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Heavier than it looks and other stories

Matthew Tobias Ray

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HEAVIER THAN IT LOOKS AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis submitted to
The Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

by
Matthew Tobias Ray

Approved by

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Marshall University
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This collection stands in memory of Jonathan Shane “Dinger” Keatley (who never told me to go home), and is dedicated to my Wandas: Mom and Grandma (who always welcomed me back). I also hope that my work will honor the memory of Wayne and Dorothy Ray, who made my education possible.

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ABSTRACT: HEAVIER THAN IT LOOKS AND OTHER STORIES

Matthew Tobias Ray

Heavier Than It Looks and Other Stories is a collection of fiction containing one novella-length story, in six parts, centering on the life of a young man coming to terms with a close friend's suicide. The remaining stories depict different characters amidst situations unique to each character's stage in life: childhood in 1930s Appalachia in "The Other Kid In a Candy Store," mourning and violent crime in "Picking A Lock," transcendence in "Pathétique," mid-life changes in "Lester's Last Melancholy," managing addiction in "Staying Clean," youthful folly in "Just For Fun," and storytelling in "The Taste of a Story." Works that influenced *Heavier Than It Looks and Other Stories* include John Van Kirk's "Newark Job," Chaudhry Shaukat Ali's, "The Open Sewer," Stuart Dybek's "Chopin In Winter," Amy Hempel's *Reasons To Live*, J.D. Salinger's *Nine Stories*, and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (as well as Robert Heinlein's *Stranger In A Strange Land*).

**INTRODUCTION:
FROM WANTING TO NEEDING**

In my earliest memories, I am a little boy who isn't unlike the character Oscar in "Lester's Last Melancholy," one who pushes a dining room chair into the bathroom, its back against the sink, so he can climb up and mischievously rifle through the oddities kept in a medicine cabinet, much to the dismay of the parent who finds him and has to clean him up.

I was born in Athens, Ohio in 1974 to Dan and Wanda Ray. Although my father was serving in the Navy at that time, my parents met while attending the University of Rio Grande in southern Ohio. They both graduated with degrees that qualified them to teach. My father recently retired from his career as a high school history teacher, and my mother spent most of hers teaching special-needs students at the high school level. To her, I owe my love of reading, writing, and language.

We made frequent trips to the public library throughout my childhood, and she didn't discourage me from reading material written for adults when I developed a taste for books beyond the children's section. The first "grown-up" book I read was *How To Live To Be 100 – or More* by George Burns when I was eight years old. In the passage I remember best, Mr. Burns describes how he and his neighborhood chums would burst through the front door of a tavern to perform impromptu Vaudeville. They chose quick numbers, usually a song and dance, that were over in time for them to pick up any coins that had been thrown at their feet, before the bartender ran them out.

I think that passage has stayed with me, first of all because it was funny, and secondly because of my love of music, which is second only to literature. My mother tells me I was singing before I could talk, and I remember waiting for the television commercials between cartoons so I could peck out the jingles on the family piano. I think this is the reason I have a particular fondness for writing that enters the musical world, which I have tried to express in “Pathétique.”

I sang in choirs and one musical production before I picked up the saxophone and drove the neighbors crazy, practicing. But I put the sax back in its case when I met Harold Rucker, a bluegrass musician, who inspired me to begin playing the guitar. I soon discovered that writing my own songs was much easier than learning those written by musicians more skilled than myself. Those songs also needed lyrics, and that is how I began to write creatively.

Some time later, I attended the University of Rio Grande to study literature and focused on writing. Under the guidance of my poetry mentor, Dr. Joanne Ford, I produced a chapbook for my senior thesis: *Emotion Sickness and Drama-Mean*. Dr. Ford taught me to remember my love of music as I wrote, to listen to the sounds that a poem makes, and to judge whether or not those sounds reflect the mood of the piece. She emphasized the inherent music of language—the tone and atmosphere that carefully chosen language can generate when words are selected for more than what they signify.

After deciding to attend graduate school at Marshall University, I enrolled in Professor Van Kirk’s Fiction Workshop in the spring of 2005 to try my hand at writing a story. What I produced—essentially a ten-page prose poem—was, as a peer put it,

“overly poetic.” I did not know that I was, to quote my professor, “going through a transitional phase concerning stylistic elements.”

Here’s an example: “He drove through hills as if they were mountains, through trees as snakes slide through forests of grass. The moon flew on silver wings...the soul of the night.” Over the course of the last several years, I think I’ve learned to recognize how much is too much, but I still believe there are moments when the sound of the language used to tell a story is important to the reader’s sense of that story.

While writing “Pathétique,” I often thought of the character, Marcy, “playing her way through the waltzes” in Stuart Dybek’s story, “Chopin In Winter,” and the way Dybek comments on music as a unique means of communication through the point-of-view-character, Michael. Although he is struggling with his spelling homework, he learns to spell “new words” he’d “never heard before...as if they were in another language, one in which words were understood by their sounds, like music” (23).

As I was beginning to understand the importance of style, I started to ask myself about the other elements of a great story. I started by taking the first story I had written and stripped away the element I had focused on when writing it, its description. I found there wasn’t much left worth keeping. So I put it away and wrote another one, which I liked more. But I wanted to know *why* I liked it. I felt that I needed to understand that before I could write another good story.

As the result of good fortune, I found myself in a genre studies class, led by Dr. Anthony Viola, that focused on the history of the short story. I got to re-read a few stories that I already knew and loved and study them critically as well as discover authors who were new to me. In addition to the primary works, we also read critical material. I read

Allan Pasco's essay, "On Defining Short Stories," and found his main point to be an insightful response to my question. He writes, that "for a [modern] short story to succeed, the author must overcome the restraints of limited length and communicate not a segment, a tattered fragment, but a world" (127).

I decided that a short story communicates a world by involving its reader in a meaningful way. After writing a term paper about all the ways a successful story can do this, I started to think about my creative thesis in these terms.

At the time, I was involved in the process of writing what would become the collection of stories that follows this introduction, and I needed to decide the particulars of the project; for example, I needed to decide if I was going to write a group of interlocking short stories that form a cycle, a group of loosely connected stories, or a group of stories where each could stand independently from the rest. To be honest, I wasn't sure at the time but knew that I needed to figure it out quickly.

I remembered Richard Bausch's first commandment in his "Letter to a Young Writer:" "try to know everything that has ever been written that is worth remembering" (1622). I have never stopped reading, but I realized I needed to focus on the short story genre in order to find my area, that special something I wanted to spend a great deal of time writing about. I needed to read authors I'd never heard of as well as re-read some of my favorites. I started by reading many of the stories in the textbook that had been required for Fiction Workshop, the *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. Some had been assigned during my workshop experience in 2005, and as I sat through the class a second time as a thesis requirement, I read them again, as well as newly assigned stories.

I read Nadine Gordimer's "The Soldier's Embrace," and learned how detailed description can be used to stop time in a short story. I noticed the way Gordimer places everything under a microscope: "the embrace opened like a door and took her in" (610). By showing the reader minute details through the point-of-view-character's eyes—"a pink hand with bitten nails," "a black hand with a big-dialled watch,"—the author slows down the speed of the story (610).

I found a Dybek story that was new to me, "We Didn't," and once again found the beauty of poetry in his prose: "The lake had turned hot pink, rose rapture, pearl amethyst with dusk" (472).

I read stories between assignments, like, Herman Melville's "Bartleby The Scrivener," and walked around for at least a week saying, "I would prefer not to," instead of saying, "No." I read Leo Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych" and discovered what my professor was talking about when he said he was interested in the narrative shift that follows, "And suddenly it grew clear to him" (1491).

I found stories I hadn't read since high school, like John Updike's "A&P," and remembered how much I had enjoyed laughing at the passage in George Burns' book when I followed Queenie, "up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-spreads-spaghetti-soft-drinks-crackers-and-cookies aisle" (1493). And I read Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" and remembered to read between the lines, a skill that had been useful while reading one of my favorite authors, Amy Hempel.

In Rick Moody's introduction to, *The Collected Stories*, he describes Hempel as an author with an "unflappable need to whistle in the graveyard" and the phrase resonated

(xiii). In “Beg[in], Sl[ip] Tog[ether], Inc[rease], Cont[inue], Rep[eat],” Hempel writes about a woman struggling to come to grips with the intense feelings of loss and regret she experiences after an abortion. The narrator describes the oddness of the variety of instinctual behavior from one creature to another by saying, “In the park, I saw a dog try to eat his own shadow, and another dog—I am sure of it—was herding a stand of elms” (48). A page later, the same narrator describes a peach daiquiri so “enormous” that, “the god-damn thing had a tide factor” (50). I’ve been lucky to have lived through only a few tragedies so far, but I deeply understand the importance of being able to laugh one minute and then feeling the weight of life at its worst the next.

Moody compares Hempel to her contemporaries when he writes, “These Hempel sentences, with their longing and their profound disquiet, do not rage or posture the way the men of the minimalist period did. They ache” (x). And although I had read, re-read, and still greatly admire Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral,” I thought about the story in those terms and understood what Moody had meant. Above all, Hempel’s stories are honest. Her narrators never attempt to explain away their feelings. Instead, they use words that capture the way difficult emotions appear in language. I want people to read my stories and come away with the feeling that what they’ve read is genuine and honest, and important if for no other reason.

Hempel writes every sentence as if it might be the only one. Her last three books took her five, seven and eight years to write, respectively. In my opinion, she is the author who comes closest to realizing what Edgar Allen Poe outlined when he wrote, “In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to be the one pre-established design” (61). Although I don’t aspire to

imitate the almost Haiku-like compaction of Hempel's stories, I admire her style and try to remember it when deciding what details should be included in a short story.

I had read the stories I've listed so far and still wasn't sure what I wanted to write about, so I met with the chair of my thesis committee, Professor John Van Kirk, and talked to him about my problem. I remembered a day in workshop when he had talked about the inevitability of running out of stories that are your own. And how it was just as important to learn to tell the stories of the people around you, stories that might never be told otherwise. He gave me an assignment, to write a story from a perspective completely alien to my own. And I went about gathering the information I needed to tell the story of a young Catholic girl coming of age after leaving home to attend college. The girl later became the character, Cecilia McKinney in "Pathétique." The assignment affected the way I thought about writing a story, but it also made me think about stories I had read, and, although I still greatly admire his work, I recognized the repetition of white, working-class, alcoholic, male protagonists in most of Carver's writing. That sort of repetition seems to indicate Carver's reluctance to explore the characters that lay within those who surrounded him.

Although a feminine and Catholic perspective was something completely foreign to me, I could relate to the idea of struggling with the lasting influence of a religious upbringing when faced with the part of life that involves self-discovery and self-definition. But as I wrote more of the story, I discovered the reason that the unfamiliar qualities of that character—her anxious nature, for example,—her otherness, had seemed so distant from how I perceived myself. I was uneasy when recognizing traces of that quality within myself. I found it fascinating that I had begun with the intention of writing

a story from the point of view I had perceived as my polar opposite, only to ultimately discover that I recognized that opposite as a reflection. Writing that story helped me to recognize humanity in everyone and helped me realize one of writing's many facets: writing is a humanitarian endeavor. By discovering the dignity of a character that I had previously thought of as completely foreign, I also discovered more of myself.

A year ago, at the end of spring semester, Professor Van Kirk sent me an email that contained my summer reading list, and I opened the attachment and started ordering copies of the books it listed. I looked down the list and remembered how hard I'd laughed when I read Donald Barthelme's "Me and Miss Mandible" and "The School." And as the books I had ordered were delivered, I opened *Forty Stories* first. I connected with its author after reading the very first story in the collection, and was reminded of my own character, Oscar, watching cartoons after a bath, when I read about the baby in "Chablis." "She looks most lovable when she's wet, when she's just had a bath and her blonde hair is all wet and she's wrapped in a beige towel. Sometimes when she's watching television she forgets that you're there. You can just look at her. When she's watching television, she looks dumb. I like her better when she's wet" (2).

After Barthelme, I read Salinger's *Nine Stories* and spent the next week of my life wishing I had written, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." I was grateful for my own comparably small tragedies after reading "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor."

But after reading all of the stories I've just mentioned, I still wasn't sure what to write next although I knew something had happened when I read Salinger's book. I recognized what it was during one of Dr. Viola's classes. We were talking about, "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor," and I was thinking about my grandfather, who had

received a purple heart for fighting in the same place that Esmé's father had been "s-l-a-i-n"—North Africa. We were speaking of Salinger biographically and talking about the post-traumatic stress he had suffered after the war. And the reality of what my grandfather had experienced (yet never talked about) struck me as "something new" (just like the feeling of the cold bench beneath Malcolm prior to his sudden realization in "After the Party"). And I started thinking about my project in terms of what I *needed* to write rather than what I *wanted* to write. That word, "needed," was becoming more relevant when I thought about what the subject of good fiction should be. After all, Hempel's first book hadn't been titled, *Reasons to Read This Book*, but, *Reasons to Live*.

But I didn't discover my direction until I received the help of a friend and classmate who brought me a copy of "Newark Job," by John Van Kirk. It was after reading that story that I started to recognize what I needed to write about, and I thought in terms of that story for nearly a month afterward. I had always enjoyed his classes, but after reading that story, I remembered a line from Tobias Wolff's "A Bullet In The Brain," and knew the feeling the author described, "the pleasure of giving respect." "Newark Job," for anyone who hasn't read it, is structured around a day the point-of-view-character, Hank, begins with the intention of helping his father maintain a crumbling apartment building. And throughout the course of that day, Hank is forever changed as he watches his father, a former army medic, patch up the victim of a stabbing. By the end of the story, Hank has seen the world around him, as well as his father, in ways that he never had before. I read the last line of the story over and over: "Hank stretched out straight in his bed, worked the back of his head into the pillow, and waited for his eyes to get used to the dark" (182).

The story described a day that begins with a father and son sort of outing, an activity that I had never experienced, having grown up mostly without a father. But I realized that “fatherlessness” was also an important and powerful concept, and was probably worth centering a story around. “Newark Job” ends with Hank literally and symbolically getting “used to the dark.” And I remembered the exact moment in my life when I watched the world darken around me: the day I learned of a close friend’s suicide. And I thought about that friend in relationship to the concept of fatherlessness and remembered the day a kind man helped me perform a minor car repair. While the events described in the section of “Heavier Than It Looks” titled “The Judge” bear no similarity to anything I have experienced, the day that man helped me fix my car was just as meaningful to me as it is to Malcolm in the story.

But it wasn’t until I sat down in John Van Kirk’s office and talked to him about what I needed to do that I became equipped with a way of approaching the task. I told him that I had read the story and loved it, and was a little perturbed that he had not recommended it. I told him about my ideas for a new story, but was concerned because I didn’t know how to approach telling the story without losing the focus on Malcolm’s experience with Ron Abrams. He told me to center the story around the day of the repair. It may sound like simple advice, but I doubt I would have thought of it on my own. So many ideas and emotions were flying around at the time that it was hard to detach from them long enough to think about something as necessary as a framing device. He also suggested that I write the story in second-person in order to allow Malcolm to express his feelings to Mike while also telling another story. I was afraid that the subject of suicide would overpower the rest of the story. And I suppose it did—as the story grew to a length

of sixty-five pages—but I hope the day Malcolm mostly spends in the garage with Mr. Abrams will not be lost to the reader in the larger context of the work.

And that’s how I arrived at the beginning of the longest work in the collection. It would have never happened had I not had the privilege to have Professor Van Kirk as my thesis committee chairman, and I cannot thank him enough for that.

The remaining four sections of that story are based on thoughts I had after learning of my friend’s death and thinking about the other people who were also close to him, their relationships with one another, and how those relationships may or may not have influenced his decision to end his life. I noticed the way we all felt guilty for being unable to stop his suicide and how we seemed to focus on other possible explanations for what had happened, to shift the blame. Those memories gave me the idea for “Reasons.” The epigraph that appears at the beginning of the story stands as an expression of this idea and my recognition of it in sections of Tim O’Brien’s work. Although war kills “the man” in several of O’Brien’s stories and suicide kills the young man in mine, both deaths are tragic. The epigraph is also present to show my gratitude for *The Things They Carried*, which has been a great source of inspiration as a collection of stories that, although subtitled, “A work of fiction,” were written as the result of a personal experience.

Not long after my friend’s suicide, I read the book, *Stranger In A Strange Land*, by Robert Heinlein, and I have to admit that fact blended with fantasy as I thought about the strange relationships I had recently witnessed forming and falling apart. Remembering the detached logic of that book in the context of a teenage ménage à trios, I had the idea for “Living Unicorn.”

Thoughts of the character of Mike, and the friend upon which he is very loosely based, led me to thoughts of other young people that I've known who were lost along the way (the character of Teddy is also loosely based on one of them). And I started thinking about a young girl who had been the victim of a terrible crime in my hometown when I was in high school. I cannot go into elaborate detail without placing blame, and it is not my place to do so, but I can honestly say that I will never forget walking Stacy home from the city park after curfew, even though it only happened once and I didn't get into a fight along the way. "Picking A Lock" is an entirely inadequate and fictionalized memory of my brief acquaintance with her, but all the same, I am pleased by the thought of others reading her name after the story ends.

The story that precedes it, "The Other Kid In a Candy Store," is a story I very much enjoyed researching and writing. One of the things we talked about in Fiction Workshop was the fun a writer can have while researching a story he or she wants to write. I had always enjoyed listening to the stories my grandmother would tell about her father and his general store, one that closed a few years after the Great Depression with nothing in the cash register but IOUs from the local farmers. I based the story on her memories of her father and that store, with its barrels full of candy and its owner's weekly trips to re-supply the icebox. My grandmother has read the version that appears in this collection and assures me that in the next installment, the reader must learn of the adventure Pauline has when she stops waiting on Perry, recruits a Beagle as her co-pilot, and teaches herself to drive.

I have no model to speak of concerning the next story, "Lester's Last Melancholy," but will admit that I thought of the character while thinking about

father/son relationships and the man who taught me to play guitar, Harold Rucker. The only thing he had in common with Lester was the love of Gretsch guitars.

I wrote the last story in the collection, “The Taste of a Story,” while thinking of a particular evening I spent with a good friend and my poetry mentor as an undergraduate, Joanne Ford. I thank her for taking the time to tell me her stories, as well as reading and giving notes on mine, and not complaining when I drank all of the Drambuie.

I thought of the idea for “Staying Clean” after experiencing the story from which the epigraph is taken, “The Open Sewer,” and, several months later, thinking of that story after meeting a drug-addict who worked on a road crew and remembering a heroin-addict I had met many years before. Addiction (of any kind) has always seemed to me as an attempt to fill the emptiness that remains where something better used to be. I wrote the story with the intention of showing that a meaningful connection with another person might be better suited to fill that emptiness.

The only story I have not yet mentioned, “Just For Fun,” is what someone I respect once dismissed as “a story with a surprise ending.” While I understand that judgment and do not disagree with it, I hope the story might be understood as a product of the idea its title represents.

“I did not kill him. But I was present, you see,
and my presence was guilt enough.”
—Tim O’Brien, “On Good Form”

HEAVIER THAN IT LOOKS

PART 1 - MICHAEL

Time has changed the way I remember you: at times your face seems different than it was, and I need to look at a photograph to reset my memory. The first page of my photo album shows one of you and Beth: her, smiling for the camera with her arms wrapped tightly around your waist while you flip me the bird. If I take the photograph out and hold it in my hand, I can see that the features I tend to exaggerate in my mind are not quite so pronounced. Your lips are full for a young man’s, but not as big as I had thought, and your hair isn’t the flaming orange I keep remembering, but more like the color that would come from mixing blood with carrot juice. Beth is pretty; the gloss of the photo paper reflects the lamp beside me in a way that reminds me of her own brightness. The light of life, of youth, always gave her eyes a color more brilliant than their natural mossy jade. My memory of her also lies to me by arguing a degree of beauty the photo lacks.

But I have no photographs of the words that passed between us; there is no infallible record when it comes to that. Even as I try to recall the details of our friendship without bias, in an attempt to understand what went wrong, the nature of my remembering continuously reminds me that my view is flawed. Each time, I concentrate, and try to pull back something new, something I’d missed before, a clue, something you might have said when I was looking the other way, something I’ve forgotten...the reason why you left. But each time I try to remember, scattered images flash through my mind

and surround me like pictures cluttering the floor. Instead of being centered, the scenes are always slightly askew, lurking in the periphery, avoiding me. I try to remember our conversations, the nature of them, what we spent so much time talking about, wanting the recollection of a profound question that should have been asked but wasn't, one that would have prompted an exchange of ideas that might have changed our lives from that point forward. But when I'm digging deep into the past with your face in mind, consistency is elusive.

And so it goes; each time I try to remember you, different scenarios surround me in a familiar and tired cliché, and I try to reach beyond it. The last time I tried, jumping from cliffs into the strip mine filled with water where we used to swim followed counting enough spare change for the bottle of grape MD 20/20 we drank before you burned the eyebrows from your face while trying to light the pilot in a gas stove. The time before that, the rattling twang of the notes coming from your fingers and your first guitar preceded my memory of your excitement after reading *Stranger In A Strange Land*. "I grok you, water brother," you said.

Your house is the image that anchors the inconsistent swirl of people, places and things that flicker in the dark. I spent enough time there for your mother to call me son, and at times, your house felt more like home than my own. I would drive along the twisting road between the hills and under outstretched tree limbs, glancing down the paths of the dirt and gravel roads that branched away. I would top the last hill, begin rolling down it and see the bricks, shingles, and white shutters planted in the side of the next hill, so very different from the apartment I shared with my mother and stepfather. I would park and jump out of my car to walk up the drive with the sound of gravel

crunching under my feet, louder than the splashing of your neighbors in their pool during the summer. It seemed like your dad was always in the garage but never greasy, and your mom was always cooking but never eating. I would ring the bell; she would come to open the door, and the muffled tones of the rock and roll music you played in your room would come through the walls like a softly spoken secret as she smiled and welcomed me.

The stifled thrum became sharp cymbals and clear vocals as I opened your bedroom door, usually to find you sitting on the floor in the corner of your room, Indian style, cigarette smoke rising from behind the cover of your latest find. Your mom would occasionally ask you to open a window to let the smoke out and complain about the smell while you stretched out the words, “Yes, mother,” and rolled your eyes. I was completely fascinated the first time I witnessed that exchange and saw you escape without a beating: my mother wouldn’t have waited for the cigarettes to kill me.

In your room, I read *Rolling Stone* and listened to *The Wall* for the first time and developed a taste for the strange and wonderful that would lead to *The Naked Lunch*, “Raw Power” by Iggy and the Stooges, and Alan Moore. We smoked cigarettes, bitched about school, drooled over lingerie models and hated the world together. Years have passed and piled up to separate us and cloud my memory, and through most of them, thoughts of my awkward teenage years and our time together have led me back to that room, the stage for many scenes. But recently, when I think of you, the day I remember most wasn’t spent there.

I haven’t spoken to you in a very long time, but I hope you’ll listen to the story of the day I spent at your house in your absence. Although it was a day that didn’t include you, it couldn’t have happened without you. You’re probably aware of many of the

details I'm about to describe, but maybe there is someone else out there who is listening, someone who knows what it is like to need to be humored, someone who also talks to the dead and knows how I feel when I wonder if I am talking only to myself.

PART 2 – THE JUDGE

We had spent the evening before as we did most Friday nights, drinking ill-gotten beer and cruising the dirt and gravel roads. I turned the stereo up, loud enough to make your falsetto-ed attempts to sing along with Axl sound harmonious while I hummed with Bill Bailey in the background. The mumbling flannel wave of grunge that Kurt Cobain rode from Seattle had just crashed in New Jersey on Jon Bon Jovi's fluffy head, but his hairspray was still dissolving. We had driven to the top of the hill on King's Road and climbed the water tower to finish the last of our beer while looking at the stars, big and bright in the chill of the autumn air. On nights like that, the small cluster of years that separated us from junior high seemed to stretch across and fill the horizon, while the future was an uncertain and fearful void, black as space.

When I woke up in your room the next morning, you were gone. I was too young to know the thirsty ache of a hangover as I gathered my things and went to the bathroom to splash some water on my face and wipe the sleep from my eyes. When I came out, your mom told me Beth had come to pick you up, and I assumed the two of you were making up again.

It was dark and windy when I walked out the front door and took slow steps down the driveway, looking all about instead of at the ground or the car. Thunder boomed and cracked (my grandmother would have said that angels were bowling). The clouds were like sooty fleece piled above and around, stretching to the tops of the hills in all directions. The weird calm that happens when the barometric pressure drops filled the air,

and the trees turned the bottoms of their leaves skyward; rain was coming. I'd seen trees turn their leaves like that shortly before a tornado ripped apart the farm I had lived on when I was four. After it had passed, we found one of our horses dead on a neighbor's property. It was going to pour, and I had barely gotten the door of my car shut when the first fat drop spattered my windshield with a loud smack. The sky flashed so brightly it made me wince, and the rain came down. The wind blew the water with pulsing force against the car that moved it from side to side. There was no rhythm to the noise, and it sounded like the car was being showered with tiny rocks instead of water. The storm calmed to a drizzle, and dead tree limbs littered the yard. Without wipers, the water flowing down the glass warped the world and made your house into a Munch painting.

I put my foot on the brake pedal and rolled the key forward in the ignition. I had started to twist around to look out of the back glass before backing down the driveway when I realized that the engine hadn't started. I had continued in my routine out of habit rather than reason. I twisted the switch harder after each failed attempt and mumbled curses, only to hear a slow grumbling whine that eventually gave way to a feeble tapping sound. I let my head drop to the steering wheel with disgust briefly before starting the process that was opening the door: I had to pull the handle with my right hand to release the latch while lifting the door by the armrest with my left and push the door open with my shoulder. The car was a real rust bucket, a clunker, a 1976 Chevy, the one you used to laugh about and call "the shitvette." It was better than walking, but not by much.

Small streams coursed down the drive, parting the gravel and slurry into hills and valleys that looked like a miniaturization of the river valley, our part of the world, where the rain can seem endless. I walked back up to your house to the front door and rang the

bell. Your mom opened the door, and I felt the warmth of the house on my face. I have since developed the idea that a person's outward appearance can be an indication of their nature, and my memory of your mom seems to confirm the suspicion. She was a plump lady no more than five feet tall with pinkish cheeks that hid her eyes when she smiled. Her gray hair made her cheeks seem even rosier and gave her the appearance of a woman more likely to be your grandmother than your mother.

She smiled and gave me a puzzled look before telling me to come in, and I wiped my feet thoroughly on the welcome mat. I followed her into the kitchen where bowls and cooking implements were scattered about. The smell of cinnamon was strong there and made the house seem even warmer. Costume jewelry glittered and rotated on the screen of a very small television that was tuned to a home shopping channel and mounted beneath one of the cupboards. The floured cutting board and nearly empty bowl of apples hinted that the appealing aroma came from a pie in the oven.

“What are you making, Mrs. Abrams?” I asked.

“Just baking a pie for later. What are you doing back so soon? I thought you were going home.”

“I thought so too, but my car seems to have other plans.”

“What do you mean?” she asked while cracking open the oven door and peering in to check the pie. The heat fogged her glasses and she cleaned the lenses with her blouse.

“It won't start...again.”

The car was almost as old as I was and most of the time seemed to be nothing more than a collection of entirely unreliable parts. During the first ten months I had owned it, the radiator blew, the battery died completely, the exhaust broke in two, the water pump went out, and something odd happened with the wiring one morning that gave me an unexpected shock when I flipped the switch for the heater fan. My brother-in-law used to fix the car before he and my sister split up. He was dark-skinned and wild-eyed and didn't wear a shirt when he worked on my car several times during the summer months. As he worked, he would tell a different story for each of what seemed like a hundred variously shaped scars that went deeper than the torso they covered. They were permanent reminders of the injuries of his life: bar-fights, surgeries, a knife wound from an ex-wife, and more. He was a better storyteller than a mechanic, but I appreciated his help and enjoyed his company. Even his unusual name, Memphis, began a story of the city where he had been born in the back seat of a taxi. He didn't come around after the divorce, and I didn't know how to contact him, so I realized that I had no one to call after I asked Mrs. Abrams if I could use the phone. She left the kitchen while I stood with the receiver in my hand, long enough for the dial tone to stop.

“If you would like to make a call, please hang up and try again. If you need help—”

I pressed the button above the number pad and sighed.

“What's wrong?” your mom asked as she walked back into the room.

“There's no one home.”

“Oh goodness, Michael didn’t say when he was coming back...let me see what Ron’s doing.”

“I didn’t know Mr. Abrams was home.”

“He’s downstairs fooling with that car of his,” she said and walked to the top of the stairs that led down to the garage below, where most houses have a basement.

“Ron!”

A harsh tone consumed the sweet sound her voice had had when she welcomed me at the front door. I looked at the floor to hide my smile.

“Ron!”

I don’t think it was anger in her voice, but the familiarity that comes with years of marriage. She turned to me and smiled while cocking her head to the side and tapping her nails on the doorframe before letting the loudest and gruffest one go, “RON!”

“What is it, honey?” he yelled back, his tone matching hers.

“I’ll just go downstairs, Mrs. Abrams. Thanks, though.”

“Okay then. Well, good luck. Let me know if you need anything.”

I hadn’t been down to the garage in a long time and had forgotten the dusty and faint smell of cold concrete that lingered there. I usually visited during the evening and went straight to your room. Not many of my friends lived in the same house with both of their biological parents. Although the word is practically meaningless, yours was the most “normal” family I’d been exposed to, but I don’t think I’d ever seen all of you in the

same room at the same time. Your dad was always in the garage tinkering with something, usually one of the firearms he avidly collected. And when I would walk down the hall to your room, I would pass the family room where a slightly cracked door showed the figure of your mom stretched out on the couch, her eyes closed behind glasses that reflected the pale blue light of the television. Even at dinner, the three of you made separate trips to the kitchen to fill your plates and carry them back to your isolated spaces to eat alone.

As I made my way down the stairs, I noticed the windows of the garage door, gray with sunlight and speckled with rain. Above your dad's worktable, a calendar had "October 1992" printed in bold black type below a photograph of an eagle in flight. There was a large rectangular gun safe beside the calendar, and a red Snap-On Masters Series Roll Cab against the rear wall of the garage. In the middle of this manly paraphernalia, a shining orange car with a decal of the words, "The Judge," sat on squeaky-clean black tires. Your dad sat at his workbench with the pieces of a disassembled pistol lying neatly in front of him beside some tools and a cleaning kit. His hair was lighter than your mom's, a gray that was nearly white, and like your mom, he seemed old enough to be a grandparent instead of a father. The few times I'd come to visit when he wasn't in the garage, he had been reclining in the living room watching a James Bond movie with a bowl of pretzels in his lap. I had never heard him raise his voice with the exception of yelling up the stairs to your mom.

"Oh, hey. I thought you were Janie. I was just coming up."

"Wow. This is yours?" I asked, staring at the car.

“Yup. Bought her new.”

“That’s awesome, Mr. Abrams. I didn’t know you had an orange hotrod down here.”

“It’s carousel red,” he said and laughed. He crossed his arms while smiling and rocked onto his heels. “I usually keep it in a storage unit in town, but I’d planned on taking it out today until we had that storm earlier. Nothing like that on the weather last night.”

“Mike said you spend most of your time fixing stuff, but he never told me about this! What is it? I mean, what kind of car is it?”

“It’s a 1969 Pontiac GTO. This model was brand new that year; there were only 6,833 of them ever made.”

“And you’ve got one. That’s crazy!”

“Thanks...I think.”

“No. It’s definitely a compliment. Wish I had a car like that. Mine won’t start again. I was wondering if you might be able to give me a jump?”

“Dead battery, huh?”

“I think so, but I just bought a new one last month.”

“Hmm, that’s strange. I can take a look if you want.”

“That’d be great. If you don’t care, I mean.”

“Pretty sure the rain’s almost stopped.”

After pulling on his jacket, he pressed what looked like a doorbell button on the wall, and the motor of the garage door opener whined and hummed as the little metal wheels on the sides of the door squeaked and slid up the tracks.

“Got the keys?”

I handed them to him, and he walked down the drive and climbed into the Chevette. The thing had never been less appealing to me than in that instant. After standing in awe of the fine piece of machinery in the garage, I wanted to beat my own car with a sledgehammer. The car didn’t make the dying growl it had before. Only chattering taps came from somewhere under the hood.

“Well, the battery’s definitely dead,” he said, pushing his eyebrows together.

“Might just need a jump.”

He swung the door of my car shut; it thumped and bounced back open. He was surprised and seemed like he was about to apologize when I laughed and walked over to the door and rolled the window down. I lifted hard on the armrest from the outside of the car while pushing the door until it clicked. He smiled and probably heard me swearing under my breath. I followed him back up the drive and into the garage where he took a set of keys from a hook beside the one that had held his jacket.

He slid into the bucket seat on the driver’s side of the GTO and brought it to life without any of the moaning or tapping sounds that came from my car. The dual exhausts blew the dust from the concrete floor leaving clean circles below the ends of the pipes.

The car rumbled with a powerful rhythm that was amplified by the enclosed space of the garage, and I could feel the pulsing throb in my chest. As he revved the engine, I could see the body of the car sway on its suspension, the fluorescent lights dancing on the surface of the bright paint. He was looking at me through the passenger's window and grinning when your mom came halfway down the stairs and bent over, her head level with the ceiling.

“Ron. ...Ron! ...RON! Will you shut that damned thing off?”

The old man looked up at his wife, and his grin shrank to a slight smile before he threw an arm behind the headrest on the passenger's seat and started backing out of the garage. She went back upstairs, and I could hear her muttering once the rear of the car cleared the door. I thought of all the times you'd told me your dad was an asshole and wondered why you never mentioned the GTO.

He backed the car up the drive enough to turn it around before rolling close to my car, putting it in park with his front bumper close to mine. He left the car running and opened the trunk with a spare key before pulling out a set of jumper cables.

“Pop the hood.”

The hood release lever made a dry squeaking sound as I pulled it toward me; a loud click came from the front of my car, and the hood jumped a couple of inches. I got out and pushed open the safety latch that kept it from being raised the rest of the way. The balance springs groaned with rust as the hood came up, and I propped it in place.

He opened the hood of the GTO and raised it without much of a sound. He fastened one of the alligator clamps on one end to the cable itself to ensure that the free ends wouldn't touch one another and then clamped the opposite ends of the jumper cables to the GTO's battery.

“Okay. Get in.”

I sat in the driver's seat of the Chevette and tried to watch him through the space between the raised hood and the bottom of the windshield. The GTO's motor slowed slightly when he fastened the clamps to my battery.

I thought about my father and hated him for not being the first person I called when I walked into your parents' house that morning. I thought of my mother crying when she learned that he was leaving her and his infant son to marry his newly divorced high school sweetheart.

Your dad walked around to my side of the car and told me to let it charge for a minute or two before trying to start it.

I thought of the contempt you held for your parents that I had pretended to understand when you spoke of it.

“Okay. Give it a shot,” he said and walked back to the front of my car.

I turned the ignition switch and heard the starter spin.

“Whoah! Hold it!”

I jumped out of the car, afraid that he'd caught his fingers in something under the hood. "What's wrong?"

"Your alternator belt is loose. That's why your new battery is dead."

"Crap."

"Well, let's see. It's an easy fix. I've got all the tools we need. Let's try to get it up to the garage so we can work where it's dry."

"Are you sure, Mr. Abrams? I don't mean to be so much trouble."

"That's okay. It won't take very long. Get back in there and start it up long enough to pull it into the garage where the GTO was parked."

I got in the car and it fired up right away. Your dad unhooked the cables, lowered my hood and moved his car out of the way. I put the Chevette in gear and started driving toward the house when I heard a hellish squeal come from my engine. The mechanical shriek lasted for a few seconds and suddenly stopped. The man looked worried as he walked back to the front of my car and lifted the hood.

"Shut it off!" he yelled over the sound of the motor.

"Man, that thing's loud," I said and got out of the car to inspect the damage.

"I'm pretty sure you've got an exhaust leak."

"Is that what that sound was?"

“Nope. That was your alternator belt breaking. It jumped the sheave and got caught. I was afraid of that, but I thought we might risk it.”

“You can just give me a ride to town if you want, Mr. Abrams. I can try to get in touch with my uncle or get a tow truck to come after it.”

“Do you or your mom have towing insurance?”

“I don’t think so.”

“No, that’s okay. We’ll get it taken care of. You have enough money for a new belt?”

“I’ve got twenty dollars.”

“That’s plenty. Can you help me push?”

I watched as he put his arm through the open window and tried to use the keys to unlock the steering column, but it was jammed. In his place, I probably would have sworn and started grumbling about what a piece of shit the thing was, but he just opened the door, sat down, and pulled on the wheel with one hand while easily rolling the ignition forward with the other.

“Have to remember that one,” I said.

He laughed and told me to push from behind the car while he steered through the open window. The grade wasn’t very steep; I’d never noticed it before when walking to the front door, but pushing the little car up the drive was harder than I thought it would be.

He grunted and said, “Might be hard going for awhile ‘til we get her rolling.”

I dug the balls of my feet into the driveway and pushed as hard as I could. My sneakers slid in the gravel when I rolled my weight onto my toes, and I nearly fell when we were halfway to the garage door.

“Just about ten more feet.”

“Okay,” I said, my voice wavering and muscles blazing.

We kept shoving my rusty heap until I felt the front of the car dip. It rolled forward on its own an inch or two and stopped.

“What was that?”

“Hold it there for a second.”

I let my arms drop from the back of the car and walked around to see the front tires in a very shallow drainage path that ran across the driveway.

“We’ll have to rock it a little and let it come back some.”

I followed his lead as we pushed hard and let go, with more force each time until it came out and crept backward. I felt his strength through the metal of the car as he stopped it from rolling further.

“Okay. Now, give it hell!”

I used all of the strength I had left and when we almost had it out and over, onto the other side, I was sure one of my tendons was going to snap. I didn’t have anything

left, but we were almost there. I was about to drop to the ground when I saw the muscles in his jaw twitch. The vein on the right side of his neck rose, and the skin over it reddened. I was ready to give up when he let out a low growl, and I felt the car inch forward. We'd made it out of the little ditch. Without a word, we both shoved harder than ever, and the rear of the car popped up as it crossed over. The rest of the way seemed easy. We let it coast to a stop in the garage. I stood bent over with my hands on my knees; sweat dripped from my nose and made small dark circles on the dusty concrete.

I remembered the party we threw when your parents were out of town visiting relatives. At least fifty teenagers showed up that night, and Mark Rhodes gave himself alcohol poisoning by drinking three bottles of cheap wine in twenty minutes. He had to be taken to the ER, but all of that happened after he poured a bottle of baby oil down the slide that led into the pool and slid down it so fast that it looked like a giant had skipped him across the surface of the water like a pebble. The baby oil ruined the water, and after he came home, your dad had to drain it completely, wash it, and refill it with fresh water and new chemicals, but he only grounded you for two weeks and made you help with the pool.

“Whew! I didn't know a car that little could be so heavy,” I said.

“That car's old enough to have quite a bit of steel in it. I just wanted to get it in the garage in case it starts raining again. I don't mind getting a little dirty, but I don't want to be wet if I can help it.”

He stood in front of the Snap-On roll cab, opened its lid, lifted a red metal tray from the top of the chest, and set it on the worktable near the front of the Chevette. With his head lowered, he picked through the tools in the tray and handed me a wrench.

“Okay, see the nut holding the negative battery terminal on? Loosen that.”

The wrench fit perfectly.

“How did you know which wrench to use?”

“Practice.”

I put some pressure on the wrench while mumbling, “Lefty-loosey-righty-tighty.”

The wrench slipped off, and I dropped it. It rattled through the tight spaces and made a clanging noise as it hit the pavement.

“Crap. Sorry, Mr. Abrams.”

“It’s like Plinko, just without Bob Barker. Here, try a box-end.”

I crawled under the car to retrieve the first wrench and traded it for the second one. The circular end of the wrench slid over the nut making contact all the way around it and was much easier to use.

“So that’s what those are for.”

“Yup. Work smart, not hard. Now take the terminal off and push it to the side.”

To loosen the terminal, I worked it back and forth on the post; there was greenish-white powder all over and around it. My face was about a foot away from my project, and

a sweet odor came from the stuff as it crumbled. I twisted the terminal off and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand without realizing I'd gotten some of the powder on my skin. I panicked at the taste of the unfamiliar tang and straightened quickly, striking my head on the hood latch. Little black spots dotted my vision as I stumbled backwards, finding the top of the worktable with an outstretched hand.

“Oh, jeez! Are you okay?”

“Mother-*fucker* that hurts,” I said, forgetting my company. “Kind of tastes like bleu cheese.”

He stifled laughter while asking, “Are you bleeding?”

I touched my fingers to the back of my head and held them in front of my face.

“No. Am I gonna die?”

No longer trying to hide his laughter, he managed to ask what I was talking about between chuckles.

“I got some of that stuff in my mouth,” I said, pointing to the powder on the battery and feeling especially stupid.

“Oh god, the corrosion? Did you inhale it?”

“No. I mean, I don't think so. I just got a little in my mouth.”

He took me over to the utility sink where I rinsed my mouth several times with water, felt like a child, and decided that I was fine.

“Sure you're okay?”

I assured him I was.

“Well, let’s go ahead and get the belt. We’ll just do all of it at the same time when we get back. You ready to go to town?”

I nodded and walked to the passenger door of the station wagon on the other side of the garage.

“No. We’ll take The Judge. Just let me go upstairs and tell Janie where we’re going.”

“Okay,” I said and smiled at the thought of riding through town in the GTO.

The stairs creaked with his weight as he traveled up them; he wasn’t fat, just solid. I walked around to the open garage door and leaned back against the hatch of my car with my eyes fastened to the polished splendor of the muscle car. The clouds moved across the sky in patches and the sun grew bright when it was between them and radiated from the chrome trim around the windshield in stars of light. They faded, and I noticed the reflections of scattered clouds in the hood, their images distorted, as if seen through a fisheye lens.

“Ready?” he asked, tramping back downstairs and walking around my car to press the button for the garage door.

He ducked under it as it lowered, and I followed him outside. The inside of the car was clean and smelled like Armor All and pine trees. Unlike the inside of my Chevette, there wasn’t a soda bottle or fast food bag in sight; even the burgundy carpet lining the floor was spotless. I pushed my feet together and centered them on my floor mat while

checking the sides of my jeans for anything that might leave a smudge on the tidy interior. He started the car and wrapped his fingers over the shifter; it had a T-shaped grip and the word “Hurst” on the top. I saw his knee move as he put the car in gear.

“It’s a standard?”

“The first ones came with a three-speed standard transmission, but there was a four-speed option later on.”

“Cool...what does GTO stand for anyway?”

“Gran Turismo Omologato”

“Omo-what?”

“Oh-moe-low-ga-toe. It’s Italian. The designer named it after a Ferrari.”

“Is that racing lingo?”

“It means that something has been granted official approval.”

I liked the way the word sounded when he said it, so I quietly practiced its pronunciation as he drove. He kept the speedometer needle near 35 while we were on the winding road that led to town and let his elbow rest on top of the door with his hand hanging out the open window. He stiffened his fingers into the wind and occasionally waved at people checking their mailboxes.

“I hope I’m not getting your car too dirty,” I said, lifting my sneaker and looking at its dusty track on the floor mat.

“Don’t worry about it. This is all I wanted to do today. Not driving a car regularly is the worst thing you can do to it. Nothing thrives from neglect.”

The exhaust that had rumbled so loudly in the garage purred below us, and I could feel the power of the car in my feet and legs, a sensation that was both exhilarating and relaxing. We drove around town and circled the park a couple of times, trying to enjoy another overcast and rainy day in the river valley (your dad called it “tooling”). We took the long way to the parts store where I bought the belt I needed. Your dad bought two icy-cold sodas that we drank on the way back, and I almost felt like we were in a Coca-Cola commercial.

Your dad was the man who showed me how to change an alternator belt. It seemed like the first time anyone had taken the time to teach me something outside of school. As we were tightening the belt tension adjustment bolt, we found that the threads leading into the alternator were stripped and the source of my problem. I wilted at the discovery and felt like quitting, but your dad found an old bolt in his toolbox that would work, and he showed me how to use a tap and die kit to carve a new set of threads into the alternator to match the bolt he had found.

It wasn’t the last time I had car trouble; the old Chevette broke down over and over again until I saved enough money to finally replace it. I didn’t realize it then, but the fact that your dad was willing to stop what he was doing and show me how to help myself gave me a sense of self worth that I had been without. It was a good day, but it was also the last time I saw your dad smile. The next time I saw him was a few days after

you found the only pistol he didn't have locked in the gun safe in the garage, the pistol he kept hidden in his bedroom to protect you and your mom. I overslept on the morning you used it to end your life.

My mom told me you had called while I was still asleep, and a couple of hours later, your mom called to tell me what you had done. I have spent years imagining what you called to say or what you might have asked. That missed conversation, the absence of those words, has created a vacuum that has taken every other word we shared with it into the void, and I can't remember a thing you said.

I blamed myself for your death for years because I missed a phone call that might have prevented it. Even now, the word *suicide* contains a slippery sound that I'd never noticed before you ended your life. I went to the movies two years after and watched *The Shawshank Redemption*. Some of the people in the audience applauded when the crooked prison warden put a bullet in his brain that left a neat red hole where it went in. I shook my head as the actor slumped into peaceful and instant Hollywood death. Your mother told me how you writhed and gasped for air after you blew the back of your skull into your mattress. She dialed 911 and begged for help, but the paramedics didn't arrive for nearly thirty minutes. When I brought Beth to the hospital, they were using machines to keep you alive long enough for us to say goodbye.

I learned about Thanatos and read the work of poets who traveled ahead of you in an attempt to understand the moment when dying makes perfect sense, but I am still angry. You were only thinking of yourself, and you forever damaged everyone who loved you. When you left, you stole the happiness I had found through knowing you: another

small bit of joy—that I had managed to find in a shitty world—gone, a world where fathers leave their sons for shoddy reasons and sons leave their fathers because they thought they were alone.

PART 3 – APPLIED RELIGION

The first time Malcolm stayed overnight at Michael's house—when he still referred to him as Mike—Jimmy stayed too and called him a mother-fucker. They were all in seventh grade then, and he probably just liked how the word felt in his mouth, strong and choppy and punishable. Malcolm twisted Jimmy's t-shirt into his fists and slammed him against the drywall hard enough to leave a crack, told him he'd take him outside and kick the shit out of him for it. He let go when Mike said he'd have to go home if he didn't knock it off. Jimmy and Malcolm both said they were sorry and all of them were friends again in minutes.

Mike had lots of friends after talking his parents into letting him go to the public high school and transferring, and he liked having the option of a different person to call whenever he picked up the phone. The first time Malcolm told him he was his best friend, Mike said he had been best friends with Jimmy Birch since the third grade. He delivered the statement matter-of-factly, as if its truth explained everything, and easily slipped back into talking about the kids at his new school. He said they were interesting and not at all like the ones who were still Malcolm's classmates at the Christian school, the ones who marched to chapel every Friday morning for fourth period and listened as the chaplain brought, what he called the miraculous fact of God's Love, to their attention.

Some of them prayed for forgiveness with shiny black shoes hurting the feet they tucked beneath their pews. Malcolm always felt like he was somehow stuck in the middle as the one who could not convince himself to close his eyes while everyone else prayed,

so he left them open and watched his classmates send their thoughts to God. After years of practice, he learned to recognize the very convicted thought-senders from the way they held their hands—clasped and close to the heart instead of with palms together and fingertips touching—and surmised that they were able to endure the endless sixty minutes of dogma before lunch because of a mild sense of virtue.

At times, his mother—inspired by the guilt she took home from parent-teacher conferences—brought him to the church for a Sunday-morning visit. Those services were more serious and formal than weekday-chapel, and the congregation's preacher led prayer instead of the chaplain, but the disjointed feeling remained. So he examined his very convicted schoolmates' parents, discovering them to be grown-up and intensified versions of their children. But instead of mere thoughts, they seemed to be fervently sending strong wishes. Malcolm imagined that they had graduated from a sense of virtue to one of a comforting Creator and Redeemer as the means they relied upon to carry them through the everlasting ninety minutes of worship.

Malcolm wasn't like the other high school students that dotted the congregation and wished they were elsewhere because they preferred football to prayer. He simply lacked the fervor he saw in the faces around him. The fact that it did not exist within him was a mystery without a solution. And he craved the ease with which the others reveled in the manifest glory that he missed. He preferred the ordinary and necessary concerns of human existence over worship. When a classmate had been diagnosed with cancer, he tried to pray for him. He closed his eyes and said all the right words but became self-conscious and stopped. So he made copies of his notes from the class they shared and visited to help him with his homework before and after the surgery instead. It wasn't the

same, but it was what he had to offer. And when his friend's report card came, he could see the good he'd done, marked plainly in the form of the letter A.

The drug had been Teddy Shorter's idea. Ever since switching schools, Mike had been impressed with him. He liked the way Teddy let his hair grow long, so Mike grew his too. He liked the way everyone thought of himself as Teddy's best friend. Teddy was even tight with his old man, who seemed cool and likeable and had built a half-pipe for his son and bought him beer. The two of them worked on their dirt bikes together, right in their kitchen.

Teddy's mom and dad had divorced, and Teddy seemed to have it made. He spent the summers with his mom doing whatever he wanted and came back to his dad's for the school year where he got whatever he wanted. When Teddy noticed that Malcolm had gotten away with staying out all night the last time all of them got drunk and that he had his own car, he invited Mike and Malcolm to come over the following weekend.

Malcolm heard Mike talking to Beth on speakerphone when he walked into the bedroom. It had been a few months since she dumped him, and Malcolm didn't understand why she didn't just leave him alone. She was at her cousin's house, and they listened to her talk to and about him while he tried to grease up his leg and slip out of his house arrest anklet. She said he wanted to go to Wal-Mart and steal DVDs and trade them for a quarter-ounce of weed. Mike said to steal a pack of Camels too, rolled a Bugler against the table, and held it up for inspection. Malcolm admired its perfect roundness

and thought about the difficulty cowboys must have had rolling cigarettes on horseback. Mike was quiet for awhile after Beth hung up, and the sound of his dad's GTO rumbling in the garage below took the place of what Malcolm was going to say about Beth. The noise made it easier for them to talk about something else.

Mike rolled his eyes. "Seems like he's been working on that piece of shit my whole life and never gets it the way he wants." He pushed up the window over his bed to let the smoke out, and asked Malcolm about his fat lip.

"It's nothing."

"Chad's telling everybody he kicked your ass. Do you have a death wish?"

"I had to do something. He wouldn't leave her alone."

"Sounds like him. Holly's no angel, man. She's a charity case. Besides, she's only in eighth grade."

"I know. I'm not trying to fuck her. I just think she's sweet."

"She is cute. He stubbed out his cigarette on the brick ledge outside the window and asked Malcolm if he was ready to go.

It took Mike three tries to get the passenger door shut; then he started talking about Holly again. Mike reminded Malcolm of last summer and the way he had chauffeured Suzanne all over the county while his car fell to pieces. Mike really laid on him when talking about how he had continued to cater to her despite the state of his vehicle until two guys he didn't know showed up at her apartment in the middle of the night.

“They were expecting to fuck her, *right?*”

Malcolm hadn't said anything as Mike ranted, but he felt his face warm with the last word.

Mike scoffed and shook his head as he reached down and tried to slide his seat back, but the tracks were old and wouldn't budge. He was still feeling around under the seat when Malcolm hit a bump in the road that gave him a jolt and scraped his hand against one of the steel tracks, coarse with rust. It didn't bleed much but he complained that it burned like hell and sucked air in quickly through his teeth. He picked off the little white shavings of skin the metal had pushed up, put his wrist to his mouth, and sucked at the wound, licking the tiny pool of blood that had crept up before it stopped. Malcolm noticed him pushing his tongue over the scrape as if he wanted more. Watching that mildly disturbed him at first; then he reassured himself with the thought that everyone must do that with only a little bit of blood, but he wasn't sure.

Teddy swung the front door open wide and raised one eyebrow higher than it should go and lowered the other. He held his mouth tight and tried to stretch the eye under his raised brow open wide, but appeared to have difficulty with the action. Malcolm smelled marijuana smoke and noticed Teddy's puffy eyelids and bloodshot eyes. Teddy laughed loud, showing a chewed bite of the sandwich he held by his waist and announced the arrival of his friends with a voice muffled by boloney and white bread, “M&M!” He turned and motioned for them to follow him as he muttered, “Man, I could go for some of those...the peanut ones.”

Mike and Malcolm followed him as he strutted through the house shirtless, little swells of baby fat pudging over his tight Levi's. He bobbed his head to the rap music that thumped through the open door to his bedroom and his long blond curls jerked up and down. He grabbed a dirty flannel from the floor by his bed and pulled it over one arm while he held the rest of the sandwich in his mouth. After he pushed the buttons through the wrong holes, he took another bite and spoke through the food, "What's shakin' pilgrims?"

"Coming to get you," Mike said and flipped a chair around from under the kitchen table and straddled it. Malcolm leaned against the doorframe and twirled his keys.

"Waitin' on me you're backin' up," Teddy said, still chewing as he rummaged through a black duffel bag. "Let's go, Axl."

"It's just the hair, man. I look nothing like him," Mike said.

"You really kinda do," Malcolm said.

"Can you do the snake dance?" Teddy asked and slid his feet away from him while holding an imaginary mic stand and singing, "Woe-woe-oh-wuh-uh-oh-ohhh-sweet-childa-my-yee-yine." He unzipped one of the outer pockets on the bag as he sang.

"At least I don't have hair like Robert Plant," Mike said and grinned at Teddy.

"Percy's the man!" he replied and struck a pose. "We may not be rock stars, but we're gonna party like 'em tonight." Teddy held up a sandwich bag containing a generous handful of gelatin capsules filled with brownish-green powder.

"Whatcha got there?" Mike asked.

“Not much, kimosabe. Just a shit-load of mescaline. My dude said it was really hard to get.” He slid four of the capsules from the bag into his hand and held them near Mike’s mouth. He opened up and Teddy dropped them in. Teddy poured a glass of Kool-Aid and offered it to Mike, slid four more capsules from the bag and tossed them into his mouth; then drank from the glass Mike handed back. Malcolm thought of all the communion offerings he had refused during Sunday-morning service.

“You ready?” Teddy asked.

“I’ve never...” Malcolm hesitated.

“It’s gonna be great.” Teddy assured him. “It’ll take you places.”

“I don’t know...I’ve got to drive,” he said, looking at Mike, who nodded for Malcolm to go ahead, so he opened his mouth.

By the middle of the afternoon, the three young men were on their way. In the car, Teddy talked about dropping acid with his girlfriend. “My dude had a whole sheet that time,” he said. “It was the most fun I ever had!” He described a small square piece of paper showing a picture of a monkey sticking its head out of a barrel with the word FUN stamped on its front. He talked about watching *Evil Dead II* and how the two of them did everything until it hurt, laughed and fucked, and then did it some more. He talked about the blue lights that had flashed behind his eyelids when he climaxed and how he could smell drug, like sweaty chemical love, leaking through his girlfriend’s skin.

Teddy said Mohican State Park was only an hour away. About halfway there, they stopped at a McDonald's because he said he had to piss. Mike went inside with him, but Malcolm decided to stretch his legs and walked a lap around the parking lot. As he stood in front of the restaurant waiting, he saw a man scoop a child out of the backseat of a car and carry the boy to another car parked across the lot. A woman wearing a worried expression opened the car door. Malcolm guessed the little guy to be around four years old. The man lay him across the backseat, and the woman spread a blanket out over him. When the man went back to his car to pull an overnight bag from the trunk, the woman kneeled down beside the open door and stroked the child's forehead. Malcolm imagined a weekend visit cut short by illness and thought of Mike always saying he wished his parents would divorce like Teddy's had. Malcolm thought he might be right to want it because the sick kid was getting loads of attention.

The father slammed the trunk lid after throwing in the bag and walked over to check on the boy. Malcolm thought he heard the little tyke moan. Mike and Teddy walked outside in time to see the boy push his head out of the car and vomit on the man's shoes.

The boys choked on laughter as they watched the man stretch his arms straight out over his sides and grimace as he flicked a foot away from the car, the stuff flying off in little gobs like instant oatmeal. The woman promptly bent over the child with a napkin and was cooing softly when the man lost it. He had been kicking the other foot to get rid of the stuff on that shoe, but instead of snapping off into the lot, a chunk flew up and stuck to his cheek. He twisted and bent over at the same time, spraying the bumper with what looked like a half-gallon of spoiled Irish cream.

Teddy cackled at the poor guy for a bit before Malcolm noticed the smell, like rotten lemons and old buttermilk, as it drifted across the lot. He felt the boiling surge rise from his stomach and leave him as he bent into the bushes by the front door of the restaurant. A moment later a pimply employee that looked to be the same age as Mike came out to ask him if he was okay.

“Here we go,” Teddy said with rising glee.

“I’m fine...just don’t feel well,” Malcolm said, spitting into the mulch around the bushes and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“There’s a bathroom inside, sir; you just can’t stand out here like this,” the kid said, showing a tense expression as he let his gaze fall to the sidewalk.

“Why not?” Teddy asked. “Shouldn’t you be bobbing for fries, anyway?”

Mike told Teddy to chill out.

“You’re right, Axl. He’s just doing his McJob.”

“All right, that’s it,” the employee said and looked up with flattened anger, hot enough to fry an all-beef patty. “If you guys don’t leave, I’m calling the police.”

“Okay, we’re going,” Malcolm said.

“Aw, come on. I’ve always wanted to meet Mayor McCheese,” Teddy taunted.

“That’s it,” the kid said firmly and disappeared inside. Malcolm pulled Teddy toward the car and said he didn’t want any trouble. He saw a wave of wind pulse toward him, showing itself in the leaves of the trees surrounding the parking lot. Then it rolled

away in reverse, a mirror image of its approach. He rubbed his eyes, trying fix them, and started to worry about making it the rest of the way to the park.

When they took their places in the car, Mike announced that he also felt ill just before he leaned out to vomit on the pavement. The sound must have been contagious, like a yawn, because Teddy echoed it. Malcolm was glad to be empty. He looked into the rear-view mirror and saw the man and woman with the sick boy get in the same car and pull away. He watched as it rolled from the lot and onto the street, taking all the ideas he had formed about them with it.

The highway stretched ahead in a long straight stretch. It was autumn and there shouldn't have been heat coming off the road, but Malcolm saw it twist the tractor-trailers in the distance into funhouse shapes. He rubbed his eyes at the sight and began to worry when the dash started giving off the same squiggly distorting vapors, but the temp light wasn't on, so he kept going.

The radio was busted, so Teddy sang "Me and Bobby McGee" in the backseat of the old Chevy as it sputtered through a patch of rain, just enough to warrant turning on the wipers. Mike converted miles to minutes out loud with every passing road sign. He told Malcolm to stop gripping the steering wheel so hard and try to relax. Malcolm felt him continue to stare and knew he shouldn't be driving anymore.

He concentrated to keep his car firmly on track, and had to make an effort to mind the dashed center line, watching it only with the use of his peripheral vision. He found that by staring straight ahead and focusing beyond the actual range of his sight, his

attention fixed to the space of the horizon—the imaginary line joining the earth and sky, he was able to drive without distraction. Although the process required effort, it seemed to prevent the drug from further taking hold.

As they approached the next road sign, Mike read it aloud, “Mohican State Park, ten miles. Let’s see.” He glanced at the speedometer. “At forty miles an hour, that’s...you know what? I don’t care how long it takes anymore. You’re only doing forty?”

Malcolm ignored him and continued to concentrate on the horizon. Teddy grabbed the sides of the front seats and poked his head between them as he said, “I’m *really* feelin’ it now, guys. How ‘bout you?”

Teddy had startled Malcolm, and he jerked. The tires whined briefly as he quickly righted the trajectory of the car. At the sudden movement, Teddy and Mike shouted their mutual surprise, vocalizing their shared emotion in frightened bursts. Malcolm heard them yelp but didn’t break his attention from the path in front of him, beyond him. He felt his arms and legs slowly stiffening and imagined them turning to stone. The feeling gave way to what he knew would soon become panic. He wanted to pull the car over, but the thought of parking alongside the highway while under the influence of this strange and powerful substance frightened him more than the thought of driving, so he kept going.

“What the fuck was that!” Mike shouted as he recovered from the scare.

“Havin’ a hard time moving right now,” he replied, barely opening his mouth to let out the words.

“Oh, shit,” Teddy said.

“There!” Mike shouted. “It’s the next exit.”

Malcolm hadn't seen the sign. "Already?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure of it."

It seemed to Malcolm that Mike had read the previous sign only a fraction of a second before, but found that when he thought about time, the subject was profoundly uninteresting. He felt the muscles in his arms loosen, and hesitantly relaxed his neck and shoulders. He sighed heavily and found himself able to release the visual lock he'd kept on the horizon without fear of complete physical paralysis, and spotted his exit at the last possible moment to slide down the ramp and off the freeway.

Mike and Teddy took deep breaths as the car slowed to a stop at the bottom of the ramp. Malcolm turned right and found that he could drive for a few more miles, although very slowly. He turned into the first gravel lot and parked.

"This stuff is serious," Mike said, with new conviction.

A trail lined with wood chips and edged with rough lumber led into the woods. The wind was warm and brought the smell of dry leaves and dying plants to Malcolm as he leaned against the hood.

Teddy started doing a rain dance in the tall grass.

"I understand why it's religious for some people," Mike said.

"What do you mean?" Malcolm asked.

"Well, everything *looks* more important."

Malcolm agreed that everything around him was intensely different. He turned to open the car door and stopped to stare at the stripes that ran down the side of the rusty Chevette. He was suddenly astounded by the vibrancy of the color scheme. He'd always thought the paint job to be a hideous throwback to the earthy harvest colors that had

dominated 1970s living, but each of the multi-colored stripes now seemed to contain innumerable soft hues of difference. He stared at the colors and noticed the pattern the stripes formed as they lay in a parallel stream. He noticed an essence within the pattern, and saw it again in the pattern as a whole, thus doubling his experience of it. He tried to rationalize what he saw, thinking that this essence lay within only the colors and lines that formed it. As he did, those elements began to pulse softly, then breathe before him, breathing that was only recurring instead of cycling. He felt his consciousness multiply from there.

“Follow me!” Teddy yelled, still rain dancing.

Mike and Malcolm followed him, and the trees arching over the path shimmied as they walked under them. Teddy ran ahead and did cartwheels, his long hair sweeping the ground. He flopped onto the path with the last one. He stood up and bits of bark and dead leaves littered his clothes and hung from his hair. His hands were muddy. He looked at them intently before pressing his fingers against his cheeks and drawing them down his face to leave streaks of earth on his face. “War paint,” he said, then circled his lips and whooped, patting his mouth with his fingers.

The trees were thick on either side of them and covered the hills that rose away from the trail. They hadn’t walked very far, but when Malcolm looked back, the trail narrowed to a point in the distance, lost in the trees. Teddy lay on the ground beside the path under an oak tree, staring up into its branches. Dry leaves rustled beneath him as he stretched to clasp his arms behind his head.

“What are you doing?” Malcolm asked.

“Just looking,” he said and pointed up.

Mike and Malcolm lay down on either side of him, wanting to see.

The oak was old and towered above them. Malcolm stared straight up trying to find what Teddy saw, and its branches seemed woven together, a web of thick wooden lines tangled with leaves. Again he was aware of a pattern while simultaneously aware of its every piece. Its intricacy and interconnection seemed to hum with significance. And he felt as though he left himself and moved into the clouds beyond and above the tree. He blinked and the sky was pink with gray clouds. He blinked again and it was black with blue stars. He closed his eyes to wake up in a dream of women.

He moves through the trees and into a clearing without a sound. The leaves littering the forest floor are gone. He watches a little girl chase fireflies. She scoops her hands through the air with slow determination before quickly cupping them together. She sits on the grass and peers into her hands through a crack between her fingers. The night is vast and still around her. The sound of busy insects working to call their mates is spread through the dark. She flattens her hands near her face and the lemon-lime glow of the firefly pulses in her palm. Her father watches her from the porch of his house as the bug flitters off; she smiles as she watches it go, her face lifting to follow it up. Malcolm kisses her on the forehead as its blinking body is lost in a cloud of its kind, but she thinks his kiss is only her hair tickling her skin and sweeps her bangs to the side.

The man on the porch loosens his suspenders, smokes his pipe. Malcolm moves closer to see what the man is like, and sits on the top step at his feet. Malcolm has seen the man's face in his grandmother's stories. The man's wife brings him hot coffee, and touches his shoulder as he smiles to thank her. His smile is Malcolm's grandmother's

smile, the one she shows when she speaks of her father. The man blows at the steam rising from the mug and disappears.

Near the tree line a fire burns and warms the gypsies that have built it. One of the men plays a guitar, another a violin, another a minor-key accordion; the music tumbles and pops. Women dance and twist their wrists above their shoulders. The one Malcolm loves sings in Romani with closed eyes, longing knits her eyebrows. Her song tells about a lost child, and she clutches at her skirt. It brushes the ground as she sways, her long earrings glittering in the firelight. He leans into her long dark hair and kisses the back of her neck, but she thinks he is only the breeze.

He looks behind, trying to find the little girl chasing fireflies, but she is gone.

Malcolm opened his eyes but was not aware of seeing the world through them. His mind had completely dissociated itself from his body. The idea of himself as a participant in his experience seemed ridiculous and far away. He knew his dream to have been only a flash within him, and he had found within it the raw substance of myth and religion. His only purpose was to contemplate the glory he beheld in all things, infinite and holy. The pattern above him within the branches and leaves of the oak tree now seemed charged with all the meaning and mystery of existence.

He heard the sounds of his friends moving around him but found it extremely difficult to acknowledge anything beyond his own experience, until he heard the sound that signified pain. He sat up to see Mike sitting with his back against the oak tree. His knees were drawn to his chest, and he was rocking slowly, letting out short quiet moans

that seemed to leak from him and drift away into the woods. Teddy was climbing the tree above them and grunting as he pulled himself higher.

“What’s wrong, brother?” Malcolm asked.

“I’m scared.”

“You’re scared?” he said and put his hand on Mike’s shoulder.

“I can feel them all slipping away, everywhere, all over the world. They’re all hurt and drifting off into nothing.”

“Who?”

“I just feel so small, and the world is big and black and I keep shrinking and it just gets bigger. Blacker and bigger every time I breathe and I don’t know what to do. It just won’t stop.”

He began to cry softly and raised his hand to Malcolm’s wrist and held it tight. Malcolm lowered his head and felt Mike’s tears sliding down his forearms as he cried and shook.

“Something’s wrong with me. Something’s *always* been wrong. And that stuff made it come out.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re just upset. Everything’s fine.”

“I can’t do this.”

Malcolm heard pattering in the dry leaves on the other side of the tree. High above his head Teddy tried to piss into the heart of the forest, but the stream fell short of his aim and splattered onto the ground below him as he chuckled. Mike’s tears fell only a few feet away.

Malcolm thought of the way the drug had taken his friends to very different places and envied neither of them.

Malcolm sat beside Mike and thought of what else he could say. He went over candidates for the right words but found none of them suitable to express the serenity that had revealed itself to him. He knew that if he could only communicate its nature to Mike, his fear would evaporate. But words seemed as merely pale indications of what they signified; no matter how expressive, they could never be the things they represented. He was about to tell Mike of his new awareness of the futility of language when he heard the sound of cracking wood from above him.

He looked up in time to see Teddy grab the tree limb above him as the one he'd been standing on wilted toward the ground and hung parallel to the oak's trunk. He dangled high above the forest floor. The sight of his friend in danger brought the part of Malcolm that could never transcend reality to the surface and he shouted for Teddy to hang on.

"I got it, dude. I'm fine!" Teddy yelled down to him. "Just need to get a better grip."

Mike sniffled and looked up to see what had happened as Teddy swung his lower body toward the tree trunk and wrapped his legs around it. Using it to support his weight enabled him to move his hands, one at a time, to another branch. He used it to pull himself to the other side of the tree trunk to a more suitable spot.

"You're going to hurt yourself, Teddy!" Malcolm yelled. "Get down from there!"

"Don't worry. I'm comin' down now."

Mike stopped crying as Teddy made his way down, dropping from the lowest branch and landing on the ground with a firm thump. Malcolm looked from Mike to Teddy and back again, feeling the pressure that had built within him begin to lessen. His friends had escaped the dangers they faced, each unique to the personality of the one it threatened. But he took no comfort in the part he'd played to help them. He realized that he had not been able to sacrifice himself as he thought he always would in such a situation. He had not risked injury by climbing the tree to pull Teddy to safety. He had not embraced Mike to calm him as he trembled and wept. He had not even considered these actions as options, and his awareness of what he had not done troubled him. He sank to the ground feeling hopelessly alone, his best friend only a few feet away.

He felt his consciousness deflate and settle, and looked around to see what had changed. The colors of the world were the same, still vibrant and beyond the English language. The parallel lines he found in a nearby stand of trees still blended to form a pattern that swelled and pulsed. But the sight of it no longer insisted its importance as an inexhaustible theme. Within it there writhed an agonized sense of its separateness from him. And for the first time in his life, Malcolm fully realized that he was trapped in his body. He knew the eternal quality of transience and yearned to escape himself, and in a small and quiet moment of visceral comprehension he understood the nature of prayer.

PART 4 – REASONS

Malcolm thought he knew everything about Mike Abrams. He knew that Mike was allergic to coconut and that his favorite comic book series was *The 'Nam*. He knew that Mike smoked Camels but carried an inhaler charged with Albuterol in case of an asthma attack. He had teased him about the contradiction although he didn't fully understand its significance. When they were freshman, he knew that Mike and Elizabeth Sheets had ditched on the Friday of the first week of class to walk to her house and exchange virginities. He knew Mike didn't believe him when he said he had already lost his. He thought he knew absolutely everything about his best friend...until Mike lay down in his bed on a mid-summer morning, put his father's pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. Afterward, he wasn't sure of anything. Odd things began to feel natural. When he spoke of Mike, he began to lengthen his name to Michael. Part of the name wasn't enough anymore, so he stretched it out the same way Mike's mother had, wanting more than what remained.

A few weeks after Mike's suicide, Malcolm was walking in the city park when he saw Teddy sitting on a bench near the riverside and tearing bread slices into pieces to toss to the geese that had gathered around him. He recognized Teddy from a distance and walked toward him, glad to see someone he associated with Mike.

"Hey, hey! What's up!" Teddy shouted in a singsong voice and stood up, causing most of the geese to scatter. A couple stayed and spread their wings as Malcolm

approached. When he was close enough to grab Teddy's hand and squeeze, the birds hissed and honked. Startled by their sounds, he broke his hand from Teddy's and backed away.

"It's all right, brother," Teddy said and threw a crust of bread toward the birds. They turned to each other to fight over the scrap and seemed to forget about Malcolm, so he sat down on the bench and said, "Those things are creepy."

"Naw, man. They're just survivin'. How 'bout you? How ya holdin' up?"

He looked down and away without saying a word. A boat sped up the river, and little waves slapped the shore after it passed. The gentle breeze that had cooled the sweat on his forehead on the way to the park picked up and changed direction. It blew the nearly empty bread sack beside Teddy to the ground and carried it to the strip of grass separating them from the river, where it tumbled along. Teddy stood up and darted after the plastic bag as the wind surrounded Malcolm with the scents of the river on an exceptionally hot day, dead fish and mud. He looked from the bank in front of him to the other side of the river and imagined the slaves who had swum across it so long ago, seeking freedom. The water was green and brown at the bank but sparkled with glittering white light toward the center of the river.

"What're you thinkin' about, man?" Teddy asked as he carried the plastic sack back to the bench.

"How everything looks better from far away."

"Yeah," he said and scratched his head. "Talked to Beth lately?"

“She calls almost every day.” Malcolm thought Teddy’s questions were vague and seemed more like hints. Teddy had asked how Beth was doing, but instead Malcolm heard him ask why Mike was dead. Mike’s friends expected Malcolm to explain what had happened, and this new responsibility laid heavily upon him. He felt like a suicide note that had not been written. For the first time in his life, he wanted the world to stop.

That desire is familiar to those who can see this word—grief—and remember its miserable embrace as something that slowly loosens over time. But the emptiness of loss was fresh then. He had never seen a dead body before Mike’s funeral, and only had to let his mind wander for the briefest of moments to find the image of Mike’s corpse.

The stitches hid, a tiny row of black specks between his lips, like a line of ants that had all turned sideways. Three small dots of the same black thread held his eyelids together, like sentences held together by ellipses. They weren’t like other closed eyelids, round with the suggestion of something behind them—the body’s new will to relax pulled at them and their absence of eyes gave them a new flatness. The parts of his face were all where they were supposed to be: nose, chin, ears, but they were all puffy and pale. They weren’t the parts of *Mike’s* face anymore. Someone had put a suit on him and cut his hair, but those changes didn’t explain why the body didn’t look like him. Why only his hands were the same. They had been laid together at the middle of his torso, the palm of the right over the place where his heart had been, the palm of the left over the right. They were the same pale and slender fingers that had often been used to hold a book. They were the only parts of him that Malcolm could recognize after Mike’s organs had been harvested for the living.

* * *

When he opened his eyes, he wanted to answer all of Teddy's questions quickly and simply by telling him that Mike was dead because he had wanted to die. Instead, he told Teddy that the pistol Mike had used to end his life was not the first implement he utilized in his attempts to kill himself. Like everyone else who knew Mike, Malcolm had been blind to the pattern that was developing. And after the evidence had piled high and could no longer be dismissed as an accident or a personal experiment gone awry, he hadn't known exactly what to say.

What do you say to a dear, yet suicidal friend—I love you? Don't kill yourself?

Yes. That's exactly what you say, so Malcolm said it. He repeated it like a mantra. He was still saying it.

The first time was with a bottle of Valium that a childhood friend of theirs—a young Lebanese lady named Patty who preferred women to men—had stolen from her mother's medicine cabinet. Malcolm hadn't been there, but Mike told him Patty called with the idea of listening to *The Wall* and eating a few pills to enhance the experience. Mike seemed perfectly candid when he said that he shared Patty's intention initially, but Malcolm sensed something restless within Mike that crawled toward death deliberately and at times in secret from the rest of him.

Mike claimed the overdose was an accident, and Malcolm tried hard to believe him during the month after. While Mr. Abrams was helping Mike fix his car, the man had talked about the sweaty fear that curled in his gut when he saw his only son crashing across the hallway from one wall to the other and back, knocking family photos to the

floor as he tried to walk to the bathroom. After counting, Patty calculated that nearly four hundred milligrams were missing from her mother's translucent amber bottle. Gastric irrigation was followed by a stern lecture from Mike's parents and an appointment to begin counseling.

But Mike did not fit Malcolm's definition of a drug addict. When Mike talked about sneaking off with Mark Rhodes and his girlfriend to smoke a joint for the first time behind the stage at the county fair, he complained about not remembering anything he tried to read when he got home that night, like the page above had simply vanished once he reached the bottom of it and was ready to turn to the next.

His second attempt also employed medication, but the drugs weren't benzos or opiates, or any of the other common drugs of abuse. Malcolm had broken up with his girlfriend, Suzanne, the day before and wanted to hide from her, so he went to visit a friend and brought Mike along. During a trip to the bathroom, Mike emptied the remainder of a bottle of Amitriptyline, an antidepressant, into his stomach. Malcolm's friend's mother later told him that over thirty of the 50mg tablets she took once a day were missing. Whatever the dosage, it was enough to cause what happened after he dropped Mike off at home and started backing out of the driveway as soon as the passenger's door slammed shut, out of habit rather than reason.

A lady traveling to work in the early morning called the sheriff's department to report nearly running over a pale young man with red hair sitting in the middle of the country highway, barefoot, Indian style, ass planted on the double yellow line. The deputies said that when they arrived to handle the situation, Mike had crawled into the

ditch by the road, beneath the branches of a shrub there and started picking off its leaves and eating them one by one while he spoke in an invented language. Gastric irrigation was followed by rehab.

When Malcolm finished listing the details of Mike's previous suicide attempts—the information that would surely show Teddy he wasn't to blame for Mike's death—he looked over to see Teddy carefully dividing the last bits of bread among the geese, as if he were administering communion. He wondered when Teddy had stopped listening. Then he wondered when he had stopped listening to himself.

PART 5 – LIVING UNICORN

After returning home, Mike admitted that rehabilitation had been especially difficult for him and said that it didn't offer the sort of treatment he needed. The group leaders at the clinic taught the patients to count their days of sobriety with pride, to collect them like trophies. But Mike had plenty of sober days to his credit before each suicide attempt, bright and shining dope-free days filled with sourceless misery. Rehab was Mike's parents' effort to save him, but they didn't seem to know from what. They also worked him back into weekly meetings with a local therapist after he came home on the first day of spring in 1992. Mike admitted that he hated therapy but said he liked his therapist. After one of his sessions, he called Malcolm and asked for a ride.

Mike slid into the passenger's seat and asked Malcolm to take him to the bookstore. He wanted to buy a book he had seen on his therapist's bookshelf, *Stranger In A Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein. Malcolm wasn't familiar with the book but was glad to see his friend excited about something for the first time since he'd been home. The local shop was small and had to order the book. It arrived a week later.

Brass bells rattled on a leather strap as Malcolm held the front door open for Mike. He went straight to the service desk where an attractive young woman with dark hair that hung below the counter smiled as he approached. A candle in a jar glowed on the counter between them, and its heavy vanilla mixed with the clean scent of new books.

Malcolm turned to the magazine rack to see Kurt Cobain on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. He'd been scanning an article titled, "Seattle: The New Liverpool," when he looked up to see Mike leaning against the counter on his elbows, his head sank into his shoulders and tilted. The young woman wore a blue smock with the words "Buy The Book" embroidered on the front with green thread. She pushed the candle between them to the side and leaned into her half of the counter. She was smiling and pointing to something inside the book that laid on the counter in front of her. Malcolm walked toward them until he could hear their voices over the Enya album that haunted the store. He spun through a rack of comic books near the counter as he listened.

"He wrote about these before they were ever invented," she said and pointed to the digital fish swimming on her monitor.

"What, computers?" Mike asked.

"No, silly. Screensavers."

"Oh. Cool."

"Yeah, it's right here," she said and flipped to a page. "He calls it a *stereovision tank disguised as an aquarium*. Lots of sci-fi books contain technovelgy."

"What?"

"When an author writes about something before it's invented."

"I didn't know it had a name."

“Now you do,” she said, still smiling. Her green eyes glittered between coal-black lashes as she slid the book into a brown paper bag.

“It was really nice talking to you, Beth,” Mike said, after glancing at her nametag. “You want to get together sometime?”

Malcolm cleared his throat, stifling his envy of the slow and easy manner Mike had slipped into while he spoke to the pretty clerk. She closed her eyes and smiled wider as her cheeks began to glow. “I’d like that, Michael.”

Malcolm rolled his eyes when he heard the seductive whisper she used to stretch out Mike’s full name.

“Hey, my own Valentine Michael Smith,” she said and laughed while writing on what looked like the order form for the book. “You haven’t read it yet. You’ll see. Here’s my number.” She slid the yellow piece of paper across the counter and he dropped it in the bag.

Mike turned toward the door, grinning like a thief, and nodded for Malcolm to follow. Instead, he stood a moment longer, noticing the way this book-slinging brunette watched his friend leave the store. Malcolm’s eyes met hers briefly, so he waved but looked from her to Mike and back. She turned her head, letting her hair hide her face before moving the candle back to its spot on the counter. Then she walked toward a group of customers in the back of the store. Malcolm walked outside and saw Mike leaning against the front glass of the next store.

“I think I’m in love,” Mike said as he put his head back against the glass and slowly slid to the ground.

“Really?”

“Yup.” He rapped the bagged book against the palm of his other hand. “She’s amazing! Did you hear her?”

“Yeah, I heard. She’s really pretty, too.”

The wind picked up as they walked to the car and Mike pushed his head into it. The warm gust split his red hair into a part that showed a crooked line of white scalp. Malcolm’s car was on the other side of an island in the parking lot that held a single dogwood tree beginning to bloom. Mike’s sneakers squished into the softness of the muddy sod surrounding the tree as Malcolm walked around the island, taking pleasure in the solid feel and sound of his boots tapping against the pavement. The wind rose and tightened Mike’s baggy clothes against his thin form but lowered as he slipped the Heinlein book from the bag he carried. He opened it and read aloud, “A competent and self-confident person is incapable of jealousy in anything. Jealousy is invariably a symptom of neurotic insecurity.”

“That part of the story?”

“Nope, the introduction.”

“Your therapist tell you to read that?”

“Not really. It was on a shelf in his office with some other books I like. Just thought it looked interesting.”

“What’s it about?”

“An alien named Mike.”

“Bullshit.”

“Seriously,” he said and flipped the book over and silently read the blurb as he walked around the car. Malcolm unlocked the passenger door after sliding into the driver’s seat. Mike didn’t say much on the way to his house and read while Malcolm drove and listened to the radio.

Gravel crunched beneath the tires as Malcolm turned into the driveway, and Mike looked up for the first time since leaving the strip mall. He let out a long sigh and asked Malcolm if he was coming inside. Malcolm said he was on his way to his grandmother’s for dinner and that he would call him later.

Through the course of their telephone conversations during the following weeks, Malcolm learned enough about the attractive young woman who worked at the bookstore to start calling her Beth. Mike told him that she drove a maroon Ford Escort, thought her feet were too big, did one hundred crunches every morning without exception, and loved waffle fries with ranch dressing. After a month, he watched as Mike’s dad began to adore her and gave his son extra money to take her out, but the two of them spent it on art supplies and went to graveyards to make stone rubbings of headstones. Mike told him about their evenings in the graveyard, saying that the glass of Beth’s Escort fogged up so easily he hadn’t seen the cop coming to the window in time to put on his clothes. He had

been completely naked when he rolled the steamed glass down to answer the flashlight tapping on the other side.

Mike insisted that Malcolm read about Valentine Michael Smith and the Martian concept of knowledge, expressed by the word *grok*, which when literally translated means *to drink*, but can also signify sexual knowledge.

Beth, like many kids of her generation, was raised by and lived with her grandmother. Their house was just on the other end of town from Malcolm's apartment. After she and Mike began to love one another, he spent most of his free time there to be near her. The June heat cooked the cool damp of May into a sticky haze that Malcolm felt in his lungs. He often drove to the east end of town to find Mike and Beth lounging on the picnic table that sat beneath a massive oak tree in the front yard.

Malcolm finished reading the Heinlein book the Monday after graduation, so he drove to Beth's to return it. He cut the Chevette's loud and leaky motor off about ten yards early and coasted the rest of the way. The tall grass surrounding the oak tree rustled beneath the car's low frame as Malcolm stopped the car close enough to hear its stereo from the picnic table.

Mike leaned back against the tabletop with his elbows perched on the edge while Beth sat behind him, her knees below his armpits. The sun was a bright fuzzy dot on each lens of his dark sunglasses. He wore a tank-top that showed the pale skin of his underarms and his pink sunburned shoulders, like strawberry and vanilla lined up in a box of Neapolitan ice cream. Beth looked up from twiddling his bangs around her index

finger and smiled warmly as Malcolm crouched to rest the small of his back against the trunk of the oak tree.

“I read the book,” Malcolm said, holding it by the spine.

“What do you think?” Beth asked.

He told her that it was different and handed the book to Mike.

“Is that all?” he asked.

“It’s weird. I mean, it works as a concept, I guess, grokking and all that...my mom told me there’s a real church based on this stuff.”

“The Church of All Worlds,” Mike clarified.

“Same as in the book, then.”

“Exactly.”

“And the leader is some guy named Raven Wing?”

“*Ravenheart*. His church is interesting because their only sins are hypocrisy and interfering with another human being,” Mike said.

“I think the idea of love and sex being linked to knowledge is fantastic,” Beth said.

“Between two people, sure,” Malcolm replied.

“It’s only two people *at a time* in the book,” Mike said, grinning.

“You know what I mean.”

“What bothers you about it?” Beth asked.

“The thought of sharing...it just seems wrong.”

Mike leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “How can love be wrong?” he asked. Beth climbed down from the top of the picnic table and walked into the house without explanation.

“You don’t believe in the idea of a soul mate, that one person is right for you?”

“But people have many different selves,” Mike said, leaning back against the table. “You’re not the same person now that you were ten years ago, are you? And you’ll be somebody else ten years from now.”

“So, you’re saying that we should just float through life choosing different mates as we go, according to *who we are* at the time?” Malcolm asked.

“That’s what a lot of people end up doing anyway...but I’m just using that as an example. It’s not always about past and present. People are complex and contain different identities. Why isn’t it possible to have multiple relationships and approach each one as an ideal, a unique, singular ideal? Where each part of yourself is given to the lover who is best suited to receive it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because people are jealous.”

“Jealousy is small-minded. It’s possible to love more than one person.”

“Sure, within a family.”

“That’s what *this* is, a family that loves you.”

“Sounds like sport-fucking to me,” Malcolm said and the corner of his mouth twitched slightly, hinting his contempt.

“Try to keep an open mind,” Mike said.

Malcolm had never refused to do anything Mike asked and was trying hard to see his friend’s side of it when he heard the screen door slap shut. He looked up to see Beth carrying two cans of Coke in her right hand, stacked on top of each other, and one in her left. “See the way she’s carrying those sodas? She only has two hands,” Malcolm said.

“Yeah, she has *two* hands. Exactly.”

She set them down on the table, snapped them open and handed one to each of them. “You two still talking about the Ravenhearts?” she asked. “Did you know they made actual unicorns?”

“What!” Malcolm exclaimed, nearly choking on the soda and laughing.

“Yeah,” Mike said. “They bred goats to have a single horn.” He was absolutely serious.

“I saw one when I was a little girl,” Beth said. “My dad took me to the circus before he left...and there was a *living* unicorn, right there in front of me. I remember wanting to pet it.”

“Did you get to,” Malcolm asked. He noticed the expression of longing she wore as she spoke, and he couldn’t stop himself from beginning to believe.

“No. But I *did* see it, so I *know* it was real.”

Malcolm watched her as she closed her eyes with the last word, almost whispering it, and thought of the first time he heard her say his best friend’s name. Mike watched, too. He was pleased and Malcolm sensed his love for her. She only shut her eyes for the briefest fraction of a moment, but it was how Malcolm would always remember her. The moment seemed to stretch into infinity. Her neck was relaxed and her face was turned up so very slightly, showing only a hint of a smile. The brightness of midday found hues of red and amber in the blackness of her hair that parted to show a few delicate freckles dotting the helix of her ear. The sun, filtered by oak leaves, formed a mosaic of shadow and light over her skin that trembled with the wind. In that moment, she was both dark and radiant, enraptured and lost.

PART 6 – AFTER THE PARTY

The days that followed Malcolm's conversation with Mike about the Heinlein book passed quickly. He had three days left to study before taking the ACT and spent his evenings at the library giving himself practice tests and learning how to convert raw scores to scale scores.

Mike's ideas about love and sex had affected Malcolm, and he spent the time when he wasn't studying or reading, thinking about the nature of a relationship between two people in love. The questions were only new in that he hadn't asked them before. And the answers had previously seemed so solid that they nearly negated the questions they answered.

Q: "Why can't you love more than one person romantically?"

A: "Because you just can't..."

Became

A: "It might be possible if..."

During study breaks, he dug for information about the Ravenhearts and discovered that the unicorn Beth had seen when her dad took her to the circus had actually been a goat. He read further and learned that Mike had been wrong when he said they had been bred to produce a single horn. The Ravenhearts found that goats grew single horns after having their horn buds surgically manipulated during their first week of life.

* * *

After he took the test, Malcolm wondered about his scores and thought of his ex-girlfriend, Suzanne. Before leaving for boot camp, she had been an emancipated minor and lived in her own apartment in the next town. Sometimes he stayed with her on weekends. They spent most of their last night together making love while listening to the *Temple of the Dog* album. Afterward, she whispered in his ear and asked him to wake her up with sex in the middle of the night. As he lay beside her, still awake, he thought of Oberon Zell-Ravenheart—how he used to be a guy named Timothy Zell. How, like his best friend, he became obsessed with Heinlein’s ideas and married a woman named Diana Moore, who changed her name to Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart and coined the term “polyamorous.” While Suzanne drifted off to sleep, a pounding erupted from the front door and shook the Ravenhearts from his mind. Naked, he grabbed a pair of jeans from the floor, zipped them with extra care despite the banging, and went to the door to find two men who appeared to be close to his age. Their whiskey breath smelled like pickled gasoline and preceded them. And in the awkward silence between the three of them, Malcolm realized they were equally as surprised to see him.

After reading his ACT score report, he sat and again thought about Suzan, and he realized—something about him had not satisfied her although he had been sure she told the truth when she said she loved him. He had always complained that she seemed like a different person around her friends, like someone he had never met before.

* * *

He didn't know if he began to love Beth because he was powerless to resist her or because Mike encouraged it. Mike would support his personal convictions with the statements he made during the many lengthy conversations they shared. During one, he told Malcolm something he would never forget. He said that evolution had determined the shape of the male sexual organ to serve the purpose of removing the genetic material of males who had deposited theirs recently, and that this proved polyandry to be natural and reinforced by evolution.

Regardless of why he had fallen for Beth, Malcolm remembered when he realized it had happened. Mike's parents had taken a trip to visit relatives out of state, and their son seized the opportunity for mischief.

They invited everyone they knew to the party, and word spread. Cars overflowed into the front yard. The hanging lamp by the front door was smashed when two football players took down the oversized decorative wooden fork and spoon from the kitchen wall and fenced with them. The teenagers didn't end the fight until one of the tines of the fork cracked off and left a huge splinter in one of their shoulders, but Mike had been too drunk to care.

People kept showing up and without enough room in the house, drunk teenagers spilled out onto the lawn. Malcolm had heard that Suzanne left for boot camp two days before but watched her stroll into Mike's house and have a seat on the lap of a dumbfounded Mark Rhodes. She told him she had failed her pregnancy test, and that it was time to start a family. Soon after, things really got out of hand. Mike made a point

not to invite Chad Facemeyer, but he came anyway and didn't leave until he had broken Mark's nose because of the way he looked at him.

After midnight, Mike began to worry that his neighbors might call the sheriff's department, but he could not convince anyone to leave. The insanity relented only when Mark had to be rushed to the hospital after downing bottle after bottle of cheap wine. Everyone huddled around him while Suzanne bent over his body and screamed that he wasn't breathing. No one wanted to stay after that.

Only Mike, Beth, and Malcolm remained to clean up the mess. It was the first and only party they had thrown, and the three of them alternated between fits of laughter and groans of disbelief as they picked up broken glass and filled trash bags with empties. Mike said, "It was a pleasant disaster."

Each member of the crowd that had left the three of them alone to clean the house became Mike's best friend after his suicide and watched his coffin sink into the ground with dry eyes. There wasn't an empty seat at his funeral, but the only time Beth or Malcolm had seen any of the dark-weather friends standing beside Mike while he was alive was during the party. Still, Beth and Malcolm sat amongst them, beside each other in the front row. They felt eyes upon their backs as the minister lectured about the sin of suicide. They learned that most people choose the simplest answer to explain what they do not understand, whether that answer is true or not.

As Malcolm listened to all of Mike's new friends speak of him in the days that followed the funeral, he began to realize that each of them saw himself in Michael.

Although none of them were sure of Malcolm's reasons for suicide, they didn't need to be. Some thought it was because of Beth while others did not. To make that decision, they transplanted themselves into Mike's life and imagined why they would have done it. The reasons were theirs.

The three of them had finished cleaning in and around the house, so they sat under a blanket on the bench in the garden, drinking the last of the unopened cans of beer they found floating in the pool. Beth stooped to smell the flowers around them as they waited for morning, and Mike said his mom had spent hours planting the tulips, orchids, and rosebushes that lined the interior of the surrounding fence. He even gave a little credit to his dad for toiling to lay the bricks that formed the walkway beneath their feet.

The work had sobered him up a little, but Mike's words were slow and garbled, so Beth put his arm over her shoulders and took him into the house to put him to bed. Malcolm tossed his half-empty beer can into a trash bag and felt for his car keys, but then decided to stay and watch the sunrise.

He wasn't surprised when Beth walked back out and sat down beside him, her hip touching his. They watched the sky lighten from ink to ocean without a word, and she rested her head on his shoulder. The stars faded and clouds took shape as he let his cheek slide over the smoothness of her hair. The sun rose behind trees that lined the hills to the east; the light grew and their distant branches separated into the black-fringed edge of the horizon, like the edge of the blanket that covered their feet.

Beth lifted her head and pressed her lips between Malcolm's; the warmth of her mouth seemed to fill him and rush through his flesh in tingling waves. He felt the heat of the morning sun on his cheek and the firm curve of her back as she pressed her breasts against him. She pushed her fingers through his hair and pulled them back, her nails scratching lightly at his scalp. The consonant lilt of hungry birds echoed through the emptiness of the surrounding country as she tugged at his clothes and kissed his neck, pulling him closer as her breath quickened. His heart battered his chest and his muscles tightened and pulsed. They fumbled with their clothes to loosen them and know the seething pleasure of bare skin pressed tight.

After Malcolm and Beth made love, neither of them imagined what would follow. The feeling that grew within Beth, and eventually prompted her to leave Mike, began after she slept with Malcolm—Mike took his life several weeks after she left him. But humor me for a moment when I ask you to compare the last sentence you read with the next one. Beth eventually left Mike and several weeks later, he succeeded in his third suicide attempt. While both sentences are true, they reflect the truth differently. For Malcolm, choosing the truest truth separated guilt from absolution.

Afterward, Malcolm lay his head on Beth's chest and felt the cold metal seat of the bench beneath his flesh as something new. The light pink circle of her nipple—nearly borderless and only visible in the harsh morning light—gradually faded to the tone of her flesh. He felt her heart tap beneath his cheek, from within her, slow and powerful. It was smaller than his, but its sound communicated the strength of its size; soon, he was filled

with its rhythm—out of sync with his own. She held him, lightly stroked his shoulder for a moment, and then sat up. They separated, and he thought of his friend, asleep inside. He was unable to decide if having sex with Beth had been right or wrong.

He watched as she lifted her dress from the ground and slipped it over her head, covering her body—hiding the form he would remember in every future judgment of feminine beauty. Although he was pleased by her, she distracted him. He looked away but was still unable to judge himself. He imagined a man who would quickly decide the matter without second-guessing his decision, a man with confidence. While sure that Mike would not be angry, he was overcome by a feeling of melancholy that he did not understand.

Suddenly it became clear to him that the thoughtful sadness he felt existed because he had allowed his mind to wander to his friend, asleep inside, and away from the man he imagined. He felt a ravenous hunger to become that man through the simple power of his will. He closed his eyes and concentrated, summoning the strength he needed to change, to become more than he was at that moment, more than he had ever been before. He discovered that his strength had always been there, merely lying dormant and waiting to be found. He felt the oppressive gloom that had descended upon him in his moment of indecision begin to melt, and somehow he knew that it was only a matter of time before it vanished completely.

THE OTHER KID IN A CANDY STORE

Pauline was sweeping the front porch of the General Store when she heard the horn of her father's '28 Model A pickup. The two little girls on the corner of the porch had scooped up their jacks and rubber ball when they heard the sound, and the stickball game that had formed in the street dissolved to let the truck through. Pauline returned the smile her father gave as he pulled the truck around the side of the white-washed building.

She went inside and walked behind the counter to get her gloves before going out the side door to help. As her father snapped the door of the Ford shut, the group of children chattered and laughed. He climbed into the back of the truck and grabbed the pick and hammer he used to split the big blocks of ice into smaller pieces that could be carried into the store and placed in the icebox.

The kids knew that Perry made a trip to the icehouse every Saturday morning, and they played outside the store while they waited for him to return. He always gave them the small chips of ice that came off as he broke the blocks apart. The kids told each other it was the next best thing to candy as they stood in line beside the bed of the truck and took turns taking the cool and slippery pieces of ice from his fingers and popping them into their mouths.

Pauline carried the bigger pieces to the icebox inside the store as her father split them off the blocks; she didn't mind the work as long as she had her gloves. Perry had taken them off the shelf and given them to her after she helped for the first time. She hadn't complained about it, but he seemed to know that she didn't like the way the ice had left her hands pink and wet and numb after the job was done.

When the last piece had been placed in the icebox, she shut the door and let out a sigh. She stared at the Coca-Cola sign on the wall, that read “Ice-Cold Sunshine,” and gave it a narrow look. She took her gloves off and placed them back behind the counter before walking outside. Perry parked his truck under the big shade tree by the front porch and shook a wad of tobacco from his package of Mail Pouch. Pauline picked the broom up again and continued to sweep. She liked the way the bristles of the straw broom felt against the floorboards of the porch, so worn and smooth from use that the neighborhood girls always sat there to play jacks because they didn’t have to worry about splinters. When she finished, she looked up to see her father leaning against the front of the truck, watching her work.

“When you gonna teach me how to drive, Daddy?”

“Oh, pretty soon I expect. How old are you now, anyway?”

“Daddy! You know how old I am.”

“That’s right. I nearly forgot you turned *nine* last week.”

“*Daddy!*”

“Well now, sorry ‘bout that, punkin’. What is it then, twenty-two?”

“Daddy, quit messin’ around. You know I’m fifteen.”

“I know, punkin’. Just pullin’ your leg is all,” he said and threw his arm over her shoulders and squeezed gently as he stepped onto the porch. Pauline rested her head against his chest and smelled the Palmolive shave cream he had used earlier that morning.

“I know you’re chompin’ at the bit, just let me think on it some more,” he said.

Pauline knew better than to argue with her father, so she just nodded her head and followed him as he walked inside.

When Pauline was little, there had always been plenty of work to be done at the general store. She was always excited when her mother let her build a display in the front window when it was time to go back to school. She loved the way a clean piece of paper felt, so smooth and perfect, and had always lifted the lids of the crayon boxes to smell them before propping them up in the window. She fondly remembered helping her mother measure and cut fabric when another woman from the village wanted to buy some. Pauline would pull it out straight along the counter and then carefully smooth out all the wrinkles before her mother snipped it free from the roll with her shears. Although it had been several years since her mother died of consumption, Pauline still thought of her every time a customer came into the store with plans of making a new dress. But those times had been growing fewer over the last several years. Her father told her it was because of Black Tuesday and the crash, but she didn't quite understand what had happened to make everyone so poor; she only knew that most of her friends' daddies had lost their jobs.

She was using vinegar and a sheet of newspaper to clean the glass front of the display case when Mr. Thomas came through the front door carrying a list in one hand. With the other, he held the hand of his little girl, Mary. Pauline's father had been kneeling a few feet away from her and scooping peppermint candies into a barrel. As soon as he saw Mr. Thomas, he stood up and smiled and walked over to take the list from his hand. Perry moved around the store gathering the items on the list and placing them on the counter near the cash register while Mr. Thomas trailed him.

While the men worked their way down the list, Mary stood near the counter, in front of the barrels of penny candy and shelves of candy bars. Pauline saw the way Mary stared at the treats and remembered how much she had liked candy when she was Mary's age, so she set down the glass bottle of vinegar and asked her if she wanted a piece.

Mary turned around and smiled. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, sure. Daddy won't mind. Which one do you like?"

"I like *all* of 'em."

"Well, I can only give you a piece, so pick your favorite."

"Can I have a Hershey Bar?"

"I'm not allowed to give those away, but you can have one of anything that's in a barrel."

"Hmm," Mary said and paced slowly before the barrels.

Pauline thought that her father loved candy as much as any kid she knew because he always had a peppermint in his mouth when he wasn't chewing tobacco. After the crash he had made cutbacks to keep the store going, dropping some items completely while narrowing the variety of everything else. Instead of offering thread in every color of the rainbow; now, he only carried black and white. The only area of the store that remained as it had been before the crash was the candy section.

The loose stuff, like gumballs, Tootsie Rolls, and licorice whips, he kept in barrels that lined the wall closest to the counter and sold them by the pound or the piece, but he also had a rack filled with Oh Henry Bars, Snickers, and Squirrel Nut Zippers, to name a few.

After much deliberation, Mary stopped pacing and stood in front of the barrel of sugar-frosted orange slices. As she turned to Pauline, she bit her lower lip and held her eyes open wide enough to make creases in her forehead. “This one?” she asked.

“Sure, that’s fine,” Pauline said and motioned for her to take one.

Mary reached into the barrel and pulled out a piece of the sparkly orange candy. She held it in her hand and looked at it for a moment before she tilted her head and tore it in two, offering one half to Pauline and tossing the other in her mouth.

“No thanks, Mary. I don’t eat candy.”

The little girl’s mouth fell open wide enough for Pauline to see Mary’s teeth marks in the half-eaten orange slice.

“You’re joshin’ me,” Mary said.

“No, really.”

“How come?”

“You really wanna know?”

“Course I do. Who don’t like candy?” Mary said and chewed hers.

“Well, one day when I was about your age, daddy gave me a chocolate bar for helping him clean the store and—”

“What kinda candy bar was it?”

Pauline laughed and said, “It was a Baby Ruth.”

“Those are my favorite,” Mary said and swallowed the orange slice.

“They were mine too.”

“Why don’t you like ‘em no more?”

“That’s what I’m *tryin’* to tell you.”

“Oops.”

“So he gave me a Baby Ruth and I unwrapped it and took a bite and swallowed it.

Guess what I saw when I went for the next bite.”

“What?”

“There was something in my candy bar.”

“Oh yeah? What was it?” she asked and put her hands on her hips.

“A little green worm.”

“Eww.”

“It gets worse.”

“How?”

“It was *half* a worm.”

“Eww! Hey, pa! Pauline just told me she ate a worm!”

“For Pete’s sake,” Mr. Thomas said. “Well, how was it?” He smiled as he stood in front of the counter. Pauline’s father bent over it from behind and wrote in his ledger.

“I didn’t mean to!” Pauline exclaimed. “It was *in* a candy bar.”

“Yup, she got a bad one that time,” Perry said. “Hasn’t eaten candy since. Bet that worm saved me a lot of money.” He looked at Pauline, smiled, and gave her a wink.

Mary turned back to Pauline and mirrored Perry’s smile; then, she scrunched up her face and Pauline guessed she was imagining a worm-filled candy bar. The thought must not have affected her deeply because an instant later she stood up and trolled back and forth over the barrels. She announced the names of each candy as she paced by it, but Pauline tried to ignore her so she could hear what her father and Mr. Thomas were saying.

They were talking quietly, almost whispering, but Pauline could guess what it was about. Every time someone came to the store and left without paying, she'd seen the same kind of discussion happen near the cash register. Her father would always write for awhile on a page in his ledger and then circle something before he spun the book around so the customer could sign.

When they were done looking at the ledger, her father shook Mr. Thomas' hand and walked over to the barrels of candy with a brown paper bag in one hand and a metal scoop in the other. He filled the bag halfway with sugar-frosted orange slices and handed it to Mary, patting her shoulder; she beamed and held the bag to her chest.

"On the house," Perry said and clapped Mr. Thomas on the back. The man turned away from them and left with his daughter, a full paper sack held up by the hand that had come into the store with only a list.

Still sitting on the floor, Pauline looked up at her father and said, "Credit?"

"Yeah, punkin'. He's good for it, though. He'll pay when he can."

"I know, Daddy." She stood up and walked back to the display case to finish cleaning the glass.

As the day passed, customers came and went. Most of them paid cash for the things they took with them, but Pauline's father pulled the ledger out from beneath the counter for a few more families that day. After each man signed, Perry shook his hand and made sure that each of his children left the store with a free bag of candy.

Pauline did not eat a single piece.

PICKING A LOCK

The thing about Holly is that she was *not* my sister. She was younger, and my biological sister is nine years older than me. Something about having an older sister just felt wrong. I don't hate the sister I grew up with, even though she often entertained herself by repeatedly smacking me in the face with my little hand while setting the question, "Why are you hitting yourself?" to the rhythm. I honestly love my sister, although she still denies her presence in some of my earliest and most vivid memories.

I spent the summer between first and second grade returning stray sixteen-ounce glass soda bottles to fill a piggy bank with dimes. I cried when I figured out she had emptied the thing for a carton of Marlboros. It was the first time I felt something empty in my chest because of money. "Malcolm, I never did that," she says, with a smile that reveals her guilt. But this is believable in comparison to the "Nuh-uh!" she gives, with straight-out laughter, unable to form words, when I ask her why she held me over the edge of a bridge by my ankles when I was four.

Holly was just a girl I met at the city park where all the teenagers in my hometown liked to socialize. I can't remember meeting her for the first time. It seems like she was always there, in the background, smiling. But I had to tilt my head and look between the friends circled around me to see her.

I knew she started following me around because she had a crush, and I didn't mind it. It's always nice to be wanted. She was a pretty girl, chocolate-brown eyes and

long dark hair. An early bloomer with a body that is hard for a teenage boy to ignore. But the three years between our ages, fourteen and seventeen, seemed like thirty at the time.

I lived three blocks from the park and the transmission was out in my car, so I would often leave my schoolbooks to see who was driving what and wait for a fight: cheap entertainment in a small town. She was always there before me, and that makes it seem like she was always there. I started to wonder if she ever ate dinner. She wore the same thin denim jacket every night, even into the late autumn. She didn't wear gloves. I don't think she had gloves. But if she had, I would make them mittens when I tell you about her. She was that cute. Adorable. It wasn't long before I started walking her home at curfew. The city cops would show up at eleven and hassle us for being out, and always ask the same thing: if we had parents.

The river flows by First Street, rolling glassy mud on an overcast windy day, black as a witch's scrying mirror at night, smudged with the red, green and white nav lights of passing boats. The barges would hum by and let their horns go low and long, filling the empty street with steel baritone that could be heard for a mile inland in the fall, like the chill in the air conducted the sound.

One evening, as that sound died and the silence returned, Holly playfully punched me on the arm as we walked. "Where do you think they're going?" she asked.

"Um, let's see, Louisville, or maybe Pittsburgh. Yeah, probably Pittsburgh."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Malcolm."

"Sure I do. One of my buddies works on the barge, thirty days on and thirty off."

“Must be nice to get away from here.”

“He always comes back.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“You wouldn’t even come back to see me?” I teased.

She smiled enough to show me I wasn’t that funny and said, “Of course I would. Don’t be silly.”

The five blocks that separated the park from the apartment Holly shared with her mom wasn’t a vast distance. Someone who wanted to cover the ground quickly could probably make the trip in twenty minutes or less. But we would saunter along, somehow knowing that getting home was not nearly as important as the steps taken to get there. We would walk slowly with our eyes at our feet, Holly kicking rocks with her canvas shoes. We stopped in front of the condemned hospital and sat on the low stone wall built around it.

“This is where my sister was born,” I said.

“I didn’t know you had a sister. What’s her name?”

“Jenny. She moved after high school.”

“What’s she like?”

“Well, she’s one tough southpaw.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. She used to save my ass on the playground when I was a kid. When I got bullied.”

“She beat them up, boys?”

“She sure did. I didn’t know whether to be proud of her or ashamed of myself.”

“That’s funny.”

“It was kind of unfair for the boys, though. I mean, what are you supposed do, hit a girl?”

“That does give us an advantage.”

“One time, my brother-in-law came home drunk. He’d just proposed to her like a week before, right?”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, he goes to hug her and she smells this perfume, and she knew it wasn’t hers.”

“What a dumb-ass.”

“Yeah, I know. So she rears back and lands this left hook that pops a hole in his cheek and leaves the diamond from her engagement ring in his mouth.”

“No way. You’re full of it!”

“I swear. It’s true. He even spit it out the window onto the lawn, thinking it was a tooth chip.”

“Now, I know you’re lying.”

“Honest! She made him comb the lawn with a flashlight in his mouth looking for it.”

“Did he find it?”

“Nope. He said he knew he wasn’t going to find it. He just kept looking until she stopped crying and let him come in the house.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because he told me.”

“Well, then I think he’s the liar instead of you.” Holly stood up and waited for me to walk with her. I always avoided stepping on any cracks in the sidewalk. The crumbling pavement in front of the old hospital was the most difficult place to do this.

“Step on a crack, break your mother’s back,” I said.

She mashed her feet purposefully on every one.

“Is she really that bad?”

“Yeah. She really is.”

I knew she was but didn’t want to remind Holly. After our walks we’d make it to their second floor apartment, and she would bang on the door that opened to a set of stairs leading up. When her mom was sober enough, she’d throw down the key from the

window. When she wasn't, Holly would jimmy the lock with a butter knife she left in the mailbox by the door.

"Let's talk about something else," I said.

"Anything."

"What'd you do last weekend?"

"Met some friends at the park and went to a party. Where were you?"

"Visiting relatives. Where was the party?"

"King's Road."

"You have fun?" I asked.

"It was okay."

"Who was there?"

"Me and Jessica, Rebecca and her cousin and a bunch of guys. Chad Facemeyer was there."

"He's nuts. I saw him knock out Mark Rhodes with one punch. Chad's a big boy."

"...and heavy."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm just sayin'."

She shoved her hands deep into her pockets and sighed.

“What happened?” I asked and stepped on a crack, no longer caring.

“We were drinking and...you know.”

“Did he...”

“Not really. I didn’t want to, but...”

“Jesus, Holly. Why didn’t you...”

“It’s not like it was the first time.”

I didn’t say anything for the next block. I tried to rid myself of the mental image, the top-heavy and drunk Chad squashing her, the long straight blond hair from the back of his mullet brushing her neck. But the scene kept repeating. The handful of words she had given me about the weekend before swelled and filled me. I looked up and listened, trying to purge the thought with something, the navy blue sky and near winter stars, the lazy slosh of the river slapping the bank below. But my mind locked on to the images her words hinted because they were real in a way that the others weren’t. I imagined her dark brown eyes, almost black, distant and empty, looking away from the weight of the man on top of her. Waiting for it to end.

I shut my eyes.

“Jesus, Holly,” I said again, “you’ve got to be more careful.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“I know you know, but that’s not good enough.”

“Lay off, Malcolm.”

“You’re fourteen, Holly.”

She gave me an angry glance, her eyelids tight and eyebrows close.

“I know how old I am. You’re not my dad. I don’t even have a dad. Just leave me alone.”

“Holly, don’t.”

I stopped, rattled, but she only walked faster, swinging her arms angrily with her elbows locked tight. She was half a block ahead of me by the time I found my voice, but a barge rolling down the river sounded its horn as I yelled for her to stop. If she did hear me, she didn’t show it.

I knew I was going to go after her before I put my foot forward. A gust of wind rattled the dry leaves in the branches above the sidewalk, and I decided to jog to close the space between us. I saw her cross the street ahead to the next block, her pony tail bouncing and swinging from side to side with each firm step. I was only twenty yards or so behind her when I stepped onto the crosswalk and slowed down.

“Holly, come on! Wait up!”

She turned her head to her shoulder but didn’t stop. I could see the tightness in her expression, lips pressed flat. We’d reached the part of First Street where the riverbank narrowed, too thin for houses on that side of the street. On our side, I could see Williams Tire and the rear of Jake’s Grocery. They were separated and surrounded by vacant lots.

I was about to turn around and walk home when I heard glass shatter and men's voices.

In the dimly lit parking lot behind the grocery store, I could see them leaning against a red Camaro and passing a bottle in a brown paper bag.

One of them walked toward Holly; she was still about ten yards ahead of me. He stood in front of her, blocking her path. The streetlight beyond them outlined his thick upper body, his form swallowing hers. As I came closer, I could see the man's hair, straight and blond, long in the back. It was Chad Facemeyer. I walked faster. He put his hand on her shoulder and she shrugged it off. He grabbed her by both shoulders as the other man walked toward them.

"Let me go, Chad. I'm not in the mood."

"Come on, baby. Don't be that way," he said.

He must not have seen me coming because he didn't look up until I told him to let her go. But after I did, I had his full attention.

"Got a new boyfriend, Holly?" he asked and pushed her to the side. She stumbled but didn't fall.

"Come on, Chad. She's just a kid," I said.

And that was enough. No trash-talk or shoving match. No tentative circling with raised fists. He hit me like lightning. Holly told me later that my eye turned purple before I hit the ground. I rolled onto the pavement between two cars slanted into parking spaces.

He grabbed me by my jacket and thrashed me between them, bouncing my head off the metal roofs of each one. She said he let me go and I slumped into a heap.

Chad kicked me once to make sure, called me a pussy and left, his aggression spent. I heard the streetlamp hum overhead and watched the moths circling the purple glow before the Camaro started and rumbled away. Holly kneeled down beside my head and asked if I was okay.

“Never better.”

“You’re an idiot. He could have killed you.”

“Probably,” I said and moaned, taking a wet red finger from my mouth, “I think he put my tooth through my lip.”

“Let me see.”

I stuck my tongue between my front teeth and upper lip to stretch it out for her and felt the puffiness of the swelling growing there. I turned my head and spat blood, the salty bitter taste lingering and familiar like an old memory.

“I’m okay.”

“You’re not right.”

“Come on. Let’s go. Your mom’s probably worried,” I said and grabbed the top of a tire to pull myself up.

“I doubt that.”

“Well, anyway...”

I didn't need her to hold me up, but I let her leave her arm around my waist on the way. For the last half block, she rested her head on my chest as we walked. Her hair smelled like vanilla and strawberries. My lip was really starting to pound, but it didn't bother me. I was proud.

No one came to the window when she banged on the door that night, but I could hear the muffled sound of the television and see its pale blue light flashing in the upstairs window. Holly used the butter knife to work the latch away from the strikeplate and open the door. It didn't take her long and I could tell she'd done it many times before.

She turned around and plunked the butter knife back into the mailbox.

“Well, I'm in.”

“You're pretty good at that.”

“Yeah. She keeps sayin' she'll make me a key and never does.”

“That's messed up.”

“I know. Listen, thanks for what you did tonight. You want to come in? I can get some ice for your lip.”

“No, it's okay. I better get home. Wish my sister would've been there for that one.”

Holly ignored the joke, stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me and squeezed tightly. I hugged her back and let my chin rest on the top of her head. She

looked up and stood on her toes to kiss me, but I turned my cheek. I told her I was sorry and that it wouldn't be right, but she didn't say anything. She dropped her arms from my waist and went inside.

The next time I saw Holly's face was in the newspaper. Her obituary is the only scrap of her I have left. The faded black type is paired with a picture of her in a cheerleading outfit, one pompom on her hip and one high above her head. Her smile is perfect and what everyone wants to remember.

No matter how hard I try, I can't hold onto Holly as she is in that photograph. Smiling wide and smelling like strawberries and vanilla. The hours we spent walking together in the night slide somewhere out of reach and are replaced by whispers that only took moments to breathe.

The little words that came from the mouths of the kids in the park in hushed voices showed me things I didn't want to see. Such small words: "three men," "stabbed," "screwdriver," and "raped," but so heavy in my ears. The words swelled and filled me. I looked up and listened, and tried to replace the image of a dull and rusty screwdriver piercing smooth soft skin with anything. The black branches of the treetops against the powder blue sky, or the wail of the wind passing through them. The gray glow of the winter sun behind clouds. But those things weren't real.

I shut my eyes.

for Stacy Renee Lucas

PATHÉTIQUE

Cecilia's sleeves dripped; wet consumed her. The rain fell steadily in a gentle breeze on a calm night. Tiny rivulets flowed down her cheeks, joined at her chin and dripped into the edge of the puddle into which she had been staring for hours. She was sure that if she could decipher the code the raindrops created as they fell into the water, all would become clear. She knew there was some greater meaning, some grand order, hidden within the splashes and woven ripples that only seemed chaotic, but the truth would not reveal itself. And so she stared endlessly in search of an answer that would not come.

She did not hear the smack of footsteps on watery pavement that came closer in the early morning, just before dawn.

“Cecilia? What are you doing?”

Her gaze continued to lie on the surface of the muddy water. She was silent.

“Have you been out here all night? Are you okay?”

Cecilia slowly turned to meet Sarah's questioning eyes with her own, put her fingers to her lips and whispered in a slight voice, “I...don't know.”

“Honey, it's going to be fine. Just come with me,” Sarah said and took her by the arm and led her away from the puddle, matching Cecilia's short, labored steps with her own.

* * *

Months earlier Cecilia McKinney, a Catholic girl from a small town, had come to attend Ohio State University as a freshman. It was 1965 and she was eighteen years old. She had dark hair that hung in two braids and bangs that covered her forehead but separated into strands that pointed nicely to her eyes and rounded nose. Her eyes shone sharp and green and were magnified by the glasses in front of them. Her big bright teeth were seldom shown in the smile that creased her upper lip a little to make room for them. She had a habit of tapping her fingers on her lips and her thumb on her chin when she was nervous or trying to compose consonance from dissonant thoughts. She brought existential books to the university and left her rosary at home. She read Kafka and Nietzsche and squinted at the truth. Years later she would read Cixous and Lacan and squint again.

Cecilia's father was a wealthy doctor and had told the staff of the university that she had been an only child and wasn't used to the sort of stimulation that came with excessive social interaction. He had asked for Cecilia to be given a room of her own and had promised a donation for the favor, but she was assigned to a room in Archer House that she shared with three other girls.

Sarah was a Jewish girl from Long Island who pronounced the name of her home as "Lawn Guy-Land" and taught Cecilia about menorahs, kosher, and "Hava Nagila." Mary Ellen was a Tri-Delt pledge who carried a painted paddle to all of her classes. She wore the kind of sweaters that fuzzed from being handled. They were always fuzziest over her breasts. Moe was tall and thin but an athletic girl who played basketball for the

university and was always hanging upside down in the girls' dorm room from a bar and ankle cuffs with hooks. Cecilia, an early-riser, often woke to find her hanging like that and sometimes thought Moe must sleep that way, like a bat.

There were times when Cecilia was in the dorm room with the other girls that she sat on her bed with her arms crossed over her chest and rested her chin on one wrist; she did this while distantly listening to the other girls talk about the guys in their classes, which Beatle they liked best, and the funny way Bob Dylan sang "Like A Rolling Stone." Cecilia thought they chattered aimlessly; instead of pointing their words sharply, they recklessly threw fistfuls of phrases like handfuls of knives at a target, hoping one would find the bull's-eye instead of choosing the sharpest blade and pausing to carefully take aim. The noise made studying in her dorm room difficult. It seemed like every time she opened a book and began to read, the other girls recognized their cue to start chattering.

She was interested only when they talked about boys. Her mind raced and she leaned closer to her roommates as she listened. Cecilia was a virgin and felt that she carried the label like a cross but was rapidly tiring of the splinters it left in her back. She had necked and petted but did not know what exactly came next. During a high school health class, she had been minimally advised concerning sex.

The nun's speech had been so brief that her words seemed to shrink as she spoke, and displayed the woman's opinion of the subject, an obvious distaste approaching repulsion. Cecilia's parents had told her even less than the nun. She had gathered that the excitement she sometimes felt could lead to danger and blood, but she honestly did *not* know how much blood or where it would come from. When Cecilia talked about the

depth of carnal knowledge she had possessed as a very young woman, she would laugh, saying that she used to picture herself naked and bleeding from the ears, barely knowing how ridiculous the image was.

During that same time, though, she felt the small swell of new pride when she thought of herself as coolly intellectual, like Nietzsche, beyond good and evil: someone who knew that God was dead and her Catholic flesh could not be as sinful as the repulsed nun had led her to believe. And as an intellectual, she felt the world to be full of ripe possibility only waiting to be discovered.

Looking for somewhere more comfortable than her dorm room to study, she began to explore the campus, hoping for the peace of mind she might find in the absence of her twittering roommates. She had enjoyed the patient luxury of unlimited intervals in which to plan and execute her next move when she was a member of the chess club at her high school. That memory led her to try the chess club at the university, but it was an unsettling flurry of clacking game pieces and blurred hands slapping timers. She became hopelessly discouraged and uncomfortable in the days that preceded her discovery of the university's music lounge and began to long for home. But once she found the lounge, she sought refuge there daily.

She savored the sensation of sinking into the big plush chairs of the lounge as the books in her lap seemed to push her down. In the center of one wall of the lounge there was an office with a small window and counter that resembled a ticket booth. On the counter was a clipboard that held a request sheet. Cecilia never tired of the same piece and always requested it: Tchaikovsky's sixth symphony, *Pathétique*.

As it began to play, she felt the low woodwinds reach inside of her and pull her down in a primal plummeting. She slipped farther along the tension created by the strings, and sharpened her posture to the ringing of a single horn. One afternoon, in the midst of her silent yet passionate reveling, she noticed a man on the other side of the lounge. He had wild hair that was big and bold. His lower eyelids drooped a bit and made it seem as if he were constantly looking up through eyebrows that curved down. The tip of his nose pointed to a mouth that cornered around a protruding lower lip that hung over a cleft chin. His resemblance to the only portrait she had seen of Beethoven made it difficult not to stare.

Cecilia's eyes were often met by his while she looked up from her books and across the room. This gave her delightful shudders that made the fine hairs on her body prickle, but she liked it best when she looked up to find the man with his eyes closed. While they were closed, his downwardly curved eyebrows lifted like rising crescendos as his body followed the music without intention. Something in his subtle sway told her that he understood the movement of music like no one else she had known.

Only after several weeks did she see the man stand up to leave the lounge. He had always seemed a permanent fixture to her. He was there when she arrived and remained as she left. When he stood, she was surprised to see that he was crippled. From the waist up he was healthy, robust, and proportioned nicely. From the waist down he seemed bent and broken. His walk was awkward and labored. His knees pushed together throughout every pigeon-toed step he accomplished with feet that got little help from the legs attached to them. Cecilia's heart ached with equal amounts of passion and pity as she watched him leave. Her hands hovered over the arms of the chair for a bit before her

fingertips pushed into them slightly, sliding down the soft cushiony fabric. The spine of her hard-backed copy of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* slid between her legs as the covers of the book snapped shut. The final thought of the essay, "We must imagine Sisyphus happy," echoed in her mind.

The next day Cecilia sat on her bed in the room she shared in Archer House. Mary Ellen was chewing gum with her mouth open and making wet smacking sounds that seemed to grow louder with each restless movement of her jaw. Cecilia laid a copy of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* beside her on the bed and watched the book bounce as she squirmed to make herself comfortable. Sarah entered the girls' room, her eyes bright with news. She was smiling. "Cecilia, you have a phone call."

"For me? Who is it?"

"I'm not sure. Some guy asking for you."

Cecilia stood up and walked to the hallway where the telephone for their floor was located.

"Is this Cecilia McKinney?" His syllables were sharpened by a German accent.

"Yes...and this is?"

"Do you remember someone from the music lounge that does not walk like anyone else?"

"How did you find me?"

"You really like Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* don't you?"

Cecilia tapped her upper lip with her index finger. A smile grew on her lips as she realized she had indicated her dormitory on the request sheet in the music lounge. “Yes. I do, very much.”

On the night Dietrich von Weissenborn came to collect Cecilia McKinney for their date, she was calm. Her hands were folded neatly together and lay smoothly in her lap as she waited on a bench in front of her dormitory. When she thought of Dietrich, she remembered the way he had swayed to the music in the lounge. He had seemed beautiful to Cecilia as he reacted to each swell of the orchestra that moved him with its story. She remembered longing to touch him as she watched, wondering what his skin might feel like next to hers. Although she tried not to consider the feelings she’d had when she saw him rise from the chair for the first time, she could not help but remember them, the way she’d been startled by the new language of his body. She tried to eliminate the thoughts of him that cast him as anything less than what he’d been before he rose. She told herself that her surprise had been reactionary rather than rational; therefore, it was unimportant.

Dietrich parked his Chevrolet on the side of the street near the front of Archer House. Cecilia watched the car pull up and recognized the man inside almost immediately. The streetlamps on the other side of the street cast their light in a way that made his silhouette unmistakable. She was sure that no one else had hair like that, curved into curly clouds.

She had never before been on a date with anyone who owned his own car. Together they went to the local premier of *Lawrence of Arabia* and afterward discussed

the unique way that music had been used to bridge the gaps between scenes. They ate lemon meringue pie and drank coffee in a local diner. Eventually Cecilia found the courage to ask Dietrich why he walked the way he did.

He explained that his awkward steps were the result of a childhood mishap that had left him with a spinal injury, the accident, a cliché. His mother had dropped him when he was only an infant. He told Cecilia that he had been born in Germany in 1943, a time when medical attention had been focused almost exclusively on members of the military. The doctors had not given him the care he needed to recover fully. As Dietrich explained the origin of his condition to Cecilia, she nodded in slow dips.

After they finished their pie and coffee and the bill had been paid, Dietrich turned to Cecilia. “Would you like to watch the submarine races with me?” he asked.

“I don’t know what that is,” she said, puzzled and delighted.

“I will show you. Let us go.”

As he drove them to their destination, she was impressed by how well he handled the controls of the vehicle in spite of his condition. She perched on the passenger seat with formal apprehension as he spun the radio dial through crackling splinters of “Wipeout” and “Moon River” before finding the sounds of a symphony familiar to them both. The *Pathétique* poured with rising ease from the car’s stereo and enveloped them both with the little shivers that only the breath of the dead can bring.

He pulled the car onto a drive that branched away from the main road and ended in a small secluded gathering of trees on a bank that overlooked the Olentangy River.

“Where are the submarine races?”

“They are right in front of us.”

“I don’t see them.”

“They are under the water,” he said as he slipped his right arm around her and pulled her cheek nearer to his. He pointed over the softly undulating swells of the flowing water and whispered, “They are always there.”

She stared over the dark water for a moment, feeling lost, before she turned to him; the corners of her mouth perked as she understood the joke. Their eyes met and the muscles in the back of her neck softened. She pushed her chin forward a little and closed her eyes. He ran the fingers of his left hand along her jaw and pushed a dark braid over her shoulder. Their lips met and tangled.

Cecilia fumbled with her hands briefly before sliding them up his back and along his spine to curve them over the tops of his shoulders. She felt as if her cupped hands suspended the rest of her. The orchestra streamed from the stereo and soared in suspended bliss. The music whirled in fluid torrents about them. She was calm at the center of the moment, harmonious, instinctively ready to give and push and take and pull. She moved her hands to cradle his jaw and ran her thumb over his cleft chin. She let them slide down his neck, over his shoulders and down his arms. She was not sure where to put them next and found her fingers catching on the edge of his belt. As she slid them toward the front of his trousers, she felt her forearms touch his legs and her body became cold. Her hands fell limply in her lap and her shoulders sagged. He was startled by her sudden change in posture and asked her what was wrong. She told him that it was nothing, and

asked him to drive her back to her dormitory. Neither of them spoke on the way back to campus.

Cecilia awkwardly told Dietrich goodbye and stepped out of his Chevrolet and into the gentle rain that had begun to fall on the way back. She heard steam hiss as he drove away, splashing a puddle onto the hot engine. She slumped slightly as she heard the sound and looked to Archer House, which was only a short distance away. She wanted nothing more than to climb into bed and hide from the world around her, but Cecilia could not make her feet move toward the dorm. The familiar flutter of anxiety again rose within her as she realized that her body would not respond.

She suddenly imagined that her legs had grown together beneath her skirt. She could feel the tight web of skin tying her thighs to one another. She stood with her knees locked straight, able only to control the movement of her eyes. As she watched waves of air move through the tree tops, she became sure that a veiled message lay within the movement of the leaves: one that would confirm her place and purpose in the world absolutely. She knew that if she could puzzle it out, that message would show her why she had failed to escape the pages of the books she read in the music lounge, why she had frozen when her flesh had pressed against Dietrich's leg. He had been beautiful and real and hers. She had been able to touch him with steady hands and now he was gone.

She saw the raindrops fall from the leaves of the trees as she felt her calves join together with new rubbery skin. She watched a single raindrop slide down one leaf and

fall to the next, rolling down and down in fluid stair steps, until it fell into the pool that began at her feet, feet that she imagined fastened together with flesh.

for Joanne Ford

LESTER'S LAST MELANCHOLY

Lester Stone tried hard to think of the phone number he was about to dial, but his mind began to wander. He stood with the receiver of the old rotary style telephone in his hand and noticed its pleasant heaviness as if he held it for the first time. It felt solid and unfamiliar like the neck of his electric guitar might, a 1964 Gretsch Country Gentleman that had been lying in a dusty case beneath the bed he and Prue had picked out after their honeymoon.

He listened to the sonorous dial tone streaming from the earphone and thought of the times he had felt proud to tell another musician that although a dial tone is actually comprised of two separate notes, the sound they make is close enough to an “F” to tune a guitar. But it had been a long time since Lester rattled off that little ditty and impressed anyone. Cell phones and electric tuners had made the tip nearly obsolete, like the 78 speed records he'd inherited from his dad.

The thought of talking to another musician led to familiar memories of his dad, how he used to play the piano and sing to Lester's mom on weekends, and the way his taste in music had made him seem older than he was. Lester remembered how he rushed home after buying his first record, *Frampton Comes Alive!*, when he was thirteen. He'd only made it through the second track when his dad came home from work and replaced it with a Glenn Miller album. Recently, Lester had begun to understand why his dad listened to big band music in the 1970s, what it was like to feel older than your years. Lester was only forty-five and couldn't remember the number to the shop where his daughter had worked for the last six years, since shortly after his grandson had been born.

The full hour Westminster Chimes began to ring from the mantel clock in the dining room. The sound centered him; he relented and took the phone book from the top of the refrigerator. He knew it was nine o'clock but counted the ending chimes out of habit. He dialed the phone and waited for his daughter's voice.

"Buy the Book, Suzanne speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hey, honey. It's just me. Calling to let you know Oscar seems to be feeling better this morning."

"Oh, thank god, that's such a relief. I was just trying to call you, but it was busy. Can I talk to him?"

"He and your mom went to the park, but they should be back soon. Want me to have him call later?" Lester asked as he took a mug from the cabinet and filled it with coffee.

"That'd be great, dad. Thanks so much for taking him. I just can't stand to leave him with the sitter when he's sick...I hate to ask, but, do you mind keeping him one more night?"

"Well, honey...I, yeah that's okay. You are coming to get him in the morning though?"

"I'm off. I'll be there first thing, promise."

"All right then."

“Well, Dad, I haven’t even counted out the starting cash or anything, I love you,” she said and sang, “See you later, alligator.”

Lester laughed and sang too, “After while, crocodile.”

He listened to the clicking sounds that came from the speaker as they were disconnected and finished the chorus, “Can’t you see you’re in my way now. Don’t you know you cramp my style?” He gently hung up the phone, picked up his mug and tipped some of the coffee into the kitchen sink. He reached into the cabinet to fish out a bottle that was pushed to the back and listened for his wife. He unscrewed the cap and noticed the sweet sting in his nostrils as he hesitated briefly before letting the last of the scotch slither down the neck of the bottle and into his mug. After pushing the bottle down into the trash, he carried his mug to the living room and sat in his chair to read the Sunday paper, still humming the tune.

He was leafing through to find out who had died and who had been picked up for DWI when he heard the hourly chimes start again. The clock had been a wedding present from Prue’s mother. After she died, Prue had moved things around in the house. She inherited her mother’s doll collection and arranged it neatly on a brand new cherry bookcase in the dining room. She moved the clock from the mantel above the fireplace to the top of the bookcase.

Some of the dolls were from her childhood and some had belonged to her mother; she even had two rag dolls that had belonged to her grandmother. Lester thought she started collecting to carry on the tradition or to mourn, but he wasn’t sure. She had even sent one of Suzanne’s baby pictures to a lady who used it to make a porcelain doll that

looked just like their daughter. When Lester remarked about the cost, Prue said that dolls help little girls tell their stories to the world. She was very proud of the collection, but Lester didn't like it. He felt like the dolls stared at him—judged him. Their empty eyes made him certain that they did not like him. As he walked through the dining room one night, the discomfort neared fear and that had surprised him because he never thought of himself as that sort of person—*those* people, the ones he'd seen on television who named it: Coulrophobia or Sesquipedalophobia. Before Prue's mother died, he used to read the paper and drink his coffee at the table, and he missed that. But having the dolls around seemed to make Prue happy—and he didn't want her to try and convince him to appear on an episode of the *Montel Williams Show* dedicated to Pediophobiacs—so he never said a word.

He was thinking about Oscar and separating the funny pages from coupons and grocery store ads when the phone rang; he carried the paper into the kitchen and lifted the receiver from its hook. He didn't recognize the woman's voice at first, so he let her talk while he tried to place the sound. She rambled and Lester listened for clues but wasn't able to picture the face that went with the voice until she laughed.

Bailey Steward had straight blonde hair that she'd always cut to shoulder length and a crooked smile that was almost too big for her face. She had faint dimples that were higher on her face than most he had seen. When she smiled, her lavish cheeks pushed into her eyes and it seemed like she was squinting at something in the distance. When Lester thought of Bailey's smile, he smiled. He planned to meet her after dinner at the Barn Owl. They were laughing their goodbyes when Prue and Oscar came home.

“Hey, Poppy,” the boy said and ran toward the living room.

“No running!” Prue yelled. “Who were you talking to?”

“Hey, buddy-boy!” Lester grabbed him around the chest and swung him in a circle before setting him down and watching him take off again. “Bailey.”

“Bailey who?”

“You remember Bailey Steward.”

“The dyke drummer?”

“She’s not gay, Prue, she’s a bisexual. She doesn’t discriminate.”

She unzipped her jacket and folded it over her arm. “Oh lord, Lester. What did she have to say?”

“She’s in town and just wanted to catch up. Haven’t seen her in years. Should I invite her over for dinner?”

“Oh, hun, I wasn’t going to do anything special tonight. I’m pooped.”

“That’s okay. And I almost forgot, Oscar’s staying again tonight. Your daughter called to ask.”

“And you gave in,” she said and laughed dryly as she went to hang her jacket and keys by the door. “Then I suppose we’re having chicken nuggets or pizza again. Which do you prefer?”

“I don’t care, and I didn’t give in. He’s sick and she had to work late.”

“He’s fine now, been running circles around me all day. She just wants some time alone. I remember what that’s like. Why don’t you take her this,” she said and lifted the newspaper from the counter. “Tell her to find a job with health insurance.”

Lester took the paper from Prue and nodded but had no intention of saying or doing anything that might make his daughter feel inadequate. He knew that she was satisfied with her job and thought she was doing pretty well for a single young mother.

Prue walked into the dining room and began straightening the dolls that lined the bottom two shelves of the cherry bookcase. He watched her work and wondered why she did the things she did—said the things she said. He remembered a time when he didn’t feel like they were an elaborate contradiction—like wrong jigsaw puzzle pieces jammed together by a frustrated child. He remembered when they were young. She had been a film student and an intern for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. They used to sit together and watch old movies with actors and titles he had before only heard of, like Cary Grant in *His Girl Friday*, or Jack Lemmon in *The Apartment*. They had interesting and playful arguments that blended their polemical language. During one quibble about which film best portrayed romantic love, Prue passionately defended James Dean and Natalie Wood in *Rebel Without A Cause* while Lester advocated Nicolas Cage and Laura Dern in *Wild At Heart*. Lester had said that Jim and Judy’s love slipped through their fingers like greasy kid’s stuff while claiming that Lula was dedicated to Sailor in a way that even prison couldn’t destroy.

Lester recalled how the gray and white light had slipped splendidly about Prue’s face as she watched old films, accenting her high cheekbones and clean jaw. He had

loved the way her finest features faded last between scenes when the glow left them alone, together in the dark. But that was a long time ago, before they found out that Prue was pregnant with Suzanne, before Lester's dad had gotten sick. Before they came home to southern Ohio where no one they knew liked to talk about old movies or Gretsch guitars.

Lester had stopped going to the bar after his dad died from cirrhosis. Although Lester didn't slip back into his old habits, he did allow himself to have a drink now and then and came to understand that it was his nature to do so. He hadn't been to the Barn Owl in over fifteen years but as soon as he passed the jukebox by the front door, he could see that nothing had changed, not even the bartender.

Bill drew a draft from the tap, scraped the head off with a metal spatula, and slid the mug down the bar. It stopped in front of the man he aimed for. Below a stuffed moose's head mounted to the rough lumber wall, Bill began to polish glasses with a bright white towel as he talked to his regulars. The way he had filled the mug, like a bartender in a Hemingway story, made Lester feel better; watching Bill work was like stepping into the past. He remembered when he had known the names of all the regulars who called their bartender Whisperin' Bill—although usually behind his back. After all, he probably just assumed that everyone else could hear him, or just didn't realize that his words came out so quiet and muffled, as if he swallowed them before they left his mouth.

Bill hadn't been like most of his male clientele. Sometimes when his girlfriend wasn't watching him work, he would occasionally and quietly make a comment about

one of the ladies. “Look at the shitter on that critter,” he might say. But it had seemed to Lester that he only said things like that to fit in. Bill rarely drank on the job and never harassed the female help when he was reasonably sober, and on the few occasions when Jim Beam put nasty whispers in his mouth, the waitresses never heard what he said.

Lester smiled as he walked toward him and Bill smiled back; he was now missing one of his front teeth. “Well, I’ll be... Look what the cat drug in,” he whispered, “...or let out.” His laugh was more hoarse than Lester remembered. “Ain’t seen you in a coon’s age,” Bill said and dried his hands with a towel. They shook hands over the bar.

“It’s been awhile. How ya been, Bill?”

“Hangin’ in there like a hair in a biscuit. You?”

“Fine, just fine. Stoppin’ by to have a few beers. Bailey’s on her way. You remember her?”

“Can’t say as I do. Bailey?”

“The girl that played drums in my band.”

“When you played here?”

“Yeah, she was with me then.”

Bill stared at the ceiling and scratched his whiskers. “Oh, yeah! I remember. She the one that backed her truck over that deaf feller?”

Lester had forgotten about that. He lowered his head a little and rubbed one of his eyebrows. “Yeah, that’s her.”

Just then, Bailey walked through the front door and shouted, “Lester Stone!” as she walked by the jukebox. In her hand she held one end of a leash that had a mutt that mostly looked like a pit bull on the other end. “Still okay to bring dogs in here?” she asked Bill.

“Long as he’s friendly. Hell, even had a guy bring a duck in here one time.” Bill disappeared behind the bar and came up with a metal bowl.

“Hey, baby!” Lester said and stood to hug her.

Bill filled the bowl with water and set it by Bailey’s barstool where her dog had lain down on the cool tile floor. He smiled at her, walked back behind the bar, and asked, “You wanna mojito?” and laughed.

“Yeah, we were just talking about you when you walked in,” Lester said.

“You were? Beer’s good, Bill. Don’t suppose you have Primo?”

“Is that beer?”

“Been on the island too long. How about Amstel Light?”

“Got Bud Light.”

“That’s fine. So what were you saying about me?”

“Talking about the time you ran over that guy in the parking lot.”

Bailey lowered her head, but Lester could see her smile through the blonde hair that she used to hide it. "It's not funny, fucker," she said and laughed. "Oh, man. I had to pay him six grand. It took forever."

"You're lucky that's all it cost you," Lester said.

Bill polished glasses until all of them sparkled while Bailey and Lester talked to remember the night and put it together one piece at a time. They had been playing a weekend gig near the Fourth of July not long after Lester moved back home and started the band. The Barn Owl didn't pay much, but Bailey had been happy as long as she got her drinks for free. The waitress kept an eye on her as she played to see when to carry a fresh one onto the stage and set it on a wooden cable spool behind Bailey's floor tom. Bailey usually drank beer, but when she came to set up that night she brought a paper bag filled with a bottle of simple syrup, limes, and mint she said she'd grown in her garden. She had to show Bill how to make a mojito, but she only had to show him once.

The Fourth of July was the most profitable holiday for the Barn Owl with the exception of New Year's Eve, so Lester hadn't been surprised to play to a packed house that night. When he walked up to the bar between sets, Bill had said things like, "Must be a full moon," or, "Comin' outta the woodwork," as he struggled to keep up with the crowd. The regulars didn't like having their bar invaded by what they called "hillbillies on welfare" although most of them were usually disabled people with freshly cashed social security checks. The women blamed them for the piss on the toilet seat and just closed their eyes and nodded their heads when Lester asked, "In the ladies' room?" The men didn't seem to need a reason not to like the first-of-the-month-crowd, and would slip

the bartender who helped Bill on weekends a fat tip to “take them out,” which was nothing more than sneaking a double shot of 151 into their mixed drinks.

Bailey usually drank a few beers each set, but that night she nodded to the waitress between nearly every song of the last one, which was their longest and featured ten songs. Lester was busy rolling up cables and breaking down the PA when she decided to back her truck up to the double doors at the front of the bar, so they wouldn't have to carry the equipment as far. Bill had yelled last call at one o'clock like always to run out the rowdy ones while a few of the regulars stayed and waited for him to lock the doors.

One of the guys that had been taken out that night was a deaf-mute. His ID said, “Lee Hinkle” over an address deep in the country. Lee had passed out in the bushes by the front door while he was taking a leak. Bailey's ears had been ringing from playing all night, so she didn't hear him snoring when she stumbled by where he slept. One of the drunks had bashed out the light bulb over the front door because Bill had cut him off, so she didn't see Lee's leg sticking out onto the pavement.

“I can just imagine him waking up to see FORD in big white letters getting bigger as your tailgate rushed toward him,” Lester said to Bailey.

Jeff and Tony were two of the regulars who sat at the bar on either side of Lester and Bailey; they had been listening to the story and scooted their stools closer as it continued.

Bailey talked about the fact that Lee was a deaf-mute and couldn't scream as she slowed to a stop only a few feet away from the front door, one of her rear tires over Lee's shin, pinning his right leg to the pavement. But she didn't know that Lee didn't get to

town much and liked to have a good time when he did, or that he had not expected to get his leg crushed when he decided to spend his check at the Barn Owl. He beat the quarter panel of the truck wildly with his fists and smacked the sole of his left sneaker on the ground. Bailey heard the thumping noise and shouted obscenities after she stumbled around the truck to see what had happened. She had bent down beside Lee before she saw that his pants were undone.

“I couldn’t understand why he’d be smiling at me with a truck on top of his leg.”

“Prob’ly wanted you to touch him,” Bill whispered.

“Maybe you should’ve. Might have gotten off a lot cheaper,” Lester said.

“Shut up, you two,” she said.

“Still had his pants down?” Jeff asked.

“*Oh*, yeah,” she said, her eyes wide. “No underwear either.”

“Bet he had a hell of a time gettin’ his other shoe off,” Bill said.

“He managed. I even tried to help until he started taking off his pants.”

“What about his leg?” Tony said.

“That’s the crazy part,” Lester said and laughed like he hadn’t in years.

“What do you mean?” Jeff said.

“He was taking his pants off so he could get out from under the truck,” she said.

Tony and Jeff just stared at her, waiting to hear the rest.

“His leg was.”

“Damn it, Lester. Let me tell it. I paid six grand for this story,” she yelled. “He had a fake fuckin’ leg. All that came out of the pant leg stuck under my truck was a stump.”

“You’re shittin’ me,” Jeff said.

“I know that guy,” Tony said.

“Scout’s honor,” Bailey told him. “He hopped around the parking lot half-naked until I moved my truck.”

“So why’d it cost you six grand?” Jeff asked.

“Had to buy him a new leg,” she said. “Those things aren’t cheap.”

“Well...I think I did tell you to break a leg before we went on,” Lester said and smiled.

Everyone else moaned and ordered another drink. Bill rang them up and Jeff paid for the whole round before he and Tony got up to play a game of pool. Lester reached down and scratched Bailey’s dog behind the ears.

“What’s his name? How was Hawaii? Lay it on me,” Lester said as the dog looked up at him, wagged his tail and let his tongue hang out the side of his mouth.

“Makani Kahonua. Most excellent, and what do you want to know?”

“Makani Kah-ho-what?”

“Kah-ho-noo-ah,” she said slowly. “It’s Hawaiin for the wind that came suddenly.”

“The wind that came suddenly,” he repeated. “Sounds like something you’d pick.”

“He’s my little poi dog.”

“Poi is like mashed potatoes made from coconuts, right?”

“Lester, you’re so Irish I could drag a potato down your street and catch you,” she said and slapped him on the back. “It’s a staple of the Polynesian diet; it’s made from boiled down kalo root.”

“So why is this kind of dog named after mashed potatoes?” Lester said, smiling.

Bailey sighed. “In Hawaii, that’s what they’re called. The natives used to have dogs that would hang around the village eating the poi they fed them. They believed the dogs were lucky, that they would protect their children. But when the dogs got old enough and fat enough, they ate them.”

“They ate the dogs?”

“Yeah, well, that’s part of why they’re called poi dogs. They don’t eat them anymore.”

“That’s nuts.”

“I don’t know. If he chews up any more of my drum kit, I might just cook him.”

Lester laughed with her but pictured a little pineapple glazed dog on a silver serving tray with an apple in his mouth.

“Don’t eat him, Bailey. He sounds like he’s a good friend.”

“Yeah, he is. And so are you, Lester. I miss playing music with you. We should get the band back together.”

Lester nodded at the suggestion and drank his beer. “I don’t know. Everything kind of fell apart after you left. It wasn’t your fault; we got another drummer, but other stuff happened.”

“Like what?”

“Greg got all strung out on pain pills. It got so bad he couldn’t even tune his bass.”

“Jesus.”

“And Mark fucked Harvey’s wife; she divorced him.”

“I never really liked Mark. God, poor Harvey.”

“He died after they split up. Something to do with his diabetes. Didn’t find his body for days, after he didn’t show up for work.”

“That’s awful. I had no idea.”

“You’ve been gone for a long time, Bailey. It’s been ten years since Harvey died. I didn’t even know who you were when you called today.”

She didn't say anything for a few minutes. Then she let her head drop to the bar and let out a long growl.

"What's wrong?"

"I left Denise."

"That why you're back?"

"I didn't know where else to go."

"What happened?"

"I came home one night and she was screwing one of the guys I worked with. Fuckin' bitch...that asshole! God, both of them!"

"That's cold, Bailey."

"That fucker!" she yelled. Tony and Jeff looked up from the pool table. She smiled and quietly said, "I did take off my boot and beat the hell out of him with it."

"You what?" Lester said and tried not to laugh. "Where?"

"Mostly on his back; he tried to curl up. God, I wanted to kill him. What's wrong with me?"

"No, I meant in the bedroom or what?"

"Hell yeah! Soon as I caught them. Beat him all the way out the door. Didn't even give him his clothes."

“Bet that was awkward at work the next day. You sure have a knack at ending up in strange situations with naked men.”

She just laughed. Lester ordered another beer and Bailey switched to liquor. He asked her where she planned on staying and she said her sister was coming to pick her up at closing time. Before long, she was drunk and telling dirty jokes to Bill. “What do a nine-volt battery and a woman’s asshole have in common?” she asked him.

Bill shrugged.

“No matter how much you know you shouldn’t, eventually, you will put your tongue on it.”

Lester listened to Jeff, Tony and Bill laugh at the punch line and remembered how much he disliked Bailey when she was drunk. After a few shots, she started talking about her sex life and saying things about her girlfriends that made him blush. He thought that if a straight person spoke that crassly about sex in public, the people listening would find it disgusting and crude. But when Bailey did it, people didn’t say anything. Lester thought it must be because they didn’t want to be called homophobic.

Lester thought about Oscar and looked at the bar clock to check the time, but it was at the other end of the bar and he’d left his glasses at home. He checked his watch and saw that it was after nine. He pulled a five-dollar bill from his wallet, set his mug on top of it, and walked toward the pool table where Bailey was cackling on wobbly legs and shooting pool with the guys. As he walked up to her to tell her he was leaving, he noticed the glassy dullness of her eyes; they reminded him of the expressionless eyes of the dolls that lined Prue’s bookcase.

“I hate to, but I got to get going, Bailey.”

She seemed stunned. “So soon?”

“Yeah, Oscar’s sick. Prue’s watching him, and I should go help.”

“Who’s Oscar?”

Lester knew that Bailey didn’t know about Oscar—Suzanne hadn’t even started school the last time he’d seen her—but her ignorance of his existence suddenly felt unforgivable.

“He’s my grandson.”

“What? You’re a fucking grandpa, Lester?” she said, slurring her words together.

“Yup. You’ll have to come meet the family sometime,” he said and hoped it would never happen. He looked

“We’ll do that, babe,” she said and hugged him.

Her breath was sour and musty and reminded him of Oscar vomiting on his shoes when he and Prue had met Suzanne to pick him up. He held his breath and patted her back. He told everyone to take care, scratched Makani behind his ears, and walked outside—back into the present. It was the last time Lester spoke to Bailey Steward.

The sky seemed bigger than it ever had; the stars were brighter than the last time he looked. A bright halo of light circled the moon, and he remembered his dad telling him it meant bad weather was coming. He started to count the stars inside the ring, but stopped to admire its beauty and stared at it for a long time before he went home.

* * *

“How was it?” Prue asked as he walked into the living room. She was sitting on the couch scrapbooking some new photos of Oscar.

“Okay, I guess. She hasn’t changed a bit. Glad to be home.”

“Hmm. Well, you know how she is. I don’t understand why you insist on giving people like that the benefit of the doubt.”

“Me neither, hun. Where’s Oscar?”

“He’s in the bathroom. Said he had to poop. I was just going to go get him ready for bed.”

“Maybe I’ll take a half-day off,” Lester said as he walked to the refrigerator and pulled a bottle of beer from the crisper. “We should get up and go out for breakfast in the morning, all three of us. Some blueberry pancakes. Those were my favorite when I was a kid. Maybe go to the park and take some new pictures of Oscar for your scrapbook.”

He was rummaging through a drawer looking for the bottle-opener when he heard the scream.

“What the hell was that, Prue?”

“Oscar,” they said in unison.

Lester was closer to the bathroom; his eyes were the first to see Oscar’s stiffened fingers pushing white goop from his face and slapping it into the bathroom sink in splattery globs.

“It burns!” the boy cried.

“What were you doing?” Lester asked.

“Oh my god,” Prue mumbled while wetting a washcloth in the tub.

“Just shaving,” Oscar said in a small voice.

Lester watched the child scrape the stuff from his face while Prue tried to get in between Oscar’s cheeks and hands with the damp cloth. When Lester reached to run water in the sink, he noticed the mashed tube of Crest on the counter. Its capless top oozed a white toothpaste snake into a coil.

“Is this what you were shaving with?” Lester asked.

“Yeah,” Oscar said, looking at Lester through tears.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you cleaned up,” Lester said. “It burned your skin?”

“Yeah,” the boy said, rubbing the cheek Prue wasn’t wiping.

Lester continued to console Oscar, ending each statement in a question with “okay?” until he sniffled less and nodded in agreement. Prue swabbed Oscar’s face until the strong smell of mint melted to the sweet clean aroma of steamy soap. Prue said it was bath time, and Oscar didn’t fight, his normally pale cheeks irritated and flushed. Lester felt beads of moisture form and slide down his chest and into the cotton t-shirt that touched his stomach. Fog crept along the mirror and turned the polished glass to rough quartz. He left the bathroom and felt the chill of warm air on wet skin. He returned to the kitchen to get the beer he’d left on the counter; the bottle was wet with condensation that

slid down its sides forming a ring of water that made a plopping sound as he lifted the bottle to his lips.

He took a long drink as if trying to swallow the entire day and thought about Oscar and Suzanne and the boy's father who was gone. He tried to remember what it was like to be a little boy and thought of the times he'd seen his dad using grandpa's double-edged safety razor. He remembered the smell of his dad's shaving cream, eucalyptus and menthol. He used to watch his dad shave on the weekends when he was a boy, and one Saturday morning his dad took the blade out of the handle and let him try. He remembered the feel of the shaving brush on his face as his dad lathered him up and told him the bristles of the brush were badger hair.

Lester walked into the half-bathroom by the guest room and lifted his dad's shaving brush from out of its mug. He ran the bristles over his face in slow circles for a little while before putting it back. He felt a bit lightheaded from all the beer he'd had and held onto the doorframe, waiting for the feeling to pass. He decided he was drunk and worried that he might smell like Bailey had when he left the bar, so he ripped the toothbrush they kept for guests from its package and squeezed some toothpaste onto its bristles. As he finished brushing his teeth, he thought about Oscar and noticed that the foam on his lips didn't bother him as he wiped it away. So he squeezed a glob of toothpaste from the tube, enough to fill his left palm, and rubbed his hands together. He laughed a little at his reflection while he covered his whiskers with Crest—but he was curious, so he made sure to spread it all over, just like he was shaving.

He turned on the water and washed the toothpaste from his hands. He watched himself in the mirror and his face tingled a bit; the vapors from the stuff smelled like cough drops and made his eyes water, but that was all. He pushed the tip of his nose up and thought about trimming his nose hairs. Then he pushed the top of his right ear down to see if the single black hair that had lately been sprouting out of it—seemingly overnight—had grown back.

He had been pinching the fat over his stomach and thinking about renewing his gym membership when he suddenly felt a different kind of burn. It wasn't like fire, but it was very unpleasant. And the longer he let the toothpaste soak into his skin, the more irritating it became. He wet the towel hanging from the rack and quickly wiped the stuff from his face.

He thought about how everything is different for a child and tried to imagine how the burning sensation felt on Oscar's six-year-old skin. He laid the toothpaste tube beside his dad's razor and brush and turned out the light.

He carried his beer to the living room and took a drink, hating how it tasted after he brushed his teeth. He flipped on the old television, sank into his chair, and fell asleep.

When Lester woke up, he felt the flashy sting of television cartoons in his eyes. He glanced, winced, and then squinted to see Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd in "What's Opera Doc?" Thinking he must have slept through the night, he parted the curtains behind the couch and saw that it was still dark outside. His wristwatch pointed to ten, and he thought about how cartoons were only broadcast on Saturday mornings when he was

kid. As Elmer belted, “Kill da wabbit,” to the tune of Wagner’s “Flight of the Valkyries,” Lester noticed Oscar sitting on the floor in front of him. His legs were tucked under him so that his butt rested on his feet. His two big toes touched one another while his heels pointed away. His other toes were little pink circles underneath his feet. His hand-me-down blue pajamas were worn and fuzzed. His normally sandy hair was sable and wet and streaked with comb marks. From across the room, Lester breathed the scent the shampoo left in Oscar’s hair.

Lester looked around the living room for Prue and rubbed his eyes. He took a drink of his beer, but it was warm and awful. He got up to get a cold one and touched his cheek, tender and a little sore from his experiment. He was walking through the dining room when he noticed the placement of the dolls. Half of them had been turned around to face the back of the bookcase, the ones that sat on the four lowest shelves. He looked back to see Oscar sitting motionlessly, watching TV. Lester walked back into the living room, forgetting that he’d wanted another drink.

“Hey Oscar...buddy...” he whispered.

Oscar turned to face him.

“What did you do?” Lester asked.

“I made them look away,” he said and stood up, smiled, and hugged Lester’s leg.

“I don’t like how they look at me.”

Lester reached down to ruffle the boy’s hair and rubbed his back. “Yeah, me neither, buddy-boy, me neither.”

What Oscar had done made Lester think of the time he'd used a plate from his mom's china cabinet for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and how upset she'd been to find it in the kitchen sink. He started to tell Oscar that story but stopped when the boy looked up at him. Lester's thoughts shifted toward the future.

“Am I in trouble, poppy?”

“No way, buddy-boy. Come on, let's go to bed. We'll turn the rest of them around in the morning. What do you want to do after that?”

for Harold Rucker

“He tried to banish the memory of the sewer
from his mind, but the more he tried,
the more he thought of it so that
at one point he felt the urge
to run to the sewer and
jump into it again.
But he was wearing a brand-new suit today.”
—Chaudhry Shaukat Ali, “The Open Sewer”

STAYING CLEAN

James Fritz had barely gotten the double-knots of his laces undone when he noticed a small black spot of tar on the end of his nose. He had to cross his eyes to see it, but it was there, so he pushed his work boots off with his toes and went to the bathroom mirror to scrape the spot off with his fingernail. Afterward, he wondered why he had bothered; the stuff practically covered him.

He walked out of the bathroom to his motel-room door, fastened the chain and threw the latch. He arched his back and pulled in a deep breath to get rid of the workday that still clung to him like the little chunks of asphalt peppering his jeans. He changed his mind, undid the locks, and walked outside his motel room with only socks on his feet—he felt the chill of the concrete through them. He looked toward the setting sun and it seemed very far away; his eyes hardened under the clenched muscles of his brow. He stood for a time, watching the bright white spot slip deeper into the black slivers of empty trees on the horizon, and his face shadowed his resolve to resist the temptation he had succumbed to the night before.

* * *

He was Jimmy to his wife and her two children, from the man before, but he had been Bub to his cellmates during a stretch in Ross Correctional Institution. The children had laughed his name in the language of childhood on the day he'd brought them two Boxer pups, one for each of them, to teach them responsibility. He had smiled as he watched the children play with them. The pups were abandoned by their mother, and the children's love for them reflected his love for the children.

Before finding his new family, he had gone to prison for a crime he told everyone he couldn't remember committing. After they extradited him from Florida, he'd told the judge that he wasn't interested in the stuff of that man's world: lawyers, paperwork and due process. He only wanted to rest. "If you're gonna send me up, just do it. Get me the hell outta this goddamn county jail!" he'd yelled at the judge when he finally got to court.

His say concerning his fate gave the judge a jolt that his coffee hadn't been able to on that Monday morning. The judge wasted no time in telling him that his accommodations would be altered, post-haste, per his request. Two days later he was transferred. He spent the van ride up the Ohio river with his hands and ankles shackled, and it reminded him of the flight up from Florida. They stopped once for a bathroom break, and the guard held the barrel of a twelve-gauge shotgun to the back of his neck while he pissed into the rest area urinal. He told the next guard he saw, the one who processed him into Ross, that the trip had been scenic and a nice change of pace.

"I felt like a dandelion puff floatin' on a summer breeze," he told the man, "Havin' commissary'll be like layin' back in a cloud of titties." He smiled as he said the

last bit, showing a left front tooth that never made it in all the way, and had become a sort of greenish-pearl color with slow rot, his other teeth, healthy and clean.

On his way into the prison, he'd weighed one hundred and twenty-six pounds, all that was left of him after months of intravenous heroin, then bourbon when it ran out. His skin was dirty alabaster, like a fresh corpse, only pink around the corners of his mouth, the flesh around his nostrils, and his eyelids beneath the lower lashes.

On his way out of the prison, a little over a year later, he'd weighed one hundred and seventy-eight pounds, and it suited his five-foot-eleven frame. The pallor of his skin made a fine canvas for his many dark freckles, reddish blond hair, and the tattoos he had recently acquired—flames carved from black ink, that seemed strikingly real, on one forearm, and a collection of skulls and spider webs that varied in spatial association on the other; they nearly covered the track marks that had turned to scar tissue.

All through the long days he spent working for the asphalt company, he picked bits of the sticky black stuff from his arms; wincing as the long blond hairs on his forearms would come out by the roots with the tacky chunks as he pulled them free. He sat on the edge of the bed, looking at the dark little bits that littered his entire body. He hated the work, but he was an ex-con with no qualifications, and it had been easy to come by. Charlie, with whom he had become friends while serving his last sentence, had called to tell him about the job the day after the wedding. His new wife wanted a better place to live for the children and he thought honest work might keep him out of jail, so he took it.

He scratched the back of his neck and decided that the energy necessary to take a shower would be worth exerting. Afterward, he dried himself with a small white towel, scratchy enough to seem starched and stopped to write his wife's name with his finger in the steam on the mirror: Hope. He pulled the boxers he'd been wearing before back on and saw that asphalt still hung from the hair on his shins. The soap and hot water had shrunk the black stains on his fingers, but the blotches were still tacky enough to feel. Too tired to bother with taking another shower or toothpaste and deodorant, he stumbled back to the mattress, firmer than what he had at home, empty without the smell of his wife.

He hadn't slept much the night before. The crew had finished the job early, and Rudy, his boss, didn't want to start the next one in the middle of the afternoon. He told Rudy that he was going straight to his room, that he was tired. Six tens added up quickly, but the overtime made for a nice paycheck, and Hope wanted to make a down-payment on the mobile home they'd looked at the weekend before. It was Wednesday night and all he wanted to do was scrub as much of the asphalt away as he could and sleep. He went back to his room and made a dry sandwich from the cold cuts he had in the mini-fridge and the loaf of white bread on top of it. After he ate, he sat watching TV for a time before getting into the shower. He had been rubbing his short and home-cut hair dry with one of the motel's scratchy, musty-smelling towels when a knock shook the chain on the door.

He jerked on the grimy jeans he'd worn while shoveling hot blacktop into cracked pavement all day. The cuffs of them were nearly solid black with the stuff and a

petroleum smell—now noticeable after his time in the shower—rose from them as he zipped the fly. Through the door, he saw Charlie's face, made convex by the peephole, sure with mischief. Charlie's wide smile, missing a front tooth, always brought those who saw it to the steadfast conclusion that he was headed for trouble and having fun on the way.

"Let's go to the titty bar, Bub," Charlie said loudly without waiting for the door to open. The latches and chain clacked and rattled. He opened the door and stood in the doorway with one hand on the knob and his forearm on the doorframe for balance. "Shit, man. You know I can't. Besides, I give my paychecks to Hope."

"Relax, man. We got plenty of work here. Prob'ly last all the way till we shut down for the winter and start collectin' unemployment."

"Yeah, man, but that ain't far off. I'm gonna lay down."

"At four o'clock in the afternoon? Don't be such a pussy. Besides, I got somethin' you'll be interested in."

"And what's that?"

Charlie pulled two small, knotted red balloons from his front pocket and smiled wickedly.

"No way, man. You fuckin' know I can't be around that stuff. Jesus, Charlie!"

"Aw, come on, Bub. It ain't like it's around all the time. I was at that little joint around the corner and lucked out."

"Man, I just can't. I'll see you tomorrow."

“All right, then. You know where I’m goin’. Call me if you change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

He let the motel-room door pull itself shut and heard the sound of Charlie’s boots on the concrete getting quieter as he walked away. He sat at the end of bed with his forearms on his thighs and felt the tar ground into the fabric sticking to his skin. He thought about the heroin in Charlie’s pocket and his head sank to his hands as a wave of remembered pleasure coursed through him. He remembered the blissful apathy that came after the pinch of the injection and craved it fiercely. He stood up and walked to the phone, held the receiver by his ear briefly, and then slammed it back hard enough to hear the bell inside.

He had been a heroin addict for nearly all of his adult life, or as his last counselor had put it, “a human being struggling with addiction.” All of the time he had spent in prison had been given to him as punishment for the crimes he committed to feed his addiction. He stood staring at the telephone and fingering a knot that had formed in the crook of his left arm from repeated punctures. He remembered stealing insulin syringes from his grandmother and lying when she asked where they were. He tasted the familiar fruity-medicine flavor of methadone in his mouth. He felt the adrenaline that had come while stealing a plasma TV and hearing a key slide into the lock on the front door. A picture of the little red balloons in Charlie’s palm flashed in his mind, and it seemed like he saw, felt, tasted and heard everything from his life that had gone with them. It all came rushing back in Technicolor, and he shut his eyes tight trying to make the thoughts go away. But the more he tried not to think about the drug, the more vivid his memories of it

became. He wanted to give in and call Charlie, but he knew that Hope would be heartbroken and angry if he slipped back into his old habits. Still, the thoughts of the drug would not dissipate, so he tried to replace them.

He grabbed the remote control and sat at the head of the bed as he clicked on the TV. He saw Ben Stiller looking into a rearview mirror in *Permanent Midnight* and thrusting a hypodermic needle into his neck. His mouth tightened as he squeezed hard on the remote and flipped to the Travel Channel. An episode of *No Reservations* showed Anthony Bourdain eating chicken and waffles with Jerry Stahl. He flipped again: *Trainspotting* and “The filthiest toilet in all of Scotland.” He changed the channel again and saw Oprah Winfrey talking to a family of four via-satellite. “No triggers here,” he said. But as he watched, he learned the reason the Hawks family gave for staying in Richland County, Ohio instead of appearing in person: none of them (except for the fifteen-month-old baby) could go without heroin long enough to make the trip to Chicago. He screamed and threw the remote at the screen of the TV, which did not shut off. He banged the back of his head against the headboard and ground his teeth before taking a deep breath and calmly standing up. He walked to the TV and pressed the power button. “There,” he said with authority and walked back to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress.

He looked at the clock-radio and flipped the switch to FM: static. He rolled the dial until he heard music: “The Needle and the Damage Done.” He recognized it and cursed but the song was ending, so he let it play. The next song, “Casey Jones,” wasn’t about heroin, but it made him think of his mom crying after Jerry Garcia died from an overdose. He quickly scrolled through more static and stopped when he heard the upbeat

tones of a synthesizer. “Eighties music,” he said with relief but continued to think about the cocaine reference in the Grateful Dead song. “At least that’s not an issue.” He let the song play and he was glad to hear it although he had been born during the 1980s and had no attachment to the music of that time. He walked into the bathroom and the cheerful corniness of the synthesizer continued. He felt lighter and bobbed his head to sounds of a slapped bass and leaned toward the mirror. The singer joined in and he ignored her lyrics until he heard, “Everyone’s a Captain Kirk,” and smiled at the thought of William Shatner’s advertising career and began to think about the new Star Trek movie. He was thinking of taking Hope to see it during the following weekend when he heard, “Scramble in the summer sky, ninety-nine red balloons go by,” and broke the mirror with his fist.

He ran to the clock-radio and tried to rip its cord from the wall so he could throw it. But the thing was mounted to the nightstand, so he pulled the Bible from the drawer below and beat the clock-radio with it. Bits of plastic flew as he bashed it, but Nena continued to taunt him with her big finish. He yelled, “It’s fuckin’ everywhere!” and slammed into it with more force on every stroke until the bright red numbers showing the time faded and disappeared. He sat down on the bed, breathing hard, his knuckles bleeding from thrusting them into the bathroom mirror, and thought about the bill for damages the company would receive after he checked out. The thought of his boss finding out was too much. He slipped his calling card from his wallet and picked up the telephone receiver. He scratched bits of tar from his pants as he waited for Charlie to answer his cell-phone.

* * *

“Man, I swear to fuckin’ God, no matter how hard I try...” He slouched for a moment, looking at the floor, before he stood up straight, cocked his head back and put his open hands beside each shoulder, the start to his best Pacino impression, “Just when I thought I was out...they pull me back in.”

“You’re fuckin’ crazy, Bub. What happened to your alarm clock?” Charlie asked.

“You did.”

Charlie gave him a confused look and bounced a little on the second bed in the room as he dug a red balloon from his pocket. “You ready to party?”

“How much?”

“Forty.”

“Forty bucks! That’s highway robbery.”

Charlie had given the man at the tavern fifteen.

“You want it or not?”

“Fuck it,” he said and pulled cash from his pocket: two twenties and two one-dollar bills. He handed the twenties to Charlie and crumpled the rest, shoving the wad back into his pocket.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, bro. It ain’t like you do it all the time,” Charlie said and tore the balloon open with his teeth.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“How long’s it been, anyway?” he asked as he smeared a tiny glob of black tar from the inside of the balloon onto a spoon he pulled from a Crown Royal bag.

“Since I met Hope after I got out. She’s the one helped me quit.”

“Don’t worry. She’ll never know.”

“Yeah, I know, man. But four months and eighteen days. God...you don’t remember me comin’ to work pukin’ that Monday morning?”

“Sure, I remember. Thought you were gonna die.” He popped off the orange cap of an insulin syringe and drew water from a motel-room glass. “Hey man,” Charlie said and looked up at Bub with a serious expression. “Relapse is part of recovery.” With the last word, his serious tone crumbled into laughter.

“So what’s Rudy’s fuckin’ problem today? You believe he was actin’ like that?”

“Man, he’s always got a stick up his ass,” Charlie said. He screwed up his face, pushed his eyebrows down hard, and with a twang exaggerated beyond his own said, “I don’t understand why you fellas is all the time complainin’. *I* gotta eat too, you know.”

“You sound *just* like him.” He smiled, wide enough for his halfway-there tooth to show.

“He’s a dick. If he didn’t have this piece-of-shit operation to run, Mrs. Rudy would have him plantin’ fuckin’ flower gardens all day,” Charlie said and slowly waved the flame of a cigarette lighter back and forth beneath the spoon. The chunk of black tar

slowly dissolved into the water. The amber liquid boiled and sizzled against the hot metal. He set the spoon down on the nightstand and pulled the cotton from a cigarette filter with his teeth. He pulled a section of it from the rest and rolled it between his finger and thumb, forming a little ball that he dropped into the spoon. It swelled and turned yellow as it soaked up the liquid. He filled the syringe after pressing the needle into the cotton. “Here you go, Bub. Enjoy.”

Bub slipped his belt from around his waist and sat across from Charlie on the other bed. He used the belt as a tourniquet and pumped his fist. He slipped the needle into his vein and pulled the plunger of the syringe out a fraction of an inch. His blood burst into the plastic tube in a liquid cloud that looked like suspended smoke and brought back many memories. A picture of Hope’s face, delicate and perfect, formed in his mind and he pushed it, and the plunger of the syringe, down. The old familiar feeling spread through him as he let one end of the belt fall from between his teeth and fell back on the mattress. Charlie reached over and pulled the syringe from his arm. Blood rose to Bub’s skin and pooled in the spot where the needle came out and trickled down his forearm, over the tattooed flames of black ink and onto the bedspread. Charlie cleaned the syringe with water from the motel-glass and watched Bub bleed.

“Better take care of that,” Charlie said.

“Hmm?” Bub moaned.

“Come on, bro. You’re all right.”

Bub slowly sat up and lifted his hand to scratch his cheek. Charlie flipped on the TV and waited for Bub to adjust to the drug. *Oprah* was almost over, but he watched Lisa

Ling wrap up her report and mention Darla Hawks admission of shooting up while she was pregnant. Charlie said, “Man, she’s a honey,” with the ‘s’ at the end of ‘she’s’ whistling through the toothless part of his ridiculously wide smile. “I’d do her.”

“You’re an asshole, Charlie,” Bub said, raising his head from a nod.

“Aw, come on, Bub. Who loves you? You know you like that shit.”

“Yeah, I do, a little too much. The last time I did that, I traded all of my step-daughter’s Ritalin for it.”

“I remember. Do whatcha gotta do, I guess,” Charlie said.

“No, man. It was just pathetic.”

“You comin’ back to the club with me, right?”

“Broke now.”

“Cover’s only ten bucks.”

“My money’s in your pocket.”

“Well, tell you what. I’ll spot you. Just give me back fifteen Friday.”

“You give me a ride back later?”

“Sure thing, bro.”

The neon flickered with an erratic pulse—glassy cotton-candy colored reflections of the light glinted on the windshields of the parked cars outside the bar. It was a full

nude club where alcohol wasn't served by the establishment. For some reason, the people passing out liquor licenses had no problem with topless girls, but bottomless ones weren't acceptable. Charlie said he thought it was a health code violation for them to have their stuff hanging out around the drinks.

“But they sell juice,” Bub said, “That don't make one bit of sense.”

Charlie admitted that he wasn't sure, that it was a mystery, but one that didn't really matter because he could bring in a bottle of whatever he wanted as long as he gave the guy at the door twenty bucks for it.

When they found their seats at a table between the stage and the bar, there was a woman dancing onstage; she had dark pubic hair and was wearing a red wig. Busy strobe lights made the men seated at tables into a stream of photographs that might appear in a case study of gambling addicts. Sub-woofers thrust the hammering bass of a Static X song, and the flashing frames of numb faces dotted the crowd to its aggressive rhythm.

The wigged woman turned her ass toward them and doubled forward, gripping her calves with long skinny fingers. Bub leaned to Charlie and made a remark about the tattoo on her left buttock, Mickey Mouse riding a descending bomb like a cowboy. When she bent forward as far as she could go, to show them everything, Charlie lifted himself with the arms of his chair. He scooted forward and slouched, settling in to give her his full attention.

Bub looked around the room and noticed the bartender's bikini, yellow with white polka dots that glowed brightly in the black light behind the bar. In a dark corner to the left of her, the bouncer wore all black and dark glasses and sat motionless on a barstool.

Some of the other guys who worked with Charlie and Bub had talked about this place during lunch and said the real action didn't happen until two, but Bub had been only once before and hadn't stayed that late.

Two topless women made slow circles around the club carrying trays of mixers. When their pasted smiles parted to show their teeth, smudged with lipstick, they glowed in the low, black and neon light of the club. The DJ bobbed his head with a gentle but busy rhythm as he watched the girl onstage and prepared the song for the next dancer. The song that had been playing, "Love Dump," came to its abrupt end, but Charlie didn't stop staring at the girl as she lost her grace, like a marionette losing its life when the puppeteer relaxes.

"Give it up for the delectable Delilah," the DJ crooned.

Scattered pops of weak applause died and were replaced by the clicking of the dancer's steps as she walked to one side of the stage. She pulled money from the top of her thigh-high pleather boots and started counting it as she disappeared backstage.

Bub felt something in between two of his back teeth with his tongue and was completely amazed when he withdrew a finger from his mouth with a piece of asphalt underneath his fingernail. "How in the hell did that get in there?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Charlie asked.

"There's fuckin' asphalt between my teeth."

"Shit gets everywhere."

"Yeah, but in my teeth...and I didn't even notice."

“Maybe you were high.”

“I wasn’t high. I’m savin’ my money for Hope,” Bub said. He held his hand close to his face with the black bit of tar on the fingernail of his middle finger and tried splitting it in two with his thumbnail.

The DJ’s voice flowed from the speakers like hot vinyl being poured into a record stamper. “Don’t worry if you’ve lost your faith because she’s right here.”

The crow’s feet around Charlie’s eyes dug into his skin as he smiled and clapped his hands. Bub scratched his forehead and leaned back into his chair as Charlie straightened to perch on the edge of his. Smoke covered the floor of the stage. Lights snapped on from over their heads and the beams made cones of blue fog tilt from the stage as “Stand By Your Man” began to play. The men in the club settled from the agitation that came with the previous performance and its music. Bub stopped looking around the club and tilted his head as he gazed at the stage, waiting for the dancer, Faith, to appear.

With the first words of the song, a delicate hand parted the shimmering curtain at the rear of the stage. The plastic fringe of the partition glowed with a blue aura and reminded Bub of the icicles Hope’s children used to decorate the tree at Christmas. He listened to the song and remembered the way Hope had often played it when the two of them were alone together. He had admired her figure, entranced, when she slipped the record from its sleeve and blew off any dust before placing it on the turntable and lowering the needle.

At times, he'd had a job close enough to home to return in time to have Hope to himself, after the children were asleep. These times were few, so they made them special with a late dinner, candles and music. He would always sit at the table and wait for her to sit beside him before taking his first bite. She always sat beside him at the table when they ate together.

Once, when they were dating, he had told her how beautiful she was, and she smiled and lowered her head, letting her long dark hair hide her face. Even though her hair was thick and the color of strong coffee, it never completely hid her eyes from him. They were green but had mixed hues of earth tones within them, like emeralds that had been dropped in the woods in autumn, lost in a pile of dry leaves. He had only meant to flatter her with his attention, to return some of the warmth she gave that had grown within him—as if planted by the strong hands of a diligent gardener—as they fell in love. Because of her embarrassment, she had moved from across the table to sit beside him, and it became a habit when they ate together. Hope was left-handed and had mirrored his actions before she moved. Afterwards, they were both delighted to find that they could enjoy most of the meal while holding hands. They fed themselves with their stronger hands and held onto each other with the weaker ones.

Faith made her way to the center of the stage through the blue fog in an all-white cowgirl's outfit, complete with hat and tassels. As the first verse of the song began, she lifted her head to show more than the top of her hat. Her eyes hovered over the crowd but rested on no one as she began to strip. Tammy Wynette's words came honeyed and high with the vulnerable strength of her voice. Bub told Charlie that he didn't think this was what she'd meant when she wrote the song. He turned his head away from Charlie and

back to Faith before Charlie could respond. Faith had removed her white leather chaps and was reaching behind her back, tugging at the strings of her fringed bikini top when Bub stood up to leave. Charlie didn't seem to notice Bub as he walked in front of the stage. He didn't stop walking until he was back inside his motel room.

Bub walked in tight circles in his motel room and regretted the evening. He tried taking a shower to calm himself and sat on the edge of one of the beds in the room afterward, trying to pry the black gunk from beneath his fingernails with his other hand. But the stuff only ended up under the other fingernail. He was still trying to rid himself of the filth when the phone rang. He answered it and heard the voice of the worker at the front desk.

“Hi, Mr. Fritz?”

“Yeah.”

“I have a message from your wife. She asked you to call home.”

“Okay, thanks. I appreciate it.”

Jimmy didn't bother to hang up the phone, but only pressed the button on the hook to get a dial tone as he dug the calling card from his wallet. He quickly entered the sequence of numbers he had nearly memorized from the back of it and waited to enter his home number. He heard the tone signaling a ring several times before he heard the sleepy sound of his wife's voice.

“Hey, baby. Did I wake you?”

“Yeah, but that’s okay. What time is it?”

“I don’t know, uh.” He paused to look at what was left of the alarm clock by the bed. “I’m not sure. Guess I shouldn’t have called so late. I just got your message and didn’t think.”

“It’s fine. I was just thinking about you and wanted to hear your voice. Are you staying out of trouble?” she asked.

“Yeah...I went out with one of the boys for a drink, that’s all.”

“That’s *all*, Jimmy?”

“That’s all... How are the kids? Still ignoring those dogs?”

“Most of the time, but when they love them, they *really* do. You know?”

“I love you,” he said, the trace of a whimper in his voice.

“Aw, baby. I love you *so* much. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just miss you is all.”

“Two more days. Sure you’re telling me everything?”

“I’m fine, babe. Just ready to come home.”

“I hate it too. I worry about—”

The line went dead. There were no more minutes on the calling card.

Still feeling the drug Charlie had sold him before going to the club, he was restless. The motel offered free premium channels. He settled back against the headboard

mounted to the wall and flipped through the movie channels he didn't get at home. He watched an episode of a show about a writer struggling with writer's block while trying to win back the estranged mother of his child. The writer poured whiskey into his morning coffee, snorted cocaine from the small of a stripper's back, and popped pills like breath mints, but no scene showed the writer dizzy and sick by noon after a breakfast of booze. There was no beautifully framed shot of the writer kicking the blankets covering his sweaty and chilled body when the drugs ran out.

He turned off the TV and picked his pants up from the floor. He emptied their pockets and looked at the two wadded one-dollar bills on the nightstand. There he saw a single strand of dark hair. He pulled it from the leftovers of the evening and examined it. Holding one end between the forefinger and thumb of his left hand, he pulled it to its length. It was Hope's hair. He was always finding her hair in the oddest places, no matter how far apart they were or how long it had been since they had been together. He had found one wrapped around his sock before he left for work that morning. When he pulled it free from the elastic, he had smiled and found the strength to start another day of shoveling asphalt. He pulled the hair from the crumpled one-dollar bill, wound it around two fingers, and tucked it into a cellophane he pulled from his cigarette pack. Then he folded the top of the cellophane over and used his lighter to seal it. It was the same ritual he had performed after buying drugs that he didn't want to lose. He set the cellophane on the nightstand and noticed a small black spot of tar stuck to his upper arm. He peeled it off without getting it stuck under his thumbnail and flicked it to the floor.

JUST FOR FUN

Sometimes I don't know what to write about, other than her. On these occasions it seems absolutely necessary to begin with a few ideas for other stories, as if these ideas are distant relatives to the family of words that will reunite, once the real story begins. These flaky, non-concentric aunts and uncles, of whom the rest of the family never speaks, should later be deleted before committing the most recent draft to paper. When I sat down to start writing this, I was convinced that I wanted to sit and write about something strange and twisted, something forbidden and sexual, which would make me hesitate awkwardly before I finally decided to print the thoughts that some part of me would be ashamed to admit. I thought I might start the story with a description of leather cuffs cutting into the tendons of a screaming girl's wrists. Then I thought about it some more and decided that would be pointless. It's been done...but every story has been told, more or less, so that's not really a reason.

The next idea was a friendlier version of the first, starting a story with an argument between a man and woman, and on and on the passionate bickering would go. The angry lovers would fight about the reasons why they hated each other, and ultimately those would be the same reasons they loved one another.

After that, I felt invited to write of an inspiring friendship, a friendship that had survived against all odds. What a fantastic and inspiring story that might have been; I guess this because such a thing has never happened to me. I've always lost friends, or

rather, didn't exactly lose them, but one of us turned a back to the other for one reason or another in the name of self-preservation.

So where does that leave me? Right here is the answer to that question. Right here, with this blinking cursor mocking me diligently. Shut up you! Stop it. If I just have to type nonsense to make you quit, I will. Don't doubt me . . .

a;sdfkjas;kfja;lskfj;aldsjfa;kjfa;jf;...

I guess I really should tell you about the first time I saw her. She must be the real reason that I want to write about love and friendship (with a twist of shame), whether or not these are tangled and needy, or twisted and selfish, versions of those concepts, will be for you to decide. That's as good a place to start as any, so why not?

I think it was April...I'm not really sure. The point is that when I saw her, time became irrelevant. I almost knew then that I wouldn't remember the month, almost eighteen years later, writing about it now. I think love is like that. No, not irrelevant, but timeless...yes, timeless. I'm sure that when I'm eighty, if I live that long, I'll feel the same way as I think back to the night she walked into the bar where I was working.

She walked into the room, and time seemed to slow. I know this is true because the customers started to yell at me for the drinks they must have ordered before I saw her. Maybe time didn't stop, or slow, or whatever I said; it was probably just me. Anyway, after I had gotten back to work, enough to satiate the angry-alcoholic-zombie-mob that had formed around my dumbstruck, distant face, I watched her carefully. I don't know what it was about her. She was not the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, but she had an

amazing presence, so full of life. Maybe that's why I wanted so desperately to latch on to her, because I don't think, at that time, I was. Okay, I'll stop analyzing everything and tell the damn story. So she was across the bar, at a table with her friends, and I was just watching her (I must have done this for a very long time because I worked an extra two hours after closing time, just cleaning up) when suddenly, *she* looked at me, straight at my face.

When she walked over to the bar, I asked if I could help her. She asked if we had Heineken. I told her we did, but I'd need to see some ID before I could get her one. She produced the plastic card from her purse and gave it to me. I already knew she was old enough to be there because of the crowd she was with, and more importantly, the way she carried herself, but it was my job to be sure.

She gave me her ID, and I was right; she was old enough to drink: twenty-four. I made some small talk about her zodiac sign: Gemini—the complex duality of the twins, and so on, showcasing my fine attention to detail. I gave her the Heineken and told her it was on me, and when she feigned surprise (I'm guessing) I asked for her phone number. I honestly wish I could tell you that it was something incredibly special, a magical and magnificent connection we shared that prompted me to act in such a way. But to be totally honest with you (probably not the best thing for telling a story), I was playing a game that night. You see, I had just gotten out of a semi-serious relationship, and I was playing the phone number game. Under the right circumstances, it can be strong medicine for an ailing ego, but I was playing just for fun. You may not be familiar with this game, but let me assure you that bartenders, especially the female ones, play it *all* the time. The phone number game consists of getting as many phone numbers as possible in one night.

You usually try to set a number before the game begins to see how close you've come to your prediction by the end of the night. I really don't know why it's called a game because there is no real winner or loser. I guess there would be in the case that a person really might want you to call, and you never do; maybe that person could be considered a loser. But they aren't really playing, now, are they?

The Heineken girl was number nine. I ended up with twelve. You may think that's a lot, and it is. I won't lie to you; I promise. I should add that it was kind of a slow night.

For some reason, I didn't call her for a long time. When I finally did, she blew me off. I guess that's what I get for playing...but in the words of the great prophet, John Lennon, "Whatever gets you through the night..." right?

She said that she had already made plans with her friends for the evening. I said that I understood, and we left it at that. I had already dated numbers one through eight for the previous three or four months. I know; I'm a real bastard sometimes. I guess it runs in the family. No one knows that except you, so keep it under your hat. Okay?

I didn't think about her for the next two months as I made my way through numbers ten, eleven, and twelve. I had no luck with any of them, and I don't mean the "get lucky" sort of luck. I'm not really sure what I mean, but I wasn't just looking to get laid. If that were the point, I could've stuck with number four. When I finally picked up the torch and called her again, she seemed disappointed that I had waited so long. She asked what had happened to me, and I told her that I'd been *seriously* ill. This procures sympathy, which, many men may not admit, is one way to get a foot in the door. After a lengthy conversation including all of the awkward pauses that usually come between two

people wanting to know one another more, but are being a bit timid about it, I decided to push the envelope, anticipating the fiery crash. After a slow silence, in which I could hear my cellular phone signal talking through my stereo speakers, coming out in an alien language, she said that a date sounded great, and that, after all, I was persistent in a really intermittent kind of way. We agreed to meet the following Friday night at seven. This was the most important number I had obtained so far.

Friday evening came. I showered twice that day, and shaved twice that day, which is usually a risk because of my sensitive skin. I found my best pair of come-hither jeans, and secured a pair of boxer-briefs beneath them. It wasn't that I was planning for her to see them, but it's always a safe bet to go with boxer briefs. "Why?" you might ask. Because most women prefer boxers, but there are some that prefer briefs. Foreknowledge of this preference is impossible, so it is best to put one's self somewhere in the middle to achieve a neutral reaction, just in case. I spent a long time deciding between a button up and a t-shirt, and finally picked a slightly thicker knit shirt. Although warmer weather had come by then, it was unusually cool that night, and this choice would eliminate the need for a jacket. I put my cologne on under the shirt so as not to be overly pungent and headed out the door of my little apartment.

I thought it would be polite to call ahead, just in case she was running behind, so I tried to fish my cell phone out of my front pocket while driving down the main drag and lighting up a Pall Mall. With one knee on the steering wheel and the seatbelt tattooing a scarlet groove into my neck, I managed to get the thing out.

She answered and sounded surprised. She said she couldn't make it. I was devastated. After all of my hard work and preparation, the evening would end without seeing her. I asked her why she couldn't come because I felt that I at least deserved an explanation. She told me that she had made other plans. This was an insult, a slap in the face, and I had not even been able to indulge in the sort of fun that usually precedes such a slap. Why had she not called me beforehand to let me know? She said that she had forgotten about our date. I reacted. I told her she hadn't forgotten, that she was afraid. She wanted to know what she could possibly be afraid of, and I told her I didn't know, but she was.

She told me to hold on because she had another call coming in. Before I could protest, she was gone. I hung up the phone and went to the bar. I usually hated spending my nights off there, but that night I needed to drink, long and deeply, to kill the sting. I know, poor boy with a bruised ego, right? I guess so, but it felt a lot worse from over here.

Weeks passed. I was at the bar with Kathy. She had been the fourth from what started as a game, but now seemed to number my days and nights. Kathy was bored with me, and I with her. The sex had been anything but boring, but by now we were past that, and everything else felt like the boy getting the girl in a movie, or the pupil surpassing his mentor, the stuff before the end.

Kathy had found someone else to talk to at the bar; although we had similar physical traits, he looked like a welder. He had the right sort of jacket and the give-away

cap. Lots of guys around here wear welder's caps, but only the real welders wear those green, spark-proof jackets in public. Normally I would have been upset, and demanded an explanation for her treachery, but tonight I just let her go, and hoped to myself that she would leave with him.

I was standing in front of the pool table, dazed, watching purposefully like I actually cared about the game that was currently clacking away. I never played pool, but sometimes I watched like I did. I had split my attention between the game and tonight's karaoke tribute to the great Pat Benatar when someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned disinterestedly, expecting someone to ask me the usual question, the one I get when I'm in the bar where I work, on a night when I'm not working: "You workin' tonight?" Yes, Bill, I am working. That's why there is a woman behind the bar furiously making daiquiris, and I'm standing here half-drunk listening to your girlfriend wail "Love Is A Battlefield" through her nose. Didn't you know this is how I make the best tips? Speaking of tips, you should tell your girlfriend, that look, the whole blue eye-shadow and leotard thing, it worked for Pat in 1983, when that song was good.

It wasn't Bill; he was playing pool. It was her, Prue, the Heineken girl, number nine. I didn't know how to respond, so I just stood there stupidly. This is how I recall it, but Bill later told me that I was smiling like a naughty crocodile. Prue asked me what I was doing here, not if I was working tonight, or why I wasn't...how refreshing! I tried to act cool. I said that I was just hanging out, waiting on some friends (which was a lie—I told you I wouldn't lie to *you*). She said that she didn't mean to interrupt me; she just saw me standing over here and wanted to say, "Hi." She was too chipper for that to be true. I looked over her shoulder and saw one of the girls that had been with her on the night I

had asked for her number. Beside the girl were several empty Heineken bottles. This was a dead give-away. Her friend had gotten her drunk and put her up to this; however, it did not lessen my appreciation of Prue's reprise. When girls and their friends do this sort of thing, there always seems to be a genuine reason.

I asked Prue how she'd been, and she told me. We must have talked hazily like that for about ten minutes or so before she invited me to sit with her. I happily obliged her request and suddenly felt important and attractive. This confidence was probably premature. I think I tended to see what I wanted a bit too easily then. After several rounds of drinks, I could almost completely block Prue's friend's words from entering my ears. I learned that the last time I had spoken to Prue, she had been consoling a grieving aunt. Prue's uncle had died many years ago on the day we had chosen for our date, and she had momentarily forgotten the significance of that particular Friday. It was always a hard time for Prue and her aunt because they were very close. I felt like a braying ass for hanging up when I did and wondered why she had bothered to talk to me again. She then told me that she felt bad about what had happened. Later she admitted that it was really because I had accused her of being afraid.

At the end of the evening, we set a date for the following Friday night, again at seven. This time I would choose a button up shirt, and I would not skimp on the restaurant, as I had previously planned to do.

The week flew by. I was singing in the shower; I had never done this before. Maybe I had, but isn't it more dramatic if I say this was the first time? Work seemed like

a blessing, and I was high on life. Prue's elusiveness only added to my attraction for her. I still watched the clock at work, but now, it wasn't because I didn't want to be there. It was because I knew every second ticked away, bringing me closer to seven o'clock on Friday evening, and these were moments of my life that I thought I would never miss.

On Thursday, I was sitting on the couch, in my small apartment, watching a Victor Borga special on PBS. He was running through his routine about inflationary language: *Once upon a time I ate my tenderloin with my fork; now I have to nine my eleven-derloin with my five* when my phone rang. Surely it was Prue calling. Maybe she was calling to ask what she should wear, or maybe she was calling to cancel. Either way, I was elated at the thought of hearing her voice. I let the phone ring three times, so it would seem as if I was doing something important that required my focused attention. I dared not let it begin the fourth ring, because everyone knows that the answering machine picks up at the end of the fourth, and losing her to the pre-answering-machine-so-I'll-call-back-later ring would have been disastrous. I answered the phone, and I will never in my decrepitly long, or tragically cut short (however it turns out) life, forget what I heard.

It was the voice of number four, Kathy. The voice told me that we needed to talk. I told it that we were talking, and asked it why. Had the welder been a tragic mistake? Had the two of them rushed to Vegas to wed, only to discover on their way that they were cousins, and now their familial and forbidden love could never be sanctified nor corrected, even by the holiness of Nevada matrimony? No. It was not the welder. It was me she wanted. Oh my god, how the fear began to creep up my spine, with its sweaty feet using my ribs for a ladder. It was impulse, or instinct, some panicky self-defense mechanism; something made me tell her she was crazy. The word seemed to ring true, so

I let it all go: I told her she was crazier than the ten-year-old-Sioux warrior, Crazy Horse, killing his first buffalo, and the construction worker stuck to the girder on the ad for Crazy Glue, combined. I told her she was crazier than the brainsick product that might be born if Crazy Horses could be rendered to make even Crazier Glue. I asked her, “Have you heard the one about Mickey Mouse leaving Minnie because she was fucking Goofy? Because, *you*, Kathy, are also fucking goofy, while probably wearing nothing but a welder’s cap.”

She told me to calm down.

She made a good point.

She said that she hadn’t wanted me like that, that she merely wanted to talk. I knew she was lying. Continuing to resist, I told her that talking often leads to other things, like walking, possibly even running or skipping. I added that I was interested in doing none of the above with her, but she said that it was very, very important.

I met Kathy at the bar because it was convenient for both of us. I had calmed down a bit, but was worried about even being with Kathy. One of Prue’s friends might spot us. My optimistic side told me that pessimism was not the way out of this situation. Prue’s friends never came to the bar without her, and she was with her aunt tonight. I just couldn’t miss my second chance to go out with her the following night. It was the most important number I had received while playing the telephone number game. I thought so because of my date with Prue. Kathy agreed that number seven was extremely important,

but not for the same reason. Seven months; that was approximately how long it would be until Kathy expected to give birth to our child.

Shortly after my heart hit the floor, Kathy left. The B-52 had delivered its cargo and was returning to base. A few hours later, my head hit the bar. Rolling my head to the side, pressing my right ear against the bar, I saw the toppled soldiers from the army of shot glasses I had battled, chewed-up lime wedges in crumpled napkins, and from this angle, I could see the tiny grains of salt still sticking to everything in front of me. I inhaled the dirty-socks smell of cheap tequila that was lingering in tiny puddles around the glasses. Through the wooden bar, I could hear the vibrations of bottles being slid further down, and the nervous tap of someone's boot on the brass foot rail. I looked up to see Bill walking in my direction.

Everyone called him Whisperin' Bill, usually behind his back, and occasionally to his face. The latter must occur in a very friendly way because Bill was not a man you wanted to piss off, and reminding him of the peculiar trait of his speech at the wrong time could be the start of a painful finish. Of all the examples of this I had witnessed, Bill had done the finishing; however, it did take quite a bit of prodding to push him to violence. It wasn't his fault that his girlfriend sang Pat Benatar songs through her nose below blue eye-shadow. But it often became his responsibility while defending her honor. He was actually a very nice guy. Bill had been the first one to treat me kindly, as an equal, when I was new in town and had started working at the bar, while the rest of the regulars looked down on me as a lesser sort of man, doing a woman's work.

The town I live in does not reflect the statistical fact that most bartenders are men. To put it in their words, “You’d make better tips with better tits,” or, “When I’m drinkin’ my beer, I need *some*thin’ to look at.” Maybe that was how the phone number game came to be. Maybe some beautiful bartendress from a forgotten time and place finally decided to have a go at getting even with the misanthropic misogynists who berated her daily, mostly during the three hours of her life that could be described as anything but happy. But Bill wasn’t like most of the guys that frequented the bar. Sometimes, he even helped out when I got really busy.

“What’s wrong, pal?”

“I don’t know, Bill . . . everything?”

“Problem with your lady friend?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

Bill looked deeply concerned as he picked at the label on his bottle of Budweiser and asked, “Anything you wanna talk about?”

“Not really, but thanks.”

Bill nodded, gave me a slap on the shoulder, and began to walk back toward the pool table when I realized that I did want to talk about it.

“Hey, Bill. Hold on a second.”

He turned to look at me over his shoulder and smiled as he walked back to where I was sitting and pulled out the barstool next to me.

“I *thought* you might need someone to talk to.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

“What’s the problem?” he asked.

“I don’t know if I can narrow it down to *one* problem.”

“That bad, huh?”

“No, not really. I guess there is just one problem. Do you remember that girl I was sitting here with a few hours ago?”

“The brunette?”

“Yes.”

“Sure, I remember her, pretty good lookin’.”

“Well, her name is Kathy, and we went out a few times...and tonight, well, she told me that she is definitely pregnant.” There, I said it.

“Whew, man...now, I understand.”

Then he told me about a banker and his secretary, someone Bill had worked for, and how they wound up in a similar situation. The story was slightly comforting. Being reminded that I wasn’t the only screw-up alive was nice, but my new confidant’s reassuring tale began to degenerate somewhere around “and they all lived happily ever after.” It wasn’t that the banker and his secretary finally met some terribly ironic end. Bill’s stories had twined together in an awkward way. The banker’s reaction to the news

of his secretary's pregnancy reminded Bill of the reaction his father had when he first caught him smoking, and away Bill and I would go, behind the garage, frantically trying to hide the smoldering butt as we heard the old man coming, madly fanning the air where the smoke still hung, ensuring our doom.

Before I knew it, we were on the top of some dam where he had worked on a construction crew in 1988, arguing with his boss about the practical applications of a particular five-gallon bucket of industrial paint.

The journey contained in Bill's narrative was too much for me. I left him, although still beside me on his barstool, playing with his first dog, Freckles, in a Nebraska corn field. I needed to figure out what I was going to do about Kathy.

During my last conversation with Prue, I found out that she lived about half a block from the bar where I worked. I was remotely aware that paying her a visit in my semi-drunken state wasn't the most suave thing I could have done, but it's what I did.

Dogs began to bark at the echoing clanging sound my boots made on the steel staircase leading up to her second story apartment. At the top of the stairs, I pressed the button to ring apartment 2. Through the iron bars that covered the glass door, I saw a door open at the end of the hallway. A gray and white cat ran from the apartment and down the hall and Prue followed to scoop her up from behind. She opened the door for me while cradling the cat with her other arm. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Dropping by unexpectedly, of course."

“Okay.”

“I was just in the neighborhood, and I thought I’d drop by.”

“Unexpectedly?”

“Um, yes.”

“Okay, whatever, come in.”

Prue scolded Liz (the cat) for her escape attempt as I followed. Her apartment was much nicer than mine. Everything was hardwood, and there were photographs of old movie stars everywhere. She told me she was in the middle of something and disappeared behind a door after telling me to make myself comfortable.

Covering one wall in the living room was her autograph collection. Little scraps of paper, bearing signatures, pressed against glass in front of famous faces: Bette Davis, Lauren Bacall, Clark Gable; these actors I had heard of, but there were many more I knew nothing about. I began to think about the connotations of a person collecting pictures of dead people before dismissing the thought as Prue confidently strode back into the room, glowing with energy.

We talked for a long time. I didn’t care about what; I just wanted to know her more. We began what would later become a tradition for our dates. She would show me something new, and I would do the same for her. She told me that there were no truly good color films. I disagreed, but tried to keep an open mind. That night I watched *A Place In The Sun* for the first time, and figured out why Elizabeth Taylor is known for more than perfume and divorce. I ached a little when I saw Montgomery Clift waiting on

death row, and had to consciously push Kathy out of my mind. Then we went to my apartment and watched *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I waited for Prue to be disgusted, but she just laughed and said, "I knew there was a reason why I liked Susan Sarandon."

"Did you know that they filmed it in six weeks?" I asked.

"No, I didn't. And I think I'm impressed that you do."

"Really, why is that?"

"Oh, I don't know. I just didn't have you pegged as my type," she said slyly.

"So now I *am* your type?"

"That isn't exactly what I meant...but I think we're finding out."

"I can live with that."

"Have you seen *Psycho*?" she asked.

"What are you implying?"

"Nothing, silly. Have you seen it?"

"That's the one where that girl gets it in the shower, right?"

"Yes, that's the one. Have you seen it?"

"Parts," I said.

"What do you mean, *parts*?"

“I mean, I haven’t watched it in its entirety.”

“That’s tragic.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, I guess you did see the best scene... Did you know that Hitchcock used over seventy different cameras to film Janet Leigh’s shower scene? The one where, as you so eloquently put it, *that girl gets it?*”

“No, I wasn’t aware of that, and why would he waste so much film on one scene?”

“You are hopeless.”

“I think I detect a note of sympathy.”

She smiled at my teasing, and took my hand.

Prue was great, better than I’d ever imagined another person could be. It wasn’t that we had everything in common, as I often hear half of a happy couple raving from across the bar. I think I was fascinated by the fact that we had very little in common. I usually don’t get along well with people I identify with. My shrink would say that this is a form of self-hatred, but what does he know? What we did share was a passion for our separate interests. She loved film, and I loved her. I think she could have lived on films alone if not for the fact that film is made from a derivative of horse hooves. Prue was a vegetarian. I think that is the only thing she didn’t like about film, that, and the fact that

the credits come at the end of the feature. She felt that this custom was a small tragedy, and gave bloated kudos to actors with already overblown egos. To me, this seemed inconsistent with her walls of hero-worship, which she called a “collection,” (complete with a signed portrait of Janet Leigh hanging in the bathroom). But I think when you’re truly in love with someone, these inconsistencies become irresistible. Her imperfections allowed me, to fit, into her life.

I don’t know, looking back, how I was able to lock Kathy up in that little corner of my mind while I was spending all of my time with Prue. A little over a month had passed since I had stumbled to Prue’s apartment, one night before our first date. Actually, it was thirty-three days. I had been counting.

I would meet with Kathy about once a week, on the night that Prue regularly spent with her aunt. It had become a consistent appointment, and like most bad habits, the ritual had become more important than the act itself. Meeting with Kathy was just a way for me to fool myself into thinking that I had a grip on the situation; it provided me with the illusion of control.

We met at the bar, as was the usual arrangement. This time, I noticed a stranger sitting beside Kathy. As I slowly made my way to them, I noticed that they talked to each other comfortably, like old friends. I sat down at the barstool to Kathy’s left while the stranger occupied the one to her right. She turned to me and smiled before she said, “Hey. What took you so long?”

“I’m sorry. Who’s your friend?”

“This is my brother, Jake.”

Jake looked at me through his eyebrows. He did not have the appearance of a happy fellow.

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” I said.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t know Kathy had a boyfriend.”

“Look. I’m not her boyfriend, okay?”

“I don’t give a shit what you think you are,” he said gruffly.

“Jake, I know we’ve only just met, but I don’t think I like you very well.”

“I also don’t give a shit *what* you like.”

“Boys, boys, behave yourselves,” Kathy said.

“What is *his* problem Kathy?” I asked.

“Well, honey, I don’t think he approves of our relationship.”

“What relationship?” I asked.

“You know what I mean,” she said and rubbed her growing belly.

“Kathy, I’m gonna borrow your boyfriend for a few.”

Jake got up and grabbed me by the arm. He had quite a grip. I told him that wouldn’t be necessary. If he wanted to talk, I had no objections. I motioned toward the back door of the bar, behind the pool table. Jake nodded, and away we went. Through the

back door, there was a small patio with a few picnic tables. We sat down at one of the tables, on opposite sides, facing each other.

“So what do you *plan* to do with my sister?” he asked.

“I don’t *plan* to do anything with her,” I replied.

“What you’ve done so far, has been plenty, but that’s not what I’m talkin’ about.”

“What *are* you talking about, Jake?”

“Do you have good intentions for Kathy?”

“What the hell do you mean?”

“Her, and the baby, what about them?”

“I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure that one out.”

“What’s to figure?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. I know that I’m responsible, partially.”

“What the hell do you mean *partially*?”

“Well, Jake, I didn’t do it alone.”

“Okay, smart-ass. I’ll *tell* you what the fuck you’re *going* to do.”

“What’s that?” I asked with genuine curiosity.

“*You* are going to *marry* my sister.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I mean, don’t think I’m crazy about having a prick like you in the family. But I’ll be damned if she’s going to raise that kid on her own.”

“I’m sorry Jake, but that definitely is *not* going to happen.”

Jake closed his eyes hard, and gritted his teeth. I could see the muscles in his jaw twitching. I began to sweat. When he finally opened his eyes, he was glaring at me. He pulled his hand from below the picnic table, and laid a very large handgun in front of him.

“I *said*, you are going to *marry* my sister.”

“I see, the crazy gene must run rampant in your family,” I muttered, starting to shake a little.

“What did you say?” Jake was turning red. This could not be good.

“Nothing. I, uh...” I stammered.

“*Now*, do you have any objections to marrying my sister? Or, would you like to tell me some more about how you were planning to *help*?”

I couldn’t take this. I was too young to die. Fuck it. Maybe I wasn’t.

“You know what, Jake?”

“What?” Jake was now officially red.

“Fuck you!”

“What?” Burgundy.

“I said, *fuck you* and your sister.” I didn’t know I could be so brave...or stupid.

“That’s it, you little prick.”

Jake leaned across the table and pushed the barrel of the pistol into my neck.

“If you aren’t going to marry Kathy, at least the kid can collect Social Security for a dead parent.”

I didn’t see my life flash before my eyes. All I saw was Prue. And I think, in that brief moment, despite the circumstances, I smiled just a bit. I could see Jake’s face tighten in response to my slight grin. I could smell the oil on the barrel. I looked down my nose to see his knuckles whiten, only inches below my chin. Just when I thought it was all going to be over, the game would end with the number six, me, six feet under, I heard a loud crack, and then a thump, as Jake’s head hit the table. I heard a whispering voice coming from behind Jake’s slumped body, “Damn. That was my favorite stick. I knew you were going to get yourself into trouble. You’re lucky it was my shot. I was about to call the ten ball into the fourteen, three rails into the side pocket, when I caught a glimpse of your little situation out here.”

“Jesus, Bill.” I somehow formed the word “thanks” as I let out the breath I had been holding, “It was no picnic.”

“You’re welcome. What are friends for anyway? Speaking of picnics, a friend of mine once took me on one, way up in the Rocky Mountains. We must have just finished spreading that checkered blanket on the ground, when an entire colony of ants came to carry off all our food. You know, like you see on the cartoons? Anyway, we dealt with

the ants, and then there were bears, the black kind; they're pretty harmless, well, not harmless, but nothing like the brown ones. They're real killers; you don't want to mess with them."

While Bill was still talking, I got up and hugged him and asked him if he would keep an eye on Jake. He said that it wouldn't be a problem as he picked up the pistol Jake had dropped, unloaded it and spun the empty cylinder as he kind of gawked at the sheer mass of the thing, whistling to show that he was impressed.

"Just buy me a Budweiser on your next shift."

I nodded my agreement with a smile.

I scowled at Kathy on my way back through the bar, and did not stop to explain why. She must have known. She just followed me with her eyes as I made my way to the front of the bar, the exit, only a half of a block from Prue's apartment.

I showed up at Prue's place, this time sober. I told her everything. Something about the pistol in my neck had convinced me that I shouldn't keep any more secrets. I might never have had the chance to be honest with her, and I was going to make the most of any opportunity from this moment forward. She was an angel, a saint. She told me that she understood.

"Can you ever forgive me?" I asked.

"I don't know the answer to that right now."

"I wasn't exactly *lying* to you."

“No. But you weren’t exactly being *honest*, either.”

“You’re right.”

“I know I’m right. That isn’t the point.”

“What is the point, then?”

“I don’t know right now. You’re just going to have to give me some time to think about this.”

“I understand . . . Prue?”

“What?”

“I know this isn’t the best time, but there’s something I have to tell you.”

“What?”

“I..I love you.”

“What?”

“I said, I love you.”

“I heard you. I mean, I know you do. I..I have to go. I mean, you have to go. Goodbye.”

It still seems like it all happened only last week, and I guess that’s a good thing because Prue will never grow old in my mind. The night that Jake tried to kill me was the

last time I ever saw her. I married Kathy, not because I really loved her (although I've grown to), and not because the man who is now my brother-in-law had introduced himself with a death threat, but because it was the right thing to do. Six months after my introduction to Jake, Kathy gave birth to a boy, seven pounds, eight ounces, and twenty inches long. I insisted on naming him Montgomery, and Kathy didn't argue. I think she was glad to have finally gotten what she wanted and didn't care about anything else.

Now, I spend most of my time writing when I'm not working at the plant. I mostly write stories about a girl who loves film. I'm never able to finish them. I think that's because they don't seem to have much plot; they're mostly descriptions, pictures of a girl with a different kind of beauty for each of her moods, but I enjoy writing them all the same.

Montgomery turned seventeen last week. I can't believe it's been that long, but it has. The other day, we had a long talk about what he wanted to do after high school and where he might want to go to college. Being a rebellious teenager, Monty told me that college was not for him. I knew that letting him go to the vocational school had been a bad idea. When I asked him why he didn't want to go to college, he told me about his teacher, Mr. Asbury.

“Who is Mr. Asbury? And why are you wearing that stupid hat?”

“Dad, you know Mr. Asbury. He's the one you talked to about my grades on parent teacher night last month.”

“Oh yeah. I remember now. I was asking him how your grades could be so low at a vocational school. I mean, the classes are damn near remedial, Monty. When I was in high school, the kids from the vocational school were always high on something.”

“Dad.”

“Okay, all right. So, what does *Mr. Asbury* think you should be doing with your life?”

“Well, I’m doing really, really good in his class. You know? And, he says that I’m a natural. He said that he’s never seen anyone take off like me, like I was born to it.”

“Remind me. What does he teach again?”

“*Dad*, and you wonder why I never talk to you.”

“I’m sorry. Please continue.”

“*Welding*, Dad. And *Mr. Asbury* says that the underwater welders make really good money. I mean, it’s a pretty dangerous job, but I could get my SCUBA certification and...”

THE TASTE OF A STORY

Cecilia's father had always seemed to her as more of a fixture than a man, a hallmark stamped into the very center of her life and nearly every memory. His presence seemed completely natural to her because she had known nothing else; he had always been there. This feeling of familiarity tricked her into believing that he always would be.

When she went home for the holidays between semesters, she had been surprised at his appearance, how old he suddenly seemed—as if he had aged twenty years since she last saw him near the end of summer. He had always been a round man, and for the first time in her life she had been able to touch her hands together at his back when she hugged him.

Her father had made his living as a doctor, and more than a year had passed since he announced rather casually that he was ill. She and her mother had begged him to seek a second opinion or some sort of treatment, but he simply refused and would say nothing more about the matter.

After returning to the university, Cecilia sat in her dorm room and tried to concentrate; spring break was over, and she needed to prepare for finals. But every time she opened a book, she soon found herself staring over the page into nothing, thinking about her father. During her last trip home, his eyes had been the only part of him that remained familiar. They were sad and wise and had always reminded her of an elephant's.

* * *

The sun was bright and the breeze gentle when Mr. McKinney stopped to check the mail on his way home from the clinic. He pulled the metal tab of the mailbox door to look inside and saw what he had been waiting for, the June issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*. The cover showed two plumbers in denim overalls standing in front of a vanity table in a woman's bedroom. The plumber on the right was squeezing the bulb of a perfume atomizer to produce an illustrated cloud of mist that hung in front of the other plumber's face.

Mr. McKinney tucked the magazine under his arm and opened the front door. He hung his hat over a brass hook on the wall and set the mail down as his wife entered the room.

"How was your day, dear?" she asked as he turned around and let his jacket slide from his shoulders and into her waiting hands.

"Fine, just fine. The post came," he said, his smile growing.

"Oh, Harold," she said and turned to look at the cover. "How dreadful, homosexual plumbers." She hung his jacket on the coat tree.

"Roberta, it's supposed to be silly. That's all."

"Well, if that's what it's supposed to be. I suppose you two will be going for a walk then?"

"Did someone say the post came?" Cecilia said from the doorway. Her father's eyes brightened at the sight of his daughter, and he bent down to catch her as she ran into

his arms. "Gotcha!" he said and scooped her up. "Sure is, darling. Do you remember where we left off?"

"The white hunters had just gotten off the boat and their men were hacking into the jungle with machetes."

"Sounds right to me. Shall we find out what happens next?" he asked and set her down.

"Oh, can we?" she begged, turning to her mother.

"Supper will be ready in an hour. Please don't let it get cold. Aren't you going to change your clothes, Harold?"

"No need," he said as he unknotted his tie and slipped it off. "We'll be back in plenty of time, dear." He turned back to his daughter. "Besides, it's a beautiful day, perfect weather for hunting elephants."

Roberta turned and walked toward the kitchen as she muttered, "Elephants in Ohio, ridiculous."

Cecilia twisted the knob with one hand and grabbed her father with the other and pulled him to the front porch. He snagged the magazine from the end table with his free hand. The two stood on the front porch and surveyed the countryside. Cecilia held her forearm to her brow to block the sun and squinted into the distance. "Those hills look like they have elephants in them," she said.

“I’m sure they do, darling. But I thought I heard some moving around in there,” he said and pointed to the cornfield across the road. The corn was tall and green; brown and yellow silk hung from the tops of the ears.

“You did, Daddy?”

“Think so. Shall we see?”

The pair walked side by side through the yard, and the summer evening sun cast their forms across the lawn in long shadows. Harold opened the wooden gate for his daughter and they crossed the dirt road. He spread his legs from one side of the ditch to the other and lifted Cecilia from the road to set her down at the edge of the cornfield. He pulled the magazine from his back pocket, flipped through it until he found what he was looking for, and began to read aloud.

Cecilia crept carefully ahead of him into the cornfield as he read about Nkima, Tarzan’s monkey, who sat high in a tree watching the white hunters make their way into the jungle. The hunters had hired black men from a nearby jungle village to work for them and clear their path; they were searching for the elephant graveyard because they wanted to become rich by stealing the precious ivory.

“I don’t know why they’d want ivory,” she said. “I’d rather see a live elephant.”

Harold knew his daughter did not think there were elephants in the cornfields of Ohio, but he was delighted at the way she seemed to push that knowledge from her mind. Every few steps, she would stop and listen for an elephant that might be somewhere ahead of her, rustling through the corn. He walked behind her and imagined that the

words he read helped the world lying in the pages of *The Saturday Evening Post* to surround his daughter. He felt it growing larger with every step Cecilia took into the cornfield.

Harold read about Tarzan's friend, Erich von Harben who was off on an expedition of his own when he accidentally stumbled onto the elephant graveyard, and Cecilia imagined fantastic discoveries ahead of her in the corn. But von Harben was not alone; the villain of the story, Lieutenant von Werper, watched von Harben as he looked upon his discovery. This news made Cecilia crouch low to the ground and listen for danger.

"I think I hear something, Daddy."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe it's an elephant...or maybe it's the bad man."

"What should we do?"

"Follow me," she whispered.

Cecilia crept forward very carefully and parted two stalks of corn close together in the next row. She poked her head between them and slowly looked from side to side.

"Never mind, it must have heard us coming."

"Probably so. I'll try not to be so loud."

"That's okay, Daddy. Let's keep going."

Harold continued to read in a quieter voice and Erich was suddenly attacked by ferocious pterodactyls; they swooped down and snapped at him with sharp teeth and drooling beaks, but he ducked into the safety of a nearby elephant skeleton's ribcage.

"That was a close one!" Cecilia exclaimed, forgetting her recent need for stealth.

But Erich wasn't safe just yet. As soon as the pterodactyls realized he was beyond their grasp and flew away, von Werper stepped from the cover of the nearby jungle and drew his weapon, finding Erich in its sites. Afraid that Erich might reveal the secret location of the elephant graveyard, he had no choice but to shoot him. So he fired, and with the loud crack of the shot, Erich slumped beneath the elephant ribcage and lay still, slowly dying. Von Werper laughed a scoundrel's laugh and disappeared into the jungle. As soon as he was out of sight, Nkima leapt from a tall tree and rushed to Erich's side. He tore away part of his shirt and used a small bone and his own blood to write a note that requested Tarzan's help. He tied the note to Nkima and told him to find his master and to be quick about it.

"Oh, no!" Cecilia exclaimed. "Poor Erich. What's going to happen to him, Daddy?"

"Guess we'll just have to wait and see. That's the end of the installment."

"But I want to know *now*," Cecilia said, stomping her foot and pushing out her lower lip.

"I'm sorry, but don't worry. I'm sure he'll be fine. Tarzan will save him."

"Daddy?"

“Yes, darling?”

“What’s an elephant graveyard?”

“It’s where elephants go when they know they’re going to die.”

“How do they know they’re going to die?”

“I don’t know, darling. They just do. It’s what we call instinct.”

“Hmm, do I have in-stink?” she asked.

“*Instinct*. Of course you do. Everyone does.”

“Will it tell me when *I’m* going to die?”

“Oh, darling. That’s not going to happen for a very, *very* long time. Don’t you worry about that.”

“Okay, Daddy,” Cecilia said. And just as quickly as she had become serious and concerned about her own mortality, she forgot the notion and tromped ahead into the cornfield. Harold trailed a short distance behind her and thought about what his daughter had said. Although not as quickly as his daughter, he dismissed thoughts of his own transience and called for her to come home with him for supper.

Cecilia was staring over a textbook, still unable to concentrate, when Sarah walked into the dorm room they shared and told her she had a phone call.

“Who is it?”

“It’s your mother. She says it’s important.”

Cecilia felt her skin tingling into gooseflesh as she stood up to walk to the hall. She forced her steps to the telephone, lifted the receiver and found that her voice came out as a whisper, “Hello, mother?”

“Cecilia. Your father wants you to come home as soon as you can. He wants to see you.”

“Okay.”

“Do you have money for a bus ticket?”

“I think so.”

“Well, please be sure before we hang up, dear. I need to know now.”

Cecilia let the phone hang by its cord and hurried back to her room. She found the money she needed for the ticket in her purse and went back to the phone to tell her mother. “Yes, I have enough. Is Daddy there? Can I talk to him?”

“He’s in the hospital, Cecilia. Just come home, and we’ll talk about it when you get here.”

“Yes, mother. I promise to leave right away,” she said and heard her mother end the connection. She began to cry and found her feet to be extremely heavy as she made her way back to the room, packed a few things and left for the bus station.

“So what happened?” Malcolm asked.

“He died a few days later,” Cecilia said as she poured cider into two coffee mugs and placed them in the microwave.

“That’s incredible. He knew?”

“I think so. Just like the elephants in the stories he read to me when I was a child.”

“I’m sorry. You’ve never told me this story before.”

“Thank you. Oh, but that was a long time ago.”

“Sounds like he was a great dad.”

“He was very important to me. I loved him very much,” she said and heard the shrill beeping of the microwave as it stopped humming. She pulled the mugs of steaming cider out, poured Drambuie and a little sugar into them, and placed a cinnamon stick in each one. She handed one to Malcolm and sat across the table from him. “So what about you, how have you been?”

“Oh, fine,” he said and sipped from his mug, smacking his lips a little after the taste. “This is really good. I’ve never tasted anything like it.”

“It’s what my father used to drink. He said it helped him tell a good tale. Enough about me. You haven’t told me anything about yourself.”

“I’m fine. Tell me another story,” Malcolm said and tipped his mug again. As she tilted her head and tried to find the best words to bring her memories to life, he sipped the concoction and held the liquid in his mouth, tasting the subtleties of each distinct flavor. It was sweet, sour, and bitter. It was intricate and potent. It contained flavors that cannot be named. It was delicious and intoxicating, and he wanted more as soon as it was gone.

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