

PROLOGUE

Thought had become pointless. There were no opinions worth forming for he could no longer express them, even had there been someone still in his life to express them to. There were no decisions to debate in his own mind for there were no actions he was capable of taking. There was nothing worth learning because he could never use the knowledge. He had never learned how to change a tire. His were flat now, permanently. That was something he knew without having to be told, or to read it somewhere.

Feelings were now irrelevant, too. Since he could no longer act on desires, he stopped desiring. Occasionally he sensed vague shifts in his moods but he suspected they were random chemical spills from the brain. Chemicals don't beget images as desires do, or little movies he could at least pretend to be living in. He had spent most of his life living in the movies his mind produced, satisfying self-serving fictions adapted for the screen from the world he actually lived in, ever reluctant to impose himself on it.

But now the screen was blank. No credits had rolled by at the end. His name didn't appear anywhere. He could no longer recall hearing anyone ever say his name. He could speak it in his mind, but that was now pointless, too. He didn't need a name anymore.

The only thing left to him in life was masturbation.

Even there, he could not produce emotional desires, or even soulless B-movies. He needed external images, a magazine, a picture, in color. He recognized what he saw, a woman, but if he closed his eyes a moment, all that appeared on his eyelids were flickering spots, white-on-black, or uneven lines and blotches, the herky-jerky end to a silent movie.

When he masturbated to the picture in the magazine, arousal was long in coming. His left hand was a virgin at first, after the stroke, but he persevered most of the time. His world had been reduced to sensation, and there wasn't much of that with his entire right side paralyzed. Masturbation was the only sensation he could command.

He couldn't control what the nurses did to him. There were always two of them now, changing him, turning him on his side, cleaning him. Every time he saw them approach he felt the only other sensation, besides arousal, he now knew. Irritation, annoyance, resentment. He had become so irritated once that he struck at a nurse with his left arm, hitting her on the shoulder. A report had been made. The nurse had been trying to use a

hoist to place him in a wheelchair. Now there were always two nurses, and they never tried to get him out of his bed again. The therapists no longer visited either.

Someone would leave the magazine on his lap. No name. Just the face, somehow familiar. After the face left, he would have to carefully reposition the magazine next to him on the bed, on the left side. Since he was propped up in bed, he could look down on the pages, flipping slowly through them until his eyes fixed on an image.

With his palm flat, he would press the gutter of the glossy page, hoping it would stay open. He would then move his hand under his pajamas to his flaccid penis, and slowly set to work. Masturbating was tiring, or was until he at last began to feel aroused, because he had to try to keep his left arm positioned over his chest as much as possible so he could have an unobstructed view of the image. At first he had tried placing the magazine on his right side. Angrily he realized his left arm couldn't reach the right-hand page to turn it. Grabbing what he could of the magazine, he hauled it across his body.

Anger, resentment, arousal, the high and low points of his day, interchangeable in the end because they at least registered on the graph as experience. Whether the curves and dots were positive or negative was immaterial. At least they had not flatlined. He was alive, though all but comatose. Black dots on a flat black line are invisible.

When he died after two years on that same bed, a nurse remarked to a passing physiotherapist that at the end of life our sexuality outlives the rest. Memories, meaning, love, they vanish long before.

CHAPTER ONE

Musical Debut

Years after the fact, Kit Cayman would tell people he never forgot the exact, precise, dead-on, eureka-and-then-some feeling of freedom that whisked him into the street the day he quit his job. It wasn't true, but it wasn't a big lie either. He had survived on his own. It felt right. The money didn't matter most of the time, which was probably for the better.

When he had work, he got up at dawn. It had become a habit over the years, even during droughts, which were more common in a freelance translator's life than the tsunamis of work. He would be at the keyboard before taking his first sip of coffee. Instant-on was his way of piling up sandbags against the usual flood of random daydreams and unfriendly self-interrogation. By the time he'd built up

momentum, usually not long after killing coffee No. 2, he was OK. He would lock into the translation on his screen and the hours would fly by. On days without work, drinking coffee in the relative quiet of the early morning often became the best part of his day, the only time when optimism stood a chance. Optimism wasn't natural to him, he'd decided.

If there was no work today, it would be the fourth straight day. But it was still early. Most of his clients were still commuting to work.

The girl in bed beside him, curled up and facing away from both him and the grey morning light, didn't budge as he got to his feet and edged his way around the bed, between it and the trunk, to get to the kitchen. As he got to the other side of the bed he saw her face for the first time in daylight. He remembered the purple hair, bob cut in uneven lengths. In the club last night, it appeared candy colored as he looked down from the stage, but now there was nothing for the hair to reflect.

After measuring the beans into the coffee grinder, he stood in the doorway between the kitchen and bedroom with the grinder in his hands. He pressed the On button and watched the girl's face. She was lying on her right side. At the sound, her left shoulder twitched once, nothing

more. He counted slowly to five, the time that seemed to create the best grind for his French-press coffee maker.

When the grinder stopped, she suddenly turned to her other side. The rotation took some of the sheet with her, baring the lower left side of her back and one rounded buttock. For a moment he studied the tattoo on her right arm, the one pressing the sheet to her body. It ran from her wrist to her shoulder, an elaborate light green, yellow and rose-colored vine growing more entwined and thicker as it climbed.

On the floor beside the bed was a small black skirt, a black corset and torn black stockings. Do they buy them that way? On top of the pile were two large silver hoop earrings, a chrome-studded black leather bracelet and a beaded black lace choker. How did women manage to be neat even when high and horny?

As the coffee brewed, he returned to watch her sleep. Kicking himself mentally, he realized he could have coffee any morning but he couldn't have someone like her every morning. He slipped back into bed. Just as he was about to place his hand on her hip, she rolled over again, turning her back to him. Was it unconscious, or was she awake? He decided not to find out. He realized he was still tired as well. The night had ended only three and a half hours ago.

It was only caffeine addiction that got him up. He closed his eyes and recalled the evening.

It was the second time that he'd linked up with a woman while playing in public, but the first time didn't really count, he now decided. When he was a waiter in his twenties and a month of stingy tips left him ten or twelve bucks shy of rent money, he took to the streets with a flute and a hat for anyone who wanted to lighten their load of pocket change. Once, a young woman from somewhere in North Carolina took him to her cheap hotel room where they shared a bottle of wine as supper. She had to return home the next morning. She wrote once, saying she'd found a recording of the Bach cantata he was playing when she first saw him. He included his phone number in his short reply, but he never heard from her again.

The encounter had faded badly in memory, as if the images had been drawn in charcoal. By comparison, he had a feeling the encounter with Selita would endure like a tattoo. She had been witness to his real musical debut. After she followed him home, he knew for certain that "musician" would have more sex appeal than "word professional" on a business card.

Now that he was working for himself, he was almost always in his apartment. It was music that got him out of

the apartment last night and it was possibly music that got this girl into his apartment this morning. Until recently, music had been his secret, one he thought he should keep to himself, like sexual fantasies that would evaporate if tested in the outside world.

He played decently but it was only while playing alone in his room that he would pretend he was a real musician. He was self-taught and intimidated by the genius of the musicians he loved, just as he was by the monster skills of young musicians coming out of university jazz programs. He had a bookshelf full of jazz theory and exercises, volumes of transcribed solos by the greats, some analyzed to death bar by bar. Each time he bought one he'd come home excited, believing it would reveal the secret to improvisation that so far eluded him. But most of the time the material seemed so dry he'd pour himself a Scotch and put the book aside.

If he wasn't too frustrated he'd put on a Jamey Aebersold or Bob Mintzer play-along CD and crank it up full volume. The CDs came with sheet music, the head and chords, and a dynamite rhythm section he could hide behind when it came time to solo. Some days he felt he'd "gotten it," he'd felt the music in his fingers. Emboldened, he would blow over the rhythm section as he was intended to do. If he felt particularly elated, he imagined one of them nodding

approval to him as he put down his horn afterwards. They'd call him by name sometimes, and he knew their names, which he found on the CD credits.

When he once told a neighbor friend about musicians on CDs talking to him, his friend said he regretted not having a number handy for a shrink.

It was during one of those play-along sax sessions that he had met his upstairs neighbor. While pausing to find a fresh reed, he heard a knock at the door. The man introduced himself as LeBron Jackson. He'd only just moved in. Kit extended his hand.

"Kit, Kit Caymen," he said.

"I play bass," LeBron said. "Didn't know you played, too, K-Man."

The name stuck, although most of the time LeBron just called him K.

LeBron was tall, and as skinny as a soprano sax. "Who are you playing with?"

If he was disappointed with the answer, that the horn was just a hobby, it didn't show.

They spent the rest of the afternoon listening to music, comparing tastes. As they drank, the bass player's ear seemed worth more than all the books combined, particularly when he said things like:

"It's not always nearly as complicated as you think. You don't not play simply because you don't have all your scales and chords down."

He told K how on certain pieces you could play a single five-note scale through the entire piece and you'd sound fine.

"You'll get bored with those five notes but you'll be making music."

In the following weeks, they started playing simple pieces together, other times just common R&B horn section licks, which LeBron would sing to him, or they'd dig out some old recordings. At LeBron's, they spent afternoons with Sly and the Family Stone, Otis Redding, The Temptations and James Brown. Some days they confined their sleuthing to anything Motown. Any nugget would do, and LeBron would have him playing it far more quickly than if he'd tried to pull it out and polish it himself.

The more time he spent with LeBron the bolder he got in the face of oppression, what LeBron called the tyranny of theory.

"Just effin' play, man. Just let your fingers find what's in your head, and if there's nothing in your head, take the horn out of your mouth and sing it, anything, then wing it. Keep playing but hang tight with that little idea

that spilled out of your mouth when you weren't thinking. Play it long enough and it will turn into something, and then it will be in your head. It will be yours, something you can use every which way."

LeBron's head always seemed to be into playing, unlike his. There were days when the horn weighed a ton around his neck. He was going through the motions. LeBron would simply stop playing. If that happened a couple of days in a row, LeBron would stop answering his door for a while. One day, when LeBron finally let him back in, LeBron was wearing a Mets hat, the blue one. Although it was grey and cold outside, the Mets were playing their home opener.

"You ready to play?" LeBron asked. "It's too bad you're a horn player because some days you'd be better off if somebody just axed off your head. But you need your mouth to play, not like bass players."

LeBron took off his ball cap and pointed it at him.

"When a real hitter steps to the plate, and some pitcher is going to throw a ball at him faster than a Charlie Parker tempo, that hitter, he's got to stop thinking. If he's thinking, he's wearing handcuffs. It's not the time to think because there is no time to think. Thinking's got to stay in the batting cage. Same with your horn."

They didn't end up playing that day. They talked and sipped and listened to the ball game.

Some days he almost regretted turning on his computer in the early morning and finding an urgent request for a submission on a translation job. But he wasn't making enough money to say no. He had learned that he wasn't a good enough, or committed enough actor to pimp himself as the translator — correction, adapter — every big-bucks corporation needed.

At the beginning, a good decade ago, right after being fired from a job at what he called a translation factory, he made a million phone calls, and sent out at least that many letters. One hundred thousand and two of the recipients promised to keep his contact information on file, two of them said "Let's meet," fourteen requested he send samples of his work or do a test, and seven of them sent him jobs within the first four months of freelancing.

One of them made him think he'd need a bank account in the Caymans to hide all his money. A woman he'd studied with at NYU had gone on to specialize in medical translation. The agency she worked for was suddenly swamped. Would he be interested in bailing them out? After confessing that he'd never translated a medical document, she assured him the job wouldn't be too technical. It was

not actually a document, she said. Instead it was four hours of taped lectures and workshops at a medical convention. There was no French transcription to work from.

"You'll have to work from the tapes. You can charge your top rate."

Not really knowing what he was getting into, he said yes. At first blush, four hours of tapes should be worth a fortune to a man who sometimes wasn't sure whether he should think of himself a freelancer or simply unemployed.

When the material arrived, the first few minutes of the first tape resulted in more than an hour of rifling through dictionaries. Play, Stop, Rewind, FF became so tedious he was overjoyed when background noise, audience applause or laughter allowed him to dismiss portions as "inaudible." The job took him three seven-day weeks of hours far longer than he ever put in at the conveyor-belt translation agency.

By the end, he had become familiar with much of the vocabulary. His confidence grew as he went back to the first pages and used Search and Replace to hide the ignorance with which he started the job. He did a rough calculation in his head of how much money the job would bring in based on what he'd done so far. When the figure topped \$10,000 he paid a nurse friend \$100 to quickly read

through the text to make sure there were no horrific errors in medical terminology.

"Thank you, NYU," he wrote in his journal. "You're moving me to Easy Street."

It was to be the last five-figure contract he ever got. The medical translation agency never called back, although their name looked good in the list of clients on his website. Out of the one million approaches he'd made that first year, he now had seven clients he could call regulars. Only one of them ever kept him working full-time for more than a month or two.

When that happened he rarely picked up his sax. LeBron worked at night, mostly as a musician, so they rarely saw each other. It was probably for the best, he would think. He never managed to dump the feeling that he was a musical pretender.

Then one Saturday in December, LeBron knocked at his door. He had a CD in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other.

"You ready to make your debut? Star Search has chosen you, my man."

LeBron sat down on the radiator by the window and laughed at his friend's petrified expression.

"An easy gig, a fun gig. I promise. What's the term I'm looking for? Yeah, fifth wheel. You'd be like a fifth wheel, a fifth horn, not really needed. Thought you might like it, you know. You'd finally become one of the really cool people, not just some closet word freak."

Kit put LeBron's CD into his computer's optical drive and plugged in the external speakers. After listening to the opening cut, all he could say was a silly "Fucking ferocious funk, Batman."

"Want to play it on stage?"

"I'd be lost before you got to the bridge."

"Don't worry. We don't need you. We've already got four horns up there. I'm just asking if you want to get a taste. You can join in on whatever you learn between now and next Thursday. One piece, two pieces. Doesn't matter. We've already played some of what you just heard, only slower and in little bits. If you get lost, just pretend. If you get back on the horse, go for it. If not, no matter. No one's going to hear you, no one's going to be watching you.

"But," LeBron added, "if you have any thoughts about soloing, we shoot you. The only thing is that you don't get paid. You're just sittin' in, as my guest."

When the gig arrived, LeBron wouldn't let K have a drink before the first set. The club, a former disco-funk hall in Crown Heights in Brooklyn, had looked seedy until the lights were lowered. Now it was half full. He guessed it might seat several hundred people.

The piped-in reggae and soca stopped and the band was announced. His knees were shaking as the leader counted out the tempo for the first number. They stopped shaking the instant he heard how big the band's sound was.

He couldn't help it. He climbed aboard and rode the rhythm. The horn section was sparring, and he was part of it, landing musical jabs right to the gut, getting more and more insistent before culminating in a glorious ensemble uppercut that launched the trumpet solo.

Christ, he'd done it. He cradled his horn and looked back towards LeBron, whose eyes seemed to be glued to the floor. He played the electric bass with his feet close together, and swayed, like a tall narrow skyscraper in an earthquake.

It was then that he looked down from the low stage and saw the girl with the candy-colored purple hair. Her eyes were closed. When she opened them they were looking straight into his.

Her name was Selita.

After the set, she asked, "You ever get to solo?"

"Nope. I prefer duets." He couldn't believe he said that, laid down a move on her. Not a moment's thought went into it. Had he become smooth all of a sudden?

She raised an amused eyebrow.

"Drink?"

Before she could reply, LeBron tapped him on the shoulder. He was squatting at the end of the stage.

"Well, word pro?"

"I'm changing professions. Right here and now."

LeBron laughed, eyeing the girl for a second as he scanned the room.

"Well, word man, gotta tell you now that I tagged you as a fool the first day I met you. Now I know for sure. By the way, you did fine."

"How do you know?"

"Because I couldn't hear you. If I did I would have known you were messing up."

"It's time for a drink, LeBron."

"You earned it. Have two, if you want, K-Man. You might not want to come up for the second set though. Boss has thrown in a new piece, one I haven't shown you. He wants to cut loose on it. Your call."

"We'll watch. I'll be in better-looking company," he said, looking at Selita. "Let's get that drink," he said to her.

"Before we do, can I touch your horn?" She said it innocently, but LeBron reacted immediately, as if she'd uttered an old musician's joke.

"OK, on that note, I'm outta here," said LeBron, unfolding his six feet six and a half inches. "Enjoy."

There were tables available but Selita said she wanted to dance, drink in hand. Like LeBron when he was playing, she fixed her eyes to the floor as she danced. He wondered whether she was doing that just to let him watch her body move to the music without the embarrassment of being caught staring. Her face made him think of a woman he'd seen in a hip-hop video but he couldn't attach a name. The more he looked at her he realized she was a few years older than the woman in the video, her face slightly wider at the cheek bones. Some faces take you to the eyes, others to the lips. Hers had options.

He wanted to leave with her before the second set was done so he wouldn't end up drinking too much, but he couldn't because his alto was still on stage, on a sax stand, its two hues of bronze conflicting brilliantly under the stage lights.

Tonight seemed to vindicate the indulgence. That horn had been his one splurge after getting the agency job when he graduated. It took him three and a half years to pay it off, in addition to the remaining debt from a long-ago vacation to Barcelona, an extravagance on a waiter's salary that would have been disappointing for the most part had it not given him the idea that mastering a second language and becoming a translator might be his passport to a real career. He was already in his late twenties at the time, too old to pretend he was just waiting for something better to come along.

After the final set, LeBron accompanied them back to Manhattan, then parted ways a few subway stops early, at 6th Avenue and Spring Street, LeBron saying he had some business to attend to. The sound of the train doors opening drowned out a joking remark about going for a spring roll.

As for Selita, she had never mentioned where she lived nor asked where they were going. It seemed irrelevant now that she'd come this far. When they arrived at 34th Street Penn Station, she got off with him. She accepted his right arm. His left held the black sax case.

As he put his head back down on the pillow the following morning, he was glad he hadn't had a coffee to jolt him into the day. The last thing he saw was Selita's

left shoulder. He reached over and covered it with the sheet. As he closed his eyes he felt the sudden infusion of sleep chemicals. At this hour on a weekday morning, when everyone else was trying to revive their corpses for work, sleepiness could be the sweetest high of all. It overtook him before he could replay the previous night.

It was a slight jiggling of the bed that woke him. He hadn't moved. He was still on his right side. He opened his left eye – the other was sunk in the pillow – and saw Selita seated at the foot of the bed with her back to him. She was juggling three differently colored balls, soft ones like hacky sack balls. She dropped a ball every two or three rotations, not that he could have done better. But she was determined, picking up the errant one and going right back at it without the slightest change in expression, as if klutzy was part of the human condition and not something to beat yourself up about.

As he watched her he began to replay the night. It was the best sex he'd had in years. He'd been seeing a woman off and on for a good decade but the feeling of sexual satisfaction was off and on as well. Rarely did making love rescue him, if only momentarily, from existence. He'd long ago lost the lifetime guarantee on erections. In consequence, mostly unconsciously, he had all but stopped

initiating, which only compounded the problem. He wished sex shops sold a magic potion that paralyzed men's minds for the time it takes to make love. It would outsell Viagra and Cialis combined, he thought.

What bothered him now was that sex last night had seemed so uncomplicated. He tried to figure out why. If something was uncomplicated it must have a complicated reason. No answer came to mind. He continued to watch her slender arms operating in turns like pistons, gently pumping the balls into space. Then he realized she made love the same way she juggled. When she dropped a ball she barely lost a beat. She was determined to learn to juggle, and last night she was determined to make love to him. She may even have been determined to do so as far back as when their eyes met at the club. She didn't ask if she could come home with him, nor did she wait to be asked. She just did.

A nice, tidy answer, he thought, but he was addicted to complicated. Why had he not complicated their love-making, or even derailed it, by mentally rating the readiness of his erection, or asking, "Did that come from me or was she mostly responsible?" He recalled her playing with his cock and balls but couldn't remember whether he was aroused much before that. It mattered because more and

more his erections were foreign manufactured. She was cute as hell, he acknowledged, but looks never seemed to be enough, not the way they had been in his twenties and, to a lesser extent, his thirties.

Eventually, she completed seven rotations of the three balls without dropping one. He thought he espied the hint of a smile before she resumed, as calmly determined as before. It was then that he realized last night was perfect because she had taken him. She had not spoiled a second with even a perfunctory nod to the usual male ego. She played him.

He tried to filter what happened through his memory of a night when a woman he had met in a bar had somehow, while sitting with a table full of other women, reached deep down inside him and found assorted fantasies, not only submissive ones but masochistic ones. She played the nascent urges like a virtuoso all evening.

But while Selita made love to him, he realized he hadn't imagined her getting rough with him, or spanking him, or any of the other fantasies he was starting to rely on to stay turned on. Did the night represent another shade of masochism? After playing sax on stage with a kick-ass horn section in a funk band, he had been silently kidnapped by a pretty woman with purple hair. She didn't have to

point a gun at him. In fact, she hadn't said a word. Total submission. It was kink without the accoutrements. He couldn't have asked for more.

As that thought occurred to him, she reached back without looking and squeezed his left big toe.

"Thought I smelled coffee. A long time ago."

She'd been awake, feigning sleep when he'd tip-toed to the kitchen. He looked at her and wondered whether she was aware of everything around her in life, including how to make him do anything she wanted.

"My intentions were good," he said. "But while I was waiting for it to brew, I looked at you there in bed and got horny."

"But you didn't do anything about it," she replied, looking at him as if awaiting a full explanation, like a teacher expecting to be told the truth behind the dog ate my homework.

"You turned your back."

"I've never heard that excuse before from a horny man."

He considered for a moment, then confessed.

"I hadn't realized at that moment, but I wanted you to make love to me, not the other way around."

"But you realize that now?"

"Yes."

As convoluted as his own words seemed to him, the answer seemed to satisfy her. She flipped the balls at him and reached for her corset. He dropped two of the balls and missed getting a good look at her lovely ass as she bent over to get her clothes.

He poured out the old coffee and put on water for a new pot. She deserved better than coffee reheated in a microwave.

While the water boiled, he also got dressed. After pressing the coffee, he made the bed, a necessity in a tiny apartment if there was company, and sat down before his laptop to check for email. Selita was in the bathroom. When she turned on the tap he heard her singing but couldn't distinguish any words.

He saw he'd received a translation job due by end of day. He swore under his breath. Overall, business had been bad for months. Every now and then, a tornado would whirl through, forcing him to hold onto his keyboard for dear life, sixteen, seventeen-hour days, during which he would neither make the bed nor get dressed because he never knew when sleep would insist.

He debated replying:

"Sorry. On deadline with another job for this aft. Let me know later if you can't find anybody for today. I'll be all yours tomorrow."

Whenever he could he left the impression that clients were lined up for his services. If he turned a job around in record time, they might think he'd given them priority, done them a favor.

Selita was suddenly beside his chair, her hand on his shoulder, her eyes on the screen.

"No good porn this morning?"

"Worse," he said. "Work."

"Wish I had some," she said, retrieving her juggling balls from the trunk.

Fantasies expressed in daydreams can sometimes seem to last ages, he thought. They end and you look around you. There's no one else in line. The bus you had been waiting for when you started fantasizing has passed. It is already halfway down the block.

Other times, like now, as he looked at her back just a few feet in front of him, the feature-length film rolls by faster than a conscious mind can see. Before Selita had put the third ball in her purse, she had become his grateful secretary. She wore bra and panties as she lay on the bed, on her tummy, propped up on her elbows reading a book,

waiting for him to dictate part of a translation while she typed, a make-work scheme allowing him to pay her a small sum that he could deduct at tax time as a subcontracting expense. A dream of an arrangement that lasted a full cozy winter. It had passed through his imagination, full blown, in two seconds, maybe less.

"Got time for breakfast?" he asked.

"Do you?"

"Not really." After a moment, he added, "But you're welcome to stay if you'd like."

The words had come out as if he were indifferent to her decision. He was afraid she'd say "Sure," yet that was what he really wanted to hear.

Just then he heard LeBron's voice in the stairway, then a woman's voice complaining.

"Too many damn stairs for a girl with no sleep."

"Whose damn fault is that?" answered LeBron, teasingly. "C'mon, girl, one more flight."

By the time the voices died away, replaced by the sounds of shoes on the floor above, LeBron's apartment, Selita had put her own boots on.

"Got train fare?" she asked.

He gave her the change he had in his pocket, more than enough. For a second he thought of giving her his

MetroCard, anything to increase the chances she would come back some day. Then pride said no.

"Thanks," she said, and gave him a light kiss on the lips.

She looked small going down the stairs.

While she knew where he lived, he had no idea where she lay her head at night. Afterwards, she frequently popped in and out of his memory. Sometimes he would think about being swallowed whole by her love-making. Sometimes he'd see her sitting at the end of the bed. He'd see her motionless bare back and twitching shoulder blades. Atop that, the purple hair. Atop that, like fireworks rocketing skyward, the juggling balls.

Once, in a dream, those balls danced above words scrolling across the bottom of his mind, like the balls once used in silent movies to rhythmically point to lyrics to help an audience sing along. The words in his dream were gibberish. There was nothing in them to understand let alone sing. But he could feel the balls each time they ricocheted off the bottom of his mind. It was as if they were pinging, like a submarine sounding, trying to map deeper waters. The dream suddenly nudged him clinically

awake but he felt he was still eavesdropping on his own subconscious. It was yakking away about how she had choreographed every dance step that night, and how he had submitted to her, an absolute stranger, without a word. She had collared him and he had never strained at the leash. She had confirmed that somewhere down there, there was a submissive itch that needed scratching.