

Chapter 1: Tractus

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At night, I do things that terrify me. Can never sleep. Exhaustion plagues me with gaps in time that I never realize until it's too late. And there is so much noise. Cars honk outside, music throbs inside; snow falls past my front window and, on the other side of the wall behind me, the neighbors are having sex.

I stare at the blank ceiling, waiting for countless seconds to tick by for hours on end, but it's only a few minutes that have passed. Or I'll sit someplace for a minute, then half the day is gone. Like how my money is gone. Stolen.

I look at the clock. No, don't think about it now. Close my eyes, wait for sleep "Paul," my mother shouts, "don't go out too deep." It's one hundred degrees and this public, inner-city pool is beyond capacity, overflowing with the bodies that are red from chlorine. We had taken the bus here. My mother stands on the pool's edge, teeters back. Her dull hair tangles over the bloodshot eyes sunken in her pale, freckled face, and she wears black sweaters to hide her arms. "Stay here."

She's wasted.

"Where are you going?"

"To find your father."

Stepfather.

She turns her back to me and the crowd swallows her.

This public pool stretches and sinks: a father tosses his son into the water for the first time; teens wrestle, playfully drowning each other; a girl sobs because she just pissed

her shorts behind me. We're divided between the floaters and the sinkers (those who must wear floats), and I'm the only twelve year old on the shallow side.

The deep half is marked by a painted line and I glide into deep water. It starts to snow; I even catch a flake in my hand. Something isn't right. Stop, I tell myself, get out of the water. But I submerge to hear and feel the wave generators sloosh across me. I surrender to gravity and fall, lifting and spinning from the undercurrent. Falling yet rising. Is this swimming? I arc my arms forward and kick at the water. I shouldn't get tired this fast. I stop. Sink. Swing my limbs out to stay afloat, but I've lost all energy and sink again. Can't keep moving sink further. "Help—" water floods my mouth. Choking. My stomach heaves, sucks in the water; I sink further. Chlorine invades my throat, nostrils, ears, eyes, and everything is numb, quiet, still. Vision decreases—are eyes are closed? I can't tell, just know need air—
—got to keep fighting. Up is
down I slam head against concrete. Blood sticks choking on blood
chlorine water. Greasy warm spot

I wake up wet and shivering. It takes a few minutes to relax. Just a dream. Thirteen years ago, I tried teaching myself how to swim. I don't know when I blacked out entirely; I was crossing into the deep half of the pool and woke up in a hospital. Two weeks of my life gone.

Outside, it really is snowing.

"Owe, owe," someone wails, and I feel them bump against the wall behind me. Neighbors. I look at the clock; two minutes since looking at it last. Really? "Bitch" the

woman gasps. “I can’t go in any more,” a man cries out. Flesh smacks against the wall. They’re inches away from me now—might as well be in the same bed. Passionate screams from fucking fills the building:

“Shut the fuck up,” the tenant above me shouts. “I’ll call the pigs.”

“Fuck the cops, I’ll kill ‘em,” from off to the left.

“Fuck you,” the couple behind me barks back.

“Fucktard,” from below.

“You’re the fuck,” replies his wife the next room over.

“I’m fucked,” I mutter. Someone has hijacked my bank account.

More tenants start shouting. Someone blasts music, making the bass rattle the walls. On the other side of the wall behind me, the neighbors are still having sex. I stare into a blank ceiling; the shadows cast upon it are from the tungsten lights outside and below. Sitting up, I survey the flat for an umpteenth time—in case I find something new.

My bed is a twin size that sits in a corner. Looking straight ahead, the only window to the outside is fifteen feet away. To my immediate right, a wall, with the door to the hallway located by the window. Behind me, the neighbors are still having sex. Left of me, an old chair serves as the table housing my miniature television—the living room—and behind that, a fridge and stove is all I own and marks the kitchen. This is an efficiency suite. I must share a bathroom with the other tenants.

Two people are screaming down the hall, throwing hard objects at each other. Giving up on sleep, I open the window. Wind freezes my face—I’m alert. Outside, heavy January snow drifts downward. I see the world from the thirtieth level in this slumlord high-rise—aptly named Sunnyside Heights: squared concrete and glass, asphalt turnpikes,

freeways coiling around themselves; the skyscrapers rise in height like the slope of a hill. It's amazing, really; I've never seen a real forest. Not sure they even exist. The only green comes from the neon that bleeds on everything. Want to know where this is? I want to know where this isn't.

Two hundred years ago, this would have been Dubai or Shanghai—the kind of cities that appear overnight. Even with the nighttime haze, the towering buildings along Yukon Avenue glitter in the distance in rows upon rows that meander west before flattening across the industrial ghettos of Alaska; or follow the highway south to the Jakarta of Antarctica. What of the brown streets and old cars, trash bags and strangers' footprints? The snow covers everything, makes it beautiful. Tranquil.

When I find the person who has stolen my money, I will kill them.

The bank is not why I stay up every night, though it doesn't help my insomnia; I am trapped in this noisy world of crap cars, shit-faced kids, cell phones, and people fucking like there's no tomorrow. What's an empty account but another distraction.

As of yesterday: starting balance, \$0; deposit, 4:15PM, \$350.62; withdraw, 5:45PM, -\$350.62; ending balance: nill.

I've already decided on murder over life; it's this dog-eat-dog world that's done it: a world reduced to economics or life, economics over life, economics as life, and you either eat or are eaten. Funny, too, how cannibalism is a crime. When I find the person who has stolen my money, I will kill them.

Am I rambling? I'm sorry—I really need sleep. It's 3am. Money isn't everything—shouldn't be—but it is to me: food, shelter, my one chance to escape this mess—if such an escape exists. Tomorrow is a new day; I will get my cash back.

Somehow.

The neighbors are finally quiet but bass still courses through the building. I slide the chair over, blast the TV. The high-pitched, static shoosh pushes the bass away. The digital snow rushes, hisses like a waterfall, drowns all other noises so that I can

Damn, it's already morning.

The alarm clock screeches—I smash it against the floor. I hate Mondays. My body stumbles forward while gravity, encouraged by sleep, tries to push me down, rest. I can't help but laugh at myself for my inability to turn this damn doorknob. I wiggle it left, right, hit it hard and swear at it, and it's not budging. I kick it. Tell it how much I love and admire it. The obvious orange lock finally catches my attention.

On the other end of the hallway, forty and six-eighths times the length of my door—I measured it one night—sits the public bathroom where I keep my caffeine pills. There are no medicine cabinets so I hide the pills behind the john. I keep my toothbrush in the sink that everyone believes is clogged. Tenants are nosy, so I've tied a rat tail I found to the end of the brush and keep this hanging out of the drain. I swear the tail twitches, which doesn't seem right, but it keeps everyone from investigating. Downing two pills, I yank the tail and pull the brush out of a plastic bag. Guess where I keep the toothpaste.

My stash is my stake in the bathroom. All the tenants hide things here. A woman fills a soap dispenser with baby food, hiding it from her husband who would otherwise eat it. She sticks the baby's mouth under and voila, like feeding a hamster. I once found a man who had drowned himself head first in the end toilet. Nobody knew him, but it inspired everyone to poetic epigraphs: "Tierd life, got nothin' but hits, died hedfirst in

sum1's shit." Died: "Call 928-312-1839 for Bubba". Religious affiliation: "JESUS WAS JUW LOL". Thirst for literature satiated, I head to the mirror.

Bloodshot. Purple half-circles bag under my eyes. I comb through my hair, blonde and subtly spiked, and feel my face for stubble with the backside of my hand. I'm very white. White, blonde, and brown-eyed, wearing loose-fitting jeans and a green T-shirt. Twenty-five, too. Quarter-life crisis time. My hobbies include sleep deprivation, getting pissed off at the world around me, working, and puppies. I love canines; cats can fuck off, mostly.

Yawning, I reach for the faucet and find myself, with eyes half open, in front of the fridge. The machine grumbles because I'm letting cold air out. The toothbrush tail is twitching on a shelf. I just shut the door.... I'm hungry but have to catch the bus; have to get to work, get paid, get revenge, get a hotel and sleep for a good, long time. I go to the window, watch the snow is still falling as I step onto the street and toward the bus.

Buses are peculiar.

It growls, headlight eyes coming toward me: Paradise Roadlines number 62; green top and bottom trim, ochre midsection, with ads for "Helios" and "Spudzz" spray-painted on the side; the tinted windshield is marred by milkshake splatter where wiper eyebrows can't reach. Passengers stream out of two sets of doors. I crouch beneath the crowd and sneak on. The vehicle lurches forward and we sit rigidly in our personal spaces, eyes locked on the floor. I can't stop myself from smiling and yawning. An old man sits alongside me, pretending he's the only one on the bus—they all do.

"How are you, Sir?" I ask. Nothing. "I'd like to know how your day is going." An

uncomfortable glance. “You are very delicious this morning.” He shouts something and jumps forward to a seat near the front. Smiling, I stare down others nearby until, one by one, they move away. Sorry, but when faceless strangers keep me up all night, well, I get bitter. We make another stop and the boarding passengers, sensing something amiss by the void around me, crowd the front.

Buses are peculiar. Did I already say that? Each turn is a possibility, and I can choose to get off now or a hundred stops later. But no matter where I go, that route has been determined by someone else, each stop calculated ahead of time. I could ride the bus and never leave, unsure of my eventual stop, but someone would know—would have decided—where the stop will be. Getting off in between is a false freedom, a sunny distraction from the ultimate reality that is the bus schedule; if I get off early or late, I’ll miss work. My life has been decided for me, the final stop preplanned. The bus knows me through and through.

We, the bus and I, zigzag though this world-city, going diagonal, cutting south, turning east, backtracking west, moving though an urban grid in the fourth-dimensional arcs of a clock. Steam clouds hiss between cracks in the road’s epidermis. We stop and go, stop and go past millions of unknowable people. Any of them could be the thief. Maybe all of them are. All they have to do is know what bus I’m on, look at the schedule, and they’ll be one stop ahead while I trip up from behind. This bus is becoming a liability—

“Hey, you,” the driver shouts. “fuckin’ get off. This isn’t a homeless shelter.”

I step outside and look around, having come full circle to my apartment. Wrong bus. No, right bus. Looking at the map, I’m on Sunday’s schedule. Twenty-four hours

ahead of yourself, Paul. I'll have to head to the bank tomorrow, then. I've seen the security cameras they keep inside; there was no mention of a transfer or ATM on the balance statement, so the theft had to have occurred inside. Un-fucking-real.

I need a walk.

I stick to the alleys because they always look more depressing than me. No flowerpot and poinsettia can lift the rust off a sagging fire escape, or reflect the sunlight down a path where high walls keep the cracked pavement in twilight. But the flower marks an alley leading toward Arty's—the beginning of the culture district.

The building is marked by a neon paintbrush and several guys are shoving snow down the alley. I nod. They nod back. Our conversation skills spent, I admire the work of an artist hunched over and painting. I don't like the smell of the paint, but the swirls of color are one of the few things that I find calming around here. The artist splashes orange over here, brown there, mixes it around, and the melting snow carries the paint in rivulets of hue, melting and freezing, the colors spiraling in and out of each other. The man bends even lower, flicks his fingers across the colors searchingly—for the key to his muse, perhaps—before he stops. He looks at me. His mouth opens, blurgles, and he pukes everywhere. Green paint sloshes across the ground. The artist falls into it. Avant-garde!

I step over the man, admire some of the older paintings along the wall, and try to ignore my shoes squishing in vomit. Sunday morning is always rough behind Arty's. My shoes make puke-prints in the snow a little ways. Several blocks further, I'll come to the historical district, but I don't want to go that far.

Though this city is all I've known, I can categorize it by sight. Over there is the building that looks like shit, my apartment. Twenty blocks north and to the left is a

building that looks like major shit. The midpoint between these two, the flowerpot, marks the alley to Arty's Bar in the east. And despite how much I need the money to find somewhere better, if there is such a thing, there's one place where I've wanted to return to.

Go halfway between Arty's and the historical district, north two blocks, take a left at the building that doesn't look too much like shit, go south about a mile, crossing over and going east by the intersection near the home for stunted people, then

724102 West Bryer Road. There it is: an unassuming row of townhouses, four stories of burnt-orange brick.

I spent most of my childhood here, and at the park across the street that is now a gas station. It was the one place where all the kids could lay an equal claim. It had no mailing address; I could not say that I lived there while someone else could not.

I knock on the door of the middle house. The door cracks opens.

"You again?" The brunette glares at me. Today, she's wearing a pearl and gold necklace over her favorite brown turtleneck. Unusual for a weekend. A plain green shirt typifies her "Casual Mondays." She wears khakis on Tuesdays. Wednesdays or Thursdays, depending on the week, are her wild days, reserved for several sets of tie-dye shirts— "What?" she demands. "Hello," I reply. "Can I—"

"No. Get the fuck away from me."

"Please, I just—"

The door slams. Deadbolts and padlocks clink shut. A pile of boxes and bits of furniture leans against the outside wall and I climb over the debris to access a window. She can close the door, but her windows have no curtains. Peering inside, I could get lost

in the darkness of the living room, fall

“Paul?” my mother whispers.

I climb under the table.

“Paul?” The lights come on. “Honey, why are you up this late?”

She can’t see me. Not between the couch and the corner by the window. I close my eyes, imagining that it’s dark, but red bleeds through my eyelids. I cover my face with my hands so the darkness will be deeper. Her breath sweeps across my hair.

“And who is Paul Cottontail hiding from tonight?” she asks.

I clench my fists, furious to have been discovered, but also smile like I always do. “That’s not how it goes.”

“You can’t be up this late. Your father and I are going to have to ground—“

“I thought you were dead.” Ground that.

The white Christmas lights bordering our window fade then brighten. A chime—I made it last year in school—twinkles somewhere outside, quiet and distant, the metal cold enough to stick to my tongue if I lick it. Our Christmas tree leans, but mother insisted on a full one this year. The silver tinsel glittering on its branches reminds me of the strands I’ve seen in her otherwise-auburn hair.

“Why?” she asks.

My mother is a mother, and she drives a gray car, and last night someone had blown her brains out and stolen her credit cards. There it was, on the news: a gray car and a mom’s blood smeared across the windshield left or right depending on how the lights flashed.

“You didn’t come home.” The gray car is now outside.

“Honey...” She brushes her bangs from her forehead, leans forward. I ready myself for her cold, phantom limbs to fall through me. Instead, they are warm. “You know your father and I both have to work. They had me do overtime, I’m so sorry. This won’t last for long—it can’t. Things will change.” Just like her once-delicious pancakes have changed; her happy-sad has changed to too-happy-too-sad; now she wears long-sleeved shirts to cover her arms.

All the lights in the house die.

“Fuckers,” she whispers. The power’s scheduled to be off next week; dad has money coming in two days. “I’ll make this up to you, Paul. Tomorrow,”

I could stare through the window all day. It seems that I have. The sky is dead blue-black. Turtleneck woman screams at me through the window, her breath fogging the glass.

“Who the fuck are you? Leave! This is my house!” Hostile. “You’re not going to leave, are you?” Defeat. “Please piss off.” Haggle. “Why don’t you leave and move on with your life?” Appeal to my optimism. “You will fucking leave.” Confidence. “I called the cops.” You bitch.

Blue and red lights flash against the façade. I jump off the trash heap. I’d run, but a spotlight has divided the world between light and an annoying green spot. “Hello officers.”

“Carrying any weapons?”

“No.”

“Drugs?”

“No.”

“Have any warrants?”

Like I’d say. “Of course not.”

“Can we see your ID?”

“Can I see yours?”

They show me their badges.

“Fair enough.” I give my work ID to one of the officers, realizing that they are twins—two green spots. What are the odds of that? “Look, I wasn’t trying to harm anybody.”

“We received a call about a stalker.”

“I’m not stalking; I came to see my old house.”

“Ever steal?”

“What? No. Look, I’m not a damned thief. This house...it’s everything to me. An unresolved—”

“No real connection to it?”

“Of course it’s real: I used to live here.”

“But you don’t now.”

“No, but—“

“You’re under arrest for trespassing.”

This is ridiculous, crazy. I can top crazy. “I’m Paul Fucking Cottontail,” I shout. “Just a fucking bunny.” The cops stare at me. “And hey, look through the window. Right there.” Thanks to the spotlight beaming in, a bong with a whole lot a’ weed can be seen sitting near the windowsill. “Who are you going to arrest? A harmless bunny or this...crack dealer?” I know, a bag of hash next to Buddha doesn’t mean a thing, but self-

preservation requires drastic metaphors.

A flash of metal. Handcuffs.

Shit, man, think. “Ah,” I scream, throwing out my right leg. “Sorry, bunny tics.” The cops jump back. Good. I scrunch my nose and try to sniff them. My hands flick over my head to scratch a phantom ear. Time for a posh, British accent: “I’ve acquired fleas.” I kick out my other leg, grab it, fight with it, walk in circles wrestling it. I roll my eyes upward and chant “bunny bunny bunny bunny bunny.” I hop toward them.

“Get the fuck away from here!” the cops shout, holding out their guns.

“But I lost my carrots.”

“Beat it, psycho.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll look tomorrow, then.”

“No. Not tomorrow, or any day after, period. If we see you here again you’re tail—ass—your ass’ll get incarcerated.”

I curl my hands, stick out my arms, and hop away. Dozens of people duck from their windows as I glare at them. Turning a corner, I catch my breath—hopping is hard work. With no more spotlight, the green dot disappears and the cops aren’t twins at all. One is short but stocky, with a buzz cut of blackish hair. The other is tall, also stocky, and bald. They knock on the woman’s door. She’s in for a long night.

“Paul Cottontail.” Can’t help but laugh. Exhaustion effects the mind in peculiar ways. Those cops were ready to shoot, not that I blame them. I’d rather be shot than arrested. If I’m arrested, I lose my job. I work menial labor—fast food—you might as well know that now. The bus fucking does.

Paul Cottontail. I was ten around Easter with an active imagination—brilliant for

my age. For my birthday, I mandated that I become a rabbit. New clothes or haircut, these changes were too small. To become a rabbit—or any animal—the magnitude of that change, everything that it would mean, would deconstruct the world. I knew that moms, symbolizing their new, married life, changed their names. Mine became Paul Cottontail, my first step to transformation.

Next, I demanded a cake made of lettuce, carrots and chocolate. They made it, too, and I got sick. I could have told them that something was wrong, but what was it? If I could become a rabbit, I would finally word the fear that my intellect knew. Why? Simple: clothing, fad; smoking, peer pressure; but to physically transcend my birth-given species, psychoanalyze that mom and dad. Your son just rejected every possible aspect of you. Now will you listen?

I then changed my address: Paul Cottontail, 724102 West Bryer Road, Easter City. I appointed myself Mayor; now people would have to listen. To curb the growing epidemic of “vegetable consumption”, all food purchases would have to meet my approval. I inspected our neighbor’s fridge, fining them for buying potato salad over french fries, or for serving leftovers. Shelves upon shelves of violations. The only way to pay the fines was to repossess their house. That’s when they threw me out.

I was no longer Mayor of Easter City; Mayor’s can’t do anything. Instead, I became vigilante rabbit-stuck-in-human-body-for-whatever-reason, throwing spaghetti out the window and dumping carrots down the drain. I felt particularly betrayed by the carrots. I even tossed chocolate (cavities) and butter (heart disease) out the window. Anything cooked in a Teflon pan (scratched-off flakes can cause ulcers) was shoved into the toilet until it clogged and I was grounded.

No matter what I threw out or whose fridge I inspected, I couldn't find it. I knew it was there, though, somewhere.

Heroine.

I was ten around Easter, how could I phrase it? I became Paul Cottontail. It's not weird, though some parents thought so. No, honey, affectionately referring to someone as sticky bee spit is weird.

Another bus pulls to the corner, engulfing me in halogen light. Heavy snow starts to fall. The bus honks and its wiper eyebrows furrow downward in displeasure.

"Not thrilled to see you, either."

Its left ear, a window, slides open, and an arm waves at me. No thanks. The vehicle lurches forward, stops alongside me. The doors open, revealing the same driver that had kicked me off earlier. "I thought this wasn't a homeless shelter," I say. Don't quip with a free ticket.

"Free Fare Monday, six pee'em to midnight."

What? No, today *is* Sunday. The bus is up to something, but I get on anyway.