

NOTHING YOU CAN KNOW THAT ISN'T KNOWN.  
NOTHING YOU CAN SEE THAT ISN'T SHOWN. NOWHERE  
YOU CAN BE THAT ISN'T WHERE YOU'RE MEANT TO BE. IT'S EASY.

# Millennium



the Hierophant/Teacher  
5

# Millennium

Spring 2003

VCU

---

Virginia Commonwealth University

English Department  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia

JGUCK



*Executive Editors*

Albert Baker  
Geoffrey Cohrs

*Fiction Editor*

Warran L. Dawson

*Poetry Editor*

Jonathon Rice

*Marketing*

Sean Agan

Assistant Editors

Joshua Cruciotti  
Jodi Deal  
Suzanne Girdner  
Elizabeth Groninger  
Paige Harbert  
Lexie Keeton  
Katie Nestor  
Karri Peifer  
Jacquan Penick  
Carolyn Smiley  
Jamison Spencer  
Charlie Stokes  
Chris Terry  
Shaniqua Williams

*Editor-in-chief*  
Carl T. Holscher

*Cover Art*  
*Hierophant/Teacher* by Charles Gustina

*Faculty Editor/Advisor*  
William Tester

The Millennium staff wishes to thank the following for their generous assistance: Dr. Marcel Cornis-Pope, Chair of the English Department; Jeff Lodge and the faculty and staff of the English Department; Dr. Wilma Wirt of the School of Mass Communications; Henrietta Brown at Student Affairs; Ted Potter and Leon Roper of Anderson Gallery and Olivia Lloyd of The Commonwealth Times. Last but not least, Millennium would like to thank all of the authors, artists and editors who helped to make this literary magazine a reality.

Millennium is an annual publication funded by student fees. The editors invite submissions of poetry, fiction, art and photography. All hard copy submissions must be accompanied by a disk copy and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for reply or return of submission. Send to: Millennium c/o Department of English, Hibbs Bldg., 900 Park Avenue, P.O. Box 842005, Richmond, VA 23284-2005

No part of this book may be reproduced without written permission of the publisher and the English Department chair or advisor.

All materials copyright 2003 by *Millennium*  
All rights reserved.

# Millennium

---

## Fiction

Inside the Lizard Tank.....	Boz Bowles	6
Chaps.....	T. D. Brown	20
No More Red.....	Warran L. Dawson	37
Progress Report.....	Jim Astrove	42
It's Electric.....	Rob Widdecombe	46
Get Going.....	Xavier Atkins	63
Piece of My Heart.....	Lindsey Ives	70
The Non-Silent Treatment.....	Carolyn Smiley	88
Sandcastles.....	Chris Terry	90
Sugar.....	Conner Ireland	104
In Micro, North Carolina.....	Michele Young	109
Palpable Love.....	Karri Piefer	133
The Runner Up.....	Payne Mason	139
Following the Third Time My Wife Shot.....	Jamie Fueglin	156
Child of Light.....	Michele Poulos	169
Great Hunters Are We.....	Albert Baker	185
Tumbleweeds.....	Margaret Brulatour	195
Totally Innocent.....	Spencer Jamison	220

# Millennium

---

Levels.....	David Pandolfe	230
Lebanon.....	Muna Hijazi	240
Snapshots.....	Chris Kresge	257

## Poetry

Day of the Dead.....	Sean Agan	35
Sunrise.....	Sean Agan	36
Accident.....	Shelly McGill	61
Sleep Walker.....	Shelly McGill	62
Not That Breed of Girl.....	Lindsey Watson	166
Bone in the Throat.....	Anna Journey	190
Still Life in the City.....	Anna Journey	192

INSIDE THE LIZARD TANK

A brand new overcammed Peterbilt dump truck meant brand new rules. One, don't fuck around with my radio, classic rock only. Two, bring beer money, we're not Meals on Wheels. And three, if you're going to do any drugs, bring enough to share—at least with the guy who's driving. Rumi and I were cruising the truck around town after planting winter juniper bushes at a gas station near the airport. We were done with the planting by noon, too early to go back to the nursery, so we stopped at the Sunny Mart and each bought a six-pack of Milwaukee's Best. Rumi got his pork rinds, too.

We climbed into the back of the dumper, crawled under the clean green tarp and crashed out on the half-load of mulch we'd been carrying since we got the truck last week, digging our feet in for the steam. Naturally, nobody could see us in the truck with the sides of the dumper bed so high. I'd only twisted up a pin joint, but it was pretty good shit, so I was willing to follow my own rules, for once, and share. I lit up and passed it to Rumi, who brushed pork rind crumbs out of his bird's nest of a beard before grabbing the joint.

He took one of those noisy hits, you know, obscene air-sucking sounds, lips puckered like your first kiss. Then he held his breath and stared bug-eyed at the burning end of the doobie, like he was making some sort of telepathic deal with it.

"Yo. Free that thing up," I said. I took a swig of beer.

He flinched a little when he heard my voice, like I startled him out of sleep or something. "What?" he asked,



even though I knew he heard me.

“Man, that joint’s all I brought and I don’t plan to just watch it burn.” I reached for the joint but he didn’t offer it back.

“Do you know what I feel like doing?” he asked. “I mean what I really feel like doing?”

“I know what I really feel like doing. Pass it over, man.” I had to get all the way up on one knee and grab the thing. He must’ve snuck a few Vicodin, the fucker.

“I feel like building a monument,” he said.

“Like that laundry pile you keep on our couch?” I spoke without really breathing, holding in the smoke.

“Something that can outlast me.”

“Oh, something to disturb the grandkids after you’re gone,” I said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said.

“Tell me about it,” I said.

We hung out in the back until almost quitting time, stoned, with our feet dug into the steaming mulch to keep them warm, both of us by then down to our last beer. We knew we needed to drink them on the road back to the nursery so we could get home before we passed out. By now we’d both learned not to get too drunk to drive home later. We were drunk, but not too drunk.

I drove us in this time, not because I was the actual boss or more sober or anything. I just happened to jump in on the side with the steering wheel, really. Rumi got shotgun.

We were headed out of the city, the long way, through the sunset red towers and glass of the high-rise district, past the farmers’ market, past the school, past the mossy gray canal, over the river and through the woods to the nursery where Rumi would park the truck while I’d turn in our work orders, not even attempting to not look totally ripped.

Buzzing from cheap beer, green dope and a brand new, forty-six cubic inch kind of boo-ya horsepower, we zigzagged over the deserted country road, one of the curviest ones I've ever been on. There's a certain invincible feeling you get when you drive a dump truck. You drive it like you're a tank.

"Pull over! Pull over!" Rumi shouted, pawing like he wanted to dig through his window.

"What?"

"I saw something!"

"What? What?"

"Go back. Go back."

I did a three-point turn, accidentally crushing a full beer between my thighs as I hit the brake. Cold beer gushed into my lap and I almost backed into a ditch that would've broken an axle for sure. "What the—did we hit something?" I asked.

"Nah, I thought I saw a dog back there."

"We don't need any fucking dog, man," I grabbed my beer and arched my back off the seat, trying to keep my ass dry. It worked for a moment, until a car appeared in the distance and I had to finish turning the truck around. I gulped the beer dregs and plopped down in the puddle, icy against my butt. "We can't even keep the cats out of the lizard cage," I said.

"This one will be easy."

"Shit."

"It will, I swear."

"No!" I smacked the dashboard. "Think about all the shit. We have an apartment. No yard. Remember? Where's the thing going to do its business?"

"No problem. I promise."

"You promise. Are you going to teach it to use that nasty ass litter box? You haven't changed that thing for days." I stomped my foot on the floorboard, coasting.

“Smells like a cat shit landfill.”

“Right here. Over here,” he bounced a little on the edge of the seat. “Stop!”

I pulled off the road and hit the brake, smiling as the hydraulic brake sounded like it was shushing Rumi.

He was already out of the truck when I saw the thing, a mutt. I couldn't even pick out any dominant breeds, the most generic looking dog I ever saw, it was only a foot tall—or would've been if it had been standing—with a light brown coat, darker down the middle of its back. Short straight hair, flop eared, its intestines had been dragged fifteen feet down the highway. Pinkish, but not stinking too badly in the cold air. For some reason, I always thought they'd be gray.

“I want to take it with us,” Rumi said.

“Rumi. Why? It's a dead dog.”

“I want its skull. I have an idea.”

“You must be kidding,” I said. I drank the last dregs and backtossed the can up into the truck. “Jesus fucking H. Christ.”

Rumi got a shovel out of one of the toolboxes cleverly welded to the side of the truck. He walked all the way to where the dog guts ended near the centerline of the road and scooped up the entrails like slabs of raw bacon. They were still fresh enough to be pliable against the steel shovelhead, a giant spatula. When the guts rolled off the back of the shovel, Rumi would pitch them on toward the dog, then start again gathering up two pink strings of dog guts, then four, then eight and so on.

“Whoa,” I said.

“Can you please give me a hand putting this on the truck, please,” he said, wiping his face with the back of his sleeve. Any way he might touch himself now seemed sickening, filthy with dead dog funk.

“No way.” I took two steps away from him, leaned

on the front fender, about to heave. The gray sky seemed closer than usual, like a low ceiling.

"Come on. We'll throw it in back." He bent like he was going to pick it up with his bare hands. "Come on. Don't be a pussy."

"What the hell for?" I set my hands on my hips, making a show of being reasonable. "It's a dead fucking dog. What, you want to make a hat out of it?"

"Exactly, man. I want its skull."

"Why?"

"Art."

"Art..." Man, I wasn't even going to bother.

We eventually cut the dog's head off with a shovel and a rake—let me just say it took a while. I know it sounds a little weird, but when Rumi got an idea in his head, it was easier to just ride it out than to fight. It was like arguing with a cat.

Once we started moving the head around, the smell became worse, putrid, in fact. I gagged against it. Thin saliva ran down the back of my mouth, my jaw spasming. I was going to throw up.

Rumi didn't seem to mind the stink. He was skipping around the dog's rotting body, the head impaled on the upturned tines of a rake, dog ears flapping like batwings, medieval. "You've taken the big leap, brother—death," he said to the doghead. "I'll build an altar."

"Let's bury it in the back of the truck." I spat thin snot, dizzy and sick from the stink. "The mulch smell will knock the edge off this thing."

When the head fell off, Rumi traded his rake for a pitchfork from the long, dirty toolbox. He climbed the ladder built into the side of the dumper, pulled the tarp back, dug a hole in the mulch and warmed his hands over it.

"We ought to name it," I said, walking around to

the back of the truck. My knees buckled a little. "At least say a few words?"

"Was it male or female?" he asked. He didn't even look up from his shoveling long wet strips of innard.

"I don't know. Its crotch is a bit mangled," I said, looking down at the body.

"Probably stuck in some asshole's bumper. Jesus, don't people look anymore where they're driving? And cell phones—"

"How about 'Dumpy?'" I said. My face was sweating cold and I was shaking. "We're going to put her in a dump truck after all." Then I vomited hard, all over the back bumper, beer vomit, steaming against the cold as soon as it left my mouth. I remember the world spinning out from underneath me, wild. Outside myself for a moment, I looked up at Rumi jumping up and down on the mulch pile, burying the doghead, and I finally recognized the cold against my face was pavement, smooth black asphalt with a tarry smell, and I retched again.

Rumi finished in the back, helped me off the street, into the passenger seat and drove us to the nursery, the big truck bucking whenever the highway dipped. He was absolutely careless about wildly crossing lanes, veering off onto the shoulder.

"Rumi!" I said, "Hey! Hey! Hey! Rule number three: head out of the clouds. Okay? You know how much this thing weighs?"

"Man, there you go, worrying again too much."

It was like talking to a three-year-old.

I'd hoped everyone would've left the office by the time we got in, but my supervisor, Mr. Stan—Stan the Man—was leaning on the hood of his Jeep Grand Cherokee, waiting. He stared at us as we passed him on our way to the loading dock, his all but bald comb over blowing in our backwash. I slumped kind of below the



dash. Rumi raised two fingers to his forehead, saluting, driving too fast and too close to Stan the Man's toes, speeding towards the lot.

"Dump the empties and go straight to the car when we park," I said. "I'll handle Stan."

"Brother, you smell like puke," Rumi said as he backed the truck up into the narrowest slot, the reverse gear higher in pitch. Intentionally popping the clutch, he rolled me around in the seat. Rumi killed the engine and glanced down at my lap as he gathered trash and beer cans. "And it looks like you've peed your pants."

"You go to the car. I'll deal with Stan," I said. "Don't even say anything for once. Don't."

Rumi got out and slammed the door with his foot, a mule kick. "Stan the Man," he said.

"Stan the Man," I said

I slid the clipboard from behind the sun visor on the driver's side, drooped down from the cab and shut the door. Colder, I thought. Getting dark. I groaned with my first step on the way to the office fifty yards away. Stan the Man was smoking a cigarette now. He bent over and grabbed a piece of trash from the parking lot, tossed it around the corner, out of sight.

Once I got close enough that he could talk to me without yelling, he looked up. I saw his surprise for a split second as he took note of the shape I was in, but his eyes quickly narrowed again, easing back into neutral.

"We hit a dog," I said, hoping that would settle it.

"We've had a complaint." For effect, he flicked away his cigarette on the last syllable.

"Another one?" I asked.

"I know he's your friend but business is—," He stopped talking and bent over, pointing at my foot. "What the hell is that sticking out of your shoe? Is that hair?"

"Please, Mr. Stan, Rumi's, you know, artistic like."

Lame, I know.

Rumi honked a long blast on my car horn and turned up a Lynyrd Skynyrd song, "Simple Man." Stan the Man grabbed the clipboard out of my hand and clapped it three times against his stomach.

"I don't know, kid," he said, turning and walking around to his Jeep's door, looking up at me again, "I think the hamster fell off the wheel."

He got in and started the engine, revved it a few times, lit another Marlboro and lowered his electric window. "Two days, kid." He held up two fingers and shook them at me.

"Okay, yeah, we didn't really hit the dog, you know." I looked down at the tuft of brown fur wedged into my boot sole, held my foot up off the ground, proof. "It was already dead. We, you know, moved it. Like out of the way some."

He raised his window, lifted two fingers against the glass as he slowly drove away.

I walked around our apartment—my apartment—with an old Big Gulp cup catching roaches. Cockroaches roamed our walls brazenly, no longer even scattering at the sight of Rumi and me. They'd won. Our place was occupied territory.

We learned that if we held a cup against the wall underneath a cockroach, then scooped straight up under it, it always fell in the cup. Then we only had to give it an occasional shake to contain the runaway roaches, like we were jiggling ice in a drink.

Rumi had bought seven small green iguanas with his first paycheck—this instead of splitting the rent with me—and kept them in the living room in a fish tank. The thing about these lizards was when we fed them, their heads turned a sort of coppery color for a minute or so.

God knows why. And they just loved cockroaches. Still, even inside the lizard tank, the roaches were clearly winning, perched just out of reach, crawling free.

Rumi's three cats, Punt, Pass and Kick, used to stare at the lizard cage for long stretches. They didn't seem to blink. Kick stared sometimes until he fell asleep against the glass, the lizards blended into their tree branch background. Pow! A sudden strike and Kick would wake up, but then the lizards would settle back into invisible reptilian stillness before the cat could find them again.

Rumi came in stomping boots, going back and forth between his room and the front door, slamming each door as he passed through. He finally clomped into the living room where the lizards and I were catching roaches. The lizards watched me with one eye at a time, knowing somehow I was on their side. All the cats woke up and ran, scattering into hiding places as far from Rumi as they could get. His own cats. Maybe they smelled the dead dog on him.

"I missed a feeding?" Rumi asked, setting a brown paper bag on the giant cable spool we used as a coffee table.

"Come on in." I tossed in another cupful of roaches, a little stoned I suppose. The lizards were slow to attack but lightning quick when they finally did. "Their heads are still gold."

"Heads," he said. "Wow."

"Busy? Wanna catch some bugs?" I offered him the cup.

"I know what I'm going to do now, for my monument." He pulled out a Swiss Army knife and a nice looking bottle of Chianti, the old fashioned kind that comes in a wide bottle with a sort of basket bottom, like the ones they put candles in at Italian restaurants.

Rumi smoothed his beard, cleared his throat and

said, "Check it out, I'm going to spin." The hair on the back of my neck felt like soda bubbles.

"What?" I was used to some weird shit from Rumi—weird shit was the best thing about him—but part of the deal was living with this fear that one day he would get us locked up or maimed or even killed. Coming out of his mouth, spinning sounded dangerous, too random.

"I'm going to spin. Like James Brown, man. Except nonstop. See?" He turned on the back edge of his boot heel.

"Is that what the vino's for?" I asked.

"That's just to get me started. I'm going to spin, like one of those whirling dervish dudes in that movie the other night."

I didn't remember which movie. "And? You mean like dancing?"

"Spinning. Like a top. Like Earth. Spin." He was twirling, clumsy with sobriety it seemed. "Think of a ceiling fan," he said. "A barber pole."

"Why?"

"It's a distraction," he said, stopping and dropping his arms. "It makes you forget what's coming."

"What's coming?"

"Whirlwind, cyclone." He clapped his hands.

"Tor-nay-do."

When I was a kid I used to get dizzy for fun. I'd spend hours spinning and falling, spinning and falling. I loved the feeling of letting go of my equilibrium, losing control and having the sensation of flying for just a moment, right before I hit the ground. Not just flying, crashing, for a moment.

Rumi once told me dancers learn to spin without dizziness by focusing on a point in space, then spinning their heads around quickly while their bodies turn below, then they find that point in space again. And again, again,

again. Madness.

"Think of, like, a drill," he said. "One of those figure skaters. Spiral of a football."

"Can I have some of your wine?" I asked.

"Have all you want." He spread his arms out, looking up and twirling on the balls of his feet, slowly, but without staggering now. "It's not the wine I want, dude, it's the corkscrew."

I figured no matter how dodgy things got, he'd die first. He was my early warning system. "Of course," I said, reaching for the Swiss Army knife. "The corkscrew."

We were in no hurry to get back out to the airport with another load of junipers, so we took the long way past the college. We figured we could ogle a few girls on campus and then blame being late on bad traffic.

"See. It sounds like all racist, but I swear it's true," Rumi said as he pounded the dash and waved to a girl on the sidewalk. He drove with his knee, like a ten-ton, practically new dump truck was no more dangerous than a child's bicycle. "They always do it."

"No way. You come up with some crazy shit." I was out of rolling papers and Rumi had hooked up on some weed, so I was packing a pipe hastily made by twisting foil around an ink pen, removing the pen and bending the end. "Genuine, certifiable." I shook my head. "You're out there, bro."

"They do!" He wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Black girls will almost always stop whatever they're doing to wave at you if you honk your horn. Honk it and they'll wave like they're excited to see you before they even look in your direction." He honked the horn again as we came upon a gray haired black woman in faded overalls leaning on a shopping cart. The woman waved both arms, like she



was signaling a helicopter for help. As we passed, she frowned and squinted, trying to recognize the two fools in the dump truck. "Hell, all black people will wave, mostly."

"Man, you shouldn't say shit like that," I said. "You come off like a bigot."

"I thought that was a guy with two wives," he said. He smacked the seat, a rim shot.

"No. That's a bigamist, idiot." I took a hit and held it in until I choked.

"Same with the Mexicans, they wave back," he said, downshifting at a red light.

"Bullshit."

"Guaranteed."

"So what are you trying to say?" I passed him the pipe.

"Nothing. It's just that white people won't wave back until they've—whoa, redhead."

"Where?" I asked, spinning around to look behind us.

"Too late—anyway, they won't wave until they've seen the face that's honking and waving at them. White people have to know you to be nice to you. Asians too. Especially."

"And you've researched this?" I asked, shaking a Marlboro out of its pack. I lit up.

"It's just one of those things. Like black people don't smoke Marlboros," he said, pointing the pipe at my pack like it proved his case. "Black people smoke Kools. True fact."

"Man, shut up." I waved my hand at him. "Don't give me a reason."

"All I'm saying is black people always wave back at you. White people don't."

"What about Indians?" I asked as I cracked the window and let out some smoke.

"Dot or feather?" Then Rumi got quiet. He wasn't afraid to be wrong, I thought. It was one of the things I loved about him, daring. He took a hit, held it, exhaled and said, "All the real Indians are dead."

For the rest of the drive through town, whenever he saw people walking, Rumi would lay on the horn and wave. He made noises, fart sounds. "Whoop! Bzzzzt! Bee-beep, zip-tang!" Almost every single time, his theory held true. White people would scowl, searching for a familiar face. Their arms would sometimes be poised to wave, but only one guy ever did, a kid with some kind of palsy. Maybe he was Puerto Rican. Either way, we were strangers.

After lunch we parked behind the post office to catch a buzz, then drove around town some more, wasting time while we were still on the clock. Steppenwolf's "Magic Carpet Ride" was playing on the radio and Rumi was trying to break a twenty mg Valium in half—the little white ones—still driving with his knee, the big Peterbilt veering off the road, then straightening.

"How's the spinning going?" I asked. "I heard you fall a couple of times last night."

"Can't go that fast yet."

"Still working on it?"

"Art takes time," he said. He tossed the half-pill in his mouth and dangled the other half just above my nose, like he wanted me to beg for it. "A little faster every day."

"What about the doghead? Did you forget it?" I asked, opening my mouth for the little white crescent of a pill. He dropped it in and I glomped it down.

"Nah, that's for you," he said.

"For me?"

"Yeah, it's really something—" He stopped talking because a dog ran in front of the truck. Rumi hit the gas, gunning for the dog. Yes, for the dog. I couldn't believe

it, he was becoming some kind of doggy headhunter, trying to kill it. I grabbed for the wheel, pushing us into the oncoming lane. Rumi yanked the wheel out of my hands too hard, jerked us back across all three lanes, and we went sailing off the road. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, dizzy, outside my head for a moment, like being really sick or high or drunk. I knew we were being tossed around in the truck, the moments stretched and distorted into spasms, but I wasn't feeling pain. Once my head got knocked in the right direction, I looked over at Rumi, who was also being thrown around the cab as we tumbled down a hill, bouncing off the big trees, bending the saplings. His face was relaxed, no expression, like this was the most typical thing that had ever happened to him and he knew it was coming. It made me feel safe, even as the dump truck rolled and lunged.

We caught a little air as we tumbled down the hill, my door popped open like a tin can and I was thrown from the truck. I was surprised by how quiet it got when I stopped tumbling and the truck finally stopped rolling against an oak tree. I hadn't noticed the noise as we were crashing, only the beautiful silence after. Once I caught my breath, I got up and staggered drunkenly over to where Rumi was, close beside the truck, tangled up in a pile of mulch under an oak. He wasn't bleeding much, just a trickle from his nose, but somehow I knew Rumi was dying. Maybe it was the look on his face. He smiled like he had a secret. For the first time, I thought Rumi looked young underneath his beard, no wrinkles at the corners of his eyes or on his forehead. I was so struck by this thought I failed to notice the moment when his eyes actually glazed over and he passed away. He didn't jerk or kick or anything. I missed it, and he was gone.

After some time—I don't know how much—I heard sirens in the distance, dogs howling along. Ambulance, fire

engine, bigger Peterbilts.

When the cops finally came, they had to ask me questions in the ambulance. The fat one asked, "Whose drugs were in the cab? Was the driver drunk or sick? How'd he lose control?" D.U.I. and insurance things. I played hurt, whining loudly about what I knew was my broken foot, and I didn't answer them. Then one of the flat-topped cops climbed into the back of the ambulance all mad like he was going to hit me. He kicked the door to get my attention and shouted, "What's the story on the rotting dog's head?"

I could have told him it was obviously a part of a monument to a righteous life. I could have said it was like a mascot, kind of his pet. Or I could have just said it was mine. But instead I told him I didn't have the slightest idea, really, and I never did.

CHAPS

I was anti before I started Basic Training, but First Platoon Panthers made me a dag on recluse. I trained with females who often left their nasty pads on the latrine floor so we all often got smoked. I trained with men who said excuse me and bitch in the same breath. And I was constantly getting cussed out by Drill Sergeant, spittle collecting in little frothy families in either corners of his mouth for pivoting with my right foot instead of my left.

“Burns! You fuckin deaf? Step, pivot, step, private, step, pivot, step!”

Everybody in my platoon wanted to be either know-it-all G.I Joe or who-gives-a-damn Slack-Ass Sam. All I wanted to do was earn some money for school and gain some discipline. Silly me. I just tried to do what I was told when I was told to do it, but only a few of us shared that mentality. First Platoon was mean. They were like The Grinch Who Stole Christmas, just down-right rotten.

Once we were all sitting on the floor in the boy's bay waiting for Drill Sergeant Powell and Drill Sergeant Kauch, a.k.a. Drill Sergeant Crazy Freaking Nazi. We had just finished being fitted for our gas masks and names were taken down for problem masks, mine being one of them. The drill sergeants were in their office, plotting our demise, no doubt, and about this time they usually recapped the day's activities and then dismissed us for personal time, which started around nineteen thirty. Before Hitler shut their door he leaned out and said real quiet like, almost gently, “I don't want to hear anyone talking, okay? Fucking just. Don't. Talk.” He said it just like that,



too, real punctuated, and he slammed the door.

There were thirty bunks in the box-shaped bay, fifteen on each side. Melendez and Arturo were sitting in front of a bunk across the bay from me. Had I been sitting in front of a bunk, where Dunston was, you could probably sit about seven or eight more soldiers between us, but I had scooted back further into the aisle between the bunk beds. Melendez had her bad leg stretched out in front of her. She had a brace on it from the knee down because she had banged it repelling from Victory Tower. The only female Hispanics in the platoon, the inseparable soldiers immediately resumed a half-whispered conversation about somebody's unfaithful esposo. I shook my head; people can't even follow simple instruction. They got shushed quite a few times and then a couple of the guys started talking about how some people needed to shut up.

I pulled out my little Bible that Calvin, my co-worker, gave me on my last day at the radio station, and began looking for Scriptures on "help." When he gave it to me I was like, "Thanks, Calvin," all smiling, but I was thinking I didn't need or want a Bible, I went to church about once a month. I carried it in my left cargo pocket though.

Help, help, help, I flipped through the concordance in the back of the Bible. My head was aching and I couldn't concentrate. I leaned back against the chipped beige cinder block walls.

Then Dunston just flipped and was like, "Yo, shut the fuck up!" and he leaped up and stormed over to the two girls. He stood there, towering over them with his Bubba Gump lip all poked out and his brown meaty fists were curled into balls at his side. Then Melendez, looking up at him, goes, "who the fuck you talking to, huh?" and he straight up got livid.

"Shut the fuck up!" he hollered, and then dude

kicks her, right in the knee. I'm like, Oh my God, and I jumped up and then some of the guys did too, and they pushed him to the back of the bay toward the latrines and they're all saying "yo, man, cool out, man, cool out," and the girls are screaming "you fucking asshole!" and Melendez is hysterical, "Ay, Mi Dios, mi rodilla, why you kick in my knee?" I was squatting in front of Melendez rubbing her leg and patting her arm when we all heard the office door slam against the wall. Bang!

Awww man... I stood up. Drill Sergeant Kauch strolled out and sat on top of the desk in front of the bay and I swear you could have heard a mouse fart it was so quiet. He crossed his arms in front of his scrawny chest and looked at us shaking his head. Black scuff marks from heavily polished boots littered the white tiled floor. All of the girls were sitting or standing near Melendez who was still snuffling and about seven or eight guys were in the back clustered around Dunston.

"You just don't get it do you?" he said to us in that quiet voice.

"DO YOU!" he boomed.

We started with push ups that I could barely do, then sit ups, squat thrusts, Hitler's Human Chair... We got smoked again, and again, and again.

I hated those people.

And then there was Chapston, my battle buddy. You always felt bad for Chappie, she was so not with it and she was funny looking, to boot. I mean, granted, I was no diva in my drab Army greens but you could tell that if I took off my issued Urkel frames and ran a pick through my 'fro I would look half-decent. But not Chappie.

Chapston's Mr. Magoo glasses magnified her pop eyes so she always looked paranoid. Broad kind of smashed nose, thick lips that when stretched wide for an unnaturally per-

fect smile, revealed a dentist's dream. Her short hair constantly stuck to her forehead and the sides of her face because she was always sweating. And her body odor! My God, she once opened her wall locker and Drill Sergeant said it smelled like what-the-fuck. It was funny but I was like, Umm Chappie, maybe you got some dirty clothes in there, huh? That need washing? She wasn't fat or anything and come to think of it, her figure wasn't that bad, but she was just, I don't know, weird. I mean, I've got my ways about me for sure, but Chaps...

It'd be one something in the morning and I could hear her up there on her top bunk going uno, dos, tres, hey!, quatro, cinco, seis, no! pounding her fists into the mattress with each "hey" and "no," over and over again. Used to trip me out. Or we'd all be in the shower and she'd just be standing there with her big eyes, grinning, like, it was the best dag on shower in the whole wide world. But you felt bad for her, or at least I did, because nobody liked her. She was so ate up.

But I was stuck with Chapston as my battle buddy and I always had to look out for her. One night during bed check, Drill Sergeant Kauch and a female drill sergeant, Drill Sergeant Adams, came into the bay and began doing their rounds, making sure each female was present and fully dressed in the correct uniform. Drill Sergeant Adams was yanking every other wall locker combination lock to be certain it could not be easily opened. We were supposed to be asleep but it wasn't like they were tiptoeing in their combat boots. Drill Sergeant Adams was short and squat and must have weighed a good one fifty, one sixty, and when her bulk stopped in front of my bunk, I went off into silent prayer.

"Private."

Dang!

"Don't act like you sleep, private. Is this your wall

locker?”

I need not have leaned out of my bunk with one hand to the floor to see where her flashlight beam was. Chapston. I didn't want to answer Drill Sergeant right away, because I knew better.

See, the bottom bunk where I was laying clearly had “BURNS” stenciled on masking tape, in red marker mind you, on the side where Drill Sergeant could see it. The masking tape on the illuminated wall locker read “CHAPSTON.”

I had to say something, though.

“No, Drill Sergeant, it's, it's Chapston's, Drill Sergeant,” I said.

“I know it's Chapston's, private! I can read! But you her buddy ain't you?”

I knew it. Now I was gonna get smoked for not looking out for my buddy and that hooker was asleep! My head started pounding.

“Yes, drill sergeant,” I sat up, hunched from both defeat and the bulge of Chapston's body weighing down her mattress. Suddenly, Drill Sergeant squatted down to my eye level and I had a weird thought that we were about to have a heart-to-heart, but it wound up being an extremely close face-to-face. I tried to swallow.

“Soldier,” she said, her hot beef jerky breath flaring my nostrils, “her shit is your shit, and y'all both need to get it together. Secure that locker,” and she clump clumped to the next bunk.

Not another night went by that I didn't double check “our shit” and before lights out I checked Chappie's boot shine, too. I mean, I felt bad for her and all, but I was not going to keep taking the heat just because she couldn't keep up. I had to literally kick her ass every morning, as soon as I woke up and I realized I was still living out the dumbest decision I had ever made in my life, I swiftly

kicked my bony foot into the butt bulge to wake her up. "We" couldn't be late.

Mostly I just tried to help her when I could, but mostly she got on my nerves. Like the first couple of weeks of training I had to keep asking her, like, "Could you not sit on my bunk?" but I was more specifically concerned about my pillow. But then this one time I laid her out, breaking it down for her that she was putting her ass where I put my face and that wasn't cool, especially if your name is Chapston... And she stayed asking me something, too.

"Hey, hey, Burns?"

"Yep?"

"How you do that again? To get the spring from out of..."

I put down my cleaning rag and pressed down a little tiny button that released the spring from inside the butt of her M-16.

"I ain't know how to get that out of there!" she said, all excited.

"Yeah," I said dully, "I bet."

Or she'd be like, "Hey Burns, what time did Drill Sergeant say formation was?" And I'd go, "Zero six, Chaps." Just like yesterday and the day before that and the day before that.

"Oh, snap! Guess we should get to bed then, huh?"

Hey, hey Burns, she would say, could you show me left shoulder arms?

Hey, hey... I'm thinking like hey, where the fuck do you be when information gets put out? Meditating on some shit or what? Dag! And sometimes I got mad at her because I didn't know what we were supposed to be doing and I didn't want to be on the same dumb ass page she was on.

That was red phase, though, basically our initiation slash learning phase. That was the constant stress-out,

please God let me get sick enough to go home, I hate these effing people phase. When we got to white phase the drill sergeants actually let up on us a bit and I was thinking about requesting to speak to one of them concerning Chaps. I'm sorry, but I was not comfortable being in the same foxhole with a soldier who aimed at a target with both eyes open. She would be laying there in the prone, dust covered and sweat soaked clear through her BDUs, rifle stock close to her face with both eyes wide open, looking like she was hypnotizing the target. It was pathetic, but I reasoned if they gave her live ammo I was through playing Suzy Sweet Soldier.

In blue phase, about the last two weeks of training, we did the bivouac, kind of like the culmination of all the major physical training, for three days and two nights. That sounds like something you win in a sweepstakes, "three days and two nights to sunny Florida," but this was sunny hot-ass South Carolina, in August mind you, with cantankerous red fire ants big and mean enough to wrestle.

At about zero eight hundred, ruck sacks loaded up with wet-weather gear, flashlights, and the like, we tossed our duffel bags into a van and filed onto an olive-green school bus that would drop us off at the starting point of our march. On the bus, I took off my ruck to hold it in my lap, leaned my forehead against the seat in front of me and massaged my temples. We had just gotten smoked, twice. First in the girl's bay because nobody would fess up to who forgot to dump the trash and because the chore roster was coincidentally missing.

Then we got smoked again because we were late to formation because we got smoked. When we came down the steps from our bay all sweaty and out of breath Drill Sergeant Powell didn't even let us line up with the guys, he just dropped us. We stayed in the push up position about a good fifteen minutes, not actually doing them, you know?,

but just staying in the “up” position. My upper body strength had certainly improved over the past month but it was still murder. And then we had to lie on our backs and hold our feet six inches off the ground. And then we did a hundred counts of over-head arm claps, all the while people moaning and going “awww” which is the number one reason why he kept smoking us. I fucking hated those people.

I kept bonking my head into the seat and prayed. Lord you have to help me, God please, I am losing it. I took out my Bible and skimmed through Psalms. He is our help and our shield. Despite this being Hell and all, I had learned so much, shoot, I breathed the motto, “Suck it up and drive on,” but it seemed like most people were still not catching on and we were over a third of the way finished. The whole “team” concept was like a Japanese knock-knock joke. People just didn’t get it, which was why we were always in trouble because everybody wanted to do their own thing. Talk about too many chiefs...

Like this one hooker who must have been hit by the “my-shit-don’t-stink” bus before she enlisted. I remember I had asked her about her run time or something for her PT test and she looked at me like I had asked did she wipe front to back or back to front. She bunched up her face and was like, “Okay, you need to worry about improving your own physical fitness before you start comparing it to mine, private.”

“Private?” I said.

“Who...” I began, and I caught myself, “right, okay, whatever,” I said to her and I just walked away. Lord, I’m trying, I am really trying.

Chappie was sitting next to me, ruck in her lap, head thrown back, calling the hogs, the pigs, and whatever else was in a fifty mile radius. She had a cold and was congested and I was just grateful she wasn’t talking to me.

The bus driver had the radio playing and that lifted my spirit some and then Puff Daddy came on and I thought maybe I could make it.

"Don't push us cause we're close to the edge...we're trying not to lose our heads..."

"Can't nobody take my pride..." I mumbled.

After about twenty minutes to a half the bus abruptly pulled to the side of a wide dirt road lined with trees as far as I could see. It was bright outside, and the air was already a little thick so I knew the heat was going to get up to ridiculous around noon. In addition to long-sleeved BDUs, we had on Kevlars and of course we were carrying our pro masks, our rucks and our rifles, which we couldn't even sling; we had to carry them at port arms.

We must have marched a good three miles with all that gear on and it was so freaking hot. I mean, I looked like I had poured my canteen over my head.

We got to the site at about eleven hundred and I inevitably got dropped along the way. My rifle slipped out of my sweaty hands and it made this loud clatter, even though it hit dirt. I might as well have screamed out, "I wanna be a Marine!" or something. It's like a cardinal sin, letting your weapon hit the ground and I didn't even wait for Drill Sergeant to tell me, I just got down and started pushing.

Anyway the site was rockier than Balboa and later in the day after we did land nav for-fucking-ever we had to dig our own fox holes. Around this time Chapston's cough just happened to get worse and she had to go to sick call, so in addition to pitching our tent I had to dig our fox hole with a raggedy trench tool.

I slammed the last tent peg into the earth and sat down in the shade against a tree, imagining if I smoked, now would be a grand time to light up. I felt my left cargo pocket. Lord, Jesus... Everybody had already started dig-



ging their fox holes and here I just finished my tent.

Drill Sergeant Kauch materialized out of like, the air, and I leapt to my feet and stood at parade rest while he stomped by. I don't even know if he looked at me because I was staring a hole in my boot but when he passed I snatched up my sorry trench tool and began attacking the plot vigorously.

I might as well have been trying to sprint underwater. I had a crick in my neck, a pain in my side, and blisters on my little hands. The foxhole was supposed to be five feet deep and I hadn't even dug two feet and I had been working for two hours. It was sixteen thirty. At the rate I was going there was no way I would be finished before dark so I asked Dunston for help. He laughed at me so I asked Verdell and he just straight up said no.

"Bout shit outta luck now, ain't cha?" he said, with his country self.

When Chester went by I begged him to help me and only after I offered him ten bucks did he go back to his own site to get his trench tool. Chapston showed up after we finished and I told her she shouldn't talk much because it might irritate her throat and worsen her condition. And I would kill her.

The next day the platoon did more land nav, and four obstacle courses, the last of which took its toll on my physical and mental strength. It was called Tag Team Tactics, "team" being the operative word. There were four teams; "A" through "D," and each had fifteen people. Each team broke into three groups so team "A" had three groups of five as did team "B," so on and so forth. The first group, in location one, was given "secret" information which they had to pass on to the second group on their team who was in location two which they then passed on to group three. Each group had to complete their obstacles before advancing to the next group's location. The first

team to complete all obstacles and relay the correct information won. I was on team "A" in group one with another female, Carr, and three males, Lyons, Smith, and Kerbiak.

Everybody in my group had to scale three ten-foot walls, climb up a rope ladder and then climb down, and low crawl under barbed wire before passing along the information. Smith and Kerbiak had to straddle the top of the wall so they could pull the rest of us up and over, but when Carr and Lyons lifted me up, I still wasn't strong enough to pull my self up far enough so they could get a good grip on me.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" I yelled at Kerbiak, who had started yelling at me first, "my mom didn't feed me bricks for breakfast!"

Kerbiak was this big hefty dude and when he gets mad his left eye starts to spasm or something, so as I tried to pull myself up, he would be sitting there looking down at me, his eye convulsing, and I would get weak from laughing and have to start over. Team "A" lost the Tag Team Tactics.

Me and Chappie had fire guard duty that night and of course we had the shit shift from one a.m. to three thirty. We were supposed to be watching out for intruders from the other platoon, but she kept up such a racket with her cough that a blind sniper would have had no trouble taking us out. Every fifteen minutes she would holler out, "Halt! Who goes there?" and there would never be anybody there. "I thought I heard something," she would say, looking around.

Later, I couldn't sleep for Chappie's snoring theatrics and the loud ass giggling fire guards. What was so funny at four in the morning? We were allowed to sleep in until zero six thirty but I got up at six.

"Ahhhh!" I scratched at the ant bites that I knew

must have covered the bottom half of my back where my shirt had come untucked during the night. The sun was back behind the trees and with the little light it cast I dragged my stuff out of the tent: my Kevlar, my LBE, my pro mask, and rifle. I began putting my gear on. I shook my head at the fireguards staked out twenty feet from our tent at the entrance to First Platoon's campsite. One of the girls rolled her eyes. I hated those people.

"Chaps! Get up!" I yelled into the tent. "It's time to get up!"

I adjusted my Kevlar on my head and snapped the chin strap. I picked up my pro mask carrier and fastened it around my waist.

"Chaps! Come on, man. Get up!"

I had gotten my LBE, on but it wasn't buckled. I stood examining my rifle, wiping off excess dirt when, again, Drill Sergeant Kauch just appeared. The fuck does he come from? I thought. This guy's like Freddy Krueger or some shit. This time he was walking slowly through the site carrying a long branch with a canister attached to the end of it and he was waving it back and forth. He had on his mask. Time began to crawl.

The fire guards were doubled over, crying. Apparently neither of them had thought to bring their masks to duty, and --I think it was Weiss-- was retching her guts out. My head started to pound as I dropped my rifle and fumbled with the flap of my pro mask carrier, my eyes beginning to water. Oh God, oh God, oh God... I yanked my protective mask out and struggled to put the hood over my head knocking my glasses off and to the ground. Fuck! Weiss and her battle buddy cried harder and louder, but nobody thought to shout (or maybe nobody could shout) "Gas! Gas! Gas!" which was the procedure in such a situation.

Chapston began to cough from inside the tent. My

hands were burning. I got down on both knees in the dirt and leaves and tried to clear and seal my mask so no gas could get in. I took a deep breath. The sides of my mask gapped and I felt like I had swallowed a combination of Ben Gay and acid. My lungs burned with the kind of lingering pain you feel when you get splattered with hot bacon grease. Oh you'll be fine, Drill Sergeant had told me weeks ago when we were being fitted for our masks. I had pointed out the gaps. You'll be okay, he had told me.

I started to cry. Partly because of the gas but mostly because it was just fucked up. People been shittin on me since day one, my mask is too big, and I can't fucking see... The fire guards were blindly trying to make their way back to their tent; blindly in their case because their eyes were swollen from the CS. Our tent began to shake. Chapston was thrashing around in the dark looking for her mask and I could hear her crying, too. As I looked around for my glasses I began to retch. They always say what can't kill you can only make you stronger but I swore was gonna die. My chest was heaving, my lungs, my arms, my hands, and my face felt like they were being blistered by steam, and Coleman and Daneely in the next tent were shrieking. Drill Sergeant had thrust the branch into their tent. That's when I felt a snap. Under my boot were my glasses, broken in half, one lens cracked. I picked up the two pieces. Jesus. I then picked up my M-16 and leaving everything that would weigh me down, I stumbled away from the site, right behind Drill Sergeant and then up the path through the clearing behind our tent. Low tree limbs batted at my helmet.

"Burns!" That was Chapston. "Burns!" I stopped and turned around.

"AAHHH!" somebody screamed. "AAHHH! I DON'T HAVE A MASK!" she cried. That was Daneely.

I had gotten far enough up the path where I could

make out some of the platoon who Drill Sergeant hadn't gotten to yet. Some, who had come out of their tents, were looking in the direction of the screams. Some were either still asleep or just didn't bother to come out. All would have heard my voice had I bothered to raise it.

"Burns!"

I ran along the dirt trail up the small mount patting my left cargo pocket.

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help, I thought. God is my refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble, therefore I will not fear, Yea, though I walk through the valley in the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. He is my help and...

Ah, Christ, I thought. Just do it.

"Gas, Gas, Gas!" I hollered, and I double-timed back down the hill to help Chapston.

DAY OF THE DEAD

An elderly woman lights her last votive  
And kneels in the corner of her bedroom  
Before the alcove carved in the wall:  
Scattered flower petals, a wedding band, letters,  
photographs.

Beads slip through her palm,  
The first rotation is complete—  
She stares into the candle divot as it deepens  
To forget. To remember...

That day, fresh in the stone blue  
Eyes of an infant, on a bench waiting—  
Sometimes he watches the Aztec Thrush.  
She wonders if he will call today—

Sudden short bursts, a quavering wheeer,  
The metallic chorus is hope enough, but no—  
White tips. White tips.

At her side, the bed they loved in, conceived—  
Now a comfort of steel as a handprint disappears,  
The impression of a body,

Joints in her knuckles are inflamed,  
A fifth rotation finished—  
The grooves of her cheeks glisten  
As walls of the wax cylinder fold for darkness,

Finally, she is at her origin, at its ending,

And the glass is at its end, and the wax at its.  
She had been left with time—  
A single night without warmth might take years,  
And those few moments they spent on content-  
ment—  
That path is the most arduous. She wonders,  
Will others burn as I have?

SUNRISE (CA. 1872)

On a jetty at the southeastern end  
Of the boardwalk, I smell the tide's descent  
In flesh light. A faint schooner opens sail  
To lobster traps. Any sooner, the moon

Would still be visible. Orange sun  
Embosses the blue-green sky,  
I mutter, "Sunrise." (Atlantic breath drifts,  
Disperses with blues and stripers).

NO MORE RED

I walked through the front door and the familiar stench of stale smoke soaked my clothes, the electronic bee-boop of the slot machines ringing. I was home. I walked the usual path to the cashier and put my hundred bucks down. The gray-haired lady inside the money jail looked up from her oversized calculator.

"How would you like this?" she asked in her best I-really-don't-care voice.

"All red please," I said.

A guy stood in line behind me. Peach fuzz covered his chin.

"What are the red chips worth?" he asked me.

"The reds are worth five bucks," I said.

"What about those green and black chips in there?" he asked, pointing to the stacks of chips piled next to the cashier.

"Greens are twenty-five, blacks are a hundred."

Annoyed with this pissant, I walked away.

I made my way past the high-dollar blackjack tables and into the men's room, eager to lose the butterflies in my stomach and start playing. An old man in a wrinkled brown suit stood gazing at himself in the mirror. He looked tired, like he hadn't slept in weeks. Relief passed through me and I made my way from my favorite stall to wash my hands. The old man seemed to be pinching the hanging flesh of his cheeks, trying to make sure it was real. He turned and looked at me. A tear ran from his eye down into his mouth.

"I've been gambling for twenty years and this has never happened to me," he said, revealing nicotine stained



teeth.

"You win big or lose big?" I asked.

"I just won fifty-two thousand dollars on the stud table. I hit the jackpot. Royal flush." He ran his fingers over his bald spot.

"Jesus! I'd be screaming and thanking God! Why are you crying?"

"Don't you get it? I'm still a loser!"

"Well, I wouldn't be a loser if I won that much. What table did you say you won it on?"

"Nine."

"Nine it is. Thanks. Good luck," I said.

I left the bathroom thinking that this rich old guy needed some help. I caught a glimpse of table nine with one open seat, and hurried over. I sat down with my chips in hand, ready to play. The slots chimed in harmony.

My first hand was a bust. Nothing worth talking about. I won five bucks on the second hand. It went back and forth like this for a while. Win five, lose fifteen. Win fifteen, lose five. I started to think about moving to another game. The talk around this table had centered on the old man and his big score. I didn't tell anyone that he was still a loser.

Finally, I got a pair of aces on the first two cards and didn't bother to look at the other three. The dealer came up with a pair of fives. All right! Another fifteen bucks! When he turned over my cards and spread them out, I was showing four aces. I jumped out of my seat with amazement and laughter. Four of a kind was worth seven hundred and fifty bucks.

Chips in hand, I skated on air to the high-dollar blackjack tables and started betting fifty bucks a hand. The thing about blackjack, when it's hot, it's on fire. When it's cold, the money goes fast. Soon I had two hundred bucks left and was feeling a little low.

I could've paid rent with that money. Oh well. I would just have to win it back. The wee-oooo wee-oooo of the slots said someone had won big. I wished it had been me.

I left the high-dollar table and went to the Let-it-Ride table. I wanted the evening to last a little while longer. I laid three green chips on the table.

"Can I have red, please?" I asked the dealer with the pretty smile.

"Coming right up," she said.

I liked this game. I had the chance to pull back two of my three chips if the cards weren't going my way. I looked at my three cards and found two kings and a nine. Yes! I laid my cards down and kept the three reds in the betting circles. The dealer turned over his first card. A ten. No help there. His second card was a nine, which gave me thirty bucks. A dark-skinned waitress wearing a thigh-high skirt brought me my ninth Diet Coke. I had to go to the bathroom, but didn't dare leave my seat.

I started to raise my bets, and I started to lose. It was close to midnight, and I had to be at work at six. I placed my last seventy-five dollars in the betting circles. The dealer handed out the cards. This would probably be my last hand. I peaked at the first card. A jack. The second and third cards were also jacks. I turned to the dealer.

"I need a jack," I said a bit too excited.

"I'll see what I can do," she said jokingly.

I stared in wonderment at the first card that was turned over. The Jack of Hearts. My stomach tried to turn inside out. My mind immediately began paying overdue bills. I said thanks to the dealer and kept quiet until she turned over my cards.

Four of a kind pays fifty to one. With my seventy-five dollar bet, I had just made a cool three thousand seven hundred and fifty. It was the most I had ever won. The

other six people at the table could only stare in awe as the pit boss, an Indian man wearing a smart blazer with matching tie, slid six purple, seven black, and two green chips over to me. I told him that I wanted no more red.

"Wow, five hundred dollar chips," said a small, wrinkled lady with a dyed-red beehive. "I've never seen so much purple all at one time."

The eighties rocker burnout scratched his beard.

"Dude, I'd take that and get out of here," he said.

Beehive nodded in agreement. "Don't let the Indians get that money back from you," she said.

I left Let-it-Ride. I went straight to the pay phones and called Julie.

"Where the hell are you?" she asked in frustration.

"I just won two thousand dollars," I told her, and hoped she couldn't tell I was lying.

"You're at the casino again?"

"Yeah, but this time I won two thousand dollars."

"When do you plan on coming home?"

"I'll be there in an hour or so," I said.

"Try and bring some of the winnings this time, will you? Maybe we can finally get the wedding rings out of hock.."

"Okay. I love you," I said to a dial tone. She had already hung up.

I went back to the main room and moved from table to table. I went through chips and drank soda and realized I hadn't gone to the bathroom in over six hours. I might have peed myself, or spilled something, I don't know. The room got colder, and my nipples stood on end through my tank top. The dealers kept wanting to give me red chips, and I kept saying no.

"No more red!" I told the roulette dealer as he scooped up my green.

The rich old man kept appearing and disappearing.

He looked happy as he lost, and I wondered if he really liked losing. I, on the other hand, wanted to win more. A lot more! I dropped another two greens and moved again. Every dealer knew me, or they should have.

Just about five thirty I remembered I still had to go to work. I dug into my pocket and pulled out my last three green. Seventy-five bucks left. I went to Let-it-Ride and sat in the same seat that had been so good to me hours before. I placed it all in the betting circles. The slots continued their synthesizer sounds.

"Okay. All right. Let's do this," I said.

The rich old man's "bathroom philosophy" echoed in my mind. I didn't even bother to look at my cards.

PROGRESS REPORT

Bobby walks along Nine Mile Road. Late to school again.

"When I was a kid," he remembers his father saying, "It was Twenty Mile Road. You're lucky you don't have to walk that to school!"

He sees the marquee in front of the parking lot. It reads, in large easy-to-read-by-passing-automobile letters: PROGRESS REPORTS GO HOME TODAY.

Maybe all of his teachers' houses had burned to the ground last night and they hadn't been able to save the progress reports. Doubtful. Maybe the office had also burned, destroying all the school records. Doubtful.

The message from the assistant principal last week had been clear to Bobby. "The next time you're tardy unexcused, Bobby, you're going to In-School Suspension to write a five-hundred word essay."

As he walks into the library he expects to be escorted to In School Suspension for his essay lesson.

At least I won't get my progress reports there, he thinks.

But he knows that there is no way the library attendance people would know anything about his punishment.

"Good morning, Bobby," says the nice woman at the desk. "Please sign in."

She signs his late pass and Bobby is on his way. Still ten minutes left in reading. First progress report--at least he hasn't found a way to fail this class.

The day becomes sunny. No one remembered the frost. At least he can ride the bus home this afternoon. Home. Progress reports. Two passing grades, the rest fail-

ing. Not the best way to enter the house.

"How was your day, Bobby?" he imagines.

"Oh, just great, Mom, I passed reading."

"That's great, Bobby."

"I passed gym."

"That's great, Bobby."

"I failed everything else."

"Didn't the listening stop a while ago?" Maybe his mother hasn't driven past the school today. Maybe his mother would never pass by the school. With that marquee always being two or three days behind, he had better hope it would be a week before she even thought of driving by there on the way home.

He feels tense as he opens the door, fumbling with the keys. That big key ring, from the days of elementary school. "So you won't lose them, Honey." When was the last time she had called him that? Was that so long ago? Before the bad time at school started? He doesn't even remember anymore what comes first. The order of things becomes unraveled with frowns and unhappiness until all that matters is not smiling and not hearing. When had she stopped listening? All at the same time. Order gone.

Blame is for God and small children. He remembers hearing this line in the movie "Papillion." One prisoner is forced to tell on another, his best friend, and later when they see each other again he asks, "Do you blame me?"

If she knows about the progress reports he doesn't know what to do. She expects failure.

Does she?

She expects him to lie.

Does she?

She expects him to just change the subject and smooth it over until the next time.

He goes down to the kitchen and sees a note on the

microwave door.

He can hear her voice as he reads, "Don't touch it, Bobby. I'll be home by six. I'm fixing it tonight."

Touch it. Fixing it. She always uses it. Not fixing dinner, but fixing it.

He can hear her saying, "You know what I mean, Bobby. It's the biggest word in the English language."

Her slogan, he thinks.

He remembers the first time she tried that line on him. They were at the beach in Nags Head. The tides had been strong that day, waves crashing, the swimming unsafe. But Bobby didn't understand. After the second time of being pulled from the water, he got the "it" line for the first time.

"The tides are dangerous today, Honey, it's not safe to swim in it."

"What do you mean, 'it'?"

"You know what I mean, Honey, it's the biggest word in the English language. Just like those big waves are too dangerous for you to be swimming in."

Maybe he should try "it" with her; try telling the truth and giving her the opportunity to listen.

Six o'clock. She's always prompt. Keys in the door, a little fumble for her too. He decides she is nervous, he decides she knows. She drove by school and she knows and she's nervous about what he's going to do. So maybe she doesn't expect after all. That would be good. What if she never had those expectations? What if they were mine, what if I was wrong?

"Bobby, are you home?"

Wrong about all of it? He wonders. Well, that would be impossible.

"How was your day, Bob-- "

"I got it today, Mom. I got my progress reports," he interrupts.

She senses it too, he thinks. A chance, maybe. The hint of something new. He feels it as she hugs him.

"I know, Honey, I know."

Later that night, under the green-glow cover of the microwave clock, she takes the copies of the progress reports out of her purse. She had picked them up at school on the way home from work. She throws them away.



### IT'S ELECTRIC

Mrs. Crenshaw was the supervisor lady who wore the big tacky denim dresses. She stood in the back of the greenhouse by a tall metal rack of viney pothos, tapping a pencil on her clipboard. Electric tried to seem interested as she explained that he would be a “tech,” which was short for, “Tropical Plant Maintenance Technician.” Electric thought this was hilarious, since the job entailed not a hell of a lot more than watering plants in office buildings and doctors’ waiting rooms. It was like a dishwasher calling himself a “Hydro-Ceramic Sanitation Mechanic” or something. Electric stood by the giant plastic bags of Spanish moss and squeezed one of them. It felt foamy.

Electric thought working with plants might be therapeutic, but the vibe in the greenhouse was sluggish and uninspired, inching along at a pace comparable to the speed at which the plants grew. Mrs. Crenshaw herself lumbered across the floor like a massive piece of earth-moving equipment. Electric was starting to think that someone had duct-taped a pair of slow-motion goggles to his head, and it would really hurt to take them off. He squeezed the Spanish moss again.

After getting laid off from his web design gig—which had twenty-two-hour work weeks, catered trendo parties, wild-ass boating trips on the crazy boss’s yacht, crystal meth, coke, weed, blow-jobs, trysts, girlfriends, and free racquetball—Electric was a little burned-out. The greenhouse stood out as a monument to, you know, plants, nature, health. That, and it was the only shit-job he could find.

But as soon as he started going into these buildings, stores, and doctors' offices, another force even more natural than the calming greenness of foliage began to kick the monotony in the ass: the death-defyingly gorgeous bevy of unbelievable office mamas. Primo babes. Sweetie-pies. Everywhere. Holy living shit! No, they weren't the throw-down party girls with rough voices like the ones at his old job, but they were better looking overall, their tones higher, perkier. Especially Darla. She sat behind the dentist's office receptionist counter in her pink scrubs and white cross-trainers like a lone tulip in a crap storm, the other assistants running all around, hustling patients in and out like worker bees. Electric watched her from behind the four-foot corn cane next to the big reception window as she typed patient information into the computer, one careful key at a time.

Electric doused each long corn cane leaf with waxy Green Glow spray, smearing it on in slow, loving strokes. He carefully fluffed the Spanish moss and thoughtfully deliberated as to which dying yellow leaves to snap off. He almost forgot to water the thing, but he managed to drag the process out until the other dental assistants cleared out of the reception area.

"Teeth are something I've never really had a problem with," he said to Darla. "Never had a cavity. Haven't been to the dentist in years."

Darla spun around in her chair, her braided pig tails centrifugally spinning with her. She had very big eyes.

"Well, you should go every six months," she said. "At least for a cleaning." Her voice was sweet and sisterly, but somehow still hot.

"My great uncle was a dentist for the Air Force in the Korean War. He actually performed oral surgery once on an B-52 flying over enemy territory."

"Wow," Darla said. "Really?"

"No. Big exaggerator. He was an army dentist, though, but like, in the seventies."

Electric already had nine phone numbers from other office babes, but Darla's was the one he coveted the most. To him, she was the snowiest of milk maidens, her unjaded breasts like pure cream under the scrubs, he was sure.

Before he could get her number, though, an all-business, older dental assistant lady with cartoon teddy bear-print scrubs charged in and asked him if he needed any help. Her name tag said: "Barbara," and she gave Electric a crossed eyebrow look of: maybe it shouldn't take you a half an hour to water four potted plants.

"Well, see you all next Tuesday," Electric said, but Darla was answering the phone.

He took his big green plastic watering can, bottle of Green Glow and leaf shammy, and headed to the accounting firm of Carter & LeBeau. He spent most of his time in the lobby reading an article about monkeys with computer chips in their brains and talking to Caitlin, the secretary. She had a boyfriend.

As Electric hit third gear in the old piece-of-crap company Civic on the way back to the greenhouse, he realized that something was gnawing at his lunch, something gurgling down in the secret swamp of his thorax.

Darla.

She threw him off guard somehow. No girl had done that since Blackie. It was a crush, and he couldn't believe it. Crushes were something Electric thought you left behind with high school, like sock hops or zits or snorting Lysol spray from plastic baggies and surfing on roofs of SUVs down major highways at top speeds. But a crush? No way. Not him. Not at the calloused and jaded age of twenty-eight. What the hell was happening! Maybe Blackie dumping him was making him soft, he thought.

That beeeeooych! But that was two years ago. He wondered if calling her would technically violate the restraining order, but he couldn't remember what the judge said. Plus he was concerned that the new number he had for her might be her new boyfriend's cell phone.

After work, Electric got a six-pack and a knock-wurst at the convenience mart. He got back into his car in a hurry, and one of the mustard packets fell out of the bag and got smushed between a beer can and the parking brake, squirting a yellow zig-zag across his neon green Luscious Plants Greenhouse polo shirt. He sat back in the seat and let out a giant annoyed sigh. He felt uncomfortable, alienated from his own body, especially in the annoying shirt. Used to be able to wear heavy metal tee-shirts to work at the agency. And now the whole crush thing was making him feel like a giant super-pussy. He just wanted to drown it all out with beer, junk food and cable, maybe do that last hit of E from his old boss Ken's "Sorry-I-Have-to-Lay-You-All-Off-and-Sell-the-Boat" party. That party sucked. Naw, he thought, pork rinds and Ecstasy...mmm...naw.

He sped home and stretched out on his late seventies-era plaid beige sofa and it hit him how tired he was. Damn that manual labor, he thought, yawning. Then he remembered that he was supposed to be working on a website for his this Alvis's band, Potato-Ass Jenkins. But he didn't have any good ideas so far and anyway Alvis hadn't even brought him the bottle of Crown Royal and wacky South American mushrooms he promised. But fuck mushrooms, he thought, stretching out to a documentary on the Blitzkrieg of '40 and nodding out.

Zoning back in a couple of hours later, Electric decided to make some coffee. He went into his tiny office and looked up Dr. Langley Spiers, DDS., and no shit—there was Darla in a group website photo! It was the whole

staff, standing outside on the front steps of their office, with square-chinned Dr. Spiers posing like Lindbergh by the Spirit of St. Louis, gazing up at the great mouth in the sky to scan for tartar. They all had very good teeth. But Darla!—OUCH! Electric couldn't believe it was her—she looked outRAGEous, her hair let down wildcat-style, and an I'm-gonna-have-a-fucking-blast-with-or-without-you smile that curled up at the edges and completely bazooked his hypothalamus. But the most purely insane thing was—she was wearing shiny black leather pants! Tight! We're talking the most luscious points of finer gamulation that he ever could have cooked up in the froth of his agile imagination. No wonder Dr. Fuckface Spiers looked so happy—(some of the other assistants weren't too all bad either.) Mmm...Electric wondered if maybe dentistry wouldn't be a bad idea for a new career choice.

The combination of brain chemicals provoked by the crush on Darla and the picture of her in the Pants now seared onto his brain was straight up kicking Electric's ass. He got his wallet out and threw all his new phone numbers in the toilet and flushed them down. Then he grabbed the toothpaste and started brushing his teeth. I am now all for Darla, he said to himself in the medicine cabinet mirror, wondering if he should shave the goatee. He didn't really know her well enough to make an informed goatee shaving decision. Another thing that sucked was, he wasn't due back at Dr. Spiers's office for tropical plant maintenance for a whole week. Dammit! That shit just ain't gonna do!

The next day, Electric finished his route and hauled ass to Dr. Spiers's office. It was about four o'clock. Darla was in the little office behind the counter, typing, squinting. She had on loose-fitting blue scrubs, and the ponytails, but Electric could only see her in the pants—the explosively crazy deliciousness of those goddam pants was turn-

ing his mind into a steaming brass bowl of French onion soup, burning the roof of his thoughts. Holy Count Crapula.

“Howdy hey!” Electric said, waving.

“Hey,” Darla said, effervescing like a crisp vodka and soda. “Weren’t you just here yesterday?”

“Yeah, but you know what? You’re right—I should get a check-up. Teeth are fine, but, like you said.”

“Would you like to make an appointment?” She was already up and grabbing the large bound appointment book. Perky. He was into that.

“Let’s see...how’s next Thursday at 3:30 sound?”

“I’ll be here.”

“Name?”

“Electric. Well, you can put Lance for the first name. That’s my business—Electric Productions. I’m a freelance web designer. Just doing the greenhouse deal to, you know, satisfy my fascination with botany and plant life and what-have-you.”

“Uh...okay. Last name?”

“Henders.”

“Henderson?”

“No. Henders. That’s okay, everybody thinks that.” He leaned over the counter toward her and whispered: “Would you like to go out sometime?”

Darla smiled, her lips curling up like on the website, and it looked like she was starting to nod her head, but the monster woman with the teddy bear scrubs on the day before blew in, only this time her scrubs had Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd on them. Fucking pajamas.

“Weren’t you here yesterday?” the woman said.

“Why, yes,” Electric said, “I was. And here I am again today.”

“He’s making an appointment,” Darla said.

“I’ll bet he is,” Pajama Lady snapped, giving him

the streamlined squint. Electric could tell she was a ranking member of the Fun Police, on a life long mission to punish anyone around her for the heinous crime against nature of, God forbid, enjoying themselves. The reason she probably even worked at a dentist's office in the first place was for the myriad opportunities for sadism, of which there were surely thousands. Luckily for him, though, she hustled another patient-victim back to the chamber, but then two more dental assistants zinged in and he felt like he was in an ant farm during a crumb alert. His neck felt hot.

Darla slid him his appointment reminder card, and when he saw that she'd written her name and phone number on the back of it, he nearly wet himself with joy.

Darla lived in a giant cookie-cutter apartment complex, but Electric gave himself extra time in case he got lost, which he did. He still wasn't sure he was at the right apartment until she opened the big beige metal door. She smiled like the innocent librarian, wearing a simple yellow sundress. Where were the outrageous party pants, screaming black leather or otherwise? She still looked good, though, like that girl in that underground French movie he never saw. Petit. Crush-induced butterflies kicked around in his nachos a couple of times. This crush stuff was a new sensation to Electric, a novel buzz.

They sipped merlot on her sofa of big pillows by the light of a raspberry candle. Electric told her all about his former high-paying e-job, his fledgling freelance aspirations, and his penchant for extreme racquetball. He wanted to show her he was more, so much more than just the guy who takes care of the plants.

Electric had recently cashed in his 401k, so when they sat down at the restaurant, he recommended the lobster. Darla spread the linen napkin out squarely on her lap and smoothed out the edges. He copied her. She said she couldn't get the lobster because she couldn't stand the

thought of eating something that had been alive so soon before she ate it.

"I know what you mean," Electric said, "Poor little bastard. You should try the flounder—those dudes have probably been dead for a good three, maybe four days."

"Thanks."

Electric realized that his choice of words was probably not the best. He felt somehow off-balance, like a monkey swinging through the forest and missing some of the branches. It was the pants—the imbedded image of Darla in them, writhing to some wacky jungle music riff—this was playing itself over and over in his continually running brain movie. He tried to steer the subject back to her so she would talk and he could drink some water and breathe. The lump in his throat was playing extreme ping-pong with the crush knot below. His neck felt hot again.

He found out that she had her philosophy degree, and that she wanted to go to grad school for Public Administration, but she didn't want to work for the government and was considering going into aromatherapy. In the mean time, she was working at Dr. Spiers until she figured out what she wanted to do. Her big aspirations were to hike the Appalachian Trail, learn how to blow glass, and write a book on women Beat writers. Electric wasn't aware that there were any women Beat writers, but he knew enough to keep his cake-hole shut this time. Her life sounded very tidy to him, a uniform staircase of goals, neatly ironed like her sun dress or the linen napkins on their laps.

When the food came, Darla asked Electric what writers he liked.

"Oh, I dunno. I used to read a lot of Philip K. Dick. I was mostly into video games and computers growing up. Never got into D&D, though, thank God."

"So, Lance, riddle me this: what do you think is the



true, absolute meaning of life?”

Holy shit. Now Electric felt like he was on a reality dating show, about to be eliminated.

“Well, this to me is the meaning of it all,” he announced, looking around the restaurant with his palms up and out. “Good wine, new friends, an awesome fucking lobster, or in your case, broiled chicken breast.”

“Doesn’t sound very spiritual.”

“Oh, but it is. Enjoyment of life is a highly refined spiritual art. It’s way Zen. I should do a website about it.”

“Actually, doesn’t Buddhism involve the removal of desire, as opposed to the hedonistic indulgence in its fulfillment?”

“Whoa, uh...well, maybe I was getting it mixed up with Shinto, or, um, Hoobatchi. Anyway, how’s that pasta salad? Can I have a bite?”

The conversation fell into a chewing lull, giving Electric a chance to regroup.

“I have to say,” he said, “that picture of you on Dr. Spier’s website is totally stunning. You photograph very well. And those pants—I have to tell you.”

“What? No, I’m not on that. They took that picture before I started there.”

“No fucking way!”

“Yeah, everybody tells me I look like that girl—I think her name was...Kellen—but she left like two months ago.”

“Really? Where to?”

Darla smile curls dropped, even though they had already sagged quite a bit since he fucked-up the philosophy conversation. Her fork went down onto the plate. Clank. “I don’t know, but if I realized you were so interested, I would have found out for you.”

Oops.

Silence.

The kneecap-tingly flavor dropped out of the evening like a cinderblock falling down the stairs. On fire. They skipped dessert. The ride home equally sucked, Darla giving him monosyllablic directions for turns through the apartment maze. He felt lost, even though she knew the way. He insisted on walking her to the door.

"No thanks," she said.

"Please?" He said, following her up the sidewalk.

"I'm really sorry I said the wrong thing."

"I'm sorry I'm not the other girl, so, good night."

"But I don't care about the other girl. I care about y—"

"Good night."

SLAM!

"Darla! Wait!" He considered pounding on the door, but then he thought, naw—that's too psycho. He hadn't even had sex with her yet.

He went home and sat down and rubbed his eyes into the back of his head. Now he felt sorry for her. He wasn't just a jerk, he told himself, he was the all-state captain of the jerk squad. It was all a fertilizer, poured on his little neon French crush. And the idea that she probably hated him now was like giving it not only fertilizer, but manure, mulch, mineral water, polishing the leaves to make them shiny, reading it poetry and playing it Mozart. This is just too the fuck much, he thought—maybe I should just go back on drugs and forget all this emotion crap.

But it was too late.

He just couldn't shake-off or otherwise exorcise himself of the idea that if Darla was his girlfriend, it'd be like a majestic confluence of cool rivers rushing over him, cleansing him of all the negative muck, funk, and stupid bullshit that seemed to be crawling up his back lately. Darla would make his life a total, righteous package. So he sent flowers to her at Dr. Spiers's office, called her there and at

home a total of seventeen times, and when she wasn't home he left notes and poems taped to the door of her apartment, often leaving a small potted tropical plant he'd stolen from work at the doorstep. Hopefully it was the right doorstep. One of the poems went:

To Darla:

The night sky is crystally and starry,  
And I am so so very sorry...  
If you want to you can have alla me,  
If you would just just please please

calla me.

Love,  
'Lectric

He figured she would appreciate it, having been a philosophy major and all. But she didn't call back.

When Tuesday rolled around, Electric exploded into Dr. Spiers waiting room full-force: showered, shaven, plenty of cologne on the pits, goatee gone. Shavened clean off.

But the mean Pajama Lady said Darla wasn't working today.

Electric slammed his hand on the counter harder than he meant to.

"Do you have a problem?" Pajama said.

"No, I don't. Sorry."

"Look. The plants are fine. I'll water them myself. Bye."

"Okay, fine then."

Electric marched out and slammed the door. His neck felt hot, the polo shirt collar irritating the crap out of his skin. When he got to the car he opened the hatchback

and threw his empty plastic watering in, slamming it into some stuff. The crashing sound invigorated him. But he couldn't figure what was bothering him so much—it had to be more than just the nasty people in the world like the pajama woman or the stupid crush or the fee hike at the health club or his late rent.

He drove to Darla's apartment, pulling the edge of his shirt collar nearly down to his stomach.

Electric couldn't believe it when she opened the door, about four inches, anyway, until the chain stopped it.

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"Look, I'm really sorry about the other night. If you'll just give me one more chance, I swear I'll make it worth your—"

"It doesn't matter. Look, there's something I didn't tell you. I have a boyfriend. So...we can't see each other anyway."

"A boyfriend! What! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because we were seeing other people for a while and the other night we decided to go back to exclusivity."

"Exclusivity, huh? Does he use those big five-dollar adverbs, too?"

"It's a noun," she said. "Look, Lance—you and I went out on one date, and we didn't even kiss! What is your problem?"

"Okay. My problem is this: I've got the biggest...the most craziest fucking crush on you. One like I haven't had on anyone in years. Like since high school! And if you're too blind...if you're too blind to see that, and what that means and what that could mean, then...then maybe you should be working at an optometrist's office instead of the dentist."

"Thanks for the advice," she said, and shut the door. Ka-chink!

Never using that reverse psychology shit again,

Electric told himself. He called Darla's name thinking maybe she would respond to some forward psychology. She didn't answer. Then he knocked. This in turn somehow became screaming and pounding. His neck now felt hotter than the orange coils of a toaster oven, and he was going, what is up with this hot fucking neck thing lately? Just as he was about to start randomly punching the inset aluminum mailboxes in the wall, he remembered again that there was no reason to be going psycho like this—he hadn't even had sex with her yet. So he left, shaking some air into his shirt.

He still had the dental appointment. And since Mrs. Crenshaw told him the next day he would have a new tech route on Tuesdays, with all different stops, it was his one final glorious shot at Darla's rarefied affections. No more watering plants at Dr. Spiers—what a rip-off.

Electric swaggered into the dentist's office in his favorite paisley polyester thrift store shirt. He considered himself to look buck stylin' even though there was probably no one on the planet who was capable of looking more white at that moment.

All that preparation and then the pajama bitch said it was Darla's day off!

"God!" Electric screamed. "What is she part-time now or something?"

The dental ladies looked at each other. There were two of them. Electric felt like he was about to get a gold plaque at an awards show for Best Assholes. Nothing was coming out right. He went over to see how the plants were doing. He started flicking at the leaves. Flick, flick.

They finally led him back and settled him into the dental chair. Maybe Darla would show up to get her paycheck or something. He closed his eyes and took in the clean detergent smells. It made him feel good to be taking care of himself, you know, oral hygiene and all that. He

even didn't mind when the other mean lady crammed the plastic planks in his mouth and was short with him throughout the entirety of the x-rays and cleaning. He realized that the whole crush on Darla thing was silly and so over. She wasn't right for him anyway, he told himself—she was too innocent, with her “exclusivity” and her utter lack of mindboggling wild-girl party pants. He'd just been too wound up lately, yeah, too wound up. That sounded good. He let the dumb crush go like he was dumping out a bag of premium enriched potting soil into the ever-flowing Zen wind behind the greenhouse, whatever the Zen wind was. It had to be something. He'd look it up on the Internet when he got home. Yeah.

Dr. Spiers walked in, with a vapor of bad cologne around him. He looked like a former pro linebacker. A rock face. He was all business, too.

“X-rays say you have six cavities, Mr. Henderson,” Spiers said. “Three on top, three on the bottom. I can do the top or the bottom ones today and then the others on another day. You choose.”

“It's Henders. Uh...jeez. I guess the bottom? The bottom ones?”

Electric barely felt the Novocain shots. They were like pin pricks. He was amazed that the science of oral medicine had come so far since he'd last been to the dentist back in '92 for an emergency root canal.

“I'll be back in a few minutes,” Spiers said.

Electric smoothed out the white paper dental bib against his chest. It reminded him of linen napkins at the restaurant on his date with sweet, porcelain Darla. He could almost smell her though the medical smell. She hadn't vaporized into windborne particles as fast as he wanted. He made a vow to get his mind off her for good.

“About ready?” Dr. Spiers said.

“Wow. This soon? I don't know. I'm not quite

numb yet." He touched his chin.

Spiers said: "Mmm," and started messing around with the overhead dental lights.

"Say," Electric said, squinting, "I was just wondering, uh...that girl on your website, Kellen. Do you perchance know where she might work now?"

"Kellen? Never heard of her."

"You know—Kellen! The hot girl with the black leather pants and the crazy smile? On your website."

"You mean Darla," he said, slamming the little stick mirror down on the instrument tray.

"That's Darla?"

Dr. Spiers started revving the drill—whine, whine, whine. He held it up and looked at it as he revved, his teeth showing. They were very white. Then he dropped into that slow, doctorly way of speaking: "She told you she had a boyfriend."

"Well, she did mention—"

"All right, prince charming—OPEN!"

Dr. Spiers took the drill up to full speed, and like some maniacal Mengele dentist, he grabbed Electric's jaw and drove the drill bit into a rear molar—whiny, whine, whine—the high-pitched spin, the icy burn, like a thousand elephants standing on a freezing razor-point as it twisted into his gums. Electric waved his arms like he was drowning, screamed and tore out of the chair, knocking into the instrument tray, trying to cuss, but he couldn't articulate very well. When he bolted for the lobby, he gave the four-foot corn cane plant a solid field goal kick, the Spanish moss flying out and landing on the carpet in a solid ring.

Electric ran two blocks holding his jaw before he realized he was still wearing his dental bib, its white fabric flapping behind him like some kind of bizarro, spit-stained surrender flag in the wind.

was scared, I could tell. Shit, so was I. But that wouldn't show right then. I was too pissed. I was pissed and I was a couple of beers under. Stay the fuck away from her. I kept on running his words in my head, kept on until I thought smoke would start coming out my ears. Stay the fuck away from her. I was burning.

Lights all in front of me. I was passing everything. Blurs and colors, bright and flashing. The window was open, wind tearing into the van, adding that rush to everything. Adrenaline was pumping into my head like a water hose. My head felt swollen with it. I was holding the wheel so tight, and leaning close, so close my face was on top of the wheel. All I heard was the wind. The engine gunning every time the light went green. Jon still talking. His voice, but no words I could understand. I wasn't paying any attention. It's like I had split into two separate entities. The mechanical part, the physical, just driving, no other purpose but to fly down this road and get there while I was still burning and all the while still make it in one piece. The other part, inside, right past the tight lips and clenched teeth and wild eyes, was where it burned. This fucker. I was going to kill him.

"Dude, for real. This is stupid, man. So what, this fucking idiot called you up? He's a pussy, man! He can't even say shit to your face. He's gotta call you up. He don't even know who you are. He's just whipped, man! Only reason he doing this shit is to be a tough guy, man. Only fucking reason," Jon said, with crossed arms, looking out the window.

I still wasn't really listening. I was thinking of that son-of-a-bitch. I didn't care what possessed him to do it. I didn't care if someone had him at gun point. I just wanted to kill him. Maybe it had something to do with her. My head felt so warm and heavy. I had tunnel vision, one goal and direction to drive towards. Then everything would



SLEEP WALKER

As the musky tobacco lifts off  
The walls and floats—an infant  
Mobile—around my head, the house  
Creeks and I remember once  
Grandpa danced naked atop the coffee  
Table between the telly and my parents'  
First date and his skin  
Jiggled in the I Love Lucy  
Light and I remember instead of walking one night  
In his sleep,  
He died.

The dog hears the footsteps too.  
They creak on the old  
Floors and move from room to room.  
Panting, he follows the footsteps to the top  
Of the stairs and he stops  
Where they stop and he growls  
At the empty kitchen.

GET GOING

No way in hell I'm going home yet was the first thought I'd had since I got in the minivan. I veered off the stretch of road, just some long and lonely old dark road. I sat there, stared ahead blankly, hands clutched at the steering wheel like dead hands. I wasn't moving. Nothing outside except a bunch of black and pale blue and quiet. After a while, I didn't know how long I'd been sitting in that van. The same song in the CD player over and over again. The same dying voice. Right then, at that very specific moment, I felt like there was something about the song, something about it that was just triggering a piece of my brain. The song defined my life right then, that night. I must have thought if I tried hard enough, really listened, it would have told me some secret. Told me something that would have made some kind of sense of everything. But it didn't. I reached over into Jon's pocket and pulled out his box of Camels. The box was crushed and the cigarettes mangled. I took out one and put it to my lips. I couldn't find a lighter. Both my hands were on the wheel again.

"Time to get going, Jon."

"Time to get going, Jon!" I yelled out the minivan.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Jon yelled back, car door swinging open, he launched in and slammed it after him. My foot slammed the pedal. The engine roared. Wheels spun and squealed. Jon put on his seat belt.

"Are you fucking nuts? This is stupid as hell! What the hell do you think you're going to do? We're only two people! All this just the fuck for her?" Jon still yelling. He

was scared, I could tell. Shit, so was I. But that wouldn't show right then. I was too pissed. I was pissed and I was a couple of beers under. Stay the fuck away from her. I kept on running his words in my head, kept on until I thought smoke would start coming out my ears. Stay the fuck away from her. I was burning.

Lights all in front of me. I was passing everything. Blurs and colors, bright and flashing. The window was open, wind tearing into the van, adding that rush to everything. Adrenaline was pumping into my head like a water hose. My head felt swollen with it. I was holding the wheel so tight, and leaning close, so close my face was on top of the wheel. All I heard was the wind. The engine gunning every time the light went green. Jon still talking. His voice, but no words I could understand. I wasn't paying any attention. It's like I had split into two separate entities. The mechanical part, the physical, just driving, no other purpose but to fly down this road and get there while I was still burning and all the while still make it in one piece. The other part, inside, right past the tight lips and clenched teeth and wild eyes, was where it burned. This fucker. I was going to kill him.

"Dude, for real. This is stupid, man. So what, this fucking idiot called you up? He's a pussy, man! He can't even say shit to your face. He's gotta call you up. He don't even know who you are. He's just whipped, man! Only reason he doing this shit is to be a tough guy, man. Only fucking reason," Jon said, with crossed arms, looking out the window.

I still wasn't really listening. I was thinking of that son-of-a-bitch. I didn't care what possessed him to do it. I didn't care if someone had him at gun point. I just wanted to kill him. Maybe it had something to do with her. My head felt so warm and heavy. I had tunnel vision, one goal and direction to drive towards. Then everything would

come to a head. Then I'd be satisfied.

"Watch the fuck out!"

The light was red and I hadn't even noticed. Worse, I didn't notice the little red Civic, the little red blur, speeding on into the intersection. I jerked the wheel, went up the sidewalk a ways, then back into the road wildly, horns blaring all the while and my eyes ready to pop out of my head. It was over so quickly, but we were untouched.

"Snap," I said finally. I blinked and it felt like I was waking up from a movie dream. I looked over at Jon and he was wallpapered to the door, a mute look of horror on his face. It made me laugh.

"That... was not... fucking funny."

"You got shook as hell," I said between laughs.

Jon crossed his arms, making that face he's made since elementary school, every time he's trying to save face. "Man, whatever. You shouldn't be worried about me being shook. You should be worried about what the fuck we're going to do about this motherfucker and your bitch..."

"She ain't no bitch, man!" I cut him off right then and there, heated all over again.

"Aright, man."

"Nah, I'm fucking serious, don't be calling her no bitch man, you don't fucking know her like that."

"Aright, shit!"

I muttered on for a minute after that. Jon tried talking again. "For real, though. I mean, who is this dude, man? Do you even know his ass?"

"Yeah, I fucking know him! Little bitch ass, white ass yuppie motherfucker, man. Motherfucker thinking cause he listened to an Eminem CD now he hard and shit. He don't know what the fuck some real shit is. But I'm gonna fuck him up though. I'm gonna break his goddamn face. Then I'ma shit in his eye."

"Yeah well, how the hell you gonna do that? You

don't even know who the hell's over there. He could have all his boys over there. And you and me, shit, we got two baseball bats and a tire iron. The fuck we gonna do, man."

"We're gonna fuck them up, that's what we're gonna do. Stop being a little pussy ass bitch is what you need to do, cause we're rolling up now." I turned into the neighborhood, dark, quiet, family sitcom material, complete with swing sets in every yard. Every house looking exactly the fucking same. It made me sick.

"The fuck you calling a pussy, man? I'm here helping your ass out! Cause I'm your boy, remember? Damn man, how long have I known you now, huh? Since second fucking grade. I used to keep the bullies off your ass in recess. You remember that shit?"

I said I did with a grunt.

"And now you think you all grown up and you're trying to roll up and start busting heads, all over some bi..." he cleared his throat, "some girl. Damn man. I thought you knew better than that."

This made me flush, made my skin feel even hotter, and I realized once I pushed past the booze enough that it was all just a lot of shame. I shook my head, "Nah man... but this ain't just no girl, man. She was it. She was it, you know? She was the one. Only she ain't anymore, and I can be all right with that. I can get past that. But then this motherfucker gonna call me up, gonna go 'round talking shit about me. Ah hell naw! You know! I ain't going out like that! Fuck that! She was my girl, man! And can you believe he told me to stay away from her? Told me if I talk to her again he'll fuck me up? He don't know the shit I done for that girl! Shit I been through for her! Shit man. Shit."

Jon sighed like some old man, "I feel you man. But damn, this ain't the right route, man. The dude, he just talking, man. You ain't got shit to prove cause you gave her

up, you know? You already been there and done that. You ain't got shit to prove. But if you did, you know I'd be right there with you, right?"

I was pulling up to the house now, and I had just enough sense about me to go covert style, headlights out, creeping. I turned off the van when I got in front of the targeted house and looked over at Jon.

"I know, Jon."

"I know you know! So then what the fuck is this, man? You know if it was me, you probably wouldn't have even let me get this far! Damn man, I know you know better than this. Let it go man. C'mon now, you know I'm looking out right? Right?" he pushed my shoulder as anyone of my three brothers would do, staring me down.

I didn't have what it took to look back. So we just sat there. Quiet, Jon and me. It was slowly getting to me.

"So, you don't think we should do this huh, Jon." I didn't even put it in a question.

"Naw, man. For real, shit just ain't worth it," he said, and I was looking at him when he said it. Good ole Jon. I thought of her for a second too. It almost made me laugh. It suddenly came to me that she would probably be loving this. To see me so worked up. See me ready to break heads over her. Like I'd always done. Like she always would want me to do. Fuck her. It was that easy. That easy to reach for the keys and start the van back up.

Something hit the van on Jon's side, BANG! We both jumped and cursed.

"What the fuck!" I yelled and looked out the window. Three of those Ralph Lauren-wearing, bleached-hair, pant-sagging bastards, all out in the yard, looking dead at us with the look of war on their faces. And she was behind them, by the door of the house, staring like she did. Like she wasn't any part of this. Like none of it even mattered.

"Motherfuckers...hit my van," I strung the words

out, and I felt it all flooding back into me, felt my blood getting all hot again. "This is my mom's minivan, man."

Jon was looking at me, breathing heavy. He didn't say anything for that second, just finally nodded.

"Let's do this."

We reached in the backseat for the bats, and stepped out of the car.

It didn't take long at all. I didn't take long and it was still so slow. Unbelievably slow. All rush and adrenaline. Incapable of thinking, just pure reaction to action. And at the end of it all, I was just standing there. Looking at her. She had tears in her eyes. She had been screaming, I remembered. When I was bashing her new boyfriend with my bat. But now she didn't look sad or happy, mad or anything. She just stared back at me. I didn't even realize I was still holding the bat. And that the guy was rolling around at my feet, crying and holding his knee. All I could see was her. But all that was going to change after tonight.

I turned around and saw Jon laying down, the other two guys laid out as well. Jon's head was bleeding, russet hair matted with the stuff, and he was just barely moving, just enough that I knew he was breathing. That he wasn't dead. I would feel guilty. I should feel guilty. But I didn't really feel anything. I just felt numb. With a heave, I tried to pick Jon up. I couldn't, so I ended up dragging him to the car, pulling him inside, and propping him up straight so he didn't look like some dead body. He looked at me weakly, through squinty eyes, but then they closed. He didn't say anything. He was out. I got back in the car, tossed the bat in the backseat. I looked one last time out in the yard. She was still there, watching. Then she just turned around and walked back into the house. I started up the van and headed off.

No way in hell I'm going home yet was the first thought I'd had since I got in the car. I veered off the stretch of road, just some long and lonely old dark road. I sat in the car, stared ahead blankly, hands clutched at the steering wheel like dead hands. I wasn't moving. Nothing outside except a bunch of black and pale blue and quiet. After a while, I didn't know how long I'd been sitting in that car. The same song in the CD player over and over again. The same dying voice. Right then, at this very specific moment, I felt like there was something about the song, something about it that was just triggering a piece of my brain. The song defined my life right then, that night. I must have thought if I tried hard enough, really listened, it would have told me some secret. Told me something that would have made some kind of sense of everything. But it didn't. I reached over into Jon's pocket and pulled out his box of Camels. The box was crushed and the cigarettes mangled. I took out one and put it to my lips. I couldn't find a lighter. Both my hands were on the wheel again.

"Time to get going, Jon," I said. I started the van up again, and stopped the CD, switched it to the radio. Eminem was playing. Eminem's always playing. I turned the radio off.



Piece of my Heart

The word got around and lots of people showed up at Morgan's party. His parents were out of town and the house was swarming with people, most of them wearing things like Marilyn Manson T-shirts and black lipstick and leather jackets and neon green and black striped tights and wallet chains and shit kicker boots and other Goth-type stuff like that. A couple of guys there were even wearing vampire teeth. Not the ones you wear on Halloween but really nice ones custom made by the dentist that they wore all the time. Some people there were pretty good friends of mine, and I recognized some other people from school or the mall, but some of them I'd never seen before in my life.

Our mother had dropped Kristen and me off there without even asking if there would be parents present like she used to do with our older sister Liza when she was fifteen. I assumed that was because she didn't want to be an extra barrier to our social lives. That sort of made sense, considering that it was only a few months ago that Kristen and I started building real friendships with anyone other than each other. Plus Mom had spoiled the hell out of us our whole lives anyway. Mostly because we made her uncomfortable, and she just didn't know what else to do besides spoil us. But whatever her reason was for ignoring her parental responsibility of finding out if the party would be chaperoned, I wasn't about to complain.

Morgan's house was decorated in sort of a cheesy country craft fair sort of theme. There were framed family photographs all over the house, and the kitchen had a sponge-painted border of light and dark blue pots and pans

all across the top of the crème colored walls. Ceramic ducks and cross-stitched pictures sat on a ledge above the sink, and the bottle of liquid dish-soap was actually wearing a little apron! The rest of the house was decorated pretty much the same way, and watching all those Gothed-out people partying in that house was kind of a trip. So I was having a great time, getting high and having a really intense conversation about that book *Catcher in the Rye* with this cute, relatively plain-looking boy named Josh when things got ugly.

It happened like this. I felt warmth in my stomach and a slight heartburn. Then I felt a little dizzy in the head. I excused myself from Josh and pulled my head back from over Kristen's shoulder and sure as shit she had a damn bottle of whiskey in her hand. I figured she'd probably gotten it from this Johnny asshole she always talked to who basically lived at the mall and hung out with a bunch of fifteen-year-olds even though he was twenty. But I'd been so preoccupied I hadn't even noticed she had the bottle until I felt the effect of the alcohol.

"What the fuck are you doing Kristen? I told you earlier that I absolutely can't drink tonight!"

"You're not drinking I am," she said sarcastically, glaring at me.

"Very funny." Not funny at all actually. The thing is, Kristen and I are conjoined twins. We both have our own set of arms, legs, hips and all, but we share a heart between us. Our stomachs are connected and so are our rib cages, so we are always face to face, unless we look over each other's shoulders to have separate conversations. Needless to say, if she gets drunk, I do too. I hate being drunk. I slur my words and it's almost impossible for Kristen and me to walk because we can't keep in step with each other as we naturally do when we're sober. Plus I always wake up with a horrible headache and can't even use

my brain the whole next day. Kristen swears up and down that she doesn't feel the hangover at all but she must be lying. I mean, we share a body, she must feel the same physical effects as I do. She probably just doesn't notice that she can't use her brain because all she ever does is watch TV anyway. Usually whenever we came across alcohol I just let her have her "fun" and deal with it, but that weekend I just couldn't afford to have a hangover. I write and illustrate children's stories, and there was a contest being held by a Parent's magazine, a nationwide publication, and the deadline was Monday. The winner would get published in the magazine, which had a very large readership; I saw this as a valuable opportunity. I had an idea for a great story, but I hadn't actually written it yet, so my brain needed to be in full working order. Kristen knew how important it was to me, which is why I was really pissed off when she decided to start drinking.

So the fight continued. "You know I can't have a hangover tomorrow, you promised you wouldn't drink."

"Well you smoked pot, like that's not going to hurt your ability to think tomorrow!"

"That's different. Just put down that bottle, now," I demanded, hoping she'd just do it because everyone else in the kitchen was starting to stare at us even more than usual.

"You always make everything about you Jane, and I'm sick of it. I want to have fun tonight so I'm going to." God she was acting like a brat.

"I think my goals for my writing career are a little more important than your getting drunk tonight." I said, trying to grab the bottle out of her hand. Somehow she switched it to her other hand behind my back, and then quickly took another drink. Our heart was pounding wildly, I felt like I was going to throw up. I wasn't going to give in. We kept fighting, yelling at each other and flailing

about even several minutes after I made her fling the whiskey bottle across the room. Kristen even had the nerve to bite my cheek hard enough to draw blood. At one point we lost our balance and Kristen fell backwards onto the floor, and then we rolled around a little, refusing to get back up because that would require cooperation between us. By now a huge crowd had gathered around us and people were red-faced trying to hold back laughter, some didn't even hold it back. I couldn't really blame them. After all, it must have been quite a ridiculous scene, one physical being with two minds fighting itself. We didn't care about the laughter, we were so angry and frustrated. Finally, when we were too tired to keep fighting and silently pulled ourselves up to a standing position, everyone in the room looked really embarrassed. Josh looked like he felt sorry for me.

Kristen mumbled, "I guess we should go."

While we were waiting to be picked up, all Kristen said was, "You and your fucking art."

I didn't say anything at all.

I wrote my story that weekend and sent it in. I doubted that it would win the contest because it didn't really turn out as good as I had wanted it to. Not because I had a hangover or anything, Kristen didn't drink enough for that, but because I was very distracted by the fact that Kristen and I were on bad terms. I mean, its not like other siblings and friends and stuff who just sort of stay away from each other after a fight, we were constantly faced with the frustration. I couldn't even talk to anyone else about it because she would hear and yell at me for talking shit about her, even if I tried to write an e-mail she'd be staring at it the whole time. We actually talked to each other as little as possible all week. I mean naturally we had to talk a little bit, just to get around in school and everything, but we didn't have any conversations. In our free

time, Kristen did nothing but watch stupid sitcoms. Usually when she does this I put on my headphones and read or write, but I was too upset to do either, so I just listened to Janis Joplin, my favorite album of the moment, and thought a lot. I guess this was bound to happen sometime. It's pretty natural for siblings to grow apart at our age, and I guess we had to go through the same thing. But the fact that we could never literally grow apart was making that experience a lot more stressful than it probably is for most people. I figured we would become close again eventually, after all, this wasn't the first time there had been animosity between us.

Come to think of it, the first fight we ever had, when we were six years old, was over pretty much the same thing as the one we'd had at the party. It happened when I first became interested in writing stories. When we were really little, Kristen and I didn't care that we were different. Even when we started school we didn't care that other kids stared at us, we just thought we were lucky to have a built in best friend. We used to always keep our arms around each other and give each other butterfly kisses and stuff. We had one of those exclusive languages common to twins, except ours was even harder to figure out because a lot of times it didn't even involve talking. We felt the same thing physically, so we just usually knew what the other one was thinking. We were happy when Sesame Street came on or when Dad or our big brother David picked us up and spun us around calling us the "twin engine airplane." Our heart ached when we would hear Mom crying to Dad about how she was "confused" about us, and when she took Liza to the mall and left us behind, even though she always returned with matching button-up shirts for us to wear.

I'm pretty sure Dad is the reason we turned out as

well adjusted as we did. Mom seemed like she was in pain every time she looked at us, and tried as hard as she could to avoid mentioning the fact that we were conjoined twins. Like if she didn't talk about it eventually we would just magically detach or something. Dad, on the other hand, seemed thrilled by the fact that we were conjoined twins, especially on Halloween. He used to get all excited about costumes for us. In kindergarten we went as a really elaborate monster, with Kristen wearing furry werewolf gloves on her hands and me with one hand in a Freddie Krueger glove and the other hidden in my sleeve and holding a plastic hook so that it looked like I had a hook for a hand. Dad even made four extra arms out of wire and sparkly, fish scale material with hands that looked sort of like fins and sewed them to our shirts right below our regular arms. Kristen wore those plastic flipper shoes made for the pool, and I wore fuzzy bear-claw slippers. We each wore a different ugly monster mask and a long tail pinned to our bottom. I think we actually did scare lots of the other trick-or-treaters, much to Dad's amusement. Another time he thought it was a brilliant idea for Kristen to wear a cop costume and me to dress as a bank robber. And then one year I went as an old woman while Kristen went as a punk rocker. Dad had a really strange sense of humor. I could go on and on, but every Halloween without fail our costume would have Dad and David doubled over with laughter. Kristen and I loved the attention and always laughed with them, so Halloween was our favorite holiday.

Besides dressing up in weird costumes, our favorite things to do together were playing with Barbie's and Matchbox cars, collecting stickers and trading them with each other, and singing songs. Especially New Kids on the Block. She liked John Knight and I liked Jordan.

But anyway, we had our first fight when I wrote and illustrated my first story. I was inspired by those conjoined

alien Muppets on Sesame Street who always said funny stuff. My story was about them and their family in space before they moved to Sesame Street. The main characters in all of my stories have been Muppets because Muppets are just so much more animated and honest than real people. Even when I write adult stories my characters are Muppets, just Muppets with really complex emotions and problems. In my most recent story a twenty-year-old blue monster who lives with his alcoholic dad falls in love with a young beatnik Muppet. It's great, he admires her triangular red nose and her short green and purple bobbed haircut and the way she plays guitar with only three fingers on each hand.

Right, but I'm getting ahead of myself. When I decided to write the story about the conjoined alien Muppets, Kristen got so mad that I didn't want to play with her that she threw a temper tantrum, throwing us on the ground with her on top of me, pounding her fists on the ground dropping tears and snot all over my face. She told me that I was mean and she hated me. I told her I was sorry but I had a really good idea and it was important that I write it down. Finally our dad had to explain to her that I had a right to stop playing with her and do other things some times, and we worked out the compromise that I could write and draw in front of the TV so she would watch cartoons. Soon after that Kristen stopped resenting the time I spent writing because she loved my stories. Whenever she read them she laughed out loud, and I knew she wasn't just being polite because I could feel the laughter rise up in our stomach. So after that fight blew over we were happy together as always, and we really didn't fight again for years. But then, there was that other time I forced us to grow apart too, only that time it wasn't really a fight.

It happened one dreary, rainy Saturday when we were in the sixth grade. Kristen and I were kneeling on the soft maroon and green striped couch in our living room, eating cold raspberry Pop-Tarts and Pringles, and drinking Capri Suns. We were watching a Beavis and Butthead marathon and laughing our asses off, having a grand old time. Then MTV news came on and they started talking about Kurt Cobain's suicide. For some reason that got my mind reeling and I couldn't stop thinking about gunshot wounds, so I asked Kristen about it.

"Hey Krist?"

Her mouth was full of Pringles so all she said was "Hmm?"

"So Kurt died because he shot himself in the head right?"

Swallowing the last bit of chips, she mumbled, "Yeah, why?"

"Well I was just wondering like, what would happen if I shot myself in the head?"

Kristen's eyes widened in disgust, "Jane, don't even joke about that!"

"No, that's not the point, I mean, I'm not saying I want to die or anything, but just listen for a minute. When most people shoot themselves in the head, they die because their brain can't control their organs anymore and all, but if I shot myself in the head, your brain would still control our heart and everything, so like, would I actually live? And if I did, I guess they would fix up my head wound and everything and then I'd just be sort of brain dead but still half alive because blood is pumping through my veins, and poor you would have to walk around attached to like this brain dead vegetable. I mean, you'd probably have to carry me around because my brain couldn't control my legs-"

"Stop," whined Kristen, looking horrified.

I was on a roll though, and I had to talk out my



thought process because I was really curious. "No but really, do you think that instead of doing that they would just sort of cut me off of you? Like chop off my head and arms and legs and all, and basically cut all parts of me down as much as they can while still allowing you to live, and then give you a bunch of plastic surgery so that maybe you'd almost look like I had never existed, and new people that met you would never even know that you used to be a conjoined twin. Wouldn't that be weird?"

Kristen started to ball. "No," she sobbed, "that wouldn't be weird that would be horrible! Stop talking about it right now, that's horrible!"

I felt bad about making Kristen cry but I really wanted to know what would happen in a case like that, so I brought up the whole thing again at dinner, with Kristen protesting and crying all of the way through. My silly eleven-year-old mind didn't stop to think that that particular question might not make for the best diner conversation. Mom didn't even let me get to the second scenario before she left the table looking angry and stomped upstairs without saying a word. Dad and David just laughed, and Liza went upstairs to comfort Mom. Needless to say no one finished their spaghetti that night. Even today I wish I had never brought it up because no one ever addressed my question and the very next week we had to start going to therapy.

The therapist was a presumptuous asshole who did more harm to us than good. He basically implied that we should feel horrible about ourselves because "all adolescents strive to fit in." Dog shit. I wanted to punch him in his stupid face every time he looked in my direction. I'm not really sure what Kristen ever said to him or what he said to her, because he made us listen to music at a really high volume and even wear a blindfold when the other one was talking to maintain confidentiality, which I thought

was sort of absurd in our case. He even told my dad that he thought my stories were "deeply disturbing," when I just meant them to be unique and fun. Anyway we saw the stupid shrink for like a year and Kristen and I still talked and everything, but she always seemed really distracted. That was when we stopped wearing matching outfits, we just awkwardly buttoned shirts with completely different patterns together. On a typical day she would be wearing something like a butterfly shirt and skirt, while I wore a flannel and jeans. She also cut her hair short and dyed it blonde, while mine stayed long and auburn. And I don't know what the significance of it was, but she took to watching that show *Sister, Sister* with a look of longing on her face. My guess is that the asshole shrink got to her and made her crave normalcy and she fantasized about what it would be like if we were the type of twins that could get into cute crazy sitcom-like situations. But every day she still told me that she loved me and was lucky to have me, and I agreed. I mean shit, I could even get shot in the head and still have a second chance at life because of her, and she could because of me. That sort of made us super-human in a way, so who the hell needed normalcy?

I'd been dwelling on all of this and beating myself up about it when finally, almost a week after the party incident, Kristen decided to start talking to me again. We were sitting on our dark purple bedspread, and I was staring blankly at the plastic stars on our ceiling and listening to *The Breeders* on my walk-man, while she talked to someone on the phone. She had been on the phone for almost an hour and for some reason our heart was beating quite fast toward the end. Whoever she was talking to was getting her all excited about something. After she hung up she apologized to me and said she hoped that my story would win the contest. Then she revealed why she had

decided to talk to me.

"So, what do you want to do tomorrow?" she said. I assumed she was just asking because tomorrow was Saturday and we usually go to the mall on Saturday.

"I don't know, are people going to the mall?"

"Well . . . I thought we could start off at the mall, and meet Johnny there."

Our heart skipped at this, and she looked irritated that I reacted that way to his name. "Why do you always want to hang out with that loser?" I asked.

"He's not a loser, he's sweet, you don't know him like I do."

"What the hell are you talking about, you don't know him either, the only time you guys even see each other is at the mall. What's going on, did he ask you on a date or something?"

Kristen turned bright red.

"He DID! Oh God." We had never been on a date before, but we had been talking about it for years. It started way back when we were into the New Kids on the Block, and we actually used to pretend that we were going on dates with them. But of course, our make-believe dates were always fun because they were double dates. She and invisible John, and invisible Jordan and me used to have a grand old time going out together. Conversations about going out with boys got more realistic back in the eighth grade when I thought I was in love with this science geek named Billy. We used to talk about it all the time, and she agreed that she would have no problem going along with it if Billy and I ever ended up going on a date, even though it might be a little awkward for her because she would feel like a third wheel. I promised her the same thing about a month later when she got a crush on this soccer jock named Randy. Neither of those crushes ever turned into anything real, but I thought it was only fair to agree to

those terms with any guy either of us ended up liking. I knew I would feel really awkward in this case, because I had a horrible feeling about this guy, but the only way I would ever be able to relax and be in a good mood again is if Kristen and I could be on good terms again. "Well, what do you guys want to . . . umm . . . do on this date?"

"Well he's going to meet me . . . or . . . us I guess, at the mall and then he's going to take us to his friend's house because his friend's parents are out of town. He says his friend lives in walking distance from the mall."

"He's going to take us to some random house? I don't know Kristen, it sounds like he just wants to have his way with you."

"So what if he does? He said I don't have to do anything I don't want to, and I do want to, you know, make out, if you want to know the truth. I mean, I'm fifteen and still haven't even had my first kiss. Fifteen is the national average for girls to have sex for the first time and I haven't even been kissed, jeez."

"It's not a contest. Besides, I haven't been kissed either."

"Your time will come, but this guy likes me and cares about me a lot, he said so. I mean he even talks to me about his family and everything. Come on Jane please, this means so much to me."

I really didn't want to do it, but I also didn't want to cause another fight. Even though I didn't like what Kristen was talking about, at least she was talking to me again. And I could tell she'd really throw another shit fit if I didn't agree to this, and then that would probably lead to a tense silence that would last even longer than the one that just passed and I just couldn't stand living like that. I suddenly longed for the days where silence between us just meant that we didn't need to talk to communicate, and we spent more time looking into each other's eyes than over

each other's shoulders. I accepted the fact that tomorrow would be a long night of headphones and reading and trying to be invisible and mumbled, "fine."

At that I felt Kristen's arms around me and I had to jump up and down to keep up with her. "Thank you, thank you, thank you! I swear I'll do this for you whenever you want me to! Eeeee! I have to call Johnny and tell him!"

The next day our dad drove us to the mall, mocking us about it the whole way there as usual. "Like, I hope you guys have a good time going to like, the mall again. Picking out the latest fashions and everything. I wouldn't dream of letting you two spend a weekend without being able to go to the Gap!" He was just trying to be funny, but I think Dad was actually sort of disappointed in us. He thought we sold out or something because he only associated the mall with fashion queens like Mom and Liza. He didn't understand the concept of mall rats. While I was offended by the fact that my dad would ever consider the possibility of me being that shallow, I didn't want to correct his assumptions because he would never let us go to the mall if he knew that shopping was the last thing we had in mind. So I just silently rolled my eyes at his wise cracks until we pulled up in front of the food court.

"Thanks Dad!" Said Kristen, "We'll call you when we want to be picked up!" We slammed the van door and he drove off. "Ok," said Kristen, "Johnny said he'd meet me at the movie-theater, he should be there by now."

Sure as shit, he was waiting by the Runt's candy machine in front of the movie-theater and that nasty grimy-toothed pedophile grin stretched across his face when he saw us coming. His long black greasy hair was down today and fell just below his shoulders. He was tall and skinny and wearing black jeans, a T-shirt with a skeleton in a leather jacket and bandana riding a motorcycle,

and leather jacket. When we got up close he smacked Kristen's ass and kissed her on the forehead. "Hey beautiful." She actually giggled. What the hell did she see in him? I was already disgusted and didn't want to hear any more of this so I reached into my purse to get my Walkman. When I looked up to put the headphones on he was looking straight at me with that same grimy grin, "Hey Jane," he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Hello," I tried to fake a smile for Kristen's sake but I don't think it worked very well, "Pretend I'm not here."

With that, I pretended to be really interested in this passing woman, looking embarrassed that her four young kids were all screaming, "Mommy, Mommy look, those girls are stuck together!" so that I wouldn't have to talk to him any more, but it really wasn't interesting at all, stuff like that happens pretty much every day of our lives. I put on my headphones and pressed play to listen to my Nirvana, Incesticide tape. I just followed them while ignoring them the best I could. First we went into Burger King, where Kristen bought him a double whopper with cheese, fries, and a coke, and fries and a diet coke for herself. What a fucking prince, not only does he take her to Burger King but she actually has to pay! While they ate, I looked out the window at the cute dorky guy working at the stand where they write people's names on a grain of rice, put it in some sort of necklace and sell it for like twenty bucks. I was having so much fun watching him and listening to Nirvana that I almost forgot why I was there. Until we got up and left the mall.

The sun was going down as we walked through this dead-looking gray forest behind the mall. It was abnormally humid for May and I felt sweat bead up and roll down the back of my neck. I kept getting pricked by thorns and branches slapped in my face. I actually took off

my headphones to ask, "Where the hell are we going?"

"This is a shortcut to my friend Ray's house," said Johnny, looking back to flash me that pedophile smile, "We'll be there soon."

After a couple more minutes in the woods, we materialized into a rundown suburban cul de sac and were walking up the stairs to a small, rickety looking house. When he opened the door the overwhelming smell of cat piss and cigarettes greeted my nostrils. Kristen and I exchanged an Oh dear god look at this but then she just turned her gaze back to Johnny. The door led straight into the living room. We stepped onto a green shag carpet that was turning brown and had lots of stains on it. The only furniture was a huge TV and a ripped black pleather couch and matching chair. Beer cans, crumbs, and overflowing ashtrays littered the floor. I couldn't help but wonder why the ashtrays were even there, because there were stray cigarette butts lying all over the floor anyway. Images of big-breasted women glared from the TV screen. Lying on the couch was this guy who looked a lot like Johnny but with red hair, and in the chair was this big fat guy who looked like he was in his late thirties wearing big glasses, an orange hunter's cap, and a ripped white T-shirt with beer stains all over it and his hairy gut hanging out the bottom. Both guys had bloodshot eyes and gray looking skin and stared at us shamelessly. Seeing all of this while listening to Kurt Cobain sing "Grandma take me home . . ." was pretty strange, but the song seemed to fit the mood somehow. I felt like I was in an indie flick. Our heart was beating wildly and our stomach hurt. I kept waiting for Kristen to say she wanted to go back to the mall, but she didn't. So I kept my mouth shut. She was going to owe me big for this.

Johnny said something to the red haired guy and he opened this door that led down some rickety wooden stairs.

This led us into a basement that was converted into a bedroom. It smelled like stale pot smoke and musty basement, and there were heavy metal posters all over the walls and dirty clothes and ashtrays on the floor. The "bed" was a mattress covered in rumpled sheets on the floor with some porno magazines and a single crusty sock lying next to it. Johnny quickly hid those under a pile of clothes, hoping we wouldn't notice. We sat on the bed. My back was to Johnny so that Kristen could face him, which made me feel very insecure - like he could pull out a knife and stab me or something before I knew what was happening because I couldn't see him. But I knew I was being irrational and swallowed hard, trying to choke down my increasing paranoia. I changed my tape to Janis Joplin and while I was doing that I heard him spouting some bullshit about how much he cared about her. I quickly pressed play and realized that all I had to look at was a Megadeath poster, God I wish I'd remembered to bring a book. After what seemed like about ten minutes I could tell that Kristen and Johnny were making out. His arms were actually around me to get to Kristen. It made my skin crawl but she seemed to be enjoying it so I kept my mouth shut. Then they stopped suddenly and Johnny ran upstairs. Kristen pulled my headphones off of my head.

"What? Are we leaving?" I asked, hopefully.

"No, look, I have something very important to tell you."

"What?"

"When Johnny gets back, we're going to have sex."

"Like hell you are! That guy's disgusting!"

"No he's not, you're just a snob! And he loves me and I want to have sex with him and you can't stop me!"

I could tell she wasn't prepared to give in. "You're too young for that and I'm not ready to have sex yet, especially with someone like that."



"I'm not too young, fifteen is the national average, remember, and besides, it's me having sex not you, so don't worry about it. I'm always cooperative with what you want to do."

"Well what if this asshole has some STD like AIDS, if he passes it to you then I get it too, so you can't even say this doesn't affect me."

"Where do you think he went huh?" She didn't wait for an answer, "He went upstairs to find some condoms, even if he does have a disease, he can't pass it through a condom."

We fought about it for a while longer and I finally agreed not to say anything if they used a condom, and made it clear that I thought she was making a very big mistake. But I had to let her live her own life or she would just hate me forever and I didn't want to live like that.

It was disgusting I had to face him while they were doing it for technical reasons so I just closed my eyes and felt us sort of rocking back and forth as we knelt on the mattress. I really thought I was going to throw up, and wondered if she was actually enjoying this. I knew she was at least excited because our heart was pounding fast. We were all tingly and I felt my cheeks flush. I shut my eyes tight and couldn't help but think about Josh from the party as I rocked with less resistance than before. I felt a hand down my pants that started on my ass and when it moved forward I gasped with pleasure and it was warm and right and I didn't want it to stop. . . No! His fat tongue gagged me and I suddenly wanted to stop. I was being groped by this revolting pedophile fuck and he was kissing me violently with his beefy, moldy cigarette breath.

I jerked my head back and yelled at the top of my lungs "You disgusting Asshole!"

"Jaaaaane!" Kristen seemed mad beyond belief.

"Did you not notice him trying to kiss me and his

hands all - aaagh! Fucking pervert!"

Kristen looked like Johnny and I had been in a conspiracy against her, she didn't know what to think. She said nothing and her eyes were welling up with tears as she pulled her underwear and skirt back on. She looked at him, "How could you? I thought you loved me, I didn't think this was some pervert twin fantasy! I'll never forgive you, you pervert!"

"I couldn't help it, she was just there, what did you expect? I'm no pervert you freak!"

We raced up the stairs and out the door, tears streaming down Kristen's face. I was still disturbed by what happened to me but more than anything, I felt bad for her. It was completely dark out now so we tripped over something in the woods on the way back and we just sat there and cried. Finally I said, "I'm so sorry Kris."

She looked right at me with her red eyes and screamed "I hate you Jane you're such a fucking curse! I'm a goddam freak, all because of you!"

I wanted to disappear, or shoot myself in the head and be sanded off of Kristen. I'd never felt worse in my entire life. Not because of what happened, or even because of what she said, but because I realized that she meant what she said. Kristen just wanted to be normal. I'd sort of known it ever since we had to go to that shrink, but I never let myself believe it until now. She wanted breasts and boyfriends and prom dresses and first jobs in retail or restaurants, and she couldn't have any of it because of me. That Johnny asshole and her attempt to become part of the national average was the closest thing she could get to something that in her mind, resembled normal. Because of me.

### The Non-Silent Treatment

I don't know why the headaches started, but they did. Sometimes I try and justify them by shrugging them off as just a product of loneliness and an extra sixty pounds of unwanted fat.

My thick cellulite-filled backside does nothing to repel the chill from the ice-cold iron bench I am sitting on. I take my gloved hands away from my throbbing temples and sit on them, hoping in vain to get rid of the numbness in my rump. I stare at the trashcan on the other side of the sidewalk and count the splotches of gum that missed the mark. I feel like I belong inside the trashcan....

Sometime later, I break out of my sullen trance, interrupted by a baby screaming somewhere. This annoys me. I am envious of such a free emotional expression. I suddenly have a momentary lapse of civility and open up my mouth to let out a cathartic wail.

For a moment I feel like I am eight again and my best friend just challenged me to a contest to see who could scream the loudest and longest in one breath. I scream until my throat is raw and my lungs are depleted of air.

Oh, the stares! I wish I had been caught on candid camera so that I could record the episode and watch it over and over again. No one ignored the fat, red headed woman—of course not!

The baby ceased crying and its alarmed mother immediately turned the stroller around and high-tailed it as far away from me as she could.

An old homeless man with white dreadlocks had been sleeping on the bench beside me. He sat up with a

start and turned to look at me with crusty, sleepy eyes.

I looked back at him and smiled. He scowled, grunted, and turned over while repositioning his makeshift newspaper blanket.

A young couple walking by snapped their heads over my way to stare for a brief moment before looking back at each other to secretly share a look of judgment on the psycho fat woman. They then quickened their pace to leave the zone of awkwardness and continued on with their predictable lives.

When it seems that I am no longer the center of attention, I finish amusing at people's reactions and turn my attention to the fact that my butt is still freezing cold. I shift my weight to free my tingly sleeping hands and turn my attention to my headache. I wait for the familiar throbbing ache and realize that the stabbing pain has completely vanished!

I marvel at the speed in which my migraine was cured. Perhaps I can journey outside to a busy city sidewalk and scream therapeutically at the top of my lungs more often—that is, of course, until I get locked up for being crazy. Anyhow, I know now from experience that it is so much more effective than Advil—effective and a hell of a lot more entertaining.

## Sandcastles

It was a spring morning in rural Maine. The air carried a residual cold from the night, but promised a warm afternoon. Robert Nolan was out jogging before work, combating the beer belly that he had begun to pack on over the winter. He had spent the season in Maine, restoring summer cottages that people rented on Sebago Lake.

The job was as good as a job could be, and left Robert with plenty of time to work on his paintings. Rooming was part of the pay, and Robert slept in one of the houses that had already been fixed up. The house's minimal insulation had hardly put the Maine winter to the test, and the cold was inescapable. Every night, Robert would paint with a blanket in his lap and a can of beer at his feet. Robert's co-workers congregated in another cottage, just down the beach. Between songs on the radio, Robert could hear their voices carrying up the sand and bouncing off of the sharp, gray water.

Paintings were what were on Roberts' mind as he jogged a little after seven. As Robert's body separated the Maine mist, he matched it so well that he was invisible to Mike DeJesus, who was driving his pick-up truck down the road towards Robert.

Mike was late for work and getting into Heart's "Magic Man" as it blared through the tinny radio. "Magic Man" was one of the last songs that they had played at his senior prom, and that night was the first time that he had been laid.

Prom night was on Mike's mind as he plowed

through the mist and the passenger side of the front of his truck clipped the jogging Robert Nolan. Mike braked for a second before convincing himself that it "Musta been a dog... or a deer." He sped off to be twenty minutes late for work, not giving the collision a second thought.

Robert couldn't give the collision a second thought. Mike's truck had sent him headfirst into the young trees on the side of the road. He broke his neck on impact, and died immediately. Eventually, the morning mist cleared. Another driver found Robert and called the police.

Within a day, Robert's will had been read, and his body was heading for the crematorium. That's what he had wanted. He was not a stationary person, and he never took well to the idea of a final resting place. In Robert's will, it said that Dave Rainier, his best friend from back in North Carolina, was to carry the urn full of his ashes until he accidentally left it somewhere. Robert figured that it would be more realistic for him to end up in a restaurant bathroom, or scattered across a downtown sidewalk, than laying in a graveyard. Dave had no qualms with this duty, and, besides, it was what Robert had wanted.

Four days later, Dave Rainier found himself heading south on I-85 in Virginia. He was going to his best friend's funeral, something that he had never considered doing. Dave was only twenty-seven, and he hadn't figured on having to think about that sort of thing for at least another twenty years. Or, at least that's how Dave thought it should be, but he had always been a procrastinator.

Dave was in D.C. the night that he found out. He was getting home from his job as the phone was ringing. He hung up with his Mom pretty quickly and sat for a while, thinking about Robert. They didn't see much of each other anymore, but Dave still felt close with Robert. Robert had moved to North Carolina at the beginning of

high school, right at a time when Dave was feeling himself drifting away from some of the kids that he had grown up with. Dave had been grateful for Robert, whose presence alone proved to him that life was possible somewhere besides North Carolina. Now, it put a lump in his throat to think that he could look out his window at the hangnail moon and know that there was no chance that Robert was looking out his window and seeing that same moon. Odd little things like this were what reminded Dave that Robert was dead.

Dave's mind was preoccupied with technicalities like getting off work to go to the funeral, trying to figure out if he had proper funeral clothes (like Robert would care) and the repetition of telling people that he would be gone for a few days because his best friend had died. The repeated telling was what ground his heart down until he began to think that it hurt so much because it was aching to start beating again.

Like most southern interstates, I-85 was tree-lined. Dave drove fast enough to make the trees blur around him until they formed a green guiding wall, taking him back to North Carolina. Once he was home, he went straight to his parents' house. Every time that he pulled into that driveway, his wheels crunched to a stop on the pebbles a little sooner than he planned. When he turned his head up for that first look at the house that he had grown up in, he found himself having to narrow his gaze, because, with each trip home, it looked smaller. The roaring blue sky above the house encompassed it and the trees that separated the ranch house from the neighbor's towered that much higher.

Dave let himself in the front door. His mother peered through the living room from the den, where she had probably been on the internet. The sight of his par-

ents in front of computers conflicted with Dave's idea of his parent's house as a place that hadn't changed since he had moved out in 1992. His mother moved forward with sympathetic eyes that made talking about Robert seem like the only thing that was appropriate to do. Dave knew that he was devastated, but he didn't feel like he had anything new to say.

The death of a loved one is not something that anyone ever gets accustomed to dealing with. Since Dave didn't know what feelings to expect, he had just kinda shut down while he waited for the flood. You could say that it hadn't sunk in yet.

Dave was reunited with a few too many people at the funeral the next morning. His ten-year high school reunion was scheduled for that upcoming summer, and although he was dreading it, he knew that he was going to go. The funeral was a few months shy of the reunion, and Dave hadn't had the time to mentally prepare for taking stock of the progress everyone's paunches, bald spots, expanding asses and drinking problems had made in the last few years.

He sat with Carol Logan and Harlan Lawrence, his two other closest friends from high school. Harlan had developed a bit of a desk-butt from a job that kept him in front of a computer, and the bags under Carol's eyes had become ordinary fixtures on her face, threatening to overtake her slightly turned up British nose. They had all stayed in touch over the last ten years, so these physical changes weren't as noticeable as the three of them talked about Robert. The way that they skirted around Robert's death had Dave looking over his shoulder every now and then to see if he was just showing up.

"Oh yeah, I heard that Robert's paintings are doing really well."



“Huh, that job up in Maine sounds like a perfect retreat for an artist. I’d love to have that sort of time to get some work done.”

At funeral services, no one really latches onto the words of whoever speaks in honor of the deceased. Even people who believe in things like Heaven and Hell think that God has already made a decision about this person’s destination, and any praying or singing that they do is half-hearted. Funeral services are good because the people there can look around the room to see just how many people the deceased has touched, and realize that everyone there has been impacted by this loss.

During the service, the tears finally came out of Dave. It’s not that he had been holding them back, it’s just that he had felt too drained to let them out. They came when he looked around the room and realized that everyone there had a long face for the same reason. They had all lost Robert. Dave would miss knowing that while he was working in D.C., Robert was working odd jobs to support himself while he tried his damndest to make it as a painter. A girl that Robert had dated in eleventh grade would remember the tissue paper flowers that Robert had made her, and know that the boy who gave them to her wasn’t alive anymore. From this point on, everyone in the room would alter their unique memories of Robert. Happy memories would become bittersweet and angry ones would be polished, the bright side finally uncovered.

Through his tears, Dave watched the service wane and slip away. He found himself rising with the others and filing out into the small plaza in front of the church. It was an early spring day in North Carolina. The kind of weather where you want a jacket if you are standing still, but after being in motion, you want to be in your shirtsleeves. Dave squinted in the sun as Carol came to his side.

Holding his arm to lovingly steady him, she reminded him that a few folks were going to meet up at her parents' house across town.

Carol's parents still lived in the house that Carol had grown up in, so Dave knew exactly where he was going. He could have made the drive with his eyes closed, and this allowed him to detach himself from his surroundings as he drove deliberately, looking straight ahead and hardly varying his speed.

The late afternoon sun seemed even more distant in Carol's parents' living room. Dusty shelves full of untouched old books loomed over dark wooden furniture like stadium seats full of spectators waiting for a bullfight. The wine-colored rug on the floor slowly became a patchwork quilt after the couch and armchairs filled with people and more guests arrived to sit Indian-style on the floor, their limbs folded in for protection.

There were over a dozen people in the Logans' living room and they all avoided each other's eyes, only to catch other vacant gazes then blink and sigh, not knowing what in the world to even say. Someone came in with a case of beer, and everyone passed the festive box around. The room was filled with the rustling of cardboard and the sound of beer cans fizzing open in erratic succession.

As the beer disappeared, people began to talk.

"You remember that time in eighth grade when Robert got a detention for telling Mrs. Grady that IBM stood for 'International Bowel Movement?'"

"What about on graduation night when you passed out on the Nolans' driveway and his dad totally called your parents? I thought that you'd never speak to Robert again!"

The anecdotes became peppered with more and more laughter and they also began to drift further and fur-

ther away from Robert as stories reminded the people in the living room about other stories. Eventually, the chain of stories would lead to one that did include Robert, and when his name would come up, everyone would get quiet and look at their feet, then around the room, remembering just why they were there.

In that living room, Dave did a little catching up with some of his former classmates. On this day, his job as a web designer seemed particularly futile, and he found his classmates lives equally uninteresting. Dave continued to make small talk, hoping to drown sorrow with platitudes. It didn't feel right to be so social, and Dave worried that someone was watching him and finding it crass that he was having a good time at Robert's funeral. He kept asking himself "How are you supposed to act at a funeral? If I'm not visibly sad at all times, does that mean that I don't care?"

A couple more cases of beer had appeared during the gathering, and on a bathroom break, Dave and Harlan cornered each other in the hall. They rested comforting hands on each other and their eyes cut through the evening shadows, making perfect contact.

"How are you?"

Such an innocuous question is usually met with an equally forgettable reply, but in this case, Harlan was sincere and warranted an honest response.

"Do you think it's right for us to be making a party out of our best friend's funeral?"

"Dave, do you think that Robert would want all of these people to be sitting in that room crying and being miserable on his account? I think that he'd be happy to know that he had brought us all together, and he'd want us to have a good time while we were remembering him."

With a deep breath and a blinking nod, Dave left Harlan's comforting grasp and ducked into the bathroom

under the staircase. The ceiling under the stairs sloped towards him as he watched his piss discolor the toilet water. When he turned around, he looked funny in the mirror over the sink. The leaning ceiling made it look like he was emerging from some sort of cave. Dave met his own eyes in the mirror and nodded before cutting the light off and rejoining the people in the living room.

Late the following morning, Dave was on the interstate again. Robert rode shotgun, the limp seatbelt coiled under his urn. When Dave arrived at Robert's parents house to pick him up, they stood in the doorway of their house, holding Robert between them like a small child holds both of its parents hands while walking down a broad sidewalk.

The Nolans were silent, their gazes solemn, reminding Dave of the expressions of the farmers in American Gothic. Mrs. Nolan pecked the cap of the urn before handing it to Dave. "Be safe." Mr. Nolan's eyes burned Dave as he retreated down the walkway in front of the house and opened the passenger door of his car. Dave knew everything that the Nolan's hadn't said, and it careened through his head.

In the car, the highway whooshed by and Dave thought about what would happen if they ran out of room for cemeteries in the United States. Every day, people are born, and people die, but when people die, they don't really go away. Most dead people stay in cemeteries, which already take up a great deal of space.

Dave remembered a visit to New York City where he rode the subway out to Coney Island. The summer sun that day was vivid, and towards the end of the trip, the elevated train tracks passed directly over an enormous graveyard. Dave had been shocked, offended for all of the people whose loved ones were buried under subway tracks.

Cemeteries are supposed to be reflective, mossy places. Active subway tracks are not peaceful. Was there no objection to the train tracks barging right through there?

"You could never rest in a place like that!" The sound of his own voice kicked Dave out of reverie. The highway was flying by, and Dave tapped the brake. Robert didn't reply.

Dave and Robert drove on in silence, changing the radio station every now and then and stopping just south of Richmond to eat fast food for lunch. They got back to D.C. just before suppertime and Robert rested in the living room while Dave walked down to the Chinese place for takeout.

That spring, Dave had a couple of close calls with Robert. One night after the bars closed, Dave set Robert on the roof of his friend's car while he was piling into the backseat. They had gone a couple blocks in stop and go traffic before Dave realized that Robert was still sitting on the roof.

Another time, Dave was standing on the Metro, skimming the paper on his way to work one morning. Robert rested between his feet. The subway car came to a sudden stop and Dave felt himself jerk forward, seeing the urn tip over under the bottom edge of the Washington Post. The cap rolled between a pair of business pumps and came to rest against a tasseled leather loafer. A little bit of Robert sifted out onto the floor of the train and Dave did what he could to brush it back into the urn as he retrieved the lid and refastened it.

Wiping the dust from his left hand onto the inside of the pocket of his slacks, Dave's eyes filled. The subway car became a blur of neon lighting blotted out by neutral wool suits and countless swatches of flesh from the faces, hands, forearms and calves that surrounded him.

Dave exited the Metro station along with the rest of the morning rush. He thought about how much of an opportunity living in D.C. had seemed to be when it first came up, but how much more fun this city could be with his best friend. He was distracted for the rest of the day and, claiming bad health, he left work around two o'clock. He spent the rest of the afternoon sitting on his apartment's fire escape with Robert. They reminisced about high school in North Carolina, learning to drive, kissing girls and always being stuck in the outfield during baseball in P.E. class.

Summer came and so did the ten-year high school reunion. Back in North Carolina, Robert hung out in the car while Dave met up with Carol and Harlan at the Waffle House that had been the hang out for the kids at their high school.

The restaurant was still a popular high school hang-out and the three friends hardly gave it a second thought when they looked across the aisle and saw Nancy Jennings. She was waving to them and grinning with the same vacuous eyes that adorned so many pages of the senior yearbooks that gathered dust in Dave, Carol and Harlan's parent's houses.

"Hey guys, what's up?"

The three friends wondered why she was even talking to them until they remembered that they weren't in high school anymore. After high school, even the people that made the four years practically unbearable suddenly became your best friend. They laugh off or ignore all of the times that they looked right through you on the school bus or that their boyfriends called you "fag" and slammed you up against rows of lockers that boomed with your impact.

Nancy's face had rounded out a bit. Her hair didn't

seem as blond as it did senior year when she was on the football field on top of a pyramid of cheerleaders. Her smile fell and her eyes widened themselves into an expression that unconsciously mocked any sincere form of grief or pity.

"I am so sorry about Robert," she tried to say gravely. The way she drew out the end of "so" was calculated to the point that Dave had a perfect mental image of her using that same tone to describe just how sexy Clint Black looked on the cover of his new album.

"If you ever need to talk about it, I'll be here."

"Uh huh."

Robert was the big news at the reunion. The class valedictorian led the "True Blue Class of '92" in a moment of silence. Dave found it ironic that this was the only time he had seen that motherfucker not talking. Nancy Jennings offered up some theatrical sobs to accentuate the emotional gravity of the moment.

The reunion was set to a backdrop of gold and green school spirit streamers and a soundtrack of 1992's biggest hits. Classmates who hadn't made Robert's funeral sipped drinks from the cash bar and stuffed their faces with pretzel twists while offering their condolences to Dave, Harlan and Nancy.

The three friends escaped with what may have been a minimal amount of meaningful hugs, sad eyes and patronizing stories about the recent deaths of distant aunts and beloved pets. The three were ready to leave, all knowing that they couldn't bear much more from these people, but not being exactly sure what would happen once they did reach their breaking point.

Dave, Carol and Harlan agreed to meet down at the lake in their neighborhood. This was the place that they

used to sneak out to in the middle of the night to drink beer and make out. Here is where they did the things that everyone relishes, but are made to feel ashamed of by other people who secretly revel in identical earthly pleasures.

Robert sat with them in a patch of sand shadowed from the motion detector light that hummed on and off in the night. Harlan pulled a joint out of his pack of smokes and pursed his lips around it, lighting it and passing it over to Carol. Dave forgot about random drug tests at work and soon joined in, coughing and feeling like he was sixteen again.

After a few passes around the circle, Dave stuck the burnt out roach on Robert's cap. Robert always saved his roaches, and when they finished off a bag of weed, he could always get everyone high one more time before they pitched in to buy more.

"We need to get in the water," said Harlan, thirsting after the lake. Him and Dave stripped down to boxers, and ran off the end of the dock, their cannonballs a one-two punch to the surface of the sleeping lake. They emerged laughing and spitting a little; proceeding to splash around and loving the way the water felt as it ran off the top of their heads and over their faces before rejoining the rest of the lake.

Robert stayed with Carol up on the sand. Carol was too high to want to move, and content to watch her two friends' shadows ebb and flow across the water in the moonlight.

"This is how it was always supposed to be," she murmured to Robert.

As Harlan and Dave got out of the water and dripped onto the sand by Carol and Robert, a well-tuned engine revved and a chalky police searchlight pounded across the small beach towards the best friends. They scat-



tered and drove back to their parents houses, like they had done every other time that a neighbor of the lake called the cops on them for making too much noise in the middle of the night.

On the way back to his parents' house, Dave checked his rear pocket three times to make sure that his wallet was still there.

Carol got out of her bed and padded into her parent's kitchen to make sure that she hadn't left the toaster oven on when she heated up a bagel half an hour before.

First thing the next morning, Harlan wandered the aisles of the town's new Piggly Wiggly, confident that he had forgotten a grocery that he had meant to pick up for the breakfast he was planning for his Mom and Dad.

While Harlan pushed a cart through Piggly Wiggly and Dave and Carol were still asleep, Kyle Croft stole down to the lake by his house. His Dad wasn't awake yet, and Kyle knew that he wasn't supposed to swim without his Dad watching. Still, he liked to go down to the lake in the morning to meet his friends and play on the swings or in the sand.

Kyle was the first one there this morning, and he set up shop in the sand, a few feet from the shoreline. He began a sandcastle, hoping that Ryan would bring his new army guys to the lake today, and the army guys could have a fight in the sandcastle. This could be the best sandcastle ever.

A couple of toys were scattered across the strip of sand, and Kyle gathered them, figuring that this one heavier pail must belong to an older kid who would have an easier time carrying it. He hoped that no one would come to take it back, and one day he'd be big enough to own a pail like this one.

The pail already had a bunch of sand in it, and

looking back towards his house as he approached the waterfront, Kyle added a little water to the sand. He packed it in tight, then dumped a perfect mold of the pail onto the beach. He did it again with more sand, and placed the mold about a foot away from the other one, forming perfect turrets for the sandcastle.

Sugar

Lucy returned to the colony holding her prize high as she scaled the giant pebbles. Though the shard of carapace was thrice her size she handled it gracefully and without effort. She went in file with hundreds of her sisters and approached the entrance to the tunnels. A dark, musky hub of industry from which her sisters came and went in all directions, the colony was the only world Lucy had ever known. She smelled the excitement of her comrades and her pheromones boiled in response. The little black ants bustled past her and bumped into her, some even crawled over the rest.

"Come with me," signaled another ant, in a language of touch and smell as articulate as spoken English, and touched Lucy's thorax with her antennae. Lucy dropped her burden near the hole and followed the ant away. "This is the way to some food," she conveyed with her scent, and led Lucy to the edge of a vast parking lot and up an enormous brick wall, to which a wad of chewing gum had been thumbed. The glob was colossal and pink, with a faint fingerprint still in it. Lucy didn't like chewing gum; it had little nutritional value and it was difficult to eat.

"Perhaps the Queen will sample this food," she suggested.

"Perhaps - It would be an honor," replied the other. Soon many ants had followed the trail of pheromones to the gum. Lucy spent the entire afternoon shuttling pink specks down into the catacombs to line a small chamber with the disassembled wad of gum. As night fell, she sat in a darkened chamber and let the cool air slow her metabo-

lism.

The next morning, Lucy was revived by the activity in the nest all around her. The colony was busy again, and she could tell by its odor that the Queen would soon lay eggs from which the reproductives would hatch, and new queens would take their flights to create new nests. Lucy dreamed of somehow being a queen, to fly and birth a colony, and then grow gloriously old. But, wingless and sterile, she had never even seen a male and the idea of mating was foreign to her.

When she left to go scouting the scent of the population's frenzy followed her, occupying her mind with the Queen and the hive. She wandered around the territory for hours looking for a significant morsel of food, but the broad black parking lot was scoured clean. Lucy turned around to return home when she noticed something many feet away, something white sitting on the edge of a gutter. She caught the whiff of something edible. She approached the object with haste, aware that anything detectable from that distance had to be fairly large.

The great cube faced her edgewise, a perfect ninety degrees all the way to the top, a crystal lattice of pure sugar. It looked to be a full centimeter tall. Lucy could taste it on the air, and as she approached it she grew more excited, feeling its solidity with her antennae. It could be enough to feed thousands, but it had to be gathered before the next rain. She broke off a grain, one of millions, and ate it. Four grains later, as Lucy was laying a scent trail from the food to her nest, she began to turn gradually left, accidentally and without noticing. The earth beneath her narrow feet was new and different, as though she could feel it inside her exoskeleton pressing outward, and faint patterns could be seen in the arrangement of the sand. She dropped herself onto the ground and felt it with the whole length of her antennae, and her head, and her thorax.

There was a tiny beetle in front of her, lying on its back. It moved very slowly and slightly.

"Get out of my way," said Lucy, and then regretted having been so terse. "Are you hungry?" Lucy asked, thinking of her sugar, but the beetle said nothing in response. It only drifted sideways slowly across the sand. After waiting a short time for an answer, she realized that the beetle was dead, so she ate her grain of sugar and carried the carcass back to the nest. As she traveled Lucy stopped frequently, sometimes to touch things with her antennae and other times because she would forget her objective. Eventually she made her way back to the hill; it was getting increasingly difficult to control her own actions. She reached the entrance, and having lost the ability to function properly, she crawled into the nest to gather her senses and find some solitude. She found it in the undulating bubble gum room, where she lay watching the walls breathe and the pink globs rise and fall with the power of her mind. Gradually her visions faded and Lucy was left with the sensation that she was very close to reaching some new kind of knowledge. She was certain that there was a question on the tip of her tongue, and that its answer could explain every other question. Lucy sat for many hours pondering that problem, questioning it. Morning came and Lucy emerged into the sunlight rested and revived, but she still didn't have an answer. She warmed herself in the sunlight and tried to remember if she had been in the caves for one night or many. She watched the other ants scurry furiously around her, and for the first time thought it bizarre.

"Come with me," said an ant, touching Lucy with an antenna. Assuming Lucy was following, the ant crawled away while Lucy watched. Lucy decided that it would make no difference whether she helped with the gathering, and that the whole colony would never notice that she had disobeyed. Lucy walked off in another direction and scaled a

rock. She looked down on the sea of ants, scrambling over and under each other until each shiny head, abdomen and thorax looked like a single black bead intermeshed with all the rest. Lucy was not stupid, she knew that she could exploit her sisters and live alongside them without working, but that was no life for an ant. Lucy knew the colony's fate was her own, but life in the hive seemed empty now. She ventured back to the sugar to see if it contained the answers she needed.

The thing had six perfect sides, and it sparkled garishly in the sun. Its corners had become rounded off, but its glory was undeniable. Lucy ate some of it and waited. Soon she felt a familiar thrill and knew that humans had created this thing. She wondered if this was how Man had become Man and, feeling the energy of everything around her, wondered if He had left this treasure accidentally or as a gift. Her mind clear, Lucy decided to submit the sugar to the queen for appraisal. The trek back to the colony was bizarre but familiar, and Lucy didn't stop once before reaching the hill. She followed the queen's odor through the tunnels until she found the royal chamber. She couldn't see past the commotion of ants bustling around her, carrying food and larvae in and out of the room. Lucy pushed through the crowd toward the Mother and, reaching her, dropped the grain of sugar in astonishment. The Queen was grotesquely fat, an immobile glob with long wisps of grey hair running down her back. Both disgusted and captivated by the beast, Lucy stepped forward and spoke.

"Mother, I have something to show you. I found it in our territory and it may interest you." The Queen said nothing, only eating the food that she had been brought and contracting her abdomen in her constant labor.

"Listen to me, Mother!" cried Lucy, but the Queen said nothing, only continuing her mechanical duty. Lucy dropped her sugar onto the floor with the rest of the food

and made her way out of the colony. Lucy had realized that an ant couldn't understand any concept or task without having it demonstrated for them, so she touched one of her sisters on the thorax, saying, "Follow me." She crawled toward the cube without looking back; already knowing that her sisters were in file behind her. They reached the flawless cube and Lucy plucked a grain off of it.

"I wonder if the Queen will taste this sugar." said one of the ants, and Lucy looked up at the sky. The humidity was high and rising, but there would be time enough. Already the others were bringing the bounty back to the tunnels; the sugar was being mixed in with the rest of the food supply and would go to feed larvae, workers, and the Queen. The revelation came to each ant the same way it had come to Lucy, and individuality spread through the nest. The little black bodies were no longer concerned with the tasks of ant life, they lived off reserved food and more was not gathered to replace it. Every ant knew that the nest was dying and agreed that it was very tragic, but the old order just wasn't worth reviving.

IN MICRO, NORTH CAROLINA

Becca sat in her claw-footed bathtub drinking cheap white wine out of a mason jar, feeling that this, the bathtub, the wine, the boyfriend, all of it, was like a cheesy scene in a movie or TV show and she didn't belong there. She had just bobbed her red hair short at the ears, and she kept running her fingers up the back of her neck. It felt good. A Rhodesian ridgeback. The wine tasted good cold, and she listened to Ted talk. He said, "I want to marry you." He was serious. Too good. Latino music and sirens spilled into her efficiency apartment on 97th Street. "You need family, Becca. People who are there for you. People who care for you." He rhymed like a bad pop song and pulled the window shut. Clumps of chipping paint and plaster sprinkled the floor.

Sunken in the tub, her calves propped on the porcelain lip, Becca repeated the pop song rhyme 'there for you, care for you' in her head and picked at a scab on her knee. She remembered bloodying her knee going down on Chris, a no-last-namer she met at Blondie's Bar and Grill in Greenwich. She remembered he kept pushing down on the top of her head in his bathroom somewhere in Soho, or maybe Greenwich, and her knee dug into the edges of the small white tiles until it bled, but she kept going because she wasn't letting him off that easy. When he took his hands from her head, she grabbed the backs of his knees and he almost fell on top of her. He said he wanted to see her again, and she said, "I have this boyfriend from North Carolina. A web designer."

She kept picking at the scab in the bathtub, and that was why, no doubt, nothing ever healed. She didn't want a



scar, no marks, but the Vaseline wasn't working.

"What's the matter?" Ted asked. "You know I love you."

"Yeah."

"You've got a funny look on your face."

"I'm just really tired tonight."

Ted sat on the linoleum smiling up at her. "Are you sure everything's okay?"

"Mm hmm, fine." She leaned forward and patted his arm.

Becca remembered that the no-last-namer was only three weeks ago. He was after an early dinner at Ted's apartment where Becca and Ted slouched on the sofa watching *The Godfather, Part II*, slugging cheap California chardonnay Becca bought at the Safeway down the block. Later that night, after the bar, after bloodying her knee in the bathroom, Becca betrayed Ted. She told Chris, the no-last-namer, that Ted liked Wild Turkey and mobster films. She told this nobody she'd never see again that Ted designed Brown and Bartlett's website. She said, "He's leaving in a month. I don't know why I'm telling you this."

Chris, naked, but for a knitted skullcap, leaned against the exposed brick wall in his apartment, shaking his head in disbelief, eating cold pizza, and he laughed, but whether he was laughing at or with her, Becca never wanted to see him again.

Ted leaned over the bathtub and took Becca's mason jar of wine from her hand. "Bed time." That's why she planned to go with him, to move to Micro, North Carolina. To start over. He took care of her. His beer belly rested on her knees, and his Popeye arms fenced her in. He said, "I've already lined up the U-Haul, Bec."

She stuck her tongue out. "Give me back my wine."

"Uh uh, nope." He dipped his head above her like

Stevie Wonder at the piano.

Ted proposed six months after they met at a rooftop party, a Brooklyn barbecue, held by a friend of a friend of Becca's. Someone Ted knew through work. They were introduced, an obvious set-up, and Becca rolled her eyes at Ted. She sipped her beer, pushed her sunglasses further up her nose, and rocked back and forth heel to toe before she focused on the hazy sky above him. Ted asked her about her job and then to dinner.

When they went out, he liked to pay for things, drinks, movies, the shoes she pointed to on Broadway. He didn't try to sleep with her the first night, the first week, the first month. He reminded her of what she thought grown-up men should be, not like her own dad, who ran off and left her in Chapel Hill to mix drinks and make sandwiches for her mother because someone had to take care of Becca's mother, and when you're eleven, you take care with sandwiches.

Ted picked up a cardboard box and said, "Pack. And stop picking that scab. It's gross."

"I am. I am," she said. "First thing tomorrow."

The next morning on the way to the subway, she stopped at the corner bodega, a brick building with a white façade, for a coffee and smokes. Hector, whom she'd been with, had slept with a few months after she met Ted, worked the counter weekday mornings. He said, "Becca, these things, they're killing you, you know?" putting the cigarettes down on the counter.

"I know," she said, "but it's a race. What's going to kill me first?" She flirted with Hector under the safety of paneled lights, and slid the Camels in her purse.

"So, where you been?"

"I'm around," she said. "Thanks."

She turned to go, but Jesus, Hector's brother, was

there, standing between her and the door, flipping through Vibe magazine, half a Snickers bar in his mouth, bits of peanut and chocolate on his chin, down his white T-shirt. She thought she could play this one cool, slip between Jesus and the magazine rack, smile and nod, say good to see you, and make her train, make it to work, make it home, make it to Micro, North Carolina. Get out of New York. Get away from these men, herself with these men, these two brothers. All of them.

"Hey," she said, holding her coffee chest high. "It's good to see you, Jesus."

Hector called from the counter. "You know my little brother, Bec?"

"Yeah," she said, smiling at Jesus. "We've met. Well, I'll see you guys later." Becca thought it was only fair that she get away with this.

She said, "Excuse me," but Jesus didn't move. The store was empty but for the three of them, and he called something to Hector in Spanish. Becca couldn't understand him, but he was smirking at her, and he was in her way. He popped the folded magazine against his thigh and traced his jaw with his brown hand.

"Okay," she said, brushing her red hair out of her eyes, wiping her upper lip and nose with the back of her hand. "I gotta go. I'm late for work."

Jesus said something else in Spanish, something that sounded dirty to Becca.

Hector shouted back, but she couldn't understand him. He came out from behind the counter and motioned for Becca, palms up. "My brother says you been with him. So tell me he's a liar."

Becca looked to the door, looked for the street, for her escape, but the door was plastered with flyers—a candlelight vigil for Selena at nine, the letters in bold, Selena, Queen of Tejano. Hector put his hands at her throat like

he might kiss her or choke her. She felt his breath that smelled like Chorizo sausage on her cheeks, the spicy warmth in her nose and mouth, and she saw Jesus watching them. She inhaled when Hector exhaled, trying to be cool, and then just as quickly as he reached for her, he let her go. He shook his head repeatedly like she was a waste of time, the way a football player shakes his head at a bad ref call, and the two brothers seemed to shout together at her, and she heard slut. Jesus said, "You want my cousin's number?"

On the train downtown she tried to forget the brothers. She hadn't meant to have sex with either of them. She was having sex with MOMA's I. T. coordinator, Paul Billings, in the men's room at work. She had decided over a year ago not to have sex with any more of the men in her building or on her block. She decided to have sex mainly downtown, if she could help it. She reasoned that it was easier to find a job in New York than it was to find an apartment, and things were casual and fun with Paul, what she wanted. There was ritual to it: She pulled her skirt up around her waist, her blouse partly unbuttoned, and they snorted lines of coke and laughed at the rules they broke, how no one had a clue what they did, and that was enough, but Paul ruined it. He showed Becca the pictures of his wife and daughter in his wallet, told her what the wife made for dinner last night, what the kid did in school, and made Becca nauseous. "Meat loaf, but it was really good. She got the recipe off the Today show." He whispered about right and wrong as they moved into each other—about weakness, and then later, he brought the wife up as they were getting dressed, and Becca quit meeting him in the bathroom. She rehearsed telling him, "Paul, it's over. That's the way it has to be," but he never approached her again. Each nodded hi, nothing but acquaintances, when they saw the other down the long halls.

Becca was tired after work. The subway was warm

and crowded, jostling her, her legs stiff and wide to hold herself steady. Her moist hands wrapped around the center pole. A teenage girl lost her balance and landed on Becca's foot when the train stopped and went black. Becca closed her eyes and tried to think about Ted. She still had to pack. She spent the afternoon arguing with three curators and one installer about the height for Jacob Lawrence's Migration series. She was a major part of coordinating the initial setup and she'd been telling herself for weeks, I'm going to fuck it up. Jacob Lawrence is going to show up and scream 'you ruined my paintings.' She didn't want to think about it.

She thought about Ted. She remembered he said his momma liked to cook. Every Sunday they all got together for roast beef or something southern and mashed potatoes. His sisters, four out of the five, brought their husbands to the house, and his brother-in-law played guitar. She tried to picture his family, her soon-to-be in-laws, swarms of children playing ball on a wide green lawn. Ted said that Becca was too skinny, that his momma would love her. He said his momma would put some meat on her bones and make her look prettier than she already was, then "On second thought, don't guess that's much possible, is it?" She smiled in the dark. She wondered if he was putting her on.

She hadn't told Ted about her own mother. It was as if her family, where she came from, didn't exist, yet she remembered the morning before her daddy left like it was yesterday. She went into her mother's bedroom, tennis shoes untied, hair wet, late for school as usual, and her mother said, "Daddy had to work late again last night with his secretary, Becca. Do you know what that means?" Becca knew. She picked up the sticky highball glass from her mother's bedside table and opened the blinds. She rubbed at the pale cream ring from the smelly drink, ruin-

ing, marring the oak table—her grandmother’s oak table. She bent down and spit on the wood. She rubbed until her shirtsleeve turned brown. Her mother said, “Just leave it, Becca. Leave the table.” Becca rubbed harder. She looked down at her mother still beneath the covers, and her mother looked back at her with a look she’d never forget—accusatory, like the layers of dust, the water marks, the big house, the sterility was Becca’s fault.

Then, as if that day at school never happened—she couldn’t remember anything about it—it was night, and her daddy wasn’t home. Her mother sat in her Victorian flower print chair, her short brown hair rolled in plastic curlers, smoothing the pleats of her calf-length skirt. She draped and redraped the hem of her new cow-brown skirt just so—with a full inch of upholstered roses showing—at the edge of the seat. She glanced at the TV in the dark living room full of dusty antiques from places in Europe where she’d never been and said, “He’s with one of them. You know that, don’t you? The sluts.” Her mother hissed the word like a dying old sot in a nursing home. “Sluts.”

The lights came on. The train moved again, and Becca sighed. She was that much closer to leaving with Ted. After the affairs, sleeping with Hector and Jesus, Paul at work, the men she met at parties and bars, the lean ones with tattoos and piercings and trust funds, too many no-last-namers, Becca thought marrying and moving to the boondocks and family and Ted might be the best things for her after all. She thought I’m not running away from anything. I’m running to something, and that’s right. Paul Billings has nothing on me. Right and wrong. These were easy concepts. Doable. She could be happy. Becca sighed again. Even smiled at the girl, now seated, who’d squashed her foot, scratched her favorite pumps.

Ted sped the small Toyota U-Haul down I-95 and

seemed to talk the whole way. Becca wished they'd left sooner, that the truck had air conditioning, but she didn't want to complain. Her arm burned and pinked in the morning sun. Ted said, "I'm so glad I found you. What are the odds of two people from North Carolina meeting and falling in love in New York? Fiancée." He gushed. "Fiancée. I just like the sound of the word." It was hard to believe that he was for real, that she'd found somebody who got up on time every morning for work, who whistled after his first cup of coffee, who didn't ask questions. Every time she met a guy that she thought she could tolerate for more than two weeks, he started in with the 'where were you last night? I called you.' The questions. Ted talked about jpeg files.

He was nothing like her own dad whom she hadn't seen in five years, not since he and Patty visited her in New York. Patty, the secretary she never asked about. The slut he married. Becca remembered that before her daddy moved out of the house, he took her for rides around the campus on Saturday mornings in one of his British sports cars with the top down. She remembered he never said much. Neither did she. She thought they had an understanding. She had planned to ask about the secretary sometime, but then he drove away that Saturday morning without her, and he later married the twenty-something secretary, Patty, who had pretty blonde hair all the way down her back, and it was too late to ask him about anything anymore.

Becca wanted him at the wedding. Ted asked her about her dad, would he give her away, and she remembered those Saturdays, just the two of them, Becca and Dad, how she had felt complete, like a real person in the passenger's seat, sometimes she got up on her knees, the wind whipping and tangling her red hair and she wanted to scream like she was on a roller coaster.

Becca smiled remembering, flicked her cigarette out the window and patted Ted's thigh. "I love you." She watched the skyscrapers disappear out her window. She said, "You know, New York's pretty. It's like once you leave the city, there's all this trash everywhere. It's funny because people think New York's dirty."

Ted said, "They ship the trash out is why. They force other states to take it. Put it in mountainsides. Meadows. It's gross."

"Yeah," she said, feeling sleepy.

"When we stop, I'll get a cooler and some cold drinks."

They stopped at the Maryland House Rest Stop for gas and food. Becca's thighs were stuck to the vinyl seat. "God, it's fucking hot," she said, lifting each leg off the seat. "Maryland's not supposed to be any hotter than New York." She yawned and stretched her arms toward the sky, her fingers wide. "I can't believe I'm moving back to North Carolina."

"Believe it." Ted smacked her on the butt as they walked toward the row of beige buildings in the afternoon heat. "I like your ring." He grinned.

Becca said, "Me too." She stared at the diamond on her finger. The ring split the sun into shards of colored light, and she watched for the ruby, the electric blues, and yellowed hues on the shiny sunlit cars in the Maryland House parking lot, on the windshield, on her arm, and on the vinyl seat of the truck speeding down the road away from New York.

Becca was surprised that Micro had its own exit off I-95. She thought that maybe Ted had exaggerated just how small-town Micro was, but then she saw the sign, Micro, Population 2,316, and they passed one gas station, a slaughterhouse, and five Baptist churches. Becca slouched



down, her bare feet propped on the dash. "Oh my God. Are there enough churches? When I was a kid my dad always said that he was too well read to buy into God." She rubbed at the pink place on her foot. "There are more immediate things to save your soul."

"Yeah, it's real different from Chapel Hill," Ted said. "But I told you, there's a college in Rocky Point."

Ted turned down Baker Street. It was late afternoon and Becca stared at the burned grass and wilted trees of this sad suburb. The yards were small and sparse, and everything seemed too low to the ground, crouching under the heat. Ted parked the truck in front of his parents' blue vinyl-sided house, and she wondered if Ted planned to buy a house like theirs. She hoped not. She hoped to God not, and figured she'd have some say about it. They were getting married.

Before Becca could shut the truck door, Ted's parents, Momma and Davey, hunched and eager, holding their own hands with delight and half-clapping, jostled down the sidewalk. "Here you are," Momma said, her boney brown arms trying to hug Becca, hugging Becca's shoulder bag instead.

Becca said, "Here we are. Nice to meet you." She was still barefoot and she could feel her moist hair lopsided, almost caked unnaturally on her head, like her own eyebrows and each strand of hair was sticky with glue.

Ted fumbled, "This is Becca. This is Becca," the road still vibrating in her bones, Ted's big hands squeezed her shoulders.

Davey said, "I bet you're tired, dear."

"Come on in," Momma said.

The house was dark with fake-wood paneling, like Ted's parents hadn't redecorated since 1975. Becca stood in the dining room.

"Here, dear," Momma said. "Set your bag down."

Have a seat.”

Becca sat on a couch in the den in front of the TV drinking the bourbon and ginger Momma made, looking at photo albums, while Ted and his dad talked about the house Ted was buying that week.

Momma said, “We’ll go for wedding stuff tomorrow, or whenever you feel like it. You let me know.”

Later that night in Ted’s old bedroom, squished together in his twin bed, her head showered clean beneath Ted’s arm, Becca listened to the welcome hum of central air. Ted slid his hand up under Becca’s T-shirt, just below her breasts, and stopped. She turned over on her side. She wore boxer shorts. She pressed herself against him, wanting to make love to him in the cramped bed, to forget the drive, the heat, the long day, but he was snoring. He was snoring, and he was buying a house close by.

Ted and Becca were getting married in a park at the end of Baker Street, his parents’ street. It was hot, but not too hot. Becca was getting ready at Momma’s house. The wedding was at five. She had asked to be alone, wanting to explain the ridiculous—that she’d never done this before. She stood in front of Momma’s full-length mirror in the wedding dress she bought in New York, and she couldn’t shake the image of herself as a dumpy kid. She remembered her mother sitting in that ugly Victorian chair, asking her, “Have you put on some weight, honey? Look at how tight those pants are at the waist.” But she knew she wasn’t dumpy anymore. She was tall and thin and getting married.

She waited for Daddy at Ted’s Momma’s. She studied herself in the mirror, in the fitted sleeveless wedding dress, and remembered the morning Daddy left. She remembered him in his silver ’61 Austin Healey. The willow tree and its dangling slivered leaves danced behind him

across the drive. She stood barefoot on the blacktop feeling dumpy—and Becca didn't know what to say to her father right then because she knew that he meant to leave. All Becca could say was what she felt, but no one in her family, or anywhere—as far as she knew—did that. She didn't fall to her knees in front of him but she wanted to, nor did she say please don't leave me, don't go, I love you, but she pretended that she had. She remembered it that way a lot, almost always, because she thought that maybe if she had pleaded with him, if she had said don't go, don't do it, if she had just for once in her life said exactly what she thought, that it would have made a difference. He might have stayed.

She remembered that she stood two feet from the car, her hands clasped together under her chin—her fingers curling around one another like when she made the church with all the people with the steeple when she was very little with her friends, looking past him at the tree because it was too hard to watch him go. Her red hair was a bundle of knots around her neck, and she scratched just above the back of her collar until it burned. She wore a blue pajama shirt that hung to her knees, and the stiff decal numbers on the front of the shirt brushed against her penny-sized nipples. She thought that she'd probably need a bra soon. She thought that someone would have to take her to the store to buy a bra. Who was going to take her to the store? Becca asked him, "Why don't we go to Joe's on Main Street for breakfast? You love that place."

Daddy said, "Becca, honey, I really have to go. We'll go to Joe's in a few weeks. No biggie." Daddy looked in the rearview mirror at his tan face, at that fine jaw he told Becca he got from his father who got it from his father who got it from his father—it was a Rowan blessing—and adjusted his wool cap. "Don't be that way, Becca," he said. "Come give Daddy a kiss now. Come

on." She had that jaw. He reached his arm out to her; it hung over the driver's door, the whiter side exposed, wax-like in the sun. He put on his sunglasses, and she watched him back out of the driveway. She did say, "Take me with you," but he didn't hear her because the engine was too loud, and it was already too late. She remembered that he smiled at the edge of the drive, and she knew that it was because he was free.

Pressing her nose against the cold of the mirror, studying the tiny wrinkles under her eyes, she wished that she had run down that drive, away from that house in Chapel Hill when she had the chance, sprinted after him, because if she'd gotten in the car things really might have been different.

Momma came for her, knocked lightly on the door, and then made a fist over her heart when she saw Becca. She said, "Lord, Becca. You're the prettiest bride I've ever seen." Becca had to believe her. "Your daddy and his wife are down at the park already. Are you ready, honey?" Momma looked like she was praying, her hands together, taking tiny steps around Becca like a geisha.

When Becca saw her dad in the park, he grabbed her at the elbow, like he had a secret to tell, like they'd just seen each other last week. He snickered, slicked his silvery-white hair back, and said, "What are you getting yourself into?" He glanced at Momma and Davey. "My God. No, no, I'm just kidding. Ted seems like a great guy." He chuckled. "A little hickville, huh? No, no, just kidding."

He and Becca waited where they were told, toward the back of the garden area by a big flowering magnolia, for the violins, for Becca's cue, and she inhaled deeply, gulping the sweetness of the magnolia, hoping she was doing the right thing. That's all she wanted—to do the right thing for once.

"Yeah, Ted's a great guy," she said. "Really nice."

"A nice guy." He dropped his cigarette butt in the grass, and she knew that he didn't approve or he didn't believe it.

They heard the violins and Daddy slid his hand down Becca's back. "Shall we?"

At the reception, everyone danced in Momma's backyard in the torch-lit dark under a canopy. There were two kegs and an open bar. Becca wore a silk sun dress and danced with her dad. She told him that her mother wasn't coming, she had said over the telephone that she was sorry, but she couldn't, not even for her only daughter, spend one afternoon around that dumb ass.

Becca said, "You, Dad. You're the dumb ass."

"Yeah, I got that Becca."

Everyone drank too much. Becca met four of Ted's sisters, their husbands, and their kids, but the sisters all looked so similar, with long brown hair and round faces, pear-shaped bodies from too many babies, wide hips, and agitated voices, that she couldn't remember any of their names. They all shouted the same things at their kids, like, "Put that down. Don't talk back to me. What did I just say?" to the point where their voices ran together and made one big nagging sister.

Life in Micro was not what Becca expected. Ted bought a house two blocks from his parents, and Becca was stuck unpacking cardboard boxes, writing thank you notes for wedding gifts, for stuff she didn't want, would never have picked for herself, while Ted commuted three days a week to Raleigh. When they had dinner together, Becca made frozen french fries most of the time. She complained to Ted, "They're your sisters, your friends, you write the thank you notes," but he never did.

He said, "Don't worry about it, Bec. I already thanked everybody. It's no biggie."

Becca made a figure eight in the ketchup with her french fry. "I'm writing the thank you notes, Ted. I mean there's some etiquette about it, despite what you or your family think. Married people are supposed to make sure no one's talking crap about them. I don't want anyone saying we don't know what we're doing. Do you?"

There weren't any big feasting get togethers at Momma and Davey's either. Ted's sisters didn't live in town anymore. Becca was glad about that after the way they were at her wedding.

Momma did bring steaks over on Sunday though. Momma brought steaks along with bourbon and scotch and sunk to Becca's kitchen floor, all ninety pounds of her tanning-bed wrinkly bronzed skin. The scotch reminded Becca of her own mother. She chain smoked Carlton one-hundreds and complained that all her baby girls done abandoned her, leaning back on one arm, her stick bone legs jutting out in a small A. She smacked the linoleum with her palm, the cigarette ash dropping, burning another hole in Becca's floor, and said, "And after all I've done for those girls. Don't mistake me none. I was glad to do for them. Even if some of them thought they was supposed to be my life. Thought that's all there was to their momma. Imagine that." She swigged her drink. "They're all my girls, and every one of them turn out good except Nadine. Guess Ted told you about her." She closed her eyes and Becca guessed she was thinking about Nadine, the one Ted said got lost, was selling herself somewhere. "Now I gots a new daughter," Momma said, "and ain't she just the prettiest—such a pretty, special girl." She looked at Becca like she meant it. The two of them drank scotch on the rocks on the cool floor in the wet North Carolina heat waiting for Ted's dad, Davey, to finish the steaks.

After Becca got a job teaching Art 101 at the community college in Rocky Point, Ted cooked dinner for

Becca. He worked less. He kept the meat and potatoes hot on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays until she got home from class, sometimes after eleven. He took her out to dinner on Friday nights to the Olive Garden in Rocky Point and she ordered chicken parmigiana and missed New York. On Saturday nights, they went to the drive-in halfway between Micro and Rocky Point because Becca hadn't seen a drive-in since she was four or five and her memory of it was fuzzy and nostalgic. She wondered if she'd ever actually been to one. She thought it could have been the scene in *Grease* where John Travolta sits on the swing in front of the screen with the dancing drink and Juju Beans behind him because that's where she remembered herself—on a kid's swing in *Grease*.

When she was home alone in the mornings, Becca painted monochromatic still-life's of blue-green pennies, potholders, the shed key, a plastic film canister and screws, the little squares, the pieces and parts that make up the minutes of the days, the pieces and parts stuffed in drawers, stashed away. Momma always asked if she could have this one or that one. "Why don't you paint us a tree or a flower or something outside like those... what is it he calls them...that guy on the TV... landscape pictures and things." Becca missed MOMA.

Ted's Aunt Sissie shook her head in awe of Becca's paintings. "The good Lord speaks through you, Becca," she said.

Aunt Sissie dropped in on Becca once or twice a week. She was on some kind of disability and was always talking to Becca about God, how it was never too late to ask the Lord to be in your life. The Holy Redeemer Church and Reverend Adams were Aunt Sissie's life.

The Holy Redeemer Church was wooden, painted white, but gray smudged and stained, just a shack really, with sparrows' nests up under the windows. It sat on top

of a hill with a creek down below, and that's where Becca saw her first baptism, in that creek, and she thought of the water there that muddied the banks somehow washing all her drunken nights and mornings with strangers away. She missed New York and the strangers, the first kiss, the brush of lips and heat on her neck and the rush of leaving at three AM. "No, I can't stay. I have to go." Leaving them awake, watchful, following her to the door. Taking the stairs, the elevator. The click of her heels. Remembering the moans and gasps on her way uptown, the power she had. Walking away.

Becca decided to get baptized. She wanted to see if she would feel anything, to see what took. She'd never had God.

Aunt Sissie came over the morning of her baptism at six AM to curl her hair because she knew how to do "real curls, ringlets, even with somebody whose hair's short like yours." Sissie told her not to wear mascara. "It'll only run down your face and you want to look your best today, real pretty, even if your hair's going to be a disgrace by the time it's all said and done. No matter. You're getting saved."

Ted said, "I can't believe you let Aunt Sissie put this notion in your head, Bec. She's downright crazy with all this God shit. Look at her. Her hair's orange, for Christ's sake."

Down by the creek, Becca's bare feet sank in the mud. Gnats flocked to her eyes. The path to the water was trugged, worn by too many sinners Becca guessed, and she waited her turn, watching the sparrows swoop overhead, in awe of all the weeping and witnessing, everybody out of their folding chairs, gathered at the creek's edge, too dressed up for eight AM, chorusing, "Praise Jesus." She tried to get caught up in it. She wanted their fervor to swallow her, to feel their heat, but she felt like a liar hold-



ing the preacher's hand, walking into a creek waist deep in a pink dress. She felt ridiculous because she didn't know if she believed in God, she just wanted to feel something strong again, and this old preacher man had one hand at her waist, at her stomach. He touched her like he loved her, like that one time Daddy kneeled beside her in front of the toilet when she had the flu, and it felt funny to be touched that way by someone she hardly knew. He said she was a little child, and then he put his hand on her forehead and cried out to God for her, but then it was her turn. She had to ask God to be saved, and she wasn't loud enough. She had to speak up. Speak up. These are cleansing waters, Rebecca. Confess your sins to God now and ask for forgiveness. Ask Jesus to save you. There was a row of teenagers on the banks, she figured pot smokers, waiting for their salvation, forced there by their parents, and there were things Ted didn't know about her. Things he didn't need to know, and this was it, that's what she knew. Even if it was primitive ritual, this was her chance to wipe the slate clean. The teenagers would just have to wait their turn because she had more sins than they did, years more to be forgiven for, and from the time she climbed into the U-Haul, she'd planned to make good. Forget all those men.

Please God, she thought, despite the preacher's hand. Please God. And they blazed, the ones she could remember, like the water had caught fire, like the fervor, the crying had caught up finally, and toppled her. The old preacher man pushed her head down into the water, and it felt cold. She forgot about the people on the bank. She forgot Ted and Momma and Davey. She forgot Aunt Sissie, who'd been waving her arms, shouting praise be His name, saying how pretty Becca's hair looked to anybody who'd listen. The preacher man pulled Becca up, and she said, "Please save me" and meant it. She remembered the

blowjob on Ninety-Eighth Street. The Puerto Rican guy and his cousin the next night. Her mother's friend. What was his name? He was sixty. It might have been Patrick. Maybe Rick? Hector and Jesus. Paul Billings in the bathroom with his pictures, again and again. He's got nothing on me. Forgive me, Jesus, please forgive me. Save me. Like angels sang in her head. I want Ted. Please God, let me love and stay with Ted. Let me only want to have sex with him, to care more than I really do about Ted.

The preacher said, "Praise be to God. Praise be to God. Oh, what a glorious day. Becca Jones has accepted Jesus into her heart. Praise be."

Only two days later, Becca thought she needed saving again. It didn't take.

Becca met Larry Shank a year after she was baptized. They met in the hallway outside her classroom as she waited for her students to file in. He was crooked somehow with his weight on one foot. His hip bone poked out like a marble egg where it had faded his denim jeans in just that spot. There was something about him. His green eyes, small and round, but steady, not beady, eyes that said he could do things to her she'd never even thought of, and she thought he is god-awful good. He looks god-awful good. She looked down at her feet, at the way they fit angled inside the yellow squares on the floor and thought what the hell are you doing? He could have been anybody. He was just anybody.

His voice was so low, so monotone, that she could have pretended not to hear him when he said hey teach, but she strolled over to him, her fingers clasped together behind her back.

"I like this," he said, pointing to one of the paintings on the wall.

They talked about nothing—the weather and how

paintings are pretty to look at.

He grinned and said, "I'll be seeing you," but she could hardly hear him.

Becca next saw Larry at Rockgut, a bar in Rocky Point. She sat at the bar with her friend Lola listening to Guns n' Roses. She and Lola tried to meet for drinks at least once a month on Fridays. Becca had already drunk five or six beers. She wasn't sure, and she thought she'd like to take Larry down to the paradise city like Axl Rose after she saw him slide into the bar. He looked like Axl Rose from Guns 'n Roses but twisted, set to one side. He sat down beside her at the bar and offered to buy her a drink. His shaggy brown hair fell across his eyes. "You want that drink?" he asked, "Teach." She knew all about him, had found out about him after she first saw him at school. He was a loser according to Frank who taught art history. He's the leather jacket type. He hangs out on campus to pick up girls. Pathetic.

"Yeah," Becca said. "I do. Um, this is my friend, Lola." She tried to introduce them, her arms heavy like wood.

He nodded and said, "Hi."

"Yeah, hi," Lola said. She rolled her eyes. "Look, Bec, let's go. I gotta get home."

"I'm okay," Becca said. "I'll figure something out."

"Maybe Ted can come get you," Lola said. "Or, you know, I can give you a ride right now. That's probably the best thing, you know. We came together." Lola put her head on Becca's jacket. "I'm sleepy," she whispered. "Come on."

"That's okay. Go ahead."

"Let's go, Bec."

"It's a Friday," Becca said. "I'll be fine. Go ahead. I'll figure something out, really."

Lola put three fives on the bar, lit a cigarette, and

snuffed it. "Last chance," she said. Then she left.

"Your friend go to Rocky Point too?" he asked.

"Well, sort of," Becca said. "She teaches sculpture."

"I'm not surprised," he said, and even though Larry didn't say very much at all, every time he spoke, Becca had to lean in to hear him.

They drank their drinks, and Larry ordered another round.

"I'm impressed," he said.

"What?" asked Becca.

"The way you can drink whiskey."

"Yeah." Becca lit a cigarette. "She was my ride. I should've gone with her."

"Why?"

Becca stirred her drink with one finger, knocking the ice cubes around. "I'm married," she said. "You know. That. Married. The big M. I'll see you later."

The bartender leaned across the bar. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she said, speaking softly, meeting his lean. "Just stupid. Um, can I get a taxi here or a bus or something? I gotta get to Micro."

The bartender said, "You're kidding, right?" He slicked his long winged hair back with one hand. "So, maybe I can give you a ride after we close."

"Forget it."

Becca sat back down next to Larry. "I got no ride," she said, picking up her drink.

Larry said, "I heard. Tough break."

"What? What did you say?" Becca pointed to her ear. "It's hard to hear."

Larry took her to his van—a beat-up Chevy in the back of the Rockgut gravel parking lot. They leaned at the door and kissed. With one of the back van doors opened, he unbuttoned her blouse. He pressed himself up against her and said, "You want to get in the back?"

She climbed inside the van on her knees. For a second, she could see Ted's round face, like the face of a ten-year-old girl, etched in the back of the dinghy vinyl headrest. "I want you," she whispered, not sure who she wanted. What she wanted.

"I know." He pulled the door shut and it squeaked with rust. Lying on her back with her shirt open and her hands on her stomach, she saw the light from the street-lamp streaming through the dirtied van window. It haloed Larry's head. He was the god she came home to, no bullshit creek god, but the god who spoke to her and touched her and told her she looked pretty when she wanted it, and his eyes looked black in the shadow—what she was used to in New York.

Larry, with his back arched, was on his knees in front of her. She got up on her knees and went straight for his hips, rubbing the spots where his hipbones made marble eggs through his jeans. He took off his shirt like a rock star, a button popped, and his ribs poked out like a witch's boney hand wrapped around his torso. He was rail thin; almost sickly looking, like an anorexic.

When he was inside her, she strived for that place she always went for, the place she'd been before, the place that felt like home no matter where she was, and then she saw a naked baby doll with a soft cloth body and plastic head in the corner of the van.

She refused to think about babies. Refused it, but there it was, that ratty baby doll. She looked down at Larry's head, his wavy light hair brushing her shoulder. She remembered Ted at the rooftop party so certain of her in the New York haze like he knew then—before he could have known—that she needed him. That she'd probably do just this. Her bra was still wrapped around one arm.

"Forget it," she said. "Forget it." She pushed at Larry's shoulders. "I need a ride home, Larry. Can we

go?”

The next morning was a Saturday. Becca could still taste a hint of stale whiskey in her mouth, and she and Ted were driving out to the mall in Rocky Point.

Ted said, “You’re being awful quiet.”

“Yeah.” Becca lit a cigarette, ran her hand up the back of her neck feeling for the prickly hairs. “I don’t know. Not feeling so hot.” She shifted her hips in the bucket seat, rubbed her moist palms down her jeans. Ted shifted gears.

“You were out late.”

“Rough night. I had way too much to drink.” He’d never ask her where she was, who she was with. “Then this morning in the bathroom I was thinking about this time when I was eleven years old, and I rode the bus to the old Chapel Hill mall to buy my first bra. I was the only little girl on the bus, and I was the only white person on the bus. It was weird.” Becca tapped the dash with her fingers, pulled her feet beneath her, and sat with her weight on her calves. “Actually, it was terrible.”

“I sat beside this nice older black woman who gave me some gum, and I remember, I wanted to ask her to help me, but I didn’t. I didn’t know anything about buying bras. I didn’t know what to do really or what I needed, but it’s more than that, too. I didn’t want to be alone buying my first bra, but I never said a thing. I figured that’s all I got. That’s all there was. I had convinced myself of that at eleven. I was going to be alone, like some dumpy ass Georgie Girl.

When I was in the JCPenneys dressing room, I heard some girl talking to her mom, and I don’t know, I felt so stupid somehow. Like fucked up. I should’ve at least asked that lady to help me I think. Don’t you think? Anyway, I took the bus home, and ended up safety pinning

a white dishtowel around my chest until I could get my mom's mail order catalog."

Ted swerved their red Miata across dust and gravel, bumping and skidding onto the exit ramp for I-40.

"Where are you going?" Becca asked, reaching for her sunglasses stashed between the seats. She felt sick and moist in the creeping autumn sun.

Ted patted her leg. "They have a Victoria's Secret at the mall in Raleigh." Becca put on her sunglasses and lit a cigarette. She shifted again onto her side and slid down, squeezed herself, folded herself onto the floor between the dash and the bucket seat and said, "Thanks, Ted." Her chin almost on his knee. Trying to shift again, to get back up, her foot caught sideways between the door and the seat; she knocked the back of her head against the dashboard, and her cigarette burned a hole in the leather upholstery.

PALPABLE LOVE

I was sitting at Jamie's kitchen table watching her trace the grains in the wood with her finger. Jamie was my girlfriend, beautiful in a decisive, confident kind of way. As though beauty was a declaration of hers and not a fact. We sat at opposite ends of the table, a solid board between us. It was an arrangement that she devised when she took the chair opposite me. I couldn't remember if we'd been sitting there for hours or just minutes.

Jamie was propped stiffly in her chair. Her face was focused on the table, the ends of her hair brushing against its surface. I sat across from her. I wanted to stretch my body out on the couch, kick off my boots from the work day, and have her face nuzzled into my neck. Her chair creaked as she pulled her legs underneath her and compressed her body into a ball. She looked up at me through her fingers.

"Are you going to talk to me about this?" she said.

I was regulating my breathing. I wanted to be sure I made no sound other than words. A box-cutter was hooked to my belt and I circled it with my thumb, shards of cardboard were stuck in the handle from that day's shipment of dried goods. When Jamie and I first started dating she used to clean out the blade for me, opening it carefully and blowing lightly at the dust.

"I want to talk about this. It seems important to you," I said.

She was quick that night. "Do you mean that it's not important to you?"

"It is. It's very important to me. I just meant that its importance to you increases its importance to me."



She watched me, her eyes narrowed. "Our love was once palpable."

We'd been talking about the palpability of love. Of love as something tangible that could be produced and measured. It seemed that I was being accused of loving her invisibly. She claimed that my love for her was not palpable because I could not draw it out of me, lay it across the table, and let her poke at it. She'd been saying the word palpable so frequently that I'd begun to question her knowledge of its definition.

"You don't think our love is palpable anymore?" I said.

Jamie stood up sharply from the table. I rubbed my hands over my eyes as she went to the refrigerator and retrieved two beers. When she walked back to me I noticed that she was still wearing her work clothes: tight pants that hugged her ass and a blouse that I considered unprofessional. Jamie sold advertising space for radio stations. Air, she would say, her job was to fill the air. While I unloaded shipments of boxes she charged through the city and put a price on air. She was very successful.

Jamie came back to the table, handed me my beer unopened, and sat back to wait.

"Tyler, I think you've changed us," she said.

"I've changed us?"

"You've changed our love," she said.

I considered this. I'd changed our love.

"Perhaps it's not you entirely," she said. "Perhaps it's changed, and you're involved. And maybe, unfairly, I hold you responsible."

"Well now we're talking about something different," I said.

Jamie is fourteen years younger than I am. I look young for my age, forty-one, and perhaps it's because she looks exactly hers that I've always felt a little guilty for

starting an affair with her. I believe, although she's never said so, that when we met two years ago, she thought I was something more like thirty.

"Maybe we should go back to this palpable love thing," I offered.

"Fine. What do you want to say about it?" she asked.

"I'm not sure what you mean when you say palpable. How would you describe it as palpable then and not now?"

"You used to do things for me. Romantic things. Remember that time we drove to the beach in the middle of the night, just to drink wine and smell the ocean? You never worried about not getting enough sleep or being late for work in the morning. We just were."

"Jamie, that has nothing to do with love. You think those things are palpable because they're things. They're examples of love. Isn't this one of them?"

"You're doing it again. How can you say this is one of them? Is this romantic to you? Is this love to you?" she said.

I reached for a cigarette and saw Jamie watch the lighter, to her left, and wait for my action. I lifted my hand to massage my brow line, it was a habit that always irritated her. I put my hand back on the table. She pummeled the lighter towards me with a flick of her hand, sighing, as though I had failed her here, as in everywhere else.

I exhaled smoke, happy for the release.

"Yes, I think this is love to me," I said.

"I don't even know what that means," she said.

Her voice caught as though she were going to cry. Jamie wasn't a woman who cried.

"Don't cry," I said. "I'm sorry, I'm not trying to do anything."

I stood and moved towards her, her hair hung over

her face. She held me off with one hand, placing it on my stomach and pushing me away. I put my hand on her head and had to stroke her hair for a minute before she let me guide her into my chest.

"You've confused the whole thing," she said into my shirt, "let's stop using that word."

"Which word? Love?"

"No! Isn't this all about love?" she had moved away from me now. "The goddamn palpable."

"Okay. We'll stop using that word."

"It's just at first, when I met you, when we were together, I felt like I could chew our love, that I could taste it. That it was a thing, and it was mine, and it was alive and I could swallow it and exist on it for months."

I knew what she meant. I felt like that when I was young, with the woman who became my wife. Jamie didn't like to talk about her. When we first got together Jamie asked polite questions about my marriage. She would sit up straight and make eye contact, as though conducting an interview. I understood later that these questions were perfunctory, that Jamie was preparing herself for my past; she understood its existence, but had never been entirely prepared to accept it.

"I think that's natural in the beginning of a relationship," I said. "You're supposed to feel that, and I think it's supposed to change."

"You don't think I know that love changes? I am an adult. I've had other relationships," she said.

I got up to get more beers. Jamie was constantly announcing this to me, her adulthood. She also liked to bring up our age difference, wanting to know if I ever thought about it. Of course I thought about it, she was fourteen years younger than me. She said, when we first got together, that we would never work if I looked at her as a kid. That I had to see her as a person comprised of parts

that belonged to her instead of just a lack of experiences. She said I could never see her as just an age.

Of course she was right, she was remarkably astute about it then. When we first got together, she spoke about us carefully, enunciating her maturity. I think I didn't understand her resolution. She decided to get involved with me and I really think she thought our love would dissolve our age gap, or rather, it would make me younger.

"Jamie, I know you know about love, I just meant that when you're with someone for some time you're supposed to fall into certain habits. That's a great part of love, too."

"I know that love changes and that in the beginning it's not so much love as it's excitement, but I think this is different. Let's be realistic. We're fading."

"What do you mean we're fading?" I said. "Nothing has changed."

My cell phone started to ring. Jamie cocked her head to one side and raised her eyebrows. I watched her study me. I clicked the phone off, pulled it from my belt, and set it between us on the table.

The thing that I adored about Jamie, when I met her, was her aggressive distaste of anything typical. She felt that people looking to follow certain prescribed paths in life were destined to fail. I thought it was remarkable for someone so young to realize this. She said that she didn't ever want to get married or move to the suburbs. She didn't want her life to look like anyone's that she knew. What I was left to contend with, however, was that her distaste was aggressive because she secretly desired a path to follow. She wanted the package.

"What are you saying you want?" I asked. "Do you want an assigned future?"

"No, not really. I don't believe in that. And I know that other people don't really have it. Not the way it seems.

I believe in love.”

“I know you do, sweetie, and we have love.”

“I think we’re talking about different kinds of love,” she said.

I wondered what time it was and if I could negotiate checking the clock without her seeing me. It was not our night to spend together and I had gotten into the habit of relishing my nights alone. She had called me at work to tell me I needed to come over tonight to talk. I felt a headache moving into my brain.

“What kind of love are you talking about?” I asked.

“I’m talking about the kind of love that makes you want to spread your arms wide and spin. I’m talking about love in country songs that gives you a pit in your stomach and makes you not eat.”

“There’s a quote,” I said. “I think it’s George Bernard Shaw, maybe it’s not him, something about love like that having to fade.”

“It’s not Shaw.”

“Maybe it’s not.”

“Shaw would never talk about love like that,” she said.

“Whoever it is, you eventually have to eat again, you have to stop spinning.”

“Tyler, you don’t have to stop spinning. That’s the point I’m trying to make.”

I looked at Jamie. She was very young and very beautiful and I realized how perfectly she had her life before her. Across from me, she sat hunched over the table, wiping her nose with her hand, but her skin was tight and clear. My body ached from sitting. I got up and went to the refrigerator, but there was only one beer left. I twisted the cap off and held it out to Jamie.

“Here,” I said.

## THE RUNNER UP

She was trying to clean too quickly and nearly knocked over another glass in the process. I thought she would cry. The man she had been waiting on sat quietly, glaring at her like a disappointed parent. The woman with him only nodded and smiled politely in a prudish sort of way as the mess was cleaned. I walked over to help, but someone stopped me, wanting more bread.

She came into the kitchen after me and sat next to Harold, our dishwasher, who was eating what I suspected to be someone's leftovers.

"You need a break, Mel?" I asked, hoping she wouldn't.

Her chin was buried in her chest. I could see her limp curls sticking to the sweat on the back of her neck. She looked up and, despite red eyes and streaking make-up, managed to make me feel smaller. "You can't handle what you got now," she said loud enough for the kitchen to hear, "besides, why would I want you out there pocketing my tips?"

"You know I don't do that," I said just as loud. I stood there a moment longer, until it felt like someone had forgotten their lines, and said, "so stop being a pussy and get back to work."

Harold laughed with a mouthful of mashed potatoes, but Melissa just stood up and shoved past me. Reuben the cook shook his head, but I could tell he was grinning by the shape of his goatee. Harold mouthed something to me, but it was lost to the potatoes.

When I got back out to the dining room she was nowhere to be seen. Good. I figured she went to the

bathroom to straighten herself out. But minutes passed and she didn't return. Her tables were becoming impatient and had begun waving at me for help, their faces filled with the confusion that comes with, say, a dry wine glass or empty salad plate.

"Yes, um, well, we haven't seen our waitress in some time," they'd say with the appearance of concern. "Could you bring my wife more water?" Concern gone.

"Your waitress is fine," I'd say, "and I'll be out with a pitcher in a moment." Great, grand, appreciate it, et cetera. Off to the kitchen I went, eyes straightforward, peripheral images of searching faces and waved hands unnoticed.

"Where the hell is Melissa?"

"Don't know," Reuben said. "She's not out there?"

"Nope."

"Check the bar then, that's where I'd be." He adjusted his cap around his thick head of hair and said. "But better hurry."

I went out the service door and jogged around to the bar entrance to avoid cutting through the dining room. She was sitting on a stool, her apron was lying on the ground behind her. I sat down next to her and caught my breath.

"I'm sorry, Mel, I was just kidding around with you. Just trying to make you laugh." She didn't look at me, just sat looking into her drink. "Is everything alright?"

"It ain't you, Mike," she said. "No reason to be sorry."

The bartender walked over to us and said, "Mikey. You down here too?" He sat his towel down, pushed his glasses back up his nose then leaned over to me and said, "One of you needs to get back up there, pronto."

"Your mustache is crooked, Carl," I said to him and he slid back away from me, turned and slicked his hair,

then went back down the bar.

"Fucking Carl," I said, flicking him off then nudging Melissa. "I'll cover for you tonight, go get some rest or something. You can owe me one." She didn't answer, just sat there, rubbing her head and staring into the drink. I got up and hurried back to the kitchen.

A moment later one of her customers poked his head around the doorway and asked if everything is all right. I told him it was and he asked if it were possible, in that case, to bring out a glass of Brandy at my earliest convenience.

Around midnight the place was empty, the kitchen was closed and I was doing the last of my closing work. As usual, I had nothing to do that night, so I had been taking my time. I was shoving the vacuum into a closet when I heard the front door slam open.

"Where the hell is Melissa?" was what I heard next.

"Check the bar," I yelled back as I returned from the utility room. It had been good advice in the past.

At the front of the restaurant, Charley, who I understood to be Melissa's most recent boyfriend, was striding through the room, his wallet chain, boot buckles and dog tags rattling as he went. He looked in every door and every section of the dining room.

"She's really not here, man," I said.

He turned quickly and nearly fell over a table. He gripped the back of a chair to right himself only to send both of them to the floor. "Shit," he said.

"You all right?"

"No," he said, pulling himself back up, "I'm not." He spoke as though I should know better than to ask such questions. He stood up, readjusted his leather jacket, rubbed his shaved head, stuck out his hand and said, "Charley Oates."



Here's what I already knew about Charley Oates: Mel met him at a rally for Senatorial candidate Oliver North. She told me neither of them were political but there was going to be a good deal of "skeet shooting" going on, something she was apparently fond of. Charley Oates also liked to shoot guns but was barred from doing so having served a little time in the state pen for assault. According to Melissa, Charley was defending himself from a couple of drunken black guys who had jumped him. Unfortunately for Charley, those black guys were sixteen years old, and according to police, Charley was the drunk one and he was the one with the gun.

Here's what I didn't know about Charley Oates, but learned directly after shaking his hand: Charley had a couple of kids by another woman. This was apparently news to Melissa. That was not the source of his concern, though. It seemed Charley was missing his truck. And by truck, Charley pointed out somewhat proudly, he meant rig.

"Charley," I said to him after learning all of that, "you should call the police."

Charley looked surprised that I would suggest such a thing. "Police?"

"Yeah," I said again, "the Police."

"Why?" He shook his head as if to clear the conversation from his thoughts and then said, "Well, let's do it." With that he turned and headed towards the door.

"Do what?" I said a second later. I said it because when he reached the door he turned to look at me as though I should be right behind him.

"Find the rig," he said to me like I was a little kid. "I need a ride. How the hell am I supposed to drive two vehicles at once?"

"You know where it is?"

"No, but how hard could it be to find an orange

International in this town? Probably hear her grinding gears from a mile away.”

“Her? You think Melissa took it?”

“Who else?” He seemed to be getting impatient with me.

“Fine,” I said and went to the kitchen to get my keys. Harold was still back there dumping bleach on the cutting boards and listening to country music on a crappy little radio. I thought for a moment about sneaking out the back door to my car, but the truth was I had nothing better to do.

I walked outside and Charley was smoking a cigarette and leaning against a Jeep. “Is this your car?” I said.

“Nope. Thought it was yours.” He looked at the pack of cigarettes in his hand and removed a few of them. He gave me a funny look, one he probably learned watching old Bogart movies, and then tossed the extra cigarettes back into the Jeep. “Where’s your car then?”

We pulled out of the restaurant parking lot and headed into the center of town. Charley asked me to stop at the gas station where he picked up a six-pack of sixteen-ounce Budweiser cans. “Shit,” he said after returning to the car, “did you need anything?” He laughed and pulled a beer free.

“Nah, this is fine,” I said as we pulled back onto Main Street, “you should’ve gotten yourself some.”

The town was dead and the roads were empty. We drove past the only other bar in town and past the places Charley and Melissa went regularly—the movie theater, the bowling alley, a few vacant lots where owners of loud car stereos converged. Nothing. Folks around there went to bed on time, I guess.

We had finished off the six-pack when Charley started talking about going to the trailer park. First he was saying, “Good place to look for a missing rig is the trailer

park, Mikey. That's the kind of folks you got up there." Then he was saying, "You know anyone who lives up in the trailer parks, Mikey? I can't think of anyone offhand." Finally, as we pulled into Rivercrest Park he said, "Don't that Sam Harvey live around here?"

Sam Harvey, or Tank as he claimed his friends called him, was Melissa's boyfriend a few years back. Once, as I understood it, he had bought a ring for her only to have it "stolen by gypsies" when he was sleeping in his truck one night. By truck Tank meant pick-up truck. Melissa believed the story and wanted to go ahead and get married anyway. Tank thought it wouldn't be proper without the ring and wanted to wait until he got the old one back or found a suitable replacement. Neither happened and Tank's occasional employment became too expensive for Melissa to manage, so they broke up. That is about all I knew about Sam "Tank" Harvey.

Here's what Charley Oates knew about Sam Harvey: He lived at 1015 Elm Court and he was a son-of-a-bitch.

We drove around the trailer park looking for an orange International but seeing mostly old Fords and station wagons. I did once spot a rig, but Charley pointed out it was not a rig, just a "shitty old Iveco." Eventually Charley said, "let's try down that street." When he said that street he pointed towards Elm Court, where if there were any trucks—rig or otherwise—they would easily be seen from where we sat.

The cul-de-sac that was called Elm Court had spaces for about six mobile homes. Of those spaces, four were occupied and two featured a short driveway that ended at a bare patch of dirt roughly in the shape of a mobile home. It was on one of these patches of dirt that I parked my car.

"Maybe we should ask old Tank if he's seen my rig,"

Charley said then lit one of the cigarettes. He stood with the door open and looked at me across the roof of the car, pausing to take a few drags. "Seeing as how he's been seeing my woman."

Charley slammed the door shut and headed down the driveway towards the home of Sam Harvey, which was directly across the street. I locked up the car and followed him up onto the porch. It was more of a deck than a porch as it was wooden and it hooked around one side of the trailer where it met the aboveground swimming pool. The pool was empty except for a couple of inches of dirty water and leaves. A lawn chair lay down in the bottom amongst a few beer cans and what looked like a bunch of pennies.

Charley knocked on the door, sending the neighborhood dogs into mass frenzy. The sound was metallic; every bark rang with the added vibration of corrugated metal, tin and aluminum. Charley knocked again and the windows next to me rattled in their frames.

"All right," said the voice inside the tin can, "I can hear you."

Tank pulled open the door and looked out at Charley and then looked at me. "Mike, what's going on man?" he said. "What you up to? Still working at the Clubhouse?" Tank walked out onto the porch and shook my hand. He didn't pay any attention to Charley and didn't seem at all embarrassed about the fact he was only wearing ratty old boxers. Further, though I tried not to notice, he was hanging out of them.

"Sam," I said. "This is Charley, he's lost his truck."

"Rig," Charley said. "And it was taken."

Tank finished off the can of Red Label he had been drinking and tossed it towards the pool, "Tank," he said to Charley, "and are you expecting to find your truck here?"

"I expect to find something of mine here," Charley said a bit louder, as if he wanted someone inside to hear him.

"Charley Oates, yes I know you now." Tank laughed and swatted me on the shoulder. "This here's the one that knocked up Melissa." He laughed again, noticing he had been hanging out of his shorts. "Shit, Charley. You got to know when to pull that thing out." Tank laughed to the point of choking and leaned against the porch railing to right himself.

I looked at Charley, "Mel's pregnant?" He didn't answer, but Tank nodded to me as he tried to catch his breath.

Tank got himself back in line and said, "come on in, I got beers inside."

The first thing I noticed about the inside of Tank's was it smelled like the Men's Fragrances section of the mall. The second thing I noticed was Elvis.

Charley also noticed Elvis and immediately began poking at his head.

"That's Elvis," Tank said nodding at the six-foot statue that stood next to the sofa. A younger and thinner version of Elvis than I was familiar with held a microphone and, with one hand up in the air, smirked in the general direction of the television set.

Charley knocked on the statue's head and said, "wooden."

"Yep, solid oak. And damned heavy." Tank handed me a can of Red Label and sat one on the kitchen counter for Charley. "So how does a guy lose a tractor-trailer anyhow?"

Charley didn't say, just nudged the can of beer and said, "got anything stronger?" Tank pointed towards the far end of the couch where Charley would find a bottle of Mescal. Charley opened the half-full bottle and tipped it back, swallowing a good deal of the remaining liquor. With the bottle hanging at his side, Charley put his foot up on the couch and said, "Now what did you ask me again?"

"Calm down Charley," Tank said as he walked into the little living room area of the trailer. "Just giving you a hard time, no need to get all excited." Tank sat on a lawn chair that was across the coffee table from the couch. "Go ahead and finish that if you want."

Charley turned to face Tank, bumping a few bottles off the table as he did. He stood there a moment, between the couch and table, looking down at Tank, clenching his fist. The moment passed and Charley sank down into the couch and took another drink from the bottle.

I pulled up a barstool and sat between Elvis and the front door where I could put one foot up on the armrest of the sofa and get up and out quick, should I need to. No one was talking and the only sound was the liquor splashing in Charley's bottle of Mescal. "What kind of dog is that?" I said pointing my can towards the lounging animal next to the TV.

"Mutt, I guess," Tank said. "All he does is eat and shit, you want him?"

"No, I got no room for a dog."

The room went quiet again and Charley continued tipping back the bottle of booze. "Well," Tank finally said, "you all trying to go to a bar?"

We agreed to head out to a place called The Shelf, which was in Leesburg, about twenty minutes by highway and the nearest city of any descent size. While we waited for Tank to get dressed and ready in the back of the trailer, Charley and I looked through what little there was in the kitchen and living room. Charley was still holding on to the bottle of Mescal and looking at the statue, just staring at it as though he was waiting for it to speak. I had located the source of the perfume smell. Tank had hundreds of men's fashion magazines piled up in the kitchen, in the hallway beyond the living room, under the tables and couch—everywhere you looked. There may have been

thousands.

"GQ," I said. Charley shrugged. "You'd think he'd have a Playboy in here somewhere, you know?"

"I guess." Charley sat back on the couch and swished the bottle around, making the little worm inside lurch about drunkenly.

"So Melissa's pregnant?" I said.

"That's what she's saying," Charley took another swig and said, "She should've gotten herself on the pill. You know?"

"I guess."

Tank came out of the back room looking like a pudgy John Travolta from the movie *Urban Cowboy*. Shiny cowboy boots, tight blue jeans, fancy collared shirt and a black cowboy hat with a band around it that matched his belt buckle.

"Shit," said Charley. "You look like a jack-ass." He looked at me a minute and turned back to Tank and said, "damn."

"Charley," said Tank, speaking with a sudden hint of drawl, "Let me tell you something." Tank checked himself in a mirror on the bathroom door for a moment and walked into the living room. "The Shelf is a country bar," Tank smiled at me as he passed, slapping me on the shoulder, "and what you find at a country bar is—Mike why don't you tell the man?"

"Country girls?"

"Country pussy, Mike," Tank said this as he tore an advertisement out of one of the men's magazines and rubbed it on his neck. "Country pussy," he said again, this time louder. "You want some Brut Mike?" he held the crumpled page towards me.

"No, I'm fine Tank, let's just go."

Charley hustled out to my car and yelled shotgun when he reached the door. Tank got to the car and cut wind that got the two of them to laughing. Charley returned the favor and I ended up holding my breath getting into the car. Tank crawled into the back seat and Charley sat in the front finishing the bottle of liquor.

By the time we hit the main road, Charley and Tank were talking about who might be at the bar and whether they ought to get some condoms and so on. Whatever issues Charley had with Tank were gone, at least for the moment.

They were still carrying on when we got to the strip in Leesburg. It certainly wasn't a long one, maybe a half-mile if that. Charley was turned towards the back seat talking when I thought I saw Melissa's red Metro. As we got closer to it I knew it was hers by the faded DARE sticker on it. Charley hadn't seen it. I scanned the line of bars looking for her, but couldn't see much.

We pulled into the parking lot of The Shelf and Charley got up and let Tank out of the back.

"I'll meet you inside, Mike," Charley said as he started to close the door.

"Wait. Why don't we cruise the strip a few times? See what we see." Tank was halfway to the bar looking back at us expectantly.

"Nah, this place is good," he said back.

"What about your rig?"

"Forget the rig," and with that Charley shut the door and walked inside with Tank.

By the time I parked the car and got inside, Tank and Charley had half empty beers and were taking shots. They were standing next to the bar with a couple of girls I had seen around town. Tank was calling one of them Dolly, but the other girl was calling her May. Tank kept tugging at Dolly's flannel shirt, which had been cut off at



the bottom to reveal a good deal of belly, and showed even more at the top.

“Mikey, tell this girl to give me back my shirt,” Tank said, not really looking at me.

The girl teased Tank with the last button that held the shirt in place, giggling and whipping her pigtails around to slap her fat cheeks. I pushed past them and waited to order a drink.

Behind me Charley was flirting with the other girl who seemed pretty young and maybe related to Dolly. She wore a lot of those gelatin bracelets and had at least two rings on each finger, some had even more. She had clearly had too much to drink already, and Charley was feeding her more.

“How come you never call me, Chucky?” I heard her say. She had the same blonde hair as Dolly, though it looked more bleached.

“I forgot your number, that’s all,” Charley said to her. He played with her styled bangs, which seemed rock hard and pointy.

I was getting nowhere with the bartender who seemed only interested in chatting with the women, so I told Charley I was going down the street. He didn’t pay me much attention, as he was busy putting a ring the girl gave him on his little finger. “To remember me with,” she was saying.

It took twenty minutes and three different bars to find Melissa. She was sitting in a place called Mooney’s drinking and chatting with the bartender. His attention seemed mostly directed at the beer glass that she slopped around as she made whatever point she was making.

“What are you doing here, Mike?” she said as I sat next to her. I noticed the bartender taking the opportunity

to slip away to the far end of the bar. "Fuck that place," she said before I could answer her first question. "I ain't going back again. You're on your own. It's a black hole. You know that Mike? It's a black...hole. And I'm done with it."

Her beer slopped over the edge of the glass and wet her wrist. She left it there a moment, then sucked it dry like someone might kiss a small cut. She shoved her brown curls out of her face and waited for me to say something.

"So you're quitting," I said.

"Not just quitting, Mike," she beamed a moment, holding her beer up as if toasting. "I'm moving—getting the hell out of here."

The bartender slid a beer over to me and quickly retreated back to the far end of the bar. I picked it up and clinked her glass. "Where to?"

"Who cares, Mikey? Away. Away from this shitty town. Maybe somewhere warm, like Florida—the Keys, maybe."

"What about Charley?"

"Fuck Charley."

"He came to the restaurant looking for you tonight."

"Fuck him."

"He thinks you stole his truck. We've been driving around looking for it."

"Ha!" she said and slammed the glass on the bar sending beer all over. The bartender jumped a little but didn't come our way. "That thing got repossessed two weeks ago. He got you driving him around for nothing."

"Dammit," I said, slamming my beer down, "Hell if I'm taking him home."

"Where'd you leave him?" She dragged her nails across the seams of her jeans, then said, "Forget it, don't tell me. I don't want to see that fool ever again. That son-

of-a-bitch knocked me up and don't have the decency to get himself a job. He don't do nothing but piss and moan about his ex and his dirty little children. What would I want with one of his dirty little kids? I'm going to get the hell out of here and wash my hands of that son-of-a-bitch," and so on and so on.

She paused after a long bit of cursing and carrying on and said, "I really don't know what I'm going to do here, Mike." The sudden change of tone struck me. She no longer held on to the glass and was now facing me, quieter and still.

"Are you going to have it?" I said, "The baby, I mean?"

"Don't know. Don't know how I got myself into this." She moved her hands into her lap and rubbed the tips of her thumbs together. She tried to smile at me but it seemed forced, the smile of a runner-up in a beauty pageant.

"Why don't you let me take you home, Mel?" I said

"Think I'm a little old for you, Mikey," she said and her smile looked a little more natural. "Where'd you leave Charley anyway?"

I told her where to find him and she hopped off the barstool and walked out the door, leaving me with a half full beer and her bar bill. I paid the bartender and hurried down the street, not wanting to miss whatever was about to happen.

By the time I caught up with her, she had pulled Charley out of the bar and was giving him hell out in the parking lot. I leaned against my car and watched them in the distance. He stood at least a foot taller than her but looked very small, his shoulders hunched and his head low. I could see her jabbing him in the chest with her fingers, her body shaking with anger. At least three times she turned to walk away only to turn back and start again.

Finally after quite some time she seemed to calm down and let him talk. He kept his head down and used very little body language—never touching her, only pointing at himself or rubbing the back of his head. They stood there quietly until I saw him pull a ring off his little finger and give it to her. After a moment they walked off down the street together. Hand in hand.

Melissa was in the kitchen talking with the cooks when I got to work the next day. She saw me come in and waved me over to where they were standing. She was smiling.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” I said.

“Ah, Mikey. You know I couldn’t leave this place.” She kept on smiling and shifting her weight from side to side, the bottom of her dress following her motions like a bed sheet. A dress! She never wore dresses. And her hair looked cut and maybe even styled.

“What’s going on here, Mel? You look suspicious. What’s behind your back?” She was smiling, the cooks were smiling, everyone looked goofy.

She raised her hand up to my face and towards my face she pointed a ring that appropriately sat on her ring finger. It was pink. A round pink stone of some kind with a band that was nearly the color gold sat two inches from the rim of my nose. A few feet behind it, Melissa seemed to be shaking with excitement and—it began to be obvious—expectation.

“Nice ring.” I mean, it didn’t look like it came out of one of those gumball machines at the grocery store. Probably the mall if I had to guess. “So?”

“Charley gave it to me,” she said, “don’t act like you didn’t know.” She pulled her hand back slowly, watching her ring as she did.

"Melissa's having a baby," Reuben said, sounding more like a proud dad than a cook.

Melissa nodded and ran her hand across her stomach. "If it wasn't for Mikey I might of never seen Charley again. I might of left town and he'd of never got me that ring." She spoke almost as if she were speaking to her stomach. She looked up from her navel and said, "I might never of even known."

I stood there and listened to her tell the kitchen about the qualities of Charley Oates. She thanked me again and told me she'd get me back for the bar bill. I stood silently forcing a smile until I had to walk outside to get some air.

She came out a minute later and sat on a bench next to me. "Do you want to feel the baby?" she said.

"How long has it been?"

"Almost two months. Go on, put your hand right here," she pulled my hand to her belly. "What do you feel?"

"You have an outie."

"You're cute. Really, you just need to wait for it." She sat patiently a moment and said, "You think I'm doing the right thing, right? Charley's a good man. He's made mistakes, but who hasn't?"

"That's true."

"I think he cares, Mike. I think he just has a hard time with it. You know, saying what he thinks."

"I guess."

"You think I'm doing the right thing, Mikey?"

She was waiting for an answer. She sat in her new dress and her new hair, smiling and holding my hand to her belly. I thought for a second I felt something move under my palm, but knew better. "I'm sure you are, Melissa."

"Me too. Keep still," she said, cupping her hands

over mine, “you’ll feel it eventually, just keep waiting.”

While I waited, Charley pulled up in Melissa’s Metro and honked the horn. Melissa hopped up and started towards the car, then stopped after a few steps.

“I was just kidding last night, Mike,” she said, flattening the dress around her hips. “I’m not really too old for you.” She got in the car and sped away.

I walked back into the restaurant and took a seat in the kitchen. I just sat there and watched Reuben and Harold prep for a while. I’d seen them do it so many times I could easily do it myself.

“You alright?” Reuben said, tapping his knife on the steel serving shelf.

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

He stopped his chopping and leaned against the counter, “Seriously, Mike.”

“I’m being serious. I think she was right.”

“About Charley?” he said.

“Oh hell no. About it being because of me that she’s still here. She’s right. She could’ve been gone from here.”

“I doubt she meant it like that.”

“Well—she was right just the same, about this place anyway. Reuben, what I’m trying to say is I’m quitting. I’m tired of waiting for something to happen.”

Reuben walked over and sat across the bench from me. “Come on, Mike. They don’t pay so bad here. The hours are plenty flexible and there’s little better in town, I’d imagine. Why don’t you just ask for a couple of days off or something?”

“No Reuben,” I was smiling, “I want to get out of this town. Go somewhere where it’s warm, like Florida—the Keys maybe.” I started to leave and stopped at the back door. “Hey, Reuben,” I said, “tell Melissa we’re even.” He nodded and I left the restaurant.

FOLLOWING THE THIRD TIME MY WIFE SHOT ME

I remember Buzzy driving me to East Trinity Hospital. I remember thinking about the hole in my shoulder, about dying. I bled into the exposed fluff of the hottest black vinyl backseat, of Buzzy's '64 Cadillac El Dorado, with the welded-shut back door. I remember that I passed out. I remember the hellish heat. The sun was a hammer.

I lay across the backseat with my head propped on the exposed ribs of the window ledge, against the jammed-shut window. I watched the brown sand and the brown dirt and the brown loom of mountain zoom by under the still, bleached sky.

I watched the right side of Buzzy's face, shaded by his Pecos Bill Stetson, two sizes too large and swallowing his head, as he sucked down a sweaty, brown-bottled beer. He tossed something into his mouth. He drained the beer, sniffed loudly, collected something in the back of his throat, the first thing I'd heard since the gun went off, and spat. He chucked the brown bottle out his open window, wanging something. He lit a cigarette.

I heard him say, "Sure is beautiful out here. What I can't believe is this," --- he swept the back of his hand out toward the windshield, over the open space of the passenger side --- "they're rerouting all of this just to make way for more people. For more offices and bigger stores." Buzzy exhaled a mouthful of smoke. "For outsiders, and pollution. I ask you, who has lived here all along?"

"Where the hell are we?" I moaned.

"Detour," he said. "I just got through saying. Construction."

"When did they route a detour?" I asked.

"I don't know when. All I know is we're sure as shit on it."

He drew up another beer from ice somewhere. I could hear him twist the cap, drop it to the floorboard. Foam rode down his hand.

He said, "As soon as we were furloughed. I bet that's when. I see it like this: we been here so long, and now these big-ass companies come in to tell us what's what. I might even pull up stakes and leave. I shit you not, brother. Last thing I needed's another furlough. I swear to god. It's bad enough I have to live in a RV in your backyard."

"Beats living nowhere," I whispered.

"We are living nowhere." He wiped the sweat from his brow, tipping his bucket hat slightly. "I mean, when do we get to stake our claim? When do we get to have what's ours?"

"What claim? What the hell're you talking about, man? I'm bleeding all over myself---"

"I just want to have something that's all mine. I just want to have something all to myself, and not to have to share. Just to have one thing all to myself." He sniffed, long and drawn out, and spat out the window again. He said, "It's our damn jobs and our damn town is what I mean. I feel like I been cheated."

Buzzy wanted to play hero. I could tell he was on one of his kicks. He'd never lent a hand any of the last times Dolores shot me, even though he was partly responsible for me getting shot every time. Since the first time ended up being no real big deal, I simply lost the end tip, not even the whole third, of the middle finger of my right hand, and as I lost nothing on the second go round, save a dime-store Marushka hung above the toilet, I never actually blamed him. Not to his face.



"How about them vultures circling?" he said.  
"Wanna talk about them?"

"I could be dying here, and you really want to talk about the landscape? Great. No, thanks," I said. But I looked out the window, and saw rows of igloos lining the roadside. I saw, I swear, igloos.

"I got half a mind right now to drive straight to Tijuana," he said.

"Hospital," I said. "Then Alaska, okay? First, hospital, man."

"Alaska it is, brother," he said.

I felt the right side of my face cooking into the desiccated yellow stuffing of the window ledge. I was losing feeling in my left arm, my side, my shoulder. For some reason, I thought it'd feel good just to be able to clamp my good hand over my shoulder. No good. This third time she shot me had something to do with either Dolores or Buzzy getting pissed off over some messed up drug deal of some sort, another get-rich-quick deal. Who knew what all happened? Sweat stung my eyes. One burnt eye to the window, I swear I saw Nanook with a string of fresh catch.

"Where the hell is she, anyway?" I asked.

"Who?"

"What do you mean who? The woman who shot me is who," I said.

He closed his eyes briefly, and tilted his cowboy hat a little. I bet his lip curled. "Shit, I don't know. You got me. I don't know where she is."

"Was it you that messed up or she that messed up?"

"Messed up what?"

"The deal," I said, "the damn drug deal."

"It wasn't my deal," he said. "I don't know where she fucking is."

Just then I thought I saw Dolores, jogging past the igloos on the side of the road, her pace matching the throb

in my shoulder, keeping just behind the speeding Caddy. Her skin gleamed like blank tundra, her black dreads reached to the horizon. I smelled her through the glass, there in the car, a smell like bright burning mangoes.

I remember I passed out. Or fell asleep, then passed out. Who could tell? I passed out again, lost between igloos and sun.

I asked, "Am I dying or what?"

"I thought you were sleeping." He turned around and looked down at me. "Shit, brother, you're barely wounded. Just a scratch---"

"So what happened last night?"

"What?" he asked. "You were sleeping."

"What happened last night?"

"You fell asleep. Been out awhile."

"And?" It got harder to breathe and the seat, floorboard, everywhere, blood. Pooled and congealing. I wanted to puke, but it'd hurt too much.

Buzzy slapped me and I woke up. The car wasn't moving.

"Goddamn, Jake, is it hot enough back there for ya?" Buzzy was leaning over the bench seat. "Damn flat tire is what," he said.

The car wasn't moving. Great.

"How bout a hand?"

"How about screw you?" I said. "I guess we're not at the hospital?"

"Now why'd I stop to change a flat at the hospital, brother? We run into a pothole while you were out." He cracked open another beer. Where they were stashed was anybody's guess. He nodded, tossed something into his mouth, toasted the road. My arm looked as white as the igloos that weren't there anymore.

"We got a spare?" I whispered.

"What? Oh, I don't know, honestly. I was just

appraising you of the situation, seeing as how you're the one needs to get to the hospital and all."

"Just see if there's a spare," I said.

He rattled around in the trunk, muttering goddam, goddam under his breath.

I prodded myself up the backseat onto my good elbow and opened the door and fell halfway out. From where I lay, I could make out the bottom of the car, sand in the distance under it. Buzzy's feet as he stood at the trunk. The car jostled, up and down. Buzzy unloaded a suitcase from the trunk. Clunked a tire iron down, a fan-jack, black denim sack. I felt jelled to the seat, like marinated steak.

"Got it," he yelled, grunting. A shoe fell to the ground, like a Dolores shoe, slut-pink stiletto, she calls it.

The car stopped bouncing. I couldn't tell which of the tires was flat.

"Oh, hey, there, look out there, brother," Buzzy said, dropping the tire in the dirt. He rushed to heft me back in the car with astonishing strength and gentleness. I couldn't see the pink shoe anymore.

"Damn, if you ain't bleeding like a stuck dink... What did you go and do that for?"

"I slipped. On the handle," I said.

"What?" he asked.

"I slipped on the handle, I slipped on it. Shit, man. Can I not talk?"

He lifted me, slid me down the seat toward the space where the other back door was welded closed.

"How did she get home last night?" I asked.

"Wasn't she supposed to stay put till after your deal went down?"

"Who?"

"Jesus," I whispered. "Who do you think who?"

His shadow fell over me. I saw his mouth turn down. His brow furrowed up, and he looked up to the sky,

as if he were contemplating all the space in this desert, in the larger universe, something he couldn't comprehend, much less hold a thought on for very long. Then he looked at me. He spat. "Who was supposed to do what now?"

"I heard her on the phone. Not 'til after three A.M., she said. But she was back by midnight."

"Huh. What do you know about that? I don't know nothing about that." He drained the remainder of his beer and tossed it in the backseat where it sunk with a plop.

I remembered how last night, Dolores had shown up at the bungalow just after Buzzy passed out. Most everybody was already passed out. She got the Polaroid camera and gathered the remaining eight or so conscious victims to witness Chad grinding his pelvis into passed-out Buzzy, kissing him there on the floor.

Buzzy woke up then. He said, "Didi? What the hell are you doing here?"

Dolores laughed and took more photos, the flash annoying all of us. Dolores is pretty when she laughs; her head bobs quickly up and down, her dreads bounce as though they concede, as if they're in on it together.

Buzzy grabbed up a pool cue and said, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me? What the fuck is wrong with you? We were just having fun!"

"Screw you," Buzzy shouted, too loud for the thin-walled bungalow, even if it is in the middle of the desert.

"You're not even supposed to be here yet."

"Lighten up, dog ass," Dolores yelled.

"Cunt," he muttered.

"What's the matter, Buzz? Afraid everyone's going to find out you're a real faggot like Chad?"

Chad slapped me on the back. He said, "He only

wishes he could be a real faggot like me.”

Then Buzzy swung the pool cue at Dolores, back and forth, like a metronome.

She laughed at him. Even covered her mouth she was so embarrassed.

“Hey, look, everybody! Buzzy got a chub on,” she said, snapping a photo as his face hardened like it always does when he’s hiding something. He puffed his chest and tackled her. He tried to jam his tongue into her mouth, to prove some point, but she slugged him, a straight jab, and his nose burst open.

“Dammit!” he yelled, his face bleeding onto his T-shirt. “You messed up, Didi. I know you did. You messed up bad.”

Dolores laughed. She laughed so hard and I thought she would cry.

Then she did get messed up. She drooped lower and lower to the ground, until she spent most of the night sitting on the can, with the door wide open, her fringed panties, covered in tiny red hearts, twisted loosely around her left knee, munching some kind of pills, calling Buzzy cock-sucking faggot, for hours, until he gagged her with those panties and locked her in there on her throne. The conscious survivors took turns mocking that scene, ribbing the smeared make-up, streaks of red and black, the matted clumps of black hair, she looked like a homicidal raccoon, like a jacked-down clown. I pulled her out of the toilet and put her to bed.

Buzzy ran in circles all night around the cars out in the rocky yard, howling high and shooting his Colt into the air. Good thing we live in the desert.

I should know enough never to underestimate the strength of Dolores. By morning, she’d made all of her accusatory remarks to Buzzy. They bickered, they screamed. They accused each other of screwing up the

deal. By noon, she'd shot me. Who knows why? Just in principle? Because I had happened to be standing closest? Who knew? All I know is for ten minutes or so I couldn't hear a damn thing.

"Hey," Buzzy shouted. I looked up. The car was moving again. He was driving.

"So where is she, Buzzy? Is she at the house still?"

He squinted down at me. "She's gonna kill you, Jake. You got to see that by now. She's got it in for you, in a permanent way, I mean. I don't think you can go back home." He drank from his beer and sweat dribbled down his nose. "Four walls do not a home make," he said.

But of course I will. I know I will always go back anyway, or Dolores will show up, eventually, to claim me. She loves me. "So is she at the house or what?"

"Your house? You wanna know what?" he asked, his face smooth, expressionless in the desert glare. "You wanna know what? I can't figure out why she's got it in for me so bad too, Jake. She only ever insults me anymore. Nag, nag, nag. Like I ain't even got the feelings of a dog." He turned his bottle up and swallowed. "I never know where it's gonna come from or when it's gonna come --- zoom! --- it just shoots out of her mouth, no reason."

He pounded the steering wheel.

"Like last night, she's got on those red leather gloves she likes to put on when she bosses people around, when she's about to make some money, you know? She says, hey little fucker, wouldja like one of these? and she stuffs her finger in my mouth, then starts tugging me around by my face!"

He squinted toward the horizon. "Do you hear me?" he asked.

"I hear you," I said.

"Do you hear me? I'm sick of it!" he shouted.

"I hear you," I said. I hoped for two things: to get

through the doors of East Hospital and get sewed up before I became permanently dead, and to have it so that the inside of the hospital was as cool as the innards of one of those beautiful igloos I watched swish by. I had it with desert. I will never live in a desert ever again.

“---and then she goes, hey, little fucker, get me a beer if ya love me so goddamned much,” his voice a nasty sneer.

“What happened with the deal, Buzzy? What all, you know, went down? Where the hell’s she at now?”

Buzzy slowed the car and pulled to the side of the road. He quickly threw his shoulders over the seat, his face quivering, his lips twitching downward to the corners: “I’m in the middle of something, here! Let me finish, okay? I’m trying to save your fucking life so just fucking listen to me when I, you know, speak! Just let me finish!”

“Okay, alright,” I said.

“Do you fucking hear me?” he shouted.

“I said I hear you.” I tried to shout, and tried to lower myself, as if this were possible, as if the seat were any longer a seat.

He shook my shoulders. He was nearly crawling onto me. “Are you finished?”

“It’s all you,” I whispered.

“I said shut the fuck up,” he curled his fist to my face. “Didi screwed up last night but good, okay, the pills we were gonna sell were a bogus deal she just wanted the pills for herself, you saw her last night, right? All messed up?”

I said nothing.

“Right? Well that’s how she screwed up and now I’m screwed too because the buyers who happen to be very good friends of mine ain’t happy at all. So shut the hell up about it if you don’t mind.” He turned and pulled back onto the road. “I’m always running around like a dog doing her favors and I’m sick of it! Why’s she doing this to me?”

He slapped his hand down onto the dash. "Why she's got it in for me so bad?"

I thought that maybe it had something to do with one of her little secrets, so I said, "Maybe it has to do with one of her little secrets."

Buzzy slammed on the brakes.

I hit the backside of the front seat. I hit the floor and heard a dull thud, a squish like the squish of a water bag. My blood would never be cleaned from that backseat.

He screamed, but I do not know what he screamed.

Everything fell silent. I am not sure for how long I was out of it, but the sun's light cast a dimmer, bluish tone, the car cooler, darker. I felt compressed at the shoulders. Cold. I wished we'd driven into one of those igloos. The scorched side of my face didn't burn. It lay on the palm of a red leather glove, the fingers of which pointed under the front seat. I couldn't tell what I saw, exactly, maybe panties, fringed, with tiny red hearts. Maybe pill bottles. A pistol, wrapped in the other glove, wrapped so it looked as if the index finger were about to pull the trigger. Christ, something gleaming, two bright eyes shining at me, blinking when we hit the bumps in the road.

"We're almost there," I heard. I somehow didn't think he meant East Trinity. He slicked his hair and put on his Pecos Bill. He turned around to look down at me, but I could only make out the hilly outline of the hat.

"Just relax. If you keep squirming, you're just going to make this all the worse. It's just one more turn in the road."

The car was in motion. We were one turn away from the doors of East Trinity Hospital, I pretended, driving into immense igloos, into the light.

And we drove, and we drove.

And then we drove. Drove into the setting of the desert sun.



NOT THAT BREED OF GIRL

A word (or several) to all you men out there:

I feel someone should tell you. You really should know because it would take you forever to figure it out on your own. Just kidding, boys, just kidding. All love. So here it is.

I love hip-hop. I love Tupac and Outkast and Eminem and all those boys who know how to stir it up. I love that parents despise them for polluting the minds of their children with their foul language and their violent imagery and their scathing polemics. Someone has to rattle the parents. Shake 'em up, boys, 'cause the tea's gone cold. Too many dregs slumbering there on the bottom.

But let's not confuse the issue. I don't love the way they treat women in their raps. Not a decent female anywhere—all I hear about are bitches and hos and sluts and honestly, that shit wears fast. You'd think none of these boys ever had a decent woman, a real woman, not the kind that rips men apart and sucks the meat from their bones. Those chicks are a dying breed.

But now, my point. Now we have another dying breed of girl, the Twinkie. You all know these girls. They are what you call high-maintenance, superficial, self-centered—that's the dense spongy cake. They are also frivolous, fickle, and willing to put themselves on display for your viewing pleasure. That's the fluffy cream filling. Twinkies.

Not that these girls are bad people—I don't condemn them or anything. They're simply misled, insecure, and they don't have the eyes to see through illusion. But they're getting there.

Men, you are beginning to see a New Revolution of Woman, and this woman is not that breed of girl.

This woman is autonomous, creative, perceptive, and fearless. This woman has no need for men because she is self-fulfilled. She has no need for security from a man because she supports herself. She has no need to compete with a man for power because she has empowered herself. She has no need for a man to complete her because she is already whole.

The men she chooses are those who share her qualities. They are those who fully understand this New Revolution of Woman because they are attuned to their yin, as she is to her yang.

This woman has no interest in being the object of your desire. She never acquiesces to your expectations, she balks at the notion of filling the roles you have forced upon her. Her place is no longer the kitchen—it is in the streets, shouting her mind and pervading society with her subversion.

This woman has fully reclaimed her own sexuality—she possesses it, understands it, and doesn't need any man to “give it to her.” When she says no, she means no. Sorry boys—date rape is a beast of the past. She will not endure your violence nor will she bear your abuse.

You are her choice, not her warden.

This woman will become the Universal Woman once the Twinkies grow tired of competing with each other for your attention and wake up. Then you will have to change to accommodate us or, sorry to say, you will have no woman.

CHILD OF LIGHT

We'd been waiting in the parking lot of the Magnolia for over an hour. Rachel passed the time hitting rocks at the dried-up fountain that sat like an oversized birdbath in the center of the lawn. I let her use my good tennis racket and every time she banged one against the angel she screamed "Smasher!" in her best sports-announcer voice, her face reminding me in those moments of her father. Fortunately, there was a lot of me in that face, too, so it was easy to look beyond whatever there was of him in her.

Phil had chosen the Magnolia Hotel years ago as the meeting place because it was exactly forty-five minutes from each of our homes. Plus, he used to work there, back when we were dating. We even had our honeymoon upstairs, in suite 502. It's strange how a place can sometimes change in exactly the same way you do. Looking at the hotel, I remembered how vibrant I had been back then. I had been full of an impenetrable optimism, seemingly sustained by fresh air and sunshine. Sadly, I thought, it seemed like a lifetime ago.

So I sat on the hood of my car and watched. It was amazing to me that a twelve-year old could look so ripe. No, that's not exactly the right word, or the right concept. There should be a way to describe precisely, in a word, the phase just before turning ripe. It's like having a tomato plant in your garden and finding a juicy-red tomato that you decide needs one more day on the vine. That's how she looked, running around in her green sundress that tied on the shoulders with a daisy between her breasts and white sandals. Sometimes I found it hard to believe she was my

daughter. She was like me, only better, a new and improved version. She was everything I would have liked to have been.

"When Dad gets here, can I show him how I hit the angel?" she asked, turning around with a large rock in her hand. A twinkle of light reflected from one of her fancy barrettes and I thought about how I hated her father for his constant disappointment. I looked at my watch for her sake.

"Mom, he's coming!" she said.

"It's been over an hour."

"But he promised."

"How much longer would you like to wait?"

Rachel turned around and hit the rock she'd been holding with full force at the fountain and a loud crack echoed off its concrete frame. "I'm not leaving."

"I think an hour is sufficient."

"I don't care. He promised."

I looked beyond the angel toward the broken building that was under hostile siege from the neighboring vegetation. One of the shutters was hanging on a severe angle, wrapped in a twisted vine, while the walkway to the front door was full of green cracks, moss tipping the concrete slabs and licking the sides like surf. The entire bottom half of the structure had disappeared behind a thick wall of ivy. If you looked fast enough, you'd swear the hotel was sinking. It was a game Rachel and I had played many times.

"Come on Firecracker," I said, sliding in to the blazing hot driver's seat and opening the passenger side door. I turned on the ignition and waited. Rachel looked at me through the open car for a few seconds before turning and running toward the fountain. I watched as she effortlessly climbed up the back of the angel's wings and planted herself firmly on the tips, wrapping her legs around the neck and holding her arms around the top of the head. I watched her fingers as she felt the nose and lips.

"Come and get me!" she screamed.

I know from experience that this sort of behavior inspires anger in other parents, but not me. Honestly, my initial instinct was to laugh. Seeing a defiant child full of heat, crawling up the back of a fountain with her wild red hair loose down her back - for a second, I stepped outside of the situation and saw my life and saw myself sitting there in my passion-colored car with art supplies in the back seat watching the scene unfold, wondering how it was exactly that I was even there to begin with. I had that sensation a lot, as if I experienced reality through filtered layers, unlike Rachel. Her engagement with the world was immediate.

"Mom, I see a car!" I heard her shout, pointing. "I told you!"

I got out and rested my crossed arms on top of the car and looked in the direction of the entrance. Eventually, through the canopy of trees, I made out a sky-blue truck. There was a black dog in back, sticking its proud head over the edge directly into the wind. I looked at Rachel whose face was set almost as still as the angel's. She hated that I was right. I hated it even more. As it got closer, I saw an older man driving. He waved as if we were acquaintances, but I'd never seen him before, so I remained motionless. I thought perhaps he had mistaken me for somebody else and didn't want to mislead him, but his easy smile grew wider till he pulled to a stop next to me.

"Niki, right? He did say a beautiful woman. Name's Ned. It was the funniest thing, I was out in the garden, standing under my pride and joy, this old peach tree with peaches like. . . well, anyway, I had this feeling that somebody was in trouble, and wouldn't you know, soon as I get back to the house, Mom tells me Phil called and that you and the kid were stuck waiting. So to make a long story longer, he sends me here to bring you back to my place. Said he had some errands and he'd be around soon as

they're taken care of. Had a special message for you there," he said, looking at Rachel. "Said 'a promise is a promise.' Just like that. Nothing more."

"See Mom, I told you he'd come," she said, smiling at the messenger, who looked as though he had taken a wrong turn on his way to Sunday morning mass. His starched, white button-down shirt was like a sheet of parchment paper rolled across his chest and his tight-fitting pants were high on his stomach, held up by a belt that clearly had been chosen for decoration. He had rings on his fingers too, big ones, college-looking things with names wrapped around ugly rocks. But the most striking thing about Ned was his smell, as if somebody had tied him up and dragged him across a bed of pine needles. He smelled like he was going on a first date. The whole thing was peculiar. Suddenly I was angry at Phil for once again thinking of himself first.

"So, how do you know Phil?" I asked as he walked over to where I was standing. He placed his hand on the open door. It was a confident gesture, made by a man who knows the importance of body language, especially during a first impression. I watched his fingers, short and round, curl over the doorframe and saw fresh scratch marks on them.

"We worked at the front desk. One of the hottest summers I can remember. They used to have this place all done up, flowers all over the place, roses and whatnot. These here things . . . thorns," he said, showing me the back of one of his hands. "My mom's got more rose bushes, sometimes I think we should charge admission just to walk through our yard," he said, moving the door back and forth.

"I don't remember him mentioning you," I said, looking at his grand, protruding forehead. It sat like a shelf and underneath its dark shadow the smaller features of his face were lost.

"It wasn't for long, maybe three, four months."

Rachel started to climb down the fountain, jumped to the outer rim, then hit the ground, her hair covering her face like a red waterfall. When she stood up, she threw her head back and like the arc of a rainbow, her hair passed through the air in a vibrant sweep of color, catching the light like a prism.

"Pretty girl you got there," he said.

"Thanks."

"Mom, are we going?" Rachel asked, walking toward me. She put the tennis racquet between her legs as she pulled her hair back in a ponytail. Up close, I could see the glitter from her sunscreen shimmering on her chest. It made the rounds of her breasts look like two opals peeking out of a spray of sea foam. I found myself thinking One false move and they'll be out there, for the whole world to see.

"Are you far?" I asked, knowing the answer didn't really matter.

"Right down the road. The kid can ride with me if she wants. I'll even put the dog up front," he said, looking at Rachel, smiling.

"Yeah Mom, please?" Her eyes were wide and full of chipped green gems. I realized, looking in them, that what I wanted more than anything else was for her to always have that much faith.

"All right, but not too fast," I said, climbing in to my torn seat. "I drive like there's gum on the wheels."

"Tell me about it," he said, putting his arm around Rachel's shoulder. As they walked away, his hand slid down her back and lingered just below her shoulder blade, cupping it before dropping off.

Suddenly, the heat wrapped its sticky fingers around my head and all I could smell was cheap vinyl burning. They walked off like reunited kin, friendly, trading secrets, conversing in hushed tones, while I was preoccupied with



finding the wrong move. I was ashamed by what little trust I naturally extended. I was becoming like one of those people who've lived in cities for too long who walk with one eye forward and one back. Was this the message I wanted to send Rachel, that people couldn't be trusted? I had heard the new thing to tell kids wasn't to avoid strangers, but to approach them - just not go anywhere with them unless specified, like with a code word or special gesture.

Then, almost as if sensing my insecurity, she turned around and waved, the brightness of her heart-shaped face shining through the dirty rear window. That was just like her, too--like phosphorescence in black, stormy water. She was a child of light, and nothing, I suspected, not even the darkest sort of experience, could extinguish her.

The roadsides on the drive to Ned's were full of fragrant purple wisteria and jasmine and all things thick and wild. I drove with the windows down, not just inhaling the perfume, but actually wanting it to be absorbed into my body. I wanted that purity to become part of me. At one point, Rachel leaned out of the window, her hair whipping the side of her face, pointing and shouting excitedly for me to look off into a passing field. I slowed down, searching the open country for something that might inspire her, when I spotted it: chalk white against a landscape of blurred grass, an albino deer. It was just standing there, peaceful as prayer. I grew up in rural Massachusetts in a house hidden inside a cedar grove, and had seen more deer than I could possibly remember, but I had never seen an albino deer. It was exquisite, and there was something even beyond its rare color that was captivating. What I found myself attracted to was its essence, or what I perceived to be its essence. I instinctively raised my hand to toot the horn for Rachel, but didn't want to frighten the animal, so I let it go.

After a few more minutes we turned off the byway onto a gravel road which hugged a pond on the right before opening up onto the driveway of a small brick ranch house. There was nothing remarkable about the house itself; the aged wood on the front door and windowsills needed refinishing, the eaves were full of leaves and could have used a cleaning, and mold grew in soft shapes on the roof. But it was nestled in a carnival of flowers so vibrant, I actually forgot I was driving and for a second ran up on the lawn, barely missing the hedge of blue irises.

The yard was landscaped into various sections, each one showcasing a certain type of flower, but not like a botanical garden, more subtle. The gardener, Ned's mother I assumed, had mixed it up a little. She wasn't loyal to the designated species. Fluffy lavender blazing stars, like cotton candy on a stick, mingled with hot pink snapdragons whose jowls were shut tight against the mid-morning sun. Sunflowers, long and lean, lined the right side of the house, stretching skyward with eager yellow faces, making way for the climbing beach roses before them. Morning glories like royal blue trumpets announced the light of day from an arched trellis over the walkway to the front door. Angelic gardenias, sculpted round, sat tight against the house amid feathery petals of bright-red Indian paintbrushes. And there were so many more: pansies, marigolds, lilies, and ones I'd never seen. Odd-looking things, some of them. There was one flower that looked like a woman's shoe and another like a tube of coral-colored lipstick. They looked so soft, pouring forth their gifts. That's what it was like, an invitation. I was in the presence of something holy, but that sensation vanished as soon as Ned's shadowed face appeared at my window.

"I didn't have the heart to tell the kid, but that white deer out there, neighbor's been trying to kill it for years," he said, his face level with mine. His eyes looked like two

plump ticks.

"That's sad."

"Not as sad as making one-fifty for it. George over there bet him fifty. I'm at least willing to part with a Ben Franklin if I have to."

Rachel, who had been inspecting the garden, reached up and bent the thick stalk of a sunflower toward her. Her hands moved up one above the other, inching the flower closer to the ground. When it was finally low enough, she turned, placing it behind her head. Golden petals fanned out from her face like sunbeams or some ancient glorious crown.

"How's this?" she yelled.

"Like a princess," Ned yelled back. Apparently that was the comment she'd been fishing for because upon hearing it, she blushed and immediately let the flower spring back.

"Well, come on in," he said, opening my car door. "It isn't much, but it beats a parking lot," he said with a laugh.

So I followed the intense white of his shirt to the front door, letting my hand graze tickling petals. I called out for Rachel to follow me and she obeyed, but not without first tearing off a gardenia and putting it behind her ear. She often did that sort of thing; I guess it was her way of asserting independence.

The inside of the house was an odd assault on my senses. Immediately my nose twitched from inhaling musty air while my eyes adjusted to the yellow antique light. The first thing I noticed when I could see properly was a loose stack of Life magazines on the coffee table. The cover of the one on top was a black and white photograph of Eisenhower holding a fountain pen at his desk. The date was June 19, 1944. Sitting beside the papers was a dish of ribbon candy, a bowl of walnuts with a nutcracker, a clear

mason jar filled with buttons, a souvenir ashtray from the Bahamas, and a yellowed flyer with the headline Lincoln-Kennedy Coincidence?.

The furniture was just as old, too; both the couch and armchair were a dirty blue with beige polka dots and ruffles. They probably had cost a lot of money new, but now looked like every other piece of used furniture I'd ever seen at thrift stores. They had a funny smell, like burnt spinach. Next to the cabinet television with pullout knobs was a pedal sewing machine that propped up a host of porcelain-faced dolls, and above that, washboards hung like stairs on the wall. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a wasps' nest, with twigs sticking out in every direction lying on the floor. I found it odd that a flourishing garden coexisted with such a dull and lifeless house. When I heard the front door close behind us, I instinctively swallowed hard, my mouth feeling like somebody had wiped it up with a sponge.

Rachel had found a dusty Encyclopdia and sat on the couch, spreading the book open on her lap. The sight of her calmed me down considerably. She propped her thin legs up on the coffee table; her bony kneecaps blushed pink from where the giant book had rested for a moment. I looked at all the wonderful freckles that played across her body. I used to tell her when she was younger, back when she still thought freckles were stupid and ugly, that the reason she had so many was because when she'd been born, the doctor who delivered her had thought she was so sweet he sprinkled her with cinnamon. The past few years though, they seemed to be fading a little--or maybe I'd grown used to them.

"Did you know dolphins are really whales with teeth?" she asked, looking up at me curiously. That was something we shared; a love for useless trivia. I shook my head no.

Ned told me to get comfortable, have a seat, then sat himself down in the armchair. Beside him on the floor was a brown leather bag that he pulled around and placed between his wide-open legs. I watched him pull the zipper with his round fingers and listened to the tinkling of the objects inside. I thought maybe he collected bottles of some sort or maybe old coins, but instead he pulled out a miniature saw with a curved handle and sharp blade whose edge gleamed in the crusty light. Then he put his arm in again up to the elbow and pulled out a couple of jars of nails and a hammer.

"Broken fence," he said, holding the hammer in a tight fist. His knuckles bulged white between thin red lines.

Suddenly I became aware of my body, hidden underneath a gauzy knee-length skirt and a matching low-cut top in pale gray. For thirty-eight I looked all right. My face had fallen, though, especially around my chin. My neck looked old; I could see tiny parallel lines stretch across the river of veins that joined in a sunken thumbprint between the collarbones. My best feature was my mouth, wide and wholesome with a space between my front teeth, a hundred churches. I smiled at Ned who'd been staring at a point on my V-necked shirt.

"Did you know that earwigs crawl into human ears and eat brains?" Rachel asked, obviously working through the alphabet.

"Honey, please," I said.

There was a strange silence in the room, interrupted by turning pages and shifting nails and bottles, but it no longer felt empty. It became filled with itself, full of dark mystery, possessed with its own presence. I crossed my legs and shifted my weight, feeling oddly like a child. I wondered if I could take on a man of Ned's size.

"When did Phil say he was coming?" I asked Ned, who had balanced the hammer on his knee and was

unscrewing the lid of a jar. Before he could answer, I heard a screen door slam shut from a distant room, the kitchen, I presumed. Moments later an old woman with black hair and silver roots entered. Kneepads clung to her wrinkled legs below her shorts and her tee shirt was adorned with purple sequins in the shape of grapes.

"Don't just sit there like a moose, get the girls something to drink for Heaven's sake," she said, "and after all these years. It's a hundred outside and these poor girls are sitting in here with no drinks looking at you and your tools. Now what sort of man does that?"

Ned put the jar down and placed the hammer inside the bag.

"A real man is considerate of women," she said, staring at the top of his head.

"I'm fine," Rachel said, her body slightly recoiling from the woman.

"Me, too," I said.

"It's just like him to make me look foolish. I'm Liona. I'd say welcome if this one hadn't already tarnished it. Sometimes I think there's nothing but muck in that head of his."

Liona's pale skin looked oddly like the papery shreds that clung to the opening of the wasps' nest. Her needlelike gaze returned to Ned.

"Did Phil say when he was coming?" I asked, this time directing the question toward Liona who had poked Ned on the arm, then opened both hands and pointed toward her knees.

"No, but now that you're here, I wonder if I could use your fingers. His are like two-bit sausages and mine are getting the arthritis. A real man could help in the garden, but not this one," she said, watching Ned remove her kneepads. "My roses up front need support. They look like they're crying, bent in half like that. If there's anything I

can't stand it's a flower with nowhere to go."

Ned carefully folded the straps of the kneepads and then placed them beside the armchair on the floor. Liona disappeared in to the kitchen and I heard a cupboard door open, then sounds of moving objects. I hazarded a glance at Rachel who turned to me at the same time, shrugging her bony shoulders.

"This house'll be the end of me," Liona said from the other room.

I watched Ned fold his hands on his lap. Suddenly he no longer looked threatening. His shoulders, so broad earlier, now sloped toward the ground in a gentle curve. He lowered his head, his mouth forming a soft pout with the ends turned down slightly. He was focused on the ground. I made out a hint of his stone-washed blue eyes through thick lashes, his languorous lids full and peach-colored. I became aware of a sensation in my chest that unfolded like a slow wash: pity.

"Take these," Liona said, entering the room with a pair of gloves and garden shears. She put the shears in her pocket then handed me the gloves. They were stiff and dirty and smelled of sweat. "You don't seem like the gardening type."

"I'm not really," I replied.

"Mom, can I pick Dad some flowers?" Rachel said, looking up from the book.

"Daisy, that's a sweet idea!" said Liona, clasping her hands together. "Ned'll take you out back where I keep my real treasures. Tell him to pick you some of those calla lilies. Ned, are you hearing me? Pick the girl some calla lilies."

Ned's gaze shifted from the floor to me, his eyes in sharp focus.

"Take a vase from the greenhouse and pick the girl whatever she wants, and don't be lazy about cutting, either. Give her plenty of stems." She turned to me, but still spoke

loudly enough for Ned to hear. "He likes to cut them short and they end up looking like something out of a bad dream," she said, flicking a piece of dirt from her shirt.

"All right," he said, sitting up straight, his white shirt filling out like a balloon. His face seemed more alert beside the stained lampshade.

Rachel put the book on the coffee table then bent down to pull the straps of her shoes over her heels. The speckled expanse of her upper back was set off by the green ties of her dress that made little rivers down the curve of her shoulders.

"When Dad gets here he'll help fix the fence. He can do anything," said Rachel, standing up. She looked at Ned whose eyes lingered on the daisy. "You'll see when he comes," she said.

Ned stood up and led Rachel out through the kitchen while Liona fitted the gloves over my clumsy hands and walked us out the front. We hadn't been in the garden for more than a few minutes when the dog started barking furiously at a small hole in the ground. Its head was inches above the opening; a pale brown lined the edge of its wet nose. Its front paws were firmly planted in the dirt while the tail flapped angrily from side to side. Liona walked toward the animal and bent down, grabbing the dog's collar and giving it a firm yank.

"You hush up. Leave the poor thing alone."

"What is it?" I asked.

Liona guided the dog toward the front door and gave it a kick into the house. "Rabbits. Been chasing them forever, but they're smart. Know what to do in a pinch." She wiped her hands on her shorts then looked at me with raised eyebrows. "Ready?"

It was a large job, tying up roses. After a while my gauzy shirt was drenched with sweat around the armpits and lower back. My forearms were scratched from where the



gloves left off all the way up to where my shirtsleeves began. I noticed the sun had passed from between the crooked branches of a sycamore tree to above a butterfly bush alive with butterflies. And still no sign of Phil. Every once in a while I stopped and looked toward the empty road, wiping my forehead with the back of a glove. But Liona kept feeding me rope and so I continued tying.

"I don't think I could have been a botanist," she said.

"Why not?"

"Takes the fun out of it. I used to want to write until I taught English. Who the hell wants to write after they've read Proust?" she said, holding back a branch from my face. "I'd rather not know."

I found a clearing through the thorns and leaned forward with both hands, securing a piece of rope tightly around a splintered piece of wood. My back felt like it was absorbing all the heat of the day.

"You know what's funny," Liona said after a while.

"What?"

"Ned," she said, shaking out the front of her shirt. Pieces of leaves and stray petals fell to the ground. The sequins on the grape cluster reflected purple underneath her chin.

"What's funny about him?" I asked, suddenly aware of how much time had elapsed since I had last seen Rachel.

"Take this flower for instance," she said, clipping a fully blossomed yellow rose. The petals were spread out wide and almost bent back on its stem. "Now wouldn't you think this is the most beautiful thing in the entire world? But not Ned." She held it up to her nose and breathed deeply.

"He doesn't like flowers?" I asked, not sure where she was going. The thought of Rachel's whereabouts began to tango in my head.

"It's not that he doesn't like them, he does, just not the way you or me like them." She took a moment to study the bush beside her and found a rose in the shape of praying hands and clipped it off. The petals had barely parted near the top. "This one here he'd like. They're buds if you ask me, but he gets mad. Says there's no mystery once they're open, they're too vulgar. He likes what he calls the 'tension of transformation.' Now isn't that the funniest thing?"

Rachel. I instinctively looked toward the house then back at Liona who was stroking the tight petals. The image of them walking off together with his hand on her shoulder blade, the way he cupped it, his slashed hands, thick and round. I heard my car door creaking, saw her barette shining in the sun. Suddenly I felt weak. The sun was playing. It changed teams, just like that, with no warning. The garden filled with deep lavender shadows. Everything looked like a cartoon--flat, all the colors saturated and mocking. As if everything meant to lure me away. Trees looked cut from paper bags. The flowers, all of them, dipped in food coloring. The house, the bricks, nothing but a painted backdrop. My chest hollowed as I watched the lie unfold. I knew Rachel needed me. The feeling was more real than what was before my eyes, but I felt sick and light-headed and looked to Liona for help, but she had returned to clipping. The last thing I remembered seeing as I fell was Liona's hunched back, Rachel my final thought.

I felt something cool on my hot face. I heard the sounds of birds and rustling grass and my fingers rested on loose dirt. The smell of honeysuckle was overwhelming. When I finally opened my eyes, Rachel was kneeling above me, crying. Her lips were wet in the corners where tears had rolled down and collected. I looked around, looked for Ned, who was holding the screen door open with his hand.

I looked back at Rachel. She had placed a bouquet of flowers on my chest. Liona was holding my head between her hands, a glass of water sat beside my shoulder.

"You all right?" asked Liona. "It's so easy to get dehydrated. You poor thing. And to think I was chatting away like a silly old lady."

Rachel shifted her weight. I noticed one of her ties was undone. Something had changed.

"You can have these," said Rachel, giving the bouquet a shake, then she smiled.

"About a year ago the same thing happened to me," said Liona. "Here, drink some more," she said, holding up the glass to my lips. I took the water gratefully.

"Dad isn't coming," said Rachel, sniffing. "He forgot about some work thing."

"He must be very busy," said Liona.

"Busy or stupid," said Rachel, looking at Ned who yelled something about getting a washcloth for my head. I heard the screen door close. Rachel's gaze remained fixed on the house. There was something about the way she held herself that was different. It was in the expanse of her chest, the way her shoulders sat farther apart, like they were being pulled back by invisible hands. Her breasts looked smaller in comparison to the strong hanger of curves that supported her upper body. Even her arms seemed to have definition. She was sitting in the grass like a child but looked powerful, and tired, like a boxer in the final round. The details would have to wait--perhaps I'd never hear them. I looked at her wet profile. It was flushed with a new level of awareness at whose core was an inarticulate loneliness. She leaned forward and lifted me to a sitting position, her hands wrapped firmly around my arms. I felt the sun's warmth on my face, then shut my eyes against the naked light.

GREAT HUNTERS ARE WE

Blake, my boss, handed me a shining black bee-bee gun that matched the one he held. He smiled broadly in the big fake smile he gave to everyone he expected to do as he told without question. Blake had been a career soldier and expected the same sort of unquestioning discipline in the real world that he gave in the Army. Without a doubt this guy was a nut case.

It was just after closing and we had gotten the last of the customers out of the store and I was looking forward to finishing my work and getting the hell out of the place. But here he was with a plan all his own about how I would be spending some of my time. Whatever it was I surely didn't want to be any part of it. But what choice did I have, the mini-tyrant was my boss, and as much as the job sucked I needed the money.

"What's this?" I hoped he would just give up on me and let me go.

"That is a Berrington Laser Sighted, gas powered bee-bee pistol. It has three times the muzzle velocity of any other bee-bee pistol on the market. We are going to kill the fucking bird that's invaded our perimeter."

A small speckled brown bird had made its way into the store a few weeks earlier and had saucily defied the efforts of Blake to lure it back out into the wild. Instead it shat all over the store. Now it was time for him to take his revenge on the disobedient fowl. He pressed the small red button on the back of the laser sight that was mounted to his pistol and a beam of red light shined from it. Blake pointed it at the bag rack of a nearby register and a red dot steadied on the center. "See, just turn on the sight and get

the dot on the bird and bam! Dead bird. Now you flank over through produce and see if you can find it there. I'll head through frozen and we'll meet in the middle. Take no prisoners."

"Yeah, sure. Good hunting," I said and trudged off toward the produce department. What the hell, I figured, I would kill some time walking around the store and maybe I could shoot some of the cantaloupes. I wondered if the cantaloupes would explode if I shot one or if it would only get a little hole. I imagined some old woman coming to me complaining about the metal ball she found while dissecting her cantaloupe, and I gave up the idea.

I moved on through produce to the apples, long rows of Fujis, Granny Smiths, Red Delicious, and Brae Burns. I began to imagine myself as William Tell with a laser sighted bee-bee gun. I turned on the laser and centered the red dot on the middle of a too perfect Granny Smith. I took my best marksman stance and pulled the trigger. The pistol let out a loud burst of air as I pulled the trigger, and Jesus, I didn't realize the thing would be so loud. The apple tumbled down to the floor. Bam, dead apple. The laser sight was accurate though, as there was a glistening wet hole where my red light had been. I just wished I had someone's head to shoot one off of. I went and turned the apple over. Maybe no one would notice.

I strolled on past the apples and towards the far wall where the collards and Kale usually sat. Now there was only a tiny wasteland of melting ice and scraps of unwanted greens lying on top. And that is where I saw it--the bird was sitting on a mound of cabbage next to the icescape. It sat there watching me intent that I not get too close, otherwise I knew it would fly for the safety of the ceiling rafters.

I stopped and watched it, not wanting it to fly away. I pressed the switch that turned on the laser sight. The bird began to twitter and plucked some of the ice out of

the wasteland. It knew. I was sure of it. If I moved it would take off. So, I stood still for a moment longer watching the brown speckled bird as it pecked at small chunks of ice.

I had a bird when I was a ten. I called it Queenie. I used to watch it for hours. It would peck at its water dish like the bird in the store was plucking up chunks of ice. Queenie was smart. It knew how to get out of its cage and knew when it was safe to fly freely about the house.

Queenie seemed to be contented to live out his life twittering away in his cage, but when we were out Queenie had to fly free. He would pry open the cage gate with his beak and fly around the house like it was the open wilderness. I got the biggest kick out of this. My parents and me would get home and be greeted by a swooping and chirping Queenie, but my dad was never one to enjoy this slightly expected surprise.

"If I come home and find this bird out of its cage one more time, it's gone. I mean it." Dad would say. You could always tell when he was drunk. He would become overly upset at the smallest things. My mother just ignored him, a sort of whatever you say kind of thing. Learning to interpret my father's moods when he was drunk was a nearly impossible task. "Shit on it. I think we should just put the damn thing out right now."

"No," I said. "It won't happen again, I promise."

And it didn't happen again, at least not for a long time. I took to tying the gate closed with a little piece of wire and that kept Queenie locked away in his cage, safe from annoying my father, at least by flying around the house.

Weeks later, I was sitting in my room reading and trying to avoid whatever mood Budweiser had brought about in my father that night. It was the best way I could find to deal with him, lack of exposure to him meant less

chance that I would trigger some beer-fueled rage that was frequent for him. There were only rare occasions where he would come through my bedroom door, and when he did he was in a rare mood where he was looking for something to argue about. When he got into this mood there was no avoiding him short of a trip to grandmother's house. As he came through the door that night, I got ready for the worst.

"Shithead, you awake?" He said coming through the door. "I've got a surprise for you."

He came through the door and threw the limp yellow body of Queenie on my bed. "I told you I would take care of the bird if he ever got out again. There you go. Now you get rid of it."

I wanted to hit him. I wanted to break his neck like he had broken Queenie's, but I couldn't. I was ten and I could only cry. I stayed away from him as much as possible after that; spending the night, sometimes weeks with my grandmother. I was afraid I would say something wrong or fly around the house in the wrong way and end up with my neck broken too. I buried Queenie in a purple Puma shoe box in my grandmother's back yard, far away from my father.

It had been a long time since I had thought of Queenie and I knew. I knew I couldn't kill the bird. What a great hunter I was. I couldn't even kill a little bird, but apples beware. I tried to make myself point the laser light at the bird, but I couldn't. The bird began to twitter louder as if it were begging me for its life. Tweet, tweet.

"You find it?" Blake said as he approached from his tour of the other side of the store.

"Yeah, I found it. But I missed when I shot at it. Hit an apple," I lied. "It's a quick little sucker."

"O.K. Let's try it again," Blake positioned himself on the opposite side of produce from me leaving the bird

between us twittering and eating ice. Blake's bald head turned red as he concentrated on getting the laser light perfectly on the bird's chest. "You too. We both can't miss him."

I began to take aim on the bird, but I knew I couldn't do it.

"All right, on the count of three we'll both shoot," he said. I readjusted my aim and nodded. Blake began to count and on two I took my shot. The bird fluttered up into the rafters to hide and Blake fell to the floor howling as my bee-bee bit into his buttocks. That one was for Queenie. Too bad Dad couldn't have been there, I think I would have shot him in the ass too. He would have been proud of the hunter I had become. I dropped the pistol on the floor and got the hell out of there. I didn't look back, never will.



BONE IN THE THROAT

On the first day of the New Year,  
I walked with you all night  
Down a red dirt road  
After all day rain into the sheen  
That wrapped our skin  
Silver with humidity.  
Past the one street light-  
Ostrich-necked over the road-  
Night dilated, and stars hung  
Barb-wired on black tops of trees.  
Race you 'til we can't see anything  
Anymore! Your breath hovered  
In front of your featureless face and floated  
With small talk to the space  
Where the moon was supposed to be.  
At times, moments bend together  
Spine-like and marrow-filled.  
Segments somehow connect  
Like stacked bones of the cabin,  
White blinds in windows,  
Ribs holding the lamplight in.  
The creek hissed against  
Our laughter, counting  
Down the New Year again  
At arbitrary hours- watchless-  
Wine glasses left full inside,  
Relics on the wooden table.  
Waters washed over small stones,  
Slipping on syllables.  
Funny how a moment will stick

With you like a bone in the throat  
After time has chewed away the meat on it,  
Leaving it skinny and white,  
Unhinged from its chronology.  
I knew when the dawn  
Tugged at our heels like a snarling dog,  
When we opened the door,  
When you ascended the stair,  
That there were no words  
For the morning's unwelcome.

Anna Journey

---

STILL LIFE IN THE CITY

(T.S. Eliot, was that your face last night in the streetlight?)

The fat robins in the snow  
Seemed so beautiful from my window-  
Richmond's greeting  
Card plastered against the glass.

When I stepped outside,  
I was alarmed  
At their brown coils,  
Littering the lawn  
(likely in hundreds)  
It takes a sheet of snow  
For me to see this clearly, even  
On my own side lawn.

Contrast makes you  
Watch your step.  
Otherwise, it's a dull trudge  
Or a blind flight to get  
Somewhere else.

---

The snow that bleaches grey  
Mortar between the bricks  
And fleshes out the alley's  
Bumpy vertebrae, is also what  
Keeps me inside, brooding over books  
And letters. My post-it notes

Are obsessive yellow scrawlings  
    Stuck to the walls of a cave.

Snow in the city stays white  
For awhile and then melts or blackens,  
Bloating cigarette butts  
    Into brown caterpillars,  
    Sludging over short stumps  
And bushes that stick like dirty  
    Q-tips in the wet cement.

---

Vague mouse rustlings-  
From the corner forest, aligned  
White trees of the painted gas heater-  
    Scratch to be let in  
On my back door.

Jim, is that you? I think two  
Weeks is a rather long time  
To keep a girl waiting...

---

It's just you and me, Eliot, you  
Black and white and two  
By two and a half-  
    A hard profile.

Was that your face  
    Last night in the streetlight,  
And your black suit  
    Rooted in a puddle,  
Or a black giraffe  
Wearing your mask  
    Grazing in my gutter,

Your fog in my computer  
Screen, doors slamming  
And the Shadow falling  
Down the stairs?

---

Two bedroom apartment  
Squaring off silence;  
I stretch the peach skin  
Of your book cover over  
My eyes and use my X-ray vision  
To dig you out of your grave.  
But text is a tough grass,  
And I'm too tired tonight  
For resurrections.

My profile fluxes with soft  
Negatives of white pillow  
As strands of red hair slip limply,  
Mustaching me into sleep.

TUMBLEWEEDS

We didn't burn down Danny's granddad's cabin on purpose. Like we went out there that night with matches, gasoline, and a plan. No way. I mean, it probably was us, generally speaking, but as to what actually started the fire, well, could've been any number of things—Janie waving around her incense sticks, that patchouli hippie crap, or Robert the moron, flicking the lights on and off. Everybody and his brother smoking cigarettes. Plus, we pretty much kept Little Man's amazing three-foot TokeMaster chugging all night long, like, welcome to Bong City. Koo-koo-ka-choo.

So it's not like it was a person's actual fault. Just one of those things. Sometimes they turn out bad. Most times—after some time's gone by—they don't even matter.

Like that one day last spring. We were hanging out after school in the McDonald's parking lot, and I was shooting the shit with Robert and Little Man, leaning in the truck window, bumming drags from their cigarettes. They kept saying, come on, K.C., come ride with us, we'll roll one up, but no way was I going to hop in between those two, not in a skirt. Little Man had a crush on me back then, and he was fiddling with my hair, saying he needed to measure exactly how long it was. He bet about two feet.

So then Robert, who's always showing off and has no reason to, reaches over into the glove compartment and pulls, out not a measuring tape, but his dad's pistol. Punky little snub-nosed thing, didn't even look real but I said wow, could I see it, like I'm all impressed, and he hands it right over. Tee-tiny thing, it felt a lot heavier than I'd

thought. Then, just because it fit in my hand so easy, I pointed it across the truck's cab and pulled at the trigger till it went, click.

Both Robert and Little Man stared at me, then at each other, back and forth, exactly like some retarded cartoon. Bug-eyed idiots. "Jesus H. Christ!" Robert said.

Little Man laughed. "Damn, been loaded you'd be a dead man, Robert."

Robert didn't laugh. He said, "Shit, K.C., what's wrong with you, girl?"

Well, I wasn't thinking. That's all. They don't know so much either, since why'd they even let me play with it? I would've said sorry but Robert was such an ass I just let the gun drop in his lap—hey, too bad it didn't go off right then! And I split. They knew I was mad. If I wanted to feel like a fool I'd go to school every day. I don't need it from them two, especially Robert. We don't call him the moron just for fun. Jerk.

Anyway, that gun business was nothing compared to April Fools' Day two years ago. Jimmy Riley and Mike Patterson were hanging out at Mike's mom's apartment, like always—Mike's mom worked, Jimmy's didn't. They'd either cut school or were on another suspension vacation for fighting, probably with each other, big dummies. They smoked some dusted dope—another dry spell, all we had was roadside Kansas hemp—you have to doctor it up. They were watching Mike's crappy TV—the last black and white on the face of the earth—and cleaning up these old rifles that belonged to Mike's dad once. He left a long time ago, but Mike keeps care of his dumb old guns and fishing rods and junk, like he thinks the guy's going to show up again, anytime. Yeah, probably next Sunday afternoon. Dude. Wake up and smell the you-been-ditched.

Anyway, their first big mistake was watching Gilligan's Island. Who'd of thought? But Jimmy wouldn't

shut up singing that retarded song, you know, "A three-hour tour," blah blah. The parts he knew, like about the millionaire and his wife, he was screeching over and over, and making up the rest as he went along. Plus saying stuff like "Ginger? Or Mary Ann?" Generally being an asshole, which he's an expert at.

Mike wasn't in the mood. He wanted to talk about their hunting trip to Witchita, which they both knew wasn't going to happen, but still. Mike wanted to make plans.

I'm sure it was like, hey, shut up! No, you shut up. No, you. That's how they always did. They'd fight like they were brothers. Probably every time Mike tried to say something serious, Jimmy'd start in again.

You can picture it easy. Mike asks nicely, "Please stop." Then he tells Jimmy—since it's his house—"Knock it off."

And Jimmy says something like, "Guess it's the Professor for you, huh, fag boy?"

Then Mike pointed the rifle at him and said, "Shut the fuck up."

But Jimmy just thought, you know, April fool!

Yeah. Try two April fools. Mike's getting madder and madder, flicking at the safety, click, click, click. Off, on. Off. And all the while, his evil twin, good old Jimmy, he keeps pouring it on.

So when Mike raised the rifle and squinted down the sights to line them up and said, "I mean it, man," well, maybe his voice shook a little, or maybe he stuttered like he does sometimes.

Jimmy laughed at him, grabbed the barrel with both hands and pressed the end right against his face, just under his left eye, and said, "Yeah, shoot me, you little wimp. Shoot me right in the fucking head."

Then Jimmy started singing again and Mike pulled the trigger.



You wouldn't think a .22 could do so much damage. Jimmy looks like Frankenstein now. The glass eye doesn't help, but whoever sewed that boy's head back together seriously needed a few more practice sessions with the chicken. That's how they do it, before they start in on people, slice open raw dead chickens and stitch them back up, over and over. They give shots to oranges. In biology class that same year, we had to practice on oranges before injecting these baby chicks with all this testosterone and some other stuff. They started losing their yellow fuzz and getting long white feathers really fast. They weren't so cute anymore. They shit everywhere. We suffocated them in jars of ether-soaked rags and did autopsies, and you could see we should've stuck to oranges.

The doctors said it'd have been better if they'd got to Jimmy a little quicker, but Mike thought Jimmy was dead and the cops did too, at first. The bullet splintered Jimmy's cheekbone and went out the back of his head, through the apartment's thin wall, right into the neighbor's fridge, where it made a dent but didn't stick. That guy called the cops, who were not too concerned if a refrigerator got capped in that part of town.

Mike had plenty of time to flush the weed—big mistake, his lawyer said. If he knew he was breaking the law about having marijuana then, duh, he probably knew blowing out somebody's brains is illegal, too. But no. He dumped the dope and then sat there, in the rocking chair by the TV—Star Trek was on—and watched Jimmy's blood soak into his mom's davenport, which sounds plenty whackadoodle to me. Too bad I wasn't the judge.

Mike's always been a little high-strung, that's why he stutters when he's upset. He probably took a good long time spitting out what happened to the cops. By the time they clued in that Jimmy might still have a pulse and they maybe should call an ambulance, *Lost in Space* had started.

Jimmy used to be okay looking, even cute, a little. We were in the same biology class. We shared a chicken and made a mess of it. He quit school, of course, since he missed the last three months of tenth grade anyway. At first, when he started talking again—which was really hard to understand with only one side of his jaw moving—he said he couldn't wait to shoot Mike right in the face. See how he liked it. But now every time you go to Jimmy's apartment to buy a bag, you got to hear all about it—again—how when Mike finally gets back from Green Valley Home for Boys they're going on that great hunting trip, which you can bet is never going to happen.

OK. That was a bad day, yes. But it's not like Mike planned it. It was an accident, same as if I'd killed Robert that afternoon in the McDonald's parking lot. We joke about how that would've been no great loss, but I know I would've been in serious trouble, even not doing it on purpose. The cabin getting burned down was an accident too. Shoot, we didn't even know it'd happened till we got accused of doing it.

Danny and Janie and me were in the park, near the entrance by the broken fountain. They were draped over a picnic table all romantic, and I was sitting on the curb of the turn-around, trying not to watch them, braiding my hair to get it off my back. Hot as hell, even at night. We had no wheels. School had been out a week and already there was nothing to do. The whole town was bone dry. We'd sat outside the liquor store at the shopping center till one of the older redneck kids that hang in that parking lot was nice enough to take our money. So at least we had some warmish Coors and a pint of Mad Dog.

Then here comes Steve rumbling up in that red and white '57 Chevy he babies to death. It's almost an antique. He was scowling like an old man, and I thought he was going to run over my toes the way he whipped that big

gas-sucker over to the curb.

I stood up too fast—I'd downed more than my share of that MD. My cut-offs were so molded to my butt from the wet heat I needed to reach back and tug them loose. I had on this silky red halter-top—it's rayon, and it's my favorite, but it gets clingy. A few damp strands of hair that missed the braids were sticking on my bare back, crawly like bugs.

If I hadn't felt so gross, or if it'd been any other guy from around, I would've slid right in the car, sweet-talked him into taking me out to the lake to cool off, leave the two sweaty lovebirds to make out all night on the picnic table. But Steve's not the flirty type to start with, and right then he looked so unfriendly, I stayed on the edge of the curb, just kind of leaned over to say "Hey," through the window.

He didn't say a thing, just glared past my shoulder over to Danny and Janie, then back at me. Didn't crack a smile. Didn't cut the engine. Then he launched. What'd we know about the fire? Who'd been out to the cabin? Who else? When? He sounded like he was my dad, already.

"Oh, what, so automatically it's got to be us that burned it down?" I was trying to joke around, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Janie sit straight up on the picnic table all big-eyed, shaking her head at me. I guess she thought she was invisible to Steve.

"Man, I knew it. I fucking knew it. God damn it. When were you all there?"

It's hard to believe Steve and Danny are brothers, they're so different. Steve gets high, but he's also like, if you accidentally trashed a tape you borrowed, he'd expect you to pay for it, and get mad if he had to remind you. He always made me feel like I needed to go wash my face.

I felt a little sick to my stomach and wished I could

sit down. I hate beer. I wished Janie would come over and talk to Steve instead of me. They went out a few times before she hooked up with his little brother. But she stayed stone-still on the picnic table bench, staring down at her arms folded across her stomach. Danny was stretched out on his back on the tabletop behind her with his T-shirt wadded up under his head for a pillow. He could've been asleep, except for his thumb flicking at the filter of the cigarette between his fingers.

"We haven't been out to the cabin for a while," I said to Steve.

"Yeah, well, it's been ashes for a while. And you little punks weren't supposed to be out there at all." Steve yanked the gearshift into park. He leaned out the window and talked loud to make sure Janie and Danny could hear. "Real nice when the old man went up last weekend and found it totally gone. Burned to the fucking ground. He practically had a heart attack. Who all was with you?"

Nobody answered. Janie tucked up her knees and put her head down on her arms, and Danny stayed laid out on the picnic table, staring at the sky like he was counting stars, just him and them, alone in the universe. He didn't move except to flip away his Marlboro butt. It arced through the air and landed in the gutter by my feet. The smoke started twisting up under Steve's nose, and he drew his head back inside the car.

I felt like I was going to fall over if I had to balance on the curb much longer, so I held on to my braids like a set of reins to steady myself and I gave him the names. But, I told him, none of us had started a fire, not even in the fireplace. "Robert found the fusebox so we turned on the lights," I said.

"It could've been electrical," Steve said, his teeth gritting together. He squeezed the steering wheel with both hands and I could see the bones in his knuckles. Bet

that steering wheel was my neck. Then he yelled out the window at Danny, "You took that freak Robert up there? Mom and Dad will love hearing about that." He jerked the car back in gear and peeled out. Laid rubber. You would've thought his dad bought his tires.

"Jesus Christ," said Danny.

"God, K.C., why'd you tell him all that?" Janie said, her head up, alive again. "I told him yesterday I'd never been there except the one time he took me."

"I'm sorry. Why didn't you tell me?" I could hear my voice take on this whiny sound, but I couldn't stop it. "What was I supposed to do? I didn't know what to say. Danny, I'm really, really, sorry. He's not going to tell. Is he?"

"Probably," said Danny.

"Well, shit. I'm sorry." I felt like crying, another thing I don't like about a beer buzz. "I didn't even know we weren't supposed to be there. Shit."

"Oh fuck it," Danny said. "K.C., it's OK. Who cares? I'm not supposed to do anything. I flunked again, and I'll go to hell before I go to summer school. I'm grounded for life already, can't you tell? What can they do?"

"Are you serious?" Janie said. She didn't mind Danny being a year or so younger than her, though we'd both been surprised when we found out he wouldn't even be sixteen till July. But she sure didn't dig the idea of going with somebody stuck in junior high, which ninth grade still is in this place. Not too cool. "Danny, how could you not—God damn it. You're too smart for this bullshit."

He isn't, though. Not like that. If he actually showed up for school on any kind of regular basis he'd do better, but he'd still have a tough time. This paper Janie and me helped him with one time looked like a child wrote

it, the shortest words he could think of, in big round letters, and half of them spelled wrong. He and Janie got into a fight over it—she wanted him to look up the misspelled words. She finally stomped off huffy and he wrote “Moby can suck my dick” right across the front page in purple Sharpie. I sincerely doubt he handed it in.

But he’s a good guy, and he sure is pretty, all that thick blonde hair past his shoulders, almost as long as mine, and not so light that he doesn’t have dark eyelashes and eyebrows, so he can skip that freaky albino look like Robert’s got. Great eyes, sky blue, not gray like mine. He’s taller than Steve, which Steve hates, but he shouldn’t let it get to him. Danny’s even bigger than their dad who’s like this lumberjack guy—they’ve had a couple head-on collisions, sort of clash of the Titans, in which the old man came out the loser, so he mostly lays off both his boys now. Unlike Steve, who worked his ass off at their dad’s lumberyard all through high school and graduated on time, Danny just hangs out, maybe once in a while fixes some machinery or does a delivery for his dad. Their lumber truck is huge—the thing has about twelve gears—but he drives it around like a sports car. That’s why we figured he was older—that plus his size. Danny’s big all over, Janie told me once, grinning, with her hand over her mouth and no idea that I already know that first-hand myself.

Janie loves to talk about that stuff, but a lot of it I swear she makes up as she goes along. Two years ago, on the first day of tenth grade when we all had to congregate in the school cafeteria to get our class schedules, she was the only normal person to talk to me. When you’re new, the losers try to buddy up. You got to be careful. I was sprawled out in one chair with my feet propped up on another, so nobody could just plop down. There’re these big picture windows that look right out on this pretty cool courtyard area, all green, and some trees, and I was wishing

I was outside. Beautiful day, sunny but not blazing. Seniors are allowed to go out during lunch.

Janie came right across the cafeteria, jiggled the toe of one of my boots so I'd move them, sat down beside me and started chatting away. First it was just casual, kind of this and that—how you doing, are those boots like really Italian or Payless? Do you smoke cigarettes? Can I bum one for later? Do you smoke anything else? You know. Then she leaned over and whispered, though plenty loud enough for folks right around us to hear, what did I think of her cleavage?

Man. Anyone else it would've been totally bizarre, but Janie's blonde, tee-tiny, and pretty as a Barbie doll, so she gets away with goofy shit like that all the time. People expect it. She just delivers.

"Check this out." With her back turned to the rest of the cafeteria, she stretched down the V-neck of her shirt. Her bra was ice blue with a ton of lace. "I got it at Bloomie's in Kansas City."

She's the best shoplifter I know. They never suspect her. Me, they watch the second I come through the door. "It has pads in the bottom, shoves everything right up. I really don't have any more than you." This is not quite true, but it was a nice thing to say.

"Hey look," she said, picking up my class schedule. "We have gym together, excellent." She acted like we'd known each other forever, like we were finishing a conversation from yesterday. Sounded like she was speeding her brains out. "Hey, look. We're going to see the movie today, you know, the movie, that's how they start off every school year. Like we forgot what a tampon was. But tomorrow let's have cramps and ditch, OK? Miss Bunschkeski will make you take showers. Buns and chesty. She's a trip. The towels are about two inches wide and the water might be barely warm. So, can you still wear white

to your wedding? Do you know what I mean? Got any gum?"

It was nothing special about me, I know that now. I had on big gold hoops, so maybe my earrings caught the sun and brought her to me, like a magpie after something shiny. Janie talks to everybody, especially when she gets a hold of her mom's diet pills. She gets along with everybody. In fact, say someone decides to go to war with you over some guy or some rip-off deal, you can count on Janie not to take sides. She'll be real conciliatory with everyone. Peace, brother. And she'll be real sure to tell each person what the other one had to say. But at least she's not a chicken, and all the guys like her, and most of the time, since she's an only child, she's got some cash and her parents let her take the car. Such as it is. Lame-ass Pinto, baby-poop green.

No car that night, though. We were still sweating, bored, barely buzzed, and now, thanks to Steve, good and depressed too. I tried apologizing to Danny again, but he just waved his hand to forget it.

"Let's get out of here before narco asshole comes back," he said, sitting up and pulling his T-shirt back on. He stood up on the tabletop and looked through the trees like he might see Steve's Chevy cutting a path back through the park. "Janie, Lady Jane, let's cruise over to your house, see if you can get us in. I'm dying of thirst. This near-beer sucks." He kicked his half-empty can off the picnic table and it cartwheeled through the air spraying foam, flashing in the moonlight before it disappeared in a clump of bushes. Some of the spray caught me across the face and it was almost cool enough to feel good.

Janie didn't say anything, and she didn't wait for him. She pushed off the picnic bench like somebody pinched her and started across the park at a clip way too fast for the weather. She twisted her hair hard as she



walked, without slowing down, until she had it all coiled on top of her head, the last couple inches tucked under the whole clump so it stayed. I can never get mine to stay. Danny watched her for a second, then caught up with her shadow as she moved under the streetlights. He walked on her shadow-hair all the way up the street.

It was a hike to Janie's. She lives on about the only hill in this entire flat-ass state. All the lights in the house were off, good sign. She let herself in the front door and Danny and I ran around back to her window—her room was the whole basement, almost like her own apartment. We crouched there in the shadow of the house a good five minutes before we heard her dragging a chair across the floor. When she stepped up on the chair and lifted the window a few inches, a wave of air-conditioning billowed out, chilly as deep lake water. It felt great.

"My dad's still awake," she said, whispering through the screen. "I'm late and he's mad. You guys have to split. Don't let him see you."

"Come on, Janie," Danny said. "Let us in, hon. We'll be quiet."

"Why don't you go home and study?" Janie said. "Here." She raised the screen a few inches, just high enough to roll out two cans of Coke. They felt like cylinders of ice and I held mine against my neck in the hollow of my collarbone, trying to control my shivers so as not to shake it up too much. I looked at the stars when Janie put her face sideways into the opening so Danny could kiss her goodnight.

I hate being the third wheel and sometimes, I swear, Janie acts like she's on stage. She wasn't feeling too romantic this evening, though. Danny didn't get much more than a whiff of strawberry-scented lipgloss. "Boy, you better do something," she said.

"I meant to," Danny said. "But you won't let me

in.” He reached his hand up to her cheek, but she batted him away.

“I’m not kidding, Daniel. Sounds like summer school to me.” She pulled back from the window and eased the screen down, then looked sideways through it at us again.

“K.C., don’t let him do anything stupid,” she said to me. “And for the love of Jesus, don’t talk to Steve anymore. Call me.” She shut the window, cutting off the cool air supply. The heat wrapped back around us.

It was a long walk back to the park. I wished I had shoes, even flip-flops. My feet were filthy. I shuffled through the little pockets of old rainwater collected here and there in the uneven basin of the broken fountain, but it didn’t do much good.

“You probably killed a bunch of mosquito eggs,” Danny said. I found one of our warm, half-drunk Coors still under the picnic table and poured it out over my feet to rinse the rest of the grime.

“Jesus, I hope the cops don’t come through,” Danny said. “You smell to high heaven—”

“Oh, shut up, it’s not—is it that bad?”

“Whew, baby.” Danny pretended to gag. “Naw, I’m kidding. Wipe ’em off in the grass. Man, I wish we had some pot. Wish we had some tunes. Do you have to go home? What do you want to do?”

Maybe you, is what I would never have the guts to say, not even joking around. Instead I said I didn’t know, but I was supposed to spend the night at Janie’s. That’s what I’d told my mom, so now I was outdoors.

Danny wanted to walk out to the overpass, meaning go drop rocks on cars, the same thing that bought him three months in Green Valley about two years ago, and caused him to be kept back the first go-round. I suspected this would qualify in Janie’s book as letting him do some-

thing stupid, so I said I didn't want to hike up another hill. There wouldn't be enough traffic this late, anyway.

"I wonder what time it actually is," I said. Neither one of us had a watch. "Let's go see if McDonald's is still open. Might be somebody there."

McDonald's was right across the main drag from the park, and it was lit up when we crossed over, although there were only a couple cars in the lot. I didn't recognize them. I had a dollar left over from the liquor store and Danny dug out some change from his jeans pocket. We had enough for French fries. I was starving.

But Charlie Allister was on as night manager, so I had to go hungry. He used to be Janie's boyfriend, like since she was about twelve. They were going to get married as soon as she graduated.

Charlie hates me. He told Janie's mom I was a bad influence, me right in the room when he said it. After Janie gave him back his ring, he came over to whine to Mrs. Hansen about how "concerned" he was. Looked straight at me and said, "Sorry if I hurt your feelings but that's how it is." Yeah, well, how it is, is you're out of luck, Chuck. You freak. God, he's so boring. He must have about three jobs, and all he ever does is work and act all sad and tired. She'd never really have married him.

Now Charlie peered over the counter at my beer-streaked feet and twisted his mouth like he'd bit down on something sour. "You can't come in here like that." The A/C was on full blast, and I knew the sudden chill made my nipples jut against the thin, damp fabric of my halter-top.

"Go take a bath and put some clothes on, Pocahontas," Charlie said, staring at my chest. "No shoes, no service."

"Nice hat, Charlie," I said. He had one of those dorky paper things on his head that they make them all

wear, even the managers. Looks like a capsized canoe. Steve tried to get on part-time with this McDonald's once, after he'd had some set-to with his dad at the lumberyard, but they expected him to wear the hat and a hair net. He got things right with his old man pretty quick.

"Come on, Charlie," Danny said. "Just let us have the cold fries. We can pay. Nothing else is open."

"Neither are we," Charlie said. He turned away to the deep fryer, and all three of us looked at the metal racks just above it. A short row of red cardboard envelopes stuffed with fries glowed under the heat lamps, flecks of salt and grease glinting all around. Charlie grabbed the big round trashcan and rolled it on its edge like a steering wheel over to the rack. He steadied the can with one hand and, with the other, swept all the red boxes into the trash.

"See? We're out of food," he said. "We're closed. Are you deaf? Get lost."

"Charlie, you are a real dick." Danny didn't sound mad, more like he was hurt that Charlie'd be so mean.

"Boy, you don't know the half of it." Charlie leaned toward us, his palms pressed flat on the counter, his teeth clinched in this big, shit-eating grin. "Now, beat it."

Two guys—the only other people in the place—sat at the table closest to the door, crumpled up wrappers and crumbs and ketchup smears all over the trays on their table. They'd pigged out. Both of them had short, dark hair with high whitewalls, practically twins, except one had a thick black mustache. Doggies from the Army base out past the east end. Main reason this dumpy town even exists, to serve up liquor, dope and whores to the soldier boys, and cash their checks at twenty percent off the top.

"Hey kid," the dude with the mustache said to Danny. He was wearing a heavy gold ring with a black stone and a huge surfer cross on a silver chain. The other one had mirrored sunglasses, like a cop. He looked

straight ahead, chewing on his cheeseburger, but the guy with the mustache held out a red fry box, extra-large, still half-full.

"You can have the rest of these. Give some to your girlfriend. She looks a little chilly. Probably need some fuel, huh cutie?" He winked at me but not in that gross stupid way like most older guys. I thought he was nice.

"Thanks, man," Danny said, taking the box. We walked outside and sat on the mom bench by the kiddie lot. The fries were covered in ketchup, which I hate, but I found a few that weren't completely soaked. Danny up-ended the box to dump the rest in his mouth, then ripped the box open to get at any salty crumbs stuck inside.

"Poor baby was hungry," I said.

"Man, are you kidding?" He licked his fingers. "I'm still starved. Wish we had more. I wish we could've stayed at Janie's for awhile. Maybe we ought to cruise back in a while, when her folks are for sure asleep—her mom is some cook." He tore off a piece of the cardboard with his teeth, chewed the salt out of it and spit a gray glob on the sidewalk.

"Gross. Eat the cardboard, I don't care. But don't spit it where I got to walk."

"Well, run tell the sidewalk police, rat girl. Jesus. Wear shoes, how about."

"God, Danny, I was just saying." I don't know why him calling me a snitch hurt my feelings so much—I knew he wasn't serious. Maybe I was still a little blurry from the booze and our long, hot walk. "You know what? Fuck you." I jumped up like I was going to split, and he back-pedaled fast.

"K.C., come on. Don't go. I'm sorry. You know I was just joking. Pretty much. No, really. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Damn, women just love that word, don't you? That, and 'please'." He pressed his hands together like he was

praying, then started to clap and bark, like a trained seal.  
“Sor-are-are-are-are-ree.”

I had to laugh. “You are such a jerk.”

“I know. Sorry. There any more Coke?”

“What’s the magic word?”

“Jesus.”

“Nope.”

“Puh-leeze.”

“Wipe your mouth off first. You got some ketchup, right there—here, I’ll do it.” He let me hold his chin and check both sides of his face as if he were a child, and then I handed him Janie’s Coke can, a few warmish swigs left in the bottom. We sat quiet on the bench, watching clouds cross the moon. Not like we ran out of things to say to each other, just relaxed. It was nice.

We weren’t together but it looked like it. I kind of wished we’d never hooked up when Janie had to go to her grandma’s funeral in Iowa last March. It was a cheesy thing to do, even if we didn’t plan it. Just one of those things. Oh, well. We were so high at the time I bet Danny didn’t even remember. I’d practically forgotten myself.

The lights inside McDonald’s flickered as the two dogfaces came strolling out, and the glass door whooshed shut with a click behind them. The storefront went black, though the kitchen part was still lit up. We could see Charlie moving around back there, on clean-up detail all by himself, like he deserved, wiping stuff down, putting stuff up. Talking on the phone.

The sunglasses-at-night guy moved past us like we were invisible, but the one with the mustache and the surfer’s cross stopped by our bench. “Sorry we didn’t have much left to give you.” He was looking at the licked-clean container in Danny’s hand. “That guy sure was an asshole to you all.”

Danny crunched up the fry box and flipped it over his shoulder. It landed on the other side of the tot lot's chain link fence. "That's OK," he said. "We'll get his house come Halloween." Charlie lived by himself not too far from Janie's place. On the edge of that neighborhood.

"No shit, you know where he lives?" The mustache man looked all excited, like a little kid at Christmas. "Well hell. Let's roll. You guys want to catch a buzz? What's your all's names? Hey Christopher—" he called to the other dude who was unlocking a yellow Camaro with black racing stripes parked right under the golden arches. "We got company. Lemme have the keys, man. I'm good to drive now. We got a mission."

The Christopher guy tossed the keys over the car to him. Danny and I looked at each other and shrugged. Go for a ride? Sure. Why not?

"This is great," Mustache said. He was jazzed like this was the big event of the evening. "We'll go teach that McMoron some manners."

"Ah, there's no need," Danny said, yawning. "You guys want to head out somewheres, we really should go to the lake instead—"

Inside McDonald's, Charlie must have hit a master switch, because the parking lot suddenly went pure black. Danny jerked out of his stretching yawn and we all held our breath for a second, blind in the hot dark. Then the moon broke through the cloud cover and an ocean of light rushed over the darkness in great brilliant waves. Everything it touched glowed, and it touched everything as it spread, rolling through the night fast as a prairie fire. The arches were lit up again, not yellow but gleaming bright white. The Camaro turned silver, and Danny's blonde hair reflected a halo.

"Wow," Danny said softly, and we all laughed a little.

"Check it out," said Mustache. "A sign from God. We got to do this." When he showed his teeth a tiny diamond chip set in one his canines flashed. He had a nose like a hawk. If he'd had a gold earring he could've been a pirate. Probably was.

"After you, little lady," he said, pushing the driver's seat forward so I could slide into the back. He put his other hand on my shoulder blade and his fingers were like icicles. Christopher was already up front, rolling a joint on a magazine in his lap, leaning into the light from the glove compartment.

The car smelled like cigarettes and beer but the seats were clean. After wooden benches and concrete curbs and walking all night, it felt great to lean back on the slick cushiony vinyl. It would've been easy to go to sleep if I'd been by myself, but Danny climbed in and plunked down beside me hard enough to rock the car, then made me trade places so he could have the leg room behind Christopher. Mustache gunned the engine and cranked the radio, til we couldn't hardly hear one for the other. Then he talked over both.

"Just tell me where to go, boss," he hollered back to Danny, as he twisted the rearview mirror to check me out. His pupils were gigantic. "Hey cutie pie, you OK?" I nodded to the mirror. I didn't want to get into a conversation where I'd have to yell everything. I wanted to watch the moon chase us through the car window. It was beautiful.

"The quiet type, huh?" Mustache said. Danny gave me a little nudge and I knew he had to be rolling his eyes. "Don't get her started," he said, and Mustache laughed.

"You're a brave man to say that with her right there." It was a question I figured Danny wouldn't get, not being the sharpest knife in the drawer besides not thinking about me that way, but he put his elbow in my ribs again,



harder, so I'd look at him. Even sitting down I had to look up at him. He was grinning, all teeth, and for a second I felt weird, a little dizzy and almost scared. Like I was all alone in the dark. I couldn't focus good enough to see Danny's eyes, but I could sure feel how Mustache kept glancing in the mirror, watching us both.

"Nah, she's all right," Danny said, running his palm over the crown of my head and shifting closer so he was sitting right next to me, his leg pressed against mine. I felt like hugging him and, for the second time that night, I felt like crying, even though I wasn't drunk now. Well, maybe a little, but nothing like our mustache man here hoped. That was just my feet.

Danny licked his thumb and rubbed at the corner of my mouth. "Got some ketchup there, babe," he said. He dropped his hand to my shoulder and leaned in front of me so he didn't have to scream at Mustache over the music. "Take a left at the light. Then the second right after we get around the park."

Mustache was bouncing in his seat, jerking the steering wheel to the rip of the bass line, making the Camaro jump the yellow line. If I'd been sloshed like he thought, I'd have probably puked.

Between jolts, Christopher licked shut the joint he'd rolled up and lit it with a Zippo, drawing deep. He passed it back to Danny. I could see Mustache looking in the rearview again when Danny gave the joint to me, so I blew into it, making the cherry glow bright like I was inhaling really hard.

"Have at it, kitten," he said, waving it off when I made to pass the number to him. "Knock yourself out."

We were halfway up the hill when Danny told him to slow down. "Cut your lights," he said. "Right into the cul-de-sac. Two houses up. The yellow brick."

"Let me out," Danny said as Christopher was open-

ing the door.

Mustache yanked the key out of the ignition and said, "Nah, y'all sit tight. This is mine." He was practically giggling. He ran around to flip open the trunk, then streaked across the yard, the tire iron glinting in his hand as it caught moonlight. The house had a long narrow row of windows across its face, all louvers, and we heard the glass sing as he raked the tire iron down each segment. He was howling. A light came on in the house as Mustache danced over to the green Pinto parked in the driveway and caved in its windshield with one swing.

"Go!" Danny whispered loud right in my ear, pushing the driver's seat forward with one hand and shoving me out of the car with the other.

He grabbed my arm to jerk me up when I stubbed my toe and stumbled, and kept hold of me as we raced across the street. Little pebbles embedded in the asphalt cut into my soles. It felt more than good to hit grass, but that didn't stop the tears rolling down my face. We ran between two houses and crossed somebody's backyard full tilt, and then Danny dove into the deep shadows beneath a high hedge marking property lines, pulling me down almost right on top of him. We crouched close together, spying through the branches back across the street. I couldn't tell if it was Danny's heart pounding that was making me shake so, or only my own.

Christopher was hanging halfway out the passenger-side door, yelling at his buddy to get in the fucking car, God damn it, but the insane one kept bouncing around, laughing wildly, waving the tire iron over his head. He ducked down to look underneath the Camaro and then sprang back up to scan the cul-de-sac, his hands cupped around his eyes, pretend binoculars. He made this trilling noise, as if he was calling a cat.

He stood stone-still for a split second, and then he

shrieked for me to come back to him, beating his fists against his thighs and screaming so hard we could see the spit fly out of his mouth, glistening under the streetlight.

But he wasn't calling me by my right name. Finally, he slammed the trunk shut with both hands and jumped in the car. The Camaro lurched forward and spun around, fishtailing crazily for a second before it caught the straightaway and leaped down the hill, just as Janie's dad flung open their front door, holding the edges of his plaid bathrobe together and screeching curses at the Camaro's shrinking taillights.

"Bet we could catch them if we got to the overpass real quick," Danny said, still breathing hard. "Like to put a fucking boulder right in that asshole's lap."

My big toe was bleeding. I could see where I'd took the top layer of skin clear off it when I tripped, only a little flap left, sticking up. It stung like hell.

"Ouch. That's got to smart some," Danny said. "You still got that joint? It'll help." I'd forgotten all about Christopher's dope. I opened my fist and there it was, crinkled by my sweat but still rolled tight.

"Good," Danny said, though he didn't reach for it. He kept his hand on my arm, not gripping, just kind of resting it on me, and I stayed still so he wouldn't think to move away. He was watching Janie's dad, who was now letting Janie's mom calm him down and talk him back inside. After a few seconds they went in the house and shut the door. We could see their two silhouettes moving around, blurry behind the gauze curtains hanging over the row of smashed windows. A siren sounded somewhere down the hill, and we both listened for a moment. It was pretty far away. Didn't seem to be heading in our direction.

Danny sat back on his heels and rubbed his face on one sleeve of his T-shirt, then stretched out the shirtfront

to dab at my cheeks. "Ah, here, take it." He yanked the shirt over his head, flapped it once and held it out to me. "Dry off. You're shivering."

"No, it's alright, I'm not—"

"Girl, will you just—please? OK? Please take it." He pressed the shirt into my hands, and ran his own hands over the top of his head, tugging at his hair. "Oh, man. Fucked up bad tonight, didn't I? Probably can't go get us another Coke, huh?"

I couldn't hardly believe he expected to make me laugh. My foot was on fire, but that wasn't why I still felt like just wailing. "Why'd you do this?" My voice was all cracking and shaky.

Danny acted like he wasn't sure what I meant at first, like maybe I wasn't speaking English. He stared down at the smeary T-shirt I held, as if the answer might be written somewhere in all its wrinkles. When he raised his head, his face looked the way Charlie's did most of the time, or my dad. Even Steve. Older. Wrung out. Tired of everything.

"I didn't know soldier boy'd go fucking psycho," he said. He sounded beat and I felt bad for even asking. It was a done deal, anyway, no calling it back. "And... Jesus, I don't know. Maybe I thought you had to see it to believe it."

I didn't have a clue what he was talking about, and it was more like he was talking to himself anyway, not to me. "Shit, I don't believe it. I know it, yeah. Hell yeah, I been knowing it. Even I'm not that goddamned dumb, don't got to—"

"Danny, stop!" I was feeling a little sick again, like when I'd been standing in the park listening to Steve yell. "I can't understand you."

"Don't you even wonder where she might be?" Danny pointed so I'd look where he was looking, back

across the street. The living room light was still on in Janie's house but there were no more silhouettes on the curtains. Then I got it, what I already knew too, what'd been making me all babyish and teary the whole damn night.

It was still a surprise, though, which must've showed on my face because Danny laughed, kind of. Shook his head. "Ah, God. The little—" He stopped again, cleared his throat and spit hard into the bushes. "Well. Sure had me going, Jesus. What a dope. Every bit as fucking stupid as she thinks I am."

He heaved this big sigh and got on his feet slow. "Alright, hon. We better book." He hauled me up as if I was a rag doll, but easy. Gentle. Like I could come apart at the seams, and he held on to me like I needed to be steadied some those first few steps down the hill. Either one was true enough.

"Danny, I'm—I didn't know, she didn't—shit. I'm really, really—"

"Nah, skip it. Screw it. Just one of those things. You know, them thangs"—he grinned at me, or at least, showed me his teeth—"but I guess we got to go burn down Charlie's crib now."

"Oh, God, Danny, you can't—"

"Christ, I'm kidding." He put his arm across my back to keep me walking, and I moved closer so he'd leave it there. "K.C., really. Don't worry." He patted my shoulder, like you would a puppy. With his other hand he took his T-shirt from me and held it close to my face.

"Everything's OK. Now blow your nose, and throw this rag in the bushes. It's wrecked anyway. Don't be shy." He made this retarded honking sound and I finally did laugh.

"You know what? I think you're actually a really nice person."

"Yeah, I'm a prince." He made a sour face.

"I'm serious, don't mock me. Make me cry again."

"God, please don't—I'm great, OK?" Danny reached toward my face, and I thought at first he wanted to touch me. Instead, he plucked a leafy little hedge twig from one of my braids and twirled it between his fingers, watching it twist and turn as if it were the most fascinating thing on earth.

"You have such pretty hair," he said, like he was telling it to the piece of hedge. "Hey, listen, K.C.. Let's roll on over to my place, see if Steve's home, catch him a buzz. He needs to cheer up too. And then, you know. I can split, if that's what you want." He flicked the little twig away, watching it arc into the grass. "Do you?"

I was feeling better and better. "Who wants to know?" I said.

"Who...?" Danny said. "Well... Well—"

"That's a very deep subject."

"Come on. All right. Maybe me."

"No kidding," I said. "Maybe you."

TOTALLY INNOCENT

“Look man, I didn’t kill nobody, you can’t pin that shit on me. I mean, ok, yeah, maybe I know something about it, but I didn’t do it. I didn’t kill nobody. I’m not a murderer. I just don’t have it in me.”

I stop there, and look at the cops to see if they’re buying it. They should be. It’s the truth.

“Keep talking. You ain’t reached no stopping place.”

That would be Myrick, the younger one, the asshole of the pair. I know all about that good cop bad cop shit, I know how they work it, I know its an act and all, and usually the good cop’s an asshole too, just kind of in disguise or whatever, but this guy, this Myrick guy, he really takes the prize. King asshole. No doubt. He’s one of those moron small town cops who thinks he’s fucking Serpico or on NYPD Blue or something, and he tries to use all his sneaky tough guy tricks he learned from the movies, but he’s so obvious, so ridiculously obvious, that I have to physically restrain myself from laughing out loud. Cause that wouldn’t be good. I may not think too much of this pair’s police skills, but I don’t know. They are serious.

Luckily, the truth is on my side. Once I explain everything they’ll see I didn’t do it. Then everything will be cool again. “Where did you get the girl? Who knew her?”

That’s Clumfeldt. Older by about thirty years and heavier by about a hundred pounds, he’s the brains of the pair, not that that’s saying much. I hesitate for a second here, cause it certainly goes against every bit of my street training to give up anything to the cops, but I remind

myself to tell them everything. I didn't do nothing. The truth will set you free and all that.

"Well that was me," I said. "I knew her. She was in my drug classes."

"Your drug classes?" Myrick.

"Yeah, I got those for a simple possession charge. Last April."

"Did you go to a twenty eight day facility?" That was Clumfeldt. Always concerned.

"Naa, no rehab. Just community service and classes for sixteen weeks. Unsupervised probation."

Myrick jumps all over that.

"Unsupervised. What kind of bullshit is that?"

I just shrug, cause really he's right. It was bullshit. I didn't even have anybody check on me as long as I paid my money on time. The justice system runs on money. That's all anyone in the courthouse cares about.

"Yeah, so anyway," I continued, "I met her last April in class and kind of chatted her up a bit. She was a cute girl, you know? Not a model or anything, but cute, and sweet. She had this smile that made you feel good..."

I kind of trail off, thinking about it. It sucks she's dead. But it's not my fault. What can you do?

"So you kept in touch?" Clumfeldt again.

"No, not really," I say. "After the classes I stopped talking to her. I only saw her once since, at some party. Well, before Saturday I mean."

"Bullshit." Myrick.

Guess who that was. I just raise an eyebrow at him and he bucks up at me, standing too close, invading my space and, for a minute, I think he's gonna hit me, but Clumfeldt lays a hand on his shoulder and he backs off.

"I think what my partner means to say," Clumfeldt says, "is how did she get there, if you didn't keep in touch. What was she doing there?"



"Well that's kind of funny," I say. "Purely coincidental. She called me Friday night. First time I'd heard from her in months."

"What did she want?" Myrick, and he's looking for holes in my story, looking for reasons not to believe me, I can tell.

I sit back in my chair, allowing my shoulders to slide low, and sigh audibly. I'm really getting tired of this.

"Can we go outside and smoke a cigarette?"

They look at me in disbelief, well Clumfeldt does at least. Myrick mostly just looks like he wants to hit me. Clumfeldt recovers quickly and smiles.

"Sure we can," he says. "As soon as we finish up your statement I'll take you out there myself. You can smoke a whole pack if you want to. Just finish your story. What did she want?"

I just look at him for a minute.

"Maybe I should talk to a lawyer."

Myrick snorts loudly in disgust and slams his hands down on the table.

"I told you he killed her," he says to Clumfeldt.

"I didn't kill nobody."

"Well if you didn't kill anyone," Clumfeldt began, "why do you need a lawyer?"

"Murder's not the only crime, you know? I could have... been involved in something else... or whatever..."

Myrick turns his back on me and paces to the far side of the room. He doesn't handle his frustration very well and I think to myself, this is a man with a lot of stress in his life. I'm betting on a heart attack long before he ever reaches retirement. Clumfeldt, always calm, always patient, smiles at me. The look in his eye labels me a simpleton but that's ok, I don't mind, not really. Let them underestimate me. I know what I'm doing.

"We're homicide detectives," says Clumfeldt.  
"That's what we do. Anything else is none of our business. We're not looking to charge anyone for anything that happened before she died. We just want to know the whole story."

That seems right to me. What do they care about a little pot? They're here for the murderers and that aint me.

"She called me looking for a sack. All her hook-ups were dry and she was jonesin hardcore."

"Marijuana?" Clumfeldt.

"Yeah."

"You a dealer?" That was Myrick again, not even bothering to turn around.

"No, I'm not a dealer, and I told her that too. I told her I couldn't get her anything. But Stokes was there and he..."

"Stephen Stokes?" asked Clumfeldt, and I noticed he was writing now.

"Yeah, Stephen was there and he said we should get her to come party with us on Saturday. So I told her that. I said we'd smoke her out if she came and partied with us."

"And she agreed with that?" Clumfeldt asked.

"Yeah, well, not right away. She wanted to know who all was gonna be there, you know? Then when I told her it would just be me and Stokes she said ok."

"So you lied to her," Myrick says.

"Not on purpose. I didn't know Stokes was gonna have Bennie with him. I didn't find that out till Saturday when they came and picked me up. I knew she wouldn't care though, and she didn't. What's one more? She just wanted to make sure it wasn't gonna be a whole party or nothing like that. A gang scene or whatever. She wasn't picky."

"Picky about what?" asks Myrick.

"About the sex. About who she fucked. She didn't care who, she just didn't want to get abused, or whatever. She had no problem partying with us as long as the dope was there. I tried to tell them that too, once things started to go bad. I told them there wasn't any need. She would party with us anyway, but they didn't care about that. That's not what they were into."

"Alright," Clumfeldt says, looking up from his notepad. "Let's back up a minute. How do you know Stephen Stokes? And," here he checks his notes, even though it's obvious he already knows both of their names, knew them long before I got here. "This Bennie... is that Bennie Tyler? How did you know those guys?"

I shrugged.

"Just around, you know? They lived in the neighborhood. I don't know, how do people get to know people? Why does that matter?"

Myrick turns around and comes toward me. He looks pissed. "You let us decide what matters. Your job is to keep talking."

I just freeze up and look at him for a moment. When I speak it's in a hard flat monotone.

"I don't remember where I met them originally. I've known them since we were kids, but we've never really been friends. Not real friends. They're not too bright."

"Ok, Ok," Clumfeldt says, and he can tell I'm pissed. He's trying to play up that friendly thing to make up for it. "Let's calm down. Myrick, why don't you go get us some drinks."

Myrick glares at him, and at me, but he doesn't say anything, just stomps out and slams the door behind him. Clumfeldt just smiles at me and doesn't say anything. It's kind of creepy. He takes off his glasses and cleans them and doesn't say anything the whole time. Then he puts them back on and clears his throat.

"I don't know what his problem is. I'm sorry about that. So, where were we?"

I don't miss a beat.

"Same place we've always been. I didn't kill nobody."

"Right. I know. Just keep telling me what happened. Did you get the marijuana?"

I think about it for a minute and then just figure what the hell.

"Yeah, I got it. Just a twenty sack though. Nothing big."

"Where did you get it?"

"That has nothing to do with this."

He frowns at me.

"I think," he says, "that if you want to keep yourself out of prison, you need to come clean about everything."

"I'm sure you do. But it aint gonna happen. There's no way I'm gonna rat out my boy for selling me a twenty sack. Telling on Stokes and Bennie is one thing, they killed that girl and that's fucked up, they deserve to get busted. But I aint ratting nobody out for hooking me up. I'm not a rat."

Clumfeldt pushes his chair back from the table and then just sits there. He's thinking about getting up, I can tell, but at his size that's not a casual action and ultimately he just sits there and looks at me. That's where we are when Myrick comes back with the sodas. I figure his coming back is gonna make things a lot worse, especially now that I've got Clumfeldt pissed at me too. I plunge back into the story before they start hassling me.

"So anyway, I took Stokes's car and got the dope, and then I picked her up and took her out to Hell House, which is where Stokes and Bennie were at, waiting."

"What the hell is Hell House?"

"It's the house. You've been there. That's where

you found her.”

“Well, I got that, hotshot. Why is it called Hell House?”

“That’s just what people call it. It’s just an old abandoned shack house, you know? Kids go out there to get fucked up and party. Supposedly there’s these Satanists that use it for their rituals, or something, so people just call it Hell House. I don’t know whether any of that’s true or not but there’s definitely something about the place. It’s pretty fucking creepy.”

“What makes people think Satanists use it?”  
Clumfeldt again, and he seems to have calmed down, he seems to be back on my side, patient and friendly.

“There’s a bunch of weird stories, but who knows what’s true. There’s all kinds of graffiti on the walls, you know, like pentagrams and shit, but that’s probably just kids into metal. Some of my friends said they saw a live goat out there, but I never really believed them. The well though... that’s the only thing that ever made me kind of believe it. There’s a bad feeling to that well.”

Myrick laughs, but it doesn’t sound like he finds anything funny.

“Well, there is now,” he says.

“There always was. Even before...”

“Before you killed her.”

I don’t even jump at the bait this time, just let it go. I want a cigarette so fucking bad my hands are starting to shake.

“You know what?” I say. “I’m not saying another word until I get a cigarette. Not another word.”

I expect them to blow up at that, but they don’t. Clumfeldt just reaches in the pocket of his overcoat and comes out with a pack of Kools and a lighter. He hands them to me without a word, and I’m kicking myself, cause I could have done this an hour ago.

I take one from the pack and run it under my nose, savoring the warm summer smell. I light it and inhale deeply, too deeply actually, and then I cough my brains out. Way to seem cool. I fucking hate menthols, but when you're desperate, you're desperate.

"You smoke these?" I ask Clumfeldt. He just nods. "You know menthols make your lungs bleed?"

He just shrugs at that and they actually lay off me for a minute and let me smoke in peace. I'm starting to feel a whole lot better about all of this, even about them. That nicotine hits my bloodstream and suddenly the whole world's my friend. I smoke the whole thing quick, then stub it out in my drink can and immediately light another. Now I'm ready to talk.

"So anyway, I picked her up and we headed out there. We smoked a joint in the car and then, once she got stoned, she was ready to party. She went down on me in the car and everything. I thought it was gonna be a great night. It would've been too, if it wasn't for those fucks. Sick bastards.

We get there and she's all excited, cause she's never been there before, and she's heard all about it from kids at school. Bennie's standing on the porch when we pull up, and I can tell he's waiting for us, but he doesn't come out to the car, or nothing like that. He goes back in the house."

They're both writing now, and neither one of them lifts their eyes from their twin notepads. They don't want to interrupt me, and I like that. I dig that feeling. I've got them hanging on my every word.

"So we go inside. Stokes and Bennie are both standing inside the door, just sort of milling around, like they're nervous or excited or something. I'm all like what's up and shit, but they're not really saying much. I introduce everybody and then start rolling a chocolate blunt.

Nothing gets things rolling like a blunt, you know?"

That's a rhetorical question, but I still wait for some kind of reply, just a nod of the head at least, but there's nothing coming. Neither one of them will make eye contact. So I continue.

"Anyway, we smoked the blunt. She started trying to fool around with Stokes, but he wasn't into it. Him and Bennie were acting weird. They wanted to go look at the well. I wasn't into that at all, cause that well is creepy, but she wanted to see it, cause they were hyping it all up. It's just a well, you know? There's nothing to see. I mean, it's creepy and all, but it's just a well.

But she wanted to go, so we went. Or they went at least. I didn't really care what we did. I kept the blunt in my hand and smoked on it as we headed outside. Bennie and Stokes were leading, and she was following close behind them. I took my time and stopped on the porch. I was keeping the rest of the blunt to myself and starting to wonder why I even brought her out there. Fuck Bennie and Stokes, I should have kept her all to myself.

So I'm just standing there, on the porch, smoking, minding my own business, and then she starts screaming. And I look up and they're all over there by the well and fucking Stokes has got a baseball bat and he's just wailing on her with it. And I'm like, what's going on, and then Bennie walks over to her and he's got a knife in his hand and he starts stabbing her and shit. It was awful. There was blood everywhere and she was just screaming and crying and begging them to stop."

I stop talking for a minute. I hadn't really let myself think about this part since it happened. It was horrible, a horrible thing to have to see. Myrick won't give me a pause though. He just comes right back at me.

"Keep going, boy." And he seems pissed, seriously pissed. There's a vein throbbing in his forehead that wasn't

there ten minutes ago.

"All right. Well, that's pretty much it. Once Bennie started stabbing her and shit it was pretty much over. She kind of broke away from them and ran over to me. That really freaked me out. She was all covered in blood and crying and shit. Her head was all fucked up, and I could see a flash of white in there that had to be bone, and her chest was just nothing but red from the knife and all, and then I noticed that the blood was bubbling as she breathed... and she was freaking all out and getting blood all over me, and Bennie and Stokes were yelling at me to grab her and shit."

Myrick speaks up. His voice is flat and cold.

"Did you grab her? Did you take that girl back over to them?"

"No man. I told you from the beginning, I didn't do nothing. I didn't have to. Once she got to me, she was done. She didn't go no further. She didn't even try to. I didn't have to stop her. She just stood there and looked at me, and I looked at her, and everything just kind of froze. Then they came over and took her away. And that's when I left. I told them I didn't want no part of that shit, and I left. I swear to God, I didn't do nothing."



LEVELS

Ben heard the sound more and more lately at night, a distant pulsating that seemed to come from the ground. He would lie in bed and stare at silhouettes of spindly branches sweeping across the bedroom wall and wonder where the sound came from and what it might be. One time he woke Mary and asked if she heard it too, but even his whispering in the dark room was somehow loud enough to drown out the sound that had been keeping him awake.

“Can you hear it?” Ben asked.

“Hear what?”

“That humming sound.”

“I don’t hear it,” Mary said.

“Ssshh,” Ben said. “Hear it?”

“No – it’s your brain. Go to sleep.”

“You can’t hear that?”

As long as they were talking, Ben couldn’t hear it either, but as soon as Mary fell asleep again the sound was there – fading in, then out, in and then out, until he finally fell asleep too.

In the mornings, Ben stayed in bed until he heard the door close behind Mary. Then he got up and drank the pot of coffee she had abandoned. Mary always turned the coffee maker off when she left, convinced that he slept in until ten every day. Ben never told her otherwise, because then he’d have to admit he actually waited until she left to get up.

It wasn’t as if he didn’t keep busy during the day. He was almost at level eighteen of Extreme Hellions,

which was a level that supposedly didn't exist. According to the software manual, the game consisted of only twelve levels. Ben knew better than anyone that whoever had gone on to write the additional code had done so on their own time and for reasons of personal mission. Wormhole code – almost impossible to get to and existing only due to ego. For that reason, Ben also knew the code would have flaws, although so far the game was smooth and hadn't once bugged. He'd figure it out – he wasn't in any hurry.

Most afternoons, he rode the ferries back and forth across Puget Sound. On sunny days – of which there were fewer and fewer now that it was September – the mountains “were out” and sunlight played off undulating water. Sometimes dolphins leapt into the air and twice he spotted whales making their way north. On overcast days, he felt insulated behind a curtain of gray and stared out at black water through beads of rain sliding down the large rectangular windows of the boat. Gulls suspended themselves next to the glass, riding the draft of the ferry. A few times, Ben considered taking a job with the ferry system, but the ferries were state run and word was that getting a job with them wasn't much easier than getting a position at Microsoft. Maybe even harder.

It was sunny the day he met Kim. Ben was sitting outside, on the upper deck, reading a Stephen King novel, *The Stand*, which he had read years ago but was reading again because it was long enough to fill the hours and he already owned it. He paused after every paragraph to look out at the water, so the book was as much a prop as anything. Despite all the signs posted asking him not to, Ben was smoking and that was why Kim stopped. Her shadow made him look up.

“Do you have another cigarette?”

With no job and cigarettes at over five dollars a pack, he usually lied about having any more. But the girl

had brilliant green eyes, blonde dreadlocks, an English accent, a wool cardigan, painter's overalls and construction boots. If he said no, she'd be gone. Ben handed her a cigarette, thinking, say something, but he couldn't think of a thing.

"Thanks so much," the girl said, and that was that. Ben watched her walk away, thinking about Mary and the mortgage which was due in two days. They had the money, but none of it had come from him.

"There's a level nineteen," Ben told Mary that night after dinner. They had watched the news while eating. They did that almost every night now when before the thought of even watching TV almost never occurred to them.

They were washing the dishes. Mary scraped uneaten pasta into the sink and turned on the garbage disposal.

"Nobody's paying you to find level nineteen," she said.

"I bet Ron coded it."

"What if he did – what difference does it make?"

"If I get it to bug, they'll have to hire me back.

Ron's the best coder at Armageddon."

"You might get Ron fired, but they're not going to hire you back. So, forget it. Besides, you're nine levels past where the code was supposed to have stopped and you still haven't found a bug. Like they're going to care. If you can't trip it up, then obviously there isn't a fourteen-year-old in the world who will either. Forget Armageddon. It's been six months. I hear Adobe's hiring."

"Right, Adobe, whatever. Probably looking for tech support."

"Sometimes people have to start in tech support," Mary said. She didn't look at him. She was watching the mound of suds build in the sink.

Ben turned off the faucet. "Whoa. Hey. Are you

saying what I think you're saying?"

"You'd probably be in TS for less than a month. It's just a way in. I did it."

"Right, four years ago, at Black Hole. Big difference. Adobe writes shit and you know it. Even when I got out of TS I'd still be in fucking hell. I code games, not office app's."

"I hear they're thinking about going into games," Mary said. She turned the faucet back on again.

"That's bullshit and you know it."

"So is a two-thousand-dollar-a-month mortgage for a condo with a view if you can't afford it," Mary said. "The savings is half gone and we'll be pulling money out of the Janus fund by spring. A job's a job."

"Fuck that. I write games!"

"You wrote games, Ben. And you fucked up. They fired you for a reason."

Ben rode the ferry almost every day for the next two weeks but didn't spot the girl again until it finally got sunny. Hoping the sun might do the trick, he made a point of being in the same spot he had been the day she'd approached him. When he saw her, leaning against the rail and staring out at the water, he waited and pretended to read. He lit a cigarette. In a few moments, her shadow fell over him again.

"Sorry to ask," she said. "Here, why don't I pay for one." She held out two quarters.

Ben shook his head no and handed her a cigarette. "It's okay," he said. "Which side do you live on?"

"Bainbridge," the girl said. "You?"

"Seattle, Belltown," Ben said.

"Nice. Kind of expensive, isn't it?"

Six months ago, it hadn't seemed any big deal. "Too expensive," Ben said. "Thinking about selling but this isn't

the best time." Ben realized he had avoided saying we by avoiding personal pronouns, but that wasn't entirely dishonest.

"You worked at Armageddon, didn't you?"

"Yep," he said. "How'd you know?"

"I was testing when you were coding Scorpion Warrior for the spring release. I tried to talk to you – I stopped you in the hall."

"I'm sorry, I don't remember."

"I told you it bugged at level fourteen."

"That game only had ten levels."

"Maybe I'm remembering wrong."

"You couldn't have told me. There was barely time to test it. There was a May first deadline and we were crunching..." Ben had counted on that deadline.

"We still tested it. They had us test everything. All of you had a rep for sneaking in extra code so I pushed it and found the next four levels. It took me almost a week to find my way in. Nice code, by the way."

"Until it bugged, right?" He looked out at the water and listened to the churning engines slowing the ferry. The entire deck was vibrating, which meant they were getting close to one side of the Sound. He hadn't been paying attention but now he saw they were getting close to the peninsula.

"Right, I tried to tell you but you didn't even look up."

"Shit, really?"

"Yeah, really," she said. "I'm Kim."

"Ben. You still at Armageddon?"

"Sure, yeah," Kim said. "Not testing now – "

The blast of the ferry horn cut her off. Ben checked his watch and it was almost four. With luck he'd still make it back to the city before Mary got home and he wouldn't have to explain where he'd been. These days it was just

easier to be furniture.

"Thanks for the smoke. Next one's on me," Kim said. "Cheers."

Kim went inside and headed for the stairs to the lower deck. Ben thought about trying to catch up with her but he couldn't think of a reason why he should. A few minutes later he watched as cars drove off the ferry and disappeared behind giant fir trees lining the town's narrow streets.

Kim was on Ben's mind all weekend. He couldn't forget what she'd said. Without seeming as if she resented him at all, she had made him feel like an utter asshole. Which he must have been to her. But he had been so busy then, under so much pressure. He'd known the game was too easy, that it could be better. So he made it better. Like he was going to toss out all that code just because of their fucking deadline. It took him three months to write the code – he had twenty-two levels worked out and all of them would have worked. For days he'd fevered in his office with the shades drawn, living on candy bars and coffee. He hadn't blown her off – he was just too focused to notice her. She understood that, right?

On Sunday night Ben could barely sleep between his thinking and the humming noise. It seemed to be getting louder, more intense, like the walls of the bedroom were vibrating. He got out of bed and looked out the window, down at the street, but there was nothing out there, and even the noise he made crossing the floor made the sound go away.

As soon as the door closed behind Mary, Ben got out of bed. He sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee and waiting until someone would be at the front desk at Armageddon. Some coders were there, he knew, but they

never answered the phones. Coders came and went at all hours. Some stayed for days on end, sleeping on the couches and living off vending machines at night, then not showing up for a week. Hours meant almost nothing. You were paid for the code you wrote. But the only place to start now was the desk. Unless he wanted to call someone he knew there, and he wasn't about to do that.

"Hi, can you put me through to Kim, please," Ben said, when one of the receptionists finally answered. He knew he wasn't likely to get far without a last name unless he sounded knowing and confident.

"I'm sorry, sir," the woman said. "Do you know her extension or last name?"

"Kim, in games, she's coding Zapper Zone." Ben made the name up – no one at the desk would know what anyone there was actually working on.

"I'm sorry, sir. Without a last name or extension I can't help you."

"But she called me this morning. Kim, in games – I'm working with her on the code."

"If she called you, don't you have her number, sir?"

The fucking bitch at the desk was getting haughty with him. Ben wondered if she recognized his voice.

"She didn't leave me her number because this is her number," Ben said. "Put me through to games. They'll know."

"Try dialing last-call-return, sir," the bitch said. "That might do it. Thank you for calling Armageddon."

The line went dead. Ben threw his coffee mug across the room and it shattered in a ceramic explosion. He spent half an hour cleaning streaks of coffee off the walls.

It took him half way through October to make his way through levels twenty and twenty-one. It was too cold and dark to ride the ferries anymore and he could order

almost everything he needed from Kosmo.com. There really wasn't any reason to leave the condo. It was funny that Kosmo was still running after almost all the other dot-com's fell and Ben figured it was only a matter of time.

They sold the condo for less than they paid for it, but it was lucky that they even managed to sell. Boeing had announced they were moving to Chicago and Microsoft was on trial, utilities were through the roof and terrorists had successfully attacked America. No one was feeling good and Belltown was lined with empty condos frozen in mid-construction. But Ben and Mary's place had a great view and the price was good, better than imaginable a year before. A cheerful couple from Singapore bought it under the condition that Ben and Mary could be out by December.

Mary had been stuffing things into boxes for two weeks and Ben barely paid attention. He would get his clothes, his laptop, PC, books and the CD's Mary had tossed into a pile in the corner of the bedroom. He told her to go ahead and keep the furniture although he didn't know why – they had paid for it together.

"You could have at least tried," Mary said. "You could have at least fucking tried."

"There wasn't anything out there," Ben said. "I looked."

He was sitting on the floor, drinking echinacea tea – he'd had a cold for almost a month.

"Whatever, Ben." Mary swept what seemed like the entire contents of a refrigerator shelf into a plastic bag and spun it around until it had a neck, which she choked closed and tied off. "You need help, you know that, right?"

There was this little glitch in the game. It was almost unnoticeable at first. But the Hellion was freezing up. His arm was raised but the sword wasn't there. He was



waving an empty fist back and forth in front of a dragon whose tail kept whacking back in the same direction against the floor of the cave when before it always tick-tocked like a perfect metronome.

“Did you hear me? You need help, Ben.”

When Ben looked back at the screen he’d lost his turn. He’d missed it – there was just the melting tone of electronic music indicating he’d have to go back to the first level.

“Ben?”

The whole thing was just too funny and Ben couldn’t stop laughing.

You started at the bottom working for the ferry system, but that was just like anyplace else. Ben worked maintenance, which other than the pay, was in most ways better than ticketing or traffic flow. Ticketers were stuck in a booth all day long answering the same stupid questions over and over. Traffic flow people constantly stood outside in the rain, waving flashlights or flags around and dodging the idiots who came close to running them over. In Ben’s second week, a traffic flow guy was killed by a drunk driver who gunned his truck past the other cars waiting to get on board. The flow worker slipped on oil trying to get out of the way and rolled right under the truck. Severed almost in two, he lived for half an hour that way in the parking lot while the paramedics tried to figure out what to do for him. All Ben had to do was walk up and down the different levels mopping and sweeping. With that many people coming and going all day, there was always something to do. The work was easy and slow, the views were great, and he had plenty of time to think.

You weren’t allowed to smoke when you were working but sometimes he would sneak up to the third deck and have one. Getting hired was difficult but getting fired was

too. One of the advantages of state jobs. He was taking his pack out of his coat pocket when he heard Kim's voice.

"Have one of mine," she said. "I owe you."

Ben turned her way but didn't accept. She offered a Dunhill – way too sweet and dry.

"Oh, no, but thanks," he said, lighting the Marlboro already in his fingers. "Still at Armegeddon?"

"Nope," she said. "Fired."

"What happened?"

"I think you know," she said.

"No idea," Ben said.

The ferry was trying to slow and the deck was humming as the engines reversed. The boat lurched and both of them reached for the rail.

"The game bugged at level twenty-one. Someone let someone know. Sometimes you just shouldn't write any-more code, right?"

"But sometimes you can't stop," Ben said. "Know what I mean?"

"You just figure no one's ever going to get there."

Ben looked out at the water. The sun was peeking out behind the Olympic Mountains. The sun did that a lot at the end of the gray days, for some reason that no one seemed to understand.

"I know," Ben said. "You think it's all yours."

She said something but the humming was growing louder and Ben couldn't hear her. The whole deck was vibrating and they were getting close to shore.

LEBANON

The bodies at the bottom of the well lie silent and still. Some days they are Muslims, some days they are Christians. They are always whoever needs sympathy. These identities though are only for those passing by. The bodies themselves no longer have beliefs and there are no enemies anymore. One looks, his face turned upwards, up past the encircling stones that stretch between him and the green unseen surface. The world around him is quiet and the sky above endless.

I have never been in better health. My wife Janice spins, dances around the room. The chandelier, the only chandelier in the apartment, shakes with her, and wisps of her red hair catch its light. The walls are pink, almost orange, warm for dining. I have a study, where the walls are dark green. A study, a kitchen, a living room. A bathroom, a bedroom, a balcony. It is small, but it is enough. It is easier to lord over a small domain.

The boxes sit mostly unopened in the corners, sometimes centers, of rooms. There are no hallways. The plants rest, if not in their right places, waiting to be. They are not picture perfect. Some droop or slant, and all have the occasional brown tip, or brown speckle, sometimes a brown-edged hole. But they are alive, and seem happy too.

For dinner, we had a can of tomato soup. Some cheese and crackers, an apple. I eat less and less the past few years, but my belly is just as big. Janice gave me a scoop of chocolate ice cream. I made her a raspberry martini. She's wearing a red sweatshirt with snowflakes on it. There is a little snowman pinned to her chest, and from

her ears dangle tiny Christmas wreaths. She is my American wife.

The new house, the apartment, is in the middle of a town, and yet feels more comfortable than any suburb I had been told I would be content in. We settle into it day by day, Janice cooks more and I arrange my books on the study's shelves. In the mornings, we eat breakfast together and take our pills—pink and white for allergies, light green for sinuses, big brown multi-vitamins, and long yellow headache medicine for the headaches to come. Then Janice goes to work and, after I check the air filter and the thermostat, I walk to the gym I have found.

I have one pair of sweatpants that I wear over my one bathing suit so that I will not have to change in front of the other men in the locker room. Instead, I can just walk through as casually as possible, the way I have just walked past the front desk, pausing only to show the membership card I quietly bought a month before. I must walk past the exercise room full of exercise machines to get to the pool, and this I regret. This is the greatest of the obstacles here, to avoid it and pretend it is not there, wide open with the way the weights throw their people around. Growling with the sound of pushing against.

There is nothing inviting about the pool. It is small, but at least long. There are few windows. Nothing about it tries to trick you into thinking you are outside, in something fresh. There are six lanes and, if you come in the morning like I do, they are roped off with buoyant blue and white plastic rings—I suppose the most effective way to divide something as evasive as water. They are an appreciated demarcation of privacy.

I pull off my sweatpants, take off my t-shirt, and put my towel down on a poolside bench. I run my hand

through my thick greying hair and my short greying beard. I dive in. I dive in and, though my body is large, I still feel I am a graceful swimmer. The water is like nothing natural I have ever swum in, it has no similar smell and does not taste like salt as it should. It moves in no way other than my way, and, though this is new, I appreciate this as well. My arms pull me through the cool water, and I feel it supports rather than resists me.

I come home one afternoon and find Janice in the kitchen, hands in a bowl of rice, sitting beside a stack of summer squash and zucchini. I am surprised, my hair is still wet.

"Hello, stranger," she winks. "Canceled clients, so a special dinner."

I blink my sore chlorine eyes.

She stands, comes close to me, and says quietly, "Amir...you were so handsome when you first came here. Muscles and all."

"I am still handsome."

"Yes," she says and kisses me on the cheek. She turns to go back to the table. I turn to go change in bedroom.

"I was from Lebanon," I say before we move apart. "Everyone was beautiful in Lebanon."

Lebanon was beautiful, and we were lucky to live there. It did not then look like the Lebanon you right now see in your mind. It was not broken down or full of holes. It was not only crumbling yellows and browns. It was lush, it was majestic, a queen on the sea. Lebanon was full of candies and dates, women who wore mascara and short skirts, men who wore silk suits and gold watches, people who spoke and lived in at least two languages. The houses were made of limestone, the sidewalks were made of limestone, the streets were lined with cypress trees painted

white from the ground up. The country glowed in the sun.

The old house had three floors, with rooms we didn't use for months at a time. Two guestrooms for guests we never had. A finished basement and a lawn we paid someone else to keep. We loved it, but it was a sick building. We lived in that house for eight years, and for eight years we were sick. Sinus problems, allergies, infections, headaches of all kinds. Illness and disease. You read about these kinds of things. They happen often in office buildings with closed environments, locked windows. Central air and heat, but nothing fresh, and conditions deteriorating internally. The wrong kind of paint, the wrong kind of insulation, the wrong combination of materials.

We used to keep all the windows closed, for fear of the pollen lurking outside. Eight years with no fresh air. Instead, we bought special vacuum cleaners, humidifiers, dehumidifiers. We had our ventilation system cleaned regularly. Which is expensive—all of this was expensive, but anything for our health. We thought of things like dust and mites, and dust mites. We vacuumed often, we hired people to clean even more for us, and yet years of only persisting, in fact worsening, problems. Health problems.

It started with me. I'm not used to this kind of climate, not immune to what it contains. Janice, I think, was just empathetic. She is a physical therapist. At night, I would stand on my head to try to get the migraines to go away. Janice would drive me to the hospital in the morning. The doctor would give me a large shot. I would sleep, finally, and when I awoke, Janice would make tea.

We must always have balconies. Balconies or porches, somewhere to sit and drink tea outside, even if we can only be outside for so long. When Janice was pregnant, when her belly sounded like a muskmelon, we sat on our

her ears dangle tiny Christmas wreaths. She is my American wife.

The new house, the apartment, is in the middle of a town, and yet feels more comfortable than any suburb I had been told I would be content in. We settle into it day by day, Janice cooks more and I arrange my books on the study's shelves. In the mornings, we eat breakfast together and take our pills—pink and white for allergies, light green for sinuses, big brown multi-vitamins, and long yellow headache medicine for the headaches to come. Then Janice goes to work and, after I check the air filter and the thermostat, I walk to the gym I have found.

I have one pair of sweatpants that I wear over my one bathing suit so that I will not have to change in front of the other men in the locker room. Instead, I can just walk through as casually as possible, the way I have just walked past the front desk, pausing only to show the membership card I quietly bought a month before. I must walk past the exercise room full of exercise machines to get to the pool, and this I regret. This is the greatest of the obstacles here, to avoid it and pretend it is not there, wide open with the way the weights throw their people around. Growling with the sound of pushing against.

There is nothing inviting about the pool. It is small, but at least long. There are few windows. Nothing about it tries to trick you into thinking you are outside, in something fresh. There are six lanes and, if you come in the morning like I do, they are roped off with buoyant blue and white plastic rings—I suppose the most effective way to divide something as evasive as water. They are an appreciated demarcation of privacy.

I pull off my sweatpants, take off my t-shirt, and put my towel down on a poolside bench. I run my hand

balcony, tiny then, and drank tea with mint in it, trying to decide on a name.

"What do you think it will be? Can you feel out its sex from the inside?"

"A boy. Definitely a boy," she said, sipping from her clear cup.

"A boy?" It was spring, and the tree that hung so close to us made the world look bright green. "Oh no. Boys are trouble."

Janice laughed and shook her head. "No, no! Girls, it's the girls you have to watch out for."

"It's the women you have to watch out for," I corrected her. "Girls are angels."

"Regardless, it'll be a boy. So a boy's name...an Arabic name."

"Really? An Arabic one? Why would you, the American mother, want a son with an Arabic name?"

"He'll live in America, he'll be an American. I already have more than my fair share." Janice picked a leaf of mint out of her tea and began chewing at its edges. "He should have more than just his father's eyes."

I closed my eyes and let the sun turn the inside of me orange. "What about Yusef?"

"Yusef.... That is nice." She leaned over and ran a fingertip over one of my eyebrows. Smoothing the stray hairs out like she still does. I winced at her treatment. "What does Yusef mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything. I mean, it means only Joseph." I pinched her on the hip, making her giggle and pull away. "You remember? Joseph, from the Bible."

"Ah," Janice had smiled quickly as she looked for a way to get me back.

"See, we are not so different. We Arabs, we know Joseph." She tugged on my earlobe. It hurt, but I held it in as if it was nothing.

“Amir, however,” I continued, “Amir means king.” I grinned. My finger found a soft spot between her ribs to punctuate my words. “Don’t you forget it.”

She squealed happily and gave birth two weeks later.

The camp I was from was called Tel al-Zaatar, though I don’t know why. Zaatar is like thyme in America. A green herb you dry and then crush, that we mix with sesame seeds and bake on to bread that rises like the morning. Thyme grew all over Lebanon then, but nothing now grows where I was born.

Tel al-Zaatar sat in the middle of busy Beirut city, a refugee camp full of Muslims who were poor in either money or land. We were the first kind, my family burgeoning out like any good Arab’s. Nadia’s was the latter, Palestinians fleeing from the first, and then the second, and then the ongoing wars. They had arrived soon after ‘67, and I remember Nadia, surrounded by her brothers and a father who winced only a weak smile when embraced by his brothers there.

The camp welcomed them with a confused mix of joy and despair, though it hid the despair behind glasses of tea and pistachios. I was young. I was only nine. I ignored the girls and instead raced after my cousins. We would ride my uncle’s old horse to sea, all five of us piled onto the poor animal’s back, and dive in, buying fresh falafel from the stands on the shore between bouts with the waves, the salt from the sea flavoring our food. By evening, we would return home, our bare feet dirty from the narrow stone streets. With the horse tied safely next to my father’s crumbling car, we’d disappear into our different doorways, our mothers all cursing the same reprimands. The houses of Tel al-Zaatar were small, but their walls were thick and strong, secure and close.



Though there is nothing there now. Now they park cars there in the middle of Beirut, over the camp's leveled rumble. On the lot they built over the remains of the mas-sacre.

Outside, I can hear the world melting, the snow dissolving and turning into streams that run down and through everything. At dinner Janice talks about work because her job is interesting and she still finds it so. I chew and listen, looking out of the window, at her, at my plate, absent-mindedly scratching at my rash.

I did not notice the rash until I noticed myself scratching at it earlier. It was there, pink and bubbling between my fingers, and there, in the private place where my forearm bends and meets my upper arm. It is, it seems, in all the places in between, all the places that are soft and unthought of. It seems as if I could tell the day's progression by noticing what tender new place my fingers had found—there, where my armpit layers into my arm; there, against the underbelly of my knee; and now, here, beneath my earlobe, where my index finger rubs and makes it appear as if I am listening ever more intently.

Janice has a profession she has pursued, whereas I only have things I have done. For me, this is only an observation that bears nothing good or bad, only notices difference. Janice is four years older than me and this country is her home. She lives here with authority, though she does not realize it. Her confidence is quiet, tucked inside of her like her mother's name, invisible to her who has not lived in a place that did not know her mother.

"There's this client I have—," she says. "Richard.... Five months ago, he shattered his arm. Fractures in three places, down the forearm and at the wrist. A tough break, but still, not that bad. I've been seeing him for four months now, four months, and after four months, he can't help but

improve. It's too minor of an injury not to. Thing is....," she spoons rice and eggplant into her mouth. "The thing is, he doesn't really want to. He comes in every other week. He smiles. We joke. He doesn't complain, he's very congenial. I like him.... He's nice."

She pauses, looking at the bits of tomato, cucumber, and onion that lay on tip of her spoon. I made the salad tonight. I washed the cucumber and cut it into tiny pieces, I halved the lemon and caught the seeds as they fell through the juice. I held the tomato in my hand and sliced it pulling the knife toward my palm. I chopped the onion and cried, and I finally pushed it all together, squeezing it in the bowl as if it were a breast, letting the juice sting my fingers. Janice continues.

"Now, these breaks, they will heal. They already almost have. They are just inconvenient. You can't bathe yourself, you can't dress yourself, you can't tie your own shoes. But he's only impaired at this point—we're not talking serious disability. He should heal."

Janice pushes her salad around on the plate. She is out of yogurt. I give her another spoonful out of the bowl. "He should heal."

I feel I am helpful. I feel I am a good husband, a better husband here. I feel have accomplished something, something different from what this world notices.

"What kind of accident was it?" I ask. I put down my fork and look up from my plate. "I mean, how did he break his arm so badly?"

"A fall. Just a fall."

Nadia had eyes made of mountains. Sharp, dark and huge, they towered over me, plaguing my sleep while I dreamt only of climbing them. I would throw myself at her feet and beg God for forgiveness for imagining her hair, hidden below her scarf, below her family's watering can.

God would never answer, and Nadia would just chuckle with her chore and her companion balanced upon her head when I begged her instead for the pleasure of carrying her load.

The congested camp felt like an expectant mother heaving through the humidity, growing more full of different things each day. Beirut, I knew, sat at the head of that table, a weary father tired with work, looking up to find uninvited guests in his home. Abu Amar had come and had brought Israel's anger with him. The Christians were giving speeches in French and training their men in the mountains. Syria loomed like a mouth that missed its favorite food. It was 1975. The air was sticky with more than the sea. I was only seventeen.

How I hated my sisters who could walk with Nadia as much as they pleased, who could tease her about her family's abandoned orange orchards, and even laugh with her to make her laugh over being stuck here, a refugee. And how I loved them when they would whisper to me at dusk in the corners the things she said just as she said them, and how I would love her more for being stuck here, with us. My uncles would listen to old recordings of Nasser on the radio and Sa'ada, my oldest sister with her long fingers would tell me Amir, she is beautiful. How I wish I could tell you of her hair. But, Amir, she is beautiful.... After my brothers fell asleep, I would pull the sheet over my head and gasp hayati, hayati—my life, my love, and I would thank God for bringing Nadia here.

Janice's ginger hair is thick and falls to her shoulders when she lets it fall. Now, like always, it is pulled back as she stands at the counter peeling an orange. She slices off one end and says, "Some people don't want to heal."

She makes four straight cuts down different sides of the peel, dividing it into four equal sections. Careful not to

break the skin. "They want to hang onto their position of vulnerability."

She pushes her thumb between the fruit and the peel of the first section and, pinching it, pulls down, off clean. She moves to the next one. "They want people to keep treating them gently, with great care and concern."

The four peels lie on the counter, curling around one another. She pulls apart the orange at its soft core, splitting it in two. "And people may or may not do so, but the world, for sure, will not."

The first piece breaks away between her fingers, and I can see juice running down her palm. "Inanimate things have no sympathy for the living, and for how long other living things will share sympathy with the wounded is questionable."

Between her teeth, the fruit snaps, almost crunches, as much as a soft fruit can. She smiles. "Do you want some?"

The night they surrounded our camp, my mother and my aunts and my cousins and my sisters and Nadia sat in the kitchen rolling grape leaves as if they were cigarettes. A year had borne itself out on the streets of Beirut and had ended in a black Saturday that warned us all of these things to come. The dark green rolls of war'ah developed adeptly in the hands of the working women, their fingers shining with oil and their conversation slick with smiles.

At the sound of the first bombs, a pot fell to the ground. Full of finished rolls stuffed with precious meat and rice, it lay there on its side at the foot of the table. I watched, as I had been watching—spying on them through the crack in the door as I pretended to study—as the women picked up the pieces of war'ah and the girls' hands shook. My mother righted the bowl and snapped Rinse

them. Rinse them in the sink. They must last.

They did not, they could not last as long as the shelling did. At first the guerillas would come and smile and say we are winning, but then the guerillas did not smile or say anything, and then they did not come at all. At first when the houses were gone we could hide in the abandoned canning factory, and the women could bake bread in its ovens, but then there was nothing to make bread with, and then there was no factory. At night militiamen tore through the camp, and our men disappeared, and our boys disappeared, and girls weren't girls anymore, and the women couldn't even bake bread.

I did not run to fight, but I did run to Nadia, to stand in the line she stood in all day, to draw water when the water was allowed to run. When the bullets went through even her and she lay there beneath me, I watched as the cool water ran from the holes in the emptying watering can and past her red scarf. I stood and I stared at her red, red hair and I knew that the siege would be over soon.

Janice sits at the computer, typing up her notes from the day, making her own brief reports on her patients' progress. I sit and do a crossword. I dislike crosswords, but I like to listen to Janice in the space between her handwriting and her keystrokes.

"...radial nerve..." she murmurs.

Four down. \_ \_ \_ R \_ \_ . Famous Arab actor, Omar. Sharif. S H A R I F. My pencil fumbles behind my ear, where the rash has remained.

"... active adduction...."

My fingers scratch at my shins that too have turned red with streaks of rash and seem sore, too, from the inside. Seven across. \_ A \_ \_ \_ \_ . Enclosed area. Garden... gardens?

“...atrophy....”

Thirteen down. \_ I \_ \_ \_ \_ . British leader during World War II. Churchill. C... No, Winston. I am used to the itches in my elbows and knees. I put talcum powder there after I shower and maybe that helps. W I N S T O N.

“...phalange...”

I look up from the crossword. “What was that word?”

“What word?” Janice replies, still typing. She backs up a bit. “Phalange?”

“Yes.” I put down the paper. My chair, my big arm-chair, sits so close to the wall.

“Oh...just a fancy word for fingers, the bones in your fingers. Phalanges in French means extremities. Les phalanges...the extremities.”

I look at the wall, its forest of green. I press my red and aching hand against it. I can feel, I’m sure, the chemicals there, that have always been there. The dirt, dust, and disease. I can smell their smell, imprecise and unwanted. Hidden molds, hidden bacteria, hidden things hiding, finding their way into me.

What are these walls made of? Nothing strong, nothing solid, nothing like stone. Pressboard, drywall, insulation pink as these fingers. They are not real walls, they cannot make real houses. Real houses protect you. These only enclose.

“Please don’t use that word,” I say.

“Why?” She looks up from typing, turns to me. “Why not?”

“It’s French. We are in America.” I smile. “We speak American in America.”

She laughs. “Oui, oui, monsieur.”

\*

We went in groups, surrendering down the road. We passed their posts and tried not to look at them, standing next to their Landrovers, crosses around their necks and machine guns in their hands. The Phalangists would shoot indiscriminately and we would fall one by one around each other. Some of them roved about between us, smiling and asking questions about food.

All Arabs are not the same. We have different words for things, we pronounce the same words differently. In Lebanon, we had the tomato test. How do you say tomato? they would ask in French, pointing their kalishnakovs at us. If you were Lebanese, you said banadora and lived. If you were Palestinian, you said bandura and died. Sometimes you just paused and the bullet came before your words.

On the road out of Tel al-Zaatar, we gave all our money to one of the men with trucks who would drive refugees to town for everything they had. The town was crowded, full of people only living busy lives in the city, and we were pushed out among them, disoriented to be suddenly inside normal life.

But the Phalange were beginning their final assault there in the Museum district. We tried to keep walking quickly, together, through the streets, past the stores and shops full of the right-wing Christians. In the window of the bookstore, there was a group of men, boys really, pushed together by Phalange guns. I heard the shots and saw them all hit their marks, the bodies falling. The glass held its shape...instead of shattering, it just changed color. A pink mist painted the transparent windows where the heads of the boys had been. There, where the bodies dropped down, paperbacks thrown from their shelves turned a bright aching red.

\*

In the bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed, Janice is on the telephone. She talks familiarly, yet enthu-

siastically, as if she is joking and the other person knows it. When she pauses to listen to the other end, she looks up at me, points to the phone pressed to her ear, and whispers Yusef. I nod, and she nods, though not to me, but rather in reply to the receiver.

"Here, your father wants to talk to you." She gets up and hands me the phone, leaves me as I stand there by the bedside table and speak.

"Your mother wants to come see you."

"Yes, I know. Why won't you come?"

"It took twenty years to get rid of you. You think I'm in any rush to see you again?" I grin, I imagine Yusef hiding a grin. "She has to come out there anyway. That conference...San Francisco. She might as well see her only son while she's at it."

"And you? What will you do with her gone?"

"I can make perfectly good cucumber and cheese sandwiches. I can make enough to last me a couple of weeks."

"That and some of your scotch should tide you over."

"Yes, and some of my scotch." I pause, scratch my beard. In my mind, I can see Yusef, with his glasses and no beard. "How is school, Yusef?"

"It's good. It's hard."

"Good. That's what school is.... Do you like it? This major, pre-law? You want to be what, an attorney...attorney what?"

"Tax attorney. Tax attorney, Dad." He pauses, then annunciates. "I'm going to be a tax attorney, Dad." He laughs, I laugh.

"It's funny...a funny profession. Voluntarily dealing with taxes. You know, there are people in France, the south of France, who live on boats solely in order to evade the tax collectors."



"It's not the taxes of people on boats that interest me. It's not even the taxes that interest me so much. It is how companies—corporations—use taxes to hide things, dangerous things. It's the process of hiding things that interests me."

"You sound silly. You do not sound like a tax attorney. Tax attorneys are cut and dry." I look down at the telephone. There are no numbers pre-set. I must remember to do that. I can never remember important numbers.

"No, tax attorneys are all about details. Details, Dad. It's interesting...."

I try to think of whose numbers I should program in...Yusef in California. Janice at work, Janice's mother in Missouri. "Yusef.... Do you remember? You used to smoke pot in the garage...and now, an attorney. A tax attorney."

"Dad," Yusef says, and he pauses. I imagine him smiling, but his smile seems like sand—serious. "People can change their lives."

"My life was changed, and now I am here," I say. Sand is like water. It gives beneath you, and men cannot walk on it, they can only appear to. "I changed once. That is enough."

\*

Yusef would disappear after dinner. We'd clear the plates...well, Janice would clear the plates...and I'd turn on the set, pick out a sitcom. I'd sit, start laughing at the stupid jokes. Janice would chuckle while loading the dishwasher. Yusef would pause and hover. And when Janice would finally come to sit down, when the laugh track was coming in quicker spurts as the characters in the scene would slip up while trying to resolve that week's conflict, Yusef would disappear into the garage, and we would not notice until the next commercial break.

The walls of the garage were thicker than the walls of his room, with the added bonus of not being right next

to our bedroom. He set up a little corner for himself, next to the old fridge. A record player, a tape player, an old chair, a beat up coffee table for his feet. He'd hung two things up on the partially painted walls, a map of the world and a poster for some band. I don't remember the band's name, but I remember the poster being dark, red and black, colors with the quality of looking like they were dribbling down.

At first, I was frustrated by this, angrily frustrated. I would say things, let my growing irritation show, and Janice would catch me. She would just turn to me, her head tilted, "We know where he is, we know he is safe. What more could we want?"

Janice's words softened my stance, and my disapproval slowly changed into curiosity. I began making my way closer to the garage. While Janice was content watching television, I'd break away into the kitchen and poke around in the fridge, because the fridge was on the wall shared with the garage. Through that wall, I could hear the rumbling of Yusef's music.

One day, a Tuesday, when he was at school, I opened the door and sat in his chair. Actually, my chair...my old chair from when I studied here in the States. It was brown and felt familiar, though smaller somehow. I leaned forward, examining the stereo. The tape player had a tape already in it. I found Yusef's headphones, large cumbersome things. I plugged them into the deck and pushed the play button.

I think primarily that it was just very loud. It was very loud and sounded very much like how Yusef's lone poster looked. I immediately did not like it all. It was disturbing and pointless, disturbingly pointless. But I understood it, I understood it perfectly. That, too, I did not like, but I had to keep listening because of this.

I put my feet up on the coffee table, pretending to be my son. I waited. Nothing happened. I noticed that the coffee table had a drawer in it. I put my feet down, leaned over and pulled it out. Inside were several things, but what I remember most is the small plastic sandwich bag with marijuana in it.

I found his papers, and his matches, and fumbled with them. I felt silly while I tried to roll a joint, something I hadn't done in a long time, something even then I hadn't done often. When I finally succeeded, I sat back, smoking, listening to the still heavy music, thinking only one thought. My son is my son.

When I cut the Phalangist's throat and threw him down the well, I felt no emotion, only the hot blood. He was not, I'm sure, the first person I had killed—I had fired guns many times. But he was the first I'd cut across the jugular and thrown down a well. I did not enjoy it. I thought only of the boys shot in the shop window, only of that red and this red. But all blood is the same.

No one was good in Lebanon anymore and I left before I would become what everyone had become. When the plane touched down on the landing pad in New York, when the pilot said to wait until it had come to a complete stop to get up, I said silently to myself what we say in the Middle East. "This plane has landed thanks to God and his mercy."

SNAPSHOTS

When I was twelve, my father broke my nose. With one hand, he grabbed the back of my head. My father seemed so huge to me then. My head must have felt like a grapefruit in his hand. With his other hand, he held the handle of the freezer door, and he brought his arms together like a cymbal player in a Fourth of July parade. He smashed my face into the clutter of old report cards and family photos that covered our freezer door, sending magnets flying across the room. My nose exploded. I didn't hear a crack or a bang or anything, more of a squelching noise, as if my head really was a grapefruit.

I had a friend who died when I was older, after high school. He got pushed off a fifth story balcony. He was selling crack, and he pissed somebody off. Down he went. Later, I would always imagine that maybe the last sound that he ever heard was that same noise. Five stories of rushing wind mixed with the cluttered noise of the city, the amplified sound of bursting fruit, silence. What a beautiful way to go.

My father took an ice tray from the freezer, closed the door, and walked to the counter. I kept my head down. I stood still. My blood was filling my hands, slipping between my fingers. I had never seen so much blood. My father put three ice cubes in a glass and five in a dishrag. He filled the glass with water from the tap, and drank slowly, standing at the sink. Looking out of the kitchen window at our backyard, he mumbled, "Those goddamn squirrels are in the birdfeeder again." He stood there for a minute more, put his glass in the sink, handed me the dishrag with the ice in it, and said, "We were playing catch,

David, and you missed. The sun was in your eyes, and I didn't mean to throw the ball that hard." He looked at me.

"Right," I said, nodding a little. "I know."

"Good man, David. Good fucking man."

You know, I was a little confused at first. There aren't many confusing situations that happen when you're taking a piss in a train station. Usually, the whole process is pretty simple. Wait your turn, handle your business, wash your hands, and exit. I was on step two. I was handling my business. I was just standing at my urinal, facing forward, in between two short aluminum walls. Then this guy came up next to me. This short little motherfucker stood right beside me in an empty row of five urinals, his white stocking cap pulled low on his head. That wasn't what confused me, though. What confused me was why at first, he was standing two urinals over, then apparently decided that the one next to me was a better decision. Maybe he thought most men enjoy pissing in a bunch of different urinals, and that I wouldn't question his actions.

The truth is, I was too goddamn high to question what he was doing. I had smoked and snorted what was left of the shit that I bought in New York when we stopped in D.C. I was paranoid as hell the rest of the trip into Richmond, thinking that the train was going to come off the tracks and kill us all. Every rumble or shake sent my mind careening into visions of luggage flying from the racks, the wails of the baby in front of me almost drowned out by the metallic screams of the cars grinding heavily against the tracks. Almost drowned out, not quite. Not until they're cut short when he and his mother are heaved against the ceiling, and she's covered in the spray of her baby's blood, mixing with her blood, mixing with my blood.

So when the man beside me glanced over the alu-

minum wall that did a poor job of guarding my privacy, I wrote it off. I was paranoid, and sometimes people get curious. It wasn't the first time somebody snuck a peek at me, and I can't really blame the ones who have. I suppose every man's a little self-conscious about their size, and some guys are just more motivated to get some standard of comparison than others, want to do a little research.

The second glance lasted a little longer, and I could see out of the corner of my eye that the man looked up at my face afterward, to see if I noticed. I pretended like I didn't. The third came quickly, and I wished I didn't have to piss so badly.

The guy had gotten brave, and I could feel him blatantly staring at my crotch. I turned my head slightly towards him, trying to subtly indicate to the man that I preferred to piss without an audience. I didn't mean to look at him, it wasn't some perverse "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours" type of deal. I just wanted to make him uncomfortable enough to stop staring at me. I didn't want to look at him. It's hard to miss, though, when there's a guy masturbating next to you.

One time I got so fucked up that I went blind. It was right after my father died, driving drunk when I was sixteen years old. I had been drinking out of a gallon of shitty vodka for eight hours, went to a party and topped it off with a couple bowls and some pills. I panicked when the pills hit me. I was overflowing. My head was filled with answers to questions I didn't know, and my body was filled with way too many drugs. I could feel my heart fighting to free itself, trying frantically to beat its way out of its cage, trying to save itself before I killed it. Calm down, I told myself, slow down. Jesus Christ just slow the fuck down.

I made my way outside, the bass pouring out of the speakers, following me, trying to steal what was left of my

sanity. I tried to fight back, drinking heavily from my bottle. The vodka didn't even burn anymore, it had lost its taste hours ago. I sat on the front porch. I could hear the bass, muted. It couldn't get me. My sanity was safe, and I tried to convince myself that my heart couldn't save itself, it couldn't break free. "It's just those fucking pills, you know," I said to a tree across the street. "If I'm going down, I'm taking my heart with me. It can't get out." The tree stared back at me, silent. It parted its lips slightly, and I could see the pity in its eyes. I could always see the pity, could sense it. I could smell it in the air when I walked in a room. It sat heavy on my tongue, pulsed in my eardrums, reddened my cheeks.

I lowered my head, rubbing the bridge of my nose, right on the bone, feeling the hard ridge that had formed where my broken nose had healed. I was curious about what the tree had been considering saying to me, but when I raised my head to ask, I couldn't see. I raised my hand to my eyes, poked at my eyeball with my index finger to make sure my eyes were open. That hurt enough to confirm the fact that I was blind. I didn't panic, though. I waited. I waited for days on that front porch, blind. It could have been months, sitting, waiting, suppressing my urge to scream, telling myself it was only the pills. After ten minutes I could see again.

I couldn't see perfectly though. I could see snapshots. Mental photos. When I turned my head quickly from left to right, it took my brain a few seconds to catch up with my eyes. I saw frames, as though I was looking through a flipbook too slowly, or watching a slideshow that was being controlled by a hyperactive child.

Standing in the train station, it was the same. When I saw this stranger standing beside me, fondling himself while looking at me, I saw a snapshot. It was almost as if

someone put their finger on the second hand, or held my eyelids open when I should have blinked.

At first I didn't know what I was looking at. I felt impotent, insecure. Holy shit, I thought, this guy's huge. What I was holding paled in comparison. I didn't realize what he was doing. Wh-en I did, I turned around and left the urinal, but our eyes met when I walked past him. I could see the fear in his eyes, but behind his fear there was an obvious longing, a desire, a fantasy that maybe I would like what I saw. Maybe I would compliment him, or smile. Maybe I would grab his crotch and tell him how turned on he made me, how I needed him right then and there, in the dirty train station bathroom. "We'll be dirtier than this bathroom could ever be," I'd say. "Fuck me on the piss-covered floor." Who knows what he wanted to hear. He didn't hear any of it, though, and all he saw was anger. Anger and pity. Maybe some fear.

I stood at the sink, scrubbing, furiously washing my hands. I felt filthy. The man slipped quietly out, leaving me standing alone under the stained florescent lights. A black hole formed in my chest, pulling me inward, trembling. My high was fading in and out, the drugs mixing with adrenaline, complicating everything. I wanted to run after him, grab him by his collar, and bash his face into the floor, over and over. The people waiting for their trains would stare. A woman would try to scream, the noise getting caught in her throat, and she would bury her child's face in her side. "It's okay, honey, they're only playing," she would say. A wife would shake her sleeping husband's arm, "For God's sake, Jimmy, just stop him! He's going to kill that man! Somebody call the police!" Jimmy would look up, startled. He would see my eyes. He wouldn't move. No one would call the police. I would beat the man's face into the waxed tiles until there was no trace of any longing, no memory of me that he could sit up at night thinking about,



no fantasy, only pain. That's what I wanted to do. But I didn't. I dried my hands. I got a cab, and I went home.

A couple months later I was wandering around on an April morning with a beer in my hand, two in my pockets, and some Jim Beam in my stomach. I walked down Main Street, trying to drown the three hours I had until the sun came up. At dawn I could walk to the park and pretend to be homeless, get some breakfast. My money was spent, and my ride was gone, passed out back in the suburbs.

I don't really know what happened. First I was walking. Some guy came up, started bullshitting. Big guy, about as drunk as I was, wearing an old Redskins jacket and some stonewashed jeans. He said his name was Peter. So we talked, just standard drunk conversation. We stood there, soaking up the thickness of the spring night, and we said nothing of any importance.

"You got a cigarette?" I asked him.

"Man, goddamn," he said. "Bums, all night long. Went through two packs tonight."

"Easy," I said. "I just asked for a cigarette."

"Fuck you."

I lost my temper. I broke my bottle on Peter's head. My mind was filled with memories of my father's funeral. My mother and I were the only people there. He never apologized for breaking my nose.

I swung my arm in a long, furious arc, connecting right above Peter's hairline. His eyes widened, shocked. I closed my eyes, and I could see the man from the bathroom, I could see his longing. My mind was filled with snapshots, images that I could never drink away. I opened my eyes. I drew back again, to punch Peter, realizing too late that I still held the neck of the bottle. I could feel his nose break. I could feel a crunch. I didn't hear a noise, but I felt the crunch. I was surprised. I smiled as the blood

pumped from my fist, and Peter fell to the sidewalk. I leaned over him, punching him, unable to tell whose blood was on my shirt, on the sidewalk.

"I'm sorry," he said, between blows. He sounded like he had a cold. "I was drunk. I'm sorry." He raised his hands above his head. He looked like an angel.

I stood. I wished the cops would come, or anyone. The street was dead. Peter slowly got up, stumbling. He didn't look at me. I felt like I should run. I felt like I should help him, put my arm around him, beg him for forgiveness. I wanted to scream his words back at him, a thousand times. I was drunk. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I was drunk. He raised his hand to his face, looked at his blood. He spat. He reached into his pocket, and dropped a pack of Marlboros on the sidewalk. He kept his head down as he walked away.

I opened my fist, but the glass was in too deep. "The sun was in your eyes," I said, "I never meant to throw the ball that hard."

264

NOTHING YOU CAN KNOW THAT ISN'T KNOWN.  
NOTHING YOU CAN SEE THAT ISN'T SHOWN, NOWHERE  
YOU CAN BE THAT ISN'T WHERE YOU'RE MEANT TO BE. IT'S EASY.



the Hierophant/Teacher  
5