ALL SORTS OF SHORTS

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For my family and friends that are family.
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CHAPTER I

OPPORTUNITY PARKWAY

I was working the reclamation of a strip mine near Bisbee. Nothing exciting, but decent pay. I drove a front loader moving mountains for the re-contouring project, though I knew nothing could undo what we’d done to the land there. The company man fed us production lines about how we were taking care of the environment, restoring the natural landscape. At the gate, they had cartoonish signs with picturesque Arizona landscapes and fake blue skies that read Back to the way it should be. It was like we were trying to cover something up, like sweeping dusty guilt underneath the carpet of earth. I took the job when Shannon, my girlfriend of three years, found out she was pregnant. We lived in a little one bed, one bath apartment on Brewery. The doctor told her she couldn’t work at the grocery store on her feet until after the baby was born because of complications. We were having a hard time making rent.

A couple weeks ago, I was talking with another driver, Ben, and told him how I sometimes wondered about the pipes running from a pump in the mine. He said it was just rainwater, and we couldn’t leave it in the mines while we’re cleaning them. That seemed a little too simple for me. There’re a lot of things in the ground that should never come up. I wondered what the water picked up in there, metals and whatnot that couldn’t be good for ground water. I asked where the pipes lead to. Ben looked up from his
bologna sandwich and said maybe it went off to the pit or something. I told him I was thinking about following it. He asked, “What’s it matter to you anyway?” I told him I just wondered and he told me to leave the wondering up to the green thumb EPA hippies. He asked for a cigarette. I told him I only had enough until payday.

Ben came on after me, but because he was the boss’s nephew, he made more than me. He always bummed cigarettes. He said he’d loan me five bucks until payday if it was that big of a deal. That would have been the fourth cigarette he asked for that day. There was another guy I worked with, Joe, had three kids. He always asked for cigarettes, too. I don’t mind giving a guy like Joe a cigarette or two here and there. He’d spend his money on food for his family, and I admired that. Ben, on the other hand, just didn’t want to have to go to the store.

After my shift was over, I took my pickup and followed the pipes North on Windwood. I thought about a newspaper article I read right after we found out Shannon was pregnant. It said the EPA was investigating levels of sulfates and heavy metals in drinking water. When I asked Shannon’s doctor about what those would do to the baby, she said it could cause all kinds of defects, if the levels were high enough, but there are tests they can do to detect that early. A blood test wasn’t all too accurate. Eighty percent. The other was expensive and risky, and required the doc to stick a needle into Shannon’s uterus. I didn’t like either of those odds. I’m not much of a gambler considering my luck. I mean, they said condoms were ninety-nine point nine percent effective. I asked if there was anything they could do if they found out something was wrong. The doc said in most
cases, no. Then it occurred to me that some folks might use the test results as a reason to
get rid of the baby. I’d just as soon not even know.

I came to a gated chain link fence to an old open pit. The land was grey and
barren, more than just desert. The ridges made me feel like I was standing in front of the
earth’s broken ribcage. In the center of the pit, water pooled like a lake, deep purple in
the center and the color of rust on the edges. The pipe ran out through the fence and
stopped right at the rim of the pit. Off to the left sat an empty dump truck. From the pipe,
a continuous stream of dirty water trickled over the edge into the pool. I took a mat out of
my truck and threw it over the razor wire on the fence and climbed over. Holding on to
the pipe with one hand, I reached out and touched the water with my fingers. It smelled
like pennies and eggs.

The next morning Ben told me the boss wanted to see me in his trailer. “We’ve
got enough people trying to run this place, Dave, and more guys looking for work. You
understand?” my boss said. I had no idea what he was talking about. Then he said they
couldn’t have their own guys snooping around, trespassing, and causing trouble. He had
to let me go. I asked what I’d done wrong. I told him I needed the job. “So do a lot of
people, Dave.” He opened his desk drawer, pulled out a wad of cash and threw it to me.
He said it would cover what they owed me and told me to leave my hardhat and keys to
the front loader on the seat.

Before I left the site, I counted the money. The sonofabitch only gave me two-
hundred dollars. I kept my hardhat and went to the Stock Exchange Bar a couple of
blocks from home. I needed a drink. I ordered a Dave’s Electric and got to talking to the
guy next to me. He was complaining about the alcohol content limits on Arizona brews to
the bartender. I butted in, “Weaker beer means you have to buy more. Bars get richer,
beer makers get richer, the state gets more taxes.”

“Is that right?” the man said. “And what do we get?”

“A hard liver, bloated gut, and empty wallet, I guess.”

We laughed and I finished my beer. I ordered another and the man asked what the
occasion was. I told him about how I lost my job. He bought me a shot of Jack Daniels
Single Barrel. He was tall, had long, thinning hair pulled back into a pony tail and teeth
that would make anyone swear off chewing tobacco. He said his name was Jon. I bought
the next round.

Jon had a voice bigger than his big body. He was friendly toward me. “I like you,
Dave,” he said and slapped the bar. “You seem like a stand up guy. That’s what’s wrong
with the world today. Guys like you get fired for doing the right thing in the wrong place
at the wrong time.” He called for another round. I told him that was only the half of it.
Jon drank his shot like sweet tea and signaled for two more. “Tell you what,” he said
when the bartender brought the next drink, “I’m going to help you out.”

The liquor was getting to my head. I felt the money in pocket, thought about
Shannon and the baby. “Yeah?”

“I know a guy, needs some work done. I was going to keep it all to myself, but
what the hell? There’s plenty of work to go around.”

“What do you need me to do?” At this point, I thought, I would clean outhouses.
Jon said all I had to do was show up and make a quick grand. He wrote an address on a napkin. “Opportunity Parkway, I call it.” He said it was in North Cochise. I took the napkin.

Jon stood, told me to meet him there at one in the morning. He preferred to work at night, told me I didn’t need to bring anything except my back, and to turn off my headlights before pulling in the drive. He threw a couple large bills on the bar and turned to leave.

“Wait, Jon, I don’t even know what we’re doing.”

Jon turned around and showed off his tarnished gums, “Making money, that’s what we’re doing. Isn’t that enough?” He walked toward the door.

I tipped the bartender and left. Jon was gone. Rather than drive, I decided to walk home on account of the whiskey. On the way, I passed a homeless man. He was sitting with an actual duck and a rabbit. I didn’t ask where he got them. I gave him some change and told him I was going to be a good father. He said it was harder than it sounds. I asked him how many children he had, and it took him a while to think about it. He answered, “Five or six.”

Back at the apartment Shannon was lying on her side, asleep on the futon. I sat down at her feet. The TV was still on the local news. Reporters were talking about a corruption scandal. A burnt out cigarette was in an ashtray on the coffee table next to a pile of unopened bills. The neighbors above us had their radio turned up. I flicked off the TV and admired the roundness of Shannon. Eight months in, I called her my giant magic
eight ball. I'd rub her belly and ask questions about the future and she'd pretend to read
the answer. Are we going to be good parents? Yes. Is it going to be a healthy baby boy?
Yes. Is momma going to change all of the diapers? Outlook not so good.

Shannon was a lot like me. My entire adult life I had lived hand to mouth. I
moved out from my parents’ place when I was seventeen and found jobs all over the
Southwest, construction mostly. I considered myself wealthy, always having enough cash
for the bar, rent, and lunchmeat. Shannon and I were introduced by our mutual friend,
Rick, in the bar. We moved in together next to it. When we found out she was pregnant,
all of that changed. It was like we caught a disease. At first we’d go to the bar, but I’d get
drunk and Shannon would get mad. We would fight. I would sleep on the floor in the
bathroom. Then we stopped going out and our friends stopped calling, put us in
quarantine. At first, I resented it.

When I finally saw the first ultrasound, something happened. My boy, flipping
around in there like Bruce Lee. Everything that was important to me was not anymore. I
was motivated. I started to think, plan, believe.

Since that day Shannon had a look to her that was more beautiful than ever. I
reached over, rubbed her oracular stomach, and asked, "Is it a good idea to go tonight?"
The baby kicked and it made me jump. Shannon woke up.

Shannon could always tell when I’d been drinking. Most people can’t until it’s too
late and I get sick. When we first started dating, Rick was diagnosed with lymphatic
cancer. In high school, we called him Soup Bone because he was so skinny. He lived a
short, but good life. Still, when the doctor told him he only had a few months to live, it hit Rick and me pretty hard. He was the one who had introduced me to Shannon.

About six months later, Soup Bone called me up and told me we needed to have a guy’s night out. Shannon and I were pretty much inseparable at that time, and since she was friends with my friends, she wasn’t all too happy with the idea of us going out without her. I went anyway, and Soup Bone told me about the cancer. He and I finished a half gallon of Evan Williams. The next morning I was so dehydrated I probably could have died if it weren’t for Shannon. She forced me to drink Pedialite and when that wouldn’t stay down, she took me to the ER. I thought she’d be mad as hell, but even before I told her about Rick’s cancer, she sat next to me in the ER the whole time stroking my head and telling me I was going to be okay. I broke down in tears and Shannon said, “Don’t waste all that water.” Rick died a couple weeks later. The cancer took hold fast, and because Rick was kind of a junkie, the pain meds weren’t enough to do him any good. At his funeral, Shannon didn't cry a drop. Not one. I sobbed. She believed God took Rick for a reason. God has a reason for everything with her. Rick didn’t believe in God, said there’s no soup bones in heaven. Only prime rib and filet mignon. That’s how I know Shannon will go to heaven.

I’m not sure if God had a reason for me to lie to Shannon, but I did. I was tired of letting her down. I told her I quit my job, but I got another, better job doing labor stuff. She asked what kind of labor stuff, and I said, “Why do you ask so many goddamn questions?”
She said, “Well, David, I worry about us is all.” She laid back down on the futon.

“I hear they’re talking about opening a new copper mine.”

“I said I got a job.”

“They ought to pay pretty well at the mine.”

“Come on Shan,” I said, sitting back down next to her, “Things will get better. I start tonight.”

I was careful not to wake Shannon. The noisy trembling of my truck and the gathering storm clouds on the mountains reminded me of her. It was her voice in my head asking what I was doing.

After Soup Bone introduced us, Shannon and her friend, Karrie, met up with us at the Stock Exchange. We stayed until closing, drinking and playing shuffleboard. It was the first time I kissed Shannon. I pointed at the stock board and asked, “If I was a stock account, and you were an investor, how would you say the market’s looking?”

She smiled and said, “Very promising.”

So, I kissed her. She leaned in for another and I stepped back. “Careful,” I said, “You don’t want to flood the market.”

Nobody wanted the party to end at the bar, so we all got in the back of Rick’s pickup and he drove us to the Lavender Pit. Rick got out a pair of wire cutters and cut out a hole in the fence. We crawled through the hole and climbed down onto a ridge. Rick pulled a bottle of well whiskey he swiped from behind the bar out of his pants. We sat down, passed them around, and philosophized about the impact of man on earth. Rick
said maybe copper was poison, and set off a slow time bomb in the human body. The
French knew this, and that’s why they sent us the Statue of Liberty. Shannon said that
mining copper had only enhanced the quality of life, and that the Statue of Liberty was a
symbol of man’s freedom. We all laughed at that. We didn’t notice the police officer
sneaking up on us.

Karrie screamed when she saw him and we all jumped. Shannon hid behind me.
The officer turned his flashlight on us, though he could have seen us just fine with the
lamps around the fence. He held his other hand at the holster on his belt. Rick told him
not to worry, that we’d go quietly. I don’t know if the cop had a bad day or what, but
when we all went to stand up, he pulled his gun on me. I guess because I was the closest
to him.

It’s a strange feeling looking at the barrel of a gun from that end. The nearest
feeling I can think of is running up on a rattler out of nowhere. When that rattle is going
fast and loud and the snake is all coiled up ready to strike. My first thought was that I
hadn’t lived long enough with Shannon. I swore to God I’d never mess with the law
again. The cop took us at gunpoint to his cruiser and ran our driver’s licenses. Turned out
the cop knew Karrie’s mom, and had a change of heart just like that. Let us go with a
warning. Rick said, “Justice is blind, man.”

In my headlights I could see Jon standing next to his truck, covering his eyes and
signaling for me to turn them off. I parked the truck and got out. The address was to a big
locked power station. Jon scolded me for not turning off my headlights. I tried to explain
that I couldn’t see where I was going. He told me to stop worrying about what was ahead of me and to start worrying about where I was at the moment and to help him unload tools from his truck. I asked if we were doing maintenance. Jon laughed and asked if I really did work at the mine. I explained that I was part of the re-contouring project. Jon said, “Well, let’s just say we’re mining again.” I told him this county was all mined up. He said, “not quite,” and pointed at the power station. “We’re mining copper. Copper wire. That’s all we’re doing.”

What Jon meant was that we were going to steal it. I hesitated. He tried to justify it to me. “Who says what we’re doing is illegal? The police? Sheesh. Where were they when we stole copper from the earth? Who says anyone owned it in the first place?” Jon leaned against his pickup. “They didn’t own it. They stole it and called it mining.”

I told him I couldn’t do it. He asked why? I told him I had a family to think about. He said, “All the more reason to do it. Great way to take care of your family.”

Part of me knew Jon was right. There was no way I could make money quick enough for the three of us, now that I was out of the mines. I wondered if his reasoning would convince God. Then I wondered about God’s reasoning. Was there a reason that I was supposed to be here? Off on the horizon, lightning lit up a mountaintop. Above me, as my eyes became acclimated to the dark, I saw hundreds of stars. Thunder bounced through the valley and I had the sudden feeling that at any moment, the sky would open up and swallow me, leaving Shannon and the baby alone and broke. I wanted to jump in my truck and drive home to protect her. But then I thought about the three of us living in the cramped apartment on food stamps. I realized I’d reason with God. “Alright,” I said.
Jon said the job was simple. He’d do all of the hard work removing the wire so I didn’t electrocute myself and I’d coil and carry it to the trucks. His work was quick, efficient, and quiet. Professional. I hauled the torn out wire from truck to truck, just a few pounds at a time. The trucks filled quicker than I expected, and I got that rush of adrenaline that comes with getting away with something you know you shouldn’t be doing. It occurred to me that Shannon would ask what I’d been doing, how I made so much so quickly, when I’d be working again. I’d want to tell her the truth. Tell her it was a one-time deal. Just to get our feet on the ground. I’d see about getting a job at the new mine. She might not understand at first, but I’d explain that I had no choice.

While we worked, Jon told me he started mining copper wire when he was sixteen and lived up north. He would tie a rope to his bumper, throw the other end over telephone wires, and then tie it to the bumper. He said he’d take off and the whole set up would come down. Copper wasn’t worth as much then, but it helped him buy his first sports car. He learned at a young age, he said, if you want something, you got to take it.

The entire job took no more than an hour.

We covered up the wire with blankets and Jon told me to follow him. We drove down Route 92 to 61 through the Coronado National Forest and Montezuma’s Pass. A border patrol truck came out of nowhere behind me and got so close I could have asked him if he wanted a ride. I was sweating, and realized I had made a mistake. It’s not that the officer would be looking for copper thieves. He might think we had people under the blankets, smuggling people, the worst kind of mining. But we were headed toward
Mexico, not away from it. The officer must have figured he’d keep a better eye on me on the way back, stopped at a turn off, and turned around.

The sun was coming up when we got to the U.S. side of Nogales. We pulled into the driveway of a scrap recycling plant about two miles from the border and Jon told me to wait outside. I stepped out of my truck and leaned against the bed. Sunrise has a way of relaxing the desert. The pink and gold of the sky drowned out the earth, making what normally looks dusty brown seem blue, like jutting mountains of water. The plants and trees, all of which prick or sting as if to say keep out, soften, and become almost inviting. Rick used to say, “If it doesn’t prick, sting, or bite, it’s not from Arizona. That’s including the people.” Shannon was from Ohio. As for Jon, I wasn’t sure. He hadn’t hit me yet.

Jon came out of the building with a couple of rough looking guys who started unloading our trucks into carts. He gave me a paper bag. I opened it and it was full of bills. “Five hundred dollars is your share this time.”

“Five hundred? You said a grand.”

“Look, five hundred is the starting wage. You want a bigger share, you’ll have to do more of the work. This was an easy five hundred if you ask me.”

Jon was right.

The money was easy and quick, but five hundred would barely cover rent, let alone anything else until I could find another job. Jon said that if I was interested, he could introduce me to the buyer. He would, of course, take a cut. I asked him where I could find copper wire on my own. He said, “You know, light fixtures, catalytic
converters, water heaters, schools, hospitals, no big stuff like we did last night till you know what you’re doing.” I took the money.

Bill, the buyer, was the clean cut type. He wore a stylish pair of glasses, had a fresh close crop haircut, and ended his thoughts with the word, “anyway.” His office inside the recycling plant had pictures of his family, a wife, a teenage daughter, and two boxers, hanging on the walls. He had a nice mahogany desk and leather office chair, but they didn’t make the place look classy. The walls were concrete gray and metallic dust pervaded every corner in the room. Condensate dripped from a window mounted air conditioner behind him. Bill said he’d buy almost anything, so long as he got it quick after it went missing. “There’s a big market for scraps nowadays,” he said. “Mutts waiting to be fed. Anyway.” Jon told him I was a good worker and had a family to take care of. Bill said, “good worker or not, if you get caught you don’t know me.” I said I never knew him to start with.

Once I told Rick that I thought I might marry Shannon, when I saved up enough money to buy a ring. He didn’t say much about it really, except something about how marriage is a washed up institution. A couple of weeks later Rick showed up at the apartment and asked if Shannon was home. I told him she was at work. He pulled a massive diamond ring from his pocket, said “I got something for you buddy.” I asked him if it was real. He said it was as real as they get. I asked him if it was hot.

“Of course it is. How else you think I’d get my hands on a rock like that.”
“Jesus, Soup Bone. What am I supposed to do with it?” He said he thought I’d be grateful. Now I could give Shannon the ring she deserved. He assured me it was safe. I asked how I would explain it to Shannon, having no money and coming up with a ring like that. I asked what happened to his disbelief in marriage. I told him it wouldn’t be right.

Rick wasn’t mad, but he was serious. I remember he told me, “Look, man, I don’t care what you do with it. It’s yours now. If you want to do all that hard work to save up for something like this—and you know this is the kind of ring you want to give her—then go ahead. Break your back over it. Sometimes you got a need, and you got to fill that need, and then all of a sudden right and wrong aren’t so clear anymore.”

I thanked Rick, and told him I’d keep the ring and think it over. Rick said I didn’t have to. I held on to the ring for a while, then ended up stashing it in a tear in the driver’s seat of my truck and leaving it at that.

***

Shannon was not home when I got there. I was too tired to notice the twelve messages on the answering machine. I fell asleep on the futon and woke up sometime after dark. All of the messages were from Karrie at the hospital. Shannon was in labor.

At the hospital I stood outside chain smoking. I couldn’t stand still. I paced, reached for the door, and let it go. I lit another cigarette and walked around the back of Copper Queen Community Hospital. The whine of the air conditioning units harmonized with the humming lamps that lit them rusty orange. All the way up the building, windows flickered with television screens like the insecure stars blinking above me. Damn it, I
thought, why can’t they just stay lit? Why is everything so Goddamn uncertain? How much copper wire is in one of these air-conditioning units?

I was there, Copper Queen Community Hospital, the day Rick died. I sat outside that hospital chain smoking for at least an hour. A half pack before I had the nerve to go in. He already looked ghostly in sterile white sheets against tobacco-yellow walls. He was sleeping. I sat down next to his bed. The pain was getting to be too much for him. He begged for more meds. It was terrible to watch. Rick had asked me to help him end it. I told him no. Rick had grabbed me by the bottom of my shirt. “You think I’m afraid of this?” He didn’t look like Rick or Soup Bone anymore. “Remember, there are no Soup Bones in heaven.”

Not even a couple hours later and there I was at his bedside, a fifth of Evan Williams and a bottle of Tylenol in my inside pocket. I woke him up and he asked what the hell I was doing there. I set the bottles on his tray. He called me a “son of a bitch,” grabbed the bottles with shaky hands, swallowed the Tylenol, and chased it with the whiskey. I got up and walked toward the door. Rick toasted me. “Dave. Back to the way it should be!” Nobody saw me come in or leave.

That night I drove home in a daze and sat down in the shower with the water running, all over my clothes, all over my face. Shannon came home from the grocery store and found me in the shower. She asked what I was doing. I told her Rick died. She told me she was pregnant, had been for the last month and a half.
Behind Copper Queen Community Hospital near the air conditioning units, there was a pile of dirty, tattered blankets, an old heavy coat, the remnants of a fire. Next to that, a crowbar. Someone had lived there. Solitude, the whirring air-conditioning fans, and hissing steam pipes told fables of families sleeping at seventy-two degrees, a glass of cold water on the nightstand.

I was alone, sweating, and the half pack of cigarettes I smoked sitting there only made me thirsty. I kicked the pile of blankets and flies came buzzing off of them like carrion. A small, yellow, Arizona Bark Scorpion scurried out, its stinger hanging over its head, a cloud of poison following it wherever it went. They say, where there’s one, there’s more.

I thought of Shannon and my newborn son waiting to meet me inside, maybe a floor or two away from where I last saw Rick. I thought of the mine and the pit. I thought, my son will grow up here, in the desert mountains, look for work, and fall in love. My clouds of poison hanging over his head, he will be forced to mine. And what will he mine, when the earth is mined of all her precious metals? Wire, then mausoleum doors, cast iron manhole covers and hypodermic needles from diabetic neighbors.

I was tired of mines. I remembered the diamond ring in the seat of my truck and decided to get it appraised. I stepped on the scorpion and felt its exoskeleton give under my shoe. I said, “This ain’t Opportunity Parkway.”
CHAPTER II
LIKE FIRE

When I first suspected my father of being an eco-terrorist I shrugged it off as another activity to occupy his new-found free time. He’d just retired from the mill at the strong suggestion from my mother and I, and after thirty-two years of twelve-hour swing shifts, overtime, and holidays shoveling coal, he needed a break. I was driving him to a doctor’s appointment—routine checkup, nothing serious—when we passed an aged vacant steel works in Warren, Ohio. He said, “A Goddamn eyesore.”

It was winter and the bare trees that once worked as a fence between unaware passers-by and the plant looked dead against the grayness of the overcast sky and the steely blue walls of the abandoned buildings. “Yes,” I said. “A shame isn’t it?”

My father let out a grunt, one I’d come to learn meant he was thinking something not appropriate for sharing. But this time he followed it with, “I’d like to blow it up.” I laughed a nervous laugh. I wasn’t sure if he was serious. He said, “Seriously.”

The following week I came to visit my parents and sat down in the kitchen with my mother. At the time I was a struggling real-estate salesman in Detroit, a job I’d practically fallen into. I’d taken on several clients whose homes had been on the market for months, prices reduced to so low they’d actually lose on the deal, and still no takers. My parents told me a friend of theirs was having a hard time selling their home. A real
sweet Victorian number. Three bedrooms and two and a half baths. But it’s hard to sell a real sweet Victorian home when it’s on an entire street of real sweet Victorian homes also for sale.

I told my parents that the Detroit market was booming right now, but I could use the break to come see them. I would help their friend. In fact I was broke, except for enough money to afford an efficiency apartment in the town center of Franklin. I was going through a rough patch in my financial life and so sold my pride for dinners at my parents’ on the weekends. My mother was preparing poor man’s soup, a puddle of ground beef, potatoes, onions, and whatever else came to her mind.

“You know,” my mother said, “I saw Molly Miles today.”

“That’s good,” I said.

Molly was an ex-girlfriend from high school and the first year of college. We were completely wrong for each other, but I really did love her. She was idealistic, politically active. I was complacent, socially awkward. She had red hair and I have black. Together we were like a couple of sticks of licorice. I love red licorice. It’s fun, and sweet. She hated the black, said anise flavor wasn’t versatile and was boring. Besides, she told me, red licorice isn’t really licorice, that I should read the label.

“She’s staying with her father for a few weeks. She asked about you.”

“Where’s dad?” I asked.

“Oh, you know your father,” my mother said, pouring way too much black pepper into the soup. “He’s out in the shed working on his plans.”

“Mom, you going to put some soup in that pepper?”

“Mom, you going to put some soup in that pepper?”
My mother glared at me. “Do you want to cook?”

I conceded to the pepper. “Plans for what?”

“He’s going to blow up the old Copperweld plant. He said he’d told you.”

“He’s what?”

“I knew he didn’t tell you.”

“Mom, he’s going to do what?”

My mother began ladling the soup into bowls. “Will you please go tell your father dinner is ready?” I stood up, eyeing my mother. She was unreasonably calm. “Will you?”

“Yes, mom,” I said, keeping an eye on her as I walked out the back door. My mother had a history of playing tricks on me, plastic wrap over the toilet seat, rubber snakes in my bed and the like, and I wouldn’t have believed her if it hadn’t been for what my father had said the week before.

As I walked out the back door, I noticed a tear in the screen, rusty hinges, a roof that needed new shingles, a drainage system that leaked from every crux. In the summer the back yard had become overrun with crabgrass and dandelions. Why couldn’t my father focus his energy on these, a normal undertaking for a retired man? The shed itself was in shambles, old cracked and gray wood, leaning to the left. I would have knocked first for fear of what I might find, but when I put my hand to the door, the latch fell off and the door eased open. Inside, to my relief, my father was hunched in his chair next to a kerosene lamp and oil heater, asleep with a stack of papers in his hands. The shed was cluttered with ancient unused yard tools and mounds of empty kerosene cans.
I touched him on the shoulder, prepared to wake him when I noticed that the papers he held were wrinkled topographical maps and architectural drawings of the Copperweld plant. I jerked my hand away from his shoulder and he woke. “How are you, Junior?”

“Dad, what are you doing with those maps?”

“Planning.”

There I stood looking into my father’s aged gray eyes, his deeply wrinkled face, his frail frame of a hundred and twenty pounds. Before me was the most nonviolent man I’d ever known. A man whose hobbies in his youth included hunting, but he had never loaded his rifle. I felt a sudden sense of calm, or more like pity. I had let my imagination run with the idea of him being an eco-terrorist and blind me to the reality of the situation. The Copperweld plant stretched for about a half mile along the outerbelt. There was no way this man could orchestrate an explosion of that magnitude, nor acquire the necessary materials for such an endeavor. He was clearly losing his mind. I placed my hand on his back. “Okay, dad. Mom says dinner’s ready.”

At the dinner table my mother kept the conversation mostly to the typical parental un-pleasantries. How was work going? When was I going to find a good woman and settle down? When I answered “terribly” and “probably never” respectively, she changed the subject and asked my father how his plans for blowing up the plant were going.

“Great, great,” he said with youthful vigor. “Old man Miles said he can get me all kinds of potassium chlorate pesticide.” I gave a hesitant smile, wondering why my mother would encourage his debilitating state of sanity, but reassured myself that she was
a good woman and that she loved my father dearly. My mother would support him to the very day he lost his mind completely, telling him he’s doing the right thing blowing up the plant as he sits babbling and drooling in an asylum.

“I hope you don’t plan on storing all of those explosives here,” my mother said.

My father waved his hand in dismissal and slurped at his soup. “Janet, where do you expect me to store it? My ass?”

I smiled and remembered a time when my parents fought over real issues. Which college I would go to, fail a semester and go to community college anyway, why my father should stop smoking, why he should retire. “I don’t know, Gerald. Maybe Junior knows of a place.” She looked at me. “One of the houses you’re not going to sell?”

I gave her the “Don’t drag me into this” look.

My father appeared intrigued. They waited for my answer. “No, no, I couldn’t. You never know when someone will be interested. I’ve got a few real sweet Victorian numbers. They’re big sellers right now.” My father focused on his soup. My mother shamed me with her eyes. And so ended the discussion of my involvement. In fact, that also ended any conversation from my father for the remainder of dinner.

After dinner my father went back out to the shed without a word to me. “He thinks you don’t believe in him,” my mother said.

“He wants to blow up a factory, mom.” I moved the dirtied bowls to the sink.

On Saturday I set up an open house for the Victorian home on Paige Court. After an hour no one showed, so I took the liberty of seeing what my parents’ friends left
behind. I walked into the kitchen and opened the cabinets. They had pretty much cleaned
the place out, save for some disposable utensils and a half bottle of Bombay gin. I filled a
Styrofoam cup with gin and stood at the sink, looking out the back window at the twenty-
four foot above-ground swimming pool. The owners didn’t empty it for the winter, and
ice had formed on the cover. Behind the pool was a ten by eight Woodbridge vinyl
storage shed. Behind that, a thin strip of wooded area, and behind that, Franklin High
School. I could hear the band practicing. They were playing something I didn’t recognize
and I wondered why in the hell anyone would conduct band practice outside in February.
I swallowed the gin and filled another cup before taking the bottle and sitting down at the
dining room table.

The dining room was decorated in old-time photos, a baby in a wash tub, black
and white pictures of men in overalls. Then there was an oversized reproduction of the
Sistine Chapel. Not the whole thing. Just the part where two fingers are almost touching.
The Creation of Man, I think they call it. I think they misinterpreted that part of the
painting. Those two fingers. It’s like life. No matter how hard we try to connect with each
other, there’s always that space. Two fingers that are just out of reach. It didn’t match the
theme of the room, but it still looked good. Some things that don’t match look good
together, like Molly and me.

Once, in college, Molly organized a war protest. The protestors ended up blocking
traffic. The town police, with nothing better to do, found out who organized it and served
her a subpoena in the middle of class. She said they wanted to send a message, quell any
kind of dissention among students. I said they were just doing their jobs. That was the end of that.

I heard people talking in the other room. I walked out to the front room, taking the gin, and saw a young couple putting on their shoes. The man was tall and lanky and the woman was way out of his league. A high maintenance type, I guessed. I greeted them and asked if I could show them the place. They said no, they’d seen enough. “But didn’t you just get here?”

“Yes.”

The couple left and I put the bottle of gin in the inside pocket of my suit jacket before locking up and leaving. I took the back roads on the way home by Copperweld. I stopped on North River Road at a pull off next to a cooling plant. Behind the plant was a containment pond. I got out of the car and walked across the street. On the other side of the road was a gray slag dump and a stretch of hard brown barren land before the tin looking buildings of Copperweld. The smokestacks reminded me of when my mother and I used to take my father his lunch on midnight shifts when I was a boy. The smell of sulfur. An exhaust flame at the top of a tower. I remember a man crawling out of the passenger window of his car. It was winter, he was wearing shorts, and my mother told me not to stare.

We waited for my father at the entrance to the plant, where we watched shifts change and men in jumpsuits clocking in. I marveled at the tangled webs of knotted steam pipes, dulled and rusted metal hidden, blurred behind the visible heat coming from them. I remembered the ever-present dirt that became thick grease in my father’s sweat
and evenly bled into his skin, the gray overcasts blended entirely with concrete and metal and the ash that swallowed them. I hated the smells of sulfur and coal byproducts permanently seared into my nostrils, my father’s hair and clothing. It was a flawless wasteland of precise machinery, exact gauges and overbearing furnaces with clouds of glistening red cinders, lumps of slag, molten metal, and dust mounting out of them. That plant was alive.

Six years later, when I was twelve, my father took me hunting. By then I’d fired a gun. Both handguns and shotguns in fact. I’d killed things too. Mosquitoes, flies, and spiders mostly. Yet I never fired a gun and killed something at the same time. It was November and fallen leaves covered the ground. They were already dead, faded into dirt and mud, lacking the vibrancy they held only weeks before when the trees of Northeastern Ohio go out with a colorful bang of reds, oranges, and yellows. I feared that whatever I killed would go out with a bang, followed by reds for sure. But, we sat down with our rifles unchambered and propped up against a tree, and we ate raisins. We fell asleep.

My father woke me and pointed to a deer that had been watching us from maybe ten yards away. It was really something, like a statue, almost. I remembered my rifle, looked from the corner of my eye at it sitting against the tree, still unchambered. “It’s a twelve point,” my father said, smiling. We watched it watching us until it leaped away, silent. On the way out of the woods we stopped at the base of a standing dead twelve foot pine tree. “Let’s knock it over,” my father said. We set down our rifles and rocked the
tree until it snapped loose from its base and fell heavy on the forest floor. Maybe Copperweld was like that.

I pulled up to my parents’ house for dinner. There was a car in the driveway I’d never seen before, a white Ford Crown Victoria. Inside my mother was making flapjacks with meat filling, a kind of thin pancake and Sloppy Joe wrap. Sitting at the dining room table were my father and Franklin Police Chief, Jim Carlson. “Junior,” my mother said, “you remember Chief Carlson?”

I nodded and Chief Carlson stood from his chair to shake my hand. “Hello Junior, how’s the housing biz?”

“Just like anything else, I guess.” I hadn’t seen Chief Carlson since a year ago, when he pulled me over at two a.m. and asked if I had been drinking. I had, and I told him so. He told me to head straight home and followed me all the way. I remembered the bottle of gin in my inside pocket.

“Chief Carlson is here to ask about our neighbor, Mr. Miles,” my mother said, “and I invited him to dinner.”

“Oh?”

“Well, just a few questions,” Chief Carlson said, tucking a napkin into his wide khaki lap. My mother placed the flapjacks in front of each of us and insisted that we say grace first. She gave a long drawn out plea to God to keep our neighborhood safe, to bless our upstanding family, our good natured neighbors, and our dedicated Franklin Police Chief.
We began eating the flapjacks and Chief Carlson spoke, “So, about Mr. Miles.”

“I hope everything is alright. He’s a wonderful neighbor,” my mother said.

“Let the man talk, Janet,” my father said.

“Everything is fine Mrs. Lyons. Just some questions is all. The flapjacks are terrific, by the way.” Already I knew Chief Carlson was suspicious of something. My mother’s cooking was not only strange but absent of flavor other than black pepper. “It’s just that I wondered if you knew why he might have an interest in acquiring a large amount of potassium chlorate.”

“Per-tassim Clarol? You mean for swimming pools?” my mother asked.

“No, it’s found in a pesticide. But sometimes people use it for other things. Things like, bombs.”

The room went silent except for my father, whose chewing probably could be heard from the street.

“Why would Miles be making a bomb?” I asked. “He’s a farmer.”

“Well, I don’t know. That’s what I’d like to find out. Do you know if he was moving a stump or anything like that?”

My father chimed in that Miles might have said something like that, but he wasn’t sure. He asked if Chief Carlson knew for sure that Miles was after large amounts of this particular pesticide, and if so, did he even have it on his property. Chief Carlson said that it wasn’t a formal investigation, that he had no reason to think Miles was up to no good. He just had to check when that much pesticide was involved. It made sense for Carlson to be suspicious. Miles had a unibomber look to him, long scraggly beard with tobacco
stains and dirty hands, though Carlson wasn’t the type to profile based on looks. But Miles had been a farmer for his entire life. He had inherited the land from his parents and rented my parents the home next door for only four hundred a month, utilities included. He was a good person.

After dinner Chief Carlson thanked my mother again for the food and thanked us for the hospitality then left. He told us to call if we saw or heard anything unusual. We said we would. My father and I sat down in the living room for a smoke and a glass of brandy. “Dad,” I said, “don’t you think this is getting a little out of hand?”

“Out of hand?”

“The Chief of Police was at your home today.”

“I was here, remember?” He slammed his brandy and asked if I wanted a refill. I said sure.

“I stopped by the Copperweld plant on the way here today. I got out of the car and walked over by the slag dump.”

“You were trespassing?”

“You want to blow it up and you’re worried that I was trespassing?”

“That’s illegal.”

“So is blowing things up.”

My father turned on the radio. We sat there in the dark, smoking and drinking, and as the liquor started going to my head I started thinking about Molly. I wondered what she would think of my father’s plan, how it involved her father, and decided she’d probably be for it. I thought maybe I’d give her a call.
I started to doze when the doorbell rang. It was old man Miles. He was wearing overalls. I pretended to sleep. Miles and my father went out to the shed. I soon followed after them, careful not to bump into anything, as my sense of balance was seriously jeopardized by the gin and brandy. I stopped at the door of the shed where light from the kerosene lamp leaked out, and listened.

“Carlson stopped over today. You have to drop out now, and we have to move the chemicals someplace safe,” my father said.

“Goddamn it. I went through all of that trouble. I’m not out,” Miles said.

“You have to. Too risky.” The men were quiet.

“We’ll need someone else.”

“We can’t risk getting anyone else involved.”

Before Molly organized the protest, as we lay in the bed at her dorm room, she held on to me and I was still. She asked what I thought about the war. I said, “I don’t know. Is anybody really pro-war?”

“So you’re against it?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

She asked if I believed in anything. I told her, sure. I protested the protest. I didn’t show up to it. I told her I watched from a parking lot. She said it was just like me to stand still while others were out making a difference.

I opened the door to my father’s shed. “I’ll do it,” I said.
The next evening my father and I went to Miles’s and picked up the explosives: sulfuric acid Miles had distilled from car batteries, gallons of kerosene, the potassium chlorate, and bags of sugar. I drove it alone to the house on Paige Court. I figured the basement would be the best place to store it. The heat had been turned off, and no one would be there. I wasn’t going to hold another open house until the owners, who informed me they were staying in Florida, started to ask questions. For the next week my father filled me in on the crucial points he wanted to explode. Some of the tanks were bound to contain flammable materials, and he didn’t actually plan on burning the whole thing, just enough that the authorities would have no choice but to clean the entire area. It was premium father-son time. He put me in charge of learning the chemical procedures from Miles for the fire bomb. I had received a “B” in high school chemistry. Miles was an explosives specialist in the military.

I spent my weekends at Miles’s home studying the procedures. The first day I went over, Molly wasn’t there.

Old man Miles was adamant about the precautions. He made me repeat them out loud and write them down. “Careful now. Sulphuric Acid will burn your skin clean off. If you spill it, wash it away with a shit load of water. If you breathe it, well, God help ya.”

“Okay.”

“Say it.”

“God help me.”

“Alright. Kerosene into the bottle to here.” Miles pointed to a yellow line one third from the top of the bottle. “Not about here. Right here. Acid into the gas. Do that
slow. An inch or two from the top, put the stopper on. Wipe bottle clean as green less you want less arms.”

“No less arms.”

“Towel around the outside, tie it off.”

“Tie it off.”

Back at my apartment I looked up Molly’s cell phone number. It had been three years since I’d talked to her and I wasn’t sure if she’d even still have the same number. I felt like blowing something up. I decided to call her. She answered on the third ring.

“Hello. Molly? It’s Todd Lyons.”

“Who?”

“Oh, Junior. From college.”

“Oh, right. Junior! How are you? It’s been a long time.”

Molly told me about how she had a job with an internal review board. It wasn’t the kind of work she ever expected to be doing, a corporate job, but it paid the bills and she was really starting to like it. I found myself nodding and saying “Uh-huh,” but realized she couldn’t see me and stopped the nodding. She asked about me. I told her I heard she was in town, and since I was too, maybe she could meet me for lunch sometime. She said it probably wasn’t a good idea.

“Molly, I’m a different person now,” I said. “I’m motivated. My dad and I started a big project. An environmental activist type thing. Right up your alley. You’d love it.” She was quiet. “I just would really like to tell you about it sometime.”
She hung up.

One solution was required to be stored away from the other. When they came into contact with each other, as Miles said, “There’ll be more fire than Hell.” My involvement filled me with adrenaline and pride. I felt as though I was part of something larger than myself, that I was finally acting, making a difference. “Now, one hundred grams potassium chlorate and one hundred grams sugar in one cup boiling water. Let it cool. Alright?”

“Alright.”

“Say it.”

“Let it cool.”

After setting the demolition date, I drove to the Paige Court home and mixed the solutions. In the basement there was a wooden workbench and two rows of homemade shelves for storage of the glass bottles once they were filled. I lined up the bottles according to their type, making sure that one was not next to the other, just as Miles had said. One was on the top row, the other on the bottom. I locked up after dark and left. In my rear view mirror, I saw a white Crown Victoria following me. I pulled into a convenience store and the Crown Vic did too. I got out and went into the store. I held the door for an old woman. I bought a six pack of Molson XXX and the most expensive pack of cigars. I walked out to my car, standing beside the driver’s side door, lit a cigar, and
opened a beer. I took my time drinking it, standing in the parking lot. Carlson got out of the Crown Vic and walked over to me. “Evening Junior.”

“Good evening Chief Carlson.” I took a drink.

“Rough day in the housing biz?”

I hated it when people called it the housing biz. I blew cigar smoke in his general direction, finished the beer and tossed the empty bottle into the trash. “You could say that.”

“You know you can’t drink that here.”

My ears were hot. “Why were you following me?”

“Look, I don’t know what you been up to in there, but you’d better knock it off. You and I both know your folks wouldn’t be too proud if I took you in for drinking that out here. Now I want you to head straight home and leave the rest of those beers in that box or else I’ll have no choice. Understand?”

He was serious, and I realized I was being a fool. I blushed. “Yes, sir. I’m sorry. I don’t know what got in to me.”

Carlson said it was okay, that everybody needs to unwind now and then, especially nowadays. He told me he was going to follow me home just to make sure I made it there alright, and he did.

The night before demolition I decided to stop by Miles’ to run over the procedures one last time. Molly answered the door. “Junior?”

“Uh. Hi Molly.”
“Now’s not a good time.”

“I’m here to see your dad.” I squeezed past Molly into the living room. Old man Miles was sitting on the couch next to a tall, fit man about my age.

Miles stood up. “Junior. Surprised to see you.”

“Sure. Sorry. I just wanted to stop in. I didn’t know you had company.”

Molly sat down next to the man. “Junior, this is my fiancé, Michael.”

I shook Michael’s hand, said, “Hey, Mike, if you take Molly’s last name, you’ll be two M&Ms,” and refused an offer to stay, have a cup of coffee, and chat.

I drove straight home to my efficiency apartment. The following silence inflamed me. The empty white walls of my apartment, the hardwood floor, my blood, all reaching a point that felt like fire. I piled everything combustible in the center of my apartment, real-estate papers, too short suit jackets, paper plates, my sheets, the curtains from the windows, and poured over them colognes, rubbing alcohol, hand sanitizer, and liquor. I lit a cigar and lit my business card, Todd “Junior” Lyons, Real Estate Sales, life-long standby, and tossed it onto the pile. The flame went out. I lit another and it finally caught. I opened all of the windows for oxygen and left the room as the flames grew higher and the fire alarm went off.

I walked outside and stood on the street. The other tenants started filing out in their pajamas. I thought about the exhaust flame at my father’s work, the red hot furnaces he smelled like, the idea of an entire factory, half a mile long, going up in flames, and me, standing there, still, as it all came down.
CHAPTER III
TRICKLE DOWN ECONOMICS

The blood doesn’t really bother me anymore. At first I had nightmares about what I saw on the job, but I finally came to terms with my purpose. I justify my profession by recognizing that it’s not me that’s capitalizing on this destruction, it’s the people I work for. Not executives or management or anything like that, but the customers, consumers of the industry, pigs gobbling up slop and not paying attention to what it is so long as there is something to gobble.

The noses on these suckers are hot right now, I thought. Too bad it was hit in the front. Both the left and right fenders were crinkled into the front of a gold 2001 Jeep Grand Cherokee, smashed and steaming against a telephone pole on the side of State Route 5. The front window was spider webbed on both the driver and passenger sides, a few hairs stuck in the cracks and bloody residue left behind. I started to stare at where the airbags should have gone off, where pieces of flesh and teeth embedded into the dash. The ambulance siren starting up snapped me out of it. The airbag units were still good. I circled BAGS on my check sheet.

The State Trooper told me that the passenger and owner of the vehicle, female, 21 years old, claims a van came left of center and forced them off of the road. It’s not uncommon for that to happen on this stretch of 5, but the empty cans of Budweiser in the
back seat suggest a different scenario. The driver and boyfriend, male, 25 years old,
didn’t have anything to say. Unless that was just a plastic sleeping bag the medics zipped
him up in, I won’t get to hear his side of the story anyway. The steering column
practically impaled him, crushing his ribcage, probably shredding his lungs like
lunchmeat. I thought about the chip chopped ham sandwich in my lunchbox in the
company van and decided I’d skip lunch again that day. We could get something for that
aftermarket CD player on Ebay. I made a note on my check sheet.

You see, we don’t deal with consumers directly; we deal with the body shops and
garages that order and replace those parts. We’re making a killing. Say for example,
average Joe Slopgobbler’s ’03 Miata convertible gets scuffed up in a parking lot at the
liquor store. It tears up his rear end enough that it can’t be buffed out. Joe takes his baby
into the garage. They tell him, “Look, we can give you a brand new bumper cover and
tail lamp for $800 plus labor. Or we can get you a salvaged, repainted bumper and tail
lamp for $400 plus labor.” What the grease monkeys don’t tell Joe is that the salvaged
materials including the cost of recovery is only $300, my company makes an 80 percent
profit, and the vehicle they came off of was involved in an accident where the front end
was fucked up and resulted in a fatality. It’s what I call real “trickle down economics.”
The blood trickles down from me to the hands of the buyer and everybody gets rich.

Real trickle down economics has helped me to do a lot of jobs that other people
might find, well, appalling. One summer I worked in a chicken factory. My job was to
kill the chickens before they were de-feathered. The chickens hung by their feet on a
conveyor belt that moved in front of me and I had to use a little gun like thing that sliced
off their heads so they wouldn’t be alive for the rest of the processing. The problem was that the live chickens would thrash around and sometimes the thing would miss their little necks. In the interests of productivity and meeting consumer demands, the belt kept moving anyway.

When I started there, very few of the chickens were dead before they let out horrible sounds you couldn’t imagine and were literally plucked limb from limb. Eventually I quit using the gun, and got pretty good at unhooking the chickens, two at a time, and, swinging them by their feet, slamming their heads against the walls and hooking them back on to the conveyer belt. It wasn’t brutality. It was merciful, real, trickle down economics.

Our society, as violent and heartless as we can be, tends to have a weak stomach when it comes to death and I’ve made a decent living because of it. It’s a strange relationship to have, high violent crime rates and a low tolerance for blood. That’s the real reason why firearm homicides are so frequent. It’s cleaner to shoot someone than to knife him. Then again, I came across a Trail Blazer once that belonged to some dealer from the south side. The 14 and 17 year olds that stole it were cornered by the cops and when the 14 year old reached for a gun, or a comb, or his seat belt, the police unloaded on them. There had to be thirty or more holes in that thing. .38’s and shotgun slugs. One of the slugs went through the pillar between the left side doors, through the driver’s seat, straight through the driver’s heart and back out the windshield. A .38 hit the passenger through the headrest. The hole in the cushion looked like someone poked a No. 2 pencil through it and into the boy’s head. His brain matter looked like the stuff that forms
around the mouth of a bottle of rubber cement, only grayer. It stained the whole interior. After all that we could still use the stereo and driver’s side airbag.

I walked around to the back of the Jeep. The lid, rear bumper, both quarters, and rear axle were fine. The right tail lamp was cracked. I crossed it out on my check sheet. I opened the right side rear door to check out the black leather interior. The back seats had some shattered glass and spilled beer on them, but were overall in good shape. I picked up a black leather case of CDs from the floor to add to the collection in the company van. I’m allowed to keep stuff like that if I get to it before the guys in the tow trucks. Once I was assigned to a car, silver Honda CRV. Suicide. The guy pulled himself into the back of a park, behind some tree growth tucked beside a little league ball field, stuck a shotgun into his mouth, and blew the back of his head clean off. Three days later some little leaguer went back there to take a piss and found him. It was the middle of summer and the thing reeked. There was brain matter all over the interior. None of that would sell because of bio-hazard regulations, but the rest of it was pristine. The body, motor, lights, airbags, you name it. The insurance company called it a total loss. We made a fortune. The responding officer kept a piece of skull bone as a souvenir. He said he was going to make a necklace out of it. I bet he did.

I opened the front passenger door of the Jeep. There was considerably less blood than the driver’s side, which meant she was probably wearing her seatbelt. They aren’t lying when they say it could save your life. I noticed a silver angel and rosary beads hanging from the rear view mirror and it made me chuckle. Probably put there by the girl’s parents. I find it amusing that people think these silly relics give them God’s
preference; although, the girl did survive the accident. But if she would have died, it
wouldn’t have had anything to do with the fact that in my assignments, most passengers
die. No, they probably would have said that God needed her in heaven.

Really though, there’s no difference. I’ve seen them both, with or without God.
Once I saw a car with a dead guy dressed in drag. “Guess he felt the wrath of God,” one
Trooper said. I smiled and nodded and continued my work. Odd how the death of a drag
queen is the wrath of God, but that horrific accident the week before where a semi truck
with a palm leaf cross hanging from the rearview mirror t-boned a minivan with a Jesus
fish on the rear bumper and blew the four passengers, one of which was a toddler, to
smithereens was an act of God calling them up from the bullpen. There must be a fine
line between wrath and love and God must be one of those guys who squeezes your hand
too hard when he shakes it.

A Trooper touched me on the shoulder and it made me jump. “Whoa! Sorry to
sneak up on you like that. All that blood can make you jumpy.”

“I was just dazing off.”

“The clean up crew is here. You all finished?” The cruiser lights glinted off of his
nametag. I made it a point not to get to know the Troopers by name. They weren’t
allowed to know ours. I feel it’s a reciprocal acknowledgement that I’m not supposed to
exist.

“Yeah. Thanks officer. I’ve got everything I need.” The Trooper held out his hand
and I handed him an envelope.
“Pleasure,” the Trooper said and then whistled to the clean up crew. They hustled over to erase the evidence that anything out of the ordinary went on there.

I say that like the accident was out of the ordinary, but it’s not. It happens every day, just not in the same place or to the same people. It’s a matter of probabilities. Even if you have a one in a billion chance dying in a car crash, you still have a chance. It will happen. It’s just a matter of when and to whom. The clean up crews move it out of the way so that it doesn’t bother anyone else. That’s how we go about our regular lives. Even though we ourselves or someone we know will be erased the same way, we can’t be weighed down thinking about it all of the time. We’d never get anything done.

When I was in high school a kid I used to play little league with was killed in an accident with some farming equipment. I didn’t really know the kid that well. In fact, I can’t even remember his name. Jimmy, maybe. Anyway, we were on the same ball team. He was a year younger, didn’t play much and I was a starter, so we never really talked. Jimmy wasn’t good at baseball. He was too thin and timid.

I went to his funeral anyway, as did much of the town, everyone pretending to empathize with his family. At the service they raised his casket above the gravesite. An old white haired minister was talking at one end, reading straight out of the Bible and everyone pretended to listen, but really was thinking that it was probably almost over. The minister made a joke about how the deceased liked watching television and playing video games, and he was probably doing both right now in heaven. Nobody laughed, except for me.
The minister called for a moment of silent prayer and everyone bowed their heads. I bowed my head and looked at the casket. It was made of cheap wood, like plywood or something, and there were red ants crawling all over it. I thought, here are all of these people prolonging saying goodbye to this dead kid through prayer and bad jokes and then there’s these ants that are like, “Well, he’s dead, let’s eat.” I tilted my head toward the sky to avoid laughter but there was a whole freaking flock of buzzards circling the gravesite and I lost it. Everyone shot me an angry glare so I tried to act like I was crying. But you know how hard it is not to laugh when you know you shouldn’t.

When I regained composure, I looked up and saw Jimmy’s sister scowling at me with her witchy looking curly black hair and long crooked nose. She was about the same age as Jimmy. I wondered if they were twins. She looked a lot like him, except maybe that Jimmy was more feminine. Something about her stare, that empty wide eyed look, made me shiver. I wiped my nose on my jacket sleeve, so I didn’t break character, and tried not to look at her. But she just kept staring at me.

After the service Jimmy’s sister came up to me, grabbed me by the arm, and practically dragged me behind a nearby mausoleum. She told me what really happened in the ‘accident.’ Turns out Jimmy was driving the tractor, the big kind they use for harvesting. He stole it, the police said, and was taking it for a joy ride when the terrain got too bumpy. Jimmy, a frail kid anyway, was jostled around and smashed his head against one of the metal pillars in the cockpit. They never said anyone else was involved. Just little Jimmy, out there on his own in the middle of a field, joy riding in a big-ass tractor.
Jimmy’s sister looked at me with those big, uneven eyes. I didn’t know what to do. She just kept staring at me. I don’t think she blinked. She whispered, “I don’t think Jimmy was alone.”

I shivered again, but this time it made me angry. I didn’t want to talk about it. “What the hell are you telling me for? I hardly even knew the kid. I’m only here because I used to play ball with him. If you know something, tell the cops and leave me out of it. Jesus Christ, you’re creeping me out.”

She didn’t blink and might not have even taken a breath. She whispered again, “Jimmy wasn’t alone.”

“Maybe he was,” I snapped. I didn’t want to talk about it. “Maybe he cracked his head on purpose. What are you telling me for?” She grabbed my arm again and I pulled it away. “Look, leave me out of this. I shouldn’t even have come here.” I walked away, looking back only once and she was still staring at me, her eyes piercing into me like she put a curse on me or something. I didn’t see her for a while after that. The newspapers the following day read, “Local Boy Killed in Farming Accident.” I guess the police were pretty sure the kid was alone.

It started to rain as I walked back to the unmarked, dented company van. Raindrops splintered the lights on top of the trooper’s cruiser and water ran along the sides of the road, carrying the leaking automotive fluids and blood into the cracks. The traffic, still reduced to one lane, was thickening. The clean up crew pressure washed the
pavement and made sure the vehicle wasn’t flammable, hosing it down and draining whatever fluids were left before loading it onto the bed of a tow truck.

I got into the company van and took a look inside of the CD case. Most of the CDs weren’t labeled, probably all illegally downloaded, so I picked one at random and put it into the player in the dash. It didn’t play though. It just made a horrific screeching noise, like fingernails on a chalkboard, the way a data CD does when you put it into a CD player. The tow truck turned on its yellow flashing lights and pulled onto the road.

I moved out of town after graduating high school, finding work wherever I could. I started out at a steel mill in Warren, but left after I saw my foreman killed when superheated steam from a broken steam valve melted the skin right off his bones, fat sizzling and him screaming. Next I worked at a warehouse in Alliance. By then I was drinking pretty heavily and was practically forced to leave because of “questionable behavior.” Then were the chicken factory, the butcher farm, and the Wal-Mart. Finally I ended up landing a job in Akron digging graves and maintaining the city cemeteries.

That’s when I saw her again, six years after her brother died. It was mid-October three years ago. I was raking the leaves around a freshly dug gravesite and I spotted her in a funeral party. She had changed in body mostly, but her eyes were still the same and her skin was still pale as if frostbitten. She wore a tight, all black dress with sleeves that accentuated her since developed body. I caught her staring at me from underneath the lacy black veil of her hat. A dark curl of hair, no longer dry and straw-like but smooth
and shiny, fell onto her cheek that was pink from makeup or windburn. I pretended not to notice and continued my work.

After the funeral she started heading my way. I walked behind what was left of a tool shed on cemetery property and gripped my shovel. I figured that if I scared her enough, she’d leave me alone. When she turned the corner I raised the shovel above my head and shouted, sweaty and swollen from the hard day’s work, but she kept coming closer. Before I knew it her hand was on the shovel and she lowered it. I was hypnotized by her eyes. “I have a job you might be interested in,” she said, never smiling, never blinking.

That evening we met for dinner and she told me about her business plan. She knew car and life insurance agents, mechanics, truck drivers, police officers, and state troopers who were interested in making the money, every last cent squeezed out of the incidents. She would handle the revenue and the clients. I would take care of the accident scene. I was impressed with the whole scope of the thing. It wasn’t my ideal job, too much paperwork really.

The trooper pulled out onto the road and within a few yards turned off his lights. Traffic was back to both lanes. I sat in the van for a while, listening to the rain on the roof and feeling the rumble of semi-trucks and SUVs speeding by, the back draft pulling at my van. These people drive by me and my work every day and have no idea what I do, or that I could do the same to or for them. It’s supply and demand. Jimmy’s sister – I never did learn her name, it’s one of the rules of the business – she finds the demand and I
supply the goods. Everyone gets a taste. The families collect life insurance, the insurance
people get kickbacks, the officers get “ignorance funds,” the mechanics get cheap parts,
and I get to do what I’m good at.

I finished the last of a beer, turned the ignition and waited. I started to feel
trapped, angry even. I remembered a brand new Chevy Malibu, not even a week off the
lot. The owners left their pit bull inside and left for a few days. Before it died the dog had
torn the entire interior apart. It even bit a chunk out of the steering wheel. I remembered
looking at the dog’s bloated carcass, his paws worn down to bloody stumps from digging
to get out, his lips gnawed down from frantically chewing anything and everything, and I
remembered for once that feeling of empathy. I pulled out the next client’s file. You
never know when things like this can happen, but they will happen. It’s a matter of when
and to whom. In the distance the beams from a set of headlights cut through the rain,
heading east. It’s a matter of probability. It’s real trickledown economics.
CHAPTER IV
SIX ROUNDS ON MIDNIGHT SHIFT

At Franklin Thermal, a chemical delivery truck pulls in the drive. I give the driver my dollar tour. It’s different than the million dollar tour the bosses give to investors. Instead of just showing him the front, the spit shined aluminum panels that veil rotten and unstable chemical tanks, the good side of the building with trailer offices and new computers, I take him into the plant. I pull back the twenty foot curtains and tell him, “Here’s the dungeon.”

We walk through the curtains and I can see the surprise on his face. He looks up at the holes in the ceiling. We snake through piles of rusted scraps, and cross a platform with no handrail past the boiler. I tell the driver not to look down. The windows are broken, and airborne coal dust glistens like snow in the fading beams of light. “Those tarps,” I say, pointing to a corner of the plant, “they cover the asbestos. Try not to kick them around.” The driver doesn’t speak.

I take him to the back where cockroaches roam on great plains of pigeon feathers. The back door opens up to a panorama of desolation. Corroded doors frame the sunset, purple and yellow like a bruise over cracked, weed laden concrete. Rusty barrels rot next to prehistoric equipment we haven’t used in years, and the cold muscles in past steam
pipes like an unwanted relative. This is how Franklin Thermal heats the city and surrounding area.

“You can leave through here when you’re done.”

I walk into the panel room and Paul, the kid who got the job because his dad runs the place, is smiling. Today is his twenty-first birthday. Ken, the guy I call “ol’ timer” who’s younger than me, asks where I came in from. I tell him, the south end, from the boiler room. He says, “Did you hear anyone shooting?”

“Shooting? No.”

Paul is smiling. He gets up and runs out to his truck. He comes back in with a big, I mean big, Smith & Wesson gun case. Inside is a brand new Smith & Wesson 500 Magnum revolver. Eight and a third inch barrel. The shells as wide as my finger and smells like oil. Thirteen-hundred dollar gun. Paul makes eight bucks an hour.

“We were shooting out back, behind the boiler,” Paul says.

“Loudest boom you’ll ever hear,” Ken says.

“I didn’t hear it,” I say.

I have to go downtown to the new “fun park” and check on the pump house. On Main Street there’s a zoo of college kids escaping from the bars into the streets and cops arresting some here and there. Cop cars are parked all along the street. College kids wearing shorts and hoodies hang off of light posts. I think about how nice it would be to have somebody pay for me to do that.

It takes a half hour to wade through them.
At the fun park there’s a new pile of human shit in front of the gauge. There is an AIDS pamphlet stuck in it. I wonder if the mayor knows this guy’s been shitting on his fun park? He’s got a right, I suppose. He’s been shitting here a whole year now.

Ken calls me on the radio. “Hey Georgie, where are you?”

I hate it when people call me Georgie. “Does it matter?” I respond, because I know it doesn’t.

“You have a ladder around you?”

I look around. There’s a ten foot ladder propped up against the pump house.

“Yep.”

“Great. Do me a favor and bring that back to the control room.”

“Will do.” I don’t bother to tell him that I’m downtown.

I load the ladder into the company truck, drive to Taco Bell, and order two burritos. A man taps on my passenger window. “Hey, man. Got a quarter?”

“Beat it,” I say.

He knocks again. “Hey, man.”

“I said, beat it.” The man leaves.

Ken calls me again on the radio, “Hey Georgie, what’s the ETA on that ladder.”

“I’m on my way.”

When I get back, Paul is up on the belt poking the chute with a metal rod. They didn’t need the ladder after all. I take a seat by Ken in the control room next to the space heater. Everything is covered in dust, and the water cooler is crusted at the tap. A pigeon lands on the window sill. “I hate those fucking birds,” I say.
Ken says that rich people call them “squab.” They’re considered a delicacy. “Rich people will eat anything,” I say. Ken says he wouldn’t know. He tells me he’s on his third marriage. His first wife left him with two kids. The oldest was six. His second wife had two kids then died of cancer. His third wife hates kids.

Paul is back, still holding on to his gun like his first girlfriend. I wonder, if he wasn’t, would I take it? He walks over with his new gun and shows it off. “Want to shoot it?” He says. The shiny steel of the gun looks fake in here, out of place, too shiny. I decline. “Shoot yourself;” Paul says.

“You mean suit yourself,” I say.

“That’s what I said,” Paul says, then walks out of the control room and fires off six rounds into the rusty barrels.

There’s the sound of a ricochet and then intense hissing followed by screams. A pressure alarm lets out hurried piercing beeps and my heart mimics the tempo. Ken and I get out of our chairs and go outside. “What the hell was that?”

Paul says, “I don’t know. We’re here, there’s nobody back there.”

I remember the driver and start off for the boiler. I hear Ken ask, “Which way were you shooting?” but I just keep going. I know it doesn’t matter which way.

When I get near the boiler I hear the intensity of sound and feel a rapid release of heat. Below an orange lamp is a pipe of leaking superheated steam. I see the truck driver on the ground, his pants melted through to the bone of his legs. His top half claws wildly at the dirt, hands bloody and straining. He reaches for his legs and the skin liquefies off.
of his fingers like a burning marshmallow. Without really thinking about it, I rush for the
driver, but Ken tackles me and says it’s not safe, we can’t see the steam.

“To hell with safe,” I tell him. “The whole goddamn place isn’t safe.”

I gather myself and reach for the unburned parts of the driver. He’s in shock now,
and though his eyes are wide open, he’s not saying anything. I drag his body out from
under the pipe, leaving a trail of melted blue jeans. His legs are as black as night.

Ken’s putting all of his weight into shutting the valve to the pipe. When he finally
gets it closed, he kneels down next to the driver and me. Ken says Paul is calling an
ambulance. The driver seems to have forgotten his hands and legs are burned off and
wants to know what’s going on. I tell him it doesn’t matter, just relax. He wants to know
why he can’t feel his legs.

Paul comes running over and stops ten feet from us. I can see the dumb look on
his face. I stand up, walk over to him, and punch him square in the nose harder than I
ever hit anybody in my life. I felt the whole weight of the place behind it. The gravity of
the situation, the thickness of burned skin, pigeon feathers and coal, all balled up into one
punch.

“Son of a bitch,” Ken says, “the boy didn’t do it on purpose, Georgie.”

The driver shuts his eyes. Ken takes me and Paul aside, Paul’s nose bleeding all
over the place and his eyes turning black. He’s crying. “Goddamn it, you two. We need to
start thinking straight. Paul, you got to gather yourself up and get the hell out of here. Say
you got in a bar fight or something. We’ll say you went to lunch and weren’t here.” Ken
turned to me, told me we’re all in this together. If anyone found out we were letting Paul
shoot that gun we’d all be through. Say it was a freak accident. The pipe burst because it was put together with bubble gum and bobby pins.

Paul looks at me for approval. “ Shoot yourself,” I say. Paul does as he’s told and leaves. The ambulance shows up. The paramedics take over and rush the driver away, sirens blaring.

The sun is starting to show on the horizon. I tell Ken I’m taking my break, we’ll let the morning shift deal with the mess. I sit on top of the plant and smoke a cigarette. The company was having a guy come in at noon to roast a pig in celebration of our safety record. Probably won’t now. It doesn’t matter. I have no appetite for a pig glazed in coal dust.
CHAPTER V
WHAT PAUL JOSEPH PROBABLY DESERVED

This is how I figure it probably happened: Paul Joseph’s keys clanged against the side of his bag as he stepped out of his 1987 Nissan Sentra. The keys fell between the seat and the door and as Paul struggled with the bag and bent over, he bumped the car door which then swung shut locking, not only his car keys, but also the keys to his apartment, inside. Paul probably cursed and kicked the door, fucking Goodwill Piece of shit, and reached into his right back pocket for a spare. This kind of thing had happened before. Digging deep into his pocket, as if it could be hiding, Paul found nothing and checked the left, though he knew it wouldn’t be there either. Squinting to make the most of the orange glow that the apartment advertisement called “a well lit parking environment,” Paul saw his keys next to the driver’s seat, mocking him from the still warm inside of the car. He’d left the spare at home. Perfect.

Paul didn’t have a cell phone, or a land line for that matter; I can’t think of anyone who would ever want to call him anyway. He probably thought about breaking the window, but he’d just bought the car with his savings and if he was going to swing rent that month, let alone eat, he couldn’t afford to get it fixed for a while. He probably even considered breaking the lock to his apartment and digging out the other spare. He’d claim someone broke in, which would fly in his neighborhood if it weren’t for the fact that he
had nothing worth stealing in his apartment. That’s when he decided to walk to the bar where we sit every night and drink. There, I would talk to him briefly, and he would try to forget about his keys.

Most likely Paul hoisted his bag over his shoulder and headed out of the parking lot toward the office building and it started to rain, not a hard rain, but the misty kind that makes it feel uncomfortable, like sweat. It was cold and most of the leaves had fallen already. I imagine Paul sludged through the unraked leaves on the sidewalk. They probably reminded him of where he worked at the dry kilns in here in Southington, Ohio. He was an operator assistant there, and the wood chips he shoveled into the furnace would soak up the rain and stick to his boots, making his feet feel heavier yet, and the water would soak into his socks and into the bones of his feet. That night, Paul wore an old pair of sneakers with holes in the sides and the water, too, crept in.

There were no lights on in any of the brick buildings of the complex except for the street lamps. I know this because we lived in the same apartment complex. Paul had to have thought it was strange that in a place that probably housed a thousand people, he never saw anyone, even on warm days. A ragged mutt from the neighborhood might have come from behind one of the buildings and slowly crossed the street. In this case, Paul would have noticed that it only had three legs, because that dog is always around. It would have stopped in the middle of the street, as it does, and looked at Paul, the orange glow spotlighting the dog with curtains of mist falling around it and shimmering like glitter. A sick Christmas decoration. Paul would have stopped too and wondered if he could outrun a three-legged mutt. “You move along now old boy,” Paul might have said.
Then the mutt probably just looked away unimpressed and continued walking with the skill of experience and pained crippled effort. What I’m getting at is that not even a three legged mutt would have been impressed with Paul Joseph. But Paul was afraid of dogs, and this is why he never took the street. This, and a fear of jail for public drunkenness is why he always walked the train tracks home from the bar. The train tracks. That’s where the police found him and the dead girl.

I knew Paul since I was in the ninth grade. I don’t mean we were friends or anything. I just knew him. The athletic director let him play on the freshman football and baseball teams when he was a senior. Paul wasn’t very smart, or physically developed, so no one asked questions. He was fast though, and had terrible luck. In baseball, whenever we needed a base runner, the coach would DH a batter and put Paul in. He’d stand up at the plate real awkward with his legs bowed in, like a fawn does right when it’s born. I swear nine times out of ten Paul was hit by the very first pitch and on base. That is the kind of luck Paul had.

After high school we worked in different mills until we ended up here together. I was the operator, he was my assistant. He did the grunt work, shoveling woodchips and such. He was the kind of guy who always bummed cigarettes. I mean always. It started out he asked if he could have a cigarette when he saw me taking a smoke break. Then he’d ask out of nowhere. Eventually he’d ask for two, and then for another for the drive home. It was the kind of thing that really gets to you after a while. Finally I told him to get his own fucking cigarettes and he never asked me again.
Paul was also the kind of guy who messed with the people who’d let him get away with it. I mean, he’d eat part of a guy’s lunch and things like that. He always tried to put on a tough guy persona. You kind of have to in a place like that, especially if you’re like Paul. He acted tough as a kind of preemptive thing, so other guys wouldn’t mess with him. He’d throw gum wrappers or something onto the floor when the janitor, Jake, walked by, just to establish some imagined pecking order or something. One time, someone stuffed all of the empty coffee cups from the break room in the Jake’s locker. When Jake opened it, they fell out all over onto the floor and he flipped. He lunged over the wooden bench and pushed Paul against his open locker, with his giant janitor hands tightening the collar of Paul’s shirt up around his chin.

“Listen to me, you goofy son of a bitch,” Jake said. He was livid. “A guy can only take so much.”

I was in there then. I saw the whole thing. “Come on now Jake. Give the guy a break.”

“It was him, I know it.” Jake gave Paul one more violent shake and let him go.

“Just because he’s an asshole doesn’t mean he’s the only one shitting on you, Jake,” I said. And to tell the truth, I don’t know if it was Paul or not who did it. That’s the type of thing guys do in the mill. But, it wouldn’t surprise me if it was Paul. He did that kind of stuff to make himself feel better. He had to do something. He lived a sad life. His mother wasn’t around for some reason or another, and his dad kicked him out when he was seventeen. His dad was a religious nut. He painted scripture onto his car and things
like that. Rumor is his dad kicked him out when he caught Paul playing with himself in his bedroom.

So, Paul didn’t have any friends or family. He wasn’t a good looking guy either. He was always rail thin, rarely shaved his scraggly beard, and had a deep sunken in, ashy face. His teeth were terrible, green and brown. That’s how you could tell if he ate some of your lunch. It would be stuck in those teeth. Whether they’d admit it or not, women didn’t like him at all, at least partly because of that. There was one woman who worked in the mill, Victoria. She was in the office, and made rounds every Thursday for us to sign our timecards. Now, Victoria wasn’t attractive by any means. She had obviously fake blonde hair that always looked wet, with dark roots standing out like fluorescent lights in the part in the middle of her head. She was big too. I wondered how she could balance without a tail. But, she was a woman, the only one, and when you get a bunch of men working long shifts doing hard labor and always throwing their testosterone around, that was enough. Once, she filed a grievance on Paul. Said he sexually harassed her. She said when he reached for the pen to sign his timecard, he grabbed her breast. Paul said it was an accident. I don’t know. Maybe it was. Maybe he just looked at her funny, and that’s all it would take. Paul was a creepy looking guy, and would never have a chance, not even with Victoria. Paul knew this.

That night they found him, Paul probably had a lot of drinks at the bar. It was payday, and we all left early to cash our checks. Paul always spent a good deal of his money there. He probably started out with a beer, but kept thinking about his keys and
about how shitty his life was and switched to shots. That’s what usually happened. One time the cops were outside of the bar to break up a fight and Paul was so drunk, I said to him, “hey Paul, you’re ride’s here.” Paul peeled himself up off of the barstool and walked out, opened the damned back seat door of the police car and got in. I lost it.

This woman cop came running over and asked Paul what the hell he was doing. Paul asked her for a ride home and she said, “this isn’t a taxi, it’s a police car.” Paul was so drunk, he pleaded and pleaded with her to take him home. She had to physically pull him out herself. She threatened to taser him. Now that I think about it, I don’t know why she didn’t just take him in. Probably because he wasn’t hurting anybody but himself.

Anyway, Paul had it rough, and like Jake said, a guy can only take so much. The newspaper said Paul abducted the woman from outside of the bar and dragged her into the wooded area near the tacks, where he offered her money for sex. When she wouldn’t accept, Paul raped and then strangled her, or maybe it said strangled and then raped. There was evidence of rape, but no semen. He probably killed her and started going at it before he knew it, then when he realized she wasn’t struggling anymore, took off. Either way, the police found marks in the mud which “looked consistent with a struggle” and sets of prints that matched both the shoes of the woman and Paul. The newspaper said the police followed the footprints from the woman’s body to where they found Paul laying on the side of the train tracks he always walked home on, passed out drunk. They took him in for questioning and when he had a few cups of coffee and sobered up enough to talk, he said he didn’t remember leaving the bar. The police showed him a picture of the girl,
and Paul said she looked familiar. That, and the bruises on Paul’s face were enough to put him behind bars and set a bail too high for Paul to pay.

That’s what probably happened. And this is what I remember from that night: I was sitting at the bar, 12 drinks into it when Paul walked in. I said hi to him and he told me he locked his keys in his car. I said, “that’s too bad.” For the last three beers I’d been pretending to listen to this young blonde tell me about how her sister is her best friend and I can’t remember her name, Trisha, Tanya, whatever, and I can’t remember why I was even still sitting there when she finally stopped talking and looked at me like it was my turn. She was average looking, had a nice smile and a fucked up nose, but I could tell she was getting drunk and besides, I was horny so I said, “It sounds like you two have a very close relationship.” She smiled a sideways smile that annoyed me, clicked a tongue ring against the front of her teeth, and I remembered why I hadn’t left. I ordered us both a double shot of whiskey, told her it was Jack but really it was whatever’s in the well, and another beer. She kept talking and I nodded and acted accordingly. We finished our beers, I ordered another shot, and I asked her if she wanted to go back to my place.

When I woke up, it was still dark and I was lying next to the train tracks. I sat up, looked around at the woods, and had a terrible feeling in my gut. My hands ached and my head was pounding. I looked back toward the bar, but couldn’t see it. I still smelled whiskey and perfume on my clothes. I pulled myself off of the ground and I was soaked. I started walking the railroad tracks back toward my apartment. I thought I’d just had too much to drink. I just blacked out. My feet were freezing. My old sneakers had holes in them and my socks were saturated. I heard someone in the woods next to the tracks and I
crouched down on the other side. Here, there was always the chance of getting mugged. When the silhouette came over the ridge I stayed silent and in the shadows.

I didn’t recognize the form, though I felt strangely aware. My muscles were tight and my heart pounded on my head fueled by liquor and adrenaline. The person stumbled onto the tracks and stopped, looking in my direction. I was sure I’d been noticed. The shadow mumbled something. I thought I heard “give me your wallet.” I leapt from my hiding spot and attacked. I hit the person at first with a running shot and felt my knuckles glance across an eye socket. I swung and barely connected twice more. The person stumbled, fell face first to the ground, and rolled next to the tracks. I jumped on top of him and raised my fist. I recognized Paul Joseph and fell back, stunned.

“Jesus Paul, what the hell? You scared the shit out of me.” He didn’t respond. He was out cold. Scared, still drunk, and a little angry, I took his cigarettes, left him, and walked quickly as best I could on the rail back to my apartment.

When the cops came to my apartment the next day and asked if I’d seen Paul and the woman at the bar the night before, I told them yes, I had, at the bar. When they asked me about Paul, I told them all I knew, but not that I saw him on the tracks. Not that I punched him in the face. I figured that, if Paul had really done what they thought he did, and I don’t know, maybe he did, he probably deserved whatever he got.
I wanted to be a horticulturalist, but ended up getting a job as second camera for Shooting Star Entertainment Productions instead. My partner running camera one wanted to be a radio D.J. so badly he made me call him by his radio name, J.T. Stone. Stone was completely jaded by the whole thing. He hoped for an open bar. He’d get rum and coke so no one knew he was drinking. On my first day he said, “This month we’re taping ten weddings. During the course of those ten marriages, six men and four women will cheat. That’s all of em. Idiots. They know it stings but they do it anyway.”

“Don’t you think that’s kind of cynical? Where’d you get those statistics anyway?”

“It’s common knowledge, Ricky.”

There are certain universals at weddings that any good videographer looks for, regardless of a number of variables such as religion, class, or culture. There’s the older guy who dances wild, the teary father/daughter dance, the cute little girl dancing with groom, the best man dancing with the groom, the best man dancing with the groom, the grandma who can’t figure out how to work the microphone, and so on. When I first started, just after dropping out of college, these universals were endearing. But, as I saw them repeat time and time again, they lost the authenticity that gave them emotional
They became as predictable as the other wedding traditions like throwing the bouquet or garter belt, cutting the cake, and the bride and groom smashing it in each other’s faces, or not. Even the tenderest moments seem nothing more than a repetition of situational behavior.

I started to think J.T. Stone was right. My own parents divorced. I was crushed when they told me. I guess I thought they were special or something. I thought that no one else knew what I was going through, but the truth was everyone else knew what I was going through. Then, a few weeks after starting the video job, I walked in on my girlfriend of four years with another guy. She said it wasn’t what it looked like. She said she was at church. “I told you. If you aren’t cheating,” Stone said that night at a wedding, “your partner is.”

Soon enough the endearing moments made me want to vomit. I started to drink on the job too, but even that wouldn’t ease the knots in my stomach, so I got high in the bathroom between cutting the cake and catching the garter belt or whatever came first.

Stone, on the other hand, reveled in the misery. We set up the cameras before the ceremony began, so it was usually just the two of us, the religious leader, the mothers, and the bridal party. That’s when Stone, in his deep nasal radio voice, would pick out his target. “That one. Right there in the pink.”

“Stone. They’re all wearing pink.”

“All but the bride.”

“All of them? Good luck.” I said, though he did have a dark complexion, chiseled features, and a Neanderthal brow that women, for some reason or another, seemed to like.
“Not all of them. That one, right there, holding the flowers.”

“The one with the hump?”

“Is that a hump?” Stone slipped a flask out of his inside pocket and took a swig. The bridesmaid glanced over at us and smiled. “Well, whatever. I never did a chick with a hump.”

“You’re disgusting.”

I decided to take the handheld and get some candid shots before the crowd showed. I went around the back of the church, a big catholic chapel, to the company van and got out the equipment. I heard some stifled laughter and rustling behind the bushes along the side. I turned on the camera and snuck around to get what I thought might be a perfect opportunity for candid shots, the ring bearer and the flower girl getting all muddy right before the wedding or something. That stuff is practically gold in the wedding video business. But, when I turned the corner, through the lens I saw the bride, the lower part of her gown hiked up to her chest, and the groom giving it to her right there against the church. A modern genuflection. I noticed a butterfly tattoo on the bride’s thigh. They were so into it they didn’t see me, so I zoomed in on their faces for a few seconds and backed away. I figured Stone would get a kick out of it when we edited the video later that week.

I went back in and people were already starting to file in. I left the handheld and sat at my station next to one of the pews in the back. Stone came up behind me. “I think she likes me.”

“Good for you. Maybe you two can make some Quasimodo children.”
“Haha. Yeah. Guard this fucking bell tower, right?” An old woman a few rows up turned around and glared.

“How do you live with yourself?” I asked.

“Hey, you remember that chick from last week?”

“Which one?” Stone thought I should keep his sexual escapades on memory file.

“The blonde.”

“Oh yeah. The blonde.” Most of them were blonde.

“Anyway, after our first go round, she told me she was only sixteen. So I was like, ‘If you tell anyone about this, I’ll find you.’ I mean, right? So we did it again and I fell asleep. When I woke up she’d pretty much cleaned me out.”

“Cleaned you out?”

“Well, cash mostly. Fifty bucks worth all together. But I figure, what the hell?”

Stone snickered.

“Maybe we should be getting ready.”

“You know what I like about you?”

“What?”

“You see all of this go down and you still buy in to that marriage bullshit.”

Stone went back to his station and the organ started playing. The groomsmen marched in. I zoomed in on the groom’s father in the front row for the classic proud poppa shot. “Jesus,” I said. The old woman turned around again. “Praise Jesus,” I whispered to her, “Praise him.” I looked in the lens again. The groom wasn’t the guy I’d seen giving it to the bride earlier. It was his dad.
The average wedding ceremony lasts somewhere between fifteen and twenty minutes. The shortest I’ve recorded was ten. The longest was seventy-five. Catholic weddings are long. this one was a half hour, but it felt like longer. When the priest asked if anyone had any objection to the marriage or “forever hold your peace,” I looked away and saw Stone grabbing himself and humping the air.

I rode with Stone to the reception at the bride’s parents’ mansion. On the way, Stone asked me if I’d seen him holding “his piece.” He never tired of that joke. I asked him what it was like having religious license for his favorite pastime. He replied, “It’s heaven.” He liked to listen to country music. “Isn’t this a little sappy for you?” I asked.

“Sappy?”

“Yeah. It’s all about love, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

He was serious. “Never mind.”

Three hundred people at the reception, easy. It was a beautiful day for a wedding, as they say, but the bride’s parents sprung for a tent large enough to fit everyone, a DJ, a temporary dance floor, and a wait staff. In the mansion, there was a room for the cake itself. It was in the center of the room, five feet tall, and they had skylights shining down on it. The best part, and you’ll never believe this, was that the room had a really tall ceiling and a balcony from the second floor. On that balcony sat a string quartet. Four guys who played for the duration of the reception, even when nobody was in the room. Live music for the cake.
The guest tables were arranged with the colors yellow, purple, and white. In the center of the tables were elaborate bouquets of wildflowers, lilacs, chrysanthemums, violets and black-eyed susans. I thought it was a strange choice for a wedding, but realized they were butterfly flowers, which explained the tattoo. The black-eyed susans, *Rudbeckia hirta*, had yellow petals and a big, dark black center. Not exactly what I think of for a wedding. Their name sounded like a joke to me. Bugs love them.

It seemed like the reception was spared no expense. But it must have been out of the budget to feed the help. Most receptions are buffets or have extra plate setting for videographers, but not this one. Weddings are all day events, and I was starving. I drooled watching the guests eat prime rib and salmon from my camera position by the dance floor. Stone came over to me, his mouth full when he talked. “Dude, these people are loaded.” He held up a glass. “Open bar.”

“What are you eating?”

“I swiped some cookies from the desert table.” He pulled a sugar cookie out of his jacket pocket, “Want one?”

“You put them in your pocket?”

“Yeah. Where else would I keep them? What’s with you today?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

“No, come on. Tell me what’s good.”

I had to get what I saw off of my chest, even if it was to J.T. Stone. “Remember when I went to get the handheld?”
“Sure. Hold that thought.” Stone hurried back to his station, where the bridesmaid he’d targeted earlier was standing with some other women. I could see him working his routine. He told her he needed some extra shots of her for filler material during editing and made her do all kinds of silly actions in front of the camera. Blow a kiss at the camera, curtsy, bend over and fix her shoe. Only I knew he wasn’t really recording.

There were still people being served, so I figured I had twenty minutes or so to sit there at my station before the fun and games started. People don’t like to watch film of themselves eating. I left my station destined to forget about what I’d seen and tried to find the open bar.

There was a young woman wearing a tux behind the bar. She had her hair tied in the back and way too much makeup around her eyes. “Whiskey,” I said. “Two, please.”

“That’ll be ten bucks.” She set the double in front of me.

I patted my pockets. Stone said it was an open bar. “I thought this was an open bar,” I said.

“It is,” she said, and smiled. A group of people gathered around from under the tent. They were watching a little boy and a little girl dancing with each other. “Aww, look at that, Big Spender. Isn’t young love sweet?” The girl was holding a bouquet from one of the tables, petals of black-eyed susans all over them.

I laughed, swallowed the drink, and walked back to my station. I turned on my camera.
You’d be surprised the things people will do on camera. At first I thought they’d all be reserved. You know, shy or nervous, like a spotlight is on them. But, add in alcohol and probably more importantly, the right setting, and people change. Sometimes it’s like I’m not even real. I’m a confidential ghost with whom these people want to share the most intimate secrets of their lives. I guess that makes for good footage.

In general, people have an unbalanced relationship with the camera. Take for example, at a reception, a guy will walk in front of the camera, become suddenly self-aware in mid-frame, then duck down so all I get is a full shot of his deer-in-the-headlights face. But later on, that same guy and the camera all alone, he’ll talk about the time he “accidentally”—he’ll actually make the quotes with his fingers—walked in on the bride showering when they were in college. That footage rarely makes the final cut. But I keep filming anyway. Sometimes those secrets are too much to keep to myself.

My point is, people aren’t always themselves in front of the camera. Maybe they are. I don’t know. Behind the camera, I am myself. Looking through the eye piece makes everything look far away. I can watch it like a television. It all seems scripted.

Something was going on over by the kids. The crowd gasped and a woman screamed. I picked up the tripod and moved it closer to get a better shot. The crowd had backed up ten feet from the little boy. They were frozen, just like they’d walked in front of the camera. The boy had pissed himself, and laid in the grass, swollen and unconscious. I moved the camera closer and heard a buss like a street cleaner. I moved closer yet, not even five feet from the boy, and zoomed in. Bees were swarming him. A woman came running from behind the crowd, his mother I suppose. She kicked off her
heels, picked him up, and took off running. I followed her with the lens of the camera.

She was almost out of sight when she finally stopped, swatted at the boy, and stuck him
with a needle. Then she swatted herself.

She had to have known it would sting.

An ambulance showed up and carted the mom and kid away. The bride was
crying, but not about the boy. She was upset that her day was ruined. Stone said, “Shit.
Did you see that?”

“Yeah,” I told him, “I got it all.”
CHAPTER VII
KEEL HAULING

It was a beautiful day for sailing, or at least what I imagine would be, since I had never been sailing before. It was about seventy-five degrees, there was not a trace of clouds and a steady, easy wind came in from the northwest. I wore my favorite blue swimming trunks, a pair of deck shoes and a white linen button up shirt. When I got to the dock, Erik said I looked the part. I pretended it wasn’t on purpose, but it was. Erik gave me a crash course on port and starboard, bow and stern, tacking and jibing, bowline and clove-hitch. I asked him to go over it again and he told me to relax. “Look, I’ve sailed her by myself. Nothing will go wrong. Besides, it’s about time I got you out here. I think you need this.” I expected that it wouldn’t really be that hard. I know how to swim, and I know how to steer, so what more could it take to sail a twenty-one foot long boat?

We were barely past the causeway when Erik shut off the motor, took off his shirt, and sat down with his right hand on the rudder. He was pale white with blond hair, and his furry blond eyebrows shadowed his face. I told him I brought sunscreen. He shaded his eyes with his left hand and looked out into the lake. “Ok,” he said, “we’ve got the wind coming right from the direction we want to go. I figure we’ll close-haul it—that’s when you sail at an angle and kind of zigzag—so we’ll do that up about six miles to the other side. It’ll take a while to get to the end, longer than getting back.” He
laughed, the kind of laugh that made me think of some Viking sailor drunk with the idea of sailing somewhere for the sole purpose of ransacking it. “There’s a bar by the dock and they’ve got wings that’re out of this world.”

I said it sounded good to me. Erik pointed to the boom. “Ahoy. Raise the sail then.”

I pulled on the kicking strap, raised the sail, and tied the rope in a clove hitch just like he told me. The sail caught the wind and the boat tilted so much I thought for sure we were going over. I lunged for the high side of the boat, mostly out of instinct. Erik leaned slightly with the tilt, and completely calm. I didn’t say anything. I tried to pretend calmness with him, but it didn’t work. “Relax, man,” he said, looking forward and positioning the rudder, adjusting the rigging. “She’s built to do that. We can flip her and she’ll right herself.”

I tried to relax. I wanted to believe him. But simple human instinct wouldn’t allow me. My knuckles were white and every wave we hit made me feel like the boat was tipping. “I know what we need,” he said. Erik maneuvered the boat to the no go zone and the sail flapped powerless in the direct wind. The boat had returned to normal tilt. Erik opened a hatch in the cabin. He pulled out a bottle of Puncheon Rum. “Here.” He tossed me the bottle. The label read, Export of Trinidad. “First take a couple of swigs of that.” I unscrewed the cap and took a two gulp drink. The rum was flavorful, sweet, but strong and I sneezed some of it through my nose. Erik returned to his place at the rudder. I regained composure and tossed the bottle to him. He took a long, uninterrupted drink and adjusted the boat to a slightly tilted degree. We started to pick up speed and he told me to
get at the low end and to sit on the side with my back to the water. I did and he started to
tilt the boat. “Ok now, when I get to thirty, thirty-five tilt, put your head back into the
water. Make sure to hold on though.”

I sat up. “Fuck that man.”

“Come on, I did it when my dad took me out the first time. I was eight.”

“No way. I was holding on with twenty tilt. I’ll fall out.”

“Okay, okay, guess we got to turn around then.”

“No we don’t. I just don’t want to put my head in the water. That’s all.”

“No, we should turn around.” Erik gave me the Viking smile again, “we should
go back to the car to get your tampons.”

“Fine,” I said, “fuck it.” I sat back and leaned my head toward the water. “Do it
already.” My heart was racing from both the rum and fear, and I wrapped my wrists
around the polished rails on the boat. Erik pulled the rigging, then the rudder and the boat
tilted nearly on its side. I leaned back and accepted that, one way or another, I was going
to get wet. I stretched my neck out, expecting nothing and accepting anything. For a
moment I felt the sensation of falling as the surface of the water now rushing by quickly
brushed my scalp then swallowed my head. The boat tilted upright and I submerged,
filled with adrenaline.

“Whoo Hoo!” Erik shouted. “That was like, thirty-eight. Fucking great, right?”

I tasted the water from the lake running over my lips. It was cool and clean, but I
immediately smelled fish and overflow from leech beds along the lake. “Yeah,” I wiped
my face and motioned for the rum. “Fucking great.”
We zigzagged up the lake, not talking except to ask for the rum or when tacking and jibing. Erik, at the rudder, would announce our turns. “Preparing to tack… Tacking… Preparing to jib… Jibing.” Each time I ducked under the boom, lunged for the other side of the boat, and pulled and secured the running rigging. Skimming across the lake, I crawled to the bow, took off my shirt and felt the sun, wind and water against my skin. I thought about how foreign the other side was, though it looked the same as the one we left, lined with maple and oak trees, scattered with an occasional home and private dock. Maybe, I thought, it wasn’t the other side that was different.

About four years ago Erik and I started hanging out after we worked together at the Ford plant in Cleveland. He was there for summer work on break from college and I was there because I couldn’t find another job. We worked for a company Ford subcontracted to check batches of parts that were set aside for inspection. If a screw was found to be loose on a pre-manufactured part on the line, for example, the whole batch would be sent to us. We were the ones to check each part, hundreds of them, individually. It was mindless unskilled labor, and sometimes we’d be sent home because there was no work. But when there was, it paid well.

We met on my first day. I was tightening screws on some part or another when one of the union guys, a tow motor operator, who had been drinking coffee and smoking at a table along the wall came over to me. “Boy, you need to take a break.” He was fat, greasy, and probably balding underneath his red mesh cap that read “Preferred Customer at the Diamond Lodge.”
“There’s hundreds of these things I got to tighten.”

“Take your time is all I’m saying.” The man stepped close enough that I could smell his breath. “I get overtime in an hour, and I won’t be moving those things till then, so you might as well…”

“Yeah, well, I don’t get paid overtime.”

The man put his face closer to mine. His breath made me want to vomit. “Boy for a sharp tongue, you got a pretty mouth.”

Erik, who had been watching the whole time, spoke up. “Bet he’s got sharp teeth too. Better cool it, Jake.”

Jake backed off and started walking back to the table. “Erik, you’d better tell this smart ass how things work around here.”

“Or don’t work,” I said. Jake turned around and glared.

Erik interrupted again. “Jake, I’ll take care of him. Come on. Take it easy, he’s new.” Erik walked over to me. “We got to put up with guys like Jake. They’re Ford employees. Union. We got to treat them like two year olds to get anything moved around in here.”

“Is it already lunchtime?” I asked.

“What? No, why?”

“Then that guy must have had a shit sandwich for breakfast.”

Erik laughed. “Yeah, you’ll fit in just fine here. I’m Erik.”
When we reached the northwest end we came to a small port with three docks. One spot was taken by a docked fishing boat and the other a large rowboat. A family of Mennonites, five of them, was loading the rowboat with baskets and fishing gear. We decided to float away from the dock for a while to let them get situated. They realized this and hurried. Erik took a drink of the rum and tossed it to me. I took a drink and it went down smoothly. We put on our shirts. The Mennonite boat shoved off and all of them but the boy rowing stared at us as they passed. Erik motored the sailboat up to the dock and tossed me a dockline. I hopped out onto the dock, feeling the sun on my skin, feeling like I had landed in a foreign country, and clove-hitched the boat to the dock.

After taking a few drags each off of the bottle and locking the cabin, we walked toward a small white building with one window that had a neon High Life sign in it and a Miller Light banner announcing Thursday night karaoke hanging beside it. There were a few cars in the gravel parking lot, but no people outside. When we got closer to the door, Jimmy Buffet was playing on small loudspeakers above it. He was singing something about the beach and living the good life. Inside was small. There was a short pool table at the door, and the bar was only about twelve seats long. Four men, probably in their fifties, sat at the bar talking and laughing. Erik found the bathroom and I went to the bar to order us a beer. The bartender came over. She was in her late forties and short. She was wearing a Cleveland Indians t-shirt. I asked her what she had on draft. “Miller Light. You boys come from the lake?” I told her yes, two please, and two orders of the wings. “How’s the water?”

“Nice,” I said.
“The wings’ll be a little bit.”

When Erik came back from the bathroom I had already racked the table. “You break. I got the wings.”

When Erik introduced me to his sister, Katherine, not long after Erik and I met, I fell in love. She was in great shape, had blonde hair, like Erik’s but long and softer, and the clearest blue eyes I’d ever seen. But that wasn’t why I fell in love. I fell in love with her smile and would do anything I could to see it. He had warned me about her before I went into his parent’s home for the first time. “Listen man, my sister’s only turning eighteen. Don’t get any ideas, alright?”

“Come on, I wouldn’t,” I reassured him. But that was before I saw her.

We walked into the house and Erik announced our arrival. “Hey, anybody home?” We walked into the living room where Katherine was watching television. The room was filled with artwork and little pieces of foreign cultures Erik’s father brought home from business trips around the world. A red silk Japanese kimono hung on the wall next to a pair of antique wooden skis.

Katherine jumped up and ran over to hug Erik. “I didn’t know you were coming home this weekend.” That’s when I saw it. She smiled at Erik. “I am so glad to see you.” Then she looked at me still smiling. “Who’s your friend?”

Once we were sailing back with the wind, there was no tacking or jibing to be done, so Erik got out a couple of Cuban cigars his father bought while on business. We lit
them and laid back, drinking rum and smoking, thick white curls of smoke trickling out of our mouths, the only clouds in the sky. Though we were moving faster, the water seemed calmer, and with the sun behind us warming our backs, I felt a little at peace.

Erik propped his legs on the edge of the boat. “So, how’ve you been?”

“Good, I guess. You know I got that job with ODOT. Simple stuff really. Put cones out all day, then pick them up. Pays the bills.”

“How’s everything else, I mean.”

“I skim along.” I took a drink of the rum.

Erik took a long hit off of his cigar. “Seeing anyone?”

“No.” We were quiet again.

A motorboat carrying three women in bathing suits, probably our age, sped by creating a wake. “Hey, hey!” Erik yelled, holding up the bottle like raising a toast. The women shouted back, but were already too far away to understand.

“You know,” Erik said, thinking carefully about what to say next. “Today makes a year.”

“I know what day it is.”

“Kat sends her regards.”

I sat up. “She did?”

“Well, not really. She’s still not talking. But I can tell, you know?”

I sank. “I get it, okay? Can we just fucking drop it?”
Erik thought about it for a moment. “I got an idea,” he said standing up. “You’ll like this.” He took the coiled dockline and tied a loop at the loose end. “Put your wrist through here, grab onto the rope. It’s called keel hauling. Well, not really.”

“What?”

“You hold on to this rope, jump off of the back and don’t let go. When all the slack’s gone it’ll drag you along the surface. You can pull yourself up real easy. They used to do something like it as punishment.”

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Erik and I didn't work with each other after the summer in the plant, but we kept in touch. He graduated and got a good job at Northside hospital in Youngstown. Still, we didn't do much together, and he didn't know that Katherine and I were dating. Katherine and I were sitting on my futon, watching television. "You know, we have to tell him sooner or later, Adam," she said. "He'll find out when we move in together."

"I know." I pulled her closer and ran my fingers across the back of her head. Her hair was smooth, and as hard as I tried, I couldn't get my fingers stuck like I wanted them to be, forever. I pretended to watch television, but had avoided the conversation as long as possible. Katherine sat up.

"Come on, I'm serious."

"Alright, fine." I could tell I wasn't going to avoid it any longer. Katherine, like her brother, had a way of making me do things I would normally just stay away from. "I just don't know how he'll take it is all."
"It'll be alright. He'll be happy for us." Katherine looked into my eyes, and I wanted to believe her. Hell, I practically did. But even with her power over me, I knew deep down that Erik wanted better for his little sister. Little sister. Jesus. She was only nineteen. How long ago could it have been that he'd bought her dolls for her birthday? And Erik knew I had a hard time keeping a job in the past, that she was smart and had potential, that the only apartments I could afford were a big step down for her. "Hey," she said. "Don't worry about it. It'll be alright."

I agreed to meet up with them the following weekend, partly because I knew it was inevitable, and partly because I didn't want to think about it anymore. Katherine came up with a plan to meet Erik at a local diner, and I was to show up, make it look like a coincidence at first. He'd ask me to join them, I would, then we'd break the news. It didn't happen that way though. Erik was late, and when he got there I was already sitting with Katherine, on her side of the booth. He looked surprised, glad to see me, then confused. "Hey, Adam, good to see you again. What a coincidence huh?" I smiled, drank my coffee nervously and fast, burning my tongue.

"Actually, Erik, I invited Adam," Katherine said. Even in the florescent lights, she looked like a dream, but she was impressively stoic and strong.

"Is that right?" Erik looked from his sister to me. I looked around for a waitress to refill my coffee. "Well, that's good. It's been a while, buddy. How's the plant?"

"I quit," I coughed. "New job in a plastics place on the line. Better pay. Benefits." I couldn't find our waitress to save my life. She was working on losing her tip.

"That's good." Erik said, still feeling out the situation.
"Adam and I are in love," Katherine's words came billowing out like steam from a boiler, "We're moving in together."

Erik tapped his spoon on the table and looked around, "do they serve food here or what? I'm starving." Erik caught a waitress's attention.

"Erik," Katherine started. The waitress interrupted. Erik ordered coffee and a turkey sandwich, and I was grateful for a refill.

The waitress left and Erik looked at me. "Suppose you've been dating a while?"

"About a year," I said.

Erik nodded, not surprised. "You've been thinking about this?" he asked Katherine.

"Yes, Erik, we're happy together."

"What about school?"

"I'm still going. My scholarship covers the tuition and Adam can handle the bills until I can get a job."

"It's not that simple, Kat. What if you decide you want to move after college, or what if you want to keep going? What if it doesn't work out?" Erik seemed genuinely more concerned than angry. I thought he might have reacted the same if it were anyone else, but I knew he wanted more for his sister than I had to offer.

"Do you think I haven't thought about that? Give me a little credit, Erik." It was clear then, that she had the same power over Erik as she did me.

Erik sipped his coffee. "Do mom and dad know about this?"
"I wanted to tell you first. I was hoping you'd help me tell them." Katherine reached across the table and touched Erik's hand. "I was hoping you'd be on my side for this."

Erik squeezed her hand. "You know I am, sis. I just want you to be happy." He let go of her hand, stirred his coffee, and looked at me. "You know, Adam, I like you. I want my little sister to be happy, and if she says she is, I'll believe her." I nodded and finished my second cup. Katherine smiled. "But if you ever, ever hurt my sister. I'll kill you."

"Erik!" Katherine barked. In a way, I thought, we were all too naive to know what any of it meant.

"Honestly," I said, "if I ever hurt Katherine, I'd do it first."

Keel hauling. Keel hauling, I thought as I slipped the loop over my wrist, took a deep breath and dove off of the back of the boat. The water split in front of me and I felt as if I was under forever. I opened my eyes, but the water was too murky to see anything, and, as panic washed over me with the water, I grasped for the surface, trying to pull myself out. I knew it was a mistake, keel hauling, being there, everything. Finally, no help from my efforts, buoyancy took over and I surfaced. The rope still wasn’t tight and I could see the boat, Erik looking back and smiling, far enough away that I started to panic again. I grasped the rope with both hands and started pulling at it with an impulsive sense of urgency. The rope jerked and I was being pulled along behind the boat. I stopped fighting for a moment and felt the water rushing around me. It was, must be, what it’s
like to fly. Left over right, right over left, I pulled myself one hand at a time back to the boat.

Erik helped me onto the boat. I took my hand from the loop and Erik reached his hand out for the rope. Instead, I tossed the end into the water and we watched the rope stretch out long behind us, trailing along at the surface. “My turn,” he said, “use the rudder and keep her on the same course. I’ll catch the rope when I come up.” Before I could protest, Erik was in the water. He was under for a long time, and I kept the boat on course.

After she left for college at Case Western University, we got a place, a cramped little apartment, together. It was summer, and the three of us were swimming at a filled in quarry in Nelson county. At one end of the quarry, there was a rock cliff that they let swimmers jump off. The ledge was about fifteen feet from the surface of the water, and from there, twenty or more feet to the bottom. The three of us stood at the top.

“It’s easy,” Erik said. “Just run and jump out as far as you can and you’ll clear the rocks. Watch.” Erik walked away from the edge to get a running start then took off, his feet pounding the rock surface. His leg muscles looked like a horse’s and he leapt forward off of the edge, head first into the water. When he came up, he shouted back to us. “Come on, see. It’s fun.”

Really, I didn’t want to jump either. “Are you going to jump?” I asked Katherine.

“I don’t know,” she said. She was wearing a black two piece bathing suit with white trim. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. I’ll never forget. “Are you?”
“Yeah, sure. Want me to go first?”

“I don’t know.”

“Too late,” I said, and I took off for the edge and jumped, feet first, into the water. Water shot up my nose and the sound of my head going under made my ears ring. When I came up I coughed, my eyes watering. “See,” I coughed again, “no big deal.”

Erik was still treading water at the bottom next to me. “Come on sis, it’s fun.”

Katherine came close to the edge so she could see us. “I don’t think I want to.”

“If you love me you will,” I said, just wanting her to be closer to me.

Katherine peered even further over the edge to get a better look. One of her feet slipped, and she didn’t have enough footing to push off from the ledge. She fell, fifteen feet, onto her back. Onto a bed of rocks. The thud was a sickening sound, like dropping raw hamburger onto the kitchen floor. No matter how hard I swam toward her, I felt like I was swimming in slow motion, backward even. I heard the rattling air smashed out of her lungs. I felt the helpless air forced out of mine.

When he came up, Erik wiped his face and looked for the rope. He grabbed for it, then again more violently. “Fuck!”

“What? What?”

“I missed it,” he shouted.

“What?” he was getting further away. I felt the panic again. If I tried to turn the boat, the sail would catch wind and tilt, maybe capsize. Besides, I didn’t know how to tack or jib by myself. I froze.
“Reef the main,” he shouted. I could barely hear him, and he stared swimming toward the boat. We were getting farther apart. My head was swimming in rum.

“Reef what? What?” I searched the boat for a life vest, finally finding one in the cabin underneath a pile of old rags. When I came out of the cabin he was still swimming, but no closer to the boat, nor the rope. “Come on man, grab the rope.”

Erik yelled back, but he was too far away to understand. He might have said, “I’m trying,” or “I’m tired.” He stopped swimming and treaded water.

“Keep swimming.” I tossed out the life jacket.

I followed the line used to raise the sail to its hitch, unhooked it, and watched the sail flap out wildly and then die in the wind as the boat came to a rest, bobbing only a little on the rippling surface, but afloat nonetheless.
CHAPTER VIII

FOOTBALL

Shannon had the summer off from work, which meant she didn’t have to make
sure and be in bed by eleven for another three months. At school, the kids in the lunch
line called her by her ex-husband’s name, Mrs. Casey, or Mrs. C. But now that school
was out, she went by a different name altogether. In fact, she became a completely
different woman. She no longer had graying hair or skin that was beginning to show her
age. She wasn’t getting fat anymore and she was taller, 5’10” and 130, no 120 pounds.
She was whoever she wanted.

It was the first summer Shannon was able to spend alone. David, her ex-husband,
left on Christmas that winter, and Ricky, their only child, hadn’t been home from college
since a year before that. During that two year period, she’d scrambled for any time alone
at the computer. Sometimes she’d forget the physical world and completely enter the
digital, often burning the stir-fry she made for David every night, which he later cited as
evidence of her infidelity at the hearing.

In the real world, Shannon was careful with her money. She and David had run
their credit into the ground and were behind on their taxes for a few years. In the
settlement, David agreed to pay off their debts rather than alimony. Shannon conserved
her earnings as a lunch lady during the school year, sometimes sneaking school lunch
leftovers on grocery days, so she was able to maintain an internet connection in the one bedroom duplex apartment in the projects.

Shannon woke up, started a pot of coffee, and sat down at her old IBM. One day, she thought, she could afford what she wanted. A new computer, maybe a laptop, and high speed internet. Until then, dial-up would suffice. She had set the old computer up on a shaky little white desk she found on garbage day. It had fit perfectly in the backseat of her Cavalier. She placed it next to the window at the front of her apartment, so when the computer was taking time to load, she could look out at the other duplexes across the street, and behind them, the railroad tracks.

Shannon was looking out that window the day her neighbors brought their first child home. They had him all bundled up like a football. So Shannon called him, Football. She’d be at the computer doing whatever, surfing, chatting, and there went Football, somebody else holding on to him like they were winning the Heisman. As Football started getting bigger, he’d squirm around and somebody different would be carrying him. Shannon would say, “There goes Football,” and pressed her hand on the glass. “Hang tight brother.”

Shannon learned that Football’s real name was Timmy. She was coming home from the school and he was sitting in a puddle in the middle of the street in. Shannon had to stop her car. Football’s Dad, Jim, a Desert Storm vet, came running out of the duplex and screamed, “Timmy!” And just like that, Football was Timmy.

Jim was outside working on his ’84 Ford Country Squire when the computer screen clicked on. The fan in the computer whirred and the sound of Windows starting up
turned anticipation into excitement. Shannon joined a game of online Scrabble and started chatting with her opponents. She typed, “35/F/OH, anyone want to chat?”

HawkeeMom08 responded first, “46/F/WI, hello”.

Then 82BuckIJak, “38/M/OH, hi all, fellow Buckeye?”

Shannon won the first round, lucking into words like RUINATE and JEZEBEL.

The next two rounds went to BuckIJak, and then he said he had to leave the game for a minute. “Hurry back,” she typed, “we need you for a good game.”

Shannon remembered her coffee and went into the kitchen. In her haste, she had only left the coffee pot half way underneath the spout and coffee ran all over the counter. She cleaned it up and started another pot. When she returned to the computer, the next game was still loading. Jim wasn’t outside, but Timmy and his sister were. Shannon counted the family in her head and wondered how it all worked. There was Timmy, a little sister, a baby in the carriage, and mom was pregnant. One day they all piled into that station wagon like they did every Sunday to go see Grandma, she assumed. But that day was Friday. When they came back, it was just Timmy, a little sister, and Mom still pregnant. No baby in the carriage.

Timmy and his sister were rummaging around for something to do. Timmy came across a pile of lug nuts from the wagon Jim placed in a hubcap. He saw the lug nuts and must have thought they were rocks or something and chucked them into the yard. Then Jim came out, mad as hell, and the whole neighborhood knew Timmy’s name. Shannon remembered another time when Timmy put rocks in the radiator. It was always something like that. Once, Timmy busted every one of those lawn bulbs in the
neighborhood with his slingshot. She knew it was him because she could hear Jim yelling
his name from her bedroom. This time, Shannon yelled out her window, “Run, Football!
Run!”

Shannon always rooted for Timmy. Maybe because he reminded her so much of
herself. A restless spirit among complacency. He was smart, and energetic for his age too.
At least that’s who she saw herself as. That’s who she was on the internet. The next
game, BuckIJak won again. He was on a roll. He was coming up with words Shannon
had never heard before, MEZQUITA, and ZOMBIFY. “Where do you come up with that
stuff,” Shannon typed, “Mezquita? Zombify?”

“I am a wordly man,” BuckIJak typed back. “Where in OH?”

Shannon did not divulge real information over the internet anymore. She’d made
the mistake once before, met up with the man that would be the final straw for David. He
was a charter fisherman on Lake Erie named Ed. As their relationship developed over the
internet, David found emails she’d forgotten to delete. The emails said things like, “When
can we get together?” and “I can’t wait to see you.” Words David rarely said anymore,
words that made her feel needed.

Shannon maintained that she never actually met with Ed before the separation,
and when she finally did, she was sure they were both disappointed. Shannon wasn’t 35,
but 45, and Ed wasn’t of athletic build, he was just over five foot tall, stout, and greasy.
The surprise of appearance was enough for Shannon to want him to leave, but Ed was
angry, not turned off. He made advances at Shannon, and when she declined, he became
irrational, said he’d driven three hours to see her, and he expected something in return. Shannon threatened to call the police, and Ed left. She never heard from him again.

Shannon ignored BuckIJak. The real world, she decided, was full of disappointment, and here, on the internet, she wouldn’t disappoint anyone. Two letter word, AX, nineteen points, and QUIFF, another twenty. “Oh my!” typed HawkeeMom, “rotflmao!”

“Well played,” typed BuckIJak, whose next word was WOOZY, twenty points. This was the type of flirtation Shannon could handle. BuckIJak could be any man she wanted him to be, and she could be the same for him. No cigarette stained teeth, clubbed fingers and chin hair. “Where in OH?” he asked.

Outside, Timmy and his sister were alone again. By then, Timmy had to be at least four, maybe five years old. Shannon watched as he beat a tree with a stick, threw matches through a hole in the manhole cover on the street, pulled his sister’s hair and made her cry. No one came out to yell at him. “The northeast,” Shannon typed. She figured it was vague enough, that she hadn’t actually told the truth. Since she moved to Ohio from Arizona, she tried not to talk about anywhere else.

“Me too! What do you do there?”

Shannon was pleased. Now, she could embellish, and he really wanted to know. She knew this because he hadn’t already propositioned her with cyber sex. “I work with kids,” she typed.

“Great. Gotta hand it to you. Kids can be tough to work with. Have any?”

HawkeeMom butted in, “I have three momma’s boys. They all play hockey.”
I’ll bet they all try to steal men too, Shannon thought, though she didn’t really mean it as an insult.

After leaving for college, Ricky only came home on the weekends at first. Shannon had dedicated so much of her time to him, she didn’t know what else to do. David worked twelve hour shifts on the railroad, and when he got home, he was too tired to bother with niceties. “Have you been sitting at that goddamn computer all day?” he would ask.

“I just sat down,” she’d respond, though she was lying and they both knew it.

“Did you do my laundry?”

“No, I didn’t get around to it.”

“Well, what the hell am I supposed to wear to work tomorrow? I work all day so we can pay for this crap and all I ask is that you help out a little.”

“David, I made dinner.”

“Spaghetti? Or is it stir-fry week?” David would storm around the kitchen, fix up a plate of cold spaghetti or burnt stir-fry, pop open a MGD and plop in front of the television, where eventually he fell asleep. When David finally woke up, Shannon would flick off the computer screen and pretend she came from bed to wake him up.

The weekends were much the same, and eventually Ricky stopped coming home, but called often. After the separation, he called once a month, if she was lucky.

Shannon typed, “One. He goes to Ohio State.” Beat that, HawkeeMom, she thought.

“Really? Does he play football?”
“No, but some of his friends do. Idk, one’s a pretty good quarterback, I guess.” None of that was true either. Ricky decided he wanted to be a pharmacist. It was something Shannon could have been proud of, if Ricky hadn’t dropped out after being hospitalized for an overdose of oxycodone.

BLOWZY was her next word, and she realized after submitting it, that it wasn’t the image she had wanted.

Shannon looked out her window and Timmy was missing. His sister walked back inside. BuckIjak didn’t respond, and instead won the game with ZEPHYR. As the next game was loading, Shannon got up to get her first cup of coffee. She happened to glimpse out the window and was sure she saw Timmy, in his Spiderman t-shirt, climbing on a parked train on the tracks.

Shannon liked being able to see the railroad tracks from her window. She and David had raised their son near railroad tracks. They took the train to Ohio. David got a job with CSX when they moved to Ohio. The constant rumble of a passing train was a blessing when Ricky was colicky as a baby.

Shannon remembered the VHS tapes David made Ricky watch about railroad accidents. The tapes were gruesome reconstructions of real events. She could remember asking, “Why do we have to make him watch these gory things? He’s only a child for goodness sake.”

David was rigid. “Because, Shan, he needs to be aware of the real dangers out there. Would you have him think life is all cartoons and cereal commercials?”
In one video, Shannon remembered, a boy was climbing between two cars when another train was connecting to it down the track. The boy’s leg got smashed between the cars and he was dragged for five miles before anyone noticed. The video showed the boy’s mangled body, which then looked to Shannon like the leftovers from a bowl of Fruity Pebbles. They showed his real life mother, a woman about the same age as Shannon, sobbing and testifying that if she, if her son would have known the dangers of the railroad, they could still be together. Even the real life testimonies, Shannon thought, were melodramatic.

Normally, Shannon wouldn’t have done anything about Timmy. Despite his high level of activity, there was always someone on Timmy’s heels looking out for him. But this time, no one came out yelling.

Shannon walked onto her porch and lit a cigarette. It was unusual that no other neighbors were out. The porch was a familial gathering place in East River Gardens, what the community leaders named the projects. Even the fat man who would usually sit shirtless and drink Natural Light on the porch just outside Shannon’s bedroom window, the one who woke her up on summer mornings with his deep throated spitting, wasn’t there. Shannon watched the train. Maybe, she thought, she had imagined it.

Shannon finished her cigarette and still no sign of Timmy or his father. She decided she would check it out, completely forgetting about BucklJak or the computer. She walked through her neighbor’s yard and tiptoed through another neighbor’s garden. She was almost to the train when she realized that she was still in her nightgown. “Damn it Timmy,” she said aloud, “You are making me look like a fool.” Shannon stumbled up
the rocky mound to the train. “Timmy?” she said. “Timmy, it’s okay. I’m your neighbor. Mrs. C. You come down off this train.” She searched along the engine, one hand on the car for balance. The rocks hurt her feet.

“Excuse me, Ma’am,” a man said from behind her. “We’re responding to a call about a crazy woman walking through people’s gardens.” Shannon turned around and saw two police officers.

“Crazy woman?” Shannon said, “Well, I’m looking for a kid climbing on a train.”

One officer, the tall, thin one with big ears and a close crop haircut, rolled his eyes. The other officer, the older, mustached one, offered to assist. “Is it your child Ma’am?”

“No. My neighbor’s.”

Ears rolled his eyes again. Shannon wanted him to know she got it the first time.

“I’m not crazy.”

“We know, Ma’am. Where did you see the child last?” Mustache asked.

“Climbing right there, on the engine. I swear I saw him. He’s wearing a Spiderman t-shirt.” That was enough for Mustache, who then called dispatch on his radio and explained the situation.

Ears was still defiant. “Where are his parents?”

“They’re home.”

The officers helped Shannon look for Timmy for ten minutes, but he was not there. Mustache escorted Shannon home. “I’m not crazy,” she said again.

“We know,” Mustache said.
In the kitchen, the coffee had run all over the counter again. Shannon unplugged the pot and left the mess. She considered taking a shower, but the thought of being unclothed made her feel uncomfortable. After all, BuckIJak couldn’t see her. To him, she could be smart, pretty, and showered. As far as she knew, so was he. He wanted to know more about her. He needed her to play Scrabble. It felt nice, Shannon thought, to be needed.

Shannon sat down at the computer. The screen was covered with dust and there were cigarette burns on the desk. BuckIJak and HawkeeMom had signed off. Shannon was alone at the board. Outside, she heard Jim yelling. Timmy was urinating on the telephone pole.
CHAPTER IX
THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY

Martin Matthews the third’s libido was out of control when he first got the internet. He was eighteen at the time and, financed by a sudden inheritance from a distant unknown uncle, moved to the city from his parents' house deep in Appalachia. Because of his parents' distrust of technology, Martin was never allowed near anything more advanced than a typewriter, which he used often during his home schooling. So you can imagine the mystery and consequent erotic excitement evoked by a sultry, sleek computer and sexy cyberspace. When the tech person who set up Martin’s new computer asked him what kind of internet connection he wanted, Dial Up, High Speed Cable, or DSL, Martin calculated with computer-like speed a number of suggestive meanings for each. After all, the internet had all of the characteristics of sexuality to a boy of his age and circumstance. It was mysterious, forbidden, and, according to his parents, dangerous.

It took Martin a few days to get used to operating the computer, but he picked it up rather quickly—that is, except for the double-click, which took him longer to master than he’d like to admit. As for the internet, there's a reason they call it the information superhighway, and when Martin took the on ramp in his horse and buggy mentality, he was nearly run over. After less than two days of having an e-mail address Martin received three e-mails that, while his life was already different in many ways, would begin life
changing events he never would have expected.

The first of these e-mails, from the Official Peoples' Games of Australia Ministry, said that Martin was the winner of the "Australian International Lottery." But, in order to receive his winnings, tax and shipping free, Martin had to send in reply his bank account number. Dumbfounded by his blind luck, first the inheritance and then this, Martin decided that first thing the next day he would find a bank and open an account with the leftover cash from his inheritance which he now kept in a laundry sack. Martin opened the second e-mail:

To: martinmatthewstethird@hotmail.com

From: Ms2Hot4U69@18yroldhotblondecoed.com

Subject: Hey You!

Message: Hey there sexy! Im a hot blonde coed that just turned 18yrs old. I was bored just sitting around in my dorm alone in my underwear so I was surfing web and came across your name. U sound like U like 2 have fun! I'd really like 2 get 2 know U. U should check out my live web cam. I'm always around and looking for a good time. Hope 2 hear from U soon!

Vulnerably Yours,

Heather (18yr old blonde coed) live web cam

Martin knew that when he moved to the city it would be easy to meet people, but he didn’t realize it would be quite this easy. He sent Heather a reply e-mail stating that he was glad to hear from her, that he did, in fact, like to have fun, and that he would check
out her web cam soon. He thanked her for making him feel so welcome and promised to keep in touch. Martin opened the third e-mail:

To: martinmatthewsthethird@hotmail.com

From: benevolenthillbilly2001@yahoo.com

Subject: ThIs Is WeIrD!

Message: This is a true story. Three years ago an immigrant woman named Mimi received an e-mail from someone she didn’t know. When she opened the e-mail she was electrocuted in the face and died an instant and horrible death. Before her casket was lowered into the ground, someone thought they heard a noise coming from inside. Family members said it sounded like a modem connecting to the internet. When they opened the casket, her body was gone and in its place was a brand new laptop computer equipped with wireless internet still in the box. Convinced it was his wife reincarnated, Mimi’s husband took the laptop home and set it up at the desk where the previous computer had been. It is said that Mimi’s spirit is trapped inside of the laptop and, in order to take her revenge on the world, she connects to other computers and electrocutes the user in the face. The only way to be safe from Mimi is to forward this e-mail to 5 friends within 24 hours of receiving it. Hurry and send this e-mail to the people you love or else you and they will suffer a similar fate! Protect yourself from Mimi, and, oh yeah, if you send this e-mail to 5 friends you will also find your soul mate.

As Martin read the message he felt as if Mimi was watching his every move. He looked at the time. It was 7:00pm, Thursday. He had until the same time Friday night to
find five friends with an e-mail address or else he could never risk sitting at a computer again. This would be a terrible loss considering the fact that he had just purchased the computer and still had not explored any of its possibilities. Martin immediately thought of his new friend Heather and forwarded her the e-mail. He decided that in addition to opening a bank account in the morning, Martin would dedicate the day to finding four more people to warn about the ghost of Mimi.

That night Martin hardly slept. The glow of the screen and low hum from the fan of his new computer, which was set up opposite of his bed, were a constant reminder of the looming threat of electrocution. In the morning Martin didn’t eat his regular Toasty O’s and peanut butter toast, but rather dressed and set out into the city with his sack of money. Three blocks away from his apartment Martin found a First Merit bank, walked in, and sat the sack in front of the teller. “I would like to open a bank account please,” he said. While the teller, with general disinterest, began organizing the necessary paperwork to open an account, Martin noticed his business card complete with e-mail address on the counter. He picked one up and put it into his pocket, which was, he thought, easier than asking for the e-mail address.

After filling out the paperwork and turning the money over to the teller, Martin walked back in the direction of his apartment to the coffee shop just down the street. The people there, he thought, would be friendly enough. Besides, they were always on their computers; someone was bound to have an e-mail address. Martin walked into the Shaky Sheepdog. It was a trendy little place with low lighting and MAC users sitting at several of the tables. Martin surveyed them and concluded that they were, for the most part,
unapproachable. He walked up to the barista, a young blonde woman named Brigitte, and ordered a regular coffee and a biscotti. When she filled the cup and returned, Martin introduced himself and told Brigitte that he was new in town and trying to avoid electrocution. Brigitte laughed and said, “Aren’t we all?” Martin smiled and told her he didn’t want to be forward, but would like to know her e-mail address so he could send her the instructions on how to avoid electrocution. Brigitte wrote her e-mail address on a napkin.

Martin left the Shaky Sheepdog thinking that getting e-mail addresses was much easier than he would have thought. If everyone was as friendly as Brigitte, he’d have the rest of the addresses in no time. Foot traffic on the street was picking up. Martin finished his coffee, ate half of his biscotti, wrapped the other half in a napkin and put it into his pocket. He looked at the people passing and would have been confident enough to start up a conversation except for the fact that everyone was on a cell phone. Though the threat of electrocution was eminent, Martin was still too polite to interrupt a phone conversation. Perhaps, he thought, if he made eye contact and smiled at a passer-by, they would initiate a conversation anyway. But instead everyone walked past him and looked through him as if he weren’t there, or as if they weren’t there. It was as if they were contained in a separate world, one constructed of digital frequencies and musical ringtones. No one noticed Martin standing on the side of the street smiling and eventually waving directly at them with no success.

“I like to think they’re all talking to each other,” said a voice behind him. Martin turned and found a man, long haired, thickly bearded, and shabbily dressed.
“Why will no one talk with me?” Martin asked.

“I’m talking.” The man set down a cardboard sign that read, “The End is Near” and extended a hand with fingerless gloves. “Name’s Tom.” Martin shook his hand.

“They can’t see you, Man. They’re stuck in a digital world. Can’t see or hear anything that doesn’t blink or beep. Can’t even see it coming. Watch.” Tom began following a man dressed in a business suit and talking on a cell phone. Suddenly, Tom ran around the man and, standing face to face, made a phone with his hand and shouted, “Hellooo! Technology has warped your mind, Man! Wake up!” his own spittle falling into his beard. The business man pretended he didn’t see Tom, or didn’t really, and walked around. Tom turned back to Martin. “See?”

“You’re lucky that guy didn’t punch you.”

“Phhhh. Yeah right. I’m lucky he didn’t just walk right through me,” Tom said, wiping wetness from his beard. “They’ll tell you I’m crazy, but I’m not the one frying my brains with those freaking mind control devices. They’re all the crazy ones. They walk around all day thinking they’re talking to real people on the other end, I mean, they really believe it. But it’s not a real person they’re talking to. It starts out as a real person, but then they’re dismantled into, like, electrons and shit, electric ghosts of people, and then fired into your brain. You know the sound a cell phone makes when you’re dialing through? That’s the sound of your brains sizzling, Man. In the mean time you’re giving a busy signal to the real people around you. Cell phones, PDA’s, television, computers, they’re not killing ‘em, Man,” Tom pointed to another guy in a business suit, “they’re already dead.”
“Then why are you trying to save them?”

“What? You mean this?” Tom picked up the cardboard sign. The End is Near.

“This isn’t a warning, Man. It’s wishful thinking.”

Martin wasn’t sure how to take the new information, but he was pretty sure Tom wouldn’t have an e-mail address. If what Tom said was true, even forwarding the e-mails couldn’t save him from eventual electrocution to the face. Martin thanked Tom for the insight and offered him the second half of biscotti. Tom swallowed it without chewing before gagging a little and calling it “yuppie feed”.

Disenchanted, Martin started back toward his apartment. Part of him still hoped that he would be able to find more e-mail addresses along the way, but as he walked he only saw in the faces of the passing men and women, zombies, mere shells of souls who avoided eye contact, who went out of their way even to avoid interaction with each other. Martin yearned for his life back in the mountains with his family. He missed the conversation, the slower pace, the quiet. No beeping. No blinking. No hum from the fan of a computer. No threat of electrocution. When he got to the coffee shop, Martin decided to stop. It was past lunchtime now, and though he was too depressed to eat, he thought a cup of coffee might lift his spirits. The MAC users were still there, still only one to a table. Brigitte was still working behind the bar and took his order. “Why so sad?” she asked, sliding a cup of coffee in front of him.

“Turns out it’s harder to make friends in the city than I thought.”

Brigitte smiled, now she knew he was being flirtatious. “Well, it can be hard.
Especially if you do all your talking through e-mail.”

“You’re telling me.” Martin took a sip of the coffee without looking up.

“Plus you got to look in the right places. Tell you what; I’m off in an hour. I can show you around if you want.” Brigitte smiled.

Martin looked up from his cup and for the first time looked into Brigitte’s eyes.

“I’d like that,” he said.

Brigitte and Martin spent the afternoon walking around the city, talking and laughing. Brigitte showed Martin the neighborhood she grew up in and they walked by her old high school. Martin told her about his home, that he was home schooled, and that he couldn’t imagine growing up in a place this big, this fast paced. Brigitte said it wasn’t so bad, as long as you don’t get too caught up in it. They stopped at an outdoor café and ate dinner, then walked to the park and sat on a bench to watch people and make fun of them. By accident, when Martin’s hand brushed against Brigitte’s, the hands somehow came together and neither Martin nor Brigitte objected. Down the sidewalk, Martin saw Tom digging through a trash can. “I feel like we really connected today,” Brigitte said. The time was 7:01 and Martin knew he’d have to get rid of his computer.
I woke up to the smell of whiskey and the sound of my Uncle Dale pissing on the alarm clock next to my bed. “Danny. Danny you awake? Well you’re no fun. Just like a woman. Good for nothin’. If you learn anything from me, learn women are . . . , dere’s no such thing as love, and I love a drink, and don’t ever get married, it ruins pissing . . . I have to piss.”

The alarm clock started to ring, as if crying out for help, but I pretended that I was still sleeping. I’d have to sacrifice the clock. “Horseshit!” Uncle Dale turned, finished peeing on the wall and then tried to silence the alarm clock. “How do ya turn the goddamn thing off? Where’s the goddamn buttons? For Christ’s sake, it sounds like your goddamn Aunt Angie, it never shuts up.”

Aunt Angie left him about eleven years ago soon after my parents died and stuck me with Uncle Dale. He talked about her a lot when he was really tanked. As Uncle Dale fought with the clock, somehow, either because of an electrical short, the alcoholic proof of his piss, or maybe a combination of the two, the alarm clock caught fire. “Horseshit!” Uncle Dale danced around the flames frantically trying to stamp them out. I couldn’t hold it back any longer. I laughed. “Well don’ just sit there an’ laugh, help me!”

I got out of bed on the opposite side, went into the kitchen, and filled a big salad
bowl with water. I laughed all the way back into my bedroom, the water rising up on the sides and spilling a little along the way. When I finally made it back into my room, Uncle Dale’s right pant leg was on fire. “Uncle Dale!” I yelled between bouts of laughter, “Your pants are on fire!” Uncle Dale bolted out of the room and into the bathroom where he turned on the shower and jumped in. I threw the water onto the fire and it sizzled out. The smell of burnt carpet and plastic rose from the ashes and filled the room. Uncle Dale fell asleep lying in the shower, the water running on him and everything. He always said he slept best in the shower, so I tried not to laugh too loud when I finally went in and turned off the water.

People were always saying that Uncle Dale was an unfit guardian, but they never got to see this side of him, the funny side. He was much more serious in public. Once Uncle Dale took me to the grocery store so he could pick up a case of beer. In line he told me I could pick any ten candy bars to take to school for my lunches that week. When we got to the cash register the lady behind the counter (her name was Angie too) saw Uncle Dale’s case of beer and my candy bars and said, “Dale, you’re an alcoholic. You need help.”

Uncle Dale got real serious, like he does in public, and lifted the beer off of the counter. “I can carry it myself. No help from you thankyouverymuch.” Then he reached way down into his pockets, grabbed a fistful of money, threw it on the counter, and stormed off. I gathered my candy bars and caught up to him. We walked everywhere, because the police were crooked in this town and they’d pull Uncle Dale over any chance they’d get.
Uncle Dale wasn’t an unfit guardian; people just didn’t get his sense of humor. He didn’t smoke or do drugs, just drank, and when he did he was never mean or violent, just funny. His lifestyle wasn’t risky, it wasn’t a dangerous environment, so you can imagine my surprise when he was hit by a cigarette truck.

I got the news while I was at school. The school counselor, Mrs. Kennel, interrupted my Reading class and took me into her office. “Daniel,” she said, her painted-on-eyebrows folded inward almost like she was angry, “I know this is hard for you to hear. A couple of hours ago your Uncle Dale was hit by a truck.”

“What? You mean, like, a pick up truck?”

“No.” She paused a little while, probably for effect, “A big cargo truck. A cigarette truck I think.” I burst out in laughter. “Daniel, I know this is hard to understand. He’s in the hospital.”

“I understand,” I told her, calming a little, wiping the tears from my cheeks. “Uncle Dale always said cigarettes could kill.” Mrs. Kennel looked disgusted, or at least her eyebrows did, and she said I should visit her office more often. She’d arrange for me to come in during my lunch hour. “No thanks,” I told her, “lunch hour is when I smoke in the bathroom.” She was not amused. Uncle Dale would have laughed.

It was a long two weeks with Uncle Dale in the hospital and when he came back something was not right, strange, different about him. He cleaned out all of the booze and candy bars in the refrigerator and replaced them with fruits and vegetables. He started
driving everywhere and even got a job at the grocery store. He was acting funny, but not the good funny, so I asked him what was going on. “I’m going sober,” he said. I laughed. Now that’s the Uncle Dale I remembered. “No, seriously Danny. No more booze. The accident scared me sober. I saw God.” I reminded him of the time he was so drunk he thought my Jimi Hendrix poster gave him the finger. He tried to pick a fight with Jimi, but eventually backed down because Jimi was so damn stone cold serious, he needed to lighten up a little.

“This is different,” he said, “I mean I found God.” Then I reminded him about the time he passed out with his pants around his ankles in the nativity scene at the church down the street. He had puked all over the manger and fallen on top of Mary. Did he expect God to just forget about that? “God can be very forgiving,” he said.

Things got worse over the next couple of weeks. Uncle Dale stopped letting me stay up late to watch television and he started making me do my homework. The duplex was cleaner than ever and smelled like real lavender instead of Fabreeze. Uncle Dale said the scent was soothing. He even started cooking dinner and asking me about my day. To make matters worse, Angie from the grocery store started coming by more often until one night she decided to stay and never leave. Then she started taking over and butting into my everyday life. “I saw you talking to that neighbor girl on your way home from the bus stop. Is she your girlfriend?” I rolled my eyes, went into my room, and slammed the door but I could still hear them talking. “Dale, have you had the talk with Danny yet?”

“The talk?”

“You know. The birds and the bees?”
“OH! The talk. No, not yet.”

“He’s getting to be that age you know.”

“Yeah. You’re right. I’ll talk to him.”

There was a pause.

“You know, if you keep putting it off, someday it’ll happen and he won’t know what hit him.”

Another pause.

Uncle Dale knocked on my door and I jumped onto my bed and pretended to read a pamphlet Mrs. Kennel gave me about coping.

“Hey Danny. How’s it going?”

“Fine.”

“What’s reading?”

“Nothing.” I threw the pamphlet onto the floor. “What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. I just wanted to talk.” He never used to say things like that when he was drinking. He’d just talk if he felt like talking. No awkwardness, no censorship, no embarrassed introductions to the idea of talking.

“Well, go ahead and talk,” I said, and he did. He went on to tell me all of the intricate workings of the female body in very formal, sterile language that completely sapped the excitement out of any notions I already had about sex. I had to get things back to normal.

The next morning I slipped whiskey into his coffee. He took a sip and spit it all over the breakfast bar. “Jesus Christ Danny! Whiskey in my coffee?! What the hell are
“Language Dale, please.” Angie said. “Danny, where did you get the whiskey?”

“Found it.”

Uncle Dale poured the coffee into the sink. “I guess I haven’t uncovered all of my old stash yet. It’s okay Danny. I forgive you.” He kissed me on the forehead.

Nothing else worked either, wine in the grape juice, vodka in water bottles, so I started doing research on alcoholism. It turns out most of the information out there is about quitting rather than starting up again. I asked Mrs. Kennel if she had any pamphlets on how to become an alcoholic. She told me I was too young to drink and when I would be old enough she wouldn’t be my counselor any more.

On my way home that day I had all but given up until I opened the door and found Uncle Dale sitting at the dining room table, staring at an opened, but still full, bottle of beer. He didn’t acknowledge my walking in, though I made a pretty good effort to make enough noise so he knew I was there. I pulled up a chair next to him. “Hey. Rough day?” I said, recalling all of the things I’d read about peer pressure and alcohol. “That looks refreshing.”

Uncle Dale blinked as if he’d just been snapped out of hypnosis. “Hey Danny. How was your day at school?” He hadn’t taken a drink yet.

“Same old stuff. Pretty stressful. Boy my mouth is dry. Is it hot in here?”

“Angie left today.” He looked back at the beer.

“Like, for good?” Of course it was good.

“I don’t know. Maybe. We got into an argument about her smoking.”
“You always said smoking could kill.”

Uncle Dale looked back at me. “You’re right.” He grabbed the beer and stood up. “I argued with her because I don’t want her to die.”

“Nobody’s perfect.” I tried to command him with my thoughts, *Just drink the beer.*

“I have to call her.”

“She probably doesn’t want to talk to you.” *Drink the beer!*

Uncle Dale lifted the bottle higher, as if toasting the entire world from our dining room, “I LOVE HER!” He rushed to the sink and emptied the bottle, threw it into the trash, and dialed her cell phone.

Two months later Uncle Dale and Grocery Angie were married. There was talk of a baby in March. I’d pretty much given up trying to get Uncle Dale to drink again, though for Christmas that year I bought him a real fancy corkscrew with my savings. I figured it couldn't hurt trying. Otherwise I directed my efforts elsewhere, like toward Grocery Angie’s smoking habits. She quit smoking cold turkey when she found out about the baby and I suffered for it. She started getting really edgy and twice as bossy. Mrs. Kennel said Angie might have been going through withdrawal, but was probably just being emotional because of the pregnancy. She gave me a pamphlet, “So You’re Gonna Be a Big Brother.” I decided to bet on withdrawal so I took Angie’s coat with me to school and smoked an entire pack in the bathroom, exhaling each time onto the coat.

The time leading up to the birth of my cousin was pure torture. Danny, don't be so
loud, Angie's pregnant. Danny, let Angie have the last slice of pizza, she's pregnant. It was even more torture when they'd talk about the thing like it was already born. Don't leave your skateboard right outside our bedroom door, do you want me to fall and hurt the baby? Stop putting liquor in the drinks, it'll hurt the baby. On top of all that, early on in the mornings I woke to Angie vomiting in the bathroom. Every once in a while I was nostalgic about the times it was Uncle Dale, retching the previous night's doings. Things were better when it was him. He would always shout the funniest things between heaves. "I don't remember eating that," or "That was stomach lining, I swear!" Back then Uncle Dale would follow it with the "hair of the dog," but the reality was, now it was Angie and she just whined and moaned.

To make matters worse, Mrs. Kennel made me come to her office during lunch period every other school day. She said the principal, Mr. Huron, thought it might do us both some good. Most of the time we just sat and looked at each other. Sometimes I tried to make conversation, "How might I grow a mustache like yours Mrs. Kennel?" She handed me a pamphlet on puberty. "How does one acquire such a large collection of pamphlets Mrs. Kennel?" She handed me a pamphlet on career planning.

On the day my cousin was born Mrs. Kennel called me into her office early. She said there were complications with the pregnancy. I asked her what was so complicated. To me the whole thing seemed simple enough. "Danny," she said, "can you never be serious? This is a very serious thing." I don't know why everything was so serious with this lady. She must have had a rough childhood, which would explain a lot now that I think about it.
After school Uncle Dale picked me up in the new SUV. When I asked him what he expected to do when the crooked police showed up, he said it was a good "family oriented" vehicle and they'd respect that fact. On the way to the hospital Uncle Dale said we might have to spend the night there, so he packed some clothes and a toothbrush for me. No books or things to entertain me, of course nothing like that. I asked him what I suppose to do with a toothbrush to which he replied, "What do you think you do with a toothbrush?"

Luckily for me there was more entertainment in the hospital than I would have expected. At first I tried to get Uncle Dale to go exploring with me. I reminded him of the times he went into the hospital for detox and how much fun we had then. Once Uncle Dale downed a flask the nurses missed in his personals and tried to escape, his bare ass hanging out of that robe, and walked right into a room full of old lady nurses. You should have seen their mouths drop. But that wasn't the best part. Back then you could always count on Uncle Dale for the perfect punch line, spot on and brilliant comedic timing. So with these old bitty nurses gaping at him in his bare ass robe, straight faced and serious as hell, Uncle Dale said, "What, may I ask, are you ladies doing in my kitchen?" Oh man, did we have a laugh after that one! I might have peed a little.

For some reason though, Uncle Dale didn't remember that particular occasion as I did and just looked at me real mean and told me to get serious, my thoughts should be with Angie. I figured the new Uncle Dale would just be a buzz kill anyway, so I told him I was going to go sulk somewhere else. That kind of thing would never fly with the old Uncle Dale. The word sulk was never even part of his vocabulary, unless of course he
was slurring his words and meant to say something else. The old Uncle Dale would have known the truth, I was looking for some entertainment.

I found it in an old woman named Mrs. Lattemer. The lady was in for an angioplasty in her leg. Her doctor told her it was routine surgery now, that she'd be on her feet before she knew it, but he must have only just met this lady because she was not what you might call a routine patient. When I wandered in front of her room she said, "Well, well. I almost forgot I had a grandson! Get in here Billy, you rouge!" So, naturally, I decided to walk in. I sat down next to her bed and she held onto my hand. "Finally I have some support here. These idiots have no idea what they're doing." From that moment I knew this lady was going to be funny.

Just then a nurse walked in with the old woman's supper. She lifted the hard plastic cover to reveal plain mashed potatoes, a slice of dry bread, and Jell-O. "What the hell is this?"

"This is your dinner Ma'm. The doctor says you should be on a bland diet."

The old woman pushed the cart away in disgust. "I'll check myself right out of here unless I get some real food. This is what I ate during the depression!" It was hard to keep a straight face. "I mean it you tartlet!"

Trust me. I wanted to lose it right then, I almost did, but the nurse looked at me like I could give some sort of explanation. I just shrugged my shoulders. "She seems pretty serious lady." The nurse said she'd talk with the doctor, took the food, and left. Finally I let out a little chuckle.

"You have to be tough. That's how things get done." The old woman smiled. She
knew what she was doing. "It's been so long Billy. How's school going?"

"I'm getting straight A's," I told her. I figured I owed the kid since I was borrowing his grandmother. She seemed pleased enough, but couldn't keep her orneriness satisfied.

"That's good. Can't be too difficult by today's public school standards." I didn't see that one coming and I let out a little laugh. "Ha!" she shouted, "you think it's funny do ya? Why, even the president of the United States is an idiot! What kind of standard is that?" I had no idea what she was talking about, but I was wonderfully amused by her enthusiasm. She was just a little old woman, maybe five feet standing, but when she raised her voice, she was a seven foot, two hundred pound gorilla.

The doctor came in and she sat up straight. I imagined her putting her fists out like an old time boxer. “The nurse tells me you won’t eat the dinner we sent you.”

“Damn right! That little whore brought me depression food.”

“Mrs. Lattemer, you-”

“Don’t Mrs. Lattemer me!”

The doctor shook his head and exhaled audibly. He turned and looked at me.

“Who’s this?” he asked.

“That’s my grandson Billy, and he’s smarter n’ you.” The doctor looked at me carefully.

I knew Mrs. Lattemer and I looked different and all, but I didn’t think it was that obvious. Nonetheless, I thought I’d play it safe. “Thanks Gram,” I said.

The doctor still eyed me as he spoke. “We’ll try to get you something you like
Mrs. Lattemer.” After he walked out I saw him talking to a different nurse. They both looked in the room and the doctor pointed at me. The nurse nodded and I knew the jig was up. He probably thought I was instigating her. I thanked Mrs. Lattemer and moved in to kiss her on the cheek. As I did, she turned and the crumbs of something around her lips, crackers or cake or something she must have had stashed somewhere, got into my mouth. I spat and she called me an ungrateful punk. I would have laughed, but the nurse was making her way into the room. I juked to the left and slipped past her, but she didn’t pursue.

When I finally made my way back to Angie’s room, Uncle Dale was sitting next to her and holding something in his arms. When they saw me, they both had a look of relief and were glad to see me. “Where have you been? We have the whole hospital staff looking for you Danny. You really had us worried. Come here, come here. Meet your brand new baby girl cousin.” Apparently both Angie and the baby made it through the complications. I moved closer and saw the ugly pink thing in Uncle Dale’s hands. It looked a little like Mrs. Lattemer, only with a sadly shaped head.


Angie was quick to change the subject. “Your uncle and I have been talking. We think that maybe it would make us a closer family if you have a part in naming her.” The prospect of naming the frog made me smile. This was a once in a lifetime chance for a renewable source of comedy. I told them I’d like to think about it for a while, you know, consider my options, but I was leaning towards Sassafras. Sassy for short. They
looked more confused than pleased about the name, but I feel like I owe it to Mrs. Lattemer. As for the baby, whatever we name it, I’m looking forward to having a cousin that looks up to me. Who knows, maybe I’ll get lucky and the kid will be a heavy-drinking chain-smoking comedian.
CHAPTER XI
MOTHER NATURE’S CHILDREN

About seven miles into North Country Trail, I encountered a fellow hiker headed in the opposite direction. The man’s name escapes me now, but had I known the events that would follow, I would have made a point to remember it. The man was in good enough shape, but older than you would expect to see alone in the woods. I thought it strange that he didn’t carry a pack, considering he was headed back from the trail quite far from any civilized establishment, though he did have a rifle slung around his back. When I stopped to ask him the condition of the trail he seemed strangely skittish. Perhaps my memory has blended this in since, but I do remember his eyes were cloudy, a milky mix of blue and cataracts. I noticed an unsightly scar under his right eye and a peculiar tear from the neck of his shirt that wrapped around his left side. Still, anxious to get the most miles for my day, I put it out of my mind.

“Hey there,” I said. “How’s the trail look? Many hikers?”

He stopped a long time to think and it was then, I’m sure, when I began to feel uncomfortable. “Trail’s fine. Saw one group of kids setting up camp about four miles back. Heard the weather’s going to be nasty, though. Maybe you should turn back and give it a couple of days.”
The weather report in the local newspaper showed five solid days of good weather. “I’m pretty well equipped for the weather,” I replied. “Plus I have a time schedule to keep. Got a pickup waiting at the other end. Back to the grind in a couple weeks. You know how it is. Got to fit it in while you can, rain or shine.”

He thought long about this too. “These woods ain’t nothing to take lightly when nature gets angry. Can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Thank you for the warning, friend. I’ve encountered my share of Mother Nature’s wrath. She and I have an understanding, I think.”

The man stood there silent. For a moment, I thought he’d fallen asleep. Suddenly he spoke. “It’s not Mother I’d worry about,” he said making, if possible from beneath the cloud, sustained and menacing eye contact, “it’s her children.”

I smiled and shook his hand. “We are all her children,” I said. I thanked him again, wished him safe travel, and we parted ways.

After speaking with the old man I quickened my pace with the intention of putting at least twelve miles on the first day. I hoped to surpass the group the man spoke of before setting up camp, for I knew their sort. The early sections of the trail, particularly in this part of the forest, are popular with young men and women in search of an obscure place where they can freely drink alcohol and partake in other illegal substances without the risk of running into authority. Rain or shine for them too. Once a boy told me, “If you can’t stay dry, stay high.” It’s not that these youths are ever dangerous; it’s just that they
can get loud at night and be heard for a mile through the ravine, and it was solitude that I was after.

In my hurry and deep contemplation of the beauty of my surroundings, the misty grays of boulders and browns and greens of pines in the primitive forest, I didn’t realize that I had wandered off of the trail until the path I was following came to a dead end of creeping cinnamon ferns. I checked for my compass to get my bearings only to find that I had either dropped it or forgot to pack it. Both seemed unlikely, considering it is a very important piece of equipment on the trail. Frustrated, I decided to attempt to retrace my steps and hopefully rejoin the correct trail, but when I turned around it appeared I lost the trail entirely. With dusk closing in and against proper deep woods procedure, I chose to navigate by my own sense of direction. I must have put on a few miles and became even more so disoriented than before. I made up my mind to set up camp in the next clearing and to get better bearing by the stars, mark the north and south before going to bed, and use the sun as my guide in the morning.

Luckily enough, there was an unusually brilliant full moon rising early and shining down so brightly through the treetops that getting out my headlamp was unnecessary. As I came near a clearing I made out the silhouette of a tent, but no fire. I approached with caution so as not to startle the owners, since Pennsylvania’s firearm laws allow for weapons on the trail. I suspected that this was probably the group the old man told me about, and found validation in the empty Budweiser cans and Doritos wrappers strewn about the site.
Normally, as proper etiquette proclaims, I would have called out to the campers before getting too close, but something about the site seemed unusual. As I came closer I realized that the site was in shambles. Four backpacks were scattered around and the tent had been torn from the side. I crept closer to inspect the tear. It looked as if it had been shredded, perhaps by the claws of a native black bear or possibly the antlers of a deer. However, there was no trace—well, besides the trash—of people. I concluded that the site had been abandoned and the wildlife tore it apart in search of food.

It was so eerily quiet that I was startled when I heard the cashhh sound of an opening can. I whirled around and saw, sitting against a tree facing in the opposite direction, a silhouette of a man, with his arm on a case of Budweiser. Relieved, I called to him. “Forgive me,” I said, “I didn’t see you sitting there.” My voice surprised the shadow and it stood quickly rising to roughly seven feet tall, but not before effortlessly hoisting the case of beer onto its shoulder. I stumbled backward a little and we two froze. “I’m not here to take your things,” I said, my voice shaky with fear. There was no answer. “I’m more of a hard liquor guy, myself.”

Neither of us moved for a while. “Where did you come from?” he said in a deep glottal voice, putting me a little at ease. It at least sounded like a man.

“I lost my way on the NCT and stumbled onto your site. I’ll be on my way, if you would be so kind as to point me in the right direction.”

The shadow relaxed and set down the case. “Well, you’ve seen me now,” it said, “You must be an exceptional dude. I didn’t hear you come in. It’s late, man. Camp here with me and have a king of beers.”
It occurred to me then that I was exhausted and hadn’t stopped to eat all day, but I
didn’t want to intrude. “Thank you, friend, but I’m sure you, as I, have come to this place
for solitude. I wouldn’t want to impose. Now, if you would just show me…”

“Dude, don’t be silly. Solitude is all I’ve known. Please, it’s no big deal. It’s cool.
I could use the company. Here.” He reached into the case and tossed me a beer. I lost
sight of it in the moonlight and it hit me in the jaw. I yelped, but stifled anything more.
“My bad,” he said, “I forgot your night vision is wack.”

“No no, it’s my fault,” I said, picking up the beer. I tapped the seal and opened it,
slowly walking toward the shadow. “I didn’t expect you to throw it.” I took a drink from
the can and looked up. The shadow stepped toward me into the moonlight and I was
instantly stricken with fear.

The enormous creature was completely naked, and, despite what I had been
foolish enough to assume, was in fact male, but not a man. I dropped the beer and wanted
to run, but I was so frightened by its hairy form and exaggerated features that I was
frozen there before it. “Whoa, chill out man,” it said, “I’m cool. I’m not going to hurt
you.”

“You’re a… you’re a…”

“Bigfoot. Yeah. I don’t like that term though. I find it derogatory. I mean, my feet
aren’t that big. ‘Sasquatch’ is cool.” Sure enough, his feet were actually small for his
frame, forever putting to rest the foot/genitalia myth, at least for the Sasquatch species.
As I said, he was freakishly tall and hairy, but not the kind of hairy you’d expect from a
Sasquatch. He didn’t look anything like the hoaxes would have you believe. In fact, he
looked more like a man than an ape. Albeit a hairy man, one of Eastern European dissent may be, and not thick and clunky as in the videos, but thin and agile, much more so than any professional basketball player of his stature.

“I’ve been chilling in these woods my entire life and dudes have come to hunt me. They are so stupid when it comes to the natural world it was easy to avoid them. I know your people have been looking for me for a long time. I know you probably have tons of questions. Please, stay with me. I am as harmless as you. I see you’re not packing heat. You are a cool man. Stay. We’ll catch a buzz and rap.”

“What about the kids who all of this equipment belongs to? How do I know you didn’t hurt them?”

“Come on man. Don’t hate. They saw me and split. I just wanted to hang.” He held up another beer. “Sides, think about it. I’m a freaking Sasquatch.” He tossed another beer to me and this time I caught it. Sasquatch crushed the can with his hand and retrieved another.

Though I’d never heard of anyone actually dying from Sasquatch attack, I took his word for it. Who wouldn’t? The logic was sound enough. I opened the beer and took a long drink. “Come, chill with me.” Sasquatch motioned with his arm and started into the woods with the beer. I remained for a moment, finished the beer in a couple of gulps, and followed him through heavy undergrowth, the sort I hadn’t seen yet the entire trip, to the top of a boulder in a rare clearing near the creek. “Not many people bother to look for this pad,” he said, sprawling out on top of the mossy rock. “Check it out.”
I looked up at the sky and millions upon millions of stars had appeared. It was strikingly beautiful and I felt a sudden sense of insignificance, but contentment as well. Sasquatch handed me another beer and I sat down next to him, not too close, for I was still a little unsure. From my seat I could smell him, and I distinctly remember the fragrance of that of a new car. The full moon allowed me to see him clearly. The hair covering his body reminded me of my father’s chest. It was patchy and mangy in places and I imagined what he would look like in human clothes. His hair would, like my father’s, probably tuft out of the collar of a t-shirt and show up in odd places around the house. His face looked no more primitive than a Neanderthal, with deep set eyes, a boxed jaw, and a surprisingly well kept beard. I decided that waxed, he would look almost human except he had no nipples or belly button as far as I could tell. Plus he was extremely tall, of course.

We began to talk and Sasquatch told me a brief family history, that his kind had been around for as long as humans had, but were a more peaceful and solitary race. He said there were very few of his kind, which made breeding a difficult endeavor and his life a lonely one. To avoid inbreeding, he was required to travel hundreds of miles every few years to see “this chick” he’d been “banging,” but since human urban sprawl limited his territory, his species was dwindling. Sasquatch also told me that he learned to speak English by watching and listening to the youths who come into the forest and party loudly at night, which explained the strange dialect and awkward slang he spoke.

In turn I told Sasquatch my family history, that I descended from immigrants to this country, and my father worked in a dry kiln. I told him that I moved to a city to find a
better life and instead found that I needed to come to the forest as often as possible to try to find some sort of balance. He laughed and said he’d been to a city once, though I’m not sure how big of one, or which one for that matter. He told me he modified some “duds” he found in a pack but was unable to find a pair of “kicks” that would fit because, though his feet were small for his frame, they were still rather large. He said that whenever he went into a building, they made him leave because of his bare feet. Then he looked down at the feet with disgust.

He told me that by nature his kind is shy. They prefer not to be known. But this Sasquatch was different. He yearned for more of a connection, for companionship. Once he confided this in his “baby momma” and it scared her. She said that he must have human blood in him. This was a terrible insult, he explained, because his kind view humans as wasteful, stupid, and violent creatures. He said his ancestors witnessed human destruction from the beginning of man, especially that in his home land, where scores of humans killed scores of their own kind. When they weren’t killing their own kind, they were killing something else, their very livelihood, their homes, killing themselves.

Despite his negative experiences in the city, and the human destruction and desecration of his home, Sasquatch believed humans should be judged on a human-to-human basis. He was a radical among them, a free thinker. Sasquatch felt that his kind had a lot to teach Man. He felt that, given the opportunity to communicate, the Sasquatch kind and mankind could coexist peacefully and be respectful to each other’s ways.

Sasquatch voiced this opinion at a family reunion that occurs every ten years in Lebanon, Kansas, the exact geographical center of the country. His own father, who, if I
interpreted it correctly, is actually the Chief of his clan, told him in front of everyone that, “As it is our nature to live free, peacefully and alone, it is man’s nature to consume one another and everything around him. Go Son, and tell man of your vision. He will murder you, and in doing so will murder all of us as well.”

“Have you considered talking with your father in private?” I asked.

“Nah. Dude is too uptight. A real downer.”

“I had a similar conflict with my father. He wanted me to work at the kiln. I wanted to go to college.”

“Yeah?”

“We talked a lot about it. I was eventually able to convince him.”

“You’re lucky, man. There’s no talking to this old bird.”

We sat silent for a moment but kept drinking heavily. Sasquatch claimed that he was proof that his father was wrong. If it was his nature to live alone, then why did he desire companionship and harmony so fanatically? Weren’t the Sasquatch kind, with their present course of standing by silently, already allowing themselves to be “one-eight-sevened”? But he kept those thoughts to himself. Had he not been his father’s son, he might already have been excommunicated from the group. He was lucky to find a mate after that.

Anyway, Sasquatch was hurt deeply by his mate’s offense and did not go to meet her on their decided rendezvous time, which was supposed to be that very night. Sasquatch sat up abruptly and said “I got to piss.”

“Yeah, me too.”
We both stood up and urinated into the creek. Sasquatch’s stream sounded like he was pouring out a bucket.

“You know Sas,” I said over the sound, “may I offer you a little relationship advice?” “Sock it to me.”

“Sometimes, well, in my experience, all a woman needs is a little genuine attention. Let her know you care about her.”

“For real?”

“Sure. She probably just wants attention.”

“Yo,” Sasquatch said, “I’d rather have met you, bro. Conversating with you’ll probably do more for my kind than burying the baby leg with that skank.” I began to think that Sasquatch was right. I thought maybe we could co-exist, and maybe it was true that I could be the one to convince the rest of the human race.

Then again, maybe it was the beer. We’d nearly finished the case and the only words my mouth could form were a disappointing, “I love you, man.”

Not far in the distance I heard the report of a rifle and quickly following it something whirring past my head and ricocheting off of the rock at our feet. “Shit!” Sasquatch howled. Another shot, and then another. “Quick!” Sasquatch was already moving. I crouched down, my head swimming in beer. “Get on my back. You’ll never outrun him alone.” Before I could consider my options, Sasquatch flung me over his shoulder like a sack of flour and was off in a dead sprint. Another shot rang out, and another, but the sound was already much further away. Maybe it was the alcohol, but it felt like he ran for twenty minutes before his breathing became heavy and another ten
before his strength gave out and his legs buckled. We tumbled into a dip in the earth and I
was flung through the brush onto my back in a bed of ferns.

I pulled myself up and frantically searched for Sasquatch. I felt my pockets for a
flashlight and fumbled with it, finally turning it on and shining it on the shadowy ground
all around me. I whispered his name for fear that the shooter would hear me. I soon found
myself in the dip where we collapsed and still, no sign of him. I heard rustling behind me
and spun around aiming the light in the direction and found the barrel of the rifle
brandished by the old man from earlier aimed at my head.

“Jesus, son, I almost blew you to pieces,” the old man said. “Did I get him? Son
of a bitch. Did I hit that sucker? That’s Bigfoot. Been hunting him all my life. Said I was
crazy. Goddamnit, I was this close. You really slowed him down. I could have swore I hit
that mean old thing. Did you see which way he went? Well, speak up, boy.”

“Sasquatch.”


“Sasquatch. He’s sensitive about the size of his feet.”

him.” He shouted into the forest. “I got you now you hairy devil.”

“You hit him?”

“Look, blood right here. It ain’t you is it?”

I felt my body for bullet holes. “No. Not me.”

“Good. Lucky I didn’t brain you. You two was close. You ain’t lovers now are
you? Haha. I’m going to be rich! We’re going to be rich. I’ll split the spoils.
twenty/eighty. Eighty for me. I mean, I shot him, but you distracted him. That’s worth something. Come on now. Bring that light over here and we’ll follow this blood trail.”

Sasquatch’s father was right. My human nature took hold of me and my blood ran hot with anger. This Sasquatch was a conscious objector to all of the hate and prejudice in the world. He was the new voice of harmony, of co-existence. The voice that could end all of that for man and Sasquatch kind. My hands shook and my vision went red. As the old man scoured the earth for Sasquatch’s blood, I snuck up behind him, took him by surprise and grabbed him. The old man dropped his rifle and we struggled with each other, but I was much stronger than he and ended up pinning him to the ground with my hands around his throat. As what I thought was his attempt at breath came from his lips the old man stopped struggling, pointed, and mouthed the word, “Bigfoot.”

I loosened my grip, turned, and saw Sasquatch towering over us. “Man,” he said, “you’re really bumming me out.” Sasquatch turned and walked, dejected, into the forest.

I let go of the old man and called after Sasquatch, but had already disappeared into the undergrowth. “Sasquatch. Sasquatch. No, wait. I’m sorry. I thought he killed you!”

The old man got up and searched for his rifle. “You fool. Are you out of your gourd? We almost had him. We were rich!”

I fell back onto a pine and sunk to the ground.

“We could have been famous. Son of a bitch. Why would you do such a harebrained thing?”
I looked up at the old man and realized it was I who ruined our species’ chance at peace. The old man was still waiting for an answer.

I replied, “We are all Mother Nature’s children.”
CHAPTER XII
CAUSE FOR ALARM

It was hot ten hour day of working on the battery at the coke plant, shoveling coal into a blast furnace. Tom took off his boots in the doorway and addressed his wife. Ana was cooking dinner. “Ana, did they bring back my alarm clock?”

“No, darling. I’m sorry. They didn’t.”

Tom could barely hear his wife’s reply over the music coming from the apartment above theirs on the second level of the duplex.

“I have to go back to work tonight.”

Ana turned around to look at her husband, a hulking, dirty creature standing there beaten, backlit by the setting summer sun, despondent, chained and exploited. “Oh?” she said, turning around to continue cooking, spaghetti, for the third night in a row.

“Beckham called off. Had to take his grandson to Boston. The foreman gave me three hours so I could take time to sleep.” Tom put his boots back on.

Turning around again Ana asked, “Where are you going?”

“Ana, I’m tired. I’m going to need my Goddamn alarm clock.” Tom laced up his coal darkened steel-toed boots, closed the door behind him, and climbed the stairs to the upstairs apartment.
The renters above Tom and Ana were known dealers, the biggest movers in Westlawn, a part of Warren the police just forgot about. When one of the men came downstairs and asked to borrow an alarm clock a week ago, Tom was at work and Ana was home alone. “Please bring it back when you’re done,” she said, “My husband works a lot.”

Tom knocked on the door and nobody answered, but he could hear the music and people talking inside. He knocked again, this time much harder and the door creaked open. Tom pushed the door aside with a heavy concrete hand, coal dust outlining the cracks and fingernails. As the door opened, the smell of marijuana fanned out. Tom saw four men. Two of them sat at a table in the back surrounded by blocks of marijuana and cocaine. One man lay comatose across a recliner in the front room and another, sitting on a white leather couch closest to the door, played recklessly with a shotgun.

“Excuse me,” Tom said modestly to nobody in particular. One of the men in the back snorted a line off of the table. Tom turned to the man with the shotgun who had begun giggling and looking into the barrel end of the gun. “Excuse me, I came to get my alarm clock.” This made the gunman laugh hysterically.

“Hey!” Tom shouted. Still no response. Tom grabbed the gun and fired it into the ceiling. He chambered another round and turned it on the men in the back room. The man in the recliner didn’t move. “I came to get my alarm clock. You borrowed it.”

One of the men at the table stood up, his hands in the air, and walked into a side room. Tom followed him with the sights, but turned the gun back to the other man sitting at the table who put his hands into the air and said, “Hey, don’t freak out man.”
The first man returned with the alarm clock and, rather than hand it to Tom, tossed it casually to him. Keeping the shotgun sighted with his right hand, Tom caught the clock in his left. “Thank you.” Tom pointed the barrel of the gun at the ceiling. “I’m going to borrow this.”

When he returned to the apartment, Ana was cleaning spaghetti off of the floor. “What was that?” she asked.

“What happened to dinner?”

“I dropped it. I was scared. What was that?”

Tom readied the shotgun. He had had enough.
I was alone in Birmingham, Alabama on business and decided to go for a walk at about noon to get out of the hotel. It was a nice day, and I’d never been to Birmingham before. I decided to get on the bus and see how far a quarter would take me. Twenty minutes later I asked the driver to stop and let me off at a convenience store and she did. She said a bus would be by in about thirty minutes.

It didn’t take me long to get the things I wanted. Cigarettes and beef jerky. I sat down and ate the beef jerky then smoked a cigarette. There was a bar and grill, Barbeque something or other, right by the bus stop. I figured I could have a beer and watch for the bus. I ordered a microbrew and got to talking to the guy next to me. He was complaining about the economy. We laughed and I finished my beer quickly. I ordered another and the man next to me bought me a shot of whiskey. I had to pay him back, so I bought the next round. I’m sure we had more. . .

…I woke up in my hotel room naked and covered in vomit. It was 8:00pm frantically searched for my pants and found my wallet empty. The phone rang. It was a friend of mine. He asked if I remembered anything from that day. I said no and he began to tell me what happened. After leaving the bar with the Alabaman, my friend, Greg,
called me from Ohio on my cell phone. This was how he knew what happened. He said he was on the phone the whole time, but I kept hanging up, so he kept calling back.

Turns out I was going to go home with the Alabaman and Greg talked me out of it. Instead, I started walking, who knows where, and I ran into a bum. I commented on his Santa hat. I told him I was buying the next round and asked him what he was drinking. He said whatever I chose would be fine. We walked into the convenience store and over the phone Greg heard something get knocked over and another voice asking me if I was ok. “More than OK,” I said, “I need to buy this man some Irish whiskey!” Then I hung up.

Greg called again and the bum was thanking me greatly and asking me where I needed to be. Apparently I knew I needed to get to the Sheraton and the bum knew how to get there. He put me on a bus and gave all of his change, so Greg says, to the bus driver so she would make sure I didn’t go anywhere but the Sheraton. I hung up again. Greg called back and I was pulling the string to stop the bus and the driver was cursing at me. She wouldn’t let me off. When we got to the Sheraton I bummed a cigarette off of a stranger and then hung up on Greg. When he called back I answered but he couldn’t understand me. He could only hear the hotel security asking how I managed to vomit on the ceiling. They let me in to the room.

When I got home I passed a bum downtown holding a sign that said “Lost.” I pulled over and asked him where he was going. He said south. I gave him thirty-two dollars and dropped him off at the bus station. I felt pretty good about it and thought about going to the bar for a couple of drinks, but decided to go home instead.
“Has it always looked like that?”

“I don’t know, I guess,” I said, inspecting the mole on the inside of my right arm opposite my elbow along with Doctor Mustafa.

“I mean, has it changed color?”

“I don’t know,” I thought hard to remember what color it was earlier that day.

“Perhaps?”

“Hmm,” Dr. Mustafa said, furrowing his fanned calico eyebrows. “Well, we’d better be safe about it. We should take it off and get a look at it in the lab.”

“You think so?” Surely his eyebrows looked more cancerous than my mole. But, what the hell, I never really liked the thing.

“Yep. We can do it real quick. Today. It’ll take a couple of stitches though.”

“Okay.” So he cut it off right there. Used a dull scalpel too. He kept using a sawing motion and every once in a while he’d cuss under his breath. It didn’t hurt though. He gave me a pretty strong sedative.

After a few weeks, when the office didn’t call me, I went back to have the stitches removed and there was a foreclosure sign on the door. I peered in the window and everything was gone. The fake leather waiting room chairs, the old coffee table with
gnawed up corners (who was chewing on that anyway?). Even the three year old *Highlights* magazine I’d finished all of the puzzles in, all of it, gone. I later read in the paper that Dr. Mustafa wasn’t really a doctor, and his name wasn’t Mustafa. He was Christopher Hatch, an ex-realtor from Atlanta who, apparently, had been performing biopsies on his patients in order to add to his collection of moles he kept in a big jar filled with pickle juice. Turns out he’d been doing it for quite a while. The article said police weren’t sure what he did with those moles, but they hinted at the idea that he sprinkled them on his oatmeal. At first, I was more shocked than upset. After all, it was a pretty impressive operation. He had nurses and everything. But then, looking at the big picture of the jar full of moles on the front page, then looking at the stitches on my forearm, dry but oozing a little, I started to miss the mole.

When the infection became more unsightly than the mole itself, I decided to remove the stitches on my own rather than risk dealing with another phony doctor. I sterilized a pair of scissors and tweezers with a quarter pint of Galens 151 vodka, then drank some. I slid the scissors underneath the center of the stitch, scraping against the chapped edges of the wound. Being right handed, I had to do this with my left and poked the scab several times by accident. I tugged at a wire stitch and it pulled on my skin like a thick, deep rooted hair. The liquor was starting to make me tired. I tugged on the stitch again, this time with the intention of tearing it from my arm, and I did just that. It broke free, but brought with it a piece of crusted flesh, the size of a bite of seared steak. The wound started to bleed and I began to feel dizzy. I swatted at what I thought were small
flies or moles with wings in front of my eyes, splattering the dark red, almost brown blood all over my white t-shirt.

The scattered spots of blood looked like tiny moles on my chest. I imagined my mole, swimming around in pickle juice, or sprinkled on top of oatmeal. I felt dizzy again, but this time because of guilt for never having liked the mole. I wiped the spots into the cloth of my shirt, smearing in the blood. I considered throwing up, took a drink of vodka instead, squinted to avoid the flies, and passed out.
CHAPTER XV
THE O-PRESS

Being always the entrepreneur, President Jeb Bush, who’d received the office as an early Christmas gift from his father, implemented his “surveillance as, for entertainment” program (SAFE) before the end of his first term. With revenue generated by fines for DWFs, Driving While Full’s, Poppa J, as he liked to be called, funded the installation of millions of surveillance cameras on nearly every street corner in the nation. The cameras were linked to live feeds on a national cable network “Real United States Entertainment,” (RUSE) and citizens were able to watch themselves, friends, and neighbors in real time video and audio on their home televisions.

Before long the cameras were self sustaining, profitable even, through subscription fees and advertising revenue as marketers began buying up public park benches and blocks of sidewalk to paint their logos. Because of FCC laws, even more revenue was generated by fines for indecent behavior on television. These included not only acts of sex and violence but also foul or suggestive language and flatulence.

Traditional crime rates, however, plummeted. Men who held stock in technology and surveillance equipment almost got rich, but the company OICU Surveillance, a subsidiary of Halliburton, received an exclusive bid for the project. The next step in the program required cameras in home televisions so viewers could watch themselves
watching themselves. This, like the other steps in the program, only resulted in profit, created thousands of jobs, and nearly quadrupled FCC fine revenue. Famous people, the ones who got the best Neilson ratings, began selling the interiors of their homes to advertisers.

The benefits of SAFE were three fold. One, the program kept the terrorists and petty thieves off of American street corners and out of their homes. Two, it greatly stimulated the economy. And three, it satiated voyeuristic American eyes and bloated them with mindless entertainment.

Because programming was for the most part regional, that is, besides the more popular homes and major cities, RUSE aired a nightly news show dedicated specifically to covering the day’s and previous night’s biggest surveillance events, the Omniscient Press. Thomas McTigue was the premier news anchor at O-Press, not to be confused with “Oprah’s”, the twenty four hour surveillance footage of Oprah Winfrey’s home. Since he could remember, Thomas wanted to be the best news reporter and had been with the press since its inception. He’d broke the biggest stories, like when Brittany Spears overdosed on Ben and Jerry’s in her living room, or when drunken senior Mel Gibson urinated on a plant in his bedroom.

Thomas did not watch television other than the clips his production team set up for the show, so he did not have a television in his home. He lived several miles away from any street corners. When he went home from work, Thomas was at least that far from any cameras. In the evenings he read books by Lewis, Orwell, Bradbury and
Vonnegut. Before going to bed each night, Thomas went outside, dropped his pants and mooned the cityscape in the distance.

At social events, people who knew Thomas avoided him. Whenever someone would ask him about something happening on television, like what that wacky Anne Coulter or Paris Hilton was up to, he’d ask if they had any idea about the poverty, war, and genocide going on in the world around them. No one could understand how someone who got to watch RUSE for a living could be such a downer. Maybe, they thought, he worked too hard.

When in his tenth year of broadcast, the middle of Poppa J’s third term, Thomas told a colleague that he would someday forget the script and tell the nation what he really thought of the infringement on personal privacy. This concerned the colleague and he informed the network’s CEO. The next day when Thomas showed up for work, the show’s producer told him he’d been replaced. Another man was sitting in the broadcast chair and Thomas watched in horror as he was announced to be the headlining story.

“Our top story for tonight, sadly, comes from one of our own,” the replacement said. “Beloved anchorman of the O-Press, Thomas McTigue, was caught on video exposing his bare backside to the entire nation on several occasions.” As the replacement spoke, a montage of hundreds of blurred behinds played. “FCC officials say the offence is on record every day dating back at least six years. The offence somehow slipped passed without notice until a government archivist came across one instance and cross referenced the time and place.” Thomas backed away in awe as the replacement
continued. “Authorities plan to arrest McTigue on charges of premeditated broadcast indecency and gross sexual imposition.”

Thomas looked around at his former colleagues for some sort of understanding. They all looked away. “In other news, Poppa J announced today the airing of a new high definition satellite camera capable of catching any outdoor activity in these United States, finally proving the sky’s the limit for our entertainment.”

Thomas bolted down the stairs of the studio and the program switched to live breaking news as he stumbled through the building’s fire exit. Policemen were waiting outside and tasered Thomas to the ground. They handcuffed him and threw him into the back of a police cruiser. Thomas sobbed openly and America watched in guilty delight. The ratings for the OPress were never higher.
CHAPTER XVI
THE REAL QUESTIONS FACING TODAY’S CANDIDATES

It is cold outside, the winter has arrived early and Franklin Hall is packed full of the town’s residents. They are conservatively and casually dressed, no one, except two political candidates dressed in suits, in anything more formal than blue jeans. Entire families are present, including a couple of fussy babies who from time to time interrupt the proceedings with disagreement.

The meeting room is spare, except for an American Flag hung on the wall in the back. At the front of the room on a stage stand three podiums. On the far left, behind the podium is Mark Carlson (D), a 6’1” young looking 45 year old man with well groomed dark brown hair in a brown suit and loosened red tie. Carlson is thin, but well fed.

Behind the podium on the far right is George Wright (R), a 5’8” chubby 59 year old man with a bright red nose and shiny white hair in an expensive blue suit and silk red tie. There is an American Flag pin on his left lapel.

Behind the center podium stands Thomas McTigue III, nicknamed Buster, the mediator. He is the beloved newspaper editor, reporter, and printer of The Franklin Herald, the only newspaper read or delivered by the residents of Franklin, OH. Buster (I), 5’10”, 32 years old, is thin and wiry dressed in blue jeans and a tweed blazer with patches on the elbows. The Herald, like the red bowtie he is wearing, Buster inherited from his
grandfather. The crowd bustles in, finds seats in rowed wooden chairs and talks amongst themselves until the feedback of Buster’s mic silences them.

Buster taps on the mic a few times and begins. “Ladies and Gentlemen, as you all know election day is fast approaching and according to what we’ve all heard on television, this may very well be the closest election in the history of the world. As it turns out, this area will have a big impact on the direction the elections go, so we were fortunate enough to have the candidates join us tonight for a question and answer session.”

Buster raises a hand to his right. “On my right, your left, Democratic Candidate, Mr. Mark Carlson.” Nothing from the crowd. “On my left, your right, Republican Candidate, Mr. George Wright.” Still silence. “Okay, so one at a time please, anyone who has a question raise your hand and we’ll get started.”

A man in the back raises his hand. “Yes sir, there in the back. Mr. Layman I think.”

Mr. Layman stands up in the back. He is a 78 year old man in overalls and a mesh cap. He clears his throat before speaking. “Thank you Buster. How’s your mother?”

“She’s well Mr. Layman, thank you.”

“You heard from Emily?”

“Not since the last time she was in town.”

“Oh, she’s doing well. Still working for a big firm in New York. Dating some artist or something. I keep telling her he’s no good. She needs a real man, you know, someone who works for a living.”
The comment gets a small applause from the crowd.

Buster raises his hand. “That’s good to hear Mr. Layman. Any questions for the candidates?”

“The wha?”

“The candidates, Mr. Carlson or Mr. Wright.”

Mr. Layman replies, “Oh right. Sure,” Then stands silent.

“Mr. Layman?”

“Yes?”

“Question for the candidates?”

“The wha?”

Buster addresses the crowd. “Any other questions? Yes, right there, Ms. Gantz. Have a question for the candidates?”

Gantz, an elaborately dressed 84 year old woman stands slowly. “Hello Buster.”

“Hello Ms. Gantz. Your question?”

“I was watching the news channel last night and the President was on talking about this and that and I just couldn’t listen to him while he’s got that smirk on his face. I’d like to slap the taste out of his mouth.”

Gantz stands waiting for a response.

“That’s not really a question Ms. Gantz.”

“I want to know what these guys are gonna do about it!”

The crowd grumbles in agreement and Gantz sits down.
Buster tries to calm the crowd. “Alright, alright. We’ll start with your response Mr. Carlson.”

Carlson puffs up like a sick, skinny rooster about to crow. “Our President has lead us astray. He’s lead us into war, into economic distress. He’s opened our borders to people who will steal your jobs and your cars and then lower the property values in your neighborhood. He’s preached intolerance and hatred and all along my opponent, Mr. Wright, was holding his hand!”

Wright pipes up, “Now hold on just a minute!”

Buster stops him before the conversation gets out of hand, “Please Mr. Wright, you’ll have your turn.”

Carlson sees the opportunity and gets in his jab, “Mr. Wright is a racist.” Carlson is finished, the crowd grumbles. Buster settles them down.

“Mr. Wright, your response.”

Mr. Wright regains his composure and addresses the crowd. “How many of you go to church?” The crowd grumbles in agreement.

Someone in the back shouts, “Praise Jesus!”

Wright continues, “Yes, our leader sent us to war. Yes, I voted for that war. It was a good thing for the people of that country. They simply did not know how to take care of things for themselves. They lacked the resources to be contributors to the world economy. They were a backwards civilization, not at all comparable to ours. They lacked the technology and education to make rational decisions. Most of them don’t even have television. They were a perceivable threat. There was good enough reason to believe that
their uneducated, undersized military could come to this town, Franklin, USA, and blow up your children. You don’t see them here now do you? It must have worked.”

Carlson interrupts, “That’s just ridiculous.”

“Please, Mr. Carlson, you’ll have another turn.”

Wright continues, “My opponent, Mr. Carlson, wants all of the men in your town to marry each other and live on welfare.”

The crowd grumbles loudly. Someone in the back shouts, “Praise Jesus!”

Carlson strikes again, “You’re out of line Mr. Wright!”

Wright retaliates, “You’re a commie Mr. Carlson!”

Yet again, Buster intervenes, “Gentlemen, please! Let’s be civil. These people have important questions for you.” The crowd calms at Buster’s command. “Anyone. More questions please. Thank you, Mr. Norman.”

Mr. Norman stands from the middle of the crowd. He is a gruff, middle aged, barrel-chested man. “Thank you, Buster. Mr. Carlson. Mr. Wright. Now I’m a hard working man.” The crowd grumbles with approval. “I put in my 12 hour days. I got dirt under my fingernails. I put sweat and blood into my job just like every other self-respectin man in this town.” Norman’s words incite more approval from the crowd. “I been workin at the mill in Warren for 24 years this December.”

A woman in the back shouts, “Amen!”

“My boss tells me they gotta give me a pay cut or let me go.” The crowd grumbles in disgust. “Now tell me, Mr. Carlson, Mr. Wright, how do I tell my ten year
old boy I can’t even afford ta buy him a jockstrap for next football season?” The crowd erupts in anger.

Buster calms the crowd. “Ladies and Gentlemen, let the candidates respond. Mr. Carlson went first last time, so Mr. Wright, the question is yours.”

Mr. Wright takes a moment, bows his head, and speaks. “How many of you like football?” The crowd shouts approval.

A man in the back shouts, “O- H!” and the crowd responds “I-O!”

Wright continues, “Mr. Norman. The answer to your question is that you don’t have to tell your son you can’t afford a jockstrap. The answer is lower taxes. If you vote for me, I’ll lower taxes. My opponent, Mr. Carlson, wants to raise taxes. He wants to raise them so high that you can’t afford any protective equipment. In fact, Mr. Carlson would probably kick your son in the unprotected crotch himself.” The crowd flares with anger. Someone throws a head of iceberg lettuce at Carlson. “God and Football.” The crowd cheers for Wright.

Buster redirects the crowd, “Folks, folks, please. Give Mr. Carlson a chance to respond. Mr. Carlson, the floor is yours.”

“Communist!” shouts an anonymous man.

Carlson leaps at the opportunity, “Are you going to believe that garbage coming from this silver spoon fed, old money, never did a day of honest work in his life glutton? I’m one of you. I’m blue collar. I worked for my Dad’s construction company. I played football at Yale! I know what it’s like to suffer financially. I’ve missed a payment on my credit card. Besides, how comfortable are you with the idea of a man whose political
associates have been accused of soliciting sex with little boys talking about your son’s crotch?” The crowd grumbles angrily. Someone shouts, “Pervert!”

“I have friends and supporters in the UAW, the USWA, NAACP, and AARP. Without your job, they couldn’t survive. They live off of your work. It only makes sense that they would support the guy who will make sure and keep you working. That’s why they support me. That guy is me. My opponent, Mr. Wright, says he’ll lower your taxes, but what price will you pay for the innocence of your children!”

The crowd yells obscene things. Someone throws a bar of soap at Wright.

“Folks, please! Do not throw things at the candidates.”

Carlson incites more anger about Mr. Wright, “I have eyewitness testimony that Republican candidate George Wright has done cocaine!”

Wright retaliates, “You sold it to me you pot smoking hippie!”

The candidates leap at each other. A scuffle ensues with Buster between them trying to break up the fight. The crowd is shouting and joining in the commotion. Someone throws a bag of potato chips at the stage.

Mr. Wright calls Carlson a spoiled brat. Carlson calls Mr. Wright an old fart. Buster finally breaks up the fight. The crowd continues to grumble loudly. Carlson and Wright brush themselves off and regain a look of composure behind their respective podiums. Buster takes a deep breath and addresses the crowd. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but please, do not throw things. Let’s try one more question. Yes, right there, Mr. Kenton.”
Mr. Kenton stands up. He is a well groomed middle aged man wearing a brightly colored collared shirt and blue jeans. “Thank you Buster. Good to see you again.”

“You too Mr. Kenton. Do you have a question for the candidates?”

“As you all know, I own a shop downtown. Ken’s. I’ve been in business for 20 years, and my father was in business for 40 years before that, and his father before that. My family has been selling outdoor sporting goods to the good people of Franklin for as long as Franklin’s been around. When the All-Mart in Middletown opened up six months ago, our sales dropped 45%. The giant is crushing my family business. I can’t even sell a box of shotgun shells cuz All-Mart’s got them half price.

Someone in the crowd asks, “Half price?”

“Yes. Half price. Thank God the sale ends tonight!”

“Tonight?”

“Yes tonight. Thank God!”

The crowd begins to grumble. Someone is overheard in the back. “I, uh, think I left the oven on.” “Is that my phone ringing?” The townspeople begin to not so discretely get up and leave the meeting hall.

Mr. Norman says, “Oh shoot. I forgot ta… buy shotgun shells.”

Buster realizes everyone has decided to leave and addresses them as they are leaving. “Well, this looks like a good place to stop. Hopefully this question and answer session gave you a little more insight to what we have to choose from. When you go to the polls this week think back to how each of these candidates answered the questions you asked tonight. Try to remember the content of their answers rather than the
presentation of them, considering the circumstances. Remember, the person you choose may very well be the next person to represent you and your ideals in government proceedings. These are the people who make the decisions. Remember, every vote counts. It’s our duty, it’s our right, it’s freedom of choice, as long as it’s one of these two candidates. Thank you my fellow Franklinites. Goodnight, and Godspeed.” Buster realizes that his words are futile. There is no one left in the meeting hall. Both candidates are also gone. Buster decides to buy some shotgun shells while they’re still on sale.
I had this woman coming over for dinner and she had a very becoming, well-rounded intelligence that I wanted to impress. So, I bought take out and set it up to make it look like I made it. I took my time, carefully folding the napkins, setting up the utensils in the appropriate order (or at least some order where if she complained I could say she didn’t know proper etiquette), taking out the garbage, until there was no evidence—other than the quality of food—that would clue her in to the fact that I did not make the dinner myself. I even set up candles, vanilla (because my Men’s magazine said it’s an aphrodisiac), put on some low music, Chopin (because that’ll impress her), and doused myself in Musk (because it’s the closest manmade smell to testosterone).

When she arrived at my door, I could tell she was immediately impressed. Her eyes lit up and her nostrils flared. I could tell from the signs, the playing with her hair and her dilated pupils, that she was into me. “It smells like ice cream and feet in here.” The scent of intimacy.

“Thank you,” I said, “it’s all for you.” I pulled her chair out for her. “Here. I hope you’re hungry. I worked on this all day.”

“Wow,” she said sitting. “You made all of this?”

“Yes, I did.”
“White rice?”

“Yes, an exotic Asian staple.”

“Is that sweet and sour chicken?”

“It is. Like the yin and the yang, sweet and sour come together to make a delicious whole.”

“And won ton soup?”

“Yes, I find the won ton is very sensual.”

“And the fortune cookies. You expect me to believe you made those too.”

“My own mother’s recipe.”

That’s when something went wrong. I could see it bubbling from deep inside of her, then, like the champagne bubbling out of my glass, laughter came from her mouth.

“What? What’s wrong? Why are you laughing? Are you strangely coincidentally allergic to all of the things I’ve made, because if you are we can get take out.”

She kept laughing. “You are too much.”

“I know, I know. It was a lot of work for our first dinner, but I think you’re worth it.”

She stopped laughing. “Wait. You’re serious aren’t you? You want me to think you cooked this.”

“Dead serious. I worked really hard.”

She got up and left.
I ate the food anyway and it made me sick. I had to go to the emergency room the next morning. In a cruel act of fate, she was a nurse there, not to mention I was feeling near death. “You have to tell us where the food came from,” my doctor said.

I looked out the door and saw her standing at the nurse’s station. “I made it myself,” I told him.

“Look, if we know the source, we can figure this thing out sooner. If it’s botulism, there are a lot of expensive tests and there is a major public health risk.”

“Maybe you should notify the market. That’s where I got the ingredients.”

In another twist of fickle fate, three more patients with similar symptoms arrived in the ER within the hour. I was on a horse-derived antitoxin before I needed the help of a respirator. While in recovery I met a woman with big voluptuous eyes. She agreed to come to my place for lunch. I’d learned my lesson about trying to pass off Chinese food as my own. This time we’re having cheeseburgers and fries.
All my life I knew I was different than the others in the herd. I think most of them knew I was different all along too, but it was one of those things you just don't talk about. You know, because, well it's different. So we all, including myself, did our best to ignore it. My first time still remains in my memory, romantic and probably more dramatic and pleasure filled than it really was. But it's the memory of the first time that usually sticks with us. We're always fighting to satisfy a taste (excuse the pun) for that ideal first time. I've heard that it gets better as you get older, but I'm inclined not to believe that because, until now, it was pretty damn good.

They say I am young for this kind of thing, but it seems most of us are when this kind of thing happens. I remember I had just come in from pasture, all of my stomachs growling. For some reason, I hadn't eaten a thing. My mother yelled a command to eat from across the green. So I pretended to, but when I put that disgusting grass in my mouth I wanted to vomit.

For that entire day I had chewed my cud and made noise like I was pleased. MMMMM. Good grass! Sometimes I got caught up in the act, prancing around like the other calves, pretending to be happy to eat grass. I have a flare for theatrics. But my
father saw right through the act. He often scolded me for my acting. He said it's not normal for a cow to act. Did I want to be normal?

Anyway, I told my mother and father I was exhausted from all of the grazing and I was headed back to the cow shed. My mother, who, as it turns out, is pretty accepting of the whole thing, just nodded and told me she loved me no matter what. My father on the other hand, glared at my mother first and then me and told me I'd better head straight to the hay and sleep.

I made my way back to the shed, starving from the long day of pretend grazing. I was all by myself, except for the chickens of course, who share the shed as their coop. I'll admit, I was a little angry with my father, stamping around all the time, bullying cattle around with his bullshit rules. I'm sure the passion of the moment had something to do with it. A little chick strayed from the flock. He waddled over to me and around my legs, but I didn't see him at first and as I kicked around the hay, I accidentally hooved the little guy and knocked him across the shed into the wall.

I galloped over to see if he was hurt and sure enough the thing was dead. I looked around for witnesses. The other chickens didn't see a thing. I looked back down at the chick. There was no blood, but he was obviously not breathing. I nudged him with my hoof. Still no movement. I looked at his soft yellow feathers, his tiny orange legs and feet, the cute little beak, and suddenly, without warning, I picked him up with my mouth and swallowed him whole. OH! My mouth waters just thinking about it! The salty taste, the feel of his feathery bag of bones sliding down my throat and into my first stomach, it truly was ecstasy.
I didn't tell anyone about it. I knew what they'd say. It's just not right. It's not natural for a cow to eat chickens. It's not the natural order of things. Cows eat grass. But it felt natural to me. In fact, for the next month I got better and more daring at it. I began eating the chicks alive. I waited with the patience of a skilled predator, carried the nonchalance and innocence of, well, a calf, and with the precision of a jungle cat picked off any who strayed from the protection of the group.

I was able to eat 48 chicks in all before farmer Jim Jones witnessed the deed. He took it kind of hard, but I think he was more shocked than angry. Of course the entire herd knew after that. I could hear them mooing about me and then hushing up right as I walked in the shed. My father was thoroughly embarrassed. My mother tried to console him, but he would just start up stampedes and trample the fences. Sometimes he started mounting other heifers as if to say, It’s not my fault. Look at me. My son’s weird, but I’m a bull’s bull!

The Jones’s decided to stay in the shed and eventually tourists came to see me, but I just couldn’t do it while anyone was watching. It made the whole thing feel dirty, their eyes on me all the time. I like theater, not voyeurism. It made me feel like a freak show. Like my personal life was on display, was being exploited. So I pretended to eat grass, as disgusting as it was. It’s been a few years now, and I haven’t even touched a chick since. Don’t get me wrong, I think about it every day. It takes everything in my power not to eat one when it waddles too close. Not to mention, now that the new calves are born, the parents watch them closely if I’m around. My father just ignores me. I’m lucky to get a snort from him. My mother walks around as if I’ve been shipped off to
burger town, but I can see the longing for contact in her eyes. Still, I don’t feel bad for eating the chicks. It’s who I am, and I’m proud of it.
CHAPTER XIX
GRAND OPENING

We assembled in front of the new complex, six for every one of five thousand openings. Our fresh faces they called amenable, pliable, easily trained. Each was given a ruler to chew on, a cud dipped in yellow paint and the words Lordtown, Ohio. Garnishment of the s. Hatchet men drove 100 cars per hour. We overheated, prematurely rusted. We blended air with fuel and caught fire. Internal combustion forged wild cats.

I’d had enough of walking to work. I turned around, and lit a Marlboro. The foreman drove up in a Vega, asked if I needed a lift. I got in. He fed me production lines about company loyalty, the importance of industry. I left at lunch and never went back.

The foreman? I figure they’ll bury him there, along with the five thousand rulers and Vega models that only made it eight miles before falling apart.
CHAPTER XX

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CONTAINMENT

I stash a pack of stale cigarettes in my locker to give away before payday. A co-worker wants money for a U-Haul, and I tell him I might have five bucks in my car. He says, *Man, that ain’t enough.* We cover up mounds of asbestos with a blue tarp, spray “Caution: Asbestos” on it with white paint. It washes into the canal when it rains. I wade through pigeon shit, check the boiler pressure, smoke a joint on the smokestack platform. The boss tells us to stack bales of hay behind the asbestos. Rain comes through a hole in the ceiling. They fire the guy trying to get a U-Haul. Meanwhile, dirty clumps of hay and asbestos run into the canal. The foreman asks for a cigarette and I give him a good one. He lets me nap on midnight shift. Downtown on Main Street, a steam pipe blows a manhole cover clean off. It takes a lot of energy to heat a city with steam, more than we can handle.
CHAPTER XXI

WHEN WILDCATS ARE TAMED

Then we were wild, vicious and hungry. Union meant we hunted in packs, communicated by body language alone, answered only to the laws of our nature. We were solitarily solid. Henry swore we'd organize over his dead body, but we took Windsor, Detroit, and Cleveland. We clawed out territory lines, picked off scabs with a twenty-two and watched them bleed. We took their intimidation, busting, and black legging with predatory skill.

Now, the feral amongst us are trapped. A dismembered member of the union, I am domesticated by complacency and overtime pay, enough for cable television and beer. A tow motor operator works between hourly cigarette breaks, or when his shift is over. A line man feigns injury, claims workman's comp, fails a drug test. A union rep sits by the window in the employee lounge like the house cat he has become. The CEOs steal millions of dollars while I steal paper towels from the men’s room.
CHAPTER XXII

TRACK TO SCRAP

From my porch I watch a train traveling at fifty miles per hour, steel wheels sparking to avoid collision with a township police cruiser. I hear the crash of dishes in the kitchen and the screeching of metal on metal, the shattering of shatterproof glass.

Authorities will blame the dispatcher for not stopping the train in time, but not the pursuing officer for parking on the tracks, the police levy for failing to fund more officers, the two men wanted for stealing copper wiring, reasons why they need quick cash, why they taste metal from malnutrition, why stealing copper is a more lucrative business than mining it, or how they banked more money stealing wiring from lights at the high school than a township police officer makes in a year.
CHAPTER XXIII

MOTHER OF THE YEAR

We almost didn't see her in her tattered off-white bathrobe, walking on the side of the highway in the snow. My brother pulled onto the shoulder and I got out of the passenger seat. The subzero air made my face feel raw, like the flesh had been peeled away. Awkward, she was holding something, and running. Get in, I told her. She did and said, Oh my God, Oh my God thank you. Don't tell the cops. Is he following us? Don't tell the cops. Cops? Who? Is who following?

Behind us, a quarter mile or more, another car, lights off, passenger door open, began rolling our way on the shoulder. We have to leave. Now. Jesus Christ you're bleeding! You're holding, is that . . .? My brother smashed the accelerator. She reeked of tequila, her eyes sunken and dark, her skin pale, but blue-green like a corpse. She lit a cigarette with her bloody hands and steadied a naked baby between her needle marked arms. Bare underneath her robe, she had no reservations about her body. She took a drag with one hand and pulled the baby close with the other, exposing the loose skin vacuumed to her bones.

Here, take my t-shirt. The baby did not cry and the smell of smoke, the sound of the road reminded us that we did not know where we were going. We have to find a hospital. We have to call the pol -- No cops, please, just take me to my mother's. I have
money. Take some money. -- No. Keep it.

After leaving her at her mother’s, when we finally arrived at our hotel, it was late.
I called my mother and got the machine. She never learned how to record a message, so a mechanical voice instructed me to wait for the tone. I hung up the phone.
CHAPTER XXIV
CUP OF G.I. JOE

An old woman’s hands ache in Colombia while here, in my grandmother’s kitchen, blood vessels dilate, synapses fire. Black as oil and nearly as profitable, it is an obsession propagated in the ninth century, fermented in spirituality, brewed with capitalist entrepreneurialism. It gives us a reason to meet, my grandmother and I, and it is my patriotic duty to stay up all night talking with her.

She says of my espresso, “that stuff’s like dope,” as she finishes off a twelve-cup pot. “Bean broth used to be wrought for the have by the have nots, she says, and it helped your grandpa win the war.” This is the third time she’s told me this today, but repetition does not change the only thing coffee did for grandpa: sober him up enough to accept the purple heart for falling off the back of a truck, drunk.

My caffeinated neurotransmitters like the idea and I smile at the thought, my grandfather like the tramp, falling off the truck in Normandy, the other soldiers laughing, the morale of the entire platoon percolating, winning the war. Anything else would have been grounds for dismissal. I finish my cup, but the coffee has left permanent stains on my grandmother’s mug.
CHAPTER XXV

GUN SHOW MEMORABILIA

When I was a fat kid I treasured going to gun shows with my dad because of the fried cheese sticks. The sound of a baton of cheese plunging and boiling, sweat dripping from the cook’s face onto a skillet, then sizzling away. Diversity at a gun show comes in the form of different ways to kill a man. Men with gray beards and military jackets who smelled like our basement, a musty mix of gun oil and marijuana, lingered over handguns, rifles, knives, and militaria. I savored my fried cheese sticks, afterward feeling like I needed a shower, and fingered the six inch polished chrome barrel of a Magnum Research Desert Eagle. The vendor noticed me, said, “that’s a seventeen hundred dollar gun, son.” I replied, “You got anything made in China?” My dad bought me a rubber band gun that held six rounds, but I could cock it back to hold ten.
CHAPTER XXVI

FISHING

*Dad, what’s a grist mill?* a boy asks as he and his father prepare to descend a fifteen foot wall across from Franklin Thermal. Below the wall there is a bank of pebbles, pieces of wooden wheel, mill stone, decomposed grain, and waterfalls of the Mahoning River. The falls, remnants of an 1823 gristmill dam, flow forcefully with greenish yellow water. The wall separates the man and his son from Crappie they can catch, but shouldn’t eat.

The man ties a rope around an ancient oak, one that has lived longer than commerce in Franklin, and tells his son about the series of wheels powered by water, the drive shaft, and the wallower. The boy holds on to the rope in front of his father. The man reaches around his son, thinks about how the boy has grown fat sitting in front of the television, eating packaged sweets absent of semivolatile organic compounds and polychlorinated biphenyls.

As they step over the side, the rope frays and snaps. Falling, everything turns sepia, moves slowly, smells like mud and dead fish. On the ground the boy cries because he is scared, and his ball cap is in the water. The man laughs, because there are better things to cry about.
CHAPTER XXVII

THE 2ND OF JULY

On the second of July the small town of Franklin triples in size for the week long celebration of Independence Day. The carnival is lackluster, five food stands to every attraction, where food is an attraction in itself, a fat kid’s festival at best. Elephant ears, corn dogs, a Ferris wheel and tilt-a-whirl can be a volatile mix for anyone. But the combination French fries, too much vinegar, and fresh lemonade is just right to a fifteen year old fat kid. It is as near to heaven as the carnival girl, her short dark hair and short plaid skirt, the way she kisses him behind a row of porta-potties.

The dunk tank clown reminds the fat kid that he is indeed fat and the carnival girl too pretty, that the fat kid will dump all of his money, desert the fair fare for three chances to sink the clown. That until sanitized of these angry insecurities, it is the last time he’ll kiss the carnival girl, but not the last time for French fries and lemonade. In a week it is gone, the dunk tank clown, the blue porta-potties, the carnival girl. Left behind are dirty napkins and Styrofoam cups, the sound of another summer halfway gone and the residual smell of other wastes.
CHAPTER XXVIII

FAT KID BACKPACKING

Wading through Japanese stiltgrass up to his chin, somewhere around ninety degrees, sweating, dirty, and hungry, a boy tells his father, *When I grow up, I’m going to burn these woods down*. The father stops, holds his walking stick in his teeth, bends to tie his shoe. The walking stick scrapes the roof of his mouth. Somehow, he knows this is the boy’s fault. They stop at a site halfway from Deer Lick camp, an overused clearing with improvised stone chairs around a dirty fire ring. The father smokes a cigarette. The boy takes off his pack and sulks his way into a creek. He catches crayfish, digs a pit which he names Thunderdome, and forces the crayfish to fight. The father enjoys momentary solitude. At night they build a fire to rival the sun, tall flames swatting at the leaves of overhanging oaks, and the boy burns the ends of sticks and draws his name with the trailing light. The father wakes early, kisses his son on the forehead, stands by the creek.