

Bob

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Cain Bauvenas was a dark place. It was far enough south that the sun made a point of coming up every morning, but some weeks in winter, with the pine trees growing in any space that wasn't paved (and some spaces that were), you couldn't tell. Not that Bob would have been able to tell anyway: he knew how the sun worked, when and how it rose and set anywhere in Canada, but actually going outside to see it was beyond his simple life. Early mornings and late nights were not for exploring. They were for making sure the bar was in order and nothing was stolen. And day in and day out, Bob made sure that nothing was.

The bar in question was named for its owner: Bob's Beers, Booze and Babes. That is, that's how it was originally named, back when he and Eli had first opened the place. But Bob complained right from the start that beer was a type of booze — and neither particularly exciting to him — and after the first month went by with no babes to be seen, that too felt wrong. So the second and fourth words were taken down and "Bob's Booze" stood proudly, if awkwardly spaced, atop the small cabin-like building.

When Bob first unplugged the words, Eli had smiled at him. It was an odd smile, that Bob often tried to understand but couldn't. His left eye shone like the sun was reflecting from it, even in the dim light of the bar, and he never squinted or looked away. *It's what people do*, Eli had told him when he asked, and Bob accepted that. Sometimes there just wasn't anything more to Eli's words.

Bob thought about these things as one o'clock rolled over and he set to work shutting down the bar. He wondered if he ever made such faces, his eyes gleaming without light and teeth not quite showing. And if he did make those faces, *why?* These questions kept him company when Eli was away. Or asleep, as the case was now. And was more often than not, it seemed. Cain Bauvenas was a dark place. Eli loved it.

As Bob was starting to wipe down the counter, a faint rapping came from across the building. Without looking, he knew there was a stranger at the door. Probably somebody lost, needed gasoline or food or sleep. Not of a lot of people came through Cain Bauvenas on purpose. Twenty-five miles northwest of Squamish, BC was about as close to nowhere as you could get, and in the dead of night this close to winter, it was a wonder anyone came through alive. That's what Eli said, anyway. Bob didn't see why it would be so difficult, though he had only a dim idea of where Cain Bauvenas actually was. Computers only knew so much, even these days, and Bob had never wished to travel for himself.

The knock came again, and Bob stopped washing. Part of him had suspected that it was only a tree branch or some rocks blown in the wind, and part of him still did. But whatever it was, it had knocked twice, and that meant Bob needed to check it out. He left his rag centered on the counter and moved quickly toward the door.

As it turned out, the knock was indeed a person, but this was no lost traveler. Much to Bob's surprise and confusion, it was Eli who had arrived at his door at 1:07 in the morning, hair askew and shirt on backwards. Bob unlocked the door and pulled it open, and the small man fell inside. He pulled himself up on a bar-stool and as soon as there was enough clearance, Bob closed the door. He didn't like to let the cold air in. Things don't work as well in the cold.

"You need to sleep," Bob asserted. Eli didn't respond. Bob locked the door again. A faint stirring rose from the sleeping man, but Bob ignored it, choosing instead to return to his work. Several minutes passed in this way, until Eli rolled over and opened his eyes, squinting at the bright florescent lights.

"Where am I?" he asked groggily.

"Bob's Booze," Bob replied without thinking.

"Of course I am," came the reply.

"Of course you are," Bob repeated.

Eli sat up and reached for the seat behind him. He used it to hoist himself up and then sat down, leaning against the table. He was the image of exhaustion. With great effort he spoke again, taking a deep breath and pressing his hand down into the table to stabilize himself. "How was the day?"

"The store opened at 9:00 this morning. No customers arrived until 11:17," Bob began, and stopped washing to face Eli. "Revenue was \$217.23. I think I might get paid this month."

Eli smiled at this, but Bob's face was unchanged: after a moment studying Eli's expression, he returned it carefully. It was neither natural nor appropriate, but late nights are for practicing. Eli had told him that once, many years ago. Perhaps the old man had forgotten by now. Bob did not forget.

"Tell me something I don't know," Eli said.

Bob smiled. Eli said this every night that he showed up, and Bob would always reply with some meaningless statistic about the day's commerce. But tonight he had something new to say. He had kept it safely in his memory,

just in case Eli were to show up. "A young boy asked who I thought I was," Bob said, and blinked slowly.

"How young?" Eli asked.

"Between twelve and fifteen, I believe. Five foot eight but his voice was still a boy's."

"I see."

Bob didn't reply to this for a moment, waiting to see if Eli would continue. Instead, he let his arm fall onto the table and laid his head down on it. His eyes closed and Bob could tell that he was asleep already. That was okay. He would be up in a few hours, and they could continue talking. For now, Bob would finish closing the bar.

Ninety minutes later everything was washed and put away. The doors were locked and most lights were out. The tills had been emptied and the bar was ready for another day. Still, Eli slept. Bob moved closer to him and said as loudly as he thought safe, "You need rest. Perhaps you should go home."

Eli did not reply.

"Eli?" Still the man slept.

"Who do you think that I am?"

Eli's breath quickened for a moment, but then settled down. It was clear that he would not wake before the morning, so Bob left him in his slumber.

The next morning was a bright one. There were no clouds in the sky and it shone brightly blue directly above them. Around the bar, the trees kept the land in shadow. It was eight o'clock now. In three hours the sun would be high enough to reach the bar windows. Assuming the clouds didn't come back, that was. Bob mused on this. Weather is a strange beast. It always does what it wants to. Hardly ever what you expect.

When Bob came out to unlock the bar, Eli was gone. He had left the door unlocked, but Bob checked the latch and pushed on it gently anyway. Then he opened the door and picked up a newspaper from the front step. He went back inside and quickly scanned the doors and windows for damage in the night, then moved behind the till. As the old cash register powered on, Bob read through the paper. He solved the crossword puzzle in thirty-four minutes. Not nearly his best time, but it would do.

At 10:16 a tall man strode inside, wearing a heavy coat with a canvas bag slung over the shoulder. The bag was marked CANADA POST but the man carrying it did not appear to be a postman. "Who are you?" Bob asked, looking up.

The man paused and surveyed Bob for a few seconds before answering. "Mailman," he said gruffly.

"Your shirt is incorrect."

"Your address is incorrect."

Bob didn't understand this accusation, so he ignored it and tried again. "Who are you?"

The man chuckled. "I'm a friend of Eli's, Bob. He registered a lot two miles down the road with the post office and asked me to handle any mail sent to it. Said he'd rather keep this place secret."

"I've never seen you before."

"No one's ever sent you a letter before."

With that, the mailman pulled an envelope out from under his coat and set it on the bar counter. He looked at Bob once again, nodded, then turned and left. Bob took the envelope and opened it.

ATTN: Robert Okinth

During a recent audit of our local business licenses, it has come to our attention that you have been operating a restaurant by the name of BOB'S BOOZE without a legal license to serve liquor.

You have eight (8) days to confirm with us that you are not serving liquor from your establishment, or we will send an agent to personally inspect your place of business.

This is a routine request. To prevent its reoccurrence, we now require any business whose name implies the sale or production of liquor to be correctly licensed to do so. Please contact our office soon to file for an exception, apply for a liquor license, or change your business name.

Thank you for your cooperation.

John Deckard
British Columbia Business Registry

Bob read the letter twice, to make sure he had gotten everything right. He smiled to see his name — the name Eli had given the government, that is — written out in full, but the part about the liquor license concerned him. Eli had taught him to be wary of government letters, and Bob had never heard of a liquor license. He decided to put the letter back in its envelope and show it to Eli the next time he came in. That aside, Bob returned to his post and set to running the bar.

The next day Eli did not visit the bar. Bob phoned him to ask about the letter, because he did not want to be caught off guard by the eight day deadline. The phone rang four times, and Bob was mentally caching a message to give to the machine when Eli finally answered. His voice was

distant and he was clearly out of breath.

“This is Bob.”

“Bob?” Eli sounded confused. “What do you need to know?”

“Yesterday at ten-seventeen I received a letter from the British Columbia Business Registry.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Bob confirmed, and waited for Eli to reply. It took a moment.

“What did it say?”

“Bob’s Booze has eight days to change its name or apply for a liquor license.”

Eli did not reply for ten seconds, prompting Bob to ask “are you there?”

“Yes,” Eli replied, and paused for another four seconds. “Fuck.”

“Why fuck?” Eli sounded angry. Bob didn’t understand angry.

“Don’t worry about it. Listen, just burn the letter. Get rid of it. What happens will happen, okay?” Eli was speaking quickly. Distractedly.

“Okay.”

“You won’t see me again.”

“Why?”

“I—I have to go. I’m going away.”

“For how long?”

Eli hung up. Bob redialed. It rang five times before the answering machine clicked on. Bob dialed 8-0-8 — dial-tone for BOB — and disconnected.

One week later, John Deckard drove to the ferry terminal. It was a rainy Tuesday morning; not a good day for a trip to the mainland. Part of him knew when he sent the letter that he would end up going out to the Bob’s Booze. The small bars never replied. Half of them pretended they never received the warning, and half of them were probably telling the truth. Normally the BCBR avoided them, but it had been a quiet month, and the John’s days were beginning to blur into one another. He needed to get out.

Yesterday it had been one in the afternoon before John had realized that he’d gotten up in the morning, gone to work and shuffled documents around for four hours. He stood up for lunch, then sat down again. His lunch box was missing. However well he had subconsciously dressed himself and navigated traffic, it was clear that John had not packed anything to eat. He put his head in his hands and pressed his eyes against his palms for a minute. His palms were warm. They felt nice.

When he was ready to look up again, John typed out an email to the office telling them he would be out on business the next two days. He grabbed

the paper from his desk with the address for Bob's Booze printed on it and walked out.

The ferry lineup was quick. On eight AM Tuesday there were only business travelers, and they knew their way around. Two hours to Tsawwassen, plus half driving to Richmond and eight to hell. Just like every day. At least, that's what John read from the dead-pan expression worn by everyone else in line with him. He saw his reflection in a window and smiled. He didn't look any different. On the ferry, he slept.

Cain Bauvenas was a dark place. This was apparent to John ten minutes out of North Van, as the forest began to thicken and trees imposed mightily on the small road, and it only got worse as he continued. Another turn led to an even smaller road, and another — almost three hours later — brought him onto what perhaps once was a road, but was now a broken trail of pavement. He soldiered on, his car dangerously low on gas but his mind wide awake. It was a strange feeling, and he held onto it.

At one point he saw a small clearing to the side of the road, and pulled into it. His legs were starting to cramp and Christ, he needed to piss. He climbed out of his beat-up once-silver Malibu and walked a short distance into the woods. It was very quiet here, save for the rustling of small animals and a small chirping that came every fifteen seconds or so from somewhere to his right. The crunching and cracking beneath his feet sounded unnaturally loud, and he did his best to trod lightly. Not that it helped: pushing pencils for eight years had not produced an athlete. Not by a long shot.

After exploring for a few minutes, John remembered why he'd left the car in the first place. He relieved himself and turned to go back. There was a surreal feeling to the forest, and a small part of him wanted to stay forever. Impossible, he knew, for someone as citified as him, and the urge bothered him. Plus, he had a job to do. Somehow he had to justify his paycheck, he thought, but he knew in his heart that wasn't true.

John sat in his car for a long time. He could start it, he supposed, but it wouldn't make a difference. He wasn't ready to leave this place yet, and it wasn't like there was something to listen to on the radio this far out. His eyelids started to droop, and afraid of falling asleep and being found by some wild animal, he forced himself to move. He checked the glove-box for a CD, knowing full well there wasn't anything there, and was surprised to find an old Massive Attack disc. It wasn't his — he had never even heard of Massive Attack — but he put it in the player anyway. Perhaps his brother has left it there when he borrowed the car six years ago. It had been that long since

he'd opened the glove box, hadn't it? Tears began to well in John's eyes at the thought.

The forest road continued on, and an hour later John rolled past a small wooden sign which looked like it might have said "Cain Bauvenas" once before. By now it was rotten and broken, but the letter C was still visible.

Ten minutes later he found the mailbox. He had surprisingly little trouble, though he never saw a soul. It was a small town, sure, but he hadn't gone far into it. (Most of the ten minutes he had spent trying to follow roads and read the dirt-covered signs, all of which had fallen over at some awful angle. In total he hadn't driven a full kilometer past the first town sign.) So perhaps it made sense that nobody would be there. But as he turned and drove down the driveway, a chill spread down his spine. It was a long driveway, probably thirty or forty meters long, and at the end of it was absolutely nothing. Trees surrounded the road on three sides and it was clear that there had never been a building there. And it was unnervingly dark, even as the clock on his dash showed 2:30 PM.

John turned around, executing a nine point turn on the narrow driveway, terrified of blowing a tire or being stuck in this horrible, deserted place, and drove back to the mailbox. He checked it for letters, and found one. It wasn't the one he had sent a week ago. The return address was simply "Eli" and nothing else was written. After quickly looking around, John opened the envelope. There was a single page inside. In the top left corner was the date *March 2, 2002*, then two blank lines and the characters ;).

Again a shiver ran through John's spine. He looked around him in all directions and saw nobody. A bird flew off a few feet above him with a sudden whooshing sound that made him jump backwards, slipping on the uneven ground and falling. The letter was gone, but John didn't care where it was. There wasn't anything more to it. Just today's date, eight years ago, and a winking face. It made him feel like he was being watched. Someone was fucking with him, he knew it, and he climbed back into his car as quietly as he could. It was safe in there.

Taking stock of the situation, John checked the address again. His paper matched the numbers on the mailbox, and he knew it was the same address he'd sent the original letter to. This was definitely where Bob's Booze was in their records, and — just as definitely — there had never been anything here. John started his engine and moved slowly forward. He thought about turning left at the end of the driveway and heading home, then reconsidered

and went right instead. If anything, he would figure out what was going on in this town.

Half an hour later there was still no sign of life, and John had the awful feeling that he was lost. The streets had numbers out here, though why they did, John had no idea. None of them went straight for more than half a block at once, and on top of that they weren't even in order. And if he wasn't mistaken, half of them had digits that were actually letters — A's and B's and D's, mostly, but there were others. His gas light was on and he needed to fill up. Not that there was anything he could do about that. He pushed the thought out of his mind.

As he turned around, John saw a man between the trees as his headlights moved by. He stopped and looked out of his window, and in the dim light he could see that it wasn't his imagination. There really was a man there, tall and wide and menacing. He wore a plaid shirt and suspenders hooked onto dark blue jeans. His eyes were smiling, as near as John could tell, and his mouth was curved into a kind of half-smile. John pushed the button and lowered the passenger's side window, leaning over the shifter to talk. "Hello?" he called.

The stranger lowered himself to look through the window, surveying the car's interior before answering. His eyebrows furrowed and he looked almost about to leave before he responded. He had a thick Canadian accent that made John think of Manitoba. "Hey there," he said.

"I'm looking for gas," John started, then quickly added, "And for Bob's Booze."

At this the stranger drew in a sharp breath. "I can help you with gas," he replied thoughtfully, considering the second request. "But I don't expect you'll find Bob's Booze anywhere around these parts. No, not here."

John was confused. "Where, then?"

The stranger looked sharply at him, a hint of anger, or possibly fear, in his eyes. "Not here."

It was clear he wasn't going to get any more information, so John asked again for gas. The stranger gave him directions and said goodbye. John started to leave again, then stopped. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Just the mailman," the stranger replied, and walked away. John sat for a minute and waited for him to leave before driving off. He felt awfully tired, and this dark place was giving him the creeps.

The gas station was ten minutes away, and by the time he rolled in, John was riding the gas to keep from stalling out. He filled up and went inside

the station to pay. Behind the counter was a small woman, forty-something, who looked at him distrustfully. John asked again for Bob's Booze, but was once again given no answer. There was something wrong about the way she denied him, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

John thanked the woman and left, starting his car with ease as it relished its full tank. He pulled forward and left the station, heading for home. Perhaps he would write another letter and ask for a response. After all, his first letter had gone *somewhere*, hadn't it?, and it sure wasn't to the mailbox that he had checked. Maybe the address had been wrong. He picked up his phone to dial 411, then remembered that he *was* 411. The address on his printout was the same address that anyone else would have. Defeated, he kept driving away.

Five hours later John was at the ferry terminal again. It was not quite 9:00 PM and he felt exhausted. Again he slept on the ferry, and drove home in a strange half-asleep state. When he got home, he passed out on the couch moments after slipping his shoes off. He dreamed of Cain Bauvenas, and in his dream the town was even darker than it was in real life. The roads were winding and curving wildly as he drove down them, bending like a whip and nearly driving him into the woods. The trees on either side shuffled amongst themselves. Out of the corner of his eye some looked like mailboxes, but when he turned to look they were gone.

On the last of these occasions, he looked to his side and an old man was sitting beside him. Though he had never seen him before, John knew his name was Eli, and that he was safe. Eli was crying softly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I have to go now."

And that was all that John remembered.

Two days later, Bob had just opened the bar when the mailman arrived again. This time Bob recognized him and wasn't bothered by his un-postmanlike appearance. However, his sudden reappearance was unsettling — Bob had run the bar for eight years and had never seen him before. Though to be fair, in the first few years Eli may have been intercepting his mail. After Eli stopped coming in every day, Bob realized how much the man had been hiding. It had been easier, though, without everything to learn at once. Bob had always had trouble putting things in context, and even now he tried to serialize all his input as best he could.

Eli had not been in for eight days now. After three, Bob had begun phoning him every morning, but there was never any answer. This was the

longest Eli had ever gone away for, save for one time three years ago when he had vanished for two months. But that time, he had told Bob how long he'd be gone for. This time was different.

The mailman again left a letter. Before he left, he looked at Bob and said, "Don't tell him where you are."

"I know." The first thing Eli had taught him was to stay hidden.

The mailman continued: "He was here, in this town. Looking for you."

"Why?"

Instead of answering the mailman tapped the letter. He ordered a beer and sat down. Bob filled his glass then opened the letter.

This one was short. There was nothing official-looking about it, and it included a stamped return envelope. It simply asked, "Where are you?" and was signed John.

Bob looked to the mailman. "What should I say?"

"I dunno. Give him a fax number," the mailman replied. "I hate coming out here all the time."

"Okay."

Bob neatly printed his fax number on a piece of paper and slipped it inside the return envelope. He handed it to the mailman, who gave him an irritated look and sealed it. He downed the rest of his beer, ordered another for the road, and left. Bob tried to charge him, but he replied "Charge it to Eli" and walked out.

The next morning Bob received a fax. "Who are you?"

Bob immediately replied "I am Bob," but he knew this was not the answer that John wanted. When people ask that question, they always mean something different, like *what are you* or *where did you come from?* And this was a question that Bob had asked himself, recently, and had been unable to come up with an answer. Eli was the only person he had known all his life, and Eli didn't like to talk about where he'd come from.

At the other end, John received Bob's messages and hand-wrote a response on the same piece of paper. He said, "I am John. I tried to find your restaurant, but the lot was empty. I need to talk to you."

"We can talk like this," Bob sent back. "I can't tell you how to get here. I don't know myself."

"How do *you* get there?"

"I live upstairs. I don't know what the streets are called." This was a lie, but Eli had told him that if he was ever unsure of what to say, to feign ignorance. In fact Bob knew every street in Cain Bauvenas — though he

hadn't known his "public" address — and where everything was. However, he never left the bar, so he couldn't be sure of any of the maps he had memorized. Often he considered exploring the entire town and drawing out his own map, but Eli didn't want him to go outside. But with Eli gone —

"Who are you?" John asked again.

"I don't know." Bob replied truthfully.

In Victoria, John rubbed his forehead. "What in the fuck," he muttered under his breath. He was dead tired with a massive headache, and his mind was spinning. *Such a simple-sounding question*, he thought. And he'd never met someone who couldn't answer. *Who the fuck is anyone anyway? What does that even mean?*

Standing up straight — and sending his chair flying in the process — John took a deep breath. He locked his computer screen and picked up his chair. The green RDY light on the fax machine blinked once, reminding him to reply to Bob. He blinked back, then walked away.

It was chilly that day, but not raining. John's coat was back in the office, but he wasn't cold enough to go get it. Besides, the cold kept him awake. It was easier to think that way. By this point he had given up on actually doing his job and genuinely wanted to reach Bob. The man was clearly trapped in some bizarre experiment, but sounded lost, not hurt. Just like John. *Just like anyone, really.*

The line was long at McDonalds, so John went to Taco Bell. He left twenty minutes later, feeling fuller than when he'd arrived, if a little sicker, and started to head back to the office. He took the long way around, through the quiet residential parts of town, but found his way back eventually. His boss was not impressed, but seeing the uncharacteristically depressed look in John's eyes, decided not to push it. He'd be better in a few days. Probably.

Back at his desk, John stared at his blank computer monitor. He turned it on and opened a few programs to make it seem like he was working, and went back to the fax machine. Bob's last message was still sitting in the out-feed, printed in that strange uniform handwriting. John took the paper, carefully lined out the words "I don't know" and composed his reply below:

I don't know who I am either. I'm not really sure anybody does, even us on the outside. But surely you have a name? A birthdate? Anything I can use to identify you. Your replies suggest to me that you're living a very sheltered life. If you're happy, I don't see why I should be the one to disturb that. And if not, well, neither am I. At least we'll have something in common.

But I still want to know you.

Bob read this reply three times. The handwriting was unclear and progressively more so as the letter went on, but he was pretty sure that he understood the words John was saying. What those words meant, though, were a different story. This letter was *personal*, and *personal* was something Bob knew nothing about. Normally he'd ask Eli for help with this, but Eli was gone. This one was up to him. *The ball's in your court*, Eli liked to say, and Bob could recall the first time he'd said it. Sometimes recall is a terribly useless thing.

So Bob responded as best as he could. As honestly as he could, too, because if Eli wasn't there to tell him what to say, he wasn't there to tell him what not to say, either. He said again that his name was Bob and that he had no birthdate. None that he could recall, anyway.

But sometimes recall is a terribly useless thing.

It was true that his life had been sheltered, but the truth was also that he had never seen a reason to go out. Inside the bar was everything that Bob knew, and everything he needed. Anything else, Eli was there to help with.

John didn't line out Bob's words this time, and sent back the same sheet of paper, with "Who is Eli?" scrawled untidily on the bottom. The words were illegible, but Bob knew the question would be coming. There wasn't a word for who Eli was to him — not a *personal* word, anyway, so Bob chose the closest approximation.

"Eli is my father."

Two hundred and fifty kilometers away, John grimly chuckled. Of course Eli was his father. And probably reading these letters, too. Although, if he *was* reading the letters, would he have let Bob reveal so much? Probably not, John decided. On a fresh piece of paper, he neatly wrote: "Where does Eli live? Can I talk to him?" and sent it to Bob.

"Eli isn't here anymore."

"Can I have his address?"

Bob sent John the address. There was no reply.

Cain Bauvenas is a dark place. The sun makes a point of coming up every morning, but even at high noon the trees are tall enough to block out the light. In the brightest part of the day, you might think it is depressingly dim. After that, most people don't leave their homes. Strange things come out of the woods at night, and argue as you might that the monsters are

natural and ghosts in your head, it won't help a lost man in his final hours. It can't help, really.

At five o'clock in the evening, John drives past the wooden welcome sign. His high beams are on but they don't help. The road winds so tightly that light can't get twenty meters before it hits the trees around another blind turn. John's knuckles are white and he shivers slightly. He considers turning up the heat, but he's falling asleep as it is. Part of him believes that he won't get out of this place alive. Part of him knows that's nonsense. Mostly, he doesn't care anymore.

Eli's address is a strange one. The house number is zero and the street isn't on any map John could find of the town. But somehow John knows that it's correct. If there's one thing in this world that Bob knows, it's Eli, and if there's anyone in the world who knows Bob, it's Eli. Given that, it really makes no difference whether the address is right or not: it's the best that John is going to get.

It occurs to him as he drives through the town that he might be heading for the real location of Bob's Booze. But as he passes more and more nameless streets, the chances of that seem slim. This search might take all night, he realizes. The strobe-light pattern of his headlights on the trees make it shockingly clear how long he is blinking for. Christ, he needs some rest.

An hour later John arrives at a dead end. He carefully turns around and backtracks, deciding to take every right turn he encounters. A long time ago, he had used this method in an intro-level computing class to solve a maze. He had been thinking of that class a lot since he arrived in this town, the cold and fatigue making him remember things he hadn't remembered in forever.

A street sign flashes by, interrupting his thoughts. Throwing the Chevy into reverse, he backs up to inspect it. TURING ST, it says, in dim but readable print. John looks down to the address Bob had given him. In eerily similar block letters, it says INGTUR ST. John laughs out loud. Is this the street he needs — a simple transposition away from the one he was looking for? Turning left, he takes it.

Turing Street is a terrible road. At John's speed, it takes him almost an hour to reach the first home. There is a long driveway, leading to darkness, but the mailbox at the end is visible. A single black 1 is printed on it. John keeps driving.

Another ten minutes go by, and John stops again. There is another driveway. The road keeps going — out to infinity, John thinks — but the

mailbox at the end of this driveway has a zero printed on it. After yawning deeply, John turns into the driveway. At the end there is a large house with a single light on upstairs. John pulls to the side of the drive and shuts his own lights off.

Reaching for the door latch in the dark, John accidentally locks the vehicle. It occurs to him to unlock it and try again, but the darkness gets the better of him. Instead, he lowers his seat, cuts the engine, and drifts into sleep.

The next morning is still dark. John blinks sleepily and checks his wrist-watch. Its green glow lights up the cab, and it takes him a few tries before he is able to read the digits without squinting. It is 8:30 AM, the watch says, and to confirm John opens his door and looks up at the sky. Sure enough, the black canvas of stars is a little brighter than it was when he fell asleep. Time still passes in this town.

At the house, that single light is still on. Probably a bathroom or something, John thinks, and realizes that he has to piss. He steps outside to do that, then heads for the house.

Eli's house is a lot smaller up close. John knocks on the door, which makes a small, solid sound. He tries again, harder, and waits. There is no answer. Annoyed, he leaves the door and tries knocking on the main floor windows. Still nothing. He moves out into yard and calls out, "Eli!" and receives no response. He waits for a good ten minutes, then mutters "fuck" under his breath and moves back toward the door.

As it turns out, the door is unlocked. John turns the knob easily and walks in. The entryway is dark, so he flicks a switch to his left. The foyer comes into view, revealing a small desk, an empty coat-rack, and not much else. In an adjoining room there are punch cards strewn across the floor, some spilling out into the main entrance-way. That room is dark, though, and John can't see anything else. "Hello?" he calls tentatively. "Eli?"

John waits a few minutes, then ventures further into the house. On the first floor he finds nothing of interest. There is very little furniture in this home, and what little there is consists mainly of shelves filled with old computer programs: a few boxes of punch cards, hundreds of diskettes and a couple of CD's. All of it looks terribly old, even without the thin layer of dust that blankets it all.

Leaving the door open in case he needs a quick escape — and to warn Eli of his presence, should he come home — John decides to venture upstairs. The stairs are dusty, too, near the edges, and soft sock-footprints are faintly

visible on the steps. Somebody lives here, definitely, though they might not have been home for a while. All the lights here are forty-watt incandescents, and the footprints are eerie in the dim orange light. John feels his heart rate increase.

At the top of the stairs is a hallway, with two closed doors on the left. To the right is a railing overlooking the entrance-way, and past that are a couple more doorways. In the middle of the floor (John almost misses it) is a white envelope. He picks it up and almost opens it, then stops. “Hello?” he calls again.

Still no answer.

John opens the envelope. Inside is a single page of lined paper, folded in thirds and filled with writing. The words are scribbled haphazardly in black ink, often crossing the lines and sometimes written over one another. It takes John a few seconds to decipher even the first line. “By Eli,” it says, then the date. 22 February 2010.

The rest of the letter is barely legible, and cryptic beyond that. *I need to go away*, it begins. *Away from the thoughts and fears Bob is haunting me with. Haunting him too, I expect, more than I could imagine. Ha. As though his imag* — the rest of the line is unreadable — *feeling fine. Doesn't know. Don't let him know, I know, or know I will. Or so I thought. Ha.*

There is a fear deep inside of each of us that defines our actions, doesn't it? It looks different for different people and most wouldn't even call it fear. But it is. And I suspect that deep down, it's the same for everybody. But Bob is different. When we met I thought, he CAN'T feel, but he CAN. He CAN and he knows it and he's asking questions I can't answer. Because fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck I've asked myself the same damn things and there is no answer theres no fucking answer

At first I thought it was best for everyone that Bob would be hidden. Best for the world and best for him, because neither of those two understands the other — or themselves, for that matter. But lately I think otherwise. They have much to learn from each other. I made a mistake. And I don't know how to fix it. If you're reading this, Bob, you're on the right track.

The text ends here, with a few blank lines on the bottom of the page. John sets it down, thinking that's all there is to it, but there's another side. He realizes this a moment later and picks the page back up to continue reading.

I have to go now, Bob. I'm not coming back. If you're reading this now, you've already figured that out, I suppose. And if this is someone else, I'm

sure Bob has talked to you. There's no other way you could have found this letter. I think.

This is followed by a solid paragraph of scribbles and half-words, and what can be made out is mostly profanity. Below this is the name ELI written in all caps at an awkward angle, spanning four lines and trailing off the bottom-right corner of the page. A small smile creeps across John's face, strangely, then disappears as he sets the letter back down. Because at the end of the hallway, peeking out the door of the furthest room, on the floor in the dark, is the hand of a dead man.

John runs.

Ten minutes down the road, at address One, Bob is sitting behind the counter of Bob's Booze. Nobody has come in today, but that's okay. Today has been spent planning to leave the bar. It's a strange idea, and tracing its consequences is time-consuming to say the least. Nobody before John has made him consider the idea, and nobody is here now to help him. Eli, after all, is gone.

Bob has a backpack prepared for the trip. It's filled with beer, which he likes for the calories, but he knows that even a full backpack of booze won't last him long. It doesn't affect him the way it does most people, though, which is a big advantage. Mostly, he doesn't have a clear idea of what lies beyond Cain Bauvenas. There is a street map in the bar, which tells him how to get down to Squamish, but that's a long way away to reach a dot on a map.

There isn't a whole lot of money in the bar. Enough that if he went to the general store he could afford enough to feed himself for the trip. But it's still a long way, and what he desperately needs is a car. And that is a problem Bob doesn't know how to solve. Another one is *why*.

Bob has tried faxing John with these questions too, but there is no answer. It seems as though John is gone too, but Bob is not one to jump to conclusions.

As John pulls into the small parking lot, the first thing he notices is the odd spacing of the words "Bob's Booze" lit up on top of the building. There are probably other words in there, but Cain Bauvenas is a dark place, and John can't see them. It's an academic concern, anyway. He doesn't give a shit what the restaurant is called, or where it is, or if it's a bar or if it has a license. There is only one question on his mind.

Given the empty parking lot, John is not surprised to find the bar empty,

save for the bartender. He is a strange fellow. There is a cloth bag covering his face and he moves behind the counter in eerily smooth motions. He pauses for a moment, then asks his question: "Robert?"

Bob smiles at the mistake. "Bob is short for robot."

John sets Eli's letter on a table, nods to the robot, and leaves.