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The Connection and We Learned It From the Birds

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**THE CONNECTION
&
WE LEARNED IT FROM THE BIRDS**

by

ALEXANDRA T. COPP

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELORS OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR MOFFETT
PROFESSOR LIU**

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
The Connection	5-39
We Learned It From the Birds	39-55

Introduction

When I initially decided to write a creative thesis I pictured myself building a fantasy world from the ground up, complete with magic and an in depth political background. I wanted to write what I read, a story comparable to the likes of George R.R. Martin or Tamora Pierce. My first epiphany came when I realized this was nearly impossible to achieve in 60 pages. I still wanted to write a piece set in a world which was somehow different from ours, but I contained the fantasy element to one key difference. *The Connection* was first conceived, as a sort of slipstream fiction with elements of both fantasy and detective narrative. While writing *The Connection* I found myself conducting research on magnetic poles, architectural styles and assortments of random things, all of which influenced the story. As I finished up the story, I realized I wasn't done writing. I had seen what elements worked, and in some cases didn't work, in my first story and I wanted to follow up with a second story that challenged it both in form and content. Because of the success I had with using research in *The Connection*, I approached this second story as a research assignment, scouring the internet for interesting facts, opinions, and interest pieces which might inspire me. One thing led to another (as it often does on the internet) and I became fascinated with the relationship between airports and birds. The second story *We Learned It From The Birds* contrasts with the first with its contained setting, heavy use of dialogue, and length, but has a similar POV character to *The Connection*. Both feel like they don't belong and both are searching for something, even if they aren't always sure what it is.

The Connection

The city is filled with strangers, all with a red lines protruding from their stomachs. The strangers pass without touching, walking quickly to the small spaces they have carved out of concrete and plastic. Their lines extend straight from their bodies, traveling through parked cars and gated store windows, through tired looking hotdog stands and white marble landmarks, far past their sight. They continue over dirty streets and gilded iron gates and intersect at haphazard angles, dismembering the landscape into minute sectors. However, one place of the city is blank, a small oasis in the city of red.

The fluorescent letters of Lucky's 24 Hour Diner cast a box of hard yellow light on the pavement. Although it was late, pedestrians hurried past the diner, their shadows briefly bleeding from their faces to pool on the curb. No one glanced inside. As they walked on, the hard curbs of the road elongated, angling themselves inwards, until the street looked like a giant V, the lines vanishing at one indiscernible point. The people all have the same destination, following the same internal compass even as they veered down different alleyways and into different hallways. Once in a while a woman would look up from her brisk pace as if startled out of some deep dream. They looked up higher, and higher, tracing the buildings' angular frame to the sky, until like an apology her gaze was forced downwards by the sheer immensity of the city. They focused instead on the two feet of pavement in front of them, secretly relieved.

In the diner Alice watched the silhouettes of these people pass and wished she had a reason to walk somewhere. Her eyes darted hungrily around the room as she watched the customers. With practiced ease she went unnoticed, unassuming in every way. Even

the waitress, who knew her by name and occasionally sold her weed forgot she was there. For all her frantic energy Alice's pen sags in her hand. It's exhausting to stare at the crowd of teenagers on ecstasy sitting closest to the south door. They flicked fries at each other, licking the grease from their fingers in an exaggerated motion. Their hands roamed across the white table, and across each other, as if touching their surroundings could make them real. They vibrated from the drugs, like their blood was made from light that might burst through their skin at any moment. The red lines of their connections extended from each of their navels in all different direction. As they talked animatedly, the thin lines, only as thick of a piece of string, bobbed and weaved in correlation to their bodies.

Alice sagged in her seat, the teenager's bubbling energy too exhausting to follow. She switched her gaze to two older men, talking with their faces close together. They waved off the short waitress before she got to their table. One of the men looked out the window. His large hands were calloused, the padding around his knuckles, thick and scarred. In another life he would have been the mayor of a small, hardworking town, or the leader of a pioneer caravan. Now he was just a man worried he had spent too much on his eggs. He looked down at his connection thoughtfully, then asked his companion a question. The other man laughed and pointed upwards with a wry smile. East of him a young woman stared at her phone, a cup of coffee cooling at her elbow. She never touched the screen, only tapping at it so it wouldn't go dark. Her eyes read something over, and over again. She took a large gulp of the coffee, now only lukewarm. Her connection ran west, exactly parallel to the tiles of the blue and white checkered floor.

Alice sat back and massaged her hand, sore from the late night writing. She tucked into the half finished remains of a slice of ham, hash browns, a hotdog, hazelnut

coffee, hummus, a hard-boiled egg and a plastic container of honey. Every so often she reached down to shove more food in her mouth without actually tasting it. Alice liked the slow, methodical process of chewing, swallowing and digesting. She liked the idea of transference, that the spoonful of honey she was eating raw would be digested, filtered, then added to her in the form of skin cells, muscles, and fat. This week she was only eating foods that started with the letter H. She liked the way the letter looked like a bridge. She imagined standing between the two columns, dangling her feet off their intersection.

Lazily, she tried to guess the time by the darkness of sky. She didn't have a cellphone or a watch and the only jewelry she wore was a round silver compass attached to her wrist with leather bands. It glinted dully in the harsh florescent light. "Late." She thought. "It's late." Sleeping was a waste of time and she wasn't that good at it anyways, so she wandered out of her tiny apartment most nights to people watch. She enjoyed *Lucky's 24 Hour Diner* for three reasons. First, it was always open. The stability of the place shocked her. There were very few places in the world where you are always welcome, no matter your level of intoxication or lateness of the hour. Second, no one ever bothered her or wanted to talk. It is an unspoken rule at diners that you keep to your booth, the waitress being the only liaison. Third, people didn't move around very much so there was less of a chance their connections would touch her. Fourth, really just a bonus, the waitresses' boyfriend sold her cheap weed.

Gnawing on the tip of her pencil Alice jotted down these reasons so she wouldn't forget their significance. One of the teenagers stood abruptly from his table. He was tall and skinny, dressed head to toe in black. He wobbled uncertainly and set his foot down

hard, as if to remind himself that the ground did exist. He limped past Alice and in doing so his connection touched Alice's neck. She couldn't help being reminded of a guillotine. She hated it when other people's connections touched her and it had gotten to the point that she had even gone to a doctor for help. He asked her to describe exactly how it felt. "Like someone is staring at me so hard they are actually staring through me. Like I'm made of clay and I'm being carved out by a fingernail, little by little. Do you know that feeling when you are climbing familiar steps in the dark and you take one more step and the stair isn't there? And you kind of feel like you are falling and then your foot slams against the ground but for a moment you don't know what is real, the falling or the floor?" The doctor smiled at her, prescribed her Xanax and recommended a therapist who was a friend of his.

The city collectively yawned and stretched, pulling the sinews of streets and avenues taut before relaxing into a mass of writhing bodies. The sun pushed against the gloom of the morning, until with a sigh the light burst from the clouds, washing the city in a buttery light. The masses of black and navy blue clad professionals looked up, surprised at the intrusion, before ducking their heads and plowing forward with renewed vigor.

Everywhere red lines crisscrossed the streets and buildings. The crowds waded through them, unawares of the millions of threads that touched them. The yellow cabs honked and hissed at each other, vying for the choicest lanes and the prettiest customers. Underneath their feet, trains roared, an underworld of machinery and speed. The air tasted like water drained from a tin can.

Alice walked down the street wearing nothing but dark purple. Her brown hair was so fine that it floated around her face in the slightest breeze, making it look like a gnarled halo. Her new sunglasses, also a shade of plum, dangled precariously off her nose as if deciding whether they should fall or not. She walked slowly, on every tenth step taking one step backwards. Passersby glared at Alice as they bumped into her. Alice glanced at their connections and glared back. Eventually she arrived at a slightly beat up building nestled between an architecture firm and a Lithuanian Bodega. Small metal letters spelled *The Agency* in an unassuming font. Bracing herself she rang the buzzer.

“Knock, knock,” a voice crackled from the speaker.

Sighing, Alice replied, “Who’s there”. She knew better than to try to skip this morning ritual.

“A broken pencil.”

“A broken pencil who?”

“Never mind it’s pointless.”

The voice on the intercom cracked up. It was still laughing as the door buzzed open and Alice walked inside. After six months working here she still didn’t know who ran the door.

The small lobby was well lit and very white. After her boss had returned from China, which he referred to as the “Oriental”, he had installed a large fish tank in the back of the room. Her boss had told her that the undulating movements of fish calmed people down and made them more likely to part with their money. The upstairs office space was filled with desks, all pointing towards the center of the room where there stood

a small raised stage. Her boss pontificated from it every now and then but no one paid him much attention. He was only a glorified dispatcher who connected his employees with potential clients. This enthusiasm bordered on manic.

It was late, around 11 o'clock in the morning, but it didn't matter. Part of the reason why she liked this job so much was because no one really took much notice of her. The pay was decent, and she got to travel on her clients' dime. She would sit at her desk for a while, usually reading *The New York Times*, until her boss strode out from his big glass office onto the stage. He was a large man, with thinning hair and green eyes and he looked as if he was about to break into a run at any moment. In his youth he had been athletic, but the years had turned his muscle to fat that hung at odd angles from his body. He still boasted about the marathon he was training for, that never seemed to happen. He was enthusiastic to the point of seeming manic.

"Alice!" He boomed, "I have a very special assignment for you!" Her other co-workers barely glanced up from their laptops. Alice approached. it was best to just let him get on with it. Her boss always conducted these conversations from the stage, making his employees look up at him. Once, she had stepped up to his level, but he had looked so aghast that she quickly stepped off.

Looking down at her, he said, "Your last client was very happy with your work! He was surprised you managed to find his connection so fast! I guess you had a bit of luck that she was in Canada. I love those north-facing clients! It makes our job so much easier!" Alice bristled a bit at this. He actually hadn't done any of the work, and it hadn't been easy tracking down a seventeen-year-old girl in Saskatoon. "He was very excited when I showed him the picture. She really is quite pretty don't you think? I

could tell he had a thing for brunettes when I first brought him in. That's why I assigned you to his case!" Alice fingered her long, limp hair. Her eyes narrowed, but her boss leaned forward quickly and grabbed her hands. Leaning awkwardly over her, his eyes seemed too large in his face. He dropped his voice slightly, a rare occurrence for him. "Don't get mad, love, I was only joking. In fact, you have been doing so well I'm going to give you a very special case. An influential client has requested our services. You're going to take lead on this!" Alice was unimpressed. She had heard him tell her co-worker the exact same thing a few days ago.

"If he is so special there must be a bonus then," she said smiling sweetly. Her boss frowned and pulled his hands away. He seemed about to say something but closed his mouth, rearranging it in a carefully upturned angle. He nodded, and walked away. Alice stared. She never got the last word before.

Alice first heard of *The Agency* the day her boyfriend broke up with her. He had called to let her know that that things with his connection had turned from "platonic to romantic." She listened, expressionless, while he explained that he had, in fact, tracked down his connection a month ago. Apparently he had gone to one of the less reputable connection location agencies where they had pointed him to Australia. He booked a ticket the next month under the guise of a business trip and followed his red line until he found a very blonde and very attractive woman. The irony of the situation was not lost on Alice. Alice hung up the phone when he said, "I only went to find my connection because I wanted to get more serious with you...I had to know, you know?" Alice had laughed bitterly, then hung up and deleted his number. Of course she didn't know. She

looked down at her stomach that bulged slightly over her jeans. There was no red line and there never would be.

Alice proceeded to get drunk off of two bottles of cheap, sweet wine. Once her head was spinning she debated whether she should throw up or keep drinking but decided to go for a walk instead. It was dark as she stumbled outside. The cold air clung to her, squeezing the last bit of warmth from her lungs. It was dangerous to be drunk and alone in this part of the city but as long as she walked confidently, staring straight ahead, no one would bother her. She thought of a camping trip she took with her boyfriend, now ex boyfriend, last summer. They had been staring into a fire, “nature’s TV” he called it. The flames licked upwards, twisting the night into thick braids of light. Bugs fluttered around, drawn to the energy. One particularly large moth spun lazily in the air then dove straight into the flames with a loud POP. They had looked at each other in shock then burst out laughing. Alice christened the moth “Icarus”. That night he had told her that he loved her. She cried when he fell asleep but she didn’t know why.

Looking back, her life had been defined by degrees of loneliness. She was an only child and shy. Her parents called her “little ghost” because they often didn’t notice her when she quietly sidled into the room. When she spoke they would jump and whip their heads around. She was often described as “mature for her age” which Alice now realized meant “quiet, and has few friends”. She wasn’t sure if she was lonely because she didn’t have a connection or she didn’t have a connection because she was lonely. The older she became the stranger it seemed, that she was wholly unconnected to the world, a free floating body cut from it’s mooring.

In school the other children would draw themselves with red lines coming out of their stomachs, stretching off the page into some imagined distance. She had never drawn that red streak for herself, but somehow she had still ended up chasing them into the distance.

In kindergarten the popular recess game was “red run”. All the students would gather in a sweaty circle in the middle of the playground. The leader would chant:

In the world they're only two.

Red connection I chose you!

The students would scatter, following their connection to the edge of the playground. The point was to find another person whose line intersected yours. Then you would grab them and scream, “I found you!” and fall to the floor dramatically. This last part their class had made up, but any excuse to roll in the dirt was appreciated. Alice never played in these games and liked to sit forlornly on the jungle gym pretending she was a bird. She saw the connections laid out from her aerial view. The red lines crisscrossed each other like the threads in a tapestry. She longed to comb them out with her fingers and arrange them in neat lines. One day she saw Nancy, her sometimes friend, run haphazardly towards Jake, a sullen but very popular boy. Nancy crashed into him in a wave of curls and bows. “I found you!” she screamed making sure everyone saw her, then boldly kissed him on the cheek. Alice stood up, teetering on the top of the plastic slide she had been sitting on. “You cheated!” Everyone turned to her. “You didn’t follow your connection!” Twenty pairs of eyes stared at her. For a moment Alice didn’t recognize any of the faces even though she knew them all by name.

“How do you know?” Nancy shouted back, looking indignant and a little embarrassed. When Alice proved she could see all their connections by pointing out the direction of three different children’s lines Nancy grew silent. “That’s weird.” Nancy said and the kids dispersed, fading away to darker corners. No one seemed to remember that Nancy had cheated.

Alice had walked all the way to Lucky’s 24-hour diner but she didn’t go in. She hunched her shoulders and stood, just outside of the light pooling from the window. A tired looking woman sipped a cup of coffee, a small boy asleep on her lap. Her hands shook slightly as she lifted the cup to her lips. Alice felt a strong desire to storm into the restaurant and slap the drink from her hand. She massaged her temple instead, afraid of the hangover that was already forming behind her eyes. She stumbled home thinking dark thoughts about fate and childhood.

The next morning Alice gagged into her toilet but nothing materialized. Her mini-fridge contained some moldy ham and an opened bottle of hot sauce. She dragged herself outside, not caring that she hadn’t changed her clothes. When she finally reached the diner she knew that the sun was shining so brightly as a personal vendetta against her. She almost missed the small sign plastered against the brick wall, but she stumbled and leaned against the building for support. It read “DO YOU SEE RED? COME TO THE AGENCY! See connections? Want to make \$\$\$? We want YOU to come to come to 13 St. Marks Place! Become a real life detective!” She might have laughed if her body hadn’t hurt so much. She tore the poster from the brick, clutching it in her sweaty hand.

The sun filters through the tangled blinds to fall in haphazard blocks on the floor. Alice had an aversion to clocks but even she could tell she was already late to meet her client. She grabbed her least wrinkled blouse and threw it on over her slightly chubby frame. She pinned her fine brown hair in a bun, smoothing down the frizzy sides with water. Peering in the mirror, she thought she looked like the type of person who yelled at baristas. Taking the stairs two at a time she hurried out the door. For the last month she had refused to use any form of transportation other than walking. This personal challenge, like eating foods that only started with the same letter, and only wearing clothing of the same color, was supposed to add some sort of purpose to her days. She could focus on these obsessions and feel a sense of satisfaction when she stuck to one of her goals. Now, to her intense displeasure, she had no choice but to break her own rules and get in a cab. It smelled like sour leather and sweat. It let her out in the East Village and she ran up the weathered steps to *The Agency*. Frantically, she slammed her finger into the buzzer.

“Knock, Knock.”

“I don’t have time for this. I’m late.” There was a long pause. Finally, Alice said defeated, “Who’s there?”

“Needle.”

Resting her head against the door Alice asked, “Needle who?”

“Need a little help getting in the door?”

The intercom giggled as the door buzzed metallically.

“Alice, happy you could make it,” her boss said while shooting her a dirty look.

She mumbled an apology. A middle-aged man stood in the glass office. His suit was made of a deep grey cloth tailored to hug his body at flattering angles and his cufflinks were yellow gold. His shoes were so shiny they reflected the bright light of the room and his hair was just starting to turn to a distinguished salt and pepper. He wore the lines on his face proudly and stood in the room with the authority of someone who had always belonged. Alice glanced at her shirt and realized there was a stain on the cuff.

Smiling, he shook her hand. “It looks like you are going to help me find my connection.” On reflex Alice glanced down at his stomach. His line was dark red, almost the color of dried blood and thicker than most, about an inch in circumference. She leaned in closer but snapped her head back as he said, “I’ve heard it is unusual.” He gestured down to his abdomen. “As a boy I went to one of those Crimson Psychics. She said that my connection is very powerful.” Alice hated those frauds. They dressed all in red and promised they could tell people where their connection lived, how old they were, that sort of stuff. Some of them actually could see connections like Alice, but most were hacks, paid to validate their customer’s uniqueness in the world. She did have to admit, though, that this distinguished man’s line was fascinating. “So where are they?” he asked.

Annoyed, Alice answered, “That’s not how it works. All I can do is measure exactly where your line is pointing, and follow it. I can visualize your line even when I can’t see you. It’s not magic; it’s math and science and a little intuition.”

“Good. I wanted to make sure you knew what you were doing.” Alice was starting to get sick of men testing her intelligence. She narrowed her eyes but her boss stepped nervously between them.

“Mr., um, Smith has agreed to a generous finder’s fee,” he tittered. “If you can leave tomorrow there will be a significant bonus.”

“In a hurry?” Alice asked, smiling with all her teeth. Mr. Smith nodded. “Fine, sit down.”

Alice unbuckled the silver compass on her wrist. Lining it up with the thick line coming from his stomach, she twisted the outer degree dial to line up with the north facing arrow. New York City lies 14 degrees west to magnetic north, so she adjusted accordingly. Her boss smiled nervously. “Alice likes doing things the old fashioned way. I assure you we do provide her with the top of the line GPS system.” Her boss gave her a little kick while Mr. Smith wasn’t looking. Rolling her eyes Alice pulled out a small handheld GPS and laid this over her compass. The coordinates read -----.

Mr. Smith eagerly looked at the machine. His face was hungry. “So will you draw this on a map then follow it until you find my connection?”

“I’m going to plug it into a computer to see what areas your line could potentially pass over. We have an algorithm, which calculates the probability of where your connection is. For example, big cities or metropolises are more likely than tiny towns. Although this isn’t always true.” She thought of Saskatoon and the week of flights and footwork it had taken to find her client’s connection. She hated the cold and she hated Canada. “We know because your line points east that your connection isn’t on the Western hemisphere. The line always takes the fastest route, so that narrows down the possibilities a bit. I’ll fly to the most probable city and then reevaluate the GPS coordinates. The closer I get, the more accurate the GPS becomes. If your connection were in New York, you would have reported seeing your connection change more

frequently on your evaluation. Because it hasn't changed much in the past few years we will assume its fairly far away. Like I said, we are detectives, not magicians.”

Mr. Smith smiled, showing a row of perfect white teeth. “That’s what I like to hear.”

There are two types of bars: the ones where you talk and the ones where you drink. Alice chose the latter. She had always liked airports and made it a point to get drunk at them whenever she had the chance. She liked the smell of the cheap carpeting and the way the linoleum floors went on forever without a crack or bump. She liked the fake leather seats, worn smooth by countless fidgeting legs. She liked the bars with their long flat black tables that were never completely clean and the bright TV’s that always seemed to be playing slow motion football tackles. The airport bar, a small vodka-flavored watering hole was an unofficial waiting room and Alice had always felt as it was a place she belonged. In these bars, she got a sense that if she could just bide her time for long enough and get the perfect amount of drunk, that something would be announced on the loudspeaker calling her to the correct gate to finally begin her journey.

Some sort of smooth jazz played in the background but the rhythm of the piece faltered every few seconds and fell apart. It annoyed Alice to the point of wanting to leave, but she had already flagged down the bartender and ordered a drink. She impatiently tapped one of her chubby fingers against the bar to the offbeat rhythm of the music. Rolling her neck, she looked out of the large floor-to-ceiling windows to see a gigantic Airbus being tugged into its terminal. It inched down the runway like a large, drowsy beast. Around the bar were a cluster of men whose connections scattered off in

different directions like sunburst. Alice thought connections always looked slightly more opaque in airports, but it could have just been the light streaming in from the large viewing windows.

Her martini arrived. It had barely touched the table before she had taken a large gulp of it. Vodka was reassuring. It tasted like nothing, pure. She liked the way the light hit her glass, making the alcohol seem like phosphorus. She imagined that the liquid was glowing while she drank it, burning away the dark crevices of her insides. Alice always thought that this is what fire would taste like. The bartender readied the next drink with a knowing smile.

The woman sitting a few seats away from Alice dropped her purse. It fell with a clack at the feet of the large man sitting next to her. Many of the patrons lifted their heads to look at her, then went slowly back to their drinks. They reminded Alice of large field cows chewing cud. As the woman reached down, looking flustered, out of habit Alice looked for her connection. Curious, she strained her neck staring intently at the woman's side. Where was it? Suddenly Alice noticed she couldn't see the fat man's connection either. As the woman hopped off her stool to pick up her purse Alice realized that these two people were connected.

Alice didn't often see connected people in real life. There were a few reality TV shows like "My Connected Life" and, "I Found the One," and a celebrity couple or two, but for the most part, the average person didn't usually find their connections, much less actually stay with them. From her corner Alice could see the couple clearly. She found herself reaching into her bag for the black moleskin journal. The pages were thick and expensive and felt almost like cloth between her fingers.

Airport Bar JFK

Female.

30/35 years

130/140lb

5' 6"

Blonde

Eye color unknown (brown?)

Dropped bag/Smiled at connection/holds herself like a dancer/ tilts her head to the side

like a puppy when asks him a question/ he smiles/ drinking a pink drink (Cosmo?)/

Hands tremble slightly/ bright pink nail polish/ Pink fetish? / Left shoulder slopes

downwards/ man turns away from her/ She looks at the side of his face for a moment too

long / seems embarrassed that she caught herself doing so/ Fingers the stem of her glass/

man watches her fingers/

Male

190/200lb

45/50 years

6' 0"

Brown

Hefty bordering on fat/ t-shirt and jeans very casual/ not very handsome/ kind eyes?

Maybe? Or just wrinkles/ drinking a pint of light beer/ Checks his phone obsessively/

looks through bifocal glasses/ barely looked up when bag fell/ Turns head to question/

smiles but doesn't answer/ takes long swig from glass/ looks up from phone seems to

notice woman/ both seem to lean inwards to each other/ almost not noticeable but their

heads tilt just on an angle as if there is a faint pull/ he takes her hand/ she squeezes it

To Alice the couple looked pretty similar to most middle age couples. The woman was quite a bit more attractive than the man, but other than that they seemed perfectly normal. However, the more Alice watched, the more uncomfortable she became. There was something about them, the way they sat just a few inches too close to each other, the way their bodies were almost unperceivably tilted inwards towards each

other. They sat motionless but it was as if they were circling each other, at perfect counterpoints. It made her dizzy to watch. She stuffed her notebook back in her bag and barely remembered to throw a few crumpled bills on the table as she nervously walked away.

The man in front of Alice on the plane was watching a new movie entitled *The Red Way*. She stared at the screen as the handsome protagonist fought with his parents in a large mansion. He slammed the door and put his head in his hands as the camera panned to the approaching storm. She was beginning to get into it when she felt a tap on her elbow. A small Asian girl had just sat down next to her. Alice smiled then quickly looked away. She hated making small talk on planes, and she didn't particularly like children. The girl began to very loudly open up a family sized bag of skittles and sort them on her tray table. She arranged the red ones first, then the purple, orange, yellow, and green candies. On the screen the handsome man had apparently tried to make himself less handsome by smearing dirt on his face, growing his beard and buying a large camping backpack.

The girl ate the green skittles first, grimacing, and then she ate the yellow, orange, purple, and finally, the red ones. She waited only a few minutes before pulling out a watermelon blow pop with bubble gum filling and crunching into it.

The handsome man was staring out over a fast moving river. His connection shone brightly in front of him, practically glowing. He jumped into the water with all his clothes on and started swimming. Alice thought this was very stupid. She was beginning to see where this movie was going.

“I’m Mira.” Alice internally banged her head against a wall. She could tell this was one of those children that had always been encouraged to speak their mind. Alice was sure the girl’s parents laughed at her outrageous comments and even rewarded them. Mira hummed under her breath. Alice craned her neck to see if there were any other Asian adults in business class who could be this girl’s guardian. As if she read her mind Mira said, “I’m an unaccompanied minor, and my parents felt bad so I got to sit in business class. First class was too expensive but economy is filled with ‘the great unwashed’. That’s what my mom said.” Alice nodded. Maybe if she just didn’t answer this girl she would be left alone. “What do you do?” She didn’t wait for Alice to answer. “My mom is a writer and my dad fires people. Well he actually works in a building, but he works on the top floor, so I know he fires people. When I grow up I am going to build a building taller than all the other buildings and it’s not going to have any floors except the top floor because I don’t want to fire anyone.”

“Why don’t you just build one floor on the ground, instead of making such a tall building?” Alice replied despite her best intentions. Mira was silent for a moment.

“Because I still have to be higher than other people so they can’t fire me.” Alice didn’t know what to say to that.

The man was now very wet and shivering. He seemed to have caught pneumonia from his ill-fated swim in the river. He had propped himself up against a tree, facing the direction of his red line. The screen faded to black.

“So what do you do?” Mira asked.

“I’m a detective.”

“So you arrest people? You solve crimes? Once our house got broken into but Mom said we have insurance so it was fine.”

“I track down connections.”

Mira’s eyes widened. “You mean like Detective Dan? Where’s your coat?”

She had forgotten about this popular child’s show. Detective Dan was a cartoon dog who helped other cartoon animals find their connections. He wore a long red trench coat and went on crazy adventures that were mildly educational so parents would be more susceptible to letting their kids watch that trash.

“I gave it to the last connection I found because she was very upset.” Alice barely had to wait before Mira asked why.

“She was crying because she was too fat and her connection didn’t want to meet her.”

“But Detective Dan always brings them together!”

“But I bet all the animals he finds are skinny. Did you ever see a fat giraffe, or a fat lion?” Mira shook her head. “Also Detective Dan wasn’t hired by assholes.” Mira’s eyes widened and she stopped kicking the seat in front of her. “So Mira, maybe you’d better lay off the candy.” Mira glanced guiltily at the unopened chocolate bar on her tray, then down at her connection. She did not eat the candy bar and she did not speak for the rest of the flight.

On the TV, the man had reached a white beach. He gazed over the water with teary eyes. He had a wooden staff that he planted firmly in the sand. In the distance a small ship sailed lazily on the horizon. A beautiful woman stood by his side. Their connections glowed hot red as he kissed her.

When they landed Alice had still not slept, so she stopped by the airport cafe for a cup of coffee. From her seat she saw Mira reunited with a severe looking woman, who quickly hugged her then grabbed her arm in a vice like grip, dragging her to the exit. Alice pulled out the picture of Mr. Smith, letting her tired eyes focus and un-focus on the glossy paper. Directly in the center of the picture, Mr. Smith beamed at the camera, his unnaturally white teeth bright against his tanned face. He stood in a beautifully decorated study, surrounded by dark wood and leather. Alice could almost smell the fragrant cigar smoke wafting through the air. Mr. Smith looked unnaturally solid, as if he was unmovable, bigger than himself. The room seemed to curve around him like refracted light. The space was heavy, dense even, as if his mere presence firmed his surroundings, weighing it down with a sense of belonging. He was as handsome as any older man Alice had ever seen. His smile was warm and natural, as if she had stumbled into his office unannounced, but nonetheless he was glad to see her. His lips might have been about to tell her some witty joke just between the two of them.

Alice studied his eyes, like flinty blue sapphires, set deeply into triangular laugh lines. They reflected the light, not straight back at her, but to an angle, so no matter how hard she tried, he always seemed to be looking slightly behind her. She turned abruptly, feeling like someone was watching her, but the only other customer was engrossed on his laptop. She lifted the picture again, turning it this way and that to try to meet Mr. Smith's eyes, to no avail. She noticed what looked like a slight smudge on his eyes, as if a master painter had carefully drawn over a mistake. She brought the picture closer until it almost

touched her nose. There it was again, like a smudge, or a shadow right under the deep blue of his iris. For a moment, Mr. Smith's smile lost its easy humor and instead looked sinister. He looked like he was about to open his mouth and it would grow larger and larger, a black hole that would consume everything around it. Startled, Alice pulled the picture away from her and looked at it again. It was just a wealthy man smiling from behind his desk. Taking a deep breath, Alice focused.

A dark red line began to appear in front of Alice. This is what had really gotten her the job at the agency. What had started out as a neat party trick was actually a skill in her new profession. Visualizing someone's connection as her own only took a photograph and some concentration. When she was about ten Alice had been looking at a picture of her very pretty aunt. She was looking for some sort of family resemblance, in the curve of the woman's perfectly curved face when she felt a small tug on her abdomen. She had shouted for joy when she saw the red line extending from her and she ran to her mother, but by the time she found her in the garden the connection had faded. Now she wore other people's connections as her job but it still felt oddly uncomfortable, like trying on clothes that were a few sizes too small.

Her black GPS felt unusually heavy in her hand as she lined it up with the connection. She typed the coordinates into her computer and a red line appeared over a detailed map. It ran almost directly through the center of London, which was a good sign. This meant that the likelihood she was in the right city was very high, a 95.8% her computer beeped. Staring down at her stomach, the connection beamed, unwavering. Alice shook her head and tried to get the image of Mr. Smith out of her head. Still, his teeth, so shockingly white, loomed in her mind. Usually, her client's connection faded as

soon as she stopped picturing their face, but somehow this one lingered. It made her feel slightly unbalanced like the ground was pushing up and against her legs. Rolling her shoulders to dispel some type of mental dust, she closed her laptop and placed a 2-pound coin on the table. It made a satisfying click on the plastic.

Alice hailed a shiny black cab driven by a man who looked like a movie sidekick who the protagonist kills to make a point. The streets curved and wound back on themselves in confusing patters, so different that the perfect New York grid. Alice wondered how anyone ever found their way around. There didn't seem to be any particular architectural style, but rather the city was a patchwork of old and new buildings. The lowness of the houses gave the impression that the whole city was under some enormous pressure. London existed in layers; it was dense and rich because nothing ever seemed to get torn down. No one was bothered that a chrome filled Apple store sat next to a Tudor façade, or that a trendy bar sat facing a large tarnished brass statue.

Alice strode briskly down the streets as it began to rain. No one on the street seemed particularly fazed and carried on with hunched shoulders. The rain was as much a part of this city as the grey brick buildings. As she walked, Alice felt the ball of anxiety in her stomach loosen. A thin tendril of excitement unfurled within her as she followed the connection in an eastern direction. Alice always felt happiest when she had a clear objective, one with a definite end. The connection coming out of her stomach was blurred by the drizzle. Looking at the silver compass on her wrist, Alice headed northwest.

After walking for about an hour, Alice decided to call her boss. He required these daily checkups to make sure his employees were actually searching for their client's

connection and not just sightseeing. Alice had heard that he even tracked some of his less reputable employee's GPSs to make sure they weren't dillydallying. Alice was happy she had left hers in the hotel. Looking around, Alice realized that the large red boxes she had seen on a few streets were actually phone booths. For some reason, she had thought these just existed in postcards and album covers. It seemed like they served an actual purpose here. Alice walked into one, closing the latticed red door with a click. It smelled of dry leaves and dust, although this was much nicer than the New York piss she usually smelled around public places. The receiver was very black, and shiny, the exact color of the cab she had taken. Pulling out a telephone card, she called her boss. The exchanged pleasantries but he seemed distracted. He babbled "Mr. Smith has already called once today to check on your progress. He is a very impatient man! I told him you were very close to finding his connection and that you had a good feeling about this one!" Alice sighed, resting her head against one of the panes of glass. It seemed she was never going to speak for herself. "How's London, is it cold? Raining?" In the background Alice could hear a loud sniffing noise.

"Are you sick?"

"Just enjoying the wonderful weather here!" This hadn't answered Alice's question. "So the faster you find this one the bigger your bonus is going to be so I urge you to hurry, hurry, hurry!" Her boss' voice was growing sharper and more frantic as if he himself wanted to race across London looking for this connection. Before Alice could even respond he hung up. Alice listened to the tone for a few seconds finding the monotony of it comforting.

Alice exited the phone booth and stared down at the wet pavement. Puddles were forming in divots like cupped hands. The water had soaked through her fine hair and it hung in wet strings around her face. Her image of London was eroding in front of her very eyes, crumbling under the pressure of the storm. She ducked under an awning, fumbling in her back pocket for the picture of Mr. Smith. Her numb fingers gripped the edges of the glossy paper, wrinkling its clean edges. His cold eyes stared past her shoulder intently. She remembered his perfect teeth and voice that diffused across the room, filling the corners with his rich baritone.

She hunched her shoulders and dipped her head, wryly realizing she looked much more like a Londoner now. Ducking under the cover of an awning she pulled out the picture of Mr. Smith. His cold smile looked over her shoulder, still not meeting her eyes. The unnerving pressure in her stomach returned and the red connection appeared. It stretched into the gloom, anchoring her to the city. Alice wanted to be home in her shitty apartment where none of her neighbors knew her name. She glanced at the compass on her wrist and with a final sigh trod into the rain.

The London streets twisted and turned like a giant concrete river. A few times Alice followed the red line into dead end streets or large gated courtyards with no exits. The architecture which had struck her as so magical now seemed misleading. She missed the grid of New York, where she could plot herself onto the face of the city, pinpointing her location in cubic degrees. The rain had turned into a fine mist that hung in the air, refusing to fall into droplets. It was even colder now and Alice's clothes hug heavily on her frame. The sky was darkening from light grey to black, but she continued forward, cutting through a large park and even jumping a sturdy looking stone wall. She followed

the connection as directly as possible, only changing her path when there was no other choice.

Alice's brown leather shoes were soaked through and she felt the beginning of a blister forming on her right heel. She stopped to rest at an empty bus station for a moment. Once again, like a nervous tic, she checked her connection. The small line pointed straight and true but as she watched she noticed an almost unperceivable shift. Lining her silver compass up with the connection she stared hard. One degree to the east, then another.

"Fuck!" she yelled, then guiltily looked around her. Of course it wasn't going to be this easy. She couldn't expect her connection to stay still forever. They were probably heading home from work, or out to dinner with a friend. Alice sat there feeling irrationally angry that other people had their own lives. The line had shifted now a few inches to her left, back almost directly where she had come from. Defeated she hailed a hailed cab. In the darkening light it looked less stately and more like a lumbering beast, wheezing and wining to a stop beside her. The driver was supremely ugly, with a square head, close set eyes and crooked teeth.

"Listen, Ill' give you double your fare if you drive me around for awhile. I'll tell you where to go."

The driver looked uneasy. He stared hard at her face and seemed to decide that she wasn't a threat to him and could probably pay. He nodded curtly and looked away. Clumsily she got in the cab, admiring again how large the interior was. With a wet groan she collapsed in the faux leather seats.

“Head east.” The car lurched into motion. The warmth of the cab made Alice feel sticky and she peeled off layer after layer of damp cloth, laying them in a dripping pile to her right. Her hand looked like exposed bone in the dim light. “So you’re an American?” the cabbie asked, his voice crackling through a sound system in the back of the car.

Alice cleared her throat. “I’m from New York.”

The cabbie gave a short bark of laughter. “I’ve heard of New York.” Alice wondered who hadn’t. “Do you know how easy it is to be a cab driver there?” She had never thought about it. Probably pretty easy since there were so many of them. “Here, you have to study for two years before you can even take the test. You see those motorbikes with the big L on the back? That’s for Learner. We have to go around London and learn all the streets. It’s not like New York. Then we take a test in a room with this guy who always has a stuffed parrot next to him. And if the parrot is looking out the window instead of at you, you usually fail. He asks you questions like how to get from Sloane Square to Knightsbridge if certain roads are closed, if you can’t answer right away he fails you.”

“Can’t you just use GPS now?” The cab driver turned in his seat and glared at her while speeding up the car.

“No real cabbie would ever do that.” The intercom turned off with a click. Every now and then Alice asked him to change direction to most directly follow the path of her connection. The houses began to get smaller and more cheap neon lights appeared. The farther they drove the more uncomfortable the cab driver seemed. There were few people on the streets and the sidewalks were badly lit, giving the impression of a sort of ghost

town. Alice's connection began changing direction faster and she asked the cab driver to circle the block a few times. The connection turned a full 360 degrees. Her stomach clenched and the dull excitement returned. "Let me out here."

"This isn't really a good area. You sure this is where you want to stop? I know a lot better places for a tourist to go." Alice counted out a few brightly colored bills and passed them through the plastic partition. She hopped out of the cab into the mist. She donned her dripping clothes. The feeling in her stomach only increased until her insides were fizzing. Steady as ever the connection protruded from her, pointing to a shabby door with faded writing above it. The wood was warped from damp and age and Alice almost expected it to fall apart at her touch. She hesitated on the edge of the doorway, overcome by the sense that the threshold contained some great distance. Chalking it up to mild hypothermia she entered.

Alice grinned when she realized what the place was. She stripped off her wet clothes and surveyed the room. It was a quintessential English pub, as close an equivalent as she could find to Lucky's 24 Hour Diner. Even so far from home, she still found herself wandering into these broken eating troughs. The room was dimly lit; a place Alice could only think of her mother describing as "rough". An L shaped bar took up half of the room, its counter dark from countless coats of varnish and cigarette smoke. A few patrons lingered over their drinks, their heads swinging slightly like bells on strings. Rough-hewn tables were set up intermittently around the room, without any sort of logical pattern. Alice realized she was lurking, and sat at one in the northeast corner with a good view of the door. She was in no rush; her connection was here somewhere. All she had to do was sit and wait.

The light diffused across the room like water slowly soaking through a sheet of paper. Alice picked up a stained menu, absentmindedly reading the block type. Not far from her, on the bruised-looking wall, hung black and white photographs. Miraculously, they were clean, without a speck of dust marring the shiny glass. In one frame, a middle-aged woman stood in front of a square building. Above her hung a beautifully hand-painted sign depicting a hyper-realistic dove in flight. In its beak it held the stem to a small apple, also painted with masterful precision. This must be a picture of the pub she now sat in, back when it was first built. The woman was reaching down to pick something up and looked startled by the flash of the camera, even though it must have been carefully set up. Her body was angled inwards, and the dress she wore showed the attractive curve of her waist.

A cough from behind startled Alice. At first she thought the waitress was a child. She was no taller than five feet and her pigtails brushed the tops of her shoulders. Her skin was free of pores, and in the dim light the planes of her face softened into almost unperceivable lines, like unformed clay. She spoke and shifted slightly to the right, and the illusion shattered. Her voice was raspy, like splinters sawn from dry wood. Her yellow teeth and rancid breath spoke of years of smoking. Now Alice could see her skin was caked with makeup so thick that it had actually been scratched off in places where she had touched her face.

“What will it be?” she rasped.

Alice picked the first thing off the menu. “Fish and chips.”

The waitress frowned at her accent. “You a Yank?”

“No I just speak like one. Too much American TV growing up.”

She frowned, her lips pulling downwards like a badly stitched seam of wrinkled cloth. She pulled the dirty menu from Alice's hand, tucking it expertly under her armpit. She began to teeter away in heels that were altogether too high for the cracked wooden floor, but Alice grabbed her elbow. The woman looked as if she had just touched a particularly nasty bit of wet food.

Loudly she said, "And I want a beer. Dark. I want to be able to chew it." Alice had heard her father say that once, and thought it an appropriate time to use the phrase. Two men looked up from their table, their eyes hard. It reminded her of the stares of the children in the playground when she was a child, curious but final. Maybe this was why she spent her life watching other people, so she could somehow achieve that same finality, the conclusion in their eyes.

They looked at her for another moment then swung their heads away. Alice fiddled with her coat button, using the time to trace the line of her connection. It passed to the right of the men, narrowly missing one of their shoulders. Their thick bodies obstructed her view. Alice could feel a headache coming on, starting with a dull thud behind her eyes. She cursed her jaunt in the rain and looked at the black-and-white pictures. She noticed that the beautiful woman held something dark in her left hand. Beneath her hung another frame picturing a young man. He wore a fine three-piece suit and a bowler hat. In his hand he held a cane. He leaned on it in an obnoxious, self-assured manner, planting himself even more firmly to the ground. He stood on a beautiful stone bridge, and the glimmer of water could be seen behind him. He posed directly in the middle of the frame, commanding attention. Something about his posture irked Alice. It was just slightly contrived, like a poor family's Sunday best. His smile

was perfect, each tooth aligned as perfectly as the stones he stood on. Alice leaned closer, staring at his face. His eyes would not meet hers.

Fear – it tasted like rusty water – filled Alice’s mouth and trickled down her back. She pulled the picture from her back pocket, surprised by how steady her hands were. Mr. Smith beamed out at her, his eyes mocking over the mahogany desk. It was the same person, forty years younger, but the cold smoothness of his eyes, the way they slipped away and past her gaze, was the same. A plate of greasy fish and fried potatoes thumped in front of her. To Alice, it looked like a carcass rather than food. The waitress produced a large glass of beer, black as ink.

“Who is that?” she asked, her voice much softer than before.

The waitress sniffed. “I don’t know.” She turned on her heels, a dial pivoting on its axis.

“Wait.”

She turned, her features arranged in an annoyed expression. One of her fake eyelashes was peeling off and she angrily plucked at it.

“Who hung up these photos?”

She shrugged, obviously hoping Alice would drop it.

“In America its considered rude not to tip, even if the beer smells like piss.” Alice placed a blue bill on the table in a swift, and what she thought was suave, motion. She hoped it was a large bill.

For the first time the woman smiled. Even with her stained cracked teeth she looked like a child in that moment. She took the bill and boldly picked up a fry from Alice’s plate, popping it in her mouth with a soft sucking noise.

“She might know.” She gestured to the corner of the room, behind the men. “Oh and you had better take that ‘piss’. She likes a drink.”

Alice unhooked the picture from the wall, expecting the waitress to stop her, but she had already disappeared behind the bar. Alice felt the tightness of her muscles and the ache of her feet. She followed the line of her connection, skirting the men who now openly stared at her.

In the corner of the room sat a pile of rags. They shifted slightly, and Alice realized a tiny person was bundled beneath them. She wore three sweaters, two coats and what looked like three billowing skirts. None of the clothing matched, but it was clean and in good condition. A multicolored scarf wound up her neck and she wore a bright woolen hat with a large pompom on top, so her face seemed to hang suspended between layers of fabric. Her face was so wrinkled that it had taken on the appearance of cloth, crumpled and sagging in grey folds. There was no perceivable change in Alice’s connection, but it seemed to solidify, becoming almost tangible. She was drawn to the woman, pulled forward by some unimaginable yearning. Then she broke the number one rule of the Agency, and spoke to her connection.

The woman’s eyes tilted towards her as if swimming up from some great distance. They were watery and sunken, and Alice realized with a jolt they were the exact same color as Mr. Smith’s. Alice nervously pushed the beer towards her in some sort of offering. The old woman exhaled as if she had been holding her breath for some time. Her breath smelt like damp wood and plaster. She picked up the heavy glass with surprising ease and drank half of the inky liquid without any indication of swallowing. She paused then with her eyes closed, savoring the thickness of the drink. Her eyes opened, and she grinned at

Alice, revealing a few rotted teeth. Alice would have thought she was senile, but her eyes roamed across Alice's face and body, fluttering from one aspect to another. Alice placed the framed picture on the table.

“Know who this is?”

The lady looked down, pressing her finger onto the glass to leave a greasy print. It dulled the lines of the young man's face making him appear otherworldly.

“It's you.” Her voice was dry leaves and flaking rust. Something in Alice's expression made her laugh. “Or at least what you are trying to be. I knew he would send someone to find me. Using one of you connectionless whores was a nice touch though.” She said this without malice.

“I'm a detective, I work- “

“I know what you do. You get paid to be a whore. Not of the body,” she wiggled mock provocatively in her seat, “that would be more fun”. She grinned again, the pink of her gums stark against her pale lips. “You try on other people's connection like gloves. You dress up in them for money, to track down their soul mate. And when you find them, maybe you forget for just a minute that you're an imposter, and you feel the pull, and you're drawn to them. And that's fucking, or as close to it as souls get. We're fucking right now; can't you tell?” Alice had leaned forward, her hand only inches from the woman's wrist. She snapped back in her seat and the woman laughed again. It sounded like stones rubbing together. “It's always the lonely ones who take your job. You want to believe there is someone meant just for you. But I'm gonna tell you something. I wish I knew it when I still had a chance. No one is meant for anyone. These connection, “she gestured to the red line between them “they don't mean anything. You are alone and you

always will be. No matter how much time you spend with someone you will still be alone. We live alone, we die alone.” She began coughing, hacking up phlegm into the end of one of the scarves draped around her neck. She picked up the beer and drained the rest of it. Some spilled down the side of her mouth but she didn’t wipe it away.

Alice pointed at the picture again. “Who is this?”

“You know. My connection. Bastard. Haven’t seen him in years and now he sends someone like you to find me. Couldn’t even do it himself.”

“If he already knows who you are then why did he send me to find you?”

She shrugged, and the wool hat slipped to the left of her head revealing sparse clumps of white hair. “He probably didn’t want to come himself. Coward. And didn’t trust anyone else to know it was really me. He always did love connections, he romanticized them.

Maybe he thought it was poetic to send someone like you, the purest way to track someone down. I never liked my connection. I never like the way it looked, like a piece of dirty thread, unwound from my insides. I thought about the person who as on the other end of it but I didn’t know anyone who had ever found theirs. Most poor people don’t. And besides, there were more important things to worry about, like food and rent.

When he found me forty years ago I couldn’t believe it, even when the line pointed straight to him.”

The woman’s eyes were far away now, surveying a vast landscape.

“He was handsome, and so young. Wore a three-piece suit even though it was summer. Still, I never saw him sweat. I was twenty years older but when he leaned down and touched me it didn’t seem to matter.” She paused then. “You wouldn’t know. You don’t know what its like to actually meet your connection. It’s like the world tipping sideways

while you stay in place. The landscape is different but you two stay the same. I never knew John to be romantic, he was practical to a fault, ruthless, even, but he felt that his connection must mean something. That I was some sort of extension of himself. His family was rich, railroad money. He bought me dresses and paid people to style me into his life. He made me over in his image.”

Looking at the woman, Alice found it hard to believe Mr. Smith could have ever loved her. She was rotting away in the corner of a pub, suffocating under layers of mismatched clothing.

“I took this picture” the old woman said. “We went to the countryside in a beautiful car. It was dark and the seats were made of real leather. He told me that I was coming to America with him. He was getting me a voice coach to get rid of my ‘low class’ accent. He never asked me anything, just told me. Still, it was better than staying here.” She gestured around the room.

“I took the picture of him on the bridge. He told me that nothing so magnificent as the handmade bridge could exist without him standing on it. It got colder, and we began to drive back in the beautiful car. He drove fast, always so fast down the roads. There were no other cars, and he sped up even more. I told him to slow down, but he only laughed. We were coming up over a hill and the sun was setting in our eyes. The grassy hills looked like they were on fire in the light. He hit a girl who was crossing the road and her dog. She was dead but the dog was still alive, howling and trying to crawl away. I was screaming and he hit me, hard across the face. I still remember the girl. She looked like she was asleep except for her arm which was pointing the wrong way. Her dress was pink but started to turn red. John was very pale and the dog kept whining, the pitch so

high that it seemed to slice through my ears. He stomped on its neck and the noise stopped. My throat's dry."

Alice motioned for the waitress to bring her another drink.

"The reason why I don't believe in these connection is because people change. If this was supposed to be fate, or destiny or whatever you want to call it then it should have accounted for that. But after we drove away, my connection was a chain. Always I would have linked to him, even when he left. I wonder if that's why he sent you. To make sure I wouldn't tell anyone. If you can find me I wonder who else will come. He was always ambitious and ruthless. I'm sure he has enemies. Maybe they will track me down and ask me questions. Maybe he is trying to tie up loose ends." She pointed to her connection and laughed at her own pun. "Tell him I say hello. Tell him I remember".

Alice stood staring down at the decrepit woman, practically a corpse in layers of clothing. She would lie and tell Mr. Smith that all she had found was a crazy old lady, alone in a pub.

She left the bar and stood in the rain. The cold hurt her face. Her connection pointed back into the building, tying her to the woman. The whole world was filled with these lines. She could see them all around her, passing through the walls of the pub, and the dim light of the street lamp. She felt them pushing and pulling the city, eclectic and magnetic. The red lines seemed to curve around her so she sat in her own little pocket of air. She laughed and strode through them all, heading for the street. They parted before her like reeds in the grass. Alice unbuckled the compass from her wrist and dropped it in a shallow puddle. The needle spun pointing North, South, East, West. Alice walked away before she saw where it stopped.

We Learned It From The Birds

Cheese propped his feet on the dashboard and wondered how long it would be before he lost his hearing. Even wearing his bright orange mufflers, the roar of the planes pressed densely on his eardrums. The sound reverberated through the wheels of the truck and up through his legs, to hum relentlessly in the joints of his knees. The sun was setting, turning the sky an acid washed violet. From the tarmac could just make out the Jamaica Bay, flowing like quicksilver to the Atlantic. The truck swayed slightly and his feet slipped from the dashboard as a giant Boeing passed, its wings casting dark shadows over his face. His thermos rattled loudly in the cup holder and Cheese couldn't help feeling lucky, even though he knew he was perfectly safe on the grass. He watched as the plane lumbered away to the launch strip. Relieved, he pulled off his muffler. The cold air felt incredible on his sweaty ears. In the distance he could hear the dull cry of Laughing Gulls, Atlantic Brants, and Waterfowl from the JoCo salt marsh. Their shrill notes rang sharply against the persistent growl of the planes.

Cheese lurched forward as the truck sped up unexpectedly. He glared at the driver. The identification card pinned to his neon yellow jacket read "Miguel Emmanuel Ramirez," but everyone called him Mack. He was a large man, both in height and berth and drove the truck with a practiced ease. His hands cupped the cracked leather of the steering wheel which was the same dark color as his dark skin. Beside him Cheese looked small and pale. He yawned and moved his hands through his limp brown hair. They had been at this for hours, and the cold of the night wasn't helping his mood. Neither was the country music spewing loudly from the radio.

“If I have to listen to any more banjos, I’m gonna kill myself,” the boy moaned. Mack’s deep laugh boomed into the open air. It made Cheese want to put his mufflers back on.

“Go ahead,” he said, gesturing to the 12-gauge shotgun propped up in the back seat. The boy grumbled noncommittally, flipping up the collar of his jacket. He had only been on the job a few weeks, and already Mack’s infectious good humor was starting to fray his nerves.

“Why do you even like this stuff. Can’t we listen to, like, a podcast or something?”

This time, Mack really started laughing. Through snorts, he said, “Cheese, that’s the whitest thing you’ve ever said”.

The boy hated that nickname. Mack had given it to him on his first day when he pulled out a cheese sandwich for lunch. *Cheese!* he had cried in his Creole accent. *Hey we’re Mack and Cheese!* Since he spent most of his time alone with Mack, there wasn’t much he could do to stop him.

Cheese turned to the right, staring out past the neatly organized tarmacs, into the short-cropped grassy fields. The wind bit at his face, making his eyes water. The car stopped suddenly, and Cheese was thrown forward into the dash.

“What the fu--“ he cried.

Mack motioned for him to shut up. A flock of Canadian geese pecked leisurely at the grass to the side of the tarmac. Their necks curved gracefully towards the sky, five black question marks. Mack reached behind him and grabbed the shotgun.

As he cocked it, Cheese muttered, “Can’t we just scare them?” Mack looked at him incredulously, then fired into the flock. Four of them fled in an exodus of feathers and blood. Three gained height quickly, while the last one hopped pathetically on the ground, trying to fly on a punctured wing. Mack pumped the shotgun with a resounding click and aimed it again at the wounded goose. Cheese looked away. When the final ring of the shot had diffused across the airfield, Mack hopped out of the truck, grabbing a trash bag from the back seat. He picked up the two birds, whistling the chorus of a country song as he tossed them into the black plastic.

“Make sure you log these! The book’s in the glove compartment.” Cheese rubbed his face. It felt numb and foreign under his hands. He pulled out a small black book laminated in plastic and flipped to the most recent page. All the entries were dated in neat columns.

<i>DC Cormorant</i>	<i>x2</i>
<i>Euro Starling</i>	<i>x1</i>
<i>Rock Pigeon</i>	<i>x3</i>

The bird in the trash bag would serve as proof. Mack climbed back into the truck. “The boys are gonna be pissed about this one.” He rolled his shoulders and picked up the 12-gauge, snapping the safety back. “These suckers are worth a lot of points! Pretty rare to see them around here this time a year, most of them got south. Lucky us.” Cheese nodded, itched his elbow and glanced back at the lumpy bag. The other wildlife agents, or “spotters” each threw a hundred bucks into a pot every year. Whoever had the most points by Christmas won the whole lot –upwards of \$1000. Cheese wasn’t quite sure who decided the point system, but different birds, depending on rarity, size and “danger potential”, counted for more points. Apparently the Canadian geese had been worth a lot.

“You could have shot a screamer at them,” Cheese said. He gestured at the small pistol containing blanks.

Mack gave him another look, this time less friendly. “We have been over this. Were they in the safety zone?”

“Yeah, but— “

“Were they within one hundred and fifty feet of runways center line?”

“Probably- “

“Are they on the list?” Mack tapped at the laminated sheet tacked to the centerboard with the words *Migratory Bird Treaty Act* emblazoned it. Cheese knew it was useless to reply. “So it seems to me that I did everything necessary in that situation.” Cheese noticed he used *I* instead of *we*. “I guess we could have scared those geese away. And they would have flown a few miles to another tarmac. Maybe an Airbus taxis by and scares them and they fly up into the active airspace and that same Airbus takes off and sucks them into its turbines at five hundred miles an hour and the engine blows and the whole fucking plane goes down and those three hundred passengers are smeared all over that tarmac.” He pointed wildly in front of the moving truck, “Right there. And you know what? That’s on you. Because you didn’t want to hurt the poor birdies. You only wanted to scare them.” Cheese slumped in his seat, counting his gloved fingers again and again. They sat in silence as a fleet of American Airlines flights queued patiently one after another. The machines loitered, their turbines humming gently. The largest of them and the first in line began to pulsate, slowly nudging farther up the tarmac. Its engines screamed at a numbing frequency. If the men had been talking their voices would have

been smothered under the weight of the sound. The plane threw itself into the air with the confidence of an Olympic diver, but instead of falling it rose, and rose.

The next morning Cheese was actually on time for work. He had already filled the tank with gas and checked the box of shells was full before Mack showed up. The large man was grinning like usual, his crooked but white teeth bright against his dark skin. He held a greasy paper bag and was humming the same country song as the day before. He rested his large boot against the bumper and tossed the bag at Cheese, who fumbled and almost dropped it. “My wife made Mofongos.” He said the last word with a surprisingly thick Creole accent. It sounded exotic and substantial. Cheese opened the bag and a rich, meaty smell escaped. The Mofongos looked like large yellow empanadas, and he held one up before taking a bite. Thick juices ran over his tongue, pooling between his teeth. The rich taste of pork and plantains filled his mouth. Even though he didn’t want to, he smiled back at Mack who grinned even more. He started the car, and the engine rumbled to life.

The mornings at JFK always felt hopeful. Cheese liked watching the planes rise towards the early sun. He imagined they were getting away from the increasingly cold days, going somewhere full of clear blue water and white sand, the passengers on a perpetual vacation. Once in a while he would get close enough to catch a profile outlined in the oblong windows. It always seemed to be woman wearing glasses. He tried to meet her forlorn stare, but she disappeared quickly out of his view. The sun glinted merrily off the wings of the planes, blinding him. Cheese had taken to wearing large sunglasses that Mack told him made him look like a bug.

As the sun rose, the wind picked up. It brought the smell of salt from the Atlantic Ocean, and the rich scent of iced over mud from the marsh. Cheese inhaled deeply even though the cold air made his chest tighten. He thought maybe his job wasn't so bad. Mack coaxed the truck to the northernmost part of the airport. The perimeter was so large it took about twenty minutes of hard driving to reach the shortly cut grass. The airport itself sat on about 5,000 acres split into landside and airside use. A sparse wood stood a few miles from the outermost runway, and well trimmed fields encroached on both sides. To the south sat the Jamaica Bay and past that the Atlantic. Their proximity to both the woods and the water attracted a large number of birds, all of which posed a danger to the aircrafts.

A few mourning doves pecked around in the grass, and quickly flew away as the truck approached over the icy ground. Their slender tails tipped upwards, gesturing to the open sky. The truck continued down the length of the runway before turning east. They followed the same pattern every day, weaving down the runways, back and forth, shotgun ready. Mack drove, and Cheese kept a lookout for birds. He had a pair of military-grade binoculars the airport provided him. Mack had told him they were worth more than half a year's salary, and to not drop them. He was still trying to get the hang of spotting the birds hidden in the dead grey grass. Cheese found that if he let his eyes wander casually over the field he might see minute flickers of motion. They were gone in an instant and were seemingly impossible to pinpoint. Mack usually spotted more birds than him, even without the binoculars. Cheese pretended it didn't bother him. He had been hired to pull the trigger, not to find the target. Silently he thanked his dead cousin for insisting he learn how to handle a gun from the time he could hold one. This

probably wasn't the type of job he had had in mind for Cheese as they practiced shooting bottles until his arms burned.

Mack stopped the car, pulling over to the side of an empty runway while Cheese scanned the airfield. "Come on. Give me something." Mack was always a little uptight until he shot his first bird of the day. Cheese adjusted the lenses to a more powerful grade. A loud crack to his left made him jump and duck for cover in the truck.

"Are they shooting at us?" he yelled. Mack laughed again, a sound that was starting to infuriate Cheese.

"No man, look." He gestured to the side of the car. A few feet away a broken clam shell oozed its viscous innards onto the asphalt. "It's the birds, man." Now Mack was looking to the sky with hunger. High above them a few herring gulls circled. He could just hear their shrill cries. Farther down the tarmac they heard another dull crack as a clam came whistling out of the sky. "They like to drop the clams on the tarmac. It's a perfect place for them to break them." Cheese looked around and saw the tarmac was littered with shells covered in frost. Many of them had been swept to the side by maintenance crews, but the remnants of their splintered outsides remained. His whole body was shaking and he pretended to inspect the clam so Mack wouldn't notice. For a moment he had been back at home, holding a pillow over his head as the barred window of his bedroom shattered into tiny shards.

Another clam cracked a few hundred feet away from Cheese and he flinched. He felt hot for the first time in days and his hand itched. He mumbled, "Fuckers. Give me the gun."

Mack raised his eyebrow and passed him the shotgun. The weight of it felt good in his hands. He hefted the heavy barrel up to his shoulder and flipped off the safety. He lined up the sight with the barrel of the gun and focused on the gulls. They circled lazily on a warm updraft, their wings tilting minutely to catch the warm current at the best possible angle.

Cheese shot and the first Gull fell. He quickly reloaded and caught the second one as it fled. By the time he had reloaded the last gull was far out of range. Mack stared at him approvingly. "Where did you learn to shoot like that? I don't know if I would have been able to get two of them." Cheese gently set the gun down in the back.

Mack was grinning as usual but his eyes were thoughtful. Under his gaze Mack straightened, standing a little taller. Cheese was at least a head shorter than him but for a moment he felt like they were the same size. "My grandpa owned a farm." he lied. Mack reached into the back and flipped the safety back on the gun. Cheese blushed at his mistake but didn't apologize.

"The other guys said you got this job cuz your Juvie officer knows the boss." Cheese picked up a broken shell and tossed it into the grass. "They don't like you. Said you're just another skinny white boy getting favors. I thought you couldn't shoot and I felt bad for you. Even tried to be nice to you but now I think you're just lazy, or a pussy, or both. This whole time you could have been shooting those birds, but you just sat here with your dick in your hand. If we don't win the pot I'm gonna tell them to fire your ass." He said this calmly, but Cheese saw his hands were clenched into hard fists.

"Fuck you."

Mack eyed him for a moment then relaxed his hands. "As long as we win." He put the truck in gear and set towards the dead birds while pulling on his thick working gloves. Mack pulled over and scooped the first one up and threw it quickly into the trash bag. The second bird was still alive, flopping pathetically on the ground. They could see the path it had made in the frosted grass as it pulled itself forward on broken wings. Mack walked over to it and paused for a moment, his eyes hooded in the noon sun. With a decisive movement he stomped on the bird's neck and it went still. "Guess you're not that good of a shot," he said. Mack picked up the bird and placed it gently in the trash. He turned to Cheese. "These are my favorite birds. Everyone hates them because you see them everywhere, down at the beach, in the city, anywhere near the ocean. But these guys, they're the reason I'm even doing this." Cheese turned his back to stare at the marsh. Mack got back into the truck but didn't turn the radio on. "I used to be a cabbie." The image of Mack squeezing his huge body into a tiny little yellow cab made Cheese snort. Mack frowned for a moment, then laughed as well. "I know, not the best job for me. It was ok. I liked seeing the city, and sometimes you meet nice people, but the hours were shit, and the pay even worse. I used to come here a lot to pick up passengers. I spent a lot of time in the hold lot. You ever seen it?"

Cheese shook his head and debated what would happen if he turned the music on.

"You've never seen anything like it. We called it the pen. Its just a sea of cabs, yellow as far as the eye can see, maybe five hundred on a busy day. Anyways, you usually have to wait a few hours to get called by the dispatcher for a pickup so I'd shoot the shit with the other guys or play cards or whatever. Sometimes I'd get some food from these little stands and feed my leftovers to the birds. Man, there were a lot of birds. I

didn't know their names then but I knew the gulls were king. I saw one of them peck out the eye of a sparrow over a french-fry." He laughed, shaking his head. "Vicious little bastards, but really fun to watch." Mack veered sharply off the tarmac into the grass, scaring away a group of swallows Cheese hadn't even seen. "One day this lady comes down, wearing one of these," he pointed to his neon yellow vest, "and she came up to us feeding the birds and asked us if we could read the sign. *DON'T FEED THE BIRDS*. She told us that they were dangerous, and because we were feeding them we were putting lives at risk. The rest of the guys laughed at her and just walked away but I asked her what she meant. One thing led to another and now I'm here. I guess I kind of owe it to these guys for getting me this job." He glanced back at the lumpy trash bag.

"I'm sorry I shot them," said Cheese.

Mac looked at him in surprise. "No, no you had to." He paused. "We're saving lives."

The weather worsened as it neared Christmas. There had been a few flurries, but no snow that stuck. The ground was hard as iron, and the wind ripped vengefully across the airfield. It battered anything in its way, including the men huddled in the truck. Many of the birds had nestled down to wait out the bad weather, to Mack's distress. He had lost his point lead to another truck a few days ago, and was still bitter about his impending loss. He grumbled to Cheese, "Those guys got lucky. Nothing but luck, no skill. Apparently the swans just walked right by their truck as happy as can be. I always thought swans were vain birds. He got three of them before they even knew what was happening. Lucky bastards." He hunched down, pulling a hideously knitted hat down

over his ears. Mack's bad mood was as palpable as the cold. They rode in silence for awhile, the tires of the truck crunching on the frostbitten grass. They parked and watched the planes take off. They were far enough away that their roar was almost soothing. The noise ebbed and flowed like giant waves.

Cheese looked at Mack, who stared blankly off into the distance. "You know what? I've never been on a plane."

Mack turned to him and was silent for a moment then chuckled. "Me neither, man." They looked out at the planes as they taxied to their respective runways.

"That moment, when the plane leaves the ground. I don't really know how it happens. It's like magic," said Cheese. Mac nodded. A huge Virgin aircraft passed them, its double decks casting a shadow over their truck. From deep within the plane a primordial growl sounded and the engine revved. It picked up speed, faster and faster and just as it seemed it would crash into the bay, it lifted its heavy noise and flew gracefully away.

"Its kind of unnatural." Mack cracked his large knuckles. "We can run by ourselves, climb by ourselves, even swim by ourselves but nobody can fly by himself. I don't believe much in God but I know sure as hell we ain't supposed to be up there. Why else do we have to make so much noise doing it." His eyes followed an aircraft coming in to land. The screech of tires on asphalt made them both wince. Cheese spotted a seagull circling slowly above the marsh but he didn't tell Mack.

"You ever heard of Icarus?" Mack shook his head, reclining even farther in his seat. "He lived in this big tower with all these pet birds. Something happened, he got invaded or something so he killed all his birds and took their feathers and glued them into

these big wings. He jumped off the tower but because he knew so much about birds the wings worked and instead of falling he flew away. But then it was such a hot day the glue melted and he fell and died anyways.”

“Where was he from?” They both shivered as a gust of wind ripped at *The Migratory Bird Treaty Act* making it flap aggressively against the dashboard.

Cheese looked up at the grey sky and couldn't find the sun. He laughed and the sound felt too large for his throat. “Not from here.” Mack appeared startled by the sound but smiled. He patted Cheese on the back with one of his large hands. Another plane with large Chinese letters on the side took off, defining them. The seagull above the marsh had circled close enough that Mack now saw it too. Two sets of eyes tracked its effortless flight. Cheese turned, looking Mack in the eyes. “We learned it from the birds, man.”

The day before Christmas dawned, depressing and cold. Even the sun at its height couldn't penetrate the thick clouds above the city. The day never seemed to come, only to dim and brighten by minute degrees. For the first time since he had started working there, Cheese didn't see a single bird. Mack's wife had made more Mofongos, which they munched on throughout the day. The thick pastry skin crunched satisfyingly against his teeth. After a few hours of pointless driving, Mack parked the car by the terminal, went inside, and brought out a cup of hot coffee. He defrosted his hands on the warm Styrofoam while Cheese pulled on another pair of gloves. “Looks like we lost. They changed your name on the board to ‘dead weight’.” Mack looked smaller than usual, as if he had been deflated.

They made another lazy circle around the field, watching the planes dip and land with calculated precision. It began to snow. “Won’t stick,” Mack said. The snow fell faster and faster. The first layer melted away on the tarmac, but soon a soft coat covered the ground, like fine down. It dulled the sharp line between the grass and asphalt until the two were almost indistinguishable from one another. Mack and Cheese watched as the planes picked their way across the tarmac, their wheels leaving black tracks that were quickly covered up. They both wore their orange mufflers for warmth. The snow muted the engines rumble, and even the closest planes sounded far away. A Delta 747 queued up for takeoff, then skidded off the runway, the wheels almost touching the grass.

“That’s it.” Mack pulled off his mufflers and Cheese did the same. “One slip and that’s all it takes. Gonna have an early night.” A few minutes later all the planes had headed back to their gates. They looked oddly forlorn as the sun set and night encroached. “Pretty amazing right? To see it this empty.”

Cheese nodded. “It’s so quiet. I never realized how loud the planes actually were.” The airport had lost its commercial feel. Cheese could picture what this land had been like before the development. The grass would be up to his waist, waving and rippling like water in the harsh wind and the trees cut away in severe lines would be all around him, bigger and taller, their roots plunged deep into the earth. If he listened he could hear the sound of dry leaves soaking up the snow, their surfaces damp and spongy. He imagined the birds scratching at the hard ground, their feathers fluffed up against the cold. The trees would be full of them, like fluttering ornaments. They would look at him and sing together, all different parts of the same song. He would climb the trees trying to reach them but they flapped their wings, hopping upwards. The ground was far away

now and he realized the birds weren't singing to him but screaming. He let go of the branch and waited to fall.

Mack prodded him with his meaty finger. "Don't fall asleep on me now." Cheese opened his eyes and looked at Mack as if he were a stranger. Mack turned off the radio and they listened to the snow fall. They rested their heads against their seats, letting small flurries fill the car with white divots. Cheese was about to suggest they go inside when he heard a shriek. It cut through the air, slicing clean lines through the heavy snowfall. They both sat upright, scanning the snowy sky. Cheese pulled out his binoculars. The cry rang out again, piercing and contained.

The owl was huge and white, its wings five feet across, tip to tip. Its underbelly was speckled with black feathers as if the night had gently brushed it with its black hand. It glided silently, the snow parting respectfully under its wings. "Holy shit," Mack whispered. The owl gracefully spun in the air, heading back towards their truck. Cheese could make out the brilliant yellow of its eyes, scanning the ground. Mack scrambled for the *The Migratory Birds Treaty Act* and frantically brushed from it. "Snowy Owl, Snowy Owl," he mumbled to himself. "It's not on the list!" He grabbed Cheese's shoulders shaking him harder than he meant to. Cheese shrugged him off. "You gotta do it Cheese! I can't make that shot with all that snow." He fumbled around in the back, pulling out the shotgun. "Come on man. If we get this, we win! Holy shit, they're gonna be so pissed." Cheese looked at the owl, half obscured by the heavy snow. He couldn't even hear the flap of its wings as it flew past.

"Mack, there's no planes flying. It's not a danger to anyone. I can't just shoot it." Mack gripped his shoulders a little more tightly.

“It’s still in airspace. I guarantee you nothing will happen. You can even say I shot it if you don’t want the credit.” Mack handed him the gun. Its dark metal looked wet in the moonlight. Cheese looked up and saw the owl in the distance. It was coming closer now, only a few hundred feet from the car and flying low. “I really need that money,” Mack urged quietly from behind. His breath smelled like Mofongos and ice. Mack felt the cold weight of the gun in his hands. It had never felt so heavy as he lifted it to his shoulder and snapped off the safety. Staring down the barrel of the gun he traced the path of the owl. The bird flapped its huge wings, arching its body into a perfect V. It climbed in height, pushing away the snow in ivory curtains.

“Come on.” Mack towered in front of him, leaning his huge body inwards. The shadows on his face elongated, turning his visage into a horrible, familiar mask.

It was his cousin who taught him how to shoot a gun. The man he had killed for breaking into his house. His mother who’s swollen hands couldn’t wash another dish. Mack was all of them, and they all wanted the same thing. They wanted to fly.

The shot violently ripped through the night.

They both watched as the owl fell from an incredible distance, spiraling madly to land silently on the ground. Mack yelled with triumph, and somehow this was the worst sound of them all. Mack started the car and whistled cheerfully, oblivious to the all-encompassing silence. They made it there in less than a minute. The owl lay in the snow, one wing bent grotesquely beneath its body. The hole where its beak had been dripped hot blood onto the snow.

Mack bent to pick it up, and noticed Cheese was still holding the gun. It was carelessly pointed at his stomach.

“The safety better be on,” Mack said, even though he could see it was not. Cheese was crying but the tears appeared black in the moonlight. He didn’t lower the gun and took a step forward. Mack straightened to his full height and peered down at his partner. Cheese looked pathetically small in the snow. If he had laid down, he would be covered in minutes.

“It looked at me. Right when I pulled the trigger. It looked right at me.” Mack didn’t move.

“There’s no way you could have seen its eyes from all the way up there.” The words sounded hard and uneven. “It’s just a bird, Cheese.” Mack stuffed his hands deep in his pockets. He tried to recall what he was going to buy with the prize money but couldn’t remember.

Cheese cried harder, his face a pale reflection of the moon. Mack reached for the gun and tugged it out of his grasp. It looked like a toy in his large hands. He stood awkwardly for a while, then got back in the truck. Finally, Cheese stood up with the dead owl and gently wrapped it in the trash bag. He held it in his lap as he got back into the car. Mack glanced at him and started the engine. Deceptively warm air flooded the truck.

“My name is Daniel.”

Mack turned to look at his face. “What?”

“My name is Daniel.”

“Ok,” said Mack. He reached for the radio but didn’t turn it on.