeeze and compress the skin around her bones, I can feel the person that I thought I’d left behind me come alive again, and I imagine that it showed –

I push him off of her, put my left hand on his shoulder, squeezing hard enough to hurt him, and pour my beer all over his stupid shoes, staring into his eyes the whole time, looking down only to correct my aim, as he awkwardly dances backwards, while I shake what remains of my beer at whatever foot is closest to me.

She cannot believe that I’ve done this, and her attraction towards me drops to nothing, briefly even hating me for it, walking away, without saying goodbye.

She later remembers that I was so angry, that I didn’t even notice that she walked away, and this fascinates her –

So consumed by petty hatred, directed at a shoe, that I would abandon someone that I was clearly interested in, taking non-trivial professional risk as well, though she realizes that it was all ultimately triggered by a strange man touching her.†

Redux

We meet again, this time, accidentally, during lunch, outdoors, a few months later.

I had a shitty day at work, so I'm a bit out of it, and she can see that, so she's almost opportunistic about it –

Though I don't compete with her at work, she is occasionally on calls with me, and less frequently, in meetings, and at this point, she thinks that I'm brilliant, but she really dislikes me as a person.

I don't say much at lunch, just listening, and nodding, staring off into the Sun light, not even apologizing for what happened when we first met.

As she's getting up, I ask if she'd like to get dinner tonight, and she almost feels bad for me, and says, "yes" –

She walks away, realizing that my hostility might have an origin quite different from its expression, and so her mental portrait of me instantly becomes more complex, forced to concede that I'm actually quite weird, and not the meathead she anticipated –

Then the night at the bar replays in her head as she walks away, again realizing how strange it is that I poured beer on another man's shoes.†

What I do

I replace people that make a lot of money, with machines, and I enjoy it, because I'm a dick –

If they can't justify their jobs when compared to some trading platform, then it's my job to figure out how to seamlessly get rid of them, comprehensively, from blocking communications, to cleaning out the stupid nonsense they keep in and around their desks, without introducing risk to the firm.

This includes anticipating shitty behavior on the part of people that I'm trying to get rid of, which I also enjoy, because it requires me to out-think people, and not just consider how to replace them with technology, creating a job that is both psychologically, and intellectually challenging.

I interact with executives often, because I'm saving the entire firm money, so they know who I am, and though I'm far from that level in terms of my career path, it's obvious to everyone, even the current executives, that I'm a contender for a C-Suite position, eventually.

Other people my age simply don't have that kind of exposure at the firm, or pressure, and this creates a mix of admiration, and profound, professional jealousy.

Most people accept that they cannot do my job, which involves a preposterous mix of managing software development, trading operations, telecommunications, ID badges, and people crying.

My internal clients absolutely love me, whereas most people around me really dislike me, except my immediate colleagues, both out of pragmatism, but also because I stick up for them, aggressively, ultimately making sure that we all make money as a team.

People talk about what an asshole I am, and they're annoyed that nothing changes –

My manager is the CFO, who mentions these things in my reviews, because he has to, but everyone knows that it doesn't matter, because the bottom line is the bottom line itself, which I move, because I don't care.

The only metric that I'm ultimately concerned with is my compensation, which consistently moves in the correct direction, up –

Technology has fundamentally changed, and I see an opportunity to use it, and take money that the firm is spending on other people, and put it in my own pocket.

I am being rewarded on every metric, according to my preferences –

Cash, location, girlfriends –

For being what borders on a monster, but I justify it by knowing, that typically, these people are already rich, and because I grew up with nothing, I couldn't care less.

I know they have kids –

I don't care.

I know their lives get disrupted –

It's my job to fuck them, maximally, I don't care.

This one has a disease –

Whatever, don't care.†

What she does

She makes private equity investments in the energy sector, which she really enjoys –

She takes money, and puts it to work, creating something that didn't exist beforehand, creating jobs, ultimately improving people's lives.

She travels, to the project sites, which she also enjoys, as she feels a sense of real accomplishment seeing a plant, or a wind turbine, incrementally get built because of work she's contributed to.

It requires her to think about engineering and finance, and practical administrative matters as well.

She has the typical professional anxieties:

She's constantly managing her relationships with others, trying to compete, balancing competition with friendships.

The workload is occasionally unreasonable, and the travel too frequent, or too long, and this creates a type of psychological isolation that can exist even in the presence of others.

But she's actually quite happy with her work life, and it is instead her ambitions to raise a family that trouble her the most.

These thoughts come to her when she's feeling alone, imagining that her work would change in color if she were doing it for someone else, that required it to happen, so that she could provide for someone else –

In these moments, she can imagine what her home would look like, what it would sound like, and even feel and smell like to carry a small baby of her own:

The tiny outfits she'd have to buy, holding them close to her skin before purchase;

And how her weekends would have a longer view, slower moving parts, until some broken pencil brings her back to more temporary concerns.

But she still thinks like a college student in some respects, yet to connect the type of strategic thinking she applies at work to her personal life, mostly because she's afraid of what that will require of her –

She has a fun life, and it's full of good stories, pleasant experiences, over which she has a significant degree of control.

So while she deeply wants a family, in particular a child, which haunts her,

often, there's no trigger to break what is a generally pleasant cycle of interesting work, and fun weekends.[†]

Our first proper date

I book a table at a modern, almost corporate restaurant, near Tjuvholmen, and the atmosphere is very stiff –

She's familiar with the place, and judges it a wise choice, given the fact that we're colleagues, and she suspects that I sensed that she was almost doing me a favor, providing both of us with a professional gloss for the next day at work, when people ask where we ate.

Everyone at the office noticed that she stayed late at the bar to talk to me the night of the shoe incident, and so there is general awareness of the possibility of romance, but given the absence of any visible follow up, everyone assumed that whatever was there had quickly faded.

There were rumors about what had happened that night, with some colleagues aware of the correct facts of the shoe incident, since as it turns out, Johann (shoe guy) went to university with one of our colleagues, which facilitated an in for a roughly accurate recounting of the events, including Johann's devastation due to the seemingly impenetrable stains left on the surface of his suede loafers.

I explicitly tell her that I'm arranging a car for both of us, and that I'm going to pick her up, at her apartment, at exactly 20:30, to make sure that we're both on time, and don't risk losing our reservation –

Scandinavians take reservations rather seriously, and it is in fact impolite to show up more than just a minute or two late.

She thinks this is a bit much, and that I'm behaving like I'm her boss, which is not the case, though my delivery deliberately conveys this impression, but it's not an inconvenience for her, so she says, "alright", but she's still a little annoyed, and gets a bit nervous, recalling the shoe incident in the abstract, as a bad association.

When I call her on my mobile phone to tell her to come downstairs from her apartment, she can hear regularly spaced clobbering, clicking sounds, and for a brief moment, she's worried that I'm wearing heels, but dismisses it as background noise.

However, I show up on a horse, i.e., an actual horse, that I paid a ludicrous sum of money to borrow for the evening, and she is simply astonished, and starts laughing hysterically.

"My God, you are a total ass –

What is wrong with you?"

She refuses to get on the horse, so I walk it to the restaurant, beside me in the street, as she episodically looks beyond my shoulder, to see this monstrous, inelegant farm horse, clobbering about the streets of her home city, Oslo.

I insisted on the horse being cleaned, which cost me extra, because the farmer had to do it himself, and the results were acceptable for a date, so her refusal appears to be based upon principle, rather than hygiene.

I tie the horse to a bike stand outside the restaurant, with no regard for public safety, or the horse, prompting her to laugh at me, yet again.

“You’re such a child.”, she says.

There’s a huge pile of piss and shit under the horse after dinner, which I simply leave, taking off with her, this time on the horse.

Though it’s summer, it’s a bit cold, so I “buy” a blanket from the restaurant, i.e., I pay the Pakistani table busser 1000 NOK to steal one for me, and throw it on the horse, while I chat up the maître d’, disingenuously apologizing for the giant pile of horse shit outside.

I deliberately buy an extra bottle of wine from the restaurant for the trip back to return the horse, which I make her hide in her purse during dinner, to her partially feigned embarrassment.

I’ve already cleared spending some time at the farm to have drinks with her afterward, which is about an hour and a half by horse from the restaurant.

Though I don’t tell her, I’ve also already paid the farmer to let us sleep in one of his bedrooms.

On the ride to the farm, she realizes that I must have somehow planned all of this while at work.

Connecting this astonishing practical reality to how little I seem to care about most people, she feels a bit broken by it all –

She’s not sure anyone has ever done this much for her before, and I did all of this in one day, while at work, unsure if she would even like me.

The ridiculousness of the evening fades into a quiet warm, as she realizes that she must be important to me, already –

She leans in, the familiarity returning, resting her head on my back, wrapping her arms around my waist, as the wind picks up a bit across her skin, prompting her to take the stolen blanket from her lap, and wrap it around her back, trying her best to include me in its coverage.

Neither of us say much of anything, clobbering on, cars passing, as at this point, she realizes that I've likely already made convenient arrangements for us to stay together.

We both miss work the next day, and that's it.†

Good morning, Caligula

“Good morning, Caligula.”, she says, waking me with the statement, and I giggle a bit at the reference, once it settles in, which was quite good.

Her face is very close to mine, and I’m facing the righthand side of the room, notice a bit of drool on my lip, which I quickly wipe off, out of embarrassment.

“Ugh, fucking revolting.”, she says, smiling, but not quite laughing at me.

She looks really good:

I can see the blue of her eyes, and her gaze is constant, with remarkable confidence, as if she were waiting for me to wake up, so that she could make fun of me once I did.

I’m feeling quite awkward, and a bit nervous, as I was very drunk, and though I remember everything, I did rent a horse, and leave a large pile of horse feces in an urban center, riding off visibly drunk, having effectively stolen a blanket from the same restaurant that I desecrated with said feces.

Nonetheless, the results seem to have been a success, as she clearly had fun, and seems quietly happy at the moment.

I briefly turn my back to her, to see fog on the windows of this old farmhouse, in Holmlia, and these old, stiff, plaid colored curtains that don’t even completely cover the window, made out of a fabric more appropriate for a small flag that you attach to a car antenna.

The bed is simply ridiculous:

One of those military style, steel spring devices, with an ultra-firm mattress, about one inch thick, that smells a bit off, and episodically sponges in random locations, leaving you shaped like a broken paper clip in the morning.

I brought my own sheets, blanket, and pillows, which add a bit of normalcy and comfort for us both.

Despite all of this, we had a tremendous night, and she clearly finds all of these deficiencies charming, so even though I’m not quite ready for profound thoughts about our future, I note her attitude as a plus.

I turn around to look at her again, and it seems as though she hasn’t moved, and so she must have been staring at my back –

“Is that an extra blanket you’ve brought for me?”, she says, in reference to what is really not that much back hair, but I suppose it’s quite a bit for a Scandinavian.

"No, it's a wash cloth, for your intimate bits.", I reply.

She smacks me on the chest, which prompts me to grab her and shout, and she screams in response, quite loud.

"Are you trying to get the farmer involved? Isn't it a bit soon for that?", I say.

"You, prick!", she replies, as she climbs on top of me, causing both of us to hesitate for a moment, as we realize that perhaps we've both become a bit too familiar –

The environment, and my absurd antics, perhaps designed to take her out of the familiar, creating a temporary space in which only the two of us exist, and some aspect must have crept in to spoil that for both of us, perhaps the hour itself, a time when we would ordinarily be getting ready for work, creating a scheduled anxiety.

Moments like these are branches in relationships –

Everyone assumes that you can correct for something that could have happened, by simply doing it later on, but that's simply not the case, as sometimes things don't work, including relationships, when things happen out of order –

Just imagine frying an egg before you break it.

The choice presented in this case is fairly obvious –

Both of us are aware of what is happening, and that it's a bit soon, especially given that we work for the same firm, and so the decision to lean in and kiss someone that you're already in bed with depends upon context, and in this case, it's a signal, and possibly a path to something that neither of us can fully control.

To my astonishment, she leans in, completely unprovoked, grabbing the back of my head, pressing her entire body against mine, kissing me, and I put my finger tips on the right side of her face, pushing her hair behind her ear, ultimately holding the base of her head with my hand.

We pause often, and simply stare at each other, laughing a bit, not quite childishly, but aware of each other's silliness, and at one point we pause, and she looks at me, and says with clarity and confidence,

"I love you, Charles."†

Christmas together

She's actually Christian, whereas I border on some depraved mix of Buddhism and shamanism –

Make that the only joke, and comb the essay for unintended comedy.

But I grew up celebrating Christmas, and I quite enjoy it.

You try and take it seriously, for her, not doing anything outrageous -

Small, thoughtful gestures, simple things, that anyone can do:

You make her breakfast, before she gets up, and bring her something to drink in bed.

You go to church together, and a children's choir sings, "min hjert vil alltid vanker", and she takes your hand.

These moments are branches in relationships –

The devil is a joke that breaks an unrelated stranger, too clever to make its intended target known, perhaps even unaware itself;

The awful grace of God, can be no different in a world like ours, routing out what is worst, drawing it to the surface, and destroying it, leaving only the unadulterated origin of our condition, grown from an unrequited generosity, and unconditional love.†

The incident

It's Syttende Mai, 2017, and we're near Aker Brygge, with a group of friends, at a bar on the water.

I am ludicrously drunk, as is Ida, with my own personal bottle of vodka, that I refuse to share with anyone else, only partially out of irony.

I'm wearing cheap, pink, imitation wayfarer sunglasses, bordering on a self-aware parody of an American.

Some random guy that Ida knew from high school shows up, and while I really couldn't care less, I attempt to be polite, and throw my arm around him, as I do with pretty much everyone that falls within one degree of friendship, under the presumption that he was a mutual friend of the group.

The music is blasting, and I'm dancing like an idiot, with this random person that I've known for just a few minutes, who is suddenly my best friend in the whole world.

I could see her discomfort, which is unusual for her, and as drunk as I was, it took me a bit out of the moment –

This was another branching point in our relationship, but in reality, I didn't have any options, because our entire network was there, so a blow up was not a possibility, especially given the absence of any hard evidence of malfeasance.

So ultimately, almost as reflex, I just pretend that I didn't notice, though suspecting the possibility that she cheated on me with him, before he took off, I made sure to pat him on the ass, and say,

“Nice to meet you, buddy.”

When we got home, I was totally blasted, and she was a bit belligerent towards me, giving me a hard time for being so drunk, which is fine, but in context, it made me even more suspicious –

So I just threw it on the table, and said,

“Look, if you cheated on me with that lesbian, at least promise me that you used some kind of protection, presumably suitable for lesbians.”

“Fuck you, Charles.”

We sleep on opposite corners of the bed.†

The investigation

Our first day back to work afterwards, I come back to the apartment, during work hours, and tear through everything imaginable:

Email, Facebook, old phones, diaries, receipts, photo albums, her camera, suit cases, whatever -

It's a complete investigation, and I'm convinced that she's cheated on me with this idiot.

If it were possible, I would have broken into her childhood bedroom, and rummaged through her socks, looking for some evidence of indiscretion.

As I ruthlessly violate her privacy, potentially ruining our relationship as a consequence, the picture that emerges is not at all what I had expected, but I quickly realize, as a wave of bitterness washes over me, that it's one that I should have anticipated as a possibility -

The last message she sent to this guy closed with,

"You broke my arm, so don't you think you should at least apologize to me?"

She was 21 at the time.

My internal response is so complete, that I think that I might have had a stroke, as I see a flash of light in my left eye.†

Hangover

I'm standing over our kitchen counter, staring at a photograph of you, in an old silver frame, waiting for water to boil, so I can make myself some coffee.

I see the silhouette of a tree, projected on the lefthand wall of our living room, lit up by the street lights below, moving in the wind.

It's 6:00, still completely dark, I'm still completely drunk, and I look straight out of the windows separating me from the outside world, into absolutely nothing.

I can feel my dependency upon you in my stomach, belittling, the fumes of my drunkenness, in the bleakness of your absence, nothing is happening –

I don't know what I'm supposed to do.†

My painting for Ida

I make her a painting, and I buy myself a painter's smock, and hat.

It's a single, white peddled flower, with a yellow, egg yolk center, green stem, each drawn with a wide, thick, soft brush, and generous layers of paint, that have a sculptural finish, with a thickness that is significantly raised off the surface of the canvas, showing the motions of the brush:

A more contemporary version of Van Gogh's, Two Cut Sunflowers.

There's watercolor under it, with blues from the sky, some whites, and some faint floral colors to create contrast, allowing the petals to be discerned from the white canvas.

The watercolor is almost entirely limited to the area of the flower bud.

The painting is large, nearly the height of our ceilings, and has a long green stem, also drawn with the same brush and style, equally heavy, that reduces to nearly a single point at its base, executed by twisting the brush till perpendicular to the bottom of the painting, at the end of each stroke.

Each component is a single, premixed color, or group of colors, mixed onto the brush before application, creating homogenous blocks of colors –

There are however, some very faint, thin lines of violet and pale blue iridescence in some of the petals.

There are accents of naturally occurring greens throughout, also drawn with a heavy hand, as if a single flower had been placed upon a flower shop counter, above fine, translucent, colored paper wraps, with their leaves generally, naturally falling nearby.

I work on the painting in secret, renting a small space in a local artist's loft, regularly lying to her, saying that I'm at the gym.

I sign it, "C. Davi", in black oil ink, with the knob of the brush used as a pen, undated, on the bottom righthand corner of the painting.

I never tell her this, but I also write on the bottom left of the back of the canvas, in the same ink –

"Jeg elsker deg, Ida."

I also hide a small okiagari doll, fashioned after Bodhidharma, resting on the bottom of the frame behind the canvas.

The frame is a natural, unfinished wood, baroque frame, that I also paint,

with small gold and white dot accents, modest in number, significantly distanced from one another, randomly scattered about the frame.

When the painting is finished, before I come home, I hand wash the smock and hat in a small basin at the studio, and leave both there to dry.

I come home to mount the painting myself, before Ida gets home from work, where I saw the silhouette of the tree that morning, alone, so that it never happens again.

She comes home that night, spotting the painting, immediately understanding why I've made it for her, begins to cry upon seeing it, and forgives me for knowing why.†

My artwork for Charles

Nihilism is not a belief system for me, but is instead an unfortunate, occasionally physically real experience that I despise, creating a terrible need for her company –

It's the leveraged depression of a hangover, written everywhere, creating a uniform signal of nothing.

Scandinavians are a bit naive, but they can afford this because they live in an insular, safe, wealthy part of the world.

As a result, basically everything you want to know about someone can be found online, including their address:

I send Andreas a friend request on Facebook the day before my performance, to make sure that he knows what I look like, and that I'm dating Ida.

I follow this up hours later, sending him a single, kissy-face emoji, and a solitary capital, “R”, isolated on a new line.

It turns out that he notices this, and he responds –

“Hey, cool, what does that mean?”

He accepts my request:

So I show up outside of his house the next day to explain, before work, wearing the painter's smock and hat, because I hate him, and I want the next 5 minutes of his life to make no sense at all:

He's about to get into his car, and I've already opened my car door to avoid making noise, as I quietly get out of my car, which is parked down the street from his driveway, slowly and unremarkably walking towards his house, waiting for him to open his car door.

Before he's completely seated, with his left leg still sticking out of the driver's seat, I run towards him as fast I can, and jump into the air, kicking the door shut on his leg, with my left leg, falling to the ground, sliding on my back, and I scramble to kick the door a second time, while still on my back, because I hate him.

I stand up, completely livid, smash the rear passenger window with a wrench that I've clung to the entire time, shouting, and as he's screaming in pain, I calmly walk over to the rear of his car, and carefully draw an upside down human nose on his rear window, using the edge of the wrench, etching deeply into the surface of the glass.

The noise is positively awful, and I can tell that he thinks that the noise is somehow contributing to his physical pain, though it's obviously not –

Nonetheless, he starts to scream even louder, perhaps realizing that this is shaping up to be an unusual part of his life, full of unfamiliar sounds and experiences.

I wore my painter's hat to partially obscure my face, but I want him to see my face eventually, so when I'm done with my glasswork, I throw the front door to his shitty car open, and I squat in front of him:

Pushing him with my right hand in the flesh of his shoulder to get his attention, I point to my eyes, making a capital "Y" with my pointer and middle fingers, directing him to look at me –

Then I spit in his face, stand up, and shout,

"This is what it means."

I am crying hysterically, shouting these words inches from his face, grabbing the bottom of his chin, and like his ugly mother, I give him a kiss on the mouth, and squeeze his face afterward, hard enough to hurt him, and grab the top of his head to make him think that I might actually rape him –

His face level with my crotch, I grab the buckle on my belt with my lefthand.

I lean in, scream for no reason, again inches from his face, and I can see my spit land in his shitty eyeballs, as he blinks, and shakes his head to get my spit off of his face, in total horror at what's happening to him, and I eat it all up:

I smush my hat onto his stupid head, rubbing it around to ruin his hair, staring at him the whole time.

I step back from his shitty car, spit on his lawn, and standing perfectly upright, I can feel the wind blow across my back, hearing the trees moving behind me –

My eyes wide open, I look up at the sky, but I don't see anything, and I know that he sees all of these things happening, because I'm already inside of his head –

I've infected him, in return for infecting my life, and infecting my family:

I lean back, again, shouting again, desperate for him to understand –

My nose running all over my face, crying like a baby, I throw my entire bodyweight into kicking him, like a fireman knocking down a door, I connect forwards, flat against his chin, and his entire body lifts and snaps upon contact.

...
 I walk away, leaving him unconscious, his body awkwardly draped over the barrier between the two front seats, and with some distance, I again scream like an animal, this time staring forward, again into nothing, for no one, not saying anything at all, otherwise calmly walking towards my car.

The birds are chirping, which pisses me off.

...

He's almost certainly going to call the police, given the facts, but I'm banking that he won't say it was me, given the facts, since I've given him an out, as this was all designed to make it look like some kind of new, poorly understood hate crime, or perhaps ritualistic violence, in either case, the sheer spectacle will deflect any sensible theory, because they'll be forced to address the giant upside down nose etched into the rear window of his car –

It is a symbol of my total disregard for this maggot, that I won't waste anything at all on:

Nothing, not even the possibility of carrying meaning –

It is an upside down, nonsense thing, just like him.

Moreover, if caught, I don't want to be associated with actual racism, so I invent a new symbol of hatred, just for him:

The upside down nose.†

The coffee shop, “hello”

I know where and when this fruit loop turned gimp gets his coffee every day, and apparently his shattered tibia and stupid foam boot don’t hold back his sense of entitlement to overpriced coffee, so I decided to say hello, twice.

I make sure to get behind him in line, and just as he’s about to pay, I start whistling the tune of, “Greensleeves”, with deliberately homoerotic overtones, repeatedly scratching my eyebrows, ostentatiously.

He hears me whistling, turns around, and looks at my eyebrows first, prompting me to scratch them even faster, as I do bit of a dance, leaning in towards him –

I can see that he recognizes me, and I can also see that he’s getting nervous.

I take my credit card out before I’ve ordered, tapping it on the counter, quickly, and aggressively, until he looks at it, and I plant it down, face up, expecting him to make a mental note of my name, while I order.

The barista seems to think I’m an anxious jerk, merely signaling to get the barista’s attention, so I roll with it, completely ignoring Andreas’ presence going forward, completing the remainder of the transaction.†

Baby powder

I call her, “my baby” during some incredibly desperate, emotionally codependent sex, and she snaps to a positively livid state, stopping everything, sitting upright, as if a high speed train had hit a twisted piece of track –

The whole thing goes airborne, and everyone dies.

I instantly get a free, but incredibly hostile education in feminist theory.

Then, episodically, for months, I randomly discover baby powder in things:

My loafers – baby powder.

My shampoo – baby powder;

My food – baby powder.

This, continuous, for months, with no forewarning –

All things are subject to baby powder.

I press the steam button on the iron, and then wet baby powder explodes all over my pants, leaving permanent stains.

So finally, I say something, and Ida explodes into a totally incoherent tirade, but the main takeaway is –

She’s mad about the baby comment, and so now everything is baby powder, constantly:

This is my punishment, which she’s judged to be appropriate.

So I say, “And if you’re right, what should I do?”

She says nothing, and I can see that she instantly hates me, and sleeps on the couch that night.

The next day, I notice that she doesn’t get up for work, I say nothing, for fear of baby powder reprisal, and while I’m gone, she attempts to rip the painting off the wall, but she can’t manage to dismount the frame, which drives her totally insane, reminding her of my constant, infantilizing nature, and now she feels trapped in some kind of rubberized playpen –

She’s convinced that I’ve somehow cleverly robbed her of the ability to express her outrage in an unsafe manner in her own home, and that nothing operates as expected, because of premeditation on my part.

When she finally realizes that all I've done is instal gliders behind the frame, so that the painting can be easily lifted, and then removed, she completely loses her mind, screaming at the top of her lungs, lifting the painting, above the requisite height, and slamming it down on the floor like an animal –

Hours later, she eventually sees what I wrote on the back of the canvas, and sees the small okiagara doll, which is now standing upright on the back of the canvas, laying on the floor, face down, she can see before her my undisturbed opinions, notwithstanding what I might occasionally say or do –

That within her lives something unreasonably relentless, surrounded by love, that is simply physically incapable of giving up, by design.

She loses it again, this time saying, “no” to herself, repeatedly, sitting near the painting on the floor of our living room, desperately and clumsily turning it back over, collecting the broken shards of the wood from the frame that are now scattered about, calling me repeatedly, though I don’t answer –

Baby powder.

I come home to see her seated on the floor near the painting, with a pile of wood shards assembled nearby, and she looks positively awful, with her hair completely frazzled, possibly the worst I’ve ever seen her look, inexplicably wearing something that looks like a wedding dress, and I’m honestly worried about her, for the first time.

So I just say,

“Ida, I’m sorry.”

The painting hangs for a week, as is, as a shitty reminder of the outside world, which both of us are not terribly fond of at times.

She fixes the frame herself, over time.†

Ida goes to work

She's drinking coffee by herself, already dressed for work, wearing a black skirt, with a somewhat visible decorative white cotton lining, like a miniature fine tablecloth, with the opening resting just above her knees, one leg crossed over the other, her bare feet moving about a bit under our small kitchen table, with a sharp, white cotton, button down shirt, with thick, smashed pearl buttons, pressed neatly, the pleats running down her long arms, with a bit of thin gold jewelry showing under her cuffs, reading the local newspaper.

She turns a few pages to find a sale on Joike balls that she's decidedly uninterested in, a bus crash in Bergen, a local politician that's been spotted cheating on his wife, and then she sees the Andreas story, in the center of some page, featuring a large picture of the upside down nose, with a sensational headline:

“Var Det Hat, Eller Sex?”

There's a panel below the main photo, with rotated instances of the nose, supplemented with other visual media, ultimately trying to reconstruct the intended final state, as the running conclusion is that it was an incomplete work of vandalism, though one analysis reaches the correct conclusion:

“Er det en nese?”, reads one caption, under an upside down version of my glasswork, with a textbook photo of a human nose to the right, for context, labeled, “nese”.

They interview the neighbors, who uniformly report what they believe to be the shouting of a man in the throws of some kind of sexually charged rage –

Only able to make out the silhouettes of the scene, they saw a man first squatting near the driver's seat, episodically shouting, kissing the other man, later standing and reaching for his crotch, with bizarre and unexplained actions taking place earlier in the rear of the car, accompanied by truly disturbing screeching noises.

It's amazing how removing some information can completely change a story, without changing the facts.

One neighbor is confident that it was a consensual encounter gone too far, and that the assailant was having sex with the muffler of the car while carving into the window –

He noted that he had heard of similar things happening in Austria, and that perhaps the assailant was foreign.

Though she feels guilty, she hates him enough to afford herself a bit of

laughter, at his admittedly severe expense, and she is in fact laughing quite loud at this point, as the story grows ever more ridiculous.

Recalling the date that I made her the painting, and given the reported date of the incident, she realizes that this was almost certainly my doing, also because it's completely mental, and seems calculated to produce absurd, and petty consequences.

She doesn't care at all –

She views it as proportional, with extra points for being funny.

She looks at her watch, puts the paper down, picks up her keys, and goes to work.†

The Roman Forum

I see her from some distance below me in The Roman Forum on vacation, in a simple white cotton dress, as I've gone off to take pictures –

In flat, tan leather sandals, her naked feet covered only by laces that wrap up high along her shins, prompting me to stare up from her muscular calves to her thighs, tracing their path, upward, as I walk back towards her, like a predator, imagining the soft touch of the skin along her inner thigh, as the cotton of her dress brushes over my wrist and forearm, and her hair touches my face.

Her blond hair, barely moving in the slow heat of the city, she's sweating, basically everywhere, including her face, and I become so aroused, that I want to kill every man that I see, just so she can understand the magnitude of my desires for her at the moment:

I would deliberately impregnate her on what remains of the grass, shouting like an animal, and raise a family right there, hunting tourists with a hand-fashioned shank for sustenance, for so long as we both shall live.

I settle for the nonetheless inappropriate option of walking towards her, leaning in and kissing her, squeezing her wonderful behind, and I can see her eyes open, because I never close my eyes outside of bed, and she says, with some sincere condemnation,

“Charles . . .”

And I instantly regret it –

Baby powder.

I realize in that moment that I value her company so much, that I tolerate the risk of psychological mania, without even questioning it:

In about one minute's worth of time, I transitioned from towering Roman upon a hill, willing to hunt human beings and a raise a family on a rock, to anxiety over being yet again subjected to constant baby powder terrorism.

Most of this is of course my fault, but she knows at this point how I respond to her presence, and she does nothing to accommodate it, and in fact, I suspect she deliberately antagonizes it –

We walk off together, and she randomly smacks my ass quite hard, squeezing it afterwards, and I yelp out of legitimate surprise, jumping a bit, and though she clearly did this in jest, she also pinches the skin between my thumb and pointer finger, biting her lip as she does this, staring off, suggesting that she was also legitimately excited by the prospect of a bit of spontaneous B.C. sex,

as a sort of immersive history:

I imagine myself standing atop the hill above the forum, as she looks up past a sea of fluted columns, and sees this beastly, bearded man, sweating, my mediocre hair flailing, like a modern Gilgamesh, both legitimately aroused, and amused by me.†

The terrarium

I come home first, and it's insanely hot in our apartment, both of us having left the windows closed on a warm, extremely sunny day, giving the apartment the feel of a moist, terrarium.

I desperately have to take a shit, so I quickly lower the temperature in the apartment, blasting the AC, leaving the bathroom door wide open to let the cold air in.

Then suddenly, she opens the door to the apartment, and it's just too hot –

I leave the bathroom door open.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Charles, close the door, you disgusting freak.”†

The y-chromosome

It's the middle of August, and our first time at the beach together –

We've rented a small house in the south of Sweden for the weekend, since the beaches in Norway are significantly colder.

As we walk to the beach from the house, I look down at my right hand, remembering that I have unusually shaped nails, which are highly circular, with some of my fingernails even forming nearly perfect circles:

I realize that I'm likely just running through the typical anxieties that you have at the beach with others, especially in a new relationship –

My chest hair is probably a bit much for Sweden, my stomach is not its best, but my biceps look legitimately awesome in my jet black, Mountain Dew T-shirt, with cut-off sleeves, so I'm feeling pretty good about my overall situation.

We get to the beach, and it's not terribly different from the beaches out in The Hamptons, with a really long shoreline, and sand that extends out quite far perpendicular to the shore.

The main difference is the presence of a significant boardwalk, and though there are great restaurants in the Hamptons, the quality of food in Sweden is world class, in my opinion on par with France and Italy, this beach being no exception, with excellent representation from basically every genre imaginable, as if they had transplanted Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and laid it upon a beach.

We pick out a spot fairly close to the water, since the tide is calm -

I lay down an oversized, rough khaki sheet, with an elaborate, but thin, blue floral print, that I bought in a small shop in the north of India, placing our towels down upon it, spaced out a bit, since the relationship is new, and the fact that she's my colleague is always coloring our time together –

Two, white cotton, hotel style beach towels, that we've taken from the house.

I reach further into the plaid interior of my Herschel bag, removing a set of small, Bluetooth speakers, that nonetheless have excellent, balanced low end sound, sunglasses for both of us, and before the spread is complete, I turn the speakers on, which makes a low frequency popping sound that shakes the unit in my hand, then pulling out my phone, ultimately kicking off a playlist that I've curated specifically for this occasion, that begins with, "Feed me Diamonds", by MNDR (RAC Remix), and as the song begins, I place the speakers in the top center of the blanket, equidistant from each towel, with the full display being crafted to convey my shamelessly pretentious tastes in absolutely everything imaginable, and that I really just want her to have a good time with me.

"I'm going to hit the loo, but I'll be back in a minute.", she says.

"Sounds good.", I reply, as I tweak the spread a bit more in her absence.

I'm still wearing my artisanal tank top, because I feel a bit fat, and I'm quite anxious in her absence, though I'm convinced it doesn't show through the shielding of the Mountain Dew logo across my chest.

About five minutes in, I see her starting to walk back towards me, and while still walking, with the confidence of a concrete beam, she begins to take off her already somewhat see-through, white cotton sundress, and I can see her fit, but nonetheless plum body come into view, like I'm watching a beer commercial, and I realize that she is bonkers hot –

I am so proud of myself at the moment, that I forget about my slight chub-biness, concluding that I must look pretty good to have pulled this off, but nonetheless keep the top on for a minute.

I take off my leather Brooks Brothers sandals, that have little palm trees on the straps, gesture for her to give me her Havaianas, that have a decorative bow across the top, which I complement, and with that and my backpack, three of the four blanket corners are now secured, holding down the fourth with her rather sizable beach bag, made of a finely woven, decorative straw, with a thin yellow print that matches notes from the bows on her sandals, the contents of which are a total mystery to me, given that I'm nearly certain that I've carried all objects of any utility.

I reach again into the backpack, this time revealing a Nalgene bottle, with a thick, grey, rubberized top, filled with a cocktail that I've made for both of us, consisting of Hendrix gin, fresh grapefruit juice, some mint, sparkling water, and a splash of limonata soda.

She's selected the towel closest to where I'm standing, sits down, and while organizing herself, she grabs the back of my left calf, looking off into the water, as I shake the bottle aggressively to circulate the ice, and even out the temperature, pouring it into the classic red solo cup that I've brought, with two cups stacked, one into the next, completing my updated American cliché.

I lift the top cup out with my finger tips, which is fizzing a bit due to the sparkling water and limonata, but at no risk of spilling, and hand it to her –

I kneel, and again, reach down into my backpack, withdrawing a small ziplock bag containing torn mint, that I then use to dress her cocktail as she holds it, and I can see that she enjoys the spread, as, "Eddie", the Oliver Nelson Remix, begins to play.

...

About thirty minutes have passed since we sat down, and while sitting up a bit, resting on my elbows, I look at the water ahead, and as she's laying on her back, I can see that her eyes are closed through one of my many cheap pairs of wayfarers, this time featuring a glossy black frame, with the name of some shitty bar in Nantucket emblazoned on both temples, close to the lenses, at an angle, the text pale blue in color, fit for a frozen margarita cup, complete with an underline accentuating the name, "The Chicken Box" –

A masterpiece.

I notice her sandy foot in my view, with her left knee raised, and her right foot perched atop, not annoyed at all, that some portion of sea has been obscured by her frame, as "Dreams", by The Cranberries starts playing –

I really like her, so this is good –

Completing the scene of the day at the beach, with the lovely girlfriend, beautiful weather, music I love, playing with a magnificent clarity, just waiting for a vodka slogan to appear in the sky, blasting out from the exhaust of American fighter jets scrambling above, confirming my impulses for empire, of which I am clearly an ambassador.

Then I notice her toenail is exactly the same shape as mine –

"Look at your foot.", I say excitedly, quite loud.

She holds up her right foot into the air, pointing her toes forward, staring at them for a moment, with her gorgeous leg fully extended, like a flying gazelle, then taking off her sunglasses, extending her arm, her palm up, blocking the sun with her right hand, perhaps expecting to find a bug, she wiggles her toes, sand falling off a bit, and looks at me, smiling.

"Now look at my foot."

I lift my right foot to the side of her's, in roughly the same position, but with a bit of distance, held perfectly still, for comparison.

She leans in to observe, and then says,

"OK, that is a bit weird."

There's some discussion about the frequency of this in nature, and apparently, she hides the ball a bit, perhaps embarrassed, as I insist on seeing pictures of her family, convinced that I'll find a doppelgänger:

I instead find out that her mother looks exactly like her, just older, which only adds to my concerns, and as I stare at her, now instead worried that we're all slightly permuted versions of the same person, producing deliberately

engineered, scientifically calibrated incest –

Some kind of secret project to produce hot, bright, belligerent people, scattered about the surface of the Earth.

She confesses that her mother does not have the foot in question, but that her father does, leading to one of those discussions that overly educated people have, that sound convincing, referencing articles from *The Economist*, but are nonetheless unscientific gibberish, ultimately leading us to the conclusion that this type of foot is likely carried by the y-chromosome.

As we both nod in agreement, with confidence, but modest professional apprehension in our conclusion, she puts her sunglasses back on, and takes a sip from her cocktail, again wiggling her toes, staring at them, then smiling at me.

This is what happens when you pay people too much money.

...

I'm still bothered by this, so I decide to lean in and give her a kiss, as she's resting on her elbows, staring into the sea, she turns towards me –

As I gently remove her sunglasses afterwards, I can see that she's freckled a bit near her eyes, which I stare into both romantically, and clinically, to find that they are nearly identical to mine in color.

I run my fingers through the right side of her wet hair, doubling back to remove some sand, to deflect from the intrusions that I've imposed upon her, then leaning back to examine her frame, I realize that she has a smaller version of my unusually broad shoulders, built like a capital "T", and I'm left feeling a bit gay, dating someone that intersects substantially with my own physical appearance.

She sees where I'm looking, and laughing a bit, she notices the same things in me –

"Howdy!", she says, feigning the accent of an American bumpkin, looking directly into my eyes, shaking the same foot –

I impulsively grab her, kissing her quickly, then roll over her, without putting much pressure on her body.

When to her right, I scoop her up, snaking my left arm under her back, ultimately pulling her onto my body.

Her face now directly above mine, I can smell the ocean on her lips, and as the wind blows, her wet hair flails, as we stare at each other with some seriousness –

I place my right palm on the side of her face, my thumb gently resting near her eye, laying with my back in the sand –

She sneaks away, inching her wet body down a bit, and falls asleep on my chest.†

Acceleration

You both decide to cook dinner at home after the beach, and drive into town to pick up groceries.

As you're driving, you reach down to your phone, and put on, "Across the Universe", as arranged by Fiona Apple, and after listening to the words for a bit, she says,

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

You reply, smiling, but without looking at her,

"That was pretty good.", continuing to stare at the road ahead.

She's a bit disappointed in your response to her joke, and you seem overly serious:

Looking at you, she now sees the person that she works with, with the strange addition of a ballad playing –

Nonetheless, she's annoyed that you didn't fully appreciate her joke.

After the song ends, you grab your phone again, and play, "Dig", by Incubus:

She looks at you again, this time a bit suspicious, as her ex-boyfriend would always play that song while driving.

Now tan, built well, she can see your profile with an animal gaze into the road ahead –

She can see the lens above your pupil illuminated as the sun starts to set a bit behind the forest to the left, and as she looks from the top of your eye down to the bottom, she sees the lit up surface of the lens lift forward away from your eye, in the shape of a parabola.

You look like a machine:

An exaggerated representation of the person that she sees at work.

Then she continues to look down, seeing the tattered cloth around the shoulders of your shirt, and sees that you deliberately started with an already totally stupid thing, and consciously pushed it completely over the edge, by cutting off the sleeves –

She imagines the psychology at the moment of purchase, as you spotted it, at some horrible store, imagining you carefully selecting the right size, after an unreasonably hard day at work, and your sincere, quiet enjoyment upon finding,

“the right one.”

She realizes that your ridiculousness could be something that you do automatically to distract from the fact that you’re simply not normal, sizing you down a bit.

Before the downbeat of the chorus, you take her hand and say,

“I think you should hold onto something.”, and then roll up all of the windows.

Exactly on the downbeat, you lean into the gas pedal, staring into the visibly empty highway ahead, with the acceleration steady, but increasingly noticeable:

The sun receding further behind the forest that bounds the outer lanes of the highway, with shadows rapidly painting the interior of the car, she hears the engine roar, and she feels the entire frame of the car start to vibrate –

Breaking her introspection, again, as if you knew something that you couldn’t have known without looking first.

You look over to her, and because she’s smiling so much, you again lean into the gas, this time out of synch with the music, the same pattern repeating, only out of synch, creating some apprehension of a third –

The entire car at this point rocking from the combustion of the engine, she sees even the dials in the dashboard moving at unfamiliar speeds, producing noises inside the cabin, with the wind pounding against the windshield.

She sees the melted ice in her drink churning in the cupholder, occasionally spilling, but she is nonetheless not afraid at all, other than by the realization that she trusts you, perhaps too much –

You take her hand and squeeze it, as she finds additional comfort in your denim shorts, and bare feet below, seeing a simply ridiculous man, that seems to really love her –

Like a proper hillbilly that’s stolen a rich man’s identity, seeing your hairy legs covered in goosebumps, concluding that you are obviously sharing in her excitement.

You look at her just long enough to make sure that she’s alright, with her smiling back, terribly excited, neither of you saying anything at all, with everything now appearing overexposed from the low angle of the sun, as she sees only the outlines of an abstraction in you, in which she has quite plainly entrusted her personal safety –

You squeeze her hand again, she finds relief, and you turn back to the road,

putting both your hands on the wheel, continuing at what is now an absurd velocity.

She focuses on the music, as the lyrics set into the context, she realizes that all of this says something that you couldn't possibly otherwise articulate:

That you see nothing else in this world when she is with you –

That there are only two of you, with no obstacles, as your mind accelerates, with no inhibitions, other than her wellbeing, like a car roaring down an open road.

“Ida … ”, staring forward.

“Yes … ”, she replies, as if asking a question.

“Ida I love you.”†

Who are you?

We show up to the market, disturbingly professional in our shopping:

You point at a parking spot, which I barrel into, in one continuous motion.

We both get out of the car like The Matrix, and walk through the automatic doors to the market like we might rob the place, quickly agreeing on exactly what we want for dinner, and the consequent ingredients, being politely aggressive to everyone around us, managing the situation like we're closing a transaction as quickly as possible, so as to avoid imposing undue costs on an important client.

Mundane considerations, such as which one of the many indifferentiable brands of Swedish produce that we should purchase get ruthlessly processed by two towering automatons, their confidence alarming ordinary shoppers, as we point at things, mercilessly throwing them into our cart, inspiring others, immaculately executing upon a menu that we conceive of on the spot, looking more like a pair of football players than shoppers.

Only the classics are ultimately permitted:

Gravlax, pickled herring, toast Skagen, Jansson's temptation – boom, done.

We pass the beer isle, and I grab several armfuls of Mikkeller beers, because I like them.

The checkout becomes reduced to a nothing, as I load items from the cart onto the belt, and you organize them on the belt, the consummate team, with your credit card already out, immediately ready for payment once all items have been loaded, both of us watching the prices the whole time for any sales that may have been missed.

I drive us home, not as fast as the way in, but fast, with no music playing, barely talking:

We're going to make love before cooking dinner, and it's going to be extreme, because car –

Baby powder.

We are both plainly in love with each other at this point, which is now no longer a secret of any order –

We are desperate people.

We get back to the house, leaving the groceries in the car, because something far more important might expire, and so we bolt the moment I open the front door to the house, with my keys already out the moment we exit the car –

Running through the interior of the house, we know the common area we both have in mind, which we agree upon by looking at each other as we're running.

As we're running, I pull up, "Maps", by The Yeah Yeah Yeahs, on my phone, and hit the play button, carrying my phone until I see the large couch in the center of the common area that I know we both have in mind –

I toss my phone into the right corner of the couch, just as the song is just getting started, and dive into the left corner, twisting my body around mid-flight, so I can finally, really see you, separating the section that I've landed on a bit due to the concussive force of my impact.

You follow shortly after, jumping in as well, landing to the right of me, with your beautiful legs on top of me, smiling, pushing the couch back as well upon landing, both of us moving, and I turn into you, grabbing the back of your head, under your hair, with every last bit of psychological well-being that I have left in me.

The house's bluetooth speakers pick up the signal from my phone, causing the song to circulate, positively blasting, with happenstance adding ever more to our favor, as the evening Sun light cuts through the entire room, into your eyes above me, and suddenly, you appear to me, your face inches away from mine, with the blue echoes of the house lights bouncing around behind you, in straight horizontal lines above and beside your head.

Substantial time passes, and we don't bother to take each other's clothes off:

Our hands and arms snaked around each other's backs, heads, and bottoms, grasping for the silhouettes that we saw earlier burned by the Sun into the middle of the air, now occasionally uttering nonsense, but none of it works.

Ultimately naked on a stranger's couch, lost in an environment that would almost certainly not protect what we've found, we plum what time allows –

Torrid and lurid desires haplessly trying to recreate the indelible realities that we both experienced hurtling along the surface of the Earth, at velocities that our Creator might eventually frown upon, in a tiny, fragile, little thing, that holds our futures in an eggshell, ultimately settling for what we have –

Far more than anything we've ever expected.†

Sketches of the Inchoate

For, “Anna”, in Denmark.