

Rockwell, a once strategically insignificant rust bucket of a town nestled near the coast of the Northeast. A town tucked deep in lush gold foliage and bordered by cold Pacific waters. A town that until a few months ago meant nobody to anybody of import. Then the giant came, a blazing beacon of life that brought something special with it. The giant, unfortunately, was a candle that burned too bright, and due to unfortunate circumstances, the innocent metal man gave its newfound life to save the town. It was an incident that touched those who saw it, a shining beacon of selflessness. For some it was but a strange day, something they'd remember and think on. For others, though, it shaped their lives, setting them on a new course. One such group were the ones closest to the giant: Hogarth, the boy who found the giant; his mother Annie and a local artist named Dean. The trio had become inexorably drawn to each other, through no small effort by Hogarth.

It was another chilly morning in the junkyard; the rising sun filtered through the trees and hit the rusted pile of Studebakers just right. The light reflected off the mirrors, sending a singular ray through Dean's window. The ray hit one of his sculptures in just the right way to wake him from his slumber. The raven-haired artist tried his best to hide from the ray, but every way he tossed and turned only brought it closer to his eyes. He groaned, tossing his blankets to the side and exclaiming to the world itself.

"I get it, I'm up!" Dean sat on the side of his bed, trying to shake his sleep.

A cool draft blew through the cracks in his run-down shack; the old girl had seen better days and would likely see worse, but it was his. Dean draped himself in his orange lounging robe; the faded zen print on the back crackled from age. Everything around him had age, had character; his surroundings were the perfect vintage to create his art. Art was his life, it's what he lived and breathed: when people looked at his junkyard, they saw trash, but he saw potential. The discarded, the refuse, all of it could be given a second life through his hands; that was the philosophy he took. Things had changed, though; the way the giant came into their lives, it brought a new source of inspiration. Dean's art was being put together to commemorate the giant; it was evidence of the misunderstood behemoth and how it touched their lives.

He shuffled his way to the kitchen, shuffling past the strewn papers and sketches to his morning salvation, the coffee maker. It was a quaint little thing he'd put together with salvage and junk, not the best looker, but you'd never find a better cup of espresso. Now if it were a standard cup of coffee, his machine wouldn't hold a candle to the Chat n' Chew; Annie worked a special magic with those machines. While he sipped his amped-up coffee, he remembered the first time he visited. He wasn't sure if it was the atmosphere or the company, but the place was comforting; the triple-stacked pancakes certainly helped. Those fluffy little pads of heaven were so nostalgic and light, it brought him back to childhood. He walked over to the window, staring out across that amber expanse. In the center of his yard sat his latest project and potentially greatest, a collection or scrap assembled into a memorial.

It was a statue of the giant who had visited him that clandestine week; it was a facsimile made of iron and wires. The eyes were assembled from leftover jeep lamps, the chassis was pounded out from flattened sheet iron. The whole thing was held together with railroad joints and machinery bolts. It was a small memorial, nowhere near the scale of the original, but you could only work in your scope. Dean took another sip of coffee, trying to think of what the next addition he would make was. Today might be dedicated to cleanup and aesthetics; it was hard to capture the rugged yet complete nature of the giant.

Bbrrriirnrng

Dean heard the ring of his phone, not something he often answered; usually his phone rang with bill collectors or annoying rich yuppies. People always were visiting him, people who had money but no creative sense. The kind of people that wanted his art to suit them, instead of taking his art at face value. Dean just continued sipping his coffee; usually those people gave up on three rings. Three rings passed and the phone was still going; the rattling bell was drilling into his mind and grating his nerves. He gripped the handle tightly between his fingers, the heat of his cup searing against his finger. The ringing wouldn't stop; it was eight in the morning, and someone wouldn't stop calling him. Dean finally relented, setting the cup down with a sigh: he walked over to the receiver and pulled it up.

"Mccopin's." Dean answered with the energy of a man who didn't get to finish his coffee.

"Dean? Your last name is Mccopin." The familiar voice of Hogarth came from the other end of the line.

"Yeah. They not teaching you to read in school? It's on the statue in the center of town." Dean rolled his eyes, leaning against the adjacent wall.

"They taught us to read. I just don't read your plaque." Hogarth had a bit of snark in his voice.

"Well, you should; there's some choice words on that thing. What's up, squirt?" Dean's body language relaxed; he was saved from another talk about money.

"Well... um. I was wondering if you could come over for breakfast today. Mom's making pancakes." There was an awkward hesitance in Hogarth's voice.

"Really. Well, she does make some good pancakes; feels kinda weird. Coming over to your house to eat breakfast." Dean had a certain slyness to his voice, like he was trying to pick at some greater meaning.

"It wouldn't be weird, and besides, you aren't eating anything nice." There was a smugness in Hogarth's voice.

“Oh yeah? I’ll have you know I’m making my own pancakes right now.” Dean didn’t want to admit he’d been called out by a child.

“Sure you are. What do you have in them?” Hogarth’s confidence was only boosted

“Well they have, um. Flour and milk and.” Dean trailed off as he looked around his shack for ingredients. “And wheat germ.”

“Come on. All that sounds nasty. Just come over for breakfast. You won’t regret it.” Hogarth snapped down the receiver before Dean could object.

Dean sighed; guess his morning music session could wait. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Annie; in fact they got along really well: it was just kind of awkward. Anytime they’d spent time together that wasn’t a city-ending crisis, he stumbled over his words. That cool and detached persona he’d cultivated would just melt away, and he’d babble like a fool. It all came down to their first meeting, that time with Hogarth and his dang squirrel. How are you supposed to be suave when a rodent’s using your pant leg as a nest?

Dean shook his head, discarding his robe and the last remnants of a comfy morning with it. He donned his signature black sweater and jeans, making sure it was clean. He took his last swig of espresso and made his way out the door. Giving a small nod of approval towards the giant as he left.

It was a quaint house, the kind of place you’d expect a full family to be living. White paint, red roof, two stories, and a small car park attached to it. It was an awfully spacious place for a working mother to maintain all on her lonesome, but sometimes, that’s the hand life deals you. She was making most of it, working her hump off for an inquisitive grade schooler. Then there was big ol’ Dean, the loner artist from out of the scrapheap.

Dean imagined himself as a misunderstood misanthrope, a man who lived for his art. In reality, that was only partially him, especially when he smelled those pancakes. The smell of a good breakfast can turn a wild man tame, and he wasn’t that wild. Dean adjusted the collar of his turtleneck, yanking it to the side, giving it that cool unkempt look. A quick glance in the window reflection to make sure his black hair was acceptably scruffy. His eyes met with the snarky glance of Hogarth looking back at him. Dean rolled his eyes with a sigh before rapping his fist against the door.

It was a good bit before someone answered; Dean was expecting the little pipsqueak when the door opened. His eyes were lowered toward Hogarth level, but when the door opened, he was greeted by the shapely curves of a woman. Dean’s gaze jumped up in a start, doing his best to avoid being caught looking at Annie’s chest.

Annie cocked her hip, bracing a hand against the door, her eyes filled with happy surprise. "Well, Dean. Good morning."

"Hey, Ann. Long time no see." Dean placed his hand on his hip, cocking his legs to a nonchalant pose.

"It hasn't been that long: could be shorter if you'd stop by more often." Annie had a sardonic tone to her response.

"Yeah, sorry, I've just been wrapped up in my project. Trying to get the giant all finished." Dean's demeanor deflated.

"That why you're not answering your phone?" Annie smirked.

"What? I answer my phone!" Dean felt like he was punched in the gut.

"Those art patrons would beg to differ." Annie backed away from the door, leaving a space for Dean to enter. "Come on in, no reason to talk in the door when we can talk over pancakes."

Once again, Dean had lost this battle of wills; Annie was a bit too determined. Dean simply shrugged, walking his way through the living room to the kitchen. He caught Hogarth sitting on the couch, snickering at the whole exchange.

"Hey, kid. Next time warn me before I walk into the doghouse." Dean whispered through gritted teeth, hopefully too quiet for Anne to notice.

"What was that, Dean?" Annie glanced back.

"Was just saying you have a lovely house." Dean gave Hogarth another biting glance before walking into the kitchen.

The house was alight with the scent of vanilla and cinnamon, but when you walked in the kitchen, it was enchanting. Dean was caught off guard; he felt like he'd just stepped foot in a bakery. Except, instead of trays of freshly baked pastries, it was a stack of buttery pancakes. The table was already set for three places; this was a premeditated trap: Annie already knew he was coming before Hogarth called. Dean collapsed into a chair, draping his arm over the back, his eyes zoning in on the spread in front of him. Tall glasses of orange juice, a spread of jams, syrups and a fresh stick of butter. Dean waited for Annie to take her seat before taking his serving of pancakes.

"So um... Annie. How did you know about the art patrons?" Dean took a sip of orange juice after posing his question.

“They come to the diner; somehow they got it in their heads that you and I are an item.” Annie fluttered her eyelashes as she said that last part.

“I’m sorry they’re bugging you; guess I should answer that phone more. What do they want so badly?” Dean took his serving of pancakes, slicing a pad of butter on the top.

“They keep talking about your statue in the center of town. It was featured on the news last month, and they want their own.” Annie took a pancake of her own.

“I didn’t know we made it on the news.” Dean chuckled to himself.

“You talked about it last week; you had the paper in your shack.” Hogarth blurted out his exclamation.

Dean rolled his eyes, trying to play off the newly unveiled fact. “I just read the funny papers, kid.”

“So what’s got you so scared? Why are you dodging these investors?” Annie looked Dean dead in the eyes.

“I don’t like people telling me how to do my art and when you get those moneybags involved, they always muddy the vision.” Dean responded in earnest.

“Have you ever actually met with one of them? You might be surprised at how hands-off they can be.” Annie’s retort was snappy.

“I guess I could give it a chance. I just don’t like people knowing where I make my art. People would be knocking down my door.” Dean took another bite of pancakes.

“Why don’t you meet them here?” Hogarth once again blurted out an idea.

“Yeah, Dean, meet them here. They already bother me night and day; what’s a little more?” Annie seemed surprisingly receptive to the idea.

“Alright then. I guess I’ll meet them tomorrow or something.” Dean begrudgingly accepted the deal.

The trio ate the rest of their breakfast with a much cheerier demeanor, the serious tone of business dissolving into something more genial. They talked about the weather, Dean’s art, and Hogarth’s school. The whole time, Dean was unconsciously wolfing down pancakes, eating a few more than he had really expected. Dean didn’t know what came over him; he never really indulged so heavily before, but there was something about Annie’s pancakes. Having an unlimited supply of them would be a dangerous thing indeed. He was just glad his sweater had

a bit of bagginess to it; the black cloth concealed the food baby he was currently sporting. He stayed and conversed a bit more, chatting up Annie while he let the mass of batter digest.

It took a bit longer than Dean expected to get into a moveable state; Hogarth had already left for school by the time he was up and raring to go. There was something holding him back, though; whether it was the afternoon malaise or the good company, he couldn't decide. Instead, he just wanted to chill, to bathe in the ambiance of the comfy household, sipping a cup of coffee as the morning turned to noon. He felt a bit guilty, he wasn't exactly working on anything, his artistic inspiration seemed to be sapped by the comfy surroundings. It was as if the harsh nature of the junkyard is what fueled his creations; he guessed he always knew as much, but he didn't feel compelled to leave. Instead he was comfortable, content with just being present around Annie.

"Enjoying the coffee?" Annie took a seat next to Dean on the couch.

"Yeah. It's the good stuff. Now I know where the Chat n' Chew gets their recipe." Dean raised the mug in a faux cheer.

Things were going well: Dean may have frozen a little bit when Annie sat down next to him, but he recovered. Her bringing up the coffee was his key to the door of smooth conversation.

"It's an old family recipe; it's all in how you grind the beans." Annie motioned towards the grinder in her kitchen.

"Didn't peg you as a fellow coffee enthusiast; maybe we could talk beans sometime." Dean chuckled, leaning back against the cushion.

"It's just something I picked up from my late husband. He really got into the whole coffee trend. He picked up a taste for it abroad." Annie sort of stared off in the distance as she mentioned him, her eyes falling slightly.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." Dean brushed the back of his neck, trying to alleviate the sudden tension in his neck.

Come on, Dean, it was going so well. You just had to push into that whole coffee subject. How could I have known that her husband was the coffee lover? It was a perfectly innocent question.

Dean's mind was racing as the awkward tension in the room started to rise; it was only a couple milliseconds, but it felt like an eternity. He was hoping she would respond, say something, say anything! He needed an out to this conversation, and it couldn't be from him. What was he supposed to do? Should he put a hand on her shoulder? On her thigh? Dean awkwardly moved his hand towards Annie's shoulder, another wrong move: she turned towards him, only to see his half-outstretched hand. Dean was stuck like a deer in the headlights, completely frozen.

"It's alright, sometimes I just think of him. Hard not to, but that was years ago. Still hard not to." Annie looked back at Dean, her hand slowly reaching towards his.

"I imagine it's hard." It was about all Dean could say.

He'd never navigated a situation like this; he was a loner for such a long time that he'd managed to dodge most grief talks. Yet, here he was now, face-to-face with a tough conversation he couldn't dodge. He wasn't sure how to take things, but Annie guided his hand, moving it to her shoulder.

"Yeah. It's been lonely too. Big house with just me and Hogarth. I spend so much time working that I don't have time to feel alone, but on my days off, it kind of sinks in." Annie leant into Dean, resting her body on his shoulder.

Dean didn't really know how to react; his loner status may have guarded him against sadness, but it made him ill-prepared for romantic situations. He knew enough to realize that this was a chance for him to make a move, though. He reached out his hand, resting it on her head, almost like he was petting her; the moment his hand touched her, he felt her relax. The pair shared a quiet moment, just enjoying each other's company and seeing where things went. For a moment, Dean's nerves had evaporated, and he could enjoy the quiet.

Brggiigngnngnngn

Both of them jumped at the sudden ringing of the phone, the quiet atmosphere shattered by a grating metallic clanging. They were so startled that they practically leapt from their seats to grab the phone. Dean tensed, ready to jump for the phone, until his brain stopped him. That wasn't his phone; he had no business answering Annie's phone. Annie patted his stomach, motioning him to take a seat, like she could sense his nerves. Annie rose from her seat, marching dutifully over to the phone, gently lifting the receiver.

"Hughes household, Annie speaking." Annie listened in on the phone, the electronic tone of another voice coming from the headset. "Mhmmm...yes...Yeah...I can arrange a time...I think I can set something up for tomorrow. Does seven work?"

Dean didn't need to hear the conversation to know what was being talked about, the topic of focus was likely Dean's work. He could tell from the way she glanced over to him and from what they had mentioned earlier. He could already feel a pit forming in his stomach at the thought of talking to business types, but he needed to agree to whatever meeting she set up. She was being called by people before the afternoon, on a weekday, so she must get flooded during the evening. Dean watched as she gave a couple more knowing nods before hanging up the receiver.

"I take it that was an interested investor?" Dean chuckled as he leaned back on the couch.

"You guessed right. There is an enthusiast interested in your art; they called themselves a patron." Annie chuckled at that last part, as if the word were pretentious.

"Oooh, a patron. Should I put on a flowing purple robe and get a funny hat?" Dean made finger quotes at the word patron.

"If you do, you better wear it to the meeting." Annie chuckled, patting Dean on the shoulder.

"So what did they want to see? Give me the deets." Dean clicked his tongue at that last part, trying to add a bit of style to his speech.

"They want to see the giant, but I know you don't want people knowing about your workshop. So we're going to have the meeting here, and maybe you could bring something more portable over?" Annie smiled, patting Dean's leg as she suggested an option.

"I guess I can whip something up. Means I gotta head back, though. Art's not made without the artist." Dean chuckled to himself, rising from the couch.

"Alright then, don't be a stranger after tomorrow." Annie got up beside Dean, walking him to the door.

"I'll try not to; can't get much stranger than me, though." Dean brushed the back of his neck before awkwardly walking out.

Dean walked back to the shop, looking back at the house with a comforted grin, waving back to Annie as he left. She may have given him a bit more work to deal with, but he wasn't exactly unhappy about the whole exchange. It wasn't until he was already down the road that he realized a hug would have been appropriate before he just walked away. He clapped his hand to his head in disbelief, shaking it in frustration as he left for home. Next time he wouldn't pass up the opportunity.

Dean had spent most of the previous day working over the metal in his yard; he had a few smaller projects that could be transported, but none were at completion. So he had to dedicate effort to just finding a piece that he could carry. That piece happened to be a small collection of tin flowers; he had made them after the fallout from the giant's demise; he had made them to comfort Annie. Like any good artist, he let the project fall by the wayside when the inspiration left him; then it sat collecting dust, waiting for an opportunity to be given life. That was until this instance; maybe it was the situation, or maybe it was due to Annie's presence, but those flowers called to him. He let the metal call to him, snipping it in ways that made sense only to him, his delicate touch shaping them into local wildflowers. The metal curled into the delicate strands of honeysuckle, the dainty curves of lilacs, the large blooms of blanket flowers all centered around a single coneflower.

Dean was happy with this piece; he'd managed to cobble together a vase from the exhaust of an old Chevy. He barely woke up the next morning, spending the whole night working away at the metal. His trip back to Annie's was heavy, feeling like he had cement in his shoes. He needed that sweet nectar of her coffee to pick him up and invigorate him; the day was brisk enough to at least keep him cognizant. The long trek seemed like an eternity, but he'd finally made it to Annie's in record time. The morning sun having only just rose when he knocked at the door.

"Surprised to see you here this early. Want some breakfast?" Annie gave Dean a warm smile.

"Coffee." Dean's eyes were dead and glassy; the energy he needed was drastically lacking.

"Yeah, I can get some." Annie nodded, leading Dean in by the hand.

Dean hobbled through the house, led by the hand like a reluctant toddler, each step getting heavier than the last. Annie let him go by the sofa, his body collapsing with all the grace of a sack of potatoes, his hand only just keeping his flowerpot from falling to the floor. Dean sat on the couch with slack jaw and lax eyes, barely alive, yet not quite dead. He was staying conscious by sheer force of will, keeping his eyelids open was a task of herculean proportions. The only stimulus Dean reacted to was Hogarth bounding onto the couch next to him, the leaping causing an accidental jab in the ribs.

"Huh? Yeah I'm awake." Dean barely reacted to the rib-shattering leap.

"Wow. You skip your coffee or something?" Hogarth settled into his seat.

"Maybe. You drink some, squirt?" Dean summoned enough energy to move the flowerpot out of Hogarth's path of destruction.

“Not yet, Mom doesn’t want me to drink it before school.” Hogarth focused at the pot on the table. “You bring Mom some flowers?”

“Nah, it’s for those investor folks. If I brought your mom flowers, I’d bring real ones.” Dean’s energy was starting to return to him as the smell of coffee wafted into the room.

“Why not these? They look nice.” Hogarth poked the petal of one of the flowers.

“You don’t bring a woman a collection of scrap metal; you bring her something colorful and pretty.” Dean waved his hand in a lazy motion, still slouched against the cushion.

“I think they look pretty nice. I’d take them.” Annie interjected in their conversation, a mug of fresh coffee in her hand.

“I’ll make sure to get some more next time.” Dean reached out for the coffee, holding the mug in his hands.

The scent was already reinvigorating him, adding some fuel to the fire in his heart, Dean could feel himself being lifted up from the couch with each sip. His posture got better, and his muscles started to function again. He was slowly becoming something that you could mistake for human.

“So what dragged you in so early?” Annie sipped her coffee next to Dean, sidling up next to him.

“For the meeting. You said it was at seven, so I’m here before seven. Art over breakfast and all that.” Dean shrugged his shoulders as he took another sip of coffee.

“It’s not until seven in the evening, Dean. You’re about twelve hours too early.” Annie gave Dean a healthy pat on the shoulder.

“Guess I got so wrapped up in working on this piece I got the times swapped around.” Dean tried to excuse his absentmindedness.

“It’s fine. Give us time for some breakfast.” Annie got up from the couch, motioning the others to the kitchen.

“So that’s what I’ve been smelling, bacon?” Dean tailed Annie, with Hogarth in tow.

Dean’s answer was provided by the spread in the kitchen, Annie had made a fair bit more breakfast than Dean would have expected. There was a whole plate piled high with bacon, some sausage, and some eggs. Dean took his seat, making note of the extra food: it was like Annie had expected him to come early.

“You usually make this much?” Dean looked at the spread curiously, grabbing some of the bacon.

“I just had a hunch you’d be over, so I made a bit extra.” Annie took a few sausages and put them on Dean’s plate.

“You think I’m a horse or something?” Dean’s smirk added his preferred level of humor to the statement, making sure Annie knew he was joking.

It really was a lot of food, though; Dean hadn’t really seen a spread like that since he was a kid: the artist life didn’t really have buffets in the picture. Dean mulled it over in the back of his mind as he ate: the warmth of the room, the full feeling in his stomach, the comfort; was this something he had been missing? While he muscled through breakfast, the topic of the room turned. Hogarth had brought up something about school, some minor gripe with the teachers.

“You can’t keep skipping class like that, Hogarth. Any more and the principal will start breaking down my door.” Annie chided Hogarth over her toast.

“It’s just so boring. I do the homework, I do well on the tests. What’s wrong with playing a little hooky?” Hogarth rested his chin on the table, staring dejectedly at his eggs.

Dean sympathized with the kid; he knew what it was like to be a bright bulb in a dull shop. Teachers were getting pretty strict these days, and sooner or later, Hogarth was going to end up suspended. Dean glanced at Annie’s distraught face, watching as she tried to reason with her son. School was a safe place, probably the only place she knew her son could be while she was at work. Dean was caught between his desires; he wanted to congratulate Hogarth for being a free spirit, but at the same time, he wanted Annie to have that peace of mind. The conversation petered out into an awkward silence, as neither really budged on their points. It was reaching that point where conversations just die and require a jump start. Just before the conversation had its last leg in the grave, Dean felt inspiration.

“Hey kid. You ever heard of malicious compliance?” Dean wagged his piece of bacon like it was a pointer.

“No? What’s that?” Hogarth’s eyes slowly lifted with his interest.

“Malicious compliance is kind of like...following a rule but doing it in a way that makes the rulemaker mad. Like if someone told you to move a box, you’d move it an inch and stop.” Dean leant back in his chair, trying to act aloof.

“I get it. Yeah. So I go to school, but just do it in an annoying way.” Hogarth’s energy picked up at the prospect.

“Bingo, just do enough where you won't get in trouble, but it will drive them crazy. Those teachers will be so up the wall that they'll be begging you not to come to class.” Dean clicked his tongue before grabbing another slice of bacon.

Hogarth nodded knowingly as the trio returned to breakfast, the rest of the morning passing by uneventfully. Hogarth went off to school, while Annie cleaned up breakfast. Dean was taking up his home on the couch, his black sweater pulled up slightly over his gut. It wasn't super noticeable, not unless your eyes were fixed at midriff level. Dean had once again overindulged in breakfast, stuffed himself silly without thinking, and he was paying the price. His stomach was as heavy as a rock, and tight as one too. The little curve stuck out on his waifish frame, and no amount of coffee was going to stave off this food coma.

Dean lay on the couch like a dead leaf, draped in odd angles, slowly nodding off. He was barely cognizant enough to hear Hogarth leave, but just awake enough to feel Annie sit down in front of him. Her hair brushed against his face, the heat of the sun filtering in baking it to an inviting warmth: she smelled like strawberries.

“So what was all that about malicious compliance?” Annie turned her head, bringing her and Dean's faces intimately close.

“Huh? Oh. It was just a little thing I thought of. I used to be a troublemaker like him, bit too smart for his own good.” Dean could barely process the things he was saying; the food must have made it up to his brain.

“And it just came to your mind?” Annie let her weight rest on the couch.

“Well, you looked worried. So I just said something I thought would help. I know when I was a kid, I would have leapt at a chance to tick teachers off without actually doing anything.” Dean's head sank further into the couch as he talked, the need for sleep finally got hold of him.

Annie was silent for a bit; it might have been a few minutes, she might have even come back and left; Dean was too food-addled to notice.

“Hmm.” Annie's response had a curt but soft tone to it, like she'd reevaluated something.

“What's hmm?” Dean cracked an eyelid to see if the answer was in front of him.

“It's nothing. Thanks for your help; I just hope it works.” The couch shifted as Annie got up. “I need to leave for work. You go ahead and take a nap; just be awake for the investor meeting.”

Annie placed a hand on Dean's stomach, resting on it for a second longer than a normal pat. Her hand lingered with a grip tighter than one would expect; it felt like she was testing him.

Her soft hand was pressed to the hard core of his stomach; it felt kind of nice. The touch was the last straw: Dean could feel himself drifting off to sleep, the world fading around him.

Dean woke up with a start, the filtering light of the setting sun tickled his eyelids, his restful torpor was broken by a sudden realization. The patron meeting! If the sun was that low, then they must be on the way! Dean leapt from the couch, stumbling forward with all the grace of a newborn deer. He could see his disheveled mess of hair in the reflection of his flower sculpture; his shirt was wrinkled and riding up in odd places. He needed to make himself presentable, at least something other than a rough beatnik. He stumbled towards the bathroom, hoping to at least get himself tidy, something that his still-bloated gut was making difficult. The wobbling curve was proving to be wholly unmanageable; he couldn't get it comfortably concealed under his sweater.

"Oh, Dean. You're here! Good timing." Annie called out from the kitchen.

In his haste, Dean dashed by the kitchen; in said kitchen, Annie was seated next to two garishly dressed individuals. Colored suits, made of expensive threads and complicated patterns; they screamed new money. Annie had an awkward and strained look on her face, like she had endured an extended awkward conversation.

"Yeaaaaah. I just ran over here; was doing some finishing touches on the piece." Dean had an awkward grin on his face as he tried to salvage the situation.

Dean scampered back to the living room with his tail between his legs; even someone like him wasn't immune to embarrassment. He tried to be aloof and apathetic at all times; it added to his air of mystique. He dragged himself to the kitchen to take a seat at the table and endure what would be countless talks about the nature of his art. The flowers felt like a prison weight in his hands, the pressure of everything that happened suddenly pushing him down. He muscled through it and took his seat at the table.

"Isn't it so rustic looking, Terrence?" The first investor chimed up, pulling at the delicate tin petals.

"It's rustic, yet soft. I can feel the warmth coming from it. Martha, look at the abrasion on the bolts; this was polished to a fine degree." Terrence leant in close, running his finger across one of the bolts.

Dean watched as both of the art connoisseurs looked over his work, dissecting it like it was a corpse on a table. They appreciated each element, but it felt gut-wrenching. To watch someone pick apart your child without looking at the whole made him grit his teeth. He was willing to endure it, though, at least to save Annie from dealing with it. He glanced to his side,

gazing over to see if he could glean the intent of her expression. She was all warm smiles and nods, making complimentary conversation; you could tell she worked in a people-facing role. Made Dean feel a bit childlike, out of his element. He was so lost in his thoughts that he almost let a question pass him by.

“...Sorry. Could you repeat that? I didn’t hear it that well.” Dean had to make up a quick lie to save face.

“I was wondering if you had any other projects? Something closer to the statue in the center of town?” Terrence repeated his question, eyes bright and beaming.

“Now Terrence, it’s not a statue. It’s a sculpture.” Martha corrected her eager partner; it was a minor distinction, but an important one.

“I do have a few projects at my workshop, but nothing that’s easy to transport.” Dean rubbed the back of his neck, thinking back to the other giant he was making.

“I see. Could we see it? Not today of course, but sometime in the future. We’d be more than willing to accommodate any requests.” Terrence reined in a bit of his eager attitude, trying to return to his more professional state.

“Ehhh...” Dean couldn’t help but hide his discomfort at the offer; to let someone into his sanctuary without reason seemed a bit of a stretch.

“He’d be happy to. Just name the time and place.” Annie did the talking for him, elbowing him in the ribs to get him to shape up.

“That would be wonderful. I just love to see how an artist really works. We can call later and arrange a time, but do you mind if we take this piece home?” Terrence reached for the flowers before Martha stopped him.

“Not without paying, of course. We would like to purchase this piece for \$1,500, if that sounds reasonable.” Martha rifled through her clutch, fishing for a pocketbook; she produced a pile of bills before handing it over to Terrence.

“Oh yes! I got so excited I almost forgot about fair compensation. Where would I be without you? Here, for the piece and also your trouble.” Terrence took Martha’s money and added a few bills from his own stash to the stack.

“This is a really generous offer. We will gladly accept it.” Annie chimed in before Dean could answer, taking the money happily.

Dean gritted his teeth; selling the art was like pulling a tooth, but Annie had already spoken up, and he couldn’t break his promise now. He watched as the trio gave some kind bows

and pleasantries, carrying off his art piece into who knows where. Dean's spirit and face dropped the moment they left the room. He could feel a heat rising in his chest, a frustration at the whole situation that he'd bottled up the past few minutes. He had been dragged so violently from his comfort zone that it was creating a panic within him.

"I think that went well. Here's your money." Annie handed over the stack of bills, a confident smile on her face.

"What was that?" Dean didn't take the money; he didn't even look at it.

"You just sold your first art piece." Annie's tone shifted slightly, a hint of fire hidden under her words.

"I didn't sell anything...I was barely there." Dean threw up his hands in frustration as he slouched against the wall.

"Someone had to sell it. If I let you do what you wanted, then my house would be hosting this little back and forth for months." Annie nudged the money closer, beckoning Dean to take it.

"It takes time to consider these things. Every one of those pieces has a little bit of me in them. If we sell them, just like that, then what's gonna be left? They're already hungry for more." Dean felt a flush in his cheeks and an uptick in his heart; he was pained.

"Maybe putting yourself out there isn't so bad?" Annie slouched on the wall next to Dean, sidling up to his shoulder.

"It's not that easy. Keep the money. I need to cool off." Dean nudged Annie away, removing himself from the support of the wall.

"Are you still coming back for breakfast tomorrow?" Annie called to Dean as he walked towards the door.

Dean didn't answer, whether he couldn't or wouldn't was another question. Annie's words stopped him in the doorframe, but he only gave her a look before leaving. Closing the door behind him and leaving off towards his junkyard. He needed to think process just what about the situation had put him so off.

Dean had barely left his junkyard that day, throwing himself into his art without a care. He furrowed his brow, the sparks from his welder dancing across his mask; that darkened visor was a good representation of how he felt. He poured those frustrations from yesterday into his metal, not thinking about the shape or form of the thing. The metal curled around his torch like a wilting flower, the edges singeing with a dark ash. He stared intently at the black creeping

upon the metal, how it danced in erratic arcs. He remembered reading an article about Japanese tea ceremonies and how they represent the soul. How making the tea represented your current state of mind: messy thoughts made messy tea, no matter how you tried. He wondered if that is what he was doing to this poor metal.

He had woken from his disturbed sleep in a haze, his groggy mind weighed down by the events of the day prior. He wanted to fully blame it on the situation of things, but he couldn't deny the impact of his dietary habits the past few days. He didn't normally eat that much, mostly subsisting on a diet of plain cereal and some coffee, whatever was cheapest or long-lasting. So when he was presented with a surfeit of calories multiple days in a row, his body feasted. All that sugar and fat, those rich grains, they found a small home on the slim spaces of his body.

His shirts didn't fit quite right anymore; his slim and toned stomach had devolved into a small overhang of pudge. A sliver of wobbling flesh that poked out from the gap between his shirt and pants. Looking at himself in the mirror made it impossible to ignore, something that he couldn't really ignore. He could hold it in his hands, wobble it like dough, but no matter what he did, it was real. Something he would have to live with for a good long while, at least until he got his diet under control.

The shirt wasn't the only complication in his daily attire, nor his only reminder of his time at Annie's. His pants were always slim-fit and tapered to his body, not on purpose; it just came with his fashion preferences. Well, when you have a slim fit and you're suddenly not so slim, the small changes become magnified. His thighs had gained a bit of heft, hugged tight enough by the fabric to cause it to bulge. These changes in physique, they were all small, only noticeable by those who took the time to notice. Unfortunately for Dean, with his current emotional state, they stuck out sorely.

He pulled away the torch, letting the heat settle, sitting back from the metal to see just what he was bringing to life. The mask he pulled up brought beads of sweat with it, as the cooler air tickled his face. He looked at the scrap metal with disappointment, angry at himself instead of the metal. He had butchered the poor scrap, letting his negative emotions run into it, this wasn't the way it should be. The metal sat on his workbench, bits curled into themselves, steel melted into steel. It was a twisted and gnarled little creation, a thing pulled from a dark dead forest. When sat next to his other creations, they looked nothing alike; they felt like they were formed by two different hands.

Dean dropped the torch, pulling off his gloves and letting them fall next to it; he was in no state to create and he knew it. He pulled off his jumpsuit, grimacing at how the zipper bulged against his stomach; he was still carrying some weight from yesterday's feast. He didn't know what to do, but being inside wasn't it; he left the clothes in a heap as he escaped out into the world. The changing foliage gave the area a burning orange glow; the filtering sun turned the lighting into something nostalgic. Dean walked past the junkyard, looking back to the giant, he wondered if he'd want someone to buy his likeness. Would he even know what was being sold? Complicated things like that never crossed his mind; he was pure, unmuddled by the

complications of a life long lived. The only thing the giant had to care for was the young boy he befriended.

He walked past the junkyard perimeter, eyes fixed on the ground as he unconsciously followed a path. The chirps of birds and the occasional call were just white noise to him, nothing that interrupted him from his rumination. Dean only looked up when he felt his feet sink into the mud; he had arrived at the lake. The small pond glittered in the morning sun, a flawless bead of simpler days, he continued down his path, walking around the shore. Dean lowered his eyes back down to the ground, watching the rocks kick under his feet. He was stuck in his own memories, letting things swirl about inside of him before a pure soul dove into his mind. He reminisced about the giant again; he remembered the time Hogarth taught him how to cannonball. Dean instinctively brushed the water from his face, just like it was that day again; those were good times. Hogarth ran into Dean's thoughts, the little conversation they'd had at breakfast yesterday.

"Why can't I get over it?" He muttered to himself in frustration, still parsing his frustrations from the other day.

The walk wasn't doing much to clear his thoughts; all it was doing was making him more conflicted. He could hear his stomach bubbling in hunger; it was about the usual time he would make his way to Annie's. He couldn't deny that he was hungry, but he wasn't going to indulge in that same level of gluttony today. He trudged his way back to the junkyard, mind still filled with all those old memories. Maybe he should have gone back to Annie's, talked things out? He hated how new this all felt. The walk back and forth from the junkyard took maybe twenty minutes, yet in that short time, he had missed something. When he arrived back at his shack, he saw the door was slightly ajar. He braced himself for the worst; he was already in a cruddy mood, so, not like it could get any worse.

Opening the door didn't reveal any grand criminal or wreckage from a burglary gone wrong; instead, there was a pack on his table. It was a bundle wrapped in some red and white checkercloth; Dean inspected it with renewed curiosity. The pack was heavy with porcelain, plates and bowls; from what he could tell, they clanked against each other while he fiddled with the wrap. The knot was loose, the cloth bunched over itself in a sloppy tie; someone had put this together in a hurry. The uncoiling cloth brought the smell of breakfast with it, rich buttery scents wafted across Dean's nose when he finally undid the whole thing. The plates inside were topped with another plate, but he could see the vestiges of breakfast inside. Tucked in the center of those clinking plates was a letter, hand-written. Dean unpacked the dishes after setting the letter aside; the treasure those plates held was more valuable than he expected.

Underneath of those green ceramics was a breakfast spread that was as large as yesterday's. This time there were waffles, big and fluffy, they were toasted to a perfect golden brown. There was a bottle of syrup and dish of butter nested in the center of the bundle; along with them were other standard breakfast goods. Toast, sausage, eggs, bacon; it was all the same stuff that Annie usually prepared. The smell of it set his stomach rumbling, but Dean

ignored it, his hands gravitating towards the letter. He recognized the writing; he'd seen it plenty of times on Hogarth's homework.

Hey Dean.

I don't know what you two fought about, but Mom's been really down today.

She was really sad after you left yesterday. I don't know what happened, but I think she misses you. I brought you some of her breakfast. Maybe it will smooth things over.

It was a short letter; can't expect a kid to give some long speech, even someone of Hogarth's intelligence. At the end of the day, he was still a kid, and he was worried; reading that letter dug a pit in Dean's gut. He felt the heat of shame crawl down his neck; how could he put a kid through that? How could he put Annie through that? Just blowing up and walking out of nowhere; to Dean it was a small thing, a warranted reaction given his hurt. He hadn't stopped to think about how it would affect them; that kid lost his dad, and maybe he'd thought of Dean as another one.

"So much for being cool and suave." Dean sat the letter down as he looked at the breakfast.

That kid put a lot of effort into dragging it all the way over here; Dean couldn't think of the proper move to the whole thing. He could go back tonight and try and talk things out, but maybe that would be too awkward. He didn't know what was going on with them; he could try and catch the tail end of breakfast with them. That wouldn't work either; it was too late, Hogarth was probably already at school and Annie already at work. The best solution, the only one Dean could think of, would be to eat the breakfast and return the dishes in the morning. It seemed like a strange decision, but that breakfast had become a sort of bonding moment between them all.

Dean rifled through his drawer, looking for the single fork he kept on hand; it was buried deep in a pile of spoons. With fork in hand, he dug into the breakfast, letting those rich flavors wash away his conflicted feelings. This could be a type of eating away his feelings, something he'd heard was unhealthy, but this was different. He wasn't eating to bury his feelings; he was using the food as a way to mend them. Each bite put another brick in a path to something better.

Dean had cleared through those waffles without realizing it, his fork scraping loosely against the clean plate, tracing lines through the syrup. They were fantastic, so good that he wanted more of them; instead, he moved over to the sausage. He brushed up the remnants of his syrup with those meaty links, enjoying the salty-sweet combination. He swiftly moved on from those to the piles of bacon he had been supplied. It was wild how Annie could keep finding all this food, but working at a diner probably had its advantages.

While Dean was digging into his meal, he wasn't completely ignorant to the changes in his stomach. The sensation of fullness had been making itself known; he could feel the fabric of his shirt crawling over his stomach. His rapidly filling belly was making its presence known, the packed potbelly stretched the waistband of his pants as he ate. The cloth dug into his bloating

stomach, denting the packed fat around it and creating a divot. It only got more uncomfortable as he ate, enough that it was distracting. He dug down beneath his waistband, slipping the fabric low so his gut could hang free. It felt like a weight had been lifted from his gut; that feeling of fullness had vanished, and he was free. That freedom made it so much easier to blaze his way through the rest of breakfast.

Finishing the meal left him with two feelings: the overwhelming urge to take a nap and a feeling of determination. He was going to take a long nap and then go to visit Annie in the morning; he'd have breakfast and make his amends.

Dean followed through with his plan; despite the wracking heat of nerves trying to pull him back to bed, he walked out the door. The pack of dishes clattering against his knees with his steps, the journey to Annie's was a bit more arduous this time around, but that was to be expected. His gut was still sloshing and shaking from his overindulgence the day prior; that blubber-covered orb was now permanently poking out from his shirt. The wobbling sphere hung over his waistband like a tiny bubble, a small ball of fat. His navel poked out from the crescent created by his parted shirt and pants; It looked out at the world like an eye in closing lids. There were the faintest hints of sagging fat on his chest, little droplets that hung down off his chest. He wasn't exactly the fittest person, but his pecs weren't normally so plush. The accumulating fat and water he was retaining were starting to turn into jostling moobs. This fat was accompanied by some new flab under his arms, just tiny bingo wings that clung to the bottom of his triceps, small in scope but noticeable to him.

This made his trip to Annie's a bit more exhausting than he wanted to admit, his breath heavier from the trip over. That's what he told himself, but honestly it was due to nerves; he'd never tried to confront a situation like this. So when he knocked at the door, he was expecting the worst. He was expecting Annie to come at him all hell and spitfire, pound him through the porch like a peg. When she opened the door, it was anything but. Instead of a verbal barrage, he was greeted with a bashful smile and a warm welcome. Like the two had never even fought at all: Dean was stumped. Annie looked a bit more ragged than usual, hair amiss and bags under her eyes; Dean could spot some red in there.

"Come in. We're just about to have breakfast." Annie grabbed Dean by the elbow, taking special care to bump against his pudgy midriff.

"Hey...you think...you think we could talk a minute? About yesterday?" Dean didn't immediately follow Annie in, using his newfound bulk to anchor him.

"Yeah. We can. Just not now. I want to wait until after breakfast." Annie tugged at his arm, pulling him back in.

Dean didn't answer; he was still so new to this that the mature response threw him for a loop. In dramas and movies there was always some big spat about something on the porch or in the open. When he took a second to think about it, he realized that was likely due to the open nature of the location. His thoughts were still off-kilter when Annie dragged him into the kitchen for breakfast. Today's spread was a bit different than the last; the normal waffle spread had been replaced. Annie had managed to whip up an enormous platter of french toast. Powdered sugar dusted over the top of them with two bowls of whip for topping. She'd even managed a whole bushel of strawberries for sides and toppings.

"Where'd you find all that? Didn't think you had any trees near the property." Dean chuckled as he took his seat.

"Mom made friends with farmer Rick a while back, so whenever he has a harvest, she can get a little on the side." Hogarth answered pretty matter-of-factly as he dug in to some ham on his plate.

"Don't tell him too much; I'll lose my inside line." Annie chuckled, heaping a large serving of toast onto the plate.

"Yeah, careful, I might start making preserves, get your mom in trouble." Dean could still turn on the quips with Hogarth around, despite his current confusion.

"You could start selling them to the diner... I think we've got ourselves a little racket going." Annie smiled before setting down the packed plate in front of Dean.

"You've already got a racket with those waffles, and now you've got french toast? Add some pancakes to it, and the cops'll be knockin' on your door." Dean was already concocting some fake pastry crime-ring in his head.

With those words said, he dug his fork into the toast, feeling his fork slice through the fluffy crust. Scooping a healthy dollop of cream before bringing the bite to his mouth. The healthy mountain cream smothered the fluffy morsel, but not enough to mask the flavor. When Dean bit into it, he was taken aback, nearly floored by the heavenly flavor. Fluffy and light, it melted in his mouth as he dove in for another forkful. Masses of fried bread vanished in his assault, finding new shelter inside of his bloating stomach. If there was one thing Dean had gained, it was an appetite. Bites that normally made him feel bloated and full were simply small bricks in a large warehouse. He tore through the pile with gusto, shoveling toast and cream in with abandon. Only pausing his feast to grab some strawberries from the pile, it would be a shame to waste good fruit.

His first bite into them was an explosion of flavor, a juicy sweetness he didn't think possible. Dean didn't know what farm Annie got these from, but they were growing some quality stuff. They had a subtle tartness to them, the kind of extra flavor you only get with natural fruit. After the first one was gone, he piled them onto his plate, slathering them in the cream. Creating

the ultimate monument to gluttony, a towering pile of fluffy toast cloaked in fruit and cream. The first bite of this concoction was a struggle, mostly from the mess of it all. Wobbling back and forth, the massive tower of food looked like something pulled from a cartoon. He managed to get it down all the same, and with one bite, many followed after.

Dean's whirlwind feast was vanishing faster than any other had before, a massive load of carbs finding a home inside of his midriff. A midriff that was getting larger by the second; his fat belly was crawling out from under his shirt like a curious critter. Taking its time, letting more of itself be revealed as his sweater crept up over it. A pale slab of blubber that wobbled with his breathing, drawing tight over an inflating balloon. His overhangs of fat elevated as he shoveled more food into his gullet, carried up by the swelling balloon. Bloated was an understated term for the level of fullness he was experiencing; so many pieces of bread found a home inside of his stomach that he looked pregnant. The soft form of his body was juxtaposed by the hard and swollen curve of his stomach, a potbelly in shape and size. It wasn't until he finished his portions of the food that he had realized just how much he had eaten.

He had done it unconsciously as well; between bites he had been making friendly conversation, talking Hogarth through some awkward school situations. Hogarth had started following Dean's advice about malicious compliance, and he hadn't gotten in trouble yet. Annie was getting calls from the teachers, though, all sporting the same story about Hogarth's behavior. When recounting the tales, Annie had a wide smile on her face, a glimmer of pride in her voice. Dean couldn't believe that he had managed so much good with only a few simple words; maybe his advice wasn't that bad. All of this conversation and revelation happened while Dean was wolfing down a whole loaf of French toast and a bowl of whipped cream, an amazing feat to say the least. When all was said and done, Hogarth was just about ready to leave for school, getting ready while Annie worked on cleanup.

Dean couldn't let Annie do all the work on her own this time, not with how much he had taken in. Trying to make himself useful, Dean scurried about the kitchen, moving dishes back and forth from the table. His increased bulk making things a bit more cumbersome; his padded rear was knocking loose shakers from the table. Normally he could manage a rear like that, but he was trying his best not to bowl Annie over with his heavy stomach. That balloon-shaped orb was an absolute menace in the kitchen; it seemed like he couldn't go two seconds without bumping into Annie. It was starting to feel purposeful, like she wanted to touch his belly; her collisions were starting to happen hands first. She cradled his gut in her hands, each touch getting a bit deeper as she explored the curves of his flesh. Those touches lasted only a moment, so quick that Dean was unsure they even happened.

They washed the dishes, taking turns with washing and drying; Annie washed them, and Dean attempted to dry them. It wasn't that drying was a difficult task, it's just that he didn't know what to do with them afterwards. They were just piling up on the counter next to him as he rapidly ran out of space. He wasn't sure the best way to ask, at least not with being completely dimwitted, so he made a little show of it. Grabbing one of the small, less breakable bowls, he

placed it on his bulbous stomach. Carefully balancing the bowl on his gut, making sure not to move too suddenly, he turned towards Annie.

“Hey, Annie. I can’t find where to put this. So...uhh, is this a good spot?” Dean motioned towards his ballooned stomach, emphasizing the bowl.

Annie nearly gasped, her cheeks turning red as she caught sight of Dean. He couldn’t tell what was happening, but some gears in her were turning. A wry smile crawled on her face as the shock faded; she looked up and down before answering.

“Oh, that thing? The bowls are right behind you.” Annie chuckled, plucking the bowl from Dean’s gut.

Before he could turn, he felt a weight on his stomach; Annie had him practically pinned. She was reaching over him, bending her body over his stomach. Her arm draped gracefully across his neck as she pressed into his body, her cheek brushing past his. Feeling her warmth against his body, feeling her weight, it was so elating. Dean had never had this kind of contact with a woman before. Being so close, he could feel every wiggle and twist of her arms through his stomach. The sensitive balloon was getting familiar with her shakes and shimmies; her angle changed slightly. He was backed against the counter, Annie practically crawling over his stomach, angling it between her legs. Dean was too stunned to move; she was so forward that he could feel the heat running through his cheeks. Dishes clinked haplessly behind him as she fished for a spot.

“Moooom! I’m leaving for school.” Dishes shook violently behind Dean as Annie jerked back to place.

“Alright, honey! I’m working today, so come stop by the diner. I’ll take you home.” Annie shouted back from the kitchen, her face as red as Dean’s.

“Nah, lil’ squirt will get lost if he goes on his own. I’ll pick him up.” Dean’s reply was a half shout, loud enough for Hogarth to hear, but not so loud that it felt like he was answering him directly.

There wasn’t a response, but Dean could hear the muffled fist pump and exclamation as Hogarth left for school. With Hogarth gone, Dean focused his attention back on Annie, but she had already returned to the dishes. That little bit of playfulness had been kind of thwarted by Hogarth’s little interjection. All that was left was to do the dishes in casual chatter. When everything was put away, Annie and Dean left for the living room. A little bit of relaxation while Dean’s meal settled; he could already feel his midriff starting to loosen a bit. He still couldn’t shake the thoughts rolling around in his head, that feeling of shame over such a little thing. Annie sat down on the floor next to the couch while Dean lay across it, his stomach rising like a hill.

“Hey, Ann. Got some time to talk?” Dean was staring up at the ceiling, counting the cracks to calm his nerves.

“About the other day? Let’s put it as water under the bridge.” Annie relaxed her head on the couch, her hair brushing against Dean’s arm.

“I wish I could, but it wouldn’t sit right with me.” Dean turned his head, getting a surprising closeup of Annie’s eyes.

“It’s alright, really. I overstepped a boundary. I just thought you needed that little shove. The nudge to push you forward.” Annie trailed off as she replayed events in her head.

“Yeah, but. It was a boundary you didn’t know about. Something that I shoulda handled better.” Dean put a hand on Annie’s shoulder, the regret in his voice audible.

“You did have me worried a bit. I thought you weren’t coming back.” Annie took hold of Dean’s hand.

“That’s the kind of thing I don’t want you worrying about. I don’t want someone to walk on eggshells around me. Your life shouldn’t be tiptoeing over landmines.” Dean held her hand a little tighter, as if trying to affirm things.

“I don’t want that either. So where do we go next?” Annie shook their hands on her shoulder, bouncing them unconsciously to break the tension.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been great at this kind of thing. I think...I think we just play it by ear. Keep doing what we’re doing and see how it goes.” Dean rolled over, working to get a better view of Annie.

“I think I’m okay with that. First step is you picking up Hogarth today.” Annie chuckled, pulling his hand closer.

The pair continued talking, just enjoying each other’s company until the time came for Annie to leave for work. During that time, Dean had discovered a new love that he didn’t realize, belly rubs. As they talked, Annie had started massaging his stomach, running her hands over the tight orb in waves. Her hands kneading the fat away and loosening his tight abdominal muscles, it felt nice. Dean felt a bit pampered in this moment, like he was living in the lap of luxury. This level of closeness and intimacy was a new field for a hermit like himself. His only course of action was to just ride it out and do what felt right; before he could act on it, his time was up. Annie was on the way out the door, and Dean was falling asleep; he’d probably figure something out later.

Later came like a whirlwind; after that reconciliation, Dean's life seemed to be in a constant upswing. Meeting with those art patrons had been more of a windfall than he wanted to admit. They saw the giant, the scrap recreation of a hero, and were immediately enamored; they wanted to buy the piece wholesale, but Dean was hesitant. He couldn't in good conscience leave it to rust away in some yuppie's closet; he left out the yuppie sentiment. So Dean and the patrons came up with a compromise: they would fund the statue's relocation. Arrangements were made to transport it to the town square, have it placed in dedication to his memory; something accredited to the patron, with their agreement to maintain it. Only one condition was placed on Dean: he would need to recreate a smaller version of the giant, something that could easily fit on a nightstand or coffee table.

Dean hated tchotchkes and the like, believing them to be heartless mass productions of someone's hard work, but there was no mass to this production. Since it was to be wrought with his own two hands, it would be a handheld piece of art. Weeks went into the creation of a single centerpiece giant, a portion of which was dedicated to agonizing over the pose. Dean didn't want his creation to be a recreation and chose a different pose, remembering his clandestine cannonball. Reaching levels of his craft he'd never thought he could reach, Dean managed to create the scene. Using wires to create the crashing waves, lining them with warped windshields to create the effect of glistening water. The giant itself was made from carefully selected car parts and watch pieces, necessitating a finer touch than usual. Finer touches only got more difficult as the piece wore on, in no small part due to Annie's splendid meals. While the relocation project was underway, Dean became a more common sight at the Hughes household. What was once a biweekly breakfast was becoming a daily affair; day after day Dean would consume more food than he normally did in a week.

At a certain point it was feeling self-destructive; Dean didn't know how exactly Annie was paying for all this food. Even with all the shadiest dealings in the world, you couldn't be a waitress and summon feasts so excessive. To prevent any hardship, Dean had started giving Annie a finder's fee of sorts; he paid out a portion of every art commission he took on, the bulk of which came from the initial deal. The payment from the giant relocation was more money than Dean had ever seen in one place, even after the helicopter fees and truck rentals. A huge windfall that could easily fund some repairs on the house, things that had gotten neglected over time. Unfortunately for Dean, this windfall wasn't a one-time thing, as the plan to move the giant into town backfired.

Over the months since its placement, Annie was getting calls nonstop; Dean had to practically camp out at the house to manage them all. Buyer after buyer clamoring for more miniature giants or more simulacrum of the full thing. Eventually, Dean had to put a kibosh on giant pieces; he relented and did the miniature ones but refused any larger scales. He wanted the real thing to stay special. Not that it deterred anyone; somehow he was getting more calls than normal. It got bad enough that he had to set up times at his shop just to do art shows and listen to requests. Annie's phone ran off the hook so much that Dean had to set up shop at the house, stationing himself by the phone so Annie could still live her waitress life.

Brgingngngng

Dean's alarm went off, the clanking bell rousing him from his deep sleep; bronze knockers that rocked his eardrums. His life was becoming more of a pattern: wake up, dress up, leave for Annie's, have breakfast, answer phones, and return home to work. Alarms weren't a thing he really needed in his life, but with all of his excessive meals at Annie's, waking of his own volition was getting tougher. Fat had piled on his body in enough spots that he could be mistaken for a sleeping bear, a comparison not helped by his fuzzy morning robe.

Dean dragged himself across the shop floor, his fluffy brown robe dragging across the floor as he tried to loosely fasten it. The belt no longer cinched properly around his waist; he could barely get the loose garment around his prominent gut. Blubber pushed out from the slowly expanding V of his opening robes. Dean was so busy that he didn't have time to really drink in just how big he had gotten over the year, but when winter finally ended, he realized it wasn't winter weight he had been holding. Standing in front of the mirror, Dean smirked, grabbing a handful of flab as he inspected his rubenesque form.

It was hard to not start with the thing that stuck out the most, his gut; Dean had gained a considerable amount of blubber around his midriff. Something to be expected, but that didn't make it any easier to accept. Looking down at his hands, he could see his fatty flesh seeping through his fingertips like dough. Tiny little bubbles of fat that jiggled in waves when he released his hands. He reminded himself of that man from the funny papers, that rotund guy always bumming hamburgers off of people. Dean's gut stretched out past his waist, hanging like an apron over his pelvis, loose sags of flesh draped around the lower circumference of his gut. Thin in parts and thicker in others, like his body was still trying to decide where to pile all of his fat. Dean traced his finger along the curve of his stomach, following the convex hangs into the alcove that formed under his navel and then back to the other side.

Dean made a turn in the mirror, holding his arms up to see just how far his fat gut jutted off his torso. The answer wasn't something he liked: Dean's belly jutted off his once slim torso like a balloon. Soft-packed blubber added more inches to his torso than he liked to admit, his arching back only making the gut that much more prominent. The apex curve stood on his body like a basketball, sloping up in an unsubtle ridge up his torso. Rows of fat hung across his ribs, creating a washboard illusion on his flanks. Starting small at his love handles and getting thinner as they reached the start of his fatty pecs, then the ridges grew large again.

Less than toned pectorals had devolved into sagging sacs of fat, curved reverse pyramids that lay upon his stomach. Tiny little dollops of cream that he could palm in his hand. The lowest tips of his nipples brushed against the top of his stomach, creating a rolled wave of flesh. He often found himself reaching under his pecs to release his skin from its own trappings. The divide between his pecs had gradually been worn away; defined shapes changed to amorphous blobs. From the sides of his chest, Dean's pecs flared out into pillows of

fat under his arms. Bulging out from his pits when he flexed his arms, a small convex slope of fat that tapered up into the canyon of his pits. Hanging down from his elevated arms, drooping bingo wings of flesh sagged off his triceps.

Dean had never been the most muscular man, but in the right light you could still see some semblance of muscle when he flexed. That was no longer true, the bunched fluff atop his miniscule biceps giving his arms a pillowy quality. Soft and flowing, moving like fluff under his skin, airy fat had yet to properly settle into the gelatinous mass of blubber that his gut had gained. Moving his arms sent the shelf of fat jiggling across his arms, waves of motion that carried down into his chubby arms. Flowing back up into his shoulders, fat merged into a wrap on his neck. A heavy and bulbous jowl was forming under his chin, making him look like some kind of walking bullfrog. It was only natural for Dean's gaze to want to end when he reached the top of his body, but he knew that his torso wasn't the only place that had been getting fat.

Trying to pinch a bit of flab from his hindquarters wasn't really possible, at least not with two fingers, not anymore. Instead he had to palm his rear, grabbing the hefty slab of adipose and letting its weight rest against his palm. It filled his hand like a soft ham shank, firm when he pushed in, but the rest was doughy and enveloping. His hand sank deep into his hide, displacing the blubber before he let it spring back into place. It felt like he was carrying basketballs on his hips, jostling mounds that barely fit into his pants anymore. Even when his robe was tied, the jutting curve of his ass still stuck out from behind. When he turned around he could still see the part of the fabric where his booty had caught it; he resembled one of those Victorian women, the ones whose dresses were purposefully tapered to have large rears.

Turning back around, he was able to really drink in the bulkiness of his thighs; they had turned into large trunks of fat that merged into the folds under his gut. Wobbling trunks of fat too wide to get your hands around, so thick that they mashed together when he walked. Heavy and rippling, brushing against every minor adjustment he made; at a certain point, Dean had to start adjusting his stance to comfortably accommodate his bulging legs. Dean was even starting to get some flare to his hips, adding to the bulky look he was taking on. Overall his body lay somewhere between the husky and fat ranges; he wasn't sure how he felt about these changes, but it was something he would deal with.

After that little morning detour, Dean got into his clothes; hiking his pants over his mammoth mounds was always a task and a half. His slacks had very little slack to them, requiring him to shimmy and shake to even fit into them. Cotton stretched over his meaty mounds, the midsection of his globes flowing over the waistband as he struggled. Heaving in waves, every struggle only got him a few inches of progress before he ultimately succeeded. Moving onto his shirt, it was comparatively less difficult; all it took was a swift tug, and the thing was down his middle. A few adjustments needed to be made around his distended midriff, his choice of black doing work to conceal his unflattering curves. Even with the slimming color, it didn't change the fact that his shirt was stretched so thin that you could see the underline of peach flesh beneath his top. Dean looked at it with a good enough attitude before making his way out the door; it was almost breakfast time.

Unfortunately for Dean, his way out was not a simple affair; his home was not designed for his newfound girth. His blubbery cheeks were swinging around his back like wrecking balls, rocking wildly with each of his steps. Knocking frames from the shelf, tools from their holsters, and dishes to the ground. In particular, one of Dean's scrap pieces clattered to the ground, a piece too valuable to let lie there. Dean bent down to grab it, feeling his fabric constraining his body as he flexed his glutes. Just a little bit further and he could...

Ripppppppp

"Great." Dean sighed to himself as he lunged for the scrap.

The seat of Dean's pants had split in half, torn down the middle like a fissure, revealing the cotton white of his underwear. He needed to get bigger clothes and maybe a bigger place; he was rapidly outgrowing his own home. Dean mulled the thoughts over, thinking about how much space Annie's place had. Repeating his pants routine while he ran through the idea, Dean rushed out the door, careful not to knock anything from the shelves.

Dean left the yard, looking at the mountains of half-finished projects, wondering which one would be the most apt to take on. A handful of them were assigned by wealthy art lovers, varying projects and landscapes to be completed. A lot of their requests made him think they didn't know what went into making junk art, like they thought he was painting. He couldn't just wave a brush and the metal would follow; metal had its own form, its own natural way of wanting to settle. All he did was take the natural shapes and make slight adjustments to affix them to one another, creating the illusion of new. Shaking his hand at the half-completed jungle someone had requested, he made for the road. Enjoying the comfortable spring weather and letting himself go to the comforting sounds of nature.

His walks to Annie's had always been a peaceful little detox for him, a way to clear his head for the day, get away from all the art. It was unfortunate that his walks were becoming slightly more taxing than they had been before. What was once a brisk few-mile walk had turned into more of an endeavor, his added bulk weighing him down. By the time he got to Annie's, there was already a bit of sweat pooling around his back. Springtime weather wasn't making that any easier, his body being ill-equipped for extra heat.

"A bit late today?" Annie had a smirk on her face as she opened the door before Dean could knock.

"Maybe a little, but that's why I don't carry a watch. Means I'm always on time." Dean tried to brush off his tardiness as he followed Annie in.

"Sure, guess that's what I'm getting you for your birthday." Annie rested her arm across his back as they both walked, seemingly breathing in the heat of his body.

“Mind if I freshen up before breakfast? It’s a bit hot out today.” Dean chuckled, breaking from Annie’s grip and moving to the bathroom.

Making his way through the house, he could appreciate the subtle changes that had taken place since the deal first went in. The way the walls had been shaped up, the refinished wall paper and the mended floorboards. This deal had been exponentially beneficial for all of them as he snuck into the bathroom. Dean took care to not slam the door as he snapped it shut, immediately pulling off his shirt when he did. That walk had worked up more of a sweat than he hoped, his bulky body glistening like glitter under fluorescent lights. Letting his tee flutter to the ground, he looked about for any towel he could grab, pulling one from the cabinet to dry himself off. Running his hands up and down his body, he felt almost hypnotized by the way his body moved, the gelatinous jiggling that shook his form. Every inch of him was padded to the nines, and after today’s breakfast, he predicted that nine would roll over to a ten. Dean fought with his shirt again before tossing the towel into the hamper; he was a bit more presentable now.

Returning to the hall, he was blasted by the scent of sizzling meats and sweet fruits, a smell that had eluded him while his mind was on other things. A heavenly aroma of salt and grease perked him up, pulling him by the nose towards the kitchen. Greeting him today was the grandest breakfast yet, towering piles of food fit for the most hedonistic king. Towers of ham that must be at least a pig’s worth; the accompanying belly sat next to those hams in the form of bacon. An entire tray of biscuits sat between them, smothered in bubbling pork gravy, an elixir so unctuous that steam rose from it. Dean looked in surprise at the table, seeing only Annie at it, Hogarth surprisingly absent.

“It just us this morning?” Dean looked in confusion as he pulled out a chair, balancing himself on the surprisingly small fixture.

“He went to school early today; had a project he needed to work on. Which gives us a little time to discuss things.” Annie smiled, her voice tapering into a sultry coo as she walked towards Dean.

“Uh, oh. I do something?” Dean had a joking tone to his response, only half believing his own deflection as he felt Annie’s hands at his back.

“Not that kind of discussion. You haven’t done anything bad in a while.” Annie’s response matched Dean’s own joking tone as she helped push Dean into the table.

“Oh, well. That’s a weight off my shoulders.” Dean looked back towards Annie, but she was already moving.

She glid about the table like a dancer, flitting between the towering stacks of food with light steps. A plate the size of a platter already in her hands, being piled high with the delicious meal she had prepared. Placing it in front of Dean with the grace of a feather, she motioned for him to eat.

“Good, because the food’s going to put some weight back on.” Annie took her seat next to Dean, grabbing a far smaller portion of the food.

Dean knew how this little song and dance went; Annie loved to see him eat and loved to ogle his body when he did. Watching in rapture as his gut filled out from the flood of food that tumbled down his throat. Each furious bite adding more circumference to his waistline, inflating the lax balloon to a new girth. During his little feasts, Dean had found the pace he ate increasing, like every bite he took made him hungrier. Scooping piles of gravy onto his spoon, slicing into the ham and snapping the bacon, turning them all into a single fattening hill that he scooped into his mouth. Dean could feel the frenzy growing, eating more and more until the plate was clean and grabbing another. Repeating this process over and over until half of those meat towers stood felled and his gut bumped into the underside of the table. This was the time when his feasting slowed, when every bite was compressing a mountain inside of his gut. This was the time that Annie knew was the best to broach the subject she wanted to cover.

“So, about that discussion.” Annie danced her fingers up Dean’s shoulder, her voice turning sultry as she spoke.

“Mmhhmm.” Dean nodded, mouth too full of food to speak, but able to acknowledge.

“I was hoping that you could move in with us.” Annie leaned close, whispering it in his ear like it was a sweet nothing.

“Hmmpphmm!” Dean’s eyes bugged out, almost choking on his mouthful as he tried to handle his surprise.

“It only makes sense, you know? Hogarth loves you, I love you, and everyone calls at all waking hours for your art. And with you coming here for breakfast every morning, wouldn’t it be nice to save you a trip?” Annie’s list seemed to hammer home the point, like she’d been practicing a response.

“What? What would we do about the art and the studio?” Dean pounded his chest, coughing up a storm from the food that went down the wrong pipe.

“We can make one here. Not like money is an option.” Annie’s response was quick, almost as quick as her refill of Dean’s plate.

“I don’t know...” Dean couldn’t think of an objection, but he was uneasy about the idea.

Recreating his art studio would be a mammoth task, something filled with more pitfalls than he could count. The most important pitfall being if it would feel the same, being so isolated allowed him unparalleled focus on his art, the ability to work as he wanted. With nothing but a sea of metal in front of him, he was living on a canvas. On the other hand, he would be lying if he said he hadn’t thought of living with the both of them. They felt more like family than any

others he had in the past, and she wasn't wrong. A lot of his day was taken up just walking to and from his studio; along with the post-breakfast food coma, it would save a lot of time.

"How long do I have to think on this?" Dean took another bite of biscuits and gravy as he mulled it over.

"As long as it's not more than a couple months. I won't let you string this girl along." Annie's response would have come off as a bit brusque, but her tone had playfulness to it.

"I don't think it will take me that long. I just..." Dean trailed off, not exactly sure how to finish the sentence.

"Until then, how about we just enjoy breakfast?" Annie held a forkful of bacon up to Dean's mouth.

"That sounds nice." Dean bent forward, leaning in to take a bite.

Dean's need to think things over didn't take long, only a few days actually; the more he looked about his studio, the more he thought on things, moving in with Annie only made sense. It was the after that decision that brought about the headaches; the logistical nightmare of trying to get his junk pile over to her house was staggering. He practically needed to recreate a junkyard in her backyard, and even then, it wasn't enough. There was too much metal and too much scrap to move over in one go, so he had to compromise. That compromise came in the form of a little ferry system; he would have trucks deliver piles of scrap and broken-down cars once a week, just enough to give him supplies to work with. Surprisingly, these constraints created a new renaissance with his art; fewer options meant he had to create in new and innovative ways. Something that boosted his already growing popularity, making him the topic of discussion among the rich elite. This decision also helped with Dean's mood and the overall cohesiveness of the household; overall, it was a boon for everyone.

It has been almost a year since Dean had made the decision to move in, and things had definitely changed around the household. Hogarth had been doing so much better in school that he was up for an attendance reward. He couldn't skirt the ire he got from teachers, but now they had nothing to pin on him other than being a bit of a fast-talker. Annie was also having a little bit of a resurgence; needing to take on fewer hours at the diner, she was mostly working on the weeks she felt like it. Now able to enjoy more of her time at home, she had taken up a few different hobbies she had been neglecting. One that flourished as her choice to focus on her coffee; the family recipe had been catching a lot of attention at the diner, to the point that people wanted to buy it. She already had a good supply of beans and ways to get more, so she wanted

to share a little of herself with the world. It was a way to carry on her past husband's memory a little.

When it came to drastic shifts and changes, Dean was definitely the one to take that prize, not in mindset, but in the physical sense. His weight had practically exploded over the months, turning him from overweight to a massive blob of a man. Moving about Annie's house was a cumbersome task that required many renovations, so he still spent a lot of this time inside of his newly expanded studio. Oftentimes sleeping in there from the exhaustion from his work, but never spending it alone, Annie had taken up nighttime residence in his studio. Giving her more time to fawn over his ample body and keep him looking neat and tidy for the incoming patrons. She primped and preened his body, removing loose wrinkles from his newly-fitted sweater, helping to hike up his overly tight pants. It was a daily ritual that she enjoyed, as Dean had become far too large to dress himself in any way that looked presentable. Not too surprising when you consider the sheer immensity of the man.

Daily feast-sized breakfasts had done a huge number on Dean's physique, blowing him up into a gelatinous blimp of a man. His bulbous gut occupied most of his torso, to the point that it added a few inches to his height, his body throwing to accommodate the sheer mass of it. Draped in a heavy black sweater, it was an absolute blimp, like something you'd see from one of those pulp books at the checkout. So large that reaching anything past the top curve was a dream, a great sphere that hung down from his torso to between his legs. Occupying enough space that his only way to move was waddling, sloshing back and forth with every step. His stomach was pure adipose; not a bit of muscle or tone could be seen anywhere on the husky mountain. His sweater only managed to cover it by sheer willpower, wrapped so tightly around his body that you'd think he was poured into it. Every nook and cranny of his flesh was exposed for all to see, each fold and band of fat painfully profiled. The grand curve of his stomach tapered down into a convex swell that merged with the wrapping expanses of his love handles.

Thick tracts of fat that traveled from his navel to his sides, playfully called a spare tire by Annie, but it was a bit too large for that moniker. Calling it a spare tractor tire would be a bit more apt, as that's how thick it was. When standing side by side with Annie, the bulk of his obliques stood larger than her head, billowing curves that seeped over the edges of his waistband. His pants had reached a size where it was impossible to keep them up without a belt, large and billowing tents of fabric that struggled to fit around his mammoth gut. If the belt that bisected his midriff wasn't fastened so securely, they'd have fallen down and left his bare gut visible to the world. Not that his pants were doing much to conceal it anyway; form-fitting and tight, his slacks showed off every curve and chunk on Dean's body. The zipper was constantly being pushed open by the tight hangs of his underbelly, the divoted folds flowing over the metal holder. Black corduroy bulging out in odd places, creating small semicircles around his expansive flesh. Folds of flesh dug down, creating wrinkles and nooks that traveled around the expanse of his lower body.

His lower body sat uneven, lacking the smoother curves of his upper half; the heavy-hanging blubber sagged over itself in blobby ridges. Smooth curves that stacked atop

each other like the pancakes he had been downing each morning. Dean's thighs were a near indistinguishable collection of blobs, only looking vaguely like limbs from a distance. Heavy hams that merged into his calves as a singular mass of flab; the only thing to break up those heavy pillars was the vastness of his ass. While Dean's thighs were lumpy and rather chaotic, his backside was spared from such odd collections.

His ass had become a chair-devouring set of hills that barely stayed hidden under his pants. Each cheek was large enough to take its own lounge, oozing blobs of fat that wobbled with his movements. Pendulous wrecking balls that knocked things from shelves and walls when he moved through Annie's home. Bulging over his waistband like dough, his meaty overhangs sagged over his pants. Wobbling balloons that jostled every time he breathed, made of the same flawless fat as his midriff. Oftentimes he would get them stuck between doorframes, requiring a little assistance from Annie to unstuck them, something she didn't seem to mind too much.

Both of them had been growing much closer these past months, close enough that Dean had finally gotten the hint that she liked him. It took him far longer than he liked to admit that being invited to live with someone was a clear sign of their attraction, but here he was. He was living in Annie's home, taking care of her kid and pulling double duty as breadwinner; it was surprising how much he was enjoying it all. Their image of being a couple extended past their home life and to their public, something that was about to become evident at Dean's art showcase.

He had set up a big showpiece to unveil to his clamoring fans, a small little outdoor gala constructed in his addition to the home. Set it at the late hour, a special twilight where the sun hit the golden leaves of the foliage around them. Truthfully, he hadn't done this for the patrons; he had a gift in store that would likely disappoint them. Rich suits and extravagant dresses juxtaposed against rusted machinery and scrapped metal, and at the edge of it stood Dean. His blubbery hands gripped around a mug of Annie's coffee, nervously sipping it as he looked about the room. Barely listening to the conversing people as he stared intently at his new piece. He hadn't shown anyone what it was, not even Annie, so it remained cloaked in a thick white tarp. It was a little present to her, maybe a tribute; he didn't know how he would quantify it. All he knew was that it was making his nerves fray as he waited for the hour to come by. Nervously flitting from his piece around the room, he spotted Hogarth near the edge. He was close to the end of his high school career and had garnered the attention of a few military higher-ups. His desire to join the Air Force worked well with his past involvement with the giant.

"Are you nervous?" Annie crept up beside him; the smile on her face was evident in her voice.

"Nah, just ate some bad clams. You know, sweating, clamminess...maybe I'm allergic?" Dean chuckled, taking a sip of coffee to try and play off his anxiety.

“Can’t fool me. What’s got you so bothered? Can’t be these rich yuppies; you’ve gotten used to them.” Annie peered up at Dean; her voice and expression had comfort in them.

“I’ve lost my mystique. It’s the new piece. I’m not sure how it will go over.” Dean glanced from Annie to the clock, seeing the minute hand tick closer to the hour.

“Hmm, it’s almost time. You want me to do it?” Annie’s kind offer was appreciated but a bit misguided.

“Nice as that would be, I think I gotta man up a little.” Dean took another sip of his coffee before setting it on the table beside him. “Guess there’s no time like the present.”

Dean left Annie at the wall as he moved towards the centerpiece, his waddling gait ponderously clearing a path towards the showcase. His wobbling body created more havoc as he walked, knocking chairs over, and scooting tables away. Glasses fell over and vases clattered to the ground, the noisy scene catching everyone’s attention as he plodded forward. Annie hid her face with her hand, not wanting her smile to add any more to Dean’s nerves. His attention-grabbing movement did achieve one goal; all eyes were focused on the center of the room.

“I know you’ve all gathered here to see my newest piece, but I have a disappointing announcement for you all.” Dean’s voice cracked before leveling out as he looked at the crowd. “Tonight’s piece won’t be for sale.”

Dean paused, letting the hushed murmurs fall over the crowd, their conversation turning into whispers. He could hear some traces of disappointment in their voices, and who could blame them? They came here to potentially buy some art and eat some good food; while Annie’s food was good, it wasn’t enough to cancel out the lack of the other factor. He waited for the crowd to quiet again, for their eyes to focus back onto the towering piece under the tarp. It stood a couple heads taller than Dean and was already the center of attention before all of this.

“The reason I’m not selling this piece is because it’s dedicated to someone. A commemorative piece to christen a new stage of my life. And I just can’t put a price on that, so I don’t know...we’ll talk after this.” Dean nervously gripped the tarp, being careful with his unveiling.

Dean’s sausage-like hands gripped the cloth, testing the gauge before finally giving it a pull. The ruffling cloth fluttered over the statue inside, flying off in a rush as Dean threw it to the side, letting his creation stand glittering in the sunset. Under that tarp had been a recreation of Annie, a scrap-made statue created with excruciating detail. Bearing her likeness to a T and capturing the warmth she exuded. Hair made from thousands of wires collected from a dozen cars, hazel eyes made from smoked headlights, and her face sculpted from painfully smoothed metal. Every detail was recreated excruciatingly, but her recreation wasn’t the only notable factor. As the light of the sunset filtered through the treetops, the light struck the back of the

statue. Myriad flecks of glass were hidden among the forged metal, embedded like gemstones, arranged so that when light struck one, it would filter through the others. The statue glowed like warm fire, a way for Dean to capture her warm glow.

“Annie, you’ve been my muse for a while now. I guess... I wanted to put that into shape.” Dean scratched the back of his head as he looked towards Annie.

As Dean stood astride his statue, a figure came rushing up to him; Hogarth was overjoyed at this development. He had already known the two were strong as a couple, so he was glad to see things finalized. Jokingly he smacked Dean’s bulbous gut, sending rippling waves through the gelatinous surface. Both of them laughed, but Dean’s gaze soon fell to Annie, wanting to see her reaction to all of this.

Annie stood speechless at the back of the room, unsure how to even react to this; the awe in her expression was all Dean needed. The two shared a silent glance as the rest of the crowd erupted into chatter. Their eyes and expressions said more than words could. This would be the start of a very loving future for the two of them.