



Corvus Review

SPRING/SUMMER 2016

ISSUE 5S

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Spring/Summer '16, an issue filled with talented individuals who have embraced the voices squirreling around in their head boxes and trapped the ideas their muses have produced onto the canvas of an utterly unblemished page/computer screen.

I think we've covered all the bases for this issue, bringing an awesome selection of fiction, flash, and poetry to the table, and I'm thoroughly pleased with the way it turned out. When you bring so many unique minds together, you're destined to strike gold. I would also like to take a moment to thank the amazingly talented Brian Michael Barbeito for his contribution to our cover. I absolutely adore his eye and attention to derelict beauty and his work is a perfect fit.

We've evolved into something miraculous and I couldn't have come this far without the help of some amazing people. As I write this, Corvus Review has hit 2500 Twitter followers and has had several requests for guest editing positions. Both of these milestones are amazing. Corvus began as a passion project, but it has evolved into so much more. Truly, Corvus is a lit rag with a bright future.

With Thanks,

Janine 'Typing Tyrant' Mercer

EIC, Corvus Review

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Brian Michael Barbeito is a Canadian writer and photographer.

Recent work appears in *Fiction International* and *The Tishman Review*.

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A Man Named Punky
Robert Karaszi

If the soul is a passport, stamped to
substantiate where a body's been,
then I present to you a man named Punky.
I met him in Red Onion State Prison.
One afternoon, they dragged him into
solitary
for exposing his dick to a female prison
guard.

His cell was across from mine and I saw him
beat his head
against the 24x9 slotted window,
but that window was more than a window;
It was Punky's personal notepad.

Often, he'd mix mustard and feces inside a
cup with a little water
till it met the consistency of ink.
Then he'd stick a finger in
and begin writing the most beautiful verses
on that window.
If there was a mistake he'd use his elbow as
an eraser.

How could beauty emanate from such
insanity?

All through the polyphonic noon he'd write
and erase
until a small masterpiece graced the
tempered glass.
This is what's missing from poetry today.
The unfiltered grit which circles humanity.

Poetry is best when it plops
like a morning coffee shit you can no longer
hold.
When it fizzes like hydrogen peroxide on a
child's scraped knee.

Literature has grown plump from the fluff
and pap of political correctness.

Lose the safety net.

Learn to walk the wire
with nothing below
but the singular dark.

I Take Requests
Allison Thorpe

Maxwell, owner of the bar downstairs,
wants me to write a poem about him.
A few times a month, he climbs the wobbled
stairs outside and knocks at my door,
a bottle of spiced rum in his pocket or maybe
the last vestiges of rock bottom rye.

Regulars call him Maxie,
but he is Maxwell here,
a soldier who fought in Iraq,
a navy seal in Afghanistan,
a marine in the Philippines,
a ranger in Viet Nam.

Sometimes he survived in a cave;
sometimes under another soldier's dead body.
Sometimes he was shot;
sometimes he pulled the trigger.
Sometimes he tires of those hard drinking
bastards with their sob soul stories,
having to pour one more drink,
setting up one more bottle.

Sometimes this is where I stop listening,
picturing him with some nice uptown woman.
I imagine him nodding to a pit bull doorman,
taking a swift elevator to a golden door,
leaving his whiskey-stenched clothes
strewn for some maid to revitalize,
donning a purple velvet smoking jacket
and gold edged slippers--
the Hugh Hefner of his building--
bedding his full blonde mystery
and dreaming of Florida or Rio, a drink
in his hand that someone else pours.

Spring Day
C.C. Russell

Sirens scrape
along the catacombs,
the simple echoing trajectories
of their terrible sound
and its implications.

The Sacred Texts
Holly Day

I would have had so many more poems to show you
but the priest destroyed them all when he came,
said my pre-Columbian ideals, my life before him,
were wrong,
told me I was wrong. I stood by, penitent, as he
hailed

box after box of handwritten journals
out to the curb to melt in the rain, came back
covered in sweat and ink to remind me
it was for the best, he only wanted the best

for me. I watched the codices that had recorded my
life before him,
disintegrating through the crack in the curtains,
pretending
to keep an eye on children bicycling in the rain,
that I was impatient for the mail. I watched

as history, deprived of its tongue,
forgot all about me.

Muses
Brad G. Garber

When you pulled the pencil out of my nose you
flowed out across the page like blood but it was
really more like tapioca pudding which I loved as a
child the vanilla kind with the tiny lumps in it but
you took no particular form **HAVING**
been all wicked smile and lizard eye and rivulets of
touch the pain like a constant suck or peel and my
hand **MOVING**
across empty space **TRYING**
to catch sparkles **RUSHING**
toward the horizon of the universe my sinuses no
longer leaden and stuffed my coconut head **LEAKING**
nurturing milk upon you the mahogany curl of
everything **TRAILING**
through my thoughts an army of flesh-cutter ants
CARRYING
me into the crypts and birthplaces of pupae to please
a queen your small feet like dots of graphite upon a
white expanse every sigh a symphony of oboes and
trumpets and blue flowers all touch skin warm
muscle flex bone strong bread dough soft and I
HOLDING
your hands in mine like hummingbird bones
WANTING
to taste them.

Emily As a Bedraggled Scarecrow

Darren C. Demaree

I grew up wanting
crop. If you saw me
now, climbing
the plank at the entrance
of the field to hold
my mouth to the mouth
of that which once
used to frighten me
away, you will understand
how much I've learned
about seasonal love.

Flesh
Jennifer Lothrigel

It took me 37 years
to want to live inside you.

I'm sorry.

I had to practice
touching the soft
palm of my left hand to space
between my breasts,
gently spiraling my fingertips
around

until

my nerves
relaxed down to my belly
like guitar strings
come undone.

I had to
replace my first memories,
with wings,
opened by my breath,
deeper
and without the fear of allowing.

I Don't Have a Need
Rob Hicks

Not one,
no desire for reflection
no wants of any kind
I am lit with
the pulse of being
I am drunk with
the grace of denial
I am overindulged
and overbearing
I press against my heart
with my song
of no great import
I am gentle,
ultimately gentle,
as I understand
life's apologies
and give none
in return.

Silver Lining (I)
Chris Bronsk

This diagnosis, the doctor said,
can sound like a hammer

to the head. The skull. Your cranium.
The occipital ridge, if you like.

A ball peen to the temple.
A mallet straight to your brow.

Let it. Let it fall like a plum.
Let the plum mottle. The stone

where it drops, patina and crack.
Let the scalpel admire your clavicle,

skirt the fascia, admonish
your nerve. Let the incision be

an eye looking in. The sutures
an ellipsis. When they stitch,

your adrenaline will pool and numb.
Let it clean your gutters, buoy

your boat. Like your child's gaze,
his steady protocols of wonder

and ask, let it raise you
above the cuts, the etiquettes

and oaths of reason. Let it
move you through the phloem

of acid in the plum's pit,
the sweet corrosion of the flesh

not quite reaching the skin
stippled with ripeness, cleaving to

itself and the air like a silk parachute
curled above a burning field.

Prairie City
Scott Neuffer

We were searching for a sentence,
perfect like the moon, but underfoot the grass
grew so tender that words surrendered,
fell like rain and made a rushing river.

Mountains boomed and shivered
as the river ran. We danced like madmen,
flies around us, shit-fed, singing,
as the moon lay hemorrhaging on the hills.

Then strangers friendly as pastures came,
mending the trampled grass, carrying with calloused
hands
all the broken moonlight they could hold—
to put in jars and store in homes of porous stone.

The Danger of the Obvious
Colin James

Who borrowed my genuine python vest
and stored it in a humidior,
as if waiting for its consciousness to return?
Usually, vacations like this are formulaic
but certainly preferable to local innuendo.
Apparently, there is a lake near here.
Reaching it by land sounds treacherous.
A truck has just now driven off road.
May I attribute that to your willingness?

A Girl's Epitaph
Tine Herald

The words stand, rooted, like tulips,
growing from the knotted locks of refulgent
black, as the night and I grow perplexed.

Undying November is crawling once again, trawling
its arms on the grass that houses me; the tawny
owl screeches my exit among the green teardrops.

I'm pillowed on a rock, a bent twig boxed
and blocked from my pristine birthright:
the beautiful dirge of anodyne alphabets, but

the immutable foot is hooked on my face,
the marble foot of the stone centurion
that stands to look at you and sing my body.

Trenchant in his vigil, he keeps watch
off the coast of mortality, and the hulls
that dock on my head with terse affections, as

he ensnares love for the scythe's neophyte,
and desiccates the bestial hubris laid,
upon the sharp angles--the twists and turns
on which we meet--declaring my sins.

He is a friend, the one from the hermit's hip--
that persistent creature born unyielding.
Never dull, never ceasing--a child of the Valkyries!

He's holding me on to the hems of eternity.

Never Happy

Lindsay McLeod

When I was young

I heard the world utter,

'Go ahead, go ahead,

be yourself,'

(did you hear it too?)

But as I grew, too oft

the world muttered,

'No Lindsay, not like that.'

The Key

Questing fingertips stroke at the darkness
reach out; peek, past this curtain of pain
through the window, can't dance in your mansion
music soaks an insidious strain,

since all of these songs locked in sadness
what was hidden emerges now plain
'tween the notes are the bars of my prison,
with the key, we unlock the refrain.

Acceptance
Adam Levon Brown

Torn pages reveal words
that no one was ever meant to read

What isn't
is really what is

I may not make much sense
but listen to the waves breaking
on the San Diegan shore and you
will understand

That to be fully grown
is to accept that death
can happen at any place
and time

Without the slightest
amount of warning

Pongal, Old and New
Sheri Vandermolén

The milk has boiled
over the clay pots' edges,
and the village women
have shaped rice flour, colored sands,
and marigold and rosebud petals
into lacy rangoli patterns
gracing each entryway.

Now, on the final day
of this harvest celebration,
the men gather to honor and decorate
breeder cows and working cattle,
burning incense and daubing kumkum
on the bovines' foreheads and hooves,
placing jasmine garlands
around their painted horns, thick necks,
and offering puja rice to the sacred.

In venerated rural fertility ritual,
the bravest locals track down
the swaggering bull —
a huge, anachronistic specimen
who dominates their dirt main street.
The animal stands stock-still,
only occasionally darting its head,
as they reach, uneasily,
under the tail, then between its back legs,
to touch its thick-skinned testicles,
their timeless ceremony complete.

In the city, miles away in every sense,
the sprawling Krishna temple
hosts a modern Mattu Pongal event
aimed at urban students —
a cow fashion show,
hosted by a local pop-music station,
with college teams competing
to display how traditional ecological values,
green methods respecting plants and animals,
can mesh with the advancing world.

Scurrying against the clock,
they create themed costumes for their cows —
an emblem-of-India peacock throw-coat;
an anti-plastics dress made of ripped-bag strips;
a flowery, cultivated-garden striped blanket;
a silk sari ensemble, with matching balloon hat;
and a beauty-and-the-eco-beast design.

While the judges weigh their decision,
a Hare Krishna band takes the stage,
for a drum-throb jam session,
as a show-stopping gold-crowned tan calf
is led up the ramp, introduced
to the oohing-and-aahing audience,
now numbering near a thousand.

Soon, the winner is announced.
The eco-beast team whistles and shrieks,
in ecstatic victory,
then rewards the champion bovine
with a sugarcane snack,
even as she sways,
stomps her gold-painted hooves,
in piqued anticipation —
another centrifugal surge
in the world of hairy cows and Hare Krishnas.

Graying in My Life
Michael Lee Johnson

Graying in
my life
growing old
like a stagnant
bucket of
rain water with moss
floating on top-
Oh, it's not such
a bad deal,
except when
loneliness
catches you
chilled in the
middle of a sentence
by yourself-
ticking away
like an old grandfather clock,
hands stretched straight in the air
striking midnight
like a final
prayer.

Living Ghost
Fabrice Poussin

Chest heaving, in an attempt to catch a last breath,
I cried in the midst of what might have been a great dream.
It was becoming increasingly demanding to be alive.

A rock, aged a million years, had fallen hard and square
Ribs shattered. Inside, crying tears of blood, a
Terrified heart took a break from its usual.

Thoughts no longer black, nor white, nor of color,
Exploded in a scream so desperate for an illusion
To arise and put an end to the doubt of visibility.

The likelihood of living any longer quickly vanishing
In an agitated semi-sleep, from dream to nightmare
Kicking and punching at the visions of nothingness.

Calm returned upon awakening, but not so true.
He would carry with him a dark ghost of the memories
Of a life filled with intensity and the matter of eternity.

Fearful of the sheets soiled with sweat and wrinkles,
Afraid of the next step in the day ahead he was,
In truth, insignificant and trapped between two voids.

Hopeless, floating in a life borrowed, inopportune
To the passers-by, with nothing to be done to become
He will return to oblivion, simply, unnoticed forever.

A JEHOVA WITNESS TOLD ME: BEFORE THE WORLD IS DESTROYED, THERE WILL BE DIVINE INTERVENTION AND I ALONE WILL SURVIVE

Michael Brownstein

because Richard Corey is the true Jehovah

We walk down the blue-lined streets of litter and tension,
the sky exhausted and white haired.

They told me the earth was a living beast
riding a tortoise shell across the light of space,
the shell old and degraded, the tortoise long gone,
only the tusks of an elephant spiking its center.

No elephant. No tortoise. The shadows of dawn
calm, a poodle mating with a shepherd, the house
on the corner bright with lights of unhappiness.

Can you not smell the carcasses of thick gray skin,
the acid in the water taking out a memory of fish,
everywhere a hand torments itself with touch,
the ears the noise of poverty and disuse,
taste a matter for another time, now the poodle
lets go and the shepherd rushes to the alley
in search of the smell and the bones piled there.

"This is the will of my world," Richard Corey says,
a bullet in his hand, a gun in his desk drawer,
the lights in the bad-luck house flickering. "Let go."

Dissenters Burial Ground
David Subacchi

A familiar road
But not the precise spot
Driving I failed to locate it.

Only on foot,
Trudging through puddles
Did I find a pillar

Marking the entrance
To two hundred years
Of burials

For those excluded
From the churchyard
Dissenters.

Every erect memorial
Laid flat
Health and safety.

Grass uncut
No benches
To sit on.

Spreading moss
Forcing frozen fingers
Into cracked stones

Splitting them open
Spoiling lettering
Disfiguring.

It is as if two
Centuries of conflict
Still linger on.

Years Later: A Daughter's Journal
Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas

There were days she'd crawl across
the bedroom floor and no one said a thing.

It was easier to watch a slow death
than to become an obstacle of prevention.

Heartbreaking really, mothers aren't
supposed to invite their children in

a home so full of gloom, yet I entered
naively, a place with no exits—

once inside, there's no way out, even
now, long after she's died. I used to wipe

the hallways clean each day, her thumbprints;
a diagram of battles. She must have

realized those images would last forever—
Hieroglyphics; tear heavy, finger marks,

a diary on walls. When the house was
sold, I gave up those reminders;

old maps running from her bedroom
to mine, long corridors wiped clean

of mishaps in the night, her shadow
finally quiet, beneath the moonlight.

Eastern Tent Caterpillars

Robert Ronnow

Mid-spring, skinny, black, blind
eastern tent caterpillars--
Malacosoma americanum--
falling from the cherry tree
leaning, human, over our deck.
Irritating. Mash and kick
them with my feet, continue
practicing or reading.

Three weeks later, reading
late at night. Heavy-bodied
black-eyed, reflexed antennae--
many hundreds of moths
crave the lamplight, some attaining
extinction through cracks
around the window screen. Vexing.
Until next morning, I look
up the name that has eluded me
all spring and early summer.

The single-minded moth and larval colony--
one small monophony.

Psycho
Jeffrey Zable

Somewhere I heard that Hitchcock made Janet Leigh do that shower scene 78 times before he was satisfied, and I know that if I'd done that scene 78 times, having Norman Bates come at me with that knife, I never would have slept soundly again, had normal relations with people, or gotten into a shower without a gun in one hand. And if I was ever in another movie; it would only be a voice over for characters like Goofy, Dumbo, or Flunkey the Baboon.

Nature of the Beast
Penn Stewart

When a male lion happens upon a single lioness in estrus, and she has cubs from the previous season, he'll dispatch those progeny and promptly plant his own seed.

You could suppose several reasons for this mother of fine young cubs to be single:

—she was expelled for catty remarks

—she rubbed someone the wrong way

—her mate died, killed by a resourceful caribou, bold crocodile, or angry impala

You thought he'd be there, but then something happened. He started staying out late, the stink of wild riding him like a man.

And when you tried to show him you're there, ready, he wrinkled his nose and yawned, looking toward the sleeping flamingos standing on one leg with their heads tucked in.

You said something, and that's when things went awry.

The others start making hay of the troubles—like it's their business. They start telling him that he's not living up to this king thing and that they might have to do something about it. It's about honor, blood, courage, and anything else they think that makes it sound like they're having an important discussion.

The one with the scar and best tail called him out. Said he didn't know how to keep a lioness in line.

Anyway, you know how this one ends.

Betrayal
Kristen Rybandt

It's like that time your mother sits on the edge of your bed and explains how you will have a baby brother soon like it's something you asked for. She pulls you near and caresses your hair and you reach for your bear, vaguely aware of the nubby soft fur by its nose and how that feels better.

The next morning, you refuse to get out of bed and your mother slides her cool dry hand across your forehead and it reminds you of the cat's nose when it's tired or sick. She is halfway out of the room when she says *alright, you can stay home from school but just today* and she does not roll the TV cart into your room. You are good and hungry by the time she brings up a wobbly bowl of tomato soup on a tray with some old tasting crackers.

By the time her belly begins to swell, you beg for details of all the things you will do together one day, presumably when the baby is older, though forever to you it is this misshapen blob, silent and forgotten in a stroller while your mother holds your hand on one side and your father on the other. You are all at the playground, on a roller coaster, at the beach jumping over waves; anywhere an unattended stroller makes no sense. But it helps to dream in this way. It gets you through.

Mostly you catalog all the ways your life changes irrevocably, unforgivably. There won't be any trips to Pappy's Pizza Parlor for awhile and there weren't many to begin with. The TV room gets a silly sailboat border and loses its TV. Your mother's lap becomes a hard, knobby place you can no longer nestle into. When she develops an itchy rash on one hand, you think to yourself I know how you got that you wicked, dirty thing.

When the baby finally comes, you are unprepared for the way its shriveled red face and cries burn. The smells are raw too, new but mixed with familiar things like wet dirt and roses in the garden and unfortunately these things change for you too, at least for a little while. One day you look down at the baby sleeping in its bassinet and feel something like tenderness. Its pinched face looks so angry and unpleasant, even in rest.

Months later, the baby spits up on your shoulder right before the spring band concert and your mother mops it up with a smelly rag. Your friends laugh at the baby and then at you and all you can smell is curdled milk during your trumpet solo.

On your birthday, the baby gets really sick, and I mean emergency room sick, though maybe this is an overreaction or even a way to show you who is most important. There is no party, of course, and both parents say *I'm sorry, champ, we'll make it up to you as soon as the baby is better* but nothing is better than a party on your actual birthday.

You begin to secretly and tentatively try out other mothers, always looking for the first sign of disappointment in either party. Mrs. Bindle is pretty and has a big laugh, but a cigarette always dangles from her lipsticked mouth. Mrs. Canderwall loves to fill you with cookies, so you tolerate her coffee breath plus trash TV always on in the background a little longer.

Probably the closest you find to a potential replacement is Ms. Hardy or Deb as she lets you call her. Deb confides things that might have bothered you had you found out on your own, such as the fact that she dyes her hair auburn (it is not naturally the shade of your aunt's dog) or that she pays someone else to clean her house. You appreciate her candor and freewheeling nature

because it trickles down to you. She doesn't mind when you show up in what your mother calls one of your moods. She strokes your hair and says *it sure must be busy in that house of yours*.

Once Deb confides breathlessly that she most admires children for their ability to constantly reinvent themselves. She isn't looking at you when she says this and you see how she must mean all children. Also, she wears too many rings and they are forever snagging your hair.

You can't shake the feeling that no one is ever enough, especially you.

You return home from one of these visits, letting yourself through the front door and standing still by the closet, smelling a warm pot of stew from the kitchen and baby smells you no longer notice. What if there is another baby, you often wonder. What if there were babies before this one that you never knew about and so were spared your mother perched on the side of your bed like it's the most natural thing in the world to turn someone else's world upside down.

You unzip your coat and pull off your boots and pad into the family room to settle into the crook of your mother's arm and hip, which is not hard anymore but lumpy in ways that make you feel sad for her too. You decide you will pack a bag and keep it in the corner of your closet where your mother never looks. If another baby comes, you can always split. Who needs a mother anyway?

A Nun's Arse
James Mulhern

"Do they still make snowflake cutouts in school, Molly? I used to love Christmas time when I was a tot."

"Mrs. Muldoon, I'm a senior in high school. We don't do things like that. They make snowflakes in elementary school."

"What a shame," she said. "People at every age should make snowflakes."

Nonna was pouring coffee and arranging anisette cookies on a plate. "I agree, Mary."

"Oh, those cookies look better than the Chinese food they deliver every night. The restaurant insists I call in the order, but I don't. It's the queerest thing. . . . Let's have a gin and tonic instead of that coffee, Agnella," Mrs. Muldoon said. "Molly too. She's a *senior in high school* now."

"Alcohol wouldn't go with the cookies," Nonna said.

Nonna set the coffee and plate of cookies on the table. "Did I tell you Molly's IQ is 148?"

"Whatever that means," Mrs. Muldoon said. "Do they teach you your catechisms at school, Molly?"

"The Sisters explain all of that to us. But I don't believe any of it."

She tsk-tsked. "You are not smarter than God, young lady." She placed her cup down firmly. Coffee spilled over the rim.

"Molly is a free thinker," Nonna said.

"What a bunch of malarkey." Mrs. Muldoon guffawed. "I've got to use the little girl's room."

When Mrs. Muldoon left the kitchen, Nonna whispered, "Grab a few of those see-through balls from her Christmas tree. Hurry up."

Nonna stuffed the ornaments in her bag just as we heard the toilet flush down the hall.

Mrs. Muldoon returned and said, "I was just thinking about Vivian Vance from *I Love Lucy*. It's sad that she died."

"I wonder what a dead body looks like. I'd love to see one," I said.

"What an odd thing to desire." Mrs. Muldoon snickered.

"And I don't see why her death is more tragic than the death of anyone else," I answered. "Do you know there are approximately 153,400 deaths per day, a little more than 100 per minute? We are all specks of dust in an enormous universe."

"Imagine? 'Specks of dust.' I don't even know what she's talking about. Wanting to see a dead body, too? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Mrs. Muldoon said.

"Don't mind her, Mary. She's just a free thinker."

"I could tell her a few things to think about." Her things sounded like "tings," and her think sounded like "tink."

"We should get going. The snow is falling again. And Molly's got homework to do."

"I can't wait to add more ornaments to our Christmas tree so it can be just as beautiful as Mrs. Muldoon's," I said.

"Yes, yes," Nonna said, rising from her seat.

Later, as I lay on Nonna's bed doing math, I picked up the phone and dialed.

"This is Mrs. Muldoon," I said, "Send me some pork fried rice and egg rolls in a jiffy. I'm so hungry I could eat a nun's arse through a convent gate."

Cowboy for Life
CB Droege

I recall clearly that I was sitting on my sister's lap in front of the television. We were watching a cartoon together. She would have been nine years old, but she doesn't remember this at all. She doesn't remember what she was doing at the time, but she doesn't think it was this. I don't either, really. The newscaster broke into the show to tell us that the president had been shot. In my memory, I knew why that was so important, why that was something for my sister to call my mother in from the kitchen to see. They were both so worried, and we watched the story unfold.

Analysts came and went from the television, most of them making noises about how short a time this president has been in office and speculations about motive. There is no talk of Jodie Foster in my memory. After an interminable amount of time, the television told us that the president was okay, and the cartoons returned, and my mother returned to dinner preparation.

I know it can't be real. The timeline doesn't make any sense. In March of 1981, I would have only been seven-months-old. But, I remember it so clearly. Perhaps I'm remembering a dream or I'm remembering someone else's story.

I remember - more realistically - my disbelief, even indignation when I was 8 years old and it was time to choose a new president. Reagan had been president for my entire life; I hadn't realized that that was something that would change. We'd learned about past presidents in school, the few years that I'd attended so far we'd talked about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, at least - not their actual legacies, of course, more about cherry trees and log cabins - but I hadn't *really* been paying attention, and I certainly hadn't made the connection that it meant Reagan would not always be in charge. I surely didn't take note in 1984 when Reagan had been re-elected.

This was nearly an existential crisis for 8-year-old me. My parents were the highest authority in my life, and the only person more authoritative that I knew the name of was Ronald Reagan. If this foundational, permanent thing can change, what else can change? I started asking about other permanent figures in my life. Will a new person be elected to the post of school principal someday? What about the crossing-guard on my street and the postal delivery guy? My Parents?! What about me? Can my family elect a new son?!

Concern struck me that nothing was truly permanent. That no place or position or person would ever be a true fixture the way I thought they could be previous to that moment. I still didn't really understand or pay attention to the presidential election cycle, that wouldn't happen for another 8 years. I had enough to think about already.

Mr. Doolittle
D.S. Levy

Even the dogs want to lick my skin. Even the mongrels come running, their sloppy wet tongues drooling their affections. And the cats -- they can't wait to knead on me with their soft padded paws like I'm a pillow of dough that would rise just for them. Birds smash against the picture window thinking I'm standing on the other side. Snakes push themselves onto the cement sidewalk for my benefit, soaking up the heat the whole of the day until I can come along and step gingerly over them, sending the languid ropes slithering into deep grass. And the animals in the zoo -- don't even get me started. When I walk through the gates the peacock ruffles her plumage, the sea lions clap and dive, the sloths start spinning around, and the bats in the bat exhibit echolocate my whereabouts sweeping frantically in the dark until I arrive, the light of their day.

And you?

You stand there by the tree gazing into your glowing smartphone, neck bent, ears keen to multitask: somehow you know it's me when I walk into your personal space -- maybe I block daylight, cast a shadow over your precious screen. You don't look, flick your eyebrows and say, "What's up?" and when you follow me across the park to the picnic table even a mosquito wants to light on my skin. Of course, I don't slap her away. I let her suck my blood. She needs it to make her eggs. Her prick stings just a little, a small price to pay. I'm hoping she'll land on you next, our blood commingling in her belly. I'll bet you didn't know only female mosquito's drink blood. Google it, it's true.

Boo
Lynsey Morandin

There's a monster in your room and you can't fight it anymore – you know he's there.

It will start in the closet, small noises keeping you awake at night, an uneasiness you can't quite shake. You'll see small flickers of him right before you turn the light on, too quick to know for sure. A shadow that suddenly disappears, one that could've just been the way you hung your shirt. The only evidence a scratch inside the door and the matted down carpet.

You're always better safe than sorry. You'll leave a chair propped up in front of the closet door, tell yourself it's because you're too lazy to drag it back to where it came from. But the problem is never the monster in your closet, hidden away behind your dresses and desperate to never be found out. The problem is when your monster can't hide anymore when it doesn't want to. The problem is when you awake in the middle of the night, your closet door ajar and your monster growing more daring.

In the morning you'll make breakfast and find shells of eggs you never ate in the trash. There will be water on your bathroom floor, the puddle just larger than your own foot. The scent of smoke lingers, but you're never able to air your house out because your blinds won't stay open no matter how many times you tug at them. The string is broken, though, you'll tell yourself, never acknowledging that your monster prefers the dark.

When you hear that scratching, that ticking, that sound that's coming from somewhere inside your room, you'll roll over, pull the covers to your throat and tell yourself it's just a trick of the imagination. You'll tell yourself that what you feel against the bare skin of your neck is just the heat from the vent above you. The creaks in the floorboards are just because it's an old house. But deep inside you know that the quick caress you feel against your cheek isn't your blanket shifting, it's him, reaching up from below your bed and across your mattress.

Your monster's breath will smell like bourbon and Coke. You'll think you hear him in the walls, in the low guttural growl of your neighbor's TV. He'll grow angrier with every night that you don't acknowledge him, grow bolder in his attempts to get you to believe. But you can't run and you know it. That's what he wants, your monster. That's what they always want. He wants you to lock all the doors behind you, to keep the lights on and tell yourself it's because you just forgot. He wants you to run into the bathroom with nothing but your own weight to barricade against the door. Monsters, all they want is to scare you, to see your knees clacking together as you tremble, to force that scream from the pit of your stomach.

So every night you wait because that's all you can do. You'll know he's coming by the sounds of glass shattering outside your bedroom door, by heavy footsteps moving much too quickly down the hall. Grinding teeth. The crack of knuckles as hands clench into fists. But the worst part is when there's no sound at all, when the air in the room gets so thick it strangles you and you know your monster is there behind you, waiting for you to open your eyes and see him for who he really is.

They always tell you these stories when you're a kid, try to scare you. They laugh about it. But what they don't ever tell you is you're never too old for monsters.

The Econlockhatchee River

Jeremy Dacruz

An unbearably hot summer in Orlando, the temperature in the upper 90s. It was my first time back since I moved to Asheville, NC and I was there to see my old friend, Ben.

We drank some strong drink, then idly considered how to best occupy the rest of our day. Ben suggested we go down to the Econlockhatchee River to cool down. I assumed we would use a canoe, but then Ben bizarrely suggested getting a kiddie pool from Wal-Mart. In the huge, horrible store, a purgatory of endless aisles, Ben quickly set his sights on an air mattress, and I picked out a kiddie pool. Why didn't I notice that Ben didn't follow his own suggestion? Anyway, I bought some cheap beer and we were off.

Near the river, we started pumping up our unconventional vessels. My kiddie pool had a strange nozzle that made inflation difficult. After half an hour of work, the kiddie pool barely a third inflated, I suggested that we just *share* the air mattress. Ben, as the veteran, declared that the air mattress would indeed be able to hold both our weight and the beer.

People gave us strange looks. Two guys, one short and fat carrying cheap beer, the other tall and lanky toting an inflated air mattress. We walked barefoot on the gravel path, wincing as sharp rocks sent stings of pain through our feet. We dodged hanging moss and cypress trees, and then crossed a small footbridge, eager to begin.

At the riverside, we flopped the air mattress into the water. The sky was darkened by an approaching storm; the river was a deep, dark, blue. We sat back to back, with the six pack wedged between us, water flowing over our hips. We shoved off and let the current take us.

The water was murky from recent rainfall, its surface completely opaque.

"Do you think there are alligators in this river?" I asked.

After a long pause, Ben replied, "Maybe?"

I took a swig of beer.

We floated along and caught up on each other's lives. I began rambling, as I often do, about the constant ups and downs of my love life, my recent move to North Carolina, and my family vacation to Ireland. Ben then imparted some sage advice about how to maintain long distance relationships as he had just returned from a summer in Bulgaria with the Presbyterians. The banks were sandy and lined with sagging trees. Our craft lilted along, and while the dark sky created a tunnel effect, we drifted towards our destination.

By the time we had reached the rope swing, a spot we always favored in the past, we only had two beers left and had taken to using the empty bottles as especially awkward, makeshift oars. I noticed that the waters had risen so high that the beach on the opposite bank was completely underwater. The darkened, swollen river had a post-apocalyptic aura, and we were piloting Noah's Ark with empty bottles of IceHouse.

We docked our air mattress against the riverbank and Ben, determined to use the rope swing, climbed ashore using the roots of a massive cypress. Just as I was about to do the same, with the rope swing dangling above me like a carrot on the end of a string, I heard splashing, turned my head, and saw a big scaly tail flying out from under the water. I scrambled much further ashore.

Normal watercrafts, such as canoes, have no real problem with gator-infested water. Except we didn't have a normal watercraft.

After twenty minutes of staring *intently* at the water, we had convinced ourselves that the gator had moved on, boarded our air mattress and began to paddle across the river. Just after we got to the midpoint between the two shores, a gator's eyes popped above the water, then back below 5 feet in front of me. I shrieked Hail Maries, my Catholic faith surging. We thrashed, and Ben sputtered that alligators are shore predators. We flung ourselves ashore, and Ben climbed up first, then I followed, dragging the mattress with me.

Back on the path, which is within a few feet of the riverbank, Ben mused, "I don't know if this makes it better or worse, but that might have been one gator following us, or *multiple* gators." I was thankful to be back on a familiar trail that I knew would lead us to the parking lot.

We journeyed back to the car, over the bridge, hearts racing and nerves shot. Our lives, normally sequestered within the world of undergraduate academia, were just interrupted by something extraordinary. We lived lives oriented towards boosting one's resume, networking, and making perfectly mundane choices. We were fools, but many youthful decisions, fraught with danger, are misguided attempts at heroism. The heroic change the world, but fools become tragedies. We, not dead, arrived at the car feeling like heroes. We experienced the river. We were friends. We out-navigated alligators, sort of. We were convinced that day God protects fools, drunks, and children. We were all three. Well, maybe not drunks.

An Absence of Stars
Alison McBain

The two girls are arguing over a toy from the dollar store, a cheap plastic lizard that is now missing three toes and the tip of its tail. It is a shade of purple not normally found in nature, with glowing green eyes faded from smudged fingerprints. Gigi splits the air with her scream, and the mother look over at her cell phone lying discarded on the desk atop a pile of papers and books.

The phone does not ring.

"Who had it first?" asks the mother. I should say me--I am the mother, but I am seeing this scene from a remove, from behind the faded lens of exhaustion. Gigi--not her real name, of course, but so nicknamed because her younger sister could not say "Georgina"--makes the exaggerated monster face that she's been practicing in the mirror for a week. When she thinks I'm not looking, like when she's brushing her teeth, she will twist her lips and her eyebrows up and out and make fierce little growling sounds.

"Use your words," I say. "Not your hands." Small hands tugging at the toy, the tips of her fingernails dark with god-knows-what. "Bedtime," I tell them a minute later. A stream of protest, a continuing half-hour whine that lasts through tooth brushing, bath time, story time ("Just one more! Daddy always reads two--") and hugs and kisses and nosey-nosey and one last sip of water and finally, lights out. ("But Daddy always lets us--")

The phone does not ring.

I sit in front of the television, flipping channels. Crime drama, crime drama, sports, news, a movie I've seen a million times, but I pause at it anyway. The lure of the familiar, the comfort in knowing that the next minute, she will walk through the door and hate the man she sees there on sight, hate him with an undying passion that will shortly turn to love and flowers and white weddings and babies and happy, happy, happy ever after.

The movie ends, and I get up and wash the dishes in the sink. On a stack of bowls, there is crusted-on neon orange that bears only a passing resemblance to cheese, but more of a resemblance to the last time the little one was sick and she didn't quite make it to the toilet, and I spent an hour on my hands and knees wondering how such a little body could produce such mass quantities of vomit.

The phone does not ring.

Upstairs, I count the seconds in my head as I turn on the electronic toothbrush. One potato, two potato, three potato, four. I linger longest on my front teeth. If all my back teeth rotted and fell out, my front teeth would still be shining like the moon every time I smiled, because appearances are so important to maintain.

The right side of the bed is stark with an untouched pillow, an unmussed sheet. I get into the left side of the bed and rest my head on my arm. I will wake in the middle of the night with my hand like a dead piece of meat and shake it until some life returns. But then I will put it back under my head, under my pillow, and my circulation will be cut off again, until the morning light wakes me and I can fix the problem in the same way, not knowing what else to do. Maybe I shouldn't wait that long--maybe I should just chop off my hand, not waiting for the numbness to overtake me.

The phone does not ring.

I close my eyes. Behind them, I see black--only black. Infinity without color, an endless expanse without light. There is no hate, no passion, no happy ever after. After all the absentee nights, nothing remains in that space anymore. Not a single star left to wish on.

The Oncologist's Mistress
Christopher Woods

Finally, he had no choice but to leave her, though he would never forget her eccentric clothes, deep laugh, her perfume or her tongue that led him down the road to ecstasy and back. The smell of her skin would follow him until his death, and maybe beyond.

Yet he knew he would never forgive himself for abandoning her like she was, would always remember her deep longing eyes that always begged for more.

She was ill, terminal he knew. He imagined darkness spreading inside her, cell by cell, on a silent march to oblivion. He thought he felt the sheets on her bed blackening around their embrace, enveloping them both. It had been the same with his wife years before.

He could not live with such a thing again. And then, what if he too became ill?

Constant hand washing, swallowing hundreds of vitamins, even going so far as to inject himself with his own licensed poisons, nothing could alleviate his fear, irrational or not, of himself dying.

He turned both blind eyes to everyone around him, gave up his treacherous practice,

He became a loner, and then finally disappeared. Weeks later he was discovered, nude and dirty in a closet in an old, rundown hotel upstate, babbling about her, her smell, her laughter.

Always the good oncologist, he had never planned on an illness that took his mind but left his body alone, much like one abandons a lover.

Butter Pecan
Dan Nielsen

Hattie dialed the Flash Cab number. Tim answered.

"Flash Cab."

"Yes, I know. Send a cab to 1814 Center Street."

Tim recognized the voice and address.

"Destination?"

Tim knew that, too, but it was his job to ask.

"Ransom's Drugs. The corner of Center and Wisconsin."

Out of habit, Tim jotted down both addresses. This was a two block ride. Minimum fare. All she wanted was a pint of ice-cream. This happened every Saturday.

"Figure ten or fifteen minutes."

"Why so long?"

"Because the closest available cab is ten or fifteen minutes away."

"I don't like your tone, young man."

"Sorry."

"Okay, but tell the driver to hurry."

Hattie returned the phone to the receiver. She went to the window and moved the curtain aside. There was an open space in front of her apartment building. The cab would park and beep two short beeps.

Watching wouldn't make the cab arrive any sooner. Hattie didn't need the toilet, but she walked to the bathroom anyway and closed and locked the door behind her. She sat awhile, just in case. After a minute, when nothing happened, Hattie got up and washed her hands. She brushed her hair and applied lipstick. She was leaving the house. It's important to always look your best.

Hattie was back at the window again when the cab arrived. She glanced at the clock. Eleven minutes had passed. She wondered if the driver could see her. She stepped away and let the curtain fall back into place. She was startled by the beeps. But only for a moment. She turned the porch light on to let the driver know she was coming.

Dave Ransom, in his pharmacist whites, saw the cab pull up and stop. It was the woman from down the street who came in every Saturday for a pint of ice-cream. There was a bell above the door. It rang when Hattie opened it, and again when it closed behind her. Hattie went directly to the freezer and chose a pint of butter pecan. Her favorite.

Back home, Hattie put on a nightgown and got under the covers with the ice-cream and a spoon. She picked up the phone. She dialed the number for the Woodlawn Nursing Home, and then the extension for Riley's room.

Riley answered.

"Hello?"

"Hello, dear."

"Hello?"

"Riley, it's me, Hattie."

"Hello?"

"Dear, it's so good to hear your voice."

"Hattie?"

"Yes, dear. It's me. I'm Hattie."

The Verge
Corey Niles

"Come down from there," screamed a flustered man in the crowd below.

Valerie sat on the window ledge of her fifth-floor apartment. A small group had gathered below, screaming out words of comfort and hesitation. Mr. Cowart pounded on the door. She had blocked the entrance with her dresser. Valerie didn't want to be saved. She didn't deserve to be saved.

Mommy! I'm hungry!

Valerie never wanted to be a mother. Experiencing the pain of a damaged mother's influence firsthand, Valerie swore she would never do it. James wanted kids. Let's just fill the house with a whole bunch of them. Let's just be happy. They had two children before James was drafted. Then everything changed.

"Every life is precious," yelled a woman below.

Valerie got the call on Thursday. Thursday, December 25th. It was snowing. Not as bad as it was now, but it was snowing. She was making hot chocolate for the kids. Thomas liked one marshmallow in his hot chocolate. Samantha liked a little milk in hers. Valerie prepared their drinks, handed them their warm Sippy cups, and went to her room. She didn't come out for two weeks.

MOMMY!

In that room, Valerie wasn't a mother. She wasn't even a wife. Valerie was a widow. A widow. The term was so strange to her. *Widow*. It changed who she was. Now she was supposed to be strong. Not happy. Not sad. Not human. Just strong.

"Take my hand."

Valerie looked back into the apartment. A woman was standing in the middle of the living room. She was wearing a black pantsuit and her dark hair was pulled back in a tight bun. She looked at Valerie and smiled warmly.

"How did you get in here?" Valerie looked behind the woman at the door. The dresser was still in its place.

"That doesn't matter now."

"It matters to me." Valerie wondered if the woman was one of those mind doctors. She didn't like mind doctors. Her mother had gone to one of them, and a different person came back. Valerie remembered watching her just sit at the kitchen table, staring off in the distance at something that was unseen and unheard by everyone else. The lights were on, but no one was home.

MOMMY!

"Come on Valerie. It's time to go," said the woman in black. She outstretched her arm for Valerie.

"You can't save me," said Valerie, tears streaming down her face. "I want to die."

"Honey, you're already dead."

MOMMY

Valerie looked down at the pavement. The crowd below had vanished. Her body was sprawled out on the sidewalk. Her limbs were unnaturally contorted, twisted in the wrong direction at the joints. A pool of blood expanded from her cracked skull in a halo-like formation. If one looked closely, a hint of a smile could be seen on her face.

"Thank you." Valerie took the woman's hand.

Together, they left.

The Trailer

The trailer stared back at me.

Learned to ride a bike on the gravel road. Still have some rocks in my elbow to prove it. Kissed Evan Strover in the backyard behind the oak tree, which is now a stump overridden with weeds. The white siding had a yellow hue from chain-smoking after school. Not that it is all that noticeable with the large orange streaks that trickled down from the rust-riddled tin roof. Held a fist full of ground beef over Mom's swollen eye on the cinderblock steps and pushed Dad through the screen door the following night. The same door that closed behind me at eighteen.

Who knew it would have survived this long.

The Mixed Wires
Rebecca Harrison

Anne's brain had strange wires. They switched light and dark. The sun shone gloom. The night sky was bright. She huddled by her window, wishing on black stars while snow fell like charred feathers. In the morning, she walked wintry scenes that looked like smashed coals. She stayed outside the other children's games. She stuffed her pockets with shells. She peered into their glow. Her steps clattered. At school, she poured ink on carpets and desks and wallowed in its gleam. On summer days, she sheltered in wardrobe-light. It smelled of broken coins.

She grew older. She stopped going to school. She stayed away from the dark day. One evening, when her parents slept, she packed a bag with her shells and left. She roamed hushed night streets under skies of depthless light. She crept past lamps beaming dinge. She looked for brighter places. At the city edge, she found a well. She squeezed into the bucket and lowered it down. Below her, the water was melted crowns. She didn't see the black sun rise.

She hunted tunnels. She basked in cave glow. In locked libraries, she scoured books seeking brighter worlds. When she found shining pictures of chasms and sea beds, she tore them out and stuffed them inside her coat. She read about space. She searched for a rocket. She left earth. Space stretched and dazzled like steam-rolled suns. She soared past dark meteors and dim planets. She opened a hatch, pushed out the shells, and watched them float away. She found a black hole and sailed into its light.

Yeah? Well My Friend Chris Hemsworth Says You Ain't Shit
Nick Gregorio

When Chris gets a few in him I can't understand a damn word he says. All sawed-off Australian syllables. Oi, oi, oi, and all that, know what I'm saying?

A couple more and he's showing me pictures of his wife telling me I'll never get a woman like that.

I'll say, "Talk American."

And he'll say, "Death and taxes, partner, yeehaw," making sure everyone hears it.

I'll tell him he has a distinct advantage. "You're fucking Thor," I'll say.

Another photo on his phone, and, "No, she's fucking Thor." Then he'll be slapping the table, laughing, sloshing beer out of our glasses onto our food. He'll stand, flex, say, "You are, all of you, unworthy of the weight of mighty Mjolnir."

As if people wouldn't be staring by then already.

Not only is Thor in a bar, he's drunk and insulting his pudgy American friend in a bar, swearing enough to blush any face in earshot and showing off semi-nudes of a supermodel.

It wouldn't matter that I'd told him he could only have one beer. That it'll be my night. That he'll be my wingman.

Wouldn't matter if he'd said, "Sure, sure. No worries mate."

I know what that means. He says he calls me mate because we're friends. But when he's shoving me around, grinding his knuckles into my scalp, ranting about my fleeting mortality, it has to be for some other reason. And if I were to tell him it'd be best if he'd just piss on my leg and get it over with, he'd do it, and toss a wallet-full of foreign cash into the air as an apology and a fuck it.

So I'll just let him drink, say, "How about a shot, Odinson?"

Or, "Another round, First Mate Chase?"

Or, "How about some more tequila, Gale?"

He always gets so huffy about his brother landing a major film franchise the same time he did. That everything's always been Liam, Liam, Liam. That his brother deserves a nut like Miley. That he's met Jennifer Lawrence once and she's not even really all that. And after that, he'll skulk to the men's room saying he shouldn't have ordered the clams casino from this pit. Again.

Then it'll be the guilt.

Yeah, Chris is a jerk off sometimes, but he's my jerk off, you know? Sure, he's sensitive for a man of his stature, but who wouldn't be? The body, the looks, the fame, the supermodel wife. That's all good, but that's all people see. There's more to Chris than that.

I'll be obliged to find the biggest, toughest-looking guy in the dive and tell him, "Hey, you saw my friend Chris, right? He had some nasty shit to say about you, man. I shouldn't even repeat it."

He'd stand all Brut and tanning lotion, shove me a little, and tell me to tell him what the fuck Captain America said.

Then, the smell of Camels and Jäger wafting from Meat's maw, Chris'll say, "Oi," loud enough that even the jukebox'll shut up.

Then he'll tear the place apart. Bottles'll shatter over heads. People'll be slid across the bar. Barstools'll explode on people's backs. The only thing missing will be a sepia filter over the scene and a drunken cowboy playing old-timey Wild West piano in the corner.

Once Chris and I are the only ones left standing, once the bartender tells us to get the hell out of there, once Chris registers the groans of his victims as signs of life, he'll lift a whiskey bottle over his head, say, "JR's Bar, I hath had words with thee," and take a good long pull.

When it comes to friendship, all you've got to do is make sure your buddy's good after he gets torn down. Even when you're the one doing the tearing. Chris rips into my ass, I'll spit it all

right back in his face, and then we'll make it up to each other. Call it practice for the real shit.

We'll both be smiling, all the guilt'll be gone, and we'll walk out of that dump together. Like friends are supposed to.

He'll say, "Come, my doughy American companion, let's go bird-dog some chicks."

"Think I'll flush one out that looks as good as Elsa?" I'll say.

He'll laugh, loud and mighty, say, "Absolutely not, Son of George and Kathy. And keep my wife's name out of your mouth."

Then we'll stagger down the street, arms around each other's shoulders, to go wreck another neighborhood gin joint.

The Ward
Daniel Galef

Midnight in the Ward. Mirror-colored fluorescents and baby-blue analgesic walls snore softly, child-locked and utterly, perfectly *safe*. The loons cry softly in the wetlands, scrubbed and padlocked in their beds. Wolf Waine cannot sleep because his bracelets are too tight and his window shade is made of metal, but he thinks very slowly, and that can sometimes tide him 'til dawn. In Wisteria, it is always May. The wisteria in Wisteria bloom in May too, so in Wisteria, the wisteria is always blooming. That is why it is called Wisteria.

In the Ward, the sunshine can only pass through the lead bunker doors if you pretend it does. Too many steps in that direction may land you in the Ward, so it's best not to try. No, far better to wait and bathe in the liquid gold in Wisteria, where the air smells like honeysuckle and cowslips, which just also happens to smell like latex and antiseptic, but that's somewhere else, and has no bearing on the affairs of another world. Cowslips are not named because of cows' lips but rather because of slips, which is slippery stuff and has no etymological relation, which is Important to know because, in this case at least, it influences the pronunciation, which is cow-slips and not cow's-lips. But, honeysuckle isn't honey's-uckle, it's just what you always thought it was.

Across the hall, Hacksem Bailey, who Dr. Beutell says used to be called Bud, is caterwauling to the moon and his wife who lives there; she who eloped with the cow one day while Hacksem was out working somewhere.

"You know you can't leave me, Sharon!" he snarls at her so that the moonlight is almost diamonding in the dappled drops on the calf's face. "I'm the glue that holds this family together! What'll you do without me, Sharon!" He said this like it wasn't a question, but it didn't matter, because Sharon had never answered him, just huddled up and pulled in her knees on the Far Side and put her finger to her white lips to keep her children quiet in their bloody garbage bags. It is Important to know that there is no such thing as the Dark Side of the moon, only the Far Side of the moon because it turns very slowly.

"Where will you go, Sharon! I am this family's solder! I keep us joined! Little silver metal tears, Sharon, and I will not let this family fall apart without me! Where did you go, Sharon!" Hacksem Bailey was a metal joiner, and he had an acetylene torch that burned through iron bars so he could weld them together or use a soldering gun to stick them to each other. After he said goodbye to his wife, though, he didn't stick her back together again. There are little gray spots on his fingers and arms where he was burned by things in the past. Wolf wonders whether Hacksem Bailey's brain is gray. In Wisteria, the moon is closer so it looks bigger and also there are three of them. They have no Far Side or Dark Side, but you can see all of them all the time, even during the day, because it is Important that they don't leave you and maybe not come back.

Next door, just over the picket fence, someone is broken-drain-cackling at the snub quadrille in the floor, which is cement until you look closer and then is concrete because it has little stones in it. Wolf has never met him but he giggles every night and cries every day and might not exist – but how could you ever really tell that. Something must be very funny. It is good that he can have fun because a lot of people in the Ward don't seem to have very much fun at all, even though it's very difficult to tell if someone else is having fun. Especially when their faces are all making strange shapes and the things they say don't make normal shapes in your head. In Wisteria, most people have fun most of the time, but not everyone, or all of the time; that would be a Bad Thing, almost like not having fun.

In Wisteria, there are waterfalls that are just for making rainbows and rainbows just for finding pots of gold and gold just for having something and never for spending because people give you things in Wisteria without you asking for them – or taking them and shooting them. Everything in Wisteria is for something, because the most Important thing of all is for something to be for

something, otherwise it isn't for anything and doesn't exist. The Man Who Has Fun might not be for anything, because he might not exist, and that must be why he cries all day.

The sun is almost up now because Wolf can feel the electromagnetic waves penetrating the red clay bricks and the plaster and the upholstered armchair walls. All the way down the hall and around the corner to the end of the world and the church window where there is sometimes watery Eucharist from the plastic hands. In the morning – which it is now – the slick, sleek, varnished nurses and shining rubber technicians come to tune up and turn on the patient waiters. Wolf's bracelets are off and his arm hurts, so it's tomorrow and the Man Who Isn't There Who Has Fun is crying. Only, it's a very loud kind of quiet and the Man Who Isn't There must not be there. Then the record is pulled by one of the hands with the papers and it isn't quiet anymore. No voices outside and the Man Who Exists After All Who Has Fun walks out on four wheels. He isn't laughing, or crying (which he's never been), but at least he's average. It's Important to remember that the average does not always tell the whole story. Wisteria has a royal palace which is for the King, which is Wolf, and it has a royal library which is also for the King and is also for reading and learning knowledge. It has a royal hedge maze, which is for something also, but it has been forgotten since time immemorial which is 1066 in common legal usage.

There is a noise that isn't in Wisteria, so it is probably in the Ward. There are pangs in the room next to his room, and a sort of breathing that Wolf Waive wishes he didn't recognize. The man with the face like a goalie in ice hockey and no hockey stick is living in the house that the Man Who Had Fun sold. It is a good house and is eminently practical for lying and living and laughing and crying in. But it is also the house next to Wolf's house, and he just had the bay windows redone and doesn't want any rowdies. Some of the people who spend all or most of their time in the Ward think things about the Goalie. They think he might be just a little bit funny in the head, but that is not a nice thing to say, and so Wolf doesn't. They say a few other things too, but Wolf thinks they have no taste even if the Goalie does not.

It shouldn't be nighttime now but it is, and the shiny nail polish bites him in the arm again and he goes to Wisteria. When the damsel is saved, the lacquered smocks are gone, but the bedroom is all of a hubbuboo, hiry, hary, hubbilschow because of the Goalie, who is hosting a very boisterous party indeed. He had half a mind to call the fuzz on him straight away. Wolf wondered what he would do to him if he could. And he couldn't. The secret door only has a handle on one side, but the Goalie Hosting a Party doesn't know that and might think the safe is safe, even from the outside, and only take the hands and the needles and leave a receipt for the rest. The Goalie Host wears bracelets made of Velcro, which was patented by George de Mestral in 1955. He was Swiss too, and got his idea from nature – like fractals and benzene and the Earth is round. They aren't Velcro actually.

The maze in Wisteria has a little picture of the Ward in the middle just so people can see what isn't. Wisteria is. Wisteria is in Wisteria anyway, which is all you can really ever say. Kierkegaard said something like it, unless it was something else. It means church-farm but is slang for a cemetery. There are sometimes loud noises in the night but there never were before so it is a New Thing, and the Host Goalie isn't hosting anymore and the party has left the building which might have been something someone said. The Glue, the Solder, is a werewolf now, and is howling in wolf language, which Wolf can understand because Wolf's name is Wolf.

"I am sorry, Wife. I didn't mean to drive you away by keeping you up at night. If you come back home from the moon I will be nice and you can share my apartment here in the Ward. I have very kind and understanding neighbors, but I will not keep them up any longer. I am the Solder and you are the Glue and won't you come back and stick to me again?" And then he stops howling, because his wife came back and he doesn't have to talk to the moon like an astronaut because he is happy. The condominium where the Solder is treating the Host Goalie to a tea is much quieter and is much quieter until the rubber nurses come along to knock on the doors selling encyclopedias

which are not encyclopedias, even though they should be, and they see the Glue and take him away because he got too happy. He is no longer grey at least, anywhere. There is no day at all this time, but it is nighttime at the same time because you can't feel the sun. Anyway, that is silly and unscientific to boot. They gave the Goalie Host a belt buckle for administering a series of group therapy sessions and prescribing a number of tried and true antipsychotics to the Solder, and he went back into his cave next door to me which is very close. The cubbyhole across the great wide way is silent and slumbering in the shadows. Sleeping. In the shade. Slowly.

Some patients they say are not reacting conducive to analysis, and might be better off as a permanent resident of the facility. It is good to be committed to what you believe in. I do not believe in the Ward. And I don't think it believes in me. Thought Wolf, I mean. It is Important to know the details of your own health and your wellness and recuperation program, unless you are a Chronic which no one is really. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was a horrible movie. The Fun still hasn't come back and the hulking Goldilocks with the brown stains under her fingernails is still sleeping in his bed. The Fun is probably not crying right now and that can only be interpreted as a good thing.

The inside of the walls of the hedge maze on the grounds of the royal palace in Wisteria is lined with wisteria. It is blossoming, and it smells like blood. The walls and connections have shifted, just enough to make the air feel uneasy. And a mischievous little trick it was, but the flowers have died because of it. It is Important to know that flowers are actually the reproductive organs of plants and that might have implications relating to human social behavior involving them. Dr. Beutell with the pink fingers and tappy pen doesn't think so, though, because it is outmoded thinking and an affront to psychoanalysis as a whole. So it is not that Important to know that then.

The Solder is behind me even though I did not look backwards. He is wearing a metal mask and has no face because of it. There is a red slit for his eyes, so he can see against the brightness of his acetylene flashlight, which is what the Americans call a torch. Even though I am an American and call a torch, a torch, and a flashlight, a flashlight. Except that I can't remember the last time I did either, so I might not be American after all. He wants to put me back together again, but I am more worried about what happens first.

The Fun is around the next corner even though I can't see him yet, so I should turn here. The Man with the long fingers, from one of those pictures, was also in a maze that was different from this one, somewhere. Maybe there will be more time to think later. I have gotten too used to thinking slowly, even though it makes things hurt more slowly.

It is midday and the sun is directly overhead which means in Wisteria I am in between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. And if I knew what day it was, I could probably know more if I knew more, but that is not Important to know right now, which is strange.

The flowers in the walls are baby blue and are not flat or peel-y but are not wisteria either, so maybe I am no longer in Wisteria. They could be cowslips or honeysuckle or cornflower or hyacinth, which all smell like flowers, even though these smell like breath. I do not know what they look like, but they do anyway. Perhaps I am in Cowslip or in Hyacinth or in Hepaticae. It looks like a place, so I am probably there. Goalie the Host is in the middle of the maze, but there isn't anywhere else to go because the Fun and the Solder are only going ways that make me go closer to him. It is not an ideal situation. Fun is wearing a clown mask, which I know a lot of people find frightening but I never thought clowns were particularly scary. Though, this one clearly is because he has a knife, but then the trouble there is more the knife than the clown anyway.

The middle of the maze is bigger than it usually is because the door is open; and the door is never open except when it isn't in Wisteria, which it must be now because it is. The Goalie Host is somewhere through it because he opened it. It's almost like the Ward except with flowers and hedge walls, which is a very nice look for it. The church door is even open and Dr. Beutell isn't acting like a hand, but is acting very tired and like a face almost.

"What are you doing out of your room? Did you run into Hurrow? Did he break out of

Skutcher's Room? What are you saying? You should go back to your room, no, you should get out of here, no, what's going on?"

I try to answer all of his questions but it is difficult because some of them aren't really questions and some of them I don't know the answers to and some of them I can't answer at all because I don't know what they mean. If I go to the royal library, I can maybe answer more of his questions because it has a lot of books that have a lot of things in them that are Important to know. But then Dr. Beutell isn't looking at me anymore. He is looking at the Goalie who is not in a room but is right here and he is going to talk to Dr. Beutell. He is looking at me now and maybe I can get back into the Ward which isn't very nice, but where things like this don't happen. Dr. Beutell is talking to me again, just not with his mouth, and he is speaking in wolf-language which I understand and he is saying: "There is something it is Important to know but I cannot tell you." And he told me. And so now I must tell you.

Silence
Leonard Klossner

Glenn stood dumbfounded as he watched the body before him grasp at its chest.

"No, the gun was not loaded."

The resultant ringing white noise of a hollow-point bullet tearing the silence asunder disproved his supposition. The body removed its hand from the cavity in its chest and seemed to make no registry of the coagulated blood that painted tributaries down its arm.

Its eyes closed moments later.

"No," Glenn repeated.

His ears peeled with the shrill buzz of severe tinnitus, preventing him from hearing the words he spoke into the silent void. He could only feel the vibrations issuing from his throat.

"The gun was not loaded."

The gunshot sounded the expiration of everything he knew; every concept and idea, his every memory, years of past time were deposited into the corpse that lay at his feet. His head ached, his brain rattling still. It was as though this body, disgorging blood ever quicker, had been hidden there for Glenn to discover. Thus was the nature of his surprise. Ambivalent to his contact with the blood that had soaked through the body's shirt, Glenn cradled the corpse in his arms and pressed his face to its chest. The tears that fell from his eyes ran down the saturated cotton fabric of the corpse's shirt which could no longer permit any additional volume of liquid. "I can't believe...the gun was not—"

Glenn removed the magazine so he could inspect its capacity as though the murder strewn before him was not indisputable proof of his error in memory. Indeed, it was fully loaded, save for the absent bullet which had been exiled from the chamber, conscripted to committing murder. Such were the terms in which Glenn's train of thought ran: the bullet had caused the murder, and were it not for the magazine—still he swore that he had not loaded it—having been filled to capacity, the corpse would have had the blessing to retain its vitality.

Glenn's senses had all been confused, his psyche fractured. He was delirious and disoriented, thus was he unable to process the tragedy objectively. Yet he could not escape responsibility. Tears stung his reddened eyes as he ran his fingers through the corpse's short blonde hair and down its cheeks, remaining poised before it long after removing his hand from contact as though wondering whether or not the body would not rise back to its feet.

The ringing in his ears had recovered enough to suffice his hearing a knock at the door. With his wits gathered well enough to enable him to commit to a course of action, Glenn returned the magazine into the body of the gun. He cocked the slide back, prepared his penance, supported the stability of the barrel between his teeth and silenced the incessant knocking.

#

Glenn was taking his son and his recent lover uptown for breakfast.

"Goddamn, it's a beautiful day," Glenn said.

Andrew laughed at his father's sudden expletive.

"Where it is we're going, again?" Clara, his lover, asked.

"The Runny Egg."

"What a stupid name," she replied.

Glenn chuckled.

"Terrible name. *Terrible*, but the food is great—best breakfast I've had. Well worth the drive."

"It had better be," Clara said.

She had met Glenn through a mutual acquaintance of theirs—Sonia was a close friend of Clara's and one of Glenn's former lovers. The introduction was conducted begrudgingly on Sonia's behalf—it was merely a formality, a service to Clara who had arrived at the suite seconds before Glenn, awaiting an answer at the door in a stranger's company—as she had been led on and let down by Glenn the week prior. Though he had developed no attachment to Sonia, this fact, manifested in his behavior toward her, had not prevented her from falling for him.

Glenn and Clara conversed over the course of numerous cocktails and beers, neglecting their mutual friend whose going-away party they were attending, and nearly consummated their immediate attraction to one another in the lesser bedroom in the luxury hotel suite reserved for the occasion. A mechanism in Glenn's mind, despite his inebriation, disallowed the possibility of a sexual encounter in order to preserve the potential for a relationship as the pair had, through the course of the night, identified numerous ideals and opinions they had been unable to share in such abundance with another.

Andrew, old enough to no longer regard his father's lovers as aspiring substitutes for his mother, was fond of Clara. The manner in which she would snap at his father in jest complemented his own adolescent snide demeanor and served to fashion a bond established through the familiarity and nearness of her youth to his. Clara joked with Andrew in a way that the friends of a boy's older sister might tease him, and this satisfied him. The two had become quite close after Clara, following no suggestion from the boy's father, had taken Andrew to the mall to shop for video games, treating him to whichever two he liked.

"Once you taste their French toast you're going to jump out the window to your death because you'll never taste anything as good for as long as you'll live."

"Then how are you still alive?" Andrew asked his father.

"I had the pancakes," he joked.

Before they were served, they discussed Andrew's difficulty in mathematics and Glenn's love of the diner's French toast. When the waiter brought them their food, the conversation turned to a recent news story which described a man who had been sleeping in a coffin each night in order to experience the death that he figured was not very distant. Clara, who introduced the topic, expressed her amusement at the dour appearance of the old man's wife as she explained her husband's behavior.

"She stares listlessly at the interviewer, away from the camera and says—" here she breaks off into an impression of the old woman—"He just lies there every night; just sits and watches TV in that coffin of his."

Glenn and Andrew laughed at Clara's impression while their mouths were full of moist bread.

"I love how he says he wants to experience death when all he does is watch TV from the coffin all night before going to bed in it," Glenn said.

Clara set her utensils down in order to emphasize her agreement.

"I know. He even had the damn thing upholstered and padded so he would be comfortable in it."

"What a weirdo," Andrew replied.

"He may be on to something, though," Glenn said. "There does seem to be a sense of comfort in no longer living. Freedom, you might say."

"Stop," Clara said, jabbing his shoulder.

"Anyway, this just goes to show you that truth often really is stranger than fiction."

"Yes," Clara said. "Like that mother who recently shot her kids and her disapproving mother so she and her boyfriend could run off together. When her boyfriend got home, he tried to call the police after he realized she had shot the kids and her mother. They weren't his kids but still he had

the good sense not to shrug it off. The woman ended up shooting him, too, before turning the gun on herself."

"That's not so strange. There are so many stories of women who snap for some unknown reason and murder their husband and drown their children in the bath. Sure, men are more violent and would murder somebody they did not know, but they would never so much as harm, let alone kill, their own family."

Andrew remained silent, enjoying his French toast, while Clara explained to Glenn her view that the murder of the woman's children, mother and boyfriend would not have happened had the boyfriend not kept a gun in the house.

"Oh, come on. If there wasn't a gun in the house she still would have murdered her family. The murder was her objective. The presence of the gun was coincidental. Had there not been a gun available, she would have stabbed her boyfriend, bludgeoned him, found some other method with which to kill him."

The couple argued until they finished their meals. Aside from the issue of gun ownership, the couple agreed on nearly all points, and this general agreement comprised the foundation of their bond, but the fact that Glenn possessed numerous firearms was a severe point of contention in their budding relationship.

"What if Andrew got his hands...?"

"Don't bring him into this," Glenn said. "Neither he nor I would shoot anybody unless they threatened our home or our family. Besides, he enjoys going out to the mountains with me to shoot my guns, isn't that right, Andrew?"

He nodded.

"The shotgun is his favorite."

"Even though shooting it bruises the part of my chest that the gun rests against," Andrew said.

Clara, despite her conviction, could not resist laughing.

"He's a good kid," Glenn said. "He would never do anything to harm or kill someone else, and to suggest that it is a possibility is insane. I've raised him better than that. A gun does not manipulate somebody's moral character. Their character precedes their lawful purchase of a firearm."

"I know, but still..."

"Consider this: when a CEO gets busted for embezzlement, he is decried as evil, corrupt. Why is this? Because he stole massive amounts of money. Does this possession of money now make me corrupt since this resource which we both possess was the reason for his crimes? Do I become equal to the criminal who breaks into and enters another man's home and kills him in cold blood solely because I possess the same apparatus he used to commit murder?"

"No, but..."

"Then it's settled. Let's talk about something else, please."

Clara spared no reply.

The waiter delivered the bill. Glenn fetched his wallet and cast a critical smile towards Clara.

"I suppose my money—owning the same means which motivated our hypothetical CEO to embezzle millions—makes me as evil, and paying for your meal must be especially dastardly."

"Alright, I get it," Clara said dryly.

"I'm just trying to point out..."

"Look, you're the one who changed the subject. Could we drop it?"

Glenn forced a nervous smile to elude embarrassment as he handed the waiter his payment. The following silence unnerved both Glenn and Andrew who felt embarrassed for his father's benefit. Remaining silent would be an admission of defeat so Glenn, as a point of pride, discussed the first topic that occurred to him.

"So, when we're done here," Glenn began, looking at Clara. "I'll drop you off, yes? And my boy and I will shop for the supplies for the barbecue tonight."

Clara nodded.

Glenn had recently received a promotion at his work and sought to celebrate the occasion by hosting a barbecue for friends, family, and neighbors with whom he was familiar. Clara, who Glenn was driving home so she could prepare for her afternoon shift, would not be free from work until seven o'clock which left Glenn and Andrew about nine hours to shop for, and prepare the necessary provisions.

Clara kissed Glenn with her open mouth before parting. Their passion was characteristic of couples newly in love, but this fact did not ease Andrew's discomfort from watching his father's tongue penetrating Clara's mouth.

"It's just you and me for the rest of the day, kiddo," Glenn said after Clara emerged from his vehicle. He patted the vacant leather passenger seat as an invitation for his son to assume it.

"First things first; we need charcoal, propane, and lighter fluid. It's been too long since I've had to fire that bad mother up."

He was referring to his prized stainless steel multi-tiered grill with supplementary stove ranges. Andrew appreciated that his father sought any excuse to use the grill as it usually entailed the presence of at least some neighborhood locals and a bit of drinking done by all which contributed to the riotous conversation over which he could not stop laughing. The privilege of his involvement in these conversations, which became increasingly vulgar and crude as the partygoers continued their drinking, felt like a rite of passage into masculinity. Men were vulgar. They were loud, gruff and often reeked of a musk of sweat, alcohol, and tobacco.

In order to feel closer to adulthood, for every teenager yearns desperately to emerge from the stifling cocoon of adolescence and take flight into the utopia of seemingly unrestrained liberty and privilege, Andrew would mutter curse words to himself, silently regarding each person and object with an appropriate expletive, and would often thief but a single can of beer to drink once his father had fallen asleep. The sour bite of the adult beverage was revolting, yet he would soldier on, devoting his focus to swallowing every mouthful of the alchemical fluid which transmutes youth into adulthood.

"Roger will be coming," Glenn said. "You know what that means."

Andrew blushed and laughed nervously.

"Yeah," he replied in order to avoid accounting for the reason of his embarrassment.

Roger was one of their neighbors whose young daughter was only one year Andrew's junior. She had not yet grown into her beauty, still shy at sixteen years of age. Her gentle demeanor, and of course her looks, suited Andrew.

"She seems like she might like you. You should ask her out."

Andrew, ashamed after recognizing his timidity, the fact of his being subdued by her mere presence in instances past, spoke no words.

"I'll let you drink tonight," Glenn went on. "Pour some beer into a plastic cup. Loosen up, get comfortable, maybe make a move."

"Okay," was all that Andrew said in response.

While his father cataloged the necessary stops, as well as the purchases to be made therein, Andrew fantasized about discovering the boldness to request Sharon's company for a walk outside. Up their avenue they would wander by starlight, maintaining a strict proximity to one another. Their conversation, which was conducted elegantly in Andrew's dream-world, would become meaningless when confronted by the significance of Sharon maneuvering her hand into his. Silence would suffice—no, silence was necessary—as their feelings bounded from imprisonment within their timidity and manifested in an amorous glance, a series of felicitous embraces, and the duet of two percussive hearts beating fervently in tempo as they explored the other's body.

Andrew's fantasy was too pure, too divine to not wish to conjure it into reality.

Tonight is the night, Andrew told himself. He was given license to consume alcohol. His father had granted him the agency to act as an adult, to enjoy the privileges that are granted by one's coming of age. Andrew was overjoyed, and his mental chambers accommodated grandiose daydreamed exhibitions of splendor, crude humor, consumption of alcohol, making a move on Sharon, enjoying her intimate company, and all the pleasantries that would follow. Tonight, he assured himself, was going to be perfect.

Glenn set to his preparations immediately after arriving home. Andrew assisted in organizing the supplies and groceries, placing them in their proper stations once they were sorted. Two hours remained until Clara would get off from work, and she would arrive shortly thereafter. The party would begin on the following hour. Both father and son had labored for nearly every minute of the hours they had to themselves to ensure that they were prepared to accommodate, serve and entertain their guests.

With close to thirty minutes remaining before Clara would arrive, Andrew went to his bathroom to prepare for the get-together and, specifically, to groom himself in hopes that he would appeal to Sharon. He combed his hair, applied deodorant to his underarms and set a bottle of cologne on the counter-top for him to administer nearer to the time at which Roger would likely arrive with his daughter. Before he exited the bathroom, he took a moment to appraise his appearance. His heart began to flutter when he began to think of Sharon; what she would say to him upon being welcomed into the house, how she would be dressed, how her hair might be styled. He hoped that she would like the way he was dressed, how his hair was styled. When he was finished, Andrew went downstairs and asked his father if he needed any further assistance.

"No, we're all set. Thanks for your help."

Glenn smiled warmly as he spoke to Andrew. He was proud of his son who was intelligent for his age, studious, well-behaved and respectful at a time during adolescence when many boys were raucous and ill-mannered.

"Okay, cool," Andrew said. "I'm going to go play games in the meantime."

"Have fun."

Glenn called out after Andrew before he reached the stairs.

"Yeah?"

"I almost forgot. Do you want to come check out my new gun?"

"Okay. Yeah."

Andrew followed his father into the guest bedroom. Glenn went into the closet to access the safe. He entered the numeric combination and turned the lock to open the door.

"Here we go," Glenn said, hoisting the handgun over his head as though it were a trophy. "This thing is a monster. I haven't shot it yet but I've seen videos. If you don't maintain proper form when you fire this and hold it steady, the recoil will send you arm flying back. I've watched some videos where the gun goes flying out of people's hands because they weren't expecting the thing to have so much power. Here, hold it." Andrew took the gun in hand and was surprised by the solid weight of the small weapon.

"Don't worry. It's not loaded."

Andrew felt powerful as he peered down the sight, acquiring a picture frame as his target.

"Boom!"

Andrew nearly dropped the gun in shock. His father laughs at him, proud of his prank, and Andrew laughed at the severity of his surprise.

"I told you it wasn't loaded. Besides, the safety is on. I saw you fumbling with the trigger."

"I know. I just wasn't...."

Glenn took the gun from Andrew's hand and switched the safety off.

"You could do some real damage with this mother."

He took aim at numerous objects while Andrew took care to remain out of the line of sight as merely looking upon his father's guns produced a double effect of awe and unease on the boy.

"I picked up a box of hollowpoints for this. Those could really mess somebody up. Once the bullet enters your body it isn't going to come out."

Glenn chuckled and continued taking aim around the room, his back turned to his son who took a cautious step backward.

"With this gun you don't need to ready the hammer. All you need to do is cock it, aim, then shoot."

Glenn turned around and aimed at the ceiling fan overhead. Andrew battled his unease, seeking to appear amused, although his teeth were clenched and his fists balled, fingers pressed into the palm. Glenn cocked the gun, then imitated the sound it made.

"Ready," Glenn said in the vocal styling of a military sergeant.

Andrew laughed.

The gun is lowered, trained on Andrew's chest. The boy remains smiling, not wishing to betray his anxiety.

"Aim."

It's not loaded, Andrew recalls his father saying. He chuckles a bit, hoping to control his fear.

Glenn's finger tenses on the trigger.

Remember, his father's voice says, calling out to him in his imagination. *It's not loaded*.

Andrew continues to smile for the final moments before Glenn's final command was muted by a deafening blast.

Clutching
Michael J Martin

It was the summer the elm bark beetles marched through the parkways of Chicago and vanquished tens of thousands of Dutch elm trees. The beetles spread a deadly fungus that the defenseless elm tried to block; it reacted by plugging its own vascular tissue, which choked the upward flow of water and minerals from its roots.

The effect of this starvation was first seen in the upper branches of the tree--midsummer, the leaves yellowed and curled, and fell to the ground. The branches died. Eventually, the roots died too, wasted by the lack of nutrients from the leaves. There was no cure once the tree was infected.

The summer's oppressive heat--the second warmest on record--together with the loss of shade, made for a comfortless season. The earth was dry and cracked, and the soil had lost its sweet summer smell. Temperatures remained high into the night and sleep was uneasy. Tempers grew short.

Carole Malloy woke with mild nausea and tended to the fussing infant. She considered the day ahead and worried it would be another day to endure, a chore to pack up the children and ride out to the south-side to see her husband's sister and her family; they were anxious to see the baby.

She moved through the morning slowly, as if stalling might postpone the trip, but it served only to delay their departure. They were late leaving, and already the sun had risen to its noonday heat against the hazy August sky. The two older children, William and Catherine, claimed the window seats, and the twins, Jack and Joan, were relegated to the inside space on the back seat bench. The infant, Theresa, sat on her mother's lap.

The expressway would carry them too far east, so Malloy took the direct route, down Cicero Avenue--from 5800 north to 8600 south entailed one hundred forty-four blocks of city driving, with a traffic light a minimum of every four blocks. The open windows collected more exhaust than the breeze they hoped for, and even before they crossed the demarcation of Madison Avenue the carload seemed spent.

Jack pushed himself off the seat and stood on the floorboard hump. He leaned over the front seat toward his mom. "Joanie's all sweaty," he said.

Mrs. Malloy looked over her shoulder at Joan. The child was splayed across the seat and her legs dangled over the bench. Her hair was damp and she drooled on her arm. "She's asleep, Jack. She's alright."

"Her underpants are showing."

Jack's mother closed her eyes for a moment and gave another, quicker look over her shoulder.

"For Chrissake," barked the boy's father. "Pull her dress down *over* her underwear."

Jack stared into his mother's neck. "I think she would cry," he said quietly.

Mrs. Malloy looked past Jack to Catherine, slumped against the car door behind her father. "Could you pull Joanie's dress down a little bit, please?"

Catherine tugged on her sister's dress and Joan awoke--startled--with a sharp cry.

"Goddamnit!" Malloy cursed over the child's wail and rolled down his window further, to invite the numbing hum of the traffic. Mrs. Malloy looked straight ahead and listened for more cries from Joan. She crossed her arms in front of the infant in her lap and held her more securely.

"Catherine, make sure your door is locked," she said.

William glared across the backseat at Catherine; he leaned over Joan and said in a low tone, "Nice going, whiz kid." The light of satisfaction in Catherine's eyes dimmed to hostility at this incursion by her brother. She aimed to shove him back, back to his side of the seat, but she caught him off guard and the butt of her hand jammed him under the nose. He screamed, "Ow-w-w!"

"Jesus Christ--that's it! William, you shout in the car again and you won't ride in the car again. Understand? Do-you-understand?"

"Yessir." William wedged himself into the deepest corner of the seat. Tears steamed in his eyes. He crossed his arms and set his mouth and stared wretchedly at Catherine. She had won this round.

"You'll have to sit down now, Jack," Mrs. Malloy said.

"But I want to watch daddy drive."

"You can watch daddy drive another time. Help mommy out and sit down on the seat and be nice to Joanie. Maybe you could hold her on your lap for me."

Jack sat on the bench and maneuvered his sister between his legs and held her loosely by locking his wrists around her waist. Malloy fired up a Lucky Strike and Mrs. Malloy thought she'd too like a cigarette--but decided it wasn't a cigarette she craved, but something to drink. She had a metallic taste in her mouth--she thought of a rusted knife--and maybe a gallon of water would wash that taste away. A picture from her childhood crossed her mind, standing out on the front lawn in her sundress, bare feet squishing in the grass, gulping from the garden hose.

Finally, the car turned off Cicero Avenue--the irrepressible sun shadowed the car like a beam. Another turn and they saw Malloy's sister Mary on the porch steps awaiting their arrival; she gave a big welcome wave when the car pulled up the small incline of the driveway. She turned and called into the house, "Walt, they're here!" and bounded down the stairs to greet the car. Her girls, high-colored and perspiring, put down their hopscotch chalk and raced over to the car to see their cousins--more, really, to see their newest cousin, the baby, Theresa.

Walt came out of the house, two beers in hand, and ambled down to the car. "Got a cold one for you, Malloy," he said. Malloy jumped out of the car, saluted Walt, and took a long swallow of his beer. He had bolstered himself for the ride with several stealth bolts of vodka, but its effect had dulled, and the noise in his head had again widened. "Nothing beats a cold beer on a hot day," he said.

Mrs. Malloy climbed out of the car with the child and bent to show her to her nieces. "She's gorgeous, Carole, absolutely adorable," Mary said, and the girls cooed after her. "C'mere, Walter, look at this beautiful little girl!"

Aunt Mary looked at Joan--beet-faced, her hair matted and damp with perspiration and still half asleep, and whispered, "Hello, darling." She took Joan's hand and said, "Why don't we all go inside where it's a little cooler and have a nice big glass of ice-cold lemonade?"

Walter and Malloy leaned against the rear fin of Malloy's Plymouth wagon and drank their beer. "How about those White Sox?" Walt asked.

"I think they're gonna do it this year," Malloy said. "It'll be the first time since the Black Sox scandal."

"And Nellie should get the MVP. The first time for an MVP with two homers!"

Jack had climbed over the bench and positioned himself in the driver's seat of his father's car. He placed both hands on the steering wheel and in his mind he made turns like his dad, hand-over-hand. Back on the straightaway, he moved his hand to the shift-lever and made believe he was moving the gears. More comfortable now, he made the throaty noises the car would make as it revved down the road.

He scooped his butt to the edge of the seat so his foot could touch the brake pedal. He saw through the windshield that Aunt Mary had stepped back out onto the porch, and she waved to him. He waved back with the two-finger farmer's wave he had seen his father give to other drivers out on the road.

Malloy finished his beer and while he awaited Walter's final few swallows he fished out a cigarette and took a couple deep drags. He considered calling to his sister, up on the porch, for a couple fresh beers, but thought better of it. He'd have to wait for Walt to finish.

Jack wasn't big enough yet to reach the deep-set gas pedal, and he knew he wasn't supposed to anyway--he had been warned several times against "flooding" the engine. He knew that his dad used his right foot for the gas and brake pedals--the left foot and the third pedal remained a mystery. He rested both feet against the third pedal and almost involuntarily pushed against it.

It was an entirely different feel than the brake! He was aware of a *give*--none of the hard resistance of the brake--more like the springiness of a rubber-band, a pedal that after a moment's stubbornness wanted to give way.

He knew it was magic, but it felt like the car was moving, rolling backwards, and he heard adult voices screaming, "Let the clutch go, Goddammit!" and "Handbrake, pull the handbrake!" but imagined they were the muffled voices of other motorists, angry that he had pulled ahead of them all.

Walter had been knocked to the pavement and his beer bottle shattered on the driveway. The moving car buckled Malloy's knees at the bumper; he spun away and charged to the driver's side door. He reached both hands in through the open window and jerked the boy away from the steering wheel. The car jumped to a stop.

Mary had rushed down the porch steps and came to Walter's side. She inspected the bruises on his hands and stood on her tiptoes to inspect the welt on his forehead. She brushed away a little blood that mixed with the sweat on his forehead. "You OK?" she asked.

"I think I'll be just fine, Nurse Nealon. Just a little bump from behind."

"That was a dandy tuck-and-roll, Sergeant Nealon."

Jack had cocooned himself against the car seat and he was crying. The rage in his father's face and the force he had used to throw him against the seat had terrified him.

Malloy, still breathing hard, reached into the car--he yanked the handbrake and ripped the keys from the ignition. He grabbed the boy with both hands and tore him from the car through the open window and set him down hard on the pavement. The boy's head had knocked against the window-frame and this momentarily stunned him out of his tears.

Mary turned from her husband, toward Jack and Malloy, piqued because the boy's crying had suddenly stopped. She watched in alarm as her brother raised his key ring over the boy's head--she opened her mouth to shout out, but there was no air in her lungs. The keys rained down on the boy's head and he cowered against the car in a new burst of crying.

Mary rushed to her brother. "Stop! Stop right now. What are you doing?" She swept the boy up, a strong arm under his rump, and carried him up the front stairs, up to the bedroom where it was cool and dark, and the fan was running. She rocked him in the rocker till the worst of his sobbing had passed.

His sobs gave way to the hiccups and sniffles, and Mary sat him down on the edge of the bed. She knelt on the floor and wiped the tears from his eyes. "Did you know you have the most beautiful blue eyes I've ever seen?" she asked.

Jack tried to smile, but in that difficult consequence of crying--when emotions are tangled anyway--or maybe it was due to his aunt's kindness, he began sobbing again.

"There, there, baby."

"I just wanted--to drive the car--like daddy," Jack managed.

"I know, baby." Aunt Mary pulled him to her and rocked him gently. She felt the boy's heat through his collared shirt.

"The car--never moved--before."

Mary ran a hand up the boy's neck and followed the swirl of his cowlick, and lightly inspected his scalp for the several slight abrasions. She found a bump on his forehead. "Did you know that I played car-driver in your grandpa's car all the time when I was your age?"

The boy shook his head.

“There wasn’t a girl in the world who could play car driver like me. Not a soul. No one could drive a car straighter, make a sharper turn or just make the car hum like I did. And I’m willing to bet anything that you are the best car driver around right now.”

Jack was in the final aftermath of his tears; each snuffle was less forceful and Mary felt his heartbeat slowing to normal. “Wait here for me a moment, sweetheart. I’ll get you a cup of water.”

Mary took a washcloth from the closet and went to the washroom down the hall and ran the cold water. She lifted her hair from her neck and tied it in a simple bun that she held with a pencil she found on the counter. She looked in the mirror and subconsciously fumbled in the drawer for the lipstick she had begun the day with. She wrung out her washcloth and filled a cup with water. She hesitated at the mirror a moment--she wondered what she could say to comfort this child.

Aunt Mary held the wet washcloth over Jack’s face, then she massaged his brow, around his ears and neck, and held it up to his nose. “Blow, baby, blow,” she said. She folded the cloth over and dabbed at the blood spots on his scalp, and offered him the water to drink.

She took the boys’ hands and looked directly into his eyes. “Sweetie, it’s important that you know even dads can be wrong. Sometimes, very very wrong.” She was uncertain how far she wanted to take this. “Do you know about forgiveness?” she asked.

Jack was holding the three middle fingers of his Aunt Mary’s hands very tightly--he was squeezing them. He shook his head *yes* to her question, and he brightened. “And I know about being brave, too,” he said.

The boy’s response hit Mary unexpectedly and tears welled in her eyes and burned down her cheeks. She brushed at her nose with her shoulder.

“OK, angel, give me just a sec. Are you ready to go back downstairs? You’re gonna be all right. You’re a big boy now.”

Hauntings
Charlie Bennett

The backlit glass-enclosed poster of the specter hung over the crowd from above the box office of the pressed-board and stone-brick building on the parkway, as the tourists milled about eating ice cream, taffy, and fudge in air-brushed t-shirts, others in various colors of Southeastern Conference schools. The apparition beckoned in a recorded voice like the disguised voices of people silhouetted to protect their identity on *20/20* or *60 Minutes*, "Welcome to the *Hauntings* ghost show. You haven't *lived* until we've scared you to *death*. Ha ha ha ha ha."

They stopped in front of the attraction. He was still wearing his coat and tie, and she her understated off-white wedding dress she'd made herself with her mother's help. They looked up at the poster and the building, the creepy voice having tickled their cerebral dark places. They enjoyed the rush of fear. In the late afternoon, they'd been married in the Smoky Mountain Wedding Chapel after checking in for a quick one at the Rocky Top Inn. It was his second marriage, her first. She was the red-headed reason for the end of his first.

"What do you think?" he asked her. "Do you want to go in there?"

"Let's see how much it is. It might be fun," she said and squeezed his hand. She carried a box of Karmel Korn in her other hand. She smelled fried food, candy and burning wood. The sweet pull of the sausages, peppers and onions from the grill of Fanny Farkle's. The night chill gave her relentless energy that affected every atom in her body. She tingled from over-stimulation. It was a crowded night on the parkway. There was some convention of religious youth in town and they ran in packs that allowed them to annoy more anonymously. They weren't obnoxious, just annoying because they were teenagers. That's hard to get around when you're that age. She understood how damned uncomfortable and unsure they all were. She'd been there not long ago herself, running at the back of packs. Still, they were a bother the way they'd stretch across the entire sidewalk and reach levels of talking that was more shouting. Things were never *ideal*, though.

"Eight fifty each. Seventeen bucks," he said holding his palms up, walking back to her from the box office.

"It's up to you. You know I really want to ride the Gatlinburg Sky Lift, the ski lift, and get our picture on it and I don't care other than that. If you want to go in there, we can. It might be fun."

"Alright, we'll do it. It's worth the adventure." He hugged her tight and turned her to the box office with him in a *Lawrence Welk Show*-esque dance move.

The young girl in the box office acted as though she couldn't have possibly been more annoyed or bored. She never said anything other than, "Here are your tickets and change, up the stairs to your right."

They were the first up the stairs and into the small room of several rows of bench seating and very false, stage-prop-ish, library walls. Fake bookshelves and books. Old wall candle lamps. A little claustrophobic and stuffy.

"Cozy," she said. "And to think of this quiet little room being up here away from all that noise and hustle-bustle down there on the street."

He squeezed her with his left arm around her upper back and left shoulder as she sat to his left, by the aisle. "I wish we could stay down here a little longer. I hate to think of going back to work."

"Let's not think of all that right now. Let's just have a good time. It's our wedding night. We don't need to talk about anything having to do with work or any of that, okay?" She put her head on his shoulder.

"You're right. I won't do that again. I promise. Fun only tonight."

A short scrawny blonde carrying a baby came through the door, a taller grisly man trailing. She looked put out and he was slightly smiling. The baby was fussing.

She leaned over to him. "Who brings a baby in here?"

"Shhhhh. It's okay. Not our worry."

"Well, the baby'll cry through the whole thing and besides, you can't bring a poor little baby into something like this. That's just ignorant."

He patted her leg. "It's okay, let's just pretend they're not here," he whispered.

"Oh my God," she now whispered, "I know that girl. She's from Irvine."

"Tell me after. Let's not talk about it now."

The couples were only sitting 10 feet apart, but they'd been talking concurrently. He figured they hadn't heard her. They were the only five people in the room. Just as the lights were dimming the blonde turned and looked at them with a devious grin. She was still looking at them in the dark. They could both see it, but the blonde didn't care.

The same deep, electronic, witness-protection voice that had lured them in came over the speaker introducing itself as their spirit host and explained how the room they sat in had been endowed with supernatural power due to the magical and mystical items furnishing it. *Material* things obtained from around the *spiritual* world. Pictures and mirrors on the wall shook. There was loud maniacal laughter as the spirit host called for spirits from the great beyond. The spectral voice asked all to hold hands to form a circle. Nobody moved but the baby began to squall. They were warned that because someone had broken the bond the spirits were angered. The baby went from squalling to screeching. There was still no movement by the patrons but knocking sounds from the walls and the fake candle lamps on the wall flickered. It was all over after several minutes and the lights came back on.

Neither of them said anything. The blonde got up holding the still-crying baby and looked back at them with a fake grin. She stretched as she neared the exit and handed the baby to the tall man. Just as the newlyweds were getting up the blonde jerked around and popped the bride's left cheek bone with a quick closed-fist punch.

"Yeah, you don't remember me, but I do you bitch," the blonde said as she took off in a run out the heavy metal door, her man already heading down the steps in front of her with the baby. The bride lay on the ground as her knees had buckled under the sucker punch. She almost lost consciousness under the weak lighting and could hear a ringing in her left ear. He suddenly blocked out the light directly over her.

"Are you okay? What the fuck was that? Can you talk?" He was panicked. He was torn between going after the blonde and going for help but could do neither as he couldn't leave his assaulted bride who was obviously rocked by the vicious punch.

"How's your neck? Did you hurt your neck when you fell?"

She struggled to speak. It had taken her breath and the ringing was still like an alarm inside her head.

"It's okay. Just catch your breath. Try to calm yourself. You're going to be okay." He gently rubbed the back of her head as he was now holding her sitting up against him as he sat on the floor by her. "You think you're going to be okay? Wow, you're swelling up around your eye already. What did you do to make her so angry that she'd do this?"

"I fucked her boyfriend in high school. What a cunt. That was so long ago. She was always a fucking criminal. Fucking skank bitch."

"Shit. You can take a punch, can't you? She knocked the hell out of you. What a fucking sucker punch. How the hell did she catch you by surprise if you had that history with her? Didn't you think she was capable of that? You said she was always a criminal? Why weren't you watching for some shit like that?"

"Hell, that was years ago in high school. What adult with a baby could still give a fuck about the high school slut fucking your boyfriend all those years ago? What kind of psychopath carries that stupid shit around their whole life? I was a slut, okay? The high school slut."

She pulled herself up slowly by one of the benches. She walked out pulling her hair down to cover the left side of her face. He walked after her as a young blushing couple came through the door and turned sideways to give them room.

He followed her down the stairs. "Come on. Let's go back to the motel and get some ice on your face."

"I'm not letting that bitch ruin my wedding night. We're going to ride the Sky Lift. Come on."

He got up beside her, gently grabbed her and spun her toward him on the sidewalk in front of *Hauntings*. "Hey, it's okay. The past is the past. Let's forget about that and I'll doctor you up back at the room after the Sky Lift, okay?"

She was crying a little and put her head to his chest. She grabbed his hand and they turned to walk down the sidewalk.

They planted in their spots and waited for the cabled chair to come from behind them with the aid of the attendant who slowed it slightly for them to take hold. It was a gentle takeoff and they put the yellow-painted metal bar down quickly, ready for takeoff up the dark mountain.

"God these things make me a nervous wreck," she said as they went over the traffic of River Road and then the Little Pigeon River. "I don't know why I love it so much. I guess from always riding it with my daddy."

"Well, this daddy will ride it with you anytime you want little darlin'. And if the Sky Lift is a rockin', don't come a knockin'." He gently rocked their chair.

"Don't you dare. I'll scream." She smacked his arm and looked back over her shoulder and down at the golden lights of Gatlinburg, just as she'd done with her daddy.

Back down at the bottom again, they decided to grab a Mountain Dew at the base of the Space Needle where they sat at an outside metal table and watched the church convention teens walk past, some wearing t-shirts they'd picked up in town as seen in shop windows that were a play on the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup logo but it said *Jesus* instead of Reese's and under that stated "My Sweet Savior."

She met eyes with a couple of girls walking by them carrying stuffed animals and smiled. "Boy, those kids look like they're havin' the time of their lives, don't they?"

"Don't I?"

"Don't you what?" she asked.

"Look like I'm havin' the time of my life?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

"Am I what?" he asked.

"Having the time of your life?"

"No, but I'm about to." He reached over and grabbed a hunk of her thigh.

Electric Avenue by Eddy Grant played inside the arcade that comprised the base room of the Space Needle. The song's synth, soaring, fading-in-and-out effects were aided by the teens making constant turnstiles of the doors, unable to stay still for a second, constantly chasing something, the unending hopeless search of youth who still believed in magic.

"God, look at them," she said. "They have so much energy, and hope. They have no idea, do they?"

"No idea," he said and reached over and gently ran his finger over the puffed flesh under her left eye.

Back at the room he grabbed the plastic ice bucket and walked down the hall to the vending area. He came back still smelling the ubiquitous chlorine odor and ran a washcloth under water before wrapping it around several pieces of ice. He handed it to her.

"Here, Rock. Put this on your eye."

"Thanks. I can't believe I'm going to have to go back to work looking like this. They'll think you're beating me already."

"Don't say that," he said. "I've already thought that. I'm going to be Public Enemy Number One already."

"I'll just tell them I got into it with a girl down here. They know I don't take any shit."

He turned the television on. MTV. A video by The Pet Shop Boys was on. He turned the volume down low and got in bed next to her. She was taking off her panties.

She woke in a panic. The room was freezing. He heard her stir.

"What is it? What's wrong?" He sat up suddenly next to her.

"I swear I just heard a scream and then a shot," she said. "I swear it was real. It wasn't a dream."

"Well, just lie back down. We'll just stay right here in the dark and listen."

They relaxed back on the bed together. A Prince video played on the television.

"I wish he'd make another *Purple Rain*," he said.

"Shhhhhhhh. I want to listen."

He turned over and looked toward the window where a little light came in from the security lights. He saw a shadow block the light for an instant. Someone had walked by the room. He heard something. Was their door knob being turned? Then nothing. Must have been his imagination.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

"Hear what?"

"I think somebody just tried to get in our room," she said in a strained whisper.

"No, I don't think so. Wait. I'll sneak over and look out the peephole," he said.

He worked himself out of bed as quietly as he could. He tiptoed over to the door, still nude. He looked out the peephole and saw nothing but morphed cars in the parking lot and the sprayed streaking security lights.

There was a loud knock on the wall behind their bed. She jumped up out of bed and ran to him. Their naked bodies stayed pressed together for some time as she clung to him and they breathed quietly in the dark. He eventually became aroused and then reached down between her legs and began rubbing her and they forgot about the noises.

He awoke to Sting's *Fortress Around Your Heart* video. He rolled over with eyes closed and she didn't seem to be there. She wasn't. He hadn't heard her get up to go to the bathroom. There was no light from the bathroom; only the flickering light from the television. It wasn't dawn yet. He jumped out of bed while calling for her and stepped to the bathroom. She was gone. Where the hell would she have gone without telling him? The door opened. She was carrying the ice bucket.

"Needed more ice. Need a Bloody Mary. My head's throbbing. I didn't want to wake you. Sorry if I did."

"Hell, I just woke up and was starting to think you'd left me already."

"There's police out in front of the place. Several marked cars and some unmarked ones. Reckon that has anything to do with what I thought I heard earlier?"

"Maybe you aren't *as* crazy as thought," he said, changing his voice.

"I'm crazier than hell but I honestly didn't know if I'd dreamed it or not."

He grabbed her and turned her around on the bed. "You didn't dream *this*, did you?"

When they were finished, after catching his breath, he said, "I say we spend all day today looking for that blonde and that animal she was with. I can fix her good. And him too. They won't be bothering you again. I'm not going to let her do that to you and get away with it."

"What would you do for me?" she asked.

"You name it," he said and ran his fingernails down her thigh.

"Well, I can think of a lot of things. Be careful with what you promise."

"Only say the word and I shall be healed by doing it."

She came rushing through the door with no groceries in her hand. She frantically slid into her seat and hit him on the arm. "Quick, take the bypass to Pigeon Forge. Move. Move. Move. We gotta get out of here. Now!"

He put the car in reverse, backed out and quickly got out of the lot and onto the parkway.

"What the hell did you do? Did you rob the place?"

"No. I may have killed her. That bitch from last night. I bashed her over the head with a jar of peanut butter. I broke the fucking jar on her head. She dropped like she'd been shot. I may have killed her."

"What about her baby and that guy?" He had them headed to the bypass but wasn't driving too much over the speed limit in order to avoid attention.

"I don't know. I didn't see them. I think she was in there alone. They must have been in the car. You didn't see them?"

"No, I wasn't looking, but no."

"I told you I'd take care of her," she said looking out the back window of the car. "He must have been parked on the other side of the store. I don't think anybody saw us. They don't know what kind of car to look for. She didn't even know it was me anyway. She never saw me. I snuck up on her from behind and just bashed her head. She fell straight forward into the shelf in front of her. I think she was out cold." She was breathing hard from the excitement. She caught her breath. "She never saw me. And the people working were kinda blocked from us and they were busy doing something behind the register. I don't think they really got much of a look at me after they heard her fall and hit the shelf. I got out of there pretty quickly but didn't run until I got through the door. God, I hope they don't have good surveillance cameras."

"You're sure she never saw you in the store at all?"

"No. I saw her right away and grabbed the first thing I saw to hit her with, snuck up behind her and lit her ass up."

"Hell, she'll have the law looking for us."

"She won't do it. She and the guy she was with probably have bench warrants out on them now for something or other. They don't want any law enforcement involvement."

"If she was hurt, I mean *really* hurt, or worse, there won't be any choice about getting law enforcement involved. They'll *be* involved."

She looked over at him. "For better or worse, you said."

"Yeah, I did say it," he said. "What brand did you use?"

"What brand?"

"Yeah, of peanut butter, what brand?"

"I don't know. Some generic extra crunchy. Extra crunchy euthanasia. Her ignorant head didn't deserve Jif. I bet she has glass dug down in her scalp."

"I hope you never get that mad at me."

"You won't give me a reason will ya?"

He shook his head and smiled.

"But she had it coming after what she did to me at the spook show. You said it yourself."

"Yeah, she had it coming," he said and reached over to hold her hand. He looked into the deep woods all around them as they drove down the bypass toward Pigeon Forge. He wished they'd gone on to the national park as they'd planned but they'd be too conspicuous if somebody was looking for them. Their car would be easy to spot at trailheads or at picnic areas if there'd been an outside surveillance camera back at the store. They could hide out in the mess of Pigeon Forge he thought and then take their chances on getting back to their room in Gatlinburg after the sun went down, but while traffic was still heavy enough. There was something about the old-growth forest that made the thought of the future bearable for him as it made the present seem like it would be of

value in time, when it was the past, and thus, essentially the present was already of value if you looked at it like that. This circular reasoning kept him going.

"Are you all right?" He squeezed her hand.

"Yeah, I just don't like having to get violent like that," she said.

He knew he'd made a mess of his life by leaving his first wife and marrying this one, but it was as though this course he'd taken was as inescapable as time. He found a rock station on the radio and turned up Fleetwood Mac.

"I want to stop at one of the candy stores and get some more of that peanut butter fudge," she yelled over the music. "Then maybe we could go find a good parking place to back into. If they didn't get the car on outside surveillance camera, which I bet that pitiful little old place doesn't even have one outside, nobody knows what we're driving if they do start looking for us. She doesn't know *your* name."

"Good thinking. Maybe we could just back into some spot at the side of a building down there on a side street. You know, that Elvis museum is in Pigeon Forge. If I have to I'll put it on the credit card."

"All right," she said. "I'll give you the Elvis museum if you'll promise to look for a funhouse or something we could maybe fool around in. I've always wanted to do that."

"I love hearing about these new things you want to try. I'm always anxious to hear what's next. Keep 'em coming."

"I always have," she said.

He looked over and she was smiling but looking straight ahead. She wasn't joking. He felt beyond lonely. But only for a few minutes.

Opus 1
André Hampshire Moreira

Once upon a time I had a naïve view of reality that had shaped much of my attitude toward life and the quality of the relationships which I had formed. This original disposition, which had inevitably been broken by experience, began to be re-born, though now made stronger by necessity and forged not by naivety, but by choice.

Though I had not yet finished college, my process of disillusionment began by the end of my junior year, which served as a preface to the ugly and cynical reality that was to come. The catalyst of this process was a girl, Kara, whom I had met in a chemistry class. She thought very little of herself then, and I suspect that she still does. Through the many layers of make-up that she so desperately applied, not without skill, almost too artistically, suggesting an obsessive need for the illusion of perfection so as to veil her true self, I found her beautiful and loved her still.

Nearly six months passed before our fairy-tale romance began to collapse, the fall of which also brought down this holy fool. I had placed my faith in her as I had with all others, incapable of conceiving any of their actions carried with malice or spite. I had known her to be characteristically different from the women of my past. Over time her secrets came slowly pouring out, one by one, like bullets from a barrel of a gun, each challenging my belief that all men can better themselves. Yet I remained hopeful and began to pity her even more. It's now unclear to me whether I loved her or loved to pity her, but what I do know is that I loved having her in my life. And so for her sake, and for my own, for I promised her that she could place her trust in me, and I'd like to keep that aspect of myself true, I'll reveal only one necessary element of this story that I imagine she would wish to be burned to ashes and spread out by the wind.

Love has a tendency of making us want to reveal our most shameful aspects, perhaps for the sake of fairness, knowing that the truth may go against our own interests. Even now, more than four years past, I remember that night as if it had just happened, for never, I suspect, has she ever made herself so vulnerable. She had just parked her car outside of the apartment complex in which I stayed at the time. Before having the chance to open the car door she told me that there was something she needed to say. Of all the possibilities never did I imagine that the person I thought I knew had been all this time fucking other men for money.

She later confessed that she had expected anger as my reaction – but how could I have been angry with someone who was clearly so broken so as to turn herself into an object for something so tenuous as materialism. I got out of the car and as she began to cry – the tears, the pain, all washing away the make-up behind which she had so long concealed herself – I grabbed hold of her and held her more tightly and closely than I have anyone since. I pitied her then more than ever.

I had hoped that this moment would only have increased our intimacy and have made her more open to the world, not so afraid to come out into the light. I now realize that I failed her. I believe that her own recognition of our intimacy made her only more afraid, driving her back to obscurity and depravity. It wasn't long after that night that her words, like a sharpened blade made ready with malice, came to me through a text message. Pain is always made worse when it comes from those we trust most. I was left with her parting words that she had chosen to return to her previous relationship, not because he made her happier but because from him she had a better guarantee of a stable future, and that I would be more suitable to the parenthetical part of the man with whom she'd later have an affair. She went on to add, merely out of spite, that our last night

together as lovers had not been an enjoyable experience and that my physique was not suitable to her taste.

I have now come to understand that the course of events which precipitated toward the end of my relationship with Kara came from someone not incapable of love, but from someone who fears it. Of course, because of my subjective position I could not have understood this fear until I myself had been infected by it. Like a disease, slowly taking root and metastasizing within my mind I, too, became afraid. It is not without reason that we mistakenly resolve to keep ourselves walled. The magnitude of the pain we feel as a result of some tragedy may be so great so as to convince us that we are better off dispassionate and disconnected. I hope that someday Kara comes to the same conclusion that I have come to: to tear down this wall which just as equally imprisons us.

Familiar Protectors
Andrea Cox Christen

My grandmother's skin reminds me of the Thanksgiving costumes we Indians made in my second grade class. Mrs. Johnson showed us how to take grocery bags and crinkle them up as small as we could. After spraying them with water, we smoothed them out and started again. Later we drew on them with crayons to make the paper look like it had symbols on it. Unlike leather, my skirt tore easily and I was the only Indian at the Thanksgiving feast that had masking tape along the seams of her vest and skirt. Masking tape won't heal my grandma's skin. Sores cover her arms from small scratches that on me would heal, but on her small, frail arms become large scabs. Her skin is polka-dotted with these run-ins with table corners and door frames. She says her skin is no longer able to heal as fast and has become so thin that anything causes it to shred, even a scratch from Chefangus, her kitten.

Actually the kitten isn't hers at all. It's mine. And she doesn't call him Chefangus but rather Tufty. I picked the kitten up one day from a girl giving kittens away on the street. I couldn't bear to see them sitting in the cardboard box in the hot sun so Anna and I took one home. I thought I could convince my dad to let me keep it, but I was wrong. He said that we didn't want Whiskers to be jealous. That's why Grandma got to have him. She needed a kitten to keep her company when Grandpa was in the field they said. Grandma sent me pictures of him and would call to tell me how he was doing, but it wasn't the same as having a furry little hairball suck on my hair as I fell asleep. He'd also chew on my fingers as if they were teats and I would laugh while running my fingers through the soft hair on his belly. Mom said I shouldn't let him, that it would ruin my nails, but I did it anyway.

She's always worrying about fingernails. Sitting in church listening to the sermon, Mom takes my hand into hers and traces all of the lines on it, my scars from falling while chasing my brother, cat scratches and little marks that must have just appeared because I don't remember where they came from. She tests my nails' strength by bending them slightly and pushing down the cuticles. "Look at the difference in your hand and mine," I say. My fingers are shorter and chubbier than her long graceful ones, and my nails are brittle and chipped while her nails show all of the attention she gives them. Every night while Jared, Dad and I are watching TV, Mom sits at the counter and files them to a perfectly round tip. On Sunday nights she applies nail polish. She paints them with soft, even strokes, spreading the color to all parts of her nail. Though she doesn't always wear it. Mom says her nails also need to breath and so she will not apply nail polish every third week. I think she hasn't decided which is more beautiful, natural or her favorite color, pearl pink, so she rotates.

The attention she gives her nails is strange because she is mostly one of those all-natural types. Her hair never has hair spray in it and basically frames her face anyway it likes. Her hair is much darker than mine with a slight wave that allows her to let it flow around her face. I used to wish I looked more like her so people in grocery stores wouldn't ask if I was her daughter's friend when I was with my darker cousin, but not now. Maybe when I'm older and she lets me wear makeup like she does I will look more similar, but I don't really want to wear all that girly stuff. Not that she wears a lot. She has a lot of natural beauty. She only wears mascara and lipstick and occasionally blush, though she has tubes of foundation sitting in the beauty chest. I sometimes use them as paint when she isn't around. They have a heavy perfume smell that I don't like, but it goes away eventually once I've spread them on the paper. Maybe the scent is the reason she never used much out of the tubes.

She says that perfume gives her headaches. So does any music I like, riding in the back seat of the car, and being hungry. When she makes me mad I like to imagine driving around in a car with her (if she ever lets me get my license), blasting the band Live on the CD player and never stopping

to eat, with her confined to the backseat. "Welcome to Headache Hell, Mom," I'd say as I rolled down the passenger's seat window, while singing "Lightning Crashes" at the top of my lungs and watching her in the rear mirror as she turned that sick, ashen gray color. Well, that's what I used to think I would do to her. Now I don't get mad at her that much. She is too busy to bug me about picking up my stuff or to ask me how my day was and say things like, "Anna who?" as if she doesn't know my best friend's last name.

Now she is always reading something, or talking to someone on the phone who might have an insight into a new cure, or she's in my old bedroom. I have been moved up to the smaller room on the second floor because my older one is bigger and on the main level so it is easier for the machines, the nurse, and though it has never been said I know it was taken into consideration, any emergency personnel to get to when my grandmother gets worse.

Grandma didn't bring Chefangus when she came. She said that she gave him to her neighbor down the road, Pearl, but I don't think she did. She hadn't sent me a picture of him in a very long time, and Chefangus never called anymore to "talk" like he used to before Grandpa died. Mom said that Grandma was too busy for a cat, trying to figure out the will and what to do with everything in Grandpa's garage, but I still don't believe her. I think that Grandpa ran Chefangus over with the truck. That's what happened when Poncho disappeared.

When I asked where the dog was, Grandma told me that he had run away. I asked her why he would do that when their place was the one house that fed him and she said that she figured he had found a nice mommy dog and family somewhere to take care of him. The way she talked about Poncho's leaving made it sound like he had gone to a travel agent or something instead of wandering down the road. She knew everyone that lived in a fifteen mile radius of the ranch, so how would a family adopt Poncho without her hearing about it? Grandpa cleared the matter up for me.

"He just got in my way one too many times. Besides, that damn dog was jumping on Ma too much. Don't look at me that way, Rosebud; it's just a dog," he said as he ruffled my hair and headed off to the backroom.

I always wondered if Grandpa planned to kill Poncho or if it just happened, and then he thought up the reasons he should have gotten rid of the dog. I don't like to think that he would have actually gotten up one morning and said, "Ma, I'm going to run over the dog. Are we having mush again for breakfast?" before heading out to check on the cows, but it's possible. I was in the truck once when he rammed into a cow that wasn't moving fast enough for him. My cousins even say they were riding with him once when he drove right over a cow that had fallen down. Maybe they were lying, but now that Grandpa's dead, they still tell that story, and I can't believe they'd lie about a dead man.

After Grandpa's heart attack, I thought a lot about Poncho and how in heaven Grandpa would have to explain things to him. "You just didn't listen and you bit the kids and you were getting old," he could tell him.

Poncho might understand. Maybe Poncho would look at him with his one blue and one dark eye and just wag his tail. Maybe Poncho would bite him and say, "Same with you, old man," like Grandma used to tell him.

When Poncho was gone, I feared that Grandpa would be next. I think that in my family, everyone has a familiar. Without his dog to go with him to the pastures, he was unprotected against all of the malevolent winds and weeds. Poncho wasn't there to bark and scare them away, and Grandpa was defenseless against what he could not see. Mom says this is a ridiculous idea and that I've been reading too many fantasy books. She thinks she knows everything about me because she's my mom and teaches my grade too. Well, I've certainly read a lot, but I don't think it's too many. There isn't such a thing as too many when it comes to me and books, just like Mom and plants. The fantasy section in my school's library is next to the pillow pile and I can go there after school and curl up in the soft pile of plushness, hardly having to move to get a book, that is until Mrs. Walton

says I have to go home or else be locked in the elementary school all night.

No one else had even thought about us having protective animals, I think, until I told Mom, except maybe Grandma. She was always worried about Grandpa when he went for a drive, not saying it was because he was now unprotected, but it must have been the reason. What else explains her whispered prayers at night about Chefangus' safety? Does she know that I have heard her whisper to herself about needing protection?

She never talks that way in front of adults. When the three of us are in Grandma's room, she'll ask Mom about school and how her fourth graders are and if Justin has figured out how to do long multiplication and show interest in whatever Mom says. They'll talk about things like that as if nothing has changed but that alone proves it has. Whenever Grandma and Grandpa visited and Mom talked about school, Grandma always said something like, "Oh, Karen, you and your teaching," and that would be the end of the conversation. Now she seems as interested as she was in how the bailer worked when Grandpa bought one and how many calves would be sold each year. But only when Mom is around.

When Mom and Dad aren't home yet, Grandma and I talk. She'll talk about how she and Grandpa met, their wedding that she didn't get to wear a wedding dress to, how handsome Grandpa was. How lonely she was when Grandpa went to war and she was all alone, working as a telephone operator. Grandma brought one photograph album with her from the ranch, and we flip through it looking at the black and white pictures. My favorite picture is the one of her and Grandpa and a friend of theirs sitting around a campfire. Grandma looks young, her round face smiling as she leans toward the fire and my grandpa, her feet towards the flames, showing off her shoes and bobby socks. She tells me how when she first met Grandpa he was chewing on a raw piece of deer meat to impress her. She tells me that he was far too old for her to date so she waited two years to go out with him.

The story that hurts the most to hear is about the baby kittens that lived in the barn. The barn cats had batches and batches of kittens, and when there were too many Grandpa would take them away. The mothers must have known that this happened. Grandma says that once my uncle wanted to play with one, but the mother cat didn't want him to. She held the kitten in her mouth to protect it from him but he kept pulling and pulling, so hard that the little kitten was ripped in half. Grandma found a bloody kitten and a mewling mother cat at her feet. Grandma says that she tried to take the kitten away from the mother so she wouldn't have to deal with the pain, but the mother wouldn't let her touch them. I think of the mother cat as I watch my mom take care of Grandma.

Grandma only tells stories when she is feeling optimistic and she doesn't have a chemo treatment the next day. If she does, I don't like to talk to her. When she talks to me on those days, it is about things no one except me should hear. She tells me about what she thinks it is like to die, about how much she misses Grandpa. Chemo hurts, she says, but when Mom talks to her about it she doesn't say a thing. I hate her descriptions of how empty the house at the ranch looked when she left, but its better hearing about this than what she says in her sleep.

I have watched her. It isn't spying, I'm not supposed to do that anymore, but I was in my old room trying to find one of my chalk pencils and I just stayed. Then I started to come more often. When she falls asleep, she looks so deflated and taken over, as if the cancer has already spread throughout her body and only needs another day to choke her. She needs someone to watch her, to protect her then. The cancer doesn't even allow her a peaceful sleep. Instead, she tosses and turns and mutters. "Help me. I need to get it down from the shelf. He won't come back if I don't feed him. Come back! Come back! Don't leave me!" She twitches in the sheets with tears beginning to seep down the valleys in her face. The fear in her voice scares me and I find myself running and hiding in my upstairs room, deep in the dark tent of my covers.

This nonsense sleep talk is worse than what we talk about when Mom is gone because she talks to people who aren't there and never could be. Sometimes she talks to Grandpa as if he is in

the room. "Well, what did you do with Poncho's body?" I heard her say once before I walked in. She was asleep in the bed, her head tilted up on the pillow, her eyes closed. I shook her awake right away.

When she knows I'm there, she explains how she will leave the world and what I should expect so I will not be afraid. She never mutters but talks matter-of-factly about the funeral and wake after it. She tells me what pantsuit she would like to be buried in, because she doesn't like dresses, and who should be the pallbearers. If Mom walks into the room during one of our death conversations, Grandma will suddenly start talking to me about my day at school and not ask her, as she does me, if she believes that we will still have a physical body after death or if we will all be ghostly souls.

In return, Mom doesn't tell Grandma about her research. She doesn't explain that she has been on the Internet, in the library, at the hospital, and on the phone with different doctors asking them about melanoma, chemotherapy, radiation, bee sting cures. Grandma thinks that the reason she is always tired and scattered is because of the extra classes she is taking. Mom hasn't told her that they are not classes for teaching credits but rather classes titled, "When Someone You Love Is Dying," "Dealing with Grief," and "Praying through Pain." I suppose that she thinks Grandma wouldn't be interested in these things since Grandma has now become interested in the fourth grade's star-gazing projects, classroom discipline and how many papers Mom has to correct.

When I get tired of listening to them talk, I play with Whiskers. Maybe it is good that Grandma didn't bring Chefangus along. The two cats couldn't get along. Whenever Chefangus was in the same room with Whiskers the few days I had him, we'd find the kitten at the top of the curtains mewling in fright. Whiskers would give a look of disdain and stalk out of the room with her tail held straight up, showing us all what she thought of the black fur-ball that everyone else found so charming. She didn't like something taking her place that was so much cuter and softer. Maybe that is why Whiskers gained so much weight and suddenly has extra flabs of skin, causing her to waddle when she walked. Maybe she was trying to make herself beautiful to us like Chefangus was. Mom put her on a diet, yet she still has extra skin hanging from her ribs. She looks like she has an udder even though she is a cat. I still love her, though.

Whiskers is the only one in the house anymore who likes to lie in the sun and doze off. We sleep peacefully, without fitful dreams. Sometimes if I lie on my stomach, she will sleep on my back so I have a purring heating pad between my shoulder blades. She has done this since I picked her out of the jumble of Siamese kittens playing in the basement of one of Grandma's neighbors. We had to get a Siamese because, until Chefangus, all cats Mom and Grandma had were. Dad says that Siamese are very aloof but Mom says they have pride and he has never let one choose to come sleep on his back like I do. She likes how I let Whiskers play with me. Mom used to lie next to me in the sun, playing with my hair and petting Whiskers, the three women of the house she called us, but now with four females she just creeps past us, afraid to wake me up.

I think she is afraid to wake me up lots. She didn't tell me that she was taking Whiskers to the vet early this morning until they got back and I noticed that Whiskers didn't want to move. When I asked Mom, she said that the vet had done some tests on Whiskers and that I should be careful with her. She says Jared and I aren't allowed to roughhouse with her anymore, and she has to stay in the downstairs, near her food and kitty box. Mom says that the vet will take care of everything, but Anna's cat never came back from there. Maybe because Whiskers came back she is better than Anna's Oreo was and won't die, leaving me too.

I go downstairs and curl up around Whiskers, protecting my cat from the cobwebs and spiders that love the cement floor.

"Don't worry Whiskers," I whisper in her pointed ear. "I won't let you be alone. I'll stay with you always so that when you sleep you'll know I am here."

As I pet her softly on her head and under her chin, she begins to purr. I hold her close to my

chest, trying to keep her warm in the underground dampness. Cats don't mutter and toss in their sleep. Her eyes slowly shut yet she still purrs and I don't leave to go upstairs until I know that she is in such a deep sleep she won't hear me move.

Green is the Color of Love
Brian Michael Barbeito

Emerald.

That was the hue. It was on the twenty-first story where I stared out into the sky. The other souls were put down to slumber. I thought for a second about how they call each level a story, and then, thinking that each floor is a sort of tale, decided that I liked the designation 'story.' I would have liked for the night to be feral with a rain that came sideways across the glass. Or silent and humid looking as in the middle of a sacrosanct July night. But it was overcast and a bit noisy, which was regular, which was prosaic.

Which was the world more often than not.

There was the emerald, though. The bric-a-brac and kitsch builders had made these lights. But, like the glow lights in the circus when I was a kid, or like the plastic bottles of sun tan lotion in the sub-tropical corner shops by piers, I loved them. It was like the lights, which sometimes blinked, held some secret. I sat and watched and waited. Sometimes I glanced the other way, to the left, and looked at the big electrical wheel in the sky. That is more literary, more cinematic, and more mythical as the wheel could and surely did symbolize everything from fortune to kismet and karma and the dharma and back again.

But I preferred the emerald.

There would be a long silence and then the cold air return system of the building would click on a breeze would suddenly begin to pump from a vent in the wall. This was loud in the daylight hours, but during the witching hour, since it erupted out of quietude, the return was a startling phenomenon. People would rouse and then grouse and go back to their dreams. I had the thought that the building was alive and I loved this notion. Unlike a dark or dreaded thing, I was enthralled and this breath, which was the true meaning of spirit, that the building let out, was akin to an invitation to the unknown, to some Gnostic or esoteric mystery and 'good' madness.

Lost in hours, the sun finally began to announce itself on the skyline. There was a man each morning that rolled up his pants and hopped unceremoniously into a pond by the bottom of the emerald lights. It was a wishing pond. He walked slowly and deliberately whilst picking up the change that others had thrown in the water. When he had gotten enough he went out, put his socks and shoes back on. He had stolen other peoples' wishes. Like a drop of paint joining the canvas of the larger rendering, he disappeared into the morning crowd.

It was always about then that the emerald lights, the color of the heart chakra, went off.

Green is the color of love, they say.

It was about then that I began my day. I would mosey through the town to this or that, and end up holding doors, or letting others in line. I would help people that needed it, even in small ways. My friend was more ambitious, secular, and worldly. She could hardly stand it at times.

Lose the brotherhood of man habit, she would caution, it only holds us up.

But I found it hard. It was taxing to join the world. I lacked the thirst for success and would probably never get ahead.

But I liked the lights. I thought sometimes in the day how they would come in the night again. They were a beacon or a shield against the lurid gray of thought itself.

They were something.

And if not love, at least they were the color of such.

Empathy: The Physician's 'It' Factor
Mirissa D. Price

It is here

I see it everywhere: walking down the street, its fingers nestled in the open spaces of a loved one's hand; all by itself, curled up under the sterile white covers of a hospital bed.

I see it everywhere, not because it's spreading like a contagion, not because it's shared like a delectable recipe, but because it has been there, always.

It starts with the first "Hello"

"He's a bit confused and dozing in and out, but get what you can from him," my preceptor gently nudged, leading me to Mr. Madina's room. "I got a bit of his history from the chart, but let's see what he tells you."

Unsure about the situation myself, I took a few slow steps towards Mr. Madina's doorway.

"Go on in," my preceptor encouraged, nodding 'hello' to the elderly man who guarded the threshold, his chapter book in hand.

"I want you out!" Out of the shadows of the windowsill, a young, vociferous woman emerged, arms crossed. "This is not the time!"

"Ma'am, I'm..." I began, cut off by her insistence.

"This is not the time! We need to see the doctors, he has to get down to his scan, I need to talk to his father..." Her anxiety was palpable, her voice projected enough to awaken Mr. Madina's jaundiced eyes.

"Miss," my preceptor interceded, "Mr. Madina was so kind as to offer to speak with a first year medical student. It will only take ten minutes."

The conflict ongoing, I walked closer to my patient. In his eyes, I could see exhaustion, hepatic encephalopathy overtaking his body. In his chest, I could see pain, his yellowed skin sinking into his lanky, skeletal frame. "Good morning," I began, introducing myself and my task. "I'm Stephanie Sosa."

"I'm," Mr. Madina whispered, his voice raspy and winded, "I'm sorry. I'm confused sometimes."

And with that, our journey began, Mr. Madina and me hobbling through his story. Shadows moved behind me. Wheels squeaked and shoes shuffled in and out of the room. I think someone began translating in Haitian behind the next door curtain. Honestly, I wouldn't know. I was too captivated by Mr. Madina's eyes, too drawn into his muted ramblings to focus anywhere but in that present moment. What did he consider worthwhile enough to mumble through his fragile body? What stories were keeping him awake in that ninth and tenth minute of the interview against everyone's expectations?

"I think you're done." The woman had returned, her frustration down from a volcanic eruption to a steady steam. Still, it was enough to break our connection. "Sam, honey, the doctors are coming."

"But you're..." Mr. Madina, Sam, looked at me with authentic confusion. White coat, pen and legal pad, doctor's bag. "Aren't you a doctor?"

It's a fake!

I sat in my dress pants and white coat on the floor of my medical school dorm room. Outside, the 5 p.m. sun was playing peek-a-boo with the gray storm clouds. *Getting ready for bed*, I thought of the sky. *How lucky.*

Exhaustion weighed down my shoulders to a slump. I had been in the hospital since 8 a.m. I had been "on" for a full day. In short, modules on acute inflammation and protein metabolism did not register as a fun or relaxing evening in my mind.

"Let's see..." Talking to myself, I gazed around the room. What could I do? Rephrase: What do I *need* to do before I study? Procrastination had the best of me as I reached to empty my black doctor's bag. "Ha! A doctor," I laughed, shrugging off Mr. Madina's honest mistake in the hospital.

Still talking to myself, I began to unpack. A stethoscope and otoscope poured out from my black bag first, followed by tissues – a lot of tissues – an apple, and a hairbrush. An eye chart and pen light clung to the bottom of the bag with the rest of the equipment neatly secured in pockets.

A doctor?! Is that what I look like?

I just couldn't sit still, my exhausted fidgeting wavering between nervous cracking of my joints and anxiously biting my cheeks. How could he think I was a doctor? Me, a four-week-old medical student. I didn't even know what hepatic encephalopathy was; I had to ask a confused man how he contracted Hepatitis C – and believe him, because what did I know – and then hope he maybe could explain to me how that related to being jaundice and showing up with his mental state in a hospital bed. I had to push him to define the uses of his medications, that is, if he could even remember the medicines he was on.

What was he thinking?

There's this thing we all go through in medical school. It's called imposter syndrome. Basically, it's that place of dressing up in mommy's heels and pretending to be grown up. Except, our heels are stethoscopes. Our pretend is a real patient, a real person's life. Mr. Madina had thrown me straight into that condition, my cheeks blushing even in the privacy of my tiny room for lack of an answer to his question.

I can't say I'm a doctor. He knew I was a new student.

The scenario of me laughing and anxiously backing out of the room replayed ceaselessly in my mind.

What kind of a doctor has a dedicated tissue pocket in her black bag?!

You could call it a pity party, attendance of one on the hardwood floor of a 150-square-foot-room. The intoxication of choice: exhaustion.

“When should I have told him I’m in *dental* school?”

It isn’t right

A week went by, Mr. Madina still in my mind. But that memory, the awkwardness of being his “fake doctor” had started to slip away. Stacks of pathology and immunology notecards will do that to you.

“Should we go around the table and check in?” Dr. Sampson asked, beginning our weekly reflection session. “How about we start with you?” He nodded towards Ben on the opposite side of the conference table, giving me time to think.

“Well, the past couple of weeks have been good, but stressful,” Ben began, his words clearly wavering in confusion. Being first, Ben had the delightful challenge of taking the temperature of the room, deciding whether it was a day for exhausted honesty or excited optimism about our busy medical school lives. “I really had a hard time...”

He decided. Emptying his frustrations about his preceptor’s constant intrusions, he chose the former – exhausted honesty. Supposedly, whenever Ben would start the physical exam, his preceptor would step in and do the maneuvers for him. At least that’s what I understood from the bits and pieces I heard. In all honesty, I was too preoccupied with my own thoughts to pay attention.

“That must make it difficult to learn,” I announced in response to Ben’s comments.

Where did that come from?! Stop talking! I scolded internally.

“Yeah, actually,” Ben replied, nodding his head as he absorbed my words.

“Have you thought about mentioning this to your preceptor?” I asked, continuing to talk about something to which I barely paid attention. I did that sometimes: listened to things with a distracted mind and proceeded to participate anyways. Somehow, what emerged from a lack of consciousness usually made sense.

“I don’t know.” Ben looked into his lap, unsure of anything but his desire to step out of the limelight. It was 5:30 p.m., and Ben’s yawn into his elbow projected all of our exhaustion. “I’ll have to think about it,” he continued, giving the signal to move on to the next student.

We continued like this, checking in around the table. One positive, one major frustration, one shrug to pass the torch.

"I'm afraid," Joe contributed. "I think I like dermatology!" His parents were dermatologists, so the idea of following in their path seemed too expected for Joe. "Besides, Sarah has rheumatology cornered."

"I'm feeling my proximal interphalangeal joints as you speak," Sarah chuckled, her voice deep with ecstasy as she flexed and extended her second digit.

"I know you are," Joe answered back, his torso leaning across the table with intensity.

"Stephanie, what about you?" Dr. Sampson asked in my direction, refocusing the group. "Do you want to check in?"

Is "no" an option, I thought, trying to un-muddle my confusion about how I was feeling. There was school – there's always school. Then there was sleep – I was getting more of that!

"I had this patient," I began looking straight into Ben's eyes for some peer support. "He had hepatic encephalopathy."

Why did I say that? Retreat! Retreat!

Sirens sounded in my mind as I landed on the one topic I wanted to avoid. It was a problem, perfect for reflection, but I didn't yet have the solution. And do you know how hard it is to avoid discussion when you are clearly unsettled?

Why did I make this choice?

My fingers tightly clenched one another as my vulnerability crouched behind a smile. "I'm trying to understand," I began, searching for words. "This man with hepatic encephalopathy," I began again, still unsure of where to proceed. "I'm confused..."

"Hepatic encephalopathy will do that to you!" Dr. Sampson intervened, lightening the room. Of course, he and I were the only two to laugh, him for the nerdy quip and generous gesture of easing my anxiety, me for the nerdy quip, as well, and the desire to find a relaxing distraction. In a room full of nascent medical and dental students – one in the same for the first academic year – a medical joke usually goes unrecognized.

Well, that puts things into perspective, I thought, staring at a room of not-yet-doctors who didn't even grasp Dr. Sampson's humor.

"You see, I had this patient," I began again, open to the uncertainty of what I would say, "who thought I was a doctor."

"You didn't introduce yourself as one?"

"No, of course not!" I answered Dr. Sampson with a giggle. "But he was having trouble staying present and focused. He was very confused, so he must not have remembered or understood my introduction."

"Why was this difficult?" Ben asked, searching for his chance to return some empathy.

"I don't know what I can do for these patients. Sometimes, I feel like I am doing more harm than good." Mr. Madina strained in pain when I reached towards his back with my stethoscope. He squinted with discomfort as he fought to stay awake in my presence. "Maybe he didn't know what he agreed to. I think the time to sleep or be with family mattered more than giving a confused history."

"You have to learn somehow."

"And these patients agree before we come to their rooms."

With all the support coming from around the table, I nodded in agreement – my sign to pass the focus to the next student.

They aren't going to get it, I thought. was playing doctor. If Mr. Madina had a crackle in his lung, maybe, maybe I would have heard it, but anything else and I would have been at a loss. What good did my pretend lung auscultation do for this man?

You're not giving yourself enough credit, I countered to myself, still outwardly shrugging and smiling as a nonverbal sign of 'thank you, let's move on.' *I know the exam...to an extent. I'm figuring out the exam.*

"How can a confused man knowingly sign a waiver, though?"

I gasped, realizing what I had just done.

I didn't...Did I?

Somewhere, between thinking and nodding, my thoughts had become auditory.

That wasn't supposed to happen.

I looked around the room, my eyes tilted upward, my chin bent down in withdrawal.

Maybe no one heard, I thought, grasping for that optimism I should have used before picking my discussion topic.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Dr. Sampson's hand move from his beard to his pen. He did that when he was ready to share his thoughts: "Could you maybe go see this patient again?"

It is alive

Eighth floor, Roseman West – whatever that means. Each wing of the hospital had its own name, so I relied on signs, help desks, and instructors to guide my way through the halls.

"Excuse me." I leaned over the nurse's desk, smiling with a deep inhale to hide my nerves. "What room is Sam Madina in?"

The nurse scrolled her finger across the computer screen, landing on a blue box on a digital calendar.

“Oh.”

I furrowed my brows, hoping to interpret her short reply.

“Do you know?”

“Know what?” I answered, still confused.

“He’s been transferred. Stonewell 648A.”

“Oh, okay.” I was confused, sighing in relief that he was only transferred. *But all that for a transfer?!* I thought, biting my tongue to hide my skepticism. *Really?!*

“It’s the next building over,” the nurse continued, pulling out a hospital map. She circled the building in blue ink and slid it towards me, the ink still too fresh to fold without smudging. “Is there anything else?” she asked, reaching for a ringing phone.

“No, thank you very much.”

I turned in a single spin towards the hallway, making my way back to the elevator. I was ready to get this over with, break through my nervousness and just see Mr. Madina again. Whenever I was nervous, it took the first step, breaking through the first hello to bring my monstrous fears back down to reality.

I’m almost there.

I was breathing deeply. Inhale – 1, 2...10 – exhale – 10, 9...1.

“Hello again.”

Outside Stonewell 648, the same elderly man from before was seated comfortably with his book. He had gotten about two-thirds of the way through and was still dedicatedly reading it at the threshold to his son’s new room. As before, he didn’t answer, only lifting his eyebrow in acknowledgment.

“Mr. Madina?” I asked, peeking around the wall. My knuckles tapped the door with a quiet knock, not knowing the proper etiquette in a large hospital room. “Good evening!” I continued, entering in the absence of a response.

Machines surrounded Mr. Madina’s head. One had an IV drip, another was a heart monitor. I couldn’t identify the rest of the equipment, though – first-year medical student problems. Mr. Madina’s eyes were no longer hollow or jaundice; instead, they were closed, shut off from the world. Mr. Madina’s skin was as fragile as ever, his clavicle reaching for fresh air.

“Mr. Madina,” I called out again, wanting to be sure he wasn’t awake and just resting his eyes. “Sir?”

Only the two of us were in the room, but, when I listened closely, I could hear three heartbeats. Mine was trotting along, anxiety balancing relief as I prepared to leave this awkward encounter. Mr. Madina's was quiet, inaudible from where I stood; the only sign that his heart was still beating came from the electrical readout of crests and troughs on the black screen to his left. The third beat in the room, the loudest of them all, startled me every now and then. It was staccato, each pulse filled with such gusto it didn't need a prolonged tone. 1, 2, 3, huff, 1, 2, 3, huff... Definitely not the S1, S2, lub-dub pattern we were taught in our sixty-minute cardiology lecture.

I looked around the bed, trying to find the life giving rise to this pronounced pulse. It wasn't the blood pressure cuff, though that had a beat all its own.

The IV machine, maybe?

But that, too, had its own noise, one far different from this beat I was registering.

I wonder...

I looked to Mr. Madina's face, tubes coming in and out of every hole. The last time we spoke, he was whispering, smiling, gazing. The last time I saw him, no more than six days ago, he was even chuckling at times. Now, he wasn't even breathing on his own, a tube forcing life into his lungs.

Ah, the respiratory machine...

I had found it, the third heartbeat. It was just one of the machines keeping Mr. Madina alive, but it was the one that seemed to take the most out of him. With every pulse from its circuitry, another false breath surged into Mr. Madina's body. Every surge filled him with a moment of time he would never remember, a moment of time he would never live.

Is this what he would have wanted? I wondered, picturing the man I had first met. He didn't even know how sick he was when we had met. He didn't know where he was for half of the interview, but when he was aware, when he was present, all he wanted was to go home. All he wanted was his work and his friends, his occasional beer, and cigarette. *Does he know? Is he fighting?*

It is too late

Aside from the three heartbeats, the beeping of monitors, the clanking of nurses walking up and down the hallways, aside from all the noise, the room was perfectly silent. In this silence, only white noise and stillness enveloped Mr. Madina and me.

I'm here to listen, Mr. Madina, I thought to myself, reaching for the hand that once shook mine. He couldn't speak to me, but that was okay. I was there, with him. His family was near, thinking of him. *It will be okay.*

"Hello?" A woman's voice startled me from behind.

Sam's girlfriend?

Her voice was raspier than I remembered. Maybe it was just exhaustion from living in a hospital recliner, but it made her voice difficult to place.

"Can I help you?" she continued, waiting for me to turn around.

"Hi," I began, apologetic for yet another interruption. "I just came by to see how Mr. Madina was doing."

"Well, you can see!"

"Yes, yes, I'm very sorry to see him in this condition."

"Yes, well..."

"Did the doctors say anything about how he's doing?"

"Are you not a doctor?"

Not again. I looked down to my white coat, wishing I could just slam my forehead into the palm of my hand. This white coat was protocol, our Wednesday uniform. Every time we stepped into the hospital, we were to wear professional attire and a white coat, at least until we started actual procedural work. Then, I think, we could wear scrubs.

"I'm actually a first-year medical student," I began, reiterating the introduction I had given the week prior. For me, Mr. Madina was only one patient and a pile of coursework distant in my memory. For Mr. Madina's family, though, I was probably at least five or six names deep in their list of newly introduced medical providers.

"Oh, that's right," the lady continued, her eyes steadily held to Mr. Madina's forehead as her hand stroked his shoulder. "Sam fell into a coma on Monday. They won't find a liver."

In a quiet room, the only sound more silent than white noise was grief. It was blasting from every pore of this woman's body and slowly slipping out of mine.

"That must be very difficult to accept," I offered, falling back to the age old empathetic phrases we were taught on Day 1.

"It is," the woman answered, her body slumping into a bedside chair.

"I'm going to leave you two to rest, but is there anything I can do?"

"No," the woman answered, looking to my eyes in surprise. "Thank you."

"Of course," I replied. I could feel my heart skip a beat as I softened my words. This woman was far from grateful at our last encounter. I just couldn't believe that tonight, with this news, she was grateful. "Thank you for your time," I continued, slowing my words to pick just the right ones. "Sam is a wonderful man, and I am glad I had a chance to speak with you both last week."

A coma?!

As I slipped out the doorway, I peeked over Sam's father's shoulder. I could have sworn, in the black ink and beige pages of his hardcover, red tears were dripping from a blood-smear scribbling of Sam's name.

It surrounds me

"Hi, I'm Stephanie Sosa, a first-year student at Harvard Medical School." I looked down towards my elderly patient with an outreached hand and a gentle smile. "I was hoping to speak with you a bit this morning, understand what brought you here and how you are doing now, and then do a very brief physical exam. Would that be okay?"

The woman looked straight past me to the black TV screen hanging from the ceiling.

"I will be in and out within about 45 minutes," I continued, hoping a time limit would reassure this woman.

Still, she stayed silent, her hand motioning to the chair in what I took as an offering to sit beside her. I was without my preceptor for this visit, handling everything on my own. A 'real' medical student, the training wheels pulled off my bike.

"To start, I want to make sure I have your name correct. Would you mind repeating it for me?"

"Mrs. Shineman," she whispered, her gravelly voice in stark juxtaposition to the delicate wrinkles on her pale skin. "S - H - I - N - E - like the sun - Man."

"Mrs. Shineman," I repeated, "Thank you for your time this morning. How is the day going for you?"

Mrs. Shineman wasn't like a typical grandmother - aside from the curly white perm. She had three kids, eleven grandkids, and a great-granddaughter on the way, but talking about them didn't seem to excite her.

Depression? I wondered, as I took note of the clear lack of a sparkle in her eyes at the thought of family and the very obvious absence of family photos. Usually, family would be the topic for which all the cell phone pictures would emerge. Not with Mrs. Shineman. Not this time.

"So you came to the hospital on Sunday after falling," I continued, shifting the subject back to Mrs. Shineman's more prolific subject: her illness. On that matter, she could go on for hours. A split second fall could fill a thirty-minute story if I allowed.

"Yes, yes," Mrs. Shineman excitedly replied, going into detail about her symptoms and surgeries. "I'm ready to get out of here!"

"It must be hard to be stuck in the hospital for so long," I answered, giving empathetic mirroring its place in the interview. "I'd like to move to a brief physical exam," I continued, seeing that Mrs. Shineman wasn't filling the pause I had left for her.

I reached for my black bag, my heart racing faster than ever. I had taken all of three blood pressures since I saw Mr. Madina. Two of them were my own.

You've got this. You've got this, I whispered in my head, hoping for confidence to substitute for skill.

"I'm going to start with a blood pressure," I began, wrapping a blue cuff around Mrs. Shineman's right arm. "This may feel tight but it shouldn't hurt." I had just discovered the direction arrow the prior night, so at least I now had the cuff aligned with the brachial artery. I also had my stethoscope in my ears correctly. We spent a good fifteen minutes learning that one!

"What is it?" Mrs. Shineman asked, waiting for me to dictate the reading.

"Well, I want to take it once more first," I insisted, covering my lack of a reading with the scientific protocol of wanting an average. "It's more reliable that way."

Pumping the cuff once more, I glanced rapidly over to the clock. 10:53 a.m. Looking back down at the blood pressure dial, I saw I had already passed 160 psi. If my first reading was at all accurate, this woman's systolic pressure fell far below 160.

Thwoosh. Thwoosh. Thwoosh.

Blood rushed through Mrs. Shineman's brachial artery, pulsating from deep within her body to the ends of my stethoscope.

Thwoosh. Thwoosh.

The dial bobbed up and down, confirming what I was hearing.

Thwoo...

Finally, the silence broke through the flow of blood. Diastole.

Squeeeeeaaaaakkk!

Emptying the cuff of its remaining air, a sharp screech filled in the silence.

"So?" Mrs. Shineman looked to me, her patience exhausted about forty minutes ago.

I didn't trust my reading. Hell, I didn't trust my ears for half of the interview at the volume of Mrs. Shineman's voice. How could I possibly hear through a stethoscope with any accuracy?

"What's my blood pressure?" Mrs. Shineman prodded, demanding an answer.

"Well..."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a stillness emerge. It was familiar, recently familiar.

It can't be.

White noise blanketed my shoulder, embracing me with a presence I had felt at Mr. Madina's bedside.

Aren't you a doctor?

Though the words had emerged from my thoughts, they weren't my own. They couldn't be. I would never confuse myself for a doctor. There wasn't a white coat or stethoscope around that could convince me otherwise.

You were listening.

The voice continued in my head, repeating words that were my own but weren't. Statements that I had once heard, but hadn't heeded.

"126 over 73."

It is time

At 10:53 a.m., Mr. Madina died.

I wasn't there – how could I be? I was with Mrs. Shineman at the time, her arm between my torso and elbow, a blood pressure cuff overtaking her flesh. But, I like to pretend that I was there with Mr. Madina, standing beside him at his final moments.

I imagine his girlfriend would have sat to his left, her head to his shoulder, tears flowing down her face...finally. On his right, a nurse would be turning off machines, ending the ceaseless buzzing and beeping that had been keeping Sam alive.

I like to think Mr. Madina would have been happy to let that third heartbeat go. It wasn't what he wanted. It wasn't work or family; it wasn't getting him closer to those things. Perhaps the silence of unplugged machines made Mr. Madina feel secure, blanketed in serenity.

I don't even have to imagine to know where Mr. Madina's father sat: outside the room, book in hand. He would have had only one chapter to go. Knowing his son was dying, he had said his goodbyes. In fact, I'm sure his goodbyes preceded my first nod in his direction back in the halls of Roseman West. He had smeared his son's memory into his book and cried out his sorrow in the crimson tears I had witnessed. He was ready for this goodbye before it was even time to say goodbye. Now, as Mr. Madina was releasing his last breath, his father would be turning another page, not even skipping a word with his son's physical absence.

And Mr. Madina...I like to think he was with me, listening the way I had done for him. When I was crying to the universe for support, trying to master a physical exam maneuver, I believe Mr. Madina was beside me. He was my first patient, the first recipient of my doctoring empathy. His was the first hand I grasped in consolation when medicine had reached its limits. Now, when I needed strength, I like to think he returned my empathy with a hand on my shoulder and a few words of strength.

To Mr. Madina, I was still a real doctor; I never had the chance to say otherwise.

It's still here

I see it everywhere – those human connections. Burrowed in moments of pain and joy, I've come to expect it. And yet, in Roseman West, in the noise of silence, I almost missed it.

In Mr. Madina's eyes, I remembered it – a human life, a chance for empathy. Even with sorrow and loss, *it* was still there.

Monster Kid
C. F. Roberts

It was almost time to go to school--as much as he would have rather not gone, Sammy figured it was time to man up. He buckled his belt and examined his model shelf. There was the USS Iowa, which his Dad had helped him assemble, but more importantly, there was his row of Aurora Monster Models...King Kong, Dracula, Frankenstein, the Phantom of the Opera, the Wolf Man and of course, his favorite--Godzilla.

Sammy had eschewed using the very hyped glow-in-the-dark parts for his models because he thought they looked stupid. He took the glow-in-the-dark monster heads and made them into little mini-models...other glowing accessories, like the rats on the Wolfman model, he just kept loose and used them as toys. He gave them names: Rupert, Ringo, and Ratfink. He liked his little glow-in-the-dark rats.

"Sammy, come on, it's getting late!" called Mom from downstairs.

"I know," he called back, reminding her that he knew what he was doing.

Sammy wanted a Hunchback of Notre Dame model but hadn't seen one in a very long time...that was in Woolworth's, three towns over, a long time ago. Joe Myers said he had seen one in Bill's Bike Shop, but he didn't know whether that was true. Bruce Pyle had been regaling him with tales of a store in Salem, New Hampshire called Monster Island where they had all the Aurora Monster Models in stock and a whole barrage of other insane things—motorized models of all the Japanese monsters—they supposedly had rubber "skin" and moved around--as time wore on Sammy was starting to feel like Bruce was pulling his leg, though. It seemed illogical, and Bruce was kind of weird and untrustworthy, but did Sammy drool over the idea of such a store? He sure did.

He made it downstairs. Mom had his lunch bag packed and his coat and boots were out. "Don't forget your winter hat," she said.

"I won't!" That wasn't a problem. There was nothing like being at that bus stop for ten or fifteen minutes and having your ears start freezing.

He suited up and she kissed him goodbye. He hit the cold air and walked across the street to the bus stop. Paula McDonnell and Andrea Gift were already there, as was Tommy David. He didn't have anything in common with any of them but he guessed he liked them all alright. Paula and Andrea talked together while Tommy sat alone and read his Ray Bradbury book. Sammy recognized that Ray Bradbury was a science fiction guy and was an author he was supposed to like--he just hadn't gotten around to him yet.

Sammy joined the line in wait for the bus. He was insulated by warm feelings left over by Saturday night's double feature, "Godzilla: King of the Monsters" and "Godzilla's Revenge". A whole week of anticipation and wrestling with his crappy UHF Antenna had culminated in a whole lot of fun that night. Sure, he'd seen them both before (as his parents reminded him with punishing, idiotic regularity), like that meant anything. The glee never stopped for Sammy when the Big Guy was on the screen, mashing buildings, roasting fighter jets and stomping other monsters into the ground. He was struck, watching them side by side, as to what drastically different movies they were. The first Godzilla movie was black-and-white and very grim. Godzilla was a towering menace that was created by atomic bombs and he destroyed cities and killed lots of people. "Godzilla's Revenge" was goofier and playful and obviously, a kiddie-movie and Godzilla was more of a roly-poly good guy...some people didn't like that much. Bruce said he thought it was stupid, but Sammy had no big problem reconciling Godzilla the radioactive death bringer with Godzilla the cuddly superhero. It was elementary that a villainous bad guy could turn around, redeem himself and be a hero, right? There were plenty of stories about it throughout history like that, Sammy was sure.

The neat thing about “Godzilla’s Revenge” was the ton of monsters that appeared in it--there was Gabra, the chortling cat monster, but there were lots of others--Angilas, Gorosaurus, Manda--Sammy knew most of these monsters had to have movies of their own---he hoped a day would come when he could see them all.

The bus pulled up--its big, ugly yellow bulk easing up to the curb. Sammy hated seeing it arrive—one more day in the school penitentiary.

As he lagged behind the other kids boarding the bus, Sammy thought about the Japanese Monster movies he knew of but hadn’t seen--“Destroy all Monsters” was supposed to be a big one and it had a ton of different monsters in it. He had also heard that “Frankenstein Conquers the World” had about five different monsters in it--he hoped someday he’d be able to see that.

As he climbed into the bus he saw Bruce Pyle halfway down the aisle waving to him--he had Sammy’s seat reserved. Sammy threw Bruce the Vulcan salute. Bruce liked “Star Trek”. Behind Bruce, Sammy saw the moon face of Bruce’s sister, Jean, grimacing. Jean thought “Star Trek” was stupid.

As he drew closer, he saw that Anne Hooks was sitting next to Jean and he remembered that Anne had stayed the weekend with the Pyles. Sammy thought Anne was beautiful, but he knew if he said anything about it, Bruce would blurt it out and hold him up to ridicule in front of everybody. Bruce liked Lucy Bernstein and Sammy kept his confidence, but one thing he learned early on was that the same rules didn’t apply in reverse. Maybe there were no real friends and people laughed at you for anything. If you

got a haircut they made fun of you. If you wore white socks they made fun of you. If they found out you liked a girl they really made fun of you.

He thought it would be nice if one day he could share his feelings for Anne and nobody would mind or bother him about it. Maybe when you got to be a teenager that happened.

He plunked down next to Bruce. “Hey--how was your weekend?”

“Boring,” said Bruce. “What’d you end up doing? I bet you watched Godzilla.”

Sammy lit up. “Yeah,” he said, “it was wicked cool!”

“How many times have you seen those movies?”

“I don’t care.”

“Muuuy name is Sammuhhhhhh,” murmured Jean from in back of them. God, not this again. And he’d have rather Jean didn’t goof on him in front of Anne...what could you do, though? He tried to ignore it. “What happened with you?”

“Dad caught Leslie smoking a cigarette,” Bruce chuckled. Leslie was Bruce’s oldest sister. She was in high school.

“He didn’t give her hell, did he?”

“Yeah, he did--it was funny.” Bruce raised his voice to a whiny falsetto. “No, Daddy, I’m sorry, Daddy. Stop hitting me! Stop hitting me!” Sammy couldn’t understand how Bruce’s father, a rapt, humorless old man, seemed to be able to pit all the Pyle kids against each other, to a point where they seemed to take pleasure in each others’ punishments.

Bruce had seemed to pick up on Sammy’s displeasure. “Whatsamatter?” He asked. “It was funny!”

Sammy looked out the bus window. He saw a tiny spider skitter across the glass. “Aw,” he said, “The Giant Spider!”

This was Sammy-and-Bruce-speak. Everything was The Giant This or The Giant That. A spider was The Giant Spider or a grasshopper was The Giant Grasshopper or a salamander was The Giant Salamander, depending on what they ran across.

“Giant what?!” scoffed Bruce. “I don’t see anything!”

“The Spider,” he said. “Right there on the window.”

“You’re an idiot,” sniped Bruce. “Just shut up.”

Sammy got it. Lucy Bernstein was in the seat beside them and so Bruce was going to play cool and act like he didn't like monsters. He was getting used to this annoying trend from Bruce. It so happened he liked girls, too; he just wasn't going to pretend he didn't like monsters to impress one. Why couldn't a girl like monsters as much as they did? There was a novel idea.

Behind them, Jean continued her slurring litany of ridicule. "Muuuuuy name is Sammyyyy," she droned. "You see this book? It's called 'Greek Mythologyyyyyy'. I like Greek Mythologyyyyyy. Do YOU like Greek Mythologyyyyyy?"

Sammy wondered for the tenth time or so if he really sounded like that when he talked, but he pushed the thought away. "What's wrong with Greek Mythology?" He asked. "Myths, according to Webster, are stories people have told over the years to explain man's place in the universe." He had no idea whether Webster had really said that, but he was satisfied that he had said something that sounded learned in front of Anne.

Anne stared back at him with dead eyes. "Wipe it up, dog face," she sneered. Sammy looked at her for a moment. "Your chin, dog face. Wipe your chin."

Sammy was drooling again. Sometimes he got enthusiastic and would talk a lot and forget to swallow. His Mom sometimes had to remind him to do so. Sammy gulped down a mouthful of saliva.

Okay--maybe he hadn't impressed her.

"Ummm Sammmuuuuuyyyyyy," slurred Jean. "This book is about Greek Mythuuluuuuhguuuuuuyyyyyyyyyy..." there was no winning.

"I try," he sighed.

"Shut up," grumped Bruce.

Greek Myths were the best. Sammy liked to draw mythological creatures. His favorites were Scylla and Charybdis, from *The Odyssey*, the Gorgon Medusa, and the Hydra, a seven-headed dragon that Herakles had fought. People more commonly knew Herakles as Hercules, but that was actually the Roman variation of his name.

Sammy figured there wasn't much difference between the seven-headed Hydra and Ghidorah, the three-headed monster from the Japanese movies. A lot of people didn't understand that, but old stories and more recent ones were very similar. He thought it was important.

The ride was over and the bus pulled into Wynn Elementary School. For once, Sammy was actually glad the ride was ending. He wanted to get away from Jean, away from Anne, away from Bruce and his uptight weirdness.

As he embarked from the bus he parted company with Bruce without saying anything. Did he want to get weird for fear of Lucy not getting the monster thing? Fine. He could do it alone.

Sammy headed out to the west yard of the school, where he was accustomed to going in. Sammy was in a special class. It was laughed at by other kids and referred to as the retard room, but this was incorrect. Miss Marston's room, down the hall, had the retarded kids--they were kids who were as old as Sammy--in some cases older---they would never be part of a regular classroom. They were like five-year-olds. They would never learn more--they would never get any better. They would never be scientists, astronauts, chefs, professors or artists.

The kids in Sammy's class were not retarded. They might have problems doing well in some subjects. Sammy couldn't do math. Other kids cussed a lot and got in fights. Some kids got upset and they would scream and cry and throw furniture around and the teachers would have to hold them down while they yelled and turned red...but they weren't retarded.

Sammy liked to draw and he liked monsters. He was sure he wasn't retarded--regardless of what Jean said.

It was cold out. He hoped the school would open up soon so he could go in and warm up.

As he approached the West Entrance, he saw Jimmy Vincent and several sixth graders from other classes huddled together. Jimmy was one of those kids who threw

violent crying fits a lot. He was integrating into a lot of the regular classes, though, and so he had friends outside the class. Sammy had Bruce Pyle--that was about it.

Jimmy called out. "Hey, Sammy!" Sammy instinctively headed over. Was Jimmy actually going to be friendly to him in front of his friends outside the "Retard Room"?

The gang crowded around him and Jimmy approached him with a welcoming, outstretched arm. "Hey! Did you see Godzilla?"

Jimmy had always voiced a dislike for monsters and everything else Sammy might like, so this was odd. But who knew? Maybe he'd finally taken the time to sit and watch something and learned to enjoy it. Why not?

"Yeah," said Sammy, "wasn't it—" that was the exact moment he saw the fist coming.

Bony knuckles connected hard with his nose and the dull, familiar pain exploded in Sammy's face. Jimmy's punches rained in, again and again, connecting with his mouth, his shoulders, the side of his head and his ear. Sammy crumpled under the furious volley and he felt a scream push out of his throat almost independently of him.

"That's right, cry, Sammy!" Roared Jimmy. He mewled in mock pain. "Eeeeeee! Eeeee!" The punches continued as the kids around him laughed.

Sammy was bleeding from the mouth and the nose. "I didn't do anything," He wailed.

"All's he talks about is monsters," yelled Jimmy. "You freak! You faggot!" The punches kept coming down.

At this point, the scene was broken up by adult bodies and the punches stopped. Mrs. Cho and Mr. Harris had pulled Jimmy off him and were trying to hold him down. Sammy saw Jimmy flailing in their grasp.

"Call Mr. Golden," yelled Mrs. Cho. "Tell him his students are fighting again!"

"Uh didun do anything," Sammy tried to tell them. Mrs. Cho and Mr. Harris were preoccupied with Jimmy, though.

Mr. Golden was there almost immediately. Jimmy was being hauled off to the Principal. "All's he talks about is monsters," Jimmy kept screaming in a high, tremulous voice as if he were about to start crying. "All's he talks about is monsters!"

"Come on," said Mr. Golden, helping Sammy up. "Let's get you to the nurse!"

Sammy's nose was bleeding profusely and his upper lip was cut. His ear hurt more than everything else, and he wondered if it was bleeding, too.

Mr. Golden looked down at Sammy with his usual gentle, beatific expression. "What did you do that upset Jimmy so much?"

"Ug web do schole?" Sammy gagged. His mouth was full of saliva again and he swallowed, taking down not only the spit, but lots of blood as well. The blood was running down his nasal passage into his throat and trying to breathe made his nose hurt.

Mr. Golden's soft expression never changed. "You're a bright guy, Sammy," he said. "You have a real talent, there, too--most people can't even draw a straight line. I know I can't! It's a pity you have to waste it all on something like monsters."

"Gugh," choked Sammy.

"Have you ever thought about finding other areas of interest so that things like this won't happen? Take a look at other kids around you. What do they talk about? What interests do they have? Jimmy has lots of friends outside the class, now. What do those kids like to do?"

"Hghuuuehrgh," choked Sammy.

"How about Hockey? Lots of kids like hockey! Do you think the Bruins will win the Stanley Cup this year? What team do you like?"

"Ngh," choked Sammy.

A Sight to Kill For
Susan Davies

When I got the call two days ago, that Bill, my co-worker, had an appendicitis attack and I now would be the one to give the presentation, I read it with the same panic I would have accorded a formal notice to appear in court. My horror lay in the knowledge that I had two choices. I could either stress out and prepare the thing in a few hours, or hear the wrath of my manager saying he would find someone else, or possibly putting me on suspension. *I would rather stay home tonight with Peter, drinking a cup of warm tea while watching reruns.*

Peter was my roommate of the last five months. Fortunate for me, his fiancé broke up with him and moved out. He had a three bedroom townhouse and advertised for a roommate. I hadn't seen the ad, but one of the girls I am friends with, knew him from work and told me about it and how little he was asking for rent. She also said Peter was a little weird and needy. She wasn't kidding. Over the last few months though he has grown on me and I just accept he is a little strange, plus cheap rent is cheap rent, so there was where I still reside.

I was still going through my mail when I saw it; a letter with no return address. When I opened it, a flash drive fell to the floor. *Must be from Bill sending me a copy of his presentation. Well that helps because now I don't have to start from scratch.* Knowing I now won't have to stress as much, I decided to go for coffee. I lay the drive on the table with the other mail and went to put on my jacket. *Better call Bill and thank him.* As I was dialing Bill, Peter walked in.

"Hey Karen," yells Pete. "What did you get in the mail? Did I get anything?"

"No," I said while holding up my finger for him to be quiet.

"Who is this from," he said picking up the drive.

"Pete!" I say while pointing to the fact that I am on the phone.

"Hi Bill," I say into the phone. "How are you feeling?"

"As good as a man can feel who just got operated on two days ago," he said. "What's up?"

"Wow, and you're already home?" I asked.

"No, I go home today and should be out of here in about an hour, actually. The doctor just signed my release a few minutes ago."

"That's great! Hey, thanks for having someone mail me your presentation so I don't have to start from scratch."

"I didn't."

"Oh? "I just received a flash drive in the mail and assumed that's what it was."

"Who is that? Bill who? Why would he send you a USB?" Peter said as I grab the drive from his hand and put it back on the table.

"Nope, not from me, not my presentation, but I would be glad to give it to you if you want to stop by when I get home," Bill says from the phone.

"Hey, that would be great," I say trying to push Peter out of the way. "I can use it and work what I already have into it. You're a lifesaver."

"Once I get home and get comfortable I will have my wife get it for you. Does a couple of hours from now sound okay?"

"Sounds like a plan, see you then." As I hung up the phone and turned around I almost fell over Peter.

"Hey, Pete I got to run and pick up something for work. Do you want to go with me and get something to eat?"

"No, I think I'll pass."

Well, that was different. Not the almost falling over him part. Peter had a habit of listening to my conversations. He would either lean on me if I was sitting down or follow me around the house if I tried to walk away for privacy, while I am on the phone, whispering, "Is that so and so." Or

something along the line of being nosy and annoying. It was a little un-nerving at first, but now I could care less. My conversations are not that interesting, so why let his tacky behavior stress me out. The part of him passing on the chance of tagging along with me was the weird part.

"Did I hear you say you got a flash drive in the mail?"

"Yeah, weirdest thing. No address or anything." *Maybe I should look at it now curiosity is killing me. No, I better go to Bill's first, I have to have this presentation ready for tonight.* "Well, if you don't want to go, I really have to run, Pete. I was going to stop and eat on the way home, but I could just get take out for both of us."

"No I ate earlier, just go eat," Pete said picking up my mail and looking through it. When he saw me look at him and frown, he threw it down and picked up a banana. "Go, I thought you had to run? See you later," he said, practically pushing me towards the door.

On the way to Bill's I stopped to order Chinese, and of course, the whole town had the same idea. Then to top it off I was stuck in the five o'clock, evening rush hour traffic. It never failed. When I am in a hurry everything seemed to go wrong. Finally, almost two hours later, I arrived at Bills. The woman who came to the door could have been a model. I never expected Bill's wife to look like that. Bill is balding with a pot belly. "Hi, I'm Karen," I said as I stuck out my hand into her perfect manicured one. "Bill said he has some stuff I can have to do his presentation." I pulled my hand back looking at my chipped polish. *Maybe Pete is right I should spend more time in the bathroom doing my nails and hair.*

"Bill is already sleeping, but here is what he has," she said, handing me his notes. "I hope it helps."

"Thanks, it will." As she closed the door my phone rang.

"Is this Karen?" the voice said.

"Yes, this is Karen, who is this?"

"This is Sheila, Peter's ex. Did you get the flash drive yet that I sent you?"

"What is this about?" I asked confused. "Why would you send me that and no letter or anything stating why?"

"I didn't want Peter to know. What he did with those pictures, is why I left."

"Listen, I don't care what happened to your love life. If you and he did some freaky film stuff, well that is none of my business."

"You don't understand...Hey, I have to go, there is someone at my door, but after you look at the drive if you want to call me you have the number." She hung up the phone before I could respond, but now there was no way I was looking at that drive...eww. *Maybe you jumped to conclusions? Well, I have more important things that need to be done, like this presentation, to worry about it now.*

When I got home Peter was gone so I ate my crappy cold take-out meal and got to work. I had finished my presentation and had a couple of hours to kill. *Thank goodness for Bill's notes or this would have been a bust.*

"Crap," I said out loud as I realized I didn't have a drive to save it on. *Maybe if I erase the one Peter's ex sent and use that?* I went to the table to find the bills filed, the junk mail discarded, and the drive gone. "Fuck, shit, fucking asshole!" I shout out loud. "Peter is so freaking anal he can never leave anything put. Always cleaning up, where the hell would he have put it?" After ranting to myself for several minutes I decided to be more constructive and look for it. I searched everywhere to no avail. I never go into Pete's room, but I was desperate. I had to find a blank drive. I looked around in awe, "Wow, does a teenage boy live here?" There were prints of Lil' Kim, Bo Derek, Shannen Doherty, and Lindsay Lohan, all nude from the cover of playboy magazines. *Well to each his own. Now I am sure that drive is of nude movies, yuck.* I searched his desktop. Nothing. No drives I can use. I think about searching the doors, but felt a sense of being too nosy. That's the difference

between Pete and me, he would have no problem searching my room from top to bottom—without a good reason. Of this I am sure. Just when I was about to give up I had seen a cute Sylvester the Cat head laying on his desk with his bottom sticking out of the USB drive. *Well, this will have to do.* I realized Pete's computer was still on and the monitor had been just turned off. I turn the monitor on and couldn't believe what was on the screen.

"Holy crap, are you kidding me, what? What! What! Hell no!" I couldn't believe it! Before my eyes was a porn site with a picture of me in the shower. I clicked on it and saw it was a film snip of my whole shower from start to finish. Furious, I turned off the monitor, removed the drive from his computer, took it to my room and inserted it into my laptop. On it are several different clips of me in the bathroom. I had felt the bile rising in my throat. I tried to call the number of Peter's ex that was on my phone, but there was no answer. Now I knew why she left.

I was afraid to shower or use the bathroom, so I didn't shower. I grabbed everything I needed out from there and went back to my room and got ready. I still had no way of saving my speech and it was in an hour, so I grabbed my laptop and headed to Staples to buy a new USB.

Forty-five minutes later, I arrived at the hotel where the conference was being held. Thought the short notice of having to deliver this presentation sucked, this could be the break I needed to prove myself at work. I don't handle stress well, and with the rush and what I had found out about Pete, I can hardly hold it together. Part of me wanted to call the police, but another part doesn't want anyone to know about the pictures. *Maybe I should just go home and find out why he did it and have him take them down. I will see if I can stay with someone while I look for a new place to live. No way can I stay there.* Lost in thought I almost missed my cue for the presentation.

I gave the presentation, but my mind was on getting home, facing Peter and getting the hell out of that apartment. I gave my excuses and drove home. When I arrived, I pulled into the driveway, jumped out of the car, and race in the door not knowing what I was going to say. Peter met me as I opened the front door.

"You took my drive."

"Yes. How could you, Pete, I thought we were friends?"

"I figured you looked at it. What were you doing in my room anyway?"

"What the hell do you mean, what was I doing in your room? Of all the gall! You take perverted pictures of me and post them on the internet and you have the nerve to be upset I went into your bedroom?"

"Calm down."

"Calm down? You want me to calm down? Do you have a hidden camera set up? Did you plan on doing this from the time I moved in, for any roommate who moved in?"

"Please, calm down and let me explain."

"I have no clue how the hell you can explain this and make it go away."

"Do you want a cup of tea? I always say tea is the cure for everything." Peter said while making tea.

"Are you serious? I just found out my roommate is a sick little pervert that was posting naked pictures of me on his...then I had seen his fallen face. "Listen, Pete, I'm sorry but this is not something I can forgive you for, I have to move out."

"Well, I am having tea, and I wish you would join me and hear me out before you go," he said, handing me a cup."

"I am so furious at you, but I really do need to calm down. I would die for a cup of tea," I said, taking the cup. "You really do need to seek help, Peter. So, how did you get those pictures? You do know that what you just did is a criminal offense? How could you do that to me?"

"You don't understand, it started as a joke, my ex was being stupid one day, because she caught me watching porn on the computer. She said she didn't want me looking at anyone but her, so I secretly filmed her and put it on the internet."

"Joke. Joke, Peter? I see no humor at all in that."

"You are all alike, she was so mad she packed her stuff and moved out. I found out she got a job at the mall and tried to go talk to her, what the hell does the bitch do, threatens to have me arrested. Peter then started rambling on and on about his fiancé. On and on and making no sense. As I sipped my tea, trying to make some sense of this, and hoping to find a place so I can get the hell away from him, a picture on the TV caught my eye. *I know I've seen that woman somewhere before.* I thought as I watched the screen. I moved closer to the TV and put my cup down on the table. They said she was found dead in her home, but I missed the first part. I stepped back in shock when the reporter said her name. I turned with wide eyes toward Peter.

"Yes, it's my ex, if that's what you just figured out."

I shivered, but not due to being cold. *Just give the drive to the police. It's probably just a coincidence.* My mind kept asking the same question: Why would someone...or was it Peter... kill her?

"I stood frozen, my breathing shallow. Fear and confusion rushed through my body, which made me dizzy. *The drive. It must have been naked pictures of his ex. Did she know about the ones of me?* Suddenly the bits and pieces I half-listened to in Peter's rambling were making sense.

"You will be a suspect Peter," I squeaked. "They will piece it all together. Please, Peter, tell me you filmed us but had nothing to do with this?"

"I am not a pervert! When I found out she sent you the drive I went to convince her I was sorry and would seek help if she would just not say anything. She called me a pervert and threatened to go to the police. You're all alike, you called me a pervert too."

I gulped back the bile in my throat as I laid a hand on my very sick friend's shoulder. "Maybe it was accidental. Did things just get out of hand, did you shove her, and she hit her head? How did she die, Pete?"

"I made her tea," Pete said.

My eyes opened wide in shock as I looked at the table at my now empty cup.

Gangs of Men's Homes
Brandon Knight

I was fucked, stuck in that place. That place where you can't tell if your dream was a dream. East Ames. To not *care* that I was fucked made my pride shine out of my skin, like rays of light stabbed through the stained sheets of a worn bed at dawn. The black blood was on its way. I'd come to crave it. I slept—or tried to sleep—next to the train tracks. Those trains, those slow blurred slugs that crawled past the foot of my dirt bed. It took no time at all to get used to that roar. You can't wake a drunk.

As luck would have it, *the spot* to fly a sign was *right* there. It took some gasps and a few tics of the neck to cross the street both ways, there and back. But it was worth it.

The first hour would take some nerve on my part. I cared too much. I let the stance of the bum with the sign hurt my pride. But, as bums do, I got used to it. The cars were just cars. They can't see you. What they *can* do is keep you drunk. At that spot, my sign, scrawled with the shakes in thick black ink read, "ON THE ROAD, OUT OF FOOD." My dog would trot out on her leash next to me and on a good day, we'd make at least half a bill in an hour. She'd trot right back to the spot by my side.

"Nice work, Soot."

The point where the bridge met by tracks was my home. My place of work was the spot on the street by the light. Once that light turned red, I'd put on a smile and pace up and down the row of cars. Tins of meat, socks, gloves, dog food, these were all trash. I had socks. I had gloves. Dog food was weight. But work was work. At each shift's end, I'd fold up my sign. I'd slide it through the straps of my pack and make sure that all the non-cash kick downs I received were in my bag. Most of the kick downs in these bags were thrown out. I'd pawn these bags off to the cans in front of the beer store. The store was just a quick left, less than a block off. Trash gone, cash in hand, beer in bag, and back to the spot.

*

My last men's home was run by Bill. Bill was like the rest of them. He was proud, dumb, sad. I saw it on his face. He was not a bad man, just weird. And proud and dumb and sad. The kind of man you can't talk to though he thinks you can. I'd beg to be shot just to get out of Bill's room, his world.

"You've been in and out of these homes, huh, chief?" his shirt failed to hold in his gut, his breath was slow and loud and must have weighed a ton. He made me think of the word "gorge."

"Yes sir, I have, but I can't see why you, or I, should care."

"I care for all the men that come through my home. That's my job."

With each word, he gave up an inch. An inch here, he'd have a stroke, his huge frame might seize up, an inch there, and his heart might fail. An inch any which way and he might cry, which I felt would be the worst thing he could do to the both of us. In my mind, each move he made screamed death.

"But I *don't* care, Bill, that's the thing."

"Oh come on, chief," Bill called everyone chief, "if you don't mean to care then, of course, you won't!"

His shirt slid up his gut a bit, his face turned bright red and took on a look of pride. He was proud of the point he made.

"Don't you see, though? That's what I mean, Bill. If I don't mean to care, and to be clear, I don't, I *do not, at all*, mean to care, then of course. You're right."

A dumb grin formed on Bill's face. That dumb grin told me that Bill thought he had caught me. He thought that he was right, that he had won.

“So ya just don’t care then do ya, chief?” Bill’s smirk just made a dumb man look smug. It made a dumb, smug man look like an ass. It made me want to say the word “gorge” out loud.

I tried not to laugh but made a note in my mind to save the sight of that smirk for a time when I might need to laugh.

“No, I don’t. I *do not* care, Bill.”

Out of all the things he’d heard in his life, this, out of seemed the oddest. Strange, as I’m sure he heard it all the time. All his life, I’d bet. No one cared for Bill.

“So that’s it huh? Gone? Just like that?” he asked me, mist in his eyes.

“Bill, I’ve been here four days, calm dow—“

Bill’s face was beet red. It leaked out the sweat and tears of all the men he had cared for, all the men that had left his home, all the men that had told him off, in that very room, that very desk.

“Listen, Bill, it’s not you, you’ve been great, you’re great, the home is great, it’s just not where I need to be right now.”

Bill wiped his tears. Did he know that I knew he was crying?

“Well, just give it a few more days, next week we planned to get a net to set up out back, have a tourn—“

“Bill, I can’t, but listen, thank you for—“

“Nope! Go on! Git!” Bill could not, for the life of him, look me in the eye at this point by. So he chose to hang his head, his eyes fixed on the cheap rug at his feet.

I felt bad for Bill. He cared. He loved his men, he was proud of his men’s home. Old Bill, God bless that dumb son of a bitch.

I took one more look at him, I hoped he could find it in him to look back, but no, just one more, “Go on! Git!”

So I got.

By now, I had lost count of all the men’s homes. There was not a damned thing in these homes that could meet the need of my id. So I checked out, found a site to camp by the bridge and went at it.

*

It was all gore. Beer, rum, gin, all the drinks I used to get down my throat now failed to stay in the sore ache that was my gut. Each drink would spout back out as soon as it went in. The hues of bile and booze that spilled out my throat changed with the time of day. At dawn, a damn near black ooze split the dust and tossed it a few feet in the air. At the day’s end, I’d pass out on a deep, dark, red. All the cash I’d make would end up on the ground, spewed forth, my will be damned, from my mouth, dick, or ass. I felt like it was time.

There was a home for drunks I knew of a few miles west. I thought I could make it, so I tried. Cars sped by and now all I felt was shame. Snow fell. The pride came back. My legs, at last, gave out. I heaved one last time, for the road. “The End” by The Doors was stuck in my head. Strange, as my brain, it’s whole life, was not a fan of The Doors, strange too, that the song choice felt so on-the-nose. Why now? Why was my bad taste saved for this? I fell to my knees and thought about Bill. That gut, that dumb smirk, that warm bed, the roof.

My face hit the snow, turned blue, then gray. I was done, thank god, and it proved my thoughts on death right—there was no one, since the spark of time, there was no one—it was all a man could want. They’d find me at dawn, old black blood on new white snow. The only thing on me was Bill’s card. They called him first. When he heard the news he hung his head and cried. He thought of all the men he had failed, the men he thought cared for him. I thought of Bill now. All I could do was laugh as I froze to death in the snow on the side of the road. I hoped Bill would have to be the first to see my corpse at the morgue.

Dirt Roads
Justin Hunter

Kyle pulled the cigarette from his lips and hid it behind his back as the red Toyota Camry skid through the dirt driveway and stopped in front of the trailer. He dropped the cigarette and kicked it off the concrete porch, out of sight. He waited to see who was driving.

The passenger window on the Camry rolled down, and Garrett leaned across the passenger seat. His long, brown hair snaked out beneath his blue Dodgers cap.

"What the fuck, man?" Kyle asked.

"You coming or what?"

"Is this your mom's car?"

"Let's go." Garrett adjusted the side mirror, sat up straighter in the seat.

A couple weeks before, Kyle offered to let Garrett drive the shit can—Kyle's rusted Volkswagen Beetle—but Garrett wouldn't go near it. Said he just barely got his permit and didn't want to mess around.

Kyle leaned against the wood beam holding up the awning above the porch and smiled down at Garrett. "I dunno. Not sure I trust you driving me around."

"Come on, man. Please."

Kyle thought about dragging it out longer, but fuck it. If Garrett was driving his mom's car without a license, there was going to be a good reason.

Kyle jumped off the porch and checked around back to make sure his mom wasn't doing that thing she did. Staring at the mountains in the distance for hours, past the sage and palo verde dotting the land behind the doublewide. She wasn't back there, so Kyle climbed into the passenger seat.

"Finally got your license?" Kyle pulled his seatbelt on and slid a crushed pack of Marlboro Reds from his pocket.

"Nope." Garrett dragged the shifter into drive.

The dirt spun up behind them. Kyle rolled up the window to keep from choking on dust. Plus, he was wearing his new Jordans. Sure, he hadn't paid for them, but they were still expensive.

Garrett took the dirt roads like they did in the go-cart he and Kyle built together in fifth grade. Garrett was new in town back then, and Kyle hadn't been able to keep friends too long. He'd do something stupid and their parents would think he was a bad influence. The end. It went on like that until he met Garrett.

The go-cart lasted them the entire summer before the steering column snapped, sending Garrett into a saguaro. That summer proved to Kyle what a real friend was. Every time Kyle messed up—the fire he lit behind Garrett's house, the broken windows at the elementary school, the shoplifting—Garrett stuck around. Garrett made the friendship last, telling his parents that Kyle wasn't all bad. That he always deserved another chance.

The Camry slid around the turns, missing the dirt embankments that bordered the makeshift road by inches.

"What's up?" Kyle asked.

Garrett held the wheel with two hands. "Nothing," he said. "Just a drive. Practicing."

"Since you scared the shit out of me back there, mind if I light another?" Kyle held up his pack of cigarettes.

"Doesn't matter."

Kyle lit his cigarette just as Garrett found paved road. The Camry's tires chirped as Garrett made a hard left at the intersection. Kyle saw the deputy sitting in his parked cruiser on the side of the road, dome light on even though it was ten in the morning and the sun shone through bright blue sky. "Shit, slow down man."

Garrett eased off the gas. He checked the rearview mirror, but Kyle had seen the deputy looking down at paperwork. He wasn't looking to pull anyone over this morning. Kyle wondered if his dad might make that transition one day. Move from corrections to patrol. A lot of guys did it. Of course, that was before the thing happened at county last year. Kyle's old man promised he had nothing to do with it, but Kyle didn't figure the Sheriff's Office would be taking any C.O.s anytime soon.

Kyle wasn't sure where they were going. Looked like maybe the interstate, but it didn't matter. It was something to do on a Saturday morning. Something to keep him from doing something else. Garrett was good like that. He was the type of friend who kept you from being you.

And don't ever forget how good a thing that is, Kyle reminded himself. You as you, doesn't work. The you with Garrett is passable.

Yet in moments of stupidity, moments of frustration, Kyle sometimes wondered why he ever hung out with someone like Garrett. It's easy to get angry at an obstacle, even if that obstacle was preventing Kyle from doing something dumb. Like the time last summer when Garrett took a punch from Kyle just because he'd kept Kyle from fighting someone else. Garrett didn't even fight back, didn't take a swing at Kyle despite his bloody nose.

"Are we calling this learning time?" Kyle said after a long draw on his cigarette. "Hours behind the wheel? I mean, I know I've had my license for a whole year, but I ain't exactly the best person to learn from."

"I don't care, man. It's just driving."

Kyle shrugged. "What's up with you?"

They came to a four-way stop and Kyle looked out the window. He caught a glimpse of a black and brown javelina. It stared at them, deciding whether or not to charge. Before it could make a decision, Garrett pulled away. Kyle imagined the javelina chasing them until its lungs gave out.

It was quiet until they hit the interstate. Then, Garrett said, "I hit Davey."

"Davey Brintz?"

"You know any other Daveys?" They passed the last exit in town—if you could even consider it part of town. Most people who lived closer to the city certainly didn't.

"All right, calm down. What about Davey now?"

Garrett squeezed the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. "I'm not just driving for practice, Kyle."

"I know."

"I hit him."

"So you hit him," Kyle said. "Not exactly your style, but so what?"

Kyle thought they'd head north, but Garrett took the exit for Interstate 8 west. Garrett finally looked at Kyle. "You don't get it. I hit him, man."

"Oh shit, you mean, like, with your mom's car?"

"No, my fist."

Kyle stared out his window for a while, trying to make sense of it. He understood Garrett was scared. The kid never got in a fight his whole life, and now he had. It was normal to be scared, but they had gone from simple-joyride to stolen-car-on-the-run scared.

Garrett was six-three, two hundred pounds. He shouldn't have been afraid of anything. He should have been playing football. Maybe he could get himself a scholarship if he did. Then he'd be able to get away from the jokes, get away from the town. But Garrett didn't want any of that.

"Help me understand this, Gar. You hit Davey Brintz. Why?"

"He said something about Kas."

That pinch in Kyle's neck came back like it did every time he heard her name. He knew Kas wasn't the type he could go with. He did things. She didn't. That didn't stop the feeling Kyle got.

“What could he have possibly said about her?” The exits stopped coming so frequently. They were replaced by barbed wire fences skirting ranches that no one seemed to own. The Camry slipped between the jagged rocks of hillsides blown apart by dynamite decades ago.

“Said she tasted like pineapple,” Garrett said.

Kyle laughed. “I’m sorry, but come on. Was he saying he was kissing her and her mouth tasted like pineapple? Because if so, fuck him. Kas wouldn’t touch that motherfucker. And don’t even tell me he was talking about the other.”

Garrett nodded. “He did mean the other, man. Said it to my face. He said, ‘Kas tasted real good down there. Like pineapple.’”

That was the type of thing you don’t say about a guy’s girlfriend. Hitting Davey in the face was fair game, and Kyle was glad Garrett had done it.

“You know Davey’s full of shit, right? Kas wouldn’t touch him. Shit, you and Kas are so straight, the whole world knows you’re both waiting for marriage. You probably close your eyes when you take a piss just to make sure you don’t see your own dick. And I’m pretty sure Kas’s pops sewed her panties straight into her skin.”

Garrett didn’t laugh.

Kyle snuck a look at the speedometer. They weren’t going too fast yet, but Garrett was pushing it. Each time Garrett got upset, he pressed the accelerator down a little harder.

“I’m just messing with you. Davey Brintz is a fucking asshole. He deserved to get hit.”

“Yeah, but I killed him, man.” Garrett clenched and unclenched his jaw.

Kyle laughed. “Sure you did. You punched him and now he’s dead. Got it.”

“I’m serious,” Garrett said. He checked the rearview mirror then looked over his shoulder. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“What?” Kyle spun in his seat and saw the light bar flashing red and blue. He got that feeling in his stomach. It didn’t matter that he hadn’t done anything this time. It was like the first time he got busted for shoplifting. Picked up in the damn parking lot. He hadn’t even made it home with his score. His gut dropped then like it did now.

Garrett had just pressed down on the accelerator when Kyle said, “It’s just Border Patrol. You’re good, man.”

Garrett let off the gas pedal and leaned back in the seat. The white and green SUV passed them on the left, lights on but no siren. “Shit.”

Kyle watched Garrett breathe for a minute. His breaths went from quick and shallow, to slow and deep. “What was that?”

“I fucking told you, Kyle.”

“You didn’t kill Davey. It’s not possible. You probably just knocked him out.”

Garrett shook his head then started beating his hands against the steering wheel. “You didn’t see it, man. He’s dead.”

“OK, tell me about it then.”

“I hit him too hard. He went down right away with just one punch.”

“You’re a big guy, you should be proud of that punch.”

“No.”

“Why do you think he’s dead?”

Garrett rolled down the windows. The warm air spun around them, slapped at Kyle’s ears, tugged on Garrett’s hair. He took a deep breath, looked at Kyle for a second, then looked back to the road.

“Davey’s head hit the curb when he went down. We were down on Cholla Street, in front of his house. I just hit him once when he said what he said. That’s it.”

“Listen, man. If you saw his lights go out, it just means he’s knocked out. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“He’s not knocked out. You’d know if you had seen head.”

“What do you mean?” Kyle lit another cigarette.

“Right here.” Garrett ran a finger from his temple down to his cheekbone. “The entire side of Davey’s head hit the curb. His fucking eye socket caved in.”

“Jesus.”

“Blood started coming out his eye, his nose, his ear, and I just fucking ran.”

“Still, you don’t know he’s dead. They probably took him to UMC. They were able to save that guy after he fell from the sixth floor of the that hotel downtown last year. They’ll fix Davey up, no problem.”

Kyle wasn’t sure he believed that.

Garrett lifted the ballcap off his head, ran a hand through his sweaty hair, then pulled the cap on low across his brow. “He stopped breathing after he hit the curb. It was instant. He hit and he was dead.”

Kyle watched the mountains rise and fall on the horizon in step with the rhythm of the road. Like the desert was taking a nap, breathing in and out slowly. Garrett hadn’t said it, but Kyle understood what they were doing now. “Why the hell are you driving west? We live less than an hour from the Mexican border. You’re going to run? You run south.”

“So you think I should?”

“You already are, man. But I’m not sure where you’re trying to run to.”

“California. The beach. You’re coming, right?”

“You should turn around, head back. We’ll figure this out.”

Garrett shook his head and kept driving.

Kyle could go to California. He wondered if there was anything really holding him back. His mom barely spoke anymore, and when she did it came out all wrong, mixed up. He asked his dad to take her somewhere because of it, but he was too busy. He was pulling double shifts, not because they needed the money—mortgage on the trailer was paid. No, his old man worked the doubles because he liked being at work more than he liked being home.

Garrett didn’t have much holding him back either. After his dad finished the overnight at the mine, he worked part-time at the high school, coaching girls soccer. Kids at school all said the same thing: Garrett’s dad would get off from the mine then get off on watching high school girls kick balls around. Then there was Garrett’s mom. She volunteered at the mission on the reservation. She was an Indian lover, she’d gone native. Everyone at school said it, but Garrett never seemed to mind. In reality, there was only so much someone could shoulder. It was no wonder Garrett had snapped on Davey.

All this time, Kyle had been propping himself up on Garrett, but Garrett didn’t have anyone to lean against. You’re a piece of shit, Kyle thought.

“You can’t run to California.”

Garrett shook his head. “Well, I ain’t going to Mexico.”

“You think a seventeen-year-old kid with no money can make it on the run?”

“We can make it together.”

They came up on a rest stop, but Garrett didn’t even slow down. “If Davey’s dead, you know they’ll pick you up the first time you land on a security camera. First time you leave a fucking fingerprint anywhere.”

“No way,” Garrett said. “Never had my fingerprints taken.”

“You never had your prints taken? Are you fucking kidding me? What about sixth grade. Mrs. Lettle’s class. The D.A.R.E. cop took all our prints.”

“That was just for fun. To show us what it was like.”

“Where do you think those prints end up? It was their chance to get us on record. My old man took my prints the minute he started working county. Difference there was he didn’t lie about what he was doing. Told me he wanted to find my dumb ass the minute I fucked up.”

Garrett made a noise like he was clearing his throat to speak. Then, he rolled up the windows and turned on the A.C.

“Well I can’t go back. I killed someone—”

“What about Kas, huh?”

“I don’t know. What’d she do with Davey? Why’d Davey say that?”

“He’s an asshole. Kas didn’t do anything with him. I promise you.”

Garrett squeezed his eyes shut longer than Kyle was comfortable with. When he opened them, he said, “I couldn’t shake the thought of it. His fucking mouth on her down there. I just swung. Didn’t think.”

“Welcome to my world, buddy.”

Only Garrett wasn’t in Kyle’s world. Garrett should be back home, applying to college and finishing school. He and Kas should be getting ready to go to some college far away. The only shot Garrett had was to turn around and face it all.

If that didn’t work though, Kyle didn’t know what would happen.

They rode in silence for a long time. Kyle spotted the sign for the next rest stop ten miles away. “Hey man, I have to take a piss. Let’s hit that rest stop.”

“No way, we can’t stop.”

“Garrett, no one is on you now. Hell, I’m not sure anyone would ever even know you did this. We can afford a fucking piss break.”

“All right, damnit.”

At the rest stop, Garrett stayed in the Camry while Kyle got out. Kyle didn’t need to go, but he went into the bathroom anyway. Standing in front of the faded mirror covered in graffiti, he wondered what it would look like to be on the right side for a change. He thought about playing video games in Garrett’s house, playing basketball in the park. Then he thought about every time Garrett kept him from doing something he shouldn’t. The car he almost broke into, the fight he didn’t end up having, the meth he wanted to try but didn’t because Garrett flushed it.

Kyle ran the water in the sink, but he didn’t wash his hands. He just listened to the sound of it hitting the metal basin. He needed Garrett to turn around and head home. That wouldn’t happen if Kyle rode with him to California.

Back out by the car, Kyle leaned into the window. The sun was high and his shadow stretched across the roof. Garrett had given up on the hat, and it hung across the top of the shifter.

“Let’s go back,” Kyle said.

“What? No. I can’t. You’re leaving me?”

“No, I’m not. We just need to head back. Like I said, I’m not even sure the police will know it was you. How would they?”

“They’ll find out. Or Kas will. Someone will know what I did to Davey.”

“If they’re going to find out, they’ll find out with or without you there. At least if you’re there, you can tell your side. Get out in front of it.”

“No, fuck that.”

Kyle started to reach in to pull Garrett from the car, but he stopped. “I can’t go with you to California. That’s it, so let’s head back home and figure this out. Just show me that Davey’s actually dead, then we’ll figure it out.”

Garrett spun the Dodgers cap around on the shifter. He mopped his head with the back of his hand. Tapped the steering wheel. Then, he turned to Kyle and shook his head. “I would have been there for you, man. You know that.”

“I am here—” Kyle slipped off the edge of the car as Garrett threw it into reverse and backed out of the parking spot, kicking up gravel.

Garrett sped off without another look. Kyle stood in the middle of the parking lot and watched the Camry disappear on the horizon. He kicked at the gravel in the lot before walking back to the sidewalk and sitting down. He stared out at the freeway, watching the cars pass by.

Permission
By Margaret Karmazin

She wasn't sure how long it had been going on - eight months to a year maybe. Before that, she'd been reasonably content with Carter and further back definitely so, but somewhere, somehow, the pleasure had worn off. When she looked back, it was as if she had morphed into someone else.

He was crying now, sitting on the edge of their bed in his boxer briefs, his legs pasty compared to his upper body. His tummy bulged a little, something she would have thought endearing a year before, but now found unattractive. His dark blond hair was box cut at the back and this too, she used to love looking at and running her fingers through, straight up the back of his head. But now she had about as much desire for it as she would the hair of a total stranger.

"I know it sounds cruel," she said, "but it's not the end of the world. A lot of people go through this sort of thing; I read about it online. Entire message boards are devoted to it. It doesn't mean the people don't love each other; it's just something that happens."

He muttered something.

"What?" she said. Her stomach clenched.

He turned his head to look at her, his normally slate colored eyes appearing a rather intense blue. "The ol' it's-not-you-it's-me bullshit," he said.

She tossed her head, as if innocently driven to exasperation. "I don't know what else to say. Would you rather I kept pretending to feel what I don't and sneak around behind your back?"

"I would rather," he said sharply, "that my wife continued to love and respect our marriage and remembered her wedding vows."

Liza thought a moment before speaking. "Carter, I don't *want* to leave you. I just want to experience some variety in my sex life. You were my first but I wasn't *your* first. I don't think it's fair that you got to see what sex was like with other people and I never did. Of course you can be monogamous now without much strain - *you've* had sex with how many women was it? Seven? Eight? I'm sure you cut the number down anyway to make me feel better."

"It was seven," he snapped. "I told you the truth."

They had met at the community college where Carter now taught general and abnormal psychology. He was two years older than she was and had been her first and only lover.

She sniffed. "Well, my number was zero." She paused and crossed her arms. "And I'm not *happy* with that number."

* * *

Discussions followed, one optimistically over glasses of Chardonnay that ended in sobs, two over coffee (resulting in screaming) and one outside on the deck with Carter jumping into his Toyota and screeching out of the driveway. Finally, things calmed down and they worked out the rules of the game. Since they did not yet have children, these appeared to be feasible, though Carter was harboring fantasies of hiring a hit man.

"Don't do it, bro," his friend Greg told him a couple of days later in The Wasted Snail, where they were in the habit of meeting on Thursdays while Liza and Greg's wife Brie took a yoga class. "People who do that always get caught."

"I wasn't serious," said Carter, though a little part of him was.

"If I were you," said Greg, "I'd probably start divorce proceedings." Probably, thought Carter, his friend was nervous. Brie might start getting ideas herself; these things could be catching.

"I'm seeing a lawyer, just to learn my options. But in the meantime, I'm 'allowed' to get myself a lover. Not to fall in love, but just to have sex with."

"Uh huh," said Greg, sipping his pilsner. He had flicks of foam in his mustache.

"Seriously, that's how she put it."

"Clearly, she knows shit about extramarital affairs."

"Like you know a lot?" said Carter.

"Well, I know that governing one's emotions is not always a given."

Carter drank and thought about this.

"Do you have someone in mind?" asked Greg after a while.

Carter hesitated before speaking. "There's the department head secretary," he said. "She's about twenty-four and edgy. One arm half tattooed and a silver stud in her nostril, you know the type. Maybe she'd be one of those Manic Pixie Dream Girls like in the movies or, on the other hand she'd give me gonorrhea. Her type doesn't really appeal to me though."

"What about that econ prof you mentioned once?"

"The tall redhead? She just got married."

"Well, someone will turn up, don't worry. And stop wallowing in misery. At least your wife has given you *permission* to do what most guys just dream of!"

Carter felt his eyes grow wet and turned away so Greg wouldn't see. "I totally don't want to do this," he said softly.

* * *

The first for Liza was Justin, the new graphics guy at work. This went on for a couple of months. He was twenty-five to her thirty-two, which at first was interesting but then palled. "Amazing what a mere six years can mean in life experience," she told her confidant, Emily, over a martini after work. "His enthusiasm was cheering at first and I enjoyed the acrobatics, but there was a certain lack of finesse. Not that Carter is full of finesse, but at least he knows where body parts are."

"You need an older man," said Emily.

"Have you ever had one?" asked Liza.

"Not actually, but I have friends who have."

"How old exactly?"

Emily considered. "I'd say in the range of forty to fifty. Not beyond that unless he's a health nut but that could bring its own problems."

"I'll think about it," said Liza.

What she had not shared with Emily (and certainly not with Carter) was how *annoying* Justin had been. All his incessant jabbering; his incredible self-centered assumption that anything he had to say was worth her listening to! Did the women his age fix him with glistening eyes and clamp their mouths shut while he blithered on? If they did, she said to herself, it had to be that they were hoping he'd marry them or at the very least suggest they move in together. But a woman who had no designs on him could not possibly endure such tedium for long.

Liza shook her head remembering his spiel on the best restaurants in town, depending on how many fermented foods they offered, this as they lay spent and sticky on his questionably clean bed in his definitely not clean apartment. OMG, she wanted to scream, who on earth *gives a fuck?*

So now they avoided eye contact at work and meantime Carter had moved into the guestroom and she and he never made love anymore. But she wouldn't let herself think about that, at least not now.

Besides, she hadn't been feeling up to par. Nothing she could put her finger on, a bit of fever and achy joints, especially her elbows and wrists. She hoped she wasn't getting carpal tunnel from all the keyboarding she did at her job.

The following Friday after work, as was their custom and for which Carter used to join them, Liza and Emily went out for tapas.

"Once again, no Carter," remarked Emily to which Liza gave no reply. She had reluctantly admitted to her friend that he no longer slept in the same bedroom.

Emily's boss, a jovial extrovert named Todd, approached their table accompanied by an older man. "I want you guys to meet my father," he said and proceeded to introduce the man. "Just flew in from Columbus," he added.

Liza and the man locked eyes before he was led away by his exuberant son.

"Well, well," said Emily. "Like I didn't see that."

Liza frowned. "How old is he? How old is Todd for crying out loud?"

"My boss, believe it or not, is only twenty-four. He looks thirty-five, but no. So Handsome there might be forty-five to fifty-five. Not too shabby, I'd say. Remember what we talked about. Todd must have gotten his mediocre looks from his mother. They're divorced, by the way."

Liza didn't comment but the next week, Emily slipped her a card. "This is from him. He's in the process of moving back here. He wants to see you."

Liza could not help feeling a rush of pleasure. The warmth "down there" was so intense that she had to shift in her chair. She understood now why they referred to animals as being "in heat." As soon as she was alone, she called the number.

"Erik Gundersen," he answered. His voice was a bit too high for complete sex appeal, but his attitude got to her. An easy assurance, which she later realized was a cocky assumption that she'd most likely call, but by the time she'd figured that out, she was under his spell.

Emily was right about an older man knowing how to please a woman or at least how to bring her to orgasm. He was also meticulous with his grooming and kept the lighting dim so their couplings were more sensual. He knew how to make it all about her, while younger men were mostly about themselves. When with him, she occasionally missed discussing current music and other media events from the perspective of her contemporaries, though she quickly forgot about that while being physically adored. Everything to do with love of husband and the easygoing friendship she and Carter had once shared seemed to fly out the window.

* * *

The Wasted Snail was unusually crowded for a Wednesday. Carter and Greg had decided to take a longish lunch since for Carter it was spring break at the community college and Greg's boss was on a business trip to the Coast. "While the cat's away," said Greg,

"In my case, it's the mice," said Carter. He'd grown somewhat numb to feeling totally rejected and was once again able to joke, though at night he often still cried in the guest room. He could, however, feel himself moving through stages and could imagine, if not actually see, a distant light at the end of the tunnel.

"So, have you found a target yet?"

Carter hesitated. Did he want Greg running back to Brie with his private disclosures? That's what married people did; he used to tell Liza pretty much everything. Now while he and Liza still made dinner together, chopping away at vegetables, sautéing in olive oil, then chowing down on high stools at the kitchen counter, most of their conversation consisted of outrage at the current political scene. Liza was not forthcoming with information about her current sexual situation. What she didn't know was that Carter had hired a private investigator for a couple of days just for a bit of concrete information should things later come to a head legally. So he had in his possession, now safely ensconced in a safety deposit box, photographs of her and some geezer - good looking, but a geezer nonetheless.

Unable to resist answering his friend's question, he took a sip of his Heady Topper and said, "I've been talking to this woman at work, not the econ prof but, well, she's a student."

"Uh oh, bro. Trouble"

"Not a *student* student, but an adult. She's older than me actually - divorced and trying to get herself on another track. Says she's always wanted to become an experimental psychologist."

Greg shot him a sharp look. "What else does this person say?"

"I don't know what you mean. She talks about herself and other things like anyone does."

"And what do you talk about to her?"

Carter now wished he hadn't started this. He paused before going on. "I talk to her about anything I want."

"Your personal problems? About Liza?"

Carter didn't answer.

"Hey, I'm not judging you, dude. If I were in your situation, believe me I'd have found someone before this."

Carter sipped his beer.

"Are you attracted to her?" persisted Greg.

"Yes."

Long pause. "Did you fuck her?"

Another long pause.

"I'm going to take that as a yes," said Greg.

* * *

Within twenty-four hours, the information was relayed to Liza. "I felt you should know," finished up Brie.

"Well," said Liza, shrugging a little, "it's his right. I mean, it's our *deal*, so..."

"Don't you want to know what she's like?"

The thought hadn't immediately occurred to Liza, but now that she considered it, yes, she did. Of course she wouldn't admit this to Brie, especially since she couldn't help but detect a trace of glee in her friend's attitude.

"I don't think it matters," she said coolly.

"I found out her name," said Brie. "It's Kristin Green. She's thirty-six! And I think she's part Indian or something; at least she sort of looks like that. She wears a lot of silver and turquoise and has long black hair."

"How did you find all this out?" asked Liza drily.

"I have my ways. To get the name, I know someone in registration at the college and I looked for a female in one of Carter's classes who's older than he is because he mentioned that to Greg. As for how she looks, I parked in the parking lot outside Carter's building and waited for him to come out after work. They took off together in her car. Has he been maybe not coming home every night or at least not till late?"

Liza sighed and looked at the ceiling. As a matter of fact, he had seemed to stay out one night and he'd missed dinner two times last week. "I don't always notice," she lied. "Sometimes I don't get home till late myself. Maybe his car is in the garage and I don't bother to look."

"You're no longer sleeping together then," said Brie.

This was not something Liza would have chosen to reveal to this particular person, but now it had slipped out. "Um, not usually," she mumbled.

"That probably isn't good," said Brie. "Not if you have plans for the marriage to survive this experiment."

So this was how it was then, Liza said to herself after she got off the phone. He was going to “show her,” was he? Why did she feel that she wanted to smash his head in? After all, she had made Carter agree to this. She had no right whatsoever to object for any reason.

Briefly, Erik passed through her mind, her older man, her excellent lover, but he had begun to bore her. She’d noticed that he didn’t always smell so wonderful after all. Often he had pretty terrible breath. His days of doing it twice in one session had long expired. She suspected him of using Viagra, which, though she knew was perfectly reasonable given his age, seemed slightly insulting. She was used to men becoming interested by just looking at or talking to her and at the most inconvenient places and times.

In addition, she was sick to death of hearing how the country was going to the dogs. Movies weren’t good anymore, music sounded like noise, restaurants didn’t cook as well as they used to, people had no morals anymore. WTF? He was technically committing adultery and he had the audacity to make judgments about *morals*? She could rave on about things *his* generation had done and caused, for instance *global warming*? That plastic island in the Pacific the size of Texas? As far as she was concerned, her own generation was way more *moral* when it came to what actually mattered.

But thinking about her own generation led her to remember how evenings used to be with Carter, preparing their leisurely dinners while sipping wine and discussing everything from physics to celebrities. They’d analyzed movies and TV series as if those were real life. They gossiped deliciously about friends.

She felt her eyes tear up, experienced almost a punch to her gut. The way it used to be before she’d done what she’d felt at the time she had to do. And surely she *had* needed to do it or for the rest of her life, she would have wondered.

On top of her disillusionment with her older lover, Liza just wasn’t feeling well.

“You might have that thing going around,” Emily told her. “People say they can’t get rid of it.”

“That’s an upper respiratory infection,” said Liza. “I don’t have that.”

She went to see her doctor who ordered tests and a week later told her that most likely she had lupus. “There’s no single diagnostic test for systemic lupus,” he explained. “A variety of laboratory tests are used to detect physical changes or conditions in your body that can occur with lupus. We just have to make an educated guess.”

For several days after, she stayed home from work and hardly left the bedroom. Eventually, Carter noticed her absence and softly rapped on her door.

He heard mumbling from the other side and when nothing more happened, opened it and stepped into the gloom.

“What’s wrong?”

She told him. He didn’t say anything, but sat on the edge of the bed and gently rubbed her arm. She felt a terrible rush of emotion. How she had missed him.

“I’m sorry,” she said as she burst into almost painful weeping.

“Hardly your fault,” said Carter.

“No, I mean about the other thing.” The bed shook while she sobbed.

He crawled in next to her and took her in his arms.

“Will you forgive me?” she whispered.

“I don’t know,” he said, which only caused her to cry harder.

* * *

The truth was, he didn’t know if he could or would forgive her. But like her, he missed their old camaraderie and the comfort of their former physical closeness. However, he truly enjoyed the

freshness and stimulation of talking with Kristin. Their experiences with their mates were similar and Kristin had once shared his sense of humiliation but moved beyond it. Their sex was mediocre, at first interesting because it was with someone new, but soon he'd realized that it was never going to rise above a certain degree of pleasure because he sensed that underneath, she wasn't the kind of person who really needed sex.

He was no longer sure what love was. But he had some idea that it did involve not abandoning a wife to fight this illness alone.

The Telescope
Philip Barbara

It was just before noon on Saturday and Vesuvio's Pizzeria was already packed with teenagers. Hugh mentally repeated his son's words as he waited in line: "Don't forget your change." As though Hugh's Alzheimer's was that far along. It wasn't, he thought. Still, he repeated the phrase like a mantra while Lee waited outside for him, the car idling at the curb.

The line to the counter was long, and Hugh gazed around the room as he waited. In the corner of the restaurant was a pinball machine. He recognized it as The Jungle Queen, an older game with a rolling digit counter he used to play as a kid. It reminded him of a girl in college he'd dated who'd shared a likeness with the Jungle Queen: shoulder-length dirty blond hair, tan skin, and the muscular legs of a male athlete. He remembered her as a girl who swung her arms freely when she walked and spent everything she earned. Hugh had been just one of her bedmates. Looking now across the room at the cartoon version of her, he wondered whether the years had tamed her as they had him. Damned if he could remember her name.

Hugh walked over to the machine and slid a dollar bill into the slot. The machine rang to life and the digit counter reset to zero. There was a loud knock as a silver ball rose to a chute. Hugh pulled back the spring-loaded silver knob and released it. The ball punched forward and began its haphazard descent, pinging and angling back and forth between the bumpers, an amplified chime sounding in time with a synchronized frenzy of lights. Hugh was entranced by the sensory explosion. He swung his hips to the right to nudge the entire machine that way, to coax the ball to a flipper, then to the right again, then swung his hips to the left, as he slapped the ball back up again. At age 65, it took more energy to keep the ball rolling than when he was a kid. When the final ball slipped into the bowels of the machine, it fell silent and its lights shut off. Hugh took out another dollar bill and inserted it into the slot.

Lee broke his concentration. "Did you win a replay?"

"Not yet," Hugh grunted, realizing he'd lost track of time.

"Where's the pizza?"

Forget the change? Heck, he forgot to order the pie. Was it early-stage Alzheimer's at work?

A half-hour later, strapped back into Lee's car with a hot pizza box in his lap, Hugh tried to recall the year he'd won a pinball tournament. "You remember my plaque?" he asked Lee, thinking of the one that had proclaimed him the "Pinball Champ." It was 1969, he suddenly recalled, the year he graduated high school. For years the plaque hung above the basement bar in their home, but now it was in storage along with everything else Hugh and his late wife Anita had accumulated during their years together.

Lee parked in his garage and pulled from the car a long, narrow box. Hugh eyed it warily but said nothing. They had to take an elevator to Lee's apartment, the penthouse where Hugh now lived. It was a corner unit of a high-rise built atop a stone ridge, from which there were commanding views of the New Jersey meadows to the west, along with the factories and power stations, truck depots and suburbs beyond, and the Hudson River to the north.

Lee pulled from the box a kit for a telescope, and as they ate the pizza, he assembled it. "The doctor said this will be good for you," he said. "You'll be able to see your old stomping grounds. It will help you make connections."

"Looks like fun," Hugh said.

When he was done, Lee raised a gesturing hand to the instrument and said, "Go ahead, find the clubhouse."

From their height, Hugh had a God's eye view. The chill November air left the sky clear and still. He peered into the eyepiece and gently moved the telescope in concentric circles, searching. Then he panned north until he found the golf and country club where he had once worked as a

lifeguard over the summers in high school. The swimming pool was empty now, a placid blue square. But in his mind he could see the girl, a club member's daughter, who dove in topless late one night after a party, an image that never left him. He moved the telescope to sight in next on the seventh green, where he and that same girl had sex on the lush apron between the sand traps. He could remember every detail of that event, and yet her name escaped him.

Hugh spent most of the next day looking through the telescope. Outside the windows lay every place he had ever known. In the distance was the small Jersey town where he'd earned a baseball scholarship to a state college, where he met his wife Anita, and settled down in a quiet suburb to raise their son. He followed several lines of commuter trains, sleek silver coaches as they cut through meadows and headed for Manhattan. The very trains Hugh had commuted on for thirty-five years. The trains, he considered, had been central to his life. Before Lee was born, Anita used to meet him in the city on Friday nights for dinner and a show. Then they rode home together. When Lee was a toddler, Anita would bring him to wait on the platform. Hugh would step down from the coach and scoop his son high into the air before holding him close, his face nuzzled against his son's soft neck. Lee had delighted in all of this, the trains coming and going, Hugh's homecoming.

The telescope placed Hugh squarely in the present as well as the past. Everywhere he looked were visions of things that were there but also no more. It made him feel like life was slipping quickly by.

He'd worked, until only three years ago, at an advertising agency. He was in middle management, but he'd enjoyed the job, the trips in and out of Manhattan. At Christmas that final year, though, he had a strange episode. At dinner with friends he'd praised Lee for unachieved distinctions, saying his son had been a cracker-jack high school baseball player scouted by the Yankees, when in fact Lee had been demoted to the bench for weak hitting. A month later, at their annual Super Bowl party, Hugh couldn't recall the names of their long-time neighbors. Anita took him to the doctor.

It was only early stage Alzheimer's and Anita quickly signed Hugh up for Spanish lessons and ballroom dancing, anything to keep his mind firing. They became closer than they had been in years, and he told her how lucky he was to have her. But she had been a lifelong cigarette smoker and drank several glasses of wine every day, and it was her health that failed first. After she died of cancer, Hugh struggled with being alone. That was last winter. At night, the rumbling ignition of the furnace would wake him. He lay in bed, aware of the creeping drip of silence, ever deepening his loneliness. It was because of this, and his increasing forgetfulness, that he moved in with Lee. For months he was aimless in his new home and spent long spells gazing out the windows, even with Lee present. Then Lee bought the telescope.

One day Hugh easily located the Hackensack River snaking through the Jersey meadows. On it he found the Aratusa, a century-old yacht moored and padlocked. It had been a floating supper club for several years, with shining oak plank floors and polished brass fittings. Cut-glass mirrors above the ornate bar gave it a baronial feel. On Valentine's Day in 1975, Hugh had reserved a table just off the dance floor where he and Anita, then still just sweethearts, had danced and drank and ate for hours. Afterward, he helped Anita with her winter coat and they stepped out onto the canopied gangplank and into the cold. They weren't prepared for the ice. Steam venting from the boat had frozen into a thin crust along the gangplank and railing. Anita slipped and plunged into the water. It was only a few feet deep, but she couldn't move in her water-soaked coat. Hugh shed his own coat and jumped in to steady her. A doorman tossed them a life ring, and with the help of two limo drivers, lifted them out. Back inside, several female diners took Anita to the ladies room to change. The maître d' gave Hugh his street clothes, and Hugh changed and waited at the bar. Anita reappeared, also dressed in donations—a cook's white pants and a patron's exquisite sweater. Hugh was quietly sipping a hot toddy, and when Anita rejoined him they became the focal point of the crowd. Someone else bought them cognacs. There was one man in a tux who Hugh never forgot.

He kept winking at Hugh. He didn't say anything at first, just kept winking. Then he finally put his round, greasy face up to Hugh's ear and whispered, "Hey champ, she's yours now. Champ, she'll follow you anywhere."

Saving the life of the woman he loved made Hugh realize their relationship would be eternal. He got down on his knee and proposed. They were married for 38 years.

"I found the Aratusa," he said when Lee checked in with him by phone. "It's abandoned. Not even a gangplank."

But after 10 years of marriage, Anita's body was as familiar to him as the baseball diamond he'd spent every afternoon practicing on in high school. There was nothing left to discover. In his mid-thirties, he began taking greater notice of the interest shown him by younger women at his office, all of them educated and well turned-out, perfumed and, he sensed, curious. They went with him at lunchtime to purchase take-out and, when a few colleagues went for the customary after-work drinks on Thursday, these women slid in next to him at the bar. Once a girl asked him if he enjoyed casual sex. Another invited him to her East Side apartment for a quick dinner, quick enough that he could still grab the last express back to Jersey. These casual encounters always left him wondering. He burned for more of them, but he always took the train home. It was hard to remain faithful in Manhattan.

A few days later, while Hugh waited for Lee to arrive home from work, he sighted in on the same rail station where his wife and son had waited for him long ago. The station's neo-Gothic style in white stone and its three-story clock tower rising above the town center made it easy to find, even though it was about five miles away. He watched for a certain woman, one he had often thought about, even more often since Anita's death. She commuted to the city for years, and they would sit together. He'd known her name and, damn it all, he could not remember it now. The thought of her began to consume him. He watched at 5:30 p.m. for the surge of pedestrians emerging from the station, and then dispersing. He was certain he would be able to recognize her once the crowd thinned, even from a distance. Then he'd watch the next train arrive and depart. Perhaps she'd taken a later train, had dinner in the city. Then he'd watch the train station for the entire evening rush hour. He began watching for her in the mornings too. He did this to the end of one work week and then the first days of the next. The telescope helped him pass the time.

She was only a woman in a crowd, of course, but she used to greet him nearly every morning and many evenings and more often than not had taken the seat next to him, as though their seats had been assigned. He knew her story. She was a manager at a merchant bank who left to have a son. She stayed at home until her son began kindergarten and then returned to work, rising to become an executive. She had a husband and a fine, happy home, until one day she didn't. Her divorce left her cynical about marriage. She told Hugh that she only wanted to keep moving forward. Every morning she was splendidly dressed and cheerful, even in the cruelest winter weather. She carried a brown leather Schlesinger attaché case that bulged with paper. Even now he could recall the luscious scent of her perfume; when he inquired about it, she had leaned toward him, smiled and whispered "Chanel." Oh how he longed to see her now. Finding her gave him a purpose. He almost thought to tell Lee, but worried how it might sound, this fixation on a woman who was not Anita. He decided to keep it to himself, for now.

It wasn't so long ago that he had last seen her, about three years. So much had happened since then. He'd commuted with her long enough to watch her hair slowly silver. Now Hugh's obsession was motivating, and it gave him new energy each morning. To hell with Alzheimer's, he thought, he was a new man, a young man. He was virile and he had desires. He wanted to inhale her perfume again, so fresh in the morning and barely recognizable at night. He could all but conjure her beautifully manicured nails clutching the morning paper. There had been so many silent mornings spent reading as the coach gently rolled on to the city. He wanted to cup those hands in his own. He wanted other things too, things he wanted back then but was afraid of—not for fear of

losing Anita and Lee, though he did fear that, but because he didn't want to ruin the dependable, dreamlike sojourn on the train, the very thing that made commuting, year after year, bearable. Hugh sensed a commotion in his body as he positioned the telescope, a surging appreciation of the possibilities that he had long denied himself.

The next day, on Wednesday, Hugh had a clear memory. She always took the earlier train on Thursdays, the day of the week her company's division heads met at eight. Hugh asked Lee to drive him to the station the next morning before their usual breakfast. When his son asked why, Hugh felt so sure of what he wanted that he opened up and explained he wanted to meet an old commuting companion, a woman.

"What woman? It's so early."

"A lady I got to know well over the years riding to work."

"You've known her for years? Did Mom know her? Did you all get together for dinner or something—you and Mom, this lady and her husband?"

"She's single."

Lee's eyes widened. "Mom had told me there had come a time when you had begun coming home late every Thursday. Were you seeing this woman?"

"Never. Not once. We only rode together. But I want to see her now."

"Have you spoken to her?"

"No. I just want to see her...and...well, maybe even speak with her."

"Why?"

"Curiosity. To see what develops. Companionship, maybe."

"Why don't you just call and invite her to dinner?"

"I don't know how to reach her. And I'm not ready for dinner."

It was silent for a moment. Then Lee said, "You want a relationship? Dad, you'd be asking her to take on a big responsibility, at your age and with your forgetfulness."

"Hey, you're in this too. You bought the telescope. If I use it to see a beautiful woman, shouldn't you be cheering me on?" He stopped there, unwilling to say what he now admitted to himself: I missed my chances years ago, this may be my last one.

The next morning they rose early. After a quick cup of tea they got ready to leave. Hugh went straight for the door as Lee put on a jacket.

"It's November. You need a coat," Lee said.

Hugh grabbed his coat and rode with Lee to the station. "Let me have your cell phone," Lee said. He punched in the penthouse address. "If you forget our address, it's in here. Call me as soon as you get home," he said before continuing on to his own office. Hugh took a window seat at the diner across the street sipping coffee, his eyes looking out over the rim of the cup. He looked up the macadam path that ran across the manicured lawn and to the commuter parking lot. Years before, she had driven to the station each morning and parked there, and he expected to see her approaching from the lot. He watched the stream of neatly-dressed office workers file toward the station and, when they reached the curb, split off in different directions—to Starbucks, to the dry cleaners, to the station. Only when the faces turned away from the path could he clearly view the next person. Still, she didn't show. Seven o'clock. Seven-thirty. He must have missed her. Or had her appearance changed so much that he didn't recognize her? He wondered, too, if it was his Alzheimer's.

But then there she was. She came from a different direction, suddenly close enough that if it not for the glass between them, Hugh might have called out to her. She was dressed as he remembered: in a smart charcoal grey pinstriped woman's business suit and a silver button-down blouse, the color nearly matching her hair. Her hair had a few stylish streaks of blond that must have been a salon's touch. Her face showed no expression, no strain from early-morning haste or worry about her meeting. She stepped into the station and disappeared.

Hugh hailed a taxi and didn't hesitate to read Lee's address aloud from his cell. He felt angry and he thought, I should have slept with her when I had the chance. Her scent in the morning had intoxicated him, and he'd fantasize about her during the quiet, bored moments alone in his office. She liked him and had looked for him at the station and openly talked about herself. She asked him about the events of his day and wanted to know more than his agenda; she wanted to know his impressions, his analysis. She never invited Anita and him over for dinner, which suggested to him that she hadn't wanted to meet his wife. He didn't want her to meet Anita, either, and was afraid it might tip off his feelings.

Riding in the taxi, his imagination surged. He visualized going to dinner with her twice a week, at least to start. He'd ask her the name of her favorite flower and would make sure the maitre'd at her favorite restaurant placed a bouquet of them at their table. She'd smile across the table. This scene as it played out in his mind's eye made him happy. He didn't forget about the Alzheimer's, but in his fantasy he believed that she'd make him forget about his disease.

Then his memory sparked. Georgette. That was her name. The doctor had told him this would sometimes happen, this clarity, and it did. Georgette Stanton. He clenched his first and smiled. Georgette. He typed her name into his phone, just in case he forgot again.

His memory may have become spotty, but he hadn't forgotten any woman he'd ever really loved or had thought about constantly. Each love affair made him see his world differently. Perhaps his sweet sixteen love, Lorry, had only taught him to kiss. But his first live-in lover, Jacqueline, had opened his eyes to new things. She made him a better listener, and he saw things that had always been in his periphery. That's the way it was with every subsequent relationship. When Georgette spoke to him on the train, after sitting so close to him, he listened intently and followed every word as he trained his eye out the coach at the passing scenery. Recalling this, he realized how much he'd adored her.

What he wanted, Hugh realized, was to fall in love again. To feel once more the thrill and wonder of new romance. Was it possible? Would love at 65 be nothing more than a thoroughly hashed-out negotiation with a new partner? "We'll take care of one another; we'll be good company. We'll enjoy the quiet of the evenings together," he imagined saying. Would they also get wild now and then? It was terrible being alone at night after Anita died. And now, he thought, I'm free. My heart is not weak.

The thought again lifted his spirits. Before Lee bought the telescope, Hugh had felt trapped in the penthouse. He had no diversions. He despised the chatter of morning television shows and the false melodrama of the afternoon soaps. The news on the cable channels was disturbing. He didn't own a car any longer and none of his old buddies lived nearby. Lee had asked the doorman to keep an eye on him when he went for a walk, but even that wasn't much of a diversion. Walking around the suburban neighborhood only deepened his sense of isolation. On street after street, no one was home; parents were at work and the children were at school. The notion that he could stride down the street in the nude and no one would notice depressed him.

But the telescope had provided a spark. The afternoon couldn't pass fast enough. Hugh paced around the condo and didn't follow the plot on a television movie. As five o'clock neared, the intervals between his glances at the clock shortened. Then Lee surprised him by coming home early.

"How'd it go? See your mystery woman?"

"Yes. Looked just as I imagined. I could have called to her but she appeared too quickly. Surprised me. I hesitated, and she crossed the street."

Lee walked slowly to the telescope. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," he said, placing a hand on the eyepiece and swiveling the instrument aimlessly, changing its line of sight.

"What are you doing?" Hugh said in a sharp tone, going to the telescope. "You're ruining my schedule."

“You have a schedule? Schedule for what?”

“I don’t have time to waste. I’m going to watch every train tonight until I see her again,” Hugh said. Lee stepped away.

Hugh reset his focus on the station. He watched several trains arrive and the passengers disperse. Then he saw a woman who looked like her step out of the station. A car that had been in a waiting line of cars moved up to greet her and she got in and disappeared.

Hugh stepped away and looked down at the floor.

“What’s the matter?” Lee asked. Hugh didn’t answer. He puzzled over the scene at the station. He couldn’t see the driver’s side. Curious thing, wasn’t it? Who had picked her up? Her grown son maybe. He had no way of knowing. Or maybe it wasn’t her. Maybe he had applied his memory of her to some other woman—it was impossible to tell from this distance. But at least he knew her train arrived at 5:50 p.m.

The next evening, Hugh took a cab to the station, and by 5:00 p.m. was at the same diner window seat. He had shaved, put on nice slacks, a jacket and tie, just as he had all those years he commuted. She’d recognize him, he was sure, and ran a scenario in his mind. He’d act surprised, say hello and then offer to take her for a drink. He waited as a wave of men and women in business suits emerged from the station and then, a few minutes later, as another wave rolled through. Many got into cars waiting for them. At 5:50 p.m., another group of commuters emerged from the station. Hugh watched a man hold the door for a woman trailing him. It was her. She smiled and said something, surely thanking him. Then the same car as the evening before moved up and she ducked into it. He could see now a man behind the wheel and he saw how she smiled at him, as she had so often smiled at Hugh. He saw her lean over to kiss the man. She kissed him on the lips. And she held her eyes a few inches from his as he spoke. It was a tableau of intimacy. Reflexively, Hugh looked away as the car drove off.

He had believed her when she told him, long ago, that she felt little need for another man in her life. But Hugh understood the habit, all too human, of falling in love.

An hour later, back at Lee’s, Hugh stood at the tall windows and looked out at the evening world with the naked eye. The little drama that had made his mind race was over. He felt deflated. The telescope had brought him, briefly, a glimpse of a future and the thrill of possibility, a last chance at love, all now lost. There would be no gaze from her, no smile across a table, no perfume or companionship. He was alone. He would be alone. The view outside now was only a sprawl that, without the telescope, was a wash of color and shape, miniature buildings and trees whose details could only be imagined. He was done looking that way. He picked up the telescope’s tripod and reset it to look north, up the Hudson. In the evening darkness he could only see a long suspension bridge. The lights along the cables that swung down from the towers were like a string of pearls, glimmering and flawless, just like the strand he had given Anita after Lee was born.

Fragile Mountains
Thomas Cannon

Jon left Sidney leaning on the fender of his truck as he ran to catch Day. Her three-year-old son's legs still had a stumble to them, but he was fast. Before Jon could catch him, he had traversed the dormant grass and was climbing on the first crumbles of the ice shove.

John took in the ridge of ice along the shoreline of the lake. "Sidney, I bet the ice shove is twenty feet high," he called out, but she hadn't budged from the truck and didn't respond. He glared at her as she stood with her arms crossed because this had been her idea, but he knew better than to remind her of that. Instead, he let it be another weight on the scale telling him to leave her. The only thing was that her black bangs against her forehead and her long body, tall enough to crook her arm onto the hood of his big four wheel drive, stirred his love for her.

He turned back to Day who was asking him something. "Mommy coming, Poppa?"

"Yeah, Buddy. I think in a moment." He picked the boy up and carried him so that Day didn't have to touch the ice to steady himself.

"Let's go to the top." The ice crumbled and gave way with each step, but he kept Day steady. The boy was against him and a reassuring weight in his arms, so he was in no hurry to get to the top. Down at the fire station, he had a reputation for being able to scramble. He had short legs and a gut, but he was as quick as anyone in the department. Today, though, he was just going for sure-footed.

They had ended last night with everything left to say. Or rather, she had. He had no doubt Sidney was a strong person. She moved out of her abusive parents' house at sixteen, graduated high school early, and then put herself through college while working fulltime in the forestry department for the city. She kept her job even while caring for Day by herself for his first year of life. She had handled her husband, David, dying. But he also knew that she was afraid of getting hurt like that again.

"Day, we're on top of the world." He felt a chubby hand on the back of his neck. "Aren't we, David?" He called the boy his full name to poke what he thought should be a tender area. He wouldn't want to take what she had with her husband away from her, but it made him wonder how much easier things would be if Day didn't remind her of her dead husband.

"We're almost touching the sky," Day answered. Then he plastered a wet kiss on John's cheek.

He turned back to see Sidney coming towards them. Sometimes he saw her taking care of the trees around the city. She'd be in her orange vest and hair pulled through a baseball cap, moving with velocity. Now she was a reluctant bride marching toward them. He thought about making her come up to them, but Day was squirming to be set down, so he jumped skidded back down the ice.

"Mama, mountains."

"Yes, Day. Both of you be careful. That ice is too fragile to play around on it."

Jon was standing on the last few inches of ice and Day was holding his pants. "In a contest between you and the ice shoves, who'd be colder?" he asked her after neither said anything.

"In a contest between the ice and your head, which is denser?" she responded.

There were other people on the ice shoves taking pictures and breathing in the spring, crystal-clean air. Jon told her, "I didn't mean to start a fight. I just didn't know what else to say."

"And that's the best you came up with?" She kicked a piece of ice. "Just tell me if you're leaving or staying."

"You couldn't possibly tell me if you wanted me to stay or not?"

"It's up to you." She had her arms folded tight against her body. She shivered. Coolness diffused out from the ice, but it was a nice spring day, so Jon couldn't figure out how she could be so cold. "Because I'm not the one saying this is not working."

He scooped Day up and set him down on the frozen ground. Not knowing what else to do, he picked up a chunk of ice and let it drop to the ground. Day laughed to see it shatter.

"I'm not saying I don't want things to be better, Jon. I don't know what you want from me."

He picked up a larger piece of ice and let it crash to the ground. "I don't want anything from you. I just want you to tell me what's going on."

"What do you mean? Nothing's going on. Except that you keep inventing stuff to be mad at me about. You're too sensitive. It makes you controlling."

"Could we talk about this once without arguing?"

She looked at him, pursed her lips so hard she had lip wrinkles like a smoker. "You can't tell me it's over and then want to talk about it."

"I don't want to leave. I have to."

"Obviously you—Where's Day?" Sidney scanned the base of the ice shove, twisting her head back and forth.

"He was right here." Jon thought she was avoiding the conversation until she turned completely around to scan the rest of the park. Then he felt her panic. She turned again and ran along the ice shove. He jogged in the opposite direction. "Day," he called out.

Sidney screamed his name. "Day! Day! Davey!"

Sidney scrambled up onto the ice shove. But Jon passed her in giant strides. At the top, he saw Day right away. He had walked out onto the ice and was standing a foot away from open water. Jon skidded down the side of the ice shove, thinking of his training that told him not to put himself in a situation where two people would have to be rescued.

He stopped and then without taking his eyes off Day, he reached out so that he caught Sidney as she tried to run by. "Stop," he told her. He held her as tight as he could for a moment. Then he crouched. "Day, buddy. Come here."

Jon reached out to him. Day looked at him and giggled.

Then Day noticed the look on his mom's face. "Come here, right now, Day," Sidney yelled out. She couldn't stop herself and Jon couldn't blame her.

But he knew what Day's reaction would be. Day stopped giggling and took a step back.

The ice cracked and then cracked again.

"Day!" She clamped her hands to her mouth, but she had already screamed. Day backed away another step.

Jon ran in a big arch toward Day and then leaped out, grabbed Day into the air with him before landing on his back. Instantly the ice gave way and both were sinking into the water. Jon felt Day's rib cage and his breathing. He felt the life force of the boy as held him up. Day was one when he began dating Sidney. He had missed the midnight feedings and even the diapers. Sidney had him potty trained by then. Suddenly there was this frenzied energy of boy in his life and he had found it amazing.

The coldness of the water hit his body. The coldness scared him. It was eating him alive as it tried to get to the boy. If both went under, Jon knew he wouldn't have the skills to hold Day and save himself. Feeling each second giving him fewer options, Jon used his shoulders on the breaking ice as a fulcrum and flung Day over his head and toward Sidney.

The force caused him to slide into the water. He thought that it wouldn't be deep, but he could not find bottom. There was just his heart pounding, his heavy clothes pulling at his limbs, and the cold.

The cold and darkness.

He burst to the surface and flayed himself at the ice. He felt the panic as he slipped back down, but then calmed himself by imagining what he would tell a civilian to do as he stood on the shore. He kicked off his boots. Then, floating for a moment, he found what looked to be the strongest part of the ice.

He kicked up, planted his palms on the ice and pulled himself out of the water while continuing to kick. Once he got his arms straight, he dropped himself down and rolled to pull his legs out of the water. He was exhausted, but still made himself roll from the water.

Rolling, rolling, he got glimpses of Sidney on the ice, clutching Day. She had him pulled close and was rocking him. Jon wasn't sure if the relief he felt was from how calm Day looked or the sound of sirens coming into the park. Jon stood up and stumbled his way to them.

He dropped to his hands and knees near them, but far enough away he wouldn't get them wet.

Sidney pulled him by the shoulder. She pulled Jon's head to her lips. "He's our son," she said. She was crying so hard as she spoke that it took a few moments for Jon to understand what she said.

"We love him," he answered. It was only then that he realized he was hyperventilating.

She looked out at the lake. "I can't lose anybody else," she said, then. It was a Sidney comment. Succinct, direct. Cryptic and not cryptic.

"Okay," Jon responded. He touched his boy's cheek. "Day, it's not safe out here. Running off is dangerous. It's dangerous here."

Day turned and looked at the white and blue shards of ice piled high. "I still love them. My fragile mountains."

Biker Girl
Vincent Barry

My throat has hurt for days. Just up and to the left of the V that's formed in the center of my collar bone. I wouldn't call it a classic sore throat exactly. More like—wound pain. I feel it when I swallow, sometimes speak—like something lodged in my throat. If it were a sound, it would be like a skate cutting into fresh ice. I'm thinking of going up to the clinic to see the stropy, bleary-eyed ENT with overhanging eyebrows and sour face too big for his head. We have to be up there anyway. I don't know, though. I've been to him twice before. Once for a burning tongue, once for whooshing in my left ear. Both times he diagnosed acid reflux. At least I think he did. He speaks with a heavy accent, so he's difficult to understand. Russian, I think, maybe Hungarian—Slavic anyway. He sent me home with a prescription for Prilosec, both times, and a grumpy order to "take dis fe da hest hof ya life." And for good measure, he shot me a sideward look with dark-rimmed eyes when he added the thick-smelling words: "Zleep zittin' up andza raise za het hof za bet huff da floor." Ash says that I could have swollen eyes and be spitting blood, and he'd still find heartburn lurking just around the corner. "Dr. Reflux" rolls off her tongue. That's what she calls him. Blue Cross calls him a network provider.

Ash thinks my throat pain is a manifestation of my fifth chakra.

"The throat chakra," she calls it. She tells me it governs speech and honest self expression. Also listening to others, letting them, y'know, feel they're being heard."

"Accept your authentic voice," "Speak your truth,"—stuff like that she tells me about my number five. "Express how you feel," that above all, she urges meditatively.

As of late Ash knows about such things.

Ash is sitting on the floor, her arms hugging her knees, two gray trembling fingers holding an unlit Dunhill between them, when she says gravely of my throat chakra, "It's bleepin'-A blocked." Naturally, I want to know why.

After an appreciable interval, she goes, "Probably because—" then abruptly breaks off and says, pointing with the phantom smoke at the pile of record albums beside her, "I wonder if they recycle." I don't know, and I'm left waiting tensely to learn why my throat chakra has gone all muddy.

Ash is getting rid of all her risqué Rusty Warren albums. It's part of her new purification program for revealing the "universal self." I'm not sure what she means, but of a sudden it means a lot to her, and therefore to me. That's why, as I say, she's bleep-canning all her bawdy Rusty Warren albums, even Rusty's classic, "Knockers Up!"—"the hilarious comedy album that has Mr. and Mrs. America rolling on the floor—from coast to coast!" Not nowadays, of course, but like a hundred years ago when we hooked up, Ash and I. The album cover shows a nuzzling couple touching foreheads. She's wearing a beehive and tipping a champagne glass his way; he's tipping her nose with two soft mallets. Their toothy smiles—"bleep-eating," Ash calls 'em—suggest that they'll soon be rolling on the floor.

I bought Ash "Knockers" right after we met in a head-on rush at one of Rusty Warren's shows in the sixties— in Fort Lauderdale, or "Ft. Liquordale," as Rusty used to call it when she played there in winters. When I first clapped eyes upon her, Ash was perched atop a motorcycle, looking every inch like—like that-that French singer with those large searching eyes, what's-her-name...you know, that-that biker girl with the bohemian sunny brown hair who was so popular back then...She had a monster record I wore out. I could recite the whole bleepin' thing in French. Oh, what was its name? I'll think of it...Pish, it doesn't matter—

The thing is, from the start I was smitten with Ash, as much as she was with Rusty. A real groupie, she was. Come the spring, Rusty flew off to Scottsdale, and Ash followed Rusty, and I followed Ash. Oh, a tight fit were we on the back of her bike, swapping desires along the way,

dangerously happy—Ash with her psychedelic silver holographic nails, me with my full red beard. She made me feel—what? that I was her first love. I made her feel she was my last romance. Later we got tattooed at Lyle Tuttle’s parlor South of Market, San Francisco—heart halves on the outer sides of our feet, hers left, mine right. They still form a whole heart when joined. Then off for some music, after a stop, of course, at the watering hole time forgot, the Persian Aub Zam Zam over on Haight—for martinis, naturally, made with Boord’s gin and Boissiere vermouth, in a ratio of 1,000 to 1, as attested to and served by owner Bruno Mooshei in white shirt, black vest and tie...

But we’re well passed our dancing days, and the tattoos have faded, and Ash has gone to short hair, and her nails have grown brittle and break easily, and my henna beard, gone flint-grey, I long since left on the floor of a Supercuts in Searchlight when I read that beards host bed bugs and sand fleas—but still...

Matrika Shakti—that’s Sanskrit, y’know, for the power of sounds. The idea, Ash says, is that every sound carries a vibration, and vibration makes up the world. So, if you say something ugly it brings ugliness into the world. Sickness, too...even—if, on the other hand, you say something beautiful, it adds to the world’s beauty and health. That’s the gist of it—at least that’s what I get from what she says, and I take her word for it because—

Anyway, bottom line: lusty oaths, profanities, vulgarities, they’re all out. Even the pink and red pin-back button, the one that shows a bug-eyed, pouty-lipped, so in-your-face Rusty Warren howling: “Amazingly enough I don’t give a bleep!” Yesterday, I saw it in the recycle bin. Jeez, I couldn’t sleep last night. I kept seeing a bunch of arrows chasing each other. They looked like strips of folded-over paper. Like, whaddya call ‘em—mobius strips. This morning, after my second cup of Deadman’s Reach, it hit me, and I went outside and rescued the button. I’m keeping it, like—what? well, like one of those things you’ll need as soon as you throw it away. You know what I mean?

Ash, to her credit, has had no trouble curbing her sexual vulgarities and forswearing most four-letter words, but—well, the excretory functions, they’re giving her trouble—I mean words referring to excrement. I guess, y’know, I don’t know—maybe they’re the last to go. So now she just bleeps them out, and she’s got me doing it, too. Like, f’rinstance, “Ah, bleep,” or “No bleep, Sherlock,” or “Bleep happens.” Like that. Sometimes she’ll just shorthand it, like: “That’s why your shoes don’t shine,”—for, y’know, “Dr. Reflux doesn’t know bleep from Shinola about the throat. That’s why his shoes don’t shine.”

“Scared bleepless”—she’s been using that one a lot lately. Me, too. Right now, in fact, I’m scared bleepless. I mean my heart’s beating like a trip hammer and my palms are damp as if—as if something’s coming, something big, as the song says, with “a click, with a shock”:

It may come cannonballin' down the sky
Gleam in its eye, bright as a rose
Who knows?

But it’s got me bleepin’-A scared.

Ash is replacing all her bawdy Rusty albums with Tibetan singing bowls and Solfeggio frequencies. I don’t know if it helps, but I know when she’s taking a bath now because she plays sound bath meditation with crystal bowls, gongs, and Shammanic drumming while she’s in the tub.

“Holy bleep!” she’ll go through the cracked door, “I’m so relaxed,” and I’ll say through a veil of steam, “How relaxed?” and from a disembodied voice, “Like warm melting butter” or “Like a bleepin’-A marshmallow dissolving in a cup of hot chocolate.” And we’ll both laugh through the mist like a couple of kids playing hooky. You do that, you know—learn to play games.

But not today.

Today she stands up and swabs the full-length mirror clear with a bony hand and regards her hairless, slim as a vine shoot reflection.

“Look at me,” she says, sharp as a knife blade, cheeks sunken, mouth compressed, eyes widely open. “I should be holding a piece of bread covered with lice,” and then, with the lines on her gaunt, achromatic, wizened face hardening and me trying to process what she’s just said, which is making my heart beat loud and my thumb worry the button in my pocket: “I look like I cheated death at Auschwitz.” I get it—she does, but I can’t bear—

In the mirror I show a sepulchral stare behind a raised, deprecating hand with a bleb of blood on the thumb. Tears of vexation bubble up in Ash’s eyes, then flow lava-like down her sunken cheeks. She recognizes the gesture for the lie it is and dismissively waves it away, then bites off, with a strong vein of metallic certainty, the word: “Infidelity.”

Somehow, some implausible somehow, it’s clear as glass to me that-that she, like an obedient retriever, has brought back the topic—the cause of my errant number five.

And then, as I’m rifling through my conscience for some betrayal unshriven, she drops on me a cold, heavy glare, and says fiercely, with a savage precision that makes the hairs on the back of my neck tingle, “I don’t mean unfaithful to *me*, bleep-hole.”

Her eyes, in the mirror, are distraught, red-rimmed, hollowed, and yet brave and watchful. They’re bravely watching me—my forehead, contracting; my eyebrows, arching; my jaws, tightening. Do they see that chilling reflection behind me? Are they brave enough? Are mine? I’m not sure. Then she looks hard at me, or the reflection does, at my moving and shifting, my looking sideways and up and down, as if—as if quailing before some gathering horror; and then she says to all of that, or the reflection does, never, mind you, unfastening its eyes from mine: “Be careful, *mon amie*, or it’ll swallow you whole before a life time comes and goes.”

And that’s when I hear once again that sweet, clear, lyrical voice singing, “Mon Amie La Rose”:

And as my friend the rose said only yesterday,
“This morning I was born and baptized in the dawn
I flowered in the dew and life was fresh and new
The sun shone through the cold
And through the day I grew, by night-time I was old”—

Only in French.

Then bang!—I can see her again, behind me in the swirling vapor: biker girl, baby face with big brown eyes and sun-kissed hair, straddling a CB 750.

And then, with the vaporous image fading and the surrounding wave of mist closing in my eyes, I get out, “Francoise Hardy,” then again, “Francoise Hardy,” and, with my lungs bursting with heartache, I swallow hard the lump in my throat, as Ash, dear Ash, reverentially regards her Chakra 5 balancing body mist by Aveda.

For Werner Erhard/Human Potential
Richard Mark Glover

Jim lit a cigarette, took a drag and then laid it on the edge of the plywood table where he worked the dough for the next day. He looked out the kitchen service window, past the counter and through the window. Cars whooshed by on Second Street.

"I'm going home now," Gloria said. Her mascara was smeared. She shook the net loose from her hair and looked at him. "Do you want pork chops tonight?"

"Whatever," Jim said, not looking up. He studied the stringy dough on the table as he took another drag of the cigarette. The afternoon sun poured through the drive-up window and formed a trapezoid of light on the kitchen wall where the big tongs hung.

Gloria picked up her purse, the mail and the hard, stale donuts. She walked through the back door and down the alley dropping the donuts in the dumpster. She looked back at the donut shop, paused, then turned and walked to her car.

The front door chime rang.

"We're just about closed," Jim called out through the service window.

"Well are you open or just about open," the Kid said. The sleeves of his white t-shirt were rolled and a fat zircon hung in one lobe. His hair was greased back and a collection of thin whiskers grew on his chin. His companion smacked glossy lips, tapped her pumps then stuck her thumbs along the waistline of her jeans.

"What do you want?" Jim asked as he walked to the kitchen doorway, wiping his hands with a towel that hung from his pants under a stained white apron.

"We want a steak," the Kid said. "What do you think we want old man?"

Jim studied the Kid.

The Kid looked at his girlfriend and then back at Jim.

"Fresh donuts. That's what we want," the Kid said. He cocked his jaw and shook his head.

"Nobody has fresh donuts in the afternoon," Jim said.

"Nobody?" The Kid held his mouth open. "What kind of donut man are you?"

Jim watched the Kid's eyes roam then lock on the cash register.

"This is Gloria's Custom Donuts. If you come back tomorrow morning we'll have fresh donuts," Jim said.

"Tomorrow," the Kid said. "Did you hear that Marci? Tomorrow he's going to have fresh donuts."

Marci nodded her head. She blew a bubble and popped it.

The Kid walked back to the front door and flipped the "Open" sign to "Closed."

"Old man," the Kid said. "We need fresh donuts-now." The Kid ran his fingers through his hair then motioned to Marci. She pulled a revolver from her back pocket.

"Now Marci here," the Kid started, "is a good shot. And she likes donuts. So," his voice slowed, "you go on back to the kitchen and make some fresh donuts." Then he smiled and said, "Got it?"

Jim looked down at the black grip of his pistol showing underneath a stack of newspaper. He looked up at Marci and the gun then turned, stepped toward the kitchen, and stopped.

"I didn't tell you to stop," the Kid said.

"What kind of donuts do you want?" Jim asked with his back to them.

"Oh that's a good question and considerate of you," the Kid said. "Don't you think that was considerate of him, Marci?"

Marci looked out the window.

"I think we should have one of each," the Kid said. "Don't you Marci?" He asked.

"Move," Marci said to Jim.

Jim hesitated.

The Kid tapped Jim on the shoulder.

"Old man. Don't get any ideas. Marci needs her donuts. They're important," the Kid said. "It's a goal we can cross off. Get your mind right. You like to get your mind right, don't you?"

Jim walked to the table with the dough. He laid out a sheet of wax paper, then turned the knob on the grease pot.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" Jim asked.

"Yes as a matter of fact we do mind," the Kid said. He looked at Marci then looked at Jim.

"Smoking is unhealthy," the Kid said. "It's one of your bad habits."

"Your name?" Marci asked Jim.

"My name?" Jim cocked an eyebrow. "My name is Jim Baland."

"Jim Baland," Marci repeated.

"Jim Baland," the kid said.

"Jim Baland," Jim said.

"Hey, Jim Baland, what do you know?" the Kid said.

Jim Baland almost smiled.

"They say that victims should always introduce themselves to their assaulters," the Kid said. "The familiarity of a name reduces tension. You failed to do that Jim Baland."

The Kid looked at Marci then back at Jim.

"Do you feel enlightened now, Jim Baland?" the Kid asked.

The grease in the fryer popped and Jim looked at the Kid then tapped the temperature gauge. He pressed the cutter into the dough and formed long-johns. He pressed the big tongs together and dropped the long-johns into the hot grease.

"I just love the smell of frying donuts," the Kid said. "Don't you Marci?"

"Is that gun actually loaded?" Jim asked.

Marci pressed the pistol straight out, pointing it at Jim's head.

"Do you actually want to find out?" the kid asked.

Marci whirled and fired a bullet into a sack of flour a foot from the Kid. A cloud of white spewed into the air.

"Goddam, Marci" said the Kid.

"Goddam," said Marci.

"What the fuck!" Jim held his arms out. "What is going on?"

"You're supposed to be making donuts, Jim Baland, not questioning reality," the Kid said. "But I give you credit. You should question reality from time to time."

The Kid looked at Marci then said, "If you burn the donuts Jimmy, Marci is going to blow your head off," he said looking back at Marci.

Jim flipped the donuts out of the grease and onto the drip pan. Then he injected the custards.

"Look at those donuts, Marci," the Kid said. "Look at them puff up."

The Kid took a bite of the raspberry donut. "Umm, that's not a bad donut, Jimmy. How long you been cooking donuts?" the Kid asked.

"Twenty-three years," Jim said.

"Twenty-three miserable years," the Kid said. "My, my, my."

"Marci, try this lemon one," the Kid said.

Marci bit it, then spit it out.

"Goddamn," she said.

"Marci doesn't like that one," the Kid said.

"Try the vanilla," the Kid said.

Marci bit and spit it out. She tried them all and spit each one at the feet of Jim Baland.

"Well I guess Marci doesn't like your donuts," the Kid said. "What's wrong with your donuts, Jimmy?"

"I wouldn't know," Jim said. "Haven't had one in seven years."

"Marci, did you hear what I heard?" The Kid asked.

Marci rolled her eyes.

"I was afraid I'd get fat," Jim said.

"You're fat anyway," the Kid said.

Jim looked at the donuts on the floor.

"Do you have a wife, Jimmy?"

"Yes."

"When was the last time you made love to her?"

"I don't remember."

"You don't remember?" the kid asked. "Do you have children?"

Jim wiped his forehead with a towel.

"You haven't answered my question Jimmy," the Kid said.

"I have a son," Jim said.

"A son? What's his name? What's he do?"

"His name is Rueben and he lives in Austin at the State School of..."

"For what?" the Kid asked. "For the retarded? The state school for the retarded?" The Kid looked at Marci.

"Autism," Jim said.

"Autism," the Kid said. "So your kid's stupid, huh?"

"Not stupid, autistic."

"Whatever," the Kid said. "When was the last time you spoke to him?"

Jim put his hand on his forehead. "I guess a year."

The Kid looked at the grease in the grease pot.

"Seems like a long time not to talk to your flesh and blood, Jimmy."

The Kid looked up, then at the clock on the wall, then at Marci.

"Are you ready to get your mind right, Jim Baland?" The Kid asked.

"What do you mean?" Jim asked.

"What do you think we mean?" The Kid asked then looked at Marci.

Marci lowered her eyes.

"Cash register Jimmy, go," the Kid said.

Jim opened the cash register and counted the dollars. The Kid grabbed the wad of money. Then he pushed Jim down on the floor and reached under the newspapers and pulled out Jim's .38 Special.

"Why didn't you use this, Jimmy, while you had a chance?" The Kid asked.

Jim stared at the gun.

"Go in there and eat those donuts on the floor. And crawl," the Kid said.

Jim did not move.

"Eat the goddamn donuts," the Kid said.

Jim turned his head and looked at the Kid then at Marci.

"No," he said.

The Kid rubbed his hair, and cocked his jaw. Marci cocked the hammer on the pistol.

"Shoot me," Jim said flatly.

"Where, in the foot, in the leg, in the heart?" the Kid asked.

"Shoot me dead," Jim said. "Shoot me in the heart. I'm ready."

"Just like that you're ready to die? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I've been ready."

"You been ready? What about your wife, your kid, this goddam business. We're talking about human potential, Jimmy! You just gonna let it go and die?"

“Yes.”

“And you want Marci to do your dirty work?”

“Why not? She’s got the gun.”

“Are you getting smart with me? Here you are with three minutes left in your miserable life and now you’re getting smart?”

“Why not?”

The kid turned and looked at Marci. He relaxed his jaw, bowed his head, rubbed his hair, and raised Jim’s pistol in the air. He opened his mouth, and closed it. He looked around the donut kitchen.

“Come on, we’re finished,” the Kid said.

Marci looked at Jim.

“We’re done—come on,” the Kid said. He unloaded Jim’s .38 Special, stuffed the bullets in his pants and tossed the pistol on the floor. Then he took the wad of money and threw it at Jim.

“I should keep it,” the Kid said.

Marci took another look at Jim and then followed the Kid out the front door.

They jumped in the car, drove to the light and turned left on Oak Street. The Kid lit a cigarette.

“Who’s next?” he asked.

Marci thumbed some papers. “A guy named Magnus at Bill’s Furniture Store on Argosy. They close at five.” She stuck a piece of gum in her mouth and looked out the window.

“I’m going in as the same punk,” the Kid said.

He tapped his ashes out the window.

“I think I’ll wear a long dress for Magnus,” Marci said.

“No. Keep the jeans—girl, they’re sexy,” the Kid said.

“I’ll wear what I want,” Marci said.

The Kid glanced at her, flicked his cigarette and then drummed his hands on the steering wheel.

“If we do three more today, I’ll buy you that leather lingerie you wanted.”

“I don’t want it, you want it,” Marci said.

“Whatever,” the Kid said. He rubbed his jaw. “What do we know about this Magnus fellow?”

Marci watched Odessa, Texas glide by.

The Kid adjusted the rear view mirror. “Oh, better call Ms. Baland and tell her the job’s done.”

Marci said, “I think we overdid it,” She glanced at the Kid then looked away. “I got a feeling something happened. I got a feeling something’s not right with Jim Baland. What if he’s dead?”

“Dead? His wife signed the release, she ordered it—we’re covered, don’t worry,” the Kid said. “Front office has it under control. They’ve been doing this in California for years.”

“I don’t like this. It’s mean,” she said. “I’m not mean by nature. You might be. I’d rather be in Phase II.”

“Takes much more experience in Phase II,” the Kid said. “Lifting those people up after they’ve been pummeled. Delicate. But when they finish the training they come out stronger, clear. Look at Yuri in the front office, all that bling and the Mercedes. Ever seen anybody more clear?”

Leave
(Creative Nonfiction)
Marie Scampini

Home is now wherever I am standing.
Spring whispered for me to leave. I stayed a bit longer.
Summer sang to me a lullaby to go. I stayed anyway, sleepier still.
Autumn shook me as orange leaves off the maple tree. I stayed a little longer.
Winter froze my attention, yanked me by the hair and screamed, "Girl, disappear!"

At the point my weight rose to eighty pounds, I knew I had to stop eating. I was huge. I was in fifth grade. Where did these thunder thighs come from? Horrified I started running six miles a day with my only companion, my Irish Setter Brandy.

The dinner table was a war zone. I stared at my food, pushing it around, as I could feel the heat of my father's rage rising in his fists. This was my act of civil disobedience. Thoreau would be proud. Food was one thing I could control. I would not be controlled a moment longer. I threw down my fork as my gauntlet.

My father suddenly grabbed a spoonful of green peas aiming for my mouth. I turned away, the spoon stabbed me in the eye. Blinded, I screamed and stumbled up the stairs to my room. Hours passed as blinding clouds lifted from my bruised eye. Blurred vision returned with a black and red ring gripping my cheekbone under my lower lashes. I was a fighter who left the ring victorious.

The door opened and my father walked in and sat down beside me. He winced at the damage he caused. He softly said, "I'm sorry," then at the end of the longest breath he could take, "I love you." I stared at the scratches on the wood floorboards which blinked and sighed. I shook my head no.

I lied at school the next day that I walked into a wall. I started saving my babysitting money and stopped coming home. I did homework under one of the school's streetlights and got another job at a fast food restaurant. I cycled to and from work while carrying leftover burgers for my canine child before our six mile run. Planning to disappear.

I would not turn another year older in that house that I grew up in, alone, surrounded by eight strangers I shared DNA with, allegedly, but I did not recognize them as belonging to me – only the common cowardice of breathing, the hierarchy of silence.

I wondered why my cousin was dead, having been killed on his motorcycle, his favorite thing. Why was I still alive? Life made no sense. Death made sense. It was final. Complete. I was a mistake the Universe had forgotten to correct. I would have to do it myself.

Then I heard my classmate, Brian, a handsome, popular boy, overdosed on aspirin, after his girlfriend broke up with him. He didn't die though. Just got sick, stomach pumped in the hospital. It was really embarrassing. If he didn't want to live, with everything going for him except a girlfriend, then it's perfectly reasonable for me to want to leave this earth. No friends. School was a nightmare. I couldn't sleep anymore. My teachers stared at me closing my eyes in class, raising their voices to wake me. I would open them, eyes rusted from tears, weary of a world that didn't want me one bit.

I would be smarter than Brian. I did my research. Sleeping pills slow down the messages to the body. The pills would slow down the messages to my heart to keep beating, messages to my lungs to keep breathing. Perfect. Why hadn't Brian thought of this himself?

I cycled over to the mall where all of my classmates met for pizza and group dates. Some would pair off and be caught kissing behind J.C. Penney, shielded by a tower of thrown away boxes.

I would never have my first kiss.

Squinting at the over-bright light in CVS, I walked down Aisle 7, and scoured the wall of boxes upon boxes of sleeping pills. Decisions, decisions. I needed the strongest.

I tried to reach for the popular brand in a serene shade of purple and blue. My arm would not lift. My limbs defied me. Then a voice louder and clearer than any season spoke- "Leave." Suddenly an option I had not thought of before. I could leave. I could live somewhere else. Even if I died somewhere else, at least I would get out of this damn town. I would achieve one thing most of these people would never achieve.

Now I felt much better, relieved. I continued working, saving every penny. I went to school. I did well in a few classes where writing was involved. Those teachers went out of their way to tell me of my potential. My essays showed promise. I wish that was enough for me to stay, but it wasn't.

I remember one of my first poems was hung in the hallway in grade school and as I walked by I always smiled, beaming with pride. But that was so many years ago. There was no poetry in the house I grew up in. My house was a box of practical desperation, lists of chores and groceries wallpapered the refrigerator. Uninspired family portraits, ordinary landscapes and an abundance of religious statues filled the rest of the empty spaces.

Two weeks before my birthday, I calmly told my mother I was leaving. She shook her head, telling me I didn't mean it as she continued scrubbing her pots. They would be of great comfort soon. When your daughter disappears without a note, without a trace, without any more words, best to scrub the pots. There must be clean pots.

On that January morning, I emptied my bank account, layered six shirts and sweaters over my body and packed a small backpack. I kissed my canine child good-bye. "I'll come back for you," I lied.

Leftovers
Jessica Walker

Kevin yanked open the refrigerator. He shifted his weight between his feet and ruffled his hand through his bed-tossed hair. He stretched one arm overhead, then the other. I kept typing on my laptop at the kitchen table, trying to ignore the fact that I could already feel the chill escaping the fridge.

"Where's my pulled pork?" he said.

My wedding ring clacked on the keys. Damn thing was always slipping off my hand. I finished my email to my boss and opened another Internet tab. This latest assignment was killing me in the same way my mother-in-law's phone calls did: with very few words and through slowly prying the happiness out of my soul.

"Laura, where's my pulled pork?"

"Hmmm?" I clicked on Google. Maybe if I just looked up what naval nuclear propulsion was, I could find inspiration that would make the housewife readers of *She Said WHAT?!?!?* magazine actually want to endure a nauseating 500 words about it.

"Where's my pulled pork from that stupid restaurant we went to last night?"

"I fed it to Buster."

Kevin exhaled. His morning breath smelled like a combination of stale coffee and yellow mustard. "You what?"

"I fed it to the dog."

I twisted the wedding ring around my finger again to get the diamond out of the way, and continued typing. I was not going to laugh. Was not going to laugh. Nope, just pretend it's all A-Okay over here.

"Why the hell," he said, pausing between each word, "would you do that?"

I shrugged. "You said you didn't like it. Too dry and, what was it again? Oh, right. And I quote, 'Like gnawing on my grandmother's butt.'"

He smacked the table. I'll admit, I jumped ever so slightly, but kept my eyes trained on my laptop screen.

"Didn't mean I didn't want it! Why else would I have gotten a to-go box, huh? I swear, Laura, you never think." He rapped me on the head with his knuckles. "I paid good money for that pork, and I'm going to eat it."

"Excuse me?" I glared at him. "*You* paid good money? *I* footed the bill last night. *I* made reservations at the fanciest, most out-of-our-price-range restaurant you'd been dying to go to. *I* drank water and had the soup of the day so that you could order whatever you wanted, and then hear you complain about how your fifth beer wasn't frothy and how your tiramisu tasted too much like coffee. News flash for you. Tiramisu *is* coffee."

His pudgy lips moved open and closed like a fish gasping for air. His icy blue eyes looked vacant. I could tell he was searching for the words, but coming up empty.

"Well, it was my birthday dinner," he finally said. "I should have been able to enjoy it however and whenever I pleased. Just like I should have expected the same of my wife last night. But, no, you 'weren't feeling like it' and 'had a headache.'"

I slammed my laptop closed. "I don't have to bow to your every command. I'm not Buster."

He hit the table again. His beer belly jiggled over the top of his boxers. "No. Apparently you're not because that means you would have eaten my pork."

Tucking my laptop under my arm, I pushed past him.

"Where are you going?" Kevin said when I grabbed the car keys off of the hook. "You can't go out like that."

"Sure I can."

“You’re wearing those nasty Snoopy sweatpants and slippers!”

I whirled around, my nose meeting the dimple of his chin. The one I used to press my finger into, waiting breathlessly until he pulled me close in the back of his BMW. Now, it just made the fat under his jawline look even more like a turkey’s gobbler. He gave another huff of morning breath, the edge to his voice dulling.

“The least you can do is make me breakfast.”

“Eat cereal.”

It wasn’t until I had driven halfway down the block that I realized my wedding ring had fallen off. I imagined it sitting with Kevin as his bowl of Lucky Charms stained the milk green. His consolation prize.

Unexpected Trouble. Unexpected Joy
Adam Witzig

Whether it was mud or crap smeared all over my face, at that point, I didn't even care. My dress suit had been turned into a swimsuit. I was swimming in my own sweat; the result of searching for seven little devils around the amazon rainforest. Leaves coated my hair, branches left their signatures in the holes in my shirt. Mud consumed my entire body. The boys stood together, stiff as the trees that surrounded them. Keeping their heads low, the guilt permeated from their eyes and into the hot, shifty air. And rightfully so.

My dinner date was at seven. I was picking my little brother and his friends up from the local park at six. That should have left me plenty of time to pick the boys up, return home, and get ready. Making it to the date on time would be no problem. I'm not one to take chances though. I was dressed and ready by 5:30.

I paced the kitchen floor, sporting my brand new suit for the very first time. Every 30 seconds or so, I would peek at myself in the kitchen mirror just to make sure every little detail was perfect. Tie straightened, pants tucked in, hair tightly wound. This was my first date with Hannah and I wasn't about to blow it. Every detail mattered. It took me a whole month just to get up the confidence to ask her out.

I arrive at the park at 5:45, just hoping that the boys are ready and waiting. Of course, they're not. They are off roaming in the woods, doing whatever 8-10-year-old boys do.

It hits six o'clock and the boys are still nowhere to be seen. My heart sinks. I'm a worrier and God has a strange humor. I seem to be the butt of many of his jokes.

Six ten rolls around and I decide I am not going to wait any longer. I get out of the car and start to yell for the boys. People in the parking lot give me dirty looks as I scream out the boys' names. At this point I am panicking. My forehead begins to drip sweat, suddenly my tie seems to be a bit too tight.

Six twenty rolls around and I am beyond pissed. I'm throwing blame around in my head as I sit slumped over on the parking lot curb. I am certainly blaming the boys for having no regard for my life. I go as far as calling this, "the worst night of my life". I blame my dad for not picking up these stupid boys himself. "What am I, his personal slave?" I complain like a moody teenager who was about to miss his date. That's exactly what I was.

Six thirty rolls around and my mindset shifts. I begin to worry about the boys and their safety. All the worst case scenarios run through my head. "Eaten by a bear? Captured by indigenous peoples?" A rush of responsibility and heroism enters my veins. Worrying about Hannah takes a back seat for a moment. I rush into the woods, determined. I search far and wide yet cannot find the boys. I scurry through the thick forest brush, dodging branches of trees and hopping over puddles of mud. No sign of the boys.

After a long, arduous search, I hear boys laughing in the distance. I recognize the voices. Robotically, I dart towards the voices. I peek through the leaves only to find the boys gathered in a clearing. They are hooting and hollering, chanting like baboons as they dance around in large circle. One member is in the center, sitting Indian style with his legs folded over. I break out of the brush and into the clearing. All of their eyes go to me, then back to each other. I stand still, anticipating their next move. Time stood still. I was waiting for some type of explanation. Anything.

Suddenly, the boys spring into more yelling and rush over to me, grabbing me with surprising strength for 10-year-old boys. They supplant me in the center of their circle. More chanting ensues as they dance around me. I was in shock. I went from being James Bond on the rescue mission, to being Piggy from *Lord of the Flies*. I was being humiliated. By little boys. In the woods. In a suit. While the most beautiful girl in the world was waiting for me...

Once the shock factor wore off, I put my big boy pants on and restored order. I said some things to those boys that I can't repeat now. All you need to know is that the boys cooled the jets on the Navajo Show quickly. Soon enough I had them marching back to the parking lot in an orderly fashion.

According to my father, the boys were doing a "standard Boy Scout ritual".

Anyways, I show up to the restaurant 30 minutes late after dropping the boys off. My dress suit looks more like a ghillie suit. I'm covered in everything you could possibly find in the woods. I rush through the front doors and there she is, looking absolutely perfect, sitting at a table flipping through her menu like nothing was wrong. She glances up for a moment, seeing me enter. She begins to laugh uncontrollably at my ridiculous appearance, but in an adorable, endearing way. For the first time, I loosen up, and crack a guilty smile.

We still enjoyed a wonderful meal together that night. The restaurant workers asked me to leave immediately because of my attire, so we enjoyed a "fancy" date at the McDonald's down the street.

Overall, Hannah handled it great. She forgave me and was very understanding and sweet. We actually went on many more dates, in which I was always on time to. The only thing is that she still loves to tell that story. In fact, it has become our kids' favorite bedtime story.

A Murmuration
Daniel Dominowski

It was just after noon when they finally rang the doorbell at the address Paul had written down after getting high and then taking the bus across town. The clouds had dispersed and the open, savage sun grew above them as they stood on the front steps.

When the bus had pulled up to the stop, it had startled a small flock of birds that had settled on the bus stop shelter, and Josh had watched them intently until Paul had nudged him. The birds' feathers shimmered in the morning light as they took off, looped around and came to rest, perching on the windowsills above the entrance to the tire store behind the bus stop. They continued to chirp, imitating car alarms and horns and cell phones. They didn't seem to mind the heat. Josh had minded it very much since walking from the bus stop to the house; he envied the birds' lack of care.

"Don't worry. I think this job is going to be easy. It's just clearing out a garage and some yard work," Paul said. Josh hadn't talked to the guy himself and figured Paul never would have mentioned it if the job had sounded difficult. "The guy didn't sound like an asshole," was all he'd said.

Josh heard a sweet, Southern voice—one jarringly different from the flat, Germanic sort he had grown up with—call to the door, "Be right there!" and moments later, the door swung inward, revealing a blonde woman in her mid-forties, dressed in slacks and a cardigan. She had sunglasses with lenses large enough to cover half of her face propped up over her forehead. There was a sheen on her forehead and her skin was deeply tanned.

"We're here about the job?" Paul said. "I talked to your husband. On the phone. Earlier."

"Oh yes, of course. Come in, boys." She pushed the screen door open and turned back into the house. Her voice was warm and saccharine and stuck to Josh's ears like morning warmth and humidity.

"Milf," Paul whispered, leaning in to Josh and slapped him on the shoulder as soon as she turned around to lead them through the house. Josh didn't see if she heard or not. He raised his eyebrows and canted his head at Paul, mouthing "Dude, shut up." They followed her inside.

"I'm Lydia. I don't know what Robert told you, but it shouldn't be too much work. Just clearing out some boxes, sweeping, clearing the yard," she continued in the hallway. They followed her through the house. The foyer and living room were decorated in the same way Josh's mother kept their house: a lot of dark, polished wood furniture, large candles in wrought-iron holders, earth tones. It was nicer, but the same idea. When they passed the den, what they saw was vastly different. There was a bear—a complete stuffed and mounted bear—staring out at them. The room was full of deer heads, birds, squirrels, beavers, badgers and a lot of little black birds.

"Oh, that is something isn't it? Robert collects those things. Must have hundreds of them." The bear was on his hind legs, arms raised above his head, staring placidly out from the room, watching as they passed by. She began moving towards the back door again. When Josh noticed that Paul was unflinchingly staring at her pants clinging to her ass, he elbowed Paul, who looked at him and then nodded at her ass. Josh nodded.

Lydia pushed open the back door and led them outside. A large flock of birds lifted like a blanket from the deck and yard, settling into the trees along the backside of the yard. She opened the garage door, revealing piles of junk. It looked like two booths worth of junk from the flea market. Gardening tools leaned haphazardly against the near wall.

"All this junk needs to be boxed up and organized," she said. Waving her hand around. "There are some more boxes behind those—and you can use those tools in the yard. Just clean up the edges of the grass and neaten it up a bit, you know? The boxes need to go out to the shed behind the garage. It's not locked."

Paul let out a short, confused grunt and shuffled his feet.

"If it looks like it should be in a box with something else, put it there, hun. Easy"

"Yard looks fine," Josh said.

"Take the weedwacker 'round the edges of the house, the deck, fence, all that. Haul them branches out to the street. There's water inside if you get thirsty. It's starting to get warm out here."

She disappeared back inside the house, leaving Josh and Paul standing in front of the open garage door. It was starting to warm up, even though it was still early in the summer. They were silent and still for a moment. Josh felt as if he were made of cardboard in the heat. He watched as the birds had begun filtering back down to the grass and the deck railing, chirping and hopping around, pecking at the dirt.

They had been working for an hour or so when Lydia came back out, carrying a triangle of three glasses. Josh cut the weedwacker off when she called out, "You boys want a cold drink?"

Josh leaned the rotten machine against the deck. The motor was running fine but the line kept jamming up, forcing him to stop and untangle it every ten minutes. His head was beginning to pulse with a dull ache.

Josh took his drink and gulped. He didn't immediately catch the antiseptic sting of vodka until it had already reached his stomach. Paul had gulped as well and was sputtering. Lydia laughed and took a sip of hers. It was vodka and cranberry. "Seabreeze," she said. "There's grapefruit in there, too."

They stood in the shade of the house and drank. Josh's head ceased pulsing. His shirt was soaked in sweat, so was Paul's.

"Looks like you're damn near done with the garage. Yard, too." Her voice was still chirpy and twangy, but there was a bluntness working its way in, slurring the sharper consonants. She drawled the "too."

The boys murmured in agreement. The work wasn't hard, just tedious. Lydia had stripped off her cardigan; her arms had the same dark tan as her neck and face. Josh wondered where the husband, the one Paul had talked to on the phone, was. They drank without speaking for several minutes.

"Ah, hell. Y'all finish up and I'll make you something to eat." The cold drinks felt good and Josh could feel his face tighten and flush and his mouth go slightly numb. He lit a cigarette and Paul followed suit. "Don't die," she said. The way her accent twisted "die" into "dah," made Josh think she was a cartoon character. He had never heard a southern accent outside of a movie before. Josh nodded along with Paul, and he tried to exude the same carefree and stupid confidence that Paul did, hoping that it seemed worldly and self-assured. They were both fifteen, and drinking wasn't new to either of them. Josh intended to act like it. She slipped back inside.

The birds' cacophony was cut short when the door swinging shut startled them. Josh hadn't noticed it rising in the background but felt like the world had been emptied a bit.

"This job is great."

"You try running that weedwacker drunk." Josh swatted at his pant legs, brushing away grass clippings.

"Hey, don't do that here. We'll have to sweep the deck, too."

Josh glanced up at him over his cigarette and put his leg down.

"I bet she's got some great tits," Paul said quietly, glancing at the door. Josh thought that she had probably been gorgeous in her twenties. Her body still looked it, even fully clothed. He nodded and laughed. He felt his shirt sticking to him as he cooled down. It felt cold against his skin. He hopped off the deck and swayed, put a hand out against the deck railing to steady himself. He took a drag from his cigarette and cracked his neck. Josh tried to blow smoke rings but they just came out as flat, deformed puffs that dissipated in the light breeze. Paul blew one that held out just long enough to be seen. Josh shook his head and blew the smoke through his nostrils.

An hour later, they were sweeping the garage. The boxes had been moved. The junk packed

up. The lawn trimmed. Lydia came out. She swayed.

"Why donchu boys come inside, cool off?"

They leaned the brooms against the garage and followed her inside. It was cool and dim. She had the curtains drawn and the lights off except in the den. She waved towards the den full of stuffed and mounted animals and said, "Go have a seat, I'll just be a moment."

They went in and sat down on the couch. The animals remained motionless so Josh and Paul did, too. Two lamps cast the animals' shadows against the wood paneling of the walls, drawing the shadows against the grain, making the shadows seem darker. Lydia came in with three glasses and a bottle of vodka. She put it all on the coffee table and went back out. She came back with a bowl of ice and a bottle of cranberry juice. She sat down on a chair across from them and went about making drinks.

Josh felt better in the cool interior of the house but his headache had returned. He looked over and saw Paul rubbing his temples. Lydia slipped an ice cube into her mouth and crunched it. Josh felt his stomach clench and heard its liquid-y gurgle.

"Oh my, you boys must be starving. Here, take these and I'll fix you up something to eat right quick." She rose and left them with the animals.

"This place is creepy," Josh said, looking around.

"Relax, we're getting free booze, food *and* paid."

"We should go," Josh said.

"Dude, trust me."

The last time Paul had said that to him was just two days before, standing behind Flanagan's Wine and Spirits. Josh had mentioned that he always saw a couple people waiting for it to open at noon, which prompted Paul to suggest that they get one of those people to buy them some booze. "What can go wrong? They're functional alcoholics, dude. Trust me," is what Paul had said.

And so they scraped together all of their money together and waited for someone. Sure enough a woman had been waiting patiently in her car for the store to open. Neither of them had known what to say and so they just stood there in the alley when she walked toward the entrance. Josh had felt like they might as well give it up and hunt down a quarter sack instead.

"What the fuck are you two doing?" She had been standing in the sunlight just beyond the edge of the alley. She had impossibly large hair and her face looked basted. She had a shiny blouse and a black skirt, all of which seemed either too loose or too tight in all the wrong places. Josh stared at her and suddenly felt embarrassed. He didn't like it, but Paul said, again, "Trust me," and Josh had.

"Listen, if you want me to buy you anything, you'd better give me the money now," she had said.

"Vodka," Paul said, handing her a twenty.

"I'll be right back." She had disappeared around the corner.

When she came out, she walked straight to her car.

"Hey!" Paul had yelled after her.

"Piss off, kid."

"Our money..."

"You want me to call the police? Get the hell out of here," she had said. She had a brown sack with two bottles in it. "All I gotta do is scream, really. Bob will call the police for me," she said, nodding at the store.

That had left them broke and looking for odd jobs, which had brought them to this house. They had smoked the last of their weed just that day, before getting on the bus. Josh was a little uncomfortable with it precisely because it was too comfortable, too easy. He had never had anything turn out so easy before. Maybe Paul was right, though. Paul figured that if they persisted long enough that something good would have to happen eventually. The world couldn't shit on them

forever, Paul said.

Lydia returned, holding a plate with two sandwiches on it. "Ham and cheese. I hope that works." She sat the plate down in front of them.

They each picked up a sandwich and began eating. Josh was looking at the animals. Among the many mammals, there were rows and rows of the same small birds that had been outside. Their unblinking black eyes watched him, watched his sandwich.

"What kind of birds are these?"

"Starlings. Oh, how Robert loves starlings."

"What's the deal with...all this?" Josh said, gesturing at the animals.

"Robert collects taxidermy," she drawled. "Yes, they are crazy, aren't they? Poor devils."

"But...why?"

"Oh heavens, I don't know. I'll never understand it."

"Is he home? Your husband. I talked to him on the phone. I mean, we were expecting..." Paul said. She laughed through her nose and looked at the floor. She lifted her head and motioned up.

"Oh, he's upstairs. He's ill, bed-ridden." She took a drink. "Can't hardly even move around anymore."

"Interesting accent you've got," Josh said.

"You think so? Southern Georgia, born and raised. Robert moved me up here. Y'all do have the most awful winters, but it's starting to get nice now."

Josh finished his sandwich and stood up. He was about to say thanks for the drinks and how they ought to get going but he wanted to check the bear out first. He went over to the bear and looked up into its eyes. Somehow it seemed more than dead but its eyes still looked sad. Josh put his hand on its fur, rubbed its belly.

"Oh, you just stay right there," Lydia said, jumping up and leaving the room. Her voice made Josh spin around. Paul looked at him, shrugged and took a drink. She came back in with a large silver camera.

"Just stand right there, against its belly, between its arms. Face me." The shutter snapped a couple of times and she lowered the camera. "Raise your arms up, the way he is—yeah, there—like that." Her voice had acquired a new dimension of joy but somehow dropped an octave—it was huskier, smokier than before. But brighter. *Snap, snap.*

"You, get over there, too. Put your heads under its paws. Yeah, like that." *Snap, snap.*

She put the camera down and took a drink. Josh and Paul sat back down. She took a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket and lit one. "You boys can smoke in here. I don't mind."

They both lit cigarettes as well. They finished their drinks and she poured out more. She leaned over while pouring the drinks, affording them a view down her shirt. It was really too dark to see much past the cleavage that was already visible, but Josh's imagination filled it in adequately. Paul tapped his arm with raised eyebrows. They looked away as she rose.

"Why do people mount deer heads? What's the point of that?" Josh said.

"It's a trophy, man."

"Male posturing," Lydia said. They stared at her. "Never mind. Pull one down. Go ahead," she said.

Josh stood up and lifted one off the wall. It had twenty points on its antler rack. He held it out in front of him, stared into its plastic eyes. *Snap, snap.* He turned it around, held it facing Paul, who was still seated. Paul looked up at it, grinning and snickering. *Snap, snap.*

"You're a photographer?"

"Naw, I just fool with it sometimes."

Josh put the deer head down on the floor, leaving it staring up at the ceiling, and sat back down. Then, Paul was up looking at a bobcat. "Imitate it." He put his hands up, like cat's paws, teeth bared. *Snap, snap, snap.* He picked up a squirrel, held it a few inches from his face, giggling. *Snap,*

snap. Josh was laughing and smoking on the couch. He forgot about how cold he had felt when he had first come in. Josh stood up and walked to the doorway.

"Where's the bathroom?"

"Jus' round the corner from the kitchen. To the left, hun."

While in the bathroom, Josh heard music playing back in the den over the fan that came on with the lights. He peeled his shirt away from his body and let it fall back into place. After peeing, he rinsed his face under the tap and braced himself against the vanity. He bumped into the wall twice on his way back down the hall.

When Josh returned to the den, Paul was holding an owl over his shoulder with his shirt off. Josh sat down and took a drink. The drink was less sweet than he remembered it being, but still refreshing.

"Take your shirt off, too, hun. Get in in there with that owl."

Josh looked at Paul.

"Oh, it's just a photograph, hun. Just fun."

Josh pulled his shirt up over his head. His chest was smooth, nearly hairless. He was smaller than Paul, but not terribly scrawny. Just skinny. He stood up and took the owl from Paul, who sat back down. *Snap, snap*. The sun was setting outside. Josh could see a bruised color filtering in through the curtains. Paul cheered him on as he picked up various animals and posed. He took sips of his drink between animals. *Snap, snap, snap, snap*.

"Take off your pants," she said. Josh heard the sex in her lacquered, smooth voice. He hesitated and looked at the floor. "Oh, dear, it's okay," she said.

A bird slammed into the window behind the curtain and fell. They paused in the vacuum the concussion made.

"I think we ought to go," Josh said, breaking the silence.

"Oh, it's fine, okay, but I thought we might make something out of the evening. It's been so long since I had anything interesting to photograph," she said. She came closer to him. "Or anything so pretty."

When he looked up and saw her patiently waiting with the camera, he began working his belt. His pants dropped to the floor and he kicked them away. She reached out and smoothed down the half dozen little hairs that had begun to sprout on his chest. Her hand was cool against his clammy skin. He stood between two stuffed wolves in his boxers.

Paul stood up and dropped his pants too, when she told him to. He didn't hesitate. Josh and Paul lay supine with a badger standing across their bellies. Lydia set the camera down and lit a cigarette. She laughed and took a drink. "I have to go to the little girl's room," she said, leaving.

The two boys lay there under the watchful eyes of the animals in silence. Paul lifted the badger off them and set it on the floor. Josh laughed and sat up. "I'm drunk, dude."

"Don't be a bitch," Paul said.

Josh sat back down on the couch and put some more ice in his glass. He was staring at the floor when the lights dimmed. Lydia was by the doorway with her hand on the dimmer switch. It seemed to Josh that the eyes—the hundreds of eyes—had become glossier, more probing, more alive. Lydia had changed her blouse out for a white v-neck t-shirt and her slacks for a pair of shorts. Her legs were long and tanned. The skin on her chest above her cleavage was ruddy and flushed.

Paul sat back down next to Josh on the couch. Paul sat at an angle from him, attempting to hide an erection.

"Get up and stand by the bear again, both of you."

Josh stumbled a bit and almost tripped over the badger. Paul lumbered past it even less steadily.

"Drop your shorts, don't be shy. That bear won't hurt you." Her accent had become thicker, more demanding on the ears. It reverberated and rang through him.

"No way," Josh said. Paul said, "Yeah, no."

"Okay," she said. "I just wanted something 'natural' and raw, or something. Sorry, I do get into fits of artsy-ness. Just stand there like that."

Snap, snap, snap. Lydia looked at them over the camera and grinned.

"You boys are naturals. Get closer, touch shoulders."

They glanced at each other and, as if they were playing chicken, moved. Josh's stomach churned. His legs wobbled, shook. He felt compelled to smile, but he felt his face growing tight, hot. Lydia rose and moved to stand a couple feet in front of them. She held the camera up and photographed their faces and chests, one after another. *Snap, snap, snap.* The room was warm, though he felt the breeze from the air-conditioning. He was suddenly aware of the dried sweat on his skin, his body odor.

Paul put his arm around Josh's shoulders. Josh's attention snapped back and Lydia was motioning for them both to do it. Josh pulled away towards the door. "I have to piss," he said, lurching into the dark. Paul was pulling his pants on and saying something about having to get home. He stumbled and felt his way past the kitchen counter and down the hall.

When Josh returned, he came around the corner and collided with Lydia. Her skin was tanned like leather up-close, dark and tight. Josh felt a hand grab his dick. He saw Paul sitting on the couch, his head resting against the armrest, asleep. The fingers then grazed his testicles and moved up to grip him again. Her hand was soft but cold. Her chest was warm, though, and he could feel the heat on his face.

Josh shivered and he pushed his way past her. Her hand trailed across him and grabbed his shoulder, turning him around. He could hear Paul snoring. She pulled him close and planted her mouth on his. He put his hands on her sides and slid them up. There was no bra under her shirt. Her breasts hung low. They felt soft through the shirt.

"We're alone now," she said. "You pretty boy, you."

Lydia turned away, holding his hand and led him through the dark house. He could just make out her shorts pulling up into her ass-crack as she climbed the stairs. She opened a door into a bedroom. There was a lamp on, and as Josh followed her in, he noticed a man in the bed.

There were machines and IV's hooked up all around the bed. The man had an oxygen mask on. He put a book down on his lap and shifted. His eyes followed them but he remained otherwise motionless.

"Robert, this is Josh."

"Yes, my little starling," Robert said behind the mask.

The man, bald and skeletal, looked him over and coughed inside the mask. Lydia pulled her shirt up over her head and sat Josh down on a couch against the wall. She had tan lines around her breasts, which were ghostly pale and veiny and freckled. Josh looked at Robert's eyes and it seemed as though he were looking at one of the animals in the den. Lydia's breasts came down on his chest. His skin felt rubbery against hers and her heat was bringing a new wave of sweat. Her hand was on his dick again, her breath on his cheek.

Josh's eyes remained focused on Robert, still holding his book and grunting into his mask. Her shorts fell away and her dark bush stood out against her pale groin. Her hands moved up along his body and slid on top of him. He pulled away but she followed him, whispering into his ear, "It's okay, you're okay, you pretty boy, this is okay."

"I really need to go," Josh said.

"Just do this for me," she said. "Let me do this for you."

"I don't think..."

"Then don't think," she said. She pulled his shorts off.

Josh only knew that it was warm and there was sweat, but above all that there were eyes watching him, watching them. There was a smile behind the clear mask. The man's hands never left

the book. Josh's hands moved up and felt her body. The skin was dry and coarse in some places, smooth in others. She moved above him and grunted, made noises and whispered but he couldn't make sense of any of it. When he tried to speak, she covered his mouth with a hand. He felt a sort of numb, moist heat pumping against his groin. He tried to speak but just mumbled out a groan instead. The room spun. She lay flat against him, her face in the crook of his neck and he saw the old man's eyes were still there, watching him, unblinking, glittering. He closed his eyes and even as his head swam and went dark, the eyes remained.

When Josh awoke in the morning, he was on the couch alone. The machinery hummed. Lydia was gone. Josh slipped his boxers back on and stepped towards the door.

"The starling was introduced to North America by the American Acclimatization Society in an effort to bring every bird mentioned in the works of William Shakespeare to the New World," Robert said. He pulled the breathing mask off his face.

"The only reference to the starling in Shakespeare is in *Henry IV, Part 1*, wherein it is described as an annoyance, a nuisance. It is widely considered to be an invasive species and has been blamed for the decline in Bluebird populations, which is probably untrue."

Josh remained silent.

"You see, unlike most birds, starlings possess powerful jaw muscles, which allow them to dig into the earth and under rocks and hunt for food rather than simply peck at the ground. They take what they want—they've adapted to that task, and beautifully. They imitate their surroundings, learn how to make new noises. And how."

Josh heard them outside the window, now. The birds were loud.

"The collective noun for a flock of starlings is a murmuration, ironically enough," the old man said. "You probably never paid much mind to them until now. I don't blame you. But listen to that, look at them: they're ubiquitous, constant, adaptive, and not often paid any attention. It may be their greatest asset, the invisibility. It's amazing what one can do when no one looks at you, when no one expects anything from you. Don't take them for granted just because nobody else can see them. They have way more power than you think."

"The birds?"

"The birds, yes, but what I mean is women."

The old man coughed and placed the mask back over his mouth. Josh left the room.

Josh found Paul half-dressed on the couch in the den with a blanket draped over him. Josh got dressed and shook Paul awake. The stuffed animals' eyes stood out in the dim room. "Let's get out of here," Josh said.

"What happened?"

Josh just shook his head and nodded towards the door. Paul put his pants on and stood up. They had made it through the front door when Josh said, "Wait," and turned around. Paul followed. Josh picked up the bobcat and walked back out to the street. Paul followed him, whining about leaving, taking the cat, not getting paid, and what the hell happened anyway.

They walked back to the bus station without talking. Starlings lined the telephone and power lines, hopped around lawns, took up every space they could. There were thousands of birds and they did not flee as Josh and Paul passed. They merely parted to make a path. They watched. They made chirps, pops, and whirring sounds but they stayed put.

Josh and Paul walked to the bus stop and stood with the bobcat sitting on the bench between them. Paul found their pay stuffed into this pants pocket when he reached in for his bus fare. Five twenties. "I'll make change," Paul said, handing Josh forty.

"Yeah, no, don't worry about it," Josh said.

They waited for the bus. The birds surrounded the bus stop and just barely made way for

the bus as it pulled up. They carpeted the world, pecking at the concrete, chirping, waiting patiently. The world murmured.

The Brothers Leibowitz
Steve Slavin

Almost everyone knows of a family with a crazy uncle they keep locked up in the attic—or in a mental institution. But my family is different. We have *three* crazy uncles—and none has spent a day in a mental institution—*or* locked up in an attic.

Meet the brothers Leibowitz—Jack, Dave, and Phil. They all held down jobs, supported their families, and as far as the rest of the world was concerned, they were not crazy. Ok, certainly very eccentric—but not certifiably insane.

In fact, when you think about it, my mother should be included in this group. My brother Howard agrees, but our cousins insist that *their* fathers are in a class by themselves.

“Judy, your mom’s not crazy—just highly neurotic” says my cousin, Elaine. “I think of her as Aunt Neurotica. And I don’t mean that in a *bad* way.”

“Elaine, from the time I even began to *think* about dating, my mom would warn me never to say anything about my uncles.”

“Why, did she think their insanity was catching?”

“Almost! She told me that if I said anything, no nice Jewish boy would marry me.”

“Judy, she probably wasn’t that far off the mark. Imagine if there were a post office Most Wanted poster with a picture of the three Leibowitz brothers and a caption, “Are you a nice Jewish boy? Do *you* want to have insane children? Then don’t marry their daughters.”

“Trust me, Elaine, my mom belongs on that Most Wanted poster with her brothers. It’s just that she displays her insanity in subtle, understated ways. Like constantly nagging my dad not to tip his kitchen chair back, because he’ll fall backwards and split his head open.”

“Judy, that’s classical neurotic.”

“Yeah, then how about when she made a combined affair—my sweet sixteen party and Howard’s bar mitzvah?”

“You know, Judy, when I asked her why she was doing this, she told me, ‘What are you complaining about? You’re getting two for the price of one.’”

“You mean *she* was getting two for the price of one. Can you *believe* she did that to us? I was so embarrassed.”

“Well, look at it this way: you and Howard both got presents, and *she* paid for just *one* affair. Look at all the money she saved. Maybe *not* so crazy.”

The big debate among the cousins was: who was the craziest of the Leibowitz brothers? Opinion was pretty evenly divided. We agreed they were *all* nuts, but which nut took the cake?

Let’s make the case for each of them. Uncle Jack gets points for doing crazy stuff all his life. But perhaps the most outrageous episode occurred during his early twenties while he was still living at home.

Being the oldest child, Jack long considered himself more a third parent than merely the most senior sibling. He would occasionally issue orders, which were always ignored. When he demanded that Phil stop caddying at a local golf course, Phil just laughed in his face. He was saving up for his own set of golf clubs, and if big brother didn’t approve, that was just too bad.

I need to explain something extremely unusual about Uncle Jack. To say that the man hated golf would be the understatement of the century. He surely hated golf more than anyone else in the world. Just the mere mention of the word drove him wild.

So despite his brother’s repeated warnings, when Phil had enough money, he went out and bought a fine set of used golf clubs. Every night, he would lovingly polish them, while his older brother huffed and puffed in the next room. One afternoon, when Phil was out caddying, Jack

suddenly flew into a rage. He grabbed Phil's golf clubs, and one-by-one, he bent them over his knee. Then he gathered all the clubs and threw them out the window.

Years later, I asked Jack if his parents were home when he broke Phil's golf clubs. Yes, they were in the next room.

"What did they say about what you had done?"

"Boy were *they* sore!"

"Well of course, Uncle Jack. You had destroyed Phil's property."

He broke into a wide grin, "*That's* not what got them sore! It was because I threw the golf clubs out the window!"

"*That* got them mad? Not that you broke the clubs, but that you threw them out the window?"

"I was so mad that I didn't bother to open the window!"

Jack's son Michael once asked him why he hated golf so much. Jack went into a tremendous rage, which registered much higher on the Richter scale than his more customary tantrums. The whole basis of his anger was that golf was an effeminate sport. "Look how they dress! And they think they're athletes! But what are they actually doing? They're not playing against an opponent. A pitcher isn't throwing a ball at their heads! No one is trying to tackle them!"

When Jack finally calmed down, he explained that no activity could be called a sport unless there is a strong element of danger. The only danger in golf is getting run over by a golf cart. So what really got him mad was the presumptuousness of calling yourself an athlete and your activity a sport.

Michael's sister Arlene compared her father's outbursts with an aspect of *You Bet Your Life*, a TV quiz show starring Groucho Marx, which had been very popular in the 1950s. During the show, if a contestant happened to say the magic word, a paper mache duck with one hundred dollars descended from above.

Arlene loved to draw this analogy: he could be anywhere, with anyone, and if someone said the word "golf", he would start yelling at the top of his lungs, often prompting those nearby to edge away from "the crazy man."

Once, when the family was having lunch in a Manhattan automat, a woman at the next table mentioned something about golf to her companion. Within seconds, Jack was on his feet screaming that "golfers thought they were athletes," that he'd like to lock each of them in a room and go a few rounds with them, and that they should all be decapitated. Everyone stopped eating, and some people stood up to see what was going on. Jack's face had turned beet red and he was pounding the table with his fists.

A couple of automat workers approached him, but then backed off as he yelled something about performing a colonoscopy on them with a white hot iron poker. He then concluded his tirade, and sat down to finish his meal. New Yorkers being New Yorkers, realized the show was over, so they went back to their own meals as well.

Not long ago, Jack's grandson Jonah decided to videotape his grandfather. But Jonah realized that the video could really be enlivened if he could get Jack to talk about golf. Even though Jack must have realized that Jonah was baiting him, he couldn't help himself. So now his views on golf are preserved for future generations.

When Uncle Jack and Aunt Ethel retired and moved to Florida, they somehow ended up living next to a golf course. When he saw people playing, he would scream at them, "*Schmucks! Schmucks!*" Once someone yelled back, "Hey mister, I'm not even Jewish!"

One day, a very overweight man asked Jack for directions to the golf course. Jack replied, "Just stand right there. I want to do road work around your belly."

When the first President Bush took us to war against Saddam Hussein, Jack called it the "Golf War." If he thought you were stupid, he called you a "golf brain." And his favorite saying was, "Old golfers never die...They just lose their balls."

So let's hear it for Uncle Jack!

Next up is Uncle Dave. Unlike his brothers, Dave never went to college. In fact he dropped out of school in the eighth grade. And yet his siblings always insisted that Dave was, by far, the smartest person in the family.

But Dave had two personality difficulties which held him back. He was extremely paranoid, and he could quickly become very belligerent. These two traits often led to his getting into fights—usually with complete strangers. His children remember his coming home from work hours late, with blood on his shirt, or with a black eye.

What happened? "Some guy was staring at me on the subway. So I sez tuh him, 'Who you looking at buster?' And then, outta nowhere, the guy sucker punches me."

"So you didn't start it, dad?"

"Ain't yuh listnin tuh me?"

And yet, this man was a self-taught Civil War scholar, probably the only person in the country with just an eighth-grade education who was published in refereed academic journals. In fact, he even taught a course at Kingsborough Community College until he was fired for throwing a chair at the Academic Dean, perhaps because of some scholarly disagreement.

Indeed, some of Uncle Dave's views on the Civil War were considered beyond the pale, except among certain diehard historians in the Deep South. He believed that General Robert E. Lee was our greatest military leader, and that he had never gotten his due among the war's historians. He also argued that the cause of the South was largely a noble one, and that General Sherman was a war criminal. Had the South won the war, Uncle Dave's views might have found more favor.

Dave insisted that his son be named after Robert E. Lee, but since the age of four, the boy insisted upon being called Robbie. After all, would *you* want to be addressed as Robert E. Leibowitz?

In an act of rebellion, when Robbie was 13 or 14, he decided to buy a blue Civil War Union army cap, with a black leatherette visor. So he went to 29th Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, an area with dozens of Korean novelty shops. Going from store to store, he finally found one that had a Civil War army cap in the window. The only problem was that it was a gray Confederate cap, which was still worn in many parts of the South.

So he went inside and told the owner that he liked the hat she had in the window, but wondered if she had any in blue.

"Why you want blue?"

"Well, blue was the color of the Union army and gray was the color of the Confederate army."

"What you talking about?"

"Our Civil War."

"Civil War?" It sounded to him like she had said "Cyral Law."

"You know, like the civil war in Korea?"

"Oh, I can remember war. I was little girl. It was terrible war. It almost destroy our country."

'Look, can I just have a *blue* hat?"

The woman found a blue hat for him, and he tried it on. It fit perfectly. As he was paying for it, the woman asked him, "Why blue so important?"

"Well, in our Civil War, the North side wore blue and the South wore gray."

"What wrong with *South*? I from South *Korea*!"

Robbie wore the hat home, and it was still on his head when Dave got back from work. He took one look, grabbed the hat off Robbie's head, and marched into the kitchen. Robbie, his sister, and his mother looked at one another and just shrugged. It had been completely predictable that Dave would not be pleased, but what was he doing in the kitchen? Then they smelled smoke.

A minute later Dave came out of the kitchen with a big smile on his face. He looked at his wife, and then at his daughter and son. "If *Sherman* can burn Atlanta, then *I* can burn your hat!"

When Robbie was three, his mother, Maxine, got pregnant again. If the new baby were a boy, Dave had his heart set on naming him after another great Confederate general, Nathan Bedford Forest, a man who regretfully went on a second career as a founder and first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. But when the baby turned out to be a girl, Dave quickly acceded to Maxine's wishes, and their daughter was named Elaine, after Maxine's grandmother.

But Dave's dreams were not entirely unfulfilled. To this day, Elaine's brother and cousins sometimes call her by her family nickname—Nate. General Forest rides again!

Dave's family lived in apartment overlooking Ocean Avenue, one of Brooklyn's most prominent thoroughfares. Every Memorial Day and Veterans Day, he hung a huge Confederate flag out the window. Not only did this attract a great deal of attention, but it incensed many of the neighbors. When his landlord demanded that he stop displaying that flag, Dave could have easily persuaded the American Civil Liberties Union and the Sons of the Confederacy to join in a law suit against the landlord. Clearly Dave's First Amendment rights had been blatantly violated. Displaying a flag—*any* flag—is a form of speech, so the landlord was trying to suppress Dave's freedom of speech.

But Dave preferred a different course of action. He went after the landlord with a sword that he claimed had once belonged to General Stonewall Jackson.

After his brothers and sister bailed him out of jail, Dave decided that enough was enough. He declared that his family would move out immediately. They could never live in a building owned by someone who was clearly on the wrong side of history.

Now meet Uncle Phil. Despite Jack's assault on his clubs, Phil remained an avid golfer. Having learned his lesson, he would lock up his clubs before he allowed Jack to enter his home. And at every opportunity, he would encourage his older brother to take up a sport—perhaps even golf.

Phil prided himself on his logical mind. And yet, despite this great gift, even his best laid plans did not always go well. Take, for example, his first marriage.

It was to be the perfect marriage. Phil loved Mildred: that was a given. There was nothing that wasn't too good for her. And then, Phil's logical mind figured out a way he could *really* demonstrate his great love for this woman. He would build her a dream house.

And so, he bought a lot near the top of a hill. It had a beautiful view, which he and Mildred could enjoy. Then he engaged the best architect in the entire New York area. Every evening on his way home from work, he would check on the progress. In fact, Phil managed to visit the site seven days a week, and made some very perceptive and useful suggestions to the contractor and the work crew. No detail was too small to consider.

One day, when he got home about an hour after supper-time, he found a note on the kitchen table. Mildred came right to the point: "Phil, your supper is in the refrigerator. I moved back in with my parents. I need some kind of human contact."

He was heart-broken. He loved Mildred so much! And wasn't he building the dream house to prove his love? Go figure.

But love would find Phil once again. Shirley was 20 years younger, and the two of them were quite happy for a while. She would put up with his temper tantrums, and his growingly irrational behavior. After all, look at his brothers. They had a son, Mitchell, who, like his father, was a very good student. Then, one day, Mitchell's teacher accused Phil of doing his son's math homework. Phil was infuriated. He had certainly *not* done his son's homework. The whole idea was completely illogical. The teacher *knew* that Mitchell was an excellent math student!

That night he spent hours writing and rewriting a letter he would send to the local school board demanding that the teacher be fired. Only *that* would give him satisfaction—not a mere apology, or even a stern warning from the principal.

Ok, maybe Phil's reaction was a little extreme, but he believed his logic was impeccable. Actions must have consequences. The teacher acted, Phil acted, and the school board must act. What could be any clearer than that?

Phil mailed the letter, and anxiously awaited a response. After waiting for almost a month, and not receiving one word, he went ballistic. He hired a lawyer, who wrote a threatening letter to the head of the school board. Only then was there a response—and a rather terse one at that.

But there had been a problem with the timing of Phil's letter. He did not mail it on the night he had written it. He did not mail it the next day, or even the day after that. When *did* he mail the letter? He mailed it exactly three years later.

Now Phil had told everyone in the family about writing the letter, yet somehow managed to leave out the part about not mailing it for three years. But Phil being Phil, he was threatening to sue the school board for their inaction.

"And what about *your* inaction, Uncle Phil?" asked Elaine.

"You mean, why did I wait three years to mail the letter? Is *that* what you're trying to ask me?"

"Well, yeah."

"I had an excellent reason: I had no time."

"How could you not have enough time to just walk to the corner and drop the letter into the mail box?"

"Don't get smart with *me*, Judy! I used to change your diapers."

"Don't change the subject, Phil," said Jack. I think you owe us all an explanation.

"You want an explanation? Ok, I'll *give* you an explanation! You remember the trip that Shirley and I took to Europe?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, what do you think I was doing during all those months before our trip?"

"Not mailing the letter?" I guessed.

"I'll *tell* you what I was doing! I was planning our trip. Do you have any idea how much money we saved because of all that planning?...Well, I'll *tell* you how much! *Hundreds!* In fact, possibly it was over a thousand dollars. And you wanted me to drop everything I was doing to go out and mail that letter?"

Under Jewish law, someone who dies usually must be buried the next day. This places a great burden on the grieving family to make all the arrangements and notify all the mourners in less than 24 hours. And if the deceased was not religious, then she or he had probably never met the rabbi who would be officiating at the funeral.

Such was the case when Uncle Phil died quite unexpectedly. As Shirley explained, "One minute he was yelling at the TV, and the next he just keeled over. Except for his high blood pressure, clogged arteries, diabetes, emphysema, and a heart condition, he was in perfect health," she said, sadly shaking her head.

A few minutes before the funeral service began, the rabbi asked to meet privately with Phil's son, widow, sister, and two brothers. The rabbi said that he would like to learn as much as he could about Phil, so he could make his talk very personal. The others all looked at each other and smiled.

"I can see," said the rabbi, "that Phil was very beloved."

"*Beloved?*" Dave exclaimed. Would any of you guys say that Phil was *beloved?*" The others smiled and shook their heads.

"Ok," said the rabbi. "I need all of you to work with me. Please, tell me *anything* I can say about Phil. *Anything* that captures his soul, his essence."

When the group emerged from the office, everyone was smiling. Jack said that while he considered all clergymen “foreflushers,” he was forced to admit that he actually liked this rabbi. And the others agreed.

Just then the funeral director asked all the mourners to please step into the chapel. When everyone was seated, the rabbi strode up to the front and began the service. And even though Phil had probably not been inside a shul since his bar mitzvah, the rabbi made him sound as devout as the Lubavicher Rebbe. Then he got to the part of his talk that will sound familiar to anyone who has been to a few Jewish funerals. It began with the boilerplate, “And while I was not privileged to have known Phillip Leibowitz, his wife, his son, his sister, and his brothers were kind enough to share with me some of their fondest memories. It was very touching to hear what a beloved father, husband, brother, and uncle he was. And when I asked if there were a few words that Phil would have wanted to say to all of you, I was told that there were.”

He paused, and looked out at the mourners. They were glancing at each other. Some shrugged, and others just shook their heads. The rabbi quickly realized that somehow, they truly believed that Phil would communicate with them this one last time. And that it was left to him to convey this last message to all Phil’s loved ones.

“There was a phrase that Phil often used when addressing his friends, his family, and even people he barely knew. It was this phrase that defined him, his outlook on life, and how he felt about his fellow human beings – and perhaps most about those with whom he may have occasionally not seen eye-to-eye...And so, from Phil’s lips to your ears... ‘You’re full of *shit!*’”

The Field of Opportunity
Terry Barr

Our driveway slopes so that the gate that Max, our Carolina wild dog, stands behind is usually all we see. Now, though, we've bought a used car that blocks our view of Max and that gate. A convertible BMW, purchased from my wife's cousin Sam and his wife Lisa who moved on to Thailand to live cheaply and to snorkel. I worry a little that we're becoming "Beamer-People," but not as much as I worry about the rear end of our new ride.

What I see is not the BMW medallion on the back, but the license plate, and even more particularly, the vanity frame around the plate, which reads "The University of Tennessee." On the plate itself is that bright orange V followed by the three other letters that drive Alabama football fans, like me, crazy.

O-L-S.

Vols.

"You know we have to get that thing changed," I say to my wife. "We're not Vile fans."

"Viles?" she asks.

"Yeah, that's what Alabama fans call them, funny isn't it?"

"If you say so, but don't think I'm putting Alabama signs on *my* car!"

"I didn't say you had to. And you know, I'm not one of those 'Bama fans who hates the Vols anyway."

How could I be? I got two degrees from UT, and more importantly, I met my wife there, sitting in an Introduction to Film Studies class. Her cousin went to UT, too, thus the car, the tag. My dilemma.

But as we sat in the driveway staring at our new Vol car, I started laughing at the nature of such experiences, the ones that don't seem to make much sense but that happen anyway. The ones we're bound to explore. The ones some call "coincidences."

"You make your own meaning from these 'coincidences,'" a friend of mine said recently.

Indeed. And there are so many experiences, so many meanings.

My therapist tells me there are no coincidences. OK, I believe him. What there are, I hear, are opportunities. But then it's not abstract words that catch me so much. It's what I choose to see, and remember.

#

We're in Knoxville, walking down Market Square Mall after lunch on a bright January afternoon, my wife, her oldest sister and her husband, and I. We'd all rather be some place else, but that isn't a choice. Even though we're about to start the paperwork to have a family member committed, we still had to eat. We chose a place called Tomato Head, owned by a Persian, the ethnicity of two of us here today. "Persians flock," my American brother-in-law says. True or not, we all used to live in Knoxville, so Tomato Head is a known quantity; there's really nothing coincidental about choosing it.

My wife has two sisters: it's the other one we're committing today. We're not sure if she's truly a danger to herself or others, but we think so. She hears voices, has been hearing them for years. Voices of angry Iranians who, she claims, are trying to kill her. She's supposed to take medication but gave it up years ago because it made her feel "lethargic." She succeeded in that, at least, for what we hear later from her apartment manager speaks to anything but lethargy: "She sees things too. Just last week when I was trying to tell her that everything was OK, she kept pointing to her roof and all the other roofs around her. 'See,' she said. 'They're up there and they have guns. They want to kill us.' I tried to tell her that no one was there, no one wants to kill her. That they were part of the plan."

By “they” I assumed she meant my wife’s other sister and her husband. My wife is the gentler sister after all, but the reality is yes, we *are* out to get her.

I’m not a psychologist and I don’t understand the genesis of schizophrenia. It’s likely genetic. My wife had an uncle she never knew who was schizo, who killed himself finally. I can’t dwell on how unsettling this is given that while we have two well-adjusted, “normal” grown daughters, nothing in future gene codes is certain.

“She might have always had the psychosis,” my wife says of her poor sister, “but we think it was triggered once she started using drugs.”

Pot, cocaine, LSD, mushrooms. Those are the ones we know about. What we also know is that just before her break, my sister-in-law was getting most of her psychedelic aids from a friend of hers, a guy we all knew. A musician and very quiet guy who seemed fairly meek and harmless to the unaided eye: Brandon. We knew he harbored a great lust for my wife’s sister who used to be beautiful, exotically alluring. Brandon would have done anything for her. He even left my other sister-in-law’s wedding, where he was supposed to be playing reception music, to go home to procure some hallucinogens for the woman he wanted.

Being stoned at a wedding reception should really be no big deal, unless, of course, you’re already on the edge of psychosis.

Fortunately, there were no major incidents that night. Just no music.

The other distinguishing feature about Brandon was that he was a clean-freak and so enamored of his own lush hair that he wound it in a turban whenever he left home to keep it pristine. And since I never visited his home, Brandon and his turban were one and forever for me. After we moved away from Knoxville, and after we got my sister-in-law on state aid and medication that allowed her to function more or less on her own, Brandon disappeared and I rarely thought of him except as a guy in a turban that I knew in what seemed another life.

There is such a thing, however, as the Parallax View, and so in the five-minute span we spend walking from Tomato Head to our car where we will head to our lawyer’s office and then later to my sister-in-law’s apartment where we don’t know what we’ll find and what she’ll do, I see a two figures walking toward us. They’re walking quickly and I’m pretty sure that one of them at least notices us and knows who we are. I see it in his face.

“I wonder whatever happened to Brandon,” my brother-in-law says as we pass these two.

“Turn around,” I say. “He just walked past you. Didn’t you notice the turban?”

#

The week before we headed back to Knoxville to face the music of commitment, I finished a new novel: Ed Tarkington’s *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*. While I read a couple of good reviews beforehand, and naturally gravitate to the works of the New Southern Novel, I confess that what really drew me in was the title.

That Neil Young song.

I bought Young’s *After the Gold Rush* in 1970, not long after its release. I had heard only two Neil songs before, both on *Déjà Vu*, his collaboration with Crosby, Stills, and Nash. I hadn’t been sure about “Helpless,” but “Country Girl” sold me. I didn’t care that people like my father or some of my best guy friends said Neil sounded like a woman. To me, he sounded like no one I had ever heard. So I invested the \$3.99 for my first Neil Young album. I played it over and over, and though it drove Dad nuts, it didn’t change the fact that we were Southern Men, at odds with each other’s music, and at least some of the time with each other. Sorry Dad, even if I could have voted in ’72, it wouldn’t have been for Nixon. I think the song on the album I liked most, though, was “I Believe in You,” a romantic tune that, if she could only hear me sing it, would certainly cause Melissa, or Mary Jane, or as I realized much too late, Karen Bass to love me and want me.

Tarkington’s novel concerns two half-brothers who listen to a lot of music on vinyl. The Stones. Dylan. Neil Young. The plot isn’t so important here, except that I’m glad I still have a

turntable and all my Neil Young vinyls. I have an iPod, too, though on the day after I finished the novel, I chose not to carry it with me on my 45 minute drive to the college where I teach American Literature, Creative Nonfiction, and Southern Film.

What I decided to do was tune in to Sirius-XM's Classic Vinyl station. After all, I pay good money not to hear commercials and to be at the mercy of radio DJs, just as I've done for most of my pop life.

"Maybe they'll play 'Only Love Can Break Your Heart,'" I said to Max as I was lacing my shoes. I had been singing this song to him all morning because I don't get embarrassed in front of him when I stumble or go flat. This song is track number three on side one of *ATGR*. It precedes "Southern Man," and truly, if you were selecting a Neil Young song to listen to or play on the air, it might be your 49th choice.

I might be wrong, because I didn't look closely at my car clock, but 33.3 minutes into my journey, with Bruce Springsteen's "Jungleland" still echoing in my memory, I hear the strums of Neil's guitar chords: "Da da da DA da DA da DA..." I hope that conveys the tune, but in any case, Earle Bailey, Classic Vinyl host, had heard my plea:

"When you were young and on your own, how did it feel to be alone?"

I was alone when "Only Love Can Break Your Heart" found me on the airwaves that day, so you'll just have to believe me and accept that I'm telling it straight.

That night when I told my wife, she made me promise to buy a Mega Power ball ticket. The money, of course, will first go to taking care of her sister.

#

A few days later I was reading Patti Smith's *M Train*, the scene where she's staying in a small hotel in London watching detective shows. She sees previews for Robbie Coltrane's criminal psych series, *Cracker*, but it won't be shown until the following week and she can't tarry in this city any longer. Later that night, as she waits patiently, the down elevator opens, and she looks right into the face of Robbie Coltrane. She's so stunned she forgets to board. In the end, she doesn't follow him or even wait until the next week to see the series.

"What are the odds," she asks.

Apparently, better than even.

A few weeks earlier, my wife and I are driving back from Bessemer, after taking my mother home from our Christmas time together. We're listening to Outlaw Country on Sirius, and I say to her, "I heard an old song last week, 'Sylvia's Mother.' It made me remember being sixteen and not being able to tell anyone that I liked that song. After all, it was no 'Smoke on the Water.'"

"Could you sing it," she asks.

"Naw, not in that way. The voice is too plaintive, too quivering, and besides..."

It begins playing on the radio. Again. Now I can sing with it:

"Sylvia's mother says, Sylvia's happy, and why won't you leave her alone? And the operator says forty cents more, for the next three minutes..."

Later, that same band would do "Cover of the Rolling Stone." Most of my friends loved that one. It was rollicking. But I can't quit thinking of Sylvia's mother. I think I played her role once, when a boy kept calling my younger daughter. He was sixteen, too, but my daughter was only thirteen. I told him what Sylvia's mother said, and though he paused, and maybe even cried a little, he thanked me.

"I think I needed to hear that," he said.

#

Back in 1986, I went to my last Tennessee football game in Neyland Stadium. My wife and I would be moving to Greenville that next summer, and so it seemed appropriate to go once more to the game. Particularly to this game because UT was playing Alabama, and my Dad was coming. Though I lived a mile from the stadium, I couldn't get us tickets. Dad did, though, from a business

associate, MW Frank. We sat in the midst of 'Bama fans on that third Saturday in October. It wasn't much of a game unless you were a Crimson Tide fan, as we were. It was 56-28 'Bama, UT scoring two late TDs to make the score slightly less unrespectable.

As we sat in the stands that day, amidst 100,000 other fans, I looked up from my aisle seat and saw my old friend Jim from back home walking up the steps. Jim loved "Cover of the Rolling Stone," played it often on his guitar. We greeted each other, yelled, "Roll Tide," and then lost each other again in the blinding sun.

#

Sam and Lisa live in the married student apartments, the cereal box high-rise I used to live in because you didn't have to be married to live there, to live cheaply. My wife and I have been married only a week, and we're staying with her parents and sisters. Our bedroom is private only in the way a room off the kitchen with an accordion-door can be private. So we go to Sam and Lisa's to play cards, to get stoned, and to spend the night.

Sam has a real-life hookah, and when we can catch them at home, we make a point to be there. Mainly, though, they hang out on the Strip amidst other crazy student Vol fans. Their favorite bar is Ivy's, which seems like any other bar to me, but then I don't wear orange and am not a regular.

In this year, 1985, Tennessee beats Alabama, and even though we're stoned and laughing, Sam and Lisa help me understand how much losing hurts. How can I be losing, though, when I'm married to a gorgeous Persian woman? Some of my friends think it's her middle sister who's the gorgeous one, and while they admit my wife is beautiful, I know that they're only seeing the sexy surface beauty. What I'm seeing, however, and what distinguishes the two for me, is that I'm with the beautiful one I can trust. The one who is grounded, and though I don't know this as fully as I will later, the only one of the two who is completely sane.

Once, my ex-roommate asks if I'll set him up with my wife's sister:

"She's gorgeous."

"Uh, you don't want to do that," I say. I thought only that he would get in over his head with a spoiled and selfish woman. Instincts are instincts, though, and I had only the barest clue of what I didn't wholly know.

That morning after Tennessee beat Alabama, I see my wife rise from our bed. I see her beautiful, olive-brown naked body. I know she could care less about football, but what I don't know is that two years earlier, as a member of the Sports Information Office at UT, she went to her one and only football game: Tennessee versus Alabama.

"Do you know who won," I ask her.

"I think we did."

It will take me a few more years to change that "we" from burnt orange to bright crimson. And then, I'll let Sam and Lisa know who really won.

#

I remember driving to Knoxville on the day I moved into my first apartment. I'm in my parents' car, my Dad in the passenger's seat, my Mom in the back. We're heading to 1537 Laurel Avenue, a white Victorian house divided into ten apartments, mine being a studio on the second floor. I know it was I who was driving because I'm commanding the radio. I find an FM Rock station, Rock 104, that I'll later snub as being too mainstream. I can't tell if I'm excited or scared. I'm certainly anxious, for grad school is alien. I know no one there, have no advisor, and have signed up for two seminars in Shakespeare and Melville, though I don't know yet just what a seminar is exactly. I'll learn, though, and escape the Melville seminar just before the drop deadline.

I hear a song now that I consider disco—"Born to Be Alive" by Patrick Hernandez. They played it at the bars I frequented back in Birmingham in that summer of 1979. Is this what passes for Rock in Knoxville? Later that night, as we drive to Regas restaurant, we pass a place called The

Europa Club, “Knoxville’s Most Unique Disco,” or so the legend on the wall outside proclaims. I’m pretty sure what “unique” means. Born to Be Alive indeed.

Tennessee is on the quarter system, so this is mid-September, still pretty warm, but at least a few trees are turning. We had found my apartment back in July, just around the time of my 23rd birthday. I didn’t know it then, of course I couldn’t have known it then, but in that same July, at a house in the West Hills section of Knoxville, the girl who would become my wife—she was just sixteen—had joined her sister and cousins, the oldest being twenty-one. Her parents had bought this house, and the kids had been sent there from Iran to get an American education. Why UT? I asked her that question many times, and the answer always came back:

“Because, it has a strong engineering program, and Iranians encourage their sons to study engineering.”

But what about their daughters?

Soon after arriving, she was enrolled outside of town in virtually the only private high school that was also residential: Harrison-Chilhowie Baptist Academy.

“They used to bus us to the downtown Baptist Church every Sunday morning, and I’d have to sit there listening to this man up front shouting at everybody in a language that I still couldn’t really understand,” she told me. “I couldn’t understand why everyone else was just sitting there letting him shout at us.”

Ah, how to explain the Southern religious experience? An Iranian girl who someone was attempting to convert, to make her “Born to be alive Again.”

She graduated from the academy, enrolled for two years at East Tennessee State University, and then transferred to UT, as a communications major. While she was on this journey, I had discovered Film Studies through a Hitchcock/Renoir course. I finished a Master’s degree, writing a thesis on the adaptation to film of Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*. My thesis director, who became my dissertation director, asked me in the fall of 1983 if I wanted to assist him in one section of his Intro to Film Studies class, since the colleague who would normally be leading this section had earned a sabbatical for that term. I jumped at the chance—an upper level class that would lead me out of teaching freshman comp.

In my discussion section was a young woman whose name I could not pronounce: Azadeh Kheirkhah.

“Just call me Nilly,” she said on that first day. “Nilly” is short for Nilufar, which means water lily. Think Monet. I did.

I also gave her a “D” on her first essay, mainly because of grammar: those dreaded comma splices. We didn’t date during that semester, but we talked. Often. Thirty-one years later we still are. I’ve often wondered how two people, one from Tehran, Iran, the other from Bessemer, Alabama, could have possibly found each other in a city like Knoxville. Could have journeyed there in the same month of the same year. I still don’t know the answer.

But I do believe in the power of sabbaticals.

Alabama beat Tennessee in my first year in Knoxville, 1979, on the way to an undefeated season and national championship. While I kept up with the season from afar, I had to begin thinking of other things, though as with so much in life, I learned that being alive means being able to see a varied calendar: dates and events and people who enter your life. Some of them even stay forever.

#

My first Alabama football game came in 1965, the year I was nine. That previous summer I had experienced three sensations that eventually led to my Dad’s taking me to the game. First, I saw bats circling our old oak tree. Time and greater knowledge tell me that they were probably swifts. But my mother claimed they were bats, and as they flitted along during this summer twilight, being bats seemed right to me, as my parents, brother and I traversed the sidewalks of our block.

The second sighting of that evening was the word “fuck,” lower case, scrawled in orange chalk on a remote slab of concrete walk on the opposite side of our block. I didn’t know then that saying “fuck” to your parents was wrong. I had never seen the word, much less known what it meant. I didn’t know it was “bad.” And I surely didn’t know that uttering it would cause my father to slap me across the face, the third sensation of that evening.

Neither of us said “I’m sorry,” the bats or swifts kept flitting, and two days later, making up something neither of us fully understood, my Dad told me he was taking me to my first Alabama game that coming fall.

The opponent: Tennessee.

The third Saturday in October, a beautiful cool afternoon. We sat on the ten yard line. I remember, because we were right *in line* that day to watch Alabama fumble twice inside that marker, in Tennessee territory, and then, in the fourth quarter, time running out and with a field goal all that we needed to break the 7-7 tie and win the game, Alabama experienced mass confusion: our quarterback threw the ball away to stop the clock, to preserve enough time to win.

Except it was really fourth down.

History will tell you that the scoreboard said third down. I seem to remember looking at that scoreboard, too, and at the sideline marker that proclaimed, the big number four. Of course, sideline markers are the accurate ones. Of course, Tennessee got the ball right there on their own ten. Of course they ran the clock out. Of course everyone spends twelve dollars and three hours out of their lives on a perfect fall Saturday to witness a tie.

I keep thinking that not many people are lucky enough *to* witness a tie for their first game, though at the time I wouldn’t have thought that and even if I had, I wouldn’t have been stupid enough to say so to Dad. I also keep thinking how two years later, Dad took me right back to Legion field on that same third Saturday and we watched not a tie, but a victory.

For Tennessee.

Dad didn’t tell me that day how special the rivalry between Tennessee and Alabama is: how Coach Bear Bryant wanted to beat the Vols worse than he did any other team; how in victory, the jubilant Bryant would hand out cigars to his players because for too many years, as a player and coach, Bear witnessed humiliating defeats at the hands of Tennessee and legendary coach Bob Neyland. No, I didn’t know for almost another decade that this was one of the most storied rivalries in the South, next only to Auburn-Georgia. Alabama had beaten UT for the past four years before that glorious and unsatisfying afternoon tie in 1965.

I looked at the sky around our house that evening when we trudged up the back steps of home. And of course you know what I saw flitting up there above my weary head.

It would be nineteen years before we would watch another Tennessee-Alabama game together. Maybe Dad didn’t really call me a jinx, but even after fifty years now, it feels like he did. I’d have to say, in my own defense, that *he* chose the games.

If I’m being totally honest, however, I also have to admit that perhaps he didn’t; perhaps it was I that charted this course. Perhaps it was I who moved The Big Orange into our sphere of consciousness.

Because it was I who asked for that bright orange pennant the year before that first game.

#

We’re standing in one of those typical souvenir shops in Chattanooga. Confederama? Ruby Falls? Amidst all the Chattanooga Choo-Choo’s, rubber Indian tomahawks with bright feathers, beaded headbands, and fake gold nuggets, I see a blue pennant with orange lettering hanging on the wall, just in my nine-year old line of vision. It’s in a prestigious college script: University of Tennessee.

Why I want this pennant still mystifies me. What was I thinking then, five years into watching “The Bear Bryant Show” every fall Sunday with my Dad? What was he thinking? He hated Tennessee even worse than Auburn.

“That putrid orange color,” I’d hear him complain over and over. “They wear that same ugly jersey every game, even when they’re the visiting team. They think they’re too good to wear white!”

“Would you buy me this pennant, Daddy?”

I already had an Alabama pennant hanging on my bedroom wall, a white pennant with red script and a trumpeting Alabama elephant in the lower left hand corner. I knew then as I know today that I didn’t want the UT pennant because I was switching allegiance or that I was even considering pulling for the Volunteers when they weren’t playing Alabama.

Is it too corny to say that it just spoke to me, to my boyhood, even if corny is true?

I asked for many things back then, heard many “noes” or “I can’t afford that’s.”

Maybe it was because we were on a weekend vacation. We usually went to Florida, but Dad couldn’t take the entire week off that summer. So a weekend getaway in Chattanooga served as our family vacation. Maybe he felt guilty about not providing us with a place at the beach, dining out at seafood palaces, buying me that plastic alligator I got every year at the local beach shop.

Maybe buying a Tennessee pennant for me was a way to say, “I love you,” or “Do you love me, still?”

Back at home, my mother hung the pennant in place just below the Alabama pennant, and there it stayed for the next six years, accompanied by a Beatles in London poster, a Raquel Welch *One Million Years BC* poster, and a framed montage of the ‘60s my mother assembled as part of her ongoing artist’s venture.

I don’t remember the day those pennants came down. When I turned fifteen, my brother took over this room we had previously shared because my grandmother died and I moved into her antique mahogany bedroom. I’m sure he and my mother redesigned our old room, and I’m sure that my mother eventually tossed the old posters and pennants, signs of a child’s, then adolescent’s, strange longings.

I assume we all thought I would forget about these artifacts, that Tennessee pennant, that phase of my life. Yet I didn’t. I couldn’t, for on that twisting road that led from Bessemer to Chattanooga to Knoxville and to the driveway of my current home in Greenville, I saw, always before me, the opportunities I had to write about these seemingly disparate moments, their odd consistency, their never-ending and un-coincidental, but ironic, beauty. The pain within the precious meanings of my life.

Flavor of the Day
David Howard

When the candy store opened the attractive woman who interviewed him asked his age, suit size and whether he drank.

"Forty-four; forty-two long; occasionally, but not when I'm working."

She looked at the tattoo on his left arm. "What's that?"

"It's the ship Ulysses sailed on trying to find his way back home."

"Are you sure you're in the right place? This is pretty much manual labor at eight dollars an hour."

"I got the tattoo a long time ago. Don't worry, I hardly read at all now. This is the type of seasonal work I like."

"Well, you fit the uniform. We'll see pretty fast if you fit the job."

The sign had read, Taffy Man Wanted. In the short time in Pleasure Beach he liked watching the large taffy-making machine, its levers pulling the candy. Now he added the job to the resume in his head, under the Ts, before teacher and tire changer. Elena, the woman who interviewed him was filed under interesting.

Let a crowd gather, she'd told him later that first day. "Turn on the music. That always pulls them in." He knew she was watching him from the supply room window. "Mix today's flavor. Wipe the levers. Build their interest," Elena had explained. "Then start the machine."

On this warm weekday a good crowd, fifteen people, stood at the plate glass window watching the taffy machine groan to life. Elena, in her usual supply room spot, tapped on the window and smiled. He wondered if she'd noticed his tie.

The ship tattoo on his arm danced in red and blue as he lifted the pail of mixture, pouring it into the beating heart of the machine. He knew their eyes would be focused on the levers as it stretched the taffy. They'd be looking at him, too, dressed in the bright red T-shirt, with the words Kunkle's Kandy crafted in taffy pieces over the pocket, a white chef's hat on his head, the words Taffy Man emblazoned in red letters around the front.

The white pants enhanced his thinness, and today he had added a solid white necktie, in honor of completing his first month on the job. It flapped against the bright red shirt. A month of playing dress-up, more enjoyable than he'd thought.

He took a look at the sugar and water hoppers, seeing they were at the right levels. "Candy Man" was playing over the speakers, almost in synchrony with the movements of the taffy pulling levers. He watched the soft taffy flow from the opening to be stretched. He took off the taffy man hat and bowed. The crowd applauded briefly and kept watching the machine stretch the taffy.

In the storeroom, Elena handed him a can of soda. "Taking off the hat, your idea?"

"Thanks," he said, raising the drink. "Yeah, it's just something I thought of, spur of the moment. I'm sure your father would hate it."

"My father." She said the words knowingly, smiling slightly as at some memory she wouldn't share. "You finish up at eight tonight. I'll be over at ten."

He sipped his soda, running his hands through his hair, pushed flat against his scalp by the hat and dampened by the heat from the machine. "That will give me time to get the smell of taffy off me."

"Don't shower. I love the smell. I grew up with it. We'll shower together." She touched his arm, briefly. Then she fingered the tie, as if testing the kind of material. "Not a bad addition to the uniform," she said, still holding it. She reached up to his neck, gently loosened the knot and undid it, folding it neatly and placing it in her pocket. "That *is* something my father would hate," she said, turning to leave. He thought about telling her he bought it for his anniversary, then just laughed and went back to work. A month on the job wasn't so great. He'd done it dozens of times. When he

opened the mental resume, he often looked at the watch on his right wrist that no longer worked. Given to his father after 30 years of counting cash in a bank, coming home on his last day of work, saying, "It's a Benrus, Maddie. Good watch. Mr. Gallworthy gave it to me himself."

"Do you ever get the urge just to grab the taffy and start pulling it yourself?" He asked Elena one night in his room.

"Are you nuts? My father would have a fit. Nobody touches the candy, except to pack it, and then they have to wear gloves. I'd rather pull this," she said, reaching for him.

Old Man Kunkle had been one of the pioneers in automated candy making, Elena told him, but admitted as a kid she used to love making the store's various fudges before her father streamlined the process. "I used to pour the mixture into a bowl, slowly, the smell of hot, burning sugar filling the air, stirring it, feeling it meld together, watching the patterns created when I added marshmallow or nuts."

"Then you know what it would be like to mold the taffy in your hands, feel the warmth, the texture."

She just nodded.

But he knew that the taffy man's job was only to make sure the guts of the machine were fed on time with the right ingredients, prepackaged by Elias Kunkle himself or his daughters. The old man still ran the business, though Elena and her sister, Donna, each had special duties. They rarely spoke to each other, and then usually only through their father. Elena wore her hair longer, which was the only way you could tell them apart from the back when they dressed in the red and white striped jumpers over the flaming red T-shirts.

There was something about working with the taffy machine that made the job pleasurable for him. He thought it might have been its symmetry, the fluidity with which it revolved, almost filling the room with its long arms. There was the noise, too; you could actually hear the taffy being stretched, a soft, slightly erotic sound, like brushing your fingers over soft cotton. Of course there was Elena, too. Fringe benefit, he figured, in a lifetime of jobs with no benefits at all.

He'd been on the job for four hours that morning. It was the single flavor shifts like this one, with no mixture changes, that allowed him to visualize adjusting the machine, reaching into the taffy mixture. Sometimes, when he was sure that none of the Kunkles were around, and the machine had completed its circuit, he would reach up with one hand to grab the steel cross piece to which the levers were attached and pull himself up, holding the position for a few seconds, doffing his chef's hat with his free hand. The crowd watching loved it. But today both Elena and Donna were in the store, barking orders at the clerks and cooks.

The machine was completing another cycle, its hoppers empty, levers stretching the confection making the last arc. He stood nearby, feeling the rush of air as the heavy arm slowly folded across his face to settle horizontal to the floor, a residue of taffy encrusted on its skin.

"You should be more careful. A taffy man two years ago was injured when that arm hit him in the chest." He hadn't heard Donna come in from the store.

"Your sister told me. I'm careful."

"I want you to make a batch of chocolate. We're almost sold out." Donna's voice was different than her sister's he'd noticed, flatter, less expressive, except when she showed her anger.

"Raspberry ripple's the flavor of the day. Do you want the chocolate first?"

"Yes." Donna came to his side and reached up to the arm of the machine. "You're going to clean this, right?"

He nodded.

She tested the weight of the lever, pulling on it, almost lifting off the floor, as if ready to swing across imaginary monkey bars. "My sister and I used to play on the machine in the winter. We'd climb on it, slide down the arms. I guess I was 10 when Elena fell off and started crying. My father

came running and she said I had pushed her off. He picked her up and told me I couldn't play in here any more."

He looked up at her still holding on to the arm, as if the memory was gained only through touching the metal. "Did you push her off?"

"Of course." Ellen took her hand off the arm. "You're not the first hired help she has fucked, you know."

"That's all I am. Hired help. I'll be gone in a couple of months."

"Yes you will." Ellen turned to leave. "But you like this job, don't you? And it isn't just the attention from my sister either."

The taffy man picked up a cloth from a box next to the machine and started wiping down the lever. "It's OK," he said softly. "No, it's better than that. This is an interesting machine."

She watched him carefully scrape the bits of candy stuck to the arm. "At least you can leave."

He thought she had gone, but when he turned, she was watching him, as if waiting, but in no hurry for him to say something else.

"Leaving *is* easy. But you have your business, your family."

"Yes, family." She let the word hang there for a minute, testing it, almost tasting it. "Don't forget the chocolate," she said, going back into the store.

He saw Elena watching them through the window, smiling.

It was the same smile she wore when she'd walked out of the small bathroom in his room two nights ago, wearing only his taffy hat, which she insisted keeping on as she straddled him, pushing him back against the thin mattress. Her breath came quickly as he entered her, as if she'd been ready for hours. She matched his strokes with thrusts of her own, leaning her face close to his, her long brown hair smelling of chocolate, brushing his face.

As she reached orgasm she shook her head back and forth, the taffy hat flying off. He couldn't tell if she was moaning in ecstasy or because she'd lost the hat. She collapsed across his chest, and lay there as her breathing slowed. He reached for the hat, offering it to her. "No, not now," she said, rolling slightly to crawl next to his long body.

When she'd first come to him, he'd been embarrassed by the tiny room, its bed, bureau and single chair. She looked around that first night, both taking in and accepting the surroundings. She went to the window and looked out at the alley between this rooming house and the one next door for a few seconds, still making no comment or judgment and started undressing before pulling down the shade.

"I'm sure my sister told you I sleep with all the taffy men," he recalled she said as they lay slightly intertwined, her hand on his hip, at a plateau as they decided between more sex or sleep.

"She mentioned it. Maybe she's jealous."

Elena had laughed, but it wasn't a knowing laugh as much as one of surprise, as if she hadn't considered it. She reached to the floor and opened her purse, taking out two pieces of taffy, offering one to him. He shook his head no, smiling as she opened both pieces and placed them in her mouth.

"You made this," she said between chews. He liked the way her mouth worked around the candy, a slight smile on her face as she savored the taste, holding on to it, not wanting to swallow the last bit.

"I call this quality control," she laughed.

He wasn't sure if she meant the taffy or the fucking.

The memory made him smile as he watched the sun break through the day's cloudiness while he wandered over a couple of streets to the ocean on his supper break. Passing an ice cream stand, he saw an older couple, looking like his parents, on a bench, cones dripping in the heat to their speckled hands. They watched the world, he thought, with eyes wishing for the past, enjoying a small treat in lives in which there were few such pleasures.

He got his own ice cream cone and studied them for a few minutes, wishing he could hear what they were saying. The old man had probably punched the clock on some assembly line all his life, and was still spending summers in a cheap Pleasure Beach motel room. His wife looked even more tired, perhaps from too many loads of wash, ironing work pants and shirts. He hurried back through the alleys to the candy store, barely having enough time to don his taffy suit.

Old Man Kunkle was playing taffy man, as he liked to do at least once a day, hamming it up for the crowd that stood three deep in front of the window. He would take cooling pieces of taffy off the conveyor belt and throw them in the air, catching them in his mouth, rapid fire, swallowing them whole.

Elena was at the door to the store to meet her father, giving him a brief kiss on his cheek, before they left the store together. Donna, behind the fudge counter, looked away. then went into the taffy room. "My father wants you to applaud him when you take his place after your supper break."

"Applaud him for what, swallowing some taffy?"

"It doesn't matter for what. That's what he wants. And if he decides he doesn't want you here, it won't matter how many times you fuck my sister, you're gone. She'll never oppose him on anything."

"And how about you. Will you oppose him?"

"Not to keep you here."

* * *

One night when Elena was getting ready to leave his room he offered to walk her back to the candy shop. The Kunkles lived in a three-story home next to their store. They stopped to look in the store window at the machine illuminated by a spotlight in the ceiling, waiting to be fed for its next day's work.

"You making sure it's OK?" Elena asked. He nodded yes. In silence they stood in a light mist coming off the ocean. Elena reached down and took the taffy man's hand. "I'm not tired. Come on, let's mix some taffy." The two of them, each wearing souvenir paper taffy man hats sat pouring caps full of flavoring into plastic mixing bowls, adding portions of heated taffy mixture and stirring.

"Chocolate raspberry," he said, "Want to add some almond, see what that does?"

She poured some almond extract into the pail, leaning her face close and sniffing. "Smells great. OK, Let's make some more flavors. Wait. I'm thirsty. Want a soda, some candy? Fudge?"

"Soda, please. No candy," he laughed. "I know your teeth are real, but I don't know how with all the candy you eat."

"I know. I love the stuff. I'm always the store's taster. And I have perfect teeth." She opened her mouth, showing them off. Before she went to get their sodas, she moved close to him, putting her arms quickly around him, kissing him lightly on the mouth.

When she came back the taffy man was draped over the machine, looking at the pipe where the paste like taffy was forced on to the stretching levers. "This adjusts, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but it's always been kept the same size. My father would have a fit if we messed with it."

"We could get more taffy out in a shorter amount of time, that's all."

She nodded in agreement, but looked doubtful.

"We're probably making a lot of noise, too," he said, looking in the direction of her house. There were a few seconds of silence.

"You think I am afraid to do anything against my father?"

"It doesn't matter. It was fun tonight. We can do this another time."

"I can stand up to him. It's my store, too. Besides, all we are doing is making weird taffy." She took a piece they had mixed and put it in her mouth, sucking it, not chewing, staring at him. "I can."

"I know that," he said, coming over and pulling her close to him.

They worked together well, he thought. The machine was operating at slow speed, the levers turned off, so the taffy just mixed and fell to a large pan they had placed on top of a blue tarpaulin.

On their hands and knees he and Elena reached into the pan, holding the still warm taffy, kneading it, then stretching it between them.

"It feels, so...I don't know how to describe it," she said, her eyes bright.

"Smooth," he said. "And warm." He unbuttoned the top two buttons of her shirt, taking some taffy and lightly pressing it against the top of her breasts. Moaning she turned to him, moving closer, pulling off a piece of the mixture, placing it in his mouth, gently, then kissing him softly, her hands on both sides of his face. He tasted both her and the sharpness of the raspberry. They didn't see Donna and her father watching from inside the candy store or even hear them enter until the old man turned off the machine.

Donna was dressed in a man's raincoat, with the ruffles of a cotton nightgown showing beneath the hem.

"Nice outfit," Elena said, looking directly at her.

Kunkle was wearing a green bathrobe. He had substituted a man's leather belt to keep it closed. A Yankee baseball cap on his head was perched at an off angle. He leaned over the machine. "What have you done? Who said you could do this?" he asked, looking at the taffy man, who was helping Elena to her feet. She broke off a piece of their taffy creation and brought it to her father.

"Try this, daddy. It's a new flavor. We want to make a bunch of them. Isn't it great!" The words rushed out, her voice higher pitched than usual but as musical. Her eyes darted about, stopping at her sister, then back to the taffy man.

The taffy man stood casually watching the old man.

"Clean up this mess and get him out of here," Kunkle said, throwing the offered piece on the floor. With the bottom of his bathrobe he wiped some spilled taffy mixture from the side of the mixing bin. "Fire him!" he shouted and walked from the room without another word.

Elena rushed after him, looked back at the taffy man, briefly, then followed her father through the door. Their voices became more muffled and finally stopped.

Donna picked up the discarded piece of taffy, holding it, examining it as one might an old coin found in change. She placed it in her pocket, looking down at the two inch of nightgown showing under her raincoat, tugging at the coat. "She won't be back, you know."

The taffy man started pulling the edges of the tarpaulin around the taffy, covering it neatly, a small monument waiting for an unveiling.

"She won't," Donna repeated, one hand still in the pocket with the taffy.

He picked up a cleaning rag and wiped the machine, folding the cloth neatly and placing it in the pile with the others that had been discarded. Elena stood watching, a slight smile on her face. He took a key, placed it on the mixing table next to the typewritten list of flavors to be made later that day, and left without a look back.

A few hours later, carrying his small suitcase, he walked by Kunkle's Kandy on the way to the bus station. The pan of handmade taffy had been removed. The machine, silent again, loomed over the small blue tarpaulin, covered with pieces of handmade taffy, sure to be discarded before the machine came back to life.

He came to the drawbridge that arched over the river with the long Indian name, meaning where salt and fresh water meet. There was a narrow walk allowing pedestrians to cross; a dim light came from the boathouse in the middle.

Almost halfway across he leaned over the stained concrete and steel fencing, looked at the fast moving water below, took the white hat from his pocket and threw it in the air. At first it looked like a bird, a white dove, had soared from the bridge, but he knew it was just a taffy man's hat, part of a uniform for a line on the resume. Before continuing his journey across the bridge, he watched the hat float on the water until it disappeared.

The Point
Patty Somlo

He didn't know why exactly the urge to walk had hit him. One morning he got up, went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face, initially on his cheeks and then on his forehead. As had become his practice, Senji sat on the bare hardwood floor, his right leg folded under the left, keeping his lowered eyes open enough to see his lap. With his palms facing up, resting on his thighs, he watched the breath in a thin white stream enter his nostrils.

Sometime after Senji started meditating that morning, the idea came to him. *I must walk. I must walk.*

At the time, Senji was living in a small studio apartment on the third floor of a house with a spectacularly wide view of Lake Washington. Senji, who before becoming a Buddhist monk was named Chris Cole, lived rent-free in the house, in exchange for cooking vegetarian meals and cleaning. Mostly, though, Senji's old friends, Dwayne and Marianne, wanted to take care of him, and this was the way they could do so without making their intentions known.

Fortunately, Senji decided to begin walking in late July, when the almost daily rains in the Pacific Northwest had taken a short break for the summer. He couldn't explain to Dwayne and Marianne why he felt the need to go, so he didn't try. Instead, while they were at work, Marianne teaching sixth-graders and Dwayne at his law office downtown, Senji stuffed a small backpack with three changes of underwear, a dark gray hooded windbreaker, and a yellow plastic bottle full of mountain spring water, tied a rolled green yoga mat underneath the pack and wrote a short note.

"I feel the need to wander," Senji began. "I don't know how long I will be gone or even if I will come back. That is the nature of wandering. I will stay in touch."

That was all he said.

He wore thick-strapped brown sandals on his feet and a black robe over his body that reached down to his ankles. His head was shaved. Anyone who ran across him would have said the man looked like a monk. His age was anybody's guess. The baldness made him appear at one moment young and in the next moment extremely old.

In truth, Senji was neither. He had slid comfortably into middle age. Most people his age would have been content to stay at home, watch TV, and take a break from any sort of striving or new adventure.

Senji, however, needed to keep opening himself up to life. Otherwise, he thought he would die. Maybe more than any other reason, that's why he started walking.

Marianne found the note late in the afternoon, on the Tuesday that Senji took off. He'd left the note in the center of the kitchen table, held down at the top left-hand corner with a small gray rock, as if the wind might suddenly decide to whip through the room and lift up the lined, pale-green rectangle of paper.

"It's about Senji," Marianne said, the minute after Dwayne picked up the phone. "He's gone walking. Like some sort of pilgrimage, I suppose."

The only sound coming through the phone was Dwayne's slightly asthmatic breathing.

"Are you still there?" Marianne asked.

"Yes. I was just thinking."

"Well, what do you think? Should we do anything?"

"I don't know what we can do," Dwayne said. "Hopefully, he'll be all right."

Senji didn't bother to tell anyone else of his plan, including his two grown children. He knew Jonathan and Zoe would try to talk him out of it, if they knew. Unlike when Senji was young and kids rebelled, while parents acted boringly sensible, Senji had always been the unpredictable one. His kids seemed more like his parents.

Jonathan worked for the government as a civil engineer, had a lovely oversized home in a suburb filled with perfect lawns, while Zoe managed the mortgage department of a large bank. They each had two well-behaved children, one girl and one boy, who they chauffeured to everything from soccer to scouts to math camp. Senji couldn't understand how he had produced such conservative kids and could only blame their mother, the woman he divorced when they were still young.

In any event, Senji knew they would hear from Dwayne and Marianne that he had gone. But it was better for them to learn this after he'd left, rather than before, he thought.

Senji found the first part of the walking extremely pleasant. He quietly recited a walking meditation, in time to the rhythm of his steps. By focusing on the in-breath and the out-breath, Senji soon noticed that everything around him—the flowering trees, painted wood-sided houses and gardens spilling over with purple cosmos and orange lilies, lavender and yellow gladiolas, looked astonishing. The yellows were a deeper yellow, the greens appeared greener, and the purples saturated with more color than he'd ever seen. If the purpose of walking was to take in the beauty of the world, well, Senji was doing just that.

But then he stopped meditating to scold himself. Walking must not have a purpose, a voice in his head told him. One walks to walk. One eats to eat. One performs every act simply for the act itself.

That was the point, after all, the one he hadn't wanted to try and explain to his children.

Chris Cole, aka Senji, had been raised to believe that the point was to *be somebody*. For Chris Cole, a good-looking boy with sandy blond hair and dreamy blue-green eyes, that seemed like a goal he might not ever reach, though he didn't share this feeling with anyone. He was so smart that good grades came easily. In fact, he was bright enough for school—and pretty much all of life—to bore him.

He continued on in school, though, eventually earning a Ph.D. in Chemistry, and went into a field of research so complex he couldn't explain what he did at work to anyone. Women fell in love with his ocean-colored eyes, and eventually Chris Cole fell back. Laura, the woman who crawled into Chris Cole's heart, looked enough like Chris to have been his sister.

They married a month after first sharing a peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwich. A son, Jonathan, was born just shy of a year later.

Three years into the marriage, Chris woke up one morning and felt like he couldn't breathe. Laura snored quietly in the queen-size bed next to him, while Chris tried to calm himself and take in more air. As the panic slowly subsided, his heart beat less wildly and his inhalations brought more air into his lungs. As soon as he'd settled down enough to breathe normally, he got up and went to the bathroom.

Studying himself in the mirror, Chris realized that he had become someone he didn't like. Yes, he had a good education and a well-paid, respected job. Yes, he had an attractive wife and a cute daughter and son. But there was this face looking back at him in the mirror, and he didn't have a clue who this guy was.

The transformation from Chris Cole to Senji happened gradually. On the way home from work that night, Chris stopped into the Zen Buddhist Center he'd passed many times before without a second thought. The following night, he stopped in again. This stopping in and meditating, his folded legs falling asleep and tingling, went on for several months.

Then one Saturday morning, he packed a small navy blue duffel bag. Laura was out with the kids at a local park. He left a note. "I need to get away. I don't know when I'll be back. I'll call you."

Chris Cole had quit his job, without giving notice or any reason for his departure. He was handed a final check, seconds after he turned over his keys. When he walked out the door for the last time, Chris noticed that he didn't feel a thing.

He hadn't wanted to explain the reason for abandoning his life up to that point. It wasn't that he didn't believe his wife and kids or his employer deserved an explanation but that he found himself incapable of putting into words all that he'd come to understand. If Chris Cole had been forced to say anything about his abrupt departure, throwing his entire life away as if it meant nothing more to him than a pile of garbage, he simply would have said, "I couldn't see the point."

Pointlessness. That's what had come up again and again when Chris Cole meditated, his folded legs aching but his mind becoming clearer with every breath. Up to the moment he'd stepped into the Zen Center and joined a group of strangers on the floor, breathing in and breathing out, the room silent except for the sound of breathing, his life seemed like a thin line of smoke picked up by the breeze, broken apart, and then gone. Vanishing into nothing.

He couldn't understand how a life that took years to create, hours in class and studying, time spent talking to Laura and changing the babies' diapers, day after day and week after week, did not have meaning for him anymore or even any substance. The more he considered this, the more he saw his life as an inflated balloon. How easy it would be to stick a tiny pin in and watch his world deflate into a ragged bit of rubber.

Senji walked south from Seattle, trying not to consider his destination or anything beyond the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other and breathing. His legs were long and he made good time without trying. An hour passed and then two, three, four. He pulled a bag of trail mix out of his pack and started munching. He took several sips of water after.

The walking continued and went on, while the sun shifted from directly overhead to a slight angle. He grew warm, the black robe absorbing the heat, and occasionally used the back of his right hand to brush sweat off his forehead and cheeks. When he needed to pee, he kept his eyes open for a gas station or store. In the men's room, he studied his face, which had turned rosy.

Senji lost track of time. Weeks passed while he walked, without a clue as to where he was headed or even his location. Some places he found shelter in Buddhist centers and occasionally in kind strangers' homes. From time to time, he slept outdoors.

He begged for change on city streets. Often, kind men and women handed him leftovers or sandwiches they'd bought. Once in a while, someone asked him a question. "Where are you from?" "Are you on some sort of pilgrimage?"

Senji answered as best he could. He never bothered to ask the name of the town or city but often a stranger would tell him.

"You're in Eugene, Oregon now," a cute blond girl told Senji, after handing him a dollar.

From Eugene, Senji made his way to the coast. By the time he arrived, the rain that barely let up until summer had begun. Senji was drenched now, from head to toe. His sandaled feet sloshed through puddles, mud darkening his ankles. The rain soothed Senji after the hot sun. Of course, he was dazzled by the Pacific Ocean.

Luckily, he made his way down to California before the snow started to come down. He wandered amongst the giant Redwoods along the North Coast, his mouth gaping open. It was inconceivable to Senji that the world went on and on, with its practically endless variety of plants and animals. The more Senji saw of the country's beauty, from the minutest drops of fog to the black volcanic rock dotting the coastline, he understood. There did happen to be a point and he had found it.

Senji had never felt so alive, his feet covered in blisters grown hard with callouses, his black robe thinned and shredding. Still, Senji had no idea where he was heading or what would become of his life. The walking had opened him up, though. He had never before thought all this feeling was possible.

He reached the small coastal village of Mendocino on a bright clear day in November. Sunlight sparkled on the ocean that afternoon, practically blinding him. He picked his way out a winding, pebbly path to the very edge of the headlands.

When he reached that spot, he noticed a woman to his right, sitting in front of an easel painting. Wild curls the color of sand bleached by the sun brushed her shoulders. Senji headed in her direction, not sure why, except that he wanted to see the canvas set against her easel. He had, of course, forgotten that he hadn't bathed in weeks or washed his robe. The fact that he might frighten the woman didn't occur to him.

She smelled him before he stepped into her line of sight. The odor caused her to gasp out loud, get up from the little red nylon seat set in front of the easel, step back and consider Senji. He could tell from the expression on her face that she didn't know what to make of him. Should she be frightened or not?

"Don't be afraid," Senji said, taking several steps back, wondering if he should reconsider, leave the woman alone and be on his way.

The woman continued to stare at him. He could see her taking him in, assessing his feet, then moving her gaze up to the frayed hem of his robe and on up to his face, which was caked with dirt and darkened from the sun, and his head, where the hair had grown out in matted clumps.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Senji said, on seeing the woman still warily eyeing him. "I only wanted to see what you were painting."

The woman stepped back a few feet more, taking her eyes off Senji, as she gripped the wooden end of a paintbrush. She didn't say a word but waved her free left hand at the canvas, inviting Senji to look.

Senji took several small steps closer to the easel. He could see that the painting was nearly done. The woman had captured everything, he could see, as he took in the view of the huge ragged black rocks scattered here and there in the water and the dark hills in the distance, then checked the painting to assess the resemblance.

"That's it," he said, not able to stifle the delight in his voice. "You have gotten it down perfectly."

He looked up and smiled at the woman, wishing he could explain what this moment meant. It wasn't just that she happened to be a good artist or that she had captured the scene spread out in front of them. No. Senji could see that she had found the point in it all, this meaning he'd been so anxious to comprehend.

Senji didn't realize this right off but seeing that painting put an end to his walking. He wandered around town afterwards, not at all sure what he was looking for, but knew that his need for the aimless walking had changed. The sun was now dropping down over the water.

For months, he had walked without noticing if people looked at him, as the woman painter had done. Throughout the town, which was filled with old wooden houses, many painted in cheerful pastel colors, he passed men and women and saw that they glanced sideways at him, then turned away. Some even frowned.

At the edge of town, he spotted a blue and white sign pointing to a visitor's center and restrooms. He headed down the sidewalk toward a small Victorian cottage, then followed the path to the left where the arrow pointed. He pushed open the door to the men's room and found that he had the place to himself.

Strangely enough, during his months of walking, he hadn't taken a good close look at himself. After peeing, he did just that. His face was black with grime, the only light spots being the white areas directly around his eyes. Dirty clumps of hair poked up and out, here and there on his head. His skinny neck was ringed with a gray-brown crust.

The water ran black in the white porcelain sink, as Senji worked first on his hands and arms and then tackled his face and hair. With his robe stripped off, he did his best to clean under his arms, his chest and legs, and lastly his feet. For the first time since he began walking, Senji noticed what had become of his toes, calloused and hardened, the nails thick and yellow, with black underneath. Like his toes, the soles of his feet and his heels felt more like wood than skin. As he rubbed the dirt off with his wet hands, he silently thanked his feet for carrying him all this way.

Senji started his new life in Mendocino, washing dishes in a vegetarian restaurant on Ukiah Street. The owner of the restaurant, a white guy with thick, sandy brown Rasta dreadlocks named Jeremy, let Senji sleep in a small shed at the back of his property, a few blocks uphill from his business. Jeremy hadn't yet decided if Senji was a wise religious man or a crazy dude, or maybe a bit of both, but he figured the guy was harmless and wanted to help him out. The young guy had his reasons for doing so. Coming from a family where everyone achieved, as Jeremy liked to explain, he felt a kinship to people like Senji, who opted for a different path.

In his new life, Senji worked hard, but now the working felt different. In fact, he loved washing dishes. He came up with a simple repetitive chant that traveled through his mind, as he scoured the white plates and clear glasses, before setting them on the dishwasher's metal racks. *Washing just to wash brings joy.* And on and on, the chant would circle through his mind, until there wasn't a single other thought.

Gradually, the town locals became accustomed to Senji. They called him *Our Buddhist Monk*. Several shop owners pitched in to buy Senji a couple new robes.

Nearly everyone liked to walk out on the headlands fronting the town and watch Senji meditate, sitting at the very edge, on the ground. It got to the point that no one could remember a time when Senji, the Buddhist monk in his long black robe, hadn't been there.

Horse Training
Renee Rivers

"You can't train for riding a horse like Pink," Beth said that day after I dismounted and shakily handed her the reins. As a middle-aged, suburban mother, I should have known better, but my friend Beth is the closest thing I know to a horse whisperer. And, at times, I don't have a lot of sense, horse or otherwise. That probably explains why I rode a psychotic horse along the cactus-lined drop-off of the Mogollon Rim on an otherwise lovely fall day with Beth's husband, their friend Brighty and my thirteen-year-old daughter.

The horse's name was Pink. Pink Floyd—a spirited and skittish horse named for a British Rock band—was it the mad look in his eye? Or, the fact that he was white with lots of pink on his face? But I knew, watching the back of my daughter's head as she bounced along ahead on a gentler horse that young girls weren't so different from wild horses. They both could be strong-willed, reactive, unpredictable.

As I rode, or rather hung on, I tried not to think of Pink Floyd songs like: "Brain Damage," "Waiting for the Worms," "Goodbye Blue Sky." You get the picture.

After a day wrangling the difficult horse, I asked Beth, "Why did you give me the wild one when Brighty's such an accomplished rider?" Brighty (by-the-way, who names their kid for a Grand Canyon mule?) was lanky, gorgeous and a good storyteller. Like a lot of women of her background, she had years of English show jumping behind her.

Hoisting a sweaty saddle, Beth said, "Because, Floyd needs a strong, calm hand. Brighty has training, but her strength's not in her core. For what you lack in training, you've got the presence to handle Floyd. You can't train for that."

You can't train for that. Really?

She explained that Floyd was a roping horse traumatized by chute training. And, he didn't like men. Her husband, Dan—in trying to establish dominance with Floyd—had tipped that balance too far, spooking him to the point where Dan couldn't get near Floyd without making him nervous.

"So you gave him to *me*?" I asked, rubbing an aching shoulder. "I think I dislocated my shoulder trying to hang on." With a bad knee, I wasn't able to hang on with legs the way most riders do. I had to cross hold with my left hand on the saddle and my right leg, saving my sore knee for signaling pressure. It wasn't perfect, but it worked.

"Dan and Brighty said you handled Floyd fine. You never got out of presence. That's what animal work requires: using your weaknesses to your advantage—staying in charge."

When I was a girl, my best friend Allison and I used to pretend we were in charge. We'd sneak into her neighbor's barn and ride his horses bareback. We were warned to stay away by our mothers, but the horses were too much of a draw. I don't know if it was the warnings or the general wariness all young girls should develop, but we were wary of the man to whom the horses belonged. But, we weren't deterred.

We'd sneak into the barn with carrots, feeding the horses from our pale, extended hands. We studied books about how Indians rode bareback. We'd pet, brush, and rein the horses. And at dusk we'd lead them to a stack of hay bales. Stepping up from the bales, we'd slide onto the horses' broad bare backs and glide through the trodden pasture, dreaming. We'd tell, years later, how getting bucked off into the hard dust never stopped us. Until the accident.

Allison worked in a stable after college. During a lightening storm, she was bringing horses back for stabling and hers spooked. Rearing back, the saddle horn caught in her mouth.

I don't need to describe the kind of destructive momentum a half a ton of thunder-spooked animal, a broken leather-bound steel horn, and a rock-strewn trail can wreak on a young woman's

body. Allison almost didn't make it. Locked into a study program overseas, I sent letters, told her stories over the phone her mother held to her ear as she lay unconscious, her swollen head and face held together in a cocoon of bandaging.

I tried not to cry. We'd always told each other cowgirls didn't, anyway.

Allison recovered, for the most part. When I got married, she took off for the Grand Canyon instead of coming to my wedding. I remember feeling hollow, wondering, where did we grow apart? Was it when I didn't know what to say when they removed the bandages? Was it the fiancé I had and she didn't? Was it the time that had lapsed since our horse years?

Perhaps Allison, like Pink, had just had enough. Perhaps what life asked of them wasn't what they wanted.

Rubbing my shoulder on the drive home, I watched my daughter looking across the mesas and realized how little time we spent with horses, how few years we had left before she'd be grown. I shuddered to think how she'd never-so-much-as fallen from a bike, let alone a horse. "How'd you like the ride today?" I asked.

"Oh, mom. It's so cool! If you only knew how much I want a horse."

"I know. I know," was all I could say.

As the highway descended through a mesa and grasslands rose behind us, I thought about what horses have given and taken from us.

It's not the kind of thing you can train for.

Bio's

Marie Scampini is a published poet, short story writer and playwright, currently writing *1775 Poems in 1775 Days*, and a collection of short stories entitled *Truth, Interrupted*.

Richard Mark Glover has published short stories with *Oyster Boy Review*, *Bookend Review* (Best of 2014), *Crack the Spine*, *Buffalo Almanac*, and won the 2004 Eugene Walters Short Story Award. His journalism has appeared in the *San Antonio Express News*, *West Hawaii Today*, and the *Big Bend Sentinel* where he won the 2010 Texas Press Association Best Feature Award, medium size weekly.

Thomas Cannon's story about his son is the lead story in the anthology *Cup of Comfort for Parents of Children with Autism*. He also has his humorous novel *The Tao of Apathy* available on Amazon. His poems and short stories have been published in many print and electronic journals.

Jessica Walker is a writer who uses fiction to unravel the world. Her short stories have been featured in *Eye Contact*, *Rune*, and *Flash Fiction Magazine*. Her best work happens with a cup of coffee in hand.

Philip Barbara worked for three decades as a staff writer and editor for Reuters News Agency, where he was features editor for North and South America. He has a journalism degree from Fordham University and Masters in broadcasting and film production from the City University of New York.

Margaret Karmazin's credits include stories published in literary and national magazines, including *Rosebud*, *Chrysalis Reader*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Mobius*, *Confrontation*, *Pennsylvania Review* and *Another Realm*. Her stories in *The MacGuffin*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Licking River Review* and *Mobius* were nominated for Pushcart awards. Her story, "The Manly Thing," was nominated for the 2010 Million Writers Award. She has a stories included in *STILL GOING STRONG*, *TEN TWISTED TALES*, *PIECES OF EIGHT (AUTISM ACCEPTANCE)*, *ZERO GRAVITY*, *COVER OF DARKNESS*, *DAUGHTERS OF ICARUS*, *M-BRANE SCI-FI QUARTERLIES*, and a YA novel, *REPLACING FIONA* and children's book, *FLICK-FLICK & DREAMER*, publishedbyetreasurespublishing.com.

Justin Hunter is currently working on his MFA at Arcadia. His stories have appeared in *Down in the Dirt Magazine* and at *AWS Publications*. He lives in Dallas with his wife and two boys. When he's not writing, Justin is probably buried under a doggie pile of children and...dogs.

Adam Witzig is a sophomore in college studying Sociology at Taylor University. Although he wants to do urban ministry, writing is a passion of his. Through his writing, he hopes to make people reflect on what really matters in life.

Brandon Knight is a writer out of Plano, TX. Rather than pursuing college after high school, he travelled the country on foot, by train, by hitchhiking. These years afforded Knight the opportunity to gain the experience necessary to write about the unknown America. You may have given him a dollar while he panhandled, and he thanks you.

Susan Davies is currently a graduate student at Wilson College, Chambersburg, PA., where she is studying for a Masters of Arts in Humanities. She currently works as a Therapist Support helping

children with Autism and learning disabilities. She and her husband have five children and two grandchildren.

The doctor said she would live in a nursing home, confined to a wheelchair, crippled by pain. That was thirteen years ago. Instead, Mirissa D. Price is a 2019 DMD candidate at Harvard School of Dental Medicine, spreading pain-free smiles, writing through her nights, and, once again, walking through her days. Mirissa Price is a Huffington Post blogger and emerging writer with publications in *Yellow Chair Review*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, and *Tuck Magazine*. Follow Mirissa's writing at [https://mirissaprice.wordpress.com/.](https://mirissaprice.wordpress.com/))

Brian Michael Barbeito is a Canadian writer and photographer. Recent work appears at *Fiction International* from San Diego State University and at *The Tishman Review*. Brian is the author of *Chalk Lines*, (Fowl Pox Press, 2013).

Andrea Cox Christen packed up her family, got on a plane and flew half-way around the world to see what it was like in the tropics. In Indonesia she writes, reads and teaches while missing her home state of Montana.

Renee G. Rivers' interests find her behind an acetylene torch or traveling. She holds an M.A. in English from SUNY Brockport and B.A. in German via the *Goethe-Institut-Muenchen*. Renee's stories appear in: PBS Filmmaker Jillian Robinson's *Change Your Life Through Travel* and *The Feminist Wire* and have won international awards from *SouthWest Writers* and *Tin House*.

André Moreira studied English and Chemistry at The University of Texas at Austin. He has recently decided to pursue a Master's degree in Music Composition, and means to continue expressing himself through prose as well as through music.

Charlie Bennett is a writer and attorney living in Louisville, Kentucky with his wife and children. He has practiced law in Kentucky since 2003 and has previously published short stories in *Fiction on the Web*, *Yellow Mama* and *PennyShorts*.

Michael J Martin is a Chicago-area writer. Seven chapters from his novel-in-progress have been published in the small literary press.

Leonard Klossner has had short fiction published in *The Birds We Piled Loosely* and *Queen Anne's Revenge*, and his latest novella, *The Dominance Bond*, is due Spring 2016. Leonard is also the founder of the literary journal and publishing imprint, *Zeit|Haus*.

Daniel Galef has published short fiction in *Kugelmass*, *Goreyesque*, and *Sein und Werden*, among others. He is a Montreal-based writer with a penchant for the bizarre and an affinity for oddity, and is well aware that every writer says just about the same thing. Let them. I have semicolons.

Originally from Wisconsin, Daniel Dominowski lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; He is a veteran and a graduate from Ohio University's MA program in creative writing. He Tweets at twitter.com/DanDominowski.

Terry Barr's nonfiction collection, *Don't Date Baptists and Other Warnings From My Alabama Mother*, has recently been published by Red Dirt Press. His work has also appeared in

Hippocampus, The Bitter Southerner, and South Writ Large. He lives in Greenville, SC, with his family.

David Howard is a former newspaper reporter and editor who lives in Massachusetts and has published fiction in Boston Literary Magazine, Fiction on the Web, Back Fox Literary Magazine and Foliate Oak Literary Magazine.

A recovering economics professor, Steve Slavin earns a living writing math and economics books.

Patty Somlo has received four Pushcart Prize nominations and a notable essay in *Best American Essays 2014*. She has three forthcoming books: a short story collection, *The First to Disappear* (Sputen Duyvil), a memoir, *Even When Trapped Behind Clouds* (WiDo Publishing), and *Hairway to Heaven Stories* (Cherry Castle Publishing). www.pattysomlo.com.

Robert Karaszi worked as a lyricist/songwriter for an independent record label, and also freelanced as a writer for upcoming artists. His poetry has appeared in Hawaii Pacific Review, Grey Sparrow Journal, The Aureorean, Conclave: A Journal of Character, and elsewhere. Most recently he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Currently he resides in New Jersey.

Allison Thorpe is a writer from Lexington, KY. The author of several collections of poetry, she has recent work appearing or forthcoming in *Crab Fat*, *So To Speak*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Gingerbread House*, *Yellow Chair Review*, *The Homestead Review*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*, and *Jersey Devil Press*.

Penn Stewart lives and writes in Wichita Falls, Texas. His short fiction appears in *Literary Orphans*, *Word Riot*, *Dogzplot*, *Night Train*, *Front Porch Review*, *Union Station Magazine*, and elsewhere. You can learn more about Penn by visiting his website: <http://www.pennstewart.com/>

C.C. Russell lives in Casper Wyoming. His writing has appeared in such places as Wyvern Lit, Word Riot, Rattle, and The Colorado Review. He has held jobs in a wide range of vocations – everything from graveyard shift convenience store clerk to retail management. He can be found on Twitter @c_c_russell

Holly Day has taught writing classes at the Loft Literary Center in Minnesota since 2000. Her published books include *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, *Guitar All-in-One for Dummies*, *Piano All-in-One for Dummies*, *Walking Twin Cities*, *Insider's Guide to the Twin Cities*, *Northeast Minneapolis: A History*, and *The Book Of*, while her poetry has recently appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *SLAB*, and *Gargoyle*. Her newest poetry book, *Ugly Girl*, just came out from Shoe Music Press.

Kristen Rybandt has written for The Fix and After Party Chat Magazine and lives near Philadelphia with her husband and two daughters.

Brad Garber has degrees in biology, chemistry and law. He writes, paints, draws, photographs, hunts for mushrooms and snakes, and runs around naked in the Great Northwest. Since 1991, he has published poetry, essays and weird stuff in such publications as *Edge Literary Journal*, *Pure Slush*, *On the Rusk Literary Journal*, *Sugar Mule*, *Barrow Street*, *Barzakh Magazine*, *Ginosko Journal*, *Smoky Blue Literary Magazine*, *Aji Magazine* and other quality publications. 2013 Pushcart Prize nominee.

Darren Demaree's poems have appeared, or are scheduled to appear in numerous magazines/journals, including the South Dakota Review, Meridian, New Letters, Diagram, and the Colorado Review.

Jennifer Lothrigel is a poet and artist residing in the San Francisco Bay area. She creates intuitively, drawing from the mystery of her body and soul, then weaves her findings together. Her work has been published in Trivia - Voices of Feminism, Narrative Northeast, Poetry Quarterly, Firefly Magazine, Cordella Magazine, We' Moon and more.

Rob Hicks is from Texas. His work has appeared elsewhere, though who cares? His book, Cornelia Avila, is available through Belle Tier Press.

James Mulhern has published fiction in several literary journals, with more stories to be published this year and next. One of his stories appeared in *The Library's Best*, a collection of best short stories. In September of 2013, he was chosen as a finalist for the *Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction*. James lives and teaches in the Fort Lauderdale area.

CB Droege is a fantasy author and poet living in Munich. Recently his fiction was collected in *RapUnsEl and Other Stories*, and a selection of his poetry appeared in the *Drawn to Marvel* anthology. His first novel, *Zeta Disconnect* was released in 2013. He recently edited *Dangerous to Go Alone! An Anthology of Gamer Poetry*.

Learn more at cbdroege.com

Chris Bronsk writes and takes pictures. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Gravel*, *Mojave River Review*, *Creative Thresholds*, and elsewhere. He lives near Boston with his wife and son.

Scott Neuffer is a journalist, writer, and poet who lives in Nevada with his family. His work has appeared in *Carson Valley Times*, *Nevada Magazine*, *The Nevada Review*, *Fiction Fix*, *Underground Voices*, *Foreword Reviews*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Construction Literary Magazine*, and other fine publications. Check out his first book, *Scars of the New Order*, at: <http://www.undergroundvoices.com/ScarsOfTheNewOrder.html>

Follow him on Twitter (@scottneuffer) or read his Goodreads blog at: https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8211556.Scott_Neuffer/blog

D.S. Levy is a fiction writer from the Midwest. She is a teaching mentor with Women's Voices Mentorship Program for Writers (womensvoicesmentorship.com) and has been published in the *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Little Fiction*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Columbia*, *Pithead Chapel*, and others. She blogs at cdogco.com and tweets @122cats.

Lynsey Morandin is determined to make this bio 50 words exactly. She co-runs Hypertrophic Press and loves strong coffee, the Toronto Maple Leafs, and her cat Frankie. Find her work in places like *The Southern Tablet*, *Crab Fat*, and *The Quotable*. That's 50 words; she's very proud of herself now.

Jeremy DaCruz is a recent graduate of the University of Central Florida and is currently living in Managua, Nicaragua. He has been published in *Mountain Xpress* and *The Drunken Odyssey*. His

time is divided between working at a center for people with disabilities, writing, and exploring the beautiful, complicated country that is Nicaragua.

Alison McBain lives in Connecticut with her husband and three daughters. She has over forty publications, including work in *Flash Fiction Online*, *Gone Lawn*, and *The Gunpowder Review*. When not writing, she reviews books for the magazine *Bewildering Stories*. You can chat with her at alisonmcbain.com or on Twitter @AlisonMcBain.

Tine Heraldo is a published poet that writes in both English and Tagalog since she was eleven years old. Her favorite poets include Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. She is currently based in Southern California and is a graduate of Sam Houston State University.

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Lindsay McLeod trips over the horizon every morning. He currently writes on the sandy Southern edge of the world, where he watches the sea and the sky wrestle for supremacy at his letterbox. He prefers to support the underdog. It is presently an each way bet.

Adam Levon Brown is a poet and student residing in Eugene, Oregon. He enjoys the outdoors, playing with cats, and writing in his spare time. He has been published in dozens of places and runs a blog at AdamLevonBrown.com

Christopher Woods is a writer, teacher and photographer who lives in Houston and Chappell Hill, Texas. He has published a novel, *THE DREAM PATCH*, a prose collection, *UNDER A RIVERBED SKY*, and a book of stage monologues for actors, *HEART SPEAK*. His photographs can be seen in his gallery - <http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/>. He is currently compiling a book of photography prompts for writers, *FROM VISION TO TEXT*.

Dan Nielsen drinks bourbon and plays ping pong. Old credits include Random House and University of Iowa Press anthologies. Recent work has appeared in, or is scheduled to appear in: *Jellyfish Review*, *Bird's Thumb*, *Minor Literature[s]*, *Storm Cellar*, *Random Sample*, and *Pidgeonholes*. Dan has a website: Preponderous and you can follow him @DanNielsenFIVES

Vandermolen (editor in chief, Time Being Books) resided in India, 2008–14, capturing experiences as commonplace as trips to the local city market and as distinct as the 2013 Maha Kumbh Mela. Her work has appeared in various journals, including *Contemporary American Voices*, *Muse India*, *Papercuts*, and *Taj Mahal Review*.

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era. He is a Canadian and American citizen. Today he is a poet, editor, publisher, freelance writer, amateur photographer, small business owner in Itasca, Illinois. He has been published in more than 880 small press magazines in 27 countries, and he edits 10 poetry sites. Author's website <http://poetryman.mysite.com/>. Michael Lee Johnson, Itasca, IL. nominated for 2 Pushcart Prize awards for poetry 2015. Visit his Facebook Poetry Group and join <https://www.facebook.com/groups/807679459328998/>

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Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in Kestrel, Symposium, and will appear in other magazines throughout 2016. His photography has been published in The Front Porch Review, Foliate Oak Magazine, the San Pedro River magazine and more than two dozens of other publications.

Corey Niles is a writer living in Pennsylvania. His most recent publications include "Buried" in Under the Bed Magazine, "The Hunt" in Eye Contact Magazine, and "Be Okay" in 50-Word Stories, which was named the Story of the Week. He can be contacted at coreyniles@gmail.com.

Michael H. Brownstein's work has appeared in The Café Review, American Letters and Commentary, The Pacific Review, and others. He has nine poetry chapbooks including The Shooting Gallery, Poems from the Body Bag, A Period of Trees, Firestorm: A Rendering of Torah and others. He is the administrator of <http://projectagtorange.com/>.

David Subacchi was born in Wales (UK) of Italian roots and has four published collections of poems. 'First Cut' (2012), 'Hiding in Shadows' (2014), Not Really a Stranger (2016) and A Terrible Beauty (2016). BLOG: <http://www.writeoutloud.net/profiles/davidsubacchi>

Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas is a seven-time Pushcart nominee as well as a four-time Best of the Net nominee. She is the 2012 winner of the Red Ochre Press Chapbook contest with her manuscript *Before I Go to Sleep*. She has authored several chapbooks along with her latest full-length collection of poems: *Hasty Notes in No Particular Order*, released from Aldrich Press in 2013. Her work has appeared in a wide variety of online and print magazines including: *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine, Poets and Artists, War, Literature and the Arts* and many more. According to family lore she is a direct descendant of Robert Louis Stevenson. www.clgrellaspoeetry.com

Robert Ronnow's most recent poetry collections are *New & Selected Poems: 1975-2005* (Barnwood Press, 2007) and *Communicating the Bird* (Broken Publications, 2012). Visit his web site at www.ronnowpoetry.com

Nick Gregorio lives, writes, and teaches in Philadelphia. His fiction has appeared in Crack the Spine, Yellow Chair Review, The Bitchin' Kitsch and more. He is a contributing writer and assistant editor for the arts and culture blog, Spectrum Culture, and currently serves as fiction editor for Driftwood Press. He earned his MFA from Arcadia University in May 2015 and has fiction forthcoming in Zeit|Haus and Down in the Dirt.

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher and conga drummer who plays Afro-Cuban folkloric music for dance classes and Rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area. He's been publishing extensively in literary magazines and anthologies since the mid 70's. Recent writing in Serving House Journal, Weirderary, Flint Hills Review, Houseboat (featured poet), Mas Tequila, Uppagus, After The Pause, Bookends Review (best of 2015), Rhysling Anthology 2015, Pacific Review, MockingHeart Review, Unscooped Bagel, and many others.

C.F. Roberts. Writer/Artist/Videographer/Provocateur/High-Functioning Autistic/Former Zine Publisher

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Rebecca Harrison sneezes like Donald Duck and can be summoned by a cake signal in the sky. Her best friend is a dog who can count. Through the WoMentoring Project, she was chosen by Kirsty Logan as her mentee. Rebecca's been nominated for Best of the Net, and was a finalist in the first Wyvern Lit flash fiction contest. Her stories can also be read at Quantum Fairy Tales, Maudlin House, Luna Station Quarterly, and elsewhere.

Vincent Barry's affection for creative writing is rooted in the theatre. More years ago than he prefers to remember, his one-act plays caught the attention of the late Arthur Ballet at the University of Minnesota's Office for Advanced Drama Research and Wynn Handman at New York's The American Place Theatre. Some productions followed, as well as a residency at The Edward Albee Foundation on Long Island. Meanwhile, Barry was teaching philosophy at Bakersfield College in California and authoring philosophy textbooks. Now retired from teaching, Barry has returned to his first love, fiction. For his other stories, see: Writing Tomorrow Magazine ("Dear Fellow Californian," June 2014), The Write Room ("When It First Came Out," Fall 2014), Blue Lake Review ("The Girl with the Sunflower Yellow Hot Rod Limo," December 2014), Crack the Spine ("A Lot Like Limbo," Spring 2015 print anthology), Pure Slush ("Blind Suspicion," January-February 2016).

Colin James has a chapbook of poems, *Dreams of the Really Annoying*, from Writing Knights Press.