

# **The Formulary**

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**For starters—you feel like a squatter in your own skin.**

Something feels *wrong*. Have you ever tried to brush the coat of a dog against the grain? And the word *unnatural* may have come to mind. Perhaps, *coarse*. Have you ever heard a loud scream and a thud in the adjoining apartment and opted *not* to call the police? When was the last time you looked up the word *indentured*? That's a little bit how your life feels like these days.

There are rules that you've outlined and detailed and tried to abide by in order to appease the deities, known or otherwise nameless. You go to work every cement-slow day, without fail, and you take pride in doing a job well, where there is an important distinction from actually taking pride in your job. For arguments sake, let's say you're a pharmacist. Now, you're not some pill-slinging donkey clocking the midnight shift at a CVS mortared into the middle of a large strip mall. Nor are you a researcher, some white-coat genius tinkering around with sugar pills and sickle-cell cures that look identical, playing your version of three-card monty with a test panel of doomed souls who spend their time managing pain episodes in the ER. Nope, none of that's for you. You happen to work in the heart of a small Massachusetts town founded by some original-school Europeans that crossed the Atlantic and thinned their ranks just so they could worship their deity in peace. Just so they wouldn't be persecuted. Think about that. How often do you even bother going to church anymore? How often do you skip just to catch that extra hour of sleep? How much do you even believe in God anymore?

Probably not enough to cross an ocean.

You run the town's drugstore, what those Europeans may have called an apothecary. What some of your more eccentric customers still call it. You work in a free-standing brick building painted white with a fading mural on the north-facing wall. You've actually tried to track down the mural's artist, from years back, to commission some

touch-up work, only to find out he'd hung himself in the basement of a bakery in Spokane. So no touch-up work by the original artist to the mural, which is of an old-timey clipper ship running parallel to a sandy shore. You've let the mural fall into a state of disrepair and you manage your tepid-guilt about it ever since.

You live and work in Clarkston, MA, an odd-shaped growth off the Berkshires, and when it comes to prescribing drugs, you're the only game in town. Unless you count mail order. Or the Internet. Or the strip mall wonder stores off the highway of the neighboring town where the nocturnal employees of the 24/7 Rx counters promise with their bleary eyes that no questions will be asked. So aside from those options, the citizens of Clarkston, MA depend on you to keep your walkway shoveled, door wide open, and shelves stocked with the best medicine science has to offer. The name of the store that you own and run, indecently, is Clarkston Pharmacy. No one has ever accused you of being clever.

You work the exact same shift, for years, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Saturday, closing up shop on Sunday so you can sleep through church. So you can worship at the altar of Foxboro. So you can stare at the walls. Take your pick. Each work day, you allot a half hour for lunch, generally in the back office, where you invariably eat a cold cheese sandwich of sharp cheddar on rye and a Coke. Though you find the redness of the Coke can jarring. The white script pretentious. You have a protégé of sorts, Timmy, who also has degrees in chemistry and pharmacology, just like you—though you suspect Timmy isn't long for Clarkston, starting to exhibit that small-town itch to move on. You've seen it before. You've experienced it before. And you've let the years go by saddled with your own inertia. Even if it wasn't always like that.

Have you ever zoned out while driving a familiar route, perhaps your commute or a drive to the in-laws, and weren't able to remember exactly how you got from point A to point B? You don't recall what you saw? Where did that distance and time really go? You tell

yourself you went on autopilot. Leveraged muscle-memory. Found your coping mechanism.

Are you starting to get the picture here?

One day behind the counter of the pharmacy you own, about a year ago, you concluded that you're the kind of person who would be willing to go to prison, to maybe even die, so long as it was for something that simply felt worthy of such a sacrifice. *Worthy*, not being the same thing as right or wrong, good or bad. The point being, you needed a change, which isn't to say you had any idea how to correctly go about it. Remember, no one has ever called you clever. You did know that you didn't want to hurt anybody, that much you were sure of—you've had that golden rule hardwired into your upbringing, by parents who didn't even believe in bug zappers or humane mousetraps. But at the same time, *do no harm* can be a tough maxim to work by, let alone live by, when you consider much of the world a zero-sum game. When you consider the trust the town has put in you as their pharmacist. Remember those parameters you try to abide by, well, they're itching to take a major blow if you let your cool detachment devolve any further.

Do you remember where you were when you made the first critical decision? You should. It was critical. You were in your newish house, pacing around the floor plan as though looking for doors you'd never opened before. Looking for rooms you'd never entered before. You'd been in that house for well over two years and you still called it *new*. It still felt new to you. Looked new. It even smelled new with the lingering waft of varnish that wouldn't abate. Before it was the place you called home, it was a plot of land that you hired a team of architects and builders to construct a house on that would accommodate your long-term plans. Back then, your long-term plans centered on some of the brighter aspects of the human condition—when words like *excitement* and *hope* weren't yet buried in cellar of your mind.

Not so much these days.

So this grand house that you've lived in for two-plus years has never really felt like a *home* to you anyway. And it didn't feel like a home that Sunday morning when you roamed around listlessly, wishing there was a light bulb to change or some hanging ferns to water. But you don't believe in the responsibility of organic houseplants. And all your lights were in perfect working order. You may recall, you were in the walk-in pantry when the doorbell rang. You were debating whether it was comical or tragic having so many dried goods for just one person, particularly for someone who mainly subsists on takeout and cheese sandwiches. That pantry was so damn big you could have rented it out as a studio apartment in NYC. You probably decided it was more tragic than comical.

Remember, the doorbell was ringing.

You answered the door and a man you've seen at the pharmacy before is standing there, holding a pair of dirty work gloves, wearing a tattered Celtics hat that casts a small shadow over his chip-of-mica eyes. You remember his name, it comes to you, Ray Greengrass, he's actually a regular at the pharmacy due to his problems with cholesterol that stems from both genetics and poor nutritional habits—the unwillingness to switch from burgers to salads. You haven't the foggiest what burger-boy is doing at your front door, not that you mind, it's been a slow morning and you were minutes away from picking stray popcorn kernels from the back of your microwave. So you smile and listen to what Ray Greengrass has to say. And as it turns out, he's delivering a friendly sales pitch, as Ray happened to notice your property is a bit under-attended and he's wondering if you have a guy, that's how he puts it—*a guy*. Truth is, you used to work on the property yourself but have grown disinterested over the past few months. Maybe closer to a year. And yes, Ray Greengrass, of all things, grew up to be a landscaper—you can't make this stuff up!

You invite Ray into your house, where it occurs to you that you hadn't a visitor of any kind in weeks, and even that was a contractor, who as you think about it, never returned your last call to quote prices on new marble countertops and backsplashes for the kitchen.

You and Ray take a seat in the family room, where he turns down your offer for French-pressed coffee, citing his ulcer, though overly compliments you on your high ceilings as though you sired and nurtured them into the world. You wonder why Ray isn't on over-the-counter medication for this ulcer of his. Ray is positive the room you're sitting in must have tremendous airflow. You tell him it has escaped your attention thus far. Then, oddly enough, you break into an apology for the unkempt nature of your property, the way the lawn is way overdue for a cut and grossly peppered with yellow patches of crabgrass. You apologize for the unchecked weeds that are choking away the sunlight and nutrients that the proper shrubs and rosebushes need. You apologize for the whole mess of your property as though you feel you've personally insulted Ray's sensibilities of proper lawn care and maintenance.

Have you ever been caught sneaking a smoke by someone you've known to survive lung cancer? Your apologies feel something like that.

Ray is caught a bit off guard by the profuse apologies and is probably wishing for that cup of coffee, ulcer be damned, just to give him a distraction from your steady gaze. He's probably wishing he just drove right by your house and didn't have the bright idea as to grow his landscaping business, one client at a time, grassroots-style, no pun intended. The two of you have gone quiet and there isn't so much as a ticking clock to fill the void. You don't believe in the responsibility of spring-operated clocks. Every time piece in your house is electric.

And in that silence, in the company of this stranger, your rebellious little idea comes to be.

You get up from your chair and sit next to Ray on the couch. You confide in him that despite appearances, money has been tight lately due to the fact that your mother in Corpus Christi has ESRD and is on a three-times-a-week dialysis regimen and you wire a considerable amount of your money to her to defray the cost until she's eligible to be Medicare-primary. You tell Ray that she's not well

enough to work and COBRA insurance only covers so much and none of this stops a bank from wanting its monthly payment. Ray dips his head in a form of condolence, where he can almost see his reflection in your thirty-thousand dollar imported hardwood floors of Brazilian cherry. The kind of floors you have to have professionally sanded and shined every two years.

You tell Ray that your mother isn't long for this world.

Then you propose a trade of sorts, what those original-school Europeans may have called a barter. You ask Ray to tend to your property once a month and in return, you'll provide his cholesterol medication free of charge. Ray takes a moment to reflect on this offer and can't help but look a touch befuddled. *How?* he eventually asks. Not the landscaping bit, the part about the free drugs. You explain to him that pharmaceutical companies are always dropping free supplies and inventory your way, in hopes of promoting more business and expanding into new member markets. You tell Ray that it's at the discretion of the pharmacist how these samples should be allocated. You say there is absolutely nothing illegal about it. You remind him that the pharmacy belongs to you, the sole proprietor. You explain to Ray that he could save hundreds, if not thousands, on co-pays and out-of-pocket expenses and all it's really going to cost him is a couple of hours on a random Sunday to keep the property looking *curb-worthy*. That, and to be honest, you don't have high expectations when it comes to lawn care anyway.

It doesn't take Ray long to agree on the proposal. You actually shake hands like two business men striking an accord.

So that's how it began. You invented a sick mother and prattled on to your new, best buddy about some kidney illness and pharmacopeia-jargon and ended up with the best looking property in the entire township. In fact, as you continued to keep up your end of the bargain, and Ray kept receiving his Tricor on schedule, you noticed just how serious he was treating the arrangement. You may not have cared that much as to the state of your property, but Ray did. It was

evident in the way the azaleas looked. How perfectly manicured the crawling ivy was. The calibrations to your irrigation system. That must have been around the time Ray got around to crunching the numbers and realized how much money he was going to save over the course of his lifetime if he did right by you. Ray was a businessman after all; he owned that small landscaping company, so he was well-versed in the concept of keeping the golden goose satisfied.

The only thing that Ray didn't know was that there were no free samples protecting his blood vessels from dangerous plaque buildup. And if there were, certainly not enough to cover the dosages he required. *You* were paying for his medication straight-up, replenishing the coffers of the business with your own money, careful to keep the pharmacy's balance sheet on the up-and-up and reconciled to the penny. It was, after all, your business. So in the end, whether it was a fictitious mother with renal disease or a burger-eating landscaper from Taxachusetts, you were out a few grand each year. Either way. The money wasn't the issue at hand.

### **It grew from there.**

People would come into your pharmacy for their arthritis medication and fish-oil pills. For their beta blockers and cough suppressants. The manager of the local grocery store, Tedward Adams, would swing by for his nicotine gum or patches or whatever smoking cessation tool de jour he was attempting that week to kick the habit. Tedward Adams, the town grocer, Ted to his friends. The thing about Ted was that he survived the first Gulf War where he achieved the rank of specialist and actually received a Purple Heart for breaking his arm during military conflict on his second tour of the Middle East. Ted would tell you it was more of a skimmerish, but that's just him being modest. He'd joined the army as a non-smoker but the general boredom of wartime turned him into a pack-a-day-man. *The boredom of wartime.* These were Ted's words.

Ted's about your age, give or take a year, and you've thrown



darts with him on occasion in the local bar that catered to the pub-dart crowd. He'd always win and you'd share a joke that he'd missed his calling as a sniper for Uncle Sam, which always garnered a chuckle. Eventually, you'd have to decide whether Ted could be trusted to participate in your silly little scheme. It wasn't like you were giving away Pez candy. Even if these people *did* have scripts from actual doctors. It wasn't like you were necessarily stealing because the product was getting paid for one way or the other, but you also weren't asking how the other side of the equation was making good on the stuff you wanted. And that's an important distinction to understand, seeing as how the reciprocity you asked for in return was always based on want, not need. If you ever needed something, you paid for it, easily. But if you wanted something, like a suit altered or your car simonized, well, that was a different story. So you had to find people who could accommodate these wants who could also be trusted, who could put skin in the game and not rat you out to varying governing boards of medicine. Or worse, the Clarkston Chamber of Commerce. Eventually, you make your decision and speak with Ted outside the pharmacy for a few minutes and soon enough your weekly groceries, which are modest at best, are being delivered to your house every Saturday morning by the seventeen-year-old clerk named Jackie, who you tip generously because you happen to know his mom is HIV-positive due to a tainted blood transfusion from back in the day before they knew how to check for such things. Now Ted feels much more comfortable about quitting smoking because he's not spending thousands of dollars a year to shake the proverbial monkey off his back. And you don't have to traipse down those aisles of the grocery store anymore, stocking that pantry like it's the end of days.

You and Ted still play darts when the stars align, only now you notice how much closer the games are. How you even seem to manage the occasional victory. This is what Ted would call a, *soldiers-coincidence*.

## Months go by.

You want to dissect a typical week now that those months have gone by? You want to take an inventory of all the progress you've made? Well, here it goes. You wake up, bright and early on a Monday morning and walk to work because it's autumn and the pharmacy is only 1.4 miles from your house. You stop in at Roasters, the Clarkston coffee shop, and trade glances with the barista who's scrubbing down a counter while foaming milk for a latte. Both tasks are temporarily abandoned to serve you a large coffee, black with an Equal and a *have a blessed day*. No line, no waiting, no register, no payment. We'll be seeing you tomorrow!

That costs you some birth-control medication.

You work your shift at the pharmacy, without fail, sometimes in front of the computer for hours at a time if Timmy is manning the counter. You pour over screens of inventory and account records for anyone who may be delinquent on receivables in excess of thirty days. Over the past few months, the pharmacy's inventory and financials have grown, noticeably. It's getting tougher to balance all the math with your outdated accounting software and hand-scratched notes. It occurs to you that a true accountant may be required. But not just any accountant; one who will be willing to swap services for handfuls of Kepra to keep their seizure disorder in check. Or erectile medication for obvious reasons. You're not too worried. You'll find somebody that knows how to keep a secret, that knows a good thing when they hear it. You just prefer they have completed their CPA exams.

You're fully aware just how tenuous this thing is becoming, how it could fall apart at any time. That there are now so many people involved, so many moving parts. But you try to frame it as a team effort. If everyone pulls their weight, things will work out for the best.

However. Have you ever built a house of playing cards? Have you ever even bothered to try? And if you have, were you ever really concerned with it falling down? Probably not. Because the truth is,

you don't stop building *until* it falls down.

Anyway.

You eat your cold cheese sandwich and sugar-bomb can of Coke in the back office, all compliments of Ted Adams, who is still keeping you flush with free home delivery of perishables and toiletries. You got Timmy dealing with the customers and you wonder how hip he is to what's been going on in the pharmacy over the past few months. You've been doing your best to keep him in the dark, uninvolved, to insulate him from something that may be considered less than ethical, if not nefarious, depending on your moral standards. Timmy's twenty-four years old and seems pretty clueless to you regarding the comings-and-goings of the business, more concerned with his failing fantasy football lineup and whether he should pursue a full-fledged relationship with a woman seven years his senior, who's taught him a thing or two in the back parking lot of a Portuguese wine bar some three towns over. How do you know all of this? Well, you've traded Valtrex with the very same woman for some gossip and maintenance on your home router system. What can you say? Small world.

Once it's 6 p.m. on Monday and your shift is over, you head to the gym where your membership has been comped in perpetuity provided the manager receives the most potent muscle-building supplements that can be legally prescribed. Nothing illegal—you're a pharmacist, not a drug dealer. So you tell yourself. And since you've entered into the manager's life, he can now dead-lift twenty more pounds and has noticeably less joint pain. He affectionately calls you Chico for reasons unknown.

After the gym, you probably go home and order a pizza and watch Monday night football because you're not clever enough to think of anything else to do. Or maybe you just really love pizza and football. You have this souped-up cable package that broadcasts every out-of-market game, including the ones abroad. The hook-up didn't cost you a thing, just some Ambien. The pizza you order has extra peppers on it and is delivered by an acne-riddled teenager of questionable intelligence who may have already hit his apex of

professional achievements. He consistently butchers the amount of change you're owed. Which is irrelevant because you invariably give him all the change back as a tip, regardless of the denomination of currency you're paying with. You also drop the occasional tube of Retin-A on him, gratis.

You pay for your pizza because you haven't struck a deal with the pizza shop owner; apparently she lives a medication-free lifestyle.

The rest of the week doesn't actually feel so much different from that Monday. Maybe you drive to work if the weather is bad. You haven't paid for an oil change or gas in months. Your car has never run better. The mechanics are an absolute delight when they're getting their baggies of Nexium every other Friday afternoon. Maybe on a lark, you don't feel like your usual lunch, so you frequent a local restaurant and order off the menu simply because you can. The busboy fills your water glass in record time. *Because you fill his diabetes medication.* The waitress will treat you like you're the only soul in the establishment. *Because her soul is dependent on anti-anxiety pills.* The chef meets with you personally to discuss the preferred temperature of your salmon. *Diabetes also.* The bill is ultimately waived since the owner is into you for prescription-strength deodorant and you help yourself to a mint-flavored toothpick and head back to the salt mines.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be picked first in gym class? To get that promotion at work? To be the unanimous homecoming queen? To get your kids to go to bed after they're asked only once? All of this is something like that.

Imagine a growing number of townsfolk becoming dependent on you for their free medication. Imagine everybody trying to keep the same secret for fear of butchering the cash cow, slaying the golden goose. And there you are, still trying to abide those boring, old parameters—doing no harm and working your shifts and keeping the pharmacy whole and providing Timmy with plausible deniability. You haven't used an ATM in weeks. You barely need cash any-

more. You have an awful lot of best friends now. You're still looking for that accountant. You still suck at pub darts. And despite all this, you're still pacing around those Brazilian cherry wood floors most weekend mornings, looking for that door that's never been opened, debating with yourself whether you're actually helping the citizens of Clarkston, MA. Debating whether it's still about you or is now about them. Wondering if this will turn out to be a cautionary-tale or praised as gospel.

In either case, it's not enough. It never is.

### **Things devolve.**

Eventually, a weekend comes around where you spend a Friday night in a holding cell for fighting with a drunken sheet-metal worker over some perceived sleight. You haven't thrown a punch since your undergraduate days. But you instigated this fight. The deputy on duty owes you for quite a few doses of penicillin to clear up a smattering of the clap from a recent guys-trip he took to Iceland, to the Reykjavik club scene. He self-diagnosed himself on WebMD and preferred to address the burning sensation during urination sans wife and primary care provider. He was looking into back-channel solutions and *your* name came up. You figured if the cop was going to approach *you*, the smartest play was to go along with it. And it eventually paid off as the deputy booted the sheet-metal worker to the curb advising him to forget any of this happened.

The deputy offers to drive you home. But you decline. You opt to stay in the holding cell overnight. You choose the eight-by-ten space. You were kind of arrested, after all. So you tell the deputy you want to keep up appearances.

You leave the next morning with a new experience under your belt, though perhaps not the kind of thing you'd look to repeat any time soon. The sheet-metal worker chipped one of your bicuspid and you'll need to see a dentist at some point. You leave the jailhouse and the early morning air feels like an ice bath meant to tamp down a fever. The sun comes down in splotches as though it were a rash

on the Earth's surface. You're a bit unsteady. After a night of sleeping on a metal, rollaway bed, your neck and back feel twice their age. Your legs are exponentially heavier, sluggish. A cab takes you home and the thought of sleeping in your own bed isn't an unwelcome proposition. You're almost tempted to smile at the simplicity of the notion. The comfort in it. Then you get home and the fog starts lifting but there's no one there to greet you and no messages on the machine and no clocks to wind so you decide instead to sleep *under* your bed on those hardwood floors you had custom installed. After a few hours of that nonsense, when your back is throbbing and you should probably empty your bladder, you curl up against the bookcase in your home office and find yourself in a reflective mood. You've got the blinds drawn and only some slits of light penetrate the darkness of the room. Your house is quiet and still, like some forgotten mausoleum. These are optimal conditions for self-retrospection. You decide that it's pretty ridiculous to pick a fight with a guy in a Home Depot. Even if you're not clever, it still smacks too much of unoriginality. If you continue to pursue that thread, what would be next? Would you frequent a prostitute and not pay her? Hide in the woods and scare teenagers chugging beer around poorly constructed bonfires? Drive to Delaware and hire homeless people to act as your roving, satellite bodyguards in some sports book? This is what happens when you stray from the parameters. This is what happens when you lack creativity.

Eventually, after you've punished yourself enough, you lay down on your king-sized bed blanketed in sheets with a thread count as never-ending as pi.

You fall asleep.

**Time continues on like this, though without the fisticuffs. You** expand your network and incorporate an accountant and dentist into the mix. You get your books in order. You get the tooth fixed. That house of cards is growing larger and larger, but amazingly, the secret remains intact, no one's revoked your license and thrown you

before some disciplinary committee. It's hard to explain, to reconcile. You just have to conclude that no one is interested in ruining this thing that's working to their advantage.

It all feels very American to you.

So you stick to your schedule and your parameters and the Golden Rule and binge-watch more television than one person should. You've become a bit of a hermit, a recluse. Even Timmy seems a bit worried for you, going so far as to invite you out to knock back a few beers, something he's never suggested before in the interest of professional boundaries. Or because he's gearing up to leave the pharmacy. Or maybe he's just never really liked you. In any case, you politely decline. But interestingly enough, Timmy presses you, taking more liberty than he's shown in the past. He wants to know what you've been up to. How things are going? Why he hasn't seen you bopping around town over the past few weeks, aside from at the pharmacy? He reminds you that a few months ago you were quite the man about town. He truly wants to know. But you want to preserve that deniability you've cultivated for him; you don't want him paying for your mistakes. So you just tell him you've been busy, preoccupied. But it's clear he's not buying it and isn't going to relent until you offer up some elaboration. So you think to yourself. And you tell him the first lie that pops into your head. You tell him you've taken an interest in modern sculpture and that's where all your free time's been going. He looks at you suspiciously, raises an eyebrow, questions you about it. You tell him you've converted your basement into a quasi-studio and just recently learned how to properly handle an acetylene torch. Timmy looks genuinely surprised, impressed. He says he'd love to see some of your work sometime. You thank him for his interest, but tell him you're not ready for that. You're just getting started. But maybe, once you can perfect the art of working with vacuum tubing. All of this finally seems to satisfy Timmy, sate his curiosity, so he leaves you alone. And you're vaguely impressed with the ingenuity of your lie. Perhaps you're not entirely un-clever. Then you wonder what it would be like if it wasn't a lie.

So that night you began your stint as an amateur sculptor of modern art.

**The first thing you realize about turning this lie into truth is that** you'll need parts, all sorts of parts that will lend different textures to the things you want to create. It's not like you were going to learn how to chisel down a chunk of marble into Michelangelo's *David*. You wanted this to be *modern*. So you need the kind of parts and materials that one would typically purchase with cash, check or credit.

However, months and months of bartering have left you mostly averse to using your billfold to pay for stuff. In fact, aside from your mortgage payment and property tax bill, which are mostly for show anyway, you haven't been paying for too much around the town of Clarkson. So you start to ask around. All kinds of people owe you all kinds of favors and, honestly, they're more than happy to help out where they can, provided their supply of medication doesn't run dry. Besides, it's not like you're asking for anything expensive. In fact, most of what you're soliciting is worthless junk. So your guy at the phone company hooks you up with some spools of curly cord. Ted Adams, over at the grocery store, gives you all the thin, wooden produce crates you'll ever need. The junkyard manager becomes invaluable, most recently laying some refurbished rebar on you. Your electrician gives you some sautering wire. Lends you an old sautering iron. You score some PVC piping from a droopy-eyed plumber battling ulcerative colitis. Decorative glass and ornamental bobbles from an arthritic antiques dealer. More light bulbs of varying shapes and colors from the hardware store owner than you'd ever possibly need. Bolts of fabric and sewing materials from the menopausal dress-shop manager. Are you getting the idea yet? You basically get your hands on whatever new, used or damaged materials you can barter with prescription medication.

So really, who's getting the better end of the deal in this equation?



After a few weeks of gathering these resources your basement has transformed from an under-utilized rec room into a pseudo-junkyard filled with materials and tools like ceramic saws and hydraulic nail-guns. On your lunch breaks back at the pharmacy, between your bites of cheese sandwich and sips of Coke, you sketch out ideas of what you want your sculptures to look like. You map them out, not wanting to dive into this endeavor unprepared; you want the effort of forethought to guide your hands through this process. You start to look forward to 6 p.m. so you can get home and commence bashing and melting stuff in your basement. You open windows for ventilation. Add additional lighting for visibility. Station fire extinguishers within striking distance. One of those evenings, you teach yourself, with the help of some online videos, how to safely use a blowtorch behind the protection of a heavy welding mask. On that day, maybe for the first time ever, that house you live in actually felt like *home*. Stripping off the hot mask. Taking the cool shower once your building session is over. Something is clicking; somehow you're forming a kinship with the house—through, of all places, the basement.

So you keep going, you stay at it, building and making mistakes and rebuilding and nicking up your hands and generally making it up as you go aside from those crude sketches and online videos. Despite your zealotry, you take your time. You're not trying to break any speed records, and besides, you're enjoying this time in the basement and haven't really anything to run off to anyway. Now the smell of bubbling, burning plastic seems forever lodged in your nostrils and you can feel the literal grit of manual labor lodged under your fingernails. You can see why it would appeal to some people. You're not going to quit your day job any time soon to work with your hands, but those hours in the basement building the dexterity and finger strength into your hands continues to mean more and more. You keep at it. Until one day you've reached the point of constructing a fully operational swinging joint, an elbow, from a piece of rain-gutter that pivots off a brass joint that's nailed into an old

coffee table leg. You use the parts from an old microwave-carousel to allow a head to turn from left to right and back again. One of your statue's knees are mostly the remnants of an old pulley system from some ancient gym equipment. You continue to develop and refine these mechanics, which requires trial and error, which is fine, since it's not perfection you're striving for. Your life has been governed by the principles of chemistry for as long as you can remember. Now all you care about is physics. You care about torque and mathematical ratios. About drills bits and crescent wrenches. You don't care that as the statues take form, they're able to move their parts in ways a human could never achieve. That their clothespin fingers can rotate three-hundred and sixty degrees or have the properties of double-jointedness throughout varying body quadrants. That their heads can rotate like owls and ankles can fold into themselves.

You're not re-creating man in the image of God after all. This is something different.

After weeks and weeks of scrapping these statues together, after weeks of breathing in noxious fumes and catching your thumb under the business-end of a ball-peen hammer, you're finally satisfied with their construction. They've been built soundly and possess a legitimate builder's integrity. Perhaps more importantly, they're beautiful in your estimation. They are beautiful in your eyes. But you admit that something is lacking. You've missed something that leaves them, somehow, incomplete. Something your sketches didn't account for. It doesn't take long to figure out what the oversight is. But in the vein of expediency, you also admit to yourself you need the expertise of someone else. The previous patience you'd worked under has evaporated under the close proximity to the project's completion. The proverbial finish line. You need to involve a certified electrician. Fortunately, you already have that relationship in place. He's the guy with all the sautering equipment and technical know-how. And yes, your electrician's name is Jacob Goodspark.

So one day you invite Jacob down into your basement and explain to him that you want your statues hooked up to a power

source. You want them *juiced*. You tell him you want them to shine. And you quickly see the confusion in his eyes. Or is it revulsion? You show him that you've retro-fitted the room for bulbs and lights and coils of wiring that need to run through their bodies and carry an electrical current to illuminate the statues. That you'll want to tap into the house's power-supply. *Your home*. That maybe a small battery, perhaps from a lawnmower, can go where the kidneys would normally be to provide a redundant power source. Jacob stares at you for what feels like a long time until he finally says, *I thought you were a pharmacist*. You tell him not to get bogged down with labels and get cracking on lighting these puppies up. Which he does without fail. He's got too much free anti-fungal medication riding on this relationship to let you down, even if he is clearly creeped out by the assignment. So over the course of a few weeks, during his spare time, Jacob comes over and wires the statues with a pluggable, energy-source backup and complimentary battery reserves. He bundles the wires with tie-wraps and lays them through the arms and legs and chest like a circulatory system, taking care to enclose them cleanly and eliminating any slack that could get caught in one of the many moving parts. It is very evident that Jacob takes great pride in what he does, in what you've asked him to do, even if he doesn't really understand what you're on about. He even vacuums the basement when he's done. When the job has been completed to your satisfaction, you send Jacob Goodspark on his way, with a hearty thanks and a case of hard-to-procure craft beer the local liquor distributor dropped on you a few weeks back. Plus the anti-fungal meds.

Before Jacob leaves for good, you tell him to forget whatever it is he thinks he's seen in this basement. Which, from what you can tell, he's happy to oblige.

So now you charge the statues up and in the darkness of your basement, the windows now spray-painted black and the lights turned off, you watch them twinkle into existence. The icicle-lights you've used as hair. The big, red bulbs that burn from their chest cavity, meant to resemble a heart. The tiny filaments that glow where

eyes would be, locked into the sockets. All of these lights churning and oscillating at different intensities, illuminating their personalities in unique ways, much as their individual mechanical movements do. This is what was missing, what your schematics lacked. The construction gave them form. But the light gave them life. You sit back, pleased, your spine flush to the cement wall of your basement, fiddling with a pair of needle-nose pliers, watching your four creations hum with electricity, learning the patterns of their twinkle-twinkle lights and staring deeply into the haze of those burning, red bulbs semi-hidden behind the patchwork of sheet metal and make-shift ribcages. You spend the entire first night with them in the basement, falling asleep on and off against that cold concrete, awash in their glow. Watching them while awake. Them watching you while you sleep.

Or so you imagine.

### **We should take a moment to clear the air.**

So what exactly have you been waiting for? Did you think the pharmacy-pyramid scheme of yours was going to topple, that the house of cards would fall? Have you been waiting to get busted? Maybe this will happen and maybe it won't. How about the money? You must have asked yourself how you've been funding this enterprise. That has to be one of the most persistent questions of this entire endeavor. Well, set your mind at ease, because the money is never going to run out, ever. You could supply Clarkston with free medication indefinitely and it still wouldn't put a dent off the interest payments you receive from the bulk you inherited when the bloodline above you hit a tragic snag. When you were bequeathed the kind of wealth that compounds faster than the Treasury can print new currency. This was more than a few years ago on the West Coast, and you needed to start over with your degree in chemistry and windfall that was forever tainted because you didn't want the bloodline to sever. You didn't need or want the money at that cost. At any cost. But it happened just the same.

Massachusetts seemed as good as any place to start over.

Your first instinct is to be swayed by the money. To blaze a different trail than the one you took. Don't fall prey to that notion. Those four sculptures in your basement don't mean anything less to you than if you were flat broke, the eldest of seven children that survived from a polio-ridden family that had ties to the Teamsters and communist sympathies. The money is the lowest common denominator—it's a crude tool, at best.

The question is, do you want to know what happens next? Or has knowledge of this wealth instantly hardened your heart? Or maybe, just maybe, you're still holding out for hope? For that happy ending?

No promises.

**You injured yourself. You broke your ankle when you fell off a** ladder trying to remove a stray branch that got caught up in your roof's satellite dish that's been obsolete since you got the premium digital package. You were feeling lazy and bored and maybe a bit despondent that day and perhaps that had something to do with your foot slipping from the fourteenth step of the ladder. Or maybe that's just what happens when you mix ladders with gravity. So you fell and broke your ankle and crushed your cell phone under the weight of your crumpled body, twisting in pain on a bed of wet, mucky leaves. Your house is built on the kind of property where you'd need a bullhorn for someone to hear your cries for help. You were on your own. So you crawled and hobbled back into the house and called the police, who sent an ambulance to squire you into the emergency room of the local hospital. You're treated very well and provided almost concierge-like attention, though you suspect the lipotropics you supply the admitting nurse has something to do with that. You're ultimately told it was a clean break and are quite lucky not to have landed on your head, that from that height, your *accident* could have been fatal. You'd like to feel more gratitude, but the pain from the fall is pretty excruciating and you're not-so-patiently waiting for the

Vicodin to kick in. The Vicodin they reluctantly gave you. Then they boxed up your foot in a cast and sent you on your way with a pair of those weightless, aluminum crutches and some scripts for the pain. You end up calling Timmy to give you a ride home from the hospital because you really can't think of anybody else to ask. The first thing Timmy says when he sees you is, *dude, you've got to be more careful*. Apparently, Timmy is now comfortable calling you *dude* once you're infirm. He also asks about your modern art projects. You fall asleep sitting shotgun in his Acura coup.

You spend the next morning or so hobbling around your house, getting used to the crutches and being an invalid and it feels weird not being at work, but you figure you'd better take a day or two off to convalesce and Timmy can handle the place in your absence. So you gimp around your big, empty house, trying to navigate stairs and take a shower with a garbage bag around your cast. You still eat your cheese sandwich, though you toast it in a pan. You drink a glass of Coke. You stare at the empty plate and lament not developing more hobbies as a younger man. You make it down into the basement and hang out with your lifeless sculptures, positioned in the exact same place you left them in the day before.

As if you were expecting otherwise?

Then you pop a Vicodin for your ankle pain.

You start moving your statues upstairs, which won't be easy because you're half-crippled and there's enough metal in each one to weigh at least thirty to forty pounds. With all the moving parts and general awkwardness of their construction, it's a small miracle you can get the four of them up without breaking your other ankle. But you eventually do get them out of the basement, not without a considerable amount of time and effort, complimentary pain, so you swallow two pills with a glass of orange juice with extra pulp and take a nap. When you wake up, you set your sculptures in the family room, putting them on the loveseat and in the rocker and even propping the smallest one Indian-style atop an antique-looking ottoman you got from Restoration Hardware two years back. You plug them

all into the room's outlets and they blink and glow anew. You sit on the couch, next to the one sculpture that you imagine would have soft hands and a stern, maternal glow about her. If it were alive. If it were a *she*. You stare into its chest cavity, where the red bulb is, where the heart isn't. You look at all four of them. You sigh and go to the fridge and get that carton of orange juice and proceed to finish off the entire bottle of Vicodin and you wonder what it will be like. Then you fall asleep and the last thing you remember is that your ankle feels, oddly enough, great.

So there you have it.

Perhaps this is what you've been waiting for? If you weren't going to get caught and the money was never going to run out, perhaps it was just a waiting game until you punched your own ticket? Maybe this was the only logical conclusion to your rebellious, little scheme. The only way to escape your *parameters*. But did you really think you were going to get off the hook that easy? You can forget that notion, pill-pusher. You didn't die that day. You barely scratched the surface. Because about ten minutes after you fell asleep and the pill bottle slipped from your hand, Ray-fucking-Greengrass showed up at your door to do some touch-up work on the property. He saw your car in the driveway and figured you were home recouping, as news of your ladder fall had spread across town. He figured he'd stop in to pay his respects and fire up the weed whacker to clear out some perimeter overgrowth. Imagine his surprise when he looked through the oversized bay windows that flood your family room with natural light to see you slumped on the floor surrounded by what looked like a bunch of flashing robots. Or were they large Transformers toys? Either way, cast around your ankle, empty pill bottle, not moving an Earthly inch.

Ray calls 911 on his cell, and you're back in an ambulance, spirited away to have your stomach pumped in the same hospital where you got your ankle wrapped. This time you're assigned a case worker and clearly won't be given anything to manage the pain, ankle or otherwise.

Before your initial psych evaluation, you ask your case worker to call Timmy and inform him he'll have to mind the pharmacy for a few more days.

**So you spend a few days in bed or shuffling around the hospital**

in your threadbare gown, your emperors' clothes. In your cotton slippers. Well, slipper—you've still got that cast. Those crutches. Everyone's got their eyes glued on you, not that you can really blame them. The literature is overwhelming. Those that attempt suicide are still vulnerable in the following days, the *if-you-don't-succeed-at-first* crowd. The ones that aren't cries for help. It's in those immediate days after the first attempt that the seed of life or death will be planted. Not dissimilar to the importance of finding a missing child within the first forty-eight hours, so holds true for the individual whose neck didn't snap or lungs succumb to the carbon monoxide.

You end up doing a lot of talking with strangers, doctors, nurses, your case worker. They all ask you a million questions and the truth is you're not particularly interested in answering any of them. You tell them you need to get home, there are clocks to wind, houseplants to water. That your robots are probably still plugged in. This kind of talk doesn't help your argument to leave, since your kind of being held at their discretion. You really can't believe the pills didn't get the job done and Greengrass just *had* to show up exactly when he did to manicure your property. The words *dumb luck* seem like an understatement. You end up having a few random visitors over the days as news gets out: Timmy, Greengrass, fellow conspirators in the pharmacy-pyramid scheme. They all want to know the same thing. *Why?* Some are too polite to ask, constrained by New England manners. Others aren't. You don't offer any guidance. Timmy brings you up to speed with how the Bruins and Patriots are doing. He tells you a lot of people have been coming by looking for you, though aside from that, the pharmacy is doing fine. He tries to cheer you up. They all do. They all have their different methods. But at this point, you've had enough of the questions and the boredom and not being



at work. That's actually one of the things you're starting to miss, the routine of work, the townsfolk at your counter.

Enough days finally pass where the medical personnel pretty much have no choice but to release you back into society on your own recognizance. They can't watch you forever; they can't babysit and hide your belt and shoelaces for the remainder of your adult life. You've told them what they wanted to hear, mostly—only lying when you needed to, only being your fake-self when you had to be. You tried to be honest, but you wanted out of that place. You wanted to put the embarrassment and the pound of flesh in the rearview mirror. You knew you weren't going to try a stunt like that again. Even if those few days of close supervision hadn't changed your heart completely, you figured you were still on this planet for some reason. It wasn't like you had on rose-colored glasses and the hospital food tasted like home cooking, but you were ready to go home and put on a pair of jeans, to lie on the couch and read about patent expirations and shifting drug tiers from the periodicals you still subscribe to. It was time to sleep in a bed that didn't have collapsible metal rails. It was time to watch your digital cable. And to throw the expiring eggs out of your refrigerator.

So they finally released you from the hospital.

This time, you took an Uber home.

And that first night back home is kind of weird. Your sculptures are still in the family room, though they'd been unplugged. Some furniture is askew, presumably from Greengrass rushing through your unlocked front door and the paramedics rushing you out. You clean up around the room, plug the statues back in and watch them glow fresh off their hibernation. You haven't eaten in a while and it occurs to you you're not remotely hungry. You treat that as a bad sign. You're supposed to call your caseworker in the morning. You know she'll ask what you had for dinner. So you'll have to lie about that. Another bad sign. You turn off all the lights in your downstairs and sit very still in the family room with the statues blinking around you. You don't bother to retrieve the days of accumulated mail. You

don't even go upstairs to check the phone messages on your landline you still keep out of nostalgia. You just sit on the couch in the dark, wearing those jeans you were so excited about, thinking about snowflakes and poison apple seeds. You think about the billions of tumors that lie dormant in the nooks and crannies of your species. You think about the things that can't be undone. Too many bad signs. But you do enjoy the way your robots twinkle. It's pitch dark outside, the moon obscured by blankets of clouds, and pitch dark inside with the exception of your creations.

It's so quiet in your house, that if you listen very, very carefully, you can hear the cardiac muscle in your heart keeping you alive.

This goes on for an hour until your legs fall asleep. Until your mouth turns to cotton. Until you're roused from your trance by a speck of light you can see through those oversized, bay windows — something that may be at the base of the long driveway. Actually, it looks like it's on the road leading towards the base of your driveway. Soon enough, there appear to be a dozen specks of light behind the first one, gently bobbing, soft and alive, but moving with a definitive purpose. In no time there are dozens of them, maybe over a hundred, and you've shaken your legs loose, pins and needles subsiding, and have your nose pressed to the window's glass to get a better look at exactly what's happening out there. You can start to make out the shapes of human bodies, people, carrying some kind of light, some kind of fire as they approach your giant house at a steady clip. You rub at your eyes and now there may be two hundred people advancing on your property with what looks like torches and it's not really making much sense to you at the moment. You hobble into the bathroom and splash some cold water on your face, returning to the windows to see nothing has changed. You're not dreaming this, not imagining this. There's no one's opinion to ask of in the room. To confirm what you're seeing. You look to your twinkling sculptures. Your statues. Your robots.

Your monsters.

They're coming for them.

The townsfolk think you've built a house full of monstrosities and they're coming to take them away. You tried to kill yourself and they all think those *things* have something to do with it. Enough people have seen them at this point: Goodspark, Greengrass, the paramedics. Word has gotten out. You spoke about them in the hospital. You said it was a hobby. But now they think you're a crazy person and this mob has come to make things right. They can't afford to lose you and the pharmacological value you bring to the community. They're not ready for the house of cards to topple. So they're going to do what's best for you and incinerate this modern art of yours.

You know you can't allow that to happen.

As those hundreds of torches are getting closer.

You look to the *monstrosities* that occupy your family room and know you're willing to fight to keep things as they are, that their place is here, with you. They are not the problem. If anything, they've been more of the solution than you've given them credit for. And they're not going anywhere. So you go into the kitchen and get a giant, vegetable-chopping knife that you've probably never used on so much as a carrot. You feel its weight and balance in your clenched hand. You figure it's you and your knife against hundreds of people advancing on your house, and you're still on those crutches. For the first time in your life, you wish you owned a gun. That you were a gun owner. You go back to the window to see the lead figure getting close to your door, your vision now half-obscured by panic and rage. By disbelief. You squeeze your fingers around the hilt of the knife. You think about how this has been a really weird year for you. How nothing has gone according to the loose-knit plans you kept in the back of your mind. It's all happening fast, but you think and think and think how you've gone from the town pharmacist to pariah in record time.

Those lights are starting to clog your driveway, clustering near your front door.

Your heart's beating fast, that trusty cardiac muscle, and you have to admit to yourself you're scared. Legitimately scared. You

run the serrated edge of the knife across your knuckles, gently, the hand attached to the arm you'd throw a haymaker with. You'll stab somebody with your other arm. You'll use your crutches in the fracas that's about to ensue, perhaps as spears until they're ripped away from you. You look to your statues and at the very least, are comforted to know who you're fighting for. The worthiness of the sacrifice. Until you look back at the window, ready for people to break through or batter your front door down, only to see Ray Greengrass tapping on your window, the lead figure, holding some kind of large prayer candle, vigil candle. He's motioning for you to open the front door. He's wearing the world's most benevolent smile.

That's Greengrass for you, always stopping in unannounced.

You quickly drop the knife and kick it under the couch.

Since the lights are off in your place maybe Ray can't see you so well, but there's no missing your four robots awash in their white and neon lights, illuminating the room with just enough visibility. Ray clearly sees you and continues to tap on the window and is pointing to the dozens of people filling up behind him, all of them holding some kind of candle or lantern or heavy-duty flashlight. You take a step closer to the window and are able to make out some familiar faces in the crowd; the guy who pumps your gas and the woman who shepherds the school kids across the busy intersection each morning. There's a town councilman and your cable repairman. Tedward Adams and that burly fellow that reads your water meter every month. They're all outside your house, bottlenecked in your driveway, standing on your well-manicured lawn, a phalanx in front of your big, wooden door. All of their faces are aglow in the candle light, in the soft yellow light, peaceful and benign. While your face is lit blue then red then pink then white, cut from different angles and different intervals, the oscillating patterns from the four sculptures. It's not hard to imagine how you may look to the townsfolk on the other side of your window. You're on your crutches, shadow and light running amok on your recently weathered face. Perhaps you've got it all wrong. They haven't come for your modern art. You're the

monster they've come for.

None of this is making sense to you.

But Greengrass is persistent, tapping on the window, mouthing something, saying something that is hard to hear over the din of the crowd and the thick glass in your windowpanes. You're certainly not ready to open that front door. To pay whatever check the townsfolk have congregated for. So you press your ear to the glass and strain to hear what Greengrass is talking about, something to the effect of, *we figured it out, we know what you've been doing*. You take this as a bad sign. You look at him in a confused sort of way; you put your ear back to the glass and really concentrate on what he's saying. *You've been paying for all our medication, we started talking to each other, there were never any free samples*. Oh, so they've figure that part out. *You don't need to be afraid of us, or anything*.

It feels like Greengrass is trying to talk you off a ledge and you have to double check to ensure you've dropped the knife, that it's out of sight. You notice that one of your robots is making a clinking noise you've never heard before. Moving parts. Moving juice. You look to the crowd and it's pretty clear that everybody outside has been a part of your reverse pyramid scheme. That they're the ones that have benefited greatly from the barter system you implemented and now they're outside your house because what was once a secret is no more. All of those claimants of pills and scripts and bronchial-dilators have banded together to peaceably besiege your house under the cloak of a makeshift vigil. They're here at your doorstep after your hospitalization because that first night back home is the most important, the toughest to get through. *You've done enough for us, more than we could have ever asked*. At least, you think that's why they're here. You think that's what Greengrass is saying. You suppose you can open the door and find out. Greengrass keeps tapping on the window. The robots keeping blinking and humming. You even notice Timmy a few rows back in the crowd. He's holding his cell phone up, ablaze with a digital torch. He's looking a bit tired from all the shifts he's been covering at the pharmacy. He's with that woman

who's seven years his senior. Your front lawn is trampled, though radiant in all the candlelight. Your statues twinkle and hold their respective places in the bosom of your family room.

*Come on outside, the community is here for you.* It occurs to you you'll need to give Timmy a raise. And you need to remember to order more pill-splitters. You figure you could flick the lights on downstairs, but they can see you just fine. They can see you as you are. The *real* you. You walk over to the statue you've imagined possessing maternal-instincts and run your fingers over the slightly warm metal of its face. This was more than a pastime to you, more than a hobby. *She* means something to you. You walk over to the other, larger statue, the one who you imagine taught you how to throw a baseball. And you take its hand into yours, those fingers of clothespins and broken plier pieces and appliance tubing and you shake its hand as though it were sending you off to college. *He* is more than inanimate. Then you let the crutches fall to the floor, you keep your weight on your good ankle. And you pick up the two, smaller statues and nestle their weight under the crooks of your arms. You feel their warmth. *They* are all that is good in this world. That clinking noise seems to have disappeared. Or maybe you've just stopped trying to hear things that aren't really there. You're in your family room. In your home, no longer your house. Greengrass continues to mouth something, but you don't bother to press your ear to the glass, it's obvious now. In fact, it's the most obvious thing in the world; you just wish you weren't such a slow learner. You may have spared yourself some pain. But you know that's not true either, the pain is necessary and not to be begrudged. But you do find it comical that it took your landscaper to convince you just how okay everything was going to be. And standing in your home, surrounded by your loved ones, inside and out, mechanical and flesh, you believe him.