SHORTNESS OF BREATH

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SHORTNESS OF BREATH

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Thesis

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CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE

Respect for the Game

Charles takes his lead off of first base as the pitcher Gracie watches. I see the entire dance unfold from behind the catcher, dressed in blue and covered in seven pounds of protective gear. Gracie takes a sign from the catcher, tips his hat down and nods. He’s pitched his share of ballgames and confidently sets. Sweat beads in patches on my face from the ninety-degree heat and a cloudless July sky means no shade. I watch as the runner on first gets bolder, but the pitcher and I know he’s not going anywhere with that shallow of a lead. The catcher waves his glove and our batter steps toward the plate. The batter surveys the field and is only looking for something to put in play.

The first pitch is in the dirt and the runner on first weighs his options and decides not to steal. The second pitch is fouled off, the batter narrowly missing what would have been a homerun. At least it looks that way from his swing. A third pitch, high and tight causes the batter to duck away. The team logo on his helmet is peeling off.

“2 and 1,” I say, adjusting my mask. Sweat pours down my face. It pools just below my lip where the artificial leather padding contacts my chin. The familiar sweet and salty flavor stays with me, even after the games.

The batter glances my way and nods. Something fat will be coming now, hard enough to drive and avoid a 6-4-3 double play.
Gracie steps off the rubber and motions for the catcher to come to the mound and talk. They bring their gloves to their mouths; just like they’ve seen watching the majors on TV. Cheever, the visiting catcher, jogs back to me and pulls his mask over his face. Charles ventures off first again, this time much farther. Gracie snipes Cheever’s sign and snaps a throw to first base. Charles dives back. My partner is out of position and stretches his hands to call Charles safe. But he shouldn’t be.

Gracie mouths “Damn,” slapping the ball in the hollow of his glove. He aims a sharp icy smile at the field umpire and turns away. For a moment, Gracie’s disgust cuts through the heat. He turns to take the mound.

Charles takes another lead, this one more reasonable. Leaning back towards first, he is cautious. Gracie nods at his sign and sets again. The field umpire slides his hands to rest on his knees, determined not to miss another one. A sigh escapes the batter’s mouth as Gracie makes his pitch. Fastball, middle of the plate; a hitter’s pitch.

Life stops a moment before the ball tears off the aluminum bat. Gracie’s face wrenches and the low line drive, a direct shot, hits his crotch. The impact topples Gracie. It should have been the thud of leather and plastic on a protective cup, but this is dull and muffled, the sound of a white bullet sinking into clothed flesh. Pain cries from glossy eyes and he sobs. Rules say I can’t call time until the end of the play.

Charles was running on the pitch, rounded second and is a few steps from third. His coach windmills his arm to send the runner home, but Charles sees Gracie and stops at third. He does it out of respect for the game. A mother runs on the field with a bag of ice. I run toward the mound and look back; no one is covering home plate.
CHAPTER II:
STORY TELLERS

They Had Never Been Children

I. The Men

They watched him. They knew everything about his day including when and where he caught the school bus. His life was there’s, as if they could look into a mirror and the pair of them melt into one person. This ten-year-old boy.

Their white van fit in the neighborhood. The windows were tinted, giving them full visibility without compromising their identities. Everyday there was a different purpose. Under the disguise of florists, they watched him catch the bus. As plumbers, they followed his walk from the corner where he left the bus to his neighbor’s house where he stayed for two hours until his mother came home. As cable company representatives, they found the best way to lure him away from the sidewalk. Like many children, he loved animals. In their surveillance, they saw the boy interact with squirrels, stray cats, birds… even insects. Captivated, the boy would watch the creatures. One man said to the other, “It’s like he wants to be them.”

In order to make it work, they would find an animal. It made no difference whether the creature was live or not, but best if it were mangled. And this is how they did it. They affixed a “Bedford Animal Preserve” sticker printed from their photo printer to the sides of the white van. The one that faced the street was crooked, but the shorter
man said to the other that it was not a concern. The boy, after all, would never see it. They found a house cat, still wearing its tags, obliterated on the roadside. The men scooped it from the asphalt, the scraping sound gritting on their nerves like a small child shaking a covered jar half-full of pennies. One, the taller of the two, carefully placed the animal’s remains on a gurney. He applied a liberal amount of alcohol to a rag, just as he had seen his grandmother do to clean blood from his shirt when he got into fights in school, and the cat appeared as though it still could be alive. At least it would look that way to a child, he thought.

The child, their target, was lured to the van by one of the men. The man, shorter than the other who was driving, pretended to be hysterical. His fake concern for the injured animal convinced the boy and he stepped up to help the men save the cat that he soon learned was already dead.

* * * * *

II. Believe

You walk, shoes echo through the quiet hallway. The hall has linoleum tiling, classic brown colors blending with greens and black specks. It matches the walls, a faded cream paint that shows signs of grimy fingerprints. Your overcoat makes you sweat; you feel the drops flow down your back and pool at the waistband of your jeans. The coat is tied closed with a cloth belt and you fish your hand inside the opening just above the knot that holds it closed. Canvas covers wires and pieces of metal, it stretches around your torso and feels like a corset. The corset idea makes your thoughts wander from what is
really going on; you cannot imagine what people will think of you. But it is not your fault, you have no other option.

Each footstep is slow and your legs burn like you just ran a marathon. Your muscles ache. Thighs feel like a cavalcade of needles poked one-by-one over the surface of your skin. The burning sensation is the worst. Every step causes the corset-like apparatus to rub at your chest, which is now raw like the exposed cut of a hunted animal. You consider turning around but know that the remote they carry is directly connected to the weight fastened to your chest. So you walk, just as they told you to.

Finding the note was the worst part. It was worse than finding your child missing. It was worse than calling the police and hearing the statistics. It was worse than hoping that he would be found, waiting by the phone, searching the fields for a body. The worst part is knowing they had him and would not let him go. You called the number on the ransom note. You followed the instructions, went to the drop point without the cops, and now you walk through the halls with this thing, this explosive harness because that is the only way they say he will be alright.

You believe they will let him go because you have to. After they push the detonator and send you into oblivion, you believe they will let him go. The thought appears in your mind that they lied, but you cannot accept that. You have to believe that they will set him free. You hear the echoes of your footsteps in the quiet halls and wonder whether or not one life, your son’s life, is worth the hundred lost inside this building.

* * * * *
III. The Trigger

I have done a terrible thing. Many people make this claim, many men and women and children talk like this, but I assure you they have nothing on me. I conspired with another man to kidnap a child. And we did.

The video monitor in our van is in color, capturing images from a feed camera located on the coat. The display shows a hallway with bricks that look like the outside of my mother’s home, though they are cleaner and better cared for. I remember sitting in the parlor, staring out the window as windstorms kicked up trash into the air. Hours of entertainment came sitting and staring out that window. The window gave me hope that there was something more outside, something better. I felt bad the day that I realized how true that was.

Our oaths, our tests of devotion, all built to that day. Some men say this was for God; to right the infidel's wrongs. “Believe,” they say. “Believe in the teachings and know the truth.” The only truth I know is we stole this boy. Now we watch his parent walking. Sledging feet on the tile, not knowing which step is the last. People do things when they think this is the end. They think about anything to avoid shaking hands with death, pretending the metal weight on their chest is anything but what it is. Watching a human body explode is like burning a hole in your retina and never being able to see right again.

My hand holds the key. The detonator is about as long as my palm and looks like a cell phone. No, more like the garage door opener on the van’s visor. By itself it is harmless. With the bomb, though, it is a different case. A small radio signal. And boom,
every brick in the hallway, every slippery shined piece of tile, everyone in the blast ratio, everything changes. With the click of this button everything changes.

My partner let the boy go. He dropped him on the same corner where his bus stops everyday. We fed him well, even tried to play with him. The fear in his eyes crippled me. The fear will build and transform into anger. He will grow up, join the military, campaign for active duty, and execute as many people as possible. It will happen again, like an inverted circle of life. It undoes life, like the bomb. If we could only be children again, we could forgive the past and play with the toys strewn all over the brown and green rug with bits of black specks on my mother’s living room floor.

Turtle Story

He took her on a vacation to Charlotte. She was happy; this was the first time he had shown an active movement toward the evolution of their relationship. He smiled when she accepted and they left Ohio on the seven-hour car ride.

Before they left, she told him that she wanted to help drive. He told her no and that she should navigate. She said that was fine. Truly, he wanted her to stick to reading the map because he hated her driving, but if he said that she would have sulked and made the whole trip miserable.

After several hours on the road, they were close to the Virginia border. He was quiet; she made conversation in between playing with the dials on the radio and sleeping.

“Hun,” he said, “where do we go next?”

She smiled and pulled out the atlas that they purchased from Wal-Mart a week before. She had the option to pay full price for this year’s edition or half price for last
year’s version and as best as she could tell it was the same. When she bought the old one and brought it home, he laughed and said, “an atlas is an atlas, isn’t it?”

“Take Route 20 just over the state line.”

He considered this for a moment, and then nodded. It was a good thing that he asked because the state line was only two miles away. “Are you sure?”

She looked at him with the ‘do you think I’m an idiot’ look and answered, “Yes.”

He nodded again and took the exit.

The road had not been paved in a while and had several rough spots, even in August. At the bottom of the exit ramp was a service station and beyond that the road twisted around the base of a mountain. He politely asked if she wanted to stop and she said no. He started around the bend and the road immediately became narrow. The car hugged the white line that separated it from the soft earthen shoulder. The road took him up, toward where the mountain shook hands with the clouds. He looked at her, his right eye squinted, and they continued to wind and climb up the side of the mountain. The speed limit was fifty-five, though the car seemed to hazardly slip through the turns at half that velocity.

She seemed uneasy about the twisting pavement and opened the atlas again. He looked over at her, then at the road that narrowed down to what seemed like one lane. She dropped the atlas down from in front of her eyes and yelled, “Stop!”

He slammed on the brakes. The car came to a halt a few feet short of what looked like a large rock in the road. The car dragged over the road like a small child who fell off a bicycle.

“What is that?” he asked.
“I’m – I’m not sure.”

He worked to catch his breath and she reached for the door handle. She opened the door and stepped out, walking quietly toward the obstacle. She bent down and picked it up. He expected her to toss it to the side of the road. But she did not. She walked, carrying the thing toward the car and as she did she held it up.

“You had me slam on my brakes for a turtle?”

She ducked her head inside and set it on the dashboard. “Yeah.”

“Get that thing out of here.”

“It’s cute.”

“No, and don’t they carry germs? Salmonella or something?”

The two of them watched as the turtle scraped its feet, pulling itself methodically across the passenger’s side of the car’s dash.

“What are you going to do with that thing?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know, keep it?”

“Where are you going to put it?”

She leaned over the center console and reached into the backseat, searching for something. He shook his head and watched as the turtle plodded toward him. She slipped back against her seat and had an empty shoebox in her hands, the contents of which were dumped on the seat. She opened the door and went over to the side of the road, grabbing a handful of grass and ripping it up. She walked back, dropped the grass into the box, lifted the turtle by the sides of its shell and placed it into the box.

He watched as the turtle cocked its head and looked around, sizing up its new environment. It seemed content to sit still and do nothing.
“We can’t just keep that thing.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, the hotel doesn’t allow pets.”

He laughed but she did not seem to appreciate his humor.

“We just won’t tell them.”

He laid his head against the rest and rubbed his eyes. “Ok, whatever. Are we going the right way?”

She seemed not to hear him.

“Are we?”

“What?”

He took the map from her. She focused on the turtle’s minimal movement. “Do you think he’s ever been in a box before?” She did not raise her head when she asked, and her voice sounded concerned, like a mother who watched her child with a steady eye.

“No.”

She looked up from the box and watched his eyes search the atlas. When he said, “No,” she believed him. He sighed loudly and snapped the atlas shut.

“What’s wrong?”

“When I asked you what the next direction was, you told me to get off at Route 20.”

“Yeah, and?”

“Route 20 was right, but the state was wrong. We’re in Virginia not North Carolina!”

She took a deep breath. “Oh.”
He jammed the car into reverse and turned around, careful not to hit the guardrail or go off the road. They rode silently down the mountain. He stared directly ahead and she watched the turtle. When the car rounded the final bend before the service station, he swerved off the road and put the car into park.

“Get rid of it.”

She looked at him and shook her head.

“You don’t even know what it eats. Just put it back so we don’t have to worry about it.”

She could feel her face getting red. “The turtle didn’t get us lost, I did. Leave him out of it.”

He stared at her, sighed, and rubbed his temples. She looked at the box, reached her hand over and opened the door. She walked the turtle and its box down a slight embankment and placed the box on its side. At first, she didn’t think the turtle would leave, but finally it scraped its clawed feet on the cardboard and wandered out, inching toward a small stream a few feet away.

He came up behind her, placing his right arm around her shoulder and carefully kissed her cheek. They watched the turtle as it picked up speed and waded into the shallow water where it carelessly swam away.

A Different Spin

Nothing is my fault… nothing.

“Don’t be so… You just get so annoying with your complexes,” Marie says.
Those were the last words that I exchanged with her, rather when we dated. We broke up, she walked through the door and found a new purpose: a highway bus that hadn’t had its brakes inspected in, oh, say five years. I guess the driver really didn’t see her. She was kinda short and her stringy black hair didn’t really stand out. She looked like every girl and no girl wrapped up in one. And no, I didn’t push her – not that I didn’t want to. That would be a different story. We fought, but she had a fire in her that I haven’t found in anyone else. Our relationship wasn’t all bad. Can’t forget the way she moved in bed.

Sorry, I’m straying. I think I may be misleading you, so let’s start off fresh.

“I think you should tell them about yourself.”

Oh, we are not alone. I apologize. That is Steve, a skinny soccer-style guy who’s been through everything with me and continues to come back.

Myself. As looks go, I’m middle of the scale. I am not a super-attractive movie star, but that’s okay. I get in with my personality and unending desire to be the center of the room.

“Dude, did I tell you the joke I heard yesterday?”

That’s Tom. He’s… something different. He was born in Michigan, lived in Illinois, moved to West Virginia, and settled here. Moving so much made him permanently antisocial but somehow he found himself within our ranks. Hell, it makes things interesting, especially when we eat out.

“Haha, he said ‘eat out,’” Tom said.

Yeah, that’s Tom.
The three of us are standing in line, ready to enjoy a hearty meal at a fast food Italian restaurant. We frequent this place because the food is good and the owner hooks us up with free stuff.

“Can I help you,” the aging man behind the counter asks.

“I’ll have the number three with meat balls,” Tom says.

The counter help looks at him, cocks his head, turns around and stares at the board. Tom loves to fuck with people and we love to watch. The man turns and looks at Tom. Tom puts a bewildered face on and stares blankly at the hired help.

“Number three is a slice of pizza and salad. You mean a number seven?”

“What?”

“It is pizza and a salad,” the man answers.

“It is?”

The man turns to look again, nods his head, and says, “Yeah, it is.”

“Okay,” Tom says, “to go then.”

“What the pizza or spaghetti?”

“Number three, with meatballs.”

The man sighs and pulls a piece of pizza out of the oven. He scoops a large spoon into a vat and plops two meatballs on the slice. The result actually looks pretty good and the man tips the plate to present the Frankensteinian creation.

“Like that?” the man asks.

Tom stares at him. “I want spaghetti with meatballs, not pizza. What kind of an idiot are you?”
The man lowers his head, drops the pizza in the garbage and fills Tom’s order. He slides the plate onto a plastic tray and Tom rides it down the metal track to the cash registers. He pays, turns away from the clerk and smiles. Toddlers have this sense of accomplishment when they take their first steps. That’s the kind of crap you can expect when dealing with Tom.

“It’s not crap, it’s gold.”

“Dude, you’re an asshole!” Steve says.

“Ladies love an asshole,” Tom says.

Tom picks a seat and we follow. The food court is empty around 2 p.m. so we have plenty of room and no one around to worry about offending. Not that we usually care. Now, where was I? Oh, I was talking about Marie.

“My joke. I was telling them my joke. What do you tell a girl with two black eyes?” Tom asks.

“Dude, where did that come from?” Steve asks.

“It’s a joke.”

Don’t know, what?

“Nothin’, you already told her twice.”

That one is a definite classic. I say classic because no matter who your friends are, there is undoubtedly someone who knows and/or tells that joke, or any number of others like it, on a regular basis.

These guys are the best friends I could ever ask for. Hell, how many of your friends have someone’s mom call the cops because she thinks you kidnapped her
grounded son and took him joyriding to the mall? Yes, kidnapped. That one resolved itself without jail time, thank God.

“Tom, is Mamma still crazy?” Steve asks.

“As crazy as you were when you dated Danielle. All I have to say is…” Tom says.

Here we go. It’s like we have a well-rehearsed script.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I’m still breaking up with parts of her she didn’t even know were there.”

We laugh. Everyone seems to pick on Steve’s past. Scratch that, everyone picks on Steve in general.

“What’s up with that? I mean I’m a nice guy.”

“You take some dogs for walks that never should have left the pound,” Tom says.

Ok, this is getting out of hand. Let’s get back to my story – you know, the reason that you’re all here.

“I’ll say,” Steve says.

After lunch, we head out to the car and pile in. Tom sits in the passenger seat and Steve finds a way to take up the entire back seat.

“He’s just making up for all the times that he doesn’t have any room back there,” Tom says.

“Keep it up, ass,” Steve says.

“You wanna go back to telling your story? Or should we just get onto the part where I destroy the pay-per-Portapotty that holds John Elway in it?” Tom asks.
Tom has a vivid imagination. I was dating Marie for about eight months when the blonde entered my life. Anne is hard to miss—short, out spoken, 36D. All important attention grabbing qualities.

“Tell them about the hair,” Steve says.

Oh yeah, the hair. Of course it isn’t really blonde. She dyes it during the summer months, something about it ‘matching her tan.’ I don’t really know what that means, but it seems to be working for her.

“Tell them about the tennis court,” Tom says.

I’m sorry but I’m not telling you about that. You can make your own assumptions as to what that means. Dick.

“Dude, they’re confused. Tell them who got hit by the bus,” Tom says.

Right. The bus hit Marie.

“And she died,” Steve says.

And she died. But, it wasn’t my fault. As I was saying...

Marie was growing suspicious, and I really don’t know what gave her the idea that I was fooling around, unless you take into account my past. Faithfulness is not exactly my mantra. I have a tendency to date people and never break it off with my girlfriend. That usually doesn’t go over well.

“Everyone wants your nuts,” Steve says.

“It’s true, remember Natalie? She wanted your nuts. And she was going out with me,” Tom says.

“Danielle wanted you and went out with me.”

“Hell, Sarah and Diana both went out with me to get to him,” Tom says.
“And don’t forget Candice…”

All right, so I have a bit of a checkered past. At least I didn’t sleep with every one of them. Not that I didn’t want to.

Straying away again. So, Tom and I went to Rockne’s for dinner one night, and Anne happened to come with us. It wasn’t planned, I swear. We ordered those great bacon cheddar fries – if you’ve never eaten there, you have to so you can try this greasy, yet tantalizingly unhealthy, monstrosity. We order and my phone rings. I answered, and of course it is Marie.

“Where are you? We’re supposed to hang out tonight,” Marie said.

Now, I specifically remember telling her that I was hanging with Tom that night… and I was. Who needs to tell her that Anne was there? Not me, that’s for damn sure. What she doesn’t know – never mind, you get the picture.

“What do you mean you’re hanging with Tom? But we had plans…”

Yeah, plans for me to hang with Tom. We didn’t always fight like this. There was a time when all we did was cave in to each other’s wants and get none of our own. Evidently a long semester together and an even longer and hotter summer got in the way of that give-and-take attitude. No matter who you are, you can’t be in a relationship where you never get your way and still be happy about it. That’s just the way it is. She continued pressing me for more and more time together, and I decided that had to stop.

Somehow I got off the phone with her and everything seemed all right. Sure, I would have to explain a detailed itinerary of our actions accounting for any space of more than ten minutes when Tom and I were apart, excluding time when one of us was in the restroom. Oh yeah, can’t forget documenting gas mileage and turning a tape of all
conversations over to her for Secret Service-style inspection. Okay, maybe that’s over the top, but it was damn close.

“Dude, what you needed was to confront her. Since you were completely unable to do that, I had to come up with viable alternative methods of breaking her heart. And there were a few good ones,” Tom says.

Tom, why don’t you tell them your “suggestions?”

“Dude, don’t use air quotes.”

Yeah, sorry.

“To quote a great man, ‘And it goes a little somethin’ like this—‘’

Did you just quote Tone Loc?

Tom rubs his hands together and says, “Yes, now, if you don’t mind…”

* * * * *

You, me, Marie, Steve. We all go to Rockne’s and sit down.

“And order an appetizer?” Steve asks.

Yeah, and order a fucking appetizer. Would you shut up? Thanks. I tap a glass with my fork, make that annoying ass clangy sound, and then ask: “Would everyone in a relationship please raise your left hand.” And I tell Marie to put her hand down.

“I don’t get it.”

“Steve, sometimes we stare at you and expect subtitles,” Evan says. “At any rate, Tom you had another option to get rid of her, right?”
This is my favorite. There’s a restaurant down the street called “The Breakers.” It is upscale, pricey, and the best possible place to take a prospective lady friend. You plan on dinner at 8pm; invite both of them. Have the host seat you in two different sections, and then bounce back and forth between them. The one that stays around at the restaurant and doesn’t take off wandering mad into the night after discovering what is happening is the one that you stay with.

“The name is the best part,” Steve says.

The Mrs. Doubtfire method, of course.

* * * * *

“Pure genius,” Tom says.

Of course. I didn’t use this method. Anyway, back to my story. We’re at the restaurant and my phone rings.

“Are you still with Tom?” Marie asked. “Did you want to stop by later? I’m kinda bored.”

No I didn’t, because I didn’t know when I would be around. She didn’t like that answer and hung up on me.

“Tightening that leash,” Steve says.

He always has a gesture that goes with this, you know, one of those “help I’m choking myself with a chain that is connected to a pole” ones. Steve has gestures for everything. So, she called back.

“She called, what, eight more times?” Tom asks.
Only three, but considering she knew where I was, who I was with (sorta) and what we were doing, there was no need to continue to call. But she did keep calling. Even the server got pissed. At this point, there was no reason for this cellular harassment.

“There would be,” Steve says.

* * * * *

Wow, I can’t count the number of times that I have heard this story. This girl really stalked Evan up and down, called him relentlessly, showed up at his house with a baseball bat and an attitude to break things, and then stepped in front of a bus. Now that is screwed up.

“So we went back home, I dropped off Tom. Anne and I spent several hours getting to know one another,” Evan says.

Getting to know one another, good joke. They probably got to know one another in the back seat of his car.

“We did not,” Evan says.

What the? How can he hear me?

“You’re the narrator, dumbass,” Tom says. “It happens in stories. Someone has to provide the point-of-view and for now it’s you. Of course that is wasted on someone who sees overweight women as desirable.”

“Lay off him, he’s got a nice one now,” Evan says.

You have no idea.
“Uh, please do us a favor and remember the narrator thing.”

My fault.

“We decided to hang out the next night, when Marie was away.”

It always seems like the ‘when the girlfriend’s away the Evan will play’ principal is in effect.

“That’s true, but only after the relationship in question is on a collision course with chaos.”

“Wait, wait, I remember a good joke,” Tom says.

Another stolen joke comin’ up.

“Dude, I told you, we can hear you,” Tom says.

* * * * *

What do a man-ish woman behind a counter, a crumbling building, and a black manager singing “Ain’t no beginning, masta’s got me workin’” have in common?

“No idea,” Evan says.

“Nope,” Steve says.

Every McDonald’s on the highway.

“I’ve never known anyone to hate so many things and yet still function in day-to-day society.”

It’s a gift. So, your story?

“Anyway, before Steve’s narration problem,” Evan says. “I was saying…”
We got together the next night. Anne and I. It did turn physical and was pretty damn fun, but that’s another story… Not one day later, however, I would get a slight shock. I planned on breaking up with Marie, but didn’t want to do it over the phone.”

If you’re going to break someone’s heart, you may as well do it at her house. It’s the considerate thing and all.

“Right,” Steve says. “Did I ever tell you guys about the time I broke up with—“

No and we don’t care. Onto the bus, s’il vous plait.

“I didn’t know you knew French,” Evan says.

I don’t. I got it from some chick I was going down on in Montreal.

* * * * *

“I did, that’s the funny part,” Tom says.

Okay, things went well and progressed fast. Before I knew it I was with Anne and Marie was a distant memory – or so I thought.

Anne and Marie happened to live in the same building. Two nights after the Rockne’s meeting the group of us decided to go back. Tom, Steve, and Anne were all hanging by my car. I went inside to take a piss and as I was coming around the corner there was Marie, standing between me and my car.

“She set you up majorly,” Tom says.

Yeah, I know. She stopped me and said… “So, you with her now?”
I told her that I was.

“We break up and the next night you’re down some other girl’s pants?”

I didn’t like where that was going, that’s for sure. I tried to just go around her, but the entrance to the building is narrow there with a four-foot drop to the street level. I was trapped.

“I saw you two. You left at four in the morning. I saw everything. You can’t tell me otherwise ‘cause I saw it.”

I don’t know what she saw, but…

“Kiss me,” Marie said.

If you can imagine standing in front of an oncoming train and not having the sense to move your dumbass out of the way, that’s what it felt like. I finally muttered, “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because, I have to go,” I said.

“You’re not going to avoid me,” Marie said. “Kiss me. You said you loved me, so kiss me.”

She kissed me. It felt a lot like kissing a corpse – bad analogy. More like your grandma.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I asked, pulling away.

“Go have fun with your skanky new friend, I should have broken up with you over the summer.”

“I still can’t believe she told you that,” Steve says.

“She was trying to dick you over with Anne,” Tom said.
If you think that is weird, wait till you hear this. Every story has a climax; here’s mine. About two weeks later, people started asking questions. “Did you hear what Marie said?” or “Is it, true?” blanketed everyone I knew, especially Anne.

“Dude, it was a magnet for you,” Steve says.

“Yeah, not many girls would pass you up after hearing that the only reason Marie was with you was because you were a good lay,” Tom says.

Marie was telling people that during the last three months of our relationship that the only thing worthwhile was the sex. I don’t know if she was trying to screw Anne and me up or not, but it made for a great rep around school.

“Hey, does that work?”

“It doesn’t matter Steve. You’re still breaking up with parts of Danielle that you didn’t even know existed.”

“Tom, you’re going to –”

I calm the situation by reminding Tom about Kristen.

“Yeah,” he says, “everyone makes mistakes. She was better than her sister, at least.”

A shot at me; I dated Kristen’s completely unstable sister.

“Hey, at least our mistakes are sane!” Steve says.

That’s a great segue. So, after the run-in with Marie…

* * * * *
Are we there yet? I really just want to get there and maybe get something to eat. Yeah, that would be nice. I mean, we already know that a bus hit her; it doesn’t matter if we get the details.

“Um, Steve,” Evan says.

Yes?

“You fuckin’ moron, you took the narration again, and to top it off you’re talking about the story in the story. Is nothing sacred to you?” Tom says.

Sorry.

* * * * *

Anyway. Marie thought it would be a good idea to confront her “new-found friend” Anne about stealing me, yes, stealing me from her. Like I am property or something.

“If I’m not wrong, you left her. To my knowledge you have never been stolen. That’s me.”

“Tom, you’re right,” Steve says.

No one told Marie this. Evidently, things don’t work right in the woman-scorned world.

“You want to come here from another state and take my boyfriend? You did a damn good job you whore!” Marie said.
Some people only get hotter when they get mad because they let their emotions and energy go. Not Marie. If you’ve ever seen someone pissed off on the television court shows, you’ve seen the look that Anne was getting.

“If you want a fight, I’m sorry, but you’re not worth it,” Anne said.

“Bitch,” Marie said.

“Dude, if they were going to fight, they could have at least had the decency to oil up first. Or maybe chocolate syrup,” Tom says.

Ever the opportunist. Why don’t they start fighting, rip each other’s clothes off, and end up making out while they’re at it, Tom?

“That’s an idea.”

That’s not how the real world works.

“It doesn’t?” Steve asks.

Marie got mad. People get angry. She was mad. Marie stormed out, up the stairs, and towards the street. I’m really not sure if she threw herself in front of that bus, or if she fell, but she definitely went ‘Marie vs. Metro’ and the result was as expected. The bus won by knockout.

“You could say elimination,” Steve says.

“At least she stopped bitching,” Tom says.

So, I’m still with Anne and actually happy. That’s why I feel bad. If Marie weren’t fighting with my girlfriend over being my girlfriend, she never would have ran out in the street like that.

“I had a girlfriend once that made a similar mistake,” Tom says.

“Really?” Steve asks.
“Said she was pregnant. That ever happen to you?” Tom asks.

Not yet. Hopefully not ever.

“Yeah, I punched her in the stomach, but she didn’t go to the hospital. Lyin’ bitch,” he says.

Of course he was lying. Nothing is sacred, not a thing. And that is how a story is really told.

Softening the Blow

“I am a man of God,” my coworker Dennis said.

Slender and tall, he smelled distinctively GQ, with a rock hung from his ear and a department store mannequin look. His workbench was a mess, with tools strewn around like dirty laundry in a basement. Cleanliness, like the other company values, was higher on my list.

“It’s just sometimes you have to take care of business, y’know?”

“Sounds like a tough situation, Dennis.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just hard cause my girl is—great—but I’m tellin’ you, if you saw Sierra, shit man.”

Dennis was the sleep-and-tell type. Today he decided to tell me about his encounter with what amounted to be a traveling circus whore. We both continued working while he continued his story. I pulled a fresh computer from its storage tray, placed it on the bench, and twisted the thumbscrews loose to pull off the side cover. The outside looked okay, but the inside was filthy.

“What about Tif?”
“I told you man, Tiffany is great but how’re you gonna pass on when she comes in my room at night and wants to crash?”

After several attempts and various different power cords, I decided that the complaint on the paperwork was right. I sighed and said, “I don’t know, never happened to me.”

“Look, she was over my house, hanging out with my cousin. She was just waiting for Tif to leave man, making excuses to stay and crap. Then, after Tif told her bye, Sierra was standing in my door talking about how tired she was.”

“So, you’re sticking with the ‘I’m a good man of God’ motif then? Even though you slept with Sier—“

“Nah man, I didn’t sleep with her, it was the temptation though, man. ‘Specially after she lay down, then twenty minutes went by and she got up and took her jeans off ‘cause they were too hot. She had these little panties on and…”

Dennis stopped. I could see the little brown and white thought gerbil bouncing around, its foot caught in the exercise wheel that spun too fast. He had the same unit on his bench as he did when he started his Sierra story.

“She got down to her underwear and you didn’t sleep with her?”

“I told you man, I love my girl.”

“So, let’s review. Tif left around eleven, Sierra showed up at your door not five minutes later, took off the majority of her clothes, got into bed, and you went to sleep?”

“Nah, I couldn’t sleep.”

“Why didn’t you just kick her out?”
Dennis shook his head and laughed. He said, “You just don’t kick a girl out, especially when she’s in her panties and shit.”

“So you let her stay? The whole night?”

He looked at me, frowned, and said, “She’s still there.”

“At what point did you, as a self-proclaimed man-of-God decide that was a good idea?”

“It ain’t,” Dennis said, checking his phone. “I’m waiting on her to call me.”

“For what?”

“To say she’s leavin’, and then I’m callin’ my cousin to have him make sure there ain’t nothin’ missin’. I don’t need her taking my shit.”

Dennis concentrated for a moment on the computer on his desk. He shook his head, put it back into the tray on his cart, and grabbed another one. It was smaller, and a store stock piece, which meant that his responsibility for repairing it was diminished. If he screwed up a customer unit, they’d send it back in no time, but a store employee won’t even turn it on.

“You’re unbelievable. What happens when Tif finds out?”

“She won’t.”

I laughed. It was a dry laugh, the one reserved for ‘man-that’s-a-stupid-move’ fuck-ups. “Why not? You got another girl sleeping in your bed.”

“She should be up by now.”

“She’s still at your house.”

Dennis nodded. “That’s what I’m worried about, if Tif rolls by and sees her car, cause she knows her car, and she knows my cousin is supposed to be at work.”
“How does a ‘man of God’ explain cheating on his girlfriend?”

“I didn’t cheat man.”

“Where’s the gray area here? Would Tif call you out for cheating?”

“Tif don’t know, but if she did, probably.”

“Probably?”

“Yeah, but nothing happened,” Dennis said, as a smile crept over his face.

“Bullshit, I know you.”

Dennis laughed, blushed, and said, “I don’t remember much, but sometime
around 3:30 I woke up and she was messin’ with me. I didn’t start it, and I didn’t
participate or reciprocate or whatever.”

He hooked the computer on his bench up to his test equipment and turned it on. It
made a repetitive beeping sound and Dennis peeled the cord out of the back of the unit.

“She just did it and I pretended to be asleep.”

“How are you going to sit here and say you didn’t cheat on Tif when you were
getting groped by Sierra at 3 in the morning?”

“It was 3:30. I told you I pretended to sleep.”

“And?”

“She finished and rolled over. No, she did get up and go to the bathroom to brush
her teeth,” Dennis said. “I need to go get a new toothbrush.”

“But you didn’t cheat?”

“Head ain’t cheatin’,” Dennis said, “specially when you’re sleeping. She did that
shit on her own.”

30
A Change of Pace

My eyes are closed but the dull glow tells me that the sun is up. My legs are bent to the left. I’m lying on my side. My left arm is numb near the shoulder. I open my eyes; the light makes me squint. Haze clears as the room focuses into view. I spread my legs out and bump into Jennifer. I don’t remember her staying here last night. There isn’t much I do remember. The drinking. The partying. The drinking. The socializing. The drinking. Oh, yeah, I did some drinking. I straighten my legs and roll over. The back of Jenn’s head is to me, she is still sound asleep. Her hair smells great even after a long night. Maybe I’ll be able to get some before she has to leave. I don’t even know what fucking day it is.

I swing my legs off the bed and plant my heels on the floor. The carpet crunches like a bag of chips under my feet. Sunlight bounces off the wall and I clear the fog surrounding my head. Her head is still sunk into the pillow. She must have dyed her hair, which she does more often than change her damn socks. It’s hard to keep track of and in the end doesn’t matter. While her hair color changes often, nothing else ever does. Her life is planned and predictable and it is really starting to wear on me. Sex is all that makes things worth it anymore. It's rough knowing you’re ten times smarter than the girl you take to bed and even harder to deal with her when she knows it’s true.

Jenn stirs, sighs, and yawns. I continue staring at the wall. She is a bitch in the morning, one of those ‘can’t function without coffee’ types. Most mornings I get up, go downstairs, and leave her until she feels like interacting. It’s easier for me, which is probably the best plan of action for anyone to follow.

“Morning,” she says.
I dip my eyebrows and listen. She strains her voice, still waking up. It sounds different. I turn to look at her auburn hair matted to her face. Oh shit, I stare directly into the green eyes of my girlfriend’s sister Clarissa.

* * * * *

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” Evan asks, taking a bite of pepperoni and mushroom pizza. “Usually I’m the one getting into that kind of shit.”

Yeah, I know. And I’m the one that listens, figures something out, and tells you how to fucking get out of it.

“True.”

Two facts. One, I woke up next to Jenn’s sister. Two, I didn’t have pants on.

“So basically, you slept with her. The hell are you going to do?”

I don’t know, that’s why we’re here, so you can fucking help me for a change. That seems like the only reason we come to this food court anymore.

“Oh yeah, my fault. What did Clarissa say?”

Ok, so she looks up at me and smiles…

* * * * *

“Guess I’m going to have you give me a ride home more often,” Clarissa says.

I sink my feet under the covers, smooth my disheveled hair, and say, “What the hell did we do?”
Clarissa lifts the blanket and answers, “Looks like a lot.” She turns her gaze to bruises on her shoulder. “I guess just about everything.”

“Oh, shit,” I say. “So, yeah.”

Clarissa sits up, pulling the blanket around her breasts. “I don’t even know why I’m bothering.” She drops the blanket, and the sun frames her topless silhouette. Clarissa springs her feet loose from under the blankets, sets them on the carpet and stands. She is beautiful; her perfect skin and tight body commands my attention.

“What are we going to do?” I ask.

Clarissa stretches her arms up over her head. She arches her back and stands up straight, then says, “I think we’ve already done it.”

“You know what I mean. About Jenn and this.”

Clarissa bends over, picks up her panties, and slides them calmly up her legs. First around her feet, up her ankles, and coming to rest below her hips. “I’m not going to tell her,” she says. “It might come up at Thanksgiving, you know, ‘say Grace’ followed by ‘By the way Jenn, I fucked your boyfriend.’”

I laugh and shake my head. It’s been a long time since I’ve smiled that wide. Maybe there is something here. She parties like me, we laugh, you know. Plus she’s has no boundaries if she’s sleeping with her sister’s boyfriend.

“Sounds like you steered out of a skid and missed a major crash. I can’t believe she didn’t freak out or something. She must hate her sister.”

She doesn’t. It’s – weird. We talked before about the difference between sex and love.

“A girl who knows the difference? Snatch her up!”
I kinda did.

“Is there anything else the people at home need to know?” Evan asks.

Not at the moment. Anyway… we finish lunch and dump our trash. Evan throws his tray away to “keep the tray makers in business.” I set my tray on top of the can, next to a sudsy bucket used to clean the tables. And someone we equally despise – Les Irvine, interrupts us. Les is the result of genetic testing gone wrong, or evolution’s big fucking joke, whichever you prefer. He jogs over from the corner of the food court. Les droops both of his arms across out collective shoulders and smiles.

“Stokin’ day, huh?” Les asks.

“Yeah,” Evan says.

“What are you boys up to?” Les asks.

“Nothing’, just finished eating.”

“Pussies. Got a joke for you, what do Rednecks do on Halloween?”

Evan and I look at each other. Everyone knows that I tell the jokes around here.

“Don’t know.”

“Pump-Kin!” Les says.

I laugh; there are only so many times that you can laugh at a joke Les tells. If you know the type who is constantly talking but never says anything, you know Les. “Yeah, we gotta go man.”

“Busy later?” Les asks.

“Working,” Evan says, lying.

“Same,” I say.
“Alright then, catch you guys later. Gotta grab something to eat and get outta here.”

We tell him “later” and escape out the glass doors and into the parking lot.

“I can’t stand that fucking guy. If he wasn’t friends with Steve…”

Steve is our vertically inferior soccer friend. We grew up with him but our personalities clash. He hates jokes and I make him into jokes. One day that’ll bite me in the ass.

“So, what are you going to do?”

I really don’t know. For now, I’m off to work.

* * * * *

Work sucked. After my shift I’m always hungry, so I call Evan and see what he’s up to. He’s meeting Steve at Rockne’s, so that’s where I’m heading. They already have a table, so I walk in and sit down, across from Steve.

“Hey Tom,” Steve says.

I didn’t know they let you out of rehab.

“Rehab?” Steve asks.

Yeah, didn’t they put you in there last time someone caught you screwing around with the zoo animals? I heard the elephant never has been the same.

Evan takes a drink of his cola and says, “Nice.”

“Ass,” Steve says.
My dad said, “The day you realize you’re an asshole is the day you look around and are the only one laughing.” You two fuckers are laughing.

The server comes over and asks if we’re ready. I order fries, and the other two each order the same crap that they always do. Steve orders something gay and Evan orders a buffalo chicken sandwich with ranch dressing.

* * * * *

“Is detailing our orders really necessary?” Evan asks.

No, probably not.

“Lost the internal monologue again?” Steve asks. “The people are waiting.”

Looks like it, you two just go back to whatever it was that you were doing.

“Sorry,” Steve says.

“Yeah, our bad,” Evan says.

* * * * *

I think for a few minutes about what Evan said earlier. I have to figure out what to do. She’s been on my mind all day.

“Clarissa?” Steve asks.

You fucking told him?

“It came up,” Evan says.

How did it fucking come up?
Evan laughs, “He asked what you were up to last night. Besides, you would have told him now anyways.”

Yeah, I guess so.

“Did she call you?” Steve asks.

“Which one?” Evan asks.

“Either one.”

No.

“Ouch,” Steve says.

The fuck you mean ‘Ouch?’

“Rejected,” Steve says.

“You would know, dumbass. When’s the last time you had a date with anything that belonged on dry land?” Evan asks.

Steve sulks his head and looks out the blind-covered window.

“I don’t know why I even hang with you two.”

Yeah, neither do we. I proceed to retell the story in hopes of gaining some redeeming advice or information, but maybe that in itself is a lost cause. After dinner my phone rings.

“Jenn?” Evan asks.

I nod, step away and take the call. A short time later I close it and rejoin my friends.

“What’d she say?” Steve asks.

Don’t you have something to do?
“No, I,” Steve says, looking at his watch. “Damn, I do. Les is picking me up and we’re going to find an apartment.”

That’s one pad that won’t be having a lot of parties. You might just want to pick up a “no trim” sign before you moved in.

“I gotta go,” Steve says.

“Have fun with king douche bag,” Evan says.

Try not to harpoon anything while you’re out.

Steve stares at me, and then slides off of his chair. “Fuck off.”

“Man, you’re really starting to get to him,” Evan says.

I know. It makes me smile.

“So, who called?”

Jenn.

* * * * *

Jenn calls me from work and says to meet her when she gets off at her a place. Ok, that’s fine. Then she says she really has something important to talk about. Fuck me. I really hope Clarissa can read a fucking calendar and realize that this is not Thanksgiving.

I show up, park on the street, and walk. Jenn’s apartment is on a cul-de-sac. Most people just park there and walk. It’s nice not to be parked in but there was one time I had to pound my way through every damn door in the plaza after some Neanderthal fucknut parked in the middle of the goddamned circle right next to my car.
“Tell them what happened,” Evan says.

Sometimes things that should stay a secret don’t stay that way.

“They figured that out.”

Yeah, I know. It’s called pacing. You’re not Steve and you should know how this fucking story-telling crap works.

“Sorry, I’ll let you go.”

Thank you. Jenn storms out her door. It slams behind her. She is already sobbing. What a change from the cool and calm voice that called me over here just under half an hour ago.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her.

She makes a few attempts to say something, but only drivel comes out. It is the same stuff that comes out of a two-year-old’s mouth when he wants something.

“I can’t under—“

She hits me, right across the face with her open hand. Stunned, I look at her. That ‘the-hell-are-you-doing-get-in-the-kitchen-and-make-me-some-food’ look is on my face. Or maybe I’m just mad.

“Bitch,” is all I can muster before a flurry of closed fists pound on my chest. Normally, I advise someone in my position to get the hell out of there after knocking her on her ass; I only follow the second part. It’s not like I try to hurt her, just push her off of me. Jenn has balance like a newborn calf, so she falls right on her ass.

“What the fuck is this about?” I ask.

“Steve called me. Steve, your friend. You know, the one that you call names and shit all the time.”
“And?”

“He told me.”

I’m going to kill him. I turn around, preparing to leave her flat on her ass.

“Wait,” she says, pulling herself off the ground.

“I’m not playing this game with you.”

“Obviously not,” Jenn says.

“What did he say?” Some damage control has to be done; it’s only a matter of how much. Jenn chokes back a sob and looks up at the sky. She lowers her chin and stares at me again.

“Well?”

Just as Jenn is about to dish out whatever horror she has, a car pulls up behind me.

“Buddy! The hell you doin’ here?”

“Les?” I ask.

Wheeling back around, I look at Jenn who is trying to manufacture some more tears.

“What’s he doing here?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Jenn says.

“Don’t you?”

Les passes me and stops at her side. “Hey sexy.”

Cue a runaway snowplow when someone just gets up the nerve to cross the street.

“What’s wrong?” Les asks, wiping away a tear that was camping out on her cheek.

“I think we’re breaking up,” Jenn says.

I don’t know why, but I feel the need to fix this cluster f- before it gets any worse.

“She’s just a little broken up.”

“About what?” Les asks.

“We go way back,” I say, “someone we both used to know just died.”

Jenn looks at me and I nod.

“Yeah,” she says, “we thought we knew him real well but it turns out we were wrong.”

Les looks at each of us, then frowns. “I can… I can leave if… if you want.”

“No, I was just taking off,” I say. “Someone should stay with Jenn, to make sure she’s alright.”

“Yeah,” Les says, “I can do that.”

“I figured you could.”

I turn to leave and feel a hand on my shoulder. Jenn walks around me, hoisting her arms over my shoulders and pulling me tight against her. It’s the first time in a solid month that either one of us felt anything beyond general annoyance for each another.

* * * * *

“Wow man,” Evan says. “So she was banging Les? How long?”

Don’t know and don’t fucking care.

“Well, you ended up on the right end of that deal. You get to nail her sister whenever you want.”
Yeah I do. Sucks though; I missed out on a great opportunity for a rodeo fuck.

“A what?”

You know, take Jenn from behind, lean over her and whisper in her ear that Clarissa is better, then see how long I can hang on. Always wanted to do that.

“You are one sick sonuvabitch, you know that? So, what are you going to do about Steve calling Jenn up and all that shit?”

Nothing.

“Why the hell not?”

Because he’s the one that called Les and told him to come over.

“How do you know?”

For as much dicking around as I do and jumping on that poor kid’s ass, he wouldn’t do something like that unless there was a good reason. Clarissa is meeting me in half an hour, I gotta go.

“What are you going to do about Clarissa?”

See if I can make Thanksgiving interesting.

“Same family, different girl. Should be entertaining,” Evan says.

It’s hard to say what’s going to happen. Clarissa and I will see what happens, especially considering that I got into this situation. I don’t know what it is, but my life never seems to feel the need to ever stop and ask for any directions.

The Weatherman

Our highly evolved society has reached a point in which it is necessary to discard certain outdated traditions that many Americans cling to with the entirety of their being. Meteorologists are the bane of our great nation and need to be dealt with in the only way
that we as a society know how – violence. Now, you may be sitting there thinking to yourself ‘This guy is crazy’ or ‘But I’m a peaceful person.’ You may be formulating thoughts that sound like this but of course you are wrong. It takes an informed person, a man who has seen the inner workings of their cult; to tell you why it is of the utmost importance that we extinguish this threat before it spreads.

Friends, I must tell you, I have been there. I have seen their meetings, sat inside the production center and witnessed first hand theileness of their treachery. An example: say, as it is common to do, you want to take your family for a well-deserved trip to the beach. You and your wife want to know what attire will be needed, and whether or not to bring an extra set of clothing in case of rain. You turn on the computer while your darling wife who no doubt just had breast enhancement surgery (this is hypothetical, so we should make it realistic) concentrates her attention on the television. Well, that is, after you turn it on for her of course. The internet and weather station both claim that the sunniest of skies is all that you will see, so you and the misses gussy up in your best clothing, swimming attire concealed beneath, and pile your 2.5 children into the stylish sport utility vehicle with leather trim and fold down third-row seating. On the good advice of these “professionals,” you take the journey. The day is indeed beautiful, that is if you were a wind gust. A nasty storm takes you by surprise, blowing in over the lake, engulfing you in its turbulence and spitting your family up like dead fish littering the beach at sunrise. After the ferocious weather passes, you even notice that the .5 child is missing, a casualty directly attributed to the weatherman. No longer can we stand by and let more and more of our half children be swept away by an errant gust when all of this could have been prevented.
So, it is with great passion that I present to you the very reason for your loss: meteorologists. Think about it. They sit pretty, high in their ivory towers and watch computer models and satellite data, they eat celery sticks and drink fancy fruit juices while tabulating numbers and checking figures dealt to them by their central command, the National Weather Service. It is too great a task, however, to start by attacking the home base. Instead, we will begin by holding our local weathermen accountable for their misgivings and false hopes. They will pay for continuing to provide us with temperatures that are “within five or six degrees.” No more can they get off saying “there is a fifty percent chance of clouds” when you and I can look outside and see them. See them? The clouds, right there out the window above the sofa. To think, they went to school for this. Or perhaps they didn’t. No matter, we the people will rise up and tell the network executives that hire these swindlers, “No more!” Protests will spring up throughout the nation and then my friends, we will be strong enough to attack the center of it all, their proverbial eyes of the storms, and make it a final resting place for these foul beasts of burden. Down with the weathermen!

Wait, who is that? My God, she is beautiful! She is reading something, and pointing to… to us. She’s pointing at me, my house, I know it! Thank you, network executives, for hiring this wheat-haired vixen to dictate the changing nature of our atmosphere. She wears her AMS seal like a badge, courageously predicting the manner in which my day will unfold. Let the winds howl, the rain form torrents coming down off the roof. Let the sun burn holes in our skin and let it all happen when something else has been forecasted! Provided that this gorgeous woman is the vehicle in which we receive it. No one needs .5 of a kid anyway.
CHAPTER III:

TROUBLE AT HOME

A World War II Medal

“I could’ve got me a medal boys,” Grandpa says. “But I had my fun.”

He lights the Kent Golden that always is within his reach, and looks at his grandchildren with anticipation.

A glass chandelier, stretching to the cathedral ceiling and riddled with cobwebs illuminates the room, though the window just above the sink lets in more light than that clanky contraption ever does.

“Everyone in town was signin’ up for this or that. I remember Buddy Carol, lived in the holla’, he’d shaved his head and walked into the Marion recruiting office.”

You don’t ask someone who is telling you about a war if the friend he’s talking about got shot or made it home. My brothers and I stare as Grandpa continues to smoke, the toxic blue gas wrapping around his cheeks and flying toward the ceiling.

“Those offices called me, too.”

He is no classic war hero. There were no gallant parties to celebrate the triumphant returns of these hardened lives. For Granddaddy, there was no war.

“The results came back sayin’ I wasn’t fit to fly.”
A car passes down the road, and the reflection shoots forward off a spoon lying in the sink. That spark of light catches the crystal of the chandelier and I collect it in my thoughts.

My brother says, “So you couldn’t go?”

“You don’t know what it’s like, boys. Watch your friends disappear and suddenly become the most eligible bachelor in two counties…” Grandpa pauses. “‘Cause you’re the only one left.”

Granny walks in, her apron tied firmly around her waist. Her face is round and her eyes resemble the crystal on that dusty chandelier.

“Isn’t that right, Granny?”

“What’s that Hughes?”

“Now Granny.”

Granddaddy moves over to the sink to watch and make sure that Granny is doing what she does the right way, even though there is no doubt in our minds. The dinner ham. She has practiced on over a hundred other hams just like this one.

“You better watch it or you’ll burn ‘er.”

Granddaddy finds his knife, older than any of us. It smells dull and reflects nothing but the grime caked on the blade. That knife mates so well with the ham. My brother reaches up and takes a piece of the pink meat, sliding it into his mouth. The salt cured smell lingers and matches the air of the old salt mining town.

“It’ll be a few minutes y’all,” Granny says, motioning for us to go into the living room. “Go on while I get it ready, wash your hands in five minutes.”
We go into the bathroom and wash up, and then head back into the kitchen. Maybe later we will try and get more from Grandpa about the war. Right now, the only thing fighting is our stomachs, wanting to take the ham and fixings by storm.

The Body in the Trunk

Steve Arnold wondered exactly what he’d do with a dead body. It’s really not something you can lug around without being asked questions. Questions are very inconvenient. But before he dealt with the problem in his trunk soaked with Febreze, he had to pick up Jonathan Coates.

The black sedan pulled out of the alley, and Steve was on his way to Jonathan’s. He took a moment while stopped at a traffic light to examine his car. Besides the usual junk, he had a worn copy of The Bible that always sat on the back seat. Sometimes, when Steve sped through cramped city streets, he’d hear the heavy cloth bound book slam into one of the rear doors. He’d smile, enjoying his little chances to get back at God. Steve knew that a kinder deity wouldn’t have let him rot in jail for those years; a more powerful being would have got him out.

The fuel light came on and the car made three ding sounds. Steve pulled the car into the gas station and opened the door. He left the keys in the ignition and stepped onto the cold pavement. The winter weather came earlier this year than it ever had and Steve was ill prepared. Wind cut through his polo t-shirt and imitation designer jeans.

The glass covering the digital readout of the pump activity was clean and in the sun’s reflection Steve caught a view of his face. He was well shaven and tinted red from the cool wind. His neck was pale. Jonathan told him to hit one of those tanning bed
salons but he had serious reservations about baking under a heat lamp for eight to twenty minutes.

The pump clicked as the flow of gasoline stopped. He watched the man next to him. He was wearing a green plaid flannel shirt and tattered jeans while trying in vain to top off his tank. Steve did not understand why anyone wasted their time on a few more drops. His pocket vibrated, someone was calling his phone. He dropped his right hand into his pocket and flipped the phone open.

“Yeah? Look, I said I’d be there and I’m on the fuckin’ way. Five minutes.”

Steve flipped the phone closed and put it back. He pulled out his wallet and stared at the screen. There was only a ten-dollar bill; the screen read $26.57. He shook his head, buried the wallet back in his rear pocket, and trudged step after step toward the front door. Steve hated gas attendants and any chance he had to avoid them was considered another scratch in the win column. He yanked the door nearly off its hinges and stepped inside. A bell rang out to alert the clerk of his presence. He walked to the line, his eye focused on a display of the newest Dr. Pepper flavor right next to one for beef jerky. Steve realized that he hadn’t eaten yet today and his stomach growled. It joined the symphony of sounds provided by the cash register, the hum of electric lighting above, and idle conversation by the couple in front of him.

“Come on,” he said aloud.

“You’re tellin’ me,” a man behind him said.

Steve turned his head and noticed that the man was considerably shorter than him. He wore a pair of glasses that made him look much more intelligent than he actually was.

“If they take any longer I’m just going to leave…” he continued.
His voice trailed on, talking about the cold snap in the weather and the local football team, which, Steve admitted, he didn’t follow. After a bit, Steve stepped to the register and offered his Discover to the dreaded pump attendant. The man behind the counter was in his forties with forcefully died black hair and unkempt facial hair. He scoffed at Steve and pointed to a sign to his right.

“Sorry, only MasterCard or Visa.”

Steve examined the sign, looked back at the attendant, and slid a Visa from his wallet. The way that dick said sorry grated like sandpaper on Steve’s retina. He hated using a card at all but didn’t have a choice. Pulling away with a trunk holding Carson’s body was not an option. The cops care more about gas station drive offs than murder, anyway.

“You wan’ anything else? Dr. Pepper just came out with—“

“Just the gas from pump two.”

The clerk swiped the card and returned it back to Steve. The receipt printed and Steve carved a few lines on it, leaving before the employee had a chance to even say anything snide like “have a good day.” The door clanged as it slammed shut behind him.

“Another fuckin’ model citizen,” Steve said.

Steve took a few steps toward the pump where he parked his car and stopped. He took a few steps past the range of the door and something grabbed his attention. The sun glared off the windshield of Steve’s black sedan. It pulled out, and he wasn’t in it.

“This is going to take a little longer than I planned,” Steve said, shaking his head and dialing Jon on his cell phone. He held the phone away from his ear and still heard Jon who was pissed that he was late.
“Yeah, Jon. I know, I know – the car’s gone.”

“I’m on my way,” Jon said. “I’ll pick you up at the diner.”

Steve walked across the street and pulled on the door of the Open Square Diner. He took a seat in the nearest booth. The fat waitress with red hair dropped off a cup of coffee. The other one, also fat, must be off today, Steve thought. Steve and Jon had a meeting with Cassie in two hours to deliver the money or the body. Fifteen minutes ago, Steve had the body. Now all he had was lukewarm coffee.

Jonathan Coates was the reason Steve got into this business in the first place. He and Jon were dropping back some liquor. When it came time to pay the tab, Jon pulled out a huge wad of cash and dropped a hundred dollars on the table for a bill of seventy. Steve made the mistake of asking how Jon got it and two weeks later he was working alongside Jon as a problem solver for Cassie Dicarcessio. Six years down and both Steve and Jon have been trying to retire, but Cassie so nicely pointed out how hard it was to find good finger men and she needed them for the Carson job.

Steve glanced outside and a cherry red Mazda RX-8 pulled up. The door opened and Coates stepped out. Jon always dressed in a pinstripe suit; this one was grey. Steve knew Jon was agitated. He looked like he could kill someone. Steve hoped it wouldn’t be him. Jon opened the door, pulled his Ray-Bans down and searched the diner. He found Steve sitting in the booth right behind the front door.

“You left your keys in it, didn’t you?”

Jon knew the answer, no matter how many times he told Steve that it would bite him in the ass one day, he never listened. Steve did not answer the question.

“Brilliant,” Jonathan said.
“It wasn’t like I wanted it to happen.”

“Didn’t want it to hap—you left your keys in the ignition of an unlocked car. A car that we, by the way, were supposed to use to transport a body.”

Jonathan looked around the diner for a moment and realized it was crowded. And the patrons were staring. Jon took off his glasses and looked at Steve.

“Why do you got to pick the most public booth you can find? We got business to take care of.”

“I didn’t think about it.”

“Let’s ride over to Carson’s and get this over with. Worse comes to worse we can wrap him and toss the body in the trunk.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “About that.”

“About what?”

“Carson’s body.”

“Body? You were supposed to wait for me,” Jon said.

“Well, it went like this…”

* * * * *

Steve looked around and parked. He checked his watch. It was just before one o’clock. His Grand Am is in the side alley, alongside Will Carson’s office building. The alley was secluded and only visited when garbage trucks rolled through once or twice a week. The dumpsters looked empty so Steve didn’t expect to be interrupted if things went bad. Carson worked on the top floor and Steve knew there were two ways in and
out. He knew that Carson would run out the front if he tried to escape. Steve pulled a paper from his pocket and punched the numbers into his phone. The phone rang only once.

“Hello, thanks for calling—“

“Carson?” Steve asked. “Side alley. You got five minutes.”

After a few minutes, Carson slunk around the corner and walked down the alley. Steve, who had been leaning on the hood, stood up as Carson approached.

“You know why I’m here,” Steve said.

Carson reached his hand under his coat. Steve plunged his hand to the inside of his own coat. The cold pistol butt was right where it should have been, holstered quietly on his belt. Carson produced a cigarette, put it against his lips, and lit it. He blew the smoke out in waves. Steve knew he was stalling.

“Well, I always like to have you stop by Steve, but I can’t—“

“You owe.”

Carson had sweat beads cascading down his face. He was puffing away and not saying much. It was obvious that Carson didn’t have the money. “We can do this the hard way, or you can give me the cash.”

“Look, you don’t have to do this. You could – we could fake it.”

Steve rubbed his temple with his forefinger and said, “What the hell are you—“

“Listen. You tie me up; throw me in the trunk, you know, whatever it is you guys do. Send a ransom note or something; they wire the money to an offshore account, the whole deal. I’ll pay you off; I’ll pay her off. In the end everybody wins!”
Carson beamed, admiring the genius of his plan. Steve reached to his holster and pulled out his Beretta. He clipped the safety off and shook his head.

“Let me get this straight. You want me to kidnap you. Tie you up. Put you in the trunk.”

“Uh huh. C-could you put the gun away?”

“Send a ransom note to…somebody.”

“My family.”

“Right. Get the money, give you some of it, and then just let you go?”

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

Steve swept his hand across Carson’s head, knocking him to the pavement. This guy was trouble and he didn’t seem to even know it. Carson back peddled, scraping his ass on the pavement. Steve thought he looked like a wounded animal before a death blow.

“You don’t have it. You’re not going to have it. And now you want me to go along with your cock-faced scheme to get your ass out of a jam?”

Steve pointed the gun at Carson’s head. Sweat sprung up like a tent city on Carson’s face.


He emptied his wallet on the hood. Steve picked up the cash and flipped through the bills. It wasn’t even enough to get groceries this week, let alone a suitable bribe.

“You want me to give her this? How long you been doing business with her?”

Carson cocked his head, looked up at Steve and said, “Two years.”
Two years and he hasn’t figured out how this works. Loan sharking seems to be so much easier when the shit stains you let borrow money are completely worthless.

Steve noticed Carson’s mismatched clothes for the first time.

“You know the money is due, you blow it on,” Steve said as he looked over Carson’s attire, “whatever it is you blow it on, and then you expect someone to be compassionate?”

Carson stood up, his hands extended in front of his body. “It’s the only chance I got,” he said.

Steve nodded. His head hurt and as long as Carson is in the trunk he won’t be able to run. All Steve has to do is take him to Cassie and dump him. She can square up anyway she wants to.

Steve popped open the trunk and motioned for Carson to get in. Carson got a foot in and stopped. That’s where things got… complicated. Carson lunged at Steve with a letter opener pulled from his jacket. Steve pulled his gun and shot two rounds into Carson’s chest. Carson staggered and Steve used his forefinger to push him back into the trunk.

The city noise made it impossible for anyone to make out the gunshots but the blood still sprayed all over the trunk. Steve knew it would have to be cleaned – again. Steve wiped the spots that were highly visible and slammed the trunk. Shaking his head, he walked toward the front of the car and stopped. He opened the back door and produced a bottle of Febreze. Steve popped the trunk and sprayed a few times. He took a deep whiff in, wrinkled his nose, and unscrewed the lid. He dumped the remainder over Carson’s body and tossed the empty bottle inside. That smell, the new death. It’s worse
than the one left over after his ’88 Skylark obliterated a deer on a rural two-lane abortion the state called a highway. That smell never left. He would have to trade this car in too. But first he’d have to drop off the body.

* * * * *

After the story, Steve and Jon piled into Jon’s car to hunt down the Grand Am. The RX-8 slammed into gear and Jon peeled the tires, leaving rubber scrapes in the worn black top.

“Where’s the last place you saw it?” Jon asked.

“South on Arling.”

Jon took a quick look in his rear-view and made a U-turn. Car horns blared and he laughed. Steve clutched the “oh shit” bar that hung down over the passenger door and his face was pale. He remembered his mother saying that phrase to his dad when he would drive like a maniac. That happened to be all the fucking time.

“They better not take anything,” Steve said.

“There’s a fuckin’ body in your trunk and you’re worried about them taking something.”

“I have a lot of valuables in that car.”

“Like?”

“My Bible.”

Jon squinted, shook his head and asked, “You have a gawdamn Bible in there?”

“You probably shouldn’t say God damn and Bible in the same sentence.”
“Why not? Besides, you’re not exactly a God fearing individual.”

“No, but—”

“You killed a guy, and there’s a Bible in the car. You didn’t toss Carson on top of it did you?”

“No,” Steve said. “It’s in the back seat.”

“Uh oh, they’ll see it for sure.”

“You think they’ll take it?”

“Probably. Even before they take your gun or your Bose stereo that I told you not to fuckin’ buy in the first place.”

Steve put his right hand on the windowsill and propped his head while he looked out the window. The street was full of cars. Uptown was a lot like a suburb. The buildings had newer faces, with fresh masonry covering age-old pipes and electrical wiring. It looked attractive to potential investors and that’s all that mattered. Jon pulled in and parked across the street from the police department.

“What, you turning me in?”

“Look, you’re just going to go inside and let them do their job.”

“I ain’t going to jail. The hell you mean—“

“Look. Go in, report your vehicle stolen, and that’ll be the end of it,” Jon said.

“Are you serious?”

Jon reached over and clicked the unlock button. This is the stupidest plan ever, Steve thought. He spent years trying not to end up here and now Jon wanted him to walk in and ask for their help.
Steve mocked speaking to the police: “Yes, I would like to report my car stolen. It happened a few hours ago. No, I don’t have the license number, but you’ll know it’s mine by the body in the trunk. Yes, that’s right officer, thank you for your diligence.”

Jon just stared and said, “Think about it. They find your car, they find the body, and you blame the car thieves.”

Steve bounced the plan around his head and decided not to waste more time. It wasn’t like he would win against Jon; Jon was stubborn when he was right, which was always. Steve exited the car and froggered across the street to the precinct’s front door.

The lights were extremely bright, clean and florescent white. The room had three uncomfortable looking chairs on the left. A heavy steel door was straight ahead, and a glass encased receptionist stared with untrusting eyes.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Yeah, I need to report a…”

The telephone rang and she put her finger in the air.

“Police department, do you have an emergency?”

Steve took a few steps around the room and looked directly into a camera in the far corner. I’m going to jail, he thought. The receptionist transferred the call and spoke to him again.

“Now,” she said, “what was it you needed?”

He looked at her nameplate. It read “Alice.” She was a young woman, early 30’s, and had dyed her hair an unnatural red.

“My car was stolen.”
Alice nodded, got a clipboard and attached a packet of papers to it. She opened a drawer and slid it to him. Steve took the packet, and flipped through the four pages. He looked at some of the lines and sighed heavily, remembering that he filled out less paperwork than this to rent his apartment.

“Is there a problem?” Alice asked.

He patted his pockets and said, “No pen.”

She stared at him and said, “It’s attached to the clipboard.”

He looked and found one dangling from the metal ring and scribbled the information on the form. Steve thought it strange that these papers seemed like bad copies, but maybe it’s the result of budget cuts. The news is always saying that the city is in debt.

Twenty minutes later Steve stepped down the concrete stairs and crossed the street to where Jon was parked. Steve darted across the road, pried open the door, and fell inside.

“Sorry, there were like…”

“Cassie called.”

“Oh,” Steve said. “What do we do now?”

“Now we find your car.”

Jon cut the wheel and pulled out in front of a Toyota. The driver slammed on his brakes and the horn faded as Jon flew down the first side street on the right. How Steve actually got to be friends with Jon he didn’t remember. Most people found Jon to be—difficult. Hell, even Jon’s wife couldn’t stand him. But Steve was different. To Jon, Steve was a brother.
“How long do we got?” Steve asked.

“How.”

Steve sat back in his seat and sighed. He said, “What the hell can we do in an hour?”

“Drive.”

The RX-8 cut down a few side streets, and the pair checked a few known drop points for stolen vehicles. Jon said that it could have been some joyriding kids. Maybe they’re in for a helluva surprise if they open the trunk.

“Yeah, could be worse though,” Jon said.

“Startle me with your mental acumen. How the fuck could it be worse?”

“You could have been pulled over with Carson in the trunk.”

Steve laughed to himself and said, “Never happen.”

Jon cut off a blue Honda and turned left down a one-way street the wrong way.

They turned onto a normal street just in time to miss a UPS truck. The driver yelled some things that made Steve wonder.

“So, that’s what ‘brown can do for you.’” Steve said.

“That’s a good business,” Jon said. “Lots of money in it. Plus, people send some fucked up things in the mail.”

“Like what?”

“Besides drugs?”

“Well, yeah,” Steve said.
“I know a guy that works for them in Chicago. He called me up one time and said ‘you’ll never believe what I found in this guy’s package.’ I was intrigued, so I bit. ‘What?’ I said. He dicked around for a few minutes and finally told me,” Jon said.

The car began to slow down. Jon leaned forward and stared.

“And?”

Jon squinted his eyes and looked. “Isn’t that your car?”

Steve braced himself and Jon spun the wheel, turning the car around to pursue. The Grand Am sped up and flew through an intersection. The light turned red and the RX-8 plowed through. At least Jon had the decency to beep. It was considerate, fucking considerate.

It’s never long before the police catch on that there’s a high-speed drag and this was no exception. Jon reached back, pulled his seat belt across his lap, and jammed on the gas. The officer followed and Steve watched his Grand Am as it weaved in and out of traffic. The police car was far back and fading as Jon hit a three-way split road. The Grand Am went left.

“Left, left – left!” Steve yelled as Jon turned right.

“Left damn it! Now you lost him.”

“I know.”

“You know? We had him and you went right.”

“Yep, and the cop went left.”

Jon looked at Steve, braked, and opened his window. The air was cold as it whipped Steve in the face. Jon launched his left arm out the window and looked in the rear view one more time.
“He ain’t a punk kid. He can drive.”

“Thanks,” Steve said. “That makes me feel all warm and good.”

“Thanks to your report, that cop’ll chase him for the better part of the afternoon.”

Jon’s phone rang. He picked it up, looked at it, and said, “Cassie.”

“Again?” Steve asked.

Jon answered the phone, nodded a few times, and said “We’ll be there.”

“So?”

“She said we’re late.”

Steve took a deep breath as Jon cut the wheel and headed downtown. After a few minutes, Steve saw the sign. O’Houlihan’s was old. The building had a brick lined frame with classic style bay windows and forest green trim around the sign. The parking lot was fairly empty when they pulled in.

Steve felt the wind slice his skin and he again wished he had a jacket. They hurried inside and immediately saw Cassie sitting in the corner booth, flanked by henchmen on both sides. A hostess welcomed them. They ignored her and walked to Cassie’s booth.

“Sit,” Cassie said.

Steve sat across from a very bald man. His face was scarred, like a firefighter that Steve knew. The guy had been trying to save a dog for a hysterical lady when a plank gave way. Steve decided that he’d never own a dog after he heard that.

Jon sat next to Steve across from a different gentleman who looked like what would be left if the entire seventies decade threw up. Steve knew him as Bruce and had a few run-ins with him at the police station. He worked during the day as a detective.
“Boys,” Cassie started, “do you know why you’re here?”

Cassie was attractive, the kind that money can get you. Behind her smug demeanor was a softness that made her easy to work with. Especially for Jon. Steve started to say something.

“Don’t,” she continued.

Steve folded his hands and put them on the table. A waitress came over and asked if they wanted any drinks. Jon looked at Cassie who nodded and they each ordered waters. Jon always had a lemon, Steve didn’t. The waitress left and an uncomfortable silence followed.

“You fucked up, didn’t you?” Cassie asked.

“I’m sure it’s just a…” Jon said.

“Didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Steve said.

“Yeah, I know you did.”

Jon and Steve looked at each other and didn’t say anything. Jon looked at Cassie, whose anger dissipated. There was something more there, Steve thought.

“So... tell me what happened.”

* * * * *

Steve sat uncomfortably as Jon wrapped up the story. Cassie said nothing.

“…and then we pulled in here and viola.”
Jon talked dramatically in front of Cassie. Steve called him out on it and Jon referred to it as his “business model.” Jon called himself a collector of people. He would herd a host of people that would benefit him, pay them due (and in some cases undue) respect and they would help get him out of sticky situations. With Cassie, though, it was more of an attraction.

“Gentlemen,” Cassie said, breaking the silence. “Go find Carson. I don’t give a shit how, but you better damn sure show up with Carson’s body before someone else does.”

Jon and Steve exited the restaurant without even getting their waters. Steve thought this was unfortunate because somewhere between chasing a Grand Am and being told to hunt down the body still in his trunk, he got thirsty. The pair cut across the parking lot and got into Jon’s car.

“We’re lucky men,” Jon said.

“Why’s that?”

“Cause Cassie usually kills guys who tell her they lost a body.” Jon said as he started the car.

Steve looked at Jon, crunching his forehead and looking lost. Steve wondered how many people lost a dead body.

“You mean this has happened before?”

Jon shook his head and said, “Steve, you get the idea.”

Jon adjusted the rear view mirror and watched Bruce and his burly friend exit the restaurant and funnel into a sky blue Buick sedan. Even from here, you could make out the bulldog jowls on his face.

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“You better hope that they don’t find Carson before we do,” Jon said.

Steve looked out of the back window as the Buick followed. After a few minutes and several traffic lights, Jon passed the police station. Steve watched in the mirror as the gangster piloted Buick pulled into the spot that a few hours ago Jon parked in.

“At least they aren’t following us,” Steve said.

“Cassie doesn’t want a paper trail.”

Steve thought Jon’s answer seemed cold. Jon was in this mess too. If it weren’t for Jon, Steve would still be working in a tollbooth taking quarters from old ladies. Steve’s cell phone rang. The display showed “unavailable.” Normally, Steve didn’t answer calls like this but since he was having such a good day he took the call. Things couldn’t get any worse.

“Mr. Arnold, we found your car. We need you to come to the station as soon as possible.”

Steve pushed the phone away and mouthed the word, “Police.” Jon nodded, down shifted and popped into a parking lot. Steve said he was on the way, slid the phone back into his pocket, and Jon gunned the engine toward the station.

* * * * *

“According to your report, the car was stolen from Joyner’s. Is that correct?”

Detective Cromartie was a medium built, dark haired man. He wore glasses, but took them off to review Steve’s report. The lights hummed like a wasp under a plastic cup. The only other sound was Cromartie flipping through the pages. Steve knew by the
detective’s look that Cromartie wouldn’t believe anything he had to say. If Steve were on the other side of this table he would think the same thing.

“That’s right,” Steve said.

Cromartie looked at Steve for a moment and forced a smile. Steve knew the detective was looking at him like a criminal. He didn’t appreciate it. It’s been years since anyone has burned that look through him and Steve shifted in his seat. This guy thinks he knows, and that has to change.

“That the good news is we found it.”

Detective Cromartie tossed Steve’s keys on the table in front of him. They scraped and made a high ting noise that made Steve wince. He debated reaching for them, but decided to wait. Steve thought he’d humor the detective. If they had anything, he’d be in cuffs by now.

“And the bad news?”

Cromartie sat back and a smile edged along his face. Maybe he should be on his way. Steve pocketed the keys. He hoped that Cromartie didn’t notice, though it was obvious that he did. Cromartie put the report down.

“Officers chased your stolen vehicle down to the bay. Your black Grand Am plunged into the Grand River near Bolognaise Street. Witness claimed,” Cromartie said, lifting the report again, “that he saw a man wearing a black shirt swimming from the scene.”

Detective Cromartie pulled a photograph from the file. He placed it on the table and slid it to Steve. Steve’s eyes darted down and he saw Carson’s smiling face. It takes a moron to smile in a mug shot.
“Is that the guy that stole my car?”

“Mr. Arnold, this is William Carson. Have you ever seen this man before?”

Steve took the photo and stared at it. He didn’t want to seem eager to say no. Steve found himself feeling more and more uncomfortable the longer this was taking.

“No. Is that the guy?”

“Not exactly,” Cromartie said. “Mr. Arnold, this was the man who the tipster claimed was ‘swimming from the scene.’ Actually, he floated from it. With two gunshot wounds. Mr. Arnold, do you own a firearm?”

“Yes Detective, I do.”

“Where is that weapon now?” Cromartie asked.

Steve thought that this situation was starting to go his way. He sat back, relaxed. Cromartie jotted notes on a legal pad. Car reported stolen, gun in car, bullets in Carson. Open and shut.

“In the car, Detective.”

“In the car?”

“In the car.”

Detective Cromartie stopped writing. His glance up indicated that he had a purpose. Steve felt that he was fucked.

“Was it loaded, Mr. Arnold?”

Steve sat up and mocked being a responsible citizen. He put both of his palms flat on the desk and went over the top.

“Absolutely not, Detective.”
Detective Cromartie stood up and pushed everything on the table to the floor. Cromartie slammed his fists on the table. He looked like a toddler fighting to get his way.

“Mr. Arnold, I don’t like being lied to!”

“I told you I don’t know—“

“How did Will Carson end up dead in your trunk?”

Steve said that he did not know.

Cromartie stuck his hands around Steve’s collar and said, “I’ll fucking nail you for this!”

Cromartie was strong, like a midget-tosser at the fair. He held Steve down, pinned to the chair and continued screaming. As interrogations go, this was not a very effective one. The door opened, Detective Cromartie’s demeanor changed and he released his grip. He turned around and watched as Detective Sam Bruce walked in. A calm swept Steve as he recognized the man from O’Houlihan’s. Bruce. Cassie sure knew what she was doing.

“Bill, they found him,” Bruce said.

“Who?” Cromartie asked.

“Your guy. Signed a full confession.”

Bruce took a folded paper from his pocket and presented it to Cromartie. He snatched it, opened it and read. Cromartie nodded, put the confession into his own pocket, and walked to the door. He stopped in the hallway, turned around and popped his head back into the room.

“Sorry about that,” Cromartie said. “Just doing my job.”
The way he said “job” made him sound even more like a douche bag. But then again he was right – five minutes ago Cromartie would have nailed Steve for Carson’s murder. It would have worked just off the ballistics match and time of death. Steve stood and Cromartie put a finger in the air.

“One more thing,” Cromartie said.

Steve sat back down feeling that eerie sick pitch in his stomach. It was all a game, they played and played with him and now they were going to come back with handcuffs. What a shitty way to end a stellar day, Steve thought.

Detective Cromartie walked in carrying a plastic bag. “Is this yours?” He held up a Bible, water soaked and tattered.

* * * * *

Jon and Steve sat quietly for the first ten minutes of the ride back to Steve’s apartment. The road was busy as it should be during the late afternoon. The buildings were old and the brickwork was faded in this part of town.

“So, what do you think we owe her for this?” Steve asked.

“Probably two more years. Well, we were close to retiring,” Jon said. “Two more years shouldn’t kill us.”

It just might, Steve thought. The pair went back to watching out their windows as buildings and traffic went by.

“You never told me what your friend found,” Steve said.
“What are you talking about?”

“Your friend, at UPS. What he found that he called you about.”

“Oh, right.”

“Well?”

Jon looked at Steve, then in the rear-view. He rolled down the driver’s side window and draped his arm outside as the cold air flooded in. Steve felt the air and enjoyed it, especially after the close call at the police station. Free air is free air, even if it’s fucking freezing.

Carson said, “I don’t remember.”

Fishy Fishy Fish

Ethan and Todd stand ankle deep in a muddy bog somewhere outside of civilization. A tiny mixed breed puppy wades through the water, splashing its paw and snapping his jaw at the bubbles that surface.

“You told me the fish was dead,” Ethan says.

He swirls his foot around, kicking up a cloud of sea dirt and sand. Ethan’s hair matches the murky color of the bog.

“It was,” Todd answers.

“The fuck you mean ‘it was’? Dead is dead.”

“Sometimes it is.”

Todd reaches down and plucks a rock out of the muck, tossing it haphazardly deeper into the bog.

“And when isn’t it?”

“Right now.”
“You mean to tell me the dead fish I’ve been looking for is alive?”

“Looks like it.”

Ethan stares at Todd, looks up at the sky and says, “And how do you know it’s alive?”

“Ain’t here.”

“No shit it ain’t. How does a dead fish move?”

Todd searches the water at his feet, squinting and bending over. He pushes his hand across the top and ripples ride away in imperfect intervals. He wonders what it would be like to be the older brother, but knows that will never happen. The ripples distort Todd’s face, making it look like he has scars by his brown eyes.

“Must have swam away,” Todd says.

The puppy begins to swim, circling Todd who reaches down and rubs his head. The pup squints his eyes and Todd stands. Ethan turns away and rubs his eyes. He watches Todd take a few steps into the bog, the water climbing above Todd’s knees.

“Dead fish don’t fuckin’ swim.”

The dog barks, but coughs from water splashing into its mouth.

Todd stops and stares out over the bog. “It ain’t dead.”

Ethan shakes his head and takes a few steps away from Todd. He says, “Obviously.”

Todd wades further; the disturbance of his walking splashes waves up to his waist. The two boys watch the pup as it moves towards the shore.

“Where you think it went?” Todd asks.
“It’s a fish in a lake. I’m betting he didn’t get up and walk away. God only knows.”

“Maybe we should ask him.”

“Ask who?”

“God.”

Ethan wades a few more steps into the bog toward Todd. The puppy barks at a leaf that blows past him. Ethan looks at Todd. “Wouldn’t know the first way to start.”

“It’s easy, just put your hands like this,” Todd says, slapping his hands together and holding them awkwardly in front of his body.

The puppy attacks the leaf, pinning it down and ripping at it with his teeth.

Ethan copies Todd’s movements and says, “Like this?”

“Yeah. Now ask him where the fish is.”

“God, where’s the stupid fuckin’ fish?”

Todd pulls his hands apart and stares. Ethan’s eyes are closed uncomfortably and they make him look more constipated than spiritual.

“He won’t answer you like that. God doesn’t find swearing funny.”

“I do.”

“I know.”

The two stand silently, scanning the bog. They watch the puppy on the shoreline, reaching his paw and splashing the water and then snapping at the splash with his jaw.

Ethan and Todd stand less than two feet apart, chilling water seeps through their denim jeans. Several yards to their left, at the bank not covered in reeds, something plops in the water.
“What was that? There, in the water.”

The dog leaps in, swimming full speed toward the noise, bellowing its bark over the otherwise calm evening.

Todd looks, ducking his head a bit. He says, “A frog.”

“Oh.”

The dog turns around and paddles back to the shore. The sun tucks itself securely under the horizon.

“Eth, it’s getting dark,” Todd says. “Mom’ll be worried.”

Ethan looks down, kicking his feet around the bog water. “Just a few more minutes.”

Todd checks his waterlogged digital watch. A bubble makes the numbers hard to read. “You said that an hour ago.”

Ethan ignores him and trudges into the deeper middle. “What am I going to do?”

The dog begins to bark.

“Quiet down,” Ethan says.

“He wants to go back. We should go home.”

“Without the fuckin’ fish?”

“Without the fuckin’ fish,” Todd says.

They look at each other, light dying all around them. The dog is still barking.

“I never did like fish.”

Todd and Ethan plow their feet against the muck water and toward the shore. The dog whines and starts runs around, darting from left to right and wagging his tail.

“With good reason,” Todd says.
“They don’t stay dead.”

The puppy darts ahead and the boys follow, their wet pants dragging on the ground as the small canine leads them back home.

Persona

McKenzie Philips sat wrapped in a towel on the wooden locker room bench. He stared down at his feet, which were pale. Very pale. McKenzie did not remember the last time that he went without shoes let alone socks. He could not remember the last time he had a good meal or a full night’s sleep (his night job prevented that) or the last vacation he took. His life over the past seven years primarily took place within the confines of Harbor Creek Mall.

Beside McKenzie, there on the bench, was a purple bunny costume, complete with a goofy wide smiling mask, a pair of matching tufty slippers, and a dingy white pouch that covered the costume’s belly. McKenzie bowed his head, rested his arms on his knees, and put his chin securely in his hands. How he could continue on this way, dressed up as one cartoon character or another while a toddler threw up all over his lap, McKenzie did not know. Every day is a parody of the last and there is no end in sight.

A heavy hand knocked on the door. McKenzie sighed and turned his head towards the frosted glass window. He knew the figure standing on the other side was his fifty-six year old assistant, Ted Adams. Ted’s distorted figure blocked the light from the hallway and cast a shallow shadow on the floor. He thought that Ted looked stupid as the assistant to a costumed cartoon character. How you go from a war veteran and steel mill supervisor to this shitty job, McKenzie did not know.

“Mac, come on. There’s already a line,” Adams said.
There is always a line. Crying kids, spoiled kids, kids who their grandparents rescued from daycare – all of them were the same. And they all waited to plop down in a perfect stranger’s lap for a picture and a quick shot of candy before they are swept away for lunch and (if they are really good) a toy.

“I’m coming.”

McKenzie stood, lifting the suit and sliding it over his back. McKenzie awkwardly slipped his legs into the costume and reached back to driver the zipper up from mid-calf to his neck. The zipper caught on part of the material and would not move. It was good enough, he thought. He would fix it later. His hands scraped the inside of the gloves. The gloves felt like the underside of a carpet square where the fibers come together with a netting to hold them together. The costume’s interior smelled; a mixture of old sweat and off-brand fabric deodorizer used in a vain attempt to hide the stench. A few more days and he will drop it off at the cleaners and have a few months to dirty up the next one.

McKenzie’s hands reached down, secured the mask and brought it to his side. The googly eyes stared at him and the creepy smile made McKenzie think it almost looked alive. And what a joke his life was. A bad joke that aimed pointed teeth at his exposed neck. He hoisted the mask over his head and down over his face. McKenzie became the Easter Bunny.

He swung around and answered Ted’s next set of knocks. The door opened and Ted continued to motion his knocking, like he did not know that the door was no longer in front of him. McKenzie watched as Ted’s fist slowed, stopped, and a smile crept over Ted’s face.
“Work late last night, Mac?”

“Yeah,” McKenzie said, “too late.”

McKenzie did not know why everyone called him Mac, but they always did. He was also fortunate that people could not see his face because the last thing he needed was someone complaining because he fell asleep right in front of them. McKenzie was pretty certain that Ted would do something to make sure that he stayed awake.

The long hallway was institution-like, lined with fluorescent lights, and clean-checkered tiles under their feet. This was an employee-only area without much traffic so the floor was unnaturally clean – especially when put side by side with the public part on the other side of the double doors. Ted butted against the left door and held it for McKenzie to walk through. Ted led the Easter Bunny through the food court and to his seat.

“Kids, it’s the man you’ve all been waiting for: the Easter Bunny!” Ted said.

McKenzie looked over the throne, an oversized gold painted wood seat. The paint was chipped on the right side and revealed a host of different colors underneath. The mall used the same props year after year because the management here was a bunch of cheap asses, which was also why he never got much of a raise. That was the same reason that he had to work a second job to make a decent living wage.

The morning passed without too many disturbances and McKenzie wanted lunch. The last time he ate was around six o’clock the night before and his stomach declared war on his concentration for the better part of the last hour. Ted was just about to put up the sign that read, “Carrots for the Easter Bunny, back in an hour,” when the blonde, whose breasts boiled out of her pastel pink cotton v-neck top, walked up.
“One more before lunch, Mr. Bunny!” Ted said.

Ted’s tone always perked when a young mom or college girl, at the convincing of her giggling friends, stepped up over the ridiculous faux wood bridge that crossed an imaginary mall stream. Adams loved to watch as they climbed onto McKenzie’s lap and flirted away. Flirted with someone who without the costume they would not even let buy them a drink (even if they were broke and thirsty as hell). Ted enjoyed his stupid games.

“Couldn’t miss the chance to have my picture made with the Easter Bunny,” she said.

“Glad you didn’t,” McKenzie said.

She spun, the denim of her jeans scraped over McKenzie’s costumed legs. The wool interior of the pant legs irritated him, and he winced as the girl adjusted herself in his lap. He was glad that she could not see his face.

“I know you’re not Santa so I don’t get credit for quality time in your lap, but maybe you could bend the rules for a good little girl?” she said.

The way “good little girl” rolled off her lips made McKenzie believe the contrary. He liked when the local college girls were home on break. Some girls have the strangest fetishes, he thought. Flirting with a costumed character is not as uncommon as he thought when he took the job a decade ago.

“Good girls get anything they want.”

She leaned back, draped her arm seductively behind McKenzie’s head, and rubbed his bare neck. Ted told her to smile, dimples formed in her cheeks, and he took the photo. McKenzie knew that she overpaid for it. She bent over, gave him a kiss on the costume’s felt cheek, and bopped the cartoonish bunny nose with her pointer finger.
“What’s your name?” McKenzie asked.

“Charlotte.”

Ted wagged the freshly printed digital photo in front of his face and stretched it toward her. McKenzie told Ted to wait, grabbed a pen from the table, and he scrawled, “To Charlotte, Love E. Bunny,” across the picture. She blushed and tucked the photo into her polka dotted purse.

“I’m kinda hungry,” Charlotte said.

“I’m on lunch now, if you wanna…”

“Sure, I love playing rabbit games.”

* * * * *

Dates came at a premium for someone who spent the week dressed as someone else. McKenzie stood in the locker room, peeled off the suit, and left the costume in a heap. He popped open the lock on his locker, fished his deodorant out, and ran it under his arms. McKenzie had to do whatever he could to make himself presentable, and he did not have time to take a shower. She was waiting. He put on a clean shirt and stared into the mirror. He did not know what she would think when Charlotte saw him without the mask, but he hoped she would not be disappointed. He sighed, nodded, and walked out the door toward the food court where he told her to meet him.

There she was, talking on her cell phone and leaning on the brick wall. McKenzie was amazed that she actually waited for him. He pointed to the Italian place beside where she stood and said, “This okay?”
Charlotte hung up her phone without even saying goodbye. She said, “I didn’t recognize you. Here’s fine.”

McKenzie and the restaurant’s manager Tony were friends. It normally was difficult to trade discounted food for free pictures with costumed characters, but it could be done. Tony had young children, one six and the other four, which meant they got free pictures at least once a season. Tony looked at McKenzie and motioned to Charlotte with a metal spatula in his right hand.

“She with you, Mac?”

McKenzie nodded. A wide smile crossed Tony’s face and he nodded. Charlotte and McKenzie ordered food and sat down. The red-topped table wobbled, and McKenzie put his foot on the post to balance it. They sat for a minute in silence.

“What brings you to the mall?” McKenzie asked.

“Looking for something to do, you know, before I head back to school.”

McKenzie cut a meatball in half, shoveled it into his mouth, and chewed. Charlotte laughed and he froze.

“What?” McKenzie asked.

Charlotte laughed again. “You’re cute.”

McKenzie breathed again. He did not realize that he held his breath when he waited for her answer.

“So, what are you studying?” he asked.

“All kinds of things. Math, lit, bio – nothing special.”

He glanced at the wall clock. There was about a half hour left on McKenzie’s lunch, plenty of time to get her phone number and see if she was busy Saturday night.
“There’s no rush, you know. Figure out what you want to do closer to graduation.”

Charlotte bit into her pizza and chewed. She swallowed loudly. McKenzie thought it was disgusting, but he would be able to get used to it. He wore the mask so much that he started to carry over his general agitation with the world into his personal life. He thought it would be good to learn how to separate work and play.

“That’s what I figure. There are lots of schools and majors. I’m not sure what I want to do after high school.”

McKenzie dropped his fork in the spaghetti and stared. He said, “I’m sorry, did you say high school?”

* * * * *

The Dust Rag’s heavy door was made of thick reflective glass. It was tinted to prevent anyone underage from sneaking a look at the inebriated patrons. McKenzie walked in, the purple bunny draped over his left arm. He grabbed a hanger from the rack near the door, threaded the costume onto it, and hung it in the far corner by itself. The head fit on the top shelf of a nearby display and McKenzie headed for the men’s room after placing it there. It was his job to come out, plaster a stupid grin on his face, and clean up after the societal drudge that frequented the bar. McKenzie needed this place, the income at least, to make his bills for the month. It was the only way he could afford to live in the city. The only way to keep himself from crawling back to his mom. The only thing that prevented McKenzie from being a failure.
The bathroom door squeaked. A heavy Russian accent called to McKenzie from the other part of the bar.

“McKenzie, oil that door!”

He answered that he would. But before he did, McKenzie ran some hot water, dipped his hands in it, and applied some to his face. A temporary fix, the water kept him awake and gave the illusion that he showered. Really there was no point. No one cared that he was there, unless you counted the regulars that used him for a punching bag a few nights a week.

McKenzie looked at his face in the mirror. A fresh cut spider-webbed under his right eye and over his cheek like a map for the pain from the night before to find its way home. He touched the cut, winced, and thought that the night before would be the last time he broke up a pair of drunken assholes.

The door swung open and McKenzie walked over to the bar. The owner Ivan stood behind the glossy-topped bar. He cleaned several mugs, placing them on a rack behind him. Rat and Spot, two of the regulars, sat near Ivan. McKenzie moved behind the bar top and helped Ivan.

“How was your day, Bunny Boy?” Rat asked.

Rat’s wrinkled face reflected years of service in some capacity. He looked like everyone and no one in one convenient package. Rat served in Vietnam and took every opportunity to remind everyone about his combat related injury that forced him to leave his unit. He left out the part about shooting himself in the foot, though.

“How was your day, Mac?” Spot asked.
Spot’s nasal voice annoyed everyone. His face looked like ground meat shaped carefully around a human skull. Add that to his lengthy frame and he was a mess. He walked with a slight limp, but no one ever inquired as to why. Most people tended to ignore Spot when Rat was not around. Reluctantly, McKenzie told them about his lunch date.

* * * * *

“So, did you get her number?” Rat asked.

“Did you miss the high school part?” McKenzie asked.

Rat laughed and turned to Spot, waiting for encouragement. Spot’s head sprung up and down like a bobble head doll. McKenzie thought he looked ridiculous.

“Beggars can’t be choosey, Mac!” Rat said.

Spot stood and motioned to the patrons in the bar. He said, “What does it take to get this guy laid?”

“He wears a damn purple bunny suit. He ain’t getting laid anytime soon,” Rat answered.

McKenzie felt his face turn flush. Anger swelled; McKenzie sat down at the vacant far end of the bar to calm his temper. His eyes focused on the television suspended from the ceiling where a nature program was on. A grey wolf stalked a tiny silver-coated rabbit. Ivan walked over, tapped three times on the counter in front of McKenzie, and worked a cloth rag furiously in and around a glass mug. Ivan waited unit
the moment in the program where the wolf snatched the hare in its teeth and then slammed the glass down.

“Ivan,” McKenzie said.

“United States.”

Ivan emigrated from Russia decades ago. Rather than the typical “hello,” he always answered, “United States,” when someone got his attention. His accent was erratic, less when he concentrated on hiding it.

“I’m stuck on the bottom of a shit pile,” McKenzie said.

Ivan snickered, which preceded a moment of divine inspiration. He said, “McKenzie, you don’t understand the world. In my country, it was very difficult; here you can the chance to do everything.”

“How does that help me? I walk around dressed in a costume. My life used to have purpose. I thought I was part of something more,” McKenzie said.

Ivan opened a bottle and poured a beer in the freshly scrubbed glass. McKenzie thought it looked heady. A bar owner should be able to pour and Ivan could not.

“That reminds me of a time in Russia…”

* * * * *

McKenzie left The Dust Rag in a hurry after Ivan finished his story. Everyone gathered around and listened to Ivan’s grand tale. Ivan told the group about how there had been a rash of robberies in the neighborhood where he worked in Moscow. His boss gave him a gun and instructed Ivan to protect the shop no matter what. Ivan left the store
that night and met a man on the subway that, after a brief conversation, threw up on Ivan’s new shoes. Ivan said that he thought about pulling out the gun and shooting the man. He turned his attention to McKenzie and said, “You make me feel like the guy who threw up on my shoes.”

The walk home was quiet. The purple bunny draped over his arm, McKenzie milled the story over and over again in his head. The apartment door opened and he dropped the keys in a malformed ceramic bowl on the table by the door. McKenzie’s mom made it during a pottery phase. She was not good at it and this abomination proved that. He put the suit on his bed and examined it. The fur was deep purple. The belly was white and had a zippered pouch. Rabbits do not have marsupial pouches, period.

The poster over the bed read, “Tomorrow is another chance to be great!” Too many things happen tomorrow, McKenzie thought. Nothing changes. Every day he woke up the same washed up, beaten down shell. Whatever asshole decided to print, market, and sell that lie should be shot with Ivan’s stupid gun.

The phone on the nightstand rang. McKenzie hustled over and answered it like he expected a call. No one important ever called him.

“Hi honey, how are you?” his mother asked.

He remembered. Normally when his mom called he was at work. The mishap at The Dust Rag threw off his entire night.

“Fine Ma,” he said.

McKenzie had nothing against her, but he hated talking on the phone. She droned on about meaningless drivel for hours if he let her – and usually he did. But not that night.
“Ma, look I gotta go. I’m tired.”

“Oh, okay. Let me tell you about Jane Andrews, do you remember her?”

Of course he did. McKenzie and Jane dated all through high school and even into college. They would be married, except McKenzie got scared and went into self-destruct mode. He decided that, since he was feeling comfortable and happy, he needed to drum up some good reasons why things needed to change. It was a sidebar story to the feature that was his life, and it was beginning to grind on his soul.

“I seem to,” he said.

“Well I saw in the paper that she’s getting married. I always thought you two would—“

McKenzie hung up. It was abnormal for him, but he could not take it right now. Not from the guys at the bar and definitely not from his own mom. He decided that he would not answer when she called and that he would call her back the next morning. He would tell her that he had phone problems.

McKenzie stood, slightly off balance. He steadied himself and walked over to the open closet. A sea of colors flowed inside as dry clean only costumes mixed with regular clothes. At the far left, a leprechaun, complete with goofy emerald green sequined top hat and cardboard pot o’ gold. There was a red-white-blue Uncle Sam and two different Santa Claus suits complete with white beards. Balled up on the top shelf, lying in a wrinkled heap was a bookworm. It was the worst. Stupid glasses and an empty photo album completed the rejected Alice in Wonderland Halloween costume.

Pulling a hanger from the closet, McKenzie headed over to the bunny, still on the bed. He lifted the suit up and wrapped it over the hanger. He smoothed the arms,
brushed down the errant fur that stood up on the arms and sighed. It was a good thing that the season was almost over, because this costume smelled terrible, like the underside of someone’s foot after they just spent a few hours working out at the gym. McKenzie tried to remember the last time he had been to the gym and thought it may be time to cancel his membership. His eyes moved over the bed, where the quilt that belonged to his grandmother covered a mattress that desperately needed replaced. Then it occurred to him: the head was missing.

He panicked, tracing his steps. McKenzie paced around the room, recounting everything he could. Then he stopped and remembered exactly where it was – The Dust Rag. He asked himself how he could be so stupid as he fished for his shoes. The phone rang and he ignored it. The machine answered. Rat’s voice bellowed after the robotic tone.

“Bunny Boy! We found your head. Don’t worry; Spot’s taking real good care of it. He’s standing on a table singing ‘Here Comes Peter Cottontail.’ You gotta come see this!”

McKenzie snatched his keys and left before Rat finished his message.

* * * * *

The Dust Rag’s door was partially ajar. The smoky atmosphere spilled out like a genie’s freshly rubbed lamp. The whole scene reeked of mystery. McKenzie kicked the door and went inside. Rat pretended to ride a young college girl around the room like a child playing cowboys and Indians. Each time she hopped up and down she nearly
popped out of her cotton “fuck me” top. McKenzie came up with that term over the summer during a conversation with Rat.

“Rat!” McKenzie said.

Like the movies, everything stopped. The collective eyes stared. Conversations ceased and the patrons readied themselves for a fight.

“I don’t have time to fuck around. Give it back.”

Rain pooled at his feet. The instant McKenzie left his apartment it poured. And people wondered why he thought there was no justice.

Rat’s smile faded and he said, “Mac, we were just having fun. Give her a try!”

The bunny headed female removed the mask. She sauntered over, shaking her ass with every step. If he were not seething, McKenzie would have swallowed every drop of this moment.

“You,” she said, extending her finger and pointing at McKenzie’s chest, “must be the owner of this.”

McKenzie reached his hand out, palm up, and said, “Give it to me.”

She pulled the head away and almost fell over. A step backward prevented her from embarrassment. “Ah,” she said, “not before you let me try on those purple slippers!”

Spot roars and The Dust Rag howls with laughter. McKenzie drooped his chin and saw the slippers. They were sopping wet and in the poor lighting appeared almost black. He thought they were the charred remains of his life, at least the one that had to do with this bar.
Standing on the bar top, Spot pointed and tapped the fluorescent light fixture overhead with a stolen spoon. He said, “A toast to McKenzie Philips, the only man enough to wear rabbit slippers to the Rag!”

The room inhaled and held its breath. McKenzie rushed over, pulled Spot’s feet out from under him. Surprised and drunk, Spot could not catch himself. His body ricocheted off the counter and sounded like a sand bag tossed on a flood levy. A punch landed across the bridge of Spot’s nose and blood welled instantly from the broken cartilage. It puddled near McKenzie’s feet and almost matched the color of the slippers, though the blood was a few shades lighter.

Rat ripped McKenzie off Spot, but several blows landed before he could. McKenzie balanced himself with a bar stool to keep from tumbling to the floor. The stool broke under his weight. He reached down, arming himself with a shard of the broken wooden leg. He was now a gladiator. McKenzie held the splintered wood like a sword and the bunny mask was his shield. What a disguise, the perfect character. Ivan called the cops; Rat pleaded for him to calm down. McKenzie only heard the low hum of the light fixtures, or maybe nothing at all.

McKenzie thought about his college roommate who used to say that there were movies that should only be watched on mute. He meant ones with semi-nude girls but the effect was the same. Silence, he thought, was something that only someone who was constantly ridiculed could really appreciate.

* * * * *
The key speared the lock of McKenzie’s apartment. Inside, the phone rang. McKenzie slammed the door and ran to the bedroom. The bunny suit sat on the comforter. He does not know where he thought it would have gone. Even though it was not alive, it tore his life apart.

Laughter filled the room. It crescendoed to a deafening scream. The bunny head gawked and its rectangle teeth dripped Spot’s blood. McKenzie turned to the window; a crowd gathered below. They made gestures with their hands, mimicking rabbit ears. Some of them hopped. McKenzie flung the window open and pushed it free of its hinges. The glass frame fell eight floors and shattered on the pavement.

“You want to make fun of me?”

McKenzie hung out the window as he said that. Police cars sectioned off the block. The insults flooded his mind, one after another. A mix of sweat and rain coated McKenzie’s face. Pulling himself back inside, he searched for a towel. Instead, he peeled off his shirt and wiped his head. The light on the desk was blinding. The bunny sat on the bed, arms crossed over its ivory chest. McKenzie turned the lamp away, toward the hole in the wall where the window used to be. It shined like a spotlight. He imagined standing on the ledge, performing for the audience below. Sirens pierced his dream, and soon police would knock on his door and say things like, “We just want to talk.”

“Everything is fine,” a voice said.

The bunny stood on the mattress, bouncing up and down against the rhythm of the sirens eight stories below. It smiled and McKenzie believed it. Everything was fine. He
put the bunny suit on. McKenzie pulled the purple fuzz legs over his jeans and struggled to zip up the back. His hands rubbed the inside webbing of the gloves.

“Give them something to laugh about,” the bunny said.

The bunny head was perched under his left arm. McKenzie looked out the window. Everyone below only saw the smile pasted on the bunny face. No one understood the man who hid behind the persona; someone who hated everything he was, everything he saw. The phone rang again. Someone pounded on the apartment door.

“Come on Mac, calm down,” Rat said, his voice muffled by the door.

McKenzie ignored Rat and picked up the phone. With a gloved hand, he pressed the “TALK” button.

“Honey is everything alright? I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for the past two hours,” McKenzie’s mom said.

“We’re fine.”

“Are those sirens? Who is we?”

“Nothing’s wrong mother, I’ll call you tomorrow.”

His finger pressed the “TALK” button again. The phone immediately rang again and McKenzie tossed it out the window. Rat pounded on the door some more.

“Go away, leave us.”

“Mac, come on.”

Calmly, McKenzie walked to the window frame. He stepped out, one foot at a time, and then pulled himself up onto the narrow ledge. McKenzie swallowed the scene, including the smog stained sky. A neighbor’s window was open and the smell of fresh baked cherry pie wafted to him, mixing with the stench of the pollution.
“Mac, come back here,” Rat said, sticking his head out and spying McKenzie several steps from the window.

“We don’t need him,” the bunny said.

“You’re the reason I’m here. We don’t need you, Rat!”

“You’re going to get yourself killed!”

McKenzie’s head was splitting. It felt like something was tearing through his forehead. Sweat cascaded down his face like rain down a downspout. His balance was off and vertigo set in. Head pounding, McKenzie leaned against the building. Killed, he thought. He pulled off the mask and surveyed the crowd below. Maybe things will be different. McKenzie slid his feet toward the window. An eerie creak came from under his feet. Almost to the window, he thought.

“We’re sorry about the girl, two hundred bucks isn’t worth this,” Rat said.

They paid Charlotte, McKenzie thought. They set the whole thing up. His face burned, his body temperature was high. And somehow, he felt free.

Like a tornado on an otherwise sunny day, everything changed. McKenzie stepped and the ledge gave way. He grabbed at the wall and wrapped his gloved hands around the molding. Rat caught his wrist and held for a moment. But the furry gloves slipped. Rat’s eyes were sewn open.

McKenzie’s muscles burned. A better McKenzie could pull himself up and hoist to safety. A better McKenzie could have avoided everything. Instead, images of costumed holiday characters ran before his eyes. Suspension perfectly described his existence. Hanging on, waiting for something to change. His only solace came by wearing someone else’s face.
His left hand clawed. The light from inside the apartment illuminated the mask. It cast a silhouette on the building across the street. If it were more than a shadow, McKenzie swore it would be smiling.

Rat morphed, one by one, into everyone McKenzie had ever known. The gloves tore and he fell. The last image that he saw was a picture: a leprechaun laughing and Santa Claus locked arm in arm with Uncle Sam as they danced to a carnival song. And then it stopped.

The Mechanic

This is the summer before Mom found the money to exterminate the annoying dandelions and several years before the giant swollen mole would turn up the soil and subsequently drown in the decorative water fountain.

“Go ahead, touch it,” I say.

Chad and I stand there staring. The honeybee, completely oblivious to our watching eyes, continues to collect the granules over its sticky legs.

“Won’t it sting?” Chad asks.

Not once the pesticides take hold and cell phone signals block the frequencies that the colonial insects depend on to communicate. That’s what the news says is happening now, but at the time we knew nothing of their near extinction.

“No, it’s a drone,” I say.

Chad learns not to believe me all the time. Wind tips the flower and the honeybee struggles to keep its place.

“What’s that mean?” Chad asks.

It’s harmless and will only fly away. “I’ve done it tons of times,” I say.
He stands and watches, soaks the vision of a tiny thing trouncing the plant life spread around Mom’s yard.

Chad says, “I’ll do it first, then you, ok?”

He bends down, knees cracking, and looks it in the eyes. Our buzz cuts make our heads vulnerable to sunburn, but not today. The sun is tucked behind the clouds.

“Fine, go ahead, touch him.”

Chad would graduate from technical school and get a job working at the Chevy dealer, stowing money away in a plastic jar that used to hold animal crackers. Or he would have if he weren’t allergic to the venom honeybees used to protect their queen.

Chad raises his arm, the bee dangling from his finger. The honeybee dances, trying desperately to wriggle free. Chad’s eyes are wide, his mouth unnaturally agape.

The honeybee conducts a symphony of silence, cueing the color to run from Chad’s face. The dandelions melt away as the whole scene blurs. Years pass before I even remember him screaming. Was he gurgling and choking, or is that dubbed in to my fragile memory?

**Family Meeting**

Paul saw the article in the newspaper this morning. He read it twice, creased the page like an elementary schooler and ever so carefully tore it out. Folding it into a credit card sized rectangle, Paul stuffed the article into his pocket right behind the thin leather wallet. He thought about how much he disliked that wallet. Two years ago, his wife Carol gave it to him. Carol was notorious for giving bad gifts, though at the time he actually liked it. He remarked to her on a trip to Walmart how his wallet was falling apart and it rather impressed him when she paid attention and gave it to him for his
birthday. A week later that happiness faded. The wallet was thin, not like a supermodel from Victoria’s Secret’s fashion show. It was more like an emaciated dog. Dollar bills (the only currency that he ever had) barely fit. His four credit cards (two Visas, Carol’s MasterCard, and the Discover that he had since college) made the leather sleeve bulge. Throw in his driver’s license and gym card and the wallet felt like floor seats to a sold out concert. He hated it and Carol gave it to him.

The article. Paul checked his pocket just to make sure it was still there. He smiled, hailed a taxi, and went home. Business trips were a treat. The ability to travel, to work during the day and explore a foreign city in the evenings excited him. For longer than he wanted to admit, he was a prisoner to his family. He and Carol had children, one after the other, during the first years of their marriage. Had that not been the case, they would have divorced fourteen years ago. He had two daughters, Casey, the oldest, and Sandy. Casey was a social butterfly and Sandy loved softball. Adding to the success of their spawn, Carol was the office manager for a popular dental practice. All of these facts helped imprison Paul and prevented him from moving up and taking any of the promotions he was offered. These positions required travel (some 85% or more) and Paul could not convince the warden at home to back his decision to take any of them.

“What about the girls?” Carol asked.

A slight argument (very slight) occurred every time. The guilt thickened and made Paul, under the guise of ‘being a good dad,’ concede. He returned to his computer to pull up his form letter that went like this:

To Whom It May Concern:
Thank you for the consideration for the position of _____ but regretfully I must decline. There are still many things that I wish to accomplish in my current position where my talents are well suited.

Sincerely,

Paul Hornscomb

The letter was all of his “talents” that he ever really used working for The Schuster Company (“investment bankers for the masses,” a trademarked phrase). When he started there, Paul wrote most of the copy for the brochures and promotional material, but recently he had been relegated to proofreading the work of interns and taking care of paperwork issues. Recently is misleading since those were his job responsibilities for the past four years. When the opportunity to go to a new client’s headquarters in DC came up, he jumped on it.

That brings him to where he is now, sitting in a cab in front of his house. Paul surveys the yard. The tulips bloomed in his absence and he is certain that Carol will talk ad nausea about it for the next two hours. She will tell him about each flower, how it catches the sunlight and unfolds just right. How the one next to it is misshapen like some animal stepped on it. Carol inspects the flowers daily, looking for ways to improve the curb appeal of their home. It is alarming how much she cares about appearances.

His bag is light. It was pure fortune that kept the weather warm in DC. Despite packing a windbreaker, Paul did not use it. He looks to the east where clouds gather. A storm system is coming and by the looks of the cloud’s dingy dishwater color, a nasty
one. The front door is open for circulation. Paul drops his bag in the foyer and peels the shoes off his feet. The cat is the only one who greets him. It rubs on his pant leg and buries its head into his calf. He bends down and his knees crack. The sound echoes off the walls and seems to sing. The cat purrs as Paul runs his hand over its back and a static electric spark causes the animal to scamper away.

“I asked you not to leave your things all over,” Carol says.

She walks in; sweat caked to her face like Paul imagines a farmer’s daughter would have had. She wears her gardening clothes, including an old faded white t-shirt and discount store jeans that she found on the irregulars rack. One leg is an inch or two longer than the other (she said she would fix it but never did).

Paul apologizes, picks up the bag, and stomps his way up the stairs. The welcome from the cat was more pleasant.

Carol’s footsteps on the stairs are enough to drive him into the bathroom. The lock twists and Paul sits on the closed toilet seat. His hand finds the article in his back pocket. As if the newspaper clipping were a valuable artifact, he carefully unfolds it and runs it over his thigh to flatten it out. The title is “A Fresh Start.” Paul rereads every word, toils over every inch of the paper in front of him. There must be a catch. Some loophole that makes this offer too good to be true. Free land with a house in Fairbanks, Alaska. All you have to do is get there.

Thoughts wander back to his family, his job, and the thin wallet. He is not sure if the house would sell. The Ohio housing market has been down for a few years now. The news claims that foreclosures are the highest in the entire nation. Even if they had to let it sit for a few months for sale, they still would only have that mortgage to pay. If it did
sell – when it did sell – they would have the money to forge the life he wants, the one he
imagines his family wants.

* * * * *

The seats in the living room are full. His daughters share the couch, Carol on the
loveseat, and Paul sitting on a stool that he swiped out of the kitchen. He shifts his
weight back and forth, settling eventually near the back half of the cherry colored
pedestal. His eyes surf over the girls’ eyes. Carol checks her watch, sighs, and cranes
her neck. Paul claps his hands to bring the family meeting to order.

“We’re moving to Alaska.”

The moment feels like a bucket, filling steadily, his statement reaching its paw
over and turning the faucet on full blast. Paul knows that this was not the way to best
relay this decision.

“Where do you get off—“ Carol says.

“I’m not moving—“ Casey says.

“But I like my team—“ Sandy says.

The voices melt into a brown mass before his eyes. Paul has fallen into a pit and
struggles; his head bobs as he tries to stay afloat. Paul watches himself claw out of the
pit; he stands on the shore and says, “I’ve already called the realtor.”

He closes his eyes and when they reopen he sees a different world. Paul is aware
of the silence that follows his comment about the realtor. He repeats it, lingers over the
words to let them resonate. Their eyes tell three different stories. Casey seems
contemplative, pining her options and forming the brickwork of her new life. She’ll find a boyfriend, someone to help ease the transition and show her the way things work there. He’ll be her doorway into the new world and she will give him some bragging rights along the way. She is an angel.

Sandy, his youngest daughter, is a dragon. Flames spew from her open mouth. Paul counts her scales (three hundred twenty eight in all). What strange math makes them so even, Paul thinks. She will not transition well; he can feel it.

Carol is counting. Paul watches as she inventories her remaining time in Ohio like a terminal cancer patient. Paul knows exactly what she is thinking. The garden– gone. Her seniority at work– gone. And of course, the influence over the household– gone if he has his way. Her entire known existence changes. She plants her feet and they grow downward, rooting her in the floor. Her face stretches and she is a tree, planted squarely in the living room. At least Sandy has wings, Paul thinks.

“Cancel the appointment,” Carol says.

Paul shakes like someone who is sensitive to cold and is chewing on an ice cube. He lets the scene seep in and watches as his eldest daughter spreads her pale blue set of wings. Her sister, the dragon, burns a hole in the sofa and speaks in a collection of guttural sounds that Paul thinks resembles hard German. Paul only knows this because of the time he spends watching the History Channel which loves to showcase Hitler and his cronies. Paul’s eyes wander back towards his wife (the miniature tree).

“Cancel the appointment, do it now,” Carol says, her voice ruffles the leaves around her face.
Paul answers he will not. The stool lets him perch over the human forms of his family but everything has changed. His daughters have wings and they float above the furniture – one happy to have an adventure and the other spitting fire that catches the drapes ablaze. Paul looks up at Carol, the leaves forming eyebrows and tracing the outline of her face.

“You can’t just uproot this family,” Carol says.

“You can’t I?”

Paul’s dragon daughter stops hovering and plants her feet solidly, sending a quake that vibrates her mother’s knick-knacks off the nearby shelf. Angry, Carol negotiates the stool out from under Paul and he tumbles to the floor. She blames him for the broken knick-knacks.

“But I want—“ Paul says.

The dragon stomps again, her language clearing up, and utters, “Stay.” Her head swings back and forth like a pendulum, settling her eyes on the charred remains of the west wall where the drapes used to be. The dragon storms through the smoldering hole. Her lizard wings extend in the side yard (the wings spanning the length of the house).

“Stay,” she says again, flying up and away towards the setting sun. Paul thinks it is ironic how someone who wants to stay just flew away.

“See what you’ve done, you drove our daughter away!” Carol says.

Paul considers this – she had always been needy and now she could fend for herself. She is a dragon, after all. Maybe it is time that she starts to make decisions on her own.

“She left because of your selfishness,” Carol says.
Paul’s eldest daughter steps to his side, tickling Paul’s nose with her feather wings like a down pillow that sprung a leak. Carol, the stool in one of her left limbs, tries to swipe the grin off of Paul’s face.

“We are moving, Carol. Don’t be so set in your ways.”

Carol turns her attention to their elder (and now only) daughter. She whips her limbs close to her body and crosses them, her eyebrow leaves forming an angry look.

“Are you staying or going with him?”

“I don’t think—“ Casey mutters.

“Answer me,” Carol says. A piece of bark crumbles off of her mouth like sweat off of an athlete.

Paul watches his daughter’s pale wings bend, fold, and hide behind her. She turns tapping her tiny feet as she walks away. Paul feels his eyes sting, but he chomps down on his bottom lip and stands. His face burns red and the flaming remains of the wall catches his sight.

“You’ll go alone. I won’t give you a divorce.”

Carol swipes her limbs again, grazing the corner of his face and stinging like chapped lips on a January day. Paul sprints to the burning wall and rips a piece of the support free (still aflame). Carol’s demeanor changes – her limbs pulling back to her trunk and a surprised look shadows over her face. Paul swoops his right hand, the fire bits shake loose and ignite the rug. He wields the flaming plywood like a sword, swinging it back and forth in front of his face. Paul points at her roots, stuck in place. His eyes float open and he knows what to do. He tries to walk to the door, but her
branches extend and trap him inside. He spins the flaming spear around and jabs it
toward her limbs.

“Move, or you’ll burn with the house,” Paul says.

“You wouldn’t,” Carol cries.

“One more time. Move.”

Paul imagines himself in a primitive war movie, tossing the wood like a flaming
spear at his enemy. His shoulder cocks back, ready to let it fly in Carol’s direction. He
gives her one more chance.

“We’re moving.”

“We’re not.”

Paul bellows a war cry. He looks down and sees that his chest is painted with
figured from a wandering tribe. The whole thing is about to happen – the spear flies and
hits Carol, burning her to the ground. A knock comes on the door that stops Paul cold.
His eyes clamp shut and he doubles over, his hands grasping his temples. He feels like
he is falling. Everything goes black and Paul his head tips back, his eyes open and he
draws in a long cool breath.

Paul’s eyes focus on the newspaper clipping resting on his lap. He never had
been happier to be sitting on the toilet. When he opens the door, she will be there. Carol
continues to pound on the bathroom door, trying to break-in.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” Paul says.

The only acknowledgement is the end of her knocking. Paul scans the article
again. He folds it carefully and moves the article toward his pocket but stops. What
would really happen when he told them that they were moving to Alaska? Paul stands,
turns, and looks at the toilet. He lifts the lid and it bangs against the back of the porcelain toilet. The sound echoes off of the canary yellow walls. Paul drops the article into the bowl and it floats like a glorious ship preparing for its maiden voyage. His hand searches out the chilly silver handle (cold because of Carol’s obsession to keep the house at sixty-five degrees no matter the season) and flushes. “A Fresh Start” surfs around the bowl. Paul watches, his chin following the article’s pathway as it spins and sinks alongside hopes for a life different than his own.
CHAPTER IV:
UNDER THE CLOAK OF NIGHT

Nothing More to Talk About

“Slow down, slow down, I want to see over,” she says.

The speed limit is fifty-five, I guess eighty is a bit much.

“Sure,” I reply.

Sometimes you don’t even notice the little things when you’re flying through them. Two and a half years had gone by and I really never stopped to enjoy them. I won her heart right out from under his nose. She was new in town, fresh meat. Of course that’s what everyone said, anyway.

“Honey, the next bridge should be about two miles,” she says.

I look at her and she smirks.

“I suppose you’ll want me to slow down then?”

She cocks her head and smiles again. Her eyebrows furrow in a way I have never seen before.

“No,” she says, sitting forward in her seat, “let’s take this one fast…”

Fast. We are so good at taking things fast. The first night, actually. There was a full moon out and her hair shined at me, and that smile. I kissed her on a whim, and she graced me with the sight of her body in the light of the night.

“Can we talk?” she asks.
I step on the gas.

“Not fast enough?”

I glance at her. She turns sideways in her seat.

“Actually,” she says, putting her left hand on my right, “there’s something we really need to discuss and this seems like the perfect time.”

Talks. I’ve talked her ear off in my time, but we never seem to say anything. That look is gone and her face is an empty box truck.

“She called again.”

“When?”

“I told you she can’t call, and she still does. Why?” she asks, shaking her invisible finger of guilt.

“Because she wanted…”

I remember the first time I met the other girl, a mere six weeks after my girlfriend. She was nothing special, but she has a good ear and was a fine specimen for my wall. Commitment is a word I cannot define.

“She’s no good. She doesn’t call again.”

“You don’t understand, and besides, this is not the time for this con—“

We hit a bump and we drive onto the bridge that runs high over the valley. When you look hard on a clear day, you see the city outline over the eastern sky. Today there’s too much smog.

“I love you,” she says.

I turn to her. She lunges over me, hurling the wheel to the right, towards the wall and sending the car into it. The front bumper catches air and we begin to spin. The car
tumbles violently. I feel like vomiting. Or maybe I already have. The car is now still and the landscape moves quickly on either side of the car.

Instinctively I grab her, pulling her to me and kiss her forehead. A wave rolls over me as I muster a whisper, “Goodbye.”

I think of all the things. All the places, the people. There is an inventory of everything I own in my head, and the more I think the more things I collect. Phone calls are made to people that should have been done long ago and reality stabs me like a disgruntled kid with a pocketknife. The car slams into the hillside, tumbles and finally rights itself near the bottom. The hood is plucked off. There is silence. We come to rest in the shallow ravine, a glove of soft mud and creek bed eases the violence of this tragedy.

I collect my wits. My neck is cramping, it takes a host of manipulations to turn toward the passenger seat. I would call her name if my throat felt less like a four story blaze. The world forms in my eyes and I wonder, considering the impact from the fall, why there is no fire. I look for her, in the passenger seat where she has been for the past five years.

She’s not there.

Panic injects itself into my veins as my little remaining strength helps peel me from the wreckage. I feel crippled, caught in a world where I cannot move, a place that I cannot get out of. I stumble into the muck and fall to my knees, catching my first view of the mess that vaguely resembles a car. There she is, that same smile across her face. She stands as though a train is coming and her shoelaces are tied to the tracks.
I tumble-run, collect her in my arms, our faces shot with tears – then everything melts into dark. My head swims and I come to. I labor to twist my head, it is so heavy. In the car still, I think. Through the blood streams on her face she smiles. Our next talk will come, but won’t eclipse this momentary sliver of time where we’re simply glad to be alive.

Under the Moon

The moon has been full for the past thirty-seven days. Cecil Williams sits alone, driving his car and analyzing what this lunar hiccup means. People seem not to notice the phenomenon. Maybe he is wrong. The moon may not have really been shining for all this time. He could have imagined it.

The twenty-seven mile roundtrip ride is beginning to take its toll on Cecil. Between eating poorly and not sleeping more than five hours per night, he is wearing thin. No one told him in the interview process exactly what ‘team leader’ meant. All he knew when he applied was that the salary eclipsed any of the other job options, plus there was no ‘assistant’ in front of the title. He thought he would actually make a difference and contribute to the company. In turn, they would watch him grow into a force that management could not live without and sooner than he could imagine there would be a mountain of promotions. Everything fell into place the more that he thought about it and now, three years later, his team quits and the fantastical career he built in his mind tears at him like a pair of dull scissors working on cardboard.

Cecil feels disoriented, the collage of headlights and street signs jumble, and the front right wheel grazes a rumble strip embedded in the road’s shoulder. He jerks the wheel, taking a moment to gather his thoughts. Cecil never falls asleep at the wheel. He
needs to do something to keep awake. He spies an emerald green road sign that leads to Tiger Gully Park. Some rest will help, so Cecil pulls off at the exit and follows the mile of pavement until the first parking lot comes into view. A single street lamp illuminates the small thirty spot lot and he pulls into one in the far corner, careful to avoid making it obvious that he is there. It is hard to say whether or not anyone is patrolling this area, but he does not want to broadcast his position. Most parks open at sunrise, and judging by his best guess, he has about an hour to rest and sleep off the cobwebs cluttering his head. He reaches down, pulls the thick plastic lever, and quietly leans the seat back until it is almost flush with the back seat.

He thinks for a second about calling to leave a message for his secretary. Cecil decides that it is not necessary because she does not start work for another two hours. He rubs his eyes and temples, and then breathes in deeply, fading off to sleep.

* * * * *

“Tell me the truth, Mr. Williams. What happened out there?” Noddings asks.

Cecil does not respond.

“Cecil, tell me what happened.”

The hum from florescent lighting bothers Cecil and he shields his faded blue eyes. The reduced intensity gives him some valuable seconds to think. Everybody keeps asking him the same question. Cecil shakes his head.

“I don’t know.”
Attorney Jeff Noddings leans back, lifting his arms over his head, stretching, and finally resting them on top of his head. His powder yellow shirt shows sweat stains in both armpits. The brightness bounces off of the institutional white walls and the overhead lamps reflect in Noddings’s eyes.

“I can’t make them believe if I don’t,” Noddings says. “Make me believe.”

The words ricochet, like the light, off the walls and floor, the ceiling and the table. They seem to have missed Cecil. Instead, Cecil stares at a fly drawn to the light bank over Noddings’s left shoulder. The fly buzzes, trying to become part of the light. The heat and purity invites the insect in, but the glass casing keeps it out.

“Damnit Cecil, your life is at stake. Don’t you understand that?”

Cecil continues to stare, watching the fly dance across the florescent landscape in front of him, while a meager dream of freedom slips away. The fly ceases its staring match with Cecil, spinning around and rubbing its head with its front legs. Focus, Cecil says to himself, focus on what happened. He watches as Noddings pushes a button on the front of his phone. The display lights up and Noddings frowns, his face folding over like poorly tended laundry. Noddings face shows stress lines and creases. Cecil thinks Noddings is young for his profession but not aging well.

* * * * *

Jeff reaches across the table and secures a pitcher filled with tap water in his left hand and a plastic wrapped disposable cup with his right. He looks at Cecil for an answer, then shakes his head and rips open the cup. In a single fluid motion, Jeff pulls
the top from the pitcher and dips the cup inside. Putting the cup to his lips, he sips the lukewarm water then places it back on the table. Some droplets mob together and tread down the side, pooling around the base.

There were other clients, Jeff thinks. Why not drop this guy, claim insanity and move on? Nothing good comes out of these meetings with Cecil. Jeff even stopped wearing his expensive suits, opting instead for the low-end department store ones that his parents bought for him when he graduated law school.

The kids are at home, on winter break. Jeff’s wife will call him in a few minutes and probably be frustrated when he does not answer. The longer he has been a lawyer, the more agitated she becomes. If he were a high profile attorney, trying cases that would earn him more maybe he would care. Cecil, this heap sitting across from him playing all these games, does not appreciate anything because he is already dead.

Jeff only hopes to keep Cecil out of the electric chair. An acquittal is impossible; the sheriff caught Cecil loading the body into his trunk. Jeff looks at the photos lying in front of him. The inside of Cecil’s car looks like the dumpster of an Italian restaurant. If a bus boy emptied pots and pans of old lasagna by flinging the contents against the dumpster’s walls it would closely resemble the carnage in the photographs. A few more minutes, Jeff coaches himself, just a few more.

He stares a hole through Cecil’s eyes. Jeff wants something, anything, that he can use to defend this man. He needs the truth so he knows what information to use and what to downplay. He cannot watch another client get that black hood slid over a pale defeated face. Cecil squints then moves his hand form his brow line and speaks.

“Mr. Noddings, I remember.”
No one is dumb enough to leave a car parked in Tiger Gully. Mila knows that all kinds of people find themselves lost in the park at night for an assortment of reasons. She has had more than her share of encounters with the would-be men in her life that sometimes started, and ended, in the fledgling hours of the morning parked very near this car. She decides to sneak up and get a better look.

The street lamp shines just enough light for Mila to see, but she barely even has a hint of her own shadow. The pavement is uneven all around so she steps carefully in the near darkness. Clouds roll past the moon, decreasing Mila’s visibility even further. It seems like there has been moonlight for weeks, and now, when she needs it most, there is only dark sprinkled with errant beams cast from a streetlight.

Mila sees that the window is cracked open slightly and she peers in. A chilled wind cuts through her blouse and she wishes she had grabbed a coat before she left. Mila curls her lips into her mouth and they make a rough sound. The noise makes her uncomfortable and sounds like someone running sandpaper over exposed flesh. She studies the interior and fixes her gaze on the man reclining in the driver’s seat. Tapping the glass with her right hand, a metallic clang sounds from her rings that echoes through the shadows.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she says.

The man does not move. Mila notices that he is stone-faced and pale. She cannot even tell if he is breathing. Her hand wanders down and stops on the cold steel door
handle. She questions herself on whether or not she should open it. Even if she leaves now, she will feel guilty that someone may have died and she could have done something about it. Mila would know that she had a chance to help and did nothing. She inhales and pulls the handle. Her fingers slip off as the handle stops. The door is locked.

“Mister?”

Mila raps on the window several more times as the man continues his death-like slumber. She cups her hands and looks inside, searching for any clue. If she is going to report a body in the park, she has to know who is dead. Scanning her eyes over the passenger seat, Mila sees that the other door is unlocked.

Mila hurries around the car, stopping directly in front of the passenger door. She pulls the lever and the door opens almost without a sound. The car’s dome light shines blinding Mila and she inadvertently steps backward. The man in the car does not move. She decides to climb in and get a look at him, hoping that she can tell if he is dead. Mila stops and listens, the sound of a car coming over gravel is heard not too far from her. If that is the police, they will think she did it. The officer will pull in, shine his spot light, say, “Is everything ok?” over a speaker, get out and find her sitting in the car with a dead body. Mila knows that once the cop pulls up her record and reads up on her arrests he will blame her. “You killed him, you slut.” She is too young to be locked up for good.

Mila ducks inside, slams the door, and watches the dome light. The only chance she has is for that light to go out before the cop comes over the hill. She thinks of her mother for the first time in years and just as the headlights run over the road, the dome light goes off. Sitting in the dark with a body, Mila watches the police car slide slowly down the road and out of view.
“I stop breathing when I sleep,” Cecil says.

Cecil knows by Noddings’s demeanor that he does not believe him. Jeff’s eyes are dull and it looks like he has not had a good night’s sleep in quite some time. It is true; Cecil wakes up every night in a panic, gasping for air like a swimmer does after twelve laps across the pool.

“And when you woke up, what did you see?”

Cecil sees the contempt in Jeff’s eyes. He does not understand. It is not that he cannot, but he does not. Cecil sweeps his eyes over Noddings and stops, staring directly at his face. If he did not know better, Cecil would swear that he is looking into a mirror.

“Someone was in the car with me. They were rooting around my glove box, looking for something.”

Mila’s heartbeat slows and she looks over at the man beside her. She thinks about checking his wallet. Mila has to know who he is. She looks in the back seat for any piece of evidence that will lead her in the right direction, but it is immaculate and the seat is leaning so far back that anything under the body would be hard to get to. She decides that she has to touch him, check his pulse and know. Then, Mila will hike up the hill, stop at the pay phone near the highway, and call it in. “There is a dead man in the park,”
she rehearses in her head. No, she will check his wallet and see his name and say, “Mr. Somebody is dead,” and hang up. They can trace the call and find out where. The police will show up, check it out, and find the man in his car, but maybe they will dust for fingerprints. They will look and find hers and identify them and knock on her door later that evening. Mila curses herself for not having thought about this sooner. Her eyes dart around the interior. She stops, thinking that most people have napkins or towels or something in their glove box. She can wipe down the handles and interior, everything she touched. Her left-hand reaches up, pulls, and the compartment tumbles open. The tiny light comes on and her fingers feel around for anything useful.

“Come on,” she whispers.

Mila drops her head and stares at the floor mat, her fingers dancing around the box. She slows her breathing and raises her head to look out the windshield. The cloud cover thins and white bright moonlight pierces Mila’s eyes.

* * * * *

Noddings watches Cecil’s eyes grow wide. Remembering is a difficult thing, particularly when someone envisions violence. It happens again, but instead of escaping and going into shock it haunts them. He lost a client once who he spent months preparing for trial. Countless doctors examined him and found him to be both competent and ready for the courtroom. The man bludgeoned his wife’s lover to death with a shoehorn. He insisted on taking the stand in his own defense, and Jeff saw the other lawyer’s strategy. He systematically unwound the thoughts that kept the man from truly remembering what
happened that day and prodded until Jeff’s client finally lost all control and sobbed, calling out “I did it,” over and over again before being shoveled off to his cell.

That will not happen again, Noddings thinks. Jeff’s eyes search the room; a bank of lights ever so slightly blinks behind Cecil. With every pulse and flicker, his eyes readjust. He shakes his head and Jeff’s thoughts jumble just like when he wakes from a dream to the droning call of his alarm clock.

Cecil gasps, his arms swim in front of his body and he grabs the steering wheel to steady himself. Cecil’s heart slams his rib cage. His eyes are wide and the light of the moon catches his view. Something in his peripheral gets his attention and he shoots his head to the right. Someone is hunching over, their hands buried in the glove compartment. Cecil freezes, staring blankly at the back of the shadow’s head. He shakes it off, reaches across the center console and seizes a handful of hair. He forces the head into the dashboard, and again, and again. The dark shape’s head slams over and over on the dash as the blows come quicker and with more deliberate force. Cecil’s arms are on fire as he tries to put the thief’s forehead through the vinyl dash. The intruder makes muffled sounds, like screams filtered through a mask.

Cecil pounds and pounds until the figure relaxes and finally stops moving. With both hands he forces the man back in the seat and flies out the door, rushing to the passenger side. He pulls the door open, the dome light makes him squint, and Cecil stares at the bloody face of a woman whose fluids taint the entire passenger front of the car.
The sounds of lonesome crickets alarm Cecil, pulling him away from his ghostly stare. She was a thief, he thinks. He did not know. The crickets close in, drawn to the artificial light provided by the car. Cecil ducks his head, cradling the woman’s body and lifting her, setting her gently down on the chilly blacktop. He does not know what more he can do. Cecil spins himself around and sits in the passenger’s seat. The drying blood sticks on his arm. He is sore, his upper body stings. Blood stained hands stretch in front of Cecil, and he rests his head in them. A woman’s body sits at his feet and this is the first time that he notices the buzz coming from the steering column alerting the driver that keys are still in the ignition. It drowns out the chirping crickets as a host of flying insects hover around the dome light.

* * * * *

Jeff Noddings lifts the cup of water resting by his right hand. He looks down, noticing the distinct ring left behind, a map showing where to place the glass again. Cecil looks like he lost a staring match with death, his eyes focusing at something indistinct at a distance. Finally, after hours of sitting in this godforsaken chair he has got somewhere. It is hard to say how a jury will react to the brutality of the case. They may be sympathetic after hearing Cecil claim that he attacked her when he believed she was robbing him. They may think, like Jeff did for so long, that Cecil is lying.

“The report says you were dumping the body in your trunk, is that correct?”

Cecil stares, blinks several times, and answers, “Yes. I was scared.”
The two men look at each other, knowing that the other man could be him. The phone in Jeff’s pocket vibrates again. She wants me home, he thinks. His eyes are heavy, fatigue shaking from deep within him. Jeff knows that he will get home and have a list of things to do, but that is how you balance a career and family. Fourteen hours a day, all his preparations and research done by himself, all because the worthless employees at his office are lucky to get to work let alone do their jobs. And he has not been sleeping well, his kids staying up late and taking advantage of their break from classes. More caffeine every day, he finally graduated from coffee to speed pills, the legal ones. There is not enough money, there is not enough time in the week for everything that needs done.

Jeff looks at Cecil, sitting across from him. There is a peacefulness to him that is unique. Maybe it is the fact that everything he used to do is done for him. Maybe it is that all the little things that most people stress and falter from no longer apply to him. Cecil looks like a quiet man whose stress has melted away, all on a chance morning not too long ago. The day that a perceived thief made the mistake of sitting next to a man who held a mysterious connection with death. On a morning in which nothing at all seemed to gel, a young woman climbing into the passenger seat for some unknown reason is beaten to death. Jeff’s hand moves up, rubs his temple and then each eye separately.

“Do you have anything else for today?” Noddings asks.

* * * * *
The voice sounds foreign to Cecil. He blinks his eyes and turns his gaze from the doorway to the person sitting in front of him. Her face is still swollen, but the bleeding has subsided. The stains taint what Cecil thought was sure to be beauty, and he knows that if he met her before this, before the exact moment when he jars awake and acts out, he would be attracted to her. Cecil does not know why he reacted like that. He just continued to pound her into the dash. All that he could visualize were the shows on television where the news says no matter what never assume your attacker is subdued.

He wants it to be all over, for her to brace her arms in front of her and lift. To see her crane her back and stretch, her arms extended over her head. Cecil wants to live in the shadow that she casts, standing in the brilliant moonlight. Perhaps today is actually day thirty-eight. But it can’t be, Cecil thinks. The moon is full once a cycle, not for an entire cycle. Certainly not more than one cycle. Yet, as he sits and thinks, he realizes that he cannot see the moon from his cell window.

Cecil leans back in his chair, staring up at the florescent lighting above him. He remembers when he and his friends would have contests when they were kids, looking up towards the sun for the most amount of time. He never won but each time he thought it was like looking the devil right in the eyes. He leans forward again as his eyes focus. Cecil knows that Noddings is growing impatient, and his phone keeps ringing. There is someone out there very eager to see him, to talk to him, to be with him. Cecil wonders what it feels like to have someone care that much, and that Noddings is lucky to have the chance to live. He cannot help but notice that his lawyer’s face is long. Noddings’s head has dipped a number of times as he fights falling asleep. This case is meaningless and Noddings is spending so much time trying to make something of Cecil’s life.
“That’s it.”

* * * * *

Jeff points two fingers to the guard who buzzes a door lock and then walks in. Cecil stands, putting his hands behind his back without being asked to. Jeff watches this murderer, so calm and reserved. The heart, once full of brutality, now as calm as a child’s, he thinks.

Jeff Noddings packs his briefcase, walks out of the small closet of a room, and validates his parking at the front desk. He should be walking quickly, a sense of urgency to answer the calls and get home, but he is not. Jeff unlocks the door remotely, ducks his head inside and leans back against the seat. He closes the door and stares out from the top of the parking deck. Between the skyscrapers, Jeff makes out the faint hint of the moon’s light. Noddings leans his head back to the rest, reaches his left hand down, and pulls the lever to tilt back the seat. Just a quick nap is all that he really needs. Each thought is a flash, blinding at first but soon fading away into nothing.

The Hardest Place to Leave

For two months, I’ve been trying to come up with the best way to get out of a dead-end relationship. The obvious ones can’t be used; she never cheated on me, hasn’t even looked at another guy, isn’t that bitchy. The point is it doesn’t feel right. If I tell her that she’ll have all these questions like “Why not?” and “Am I not good enough for you?” and others I equally don’t want to hear. Everyone has their own way of dealing with things. My personal method involves deciding my cryptic brain’s desires and
communicating them as painlessly as possible to those involved. I’m not a private person but people that don’t need to know things don’t know them. It’s easier and provokes less drama.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. The other girl dangled in front of me for months, showing up here and there, catching my eye. She was all I could think of and when I wanted to concentrate on my girlfriend Janey, all I could see was her.

Her name is Heather, not spectacular by any standard. She’s tall; about five foot eight without heels. Skirts are her natural attire, from jean to plaid to suede. Trendy is one way to describe her, but there’s something else there. More alluring and unique. She’s more woman and less girl – which is what I think I’m looking for.

When Heather talks everyone listens. It’s not her obnoxious “try to prove me wrong” attitude that captivates, it’s her point she makes. I never stood toe-to-toe intellectually with anyone and lost, until her.

What bothers me is that things are fine with Janey. I mean, I guess there’s always a little problem here or there, but I feel like its run its course. It took some thought, but I decided the best way to move on: a letter.

People say a breakup letter is cheesy and passé. Normally I agree, but it’s the best way to deal with this. My words jumble when I talk so to get my point across it’ll have to be like this. I write the letter using all the good ones: “It’s not you it’s me,” and, “We’ll still be friends.” I scribble my name at the bottom and slip it into an envelope. It floats right in and I pocket the note. It would be stupid to drive over there and forget it.

The car starts and I shift into gear. It takes about ten minutes to get to Janey’s house. I’ll covertly slip it under her door and walk away from the whole thing with a
smile on my face. Just to make sure, I’ll turn my phone off and conveniently not be home for a few hours. I avoid confrontation whenever possible. It’s not that I can’t deal with people, I just choose not to. People say that I’m insensitive, but I don’t care.

The sky is dark, but I don’t remember there being any rain in the forecast. Hopefully the weather will hold out. There is a slow rumble in the distance, like a band’s sound check. It isn’t quite music but is more than noise. Something else is there, under the surface.

Janey will get the note and look around outside. She won’t see my car and figure that I dropped by on the way to work. I do things like that, or, well I used to. I speed when I drive. The sheets of water fall like motor oil on my windshield. Wiper blades only go so fast. The letter is staring at me from the passenger seat. I have a knot in my stomach, and it eats at me. Turning around is not possible. This is what I want. Heather is waiting for me, but she won’t wait forever. Once this is done, the new chapter begins.

The rain is a lake hanging in the air. My car makes waves through the sky. Next to the letter, my cell phone rings. “Heather” is on the display in block letters. I reach over, flip it open, and say, “Hi.”

Silence. Maybe the storm is interfering. I try again. “Hey Heather, how’re you?” There is no response. “Hello?”

Heather’s voice splits the silence, “We can’t do this anymore.”

“Can’t do what? What are you—”

“I’ve met someone who wants to be with me. Only with me. Don’t call me.”

She hangs up. I toss the phone back on the seat; it falls on the letter. What does she mean? Who wants to be with her – me. I do. I fucking decide to rearrange my
happy life for her and this bitch dumps me before I even… the letter. I reach out and
grab the letter and my phone falls between the seats. “Janey” is scrawled on its front with
two lines underneath it. The letters meld into her name and I have to shake my head to
focus on them.

The phone rings again, muffled. I dig between the seats, finding it trapped by the
seat bracket. I knock it free and flip it open.

My concentration springs back to the road where brake lights shine a few feet
away. I jab the brake pedal. It mocks me. The brakes lock up and hold. I hydroplane.
The cell phone drops, the name “Heather” on the display again. The slow working cogs
of my life hang and stop like a failure in an otherwise useful machine.

* * * * *

The room is dim and stuffy. Chairs are lined in neat rows and the plastic white
seats reflect what little light there is. People walk up, sign in, and maneuver through the
double sliding wooden doors. The scent is overpowering, flowers and bleach. Death’s
potpourri. Even though the showing was at night, Mr. Reynolds demanded every inch of
the parlor was spotless and clean whenever a client’s family arrived. It’s a bit misleading
to refer to the recently deceased as a client, but officially I am.

People crowd the room. They congregate far from the casket leaving space for
the brave to wander up, pay their last respects, and then disappear like phantoms.
Reynolds is speaking to my mother.

“Please know that anything you need will be provided to you,” Reynolds says.
Tissue in hand, Mom wipes her eyes and tips her head. In her left hand is an envelope, addressed to Janey. In my own handwriting. I’ve not been here long, but I know that matters of living don’t concern me. Still, I wish I could reach out and snatch that letter out of her hand.

Mom shakes her head and looks again at the seal on the envelope, which she broke hours ago. I watched her read, tears overflowing. Janey is like family, and my desire to break up with her bit mom's heart.

Janey walks through the door. Mom sees her, grasps the letter against her chest, and tears tumble like blown leaves from her face. Janey looks sedated. She holds a yellow rose in her left hand, her keys dangling from her right. There is something beautiful now and I know that if I were alive I would know, feel, and appreciate that beauty.

“David,” Janey sobs.

Mom grips the letter tighter and walks toward Janey. Her eyes sting and Janey’s features melt into a cool mass through Mom’s tears. Mom reaches her, places an arm over Janey’s shoulder and says she’s sorry.

“I can’t believe he’s gone,” Janey says. “Janey, David loved you with all of his heart.”

Janey turns and buries her head into Mom’s shoulder. Mom cradles Janey’s head like a newborn and puts my letter away in her purse. I don’t know if it’s my being here or not, but something changed her mind. Her decisions always are better than mine.

“Janey, David loved you with all of his heart.”
Felix sat and watched through the crack in the door as his mother worked. He never was allowed in the room while his mother was “with a client,” but through some miracle of chance she had left the door open to the workshop and now a sliver of light was Felix’s key to the mystery. He stood in the breezeway that connected the workshop to the rest of the house. The washer and dryer were behind him, and a coat closet was between Felix and the door to the outside. If his mom catches him, he’ll be grounded – she put him to bed over two hours ago.

Felix thought to himself what good timing this was because he had an assignment for school where he was supposed to talk to his parents and find out what they did for a living. Rather than ask her boring questions and have to write down everything word for word, this gave him the opportunity to watch his mother and write his essay based on that. Mrs. Vayne would enjoy his essay and maybe it would even be entered into the 6th grade writing fair and arts festival in April. Felix had watched most of his classmates get their homework put on display for the parents that came to the arts festival and always wanted to be able to lead his mom to the very spot where his was displayed. Felix opened the coat closet where his book bag was and pulled it out. He carefully set his backpack on the floor, unzipped the large pocket, and produced the assignment sheet that Mrs. Vayne had given him that day. The paper had a few checkboxes for the important information that had to be included in the report and next to the one that said “Job” he had written “Safety Equipment Engineer,” just as his mother had told him.

The assignment was supposed to be about his mother and father, but it had been a long time since he had seen to his father. Mom said that he was sent away on some very
important business and that he would come home soon. That was just after Christmas and Felix was beginning to wonder when soon was. According to the calendar, it was the middle of February.

Felix squinted his eyes and tried to see more of the room. He could just make out his mother’s florescent light hung from a chain in the middle of the room. There were a lot of shadows and doctor looking things around the room. Some were pointy; others had long handles that resembled shovels. Felix thought that it must be difficult to test out all the safety equipment that Mom designed. He often watched her carry some contraption or other to the garage where she could clean and hose off her inventions. On more than one occasion, he tried to go in and watch her test a new harness that she made or a helmet that was supposed to help construction workers from getting their heads punctured but his mother made sure to reiterate how important it was for him to stay out.

“Felix,” she had said, “I don’t want to lose you. It’s dangerous in here, even for me.”

He remembered asking her what would happen if something went wrong.

“It won’t.”

Felix nodded and from that moment had not the least interest in the room, until now. It is okay, he thought, because this is for school. With that in mind, he nudged the door a little and the crack grew wider. Now, he could see everything inside.

His mother was standing in front of a chair that looked like one in his dentist’s office. There were shiny instruments all around her, on a couple small tables. The light from the fixture over her head shined off each instrument as she carefully picked each up and used it. Felix could not see exactly what she was doing. Felix’s mother sighed and
then walked into the far dark corner of the room. Felix noticed that there was a shielded area in the near corner with some kind of glass. He imagined that it was there to protect his mom when she was working with something that might fly around the room or make a big mess.

With his mother out of the way, Felix could see the chair that his mother had been standing in front of. He believed that it was an old dental chair because of the way it slanted and looked. Felix could see one of the dummies that his mother had stored in the garage propped up and leaning funny in the chair. Felix readjusted himself hoping to see even more, and then he realized that the foyer light was on. He spun around quickly and ran to the switch, flipping it off. That was close, he thought. If his mother had looked toward the door, she would have seen him spying on her and that would have meant at least a few swats on his butt. The blows never hurt for more than a day or so, but Felix learned a long time ago that when he got punished for something he wasn’t to do it again. The second punishment was harder, meant to make certain that he did not forget. He had never been punished for doing anything more than twice, and only a few times did he need to be hit again. Felix tiptoed back to the door. Having the light out behind him actually made it much easier for Felix to see and make out what was inside the room. With this newfound visibility, Felix could clearly see that there was a man tied up in the chair.

* * * * *
Jeff Noddings woke up violently and stared at a brilliant white moon. It was cold. The winter months always were, and he had fallen asleep in his car again. He watched as his breath clouded in front of his mouth and he wiped his eyes in a vain attempt to wake up. He reached down into the center console, lifted a bottle of water, and noticed the floating chunk of ice in the half full container. Jeff twisted the cap off and dropped the freezing liquid into his throat. It stung and he winced, but it quenched his thirst. He swallowed a few more gulps, put the cap back on, and returned the bottle to the cup holder.

Jeff took his phone out of his coat pocket and opened it. It was quarter to seven in the evening. He finished his meeting a good two hours ago and his wife would wonder what happened to him. More importantly, she would wonder why he didn’t bring home the milk that she had demanded in her message earlier. Jeff turned the key, popped the car into reverse, and pulled out of his spot in the municipal parking deck. He wound through the tight turns and corridors, noticing that the lot was scarcely populated. Most normal people left hours ago, Jeff thought. He took out his phone again and dialed home. Jeff’s wife answered, agitated and angry.

“I told you I’m on my way home,” Jeff said.

“You said that two hours ago, I packed your son and up and went to the store.”

Jeff asked her what she wanted him to do.

“I don’t even care,” she answered.

He slammed the phone shut and tossed it onto the passenger’s seat. It slid off, landing on the floorboard and sliding out of view. Perfect, he thought. Jeff reached but the console was in the way. Anyone that would call him wouldn’t have anything good to
say anyway. He sat back. The car jumped on the highway, and sped up. Jeff swerved the car through packed traffic, twisting and turning as though the routine was designed years ago and perfected. An asshole in an SUV prevented Jeff from merging in time to exit. He sighed, smoothed his hair with his left hand, and decided to take the next exit and stop by the game hall. After the week he had, it seemed like a perfectly legitimate place to waste some time. It wasn’t like he was really expected to be home.

Jeff took off his tie, tossed it behind him, and opened the door. He snatched the keys from the ignition then slammed the door. Pushing the button on his remote start device on his keychain, the doors locked and the car horn sounded once. The lot was nearly empty, except for a few older cars parked near the door. He never parked near anyone else if he could avoid it. Body shops were a place he never liked to end up.

Jeff walked toward the entrance, stuffed the keys into his pants pocket, and stopped at the door. The neon glow of the “OPEN” sign burned his eyes and the crackle sound it produced annoyed him. He wondered why these signs were always so cold. Jeff felt his pockets and remembered that his phone was under the seat in the car. He considered walking back and getting it, but decided that he did not need it. The automatic door flung open and Jeff stepped inside.

The hall was hazy. Not many people were here tonight, which he expected on a Tuesday night. The weeknights were never very crowded. Most bars and restaurants ran specials just to pull people in Monday to Thursday. This particular Tuesday there seemed to be even less patrons than normal.

Jeff pulled out his license and gave it to the overweight mess behind the counter. He is always here, sitting on a metal stool and collecting ids and money from everyone
who uses the tables. His face resembled a bulldog, with distinct jowls hanging down and flopping around like a walrus on dry land.

“Eight ball?” the man asked.

Jeff nodded. The man produced a rack, balls, and chalk. Jeff took them, surveyed the hall, and headed to the table furthest in the corner. The last thing he needed was for someone to bother him.

* * * * *

The man shook his head violently and started to breathe heavily, like he had just dived into deep water and surfaced a short time later. He seemed frantic and Felix thought that maybe he was crazy. The man pulled and struggled, but his mother had tied him down, probably for his own sake. Felix’s mother walked back into the light and Felix could hear the man beginning to make noise. He was mumbling and hard to understand, though Felix thought he heard the man ask, “Why?”

Felix cocked his head and considered this. Perhaps the man was sick or maybe even insane. He thought that his mother was making something for him to protect him. Felix remembered watching a show on television last night that said some people were unable to feel pain and had to be monitored all the time because they could hurt themselves and not even know it. He could not remember the name they called it, but he remembered the people. Felix imagined that this man was one of those people, and that his mother was going to help him. He thought about how fortunate it was that his mother was inclined to help these people, no matter what problem they had.
Felix watched as his mother bent over, her white lab coat glowing, and picked up a brick from the ground. She put her finger to her mouth and said, “Shhh.” The man tried to scream and Felix’s eyes grew wide. The mannequin in the chair had something in his mouth and he could not talk right. Felix’s mother pulled her hand back and at the same time Felix’s cat Daisy twisted around his feet. Felix shot his gaze down, hoping that the cat would not try to go in. There would not be another chance like this, to watch his mom help people, and he was not going to let the cat spoil it. The man in the room was still making a lot of muffled noise as Felix bent down, picked the cat up, and walked it into the other room. Felix thought he heard a sound, like the one that came from the cutting board when mom used the hammer thing on the steaks before she cooked them. He quietly closed the door and took his post again, seeing the man in the chair slouched again and sweat beads running around his mother’s goggles and down her face. The phone rang in the other room and Felix felt very hot. His mother was walking towards the door, directly at him. Somehow Felix had to get inside the workshop. Mom would notice that the door was open and when she went back would make sure to shut it. Then he will never know what happens to the man next. Felix darted his eyes around the room and decided to duck into the coat closet. He left the closet door cracked. He decided to run into the workshop when his mother was in the other room. Felix hoped that his mother would not notice, and she did not. She walked past, into the kitchen, and closed the door. Felix heard the cat meow and darted across the hall, through the open workshop door, and closed it behind him.

His mother had turned off the light as she was leaving, but Felix searched the wall and found the switch. He flicked it on and the hum of the florescent light drowned the
silence that had been swimming in the room. Light pulsed through the bulb a few times, and then it came on full. Felix walked toward the slouched man in the chair like he was crossing a shallow stream on slippery rocks. He wondered what was wrong with the man, and why his mother decided to help him. As he neared, Felix could see that the man was wearing some sort of wire device that held open his eyes. This made the man look like something else; he looked like the mannequins that were stored in the garage. Felix approached and forgot that his mother was on the phone in the other room. He forgot everything about the assignment for Mrs. Vayne. Felix dipped his head to one side of the man, then to the other. He looked on as the man began to raise his head and noticed a bruise on the left side of the mannequin’s face. There was swelling but the apparatus over his head kept the eye open anyway. Then the man whispered, though his mouth barely moved.

“H-help m-me.”

* * * * *

Jeff grabbed a cue from the holder on the wall and admired his job racking. He rolled it on the empty table next to his and determined it was pretty straight. It was close enough, especially for a pool hall’s provided equipment. More often than not, the local yahoos use them to fight with or kids got a hold of them and then they became worthless. But this one was straight. He placed the cue ball on the table and lined up his break.

“You playing all by yourself?”
Jeff’s eyes rose from the blue felt and he stared at the woman. She was about his wife’s age, similar build. If Jeff did not know better and saw her from the side or behind, he would probably think it was his wife.

“I was.”

She smiled, sighed, and turned to leave. “I’ll leave you alone then,” she said.

Jeff envisioned watching her walk away and lowering his concentration back to the table. Instead, he invited her to play.

They passed the first game quietly, feeling out each other’s game. They continued to play, each taking turns telling the other about personal things. Jeff learned that her name was Sarah, that she too had a son, and that she worked from home. He told her that he was a lawyer and she laughed when he added, “Not a good one.” They split the games, each winning a few.

It had been a long time since Jeff met a new friend. He was busy. People generally annoyed him and spending an extended amount of time with anyone rubbed on his patience. Lately, Jeff tended to be a drain on everyone around him – most notably his family. The more time that he spent playing pool with Sarah, the more he felt like his old self.

“Tell me Jeff, do you think I’m pretty?”

“Excuse me? I don’t think—“

“Don’t give me lawyer shit, just answer the question.”

Sarah bent over the table and lined up her shot. She slammed into the cue ball and combo sunk two of her solid colored balls.

“Yeah,” Jeff said, “you really are.”
They stared at each other. Jeff looked up and caught a glimpse at the clock on the wall. It was late; he had to be back at the courthouse in ten hours. It was time to cut this short and get home to fight with Lynn, his wife, until one of the two of them just fell asleep. He mentioned that it was late and he had to work in the morning and she frowned.

“Don’t you want to know what I do?” she asked.

“Sorry, I really have to get going.”

“Come on, I guarantee this will be a night you never forget. Plus, what else do you have to do?”

“Fight with my wife,” Jeff said.

“Exactly,” she replied.

Sarah told him about her son, and about how her husband left them a few months ago. “It wasn’t like he found someone else, he just was a different person. It was like the man I married was dead,” she said.

She seemed to be a little upset, and Jeff agreed to go to her place and see her work. He thought it was a little strange, a woman who was so involved in what she did during the day that it spilled over into her nights. Jeff admired her dedication and thought that maybe, just maybe, this was someone who could appreciate his own connection to his work.

Jeff walked out the door and Sarah followed. He stepped down off the concrete sidewalk and into the lot. Sarah stopped him, told him that she was parked closer, and coaxed him to ride with her. She promised to bring him back later for his car. He
paused, nodded, and reluctantly agreed. Sarah was very persuasive, and Jeff hoped he would not regret his decision to leave.

* * * * *

Felix felt his heart pounding in his chest. The mannequin man tried to say something more but passed out. His head sunk back over the rest and Felix noticed how dry the man’s eyes looked. They were like a sandy desert in the middle of his head.

Felix walked around the chair. The man was leaned back and Felix extended his hand and touched the wire harness. He could see where the sharpened ends dug into the man’s face. The harness clawed in and firmly held the man’s eyes open. Felix stuck his finger out and rubbed over the surface of the man’s right eyeball. He thought that it would feel different, but it felt like running his finger over any part of his own skin. Except that the eye was course and dry. Felix checked the other one and the man in the chair did not even move.

Felix spied his mother’s tray a few steps away. He moved over to it and his eyes inventoried the instruments laid out on the shallow tray. The tools looked sharp and Felix thought he needed to be careful if he picked up any of them. His mother was so professional; these were the cleanest things that he had ever seen. In addition to the instruments, there was a brown wallet that Felix picked up and flipped open. He twisted the wallet into the light.

“Jeff,” Felix said. “Jeff?”

Felix reached and shook the man. There was no response.
He again stood over Jeff. The light was hot and began to make him feel sweaty. He turned his attention back to the table. There were a host of other things on the table, including a six-inch long skewer looking thing. He saw a wastebasket next to the chair and inside was an empty syringe on top of some blood soaked rags. Felix thought that his mother had probably given the man something for his pain. The man would not feel anything. The man seemed to still be unconscious. A shadow crept up the man’s body and eventually covered his face. Felix lifted his head and stared his mother in the face.

His mother said, “Shhh, it’s ok,” and reached down to the table, picking up the long scalpel and walking behind Felix. She took his hand, frozen at his side like it had been soldered in place, and moved it free. His hand turned upward, Felix’s mother placed the instrument firmly in his grasp and she closed his fingers around it. His mother turned his hand over and guided Felix’s hand and the blade.

Felix put the tip of the skewer on the surface of the man’s eye and began to push. The tool was sharp and the tip pierced into Jeff’s eyeball. A clear liquid oozed from the wound and a crimson streak began to run through it. The light reflected off of the liquid and Felix thought that it resembled a candy cane, the way the red mixed and swirled.

Felix cocked his head, turned it from side to side, and admired the sight of the shiny silver tool reflecting light from inside the man’s eyeball. His breathing slowed and Felix felt something that he had never felt before – control. Somewhere, deep inside him, he knew that this was something special. His mother moved around the chair and watched, her arms crossed across her chest and smile plastered over her face.

“Felix,” she said, walking over and plucking another scalpel from the table, “you have a lot to learn.”
The Pit

It starts when three of four cannot control themselves anymore. The energy moves from amplifiers to the air, reverberates, and settles inside their souls. People consume the sound, searching the floor for the likewise afflicted. They push each other while the pulse of music moves them. The guitar stabs a common melody, listeners shake and their skin cracks open giving birth to the pit.

The pit stretches, self aware and hungry. Its form is a misshapen circular body. It is gluttonous, needing to expand and consume more souls. Social felons pull in, morphing and taking their place. The pit extends a sonic arm and jabs into the minds of the timid. They submit, following a slippery, beer-laden path into the pit’s gullet. It roars resembling the demanding drive of ringing double bass drums. The pit is cumbersome and difficult to move. Outcasts fall away into their own group. Another pit forms. Each pit fills, each person slamming around, passing violent energy from one to the next.

Something changes; someone becomes unstable, forms a fist and slams it into another’s back. Conflict rises. More fists fly through the air as fleshy knuckles land blow after blow on glass rim jaws. The lights flash and pulse, seeming to encourage the chaos. Sounds become subtle as a sea of yellow shirt flow over the security railing. They bust in and pounce to put holes in the violence.

Blood. Faces splatter crimson smiles on the yellow security shirts. Bouncers diffuse the fights as the number of people clawing, groping, gouging, slows to zero. The social lepers wait for the next monster to rear a salivitic head as the band tells the crowd good night.
Information Age

“This website is the fuckin’ shits,” Danny says.

Danny Wilma’s furious keystrokes mark his computer competency better than any standardized test. He is flanked by his coworkers, Jeremy Biggs and Randall Walker. They stare at the computer screen. Danny and Jeremy resemble adult forms of characters from “The Simpson’s,” at least to Randall. Randall steps back to keep his belly from bumping into Danny’s chair.

“What the hell are we lookin’ at Danny?” Jeremy asks.

Danny stops typing. He clicks through several links and points, pointing to the screen.

“There.”

Jeremy stares. He wonders where Danny is going with this.

“And?” Randall asks.

“A whole fucking list of the collected sleaze, scum, and psychopaths from all over Ohio. This shit is amazing.”

Danny’s desk is in an L-shape around an electrical bank of cords and empty plugs. The computer system is new, having been recently upgraded. Randall thought in corporate terms the word recent is used to describe anything dealt with inside of the last three years. He stands behind Danny, who sits in a comfortable midnight blue rolling chair. The trio stares at the webpage. Randall cocks his head and wonders why anyone would want to see this.
“See, you just click like this, and bring up anyone convicted of a felony. It includes the status of their court proceedings and when, if ever, these shit-stains get out,” Danny says.

Jeremy laughs, but not like he is amused. It’s that uncomfortable one, the laugh that means you don’t want to be seeing or doing whatever it is that you are.

“Okay, pull up my cousin,” Jeremy says.

“What’s his name?” Danny asks.

Danny types the letters as Jeremy spells them: S-T-E-P-H-E-N K-I-N-G. Danny stops and looks at Jeremy.

“Your cousin’s name is Stephen King?” Randall asks.

“Who the fuck would do that to a kid?” Danny asks.

Jeremy shrugs his shoulders. It must not be that uncommon, Randall thinks. He clicks the button and three links come up. Danny floats the cursor over the links, each with a different middle name and birth date.

“What’s his middle initial?”

Danny looks at Jeremy, who stares at the screen. His face is contorted and looks puzzled. If there were a picture in the dictionary under the word “confused,” Jeremy’s image would be there.

“I don’t know.”

“You have to – aw, fuck it. I’ll just click them all.”

Several moments pass as a bank of photographic images cascade down the screen: Relatives
A former elementary school teacher.

Each felon stares not at the camera, but up. They look as though an alien craft is landing and it is too important to miss. Jeremy realizes that it is a trick to keep people from freaking out when convicts look at web surfers on their home computers.

“Dude,” Danny says, “I wonder if you’re in there Jeremy!”

Randall shakes as a chill rides up his spine. The room feels like it is constricting, imprisoning Randall where he stands. Work is hell, he thinks, shaking the cobwebs from his head.

“You think I’m some real sick fuck, don’t you Danny?”

Danny smiles, and taps the keys to type Jeremy’s name.

“Money on it?” Danny asks.

“There’s no way, dumbass, I’m standing right here.”

A voice cuts into the conversation: “Walker, here, phone call,” a dark expressionless man says. Sound cuts through as the distinct *shkink dink dink* sound of metal on metal pierces Randall’s ears.

Another customer wondering what is and isn’t covered by our service plan he thinks. “Duty calls,” Randall says, walking away.
Danny and Jeremy stare at each other. Danny mouths “Randall” to him and Jeremy shakes his head in affirmation. Danny taps each key loudly and uses the mouse to hit the button marked “SEARCH.”

* * * * *

Randall Walker’s pickup pulls into the driveway, each piece of gravel crunching to a different tune. He speeds up the drive every time, flinging rocks into the grass that his lawn mower will find this spring.

The creak of the door challenges the spearing sound of his key as the front door opened. Two steps in and off go the shoes, the keys rest on the mantle. This room gets so hot, Randall thinks. He gets up and walks to adjust the thermostat hanging on the hallway wall. He walks into his bedroom to open the foldout 1950’s windows. The heat escapes in waves like water on the shore of a bay.

The metal-rimmed glass window rubs on overgrown rose bushes, forcing them aside. He has good intentions to trim them back, but really, who has time? Randall knows that they will just grow back. His computer monitor flickers and seems to come to life.

“I wonder,” he says, adjusting his shirt collar that crept a bit too tight.

He heads for the computer, pulling the tray from its hiding place and rapping lightly on a few keys. The Internet browser opens at the click of his request. He loves the power and control he has over the computer. It is one thing he knows that he would miss.
The site showing Ohio’s criminal offenders maximizes and fills the screen. Randall stares for a moment, and then types Danny and Jeremy’s names into the search box. Danny Wilma, 0 Records Found. Jeremy Biggs, 2 Records Found.

“They didn’t hire an ex-con…”

He clicks through. The pictures save Jeremy, as neither one looks remotely like him.

Walker’s keys dance from letter to letter, spelling out his own name. He scrolls the mouse over the button and hits “SEARCH.” The screen answers “FINDING. .. …” Thirsty, Randall pops from his chair and walks to the refrigerator. It is barren, but the food that is there looks like picture from an ad for a bad Chinese restaurant. Neatly organized, the fridge has so many things, none of which could really be eaten. Sauces of every kind litter the shelves of the ivory white door, and jars of garlic pickles and applesauce (flavored artificially with cinnamon) takes up the majority of the space usually reserved for leftovers or thawed meats. Few meals are made in a kitchen like this. Food is often doctored but rarely sits over the burner.

He grabs the can on the bottom shelf and tosses it quietly to himself. He tap-tap-taps the can before moving back to his computer. The screen saver is up: a picture of him and his mother shortly before she passed away. Without warning the picture changes to one of a gutted dear carcass that he had shot the previous year. Randall sits, and moves the mouse to wake the computer again.

Randall puts the can to his lips and slurps. The image on the screen reflects in his eyes. He flies to his feet, the chair kicking back and rebounding off of the wall. The can falls and Walker leaves the room. His keys scrape from the mantle, the door slams shut,
and his truck crunches gravel as gulps of pop escape the aluminum can seeping over the linoleum floor.

* * * * *

Randall pinches himself on the arm until blood is drawn. His hand recoils and his face is flush.

“I’m not in jail, not a murderer. How can I be?”

The truck swerves violently and Walker shakes his head and focuses, the dancing headlights of oncoming traffic cause him to jerk back into his own lane.

At once, like a fresh breeze cutting through his warm night air, the thought of taking his own life fills his mind. How, he often wondered, could anyone of sound mind and body take their own life? For once he understood – and it makes him smile crookedly as he looks at a pair of headlamps speeding at him in the southbound lane.

* * * * *

Felony prison is no place to find the answers to the riddle in front of him, yet that is where he is. Hastily, he finds a handicapped spot in the visitor’s lot. He will not be there long.

The walk to the side entrance is quiet. Randall runs, swinging open every door between him and the receptionist who surely could straighten this out. There is no
receptionist. He pounds on the glass that separates him as a visitor from them, the inhabitants of Marion State Prison. No one answers.

Randall pulls the door, which gives and opens without much effort. He sees the lock is sprung and a ring of keys is in the door. Still no one comes running to right this intrusion, so he pulls out the keys stuck in the door and heads down the long, straight, well lit corridor. It is almost like he is a lone ant climbing out the entrance of the colony’s hill.

Randall Walker slashes and dodges his way through the halls, looking. He mazes his way through the darkening passages, each turn brings fog over the light and obscures the path more and more.

He stops. A blinding white light burns at the end of this hall. He zombies toward it and with each step it materializes. Before his eyes he sees an empty cell, door ajar, white pressed sheets on a set of bunk beds. Randall steps inside. “Is this me?”

Randall clinches his eyes and grabs his head. He stumbles and sits down on the lower bunk. The room is empty and unforgiving. There is a sterility that brings no comfort. His head leans against the painted cinder block walls. Silence. His eyes close and he fades into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

*Shkink, dink dink.* Randall sits; his eyes fling open. The sound of the door closing wakes him.

“No no fucking no!”
He claws his way to his feet and slams his body weight against the pale blue painted bars. He screams, “I didn’t kill nobody! Let me out!”

Randall shrinks to the ground slowly. “Let me out… Didn’t kill her…”

The computer answers “SEARCHING. …” and reveals Randall Walker’s photo on the monitor screen. Jeremy steps back as though he was afraid that the image could harm him.

“I-I-I don’t believe it,” Jeremy says.

Danny leans back in his chair. The seat responds with a creaking sound.


The charges and sentence are in crimson letters, slightly larger than any others on the screen, just below the photograph. Randall is looking up, like all the others.

“I used to eat lunch with him,” Jeremy says.

Danny rolls his chair, stands. He says, “Yeah, me too.”

Night at The Gypsy

I walk into The Gypsy Mediterranean Restaurant on a warm April evening. Even though it’s dinnertime, the dining room is near empty. It looks like everyone is somewhere else but me.

Work takes me places like this all the time, off the normal path. Usually I do my research in the less touristy parts of whatever city or town. I often end up here, not literally, but figuratively. Every town has an oddity and I frequent most of them. Chain restaurants are boring with their corporate comfort and lousy service. I end up at a place
like this when some idiot wraps his vehicle around a pole and the insurance company wants to avoid paying the claim. Interviewing the victims is my responsibility with the underlying goal of tripping them up and saving the corporation several thousand dollars.

The sign at the front says, “Please seat yourself,” and I comply. I pull the chair from a table near the kitchen and sit. The table is no more than twenty steps from the door. Each tablecloth is a different color and there seems to be no order to the color of the chairs at any given table. Don’t get me wrong; they’re quite comfortable, though the green plaid on my table strikes a contrast with the sky blue chair that’s not visually pleasing.

The place is clean but cluttered. On the far wall a television, suspended from the warehouse style ceiling, is on. There is a sports highlight and scores program dancing over the screen. No one seems to be watching it. Below the television lies a long bar top that runs the length of the far wall. The bartender, a skinny pale man with glasses and a goatee, stands behind it. If there was a picture of “normal,” his face would be it. I realize that he didn’t even greet me when I walked in. He is holding a large wooden wedge and works it up and down to smash a block of ice into tiny bits to serve in people’s drinks. It might be more cost effective or may just be a way for him to stay busy when the restaurant is slow.

On the wall directly in front of me is a mirror with the outline of the city etched into it. While usually this is considered tasteless and touristy, someone sprayed the word “sin” across it with silver paint. My server walks over and asks for my drink order.

I order something under the heading of “strong” from the menu. He nods and sets a food menu down before scurrying through the kitchen. He moves like a rodent
scrambling to hide after someone turns the lights on. For the moment, I am alone. I think about the silver sin. Why silver? Red would be my color of choice. Then again, maybe it is a waste of time to consider the color of graffiti. Some people say it is art—but it’s just an eyesore. Sin is silver because that’s what color paint they had and it worked all the same.

The server returns, carrying my drink in a glass bottle. He sets an empty mug down on the table next to the bottle. His other hand holds a small wicker basket covered by an ivory white napkin. It’s amazing the excitement created by a little mystery. Inside the basket is a misshapen loaf of bread that in my estimation typically serves three. Next to it lays a copper flat knife and plastic container with a lone pad of butter. I suck down part of the beer and bite into the loaf. Ten hours separates me from my last meal so I happily shovel down this bread.

My server clears his throat and I realize he has been waiting for me. He asks for my order and with a mouthful of bread I tell him that I need a minute.

“Take some time,” he replies. A heavy accent makes the words sound odd. He is middle European, though my experience is not vast enough to venture a more exact guess. His skin resembles the crust of the bread sitting in the basket.

In the kitchen is a young looking black man. He is working, preparing meals and setting plates of food on a pickup ledge. For each plate, he rings a tarnished metal bell. The sound is more of a thud than a ring but the server responds anyway. Pavlov and his dog. The server hoists the plate, a salad of some sort with greens and a raspberry dressing, and walks to a table on my far right. He ascends a set of steps on an aging
wooden staircase and disappears around a corner. Another plate is on the shelf and
another muffled ding.

This process repeats and I see my server again. He smiles and asks if I’m ready.
I forgot to look at the menu when I got involved in people watching but I point to
something on the page. He dips his head and takes the menu from my hand before fading
away into the kitchen. There is a door on the opposite end that the server pops through.
The door flaps back and forth, a tensioned spring works to keep it closed. The door
opens again; she walks into view.

Her hair is kinked and held back behind a bandana. She’s short, but most fashion
magazines would call her petite. She talks on a cell phone. Light catches the rhinestones
that shine like flashbulbs. It reminds me of the red carpet of a stuff shirt awards show.
The cook rings his bell and she nods, slipping the phone into her right back pocket with a
bit of effort. Her pants are vacuum-sealed to her legs and ass. Her naked arm stretches to
reach the plate. The skin on her arm is lighter than the man that I imagine is her brother.
She spins around, plate in hand, and walks toward me. She passes me and sets the plate
down onto a table where two men in suits and a professionally dressed woman sit, near
the front door. I have been so busy watching the kitchen that I didn’t notice them come
in. Neither did the bartender who still works on grinding up the ice block into pieces to
serve in the drinks.

She walks by again, heading to the kitchen. I watch her leave, pushing open the
doors and disappearing from my view. My server descends the steps where he delivered
the last plate of food. Another plate teeters on the ledge of the pickup window. The cook
sees my server rounding the corner but rings the bell anyway. The server’s face contorts. He must dislike that bell. He and I have one thing in common.

The server grabs the plate and walks to me. I try to hide my surprise, not remembering what I ordered. He says something questioning me on whether that is my order and I smile, answering that it is. He tells me to enjoy and walks away. The plate contains spare ribs with a honey sauce over some various greens. The spices are strong but the sweetness of the honey counters them, balancing the taste.

An aging man steps across the dining room. He carries a rag in his left hand and stops at a table near the door. His arm extends and even in the poorly lit room I can make out how hairy it is, like a warm sweater in the dead of December. I imagine this family working together every night. The brother and sister wait tables and the father keeps the place clean. They hire a cook and bartender and pay them under the table. This family fights to make a living in the non-tourist part of the city.

The door to the kitchen swings again and she walks through. There is no food on the ledge; she takes a rag from a bucket, wrings it dry, and carefully drags it over the pickup shelf. I watch her move, fluidly swiping forgotten parts of entrees and salads into her open hand. Her fingers close and she dumps their contents in a nearby wastebasket. She bends over, scoops something off of the floor, and I take a mental photograph of her contorted into this pose. I adjust myself in the seat to better enjoy the view.

Her father cleans the table across from me, interfering with my daydream. The man is tired, his spirit worn and jagged. The father catches me looking at his daughter who walks with a plate of food to a table around the corner. He stares at me. I continue to watch her, knowing that I should look away. Courtesy says I should, but I don’t give a
damn. The father watches me watch her. Hopefully he won’t find my gawking annoying enough to provoke a fight.

He lowers his fatherly head, a beaten man, and slinks to the kitchen. His reaction says to me that men usually stare at her, and that he won’t do anything about it. Looking is all I ever do; finding someone who wants to spend a night with a stranger who just blew into town is hard. Talking and sealing a date never works in my favor.

I eat the last bits of meat from the bones and push the plate aside. The bones and leftover greens look like remnants of a natural disaster. Lifting the bottle, I drain the beer. My server slides the bill onto the corner of my table and the pale yellow paper stands out. He sets a glass of water down and says, “That beer – very strong.”

I thank him for the water. He smiles and walks back to the kitchen. The old man still stands by the pickup window, watching me. I consider dropping a twenty on the table and leaving. Lifting the water glass, I take a drink and realize how thirsty I am. The water skims my throat and I drain the cup empty. The daughter walks, hands full of dirty dishes. She sets them in the sink near her father and washes her hands in the steamy faucet. Her father leans in and says something to her. Her head turns and we make eye contact. She smiles and I look away. Why am I sitting here? Can’t I just pay and leave? My eyes fix on the tainted mirror, sin sprayed in silver letters over the city outline.

Her father limps toward me with an expressionless face. He looks hollow, like a wooden tribal mask. He carries a rag in his left hand and stops at the table next to mine. His hand takes a wide angling path, wiping the vinyl tablecloth. That table has been empty the whole time I’ve been here. The father nudges between an empty chair and my own. He leans close and says, “You like my daughter?”
I don’t answer. Instead, my gaze finds her, her black hair peeking out from under the blue and white hair band. Her face is soft and inviting and my thoughts wander to her black button down top and the curves hidden underneath.

“Thirty dollars, you have her,” her father says.

My eyes grow wide as she shoots me a smile. I fish my wallet out of my left rear jeans pocket and I hear the crushing sound ice makes as it is smashed up for the drinks. I stand and survey the restaurant, settling my eyes on her aging father’s face. His skin looks like a piece of cut potato, dried and split. I contemplate the offer, hands roaming over bodies in the hotel room no more than two blocks away. Her father grows impatient; I swipe the bill off the corner of my table and saunter towards her. My thoughts return to her, imagining the mental image of her that I have from when she bent over to sweep. A fifty-dollar bill twists over the fingers of my left hand; I feel the coarse paper rub the tip of my pointer finger and thumb like discarded sand paper.

When I reach her I don’t know exactly what I will say.
Shelly, Elmer, and I stare at the sign printed on neon orange paper. Each of us ponders it with great attention. Elmer rubs the blonde whiskers on his chin, as he always does, and asks, “Do you suppose it means something?”

The three of us consider this. “I believe it does,” I answer.

Shelly scratches her stringy sandstone hair and weighs in: “It is a sign. It means something.”

Elmer sits on the tile floor, taking extreme care to avoid the remains of a Twinkie. I look at him and he rubs his temples.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He looks up and reads the flier from the floor. “Getting a different perspective.”

“You think that reading from the ground will help?” Shelly asks.
Elmer considers this and looks at her. He says, “I think it would be a good idea to approach this from a few different angles.”

“Whatever angle you hope to achieve, I don’t think it’s working,” I say. I lean inches from the wall. “Is there significance to the word ‘Volunteers’?”

Shelly looks at me, and Elmer stands. He brushes fuzz off his orange calico suit coat before resuming his dissection of the flier. The coat looks like the cover of something my cat would use as a scratching post.

“Volunteers,” Elmer says, “means free. Volunteers expect to participate without compensation.”

“Is that true? I have volunteered and been paid,” Shelly says.

“What for?” Elmer asks.

“You know… stuff.”

“Stuff?” I ask.

Shelly shifts her weight from one leg to the other and then back again to the first. She looks like a wind-up toy. “Blood.”

“You mean like, the blood bank?” Elmer asks.

“Yeah.”

Elmer smiles and taps the wall. After a few taps, he stops and says, “Wait, you don’t get anything for that.”

“Cookies and punch,” Shelly says.

“Cookies and punch, indeed,” I say.
Elmer nods, accepting completely that you do indeed get something for volunteering to give blood. He taps again, this time on the sign. “But,” Elmer says through the taps, “what does this mean?

I search my pockets and pull out my cell phone. The display lights up as I fling it open and dial. Elmer and Shelly stare as I wait for the rings to stop and the friendly voice on the other end to say “Hello.” Following four rings, I hang up. Where is Room 322-A?”

Shelly shrugs her shoulders. I wonder that as well.

“Is it in the west wing?” I ask.

“Is the west wing done yet?” Shelly asks, blowing a few errant hairs from her face.

“It is if the test is there,” Elmer says. “We should go there. Perhaps we’re meant to find this paper, examine it, and fully contemplate it. Once we have a firm grasp on it, we then go to the room and volunteer. Per our example earlier, if we go to Room 322-A they may give us something for solving this riddle.”

Shelly shakes her head and looks at the poster again. “Wait,” she says, “why don’t we just call them?”

The three of us carefully study the bottom of the flier. A phone number is neatly typed along the bottom.

“Let me use your cell phone,” Elmer says.

“Use yours,” I reply.

“Mine’s dead,” Elmer says. “Besides, I don’t want them to have my number.”
I produce the phone and say, “Do you suppose it’s good that they have my number?”

Elmer takes the phone from me and says, “I wouldn’t worry about it.” He types six and stops.

“What’s wrong?” Shelly asks.

Shelly and I stare eagerly at the phone waiting for it to do its technological magic trick. Elmer looks at the number on the paper.

“How do I dial an X?”

Shelly ganks the phone from Elmer. “It’s the button that corresponds to the letter above it.”

“Ok, so the twenty four button then?”

“Not the corresponding alphabet number, the digit below the number on the keypad,” Shelly says. She dials 330-425-9072 and it rings. She frowns and hangs up.

“What happened?” Elmer asks.

“It’s a pizza shop,” she says.

In a moment of contemplative genius, we continue to study the poster. Most of our options have been exhausted.

“Looks like we’ll have to find Room 322-A after all,” I say.

Elmer reaches up and begins to peel the sign off of the wall. A petite female student walks up behind us.

“Hey, what are you doing?” the little student asks.
We turn simultaneously like a cleanly oiled wheel and see the tiny female student is holding a stack of neon orange papers. Her nametag reads, “Hi, My Name is ______.”

“Going to volunteer, would you like to come with us?” Elmer asks. “We’re having a bit of trouble finding Room 322-A, though. The prevailing thought is that it’s in the West Wing.”

“No thanks, I’ll pass. Good luck,” ______ answers.

_______ steps past us and rips the sign down. She attaches a new sign where the old one used to be. We watch as ______ leaves, shaking her head and mumbling, “Idiots.”

When she is out of sight, I scratch my head, turn, and examine what she posted moments ago. The new sign reads:

Psychology Department
Seeks Volunteers
Who Can Edit and Proofread
Department Communication

Elmer cocks his head, Shelly examines the quality of the paper, and I squint. The memory of the previous adventure evaporates like water drops off a freshly washed car in the summertime.

Shelly turns to us and asks, “Do you think it means something?”