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Redeeming the Short Story Cycle: Evolution of One of the Last Literary Genres

Joshua J.W. Mattern

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Redeeming the Short Story Cycle:
Evolution of One of the Last Literary Genres

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by
Joshua J.W. Mattern

Dr. Anthony Viola, Ph.D., Committee Chairperson

Dr. Christopher Green, Ph.D.

Dr. Edmund Taft, Ph.D.

Marshall University

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ABSTRACT

Redeeming the Short Story Cycle

By Joshua J.W. Mattern

Every artistic genre, over a long enough period of time, can and inevitably will evolve. In music, the guitar, once a rhythm instrument playing a purely back-up role in gospel groups, has become the driving force in contemporary acts. Andy Warhol, perhaps believing there were enough portraits of birds and depictions of children playing with dogs, decided to reproduce images of popular culture, giving birth to an entire new genre: pop art.

Literature has seen the same sort of movement, in many of its subgenres. I chiefly concern myself with the evolution of the short story, into the relatively new genre of the short story cycle. Boiled down to its simplest terms, a short story cycle is a collection of short works that can be read individually, independent of one another; or together, in sequence—cover to cover, as it were—for a single, unifying experience.

Some authors, such as Sherwood Anderson and, to a lesser degree, J.D. Salinger, have experimented with this genre, but no writers have, to date, attempted to create the ultimate short story cycle: the pieces of which can exist *completely* independently, with no hint that they are part of a larger whole; but which also, when put together, form a novel, with a single, overarching narrative.

I begin my exploration with a short introduction to the genre of the short story, from its early incarnations to the first attempts at creating cycles. From there, I briefly dissect the attempts of a few authors to consciously create short story cycles—focusing primarily on their (quite noble) shortcomings. I then lay out for the reader the framework for my own attempt at creating a short story cycle.

The bulk of this work, though, is, of course, my personal foray into the genre. My narrative concerns four principal characters, and the stories cycle through their respective points of view, in a 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4 format. Collected here are the first six stories in the cycle. The reader is introduced to each of the principals, in the first four stories; and with the last two, the audience is able to see how the sequence will progress overall.

I do not view the writers who have worked in this genre before me as failures; rather, I see them as residing within particular spots of an evolutionary scale. Subsequently, it is not my desire to revolutionize a genre, but to simply occupy my own, personal spot on that same scale.

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Redeeming the Short Story Cycle:
Evolution of One of the Last Literary Genres.

Medicine changes, the study of it progresses, because if it doesn't, people die. That is fairly easy to understand. No one questions, or would think to question, the reasoning behind pushing for innovation in such an important field. Similarly, as populations have had to learn to be concerned not just with the goings on of their neighbors but also with the activities of people all around the world, so, too, has politics changed: it, like medicine, serves an undeniably fundamental need. This, though, is not about medicine; nor is it about politics. This is about the art of writing; and though my studies have nothing concrete to do with either of those former subjects, there is yet an important similarity that all three areas share: the need to expand, and to innovate.

Why, though, must the art of writing concern itself with innovation? Ours, while indeed a noble pursuit, is in no way what any honest individual would classify as important—certainly, in any case, not in the same way that a police officer's job is important or that a National Guardsman does important work. We, artists of the written word, do not end wars. We do not cure diseases. We do not teach children to share, and we do not instruct men in the ways of living just and ethical lives. Perhaps we sometimes like to fool ourselves into believing such positive things about ourselves, but at the end of the day, when we are all alone, each among our ranks must shrug, sigh and admit: we write not to fix the world around us; we write simply to deal with the world as it is.

Viewed in that light, the need for innovation becomes clear. As Robert Marler so keenly observes, a writer "requires a stable society, and his fictive world tends to be an imitation of the

actual world of men” (154). The old saying—cringe-worthy as it may be—is that we write what we know, and what we know is the world; and the world itself is constantly changing.

For centuries, poets have performed their work for captivated audiences. Playwrights, for almost as long, have busied themselves with producing grand shows that drew in the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor alike. More recently, the novel has established its roots in the literary community. One of the last literary genres, it seems, to have grown in any real way is the short story. Evolving from the serialized magazine tale in the 1850s into what we know it as today, it is only recently, really, that any real *critical* eye has been turned toward the short literary forms (153).

Subsequently, for a genre that itself has undergone relatively little critical scrutiny, it should come as no surprise that one of that genre’s *subgenres*—the short story cycle, with which I chiefly concern myself here—would receive virtually no serious critical study. Robert Luscher, one of the few theorists to devote any critical time to the sub-genre, states, and surprisingly so, that “this phenomenon [the short story cycle] has been exploited since the inception of the short story as a genre—especially when the stories have been [crafted] by the same hand” (148). Exploited? Certainly by those authors, such as Sherwood Anderson and Tim O’Brien (both of whom I will discuss more at length later), who have used the short story cycle in their own art; but expansion, and not simple exploitation, is my aim. My goal is to take the short story cycle—typically understood to be a collection of independent short stories that, when bound together, make for an overall unified impression (148)—and expand it past its previously-understood constraints. My creative work, which follows this short critical inquiry, seeks to establish two simultaneous—and equally important—goals: to produce a collection of obviously and

intricately related short stories that stand alone as full bodies of work; and to create, within that collection, a single, overarching narrative that *transcends* the individual stories themselves.

Short story cycles—interchangeably referred to as short story sequences, interrelated short stories, and even rovelles—are not, individually and of themselves, distinct from ordinary short story collections (149). They all “invite us to consider them singly, since...[a short story] rewards us with a sense of closure” (157). What distinguishes the short story cycle, however, deals in part with how the human mind naturally considers a collection of work contained within a single volume. Our minds yearn for patterns, and thrive on the creation of them. Indeed, even when they are not necessarily present, we still press a sense of order upon the things around us. Short story collections are no different. “Given a title, a beginning, and an end, we will valiantly attempt to make sense of what initially seem disjunct images, unrelated incidents, or a static series of sketches” (155). In other words, the natural tendency is already there, to experience a group of stories—or images in a gallery, or songs on an album—and assume that all the individual pieces are part of a larger, and rather coherent, whole. The short story cycle simply capitalizes on this already-present tendency of patterning.

If a single short story can be looked upon as a “single apocalypse”—i.e., an isolated telling of an important event—then the short story cycle can readily be understood as being a succession of miniature apocalypses, with each one simultaneously exploding and readying the reader for another one to follow: “The volume as a whole thus becomes an open book, inviting the reader to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact” (148,9). An ideal cycle, then, exists as an almost dizzying sequence of rise-and-fall: the literary equivalent of an hours-long lasting roller coaster ride.

That is the problematic term, though: ideal. Most cycles admittedly do not follow that pattern: for instance, the previously-mentioned rovelle, which “suggests the presence of a causal and temporal narrative dimension most sequences do not possess” (149). Most short story cycles, then, while maintaining some sense of unity throughout—whether it be as specific as common narrators or locales, or as general as common themes or motifs—tend to shy away from attempting to create all-cohesive, all-encompassing, narratives.

Some cycles, though, do tepidly approach and toe the line of overarching narrative (though they dare not step over it). Perhaps one of the most widely known examples is Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*. In it, we have a common narrator, George Willard, who appears sporadically throughout the collection’s pieces, mostly in the role of listener to other characters’ dissatisfactions with their lives in Winesburg. David Stouck, who explores common themes within *Winesburg*—those of death and of running—rather comically points out that, “Over and over inarticulate characters in a moment of passion wave their hands in the air and burst into a run” (532). More stoically, though, he observes that, “In each story when the characters reach an ultimate point of insupportable frustration or recognizes that he can never escape his isolation, [they react] by... finally running away” (535).

Aside from the idea of characters who constantly run from their problems, though, *Winesburg* does not explore the wide possibilities of what a short story cycle can ultimately become. It makes use of several *devices* of the genre, yes, but none of these, really, for any reason other than their function as devices.

One such device, which seems rather ubiquitous in the genre, is the inclusion of an introductory, or framing story. In *Winesburg* that story is “The Book of the Grotesque,” and it tells of a man who agonizes over supposed truths of people’s beings which, in his mind, makes

them into grotesque figures. The rest of the collection, of course, mirrors that same idea, with stories about the residents of a small Appalachian town who are grotesque because of individual truths: George Willard, the aforementioned narrator, nurses throughout the book the idea that he is destined for greater things than small town life, and he agonizes over the decision to leave (or, to run away); the title character in the story “Hands” escapes to Winesburg (again, running) to leave behind a past in which he was an accused child molester. Both characters, then—and most others within *Winesburg*—are in possession of personal, and more importantly, shameful, truths.

Again, though, the devices themselves are included only because of their functions as devices, and not because of any enrichment to the overall narrative they provide; it is akin to the inclusion of conventions such as long lists and epic battles in epic poetry: these things *must* be included for the story to fit convention. The framing story in *Winesburg*, “The Book of the Grotesque,” is so hastily and confusingly constructed that it “is either ignored by critics or dismissed as a murky and confusing allegory” (532). Furthermore, Amy Greenburg, theorist and Pennsylvania State University professor, tells us that Winesburg as a setting also has no real significance: Anderson did not use Winesburg, Ohio (a fictional town representative of the author’s real-life Ohio hometown) as setting because of any great symbolism the place held for him, but, “simply because it was the setting he knew best” (268). In other words, small-town America was comfortable and easy for Anderson to write about.

Tim O’Brien’s work *The Things they Carried* explores more fully the untapped possibilities of the short story sequence genre than *Winesburg*, though again, as in Anderson’s work, the advances stop well short of full and complete innovation. Whereas *Winesburg* was content to exist as a collection of independent short stories focusing on similar themes in each, Central Michigan professor Jill Taft-Kaufman asserts that O’Brien’s work “is a sequence of

twenty-two interconnected stories that gain the force of a novel through recurring characters and intertwined threads of plot and theme” (18). Farrell O’Gorman echoes this sentiment, calling *The Things they Carried* a “composite novel,” meaning that within its pages the work contains the “development of both...a ‘clear, collective protagonist’ and ‘an emerging protagonist’” (299). Each miniature piece of O’Brien’s whole can rather adequately exist independently of the others (the “clear, collective protagonist”), but the entirety of the work can be read to contain an overall, overarching message (the “emerging protagonist”).

Like *Winesburg*, *The Things they Carried* opens with a framing story, entitled, appropriately enough, “The Things they Carried,” in which O’Brien, here serving as our narrator, sets us down directly in the middle of the Vietnam War, describing to the readers all the different sorts of baggage—emotional and literal—that the soldiers of this war have brought along with them to the battlefield. From that first story, though, we travel back state-side, and learn about the inner conflicts of a man who, after being drafted, reflects on his utter lack of desire to take any part in the conflict, and the reader is led to realize that this “is fundamentally a story about the burdens carried through the territory of the human heart,” within and without the war (Tate-Kaufman 18). For that reason, the collection is not only a selection of similarly-themed stories, along the lines of *Winesburg*, but also provides more of a singular, novel-esque experience for the reader.

I say novel-esque, though, very deliberately; for, and quite peculiarly, too, O’Brien’s text works only within the confines of one’s understanding of the composite novel. It is “a story and stories about the whole of humanity,” in which the individual pieces do not, on their own, make any real impression on the reader; but it is also a whole body of work that can only be seen as a collection of smaller pieces, and not, I would argue, as one, large work (294). For example, the

successive stories “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes” cannot be adequately understood—I would go so far as to say comprehended at all—except in relation to one another. In “Speaking,” we follow one character, Norman Bowker, home from the war, and learn of the difficulties he encounters in trying to readjust himself to civilian life. The next story, “Notes,” explains to the reader just exactly how Bowker inspired “Speaking.”

A neat device, to be sure, one story deliberately playing directly off another, but it violates the (admittedly shakily defined) conventions of the genre: Bowker’s story in “Speaking” means nothing to the reader as an isolated incident, and “Notes” is a nearly-incomprehensible mishmash without “Speaking” as its accompaniment. Ideally, in keeping with the conventions of the genre, wherein it is said that “the individual stories do not lose their distinctiveness” (Luscher 149), “Speaking” would not necessarily *need* the accompanying “Notes” to build its meaning; nor would the reader of “Notes” scratch his head in confusion if denied the opportunity to read “Speaking.” To over-simplify, then, the ideal short story sequence would consist of stories when, if presented to the reader individually, would be immediately recognized as complete short stories, but which, if presented together as a whole, would immediately be recognized as a novel.

Curiously—and I assure you I did not know this as the case going into my research, as serendipitous as it may seem—both *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Things They Carried* have been partially adapted as stage productions. Not surprisingly, though, these have not been straight adaptations, but rather carefully edited versions of their source works—composites, if you will. In the case of Anderson’s work, “*Winesburg, Ohio: a Play* focuses more squarely on the figure of George Willard and the events, particularly the death of his mother, that precipitate his growth

into manhood” (Stouck 538); and Jill Tate-Kaufman, herself the force behind a stage adaptation of O’Brien’s work, says that:

Of the novel's twenty-two stories, the five I chose to adapt for presentation stood out to me for several reasons. First, they strongly established character, not just of the narrator but of all the men in the platoon. This characterization is boldly set forth in the title story, in which the narrator introduces each of the men in his platoon and evaluates the physical, emotional, and psychological loads they shouldered (24).

To be more succinct, her chosen adaptations were selected for their narrative qualities, and for how easily they lent themselves to the idea of a single, rather chronologically-traveling storyline.

Without being so bold as to actually say so explicitly, both Tate-Kaufman and those who have presented *Winesburg* as a stage play realize that, while both volumes of source material are in and of themselves full and rich bodies, they resonate much more deeply with the audience (whether theatre goes in an auditorium or readers of a book) when careful, explicit attention is paid to the idea of a single, concurrent narrative. “If one preserves the narrative in adapting a novel for the stage,” says Tate-Kaufman, “then the adaptation process includes selecting, ordering, and editing” (25), a process, I would argue, which wouldn’t be necessary if the author himself had already taken such steps in his original source work.

As is the case with most matters of study, literary and otherwise, the more time goes by with more practitioners, the more refined and closely resembling the ideal the study itself becomes. A quite contemporary example of this is Pam Houston's 1998 work, *Waltzing the Cat*, a short story cycle concerning itself chiefly with the romantic exploits (and missteps) of its likeable heroine, Lucy.

Here is a work that so blurs the line between novel and short story cycle, that individual reviewers cannot decide upon concrete terms in which to describe it. *Publisher's Weekly*, in its review of the book, goes from describing it as the author's "second collection of interlinked stories," to calling its final story an "epilogue," which is a conventional term traditionally associated with the novel (59,60). Joanna Burkhardt's *Library Journal* review is more straightforward in its uncertainty of the genre that *Waltzing* inhabits, at first calling it "a series of linked vignettes," and then just a "novel."

As stated, Lucy is the most dominantly occurring link between the stories of *Waltzing*, but there is also present here something that we haven't really seen much of beforehand: a consistent, and progressing, plot. Oversimplified as it may seem, each story within the collection "is a search for [both] a home and man with whom to establish it" (PWForecasts 59). In the collection's opening story, Lucy is as far from emotionally and romantically stable as one can really get in this world; by the end, the "epilogue," she has acquired both the home and the happiness that beforehand have eluded her.

Further differentiating *Waltzing* from other, earlier short story cycles, is the complete and utter ability of its individual pieces to stand entirely on their own as short stories. The story, for example, from which the book gets its title, "Waltzing the Cat," is a completely self-contained tale of Lucy's dealing with her mother's death. It can easily be read as its own story—the story

of a young woman, long emotionally detached from her parents, attempting to understand the grief of losing one of those parents—but, just as complete of an experience can be had in looking at “Waltzing” as simply a chapter in a greater, more complete work. Looking at the work holistically, “Waltzing” resembles the typical novel’s turning point—when the whole direction of a protagonist’s life and motivations must be self-inspected and reevaluated.

Perhaps, though, I grow too comfortable in my supposition that all share my conviction as to what constitutes an ideal novel. Admittedly—as is undoubtedly clear to the reader of this introduction—I put much more personal stock into standard conventions of forward-moving plot and character development. Considering my professional and educational environment, I should perhaps be ashamed to admit it, but I am firmly an adherent to the idea of conflict—rising action—climax—falling action in a work of literature; and for every Milan Kundera novel or Italo Calvino work that one would hold up in opposition to my claim in this area, I would eagerly counter with most anything by Steinbeck; the wonderful, story-driven tale of *Gatsby*; or *Moby Dick*. These tales that we (readers, critics and theorists alike) hold in reverence survive not so much because of symbolism or innuendo (though the *White Whale*, I know, is a little more than just a *White Whale*), but because of the stories they tell—the characters and their chronologically-moving journeys, which we will never allow to be erased from our collective consciousness.

All of this discussion brings us, finally, to my own foray into the sub-genre of the short story cycle. While it is true that *Waltzing the Cat* more closely realizes the full potential of the genre than do its predecessors, Houston’s collection still has as its narrative thrust a rather general plot—again, a woman’s quest for self-actualization through love and home. It is my firm belief that a short story cycle can, through careful planning and skillful execution, deliver a

linear, plot-driven narrative, not too unlike that which is present in most popular fiction: protagonist immerses him or herself in a dominating conflict, spends most of the book wading through that conflict, and, by the end, resolves, for better or ill, that conflict.

My collection, entitled *The Redemptions*, consists of a cycle of sixteen short stories, revolving around four principle characters. Each of the principle characters is the focus of four of his or her own short stories, and the stories themselves are presented in a 1-2-3-4; 1-2-3-4 pattern. For example, the opening story—which also functions loosely as a framing story, is “Learning to Talk.” In this story, the reader is introduced to Clay Pearl, an elderly Vietnam veteran who blames himself for his wife’s tragic death. In “Learning,” the reader not only meets Clay, but also learns of his motivations, his frailties, his mannerisms, etc. Then, through the next three stories, we meet the other three principle characters (I shy away from calling them all protagonists) before returning, in story five, to Clay Pearl, in “Dead Gods and Living Birds.”

Each story is entirely self-contained, and I am confident a reader could pick, entirely at random, one story from the collection, read it, and receive a full reading experience; however, read sequentially—cover to cover, as it were—an obvious and dominant narrative begins to emerge: the story of four distinct, yet intricately related, people in a small town, struggling to forgive themselves for grave transgressions (whether they be real or imagined). The entire collection culminates in a story that is, at once, a self-contained one about a zealous Baptist minister and a river-side revival, but which also, if read as a novel’s final chapter, becomes the climax of a conflict between the four, previously-introduced, principles: the rising of a literal flood from the river, come to wash away their sins, in one way or another.

The difficulties in composing such a collection are quite daunting, and at times just cumbersome. In each story, characters and setting must be re-introduced to the reader, as if in a

brand new meeting, to keep the writing within the confines of the short story genre; this, however, must also be done so as to not to become redundant (and, frankly, boring), in the interest of keeping the action moving, as would occur in a traditional novel. Also, logistical concerns arise, chiefly matters of time: if in story number one, Clay Pearl has a discussion with the Baptist minister, a scene which is repeated from another perspective in the second story, when that repetition occurs careful attention must be paid, on my part, to the reader's impression of *when*, on the overall scale of the narrative, this scene is occurring. The easy—and cheap—way out would be for me to say that I am simply experimenting with the genre of the short story and with concepts of time, but as continuity and fluidity are two of my greatest concerns, I have had to find a way to not take such an easy way out—and not with such eye-roll-worthy devices as “Two Days Later” chapter headings or the like.

Novels and short stories provide for two very different reading experiences. A novel is like a long, comforting journey, in which the reader can hang on to the shirrtails of the protagonist, cheering him on, along the way to triumph (or failure). Short stories give us small, simple snaps of action or allegory, allowing us to get our pleasure in measured doses. The short story sequence, though, when ideally realized, can allow us to “experience not only the pleasure of a patterned closure in each story, but also the rewards of discovering larger unifying strategies” (Luscher 158). It is the best of both worlds. The aim of my studies is to, if not actually revolutionize anything, at least provide another step in that direction.

I am not—thank God—trying to cure any fatal diseases (though some writers feel their work is akin to saving lives); nor am I attempting to communicate any great and wondrous world view. In short, there is no good reason for me to be doing what I am doing, other than the fact

that I can, that I want to, that it hasn't been done. For writers, that explanation is often the best, and most natural, in explaining why it is that we do the crazy things we do.

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Learning to Talk

1.

Okay, look at it this way:

You're sixty-three years old. You live in Fairmont, a steel city that's been dying for fifty years longer than you've been alive, with Main Street Projects and Downtown Revitalization Efforts just putting off the inevitable, in a state—West Virginia—that's long past dead. And your wife, Edna, she's been dead for six years—six years to the day, to the *fucking day*—and it's Springtime, May, flowers all in bloom and that nonsense. And it's the happiest looking day of the year, and it makes you sick at six-thirty in the morning, because you're still drunk from the night before—you woke up clutching the bottle by the neck, like a little kid who falls asleep petting his new puppy—and you own a coffee shop, a goddamn coffee shop, and your wife's dead, and it's been six fucking years since you got drunk the night of the high school reunion and insisted on driving home, and Edna, because she was strong but not quite that strong, instead of taking your keys or even *trying* to take your keys she jumped into the other car, the one she drove to the reunion behind you because she knew something like this would happen, and there were lights and flashing and loud sounds and a truck—a truck just hits you.

And six years ago—well, six years and about six hours ago—she thought you were dead when the truck hit you, and she had a heart attack, and she died. And you had to wake up a week later in the hospital and say, “Where's my wife?”

And now it's six years later than six years ago, and you own this coffee shop that was her idea in the first place and you've kept this stupid little coffee shop, the business you hadn't even

wanted in the first place, so that you could keep yourself from thinking about her. But, and this is the ironic part here, whenever you're in the shop, working, you think of her even more, about how much you hate this thing she loved. And you think, some days, that the only way to truly forget her would be to kill yourself. And though you don't believe in God, you're just afraid enough of Hell to know that if it was real and if you killed yourself you'd go there and your torture for all eternity would be to think of her face, over and over again, and not even be able to cry.

And that's who you are, and it's six years later than six years ago and here we are and here you are and here you go.

2.

He lived above the coffee shop, Clay did. The space seemed so empty since she died, and when he stumbled down the stairs at six-thirty in the morning, taste of cheap bourbon and dried vomit in his mouth so strong he could almost see it, the shop's interior was still dark, the blinds on the windows still drawn, and he could almost imagine that morning was still yet to awaken.

The door from his apartment opened up behind the bar, and on his way past, eyes still half-closed, he took a bag of whole-bean and measured out three and a half ounces on the scale, then dumped that in the grinder and pushed the button. As the grinder worked its magic, he went out to the porch to pick up the newspaper.

People attach significance to anniversaries. This fact is not disputable. Holes that need to be filled, and we use calendars to do it. We use memories and faces and, sometimes, when we

are Clay Pearl, and we are sixty-three years old and our wife has been dead for six anniversaries, we use the man with the sunglasses and the gray suit and the cell phone clipped to his belt.

He came in at six fifty-five, even though the shop didn't open until seven, and the sign on the door was very clear about that. The bell above the front door chimed, announcing the entrance, and the sound traveled from the bell to Clay's head, reverberating, vibrating, and Clay thought his head would implode from the vibrations.

"Hey," the man said, blurring the single syllable out quickly and nervously, like he had already had his coffee elsewhere, and was here only to torment Clay. "What do you have?"

Clay turned, slowly, from the brewer. The coffee was ground and the air pot rested beneath the brewer and all he had to do was push the button. "Don't have nothing yet," he said.

The man frowned. As if it were part of a scripted play they both were in, and this man came by every morning to practice his lines with Clay, he took off his sunglasses and closed his eyes and pressed the thumb and index finger of his left hand into his eyes. He sighed.

Clay said, "I don't open until seven."

"It *is* seven."

Clay looked up at the wall clock behind the man in the suit, who himself turned to look.

He then turned his attention back to Clay. "It's three till," the man in the suit said, the corners of his lips turning downward, slightly.

Clay stared at the man, silently, pupils thinning, because now...*now* he recognized the face. "Do I know you?" he asked, surprised, impressed, at how evenly the words came out.

"No," the man said, quickly enough for Clay to know it was a lie.

“I know you,” Clay said, sure this time. Seeing the face again, the last one he remembered seeing that night. The driver, behind the wheel of the truck. Getting out of the truck, running over to him—*JesusJesusfuckingChristareyouokayohfuckcallafuckingambulance*. That face...he would never forget.

“How dare you,” Clay said.

“What?” the man asked, putting his hands up into the air, palms outstretched toward Clay.

“How dare you.”

Clay picked up a glass bottle of vanilla syrup that rested on the bar, and, without taking his eyes from the man in the suit, reached back and smashed it against the wall behind him. The sound was deafening against the plaster, for some reason, and several small slivers of glass embedded themselves in his hand. He tried not to wince as he felt blood begin to flow down his palm.

“Jesus!” the man said, jumping back as the glass shattered.

“Now leave,” Clay said.

“What the—what the fuck is your problem, man?”

“I told you to leave.” And blood, thin still from his drinking the night before, flowed, and he felt his head lightening, the room beginning to spin. “Leave!”

The man in the suit left, without saying another word, though he opened and closed his mouth several times, as if he wanted to say something, but did not know what to say.

After he had gone, Clay went to the bathroom and bandaged his hand. Then he went back out to the bar to clean up the glass, and he did not pass out, though he was almost sure he would. The only thing that kept him conscious was that face, seeing it in his mind.

3.

The bell over the front door rang, right around noon, and Clay looked up from where he stood behind the bar, saw the Peyton girl walk in.

Probably fifteen or sixteen, she was a nice girl, albeit a bit bleak looking. She always dressed in black, from head to toe—though she pulled the look off, in a quietly dignified fashion—and her skin was a pasty white, bordering on unhealthy.

But she was quiet, which was good, and whenever she smiled at him and said, “Thank you” after he gave her a cup of coffee, he did not see in that smile, nor did he hear in those words, anything less than true gratitude.

He tried to not give anything away, when she walked from the bar and made her way toward the back of the building. Sealed off from the main room by a thin glass door was a small room he called the “Smoking Room,” where customers were allowed to smoke indoors. Past this, on the other end of the smoking room, was another glass door, this one a sliding door, and walking through it, one could reach a small awning-covered porch overlooking a rather expansive back yard. She went out there, Clay knew, to smoke cigarettes she had gotten from somewhere—he often found the butts in the yard outside in the tall, untended grass. And she tried to be sneaky about it, even around him, probably thinking he would tell on her or something.

Clay had met the girl’s mother, once, when a tall, striking figure walked through the front door, up to the counter and said, frowning deeply, “Have you seen my daughter?” He told her, kind of honestly, that he didn’t know who her daughter was, though something about the

woman's eyes, their light gray hue and how they narrowed to slits when she talked to him, led him to guess.

The woman had stridden away from the bar toward the back of the shop, and a moment later returned, followed closely behind by the sulking Peyton girl, and she was ranting, in a hushed voice. "You can't just come places and loiter around like street trash."

He did not know why he said it, but Clay said, "She wasn't bothering me, ma'am."

The girl's mother stopped, and looked over at him. She smiled, wide and plastic. "Thank you," she said, and did not mean it.

If that's what she had to live with at home, Clay thought, it was no wonder the girl's eyes always seemed so lonely and tired.

He followed the lonely girl with his own eyes as she went into the smoking room, then to the sliding door, pushed it open, and disappeared outside the building.

Shortly after meeting her mother, Clay bought a pack of cigarettes. He kept them in his bedroom, on the nightstand, and every couple of days he took two from the pack and put them outside on the back porch for the girl. He knew it was wrong, but they seemed to make her happy, and Clay felt that everyone deserved to have something like that, no matter how small or dangerous.

She came back in, the aroma of fresh smoke rising off of her, and set her coffee cup on the bar. "Thank you," she said, and smiled.

He smiled back, said, "You're welcome." And meant it.

He looked down at his hand. It was not bleeding.

His hand started bleeding again, right around the time the preacher man walked in. Clay didn't know if this was appropriate based on who the preacher was, or on who he himself was. They both had secrets—the sorts of secrets that aren't really all that secret, though we still guard them like an old dog guards his food bowl, teeth bared and eyes glossy.

“I should get this checked out,” Clay said, holding his hand up, watching fresh blood seep through the bandaging, making it stick to his skin.

The preacher man said, “The love is so boundless, we don't even feel half of it. We don't even feel a tenth of it! It's the iceberg theory: what you can see, what you can experience, is only, as they say, the very tip of the iceberg. And it's true.”

Clay had heard stories about the preacher man, though he didn't know him outside of the coffee shop, cruising the couple of gay bars Fairmont had. And there was the time his name was in the paper, the police blotter, for solicitation. The preacher explained it away as a misunderstanding, said he was just offering the woman a ride somewhere—except the truth, as it was whispered, was that it was a different sort of ride he was offering her, and she wasn't a her but a him.

Clay said, “Do you think I should get this checked out?” Strangely—or perhaps not so strangely, as Clay had no real knowledge of biology or chemistry or things like that—the injury had lightened his haze, and he no longer felt drunk.

“If every man, woman and child would just open their hearts to the glory, well, then, my brother, the sun would always, *always* shine!”

The preacher spoke like a man trying to convince himself, and Clay wanted to tell him that the sun always shone anyway, and it had nothing to do with God. It had more to do with

angles of light and cloud covers and revolutions or something, but Clay didn't really know enough about these things either to really speak on them, so he said nothing.

The preacher man, though, his words sounded hollow, and the more he talked of God, the more beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, and the more his hands began to shake.

The preacher said, "What about you, brother? Do you know the Savior?"

At first, Clay was not aware that the man was speaking to him; but there was a silence hanging over everything, and Clay understood that it was his turn to talk. He looked at the preacher, who looked more like a caricature of a preacher than the actual thing, with his black hair slicked back over his head, the dark gray sport coat probably worn just to hide the sweat stains under the arms of his shirt, and a clip-on lavender tie.

"I've never met Him," Clay said, and went back to brewing a fresh pot of coffee.

Behind his back, the preacher laughed. "You will, brother. One day, you will."

"Is that a threat?"

The preacher laughed, like it was a joke, then his face suddenly sobered. "Oh, my," he said. "What happened to your hand?"

Clay shrugged. "Blood of the Lamb."

5.

Night fell over the day, as it ultimately does to every day, and Clay turned off the coffee pots, and he wiped down the counter behind the bar, but he did not sweep the floor. He didn't feel like doing that tonight. He was in too much of a hurry to see her, to talk to her.

Though she always listened faithfully, she never really said much back, just sat there, in the picture taken of them on their fifteenth anniversary, staring at him, smiling, while he closed his eyes and spoke and cupped his hands in front of his body as if in prayer, and he blinked away the tears as they came, then wiped them away, because even now, even alone with her, he still felt self-conscious of them.

And he said things to her that he could never say to other people. This night, he said, “It was him, Edna. I know it was. If you saw him, you’d a known it, too.” Then he shook his head, and he laughed, loud into the air, because he could not lie to her. “Okay, okay,” he said, “I don’t know why I did it. I didn’t even think. He just...said that, and it wasn’t even what he said—” He stopped, thought a moment. “It wasn’t even the way he said it, either. It was just...it was just that he said something, and right then was a bad time to say something.”

And Edna stayed silent. He wondered if it was a struggle for her to keep her lips sealed. He wondered what it was she tried so hard not to say.

“Just talk to me,” he whispered, as if to an altar of Christ. “Please,” he said, “please.

“But you knew!” he said. “You knew who I was...” A drunk. He couldn’t say it aloud, so it hung there in the air between them, between him and the ghost of her. And what’s funny, what’s rich—this is great—when he was in Vietnam and he wrote letters to her, he promised to quit drinking. He said the things he had seen, they had convinced him he should stop drinking. But then, of course, he stopped *seeing* things, and started *doing* things, and, well, you know how that goes.

He said that she was right—he should have learned to talk to her after he came home, instead of unloading his horror stories on bottles of cheap bourbon. He admitted that yes, maybe she was right: maybe if he had learned to talk, he wouldn’t have been drunk. And she was right,

she was right, goddamnit, if he hadn't been such a stupid worthless drunk, and if he hadn't been drinking, and if he had just learned to fucking talk, they wouldn't have been driving home, zig-zagging through streets and running stop lights, and then running right into that goddamn truck and yes, yes, yes he knew the man with the suit and the cell phone wasn't the man in the truck but goddamn it, why not? Why fucking not?

But, yes, if he had just learned to talk, then all of this would have been different.

"It would have been different," he said, tears flowing easily down his cheeks now. Now, he wasn't feeling self-conscious. Now, he just let them fall, let them run rivers down his face and fall to the hardwood floor in the hallway. "It would have been so different," he said. "You were right," he said. "You were right."

"Just talk to me," he said, "please."

But she did not talk to him. And he leaned forward, then stood up, and pressed his forehead against the picture, tried to ground his forehead into the picture, make it become a part of him, if that was possible.

Tears, again, still streaming down his face, and he shook his head from side-to-side, feeling the friction of his forehead against the picture.

And he said, "Talk to me."

And he said, whispered, promised, swore, "If you told me." And he held up his bandaged hand, and with the other unwrapped the bandages. Still, it bled. "If you told me," he said, "just said the word, I would do it." And there was this weird, sick part of him that wanted to do it, really wanted to feel it, wanted to go back out into the shop and into the trash can where he had thrown away the broken pieces of that bottle and get out one of the pieces and he would feel—

Clay heard the knock at the front door, and he turned the lights on, made his way through the shop and to the front door. He pulled the deadbolt and turned the lock, and, wiping his eyes once more on his shirt sleeve, opened the door, a crack. A dirt-smudged, tired face with bloodshot eyes stared in at him, but said nothing.

“I’m closed,” Clay finally said. “I close at nine.”

The face regarded him, its eyes twitching, slightly. After a moment, the head nodded. Clay wondered if it had a voice.

He waited some more, but the face made no move to go. He noticed, just then, that the face also had a body, and it was the body of a young boy, maybe eighteen, nineteen at the oldest, and it wore green Army fatigues, and suddenly Clay was looking at a ghost of Springtime past or something—he saw himself as a boy, going off to war, or maybe coming back from it, that same dead look in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Clay said, nearly choking on the words, “but I close at nine. I have to go to bed. You have to leave.”

The boy nodded again, then turned to go.

He left the front porch and began walking directly into the street past the sidewalk. Halfway across, the boy stopped, and shifted a large gray duffle bag from his left shoulder to the right. He looked up at the cloudless sky.

Clay followed the boy’s gaze up into the heavens, and when he looked back down again, the boy was gone, just like a ghost.

And suddenly he got it: he fell down to his knees, because he got it. He had asked for Edna to speak to him, and instead she screamed at him, but he didn't hear because he was listening for something else.

7.

But then maybe you're looking so hard for a sign that you think everything is a sign—a bird is a sign, a gay preacher is a sign, sun hitting the window blinds just so and reflecting off that glass paperweight over there just right is a sign, and a little girl with black eye makeup and a sadness that just cuts you so fucking hard is a sign, and when the paper boy throws the paper and the paper lands in the flower pot instead of on the porch is a sign and a boy wearing Army fatigues and carrying a duffel bag who disappears when you look at the moon is a sign and blood on your hand is a sign and everything is a sign and every one of these signs is pointing in a different direction until you're walking in circles trying to follow them all and it's hours, days, years, lifetimes until you realize you're not getting anywhere but by then it's too late to turn back, because you've come too far.

But you'll get there, one day, you know.

And so you walk, and you keep looking for signs, even though you won't know what to do about it when you see them.

Things that Hurt.

Spring in Fairmont. Perfect, Julie thought, turning her head and looking out the window, sun shining in, casting on everything in the office, the oddest shapes and most interesting reflections of light—a shadow puppet show, except during the day, she thought.

“Julie, please,” he said.

And she turned back to Dr. Morrell, sitting across from her behind his desk. He was fat, and bald. And she thought he looked sleazy, too. Did he sit there, even now, as he tried to probe the mind of a disturbed sixteen year-old girl and grin to himself at the double-entendre of the word “probed”?

“My father works in a steel mill,” she said, quietly, her voice soft like her face. Many people thought she wore makeup, white makeup, to make herself look ghostly, but it wasn’t so. She never wore makeup. She was just supposed to look like this.

Dr. Morrell sighed, but he knew better than to try to drag her back onto the right track. The harder he pushed, the harder she pulled. And so, he had learned—and good for him, too—that when she veered, it was best just to let her go, until she was good and ready to return.

“You drive up the interstate, about an hour and a half, and you start seeing signs for Pittsburgh. Steel City.” She shook her head, felt the tips of her long, black hair licking the bottoms of her ear lobes. “Lot of people don’t even know we have steel mills here, though. Did you know we had steel mills here?”

He sighed. Narrowed his eyes. Looked like he was trying to decide whether or not to answer. Finally, he decided. “Yes,” he said, “I did know that.”

She shrugged. “Lots of people don’t.”

“Do you want to talk about what you did at school?”

Silence.

He leaned toward her, slightly—so slightly he probably didn’t even notice he was doing it. “Did you mean to hurt anybody?”

“What’s that?” she asked, and nodded toward a small, yellow plastic table resting across the room. It set low to the floor, and had hundreds of raised indentions on its surface. And lying on top of the table was a ragged looking doll. “Is that the doll you use for kids whose dads are perverts?” She did this kind of thing on purpose, and even as she did it, as she watched him squirm before her in his chair, at even the most subtle mention of sex, she hated herself, could actually almost feel dirt beginning to form, being actually born, on her skin, the kind of dirt you can’t wash away. The kind of dirt you have to slice your own skin off to get rid of.

“Julie,” he said, his voice pleading with her.

“So...do I show you where the doll touched me, or what?” she asked, and then, “Oh, wait...that’s not how it goes, is it?”

He said nothing, and she said nothing back, and it was the most fulfilling conversation they had had, over the last two weeks she had been coming to see him. And she saw the sun coming in the window, and it shone through a glass paperweight on his desk, and it made the most beautiful rainbow on the wall.

She picked up her purse from where it rested on the floor beside her. She shook it, because for some reason she thought she was going to cry, and whenever she felt like crying, she shook her purse, and it went *click-clack-click*, and it calmed her down, a little bit. It was a bout of genius, several weeks ago. Her mother had forced her to spend the night with another girl from the church, a girl with braces and frizzy red hair with split ends who babbled incessantly

about Feeling the Spirit of Christ, and who didn't get it when Julie raised her own eyebrows, licked her lips and asked, "What did it feel like?" She had just gone in to use the bathroom, and opened the medicine cabinet, looking for aspirin. Instead, she saw a bottle with the label: Vicodin. And she wanted to take it, and so she did.

She drew a deep breath, held it, let it out. "That bitch was going to kill me," she said.

He leaned forward. Again. Jesus, why wouldn't he quit doing that? "And?"

She shook her head, then shook her purse, and it went *click-clack-click*, but it wasn't helping. "You know the rest...why do you keep asking me?"

He shrugged, a genuinely apologetic gesture. "I have to."

Julie looked again out the window. She watched the sun, caught a glimpse of it between the blinds, stared into it. "It was pretty out, that day, too," she said.

She had been waiting, sitting at the top of the stairs, her head resting against the banister. Even from up there, at the top of the landing, she could hear the television down in the kitchen, the one from which her mother got her daily fix of blood and guts, could hear clearly the words of the men with the microphones as they spoke of roadside bombs and the toppling of dictators and the coming March of Freedom.

She took these moments, Julie did, every morning, sat at the top of the stairs every day as she did then, pressing her forehead against the wood of the banister, imagining that if she concentrated hard enough, her face would fit between the wooden beams, and she would come out on the other side whole; not only a new person, but a new person in a new life.

Minutes later, walking to the school bus, she carried her purse, slung over her left shoulder, and with each step she took down the concrete, was reassured by the *click-clack-click* sound its contents emitted. It was not the late April sun, shining down upon her. It was not the

laughter of other, younger children who passed her by, running and chasing each other on the way to the bus. It was not a dream, a fantasy—maybe of love, of fame, of whatever it is most girls dream—that made her smile as she walked, or at any other time, but the sound of her purse, of the rattling saving grace hidden within.

She walked, it rattled, she smiled.

Dr. Morrell didn't know about the Vicodin. Nobody did. The woman Julie stole them from never told. But how could she? To tell would have been to admit her own frailty, to publicly acknowledge that No, by the Grace of God alone I cannot Do This.

“Why that day, though?” he asked Julie. “What changed?”

She shook her head, slowly, staring past him, at a blank spot on the wall, and she mouthed the words soundlessly: *I don't know*. Suddenly, she let her eyes find his. “That's the scariest part. I have no idea.” She shook her head again, but more quickly this time. “That's not right,” she said. “It's more like...you barely have it all together, you're keeping everything from breaking. And as long as everything is okay, as long as nothing goes wrong, then everything's okay.” She paused, licked her lips. She spoke again, fighting to speak through the urge to choke and gag. “I was late to class. He took too long at his locker.” She shrugged, laughed. “That's it.”

Julie was a junior, and so should have been given access to one of the coveted top lockers that rested upon the bottom lockers that freshmen and sophomores were normally relegated to. But her late enrollment in Fairmont Senior—on account of the failed attempt of her mother to get Julie into Baptist Academy, the school adjacent, physically and conceptually, to their church—put her on par, locker-wise, with the underclassmen.

Baptist Academy was ridiculously expensive, even as far as private, Christian establishments go, and so they should have just been happy to get their money and push Julie on through. And, normally, Julie guessed, they would have been. But something about her, they had told Julie and her mother at the Final Interview, just didn't mesh with the B. A. 'Sense of Community'. *Your daughter*, Pastor Rick said, then looked at Julie, remembered she was in the room, remembered it was her life they were playing with and pulling at, *Julie, we just don't think you would...flourish here, as well as somewhere else*. Translated, those words meant: you do not believe, and you do not belong.

For her mother, it meant the embarrassment of knowing that her daughter—and by extension, she herself—was not worthy. For Julie, it meant being left to stand among those who waited with backs pressed against the wall, while juniors and seniors took their sweet time in depositing backpacks, removing books, gossiping with each other, having no thoughts or concerns of the late slips those waiting behind them would inevitably receive.

By the time the boy whose locker was on top of hers was done rifling through his backpack—looking for a pen, or a calculator, who knows—it was already five minutes after eight. But she said nothing, just bit her lip, looked up at the clock on the wall, and shook her purse.

The second bell rang, and still she waited. Finally, though, she just turned around and began to walk away.

From behind her, then, she heard his voice. "Hey," he said.

She turned to him, tried to speak, could not.

He regarded her silently for a moment. “Sorry I took so long,” he said, gesturing back toward the lockers. “Just...long weekend, you know? Too much shit going on. Still haven’t cleared my head. You know?”

She shook her head. “No. I have no idea.”

A small smile appeared on his face, then turned to a broad grin, and he shook his head, widened those blue eyes. “Whatever,” he said. “Well, if you ever do need in your locker, and I’m in your way, just...kick me, or something.”

Julie nodded. “I’ll be sure to.” She felt herself shaking.

He frowned. “I was kidding.”

“Oh.”

He shook his head again, and waved. “Anyway, I gotta get to class. See you?”

“Yeah,” she said, looking down at the floor, “See you.” But she looked up again, and he had already disappeared.

She took off down the hallway, toward homeroom. And not only was she late, but her seat was in the very back of the classroom, and so it was not so simple as to just slip into the room quietly and slink down into a chair near the door; no, she had to walk between the middle two rows of desks, bumping into every other person, tune out their snickering, and pretend to not hear the teacher calling her name.

When at last she reached her desk and fell into it, Julie turned her eyes to the teacher, Mr. Jacobin, whose attention was focused wholly on her, and smiled.

He did not return the gesture. He had been teaching at Fairmont for twenty years or longer, and now wore the perpetually drained smile of one counting the days to retirement.

“You’re late,” he said to her.

“I am,” she said, shrugging, affecting a tone and demeanor of complete indifference. In reality, though, she fought the urge to shake, to quake, to burst into tears.

He shook his head at her, and bent down to his desk, began writing something. He then righted himself, and held a pink slip of paper toward her, like a lure on a hook. “Maybe take lunch time today and think about your nonchalance?”

She didn’t budge from her chair. “Am I supposed to go get that?”

The class was hushed, waiting, anticipating...something.

Mr. Jacobin’s frown broke into a grin. “No, I’m sorry. What was I thinking? You’re supposed to leave my classroom, and go the principal’s office.” A few people laughed at this, and he didn’t even hush them.

Silently, in her head, she said, *Don’t*.

“Ms. Peyton? Now, please?”

She said, *Please*.

Dr. Morrell’s eyes found his wristwatch.

“There was this time,” she said to him, “I was about five, or six, I guess.”

He did not try to disguise his impatience. Could it even be boredom? Maybe.

“I was getting out of the bathtub, I barely remember it—it was so long ago, you know? But I was getting out of the bathtub, and usually my mom helped me dry off and get my clothes and everything.” She paused, looked at Dr. Morrell, wondered what he must be thinking. “But my dad was there. Which was okay. But...he was just looking at me. I didn’t understand it, of course. But it still, even then, even not knowing anything...it felt weird. Wrong.”

For a long time, seconds audibly ticking away on his wristwatch, Dr. Morrell didn’t say anything. Finally, and he leaned forward again, he said, “Is that true?”

She shrugged. “Who knows,” she said. “Maybe.”

He sighed. His face turned a slight shade of red. Now he was angry. She had made him angry. But he would have to hide it, would have to keep it buried.

“It’s the kind of thing you do quickly,” she said, “because you know that if you stop and think about it, you’ll realize how foolish it is, and you won’t do it.”

Julie left homeroom, purse slung over her shoulder, stalked quickly down the hallway, but bypassed the principal’s office, went instead to the bathrooms, just a few doors down. She walked into the third stall, the one farthest from the door, and closed it, quietly, behind her. She set her purse down on the back of the toilet, and unzipped the central compartment. She reached inside, her hands brushing against the bottle, until her fingers came to rest on one of the cigarettes she had stolen that morning from her father’s pack. In a shaking grip, she pulled it out, then found her lighter.

She lit the cigarette and closed the lid of the toilet, and sat down. She smoked too quickly, though, and began to get lightheaded. When she was done, she dropped the smoldering butt to the floor, snuffed it out with the toe of her shoe, and rested her forehead in the palms of her hands, waiting for her head to clear. When finally she felt she could stand without falling over, she pulled herself to her feet, and left the stall. Julie inhaled the smells of teenage sweat and stale cigarette smoke through her nostrils, and the cheap perfume sprayed like insecticide. She walked to one of the four sinks lining one side of the wall, and she set her purse upon the counter above it, a metal ledge that stuck out from the wall, three or four inches above the sink.

She opened her purse and pulled out the bottle, her *click-clack-click* companion, and set it upon the counter. It was full, still, even all this time after she had stolen it; every day that she

finally thought she had found the courage—for it truly took courage to do what she wanted to do—a small, yet powerful, voice would speak from deep within her head: *Today is not the day.*

She looked up at herself in the mirror, and nearly cried out in abject terror. The girl who stared back was one that she wished she didn't recognize. Ashen, white skin. Bags of restless nights hanging below the eyes, and holding within them the storylines of nightmares she could never quite forget the next morning, the kind you can't tell people about. Her lips chapped, cracked, bleeding in the one corner there, from the savage sinking in of her teeth, the constant, necessary and safest reaction to words meant to hurt and hands designed to break.

And the eyes themselves, once blue, now faded to gray, making her think that maybe eyes turned gray as they grew older just as hair did with age. Her eyes, the pupils quivering, trembling like hummingbirds, mist rising from the bottoms of her open lids.

She closed her eyes and wished it all away. Spun a wheel and picked a God. Prayed to it.

Cradling the bottle tightly in her hand, the prescription label just visible through the cracks between her fingers, as the bathroom door swung open, and three girls, separated-at-birth Siamese twin bombshells, nearly fell into the bathroom. They stopped their talking and whispering when their attention met Julie's, and they halted, hands to hips. One of the three, the prettiest one, standing in between the other two, popped her bubblegum, loudly.

You are not one of us.

I am not one of anything.

The girl with the bubblegum, she said, "What's in the bottle?" Sneering. "Diet pills?"

Julie shook her head. "What?"

The girl sized her up, cracking her gum now. "That how you stay so skinny?"

The one on the left added, "I thought she purged."

Bubblegum Girl laughed. “Yeah...if you weren’t such a cunt, maybe that body would get you something.”

Julie froze, as the girl’s smile abruptly faded into a scowl, and she stepped slowly, confidently toward Julie, until they were literally nose-to-nose. The girl was chewing grape gum.

The others had a hold of Julie’s arms, at the shoulders, before she realized what was going on. Then Bubblegum Girl reached into her own purse, and her hand came out holding a nail filer, brown plastic handle with slender, gleaming blade.

She pressed it against Julie’s neck. It was sharp. “I saw you out there,” she said, “making eyes at my man.” She was blonde, she was beautiful, and her eyes sparkled with something not quite evil, but close. “I know you wanna fuck him. Don’t you?”

Julie said nothing. She was trying too hard not to shake. Trying to keep the blade from inadvertently slicing into her throat.

“Well, I don’t know if no one told you, or what,” Bubblegum said, and she moved the blade away from Julie’s neck, moved it around to the back of her neck, underneath the hair, “but cunts like you, they’re not careful they could get hurt. Bad.” Then, the pressure of breaking skin, and a moist warmth, flowing down the back of her head.

Julie swallowed the fear and the pain, and forced her eyes, which were shut tightly, to open, and look at Bubblegum, right into her eyes. “If you’re going to do it,” she said, “make it fucking count.”

Bubblegum opened her mouth, and her eyes widened. Julie grabbed her hand, the one with the blade, and brought it back around to the front of her neck again, pressed the steel against her skin. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

The girl's hands shook.

"Just...fucking do it."

Julie leaned forward. She felt the blade, knew the skin would break, any second. Any second.

"Do it," she said. "Please."

Bubblegum's voice came out small, and scared. "You're fucking crazy."

Julie's free hand—the other still clutched the bottle—came up from her side and wrapped around the other girl's fingers. Bubblegum didn't even struggle, as Julie pulled the nail filer from her. Then, she raised it again, against her own skin. She said, "Here." She said, "I'll show you."

Bubblegum started forward, just a half-step, her lips frozen in an 'o', and in a single motion Julie swung the blade forward, and it raked against the girl's cheek. It wasn't deep, not too deep, but Julie could tell, even then, right then, that it might leave a scar, even if just a small one, and she smiled.

The other two girls grabbed Bubblegum, whose hand was pressing against her cheek, small streaks of blood peeking between the fingers, and hurried her out of the bathroom, whispering small words of courage and comfort, but all the while careful to not take their gazes away from Julie, who stared back, blade held at her side.

And once they were gone, her fingers unwrapped from around the filer, and it fell down to the floor. She heard it clatter, then sunk down to her knees beside it. She looked down at her left hand, still clutching the bottle. Her knuckles had turned white.

Dr. Morrell was frowning. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Julie shrugged. "I don't know," she said.

He stared at her a moment, not saying anything. Finally, he sighed. “She cut you first?”

She nodded.

The sun still shone in through the window, but had traveled enough through the sky that it no longer hit the paperweight. No more kaleidoscopes, no more shapes. “Can I ask you something?” she said.

He nodded. “Of course you can. “That’s part of the reason we’re here.” It was interesting that he said *we* are here, and not *you*. “A big part.”

She tried to think of her words, how she wanted them to come out. Ultimately, she just closed her eyes, felt them roll back into her head, fall somewhere into the back of her skull. She drew in a breath. “Why are hands designed to hurt?”

And because it was undoubtedly and most certainly the truth, he said, “I don’t know.”

The Resurrected.

Rick walked into his office, saw the note taped to the telephone, and knew something was wrong. That's why he didn't read it immediately.

Fairmont did that to you. It was the kind of place people went to die. Rick Stanley was only thirty-four, and yet still felt as if he, too, had come here to die. He had lived here for the past five years, and it was not:

Graduating high school and leaving Lincoln, being overjoyed at gaining acceptance to Baptist College in Papillion, and then, by some sort of Divine Intervention, being asked to go East and head a small church where he would live out the rest of his days in a pool of smiles and rainbows.

What it was:

Going to Baptist College without thinking, the same way sons of doctors go to medical school or daughters of lawyers go to law school, all the while telling himself it was just a stepping stone, that he would find himself, his true calling; and then, when he was still in college, when he had no one else to talk to, speaking instead to cocaine. Cheap whiskey, when money was tight.

And then one day he woke up, and he wasn't drunk, and he wasn't high, and he was the head preacher at Fairmont First Baptist, a backwards kind of congregation in a backwards kind of town in a backwards kind of state. The kind of place people went to die. And not in the way that people in their sixties or seventies go down to Florida to die; but the way an old dog, who hasn't been able to keep any food down for days, finally limps out the front door and drags himself across the yard to that old shed on the edge of the property.

It was early Sunday morning, long before even the Sunday school crowd was likely out of bed, and Rick went into his office and saw the note. The walls inside the office were barren, just white, cracked plaster, and the only furniture was a large, wooden desk, a telephone resting at the edge of it, with that small piece of note paper stuck to the receiver, and a King James Bible setting in the middle of the desk, almost centered on its surface. It hadn't been opened in months, maybe close to a year.

He sat down at the desk and pulled the note from where it stuck to the phone: *Sister called. Urgent*, was all it said, and his immediate concern was to wonder who had taken the call, who had written the note. He didn't have a secretary. He wondered, then, if maybe there was a janitor. Then Rick thought that this was exactly the sort of thing he should already know.

Rick Stanley didn't believe in God. He never did, not even growing up. Most children believe in everything: Santa, the Tooth Fairy, Jesus. Just because Mom and Dad say *It Is So*. But it was for that same reason that Rick never could believe, not fully. The first time he caught his father sneaking down the stairs on Christmas morning, long before the sun had started to rise, to put presents under the tree. The time no one left a quarter under his pillow, and his mother said that the Tooth Fairy's wings must be in the shop, and they must have thought that he didn't see the look and laugh she and his father exchanged.

After that, losing the rest of his faith in imaginary creatures wasn't too hard. By the time his brother died, when Rick was seventeen, he already knew there was no God. But it sure didn't hurt to get the reassurance.

He crumpled up the note and dropped it to the floor—his office didn't have a wastebasket. Wastebaskets were the sorts of things you bought and placed when trying to achieve some sort of stability, a sense of permanence.

The phone rang, and he stared at it, watched it vibrate, convulsing against the wood of the desktop, shaking and jumping at him, as if more than ringing, it was really yelling at him, urging him to pick up the call. He knew what these things meant: messages that said *Urgent*, dancing telephones. Certainly not good news, because had it been good news, no one would have thought to call.

The phone stopped ringing, stayed silent for a minute, maybe two, then began again. Rick ran the fingers of one hand through his hair, imagined he could actually feel the first strands of gray peeking through the brown, and picked up the receiver with the other, thinking of cheap plastic wind-up toys you can buy from the checkout counters at drug stores.

“Hello?” he said.

“Rick, fuck!” It was his sister. He knew this, not only from the note, or the sound of her voice, but from her language.

“Reese,” he said, “how are you?”

“Don’t give me that shit,” she said, “I’ve been trying to reach you for fucking hours!”

“I have service this morning,” he said. “I’m sorry I haven’t been available.” She always expected that her tone, and her words, upset him, and so he was always sure to keep his own voice even when speaking to her.

“Goddamnit, Rick!”

Her voice was beginning to shake. And if such a thing were possible, he would say he heard tears rolling down her cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, trying to hide his own concern.

“It’s Dad,” she said. “He’s dead.”

And she said it just like that, too, because they were that kind of family, and they didn't like talking too much, and it was especially true that Rick wouldn't care about his father's death, other than in the same way he would care that though the newspaper said the temperature would only reach 78, the thermometer actually peaked at 80.

"The service is Wednesday," she said, still crying, not noticing, or not commenting on, his lack of emotion. "Will you come?"

He held back the laugh, but only barely. "Reese. Nebraska? I don't know...." He hadn't been on the other side of the Mississippi River since first moving to Fairmont, and felt no desire to again see the American West.

"Mom wants you to do the service," she said, and then, perhaps anticipating his response, "Mom wants this."

He smiled into the phone, as if she could see him through the receiver. "Not you, though." He was silent a moment. "Certainly not Dad."

"Rick, please," Reese said, her voice weak, almost powerless. Pleading with him.

He looked at the door, looked down the hallway, through the doorframe separating the hall from the Sanctuary, into the Sanctuary and past the back row of pews, all the way to the front set of doors, the ones that led out onto the street, the ones that no one ever used because the parking lot was on the other side of the building. "Hold on," he said, and stood, walked across his office, and closed the door. He went back to his desk and picked up the phone again and, closing his eyes tightly, said, "It would be the right thing to do. I know." And he licked his lips. "But still...." Thinking about college, about the church. About little Baptist churches in West Virginia.

"Yeah," she said, "I know."

Rick breathed, long and deep, into the phone. “It’s not what you want to hear,” he said, “but I’ll think about it. That’s the best I can say.” He waited a second, but heard nothing on her end, was only sure she hadn’t hung up because he hadn’t heard the tell-tale click. “Okay, then,” he finally said. “I’ll call you later.”

He hung up the phone, opened up the middle drawer of his desk, and took out his appointment book, opened it up to Wednesday. He could, he knew, schedule a Tuesday night flight, get there early Wednesday morning, and be back in time for the Deacons’ meeting on Thursday. Finding someone to cover the Wednesday night service wouldn’t be a problem, either. He took a pen from the drawer, held it over the 6-9 p.m. block on Wednesday night. Then, after a moment or two of hovering, he drew a large, dark X over the whole date, not knowing, even as he closed the book and replaced it in the desk drawer, what the mark meant.

He flowed through the Sunday morning service in a half-daze. A great part of him was not-quite-lucid. He sweated, more than usual, and when he cast his eyes up toward the ceiling lights and then looked away, his vision clouded, and the light seemed to float along through the air, like the tails of small comets. Afterward, as he stood at the Sanctuary’s back entrance, shaking hands and trying to smile—trying, when he gripped their hands, to steal away some of their...whatever it was they carried with them that made them glow—several members of the congregation fixed upon him concerned gazes. He fielded, several times, the question of whether or not he was “okay.” It was a loaded question, but this he could not say, not as Mr. Shannon was trying to hurry home so he could get the barbecue started, not as Mrs. Peyton was so focused on shoving her sulking teenage daughter out the door that her world did not exist at the periphery. So, instead, he said, “Yes.” And on they went.

Normally on a Sunday evening he would have to head the nighttime service, but Rick instead went back to his house, a two-story building that was entirely too large for a single man, and took the phone upstairs, into his bedroom. Seizing upon the popular consensus that he was ill, he sat upon the mattress and called one of the senior Deacons, said he thought he was coming down with something. Immediately, though, he regretted the lie and said, “Actually, I just learned that my father has passed away, and I need some time to...process it.” This, too, he regretted immediately, as it set up a flurry of probing and discomfiting questions—Is there anything I can do? Is there anything *we* can do?—and Rick ultimately had to practically hang up on the man.

Afterward, he dropped the cordless phone to the floor, where it bounced on the hardwood. When he had moved in to the house, he had been told the whole building could be re-carpeted however he wished, but he never got around to really thinking about it. Another comment by his subconscious, perhaps, on the subject of permanence.

Rick scooted his body up the bed until his back was pressed against the headboard. He stared through the window on the opposite wall, watched the rays of the early evening sun as it began to dip below the horizon. Through the window blinds, his face was illuminated in thin strips of sunlight, and as the minutes ticked by, the horizon line fell, from just above his eyes, to below his chin, to his neck, until finally his head was entirely covered in darkness.

He wasn't aware of sleeping, and only became conscious of the morning when he heard the chirping of predawn birds announcing the new day. His back still rested against the headboard, and ached dully from the rigid posture it had been held in through the long hours of the night. His first impulse was to lie down, close his eyes and try to sleep, but this he

suppressed, truly afraid of the dreams that would come, as dim and instantly forgotten flashes of the ones he must have just gotten through darted before his eyes in horrible bursts.

Instead, Rick climbed out of the bed, and went to his bathroom. He showered, shaved, then dressed and left the house, wondering as he went to his car, even as he held the keys in his hand, where he was going. He got into the car, and pulled away from the driveway, and just drove.

For a time he followed cars. He himself often wondered while driving if vehicles behind him were merely innocent travelers, or if they were in fact following him. And so he wondered, naturally, if others felt the same way, held to the same paranoia. He felt that surely they must; the alternative was to believe that it wasn't a natural impulse, and that...that was too much to consider.

A blue sedan of some sort took him on a winding, meandering path through town, and finally brought him to rest at a stop sign, just in front of a modest, two-story brick building. A wooden sign, haphazardly hammered into the ground and rising about four feet up into the air, said, in black, blocky letters, "Clay's," and was accompanied by a rather crude drawing of a coffee mug. Rick couldn't help but smile at the child-like simplicity of the sign, and decided to park, just down the block.

He walked up the sidewalk, toward the wooden sign. This was the old downtown, the part of the town that the various Main Street Projects had somehow managed to miss in their revitalization efforts. Mr. Clay's shop was one of a few, and quickly shrinking by all visual accounts, number of locally owned businesses that still somehow managed to survive. To one side of the coffee shop was "Gray's Gold and Pawn." On the other side plywood nailed over the windows said, "Keep Out."

He stepped up onto the front porch, then through the front door. A bell above the door chimed, announcing his arrival. It was a large space, with an L-shaped bar that wrapped around the whole room. At this time the place was empty, save for an older man, presumably Mr. Clay himself, who stood behind the bar, his head hovering above a newspaper lying on the countertop. As Rick entered, his eyes left the newspaper. “Morning,” the man said.

“Good morning,” Rick said, and attempted a wide smile, felt foolish for it. It was something wrong with his wiring, he supposed, that even outside of the Church, he couldn’t be a real person. Maybe he had forgotten how to do it, it had been so long.

Mr. Clay fixed upon him a bored stare—the look of a man who has encountered representatives of every sect of the human race, and who was not impressed by what he saw now. “Help you?”

Rick ordered a coffee, and sat down upon one of the bar stools. He tried to engage Mr. Clay in conversation, to see if it was something he was capable of doing as much as for any other reason, but the man only responded in nods, single syllables and the occasional tired sigh.

“Your hand,” Rick said after a time, pointing to Mr. Clay’s left hand, which was wrapped in a white gauze. “Hope it wasn’t too terrible of an accident.” And he smiled.

“Cut it,” Mr. Clay said. “Broken glass.”

“Did it hurt?”

Mr. Clay’s eyes widened. “Like a bitch.”

Rick felt the sun shining through the door behind him, warming his back. It was as if the sun were chasing him. “If every man, woman and child would just open their hearts to the glory,” he said, but stopped. *We would tear our own hearts out of our chests.* “The sun would

always...always shine.” Even as he spoke, part of him feared that the sun *would* always shine. Would always chase him.

Rick concentrated on his coffee cup, gently shook it and watched the black liquid inside swirl around. As the coffee stopped moving, he said, quietly, “Do you know the Savior?”

“Never met him,” Mr. Clay said.

Rick set his cup back down on the bar and looked into the man’s eyes, almost unable to keep the smile off his lips. “You will,” Rick said.

“Is that a threat?” Mr. Clay asked him.

Suddenly, he couldn’t keep the smile off his lips, and it was quickly followed by a laugh, a dark laugh from somewhere deep in his belly.

When he finally regained control of himself again, he nodded, slightly. “Sounds like it, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose,” Mr. Clay said, looking up at the ceiling. Rick followed his gaze upward, but did not see God there. “I guess my feeling on the whole thing is this. So much...bad shit happens, there’s got to be someone in control of it.” He shrugged, as if in apology, but it was probably the best argument for the existence of God that Rick had ever heard.

“Let me ask you something,” Rick said.

Mr. Clay shrugged. “You can ask. Don’t mean I’ll answer.”

“Advice, more like,” Rick said, pointedly ignoring the sharp edges of the man’s words. “My father’s dead. He died yesterday.”

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Clay said, an automatic response.

Rick waved off the condolences. “No...I don’t think you are,” he said, and smiled, “But that’s not the point. The point is that they want me to go and do the funeral service. It’s in Nebraska—I grew up there—and I can’t decide if I want to go.”

Mr. Clay was quiet a moment. Then he nodded toward Rick. “Your voice is different.”

“What?”

“Your voice. It’s changed. It don’t sound quite as full of shit as it did before.”

Rick shrugged. “Strong coffee, I guess.”

For a moment Mr. Clay made no response. He picked up a white rag, resting on the bar in front of him, and passed it from hand to hand, as if in deep thought, as if passing the rag back and forth helped juggle his mind, reorder his thoughts. “How about this,” he eventually said, setting the rag bag down without having even used it. “How about...you can look at it a couple ways. First,” and he took a step backwards, crossed his arms across his waist, “you can do the right thing, and go out there, and do the funeral.”

Rick waited, but Mr. Clay didn’t seem to be in a rush to say anything. “Okay,” he said, “or?”

“Or, you can do what you want to do.”

Rick smiled, looked down into his coffee cup. “Yes,” he said, “and what’s that?” He looked back up at Mr. Clay. “What do I want to do?”

Mr. Clay nodded, like a man who had been there. A man who had faced death, and, more importantly, like a man who hadn’t wanted to face it. “You wanna go out there.”

And Rick couldn’t be sure, but it was as if...they had shared a moment. No, more like they had created a moment. Two people, who didn’t even know each other, who were both talking about entirely different things, both arriving at the same answer. It was, Rick thought,

kind of like God. Different questions, different lives, different deaths. The same answers, in the end.

And because Rick was out of things to say, and because he was out of coffee, he asked for a phone book. Mr. Clay didn't ask him why, probably knew he was going to call the airport, and see if he could get a plane ticket. Even if he didn't know, though, that didn't make any difference.

He had come to Fairmont, he knew, could now face, fully, to die. And Death was chasing him, yes; but it had taken a pit-stop in Lincoln. And he felt, inexplicably, this almost...passionate desire to go there, to meet his adversary, head-on. To see what it was capable of doing. To see what it had done. To see what future promises it whispered.

A few moments later, he was back in his car. There's this small part of everyone, he thought, navigating Fairmont's mostly empty streets, that tries to convince you to keep driving forever. This morning, it whispered to him, in his ear, to drive all the way to Nebraska. To stop in Lincoln, where he had grown up and where his mother now lived alone, to get a hotel room and wait for the funeral, then stand at the edge of the cemetery as they put him into the ground. He would not say a word, to anyone. Then he would get back in his car and keep driving, out West. As he reached the California coastline, he would press his foot down on the accelerator and drive right into the ocean. And he would live there, below the water, and he would learn to breathe underwater, and he would live there and breathe there until they forgot about him, until they moved on, until everyone he had ever known was dead and gone; then, maybe, he would resurface, reborn, and try again to learn to live.

The Graveyard.

The day ended, like so many others, with a dead body.

What you need to understand about John, if any of the rest of this is going to make sense, is that he was nineteen years old, and had spent the last several months in Afghanistan, killing a few terrorists and a whole lot of people who probably weren't terrorists but who happened to have brown skin and worship the wrong spelling of the right God.

“Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck,” John said. Standing in the alleyway behind the bus station, late in the evening, after the sun had gone down but before most people followed its trail into sleep, former Private First Class John Anders looked down at the body at his feet, and knew three things:

- 1) He was responsible for the body.
- 2) The man had done nothing to deserve it.
- 3) No matter how hard he tried, John could not convince himself that this was somehow unavoidable. And, oh, how he tried.

John was a good soldier—he did what he was told, for the most part, without second thought, word or glance. But there was a day, in a village, the middle of a cloudless afternoon, and John pointing his rifle at a boy, no older than twelve. Through the sight, John could see the boy's pupils contracting. And someone screamed at John to shoot, but John couldn't shoot, because the boy didn't have a gun, or a bomb, and he hadn't threatened to hurt anyone—he was hiding in a hut when they got there, started crying when John tore through the tarp that hung in the entranceway, fell to the dirt floor and pulled himself into a ball and started quaking as John advanced.

And there was gunfire, everywhere, around them, and with each blast, the boy shuddered, as if someone had pricked his toe with a needle, and when he realized he was not dead, he would peek up at John, see the rifle still pointed at his head, and begin to cry, silently, again.

And then someone was behind John, coming in the doorway, bumping into him, knocking him forward so the gun thrust toward the boy, who no longer screamed, no longer shuddered, no longer really cried—just stared silently up at John as tears ran twin streams down his cheeks.

And someone was saying *Do it fucking just fucking do it do it now just fucking do it what are you waiting for*, and even cackling, and a voice outside: “This is fucking priceless.”

And John: “You don’t understand,” *What are you waiting for just do it*, “I’m trying to tell you, trying to show you.” And he wouldn’t do it, even though they didn’t understand. He couldn’t do it. So someone else did it for him.

He saw the boy’s body fly back against the wall of the hut before he heard the shot, then looked behind him, saw a man in a uniform holding a gun, and because he never, ever thought before doing things out there—that’s how you got killed, thinking—he fired.

In the alley, standing over the dead man, he was smoking a cigarette, took a long, deep drag that burned the cancer stick a third of the way down the filter, got that stale, almost nauseating too-much-nicotine feeling in his stomach, and tossed the cigarette away. It landed on the body’s face, began to sear a hole in the cheek, and John fell quickly to the ground and flicked the cigarette away. His nose that close to the dead man’s skin, he could already smell the flesh burning. “Fuck,” John said, his voice unnaturally high, and he was, he realized, crying, as he began to gingerly tap his fingers against the body’s cheek, where the cigarette had landed, trying to get the skin to stop smoldering.

He stayed there, kneeling, resting, trying to will his heart to return to its normal rate of rhythm, but as it did, as the sound of his own heartbeat began to fade in his ears and retreat back into his chest where it belonged, he could hear people sounds coming from the front of the bus station, and his heart began to beat that much faster.

It beat hard against his ribs, like it did the day of the Court Marshall. The case against him was iron-clad. He had shot, for no good reason, a Commanding Officer. They asked him: were you conscious of your action? *Yes*. Did you mean to harm Sergeant Blevins? *Yes*. Do you feel any remorse? *Yes*. For killing Sergeant Blevins? *No*.

And then: We really have no choice but to— *I'll tell them*. Excuse me? *I'll tell them everything*. Who will you tell? *Whoever'll listen*.

And then: We need a minute to talk things over.

And then: We've decided...that no one deserves to suffer irreparably for a...mistake.

The body, the dead man at his feet, did not deserve this, either. But there was nothing, not at this point, that he could do, that anyone could do. And as badly as he felt, as terribly weighed down as he now felt, John knew the right thing to do: he moved his hands down to grip around the man's ankles, and he pulled the body back, back, back through the alley, to the darkest part, where the street lights did not illuminate the surroundings, not even a little bit. If he had more time, if he could afford to waste more time...but no, this would have to do. And he let go of the ankle, then pressed both hands against the side of the body, shoving it far into the shadows, against a cinder wall, beside a dumpster, and then, finally, backed away.

John stepped backwards, until he was out of the shadows, until street lights from the road in front of the bus station illuminated him, and looked into the dark space where the body lay. His chest went up and down. Sweat trickled down his forehead, landed on his upper lip. He

opened his mouth, to breathe more easily, and the sweat fell into his mouth, bitter salty tinge on his tongue. He wondered if that taste would ever leave him.

They had gotten off the same bus: John, coming from a bus station in New Jersey where a man who wore a Captain's uniform and who didn't say anything to him dropped him off, handed him a hundred dollar bill and then sped away. He was still wearing his green fatigues—when they had asked him to take them off, he said *No*, and that was that—and carried a duffel bag, slung by the strap over his left shoulder. The ticket he bought was for Gainesville, Florida, but only because that was as far South as the bus route ran before looping back. Somewhere between, John figured, he would get off the bus, and just not get back on.

The man joined him near the northern border of Virginia. He was very tall—John noticed this first, and it stuck with him, because when the man's head first appeared, it bumped against the door frame, and he put a hand to his forehead and laughed. He was one of those people of indeterminate age: the lines on his face could have been the markings of a hard life, or just a long one. That's why John first noticed him, but the reason he couldn't *stop* noticing him was the way the man looked at him: not with malice, nor with friendship twinkling in his eye, but directly, purposefully.

He sat down across the aisle from John, and four seats closer to the front of the bus. The man backed up against the window, and spread his long legs over the seat, his feet spilling over into the aisle. He wore brown boots, with steel toes. John stared down at them, then slowly worked his gaze back up to the man's face. He was staring at John, and smiling. "Like them?" he said. John looked away.

In West Virginia, a small town called Fairmont, the bus stopped at a Greyhound station to change drivers, and all the passengers were told they'd have about fifteen minutes before leaving

again. Most people didn't get up, some slept soundly through the announcement. But John stood, to use the bathroom and see if he could bum a cigarette from someone, and the tall man stood, also. He looked at John, that thin, amused smile still on his lips, as John made his way down the aisle and past him; only then, after John had passed, did the tall man himself enter the aisle and start off the bus.

He didn't know why, but John was extremely nervous. He felt his back begin to dampen with perspiration, though it wasn't that warm outside—it was April, and the sun was just starting to set in the sky. Instead of looking for the restroom, he sat down on a bench by the curb, to clear his head. It was pounding, his temples throbbing. He put his hands up to the sides of his head, and felt veins bulging. Looking up a moment later, he saw the tall man, standing now at the edge of the sidewalk. He was looking down at John, and smiling. Again, John looked away, turned his head back down toward the ground.

When the man lit a cigarette, the smell of the smoke flowed into John's lungs. He desperately wanted to ask the man if he could spare one, but was reluctant to engage in any sort of contact.

The man finished his cigarette and flipped it into the street, a shower of sparks flowing off of it as it fell to the ground. Then he turned toward John. "Evenin'," he said, and walked up to the bench, and sat down.

The sound of the bus engine starting up again, and then the shocks hissing. The driver opened the door, waited a moment. John tried to stand. He wanted to stand, to get back on the bus, and leave this man behind. But his legs would not work. He could not move. The driver shrugged at him, then the doors closed and the bus roared away. *Fairmont*, John thought.

Fucking West Virginia.

The sun fell farther from view, down over hills and trees far off in the distance.

“Evenin’,” the tall man said again.

Instinctually, John’s hand pressed down over the top of his duffel bag, resting down at his feet. “Feels more like...two in the morning, doesn’t it?” John asked him, attempting a smile.

The man shrugged, and smiled, exposing several gold teeth, and one he hadn’t gotten around to replacing, brown and rotting. “Don’t know. Don’t worry too much ‘bout time anymore, actually,” he said.

John nodded.

“Don’t mind if I sit here, do you?”

John said nothing, but moved over, slightly, to make more room.

Time passed, maybe ten minutes; John couldn’t be sure—at night, he had noticed, the passage of time always seemed more fluid than during the day. During the day, he could use the sun as an approximate clock, a skill he learned long before the military, from his uncle Parrish back in Utah. “At nine-fifteen every morning,” Parrish had told him, “the sun shoots off the salt fields like monkeys out the trees when the poachers come.”

He smiled at the memory, one of the few good ones that had come out of that place, and noticed that, at the gesture, the man beside him twitched. Taking a darting look, John also saw that the man’s left hand had crept toward his beltline, where his long-sleeved polo shirt came down and covered the top of his jeans.

“What’s your name, son?” the man asked him.

“Paul,” John said.

“Where you from?”

“Florida,” John said. “Gainesville.”

“Goin’ home?”

John nodded.

“Missed your bus.”

John said nothing, and the man began to laugh. It was one of those laughs, he thought, that you’re supposed to trust, because it sounds innocent, it sounds benign. But it is anything but. When people laugh like that, he knew, they’re buying time, like politicians who say “Good question” when asked something they can’t answer: loud, staccato bellows of laughter, the man’s chin pointed toward the sky. The man was waiting for something.

John tried to buy time, too. He said, “What’s your name?”

The man smiled. “Emmanuel.”

John cocked his head to the side, did a half-smile, and squinted up at the man. “As in, ‘God is with us’?” He shook his head. “Then, I suppose...are you God? Or, maybe...are you some sort of spirit thing, here to put me on my right path?” Before the tall man could say anything, John did his own short laugh. “Christ,” he said.

The tall man seemed to think for a while. “No,” he said slowly, then, “I’m a man, my mama named me Emmanuel.”

John’s eyes traveled up the man’s body, then, until the two locked eyes. Everything went quiet. Even far-off traffic sounds and crickets hiding in the grass between the sidewalk and street seemed to melt away, as if the whole world was waiting for these next few moments, waiting as John was waiting, for Something to Happen.

The man narrowed his eyes, trying to get John to back off his own stare. But the kinds of things John had seen—the kinds of things he had *done*—make it hard to find much in the regular world intimidating, and so John did not budge. Finally, then, the tall man nodded and, as if he

had intended to say it the whole time, as if this were natural, this whole scene, and they were just two normal guys having a normal conversation in the middle of the night or really late at night or whatever the hell it was outside a bus station in West Virginia, he said, “You Army?” His eyes quivered a bit as he said this.

John did not waver his own gaze. “Was,” he said.

Tension seemed to flow down from the skies, and it filled the air around them. John looked over at his new companion, while still holding his bag, and saw the man’s knees as they bounced up and down, saw the man’s lips quivering, saw the fingers of his left hand drumming nervously against his knees. Noticed as he slowly, but deliberately, began to move his left hand from his knee back up to his beltline.

The man, maybe sensing he was being studied, looked over at John, and his hand stopped twitching. He smiled again, then looked down at John’s bag. “What you got in there?”

“Some things I need,” John said.

“Yeah?” the man said, a slight strain creeping into his voice. “Like what?”

John shrugged. “You know,” he said, “like travelers’ checks.” Then, “Do you have a cigarette?”

The man didn’t say anything at first, and in fact seemed to freeze for a moment. Then, after looking at something up in the sky, and moving his lips as if carrying on a silent conversation, he nodded, and smiled again. “Sure,” he said, and reached down into his pants pocket.

And you don’t think before you do something, because if you do, then you get killed.

John grabbed the hand the man had shoved into his pocket, pressed his other hand against the man’s mouth, so that he couldn’t scream when John twisted his wrist. When it cracked, the

man still tried to scream, but it came out sounding more like someone blowing bubbles under water. John released his grip on the man's hand, and it fell limply out of the pocket and rested on the bench, the fingers stretched out and pointing in different directions, like a creative gang symbol. As the hand fell, so, too, did the silver dog tags the man had been pulling from his pocket.

It took John a moment to understand what it was he was seeing, lying there on the ground beside the tall man. But as soon as he did understand, as soon as he *got it*, he opened his mouth wide, like to scream except with no sound, and released his hold on the man. Immediately, John had to parry to the left, to avoid a flailing blow, and then, without thinking—*Thinking gets you killed*—he clenched his own hands into a fist, and swung. It connected with the man's left temple, and his eyes closed, as his body slid down off the bench and onto the ground, unconscious.

John quickly picked the slumped form up in a fireman's carry, and lugged the body to the alleyway behind the bus station. He dropped the man in a heap and, trying not to think about the dog tags—*Thinking gets you ki*—shoved his hands into his pants pockets, looking for the gun, or the knife, or whatever weapon the man was carrying. He found nothing, and so moved up the body, patting him down like a police officer would a suspect. Still nothing, and he reached up underneath the polo shirt, thinking maybe a gun was taped to his chest. Nothing; nothing except for a half packet of menthol cigarettes, and a lighter.

These he took, then hurried back to the front of the station, then to the bench, and knelt to retrieve his bag. He saw the tags, still lying on the ground, and picked them up, unzipping the bag, and dropping them within, not daring to read the words printed on them, not daring even to glance. He zipped the bag again and fell onto the bench. After rocking back and forth a moment,

running everything through his mind, he leapt to his feet, and jogged back to the alley behind the building.

The man still lay on the ground, his hand still twisted, but his head was moved, slightly, from where John had left him. He would be awake soon, and then Something would Happen. Something would have to happen. John knelt beside the unconscious man, took his bag in his hands, and pressed it against the man's face.

He struggled at first, as people always do when at that last moment. Whether it be several moments before breath is choked out of the body, or the single second before a bullet pierces flesh, there is always a struggle. John had not learned much since the first time he put on a uniform, but he had learned that much.

The man fought. He raised his arms into the air and swung them around, wildly, and John had to weave his head from side-to-side like a boxer to avoid the blows. The whole time, John tried to speak, tried to tell the man to Just Shut Up, but he could form no words, none fully, anyway, and those he attempted to say turned instead into long lines of spittle that flowed out of his mouth, settled onto his bottom lip and then fell down through the air onto the duffel bag.

And then, suddenly, the man's arms dropped. Just like that. And despite the warm air of an early Spring night, John felt a coldness flow into his body, as if his own body was breathing in this man's spirit.

His teeth chattered as he rose again to his feet, slung the bag again over his shoulder, and because he hadn't thought before and was only thinking now, he realized: *I shouldn't have done that*. "Oh fuck," he said. His chest shuddered and the hairs on his arms stood up, pressing against the fabric of his sleeves, as he stepped away from the body, and leaned his back against the brick wall of the next building over. "Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck." His hands nearly shook

too badly, but not quite, as he attempted to dig in his pants pockets, and retrieve a cigarette from the pack. He held it between his lips, his teeth chattering so hard now he nearly bit the filter in half. It took several tries, but he finally got the lighter to light, and ignited the cigarette.

The nicotine traveled into his body—it was his first cigarette in three days, and he began to feel lightheaded. He figured the feeling would soon go away, but it didn't—it got worse, and, finally, he let the cigarette fall from his mouth, hit the ground, and John sunk to his knees, scraping his back against the wall as he fell. He took the palm of his left hand, and pressed it against the brick, then made a fist, pulled back and punched.

He punched again, and felt the skin on his knuckles break. He punched again and felt blood sticking to his fingers, and he screamed. He punched again, and the pain turned to dull nothingness.

How long he sat there, back against that wall, staring over at the tall man's body, he couldn't be sure, couldn't even guess, and he thought again of the salt flats. The thought came to him, then, in an instant, and without warning. *Have to go.*

He leapt to his feet, ignored the pain that was shooting down into his hand. He began to walk, out from the alleyway, checking down both sides of the street and not seeing anyone. He couldn't remember ever being somewhere with so many buildings but so few people. The adrenaline was quickly wearing off, and he was beginning to feel very tired. Whatever he did, wherever he went, he had to do it, and get there, soon.

John began to walk. And he began to do the thing people do when they walk alone in a strange city after killing someone and with a bleeding hand: he thought. His thoughts, though, did not come in concrete pictures, images, or movies of his past or presumed future. No, John

thought in colors, lines of colors that swirled through the blackness of his mind and formed words, like a laser light show in the sky over an amusement park in the summer.

Words like: *Kill*. Like: *Pain*.

Works like: *Remorse* and *Regret*.

The bus station was far behind him, two blocks or more. He turned left down a sidewalk—still, he hadn't seen anyone—and the station disappeared completely from view. He imagined hearing police sirens, but did not really hear them. He imagined someone tackling him, throwing him down to the ground and sticking a gun to the back of his head, but this did not really happen. He imagined being in a military prison, thought, for the first time, that maybe that was where he belonged, but, this, too, was not real.

He soon came into what looked like a more forgotten part of town. Here, the buildings were smaller and shorter. For every dusty window that held a business sign, he saw two more boarded over. It looked, John thought, like a place people went to die. He wondered, smiling a real smile for the first time in a long time, if it really made sense that he had been fighting to protect a place like this. This graveyard.

The sidewalk he was on led him to a cozy looking, three story home. Out of place for its location away from any other businesses, as well as for the obvious attention to maintenance and upkeep paid to the structure. It was only as he stood directly in front of the building that he saw the wooden sign in the grass beside the front porch: "Clay's" it read, simply, in large, block letters, with a crudely drawn picture of a coffee mug beside that.

Because this is where people go to die, he walked up the sidewalk and onto the front porch. He tried the doorknob, but it did not turn. Looking through the glass of the window on

the door, he saw a large, empty space: an L-shaped bar surrounding most of the room, a couple of tables, another door in the back. But no lights, and no people.

For some reason, he tried the door again. Then, he raised his hand and knocked it against the wood. Pain shot down his arm and through his entire body, and a bloody print was left imprinted on the wood. He knocked again, felt the pain again. Then he pounded, and it hurt so bad, he almost began to choke.

Lights appeared within, and he froze. A face was coming toward him, the face of an old man. Tired. Bored. Annoyed. Sounds within, and the door opened a crack, and the face looked out at him.

John tried to speak, but he could not. He looked through the small crack in the door, and saw the old man's hand. It was wrapped in white gauze. The bandages looked fresh. His body began to shake, slightly, and all he could do was stare up at the face.

"I'm closed," the face said. "I've been closed for a couple of hours now."

John just shook his head, slowly, still trying to say...what? He didn't know.

"You have to leave now," the face said. "You have to leave."

John nodded, and turned away.

As he walked, he wondered what had happened to the man's hand. What had he hit? Who had he hurt? These things, he knew, he could not live with himself without knowing the answers. And so as he walked, he thought of all the different things that make us punch walls and doors until we can't feel pain anymore.

He stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, in front of the building, and he looked up at the moon. It looked like a full moon, but probably wasn't really. More like a three-quarters moon, or even something beyond—something to the point where it gets ridiculous to even make

distinctions. And he thought of his Uncle Parrish, and how when he always thought of him he thought of telling time, and not evenings spent in the basement, or art collections taken from homes in Poland. And he thought, above all else, how fucking good it felt to just *think*. And he knew, as he stared up into the moon, that back on the porch, the old man stared, too. And it was a good feeling, for some reason. It was a great feeling.

Dead Gods and Living Birds.

This is how memories go. Real ones, the ones that stick with you, the ones that you think of when someone asks *Who are you?* or *What defines you?*, you can't recall or suppress them. They appear like unwelcome guests in the middle of the work week, and disappear like the brother who tells you he's staying until Saturday but when you wake up on Friday all his stuff is gone and the blanket you gave him that he used is folded up, resting on the couch, with a note on top of it that reads, "Thanks."

These things, these memories, all you can do is learn, somehow, to deal with them. To know that occasionally they will come, and, more often than that, they will strike you like a knife in the chest, then evaporate while you're still bleeding.

The newscaster for WBOY—Fairmont, West Virginia's only television station—stared through the screen at Clay wearing a macabre sort of smile, the kind where you're trying to make it seem like you're really *trying* not to smile, even though everyone knows damn well that you're not making any real effort.

"The victim has been positively identified, but his name is being withheld, pending notification of family."

Clay Pearl clicked off the television and shook his head. He didn't often watch the news—only when he woke up feeling particularly down, and needed a quick lift, some visual reminder that yes, things could be worse. And any more, those days when he needed that lift were more and more frequent. He was sixty-three years old, and felt every one of those long years—those and many more. And since the death of his wife, Edna, six years ago, the days went even slower, and the years themselves had begun to crawl.

It was still early when he left his small, second-floor apartment, and traveled down the staircase and through the hallway, into the coffee shop he owned and ran, once with Edna, before she died, but by himself since then. He stepped behind the bar and started a pot of coffee brewing, then unlocked the front door, went out onto the porch to get the newspaper. Army John sat at the edge of the porch, his legs dangling over the edge, smoking a menthol cigarette, the side of his head resting against one of the porch support beams.

“Morning,” Clay said, as he knelt to pick up the paper.

John was a boy of barely eighteen, and every time Clay saw him he wore the same set of Army greens. He didn’t object to the nickname, actually chuckled the first time Clay used it, a couple of weeks ago, just a day or two after the boy first started coming around.

Army John turned slowly and smiled politely. “Good morning,” he said. The boy didn’t tend to say much, but he was nice enough, and paid for coffee and food by doing various odd jobs around the shop. He was a transient, that was obvious: stuck temporarily between a place he’d never been and one to which he never wished to return. That part of his life, when he would finally have to choose one or the other, Clay didn’t envy him that part. In the meantime, the boy obviously was grateful for the food and didn’t mind the work, and Clay, though he wouldn’t admit it aloud, appreciated the company.

“Hungry this morning?” Clay asked.

“No thanks,” John said. “Coffee wouldn’t be bad, though.”

“Sure,” Clay said. He hesitated a moment, and noticed that John was staring at something off of the porch, down on the sidewalk. “Want to help me carry some stuff down from the attic later today?”

John nodded, then pointed out to the sidewalk. “There’s a bird down there,” he said, his voice strangely quiet. “It’s hurt, I think.” He turned to Clay, and smiled lightly. “It’s too perfect a metaphor...I figured it wasn’t for me, though, so I left it there.”

He turned his head back then, and Clay followed his gaze, saw the bird. It was a small gray pigeon, just a baby, it seemed, and was sitting, as if perched, in the middle of the sidewalk. Every moment or so it flapped one wing, but otherwise did not move.

“Coffee should be ready in a minute,” Clay said, and went back inside.

He had long ago emptied the coffee shop itself of most reminders of Edna, just to avoid, as much as possible, the conciliatory conversations that never seemed to end. After the first year, he was sure they would stop, but they didn’t, the *Are you okay?’s* and *I’m glad you’re holding up so well’s*, and so one day he kept the shop closed and went through and removed everything—every candle she had paid too much money for at the mall, every Afghan she had crocheted and displayed on the walls, every painting they had bought together—everything except a single black-and-white photograph.

It was Edna, in profile, over thirty years ago, when she was a young woman. Her hair was still long and black then, and it shined so brightly that, even in the monochrome of the photo, one could see its gleam. She wore a white dress, shoulder straps just visible in the photograph, and a thin, silver necklace. He had asked her once about the necklace, and she had laughed, said, “It was just some silly thing I took from my mother’s bureau.” Clay had been disappointed at this, he remembered. He didn’t know why, but, somehow, he expected it to mean more. Wanted it to mean more.

That photograph, he couldn’t bring himself to take it down, and so he kept it where it was, hanging on the wall above the decorative fireplace at the back of the shop. It became a sort

of shrine, in a way: a quiet, almost holy place. Even customers who hadn't known her, hadn't known the two of them together, instinctually looked up at it on their way past it to the restrooms just down the hallway, and then lowered their eyes again; if they were speaking, they went quiet, and if they were already quiet, they crossed their arms around their waists and slowed their strides, in deference.

Army John came inside just as the coffee maker started grumbling, announcing that it was finished brewing. Clay went behind the counter and poured two cups before setting the pot in the serving tray, and handed one to John, who nodded, said Thanks, and sat at a stool at the bar.

John took a sip of his coffee. Clay watched as he gritted his teeth against the heat, and set the cup back on the bar. "That's her, right?" he said, nodding toward the photograph. "Your wife?"

Clay didn't know why, but they were allowed to ask each other questions like this. He said, "Yeah. Edna."

John cocked his head, still looking at the picture. "Beautiful name," he finally said.

"Beautiful woman," Clay said, and then looked at John, as if suddenly pulled out of a trance. "You sure you're not hungry?"

John shook his head. "Thanks, though." Then he finished his coffee, and said he was going outside for a cigarette.

After he had gone, Clay went into the back of the room, toward the hallway that led to the restrooms, but hesitated for a second by the photograph. He had conversations with it, every night. This he told no one.

Through the rest of the morning, into early afternoon, Clay kept busy as best as he could. It was quite difficult, too: business had been slacking off a lot, lately, and many days he was faced with long chunks of empty time to kill; and now that Army John had come along, the very few odd jobs and side projects he hadn't gotten around to on his own were well on their way to being accomplished, as well. He worried, though, about actually finishing everything that needed done. Once every window was clean, every shelf dusted, every door hinge fixed, what would there be left to do?

The three o'clock hour came, and it was the time of day that Clay had the least business: the unemployed were picking their kids up from school, and those with jobs wouldn't start their evening commutes for another hour or so.

"Really," John said. "I'm not hungry."

Clay frowned at him, and then looked up at the clock. "You wouldn't eat breakfast, and you've been here all day. I know you're hungry." And he had, in fact been there all day, chain smoking on the porch, drinking too much coffee, doodling in his sketchbook.

Army John had his duffel bag slung over his left shoulder. Clay had never seen him without it, nor had he seen what was kept within. He slung the bag from his left shoulder to the right, a sort of nervous tick Clay had noticed, soon after meeting the boy, and he said to Clay, "Tell you what...let's carry down that stuff from your attic, then I'll let you make me something."

Clay couldn't help it: he laughed. "You'd be that thoughtful?"

John shrugged, said nothing.

He agreed, reluctantly; telling John he had things to carry down from the attic was akin to when you say you need to clean out the rain gutters, or finally replant the garden before it gets too hot: things you say, to make yourself feel better.

Nonetheless, he led John up to the attic, a large, open space, with no furnishings, but Clay didn't like to store anything there, either. Long ago, he and Edna had toyed with the idea of expanding the business, hiring a real, paid staff and turning the place into more of a restaurant, and opening up the attic to special reservations. Out of regard for those ideas, or probably just for her, really, he had decided to finish emptying it out, as the two of them had started doing before she died. A couple of times since then, he had carried down a few armloads of junk—Christmas decorations, old clothes, various knickknacks of the sort that you'd swear you've thrown away until you actually see them in the box. But on each occasion, by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs he was panting, and not from the physical effort, and so for several months now the project had been abandoned.

The window was at the far end of the large single room of the attic. It was ten feet high, and five feet across, constructed of stained glass, a Biblical image of some sort. Clay wasn't a religious man, and so he didn't know, really, what the scene was; he just knew that he saw the figure on the left holding a golden urn, and wearing a white robe with white rays of light radiating off his body, while the two figures on the right had their hands placed against their cheeks, kept their mouths open, their tongues visible. Edna had said it was beautiful, said they were in the midst of a great joy. Clay never saw that, though. To him, the figures seemed to be screaming, or trying to scream out, but nobody could hear them.

They stood before the window, boxes resting behind them on the floor, momentarily forgotten, and Clay placed his hands on his hips, smiled ruefully up at it.

“My God, this is incredible,” John said quietly. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it from the street.”

“Most people don’t see it. They aren’t looking for it.” Clay nodded. “Edna used to be a glass blower.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw John smirk. “What?”

“She should have stuck to that.” He turned to face Clay. “You could have just ridden on her coattails.”

“Yeah,” Clay said, “Well...” And he stepped closer to the window, gazed into it, then through it, down to the street below. He was looking for the bird, on the sidewalk. Finally, he spotted it, or what he thought was it, still resting in the same spot as before. It still seemed to be moving, though from up here, that could just be a trick of the eye, or even the wind. He didn’t know why, but he was glad it was still there.

Beside him, John sighed, and said, “You ever wonder if God lives in that glass?”

Clay placed his hand upon the glass, upon the image of the urn. “Trapped, maybe.”

He shook his head. Army John had a way of doing that, Clay had noticed. The kinds of things he said, in that low, knowing voice of his, as if he knew all the secrets to the universe but he was trying to see if you knew them too, it had a way of being...contagious, Clay would say. And then when you tried to step back into the real world, and to pull him back with you, you just felt foolish. But John always followed, if reluctantly.

“Come on,” Clay said. “This isn’t the kind of thing I want to take all day.”

“Yeah,” John said, “and I’m hungry.”

True to his promise, after helping Clay carry down a few boxes—nothing important, and Clay figured on throwing away much of the junk—John asked if he could have some eggs. Though he didn’t advertise the fact that he made food at the shop—it tended to be too much of a

chore, with just him working there—there was a small kitchen, in the back of the store, adjacent to the bathrooms, and Clay kept the refrigerator well-stocked, the oven and stove meticulously cleaned.

After eating, John announced that he was leaving, and went out the door. But later, an hour or so, Clay glanced out the window, and saw a stream of cigarette smoke flowing up into the air. He frowned to the empty air: John insisted, every day, that he had somewhere else to stay, but Clay never believed him.

Later, after a very short five-o'clock rush, Clay made his way back behind the bar. He dumped the two coffee pots into the small sink beside the bar, one of them a third of the way full, the other with only a single cup of coffee drained. He filled them both to the brim then with bleach water and, while they soaked, began wiping down the prep counter. It was still relatively early—not quite seven-thirty in the evening—but it was his business, and he figured he could close whenever he damn well felt like it.

The bell above the front door chimed, and he looked up as John came back in. He had been outside since eating; drawing, Clay supposed. “Need help with anything?” he asked.

Really, he didn't, but instead of saying that, Clay said, “You want to get the dishes for me?” John nodded, and Clay handed him a bus tub he kept underneath the bar, full of plates, coffee mugs and silverware, which John took to the small kitchen in the back, back by the bathrooms. He had to walk by the photograph of Edna to get there, and Clay pretended to not notice, to not care, when he stopped for a moment in front of it and stared.

The two of them had the place pretty well cleaned up within the span of a half-hour, with John sweeping the floors and spot-dusting with an old, worn rag, and Clay finishing up things

behind the bar. When they were done, John handed over the broom and said, “Guess you’re closing up, then.”

Clay nodded, tried to keep the sympathy off his frown when he frowned. “Been kind of dead today,” he said. “Figured I could use the extra rest.”

John nodded, hesitated for a moment, and then said, “You need any more help with anything?”

No, Clay thought. What he said was, “Goodnight, son.”

John licked his lips nervously, looked as though he wanted to say something else—though Clay knew he wouldn’t say it, whatever it was. And then he just left, went out the door, into the slowly blossoming night, on toward wherever it was he went whenever he left this place.

After he had gone, Clay waited a moment in the quiet, listening to the ticking clock hanging on the wall, the refrigerator humming from back in the kitchen. He sighed aloud, the sound escaping into and weighing upon the air.

He walked toward the photograph on the wall, and stopped before it. He smiled in spite of his sorrow. He said, “You knew it would come.” She didn’t answer him.

Screaming. That’s the last, most vivid memory he was left with. It was a long time before he could sleep, at night. After several months, he was able to sleep, for more than minutes at a time. Still, though, he would wake up the next morning, sweat plastering his pajamas to his skin, still able to hear the screaming in his ears.

He went down the hallway and stopped, before the bathrooms, at the small utility closet. He opened the door and dug out a hammer, lying buried underneath a pile of broken coffee airpots, then dug through a large tool chest resting on the floor until he found the glass cutter. From there, he went, with his tools, back up to the attic.

Pressing the glass cutter against the window was like trying to cut a diamond with a folded piece of paper. The blade touched up against the edges of the urn, and as hard as he tried, as much pressure as he put into it, he couldn't even make a scratch. He wanted to save the urn—thought Edna would want that, thought that maybe if he saved the urn, she would forgive him of the rest.

But he couldn't even scratch the glass. Still, though, he tried. He pressed. He put all his weight and leverage on the handle and pushed, knowing how easy it would be to slip and slice through his hand, how long it would take to clean the blood from the floor; guessing how long he could lie there, on the floor, bleeding, until he bled to death. He wondered if it would be painful enough. But no, not enough. It would never be enough.

Frustration took over, and he pulled the glass cutter back in one hand and yelled, and stabbed it, right into the center of the urn. The blade bounced off the glass, fell from his hand and hit the floor, where it stuck in the wooden floorboard.

Beside it rest the hammer, and he knelt, picked it up by the head, then rose again to his feet. He flipped the hammer into the air, sent it spinning, then caught it again by the handle, like an Old West cowboy showing off his six-shooter skills. He held the hammer up, pulled it back behind his head, and took a step back, another, then another, until he was about seven feet away from the window.

"I miss you," he said, and the hammer shook in his wavering grasp.

He narrowed his eyes, forced his lips downward into a tight frown, tried to keep them from quivering, tried to keep his vision focused squarely on the urn. He did his best to not look into the eyes of the people in the window. Clay thought, finally, that he knew why they looked on at the urn in horror: they had been waiting, all this time, for him to destroy them.

“Goddamnit,” he said, and his grip shook even more, then, “Godamnit! Goddamnit! Goddamn! Goddamn!”

And Clay gave up. He let the hammer fall, let it hit the floor, and he slunk down beside it, and the sound that came out of his mouth, a great mournful cry, the kind where after it happens the camera pans out and birds from miles around fly from their perches in trees, it emanated from beneath his throat, somewhere deep in his belly; it was something less than human, less than animal, less than anything resembling life.

It took him a while, a good, long while, but he eventually regained control of himself, enough to slightly raise his chin and say, “How long...have you been back there?”

Behind him, John’s voice, stuttering, “I...the door was unlocked. I think...I think I left my cigarettes...then I heard—.” He stopped, and Clay heard him sigh. “I should have left. I’m sorry. I’ll leave now.”

Clay said nothing, did not turn around, did not move until he heard John’s footsteps receding through the room, toward the staircase down to the building’s second level. “Hey,” he said, still not able to turn away from the window, and the footfalls stopped. “Do you drink whiskey?”

“Not really,” John’s voice said. “I mean, I’ve never really had a taste for it.”

“Please,” Clay said, keeping his voice low, trying to keep his voice from breaking. “Will you drink whiskey with me?” He turned, and saw a scared child standing at the top of attic staircase—the look on John’s face, a perfect blend of confusion and terror, was the same sort of look a little boy or a little girl would get, after walking in on his or her parents having a loud argument.

John's mouth hung slightly open, and he nodded his head. "Do you..." he said, then paused, "can you get up?"

Clay smiled. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I'm good."

With great effort, he pressed his palms against the floor, and pushed. He saw the veins on his hands, his old, wrinkled hands, strain and bulge at the effort. But it was effort enough, and he pushed himself up to his feet. He turned back to the window, stepped closer to it, looking for...what? Maybe a small nick in the glass? To see if maybe he *had* been able to damage it.

"You know," he said, surprised at how calm he now felt, "the way I kept the shop open after she died—people admired me for it. I knew that."

"It must have...it must have been hard."

Clay ignored him, went on speaking. "I knew they said things to each other like, 'What a way to honor her memory', or, 'That...that's love'. The truth, though, was that at first, I had thought of closing the business down, or maybe selling it to someone." Now he turned back to John. "But in the two days I *was* closed after the funeral, all I did was sit on the bed, our bed, and stare at the wall..." He let his voice trail away to focus, for a moment, on the memory, because in a way, a way he couldn't really explain, it was a happy memory. He opened his mouth again, and began to talk, in a hoarse whisper. "I tell you, boy...I had felt grief before. My daddy died in the second World War, and I was just old enough to remember it, to feel it. But Edna...that grief attacked me with a savagery. It was so violent, I was surprised to have no bruises."

"How did you...how did you deal with it?" John asked.

Clay shrugged. One side of his face turned up in a slight smile. "I came downstairs, on a Tuesday, and I brewed a pot of coffee, and I turned the Open sign around."

John waited by the top of the staircase, for Clay to pass him by, then the two of them went down from the attic, out of his apartment and into the coffee shop. Clay took a bottle of Jim Beam bourbon, and two small glasses with ice, out to the porch. Early in the summer, the sun was just starting to set on the horizon, and as it dipped behind the old, long-abandoned courthouse building across the street, for a moment, if only a moment, this didn't look like an old, broken-down steel town. As Clay and John each pulled up a plastic chair to the edge of the porch and sat, side-by-side, with a small table between them holding the bottle and the glasses, the sun made this place look kind of like a greeting card.

For a short while, Clay could imagine that he wasn't in West Virginia, but somewhere farther South, Georgia, maybe, and the plastic chairs he and John sat in were really wooden rocking chairs, and the table, sure, it still had a bottle resting upon it, but also, maybe, a chess board. And just as the sun fell completely behind the courthouse building, and the last remnants of its rays turned the sky a deep and marvelous mixture of pink and purple, he could imagine that at any moment, Edna would come out that front door—except now, it was a screen door, with part of the screen broken, and rusty hinges that groaned every time the door was opened—and she would laugh, and frown at the same time, and say, “About time you boys come on in, isn't it?”

They drank, in silence, for some time, until the sun and all signs of it were completely gone, until the world around them was left in darkness, and the streetlights lining the street finally kicked on, the gentle buzz of electricity replacing the sounds of car engines, of voices of people walking by, of passing bicycles desperately in need of oiling.

Clay looked over, noticed that John had emptied his glass, and he picked up the bottle, uncapped it, refilled the glass. John laughed, nervously, said quietly, “You don’t need to do that.”

Clay waved him off. “Don’t worry about it.”

John took the glass in both hands, and rested it down between his knees. Looking down at the porch, he said, “I feel like I’m intruding.”

Looking out onto the sidewalk, Clay said, “Hell, son. I told you to stick around. How could you be intruding?” He looked for the injured bird from earlier, but could not spot it.

John shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said, slowly, as if it were true, as if it were surprising to him, that he felt like he was intruding, yet did not know why he felt that way. Then, suddenly, he turned to Clay. “What happened to your wife?”

Clay was taken more than slightly off guard; and not just at the question itself, but at the courage it must have taken to ask it. Looking at John’s face, then, he could tell, from the way the boy frowned, the lines appearing on his forehead, just about his eyes, that this was a question he had wanted to ask for some time, and yet couldn’t, earlier. Now, though, with the combined powers of mid-shelf whiskey and a quiet, suburban evening, courage to pursue his curiosities came to him.

Clay took a deep breath, and an even deeper drink from his glass. “Car wreck,” he said, after a time, then shook his head. “I mean, I was in a car wreck, and she had been following me.” He turned, looked shyly at John. “I’d been drinking, and she knew she couldn’t convince me to give up the keys, so she just followed me in the other car.” His voice suddenly went quiet. “She always did that.”

He shook his head, quickly, and even a bit violently. “Anyway, I was watching out for her, in the rearview, and I ran a light. A truck...hit me, coming through the intersection.

“When she got out of her car, and came to me, I guess I was unconscious, and the guy in the truck that hit me, he told the doctor, or the paramedics, or somebody, that she thought I was dead.” He paused. “They thought I was dead.”

He turned his gaze back to the sidewalk, then, finally caught the bird again in his vision. In the slight breeze, that one wing waved slowly back and forth, as if beckoning him to something, or warning him away from something. “I wish,” he said, and then stopped, found his breath. “I wish it really were a memory. A real one. One I’d actually experienced, and not something picked up secondhand.

“She just...fell down, shook her head, grabbed her chest,” and Clay put his right hand over his own heart, “and she went to sleep. And she didn’t wake up.”

They were quiet, for a long time after that. Once, John took a drink of whiskey, and set the glass back on the table, and rattle of the ice cubes inside the glass so startled them both that he left it there, and neither of them moved, or said anything else.

A car drove by, shattering the silence. The wind from its wake caught the bird, and both wings briefly shot up into the air, and a slight ruffle went through the feathers. Then it went still again.

John said, “You hear things like that all the time...people living for love, and when it’s gone, or they think it’s gone, then they go, too.” He picked up his glass again, put its brim to his lips, and crunched an ice cube between his teeth. “You never believe it’s real, though,” he said, his voice lowered.

Clay didn't ask him how he knew it was real. It wasn't necessary. It wasn't important. What was important, was that they both were sitting there, and they both knew it was real, that it happened, and that years later, many, many years later, maybe they would finally be able to look on those memories as they should: with reverence. With even a smile, maybe. Until then, though, Clay would just wait, and be thankful for the darkness, and that it allowed him to shed silent tears.

John cleared his throat, loudly. "I should tell you something."

Clay nodded, slowly. He blamed himself for Edna dying. That was clear, always had been, to anyone who knew him, her or them. But what had been a secret, these six long years, was how at night one of the dreams Clay had was where, with his eyes closed, unable to open, Edna floated down from Heaven, through the ceiling, and hovered just inches above him and the bed, and she whispered, *Murderer*.

John said, "A man died. By the bus station."

"Yeah," Clay said. "They talked about it on the TV this morning."

John said, "I did that. I killed that man."

For some reason, Clay wasn't shocked, nor was he angry or anything like that—he felt no urge to run to the police. He was curious, instead. "Why?" Clay heard a lighter spark, then smelled the smoke from John's cigarette floating over toward him.

"I was in Afghanistan, for a while. And I think my head got really messed up." He paused, to drag on his cigarette. "But I'm pretty sure I'll never do anything like that again, because as soon as I did it, I realized what I had done. I knew it was wrong. That grief you talked about? That's what I felt. I don't ever want to feel anything like that again."

They sat there, in their chairs, with the table separating them, and they drank until the bottle was empty.

Then, Clay said, “We should bury it. The bird.”

“Yeah,” John quietly agreed, “we should.”

But they wouldn't. And they didn't.

Measure of a Man.

On the airplane, Rick Stanley had an aisle seat. He hated aisle seats. He hated them, and he suspected that the airline companies knew this, and that they took delight in having their pilots call over the intercom and say, “Those of you on the left side of the plane,” and insert your chosen majestic image here.

He took to his aisle seat with silent contempt, and hoped that when they flew over the Rockies the sky would be buried under a heavy cloud cover.

Shortly after getting situated, a young woman sat down in the window seat beside him. She was probably in her mid-twenties, with long, curly red hair and eyes so green he wondered if she wore contact lenses. She smiled at him, and took off the silver wedding band she wore on her left hand. “Hi,” she said. “I’m Nikki.”

Nikki was twenty-three, and had been married for little under a year. “When I got pregnant,” she said, “his mother practically insisted we get married.” She paused, looked into the air above them, and laughed. Rick looked up as well, to see if the memory was maybe floating there.

“She actually...came to the hospital, the day I gave birth, and she said, ‘have you all thought about the wedding yet?’” Nikki rolled her eyes, and laughed again. “My baby was over a month premature, in the ICU, his skin’s yellow, and she wants to know when the wedding is.”

Nikki’s husband, an independent contractor of something and such, was in Sacramento on a job, and had unexpectedly gotten done a few days earlier than expected, so she was flying out to spend some time with him. “The baby’s at my mother’s,” she said. When Rick made no

response, Nikki ordered a cocktail from a passing flight attendant. She drank it quickly, and said, “I told him I wasn’t bringing the baby, and he didn’t even ask why.”

These were the sorts of conversations Rick Stanley had, on a fairly regular basis. And they weren’t even really conversations, either—more like, monologues, dramatic soliloquies, spontaneous confessionals. He often considered telling people that he was a preacher, and not a psychologist, but that probably wouldn’t help. Knowing he was a Man of the Church, they likely, he reasoned with himself, would just keep talking, thinking that Rick had a direct line of communication with God. That he could call in favors, or something.

“I’ve never been to California,” she said to him. “All I know is what I see on TV. And that just tells me that it’s full of men who wear their sunglasses indoors, and women who don’t eat.” She frowned, and looked out the window. Rick followed her gaze, and could see no mountains. When she turned her head back toward him, they were staring at each other, their noses mere inches apart. Nikki breathed in, quickly and deeply, and Rick felt sorry for her, for the way wrinkles already had burrowed into her cheeks, for the way the dark circles holding up her eyes would probably never go away.

Her face reddened, not quite as much as her hair but almost, and she looked down at her feet. She dug into the front pocket of her jeans, and pulled out the wedding band, put it on her finger, took it off again, then just held it.

“Have you been to California before?” she asked him.

He had, but not under circumstances she would understand, and so Rick just smiled, and shook his head.

“God, I don’t want to go.” Nikki leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. She laughed, and Rick could see her eyes rolling beneath their lids. “Maybe I should go with you,”

she said, quietly. She opened her eyes again. “Where are you going?” Before he could answer, she shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’m so...fucking rude. What was your name?”

“Rick Stanley,” he told her. “And I’m going to Nebraska. Lincoln.”

“Oh,” she said, “you have family there?”

Rick said, “Yes. We haven’t...seen each other for a while,” thinking, hoping, this would be enough to satiate her curiosity.

But Nikki asked, “Birthday?” And she smiled.

“Funeral.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. Rick looked, and saw her put the ring back on her finger. “Who...I mean, may I ask—?”

He put up a hand. “It’s okay,” he said. “My father.” Then, to her frown, he went on, “Really, it’s alright. We weren’t close. I wasn’t even going to go, actually. But they want me to do the eulogy.”

Her lips formed an O, and she exhaled through her nose. “So...are you a preacher, then?”

Rick couldn’t help it—he laughed. “Yes,” he said. “I’m sorry for not saying so earlier, but, as you may imagine, it makes meeting people rather awkward, sometimes.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” she said, and waved a hand dismissively. “It’s not like...what we do isn’t really all we are, right?”

“No,” he agreed, thinking, What a curious thing to say. “It’s not.”

They both went silent then, and Rick leaned back in the seat, looked up at the carry-on compartment above them. Before take-off, when he first saw Nikki, she was walking up the aisle toward him. She had stopped beside him, looked at her ticket, and shrugged and smiled,

said, “Guess this is me,” and then took her backpack in her hands and stretched her arms to put it in the carry-on compartment. She wasn’t a very tall woman, and so raised herself to tip-toes and stretched her arms, and when she did this, her blouse rose up above her navel, exposing a green stud.

When she finally got the bag placed within the compartment, she looked down at him, caught him staring and, blushing, pulled her blouse back down. He didn’t tell her that he stared because the green stone matched her eyes so perfectly, and he wondered if it was a conscious choice on her part, or just chance.

“Then what is it?” she asked, so quietly, it was more like a breath with syllables attached than actual words.

“What’s what?”

“What makes us...us?” She closed her eyes, tightly, pressing them closed, like something was trying to escape that she had to keep in. “If it’s not what we do...is it what we say? Who we love, or hurt?” The ring off her finger again, resting in her open palm. “The things we let go, that we give up, just to do what’s right.” That last part, not spoken as a question, but as a reflective, more than somewhat mournful, declaration.

“I think,” he said, placing his hands against the seat in front of him, pressing his fingers against the fabric, trying to feel what rested beneath. “I think you take the greatest thing you’ve ever done, and you place it right next to the worst.” He paused, licked his lips. “And in your mind, your heart, you put them on a scale, side-by-side, and see which one’s heavier.” Rick nodded his head. “That’s what makes us who we are. The measure of those things. The answer to that question.”

He looked over at Nikki, and she was looking back at him, smiling. “What?” he asked, smiling himself.

She shrugged. “I just didn’t expect an answer.”

“I know.”

If Rick Stanley’s life was a better story—and not just the sort of story you read about in books, because those, too, can be depressing; but, rather, the kind of story they make movies out of, right around Christmas time, or Valentine’s Day, where people can start out kind of shaky, even crumbling, maybe, but they make it all right in the end—if his life was that sort of story, then there would have been more smiles, more conversation, between him and Nikki. And, if his were the best sort of story, when his plane touched down in Lincoln, she would have followed him, and he would have wanted her to—or, even better, the plane lands and there are technical problems with her connector flight and she has a twenty-four hour layover, except Rick doesn’t know this until they run into each other at a restaurant down town.

But, Rick Stanley’s life is not one of those stories, and so a few moments after he answered the question she didn’t really want answered, there were mountains outside her window, and she turned her head toward the glass, and Rick, after trying to see her eyes in the reflection for a couple of moments and failing, rested his head back against his seat, and closed his eyes, and fell asleep. And then the plane was descending, and the change in altitude and velocity brought him back awake, and he kept his gaze trained forward, toward the seat in front of him. And when the plane landed, he stood, and stepped past her, walked down the aisle and off the plane.

The sun was just starting to dip over the horizon when Rick left the airport and walked into the late spring Lincoln air. Big city or not, the air was cleaner out here than back in

Fairmont—it was, in fact, one of the few things he missed about Lincoln. He took a deep breath, inhaling as much of it into his lungs as he could, as if he could bottle it up somewhere inside of him, and take it home like sand from the beach. He set his suitcase down, let it rest on the sidewalk beside him, and waited. People walked by him, going into and out of the airport, but Rick just waited, silently, patiently.

Maybe a half-hour passed, and he heard the boom of jet engines, and looked skyward, just as a plane passed overhead, flying west, chasing the sun. He tried to imagine Nikki inside, sitting in another window seat, telling another traveling companion about her husband and her baby and saying without saying that she was unhappy. And he wondered if this passenger, this new friend, would be able to handle himself as well as Rick had; if he would be able to sit there and not say *Everyone suffers* and hold back the urge to scream and kick and cry out.

“Where the fuck are you?” The voice came seemingly from nowhere, and knocked Rick out of his thoughts.

He looked down from the sky and into his sister’s impatient face. Reese was thirty-five, just two years older than Rick, but could easily pass for ten years younger. He smiled, but not at her; rather, at the way that still, after all this time, she still pretended like she didn’t live in Nebraska: she was tall, wore her hair long and bleached like a Hollywood starlet, her blue jean shorts would have been risqué even at a poolside, and her sleeveless white tank top hugged her waist and chest in twin death-grips.

As he stood there, hands in the pockets of his trousers, suitcase still resting on the ground beside him, she rolled her eyes and flipped him off, which made him laugh. She threw her arms into the air. “Fine. Fuck. Just stand there.” And she turned, started away. Rick shook his head, grabbed his suitcase, and jogged to catch up with her.

He came up beside her, and saw Reese look over at him from the corner of her eye. Just as quickly, she turned her eyes back to the sidewalk, toward the parking garage she was leading him to. “Good to have you home,” she mumbled.

“Yes,” he said.

“Shitty circumstances, though.”

“Yes.”

They reached her car in the garage and began driving, and fell into silence. Rick just let her drive, tried not to shiver as the full-blast air conditioning assaulted his face. The sun was completely gone now, and the moon had risen over Lincoln.

“So,” she said, so suddenly and after so much silence that Rick nearly jumped. “Have you written anything?”

He shook his head, and she arched her right eyebrow at him. She used to make fun of him when they were both kids, because he would try to arch his eyebrows, too, but couldn’t. He would press his hands against his left eye, holding the skin down, while forcing the other one up.

“You just gonna wing it, then?”

“I’ll figure something out,” he said simply.

Their parents lived in a relatively small, two-story home outside the city, in a suburban area of tight and rigidly conformed development—a planned community, where printed notices told you what kind of wood you could use for your storm doors, and town council meetings decided if residents could be forced to place American flags in their yards.

When Reese turned the car onto their street, Rick saw the house immediately—it was the only one on the block with all the lights inside still blazing. And the street itself was lined with cars. “Fuck,” Reese said under her breath. “Where am I going to park?”

Rick said, “Is it absolutely necessary that you curse so much?”

“Yup.”

They circled the block twice, and finally Reese just parked the car in the middle of the street, parallel to a small, white coup, so close that Rick couldn’t open his own door and had to climb out of the vehicle on her side. “Why are there so many people here?” he asked, as he followed her up the walkway to the front door.

“Dad was a popular guy.”

He smiled wryly, though Reese couldn’t see it. “Right. I forgot.”

She rang the doorbell, and Rick laughed. “What?” she asked.

He shrugged. “It seems odd. That we have to ring the doorbell.”

She cocked her head to the side, and opened her mouth to respond, when the door opened from within, and Rick Stanley saw his mother for the first time in over four years.

She looked first at her daughter, and frowned. “I see you dressed for the occasion.”

Reese gave an all-teeth smile, and even curtsied. “I aim to please, mother.”

“Mom,” Rick said, quietly.

She turned her attention from Reese, and smiled at him, her eyes bloodshot and puffy around the edges. Her hair was gray. When Rick had last seen her, it was still a luminous brown, with not even a hint of graying, and her face did not hold the wrinkles that he now saw. Rick’s mother, like his sister, had always looked younger than her actual age.

“Richard,” she said, and stepped through the doorway to take him in her arms. The gesture was mechanical, and their embrace was awkward—more of a socially-mandated necessity than a genuine display of warmth. Rick had never had any real problems with his mother—not like with his father—but her complicity in how the man had treated Rick’s older

brother had forged a foggy sort of distance between them: through its haze, they could still see each other, even though they could never hope to navigate through the mist. And after Bobbie died, the mist got denser, its fog more impenetrable.

They went into the house, the three of them, Rick and his mother in front, her hand clasped over his, with Reese taking up the rear. Inside, faces he had not seen in years looked up briefly at their approach before going back to their conversations, and then did double-takes and smiled when recognition kicked in.

As Rick's mother led him through the house, he said to her, out of the side of his mouth, "Have they been here all day?"

"Your father was loved by a lot of people," she said. Behind them, Reese snorted a half-laugh, and Rick himself grinned lightly.

When a tall, dark-haired man approached them and said something into Rick's mother's ear, she nodded, excused herself, and left them. The dark-haired man stayed behind a moment, looking at Rick and frowning. Rick knew he should recognize this man, but for the life of him, couldn't. Finally, the man nodded, and went after Rick's mother.

"Who was that?" Rick asked his sister after he had gone.

She shrugged. "The man Mom wasn't fucking but probably will be fucking in the very near future."

"It's not just the cursing, but the lack of variety in your vocabulary."

She smiled, and slugged him in the shoulder. "Let's get fucked up, and make fun of what people are wearing."

She started off toward the kitchen, but Rick stayed behind, looking around him at the all the people. When she realized he wasn't behind her, Reese stopped and turned back to him.

“What?” she asked.

“How many of these people came here when Bobbi died?”

She was a silent a moment. “Dad was here,” she then said, quietly, and bit her lip.

“That's appropriate in a way that will make more sense once we're drunk.”

Bobbi was gay, but it was actually heroin that ultimately killed him. He had started by snorting it, with friends. When he finally decided, on his own, that he wanted to kick the habit, Rick's parents wouldn't support him, other than to say he should put it in God's hands. So Bobbi used his own money to check into a rehab center. When the money ran out, he again appealed to his parents for help, and once again was refused. This time, as a cost-effectiveness measure, the heroin went through needles, and that's how he got sick.

The night he left the house for the last time and held a knife to his father's neck, Rick, only sixteen at the time, could see, from where he watched at the top of the staircase, the tears streaming down his brother's face. His father later said that Bobbi wanted money, and that's why his son held a knife to his throat. But he didn't file any charges, and nobody asked why Bobbi had left without taking any money.

That's what Rick and Reese talked about in the kitchen, sitting on opposite sides of the large, round table, drinking glasses of chilled bourbon. How when Bobbi found out he was sick, he called the house, and when Rick answered pleaded with him to tell their father, because he had made himself a promise to never speak to the man again. Rick refused, and took the phone to Reese, who nodded as she heard the story, began to cry, and then said one word: “Okay.”

Their mother came into the kitchen, just as Rick emptied his second glass of bourbon. She looked at the table, and the bottle that rested there, and frowned. “So this is why my children won’t socialize. They’re drunk.”

“Socialize,” Reese said, and snorted.

Rick looked at his empty glass. “And I forgot to wear a tie,” he added.

His mother shook her head in exasperation, said, “Why don’t you two make some coffee, straighten up, and come into the other room.” She left without waiting for a response.

After she had gone, Rick looked across the table at Reese, and found her staring at him and smiling widely. “What?” he asked.

“You’re funny when you’re drunk,” she said. “Much more...entertaining to be around.”

“Maybe I’ll try it on Sunday.”

Reese rolled her eyes. “How can you even do it, anyway?” she asked.

He shot her a questioning gaze. “What do you mean?”

“The church thing,” she said. “I mean, it’s not a big family secret or anything that you were the last one anyone’d expect to go that road.” She paused a moment. “Even Bobbi. I’d have seen him doing the God thing before you.”

“Well,” Rick started, and took the bottle in his hand, refilled his glass. “How do you do what you do?”

She laughed, and rolled her eyes again. “Fuck you,” she said, “I’m in advertising. I just do it.”

“Me, too,” he said. “I just do it.”

She put her elbows on the table, and rested her chin in her hands, and leaned toward him, her eyes narrowed to speculative slits. “What an inspiration you must be to the flock.”

As the night wore on, and the ‘guests’ started gradually spilling out of the house, Rick and Reese kept drinking in the kitchen. When finally their mother stuck her head into the kitchen and said, still frowning and looking at the bottle, that she was going to bed, Reese looked at her watch and told Rick that it was nearly two in the morning. “Maybe you should write something now,” she said. “Drunken honesty, and all that.”

“Maybe you should write it for me,” he said. He put his hand over his face and sighed. “Geeze, I can’t believe Mom wants me to do this. It’s absurd.” Smiling, he removed his hand and looked over at Reese, who was biting her lip and concentrating intently on her glass. Her chin was shaking, as though she were trying to speak, but couldn’t bring herself to say the words. The smile left his face. “What?”

Still looking into her glass, she said, quietly, “Speaking of drunken honesty, I guess someone should tell you before we get there.”

She stopped, and Rick leaned forward toward her. “Yes?”

Finally, she looked up at him and attempted a half-smile. “Frank Felt and his band of merry men are going to be there.”

Frank Felt was the famous, or notorious, rather, leader of the Northfolk Baptist Church in Northfolk, South Dakota. Frank, along with his entire congregation, made a habit of taking field trips around the country, protesting gatherings and funerals of causes and people they felt were ‘fag enablers’, whatever that meant. They even operated a website out of Northfolk Baptist, “JesusHatesQueers.com”.

“Why in God’s name are they coming to Dad’s funeral?” Rick said, more shocked than angry. His father was high-profile enough to warrant one of their visits, sure—the church he had preached at for thirty-five years had grown into the largest Mega Church in Nebraska, and was

among the largest in the entire country—but he was as evangelical as Felt was, the only difference being, as far as Rick could see it, his father didn't use quite as big of a megaphone to voice his intolerance. "I mean, they're on the same team, aren't they?"

"I don't know," Reese said, "but Mom told me, and I checked the website, and sure enough..." Her voice trailed off, and then she went on. "Guess Dad wasn't... extreme enough, or something."

Rick sighed, a long and drawn out exhalation, and when he had cleared his lungs he took his glass in his hand, half-empty now, and held it up off the table, at eye level. Then he put the glass to his lips and drank the rest of the liquor in a single shot. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth as the alcohol burned his throat and moved into his stomach. Then he looked at Reese again and said, "What do these people even protest? The fact that he's dead?"

"Yeah...you'd think there'd be red balloons instead, or something."

Rick shrugged. "You know what, though...I'd almost want to be out there myself, instead of giving the eulogy."

She raised her eyebrow, arched it high. She had gotten much better at it, he noticed. "Almost?"

He laughed: she had a point. "Yeah...you're right." He paused, eyeing the empty bottle setting in the middle of the table. "Difference is, though... We can talk about all these things we want to do, wish we could do..." He trailed off, let the thought float into the air.

Reese reached up and snatched it, finished the statement. "Doing them, though, is something else."

He nodded, then opened his mouth to speak. But he closed it again before any words came out, instead said, "I think I need to get to sleep."

What he was going to say, was that he had just written the eulogy, in his head. But his sister, had he told her this, would have wanted to hear a dry run. So he stood from the table, told her Goodnight, and went into the living room.

~

When Rick awoke the next morning, staring up at the living room ceiling from the couch, his first thought was: My head doesn't hurt. He looked at the clock on the wall across the room from where he lay: 8:05. Above him, he heard movement, the busy, scurrying steps of two women rushing to dress and apply makeup. He sat up on the couch and immediately felt dizzy. That's why he wasn't hung over, he realized, and actually said, "Oh," aloud: he was still drunk.

He heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and looked toward the staircase just as his mother descended. She stopped at the bottom step and crossed her arms around her waist. "You're awake, finally," she said.

"'Finally'?" he asked, scratching the side of his head. "It's only eight o'clock." The funeral wasn't until eleven.

She rolled her eyes. "So by all means, let's get there at the last moment."

"Can't we do this tomorrow?" he asked. "We can go see a movie today, instead." Before she could say anything, he stood up and said, "I'm kidding. I just need a shower." He smiled in her direction, and was momentarily blinded by the sun, shooting in through the blinds in the hallway. He held his hand to block the light. "I'll still be ready before you two."

His mother hovered at the bottom step still, and rested her hand on the banister. “I put your suitcase in the hallway upstairs. I’ll be done in the bathroom in a minute.” She started back up again.

“Hey Mom,” he said, and she stopped. “When were you going to tell me about Felt?”

He saw her shoulders slump. Without turning, she said, “If I had told you, would you have come?”

“No,” he said. “But that’s the point.”

She went back upstairs then, and Rick sat down upon the couch. He stared at his reflection in the blank screen of the television set against the wall and waited, until Reese peaked down from the stairway and said that he could have the bathroom. He rose to his feet again, and made his way, slowly, across the living room, to the hallway and up the stairs. He found his suitcase, right where his mother had said it would be, with the hanger his suit was on draped across it.

He moved slowly, once in the bathroom, but, as per his prediction, was still able to brush his teeth, shower and dress before Reese had unwrapped the towel from around her head or his mother had even started her makeup. He went back downstairs and into the kitchen, started a pot of coffee and sat at the table, opened the newspaper, waiting for the coffee to brew.

From behind him, his mother’s voice. “Are you ready to go?”

He turned to her, frowning. She was wearing a long, flowing black dress. “Two minutes ago you were in a bathrobe,” he said.

She shrugged. “You get to a certain age, it doesn’t take long to get ready anymore.”

He closed the paper. “Coffee’s not even done yet.”

“You should have gotten up earlier, then.”

“Funny.”

They took Reese’s car, and Rick sat beside her in the front, with their mother in the back. They drove in silence, most of the ten miles from the house to the graveyard. It was only when they left most signs of urban development behind them and trees started to outnumber houses that Rick felt his mother’s hand on his shoulder, and she said, “Honey, I hope you’re ready for this.”

He shifted the shoulder downward, letting her hand fall into the air. As they neared the graveyard, and the first white poster board sign came into view, Rick said, “Remember, Mom: this was your idea, me doing this.”

They were ugly people, Fred Felt’s crew; a type of ugly that originated within the heart and other major organs, and then, as it pulsed and grew, infected their outward appearances, as well. The little boy, the first protester Rick could clearly see, who couldn’t have been older than ten, maybe twelve, was short, and too thin, and his skin was an almost-horrifying mixture of ghostly white and the splotchy first signs of a long and miserable teenage life of acne suffering. His sign read: “Queer Enablers Burn in Hell”.

Reese steered the car into the graveyard, passing the whole line of sign holders, who said nothing, but held their signs higher as the vehicle went by. “You missed them,” Rick said, and she smiled.

At the front of the line, just past the graveyard entrance, stood the proud patriarch himself, Fred Felt. He was a ghoul of a man, tall and sickly-looking, rather like a human skeleton with skin haphazardly stapled to the bones. Felt was the only one in their group who didn’t hold a sign; instead, he had his arms raised high into the air, a smile of yellowed and

rotting teeth beaming at the car as it passed, as he screamed a storm of vile curses in the name of God.

As the car slowed to a stop, Rick reached for the door handle, but he heard a click, and when he tried the door it wouldn't open. "Don't," Reese whispered beside him.

He looked over at her, and felt the sweat on his upper lip. His eyes felt puffy and strained. And he became aware that he was breathing heavily; panting, almost. "Why not?" he managed to say.

"Mom," she said, still whispering. Tears glassed the corners of her eyes.

From the back of the car: "I can hear you, you know," their mother said. "I'm not quite deaf yet."

"Let's just..." Rick started, and looked out the window again, at Fred Felt, who still smiled at him, still called out to him. "Let's just get this over with." And he unlocked the door, climbed out of the car, and walked right by Fred Felt, passing so closely he could smell the man's stench of hate, up toward the graveyard, where a crowd had already gathered.

The Stanley family had a large plot, near the center of the graveyard. Two sets of folding chairs, set up on either side of a grassy pathway, faced and led up to the open-lid coffin. Behind it, a small granite headstone stuck out of the ground, and an empty hole in front of it seemed like an open mouth, eagerly awaiting its meal.

There would be no viewing for this man, no service in a small church, and then the long procession of cars, each one among them with those little purple funeral flags clipped to the radio antenna that floated and flapped in the wind, like the colors of a small army riding off to a battlefield. No, the Stanley family—at least those who still lived in Nebraska and shared the

faith—and most members of their church preferred to get the whole thing over with in a single motion—burying two birds with a single stone, as it were.

The chairs, Rick saw as he approached the gathering, were full, all but the two front rows on the left side, and all around the edges, countless other mourners stood. Standing at the back of the pathway, Rick stared up at the sky. The sun shone brightly, and there were no clouds visible, in any direction.

Reese appeared at his side. “They’re waiting on you,” she whispered.

“Let them wait,” Rick said, not whispering, and he smiled when a couple of people cast disapproving glares in his direction.

“You were the one who said we should get this over with,” and she pushed him, not too gently, on both shoulders, and he started forward a few steps. Everyone turned to him, and he glared back at his sister, who smiled sweetly. Rick took a deep breath, faced the coffin again, and started forward.

He could hear them chanting as he walked, just outside the gates of the cemetery. He did his best to focus on all the other sounds around him—the piano off to the side, playing a soft melody; birds chirping as they flew through the sky; his own heart, nearly exploding in his chest.

Rick kept walking toward the coffin, deliberately keeping his eyes trained straight ahead, not looking down into the coffin, not wanting to view his father’s face, the eyes stitched shut, the short black hair combed back, in a way the man had never combed it himself. He wanted not to see these things, but the more he tried to not see them, the more he saw them, the more they expanded in his mind until the only thing he could see was his father, and the only thing he could hear were the words “Fag” and “Queer” and “Hell” being screamed from down below.

A podium with a microphone was set up in front of the coffin, but Rick didn't take it—his own church was full, on most Sundays, of over two hundred people, and even there he only used the microphone if his throat hurt.

“Good morning,” he said, standing beside the podium, hands on his hips. A couple of voices in the small crowd murmured greetings back to him. “We're here to...celebrate the life of Richard Stanley the First.” He paused, looked down at his mother, who sat in a chair in the front row. “My father.”

He rested his left arm upon the podium. “My father was a preacher, just like I am. A Man of God. And he cared about his congregation, about his work, just like I do my own.” He smiled. “A measure of a man's success, of his worth...some would say it's how much he loves what he does. And my father, he loved his job more than anything.”

A few voices sounded with “Amen”, but Rick could see his mother frowning up at him. He looked around for Reese, but she had fallen into the crowd somewhere. Abruptly, he took his arm off the podium and began pacing, back and forth, in front of the coffin. “But he had a family, too, outside of the church. My mother, his wife...there she sits today,” and he indicated toward his mother as he kept pacing. “And his daughter, Reese, who seems to have temporarily disappeared into thin air.” He chuckled, a forced, obviously affected gesture. “And myself, of course.”

He stopped for a moment, because finally, he spotted Reese, standing far back behind the last row of chairs, her arms crossed across her chest. As he looked at her, she shook her head, slowly, at him. And still, he could hear them chanting.

Still looking out at her, Rick went on, nearly whispering, so that those sitting farther back than a few rows leaned forward to hear him, “Just because a man professes a great love, doesn't

make it so. Doesn't make it true. Just because a man claims God in his corner, doesn't make him perfect." Rick shrugged. "And, just because a man has problems, doesn't make him evil." Suddenly, he raised his voice to nearly a yell, as if he were back at Fairmont First Baptist, delivering a regular sermon. "And those who turn their backs to those sinned against, should not rest easy, either, for they, you, are as bad as the sinner himself!" He was panting, and sweating, again, and lowered his voice, his lips turned downward in a snarl, and extended his arms outward, palms facing skyward. "You take the worst thing you've ever done, and you place it right next to the best...that's the measure of a man."

He raised his right slightly. "Stand in front of hundreds of people, week after week, for *years*, and give them comfort." He lowered it, and then raised the left. His voice nearly crumbled, cracked in two. "Shun your first child for admitting his weaknesses...for not being as perfect as you wanted him to be." He shrugged. "Which one is heavier?" Nobody answered, of course, though Rick waited a moment, as if he expected someone to. Then he said, whispering once again, "I shed no tears for this man, lying in this box. I shed no tears for him." He looked, once again, at his mother. She had her head held in her hands, and was looking down toward the ground; but as if she could sense him looking at her, she raised her eyes to meet his. "Not one single tear. I used them all up on Bobbi."

He didn't wait for any reactions—that wasn't his goal. His goal was to make sure the man received a fitting and appropriate sendoff. As he walked down the aisle, he did not look at his mother, and thought, for only a moment, if she ever would speak to him again. Rick went straight toward his sister, then past her.

She stopped him, put a hand on his arm, and he jerked it away violently. "What?"

"Where are you going?" she asked, concern weighing deeply on her face.

“To smoke a cigarette.”

How far did he go before she remembered he didn't smoke? Rick didn't know, but he didn't look back to find out. He made his way straight for Fred Felt and the protestors, who still held their signs. And Fred himself still chanted, but stopped, smiled at Rick, as he came closer.

Rick halted, just several feet away from Felt, who nodded, and smiled, winked his left eye. “Brother,” he said.

“What did you want from him?” Rick demanded. “Did he not hate enough for you?” Tears fell from his eyes, clouding his vision, and he didn't know why he was crying, and the fact that he was crying only made him angry, which made him cry more.

Felt narrowed his eyes, and looked upon Rick, as a father would a toddler who played with his stuffed toys, imagining them to life. “I want only that people believe the Word of God...the true Word.”

“He hated plenty, you bastard!” Rick said, spittle flying from his mouth. “You have no *idea* how much he hated!”

Behind him, he heard Reese. She had finally caught up to him. “Rick,” she said softly, and he felt her hand on his shoulder. “Don't be stupid.”

“Listen to the woman,” Felt said evenly, and then, “Don't punish the world for your own sins.” He smiled, showing his teeth. “There are no secrets kept from God.”

Rick practically leapt the several feet that separated them, and his left fist connected with Felt's jaw. A loud crack was heard, but Rick didn't know if it was the man's jaw, or his own hand breaking. Either way, Felt crumpled to the ground, his eyes glazed over, and blood began to stream from his lip.

Rick knelt over him, and put his face inches away from the fallen man's. "I keep my secrets because of the way *he* raised me, to hate *myself*." He took the collar of Felt's shirt in his hands. "It's dirt like you, who've made me feel like I've had to hide myself. How can that be part of God's work?"

"Rick!" came Nikki's strained voice. "It's enough!"

"Answer me!" He tightened his grip and started shaking the man by the collar, convulsions that started in his hands, and eventually traveled through his entire body. "Fucking answer me!"

Finally, Felt sputtered, a bit of blood flying up into the air and hitting Rick in the face, and he opened his eyes, smiled up at Rick. "You, too, are a man of God," he said softly, "a liar, just like me. How much fun the three of us will have in hell."

Suddenly, Rick felt sick to his stomach. He released his hold on Felt, and stood, quickly. He began backing away from the man.

Still lying on the ground, Felt began laughing, and called after him, "I know who *I* am. I have *always* been sure. Do you? Have you ever?"

Instead of saying anything, Rick stumbled backward, fell down to the grass, onto his knees, and began to vomit onto the ground.