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Memento Mori is a short story written by Jonathan Nolan. In this short story, he takes time and its relationship with a man to a whole new level, and introduces the reader to to what he calls a ‘ten-minute man’. “Believing the lie that time will heal all wounds is just a nice way of saying that time deadens us.” The story revolves around Earl, a patient of anteretrograde amnesia (a condition that involves short-term memory loss), having sustained injuries from a gruesome assault – one that also led to the death of his wife. He is shown to be stuck in time just before his wife’s murder. His life is a long array of ten-minute chunks, after every one of which he is a clean slate. The story opens with Earl waking up, with no memory, in what looks like a hospital room, covered in what seems to be filled with predominantly white colors. The room is rather large and he finds notes stuck everywhere from his toothpaste, his washroom or his cigarettes. By the time he starts making sense of the environment, his memory resets, and he finds himself going through this – sometimes even doing the same thing – over and over again. The story goes back and forth between two different settings. The first one is where Earl is confined to a mental health institution. He goes about with his day following the notes that he has left for himself. The second one being the one where he seems to be on the run trying to hunt down the man that killed his wife and reduced his life to that of a vegetable. The author delves into the deeper topic of life and its meaning, looked at from the perspective of a person whose ability to make new memories is severely impaired. This is captured through a constant dialogue that happens between him ten minutes back and him in the present. His past self mentions forgetting and how that is deeply embroiled in the life that he lives, every 10 minute chunk to another. His past self reminds him that his wife is dead and that he might be hurting but he will forget it in the next 10 minutes. His condition in addition to him not being able to remember anything, is a constant reminder of what misfortune led him to that point. Locked in his hospital room, and through means of notes that he leaves for himself, he tries to devise ways to make use of his life, to get revenge, the irony being that he would never remember having sought revenge, even after he did. Turning his life into one gigantic Groundhog day replay albeit in painful 10-minute chunks. Memento Mori is derived from Latin and means ‘remember to die’. In olden days, this was a reminder for people to be living a moral life keeping in mind the inevitable judgement day. There are a variety of interpretations and adaptations of this concept in other cultures. Earl buys himself a bell to serve as the memento for himself. This bell, on which he inscribes his date of birth and date of incident, later appears when he looks for a pen after completing his mission. He lives outside of time. In his conversations with his past self, there are a lot of epiphanic moments, some humor, some hopelessness which alternate in intensity, but a burning desire for revenge shines. Consider, for example, when the Past Earl mentions forgetfulness to him, taking a dig at his state and the society that we live in. Sure as hell can’t hold a job. Not too many professions out there that value forgetfulness. Prostitution, Maybe. Politics, of course. Another one, where he blatantly discredits his current state and tries to reinforce his purpose – revenge. ‘So the question is not “to be or not to be”, because you aren’t. The question is whether you want to do something about it. Whether revenge matters to you.’ In his desperation of not being able to do anything with his limited time and a continual reset, he even goes to the extent of blaming his inaction on cowardice. ‘And time eventually convinces most of us that forgiveness is a virtue. Conveniently, cowardice and forgiveness look identical at a certain distance. Time steals your nerve.’ And to the advantages of having a list for a person as impaired as him ‘It’s like a letter you write to yourself. A master plan, drafted by the guy who can see the light, made with the steps simple enough for the rest of the idiots to understand. Follow steps one through one hundred. Repeat as necessary.’ And it might sound cliché’d but the wisdom in these words cannot be undermined. ‘After all, everybody else needs mirrors to remind themselves who they are . You are no different’ Although overshadowed by its cinematic counterpart, Memento – a movie by Christopher Nolan, this short story has a lot to offer and promises to stay in your memory much longer than Earl’s. The short story by Jonathan Nolan that is the basis for the movie Memento is included on many versions of the movie’s screenplay. Given the fact the script is widely available and this is strictly for educational purposes, I thought I’d post the story in excerpts each day this week.MEMENTO MORIbyJonathan NolanWhat like a bullet can undeceive!"-Herman MelvilleYour wife always used to say you’d be late for your own funeral.Remember that? Her little joke because you were such a slob-alwayslate, always forgetting stuff, even before the incident.Right about now you’re probably wondering if you were late for hers.You were there, you can be sure of that. That’s what the picture’sfor-the one tacked to the wall by the door. It’s not customary to takepictures at a funeral, but somebody, your doctors, I guess, knew youwouldn’t remember. They had it blown up nice and big and stuck itright there, next to the door, so you couldn’t help but see it everytime you got up to find out where she was.The guy in the picture, the one with the flowers? That’s you. And whatare you doing? You’re reading the headstone, trying to figure outwho’s funeral you’re at, same as you’re reading it now, trying tofigure why someone stuck that picture next to your door. But whybother reading something that you won’t remember?She’s gone, gone for good, and you must be hurting right now, hearingthe news. Believe me, I know how you feel. You’re probably a wreck.But give it five minutes, maybe ten. Maybe you can even go a wholehalf hour before you forget.But you will forget-I guarantee it. A few more minutes and you’ll beheading for the door, looking for her all over again, breaking downwhen you find the picture. How many times do you have to hear the newsbefore some other part of your body, other than that busted brain ofyours, starts to remember?Never-ending grief, never-ending anger. Useless without direction.Maybe you can’t understand what’s happened. Can’t say I reallyunderstand, either. Backwards amnesia. That’s what the sign says. CRSdisease. Your guess is as good as mine.Maybe you can’t understand what happened to you. But you do rememberwhat happened to HER, don’t you? The doctors don’t want to talk aboutit. They won’t answer my questions. They don’t think it’s right for aman in your condition to hear about those things. But you rememberenough, don’t you? You remember his face.This is why I’m writing to you. Futile, maybe. I don’t know how manytimes you’ll have to read this before you listen to me. I don’t evenknow how long you’ve been locked up in this room already. Neither doyou. But your advantage in forgetting is that you’ll forget to writeyourself off as a lost cause.Sooner or later you’ll want to do something about it. And when you do,you’ll just have to trust me, because I’m the only one who can helpyou.***EARL OPENS ONE EYE after another to a stretch of white ceiling tilesinterrupted by a hand-printed sign taped right above his head, largeenough for him to read from the bed. An alarm clock is ringingsomewhere. He reads the sign, blinks,reads it again, then takes a lookat the room.It’s a white room, overwhelmingly white, from the walls and thecurtains to the institutional furniture and the bedspread. The alarmclock is ringing from the white desk under the window with the whitecurtains. At this point Earl probably notices that he is lying on topof his white comforter. He is already wearing a dressing gown andslippers.He lies back and reads the sign taped to the ceiling again. It says,in crude block capitals, THIS IS YOUR ROOM. THIS IS A ROOM IN AHOSPITAL. THIS IS WHERE YOU LIVE NOW.Earl rises and takes a look around. The room is large for ahospital-empty linoleum stretches out from the bed in threedirections. Two doors and a window. The view isn’t very helpful,either-a close of trees in the center of a carefully manicured pieceof turf that terminates in a sliver of two-lane blacktop. The trees,except for the evergreens, are bare-early spring or late fall, one orthe other.Every inch of the desk is covered with Post-it notes, legal pads,neatly printed lists, psychological textbooks, framed pictures. On topof the mess is a half-completed crossword puzzle. The alarm clock isriding a pile of folded newspapers. Earl slaps the snooze button andtakes a cigarette from the pack taped to the sleeve of his dressinggown. He pats the empty pockets of his pajamas for a light. He riflesthe papers on the desk, looks quickly through the drawers. Eventuallyhe finds a box of kitchen matches taped to the wall next to thewindow. Another sign is taped just above the box. It says in loudyellow letters, CIGARETTE? CHECK FOR LIT ONES FIRST, STUPID.Earl laughs at the sign, lights his cigarette, and takes a long draw.Taped to the window in front of him is another piece of looseleafpaper headed YOUR SCHEDULE.It charts off the hours, every hour, in blocks: 10:00 p.m. to 8:00a.m. is labeled go BACK TO SLEEP. Earl consults the alarm clock: 8:15.Given the light outside, it must be morning. He checks his watch:10:30. He presses the watch to his ear and listens. He gives the watcha wind or two and sets it to match the alarm clock.According to the schedule, the entire block from 8:00 to 8:30 has beenlabeled BRUSH YOUR TEETH. Earl laughs again and walks over to thebathroom.The bathroom window is open. As he flaps his arms to keep warm, henotices the ashtray on the windowsill. A cigarette is perched on theashtray, burning steadily through a long finger of ash. He frowns,extinguishes the old butt, and replaces it with the new one.The toothbrush has already been treated to a smudge of white paste.The tap is of the push-button variety-a dose of water with each nudge.Earl pushes the brush into his cheek and fiddles it back and forthwhile he opens the medicine cabinet. The shelves are stocked withsingle-serving packages of vitamins, aspirin, antidiuretics. Themouthwash is also single-serving, about a shot-glass-worth of blueliquid in a sealed plastic bottle. Only the toothpaste isregular-sized. Earl spits the paste out of his mouth and replaces itwith the mouthwash. As he lays the toothbrush next to the toothpaste,he notices a tiny wedge of paper pinched between the glass shelf andthe steel backing of the medicine cabinet. He spits the frothy bluefluid into the sink and nudges for some more water to rinse it down.He closes the medicine cabinet and smiles at his reflection in themirror.“Who needs half an hour to brush their teeth?”The paper has been folded down to a minuscule size with all theprecision of a sixth-grader’s love note. Earl unfolds it and smoothsit against the mirror. It reads-IF YOU CAN STILL READ THIS, THEN YOU’RE A FUCKING COWARD.Earl stares blankly at the paper, then reads it again. He turns itover. On the back it reads-P.S.: AFTER YOU’VE READ THIS, HIDE IT AGAIN.Earl reads both sides again, then folds the note back down to itsoriginal size and tucks it underneath the toothpaste.Maybe then he notices the scar. It begins just beneath the ear, jaggedand thick, and disappears abruptly into his hairline. Earl turns hishead and stares out of the corner of his eye to follow the scar’sprogress. He traces it with a fingertip, then looks back down at thecigarette burning in the ashtray. A thought seizes him and he spinsout of the bathroom.He is caught at the door to his room, one hand on the knob. Twopictures are taped to the wall by the door. Earl’s attention is caughtfirst by the MRI, a shiny black frame for four windows into someone’sskull. In marker, the picture is labeled YOUR BRAIN. Earl stares atit. Concentric circles in different colors. He can make out the bigorbs of his eyes and, behind these, the twin lobes of his brain.Smooth wrinkles, circles, semicircles. But right there in the middleof his head, circled in marker, tunneled in from the back of his necklike a maggot into an apricot, is something different. Deformed,broken, but unmistakable. A dark smudge, the shape of a flower, rightthere in the middle of his brain.He bends to look at the other picture. It is a photograph of a manholding flowers, standing over a fresh grave. The man is bent over,reading the headstone. For a moment this looks like a hall of mirrorsor the beginnings of a sketch of infinity: the one man bent over,looking at the smaller man, bent over, reading the headstone. Earllooks at the picture for a long time. Maybe he begins to cry. Maybe hejust stares silently at the picture. Eventually, he makes his way backto the bed, flops down, seals his eyes shut, tries to sleep.The cigarette burns steadily away in the bathroom. A circuit in thealarm clock counts down from ten, and it starts ringing again.Earl opens one eye after another to a stretch of white ceiling tiles,interrupted by a hand-printed sign taped right above his head, largeenough for him to read from the bed.As you read the story this week, ask yourself this question: What narrative elements about it make it a story worth turning into a movie? This short story was the basis for the movie, Memento. I added the part numbers because I found myself reading it incrementally; they are not part of the original story. The italics, type, emphases, and so on are original. This was copied from the Esquire feature on it, and is also available on the DVD version of Memento. I archived both here to avoid link-rot. 1 "What like a bullet can undeceive!" —Herman Melville Your wife always used to say you'd be late for your own funeral. Remember that? Her little joke because you were such a slob—always late, always forgetting stuff, even before the incident. Right about now you're probably wondering if you were late for hers. You were there, you can be sure of that. That's what the picture's for—the one tacked to the wall by the door. It's not customary to take pictures at a funeral, but somebody, your doctors, I guess, knew you wouldn't remember. They had it blown up nice and big and stuck it right there, next to the door, so you couldn't help but see it every time you got up to find out where she was. The guy in the picture, the one with the flowers? That's you. And what are you doing? You're reading the headstone, trying to figure out whose funeral you're at, same as you're reading it now, trying to figure why someone stuck that picture next to your door. But why bother reading something that you won't remember? She's gone, gone for good, and you must be hurting right now, hearing the news. Believe me, I know how you feel. You're probably a wreck. But give it five minutes, maybe ten. Maybe you can even go a whole half hour before you forget. But you will forget—I guarantee it. A few more minutes and you'll be heading for the door, looking for her all over again, breaking down when you find the picture. How many times do you have to hear the news before some other part of your body, other than that busted brain of yours, starts to remember? Never-ending grief, never-ending anger. Useless without direction. Maybe you can't understand what's happened. Can't say I really understand, either. Backwards amnesia. That's what the sign says. CRS disease. Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe you can't understand what happened to you. But you do remember what happened to HER, don't you? The doctors don't want to talk about it. They won't answer my questions. They don't think it's right for a man in your condition to hear about those things. But you remember enough, don't you? You remember his face. This is why I'm writing to you. Futile, maybe. I don't know how many times you'll have to read this before you listen to me. I don't even know how long you've been locked up in this room already. Neither do you. But your advantage in forgetting is that you'll forget to write yourself off as a lost cause. Sooner or later you'll want to do something about it. And when you do, you'll just have to trust me, because I'm the only one who can help you. 2 EARL OPENS ONE EYE after another to a stretch of white ceiling tiles interrupted by a hand-printed sign taped right above his head, large enough for him to read from the bed. An alarm clock is ringing somewhere. He reads the sign, blinks, reads it again, then takes a look at the room. It's a white room, overwhelmingly white, from the walls and the curtains to the institutional furniture and the bedspread. The alarm clock is ringing from the white desk under the window with the white curtains. At this point Earl probably notices that he is lying on top of his white comforter. He is already wearing a dressing gown and slippers. He lies back and reads the sign taped to the ceiling again. It says, in crude block capitals, THIS IS YOUR ROOM. THIS IS A ROOM IN A HOSPITAL. THIS IS WHERE YOU LIVE NOW. Earl rises and takes a look around. The room is large for a hospital—empty linoleum stretches out from the bed in three directions. Two doors and a window. The view isn't very helpful, either—a close of trees in the center of a carefully manicured piece of turf that terminates in a sliver of two-lane blacktop. The trees, except for the evergreens, are bare—early spring or late fall, one or the other. Every inch of the desk is covered with Post-it notes, legal pads, neatly printed lists, psychological textbooks, framed pictures. On top of the mess is a half-completed crossword puzzle. The alarm clock is riding a pile of folded newspapers. Earl slaps the snooze button and takes a cigarette from the pack taped to the sleeve of his dressing gown. He pats the empty pockets of his pajamas for a light. He rifles the papers on the desk, looks quickly through the drawers. Eventually he finds a box of kitchen matches taped to the wall next to the window. Another sign is taped just above the box. It says in loud yellow letters, CIGARETTE? CHECK FOR LIT ONES FIRST, STUPID. Earl laughs at the sign, lights his cigarette, and takes a long draw. Taped to the window in front of him is another piece of looseleaf paper headed YOUR SCHEDULE. 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The shelves are stocked with single-serving packages of vitamins, aspirin, antidiuretics. The mouthwash is also single-serving, about a shot-glass-worth of blue liquid in a sealed plastic bottle. Only the toothpaste is regular-sized. Earl spits the paste out of his mouth and replaces it with the mouthwash. As he lays the toothbrush next to the toothpaste, he notices a tiny wedge of paper pinched between the glass shelf and the steel backing of the medicine cabinet. He spits the frothy blue fluid into the sink and nudges for some more water to rinse it down. He closes the medicine cabinet and smiles at his reflection in the mirror. "Who needs half an hour to brush their teeth?" The paper has been folded down to a minuscule size with all the precision of a sixth-grader's love note. Earl unfolds it and smooths it against the mirror. It reads— IF YOU CAN STILL READ THIS, THEN YOU'RE A FUCKING COWARD. Earl stares blankly at the paper, then reads it again. He turns it over. On the back it reads— P.S.: AFTER YOU'VE READ THIS, HIDE IT AGAIN. Earl reads both sides again, then folds the note back down to its original size and tucks it underneath the toothpaste. Maybe then he notices the scar. It begins just beneath the ear, jagged and thick, and disappears abruptly into his hairline. Earl turns his head and stares out of the corner of his eye to follow the scar's progress. He traces it with a fingertip, then looks back down at the cigarette burning in the ashtray. A thought seizes him and he spins out of the bathroom. He is caught at the door to his room, one hand on the knob. Two pictures are taped to the wall by the door. Earl's attention is caught first by the MRI, a shiny black frame for four windows into someone's skull. In marker, the picture is labeled YOUR BRAIN. Earl stares at it. Concentric circles in different colors. He can make out the big orbs of his eyes and, behind these, the twin lobes of his brain. Smooth wrinkles, circles, semicircles. But right there in the middle of his head, circled in marker, tunneled in from the back of his neck like a maggot into an apricot, is something different. Deformed, broken, but unmistakable. A dark smudge, the shape of a flower, right there in the middle of his brain. He bends to look at the other picture. It is a photograph of a man holding flowers, standing over a fresh grave. The man is bent over, reading the headstone. For a moment this looks like a hall of mirrors or the beginnings of a sketch of infinity: the one man bent over, looking at the smaller man, bent over, reading the headstone. Earl looks at the picture for a long time. Maybe he begins to cry. Maybe he just stares silently at the picture. Eventually, he makes his way back to the bed, flops down, seals his eyes shut, tries to sleep. The cigarette burns steadily away in the bathroom. A circuit in the alarm clock counts down from ten, and it starts ringing again. Earl opens one eye after another to a stretch of white ceiling tiles, interrupted by a hand-printed sign taped right above his head, large enough for him to read from the bed. 3 You can't have a normal life anymore. You must know that. How can you have a girlfriend if you can't remember her name? Can't have kids, not unless you want them to grow up with a dad who doesn't recognize them. Sure as hell can't hold down a job. Not too many professions out there that value forgetfulness. Prostitution, maybe. Politics, of course. No. Your life is over. You're a dead man. The only thing the doctors are hoping to do is teach you to be less of a burden to the orderlies. And they'll probably never let you go home, wherever that would be. So the question is not "to be or not to be," because you aren't. The question is whether you want to do something about it. Whether revenge matters to you. It does to most people. For a few weeks, they plot, they scheme, they take measures to get even. But the passage of time is all it takes to erode that initial impulse. Time is theft, isn't that what they say? And time eventually convinces most of us that forgiveness is a virtue. Conveniently, cowardice and forgiveness look identical at a certain distance. Time steals your nerve. If time and fear aren't enough to dissuade people from their revenge, then there's always authority, softly shaking its head and saying, We understand, but you're the better man for letting it go. For rising above it. For not sinking to their level. And besides, says authority, if you try anything stupid, we'll lock you up in a little room. But they already put you in a little room, didn't they? Only they don't really lock it or even guard it too carefully because you're a cripple. A corpse. A vegetable who probably wouldn't remember to eat or take a shit if someone wasn't there to remind you. And as for the passage of time, well, that doesn't really apply to you anymore, does it? Just the same ten minutes, over and over again. So how can you forgive if you can't remember to forget? You probably were the type to let it go, weren't you? Before. But you're not the man you used to be. Not even half. You're a fraction; you're the ten-minute man. Of course, weakness is strong. It's the primary impulse. You'd probably prefer to sit in your little room and cry. Live in your finite collection of memories, carefully polishing each one. Half a life set behind glass and pinned to cardboard like a collection of exotic insects. You'd like to live behind that glass, wouldn't you? Preserved in aspic. You'd like to but you can't, can you? You can't because of the last addition to your collection. The last thing you remember. His face. His face and your wife, looking to you for help. And maybe this is where you can retire to when it's over. Your little collection. They can lock you back up in another little room and you can live the rest of your life in the past. But only if you've got a little piece of paper in your hand that says you got him. You know I'm right. You know there's a lot of work to do. It may seem impossible, but I'm sure if we all do our part, we'll figure something out. But you don't have much time. You've only got about ten minutes, in fact. Then it starts all over again. So do something with the time you've got. 4 EARL OPENS HIS EYES and blinks into the darkness. The alarm clock is ringing. It says 3:20, and the moonlight streaming through the window means it must be the early morning. Earl fumbles for the lamp, almost knocking it over in the process. Incandescent light fills the room, painting the metal furniture yellow, the walls yellow, the bedspread, too. He lies back and looks up at the stretch of yellow ceiling tiles above him, interrupted by a handwritten sign taped to the ceiling. He reads the sign two, maybe three times, then blinks at the room around him. It is a bare room. Institutional, maybe. There is a desk over by the window. The desk is bare except for the blaring alarm clock. Earl probably notices, at this point, that he is fully clothed. He even has his shoes on under the sheets. He extracts himself from the bed and crosses to the desk. Nothing in the room would suggest that anyone lived there, or ever had, except for the odd scrap of tape stuck here and there to the wall. No pictures, no books, nothing. Through the window, he can see a full moon shining on carefully manicured grass. Earl slaps the snooze button on the alarm clock and stares a moment at the two keys taped to the back of his hand. He picks at the tape while he searches through the empty drawers. In the left pocket of his jacket, he finds a roll of hundred-dollar bills and a letter sealed in an envelope. He checks the rest of the main room and the bathroom. Bits of tape, cigarette butts. Nothing else. Earl absentmindedly plays with the lump of scar tissue on his neck and moves back toward the bed. He lies back down and stares up at the ceiling and the sign taped to it. The sign reads, GET UP, GET OUT RIGHT NOW. THESE PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO KILL YOU. Earl closes his eyes. 5 They tried to teach you to make lists in grade school, remember? Back when your day planner was the back of your hand. And if your assignments came off in the shower, well, then they didn't get done. No direction, they said. No discipline. So they tried to get you to write it all down somewhere more permanent. Of course, your grade-school teachers would be laughing their pants wet if they could see you now. Because you've become the exact product of their organizational lessons. Because you can't even take a piss without consulting one of your lists. They were right. Lists are the only way out of this mess. Here's the truth: People, even regular people, are never just any one person with one set of attributes. It's not that simple. We're all at the mercy of the limbic system, clouds of electricity drifting through the brain. Every man is broken into twenty-four-hour fractions, and then again within those twenty-four hours. It's a daily pantomime, one man yielding control to the next: a backstage crowded with old hacks clamoring for their turn in the spotlight. Every week, every day. The angry man hands the baton over to the sulking man, and in turn to the sex addict, the introvert, the conversationalist. Every man is a mob, a chain gang of idiots. This is the tragedy of life. Because for a few minutes of every day, every man becomes a genius. Moments of clarity, insight, whatever you want to call them. The clouds part, the planets get in a neat little line, and everything becomes obvious. I should quit smoking, maybe, or here's how I could make a fast million, or such and such is the key to eternal happiness. That's the miserable truth. For a few moments, the secrets of the universe are opened to us. Life is a cheap parlor trick. But then the genius, the savant, has to hand over the controls to the next guy down the pike, most likely the guy who just wants to eat potato chips, and insight and brilliance and salvation are all entrusted to a moron or a hedonist or a narcoleptic. The only way out of this mess, of course, is to take steps to ensure that you control the idiots that you become. To take your chain gang, hand in hand, and lead them. The best way to do this is with a list. It's like a letter you write to yourself. A master plan, drafted by the guy who can see the light, made with steps simple enough for the rest of the idiots to understand. Follow steps one through one hundred. Repeat as necessary. Your problem is a little more acute, maybe, but fundamentally the same thing. It's like that computer thing, the Chinese room. You remember that? One guy sits in a little room, laying down cards with letters written on them in a language he doesn't understand, laying them down one letter at a time in a sequence according to someone else's instructions. The cards are supposed to spell out a joke in Chinese. The guy doesn't speak Chinese, of course. He just follows his instructions. There are some obvious differences in your situation, of course: You broke out of the room they had you in, so the whole enterprise has to be portable. And the guy giving the instructions—that's you, too, just an earlier version of you. And the joke you're telling, well, it's got a punch line. I just don't think anyone's going to find it very funny. So that's the idea. All you have to do is follow your instructions. Like climbing a ladder or descending a staircase. One step at a time. Right down the list. Simple. And the secret, of course, to any list is to keep it in a place where you're bound to see it. 6 HE CAN HEAR THE BUZZING through his eyelids. Insistent. He reaches out for the alarm clock, but he can't move his arm. Earl opens his eyes to see a large man bent double over him. The man looks up at him, annoyed, then resumes his work. Earl looks around him. Too dark for a doctor's office. Then the pain floods his brain, blocking out the other questions. He squirms again, trying to yank his forearm away, the one that feels like it's burning. The arm doesn't move, but the man shoots him another scowl. Earl adjusts himself in the chair to see over the top of the man's head. The noise and the pain are both coming from a gun in the man's hand—a gun with a needle where the barrel should be. The needle is digging into the fleshy underside of Earl's forearm, leaving a trail of puffy letters behind it. Earl tries to rearrange himself to get a better view, to read the letters on his arm, but he can't. He lies back and stares at the ceiling. Eventually the tattoo artist turns off the noise, wipes Earl's forearm with a piece of gauze, and wanders over to the back to dig up a pamphlet describing how to deal with a possible infection. Maybe later he'll tell his wife about this guy and his little note. Maybe his wife will convince him to call the police. Earl looks down at the arm. The letters are rising up from the skin, weeping a little. They run from just behind the strap of Earl's watch all the way to the inside of his elbow. Earl blinks at the message and reads it again. It says, in careful little capitals, I RAPED AND KILLED YOUR WIFE. 7 It's your birthday today, so I got you a little present. I would have just bought you a beer, but who knows where that would have ended? So instead, I got you a bell. I think I may have had to pawn your watch to buy it, but what the hell did you need a watch for, anyway? You're probably asking yourself, Why a bell? In fact, I'm guessing you're going to be asking yourself that question every time you find it in your pocket. Too many of these letters now. Too many for you to dig back into every time you want to know the answer to some little question. It's a joke, actually. A practical joke. But think of it this way: I'm not really laughing at you so much as with you. I'd like to think that every time you take it out of your pocket and wonder, Why do I have this bell? a little part of you, a little piece of your broken brain, will remember and laugh, like I'm laughing now. Besides, you do know the answer. It was something you learned before. So if you think about it, you'll know. Back in the old days, people were obsessed with the fear of being buried alive. You remember now? Medical science not being quite what it is today, it wasn't uncommon for people to suddenly wake up in a casket. So rich folks had their coffins outfitted with breathing tubes. Little tubes running up to the mud above so that if someone woke up when they weren't supposed to, they wouldn't run out of oxygen. Now, they must have tested this out and realized that you could shout yourself hoarse through the tube, but it was too narrow to carry much noise. Not enough to attract attention, at least. So a string was run up the tube to a little bell attached to the headstone. If a dead person came back to life, all he had to do was ring his little bell till someone came and dug him up again. I'm laughing now, picturing you on a bus or maybe in a fast-food restaurant, reaching into your pocket and finding your little bell and wondering to yourself where it came from, why you have it. Maybe you'll even ring it. Happy birthday, buddy. I don't know who figured out the solution to our mutual problem, so I don't know whether to congratulate you or me. A bit of a lifestyle change, admittedly, but an elegant solution, nonetheless. Look to yourself for the answer. That sounds like something out of a Hallmark card. I don't know when you thought it up, but my hat's off to you. Not that you know what the hell I'm talking about. But, honestly, a real brainstorm. After all, everybody else needs mirrors to remind themselves who they are. You're no different. 8 THE LITTLE MECHANICAL VOICE PAUSES, then repeats itself. It says, "The time is 8:00 a.m. This is a courtesy call." Earl opens his eyes and replaces the receiver. The phone is perched on a cheap veneer headboard that stretches behind the bed, curves to meet the corner, and ends at the minibar. The TV is still on, blobs of flesh color nattering away at each other. Earl lies back down and is surprised to see himself, older now, tanned, the hair pulling away from his head like solar flares. The mirror on the ceiling is cracked, the silver fading in creases. Earl continues to stare at himself, astonished by what he sees. He is fully dressed, but the clothes are old, threadbare in places. Earl feels the familiar spot on his left wrist for his watch, but it's gone. He looks down from the mirror to his arm. It is bare and the skin has changed to an even tan, as if he never owned a watch in the first place. The skin is even in color except for the solid black arrow on the inside of Earl's wrist, pointing up his shirtsleeve. He stares at the arrow for a moment. Perhaps he doesn't try to rub it off anymore. He rolls up his sleeve. The arrow points to a sentence tattooed along Earl's inner arm. Earl reads the sentence once, maybe twice. Another arrow picks up at the beginning of the sentence, points farther up Earl's arm, disappearing under the rolled-up shirtsleeve. He unbuttons his shirt. Looking down on his chest, he can make out the shapes but cannot bring them into focus, so he looks up at the mirror above him. The arrow leads up Earl's arm, crosses at the shoulder, and descends onto his upper torso, terminating at a picture of a man's face that occupies most of his chest. The face is that of a large man, balding, with a mustache and a goatee. It is a particular face, but like a police sketch it has a certain unreal quality. The rest of his upper torso is covered in words, phrases, bits of information, and instructions, all of them written backward on Earl, forward in the mirror. Eventually Earl sits up, buttons his shirt, and crosses to the desk. He takes out a pen and a piece of notepaper from the desk drawer, sits, and begins to write. 9 I don't know where you'll be when you read this. I'm not even sure if you'll bother to read this. I guess you don't need to. It's a shame, really, that you and I will never meet. But, like the song says, "By the time you read this note, I'll be gone." We're so close now. That's the way it feels. So many pieces put together, spelled out. I guess it's just a matter of time until you find him. Who knows what we've done to get here? Must be a hell of a story, if only you could remember any of it. I guess it's better that you can't. I had a thought just now. Maybe you'll find it useful. Everybody is waiting for the end to come, but what if it already passed us by? What if the final joke of Judgment Day was that it had already come and gone and we were none the wiser? Apocalypse arrives quietly; the chosen are herded off to heaven, and the rest of us, the ones who failed the test, just keep on going, oblivious. Dead already, wandering around long after the gods have stopped keeping score, still optimistic about the future. I guess if that's true, then it doesn't matter what you do. No expectations. If you can't find him, then it doesn't matter, because nothing matters. And if you do find him, then you can kill him without worrying about the consequences. Because there are no consequences. That's what I'm thinking about right now, in this scrappy little room. Framed pictures of ships on the wall. I don't know, obviously, but if I had to guess, I'd say we're somewhere up the coast. If you're wondering why your left arm is five shades browner than your right, I don't know what to tell you. I guess we must have been driving for a while. And, no, I don't know what happened to your watch. And all these keys: I have no idea. Not a one that I recognize. Car keys and house keys and the little fiddly keys for padlocks. What have we been up to? I wonder if he'll feel stupid when you find him. Tracked down by the ten-minute man. Assassinated by a vegetable. I'll be gone in a moment. I'll put down the pen, close my eyes, and then you can read this through if you want. I just wanted you to know that I'm proud of you. No one who matters is left to say it. No one left is going to want to. 10 EARL'S EYES ARE WIDE OPEN, staring through the window of the car. Smiling eyes. Smiling through the window at the crowd gathering across the street. The crowd gathering around the body in the doorway. The body emptying slowly across the sidewalk and into the storm drain. A stocky guy, facedown, eyes open. Balding head, goatee. In death, as in police sketches, faces tend to look the same. This is definitely somebody in particular. But really, it could be anybody. Earl is still smiling at the body as the car pulls away from the curb. The car? Who's to say? Maybe it's a police cruiser. Maybe it's just a taxi. As the car is swallowed into traffic, Earl's eyes continue to shine out into the night, watching the body until it disappears into a circle of concerned pedestrians. He chuckles to himself as the car continues to make distance between him and the growing crowd. Earl's smile fades a little. Something has occurred to him. He begins to pat down his pockets; leisurely at first, like a man looking for his keys, then a little more desperately. Maybe his progress is impeded by a set of handcuffs. He begins to empty the contents of his pockets out onto the seat next to him. Some money. A bunch of keys. Scraps of paper. A round metal lump rolls out of his pocket and slides across the vinyl seat. Earl is frantic now. He hammers at the plastic divider between him and the driver, begging the man for a pen. Perhaps the cabbie doesn't speak much English. Perhaps the cop isn't in the habit of talking to suspects. Either way, the divider between the man in front and the man behind remains closed. A pen is not forthcoming. The car hits a pothole, and Earl blinks at his reflection in the rearview mirror. He is calm now. The driver makes another corner, and the metal lump slides back over to rest against Earl's leg with a little jingle. He picks it up and looks at it, curious now. It is a little bell. A little metal bell. Inscribed on it are his name and a set of dates. He recognizes the first one: the year in which he was born. But the second date means nothing to him. Nothing at all. As he turns the bell over in his hands, he notices the empty space on his wrist where his watch used to sit. There is a little arrow there, pointing up his arm. Earl looks at the arrow, then begins to roll up his sleeve. 11 "You'd be late for your own funeral," she'd say. Remember? The more I think about it, the more trite that seems. What kind of idiot, after all, is in any kind of rush to get to the end of his own story? And how would I know if I were late, anyway? I don't have a watch anymore. I don't know what we did with it. What the hell do you need a watch for, anyway? It was an antique. Deadweight tugging at your wrist. Symbol of the old you. The you that believed in time. No. Scratch that. It's not so much that you've lost your faith in time as that time has lost its faith in you. And who needs it, anyway? Who wants to be one of those saps living in the safety of the future, in the safety of the moment after the moment in which they felt something powerful? Living in the next moment, in which they feel nothing. Crawling down the hands of the clock, away from the people who did unspeakable things to them. Believing the lie that time will heal all wounds—which is just a nice way of saying that time deadens us. But you're different. You're more perfect. Time is three things for most people, but for you, for us, just one. A singularity. One moment. This moment. Like you're the center of the clock, the axis on which the hands turn. Time moves about you but never moves you. It has lost its ability to affect you. What is it they say? That time is theft? But not for you. Close your eyes and you can start all over again. Conjure up that necessary emotion, fresh as roses. Time is an absurdity. An abstraction. The only thing that matters is this moment. This moment a million times over. You have to trust me. If this moment is repeated enough, if you keep trying—and you have to keep trying—eventually you will come across the next item on your list.