

THE SIGNATURIST

Thomas Maurstad

“Don’t touch that.”

The words came out hot and snapping, a dog’s bark. Her hand froze in mid-reach then dropped to brush her bare hip leaving the quill, onyx black with inlaid silver filigree, unmolested. She wheeled around, scowl masking fright.

“I just wanted to hold it. It looks... heavy.”

“It isn’t, actually. Light as a feather. Sorry. I just don’t like anyone touching my stuff.”

As he said this, smooth croon restored, he stepped over and inserted himself between her and his drawing table, clasping the offending wrist in his hand, taking care not to squeeze too tightly. She twisted her wrist free and crossed her arms over her breasts -- a pout’s onset.

“You sound like my dad.”

He gathered his grey bathrobe about his waist with one hand while gently pressing the small of her back with the other, scooting her out of the room and in the direction of the kitchen.

“Let’s get those scrambled eggs I promised.”

She dutifully complied, traipsing through the doorway to disappear into the kitchen and out of this story.

The man who cinched his bathrobe as he watched her plummy bottom sway out of the room was Robert Fairchild. At 41, he was more than twice her age and if you were to lean in, tap him on the shoulder and quietly ask what her name was, he would scrunch his brow, gaze at the ceiling for a moment, and then venture “Isabelle?” He would be wrong.

Robert Fairchild was a signaturist, a term he claimed to have coined and, who knows, maybe he really believed it. Maybe in the almost five years since he copyrighted the term and built himself into a one-man profession, he had never bothered to Google ‘signaturist’ and thus learned it originated as a 17th Century neologism for subscribers to a silly and long since discredited concept. It doesn’t really matter in any big way. This much at least is true: he contrived a new application of his old title. He was a signature stylist; he created signatures. He performed this service for anyone with both the desire to have a bespoke signature and

the means to pay the immoderate sum he charged. Robert had yet to encounter a potential client for whom the first feature wasn't a direct consequence of the second; thus, his client list, to a person, was made up of people who, in one iteration or another, were successful players in the celebrity industry.

A lot of them were recent and on the rise, making the jump from internet sensation to multimedia star, pop music to pop everything else. A few were established, mid-career celebs seeking an upgrade. Then there were the book-tour-bound authors who came to him like corporations about to go public and in desperate need of a bankable logo. He had worked with a few politicians (a junior senator gearing up for his presidential bid) and a couple of pro athletes, but these were the exceptions. His bread-and-butter customers were hot, freshly fused and varyingly amalgamated compounds of rich and famous. Robert had a term for them, these creatures, his clients, that reflected their signifying attributes—unschooled, unsophisticated, undisciplined. He called them “savages.” Not to their faces, of course. Not to anyone, in fact, save his agent, Gillian Clark. “Gill...eyun, with a hard ‘G’,” was the first sentence she had spoken to him as they introduced themselves. When he replied, “you mean, as in ‘ghoul,’” she smiled a smile that many women she had slept with, even a couple she'd lived with, never saw.

It had been Gillian with her hard G who conceived of Robert's improbable profession. She was then yet another agent's assistant, young and ambitious, out and about in Los Angeles on a Friday night, working her way through a smartphone list of events and locations, on the prowl for anyone or anything that stirred her future-heat sensor. She was making a reconnaissance sweep through a group show of unknown artists at a barely-there gallery, killing time more than anything else so scarcely paying attention, when a cluster of panels hung in the far back corner of the space drew her in, made her stop, and stare. Five three-by-four rectangles of gessoed linen. Was that ink or acrylic? A closer look confirmed it was ink. Two were black, two were blue-black, one had some crimson bleeding through. The figures on each panel were sharp, slashing, calligraphic. She was still staring when she sensed a presence and turned her head to find a man standing just behind her left shoulder. He smiled. She nodded at the wall.

“Yours?” Gillian asked.

Now he nodded but said nothing.

“They look like tattoos by Picasso.”

She really liked them. She and he talked. She really liked him,

and he her. She gave him her card; he invited her to his studio in Inglewood, which was also where he lived since, soon after his move from Dallas, maintaining a separate apartment had proved too large a monthly nut to crack. A few days later, there she was at his door. In an uncharacteristic flourish of counter-frugality optimism, he had gone to the corner mercado the morning after their meeting, so he was able to play the well-provisioned host and offer her a cup of Costa Rican coffee, a bottle of Jamaican beer, or a glass of sparkling mineral water. Two snaps of a church key later, they were clinking their squat, brown bottles together in a toast to new friends and she commenced her survey of his cluttered but clean space. She was immediately drawn to a stack of sketches. Some were sharp scrawls—jagged, severe, chopped. Some were soft-edged swirls—swooped, sculpted, blobby. Some were simple and spare; some crazed and elaborate. They were all beautiful. They looked like signatures, she decided, written using letters she couldn't quite identify, in a language she'd never seen. But each of them provoked a vivid image of the "person" who had "signed" them.

She looked at them as he stood next to her watching her look at them; she was still looking at the last of the cache when she quietly said, "They're like portraits."

He had quickly looked down while stuffing his hands in his pockets to keep himself from hugging her.

"They are portraits."

That had been the beginning and things took off with a whoosh from there, faster even than Gillian had predicted, in the way that always and only happens when someone comes up with an idea that makes people feel like they've been waiting and wanting and needing it as they first encounter it, something so ripe and ready and inevitable, it feels like a thought everyone's been thinking all along without ever realizing they were.

"Think about it," Gillian said a few nights after that first studio visit, while they waited for the bottle of rose wine she had just ordered. As Robert scanned the room—he wasn't looking for famous faces, but he saw one and then another—he soaked in the decadent pleasures of sitting in the sort of hiply upscale restaurant he hadn't been able to afford since moving to LA almost two years ago. Gillian continued the wind-up to her pitch.

"No one writes with pen and paper anymore. They barely even teach 'penmanship' (she somehow pronounced the word so that it became a homophone with 'buggy whip') in school now. For most people it's just another thing, like trigonometry, that you're never going to use in the real world. The signature is a

last, leftover relic from another age. The only time anybody ever writes anymore is when they have to sign their name. And that's mostly on little screens now, using a piece of plastic shaped like a pen. And soon enough those little electronic squiggles will be gone too."

Gillian paused as the waiter returned and presented a bottle for her approval, which she gave with a quick flick of her hand. Robert leaned forward to more closely observe this bit of theater known as the wine tasting. The waiter had the more straightforward role, all technique, little room for improv or interpretation -- present, pour, pause, then confirm the diner's inerrant discernment through a series of submissive nods and hushed assents. Gillian, as the taster, had the more free-ranging role and Robert couldn't wait to see which direction she would pivot. Big or small, hammy or contained, angry or affable, classical or jazz? He had his hunch, but couldn't be sure. She'd already shared enough tales from the front so that he knew her boss and her boss's boss were top shelf assholes, and subordinate abuse, like fraternity hazing, was most often maintained as a my-turn tradition. He placed his bet: She would choose to spit rather than swallow, and send the bottle back just for the imperious fuck of it. He watched, he waited, and then he lost. He had her completely wrong; Gillian scarcely noted the proceedings, taking the glass, a quick spin followed by a quicker sip and a brusque nod to the waiter to get on with it and go away. Robert leaned back, cursing himself and congratulating Gillian, though had she been looking at him she would have seen neither reaction flash across his face. In that moment it took the waiter to pour the wine and scurry away, and Gillian to start up again, he had a thought both rebuke and promise: "That's the only time I get her that wrong."

So far, it had been.

Back on that night, at that table, in that restaurant, Gillian continued.

"Here's the funny thing. As the signature is vanishing from everyday life, its celebrity counterpart, the autograph, is on fire in the marketplace."

Robert must have smirked at this pronouncement because Gillian nodded, let out a derisive snort, and grabbed her wine glass for a gulp.

"I know—ridiculous. But I'm telling you, autographs are big business, more and more of our clients are being 'asked' (she leaned in conspiratorially as she uttered the word to emphasize her ironic intent) to make appearances, attend events that are just endless signing sessions. And wherever they go, there are as

many autograph collectors now as paparazzi and that's because autographs are a booming commodity in the online celebrity-souvenir market.

Gillian paused and looked over at Robert, raising her eyebrows as she opened her palms to the ceiling, trying to match words to the torrent in her head.

"It's like... like having a really beautiful, you know, refined signature is one of those things now, like perfect teeth, perfect skin, hair, body, clothes, all of it, that can elevate someone, mark them as that much more special, rare, important.

Robert turned his nose to the heavens as he exclaimed with a hissing burst of breath.

"A star."

Another fuck-me snort, another gulp of wine.

"Exactly. That's the point. Attractive, unique, stylish, you know, 'cool' autographs are an increasingly desirable celebrity accessory, not to mention a lucrative product. And this is all happening at a time when nobody under the age of my grandmother knows how to sign their name in a way that doesn't look like the signature of a dyslexic five-year-old.

Gil (as he would learn she preferred to be called by friends, lovers, and clients, category distinctions so fungible in her world as to render them all but pointless) performed another conspiratorial lean as she lowered her voice to a dramatic murmur.

"You would be shocked how many"—her scan quickly helicoptered the room—"major players sign their names like chimps."

Robert refilled their glasses as she presented her vision for his future: He would become a signature stylist to the stars. She assured him that just among her agency's stable of clients, he would be certain to have enough work to keep him busy for the next two years during which time, not incidentally, he would make, based on his career thus far, at least two lifetimes-worth of income. And once established—Gillian had already blocked out a preliminary line-up of projects to maximize the contagion effect of his work—she assured him his phone, and by his phone she meant her phone, wouldn't stop ringing. She raised her glass to punctuate her spiel and offered a powerfully persuasive two-syllable summation.

"Ka-ching."

This was Gillian's sales pitch, which was true. There was also the unspoken reason behind it, which was the truth. The return to autographs wasn't a fluke; it was a deliberate scheme, part of Hollywood's anti-selfie campaign, with Gillian's agency leading the charge. Selfies were a disruption of the natural order, rep-

resenting a democratizing loss of control, an inversion of power between celebrities and civilians. Selfies in their spontaneous intimacy—the sweaty embrace, the beery breath, the arm-in-arm/cheek-to-cheekness of it all—transformed the civilian interloper into photographer/director/co-star/distributor while the set-upon celebrity was demoted to mere stage prop. Like run-off from a flash flood, the proliferation of “celfies” as the primary interaction between celebrities and fans seemed to happen overnight, carving a new, unstable and unwelcome ravine through the landscape. The initial response from the various industry players had been to go along, to present an affable and accommodating front to the evolving technology of adulation. But accommodation had devolved into unworkable appeasement, as civilians became more emboldened, celebrities more resentful, and the money guard more fretful over the corrosive (and potentially profits-impinging) effects of an ever-expanding and unregulated reservoir of digital images. Autographs had been settled on as bulwark, deflection and consolation, providing a ‘no’ wrapped in a ‘yes.’

Robert didn’t know any of this then and if Gillian had explained it to him, he wouldn’t have cared. All he knew was that he was tired of being a starving artist and here was someone smart and connected praising his talent and offering an opportunity. He briefly considered going over the reasons why it wasn’t the prospect of making a ka-ching’s worth of money that made Gillian’s offer so appealing, but he just as quickly scotched the impulse. It was the money, and so what if it was? He’d suffered in spartan obscurity long enough; he had earned an upgrade. He gave his assent with a smile and a nod; they marked the launch of their new venture with a toast, followed by several more, a second and then a third bottle.

They made a great team, forging the essential dynamic of their tit-for-tat interplay over the next couple of weeks as they worked out the mechanics of the signature-stylist experience. Gillian hammered on the importance of Robert’s behind-the-scenes status, how the power and appeal of a signature was as an emblem of self-expression, so no celebrity would want it getting out that he or she had outsourced its creation. “I get it,” Robert had snapped as Gillian reiterated this core component. “Nobody wants to be known as the star too stupid to sign their own name.”

And while a signature needed to be “stylish” and “expressive” and “unique” and a host of other descriptive ejaculations, it also needed to be—“absolutely has to be” is how Gillian phrased it, in a tone so grave she seemed to be dictating to an unseen assistant furiously chiseling her words into a stone tablet—“one-

hundred-percent legible.” A look of incredulous exasperation instantly radiated from Robert’s face and fired the space between them as if the door to a blazing pizza oven had been thrown open. This saved him the bother of having to articulate his reaction.

“What I mean is, you have to be able to read it.” She stretched that last verb, riding it like a skateboard. “Not every letter, of course. You just have to be able to tell whose name it is.”

Another look, another blast of wordless heat. This time Gillian fired back.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Am I offending you? Are my instructions insulting to your self-image as an intelligent and autonomous artist? Well, welcome to my world. I’m telling you what I’ve been told to tell you. This is what you signed up for. And by the way, I’m the one out on a limb for proposing a scheme centered on a nobody doodler fresh off the boat from Texas. This has to work. And for it to work, you have to do what I tell you to do, the way I tell you to do it.”

Robert’s face went flash-frozen, the scornful mask that had provoked Gillian’s outburst remained intact, but the blood drained from behind it so that it hung on his face like the wrap left behind by a party-goer making a hasty exit. Gillian shook her head slowly and brought her voice down as if she were talking to herself.

“Or we’re both fucked.”

In that moment, the first of many such, Robert had relented, acquiesced, flashed a goofy, chagrined grin and they had moved onto the next crucial detail requiring his exacting compliance. This was his first brush with the defining reality of the world he had just entered; he would develop an exquisitely attuned understanding of it, but even during that introductory flare-up, he had an intuitive grasp. In an industry where everyone was an ‘artist,’ ego was a given, but the power to impose yours on others was a currency, and just as with literal currency, Robert at this point had next to none. So in those early days, there were lots of acquiescences and goofy, chagrined grins. His ego account did enjoy an initial uptick when he proved himself not just an uncanny creator of signatures but a gifted instructor as well.

Gillian had assumed some sort of penmanship tutor would be a necessary complement to the signature stylist experience, a chef to execute the nutritionist’s dietary vision, but Robert brushed aside that notion. For workshopping purposes, Gillian played the role of The Client and Robert wasted no time as he introduced himself, asked a few chitchat questions, and explained that for their work together to succeed she would need to be as relaxed

and open as possible. He offered some green tea, they sat in facing folding chairs, and he began—gently, calmly, but earnestly—to ask questions about her career, her childhood, her hopes, her regrets. It was a surreal experience, floating somewhere between therapy session and job interview. They hadn't discussed beforehand how, exactly, this rehearsal would unfold or what, specifically, they would talk about and Gillian found herself going blank and basking in Robert's performance as if she were spectator rather than co-star. She had to rouse herself to match his method immersion in this improv moment they were making.

She answered as someone else, wondering from where or, more precisely, whom her answers were coming as she breezily gabbed about her parents' divorce, a back-and-forth childhood split between New York and Los Angeles, her first audition, her first job (a TV commercial—national!), which led to a recurring role in a tween series and then a spin-off starring role. By now, Robert had leaned back, his gaze intent and focused, projecting 'The Look' of listening closely, but he periodically glanced down at a sketchpad propped upon his crossed leg to squint at his busy pen. Gillian listened to herself talk about her first movie, a goofy remake of some old cartoon series. The studio was hoping for a franchise; instead, it flopped. But, Gillian explained, giving each word its own breathy, upward-inflected emphasis: Nobody blamed her. Everyone had loved her. Problems with the script. The director's energy wasn't right. Anyway. And now she had just finished principal shooting on her first "real" movie, her "coming out" role, the independent and complex young woman shedding her child-star skin.

"Tell me more about that, about her" Robert said. "Give me a list of words, describe the who and what you want this woman to be."

Out came a torrent of adjectives and aspirations. Gillian heard herself use the word "electrifying" and stopped. She suddenly realized her hands were in the air and shaking. She dropped them into her lap, looked down, let out a self-conscious snicker, followed by a whisper.

"And... scene."

Robert nodded. He wasn't looking at her, his face a mask of concentration as he peered down at his pad. Gillian heard the skritch-scratch of his pen across the paper.

"That was great," he said distractedly, as if he had just remembered someone else was sitting there. She watched his arm bob though she could only guess what marks his unseen hand was making. A couple more silent minutes and his movements

ceased, he uncrossed his leg, and looked over at her. He flashed a confident smile as he spun his pad to show her the results.

“Allow me to introduce you to your new signature.”

This was one version of what they had decided to call “The Affirmation.” There would be many others as he developed his routine; they were whittled down as he established himself until he stopped using them altogether. His resume and his artistry were now all the affirmation anyone should need. But in the beginning, it had been a subject of much negotiation from their opposing positions, trying to strike a balance between a server’s deference (Gillian) and couturier’s authority (Robert).

“I’m telling you Gil, if we take that ‘customer’s always right’ approach, we’re inviting catastrophic failure. I worked retail. The customer is never right and frequently insane.”

Gillian had conceded this universal truth while offering another.

“Fine. You’re right. It should be your choice. That’s the easy part. The trick is going to be making them think they’re the ones choosing it.”

They had agreed to use Gillian’s name (Gillian Lawson) for this test run, in part because Robert loved the capital ‘G’ and held the series of letters ‘i-l-l-i’ to be one of the most beautiful sequences in calligraphy, but also because ever since he had watched her sign her name at the restaurant that first night, he teased her mercilessly about her remedial scrawl.

“Look at it,” he had said in mock horror after snatching up the credit-card receipt to hold it under his nose as Gillian lunged in vain to stop him. “What a colossal misfire. It’s such an abdication of self, this generic spritz of dashes and dots. Why don’t you just get “I give up” tattooed on your forehead?”

The instant she saw “her” new signature, she knew she had been right about him. It was sleek, sculpted, sophisticated. It began with his beloved capital ‘G’ — he had used an uppercase print rendition of the letter rather than going cursive. It looked like a cartoon sketch of a human ear; the word “cute” popped into Gillian’s as if someone had just whispered it. The rest of her first name seemed to be skipping into that ear like a string of musical notes. The capital L that started Lawson likewise forsook the loopy-ness of its cursive form. This signature wasn’t at all swirly or decorous. It was straightforward. It looked smart, in two shades of the adjective, and as Gillian smiled to herself at that thought, she realized this was, in fact, her signature. Robert had created a portrait of her, not the yappy ingenue she had just been channeling. She looked up from the sketchpad and found Robert’s gaze waiting for her.

“What do you think?”

She was about to burble some heartfelt expression of wonder and gratitude, but in the moment it took those feelings to well up from her chest and spill down from her eyes, Gillian realized he was still speaking in character to her character. She glanced down, gave her head a self-scolding shake, and looked back at Robert.

“Fab-ma-tab. I love it.”

Now she brought up a referee’s hand to call time-out.

“The way this is probably usually going to work is you’ll meet, come up with your design and we’ll submit through their manager, so let’s just assume all that’s happened and everyone’s happy and here we are.”

Robert nodded as the barest tremor of irritation pulsed beneath his brow.

Gillian had had no idea what to expect when Robert switched gears and she was braced for ire and humiliation as he put a pen in her hand, set a blank pad before her, and began his tutorial. Flashbacks of a third-grade teacher looming over Gillian’s desk while growling “no, no, no, bring your loops up and over” smeared into her dad flinching in the passenger seat while mashing his foot on a phantom brake pedal and screeching orders. She had been dreading this part. But if Robert noticed (he did), he didn’t let on as he crooned his instructions.

“Don’t think of it as writing. Think of it as drawing. Forget the letters. Just see them as shapes. Focus on the shapes. Let’s break it down, one shape at a time. Once you’re comfortable with one, try the next. After that, we’ll work on connecting them. It’s easy, you’ll see.”

She had started with stiff, jerky motions, clutching the pen in a skeleton claw, scratching out marks that in no way resembled Robert’s smooth flowing lines. After a few more spasmodic squiggles, her “signature” looked like the peaks and plunges of a polygraph exam she was failing, miserably. Robert, standing just behind her, watching, emitted a single, soft cluck of his tongue as he rubbed her shoulder with one hand and pried the pen from her cramped grasp with the other.

“Relax. Let’s start over. Take the pen and hold it like it’s a living thing. A living thing you’re not trying to choke the living shit out of” (he gently patted her shoulder as a tactile laugh track). “Now we’re just going to make shapes, whatever you want, circles, loops, waves, lines, whatever. And as you do, I want you to move the pen across the paper lightly. Soft and smooth. Steady. How do you touch a lover when you’re trying to arouse her?”

That's what I want you to do. Tease the paper, awaken its desire for your sweet ink."

In her head, Gillian wanted to laugh and unleash the dogs of snark, but before she had the chance, she saw her hand jetting across the white paper, up and down and over and around, a fluid contrail of black streaming from the pen; even more, she felt it, a liquid slipperiness, like the final swells of surf lapping at the sand.

"There you go, that's better. Feel the flow, stay with it."

Another snit of sarcasm was instantly squelched by the incontestable pleasure coming from her obedient hand; then and there, Gillian let go and gave herself over to his croon and her flow, and somewhere between the two, any shapes segued into his shapes, into her shapes, and then this shape was connecting with that shape and the next and the next. Two into three unnoticed hours later, she brought up her hand with a triumphant swoosh as her pen completed the final addition to what had become a field of evermore graceful signatures — "her" signature now fully her signature. She turned her head to gaze over her shoulder at Robert and share an expression of jubilant disbelief, but he wasn't there. In that same moment, she heard a pop coming from behind her other shoulder and turned that way to see Robert walking in from the kitchen holding a bottle and two glasses.

This had been the beginning of a beautiful friendship; moreover, an exceedingly profitable one. Now, with the five-year anniversary of that beginning just around the corner, Gillian was an agent in full with an enviable roster of clients and plans to open her own boutique agency. And Robert was the Signaturist to the stars, living in a concrete-and-glass parallelogram cantilevered on a hill above Sunset Boulevard, purchased in a sweetheart deal from one of Gillian's other clients, a celebrity chef moving to Las Vegas, the new center of his dining-theme-park empire.

Robert shuffled out onto his patio, into the late-morning light, plopped himself in one of the low-slung deck chairs, raised the tumbler of tabasco-spritzed tomato juice to his forehead, pausing to extend a pinkie and press his sunglasses higher up on his nose, and dragged the glass across his brow, hoping its slick chill would dampen the headache roaring behind his eyes. He stared at the infinity-edge pool, letting his gaze go soft as he tried to remember the last time he had dipped so much as toe in it. He didn't try too hard, and with only blanks-pocked success — sometime soon after moving in, another lost night, another lost girl whose name and countenance he didn't even bother trying to reacquire.

He was on the cusp of ascending to the next ring of success: the roll-out of his book, *Make Your Mark: Sign Like a Star*. No longer an anonymous cog in the Celebrity Machine, Robert Fairchild was out in the open now and had been ever since one of his clients, his first A-lister, a grand dame with a bandolier of statuettes, had broken protocol and sung his praises during a run of interviews and appearances. She loved her new signature, of course, but even more the process of discovering it, “the journey” by which the two of them had “blazed a trail through the wilderness of my soul,” which had been “the most intense act of self-discovery” she had ever experienced, “not just as an actor, but as a human being.” Gillian had panicked, at first, but as the subsequent boil of media queries, peer congratulations and, most persuasively, new-client requests quickly confirmed, this was a coup not a disaster, and her bushwhacked horror shifted seamlessly into poised elation. Robert had surprised himself by feeling a prickly ambivalence at his outing that sharpened into something darker and more distressed when an exultant Gillian rushed over with the good news that the bad news was, in fact, great news. He had surprised himself again when, instinctively, he chose not to share his reaction with her.

He drained his glass as he inventoried his upcoming schedule: He left for New York a week from tomorrow for a blitzkrieg of television appearances, interviews and photo shoots, beginning with a sweet-spot appearance on the Today show (top of the second hour) and ending with a photo/interview session for a People Online feature (pitched to Gillian as “The Man Behind the Pen”). Gillian was negotiating terms for a series of instructional videos, then there was the book tour schedule to finalize; she was already fielding early prods from the publisher about a follow-up, maybe a memoir; and most immediately, there was his initial meeting with a new “mystery” client in—he closed his eyes and let his head fall back as he drew in a deep breath—about an hour. Fuck. Everything was great, so why was he awash in dread? He was on top of the world, so why did he feel crushed by it? He looked again at his azure pool, admired the clean, precise lines of his landscape, scanned the downhill vista of west Hollywood and chuckled over his great good fortune: He was tucked-in and fancy-free. He was the luckiest man alive. So why did he feel cursed?

Five years. A long time; the blink of an eye. What had he told himself, and Gillian, when they started all this?

“I’ll do it. But only for a couple of years, just long enough to save up some money. Then I’m going to move back to the middle of nowhere Texas, maybe Marfa, or Alpine. Make my life as small

as I can. Get up every day and work. My work. Have the same day every day, over and over again, until... for as long as I can.”

The look on Gillian’s face—she hadn’t laughed outright, but only by the merest technicality. It never occurred to her to mask or even modulate her scornful amusement at his dipshit pronouncement. She just shook her head.

“Whatever you say, Obi-Wan.”

Two years came and went, of course, then three, four, and now about to be five. Robert looked down at his fingers curled around the tumbler as he silently ticked off this countdown, and as he did he had the sudden, odd sensation of sitting outside himself as words scrolled through his head, graffiti on a wall he read through a bus window as he rumbled by, words unprompted, detached from any conscious effort to conjure them, floating into view before the thought that had spawned them registered: ‘My life is getting bigger and bigger. I’m making my life as big as I can make it.’ And then he was back within himself, still staring down at the hand holding the empty glass. He had not only broken his solemn, stupid pledge, but he was devotedly, industriously enacting its opposite. Why? He got up and shuffled back into the house as a way of making it easier to pretend not to notice that he didn’t answer.

Khaki canvas shoes, ecru cotton pants, unpleated and rolled up just above his ankles, a white singlet under a white Oxford shirt, untucked, sleeves rolled up just past his elbows—Robert thought of this outfit as his uniform and wore it for every first meeting with a new client. He glanced at his phone and saw he still had about twenty minutes, if this appointment was on time, which was, in his experience, unlikely, so he stepped into his study-studio and over to his drawing table. He stared down at the sketches covering its surface, six of them on six large sheets of drawing paper, arranged two-by-three, each with a blue-black ink figure at its center, like giant mahjong tiles. They were new; he had only started working on them last week, the first new work he had produced in... a while. What was the line he always used when the subject came up (which more and more was less and less)?

“When you dig ditches all day, it’s hard to come home and dig another ditch, a special ditch, a ditch that’s just for you.”

His eyes scanned slowly from one to the next, from left to right, first the top three, then the bottom. They were studies, notes to himself about an image-idea he’d been having that wouldn’t leave him alone until he let it out. He gathered up the other five as he continued to stare at the last one, which was the first one

he'd drawn. These others, he now saw clearly, were ever-paler iterations of the image-idea he'd been trying capture; they moved farther away not closer. He dropped them on the floor beneath the table as he continued studying the remaining figure. He liked it, and he hardly ever liked anything he did. Not so much it, exactly, as the excitement looking at it stirred in him, the wheels set spinning, the possibilities beckoning just beyond, if only he would follow. He picked up the drawing, held it in both hands, stretching out his arms as if trying to bring some fine print into focus. He rotated the sheet, clockwise, from horizontal to vertical, vertical to horizontal, and twice more, so that his drawing performed an intermittent cartwheel. Another swell of excitement pumped through his chest: what he saw in the drawing; how he saw it; how it changed; what he hadn't noticed and what he now couldn't stop noticing as his sketch spun, as he spun it, from right-side up to upside-down and back again. He could feel the ideas, like train cars, lining up and clicking together, ready to be pulled out and into the light.

Robert remembered this feeling in the same instant he realized how long it had been since he'd felt it. Chasing after this feeling was how he had ended up in a dingy studio in Inglewood, fifteen hundred miles closer to the world he'd moved from Texas to inhabit, and still a million miles away. The waves of long-gone excitement surged and crashed against the sheer face of his newborn dread. He wanted to close the studio door, shut himself in and everything else out, chase after this image-idea until he caught it, lashed it down, made it his. But, he reminded himself, he couldn't. Not right now. Later. Right now, he had to get ready, do all the things, the work, that had brought him to this well-appointed point, living the life he'd always wanted. He frowned as he thought this, dropped the drawing back on the table, and here came another scroll of words. They jolted him like a tattoo he didn't remember getting: "The life I've always wanted requires doing the opposite of what I want to do." Robert flashed on the film clip to a news story he'd seen yesterday (or the day before) about a luxury apartment complex teetering atop an eroding cliff somewhere up the coast, maybe near San Francisco. El Nino-charged waves pulverized the cliff's base as, again and again, huge scabs of earth sloughed off the side and crashed into the relentless surf. The cliff's edge was creeping closer and closer to the idyllic and doomed apartment building. It was just a matter of time.

There was a knock at the door, five sharp raps in an unmistakable, dash/dot-dot/dash/dash syncopation. Robert mumbled

a curse, laid the drawing on the table and hurried out, leaving the studio door open. Another round of the five-rap knock resounded as he stepped up to the entrance. He paused, grimaced, exhaled, shimmied his shoulders, performed a little tippy-tap with his feet, and opened the door. Robert was confronted by a young man, slightly shorter than Robert's 5'10" – tall by celebrity standards. He had a mop of hair so precisely haphazard, it appeared designed by Frank Gehry, while the depth and variety of its shades made each strand seem individually tinted. He wore an oversized, black, blank basketball jersey, all the better to show off the sleeve-and-a-half's worth of tatoos covering his arms. He didn't look at Robert, but rather past him, which saved Robert the bother of masking the disappointment that flared in his eyes in that instant of recognition. He pasted a welcoming smile over a stifled groan and reached up to give the opened door two quick, sharp knocks, the rhythmic punchline to his visitor's set-up.

If the young man appreciated, or even recognized Robert's response to his call, his distracted airs offered no sign. He continued to stand mute, looking past Robert. Robert let out a slight, dry chuckle and tried again, knock-knock, while softly chanting "two... bits."

Now the young man did look at him, then leaned in as he did this exaggerated bug-eyed sneer thing with his peach-fuzz face.

"What? What's that? Two bits? Two bits of what?"

Then he laughed at his own joke as he swiped the back of one hand across his nostrils. Robert experienced a nano-coma, not moving, not thinking, not breathing, and then was snapped back to consciousness by the image of throttling Gillian when next he saw her. He reapplied the smile to his face as he tried again.

"I was just finishing your knock, you know, the old routine," muttering in a little sing-song improv, "shave-and-a-hair-cut/two-bits."

The dead stare from his visitor caused Robert to instantly regret his performance. When, that evening, he recounted the car-wreck horror of this exchange to an unabashedly gleeful Gillian, he would wave a hand in her doubled-over direction and declare, "But wait, it get's worse." And it did.

The young man broke off his stare, passed a hand through that wondrous hair, and let out a laughless chuckle while slowly looking Robert up and down, a gesture Robert (rightly) inferred was intended to convey that this punk-shit was laughing at him, not with him. And then, he resumed looking past Robert as he started talking past him, too.

"That's the beat of my new single. Just dropped last week.

Blowing up the internet. It's everywhere. That's probably where you heard it. It's so everywhere, you probably didn't even know you knew it."

To prove his point, he reached up again and repeated his five-rap knock, this time providing an adenoidal croon to match its meter—"Bay Bee don't cool down." Robert experienced another nano-coma of blank-faced stupefaction, which the illustrated cherub interpreted as awe-struck gratitude and generously dropped the cherry on top of his impromptu gift by adding a concluding rap-rap as he grunted, "Heat up." Then he broke into the half-cocked grin that had conquered an international army of tweens.

"Yeah, you recognize it now. I told you. 'Heat Up.' That's my beat. It's number one. Everywhere." He flared his fingers in a simulation of bombs bursting in air.

Robert managed to regain his game-face grin and nodded.

"Yes, well, anyway, I'm Robert Fairchild and you are, of course, Tristan Shane." Robert turned himself sideways in the doorway and swept a hand back into the house. "Come in. Welcome."

Instead, Tristan Shane turned his back to Robert and made a flat-palmed pressing motion to a gleaming SUV purring by the curb. Now that he saw it, Robert couldn't believe he hadn't noticed this disco-ball tank the moment he opened the door; if a dirigible had been tethered to his mail box, it wouldn't have appeared any more ostentatious. The pearlescent platinum beast hunkered on hula-hoop wheels of black metal honeycomb, which complemented the massive windows' impenetrable tint. Robert felt more than heard the dampened thuds of whatever song was no doubt blasting within. The man-child 180'd to once again face Robert without bothering to look at him.

"My boys. My manager said you work one-on-one, so they're just gonna wait out here. S'cool."

And with that, he slid past Robert, zipped through the house, and was out on the patio, standing at the edge of the pool, looking down on Sunset even as Robert turned to follow him in. Striding double-time, through the house's open-air interior and Italian modern furnishings, past the facing-chairs workspace where he had intended to lead his new client after some genial chit-chat and the offering of refreshments, Robert raced out the retracted wall of glass panels only to pull up just behind Tristan Shane. He stood precisely behind his new client, noting how the pop boy's slight silhouette was eclipsed entirely by his man-in-full frame, an observation that prompted Robert's first and, for the rest of the afternoon, only unforced smile. And as that smile lingered, Robert spun into his escape:

The sunlight glittered on the water. A honeyed breeze wafted down from the hilltop. The muffled drone of downhill traffic was the only sound as Robert picked up the matte-glazed, decorative vessel, heavy but not too, and with both hands raised it high, stepped forward, and brought it down onto that famous, fabulous hair. He heard the crash; he felt the crunch. Robert was left holding two large pieces of the pot while a shower of clay fragments rained down on the stone deck. Tristan Shane, meanwhile, pitched forward and crumpled into the pool, face down, motionless, a liquid cloud of crimson billowing slowly from his head, which, as Robert stared down, reminded him of a teabag dropped in a steaming cup to steep. Robert nodded down at the sodden teen idol whose feet had now sunk so that his toes touched the bottom of the pool, as if he were striking a pose. "You're right, Tristan. A cup of tea really would hit the spot." Now it was Robert's turn to laugh at his own joke. As an in memoriam gesture, he swiped the back of a hand across his nostrils.

Robert blinked as he imagined trying to inventory all those ceramic shards scattered everywhere. Then there was the blood in the pool, not to mention the body, the surrounding hills with all those houses, all those eyes. And what about the designer hovercraft docked out front, full of "my boys"? Robert sighed and let go his reverie, watched it float up and away like a child's lost balloon, and then stepped beside his guest. He took a beat to swallow back his exasperation before speaking, and thus found himself once more being spoken past.

"Hey, I can see my billboard from here. Lucky you. My house is so high up, all I see is haze and rooftops. I'm thinking about getting a place on the ocean, but, you know, the fuck do I care? I'm hardly ever here. There. Wherever."

"Yes. Lucky me."

Robert turned back toward the house, hoping to lead his new client by example.

"We should get to work. I know your time is limited."

He took a few trial steps before turning to see if he was being followed. He wasn't.

"Tristan?"

A last, lingering look at his billboard and Tristan Shane spun on a heel and motored past Robert, back into the house where he stopped in the middle of the floor, a low-slung sitting arrangement to his left, the work station to his immediate right, with the dining area and the open kitchen beyond. Hands on his hips, he swept his gaze around as Robert followed him in and stopped

alongside. He started to offer Tristan something to drink, but didn't get the words out in time.

"Nice spread. Who'd'ya use?"

Robert offered the name of a top-tier designer (another of Gilian's clients) and was about to tell his go-to anecdote about how this designer had won him over when, as he was describing the styles of furniture he admired, the kinds of pieces he wanted, she had interrupted him to say, "don't tell me what you want your house to look like, tell me how you want it to feel." But, again, not in time.

"Yeah, sure. I worked with her for a minute."

He gave the interior another scan, and added another back-of-the-hand nostrils swipe.

"She couldn't get my thing, what I was going for."

While trying to form the most neutral, bridge-building response he could muster, Robert watched as Tristan Shane began to wander, briefly pausing before the large abstract painting that had been a gift from a South Korea-born artist Robert met soon after moving into his Inglewood studio—his first L.A. friend! She had since caught fire and recently been included in a "New Not New School" exhibit at LACMA whose opening-night festivities he really had intended to attend. His free range guest then drifted over to the built-in shelves to scan and run his fingers across the spines of artist monograms and first editions; he picked up and peered through a mottled brass, 19th-Century kaleidoscope, set it down rather too heavily and not at all where it had been, then poked at the cluster of vintage casino dice, leaned in to leer at a couple of surrealist photos, straightened and spun around, spied the display of ornately enameled antique pens and made a beeline. Robert cut him off at the ottoman with three quick sidesteps.

"What do you say we sit down and get to work. I know your time is limited."

Another laughless snicker; another bug-eyed sneer.

"S'cool. I don't feel like sitting. Anyways, I'm not here to..." He lost interest in this sentence before completing it and instead wanly waved a hand. "My manager said you wanted to meet me, so here I am. Now, you just do what you do and we'll be all good."

Tristan Shane dipped a shoulder as he prepared to step around Robert, but Robert moved with him to continue obstructing his path and as he did, he realized he had brought up a hand with the reflexive intent to place his palm against the young man's chest—at best an impolitic gesture, with the potential to be much worse. He tried to salvage the moment by clumsily re-directing the offending hand into an over-the-shoulder, prithe-

come-follow gesture, but abandoned this folly and let his hand, his gaze, and his voice drop as he tried once more.

"It's not that I wanted to meet you. I mean, it's not just that. I need to get a sense of... you. Who you are, who you want to be, so I can come up with a signature that captures that... you, and reflects it back to the world."

Then came the look, the expression on Tristan Shane's still soft face. It wasn't, as it had been until now, a shifting portrait of annoyance, impatience, dismissal, indifference and boredom. Now, it was just one sentiment, simple and terrible. Pity. And then came the punk-shit pop boy's first (and only) genuine guffaw, which added another yet more terrible dimension to the look. Amused pity. That night to Gillian, Robert would go on and on about that face—"he's still got baby fat"—but he would never mention that look.

The boy-king shook his head as he concluded his chuckle and flipped one of his hands at Robert as if waving off the waiter.

"Nah, nah, fuck all that. All you need to know is..." He paused a beat measured with a breath. "Cool, strong, sexy."

He leaned into these words recited at a remedial pace, as if repeating the alphabet to a slow learner.

"That's it. That's all you need." More finger fireworks.

"That's not how it works. That's not how I work."

Were Robert's eyes closed as he said this? He couldn't be sure because, while speaking, he was fixed on the inward image of himself braced against a fire door, straining to keep it shut as his anger raged on the other side, desperate to burst through and set the room ablaze. He succeeded insofar as his voice stayed calm, even conversational, but the effort this success required had caused his head to droop, and when he brought his gaze back up to follow his words, Robert discovered his guest was no longer in front of him. He wheeled around and, sure enough, Tristan Shane had just pulled up in front of the white porcelain platter on which the antique pens were displayed. Robert froze as he watched the boy-king's eager fingers twitch in anticipation of handling the cool, lacquered weight of presumably each and every one.

"Stop! Don't touch those!"

Nothing calm or conversational about that. Robert's voice had been sharp, shrill and loud. He tried to gulp back his frenzy. Now it was his turn to serve up a laughless chuckle.

"Sorry." Another swallow to unclench his jaw muscles. "I just don't like anyone..." His voice fell as he concluded... "touching my stuff."

Tristan Shane, back still to Robert, but with his head half-

turned to deliver a one-eyed glare, stiffened and raised his hands as if responding to an arresting officer's bark. He held himself in that pose for what to Robert felt like an endless, awful moment. Robert remained mute and motionless, trying to simultaneously run through opposing scenarios: one in which he wheedled his unwilling client into some kind of workable compliance, and one in which he charged over, grabbed Mr. CoolStrongSexy by the scruff of the neck and bounced him out the door. Each exercise produced a mirror-image result of the other. Robert knew which he should choose as certainly as which he would choose, but he lingered here where he might still opt for immediate gratification over future reward. "Good right now would feel so good, right now." He silently, slowly stretched the phrase across his tongue, squeezing each word like fingers running down a string of prayer beads. It became just another idyll interrupted as Tristan Shane dropped his hands, issued a loud snort, rolled his eyes, brought his flared fingers back up and gaped his eyes and mouth in a garish mask of remorse.

"Chill."

Another backhanded swipe of his nose. Another mirthless leer. He turned to step away from the display, but as he did he raised a hand, extended its index finger and, as if operating a construction crane, slowly swung his inked forearm over the porcelain platter and lowered his hand until his fingertip made contact with one of the pens. He tap-tap-tapped it a few times, withdrew the offending finger, spun around, stared at Robert for a fixed instant, and then shrugged his boyish shoulders.

"Oops."

He walked back over and stood in front of Robert and struck a pose, one thumb slung in a hip pocket as his other hand raked through that godstruck hair so that it fell in a flaxen tumble just so across his peerless brow. He emitted a tiny, breathy titter. It trailed into a shy-sly grin as he dropped his head and then turned his abruptly angelic face up to gaze, searchingly, at Robert who stood statue-still as he marveled at this silky, practiced performance. Tristan Shane clapped his hands together to mark the end of the scene, and spoke.

"That's it, that's all. I'm not a safe you need to crack. There's no secret stash. My manager was supposed to have explained all this to..." he drifted off, uncertain of how to conclude "...whoever." He brushed his hands against then away from each other as a punctuating gesture. "You want to ask me something, go ahead and ask. I probably won't answer, but.... And I'm not sitting. I don't do sitting and talking."

As if to prove his point, he resumed his wanderings while Robert, with a small, sagging sigh, seemed to adopt the vigor and command of a scarecrow. Surrender. A sure end. All at once, the cresting wave of Robert's anger didn't just break and recede; it vanished like a heat mirage, leaving him alone, at a loss, weightless -- a ghost in his own house. Without realizing it, Robert started murmuring a line from a long-ago song: "I get the feeling that I don't belong here." Should he, unheeded, disregarded, carry on as he otherwise would? Take his place at the work station and start sketching out variations... of what? Based on what? And for whom? Certainly not the auto-tuned cypher no doubt soon to be rummaging through his cabinets. Tristan Shane had zero regard for Robert, his process, or its outcome, and Robert applied a cartoon-German accent to his inner retort: the feeling was mutual. Suddenly, everything about this situation was silly and pointless, a feeling that instantly threatened to sweep out and stain everything in Robert's life and surge into a thunderhead of self-loathing—if he didn't immediately do something to shut it down or, at least, divert it. Just then, in an act of charity as unwitting as it was uncharacteristic, Tristan Shane intervened and delivered Robert Fairchild from himself by noticing the invitation of an open door. He accepted and sashayed into Robert's studio. With an involuntary yelp, Robert charged after him.

Robert burst through the doorway, his rubber soles squeaking to a halt. He made no attempt to temper his spluttering agitation, which turned out to be fine since Tristan Shane's back was to the door, so his unflappable poise or its lack didn't matter. That was the good news. The bad news: Robert arrived just in time to witness his worst-case scenario play out, in real time, just beyond his reach, like a waking nightmare. Tristan Shane stood over the drawing table, holding Robert's first and now only new sketch in almost the same way Robert had—arms outstretched, turning it this way and that, pulling it closer in, pushing it farther out. If he knew Robert was behind him, he didn't show it. Robert's fingers curled into fists as he turned his face up to the ceiling, reeling in a wordless, whiteout swirl. He felt his heart beating in his ears, made his fingers unclench, exhaled, and brought his gaze down. He drew in what he endeavored to make a restorative breath and then cleared his throat to announce his presence. Tristan Shane spun around and favored Robert with his first genuine smile.

"This is it," the boy-king pop-star yipped as he held the sketch out for Robert to see. "This is perfect."

As was ever the case with Tristan Shane's face, his expression shot a conductor's cue at whomever it was aimed—in this case,

his crinkled eyes and affirming nods were already basking in the grateful, relieved burbles Robert was now to commence heaping upon him. But that isn't what happened. Robert was too busy speaking to follow Tristan Shane's unspoken prompt, and what Robert unleashed was neither gratitude nor relief.

"What!? No! Stop! That's not... That's... That's not for you! Put it down!" As he said this, Robert noticed his fist was extended, that it was shaking, that he was shaking it at Tristan Shane, and that he had advanced toward his interloping client who was now, once more, glaring at him. Robert holstered his fist in a hip pocket as he forced himself to pause, and breathe. In through the nostrils, out through the mouth.

"Please. Please put that down. That work, this room, are private. That isn't... for you. That's not..." He brought out his now limp hand and flopped it back and forth between the two of them. "...part of this. I'll create a perfect signature for you. You'll love it. I promise."

Robert had turned sideways and was now gesturing with his arms like a traffic cop, directing Tristan Shane to move along, through the door and out of the room. But instead his superstar client just stood there. The glare continued. His face clouded over, the brightness in his eyes darkened, and his head initiated a new series of nods, sharper and not at all affirming. Up came a silencing hand as he continued to clutch the drawing with the other.

"The fuck is your problem? I'm telling you. This is it." Now he was pointing at the sketch. "What did I say? Cool, strong, sexy." Now he was holding the sketch with both hands again as he gazed at it. "Just make my signature look like this, like it's made out of barbed wire veins and arteries and shit. This looks alive, like it's got a pulse. It's sexy, it's scary, it's... what I want." He trailed off as he stared at Robert's drawing. The affirming nods returned. Now he did put the paper down on the table, still nodding at it. "Yeah. This. This is my sign." He snaked a thumb and forefinger into his back pocket and fished out his cell phone. A few rapid taps on its screen as he held it over the drawing. He was done before Robert registered what was happening: he was taking pictures of the drawing. That done, he slipped the phone back in his pocket, walked over to Robert, and clapped him on the back of a shoulder.

"Cool. Get on it. I want to bust this out at the Brit Awards next month."

And then the boy-king was gone. The sound of the front door slamming shut was like a hypnotist snapping his finger, jolting Robert out of his fuse-blown stupor. What had just hap-

pened? He looked through the doorway and into the vacant space beyond. He thought for a moment of chasing after Tristan Shane to—but here the impulse went blurry and instead he turned around and stepped over to look down at his drawing, the drawing that just a little while ago had been so furtive and new to him that it thrilled him to look at it, to reach out and hold it and lose himself in replaying its consummation, this shape into that shape, slowly slowly slowly, then a rush of strokes and slashes. No one could know or understand that feeling, how good it felt.

And now—nothing. No. Worse than nothing. Robert stared down at the drawing stripped bare. He could still see it being snatched up and ravished by that snot-nosed, greasy-fingered brat. Taking pictures of it. Claiming it as his. It wasn't his. It wasn't. It. And just like that, Robert felt everything inside him turn cold and hard. He hated the drawing now, and how looking at it made him feel. It wasn't his drawing anymore, and if it wasn't his, then—a smile stretched across Robert's face as he finished his thought. He reached down to take up the drawing, crumple it into a tight little ball, or rip it into tiny pieces or set it aflame and watch it curl into ash. Or—and here he added a chuckle to his smile—all three. But before he could start, he felt his phone buzz in his back pocket. He grimaced, and pulled it out to see who was calling and whether he would answer. "Gillian" appeared on the screen and he tapped his acceptance while bringing the phone up to his ear.

"Hello Gillian."

"I was planning to call to see if there were any survivors."

"Har har. And fuck you, by the way. That really was some sort of hate crime you engineered, sending prince charming over here without a word of warning."

"I knew if I told you, you'd never let it happen. It was for your own good."

"God protect me from those trying to protect me."

"You know I'm right. In fact, I'm a genius. I just got off the phone with his manager. He's over-the-moon excited about the signature you're designing. This is huge, Bobert. This guy represents... so many... This is huge. We are celebrating tonight!"

Gillian went on like that for a bit longer and Robert didn't try to stop her. He didn't interrupt, didn't jump in with any corrections or clarifications. He just stood there, alone in his studio, in his house, nodding his head as if in agreement, but he wasn't really listening. Her eager, excited words were just a pitter-patter of sounds streaming by. She would be there soon. He was to get

ready. She was taking him some place special. It was a surprise. She was very happy and excited. He should be, too.

There was a click and she was gone. Robert dropped the phone on the drawing without looking down and walked out of the studio. He needed to shower and get dressed, but he had some time so instead of heading toward his bedroom he walked back outside and stopped at the pool's edge, looking up at the darkening sky. He stood there for a moment, trying to decide when he had decided and deciding that he didn't know. No. Scratch that. That it didn't matter. He slowly brought his gaze down and settled on Tristan Shane's billboard, trying with all his might to feel lucky.