



MILLENNIUM

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Millennium

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VCU

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## Millennium

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Spring 2002

Boosteropolis.....	Rob Widdicombe	5
Queen Mab.....	Kimberly Conway	29
Oh Allison Riley.....	Vivian Davis	30
Deluxe Dreamer.....	Patrick Egan	41
Formaldehyde.....	Shelley L. McGill	56
Narrow.....	Traci Wood	57
The Highlights.....	Jeff Grant	73
Upside Down.....	Julia Taylor	80
Taking Root.....	Patty Paine	82
My Mother.....	Patty Paine	84
Vantage.....	Patty Paine	86
Untitled.....	Micah Daingerfield	87
Pride in Faith.....	Shawn Miller	88
Homage to an Ascetic.....	Shawn Miller	89
Bucolic Life.....	Lee Meadows	90
Meanwhile Back in America.....	Jim Thomson	91

Autumn.....	Lee Meadows	92
Race of Giants.....	Steve Kane	100
Eye.....	Elizabeth Hanners	111
Full Boxes.....	Ian Holland	122
The Ante.....	Micah Daingerfield	125
The New Raymond.....	Greg Weeda	127
Catheter Through the System.....	Brian Mazzara	136
Snapshot.....	Peter Imhof	151
Circular Stampede.....	Warran Dawson	152
Dragging Cherries.....	Jennifer Bryan	163
I Hope This Letter Reaches You.....	Jamie Feuglin	171

## BOOSTEROPOLIS

The hardwood floor of the Clown Room was about the worst place in my apartment to wake up in the summer heat, a mean sharpness lodged inside my dehydrated, dusty head. My neck was all warped too, cricked and stiff from using Wacky Lulu's giant clown shoe for a pillow. This is added to the swirling circus colors in there, bright as a horn section, all the stripes and polka dots, crazy circus posters, clown faces, irrational color schemes. I shut my eyes but then all I could think of was the headache and how bad the scummy flavor of Ancient Age bourbon and bargain diet cola pasted to the insides of my mouth was. So I looked up into the chaos, up at Flappy the Clown from the lid on the make-up box. Yeah, and he was watching me. Again.

Wacky Lulu was just a regular mannequin underneath the shiny green clown suit and red and black greasepaint I put on her face, so there was no chance of her going to the fridge to get me a beer. Let alone give me the back rub I needed. Then I noticed that my old framed engraving of Dan Rice, the world's biggest asskicking superstar clown of the eighteen-hundreds, was hanging crooked. Uncool. I would have to fix it A.S.A.P. This was a dishonor to the Great One, and his picture needed to be right and it was time for me to get up. Soon.

When I finally heaved myself onto my feet, I brushed off the floor dust and little curls of fire-orange clown hair that were everywhere from a wig I picked up at the flea mart. Then I stretched out and yawned and looked at Dan Rice. He was hanging perfectly straight.

I readjusted my balance with the door frame and



went into the kitchen to make coffee, got it going and threw back a couple headache powders with tap water. Then I checked my messages from all the calls I'd been ignoring for about the last three days. There was only one.

My sister's screech shot up and sliced the air like a bottle rocket: "Hi, Stu! Maggie here! How are you! Hey, remember that one you owe me? Well, me and Booster and Donny'll be there tomorrow at noon, and we've got a little favor to ask you. Yeah, we're just passing through on our way to the beach and," then she went from real-estate-agent-voice to seven-year-old girl: "I just know you can please help us out a little. It's really no big deal, okay? See you tomorrow about twelve, then. Bye-bye, Stoobie-doo."

Stoobie-doo. I looked over at the stove clock—twelve-thirty! If I can get dressed and motivate the hell out of here, I thought, maybe I can get away in time. I went up to the front door and looked out into the street, no sign of them, thank God. All I needed was some socks and my coffee cup which was somewhere. No, forget the coffee, there wasn't enough time. Eighty-six the socks too.

They came while I was tying up my boot laces.

"Hi! Hi!" Maggie yelled through the screen door, banging on it. I'd called her Maggie to make her mad when we were kids and never stopped. She knocked again. Machine-gun knocking.

"No," I whisper-screamed. It's way too early for this. I dropped my head between my knees and cursed myself for not having just closed and locked the front door and hidden in bed.

"Hello!" she went. "Stuart. Hello?" More banging.

I knew I was busted, so I poured myself out into the hallway, resigned, feeling like I wasn't capable of escaping from a brown paper bag if I had to.

Maggie was wearing a big white floppy hat and an annoying scream-yellow sun dress with little daffodils all

over it. The dress had the effect of magnifying my headache, like sunbeams tightened through a thick lens, aimed directly at my hangover.

"Hey," I managed, massaging the bridge of my nose, my head cocked back. "How y'doin'."

"Great! Come out here," she sing-sang, "I want you to meet Donny!"

She opened the screen door and grabbed my hand as I eased up, yanking me out onto the front porch. The fresh air made me cough.

"Your scar looks great!" she lied, cringing at my forehead and the nasty Z-shaped scar running down it from the car wreck. I was just glad I got the fat insurance cash-out to buy clown stuff with and not have to work. And thank God no one was calling me Zorro yet.

A pudgy guy with black hair about in his forties was standing out on the sidewalk by Magpie's car. I could tell all the way from the porch he was hairy. Pale and hairy. Dark hair came spilling out the neck of his bright purple polo shirt and he had pursed-up wet lips. He was standing there all funny, too, like he was half guarding the car, like someone who just hadn't had the benefit of a single non-awkward moment since birth. But worse than that, he looked just like Seventies Steve, our mom's weirdest boyfriend ever. Me and Magpie hated him. When she was thirteen and I was ten or eleven he even tried to make-out with her a bunch of times. When Mom finally dumped him, me and Magpie celebrated by taking a bicycle of his that he'd left out in the shed and egging it with an entire carton of jumbo eggs.

"Stuart," Magpie announced, "this is my boyfriend, Donny Tolbert."

"It's Stu," I said, coming down the porch steps. Donny's nervous handshake was even wetter and more fish-like than I could have imagined, and I had to wipe my hand on my shirt when we were done. He smelled like band-aids.

"Nice to meet you," he said in a milk-wet voice. More wetness. "I've heard lots of great things about you."

"Well," I said, rubbing a painful itch out of my nose, "I'm sure she left out the part about the stink bombs at the old folk's home and scrumping the nuns at the rector—"

"Stuart!" Magpie scolded. Then she leaned toward me a little and said softer, "What's 'scrumping'?"

"That's an old one," I said. "So where's Booster?"

"Mister Boo," she said all incensed, "is refusing to get out of the car."

"Yeah?" I said. "How come?"

She didn't answer. Then Donny just slowly inched off and rolled his head back, hands in his pockets, gazing up at the row of old duplexes like he was beholding them with wonder. Magpie grabbed my hand again, looking all feel-sorry-for-me and heavy.

"Stu," she said, "Donny is wonderful and he's got such a great job. We just want a couple days alone together at the beach. Would you mind hanging out with Booster until we get back?" She even flitted her eyelashes at the end.

"What? No way," I said. I laughed. "No way. Are you crazy?" I laughed more, shaking my head, which hurt.

"Stu. Please?"

"Why can't Mom do it?"

"We don't have time to drive all the way to Florida. Donny has to be back in Baltimore Tuesday to close on a house."

"This is a joke, right?" I rubbed my eyes hard with my palms and ran my hands through my hair. "I mean, there's no way in hell I'm watching a ten-year-old kid."

"He's eleven."

"I don't care if he's older than God—I'm not babysitting him."

"It's not babysitting! Look, Stu, I'll give you two hundred dollars, it's only until Monday, and I swear you won't

even notice him around.”

“Whoa...” I said. “I’ll do it for three.”

Booster had a backpack and a bed roll and an oatmeal look of nothingness on his face. The tiny bags under his eyes made him seem like a miniature forty-year-old-man.

“Hey, Booster,” I said.

“My name’s not Booster anymore.” He looked down at the concrete. “It’s Leonard.”

“Leonard? Okay.” I tried it out: “*Hi, Leonard.*”

His red soccer team shirt was tucked flat into his puffy shorts and the bleached tube socks were pulled up tight on his calves, striped red and blue at the top.

Magpie waved to us from the car as she and Donny rolled off, but I just stood there, the soothing roll of ATM-fresh twenties vitalizing my hand like magic paper.

We went inside and I told Booster to throw his stuff in the living room, where he’d be sleeping. Then he followed me into the kitchen.

“Well,” Booster said, “they succeeded in dumping me off. I guess they can go have fun now.”

“Well, if I was Donny, there’d be no way I’d want a little kid around, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, he wanted me to go to the beach with them. I’m the one who didn’t want to go.”

“What! When I was eleven I was busting to go to the beach.”

“I’m ten,” he said. “My birthday’s not until October twenty-seventh.”

The draft from the hole above the stove along with the fan blowing from the counter was making a medicating little cross-breeze and I thought about how great it would be to go back to sleep, preferably waking up as someone else.

“Well,” I said. “I don’t blame you for not going. That dude seems like the Freak of the Week. He totally reminds me of this guy our mom used to date. One time



he—" then I thought, what the hell am I telling Booster this for? He probably doesn't even know what 'make-out' means yet.

"One time he what?"

"Um..." I scrambled, "one time he took me and your mom to the movies and his beeper went off in the theater and he had to...go to work and he just left us there. What a short-stick, y'know?"

"How'd you and Mom get home?"

"Well, actually, we flew. Yeah, we found some old car parts and wooden planks and pulleys out behind the theater and built a two-person helicopter raft. Then we caught up to the circus train, after we got through some trouble with this flock of flying fish." I started to bat away at pretend air-fish, happy now that the headache powders were kicking in. "Back! Back away you bottom-feeders! Anyway, Booster, I mean Leonard, we ended up joining the circus, the Crazy Ross Brothers Traveling Hobo Revue and Electric Dog Show out of, um...Detroit Rock City."

"Nuh-uh."

Booster looked down at the coffee I'd poured him, which he hadn't touched. Then there was this long-ass silence.

After a while he looked up and said: "Did my mom give you a lot of money to let me stay here?"

"She gave me enough."

After my nap, which took place in bed and not on a goddam clown shoe, I announced to Booster that he could only stay in Uncle Stu's triple-chill mondo crib if he made himself completely invisible when I was there, promised not to mess with my stuff, especially anything in the Clown Room, and he'd better have his own towel because I didn't have one for him. I peeled him out ten bucks and told him to buy his food at the Hurry-Stop two blocks down, but not to go there at night, or twilight even, because it might get

dark on the way back. The boogeyman was still at large, I warned, and Sherlock Holmes was in rehab kicking brandy again or whatever it was he drank. I showed him how to work the microwave and jiggle the broken toilet handle. Then I told him that if he broke anything, I would rearrange his face.

Rearrange his face. What a dorky thing to say. Where did I get that? Then I remembered—Seventies Steve. He used to say that all the time. Man, I thought, what a major league jerk-off he was. Then I wondered if I got that one from him too. I shook it off and made an instant pact with myself: no more Seventies Steve expressions, dude. Jeez Louise.

I started more coffee and went back to my room and called up Jerome to see how much crank I could get for two-fifty.

"Yeah, man," I said, "you still getting those, uh, discount lift tickets for next winter?"

"Crystal only," he said, like a midnight jazz deejay. "Cola machine's broke."

"Um, yeah...that crystal fake snow works best anyway."

"Ten-four, good partner," he said, now like a redneck truck driver.

"Awesome. I'll be by."

I went in the living room and told Booster welcome to Bachelorland, and that I'd be gone for a while.

He asked if he could see the Clown Room.

"I thought you were afraid of clowns, there, Leonard Nimoy."

"Not anymore," he insisted. "I'm older now."

"Are you *sure*?" I said, bulging my face out all goofy and sinister. "I don't want to be all hearing about no clown nightmares now, son." I was trying to sound like Jerome's redneck.

"No, no," he protested. "I promise."

"Okay then," and I switched to circus barker: "Step right this way!"

I led Booster into the Clown Room like he was being made into the mafia, with boatloads of industrial strength gravitas. It was my own personal clown mafia church, in fact, a shrine-room of clown. Way legit, with my three-by-five Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey throw-rug and a clown-headed helium tank to blow up balloons with. My Jocko the Juggler pinball machine cost six-hundred, but it had a stupid short in it, so I had to tell Booster he couldn't play it. He gaped at the amazing clown spread, the wig collection and my cross-eyed purple and yellow clown puppets, and he seemed to carefully take in Wacky Lulu, Dan Rice, Bozo, Flappy.

I went over and turned on the clown-face lamp and put a circus calliope LP on the old plastic kid's record player, which was covered with clown face decals as was just about every other open space. Then I asked Booster which posters he liked best: the hobos, whitefaces, acrobat clowns, or the spooky dancing French harlequins from 1907.

He said he liked rodeo clowns, because they always got away from the bull.

"But rodeo clowns aren't the same," I tried to explain. I, the godfather of clowns.

"We had Captain Zippo at Terrance's birthday party last year," Booster said. "She was an awesome clown."

"Zippo? Man, that's a *lighter*. And how do you know it was a she? A true clown is often genderless. True, Clara Bell was obviously a man, but give me the circus clowns—the *real* ones. From 1873. See that clown there?" I pointed to the picture of Dan Rice, and nodded to it in homage.

Rice's inked image was that of a wiry, bearded, maniacal life force bursting through his puffy U.S. flag suit, his sharp little face kicking full mischief under the black

stovepipe hat. He didn't have on any make-up, just the pointy black beard, but he was a million percent clown.

"That's Dan Rice," I said. "King of American Clowns. He was the original Uncle Sam too, and inspired the saying, 'jump on the bandwagon.' He was also a circus strong-man and he would beat the shit out of the townies whenever they gave the circus any trouble."

"Why don't you become a clown?" Booster said, looking up at me, the oatmeal coming to life a little. "You could probably make a lot of money."

"Naw," I waved it off, cringing at the idea. "I'm just into clowns. I have no desire to be one. I mean, I think they're cool, but...anyway," I lied, "I don't need money."

I told Booster not to ever go into the Clown Room unless he asked me first or Wacky Lulu would come alive and kick his ass. The bad humidity we were having caused her make-up to melt again, red and black greasepaint sliding down her face, making her look like Mrs. Satan. Booster agreed to stay out with rapid head nods, like there was always that chance I could be right.

I got on my bike and went by Jerome's and bought the bag of speed, then met up with Dell to go to Screaming Nigel's for Shots Night. After the bars, about six or seven of us piled up into my apartment with the two punker kids who lived upstairs. Everybody was laughing all loud, pretending to cuss each other out, full of their own drunken charismas. I was so blitzed I almost forgot about Booster. He was asleep in his bed roll in the corner of the living room with his face toward the wall, like he was a natural part of the floor.

I cut the light on and tried to shush everyone and tell them that my nephew was over there asleep, but it was like gasoline on the barbeque.

"Don't lie," Erica said, "that's your *son*!"

"Let's wake him up and teach him how to party," some other professional loser blurted out.



They finally quieted down a little when I put on some Deep Purple and grabbed the bag of crank out of my backpack and the California Breeze mirror from underneath the coffee table and started chopping. I did the first line myself, passed the mirror and went to get the twelve-pack of PBRs I had in the fridge. When I got back from the kitchen, Booster was standing in the middle of the living room, his bed roll bunched up in his arms, squinting hard at me in the bare lightbulb light.

"Thanks a lot!" he yelled, his voice breaking. I could tell he was trying not to cry, probably scared half-shitless by the Deep Purple. Then he stomped past me out of the room and down the hall toward the kitchen.

As soon as he turned into the kitchen doorway, the whole crew blew out in hysterics. They started calling me Uncle Scrooge and telling me that was no way to treat my slave boy. I told them all to shut up and fuck off, but it accidentally came out like I was really saying it, not like kidding around.

The last of them finally left about eight, but I was still zooming so I started organizing my circus band and cartoon jazz LPs in my room. After a few minutes of that I decided to see if there was any beer left.

Booster was sitting at the kitchen table in front of a giant junk food feast. He had an open bag of cheese doodles, three or four Moon Pies, a bowl of Cap'n Crunch, (milked with chocolate milk), and a bottle of fruit punch. His lips were all stained red.

I got a beer and sat down.

"Hey," I said, "sorry we woke you up last night."

"Oh, that's okay." Booster set his spoon down and looked at me. "I found a place where I can disappear invisible. I'll be staying there for the rest of my visit."

"Disappear invisible, huh? Where's that?"

"It's my secret fort. I built it this morning."

"Cool—a secret fort. Where is it? I can keep a secret."

"Well," Booster said, rubbing his knuckles together all nervous. "I didn't know if I wasn't supposed to go down there or not, but it's...it's in the basement."

"Oh, that's okay, man. It is kind of rough with all those boards and nails and shit, though. Don't go down there without shoes on, whatever you do."

"I won't. You want to see it?"

"Sure. Why the hell not?"

I followed Booster out into the hallway and through the door and down the little stairs to the basement's sprawling dirt floor. The place was huge, stretching the whole length of the building, but the air was dead and mildewy and it didn't move at all. Old tenants had left all kinds of junk behind too, like freight pallets, cardboard boxes, piles of rotten insulation, bricks, blocks, car tires, ruined furniture parts, stuff like that everywhere. The hanging skunkiness and dirt of the place made a kind of haze, lit up all a weird dull yellow by the flood lamp in the far corner ceiling. The lamp hung over an old exercycle which was draped with cobwebs, and there was also a set of dumbbells sitting on the floor by it, making that corner of the basement look like a little gym for ghosts.

Booster marched me over to his fort, which sat against the wall by a pile of trashed electrical cables. It had two cinder block sidewalls and a pallet roof with a moldy green canvas tarp draped over top of it. The tarp hung down the sides, where it was neatly tucked in around the edges. It was about three feet wide and three feet tall, and on the inside his bed roll was stretched out flat over the ground with his backpack in the rear corner. It looked like a little World War II field office tent. He had even fixed my flashlight up in the boards of the pallet, giving the fort a ceiling light.

"Hey," I said, "not too bad."

He slid feet-first into his fort and turned on the flashlight. Then he rolled over and reached up and pulled the tarp down, covering the opening.

"See?" he said. "I disappeared invisible! Now nobody can ever see me."

"Dang," I said. "Where the hell did Boos...I mean Leonard, go? Man, he really disappeared."

Then he pulled the tarp back up, flopping over on his belly like a beached sea mammal.

"I was here the whole time," he said, disappointed.

I sat down on a giant wooden cable spool, lit a cigarette and checked out Booster's fort. It looked pretty sturdy considering the little putz built it himself.

I asked him about school and if he wanted to play sports and he gave bland answers to everything, but they were pretty bland-ass questions. So I asked him what he thought of Magpie's new boyfriend.

"Oh, Donny?" he said. "Mmm...I guess he's all right."

"That didn't sound very enthusiastic. He seems like pretty much the King Of Greater Dweeba to me. God, he so reminds me of Seventies Steve. We called him that because he wore white patent leather shoes and bad sports jackets. What a pervert."

As soon as the word 'pervert' came out of my mouth, Booster squirmed like I'd harpooned him.

"What, is Donny a pervert too, or something?" I said.

Booster sort of curled up there with his face all twisted, completely silent.

"He sure dresses like it. Well, is he?"

Booster rolled over and curled up more. Something was very weird, but Booster was such a weird kid anyway. Then for some reason, I just decided to pretend that Booster

had answered yes, Donny was a sicko. "So, what does Donny do that's so perverted?"

Booster rolled back over and clenched his face up even more, looking like he was holding his breath.

"Okay, man," I said, "now I know you're hiding something. C'mon Lenny, you can't fool the ringmaster."

We sat there for about nine years of total church silence. I lit another cig and wished I'd brought my beer.

Finally, Booster said: "He likes to play Find the Submarine and stuff like that."

"Find the Submarine? What the hell is that?"

"Umm...that's when a little kid helps a grown-up man find the...his submarine, and the man tells him about the birds and bees and stuff. It's really stupid."

"It sounds really fucking sick! Are you seriously talking about the man's *johnson*?" I almost whispered the last word.

Booster nodded his head.

"No way! Does Magpie know about this?"

He didn't answer.

"Well does she?"

"Mmm...not really," he said.

"Good God!" I yelled, the blood all screaming up to my face, my arms and legs going dead. "Well, don't you worry, Boos. I'm calling the cops on Donny's ass and I'm gonna beat the everliving shit out of him for you."

"No! Don't do that! Mom'll get really mad."

"Sounds like she's not mad *enough*!"

"Oh no, Stu, please don't call the police. Mom'll get really mad."

"Okay, okay," I said, holding up my hands in surrender. "I won't call them."

I crushed my cigarette out into the dirt floor and told Booster not to worry, because Uncle Stu was going to make everything all right one how or another. I high-fived him



and gave him another ten bucks for food or whatever else he wanted and we went back upstairs.

Booster drifted outside to pick blackberries off the scraggly bushes in the back yard and I went in my room and dialed nine-one-one. When the lady answered, "Emergency," I realized it wasn't really an emergency and told her to transfer me to the regular desk. I eventually got through to an older guy who sounded like a detective or something else serious and gave him the whole deal. I couldn't believe it—he was actually taking my side.

"Just make sure you can stall him there tomorrow and then call me, Detective John Claiborne, and we will...we'll take care of this, sir."

"That'll be great, man."

When I hung up with him I called my ex-girlfriend Treece, busting to tell someone all this. We met for coffee at Liva's and she couldn't stop telling me what a great thing I was doing by turning Donny in. Then she started ordering me vodka tonics. I sucked them down like a world alcohol champion. Little trophies to warm up for the giant trophy of her mushy futon, as I hoped. Next thing I knew she was hinting around about doing a bumper in the girl's room, but I forgot to bring any crank, so she just sat there and looked at me like I was an idiot. Then somehow she convinced me to pay the tab for the drinks she was supposedly buying me and go home and get her some and meet her at her house. All on my stupid bike. Never was such a sucker born to this earth, I told myself. Mom must have had me right on the goddam sucker minute.

When I got to my house, I threw my bicycle down in the hallway and said hey to Booster. He was lying on the couch, his head fixed on the TV. I went in my room and grabbed the crank from the shoebox underneath my dresser. I thought about it for a minute and then decided to blow a quick line. It felt like crushed glass going into my head when

I snorted it, but what price glory and crap like that, right? I pulled the cellophane wrap off my pack of cigs and dropped a couple pinches into it, rolled it up with a rubber band, and stuck it in my pants pocket.

When I crouched down to put the box back, though, I noticed something different across the floor under my bed. I looked over and saw that all of my porno mags were a mess, piled up with uneven corners. I stood up and tore down to the living room.

“Booster! What the hell, man!” I screamed. “I thought I told you not to mess with my stuff!”

Booster looked at me then back at the TV, his mouth hanging open like he was on Planet Nifnar.

“Sorry,” he barely said.

“Sorry!” I mocked him. “Damn, dude. Sorry—what-ever—stay out of my stuff.”

I left the house sweating and pedaled to the Hurry Stop for some more cigs on the way to Treece’s. I started thinking maybe Booster checking out my pornos wasn’t so bad. I shouldn’t have chewed him out so hard. I should have said hey, help yourself to my dirty magazines, captain buddy. At least he was trying to be normal after Donny messing with him. And Booster deserved to be normal, have a normal life, grow up, play sports, go to college, get married, drive an SUV and die old in bed on lots of pain drugs with a crazy-hot nurse standing by to give him constant hummers, blend him up margueritas and change the channels for him. Maybe fan him with palm leaves in between some of that. But what the hell did I know about ‘normal’ anyway? I’m not exactly what you’d call an expert.

For the rest of the bike ride I imagined Donny stretched out on a giant medieval torture rack, getting his arms and legs slowly twisted off for what he did to my main man the Booster, or having water slowly poured up his nose until his lungs filled up, Chinese-style. When I finally got

off my bike up at the top of the hill I was dying; the air was so humid it felt like my brain was being steamed in my head.

I slept at Treece's until ten or so in the morning and rode home in a colossus head fog. When I got there I called around the house for Booster, and he called back from the basement, a-okay. I took the portable phone into the bathroom with me and set it on top of the toilet tank. Then I went in my room and landed on the bed and fell asleep.

"Stooie! Stuart!" Magpie's lemon juice voice shot into my nap. "We've got some news for you."

I pulled myself out of bed and into the hallway and there they were, their noses practically touching the screen door. I tried to shake the sleep out of my head but it was glue sleep.

Donny was standing just behind her, his smiling wet moon-face hovering over her shoulder.

"Guess what?" she said. "We got married!" She pulled the screen door open and stretched her arms out to me. I stepped up and hugged her. She was warm, like a big apple muffin.

I stared at Donny and his eyes sharpened. Yeah, you better be on your guard, I thought. My brother-in-law. Un-motherfucking-believable. I was now fully and finally convinced: life is a giant twenty-four hour running cartoon.

"I didn't say anything because we wanted to surprise Boo," Magpie said, "and I know how you can't keep a secret. Aren't you going to say congratulations?"

"Congratulations."

"So where is the Booster-man?" she said, finally letting go of our hug. She brandished her fat diamondy wedding and engagement rings at me. The glare hurt my eyes.

"I think he's down in his fort," I said, wondering if I'd be able to score the rings after Donny got busted.

"What do you mean 'you think'? You don't know?"

"No, I'm pretty sure he's down in his fort thing."

"Fort thing? I want to see it," she said.

"Why don't you guys come in and sit down," I said. "Y'all want some coffee or something? Beer? You gotta check out this new circus record I got from the flea—"

"No!" she screeched. "I want to see him now. We want to tell him."

Donny just stood there, wet as ever.

"Umm...okay. Uh, let me go pee first real quick." I darted into the bathroom and shut the door, turned the faucet on full blast and called Detective Claiborne. He answered right away and said officers would be to my house in fifteen minutes at the most, give or take, something like that.

When I came out, she and Donny were standing at the other end of the hall by the basement door.

"Is this the way to the mysterious fort?" Magpie said, squeezing her floppy hat in her hands.

"Yes ma'am," I said, laughing to myself. Try the 'pervert trap' instead. I walked past them and pulled the knob. "Right this way," and let them go down first.

"Booster-boo," Magpie sang, "we've got a surprise for you! Oh, it's awful down here."

Booster was making zoom sounds, hopping up and down barefoot in the middle of a sweeping, shining miniature city of cardboard boxes, end tables, scrap wood, electrical cables, cinder blocks, anything he could scrounge up, all carefully covered and fitted with my whole entire economy-size roll of aluminum foil. And through his manic hopping I could see his face was all done up in clown make-up, in Flappy the Clown greasepaint and on top he had a neon green fuzz wig and my orange bowler on top. He had even painted a "Z" on his forehead in purple, just like my scar.

No one said anything. The muffled yellow light reflected in the aluminum foil buildings in a way that put the city a strange sparkling but hazy twilight, and gave it this

weird underlying buzz of activity, its own vibration. Boosteropolis, I called it, right there in my head. It was laid out in perfect blocks. The buildings had tiny squares for windows magic marked on the foil, but one looked important, like a grand hotel, with swirly inked cornices and my foiled flashlight beaconing from the roof. One building had an upside-down clock radio on top of it. Then there was my toilet plunger, its handle jammed into the dirt floor, a twisted foil doo-hickey rising from the round rubber top like a futuristic space antenna pointed at God. And he'd filled up my entire unopened bag of thirty-six mylar clown face balloons, who were now watching from all along the ceiling pipes and open rafters above Boosteropolis.

"Booster!" Magpie finally busted out. "What are you doing down here? Stuart—this is not what I had in mind when I asked you to take care of him!"

"I don't know—it seems like I've been taking a lot better care of him than *you* guys have. Besides, what the hell's wrong with Boosteropolis here?"

Then I saw my California Breeze mirror, with the razor, straw, and half-opened bag of crank. It was all sitting on the ground by a foil box house on the outskirts of the city.

*No!* I screamed to myself. Not Booster snorting my crystal meth! And the cops coming—anything but that, *please!* I'll take a pot of boiling motor oil poured down my ass or the circus train running over my face a thousand-and-one times instead. Anything! Aw...*Jesus*—don't let his heart explode!

"Mom! Mom!" he yelled. "If I had some more spaceships and flying rafts, I could rule all the planets!"

"Hey, Booster," I said, "that's a neat foil space boat. Why don't you show your Mom?"

"Okay!" he high-pitched. He picked up this pointy foil sculpture thing he'd made and ran it toward them.

The chaos worked, and I stepped into Boosteropolis

for the first time. I grabbed my bag of crank and shoved it in my pocket and stuck the mirror carefully down the back of my pants. Then I looked back at the three of them as Magpie yelled at Booster. I ground the razor and straw into the dirt floor with my boot sole, trying to be casual, but Donny was watching me.

"What has gotten into you?" Magpie said to Booster, trying to grab his squirmy little shoulders. "Why on earth would you ever want to play down here?"

"Play down here?" he said with a mocking, smart-ass flavor I'd never seen in him before. "I am not playing. I am General Hitler, King of the Flying Clown Brigade!"

"Booster!" Magpie screamed, horrified.

I edged my way around the city limits and tried to slip by them, heading for the stairs, but Donny stepped up and tried to square himself, trying to block me without going so far as to fully block me. I couldn't believe it.

"Hey," he said, in a milky attempt at being tough. "What was that stuff? Is that cocaine?"

A roaring head of insanity charged up my neck, and the instinct to pull the mirror out and smash his face with it was almost too much. I held myself back somehow, but I came close to swallowing my teeth.

"Look here, freako!" I screamed, pointing my index finger an inch from his face." Booster told me what you did to him!" Then I looked back at Magpie: "Did you hear that, Sis? Yeah. Donny molested Booster. Uh-hu—he's a pervert. Sorry, but it's time to wake up and smell the *dog* shit."

I shook my head at Donny, pointing at the center of his ugly shirt of palm trees and sailboats.

"You're going down, bitch," I said. I'd always wanted to say that to someone and really mean it. Then I pushed his mushy shoulder out of my way and walked to the stairs.

Magpie ripped into Donny so hard I thought I was nine again and had just been busted for peeing on her



Barbies. No possible punishment invented by the cops or the courts could ever be anywhere near as bad as the Rage of the Magpie. It busted out through her phony smile and her 'everything is always great' line of bullshit, all the vinegar and rage against Seventies Steve, our disappearing dad before him, all the psychos who ever slept in her bushes over the years, all of it came out roaring like a lava ball straight into Donny's neck: *What did you do to him! What did you do to him!* She kept saying it over and over, not giving him a chance to answer.

I went upstairs to the bathroom and set the mirror down in the bathtub and ran some hot water on it. I dumped my bag of crystal meth into the toilet and watched it swirl down. Then I was like, what the hell did I do that for? I could have hidden it. Or at least had one last banger before the cops came. What the holy hell is my problem?

Then I noticed the Flappy the Clown greasepaint tins were up against the back of the sink counter. I picked up the white one and shook it a little, watching the goo shimmer in the light, wondering—why doesn't any of this pervert drama seem like a big deal? It was, oh yeah, I save kids from pedophiles all the time. But what was the point of thinking about a bunch of deep shit anyway? Don't dwell on it, I told myself. Relax. Roll with. But I knew it was in there, sharper than wet navy knots, the hell-dreams stretched tight across the top of my bowels, Seventies Steve showing me how to play Catch the Wilbur, whatever it was. Whatever. Move on. Roll with it at all times forever. Life's a constant tape loop, running all the time—it's totally easy to edit anything out, anything you want, just hit rewind and cover the tape over with new stuff.

I stood at the sink and drove my fingers into the white greasepaint. It felt cold when I slapped it on my skin, shooting natural tingles down to my feet, and I followed it with blue cheek circles, a red lip outline, and finally a big

green "Z" over top the real one. Then I went to the Clown Room for headgear.

There on the Ringling Brothers rug, a clown from neck to goofy hat, I started floating off into some kind of space cloud, off into the nothing between the clown posters. I shut my eyes and saw the sleepy, weatherbeaten ghost of old Dan Rice, the crinkly wiseguy. He nodded his head to me one time and cracked a slow, death-tired smile. Then he disappeared invisible, followed by a perfectly timed puff of moldy sawdust, the steam whistles of his calliope car tooting in eerie wisps as it's pulled down the tracks by the prize team of white Indian elephants. Then for some reason I remembered reading that Dan died a painfully miserable loser and a very mean drunk, dead broke and totally pissed off at the world. Great, I thought, I finally put on clown make-up and have to remember that.

The loud slams of the cop car doors knocked me out of my downer, but then at front door they looked at me like *I* was the pervert. I let them in and told them I was a professional clown and that we have to work too, so don't get your panties in a bunch. They followed me down the hall and Magpie was coming through loud from the basement, still firing off at Donny. I wanted to high-five the guy cop and kiss the lady one and pour drinks. And when I pulled open the basement door, we could hear Booster's weird zoom sounds too. The two cops looked at each other like they were walking into a living freak show.

And they were. I should have charged them admission.

"The guy you want's down here," I told them. "Heh—he'll probably be glad to see you."

I was surprised they didn't take us all in on insanity charges before the whole thing got sorted out. The cops yelled at Booster to chill with the sound effects and the jumping, and they threatened to arrest Magpie if she didn't

calm down and stop screeching, but I could tell they were bluffing on that one. The sight of Boosterpolis alone must've just made them decide for sure that we were all completely nuts, but I don't think they ever got over the uncle-and-nephew-matching-clowns. They looked almost disappointed when we showed up in court in our suits and ties and regular faces.

Donny sat at the defense table squirming like a worm on the hook, waiting to sink. And the judge was a football coach sort of crew-cut good ol' boy, hard-ass Judge Dierdon. He didn't exactly seem like president of the child molester fan club, then again, who the fuck knows what anyone's hiding. He could have a harem of teenage boys chained in his basement or a one-armed Portuguese mistress he keeps in the mower shed. Who can really say?

Booster hopped up on the witness stand like he was getting on the couch to watch infomercials, a natural. Everybody in the courtroom squirmed when he got to the Find the Submarine game just like they were supposed to. I leaned over and whispered to Magpie that the rehearsals with the prosecutor really paid off. She didn't say anything, so I leaned over again and said that Donny had way worse coming his way in jail, if you know what I mean. She just gave me the blankest, most frozen look with her scrunched up weak little eyebrows, but I didn't see what was so bad about it.

When the judge read the guilty verdict I stood up and threw my fist in the air and yelled, "Awesome!" Then I looked over at Donny and smiled as cruelly as possible, nodding my head, rubbing it in with all my strength. So long, Scum Scumbert. Have fun in *jail*.

I was so the white-gloved super hero, Zorro-man, square-chinned, bolting down from the red-and-purple storm clouds in my black semi-gloss cape, swooping up Booster from the Land of the Monsters and punching the

monster's nose, which in turn causes it to disintegrate into a gazillion microscopic pieces. Plus I'm looking way bad-ass in the cape. And all my friends did actually start calling me 'Zorro,' and it sucks beyond belief, but I guess it was inevitable. I guess it's better than Stooie-Doo or Freak-Boy or Doughnut-Leg or something.

After the sentencing deal, at which Donny got only *one year* of jail and some bullshit probation after that, me and Magpie took Booster to the arcade at the bowling alley and let him loose with twenty bucks. We flopped down at a plastic table and tried to eat some horrible plastic bowling alley pizza with tiny grease lakes all over it. Magpie's normally perked-out face was slumping into itself. She looked like she was made out of an old potato sack, exhausted, like Donny was the final vacuum that sucked out the rest of her soul or something. The "food" didn't seem to be much help, either. Souls can grow back, I thought, but stomach linings can't. At least not for a long-ass time.

"This whole Donny thing," I said to her as I chewed pizza, "it reminds me of when we threw eggs at Seventies Steve's bike and how it ruined the bike but he never came back for it anyway. Perfectly good bike, you know? It felt so damn good to egg it, though. Remember?"

She just looked at me like I was insane again. And I realized as I was saying it it didn't make much sense. Then all the super-hero glory crap just felt so painfully retarded and super-lame I just wanted to instantly disappear from the earth. Disappear invisible like Booster disappeared into Boosteropolis. It just made me want to run to the jailhouse and smack Donny in the face with a two-by-four until they wrestled me into a straight jacket and threw me in the river, or whatever it is they do with freaks like myself.

Then I asked her about the rings. I told her if she gave them to me, I would use the money to move to Florida and go to clown college. I hadn't really thought about it all

that much, but it came out sounding like I'd been planning it for years. But it's not so much about actually being a clown, it's about being a clown scholar, a professor of clownology, if there is one, and I'm thinking I should knock down some real clown work first to be fully legit. You know, research. Plus, I told her, I can visit Mom down there and show her this copy I got of Donny's mug shot, see if he reminds her of Seventies Steve.

Magpie said yes, but only if I promised to stop calling her "Magpie." She hated it and she always hated it and she wanted me to stop.

I said okay.

I ended up scoring a whopping forty-five hundred bucks for the jewelry, which is probably more than Uncle Dan Rice made in his entire lifetime, dancing his patriotic jigs, mocking Shakespeare, riding bareback while singing satirical songs for hours and hours and hours. No wonder the poor bastard looked so tired.

QUEEN MAB ○

Last night I saw you die  
two thousand times in one dream.  
Languid bones dancing through smoke  
as it billowed out your bedroom window.  
A milder version of my skin and teeth,  
you wandered out in the night.  
Papyrus cracking in my ears like rips through the sky,  
The message on your voice mail  
echoing through my lost mind,  
the only sound you left me to hold.  
Insanity poured off my tongue,  
wailing like caged birds engulfed in fire,  
melting all I had left.  
Scraps of letters,  
corners of paintings,  
the last remnants of you  
wafting through purgatory scenes.

## O ALLISON RILEY

The bus-ride to school took forty-five minutes. That was in 1986 before EPA emission standards trickled down to the School Board's fleet of yellow buses. The big diesels would chug away, shoving as much smoke into the sky as the chimneys and cylinder stacks that flanked the sides of the streets. That's a lot of smoke to be putting into a boy's lungs so early.

In 1986, Southwest Virginia was dying from the grease-slick industry that had given her a shot as a boomtown. The same industry that put a color TV in every home and an iron lung in every chest was too sick to pay a pension. The coal miners wheeled their oxygen tanks around on dollies and sat at the sandwich counters eating egg salad, dying of black lung, emphysema. You could hear them talking in hoarse whispers about the gradual closings of one mine or another. Some were confused, like moles that had been underground too long. Surprised, sometimes resentful, at the sight of sunlight. But the air was still gray then. Not just from the stacks, but from the stoves burning with coal. The small highways were still freckled with trucks hauling the black tumors to and from the mines.

In the span of a forty-five minute bus ride, a mind can find lots of things to think about. Particularly when it happens to be seven years old. For some reason during that year there was only one thing on my mind. It was something that I registered as trouble, a scratch right down at the base of my throat. But I could place the source of it all. It had to do with Allison Riley.

That summer the principal sent letters home to parents, form letters asking for permission for this year's second

grade students to undergo weekly dental treatments. My mom got the letter. Her housecoat back then was new and terry cloth, pink like a raw piece of bacon. Not curled and dusty on the edges as it would become in later years. She was a new widow, and she checked yes. It was the responsible thing to do, and you could be sure that our next door neighbor, Mrs. Riley, would check yes on her form.

The Riley's lived across the street from us in a white-washed house and had lived there for as long as I could remember. My brothers and I would sometimes play with the boys of the family, luring them out of their front yard into the drainage ditch that ran along the curbs in our neighborhood. The place where boys went to give each other Indian burns and look for ghosts of tadpoles in the black water. But Mrs. Riley and her only daughter Allison, who was close to my own age, rarely ventured past the screen door to our side of the street. I would see Allison sometimes in the crowded halls of our elementary school, always mute and colorless, like a Kewpie Doll floating above the stacks of prizes at the carnival. But neither she nor her mother crossed the street. Not until after my Dad died.

Last spring after the funeral, Mrs. Riley became something like a friend to my mother. Her own husband, Earl, had died two years before when one of the ceilings down at the mines collapsed on top of him. She began to visit on Wednesdays. Mrs. Riley would drink iced tea and comment on the house's new paint job, the Avon catalogs on the coffee table, my mother's tiny hands, my brother's new Firebird.

Mrs. Riley was a fat woman. That's what I would have said then. With several children under her belt, her belly stuck out in a state of constant maternity while her legs underneath were skinny and pale. Either from one on the way, or the aftershock of one leaving her body. There are so many shades of fat a woman can wear, and Allison Riley's



mother wore only one. She was hateful fat. Not jolly fat or sweet fat. She was just big and hateful fat. Her hair was blonde, just like Allison's, but it didn't look like her daughter's. Bits of it slid off of her scalp like straw. The day the form letters arrived she came to our house, walking through the garden carrying a plate of deviled eggs in one hand and Allison in the other. It was the first time that I ever really got a good look at the two of them together. She knocked on the screen door of our house, clutching Allison and the deviled eggs to her chest.

I sat across from Allison on the porch as I listened to them talk about the letters. We made a sullen pair sitting on the steps beneath our mothers' feet with the toys she brought over. She sat in front of a miniature doll swimming pool filled with an inch of dirty tap water, swirling a Barbie's blonde hair around in the mess. I heard her mother tell mine that we'd be in the same class together. Getting the same dental treatments.

"Fluoride," Ms. Riley said, sticking a finger into her mouth to suck off the egg. "This is the kind of the thing we need here. They've been doin it up in Northern Virginia for years, I heard. And they're not better than us." She reached for another egg, "What kind of toothpaste are you buying now?" she asked with a mouthful.

"I think we get Crest," my mother replied, searching for a sugar packet, "or sometimes whatever's on sale at the Payless." Mrs. Riley eyed her. Then she looked down at Allison and then at me.

"Well, I guess it can't hurt. Your boy's got straight enough teeth," she said slowly, studying me as if my teeth might suddenly sprout sharpened points. "This one though," she said, pointing to Allison whose Barbie was now completely submerged in the pool, "this one has ten fillings. This fluoride's the only thing that'll save me from getting her a mouth full of braces," she finished with a grunt, nudg-

ing Allison with her foot. "You still leaving him with Lil in the summers?"

I looked up at Mrs. Riley. Lil was my Nana. She was my father's mother.

"Yes, when the older ones are out, he goes down to Lil's," my mother said, dumping the contents of the packet into the iced tea, "and when I start my job, he'll stay down there after school too." My mother picked up her pair of black Jackie O sunglasses from the table, running her hands over them.

"I don't know about that," Mrs. Riley said, "haven't they always been a little touched? The Callahans? I know you're not one of them by blood," she said. "Anyway," she continued, "you better watch what Lil lets him do. I saw him down there in the drainage ditch the other day. It's not sanitary," she said as my mother held the sunglasses tighter.

I picked up a dead mill bug that was lying between Allison and me, rolling it between my fingers. I held it out to the girl. She looked over with the naked Barbie doll in one hand and swatted me, quick on the side of the face with Barbie's wet hair. Streaks of tap water smeared my face. Ms. Riley looked down, alarmed, and grabbed the Barbie. She scooped the little girl up, staring at me all the while. Allison buried her face in her mother's chest as Mrs. Riley stroked the back of her head.

"Well, I gotta get her back inside," Mrs. Riley said, "she doesn't take well to these afternoons." I smashed the mill bug into the concrete porch. Glancing at my mother over her shoulder, Mrs. Riley made her way back across the street to her house. My mother put her hand up to her mouth, touching it as if it were a bruise. I watched the blonde hair disappear across the street and behind the screen door.

My Nana lived down the hill from my house. Those sum-

mers while my older brothers walked down to Tom's Creek with cases of contraband beer, she would sit out on her cinder block porch, watching me play in the pile of coal behind her house that she used to run her furnace. I would sit for hours, building towers out of black rocks and moats of soot. Sometimes I would dig in the drainage ditch that separated the lawn from the street throughout the neighborhood. Occasionally, I picked up the Nehi soda bottles that people had thrown into it. My Nana would cash them in for me at the Payless and hand me a fistful of dimes and quarters.

Inside the house, I would sit at the kitchen counter and watch Nana slice green apples and sprinkle them with sugar, getting ready to can them. She would sit in front of the sink and smother the jars with steaming water. The steam would rise up and fill the kitchen like smoke. I watched her bob the jars up and down, nearly burning her hands in the tub, and listen to her talk. She would always talk about my grandfather. And my father. Talk about them like they weren't dead.

My father didn't die from black lung like everyone else. Not like my grandfather who died of it last winter. Nana still had the plaques of arrowheads that my grandfather had collected before he died and his three-foot statue of a Sioux Indian in her hallway. The statue had a big silly grin like a used car salesman, so my grandfather named him Chief Pontiac.

After years of coal mining, my grandfather was almost as hunched and short as the Chief. The hall was the only place he could sit, still connected to the coils of tubing from his oxygen tank, and spread out his arrowheads. He would sit next to the statue in the hall as if they shared a special camaraderie, sorting through arrowheads. At the end when it got to the point where he couldn't walk, he would instruct me how to turn on the tank. Pure oxygen coiled through the tubes.

My dad's death was an accident. It was six months after my grandfather had died. I only remember the day before it happened, the beer cans littered the living room, and the furnace went out early in the morning. There must have been a blast, then commotion. An ambulance, then policemen. I didn't go to the funeral. I only saw my Mom's eyes peering out from the darkness of the front porch where she would sit with her head resting on her hands, the way she did when my brothers came home drunk from Tom's Creek.

"You see those pictures on the window don't you?" Nana asked me sometimes. There were three Polaroids taped up onto the storm window of the kitchen. They were illuminated by the light filtering in the window, resembling stained glass. The first picture was of a man with black hair, and jean jacket, no shirt on underneath, barefoot in the backyard. It was my father sitting on the edge of Nana's porch, perched as if he might fall. It was the only one I ever saw of him. My mother didn't keep any pictures of him in our house.

"That's what your daddy used to look like," she would say. "I know you don't remember him too good, but you've got those eyes just like him." I would look at the eyes, imagining they were mine.

I told Nana about the fluoride treatments. She was sure that Mrs. Riley had talked my mother into signing the form. She never liked Mrs. Riley. She said she couldn't understand how a woman could look so mean. Or so fat. Nana was a lean and wiry woman who could tie a dishtowel twice around her waist. She had no sympathy for the portion of the human race whose flesh bulged from their cut off jeans.

As Nana talked about the treatments, I felt the back of my throat itching. I imagined the cups, filled with a

foaming chemical, which would sear straight through the enamel of my teeth, deep down into my jawbone. In seventh grade I would find the element on the periodic table. It was fluoride. I wondered if it would be the first thing I saw when I walked into the classroom. I wondered if Allison Riley would be there on the first day of school. Nana stopped talking for a moment and reached for a packet on the counter. She had smoked for years.

"You know, you have to do what your momma tells you to," she said breathing in a lungful of smoke and steam from the bath. "But if your daddy were here it'd be different. That woman's been through a lot, I guess," she said as if she didn't half believe it. "But still," she finished, letting her words drift into the air with the rest of the haze, "he never meant it. He didn't mean it."

That same year my elementary school decided to expand the second grade. They built a little makeshift house right outside the school building. It looked like the Native American longhouses my grandfather always talked about, but without the hole cut in the ceiling for the smoke to filter out of. It was where my second grade teacher, Ms. Couch, would teach her class until the funds came through the school board to add a new wing to the elementary school. Ms. Couch's new room would have an aquarium and spackled ceilings.

Allison Riley was there on the first day of school sitting at my table. Without her mother, she seemed even smaller. As we ate lunch, I could feel my throat scratching, watching her unfold the wax paper her sandwich was wrapped in. There was no mother around. She only ate the white part of her sandwich, leaving the crusts. I did the same.

"My mom says to tell her if we don't get treatments," she said quietly.

"Well, I don't know. I don't think I'd tell my mom," I said with a mouthful of bread. Allison stared at my eyes for a minute.

"Why?" she asked. I didn't answer. I took the crust of my bread and began to eat it. She did the same.

For a few days the fluoride treatments never happened. Then, about mid-September, the parents came in for that day where the teacher shows them around the classroom. We had all made pictures of our families to give them, mine with a blue eyed man in the middle. But my mom had to work. And I already knew that. But you could bet that Mrs. Riley would be there.

That same day, like many days, I had let Allison cheat off of me during our math test. She was slow, so I would nudge my paper to the edge of my desk so that she could see. She wouldn't look at it at first, but after a while she would whisper for me to slow down and wait for her to finish copying the answers. She would suck on the ends of her hair when I got too far ahead. Watching her, all I wanted was to touch it for a minute, not pull it, but hold the blonde wetness between my fingers.

When her mother came in that day, Ms. Couch showed off the math test to her. Mrs. Riley beamed. Allison beamed too. I could feel a little tickle at the bottom of my throat, but my eyes were glued to the door thinking my mom would make it after all. The last of the parents, all women, filed in wearing reds and blues and Mary Kay cosmetics. Ms. Couch walked to the front of the room and started addressing the room of twelve women and sixteen children. That's when I saw Mrs. Riley slip out.

She was gone for a while, but about ten minutes into Ms. Couch's speech, the vice-principal walked into the classroom holding a jug and a stack of small plastic cups. Mrs. Riley was right behind him. She took the cups from him and

spread them out on a miniature table edged by seven miniature orange chairs. She filled the cups as the vice principal walked to the front of the room. I felt a scratch at the back of my throat. Ms. Couch looked over at the vice principal surprised and stopped talking.

"Mrs. Riley has pointed out to me that we have been neglecting the fluoride treatments for this class," the vice principal said as he watched Mrs. Riley ladle out the doomsday serum.

Allison Riley looked at her mother, confused, and an almost inaudible whine was heard from her lips. Mrs. Riley, her chin wobbling from the weight of her skin, nodded her head justly and turned a stern eye towards the girl. Allison Riley's face was silent, her forehead smooth. She lifted her fingers, stiff with the baby fat that supported her bones, and stuck a strand of her blonde hair into her mouth. She sucked it, quietly.

The cups were passed around and each student was commanded to put its entire contents into their mouths and swish accordingly. I looked at Allison who was holding her cup as far away from her body as possible, and I poured the contents into my mouth. My eyes closed.

"Keep on swishing," Ms. Couch said. I could hear her walking down the aisles.

"Get it good," I heard from the corner.

Thirty seconds ticked by and I could feel the green water eating away at my teeth and gums. Some of it escaped down my throat and I began to gag. I opened my eyes. Allison was having a problem of her own. Just as every other kid in Ms. Couch's class had been lifting the cups to their mouths, Allison had been able to pour the fluoride down in a puddle on the floor. It spread out around her feet, making a shallow pool of green on the linoleum floor.

Ms. Riley saw the pool as I felt my stomach bubble up and a terrible stinging sensation in my throat. Tears

peeked out from my eyelids. The smell rose up from my mouth. She crossed the room towards Allison. I quickly turned around and spit the green fluid back into the cup. A tiny surge of mucus and bile rose up in my throat, but I held it in my mouth. No one noticed. Ms. Riley jerked Allison by her hair and pointed down to the puddle on the floor. My cheeks were bursting with vomit and fluoride. I felt myself begin to retch as I swallowed.

Allison was crying now. Her mother had her down on the floor in the middle of the green water, sponging up the mess. The vice principal looked alarmed. He walked over to Ms. Riley and whispered something to her. The classroom looked smaller. Ms. Riley looked larger. She gritted her teeth and jerked Allison up out of the puddle by her arm. I could feel my stomach cartwheeling inside of me. I knew something was coming back up. I looked out of the window to make sure the smokestacks were still there, trying to stabilize myself. And then it all came out. Everything came out of my stomach and through my mouth onto the floor. Mrs. Riley stopped struggling with Allison. I was coughing. Ms. Couch and the vice-principal were coming towards me at an alarming speed.

An hour later my Nana came and got me in her pick-up truck. I slumped into the seat as she buckled me in. She drove us around the back roads on Sandy Ridge for hours.

"This is what I used to do when you were just a baby," Nana said, patting my leg, blowing cigarette smoke out of the window. As it was getting dark, we pulled into the driveway. She carried me into her house and laid me out on the bed in the backroom. She said she was going to talk to my mom about the fluoride treatments. I lay in the bed and looked into the hallway. Chief Pontiac looked at me with sympathetic eyes. I could hear my Nana in the kitchen slicing some apples and running the steaming water for the



bath. Through the window, the sun was gone behind the hill, but I could see the smoke from the coal stove coiling up into the sky. It was reaching to the top of the hill, to Allison Riley's house. The smoke could reach for miles if you'd stretch it out. It could last forever.

It is in my mouth. I'm on my back. My head is on the floor. My hair and beard down to the puddle on the floor. My cheeks were burning with vomit and fluoride. I felt myself begin to twitch as I swallowed.

Allison was crying now. Her mother had her down on the floor in the middle of the green water, sponging up the mess. The vice principal looked stunned. He walked over to Mrs. Riley and whispered something to her. The classroom looked smaller. Mrs. Riley looked larger. She gripped her teeth and jerked Allison up out of the puddle by her arm. I could feel my stomach cartwheeling inside of me. I knew something was coming back up. I looked out of the window to make sure the smokestacks were still there, trying to stabilize myself. And then it all came out. Everything came out of my stomach and through my mouth onto the floor. Mrs. Riley stopped struggling with Allison. I was coughing. Mrs. Couch and the vice-principal were coming towards me at an alarming speed.

An hour later my Nana came and got me in her pick-up truck. I slumped into the seat as she buckled me in. She drove us around the back roads on Sandy Ridge for hours. "This is what I need to do when you were just a baby," Nana said, patting my leg, blowing cigarette smoke out of the window. As it was getting dark, we pulled into the driveway. She carried me into her house and laid me out on the bed in the backroom. She said she was going to talk to my mom about the fluoride treatments. I lay in the bed and looked into the hallway. Chief Pontac looked at me with sympathetic eyes. I could hear my Nana in the kitchen slicing some apples and running the steaming water for the

## DELUXE DREAMER

A fat woman wrapped her arms around the game show host. Her body blotted out his skinny frame, dominating each television screen stacked in four columns, four high. He saw this image every day, over and over and over. Women half-jogging, half-dancing up the aisle through a studio audience, embracing the dimpled MC like a long lost sibling. The women were different sizes, shapes, colors, but always the nasty, inescapable hug.

Those televisions saved Dan Feltcher. If Bedding were next to, say, Children's Accessories, he'd be long gone. Proximity to Audio/Video was the plum that kept him from fleeing the building, screaming. Just like he did three weeks after starting at Summer FUN-Damentals, selling pool accessories. It was last January, right after he got booted out of Struber Community College, and seventeen inches of snow covered the ground. The store manager there required Dan to fill out a Sales and Traffic Action Report every freakin' day. To make the task of filling in zeroes and N/As fractionally more interesting, Dan learned to complete them first with his weak hand (the left), then upside down and, finally, upside down with his weak hand.

People don't buy mattresses on Monday mornings. They drive to work, they drink coffee, they move files from one side of the desk to the other, and they talk about the weekend's events: the kids' soccer games, the movies they rented, the downpour that washed out their barbeque. Mattresses, no. They don't talk about them and they certainly don't buy them. Not Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday mornings,

either. Dan's supervisor told him it picked up on Fridays, but he hadn't seen this yet.

This Monday was no different than any other. Dan reached under his navy wool-blend blazer and squeezed himself above the waist. Swells had formed at his sides the way trees grew. Sneaky. One day, there was a presence. The woman on the television made her best guess on the showcase price as she bounced on her toes, excited by the audience's roaring assistance. Her cellulite rumbled over her elbows as she clapped for luck. As Dan watched, he squeezed his paunch harder, trying to remember the spread of his thumb and finger the last time he measured. Or had he even needed to measure before?

He had a cramp.

It passed.

His supervisor called it the mattress game. Said there was going to be some dues paying in the beginning. "Traffic might be a bit slow sometimes," he said. He liked to remind Dan that with perseverance and stamina, there were rewards. He drove a Buick. Dan drove a Dodge Colt that no longer had a passenger seat, the result of a homemade bong experiment gone real bad—fire, dripping plastic—and he parked it in the back of the mall where the delivery vans docked. Dan hadn't worked in the store long, but felt like he'd paid dues steeply on a daily basis. He worked only weekdays, from opening until Oprah. The supervisor promised that a weekend shift would soon be in the offing. They brought a team in for the weekends. Golden hours.

"First," his supervisor said, "learn the product, learn the people, learn the game."

It didn't seem much like a game. The games Dan played best featured a joystick, sharp graphics, absurdly muscled arms wielding nunchucks and switchblades, and puddles of blood. He and his two ex-roommates, guys he met landscaping over the summer, both named Jimmy, made

it to virtual ninja status during Dan's first semester. The Jimmys—one sweated profusely and the other hummed Allman Brothers songs most of his waking hours—were career landscapers and collected unemployment once it got cold in November until the April rains, during which time they smoked dope and drank cases of cheap beer. In a haze, Dan missed two of his final exams. His parents got the grade report and quickly cut off their college bribe, the two hundred bucks each month enabling him to live in that dumpy apartment. God, he missed that shit hole. Now, back home, he played by himself in his bedroom, surrounded by empty, sticky boxes from the Holy Wong and Tulio's Pizza. His parents, happy he was a nine-to-fiver, prepared dinner every night with an open invitation, but he preferred eating take-out on his bed.

Technically, Linens was a separate department from Bedding, but it was no coincidence they were right next to each other. Marketing whiz-bangs.

A middle-aged woman managed the area during most of Dan's shifts. Myrna. She reported to Dan's supervisor, who said she looked decades older than she was in reality. Cigarettes, white zinf and tanning booths. Years ago, when Dan's supervisor was a salesman, he and Myrna had competed for the top job and this was how it worked out. People thought she'd quit for sure. She was either stronger than they guessed or she just didn't give a crap.

Her hair was metallic gold and sculpted with a geometric precision, resembling a German combat helmet. Liver spots covered her forearms and hands. On each finger was a big, brassy ring, some of which twisted into wild shapes, others a full inch wide, a few with insets made to look like an amethyst or emerald. When Dan first met her, she twisted the one on her middle finger, the one with a huge hunk of dull cubic zirconium, twisted it round and

round, and barely tried to make a smile. That was as warm as it got with Myrna. His first day alone on the job, just after opening, she hit his extension, saying, "I'll be back in ten minutes. Cover me." The phlegm build-up in her lungs gurgled on top of her voice, practically sliding through the phone line. Dan knew it was her right away. Before he could say no problem, she hung up. When she got back, he drifted over to her station. The menthol smell hovered in the air. Before he could chat her up, she went to a rack of bath towels—half-off that week—and started refolding. Message sent.

Real customers came to Linens, people who actually bought stuff. Down comforters, duvets, cotton jersey sheet sets. Mostly women, some actually good-looking, some with kids in tow. Myrna racked up commissions and Dan got nothing. So far, a few old cranks managed to come in during his shifts, breaking from their air-conditioned power walks through the mall. They cautiously squatted on the most expensive mattresses and scattered like truants as soon as Dan approached, probably to Kitchen/Cookware where they could snag free samples of stir-fry chicken or cashew clusters or whatever.

There were some guys in Audio/Video. Dan walked over a couple times. They tolerated him, taking his arrival as a sign to snap off some jokes about Myrna, referring to her as the Ferret and telling him to wait until the Christmas party to see why. Dan laughed with them anyway, even though he didn't get it and wasn't sure he would.

Man, he wanted to sell some of their inventory. Sleek black components with blinking neon lights, digital read out, wireless functionality and remote controls. Sexy stuff. This equipment delivered immediate excitement and gratification to the buyer. Customers were *always* in there. One morning, Dan was over there checking out a thirty-five inch Sony with picture-in-picture and voice recognition capabil-

ity. A beauty. One of the guys came over.

"What can I help you with, young fella?" he said.

"Hey, George, what's going on?" Dan said.

"I'm sorry, have you been in before?"

"George, I work right across from you. Bedding. Mattresses." Dan showed him his nametag. "I've been here over a month."

"Oh, my fault, my fault." He lowered his head to look at the tag. "Dan, it is. Hey, I'm kind of busy right now and I've got a break coming up, but if you need anything, anything at all, you come see me." He scurried away as if Dan had small pox.

Dan was finishing off the bag of cheese curls he picked up with his French vanilla latte at the 7-Eleven. When he was paying at the register, he noticed the new issue of *Maxim* featuring the big boobed teenage vampire from television. Dan couldn't resist. It had been a while since Tracie Burbick. She was sweaty Jimmy's cousin and came to the apartment with a couple friends from the salon where she washed hair. They brought a bunch of peach wine coolers. Tracie took a liking to Dan and seemed in command of her faculties when he led her into his bedroom. He put some tunes on the mini-stereo and went to grab two more drinks. When he got back, she was unconscious on his bed, out like a rock until he tried to rouse her. She pissed on his bed and woke up crying. Forget the mood music.

Dan had the magazine and the snack bag below the counter so no one could see. Who might see him he had no idea. He licked the orange, cheesy residue off his fingers before turning each page. The clapping of the footsteps coming down the hall was strong and forceful, heel to toe, heel to toe.

The guy marched into the showroom like he was going to take it all over, going directly to a Feather Rest,

checking the tag—it was a mid-range model—and moving on. After inspecting the next bed, he noticed a mirrored wall and touched his thick, dark hair, styled and slick, not the least bit concerned about who was watching. Buckled black shoes shined like new cars. He wore a pressed shirt the color of red wine and left an extra button free. A little shrub of chest hair grew out, nestling a thin gold chain. He got away with it. A cell phone hung off the braided leather belt. Dan wanted to see how fast this guy could draw it, identify the caller, and make that split-second decision to accept or reject. Here was a buyer, no question. In his pocket, a snazzy wallet full of platinum and gold. It was go time.

Dan scoped himself in one of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors fixed to the building support columns. The glaring lights highlighted the history of his long bout with zits. He maneuvered the endangered wisps of his sandy brown hair, pulled his tie taut to the neck to hide the big, fleshy gap at the collar. Out the door went Selling Principle Number Three: *Give the Customer Time to Get Comfortable*. This was too much. He approached. “See anything you like?”

“Just looking around right now, my friend,” said the customer. “I’m kind of new to the market.”

“I’m Dan,” Dan said.

“Charlie Martone,” the man said, extending his hand.

“Are you looking for anything in particular, Mr. Martone?”

“Whoa. Hang on. My name’s Charlie,” he said. “My father’s name is Mr. Martone. Hell, I’m not that much older than you.”

“Well, okay then. Charlie. Just take your time. Look around.”

He did, walking in between the foam slabs, handling the tags and flipping them to the price side. He didn’t gasp or shake his head when he hit the high-end section. Quite the opposite, lingering and inspecting and prodding. His

fingers brushed the smooth polyester coverings.

"Tell me about this one, Dan," Charlie said. He was next to the Lady Luxury—it sold for more than a grand—the second best model they sold behind the Deluxe Dreamer.

"That's a good one. It's got all the new features. There's new technology, you know." Dan crossed his arms and waited for a second. "Some people aren't aware."

"And I'd be one of them," Charlie said. "Why don't you talk to me about it."

So Dan gave it to him. Everything they made him learn in his four-hour training session, what he could remember anyway. The gravity-dense coils, the spring-loaded foam, the anti-microbial fabric. He remembered the sales tutorial cassette he played in the car each morning: *Selling is Winning*. "This person can be your friend. Make him or her *feel* like a friend." Dan concentrated on avoiding robot voice. He saved the big one for last. No-flip technology.

Charlie cocked his head.

"Oh, yeah. The older models, you've got to flip them every six months. Or they lose the support. Heck, one of the guys on the sales team flips his every week, every time he changes the sheets. Most companies are still making them the old way, but not for long," Dan said. He pointed to the Lady. "They're all going this way."

"Hey, now," Charlie said, "that's something new to me. I'm learning today." He sat down on the mattress, thrusting his arms into the meat of it. He didn't make much of an indent. It was a stiff one.

"Charlie, we like to say that buying a mattress is investing in yourself." Right from the manual. "A good night's sleep affects every part of your day."

"You're goddamn right it does," Charlie said, winking.



"You bet."

"Well, partner, I could stand to do a little investing in myself. My wife and I are done. Four years and out. I'm on my own now. Got a nice apartment and a TV, but my mattress is crap. Something I pulled out of the basement when I moved out. This is my first big purchase."

"Let me get you a brochure," Dan said, hustling back to the register.

"I like this one, Dan-O," Charlie said. "Firm. Good for the back. Good for more than just sleeping, if you get me."

Dan handed him the foldout glossy.

"How can I really get a feel for it, though?" Charlie said.

"Go ahead, lie back. Don't worry about your shoes."

"Un-uh, guy. You're not getting me. I'm talking about really testing it. See, you and me, we're in the same league. Different divisions, maybe, but we sell. Salesman."

He pulled a card out of his front pocket, holding it like a cigarette between his fingers and handing it to Dan. The gold embossing flashed under the fluorescence. "Long distance phone time. Talk about competitive! How do I do it? I let people know what our product's like. I'll give them a taste because I know they'll come back." He lay down on the mattress. "I can do this for a couple minutes, but where does that get me? Do I *really* know what it's like to sleep on this baby?"

Dan considered this. The manual didn't cover this topic. They stared at each other.

"I never thought of that," said Dan.

"Exactly," said Charlie, long and slow. "That's what we have to do, partner."

"No, absolutely. I'm just a little...."

"Look, I've got a monster SUV right outside. We could throw this thing right in there and I'd have it back in

the morning. What's it called, again?" Charlie said.

"The Lady Luxury. Charlie, I...I can't do that. My boss would whip me," Dan said. He tugged on the skin on his chin, staring at the mattress. This was the make or break point of the deal. He could see his supervisor clapping him on the back when Dan told him about the sale, offering to buy him a beer and forgetting he wasn't quite of age. And the commission. On a Lady, that was some cash. One step closer to a Saturday as well. Real money.

"Hey, maybe this. I come in for a little nap. It gives me time to settle in, relax. Really check it out."

"Well, yeah, I guess. I could move her into the corner over there," Dan said. "Dim some of the lights."

"Sure you can, Dan, sure you can." He rubbed his palms together. "When's good?"

Either Myrna just popped from around the corner or Dan was so focused he didn't see her come around. She looked a little confused, like she didn't know whether to walk away or say something. Dan froze, unsure of what she heard, how much she knew.

"Ma'am, I'll be finished with this guy in just a second and then he's all yours," Charlie said. "He's a real pro." Looking back to Dan, he said, "How does Wednesday sound?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's the, well..." Dan turned away from Myrna. "Yeah, okay. That'll work fine." When he glanced back, Myrna was gone. "Here, I'll give you *my* card," Dan said, grabbing a pen, "and I'm going to put my home number on the back in case something comes up."

"Fantastic, Dan-O." A thumbs up on the way out and he was gone.

Dan waited until the end of the day, putting it off as long as possible. Her elbow was propped on the counter providing a pedestal for her head as she casually flipped through the

new fall catalog, dabbing her index finger to her tongue before each turn of the page. She didn't seem to be actually looking at anything.

"Hey, Myrna, how's it going?"

Her eyes were dried out olives, drab and green. The lights overhead shined on the old lady fuzz spread across her cheeks. The corners of her mouth turned down, dipping into fleshy bunting hung from her jaws. She offered a small grunt and her apathy told Dan she hadn't heard any of his conversation with Charlie. Not the important stuff anyway.

"You ever have to do something weird to get a sale to go through?" asked Dan. He cracked a row of hairless knuckles.

"Weird? What do I look like? I just sit here and let them pick out what they need," she said. "If they don't need anything, then who am I?"

"Come on Myrna. I see you. You help people out. What do you say to them? I'm close on a deal. To that guy," Dan said. "I just need one break."

"My guess is you're going to need a lot more than a break," she said. "Speaking of which, it's time for mine now. I'll be back."

What a waste. God willing, she'd be outside smoking most of the time Charlie was sleeping. Driving home later, he thought about his commission. So close. Inside his wallet, there was a yellow post-it with the calculation, but the number was already fixed in his head. And spent. The take on a Lady Luxury would be very sweet, more than enough to pick up the newest webcam for his computer. With that, he could put his face into the online commando game BodyBag and become a player. He'd logged on as a "Candy Ass," what they called non-participants, watching guys with screen names like Typhoid and Assman and Corn Hog slaughter each other. Sometimes they worked alone. Sometimes they formed a killing alliance, a team.

He spent Tuesday planning, mentally configuring the test area. As usual, Wednesday's schedule showed no one in the store besides him, but he checked and checked again. Charlie's card was on the desk in Dan's in-box, until yesterday an empty box but today a box with paperwork. He fingered the card periodically, toying with the idea of calling, just to confirm the details. *Do Not Pressure the Customer.*

Dan told his parents about the deal at dinner that night. For the first time in a long time they all ate together, and his father offered him a beer with the pot roast and smashed potatoes. "Only one," he said. "You've got to be on top of your game tomorrow."

Dan got to the store early on Wednesday. There was a voicemail message from the previous evening, his supervisor's usual, reminding Dan when he'd be in that afternoon. He wanted to give the boss a heads up, but thought it would be a jinx. Besides, it would royally suck if he said he had a deal and said deal disappeared. He didn't want to risk it.

Charlie's timing was perfect. He carried a backpack and technicolor quilt, something a mother would make. They shook hands. Dan searched for Myrna, but she wasn't around.

"I woke up at five this morning. I wanted to be *real* tired. We all set?"

"Oh, yeah. I set you up over here, out of the way." They wove through the maze into the mattress lab. From the backpack, Charlie pulled out a loose sheet, a men's health magazine and a water bottle. "I always read before I sleep," he said.

From the girth of the quilt came a pillow with a solid, definitive form. One of those Swedish things with thick, squeezable foam. Dan picked it up and the weight surprised him. "I can't even begin to think about sleeping without that baby," Charlie said. "I take it everywhere. It's a pain in the

ass, but you've got to sleep."

"You're darn right, you do...goddamn it," Dan said, pointing at Charlie. He went to the lighting control panel and tried to find a reasonable level that wouldn't attract Myrna's attention while maximizing the sleep atmosphere. "How's that?"

"I can live with it," Charlie said. He nodded, slipping under the covers in his khakis and white V-neck T-shirt. Dan pushed the socks, shoes and backpack under the bed, like it would matter. He left Charlie to his business, creeping through Bedding and Linens twice. Still no sign of Myrna. She liked to pick up a cinnamon bun at the Food Court occasionally.

Charlie would get forty-five minutes to try it out, plenty of time to nap and feel the firmness, the bed's invitation to slumber. This might become a new selling strategy: on-site test-drives, just like when you go to the car dealerships. Selling Principle Number Eleven: *Show the Customer How She and the Product Belong Together*. What better way. Dan went back to the register to re-familiarize himself with the bill of sale.

As he expected, no other shoppers appeared. He could hear a talk show from the wall of televisions, rough-necks who didn't like to clean themselves up. One dressed top to bottom in green and brown camouflage while another hadn't shaved or trimmed his beard in maybe six years. The women who loved them were just fed up. A young fiancé cried. The show provided new outfits, haircuts, a shower and a shave; a makeover is what they called it when women were involved. The crowd whooped as each transformed lug appeared from behind the curtain. Some were shy, head hang-dogged, while others returned with a little swagger, clearly impressed by what they saw in the mirror.

Dan worked on the paperwork. Name address, home and work telephone number, email address. All of this he

knew. Charlie entrusted him with this information. He went slowly to make it neat and presentable. He filled in the make and the size of the bed. When Myrna cleared her throat, it was the last spitting sounds of the coffee maker in the morning and Dan jumped, scribbling outside the line. She wore a blue pantsuit with gold fringes all over, especially on the banana-yellow shoulder patches. She looked like she was part of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club band.

"Hey, Myrna, how's...."

"What the *hell* is going on?" she snarled.

"What do you mean?"

"Back there, someone's in one of the beds."

"Yeah, he's my customer. I told you about him," Dan said. "I'm filling out the order right now."

"He's *doing* something," said Myrna.

"Yeah, he's taking a trial run."

"No, he's doing something. You need to go over there. Now. I'm calling Bob."

Dan raised his hands, palms out. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a second, Myrna. I'm just trying to make a sale here. Let me go check it out. I'm sure it's no big deal."

"Oh, it's a big deal. He's a very fitful sleeper." Myrna said. "Just go over and stop it. It's terrible."

Dan walked over to the lab, looking back over his shoulder. Myrna was already gone.

The woolly blob on the bed pulsed quickly. A concentration of yellow and orange patchwork popped outward like an engine piston. Under the quilt, the sheet rustled and fleshy sounds, like the smacking of lips, escaped.

"Charlie, what the hell?"

The quilt settled. A hand appeared at the top, peeling away the layer. Charlie's hair was matted and the moistness on his forehead gleamed. He breathed deep, blowing it out with a hollow whistle.

"Wow! I am *sold*. This is a good mattress here. Is my

time really up?”

“Charlie, you’re going to get me fired.”

“For what? No way, partner. We’ll handle this,” Charlie said, propping himself. “Hell, I’ll handle it myself. Who do I need to talk to?”

Myrna’s voice rained down from the intercoms in a diesel scratch, “Dan Welcher, pick up line two.”

Done and done.

“Look, you’ve got to go, all right,” Dan said, with the hint of a plea. He looked over and could see Myrna’s head stretching over the register, pointed at him, and she held the telephone handset high above her like a trophy. She looked ecstatic and Dan was almost grateful to know this existed in her. Her eyes glittered. Then, Dan heard it again.

“Dan Welcher, line two.”

He walked over and Myrna stepped away from the phone but remained close.

“It’s Feltcher, Myrna, Feltcher,” he said. He covered the phone with his hand. “Do you mind?” he asked.

She stayed right where she was.

A plastic button was flashing red with a rhythm not far off from Charlie’s beating quilt. Dan pushed it. He listened. He hung up.

“Well?” asked Myrna, her hands on her hips.

Dan turned away from her. He picked up the bill of sale. Just a little bit more, a credit card and a delivery date, and the deal was done. The exit sign burned red at the far end of the hall. Underneath it, in slow motion, with the quilt hanging over him, the pillow and water bottle and backpack pinned under his arm, Charlie slipped through the door. He never even looked back at Dan, who was trapped in a frozen frame. The crowd released a collective moan and an organ tripped down a musical scale.

“I’m sorry,” said a kind, gentle voice, “but you were a great contestant today. Really.”

Dan waited and waited for a comforting arm across his sagging shoulders and when it didn't come, he knew. Selling is winning.

FORMALDEHYDE

As you exit the elevator the flames  
Thick and marshy begin  
To breathe on their own around you  
And you, lured by the silent hum  
Of the metal box that brought you up  
To this place slowly ever so calmly  
Mosey into the white open room with  
The shiny silver countertops  
And the bodies inside and  
You see the one  
Body glistening and slick  
In the light and your hand  
Meets his hand, cold and damp  
This faceless body still  
Wearing his socks.



Shelly L. McGill

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## FORMALDEHYDE

As you exit the elevator the fumes  
Thick and marshy begin  
To breathe on their own around you  
And you, lulled by the silent hmm  
Of the metal box that brought you up  
To this place slowly ever so calmly  
Mosey into the white open room with  
The shiny silver countertops  
And the bodies inside and  
You see the one  
Body, glistening and slick  
In the light and your hand  
Meets his hand, cold and damp  
This faceless body still  
Wearing his socks.

## NARROW

The first time I saw him, moving through sound, slow swaying like liquid, through spaces in the dark club—hunger, desire. I wanted him, and later, when we walked the long streetlight shadows, high, my palm round over the stone smoothness of his hand, back to my narrow-roomed apartment in Brooklyn, I felt nearly weightless, rising like a tiny bird let loose in the night.

In the club, I'd studied him dancing alone, head down, damp hair heavy over his eyes. Who doesn't love the beautiful dying? Inky eyes lined black, his face in silent film loop, flickering. Lights throbbed against his narrow body like the sheen of moon on dirty water, or pooled blood. Dark animals lived there, on Pearl Street, in the water. Junkies, paper-thin with skin like paste, thin and pretty feral faces. Watching him, a metallic taste filled my mouth blue. Junky radar. Delicious. I leaned against the steel drum bar, touched my lips to the sweating glass in my hand, dipped my tongue into the dark brown beer. He swayed to the rhythm of his shadow moving snake patterns against the black wall. He lit a cigarette, candled a moment, then gone. Long tenuous fingers, lovely long wrists that peeked from buttoned sleeves. I imagined arms thick with ropey dotted veins beneath. Sweet boy, this one, like honey.

It was hot inside the club, so many bodies pressed smoky close, my clothes damp and cloying. I wasn't well. What more is there to tell you? Not sick, but not at all well. I'm the someone you dodged on the L-train, already totally, hopelessly gone. It was only a matter of time before the heaving flatness came, the teeth-grinding waves of white

that started in the gut, the twitching and retching arriving like fever dream. I was running out inside. You'd never know.

Like a hand, I walked the edge of the dance floor and stood closer to him, clicking in. I wanted to touch him, to stroke and knead his skinny body with my fingertips. To kiss him then, deep, without breath.

*Keep your mind on business.* Time to move. I made a track to him, through the bodies, junk hunger pushing like a dry-lipped thirst. I knew the deal, kicking the shit, puking and shivering epileptic jerks on a dirty tile floor. So I went to him, soft and slow. I touched him. He turned to me and I gave him the look, one junky to another. Fragile. Practiced. Full of promises. I was surprised when he looked down to his feet, clean, clean. No way. My look never missed it, the familiar spark that lead to a familiar score, somewhere, heaven.

Hey, you. You don't mind fucking me do you?

Plan two. I despise plan two, dipping into my own stash, pills that cut the descent when times are painfully lean—codeine, percocet, valium. The bend and nod of his heavy head though, that sold me. I knew he carried. He seemed worth the loss of a few little pills. Reaching into the satin bag looped around my waist, I danced and held a palm to him—pink, mauve, orange, yellow, red. Sunrise to sunset, I held them the way you offer a hand to a licking animal.

It paid. Later, sweating half-moons on my sheets, we nodded into each other. I wanted to do him, true. I wanted to feel his hips jutting angles beneath my own, dip my tongue between his thighs, wanted the coarseness of his hair against my mouth and lips and tongue, the velvet head, the bulk. He pressed his face to my breasts like a baby, into the hollow between them. The night closed its dark lips around us, we were so high. I couldn't move.

"How is it?" His voice was thick and sweet.

"Lovely."

"Matt... Mathew," he said. "In case you wanted to know."

I suppose I did. "Olivia," I said in trade.

I slid my hands between his thighs then back up, over his ribs, around his neck and toward his shoulders. We fell asleep.

That's what the nights were like, most times, rising.

The days were different. I had to work, maintain, dress and talk the part. Two people lived inside of me. The night me, the day me, knotted up inside me tight as Siamese twins.

Matt moved into my place. Clothes. A dartboard. Canvases. We fit nice there inside in a bombed-away world of our own. "Shotgun shack," Matt said, "shooting gallery." I'd laugh at him. Sometimes we raced through the linking rooms aiming at each other with his paintbrushes. Cowboy and Indian kids. The place was rent controlled and the neighbors weren't too nosey. Next door there was this cheap Greek bakery. In the mornings Matt and I would lie in bed inhaling the early sweet smell of cakes and bread. We whispered through rainy afternoons, *cinnamon*, *persimmon*, giggled at the impossibility of hunger, touched each other and shuddered.

Love, smack. The first time I did it, I knew. Bittersweet, like making out breathless beneath the bleachers, damp and desperate, aching. That was the sexy pink glow of dope. I did it with some guy, a friend of other friends, who straggled home with us one night after the club. I'd always wanted to try it, was always looking for the next ride. When the guy offers you a thick brown line, you take it. Then you take another, easy. You sink like jellyfish into the sofa, the guy's limp hand on your thigh. You nod with your skin hanging off like a peel run round with the knife. Later, you puke and even that pures it out somehow.

Now I'm in bed with Matt, good, hard, gentle Matt. No more pick-ups in clubs, looking to score. No more double language spoken to strangers on the train, "So, you ride? Horses? You know where I can ride?"

And Matt got us the good stuff, mostly Mexican H. I didn't know his connection. He handled everything and I didn't ask. I went to work instead, morning crawling on its belly the same way. Arrive at eight. Creep into the carpet-lined blue cubicle. Edited technical manuals inside the fuzzy walls. I worked for a government contractor because my father had connections and I had a degree in English from Brown. There was a time when I wanted to paint. Now I inserted commas, colons and periods. Corrected run-ons and fragments. Feigned concern about submarines and electrical wiring. I wanted to quit but the job paid great.

Matt was a painter. He'd dropped out of NYU his fourth semester—"to get real," he said, away from the bullshit academy. His canvases packed our tiny apartment with singing streaks and slashes of color. Stick people. Needle-haired dogs. Embryos. Vaginas. Words. I hated leaving him in the morning his paint smell a sweet, thick balm oozing from every pore.

A habit is cheap at first, but not for long. Dope hunger is as big as God and you're like Alice falling down the hole. Who wouldn't know, who doesn't know this? No words to the wise.

In the cubicle next to mine, there was this guy, Anthony. He looked like a well-fed movie star, sleek, tan. He just seemed born that way. Perfect. Straight white teeth, thick brown hair. Perfect smell, sort of sticky-sweet and dark, like something expensive you'd buy in a store downtown.

When he walked down the hall, Anthony called the women names. They flowed from his mouth: beautiful, sweetie, doll. Hey Baby. The women didn't seem to mind.

Middle-aged with the onset of secretarial spread, they simpered behind their mock disapproval, blushed and tittered. But it got on my nerves, *he* got on my nerves and because he knew it, Anthony seemed to bother me more than most. He said I reminded him of an Audrey Hepburn type. But when I looked in the mirror, I didn't see any likeness, besides the eyes. My mother was exquisite, olive skinned with thick dark hair. I didn't see any resemblance there either.

"Hey beautiful," Anthony said lounging against the water cooler in the break room. "When you going out with me?" I didn't turn around, just kept stirring my second coffee.

"Really, I mean it."

I turned. Flashed him a tight smile. "I have a boyfriend, marrying kind."

"So?"

"So."

I'd wish he'd crawl away and die.

I rarely talked about work to Matt, but I knew I was about to lose my job. Floating some mornings, I'd been called on my mistakes more than once and my boss had lost his half-smile when he pointed them out. Still, my night world with Matt seemed more real than the day world, a night place where comma splices, airless cubicles, and Anthony didn't even exist.

Then Matt finally caught a break, hooked up with this guy who wanted to stage a show in his loft on Forty-first. Matt said it looked like a cave, that the guy had a trust fund and thought he might try to get something going with art, that the guy was giggly high all the time. Matt would get an entire wall at the show. I watched him work when I got home, watched him move across the canvas with thick strokes of opaque color.

"What do you think?" Matt stepped slowly back from

the canvas and pointed at the center with his brush. A yellow horse, wearing a crown, floated over jagged black buildings. Two stick-dogs rode on its back.

"Nice." I pulled our stash out from under our futon.

"Really...look." He reminded me of a court jester with his hair hanging in long painted knots. Primaries. Outside I heard the wail of a siren, the muffled voices of men arguing beneath the streetlight, the yellow, insect-hum of the liquor store sign.

I crossed the room, stood with my arm around his waist. I looked. "It's beautiful, sweetie. Is it mine?"

Later, in bed, Matt rolled over to me.

"You out yet?" He touched my cheek. I smelled the oil he mixed with his paint. It smelled like bees, hives dripping.

"No, not yet." I touched his hand in the darkness.

"We should go somewhere someday..." His voice whispered, far away. I moved his hand under my T-shirt, pressed it flat against my belly.

"Where?"

"We could go to Mexico, the desert. Or the ocean. I've never spent much time at the ocean."

"Yeah, the ocean." The fan spun in lazy hands above us, a heavy thumping sound like a heart in the attic, alive.

The sign buzzed steady and I wondered what would happen if it ever burned out, sputtering like the candles we kept at the head of our bed, gone.

At work a few days later, the electricity went out and the computers died. I watched it happen, dreaming. A squirrel skipping his way across the lines outside took a wrong step, hopped and paused in spasms, blew the transformer. Lights out. "He must have been a pretty big fucking squirrel," I heard a woman say in the bathroom. "A big one can do that."

Toast.”

“It won’t take long to get things up and running,” the boss, fat and wheezing static through the intercom, announced. Her voice pinged against the walls. “And people, *please* do not leave the building.”

I wasn’t going anywhere. Nestled in the dark stall of the bathroom, my nose burning junk fire, I felt like an embryo in gelatin. The bathroom, an ocean of smoothness. In the bathroom, all women are equal. So many bad things go on between the cool tiles, in locked rooms, secret things. Shit and piss running like waterfalls, the Ex-Lax solution to spreading thighs and creeping bellies. No matter how big you are you can never get small enough. We left the stalls, washed our hands, never mentioned the smell. Woman smell, bathroom smell—shit and desperation. I knew the score, used to be one of their rank and file before going on the junky plan.

The habit was growing, I knew it. Maybe Matt knew it too, but we didn’t talk about it. The rules had changed. Weekends to weekdays, every day. Just a little more to get there, to the insect itching rise, just a little more to stay well. I didn’t like doing it in the bathroom stall. I wished I were one of the women again, trading in gossip and laxatives.

“You know, we’re a lot alike, you and me.” Anthony lounged in the break room. My back was turned, but I could feel his long white smile stretching behind me, like a thing in the water that bites.

I poured a fourth cup of lukewarm coffee. The power had been out for forty-five minutes. “I really don’t know what you mean.”

“Baby, there are two kinds of birds in the world, us and them. We eat the worm, hunt it up and suck it down.” *Sk/sl....* He rolled his tongue.

“Are you kidding?” I turned to face him.



"No baby. Now those other birds, well, they scratch around in the dirt. Never want more than a little seed."

"That's some sick shit."

"You think so, little bird?"

"I really don't know what you're talking about."

He straightened his tie, brushed the cuff of his sleeve. He could be a model, tall, smooth, a picture in a glossy magazine. I wanted to lift his wallet in the street, but then a look he gave me scared me to my shoes. He freaked me a little.

I pushed past him, into the hall. Battery light glowed dimly from the ceiling. The hall looked like a spaceship, blue, compressed. I stumbled against the doorframe.

"Careful," he said. I didn't look back.

When I got home that night, I told Matt about what had happened. I felt strange.

"Hungry birds?" Matt leaned into the canvas, wiped his forearm across. Red lines bled into blue skies like angry seagulls. Behind the skies and to the right, a giant molar bloomed in the paint, in its center, a metallic wet green filling. Brilliant and magical.

"Yeah, something like that. I don't know." I shouldn't have mentioned it. Matt stood quietly before the painting. I sat cross-legged on the floor and cut six lines on the back of a Billie Holiday CD. The stash was getting low.

Matt wobbled back and slid down beside me. "There's rust in the pipes again." He didn't look at me. He was already pretty stoned.

"I know." I handed him the dope, held back a piece of hair that had escaped from the rest. He had paint on his neck.

"You should be careful Olivia." He took my hand, put a finger in his mouth.

"I'm not worried about it." Dope petals opened inside me, glowed down the length of my spine. I sucked up

another bitter line. Then another. So far we'd resisted shooting it. Matt said he hated needles. Spike in the vein. As long as we didn't go there, maybe it wasn't so bad. We still had choices. But one time, after I'd first started, I stole a needle from this diabetic friend. I was listening to a lot of Lou Reed at the time, *when I put a spike into my vein*. I was in silly-girl love. I wanted everything. And I still had the needle, tucked in a shoebox, even though I knew I'd never use it.

"Don't worry," I said again and went to the kitchen to get a beer. The cat purred loud circles around my ankles. I opened some food and squatted down next to her. "Hungry, huh?" She eyed me brightly, tail twitching electric blue snaps.

Full of smack, we floated together in the bathtub. Steam drifted wisps in the air like angels. The warmth of the water stretched me, lengthened my spine. I leaned my back into Matt's belly. "You've got the best feet," I laughed. Matt cupped his hands around my breasts, lily pads raised to the surface. The water dripped one round eyeball then another. Outside, the street was quiet. The cat perched on the toilet, watching the water, watching us. "Tell me about the tooth," I said.

"It's a theory. I read about it. Something about objects implanted in the body. Earrings, fillings, you know? They pick up signals, transmit messages, stuff people said even hundreds of years ago. Sound bouncing around in the universe, against the stars." He spoke soft, slow. "Maybe you'll open your mouth and start speaking Einstein. Maybe you already are, you just can't decipher the frequency. Nobody can. You're receiving in secret code—the Last Supper, 'I have a dream,' the trials at Nuremberg. Little stuff too, people having sex, eating, dying. Waves passing through you, bouncing around inside. Continual repetition.

It never stops."

"A universe," I said, touching his toe with my heel, "a whole universe of sound." A mother weeping, a radiator hissing, the beating wings of insects, birds.

Matt sank down into the water. "If you could hear it all though, you might go mad."

"Too late." I laughed and kissed him.

I heard him before I saw him, heel clicks on tile. Anthony walked into the break room and sat down in the chair beside me. We had the same lunchtime, so it seemed. "Hey." He unwrapped a Hershey bar and broke it in half. "Here," he said, offering me a piece. It looked like a bug, thick and black.

"No thanks. I don't eat chocolate," I said. I brought my book to my face.

He put his hand over the page, slowly pressed the book down. "No offence Olivia, honey, but it doesn't look like you eat much of *anything*." He nudged at my untouched sandwich. "Hey, why don't you let me take you out to dinner? Buy you a real meal, a nice thick steak, some wine. Red meat would do the trick. Then, afterwards, maybe a little nightcap?" He stretched a wide grin. "You don't fool me a bit."

"What the hell is it with you?" My voice shook. I was in bad need of a fix. "I told you I have a boyfriend. And I'm not your *honey*."

"Easy cupcake, really."

"Just, okay, stop. They may like it, but I don't."

"You know Olivia, you *all* like it. Just takes some of you longer to figure it out." He brought his handsome face close to mine

I pulled away I wanted to stand, to walk away. I felt woozy, cloudy, my teeth not right. "You know, I could tell. I could go to the boss right now."

“Yeah... you could, you could just do that Olivia. But you won’t. And if you did, it wouldn’t matter anyway.” He stood, popped a dark wedge of candy in his mouth, and sauntered away.

By two o’clock, a sticky wad of phlegm had lodged itself in my throat. My stomach was full of sauce. At three, I saw a black bug race across my monitor.

I grabbed my purse and walked down the hall to the bathroom. Purses and periods, an inescapable link. Thank God. No one ever questions a woman heading to the bathroom with a purse. *She’s on the rag*, women nod to each other. Period, men nod to themselves. A woman could go to the bathroom a hundred times a day and still no one would say a word, for weeks in a row even. *I’m bleeding. The doctor says there’s something wrong. I just started a new pill.* So many reasons to bleed. Inside most, the tools of the trade, tickets to a little privacy in the stall. Soft white pads with raised cotton ridges, tampons of all sizes encased in pink plastic, deodorant spray in a trim lilac can. I hadn’t bled in months, but still toted an ancient tampon, smashed and ratty at the bottom of my bag. In the eyes of others, I still bled, my children swirling through gunk-lined sewers every month.

The bathroom was empty. In the stall, I flushed the toilet and snorted three lines off my pocket mirror. I stuffed my finger up my nose, licked the blood-brown crust. Nothing wasted. Practical stuff, I licked the glass and wiped it with a piece of toilet paper, checked my face, ran a damp finger over my eyebrows. Better, solid again, I stood. From the darkness of my purse, I knew the vial of heroin glittered sure as any glass eye.

But how can you ever know, ever be ready, for the moment when fate swoops down its big broad hand. We collided head-on in the hall. “Whoa,” Anthony said, stum-

bling back, dropping a stack of folders, like someone in a sitcom.

My bag hit the floor. I watched the contents scatter in skip-time, lipstick, change, pens, the ratty tampon. Then it rolled to a stop against one of Anthony's folders, the vial of glittering brown smack.

I thought of seashells blinking in the sun, how you could look all day before finding just the right one.

I watched him gather the folders. Slow motion

"Hey." He held the vial in his hand. "You're kidding? You do drugs."

A razor on the carpeting, bluely fine.

"Give it to me." I held out my hand. I was surprised by how steady I was.

"What is this? Crack? My God." Anthony passed it to me, never smiling. It was the first time I'd ever seen his face so still, serious. The look aged him, brought out the lines around his mouth. He dropped the vial in my palm and walked away, backwards a little, then gone. So long Tony.

I didn't say anything to Mathew, didn't want to break the spell, our nights of paint and baths and sex and humming yellow sleep.

At work, Anthony avoided me. When I did see him, he looked sullen and although he still called the women "baby," his voice didn't seem so loud. I kept doing smack in the bathroom. I was scared, but I couldn't stop. I wondered how much time I had before Anthony narced on me to the boss. I wanted to quit, just pack up. I sat in my cubicle thinking about the ocean.

One day, after work, Anthony waited for me.

"Olivia, I need to talk to you," he said. His long body draped the cubicle. He smelled of expensive cologne, a forest, lush and green.

"Yeah, well...." I took my time shutting down the computer, straightening the folders on my desk. No problem. Right.

"Really. I just want to talk to you. There's this bar down the street." He touched my shoulder.

The bar was dark and brown. Everything was brown, the paneled walls, the vinyl booths, the dirty floor. Two wrinkled men sat at the long counter drinking shots from a bottle. They barely looked up as we entered. A bar like a million others.

Anthony led me to a booth in the back.

"What'll you have?"

"Anthony, I don't think...."

"No, I'm buying baby."

When the waitress came, a hard-looking woman with nicotine stains on her fingernails, Anthony called her "doll." She smiled wide and he winked at her. I wanted to put the razor to his throat.

"Okay Olivia, so here's how I see it. I know you don't like me. I know I joke around a lot." He took a sip of his beer, scanned the room. "But the deal is, I like you. I've always liked you. No shit."

I didn't know what to say. Instead, I thought of the submarine manuals stacked and waiting in my cubicle, thought of commas and colons and run-on sentences. The walls of the bar were breathing greenly, the wood aware, greasy, watching me.

"Are you listening? Olivia, I give a damn, okay? Now I know why you act the way you do. Anthony isn't so dumb. What was that shit? Crack? Have you been smoking crack?"

I wanted to laugh. The bugs tumbled over themselves in my stomach. What difference did it make anymore? I felt so tired, like I'd run a million miles, like I'd fallen down the rabbit hole for a thousand years.

"No, dope. Horse. Heroin."

Anthony sat back in his seat.

"Fuck Olivia. What the *fuck* is wrong with you?"

"What do you care? And keep your voice down, please."

"Look at you. Like it doesn't matter. Jesus." He leaned forward all concern, seduction, like a pimp.

I sipped my beer. "You going to tell?"

"And if I did?"

"Fuck you Anthony." My legs itched, my skin twitched. I hoped there weren't any bugs in this dive. I imagined them crawling up my pants, into my panties. Inside me.

"Look. Let me help you. Let me take care of you." He leaned forward. "I play a good game. I know it. But baby, I'm for real here." He touched my hand.

"Don't," I hissed, drawing back. "Don't touch me."

"Okay, okay. That's cool." He leaned back. "I'm not going anywhere." We stared at each other over our drinks. I knocked mine back and ditched him.

"Hey babe," Matt called out as I came through the door, his shirt off and paint streaking his skin. He held a brush.

"Hey." I went to our room, stripped out of my clothes. Skin the rabbit.

"Here." Matt stood in the doorway with the CD case.

"You know, I don't think I want any right now."

"Really? Okay, whatever." He crossed the room, touched my nose and licked my neck.

Later, after he was asleep, I got up, cut four lines and deftly snorted them one after the other. In my head the bugs, thick and clicking, scurried down my shoulders, over my breasts.

I called in sick on Friday.

Matt painted while we got high. We talked about the show. It was just a week away. It was a good day, playing. We were going out, to walk, get stoned on the boardwalk with the ocean and sunlit sand sparkling all around us. We'd never been to the ocean together. Matt kept kissing my neck.

Around five, there was a knock at the door.

"Shit," Matt said, "put it away."

I snorted the lines spread out on the case, shoved it and the vial under the mattress. When I stood, my head felt wet, thick. The floor lurched beneath me. I wanted to sink, to fall.

"Hey, Olivia," Matt called from the door, his voice tight. "Someone here to see you. You decent?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm coming." I wiped my nose, stuck my finger in and swirled it around, popped it in my mouth. Shit.

Anthony stood in the hall talking to Matt.

"Anthony?"

My gut rolled up into my throat.

"Hey, Olivia." He smiled. "Yeah, I was on my way to this party and the boss wanted to know if you'd take a look at this." He handed me a thick blue folder. "They need it el pronto, I mean...I know you're sick, but they need it by morning and it's your guy and all, I mean, your client. Thought I'd drop it."

I pressed my hand to my stomach, sick.

"What? Nobody called me about it."

Matt stood between us, hands in his pockets. He leaned back against the wall.

"Yeah, well, maybe Harris forgot. Happens sometimes." Anthony looked at Matt, then me.

"Hey man, um, we were just going out. Otherwise I'd offer you a beer or something." Matt moved to the door.

"No, I'm cool. Got to get to the party before they



miss me. Thanks though Buddy.” He reached out and play punched Matt on the chin. “Maybe some other time. Just you and me.” Matt just stood there, his arms by his sides. He looked small next to Anthony.

“See *you* tomorrow, Olivia.”

Then he was gone.

In bed, I tried to tell Matt about the ocean, how sound carries across the waves. I told him about the gulls, how they follow a boat out for miles, how they screech and fight over the bloody ropes of guts and bone the fishermen throw to the wake. I told him the story of a fisherman who once caught a mermaid with his nets. “She lost her voice,” I said, “she died, then the fisherman died too. The villagers buried them side-by-side near the ocean and flowers bloomed on their grave the whole year round. Even in the winter.”

Matt didn’t say anything. I listened to the hum of the liquor store light.

After a while, he said, “I need some more.” His voice was thick.

I rolled up from the bed, went to the kitchen. Cat circled my ankle and mewed. “Nothing left sweetie,” I told her, squatting down to stroke her slick gray fur. “Tomorrow though, I promise.”

I got a spoon from the drawer.

Matt hadn’t moved. I got the shoebox from the closet and sat on the floor beside Matt’s head. “Just once baby, okay?” I pulled the hypo from the shoebox, everything. “Let’s try this,” I said.

## THE HIGHLIGHTS

“Do they really eat cheese?” Michael asked.

“Well I can’t imagine they don’t,” Fred said. “Seems like there’s gotta be some truth to that. I figure the fuckers will eat just about anything. I mean, I watch them crawl around the damn dumpsters at work.”

Fred rested the pellet gun in his lap while he adjusted his baseball cap. He tugged on his pony tail and ran it through his hands so that it came to a point.

“It just seems a bit too cartoony,” said Michael.

“So sorry, college boy,” Fred said.

“Ah-ha! That took less beer than I thought it would, usually I’m not ‘college boy’ until number six or seven.”

“I didn’t know it bothered you so much, college boy.”

“What about this sociology textbook I brought to show you? Where do you think I got it?”

“One dumb book has one lousy picture of Hendrix in it and I’m supposed to be impressed? College is still loser shit.”

Michael often felt like a school girl that Fred was trying to impress. From what he had gathered through conversations, he figured Fred to be about forty-five. At work, the kitchen radio would sometimes prompt Fred to relay some story about having seen Janis Joplin in concert, or the first Eagles tour. There was never really any meat to his stories though—more like bragging. It made Michael wonder whether or not he was telling the truth. Fred was also famous for saying, “I’ve been in the restaurant business for twenty-five years,” but sometimes it was twenty years, or thirty years, or his whole life.

Fred sat in the beat-up recliner in the living room of his trailer. Behind him, Michael shuffled around the room trying to think of the least abrupt way to announce he was leaving. Michael looked around the room struggling for something to say. That way when he left it would look like he actually wanted to stay, but was torn by obligations elsewhere.

Flourescent lights lit up most of Fred's trailer. Fred didn't have cabinets. He had a wall of plastic milk crates stacked on top of each other. In them, Fred kept most of his food and kitchen utensils. Michael imagined that similar milk crates probably served as Fred's dresser. He had a lot of canned food, as if he was hoarding or saving up for the winter. Michael glanced at the cover of a *Sports Illustrated* on a small table, but he knew that a conversation about sports with Fred would keep him there all night.

"If you want another beer you can go ahead and look in the fridge," Fred said.

"No, I think I'll be all right. I was actually thinking about heading home. Big test tomorrow."

"Well listen," Fred said. He fidgeted with his pellet gun. Michael sensed from Fred's tone that he was about to deliver some alcohol induced sentimentality. "I just wanted to say again that I appreciate you driving me home from work every night this week. I'll make it up to you sometime. Herman should have my truck fixed by Tuesday, I don't know what the fuck's taking him so long."

"Don't sweat it."

"Well I know it's out of your way, and that after work the first thing anyone wants to do is go home, and I know sometimes I can be a little..." Fred sat up in his seat. "Shh!"

He put his finger to his lips in a sudden silencing gesture, even though he had been the only one talking. He devoted his attention to a rat that scurried from the kitchen. It paused about a foot from the shredded cheddar that Fred

had set on the floor in the hall. The rat sat still, reluctant to go for the cheese.

"Maybe he's partial to provolone," Michael said.

Fred tapped his finger on his lips. "Shh, don't say a word," he whispered. He inched near the edge of his chair. He gripped the pellet gun with one hand and rested it on the other. Extending his arms out in front of him, he took aim at the rat.

Michael thought the rat looked more like an inflated mouse. As disgusting as he thought it was, he couldn't help but pity how it seemed unaware that it had any enemies.

Fred fired, *blip*.

"Son-of-a!" Fred yelled. At the same instant the pellet ricocheted from the floor to the wall and disappeared into the kitchen.

Michael rolled his eyes. He was still standing behind Fred. "Well that's about all the excitement I can handle!" he said.

"Little fucker can run!" Fred said. "I bet he ran faster than the bullshit that flew out of this shit-ass pellet gun!"

Michael was already at the door, his hand already on the knob. "You have a good night, Fred."

Fred seemed to be in his own world. He was still on the edge of his seat, but with his arms limp at his side. Michael tried to get his attention once more before saying goodbye.

"Best of luck with the rat problem," he said. "You know, they sell this bizarre stuff called rat poison at the store, you might want to check it out."

"Peace of mind, that's all rat poison is."

Michael paused at the door. "What do you mean?"

"Why count on something else to get the job done if I can sit in my chair with a few cold ones and a pellet gun, and do it myself?"

"Oh yeah, and you seem to be doing the job really

well," Michael said.

"Shit, I hit 'em all the time. Just a little dizzy tonight. If you don't believe me I can start saving 'em and showing 'em to you." He cackled as he said this.

"If I ever come here and you've set up a rat trophy room, you can forget about me even turning the car off and coming in," Michael said.

"That's all I gotta do to keep you from coming inside and drinking my beer?" Fred asked.

Michael didn't know whether to admire or pity someone that laughed at his own jokes. He figured that Fred laughed at his own jokes because no one else was ever around, but maybe no one else was around because his jokes weren't that funny.

"Maybe, but your ass'll be stuck at work then," Michael said.

"Seriously though," Fred said, "Herman oughta have my damn truck done soon. I didn't know he'd be taking his sweet time."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'm sure I'll be there before you, so long as Herman wakes up in time. Dumb-ass day cook'll probably leave me plenty of prep to do, too. I think they're gonna fire that jackass anyway."

"Gotta love the high turnover rate," Michael said.

"Don't you go and get fired. You're the only one I don't want to lock in the freezer."

"Well that's incentive enough. Don't worry about me. You have a good night."

"All right, man."

As he got into his car, Michael heard a *blip* and Fred's muffled cursing come from inside the trailer.

Michael was a few minutes down the road when his cell phone rang. He fished it from his coat pocket.

"Hello."

"Hey there moneybags," Fred whispered.

"I thought I was done with you until tomorrow, and why are you whispering?"

"You left that fancy-pants sociology book of yours here. And I'm whispering because our rat friend is headed for the cheese again."

"Damn, I need that book tonight. Why did I even bring it inside?"

"Hendrix, remember? I'll be up for a while, or I could put it on the porch," Fred said, still whispering.

"Fuck it, I'll come back. I'm turning around right now," Michael said. As he turned off his phone, he could still hear Fred muttering.

Soon Michael was slowing for the speed bump at the entrance to Fred's trailer community. He passed the cats that scattered at the sight of his headlights. Michael parked in the empty spot next to Fred's trailer. As he neared the trailer's steps, the door creaked open and Fred stood with the book in his hands.

"I've read this twice already," Fred said.

"I bet. You look just like a sociologist."

"No, serious," Fred said, "I even marked my favorite page for you."

"I'd love to chat about it but I really have to get back. What was it though—Darwinism? Marxism? Which part really got your blood pumping?"

Fred was silent. He handed Michael the book.

Michael saw that there actually was a marked page and he opened the book. When he found the page, he was puzzled by the bookmark. It was pinkish, long, skinny, cylindrical, and sort of fleshy-looking. He flung the book from his hands like a hot dish. Michael yelled out, and by the time the book made a thud in the yard, Fred was already slapping his thighs and cackling into the night air. His

laughter was louder than Michael's scream, and it caused a dog in another yard to start barking.

"I wish you could've seen your face when you opened that book! Jesus!" Fred hollered. "Funny as shit, man, that shit was funny as a bitch."

Michael was turning circles in the front yard, shaking his hands as if they were on fire, or as if the germs might fall right off them.

"You know, there's a big difference between funny and disgusting," Michael said.

"And that was both!"

"So I'm assuming you captured the rat, then?"

"Oh yeah man, it was great. Hit that sucker with a pellet and he made all sorts of weird noises and was squirming around. Then I ran over to him, took aim, and hit him right square in the head! Then he stopped moving."

Michael made no comment. Fred began again, "Then I put him in a bucket of water for good measure, and after a while..."

"Okay," Michael said.

"I haven't even told you about the tail yet. If you had gotten back here a minute earlier you would have seen me do it." Fred said. He was still laughing.

"The tail was in my book! My imagination is enough!"

"Suit yourself, Richie Rich."

A few minutes of silence passed in the front yard. The dog across the street stopped barking.

Michael went inside to wash his hands in the bathroom. Fred walked toward the bathroom but stopped short. Michael was standing at the sink with the water on full blast, ferociously rubbing a bar of soap and grumbling.

"Hey man," Fred spoke up, "couldn't help but overhear your muttering—tell you what, when you get to work tomorrow I'll have the biggest plate of nachos for you that

you've ever seen. Shit, I didn't know you'd think it was so gross."

Michael turned off the water and looked around for a hand towel. Finding none, he shook his hands over the sink and patted them on the sides of his pants.

"Don't worry about it," Michael said. "Just do me a favor and clean out that book."

"Already did. Good as new. I put it on top of your car."

"For real?"

"Sure man. Clorox and all."

The book sat on top of Michael's car. It sat like an impatient passenger waiting for the door to be unlocked. Michael got in behind the wheel and threw the book on the seat next to him. Just as he put the key in the ignition, Michael heard Fred's trailer door spring open. Fred jumped out the door and waved his hands in the air.

"They're running the highlights from the game, come in and watch this shit!" Fred said, his voice waking up the neighbor's dog again.

Michael shook his head and hit the gas. He drove past the cats, over the speed bump, and out of the trailer community. It wasn't until he hit the main road that he pulled his phone from his coat-pocket. He dialed Fred's number.

"Hello," Fred said.

"So who won the game?" Michael asked.

"Huh? Oh, I didn't watch it. Geez, go home college boy, I'm trying to get to bed. Go home, go on home."



## UPSIDE DOWN

Monday we buried the baby. I didn't know what it was. To me, she looked like a very old shrunken lady with red, wrinkled walnuts for hands. My aunt told me it was time to say goodbye to my sister. I turned and said it to Annie who was wearing her best church dress, the white one with tiny strawberries on it.

"Silly," Annie sniffed. "Not to me, you're supposed to say goodbye to the baby."

The way she said it, stretching the word out so that I would feel exactly as small as I was. It made me curl my fingers into my hands, just enough to hurt a little.

"Girls, now is not the time. You don't want your mother coming in here to find you two bickering," Aunt Lucy said, walking over to the window and looking out between the curtains. "Where's that car?"

Mommy had been walking around for two whole days, sniffing. Her eyes looked like they were bleeding and she said she didn't know what to do with herself. I remember that sounded dumb to me. Now she walked into the room and whispered to Aunt Lucy that the car was here, which meant we could go.

The ride to the cemetery wasn't long, but it was long enough to hear Mommy and Aunt Lucy crying in the front, while I sat in the back with Annie, kicking the seat in front of me. I hated the smell of the car. It smelled like Granny and hairspray.

"Stop it, stupid," Annie said. "You're going to make her cry even more if you keep doing that. Do you want it to be your fault?"

"No."

"Then quit it. Just quit it."

The car climbed the hill to the cemetery. There was a big group of people. I thought I was pretty special. They were all there waiting for us so we could say goodbye to the baby. Mommy called it Eleanor. I didn't really understand all the fuss over the little old woman. Aunt Lucy said it was a proper goodbye and I figured anything proper had to be important.

As soon as I could get out of the car, I ran over to the tent and did a handstand. I always wanted to know how things looked upside down.

Mrs. Cratchett, the lady from next door, told me that I was shocking. I wasn't too sure what that meant, but I didn't think it was a good thing. I thought the hair coming out of her chin was shocking and told her so.

That was the Monday we buried the baby, Eleanor. Aunt Lucy took me over to the tent and we stood under it, holding hands. We stood in a row, me, Annie and Aunt Lucy. In front of us, the baby's gravestone stood beside Mother's casket.

I can still remember the way the car smelled back then. It smelled the same way today when we came to bury Mother. I didn't do a handstand this time. I didn't have to. This is what the world looks like upside down.

Patty Paine

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## TAKING ROOT

I'm waiting for the bus and thinking about the cutting of Swedish Ivy wrapped in a tissue in my purse. My apartment is so empty it looks like I'm on the verge of leaving, so I take cuttings when I can. This morning when my caseworker left her office to look for my file I sliced a piece of her ivy with my fingernail. By the time she returned it was in my purse, and I could already see a spindly tangle of new roots dangling in a glass of tepid water. There was a time when I woke up and believed the whole of my life had been a dream, but too much life has gone by for that now, and now I know there are other lives going on everywhere around me. Behind the walls of my apartment, behind closed doors and drawn blinds, I know more than I can bear of other people's lives. I know at four o' clock everyday a droopy-eyed man comes home to his obese wife and berates her in front of their five year old son. This son will spend what's left of the afternoon shrieking like a wounded animal while chasing other children with a baseball bat. I am worried about the snippit of ivy dying at the bottom of my purse. I have to be careful not to let too much depend on this plant. My husband and I once nurtured an avocado seed into a six foot tree and came to believe it a symbol of our relationship.

Shortly after the tree died and he left  
I dragged it onto the patio, tipped it over,  
slipped it from its pot and saw  
a strangled mass of roots. Sometimes I stop looking  
in mirrors, I shun the surface of puddles,  
I avoid myself in windows. And sometimes I dream  
I am running so fast my feet touch down just long enough  
to keep me from being flung from the earth.

During the war she found  
a tiny girl folded over her lifeless  
mother screaming over and over  
mommy please wake up  
mommy please wake up  
My mother didn't see me  
crouched behind the door  
as she danced in the dark  
Whirling and spinning  
her hands spread like fans  
her smile something wild  
chest lifting and falling

Patty Paine

---

## MY MOTHER

My mother is a tiny woman,  
with skin like stones worn  
smooth by the passing of water.  
Her hair is black and coarse,  
and she wears glasses  
that on her face look  
like two huge butterfly wings.

During the Korean war she lay  
very still in a ditch among  
dead bodies,  
the stench filled her  
nose and throat, and she lay  
there for a long time, long  
after the threat had passed.

During the war she found  
a tiny girl folded over her lifeless  
mother screaming over and over  
mommy please wake up  
mommy please wake up

My mother didn't see me  
crouched behind the door  
as she danced in the dark.  
Whirling and spinning  
her hands spread like fans  
her smile something wild  
chest lifting and falling,

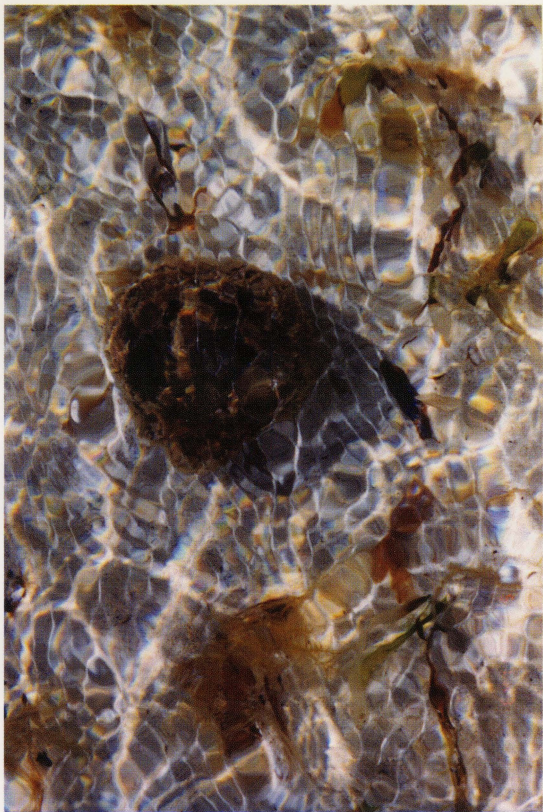
the air pulsed  
around her.

Then her legs gave way  
and she crumpled  
to the floor.

With tears running down her  
face and her neck she crawled  
to the couch and she lay there  
for a long, long, time.

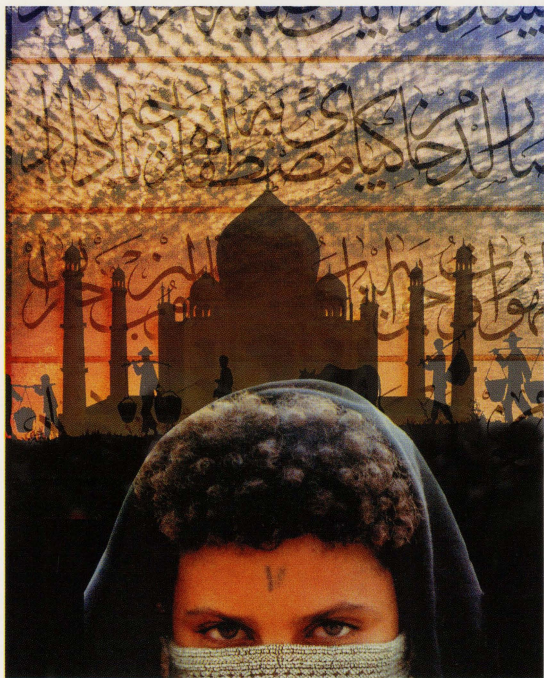
VANTAGE

A man in prison spends hours  
constructing elaborate mazes  
on the floor with match sticks.  
He pools Tabasco at the end  
then lays down a thin trail  
of sugar to guide ants  
when they come. They come,  
and he watches them wind  
methodically through his maze.  
When they reach the pool  
of Tabasco they falter.  
Some die, and then more,  
until the pile of dead becomes a bridge.  
Ants that cross over are rewarded  
with a small mound of sugar  
which they carry off  
a crystal at a time. In Hiroshima  
those far from the hypo-center still speak  
of the *pika* followed by the *don*.  
Those closer don't remember  
seeing the *pika* or hearing the *don*.  
What they remember is the heaving  
under their feet. What we remember  
is the mushroom cloud  
that leads the eye higher and higher,  
until the man excusing the foot  
bumping dead bodies as he stumbles naked  
down the street, is almost too small to see.

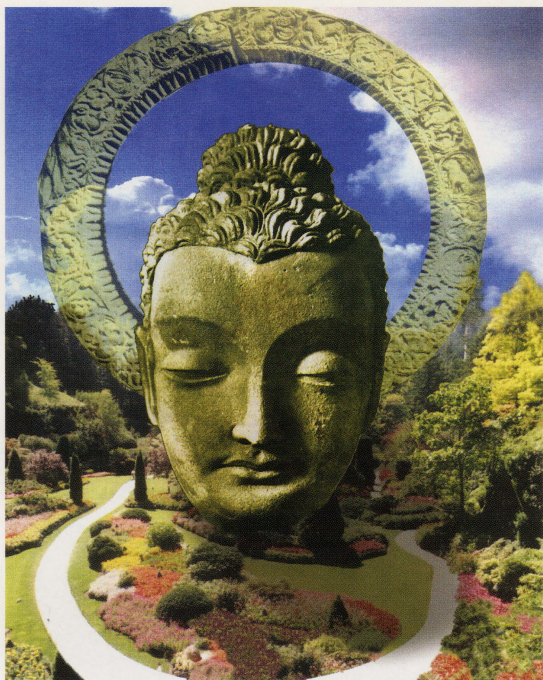


Untitled  
Micah Daingerfield





Pride and Faith  
Shawn Miller



Homage to an Ascetic  
Shawn Miller



Bucolic Life  
Lee Meadows

## MEANWHILE, BACK IN AMERICA

I have a nice new (used) sweater

the tag reads: Made in Yugoslavia

70%

Acrylic

30%

Mohair

I love it & wear it

more than any other sweater (sorry green)

a blue v-neck,

looks good with brown.

I say,

more sweaters from Yugoslavia.

AUTUMN

Driving down the highway toward Halifax, the turning leaves reminded Kate of the kitchen tiles in the house where she grew up. The tiles were squares of brown, filled with bold autumn leaves waiting, twisted and dry, ready for a light breeze to blow them out of the path of feet crossing the floor. It was the same room where her father hit her so hard she flew backward across the floor, breaking both bones in her arm as she tried to brace herself for the fall.

The leaves seemed to dance around on the floor that day as she held her arms out at her sides and spun around on sock covered toes. She was dancing to music from some soft rock station out of Richmond when her father walked in the front door. The music covered the sound of his feet coming up the stairs but was not loud enough to disguise the slamming door. Kate knew who it was immediately and stopped dancing. She slid across the smooth floor to the stereo.

"Turn that music down," her father yelled.

She turned off the stereo and walked back into the kitchen without a word spoken, waiting for him to leave.

"What the hell is going on in here?" he said. "I couldn't hear anything but that noise when I walked in."

"It's not noise. It's music," she said.

"Are you drunk? What did you say?"

"I, uh, said it was music," she said.

"It's crap, that's what it is and you won't listen to it in my house. You'll show me some respect," he said, grabbing her shoulders and shaking.

"When you deserve it," Kate whispered.

Her head snapped back as his hand made contact



with her cheek. The force of it made her body fall back and her feet slide forward. The leaves danced again as she fell but when she hit there was no softness to cushion her fall.

She turned fifteen that fall, she thought she hated him more than she loved him.

"Hey, Dad, are you going to be at graduation?" she had asked, trying to make it a casual question.

"No, I have a trip that weekend," he had replied. "I can't make it."

"You've known about this for twelve years," she said. "So you're saying your business is more important than my graduation."

"Right now," he replied, stepping forward so that his height and barrel chest would be more intimidating. "Yes."

"Fine."

"Don't get smart with me," he said, moving closer to grab her arm. He squeezed her upper arm and his eyes were wide, hiding none of his rage. His body shook as he whispered, "I pay the bills around here. Remember that."

"Okay," she responded, shrugging away from him. "Okay."

Slowly he let go of her, leaving red marks on her arm where his fingers had been. His hand brushed through his brown hair and then dropped to his side. Kate trembled, slowly turning away. She walked to her bedroom and stayed there until she heard the front door slam.

Even after he left for his trip, she hoped that this one time he would surprise her and make an appearance. At the ceremony, only her mother and her mother's parents showed.

"I am really proud of you," Kate's mother said.

"I know. I just wish Dad had come."

"I know. Well, I have to go, I'll be late for work. See you at home."

As her mother left for her night job, Kate wondered why her mother stayed with him. Kate waved goodbye to her mother as she drove by, then signaled her friends over. She was ready to go.

Kate and a few friends drove to a party one of the other graduates was throwing. At the party, Kate drank whatever was available, not minding the slow burn in the back of her throat and the heat filling her body. Hours later, she noticed most of her friends were gone, the only people left were couples clinging to each other on the couch and a few bodies laying crumpled in the shadows. Kate walked past them all, out the door, leaving it drifting open after her as she stepped off the porch. She walked to her car and drove home.

Pulling into her driveway, she spotted her father's van. Stopping her car, she pushed the gearshift into park and turned off the engine.

"Fuck, Fuck, Fuck," she said.

Her stomach churned, thinking about him waiting for her inside. She swung the door open and leaned out, letting go of all the alcohol she had in her stomach. Kate leaned back against the headrest and let the darkness calm her. She got out, standing by the car for a moment before rolling her shoulders back and then walking up to the front door.

In the house, it was quiet and dark. He sat on the couch waiting.

"It's about time you got home."

She walked past him and went into the kitchen.

"You reek. You're never going to make anything of your life," he said. "You're going to be gutter trash, some drunk whore."

"Fuck you," she said, feeling warm and defiant.

He had moved close when he called her trash but she did not notice. When his fist met her jaw she realized her

mistake.

"What's going on?" her mother's voice said, as Kate groped the countertop to stay standing.

"Nothing. I'm just teaching Kate some manners."

"It's late, everyone needs to go to bed," her mother sighed as he pushed past her.

"Good night," Kate said, turning to walk to her room. Kate stopped when she noticed a bouquet of red carnations laying in the trash. She could make out the words *Congratulations* and *Dad* embossed on the big card.

*Too late*, she thought and kept walking.

In the morning he was gone and so were the flowers.

The quiet that filled the car brought Kate back to the present. She had today to deal with and she was running out of time to prepare. She did not tell her mother she was going to see him. Her mother had left him a couple months after Kate left for college, Kate moved into the dorm and her mother moved in with Kate's grandparents. Kate's father moved to a small town near South Boston. Her mother did not like to talk about him so Kate never mentioned it.

Pulling into the gravel driveway of her father's house, Kate drew in a few deep breaths and wondered if her hands would stop shaking. She wondered why she answered the letter he sent a few months ago. She wondered what he would be like after all this time, *What if he was violent? Who would help her?*

As her car came to a stop in front of the white two-story farmhouse, a man walked from around the leaning red barn off to the right of the house. She could tell even at a distance that it was him. He now had thick white hair that lifted in the wind and fell back into place as if nothing had even disturbed it. He seemed thinner. He held a cigarette and flicked it to the ground and then stepped on it with his heavy work boot. As he walked, his plaid flannel jacket



swung open, showing a cotton undershirt. He wore the same khaki work pants belted in at the waist like she remembered. He carried a bucket full of yellow splotchy fruit.

Kate sat still when he noticed her. He had the same brown bushy eyebrows, menacing even when his eyes were closed. He walked the same, she thought, guessing he weighed about seventy-five pounds less than he had when she was a senior in high school. She took one last deep breath before getting out of the car.

"Hello, Dad," she said.

"Hey," he replied.

They stared at each other.

"So how are things here in Alton?" she asked, looking over the small farm as she scratched at the grooved headband she wore, splitting her hair into multiple little rows, with the back of her hair spiky and shooting out in different directions.

"Good, good," he replied. "I have been working in town and the garden keeps me busy."

So he finally got a real job, she thought. She could not remember a time when he had worked for someone other than himself.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Yeah, I do."

Kate was quiet again, mindful of what she was saying, the strangeness of seeing him reminding her what he was like when angry.

She smiled slightly, "That's great."

"Let me show you around," he said.

They walked together over the pastures he had seeded with grass and small grains, winter food for the wildlife. They walked through the vegetable garden and the tied off boards sticking out of the ground. He explained they marked where the new barn would be since the old one was probably going to fall over in the next big storm.

"I've been trying to fix up the place," he paused. "Since I found out I, uh, well."

Kate wanted to know more but she did not ask for an explanation.

"Would you like to take some pears home?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Sure," she said, remembering the full bucket.

They walked over to the drooping tree next to the dilapidated red barn. Yellow speckled pears that had been blown off in a recent storm covered the ground and made it difficult to find level ground to stand on as they walked near the tree. Big buzzing insects flew around the ground, hovering, while Kate and her father shuffled closer to the tree.

"Throw the ones on the ground into the paddock so I can put a ladder under the tree to pick fresh ones," he said, taking charge of the project.

He started tossing pears over the fence and for a moment Jane watched resentfully. *God, I need to get over this,* she thought, *he's changed, why can't I?* Making the decision to try she picked up one of the pears, getting ready to lob it into the nearby field. She tested the weight of it in her hands adjusting the force she would use to see how far she could send the fruit. She pulled her arm back and let the pear go. The hard pear slid off the side of her hand and flew high to her right, directly toward her father. It moved like a missile headed for a target.

He was turned away, tossing pears over the fence and never saw it coming. As the pear slammed into his shoulder, Kate could not move. She waited for him to whirl around and strike back, even though the hit had been accidental.

He turned and rotated his shoulder, stretching the area on his upper arm. He looked at Kate for a moment, thinking she looked different than she had as a senior in high school. She no longer had long blond-brown wavy hair and a baby face. Her eyes seemed darker to him, more dis-

tant. She was taller and heavier too. He shook his head with a slight smile on his lips and said, "You've got one hell of an arm."

Kate laughed while he stood rubbing his arm, laughing so hard that tears welled up in her eyes and she could barely get out the words, "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"That was an accident, Dad," she said.

"Sure," he said.

Kate turned and looked out over the small paddock with golden pears littering the field. "Why did you write?" she asked.

"Because I had so much to say but I didn't know what to say," he said, looking at the ground, knowing she referred to the letter he had written six months ago, asking her to come. In the letter, he had wanted to tell her about the people who did not like him when he first moved there but now acted like he was a native. He wanted to tell her he quit drinking. He wanted to tell her about the nurse he played cards with each Saturday night and about when the doctor told him he had cancer. He had wanted to tell her he had gotten the job in town and about his health insurance for treatment. He wanted to tell her that sometimes he had been so lonely over the past few years he thought he would go out of his mind and sometimes he thought he had gone a little out of his mind. But instead, he wrote, *I love you*.

"It was easier to be able to write it down and change what was wrong. That way I wouldn't hurt you with the wrong words."

Kate realized he was telling the truth.

She told him about college, leaving out that she did not remember much of the first two years because she drank too much and forgot she had classes to go to. She left out that she was trying to stop drinking and had quit using over the counter medication to just make it through each day.

Instead, she told him about her friends and about a guy she dated for three months but broke up with after he slapped her one night during an argument.

"You know, I came because I wanted to believe you wouldn't hurt me."

His head dropped a little. "I won't."

"I know that now."

"I might."

She picked up another pear.

"You won't," she said, tossing the fruit to him.

## RACE OF GIANTS

I had been living underground for almost a month, which is about how long I'd been having the nightmares. About how long I'd been afraid to go out. My old rent-controlled apartment building was being turned into condos so I was forced to move, and that basement efficiency was pretty cheap. Cheap for D.C.

Charlie, my fat tabby, warmed my lap as I sat back on the futon, staring up high on the wall at our only window like it was a television. Human legs moved in shadows back and forth across the dimly lit panes of glass. Their approaching footsteps crescendoed and then faded out. A patch of dark green mold was growing on the wall just below the sill. The sun headed west and the darkening city was giving way to street lights.

Since moving there I had become like Galileo, intensely aware of the sun's daily routine. The small, bare window faced east, so each morning, a purring Charlie impatiently thumped his tail on the kitchen table where I sat, waiting for the sun to rise above the stone church across the street. When it did, our apartment got blasted with light rays and heated up like a kiln. Charlie would roll over and dance on his back and I just sat there glazed, sipping coffee. Then before the morning was officially over, the sun was gone, a solar eclipse every goddamn day. We lived in a hole. I mean literally a hole.

The phone rang, Charlie jumped down. It was my brother, Murph. I hadn't seen him since he helped me move.

"Hey asshole, tried to call you at work but they said you hadn't been in all week," he said.

"Yeah, I...couldn't concentrate."

"All week? You couldn't concentrate all week? You sound like shit, man. Let's grab a beer, you can tell me about it."

"Bring over a six-pack," I said.

"There's no parking over there, besides, you know...your apartment...don't you want to get some air?" he said. "Come on, let's just go out."

I didn't want to go, but I forced myself because I hadn't left my hole for I don't know how many days and besides, I needed to get Charlie food.

"We can't let you starve can we, Charlie." He looked up from licking himself when he heard his name, then got back to it.

"Are you talking to your cat again?" Murph asked before hanging up.

Murph is a lawyer, a pretty successful guy. He has a house in the suburbs, a family, good job and all that. I hoped he could help me. I needed to tell him about the nightmare. We agreed to meet at The Pit, a bar I like, a few miles away.

I needed a shower and a shave. Stepping over pizza boxes I headed for the bathroom. Charlie high-tailed it in ahead of me, and jumped up on the sink. I turned on the water for him because he likes drinking from the faucet. He just does.

I stayed in the shower until forced out by cold water.

Not until I spit green foamy blood into the sink did I realize I'd been brushing my teeth for twenty minutes. I felt like I'd pitched nine innings.

I was ready to go, but got worried about Charlie, so I left a note. I hoped it was legible because my hand was shaking so much I probably could have used it to jerk-off. The truth was, since moving into that place, I hadn't been able to masturbate. I felt a strange sensation of self-loathing when gripping myself and had to let go. I scotch-taped the

letter to the kitchen table:

To Whomever:

If anything happens to me please call my brother Murphy at 703-323-4458 and ask that he come pick up Charlie, the cat that lives in this apartment.

Had to wait for my hair to dry.

Standing on a chair looking out the street-level window, the world appeared to be inhabited by a race of giants. That's how Charlie must have seen it. I accidentally breathed a curtain of fog over the windowpane and the scene disappeared. In an instant I was back in my head, wondering what was making me scared to go outside. But if I didn't go outside, I knew they'd come get me and put me in a hospital, like Mom.

I tried on every jacket I had, even ones I hated and would never wear anyway. Mom used to get me a new one every year for Christmas. Two years in a row she got me the same exact jacket. "Which one should I wear, Charlie? The blue one? Okay."

A moment of silence, a deep breath, and I gripped the doorknob tightly to steady my hand, turned and pulled. The twins from the overcrowded apartment next door were playing ring-around-the-rosy in the hallway, naked. Their door was open. Cute little boys, with thick curly brown hair, maybe two years old, I couldn't tell. They didn't see me. One of them started pissing. His stream arced up and splashed down onto the bronze tile floor—they looked like two cherubs escaped from a Roman fountain.

I walked down the hall laughing, remembering how when Murph and I were kids, we hardly ever pissed in the toilet either. Whether we were fixing fence, putting in hay, fishing or just playing catch out behind the house, Murph and me preferred to piss outside. Back then the world was our toilet.

Outside on the street the cars appeared to move on

conveyer belts along an assembly line. It'd gotten colder since I was above ground last, and the air whipped my face like a flyswatter. People were walking with their shoulders hunched up and their hands in their pockets, as if they weren't used to wearing coats at all. A vanishing tail of white jet smoke stood out against the blue sky. Stepping beyond the shadow of my building, I felt the warm sun on my back and turned around to feel it on my face. The sky looked like a peeled blood orange. Suddenly there was a crash. A red Miata was bleeding all over a metro bus. I quickly looked around, waiting and waiting for the light to change. Green, green.

Fuck it. I ran headlong into traffic. Tire squeals and horns and a cabdriver shouted, "Asshole!"

"Hack!" I said back, smacking and pushing off of his hot yellow hood.

I zigzagged across Sixteenth, down Yuma street to my blue Nissan, brushing from my windshield a pile of tawny leaves big enough to jump in. I was safe inside the car, door locked. In my rearview mirror I saw a bottle-shaped brown paper bag on my trunk. Hated to give up such a great spot. I lived on Sixteenth Street, behind Rock Creek Park and the zoo—there wasn't much parking around there. Fourteenth street was just two blocks away and that area has never really recovered from the riots.

When I pulled into traffic the bag did a back flip. I pushed in the tape. Kurt was crooning about his demons.

*...the animals I've trapped, have all become my pets, and I'm living off of grass, and the drippings from the ceiling...*

"You're okay now, asshole," I said, flicking on my headlights.

Murph was waiting at a small table in The Pit, and gave me a royal wave when I walked in. He still had his shirt and tie on from work.



The Pit is a murky one-room joint with high pitch-black walls. A votive candle burns on each table. None of the tables and chairs match, but are somehow unified by the smoke that hangs about. And by the Christmas lights unceremoniously strung from each corner to a wooden post in the center of the room, year around. Larry was dug in behind the bar, working the taps like a backhoe operator.

I sat down and blurted out, "Before I forget, Murph, if anything happens to me will you take care of Charlie?"

He just looked at me. My eyes darted back and forth between his good eye and his lazy one. Murph looks like Dad. He is what they call black Irish; dark hair and dark eyes with a widow's peak wedged into his fair skin.

"Do you have cancer, man? Dealing drugs? Or are you really in the C.I.A.?" His rant was interrupted by the raised eyebrows of Becky the silent waitress. We asked for two pints, she nodded and walked away.

I was distracted by a painting on the wall above our table. A new one by some local guy. "That painting is giving me the chills," I said. The painting was of a grinning skeleton in a red pinstripe baseball uniform leaning over the batter's box, bat held high, waiting for a pitch.

"Really? It doesn't bother me," Murph said. "Looks like a Halloween...World Series thing."

Murph leaned across the table on his elbows. "What's happened to you?" he said, scanning my face. "Have you looked in the mirror lately? You look like the walking dead. AIDS? Oh, my God do you have AIDS?"

"I think I'm losing it," I said, my hands trembling under the table.

"Go on," he said, bowing his head to light a Marlboro off our candle. "Tell me."

"Ever since I moved into that apartment...nightmares," I said. "Every fucking night."

Murph exhaled through the corner of his mouth like

a steaming tea kettle. "What is it? The nightmare, what is it?"

Becky set down two pints. We thanked her, she winked and moved on.

Hands stuck between my legs, I bobbed my head down to the glass for a gulp of beer. Licking the foam from my lips, I began. "I can only ever remember a little bit of it. I'm in this green field, the grass is about sneaker high and the sky is blue, but slanted or else the field is slanted, either way I'm off balance. Then I look at the sun and my eyes fill with kaleidoscope tears so I can't see the commotion right in front of me, but I hear it. Screaming, hissing, crying."

"Hissing? Like a snake?"

"No, not a snake, something else. I don't know."

"Then what?"

"I look down..."

"And?"

"And I see blood stains on my shirt. That's when I wake up."

"Christ, you have this same dream over and over?"

"Yeah, you know, variations of it. I wake up in the middle of the night terrified, covered with sweat and...I think Charlie's dead, so I jump out of bed and find him, always relieved he's alive. He doesn't sleep at the foot of the bed anymore. Then I can't go back to sleep. I've been averaging three or four hours a night for a few weeks now. On top of that, I'm afraid to leave the apartment, afraid of...I don't know...some unknown danger."

"Danger ? You do something bad?"

"No!" I said. "I don't know why it's happening. How old was Mom when she went crazy?"

Murph ignored my question and didn't seem to know what to say. He took a long pull from his cigarette, tilted his head back, looked at the ceiling and blew the smoke straight up, as if signaling for help.

"So," I said. "What's new with you?"

Driving home in silence with a beer buzz in my head, I got to feeling all right. Murph and I had stayed so late he had to call Suze, his wife. We ended up having a really excellent time. Things were going well for him. Turned out he was getting promoted in his firm and would be moving to San Diego next month. I wasn't too upset, you know, we don't hang out that much anymore. The only grief in his life came from the fact that his son, Jim, sucks at baseball. When the check came I realized I'd forgotten my wallet, I really did forget it, so he paid. Oh yeah, Murph thought I should see a shrink.

Looked all over hell for a parking space. No spots on Sixteenth. Tried to stay calm. I snaked through the side streets—Yuma, Wilson, Vincent, Underwood, Tilden—nothing! I tightened my grip on the wheel. A wave of anxiety was washing my buzz away. I needed to get back to my apartment, back to my fucking hole. Shit! Nothing on Fifteenth or Fourteenth either. Damn! I'd forgotten to get food for Charlie.

There. I was surprised to see a Volvo wagon parked on Eleventh and pulled behind it hoping a thief would steal it over mine. Getting out I saw some guys camping in the doorway of a dirty glass-front building. It was cold out; I could see my breath. One of them poked his face out from a blanket where I thought his feet were. "Hey man, spare some change?"

"Sorry," I said, closing the door and walking as fast as I could without running to the corner.

"Fuck you then!" he shouted behind me.

"Hey, fuck you, too," I said.

At the corner of eleventh and Wilson I kneeled down to tie my sneaker. Voices and squeals of laughter were coming from somewhere. Fumbling with the lace, I looked up

and was struck by my surroundings. Across the street a blue, warehouse-looking building with no windows was losing its paint. The patches of exposed plaster were strung together like continents to form a strange, new map of the world. The sidewalks and lots were covered with a thin layer of broken glass. The same street lights that blocked out the stars, make these glass shards twinkle and pulsate, so everything seemed upside down. Where was I? Had to get home. Had to get fucking home.

I beat the dirt off my knee and began walking fast down Wilson. Rundown row houses lined both sides of the street—the only light on the sidewalk came from corner streetlamps. I decided to run, stopping at each corner to rest in the safe light. I ran from Twelfth to Thirteenth, resting under the lamp. My eyes were a few seconds behind adjusting to the alternating light and darkness. Back into the dark, I headed toward Fourteenth. Up ahead, I heard a loud trundling noise. I began to shake from the cold and the fright.

A guy in a snorkel-hooded jacket was plowing a shopping cart of junk down the sidewalk. He didn't see me and I had to dive out of the way. Leaning back on my hands, I sat on the cold concrete watching him disappear up the sidewalk. What the fuck was that? Something strange was happening to me. Fear left my body. I saw it. Saw its breath. Watched it get up and walk out of my body and chase after the man with the snorkel jacket. I sat alone on the sidewalk.

Turning around, I saw something else up ahead in my path. It was a guy, a big ruddy faced guy standing with his feet spread apart in the middle of the sidewalk, like he'd been waiting for me all night. I got up and walked, stopping a few paces in front of him. He pulled his yellow bandanna down to just above his eyebrows and had his other hand hidden in the pocket of his Redskins jacket.

"Give me your wallet," he said.

"My wallet?"

"Yeah fucko, wallet. Waaalllet."

"Come and get it." I couldn't believe I said that, but I did. He was pissed.

"You little son-of-a-bitch," he said.

An arm from behind snaked around my neck, jerking me backwards against another body. A hand was clamped over my mouth. I could feel hot angry breath on my neck and his cold ring against my lip. Couldn't breathe. Of course there was no wallet. The Redskins guy was punching me full of pain. On the ground, getting kicked, I felt blood warm my face and soon blackness spread out over everything.

I was in the green field again, the grass about sneaker high and the sky blue. The field lay on the steep side of a mountain and was surrounded by a stone wall. Murph and I were on our way to little league practice at Fireman's Park, wooden bats and mitts slung on our shoulders—like two hoboes. Our Phillies caps were pulled down low to block the sun. We stopped by a chuck hole that was surrounded by loose gravel. "Fresh," Murph said, swirling the dirt with his sneaker. I looked down the hole but couldn't see anything. A few steps more and Murph stopped dead, like a bird dog, his right foot hung still in the air behind him.

There a few yards away, a woodchuck stood on his hind legs, his back to us, looking at the sun as if hypnotized. The wind blew our way so he couldn't sniff our scent. Suddenly, the woodchuck saw us and tried to hide down in the grass. We were standing between him and his hole, the stone wall was too far. Murph slowly slid his mitt off his bat and I did the same. Something was bubbling in me and in my brother too. An atavism from long ago, before baseball and before this field was cleared and that stone wall built.

"Let's get him," Murph said.

"Walk side by side, so he can't get by," I said.

The woodchuck circled to the left, and we moved to the left. He came back to the right so we moved right. He was chubby and the sun made his thick brown coat ripple when he ran. We took a step closer and he hissed at us, bearing his two front teeth and holding his ground. Finally, he made a break for his hole, trying to run between us.

"I got him," Murph swung down hard, hitting the chuck with a thud.

"Good shot!" I shouted back, caught up in the thrill of the hunt; swinging my bat over my shoulder with all my weight, deadening it against hide and bone. He jumped back hissing, and our excitement turned to shock, like we were hit over the head ourselves.

"He's bleeding" Murph said, his voice suddenly filled with compassion.

Thick red blood was pouring out of the woodchuck's nose and filling up his mouth, like he'd been eating Mom's cherry pie. He was limping and wheezing and suffering and we were stunned.

"He's going to die," I said. "He's going to die. Shit, we killed him."

"We can't let him suffer," Murph said. "We have to do like Dad did, when he hit that deer with the car. We gotta finish him, otherwise he'll suffer. A mercy killing, he called it."

Charging the woodchuck, we beat him until he stopped breathing—then both fell to the ground, brought down by the weight of our guilt. I carried his body in my arms over the stone wall, into the woods. There Murph and I dug a hole in the soft black dirt under the pines and buried him with our bloody bats and my bloodstained tee-shirt. We walked home in silence.

I opened my eyes but couldn't see. Rubbing the blood out of them, my sight returned, though my left eye was nearly

swollen shut. Slowly I remembered what happened. I was freezing, had great sharp aches in my face and no feeling in one leg. I sat up and thought of Mom—her asking us that day we came home where our baseball bats were and why I wasn't wearing a shirt. She used to stay in her bedroom for so many days we joked she was hibernating.

Pulling myself up from a clump on the sidewalk, I limped toward my hole. Other than a few nighttime trips out for Charlie's food and toilet paper I stayed down there all winter, waiting. When spring came I broke my lease and moved on.

## EYE

I see her in my mind's eye. Some days I can picture her face almost perfectly. Others, all I can manage is her figure from a distance, running away from me across the bright green of summer lawns. I hadn't thought about her in years. And then one day I remembered. I was on a bus. Or maybe I was just walking down the street. Maybe I was standing in an elevator. Maybe it was a stranger's perfume that brought her back. Maybe it was the smell of wet leaves. All I know is that suddenly, she was there, and now I see her occasionally. I see how she has a place. I'll be reading quietly, and her feet will dance across my brain. Bare feet, thumping across the floor. Her laughing. Sometimes I'm trying to fall asleep, and I hear her giggle, muffled by pillows. I guess we never completely forget anything. Or anybody. I have faith in my mind's eye to show her to me, when I need to see her.

Metal gray clouds were rolling up, making the sky look close enough to touch. We'd been playing outside all afternoon, with the storm approaching. In a burst, fat drops fell, splatting on our forearms, and the hot tops of our heads. We ran into my house. The difference in the air inside was startling, mechanically cold against the living humid web of heat outside. For awhile, the three of us, Justin, Anna and I, played in the basement. Justin and I played Ping-Pong. Anna stood on the arm of the couch, watching the storm out the little window that was just level with the ground outside. I kept missing the Ping-Pong ball. I kept looking over my shoulder at her, at the way the shadows and shimmers of the rain pouring down the window danced down her pale face.



After it rained, everything always rang with scent. It echoed and echoed all around me: wet concrete, wet grass, wet street. There was still a cloud cover, but the evening sun burned through now and then. I sat on the curb, watching Justin bounce a basketball. Anna sat beside me. I could feel the compressed air inside the ball with each bounce. It seemed his dribbling rang louder now, after the storm. It was one of those crazy summer thunderstorms where you can feel the air around you invisibly filling and filling and filling, becoming stickier until it just breaks; and then rain pours down in a beautiful way, like a huge sigh of relief. The heat haze that would have insulated the ball's sound was dispersed by the storm. I thought I could hear the dribbling echoing off the front of Justin's house, two streets away. He kept dribbling, faster and faster, and closer to the ground.

"You guys wanna play? Come on let's play," he stopped dribbling and tried to spin the ball on his finger.

"I hate basketball," I said.

"I know, 'cause you're bad at it," he grinned. "Come on, Ann, let's play." We called her Ann, but in my mind she was always Anna. She was looking down, and her hair hung, hiding her face. She was scraping designs in the gravel by the curb with a little stick. I noticed there were iridescent and vein-like slug trails on the sidewalk behind her.

"No, let's do something else," she said without looking up.

Like what Justin said. "I don't know. Something else."

"We could walk to school and play on the playground," I said.

"Nah," Justin said. He started throwing the ball in the air and clapping between catches. A squirrel skittered across the street a few yards away, its tail twitching. A hole opened in the thinning grey clouds and the sun shown through in a weird line, lighting up a slice of the front of my

house. We all looked into the light.

"Weird," Anna said.

"Yeah," I said.

Justin said, "What?"

"The light, it looks weird," I said.

"Oh." He started dribbling the ball fiercely. Sometimes he got irritated when me and Anna saw things he didn't.

I looked over at her. A drop of clear sweat ran down her temple; it was like seeing a white candle sweat drops of wax. Clean. In the past year, she'd changed so much, become quieter. Her body changed, too. Sitting close beside her, now, I smelled how she was different. Her dampness still had a child's scent: like the fogged inside of a glass, hot from the dishwasher. But now, underneath that, there was another smell, something deeper, more mysterious. Her eyes seemed to have this funny new slant. She would be thirteen next month.

When we played outside, she mostly wore these old cutoffs and a T-shirt. Last week, though, had been the neighborhood picnic. Her mom had wanted her to look nice, so they went out together and bought this little sundress. It was white with tiny, close-together pink stripes, and straps that tied in little bows on each of her shoulders. Five months ago, it would have hung from her shoulders, her body barely detectable beneath. But now this slight fullness in her hips and thighs pressed against the light cotton. I couldn't stop looking at her that day. She looked so different.

When we were alone, me and Anna, she'd say we'd be famous.

"One day, we'll be very famous, you and me," she'd say. She'd never say this in front of Justin.

"What about Justin?" I'd asked once.

"Well, I don't really think we'll be friends with him

that long. I mean, until we're grown up. But you and me will, Danni. we're going to be famous, together. Dannica Lewis and Anna Vaughn. We'll be the most famous women in the world. When she talked like that, it pleased and terrified me, all at once.

"What will we do?" I'd ask.

"Oh, something. Something BIG."

"Maybe I could change my name first."

"No. Your name is perfect."

"But I hate it. Dannica. It sounds like a soda."

"It sounds beautiful. No name changing." She'd swish her hair back off her shoulders and stick her chin out. She did that to show she was serious, in a joking way. Anna had black hair and straight across bangs. I was much taller and bigger than she was, but I always felt small when she was near. Not in a bad way, though. She made me feel bigger, inside, than anybody ever had. But my inside was still smaller than hers. I didn't think there could be anyone in the world with as much space inside as Anna.

The night I asked about Justin being famous with us, I was sleeping over at her house. I almost always stayed at her house, and she hardly ever at mine. This was because she had the best room for secrets. It was all the way down the hall from her parent's room. The door to my room didn't lock, but hers did. Everything inside her room was pink and white. Her parents had taken the doors off of her closet, and pushed the head of her bed inside it.

This made the best secret place of all. They hung curtains around the alcove, and we could pull them closed and sit facing each other at the head of the bed in that little hidden place.

Anna liked nightlights. She collected them. Her dad built several shelves inside the alcove, and these held many little lights. My favorite was a pink plastic princess castle with turrets whose pointed roofs looked like they'd been

painted with pink wink nail polish. Its tiny windows glowed. "Dannica Lewis and Anna Vaughn," she said again. We were sitting across from each other in the secret place. She sat cross-legged, her head cocked to one side and all her hair hanging down as she brushed it. I looked at the lights on the shelves behind her. A moth was fluttering madly behind one of them, its shadow enlarged on the wall. She was wearing a white nightgown that stopped just above her knees. It had small white lace around the hem, and a satin ribbon tied the bust together. We'd been spraying perfume on her lamps earlier, and the scent of flower petals hung around us. I imagined it coming out of her hair; each time she pulled the brush through, the scent wafted out like steam. She was humming a little. The pink light shone on her bare neck. I could see the soft fullness of her chest pulling the front of her nightgown open a little bit. My face flushed suddenly. I'd been here with her like this many times before, but suddenly it felt different.

"I have something to show you," she said. She reached down behind her and brought up a small wooden box, painted white with brass hinges. The top of the box seemed heavier than the bottom. It had thick carvings of leaves and flowers. She opened it.

"I found this. isn't it so pretty?" She held up a white cloudy stone that faintly sparkled. It must have been quartz. I'd seen lots of them before in my yard, but of course this one was special for me, because she held it, cupped in her warm palm.

"Kiss it for luck." She held it out to me, between her slender fingers. I kissed. I felt her thumbnail against my lip. She brought it to her lips and kissed it. Then she dropped it in the little box. The lid spontaneously dropped shut with a hollow note. She lifted it opened again with the back of her hand.

"We'll be friends for a long time, don't you think?

"Til we're really old ladies." She said this as she looked down at the white stone, resting on the pink velveteen-lined bottom of the box.

"Of course," I said. I suddenly felt chills and my stomach was kind of clenching on itself. I think I was a little afraid of her. More and more I felt that way around her. My feelings for her constantly wavered. One moment, she made me feel like one of her nightlights: filled inside with a warm pink light. The next I was afraid of her, and she seemed foreign. Sometimes she just seemed like somebody else.

Justin was kind of dumb, but he wasn't so dumb that he couldn't see that Anna was different. One time, when we were playing with food coloring in glasses of water in my kitchen, Anna said that the red dye spreading through the water, clouding against the sides of the glass, must be what anger looked like.

"What do you mean? You can't see anger," Justin had laughed at her. She didn't say anything. She talked less and less around him.

Now, after the thunderstorm, she stood up from the curb and said, "I think I'm going to go home."

"Me too, I guess," Justin said.

"See you guys tomorrow, then," I said. It was almost dinnertime anyway.

At my house, Mom put pieces of bread with tuna salad, cheddar cheese, and one tomato slice on a cookie sheet in the oven. Everybody had iced tea to drink. We only made iced tea in the summer. We could have made it during winter, but it wouldn't have been right. We ate with the door open, and the smell of wet leaves surrounding us. Outside, the temperature dropped right along with the color. First, the sun blazed everything orange, then sank away, leaving the world cooler, and blue.

"It's supposed to cool off tonight," Dad said.

"Thank God," said Mom. There's Popsicles in the freezer for every child who is a member of the clean plate club."

"My plate's clean," my brother said.

"Have some more, there's plenty more left," Mom said.

Later, I was lying on the rug drawing. It was only around eight and we didn't have to go to bed for a while. My brother was playing with Leggos on the coffee table. He laid down his Popsicle in its wrapper and it was melting on the rug a little. I was drawing it with crayon; I had the puddle of orange almost right. The phone rang.

"Danny! It's Ann! Pick that up, Marcus. It's dripping on the rug." My mother left the phone on the counter for me.

"Hello?"

"You have to come over right now! I found something *amazing*!"

"But, it's getting late."

"I don't care! I'm telling you, this is *amazing*! You have to come over right now! You have to hurry! It might move!"

She sounded really excited. "What is it?"

"I can't explain, you just have to see it! You *have* to!"

"Okay, okay, I'm coming!"

"Hurry! Just come into the backyard." She hung up.

I scrambled to find my sneakers. One of them had been kicked under the couch.

"Where are you going?" Mom asked.

"Anna wants to show me something. it's really, really important." I stood up, holding my shoe. "Please, can I go? It won't take that long."

"Well, ok. But call us if you decide to stay over."

I ran out the back door. It was very dark, for a sum-

mer night. I scrambled over the fence, looking forward through the trees. Anna lived only a few houses up the street. I cut through the backyards between hers and mine. It felt exciting to be hurrying through the dark, just out of reach of the light from the houses. Wet leaves slapped my face and arms as I pushed through a hedge. The Vaughns had an old wooden fence around their yard that was falling down in most places, covered in patches of greenish moss. There was a certain broken place in that fence that I usually squeezed through when I came over. She was right there on the other side, when I did.

"C'mon, c'mon. You gotta see this!" She whispered loudly. I could just barely see her face. Her teeth and eyes gleamed. "I couldn't really tell what it was at first, 'til I went back inside for a flashlight." I followed her over to the little metal tool shed that her Dad kept the rakes and stuff in. Next to it they kept their trashcans when it wasn't trash day. "I was taking out the trash and I saw it." She was whispering quietly now. She turned on her flashlight and shone it on the side of the shed. We stood there for a long time, just breathing and watching.

Finally I said, "Are they...mating?"

"I think so..."

Two slugs were mating on the side of the shed, stuck to the vertical surface with their own iridescent goo. What I figured must have been the female moved in a circular path, leaving a gooey trail of eggs behind her. We couldn't see any eggs, it just looked like fluid to us, but we knew they must be there. The male was following along after her, fertilizing the eggs with his own special goo. This is what logically seemed to be happening. I put these pieces to the puzzle together slowly, as I watched. My mind moved between trying to make literal sense of what I was seeing and sheer visual fascination.

We looked and looked. The crickets made waves of

chirping. There was a laugh track from the TV in Anna's house. But the slugs didn't make a sound. They moved in their imperfect and undulating dance. Their bodies glimmered in the flashlight beam with beads of tiny moisture, the way cold drinks do. Their movement was breathtaking. They circled, again and again, one after the other, sliding around faster with momentum on the bottom curve, arching slow and stretching at the top. Their goo shown, opalescent, swirling and pulling in time with their circular dancing. Their movement made the vertical surface seem to fall away so they seemed to be suspended, moving in midair. Or to be swirling and swirling forward down a glittering whirlpool. In and in and in. It was, as she had promised, amazing.

"Ahhh...." The sound I made was one of slight disgust and awe. *How gross*, I thought. *And how beautiful*. I felt like I'd just discovered a fantastical and wondrous secret. I felt like this secret was being whispered to me, in soft tones, terrifying and giddy. It was like the fact that there were more synapses in my brain than stars in the universe. Or that in the Arctic, a drop of water would freeze before it hit the ground. Like the Grand Canyon. Like an ice cream headache. Like the blood beating through my veins. All strange, amazing and beautiful things. The indescribable beauty in her nearness, her breathing, her delicate hand reaching out for, holding mine. Into this swirling eye, we looked with awe, and quiet, stunned reverence.

Standing there, holding her hand, I felt that feeling she gave me of being full of pink light. It was one of the last times I did. At the end of the summer, we both started seventh grade. We didn't have any classes together. Homework kept us busier than ever. Then she met this boy. I can't even remember his name now, but she started talking to him on the phone constantly. Before I knew it, a month had gone by without us even speaking. Then another passed. That next summer, she went away with her family to Europe. I had a



lot of new friends by then. When her family decided to buy a house in a different neighborhood, we spent a day together. But it wasn't the same. I didn't even know what to talk about with her. When we started high school, we'd smile at each other in the halls. Then, when we were sophomores, I'd see her smoking before school in the parking lot with a group of kids all dressed in black. She clomped around school in these big boots with this tall skinny guy, who shaved his head and always wore T-shirts with things written on them in black magic marker. She put purple streaks in her hair, and she didn't smile at me in the halls anymore. I don't think she ever smiled at anyone.

When I think back on it, it seems like it happened over night. One day, she was my whole world, and I looked to her for everything. The next day we didn't even look each other in the eye. As high School went on, I thought about her less and less. Things happened to me, too. I had my first real boyfriend. I got drunk. Once. I found a new best friend. I cut my hair short. I made the track team. By then she hardly even came to school. I got into college. I don't think she even applied. I forgot about her for a long time.

These days I think about her a lot. I have no idea where she is. I even lost the address her parents moved to. she's completely gone from my life. No physical trace of her remains. But I know how to find her. Whenever I visit my parents in the summertime, I walk through the old neighborhood at night. Especially if it's rained that day. The dampness surrounds me, filling my lungs and throat so I feel like I'm truly drinking the air. I walk through all the backyards on our street, mostly knowing my way, and not seeing it. In the dark, the shapes of bushes and tool sheds are dim and looming. I feel small again. I'm drawing nearer. The crickets are loud; their sound is so layered. I imagine them: thousands, in the grass, in the trees, thousands of them everywhere, chirping. The sound they make together is

what the stars would sound like, if they sang. The houses make pools of yellow light on the grass. I draw nearer. My shoes are wet, and the moisture seeps through, wetting my socks. Here is the fence now. It's falling down more than ever, but the place where I go through remains standing. Here I stop. I stand. I listen. I hear my own breathing.

I know she is there, on the other side, waiting. I know she'll always be there, waiting. Waiting to show me that wondrous sight, the flashlight trembling in her hand. I can almost hear her breathing, on the other side. I could almost call out.

She could almost answer.

## FULL BOXES

**Boxes** full of things, full of her. In my hands, I hold her soft towels, the jeans she never wears anymore, her collection of small porcelain pets wrapped in waves of denim. I've carried to the car, shirts, CD's and tapes—even those she won't admit she likes—her books, her videos, and her photo albums, poking out of the of boxes like bits of burnt rubble. It's slow going.

She stops to look at what she's seen so many times before. I stop to look at her staring down, rubbing her fingers into a snow globe of Memphis, letting page after page of a book slip under her fingers tips, tracing a line in the picture frame.

The walls are stark and barren; shell white. She looks every inch of her five feet and even a little less, her black shirt, dingy from work, and her dark blue jeans, white fringe showing at the torn parts.

Her shower curtain is in my hands, slick and loud as I fold fish after fish, they keep looking up at me, looking at her through the door frame, past the kitchen, into the living room, all of it shell white and empty.

We put box after box into the back. The hatch on her Rabbit won't close, and still we load it up. Box after box, like a puzzle. This one here, the short one there, so the long one can fit. Turn it. It'll fit, if you turn it. I kneel down, looping thin rope through the holes in the latch. Pull it tight and run it through again, a knot at the end. She's looking at herself, down the side of the car, into the side mirror where the street behind us stretches out in front of her. I stand up.

"You're going to have to cut it."

She looks into the mirror and says, "Long as it works." She lets the last word dangle in the air. She turns and looks at me, silent. I'm fixed on the dark swirls of her eyes. With the farthest of my fingers, I touch her back lightly. First time I touched her today. There were no hugs that lingered a little too long, no playful pats. It wasn't the day she asked me to go shopping with her and we wrestled in the Banana Republic. It was not that day. It was moving day.

She leaves my touch and I follow her inside her apartment, one last time. There's nothing left, room after room, vacant. Fields of hard wood floors, scuffed and used, stretch out before us, with a bright sky of belittling shell white. I stand in the kitchen, next to the oven, looking down the hall where she is. Down the hall the bedroom turned spoiled, and empty.

I walk into her living room. In the corner sits her desk lamp. I carry it to the bedroom. In the corner she stands, waiting, looking, at me. I hold up the desk lamp.

"Just this," I say.

"Okay then," she slips. She looks out the window and I hear her voice. "Time to go."

I follow her down the hall. We step outside, just past the door frame.

"Oh, I left the keys in the kitchen. Could you get them for me?"

She takes the lamp from me. I hurry and come back, locking the door behind me. She is standing beside her car, hand on the door, the lamp has vanished somewhere down into the Rabbit. I hand her the keys. For a breath, I have her. She looks at the sky. I feel myself speak, "He's a bastard. You know that."

She looks at my chest, "Yes, I know." I lean to her and she still seems small. She gets into her car. Her desk

lamp is in the front seat.

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## Micah Daingerfield

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### THE ANTE

From a token comes the song  
Of imagined lives,  
Lived by those with strength.  
A ring to tie and constant cries  
To sleights of incomparable wrongs.

Expectations met: a sorbet  
Cleans the palate, cleans the soul  
As the first born  
On quavering, unsteady legs of foal,  
All acceptance and no more play.

Desires last as long as thoughts  
Loaned in debt to doubt.  
I bought the bet to hold her hand,  
And try for us and social clout.  
Drawn from hell, I had a shot.

The wishing glance of the kitty  
Brings more coin to the table  
Than most suits of women.  
How true the fairies fable  
Of souls bound, lost in pity.

Promises written, earrings hid  
Never meet enameled lips.  
The little I know  
Stands against curved hips,  
Looking for an ace to bid.

The round of men calls constant strife.  
To take the deal is always hard  
Never hoping for an outside straight.  
If I am to live by the turn of a card,  
Let me never take another wife.

From a broken corner the song  
Of imagined lives,  
Lived by those with strength,  
A ring to me and constant strife  
To slights of incomparable wrongs.

Expectations meet a sorbet  
Cleans the palate, clears the soul  
As the first born  
On quivering, unsteady legs of soul,  
All acceptance and no more play.

Desires fast as long as thoughts  
Landed in debt to doubt,  
I bought the bet to hold her hand,  
And try for us and social clout,  
Drawn from hell, I had a shot.

The wishing glance of the kith  
Brings more coin to the table  
Than most suits of women.  
How true the fables fable  
Of souls bound, lost in pity.

Promises written, earnings hid  
Never meet cannibled lips.  
The hide I know  
Stands against curved hips,  
Looking for an ace to bid.

## THE NEW RAYMOND

I walk into the screened porch, knock on Walter's front door, and brace myself to smile. It's a small house, so he's quick to the door, and smiling up at me like I'm his grandson come to visit. I'm just delivering dinner. It's Walter's usual order: a dozen wings, spaghetti, two slices of garlic bread, and curly fries. I take the two white sacks out of the insulated bag before I get out of the car, like I always do when I deliver to Walter, hoping he won't talk as long if his food is getting cold. It hasn't worked once. Eating can wait, even if it means lukewarm wings. This is Walter's time to socialize.

Walter shakes my hand and pulls me inside. While I do my best to keep smiling, he's saying something about how he likes my new haircut. I can barely hear him through the smell. Breathing through your mouth is no use. The smell crams itself in, like your nose is a lifeboat. A smell like my grandmother's kitchen, but with something rotting in the corner. The only light in there is this little lamp that turns the dark orange but doesn't brighten the room much better than a child's night light. The lamp is sitting on a cloth-topped bureau with a bunch of little framed pictures. Walter stands next to the bureau, a steady rocking from one foot to the other, like a toddler.

He's telling me about how he had to take his mother to the hospital again last week. Instead of listening to find out what's wrong with her, I wonder how he gets to the hospital without a car. I don't ask. He talks plenty without me asking him things. Asking would just make him talk more. So I wonder. I know he doesn't have a car. The worn strip



of yard that I park on when I bring him food is always empty, and the house is too small for a garage. It doesn't look like the house of a man who can afford many taxi rides, so I guess that maybe the hospital has some sort of shuttle program, or he has insurance that covers transportation for doctor visits. However he got there, it wasn't a friend of his that gave him and his mother a ride. Walter doesn't have friends. That's why he talks to delivery drivers.

One of us, a guy named Ben who's working with me during this summer between high school and college, will become Walter's best friend. But this isn't Tuesdays with Morrie. This is more pathetic. Ben doesn't become Walter's best friend by spending afternoons with him, sipping coffee and sharing stories. And Ben sure as hell never drives Walter or his mother to the hospital. Ben will deliver food to Walter maybe a dozen times, and take him to see *Star Wars* at the end of the summer. That's it. After that, there's suddenly a new picture on the bureau. But not yet. At this point in the story, while I'm standing in Walter's dark orange front room in early July, aware that he's talking but not really listening, the pictures framed on Walter's bureau are old ones.

The pictures are mostly of people about my age, in faded orange portraits from when they graduated school or left for war. Ever since my first or second time in this room, I've wondered if one of the pictures, a belly-up shot of a man in army clothes, might be Walter himself. I didn't ask then and I don't ask now. If I ask, he might tell me a story, and I just want to be out of there. At the same time, I walk in there knowing he's going to talk, and if I ask a question, maybe the talk will be interesting. Maybe he would tell me a story that would pull him out of this pigeon hole I've crammed him into, the lonely old man with eyes like a child. But I just stand there nodding, letting him chatter on like an infomercial with nothing to sell. I think I'm just afraid of

showing interest, afraid he'll start requesting me when he orders or asking for my phone number.

Standing in Walter's living room, I tell myself that this time I won't even listen. This time I'll wait till he pays me and bolt out the door and not give him the chance to suck me in to one of his boring conversations about crappy Hollywood movies or what color his mother's phlegm is or who else is working today. But I can't do it. Something about the way he smiles at you like you're the high point of his week makes it impossible to be rude. That, and he hasn't paid yet. He never pays until this little timer goes off in his head after ten minutes and he realizes it's time to walk you out. That's one thing I'll say for him. Lonely and weird as he is, he knows he can't stand there jabbering forever.

That's why he orders food, I think. He has to jabber at somebody. He calls Santino's, the place I deliver for, just about every day. He almost always recognizes the voice that takes his order and says hello, and if he doesn't, he introduces himself. The first time I delivered to him, my manager stopped me on my way out the door. I had two orders besides Walter's and the manager said, "Make sure you go to Walter's last. Trust me. He's gonna talk your ear off. And he might introduce you to his mother."

He didn't introduce me to his mother on that first delivery, but he did talk. While I did my best to listen through the worst smell I've ever had to ignore, he introduced himself in a squeaky drawl. Walter Landry. I told him my first name. He said it was a pleasure to meet me, and asked if I was in school. I told him I was a religious studies major, and he got a really proud look on his face. He thought I was studying to become a preacher, and told me why he walks two miles to the Baptist church down the road even though there's a Methodist church across the street. Or maybe it was the other way around. I didn't really pay

attention.

When I told him that wasn't why I was in school, he smiled and said being a preacher isn't for everybody. He asked other questions, things like where do I live and what do I want to be, and I answered. Like I said before, I never ask him anything. But he always finds something to talk about. If he doesn't have any news about his mother or the movies he uses the ten minutes between inviting me in and paying me to show me how much he remembers, and to update his list. Walter's list. That's what me and the other drivers call the short biographies for each of us that Walter seems to keep in his head. He tells me my name and what car I drive and where I live and that I'm studying religion, but not to be a preacher, and did I know that Joey, the short blond driver who drives a Saturn and wants to be a biologist, lives in my neighborhood? Then Walter runs down the list of drivers like he's been away for a while and wants to catch up with his old buddies. When the little timer in his head dings, he pulls out his money and pays, "cause I'm sure you're busy and want to get on your way." Then he walks me out to my car, shakes my hand again, and reminds me to make sure I turn around in his yard instead of backing out, because it's a busy road. I pull out into the street and if I check my rearview mirror, he's always standing there, watching my car through the dust I stirred up in his yard until I'm out of sight, relieved that he still hasn't introduced me to his mother.

Something's different on this delivery, though. As my nose adjusts to the smell and my eyes get used to the dark, I tune back to what Walter is saying. He's still talking about his mother, how she's back at home with him and feeling better the last few days. I've been here as many times as most of the other drivers, but I'm the only one who hasn't met his mother. The other drivers have told me about her. They

told me she always sits at the kitchen table. I'd never seen the kitchen. In all the times I'd been here, I was never pushed past that first dark room. From there, I could only see the next room over, crowded with nothing but an old wooden TV and an empty recliner. The other drivers said Walter's mother was a little creepy and hard to understand, but very sweet and if you saw her you would have to hug her. I didn't know why I was the only one who didn't have to meet her. We used to joke that maybe I'm just too ugly and Walter's afraid I'll scare her. Standing in Walter's front room, hearing him say that she's back from the hospital and feeling better, I'm hoping that's the reason. Because the only other explanation we could come up with for him to keep me out of the kitchen was my hair. Walter has already told me he likes my new haircut. Said I look handsome. My hair had been long and dyed black with a year of roots and a dreadlock that spread into a mat in the back so that I could grab one strand and lift the whole thing like a rug. Earlier that week, I cut off the big nap and all the black hair and here I am hoping I'm still too ugly to meet her. The next words I hear?

"Speaking of mother, I don't believe I've ever introduced you, have I? Before you leave, why don't you come back and say hello? It'll make her day."

I walk behind him into that tiny TV room and turn left through a doorway leading into the kitchen. While my eyes adjust to the sudden brightness of the kitchen, he tells his mother my name and tells me she's his mother and she says something I can't understand because her voice is like Yoda's but deeper. Then her arms come up and I know I have to bend down and hug her. The stories are right. She's sitting hunch-backed in a straight-backed kitchen chair at the table and she looks like she won't be getting up for a while. She says some things I don't listen to. I just want to be out of there. Her smile is almost scary with her thin lips

and her tiny brown teeth. I look away as much as I can, looking for something to pay attention to that isn't this terrible smile. I focus on the paint hanging like rags from the ceiling. The bare light bulb makes it so bright yellow in there that I wonder if it's the years or the burning light that's making the paint peel away. One more hug for Walter's mother and then he takes me back to the front room, pays, and walks me out like usual.

Sometimes, drivers come back from Walter's and bitch about hugging his mother or just losing money while he keeps his list straight. I always tell myself I'll be bigger than that, that I'm only in that decaying house for ten minutes a week. Walter's the one who has to live there. What right do I have to complain? But I almost always say something about how much I hate going there. This time's no different. Ben's on his way out with a delivery, but he stops long enough to ask, "So, was it just your hair or are you still too ugly?" I answer with a groan and he slaps me on the shoulder and says, "Good for you, handsome," and he walks out the door laughing.

About Ben the delivery driver: He's never switched with me when it's my turn to go to Walter's. He doesn't like it there any more than I do, but he has the right to laugh about my grumbling. He's never complained about going there. That's not his style. He has a big, easy grin and teeth for grazing and his friends can't resist calling him "Horsey" or "Hoss" or "John Elway." He laughs at the names, too, so that every time somebody says it he just smiles bigger and looks more like a horse. Ben doesn't complain about anything. He didn't complain the night a customer called for a delivery on a dead night two minutes before we closed and it was his turn to deliver. The customer paid for the eighteen dollar order with a twenty and demanded Ben go to the gas station to break it because he didn't believe in tipping and Ben hadn't brought change. We were hanging out that

night after work, so I was waiting out front when Ben came back an hour after we should have been out of there, his face redder than the insulated bag he was holding. He wasn't angry. He was laughing. Ben hadn't only wiped his ass with the dollar bill. "I folded it in half," Ben said, "and I made damn sure I held it out so he had to grab the sweet spot."

I said it was a nasty thing to do right before someone eats. His answer: "It's not my fault if the man doesn't wash his hands after handling money." Ben doesn't bitch when he doesn't like a situation. He makes it amusing.

So one day, early August, Ben comes back from his delivery and says he's taking Walter to see *Star Wars* next Sunday night. He's not kidding. He says he just talked to him, and Walter said he can't wait. Then he asks me if I want to go. I tell him probably not. I run through reasons in my head. I'm not some boy scout looking for a good deed. I'm not Walter's friend. The man's taken up enough of my time as it is. Then again, it's just one night. It would mean more to him than drinking and playing guitar and watching *The Simpsons* will mean to me. I'll feel guilty for being selfish if I don't go, but I'd feel like a phony if I did. I don't want Walter liking me any more that he already does. I don't like being in his house, smelling death while he talks about movies or updates his list. What if Walter starts to think I'm his pal? Asks me for my phone number? As much as I didn't want to meet his mother, I couldn't say no when he asked me to. How would I say no to that? Ben can have his good deed. I'm not going.

The next Wednesday at work, he has his easy grin and tells me about Sunday.

"He got all dressed up for it. He knew we were just going up to the mall theatre, but he had his hair combed and gelled and a nice shirt all tucked in. He wore wingtips. Lisa said he was adorable. She wanted to pinch his cheeks."

"Lisa? You actually talked somebody else into

going?" I'm not sure why I'm surprised.

"Hell yeah, I did. We had a full car. Rasheed brought a joint to smoke on the way to his house. Walter was waiting in the front yard, looking like a little kid whose mom dressed him up for a party. Rasheed got out so Walter could sit up front and he spent the whole drive asking about how everybody at work was doing. He's always working on that list."

"Did he smell the smoke?" I asked.

"I doubt it. We kept the windows down. And he was wearing enough after-shave. I doubt he smelled anything else all night. But we got to the mall and convinced Walter to let me and Lisa pay for his ticket. We said it was only fair since it was usually him giving us money. And we were still high enough in the movie so it didn't matter that the acting sucked because the fight scenes were straight eye candy. And Walter smiled like it was Christmas morning the whole time."

It's Saturday, a week after Ben left for school. I've saved up enough money over the summer to stop working after this weekend. The other drivers are all out on deliveries. Walter's address is at the top of the delivery list. I have to go there one more time.

I knock on the front door and brace myself. Six quick steps and the door opens with Walter smiling up at me out of the dark. He shakes my hand and pulls me in. I hand him the two bags like I always do and he puts them down on the chair by the door. I look over at the bureau and there it is. In front of all those faded portraits is Ben, framed there wearing his big grin and a photographer's smock that looks like a tuxedo. It's his Senior yearbook photo. Walter is talking.

"Such a nice boy. He stopped by last week to drop off that picture and say goodbye. I sure do miss him. One

of the nicest people I've ever met. Did you know we went to the movies a couple weeks ago? It sure was a great time. You know, when Ben comes back on winter break, maybe we can go see another one. You should come, too. It's a great time."

I tell him maybe we can, when Ben comes back. I guess it wouldn't be so bad, getting some heads together, taking the man to a movie. It actually sounds like a good time. I'm thinking this, but I don't say the obvious thing. I don't say why wait for Ben to come back. I don't call up Lisa or Rasheed and try to set something up. I'm even almost afraid that Walter might suggest it. He doesn't. I don't tell him this is my last delivery, either. I just agree to tell Ben hello if I see him. I take the money for the food, and drive off with him waving to me through the dust. It might be wrong, but I can't help feeling relieved that I got out without hugging his mother.



Brian Mazzara

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## CATHETER THROUGH THE SYSTEM

Morgan walked by himself at the end of Onslow Beach, skipping his high school biology class. The beach was a small strip of dust, ten minutes from Mainside Camp Lejeune. The portion of the drift where he paced was the northern edge of what little earth was reserved for the liberty activities of dependant families and their Marine providers on the vast Marine Corps Base. Dunes and the barren beauty of coastal Carolina framed the beach, littered with shell cabanas that had green paint peeling from their tattered wood walls. During the summer months, the shore was plugged with the happy yelp of playing and holler and whistle of hot weather. A single gull banked and coughed a whining noise at the ocean as it flapped over his head.

He was not missing much in his biology class. Mr. Brown, his junior class biology teacher, was a large bald man who sang to his classes in a thick southern black dialect and always accused Morgan of having "something going on." Morgan had no idea what a "jive turkey" was, but he knew Mr. Brown was pretty vocal about him being one. They were studying the parts and functions of the human heart, which Morgan had decided he did not believe in, and had not for a long time.

The air stabbed with a coolness that slithered in through the V created by the half zippered opening of his blue hooded sweatshirt and chilled goose flesh into the cushion of his young skin. The wind smelled of salt and tainted him and his car with a dusting of natural glass.

Father Flemming had lent him his little black Honda Civic while he went with a Marine Expeditionary Unit on a float in the Mediterranean. Father Flemming was that kind of good looking, naïve, excited about faith, straight priest that all the girls in youth group would pat and pull their panties for at Mass on Sunday mornings. Mom and Dad were close with the young chaplain. The wooden cross hanging from the rear view mirror of his car dangled inside the windshield. The car was empty, and it sat warm, dusted and dark, sinking into the dunes.

Before him towered a sign, two stories and paint cracked white. The sign signified the boundary of Onslow Beach. Fun stopped at this point, at this end of the sand. The sign told a warning in angry red letters. **IMPACT AREA - UNEXPLODED MINES AND ARTILLARY ROUNDS - DO NOT ENTER.** Beyond the rise of dune to his left stood the Swiss cheese remains of an old watchtower, surrounded by a steel diamond quilted fence and accordian concertina.

Morgan lifted on his tiptoes and stretched his arms behind his back; time to run. He bolted his legs forward into the impact area, pumping his left and then his right and left again. Pounding his Samba covered feet into the beach, pounding past the point he could taste his guts on his tongue. He imagined his heart and followed the path of his life.

His life tumbled red through the fleshiness of his vena cava. Sand dusted up and out in ribbons away from his toes. His life trickled redness into the bladder of his right atrium to wait for what was to come, a seeping romp through the flap of his right AV valve south to the right ventricle where it sat for a second and then contracted up through the semi-lunar valve into the pulmonary artery. *Blow!* He thought. *Why not.*

There is a tear that swallows the heart and drowns it. Ten years earlier Morgan huddled in his Spiderman pajamas, playing dead on the living room floor of their New Jersey townhouse on Fort Monmouth, minutes south of Asbury Park. His world consisted of a couple of blocks of rowed houses trapped in a cage of martial fencing. Meshed metal, barbed wire, and the Garden State itself surrounded the small land locked island of men and marching music.

He felt the tickle of dirt crusted into the curls of the living room carpet. Holding his breath, he counted. He had reached ten and she had not noticed. Twenty.

"You're playing dead, Morgan. Playing dead. You're not really." His sister poked him in the ribs with the toe of her jelly shoe. Morgan squinted open an eye and could see up his sister's plaid jumper. Her panties were the deceptive nil-color of a hundred visits to the washing machine and had the same no-color flowers printed across her crotch.

"I see London, I see France, I see Caitlin's underpants," he breathed out as he rolled away on the carpet of the living room floor.

Caitlin placed her hands between her legs, pushing her skirt closer to her private parts.

"I'm telling Mommy." She cried as she walked over towards the sofa where he had rolled to laugh at her and she kicked him square in the testicles.

There was a brightness and he felt his lungs drop and mingle with the tangle and pull of his intestines that seemed to want to escape out of the hollow of his belly button. Doubling over, he clutched his knees to his chest and coughed. He toppled on his side, rocking a little with his eyes shut, clenched in the suffering and the gasp for lost oxygen. Opening one of his eyes, Morgan lifted his head in time to see his sister tearing around the corner into the hall, headed for the clatter of dishes and the banging wood of a cabinet against the wood of framework, the chorus of

Mommy cooking breakfast in the kitchen. He struggled to his feet and pursued, charging in his Spiderman pajamas, headlong into the kitchen.

"Mommy, Morgan looked up my dress!"

"Mommy, Caitlin kicked me in my nuts!"

Mommy turned from her cooking and looked down at the two of them. She rubbed her hands upon her swollen belly. She was eight months pregnant. All her beauty made Morgan warm. The warmth vanished as she smiled the smile. They both turned to leave.

"Morgan, to your room and put on your uniform for school, and no playing with your Legos. Caitlin, sit down in front of the TV and turn on the news for Mommy."

Morgan thumped his feet upstairs to the frenzied sound of TV snow, a click, another click, and then Willard Scott hammering out the weather and the birthdays in his robust and annoying tone. As Morgan rose above the top step, he unbuttoned the plastic snaps that connected the fade of his pajama top to the tear and holes of his pajama bottoms. He stomped into his room and stopped beside his bed with the Snoopy sheets smooth and tucked in, hospital corners like Father. He sat on the morning warmth that touched the paisley of his comforter.

Kicking his feet, he pulled off his bottoms and his toes scattered the Legos that sat on the floor of his room on top of his red plaid sleeping bag, like plastic barricades waiting for the approaching gallop of a sister or parental unit. He pulled his slacks on over his tighty-whities and buttoned his shirt over the youth of his cage. Clipping on his maroon plaid tie and sliding into his socks and penny loafers, he grabbed his book bag from the corner beside the door of the closet. Tumbling a run down the steps, he booked into the living room and sat down in silence with his sister Caitlin on the couch.

She had changed her shoes to the leather ones with

the shine that never seemed real stuck to them. If she had been wearing those brutes with their little metal tips when she had placed that pain in his balls, he shook his head at the thought. She looked up and stuck out her tongue.

His two youngest sisters, Pia and Beth were awake, sitting Indian style on the carpet, and staring back at him. Pia was dressed, wearing her uniform and had her lunchbox with Daisy Duke and the Jeep Daisy Duke drove stickered on it leaning against her leg. She was in kindergarten and she loved that Daisy Duke lunch box. It was old and the hinges were rusted, but she loved it.

Little Beth was still in her PJ's. She was not in school yet, at three years old. Her pajamas had the feet sewn into the pants. The bottoms of the pink footies of her PJ's were peeling off in pieces. Pia and Beth blinked at Morgan and stuck out their tongues.

Morgan sat alone, surrounded by his classmates.

"Our Father who art in Heaven," he fed the words to the church, memorized glorification and humility engrained from the innocence of life even before Kindergarten.

Third graders chimed together in his pew at First Friday Mass. His class at St. Leo the Great Elementary School went to Mass every first Friday of the month during the hour reserved for their recess. The older grade levels got out of math or history, but the third graders and their subordinate classmates got screwed out of recess. They missed out on raging war on top of wood, playing king of the hill atop the piled mountains of cedar mulch that remained warming in the sun, waiting to be placed around the unfinished beds that decorated the edges of the raised track. The track ran above the playground set upon a hill surrounded by a half mulched incline. The playground sat empty, the rust of the swing set burning in the sun, but cutting no child's hand, the paint peeling in the overpower and

glare of the sun.

Morgan tugged at his tie, scratching at a clotted syrup circle from breakfast that interrupted the hashed rhythm of the maroon plaid with sticky firmness. As Mass came to its close, old Father Sebastian and his crew of sixth grade altar boys processed, accompanied by the tinny breath and metal melody of organ music somber towards the front doors of the church. Father Sebastian peeled off from the procession and sneaked, with his hunched and aged shoulders turned impossibly horizontal, into the darkness of the confessional.

Morgan and his classmates rose from their pew and formed a line outside the door of the confessional, guided by the hand gestures of their teacher. Morgan waited his turn, and when his time arrived he wandered in silence into the cold dank of the tiny room.

"Oh my God I am heartily sorry for having offended you," Morgan prayed the monotone of his Act of Contrition and rambled after into his quick confession. "Bless me Father for I have sinned, it has been one month since my last confession."

He could hear Father Sebastian flutter and shuffle in the shadow of his little alcove, seeking no doubt to remain awake during the banality of each student's confession. There was a long pause.

"Father?"

"What are your sins, child?" Father Sebastian said softly.

"I lied to my mother, I hit my sisters, I had impure thoughts," Morgan had no real clue what impure thoughts were but it sounded like a good sin, just vague enough, just empty enough to fill up the hollow time of his confession. He never remembered his sins, and often made up some approximation of a possibility so as not to sit in silence with the priest on duty. He had on varying occasions, bore false

witness, had impure thoughts, forgot to keep holy the Sabbath, and once he even coveted his neighbor's wife.

"Say three Our Fathers and two Hail Marys," Father Sebastian absolved him of his sins and sent him with Latin out of the confessional, back to his pew and onto his knees to pray and beg God's kind forgiveness. The organ dribbled melody like white noise or nothing from very far away.

"Three Our Fathers, Hail Mary, Hail Mary," said Morgan with the swiftness of a getaway.

Making an almost imperceptibly vague appropriation of the sign of the cross, he pressed his shoulders against the back of his pew and looked around, waiting for the rest of his class to pretend along with old Father Sebastian. He had only just returned to picking at the syrup invader on his tie when his teacher tapped gently on his shoulder.

"Your mother is in the hospital," she whispered.

Morgan sat and had no thoughts.

She seemed a softness, tired and happy. She rested in the elbow of the curved hospital mattress, caged in hospital white linen, steel, and bed adjustment buttons. The room smelled like iodine and detergent, but Mommy smelled good. She smelled like she always did, the very odor of protection, the insistent air of loving. She breathed and seemed to push her tiredness back against the pillow of the bed with each wind and she sounded like sleeping.

"Come here guys, say hello to your new brother." She said and she lifted the baby up slightly in her arms as her eyes looked like wet pride. The children crowded about their mother and reached out to touch their brother's shrunken, wrinkled toes and fingers. Little Beth was only about face level with the mattress, so Caitlin bent and lifted her up. Hanging a rare smile on his face, Father stood back with his arms crossed over his uniformed chest.

Morgan watched the small thing move. The child

reached up and squinted and dropped his arms and squirmed and looked at nothing through the slits of his eyes and relaxed and stayed still and moved again. His fingers were small and his toes stuck out from under the blue blanket that hugged his frail body. His feet were an off blue, and they shivered in the cold hospital air. Morgan reached over, flanked by his sisters, and pulled the blanket over the smallness of the baby's feet.

"Mommy, why are his feet purple like that?" Morgan asked.

Mommy smiled. "It's okay, Morgan. All babies look like this. You did. You don't remember, but your sisters did too."

Pia looked amazed.

"Mommy, he looks wrinkled like a raisin. I never did," she said.

"You did," said Mommy, "and you cried more."

"Uh, no," she said.

"It's okay Pia, babies look funny to you right now but when you're older and you have your own they'll seem wonderful. This is your brother, Nicolas."

Nicolas, my brother's name is Nicolas, thought Morgan.

He looked at his little sisters and smiled. "I'm not the only one, anymore," he said, and his sisters laughed and Father patted him lightly on his head.

Morgan wandered into his parents' room, scratching the fingernails of his left hand against the mahogany of their canopy bed that never had a canopy. He rubbed his eyes with his right hand and yawned. He wandered over to the bassinet and looked inside. Nothing. There was nothing in there. He scratched his butt through the wear of his pajamas and headed back towards the door of his parents' room. His father stood blocking his path, pressed and sharp in his



Charlies, all khaki and green and precise, a salad bowl of ribbons above his left breast pocket.

"Morgan, stop. Your mother and I want to talk to you guys."

Caitlin pushed past Father into the room followed by Pia and Father stepped briefly aside to let Mommy pass carrying little Beth. Morgan climbed the glazed wooden stepstool and pulled himself up onto the mountain of the raised mattress. Caitlin followed and Father lifted Pia and sat her in the middle of the two older children

"Mommy, where is Nicolas?"

Mommy squeezed the sleepy Beth against her breast and turned and placed all of her grace into the cradle of her old sewing machine chair. The chair creaked under their combined weight. Father folded his arms and looked unmovable inside the doorway. He cleared his throat and looked at the children.

"Your brother Nicolas is not going to be here anymore. He died last night in the hospital. He wasn't in pain." Father's voice trailed off, and he shut his eyes briefly and looked angry. He opened them again and still looked angry.

Mommy began to cry. She held on tightly to Beth who looked up and around and squeezed her little fist against her closed eyelids. Mommy buried her face in Beth's small shoulder.

They traveled in Mommy's Volvo that morning to the hospital. Morgan could not think of what to say. He could not look at his sisters. He placed his gaze at the blurred movement of the world sliding by outside his window. Paint clung to the highway in a dot dash pattern inside the window frame. He glared at the faltering pattern of the lines in the center of the road. The Morse code would disappear from time to time as Father switched lanes and a solid line of white or yellow that moved up and down inside his vision would replace the dash and dots. They all piled

out of the Volvo at the hospital, Father helping Mommy out of the car.

The automatic doors of the hospital clunked open and they wandered inside the box of doctors and sick. They sat down on the cushions of the waiting room couches. Pia was on Father's knee and Caitlin sat next to Mommy with her hands in her lap. Beth sat next to Morgan and played with a My Little Pony doll on top of his leg. It took what seemed like hours to Morgan until a tall man in a white coat approached them in the waiting room. He was speaking to their parents and Morgan caught only bits and pieces. His vision seemed trapped in a painting on the waiting room wall of a sailboat churning near a buoy on a dark and heaving ocean, wrapped in a storm. The conversation drifted into the waves and the mast of the small cutter bobbed with a realization of the existence of the words if not in understanding of their entire meaning.

"Make arrangements."

When the man spoke, Morgan tried not to listen and pretended he was on the boat. He felt a wave crash against the hull.

"Your son."

"Interrupted aortic arch."

"It collapsed."

He held his breath and lifted his head above the hatch, glancing at the raging ocean around him.

"Chain reaction"

"Two massive holes in his heart."

Sea spray touched his cheeks and salted his lips.

"Heart straining."

"Put a catheter through the system."

"Artery, the veins."

"Stinosis, thinning."

He heard the snap and gazed up to see the boom splinter.

"Thinner than it was supposed to be."

"Leading into other organs."

"Thinner where it was supposed to be."

Morgan winced his eyes against the rain and other salt water.

"It was a miracle he survived as long as he did."

In the painting the sea slipped the fragile vessel in and out of each slapping wave and rolled on. The boat tipped and blinked out of sight beneath a white-capped wave. Morgan felt a tear, wet against his cheek. He wiped it away. His hand shook.

They arrived home and silently they wandered into the house. Morgan climbed the steps towards his room and slid inside the cocoon of his sleeping bag, he zipped it shut and he prayed. Saying his Our Father, his Act of Contrition, his Hail Mary, his Prayer to the Guardian Angel, he even recited the books of the Bible. He could only remember up to Psalms.

He slept. He dreamt his khaki dreams of drowning, felt scary math rise up in his sleep to drown him. He saw it as always, tan or khaki, or math, or something. Not able to wrap his brains about its meaning, it seemed to drown him again and again inside his sleep. And then within the dream Morgan breathed. He didn't remember dying but he felt he must have, that tan must have been his spirit shattered into a billion pieces that breathed out scattered, mingled with the khaki mathematics that drowned him.

Both the Mass and the wake seemed hurried to Morgan. He thought that perhaps the people didn't want to think about stuff that much just then, or maybe they were just too afraid to let themselves question the existence of fate as he had. He had sat through Mass and stared tepid eyed on the child-sized box that rested thick and silvery blue in front of the altar. The Mass mumbled on about him as did the eulogy

and the soft whimper and snuffle from family all around him. He had finished his crying. As the ceremony ended Morgan left with his family towards their cars.

They rumbled down the highway, a caravan of headlights and somber. Morgan sat crouched on the balls of his feet on the passenger's side floorboard behind the front seat of Nana and Poppop's plush sedan. He saw the tangles of the carpet and fingered the rubber edge of the sole of his penny loafer. His Aunt Lydia sat with him and his cousin Billy in the back. Aunt Lydia was a young lawyer in Washington D.C. and looked all professional and had hair straight and blond like straw. She was talking to Billy about a movie that had come out recently wherein a man gets his hand chomped off inside the maw of a hungry alligator. Billy and his parents lived way out in Seattle and they would not let Billy get a Nintendo because it had shooting games.

"I can't believe your parents let you see that," said Aunt Lydia, lifting a look towards the front seat, speaking of Billy's mom and dad who were riding in another car.

"I'm old enough," said Billy, "I've seen worse."

Then Morgan looked up to see the wrinkle of Nana's chin appear above the passenger seat. Morgan thought that she must have been looking at Aunt Lydia. He wondered if she had seen the movie. He wondered if she had seen worse.

"You'd like it Morgan, it's like Indiana Jones, just like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*." Billy attempted to recruit Morgan's support.

"I don't wanna see a movie where some guy gets his hand bit off." Morgan said just above a sigh.

Aunt Lydia smiled and reached over to touch Morgan's shoulder with the delicate tips of her fingers.

"Why don't you climb up on the seat with me and your cousin?" she said.

He shook his head, looking at the polyester stretch at his knee. He spoke to the pinstripes on his trousers. "I like

it down here.”

They arrived in formation rolling into the white and green of the federal cemetery. The headstones rose like tulips out of the manicured lawn. The people crowded together under the plastic wet tapping tent in a weird semi-circle around a line of folding chairs and the miniature casket. The rain beat lightly on the coated exterior of the tent and the sky looked like the headache sadness of a stormy story. Morgan thought of Legos and castle walls and the time Caitlin had fallen and sat on the castle he had spent all Christmas morning working on with his mother. The Legos had scattered in a cascade of yellow plastic away from Caitlin’s butt and his anger had been unstoppable. He had yelled and it sounded in his head like the intensity that Father made when he got really mad.

Morgan turned in his folding chair and touched the stocking on Caitlin’s knee with his fingertips. She looked away from the casket, pulling on the hem of her dress to cover her knee; she frowned a smile.

The box did not seem real as old Father Sebastian rattled on about plans and gods and such. And the music of the priestly manifesto felt like a foreign song on his ears, touching nothing but his hearing.

Morgan woke up slowly the next morning from a dream about playground combat with his classmates. He had shoved his best friend Aaron off of the pile of mulch and raised his arms victorious. The sun burned his head and warmed like living.

Morgan pulled his Snoopy sheets in a V, away from his legs and got up. His Legos reminded him of snow and he kicked a few towards his door with a fling of his big toe. There was something he needed to do, but he could not remember the rest of his dream that had told him today’s schedule. He heard Mom move like emergency in the

kitchen, and their home smelled like cooking.

There was no fire in the house, no sickness to be fought, only death and a memory. A single bell sounded and returned, sounded again and died.

Morgan walked into the kitchen where Mom hung up the phone and continued cooking Sunday morning breakfast. He padded along the tiled floor in his Spiderman pajamas and hugged his mother's thin waist, his arms squeezing hard about her apron. Her apron seemed too empty. She wiped her hands clean on her chest and knelt down to hold him. He forced himself to look her in the eyes.

"Either I am a bad person and God is punishing me, or there is no God. I am awake, Mom. This is not just a bad dream. I don't know anything else anymore."

"Mommy, Morgan looked up my skirt," said Caitlin.

"What are your sins, child?" asked Father Sebastian.

"Mommy, he looks wrinkled like a raisin," said Pia.

"Make arrangements," recommended the Doctor.

"I've seen worse," said Billy

"You got something goin' on there boy, I know it. You a jahve turkey," said Mr. Brown.

*Blow!* Morgan thought. *Blow goddamnit!* *Blow!* The sun beat warmth against his forehead inside the autumn cool as he lifted his run. His life rubbed north and a little sideways to his lungs to finagle oxygen and spit out carbon dioxide, dripping south through his pulmonary vein into the sag of his left atrium, yielding to gravity through his mitral valve south to his left ventricle, pausing for a split second only to contract in a rush towards his aorta and the rest of his thin body.

He ran. Driving his toes hard into the coast until he could feel his body scream quit, and yet there was no explosion of sand to consume him in fire and metal. He col-

lapsed, his back against a sleepy dune. His vision moved from breathing at the sky to heaving air at the ocean. The waves lapped against the shore as if the world was too big for dying.

That feeling of smallness and wonder that the sea paralyzes people with, entered his mood in a riot. *No suffering worth dying for, no death answer for real lifers like me*, he thought. There was that seagull again. There was that cool slither of fall wind inside his hood. He tapped his foot in the sand and smiled. *You're an idiot*. Morgan began to carefully walk the mile back to the car. He could see the faint ghost of the impact area sign and the dilapidated tower that stood next to it.

*Boom*, he thought as he stepped homeward.

"Boom."

SNAPSHOT

Bourbon Street, late afternoon.  
April and already hot.  
Smells of food, beer, sewage.  
Down the middle of the road  
the sluggish crowd, from windows fusion  
jazz fragments. Suddenly your lively  
brown eyes, your chestnut hair in waves  
past your cheeks playing around your  
bare pale shoulders. Yours is  
a young face caught between teen  
and woman, with painted lips softly smiling.  
The simple dress clasped between your smallish  
breasts, the nipples shining faintly through  
the bronze and brown synthetic weave of shimmering  
cloth that forms a gentle curve caressing  
your hips. Our eyes meet for a fraction of time  
and a flirting, mocking smile hovers over  
your face before I disappear, caught  
in the mass of beer drinking pedestrians,  
flowing through the smelly street,  
while you turn and swiftly climb  
the stairs to the "Caberet d'Or"  
of female impersonators.



## CIRCULAR STAMPEDE

I like big butts, so sue me. Standing at the edge of the midway, I saw some wide thighs. My mind filled with nasty thoughts. "This is it, Jelly."

"The carnival is it?" Jelly said. He offered me cotton candy.

"I'm in hog heaven, boy. Look at all the hot heifers. I just have to get a job here."

"I see what you mean. Lots of nice ones."

"That's what it's all about, Jelly."

"Cuz, instead of going through all the trouble of getting a job and having to work and stuff, why don't you just call Jessica? Man, she's been after you for months."

"You know I look for certain things in a woman. She just doesn't have the payload, know what I mean, Jellybean? Besides, Jessica has a bad attitude."

"So she's skinny. I'd give my right arm just to sniff her panties. And don't call me Jellybean."

"Whatever, man. Let's go find the office."

We made our way down the midway, carefully through the center so as not to be lured into spending four dollars to win a two-dollar stuffed pig. What do I need a stuffed pig for anyway? The office trailer came into view and I picked up the pace. Jelly stopped at a refreshment shack again.

"Dude, I'll wait here. I see a few hot dogs with my name on them."

"Cool," I said and went to meet my carnival destiny.

The smoke inside the trailer made my eyes water. A toilet flushed and a massive man fought his way out a door

and into the hall.

"Hello, sir. Might I inquire if you have a position open?"

I used my best responsible voice.

"Yes," he said.

"I'm sorry, yes you have a position?"

"Either one, don't matter."

"I'd like to apply for anything you have available."

"Just had a guy quit, something about his wife being sick, I don't know. Why you wanna work for me?"

"Well sir, I have a knack for entertaining a crowd. I'm very likable and I'll work extremely hard."

"Son, cut the crap. You boys are always just looking for a way to get off easy or get some." His hand traced his big belly.

"Well, that and I don't have a job right now," I said as I stared at my worn sneakers.

"Money and cooter. Hell, that's why I started working the circuit. Here's the deal. Thirty bucks a day. Got a license?"

"A what?"

"A driver's license, son."

"You bet."

"Then you can learn how to set up and tear down," he said.

"Sounds good." I had already started figuring my paycheck for the next six days.

"Fill this out and come back tomorrow before twelve."

"You got it, and thanks."

"Say, you don't have a record or anything we should know about, do you?"

"No, nothing like that."

I smiled through the haze.

I made my way through the crowd to the refresh-

ment shack. Jelly wasn't there. A large lady in a short skirt had taken his place. The sweat rolled down her neck and into her cleavage to be lost forever. She smiled at me as she picked up her funnel cake and lumbered away. I smiled.

"Dude, what's the deal? It's hot out here and I'm still hungry. This food costs too much. You get the job?" The sweat on Jelly's head had matted his thin hair onto his forehead, making him look like a painted mannequin.

"Yeah, I got it."

"Good, can we go now?"

"Sun kicking your ass? Let's go into the Maze of Mirrors."

We bought our tickets from a dying woman with nickel-sized bags under her eyes.

"I'm about to start working with you all," I said.

"Good for you, sport." She coughed a cancerous cough. "Don't ride the Hammer. It won't last much longer."

The Maze of Mirrors was as stupid as it sounded. Mirror after mirror we were small and big, short and tall, fat and skinny. Jelly liked the mirror that made him look skinny. It made me look like a blade of grass.

Two immense girls entered the maze at the other side and their reflections filled the room. I gazed from mirror to mirror watching them get shorter, then taller, then fatter. I liked that one.

"Hey Jelly, see them two girls? Which one do you want?"

"As usual, I want the one that you don't want," Jelly said, standing sideways with his hand on his stomach, looking at his image.

I made hilarious faces into the mirror just as the two women rounded the corner. One giggled. The one that just stared was definitely mine.

Burgers, dope, laughing, more dope. I buried my face in the folds of skin and kissed and licked. The thighs

were like ear muffs and I couldn't hear a thing. I sank into pillow-like softness and stayed. I dreamt of marshmallows.

The carnival was just about to open as Kenny showed me the controls of the Hammer.

"First position is stop. Second is start. Third is full speed. It's about the easiest thing we got here. Anybody pukes, you clean it. Hose is over there. Disconnect the juice first."

I looked past thick power cables and sputtering generators and spotted it by the Tilt-a-Whirl. I would be needing that hose a lot.

People started filing in and Kenny showed me the ropes. The later it got, the more people came. Kids were running around screeching and laughing, followed by their half dead parents with stuffed animals and soda cups overflowing their arms. A barker was convincing people how easy it was to sink a Ping-Pong ball into one of the many cups on the turning wheel. Another wanted more contestants for the Clown Water Balloon race.

"Land a dime in any one and you're a winner."

It got hot, but the friendly face of the Funhouse clamored on and sang with invitation.

"Sir, you look like you have a good eye. Shoot out the star and win a prize."

The carousel music played over and over as a dozen different horses frozen in mid-gallop continued their circular stampede.

"Winner every time, just one dollar to play."

The bell sounded and a girl squealed as she filled the clown's mouth with water and watched the balloon grow. The bell sounded again.

"Winner, number eight. Number eight is a winner."

As for the Hammer, I had a steady stream of kids wanting to get dizzy and hang upside down. I was more than happy to grant their wish. One kid actually fell over after

leaving the car. His mother helped him up, shooting me a mean glance as he leaned on her for support. I just laughed. Moms. I had one too.

A number of girls came over to watch me run the ride and I played for them. I rocked my head back and forth to a Judas Priest tune. My long green windbreaker, wide eyes and air guitar caused one family to walk the other way, but the girls laughed and wanted to ride again and again. I was Thor, the Hammer God. I had mighty powers and sincere charm. Man, that thing could spin. They all wanted me.

Lunch break came and Jelly met me at the refreshment shack.

“Dude, you looked crazy out there.”

“Jelly, I have found my calling. I got twelve phone numbers, but only kept four. I can pick and choose. It’s fucking awesome.”

“Cool.”

“So, how did it go last night?”

“I don’t know what happened, man. We were in the back seat and we were kissing and she went down on me. Then it was over and she got out of the car and left. I don’t know her phone number, or where she lives, or even her last name.”

“No problem, Jelly. I got a million of them lined up at the Hammer. Come over and take some off my hands.”

“Thanks dude, but I think I’ll just go home. I’m getting burnt out here anyway.”

“You sure man?”

“Yeah. I’ll stop by later,” he said with his face a darker shade of red than normal.

Back at the Hammer, I found skinny Jessica waiting for me.

“I heard you got a job here. Just came to check it out,” she said and smiled a skinny smile.

“It’s a sweet gig.”

"How about getting together later and celebrating? My treat." She wanted me bad.

"Thanks for the offer, but I have plans. Maybe some other time."

"You can count on that." She walked away.

I just didn't get it. What did guys see in skinny women? No cushion. Small thighs. And they're only with you until something better comes along. Jelly and a very nice looking woman walked up to the Hammer.

"Hey Jellybean, who's this?" I said.

"Hey Cuz. This is Beth. Beth, this is Rick, my cousin."

"Nice to meet you," she said.

Perfect teeth and a cute dimple. Her voice was sweet, as sweet as I imagined the rest of her being.

"Nice to meet you too," I said, careful not to let Jelly catch on to my amazement with this wonderful woman.

"We're going out to dinner, but I just wanted you two guys to meet. Later."

The next morning Jelly came over to my filthy, one-room apartment early and woke me up. His enormous bulk shook with excitement as he talked about Beth.

"Dude, Beth's fine, ain't she? We had dinner and talked for hours about everything. I told her stuff I've never told anyone. We didn't do it and that was okay. It just felt good being with her."

"Hey man, that's great. She was definitely fine, and seemed nice."

"We're meeting at the carnival later. I'll bring her by the Hammer."

"Cool," I said. "Listen, let me get back to what's her name and I'll see you later, okay?"

"Yeah. Later."

Jelly skipped out my front door and it made me smile. I was happy to go through life one gigantic piece at a

"Hey Cuz," was all he said.

"Where's the squeeze, Jelly?"

"She called me earlier and said she was running late. Should be here any time."

"Cool, listen, why don't you take a ride while you wait? I'll bump you up to the front of the line."

"Naw. I don't want to miss her," he said looking around.

"C'mon now, you said she's running late. Soar with the eagles in the Hammer. It's good for the soul. I'll play some Iron Maiden." They had all the copied cassettes you could name.

"Flight of Icarus?"

"You got it buddy. Just climb right in there and prepare for the ride of your life."

"Yeah, all right, but a short one, okay?"

"Sure thing, Jelly. Sure thing."

I started off slow, just to lull Jelly into a false sense of security. Then I turned it on. I jerked the stick down. Then I jerked it back up. I jerked that stick up and down with all my might. I heard a metallic screech and the pop, pop, pop. The Hammer came to a sudden halt. It won't last much longer, I thought.

People on the ground screamed and backed away. Someone in the lower car yelled to get them out. I ran over and unlatched the door. It wasn't Jelly. Jelly was stuck in mid-air. I could hear him yelling my name. I yelled back at him to hang tight. Kenny showed up and immediately calmed the crowd. It's all okay, he told them. He screamed to Jelly that we would have him down in minutes. He had a soothing effect and the crowd seemed satisfied. A guy in coveralls came over and stuck his head inside the machinery. At least he looked like he knew what he was doing.

Twenty minutes later Kenny and the coverall guy talked and then coveralls walked away. Kenny told me it was

going to be about another ten. I wondered what Jelly was thinking up there, all alone in the air.

"You running this thing today?" Beth said.

"Oh, hey. Yeah, I'm Thor, the Hammer God." I said.

"Well, it's good that it broke. It gives you and me a chance to talk."

She wanted me.

"Look, I'm not really that interested in your cousin. He's nice and all, but I came here to tell him I didn't want to see him anymore," she said.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Jelly's a hell of a guy."

"Well, I think he'll be okay. In the meantime, why don't you give me a call?" She pulled a pen and pad from her purse and wrote down her number, then stepped closer to hand it to me.

"You smell delicious. What is that?" I said.

"You like it? You should smell it up close."

She came even closer and lifted her hair. I leaned in and smelled a most amazing aroma.

"Listen, I don't think it's a good idea for me to call you," I said. "Jelly and I are cousins and friends. Maybe sometime, but not right away."

"Oh, well okay. Just don't make me wait too long," she said, and she turned and walked away.

I stood for a second looking at her phone number. Maybe I should run after her and tell her that I wanted to take her places she'd never been before and do things to her no one has ever done. Instead, I crumbled up the phone number and threw it on the ground. Kenny came over with a frown on his face and handed me an envelope with a couple of twenties in it.

"Look. You can't go fucking around with these machines like that. You could've hurt someone real bad. I'm sorry man, but I gotta let you go."

"What?"



"You're fired," he said. There was no emotion in his voice.

"Oh come on, man. I didn't do it on purpose. It just happened."

"I saw you fucking with the stick like it was a shift in a Mustang. You were *trying* to break it!"

Kenny was mad at me and that made me mad. I didn't want to lose this job, but I didn't want to take anymore of his shit.

"I'll be God damned! You fat fucking son of a bitch!" I said. "You put me out here with fucked up equipment and then blame me? You knew it was gonna break. You told me it was gonna break. I'm not taking the fall for this."

"What the hell are you talking about? You know what, just leave." Kenny walked back over to the Hammer.

The Hammer made a sputtering noise and finally resumed motion. Kenny was standing at the controls and glided Jelly to a smooth landing. He got out of the car and came right over to me.

"Jelly, man, I'm sorry. I didn't know that would..."

Jelly pushed me backwards as he walked up. The force knocked me to the dusty ground.

"You dick," he said. "You did that on purpose. You couldn't let me have just one could you? You had to take her from me."

"Jelly, cool it, man. She just started to come on to me. It wasn't my fault."

"That's bullshit, man. You ain't worth shit." Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

"Jelly, man. It wasn't like that."

"Fuck you, man!"

Then Jelly just walked away. I yelled after him, but he wouldn't stop or turn around. He just kept walking. He just kept walking.

Sitting on the ground with the dust and the sawdust

and the people walking around me, I didn't want to get up. Then I remembered Beth. I got on my hands and knees and looked for her crumpled up phone number. The skinny couple with the giant panda asked if I needed any help.

I cleared dust from my throat. "Fuck off," I said.

"Jeez. Just another freak at the carnival," said the skinny woman, and they left. I found Beth's number next to a half-eaten piece of pizza. It had been stepped on but was still readable.

On my way home I stopped by a phone booth. I called Beth's number and no one answered. I dialed again and let it ring. Then I dialed her again.

## DRAGGING CHERRIES

She looks out the window and watches two men fight for a cab. They look the same in their tan overcoats and wing-tipped shoes. She watches their anger rise, the spittle forming on one man's mouth. She watches the traffic, the headlights from cars almost blinding her through the glass, the brake lights from a taxi across the street at an expensive hotel. They flare when the cabby steps on the pedal, then go dark as he drives off leaving a milky red to the gray evening. She thinks about calling Carl and then has doubts. It will irritate him; her scolding him like a small child that couldn't meet her on time. She looks at her watch, it seems as if the minute hand is moving backwards.

She sits in the dimly lit restaurant, taking a drag on her cigarette then sets it down in the ashtray. When she turns back to the window, she catches her reflection in the glass. She is continually surprised at the woman staring back at her, expecting to see the fourteen-year-old girl with half-pint braids, buckteeth and glasses. Everything physical she hadn't liked she'd fixed. Braces and contact lenses. Expensive haircuts and the warmth from the tanning bed lights.

She looks at her watch again. It is still early enough in his lateness that she doesn't allow herself to be angry with him for keeping her waiting.

She takes another drag of her cigarette; she likes the way it feels between her fingers. She likes the way the smoke dissipates after blowing it out, never existing. She remembers watching her father blow these amazing smoke rings with his cigars when she was a child. When she was

six, she thought.

"Do you need anything while you're waiting ma'am?" the waiter asks.

She doesn't turn around to look at him; she watches his reflection behind her. The pucker of his lips, the arch of one brow.

"Not a very nice evening is it?" she asks.

"No ma'am. Is there anything I can get you while you wait for your party to join you?"

"No. I think I'm okay." She turns in her chair to look at him. "Yes. I think I'm all right."

"Very good ma'am."

"Do you think..." she says, but he's gone.

She swirls her drink listening to the ice cubes clink against each other. She tugs on the cherry string to keep it from falling to the bottom of her drink. She wants to eat it after she's finished. She thinks about a man she dated that could tie the cherry stem in a knot with his tongue.

She looks at the other people in the restaurant, wondering what they are talking about. She wiggles in her chair, trying to catch snatches of conversations. She watches a couple across the room, lost in the tall red vinyl cushions. At another table a man brushes his lover's knuckles with his thumb. They sip martinis from those tall glasses. She likes the sophisticated nature of martini glasses but has no stomach for straight alcohol.

The waiter passes by and she swipes the air for his attention.

"Could you bring me two olives on a toothpick?"

"Ma'am?"

"Two olives on a toothpick. Could you bring me two olives on a toothpick from the bar? You know, like the ones they put in martinis."

"Certainly ma'am."

She can already taste them. She remembers that as

a child her mother would bring her a jar of green olives from the grocery store every other Saturday. She would disappear to the corner of her father's study where the carpet didn't meet the wall. She remembered the cold of the hardwood floor through her panties. Only there would she open the jar of olives, listening to the pop from the sealed lid. She loved to eat them in the corner. Sometimes she would put them up to her lips, the juice slipping down her chin. And suck. She would suck out the red pimento, sometimes too hard, and it would sink down her throat whole. But other times she savored the taste of the red center and chewed the olive fast to get to the next.

The waiter drops off the olives on a bar napkin, juice soaking the thin paper.

She looks above the bar at the clock. It seems out of place in the upscale modern restaurant with its black tablecloths and funny silverware. The cuckoo clock rests above the shelves of colored liquid. She remembers her parents having a cuckoo clock they had brought back from Germany. It's in the old picture of her mother she carries in her wallet. Her mother is swollen from pregnancy, the long pigtails hanging on either side of her face, the hair so straight it looks like she ironed it. Her mother stood in front of the cuckoo clock when the picture was taken.

She looks down at her fork and then fingers the spoon. The bar clock chimes and the cuckoo bird slides out seven times before the door shuts behind him, imprisoning him for another hour. She sips her drink, trying to look like she isn't waiting. Trying to look comfortable sitting alone. Pretending she doesn't mind the tables around her engaged in conversation. She takes a drag on the cigarette that has burned itself to the filter and stubs it in the ashtray.

She sees him come through the restaurant door. It isn't the man she's expecting. It's another man; one she

would rather forget she had met, ever. She thinks if she looks down he won't notice her. He will go to the bar and order a drink and not notice that she is sitting here. Alone. Maybe he won't even recognize her. She turns to look out the window. She fingers the shortened curls, colored copper instead of boring brown. She touches her cheekbones; she is thinner now and had her nose done a few years back. Just a few changes, maybe not enough. She looks down at her napkin, hoping he will leave. She decides that this is just a convenient meeting spot for him and his guest. He will spot his co-worker or the leggy blond and they will disappear outside into the drizzle. Maybe the person he is supposed to meet isn't coming; he will give up quickly and leave. She stares at the napkin, her silverware, her cuticles, her place setting as if they are the most interesting things in world. She follows the pulp fibers through the napkin tracing the bottom of it with her nail-bitten finger.

"I thought that was you."

She looks up to find him standing at her table.

"You mind if I join you?" he says, reaching for the opposite chair.

"Actually I'm meeting someone," she says.

"So, how have you been?" he asks.

She looks at him. The last time she saw him he had been trying to pull her Halloween costume over her head at a college rugby party. There hadn't been much to the toga. She had stripped the sheet from her bed. Last minute party, last minute costume. A rope was tied in a knot around her waist.

"I've been good. You?" she says.

"Well, I can't complain. I took a couple years off after undergrad. Tried to figure out what I wanted to do. You know, find myself. Then I decided what the hell I'll be a lawyer; my dad said he'd pay for it. I just finished and he gave me a job in his firm. The tough part's going to be

passing the bar. Any bar."

He winks at her.

"That's great," she says.

He had fumbled with the rope around her waist, his breath smelling like garlic bread. She laughed because her roommate had tied the rope, saying the knot acted as a deterrent. He cursed at her under his breath and she snorted through her nose when she laughed, drunk from the punch in the garbage cans. He asked her when she was going to help him and she said she wasn't. He kissed her then, hard across the lips, in front of everyone, pushing his tongue and too much spit into her mouth. Then his hand on her thigh pulling the fabric up from the bottom, not bothering with the unfaltering rope. She pushed him away then, saying no, or she thought she had said no.

"Where are you working?" he asks.

Had she said no? Because then he had pushed her back onto a bed that smelled like urine and he was fumbling with her panties. The fluorescent lights were on under the desk across the room. You know you looked beautiful tonight, he said. I don't want to do this, she said, please get off me. He laughed and got his hand in between her thighs. It was years ago, but it didn't seem that way at the restaurant.

"I'm working for the university in admissions," she says.

"I see you still drink those amaretto things," he says.

She had felt him jab at her legs. Open your legs wider, he said. No, please get off me, she said. I don't want to do this. What are you saving it for? he said. She felt him try to push it inside her and it felt like he was tearing her in half. No please get off me. It hurts. It hurts, she had said. He kept pushing and she thought that when he was finished she was going to find that he had split her down there. She thought that there would be blood. She

had heard there was blood the first time.

"Amaretto sours. Yes. It depends on what kind of drink I'm in the mood for," she says. She looks at her watch.

He had kept pushing, and she wasn't sure if he was ever going to get off her. She wasn't sure he was even in her. But he kept pushing at her. Please stop, it hurts, she had said. Then he stopped.

"I'm supposed to be meeting someone here too," he says. He looks around and then back at her.

"I'm sure you are," she says.

She remembered being surprised that he had stopped. Are you finished? she asked. You told me to get off, he said. He left the room and she looked down between her legs to see that there was nothing different.

"Maybe if your date stands you up and my date doesn't show we should spend the evening together," he says.

She doesn't know what to say. She looks at his tie, his thick cuff-linked wrist and feels dizzy with anger or fear, undone. She wants him to leave. She knows her face has been flushed from the minute he confronted her and she doesn't want him to mistake her pink cheeks for desire.

"I'm sure my husband is coming any second," she says.

I see you, she wants to say. She says it in her head, but the words don't reach her lips.

"I'm sure my date is coming too," he says. "But it would be so much nicer to have company until they get here, instead of being alone. We haven't seen each other in so long. You don't really want to sit here alone do you?"

I see you, she yells inside her head. I see you. I see you. I know. All these words in her head. If she yelled them aloud, would he understand? Does he understand? He pulls out a chair and sits down at her table.



"So when did you get married?" he asks.

I know, she thinks.

"I've been married for three years now," she says.

"Where did you meet?"

I know, she thinks.

"A mutual friend introduced us at a party," she says.

"What kind of party?" he asks.

She sits sipping her drink, pulling another cigarette from the white box, lighting it and inhaling, enjoying the familiarity of the motion, as her nerves settle.

"I don't remember," she says.

"Oh come on, you women remember everything.

You know how you met your husband," he says.

I see you, she thinks.

"Actually it was a party for a political candidate. I was working on her campaign," she says. Get up and leave, she thinks. Go. Leave.

She looks at her watch. She takes a drag on her cigarette. If she were brave enough she'd blow the smoke in his face, throw her drink at him, her cigarette. If she were brave enough she'd tell him to leave.

"I didn't know that you were so into politics?" he says.

"I wouldn't expect you to," she says.

She looks up and sees her husband heading toward the table.

"My husband's here now. I guess you'll be going," she says.

"Hi sweetie, sorry I'm late," he says, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

"No problem," she says. He looks at the man sitting with his wife.

"I'm Carl," he says, extending his hand.

"Aaron. Old friend from college," he says.

Both men look at her as Carl takes his seat.

I know, she thinks.

Aaron gets up from the table. She looks down at her lap.

"The best part of the amaretto sour is the cherry," Aaron says. "Though it always seems to float to the bottom."

"I see you," she says.

"What did you say? Didn't hear you?" Aaron says.

"I see you," she says.

"Well," he says. "Well, see you."

"No, I see you," she says.

Aaron leaves the table.

"Good friend of yours?" Carl asks.

"No," she says.

Jamie Fueglin

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## I HOPE THIS LETTER REACHES YOU

I think of you as I ride the bus from the hospital in the middle of the sprawling city, where I will wait in line for three hours for pills, sitting and then standing with men who talk to loved ones long gone and women who are convinced it is still 1948.

I am always careful in choosing a seat in that waiting room, as drool collects in the dips and grooves of the powder-blue linoleum seats. Occasionally, a young nurse with a bottle of green disinfectant and a rag comes in to wipe the seats down. The smell lingers in my nostrils all day.

The man seated next to me may proclaim, "I think my heart's exploding, I think my heart's exploding." I will turn to see he is not looking at me; his breath may smell faintly of milk. The woman seated perhaps on the other side of me may ask if I would like to share this dance. I would gracefully decline. I will walk to the glass-encased desk in the midst of all this and ask the woman how much longer I must wait before I am allowed to stand in line.

I am careful in selecting a bus seat. I tend to have an enjoyable ride when I pick the best vantagepoint for watching the pattern of traffic maneuver around crowds of people. I make sure to place my black backpack on my lap, so that people know the seat next to me is free. It is rare that anyone not my color sits next to me. When someone does, he is most often male. He sits with his back to me, facing the aisle and the profiles of others, facing any direction other than mine.

A young woman gets on the bus. I smile at her as

she sits down next to me. She rifles through a satchel of schoolbooks and papers and pulls her test results dated May 29th. I see the top of her results. Name: Jennifer Marty. She has very pink ears, the tissue of the outer cusp thin with tiny blue veins. Very pink, like shells, and I think of you.

I ask her if she knows the cross street stop for the library. She looks at me. She says, "I do not know," and turns away. Her lids are heavy, but her eyes are alive. I want to see Jennifer Marty's eyes again. As we pass the Historical Library, I ask, "Not the Historical Library, but the City Library, the Public Library?"

"Oh," she says, as her eyes dart from the top of my head to my chin, from cheek to cheek, locking with my own eyes, but only for that second. I am mesmerized by her low eyes, the saddest brown eyes I've ever seen. "No. I don't know," she says, "I haven't lived in this city for too long, don't know my way around yet."

"Riding busses is great for that," I say, "even though I don't know all the cross streets. Almost all of them are the same."

"Oh," she says.

"Yeah, you don't have to watch the street, and you can look at all of the shops. See that one there?" I point to the pink "fresh" and yellow "fish" neon signs, between a manicurist's salon and a pawnbroker's office. "If you like fish, I hear they make a mean fish sandwich, although I never been there because I don't like fish so much."

"Oh," she says, shuffling her satchel together, pulling the cord tightly. She hugs the bag to her chest.

"Haddock, occasionally, on special days. And see that place? If you ever get a car and need work done, they're fair and professional, from what I understand. I have two cars that don't work. But just because I'm kind of broke, I can't get them fixed, is why I ride the bus."

"Oh," she says.

Jennifer gets off at the 10th street stop, this cross street unlike all the others. The one I can't forget. Where you did not watch the street. Where I waited with the crowd, hoping for you to get up. Where the façade of the abandoned glassworks shop still gapes back at me.

The bus loops the corner, moving toward the hospital where the doctors did nothing for you.

I spy the laundromat on the corner of Lim and Chen. I haven't been inside for sixteen months. I get off the bus, peer around the corner to that 10th street stop. I go inside.

I take a seat on the wooden bench where the glossy green paint is most intact. A woman somewhere in the rear of the laundromat claps her hands to the music that warbles from her transistor AM radio. She sings in unison with the commercial for a miracle-musical coming soon to the Chosin Theatre called *Moving Low on the Fast Side*. She carts her wet clothes methodically to the drier next to where I'm sitting. A homeless man in a greasy down vest with a patchy black beard comes into the laundromat. He stands behind the woman, silent, staring at the back of her head.

She turns and shouts, "Don't sneak up on me like that! Scare the Jesus out of me, Chester!" She pats his chest and asks, "What are you doing on this end of town?" He mumbles something I can't hear, so I lean a little closer.

She eyes me. They are large and glassy, two agate marbles, one off-center, directed more toward the wall just above and behind than actually at me.

She frowns at Chester and says, "Lordy, Chester, you and that poison!"

He mumbles again.

She says, "It's a damn shame the thing you want most is the last thing you get, and what you get is the last

thing you need!"

I think of you.

She takes Chester's filthy hand and leads him to her radio, saying, "Come sit down with me and confess yourself."

The radio fades. I hear the low grumble of Chester. She asks, "Do you confess?"

He mumbles.

She yells, "Do you confess?"

He grumbles.

"Do you confess?"

I think of you.

I answer, "Hell yes, I confess!"

But what I would confess you would not believe.

It was snowing when I was last in this laundromat sixteen months ago. I was eating a bag of pretzels. I remember the date, February 29th. I met a woman, fragile as a seahorse, who wore a peach pantsuit with wadded newspapers beneath her topcoat. Her name was Ginger. We had nothing else to do than to sit in this laundromat watching the snow. She told me she was looking for a man. His name was Steven.

She said, "He was a movie star and he was the most beautiful man who ever sat on a motorcycle. He rode off to San Francisco during the Summer of Love and I ain't seen him since."

I told her we were a long way from San Francisco. She looked down and sighed. "I know that. But on the other hand, far away is just down the street and around the corner."

"Hell," I said, "you're really close then."

She readjusted her babushka with her gnarled fist and wiped her nose. She said, "I doubt it, honey, I doubt it. But I hope I find him anyway." I gave her a pretzel.

The super came in with the smell of disinfectant

and closed down the machines.

I helped her to the bus and paid her fare. We rode around the city. The sky began to glow from the light refracting through the flurry of snowflakes outside. It's a wonder the driver was not blinded by the snow, did not skid on the slick street. The closer we got to the heart of the city, the more alive the night seemed.

"I believe he's dead, you know," she said. "Steven. I believe he's dead."

I said nothing.

"I've been having dreams about him. I missed that one opportunity to ride with him."

I watched my breath spread across the window, traced the outline of an angel in the condensation. I thought about you.

Ginger drifted off in a series of heavy sighs, leaning her tired head on my shoulder.

I get off the bus at 4:15 a.m. at the hospital. I wait for the doors to open so I can stand in line and sit with men who talk to loved ones long gone and women who are convinced it is still 1948. I hope this letter reaches you. I am learning things every day and getting better, getting better.

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MOVE TO CENTER  
→

