

Oblong

Fort walked home in the rain carrying a box filled with objects that had each been desk-bound for years. He had a square forehead and a hairline which seemed to notch the top of his face into corners. The three dark wrinkles in his forehead looked like the power lines that hung tightly above him, looming over the street like braces between transformer teeth. Fort could see the climbing brackets stretching up the sides of the telephone poles like staples, far too slippery with rainwater to climb. It was a rare moment when you could really feel the blood flow through your veins.

Fort's real name was Fortunato but after about fourteen years of a miserable life he realized the true irony of the first seven letters of his name (Fortuna, the Roman goddess of fortune), and from then on went by the first four. Fort's last name was Cabral,, which means "a place of goats." For this reason, he specifically hated milk and bells and maintained a comfortable 5000 mile distance between himself and the Republic of Chile, where his goat-breeding family resides.

Since the morning, Fort had worried today would be a bad day. He was worried it would be a bad day because earlier he had nicked the inside edge of his left index finger's nail without realizing it, and had continued going about his morning. A short while later, he noticed he had gotten blood all over his work ID and his car keys. After getting fired this afternoon by his boss Frank Ramos, Fort became convinced that the spilled blood had been a bad omen and that he was destined to die in a car accident on the way home from work, hence the walk through the rain.

The tall thin telephone poles sent their voltage beneath rubber like blood beneath veins. Fort saw weeping willows bristling in the cold-water wind. They lined the other side of the road, shaking "no" with their shaggy heads like most of the customers he had tried to sell used cars to. He watched the bumpy road's center line emerge from the asphalt as yellow rectangles and disappear beneath the black at the same rate as the bumps of a hunched spine. The sidewalk squares were so uneven they weren't squares at all. Fort heard raindrops pinging off the iron mailbox and watched them sink into his red wool jacket. He

saw three unopened copies of *USA Today* in his driveway and left them there. He ignored the stone pathway that led to his house and instead sunk footprints into the already patchy buffalo grass lawn. His house was a box but except for the roof, which looked like a squished and soggy Egyptian pyramid resting over brick walls. Surrounding the white oak door were scalloped glass windows, each taller than it was wide. The lock clicked when the key turned but the door had to be pulled rather sharply to dislodge it from the frame, which had been painted too thickly in gray. He used his back to close the door and put the box on the floor and kicked off his shoes and watched the mud splatter on the seashell-colored tile floor. He didn't care.

The refrigerator shook from within with a sharp crystal collision as he yanked open the door. The door's seal lost suction and let out a moan of cold air like the tired groan of a person turning over in mid-dream. He grabbed the Hershey's syrup and closed the door with a whoosh and grabbed the peanut butter and three slices of Sunbeam white bread from the pantry. He slathered peanut butter over the top of each slice and then smushed them all together and dribbled chocolate syrup over it all (drawing what looked like a 3 x 3 pane window), creating what was effectively a triple-decker peanut butter and chocolate sandwich. His jawbone seemed a right angle with the way he chewed, and as he took a particularly big bite, his jaw muscle overextended and stiffened and cramped for a moment; he shuddered at the discomfort but quickly resumed eating. As he chewed the food up and down, his mustache—split distinctly down the middle into two lightly penciled columns of black—seemed to widen and shrink as his mouth moved. His eyebrows were perfectly trimmed into wide blocks of curly black, with some gray hairs poking around the edges. And his hair wasn't exactly pleasant to look at close up. It sort of wrapped itself awkwardly over his head like a very weak wave with little tendrils of gray interweaving throughout like lightning bolts in a black storm.

Three years ago, the guys at work started calling him Forty instead of Fort because at his fortieth birthday party, he drank two forties faster than anyone else, and then drank more to celebrate and had to be taken to the hospital against his will. He wanted to keep going. It took him a while to make friends at

the dealership and once he finally did, the bosses wanted him gone—and he was sure he had made enough sales. He was sure of it.

He walked around the house for a while, pondering his future. He first entered the study, wherein, seeing his leather computer chair surrounded by thousands of sheets of paper, he immediately felt the need to clean up the whole mess, as he might forget were he to wait. Fort started moving the paper around, trying to gather it into piles, sorting it, but was quickly frustrated knowing how long it was going to take. As he shuffled through his papers, he noticed a peculiar yellow-tinged manuscript, that of a short story that he had written almost thirteen years ago. The title was “Outside the Box,” and it was about a polymath who creates a symbolic system that maps all the meaning in the world. For a moment, Fort considered reading it, publishing it even. But he took one look at the first sentence and grew angry at a grammar mistake and crumpled the story into a ball and threw it into the corner of the cubicle room. As the storm outside picked up to a cyclonic level, the lights and the heat in the house shut off.

Fort was scared now. No light. He hated that. The dark was like a fissure of anxiety pouring over his head. Fort felt like everything surrounding him in his house was too heavy, like nothing could be lifted or moved. He felt, in short, a weightless hopelessness, like that of a ghost or a cirrus cloud. After sitting beneath the pressing weight of his consciousness for what seemed like hours, Fort grabbed the remote and tried to turn on the television but it wouldn’t power on. He took out his Droid smartphone and turned on the flashlight and found his way to the plaid blue and white couch, where he sat. He opened his phone’s Internet browser and flipped it sideways so he could watch animal videos on YouTube for a while. He opened the first video and an ad came on promoting a Republican candidate; he skipped it before the voiceover could even finish saying “Obama.” His howler monkey video came on and soon his dark living room was filled with glorious sounds from the jungle, while wisps of ghost-like light crept softly around the bone-like window panes. Eventually, after about 35 minutes, Fort grew bored of howler monkeys and wished for something else. The power was still off and it was starting to get cold. Fog was gathering outside after surging down from the mountains to the west. He opened up his phone’s music

player and began listening to Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Run Through the Jungle" and closed his eyes.

When he woke up, the power and heat were back on. He went into the foyer and brought the rain-drenched cardboard box into the kitchen and set it on the mahogany table, which had one black schoolhouse chair pulled up to it. He took off the lid and found himself bored as he emptied the box. Inside there was a clear-blue and black PaperPro miniature stapler, but it was broken. There was a copy of *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon, which Fort had begun reading; and though he had empathized with the melancholic mechanic named Wendell "Mucho" Maas, he had really only bought it because he saw a car lot on the front cover. He took out two black leather gloves, which he had put in the box to keep from getting wet and ruining the leather of the only gloves he had. Then he pulled out his old earbud headphones and iPod—he. He used to listen secretly at work by slinking the earbud up his sleeve and having it rest between his wrist and the shirt, holding his hand to his ear like he was resting his head and listening softly throughout the day. Last he pulled out a dying, or by this time dead, bonsai tree, its thin twisted trunk cracked in half and blackened in places from rot. He felt very silly for taking with him the things he did. The bonsai tree even looked somewhat salvageable, maybe some duct tape around the trunk could allow it to heal—

Right at that moment lightning struck Fort's backyard. He saw where the bolt struck the tree's trunk with fire hotter than the sun, exploding in a blast of blue and red sparks and then black smoke. The trunk sizzled and cracked as it began to tumble down slowly toward his house. With a huge smash, the tree broke through the tall orange oblong kitchen window. Glass shattered. Tree branches crashed inside the house and stopped moving three feet from where Fort stood. And at that moment Fort's phone rang.

"Who is it?"

"Stanley, from the dealership. Listen, I've been looking over these tapes to try and spot who stole that spoiler, and I noticed something really strange in the parking lot involving you."

"Really? What's that?"

“Well from what I can see it looks like your belt is completely undone and hanging, but you aren’t noticing, and you’re going around and trying to help customers but they aren’t talking to you because your pants’ button and fly and belt are undone. Somehow you manage not to bother anyone long enough for them to tell you about your pants—perhaps they were worried they would offend you—but really the reason you got fired it seems to me is that a couple of these women here with their kids got really miffed by your almost letting it all hang out and complained to Frank, and you know Frank. Anyways, I’m gonna talk with him tomorrow about this being an innocent mistake and all—I can’t believe he wouldn’t come talk to you about it first. Alright then, have a good one, Forty.”

Fort remembered that he had only undone his belt and button while sitting in his car to make room for his gut, and had forgotten to refasten them.¹ He could explain this to Frank. He might get his job back. Fortunato Cabral felt an immense amount of relief flood over him like the water flowing through his house’s gutters. And then he remembered the tree.

¹ What’s really amazing is that they didn’t fall down.