

## Dead Letters

Late on the last day of March, a woman, unable to sleep, sat up and stared blindly at the expanse of wall by the bed, watching the filaments of her thoughts form and reform in angular shapes. She closed her eyes, opened them: no difference. Her lover, Kailash Mira, of all things a postal worker, lay curled around her, murmuring in his sleep, his dreaming hand curled in an infant's gesture. She tried to imagine some woman at his work he might be thinking about, some woman at the dead letter office. No, she decided, he's dreaming about his photographs, and now they're in my mind as well. She disentangled herself from Mira's limbs. His skin is so hot, she thought. It's suffocating to sleep next to him. No wonder I'm always so tired at work.

Ardita found a glass of lemon water and sipped from it. She walked over to the bedroom window and looked out at the night sky. The crescent moon capped the top edge of a high-rise apartment building, off to the west. The city lights obscured most of the night sky. She saw one star, brighter than the glow of the mercury lamps on the streets, steady, not twinkling. She stared at it. She recognized it, and felt strange that she could not immediately remember the name of it. Jupiter? Wanderer. She turned back and saw that Kailash had curled up even tighter, now wrapped around some empty blankets. He was a tall man, almost two meters, but when he walked he hunched his shoulders, and when he sat, his posture was even worse, as though his center of gravity was somewhere outside his body, somewhere in front of his chest. He was trying to circle around it, during the day, quietly, at night. In zero gravity he'd just spin and spin. She imagined him slumped over the glass table in their living room, staring at his little photographs—and this second reminder of them made her slouch as well. She was so tired of those photos: they didn't mean anything to her. She thought that they were clinical and cold things, frightening, like diseases and bankruptcy and that high-pitched whistle that came from somewhere in the kitchen.

Kailash Mira's eyes fluttered, shut tight, and flashed open. He looked around. The flames from his dream were gone. The night had passed since Ardita had been up, and some of the sounds she had made had leaked into the last part of his dream: cowrie shells rattling against a stone table top, footsteps, a door closing and a lock falling into place with an aggressive click. Light reflected off walls, through doors, illuminated the outlines of the furniture in the bedroom. He propped himself up, and tugged at his hair, and listened. He was by himself in the apartment. He tried to remember his dream. What was it? He shut his eyes, to bring it back, to sip from it again. It was gone. What time is it? Morning. The sky had begun to turn blue. The morning star, a little white dot, was about to set. He shivered and got out of bed, aware that today promised to be hot and hallucinatory.

In the bathroom Mira found a note with Ardita's handwriting, stuck into the moulding of the vanity mirror: *You look nice*. He stared at the note. Nice. What does that mean? He looked at himself, saw the dark shadows under his brown eyes, the creases that were beginning to form at the juncture of his brows. Mira imagined Ardita painting her lips with her dark red lipstick, pursing her lips, smirking at her own reflection. He tried smirking, too, but every expression he tried to wear seemed only tired, worn. He threw the note away. *You look nice*, he told himself, sarcastic, brushing his teeth. He had become afraid of Ardita. She'd threatened to throw him out, a few weeks ago. *Why can't you keep a job? she wanted to know. Why do you live in a state of—what was it?—perpetual distraction. Stop thinking in all the wrong directions. She loves that word. Wrong. It's wrong for you to stay if you can't...* She pretends to forget she ever said it—an ugly word, to his ears. She doesn't need to remember. It's her apartment. Her food. Her car. Mira went over to the kitchen, reached for the kettle. Her tea. He turned on the stove, and stared as a discus of blue flames glowed on the front burner.

Kailash Mira tidied up with one hand, carried his cup of smoky tea around with the other. Ghostly traces of Ardita floated around the apartment, yesterday's crossword, still unfinished, a half-eaten orange in the fridge, the smell of her hair in the bedroom like the smell of his tea. He gave up cleaning the instant he rediscovered in the cramped living room his manila folder, half-hidden under the plump vinyl sofa.

Mira brought the folder with him to the kitchen, emptied its contents onto the table. Four photos, identical in size, each with its own corresponding envelope. The photographs still held the same morbid fascination for him now as they had when he first saw them. The envelopes were covered with black scribbles and inked stamps: *Insufficient Postage, Return to Sender, No Return Address, Send to Returned*. He'd brought them home from work a week ago. They were x-rays, except on white paper instead of film. They were cropped to fit into the envelopes. He wasn't sure what they were showing, gray and white shapes swirling on a black background. Something in the periphery of the whorl was circled, in every one of the photos, with red pencil. In the most recent of the series, the word "deteriorating" was written alongside the red circle. Mira studied the small hourglass-shaped blot inscribed by the circle. He imagined something eating away at the waist of the shape. He saw someone, some young girl, in a hospital bed, clutching at her sides in the middle of the night. He saw a nurse bring the patient some medicine, a glass of water, some soothing words. No, cries the patient, can't you see what I need? The nurse holds the cup nearer, saying, This is what you need. You need to drink this. This is what you need. The patient clutches at her eroding sides, curls up, wonders why they can't see what's wrong with her. It's so *obvious*.

Mira picked up his cup again, sipped the tea, peered out from over the rim with serpent's eyes. The living room seemed small and dark because of the black furniture. He slid the photographs and their envelopes back inside the manila folder.

Mira examined the pachisi board on one of the end tables. He and Ardita played the game slowly, over the course of weeks. This was how they kept in touch with each other, during the day, without having to admit that they had nothing to tell one another. Mira examined the board and saw that Ardita had moved one of her pieces. He looked at his own pieces and tried to remember if that was where they were before. Was she playing honest? He collected the cowrie shells into his cupped palms, shook, and dropped them on the board with a clatter. Two shells landed mouth-down, four with their mouths up. The mouths were smiling, hungry, infantile.

Kailash Mira was a tall man, with wheat-colored skin and black hair. He took the bus to work on days when Ardita needed to drive her beige Shadow, like today. He

greeted the bus driver with a "Good morning" and walked several weathered blocks from the stop down to Alexander Street, where the dead letter office was located, in the shell of the aging Perceforest Theater. He thought it was unusually warm for this time of the year; spring had only just begun.

The sidewalk was broken up near the entrance, and a man in a black jacket, wiry, predatory, sat on a crate, playing the shells game with three matchboxes. He had two people interested. They were smoking. His gambit was double their money, if only they correctly guessed which box hid the white bead. Idiots, Mira thought, squeezing past them. Just outside the theater entrance, another man lay on his back: his face was hidden in a rough hole in the sidewalk. He had covered up his face with gravel, so that the gray stones were flush with the cracked cement. A shoe box lid read, "I am pathetic." Some change lay scattered on top of the words. Mira dropped a few coins onto the lid, and stepped into the Perceforest Theater with his x-rays hidden in his thin coat, flat against his chest.

Mr. C.K. Caraway—Mira's new manager—pushed, hard, against his desk and rolled over the hardwood floor of the balcony to the rail. He peered through the columns of the balustrade at the activity down on the sloping floor of the old theater, to check up on his men and that tall dark-haired fellow in particular. Men and women in steel blue postal service uniforms stamped envelopes and sorted them into piles, stacking them on small metal tables. Occasionally people came along and took these piles and brought them to a large machine nestled in the orchestra pit. The envelopes disappeared into the top of the ink-stained machine, with a hiss, and reappeared, neatly wrapped, in square bundles bound with tape and stamped with the date. The binder made a thick bussing sound, and this was how Caraway, leaning forward over the theater balcony, knew he was good at his job. He would remind himself of this in the margins of his notes. I'm good at this.

In front of the orchestra pit, two dozen desks were aligned in neat columns of five, with one desk conspicuously missing, a desk that had been moved onto the stage just a few days ago, leaving in its stead a rectangle of dust. The previous manager had been involved with some shady mail-order business. A fellow named Smith had run the

operation for him—it was Smith's desk that Caraway's new assistant manager, Mr. Desengio, had moved to a spot on the stage. Smith and the old manager had been selling fake gold coins and jars of imitation beauty cream through colorful newspaper inserts. The two of them were now serving time in prison. Mr. Desengio, a shrewd, elderly man, had been brought in to weed out anyone else involved with the scandal, to weed out the false coins still in circulation. The spot to the left of Smith's discredited floor space was occupied by Kailash Mira, who now scowled up at Caraway.

Caraway ducked out of sight. He rolled back to his desk, where topographical maps of Giza were spread and held down by picture-books about ancient Egypt. He had found a box of trapezoidal erasers in the desk and with these had begun to construct a little pink pyramid. It was coming along nicely now, although it looked more like a pink ziggurat or a sandstone tower of Babel than a pyramid per se. Little thumbtack men slaved over a monolithic eraser, pushing it up the sandy dunes of a telephone book, using great logs of pencils as rollers. Caraway rummaged underneath the construction site and found the list of employees. He searched until he came across Kailash Mira's name. It was the fact that Mira seemed so angry that Caraway had taken an interest in him. What a strange name. Meera? Mirah?

Mira had the spectre of the space where Smith's old desk once stood to contend with, among other pressures, as he worked. There was Caraway himself, watching him, him in particular, it seemed. Whenever Mira looked up at the balcony above the work floor, there was bald Caraway, looking down. In addition to this there was the new assistant manager—they had never had an *assistant* manager before—some old man named Desengio who walked about with a stiff leg and a utility belt strapped to his waist. Desengio had put up posters in conspicuous places. One showed a badly drawn arrow in flight: THE ARROW THAT FLIES FOREVER IS THE ONE THAT HITS ITS TARGET. Another poster, more to-the-point, depicted a postal carrier being dragged into a jail cell: TAMPERING WITH THE MAIL IS A FEDERAL CRIME.

Mira brushed off a piece of paper on his desk into the waste bin, wiped his hands on his blue pants. He checked again to see that he wasn't being spied upon, unlocked

the desk and put his stuff in the top drawer. He then pulled out a stamp pad, and a tray of paper clips, pencils, and set to work.

A kid brought a bunch of letters and piled it on a table by Mira's desk. Mira sorted these, one by one, checking to see if the address was legible. If it was, he would drop the letter into the nixie bin, which would get carted over to a few clerks, who would try to decipher what they could of the address. He knew a woman named Alex, who was one of these 'blind clerks,' a frail-looking woman, in her thirties, with her hair tied up in a braid. Like Mira, she liked to open the letters in secret. But now that everyone had become paranoid, Mira had to settle for looking at the contents of an envelope by holding it against the light of his desk lamp, looking at shadows of strange shapes, change, buttons, love letters. Alex was spared the constant supervision. She collected the letters she found, pasted snippets of them in a scrapbook she collected. Sometimes Mira sent her envelopes he knew she'd find interesting, and they'd whisper about what was inside later, during their lunch breaks.

Alex watched Mira from her cubicle in the corner of the stage. She could only watch him when Desengio was pacing around from station to station; and it was at those times that Mira never looked up from his work. She knew he watched her as well. He watched her from the periphery of his vision. She knew how that worked. He has nice eyes. But now, she thought, he has stopped looking at me. She thought these things without putting them into words, not even in her own head. Words were what she looked for when she goes over the obscured words of an envelope with a magnifying glass. She thought of him by rearranging moments, his hand brushing against hers, the cloves he gave her to chew on, the smell of almonds that follows him like a shadow when he walks by; moments like pieces of colored glass rearranged in variations on an ideal mosaic.

Kailash Mira did his job quietly. He stamped the hopeless category of letters with today's date, and his own code number, '25.' At the end of every month, the letters would be destroyed. He worried that Caraway had seen him hide the yellow folder full of x-rays away. He could handle that guy Desengio, the new assistant manager. But Caraway had an unfair advantage from his perch. Mira suspected that Caraway kept a pair of opera glasses up there too, the vulture.

Mira stopped processing letters. He thought he had seen something. A ghost? The ghost letters were what intrigued him, more than making sure that lost phone bills made it to their destinations. The ghost letters were letters that people insistently sent to the wrong address, knowing that they wouldn't get a reply, resigned to the fact of talking to silence, but hoping anyway for a response. Sometimes they sent pictures, and on the back of the pictures would be explanations like "remember the time..." and "I'm going a little bald, now." But the only way to recognize a ghost letter was by its afterimage, as it passed through his hands. His gloved hands handled hundreds of letters every day. Thousands of names, street addresses passed by his numbed eyes. But sometimes he'd subconsciously recognize a ghost. There was no telling how many ghosts passed him by every day. But there wasn't much he could do about that.

Mira reached over and pulled out some letters from the bin. He went back over them, saw how the ink from his stamps had smudged, he examined each letter closely, no, not this one, not this one either; there! He pulled out an envelope, yellowed and thin, wrinkled from some encounter with water, its ink blurred a little. He recognized the handwriting. He recognized the address. Same envelope, same color ink, same wrong address. Mira looked around. No one was looking. Desengio was helping someone adjust her chair. Caraway was at his desk, reading. He took the letter and slid it into the inside pocket of his coat, which hung from the back of his chair.

Kailash Mira met up with Alex during their lunch break, in the corridor backstage. "I want to show you something," he said.

"Let's go to the lounge," she suggested. "I want to have a smoke."

Alex brought a flashlight with her and they made their way through the backstage corridors, to a door that led to the storage rooms under the stage. There was no light; someone had broken the bulb in its socket. Alex led the way, shining the light to show the way. At the end of the corridor was another door. On the lintel was a spare key; they opened it and stepped inside.

Alex shone the light around the perimeter of the ceiling.

"What are you looking for?" Mira whispered.

"The light switch," she replied. "Ah," she said, and pulled the cord. The storage room was two levels below the stage. There was an exhaust fan, which brought fresh air into the room and pulled smoke out. They used to use this as a lounge, Alex told him. Now it's more storage space. All the shelves were empty. Bins were stacked carelessly in the corner. All the letters had been burned yesterday.

"I found another ghost," Mira announced, proudly.

"Really? Which one?"

"Robert to Alice. I haven't read this one."

She took the envelope from him, tore it open. Robert was madly in love with Alice and insisted on writing to her every month, even though she never wrote back. Robert implored her to leave her husband with flowery words and little diagrams of the house they'd buy in the south somewhere. The living room had little arrows drawn to it with labels attached, 'plants' or 'sofa' or 'window.' Alex lit a cigarette, and the smoke drifted towards the fan. The fan was at face level for Kailash. He went over and stared into it, hummed to hear his voice modulate.

When Alex was done reading, she put the letter back in the envelope, and stuck it in her black purse. She looked up and saw Kailash Mira tending to his eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"My eyes hurt a little, that's all."

"Here," Alex said, and stepped close. Mira tensed up. She put her hands on his temples and began to rub. "You shouldn't stress about this job. You can get promoted pretty quickly, to something easier." She rubbed his forehead, over his eyes, smoothed down his eyebrows. He watched her. She smelled like turpentine. "Close your eyes." She drew her fingers over his eyelids.

"That's really weird," he said, squirming a little.

"Relax! Tell me what you see."

She moved so that she wasn't blocking the light, and Kailash saw the silhouettes of her fingers moving in front of his eyes.

"I'm just going to press down a little," she warned.

Clouds of different colors burst into his field of view. He shook his head, backed away. She moved closer, kept at it. Her fingers ran along the soft comb of his eyelashes.

"It's not so bad, is it? My friend Iris taught me how to do this right." Mira didn't look too pleased. "What do the little shapes remind you of?"

"Those little squiggly things that you always see floating in your eyes."

"Use your imagination."

"I don't know what they look like." Mira shook his head away from her and opened his eyes. "They remind me of those photos I showed you, and those are the same, they don't look like anything."

"If they don't look like anything, why do you like them so much?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I *like* them. I just think about them a lot."

After a while she decided to leave, and left Mira behind, by himself in the room. He stared at the blades of the exhaust fans: one fan drew air in, the other sucked it out. There was enough space between the bars of the mesh covering the fan that he could stick a pen or his finger inside, to stop the blades. He decided against it and pulled the chain on the storage room light, and the room went black, and the sound of the fans whirring seemed to grow louder. Where the bulb had been an afterimage persisted, it moved when he looked about in the darkness. He followed this light out the door and down the corridor and up onto the stage and down to the brightly lit floor of the theater. Desengio, the old crow, was waiting for him. Desengio was sitting at Mira's desk. He had opened the desk drawer where Mira kept his ghost letters.

"Mr. Mira! Come here!"

"Yeah?"

"I said you could take a *five* minute break. Mr. Caraway would like to have a word with you right now." Kailash looked up at the balcony and saw Caraway, leaning against the balcony, watching him again.

Up in the balcony, Caraway saw Mira turn to look up at him. He backed away from the balustrade, but too late: Mira saw him. Mira left his spot by Desengio and marched over to the stairs. The tall man made his way through the rows of tables and letter bins, toward the long, winding balcony stairs. His pounding footsteps, the rustling

of papers he knocked over by accident, the anxious whispering of his co-workers—all these were perfectly audible to Caraway, as if he were down on the floor making the sounds himself. The building had been designed, some decades before, so that the handful of people who sat in the balcony would be able to hear with great detail all that was said below. The architect of the building, a graying man whom all had wanted to build their houses, had once made the mistake of trying to sketch his sleeping wife with a tired, unpracticed hand. He had a little problem with the eyes, making them too round, too soft. Still, he liked the drawing, and kept it in his bureau. The next day, his wife discovered the sketch. She did not recognize herself in it, and decided that it was the portrait of another woman—asleep, no less—and proof that her husband continued to be unfaithful. She left without notice to visit her sister. In his sudden solitude, the architect cynically designed a theater that no one would perform in, that no one would patronize, because of the perverse acoustics. Any conversation held on the work floor felt lifeless, muted. Yet Caraway, from the balcony, could hear everything—people whispering, the binder machine’s fluttering hisses, and Kailash Mira’s footsteps as he opened the door to the balcony office.

Mira’s face was flushed. He stood up straight, and his head almost reached to the top of the balcony ceiling. From this angle Mr. Caraway looked less intimidating. In fact he seemed rather small. Mira took a breath and stepped in with a question: "Can I ask you something?" Caraway did not look up from his desk quite yet. He returned the most of the pushpins back to their barracks in the desk drawer. Mira tried again, this time louder, "I’ve got a question for you." Down below, people sensed an argument and grew quiet.

"Yes, I know," Caraway said. "Why don’t you sit down? I’ll be just a minute."

"No, I want to—"

"Not yet! Please sit." Caraway lifted his head up a fraction and pointed at a plastic chair nearby. Caraway went back to his push pins. One was rolling about in a tight circle.

Mira frowned and looked over at the chair. He hesitated, then stood his ground.

"I want to know why you've—"

"Now, then," Caraway said, slowly. "What can I do for you?"

"-always been watching me?"

"What?" Caraway asked. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you."

"Why you're always watching me? I don't get it. Everytime I look up, there you are. Why are you always spying on me?" Mira blurted out. He put out a finger to point but quickly drew it back in again.

Caraway's eyes widened a little. He seemed puzzled. More than that, he looked as though he had never seen Mira before in his life. "Spying? Why do you think I've been spying on you?" He sounded almost hurt.

"You're always watching me from up here."

"Sometimes I look down from the balcony, yes, that's true. I wouldn't go so far as to call that spying, though."

"I don't know what you got against me, man."

"I like to watch over what you people are doing down there. That's true as well. I guess you're right. Sometimes I do watch you and the other associates at work. It's unnerving. Do you find your job difficult?"

"No! It's not hard." Mira, who had begun to slouch again, stiffened visibly.

"Of course it's not especially difficult, but it must get so tedious after a while. Doing the same task over and over again, sitting in the same posture for hours on end. I can't see how you can stand doing your work."

"I like the work. I just don't like you watching me doing it. What do you do up here anyway?" Mira looked around. He saw the topographical maps and the erasers.

"And you are always seated in the same position, slouching over like that for hours on end. Your neck begins to ache and you kick out your feet to shake the needles out of them. Your eyes glaze over and then you get distracted. I can't blame you, really."

Mira was confused. Needles? What's he talking about? Mira found his eyes returning again and again to the pyramid of erasers.

"And the frustration of it all," Caraway said. "I can imagine. Doing all this work so that some letters get burned. Letters with important things written in them. Very frustrating. Isn't that so?"

"Mmm, no," offered Mira. "Not really. It's good pay."

“But it’s so boring. I’ve seen you all staring at each other in sheer desperation. You’re constantly looking over at that woman, what’s her name...” Caraway peeked at his list again. “Miss Gray, is it?” Caraway slid his chair over to the balcony and poked his head over the top of the balcony rail. Down below he saw that a small crowd had gathered on the stage to listen. They turned their heads away and moved off slowly, all except for Alex, who was furiously scratching at an envelope with a thin blade. He rolled back towards the desk.

Mira was trying to read the legend on the map: “Excavation Sites.” He looked up. He was back to slouching. “You wanted to see me about something?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t important,” said Caraway. “Let’s get back to this issue of spying.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ve never been up here before. If I worked up here I’d want to look down too. You have this good view.”

“But you don’t like being considered scenery.”

“What?”

“You don’t like being watched.”

“You can’t help it, you know?”

Caraway smiled. “No, you’re right. It’s wrong to spy on people. You’ve got a good point there. It’s bad enough doing this work, I’m sure.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“So you like it?”

“Yeah, sometimes.”

“I’m sorry if you thought I’ve been watching you all this time.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“No, no, I really should apologize. Here.” Caraway took one of the erasers off the pyramid and placed it on the corner of the desk nearest Kailash Mira. “Here’s a bonus for you.”

“No thanks, I’ve got one.” Mira looked at the eraser. It was brand new, with neatly rounded edges. It looked soft.

“You’re right, that’s a terrible bonus. How’s this? Why don’t you take a break for a while?”

"I just took a break. I can get back to work. Thanks though."

"No, I insist. Take a break. As a reward for being harassed by my constantly observing you."

"You were just doing your job."

"You're right. I am the supervisor here," said Caraway. "It's my job to make sure everyone works hard. I try not to be a prison warden. You're not a prisoner. So you're free for the afternoon. When I had Desengio send you up here I didn't mean to get you angry like that. You're doing a good job here. Don't worry if Desengio's always treating you like a criminal."

"I didn't do anything wrong. I was just—I was angry because I don't like being spied on. And I don't like people looking through my desk."

"It's not your desk."

Mira frowned. Caraway was right. Mira wondered if anything was his at all. He wasn't even wearing his own clothes. He was wearing government issue. There was a long pause. Whispers from down below seemed loud in the silence. Caraway was looking at the window set into the wall.

Kailash Mira was about to speak again when Caraway cut him off with a raised hand. Caraway spoke very quietly: "Do you know anything about people opening the mail?" He waited, but Mira was silent. "I have heard a rumor that someone's been taking money from people's letters."

Mira stepped towards the chair and sat down. He was within arm's reach of the eraser now. He sat for a moment, stunned. He could hear Desengio's footsteps below. He could hear the rustling of papers. He even heard his name being whispered. Desengio must have found the opened letters. Maybe Alex told him?

"I didn't take any money. I just take home some of the ones that were going to be burned. But I didn't steal anything."

"You're telling me you steal letters from the U.S. post office and take them home and read them. What do you do? Sell pictures of women to magazines? Or do you just go gallivanting off, reading people's lives at bar poetry slams?"

"I've done nothing wrong."

"Or are you looking for more money orders for gold coins?"

"I had nothing to do with that."

"Why do you want to get involved with these peoples' lives?" Caraway sat back in his chair, which squeaked a little. Down below, hearing that squeak, everyone went quietly back to work. Caraway felt a little disappointed. He needed to ask Desengio a few questions, without having hot-tempered Mira around. "Here. I'll tell you what. It's hot in here. Why don't you take the repaired letters back to the main office? You could take your lunch break as well."

Mira kept quiet.

"Take a few hours. There's a good middle eastern restaurant in the university district. Cheap, too. We'll continue this talk after you come back. Just make sure to leave your desk keys here, until you come back. How does that sound? I'll just take it as a touchstone. I'll just scratch the surface a little. We'll look through our desk and see what we've been opening. If nothing shows, then that's fine, you'll get an apology from me. How's that sound?"

Mira was staring at Caraway again, with the same furious look in his eyes; but this time he wasn't staring exactly at Caraway, but somewhere in space, at some distant point. Mira finally looked down, then shrugged, and surrendered the keys.

After Mira had gone, Caraway went back to his eraser pyramid. He thought about a story he'd read, in one of these books about Egypt. A city is under siege somewhere in the desert. The pharaoh has to get a message out to an ally to get help, because people are beginning to starve and the water is running out. The pharaoh selects a messenger from among his servants. The messenger is given the message, and is told to wait until the right moment to sneak out. The right moment comes, the kid tries to sneak through the siege barriers. The enemy sees him skulking about, captures him and asks him what he's trying to do. They beat him thoroughly, but they can't figure out what message he's supposed to be carrying. So they kill him, and cut off his head, and send it on its way to its original destination. The pharaoh's ally receives the head, has it wrapped in blue silk so that only its hair and two puzzled eyes are exposed. A feast is thrown in the brave messenger's honor, and the head is shaved, and there painted on the skull are two concentric circles: a city under seige. The ally understood.

Kailash Mira left the building, headed north towards the bus station, passing by the man with his head in the hole, past the shells game man, who was napping, with his jacket for a pillow. Mira stared glumly out the window on the bus ride home. A little boy sat next to him, a little seleucid Siddhartha, no more than four, with a harness tied to his torso. The boy showed Mira his middle finger. Mira thought the boy was telling him off. The boy's explanation that he had just caught a thorn from an old 'ye olde shoppe' sign didn't convince Mira that the kid was on the level. Near the post office there was a delay. A taxi cab had crashed into a utility truck ("Mullville Resurfacing") so he had to get off a block early and walk.

Back at the apartment, Mira saw that the pachisi game had changed since he'd last seen it. Ardita had blocked one his pawns from moving ahead any further. A little wave of loneliness swept over him as he picked up the shells. They clinked against each other in his palm.

The window blinds had been drawn. The bedsheets were ruffled. She'd probably come home and taken a nap. Mira absent-mindedly tugged the sheets back over the bed. A little sunlight filtered from between two high rise buildings and into the living room. Ardita didn't have much up on the walls, some prints she had saved from college, Georgia O'Keefe, Wyndham Lewis, a map of the solar system. Mira didn't really like any of it. He sat in the kitchen, which didn't have any posters except for a "home sweet home" embroidery from Mexico. The kitchen looked smaller by day than it usually did, in the evenings, when Ardita was around. He adjusted the gas flame so that the little flames were taller than was safe. He drank some leftover soup from the fridge, cold, and watched the flames grow brighter and brighter.

Mira sat down at the table and stared at the one x-ray he had left. Its siblings were probably being confiscated by Caraway. Mira's imagination deteriorated somewhere beyond that thought. A nurse brings a cup of water and some pills to the patient. The pills are made of gold, and the patient, small and frail, protests, shaking her braid from side to side. Those aren't the right pills, she said. Those are fake pills. The nurse says, It's not the pills that are important. You need to drink this, holding out the

glass of water. Mira imagined the nurse to be gray, gray-haired, gray-skinned, a part of the black-and-white scenery. The patient is the angelic one with the halo over her head, and the halo is blue and fiery and gives off sparks and quivers in potential, somewhere above the thinning patient's head.

Mira decided to try to return the photograph. "Deteriorating." He had to let the doctors know what was happening.

At the university hospital, for the first time since he just barely passed his postal worker examinations, Mira felt glad to be wearing his blue postal worker uniform. Ardita always joked about him looking like a car mechanic. Red arrows directed him to the reception desk. A woman sat calmly reading a magazine. The receptionist was behind a pane of invisible glass. Mira knocked on it. The receptionist frowned at him, and picked up her telephone. A phone on Mira's side of the glass rang. "Hello?"

"Yes, may I help you?" The receptionist, a bony-faced woman, seemed irritable.

"I'd like to speak to someone in the x-ray department, please." He knew there was a word for x-ray people but wasn't sure what it was; so he just repeated, louder: "X-ray," and showed the receptionist his photograph.

"That's a CT scan," the receptionist informed him. "You need an appointment to visit that room."

Mira tried to sound authoritative: "I'm from the Returned Parcels section of the post office, ma'am, and I need to get in contact with a technician in order to get an address." He waited, the receptionist waited. "My boss already called in to explain this to someone. Wasn't that you?"

The receptionist said, "No. Why don't I call your boss up, just to reconfirm."

"No! No, that would take too much time, and you'd have to talk to all these different people to get to him. That's why I came here in person, to get around all this bureaucracy, you know?"

"I see." She thought for a second, then opened a door into the office area. "Here, I'll get someone to take you there."

A candy-striper brought Mira to the CT scanner room. Mira peered through a glass window. A patient in a pale green dressing gown was being rolled into the center of a huge metal torus. A technician came up to him, and he explained what he wanted: the address of the doctor or whomever these x-rays were supposed to be sent to, so that the letters could be sent on their way. The technician took the photograph and disappeared for a while. The machinery in the room rotated around the patient's skull. Mira wondered what it was doing. A round white clock showed that it was almost a quarter to two, and that he had some time before Caraway and Desengio would be expecting him back. If he were late, that would be as good as an admission of guilt. Caraway would find the other photographs, and other letters. His job was as good as gone. Ardit, too, and the apartment.

The technician returned, with a puzzled look on his face. "Here's an address, but it's not much of an address. Just a street number. I also found the name of the person who ordered the study done, and his address, if that would help." Mira jotted these down, borrowing the technician's pen. The technician tugged at the collar of his lab coat and said, "That's a very unusual photograph, by the way," but Mira didn't have the time to investigate further. He didn't care if he ever found out what was meant. He just wanted to get the photos sent on their way.

A taxi dropped him off at the address, where a man named Robert Whitman lived, and Mira stood for a moment in front of the small two-story building, trying to think of what to say. He rang the buzzer, and someone let him into the building. He climbed the stairs to the second floor apartment. He rang the doorbell next to a black door. A small, wiry man answered, staring up at Mira. The man's eyes were lit with surprise; this seemed like his most natural expression.

"Good afternoon! I was just thinking about the mail. Have you got something for me?"

Mira didn't, really. He nodded his head. "Um, can I come in?"

"Sure!" The man introduced himself as Bob, offering his hand to shake. His palm was cold. "Come in, come in!" He seemed pleased to have a visitor.

Mira again found himself in someone's kitchen. Some forgotten carrots were the only thing on the counter. "Sit down! Let me get you a glass of water." It didn't look like a doctor's kitchen. He expected to see more artwork on the walls. There was a calendar up. The man had forgotten to change the month. Whitman had filled a tumbler with water, when the phone rang. "Hey, there's some ice in the freezer. Help yourself," the man said, before he hopped into the next room to get the phone.

Mira went over and opened the freezer. A bag of frozen vegetables, a plastic bag of ice, and a gray ice tray. Mira pulled out the ice tray and shut the freezer. The ice was covered with frost. Something seemed wrong about the whole situation. He didn't think that Whitman was a doctor. He brought the ice cube tray to the table and was about to twist the ends when Whitman peered in, his ear to the receiver. "No! Put that down! The ice is in the plastic bag. Don't, no..." Whitman spoke into the receiver, "George, why don't I call you back?" He hung up. His ears were red.

Mira was staring at the ice cubes in the tray. What was wrong with them? Whitman came over and grabbed the tray. He brushed off some of the frost on the tray, and Mira saw that in the ice cube that Whitman had cleared off, there was a small goldfish, curled up, with wires running around its body. A small thermometer that said "Niagara Falls" on it kept the fish company. Mira stepped back a little.

"No, don't worry," Whitman said. "The fish's name is Laz. He's not dead, he's in hypostasis. Welcome to my research."

Mira sat down with his warm glass of water. Whitman carefully replaced the tray in the freezer, put the bag of vegetables on top of it. "I would not have recommended putting that in your water. The chemicals are quite toxic. I know a guy who once presented a paper on cryobiology that included the demonstration of a fish like this being thawed out in a glass of water, but it turned into quite an unpleasant sight. No, I'm afraid the liquid is quite toxic and the process is irreversible." Mira stared at his glass. He was trying to puzzle things out in his head. He had always wanted to be a post man so he could drop in on people's lives like this. Whitman plunged on. "I bet you've never seen fish like this. Laz's big brother is still at the lab. A big carp. You've got to see him." Whitman grinned.

Mira pulled out his photograph. "Is this yours?" he asked

“That’s a CAT scan of fish. How’d you get it?” Whitman didn’t wait for an answer. He sidled up to Mira and poked a finger at a white spot. “See, the fish is asleep. The fish is in a state of induced dream. Fish don’t really dream. We’re building new computers out of these things. Their brains can do stuff that the new microprocessors can’t do. Biotechnology. You should invest in it.” Whitman waggled a finger at Mira. “When the fish are asleep, their brains reorganize its neural activity. We can use the part of the brain that’s not being used for attending to senses and breathing. At these cold temperatures frostbite sets in pretty quickly, so the fish become useless. So we’ve come up with replaceable modules.” He rushed to another room and returned with a tray of small objects. He took one of the knick-knacks out and put it on the table. It was a small black cube. “See? They’ll keep a fish in there. Just plug it in. It’ll drive your car for you. They’ll run traffic lights, they’ll sort the mail. No more confused mailmen losing letters.” Whitman paused to consider this, not noticing Mira’s uniform. He plunged on: “Fish don’t have a cerebellum like you or I. They dream but they only dream about breathing. It’s not cruel, if that’s what you’re thinking, because we give them a much longer lease on life than they’re used to. They get a new body, a bigger one, one with gold plated electrodes and pinstripes. The entire fish skull is in there, eyes and all. That’s why it’s black. To keep the light out. Sensory information disturbs the fish’s functioning. Makes them sleepier, too. We’re still testing. These pictures are from CAT scans we took at the university hospital. I thought I sent those off already. The first model fish has begun to grow old. I thought we might throw a party on its behalf, for all the researchers. You could come, you know. What did you say your specialty was?”

Mira said, in a weak voice, “I forgot my bag. I’ll be back. I’ll bring the rest of the photos back.”

“Get too absorbed in your work, eh? Happens to me all the time. I’ll be waiting!”

Mira got on the first bus he saw and transferred twice before he got onto the right bus to take him back to work.

Again Mira saw the man lying in the sidewalk. This time he stopped, for he saw something was odd: the man was wearing different shoes. He glanced at the shells man,

who was watching him, and looked carefully at the man's legs. They looked skinnier. It was a different guy. Mira asked the man sitting on his crate, "Can he breathe in there?"

"Sure, the air filters through the rocks. It's a lot more comfortable than it looks. There's a blanket down there, and they take breaks every hour or so."

"How do you know? Have you tried it?"

"Yeah, I have, and I know because it's my hole. I sublet it to these guys for a percentage. It's real therapeutic. The rocks act like little massaging fingers, and on top of that it's really good for the back. You should try it. You look like you need it."

Back inside the theater, Kailash sat at his desk, without opening the drawer with the x-rays in it. Desengio came up to Kailash as he sat on a bench in the lobby. He shone his flashlight into his eyes and intoned: "I am searching for an honest man." He cracked a smile. He kept the light in Mira's eyes, and said, "I'm quitting this job. They're going to need a new 'assistant manager.' I think you're the man for this job. Are you?" He shut off the light and walked away, leaving Kailash with a green afterimage to blink at.

A woman came up, with a fresh envelope in her hand. Someone explained to her: you can't post that here. "Why not? This is the post office, isn't it?" The others tried to ignore her, but she would not leave. "Is there anyone here that I can talk to? I don't understand."

Kailash Mira went back to work, and within a few hours of processing letters was again completely numb. He watched as his hands moved of their own volition, reaching over to ink the stamp, stamping the envelope, pushing it into the bin by the desk. There was one particular gesture that he made that he had never noticed before, which grew stranger and stranger once he had noticed it. *After* he stamped the envelope he would nudge the stamp out of the way with his thumb, tucking it between his fingers to keep the ink from staining the envelopes. He paused in his work and looked at his thumb. It was black with ink and the tip was indented, from the pressure.

Mira became obsessed with his thumb. Its round stain was like a message to him. After work he went down to the washroom and stood in front of the mirror, peering at the ridges in his finger. On the bus home he kept pressing against the window with the

same thumb, to see if the indentation at the tip was permanent. At home, he pressed one of the cowrie shells into the indentation, as if the shell was biting into it. He bit on it as he cooked some instant soup over the burner.

He crawled into bed early, curled up into a foetal position and fell asleep, numb to any thought other than the indentation on his thumb.

Ardita came home late from work that night. She came straight into the bedroom and kicked off her black pumps, and turned on the light. Mira stirred, and whimpered a little. Ardita turned off the light again and sat by his side, on the bed. He was frowning. She peered closely and saw that under his lids, his eyes were moving.

“Are you asleep?” she asked.

Mira stirred, opened one of his eyes, and quickly shut it again.

“What’s wrong? Did you get fired?”

Mira didn’t answer. After a long pause, he shook his head.

“What?” She couldn’t see him in the dark. He muttered something. “I can’t hear what you’re saying. You’re talking into the blanket.”

“I didn’t get fired,” Mira said. “I got promoted to assistant manager.” He opened his eyes, and considered his thumb. He cringed and squeezed his eyes shut again.

“April fools,” Ardita said, smiling.

“No, really.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No,” he said. He yawned. “They had to test me first.” Ardita laughed. She couldn’t help it. “My postman,” she said, and kissed him. “Guess that means you can afford to pay for your own food now. Good!” She moved to get up, but he stopped her by tugging at her blouse. “What is it? I’m coming to bed soon.”

“They were going to replace me with a fish.” He yawned again.

“You’re sleepy.”

“A microfish. Thumb.” With those words Mira fell asleep.

“We’ll discuss this tomorrow. You’re not making any sense.” Ardita leaned over, pulling her hair out of the way, and kissed Kailash Mira on his mouth; he replied with some incomprehensible sound, and sighed in frustration. Ardita also sighed, as everyone must when they innocently kiss someone lost to them in sleep. But in sleep he

found her again; and when he breathed out she breathed in, and for a moment or two they breathed each other's air, and there, in the dark, inside each other, they made an intangible connection.