

# **Roots and Wings**

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"Good parents give their children Roots and Wings....Roots to know where home is, Wings to fly away and exercise what's been taught them."

**Jonas Salk**

"It takes a village to raise a child."

**Hillary Clinton**

"That's what I know."

**Sue Hughes**

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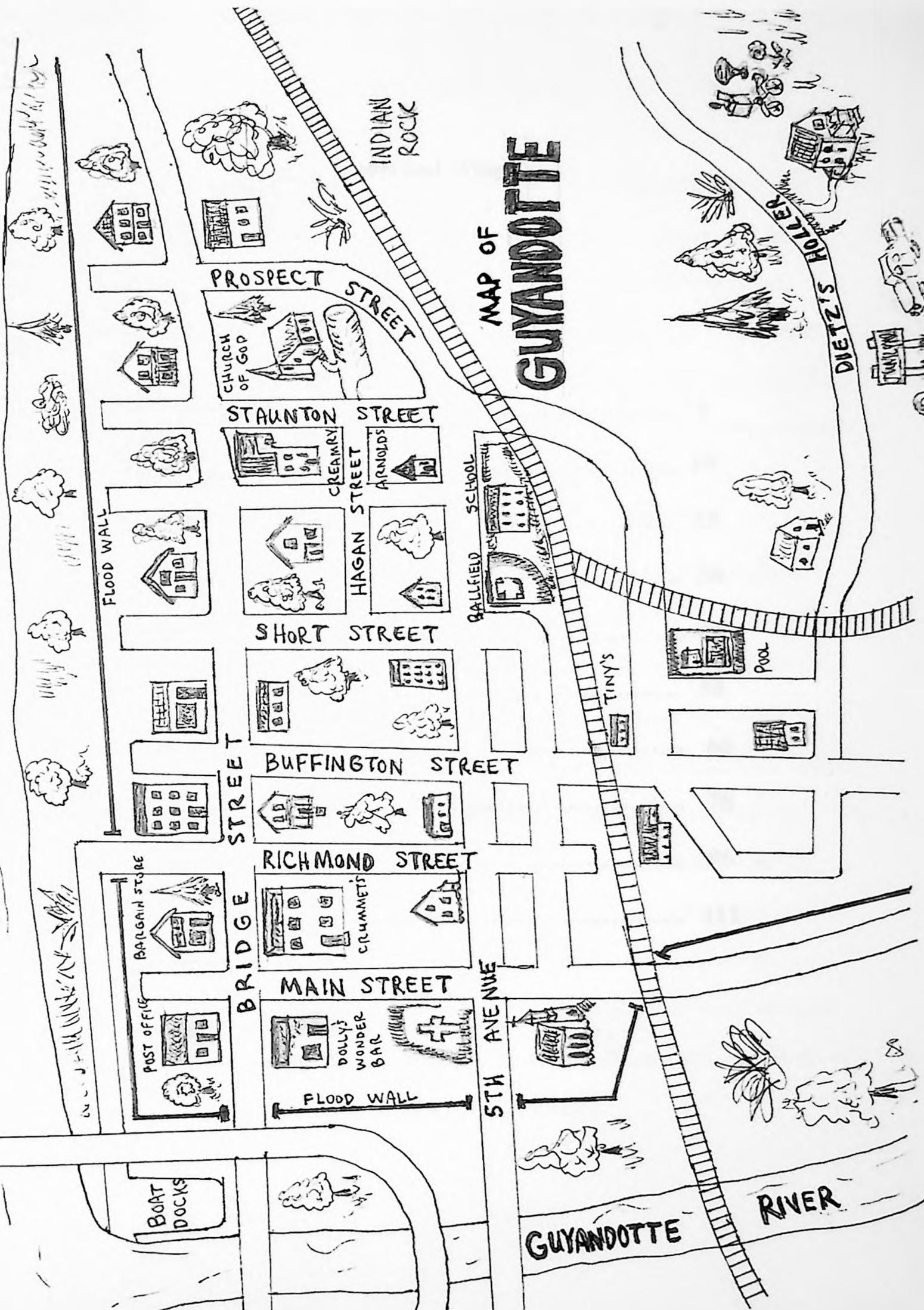
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Kateryna Rudnytzky Schray

OHIO RIVER

MAP OF GUYANDOTTE



## Roots and Wings

### Contents

<b>Roots and Wings</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Onioneyes</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Idy Bullfrog</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Eddie Peanut</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>Buggs</b> .....	<b>43</b>
<b>Mr. Lucky</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>Home</b> .....	<b>66</b>
<b>Otter</b> .....	<b>78</b>
<b>The Finger</b> .....	<b>96</b>
<b>Harvest</b> .....	<b>111</b>

## Roots and Wings

Certain experiences happen to you during your early teen years. Some of them you never think of again, others affect for the rest of your life. It's the awkward time between childhood and adulthood, when your body and mind begin to develop into whatever it is you will become. The friends you make during these years will be your oldest and dearest. They will share both your innocence and your awakening, and you theirs. I passed through this period in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an era of remarkable social, political, and moral change. But at the time, I thought it was only me.

"Where you goin'?" my mother asked as I headed out the door. Pausing in the doorway, I looked at her a long while until I finally admitted, "I guess I don't know. Just out." She shook her head and answered, "Well, go on then, you're letting in flies."

That was the trouble. I never knew where I was going. I just went.

I hopped on my bike and peddled up the brick street toward the ball field. That's what I did on most afternoons after school that spring when I was twelve years old. I knew nearly all of the guys on the teams from school. But they looked different as I leaned into the chain-link fence, weaving my fingers through the openings, and watched the game. Out on the field, they wore cool matching uniforms and caps, just like Cincinnati's Big Red Machine and other baseball teams on TV's Wide World of Sports. They had umpires, coaches, and a lively group of fans - parents, brothers and sisters - in the bleachers watching and cheering every move they made.

I went out for T-ball when I was six, but I wanted to be on my cousin Kevin's team and they didn't choose me, so I didn't show up after that. Watching the players out there today, Bonehead and Big'un slinging the ball around the bases, Shakes and Chipper chasing outfield flies, Booger and Hugo chattering at the opposing batter, now I wished I had. I imagined myself on the mound pitching one blazing fastball after another as every batter cowered in fear. I imagined myself at bat slugging one over the fence as all the girls in my class swooned from the bleachers. "There goes another one," the loudspeaker crackled across the field as I rounded the bases waving my cap to the crowd.

"Hi Chuck," a voice startled me from behind. I twisted my neck around and saw Sherry King, the girl who sat behind me in homeroom. Apparently, the ball field cast the same strange transfiguring spell on her that it did on the players on the field. She had tucked her blonde hair under a blue baseball cap the color of her eyes. A few ringlets of yellow hair escaped the cap and bounced about her neck as she spoke. The snug gold sleeveless shirt she wore revealed about an inch of belly above her white shorts.

"You should be out there, Chuck," she said, nodding her head toward the field. "I bet you'd be good," she said with a smile.

"Yeah. I wish I had, ah, was, I mean. Yeah," I replied.

"Just look at that muscle," she said, grabbing my upper arm and giving it a firm squeeze that made me grimace. "You know, Chuck, my brother has a car. A nice one. And *The Graduate* is on at the East Drive-In this weekend. I bet I could get him to take us, if you wanna."

Thoughts flew through my head like ricocheted bullets, but not one shot out. DriveIn-Dark-Sherry-Nice-Cash?-Hotdogs-Popcorn-Holding-hands-Whato-do?-

Whatosay?-Hurry! I stood there gaped mouthed and speechless, hoping some untapped reservoir in my brain would suddenly gusher forth words to save me from this awkward moment. With a blank look, I finally shot a dud out of my mouth. "Ah, I dunno," I answered truthfully.

For an awkward moment, we stood in silence as she ran her perky blue eyes up and down and all over me. Finally she said, "Well, let me know, Chuck," before running to the obscurity of the bleachers.

I had that feeling again, a confused, sick, bewildering feeling, as if something was wrong but I didn't know what. I got it all the time. I didn't feel like watching the game anymore, so I got on my bike and rode. The first intersection I came to was the corner of Short Street and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. I could continue straight on Short Street, peddle up Hagan Street and be home *or*, I could turn right on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue for a block, and then coast down the alley. If I took Short Street, maybe Dreama Wilkes would be on the porch wearing her halter-top. But if I rode down the alley, I could speed down the hill and make the baseball cards in my spokes sound like a real engine. Straight or right? Dreama or plaplaplaplapp? Then I noticed the mailbox on the corner was just a few feet away. I swerved right, then left, then hopped the curb and crashed into it, spilling onto the grass. Looking up I caught a glimpse of Sherry passing by in the back seat of her dad's station wagon, waving at me and smiling, I think.

That was the moment of my epiphany, when I realized that if I didn't make my own decisions, someone or something would make them for me.

It was springtime, and the whole world seemed fresh and new. Tulips bloomed in the front yards on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue as I trotted toward Enslow Junior High School on that crisp morning in 1970. There's nothing like breathing in the cool clean air of a spring morning, seeing the grass turn from brownish-yellow to a lush green, cheeks flushed with activity, the excitement of a new day ahead. I had gone out for the track team that week and took every opportunity to practice and train. Coach Cathell listed me as a sprinter, penciled in to run the 100 and 220-yard dashes. There were ninth graders on the team who were sprinters too, so I had a lot of catching up to do.

For first period that morning, I had Mrs. Tolley for English. We'd just finished Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and were starting James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. Unlike my other English teachers, she made these old stories interesting. The tone in her voice was different from most other teachers too. She treated us like people instead of a bunch of kids. We may have been simple 13-year-old hillbillies, but we knew the difference between a teacher who just wanted a paycheck and one who wanted us to learn. One day she told us she was going to read a section of Cooper's story omitted from our textbooks. She thought our class was mature enough to understand it and perhaps learn from it, she said.

Sitting on a stool in front of the class, she held the open book in her hand. She had a graceful figure, long auburn hair, and a voice that allowed no choice but to listen. We followed every word as she read the short section of *The Mohicans* to us like a friend revealing a secret they thought you ought to know. She told us that the Indians mimicked the white man since he possessed technology and knowledge the Indians revered. They repeated the white man's words, even when they didn't understand their meaning. Soon,

Indians were saying, "goddamn" whenever they confronted adversity, just like the white man. The Indians said "goddamn this," and "goddamn that," smiling at one another, thinking they were uttering the enlightened incantations of a superior race. Then, one day, the Indians learned what "goddamn" meant, and became confused. Why would we curse the Great Spirit, the maker of the trees, the streams, and the corn that feeds us, they asked? Why would we condemn our Creator that breathes life into us? Have we misjudged the ideas of the white man, they thought?

I listened, amazed, as Mrs. Tolley spoke. Not since first or second grade had anything at school been so fresh, so startling. Not just the words she read, but her attitude toward us triggered a hunger in me for more raw truth, insight, and wisdom. This was not your ordinary literature class. Mrs. Tolley expected more from us than our other teachers and I think she got more. It struck to my heart and made me feel alive. What I learned the short time I had her class has lasted me a lifetime.

At the end of class, she introduced a new student named Lila Fulks to our group. Lila had moved here from Kenova and Mrs. Tolley asked everyone to welcome her to our school. Lila was a lovely, delicate, girl, probably 13, with wispy blonde hair, soft blue eyes, and a fidgety way about her. She sat at her desk and stared into her *Adventures in Literature* textbook as Mrs. Tolley spoke, never looking up. As Mrs. Tolley introduced Lila, I studied her features, her narrow straight nose, arched blonde eyebrows, and high pink cheekbones. She was a vision, and had an affect on me I'd never experienced before. When the bell rang, I had to set at my desk a few minutes, pretending to organize my Meade binder, before I could stand up and go to second period.

After school, Coach Cathell cancelled track practice because of a school board meeting, but he told the pack of boys gathered in the gym to "run on your own anyway." As I leisurely jogged home to Guyandotte, my books tucked under my arm, I felt a spring in my step, a curious kind of feeling like when Mrs. Tolley read aloud. When I got about halfway home, I noticed in front of me on the sidewalk, a couple of blocks away, the thin figure of a girl I thought I recognized. It was Lila. I knew it by her short plaid "Marsha Brady" skirt and wispy blonde hair.

I increased my pace and kept an eye on the plaid skirt in front of me. The way it flapped against her thighs when she walked. The distance between us narrowed. Then I realized: I should be at track practice. I should be running. This was a good opportunity to not only impress the cute new girl with my athletic prowess, but to train for sprints with those mustached 9<sup>th</sup> graders I'd be competing with. I envisioned the scene about to unfold as I briskly loped up the narrow sidewalk like a gazelle. Soon, I would gracefully rush up beside her, barely out of breath, and start a conversation that would both dazzle and endear her.

I started running along the uneven concrete, juggling my books under my arm like an NFL running back. Now she was just a block ahead, and I noticed how she labored with her armload of books. I could carry some of those books for her, I thought. I hurried toward her, my arms and legs churning in fluid motion, struggling to cling to my jostling books. Only half a block to go, I thought, sprinting like a cheetah, my eyes still trained on Lila.

The sound of my Adidas slapping against the pavement like the hooves of a thoroughbred caught her attention and she turned and glanced back at me. My moment's

almost here, I thought. Soon, we'll be strolling side by side, talking and laughing and admiring her skirt.

But, for some reason, she had quickened her pace. She had pulled her books up closer to her chest and now took long quick steps like a petite Cossack dancer, waddling from the burden of her books. As she clumsily hurried up the sidewalk, she glanced back once more, this time with the unmistakable expression of terror in her blue eyes. Her arched eyebrows now coiled like venomous snakes hissing at me, her lips twisted from holding back a scream. Confused, I slowed down and coasted to a walk, and watched as she dumped her books on the ground and darted down Buffington Street like a rabbit on the run, her wispy blonde hair waving in the wind, her pretty plaid skirt struggling to keep up.

Lila never came back to Enslow Junior High School. I like to think it's because Mrs. Tolley's reading that day had shocked her, or that her father got another job in another town, and not because of me. But I guess I'll never know.

In the summer of my 13<sup>th</sup> year, due to some mysterious desire, I began reading passages from the *King James Bible* in bed before I turned off my lamp and went to sleep. I don't know if this habit was spawned by the terrible guilt that accompanies hormonal changes in a boy's early teenage years, or an attempt to clear the confusion brought by my few and infrequent visits to the Pentecostal church down the street, or just a radical relief from a three month vacation full of TV, swimming pool, and wiffle ball.

I rested on my propped pillow with the Bible in my hands and started with the *Psalms* and *Proverbs*, pithy bits of wisdom in an exotic tongue that required more

thinking than reading. However, it was the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke* that had the most profound impact on me. Each told the same story, yet their details and perspectives varied enough to make them unique. It seemed that each gospel writer had his own version of the truth to tell, and with the telling, each became an intricate part of that truth.

Soon after this, I began keeping a journal of my thoughts and feelings, somewhere to store my ideas and record my inner dialog, as I searched for my own truth. One spiral notebook filled up and I started another, all written with the medium point black pen I perennially kept in my pocket. I enjoyed the creative act of translating my thoughts into words and onto the neat blue-lined page, then watching those words as they took on a life of their own and participated in the ongoing creation. Every so often, alone in the lamplight, I paused, and delighted in what my words had sprung. During these rare moments, I surrendered to the power of the universe, in a blissful and egocentric microcosm, as my truth was mirrored on the page.

In one of my high school writing classes, we chose pen names to use for the semester with the idea that our peer evaluations would be more objective. At the end of the year, Mrs. Ayres summed up the semester for us, what we, and she, had learned. She told us that we had progressed as a group, but that Dr. Winston O'Boogie showed promise to become a talented writer. I then wished I'd chosen a better name.

Through the kind and careful encouragement of my teachers and others throughout the years, I gained confidence in my writing ability. I learned that writing is like everything else in life: the more you do it, the better you are. The more time you

spend by the lamp light reading and writing, the more reflective you will be, and the better you will mirror, in your own unique way, the truth that shines on all things.

## Onion Eyes

The Guyandotte River winds gracefully down its tree lined banks, under aged wrought-iron bridges marking the crossroads of small towns like Roach, Martha, Yates Crossing and Blue Sulphur. Curving past modest hillside homes and barking dogs, drifting by outcropped rocks where old men and boys sit whittling or fishing. The coffee colored water follows beside railroad tracks that snake between road and river and the long line of hopper cars, heaped to overflowing with black coal, then disappears into the distance behind another green mountain. Springing from the hills of southern West Virginia, this river is born in a land of mountain streams and shadowed hollers cradled by rolling forested hills, a land where the Hatfields and McCoys feuded, a land where coal is king and labor strikes have turned violent and bloody.

But as the river nears its end, flowing past the gray concrete floodwall built after the '37 flood, it meets backwater and slows, mingling peacefully in swirling eddies, before emptying into the wide Ohio River at the town of Guyandotte. There are no dank, dangerous underground mines here, no violent mobs of UMW pickets, no overloaded coal trucks barreling nearly out of control down narrow winding roads. But there's something in that brown water that's carried down from the coalfields, something that makes people mean, and want to feud with their neighbor. It's a little watered down by the time it gets here, but like the blood flowing through our veins, it doesn't matter whether it's upstream or downstream, it's still the same body, the same mind. Guyandotte is only where the river ends.

It was here, one hot July afternoon in 1966, that Ricky, Chuck, and Raymond Roy walked side by side up the narrow brick street beside the gray chain link fence that surrounded the Guyandotte pool. They wore only cut-off faded jeans that hung askew around their scrawny waists, and frayed ends of long white wet threads clung to their skinny thighs. Chopped-off hair, made wild and free by a combination of breeze and indifference, pointed in all directions on their over-sized heads as it dried in the sweltering sun. It was 5 o'clock and the pool crowd began to disappear in cars, on bicycles, or on foot as they made their way home to supper. The three boys hopped up the hill toward the railroad tracks as the hot red bricks stung their bare feet.

“Have you ever laid awake at night, when everyone else was asleep, and stared into the darkness, and thought what it would be like to be somebody else?” Chuck asked Raymond Roy as he hopped across the searing bricks.

“I reckon' I have, once or twice,” he answered, finding a cool path to follow in the shade of a big willow tree. “Sometimes, when I'm laying in bed, fighting for space from Ricky and Jeff, smelling the sweat stickin' to my skin, I wonder what it would be like to be J. D. or Derrick.”

Raymond slowed up to watch a robin fly past. Both boys looked up as the bird landed in the willow tree and dropped a fat worm into her nest. “Anna Marie always makes them take a real bath before they go to bed ... even in the summer!” Raymond Roy said, wide-eyed, before the glaring sun made him squint and turn his head back to the ground.

They reached the top of the hill and turned left onto the railroad tracks. The rails were too hot for bare feet, and the gravel between the ties too rough, so the boys marched in long equal strides on the creosol ties between the rails.

“Mama made me walk to their house last week to borrow some salt so she could make some beans, and I could see from the doorway, both of 'em, laying there on the carpet, in front of their color TV watching *Flipper* and eating popcorn out of a big bowl on the floor. It was like some picture out of a book at school.” Raymond Roy’s voice faded to silence, and his broad steps along the railroad ties slowed to a crawl.

“They had on pajamas,” Raymond Roy told Chuck, with a mixture of wonderment and envy. “Clean, white pajamas, with pictures of race cars and cowboys on 'em, and collars and buttons and cuffs on the pants ... just think of it.” Raymond Roy walked stiffly along the measured railroad ties, his pale blue eyes glancing ahead at the long narrow path that lay before him.

“I've never had pajamas either,” Chuck said. “I can't imagine us with pajamas. We're just not pajama people. You know what I mean?” Raymond Roy understood, but it didn't make him feel better.

“I hope Mama has something good for supper,” Ricky said.

“Yeah, I hope my mom made some chicken pot pies!” said Chuck, “I love 'em!”

“Let's look for pop bottles in the ditch,” Raymond Roy said. “We can sell 'em for deposit and buy some orange pop and Vienna sausages at Arnold’s Market.”

Without another word, the three broke their paths. Ricky and Chuck tight-roped along the concrete curb beside the railroad tracks; they walked slowly, their heads bowed, eyes searching the ditch for sparkling shimmers of glass. Raymond Roy took the other

side of the road, where his eyes followed the ditch line along the steep hillside that served as the front yard for several old well-kept homes.

The boys hunted pop bottles quite often, using the deposit for candy, pop and other treats. They spent many afternoons silently combing the ditches for Pepsi. Coke and Sprite bottles tossed out of passing cars. Sometimes, they brought Chuck's red wagon along so they didn't have to quit when their arms were full. On most of these days, the rumbling of the wagon wheels mingled with the chirping of birds and, the hours passed quite quickly. Plus, the thought of having a handful of change and a bottle of pop at the end of the day helped push them along. But this afternoon the boys were distracted by parched throats and growling bellies brought on by a long, active day at the pool. For the past five hours they had exhausted themselves, playing tag, Marco Polo, and Tarzan in the shimmering blue water of the crowded pool. Earlier in the day, they had walked to the pool without any money, hoping that they could talk the lifeguard into letting them inside by "picking up papers" for him. He agreed, so after each of them stuffed a plastic bag full of plastic cups, Sweet-Tart wrappers, and Popsicle sticks, they joined the paying crowd in the cool, cleansing waters. This was just short of paradise for these boys on this hot summer day. The only distraction from their pleasure was the long minutes endured when the Jingle-Bike man appeared at the gate of the pool on his bicycle, pushing a chest full of push-ups, Creamsicles, and Snow Cones. Watching the other kids line up with sweaty palms full of nickels and dimes, then coming away unwrapping, licking, and sucking away at some icy, odd colored confection, left the boys a little weak, both in flesh and spirit.

By the time their tired, hungry bodies advised them to head home, the two-mile journey through the hot, dusty streets of Guyandotte seemed almost impossible. Their search for pop bottles had just begun when they glimpsed something they weren't looking for, something they were sorry they found. Raymond Roy was the first to notice the two figures approaching them in the distance: two boys swaggering steadily toward them on the track ahead. Raymond Roy's eyes grew even larger behind his thick glasses, and for a moment he paused, feet planted firmly in the dust, ready to retreat.

In one terrible moment, the nightmare locked in his mind began to replay with all its gruesome details. Although it had been several weeks, the awful scene was all too fresh. The two figures were only vague stickmen emerging in the distant heat, but Raymond Roy recognized them as Doug and Butch Harris, the boys that he had never wanted to see again.

Raymond Roy bit his lip and recalled the last time he saw Doug and Butch. He was lying on the couch watching Scooby Doo when his mother asked him to go to his Aunt Suzie's to borrow a couple of onions to put in the chili. Aunt Suzie lived only a few blocks away, yet Raymond Roy's blue eyes glistened with fear when his mother asked him to go. Encounters on the playground, or walking home from school or the barbershop had taught him that the streets of Guyandotte were littered with mean, rough kids with nothing much to lose.

One lesson he learned on the playground of Guyandotte Elementary involved a marble game called "Hit It, You Get It." It was played on the west side of the school, where grades four through six gathered during recess and lunch. To play the game, one person would sit down with their legs spread wide and place a particularly valuable

marble from their collection on the ground in front of them. Then they would announce to everyone within earshot, "Hit it, you get it!" Any shooter hitting the marble from the edge of the sidewalk, the established shooting line about six feet away, won the marble. However, any marble that's shot and misses is theirs to keep.

As a fifth-grader on this playground Raymond Roy watched with curiosity and envy as these young gambling entrepreneurs risked their precious Steelies, Aggies and Bumblebees with the hope of pocketing a sack full of Cat's-eyes heavy enough to drop their drawers. Some went back to class beaming ear to ear, their drawstring pouches full of winnings, and others returned near tears after losing their favorite orange and green oversized Swirler. No matter what their outcome, Raymond Roy admired the players, and wanted to share in the excitement.

Raymond Roy had his own marble collection at home, in a red Folgers's coffee can under his bed. The can was about half full, and included a frayed canvas pouch that held his best marbles: one large and one small Steelie, a milky-white and blue Swirler, an impressive Corkscrew and, his favorite, the crystal clear Shooter. Every night before bedtime, he pulled that coffee can out and ran his hands through the smooth glass, then opened the canvas pouch and lay those five special marbles out on the floor before him like some beautiful cosmic alignment before his shining eyes.

Then, the day came that his dreams and courage converged and he decided to put his marbles on the pavement and play the game too. That morning, he jammed a strawberry Pop Tart in his mouth, grabbed the canvas pouch from underneath his bed and stuffed it in his pocket, and swaggered up the brick street to school. In Mrs. Thackston's music class, as he sang "The West Virginia Hills," all Raymond Roy could think of were

the mounds of marbles that would be his after he played "Hit It, You Get It" at recess. As he played "War Ball" in Mr. Chapman's gym class, he imagined the crowd of boys that would gather at lunchtime to flip their marbles at him like rain falling in a bucket.

Finally, the lunch bell rang and he flew from his seat and out the door toward the playground. While others sat and ate their peanut butter sandwiches from paper bags, or climbed the slicky-slide, or rode the merry-go-round, Raymond Roy sat down in the area where the marble gamblers played. From his canvas pouch he took out his crystal Shooter, placed it in between his legs, and shouted "Hit It, You Get It!"

Two classmates immediately crouched down at the line, bit their tongues in concentration, and shot two Cat's-eyes in his direction. One marble missed his crystal Shooter by two inches and the other rolled up his pant leg. The boys each took one more shot, missing again, before they walked away in disgust. Raymond Roy looked up at his three newly acquired Cat's-eyes and wiggled his leg to feel the fourth one coolly wedged under his knee. A heartfelt smile formed on Raymond Roy's lips, then he raised his head and shouted triumphantly, "Hit it, you get it!" to the world on the other side of his thick glasses.

But as he looked up, a sixth grader named Roger Sheppe stooped in front of him, smacked his crystal Shooter from about three inches away with an ugly Cat's eye, and said, "I hit it, so I get it!"

Raymond Roy was shattered. He didn't know what to do. The only verifiable rule of the game was explicit. Roger did, in fact, "hit it"; consequently, he must "get it." How could Raymond Roy argue otherwise? It didn't really matter anyway. Roger had already

rounded the corner and disappeared, clutching Raymond Roy's crystal Shooter in his sweaty little hand.

These thoughts still haunted Raymond Roy. And like so many other dreaded moments in his life, like the thoughts that tossed and turned in his mind as he lay in the darkness waiting for sleep, this one crossed the thin gray line between imagination and reality, and became truth.

Having fetched the onions from his aunt, he was on his way back home when he felt a presence behind him. Walking faster, Raymond Roy clutched the onions tighter in his hot little hands until he felt the juice ooze between his fingers. Suddenly, a strong, heavy hand fell on his shoulder and stopped him in mid-stride. The tight grip squeezed his skin and bones together. He hunched over in pain, then turned around to see Butch's angry mug just inches away, and Doug right behind him wearing a terrible grin.

"Where ya think ya goin' there, Four-Eyes?" Butch asked.

"Home," Raymond Roy whispered.

"What's the onions for?" Doug demanded in a scratchy voice.

"Ah, d-d-dinner," Raymond Roy answered with clenched jaw and watery eyes.

Doug produced a pocketknife and slowly opened the blade, turning it in his hand so that it sparkled in the sun. Raymond Roy's skinny white legs grew weak beneath him; his thin pink lower lip began to tremble, ever so slightly. Doug and Butch watched his Adam's apple protrude and quiver as he stood in silence. He wanted to speak, but the words were like a logjam in his throat. Doug flashed a mean smile and turned the knife in his rough, dirty hand. Doug watched the small knife resting in his open hand, looked at Raymond Roy, then back at the knife again. Raymond Roy's lips fluttered fast as

humming bird wings, in dry, silent prayer. With nowhere else to turn, he shot a look toward Butch in hopes of finding some pardoning light shining in his eyes. Instead, he was met with the cold hard stare of mean brown eyes. Butch's glance moved down to Raymond Roy's hands, in the direction of the onions.

"Gimme those!" he ordered.

Automatically, Raymond Roy offered them to him with outstretched arms, hoping the gift would be enough to send the two boys on their way, and end his nightmare. Butch snatched the two vegetables from his sweaty palms and turned his new possessions slowly in his hands, as a devilish glaze covered his eyes.

"Cut it up," Butch ordered Doug, handing him one of the onions.

Doug took the onion and sliced it with slow thoughtful strokes of his knife, carefully rolling it in one hand as he used the other to press the knife through its skin and flesh. He cut off two thick slices as juices mingled with his grimy, nicotine-stained hands, and produced an odor, both nauseating and overpowering. He closed the knife blade and stuffed it back in his pocket, then held the two wet white slices in front of Raymond Roy's blank blue eyes.

"Here's yer dinner, buddy!" Butch snickered as he grabbed the onion from Doug and stuffed the two white slices behind Raymond Roy's glasses.

The world suddenly went dark for Raymond Roy as the stinging onion juices forced him to shut his eyes as tightly as possible. His eyes immediately began to swell with tears as the intense aroma of the onions overpowered him, scattering his thoughts like cockroaches when the light's turned on in the kitchen.

“And don't take'em out till ya get home, punk!” Butch barked at him. Then, in a low, threatening voice, he added, “or...we'll know it.”

For the next few hours, Raymond Roy wandered blindly through the streets of Guyandotte, tears flowing freely from his red swollen eyes, his outstretched arms searching, groping, in vain for something familiar, something safe. A policeman brought him home near sundown, his eyes bloodshot from the ordeal, the two onion slices still held weakly in his trembling little hands.

Raymond Roy's chlorine-stained eyes reminded him of that day, and as he stumbled along the railroad tracks looking for pop bottles, the white-hot sun tormented him as the memory returned. Soon, he was next to Ricky and Chuck, their eyes still focused on the ground.

“Look who's a comin',” Raymond Roy whispered to them without looking up.

The two boys raised their heads and saw what Raymond Roy saw, and the sun stung their sore, brown eyes as they widened in recognition of the two approaching figures. They quickly dropped their heads again, but not so far that they couldn't still peek ahead and keep an eye on the two boys. Their pace slowed to a crawl, as they watched the figures suddenly duck into the tall weeds beside the railroad tracks and disappear.

Suddenly hopeful, their thin cracked lips muttered silent prayers into the dirt.

But the figures soon reemerged and continued toward them. Before long, the boys were face to face with Doug and Butch, who had stopped a few steps ahead to wait for them. Everyone paused under the hot white sun. Ricky and Chuck pretended to keep looking for pop bottles, while Raymond Roy's eyes stared far ahead, focused on nothing.

“Hey, how ya doin'?” came a strange, hopeless voice from Raymond Roy's lips.

“None a yer damn business, punk!” Butch replied.

Ricky, Chuck, and Raymond Roy lowered their heads in unison and began to fidget.

“Don't I know you?” Butch demanded. His tiny gray eyes squinting in the sun, his eyebrows curling in vague concentration as he stared at Raymond Roy.

“Who ... me?” came the shrill reply. Raymond Roy pushed his heavy frame glasses back on the top of his nose with his index finger, and began twirling the small mop of white fuzz on his head. His ribs appeared, and disappeared, with every breath, and it looked like his breastbone was twitching beneath his skinny, white naked chest. His eyes still searched the ground, half-heartedly, hoping that this was all just a bad dream from which he would soon awaken.

Butch's eyes suddenly opened wide and a smile appeared on his face that showed his crooked, yellow teeth. “Yeah, now I remember you ... you're Onioneys,” he announced loudly as he and Doug broke into laughter, then looked at each other, and laughed again.

A fat pigeon flew overhead, and his forlorn eyes watched it disappear into the distance, Raymond Roy felt his hopes of escaping from this new nightmare disappear as well. Only habit held his body erect. Only faith kept his heart pounding its vigil.

“Gee, we're sorry about that, buddy. You're not sore, are ya?” Butch said, with a twisted grin.

Raymond Roy grasped at these final strings of hope as he enthusiastically countered, “Heck no! That's alright! It was ... funny.” His slender frame straightened and

he pushed his glasses up again. "I knew you all were really good guys. Yeah, I could tell you were ok all along."

"Sure we are. We were just having some fun before, that's all," said Butch, giving Doug a quick look. Raymond Roy was smiling so hard, it looked like his face was about to break.

"How would you like some Mountain Dew pop?" asked Butch.

A ghostly silence paused the world as Butch's grimy hand extended the big paper cup toward Raymond Roy's anxious lips. Not a sound could be heard, not a breath was taken, until...

"Sure, I'd like that!" Raymond Roy's voice cracked the silence like a nail driven through human flesh.

Ricky and Chuck's bare feet rustled in the dust as they watched the brightly colored Dixie cup exchange hands. Their eyes met in silent anticipation as the yellow liquid inside the cup sparkled in the sun, until a cloud suddenly covered the light above and a shadow covered them all.

Butch's voice announced, "Here ya go, then, buddy."

Raymond Roy took the cup and cradled it in his delicate hands. And as he raised it to his lips, he closed his eyes and drank deeply from it.

"PAUH! Phew! Blah!" Raymond Roy spit, slung the cup to the ground, and gagged, all in one motion. "It's pee!" he finally screamed.

Doug and Butch exchanged a glance and then broke into hysterical laughter. After a few moments they moved on down the road, still bent over in laughter, and pausing every few steps to look back and laugh some more.

Ricky, Chuck, and Raymond Roy continued their journey home, but no longer searched the ground for pop bottles. Their eyes looked straight ahead, as the dying sun cowered behind the Guyandotte skyline. No one said a word all the way home. The only sounds were the birds singing in the treetops and Raymond Roy spitting in the weeds.

## Idy Bullfrog

Everyone in Guyandotte had heard of Idy Bullfrog. She was an ancient, wrinkled lady, eccentric even by Guyandotte standards. She lived alone in a humble pea green house at the end of Dietz's Holler past the junkyard at the foot of the hill that leads to the dump. Some people thought she was a witch and had changed her husband Clarence into the black cat that lurked around her house at all hours, scratching at the door, meowing to be let inside. Others said she was just "a little off," after living with her Pentecostal preacher husband who demanded that he and his wife live according to his strict, personal interpretation of the Good Book.

Charlie was twelve years old the first time he saw Idy. That Saturday morning in April, Charlie woke up early to help his dad clean out the over-filled storage building in their backyard. Father and son each made several trips, loading the old red pickup with trash and broken furniture to take to the dump. When the building was nearly empty, Charlie's eye caught a small cardboard box sitting in the back corner. The top flaps were folded over one another to seal up the box, and the word "Charlie" was scrawled with black marker on one of the flaps in his mother's handwriting. Kneeling on the cold concrete floor, Charlie anxiously unfolded the flaps. Rummaging through the box, he discovered one lost treasure after another. Here were the dusty and broken action figures he grew up with: GI Joe, Spiderman, and the TV Wrestlers. There was his odd and colorful collection of Pez-dispensers: a red and white Santa, a dark brown Scoobie Doo, and a candy spitting Charlie Brown. He found a "Get Out Of Jail Free" card and a tiny silver boot from his old Monopoly game. Lying on the bottom of the box were several

broken crayons and his Mr. T coloring book, its pages yellowed, dog-eared and torn. One by one, Charlie held each item in his hands, examining it briefly before flinging it into the "Things to Keep" box next to the door. He then looked up and noticed his dad standing in the doorway. Tilting his head in the direction of the truck, Charlie's dad smiled and said, "Come on, son. Let's get going." Charlie jumped up, ran out of the storage building, and leaped into the cab of the pick up. Soon they were bouncing up the uneven red bricks of Buffington Street, headed toward the dump.

As they passed the junkyard, Charlie noticed rows of wrecked and rusted vehicles scattered along the hillside on either side of the wide, gravel road. It was like a frozen, forgotten scene from some future archeological textbook, a graveyard of cars, trucks, and buses, abandoned and in different stages of decay. Something, a shadow, moved across the cracked windshield of a Sunday school bus, and then disappeared.

Their pickup suddenly lunged forward, jerked, and almost stalled. His dad tapped the brakes and muttered, "Damn!" Charlie grabbed the edge of the bench seat with both hands and looked ahead just as something black darted across the road.

"There goes Clarence heading for home," his dad said.

Downshifting to second, he wound the truck around a sharp curve as they headed toward the steep hill ahead. Charlie glanced out his side window again, just as Idy's house came into view. It was a tiny green frame shack with broken black shutters and a rusted tin roof. The house was so close to the road Charlie felt like they were driving through her front porch. And there was Clarence, just as his dad had said, bouncing up the flimsy wooden steps as if he owned them, warily approaching the worn screen door. Inches away from the door, the burly black cat paced back and forth, peering inside.

When the pickup reached the middle of the curve, as they were closest to Idy's green dwelling, something burst from the quiet darkness within the house, slapping the screen door open like a dam break. Suddenly, a flood of noise and commotion spilled onto the rickety porch with a thunder, causing Charlie to sit straight up and unleash a shrill squeak before he could restrain it. He hoped his dad didn't hear it.

Clarence flew from the porch with one long inspired leap, and quickly scampered into the bushes across the road. "Get the heck out'a here, you dang fool!" came the throaty roar of the hefty gray haired woman standing like a wall in front of the doorway. The screen door remained wide open, stuck fast on its hinges against the side of the house. There Idy stood, fists resting on wide hips, bulging eyes staring out into the distance. The overloaded truck lumbered round the curve, seeming to take forever to pass out of sight. Charlie struggled to face forward, toward the safety of the straight stretch of road coming up, but couldn't help but cock his head and stare at the figure on the porch, motionless and silent. Fat sagging jaws and arms stuck out of a faded yellow floral dress and quivered every time she blinked. Her salt and pepper hair was tied up in a bun above large gray eyes that stared somewhere far away. The image burned into Charlie's memory as the truck rolled by like a spaceship orbiting a horrible planet.

That was Idy Bullfrog.

In her side yard was a junk garden, a collection of items she found in the dump. Toilet seats hung on a decrepit wood trellis near the front of the garden, each seat framing the face of a different baby doll head attached to its center. Plastic flowers littered the ground and a broken white ceramic angel pointed up toward the dump. A dozen empty white milk jugs tied to a clothesline pole danced in the morning breeze. In the center of

the garden stood a shiny tan hobbyhorse tilted sideways on its broken springs. Charlie's dad threw the truck into third gear and the scene quickly disappeared behind them.

Facing forward again, Charlie shrugged, shivered slightly and looked down to realize his hands still clutched the seat. After tossing their junk from the pickup into the sea of debris at the Dietz's Holler Landfill, they turned around and headed for home.

On their way back down the hill, Charlie didn't look at Idy's house or junk garden again, but stared at the wildflowers and the rhododendron on the other side of the road, wondering if Clarence was still there.

Forty years earlier, in 1927, young Idy Latulle inherited a goodly sum of money from a great-uncle who founded Huntington's Fesenmeier's Brewery in 1891. Although now wealthy and independent, Idy lived humbly in an airy two-story frame house she shared with her sister Norma on Staunton Street. The house was just up the street from the Guyan Creamery, right next door to the Glorious Church of God, and it was seldom empty. Idy collected people, the refuse, unwanted and needy into her home, and kept them and cared for them until they could make it on their own. When Erastus Wellington fell off a ladder, broke his leg, and couldn't work at his job of painting and carpentry, Idy put him and his pregnant wife Charlotte in one of the upstairs bedrooms until he healed up. Homeless wanderers, drunks and the mentally ill who slept under bridges or in abandoned buildings sometimes came to Idy's to bask in the temporary comfort that her food and kindness provided. Most left after just a day or two, when their need for detachment forced them back into the streets and alleyways of Guyandotte. When tuition, books, and food used up all their money, students from Marshall College stayed for

weeks, even whole semesters. Idy wasn't much older than these students. With her perky gray eyes and long black hair, they saw her more as a big sister instead of a generous but eccentric lady helping them to stay in school. College counselors kept Idy's address scribbled on their desk pads when desperate students came for help that no one else could give. Sometimes the house seemed to be bursting at the seams with people, but Idy never turned anyone away.

Every morning, smells of eggs, bacon, cathead biscuits and gravy, and sometimes white hominy and sausage, floated along the ten-foot high walls of the nine congested rooms. The noontime meal brought a mixture of aromas, as Idy and Norma began cooking the day's supper, pinto beans and cornbread, beef stroganoff with rice and peas, sausage-meatloaf doused with barbeque sauce. Chocolate pie was Idy's special dessert. While supper smells filled the air, the girls prepared one of their special lunches for their guests. One of the most popular dishes, Shit-on-a-Shingle, consisted of toast smothered in hamburger and gravy. The children especially enjoyed an appetizer they called Weenie-Balls: Vienna sausage wrapped in biscuit dough. What really made their tiny eyes tear up was when Idy slammed a long roll of Eatwell bologna onto her kitchen table and cut off thick chunks to layer with a generous slice of onion, a fat squirt of French's mustard, and a fist-full of potato chips between two slices of bread. Pieces of crumbling potato chip spilled out over the edges of the white bread when she cut the sandwiches, corner to corner, before serving them to the children with a tall glass of Kool-Aid in a Tupperware cup.

Idy created recipes out of little or nothing, just like her mother did when Idy was a poor little girl growing up on South High Street. Food was scarce, and variety slim when

little Idy helped her mother boil sugar and water to make syrup for their pancakes. When they had it, they mixed peanut butter with their syrup, swiped it up with homemade bread, and filled their hungry mouths. When bits and pieces of uneaten meals accumulated in the icebox, her mother made Refrigerator Soup by dumping the leftovers into a pot of boiling water, along with some salt, pepper, and bacon grease from the metal container on the stove. In the winter, Idy's mother gave her the silver milk pail to scoop up heaps of freshly fallen snow to bring to the kitchen, where her mother added a little sugar, milk, and a shake of vanilla extract to make snow cream. Now, Idy watched the children in her house lapping up this same frozen treat she had as a girl. Just like her, the children were too busy enjoying it, and giggling at each other, to realize that they were too poor for "real" ice cream.

Folks came and went, never staying more than a few weeks, then going on with their lives, soon to be replaced by another cluster of faces. Besides the college counselors, area churches also referred the needy to Idy's home. Preacher Clarence Bullford from the Guyandotte Glorious Church of God often steered hungry mouths and wayward souls toward Idy's door for a dose of unconditional love when their needs were more than his congregation could handle.

Brother Bullford always warned those he told of Idy's accommodations that, although the woman was a great blessing, she was not yet "right with the lord." Idy, in fact, had only entered his church once, and then only after Bertie Blair had sufficiently instilled the fear of God in her by maintaining a constant prayer vigil, asking God to "set her right" for smoking the herbs Idy grew in her backyard. Brother Clarence remembered well the Easter Sunday last April when every pew was filled to overflowing with singing,

shouting, and stomping bodies, raising their voices, waving their hands, and lifting their spirits in an event the preacher liked to call “a good ol’ fashioned Guyandotte Hallelujah Chorus.” Woody Reynolds duck-walked in front of the pulpit, flapping his arms and periodically shouting “Amen!” Toots Bell stood at her pew in the back, wiping her tear drenched face, waving her lacy white hanky in the air between sobs, and periodically howling like a fire truck. Hank Merritt ran, full speed, up and down the aisles, making train noises and pulling on an imaginary cord in the air above his head. Among all this activity sat the silent and observant Idy in her yellow sundress, wiggling uncomfortably in her pew next to sore-eyed, mournful Toots.

Idy continued to take in temporary boarders, even after her sister Norma was diagnosed with TB. Although the rooms were still filled on most days, and the aroma of pinto beans, baked pies, and fried potatoes meandered through the downstairs hallways and out the back screen door, a certain empty feeling haunted Idy as the sea of faces ebbed and flowed through her life.

As Norma spent more time in bed, Idy spent more time alone. One day, Preacher Bullford knocked on Idy’s door. He peeked through the dirty screen into the front room of the house where an old man dozed in a camelback couch by the stairs, his fedora over his face. Above the man was a row of ceramic owls perched on a shelf. Newspapers and coffee cups littered the hardwood floor, a toy monkey holding cymbals sat on the mantel, and a poster of a donkey without a tail hung askew on the opposite wall. The preacher stood on the wide wooden porch and waited. Behind him stood a plump young girl with flat blonde hair and an unassuming expression. Idy hurried into the front room, wiping her hands on her apron before opening the door.

“Howdy, Miss Idy,” Clarence said.

“Well, hello, Preacher. Come on in,” Idy said.

Idy saw the young girl behind the preacher and looked her over. Her face and neck were dirty, her skin pasty. High cheekbones and a narrow chin gave her face a triangular appearance. Except for her shoulder length hair, she looked almost like a boy in her roughed up jeans, faded flannel shirt, and overstuffed duffle bag slung over her shoulder. The girl’s brown eyes had gray circles under them and a look that Idy had seen a hundred times.

“Well, who’s zat ya brought with ya, Preacher?” Idy asked. “And why ain’t ya totin’ her bag fer’er?”

“Oh, yes, ah well” he stammered, removing the bag from the girl’s shoulder, almost dropping it.

Facing Idy again, Clarence continued, “This is Debra, Miss Idy. The poor child’s walked all the way up here from Chapmanville. Only 15 years old and walking two days alone, sleeping in the woods. It’s a miracle.” The preacher threw a serious gaze toward Idy’s porch ceiling and raised his free hand skyward.

“The Lord brought her to my church door, and she tells me she wants to set herself right. Seeing how she’s over four months along with a baby, now I’m bringing her here to you,” the preacher said.

“You got no family, sweetie, back in Chapmanville?” Idy asked, putting her arm around the girl and leading her and Clarence into the parlor, guided them to the couch.

Debra turned and looked into Idy's gray eyes. "I reckon not, ma'am. My papa, he tossed me out. Told me I'z trash an' not ta come back," the girl answered, now staring down at the broken buckles of her black, dust-covered shoes.

"None of us measure up in the eyes of the lord," Clarence asserted in loud, well-spaced words that sounded out of place in Idy's accommodating parlor.

Debra moved into the bedroom next Idy ad Norma's and soon she and Idy grew closer. She cleaned the girl up and gave her some her some of her sundresses, which were big enough even when she started to show. Idy now took Debra shopping with her, since Norma always tired out so easy, and taught her to cook all her favorite recipes. Sometimes they would sit together at the kitchen table late into the night just talking.

"I 'm wantin' more fer my baby than I ever had, Idy," Debra said, cutting a piece of chocolate pie and dabbing it in her plate.

"Yea, that's what I know," Idy replied.

"Well I'm thinkin' we'un should be gettin' ta the church regular. Thad be a start."

Idy's gray eyes squinted just a tad at the thought, but soon she said, "If'n that's what ya want, Debra, I'll sure take ya there."

The two girls became a fixture at the Glorious Church of God, and Norma came too when she felt good enough. Every Wednesday and twice on Sunday they sat in the back next to Toots and listened to Clarence preach about our damnation and evil ways. Then the Glorious choir would raise their voices in song about suffering and dying and how fine heaven would be if they did everything right and got there someday. Debra clapped her hands and smiled. She felt relieved, like she was on the road to redemption. Idy endured it all for her sake. Preacher Clarence Bullford was pleased to see two new

faces among his congregation. He introduced them to the Church leaders and asked Idy to be on the Church Improvement Committee. As the weeks pass, he spent more and more time next door at Idy's house.

"Miss Idy, I think it's fine that you're bringing that young girl to God's house like you are. I've always known, deep down, that you're a good woman," the Preacher said.

"That's kind of you to say, Preacher, but I don't quite git how all this hootin' an' hollerin' an' Baptisin' kin make a soul 'right.' It just don't link together somehow," Idy said.

"There's many mysteries in this old world, Idy. We can only do our best to figure'm out. But I think the Lord's brought us together for a reason. I think He's callin' me to save your soul from eternal hell," Clarence said, taking her hand and looking into her gray eyes.

She didn't know what else to do when Norma died, so Idy let Clarence handle the service and the funeral. He preached a fine sermon that morning, telling everybody what a grand lady her sister was. How she always worked in the background doing things for people that they never knew about, and how she was always a loving sister, until the end. Debra sat next to Idy and held her hand as they listened to the Preacher's words. Toots cried so hard she threw up in her pew. Hank Merritt rushed the coffin, screaming in some unknown tongue, and had to be carried out by the ushers. All in all, it was a good service.

When Clarence and Idy tell her they're getting married, Debra is overjoyed, and laughs so hard her water breaks. It flows over the green and white linoleum tile of Idy's kitchen and creeps under the Frigidaire. In the Delivery Room at St. Mary's, Idy's at Debra's side, squeezing her hand tighter during the contractions and gently wiping the

sweat from her face. Wisps of wet blonde hair cling to Debra's skin as she puffs out syncopated breaths between screams. Idy squeezes tighter, watching Debra's brown eyes strain in their sockets.

"God's answered my prayers," she pants at Idy. "Now I'll have a family agin, my sins'll be all wiped out, just like the Preacher said."

"That's right, honey, just try to breathe, ok?" Idy answered.

When the nurse laid the baby girl on Debra's stomach, she and Idy examine it with misty eyes. It flailed about at first, struggling to adjust to the air, light, and noise of the world. Its tan complexion and tufts of coal black hair stand out next to Debra and the white sheets and walls of the antiseptic room.

Clarence and Idy are married and Debra brings little Ida Mae home to her new family on Staunton Street. The Preacher mingled easily with Idy's houseguests, pulling them aside, one by one, and informing them of their many sins and what they needed to do to escape Hell's fire. Gradually, Idy's house became more and more vacant. For the first time, she could walk through the hallway, see open doors and empty rooms, and hear her footsteps on the hardwood floors.

Clarence coerced Idy into wearing her hair up in a tight bun, and to throw away her sundresses and wear only the heavy ankle-length dresses that he bought her. On the first Easter Sunday after their marriage, Clarence dunked Idy in the Baptismal pool on the alter in front of the whole congregation, and the place went wild. The Preacher held Idy's head in his hand, and bestowed on her a new life so that she might meet him, Debra, and Ida Mae someday in the clouds. Idy opened her eyes when she emerged from the water and looked up at Clarence. She listened to the shouts, clapping, and triumphant "Amen's"

of the congregation as rivulets of her wet black hair dripped back into the pool. Spitting the water from her mouth, she whispered a prayer to herself.

The evening of her Baptismal Idy sat at her kitchen table, her hair tied in a knot, wearing a long brown calico dress and holding a picture of Ida Mae in a silver oval frame the size of her hand. Clarence walked in from the back porch, a roll of papers in one hand and a bible in the other. He tossed the papers down on the table in front of Idy, waved the Bible at her, and said, "Idy, I just been conversing with the Lord and you know what He said?" He looks for a response from Idy, but when none comes, he goes on.

"Well, a 'course ya don't. He just told me to tear this old house down and add onto the Church. An auditorium. For revivals, cantatas, plays, bingo. Whatever," he says.

Coming down the stairs for some milk and a piece of pie, Debra hears voices and stops next to the ceramic owls. Her hand on the railing, she waits and listens. The light from the upstairs hallway casts a long shadow that covers the stairs.

Idy stood up, put her fists on her hips, and looked Clarence in the eyes. "I cain't keep this up no more, Preacher. Lying to myself and ever body else. Iz all a bunch a hogwash, that's all!" she told him, her voice rising with every word.

Clarence slammed his Bible, hard, on the table, knocking the silver frame into the floor. "Idy Bullford!" he shouted, "I'll not stand for my wife blaspheming that way. Now you git down on yer knees and pray forgiveness afore the Lord strikes you down dead!"

He clinched his fists and trembled before her as he spoke. The vein in his forehead over his left eye seemed to pulse as he shook uncontrollably, waiting for her reply.

“I don’t wanna have nothing ta do with the Lord you’re talkin’ bout, Preacher,” she said.

They didn’t hear the footsteps running up the stairs or the door slam to Debra and the baby’s room. The next morning they were gone, nothing left behind but a note on the bed about redemption and salvation and the family she never had. Idy cried for days. Soon she found out that Clarence had spent most of her inheritance on his church. Penniless and alone, she moved into the house on Dietz’s Holler just before the construction crew began to tear down her home to make room for the church addition.

As the Guyandotte Glorious Church of God began to grow in size, its parishioner’s curiosity increased concerning rumors of their preacher’s shaky marriage. Clarence continued to wear his wedding ring at every sermon, even though Idy was always conspicuously absent from the congregation. His sermons grew shorter and shorter. He started showing up late for service, dragging up to the pulpit ill prepared and uninspired. Then one Sunday, he didn’t show up at all.

The image of Idy Bullfrog that burnt into Charlie’s mind lingered through the rest of the spring, the summer, and into the fall. Nearly a year later, on Halloween night, Charlie and his cousin Raymond decided to visit Idy’s house and see what a witch did on Trick-or-Treat night. It wasn't quite dark as they rode their bikes past Guyandotte pool and across the railroad tracks toward the dump. The crickets started to sing, and the night brought a cool chill. When they arrived at the gravel hill, they pushed their bikes up.

At the bend in the road just before Idy Bullfrog's shack, they heard a rustle in the bushes and stopped, staring at each other, waiting.

“That must be Clarence,” Charlie finally whispered.

“Or a big rat from the dump,” Raymond said.

Pushing the bikes round the bend, the boys passed the dim glow of the streetlight. All that remained was what little bit of moonlight the clouds and trees allowed through. Shadows of black bare branches danced on the rough gravel road and the crunch of the fallen leaves rustled beneath their feet. Now and then, the swollen moon peeked out from behind the racing clouds. Soon, the outline of the shabby house stood before them, and beyond it, the dark shadows of the junk garden, silent and still.

“Maybe we'd better turn around and go back,” Raymond whispered.

“In a minute. I want you to see this first,” Charlie said.

They pushed their bikes further up until the garden lay before them like a dark, clandestine graveyard. The whole scene seemed to hold its breath as the boys gazed at it in wonder. Raymond and Charlie leaned on their handlebars, motionless and tired, hearts pounding. The cool night air tickled the back of Charlie's neck. He and Raymond surveyed the image with appreciation and fear. The totem pole of white plastic jugs rotated slowly in the mounting breeze. The torso of a store mannequin poked out of a washing machine like a demented jack-in-the-box. The white porcelain and chrome fixtures of the kitchen sink shone like jewels in the moonlight.

The boys stood hypnotized. Charlie's grip grew tighter on his handlebars and his knees trembled beneath him. Then, a scratching sound turned their heads toward the house just as Clarence flew off the porch and into the air with a screaming “Mreeeeeerrrouw!” There on the porch steps stood the huge figure of Idy Bullfrog.

“You ain't gettin' in my house agin! Fool!” The old woman's voice exploded like thunder, then echoed up and down the hillside like a flood of noise rushing down the holler. The boys watched, wide eyed, as her fat round head swiveled in their direction.

Motionless, Charlie stood for an eternity until the chill air seized his shoulders and shook him, knocking the last ounce of warmth from his body. Idy's gray eyes glistened in the darkness, growing wider as she stared at the boys. Her huge head jutted slowly back and forth, quivering on top of the several rolls of flesh that formed her neck.

Her mouth opened and a well-deep “Crooooooooooak!” shot out as the front of her throat swelled and dropped back in place.

Panicked, Charlie and Raymond dropped their bikes and dashed down the hill so fast that they were almost falling. At the bottom, they stopped under the streetlight and looked behind them into the darkness. Then they looked at each other and realized their common thought.

“To heck with the bikes! Let's get home,” Charlie said.

A couple of days later, Charlie, Raymond, and his older brother Rick, walked up to Dietz's Holler in the middle of the day, hoping their bikes would still be there. When they got to where they left the bikes, all three boys stopped in the middle of the gravel road and stared at Idy's Junk garden. In the back of the garden, a TV antenna lay tilted in the high grass. There, hanging on the silver spokes were the bikes, like bugs pinned to the pages of a scrapbook.

## Eddie Peanut

I knew him as Eddie Peanut because of what happened at Crummet's Drug Store when I was twelve years old. Donald Howard and I were leaving the store with our *National Geographic* magazines and bags of cashews when we spied Eddie across the street in front of The Bargain Store. He was standing at the bus stop looking up and down Bridge Street like he was waiting for the bus. Then, Eddie's drifting brown eyes caught ours. He awkwardly romped across the street toward us as if guided by the strings of a drunken puppeteer, escaping just inches from a speeding Church bus full of wide-eyed children.

Eddie stomped up on the sidewalk, stopped and stared at us with his crazy eyes. I'd seen him at Guyandotte Elementary School in the Special Class, the group of retarded kids they brought into Mr. Chapman's class when he showed health movies. Eddie stood out among the other special kids. He wasn't despondent or withdrawn. In fact, I sometimes admired him for his lack of shyness, how he walked up to anyone and spoke like he'd known them all his life, even if he didn't make sense when he did.

"Hey Eddie, ever see anything like this?" Donald asked, opening his magazine to a photograph of a group of topless native girls from Tahiti and dangling it in front of Eddie.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" Eddie's ribs rippled as he cackled like a cartoon chipmunk. Then, frozen in unblinking silence, his bursting brown eyes locked on the picture staring at the curves of chocolate flesh, the colorful flowered skirts tied low at the hips, and the bouquet of young girls' smiling faces.

“Me see dat?” Eddie said as he lunged toward the magazine just before Donald yanked it away. Eddie’s forehead wrinkled up and a dejected frown formed on his face.

“Heck no! Get your own,” Donald shouted.

Donald hid the Tahitian girls safely behind his back and Eddie’s sour mood brightened. His forehead calmed like a placid ocean and his frown turned into a small round cup, filled to the brim and overflowing. His Cub Scout T-shirt was stained with a week's worth of dirt and food, his naked grimy feet rocked from heel to toe on the hot sidewalk, his open mouth revealed decayed teeth, wet and sparkling in the sun.

As we turned to walk away, Eddie saw the magazine again and grabbed at it, but succeeded in only freeing the bag of cashews from Donald’s hands, which ripped open and spilled, bouncing nuts all over the pavement. Eddie dashed off down the street, stopping only once at a safe distance to turn around and show us his scrawny middle finger.

“Come back here, you little shithead!” Donald screamed as Eddie disappeared down an alleyway. Donald and I crunched on down the sidewalk, past Fern’s Ten-Cent Store, Rick’s Tattoo Parlor, and Freddy’s Barbershop to our homes.

The next day in History class, when Mrs. Thornton left the room, Donald tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, “Hey, look at this,” pushing a drawing of Eddie toward me. The oversized mouth contained about ten teeth, most of which were black, and on his head dozens of tiny dots and dashes created his burr-head haircut. On the T-shirt, instead of a Cub Scout insignia was the figure of a peanut shell wearing a monocle, a top hat and carrying a cane. Printed in large block letters at the bottom of the sketch

was the title "EDDIE PEANUT." Inspired, I added several nuts lying around his naked, dancing feet before Mrs. Thornton grabbed the paper from my desk and threw it away.

I had known Eddie for several years. Anytime you went through town, you'd see him, the poster child of Guyandotte, always out on the streets, day and night. I saw him, his bother William, and his mother scrounging the alleyways of Guyandotte with a stolen B&B grocery buggy, searching for decent rubbish they could take home or sell. Eddie struggled to push the buggy over the rough gravels as Mrs. Peanut and little William scoured the trash racks and dump piles. I remember watching such a scene one Sunday morning as I stared out my bedroom window. I saw Eddie dashing from the buggy and running over to our trashcans to retrieve an old red baseball cap from a half-opened can. Just when Eddie slapped the paint-spotted, chewed up cap on his dirty head, his mother yelled in her quick, incoherent voice. "Pa da 'en hare, Enie!"

"Huh-uh," he replied, his capped head shaking his answer.

By this time, Mrs. Peanut had run at Eddie and grabbed him by the ear, almost lifting him off the ground.

"I 'o whib yo' az!" she said.

Dragging him over to the buggy, she snapped the cap from his head and threw it on top of the pile. Eddie ran ahead and pouted as William grabbed the handle of the buggy and began pushing it through the gravels. When Eddie and Mrs. Peanut were again engrossed with their search of the alleyway, William snatched the red cap off the top of the pile and flipped it on his head.

Eddie lived at the Guyandotte pool every summer. He hung around us at the pool every summer, eating my mom's bologna sandwiches and drinking our Kool-Aid. He

loved the crowds, the laughter, and the water. And even though he complained, you could tell he loved it when older kids threw him in the deep end. He couldn't really swim, but would splash so frantically that eventually he moved toward someone or something and grabbed a hold until he was safe. He ran and jumped in the shallow end himself, not even looking to see if someone was in the way, then he would splash about wildly until someone or something caught his interest. Most times Eddie was kicked out of the pool for jumping on some little kid, or for annoying an adult as they ate their corndogs or pushups from the concession.

Doug Harris and his brother Butch were always looking for trouble. They loved picking on other kids for no reason. So, when Eddie jumped on Butch's face and knocked him under water, the brothers were primed and cocked for revenge.

Doug pulled his big brother up out of the water and inspected him for damage. When he saw only a little blood dribble from Butch's mouth, he rushed straight for Eddie. He sat on the edge of the pool, his foot pulled up to his face, inspecting the teeth marks in his heel. The Harris boys jerked Eddie up by the arm, and took turns throwing him into the deep end of the pool, each time jumping in and dunking him until he splashed and churned so violently that they were afraid to get near him.

Eventually, when Eddie started making sounds like a porpoise in heat, several loud, shrill whistles stopped all the action and the lifeguards dragged Doug, Butch and an exhausted Eddie past the showers, the bicycle rack, and out the chain link fence.

But Doug and Butch weren't done with him yet. When Eddie was outside the gate and had wandered as far as Tiny's Market a block away, they sandwiched him between

them and the ice machine outside, boxing him in so he couldn't move. Then, still tired from dunking Eddie, they told him in panted breaths, what they had planned for him now.

Eddie threw the two bullies a puzzled look and tried to get away. Butch stepped in front of him and laughed briefly. Then Eddie raised his knee hard into Butch's groin and immediately dashed past him as he doubled in pain. Doug watched, stunned, as Eddie ran down Buffington Street like a monkey from a cage, turning every twenty feet to stare back at the Harris boys and laughing like he had good sense.

When I told Donald about it, he drew a new picture of Eddie kicking Butch Harris in the crotch as he flashed a gapped tooth smile. But this time the caption at the bottom read: Eddie Peanut – Survival of the Fittest.

## Buggs

When Buggs Arthur was twelve years old, he became obsessed with the movie *The Poseidon Adventure*. The film was popular with the public, but Buggs was addicted. The Keith-Albee showed it for several weeks, then later that summer it came to the East Drive-In for a long run and Buggs was at most screenings. All counted, he sat through 37 viewings of *The Poseidon Adventure*. I don't know if that's a record, but it should be.

It all began on December 15, 1972, the day that the movie opened in downtown Huntington. Buggs was near the front of the line, waiting for the first showing on that frigid Friday. It was the first of eighteen straight days off school for the Christmas/New Year vacation, and Buggs was beaming with excitement. Although it was sunny, he could still see the frosted breath of the others in line. He stuffed his hands deep in the pockets of his CPO jacket for warmth and took in the aroma of the fresh roasted peanuts from The Peanut Shop next door. Buggs was especially happy today because it would be almost three weeks before he would have to endure the torture of Enslow Junior High School again.

Buggs didn't fit into the school environment. In fact, school was hell for him. Every day brought snickers and insults from his classmates, and impatience from his teachers. Junior High is an awkward time for every child, but especially for Buggs. His big bucktooth smile gave him his name. Even the teachers called him that. His mother told him not to worry, that it was better than Chubsie, his old nickname. But that wasn't the bad part, you see, Buggs wasn't just bucktoothed. He wasn't just bucktoothed and chubby. He was a bucktoothed chubby sissy. Every school day was a painful reminder of

how he didn't fit the mold, of how he and the world were playing by different sets of rules.

But those thoughts were miles away as he stood in line waiting to see *The Poseidon Adventure*, the mother of all disaster movies, the movie that promised it all: adventure, romance, laughter, tears and hot buttered popcorn. The girl at the window took his money. The boy at the gate tore his ticket. The usher with the flashlight pointed toward the seat where Buggs would sit and watch the movie that would change his life forever.

In the weeks that followed everyone in his family learned the dialog to *The Poseidon Adventure*. Buggs made sure of that. During his fourth viewing, he took along a small tape recorder and taped the significant scenes. Now, Buggs' every waking moment included at least a snippet, if not a long recreation, of a sexy Carol Lynley, a boisterous Ernest Borgnine, or a poignant Gene Hackman reciting their dialog before, during and after the ship capsizes. Soon, even visiting relatives didn't blink an eye when the sound of breaking glass, high-pitched screams and general chaos suddenly erupted from the next room. No one took notice as Buggs' voice slowly slipped into character, usually that of Carol Lynley, and repeated dialog with an authenticity borne of his obsession. His older brother Chipper stole the tapes several times, throwing them on the roof of the BBF as he walked home from school. But Buggs just made new ones.

Buggs' mother became frustrated when she had to clean up the messes left by his reenactments. He would remove the three drawers, clothes and all, from his dresser and carefully place doll furniture and other props inside the empty shell. Thin Christmas

ribbon became streamers decorating for the ship's New Years Eve party. A suspended Christmas ornament became the mirror ball twirling above the dance floor of the ship. A four-quart Tupperware container full of water stood nearby, waiting for its cue from Buggs' tape recorder.

Buggs shared a room with his brother Chipper, who was constantly getting in fist fights at school because of Buggs. One day Chipper stormed down the hall and shouted at his mother standing at the iron. "I want my own room! I can't even find my bed in that mess anymore!" His mom splashed water on her husband's shirt from a 7-Up bottle and said: "Now honey, don't say that, it's just a phase. And Buggs has so few friends as it is, don't you desert him too." Chipper stormed into the living room. Before he slammed the screen door on his way out, he yelled, "It's not just the mess mom, you know what I mean! It's the way he is!"

His family realized it was getting out of hand the day Buggs' father walked past his bedroom just as the wall of water engulfed the ship. The entire room had been transformed into the ship's banquet room. Plates of food sat neatly in a row on top of a table covered with Buggs' bed sheet. Knives, forks and spoons were set out on blue washcloth napkins next to every plate. Various jelly glasses waited to be filled from the bubbly 16 ounce 7-Up that rested in a Tupperware bowl full of ice cubes.

Buggs' father stood in the doorway, gape mouthed, wide eyed, as the audiotape played in the background and Buggs, dressed in his mother's canary yellow sundress and fake pearl necklace, stumbled out of control. He swayed to the left, then to the right, catching himself on the walls and props in the room with such force that furniture slammed to the floor and dozens of knick-knacks, curios and festoons were sent flying in

the air. This chaotic stumbling was strangely choreographed with the background sounds of screams and crashes, and culminated as Buggs raced like a plump ballerina toward his twin bed and deftly uprooted it from the floor with one quick jerk. As the tape became quiet, except for a periodic and poignant scream from the capsized actors, Buggs clung to the edge of the overturned bed, his feet dangling inches above the littered hardwood floor, his own screams intermingled with those from the tape. One red high heel fell to the floor. Then, the other. Kerplunk!

“ShitfiredamnittohellBuggs!” was his father's only response. Buggs hung from the bed in white knuckled fear, and secret joy. He was relishing this final exciting moment in the world he had created. In this world, he could turn off the tape recorder anytime and the disaster would come to an end.

In the summer of 1997, Chipper Arthur drove his mother to Nelsonville, Ohio near Athens, about an hour and a half trip from her Guyandotte home, to visit someone who used to be his brother Buggs. After years of counseling, months of hormone treatments, and various surgeries, Buggs was now his sister Gina, who had contracted HIV in the 80s. Though she was a carrier, she never got AIDS and was wealthy and happy living in Nelsonville in a tidy little white frame house with a pleasant front porch overlooking US Route 33 with her significant other, Neil. Neil was a burly blonde country boy who worked as a guard at the nearby Southeastern Ohio Regional Jail. He knew all about Buggs, who he now called Buttercup. He was away on an Alaskan fishing trip with a college friend during their visit.

Seeing his brother with breasts and long hair still made Chipper uncomfortable. Whenever Gina would show off a new dress or blouse, he always looked away. Sometimes he counted the boards in the hardwood floor, noticing the water stains in the wood. Other times he inspected the stereo equipment, seeing a homemade cassette in the tape player with "Buttercup" scrawled on it in Neil's handwriting. Chipper was constantly slipping up and saying he instead of she, or Buggs instead of Buttercup or Gina, causing Buttercup to quickly retort, "No Chipper. I'm Buttercup now. That little boy you knew as Buggs is dead."

Chipper's most vivid memory of this particular visit was a videotape that Buttercup popped into the VCR for them to watch. Before pushing the play button, Buttercup turned to them, tears welling up in her eyes, and explained that it was a video of Mr. Cat's funeral, which had taken place just 3 weeks ago. In silence, they watched the TV screen scanning a carpet of fallen autumn leaves scattered beneath a large Maple tree. The camera stopped, then zoomed closer, and focused on a mound of red-brown dirt in front of a silver feeding bowl. The bowl had been stuck edge-wise into the ground as a marker, with the words "Mr. Cat" etched into it in bold block letters. The image zoomed back again, and shook noticeably, as an emotional voice they recognized as Neil's began to speak. "Mr. Cat used to play in this yard," the voice quivered from the tiny TV speaker. "He used to love to jump in the leaves when he," the voice broke, but recovered to conclude: "But Mr. Cat won't ever frolic in these leaves again." Then the scene went blank.

Buttercup's mother comforted her as she wept into a beige pillow on her powder blue couch. She cried so hard the 55-gallon fish tank trembled in the corner. The fish

darted frantically through the bubbly water above the capsized boat. Chipper sat in a wicker rocker next to them, pulling up his socks and tightening his shoelaces, not knowing how to react to this emotional scene.

When Buttercup regained her composure and the fish had settled down, her mother brought her a can of Pepsi from the refrigerator and asked Buttercup, if she could, to tell them the story of Mr. Cat. She looked at her mother with her sad brown eyes, took a sip of the Pepsi, and told them she would try.

This is what she said.

“In July 1989, Neil and I had just moved to Celina, Ohio and we had no pets. We lived under a Brokerage firm, a two-room apartment in the basement with a kitchen, living room combined, and a bedroom. It was really nice and I made curtains for the windows myself.

“Anyway, in July 1989 in Celina, where I get my hormone pills, in the middle of the road I saw a black blur as a car sped by. Others weren't watching, but I screamed ‘Oh my god, stop, stop!’ and every car stopped. It was Mr. Cat. He had really bad sore eyes. I scooped him right up and said: ‘You’re safe with me now, sweetie.’

“I kept him in a crate until Neil got home. When he walked into the apartment, I said, ‘Guess what Neil, we're a family.’ He was mad at first and said we couldn't keep it, that the landlady wouldn't let us. The old man at the Humane Society in Celina was mean. He said, ‘That's a puny little cat, and his eyes don't look very good.’ I started to cry and wouldn't hand the kitten over to him. ‘He's my baby. He's my child,’ I sobbed. People aren't sympathetic about putting animals to sleep, like they are with humans. So we told our landlady we just wanted to ‘treat’ Mr. Cat until he got better, not keep him

permanently. The apartment cost \$225 a month, all utilities paid. She raised it to \$250 after that. Later, we moved here to Nelsonville and Neil got his job at the jail. Mr. Cat and I would wait up until Neil came home every night and he'd sleep in a little ball between our pillows."

Chipper cleared his throat at the disturbing image of his brother in bed, face covered with cold cream, hair in curlers, lying next to Neil.

"Anyway, we had Mr. Cat for six years, until he got the cancer. He got skinnier and skinnier, his hair fell out. When the sedatives wore off, the pain was so bad that he screamed, not like a cat, but like a child. The pain wouldn't go away, and Mr. Cat looked worse than ever, like a skinny bald pink thing lying there in its bed. The cat doctor asked us 'Do you want me to put him to sleep?' Neil held him in his arms as the doctor injected Mr. Cat with that awful syringe. We talked and prayed together, and said goodbye. 'You're my baby, I love you,' were my last words to him."

Once again, Buttercup's puffy shoulders shook and the fish tank gurgled. Her mother patted her gently on the back as she wept, then handed her a tissue from her purse. She blew her nose loudly. "That's okay honey, cry it all out now," her mother said, comforting her. Chipper sat up in the rocker, but remained seated. His expression was a mixture of sadness and confusion. He watched the mascara roll down Buttercup's full cheeks, his mother's frail fingers pressed into the back of her pink chiffon blouse. He thought of schoolyard fights defending a little brother named Buggs. Leaning forward in the rocker, he reached over to the stereo and pushed "play" and touched Buttercup on the elbow as he eased back down in his chair. "Don't worry, little sister, you're be all right," he said.

## Mr. Lucky

Annie was a cowgirl. She loved Stetson hats, snakeskin boots, pickup trucks, Friday night line dancing at The Wild Dog Saloon. Most of all, Annie loved the feeling she got when sitting high in a saddle, her boots in the stirrups, her hands on the reins, and a beautiful, powerful horse taking her wherever she wanted to go. Each evening, after eight hours of processing mail at the post office, typing in zip codes as letter after letter flew past her, she drove to the Guyandotte fairgrounds to ride Mr. Lucky, her Palomino stallion. The fairgrounds were a flat, fenced-in grassy field next to Bottomville High School that stretched from the school cafeteria to the Ohio River road almost a mile away. One night a year, in August during the county fair, the field became the scene of what locals called hillbilly jousting, when wild-eyed boys and hairy-knuckled men proved their worth by crashing cars into submission during the demolition derby. The rest of the year it was more tranquil, a pasture where Annie and other horse lovers came on evenings and weekends to saddle-up and stroll along the worn rail fence, or sprint across the center with just a touch of the spurs. This is where Annie met Richard.

Annie was 33, with three kids, all boys. She and her husband, Bart, had married when they were both 17 and she was pregnant. She quit Rugged Cross Christian School when she started showing, three months shy of graduation. Bart quit too, to go to work and provide for his new family.

They hadn't let their rough start hold them down though. They both had GEDs and worked steadily while raising the boys with the help of Bart's mom. Annie's post office job paid good money, and Bart drove a big rig for Maier Transport out of

Barboursville. Together, they kept their drafty two story white frame house in Guyandotte warm enough in the winter, and always found something to paint, repair or replace each July. On summer evenings when music from the ice cream truck began growing in the distance, Annie would smile as she rose from the porch swing, dig into her pocket and hand out change to the boys as they appeared, then disappeared, one by one.

Annie and the boys lived there, anyway. Bart's job kept him away 20 days out of the month. His weekly runs took him to Atlanta, Charlotte, and Knoxville in his red and black Peterbuilt. The boys knew when they heard his air horns that he'd soon be coming through the door with three pokes full of pecan logs, Goo Goo Clusters, sock monkeys, smoke bombs, and other presents from *Stuckey's* and other truck stops along his route. They didn't mind that everything smelled like diesel fuel. If Annie was home when the horns sounded, she'd peek through the curtains, until she saw the words "Annie's Guy" airbrushed on the wind-scoop above his cab.

These homecomings were an oasis for her soul. Raising three boys, sorting mail 40 hours a week and finding time for riding sometimes put a strain on Annie. When it got too rough, she'd leave the boys with her mom, or her sister Patty, and keep Bart company in the truck on his shorter trips.

When Bart bought Mr. Lucky for Annie last Christmas, he also arranged to have the horse kept at the fairgrounds. The stall next to Mr. Lucky held a speckled brown and white Appaloosa mare named Aggregate that belonged to Richard. Richard took up horses and riding the previous year, 6 months after the doctors told his wife she had cancer. At 52, after 30 years of marriage, he just didn't have the energy, physically or emotionally, to cope with his wife's disease, or the care and time she now demanded. He

had to work hard, six days a week to keep his construction company in Guyandotte running. He had to pay the bills. His wife, Ilene, had just started chemotherapy at St. Mary's Hospital when Annie first met him at the stables. All the single and divorced women at the fairgrounds whispered that he "had money" whenever he passed by.

One Saturday morning in March, Richard led Aggregate back into the stall just as Annie brought Mr. Lucky out of the stable. The two slowed their pace, exchanged a glance and a smile as they passed close enough, almost, to touch. Annie mounted Mr. Lucky and rode him out to the opposite fence, where she stopped and looked over her shoulder at the stable. Peering back at the open stable door, she watched Aggregate and Richard suddenly emerge and trot toward her. Richard's horse glistened with sweat, and breathed heavily, as they approached. Annie pulled on Mr. Lucky's reins and turned to greet him.

"Howdy," Richard said, tipping his hat in her direction.

"Howdy yourself cowboy," Annie replied with a flash of her smile and playful blue eyes. "It looked like you were leaving, just now."

Then, perking up in her saddle and putting her hand on her thigh she asked, in a singsong voice, "Did, uh, something change your mind?"

"Well, uh, ha, ha," he chuckled, "maybe...me and Aggregate here, we're just gettin' our second wind."

Richard's slight paunch and short legs made him appear shorter than his 5 foot 8 inch frame. The black cowboy hat hid most of his short brown and gray hair, and his receding hairline. His bushy gray moustache didn't quite hide his stained teeth, colored by the dozen Pepsi's he drank everyday.

“May not look like it, but we can still keep up with the best of ‘em,” he boasted.

“Is that right?” she asked. “Well, let’s just see!” With that, Annie grabbed the reins with both hands, gave them a quick jerk, and raced off. Richard chased after her, as Aggregate’s tongue loped out of one side of its mouth.

After that day, Annie spent even more time at the fairgrounds, and both horses and riders grew more comfortable with one other. Richard grew up around horses and always had time to teach Annie something new.

“Don’t yank so hard on those reins, little lady, or that horse’ll never get bridle-wise.” “If you’re wantin’ to get your way when it comes to a horse, it’s better to use honey than a hammer,” he told her.

“What do you mean?” Annie asked.

“Use your reins instead of the bit to train ‘em. Then, make a cluckin’ sound when he responds. Like this, *cluck, cluck, cluck,*” Richard flipped his tongue off the roof of his mouth to demonstrate the sound. “Pretty soon, you’ll be cluckin’ and he’ll be truckin’.”

“Ha, ha! I hope I don’t sound that silly when I cluck!” Annie laughed in reply, then added, “Hey, Richard, can I use that trick on guys too?”

With all the new tricks, Annie’s confidence grew. The more she rewarded Mr. Lucky, with a “Good boy” or a stroke on the neck, the better he responded to her commands. He liked red apples in the morning and sugar cubes after a ride. She began to feel more independent and in charge of her life. When Richard showed her the poster about the spring Rodeo at the fairgrounds, she decided to enter the barrel-riding competition with Mr. Lucky. Every evening and weekend she practiced with Mr. Lucky. Richard helped by setting up the barrels and shouting encouragement. She learned to

maneuver the horse by whipping the reins to the left or the right, “*cluck, cluck, cluck,*” and to squeeze her legs around his thick middle hard enough to make him stop dead in his tracks, “*cluck.*”

Annie told her mom and Patty about the rodeo and, for the next few weeks, they were constantly on the phone together planning for the event. The girls took Bart’s Visa card to the mall and bought all new cowgirl clothes from the western-wear shop. Patty stuffed herself in some size 12 Levi’s and put on a see-through white blouse and a cute blue vest embroidered with golden lassoes. Lovey, their mother, wore a frilly white blouse with turquoise buttons, and a long blue-jean skirt, split up the side, to expose her white boots and thick thighs. Next to them, Annie looked like the cover of *American Cowboy* magazine. Straight blonde hair spread from under her white Stetson and feathered halfway down her back. She wore a tiny black vest barely held together in the front by two pearl snaps, and a red suede bolero jacket covered with long beige fringe. Below her exposed midriff sparkled a silver horseshoe buckle. Her skin-tight black jeans were neatly tucked inside her gray and white snakeskin boots.

Annie’s blue eyes beamed with excitement the day of the rodeo when she, Lovey, and Patty sashayed onto the fairgrounds, sporting tulips in their hats taken from the bouquet Bart had sent from Atlanta that morning. Wooden bleachers on each side of the field were full of happy white faces in cowboy hats cheering for their favorite rider. Patty had commandeered an area in the front row by placing purses and hats on the bleacher seats, and standing guard until Bart’s mother brought the boys to fill them.

Finally, Mr. Lucky trotted out onto the field with Annie, sitting erect and grinning, rotating her white-gloved hand to the crowd in Miss America fashion. When

she took her mark at the starting line, Lovey and Patty waved their hats in the air, and the boys whooped and hollered from the bleachers. Then, for a split-second before the starter fired his gun, the crowd went silent. Mr. Lucky's thick white tail and mane stood out against his shiny copper coat, all bronze except for the eight to ten inches of white on the bottom of his legs that looked like socks. Annie bit her lip and flipped the reins around her wrist in preparation. Taking a deep breath, she caught a whiff of freshly mown grass, mingled with wild onions and horseshit, floating in the evening breeze.

*Bang!* They started out slow and cautious around the first few barrels, gliding smoothly from one, *cluck*, to the next, *cluck*, until she began to sense an easy rhythm, like she and Mr. Lucky were one body, one mind, dancing together in a dream. Maybe she had a chance to win, she thought. Only two barrels left. *Cluck*. Now one. She pulled Mr. Lucky close to the final barrel, and then watched it slowly lean, and topple over. The rodeo clown romped out quickly to straighten the barrel, then just as quickly disappeared behind the fence. Even with his white face-paint, red bulb nose, and wild orange wig, Annie couldn't help but notice how much the clown looked like Bart. She didn't win the competition, but she impressed Lovey and Patty by how well she handled Mr. Lucky around all those barrels. Richard was impressed too.

"Maybe you didn't get 'round them barrels as quick as those other riders but, I tell you what, you're sure the best lookin' one out there today, Annie," Richard told her with a smile and a confident nod of his head.

In the weeks that followed, Richard's wife grew worse, and Annie and Richard grew closer. Hospice took care of her now at her mother's house, leaving Richard with more time at the fairgrounds. The chemotherapy only slowed the disease down. She lay

in bed, bald, helpless and dependent, waiting for a miracle, trying to endure lonely hours of pain and desperation. Sometimes, late at night, the phone rang, and Annie's and Patty's drunken voices would tell her stories about her husband and the other woman he was seeing.

Soon, Richard and Annie met in places other than the fairgrounds. Most nights found them at Dolly's Wonderbar, dancing to western-swing and hugging longneck Buds. Annie's enthusiasm, slim figure and cowgirl chic stood out, while Richard, squatty and bleary-eyed, followed her movements with an odd mixture of admiration and dread. Most of the men at the Wonderbar knew Annie, and the ones that didn't, wanted to.

More than once, their spring / winter romance caused a confrontation between Richard and one of the younger cowboys wanting to scoot Annie onto the dance floor. These scenes grew more awkward and embarrassing. Late in the evening, after a few beers and dances, Richard would slump at his barstool alone, with a Marlboro Light hanging from his lips, and lines around his eyes that weren't there the night before.

One day, Bart appeared at his mother-in-law's office

"What're you doing here, honey?" Lovey asked, as Bart took the seat on the other side of her desk.

"Mom...we need to talk," came his choked reply.

His red eyes and sullen expression told her all she needed to know, but he went on anyway.

"Everybody's talking. Annie's been fooling around. I don't know what to do."

Curious clerks and customers passed slowly by her doorway, like rubber neckers staring at an accident, as he pleaded with Lovey between sobs and tears.

"I still love her, and I don't want to lose the boys. How can I get her back?" he cried.

"Well, I don't know. She's hardheaded," Lovey said.

"What can I do, Mom?" Bart asked.

"Sometimes we have to do things we don't want to do. You know how she is," is all Lovey had to say.

The following week Annie and Bart's, and Richard and Ilene's divorce announcements appeared in *The Guyandotte Times*, right next to the horoscopes. Both Annie and Richard were born under the sign of Taurus. As he stood in the stable at the fairgrounds looking at the paper, Annie put her head on his shoulder and read their fortune aloud: *Luck arrives via hard work and perseverance.*

It seemed as if fate was calling their hand.

In November, Richard and Annie moved into the new house they had built on Richard's family farm near Indian Rock. Everything about the farm was perfect, from the roomy barn where Aggregate and Mr. Lucky now stayed, to the rustic cabin that adequately, for now, held all Annie's possessions. The over-sized bedroom set that Bart's Peterbuilt had brought from the Amish country looked like it belonged among the hardwood floors and rural surroundings of her new farm. She drove new nails and hung up her horse pictures on the walls, and tacked one of Mr. Lucky's shoes above the doorway. Lovey and Patty helped her wallpaper and drag in new furniture and appliances, until soon the once empty rooms now looked like a feature from *Southern Living* magazine. Exhausted, the girls plopped down on Annie's new sectional sofa and celebrated with champagne and sherbet. They lapped up their treat and gazed out the

windows of the patio room, where the green rolling hills of Guyandotte cradled the Ohio River, and the cables of the East Huntington Bridge were illuminated in the summer dusk.

“Just look at all this stuff, Annie!” Lovey exclaimed, whipping the sherbet off her chin and looking around the room.

“Yeah, you lucky bitch,” Patty said with a smirk.

“I’m gettin’ some more a this. It rocks! How ‘bout you all?” Patty continued as she headed toward the kitchen.

“I’m not finished yet,” Annie answered.

The boys didn’t like living on the farm. Besides being stranded on a hillside away from their friends, it felt awkward when Richard tried to play father to them. Annie, too, sensed a certain uneasiness when she, Richard, and the boys occupied the same room. She had always been an affectionate, touchy-feely woman, but the boys made her self-conscious and kept her from getting all she wanted. Their furtive glances seemed judgmental, and finally repressive, to her.

Bart moved to North Carolina to look for work, and the boys moved there with him. When he found a job, his mother moved there too to take care of the boys. Annie cried when she put the boys and their bags on the bus, and stood and waved goodbye until it drove out of the greyhound station, down Fourth Avenue, and out of sight. Now she could use their rooms to store the antiques she gathered from estate sales on the weekends.

Of course, now that Aggregate and Mr. Lucky lived in their barn, they needed a horse trailer and a new heavy-duty pick-up to haul them to the fairgrounds and horse

trails. Annie kept her T-bird even after she and Richard hauled the new Sundowner Aluminum 4-Horse trailer behind their new F-350 Lariat 4 Wheel-Drive Ford truck. Plus, she had Richard digging posts for a corral on some flat land near the barn so she could see the horses through the kitchen window. He leaned on his post-hole digger and watched as Annie jumped into the new red Ford and spun off down the old dirt road to meet Patty and her mom for the lunch buffet at *Golden Corral*.

“Everything turns out so good for you. No matter what!” Patty said, wolfing down a plate full of liver and onions and looking at Annie across the table.

“Don’t be pissy, Pat! She’s worked for what she’s got,” Lovey scolded, brandishing her fork in irritation.

“It could be worse. Could be better,” Annie said as she stabbed her fork into a slab of ham and began sawing it with her knife. “Seems like you always want what you don’t have.” She popped the morsel in her mouth, cocked her head slightly, and slowly chewed.

With all the new material objects to pay for, Annie began to spend more time at work, volunteering for overtime to make extra money. Now with the boys gone, she no longer had to be home for them, no longer had to pick them up or drop them off, no longer had to worry about them playing catch with her snow-globe collection, or finding their action figures mixed in with her Hummel figurines. For the first time since she was 17, she only had to worry about herself. Now she could spend her extra time socializing after work, and taking care of the farm and the horses, and meeting her mom and sister for lunch.

“Well, he fell asleep again last night, Mom! There I was, all perfumed and spunky, and he’s lying there snoring like a horse,” Annie said as the *Stewart’s* curb boy walked away from the truck with their order.

“Blah, blah, blah! So, Little Miss Rich Girl’s horny. I’m soooo sorry!” Patty pouted from the back seat.

“You girls shut up before that boy hears you,” Lovey whispered, then added in a normal voice, “Annie, you know you can’t have everything. Richard’s not a young man anymore. And he’s not that healthy either.”

When the boy brought their food, Annie raised her window a little so he could hang the tray. After handing out the hotdogs, root beer, and fries she turned to Lovey and said, “I’m not sure what I want anymore, Mom.”

Lovey finished chewing, swallowed, and asked, “Don’t you still love Richard?”

With her head hung down, and a pucker on her lips, she examined her curly fries, and answered, “No, ...I don’t think I do.”

A gargled laugh came from the back seat. “Nothing left to love for, huh sis?”

After that, Annie, Lovey, and Patty were on the phone together daily, trying to figure out how she could get out of this mess without losing everything. Richard had the farm in his mother’s name, and the truck, trailer, and new furniture wasn’t paid for yet. Together, they scheduled a time, rented a U-Haul, and storage building where everything could be safe. Annie’s friend from the post office, Big’un, came to help load the truck.

When Lovey got the call in her office, she was devastated. “What? You didn’t get anything?” she cried into the receiver. Annie told her that Richard had suspected something was up and had tapped the phone. He knew everything. He even knew about

Big'un. When Annie, Patty, and Big'un pulled into the gravel driveway of the farm, three Cabell county sheriff's cruisers were waiting for them. They had the taped conversations, and now they had three guilty looking people with a U-Haul and a horse trailer. All Lovey could say was "Shit."

At first, it was bad, real bad. Annie moved in with Lovey, where she moped and cried for days. She crammed Lovey's garage full of boxes of clothes and other items Richard and the Sheriff said she could take. Lovey's once immaculate house was becoming a pigsty, with empty cans, bowls and newspapers littering every corner and cranny. Annie moped around the house, listless, her hair in tangles, circles under her eyes. Lovey couldn't park in her garage and the driveway was always blocked by Annie's big Ford truck.

"Honey, you can't go on like this. Why don't you call Richard, or better yet, go over and talk to him," Lovey asked as she went through her living room filling a garbage bag with waded tissues and empty soda cans.

Annie rolled over on the couch to face her mom. She blinked her eyes to focus, and smiled, just a little.

"I think I will," she answered. "I think I will."

Annie started to knock on the door of the house, but then just opened it and walked in. Richard startled up from the day bed and looked at her standing there in her black sleeveless cardigan sweater with little white horses galloping across it. She could tell he'd been crying.

"Annie, what're you doing here?"

"I've come to talk. If you'll let me," she answered.

“What happened to us? I thought we were good. That we were real,” he said in a flat, dead tone.

“It’s all my fault Richard. Things happened so fast.” Her voice quivered. She took a few steps toward him, and then whispered. “Too fast. All the changes in my life, you know. I just messed up.”

Richard wiped his nose on his flannel shirt. A hurt sound escaped from him.

“And, I didn’t think you’d always be there for me,” Annie continued, now in a stronger voice. “Sometimes you weren’t, you know.”

“Oh, Annie!” Richard cried as he stood and put his arms around her.

“I’ll always be there for you from now on,” he promised.

Lovey and Patty helped Annie move that evening.

In the days, nights, and weeks that followed, Richard strived to keep his wife happy. They skipped work and spent the day together, working on the farm or in the fields, fixing elaborate meals, and making love. Their affection wasn’t confined to the oversized Amish bed. It spilled over into the hayloft of the barn, while Aggregate and Mr. Lucky snorted below in their stalls. It mingled with the grass and mud of the pasture, while rabbits watched from the tall weeds. It spread onto the kitchen table, as plates full of bacon, sausage, and biscuits fell crashing to the floor. Everything seemed to be falling into place.

Richard had lost Annie once, but was determined to keep her happy and content this time, so that she would never leave again. He found out from Patty that she wanted a landscaped patio and in-ground pool for the backyard, so he started building it himself. A half-ton of rocky dirt needed digging and stacks of landscape blocks needed to be carried

and positioned in higher and higher rows. He had to fell three towering sycamores to make room for it all, and their roots were deep and stubborn. But it was all a labor of love for Richard.

With all that he was doing, and all they were doing together, Richard began to feel that Annie had turned around, that she now focused only on making him happy. His memory of those younger cowboys vying for her affections on the dance floor at *Dolly's Wonderbar* slowly faded. Now when he saw that glint in her eye and that sly smile form on her lips, he knew he was the one putting it there. And his belief only made him want to work harder to keep it that way.

One Friday morning, as Richard got out of his truck at a construction site he felt a sudden tightness in his chest. He leaned against the door of his truck and tried to remember what he'd eaten for breakfast. He'd felt these before, but never with as much pressure, like a vise around his chest. It scared him. He felt queasy. Maybe it was just the cathead biscuits, ham and gravy Annie fixed that morning. That afternoon, he went to the Medical Group office downtown, where Dr. McClelland scheduled an EKG, blood-work, and a stress test for Monday morning.

That night after dinner, Richard told Annie about his doctor visit.

"The doctor said it could just be indigestion," Richard told her as she dumped the pork chop bones into the garbage.

"Yeah, it's probably nothing to worry about, honey," she said nervously while filling the dishwasher.

Richard set his beer down on the trestle table and stared ahead blankly.

Annie wiped her hands on the dishtowel and walked over to Richard.

“Oh, honey...don't you worry. I'll take care of you,” she told him, rubbing his shoulders and lightly kissing the bald spot on top of his head. “You're my man,” she said, hugging his neck.

That weekend, Annie followed Richard everywhere, touching, petting, and caressing him as if he were a magic lamp. She brought cold beer to him while he wrestled with the landscape block out back, coaxing him to take a break from the heat.

“Take it easy, honey. You're not as spry as you used to be,” she said, popping open the can and handing it to him.

“I'm a...fine. I'm a...your man...right, Annie?” he said, looking at her with tired eyes and wiping his forehead.

“Look how sweaty you are! Here, let me do that for you,” she said, taking off her halter-top and slowly wiping his face and body with it.

She wiped him harder, slowly forcing him down onto the matted, muddy grass next to the rough gray block he had been laying. She could smell the earth that was their bed, feel the firm ground beneath her. They struggled there while throes of passion and pain intermingled and mixed with the dirt and flesh until all became one and it ended.

Richard lay limp and silent under Annie, his eyes no longer focused on her, but somewhere far away. The paramedics arrived just as the U-Haul pulled up with Lovey, Patty, and Big'un. The EMT's took turns pumping his chest and breathing into his mouth, trying to revive him, but it was no use. They rushed his body into the ambulance and sped away toward St. Mary's Hospital, while Lovey, Patty, Big'un and Annie stayed behind to load the U-Haul and horse trailer.

Annie didn't get the farm, but she got most everything else. Plus, she got the sympathy of everyone, except maybe Patty.

"Yes, she had to see it all, poor thing. It was terrible," Lovey told her friends. "She'll live with that the rest of her life."

The boys soon moved back home, and Annie promptly took them to Myrtle Beach and King's Island as a sort of therapy. When they returned, they all moved in with Lovey until they could find a place of their own. Of course, Lovey and her neighbors didn't like the big horse trailer parked in her small driveway. But Annie is recovering well. The insurance company paid everything off and that cute agent handed Annie a handsome check when she drove to Charleston to pick it up. That, along with Bart's child support comes to quite a bit of money for Annie. Enough for a while, anyway.

She sold Aggregate and Mr. Lucky. They held too many memories for her to keep. Annie hopes to find another horse someday though, when the time comes. Even though it'll never be quite the same as it was with Mr. Lucky, Annie's certain that she'll learn even more tricks with her next horse.

## Home

Big'un Adkins lived with his mother at 315 Prospect Street in Guyandotte, but that wasn't his home. That was just where the Parole Office sent his mail to remind him when it was time to come in for his drug test. He slept a lot of different places, at the Motor Lodge when his buddies had one of their parties, in the cab of his pick-up when the weather was warm, or sometimes on his mother's front porch. Ever since he got in trouble with the law, he was only allowed inside the house when his mother was home and awake to keep an eye on him. So lately, when the pre-dawn hours begged sleep and the Harleys and Yellow Cabs roared off into the darkness leaving Big'un alone on the sidewalk in front of Dolly's Wonder Bar, he staggered up Riverside Drive toward Altizer and the broken aluminum door of Juanita's trailer.

The three miles from the bar to her trailer were quiet and confusing ones. The infrequent streetlamps along the river road allowed barely enough light to guide him as he stumbled his way through the floodwall, under the railroad trestle and into the trailer park.

"Neeter! Hey, Neeter! Lemme in!" Big'un's words rumbled like a wave of thunder down the gravel path to the end of the 6-Lot trailer park.

The low and lengthy growl of the dog on the other side of the silver door soon brought a chorus of yelping and howling from nearby trailers. Bracing himself with an unsteady hand on the flimsy porch railing, Big'un opened one eye as the window beside him suddenly filled with light and the silhouette of several bowling trophies. As he heard the quick, hard steps of Juanita's feet toddle closer to the door, a lazy smile formed on the slightly raised corner of his mouth, and he opened his other eye to greet her.

“Shit, Big’un, shut up and git in here,” Juanita said as she pushed open the door with one arm and held Little Bit, her black miniature Schnauzer, in the other. Standing in the doorway buck naked, she tried to hold the dog as he squirmed and snarled at Big’un. She was a beautiful woman, by trailer park standards. Her straight red hair reached her shoulders and then flipped up on the sides like Mary Tyler Moore’s. Her mean green eyes glared at Big’un and her mouth was in a scowl as she awkwardly held the door open for him. The half-moon high above the trailer park bathed her creamy skin in a soft glow, cast her slender shadow on the door, and revealed a Guyandotte tan that would disappear with her shower later in the day. The moonlight played upon her pleasant breasts as they jiggled every time Little Bit struggled in her arms.

“Damn ... why don't that dog like me?” Big’un wondered aloud. “When I picked him up at the pound he was lickin' the hell out of me. Happy like he had good sense. Now look at 'em,” he said as he pointed a wobbly finger at the dog.

Suddenly, Little Bit lunged forward, almost jumping out of Juanita's arms, and snapped at Big’un's shaky finger. Before she could pull him back, the dog snipped the tip of Big’un’s finger with its sharp teeth, squirting a little stream of blood into the air before he could clamp the wound shut with his other hand.

“Shit fire! Damn it to Hell!” Big’un screamed loud enough to start the yelping and howling from the other trailers again. “That black devil's trying to kill me,” he said as he twisted the bottom of his tee shirt around his bleeding finger and rocked back and forth in agony. Tears welled up in his eyes and he said in a broken voice, “I just wanna go to bed, Neeter.”

"I'm not sleeping next to your drunken bloody ass. You just heap up on the day bed. And don't get no blood on it, it's rented," Juanita scolded. He crawled onto the cramped bed, carefully holding his finger in his shirt and away from the soft orange and blue quilt.

She stood in the shadows for a moment, stiff and silent, her mouth formed into an angry pucker and her eyes glaring at him like spring ice. Then she twirled around and walked away. Big'un opened one eye and watched her skinny bare ass oscillate down the hallway to her bed. Little Bit's head hung over her shoulder and stared back at him.

The dog threw one last yelp toward the day bed just before Juanita slammed the bedroom door.

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Months ago, Big'un met Juanita during one of his buddy's parties at the Motor Lodge. Big'un tagged along to these parties with five or six guys from the East End Body Shop, where he worked part-time, when he needed to, detailing and cleaning cars for minimum wage. Each of them pitched in enough money to rent a single room at the Motor Lodge, which was across the street from The Kat's Meow, a strip bar. They brought whiskey, beer, drugs to the room, shot the bull, got high, and watched *Wheel Of Fortune* and *Jeopardy* on the TV anchored to the dressing table. When they became, as a group, suitably drunk enough they invaded The Kat's Meow for a wild night of bug-eyed howling and rowdiness. About 4 or 5 am, high and horny, they wove as a pack across

four lanes of traffic back to the motel room where they passed out on the floor until the cleaning lady chased them away. More times than not, they forgot to use the beds.

Big'un had never gotten lucky at The Kat's Meow. New girls showed up all the time, so there was scant opportunity to develop a relationship with any particular one. They weren't like the skanky women at the Wonder Bar, with their tired eyes, stretch-marks and potbellies. The girls at The Kat's Meow seemed foreign and exotic. Their fancy costumes, styled hair, and eye-catching make-up made them seem remote and unapproachable.

The crowd erupted when Kandy sashayed down the runway in her leather vest, shiny-spurred boots, and cowboy hat stuffed over penny pink curls as she twirled a lariat to a Travis Tritt tune. The room ignited with dangerous electricity when Salome danced onto the plywood stage to the thumping, hypnotic bass of Led Zeppelin's *Kashmir*. Raven hair and colorful veils flowed with the music as she whirled in circles, her braceleted arms stretched skyward, playfully kicking a mannequin head that lay on the stage with her bare white feet. Finally, she punted the head into the crowd, knocking over a pitcher of beer that sent that table scrambling.

These girls were from another world, Big'un thought. Their uptown attitude, bright red lips, and sexy blue eye shadow gave them a glamour he'd only seen in TV award shows. They were there to see, but only from the other side of the screen. Big'un clinched the velvet rope that surrounded the stage in anticipation of the next dancer.

This was the night that Juanita made her debut. Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers energized the smoky air as their wild guitars blared from overworked speakers hidden in

the darkness. Then, like a shiny new penny on a dull gray sidewalk, Juanita pranced onto the stage as Tom began to sing:

*It don't really matter to me, baby,*

*Everybody's got to fight to be free.*

*You ... don't ... have ... to live like a refugee*

*(You don't have to live like a refugee).*

Was it the music, the mescaline, or the cute way she bit her bottom lip and squinted in concentration when she performed her routine? Whatever it was, Juanita brought a certain atmosphere into the room that made Big'un feel warm, comfortable, and trouble-free. She made him feel at home.

While all the other customers whistled and yelled, Big'un stood quietly at the edge of the stage, staring up at Juanita as she kicked, shimmied, and disrobed slowly, piece-by-piece, in time to the music. First, she tossed the flip-flops off her feet and into the darkness. Next, she slowly unzipped her Daisy Dukes, carefully stepped out of them, and flung them nervously up in the air and behind her. Striking a pretty pose, she then took the bottom of her tight Have-A-Nice-Day tee shirt and slowly inched it up. Twisting it teasingly, she raised the shirt, first above her yellow thong, then above her pierced belly button, then enticingly up to the bottom of her breasts. After a brief struggle, she leaned forward, grabbed the back of the shirt, pulled it over her head and heaved it toward the opposite wall. At the end of the song, she tore off her rhinestone studded yellow thong and twirled it above her head. The crowd went wild. Before bouncing off into the back

room with the other strippers, she let go of the spinning thong and sent it flying across the stage, past a man in business suit, a trucker cradling his warm beer, the high school boys who got in with fake ID's, and smack dab in Big'un's face as he raised up with her shirt in his hand. He grimaced, plucked it off his face, and held it tightly in his other hand. With a broad smile, he used it to carefully wipe the trickle of blood from the corner of his left eye.

Big'un stayed late at The Kat's Meow that night, long after his buddies left for the peep show next door. He stayed for Juanita's final show, an athletic routine to the tune of Three Dog Night's "Mama Told Me Not To Come," then waited for her at the back door as the place was closing. Coming out onto the nearly empty gravel parking lot, she noticed Big'un just as the door slammed shut behind her. Startled, she reached into the pocket of her satin bowling jacket for her pepper spray. With her hand tightly clasping the tiny cylinder, Juanita looked Big'un over slowly, her green eyes roving up and down him as if to some music playing inside her head. Raising one corner of her mouth, she nodded her head slightly as if she knew something he didn't.

"Whada ya waitin' for?" she finally asked him.

Big'un stared at the hard white gravel at his feet, flipping one over with the toe of his tennis shoe and searching for something to say.

"You, I guess. I liked your dancing. You're real talented," he said.

"Thanks," she said, pursing her lips into an abbreviated smile.

"Oh, and I wanted to give you these back," Big'un held out both hands with her thong and shirt in them.

"Thanks. Man, what happened to your eye? Looks like a bad paper cut." Juanita stepped closer to him and lightly touched his face, gently turning Big'un's head to examine the wound.

"Izat your truck over there?" she said, nodding at the only vehicle in sight.

"Yea. Ya need a ride anywhere?" he asked.

Her eyes opened a little wider and her mouth slanted toward the truck. "Mmm, ok. Sure. That Cabbie'll figger et out when he gets here, I guess."

After that night, Big'un became a regular at Juanita's trailer park, and a few weeks later, he brought her a tiny black puppy for Valentine's Day. It seemed that his life was getting better since he found Juanita. She made him stop the drugs, and slowed down his drinking. He even thought about getting a real job.

Although his life improved, Big'un's troubled past still haunted him. His mother let him inside her house more often, but she still didn't trust him there alone. Joe, his Parole Officer, acted friendlier and more helpful than before, but he was still all business when it came to monthly drug tests.

"Joe, how'd you get on here?" Big'un asked as they walked down the dim hallway to the State office building's restroom.

"Criminal Justice," Joe answered as he held the restroom door open for Big'un. "I got a degree in Criminal Justice and landed this job a week later. Plus, my aunt's the County Commissioner, I guess that helped too."

"You gotta have a college degree to watch people pee?" Big'un asked in an uncomfortably loud voice that started toilet paper rolls spinning from inside several stalls.

"Well, yeah. I guess you do," Joe replied.

"Shit," Big'un said as he unzipped and started filling the plastic cup.

"Why do they call you Big'un?" Joe asked, watching him fill the cup.

"I got that name when I was a kid because I liked to drink 7-UP. I drank it all the time," he answered.

"Huh? I don't get it." Joe said.

"You know, the UN-Cola. I used to drink it straight out of the 2 liter bottles. Pretty soon all the kids started calling me Big'un. I don't drink it anymore, but they still call me that," he said.

"Oh," Joe replied.

When the results came back, Joe was surprised that Big'un passed his drug test. So was Big'un. Juanita just smiled and said, "I knew you could do it." For the first time in a long time, he felt good about himself and his life.

Still, Big'un didn't get a real job, and he didn't stop drinking completely, but he did stay over at Juanita's trailer if he didn't pass out along the way.

One afternoon, while Big'un and Juanita were having a slow, easy roll on the day bed and listening to Jerry Springer on TV, Little Bit, for some reason, became agitated and started growling and barking. Big'un raised his head, then one eyebrow, and threw an intimidating stare at the dog in an effort to quell its anger.

"Shut up dog," he said in a deep strong voice not unlike John Wayne in that movie with Maureen O'Hara.

Little Bit yelped back, undaunted.

"Don't make me get up, dammit," came Big'un's ultimatum.

Little Bit stood there, steely eyed and defiant, looking Big'un straight in the eyes, poised for action.

He yelped again. Twice.

"Okay, you're askin' for it," Big'un said as he pushed himself up from the day bed, leaving Juanita's musky fragrance. He caught a glimpse of her smiling lips just before he rose and turned toward the dog.

Our lives can change dramatically in a few precious seconds, our hopes and dreams altered in the context of a sigh. Big'un's life was evidence of that. As he headed toward the dog, Little Bit, enraged by some unnamed fury, pounced at Big'un and snapped at his faltering erection with the zeal of a flying monkey.

"Oh ... My ... God!" Big'un screamed into the brown paneled walls of the trailer and beyond, instigating a chorus of yelps and howls that seemed to come from inside his brain.

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"You'll be all right in a few weeks," the doctor said as he finished swabbing Big'un's tender penis with Neosporin and wrapping it with gauze. "It's just a superficial wound. No big deal. But you should refrain from any sexual activity for the next three to four weeks. You have to let it heal."

After spending over 3 hours in the ER waiting room unabashedly holding his stinging privates, Big'un thought it was a big deal.

"Screw you, Doc," came Big'un's cathartic reply.

As the doctor shook his head and walked away, several EMTs rushed in the door, pushing a lady on a stretcher. She was a tiny elderly woman with grayish red hair and a drooping mouth.

“Mama?” Big’un cried.

Later, Big’un and Juanita stood in a barren waiting area off the emergency room entrance next to a table where his mother lay. The doctors said that it was a stroke and that there was little hope of recovery. She lay helpless on the table, eyes glazed, mouth shifted at an awkward angle. Big’un looked at Neeter and felt a stinging pain in his crotch.

Just when things were beginning to fit together, this happened. Just when the picture was almost complete, something went wrong. It hadn't always been this way. Big’un remembered when he was a kid and everyone called him Raymond. He had no troubles then. No worries at all. He remembered his seventh grade art teacher, Miss Nail, and the acrylic painting he'd worked on all semester. He painted the pink block house near the Creamery where his family lived, and carefully drew his mom and dad sitting together on yellow metal chairs in the back yard as they watched Raymond and his brothers playing and laughing together. Miss Nail told him the painting was good, that he had talent, and that maybe someday he could be an artist. He was excited and anxious to show his parents his painting. He stopped at the door of the pink block house, painting in hand, and listened to his parents scream and cuss at each other on the other side of the door. His father left home soon afterward, and the image of his painting sticking out of the trash is still strong in his mind.

Big'un drifted away from home soon after that. With every new episode of trouble, each new argument with his mom, the image of his home faded further into the distance, until eventually it all disappeared.

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Although his mother never knew it, for the first week after her stroke, Big'un and Juanita visited her every day in the nursing home. They ate lunch there sometimes and got to know the nurses, aids and other patients. It was hard, but pretty soon Big'un got used to the heartaches and the smells that were part of such a place, because he knew that, in spite of these heartaches and smells, there could just as likely be something precious waiting around the corner.

One day, as Juanita and Big'un sat together in the lobby, a bent, fragile elderly couple moved slowly by. The man and woman were well dressed, probably in their 70s or 80s. They inched along, arm in arm, toward the glass door entrance. The woman appeared to gently steady her companion, and the slight shuffle of his left foot was apparent as he moved ahead. Reaching the door that emptied out into the bright sunshine and fresh air, the woman's frail fingers pushed the small red buttons on the wall, entering the code that would unlock the door. But before they pushed the door open for her to leave, the man and woman stood face to face, staring into each other's eyes, then curved their necks and gently leaned together, closer, until their lips met in a kiss, a kiss they had no doubt shared innumerable times before. The woman slowly pushed the door open and walked away toward her car. The man stood motionless and silent, his back to those in

the lobby, intently watching her in the picture framed for that small audience. As she drove away, the man turned to make the long lonely walk back to his empty bed. Mindless of those watching him in the lobby, yet conscious of some greater unseen audience, he said aloud, with a slightly trebling mouth and misty eyes, "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

Big'un looked over at Juanita, whose mouth was drawn into a rigid frown. A single tear suddenly popped out of one of her mean green eyes and rolled down her cheek. Big'un took Juanita's fragile warm hand in his and gave it a tender squeeze. "It's sad, ain't it Neeter. He ain't gettin' any either," Big'un said, close to tears himself.

The old man shuffled down the hallway toward his empty room, past Big'un and Juanita seated hand in hand at the end of the lobby. But before he passed, he stopped, and watched the couple for a long moment. Then he turned and continued down the hallway.

## Otter

In 1969, the thoughts and passions of most American young men centered around certain common events: the Vietnam War, how cool *Hey Jude* sounded on the radio in their dad's Buick, the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, or ogling Olivia Hussey in the movie *Romeo and Juliet*. But in the town of Guyandotte, during the Summer of Love, teenage boys saw the world a little differently. Most considered a draft card and a trip to Vietnam a free ticket out. The limited movies, music, and other entertainments they experienced came from a world as remote and unreal as the rice patties and rifle shots they watched every night on the six-o'clock news. There was a different world and they absorbed themselves with other problems.

One breezy afternoon in October, Bonehead called an emergency meeting of the Guyandotte Wreckin' Crew at the boat dock picnic tables. Some of those West End Boys had been keying their rides, dating their girls, throwing flaming shit bombs on their porches, and just generally talking trash about them. Something had to be done.

"Something has to be done," Bonehead told the group assembled before him. "But who's gonna do it? Now that I'm on the Disability I can't be caught doing nothing more than walking, and that's with a cane."

He stared at them, one by one, looking for an answer. Hugo and Rocky sat at one of the picnic tables, sipping on cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon they had pulled from a paper bag on the ground at their feet. Big'un was on some kind of drug, and sat very, very still on the hood of Bonehead's El Camino like an oversized ornament. Grease Monkey was in jail, but Bonehead had brought his ratchet set and put it on the table in front of him as a

reminder to the Crew. Shakes sat alone at a table twitching, sucking on a Pepsi, and scrawling in the spiral notebook he kept under his pillow at night. Otter perched on a tabletop, in the middle of the crowd, staring straight back at Bonehead. The group had just recently voted, after a heated debate, to let Otter into the Wreckin' Crew as their first black member.

Hugo popped open another Pabst and studied the can carefully, turning it slowly in his hand. Then, in a voice that seemed to come from somewhere else, he addressed The Crew between belches. "I know Bonehead and some of you other guys are pretty pissed about how the West End Boys been ditchin' us lately. First, Booger Hazlett sweet-talked Bonehead's girl away from him. Next, Booger and Lightnin' locked Big'un in their trunk and dumped him in Wayne county. Now, Crazy Dave's scratched up Grease Monkey's uncle's Chevelle and landed him in jail."

Hugo turned the can up and downed a long gulp, then continued. "But, as Captain of the Wreckin' Crew, I say let's just keep our cool. I know those guys and they ain't worth worrin' about. They're miles away from Guyandotte." Hugo finished his speech and beer at the same time, and then looked over the silent gathering.

Otter stood up and turned toward the Crew. "What we should doooo," he shouted, "is go out to the West End and POUND those punks into Kentucky." He slammed his fist on the tabletop with such violence that Big'un jumped. All eyes of the Wreckin' Crew looked up at Otter now. Even Grease Monkey's ratchet set seemed to pay attention. "When I lived on Doulton Avenue, man, we learned young, if you don't protect whatcha got, you don't got it for long, you know whaddamean? Shee-aht, we're the Guyandotte Wreckin' Crew man. Scars heal, but when ya lose respect, man, it's gone for good."

Otter's voice was like a song to the Crew, proud and defiant music that made their hearts dance like little girls in love for the first time. His animated gestures harmonized with his words. His black fist punctuated every sentence. The Crew's spirit soared. They sat up straight in their seats and stared at Otter with misty eyes. Shakes scribbled feverously in his notebook. Otter's words had moved them to a place they thought had disappeared. Their hearts swelled with anger and pride.

"Well, I don't know 'bout you guys, but I think Otter's right," Bonehead said.

Shakes looked up from his notebook and said, "Yeah, I like what he says."

Big'un hopped off the hood of Bonehead's car and spoke slowly and precisely, "Me too."

"All in favor of makin' Otter the new Captain of the Wreckin' Crew, either raise your hand, say aye, or git back up on my hood," said Bonehead.

So, Otter was elected the new Captain of the Crew. Hugo scowled and whispered something to Rocky across the picnic table, while the other members grinned at their new leader. Hopefully, their good name would soon be reclaimed from the West Ender's. Then, maybe Guyandotte, the Paris of Appalachia, could be a proud and sparkling jewel once more.

Two hours later, as darkness fell on a pink two-story block house next to the Guyan Creamery, two shadows moved among the silent milk trucks, slowly creeping toward the house. From deep in the plush green woods by the river, the lonesome voice of an owl welcomed the obscurity of darkness. The two shadows paused beside the loading dock, like sluggish spirits cast upon the brick and mortar of the building, and then continued.

As the two figures reached the house, one pulled a can from inside his shirt and handed it to the other shadow. The second figure shook it violently, pulled off the top, stepped closer to the house, and began to slowly spray "NIGER LOVER" in three-foot high black letters.

"Dammit, Rocky, you dumbass! You spelled it wrong! There's two G's in nigger!"

"Shut up, Hugo. They'll know what it means all right."

The boys stepped back from the house and looked in the lighted window of the upstairs apartment. The sheer white curtains quivered in the evening breeze. Rocky's arms hung limp at his sides. Streaks of black paint ran down his fingers as they curled tightly around the can. Hugo slowly rubbed his mouth and chin, considering their next move.

"Let's tell him," Hugo finally whispered to Rocky.

Rocky straightened, pulled his shoulders back, and let the paint can fall to the ground. Throwing an abrupt nod in Hugo's direction, Rocky kicked gravel behind him a couple of times with the bottom of his dirty tennis shoes.

"Hey you! Hey you! You know where your daughter is tonight?" Rocky screamed at the house while Hugo picked up pea-gravel from the alley and threw it at the upstairs window.

A screen door slammed and a burly, bald man stomped onto the second story porch. He scratched his huge bare stomach with the edge of his beer can and yawned, then spotted the two boys in the shadows below him.

"Hey! Who're you? What the hell you hollerin' about?" The man leaned on the banister and peered at the figures below, trying to make them out in the darkness.

“You want me call the police on' ya?”

Hugo nudged Rocky forward, and stepped behind a wooden fence, just barely out of sight of the man.

Rocky answered, “Yeah! You should call the police ... call'em to fetch your daughter from that black man she's been shackin' with.”

From behind the fence, Hugo held his open hand on his cheek and hollered in a ghostly voice, “She ain't home, is she? Lord knows what she's up to with that black bugger tonight. It ain't natural! No! Just ain't right.”

A rapid, thunderous stomping of feet echoed from the stairwell. Hugo fled from behind the fence with a squeal and a fart, and flatfooted it down the gravel alleyway. Confused, Rocky darted his head from one sound to the next, turning in time to see the dark shadow of his partner swerve onto Short Street and disappear.

“I'll give ya sumpin' ta holler 'bout, you rapsCALLION!”

Before Rocky could react, the man barreled from the stairway and knocked him to the ground, kicking and punching him in a dialog of screams and profanities. One by one, porch lights flashed on and neighbors gathered to watch the show. The screech of a police radio drifted through an open window, blending with the cacophony of the crying and the cussing, and let the crowd know it would soon be over.

Confused and bleeding, Rocky leaned against the cruiser as the officers questioned him. At first, he refused to confess or to snitch on Hugo. But after several minutes of badgering, he broke down, telling everyone he was sorry for the misspelling. No one could understand him, he whimpered so badly. So the bald man and the police agreed to “go easy on him” if he just tells them where the girl is.

During Rocky's interrogation, Hugo had slipped into *Dolly's Wonder Bar*. Out of breath and shaking, he ordered a bottle of Blue Ribbon from the bar, swigged a couple of long swallows, then walked to the back to sit with Otter and Mona. Soon the police arrived with Mona's dad, still shirtless, and the badly beaten Rocky, and headed toward their table. Not strangers to trouble, the *Wonder Bar* crowd could distinguish the difference between a routine fracas and the intriguing *mêlée* developing before their eyes, so they collectively sat their beers down to watch.

When he saw his daughter sitting at the table with Otter, Mona's dad shouted and rushed toward them. "I'll kick your ass, your brillo-headed baboon!" Before he could make it to the table, the two officers grabbed him, each holding a hairy tattooed arm, and stood between him and Otter as they asked questions.

"Would you like to tell us what you're doing here with this man's daughter?"

Otter got up from his seat beside Mona, rested his big right foot in the empty chair next to him, and prepared to tell his story. The untied white laces of his size 15 Nike sneakers spilled out onto the seat of the wooden chair like linguine onto a cafeteria plate.

"I'm more at ease fightin' than talkin', man," Otter told them, his open hands moving smoothly in the empty air as if to animate his words. "Before I joined the Reserves, and mama and me moved outa the hood, evera day promised more trouble, another fight, another arrest, another killin'. You know wat I'm sayin'? Evera night rang with bullets. Some from far away. Some as close as my ear," Otter continued, placing one dark finger behind the mangled lobe of his left ear. The whiteness of his open palm looked strange next to his dark skin. "Now youse tellin' me that me and Mona, we can't be together. That cause I'se black, and she's white, that we cain't happen. Well, pardon

my French, but thaz jus' bull. She's free, white, and 18. It's her life. She should have a say."

The people in the booths and on the barstools of the *Wonder Bar* grew silent as Mona stood before the row of turned heads and timidly prepared to speak. The bubble-lights of the Wurlitzer jukebox at the back of the bar percolated in reds, yellows, and blues, oblivious to the scene.

She wore cut-off blue jeans and a tight sleeveless white top with a gray anchor embroidered on the front, causing her chest to appear larger than it was. The exposed skin of her long legs, bare arms, and pleasant face, was pale and soft. Freckles were everywhere. Chestnut hair, parted in the middle, fell softly onto her shoulders and curled slightly at the ends. When she looked up and smiled, her chipped front tooth, a backyard swing accident, gave her a sincerity that seemed impossible to question. She looked at her father, but spoke to everyone in the room.

"Daddy, I swear this iza tearin' me at the seams. You gimme life, and learnt me right an' wrong. You raised me, all alone since mama died. Well, now, I love Otter, just like mama loved you." At Mona's words, a murmur fluttered through the *Wonder Bar* crowd and her father's folded beefy arms dropped lifeless by his side.

"And he loves me too, Daddy. Look what he gimme!" her voice quivered as she held out a silky white scrunchie, an elastic hair tie, embroidered with delicately designed strawberries. "Ain't it the purdiest thang you ever seen?" Her muddy brown eyes glistened with tears begging to be let go. She smiled wide, exposing her chipped tooth to everyone without shame or prejudice.

“Yes, Monie girl, it’s damn purdy. It sure is,” her daddy told her as his muddy eyes glistened just like hers.

The policemen rolled their eyes and abruptly walked away, leaving Mona, her father, Otter, Hugo, Rocky and everyone else in the *Wonder Bar* speechless. Yet, Mona's father was torn. He remembered his little girl riding her bike on the Creamery parking lot with her sock monkey, Mojo, in the basket on her handlebars. How she laughed so hard at Scooby Doo cartoons on Saturday mornings, sometimes until she cried, or even peed her pants. Her voice singing along with the radio, filling the rooms of their tiny upstairs apartment with music and happiness. He knew her love was real. He could see it in her eyes, in her chipped-tooth smile, and in the way she bounced on the balls of her feet when she talked about it. But he couldn't accept it, and only wanted to pretend it didn't happen. If only he could, he thought.

That weekend, the Wreckin' Crew met at Midway Drive-In for burgers and fries and to plan their revenge on the West End Boys. Grease Monkey was out of jail and pulled onto the parking lot on his uncle Lonnie's Harley Sportster. He wore a red James Dean jacket he got from Goodwill and was in transition between his Elvis sideburns and his Beatles haircut. Uncle Lonnie was proud of him, but his mother always worried. Pretty soon the order was up and Juggy the waitress bustled through the café doors with more food than a Baptist bean dinner. Greasy smiles and happy conversation filled the hot air at the crowded counter of the Drive-In as B.J. Thomas sang *Hooked on a Feeling* from the Juke Box in the corner. Then the dwarf walked in.

He sort of waddled out of the back, wearing his apron and white hat, with a serious smile on his face. Smudges of splattered food and grease painted the contour of

his big belly on his apron. He talked to Juggy beside the milk shake machine and Grease Monkey noticed him, spewed his cherry coke, and laughed hysterically.

“Damn, I guess we’re not in Kansas anymore. Looks like the munchkins have landed.” Grease Monkey laughed, stopped, and then laughed again. Finally under control, he pointed and stared at the dwarf and asked, “Is that what's been fixin' our food?”

The dwarf stared back.

“So that's what they mean by a short order cook,” Grease Monkey continued, looking up and down the counter for applause. But none came. Only a few smirks and some nervous laughter from a few of the Crew. The dwarf waddled up to the counter in front of Grease Monkey and scowled at him between the silver napkin holder and the red plastic ketchup dispenser.

“You gotta problem, bub?” the dwarf snarled like an angry talking head, his chin almost sitting on the counter top.

“Buzz off, Bozo!” Grease Monkey said with his mouth full of onion rings soaked with so much ketchup that it had oozed out around his lips.

Suddenly, the dwarf grabbed the fork from his plate and jabbed at Grease Monkey's face like a child trying to break a piñata. Grease Monkey seized the dwarf's outstretched arm and pulled him forward and over the counter, clutching him by his wrists as he wiggled in vain.

“Hey you, put him down!” Juggy yelled from the coffee machine. She dropped a cup and glass shattered on the floor.

Panicked, Grease Monkey heaved the dwarf higher and tossed him across the counter. He bounced off the menu board and landed on top of the hot griddle with a crash

and a shriek. For a few long seconds he flopped there like a fish, squealing, rolling left, then right, struggling to get off the singeing grill. The crowd watched in disbelief and began to smell something that reminded them of McDonalds. Finally, Juggy rushed, snatched a spatula from the counter and flipped the dwarf off the grill. He fell onto the green and gray tiled floor, twitching and silent.

The paramedics treated his burns, but had to restrain the dwarf on the stretcher so he didn't go after Grease Monkey. The cops handcuffed Grease Monkey and led him outside, jingling the bell on the door when they pushed him through. They ducked his head into the backseat of the cruiser as the dwarf screamed obscenities a few feet away. The rest of the Crew, Juggy, and an old couple eating hotdogs stood on the parking lot watching the back of Grease Monkey's head trail off up 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue behind the ambulance.

"This sucks!" Otter muttered to himself above the hum of the crowd. He silenced their hubbub with a long wave of his out stretched hand and told them, "Like my mama always says, there are rules we gotta follow in this world, and one of them is: Never Kill the Cook, you know what I'm sayin'?' From this day on, Grease Monkey's outa the Guyandotte Wreckin' Crew." Otter pointed up 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue toward the black and white cruiser heading toward the jail. "We don't need *his* kind," he told them.

Since the dwarf lived, and had good insurance, and the County jail was already full, Grease Monkey had to serve his sentence in home confinement. He still got all his dental and optical bills paid, as well as three meals a day and maid service like all the regular criminals. The only difference was he had to stay home, which should have pleased him. But it didn't. No longer a member of the Crew, Grease Monkey had lost his

identity. Didn't know who he was. His reputation, his rank, and most of all his friends, were gone. He called up Hugo on the phone to talk about it.

“Yo, Hugo. It's me. What can I do to get back in the Crew? I can't stand being a turd floating around alone like this. Help me out, man,” he pleaded.

“Well, let's see. I don't know. Maybe you should go to the meat of the matter. Bend Mona's ear with your troubles, then maybe she'll sweeten Otter up so he'll let you slide back in the Crew,” Hugo replied.

“Sounds like a plan, man. I'll do it,” Grease Monkey said excitedly, hanging up the phone. So, Grease Monkey followed Hugo's advice and set up a meeting with Mona, who agreed to meet him at his house that afternoon.

Standing on Grease Monkey's porch, Mona knocked on the screen door and waited nervously for their mysterious meeting. He seemed so upset on the phone. What could he want to talk to her about, she thought? Why was his garage bigger than his house, she wondered? “How many roads must a man walk down, before they call him a man?” she sang aloud, waiting for someone to come to the door.

“Oh, howdy Mona. It's real good a you to come here to help me. I knew ya would.” Grease Monkey said, opening the screen door.

“Help ya? Help ya what?”

“Help me get back with the boys, that's what I want. And I figger if you'd talk ta Otter for me, and tell'm how sorry I was, that he'd do it, ya know?”

“Well, I don't rightly know 'bout that. Seems ta me yadda be talkin' ta that there dwarf 'bout bein' sorry. If'n ya are,” she argued.

Grease Monkey thought about it, then replied, "You're as right as you are pretty, Mona. That Otter's one lucky man."

"I reckon he is, Mr. Monkey. I love'm more'n anythang on this here earth."

"I'll do it." Grease Monkey said. "I'll hunt up that dwarf and beg'm for forgiveness. That's the right thing."

"Well if'n ya do, I'll sure'nuf sing yer praises to Otter ever chance I git," Mona promised.

"Thank ya, Mona," he said, looking into her muddy eyes. "You're a good woman."

Their meeting over, he followed Mona onto the porch, where they briefly embraced in a goodbye. At that moment Otter's green Ford passed by unnoticed. He saw them on the porch and started to hit the brake, but hesitated, then rolled on down the narrow brick street. Peering into his rearview mirror, he slowly drove away.

Distraught at what he just witnessed, Otter drove around, trying to decide what to do, when he saw Hugo ducking into Crummet's Drugstore. He found Hugo near the front of the store reading Fishing magazines and eyeing Lila Fulks, the checkout girl. Otter approached him, hoping for some advice and consolation from his friend.

"Hey, Hugo, what's happening bro? Watcha fishin' for? That chick?" Otter asked, nodding in the direction of Lila.

"Sssshh, man. You'll scare her away."

"Oh, sorry. Hey, Hugo, you been around. You think most women is faithful?"

"What? You kiddin'? Man, women are like fish, they just go for the best bait,"

Hugo told him as he grabbed another magazine and glanced toward the checkout.

“Yeah? Ya think? And what ‘bout Mona, you think she that way too?” Otter asked.

Hugo looked up from his magazine and studied Otter before he answered. “Well, don’t take this wrong, man. Mona’s Righteous. Capital R. But she’s still a woman. She left her father for you, didn’t she?”

Lila yelled from behind the register, “Hey, if you boys ain’t gonna buy something, then just skid addle out the door.”

Although their love had been true in the beginning, Hugo told Otter on the sidewalk in front of Crummet’s, great enough in fact for Shakes, the Bard of Guyandotte, to pen a lengthy poem about them entitled “The Places They’ve Done It,” it seemed that Mona’s flame had faded and, Hugo feared, perhaps Grease Monkey was trying to re-ignite it. Incensed, Otter marched toward his truck without saying a word, slammed its door, and fishtailed down Buffington Street, determined to douse water on this dream.

The next day, Otter sat on the riverbank with a fishing pole in hand, waiting for the catfish to bite. He had a tub of chicken livers on one side and a quart of Colt 45 on the other. He watched the reflection of the sunset on the river, the pink and purple clouds shimmering on the water, when Mona walked up behind him. She softly touched his neck, then began to rub his shoulders. Undoing the scrunchie from her ponytail, she slipped it onto his smooth black arm, sliding it slowly up and down, repeatedly over his thick forearm, watching the silky white scrunchie move back and forth against his dark skin.

This was one of those moments people remember the rest of their lives. A moment when light, sound, and sensation collide to create a lasting impression. Time

froze. There was a moment's hesitation. Otter's red and white bobber sank below the surface of the water several times.

"Otter," Mona sighed, "don't ya think Grease Monkey's suffered anuff? Don't ya think he deserves a second chance?"

Otter suddenly pushed her away, knocking her to the ground, spilling his malt liquor and livers onto the muddy ground. Scuffed up and disheveled, Mona rose to her knees and looked up at him, her chestnut hair swirled at odd angles and hung in her face.

"Whad I do?" she asked.

Throwing her a terrible glare, Otter replied, "Yeah, woman, what did you do?"

Mona burst into tears and ran off toward her pink house.

That evening, Otter waited on Hugo's mother's front porch for Hugo to come home. He sat on their porch swing, noticing at all the cactus plants in the pots along the banister, and tried to sort everything out in his head. He couldn't shake the awful doubt haunting him about Mona. What had she and Grease Monkey done? Would she leave him as she left her father? Was his black skin a barrier between them? He wanted to rise above the judgment of others, disappoint their prejudice, and be seen as more than just a black man. Touching his wounded ear, he thought and waited.

Soon, Hugo came up the porch steps carrying his rod and reel, as well as some catfish for his mother to fry for supper. Otter met him at the steps and grabbed him by the arm as he entered the door. "Hugo, I gotta know for sure if my Mona's doing it with the Grease Monkey. All these doubts are cloudin' my mind and driving me crazy. I gotta have proof! I gotta know fer sure!" Otter lamented as Hugo hung his rod and reel on the

rack in the hallway and set his tackle box on the floor. On the wall of the living room hung several mounted fish Hugo had caught, Rainbow Trout, White Bass, Red Snapper.

“I don't know, I might be wrong, Otter, but a man like Grease Monkey's got a lotta things a goin' for'em. His mama's got money and he's his mama's only child. When his mama's not around, his uncle Lonnie keeps him stocked with Pabst, Boonesfarm, reefer, stereos, Harleys. What woman wouldn't want'm?” Hugo asked.

He looked Otter in the eye and added, “Plus, he's the right color, you know. That would make her daddy mighty happy.”

“Don't play with me. Show me proof, or you'll be doing a dwarf dance too, muther,” Otter screamed, grabbing Hugo's shirt and pinning him against the wall between his mounted fish.

“Ok. Let me go. I didn't want to tell you, but, I found this hanging in Grease Monkey's bathroom last night when I went to take a piss,” Hugo confessed as he pulled something from his front jeans pocket and dangled it before Otter's wide eyes.

“The scrunchie,” Otter moaned. “My mama's lucky scrunchie.”

Otter bounced down the brick street in his green pick up and slid to a stop in front of Mona's pink house. He lay on the horn until she appeared at her balcony and danced down the stairs, across the gravel, and up to his truck. Her chestnut hair flowed behind her as she ran, her chipped tooth smile offering Otter an endearing hello. He got out and met her at the truck door.

Mona stood, breathless, leaning her head against Otter's chest, looking into his dark eyes, and stroking his face with her fingers. Her every breath was filled with laughter. Two Chickadee's sang on the electric line above them.

“Where's the scrunchie, Mona? What have you done?” he asked in a controlled voice.

“I been lookin' fer it,” Mona replied, “Butta cain't find it nowhere.”

“Damn you, devil woman. You're a lying.” Otter's arms flailed above him, his hands opened and shut as though tossing words in the air as he spoke. “How many more lies you been tellin'?” Otter's voice rose higher with every word. He inched toward Mona, backing her up with his anger.

“No! Otter! Stop! Whaz git enda yooou?” Mona screamed.

She tried to keep him away, pushing at his chest and face as she tumbled backwards into the cab of the truck. Her elbow banged the steering wheel, honking the horn and spinning her around. She fell face forward onto the bench seat and cried into the white cloth upholstery.

“Why, Otter? Why?” she sobbed.

He glared down at Mona, clinching his black fists, oblivious to her words and tears. He didn't hear the feet pounding down the stairs until it was too late.

“I'll kick yo' ass, you sonavabitch! Git way from my girl!” Mona's father yelled and knocked Otter to the ground, sending him sliding through the gravels, and up against a wire fence.

He helped his daughter out of the cab and pulled a red bandana from his back pocket to wipe her face. Mona turned back to look at otter one last time. “I loved you, Otter, with all my heart,” she said, then cried on her father's shoulder. A little brown-haired girl, pedaling her bicycle down the alley, stopped to watch the curious scene.

“Whaz all this ruckus 'bout?” the little girl asked, leaning on her handlebars.

Neighbors, peering through their curtains, quickly had the police radios in Guyandotte announcing the disturbance at 518 Rear Hagan Street. The girl on the bike soon blended into a crowd of faces gathered on the Creamery parking lot. Hugo and Rocky arrived with a six-pack. Shakes showed up with his spiral notebook. Bonehead and Big'un pulled up in the El Camino. Grease Monkey carried a broken home confinement ankle bracelet in his hand. As they all debated the reasons for this tragic scene, Hugo began to slip away from the crowd.

Grease Monkey walked up to Otter, still crumpled against the wire fence, rubbing on his elbow. "Dammit, man! What the hell did you do? That girl loves you more'n anything."

Mona's father had his arm around his daughter, wiping away her tears. As he looked in her face, he saw the orange-red tattoo under the gray hair on his shoulder, a heart the size of an apple with the name Eva in the middle. He turned to Otter and stared at him a long time before saying, "I'm disappointed in ya boy."

Hugo inched further down the alleyway, until Rocky noticed him and shouted to the crowd, "He did it! He did it! It's all his fault this happened." He pointed at Hugo running down the alley, his can of Pabst left foaming in the gravel behind him. Otter cried uncontrollably, his face in his hands, leaning against the fence. The two Chickadees sprang from the electric wire above him and flew away.

When the police arrived, they broke up the crowd, but the only one arrested was the little girl on the bicycle, which they discovered was stolen. Mona and her father went up the stairs of their pink house and slammed the door. Otter sat in his pick up, still crying, his crimson blood staining the white cloth upholstery. Rocky, Shakes, Bonehead, Big'un and Grease Monkey stood next to the truck, shaking their heads and wondering

what would become of the Guyandotte Wreckin' Crew now. Suppressing his sobs, Otter motioned Shakes to come nearer. With his notebook under his arm, he walked to the window of the green truck, and leaned down close to Otter's lips.

"Shakes, promise me. When you write about this," Otter said, choking back tears, "remember that I loved Mona. Maybe not as smart as I could've. But too damn much."

"That's what I know," Shakes said solemnly, nodding in agreement.

## The Finger

Boomer sat in the front seat of his mother's faded gray Dodge Caravan as she drove through the floodwall gate and across the 3rd Avenue Bridge to her mother's home. They both turned toward the lighted signboard at the Pentecostal church to read its warning: "Prepare To Meet Thy God." The light turned red at Main Street and they skidded to a stop, spilling a few kernels of Boomer's popcorn on the floor. The errant kernels stuck like Velcro to the fuzzy blue carpet of the van.

"That was a great movie, Mom, thanks for takin' me," Boomer said.

"I enjoyed it too, sweetie. It's nice to get away from the humdrum and get lost in a fantasy now and then. We should go more often," she replied with a quick smile.

The sun cowered behind the Guyandotte skyline like a shiny bald head peeking up over the faraway hills. Rosy fingers of light gently strummed the sparkling white cables of the bridge, casting long shadows on the rows of houses and narrow streets of the town. The music of the crickets rose and fell from the surrounding green hills. While Boomer and his mother waited for the light to change, they watched an old man in bibbed overalls leave The Bargain Store on the corner, locking the door behind him. He turned and strolled slowly down the sidewalk, in the direction of the bridge, lifting his eyes toward the pink and purple clouds on the horizon. A faint smile arose on his lips. As the old man walked past them, the radio blared an Elvis Costello song and Boomer's mother tapped her fingers on the steering wheel as she sang along.

*I'm giving you a longer look,*

*Everyday, everyday, everyday,*

*Everyday I write the book.*

The light turned green and she started to pull into the intersection when suddenly a primer red Thunderbird with Ohio tags swerved in front of her, passing just inches from her door. Boomer's mother laid on the horn, and slammed the brake pedal to the floor. Their seatbelts jerked them back into the safety of their cushioned seats. Popcorn flew from Boomer's bag, covering the floor and dashboard. A chubby dark-haired man with large glasses stared at them from the T-bird's open window as it sped past, a smug smile on his lips and a bony middle finger thrust skyward for them to see.

"Why did he do that, mama?" Boomer asked, louder than he intended.

Silent, her blue eyes misty and wide with alarm, Boomer's mother stared ahead, her foot still pressed hard on the brake pedal. She blinked and swallowed before answering in a slow, controlled voice.

"Some people are just odd, son. Sometimes you have to overlook them." Her fingers still clenched the steering wheel of the van.

Still shaken, she took her foot off the brake and eased away from the intersection. She drove past the deteriorated storefronts of the town, the same ones she'd passed when riding the school bus as a child. It was sad to see these landmarks of her youth neglected, forgotten, or gone. Arnold's Market, across the street from Guyandotte Elementary School, used to have the best candy selection in town: Turkish Taffy, pink Bubble Gum Cigars, and Pig-in-a-Poke. Now all that's left of Arnold's are concrete steps that lead to a vacant lot full of high weeds. Murphy's Drug Store, where her mother had taken her for ice cream sundaes, had been torn down and replaced with an Exxon station, and the Boys Club pool where she and her friends went swimming was now an ugly cinderblock tattoo

parlor. Everything was changing, and it was hard to find something stable to hold onto, she thought.

“Do we have to go to Granny's?” Boomer asked as he picked up popcorn and ate it from the floor.

“Yes. We do. I promised her we'd stop by, and I think she might need some Bingo money,” she answered.

Boomer stared ahead, chewing his popcorn, trying to separate it from the blue carpet fibers with his tongue.

Granny's house consisted of only a kitchen, as far as most people knew. The other rooms served merely as walkways to pass through when going to and from the kitchen, which always seemed crowded and bright, thanks to the three 100-watt bulbs in the light fixture on the ceiling. Pale yellow wallpaper and painted white cabinets covered the walls. Granny's kitchen was always too warm, maybe because one of the burners on the gas stove wouldn't turn off and she felt obliged to perpetually cook something: pinto beans, fried potatoes, or Guyandotte Goulash. Like Sisyphus pushing the rock endlessly up the hill, Granny felt destined to constantly cook, eat, and then cook again as long as that eternal flame burned.

No one looked up as Boomer and his mother entered. Sis, her daughter Pudd'n, and Granny sat around the yellow chrome dinette, a heavy layer of smoke swirling above their heads from the Winston Lights pursed tightly in their mouths. The police radio hissed like a sick cat from atop the refrigerator. Hypnotized by the pile of potentially winning scratch off lottery tickets laid out before them, the three women each performed

a synchronized and spooky ritual as if possessed by a demon conjured by the smoke. Maniacally grabbing a ticket from the pile, they vigorously rubbed off the silver squares hoping to reveal the winning numbers; then after muttering a curse at their misfortune, they threw it aside and snatched another. The table shook under their collective powers, scratching off tickets one by one.

The dinette jittered like a giant Ouija board communicating with some distant spirit as Pudd'n, Sis, and Granny hovered over the table, each contributing their individual energy to the greater power they conjured. On the Lazy Susan between them sat an angel figurine guarding two small children crossing a bridge. The Lazy Susan rattled and the angel trembled from the vibration, casting an eerie image behind the curling ringlets of smoke rising into the air. The angel's look of concern for the children now seemed directed at the unstable chrome dinette.

Boomer and his mother watched silently through the haze of cigarette smoke while the police radio squealed in the background. They realized any communication with the three women could not begin until this spell was broken. Finally, the last ticket was scratched, a slew of obscenities grumbled, and the spirit in the table returned from whence it came.

“My luck's just gone and left me. I cain't do nothing,” Granny said with eyes forlorn and close to tears.

“Oh, your luck'll come back, Granny,” Boomer's mother said. “It always does. Here, take this twenty bucks and go play bingo. Maybe you'll hit the coverall.”

“Why, thanks honey. I hope you're right,” Granny replied soberly. Then, acknowledging her grandson for the first time, she rubbed his head with one hand and put the bill in her purse with the other.

“Well, hi there Boomer. How's my darling today?”

“Fine, Granny,” Boomer said. Granny, Sis, and Pudd'n looked him over, their cigarettes tilting down in their mouths as they smiled.

“Show'im your tattoo, Pudd'n,” Sis said.

Pudd'n unbuttoned the top button of her shirt, pulled it to the side and displayed a round black and white tattoo about five inches in diameter on her left shoulder. In the center were three black, bat-like, devils and three white-winged angels, each one formed by the outline of the adjacent one, in a circular pattern. The images evolved outward in ever increasing concentric rings as smaller replicas, circling toward the edge of the sphere until they disappeared into infinity.

Boomer stood on his toes and raised his eyebrows as he peered at the tattoo, then looked to his mother for some hint of the proper reaction. She only rolled her eyes back and raised one corner of her mouth in a perplexed smile. She had grown up in this world herself, but still couldn't explain it to anyone who hadn't.

Looking again at the tattoo, Boomer answered, “Yeah, that's nice, Pudd'n. What is it?”

“Huh, what'd you mean? It's a tattoo,” Pudd'n answered, pulling her shirt back and buttoning it. She opened her pocketbook, took out another Winston Light, then tossed the pack back inside. A mass of silver keys sparkled inside the purse as it reflected the light from the three 100 watt bulbs above.

Besides the keys, the contents of the purse included a tube of Bonnie Bell orange lipstick, a Cover Girl compact, a fat blue Velcro wallet, Tampax tampons, a Bic lighter, a pack of Trojans, a dirty hairbrush, and a human finger. The finger had been in there for three days and didn't really look like a finger anymore. It'd shrunk and turned the color of boiled shrimp, and now reeked of cheap perfume and cigarettes. Leaky pens, uncapped lipstick, and fuzz balls from the world it now inhabited had also changed its color and texture. So now, if you stared at it long enough, you lost all idea of what it really was, or used to be.

"What's in your purse, Pudd'n?" Boomer asked.

"Just a bunch of junk, ya know, stuff I have to have," Pudd'n answered.

"Can I look?" the boy pressed on.

"Have at it, kid."

The police radio squealed from behind them: "We have a code 5150 in Guyandotte, attention all units, code 5150." Boomer grabbed the purse and shook the contents onto the Formica tabletop, spilling out a puzzling heap of Pudd'n's life into the bright light of Granny's kitchen. While the women talked about *All My Children*, and gossiped about their cousins and boyfriends, the boy picked through the pile on the table, his curious eyes examining every item. Then he noticed the human finger. He picked it up, held it up to examine it, and asked Pudd'n, "What's this?"

"Oh damn, Boomer. Put that back. I forgot that was in there," Pudd'n said, turning a little red with embarrassment.

"Is it real?" Boomed asked.

“Oh, heh, I found it thumbing on the Interstate, around some broken glass near the guardrail. It’s real to me.”

At these words, everyone grew quiet. Granny and Sis even stopped puffing their Winston Lights. The three 100 watt bulbs flickered off and on, then off and on again. Puzzled, Boomer quickly threw the finger back onto the table and wiped his own fingers off on his jeans several times.

Boomer's mother grabbed him by the arm and suddenly announced, “We have to go.” Mother and son shuffled out the door into the cool night air and hurried to the van. They latched their safety belts, Boomer's mother turned on the headlights, and they pulled out of the driveway and sped down the alley. Driving down Bridge Street, glad to be on their way home, they listened to the crickets chirping through the open windows of the van. They drove past the old Guyan Creamery, now just a vast, empty brick shell. Across the street, next to the BP Station, an eerie light glowed from the upstairs window of an apartment in the Elliott Garden Housing Project.

Through that window, a man heard the van squeal by. He stopped typing, got up and shut the window. Returning to his typewriter he sat down, closed his eyes, took a deep breath through his nose and slowly let it escape from his mouth.

He had been writing for three days straight without sleep, but was pleased with his story so far. His thin lips formed a sly smile as he thought about the intriguing worlds he had already created and the cast of characters he’d peopled them with. He had produced them out of his imagination as God had Adam and Eve out of the soil of the earth. They were alive! With his words, he could make them laugh, cry, live or die.

Suddenly a siren wailed on the street below. He shook himself awake. Had he been dreaming, he wondered? He got up to look out his window in time to see the fire truck racing up Bridge Street. Opening his window, he stuck out his head and watched it speed past the BP and around the corner. Then he saw, in the distance three blocks away, billows of pure white smoke consuming the night sky. The lights from the BP Station shimmered on the wall of smoke, reminding him of the giant white screen of the East Drive-In Theater just before the movie started. He caught a scent of it, a curious mixture of popcorn and cigarettes that made him stare harder into the haze. He watched until his eyes burned, until his throat was sore. He coughed, gagged, and spit, watching his phlegm fly through the smoky air and plop on the sidewalk. Then he slammed the window shut and sat back down before his typewriter to finish his story.

Outside, the smoke grew thicker. He watched it move through the air, pressing against the glass, touching the panes with soft whispering caresses. Tapping his fingers on the desk, he looked back at the paper in his typewriter, trying to think of the next sentence. He thought he could hear the smoke tapping on the window. Staring at the glass, he struggled to fuse the sight and sound of it.

The knock on the door startled him. Who could it be this late, he thought. The knock came again.

“Hey, Shakes! You in there, man? Lemmie in!”

“Zat you, Bonehead?” the writer answered, flipping the latch and opening the door.

“Man, there’s a big ass fire up the street. Fifty-foot high flames. It’s wild, man, wild. Smoke’s all over Guyandotte,” Bonehead said.

“Yeah, I saw the truck go by. That is a lot a smoke,” Shakes replied.

“Speakin’ a smoke, look what my girl Pudd’n just gimme,” Bonehead says, digging in the pocket of his jeans anxiously. He pulled a baggie of weed and a green and gold ceramic pipe from his pocket and held it out for Shakes. The baggie held about two inches of marijuana, the pipe was half the size of Bonehead’s hand and shaped like a Genie’s lamp.

“Yeah, man!” Bonehead laughed. “When the cops and fire trucks started showin’ up, Pudd’n and her mom and granny were standing across the street watchin’ their house turn ta toast. Then Pudd’n, she starts getting’ nervous, thinkin’ they’re gonna frisk’er or something. So she dumps me a load a stuff and tells me to run like hell.”

“Well I’d say she wants her stuff back, Bonehead. Don’t ya think?”

“Yeah, sure. But I thought we’d take a couple a tokes for carryin’ charges, ya know,” Bonehead said.

Shakes stared at the baggie and pipe in Bonehead’s hands, then said, “Well, I could use a break. Okay, why not.”

Soon the two sat on the low orange sofa, lighting up, listening to the police radio and Pink Floyd. The songs seemed to tumble from the sky, shower them with music, and flood the room with drops and puddles and pools of scattered noise. Shakes got up and waded through the sound to make sure he’d locked the door. Looking around the room, Bonehead noticed the typewriter sitting on the kitchen table, a page sticking out, and sat and waited for Shakes to return.

"You still writin' that Twilight Zone crap, man? I liked your old stuff better," Bonehead said. Shakes sat and stared at Bonehead for a few minutes, while the drums, guitars and voices drenched them in a slow steady pour.

"Who you think you are? You don't know nothing 'bout literature," Shakes shouted above the downpour.

"I'm Bonehead, man. You know me. We went ta school together."

"No, I mean about my stories. You don't like 'em?" Shakes said.

"They're just not right, man. Readin' 'em, ya don't know what ta believe. There's gotta be a center, somethin' that ever thing spins 'round, ya know."

Bonehead stuffed the pipe full again and lit it, sucking hard as the dried greenish leaves turned orange and smoke filled his lungs. He held his breath and passed the pipe to Shakes, who took it from his bug-eyed friend and inhaled deeply and passionately as Pink Floyd ended. The police scanner hummed some unintelligible noise and then a new rain of sound began. Miles Davis' meandering trumpet swirled around the room's white bare walls as the thumping bass followed in steady pursuit. They watched the doorknob for movement and strained to hear the police radio behind the shower of jazz.

Finally, Bonehead said, "Let's get outta here."

The smoke from the fire had cleared up, but an odd smell still lingered as they walked in the grass beside the floodwall. Bonehead knew just the place to go, he said, in case the cops or the firemen knew they were high and tried to find them. Shakes followed behind him, laboring to keep up in the pitch black, hoping he didn't step in, or on, something along the way. A couple of times he asked Bonehead if they were lost, but he assured him that he'd been this way a thousand times before. On the other side of the

gray concrete wall, the Ohio River lapped against the muddy bank like a cold, invisible heartbeat.

They came out on Main Street and Bonehead ran into Dolly's Wonderbar for some beer while Shakes waited outside as a lookout. After lassoing the fire escape and pulling it down with his belt, Bonehead led Shakes to the top of the Crummet's Drugstore building. Once on the vast flat roof, they sat on the rough asphalt and leaned against the short brick ledge, then Bonehead pulled two quarts of Stroh's out of a paper bag and handed one to Shakes.

"Damn! I hate Stroh's. It tastes like piss," Shakes complained.

"That's all I could get with two bucks, man. Don't bitch."

"That's what I was sayin' before: truth is subjective. I don't like Stroh's, okay. That's the truth," Shakes said, twisting off the bottle top and downing a long gulp.

"That's your truth. But it's not *the* truth, ya know," Bonehead said. "I think people are a lot more alike than different."

"Piss!" Shakes said.

"There's some big truths out there, man. Like beer, in general, and women, they're good. Ya gotta go with that, man. That's *a* truth!" Bonehead said with a goofy grin.

"Humph!" Shakes replied, as he forced down another swallow and glared at Bonehead with blood-red eyes. He hadn't shaved since he started his story three days ago. Stubby black hair covered his jaw and upper lip. He hadn't eaten much either and the beer and dope were starting to make him queasy. He strained to focus on Bonehead's face but kept confusing him with a character in his story.

Bonehead sat, his elbows resting on his knees, swirling the quart with his wrist and looking into the sky. He wore a red ball cap backwards on his closely shaven head. His eyes, nose and mouth appeared oversized for his face.

“And ya know, when ya look at people, an see the way a mama holds her baby, or the way those firemen came to help strangers, puttin’ their ass on the line, ya know. There’s a truth there too, man,” Bonehead said, before sucking down another mouthful.

Frustrated, Shakes groped for a comeback, something to explain his idea of a fragmented reality. He took another swig, contorted his face and answered. “Ah, that’s just the old universal in particular hogwash. It’s the particulars, the damn details, always messin’ stuff up.”

“No way, man. Bullshit. The little truth *is* the big truth, multiplied. That’s what holds it all together. The crap you’re driveling out is poison for the soul. That’s what I know,” said Bonehead.

Shakes sat silent. Then his bottle, hand, and arm started shaking, fast and hard, like a hummingbird’s wings. Strange, unintelligible words raced from his mouth. Suddenly, he jumped up, broke the end of his Stroh’s bottle on the ledge and shouted, “Well, you can go to hell then! You can go to hell right now!”

“Whoa, man, don’t freak out. We’re just talkin’, ya know,” Bonehead said, standing up and studying the jagged edges of the bottle in Shake’s hand.

“Well, I’m gonna talk ta yer face with this now,” Shakes said, waving the brown glass.

Shakes had moved away from the ledge when he got up and now had Bonehead cornered, his heels rubbing against the wall, leaving him no escape from the wild-eyed

writer. Suddenly, Shakes lunged at him with the sharp glass, raising it toward his face as he rushed forward. Bonehead stepped aside and watched as Shakes tumbled over the ledge, gracefully rotating once as he fell the thirty feet or so to the ground. He landed with an ugly thump, flat on his back on the sidewalk near Main Street, in front of The Bargain Store where the window was full of ceramic pigs and used coveralls. Bonehead clutched the coarse brick ledge with his fingers and stared down at the body, unmoving and silent, the broken Stroh's bottle still gripped in its fist.

"Oh shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit," Bonehead muttered over and over, for what seemed like hours.

Bonehead agonized. Shakes was dead, he thought, and if he's caught up in this, nobody'll believe him and his parole officer will have him in the can faster than he could spit. Should he go down, move the body. Hide it maybe. No, somebody might see him. Or maybe somebody's already seen them together tonight. Maybe the bartender at the Wonder Bar saw them through the window.

The sound of birds chirping made Bonehead realize that the sun was coming up. It peeked over the western hills, behind the smoldering ashes of the house that had burned. A few ribbons of smoke still reached into the hazy heavens. Then he saw the bottle release from Shake's hand, awkwardly roll a few inches, and fall off the curb with a tinkle like a wind chime. An arm moved. A leg twitched. The body released a long bitter moan that made Bonehead's fingers dig into the cold brick. Shakes rose up off the sidewalk, brushed off his clothes, and looked around as he rubbed the back of his head. Bonehead clung to the brick, confused and silent. Shakes noticed a phone booth at the

post office across the street, stared at it for a long time, and moved in that direction. As he stepped off the curb, he heard the distant sound of children singing,

“Jesus loves me . . . this I know . . . for the Bible tells me so.”

As he turned his head in the direction of the singing, Shakes saw the front of the Sunday school bus speeding toward him. He saw the huge glass windshield and the face of the alarmed driver, his panicked eyes, his white knuckles on the wheel. He saw the silver block letters, BLUE BIRD, flying toward his face. Stunned, he watches the headlights growing larger, brighter, and the massive black bumper, like an angry mouth, roaring toward him. He's knocked to the pavement, skids across the rough concrete on his face and arms, feeling the dirt and sand accumulate in his skin as he slides. He crashes into the steps of the Bargain Store and realizes that someone is on his back. Turning his head, he sees Bonehead's nose, bleeding and bigger than he remembered. He saw the bus barreling up the street toward the floodwall, its horn trailing in the distance. In the back window, a little fat boy in a white shirt pressed his nose against the glass and raised his stubby middle finger under a sign that read “Follow Me To Church.”

Shakes and Bonehead rise and sit on the Bargain Store steps, bleeding. For someone who hasn't slept, or eaten much, in nearly four days, who's gotten high and drank piss beer, and fallen 30 feet onto concrete, and almost gotten killed by a bus load of pubescent Holy-Rollers, Shakes has an illuminating thought.

“I've got an illuminating thought, Bonehead,” Shakes said.

“Yeah, what?” Bonehead asks, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

“I was wrong about the nature of reality. God is the author of my life. He could have killed me just now, but instead He sounded the horn of salvation and saved me. I heard it!”

Bonehead stares at him, puzzled, and replies, “No, man. It was me, Bonehead, that knocked your ass out of the way. That’s the truth!”

## Harvest

The sweltering West Virginia sun shone like a golden kernel of corn hanging above the green rolling hills of the horizon. Charlie Clemens took the red bandana from the hip pocket of his bibbed overalls and wiped the sweat from his forehead, leaving a smudge of dirt on his brow from the dark earth dug from his backyard. His aged fingers caressed the soil with his worn silver spade as he transplanted another fragile tomato seedlings into the neat furrow he had plowed the day before.

Carefully patting the ground around the last plant, Charlie raised his slender frame to observe his work. He smiled at his day's labor, the final portion of a rich and yielding dark plot of land, every inch of which his hands had known. He stood there, at the end of the long wooden fence, and made a silent wish that Sarah could share this moment. He thought of the skinny young girl he had first brought to this place, the tears in her eyes as she tried to guide a plow through this once rocky field on a cold spring morning long ago. He remembered that particular summer evening as they sat on the porch swing together, her yellow hair dancing in the breeze, watching the white clouds race across the darkening sky, and looking out at their field, their first good crop, and sensing all they had accomplished together.

His wife Sarah had been gone two years now and the solid two-story white frame house echoed each day with the sadness of her leaving. Charlie had closed up the upstairs rooms when she died, and now slept in the guest room off the kitchen. The quilt she had been sewing lay draped over her rocking chair near the fireplace, just as she left it. He could always fill his days with work around the farm or on visits to Freddie's Barbershop

or Moore's Hardware in town. Anywhere but in that empty house. On quiet nights, the creaking timbers harmonized with crickets hidden in the tall grass along Ohio River Road leading to Guyandotte. One by one, stars sparkled in the lonely darkness, blinking away seconds of eternity like a giant clock in the sky.

Charlie noticed a fallen rail on the fence beside him and walked over, pulled it back in place, and hammered the loose nail with the handle of his spade. It wasn't that long ago that their tan and black Beagle, Bonnie, used to dig under this fence and chase rabbits from the garden. Bonnie was a pup from their first dog, Patches. He remembered the day that Sarah got the tiny, floppy eared puppy, in trade for some sewing she did for Bernice Adkins. Screams of excitement from little Huck and Pepsi filled the air when Sarah brought the pup home. Charlie glanced over the fence and past the clothesline he and Huck rebuilt after the cow got loose. Staring at the patches of spring grass in his backyard, he imagined a little girl and boy running barefoot, laughing and playing as the new puppy barked and chased them until all three collapsed in a pile of kisses and giggles.

Charlie took off his hat and turned his tired brown eyes upward, over the back porch and into one of the second story windows of his home. He focused on the flowered curtains, ones that Sarah had made, and remembered the peach wallpapered bedroom where Pepsi first came screaming into the world. Such a lovely little girl. Her golden curls and loving blue eyes were as fresh in his mind as they had been 32 years ago, when he first cradled her in his arms. Two chattering sparrows flew out of the pine tree beside the window. They flew together playfully, pausing once in midair, and then quickly disappearing behind the house. Charlie remembered the sound of Pepsi's laughter when

she burst out of that house, the screen door slamming, and ran through this yard, beside this fence, and up the dirt driveway, chasing baby chicks or stopping to pet the piglets snorting up against the wire fence beside the barn.

The pigs were gone now. But the remnants of the gray wooden fence stood like a monument to his memories, stretching silent and unused behind the long back porch. Charlie put his tools in the shed, and made his way to the house. Easing into the back porch swing, he used his bandana to wipe the black dirt from his gnarled hands with thoughtful strokes. Then he stuffed the dirty cloth into his pocket, leaned back into the swing, and let it sway his body, slowly back and forth, as if he was drifting into an easy dream. This is where he and Huck sat on lazy afternoons, listening to the Cincinnati Reds on the radio, or taking turns imagining what the cloud formations looked like. Sometimes they just sat in silence, whittling sticks until they disappeared into a pile of shavings on the ground.

He could still hear little Huck's voice saying, "Look Daddy, there's a doggie with big ears," as his brown eyes gazed up at a billowing cloud crawling across the blue sky.

Charlie picked up a twig, took his knife from his pocket, and slowly shaved the fragile stick with measured strokes until the wood was white, soft, and rolled easily between his fingers.

"Daddy!"

Charlie's startled face rose up, eyes searching left, then right. Nothing. All he saw was the worn gray enamel of the wooden porch floor, and the slender white banisters that held several potted plants. These familiar surroundings, the garden, the fence, the barn, the tinkling wind chimes hanging on the porch, had somehow absorbed the past and were

now full of images of his life. Charlie had only to remember, and reap the memories held in each sight, sound, and touch of the world around him.

Puffs of white cloud danced slowly past the rusted rooster weather vane on the barn, and a gentle breeze waved the yielding grass in the field beyond. Barefoot children laughed as they ran through the backyard, collecting dandelions and four-leaf clovers, chasing fireflies, then disappearing into the darkness. Charlie's thoughts began to ripen with the feeling of going back. He remembered little Huck peeing in the snow behind the barn, shivering at the end. Pepsi on her new red bicycle from Sears, pedaling proudly up the driveway on her ninth birthday. He thought of Sarah, standing in the doorway of the barn, carrying the lunch she'd made for him in the canopy of her apron, and how the sunlight bathed her face at that moment. Each of his collected memories sprang into another, random dots connected in his ever-developing picture. It was coming more into focus. It was gaining meaning it didn't have before.

In a few months, his harvest would be in. The cucumbers were always the best, and he would can jars and jars of sweet pickles for himself, his children, as well as some to take to town for Freddie and Elsie. His pickles were good, but not as good as Sarah's. Hers had always been just right, a subtle mixture of tart and sweetness -- like doing something familiar for the first time. And there would be another cellar full of beans and tomatoes, peaches, peas, and corn too. Too much for one man, so he would end up giving most of it away, to Pepsi, Huck, their children, and friends. It felt right to.

Pepsi lived in Charleston, almost 60 miles away, with her husband, an accountant. She had three kids, ten-year-old Mary, six-year-old RC, and three-year-old Sarah. Charlie got to see them only once every two or three months, when their SUV rolled into the dirt

driveway and the horn repeatedly announced their arrival. The children spilled out onto the neatly trimmed lawn with the enthusiasm and sound of a carnival coming to town. Charlie savored these visits.

The time lapse in seeing the children made the subtle changes in their growing up seem like little miracles. Mary was becoming a beautiful young girl, and last time he saw RC, he was learning to read on his own. When the little boy climbed next to Charlie on the sofa and said, "Grandpa, let's read this book!" he snuggled next to him and turned the pages as they read, the same as he had done so many times before. And little Sarah ... there were no words. She was the angel of his eternal promise, the blessed blossom of his dreams.

Huck and his wife Becky, their two children, little Charlie and Sue Ann, lived nearby in Guyandotte. They came over every few weeks and spent the day, always leaving with the trunk of their car rattling with freshly canned vegetables. Charlie stood alone in the driveway, his hand held up in a silent good-bye. He watched the familiar gray Buick roll onto the blacktop and speed off down the winding road beside the railroad and the river until it finally disappeared behind the hillside.

The sun dipped behind the western hillside and Charlie rose and went into the house, letting the rickety screen door slam behind him. He ate heartily his evening meal of stewed tomatoes, corn on the cob, green beans, a tender steak he had thawed that morning, and a baked potato. Washing it down with a tall glass of foamy white milk, Charlie wiped his moustache with his napkin, stacked the dishes in the sink and walked tentatively into the living room toward the fireplace.

He paused at the unfinished quilt sprawled across the rocking chair and stared at it for several minutes. She said it was a memory quilt, he remembered, something pieced together from scraps of loved ones clothing. There were pieces of Pepsi's pink baby gown sewn into it, triangular scraps of Huck's Little League uniform, and fragments of Charlie's overalls evenly spliced within the pattern. The weak lamplight of the living room also revealed swatches of clothe from the grandkid's outgrown clothing sculpted into the quilt. Charlie then saw the delicate, faded white fabric of Sarah's wedding dress stitched into the pattern. He reached out and caressed it with his wrinkled hand, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger, then, he lumbered up the stairs to go to sleep.

That night, his dreams were as sweet as the corn he had grown and eaten from his garden. For the first time in many months, he slept well, and deep, and peacefully. And not even the mournful creaking of the old house, or the sound of the hidden crickets, could disturb the joy of his bountiful dreams.