

FutureFeedForward

d a v i d r i c e

v. 0.2004.11.22
hamlet monkeys media

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2.

A Death Worse Than Fate

Satchel is not particularly tall, incapable of looming; he is, in fact, a bit on the short side, but rangy. He is built like a boast and looks rather difficult to knock down, as if prepared for life by persistent hazing at the hands of a dozen older brothers.

"I'd like to talk to my client," exclaimed Satchel, nostrils stuffed with cotton.

"Uh," murmured Mischka, looking him up and down.

Satchel's hair is a cautionary tale about the perseverance of Nature. It is characterized chiefly by an enormous, fractal cowlick that refuses to succumb to the fistfuls of gel that slap against it every morning with the regularity of an incoming tide. Rebellious, oily, black spikes of hair jut from the top of his forehead like leaves from the crown of a pineapple.

"Sure," Mischka added with a start, realizing that what at first glance looked to be a white shirt and a bright red tie was in fact an undershirt stained down the middle with a trough of blood.

"Good," he snorted, waving for me to join him in the hall.

"What happened?" I asked, once the door had closed and we were alone. "Where were you?"

"Where was I? Where were you? You were supposed to drive me down."

"I was?"

He snorted and leaned in close, grinning. "Do you want to see something?"

"Maybe."

"This is 100% level," he whispered. "100 per-cent shit." He moved the bag of ice to the top of his head, balancing it like a load of mangoes. "I got it last night," he said, reaching for a large bandage maniacally taped to his right forearm.

He peeled back the bandage, revealing what looked like a gigantic scab in the shape of a hula dancer.

"Is that infected?" I asked, grimacing. It had begun to writhe, seething with malicious animal spirits.

"No. I don't believe in germs." His brows knit for a second. "Wait, this'll help." He reached into his undershirt with his free hand and began scrubbing the scab vigorously with the stained front of the shirt. I could hear him sucking his breath in through clenched teeth. At last, with a toothy grin, he held his forearm up for me to examine.

It was a tattoo, inked in the greens, greys and blacks of a dollar bill: a full-figure, currency-style etching of George Washington, jacketed, stockinged, buckle-shoed, but in a big grass skirt.

"Uh-huh."

"No, wait, check it out." Suddenly the tattoo broke into a full-on, hip-swaying hula, both arms oscillating to the right, then both to the left.

"Huh," I stuttered.

"Completely shitted, eh?" George stopped dancing. "It's a new process, some kind of little ink balls that turn around, different colors on different sides."

"Ink balls?"

"Real tiny. Tick dicks."

"But."

"They just poke a whole bunch of 'em under your skin with needles, and then, the electricity in your skin..."

"Galvanic skin response?"

"Something like that; it just makes him dance."

"Can you control it?"

"Pretty much. I can make him dance if I want, but sometimes he starts up by himself." He looked vaguely confused for a second. "Kinda tickles."

"Is it safe?"

"Safe? I talked to the guy inventor. He told me all about it. He tweaked an FBI lie-detector patch."

"Lie-detector patch?"

"Completely non-invasive. They'd get somebody in for questioning and stick this patch right on their forehead. Based on the galvanic skin thing, the ink in the patch would say 'Truth' or 'Lie.'"

"They can do that?"

"Sure." Satchel began making a show of tucking in his shirt with one hand.

"And, so, does he dance if you're lying?" The bag of ice slipped off his head, but, with a quick move of his elbow, something like the flapping of a chicken wing, he managed to catch it in the crook of his arm.

"I'm not sure, I haven't tested it." He hastily repositioned the bandage and began pressing the strands of tape with his fingers. "Look," he said under his breath. "How's it going in there? Did you say anything?"

"About what? They just asked a few questions and I told them the truth."

"Okay, that's okay then."

"I'm not sure it is okay."

"How so?"

"Well, just before you got here, they pretty much accused me of lying. They didn't believe me when I told them about the network, and the lead one, Mischka."

"Mischka?"

"Mischka. Mischka seemed to think it's a fraud."

"A fraud. That's no problem. I've got that covered."

"You've got that covered, well what about me? I don't appreciate being sent down here unprepared."

"Unprepared? You were supposed to bring me with you so I could prep you on the way down. You left me high-n-dry. I had to borrow Emily's Beater to get here."

"I'm sorry about that. Still, it doesn't look right if the head of marketing doesn't know enough about the product to convince somebody that it isn't a fraud."

"Look, it's under control. This is the way Red wants it. If you don't know anything, you can't give anything away."

"Loose lips sink ships, blah blah."

"You can shit about this later. Let's just take care of the deposition first. Did they say anything else that sounded bad? Did they ask about anything else?"

"Not really. They were a little curious about the shares."

"The shares. Okay. Did they ask about Quarktrain?"

"Quarktrain?"

"Quarktrain, or the Quarktrain matter?"

"No. What's Quarktrain?"

"A former client. Nothing really. What about Megalolift Media LLC?"

"Megalolift? No."

"Sprague Ventures?"

"No."

"Alchemical?"

"No."

"Osmosis Technologies?"

"No, they didn't ask about any of them. Have you been in trouble before? Is there something I should know about?"

Satchel stood up straight, dropping the bag of ice and looking into an imaginary distance. "No," he said, scratching absently at the bandage. "Not really." His voice trailed off. He stood stock-still, surveying a vista only he could see, like some piece of Stalinist statuary.

"Not really?"

"No," he confirmed, returning to himself. "No trouble." He turned to look at me. "Let's do this," he said with a reassuring snarl.

"But wasn't there something you wanted to tell me, some instructions or something."

"No. You've met George. I think we're ready." He opened the door and was into the locker room handing out business cards before I could object.

"Are you sure it's appropriate to continue the session?" Mischka was asking, looking Satchel over again. "My colleagues and I have been discussing it and we would all feel comfortable rescheduling."

"No. I think we should go ahead and wrap this up," replied Satchel.

"I see. Has your client apprised you of our concerns, that, namely that we are taking seriously the possibility that he, and possibly others at the company, have participated in fraudulent representations concerning the nature of the technology used and developed by the company, and that these fraudulent statements may have been made in connection with the sale or offer to sell securities in violation of Federal securities laws?"

"I get the picture."

"And we'll continue the questioning, then?"

"Sure," said Satchel, looking at me. I nodded.

We all took our seats on the benches, and Mischka turned to me. "Mr. Vigor, I'd like, then, to review the key part of your testimony, review it with counsel present."

"Certainly."

"It is your testimony, Mr. Vigor, that your employer possesses a machine, an electronic device, for receiving data transmissions from the future."

"It is."

"And that this device does in fact receive information from the future."

"It does."

"And you have, on at least one occasion, made representations regarding this device to potential investors."

I hesitated, looking over at Satchel. He was lifting the corner of his bandage and peering intently at the bloody mess underneath. "On many occasions," I answered.

"These representations concerning the device have been substantially like those that you have made to us here today."

"Yes."

"To your knowledge, have any persons purchased securities in the company on the basis of these representations."

Again I looked to Satchel. He had pulled the cotton from one of his nostrils and was examining it for saturation. "I believe so," I stuttered. "We have sold some shares. I don't know how many." Satchel flipped the cotton around and stuffed the un-bloodied end into his free nostril.

"But records have been kept."

"I assume so."

"Any records concerning exactly which current or former shareholders were present in forums where you discussed the purported device?"

"I don't know."

"What about records concerning which shareholders have had access to marketing materials making representations about the device?"

"I'm not sure." Satchel was rejiggering the cotton in his other nostril. "Probably all of them have, I couldn't be sure."

"All of the company's current shareholders have been told that this device exists and that it functions and is in use at the company?"

"I imagine so."

"Okay," said Mischka, crossing her legs and glancing at the blackboard. "I'd like to ask you about other people at the company."

"Okay."

"Mr. Boudaine. Redroe Boudaine."

"Red."

"He is the chief executive officer."

"Yes."

"And the founder of the company."

"He invented temporal networking."

"Invented. Okay. Has he, to your knowledge, made representations concerning the device to potential shareholders?"

"Do I count?"

"You? Do you own shares?"

"I do."

"Well, to anybody besides you?"

"I'm not sure. Probably at least to me, and to Satchel." I pointed over at him. He didn't seem to hear his name. He was busy looking around the room, his mouth hanging open, a look of vague recognition on his face. "And likely to Emily."

"Emily Efou?"

"Yes."

"And to anybody else? Any other employees?"

"No. That's all the employees. Just us."

"Four employees?"

"Yes."

"The entire company."

"Yes, but we're looking to grow."

"I see."

For some reason Satchel was beginning to lean back very slowly, like a drawbridge being lowered.

"Mr. Vigor," Mischka continued, "what is the annual revenue generated by Futurefeedforward?"

"Generated?"

"Earned. How much business is the company doing?"

"I'm not sure I know."

Satchel was leaning even farther back, craning his neck to get a look at the shower room.

"You don't know?"

"I'm not the numbers guy. I'm the mouthpiece."

"I see. Well, how many customers does the company have?"

“Hey,” Satchel said suddenly, just as he crossed his own personal tipping point and fell ass-over-elbows backwards off the bench in what can only be described as a fairly plausible pratfall. His head managed to land on the baggie of ice as if on a pillow, and the force of the impact caused the bag to erupt, spewing irregular, half-melted ice cubes across the floor like so many pucks on an air hockey table.

I may have failed to mention something about Satchel. He has a glass eye. One glass eye and one lazy eye. It’s one of the things that people tend to notice about him right away. The odd thing about it, though, is that his glass eye is the one that tends to look directly at you and follow your eyes. His good eye, the lazy one, tends to wander in its own elliptical orbit, sometimes near, sometimes far, a prodigal peeper that only occasionally turns up to complete his gaze. The glass eye, due to some miracle of medical technology, always looks just where you expect Satchel means to be looking: at your unfinished food after a meal, at the road while he’s driving, or at an unusually large dog turd he’s spotted on the lawn and sure to say something juvenile about.

I think that eye has a tiny gyroscope in it and some neuro-sensitive magnets. I’ve sometimes, though, imagined an itty-bitty squirrel, looking out a porthole and rotating the eye by running around like a hamster in a clear plastic ball.

It turns out that the impact of Satchel’s head hitting the floor also caused his eye to pop out. The glass one. And it went skittering across the floor in the shower of ice and came to rest, disconcertingly, between Mischka’s feet, staring up at her. Her mouth, understandably, fell open, then Tony’s, then, five heartbeats later, Malcolm’s, out of which a blob of remoulade fell rather dramatically, splattering on the tip of his shoe.

“None,” I said.

“.....” Mischka ventured.

“....” added Tony.

Before anybody else could fail to say anything else, a shoebox-sized door in the base of one of the lockers opened. Out came an autosweeper disguised as a little zamboni and it began darting from ice cube to ice cube, sucking them into its dustcache.

Satchel was suddenly on his feet, brushing himself off spasmodically. “Pisser,” he muttered, arms flailing as if to ward off an insistent bee. “Sorry about that, but I wonder if anybody has seen....?”

“.....” said Mischka, pointing down discreetly. I was reminded of one of those people who manage to inform you that you’ve got spinach between your teeth with just a snarl and the flick of a tongue.

“Ah, yes,” Satchel huffed, hiking up his pants and surveying the bench that stood between him and his erstwhile eye. It was then that Satchel’s socket seemed to spot the zamboni working its way towards Mischka’s feet. We all noticed it then, and gasped in unison, drawn together by our desire to plot the trajectory and speed of the sweeper against the distance between Satchel and his eye.

Mischka, instinctively, started to lean forward and extend her hand, as any civil person would to retrieve for somebody something out of reach, but she hesitated as soon as she caught the eye staring up at her. The sweeper, meanwhile, made an oblivious beeline for its prize.

Satchel pounced over the bench, coming within inches of landing on the sweeper. The rest of us startled, but had no place to run. He lunged just in time to see his eye sucked up under the zamboni, but, on the follow-through, without a moment of hesitation, gave the sweeper a swift kick. The general effect was that of a toaster being drop-kicked inside a public bathroom. The sweeper bounced off a wall and came to rest near the hors-d’oeuvre table, dented and flipped over on its back, its various wheels and brushes still turning forlornly like the legs of an upended beetle.

Satchel sauntered over, shaking his head pityingly. He stood over the struggling sweeper, head bowed, considering its predicament. He shuffled around it to get another vantage and began scratching furiously amongst his cowlicks.

Mischka made as if to raise a finger.

Too late. With an unexpected fury, Satchel snatched the sweeper up with both hands, raised it high over his head, and, like some catapult that had been aimed accidentally at the floor, flung it down with an exertive grunt. Bits of sweeper shrapnel pinged around the room. A pinky-sized brush lodged itself deep in an untouched mint pudding amidst the hors d’oeuvres.

Satchel snatched the thing up again before it could stop spinning and hurled it down. Then again. And again. His rhythmic assault quickly filled the room like the clangor of an automated assembly line. An automated dis-assembly line. A miniature zamboni fender bounced off of Tony’s hair. Plumes of dust began to shoot from the sweeper like feathers jetting from a pillow during a

ferocious pajama party. I'm almost certain I saw cascades of red and blue sparks whenever the thing hit the floor.

Eventually the attack abated. Satchel began to wind down until his throws became intermittent chugs, the final spasms of a piston running out of juice. The sweeper finally came to rest near the door and an eerie quiet settled over the room. Satchel tossed his head back, panting, arms akimbo. Another blob of remoulade fell out of Malcolm's mouth, decorating his other shoe. Mischka coughed and cleared her throat.

"Never mind me," Satchel said, stooping over the carcass and somehow plucking his missing eye out of its distraught innards. "No need to be embarrassed." He began polishing his eye with his shirt. "I'm not," he concluded, working the eye back into his head.

You may be wondering, as I often have, how it was that Satchel lost his eye in the first place. It is not difficult to imagine him toddling around perilously with scissors in hand, or having a close encounter with the proverbial sharp stick. According to his kid sister, Eva, who was born after the fact and so may not be an entirely reliable source, Satchel, as a child, fought with the sun. He despised its regularity, its white-hot, blithering redundancy. Every morning, up; every evening, down. He was consumed by the injustice of it, that something so powerful could be so boring. And so he defied it. He resolved to stare it down.

I don't know his age at the time, but, as Eva tells it, he knew enough to know the dangers, and so, out of a sort of prudence, decided to risk only one eye, covering the other with his hand. I suspect that he thought he might really pull it off, make that shiny bastard blink or cry uncle. How long did he stare? Long enough. Where was he when he did it? Was he alone? Did he keep at it after he could no longer see? I should ask him.

"I think I've got a way we can wrap this all up quick," Satchel was saying, pacing the room. "Have you got a wireless?"

All three of them nodded, mouths still hanging open.

"Good." He began to gesticulate. "Your big thing is you think we're a fraud, right?"

They nodded.

"You've never heard of a machine like we've got, a temporal network?"

"Mmmhmm," Mischka managed.

"Doesn't make any sense. Can't work. Impossible."

"Yes," she coughed, "impossible."

“Can’t be?”

“Can’t be.”

“Pipe dream?”

“Pipe dream.”

“Well, let me tell you what we’re going to do,” said Satchel, “we’re going to dream that pipe dream together, right here, today.”

“Today?”

“Today.” Satchel had begun to punctuate his sentences with wild stabs of his fingers. “We’re drinking the Kool-Aid.”

“Kool-Aid?”

“We’re taking the red pill.” He hesitated.

“The red pill?” asked Mischka.

“We’re taking the blue pill. We’re taking the red pill and the blue pill.”

“Two pills?”

“I’ll tell you what we’re doing,” he turned sharply on his heel, “we’re eating the EAT ME cake.”

“Cake?” asked Malcolm.

“Have you got that wireless handy?” Satchel asked, turning to Tony, who, without blinking, took out an LG. Satchel began brandishing an envelope he had pulled out of his hip pocket.

“This is the cake,” he intoned. “This is THE cake.”

He handed the envelope to Mischka who almost failed to take it. After a moment the furrows on her brow relaxed. She sighed in resignation, and opened the envelope. It had a single sheet of paper in it, which she held up and started scanning. By dint of the light shining through it, I could make out what looked like a column of newspaper print marred by a half a dozen thick, black redactions.

“No,” interrupted Satchel, “go ahead, read it out loud.”

“I don’t know where this is going, Mr. Pincher.”

“Out loud,” he insisted.

“I really don’t think it’s appropriate.”

Satchel grimaced, shrugging with mock encouragement.

“Do you mean this as some kind of threat?” she asked.

“Threat?”

“I mean if your intent is to intimidate us with a document like this, it’s just not going to work.”

“Intimidate? Let me see that.” He snatched the paper from her and started reading it. “Huh. Wrong envelope.” He stuffed the paper back into his pocket and pulled out another envelope.

“I hope this isn’t some kind of joke. Disemboweling is not funny.”

“Disemboweling?” asked Malcolm.

“And neither is trepanation,” she added.

“Trepanation?” Malcolm repeated.

Satchel tossed her the other envelope, which she deflected into her lap with the palm of her hand. “Forget about that one,” he said. “This is the one.”

“The ‘cake’?”

“Yes. The cake.”

She took out three or four pages covered with columns of numbers and letters. She flipped through them quickly.

“You’ve got five stocks there,” Satchel explained, “and a long list of trades for each one.”

“I see,” said Mischka, pursing her lips, “these are trades that haven’t happened yet?”

“Check the execution times.”

“And this information came from your machine, from your company’s machine?”

“Bingo. Take a look; we’ve got some there that should be right about to pop.”

She handed the pages to Tony, who had begun breathing over her shoulder with his LG in hand. “Hnn,” he sneered after a minute, “there went one; when’s the next one? Oh, wait, there it went. That’s two.”

Satchel smirked, winking and giving me two pistol-fingers. Certain faces are just built to wear self-satisfied grins.

The three inquisitors huddled together for a good ten minutes, getting quieter and quieter. At one point, Mischka glanced back at us with a look equal parts disgust and credulity.

“Okay,” she said at last, clutching the pages, hands on hips, “what do you expect us to do with this?”

“Take it under advisement.”

“Advisement?”

“Take it back and take a good long look at it. Check it up and down and see if we’re not right, 100% right. Then call us if you have any more questions.”

“I see. Call you with questions. No more questions now.”

“I think you’ve got plenty to chew on. I’d also like to remind you of the accident.”

“The accident?”

“The disemboweling. The dragging. The bystander’s umbrella.”

“The accident,” Mischka repeated, nodding absently.

“Yes. Now you’ve got it,” said Satchel taking the piece of paper from the first envelope out of his pocket and smoothing it out on his thigh, “the unfortunate accident. As it turns out, our network delivered some sad news. One of you, I don’t know which one, is going to....”

“Be disemboweled?” asked Tony.

“And trepanned?” Mischka added.

“All that, and, I’m afraid to say, a bit more,” said Satchel reassuringly. “This, here, is a clipping with all the details. It’s from the *Times*. The date’s been blacked out, but I can tell you that it’s guaranteed to be too soon.”

“This story is about one of us?”

“Poor sap. It’s the indignity of it all that really gets to you. I had heard that circus animals do sometimes just snap like that. I hadn’t heard about their taste for human intestines. Just like a string of little sausages, I suppose.”

“Is it Malcolm,” asked Tony, hopeful. “It’s Malcolm, right?”

“Can’t say. Don’t know where, don’t know when.” A twinkle sprang into his eye. “But maybe you should keep this,” he added, holding out the rumpled article. Mischka took it, her jaw set in thought. “Otherwise, I think we’re done here.” And with that, Satchel lifted me bodily by an armpit and hustled me out into the hall.

“What about the cake?” I heard Malcolm ask in a small, disappointed voice as the door closed behind us.

* * *

“We won’t be hearing from them again,” Satchel boasted as we emerged from the DEPOT. “One thing you should know about me is that I’m a closer. I shut things up.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Another thing you should know is that your car has been impounded.”

“What?” I stopped dead in the middle of parking lot traffic.

“I needed it to post bond.” Satchel kept walking. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll get it back in 30 to 60 days.”

“30 to 60 days?”

“I had to throw down this morning...” His voice was breaking up as he got farther from me. “...bogus charges...assault...spot bond...asshole...”

“My car?” I shouted, incredulous. Traffic was starting to collect behind me like flotsam in an eddy.

“...appearance...impound...get it back...” He looked around suddenly, a prairie dog on high alert, then caught sight of me.

“Why MY car?” I asked.

“I couldn’t give them Emily’s car,” he explained as I caught up to him, “she’d wring me, and I’m tapped. Always pushing the limit. Leverage over liquidity. I had to make the bail or they’d take me down to book me, and if they did that, I wouldn’t have been there to save you just now.”

“Save me?”

“Save us. Temporary cost of doing business,” he said as we got to Emily’s car, a brand new Volkswagen Beater: mismatching driver’s door and hood, mangled passenger’s side, jaws-of-life moonroof, dragable muffler, all the extras. It looked like it had been wadded up in a giant fist. There was an attaché-sized box in a yellow cellophane bag on the passenger’s seat. I put it on my lap as I got in.

“Did they give you a receipt or anything? If I give you the money can you get it out sooner?”

“The paperwork on that alone would take more than 60 days,” he said, getting behind the wheel. “I’ll just get it back when I make my appearance.”

“Can I trust you to do that?”

“Can I trust you to shut the fuck up and check in the glove box for some aspirin?” he asked with a grin.

I started rummaging around in the compartment and came up with a purple plastic bottle with one of those child-proof caps: LARVAPRIN. There were no gelcaps in it, but there was a surprisingly large, throbbing caterpillar with a dangerous looking orange spike on its business end. I put the cap back on and took note of the smiling, cartoon caterpillar on the label spitting out a speech bubble: “Feed me for headache relief!” I turned the bottle around to read the instructions:

DIRECTIONS FOR USE: Larvaprin spins 3-6 tablets every 1-2 hours. Feed Larvaprin an amount of fresh

plant material that will fit comfortably in the bottle. Do not overfeed. Take tablets for temporary relief from minor aches and pains due to headache, fever, stress or the common cold. Discontinue use if directed by physician. Eating Larvaprin itself does not provide relief.

“Hold on,” I said, getting out of the car and wandering over to the parking median. The median was covered with thick, lime-green grass. I tore out a couple of handfuls and stuffed them into the bottle.

“I’m not eating grass,” said Satchel leaning out the driver’s side window. “Just give me the pills.”

I ripped a couple strips from the leaves of a newly-planted sapling, dropped them into the bottle for good measure, and climbed back into the car.

“What? No aspirin?” he grouched, cranking the ignition.

I held the bottle up to the light and could make out the profile of the caterpillar patiently chomping on a blade of grass as if it were a cold, crisp celery stalk. If it had lips, it was likely smacking them. “This might take a while,” I said.

Satchel is a manicautious driver, sort of like a manic-depressive who’s both up and down at the same time, all of the time. Everything about his posture says Little Old Lady from Pasadena; everything the car does says Monster Truck Rally. We hit the freeway with the muffler on Drag, a dozen cars lurching in our wake, horns blaring. Satchel looked over at me with his glass eye.

“You done good,” he said.

“About that,” I started.

“No, good. I’m not kidding. Gu-hood.”

“You don’t even know what I did. You don’t know what I said. You just put on your Hulk show, no questions asked. For all you know, I fucked up the whole thing, spilled the beans.”

Satchel went back to peering over the steering wheel. “No sir, you spilled nothing because you know nothing, ja?”

“That’s the other thing that doesn’t make any sense.” Satchel began to raise an impatient, cautionary finger from the steering wheel. “I need to know what’s going on. I can’t do anything about our public image if you and Red are showboating all the time. Wild stunts don’t help our reputation. You think VCs

invest in reckless companies?” His finger began to waggle. “I can’t work this way. I can’t do my job under these conditions.”

“Look, junior,” Satchel blurted as he began using the shoulder to pass slower cars, “you’re a pretty face, but you’ve got no chops. You weren’t ready for the deposition not because I didn’t prep you, but because YOU. WEREN’T. READY.” He punctuated each of the last three words by swerving into a new lane just in time to fill a Beater-sized space. “I know you’ve got questions. I’ve got questions. We’ve all got questions, like When am I going to get paid? How does the machine work? If the machine works, why doesn’t it tell me when I’m going to get paid?”

“How does the machine work?”

We veered onto the 1015, barreling by levels of freeway stacked up like the tiers of a massive wedding cake, on-ramps and off-ramps, carpoolways and mergeways arcing across the skyline like the loops of ribbon on a Christmas bow.

“You’ve got to come to grips with the big picture,” Satchel was saying. “The big picture is you don’t see the big picture, and neither do I. But Red has shown you what he’s shown you and he’s shown me what he’s shown me.” He trailed off as if dazed by a sudden memory. “The future is tricky business,” he said finally. We sat in silence for a good while.

Eventually I got tired of the scenery and looked down at the box in my lap. It was covered in large, isometric rectangles, tone-on-tone greens and greys. “The Michael Graves Collection” it said in one corner. I pulled back the edges of the cellophane bag. The cardboard was smooth and crisp. “Clock Timer” it said in a coy typeface. In another corner was a picture of the Timer. It looked like half a white fluffy cloud that had been encased in a smooth, translucent candy-coating. There were two large slots cut into the top, a different bedside clock balanced in each. I tipped the box up and started reading the bullet points:

- GAUGE THE ACCURACY OF ANY CLOCK.
- NO BATTERIES REQUIRED.
- TIMELESS CONTEMPORARY DESIGN. LOOKS GREAT WITH ANY DÉCOR.
- TAKE IT WITH YOU WHEN YOU TRAVEL. WORKS IN TIME ZONES WORLDWIDE.

- SIMPLE TO USE: PUT AN ACCURATE CLOCK IN ONE CRADLE. PUT A TEST CLOCK IN THE OTHER CRADLE. WATCH THEM BOTH. IT'S AS EASY AS ONE, TWO, THREE.*

I looked up. We were shooting through a canyon of big-box retailers and cantilevered office parks. Satchel had both eyes on the traffic. We rode the rest of the way in silence.

As we pulled into the office lot, Satchel managed to take a hand off the wheel and start kneading his forehead. "What's with the aspirin?" he asked as he turned off the ignition. I handed him the Larvaprin bottle and climbed out of the car.

Satchel stood on the sidewalk for a minute, wrestling with the childproof lid. Eventually he dumped the bottle into an open hand. Bits of grass rained down like ticker tape. He regarded his palm. "There's a fucking worm in the aspirin," he said without concern, plucking up two tablets and popping them into his mouth. "Look at that," he said, proffering his palm.

"Huh." I said.

With a flick of his wrist, Satchel dropped the caterpillar onto the concrete and ground it out like a used cigarette. Then, without missing a beat, he leaned around into the car, snagged the Clock Timer from off of the passenger's seat, and trotted off towards the office. I stood for a moment, transfixed by the bright, sticky stain that remained on the sidewalk among the scattered shards of grass, transected by the great orange spike that had been its best defense.

* Clocks not included.