

2007

Subject: impromptu congress of amateurs

Okay gentlemen, here's the scoop.

Instead of having a book discussion at the beach, I am proposing (no, wait, we had a quorum at the end of last book club meeting! this is official) ... what we are going to do at the beach is that you are each going to submit one page (that is, one side of one piece of paper) *in your own write*. It can be a poem, a song, a play, a short story, a character sketch, a rant, a piece of a larger work, a dream, a memory, an incident, a last will and testament -- fiction or non-fiction or somewhere in between. No Donzo, it cannot be something you wrote in college or worse, law school, unless you have reexamined it and rewritten it. I want it to be you, now. And no, Monkey, it cannot be resolutions of a committee of interested board members justifying a LBO valuation (though those tend to be rather creative). If it's a song, you can sing it only after it has been *read* to the assembled pulchritude. And no more than one side, one page but you can fill it edge to edge with 8 point type as far as I care, so long as I can read it. My plan is that throughout the week/end, we will read one every once and a while, like at dinner, on the beach, round the hot tub, afternoon cocktails, or middle-of-the-night GB, or Cups halftime, wherever we happen to be mostly assembled and the time seems ripe. I'm not sure yet if you will each read your own, or I will read them, or ODS will read them, or whether we will have Cigarette Girl read them. Since I thought it up, I get to decide, at least this time. My inclination is that you will not read your own, but they will be read aloud (he said oral), so part of the fun will be guessing who it is -- therefore, they need to be typed or printed neatly or at least legibly. There'll be no scoring, but we will discuss *in a positive way*. Even if you hate it, you better hate it because it so thoroughly raped your lesbian soul. And I will be pissed and affronted if I catch you writing it at the beach (other than proofing and maybe minor re-jiggers). You can hand them over when you walk in the door as I plan to be there before most if not all of you. That's it. Clarifications may be sought, but whining will be eschewed. (gesundheit)

I really want you to do this because I know truly that you each have it in you, and I'm older than you so you have to do what I say, and I'm tired of renting movies that only I watch.

Thank you very much.

Jimmy Crack Corn

Who Am I, Really?

Am I a father, husband or a son? Studious, loving or lazy? A singer, teacher or psychologist? A hiker, biker or swimmer? Average, special or, God forbid, "special"? At any given time we are members of many different groups. In one way or another, the groups we identify with define who we are. Whether that identification is a good thing or not can depend on its name: to be "labeled" by others is bad, but to find your own "identity" is good. I will label these groups or labels as 'circles'.

Some circles you choose – for example, I decided to go to a particular college and join a fraternity there. Others are chosen for you – the community and church you grew up in. Still others are more fundamental and required no choice at all – your family, gender and race.

Some circles are so small that they set you apart from everyone else you know. No one else has your name and combination of circles. We are each unique – at the same time we also have the power to defy and overcome our circles.

Some circles are so large that they have no everyday meaning. Do you consider your status as a resident of Earth important? Other times, it depends on where you are. When traveling overseas, being American can have an impact (or in the wrong neighborhood, being white).

Some cannot survive without their favorite circles. We all know someone who is defined mainly by a sports team, talent or favorite issue. Others do not allow those to define them. I am a member of my family, my school, my church, my club. I can (and will) be identified by my job, social rank and age. But I can also be more than those things.

I know each of you, some for many years. I know some of your circles and you know some of mine. Who am I to you – one or two of those, or the sum of them? Can I think of you without separating you from your memberships and experience? We are all 'Heads, and that holds us together, as well as other circles that link us.

Our circles give us a point of reference. What we expect from the world is based on the combined experience we have had to that point. What we expect from ourselves is a function of how we have labeled ourselves.

When someone asks you who you are, what do you say? What is your first thought? People like order – they like to know what's coming, what to expect. They like simple answers to complex questions. But you are not simple, and neither am I. Do you really see me? Am I what you see? In a way, probably so. Is it your job to look past the labels and see the person, or is it mine to show you who I am?

We can change our circles, our labels, and in so doing change how others see us. I believe we can also change ourselves. But not just by changing our name or label. Change is a blessing and a curse. It is a chance to start anew, and a chance to repeat past mistakes. It is a rare gift to be able to be yourself – to make of yourself what you can. It is rarer still to be accepted as you are, regardless of labels.

I am my name, my loves, my friends. I am a 'Head, and that will never change.

An American Tale

Today, on my way to work, I had the honor and privilege of tuning into NPR and listening to one of those classic American Tales that so intrigue me, and make my mind whirl with delight, and get me to engage in a self indulgent private giggle. It was a tale involving all of my personal classic touchstones: invention, the tipping point, mass marketing, anomaly and historical legacy.

The story was an interview with this dude named Rick Silver, a man with an ethnic northeast accent in his particular lilt of speech. Mr. Silver claims to be the inventor of the dreaded "Electric Slide" line dance that makes it obligatory, half-hearted, overly-clichéd, and ubiquitous appearance at almost every American wedding over the past 30 years (present company accepted of course). Ah, the Electric Slide, the carefully choreographed line dance that is so 'easy to do' that even people who have no dancing ability at all can safely trot out to the dance floor and join the growing armada of hopelessly a-rhythmic American pin wheels spinning freely across the dusty tundra of vapid American pop culture.

So, apparently Mr. Silver (who is a mild mannered accountant by day, and a "dance teacher and singer" by night) invents this dance in the mid 70's or so, for the Manhattan, discotheque, beautiful people crowd, and after a few years of being a strictly sub-culture and regional phenomenon, the 'buzz' about the dance reaches the pop cultural tipping point, and the dance becomes a craze that sweeps the nation. Ahh, America, land of ideas, invention and the distribution thereof.

But a funny thing happens on the way to historical legacy. Apparently, in the midst somewhere of the dance going national, a few of the steps get tangled up, a few of the best moves get dropped, and a few other tweaks are administered. In other words, you got the real phenomenon and power of folk culture going on. People dropping parts, and adding parts, just like we used to do in the days before mass marketing, TV, advertising, radio and wrinkle free cotton shirts. And, I say to myself, well "good, that is what's supposed to happen" if you really want something to become a folk song (like Amazing Grace), or a folk poem (like Beowulf) or a folk dance (like the Virginia Reel). And then what occurs is that the turbo charged American mass communication system kicks in, and starts distributing the mutated dance, like a quintessential oncological condition, to the far corners of Spokane, Washington, Lowell, New Hampshire, and Lake Charles, Louisiana. Like a nightmarish 'do loop' computer program, the mutated gene gets replicated over and over until, like a tumor, it has covered the land from sea to shining sea. Ah, technology!

Then the camera cuts to Mr. Silver, the accountant, who sees that the debits and credits of his Frankenstein are most surely not adding up squarely. He calls for an audit. And the music of the Electric Slide cues up and drowns him out. Can you hear it in your minds eye? Its Electric! Mr. Silver shouts to America that they are actually "DOING IT WRONG!". And again, the music cues in . . . Its Electric! Mr. Silver can see the waltzing bands of mindless penguins waddling over America's dance floors. "Stop", he shouts, "You're doing it wrong!" But like so many zombies, on the night of the living dead, the throngs of American mass dancers go on dancing, and replicating their viral load, rampaging from town to town, and pay nary a word of attention to Mr. Silver's agonized screams of protest. "But I am the creator of the dance, and THEY are doing it wrong!" shouts Mr. Silver. Ah, Mary Shelly would be positively beaming, would she not? And the beat goes on. It's Electric!

The interview then contains a clip from a clever and respected copyright lawyer who explains that Mr. Silver has a very weak case to pursue the masses for copyright infringement of 'his' dance. Then cut to Mr. Silver who earnestly states: "This is not about pursuing a legal remedy that leads to a huge recovery. No, no, no, . . . there is a greater principle at play . . . people are doing the dance incorrectly, and unless I do something about it in my life, the historical legacy of this dance will be destroyed . . . forever."

It's Electric!

Why, always, the necessity for more words? Time retreats in the rear view mirror. But words live forever, right?

Bruce frequently visits me at night. Bruce is a good friend, but was dead. I should say: Bruce **was** a good friend, and **is** dead; but is that distinction pertinent? In these dreams, he isn't dead. But, none of the other people in the dream, who are all privy to the same information as I, who are my equals in knowledge, are the least bit surprised to see that Bruce is alive. Nobody but me has any questions about where he has been or why we are rejoined nor what has been doing for the last 14 years, because to all the others, Bruce is alive still and it is I who am out of place. In these dreams, the dead are alive and the alive dreamer is the one who is missing – nobody sees me except for Bruce. He chuckles and looks me in the eye and says: "Can't you figure it out man? You have always been so fucking smart; it should be easy for you".

I am the only one who doesn't know that his death has been staged, staged for the tragedy and the ensuing sadness but mostly for the exquisite freedom that death must bring. By the time I awake I realize that **everybody** but me knows he is not dead, but has been leading a secret alive life. In the madness of the dream, I console myself with the knowledge that Bruce really is dead, and that this is just a dream. Yet, when I wake, I am slathered in sweat and dread. And feel as if I am missing the most obvious truths. Is death really the only freedom available to us?

How do they do it? How do the best writers place words on paper and manage to effortlessly take us away to that special place reserved for the sweet exquisite power of inward looking thought? Some do it with brevity, by putting just the right words together in just the right places with just the right rhythm and pace. Others prefer to write very long sentences, sentences that never seem to end, sentences that by all accounts – although extremely lengthy – always seem to end up just right...just in the place that you hoped the sentence was going...sentences that depict vapor as if it were something tangible and real and SOLID; word constructs that bring the unknowable all the way around to the known and then back again to the place where we – we the living - can appreciate the "art", the "heart" the "soul", the overarching oneness of man...the eternal questions that cause us all to continue to search far and wide for the essence of what we truly want to be and to say and to do.

But nonetheless there do remain so many questions. That sentence really wasn't that long, was it?

Bruce was (is?) one of my oldest friends, a very close high school buddy. He died of melanoma cancer at age 39. I attended his funeral and rode with his mom and dad and brother in the hearse to the cemetery. I placed a shovelful of dirt on his casket. I sang a song for him at the service. I cried crocodile tears. Why then does he taunt me in my dreams, laughing at the exquisite irony that it is he who is truly living – living the life that he wanted all along but could never achieve in his short mortal life?

And what difference would the answer make to my words? None that I can see clearly.

DRAGONS

*Ripped from solitude
Beginning in consciousness
Knowledge yet to come*

*Eyes foretell nurture
Blissful, simple existence
Sense the horizon*

*Creator, destroyer, mentor in love
Tease with a brief spell of innocence
Impostor, teacher, myth from above
Leave this place with reticence*

*Enter the dragons, to slay or be slain
Can one truly hope to claim victory?
Marshall dear allies, rare halogen days
Emerge from youth's angst with sweet injuries*

*False strength comes next wrapped in a vacuum
Swim upstream in a wavering line
What they say you must be
Will erase I and me
Remember when all was just rhyme*

*Pray weakness and ignorance claim you!
There's more power in yield than fight
Stretch, listen, explore
Pry open dark doors
Learn something to say to the light*

*Teach youth to those too young to be young
Give back what was taken with blood
Admit but let go what is unsung
Crawl free of the populist flood*

*Revisit the dragons, last lucid days
No need to fear what is certain
Behold thee the wisdom, wrung from your ways
Step humbly into the curtain*

*Senses soon falter
Find comfort in fading light
Returns the horizon*

*Did I love enough?
End: will you succumb to faith?
Return solitude*

Lightning over Sulawesi

After one night killing 157 mosquitoes with my book in a cinderblock cell of a room at the Hotel Palu, I was ready to leave, again. A long way from the day before in the hustle of what used to be colonial Makassar, where the Frenchman told me of untravelled country, timeless minimalistic phallic megaliths, and hinted of a newly embedded network of satellite communications systems for un-named multinational powers, further still from peaceful, welcoming Bali, much less home. The slight paperback Conrad, dog-eared and sweat-stained to begin with, now covered in insect remains mingled with blood, had to be left behind.

The bus to Poso, up and over the fecund spine of the island, was nowhere to be seen when due. Roughly two hours later, all purple, black and silver swirling designs, it pulled up to the mostly deserted bus station, only to roar off again almost immediately, passenger-less. "Go get gas, back soon," shrugged the ageless station agent. Another hour of *jam kerat*, Bahasa "flexible time," wasted in the moist air of the ramshackle station, barely stirred by the slow, off-kilter oscillations of the overhead fan. Finally, almost four hours late, it returned and sat in the heat of the dying afternoon, its 36-seat frame shuddering as hot exhaust turned the shacks across the dirt street into shimmering mirages, open doorways into undulating maws. Despite my being the sole passenger, the agent, inscrutable but wanting to be rid of my impatient, pacing Western presence, huddled with the driver and his two assistants, all of them dark and at least a head shorter than I, and convinced them to make the run into the dusky rainforest with a virtually empty bus.

Across the flat of Palu river valley, and up into the forest we rose, slowly torquing one switchback after another, bending around burnished trees whose roots were obscured far below dense, darkest green undergrowth and whose tops, farther still, blocked out the fading light. Up, up, up precipitously, then turning down without sign, no village or stop. Soon pitchest black reigned, only 50 feet or so of uneven, rutted dirt emerging grudgingly from the steamy forest in our headlights. We crossed rivers heard but not seen below the "bridges" of downed palm trees the driver would approach cautiously, inching up and peering at his feet to judge their width and strength, and his angle of approach, backing away and trying again if unsure of his alignment.

I dozed despite the stickiness, the bouncing and the uncertainty of thoughts. Where exactly are we? Will these three deliver me? To or from? Jarred awake from undescribable Jungian dreams, I see the lightning-strobed landscape of the other side, finally out of the forest.

The island as a cipher, mirrored by the bolts etching the night sky, illuminating ghostly palm trees in a row between the dirt road and the rice paddies beyond. Is it pi, incalculable but precise, enclosing the radius of our lives? Its peninsulas akimbo, land masses colliding and spinning in a time-frame beyond our vision, held together by forces beyond our understanding. Dark energy subtly holds back entropy in our insignificant speck of the universe, only 4% visible.

I awake at 38,000 feet to the rattle of a couple playing a dice game in the seats beside me. Shake, rattle and roll. The sound of chance, or fate. Or Jerry Lee Lewis, that drunk hillbilly rocker of cradles. "You owe me two dollars," laughs the woman.

I had awoken earlier that morning knowing I had done wrong and that I was in someone's debt, but with no memory of how. A girl was breathing loudly in the bed, asleep or pretending to be. I was on the floor.

"What happened?" said an ugly old voice that turned out to be mine.

The girl's breathing became a chuckled, "*Oh god.*"

I said nothing more but groped my way to the bathroom where I forced myself to drink water from the tap.

"*Don't you remember?*" she said, finally, impatient for some response.

At the moment I was trying very hard to restrain various responses that were attempting to force their way out of my body.

Do you remember being in the bar?

"Yes," I managed to say in what I imagined to be the normal tone of someone not hung over.

"Do you remember coming back to the hotel?"

A pause. "No."

A delighted laugh. "*Do you remember trying to get out on the balcony?*"

Another pause. I had to think about that. "There's a balcony?"

"No," she snorted. "*That was after I locked you in the room.*"

"Oh," I said, as if that made sense. "Why?" My stomach was starting to pay attention to the few sips of water I had managed to swallow.

"You were going to run naked through the hotel lobby," she giggled.

I had no recollection of drinking much — much less that much; but I had at that moment a very brief memory flash into my head of my father on one of his extremely rare but extremely memorable toots.

"How did we get back to the hotel?"

"We walked," she said. "*Actually, I walked; you sort of rolled.*"

I had a question but it had to wait while I briskly threw up three ounces of water. "Where are my clothes?" I said finally.

"Oh," she observed airily, "*all over the place. You were funny,*" she added as a consolation.

I did not like knowing that I had been drunk and "funny" before this girl many years younger than me.

"When did we leave the bar?" I said.

"I think it was about 11."

"Did I remember to pay?"

"Oh yeah, you paid. You paid for a lot of people, including the fat couple at the table."

"The fat couple?"

"Yeah. Remember?" she said — again with the snorting. "*The ones who got doused with beer.*"

I hesitated. "Did I do that?"

It was not asked innocently. My brothers and I had, from our youths, histories of drunken faux pas's that were best told, if ever, years later and then only under guarded circumstances. We did not encourage each other to tell the stories, especially since many of the stories were because we had encouraged each other. Without the tempering agent of even a single sister in our family, we four boys were able to achieve a momentum of wild inebriation that was frightening to our mother and various girlfriends, and a source of wonder to our friends and even to my father.

"That," the girl said confidently, "*you did not do.*"

It has been years since those days, those days with my brothers. And we brothers, the ones still alive, rarely tell the stories: the stories do not need telling. But as I sit on the plane, retreating from Boston, listening to the chatter of dice in the box on my neighbors' knees, I think about the markers and marks I have left behind me. With the girl in the hotel room, for instance — my daughter. And I realize I have left nothing behind. Everything I've paid for, I still owe.

Sweet Relief

I hated going to visit Ma-Ma at the home. When I walked in, the smell of urine and shit and disinfectant settled around me like a smothering blanket. Part of the odor was actually the smell of decaying flesh, the smell of people dying, or maybe it was just what anyone would smell like if she were unable to get out of bed, times 300 beds.

Miss Adelaide was one of them. She shared a room with Ma-Ma and the nurse told us Miss Adelaide had already been there for three years in a vegetative state. None of us could understand why Miss Adelaide was allowed to live, but apparently Medicaid was still paying for her bed and she had no one to authorize withdrawing the feeding tube. Still, she was harmless as a roommate for Ma-Ma, except for her contribution to the stench of decay.

Part of the reason I felt so trapped when we visited Ma-Ma was that the smell sent me back to when I was a boy and we would visit Granddaddy Holt – Ma-Ma’s father – in another “rest home” in Norfolk. I don’t remember as much about Granddaddy Holt’s rest home, except that it was smaller and it scared the crap out of me to go see him. Even as a boy I knew that he was there only because there was no other place to put him until we buried him.

So, when we visited Ma-Ma, it brought back those same frightful and dreadful feelings, except now I was a man; I was supposed to be brave and to bring my own children with me. One day, I will ask them to describe how they felt about these visits, and I can only hope that they either don’t remember, or that their memories are not as unpleasant as mine.

We tried to pretend that we were glad to see Ma-Ma, and we once even borrowed the home’s parlor to celebrate Ma-Ma’s last birthday in the home. Some of the other guests shuffled in, uninvited, to join us in the celebration. That was *some* party! In contrast to how cheerful I tried to act on these visits, most of my thoughts were about Ma-Ma’s impending death. How soon will it be? How many more of these visits will I have to make? Will I be here when anything bad happens? (Please...don’t let anything happen while I am here.)

Most of all, I was afraid of how I would react to Ma-Ma’s death. She was there when I was born and was there for every birthday after that. As a child, we went to Ma-Ma’s house a couple of times a month, at least, and we celebrated almost every holiday at her house. I had grown up eating Ma-Ma’s Brunswick stew and country cooking. When I was a teenager, she even filled in for Mom to take care of my sister and me when Mom worked extended shifts at the hospital. I had grown up with Ma-Ma, and *surely* I loved her. Yet, I remember that I felt nothing except vague relief when her father, Granddaddy Holt, died.

When my father’s mother and father had died, I went to the funerals, but I felt nothing about their deaths and funerals – the funerals were just new and strange rituals. It is hard to recreate my feelings now, but regarding their deaths, I think I felt the way I feel when I finish a book: “That was a good read, but now I’m done and I’ll pick up another one at Borders.”

As I looked forward to Ma-Ma’s death, I wondered about myself and even wondered if I were human – if I could possibly be human if I had never loved my family deeply enough to grieve their deaths. Did I need anyone else? Did I even understand what love is?

Finally, I got the call from Mom one day as I was getting ready for work. She was calm and told me the details of how Ma-Ma died, funeral arrangements, etc. She was on autopilot and so was I. I asked Mom how she was feeling and discussed arrangements for going to the funeral. All the while, I was amazed at myself as I realized that I really was an automaton. I sent the kids to school with my wife and stayed at home, trying to figure out how people would expect me to act now that my grandmother had died.

Then, thank God, I broke down. I moaned Ma-Ma’s name, over and over, crying, grabbing the counter to keep from falling over. I mourned her, grieving, missing her. I was also relieved, but not because she was dead. I felt, finally, sweet grief – sweet relief.

"Fault?" he thought as the motorcycle carelessly weaved between the cars at over 70 mph. He wasn't much worried about the dimming light or the pocked road. However, the driver's condition might pose a future problem—along with the contents of the three foot vinyl bag wedged between them—should they encounter any lawmen. This is, he thought, an odd place to be projecting into the future on the question of who would be assigned fault if, but more probably when, the wheels came off and the inevitable happened. Just then the wind shifted, the bag shifted, and all he could think about was the Velcro ripping open and contents flying into the wind. That would be tragic, expensive and, well, short of all that, humorous to watch from the cars behind. The sudden reach for the closure flap caused the bike to shift and the driver to turn his head slightly and utter (he was famous for this) a single terse word: relax. Easy for you to say, asshole. All you're doing is driving this piece-of-shit under-powered Jap-bike with a nice reward for the trip when we get back. My butt is flapping in the breeze, holding the bag (both literally and figuratively) and wondering if the whole sordid thing will come to light one day and they will pin it all on me for not getting him help, not being his brother's keeper, not looking after the younger, smaller one. Relax? Shut up and drive. It's probably going to be my fault no matter what.

Relax...maybe that was the idea. Let the wind take your troubles away. Maybe that was the "solution": just open the flap and let nature test the super tight double ziploc closure "strong enough to keep food in and air out from SC Johnson 'a family company'". What a joke, he thought. How much of their "family company" revenues come from people stuffing handfuls of brown, gold, green, white, and any assortment of capsules, tablets and who-knows-what into their "family company" products. Relax and watch the granules, the shake, the leaf, the buds, all of it, just watch it fly away like the flocks of corn crows that seemed to leap every few miles from the endless expanse of fallow fields. His was a "family company" too, but he was more than convinced that the Johnson's well crafted marketing message wouldn't fly with the part of *his* family that wasn't involved in the business or the legal system. It was an ill-made seam between the road and the exit ramp that brought him back to the moment. As the light turned from red to green he started running through the arrival sequence that was, like the potential for future assigned fault, nearly inevitable but certainly more immediate.

No matter how many times he did the run they seemed to have to do the math over again, to "run the numbers" as they called it. Sixteen times five times thirty-five if they did it all in singles. Sixteen times three times thirty-five plus four times two-hundred if they did two in halves. The combinations were almost endless. The part they never figured out was how much it would cost, and who would pay, if the wheels came off. Who knows when or how those wheels might come off, or if in fact they were loose already. Too many damn Ford Crown Vic's in the world to keep track of tails. And hey, the guys never seemed concerned when he went for the pick-up. If he asked for five he got five. Seven? No problem. Two hundred blacks...that all?...how about some bootleg Ludes...no one can tell the difference. Two bucks a piece and you can move them at five. But what if...what if it all came tumbling down and they had to start paying with lives instead of cash?

He could hear his Mother's voice and see his Father's head shaking along with the cold hard stare as they assigned the fault that he knew was his for contributing to the problem instead of helping solve it. OK: Sixteen times five times thirty-five if we do it all in singles...

It begins with a hazy, subconscious sense of being at less than center. A fog that mutes shapes, colors, senses... almost imperceptibly at first. It ends with the tendrils of an unseen vine clutching at his throat.

Calm now; or perhaps the storm. It may be gone. He can never really tell.

Brief moments of escape come only through conscious, focused effort. But if he relents, it returns in an instant, always undefined and immeasurable like a melting sundial on atomic clock ticking. The tightened jaw, the stiff eyes, the fractured face, all pointing to the heated pit where it resides.

Calm now or perhaps the storm. It may be here.

Not sure if it's ~~the~~ something concrete or some bizarre emotive vapor that feeds upon itself, he slips out the door with vague intent. With no clearly defined course he is sure of only one thing: he knows he doesn't know. Perhaps it's just a thread of misplaced anxiety or maybe insanity light, now in a convenient carry-on size. Surely he's not crazy but how strange that it should have it's own gravitational pull. How odd that it should hover over him like a full moon, a glowing orb, moving ever-so-slowly, pulling.

He starts to walk. The rain makes it ~~the~~ a bit dreary but the shimmering reflections are bright and glistening. How festive. Maybe it will help him decide to punish or be punished. He knows them both well.

Will it be calm or storm, drugs or alcohol,
a state of meditative grace or a blinding rage?

As he steps from the curb, a black sedan
with smoked glass windows runs a light and
nearly kills him on the spot. How close. But off
it rides, smoke seeping from its bare-cracked windows.

Mother fucker! That's it. Time for the real thing.
Chipped teeth, flecked with blood and gold. The storm
is here. He never really knows.

2008

Assigning Meaning

Paint streaks both
sky and siding while
what must be ancient brakes
screech us to waking.

Our dreams know only meaning we assign them,
filled with inquiry.

New spaces stretch
through canyons of light
reflected upon itself so
even the blind man's cup sparkles.

We are displaced here among the dispassionate souls
teeming to be...

As fast as we can we are slipping
back to the protection of our collected memories:
those that touch us, those that touch others,
those that remain painted on the walls of our lives
in script we cannot read but
mark territories of the free.

Inadequate vessels of thought
Shipwrecked and marooned.
imaginary friends converse.

Synapses spark to life:
blue arc corona bathes
the muted pair
in hopeful anticipation.

though word weary,
still on they sail
and continue relentlessly
beyond silence

Whitman's Folly

**Doubt swells like an embolism
Heaved out of the soul, threatening to spew forth
It must be swallowed, sacrificed to acid bowels
Back into the pain that bore it**

**Hope is gentler, subtler
It requires great nurturing, a patient and fertile soul
A quiet place where calm is breathed
A loving, embalming constant**

**Enigmatic, charismatic darkness
There's promise in the unknown, the untested
What is more vile than now
The given, the mundane?**

**Bathe in the warm light
Comfort and softness infused
Weightless, fingerless caress
A blanket that shields the essential**

One Together

Together with the others
He is alone
Longing for belonging
Being more than one
He once found at home

Then found with friends now long forgotten
Lost in the busyness of work
In the darkness of a bar
Surrounded by so much
So many alone

He knows the emptiness
A constant companion
Not hurting so bad now
A dull pain never leaving
Almost not there but darkening all

The old feelings almost forgotten
The desire half remembered
So painful to acknowledge
He builds walls to protect
Against the risk of another loss

Still the longing demands an answer
Barely remembering the way
He goes through the doors
With others also alone
Uncomfortable, exposed he waits

Awkwardly shuffling as the lights go down
The music starts, the voices lift
Something old is reborn within
Awkward and self conscious he resists
But the one calls forth his voice

The pain wall cannot hold
Crumbling, leaving him naked
Exposed to the one, alone no longer
Crying, afraid, but filled
Together with the others, the one

Feeling whole, suspended in time
Seeing the music, tasting the lights
Joined with the one, the others
Remembering nothing and
Feeling everything now

Wishing it would never end
But the music stops
The lights come on
He looks around, not sure
Are they the others or still the one together?

Wanting to stay but the one is gone
Cold, he puts on his coat
Goes back through the doors
Together with the others
Wanting to be one together again

The magic of the time and place
Made easy the joining
Yet dimly he remembers a time when
He walked constantly with the one together
And vows to find it within him again

Ode to the Head, Well-Wrought

When in my youthful life, now and again,
the company of women I had sought
in preference to the chummery of men,
the error of my ways was harshly taught.
I'd drag my wounded self back to the fire
and hit up my compadres for a smoke,
then tell them funny tales of my desire
-- as if a heartless woman was a joke.
With age and faded scars I now declare,
fraternity of men is more preferred;
but even in the presence of mon frères,
inside the old desire can be heard --
to search for that which beckons, still unknown:
the girl who loves the skull more than the bone.

The Well Formed Heads

O my brothers seeking knowledge,
Open-armed and open-minded,
We, of ourselves and for ourselves,
No one or thing a greater cause.

Monthly nourished by each other,
Victuals tasty, and libations
Plenty, and fellow love, o souls;
This we yearn for, our congeries.

Expand, O 'Heads, propound and grow,
In all we read and do and love,
Even as the scented herbage
Of our breasts grows more grey and curl'd.

We live, we sing, we celebrate,
Democratic and romantic,
American and of the world,
We kiss kosmic literatus!

For those paying attention

She arrives softly
without fanfare
or introduction
even the calendar cannot predict

She arrives with
the blush in her arms as if
She is embarrassed
to be seen with
so little on

Light betrays her arrival
but only to those who know
remembering
Her last visit

An arbitrary Tuesday
She slips in
She is back though some
will not see Her for weeks
They know not Her subtlety

Straw colored until now
dry to match Her body
In Her exertion to arrive
hints of gold-like hair appear

She arrives softly
and touches our souls
with tenderness we cannot
otherwise know
in such a place as this

“What is this . . . dark . . . matter?” he said, holding up a small smear of moist brown on his index finger. The Frenchman spoke articulate English, but hesitated over his words, seeking fluency, *le mot juste*, if it exists. Coffee grounds, I ventured. “No. *Merde--comment disez-vous?* Yes, ‘shit.’” he concluded. I couldn’t believe he found that on his beer bottle, but he insisted. Eyes darting around the dank bar, he said you always had to beware of little tricks like this one, and worse, not just because we were drinking on a Moslem island.

Outside the traffic buzzed and beep-beeped through the forking multi-pronged intersection, the roar of a metropolis over-modulated to a high pitch, the motorscooters’ and tuk-tuks’ insect whine somehow appropriate to the heat and humidity. How many lanes, if you could sense that much order to the thronging flow, between one curb and the other? Too many to possibly cross and to what end, haphazard neon jumble offering no clear respite on one corner or another, so I had sought refuge in the first dark doorway on the same side of the torrent as my hotel, and met this bearded Gaul.

He shifted from gregarious to suspicious and back again without warning. Just back to Ujung Pandang from weeks of trekking the interior of the island, he greeted me warmly, sitting alone as I was, the only Westerner in the bar and the first he’d seen in 28 days and nights. With this connection, we drank together and sought more. His travels were for business, not pleasure, but that line of inquiry, so often successful in opening strangers up, resulted in furtive glances, a few key phrases in a lowered voice and demurral rather than detail. Hearing that I planned to explore the less-traveled parts of the island, he brightened, and shared details of remote valleys and jungles, the real thing, away from the death-tourism of Tana Toraja. “Seek . . . the ancient statues of the Bada Valley . . . many nights’ walking from Poso,” he advised, “Erected . . . before written history . . . in this . . . twisted land. By peoples and for reasons unknown.” And yet, he hinted, somehow important both to his work and to him personally, ciphers drawing a pattern obscured in the remotest jungle, direction or connection far beyond this spinning swamp.

The next day I awoke early, startled to consciousness again, as everyday in this city, by the blare of the muzzein calling out the morning prayer. Sweat drenched me despite the ceiling fan chopping at the air, obscuring and then revealing, obscuring, revealing the arrow pointing the way, “Kiblat,” to bow to Allah’s home on earth. Shoddy as Room 314 was, the paint of the directional was bright, its lines crisp and well-defined. Would that my direction were so clear. I crammed my backpack overfull of threadbare clothes, maps, books and minimal supplies for the travels ahead (waterproof flashlight and matches, candles, poncho, Xifaxan to stave off the foreign bugs from my gut, canteen, protein bars, journal and pens), and retrieved my passport at the front desk when I checked out. At the airport I booked an afternoon flight to Palu, on the Western coast near the axis of the out-stretched arms of the island’s peninsulas, seeking the center or some answer no fellow traveler would, or could, share.

The Handwriting Analyst

He sits alone in the room at the desk, gently holding down the edges of a piece of paper as if to calm it, to keep it from some rash act. He reads the crabbed symbols of spoken words, themselves the emblems of thought, looking for meaning and trying to recall her voice. But she has abandoned speech and fled contemplation, leaving him only these symbols of symbols to be deciphered.

The words say nothing he can comprehend. A few remarks, an apology, good-bye. Upward strokes, downward angles; a tired hand with cramped spacing. Letters leaning back to the point of aversion. No sense of margins, baselines sagging, lower loops left open and trailing. A curious spell of misspellings. He looks for spirals: the penmanship of madness. He suspects forgery: this is not the woman he thought he knew.

He studies the dark penciled scrawl over and over, upside down, bottom to top, end to beginning. No longer reading; no longer seeing words at all. Just threads of letters, tied together like dried garlands. Upper zones descending, lower zones dependent, consonants ending in hooks. Outside the window, sunbeams diagram the syntax of sky, clouds, leaves and shadows. Inside, he closes his eyes and the letters become white gnarled knuckles and bones, worn smooth with reading, rolling across his eyelids like dice, foretelling an illegible future on which the page has already turned.

And at the end, the signature itself: small, brief, snarled and final. An icon of her. Reaching, withdrawing, circling about; head down, muttering; hands tucked away under arms. How did he not see this written till it was literally on the wall: the diagram of her shadow, inscribed across wallpaper, the floor, the desk, the page. A scroll of dead language -- hanging from a beam, unrolled and unreadable forever.

Dear Jim:

On Thursday, we had a good little trip down to Wilmington. We took the boys down to the north end of Eagles Island to see the Battleship. We spent three hours climbing through naval hatches, cramped berths, gunner's quarters, engine rooms, wheel houses, galleys and sculleries. We even spent 45 minutes in the god dammed sixteen inch gun turret. There was 27 people cramped in there like sardines, and the boys wouldn't give up the show. I kept asking them if they had enough, and they would both scream "noooooo!" in perfect unison. They were talking a mile a minute the whole time, cutting one another off, teaming with testosterone, leaking little boy, giving me their own version of the guided tour of the ship. I have never, ever, seen them have a better time in all their born days. We finally peeled them off of the ship, had an unremarkable lunch downtown, and headed over to the south end of Eagles Island to see Julie's Dad and hopefully continue the nautical theme of our day by scoring a ride on a tug boat up the river.

Well, we pulled into the parking lot and we were greeted by Julie's Dad and Julie's cousin, Eddy Green. Now Eddy is a big fella. He is a mountain of a man; and his head is bigger than a good sized pumpkin you'd see at the State Fair. Eddy has seen some life. He has spent all of his days on the river as a tug boat captain and a docking pilot driving the big freighters into port. He was married young, had four fine strong sons, got divorced, picked up a second wife along the way, and then watched in slow honky tonk agony as his first wife, mother of his 4 boys, fought a good long fight against the big C and wasted away. And now, his boys are having boys of their own, and he proudly wears the moniker of grandfather. He is a country song in the body of Haystacks Calhoun. As a Grand Pa, he took to my boys immediately, and more importantly, John and Joey took to him immediately.

So, Julie takes the boys into the office for a quick pee (in the case of Joey) and quick diaper change (in the case of John). And I find myself outside in the parking lot, standing out there looking at the Cape Fear River, and its just me and Eddy standing face to face. As you might guess, the relationship between an overly passionate, openly Italian-Irish, New Jersey talking, city slicker lawyer, GD Yankee, on the one hand, and a classic Faulknerian dysfunctional southern family, on the other, hasn't been ALL bad, but there have been precious few times where we really connected.

But on this one particular day, old Captain Eddy Green looks at me, and exhibits a smile you might see on a soda cracker, and says, "God Damn Joe, I just gotta tell ya, Johnny played me that bluegrass record that you did, and let me say By Gum Tooossee, you boys sure can play. I mean, it was so good, I couldn't believe it was you!!! Where in the HELL did an Eyetalian Yankee learn to play bluegrass like that? And thankfully I am now old enough to recognize and appreciate that the little old record was likely to be the best connection I ever had, and probably will ever be, to the river people of Wilmington. I must have gone up 67 notches on the old totem pole just b/c of that one little old record. So, I thanked them, of course, and we talked a bunch of chatter about how did we record it, and did we use one microphone like the real bluegrass guys, and all that such and such.

So, then old Captain Ed, looks at me with his river weathered face, eyes me up real good, and I can see he is deliberating hard on something. Then I can see, that in his mind, he has resolved something. He leans his huge pumpkin down to me, and I can see that he wants to regale me in a little story of his own. He proceeds to tell me of the time he and his first wife heard a host of bluegrass acts, including the great Bill Monroe and the great Doc Watson, play the BlueGrass Azalea Festival right outside of Wilmington in 1976. It was a wonderful three day affair where the music started in the early afternoon and ran all the way to 3 or 4 in the morning, and everyone would give it a rest for awhile, and then the sun would come up, and everybody would rise, rinse, and sober up for a few hours before it all cranked back up again. Of course he drank a mess of beer (and looking at Eddy I am sure that he could easily clear off the entire beer isle at your local Piggly Wiggly and still be standing), and that Bill and Doc were the finale each night. He said that it rained like all "get out" on Saturday night, and the organizers had set the festival up in a giant natural earthen inverted dome, and as the rain fell, the water started sliding in from the top, and collecting at the bottom. Somewhere around midnight, he said half the damn crowd was up to their knees in mud. And yet the music went on and the beer kept rolling. He said by 2am in the morning, the mud was slinging everywhere and people were just covered in mud from head to toe, and Bill Monroe was just TEARING IT UP on the stage. And then he looked me deep in the eye and said "It was just mud, rain, beer, and bluegrass music and nobody there feint of heart, it was just the die hard crazy people in love with either the music, the moment or the beer. and all of it was real, man, all of it was real. and I never felt more alive in all my life". And there was a pause, and then he continued, "You know what I mean?"

And I looked deep in my heart, because I know he wanted me to look there for the answer. And thankfully, I got lots in my heart on this particular question. And I said, "Yeah, man, I know EXACTLY what you mean, because that's exactly how I feel every god damn time I play with the gravy boys. At most gigs, by the third set, I feel like we are playing for a bunch of people who are standing in a great earthen bowl, six inches in mud, in the rain, drinkin' beer, and feelin' the spirit!". And Captain Eddy said: "That's good, Joe, that IS what it's all about. That's what the bluegrass is all about. If you can make people feel what you are feelin' right there, what you just said, well, that's what they want. That's what they want. Sometimes they don't know it, sometimes they deny it, but if you can get 'em in a big old muddy dome, in the rain, drinkin' beer, well, then the truth will come out."

So then, from there, I of course wanted to just sit a while and digest what he had just told me, and internalize it, and all, but Captain Ed wasn't up for the standard Spagnardi Indigo Girls treatment. And before I know it, he was describing with great gusto the events of Sunday afternoon, and how just about everybody's truck (not car!) had slowly slipped down into the mud bowl overnight. How there was so much mud, that nobody could get their god damn trucks out of the bowl. And how they had to call a wrecker and attach a line and fish them out of the bowl, one by one, as the music blared on in the sun of that fine Sunday afternoon. Can you imagine, Jim, the prospect of song after song going by as each truck was towed out of the bowl? Ahhh, the bluegrass music and the wind of the winch!!

So, I asked him, if he brought a tent or sleeping bag? He could barely muster a dismissive grunt. Eventually, he responded with "You know, there wasn't that much preparation that went on, it was just, you know, bring some beer and your truck, and sort of hang out for awhile and leave when you want to. but it was just so much god damn fun, drinkin' beer and standing in the mud, that we just thought we would hang out for a few days."

And then we were off, for a tour of the tug boat, and to the glee of the boys, a ride up the Cape Fear River, with Captain Ed at the helm. And Captain Ed let them steer and play with the flashlights. And we floated down river past the barges, docks and the shoals that Captain Ed had navigated a thousand times before. And he blew the whistle. Thundering loud. And the boys loved him. And so did I.

The first hint of trouble had been subtle. The commotion had registered only within the deepest recesses of Len's muddled brain. If that initial electrical impulse had just been a bit stronger, things would probably have turned out different. Better. As he waited for her arrival, guilt made its daily visit, rising like bile in his consciousness. He couldn't get past the notion that too many years of this shit had finally caught up with him. If he had been stone cold sober, maybe he would have recognized the warning signals for what they were. He should have seen it coming. Intuition was supposed to be his strong suit. The only thing Len knew for sure was that his fucking jaw and nose would still look like his DNA had originally decreed if he had been on his game that day.

But who was he - Lennon fucking Dvorjak - to try and rewrite history, anyway?

Looking towards the door, a new excuse came to him. It was because the light was so bad that he missed it! A certain pride (plus lack of discretionary funds) had conspired to prevent Len from acquiring the sight correction he so sorely required to see well in anything other than bright sunshine. He could see really clearly only in the natural light of day. Things always looked fuzzy otherwise, like looking through a screen. But sunshine, normal daylight, hadn't been a part of Len's natural habitat for a very long time. Though it was mid-afternoon, it was still dark from where Len sat on his usual perch at the bar towards the back of Art's Caravan Lounge. Most of the patrons preferred the tavern that way - dark - and Artie had no plan to renovate the place or to start a marketing campaign to go after a different demographic. If nothing else, Artie was loyal. He frankly didn't much care for the fucking light of day either. This way neither he nor his clientele had to really look at their own reflections in the massive cracked mirror that lined the back of the bar. It deflected their empty stares into a room of dimming shadows lit only by the ancient plastic Hamm's Beer shield, a string of faded mini Christmas lights and the small amount of natural light that seeped through the cracks of the heavy blinds that, as per usual for this time of day, were shut tight. Artie knew that his regulars preferred not be reminded that it was the middle of the fucking day and what the fuck were they doing sitting in a fucking dive bar drinking cheap draft beers and bottom shelf liquor again in the middle of the goddamn day? Artie liked to think that he was the one who thought of it first - perpetual darkness, no natural light, no clocks - before the guys who ran Vegas did.

Len was in a particularly sour mood, which he figured made sense given recent events. He perused the Tribune and saw that the Cubs and Sox had not only both won again, but were in fact leading their divisions. So what? It was only April 3rd and there were 159 games left for the teams to add to their life-long legacy of losing. Mr. Negative.

He looked at his watch. She was late. He didn't mind. Enough time left for a boilermaker before he had to put on his game face and do his usual song and dance explaining to perspective clients just why it was important to meet at the Caravan instead of at his "office". (The Caravan WAS his office, but they didn't need to know at this point). He signaled to Artie with his eyebrow, and soon enough the two glasses of booze appeared in front of him. Artie wanted to talk.

"Hey Lennon, howz it hangin' man? I heard you was back in town like a fuckin' week ago. Where the hell you been, man? Glad to see you're up and about...ya' look a whole hell of a lot better than you did the last time I saw you man. Jesus. That motherfucker really did a number on you... kicked your goddamn ass! They ever catch the creep?"

"Doin' OK, Artie. Yeh, 'bout a week I guess. Up North. Look better than I feel. Yah, he sure did. Not yet."

When Harry Met Yahweh

Harry Caray (HC): Hey everybody! [cracks open a can of Budweiser] Harry Caray here coming atcha from celestial sister stations WHEV and KGOD! We've got an exciting guest in the studio, especially for you rookies that haven't been in town long. Yessir, the rumors are true! It's the Alpha and Omega, the creator of heaven and earth, the guy who did NOT send all those witnesses to your front door, and the only one who can honestly say he never laughs during Letterman ... everybody say hello to the REAL Godfather: Mr. Jehovah Yahweh! [canned applause] Thanks for coming your most High!

God the Father (GTF): My pleasure, Harry. Love the show. Mean it.

HC: Well thank God! I mean you! Oh Christ! Can I say that?! [opens another can of Budweiser as the first empty rolls across his desk] I'm not real clear on the taking the name in vain rules!! [GTF mirthfully nods in assent] Holy Cow! I haven't been this excited since Saint Pete handed me the bottomless keg of Budweiser! We're gonna get right to the questions for God, but first a word from our sponsor. [Harry turns to a camera stage right and begins reading from a teleprompter] Hi folks. Tired of those annoying calls for help from former acquaintances, family members, telemarketers and investment bankers that got sent down south to burn for all eternity in the minors? Me, too. [picks up a necklace with an amulet shaped like a bullhorn attached and puts it around his neck] That's why I use "Straight to Hell," the amazing new device that will end those calls quicker than Ernie Banks turning two. Just put it around your neck, say a quick Our Him [gestures towards GTF] to activate it and then FORGET IT! The next time one of those smoldering assholes tries to call, 'Straight to Hell' automatically sends a return message via a hypersonic recording of the "Hallelujah" Chorus. And you know what happens to anybody who gets caught dancing to that little jig in Lucifer Woods, right?! Right! Remember friends ... send 'em Straight to Hell!

[HC turns back to GTF as he reaches under his desk for a third beer and opens it] Thanks for your patience, Holiness. Gotta pay the bills, you know, and unfortunately none of the Busch family have lasted up here long enough to buy any ads.

GTF: No problem, Harry. Actually my Son is a big fan of Straight to Hell. Ever since he got one it's been radio silence from the voices in the wilderness.

HC: Hells bells folks! How's that for a testimonial?! I predict sales will go through the roof! [Turns stage left and yells over GTF's head] Hey Hal! Call my broker and tell him to go long on Straight to Hell! Tell him I've got inside information! That'll make the little Jew squirm! HA! [Guffaws, chugs a beer, slaps his knee and then turns back to GTF, suddenly serious] So. God. Can you tell us, what's the most common misconception that rookies have about heaven when they first show up?

GTF: Oh that's simple, Harry. [Turns to look straight into the camera] Here's the deal, kids. You don't get to spy on folks back on the Rock. Believe me, it's for your own good. You do NOT want to see all the things they're up to on a daily basis. Frankly, it's embarrassing for everybody.

HC: Do us angels get to know anything about our folks back at the Rock? [belches, tosses an empty over his shoulder and reaches under his desk, bringing up what's left of the 12-pack he's been steadily depleting and places it on top of his desk]

GTF: Oh yeah, sure. You always have a sense about their general well-being and you can send them telepathic warnings when they're in danger. Not that the dimwits will listen. They're too busy buying press-on nails and eating pork rinds to tune into something as [snorts and rolls his eyes] "meaningless" as divine intervention.

HC: So how 'bout those Ten Commandments?

GTF: [smirks] What about them?

HC: Did you really write those? Was "Raiders of the Lost Ark" on the right track?

GTF: Uh, no and no.

HC: Really?! For the love of ... HOLY COW!! [Turns stage left again scanning for the manager] Hey Hal! Get that ever loving keg out here we were saving for after the show! Me and the Big Guy here are getting over served tonight! And I hate to break it to you like this, Hal, but your wife and I were doing the wild thing back on the rock! Just kidding! Actually, that mighta coulda been your sister ... [opens another beer and turns back to GTF] Hey God! Do you like Budweiser?!

GTF: No, Harry. Not really. When I drink, it's tequila. And not the high end stuff. I like it nasty and oily.

HC: No shhhii ... uh, I mean, wow! I would have pegged you for a wine guy!

GTF: What do I look like? [laughing] A Roman Catholic?! [slaps Harry on the back jovially] No wine for me, unless I make a trip to the Rock and then it's strictly Rafanellis. I got turned off by wine in the Old Testament days. The offering grape back then was absolute piss. COMPLETELY unfiltered, if you know what I mean. And it wasn't like they started with pure artesian water in the vats, the filthy little goat herders.

HC: How 'bout that folks?! You learn something new everyday! Even an old guy like me! I love to learn new stuff, don't you God?!

GTF: Would that I could, Harry. Unfortunately, there's not much that I don't already know.

HC: [laughing] Well, you got me there! I came up here expecting the mother of all wake-up calls, but there sure is a hell of a lot I still don't know. Take for instance the meaning of life. What's that all about?

GTF: What's it about? Not much. There is no meaning of life.

HC: Come on!! Every priest I ever stumbled out of a bar with told me that "all would be revealed" in your presence. I thought they meant the answer to the big questions like that, or how to hit a one-iron, or where the hell Dutchie was hiding that GD g-spot. [opens another beer]

GTF: First of all, Harry, why did you ask a priest, and a drunk one at that, for wisdom? Didn't you read the newspapers? [crowd groans] Seriously. There is no meaning of life. Especially on the Rock. You're there and you're alive and then you're not. If you're lucky and a little more self-aware than average, you learn how to use your mind, how to contemplate, how to believe, how to love. So let's just say you have a "purpose" on the Rock, if you need a word to get wrapped around. Basically, you're supposed to be stretching out and warming up your soul. It's not until you get up here that the real work begins, where the epiphanies start flying fast and furious. This is where you start to comprehend the meaning of being, but not the meaning of life. There's no such thing.

HC: Holy cow!! I'll drink to that [Harry has put the empty Budweiser 12 pack carton on his head and cracks open his last beer] It's a good thing they don't know that back in the 'hood [says Harry aping a gangsta accent]. The parochial schools and bars would lose all their customers! [canned laughter] Hey God! Is it possible for me to see the Father, Son and Holy Ghost all at the same time?

GTF: Of course. You're seeing all three of us right now.

HC: Naaaahhh! That's not what I mean! Cuz all I see right now is you! God! [stands up laughing and points over GTF's lap] I want to see three butts in three seats on that couch and I want to see it now!! [looks out at the audience] Anybody else with me on this?! [laughing, sits back down]

GTF: I understand, Harry. It can be confusing, the whole Three's Company thing. Like a lot of things our marketers rolled out to help folks on the Rock, that one got really jumbled. But we should have expected that from beings who only see with their eyes.

HC: [Harry feigns ignorance and looks at God from under his glasses] Huh? [then laughs] What else confused us back on earth that you can clear up for us now?

GTF: Well one thing I wish we had made more transparent was the role of Judas, poor bugger.

HC: Are you kidding me? Seems to me he got what he deserved.

GTF: Not at all. Actually, Judas was our personal favorite amongst the disciples, the only one who really got the message, and the only one willing to do what needed to be done. To let go of the Messiah myth and truly hear what we were trying to teach.

HC: [Harry looks dumbfounded while cracking open his latest beer]

GTF: It's true. Judas was no betrayer. He was the most obedient servant of his day and should have been revered by history as the disciple that followed our instructions to the letter.

HC: What instructions were those?

GTF: To turn Jesus over to the Romans so that he would be sacrificed and freed from his [makes the bunny ears gesture with his hands] "earth suit". Without Judas, there is no Christ, no resurrection, [grinning] no chocolate rabbits ...

HC: ... no pickled leftover easter eggs at the 7-Eleven ... Hang on a minute, God. A second ago you said Judas was the only one who got the message. What message was that?

GTF: That the human form is a form of spiritual prison. That true freedom comes from death. That's why we gave earth the prison-esque nickname "The Rock". But the good news is that, like all prisons, it can be escaped, is only temporary, and can be a place of joy and learning while preparing for liberation, even in the face of all the pain that comes from incarceration.

HC: Wow! It could be! It is! A home run by his Ultimateness! How yuh gonna follow that! Answer: yuh don't. Hey God! Speaking of death, if you were a can of Budweiser, would you kill yourself? I know I would. I'd be a suicidal maniac like you read about ... [turning to camera] Hey that's all the time we've got for now! And thank you God for joining us ... it has been a pleasure. Hey folks! Tune in next time when Charlton Heston broadcasts dead from the minor leagues with a special report entitled: The 2nd Amendment-America's Highway to Hell. Until then, and as usual, God wins! God wins! God wins!! [turns to God as the audio fades and points towards an empty beer can: Hey God! Can we talk about getting the buzzer put back in these babies?!!]

THE LOVE OF MY LIFE

Been a miner, been a sailor
Been well known to the jailer
To my daddy, a failure
Still I done what seemed right

2009

Yet to her I'm just proper
Never mind I'm a pauper
If she takes up my offer
Gonna make her my wife

She's my terra, she's my pistol
She's my crackerjack whistle
Met her down to the grist mill
That copper moon night
I'm a little scared of her
But I tell you what brother
Wouldn't have me another
She's the love of my life

Been to England, been to China
But my North Carolina
Why I've never know finer
A place to call home

Still if she was to ask me
I'd head straight for Alaska
Cuz your home's where your heart be
And my heart she does hold

She's my terra, she's my pistol
She's my crackerjack whistle
Met her down to the grist mill
That copper moon night
I'm a little scared of her
But I tell you what brother
Wouldn't have me another
She's the love of my life
Wouldn't have me another
She's the love of my life

We began in small groups without society – without culture. Families spent all day searching for food and shelter, trying only to live long enough to create and raise the next generation, and often not succeeding. No time for anything else.

You know the story. The tribes of Earth learn slowly, ever so slowly, to tame fire, plants and animals – they learn to avoid death. Food is easier to collect, allow some time for non-essentials. Bowls, carvings and woven mats begin to show design and color. The tribe gives food to its leaders, and in return those leaders devote more time to decisions that affect the tribe. -- The term “tax” is not yet used.

As Man controls his surroundings, he has more time for other things. He can stay in one place for more than two seasons and study the world around him. He can make records of those studies, preserving that knowledge to pass on to others. He has time to make things that will last.

Many support the few. The few now have time to travel and to dream; time to support the artists and thinkers. Experimentation with the world leads to magic and alchemy; then to science and steel. Dreams become theories; and theories, fact.

Wheelbarrows lead to carts, carts to wagons, wagons to trains. A “day’s travel” takes us farther and farther from home. Harder materials make the road stronger; allow soldiers and mail to travel farther; horses then cars to go ever faster. The peoples of the world are brought closer together. The world shrinks. With increased trade comes specialization. Cities are born, die, born again.

Productivity becomes God. Make more, faster. Sell more, cheaper. With productivity, we think, comes leisure. With leisure, time for love, art and discovery. With society, culture. If only.

Yes, we have more time. Time for Jackie Gleason and the Professional Bowlers Association. Time for soap operas, “Dancing with the Stars” and YouTube. Time for Pac Man, Guitar Hero and Twitter. Entertainment Tonight and reality TV.

God bless innovation and technology – for what would we do with our hard-won free time if we actually had to think? Would we consider other opinions? Make a difference in a person’s life? Make a difference in the world?

Most of our contact with the world is without flesh and substance. The ringtone calls, and we cannot refuse it. Pictures and talking heads easily lie. More and more, we seek only those who agree. We want 30-second answers to lifetime problems. Don’t make me think about that now – I don’t have time. We lie to ourselves that this is real. A virtual life. A society of one.

“The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilization.”

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

Len emerged gradually into wakefulness, the dull pain in his head - the residue of too much fun - too much Jim Beam and nearly a full pack of Marlboros - dawning on him as the grey light of early day brought the familiar outlines of the room into relief. He smiled at the memory of last night. He had to piss, but was reluctant to emerge from his warm cocoon. He heard the metallic crashing sounds of train cars coupling in the freight yard nearby. He took in the squawking of seagulls as they patiently circled the wharf hopeful for a morsel of discarded human food to breakfast. He absorbed the muted shouting of dockworkers as they loaded the Ann Arbor RR car ferry for its morning departure back across the big lake back to Manitowoc.

Len mulled over the serpentine course of his life. How 14 years of dedicated service to the Chicago Police Department, the last 7 as a Homicide Detective, had led to this moment. He'd been collecting his meager pension and disability payments for almost 3 years after being shot and nearly killed in the line of duty. The slow, nearly year-long recovery from his wounds and the onset of excruciating boredom had led to the decision to get his 'private eye' license. During the course of what appeared to be yet another routine "I believe my (rich) husband is cheating on me" case, he'd stumbled across a web of corruption leading directly to the upper echelons of the Chicago political machine. He began sniffing around, on his own time. The quickness with which he had apparently risen to the top of the shit list of these dangerous and powerful people had served only to further pique his curiosity and resolve. Verbal warnings to back off had been made. Len ignored them. The threats escalated to warnings of physical harm. He'd decided to leave the city for a while. Let things cool down a bit. He needed time to develop a new strategy to pursue the tantalizing leads he had developed. It would be a bonus if the bad guys thought he had heeded their warnings and backed off. But Len was a pragmatist and realized that they surely knew of his reputation. Detective Dvorjak had been known as "The Bloodhound". There wasn't a scent he would not follow it to its source. And now, here he was, at the Harbor Inn in Elberta MI, on a short "working vacation" to gather his thoughts, and enjoy some much deserved R&R.

He reached for Jenny, but found the bed empty. Hopefully she was out getting coffee and cigarettes. He'd met her in the midst of that last, nearly fatal, murder investigation. She was a friend of a friend of the victim. He'd conducted a routine interview and was immediately smitten. Much to his surprise, he asked her out at the end of the interview. To his even greater surprise, she accepted. The fact that she had absolutely nothing to do with the murder was icing on the cake. They "dated" for a month and then moved in together. She had drawn Len out of his profound darkness and ennui. She had nursed his soul back to the land of the living. He opened up to her with details of his life that nobody else knew - his early childhood in Leningrad, one of 2 children. They had named him Lennon after the Beatle, not the Father of the Soviet Union. The tragic death of his older sister and the subsequent migration to the US. The bitter deterioration of his parents' once loving relationship. His mother's rapid decline into madness. The murder/suicide that left him utterly and completely alone at the age of 18 in an "Eastern European" enclave on the Northwest side of Chicago. She had shown him that there was far more to life than the perpetual loneliness that had come to define him.

She entered the room just as Len emerged from the shower. Her cheeks were flushed by the frigid outside air. He immediately felt better, her mere presence enough to erase the last remnants of his hangover. His dream girl was real. An angel, delivering salvation to a lost soul.

"Hey handsome, have a cup of coffee on me!" she said. Jenny slowly, seductively disrobed leaving nothing other than her undies and the steaming Styrofoam cup strategically placed between her legs. "You're supposed to laugh baby! That was a joke - 'a cup of coffee on me' - get it?" Len dropped his towel. "Yep, I got it babe. You like cream in your coffee, right?" He flashed a devilish grin. She reciprocated with her special "bad girl" smile as she wiggled out of her panties. Their eyes locked in profound anticipation. As Len knelt before her, he prayed that he could protect this blessing from what was sure to come upon their return to Chicago. Then he got down to the business at hand.

Her head was positioned awkwardly on the knife edge of the cheap guest room mattress. The shirt she had been wearing for what smelled like weeks was twisted around her torso under the light summer blanket they kept folded on the end of the bed. Without thinking too hard she knew it hadn't turned out very well. The light filtering into the room looked like it could rain all day; not a bad thing from how her head felt. Remembering the night before wasn't going to be pleasant, or entirely accurate, given how often she got things wrong. At least she was in the guest room and not draped on a piece of furniture or collapsed on the floor like a chalk-lined victim of a shooting or a hit-and-run.

There had been the standard shouting and name calling. The ache in her left shoulder indicated that there had been pushing or resisting, maybe shaking...they were fond of shaking the truth *into* her. The dryness in her throat brought back the recollection of crying. Everyone crying. And pleading. Odd how "please" came out so differently on different planes of speech. "Pleease Betsy..." And, "oh pleeeeeease, not this again." Her use of the same word came in short bursts: "please don't tell me..." and "would you please stop shouting at me." But all of this puzzle-piecing hurt her head so she decided to close her eyes, rub the bruise on her hip, and reconstruct the night.

Instead what she started to think about was the last time. The usual events, and then the police. The lights. Why don't they turn off the lights? Are cops bred to have a fascination with flashing, strobe-effect lighting? The neighbors, who are called to their intermittently shadowed porches to have a look at "the problem child." Trying to look concerned with crossed arms and squinted faces that don't hide the embedded judgment. If they were closer she could hear their clicking tongues and the I-told-you-so comments. The hand on her arm, the hand pushing on her head, the backseat, the cold steel cuffs, strip search, the cell, the metal toilet that catches all of her, the last of her. But, instead of the trip upstate to yet another rolling hills setting for people with her "problem", she sat there until the county finally let her go.

They had held their ground against her when she showed up. No apologies. No pleading. No one was saying, "pleeease Betsy". None of that. What could have been said had been said many times before. The same crossed arms as the neighbors. Cross looks standing on the porch blocking her entrance to the house she hated. She knew they were weak and would let her in, just to get some things. Pleecease, she said. Pleecease let me just get a few things. They had resisted until the telephone rang and he was called away. One-on-one she could always win, and did. After they offered her lunch and some advice she would have to ask for some more money.

And now this. No police this time but a slanting memory of the shouting and the hoarse, false apologies that meant nothing and went nowhere. They had stopped pleading; that was her role now. From the position of her head she could see that her options were few and the light filtering through the window looked like it could rain all day.

Why I Torture

I sometimes torture my kids. I take away their cell phones and make them do yard work. I know its torture because of the sounds they make when I do my evil. I torture my wife everyday. When she asks me a question, I answer the question she asks. She tortures me back by answering all my questions with obfuscations or questions back. I torture my employees by requiring them to show up on time and do work..... With added malice, I do not pay them as much as they want. Torture is effective and fun.

Torture is all about inflicting pain. And it is reasonable to ask, is it really ok to do that? I think it is. But there needs to be rules for torture because it is both fun and effective. The first rule is this: Torture should not be done for fun, punishment or revenge. Or the half-full glass, torture is for positive outcomes only. Unfortunately, my wife torture, which serves no purpose but is a lot of fun, breaks this rule and should stop... Damn. The second rule concerns pain. The rules about pain are a bit tougher because there are two kinds of pain; mental and physical. Both need to be measured by a reasonable and appropriate standard, like don't leave a mark. And don't do something to someone else you wouldn't to yourself.

There is a lot of discussion lately about torture. I hear people say that torture is wrong and that we should never do it. That sounds like a really good idea. And I agree that I should not torture my wife. That's just for fun. But what about my employees and my kids. If I can't torture my children who will mow the lawn and wash the cars? And if I can't torture my employees who is going to open my stores on time and take care of my customers?

I don't see how the world can operate effectively without torture. And when we torture we have to follow the rules: Don't torture for fun and don't leave a mark. Torture is an important part of life and with out it we would have unmowed lawns and late opening stores. That's why I torture. It's good for my neighborhood and good for my business.

tor·ture

[tawr-cher] ⓘ Show IPA noun, verb, -tured, -tur·ing.

—noun

1. the act of inflicting excruciating pain, as punishment or revenge, as a means of getting a confession or information, or for sheer cruelty.
2. a method of inflicting such pain.
3. Often, tortures. the pain or suffering caused or undergone.
4. extreme anguish of body or mind; agony.
5. a cause of severe pain or anguish.

—verb (used with object)

6. to subject to torture.
7. to afflict with severe pain of body or mind: My back is torturing me.
8. to force or extort by torture: We'll torture the truth from his lips!
9. to twist, force, or bring into some unnatural position or form: trees tortured by storms.
10. to distort or pervert (language, meaning, etc.).

Rapture

He remembers trying to help. After a baseball game in his last year of Little League, in sunny suburbia, he lifted a small girl by the armpits so she could wash melted ice cream off her hands in the water fountain she could not reach. Dripping and smiling through dimples, she thanked him and dashed off into the crowd to find her parents, leaving him with a warmth in his heart, nowhere else, a small yet immensely powerful, elemental reaction. Years later, when a child fell at a playground in a large urban park where he was walking in the winter chill, the man picked her up to soothe her tears. The women there react in horror and snatch her away, her fading sobs pitched to frantic shrieking in the confusion and turmoil of their unimaginable fears.

In and out of focus, the intertwined limbs on the screen shift and rub. Are they blistering, burned? No, now smooth, pale ivory against a more golden tone. Then out of focus again, or ashy and flaking, and again smooth. His nascent tumescence falters through the disconcerting metamorphoses, and he clicks the window closed, moving on in his search for something deeper, or more superficial, to relieve the pressure, to ease his loneliness and angst, however temporarily. He should've known a movie called "Hiroshima, Mon Amour" wouldn't do it, French and arty or not. Where to look that's not tawdry or obvious? All he wants is love and beauty. The Web puts so much at his fingertips, yet it is aptly named, a reticular labyrinth full of dead-ends and traps without cynosure, teasing him with inadequate thumbnails, grasping for his identity (and credit card number). Searching on, with every click, he knows, he leaves a trail that someone could use to track, enmesh and blame him. The Danish clip he savored so often is gone, erased from whatever anonymous server hosted it. Here--this girl is so gorgeous, captured somewhere on silicon, unchanging perfection, which guarantees he'll grow tired of her, causing her beauty to fade, ageless as she is. But for now, she's like heaven. Do you believe in rapture, babe? Even when he's done, he wants to touch her, hold her, take care of her, even just talk to her. Is this a crime, regardless of her age? Is it his fault if she's a teen runaway, the unimaginable horrors she's suffered and yet do not mar her image? Or does that possibility somehow make her more compelling to him, unattainable as his true desires are? Where is the victim of his proclivities, this repeated self-flagellation, if not himself, here in the dark, shorts around his ankles, alone again?

The tortured metal frame of the dome glints in the sun, a stark reminder rising above the cherry blossoms. Locals and tourists from every corner of the globe orbit through the grounds, many talking and laughing as if this were any urban park. Others are more reverent and somber, some moved to tears by the horror unleashed here, the lives swept away in a flash and those left behind in anguish. An old man shuffling along the path trips and falls, unable to react quickly enough to catch himself or even slow his descent or minimize the impact. His nose bleeds below his crooked eyeglasses, one lens shattered. The crowd awkwardly parts, shifting humanity looking away, and all walk slowly on without stopping. The saddle-shaped arch of the Memorial Cenotaph represents a shelter for the souls of the victims, and reads: "Repose ye in peace, for the error shall not be repeated."

JEAN THE WATCHMAN

Jean woke with a dis-ease that reminded him of mornings after long nights drinking that Wal-Mart wine. This morning's malaise was not related to drinking though for he had been pure for weeks now. His joints ached with cold and his neck was sore from the sorry pillow he made from smaller contents of his cart. He had not truly slept in months as he always tried to keep one eye open to watch for evil men and women who tried to stop him. He would keep watching and waiting until his purpose was fulfilled.

The dim light of morning was only beginning. It would be two to three hours before the visitors, who would buy their salvation, started to arrive. He felt sorry for their simple-mindedness, but he knew they, too, fulfilled their purposes. He looked forward to seeing the misguided and delusional Rev. Skeletor. He said the craziest things, but his smile was genuine and permanently affixed to his gaunt face. The gifts of muffins and coffee he brought were welcome, but that damned hymn he played, over and over, drove Jean to distraction. "What can wash away my sins -- Nothing but the blood of Jesus," all the while, Rev. Skeletor bopping herky jerky to some imagined beat. The way these white people turned the blessed Word into torture for his ears never ceased to amaze Jean.

He huddled among his things and watched for signs. Snoring arose a couple of bushes away, where the Mexican day laborers slept. None of the sleepers in cars stirred yet, for they were warm and somewhat comfortable. In the far corner of the field, Lame Mary was stirring, moaning and muttering like always. Same as every morning since he had been waiting, but he reminded himself to remain alert. Shortly after the sky lightened, the Reverend's van arrived, with the usual assortment of helpers and the damned sound system.

Jean lined up with the other human refuse, thankful for the warmth of the coffee and the bread. Rev. Skeletor launched into his message, but Jean tuned him out. He needed no distractions from his task, setting himself up on the wall at the edge of the field, at the end of a long line of the others perched along the wall. As the sun climbed, city dwellers began to occupy the field with their mindless pursuits. Mostly they avoided Jean and his breed, as usual. Once in a while some good Samaritan would drop coins into a hat and quickly move along.

Jean's mind was wandering when he noticed a variance. Another urbanite was moving through the field, but he sought out the wasteland dwellers in the quiet places. He touched them, looked into their faces and spoke something that brought a smile. Along his path, he approached Lame Mary, touched her and moved on, but Jean saw Lame Mary stand up straight as the stranger walked toward the line of men, where Jean was at the front. Jean, usually confident, grew dumb with uncertainty. As the stranger approached Jean and a group of two other men, he said, *I have something for you*, and gave Rheumy James a five dollar bill. *How did you know that is exactly what I needed for my medicine?* *I didn't. I just wanted to help.* *That is exactly what I needed.* *My name is James.* *And mine is Manuel.* *Excuse me James, I have to help some other people.*

The man then turned to Jean and said, *I have something for you*, extending a five dollar bill. Jean grabbed him by the arm and asked, *Who are you?* *I'm just a friend.* *No, who are you?* *I am just here to help.* *You know Matthew says to beware those who claim to be great in the eyes of the Lord.* The man stepped back, looking nervous. *I make no claims, though, I am just trying to help.* Jean agitated, *You know, you have a glow about you, you are different. I can tell there is something about you.* *I have my purpose you know. We all have our purpose it is written. I knew it was time....*

Suddenly the stranger backed up, *I have to help some other people....*, and he turned and walked away.

Jean saw the golden glow about the stranger rise, turn red and take the shape of a horned demon, laughing at him, again. The man walked on and Jean cursed and returned to the wall, watching.

They Grind the Bones (Oh Yes, We Have!)

Open letter to all sobbing gangsters:

Lift up your heads and rejoice for the ramhorns have sounded and the flowers of – of – well, certainly there must be flowers – the lilies of the field, mustard seeds and somesuch – and it is in these blossomed fields that your rat-smeared hands will be made clean. Surely, this age of foreclosures is rich – and forbearance – since there must be some, in all likelihood – will be provided to the huddled...and the yearning... and so forth... but I digress, gentle fascists.

The time is come to make good with the double axe. Not the one with the sharp blade on one side for the quick split and the rusty thump on t'other for the ones what need a rusty thumping to keep 'em in line. No. Let us cast back to the original double axe – that Minoan hardscrabble where the bones of hero and slave alike were picked clean by the bullman. Today, these labyrinths are easy to build, economical, and monsters are plentiful.

*Above us, I've been told, is something like a sapphire in form
resembling a throne. And next to it, perhaps, there was a wheel.
And maybe this wheel was on fire. But for all that we have no need.*

The key to the whole operation, gentle bandits? Show 'em how it's done and folks'll build the warrens themselves. All profit – no risk. But as we stalk their mazes and shovel gold into our helicopter gunships – let us always keep one eye on soft moon. For it reflects not the sun, but the light from our world. If you look real close with a clear glass, you can almost make out Kansas in the eye of the old man up there. He's yawning away at us, sure – but one day, that moon man mouth will swallow us whole. And every Jonah's son will liken the darkness the anus of their first love.

*And over yonder I've heard tell of a man in camel hair who eats
locusts and honey. On his right, a tree chopped at the root
prepared for the fire. Its fruit like poison sumac. But for all that we
have no need.*

For all ages – from Achaeans to Ford Motor – are ruined by what interests them most. And this day's Jericho will surely tumble in a hail of candy colored cluster bombs and pornography. So my charge to you, dapper hoodlums, is to stop squabbling over trifles – the cost-plus contracts, the entertainment bucket, the death taxes – and let us fashion a full design of life. Stamp and coin a pattern on everything, everywhere on everything future and past. We need to create the maze inside. Where a rally for workers rights means the same thing as a two thousand dollar glass of wine.

And lately, I've read in the trades, that scratching under our very skin is a jagged eye blazing with the fermented metal medicine – a single grain of which can cure a galaxy or two. And maybe there was a demonic seal given to Jefferson in the presidential garden as he buggered his slave mistress. But for all that we have no need.

Because when we control the darkness before the word is spoken, it stands to reason we control the word. So how do we get there, right? How do we grind it all up – every last Amadis of Gaul – so there will be only one truth. It's simple – so simple and inhuman that it's never been thought of in the history of the world. We must forgive everyone. We must forgive every last murderer, thief, rapist and thug. Give a free pass without condition or exception. For once we break the natural barrier of human outrage, my criminal sweethearts, we can pollute reality faster than all the flush toilets in India.

And deeper still, rumor has it, are eleven dimensions of strings vibrating to infinity in an essential, all encompassing fabric. And these smaller than theoretically possible building blocks are weeping – honest to God weeping for us, my darling chisellers! But for all that we have no need.

I forgive François Eugène Vidocq, Oppenheimer, and the Shah of Iran. I forgive Queen Victoria, Chase Manhattan and Pol Pot. I forgive Tomás de Torquemada, Hung Hsiu-chuan, and Conrad Black. I forgive Vlad the Impaler, John Wesley Hardin, Xenophon, Anais Nin and Judas. I forgive William T. Sherman, Prince Faisal, James Earl Ray and Hitler. I forgive J. Edgar Hoover, Fred West, Eddie Slovik, and Justinian. I forgive Henry Ford, Paracelsus, Charles Manson and Dillinger. I absolve you all without need of penance or apology. And sure as Christmas morn, they'll hang me for it.

Farwell now, beautiful vermin. The skies are darkening up and there's a lot of history to rewrite. If you'd like, we can sing a beautiful song of the steadfastness of Job - but better to spend our last moments together washing each other's hands – all God's children in the muddy creek. And when you read these words in the next age – typeset with the red ink of saviors – remember to watch your back, for I have many people in this city.

Winter Wheat

He opened his eyes and looked towards the door. He could see light cracking through the jamb. Because of his orientation on the dilapidated bed, the vertical crack appeared as a horizontal line. He could hear the wind blowing across the plains of his desolate 65 hectare homestead. He could smell his own sweat soaked into the sheets. He looked at the horizontal line. The sun was rising on another day. One more.

He tilted his head up and looked around the one room sod cabin in the meager light. He wondered whether he had the strength to reach out for the bucket of meal cake. He then peeled back the fetid blanket and took a good long look at his swollen pink leg. The throbbing pain of the past few days had been replaced by a creeping dullness. He eased himself back down, tilted his head towards the horizontal light, and thought of her. He wept bitterly thinking of how she would have made sure that he was fed and that his wound was clean. He was angry at his God for taking her.

He could see her now. Katriana was what her family called her. She was one of seven in a large Russian Mennonite family that had immigrated to the Kansas Territory from the Ukraine. She had a round face, a fair complexion and an overall demeanor representative of her family's peasant stock. At one time, she had rich chocolate-colored eyes and lustrous auburn hair that was a perfect match for the shining boundless optimism brimming in his own heart. She was the apple of her father's eye and an angel from another place and time; not so suited to a hard life on the prairie. They were married in '82, and by '85 the prairie winds had already left their permanent mark on her, depositing their misfortunes in the wrinkles of her brow.

Unlike other members of the congregation sitting on homesteads further west, they had trouble eking out a living yield from the first season. Perhaps it was because his Ukrainian neighbors were experienced dryland farmers. Or perhaps it was the slight slope of his land that ran up to Chawpwa Ridge. The incline left his stake exposed to the dry winds, and encouraged what little rain water that did fall upon the land to escape to the west. In a quick succession of years, they endured droughts, locus, and blights. In January of '86 they endured far worse with the sudden death of little Nika. After that, the light seemed to dim in Ana's eyes. After another miserable summer, they were nearly done. They even talked of leaving. Bernhard Warkentin came through Cutler's Park in September igniting embers of hope with talk of the virtues of winter wheat. In the failing amber hues of November's last days, he in his blackstrap hat, tethered to the ginny mule, and Ana in her bonnet stooped and tending to the newly furrowed rows, planted the last of their resolve in the unforgiving prairie soil.

December brought bitter cold winds to the lands. On Christmas Day, 1886, with a crop of winter wheat germinating under a blanket of snow, a fever came to Ana. She was gone in three days. Wading his way through the countless drifts, he finally found the marker, so that he could lay her to rest beside Nika. It was late January, when the accident happened. It had been all he could do to drag himself back into the sod.

Back in the pale waning light, he once more thought of Ana's voice. He asked his God for what reason she had been taken. He gave up all pretense and wailed her name, begging God for her return. An overwhelming bitter ache seized his heart, slowly filling and then completely swamping it. It rotated slowly one full clockwise revolution and then sank into a fathomless sea of despair.

He awoke once more with long shadows thrown against the walls of the cabin. How much time had gone by? How much more could he endure? The dullness in his leg returned. It called his name seductively. Fleeting thoughts assaulted his mind, flogging it, one after another. If only he had staked his claim to a different tract. If only he had seeded wheat last winter. He looked at the horizontal crack and dusk's pink hues surrounding the door. His mind focused. He thought of his little Nika in the cold ground. He cursed Kansas and its dry land. He cursed Warkentin and his wheat. He cursed his choices. He knew in soul that God had indeed forsaken him, and so he cursed him too.

He closed his eyes. He fervently hoped that he did not have to open them again.

Coming to a Few Terms

Dear friend,

I am sorry I have not written again sooner. Things being as they were, it didn't seem appropriate somehow to stray away mentally from all that was happening at the homefront, though many days were spent simply marking the time, especially just before my father died.

It was and is still hard to say how my emotions run on this. I think that probably I was most upset when I first came back home in the spring right after my dad had had his first "episode" of dementia and I found that he had essentially lost his grip. It was so odd to think that someone who had such a powerful personality was losing a battle with and within his own body. The hardest part was during the afternoons when he was still having fairly lucid periods but could not understand what was happening to himself - none of us could either - and suddenly I would notice, and then he would, that his mind was slipping away, just like watching the sun go down. And as scary as it was for me to watch, I realized that it was terrifying for him to recognize and have to experience the slide. It was like that movie about the retarded guy who has his intellect freed by an operation, and he begins to learn and have a normal, happy life, and then suddenly he realizes that the cure is only temporary and that he is slipping inescapably back into the dark. Dad would grow frantic, repeating names and dates and events in an effort to cling to his awareness, asking me to tell him, again, this or that, but then finally lapsing into some strange waking dream. Going back and forth from here to my home town, seeing Dad at intervals, each time worse than the last, I think I was ready for him to let go - unlike my mother, who had grown accustomed to his slow weakening and saw only the bright spots, the moments when he returned to himself. I only saw big descending steps. Where she had moments of hope, I only saw defeat.

I tend now to remember my dad at his most robust, because towards the end, I realized it just wasn't him anymore, and I guess that made his death easier. His last weeks did nothing except to contrast the person he had been. Although his decline was in many ways sudden - it all happened in less than a year - it was also insufferably slow once we understood that it was only going one way. But I will tell you, in a way, his death was, finally, somehow reassuring, because when I watched him when he died, I realized that "he" had left, that "he" was somewhere else. I don't mean this in too religious a way (especially as it's not altogether clear to me where the heck he might have gone, and whether maybe he's still hanging around here somewhere listening in!), but it was clear to me that one moment he was there, and the next moment he was not.

After he died, my little brother and I stayed with his body until the man from the funeral home came. While we were waiting, this sweet young nurse assistant came in and started washing his body and dressing him in some of his clothes. Another woman came and helped her. It was like something ancient, a timeless ritual: the women preparing the dead; the women who shepherd us into life and back out again. I helped her lift and roll my father's body and legs while she was working. You know me, this should have just freaked me out. But it didn't, because it just wasn't him anymore. It was -- I hate to say it -- just a carcass. The spirit, I realized, was ageless but not timeless. It was its time to move on. The scary part was thinking that somehow maybe he would come back to occupy that worn out old body, which would be too horrifying -- not from a Night of the Living Dead standpoint, but from the awfulness of having someone you love come back from wherever he has escaped to and be imprisoned once more inside that thing, that suffering. I wonder if Jesus thought, *what a mistake*, when he brought Lazarus back from the dead.

Maybe that's what I want to tell you. Not that I am not afraid of death - I am; I don't want to die; it seems a lonely proposition - but that I no longer believe that it is a ceasing to be. Rather, it is a departure. This is good news to me. I tell it to you in that vein.

2010

There is a land I have visited in my dreams -- often enough that I can describe it to you now. It is on a river, near a sea. The sea is flat, the river calm. But I have been on the beach when dangerous waves have broken, and I have jumped from trunk to trunk of fallen trees that have crowded the river banks after a great flood. It has tangled forests that have been cut back here and there to make room for coffee or copra plantations. The roads are mostly sand or shell. On the sea shore there are small dunes scattered between the sea grass, and sometimes modest beach houses where I stay awhile. And sometimes not.

A few miles up the river from the dunes, at the end of a sandy road through a shady forest, where the choking vines and brush have been cleared away leaving tall trees whose branches tower above our heads, there is a riverboat wharf. It is made entirely of cedar or cypress and has a couple of buildings attached to it. One is a ticket office and freight counter. The other has a loading area for freight and a waiting area for passengers. Sometimes the passenger area has a restaurant and a bar and is full of people. Sometimes not.

I cannot remember now what I do there or why, but the last time I visited it in my dreams was soon after my parents had died. I spotted them both outside the waiting area. They were getting ready to leave on the boat, which was headed down the river to the sea. I was so happy to see them and they were happy to see me. They didn't say anything but they pointed to the crowd in the waiting room and a small girl ran out to me and hugged my legs. It was my daughter, I'm not sure which one, but my parents told me to cherish them both.

I have not dreamed of this place since then. But I recognize it now and I know I will see it again. It is the place to which, or from which ... or through which ... my people embark.

Chapter 3

Slumped down in stakeout position, his line of sight was framed by the spokes of the steering wheel. Dvorjak reminisced. When he first joined the force, his naivety allowed him to believe that humanity could be divided into 2 categories: good and bad. This simple worldview had had but one advantage that he could recall after all these years - it made his job very easy to explain - "keep the bad people from doing bad things to the good people". And in spite of the reams of evidence to the contrary, Len continued to stubbornly hang on to the notion that the majority of human beings were fundamentally good. He actually still believed in "Truth, Justice and the American Way".

"What an idiot", he chuckled to himself as he rearranged his rear end in a futile effort to find a comfortable position, "I really AM a dumb shit". 14 years of "serving and protecting" the people of Chicago had slowly but surely awoken him to the fact that most people are in fact self serving dickheads with the morals of a slug. 3 years as a private investigator had only reinforced the point. He shook his head, chagrined that he nonetheless retained this strange predilection to give people the benefit of the doubt. As he spotted O'Connor, he concluded that it must be some sort of hereditary, DNA related thing. There was really no other plausible explanation.

His instincts had told him to proceed with this self funded investigation, and it was now bearing fruit. Sure, his source was a louse, but he had to admit that he had put him onto something that was potentially very big indeed. The fact that Len knew and respected O'Connor had influenced his recent decision to implement his "lay low and take it slow" investigative strategy. Len mulled it over as he waited. Why would O'Connor risk everything? Could it be that he was being led to the dark side by one or more of Len's famous "Big 3" - Money, Pussy, and Power? There was certainly plenty of precedent.

Then he saw him. For the 3rd time in 10 days, O'Connor was evidently joining Tony Carruzzo for lunch. Carruzzo was known by law enforcement to be the head of Chicago's largest organized crime ring. Despite years of continuous effort by both the Chicago PD and various Federal agencies to bring him down, he had avoided even one felony conviction. As before, they were meeting today at a small Italian restaurant just off Maxwell St., which, after many dormant years, was again the site of a thriving street market, though now frequented mostly by yuppies rather than 1st generation immigrants. From what Len could make out through his binoculars from his uncomfortable vantage point, Carruzzo did most of the talking, gesturing wildly with his hands. Chief of Police Michael Aloysius O'Connor appeared to be nervous and distracted, furtively casting glances out the window towards the street.

O'Connor had a well deserved reputation as Mr. Clean. He was respected for maintaining a modicum of independence from the entrenched patronage system that defined Chicago politics and power. He had a beautiful wife and 3 beautiful kids. He was a TV and print media darling. He was a regular on the 6:00 news, more often than not taking credit for another arrest in his ongoing (and relatively successful) campaign to "clean up the streets of our great city". By all accounts, the sky was the limit for him. There was a lot of buzz of an impending jump into politics, rumblings of a run for Governor. Hardly the profile of a man likely to cavort with the mob.

As was his wont, Len considered explanations beyond the Big 3. Extortion and blackmail came to mind as he pulled the Crown Vic away from the curb. Things had been so much easier for him back when everything was black or white. But dealing in absolutes was simply no longer possible.

It had taken some time for O'Connor to recognize the alien entity that had invaded his life two weeks ago. After all, fear - particularly this elemental, visceral type of fear - was an emotion that was unfamiliar to him. The power that came with being the Chief of Police of the nation's 3rd largest city, combined with his 6'4"/210 pound frame, made O'Connor the type of man who *created* fear, not one who *felt* it. He was now in a haze, disoriented. He was running out of time, yet felt as if he was in suspended animation, unable to actually *do* anything. It had dawned on him this morning that he was truly in a no win situation. In simpler terms, he was pretty much fucked. He recognized that if he followed Carruzzo's instructions and was caught, a lengthy jail term was inevitable. If he chose to defy him, the alternative was even less attractive. He didn't fancy himself as fresh water fish food. He wondered if any species of Lake Michigan fish would actually eat decaying human flesh. Goddamn Carruzzo!! Then, this afternoon, sitting again in that goddamn wop restaurant eating more goddamn pasta with that wop prick, a vision of hope suddenly appeared to him as he glanced out the window at a passing car. In the front seat of a beat to shit Crown Victoria, he saw Len fucking Dvorjak. He suddenly felt much better.

(SPEAKER INSTRUCTION: Start out pacing back and forth in front of assembled men, then stop, look straight at someone in front row, and begin in a firm voice without yelling)

If you don't know why you're here ... leave now and take my blessing. If you don't know why you're here, you are a threat to yourself, to the men standing on either side of you, to those in front of and behind you. You don't intend it, but a man who does not know his own mind is a house divided ... and a house divided will fall ... especially on the field of battle. We have no use this day for a warrior who fights himself, who is predisposed to fall. For the enemy we face is strong, is numerous, and has the courage of their convictions, warped and reprehensible though they may be.

What is needed ... what you and I all must be on this day ... are warriors of single-minded purpose, fueling our own internal flames, for one common objective ... And that objective, my friends, is the annihilation of our unfortunate enemy **(finish this sentence with a slight, ironic grin)**.

(Pause to scan the men, looking as many as possible directly in the eyes, and return to a look of grim resolve)

Note carefully, brave brothers, I did not say that we must all have the same purpose, fueling the same internal flame within us ... Nay. I said instead that we must have a common objective on this day. Your purpose, your flame, need not be the same as mine. It need not be the same as your neighbor's, your fellow warrior's. Indeed your purpose needst only be your own, residing firmly in your heart and holding true to your most sacred and personal belief. A belief you would gladly die for. And that purpose must be so central to your being, that even now it is fanning that flame inside you. Fanning a small but white hot spark that leaps from each molecule of your body to the next, igniting a furnace of righteous and mighty power within the heart pounding inside of you ... within the legs trembling to launch you like a projectile into the heart of our enemy ... within the arms now trembling to strike down every obstacle that threatens your purpose!

What is my purpose today you might ask? I will tell you. But not as an example of what your purpose should be. Yours is yours. Mine is mine. I will tell you mine for what it is, a mere statement of fact.

I am here, prepared to kill and stand in judgment thereafter before my God, because I hold one sacred tenet to be true. That no man may tell another what he must love. ... I will fight today to love what I must love. And with my last trace of passion, my last drop of blood, I will fight today to love the God, the people, and the home that I choose to love! For the reasons I choose to love them! And if you stand between me and my sacred choice THEN MAY GOD HAVE MERCY ON YOUR SOUL!! MAY HE GRANT YOU A QUICK AND PAINLESS DEATH AT MY HANDS!! THAT YOU NEED NOT WITNESS THE AGONIZING DEATHS OF THOSE WHO STOOD WITH YOU BEFORE THEY TOO FELL UNDER ME!!

(Allow men to briefly revel and then calm. Begin again with passion but start at just above a whisper and slowly elevate in volume to a preacher like rant as you finish)

What is your purpose?!?! What is your purpose?!?! Whatever it may be ... WHOever it may be ... unleash it now! Let it explode inside you and ignite a roaring flame!! And now as that flame bursts forth ... take hold of your steel and prepare to follow me and REJOICE as our combined flames ... this righteous conflagration of brothers ... descends upon an enemy ... an ignoble BEAST ... that is destined this day to be CONSUMED BY HOLY FIRE!!!

WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE?! WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE?!?! WHATEVER IT IS ... EMBRACE IT NOW AND FOLLOW ME AND MINE TO VICTORY!!

We Are What We Are

(or a brief summary of man, nature and God)

We are what we are. We are savage and perverted, wicked and evil. We are corrupt and corrupted to our cores. By nature this is the way we are.

Our ancestors through history have made innumerable contributions to the bank accounts of our being. Each successive generation lived and died in accordance with the strict and unforgiving laws of nature. Our ancestors were strong and they survived and prospered. They sought power and protected their progeny. They killed for food and took the land they wanted. They raped their neighbor's daughters and stole what they needed. They did whatever it took to survive and propagate their seeds. Honor, love and charity were subordinate to murder, theft and the raw power of the fist, club and spear. Our ancestors were the winners who passed their successful ways of ruthlessness and savagery to us through 10,000 generations by their DNA and in the teaching of their children. We are the refined product of their brutal work. Just as our arms attach to our shoulders and our toes stick out from our feet we are corrupted by the genes of our ancestors who played by the rules of nature and won.

The programming of our ancestors DNA traps us and gives us little hope for a better future. Modern civilization gives the appearance of a new order but the laws of our ancestors still apply and we all prepared to play by those rules. We very effectively do what it takes to survive, succeed and procreate. The powerful among us take what they need and abuse the weak. We are what we are.

Only God can save us. But He is not who many think He is. God is not Michelangelo's bearded muscular force on a throne who looks down upon us from above and smites sinners who incite his wrath. Nor is he the supernatural uncaring designer who created the oceans and the trees and provides for the natural order of the universe. God is the ethereal chord of good that runs through each of us. He is the intellectual embodiment of all good things in man. He is the Savior who saves us from ourselves.

Man created God from hope and reason. Man hoped for a better world and reasoned a path to it. While our ancestors were killing, surviving and procreating, some among them thought and imagined a better way. Some found love in lust, saw cooperation in competition and felt compassion instead of hatred and murder. These ideas ran counter to our nature but bore fruit as an idea that is God. The one true God and savoir of man is reason. Only reason can save us from our corrupt and evil nature.

The Warrant

When he woke in the night he would reach out and touch the hope sleeping within him. An anchor in his increasingly directionless existence, the dreamed resurrection of warmth, song, soft breezes and brotherhood now faded, an ill omen. Shaken and anxious, a light sweat made clammy his chilled flesh. The embers of his fire glowered dimly in its pit. The days had been short, and the cold seeped in and stayed like it never did before. Like ashes from some unholy conflagration, snow silently drifted down through the black sky as it rarely had.

Once, frogs teemed in the creek, arising in the spring from their muddy coagulate hibernation. Deep, rich, mottled green-brown glistened on their backs, maps of the mystery of the world incarnate, they hummed and trilled in the glow of eventide, filling the fecund swampiness with life, wet, mossy, smelly and ephemeral.

The man lay fraught in the dark, thinking, worrying. They had focused on getting to the coast for so long. Now he was the one, the one who had to worry about everything. His solemn promise to carry on, to prepare the way for them. The weight of it staggered him, caught short his breath. His heart fluttered. No hours of futile planning, nor steeled readiness, could anticipate nor overcome the fuliginous twists fate might ordain. Yet he must go on, do what he can, for them, or the fragile idea of them.

What road led most directly and least dangerously to the rendezvous? When to cross the barren wastes yawning ahead? Would he arrive to find naught but desolate, frigid fulgurite pounded by endless, dull, leaden, foamy waves, no birds, no hope?

He dreaded the waiting there, alone, more than any nightmare of flight or armageddon. Would they travel singly, or in pairs supportive yet slowed by the weaker, perhaps into bleak dark hours treading blindly in the void, no star to guide them true? Would they be waylaid by others' holy craven wants, oblivious or opposed to their pilgrimage? He knew they would not all make it. He rocked gently in his bed, and mourned, almost audibly, the inevitable demise of those not yet fallen.

Would they find the promised shelter? Would there be enough to drink, sustaining sacrament? Food to nourish and even provide a modicum of fleeting physical pleasure, calling forth blessed cries of thanksgiving? The most rudimentary means to prepare and store it? How could he carry these and the fire, and humbly clear and ready the way for them to arrive, all full of breath and light?

He would. He told himself, and all of them, he would.

From where she laid the sway of the palm tree outside made the sunlight sparkle in her nearly black eyes. The shadows danced across her forehead. Traffic was picking up on the road and as usual morning had brought voices of all sorts to her ears. The hum of the world was increasing. Large trucks caused temporary vibration as they rolled past. Her sister lay within arm's reach and was still, as if photographed.

The light was welcome, as was the traffic and the voices and her sister. They were all senses that she embraced in the dreamscape of her memory. Like the street vendors who always seemed to install themselves just outside her window. As a child the vendors would come when she was most hungry with their small braziers and hot coals to cook the meat that had been placed on sticks, the smoke rising to their room above the avenue. Or the man who would arrive with his flimsy cooler filled with stolen ice and stolen ice cream to sell to the lucky children who had the dime. His songs rising like the cigarette smoke to catch her attention; but no dime, not today. Her favorite was the man with the fruit on skewers that she would eat one piece at a time, saving each piece for what seemed like an hour before trying the next: pineapple, mango, melon, pineapple, mango, melon. What she would give now for the sweetness, the coolness to hold in her mouth.

The rain had only lasted for an hour and did not wake her at first. The sound of dripping and the occasional splash on her face had roused her from dreaming. The men with the dogs had come and gone away because the rain had come hard for a time. She thought about the mud outside and wondered when it would move finally down the hillside. But then the rain stopped and the mud stopped but the men with the dogs did not come back. She didn't like dogs normally but this was different. She had never known dogs who barked for good, only as a warning of bad things to come. When it all started the dogs had barked their warning, and stopped.

The pain in her legs had subsided to a dull ache. Was this what the boy in her church felt like, the one with special crutches and the metal braces? Or what Jesus felt when they put the nails in his hands? She tried to move her arm to feel her knee but the broken door was in the way, wedged there by a bookcase and the antique RCA that until recently only brought loud news to the woman upstairs with bad ears and worse breath. She had lost her bladder days ago and it embarrassed her to the point she didn't want to say anything to her sister. So still she slept, so peaceful.

Her parents had gone to work and had not returned. The man next door had gone to the store but had not come back nor brought the milk she had paid for; mother would be angry and would slap her but she didn't know what to do. Maybe when the shaking stops for good and the men with dogs come back, maybe then she will see her parents and move her legs from under this tremendous weight and wake her sister, the two of them finding their way into the busy street.

Until then the dappled sun coming through the palm tree tossed bright shadows across the piece of wall hanging as if floating and crumbling slowly into nothingness and causing particles as fine as angel's dust to rest on her sister's hair. She heard the dogs barking as sleep overcame her nearly black eyes for the last time.

Days Both Long and Short

The years have worn life
paper-thin
not quite able to see through

Patience strength tenacity
Forged by preacher father
dozen brothers
mountains
waterman watermen
language longing love

Sight replaced
with holding touching
Words
with understanding
Teaching still

Your body a small bowl
chipped and worn
fragile
used to hold the left-overs

Are your days long or short?
Are your dreams sweet?
Are Ran Jimmy Cy near?

Can you hear the wailing TV
moaning roommate?
The singing at your grey temple?

From you has come
questing and satisfaction
service and expectation
twist of chicken or tomato
mending and trumps.
Confidence above all

Can you feel our love?

Always small
in height
Never heart or soul or patience
Tiny at the last

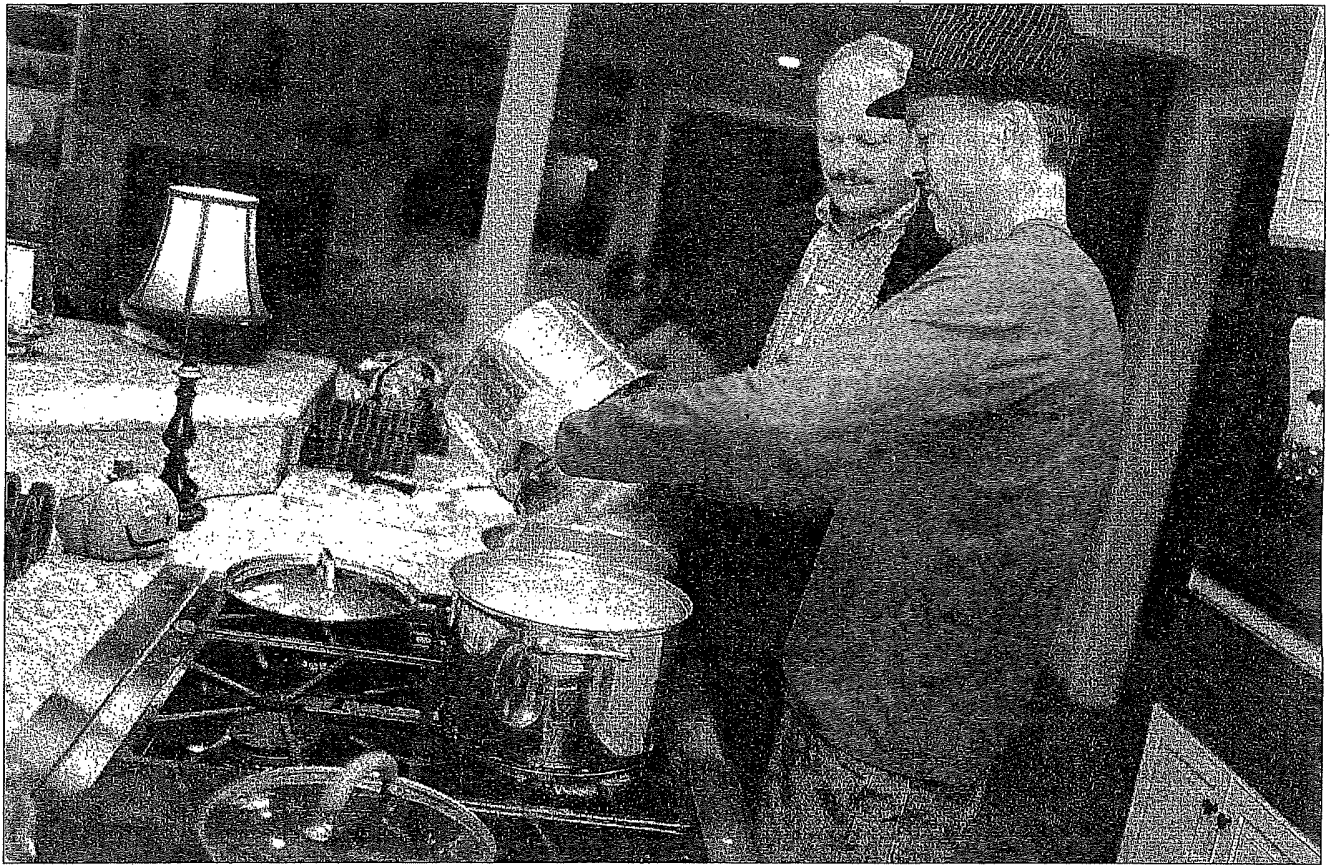
Now to till the marble garden
Grow in stature with family
known and storied
Now mine to tell

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2010

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

Life, etc.

www.newsobserver.com/life



Chip Williams, left, watches host Don Reynolds prepare egg noodles for the meal at a recent meeting of the Well Formed Heads.

TRAVIS LONG - tlong@newsobserver.com

From: Pat Miller [mailto:pat@blueridgerentals.com]
Sent: Thursday, April 07, 2011 1:38 PM
To: James L.S. Cobb
Subject: A High Country Retreat- Cobb/Robbins

2011

Hello James,

I am writing to let you know that there was damage found after your departure from A High Country Retreat.

- the finger rods on the hot tub cover's lift mechanism were broken and will need to be replaced

Please feel free to contact me or reply to this email if you have any information concerning this issue, and we will contact you if any charges will apply.

Thank you,

Pat Miller
Quality Assurance & Field Manager
Blue Ridge Mountain Rentals

From: James L.S. Cobb
To: Pat Miller
Cc: Micki Hartley ; Donald R. Reynolds
Sent: Thursday, April 07, 2011 3:45 PM
Subject: RE: A High Country Retreat- Cobb/Robbins

Hi Pat,

I have canvassed the group and no one used the tub, nor saw anyone else use the tub, mainly because of the weather, which as you know was cold, sleeting/snowing and very windy until Sunday (when unfortunately everyone had to go home), but some also from concerns for hygiene.

Because it was snowing/sleeting Friday when the first members of the group arrived, no one ventured outside to inspect the tub or other outside features, but limited their inspection to inside the house. And quite frankly, per my questions to the group, no one knows what a finger rod is, much less what a broken one looks like, so I doubt seriously we could have identified it for you in any case.

I don't know what further I can tell you. We are sure we did not cause the problem but we cannot tell you who or what did, or when, or even visualize the damage.

On the bright side, we loved the house and the views, and are hoping to return next year for our annual retreat. I think I mentioned to you – or maybe it was Micki – that our book club decided to venture away from the beach this year, and we're glad we did.

Let me know what further information you find out.

Thanks,
Jim Cobb

James L.S. Cobb
ATTORNEY

Direct: 919.865.2813
jcobb@wyrick.com

From: Pat Miller <pat@blueridgerentals.com>
Sent: Monday, April 11, 2011 3:28 PM
To: James L.S. Cobb
Cc: Micki Hartley; Donald R. Reynolds
Subject: Re: A High Country Retreat- Cobb/Robbins



Thank you very much Jim, and we do hope that you will consider renting with us again soon!

Pat Miller
Field Manager
Blue Ridge Mountain Rentals

MY FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

Today was my first day of kiddergarden. Mommy walked me there so I wouldn't get lost even though our house is very close to the school. My teacher's name is Mizzus Sanderson. Or maybe the school is called Sanderson. I'm not sure. She is a nice old lady even though she made me cry when she asked me if I knew my address yet. I told her we lived next to a busy road in a house with orange trees and the house had two 4s and a couple other numbers on the front next to the garage door. She said I needed to work on memorizing those numbers and our street name and I said with tears getting big in my eyes, "Why? You can see our house from the playground!" I was mad because she made me feel stupid, even though I don't think she meant to. When I got home I stared at the numbers on the house until I could say them out loud. I still don't know which street I live on because we live on two of them and teacher said addresses only have one street or road name in them. I'll ask Daddy tonight where we live because he is very smart. Daddy is so smart, he even knows how to make fireplace logs out of newspaper and wire and when he had to work by himself in Shim-mee-uh he figured out how to make piggy banks. I like when he explains things to me as long as I wait till after he has his dry marteenee when he gets home from work. If I ask him before that he looks mad and doesn't talk or says he has to talk to Mommy first.

I met some new kids at school today. Mommy said I would make lots of friends. I don't think any of the kids I met today are my friends. Friends are people you play with who smile a lot. I didn't really play with anybody new today, just the kids I already know who live on my street or on the street behind our house. I played on the swings and the slide with my real friends while we kept our eyes on the other kids in case they did anything weird. One of the other kids is colored. He has big glasses and smiles a lot even if you don't talk to him. He has very white teeth and his gums look funny. He also has a spot on his head where his short, curly black hair is missing. The spot is shiny and brown and looks soft. I want to stick something into that spot and see if his skull is missing, but I don't because that wouldn't be nice and I don't want him to die. I still want to poke something in his head, though. Maybe the little scissors they gave us to cut the 'struction paper would work. At the beginning of school, we all sat on the floor in rows like the soldiers on my Daddy's military base, except we weren't standing at tension. We had to sit like that for a long time while the teacher said a lot of stuff I didn't understand except for the parts about lunch and snacks and sharing things. And something about cars swimming in pools. There was a little girl sitting next to me with short brown hair who smelled nice and I heard her tell the teacher her name was Suzy. I kept trying to look at her without her catching me and I think she was doing the same thing to me, too. The teacher kept talking and I was getting sleepy and my eyes started to drop down to the floor. Just then I noticed that Suzy was wearing a very short dress and I could see her panties. They were white with little flowers on them. I've never seen panties on a girl other than my little sister before and never wanted to, but now I liked seeing them. My right hand was very close to her bare leg and I thought I should move it so she wouldn't think I was doing something weird, but I didn't want to move my hand and I hoped she'd move her leg close to my hand.

I guess I fell asleep then because the next thing I remember was I woke up laying down next to Suzy. She was on a little mat just big enough to cover the floor underneath her. She was asleep just like all the other kids. I was laying on the same kind of mat, but couldn't remember how it got there. Suzy was breathing slow and her eyes were closed and her mouth was part way open, that's how I know she was sleeping. I started thinking about the flowers on her panties again, but then I looked toward the back of the big room we were in and I caught the teacher's eye as she smiled at me. That made me feel good and I smiled back. Then I closed my eyes.

I woke up again because all the other kids were making lots of noise even though the teacher was telling them to roll up their mats and put them away "and do so quietly ladies and gentlemen!" she said. Most of the kids were quiet then, but some weren't. I couldn't understand why they didn't be quiet after the teacher told them to because she's grown up and you're supposed to do what grown ups say unless they're strangers in a car or retarded or bad guys with guns or knives. If I don't do what grown ups say I get yelled at and Daddy talks about the belts hanging in his closet, especially the skinny one he calls "the strap." Then I shut up quick 'cuz I don't wanna get whipped like a racehorse.

I was glad when school was over. I wanted to go home and eat some oranges off our trees and play on my own swing set even though it's way smaller than the school one and try to ride my new bike again since Daddy took off the training wheels. The teacher said good-bye to me when I left and I smiled back at her but couldn't quite look straight at her when I did. Then I was out in the school car lot and I was a little scared because I left the school from a different door than the one I walked into and I didn't know which way was my house. Then I looked around and Mommy was standing not too far away holding my little brother's and sister's hands. My brother was very jealous that I got to go to school. I was glad he was jealous so I didn't tell him school is actually pretty boring. My little sister is too young and dumb to know what school is so I don't care what she thought.

Len brooded. He barely registered the dust that floated warily though the slanted rays of dimming sunlight edging through the worn blinds. His eyes hurt. One of these days he was gonna to take the time and put down the cash to get a decent pair of glasses. The cash part was the big obstacle....time was not the issue.

Artie brought his drink over and for a split second considered sitting down for some conversation. A close look at his old friend quickly revealed that Dvorjak was in no mood for small talk. Artie shuffled quietly back behind the bar as a mumbled "thanks Artie" dissipated into the trailing air. Art resumed watching the vintage, rabbit eared 27" Zenith in time to see the Cub's bullpen implode again. Art's Caravan was most certainly not listed among the "best sports bars of Chicago".

Len needed income producing work, a case that paid, and he needed it bad. Although she hadn't brought it up, he sensed that Jenny was getting tired of playing the role as primary bread winner. Or perhaps he was simply questioning his own manhood. Either way, it was sticking in his craw....he needed a positive cash flow.

The 1812 Overture broke his reverie, the ringtone honoring his Russian heritage. "Dvorjak here". Silence greeted him, but he could tell that the line was live, that somebody was on the other end. He waited, hoping it wasn't a wrong number. "Dvorjak here, speak up for god sakes", he said, his voice rising in frustration.

"Len", a low, muffled voice. "I saw you yesterday.....it....it....it was like...it was like seeing a vision from God. I saw you, I saw a fucking angel". "Caruzzo's got me cornered....I'm in way over my head..I'm..we're...I'm running out of time. My family's in danger.... there's nothing I can do about it.... not without throwing everything away. Dvorjak just listened. "I got no one....nobody I can trust. I don't know where to turn.... Len?" His voice trailed off into troubled silence.

"Jesus Mike, take a deep breath, OK"? "What the hell is going on?" "Not that it matters, you know I'll help"....

"Where are you Len? I need to see you. I can't do this over the phone."

"I'm at the Caravan. I'll wait". "Make sure nobody's trailing you".

=====

Jenny whistled while she worked. Scallions, garlic, olive oil, red wine. Just the start. She loved to create meals for him, almost as much as she loved to watch him devour whatever she prepared. It had become a running joke between them. If he didn't say: "thanks for dinner babe, that was really good, per usual," in a timeframe she deemed appropriate to the quality of the meal, she would attempt to imitate his voice and chide him, exclaiming - in mock annoyance - "gee Jen, **great** dinner, you've outdone yourself! Thanks **so** much for the **wonderful** meal, it must have taken **hours**".

She thought back to when they first met. She had felt an immediate attraction that she didn't understand. He was a good looking man, but going to seed, almost old enough to be her father. Len had no steady means of income, and he drank way too much. With time, she came to realize that her initial attraction to Len was instinctual, akin to a pet lover falling in love with a mangy mutt on a visit to the pound. It was as if he was that very special abandoned and forlorn dog, the one that wagged his tail with the most abandon, but with eyes that showed a glint of superior intelligence. Some said these mutts made the best pets. But the pet owner was equally culpable. Early on she had been satisfied simply by Len's neediness and loyalty.

He also fulfilled a part of her that she hadn't known existed....the masters' need to be in control of her subject.

Over their time together, her love for him had evolved. It was now unconditional, complex, marked by great nuance. A three dimensional love, based on mutual respect, complete transparency, total honesty, true equality and a shared carnal lust. She no longer cared that they were clearly never going to get officially married.

But a love this rich brought some unexpected consequences. She had started to worry profoundly about Len and their future together, her dreams troubled. Events that were soon to unfold would prove that her concerns were fully justified.

Born just after the new century, his was a tradition of industry and craftsmanship. The fifth of seven boys, he only wore what others already had. In his youth, a football end and trained "basso profundo." He married a fiery Scot lass who was his lifelong love, and complement. At 6 foot 4 and rail thin, he was first noticed for his size, but it would be other traits that were later recalled.

He was a gifted engineer and psychologist. The engineering training came from University. The understanding of people came naturally.

During the Depression he offered to sweep the floors at a construction office in hopes of a job to support his young family. He was diligent in the little things, and made a good impression. It put him in the right place at the right time. He was good at what he did -- building things large and small. More precisely, his great skill was understanding how best to get the thing built. To make the most of people and their talents.

During the War he built ships by the hundreds -- ships to carry men and machines across the Oceans. His shipyard ran night and day, literally for years. The workers continued through Christmas Day, their single day off, in order to further the War effort. Christened and launched, the pride swells beyond the model on his desk.

He traveled the nation, and later the world, to build what had been imagined, and to rebuild what had been destroyed. Post offices and court houses in the South and Midwest. A year and gone. Greenland, Okinawa, Jordan, Poland, Brazil -- a handful of the dozens of red dots on a World map I studied again and again. In each a "build" -- at each a stone and steel remembrance of his stay.

His most ambitious building paled in comparison to these edifices. It was a joint project, with him as the architect, and his red-headed mate the more colorful foreman. Together they built a family brick by brick with wisdom, trust and quiet confidence. Four children, eight grandchildren, an even dozen great-grandchildren. It was a long project, covering 55 of his 82 years.

His last home was a solid place built in among trees large and small. That was where I knew him. Among his shop tools and crossword puzzles. When out and about, his uniform was a suit with tie and hat. A grey fedora with dark grey band, and an inner lining so old that the plastic was crinkled and cracked. It wasn't so much formal as dignified. His speaking voice soft and low, I remember no cross word. His reading and singing voices, clear and strong always.

He mowed their 3 acres with an ancient steel dinosaur, red and roaring, breaking often. Curios of memories, rarely shared and uninteresting to youth -- wishing now that they had been. Lawrence Welk every Saturday night, Walt Disney on Sunday. The sounds of shuffled cards for endless solitaire, and screaming table saw. German rarely spoken.

On his final day, the greatest oak -- stories tall and centermost of three standing before his entrance door -- fell with a great boom. A final basso note -- a final keel laid.

The death rattle.

Skin gone waxy, muscles atrophied to strings. Even this slender man reduced so his skin hangs and sags, unable to shrink as much as he has. Hardened, crusty moles grow, like misshapen barnacles and darker, more mysterious parasitic accretions on the underside of a vessel too long at sea.

Hospice advises you, warns of potential delirium, pain, regret, shouting, anger, fright and struggles physical and emotional, grasping and fighting in the end to cling to life, the body involuntary refusing to let go, gasping for precious oxygen even when the will appears gone. They provide counseling, and devices to ease the passage—diapers, and drugs for pain and nausea--but cannot truly prepare you, not even for this peaceful descent.

Yes, he is confused now and then, and cries briefly at a random memory, but remains calm and resigned, quietly steadfast and self-disciplined unto his end more than ever you might imagine possible. The negative aspects of his quiet ego, the sometimes awkward self-consciousness and the reserve that could seem cold, have fallen away. He sighs and whispers simple, warm gratitude even to strange women, a different one every other day sent from hospice, for a sponge bath, brushed teeth and lotion rubbed on dry skin.

Yet the ego is there, if more unobtrusive than ever, powerful will overcoming. Cancer and decay, pain and fear will not win. He will decide, *has* decided, without doubts or regrets. He booked, and we joined him on, what he did not describe as one last ski trip, his cherished silent joy gliding through shimmering aspens with careful ease, tougher than ever before to acclimate to 8,000-plus feet and needing shorter days and longer afternoon naps. Now, he's put everything in order, passwords revealed, responsibilities gently, clearly delegated to those he continues to teach by his example. Short visits from each of us quietly share warm memories and final connections. A bit of Brubeck or Tjader on the cd player, but willpower overcomes even physical drives, he limits his ice chips to hasten his journey into the dark desert. Gone the careful hedonism, he will not eat. Never again ripe fruit in a bowl; chewy, warm bread; juicy tomatoes with a sprig of fresh, aromatic basil; or grilled meat with rich, dark wine.

Slowing breath descends into apnea, a slight gasp every 30 or so silently counted seconds. Once, twice, three times the lungs feebly pull after an aching long delay. Then the tolling goes to 60, 100, lost before 150. Eyes wide open, he's gone.

For RJR, 10/11/28-4/26/10

Ekko's Dialog

Ekko, anxious because she was running late, feared that Nikolas would get to the kitchen before she had a chance to make the coffee. He had never asked her to make the first pot, but she was sure he appreciated it and did not want to disappoint him. She was relieved to see that the pot was still in the dish drainer and no one had been there yet. As she was filling the coffee pot with water, she heard the quick pacing of the steps she knew were his. Before he rounded the corner, she called out, "Good morning, Nikolas, I'll have the coffee going in just a second!"

"Yes, thanks, good morning," he replied and went to look at the paper.

As she finished the coffee prep and turned on the machine, Ekko thought, He seemed a little peeved; I hope he isn't angry about the coffee not being ready. But maybe he was just preoccupied by something involving his family. I know he has problems with his children. But he is always so busy with work and I know his routine is so important to him, including his morning coffee. It can be so hard to figure out what he is really thinking because he keeps his thoughts to himself so much.

She tried, "It seems awfully cold out there for Spring, don't you think?"

Without looking up, he answered, "Yes, a good day to stay inside."

Encouraged, Ekko continued, "I just put away my sweaters and my winter coat. It takes me a good 3 hours every Fall and Spring to switch my clothes out, and I hate it when I do it too early for the weather change. I'm excited about this time of year, though, because I get to bring out my brighter clothes and it gives me an excuse to go out and buy new outfits, especially when the department stores hold their Spring sales. I think Nordstrom has their 50%-off special starting this weekend. In fact, I was just thinking" But then she noticed him moving to fill his coffee mug and she knew that this was a sign that the conversation was over, so she quickly finished, "Well, have a good day!" She wasn't sure, but it seemed as though his eyebrows were furrowed as he moved past her down the hall. She had tried studying his expressions when he wasn't looking, but she was afraid he had caught her staring a couple of times, so she was only able to catch a quick glance. But the more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that he did look annoyed as he left the kitchen.

After he moved on, she couldn't decide if she had bothered him somehow with her talk of clothes and sales. She knew he was quite well off financially, so perhaps he doesn't care about department store sales. She wondered if he thought she was petty or vain for fussing over her wardrobe but, after all, she was a woman and men don't understand the effort (and expense!) a woman must go through to keep up her appearance. She was attractive for her age, which she knew from the way other men looked at her. Not that she was trying to appeal to Nikolas, but she hoped that he would appreciate her effort. But that furrowed brow was nagging at her.

An hour later she checked on him. "I hope I organized things the way you like when I was straightening up this morning. I left the newspaper on the coffee table and I piled the magazines grouped together by month, and I wasn't quite sure what to do with the loose note papers, so I placed them all in a folder right in front of your chair" Nikolas cut her off, saying, "Yes, thanks Ekko, everything was fine; I need to focus on something right now, though."

Ekko quickly retreated. She hated it when he used that stern tone of voice, but she knew that meant he needed to be left alone. This confirmed for her that she was right about the look of concern or anger she detected in the kitchen earlier. *I know sometimes I don't make the coffee as strong as he likes, but surely that wouldn't bother him so much. I'll bet he thinks I misplaced something when I was organizing the papers, but I'm sure I didn't. Maybe I am worrying too much; it could be something else entirely. Still, for the past month, when he looks at me, he has not once smiled at me. I have been seeing that look a lot lately. I know I get worked up sometimes, though, and he'll really be mad at me if I don't take care of my own business. Anyway, I have plenty to do, so I had better get busy and try not to bother him until he talks to me.*

It was several hours later that Nikolas approached Ekko and said, "Look, Ekko, it's been a busy day and there are some things we need to change around here. I want to bring you up to speed, but I'm on my way out of town for the next couple of days and I'll be back on Tuesday. Let's catch up then. Have a good weekend." He was already on his way out and Ekko was still trying to process what he had said, but she could swear she had just seen a slight kind of smile, but just at the corners of his mouth.

So, here it starts, sitting in 8F on a ground hold, as usual. The last three flights have converted to a lucky upgrade situation so that wide, comfortable seats in the front of the plane were starting to feel pretty normal. But here I am back in coach waiting for the rest of the flight. Up and away, on with life. Anyway, I'm dozing and reading. Reading some and dozing some and just letting my head loll freely. I'm in the window seat because someone else made my reservation. The fresh-faced couple next to me is flirting and cooing and playing with their phones. Me, I'm just in the fantastic place between sleeping and carelessness. Somewhere between REM and trying not to snore. 8F has a potion on it that is trapping me tighter to the ground when I want to be on to the next adventure.

The announcement that we have been given four additional minutes of earth time startles me awake. The holding pen at the end of the runway looks like a fine place to read, now that dozing has been interrupted, so I reopen my book and take up again with my new friends: the judge, the hookers, a priest and the tightrope walker. They have intersected each other's lives as they have intersected mine: through a third-party imagination. Their lives are part of the cocoon that insulates me from the world at large, at least temporarily. My new friends are sharing their stories with me when we leave terre firma, as we betray the grip of gravity and float above row after parallel row of homes near the airport. So predictable, the ordered repetition of rectangle and square until the odd-angular street abruptly cuts across the geometry disturbing the symmetry. How long, I wonder, do they live there before the sound of takeoff or landing becomes as normal to their ears as the requisite blaring cab horns of Manhattan or the deep warning resonance of tug boats on Puget Sound? How long until the jet sounds of leaving and returning are ignored and the illusion of the ordered predictable life, like the streets that surround them, goes on?

It is later in the day so the shadows of the high rises on the Gold Coast are cast long across the shoreline and well out into the cold blue. The sparkle of the windows changing and shifting; the light clicking up the sides of the buildings as the plane angles further into the bright sky of afternoon summer. The fingers of shadows pay no attention whatsoever to the starboard side passenger in 8F staring with childlike awe for the countless time as distance widens between the planet and plane. The shadows don't care that they cast bright grey lines over Sunday afternoon bathers at Oak Street beach. The bathers, no doubt fully missing the irony of "Oak Street Beach" and the shadows coming not from oaks but from pillars of iron. The irony of iron. It makes me smile, this beach shadow irony. It makes me smile that I observe this, and process it, and it is lost on so many others.

The young couple next to me knows nothing of the shadows, the bathers or the irony. They do not see the sailboats on the lake or the light playing off the windows. They do not know my book bound friends who unfold their private life stories one at a time. The geometric street patterns are invisible to them. They are only aware of themselves and their personal space as defined by 8D and 8E. Self-absorption has sucked them so closely together they make me ache for my life mate who I have temporarily left behind.

And then I notice the moth. I notice the dead moth between the outer and inner window. The sealed window on the plane that is designed to safely carry me from the nasal welcoming of the Midwest to the hard edge of the East coast. The dead moth that is so clearly there, yet I am still compelled to slowly raise my hand and touch the Plexiglas to confirm that it is indeed *between* the panes and not easily flicked to the floor, out of my sightline. But how? Captured on a night of preventative maintenance window replacement? What bad luck. Or perhaps born to a life of travel somewhere in a construction hangar? Laid as larvae to emerge some weeks later on a lay-over between random cities? Suddenly your turn to grow up. The short happy life of a common month, but with an uncommon opportunity to see the world. So Pixar. So Nemo. So tragic to be born and die on an aircraft. Sometimes, I think to myself in that split second, sometimes I am the moth or the moth is me. Curiosity gets us into some tight spots that we can't seem to get out of as easily as we got in. Ugh, a life lesson in the dead moth? What would my new friends who only exist in the pages of the book on my lap say about the meaning of the moth captured between the panes next to seat 8F?

Jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge

He had heard somewhere, when he was younger, that every year, 26 people jump off the Golden Gate Bridge. He remembered thinking, *that's not very many*. The Golden Gate was the biggest, and certainly the most beautiful bridge he'd ever seen; and the view from it was spectacular. So when he heard that people jumped off it, he thought he understood why. Not why they jumped, but why they chose the Golden Gate to do it. But 26 ... it sounded to him like a ceiling, or a quota. Like for some reason, every year, 26, and only 26 people could make the jump. As if weather conditions somehow made conditions right for the jump only 26 times a year. Or as if the police or bridge authorities put their foot down each year and said, "Okay, no more than 26, then we're shuttin' her down!" so that when the magic number was reached, Mister 27 and the others, patiently waiting their turn, were instead turned away and sent back home. Or maybe, for more mysterious reasons, only 26 persons each year got the call: to get on the bus, catch a cab, and make their way on to the bridge, like some terminal migration of the elected few. And maybe they weren't intending to jump to their death at all. Some – the truly elect – actually survived. In fact, over the span of time, a total of 25 persons had survived the fall and been rescued from the chill dark swirling tides below.

He thought of this again when he met her. His had been a lifetime of diffidence, rescued occasionally by friendship and luck. Luck had struck again, but, as usual, it was a genie's curse: you got what you asked for... *exactly* what you asked for. In this case, it was an improbably young, beautiful woman. Clear blue eyes, sunshine smile, spectacular body. Who said (if she was to be believed) that she liked older men.

He had worked over all the possible angles in his mind. She was not well off nor well educated. In short, a different echelon than he had frequented of late. Well, let's be frank ... any frequenting he'd been doing in the past 20 years had been with his wife – now ex – and that had not been lately, nor ever very frequent for that matter. He of course suspected that she, the girl, had had it with her working class existence and was looking to him for a somewhat more comfortable sinecure. But that never quite proved out. She made no hints, requests or demands in the area of money, favors or position. She gave of herself freely, wonderfully, sweetly.

At first he had held back. After all, a lifetime of reserve does not easily find its way off the leash. And he could have been her father – from a high school shotgun wedding, perhaps, but still there was a difference, not only in their ages, but in their generations as well.

But, in his heart of hearts, he wanted very much to give himself over to this love, or whatever it was she professed. He *did* want it to be love. It looked like love, it felt like love. But if it *was* love, he feared a great defenestration from those bright eyes, because he knew, in his heart of hearts – and not just the weathered soul of an old cynic – that it could not last.

For one thing, she was not terribly faithful. At least she had not been when they first started their orbits around each other. However, since the time they had finally, really connected, she had not (she claimed) wanted anyone else. But she still had her many admirers, many much younger than he, whom she talked to and texted and occasionally ran into on the "girls' night out". The girls' night out was no quilting bee, nor even a cocktail-laced session of gossip and intrigue – dishing the dirt with the gals in a corner table of the local red-leather bar and grill. It was looking for men, looking to be looked at, hopefully to be desired, to be asked home.

At least, that's how he imagined it. He thought himself beyond such jealousies, but he couldn't even kid himself. He loved her and wanted her. She restoreth his soul, his cup runneth over. Surely her goodness and kindness would abide with him all the days of his life.

And so he found himself, more than midway across his life's span, hoping to be the one, the lucky one, to throw himself into the hands of fate and faith and be rescued by her from the inevitable fall.

Where Ya Wanta Go?

Night – a blinding snowstorm. An 18-wheeler barrels past as Jim, a reluctant hitchhiker, gets into the car of "Big" Bill Bates. Jim and Bill strike up a conversation as the wind howls outside. Bill asks Jim how he got out in the middle of nowhere and where he's headed.

Jim's hard luck story of getting his car stuck in a snow bank is continually interrupted by Bill's GPS device. The device – called the Gemini – has two distinct voices that give conflicting directions and begin to argue with each other.

Sick of loud bickering, Bill asks Jim if he wants to go downstairs for a drink or a game of pool or something. Jim doesn't understand what he's talking about. But Bill opens a hatch in the back seat and descends an echo-y staircase, beckoning Jim to follow.

Bill and Jim end up in a busy bar called "The Terminal". There are pool tables, a jazz band and an airport. Bill goes to the bar for some drinks while Jim bumps into a woman named Vera who's loaded down with luggage. As gate announcements and soft jazz play in the background, Jim strikes up a conversation with Vera.

Vera realizes her plane is about to take off and Jim helps her rush off with her bags towards the gate. As they continue a breathless conversation about where she's headed, we hear them run through several different environments – from a new-agey relaxation tunnel to a rainforest to a middle-eastern bazaar.

They make the gate just in time and while Vera hands in her ticket, Jim is accidentally bundled up with Vera's luggage into the cargo hold of the plane. It takes off and he notices he's not alone. Jim's Aunt Dorothy is also in the cargo hold – it's her favorite way to fly now that she's campaigning for state governor. She tests out one of her speeches on Jim as they head off into the wild blue yonder.

VOICES	SOUNDSCAPE
<p>Jim: Oh ... PLEASE stop. Please stop.</p> <p>Bill: Hop in partner.</p> <p>Jim: Oh, thank you!!! Sure glad you stopped.</p> <p>Bill: Let me turn up some heat for ya.</p> <p>GPS Voice 1: In one mile, take exit twenty-four.</p> <p>Jim: Freezing out there.</p> <p>GPS Voice 2: In one mile, keep straight.</p> <p>Bill: Y'know, I once saw a man – on a road just like this – standing straight up (thock!) frozen solid.</p> <p>Bill: Just like a statue of McKinley holding out his hand. (chuckles)</p> <p>GPS Voice 1: At exit twenty-four, bear right.</p> <p>GPS Voice 2: Go straight –</p> <p>GPS Voice 1: You're missing it!</p> <p>GPS Voice 2: No, go straight!</p> <p>GPS Voice 1: Great! You missed it. (beat) Recalculating.</p> <p>GPS Voice 2: Recalculate all you want; as usual, you just blew it!</p> <p>Jim: Shouldn't you have taken that ex ...</p>	<p>A howling snowstorm on a lonely highway. The sound of 18-wheeler barrels past.</p> <p>We cut to inside the cab. The driver, Big Bill Bates is singing along to a country tune on the radio.</p> <p>We cut to a hitch-hiker on the roadside. As the truck approaches Jim is pleading aloud ...</p> <p>Bill hits the air brakes, pulls over, and swings open the door.</p> <p>Jim climbs into the cab ... settles in.</p> <p>Knobs turn – the heater kicks on.</p> <p>In the background we hear GPS Device Voice 1 make an announcement.</p> <p>A second GPS Voice chimes in – the two men barely notice.</p> <p>A rising argument ensues between the two GPS voices</p> <p>The truck barrels past exit twenty-four.</p> <p>After a beat, Jim pipes in.</p>

<p>Bill: Ahh – don't pay them no mind. It's just the new Gemini GPS is all. Them two'll drive you nuts if you let 'em. "You two hush up"!</p> <p>Bill: You might want to head down to the concourse ... get ya' a hot cup'a'joe.</p> <p>Jim: Concourse?</p> <p>Bill: Yeah, just head down through that hatch.</p> <p>Jim: Open this?</p> <p>Jim: Wow. A hot drink sounds good.</p> <p>Maitre de: Good evening sir. Take your coat?</p> <p>Jim : Uh – sure ...</p> <p>Maitre de: Here's your coat check, sir.</p> <p>Jim: Sorry I don't have a tip...</p> <p>Maitre de: Perfectly alright. If you need gate information, it's right on those screens.</p> <p>Jim: Gate information?</p> <p>Vera: Oh, for heaven's sake.</p> <p>Jim: Oh, gosh – sorry! Let me – just...</p> <p>Vera: No – it's my fault – all these crazy bags. Did you happen to hear them call my flight?</p> <p>Jim: Uhhh - I'm not sure what's going ...</p> <p>Announcer: Final Call: Flight Twenty Four – Geronimo Falls. Gate 22 A.</p> <p>Vera: I'll never make it!</p> <p>Jim: Here let me help you with those...</p> <p>Which way to gate 22A?</p> <p>Attendant: Go through the tunnel. When you come out, go past the duck pond, make a right, then a left at the bazaar.</p>	<p>Bill bangs the dash board and then switches the unit off.</p> <p>Jim opens the hatch ... ambient noise from the lower level wafts up ...</p> <p>Jim's voice trails off as he descends a spiral staircase.</p> <p>Jim is taken aback as he enters the Terminal Bar – the place is moderately busy with a Jazz trio playing in the background.</p> <p>We hear Jim bump into a Woman named Vera. Lots of suitcases drop.</p> <p>A clattering of bags as the two set off running. Jim yells to an attendant standing nearby.</p>
--	---

<p>Jim: (under his breath) "Bizarre. You ain't kidding".</p> <p>Vera: I'm Vera.</p> <p>Jim: Jim.</p> <p>Vera: You seem like a nice guy.</p> <p>Jim: Ah, thanks. But this is all a little...</p> <p>Vera: I got divorced in Iceland, so I might still technically be married here.</p> <p>Jim: I think we go right here.</p> <p>Vera: But that doesn't mean I can't have a dinner out with a friend. How is dinner with a friend some kind of moral breach?</p> <p>Jim: Wow, bazaar.</p> <p>Vera: Oh, here it is.</p> <p>Airline Representative: Geronimo Falls?</p> <p>Vera: That's me.</p> <p>Airline Representative: Plane's still on the runway if you want to catch it.</p> <p>Vera: Thanks!</p> <p>Jim: Well, I guess this is goodbye!</p> <p>Baggage Handler: All these bags yours, Miss?!</p> <p>Vera: Yeah. Sorry I don't have a tip!</p> <p>Baggage Handler: That's alright!</p> <p>Jim: Hey, don't – I'm not luggage! I'm – hey!</p> <p>Jim: Hello?! Hey, let me out!</p> <p>Aunt Dorothy: Could you pipe down, please?</p>	<p>We hear Jim and Vera running through a large airport with lots of bags. Security announcements play, people order coffee, etc...in the background. Jim and Vera speak to each other breathlessly.</p> <p>Their voices reverberate as they enter the a moody, atmospheric environment tunnel.</p> <p>As they exit the tunnel we hear the sounds of a duck pond.</p> <p>The Sound Effects Change to a Middle Eastern Bazaar with snake charmers, camels and Shabaz, who's hawking his combination juicer, camel brander, and shoulder mounted missile defense system.</p> <p>A door opens onto a loud airport tarmac.</p> <p>We hear Jim and Vera running towards the whine of an engine. Everyone has to shout above it.</p> <p>Jim is swooped up in the rush.</p> <p>We hear the sound of the bags getting thrown into the cargo hold along with Jim.</p> <p>The cargo door is shut. Jim pounds on the door.</p>
--	---

Jim: Wait! Aunt Dorothy? What are you doing...?

Aunt Dorothy: Jimmie – is that you? You look thin!

Well, isn't this wonderful – maybe you can help me with my stump speech!

Jim: But I thought...

Aunt Dorothy: Oh, the charges were dropped – I can run for Governor again!

Jim: But what's going on here? Where are we going?

Aunt Dorothy: Oh, they can take you wherever you want to go. It's like magic!

Now sit back and listen. "The great William McKinley claimed he always knew he would one day be made President. And I stand here before you with the same unshakable conviction..."

Announcer: Great audio can take you anywhere. Where do you want to go?

Suddenly, another person is heard in the cargo hold with Jim – his Aunt Dorothy.

Dorothy turns on a tape recorder with some patriotic background music. She delivers her stump speech as we hear the jet take off into the sky.

Her voice fades out as the music becomes fuller.

2012



WFH visit to Mount Trouble

Walk

The brightness of early morning pierces the dusty cabin windows, calling the old man forth despite his headache and stiff joints. Much as he'd like to, he can sleep no more. Outside the door, his breath visible in the almost horizontal light coming through the trees, he shivers both with the cold and with the beauty and anticipation of a new day. He strides purposefully across the meadow, through dew-beaded grasses going to seed and tiny, new, intricate wildflowers of purple and yellow, believing a clear head, warmth and limberness, at least in relative terms, will result from a good walk.

Over the ridge, the fog descends, enshrouding the trees in a reversed and shifting penitence landscape. Dawn becomes dusky before he notices the changing light. His surroundings resist his mind's constant, almost pre-conscious attempts at completion, subaudition, comprehension. It's not the dizzying vertigo of skiing in the white-out of a blizzard, that intestine-gripping fear of falling into a deep ravine or crevasse, but disorienting nevertheless, as unexpected shapes loom out of the edges of reality, downed trees overrun by mushrooms, lichens and molds instead of an open field, an abandoned, overgrown, caved-in shack instead of a limpid pond.

He walks on, quietly, almost reverentially, one step, one foot, then the next, the other, carefully. It is as if the enclosing mist demands a different pace, a caution and a focus. Yet onward he continues, skirting the darkest, thickest overgrowths, carrying his burdens always.

Is walking mithridate, the simple primordial cure-all, or merely distraction from the inevitable? This is not his youthful, energetic achievement of 10 miles in under an hour in the golden hills, bettering himself, striving in order to beat others in the next race, always faster, measuring and living for his performance and ranking. Those days are gone, along with most of his right miniscus. Much as he might rue their passing, he knows the ephemeral to be fundamental and necessary, the fount of life, renewal and beauty. Now just keep moving, though, get outside, low impact exercise, such as it is, for his remaining days, which he knows have a finite, yet unknowable number.

For Wallace Stevens, perambulation tapped a fount of poetic transport. But for the old man, too often his mind warped to creative inspiration's antipode, trapped in storm of random thoughts that refuse to cohere into a timeless poem or even a tight, logical whole. He had to fight through them, push forward somehow. They lead instead, inevitably, into a seemingly endless repetition of a fractured fragment of some pop song (often one he thought had no redeeming value, or even one he'd never owned or liked), repeating, repeated, repeat, reap it. Keep going, move ahead, try to deflect it, it's not too late Focus. Walk on. Breathe. Stride. Breathe.

He tires even at this modest pace, but his blood finally begins to tingle in his bony fingers. His sinuses slowly drain. He returns to his den in the forest for other, remaining, small daily rituals, a bit of nourishment, coffee and defecation. Another day begun, another walk complete. Even if that is all and it's his last, he would go softly on.

April 28, 2012

The shriek of pain from his brother, five years younger, seemed worth it at first. He remembers the joy of anticipation as the perfectly packed, wet snowball left his hand and flew, quietly, toward Tommy who was rolling a base for his snowman. Johnny thought no one would know it was him because his hiding place behind the great fir tree was a secret. After Tommy ran crying inside, Johnny thought he was safe, but Johnny was surprised when Father appeared right away at the outskirts of the tree and called him out. He could tell the depth of his trouble when he saw Tommy, beside Father, with a bloody gash on his nose where his glasses usually rested. Now Johnny sits outside in a folding chair in front of the house, wearing nothing but his underpants, shivering, while neighborhood kids walk by laughing and the neighbors peer out their windows to watch the spectacle. The cool on his skin matches the cold voice Father used to prescribe Johnny's penance for the sin against his brother. He is so cold now, sitting there, not moving, not thinking, getting sleepy, his eyes closing, drifting off.

He opens his eyes and sees the fire has gone out again. He had been "off" again, not really sure of how long. It was still gray outside, but with the short winter daylight hours and constantly overcast skies it was impossible to guess what time it was. He had stopped winding the ship's clock over the mantle as soon as the winter came. It hurt his knees and hips too much to get up. Also, getting up meant he would have to take off the blankets that provided what little protection he had from the biting winds that whipped through gaps in the cottage walls during these storms. Yes, he was going to have to get up though to call the propane company. They had said he was eligible for a tank refill from their emergency assistance fund, but then he had been too proud to ask for help. Now that the gas fire was out, his sole source of winter heat, he would have no choice but to ask for assistance.

In the back yard, the roar of the diesel wood splitter is grating. Johnny watches Ingrid maneuvering the cut logs under the awl and splitting them into small pieces that will fit in the wood stove in the kitchen. He admires the way she makes efficient stacks of split wood, the way he used to do it. He is grateful for, and a bit envious of, her ten years of relative youth, but glad they are still partners in this chore that keeps the cottage comfortable in the winter. This, their late Fall routine, has flip-flopped so that now he simply brings the split wood into the bin by the kitchen stove while Ingrid continues her work by the machine. As they finish for the day Johnny brings Ingrid a double martini, with two olives, which they share on the bench where the cottage property drops away to the rocky beach below, the waves receding in the ebb tide. The gentle wash of the waves is hypnotic; Johnny thinks to say something important to Ingrid, but can't remember what it was, so he listens to the waves, savoring the moment, meditating, drifting off.

He opens his eyes again, shivers and remembers that the fire has gone out. He was going to call the propane company, but can't remember if he did. He knows he should get up, just to be sure, but the blankets are so comfortable and the cold of the cottage is so paralyzing. He looks up at their wedding picture on the mantle, seeing Ingrid in her youth. They both had thought she would bury him, but now he is left alone in their cottage, a widower. They had promised each other they would live there at the cottage forever, as long as Johnny could manage. The memory propels him up from the couch, looking for the phone by the window to call the propane company. Outside the window, Johnny sees the place where Ingrid waits for him.

"Which one to use?" he thought.

Morgan weighed two bricks in his hands, examining each one closely. One was correct for this spot in the wall, and the other one was inferior. It was important to get these things right.

Morgan Chapel was a builder, and an artist.
Certainly that's how HE saw himself.

Transforming the simple pile of bricks next to him into a sturdy structure was hard work. He didn't mind though - it was his love as well as his job. Practically his entire life had been spent in the assembly of one structure or another. He dreamed of new and better things to build, and often woke up with ideas for his next creation.

Morgan's project for today was to erect one side of a small house - a wall that was straight and strong. He had already laid the base, and made sure that it was stable enough to support the weight of the wall and the roof to come. He had already set aside more than enough bricks of the proper size. He placed each brick into its proper place.

Others saw only a wall; an arch; a tower - a collection of similar rectangles or squares, and did not appreciate the time and craftsmanship necessary for each one. Did not appreciate the planning and precision required for the wall to turn the corner; or to leave proper space for a window or door.

They did not understand how keeping a wall level over rising ground meant sometimes having to pull it down and start again. First one brick, and then another. Each one hand-picked and examined for size and color, to make sure that it would fit his vision of how the wall would look.

From time to time the boss walked by to check Morgan's progress. Complements were few - the best he usually got was a "That looks good" or "Very nice."

Most days he worked next to his friend Roberto - they acknowledged each other rarely, absorbed with their own work. During breaks, each appraised the other's efforts with a professional eye. They would sometimes work together to complete an especially big job, but that didn't always turn out well. They had different visions, and often wanted to use the same bricks. Roberto also had a habit that was a constant irritant to Morgan - he mixed the colors up. That was sacrilege to a purist like Morgan.

After hours of concentration, Morgan was able to step back and admire his labors. He had worked hard to get it just right, and was pleased. The boss said "Time to clean up now, Morgan. Put your things away."

So Morgan did what he always did. He broke his wall, and roof, and floor, into its smaller pieces, put them into the Lego bin, and went out to meet his mother.

60 Second Short for FX or other men's cable channels

Camera zooms into earth's atmosphere from deep space and ultimately centers on upturned face of Bill Kratt, standing in his driveway, looking up into the sky with a vacant stare while chewing gum with his mouth agape, looking like a classic mouth breather, but with his head cocked to one side in a thoughtful manner. As Bill's face comes into focus, Announcer says:

"Looking for answers?"

Camera leaps up from Bill's face, Google Earth style, and "lands" in front of the legendary Steve Celestini, standing in front of Raleigh Memorial Auditorium's column facade, who says in his best impersonation of The Simpsons' voice talent character Troy McClure:

"So was I. Know where I found them? In an all male book club. That's right, an all male book club. Hi there. My name is Steve Celestini, and I'm a Well Formed Head."

Steve starts walking at a 45 degree angle towards, but to the right of, the camera view as the camera pivots to follow and says:

"Now I know what you're thinking. An all male book club, Steve? "Well Formed Heads??" Could you BE more gay??"

Immediately switch to Chippendales type stage scene featuring topless [redacted] dancing with topless Chip Williams whose back is turned to camera as he looks over his shoulder at camera and spansk himself while hip gyrating. They're dancing in front of an all female audience, with the exception of Chris Lynch and JD Ice who are front center and screaming:

Lynch: "TAKE IT OFF BITCHES!!!"

Ice: "WOOOOOOOHOOOOOOO! GIMME A PIECE OF THE BIG ONE MOTHER F[BLEEP]R!!

Camera returns to Steve and follows as he walks bringing Raleigh Convention Center into background view while Steve says:

"That's not a book club. That's an aberration." Steve thoughtfully pauses while looking down at the ground, then looks back up at the camera and says, "But a book club doesn't have to be a touchy-feely bore either."

Immediately switch to the black and white TV studio setting for "Leave It to Beaver" in the Cleaver's classic 50s living room where Jim Cobb and Don Reynolds are sitting with Ward Cleaver who is dressed like he just got home from work, but hasn't donned his cardigan sweater yet. Jim and Don are clad in suits that are very similar to Ward's, but they're "colorized" and Ward is saying:

"I don't see how what I feel about this book matters, gentlemen. I don't know the author nor do I care to. Now then, shall we adjourn to the patio for a pipe? [Ward raises his voice and says ...] "June, dear, we'll take those drinks out back please."

Camera returns to Steve who is now standing in front of the Sir Walter Raleigh statue in front of the Raleigh Convention Center as locals mill about behind him. Steve continues:

"There's a better way. A well trod way. The Well Formed Heads way, to be exact. Well Formed Heads you ask? Who are they? Well, they're arguably the most successful mens book club in the country by any statistical measure, and they're headquartered right here in Raleigh, North Carolina. In fact, the Heads have been reading, drinking, meeting, drinking, eating and drinking for over 15 years now. That's right ... 15 years. What's the secret to their success?"

Switch to camera focused on headshot of Steve Storms being interviewed who answers the hanging question:

"No chicks. None. Absolutely the only way to have a fighting chance at club longevity." [Other Heads off camera but in the vicinity start snickering near the microphone, then Steve Storms continues somewhat flustered] "Come on! I'm serious! If our wives or daughters were here we'd be thinking about getting in their pants instead of really talking about the books!" [pause during loud guffaws off camera and Steve continues] "What?!?! I meant THE WIVES pants not the daughters!" [followed by uproarious guffaw from off camera]

Camera switches to interview shot with Joe Spagnardi who says, "You could say it's the book selections and lesbianly soulful discussions. You could say it's the food we cook so well for meetings. You could even say it's the green light cocktails and tip cups games. But in my humble opinion, it all comes down to four simple words" [Joe pauses for dramatic effect and then bellows with eyes bulging]: "FELLOWSHIP OF THE RABBITS!"

Camera switches to interview shot with Kevin Silva. Caption under Kevin's face reads "Kevin Silva: Local celebrity and retired member emeritus of The Well Formed Heads", as Kevin says: "The things I really loved, but ultimately the reasons I had to resign, were the pornography and the pot. And we aren't kidding when we call themselves a drinking club with a reading probl ..." [camera shakes off center and then cuts abruptly back to Steve Celestini who is now standing on the steps of the Raleigh Capitol building].

"Good friends, drinking, reading, good food, rabbits, drinking, pot, pornography, drinking and no chicks. Everything a man needs to find his [ahem] center. Yep. The Well Formed Heads have got it going on. Where do you sign up? You don't. If we wanted you here, you'd already be here. So, what is it the kids say these days? Oh yeah ... SUCK IT. In the meantime, we just wanted you to know what you were missing." [Steve turns his back to the camera, then slowly and deliberately turns back as he flips the middle finger to the camera with a half-way grin on his face, then winks and says] "Have a good day, mother f[bleep]rs."

She moved slowly. Cautiously feeling her way through the dimly lit corridor. She'd been walking towards the bluish glow forever, through a labyrinth of twists and turns. The light remained steadfast, always in front of her, a beacon casting just enough light to convince her to continue. When at last she reached the source of light, she was baffled to find a door.

Her eyes were drawn to intricate movement. Grotesque humanoid figures, squirming, writhing, alive in the door panels. She was unable to focus in the dim glow, the fresco before her undulating with unsettling movement that caused her to feel panic, rising like bile. Turning back was not an option...there was no light in the other direction, there was nothing. She drew nearer and and heard faint,muffled voices. The words were muddled, incomprehensible. The forms on the door jeered and hissed, mocking her.

She began to sob, great rivers of tears cascading over towering falls high in jagged snowcapped mountains. The sky was deep blue and the sun hurt her eyes as it reflected off the brilliant ivory snowpack. She shivered, freezing with cold. Her tears fast froze. She heard them crash at her feet, each sounding like a crack in the world. She felt her blood congeal and freeze in her veins. She screamed, but no sound was heard as she collapsed and broke into a thousand pieces of blue ice....

Music played. Beautiful melancholy music, played by a cosmic orchestra. The very start of time, the creation of the universe filled her ears. It was music like she had never heard before, but the dulcet harmony moved her deeply. She turned towards the celestial sounds and the blue glow again illuminated the door.

It was time. She reached for the knob, slowly turned it and pushed inward. She stepped inside and was immediately enveloped in utter darkness. The music changed to a dissonant barrage of shrieking cacophony. She blinked her eyes, saw nothing but ebony. Trying to move, memory began to return. Slowly, like a lifting fog, she recalled leaving work, walking to her car, anxious to get home, to see Len. Two men grabbed her, a pinprick of pain. After that, nothing. Nothing and then the labyrinth, the blue glow, the cold, the music, first beautiful and then horrific. The dream-like return to consciousness.

She tried to move, couldn't. Now fully awake, she realized she was bound, gagged and blindfolded. She shivered in the cold blackness. And thought about Len.

=====
"Turn that fucking shit off! Here he comes! He hates that fuckin' heavy metal crap! Me, I don't know what I hate worse! Your shit gives me migraines and his goddamn classical shit makes me want to fucking puke! Doesn't anybody listen to fuckin' normal music anymore?", asked Sorrento from the passenger seat. "And it's freezing in here. Turn down the AC Vinny! Fer fuck sakes". Putting up with Vinny's taste in music along with his hot blooded constitution was a small price for Sorrento to pay. Vinny was the best goddamn driver in the Tri-State area. And he was the boss's nephew.

Vinny dutifully ejected his 'Pungent Stench' CD, raised the temp back to 72 and inserted Carruzo's most current heavy rotation obsession: Barber's "Adagio for Strings".

Carruzo walked briskly towards the S63 AMG. An air of inevitability surrounded him. The placid tones of the Adagio met him as he opened the backdoor and slipped into the plush backseat leather. Not a hair was out of place. His skin shone with a healthy moist glow that belied his age. He was impeccably dressed in Armani. He could afford the finer things in life and made no effort to conceal that fact.

"So what about Dvorjak's woman"?, he asked gesturing with his thumb towards the trunk of the Benz. "That shit's gonna be wearing off. Bitch is probably conscious by now. Let's move", he commanded.

Carruzo listened closely to the viola and cello. He could visualize the interplay of the notes. The music calmed him and brought to mind the absolute perfection of his plan.

=====
Dvorjak couldn't wait to see her. He had made an important breakthrough in the investigation. He needed to fill her in. She needed to be careful. But first things first. Jenny was preparing his favorite meal. It had been a hard week, both so busy they had barely had time to talk. Everything was going to be fine. Tonight was not about business or Carruzo. It was time catch up. It was about them.

The crossing was difficult. The waves and wind were against us. We measured our slow progress against the long, low shoreline of an island off to our left: but each time we looked over, it seemed we had never moved. The people on the island went on about their business, paying no attention to our plunging paddles, cutting into the water in endless syncopation like the wings of grim birds in weary migration. Our own island was more distant, a drab green smudge on the darkening horizon ahead, seemingly unreachable in that wind and that sea.

When we finally landed, we dragged our boats up on the beach on the lee side of the island, where the dunes, covered with sea grape and low palmetto, blocked the wind and most of the spattering drops of rain. We sat with our backs against a sandbank, our legs splayed out before us. Someone brought food and a bottle and we took small sips. There were no questions about our passage or purpose. It was what had to be done when one found oneself on a distant caye needing to get back to one's own. No questions, no doubts.

As we sat, silent and resting, a tiny black bird with brilliant red marks on its sides came hopping slowly across the sand at our feet. We had never seen anything like it, and were sure it had been blown this far out to sea from the mountain jungles on the mainland to the west, before finding refuge on our island. It must have been tired and confused. It paused now and then and looked up at us, past fear or trepidation, venturing up next to us at times, as if looking for passage beyond. My brother had a small bowl of rice and tossed a few grains to the bird. It ignored the offering, but continued around us and into the vines behind us. We laughed and our mood lightened as the tide and daylight began to ebb.

Later, under the waning moon, I came back down to the beach and, after swimming in the dark waters, walked along the shoreline to dry, gazing at little specks of luminescence winking in the sand. There, among the detritus thrown up by the sea, I spotted the little black bird – a mere shadow huddled at the edge of the water. I bent down, noting again its utter lack of fear. It briefly tucked its head under its wing, then looked back up at me. I lay my hand upon the sand before it and, to my wonder, it gave a small, weak hop onto my palm. I gently closed my fingers and other hand around it so it wouldn't fall and, careful not to hold it too close, I stood and slowly, carefully carried it back to show my brother and the others.

They all gathered around to see the beautiful little creature, nesting in the warmth of my hand. The tiny bird showed no alarm but eventually raised its beak up to us, opening and closing it a few times, as if receiving a morsel from its mother. Then it lay back down and was still. It took me several seconds to realize that it had died, there in my hands.

Startled and confused, I bent down to lay it in the cold ashes of the dying fire, but my brother took it from me and, picking up the split husk of a large seedpod, walked down to the shoreline. He placed the bird inside the seed and launched it gently upon the water, where it rocked and bobbed and slowly headed out to sea along a path of light reflecting the distant glow of the western shore. We watched beyond the point we could no longer see.

The intoxicating smell of blooming daffodils outside the south entrance of Monroe Hall was like perfume that the world suddenly decided to spray on itself. Sun reflecting off of the rose windows in the old stone chapel seemed to intensify the brightness of the day and mix with the fragrance lifting from the golden daffodil-lined sidewalk. What a difference a day makes. The rain yesterday had made this same scene as bleak as anyone could imagine. But today...today was a post card with the addition of a scent that would make even the most ornery or jaded fall in love. The only remnants of yesterday's rain stood in low places where the brick walkways had settled, or the worn places in the steps that carried the memory of millions of passing feet, generations of feet, going to and fro from one side of campus to another.

A day like this should be celebrated. A day like this should be captured and bottled and shared. From the light filtering through the bare branches to the early blooms on the tulip bushes this was a day to be savored.

The wheels of her chair rolled briskly over the walkway and down the softly sloping ramp toward McCormick Street. A light breeze ruffled the pages that lay in her lap. These weren't just pages; these sheaves and the ink on them represented the solution to a problem that had vexed generations. She was the one who, through her own work and those who had done scraps of seemingly unrelated research before her, had ultimately found the solution. It occurred to her obliquely that there was a connection between her, the chair and the solution that lay almost randomly in her lap. Genius rarely recognizes itself and almost never can see its own reflection...or so her mentor frequently told her.

Across McCormick with the light change and up the z-shaped ramp on the other side of the street to the research building that functioned as a second home. Into the elevator and out on the fourth floor, down the softly lighted hallway to the research lab that helped produce the solution only she possessed today. Next week it would be sought by venture capital firms who had already expressed interest from research presented at conferences. She flashed back to Lexington and briefly smiled but did not allow the distraction to linger. Today, on this day that sparkled like a jewel and smelled like spring honey and lilacs and daffodils, on this day it belonged to her and to no one else.

Wilson Drimmel only knew of the solution by such an odd confluence of circumstances that even he could not believe his luck. His venture capital company had come late to the pre-bidding that would make Ahnya Redman not only famous in research circles but insanely wealthy all at the same time. Her work had identified just the parts, almost scraps, that so many had overlooked thereby allowing for a new combination that would change...well, everything. He had been late to the conference in Lexington having stayed up well into the night reminiscing with a former lab assistant. Who could have guessed that the very person he was supposed to meet later that day was the auburn haired beauty rolling peacefully, almost stealthily through the marble floored lobby. Since there was no one else around he asked her which way he should turn to find the Paddock Ballroom. Follow me was all she said, but the smile that accompanied those two words was more like an encyclopedia of invitations.

Drimmel had followed her and had listened to the presentation of her research. Like others present he knew the field and while interested in the research really wanted to hear the results that would make them all very wealthy. In all of his years at various Universities, in industry and now working for a venture capital group he had never met anyone quite like Ahnya. The fact that she was in a wheelchair only served to intensify her beauty. He had only slept with her a few times after the conference but that was enough to get access to the research documents on her computer and make the subtle changes that would allow his company to get a competitive patent should they not win the V.C. bidding war. And now, as he watched her roll into her lab through a high powered scope attached to a silenced sniper's rifle he knew that he would have to kill her.

Risk and Reward - A Cautionary Tale

This is a story an old friend shared with me about a risk he took and the reward he gained in a chance meeting with an odd fellow after a football game in Charlottesville. His experience changed my thinking about trust and the magnanimous generosity of strangers.

The game was lost and the stadium was clearing as my friend found an open bathroom at the far end of Scott Stadium. The day had taken its toll as he closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the painted cinder block above the urinal. Time passed. He let out a sigh as the bottle of Makers Mark he had finished during the football game poured out of him in an endless stream that bubbled in the white porcelain. The bathroom door squeaked open. He peeked with one eye to see little bearded man, no taller than 4 feet, dressed in green take the urinal next to him. He turned his head and his eyes opened wide as the guy broke out his equipment and begin to pee. My God, he thought that munchkin's dick nearly touched the ground.

As the little guy stepped back from the urinal holding himself with both hands, my friend was aghast. His dick was huge!

The Lilliputian glanced up and caught my friends stare. He smiled and spoke in a rich Irish brogue.

L: "Whatcha lookin' at Laddie?"

Caught and embarrassed my friend stuttered, "I'm sorry ... But I have never in my life seen a cock on a man that large."

The undersized man with an oversized chub gave his tree a shake and said ... "You mean this?"

F: "Yes"

L: "Well I'm a Leprechaun doncha know"

F: "What?"

L: "I am a leprechaun and this here comes with the package"

F: "You're a leprechaun. OK."

L: "Sooooo ye don't believe me, do ye?"

F: "No, I don't."

The little man put away his Louisville slugger and stroked his beard. "Well now, doncha know that if ye catch a leprechaun he is bound to grant you three wishes. An' since ye've caught me here in this little bathroom I am so obliged."

F: "Pardon me?"

L: "Ye get three wishes Laddie. Now what 'll it be?"

F: "What do you mean?"

L: "I mean I will grant you three wishes. They can be for anything ye like, money, women, cars boats... Doan waste my time... Laddie, What would ye like for your first wish?"

My friend thought he would humor the midget and play along. "OK, I want a million dollars"

L: "Jus' one million?"

F: "No.... Two million"

L: "Only two?"

F: "Alright, Fifty. Fifty Million dollars. I want fifty million dollars. In cash and I want it tax free"

L: "That's more like it, Laddie"

The odd little man dressed in green took out a pen and scribbled numbers on a scrap of paper. When he was done he handed it to my friend saying "Do ye see these numbers Laddie? They are the phone number, account number and password to a bank in Switzerland. Next Monday morning I want ye to call that bank and read them the numbers and password... Ye can then transfer \$50 million dollars to any place ye like. The money is yours to spend however ye like"

My friend was stunned and mumbled a "thank you"

The leprechaun continued, "Now what's yer second wish?"

F: "What" My friend asked still stunned as he looked up from the scrap of paper the leprechaun had given him.

L: "You get three wishes, what's your second wish?"

My friend came back into the conversation and said "I'm wealthy now." He paused to think. "So how about a beautiful woman?"

L: "What kind of woman?"

F: "What?"

L: "What kind of woman do ye want. Tall, short, big breasts, blonde hair? What would ye like?"

F: "Tall. No. Medium height, C cups and blonde hair. Like Marilyn Monroe."

L: "Is that all?"

F: "Yes.... No. She has to be nice.... doesn't talk too much ...and she has to cook and clean."

L: "Is that all?"

F: "Yes"

L: "OK laddie,... it's done. When you get home this evening and open the door to yer apartment ye will be greeted with a kiss from a beautiful young woman who looks the spitting image of Marilyn Monroe; blonde hair, red lips and big tits that point up to the ceiling. And yer apartment will be clean and there will be food on the table and she won't be sayin' nothin' but will be there to fill your every wish."

My friend was incredulous: "You're kidding?"

L: "No, I'm not kidding. The woman of yer dreams will be waiting for ye when you get home tonight. Now doan waste my time Laddie I must be goin'. What's yer third and final wish."

My friend was stupefied. There in the back hall of a football stadium he has a chance meeting with a magical Leprechaun who has made his dreams come true. He was at a loss for words.

Annoyed the Leprechaun asked again: "Laddie, I doan have all day. What's yer third and final wish?"

My friend came back to earth and spoke: "I don't know how to thank you for the gifts so far. But I have everything I want; money, a beautiful woman. Well I suppose there is one other thing I could use and that would be a cock as large as yours."

L: "What was that laddie?"

F: "As my third and final wish I want a dick at large as yours."

The Leprechaun shook his head and said, "I'm sorry laddie. I canna' do that."

F: "Why not. You said I could have anything thing I wished for. And I want a gun as large as yours."

L: "Well laddie ye see that's a "Special Circumstance"."

F: "What do you mean "Special Circumstance"?"

L: "In order for me to give ye a dick as large as mine, well ye would have to let me give it to ye in yer arse."

F: "What"

L: "If ye want to have a dick as large as mine ye have to let me fuck ye in the ass."

F: "Oh."

My friend thought to himself, that was indeed a "Special Circumstance"... So he scanned the empty bathroom. No one was around and the stadium was empty. He thought to himself, I've got plenty of money and a beautiful woman, I can do this. Without another thought he dropped his trousers and bent over putting his hands on his knees.

Quick as a whip the little man in a green suit broke out his spear and rammed it hard into my friend's behind. My friend let out a yelp. A tear formed in his eye as the leprechaun commenced to sawing away at his backside.

(stand up and read this part acting out the Leprechaun's hips thrusts and howling the friend's pain)

F: "Ohhhh ouch oooooh ow ow"

L: "So Laddie, what do ye do?"

F: "Ohhh .. owOhhh... I'm a lawyer."

The Leprechaun kept sawing away. "A lawyer eh? And what's yer name?"

F: "Ohhh ..My ow... My name is ...Ohhh.... My name is Chris"

L: "Ahhhh Chrrris. A fine christian name, An' how old are ye Chris?"

F: "oooooohFifty aaaaagggghhhh!

The Leprechaun kept stroking away.

L: "Fifty." He scolded "Fifty? Doncha know Laddie, yer a might OLD to be belevin' in Leprechauns.

A flinty grey sky hung over the corner of Leroy Street and Seventh Avenue. A twisted tangle of black and white words from yesterday's New York Times spun in the wind as it slowly tumbled down the avenue. A yellow cab pulled up to the cement curb and Blompkin emerged. With a furtive look at the clouds and the remains of the Times, he headed towards the door at 22. As he descended the stairs, he stooped to avoid hitting his bowler on the ceiling and entered a clean well-lighted place, beneath the streets of the village. As he entered, there was the familiar rumble of the Seventh Avenue express running along the west wall. From across the room, he spotted Thomas sitting in his usual spot at the bar. He waved a hand and Thomas returned the acknowledgement with a mere tilt of his chin as Blompkin made his way over.

"What's up with you --- you look down" said Thomas, "is it the death of the dirt farmer or your job prospects?" "Don't know. Could be bio-rhythms," said Blompkin. "You're not gonna drive the poor man crazy with all your specificity, are you?" "Absolutely --- it's the best part."

As the tender leaned over the bar in response to the anticipation in Blompkin's eyes, Blompkin said: "I'd like one of those Park martinis with Plymouth Gin and the Doolin dry Vermouth, fresh bottle of course, 70/30 mix, stirred, with a dash of orange bitters and a lemon twist." Without so much as a syllable of assent, the tender aimed his eyes at Thomas who responded with "Slug of Gin -- your move."

"You're not even going to bother to call your shot?" said Blompkin. "No," said Thomas. "Oh Thomas, don't you even care?" "Not in the slightest." "Tch, tch, if the old adage is true that a man will be judged by the company he keeps, I can see I am going to have to make a change." The drinks were mixed, stirred and in due time served up.

"Look at you --- You look like something that just walked out of a daguerreotype," said Thomas with the best jaundiced eye that he could summon. As if in response, Blompkin solemnly raised his cocktail, holding it as one might hold a chalice, and focused his complete attention on that first emersion. Before he closed his eyes in divine rapture, he momentarily flashed Thomas the merest twinkle of his eye through the top rim of his martini glass which had been hand-painted with an antiqued rose-colored salmon. "... And that," said Blompkin having fully devoured the first acknowledgement, "is why I come here ... for the artisan that still cares."

Before the gin made a beach head, Thomas decided to make a run. "Look, everyone acknowledges that you did a damn fine job on that last appointment, but you are going to have to let it go, and get on with it. And yes old man, the young Turks are out in force and opportunities like that are not growing on cypress trees. But your whole countenance, ... it reminds me of --- what's his name? --- that Brunel character you told me about. He was the most brilliant engineer of the Victorian era, designing the industrial age of bridges, tunnels, railroads and ocean-going steamships, but always with one foot set in the romantic era of bygone days. You've got that in you, you know, and it's not serving you well."

As if on cue, the tender stepped over and carelessly asked whether another round was in order. "Oh yes," said Blompkin, "my friend here fancies that I am sort of an engineer, and since he has nicely covered the land and sea, I will plunge forward to the next frontier --- flight. And I do believe that if we are going to contemplate flight, then we must have two wings."

The tender placed his unanimated gaze on Blompkin. In due course, Blompkin chattered: "Ah, right. Here's one I had over at the Broken Branch last night. 1 part Martin Miller's Gin, 1 part St. Germain, 1 part Lillet blanc, ½ part fresh squeezed lemon juice, 2 dashes of absinthe, garnish with a stemless cherry." "Jesus," said Thomas, "don't forget the hemlock." And then, "What the hell do they call *that* potion?" "I believe it's known by the moniker 'The Corpse Reviver'" said Blompkin with a wry grin. And then he added, "What. I do not jest. Doubt me? --- then ask our noble guide." "It's legit," said the tender, with all the indifference he could muster. And training his dull blank stare on Thomas, said: "and you sir?" "I'll have another slug of gin --- no fruit" said Thomas.

"And where were we Old Sport?" said Blompkin, "Oh right, Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806 – 1859) --- one of the most inspiring and compelling figures of the 19th Century. As you say, very much a man born into the old world age of wood and horse yet absolutely pivotal in the creation of the modern age of iron and steam. Project engineer for the first tunnel under the Thames, master engineer of the Great Western Railway, architect of the Clifton Suspension Bridge, and visionary of other ground-breaking projects too numerous to mention. And once the British countryside was dotted with his creations, he remained transfixed by the romantic notion to extend those railways and bridges to the greenness of America by way of the sea. Brunel designed three of the greatest ocean going steamships of their day. Each one twenty years ahead of its time. Respected by his peers, admired by the people and ultimately named one of the greatest Britons of all time." And with the tide of emotion cresting in his voice he could not resist adding, "And for all the earthly achievements of the great Brunel, the one I most admire was that he was able to shuffle off this mortal coil at the tender age of 51."

"Cut it right there" said Thomas with a steely hardness in his voice. "Finish that drink; we are moving on."

For a moment, a thick cinereal layer of clouds drifted in to fill the silent chasm between the two.

And then, like a suspension bridge slowly rising from the banks: "You are quite right dear Thomas" admitted Blompkin, quietly with downcast eyes, "I suppose I have to remain somewhat sensible about this whole affair." And then with marginally more energy, he continued, "Well, if we're going to crime scene two, then I absolutely insist that it be the Raven on Hudson." And like steel wheels slowly picking up steam, "And it's high time that we switch from London gin to Manhattans. It is, after all, getting close to the dinner hour. As the sun makes it way west, so shall we. And dammit, Thomas, if we get over there, don't embarrass me by not calling your shot. It's got to be Bulleit rye right out of the gate. It is, after all, *the* American frontier whiskey." For a moment, Blompkin cast an inquiring eye over at his old friend. "You know," uttered Thomas, "you are a complete an utter pain in my ass." And with a slinking smirk crawling over his face, Blompkin returned with: "Dinner, Manhattans, the Raven, my treat."

And despite the brave words, as Blompkin hoisted himself down off of his bar stool, he was powerless to stop the irrepressible sensation that he was falling towards the floor and beyond, without any wings, and without any will.

Thomas ambled down the lonely street, turned in at number 144 Greenwich Street/Avenue and climbed the well-worn wooden stairs to apartment No. 3. As he carried himself across the threshold, he thought of his friend Brompton. Where was he now? He noticed that the apartment had already been substantially cleaned out. Most of the furniture, housewares, and pictures were all gone. There was, however, one remaining picture leaning up against the wall with a note attached to the side. It was a portrait of the SS *Great Western* at sea. The note said, "for you, Uncle Thomas --- Emily." Thomas gazed at the great steamship and then out at the Hudson passing by in the view of the western facing windows. Down at the greenway that runs alongside the river, Thomas noticed a man calmly sitting and staring at the Hudson with a board smile on his face.

A cardboard box remained in the middle of the room. Thomas sat himself on the hard wood floor and slowly filtered contents of the box through his hands, and briefly immersed each item in to his mind. It was filled with things like ticket stubs, playbills, the schedule from last year's opera season at the Met, clips, subway tokens, and other personal effects. He sorted through a stack of papers and came across a draft of a Trust Agreement for the benefit of Emily. There was a careworn softback copy of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, dog-eared, with favorite passages marked. And then something caught Thomas' eye --- it was a writing in verse form. He laughed, silently and inwardly, as he read Brompton's explicit and exacting instructions to his reader. He did as Brompton directed.

<p><i>[Direction: To be read slowly, with a slight halt between each line, and a slightly longer pause between each verse. The voice should be filled with a quiet dignity.]</i></p> <p>I had a Mom; she loved and nurtured me She opened my mind's eye so that I could see But then she was gone, A loss so great I could not bear the thought of grace And I found myself in a most peculiar place</p> <p>I had a heart; I gave it readily The joy of love it stirred seemed so real to me Oh how it glowed, Oh how it faded without a trace And I found myself in a most peculiar place</p> <p>I have a son; I saw his nascency Don't see him now due to the distance between his mom and me As a young man he made choices, I so wanted to be one of his inner voices And I found myself in a most peculiar place</p>	<p>I had a craft; It was my identity With luthier hands I worked the spruce and mahogany It defined my life 'til my hands were knarled and fingers ached And I found myself in a most peculiar place</p> <p>I had my beliefs; my personal philosophy It seemed to serve me well in life's ascendancy But then hard times came It became vague, inchoate and effaced And I found myself in a most peculiar place</p> <p>I had a life; it ebbs away from me The time I had here expired all too rapidly A passing through a portal A fear of an unknown state And I found myself in a most peculiar place</p> <p>I have a soul; is it within me? Or is part of a timeless collective unity? Om. Om. And I find myself in a most peculiar place</p>
--	--

When he had finished, Thomas carefully folded up the paper and placed it back in the box. He walked past the portrait of Brunel's great ship, closed the door to the apartment and mindlessly descended the stairs lost in thought. He walked over to the Raven, leaned on the oak bar, and for the very first time in his life, called his shot.

THE LAST SLICE

Suddenly she notices how cold her feet are and realizes she had been standing there a long time. Looking down, she sees the hairs on her arms standing up, and the steam of her breath visible. It takes a moment to reconnect with *now*, and then she looks up and shuts the freezer door. How long was I standing there, she wonders. "Well," she says, "I'll wait until next year. It'll still be fine next year."

Thinking she should get her slippers to warm her feet, instead she sits and counts to remember how many years it has been now since Ma died. Over the years, it had been Ma's role, her custom, to make the birthday cake for everyone in the family. And what cakes they were! With so many layers they seemed to defy gravity, and so heavy with butter and eggs that Ma needed someone else to carry them to the table. Ma made bespoke cakes, tailoring everyone's favorite to order, even when it meant hours of labor in the kitchen and skimping on other groceries for the month in order to afford the ingredients. At the end, in her 80s, Ma still took her responsibility seriously, though it was increasingly a physical strain. The family truly appreciated her gifts as a baker, and that satisfied Ma and justified her labors.

So when Ma had died in her sleep, it seemed fitting that the family found a beautiful, three-layer, chocolate cake, glistening with chocolate icing, waiting in Ma's refrigerator. For the next day, Ma had been planning to come over to her house for the birthday party. The ingredients and baking supplies had still been on the counter in Ma's house the morning she died; evidence that making the cake was Ma's last act of love while she was alive, her last gift. Of course, no one had wanted to celebrate a birthday after that, but the whole family agreed Ma would have wanted them to enjoy that last cake. So, that night, they had sat around the table, had their family dinner, and brought out the cake. That night, it had seemed a strange mix of right and wrong to cut into the cake, but she had cut a slice for everyone according to their taste, smaller pieces for those intent on watching their waists and larger ones for those intent on eating as much as their stomachs could hold of Ma's rich gift. When all had their fill, she had carefully sliced the remaining cake into six hearty individual slices, tightly wrapped them in plastic wrap and then wrapped them again in a protective layer of foil before placing them in the freezer.

Of course, that had been far longer than six years ago. On the first anniversary of Ma's death, she had taken out one of the slices, thawed it and shared it in pieces with the family that night after dinner. To everyone's surprise, it tasted just about the same as ever. It had almost been like Ma was still with them! Trying to remember the years now, she thinks she recalls following the same new tradition on the second anniversary of Ma's death, but she can't remember when was the first year she decided to save the rest for the future. She remembers the year (she thinks the fifth anniversary) when there were still two pieces left, and she decided to stretch Ma's cake by cutting a piece with a bread knife while it was still frozen hard. It had worked like a charm and the other half was re-wrapped and put back in the freezer for another year. They only had half as much of Ma's cake to share that year, but as the years passed there were fewer of them in the house to share it, and she was happy just to have a small piece still to enjoy.

The next year she had tried the same trick with far less happy results. In her effort to slice what was already half a slice into a quarter slice, the knife slid suddenly to the side, sending her to an urgent care center to receive four stitches in her thumb. After that traumatic experience, she dared not slice the cake for – she thought – three years. During that interval, the last slice sat untouched in the freezer, except for the day it had been packed on dry ice while it was being moved to her new home, where it took its customary position in the back of the freezer in the new home.

Once she had arrived in her new home, each year she had unwrapped the last slice and mustered her courage to cut another small sliver off. What was left in the freezer now barely qualified as a 'sliver' and each year she considered eating the last sliver, but it never seemed right. Each year she stood in front of the freezer, remembering the birthday parties... remembering Ma mixing the flour, the eggs, milk, sugar, butter... remembering Ma showing her how to bake... remembering the taste of Ma's gifts....

And here she is, again, in front of the freezer, and realizes she is softly crying. "It'll be fine next year," she says to herself.

My Dearest Miss Lyda,

You may think the appearance of this letter in your saddle bag mysterious, as if placed there by a prairie specter. And while it's true that it took a nearly supernatural confluence of events to slip this missive therein without detection by yourself or, worse, another of your students, I can assure you that I am no ghost writer and my identity will reveal itself before you have finished reading this page. But I think it best to start by confessing that I find myself in the exquisitely uncomfortable and thrillingly foolish position of having fallen in love with my school marm.

I remember the day you came to our Nebraskan outpost from Boston as if it were yesterday. Indeed it was a mere two years ago (next week), but given the cataclysmic change wrought on my life's outlook since then, I could easily be convinced an eon or more had passed. The rumors regarding the reason for your arrival, a former love gone tragically wrong and the local hens' scarlet accusations about your city bred immorality, were inconsequential to me. I, quite innocently at first, saw only the chance to renew my education and move closer to an objective beaten into me, often literally, by my father since I was a young lad: to study at an eastern university, to learn the eccentricities of the law, and to bring that knowledge back to the prairie for the advancement of us all, both figuratively and financially. But nearly twenty-four months of cycling between the ecstasy of your physical presence in our ramshackle schoolhouse and the corresponding agony of separation during planting seasons have blossomed within me a new objective, one driven much more by the desires of my now pounding heart than by the hungers of my brain.

I promised that the mystery surrounding this letter would soon vanish, and here it shall. I am the eldest member of your class, at least I am now that Isaac Cohen took off and got himself killed in the employ of Robert E. Lee for Jefferson Davis. His poor wife, Sara, still talks about their Zionist marriage ceremony, especially the stomping of the linen concealed glass, as if she and the decedent daily celebrate the occasion together. I fear she will soon go mad if she hasn't already. If she does, she'll one day be in good company with Isaac. His rantings about individual state's rights and cultural heritage before he left to join the rebel cause made as much sense as his joining a force for the preservation of an institution so disconcertingly evil (slavery, of course) that he could never find himself able to spell the word for it correctly in our classroom. But that is irrelevant to this declaration, and your intellect being as keen as it is, you will have correctly surmised that the author of this letter and precocious confessor of his undying admiration for you is myself, Jedediah Springfield.

Now you may say that we cannot be, that you are too much more experienced in life, that I am too green in romantic affairs. In response I say there are but four winters between us and after ten more that difference will hardly seem significant. Why, Judge Peters is fifteen years older than Mrs. Peters, and the undertaker Mr. Parker is at least six years the junior of his betrothed, and yet each seems perfectly content with their respective arrangement. But here I am getting ahead of myself, assuming marriage in the town chapel before a proper courtship and proposal! Prithree, forgive me for my presumptions. These things may come in the proper course; in the meantime, I fervently hope that we can reach a sort of ... well, accommodation, so that I need not fear the coming planting season and consequent cessation of schoolwork as I do now; so that I can stop wondering if my father's weakness for hiding behind liquor runs in the family; and so that I can calm myself instead with the knowledge that lectures may become stories about your life, that rote learning may be transformed into caring advice, and that the subject of study will be not what is written or memorized, but what is etched into each other's very souls.

Dare I ask this of you? Apparently, I do. And I'll claim to have earned the right using language taught me by none other than you, Miss Lyda. You who revealed to me the power of introspection and reflection. You who challenged me to drill deep into the well of my thoughts and let them gush forth no matter the risk of condemnation by those less reflective. You whose unexpected appearance in this rugged place offers a divine explanation of why I was born in a backwater: in order to be standing right here, right now. So, with those lessons firmly grasped, I beg of you to reflect on this, my declaration of true love; to consider not just the differences between a city educated woman of substance and a maturing bumpkin trying to cast aside the shackles of a desperate farming life, but also the similarities in the way two people of such disparate origins may come to think of the world at large, and of how such a duet, combined in thought, action and dedication to each other, can grow immensely more than if apart.

Pending your reaction to what you have now read, I live in a state of suspension, as if time and life have halted, the sun frozen in its orbit and the only thing that can restart the heavens and me on our combined destiny is to know your response. I fully appreciate that I cannot expect you to see and feel things as I do, although nothing could possibly make me happier in this or any other world. All I ask is that you give me some insight into whether you could ever be favorably disposed to a life by my side. And all you have to do to share your reply is to get up from the desk where you now sit and walk outside to the hitching post in front of the schoolhouse. I'm standing there now, holding the reins of your gentle Molly, ready to take your hand and travel together into a future of learned bliss or, if it be your choice, help you onto your mount and wish you a life well lived 'ere I head north and eastward to attend my future studies, alone.

So, until such time as it takes for you to traverse the fifteen or so steps and pass through the door that now conspire to separate us, I remain ...

Your most devoted student, respectfully longing for so much more,

Jedediah Springfield

MY SCHOOL MARM [G]

[G][G][C][A][G][D][G]

[G] My dearest Miss Lyda
I'm [C] not a ghost writer
By the [G] end of this letter, you'll [D] know
My [G] identity
And my [C] blossoming [A] need
By the [G] time you're done [D] reading, all
[G] told

Since you came to our prairie
Left your flame unmarried
Book learning's a joyous to do
You've made me feel smarter
Made my heart to beat harder
Now I need to be honest with you

[INSTRUMENTAL TO [G][G][C][A][G][D][G]]

I'm the eldest in class
Since Ike Cohen broke the glass
And run off to join Robert E. Lee
He left a new wife
Give Jeff Davis his life
Though he never could spell slavery

By now you'd have guessed
That, yes ma'am, this is Jed
So prithe don't think me a fool
If I confess to thee
You're the only ... for me
And I'm waiting outside of yer school [G7]

All I [C] ask is a moment's
re[Am]flection
On these [C] thoughts you have taught
me to [Am] think
How I [C] live in a state of
sus[Am]pension
I can [C] guess what drove Daddy to [D]
drink
Because [G] I...., now know [C9] whyyyy
I was [G] born on this broken down
[C9]farm
Lyda [G] just take my hand
Look at [C] me ... I'm a [A] man
And I'm [G] destined ... to [D] love my
school [G] marm

(C) Stephen Celestini, 10/2/2010 & 3/23/2013

[INSTRUMENTAL TO [G][G][C][A][G][D][G]]

If you think I'm too young
Well, you're just 21
Four years won't seem nothing in ten
We can wait to get married
In a church on the prairie
But I can't wait to see you again

When they close the school house
For the planting time, how ...
On earth will I pass every day
Wondering what you are doing
No pupils for schooling
Would you miss me in some little way?
[G7]

All I [C] ask is a moment's
re[Am]flection
On these [C] thoughts you have taught
me to [Am] think
How I [C] live in a state of
sus[Am]pension
I can [C] guess what drove Daddy to
[D]drink
Because [G] I...., now know [C9] whyyyy
I was [G] born on this broken down
[C9]farm
Lyda [G] just take my hand
Look at [C] me ... I'm a [A] man
And I'm [G] destined ... to [D] love my
school [G] marm

[INSTRUMENTAL TO FULL VERSE]

[REPEAT BRIDGE/CHORUS]

Lyda [G] just take my hand
Look at [C] me ... I'm a [A] man
And I'm [G] destined ... to [D] love my
school [G] marm

[INSTRUMENTAL OUTRO TO
[G][G][C][A][G][D][G]]

“Before”

You can’t change yesterday and you can’t see tomorrow.

The Tuvan people of central Asia speak of looking forward to the past, and of the future being behind them. In their language, “*songgaar*” means both “go back” and “the future,” while “*burungaar*” means both “go forward” and “the past.”

A photograph appears alongside these definitions, in an article about saving lost languages, on pages 64 and 65 of the July 2012 issue of *National Geographic* magazine. It shows the upper body of a grey-haired man in the lower left of the frame. He is facing the camera and the reader but looking down, not meeting our eyes. He appears to be standing on the ground. His right arm reaches up and holds a support pole. The picture also contains a young child flying in the vast blue sky above and to the right of the older generation, strapped into the harness of a bungee-cord ride, legs bent with feet almost meeting sole to sole, arms spread to hold the ropes in an angelic pose. The child is also looking downward, but unlike the man, the child’s back is to us.

Does the Tuvan worldview strike you as backwards? Their realism reverses the Western perspective of moving ever forward into the bright future ahead. They traditionally live close to the land and animals, the horses they ride and sheep at cattle they tend. Tuvans see and remember the past, and acknowledge in their very language the unknowable nature of what’s coming. If the future were ahead of us, wouldn’t we be looking at it and able to see what it entails, what beasts might be stalking us, sneaking up behind to pounce upon us?

Imagine walking west while facing east, unable to see what might trip you or cause you to stumble. And what if technology allows you to do so moving ever faster, like sitting in a bullet train speeding into the sunset while facing the other way, watching the landscape of elongating shadows racing away from you? There is no omniscient conductor or engineer watching the approaching curves. We built the train and drive it blindly where tracks cannot yet exist. Yesterday is a blur, the lessons of the days before lost in haste and darkening distance. What looms tomorrow? I don’t know, because it’s behind my back, so I can’t see it.

Let’s return to the photograph. The man is a product of the nomadic life of the past, when his entire world consisted of his family’s *aal*, or encampment of yurts, moving from pasture to pasture. Today, the people live in a village, no longer continually on the move. He works the foreign bungee-cord ride at the fair all day, no time for riding with a horse he loved so. He’s weary of standing, over 50 years old, an elder in his community, without much more of the personal future he cannot see, and the past fading away in front of him. He does not understand the children surrounding him, who learn Russian and mathematics and science in the solid grey cinderblock village school.

Yet the child in the harness speaks Tuvan fluently, too, and reads it. From her new perspective, she peers inquisitively at everything before her, while looking downward humbly at the world as the man does. Next to the bungee-cord ride, a small group of young adults engage in traditional Tuvan throat-singing, accompanied by a horse-head fiddle. Their song evokes for both the man and the child the feeling of spiritual depth the Tuvans call *khei-at*, or “air horse.” The child soars upward, rebounds toward earth, springs upward again.

Cecilia, on Fire

The hills had been burning for days. Every night the sky glowed red and the whole city smelled of smoke. Fanning the flames were the hot Santa Ana winds, blowing in from the desert in their perennial cycle, changing everyone's mood, lighting everyone's fuse. Most years the Santa Ana's mind-altering voodoo was to be endured because, ultimately, it blew all the smog out to sea. One morning you'd wake up and look out and see snow-covered mountains standing above the buildings where, before, you could barely see the buildings. But during the fires, I'd wake up and find the skies dark crimson and gray, and everything covered with ash.

I can't remember how I got to Cecilia's apartment that night. I probably walked – down the Cahuenga Pass to Los Feliz [pron. "fee-lace"]. The smoke didn't really bother me. I already smoked. So when the air got too heavy, I just quit cigarettes. The cigarette money I spent on beer. In fact, I must have had a six pack with me, walking to Cecilia's.

Cecilia was a crazy Polish girl from Kentucky – the University of Transylvania – who claimed she was *Roma* – gypsy. She looked it. She was solid but built, and wore the tightest black jeans and the sharpest stiletto heels I'd ever dated. Her jet black hair was either pulled back tight in a ponytail, or flashed out around her heart-shaped face like electricity. She took no shit from anyone, but I didn't give her any. In the few short months we'd been dating, the \$2000 I'd managed to save from my \$12,000 a year job had been well-spent keeping us in gas, beer, cigarettes and punk rock clubs from Chinatown to Venice Beach. By the time the fires came, my means were even more modest but Cecilia was okay with that. Money was not something she worried about, so neither did I. In fact, she did not know from risk, and she led me by the hand through a lot of risky business in the year we dated.

When I got to Cecilia's apartment, her roommate was there – a tall, big-boned bitch who was dating a short, stocky, deep sea diver. How they met, I don't know. He was one of those hard helmet divers who worked for hours deep in the ocean darkness at the bottom of oil platforms. I liked him. He was kind of blue collar, but he had to have a sharp mind and a lot of guts – it was a death defying job. He once gave me a little blue cylinder, about the size of a fountain pen. "What is it?" I asked. "A *cauterizer*," he said, "in case you get cut down there. At those depths your blood will be squeezed out of you before they can get you up. You pop the top off like this," he demonstrated, "and

cauterize the wound." He pushed a little silver lever, which I'd thought was the pocket clip on the pen, and instantly the blunt, chisel-shaped nib glowed white hot. I could feel the heat of it two feet away.

Anyway, there was Barbara, the bitch, drinking vodka and Hawaiian Punch. Barbara "eschewed" beer, she had told me once, pleased to use the term with someone she thought would appreciate it. I did, but Cecilia didn't. Cecilia said Barbara didn't drink beer in a vain attempt to keep herself and her ass in the same room. Cecilia had a few other theories about her roommate, including why her boyfriend kept his diving helmet in her bedroom. But I liked Barbara. She reminded me of my aunt. "Hi," she said, smiling.

At that moment, Cecilia came in from the little balcony of their apartment, grabbed the six pack from me, opened two beers and threw the rest in the refrigerator. "Is this fucking weird or what," she asked in a vain attempt to sound rhetorical. We were not thoroughly jaded Angelinos at that point. All this – the fires, the hot winds, the sublime insanity that was L.A. – was still a strange arcade to us displaced southerners.

We walked outside and stood on the sidewalk, drinking beer and brushing flakes of falling ash from our hair, occasionally looking up at the red pulsing skies, which were like some hellish *aurora borealis*. I wanted to kiss Cecilia. I always wanted to kiss Cecilia, and she was usually amenable to that, especially if she had a beer. I put my arm over her shoulder. Barbara came slouching up behind us.

At that moment, a '69 Mustang came peeling around the corner, skidded across the street, and ran up onto the opposite sidewalk, straight into a fire hydrant. After a moment's hesitation, the water burst up into the air, a gushing column that topped out at about 20 feet before settling into a chugging fountain that washed over the hood and windshield of the car.

We looked around for the camera crew. Though we'd only lived in Hollywood less than a year, we were accustomed to the industry that operated around us, in the studios, on location... any time of the day or night. So this abrupt stunt, far from sending us into a panic, had all the earmarks of business as usual. It was not until the driver, bleeding, crawled out of the car, sprinted to the corner, and dove into the rear window of a passing Plymouth Fury, that I started to appreciate the surrealism of the situation.

The next thing I knew, Cecilia turned and threw her beer can in Barbara's face.

Six March/April 2013

Above him, sunshine poured through the last remnants of cloud, the air sweet with the scent of newly fallen rain. On the horizon, the battleship grey storm advanced relentlessly across the lake, eastward towards Michigan. The oppressive tropical heat was quickly returning, the rain storm winning the battle but not the war against the thick wet blanket of Gulf air that had been stationed over the Midwest for weeks. The thunderstorm had been brief but violent, the sudden transformation from calm to tempest back to calm jarring in its intensity. Thunder reverberated back across the water, the deep rumbles diminishing with each crash. The seagulls took back to wing, hoping for treats from sun worshippers who would soon return to the beach.

Len emerged from the doorway where he had sought shelter and continued his trek. The rain had provided Dvorjak a momentary respite from his conflicted thoughts. He was teetering on the edge of hope and despair - and at the moment despair's gravity was showing it's superior strength. His old friend Dr. Al Goldschmidt - Cook County's Chief Medical Examiner - had called about 20 minutes ago.

"Len...hang on. Listen....I hate to tell you this, but we got a Jane Doe brought in this morning, looks to be around Jen's size and weight. Found on the banks of the Sanitary and Ship Canal. The heat and carp and bugs have worked her over pretty good.....we're...ah... running the dentals now....we should know one way or the other within a couple of hours". Goldschmidt paused. There was nothing but silence at the other end of the line. "I just wanted to let you know. I am really sorry Len....I will get back to you with the ...". The line clicked dead.

Len couldn't wait "a couple of hours"....screw the dental I.D. She'd been missing for almost 2 weeks. He'd hung up on Goldschmidt and began running towards the Halstead St. L station before the storm hit. Len would know if it was her. He knew every inch of her, inside out. He'd catch the Blue Line, the morgue a few stops to the west. He prayed to unknown gods. "Please. Please.....I beg you.....please don't let this happen to me again."

It all flooded back, the eerie symmetry between now and then, transporting him back to that awful day so many years ago.... *They lifted the sheet. Before him on the stainless steel table lay the mutilated corpse of his 19 year old sister. Lucia was a stunning beauty. Her radiant soul and generous heart exceeded only by a transcendent physical perfection. The fucker hadn't touched her face, but the rest of her - oh sweet Jesus the rest of her....He wailed. Screamed in horror. He looked at his mother. Saw the light in her eyes go dark- the very first moment of her descent into madness. He imagined his mother's life force draining to the concrete floor, her shadow transformed into a pool of ink black blood. His father looked on hopelessly, weeping. Len had never seen his father cry. Release papers signed, they trudged home, alone together through the bitter December chill. Leningrad was bleak and stark and grey, all remnants of color rendered invisible.* Nothing was ever the same.

He waited for the train; sweating profusely on the platform as vaporous entrails of steam rose and enveloped him in a wet blanket. He choked back tears and tried in vain to regain his composure. Dvorjak's demons had been exhumed, still vital, years after being buried and left for dead. Lucia's murder had led Dvorjak to Chicago, to this very moment in time.

The silver CTA train emerged ghostlike from the dense ground fog and screeched to a stop. Len steeled himself as the doors shut behind him. Cool air from the overworked A/C unit washed over him. Len shivered at the sudden chill and wrapped himself in his own arms. He sat on the molded orange plastic seat and stared out the window, seeing nothing as the L took him to his stop.

Four Seconds in Turn Three by Chip Williams

When you lose control of your car going too fast in turn three at Summit Point Raceway events will transpire in slow motion. The front of your car will start to feel light as the rear starts coming around. If you try to stop the spin with steering it will have no effect. I know they told you in driving school to turn in the direction of the skid, but at 70 miles per hour in a big sweeping turn in a race prepared Porsche 944 it's not going to help you. In this slow motion world you have time to fix this so turn the wheel, it will have not stop on the impending spin. The tail continues to come around.

You look straight ahead as the scenery changes like the panorama shot in the movie *Gladiator* with Russell Crowe standing in the middle of the coliseum after defeating his opponents. So too does our view pan around the race track with no control over the images. You are no longer looking in the direction you are traveling but helplessly watch, as trees boulders and grass fly by while your car revolves at her discretion.

You are now staring across a short field into a bleacher full of spectators frozen by your innovative entry into your favorite turn at the track. It is in turn three at Summit Point Raceway where you can pass the new-bees and gain position over faster cars and better drivers. What new-bees don't know about turn three is that in the second half of the turn, from the apex to track out, the surface is inclined up ever so slightly. New-bees can't see the gentle hill as they approach but your tires feel it just enough to save you as you complete the turn. If you know this important piece of track trivia you can enter turn three too fast and with abandon like it was a banked NASCAR oval. You fly into the apex and as you start to slide sideways the gentle hill increases traction and holds you, leaving the new-bees in your rear view mirror wondering how you did that. Well that's how it is supposed to work. Right now you are in a slow motion spin, sliding sideways and facing a crowd in the bleachers at the apex of your favorite turn. This is where you remember crossing a small puddle of water just before you turned in that wet your tires ever so slightly and caused the evens at hand to develop as they are.

Now would be a good time to come out of the throttle. As you lift your red 10 ½ wide fireproof Sparko racing boot off the custom drilled aluminum accelerator and simultaneously press in the clutch, your bumblebee yellow race prepared Porsche 944 with big black vinyl numbers on both doors snaps half way around and you are back in real time looking straight into the eyes of the good fellow that was following you into your favorite turn.

This is the guy with the 350 horsepower 911 Porsche who you have been holding off for the last 2 laps. With twice your horsepower he is faster than you on the straights but you have a better suspension and walk away from him in the turns. Well, the last two laps you did. Now you are going backwards in turn three at 70 miles per hour and looking him straight in the eyes. Even though his face is covered by his Bell special application racing helmet, his eyes peak out and show a surprise unique to racing. It's a cross between, "Oh my God", "Shit" and "What the fuck is that asshole doing?" Note to reader, "that asshole" is you. I am not in his head but can only assume he is also wondering if you and he are going to bend some metal together very soon.

Now for the strange part. You notice two things happening that rarely occur during a Porsche club race. First you have stopped spinning half way around. Second, you are traveling backwards, in a turn in excess of a mile a minute. This is something they didn't prepare you for in racing school. What now?

Brakes? Brakes are rarely a good thing to use in a time of crisis when racing. Brakes takeaway all driver control of the car and send you skidding in whatever direction you were going when you applied them. Not a good idea in this situation.

Throttle? Your "go-to" peddle seems like a bad idea too. If you let out the clutch and add throttle while going backwards at this speed it will be very messy indeed; an exciting and memorable scene for the spectators in the bleachers but a difficult and expensive event for you. No one can predict where your car would go nor how much of the transmission would be left intact if you were to let out the clutch and add throttle whilst going backwards in a turn at 70 miles per hour.

Steering is the only driver input you have left. And while steering did little to help you at the beginning of this mess, you now envision that a quick flick of the wheel might actually "turn things around" and solve this stimulating problem you have gotten yourself into. "What the hell." You jerk the wheel sharply to the right.

Things start moving in slow motion again. The scenery is panning around you. The wild eyed driver in the silver 911 slowly disappears to your right out of peripheral view. You peer out over the upside down 28 stuck to the front hood of your 944 to see the old pine and hardwood forest on the outside of the turn. "Oh my. You really don't want to go over there."

The panoramic scenes continue to unfold. You continue to spin and after another half rotation you see the tail end of a red 944 you were chasing before all the spinning panoramic movie shit started. Time snaps back to normal and you notice he has increased his distance ahead you. Enough fooling around. Blip the throttle, let out the clutch then hard on power to set the suspension and stick the tires. Feel your Toyo Proxi RA-1 racing rubber grip the gentle hill just like you planned. You stare at the red tailed 944 and accelerate to close the gap.

Just ahead, turn four bends gently to the right then the track opens up and heads down a steep hill into turn five. You can catch that red tailed son-of-a-bitch and pass him if you don't brake before four and hold full throttle down the hill.

You feel your butt pucker as enter turn four with full throttle.

"Can't we stop now Simon?" "Quit complaining, Jamie - we took a break just a bit ago, and we've got to get to the campsite before dark."

It was a great day for a hike, but they were behind schedule. This trip was one that Jamie had been looking forward to for weeks – a last chance to get out in Nature with his best friends before Devin and Eric went off to college. They had all agreed to go back to the Timbers Wilderness Area where the group had so much fun last year, and spend several days exploring. School was out, Summer had started, and they were looking for one more 'adventure' together.

Physical exercise was not Jamie's favorite thing. He enjoyed being with his friends, but would have much rather been at home playing on his X-box. He was really a geek, and proud of that, mostly. As they walked with their large packs along the narrow trail, he thought how surprising it was that he, Simon and the other boys had stayed such close friends over the years. They had known each other as long as they could remember. They had played on the same teams and gone to camp as a group, but had developed different skills and interests.

Eric was going to State College, where he had gotten a baseball scholarship. A 3-sport athlete, we had not seen as much of him the past couple of years. Devin was looking forward to attending that private school over in Anderson. His parents moved last year to a bigger house. Simon would be lucky to get out of high school at all. He had been unable to keep himself out of trouble. The last time he got caught shoplifting he got sent to that special program – we all try to remember not to bring it up. Since Jamie started home-schooling, and with everything else going on, the guys were lucky to see each other every month or so, and texting wasn't the same.

They had come a long way since leaving the car that morning, and still had several miles to go. They had agreed to follow a different trail this time, along the wide stream to a waterfall and swimming hole they had read about in the guidebook. It would take all day to get there, especially with as many stops as they were making to rest, eat and take a leak. But as they walked the boys all told bad jokes, and lies about the girlfriends they didn't have. I guess we realized that all was likely to change soon.

The day had been warm, but there was a chill in the air as they walked along the river bank. The night would be cold, especially for June. It was already getting dark and they hadn't gotten to the falls yet. The stream continued its easy movement, now more heard than seen, a few yards to the left. They were just about to pull out their headlamps when Eric saw a light ahead. "That must be it" he said. "But someone is there ahead of us." With the blazing campfire as a guide, we walked closer. A solitary figure sat there, and welcomed us warmly. He was old, made to look positively ancient in the flickering firelight. In answer to our question he said that there were several clearings for tents, and gestured to one side. We found good spots just a stone's throw from the stream, and pitched camp in a rush. Tired and hungry, we boiled water to cook our bag meals and ate in silence. Refueled, we began to laugh more, and play with the fire. The old man had wandered off, but soon returned. He had also been traveling a long way, and was going back along our trail tomorrow. He said that he was looking for something particular, and couldn't stop until he found it.

The man had been fiddling with a stone in his hand, and asked if one of us knew much about rocks. I decided that three geology classes at the museum counted for something, so held out my hand. As he tossed the stone lightly, it glinted in the fire light. When I caught it, the static electricity surprised me. I would have dropped it, except that it clung to the skin like a balloon rubbed on a sweater. It came free when I pulled it off. "Interesting," the man said. "That didn't happen before." I offered it back to him. With a chuckle he said "no, its obviously attracted to you." After awhile he said goodnight, that he would probably see us in the morning, and retreated through the dark to the other side of the campsite. We were very tired, and soon followed to our tents.

I woke with a start, knowing that something had changed. Everything looked fine in my tent. I heard the rustling of the others getting up and dressing, but nothing else. Then I realized it was quiet – after drifting quickly to sleep with the constant sounds of the stream and nearby falls, their absence was now a clanging gong. We all came out of the tents at the same time, in various states of wake, but all aware of the strangeness. No campfire, no stream. The trees our packs had been strapped to were gone, but the packs lay on the ground. The only thing that had not changed was the old man, who was sitting on the same log where we had found him the night before. "Hello," he said, "and good morning. I hope that you slept well. You should pack up your things quickly, and I will buy you breakfast at the carnival just down the road." Looking around, we saw a dirt road a little ways off, and could hear the sounds of many people at a great distance. "What the fuck is going on here?!?" Said Eric, which is what we all were thinking. The man said "I am afraid that I owe you an explanation, and I promise it will be interesting. I will tell you on the way." "First, my name is Merlin."

The call came into Clearwater Station at 10:47 a.m. on Thursday August 16th. A fifty-four foot custom Bertram yacht was spotted in a "death spiral" three miles off the coast at the first deep water buoy marking the long narrow channel into Clearwater harbor. In Coast Guard parlance a death spiral means that something has happened and the auto pilot has not been touched for over four hours. The yacht puts itself into a long slow turn to starboard. The shrimper who reported the incident also mentioned a small dog on the bow. Tiny cargo for a two million dollar luxury yacht slowly turning in calm open seas miles from land.

Drew Holder was helping a friend reshape his prop after an unfortunate grounding on shallow oyster beds. The call from the Station sounded on his mobile phone like a fog horn. Then Holder heard this announcement, "Attention crew of CG 82656. Be advised of reported LAS (lost at sea), buoy one. Report immediately at Clearwater Station for rescue op." Being a newly minted non-com officer this was the call Holder had been waiting for. He dropped the Dremel he was using to grind out the gouges, slapped his buddy on the back and jumped in the Boston Whaler tied to his dock.

CG 82656 is a 38 foot fully equipped high-speed search and rescue class ship and part of the fleet at Clearwater Station, one of the largest and busiest Coast Guard stations in the country. Holder had joined the civilian volunteer arm of the Guard when he relocated to Florida three years earlier. The station Chief had immediately recognized his ability to operate and safely maneuver both his own boats and those he trained on for the Guard; he was encouraged to join the non-commissioned civilian team that makes up the majority of personnel at Clearwater. This would be Holder's first LAS mission and the Chief was eager to see how Holder would handle it.

With the crew assembled and the Coast Guard Air Station notified the team started to make a grid search plan for the former occupants of the Bertram. The beacon coming from the yacht's GPS indicated a Naples home location but as any crew knows that usually means squat; guys who buy toys like this typically don't know how to change the clocks let alone their home port GPS. But, with very little to go on they created a search grid from Naples north to buoy one; a distance of 139 nautical miles. Calculating drift due to tides and winds Holder knew his team and his colleagues in the air were searching for human dust specks on a wide blue canvas. The team left their dock at 2:06 p.m.

Their first stop was at the yacht to kill the engine, drop an anchor, rescue the dog and collect any information that would help with the search. Holder boarded the Bertram and discovered that two adults, from what he could tell about clothing, had recently been in residence. At least he knew approximately how many people he was looking for.

"CG 82656, this is air rescue 7. Be advised that we have spotted a floater, 13 miles southwest of your present location. We are not equipped for sea rescue. Please advise." Holder responded that he would travel to the coordinates provided. Even with near exact coordinates finding a body floating on the open ocean is a challenge. The bright sunlight reflecting off of the Gulf of Mexico helps hide any number of floating items. Not until his spotter on the upper bridge called "all stop" did Holder see the body. Near purple from exposure to sun and salt and fully nude, they pulled the woman from the sea and took her to the onboard medical facility. After 20 minutes of intravenous fluids the woman was able to say one important word: husband. Holder knew he had another floater somewhere out there. As this thought was passing through his mind the radio barked again: "CG 82656, air rescue 7. Second floater spotted 8 miles due south of your present location."

When the man on the upper bridge called out the second time on this day they knew it was likely a male. No one was surprised. He was alive but near purple in color and had jellyfish stings across his torso. He was also without clothes.

The ride back to Clearwater Station took nearly two hours at high speed. Ambulances were waiting for the couple who were near coma from exhaustion, dehydration and exposure. Not until the debrief two weeks later did Holder learn the reason for the separation of the owners from their yacht. And, it was summed up in a short sentence, "Seemed like a good idea to use the autopilot while we got naked and have sex on the swim platform....but it really sucks to watch your yacht motor away without you after slipping off." Money, Holder thought, never seems to buy good sense.

A Unified Theory, or the Zero Sum Game

There is balance in imbalance.

According to the Buddha, only a very, very few attain nirvana and pass beyond the mortal realm. The vast majority of us are not that good, and we must return, again and again and again. But we can move up the chain of life, from animal to human. Hence what has been called the population explosion, crowding the earth with now billions of men, women and children.

One of the reasons environmentalists decry human behavior is our encroachment on animal habitats and the resulting slaughter or just simple squeezing out of so many wild creatures. Once, bison thundered across the American plains in herds miles long and wide. A few, hardy, indigenous tribes killed one or two as the oceans of fur, horn and muscle rolled on. Then, European hunters arrived, with guns, and buffalo died, and more humans invaded, establishing isolated settlements that have now become sprawling metropolises, covering the land as far as the eye can see, much as the bison herds once did.

This chain of cause and effect are said to threaten our very existence with the potential collapse of the terrestrial ecological pyramid spiraling out of control disastrously. Honey bees die and the crops they pollinate fail. Global warming eliminates polar bear habitat, parches farmland and floods fertile coastal plains. And there are more of us every day.

Today, as reported on page 27 of the July 2013 edition of National Geographic magazine, Rabb's fringe-limbed tree frogs are all but gone. Rescued by environmentalist researchers in 2005 when an invasive fungus threatened to eliminate entire populations of amphibians in their native Panama, "[t]he last Rabb's—nicknamed Toughie by his caretakers—lives inside a biosecure shipping container" at the Atlanta Botanical Garden. "[H]e's fed a diet of crickets and is weighed weekly but otherwise touched sparingly. . . . Toughie is healthy . . . and very old." Toughie will die, despite his handlers best efforts and intentions to preserve the species.

When he does, another creature will be born, maybe an exhausted, underfed Somali 21-year-old's seventh child, tiny, wide-eyed, quiet and stoic, arriving prematurely without a cry on the packed dirt floor of a small hut in the midst of famine and drought; or maybe a wealthy bureaucrat's illegal, but fat, healthy and squalling third baby girl in the anti-septic white of a hospital in Shanghai.

In recent years, scientists seeped in Buddhist teachings have meditated over burgeoning extinction and population growth statistics derived from ongoing surveys and the fossil record. Armed with vast computing power, they have correlated and analyzed vast historical data sets, leading to the inescapable apodictic reality--the aggregate number of creatures of all species has remained virtually constant over the ages. Allowing for a transcendent bodhisattva or two per generation, the reduction in the numbers of other animals matches the increase in the human population. Reincarnation is a mathematical certainty.

But this balance has led to the imbalance of human overpopulation. Everyone agrees we are in our planet's climacteric, a critical phase of change some believe will be catastrophic and unavoidable. The thorough, unbiased sages who arithmetically proved reincarnation have also extrapolated myriad scenarios for our future. In scenarios some envision as our unstoppable manifest destiny, ever-accelerating technological advances allow humankind to expand our reach into the universe, where our continued proliferation matches massacres of native creatures on our new planetary homes. In other optimistic scenarios, technology combined with seismic shifts in human attitudes and philosophies away from greed toward sustainability provide balance in all populations here on Earth.

In what most of us would call the most dire scenarios, it seems that balance must be lost. We cannot physically escape as our ecosystems all completely collapse, leaving us virtually alone on a planet that cannot support us. What then, the end of time, rapture and the day of judgment? No, mankind might die out, but as we do, having ravaged the planet with our greed and myopia, our successors, the "lowest" and hardest creatures, microbes and insects, will survive and proliferate. They, we, cannot escape. The circle will continue, forever.

Words fell unheard, as if existing in an empty anechoic chamber. His movements were being directed by a man in a long white coat. He guided him towards a battered gray folding chair. Once sitting, he leaned over and placed his head deep into his hands. The man with the white coat had lips that continued to move with silent unrecognizable sounds, while with a gentle rhythm he patted and rubbed the seated man's back as if consoling a frightened animal or child.

The seated man raised his head and saw another man, also seated, peering directly back at him. That man's gaze bore into him. As he stared back he noticed a clear liquid running down the man's face. He saw the liquid drip off the man's chin. He felt something wet on his hand. He looked down at his hand in confusion. He raised his eyes and again peered at the man and realized that the man was crying. As if a switch had been flipped, he became aware that he was seeing his own reflection. He leapt from the chair and howled in anguish, suddenly emerging from his fugue state. He trembled and felt sick. He recognized his own voice screaming "NOOOOOOO.....No.....oh sweet Jesus....you can't be dead....please don't leave me....please God....NOOOO!!"

The man in the white coat pleaded. "Len....Len.....it's me! Everything's going to be OK! Listen to me man. Take a deep breath... breathe.....breathe.....Len, come on man, get a grip!" Len collapsed back into the chair and sobbed uncontrollably. Dr. Al Goldschmidt, Cook County Coroner, gently prodded Len to his feet. "Come on Len, let's get out of here. I'll help you fill out the paperwork. We need to make arrangements for the body. Then I will take you home."

=====

He transitioned from the seething hot August sunlight into the welcoming cool darkness of the Caravan Lounge. Other than Artie at his usual perch behind the bar, the place was doing its usual booming mid week/early afternoon business - 2 guys sitting in a back booth nursing beers, and a young couple on bar stools who seemed much more interested in their cell phones than in each other. Artie saw Len come in and then stop by the front door, seemingly unsure of his next move. "Hey Len, come have a seat". Len walked towards the bar with an awkward, slow gait and stood motionless before him. He was at least 20 pounds lighter than before. His eyes were gaunt and bloodshot, his hair wild and unkempt, his clothes dirty. Artie gazed at his old friend, shuddered inwardly and thought to himself. "*Jesus H. Christ, he looks like absolute shit. He looks like one of those fucking Night of the Living Dead zombies. Fuckin' A....*" "Can I get you a drink Len?" "Sure, bourbon". "I don't know what to say Lennon, I can't fucking believe it. I am so fucking sorry. I am really glad you came in...it's really good to see you. I guess you didn't have no service or nuthin' for her?" Len said nothing. He looked up at Artie with eyes that seemed devoid of life. "You need to start taking care of yourself. You look like shit Len." A loud silence, then finally: "I am shit Artie. I am a piece of stinking rotting putrid human shit. And every thing I touch turns to shit. Everything! I am a fucking living and breathing curse. Everybody I have ever cared about, ever loved, ever cherished is dead. DEAD!! My whole family and now Jen". Len broke down and began to sob, his body heaving. "After Jenny brought me back from the fucking darkness and taught me how to live and love again. What a fucking joke. What a piece of shit I am. I KILLED her Artie. If it wasn't for me, she would still be alive. I am just pure shit."

"Lennon, I am here. I am not dead. You still have me. Anything you need, I am here for you...don't ever forget that. Don't give up. You are NOT a piece of shit." Len labored to regain his composure, He looked at Artie and said, "Thanks Artie, you have been a great friend. I will never forget that. Always know that you have done way more for me than I deserve. You're about all I have left. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you." Artie let the words sink in and said, "You know I don't drink on the job Len, but this is a special case. For you, I'll make an exception. You and I need to talk, get shit faced and talk some more. I'll call Johnny and tell him his shift starts in 20 minutes".

Artie made the phone call and then grabbed a bottle of Stoli from the freezer, walked from behind the bar and set the bottle down at "Len's booth". He got 2 shot glasses and a bucket of ice. He joined Len, poured the drinks and they began to talk. 5 hours later, the bottle was empty.

=====

Len sat at his kitchen table and watched the room spin. He poured another shot of Stoli, inhaling deeply on his Marlboro. Artie had walked him home. They had stopped for a couple of Vienna dogs and some bottled water. But these countermeasures had had little impact. Len was still stone cold drunk and figured what the fuck....

He thought about his life and about his evening with Artie. Artie had always been a great listener, but tonight he had been unusually vocal, dishing out advice and opinion. A regular therapist fer fuck sakes. Artie had told him that he needed to get back on the horse...he had done it before...get back on the O'Connor/Carruzo case and nail the fucker or fuckers who had killed Jen. Solve the big case and bring em all down! Len relished the prospect of revenge and justice. Artie really had made a strong case. Len lit another cigarette and downed a shot of vodka.

His thoughts came back to Jenny, her decomposing body lying on the stainless steel coroner's table. The image haunted him, the last in the never ending string of horrors that was his life. He remembered discovering his sister's mutilated body. He thought of his parents. His mother -gone mad with grief - killing his father and then turning the gun on herself. A man could only take so much, could only muster so much strength, had only so much resolve.

He thought again of Jen and finally - his mother - as he picked up his service revolver.

more commonly, however, a psychic attack, if of sufficient force to make itself noticeable at all, will be pre-saged by certain characteristic dreams. Such dreams may include a heavy feeling upon the groin, as if a small sweaty village boy is sitting on the sleeper. If this sense of weight is present, it is certain that the attack emanates locally, possibly from one's disgruntled mistress, for the weight is due to a concentration of bodily ectoplasm. A great deal of research has been done upon the nature of this tangibly sticky substance. The reader is referred to the experiments conducted by Lattimer with the Scone Circle Society in Belfast, and by the notorious Eva du U___ with certain adepts in Paris. It should be noted that Lattimer eventually drank himself to death for no logical reason, and Madame du U___ soon took to wearing men's clothing.

Evil odours are another manifestation of psychic attacks. The characteristic smell is that of certain cheeses aged in the Combalau caves of Roquefort-sur-Sacrebleu (so tasty with biscuits!), which comes and goes capriciously. But while it is manifesting, there is no doubt whatever about it, and anyone present can smell it, whether they are psychic or not. I have also known a frightful stench akin to the odour of women's gymnasiums to arise when the ritual of the Elementary Earth Femme is being incorrectly performed.

Another curious phenomenon is the precipitation of slime. The evidence is often as if an army of slugs has been marching in parade formation. Sometimes a broad smear is found in bathtubs and porcelain commodes; at other times, distinct footprints of minute size are found spattered across dressing room mirrors. A particularly noxious slime was found one morning hanging in small mucous-like globules from the chandeliers illuminating the bedroom of Lord Q___ after a night of drunken and rather violent quadrilles. (I did not actually see this myself, but I have it on first-hand information from a small village boy who claimed he was at that time the personal valet of a highly respected member of the Royal Family (who shall remain nameless)).

I myself once had a singularly nasty experience in which I accidentally gave form to a were-creature. Unpleasant as the incident was, it shows what may happen when a sufficiently undisciplined but overly stimulated neophyte finds himself handling occult forces. I was lying on my chaise lounge one afternoon perusing the special gazette I receive quarterly from Paris. Someone had apparently stolen into my

boudoir and spoiled a page of the latest issue of *Mon Prédilections*, and I was sorely put out. I was brooding over my resentment, and while so brooding, drifted towards the borders of sleep. As I did, the ancient Nordic myths rose before me, and I thought of Benddick, the were-hound of the North. Immediately I felt a curious drawing-out sensation from my groin. Suddenly, there materialised beside me on the sofa a large, rather indolent dachshund, with a well-formed ectoplasmic head. Like my former wife, the spectre was spongy and colourless and, like her, it had a great deal of heft. I could distinctly feel its back pressing against me, as a small sweaty village boy might. I knew nothing then about the art of making ectoplasmic elongations, but it was clear I had accidentally stumbled upon the proper formula: the brooding petulance, highly charged with emotion, the invocation of impropriety, and the condition between sleeping and waking in which ectoplasm readily extrudes. I was horrified at what I had done, and knew I had put myself in a tight corner. Everything now depended upon my keeping my head. I had had enough experience of practical occultism to know that the thing I had called into visible manifestation could be controlled by my will alone ... provided I did not panic. But if I lost my nerve and it got the upper hand, I had a veritable Frankenfurter monster to cope with!

I stirred slightly. The creature obviously objected to being disturbed, for it turned its long snout towards me over its shoulder and snarled, showing its teeth. I had now "got its wind up" properly, and I knew that everything depended on my getting the upper hand and keeping it firmly grasped, because the longer the Thing remained in existence, the longer and stronger it would get, and the more difficult to dispel. The only thing I could do now was to join in battle! I gave it a firm poke in its hairy amorphous ribs and said to it out loud: "If you can't behave yourself, you shall have to go on the floor!" With that I pushed it off the sofa, and the wretched Beast disappeared!

I was reaching for a congratulatory aperitif on the sideboard when suddenly there arose an evil odour ... of slime! My bowels were gripped by an overwhelming urge to evacuate as the Creature suddenly reappeared, growling, and began to urinate on my best Persian, which I had bought in the old slave markets of Constantinople while on Cook's tour. Needless to say, I was livid! I dropped

April 16, 1899
Jedediah Springfield, Esquire
Professor of Law, New York University Law School

Dear Professor Springfield,

Or should I address you as Judge Springfield? I am well aware of your ten years served as a Federal Circuit Court justice, but as you have moved on to an academic position, I thought it best to address you as such. You must be wondering who I am and how I came upon the nerve to write you in this uninvited manner. My name is Lyda Ellsbury, but you knew me as Miss Lyda, your school teacher, until approximately 35 years ago when you departed your family's homestead in Nebraska to attend university. Do you remember? I should not be surprised if you have made a conscious effort to forget our time together. I live in Boston now, back in my family's home of several generations. You may recall it was here I left when I first moved west.

Coincidentally, I saw you here in Boston, in person, from a distance, very recently. Your contributions to our society as both a judge and law professor have been well documented by the press and I have happened upon quite a number of articles detailing your accomplishments over the years. A couple of weeks ago, I saw an announcement in The Boston Globe indicating you were to be a guest lecturer for one evening at the request of the Harvard Law School, with limited seating available for the public at large. I managed through a family acquaintance to make myself invited and attended the event which, as you know, took place just the day before yesterday. I was very moved by the passion and skill of your oratory, Professor, but even more powerful was the impact of physically seeing the man you have become; and although you did not see or have occasion to acknowledge me I confess that the sight of you caused a thousand memories, both painful and pleasurable, to collide like runaway steam trains in my mind. It has taken until just this hour for the detritus of all those memories to finish pouring out of my eyes and I fear the stream of them will be unleashed anew at any moment.

It is at best precocious and most likely brazenly presumptuous of me to tell you all of this, but I remember very clearly another letter with a similar, brave dollop or two of presumption folded therein, written to me, instead of by me, and which I have carried as both a great burden and a treasured possession for three and a half decades. And so it is that now I have determined to will myself into responding to that letter with this one, and I pray that you will see fit to complete its reading even as I beg forgiveness if any part of it offends you, for that is surely not my intent.

Professor, or, if you will permit me, Jedediah, I painfully recall the day I turned you away in front of that weathered schoolhouse. I remember very clearly the expression on your face. So brave, but so hastily drained of color by the exhortation of a hope that I know from your letter was very dear to you. As it was to me. The recurring image of that expression has haunted me these many years. In truth, I was heart broken when you left, but given my fear of bringing scandal upon you I could not risk being with you. So I let you go, and had no one in that gossip addled town to seek comfort from except dear Old Molly, my horse, who loved you dearly. Poor Molly succumbed the winter after you left. The townsfolk said the winter was just too harsh for her, but I know she died at least in part of a broken heart, she missed your kindness that much.

I left Nebraska for Denver soon after that. By then I'd heard from your family that you were very much enjoying your studies in Philadelphia and I was happy to know that indeed, but little else was left in Nebraska to make me happy so I responded to an advertisement I had seen promising good jobs to school teachers in Denver. That promise was not kept and after a couple months in that beautiful but dangerous place I despaired that I would ever find another home. My desperation led me one day to a disreputable part of town where I was considering taking a job at a saloon. There I happened upon a woman in the streets who was very ill and had been savagely beaten, especially about her face. Still, I could tell that she was a natural beauty and something in her eyes, some spark of fire, ignited a passion to help her. I took her back to my boarding house and begged the owner to let me nurse her there, which she allowed out of the pretense of compliance with the cross over the hearth but not with the contents of her own miserable character.

My new friend's name is, or, I should say, was, Delilah. As soon as she was well enough we were both evicted from the boarding house. We made a pact on that miserable day to support each other until such time as we were rich or dead or both. I'm sure you'll be shocked to hear that we kept our mutual promise by starting and eventually owning outright the most successful bordello west of the Mississippi. I managed the books and front of house while Delilah recruited and managed the "Ladies of the Night". We created, despite what you must be thinking, a most respectable place, one that was regularly patronized by pillars of the Denver community, and who appreciated our policy of absolute discretion as to their identities. Our success continued for almost 30 years, until dearest Delilah passed away two winters ago. Not long after that, I heard that the man whose deprived nature drove me to Nebraska in the first place, my husband, had passed away as well, so I felt it safe to return to Boston and what remained of my family. Yes, dear Jed, I was a married woman when I met you, and that was the scandal I sought to protect you from when you so sweetly bared your heart to me. And I would happily have bared mine to you as well and traveled with you to Philadelphia if not for fear that our eventual legal union and proximity to my former hometown would allow that viper to find me and drag me back to his lair. And worse, his anger and influence with members of the business and legal community in the Northeastern states were both substantial; thus I feared his retribution towards me would harm your youthful and promising prospects as well. I was then, and remain to this day, very sorry for the both of us.

If you haven't already tossed this missive into your fireplace, then I have a gentle request: I should very much like to see you and talk to you again. You now have my address. Either way, I remain

Respectfully and fondly yours,
Lyda Ellsbury

He was young, a recently graduated sommelier from a school in Santo Domingo, the home of his mother's family, Castillo. While pouring the wine at a small but elegant dining establishment he imparted this story to my companions who were visiting our Punta Cana seaside home in the winter months, about his station in life and how he came to be in this place at this time:

My father, he told us, was born in a small industrial town not far from Madrid that was well known for a specific type of manufacturing. It was also home to a number of casinos where workers and tourists alike gambled at games of chance. My father had a particular affection for card games given his keen mind and ability to remember many of the cards played. He won far more than he lost and started to establish quite a small fortune, but also a reputation. Games spanned days and, as is usually the case, would move away from the confines of the casino to private homes and hotel rooms rented by visitors to our town. After one of these particularly long games, after my father had missed work again at the café where he was head waiter, he was fired by the owner. Papa took it as a sign that life should change so he began to sell his possessions so that he might move quickly at the right time. But one more game was formed on the night before he was scheduled to leave for a new life in the French coastal town of Eze. By the time the sun rose there were only two men left at the table: my father and an American. They were evenly matched but in the end the American was out of money and luck. His only remaining item of value was the Rolex Oyster with a gleaming blue face on his wrist. The American asked my Father "would you take a check for the monies owed; certainly two gambling men could trust each other, si?" "No" my father said smiling, "but I will take your watch and we can part as friends."

The move to Eze proved to be both wonderful and ultimately tragic. It turns out that the coast of France has a number of gambling houses that attract the international yachting crowd and my young handsome father quickly fell in with them. Single and well-bred he attracted men who liked gambling and women who liked his winnings. Life was as sparkling as the waters and beaches of the French Riviera...that is until his luck turned. You see, my Papa had a gambling problem that would forever be his downfall. But, I get ahead of myself. During the day he would sail and fish with wealthy visitors, at night he would join them for card games on their yachts or in the private rooms of the seaside casinos. When he started to lose he refused to believe that it was anything more than a run of bad luck. But by the end of the summer season, after all of the yachts left the harbor he was broke. Remembering his final winning night a number of years before in Madrid, my Papa went to the only casino that would still let him in to try and make some money to leave town. He had sold his car that very day and turned that money into chips. Again the game went all night and into the next day but this time it was he who was relieved of the Rolex with the blue face, this time to a Dominican sugar baron visiting his mistress in France.

The Dominican could tell that besides the clothing on his back, he had just taken the last valuable possession my father owned. "What is your line of work?", he asked my Father. "A waiter is what I have been most recently, but that was a number of years ago." And so, Senor Castillo hired my father right there to travel back to his homeland, The Dominican Republic, to be his personal butler. They became close friends. My father met and married a beautiful local woman in Santo Domingo, my mother, and worked for Senor Castillo until the day he died.

"More wine" he asked? Certainly the table said with gusto after just hearing a fantastic story. And as he poured the wine no one missed the gleaming gold Rolex with the blue face that peeked, ever so subtly, from the sleeve of his starched white shirt.

Winding through Virginia forest, back roads. Plantations passed, we never stopped
Rivers bridged and crossed - Mataponi, Pamunkey
Sweet stink of the pulp mill woke my senses, we will be there soon

The family origin, who they were
Homestead long since sold, but remains guarding the Creekside with large oak
His aging siblings, some have stayed, their children gone away

"Watermen" they called themselves, though some would never boat. Life, wealth and disaster - the Bay was the
source of all. Weather and boats they talked about, even my big-city Pop. Baseball and politics were for fun.
Weather is serious business. Ice smashes piers. Tides move sandbars. Storms wreck hulls

Quiet and needy, sagging house with yellow paint awaits our return. Turn at Hurd's Store, then Lovers Lane.
Too far and you reach the shell pile at Stingray Point. End of one world, beginning of another

Fiddlers and periwinkles among the reeds. Crabs hang heavy on the piles, wary of my net
Catch a few for fishing bait, mind the snapping pinchers

On fishing days I woke up early. One look out the small window told the tale.
Any whitecaps seen would change our plans. Ski-boats don't break waves, but get broken

Round the bar and through the channel. Green stays on your left. Ospreys mark your passing. When young my
job was spotting crabpot buoys, dotting the hidden bank. Thousands of bobbing mines, each reaching to foul the
prop. At the other end is chicken, wire and guts. And skittering claws if man is lucky

We seek the hidden spots. "Deep Rock", off the Point, around the island. Tall tree off to that side, the
lighthouse sits just so. Engine is cut and poles come out, bobbing on light seas

Peelers, bloodworms bait the hooks, chopped up on the board. Wearing hats, shirts torn, stained and dried to
keep away the sun. No fashion sense or care, no bikinis on the bow

Croaker, spot and crappie good to keep. Mud toad, dogfish ruin your day. I never learned the fancy names.
True names were enough. Might return through fog or rain, tossing seas. Sea legs come early.

The water is the road that counts. They lived on Jackson Creek. Boats would stop from the whole world round
Safe shelter on the map. Need supplies? You can take the car. Come later for some bridge

The dark wet highways ancient names bubble on my tongue. Piankatank and Rappahannock. The lights from
bridges, and flashes from buoys and light houses mark the night.

Eccentric seemed the norm. Uncles Erk and Jesse loved to talk and terrorize. Aunts Alva and Lavina cooked
and smoked. Dorothy was her brother's twin if not for calico. Ink and Dink were local boys who wandered
here and there. In their 50's then, never talking. They might be standing in your kitchen when you wake.
Scary to children -- and cityfolks

Lots to do and nothing. Those were good days.

Solo Uh-Oh

It was a dark and stormy day. A thousand thunderstorms brewing in the summer sun have come together in a black mass of boiling anger and rolled in from the Gulf of Mexico over Biloxi, Mississippi. I am a novice pilot making my first solo flight to Biloxi. I am flying a small single engine airplane, buffeted by the weather and low on fuel. Visibility is poor and getting worse. I fly just below a layer of clouds anxiously scanning the ground for place to land. Approach directs me to "Call runway in sight". But all I see is dirt and black clouds as concord grape rain drops smack my windscreen at 150 knots. If the airport closes because of the weather, I don't have the fuel to reach my divert airfield. If I overshoot the runway I am screwed. If I don't find the runway and land right now I'm screwed. I am so screwed.

Two hours earlier I was walking tall in my black boots and aviator sunglasses as I inspected my airplane in pre-flight. There was no prickly instructor pilot there trying to trick me with obtuse questions about the auxiliary fuel pump or what to do when the igniters stick after start-up. I was solo and not just local solo, cross country solo. I signed for the airplane and I am going to fly somewhere I have never been.

My flight plan is by the book. 9:30 am take off from Whiting Field in the western panhandle of Florida, depart west, climb to 5000 feet, set 160 knots and cruise for about an hour over forests and Mobile Bay then arrive at Kessler Airforce Base located a few miles north east of Biloxi on the Mississippi gulf coast. Make all the proper radio calls, land safely, refuel, eat lunch then return by the same route. If thunder storms roll in from the ocean and cause the airfield to close turn around and fly back to base. It is a safe well planned trip designed to test my aviation skills and build self confidence, putting me one more step closer my goal of becoming a naval aviator.

I strap on my airplane, complete my checklist and start the engine. The turbine whines as it spools up and the propeller beats the air. I check my gauges then tap my fists together with thumbs pointing out to signal the ground crew to "pull chocks" and release my airplane. I give them a crisp salute and taxi off.

Minutes later I am calling the tower. "Whiting Tower, Navy255, Solo, Holding Short, Runway 32, Ready for takeoff". I look over my shoulder to confirm there is an empty seat behind me. There is no instructor, no adult supervision in the airplane. I am alone and free. My headset crackles "Navy255, Whiting Tower, Cleared for takeoff, Runway 32, Have a safe flight". The adventure begins. I relax my ankles releasing the brakes, add power and left rudder as I turn on to the runway. I push the power to full and my orange and white navy issued single engine fully acrobatic 1200 horsepower airplane accelerates down the runway. At 140 knots I ease back on the stick and the bumps and clatter of the runway give way to the drone of the engine and whoosh of the air. A smile grows across my face that touches both ears.

I climb to 3000 feet and head southwest at 160 knots. Ten miles out I say goodbye to departure and level off at 5000 feet. The sky is clear. It is a beautiful morning for a relaxing and uneventful flight. I was flying my flight plan but this was not the flight I was going to fly. I reach down beside my right hip and turn off the transponder that transmits my location as I roll into a sharp left turn at a 45 degree angle of bank. I add power to hold altitude and scan the horizon for other airplanes. No one in sight. When a full circle is complete I pull the throttle back to idle and push the nose over into a dive. The thick pine forest below comes racing towards me as the air speed climbs to 280 knots. As I near 500

feet I pull back on the stick and level off just above treetops. This is flying. At 5,000 feet you can't feel speed but when you are clipping the tops of pine trees at 280 knots you can. I holler "Yahoo!" as my field of vision shrinks to see only what is in front of me. My hands react instinctively to keep from hitting a line of old growth of trees that are 30 feet higher than the trees below me. Birds pop up to test my reactions and I turn sharply away from a ranger tower so he can't read my numbers and report me for flat hatting. I am a pig in shit. Off the radar, full of testosterone and adrenaline, screaming over tree tops, alone, far from home and free in my orange and white 1200 horsepower fully acrobatic navy issued airplane.

I reach Mobile Bay in no time and climb back 5000 ft to catch my breath. I fly leisurely over the water but am way ahead of schedule. If I arrive too early I will have some explaining to do so I pull the stick right and turn north looking for another diversion to fill the time.

Billowing white summer clouds fill the sky around me like snow covered mountains. I push the throttle forward and pull back hard on the stick flying straight up the nearest cloud until my airspeed slows and the plane dangles off the prop stopping in mid air. The nose falls, I pull the throttle back to idle and my airplane accelerates down the undulating slopes of white puffy vapor. I ski down the sides of the misty slopes jerking and weaving my airplane through an imaginary Olympic Giant Slalom. The course ends at 3000 feet so I do it again and climb the next cloud for second run. No waiting in lift lines. Cumulus snow skiing is a rip! Flocks of cumulus clouds continue to form and gather like trees giving me new challenges to fly up and down, around and through. It's a flying Disney World of unlimited E ticket rides with no waiting in line.

But reason returns and I assess my situation. Low level tree top flight? Check! High level acrobatics and cloud play? Check! Fuel state? Low. Pilot? Spent. All good things must come to an end and this party is over. I have used up most of my fuel and all of my adrenaline. I am mentally drained a little dehydrated and hungry for lunch. Time to land this airplane and recharge my batteries. I bank left heading south east and level off at 3000 feet. I set 150 knots and relax for the 10 minute ride to the Kessler Air Force Base. I scan my instruments then look up into the distance to see ominous dark clouds and bad weather ahead.

Uh-oh.

2015

Sulphur, saltpeter, charcoal, paper

elegant combination - one thousand years old.

Both celebratory and destructive - for young boys, which is better?

Hawked with large billboards at the state line; forbidden at home. Bought with pennies hoarded from newspapers sold. Hidden in closet, box under shoes, for months and years, waiting.

Summer brings cousin, and outside boredom. Green army soldiers, G.I. Joe, Barbie, may not survive unscathed ~~the~~. Toads and cavers do not. Scared sisters a bonus.

How fast will it burn?

How high will it go?

Digits barely intact. ~~3~~

When I arrived she was seated at a small round table that was touching an ancient moss-covered stone wall and was benefitting from the shade of three large fig trees that were still pushing out new leaves and setting their fruit for the year. The sun was just past the fulcrum that balances our lives, particularly at this time of the year, between our daily rising and resting, lifting up and laying down, the daily alpha and omega. We agreed to meet at 1:00, after much of the lunch crowd returned to their offices—the unfortunate ones—or back to their homes for the requisite mid-day rest...or whatever they did during that time, so we could have a modicum of privacy while we discussed our business and enjoyed our *dejeuner*. The table under the trees was one of our favorites so seeing her sitting there, in profile to the stone wall, was not a surprise and did my heart good to know that she would ask the *maître'd* to be seated there for our reunion after so much time away from both this place and from one another. All of this I could see from across the street as I waited for the lazy street car to approach and pass on its journey down the sloping street to deliver riders to the seaside part of our village just below the main town, where I stood, higher up on the hill. Some called it old town, others referred to it as the Roman section given that it was within the remaining ramparts of the centuries-old walls that formed the first garrison built here centuries ago. As I watched the street car glide past I focused beyond it, out to the sea, where the curve of the shoreline met the horizon. That point out there, I thought, that is where I would rather be right now...sitting on that nearly deserted stretch of sand where the local fishermen launch at dawn and land many hours later with their daily catch to only do it again the next day and the day after that. A simple honest life made up of simple honest work, shoulder to shoulder with men who value the sea and the camaraderie of those just like them. Gazing out at that point I could clearly see in my memory's eye the small café, right now sitting in the cool mid-day shadow of the campanile of the only church in the village, the one that my grandfather's grandfather helped build out of the same quarried coral blocks that the Romans used to build their walled city. I could see the whiteness of the wash on the coral making it painful to look at in the sun, shining like a beacon to those not from this place. The precise size and cut of the coral slabs, one laid upon the other with such precision that the entire wall of the church looks like a single piece lifted from its horizontal resting place for millions of years of life and death formation, and compelled to stand vertically for centuries as the eastern wall of this iteration of God's home. How, I wondered, did the Romans cut the coral from the seabed and bring it up this hill on which I now stand to form their fort and further their empire building so long ago without draft animals; the same animals that until recently pulled the street car that was now disappearing out of sight and away to oval at the end of the line only to come back up again on its monotonous rotation. I retuned my gaze back to the cool shadiness of the small table where I would be seated in the scant few moments it would take me to cross the street and wind my way through the lingering diners, and could see the waiter delivering a bottle of water to the table—still, she would have said, or possibly, *no gas merci*, if she were feeling confident in her adopted language. As my foot met the cobblestoned street, and this is where I struggle to regain my memory, a sound met my ears that could only be a pistol shot but sounded like the beginning of one of the local religious fete where strings of firecrackers are tossed from the iron railed balconies that protrude from the apartments of local merchants, now napping after their lunch of freshly caught fish and rice cooked with just a hint of blood red saffron, the same color that was spreading across the starched whiteness—as painful to look at as the coral walls of the church campanile—of the shirt I was wearing that day. The table was empty and the still bottle of water stood alone, small droplets starting to form and shimmer in the mid-day sun.

April 23, 1899

My Darling Lyda,

I have written this letter in the chambers of my imagination a thousand times or more, but never did I contemplate its writing under these circumstances.

Previously, I had intended to put aside my long held fears and hesitation and tell you these things as they should be told: in person, with eyes locked on your own and trembling hands ready to join yours in a symbolic reclaiming of so many years spent unwillingly and purposely apart; grasping with quiet desperation a solemnly joyous future that had only been dreamed of for three and a half decades. But the fates have decreed that I say what must be said in writing, in what amounts to the third and penultimate installment of our story.

Perhaps it would sound foolish to you (I trust it would to dozens of others who have known either of us) if I redeclare my love to you at this stage of my life, but even a fool can know truths, and this truth I have never doubted: I adore and have loved you every day that I have known of your existence on this earth and I am bold enough to declare that I shall adore and love you even after I am sprung from this mortal coil. In point of fact, I am counting on that very thing in order to maintain the semblance of sanity to which I am clinging long enough to complete this letter.

Is it really just seven days since I received your letter, like an answer to a prayer daily recited since I came east? Can it possibly be only four days ago that I received a telephone call in my office from a "Miss Ellsbury"? My chest nearly exploded when my heart heard the words, presuming, of course, that Miss Ellsbury was yourself and not your sister, the delightful Edna Jane Ellsbury. Never have I felt so much panic and elation in one moment as then! Imagine if you can how bumbling I was when I took the call and your sister introduced herself and declared herself not only a fellow denizen of Manhattan but more thrillingly your "envoy of a diplomatic mission long overdue"! Oh how we laughed when my wits finally caught up to my voice and I confessed my confusion, and this not until she proclaimed, "I'll be thrashed if I'm going to wait another thirty some years for one of you to write a blasted letter!" The sound of her laughter was so like my memory of your own that I was instantly transported back to a prairie school house and almost missed the invitation she extended on your behalf to meet the next day in Central Park.

What I would give to hear again such laughter. Instead I find myself haunted by much different sounds. The pleasantly curious surprise I experienced seeing you arrive in the park on horseback was soon obliterated by the noise of a thousand flapping gray wings, like Chinese firecrackers cloaked in a million agitating feathers. The next few seconds run together like a cataclysm imprinted on my brain: the startled and terrified white eyes of an otherwise gentle horse; the slow, graceful, deadly arc that a cherished form took from a pristine saddle to the stone lined path upon which you cantered; the whisper of your last breath when, moments later and thirty-seven years after I first felt the longing to do so, I finally held you in my arms, finally felt the physical warmth of your soul, even as it waned before me. These are the searing, heart wrenching sensations that flash and reverberate incessantly within me; that I fear will end only on that blessed day when we meet in a hereafter.

The sound of those accursed wings echoes in my every waking moment and most of my somnambulant ones, louder than the Hudson River fireworks for the Statue of Liberty dedication; constant, horrid reminders of the arc it was my agony to witness. I confess that last night I tried and failed to muzzle that sound with drink, but in the alcoholic haze thus rendered a solution was conceived and a plan formulated—a plan that will soon see me return one last time to the very river dock upon which I stood and watched the aforementioned pyrotechnics.

What bitterly ironic comedians are the fates! To place us in a time and place where all that we had patiently contemplated and heretofore so longingly denied ourselves was at last within our grasp, only to be dashed upon the stones of a path I had walked countless times while contemplating a very different existence than what we have known. During those perambulatory musings, all such walks happened with your right hand gently clasped in my left, and your thoughts as well known to me as are now the lines of a letter penned recently by your same hand. Then just when the time had come to ...

But no matter, for at least my path forward is finally and resolutely clear. I now have returned to me by your loving and discrete sister the letter I first wrote you before leaving the prairie. It is folded together, intimately, with the letter you wrote me, and the two of them will soon be wrapped in the loving embrace of this one, henceforth to be delicately placed against your bosom by your undertaker, who is a long time client and family friend. And when next we meet, we will read these together, and laugh and cry and stare with incredulity at each other, that we could ever let so few and so little stand against something so massive, provocative, and enduring as our love.

The next time I hear firecrackers I pray they will be the reports of angels wings and harbingers of our reunion; explosive and sacred and audible waypoints in a night time about to end, piloting towards a dawning day that will begin whence I see heavenly lights upon your beloved face; a day when this interminable separation, heretofore our destiny, will end, and the rest of forever, and the final installment of our story, will start. Until such blessed time, I remain, with all my adoration and love ... past, present, and future,

Your Jed

Something woke Jonny up. He was sweating, stuck to the sheets. The clock on his bedside table read 3:48. Everything was very quiet, anticipatory. A warm breeze came through the open window, the glow of the streetlight revealing the curtain billowing like the sail of an old fashioned schooner. When the wind subsided Jonny realized that it was not completely quiet after all. The constant whirring sound of the big attic fan in the hallway had become part of silence itself. It had been on non-stop for 5 days straight, in a valiant but fruitless attempt to keep the upstairs "cool" during the recent heat wave. Of course, what little relief the attic fan could provide worked only if the bedroom windows AND doors were open. But Jonny liked to keep his door closed. His hand written sign - "JONNY'S ROOM, NO GIRLS ALLOWED" - took precedence over comfort. He didn't want his many sisters to see him sleeping when they got up to go tinkle during the night.

Most of his friends had real air conditioning, but Jonny's dad said he'd be ***"gul durned if he was gonna spend that kind of money on such an expensive, self indulgent contraption"***. Jonny's dad said that he and Johnny's mom had done ***"just fine thank you"*** growing up with nothing but God's own air at whatever temperature God thought appropriate on any particular day. When Jonny pointed out that they had a brand new furnace that had kept them all nice and toasty during the long cold winter, his parents had both smiled, and said that he was too smart for his own britches.

A sudden flash of blinding light was followed by a distant clap of thunder. Jonny heard the first rain drops. Big ones. He could tell by the big fat "splat" sound they made when they hit on the leaves. The kind of rain drops that bounced an inch off the pavement and foretold a real gully washer. He imagined them bouncing off his driveway, wishing it was day time so he could go outside in his raincoat and rubber boots and float leaves and sticks and stuff on the rain water and chase them as the torrent swirled them around and then down the big storm drain at the end of the block near Bert's house. The curtains swayed at another crack of lightning and thunder, much nearer this time. Another followed almost immediately, resonating and rumbling off into the distance. There was a knock on his door. ***"Jonny, close your window now so all the rain doesn't get in"***. ***"OK, mom"***, Jonny responded. But he never got out of bed, instead drifting back to sleep as the storm subsided, dreaming of cool crisp water splashing over the rails of a schooner, its sails billowing pure white against a brilliant blue sky. Morning came quickly and he rose excitedly from bed, thoughts of the day ahead racing through his mind. Last night's storm had finally broken the heat. Jonny could tell that it was going to be a perfect early summer day.

Jonny's best friend Bert had a big brother -Dave - who was 17 and had a grey '59 Edsel with orange accents. Yesterday, Dave had collected money from all the neighborhood kids. He said he would bring back whatever they wanted minus his 10% service charge. If any of them told their parents he would have no choice but to beat the living SHIT out of them! They all watched as Dave put on his Ray Ban's, waved and drove off, heading towards US 41 and the giant Schlitz beer sign that marked the state line 25 miles north. Dave said the place was right underneath that sign. You had to go to another state to get the stuff, because they were illegal where Jonny lived.

Jonny had been saving his lawn mowing money since late March and had yesterday given Dave \$13, holding back only \$1.63 for candy and ice cream to tide him over until next week's mowings. When Jonny handed Dave the money, he had bravely looked him in the eye and said: ***"Get as many M-80's or cherry bombs as you can after you get me 2 boxes of Black Cat one and a half inchers. I don't want any of those little kid lady fingers or any stupid baby sparklers or anything like that. I only want the kind that go BOOM and can blow stuff up and hurt you if you aren't careful"***. Dave assured Jonny that he knew exactly what Jonny wanted and that he wouldn't let him down. Dave had been 7 years old once too.

Jonny got dressed, grabbed the book of matches from its secret hiding place in his desk, and went down for breakfast. His dad smiled and said: ***"Happy 4th of July kiddo!" Looks like a perfect day for the parade and the festival and then the big show tonight at the park"***. Jonny ate quickly, barely containing himself. He ran half way around the block to Bert's house. He couldn't wait to set off his first firecracker of the day!

What I love, and one reason why

One of the most important and amazing aspects of the game of baseball, as with our love, lies in its distances and the balance they provide.

It has been said that baseball is the only team sport played by a team of individuals, and that in baseball there is no place to hide. Reflecting the human condition, each player, whether in the field or at bat, stands alone, separated from all the others when his turn to act comes.

A beauty of the game is that all the separations are just right. Move the omphalos of the pitcher's mound even five feet closer to home plate and strike-outs would skyrocket, hits and runs plummet; five feet back and an antipodian chaos of hits and runs would reign. Spread the foul lines or shorten the base paths and infield hits in particular would abound.

Outfield fence distance provides the exception that proves the rule. Roger Maris' 61-homer season is asterisked by the purists not so much because his season was longer than the immortal Ruth's (Maris actually had less at-bats in 1961 than Ruth did when he hit 60 home runs in 1927) but because Maris hit so many of his just over the too-short 296-foot right field fence at "modernized" Yankee Stadium.

The fact is that the game changes, but the distances make it work. Training regimens, legal or illicit, benefit everyone, as do scientifically precise, up-to-the-minute scouting reports and video. Night games and righty vs. lefty specialist relief pitchers are offset by clean, dry, white, unscuffed baseballs on virtually every pitch.

In this balance, we find beauty, ephemeral yet recurring and eternal. A perfectly spotted, tailing fastball at the knees flashes across the plate in an instant, smacks the catcher's glove with a firecracker pop, and is gone, but hundreds, nay thousands, of Sisyphean hurlers climb back up that hill and strive to repeat the task. It is just hard enough to do that we truly appreciate it, yet not so rare that we can't bear the wait for its re-appearance.

We can, and do, bring the same balance to our union, my love. Your physical beauty can still take my breath away, in part because of your inner strength and independence, which ensure a proper distance between us. A life's companion tethered too closely, always following a short step behind or elbowing alongside every step of our journey, would be jarring, boring and off-putting. Pitching from 50 feet and striking everybody out would not keep my interest; neither would always getting my way or having to make every decision about our lives. It is no coincidence that ambivalence means both the smallest distance and misfortune.

Our independence and distance support this strong, lasting relationship, avoiding boredom and control, while fostering our love, mutual respect, and a little mystery and yearning. I wouldn't want you in my shadow, but instead in this finely balanced, sustaining orbit, circling always, sometimes closer together, sometimes a little farther apart, a life-long dance whose minor frustrations renew and sweeten its pleasures. Just like the game that I love.

THE INTERROGATION

By Kevin Silva & J Chachula

Characters:

Nick Slade, a police detective

Jimmy Kransky, a suspect

A police Sergeant

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT

NICK SLADE paces a small interrogation room, he's tired. The phone rings on a table in the middle of the room. Nick goes for it.

NICK

Homicide, Slade. Yeah. Bring him in.

Nick sits down and arranges some files on a desk. He gets out a 5th of whiskey and some paper cups. The Sergeant brings Jimmy into the room and leaves. Nick just keeps arranging papers.

(pause)

JIMMY

Working late, Lieutenant?

NICK

When the scum on the street start working 9 to 5, so will I.

Nick looks up at Jimmy standing.

NICK (CONT'D)

You wanna take a seat?

JIMMY

I gotta choice?

NICK

Sit.

Jimmy sits across from Nick. Nick pours drinks for himself and Jimmy.

NICK (CONT'D)

Drink?

Jimmy takes it, but sniffs the drink first.

JIMMY

You wouldn't slip me a mickey, would you Lieutenant?

NICK

Relax, Jimmy - this is just a friendly chat.

JIMMY

Some friend - yankin' me outta bed in the middle of the night - haulin' me all the way downtown -

NICK

You seem pretty nervous, Jimmy.

JIMMY

Nervous? I got nothing to be nervous about.

Nick eyeballs Jimmy silently for a long moment.

JIMMY (CONT'D)

Well if you're gonna eyeball me like that, Lieutenant...

Nick stares at Jimmy a beat longer, then looks down at some papers on his desk.

NICK

June 12th. Friday. Where were you that evening?

JIMMY

Uh, home - I was watching a ball game.

NICK

Alone?

JIMMY

Yeah.

Nick stares at Jimmy again with purpose.

JIMMY (CONT'D)

So what's wrong with being alone
sometimes? It's natural.

NICK

Just didn't peg you for the stay at
home type.

JIMMY

I stay in, I go out - what's it to you?
Quit playing games, Lieutenant. There
ain't no friendly chats in homicide
- you got a body and nobody to put the
finger on, right?

Nick leans back.

NICK

Who said anything about a body?

JIMMY

I'm just saying - there's gotta be a
reason you bring me in is all.

NICK

Well, Jimmy - word on the street is
you've been seein' somebody.

JIMMY

That so? Says who?

NICK

Couple pals of mine - Brownie and
Kodak.

Nick takes out some photos of Jimmy coming out of different
theatres - we can't see that he's with anyone.

NICK (CONT'D)

January 17th, The Odd Couple at New
Horizons; January 24th, Noise is Off
at the Barrymore ; February 7, The
Sound of Music; March 16th, Steel
Magnolias; April 9th, Hamlet ... want me
to go on?

JIMMY

Okay, okay - so I was seeing her,
alright? So what?

NICK

So why'd you deny it?

JIMMY

Maybe I didn't want anyone to know
about us.

NICK

Or maybe you wanted her all to
yourself, huh? I hear she can be quite
the little firecracker.

JIMMY

Look, we had a few laughs. Is that a
crime? It was a casual thing - I broke
it off weeks ago.

NICK

Cut the crap, Kransky. You were seeing
her four, five nights a week. Admit
it, you were crazy about her.

JIMMY

Alright. Sure. I was in love with her.

NICK

But you broke it off. Why?

JIMMY

Sometimes...sometimes she was bad.

NICK

Most fellas like it when they're bad.

JIMMY

Get your head out of the gutter,
Lieutenant - I don't mean that kinda
bad. I mean bad bad.

NICK

What are you talking about?

JIMMY

It's like this - sometimes she was
great. But sometimes I'd expect her

to be good, and she was bad. Then sometimes she was so bad that she was good. Other times I couldn't figure out what she was doing. She'd confuse me.

NICK

So she was unpredictable.

JIMMY

And moody too.

NICK

So she has a couple bad days and you decide to bump her off.

JIMMY

Wait a minute - I never said...

NICK

What was it, Jimmy, jealousy?

JIMMY

What are you...

NICK

She's attractive - she connects with people - maybe you feel she's out of your league? Maybe you worry other guys understand her in ways you never could?

JIMMY

No - no -

NICK

Or was it because she challenged you, Jimmy? Made you look at yourself for who you really are.

JIMMY

I - couldn't...

NICK

Even when you were laughing you had a feeling she wasn't just joking. That she took you seriously. That you were worth something ... even a two-bit punk

like Jimmy Kransky. That he had a soul.
Was that the problem? She gave you a
little hope?

Jimmy breaks down, sobbing.

NICK (CONT'D)

That's it, isn't it? Nobody ever had
any use for you, did they? You were
just another cog in the machine. But
she was different. Theatre made you
feel like you were worth a damn.

Jimmy looks up at Nick. They stare at each other.

NICK (CONT'D)

And you hated her for it. So you figure
it's curtains for her - lights out.
How'd you do it? Smother her in her
sleep? Poison her? Cap off some
enchanted evening by throwing her off
a cliff?

JIMMY

No. I didn't kill her. I swear. I just
wanted her to leave me alone - but I
didn't kill her.

NICK

I know you didn't.

JIMMY

What? How?

NICK

Because Theatre ain't dead, Jimmy.

JIMMY

So - why bring me in?

NICK

Oh you tried to kill her, alright -
and I'll admit, you played it pretty
smart. You knew she needed human
contact to thrive. And you figured if
you just stopped going, she'd die a
slow, painful, ugly death...from
neglect.

JIMMY

You don't know what she's like, Lieutenant. At first, she's a lot of laughs - dancing, singing. Then she gets more demanding. She isn't satisfied. She wanted...she wanted all of me. That was too hard. So I stopped seeing her.

NICK

Dropped her cold like a hot potato.

JIMMY

But I still miss her...I can't stop thinking about her.

NICK

So what are you going to do about it, Kransky?

JIMMY

What do you mean?

NICK

You can turn it around, it's not too late.

JIMMY

Ahhh, she'll never take me back.

NICK

She'll always take you back. Because she's that kind of a dame. Maybe you're just too blind to see that she cares.

JIMMY

She cares? She said that?

NICK

Yeah, she cares - and she's desperate.

JIMMY

I know it's hard for her - she's always struggling.

NICK

So go see her. Do it tonight. Do it any night. Do it every night.

JIMMY

Every night?

NICK

Yeah, except Monday. She's dark Mondays, you know that. And don't go empty handed. Bring her a little something.

JIMMY

Like what?

NICK

Whatever you can afford - she'll love you for it. Now, beat it.

JIMMY

So...you're just going to let me go? Why?

NICK

Maybe I got a soft spot for two crazy kids in love.

Nick pours another drink for himself as Jimmy watches. Nick looks up at Jimmy as he drinks. Jimmy gives Nick a hard look.

NICK (CONT'D)

Or maybe you should know when to amscray without asking any questions.

JIMMY

You're some detective, Lieutenant. Is that where you find your hope and inspiration? From a bottle?

NICK

Hey, me and Johnny here, we do just fine.

JIMMY

You ain't gonna find no answers in a bottle - believe me, I've looked.

NICK

I said beat it, Kransky.

Jimmy leaves. Nick considers the empty bottle of whiskey. Then he stands and speaks out loud as if doing a theatre soliloquy.

NICK (CONT'D)

I hated to admit it, but the kid was right. It was empty...my life, I mean.

Nick drops the whiskey bottle in a trash can and takes a step forward away from the interrogation desk - as if walking downstage. A STAGEHAND - in black from head to toe - moves stealthily across the stage and removes the trashcan as Nick continues his speech.

NICK (CONT'D)

Take away the thugs and the boozers
- the hookers, bums and stranglers and
what did I have?

Slow

A spotlight fades up on Nick as the rest of the room dims behind him. More black-clad STAGEHANDS hurry around behind him, rolling away the chairs and the table. Nick continues not acknowledging them - but speaking to an unseen audience.

NICK (CONT'D)

Hopelessness and despair as far as my
bloodshot eyes could see. I was wound
up tighter than a Catholic School girl
at a drive-in movie. Something had to
give.

Behind Nick, the Stagehands move away the walls that formed the interrogation room and they bring in a forest backdrop. Then they bring in some styrofoam Roman columns. The lighting changes behind Nick.

NICK (CONT'D)

I thought - Maybe I should see this
Theatre myself. Maybe she wouldn't
play me for a sucker like every other
broad I'd known.

We move in towards Nick as he wraps up his speech - from behind one of the columns, Jimmy appears in a toga. He wields a knife above his head. Nick doesn't notice a thing.

NICK (CONT'D)

And maybe - just maybe - she had room
in that big heart for one more lost,
lonely soul.

Jimmy plunges the knife into Nick's back and he lets out a yell~~x~~
and buckles to the floor. Jimmy cradles Nick in his arms as he
lay dying.

NICK (DYING ... CONT'D)
Et tu, Kransky?

Jo'. BLACKOUT

Letter from Hell

I'm at the grocery in my underwear again, and the nightmare's ramping up to gauge my sin. Some Samoan dude in canned goods is sitting in his beach chair, and he's looking like he wants to do me harm.

Then suddenly it's dark and there's something big behind me but I can't turn-round and see it -- no, I *do not* want to see it -- so I start to scurry down the grocery aisle; but the floor is now all flooded and my feet are all blood muddy and the monster's coming closer all the time. It's all so fucking scary, and *frustrating* and crazy, as the waters rise and flush me down the drain...

Now I'm swimming at the bottom of the whole Atlantic ocean, with deep green shadows flickering, and toothy shapes a-flipper, in waters just beyond my failing sight. But I can breathe (how is this so?) am I drowning or *transforming* into a water-worldly sprite ... or a gator in the sewers of New York?

No I'm dreaming (aren't I dreaming?) these-same dreams from never-ever, running through my mind forever, but I'm living them and never waking up. They're measuring my sin I'm always meaning to repent but then

I must be back in Hell,
again.

I'm in school, there's my teacher, Sister Ghetty, she's a hundredtwo and rotting, with her gray false teeth and whiskers, staring at my crotch and grinning -- *why* I've got a boner I don't know. She passes out the finals that I didn't know were coming, never studied, seems I haven't gone to class all year...

... *fact* I haven't gone to class in 50 years!

But then an angry girl appears (it seems I've dated her for years) and she looks sort of familiar and I'd like to think I've loved her, but for Jesus' sake I can't recall her name.

I try to put my arms around her, cooing softly, try to whisper, when she turns into my mother and starts laughing and I'm crying and I must be back in Hell,
again.

And now this letter I'm transcribing has turned into toilet paper and it's ripping as I'm writing, and my pencil is my penis, and my penis is on fire! and its spewing like a mini-roman candle. So I send this on to you to say this all has happened to me countless times throughout existence, I'm just waiting, I'm just waiting, to wake up.

But suddenly it dawns on me that *dawn* has never dawned on me, it *seems* my dreams have now become my life.

And that's when I remember as I do every-so-often that this story is my anthem, this dream is my Byzantium, to which my soul is slouching for rebirth.

But the advent never happens, and this rap of mine goes onward never forward never upward, and once again it hits me that despite all my epiphanies I must be back in Hell,
again.

Outside Looking In

In 1676 Issac Newton, the father of modern science, wrote in letter to Robert Hooke, who discovered the cell, "if I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." Through history man's knowledge and understanding of the world has grown when great men of science discover truths that change the world to improve the human condition. Firecracker.

The ancient Greeks gave us the rules of thought and reason, Issac Newton wrote the laws of modern scientific inquiry, Copernicus reorganized the universe, ~~the Chinese made firecrackers~~ and Darwin found that humans were not made from whole cloth but were mere hand me downs altered by an invisible hand through time.

Of the great minds who solved the mysteries of the universe or who gave order to our thinking, it is Charles Darwin who most captures the imagination. While rules of the external world are interesting, it is the inquiry into our selves that most challenges us and confounded our ancestors.

Some think that the idea of a god was first used as a catch all for the things that weren't understood. From the rumbling of thunder and earthquakes to the miracle of birth and the tragedy of death, God was responsible for the things our ancestors couldn't comprehend. But as knowledge grew and men found order in the universe, the real causes of thunder and earthquakes were understood and the things attributed to God's divine hand diminished in turn. We can thank Darwin for discovering that our creation was NOT the work of an invisible omnipotent spirit but occurred through a natural process ~~of driven~~ ^{by} ~~mutation and competition for survival.~~

So here we are, the winners of millions of years of competition and adaptation. Our superior minds and our stamina, our violence and our caring, are all products of natural selection programmed into our DNA.

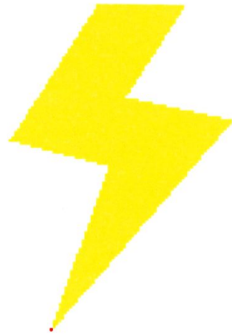
Jonathan Haidt (pronounced "height"), a modern scientist and professor of social psychology, has recently proposed that even our moral compasses are a product of natural selection. From his study of moral attitudes in people around the world, he has identified five common moral foundations common in all humans and he attributes these sources of intuitions and emotions to natural selection. He contends that our basic ~~intuitions~~ ^{feelings} about right and wrong are inborn rather than learned from teachers, parents and preachers.

Professor Haidt writes that all of us are born with a sense of caring for others to protect them from harm, a sense of fairness and reciprocity, a desire to belong to a group and to be loyal therein, a respect for authority and a concept of sanctity and purity of person and spirit. These five traits are common in all humans and are the basis of our moral intuitions and emotions. These five traits ~~give us our~~ ^{are the source} ~~of our~~ common feelings about what is right and wrong, and are the basis of our predilections to religion and accepted societal norms, and are the cause of war, political harmony and discord.

It's obvious to a rational observer that our physical and psychological attributes are the product of natural selection, but much less apparent that our moral framework, like the beaks on Darwin's mockingbirds, come from a competition for survival, and over the millennia have been hard wired into our genes.

2016

WRITE!



the start

I have to write something. Problem is, I've got nothing much to say. No ideas, no plan, no beginning, no end. All I have is the assignment. So I will simply begin to write whatever comes into my mind and continue until it is complete. I struggle to write this sentence. Every sentence will be a struggle. Empty words filling an empty page. Why bother? What purpose do these words serve? And who cares to hear what my brain happens to be spewing forth at this moment? What am I thinking, anyway? I guess I am seeking depth, but it seems as if I am ill prepared. For I exist in the shallow end of the thought pool, the kiddie pool of cognizant thinking. Detached, I can see myself writing about my inner voice saying: "Just stay where you belong, safe, knee deep in an ill-fated attempt to pretend that you are more than another mediocre, run of the mill human specimen that has somehow deluded yourself into believing yourself the master of your domain – a domicile that you are incapable of truly understanding". I am not yet buoyant enough for the deep end. I would sink.

the ways and means

Out of the vastness of infinity, we create boundaries and categories. Rules and regulations and structures, time, orders and laws and hierarchies and networks, superiors and inferiors, pros and cons, haves and have-nots, wheat and chaff, ignorant bliss and enlightened nihilism, winners and losers; but at this juncture I must leave these conventions and systems and contradictions behind and focus solely on the task at hand. As for the rest of it, I leave it for the deep-enders to sort out. Speaking of rest, I will, but only later, when I finish filling the page. The assignment is all that matters. After all, the rules are the rules! And by god the assignment has rules: it must be completed, turned in on time, and must not exceed the predefined limits of its one page universe. So I plow headlong to the edges of this 8.5" by 11" world. Bear in mind as we traverse this midget paper cosmos that the assignment must also be respected for what I postulate to be its true intent. Is it a way to demonstrate that the assignee has the ability to form words relatively coherently into sentences and paragraphs that provide insight, a fleeting glimpse, or a secret passageway into the deep crevices of the writer's psyche? Perhaps, perhaps not. I don't honestly know.

the infinite silence

The page must be filled with words, but right now I have no imagination, no insight, no creative spark, nothing much to offer. I have only the assignment, so I am duty-bound to continue. My audience is one that has no choice but to listen to this meandering plethora of platitudes where I simply put one letter after another after another after yet another with no actual concept of what the next word might be other than the realization that there must and will be another word, and another, and another yet again, ad infinitum, until next thing you know a strong foundation is laid to construct a nice, big, fat, juicy, never ending granddaddy of them all run on sentence that, as inevitably as thunder follows lightning, must at some point finally come to an end, a respite surely welcomed by those gathered here, allowing both a collective breath to be taken and a digestion of that which has now confused length with substance, substituted verbal chicanery for meaning and which has finally and mercifully reached the point that, like the thunder after lightning, reverberates and echoes into a final, eerie, almost deafening silence. Ad infinitum.....

the big reveal

I once longed to be what I am not. I considered myself a failure. I still do to some degree because I am not yet what I will become. But now, I understand and accept that I am what I am until such time I become something else. It helps me enormously that I have found a real faith for the first time in my life. I have come to believe that I'm not alone – that all of us harbor at least a shred of self-doubt. Are any of us truly 100% of what we want to be or dream of being? Everyone, perhaps some more than others, at some point catches sidelong glimpses of themselves and sees the voids, the holes of what might have been or what might still be. I believe that everybody wants at least some little bit of what they will never have. I believe that this doubt binds us all regardless of the ways and means. Am I right, or is this agnostic faith a self-delusion particular to those that have spent life confined to the shallow end?

the ending

It is this belief in the universal nature of existential disappointment that allows me to have hope, to persevere and to cling to the naïve but comforting knowledge that I am what I am for a reason, and that there is still time to uncover what that reason may be.

I am running out of room, this page is almost filled, the assignment nearing completion. They say you should end with a bang! So these last few words should be strung together with substance, meaning, depth, dare I say - gravitas. If they do not, can I honestly claim to have successfully completed the assignment, even if the page is indeed full, the border of the universe reached, but, of course, not breached?

I may drown as I steadfastly continue to make my way from the kiddie pool towards the deep end. Perhaps it doesn't really matter if I sink or swim. Maybe, after all, it is only in the infinity pool that I can honestly expect to finally find and accept my true self, voids and all.

Dark forces are at work.

Oil prices are plummeting, dragging world stock markets with them, and climate change accelerates. More immediately, the Middle East is in turmoil and terrorism spreads.

The November 2015 terrorist attacks in the City of Light shocked and frightened us because of their apparently random targets. We all know about the bombs, shootings and Bataclan Theatre siege. Most don't know that Jean-Claude Lumiens, a brilliant, bearded electrical engineer with front row seats that night, is not listed among the dead, nor among the survivors.

Eyewitnesses swear the one time a gunman specifically chose a victim, it was to shoot Lumiens' date dead, before dragging him across the stage to a stairwell leading to the roof. Authorities dismiss these accounts as confused by the chaos inside the darkened theatre, lit only by flashes from cell phones and the strobing muzzles of automatic weapons. They also ignore the "preposterous" testimony of nearby residents who claim to have heard muted rotors and caught fleeting glimpses of a stealth Black Hawk helicopter landing on the theatre roof and quickly taking off again, shortly after the attack began. The CIA "black hole" exception to the Freedom of Information Act bars comment on whether this could have been the craft abandoned in Abbottabad. Likewise regarding an unconfirmed report that Pakistan allowed Chinese military officials and others to examine the wreckage before selling it in a clandestine auction.

I know about Lumiens.

He was on the National Center for Atmospheric Research Gulfstream V in August 2009 when, according to Space Daily, it "flew into an extremely violent thunderstorm—and, it turned out, through a large cloud of positrons, the anti-matter opposite of electrons . . . [providing] insight into the bizarre and largely unknown . . . world of gamma rays, high-energy particles accelerated to nearly the speed of light." Lumiens studied this so-called "dark lightning."

And it was he I met in that dank Indonesian bar, soon after he finished a mysterious project in the Bada Valley.

I escaped Poso and Amir's watchful eyes on a bus headed to Lore Lindu forest, home of birds that laugh like people and primates three inches high. I slipped away on foot at a refueling stop, headed to the Bada Valley. There I found the megaliths, minimalistic, inscrutable, sole remaining evidence of an otherwise completely unknown culture, ancient and lost to recorded history, leaving no trace but its idols.

I also found, and observed during one of the common nightly storms, Lumiens' Chinese-funded project. A fractal pattern of tall metallic rods reached into the sky, each originating at the base of a *feerique* and connected via large, heavily insulated cables to a low windowless building, matte black, set in a meticulously cleared patch in the heart of the jungle. Distant thunder growled like a massive watchdog, apparently unconnected to the lightning flashes that preceded. The storm moved closer, aligning brilliant bolts with some of the thunder, but not all. Every so often one of the rods sent up a positive streamer, drawing and meeting a blinding streak, followed by a high-pitched whine through the cables into the building. Lightning is hotter than the surface of the sun, carrying about 500 mega-joules, enough energy to instantly boil 250 gallons of water. According to MIT's "Ask an Engineer," even if harnessed, this translates to only $\frac{1}{4}$ of a kilowatt hour of power, worth about 5 cents. The towers and cables hummed more, and deeply, between visible strikes, however. Dark lightning, converting antimatter and storing plentiful and immensely powerful dark energy? Where is its master, and who will benefit from it?

THE EMBRACE

Sitting in the parking lot at the trailhead, I listen to the insistent tapping as the rain drops begin to turn solid and transition to freezing rain and then sleet. The temperature indicator says it is above freezing outside, so I wait, but the icy slush keeps coming. Why do I do this to myself? Do I really need to go for a run today, of all days? I had just said goodbye, then I got my gear and drove to the park. Maybe I just need to be somewhere other than her house right now. I had said goodbye before, times when I thought it might be the last time, but this time felt different. When I returned home those other times, I would drive away while playing sad songs and crying, but today I need to run.

I get tired of waiting for a break and I head out into the weather. Normally I run with music to keep me company, but today I need silence. It starts as one of the most miserable runs of my life – cold, wet, mud splashing my clothes, feet getting soaked – but eventually the endorphins kick in and I warm up enough not to hate what I am doing. I remember how much I love this park. Even in the sloppy rain, the trail is beautiful and I take in the bald cypresses draped with Spanish moss as the trail weaves through the coastal swamplands. This park has been a refuge for me on earlier visits, a place to check out for a while, to let nature calm and distract me from the reason for my visits. Today, it is working its magic on me again, thank God.

The deeper I go in the woods, the less I see. The trees recede and I am back at my mother's house. I am telling her that I have things I want to say to her while there is still time. I say that I love her and thank her for being such a great mother for me. I tell her how proud I am of her strength and accomplishments. When my father left us, she had to go from being a stay-at-home mom, to train as a nurse and then as a nurse anesthetist, a job that required extensive training, long hours and overnight shifts at the hospital. She dismisses my praise, saying she feels like my sister and I have had to be *her* nurses these past months. She is right – we have been her nurses – but she needed us. I thank her for the sacrifices she made for me and my sister. As a single parent, she had precious little time for herself after taking care of her responsibilities at work, at home and as our mother.

Then, I tell her again, one last time, "I love you *so much*, Mom," and I reach forward and give her a hug, something I haven't been able to do in months. She has spent two months in hospital beds and I have not felt her arms around me since long before her hospitalization. Her embrace is weak, but I feel her arms around me as she strokes my back, saying she loves me, too, and I feel like a child again. The feeling of her hands on my back stays with me, tangibly, even here as I am running in the mud and sleet. I am crying again, but it feels so good to feel her hands again, and I want it to last forever. I replay that scene again and again and my running is effortless, I am gliding through the woods, I lose track of time and place. Then, too soon, I return back to the present, I am seeing the trees, the swamps, the hills and the roots. The sleet has turned back to rain and I am cold and wet, my feet are developing blisters, I am tired, and finally I am back at the car.

I return briefly to my mother's house to shower and change before I get back in the car to drive home. I know that I have said my final goodbye to her, but I hold on to my memory of that last embrace. When I drive home this time, I do not cry.

Its Easy [Read with lots of pauses]

The yogi calls out the next pose. Arms this way, hips that way. Shift your weight. Small adjustments. Land on your mat. Raise your knees. Relax the shoulders away from the ears. Lift your heart. Broaden your chest. Find your breath.

All you have to do is keep working at it. Relax, it just takes time. You'll figure it out - Just start and the rest will come. You just need a system. Small steps.

It's easy, they say ----- But what if its not?

All those things they tell you -

Make a list Have a plan
Visualize the goal Create reminders
Write one sentence a day
Big things in small pieces
You're doing this for long-term benefit
Make it happen Don't worry about it

When the go-to's fail, what you got left?

When its all bullshit

The advice doesn't take.

I'm just not getting it. I can't do it like they can. They make it look so easy.

The frustration rises

I don't need this - I can do other things. Avoidance is the better plan

Just do it!!

How many days since you did laundry? Showered?

You've got to push through this

Just go walk around the block - just for 5 minutes. Ok? Promise me you will?

Get moving!! Will you make that phone call today?

Turn that off NOW! How many times do I have to TELL you !?!

You never had this trouble before

The definition of insanity is

But if not that ... what?

Ok, we'll try this one more time.

Optimism can only get you so far. When you can't do the easy things, why try the hard ones?

What the hell am I doing here? Can I even do that? My knee won't go that way. Maybe there is improvement. I do see a difference. A little practice - its easier than last time. Maybe next time I won't fall over.

The changes come so slowly.

Things will get better. ---- (they have to)

You and we desperately want to know what pill, what app, what search will turn the tide

Seeking the magic ... the motivation

The bolt from the blue ... the 'cure'

The mind is a deep chasm with endless plunges, dead ends, mysteries

Endlessly grateful that your smile and humor are always near the surface.

That is grace

I cannot see what you see, Cannot feel what you feel -- I wish that I could

Wish that I could to better understand the disconnect, the need for distraction

So I don't know what it is

But I know what's not.

Its not easy

Mr. Box

I have not seen Tom in 40 years -- a difficult interval to accept, because it measures a lapse of time that confirms that youth is truly just a memory.

We had grown up together and been best friends in a town that was so far away from today it makes me marvel even now. For a couple of 11-year-old boys there was nothing and everything to do. Our greatest form of entertainment was to get one of our mothers to drop us off downtown by the river on a Saturday morning and spend the whole day walking back home, looking for, and often inventing, adventure. We would tell stories, make up jokes, explore alleys, climb fire escapes to the roofs of downtown stores, throw bottles and old light bulbs and anything else that would shatter or pop. We were petty vandals, bubble gum thieves, small town Paladins (have fun, will travel) -- just being kids, killing time, while puberty waited in the wings.

One such Saturday, behind the Ben Franklin, we found a 3-foot high cardboard box. I don't know who thought of it, but Tom pulled out his Cub Scout jack knife and cut armholes on either side of the box and two crooked eyeholes in the front, and we took turns bumping around the alley, like half blind robots. Whose idea it was to take this act on the road, again I don't know, but the next thing, we were walking up Rogers Avenue, Tom dancing along the sidewalk in the box, waving his arms like a cartoon character, while I shouted at the passing cars, "He's here! The incredible Mr. Box! Say hello to Mr. Box!" This was our joke, for us and our own amusement, and so we were surprised and somewhat thrilled to see small children leaning out car windows waving back at Mr. Box, their mothers slowing for the treat, the novelty of a dancing box on the streets of our small town. Then kids started coming out of houses, as if the ice cream truck had arrived. It was magic, we were celebrities, merry pranksters. It was like our inside joke spread out from us and was taken up by the children, who followed Mr. Box, the pied piper of suburbia.

Without warning, Tom tripped and fell over and lay there in the box, arms out to his sides. The children gasped, then giggled, then grew quiet as Mr. Box lay silent, not moving, no longer a living dancing thing. I quietly, gravely, walked over and tapped gently on the box. "Mr. Box, Mr. Box, are you in there?" The silence extended. I tapped on the box a few more times. The little kids leaned forward, hardly daring to breathe...

"*Oscar Meyer's Weiner!*" screamed Mr. Box suddenly and the children screamed in return and fell back into their yards, giggling, as Mr. Box climbed clumsily to his feet, waving his arms wildly, like some cubic Humpty Dumpty, all his pieces put back together again. Then we ran, chuckling, down the sidewalk, around the corner and out of sight, as the afternoon waned and the lightning bugs ascended into heaven.

It was fun while it lasted, and it seemed our fun lasted from that day on through junior high and high school: double dating, working on school newspapers and yearbooks, high school fraternity hazing, and learning to drive cars, drink beer and smoke cigarettes. Mr. Box morphed into an intricate structure of inside jokes and allusions, jokes that only we got, the more obscure the better. Tom thought I was just kidding when I said I was going away to school. "Who's gonna get my jokes?" he asked, puzzled.

We kept in touch during college but didn't really see each other again until I was home after graduation. It was a short reunion. Tom came by and picked me up with a case of beer, we got drunk, and then Tom drove us into a tree and broke his neck. I walked away without a scratch. When I came to visit him in the hospital, he was flat on his back under a plastic shroud, his eyes closed, a series of levers and springs holding his neck bones together. I tapped on the ventilator and then bent down over him, looking for a sign of life. "*Oscar Meyer's Weiner*" he whispered, grinning weakly.

That was the last time I saw Tom, 40 years ago. Oh, he survived and mended. But it took months and months, and in the meantime I had left town for all time. I heard about him from time to time: his marriage, children, jobs, divorce, other jobs. What I did not hear about was the dependency on painkillers he had acquired in the hospital, which followed him all his days until now, 40 years later.

When I say I had not seen Tom in 40 years, that is *not* to say that I see him now, from where I stand in the back of the Baptist church. I am relieved that they decided not to have an open casket. I would not be able to pass by an open coffin and look down to see what little is left of my memories, and with them my youth. But with the lid closed, I can go up and pay my respects ... and hopefully resist the urge to reach over, and tap on the box.

We Must Have Forgotten

July 2008: Dear kids, we went to the doctor today to get the tests. The good news is my heart is fine. But, and this might not come as a surprise after our ordeal with your Grandfather, I too have Alzheimer's disease. I'm now on some drugs to slow the progress and both Jim and I are hopeful this will turn out better than Papa. Jim says we can stay in the house indefinitely. Exciting news: I got a part in a show called The Lightning Thief that the Senior Players is doing in September. Can you both come from New Jersey to see your old Mum on stage? Hope so; it would mean so much to me. Can't wait to hug you both!

January 2009: Kids, We went to the store today, Publix I think, for some groceries but I forgot the list and could not remember what we needed. Jim was no help so we went out for dinner and then came home. I was frustrated that he wouldn't help me but it isn't his fault. Sometimes I just don't recall things. I'm hopeful neither of you has to deal with this. I decided to not audition for the next show with the Senior Players. It took up lots of time last year and some people just weren't very nice.

November 2010: Hello: your Mom and I were on our way to the theatre to see one of the traveling Broadway shows (something about a Spelling Bee?) and she insisted I turn around and go home. I tried to convince her that we were on our way, we paid for the tickets, but she wouldn't stop insisting and started crying. We got home and she went to bed. This morning she doesn't recall anything about it. I showed her the unused tickets and she told me we must have forgotten. Have a good day!

June 2011: Good morning: we went to the doctor's yesterday. Your Mom is not responding to the drugs and the doctors say that they are going to change to a more potent memory drug that should help. While we were there she wouldn't answer any questions the nurse or doctor asked. When they left the room she whispered to me that she thought they were homeless people just pretending. I didn't know what to say so just smiled and patted her hand. Hope you have a good day!

October 2011: Hello: I told your Mom that you two are coming for her birthday. I think it is confusing her because she thinks you are already here and asks where you are. Maybe showing her a calendar and crossing off the days will help. Looking forward to seeing you both next week. I think we will be able to stay in the house for another 5 years. Let's have a good day!

March 2012: Hello: Your Mom is very confused again today. She has been spending a lot of time in her walk-in closet rearranging her clothes. Then, after lunch today she went back in and was very upset; she was crying. She insisted that someone was in our house and had moved all of her clothes and some were missing. She wanted me to call the police but we were lucky enough to locate all of her missing clothes! She saw the ladies across the pond sitting on their lanai again this morning. She tells me stories about them. I can't seem to see them but maybe that is just as well! Let's have a good day!

March 2013: Thanks for visiting for early Easter; it meant a lot to your Mom and me. I'm so sorry she did not know who you were; I guess prompting her for the last few weeks didn't help. She was very embarrassed after you left. Thank you for not mentioning it; that would be hard. She seemed to know you when you arrived and then it was all gone; that happens. She doesn't mean to be angry with you. But, she knows she has the disease and it frustrates her a lot. Let's all make it a good day!

October 2014: When are you arriving for your Mom's birthday? I think it is on Friday but now I can't remember and, well, your Mom doesn't know you are coming. Let me know your plan so I can go to the store for some food. Don't be surprised when you see your Mom; she has been eating very little and says she isn't hungry. She is down to about 100 pounds. Yesterday she pointed to the shower and asked me how it works. Last week it was the kitchen faucet. Let's all make it a good day!

June 2015: Well, it happened for the first time today: your Mom did not know my name. First, she asked me where everyone went and I told her we live here alone and have been married for 22 years. I showed her pictures around the house of our wedding, the two of you and others in the family. She finally remembered enough that we could go to bed. I think we'll be able to stay here for another year or two. Happy we set up a plan for the daily calls; it takes away some worry in case something happens to me. Your Mom wouldn't know what to do and can't work the phone. Let's all make it a good day!

December 2015: It was good of you to come for Christmas. She still thinks people are stealing her clothes and there are people living in our house; she doesn't see the ladies across the pond sitting on their lanai much anymore...I sort of miss them! Your Mom has been very upset. After you left she said that you were an old boyfriend of hers and that she never wants you to come back or see you again. I told her you are her son but she insisted I am wrong and that you never picked her up for the high school prom. We should be ok staying here for another year or two. I know you want me to get some help but that isn't an option; there are too many people out there who prey on old people and I just won't let them into the house. Thanks for cleaning the kitchen floor last week; I didn't know it was so dirty! Let's all make it a good day!

March 2016: Good Morning: Today your Mom asked me my name. She said my name couldn't be Jim because I am a girl. I told her I am not a girl and that we have been married for 23 years. She insisted that we couldn't be married because it is impossible for two girls to be married. She then asked me if I am her father. Again I told her that I am Jim and we have been married for 23 years. We looked at pictures; I think it helped. She says that someday we need to have a serious talk about this but I know she won't remember any of it tomorrow or even later today. This is getting very sad. I'm not sure what will be next; also not sure how much longer we can stay in the house. Let's all have a good life, one day at a time!

The First One

A true story of love at first sight

*She was a dark haired beauty with big brown eyes,
Points all her own sitting way up high
Way up firm and high*

I met my wife at a beach party under the stars. As a garage band played beach music that mixed with the crashing surf, she caught my eye dancing by herself on the crowded dance floor. It was odd to see a tall, thin woman with dark brown hair in peg leg jeans, flat soled tennis shoes and a loose fitting blouse bouncing around like a cork on the waves. *In the summer, in the sweet sweet summertime.* So I walked her way

"Do you dance with strangers?" I asked. She nodded and we began to dance.

We held each other close but kept our distance and moved with the music, each not sure of the other but not caring a hoot. *We were just young and restless and bored.* Two curious strangers enjoying a ride.

"What is your name" She asked.

"Names aren't important" I responded.

"Then what do I call you?"

I made up our names *and neither one cared.* We danced and laughed *we were getting our share.*

"Are you married" she asked. "Sort of" I replied. "I'm married but separated. We are getting divorced."

None of this was true I had never been married and certainly wasn't separated but IF there was ever a good time for bullshit, this was it. I had just broken off a two year thing with a nurse who was interested in marriage, I had orders in hand and in two weeks was moving to Washington DC. I was *free and restless and bored, I was livin' by the sword.*

"Do you have any kids?" She asked. "Sort of" I responded and explained that I had no children from my FIRST wife but that my SECOND wife was pregnant. "And we are getting divorced."

All this bullshit was received without judgment or surprise and we continued our dance. Odd that she didn't seem to care that I was married twice and had a pregnant wife. She confided that she had recently broken up with her boyfriend and needed a break from guys for a while. *She was working on her night moves, yeah yeah.*

This woman was interesting; not impressed with my job, immune to my charms and she could care less if I were married and had kids. I planned the next move to get her alone and *to steal away.*

I scanned to crowd to find my friends came upon a fearful sight. The sweet nurse who I had so gently removed from my life only 10 days earlier was now headed towards me like a bull to red, like a torpedo to the Lusitania, like my night was over, *with autumn closing in.*

She was formidable; fit and liquored up, goal oriented and not taking no. I was soo screwed.

My instincts took over; Run away! I ducked down and pierced the crowd around the dance floor pulling Darsey along and telling her we had to go. This seemed perfectly normal to her and she moved with me stealthily thru the drunks and whores until we found our way the exit and popped up to look around. *Ain't it funny how the night moves.* I told Darsey we were leaving and invited her to dessert and coffee. She accepted my offer as we turned to leave, someone grabbed my free wrist and pulled me to a stop.

When you just don't seem to have as much to lose, my Ex found me. I was stuck in her web and she was ready for battle. Holding tight to my arm she looked Darsey in the eye and told her, "He can't go with you tonight. I am his wife."

I marveled in the moment.

*Oh the wonder
We felt the lightening
And we waited on the thunder
Waited on the thunder.*

Unflapped and without a pause Darsey looked her up and down and noticing a small paunch asked politely, "Are you his first wife, or the second one?"

Stunned like a cow in a slaughterhouse queue my old flame froze and feeling her grip weaken on my arm I broke free. Darsey and I disappeared through the door, climbed into my car and were married a year later. *Ain't it funny how the night moves, yeah yeah.*

Elec-centricity Syndrome

Travis pulled hard on a clear liquid from a not so clear old jar in his right hand as he subconsciously rubbed his left thumb across the snarling tiger head medallion soldered onto his father's brushed aluminum lighter. Papa had lived through Vietnam bodily, but the rest of him never returned. What did come back ranted and drank itself to death on homemade shine, leaving Travis nothing but a rickety cabin, a still, a recipe, and this goddamn gook lighter.

Travis tried to rise above, to persevere over his legacy, regardless of what folks in the valley said was his destiny. And he did alright for awhile. Used some of the money Uncle Sam sent him in appreciation of Papa's sacrifice to get himself schooled, get a job in town, keep up the old place best he could, at first alone and then with some help from Darla. She'd been a good wife for several years and he a good husband. But then lightning struck Travis. Twice. Within fifteen seconds and three staggering steps. And it fucked everything. Or, more accurately, revealed how fucked everything already was.

Travis didn't die that day, but he sure as shit stinks commenced to dying faster. And so did everybody else. Only Travis was the only one that knew it. Of course he'd tried to tell others, but they didn't want to hear it and pushed him away because of it. Even Darla. So before long he stopped telling anyone else what he knew about ... everyone else. Just holed up inside himself and started preparing for what was coming.

When the first bolt hit Travis it wasn't out of the blue. He'd seen the storm spilling over the mountain behind his cabin. It was just like he'd learned about later when reading accounts about the other nine out of ten strike survivors. Ten thousand hornets stung him simultaneously and his innards felt like hot soup inside a parched burlap bag and his eyes slammed open so wide he felt like his whole head was a giant eyeball. Bad as that was, though, the second bolt was infinitely worse and indescribably more terrifying. Because that second one was not just beyond painful. It was ... illuminating. Mentally. Historically. Psychically. And oh my fucking God I used to believe in how horrifically.

Travis didn't really see anything at the first strike other than the whole world become bluish light. But when the second strike hit he saw, well, a thing he could only describe as death incarnate. No, wait, not death. Annihilation. And in truth he hadn't seen it with his eyes, but with his mind. As if the first strike had flipped a switch that allowed him to telepathically view something riding that second bolt like a cosmic commuter. He knew that what he'd seen was a harvester spore in its fertilization stage being planted in the earth to some day soon join up with untold trillions of its kind to sweep the earth clean. Of everyone and everything. Everything made of carbon, that is. But stranger than that was that Travis knew the **THING** KNEW that Travis had seen it AND that Travis knew what it was there to do. And that thing and Travis were brothers in knowing what he wasn't supposed to know. Nobody else was Travis' brother because no one else on earth knew. Travis knew only because he survived what he wasn't supposed to survive. And because of that misfortune Travis now knew that each lightning strike since time immemorial had planted just such a spore deep in the ground. And he knew that lightning never strikes twice in the same place so that one spore's delivery won't destroy a previously planted spore. That each spore is placed in the ground with mathematical precision to maximize coverage of the earth. That each lightning strike infinitesimally but inevitably raises the earth's surface temperature. That mankind hasn't done itself any favors neither by destroying the ozone and overproducing carbon dioxide. That when the average temperature of the earth's surface crust reaches 60.1 degrees Fahrenheit the spores will simultaneously and violently combine themselves into larger, multi-tentacled things about ten foot high and twice as wide—to become the harvesters. That the energy consumed by the harvesters' reconstitution will just as instantaneously and even more cataclysmically pull so much energy from the earth's crust and atmosphere that the world's surface and 20,000 feet or so above it will be flash super frozen, killing every living thing not on a commercial jet or climbing Mount Everest or digging for diamonds, and preserving it all like lobster tails in a restaurant walk-in. That the harvesters will roam the frigid dead earth gathering all organic matter and consolidating it into storage areas to await consumption by the creators. That the creators are gigantic things, more hideous than their harvester pawns, who created our universe for this very purpose—to be their "farmland". That our universe contains hundreds of thousands of millions of other "earths" all evolving towards this same end and strategically located so that none of them learns of the existence of another. That therefore surviving that lightning was not exactly living since the end was coming faster everyday and nothing could stop it and it was all gonna happen no matter what because that's what the creators had in mind when they planted us here in the first place and made all those spores just like that fucker biding its lethal time underground not twenty paces from his front door and oh my fucking holy shit if only I could go back to not knowing ...

By Travis's calculations the end was truly near. Probably no more than a month away. He'd been watching the NASA website and knew that the average global surface temperature had long ago passed sixty point fucking zero. And goddammit, it was time to stop knowing. To take control of his own destiny, seeing as he was the only one on this totally fucked planet that could—or would. So a couple months ago he'd started stilling instead of sleeping, squeezing as much of Papa's liquor as fast as he could, and pouring what he didn't need for immediate drinking into the clawfoot tub he'd drug out of the cabin onto the porch. Well now it was as full of lightning as he was of knowing and dreading. Without another thought, Travis climbed in naked as birthing and smoothly submerged himself entirely, except for his left hand ... the one still holding Papa's lighter. Taking one last huge gulp of shine he opened his eyes and through the stinging pain saw his left thumb flick and the liquor's surface turn a familiar blue. He pulled the lighter under, pressed it against his heart, and twenty interminable seconds later his lungs forced him upward to finally and irrevocably scream the remnants of his mind and the spores to sleep.

Maybe Gray

Looks bare and black
Feels empty white
It's hard to hear the gray
Nestled in between

I scale majestic mountains
Plunge straight down thirsty valleys
Feel gravity's strong pull again
One day up, Tuesday down

Rest. Relax. It goes away.
Rest. Relax. Did someone say
Rest. Relax. I hear the gray
Relax into another day

Standing at the cliff's edge
Waiting to go on
Trying to be still and watch
The setting of the sun

It shoot its shards of magic light
That dance the mountain's side
Declare the green of life itself
The juniper and pine

Above it's blue and full of glory
With shades of pink and pale
The distance though ... a stark reminder
Of nature cold and cruel

Gray clouds gather, flashes strike
Great thunder rolls right through
The red and rusted hillside
The scarred and severed heart

It's rumbling now
Somewhere for someone
It'll rumble more for me
Maybe white or empty black
Or maybe only gray

Rest. Relax. It goes away.
Rest. Relax. Did someone say
Rest. Relax. I hear the gray
Relax into another day

I can't do more than call a truce
With the tribe of my affections
The fear, the guilt
The white, the black
Or maybe just the gray

STAMPEE



ENTERTAIN

For One Day only.

THE
UNITED BROTHERS, CHANG-ENG,

Very respectfully acquaints the Ladies and Gentlemen of

THE WELL-FORMED HEADS

THAT THEY WILL BE IN THAT PLACE ON

Wednesday, February 7, 2001

And will receive Visitors at the

COBB'S LUNATIC ASYLUM & EATERY

The Hours of Admission will be from 8 pm till ?? in
in the Evening.

ADMITTANCE 50 CENTS.

Pamphlets, containing an historical account of the Twins, with many interesting particulars never before published, can be purchased at their Room. Price, with an engraved likeness, 12 1-2 cents—with a lithograph, 18 3-4 cents.

The Twins have also a few copies of a very superior likeness, executed in lithograph, and suitable for framing.

NO RE-ADMISSION TO THE ROOM.

J. M. Elliot, Printer, 23 Liberty street, New York.