

Dous

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Content warning: Contains brief mention of cancer, leading to the death of a minor character.

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Dous

ON A RANDOM DAY in February, after what Sam is quick to describe as an impassioned *discussion* about the inadequacy of BISAC codes in the used book retail environment, he gets sent across the street to bring back lattes as penance. The café is called Dous. He tentatively identifies the word as Haitian Creole, possibly related to the French *doux*, sweet. The aesthetic is eclectic without being kitschy, the menu is largely classically Parisian Viennoiserie—with an Italian selection of coffee drinks, although who doesn't serve a macchiato at this point? He hears a slightly muffled argument in a Slavic-sounding language going on in the back room, but no one out in the main room seems distressed about it.

There are a few people sitting around—students, mostly, lost in their laptops or books. The space is large and full of light in the exact way he wishes the bookstore was. There are green plants in the windows and a small stage at one end, currently empty. After a while, a tall Black man in an apron and glasses comes out and runs

an eye over the assembly. "Can I help you?" he asks when he realizes that Sam is waiting.

"Yeah," Sam says, and places his order, including the excruciatingly detailed instructions Ellen had given him as a punishment for making her care about sub-arrangements. The man hums as he punches everything into the computer. "It'll be a few minutes on the drinks," he says. "But I've got some fresh croissants, just out of the oven. You want to try one?"

The man's accent is like distant honey, and his voice is warm. Sam likes him immediately. "Sure," he says.

Sam had worked through lunch, and the croissant is the greatest thing he's ever tasted. The coffee, when delivered, is delicious. The argument has started to calm down.

"This is an amazing place," Sam says as he collects the other two drinks.

The man digs under the counter for a cardboard thing to carry all the cups in. "Thank you for stopping by. I hope the, ah—" he gestures toward the back room, where something has flared to life again "—has not put you off."

"No. No, not at all." He turns to look at the doors. "I run the new bookshop over there, so I'm sure I'll be back soon." Tonight? Is that too soon? He's already tired, can't quite stomach the thought of cooking.

"Welcome," the man says. "I'm Obe."

"Sam."

They manage to shake despite all the items Sam is holding.

“So you aren’t going to be one of those bookstores with a café inside?” Obe sounds like he’s teasing, but Sam can hear the anxiety underlying his words.

“No. Not at all. We’re, you know. Used and rare. Battle-scarred and niche. Not a Barnes and Noble.” He’s vaguely aware that he’s babbling. Ellen has told him he should try to sound more confident when he tells people about the shop, but he’s not good at that yet.

Despite this, Obe grins genuinely. “I know someone who’s going to be very excited about that,” he says, his eyes darting to the back again.

“Maybe we can work out some kind of trade.” He’s supposed to *sell* the books, but if he can get fresh croissants every day. . . What can the profit margin on a book be, anyway?

When Sam comes in the next day around two, having worked through lunch again to try to ensure everything will be ready before Harry leaves for Leipzig in two days, there’s someone else behind the counter. A few inches shorter than Sam, fair skinned, dark hair, and then he looks up and Sam nearly swallows his own tongue because the guy is a dead ringer for James Dean and he does not know how to deal with that information. Like in theory this is just a guy who works at a café. That he’s also the most beautiful man Sam’s ever seen in person is . . .

He doesn’t even know how to finish that sentence. The guy has bright blue eyes. Sam feels pinned by them. He

had come in to order a croissant, but now that seems asinine. The guy is obviously waiting for him to say something.

He says, “What are you reading?” And then reads the title off the open page and raises an eyebrow: *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Foucault, in the original French. Not the only book he has on hand, though—on the back counter Sam spots the Foucault in English, and a copy of Bulgakov’s masterpiece, *The Master and Margarita*, also in English. And something else in Russian or something similar; Sam doesn’t read Cyrillic for other than cataloging purposes.

The guy says, “There’s a reading group that meets here at three. I’m just catching up on today’s discussion topic.”

“Are you a student?” He looks to be Sam’s age, but it gets hard to tell. And it’s Madison—lots of people go back to school.

The man says, “No.”

“A—” He eyes the man, who is wearing a white T-shirt with a white apron over it. (Ignores the way the shirt stretches over the man’s chest and shoulders, which—the guy is fucking *yoked* for working in a café.) “Do you lead the group?”

“No. I like to make fun of their conclusions.” He shoves a piece of receipt tape into the book and shuts it. “Some of the kids call me Socrates, though. So I feel like I have to be up on whatever they’re working on.”

Sam snorts. “Not Diogenes? And they call themselves philosophy students.”

The man starts to laugh, and Sam falls in love with it. The way the handsome, disaffected lines in his face dissolve into helpless mirth is the greatest thing Sam has seen in a long time.

“I’m Sam,” he says after a moment. “I run the new bookshop.” He points, vaguely.

The man nods. “Ulysses.”

There are other people coming through the door of the café now, and although Ulysses aims a glare at them Sam finds he now has to make a decision, either step out of line, tacitly admitting that he wants to keep flirting with Ulysses, or ask for something and drag money into their interaction. Which. Super not cool. He panics and says, “Are there any croissants?” in a hopeful sort of way.

“I don’t think so,” Ulysses says, glancing at the case, which is actually looking a little scant. “You want a sandwich or something?”

Sam, helpfully, cannot deal with the level of choice represented by the sandwich menu and only orders his coffee. But when he’s at the end of the counter feeling sheepish and hungry, Ulysses sets a brownie wrapped in plastic next to his paper cup. He turns away nonchalantly, like he doesn’t want Sam to mention it, so Sam just says, “Thanks” when he picks it all up.

Ulysses is busy with the espresso machine, and for a moment Sam doesn’t think he’s heard, but then he glances over and winks.

Sam walks into the door on his way out.

When Sam goes back, because of course he goes back, Ulysses remembers his order. And that's it, now he *has* to go there every day for the rest of his life, or at least for the next five years until he runs through his inheritance and has to close the bookshop and become homeless or something.

He's, uh, anyway not thinking about that. It'll be fine. If he fritters it all away one cappuccino at a time at Dous, that will be money well-spent.

A few days later, he goes in early, because drinking coffee before noon is a really normal thing to do, and definitely not because he's hoping to run into a certain barista. But Ulysses isn't there; instead, there's a woman behind the counter. She's got a long braid and looks a little bit cranky about something. Sam thinks she must be related to Ulysses. It's in the nose and chin, maybe? He smiles and asks while she rings him up, definitely not at all awkward.

"He's my younger brother." She rolls her eyes; apparently, this is the source of some antagonism, and he thinks back to the argument he overheard the first day and understands, somewhat. "My husband is the chef," she adds. "Family business."

"Obel!" Sam says. "I met him a couple days ago."

She nods. "Usually I handle management. Ulysses works the counter."

Sam wonders what management entails, exactly—maybe catering on the side? Ordering ingredients and coffee? Do they roast their own beans, too? But he doesn't ask, just collects his drink and wishes her a good day.

A few hours later, Ulysses comes over to the bookstore. Harry is working out pricing on some stuff, Herbie Hancock loud on the speakers, so Sam doesn't hear the bell jangle and doesn't hear the footsteps on the stairs up to the second floor, which is really a wide balcony that runs around all four sides of the space. Sam is sitting on the floor in the medieval history section, thinking about BISAC categories again (terrible, inadequate) and trying to decide if he was wrong to commit to sub-arrangement by author or if they should be collocating things by topic, and how much is Ellen going to kill him if he goes back and says that to her now.

"Hey," Ulysses says, and Sam looks up and feels his heart skip, that old cliché, except he's actually about to clutch his chest. Ulysses is usually wearing an apron, everything modestly covered up. Today he's got jeans and a David Bowie shirt that has been cut off at the bottom so it sits just above the line of his hips, revealing a tantalizing line of skin in the gap between pants and shirt hem, a flash of hip bones when he moves and a super butch leather jacket that's covered with buckles and zippers.

Sam says, "Hey," and somehow doesn't die. "What's up?"

It had all happened in sort of a rush. Sam quit his job and came back to Madison when his father got sick. Not that Howard couldn't afford a nurse. Not that Howard needed him there. But he felt like he should. . . . Well, he felt like he should. That was all. And that was eight months of his life, November 2008 to June 2009. Long enough to fall in with Ellen and Harry, whose lives didn't involve chemo schedules, anti-nausea drugs, and picking up opiate refills, and trying to explain the difference between hospice and palliative care to his step-mother. Harry and Ellen were awesome, grad students in history and math respectively, friendly and smart and warm, always willing to drag Sam out of his fits of melancholy. Sam got a job at one of the UW libraries. They would be able to hang out every day. It would be great. And then in July the job evaporated because of budget cuts and his father died.

It wasn't a great summer, all in all. And now it's February and he co-owns a used bookshop with a guy who only really cares about the world between the years 500–1500 CE and a woman who's doing a PhD in statistics for fun.

It feels entirely surreal to watch the guy from the café crouch down, saying, "You didn't come in. I brought you a sandwich." Like Sam lives in a world where that makes sense.

"I, uh, mistimed my visit," Sam says. "Your sister was working."

Is it his imagination, or does Ulysses look a little irritated at that? But he nods. “I had a thing this morning.”

Sam is still holding a translation of *The Green Knight*, which is its own disaster. Does he shelve it under the translator or anonymous? He says, “A thing?”

“An interview.” Ulysses looks like he can’t decide if he’s going to sit or leave, so Sam waves at the floor in wordless invitation. He sinks down the rest of the way gratefully, wrapping his arms around his knees. He’s still holding the sandwich, wrapped in white paper.

“How did it go?”

Ulysses shrugs. “It was fine. I don’t know.” He tosses the sandwich to Sam, surprising him, but he doesn’t fumble the catch. “Do you know anything about the history of this building?”

Sam looks around, like the walls are going to tell him a story. “Built in 1884, I guess. It’s been two shoe stores, three bookshops, and a juice bar.” He makes a face. “Not exactly auspicious.”

“Why?”

“Well, they all went out of business.”

Ulysses hums. “Ever hear about it being haunted?”

Sam valiantly does not say there is no such thing as ghosts. He does not say that is a crazy thing to ask about. No one has brought up ghosts. Isn’t that a required disclosure on the paperwork? Instead Sam says, “If you ever feel like doing a stake out, I live upstairs.”

In case that was actually an effective pickup line of some sort, Sam cleans his apartment. But it's not a pickup line. Ulysses comes over on a Saturday night and draws a large chalk circle on the scarred wooden floor, and then Sam sits nearly knee to knee with him, staring at a candle and wondering if he is doing the meditation incorrectly while Ulysses slides into some kind of trance.

Eventually, Ulysses shakes his head and opens his eyes. There's a presence in the apartment, but he can't pin anything down about it. So they open a bottle of wine and sit at opposite ends of Sam's crummy sofa and drink. Sam doesn't have a TV, so they can't pretend to watch a basketball game. Instead, this is when Sam tells Ulysses how he came to own the shop, and more—about his siblings who are married and too busy to help, his half-brother who goes to school out of town, his step-mother who hates him. His father, who didn't hate him but always seemed kind of disappointed that he'd turned out like—

“Like what?” Ulysses asks when Sam trails off.

Sam gestures to himself wordlessly. “Whatever this is.” He sighs. Two honors degrees from Ivy League schools and he's working in a used bookshop. The old man would lose his mind.

“I think it's pretty nice, actually,” Ulysses says. “Whatever this is.” He sniffs into his wine glass, and Sam doesn't have the heart to correct him. Just like he doesn't have the heart to explain that there are no ghosts in the apartment but the ones Sam brought there himself.

Harry is in Leipzig at the antiquarian book fair and Ellen is at her big-girl job, which means Sam's been knocking around in the shop for TWO DAYS (or, okay, almost thirty-six hours) alone. It is the beginning of March and the weather is sunny for the first time in about two and a half months. So before he can think too hard about anything, he changes the "open" sign to one that says "don't panic," locks the door, and goes across the street to the café.

He walks into the reading group meeting. He knows immediately because Ulysses is sitting on the counter and scowling at a bunch of twenty-year-olds. They're all male save two, all white save one. Clearly philosophy students. When Ulysses sees Sam, he brightens immediately, and gets up, starts knocking the old grounds out of the espresso machine.

"What time do you get off?" Sam asks, and one of the twenty-year-olds laughs. Sam rolls his eyes. "I mean, when do you get done with work?"

Ulysses checks his watch. "Five minutes. Why?"

"Wanna go for a walk?"

"Yeah." He glances at the students. "Can you explain to them why their refutation of Spivak, which is that the subaltern can speak because of Twitter, is wrong?"

"Not just Twitter," one of the kids says. "Blogs."

Another one says, "Not wrong, just unnecessary."

Sam feels his hopes in the youth of America gutter like a candle in a windstorm. "Look at who isn't on your syllabus."

One of the guys says, "What?"

Sam steps forward and picks one up off the table, leafing through it rapidly. "How many women philosophers are on here? How many from anywhere that isn't Europe or the UK?" He drops the paper back on the table. "Do you think that in all of China, all of Africa, there's no one writing about post-colonialism? And those would be the most privileged people in their society. If they don't have a platform, how can you assert that the poorest in a society would have one?" He turns back toward the counter while they chew this over.

Ulysses is holding out his cappuccino. "Marry me."

Sam smiles, and their audience whoops. "Walk?"

Ulysses takes off his apron, folds it neatly, and shoves it under the counter. Then he goes over to one of the doors—not the one to the kitchen—and leans through, speaking rapid-fire Russian to the person within. When he steps back, Celeste follows him out. Sam sees her glance at him, then back at Ulysses, one eyebrow twitching. She says something quiet in Russian and he grins and comes around the end of the counter without looking back. His coat is on the coat rack at the back of the shop. "Be good while I'm away," he tells the study group, who are still arguing. To Sam, he says, "Let's go."

They walk for a while before Ulysses's mood breaks open, making it all the way down State Street, across the

Mall and down onto the Lakeshore Path. Ulysses walks fast, hands thrust in his pockets, face a mess that Sam doesn't try to read.

Sam says, "You don't have to interact with them like that if it upsets you."

"That's not it." They go a little farther, and Ulysses pauses, staring out at the geese that are exploring a spot of melting ice. "I used to be a philosophy prof—well, I was a lecturer." There's a story here. A brilliant student, a PhD. No tenure-track job leads, but he'd gotten a position as an instructor at a community college and he was making ends meet. Barely. Then he came off his motorcycle and broke his leg. Surgery. Hospitalized. Lost the job, lost the insurance, lost everything. Moved home to regroup. No one cares how brilliant you are if you can't show up for class.

"At least they didn't fire me until I got out of the hospital," he says, and sounds genuinely grateful.

"That's messed up," Sam says, unhelpfully.

"Yeah, well." Ulysses heaves a sigh and starts walking again. "My interview last week was about adjuncting at Edgewood. Celeste disapproves. It would be even lower level than my last job, no insurance, three thousand bucks per class for a whole semester. But I'd get to keep a hand in."

"That's rank exploitation!" Sam grabs his elbow without thinking.

"That's what Celeste said." Ulysses looks at the spot where Sam's hand wraps around his forearm, which feels

wiry and muscular even through his coat. “But I don’t want to be a barista all my life.”

“You couldn’t just be one of those weirdos who writes philosophy from outside the academy? Like Pirsig?”

Ulysses laughs. “I don’t know. Nobody is like Pirsig.” But he sounds thoughtful.

Sam learns about Ulysses in dribs and drabs, because although they’re friends now, Ulysses still likes to keep his cards close to his chest. Maybe he’s superstitious. Lots of writers are. But eventually, he tells Sam about: his book manuscript (out on submission to a prestigious university press), a couple of journal articles he’s been picking at, the things he’s reading. But at the same time, this all takes up a tremendous amount of Ulysses’s brain space. Apparently when he’s at the café, he’s often working on this complex thing about post-structuralism and the philosophy of translation. He writes it longhand on a legal pad that he flips over when people come in, which is funny; no chance that even Sam could read his scribbles upside down. But it’s interesting to hear about, one morsel at a time.

Instead, the rest of the time, they talk about magic. It’s something he learned from his grandmother—who raised him and his siblings, Sam eventually gathers, and with whom he lives. Some of it is Russian stuff—the oven being the place of power in a home, the red corner. Some of it is more folk magic—the thing with the chalk circle, a small bag of salt and dried herbs he drops in a little

copper dish next to the register, the glass globes Sam eventually comes to understand are witch balls that hang in the windows of the café, shiny and pretty and a little bit weird.

Is it weirder than believing in quantum physics, though? Sam's not sure. There are plenty of things he's aware of but doesn't understand, although he assumes somewhere out there *someone* understands muons and leptons and whatnot. Probably someone understands magic, too. Sam understands the Library of Congress Classification System and how databases function and, barely, eventually, how to create an API that can pull info about books from WorldCat for the store's personal use so he doesn't have to catalog things that will be there for a week.

Which is all to say that when Ulysses says one morning, "Hey, I've been thinking about your ghost problems. Mind if I come by this weekend?" Sam nods. Partly because he has two friends in town who are also his business partners, and they're going to get pretty sick of his shit if he doesn't pace himself, and partly because . . . why not magic? Why not ghosts? If that's what Ulysses does with his off time, Sam isn't going to judge. If that's symbolic of how far gone on him Sam is (which is pretty far, to be honest; it's a dragon eating him from within at this point), so be it.

So: séance, take two. Sam goes by Riley's and picks up another bottle of wine, and tries to decide if he's going to

try cooking or if he should order a curry or something. Or pizza. That's what normal guys do, right? Ulysses has mentioned one ex, who sounded like she was female, but he did propose to Sam that one time, and he flirts a lot, and once or twice Sam has definitely observed him in T-shirts that are far shorter and tighter than any straight guy would wear, and. Maybe Sam should have said something earlier, but he didn't.

He makes spring rolls with tofu and peanut sauce in the end, realizing dully at the last moment that someone with actual muscles and a workout routine might want something more substantial. But Ulysses is somehow thrilled that Sam tried, or at least he's polite about it, and the wine is good. And then he drags out this thing.

It looks like a Ouija board planchette, except there's no board, and it has a hole drilled through it that can accept a pencil. And okay. "I read *The Haunting of Hill House*," Sam announces, staring at it, and Ulysses gives him this kind of perplexed look out of the corner of his eye.

"It's not automatic writing," he tells Sam, putting down a blank piece of paper and centering the planchette.

"Definitionally—"

"No. No, okay. Automatic writing is when a medium enters a trance and writes something that is ostensibly dictated by a spirit." Sam appreciates his use of *ostensibly*, anyway. It makes it seem like this isn't entirely insane. But then he says, "We're going to channel

the spirits through you,” and they’ve gone back into the red again somehow.

Sam downs his wine and then stands in front of the table, looking dully at the paper and the planchette and another fucking candle while Ulysses just. He. Leans against Sam’s back, one arm around his waist, and kinda starts talking in a low voice that—if it was meant to do something like calm Sam or put him in a trance, mission fucking failed. Sam stares at the candle, terrified about all the ways he is messing this up, and the worst part is that he can maybe convince himself that something is going on, some sort of . . . power . . . thing? Like static electricity or like . . . a sneeze that hasn’t happened yet. It’s hot figuratively and literally, sweat beading on the back of his neck, and then at some point he nudges the planchette and it moves.

When they turn the light back on, there’s one word on the page: Dionysus.

Ulysses is fascinated and confused, and Sam drinks another entire glass of wine before he can interrupt the theorizing to say “No, it’s me. That’s my first name.”

At least this time when they pass out, having drunk the bottle of wine that Sam got and also made a reasonable stab at making daiquiris with the ingredients in Sam’s apartment until something like 3am, they’re lying in the bed rather than the sofa. Fully clothed, and (as Sam discovers when he wakes freezing a few hours later) on top of the covers. But it’s something.

All in all, it's a little bit of a surprise when the store has its grand opening and things actually somehow start to work. People come in and buy books. He is as shocked as anyone that this is happening, but after he marvels about it to Ulysses four mornings in a row, the guy finally says, "What did you think was going to happen? People like books." Which, yes, but also Sam was pretty convinced he was going to wind up broke and alone, probably dying of an overdose in an alleyway somewhere. There is a recession on, after all. That's what happens. The response earns him a very concerned look from Ulysses, but all he says is, "There's still time. You're young yet." Which is absurd and hilarious and Sam laughs until he cries and thinks about kissing Ulysses until he can't breathe.

They hang out a lot. There are long walks, a handful of lunches. One Sunday, Ulysses drags him along to the Duck Soup Cinema thing they do at the Overture Center and he sits through ninety minutes of Buster Keaton flicks, laughing as Keaton escapes trains and jumps from building to building, each time barely making it, but coming up alive and untroubled. A different day, they fetch up at the Terrace where a band is tuning up—some Brazilian guitarist who does beautiful, gentle covers of David Bowie songs in Portuguese.

The thing is. They have fun, is the thing. They're a decent match intellectually—Sam has never wanted to get laid badly enough to read *Being and Nothingness* before, but here they are. When he asks Ulysses a

question about the text, Ulysses kind of explodes with excitement, and winds up taking a break to sit in a sunny corner of the café and talk. And when the conversation devolves into an explication of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Sam can barely look away from him. His passion is entirely genuine, almost flamboyant, and Sam is entranced. He always enjoyed philosophy, like he took a bunch of classes as an undergrad, but this is something else. Whoever declined to give Ulysses a tenure-track job lost out on something amazing. Even twenty years ago, the world would have beaten a path to his door.

One morning, Sam's getting back from his run later than usual and he meets Ulysses on the street. Ulysses looks barely awake; he's not a morning person, apparently, or he waits to drink any coffee until he's opened the café, and it's *adorable* if Sam is being honest. This morning he's wearing shorts and a long-sleeved shirt, and Ulysses's gaze is *heated*. It's nice.

"I've been thinking about your problem," he announces.

Sam scratches his head. "Which one?" Although, for the first time in a really long time, he's feeling pretty good. Like before, he was so far down that he couldn't see the surface of his depression looking up, and now he's walking around and talking and remembering to eat almost every meal. The shop is a stressor, but he's learning to live with it. He's making enough to live on and to pay Harry and Ellen, barely. It's stopped hemorrhaging money, anyway. He still has nightmares

sometimes, remembering his father's last days, but he's beginning to think that will eventually retreat far enough into the past that it will be a *sad thing that happened*. His biggest problem is probably that he's become so close with Ulysses and neither of them has made a move, and now he doesn't know if they're just going to be really good friends or something more, and he's got a crush the size of Montana on the man, and he doesn't know what to do about it.

But Ulysses says, "The Dionysus thing."

Sam blinks. Is that a thing? "All right," he says, warily.

"I'm concerned that there's something weird going on." Ulysses rubs the back of his neck, his eyes on the strip of skin directly above Sam's knees. "A malcontented spirit or something. I can—sense it."

And there it is again—Ulysses is so smart, like frighteningly so, so what is *this*? It defies logic. But then, just before Sam shakes his head, he gets a sense of Ulysses standing there, looking disappointed, and he can't. "A spirit?" he says instead.

"Yeah. I think we should try to take care of it." Ulysses finally meets his eyes. "I wouldn't want it to . . . I don't know. Possess you or something."

"Possess me," Sam repeats. He wants to say that he wants *Ulysses* to possess him. He wants to say, you don't need an excuse to come sleep in my bed again. Instead, he says, "If you want to come over sometime, I'll make lasagna or something."

DOUS

Ulysses grins. It's still chilly out, but the memory of that look keeps him warm for a while.

In the meantime, Ellen and Celeste have joined forces; the bookshop is sponsoring a series of readings by local poets at Dous, and carrying a small section of their books and chapbooks. Ellen, it turns out, likes poetry. Who knew?

It's latish on a Thursday night toward the end of March when Ulysses helps him pack up the few remaining books and the cash box and carry them back across the street to the shop, and then up the weird back staircase to his apartment. He sticks the lasagna in the oven and then dithers around, trying to decide if he should open a bottle of wine. Ulysses saves him by sitting down on the sofa and saying, "Tell me about Dionysus."

"What?"

Ulysses gestures at the sofa next to him. "Where'd the name come from?"

"My great grandfather, Dionysus Constantinou." Sam sits down next to him, far enough away but also not that far. "He immigrated here. His daughter, Alexandria Sophia Constantinou, married Julius Sterling, my grandfather. Then they had my father, Howard." He shrugs. Recited in a group, it feels like the names are kind of a downward spiral into something mediocre and American.

"So who was Sam?"

Sam blinks, surprised. "No one. I mean, Sam is me."

Ulysses thinks about this for a while; Sam gathers himself.

“Sam was my—” He sighs. “My mother liked it. She died when I was born. She and my father hadn’t agreed on a name yet, and then it wasn’t a joint decision anymore. He took his preference and hers and put them down on the birth certificate.” Sam’s mouth turns up at one edge. “He never called me Sam, but I think he was pleased that I liked it. Deep down.”

Ulysses nods, clearly not quite understanding, but interested. Sam presses on. “So this exorcism thing . . . I don’t know.” Sam takes a deep breath. “I don’t know if I—everything here is me, you know? It’s just.” He can’t explain how the planchette wrote his name, that was incredible and unexpected. He’s willing to believe that somehow his psychic mess is somehow spilling out into the area around them. “Whatever is wrong isn’t going to be fixed by, you know, *exorcizamos te, omnis immunde spiritus*.”

Ulysses nods again, eyebrows drawing together. He’s come over with nothing except his leather jacket, none of the sorts of things Sam would imagine being used in an exorcism. Sam doesn’t really think about it all that hard. But when the lasagna still has about five minutes to go, Ulysses abruptly gets up and says he has to leave.

“What?” Sam babbles, and, “But dinner.”

“I’m sorry,” Ulysses says, touching his shoulder, and then he really quickly leans in and kisses Sam’s cheek. Sam’s stunned into silence, obviously, and that’s why he

doesn't object when Ulysses lets himself out.

But he's angry. All that night and the next day Sam is having arguments in his head. Sometimes he fights with Ulysses about whether he should go. Sometimes he's fighting with himself about whether he should have been more straightforward, or if he would just have gotten his heart broken sooner, or what.

It's four full days before he goes back to the café. When he does, he walks in during a rush and stands at the back of the line. Celeste is taking orders while Ulysses works the espresso machine. He's got his head down, pulling shots in some kind of zen trance. When he turns and sees Sam in line, he drops one of the milk pitchers on the floor.

It's loud and messy and honestly kind of amazing as moments go, the way the contents fountain up across his apron and the cabinets and everything. Celeste busts out a lot of Russian that could have been . . . well, maybe it's reassuring and kind, and it only *sounds* like she's reading him the riot act, but Sam is willing to bet otherwise. But the best part, maybe, is that Sam suddenly understands something about why Ulysses left the other day.

When he gets up to the counter finally, Celeste has drifted away to talk to a regular, and Sam is the end of the line, so they have a moment to themselves. Sam props his elbows on the counter and says, "How's it going?"

Ulysses says, "Not bad," in a guarded way that in the Midwest means *I'm severely depressed*. "Got some

work done on an article. I think I'm going to fix up the bibliography and submit it."

"Wow," Sam says, and means it. "Can I read it?"

Ulysses raises an eyebrow. "You—sure, okay."

There's a little space in between them, and Sam leans closer and says, quietly, "Is lasagna not your thing, or . . . ?"

"That's not . . . it smelled delicious. I just had to." Ulysses looks over Sam's shoulder in a panic, like he's hoping a customer will materialize. "You didn't need me."

Sam shrugs. "I mean. Not for an exorcism."

Ulysses looks really blatantly surprised, which is *hilarious*, except that maybe it's not.

The thing is. The thing is that Ulysses and Sam do not share Sam's view of Ulysses, which is that he is an amazing genius who is inevitably going to win the Nobel prize for philosophy or something. Sam thinks that maybe Ulysses actually thinks Ulysses is a bit of a fuck up who is now living a life of ignominy on his sister's sufferance. And maybe Ulysses really wanted to get something right, do something useful for once.

Sam desperately still wants to kiss him, right here, but not in front of Celeste and the entire world.

And when he thinks about it that way, the answer is really clear. "Want to try again?"

"The—lasagna?"

"The exorcism."

Dionysus Constantinou had come to the United States

as almost a child, starting at Harvard at age 17 in the days when Greek people decidedly did not go to Harvard. He graduated in time to go off to the First World War as a medic, then came home and went to medical school, became a doctor back in the days when that still meant something. He sent all five of his children (well, four; Alexandria went to Radcliffe, obviously) to Harvard as either some sort of display of pride in an alma mater that probably wanted his donations but not his swarthy face hanging around, or possibly as an extended fuck you to the upper-class white supremacists who'd cut him while he was there. Sam hasn't ruled that out.

Alexandria had been beautiful and clever and had married Julius Sterling, who had graduated from (of course) Harvard and gone off to World War Two. He came home in 1944 and founded a shipping firm. Then they'd had Howard, the single most obedient fucking child in history, on whom the sixties had been *totally wasted* as far as Sam is concerned. Or maybe not; not everything Howard had said could be taken as gospel. But what happened was that he got drafted, went to Vietnam where he was a . . . tail gunner in a helicopter? Sam is a little shaky on the details. Picked up a pretty bad smoking habit, but then he came back and took up the reins of the shipping firm, married a woman named Diana, and had three kids with her, which had been great until she died of a hemorrhage and he was left with three kids. But he'd rallied, and remarried, and . . . had another kid. Fine. Sam didn't—still doesn't—begrudge

his half-brother anything. But as the third of four kids, he feels like he's spent most of his life trying to get someone to see him.

He tried drugs and sex as a teenager, then graduated at sixteen and went off to Harvard, partly because he was smart enough they figured he wouldn't totally embarrass himself, and partly because legacy admissions, and partly because Howard had a lot of money. And he worked *so hard* while he was there, taking as many classes as he could and sometimes sitting in on other classes or doing the reading for things his friends were taking, because he had a vague feeling that was his job, that was what would make Howard happy with him, and so that was what he was going to do. But it didn't work that way, of course. And even if he'd wanted to go fight—whoever they were fighting post-9/11, he's not totally sure who or why anymore—there's don't ask, don't tell. So. He burned out hard and went to grad school to be a librarian, because spending the rest of his life wearing a cardigan and drinking tea at a reference desk sounded nice.

(Being a librarian is definitely not like that, but he finds he really enjoys it anyway. It has a tidy orderliness and a pleasing sense of helpfulness.)

And then Howard got sick, and it was somehow Sam's job. He doesn't want to say this part out loud to Ulysses—the part about what it's like, watching someone waste away because they can't stomach food; helping your former Marine sergeant father off the sofa and realizing you probably outweigh him now; the way that

people breathe when they've had a lot of morphine. The sneaking suspicion he's been left with that being alive is just a way of keeping meat fresh until it's time to be dead and give your molecules back, and he doesn't know why it happens. What is even the reason to *be* alive, he's not sure. So there's a possibility that when Ulysses says that he thinks Sam is haunted by something, well. He's probably not wrong about that.

Sam doesn't have time to cook. It's a Monday and Ulysses appears at the door at six o'clock, carrying a duffle bag full of stuff. Sam is still not sure if this is insanity or not. But maybe he's not the only one who's being exorcized?

He's still thinking about that when Ulysses thrusts an envelope into his hands. It's thick, full of heavy, good paper, and when Sam pulls it out, the cover letter explains that it's a publishing contract. From Oxford University Press!

"Congratulations!" Sam says when he's read it. "When did you—I mean—they didn't email?"

Ulysses shrugged. "I kind of thought they must have made a mistake," he says, rubbing the back of his neck. "But they sent a contract. I'm going to have a lawyer look it over."

"You deserve it," Sam says softly, and watches Ulysses look away.

After that, the ritual is weird, but he didn't expect it to be otherwise. Ulysses draws another circle on the floor in chalk and Sam sits in it. They turn off the lights and light

some candles. It would be a little romantic, except Sam has taken his shirt off and the apartment is still pretty chilly. Ulysses anoints his shoulders with sweet-smelling oil, chants quietly and sprinkles some herbs on his head. Meanwhile Sam tries not to panic about how much he is definitely getting all of this wrong.

Something crackles over his skin, fast and cool like liquor burning off a flambé, and he feels a little different. Lighter. Not quite made new, but maybe something has been stitched up now that needed it.

When Sam opens his eyes, he's lying on the floor. Still shirtless, not quite sure how he got there. Ulysses is kneeling over him, asking him how he feels, does anything hurt, is he okay.

"I'm fine," Sam says, putting a hand on Ulysses's bicep. And then he falls silent, struck by the way that Ulysses is . . . he's his own subject, Sartre would say, infinitely unknowable, and yet Sam desperately wants to try.

"Are you sure?" Ulysses asks, voice clearly doubtful.

Sam grins and runs his hand up to rest on the back of Ulysses's neck. "I was just—experiencing double reciprocal awareness." The Sartrean basis of desire, the moment at which both subjects perceive the Other, because he *did* do the reading, after all.

"You—" The range of emotions that trek across Ulysses's face are worth it, and then Sam gently tugs him down and actually, finally kisses him.

It isn't the fifties anymore. It's easy to tumble into bed with someone in this, our modern time. At least, Sam

has never found it especially difficult to find someone who liked his face well enough to give the rest of him a try. Easy to buy condoms after that first, horrifically embarrassing time, to have them on hand. It's much harder to make it mean something. But Ulysses kisses him back like that, like Sam is special and this is something important, something almost holy, and Sam loves him for it. Drags him into his bedroom like he probably meant to that first night, when they had too much wine and passed out on the sofa with their legs tangled together. But this time they're both sober, and this feeling between them is something raw and exciting and new.

Sam plucks at the hem of Ulysses's T-shirt, even though he doesn't want to leave off kissing him long enough for him to take it off. Ulysses eventually laughs when he leans back to strip it off, apparently appreciating Sam's little whine at the loss of contact, and Sam unbuckles Ulysses's belt one handed, letting the fingers of his other hand trace the line of Ulysses's hard-on until he rolls his hips forward into the touch, his forehead resting on Sam's shoulder now. They scramble out of their jeans and underwear together, and then Sam pitches backwards onto the bed or is pressed that way, and winds up with Ulysses on top of him, straddling his hips.

Ulysses's body is amazing, hard planes of muscle crested by little scars, here and there, with a big surgical one across one thigh that Sam traces, first with his

fingers, later with his tongue. Ulysses twitches and laughs, but it feels important to touch the spot where he was broken and put back together. Might as well, when none of their other places can be reached quite so easily. If Ulysses senses the direction of his thoughts, he doesn't say anything, just kisses the corner of Sam's jaw and leaves his tooth marks on Sam's neck, and for a while they can be there, together. They explore the ways their bodies fit together with little murmured questions and gasps the only thing filling the space between them, and Sam enjoys it and does not think that he must be getting something wrong.

Afterward, Ulysses sprawls over him, head on Sam's shoulder, one of his hands tucked beneath Sam's back, a leg pinning his hips. Sam is full of questions and worries, like where is this going, what *is* this, but he finds after a few moments that he can maybe breathe through them. He trusts Ulysses in this, with his heart as well as his body and . . . spirit. Soul. Something. Such as it is. Sam doesn't realize that he's grinning until Ulysses lifts his head and inspects his face.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." He drags his fingers up Ulysses's side until he can cup his shoulder blade. "I was just thinking that life is somehow much more complex than I thought, and yet it really isn't."

Ulysses shakes his head a little. "Run that by me again?"

“Life,” he says. “Like . . . people are alive because we’re made of meat, just like cows or—” He pokes Ulysses when he starts to laugh. “I think consciousness was probably an accident. It was just more advantageous for our brains to be like this. We could procreate more if we could think about what predators would do, that kind of thing. But because of that, life can be so— But it’s all kind of an accident, too. All the cathedrals and jazz and wars and—love.”

Ulysses stares at him for a long moment. “Well,” he says eventually, “it’s an ethos.”

Sam laughs too. “I know how it sounds.” After a moment, he adds, “I’ve only had the undergrad course in philosophy so far. You’ll have to bear with me. I’m still learning.”

“I’ll get you into some seminars,” Ulysses says. He sits up and stretches, luxurious. “In five or six years, you’ll be ready to write that up and send it off as an independent scholar.”

“That seems very optimistic, but I’m willing to keep studying. Even if it takes a few decades.” Sam runs a hand up Ulysses’s thigh, which is the closest part of him to Sam and also magnificent. Sam doesn’t want to stop touching him, would probably pull him back down for another kiss, but one of their stomachs makes a loud noise suddenly, and he laughs instead. “I think I have some leftover lasagna. You hungry?”

Ulysses says yes.

Annotated Bibliography

Anonymous. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

A fourteenth-century chivalric romance. Sir Gawain chops the head off the Green Knight at Christmastide, and the Green Knight says, “In one year, I’ll cut your head off.” Hijinks ensue. It was made into a movie in 2021 with Dev Patel playing Gawain. We did a podcast about it (episode 60). Translated by scads of people, including JRR Tolkien. First printed in 1839, but written well before that.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Not

her most famous work, but maybe the most relevant one to our modern times—de Beauvoir develops an ethical framework for existentialism, arguing that while we are all radically free, we must consider ourselves as both subject and object of that freedom, and we must be willing to fight for freedom for others as well. Published in 1947.

Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and Margarita*. A fantasy novel about what happens when the devil and his entourage arrive in a Communist (atheist) Moscow. Written 1928–1940, but not published in full until 1967ish.

Foucault, Michel. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Translated into English as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. One of Foucault’s most well-known texts on power/knowledge and the changing ways in which we view the human body. It’s tremendous. Published in 1975.

Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House*. A Gothic novel; a paranormal researcher invites a few people to rent an ostensibly haunted house with him for a summer to do research into the paranormal. There’s a theme of “is it real or isn’t it” about the events the characters experience. Toward the end, the researcher’s wife turns up and does automatic/spirit writing. (This was where I first learned the word *planchette* as a child.) Cat Sebastian discussed the latent queerness of the work in her May 2024 book *You Should Be So Lucky*, but I don’t recall thinking anything was particularly queer when I read *The Haunting of Hill House*, which to be fair was many, many years ago. Also I want to note that I wrote these lines months before *YSBSL* was released, so *THHH* is not mentioned in tribute, just a weird confluence of events. Published in 1959.

Pirsig, Robert. They don't specifically mention his works, but he wrote *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (published in 1974, about quality, education, and what is good) and *Lila* (published 1991, about morals). He taught rhetoric but I don't think he ever really taught philosophy—he had a lot of other stuff going on.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness* (in French, *L'Être et le néant*). A foundational existential text that develops a complete phenomenological ontology (a philosophy of consciousness and being) based on Sartre's theories. It introduces some interesting and now well-known ideas, like nothingness and bad faith. Existentialism is usually seen as a fancy way of being philosophical about atheism—an attempt to answer the question of how do we live in a universe that has no particular motivating force, just chaos, emptiness, and absurdity (in the Camusian sense). But here, Sartre develops an entire system of thought, rejecting Kant's phenomenology (the noumenon stuff—we don't perceive things directly) and developing his own explanations of how human consciousness can arise. Fun stuff. In many respects, and through no fault of its own, this is a deeply existential short story. First published in 1943, translated into English in 1956.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Probably Spivak's most well-known essay; here she tackles the problem of intellectuals who appoint themselves spokespeople for the

disenfranchised and powerless, as viewed through the lens of *sati*. She explicitly engages with Foucault's power/knowledge idea, because of course if knowledge presupposes having some power, the people without power are seen to have no knowledge. There are at least two papers on Google Scholar with the title "Can the Subaltern Tweet?," plus lots of others using the title as a snowclone to ask if the subaltern can ride, be heard, save us, do digital humanities, act, teach, sing, be felt, etc. The poor subalterns are never getting a day off. Lest you be tempted to think that the students' analysis is correct/the problem has been solved, I very recently (i.e., May 2024) saw a clip of a TED Talk in which an American philosopher with interest in developing non-religiously derived ethics was asked how he engaged with the fact that many Muslim women wear the hijab by choice. He said, in essence, that he thought they were brainwashed. Published in 1988, but nothing has changed.

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The Joy of Fishes (Vagabondage Press, 2013)

Wisconsin Gothic series (Winnowing Fan Press):

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Book 4.5: *The Alignments* (2025)

Book 5: *Rénaissance* (2026)