ABSTRACT

MILFORD, DELAWARE, OF ALL PLACES:  
TEN STORIES BY GREGORY S. LAYTON

by Gregory Scott Layton

This collection of short stories demonstrates a range of structures, voices and points of view, all used to explore themes of place and community. These stories portray characters attempting to integrate themselves into social structures that resist them, extricate themselves from social structures that repress them, retain social structures that support them, or simply comprehend social structures that baffle them. Some stories are intended to evoke readers’ sympathy by allowing them to share character’s perceptions. Other stories use a range of narrative distances to provide an ironic view. In short, these stories offer a range of views on social dynamics. They mark the writer’s developing grasp of the short story form and desire to experiment.
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**Tomatoes**

The still morning air had been cooled by an afternoon breeze, but she didn’t mind. The season had been unusually warm, and all through this first week of April, working behind the register at a new job, she had imagined doing what she had done today: planting a garden in back of her grandfather’s home. She had imagined it clearly, how she would wrestle the rotary tiller over the ground, how she would scrape soil into long rows and small mounds, how she would pry six-inch tomato plants from crackling plastic cubes. She had even imagined the way she would sit on the steps when she was done, stiff and perspiring, because she had wanted to suffer a little, to feel she had worked. But now, as a cold gust found her on her grandfather’s porch, she knew she would have quit if the day had been any hotter.

She had finished, but to be working in a garden hadn’t been as much fun as she had remembered from childhood, from 15 years back when she and her sisters had raised things for the Delaware State Fair. She had forgotten the feel of dirt beneath her fingernails, how it could actually hurt, how it could get in deep and leave stripes next to the flesh. She had forgotten the worry, the questions that went along with it, too. Was she planting too early? Too late? Too deep or too shallow? When shadows fell from the farmhouse in the late afternoon, she wondered—would her plants get enough light? Marcy couldn’t decide, and briefly considered tilling everything under just to settle the doubt.

Instead, she had brought a hose from the barn and soaked the brown earth, left to right. She did what she could. She had made progress and hoped a sense of momentum
would carry her into the evening. She had decided to move on to the laundry quickly, before her ambition waned.

Marcy was hanging clothes on a line strung between pulleys when she heard his shoes on the steps to the porch.

“I can’t believe you’re doing laundry on a day like this,” he said.

Her heart choked inside her and then coughed back to life. She had been caught, but refused to admit it. “You prefer to hang clothes in the rain?” she said.

“No,” Bruce chuckled. She could picture his grin. “I prefer using a dryer.”

Marcy turned, slowly and calmly she hoped, and there he was, as big as life—Bruce, in Bermuda shorts and a pink madras shirt. He owned the Whaler, a bar on Lewes Canal. He was fifty-four, partially gray and partially married, but everyone knew about Marcy—a barmaid about to turn thirty. They’d been together two years, since two weeks into her trial separation, but this was the first time he had to come looking for her, at least all the way out to the farm. Whether he’d try to bully or sweet talk, she couldn’t predict.

“So, what’s up?” he asked. “What are you up to this weekend?”

Nothing much, really. Her plans were just this: to finish the laundry, to fix some dinner for Grandpa, and then to fix up a room for her son to move into. She’d pick him up from his father’s in the morning, but she knew that’s not what Bruce wanted to know. He wanted to know, first of all, if she would be sleeping with anyone else.

“I planted a garden,” she said. He turned to look where she pointed. The twenty-by-thirty patch was muddy and barren, aside from three rows of tomato plants that forced one to admit this was a garden.
“Very nice,” Bruce said and faced her again. “Maybe you could help me start one at my place.”

Marcy shrugged and then nodded. He hadn’t blown up, though the possibility of it remained. In the meantime, however, she couldn’t let herself be bullied. She’d come too far. She had moved out of the place he’d set up for her, hauled her stuff to her grandfather’s farm, cancelled her cell phone. Though she’d never been what one might call a reliable worker, though he’d never punished her for missing days here and there, she hadn’t gone to work in two weeks. He ought to be furious.

“I’m not really an expert,” she said. “I probably wouldn’t be much help. I only know you’ve got to tend to it daily.”

“I think I could do that,” he said. “It might even be good for me.”

That’s what Marcy thought, too—the garden would be good for her. It would remind Grandpa of gardens Grandma once kept. It would be something for Tommy to learn. It would force her to get up early and do something. She certainly couldn’t be out all night drinking, sleep until noon and expect her garden to live. She’d have to get organized. Marcy turned back to the laundry, stooped and picked up a shirt.

It was her grandfather’s. She took clothespins from her apron and pinned its shoulders to the line. The shirt was worn-out and sported the logo of a seed company that no longer existed, but it was Grandpa’s. She hoped to preserve it because he’d worn it, or ones like it, as long as she could remember—Bruce, though, would probably scowl if he noticed the rag. His father and grandfather had run a department store in Philadelphia, and after they sold it, Bruce moved to Delaware and opened his bar. He owned some old-looking shirts, too, but they had come that way on purpose.
Marcy stooped to grab something to hang. Bruce bent beside her to help; he must really be worried. After they stood, Marcy gave the shirt in her hands one crisp snap and then pinned it to the line. Bruce shook a pair of damp jeans up and down, scowling because the wrinkles wouldn’t come out. Marcy hung three more shirts. Bruce hung a second pair of pants, and then they were done. Marcy sent the laundry basket skidding up to the door with a kick. Bruce clapped his hands once and said, “Okay. What now?”

Bruce would have mowed the lawn, trimmed the hedges or even cleaned the gunk from the gutters if only she had asked him. He seemed to want her to ask him—he was ready to help, but Marcy knew there would be limits. And, afterward, she would be obligated.

The garden was still there behind him. The tomatoes were trembling. The soil had dried gray. Marcy would need a jacket sooner or later, but she wasn’t ready to go inside just yet. She didn’t want to risk any questions about Bruce.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s go for a walk.”

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Bruce followed her past the barn, past a series of rusting wire pens and on toward the orchard. Marcy walked just ahead of him, because walking by his side she would have had to play tour guide, point things out, tell stories, and his interest was making her nervous.

Her ex-husband Garry had loved her farm stories, and they had walked out over the farm often when they were dating. His family wasn’t a farm family, but they didn’t live in town, either, and seemed to regret that they had no farm traditions. Their fascination had always disgusted her. Here was an iron cultivator, rusting in tall grass and
briars. Garry had said more than once that they should find a way to take it home and
decorate the yard with it, but she had never encouraged him. It would have looked like
junk somebody had left there by accident, but now when she saw it she wanted to touch
it, to feel its old metal flaking beneath her fingertips. She was glad Bruce didn’t see it.

When they arrived at the orchard’s edge, Bruce stepped ahead of her and lifted the
first bough out of the way. Again, she resented his kindness. It seemed to indebt her.

When she stepped face-first into a spider’s web a minute later, she felt better.

“What are these, orange trees?” Bruce asked, with a kind of amazed tone in his
voice. “They’re not oranges, are they?”

“No. They’re not orange trees,” Marcy said and let a branch snap back toward his
face. “It’s too cold here for oranges.” While Bruce tried to think of what to ask next, they
walked without talking. He pressed through branches behind her, too big to duck and
maneuver. Cottontail rabbits leapt out of their path. Marcy kept her eye out for deer.
She’d seen dozens here over the years, but hoped they wouldn’t see any today. If they
did, she would wish Tommy had been here to see them. Maybe tomorrow she’d bring
him out. She’d pack his backpack full of peanut butter sandwiches, apples and juice
boxes. They’d walk slowly and quietly. They’d hold hands.

Bruce grumbled in the branches behind her, frustrated, but somehow amused by
the branches clawing his chest. “Dangit, oww,” he kept saying in a silly voice. “I bet this
was a great place to pay hide and seek when you were a kid.”

Marcy ducked beneath the low limbs of an apple tree. She went to the other side
of the row. She picked up her pace, and laughed aloud when Bruce refused to duck under
the trees but kept a parallel course until he discovered an opening. She ducked again and
crossed the other way.

“Well, you’re a little jackrabbit now, aren’t you?” Bruce said, at least ten yard
behind her now. This wasn’t a game he was equipped for, and Marcy scurried ahead,
enjoying herself. She raised her arms in a small clearing and spun. Though the weeds had
grown to her waist and the branches hadn’t been pruned in years, she knew the old
orchard by heart.

“Come on,” Bruce said. “Wait up for the wildebeest.”

She stopped, and when she crouched to look back she saw him squinting in her
direction through the branches. “Hey. I’ve got something to tell you,” he said. “There’s
something we need to discuss.”

Would he say she was fired? Would he ask about boyfriends, or whether they
were finished for good? Why couldn’t he just let things be?

Bruce fought his way toward her, and with every step he took Marcy thought
about running.

“Julie gets out of school in May,” Bruce said when he finally reached her. His
spoiled daughter was the last person she wanted to hear about. “We thought she’d be
coming home for awhile, but she’s moving to Boston. She’s got a job in a lab.” She
stared at him blankly. “Do you know what this means?” he asked, and Marcy found
herself really wanting to know.

“What?” she asked after a while.

“I’m done with Jocelyn,” he said. “I’m free. I’ve raised my daughter. I’ve fulfilled
my natural obligations, and next week I plan to talk to my lawyer and file for divorce.”
Bruce came forward and hugged her briskly, and then stepped away smiling to
gauge her reaction. He glanced from her feet to her eyes to her feet again. He waited.

“That doesn’t mean I intend to stay single,” Bruce said after a moment. He
crossed and uncrossed his arms. “I’m ready for something stable and serious, okay?”

Marcy watched him without responding at all.

“Just think about in your garden, okay?”

*

“We went for a walk,” Marcy said halfway through a second beer. Laura was
starting a third. “We went for a walk, and then he went home.” The Whaler was packed.
Why had they come?

“And?” Laura held up her glass while Marcy looked the room over. Laura wanted
to know what had happened, and Marcy wanted to tell her, but she couldn’t tell her too
quickly.

“Nothing,” she said when Laura finally drank. “I told him I had to stay in, to set
up Tommy’s room”—something she still had to do.

“You’re lucky, I guess,” Laura said. “Steven would lose his mind if I moved
without telling him.”

“That’s because Steven thinks you’re capable of leaving for good,” Marcy said,
and then winked at a scandalized busboy, Dan—he worked for Bruce. He probably knew
more about her than she wanted him to.

“That’s because it is possible,” Laura said, sliding a pack of cigarettes from one
hand to the other.

“Yeah, well. You haven’t proved it.”
In some ways, Marcy had outgrown her Laura, her old drinking buddy—Laura, who still thought there was no higher accomplishment than landing a man. Still, Marcy had needed someone to talk to, and now here she was, a sad parody of her twenty-three-year-old self. Disgusting. They were half-drunk and swapping details about men—but okay. She swallowed her beer and then told Laura what had happened.

“Are you ready for that?”

“Ready?” Marcy asked. “That makes it sound so inevitable.” But maybe it was. People get married—right? People get married, if they can find someone, that is—if they can find someone who isn’t married, drug-addicted or overtly abusive, that is. She was nearing thirty, after all—thirty, for God’s sake.

“Well, I still believe in the one, or at least a couple of ones—certain people who are right for you,” Laura said. “I’m not saying that to sound religious or anything, but that’s just what experience taught me.”

Laura and Steve had been married for all of eight months, six years ago, and now they were living together again. So Laura was obsessed with coincidence.

“I mean, I never thought it was wrong that I married him,” she said. “I always knew I’d learn something from it, but now I know it was just the wrong time.” She fished a cigarette out of a carton. “I don’t regret marrying him. I don’t regret divorcing him. I don’t regret all the fun we had after that, but I don’t regret going back to him either.”

Laura pushed back her chair, ready to go outside for a smoke, but Marcy sat, wrenching her mouth back and forth. Sure, she had sown some wild oats, and, sure, she was trying to be more responsible, but could be considered an insight? Laura was simply afraid to be lonely, and as she approached thirty-one, her options were limited. Steven
hadn’t changed. He just didn’t get on Laura’s case anymore—because he was out with his own friends, now. Too bad Garry hadn’t changed. Good old dependable Garry.

Marcy pushed back her chair and stood up with Laura, who was dancing in place. She’d have just one cigarette in the parking lot and then she’d go home.

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On one hand, Garry fathered your son. Okay, forget that. Compare them as if you’ve never been married. Okay, so Bruce has money, but you can’t think about that, either. You’re not a whore.

The car was cold when Marcy started it up, so she turned on the heater. Now the windshield was fogging. Highway One was empty. The families who’d come down to get pizza or walk on the beach had gone home or back to their hotels. And the locals who’d come out to the bars wouldn’t leave for an hour. The highway looked the way it had in mid-winter.

What Bruce had done, with his semi-proposal, Marcy hardly understood. He’d made their involvement more than just a fling, and worse, he had proven it had never really been just a fling. What she’d thought was going nowhere, he’d seen in motion, and now she felt betrayed, because—dammit—this is what men always did. They got more serious than you were ready for.

She wondered: Would choosing Bruce be change or capitulation? She’d love to hear what Garry would say. He was a prude all right, but at least what he wanted to do and what he thought he should do weren’t in cahoots.

_He loves me_, she’d tell him. _What should I do?_ But she knew he’d only pull her into his arms and affirm her right to decide—that he really didn’t know, that he wasn’t in
her shoes, that he’d respect any choice she could make—and she’d end up feeling that he was the one in need of consolation. And maybe he was. Maybe she’d just listen this time. Why did she need a man in her life after all?

The center line flashed as Marcy drove through the night. The lights of Milford, and Dover, and perhaps even Georgetown, glowed on the haze overhead. She had grown up near Greenwood, seeing the lights of the Delaware State Fair, bright over Harrington each summer. She remembered riding home in the back seat, hands sticky from ice cream, 4-H-prize corn and potatoes resting beside her. She remembered her sisters kissing second-place cantaloupes, promising never to eat them. But she had taken a Wiffle ball bat to her blue ribbon squash the next day, because after the judging—then what?

Marcy glanced at the radio, and when she lifted her head a deer had stepped from the side of the road. She gasped, but wouldn’t have had time to maneuver, even if she had wanted to. She pushed away from the steering wheel as the ghostly buck passed in front of her grill. Then, with a leap, he was gone. She wondered if she’d seen him at all. Her body was shaking so hard, she considered pulling to the side of the road, but she knew if she stopped, she’d stay there all night. She had to keep going.

The gravel in Garry’s lane crackled and crunched as Marcy’s car rolled toward the house. She cut the lights, not wanting to wake Tommy, who slept in a front room. She parked on the far side of a forsythia bush. She found the plastic rock by the steps engraved with both their initials. She took the key from beneath it, and then mounted the steps.

“Come in,” Garry said. “I thought you might be stopping this way.”
She gave him the key.

“Sorry I didn’t call,” she said. “I just knew if I went back to Grandpa’s I wouldn’t make it here in time to get Tommy.”

“It’s no problem,” he said, standing in front of the door he’d just shut. “I heard you planted a garden.”

“I did,” she said and settled against the kitchen wall. “It’ll be a nice one, I think.”

The room still smelled like hers. She felt its warmth in her lungs. The curtains, the canisters, the burner covers, all bore the mushroom pattern she’d picked out. The refrigerator magnets had come from her great aunt’s house, and there was a dirty mixing bowl in the sink. She’d always made cookies from a tube, squeezing them out and spooning greasy yellow dollops onto a tray, but Garry wouldn’t make them with anything less than a beater and eggs, brown sugar and extracts.

He walked to the refrigerator, poured a glass of tea and handed it to her. She took a quick swallow and then left it on the counter. He was tall and lean, a Rockwell painting in gold and blue.

“It’s cold out there,” Garry said as he turned toward the hall. “I was thinking about planting today, myself, but the guy at the hardware said I should wait.”

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Frost, I suppose, though it’s been pretty nice out.”

Marcy stared to the window, studied its pane. The vapor in its corners hadn’t frozen, but she had seen her breath outside.

She followed him mutely, past his grandmother’s table with the paws on its legs, past the hand-wound Victrola his father had left him. She wanted to touch them, to sweep
her fingers across them, to absorb their goodness, their stability, but she knew she
couldn’t. She couldn’t even make herself truly want to. She felt like a spy, a saboteur in
her own home, someone who could pass for a native, but whose sole mission—hardly
uncertain—was to destroy. She had known this since she was married, since the first
night she’d come home smelling of Marlboros and Heineken.

“You can have the bed, or you can have the couch,” Garry said, standing in front
of the window. “I really don’t mind, either way.”

Because he had offered, she took the bed.

In the dark, Marcy thought about Tommy. How soon would he be too old for her
to sleep over like this? How soon would it lead to embarrassing questions? Already,
Garry’s friends thought they were back together. They must. They’d been leaving after a
card game one Friday night when she’d arrived, drunk, weeping, and wanting to crash.

But Marcy had come up with a good one. He’s finally got what he wants, she had
told Laura, a wife he can’t have. Laura had repeated the line more than once in mixed
company.

Marcy left the bedroom door open, hoping to hear Garry turn on the television,
but he didn’t. Instead, she heard the wind curl up against the corners of the house like a
cat. She imagined its fur bristling with frost. It peered into her face and hissed.

Marcy sat and put her feet on the floor. She was shaking again as she had in the
car. What if the man at the hardware were right? What if her tomatoes were doomed? She
saw herself sleeping in late, drinking in the basement, calling men she ought to avoid—
wasting the summer of her thirtieth birthday. She saw herself sitting at the end of a bar,
rail-thin, leather-faced and forty.
Garry seemed to be sleeping when she entered the living room, only she knew that he wasn’t. She knew he’d been waiting. His breathing slowed as she knelt next to the couch. His eyelids fluttered.

“Are you awake?” she asked, kneeling beside him. A tee-shirt she kept at his place covered her knees, but she had tried to pull it down farther. Her legs were covered with goose pimples.

Garry yawned and propped himself up on an elbow. “What? Hey. What do you need?”

“I can’t sleep,” she said. “I guess I’m a bit rattled.”

“Why’s that?” he said and pushed back the blanket. He rubbed his eyes.

“I almost hit a deer on the way.”

He sat up. “You did?” he asked. “Are you okay? Is your car okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I’m just rattled is all.”

Garry looked past her toward Tommy’ room. She sat on her knees.

“And what you said about frost,” she said. “I hadn’t thought about that before. I mean, really, what can I do?” She placed her hands on the edge of the couch. She leaned toward him.

“You’re probably okay if all you’ve put in are seeds,” he said. “The frost can’t get them if they’re still in the ground. And if it does, big deal; you can always plant more.”

Marcy opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it. Garry’s hand was warm on her shoulder. She wondered what would happen if she put her hand on his face. Their eyes met.
“You don’t have to sleep on the couch,” she told him. “It’s your house. There’s room in the bed if you want,” but Garry didn’t reply, only pursed his lips and furrowed his brow.

“I’ll stay out here if you want,” she said after a moment and then kissed the side of his arm. He squeezed her shoulder softly and then let his hand fall away. “It’s up to you.”

Garry swung his feet to the floor, squeezed her arm firmly and then stood.

“Okay, if that’s what you want,” he said, stepping around her, “I’m going to bed.”

Marcy sat on the floor, watching Garry recede into the hall. He didn’t glance back even once. He just left—he’d never done that before—and now her eyes were beginning to sting. No, she decided after a moment; they weren’t. They were dry. She was okay. There was a reason she found herself here. This was all meant to happen, she said to herself, but already the tears were beginning to run. She wrapped an afghan snugly under her arms and then stood. She knew what to do. She moved toward the hallway to check on her son.

**A Beautiful Place**

The town had strung the railing next to the river with Christmas lights, and as we walked through the park, Kez was scraping them off with a stick. If I had been driving by and didn’t know better, I might have called the police, because Kez looked pretty rough. He wore ratty jeans, and his name had been torn from his letterman’s jacket, but walking beside him, I knew he didn’t mean any harm. He wasn’t even aware of the damage he caused. It was just something to do, and most of the bulbs broke without fanfare. They
didn’t tinkle or burst. They simply cracked and went dark as the stick rattled over their sockets.

Shmitty’s behavior wasn’t much better. He walked to my right, farthest from the river, and his mission was two-fold. First, he wanted to stagger the length of every park bench we came to so as to prove he was sober. Second, he wanted us to hurry up to the liquor store so he could drink himself into oblivion. The clerk at the liquor store was his girlfriend, he said, and she would hook us up.

“That girl is just what I need,” he said, leaping onto the next bench. “She is sassy and sweet—sassy and sweet, sweet, sweet.” He tottered at the end of the bench and turned to see if we had been watching. “That’s the kind of girl you need, Joshie Josh.”

I didn’t answer. I was tired and grumpy and didn’t even want to be there. I had only come because Kez and Shmitty lived two and three doors down from me on a hall of crappy apartments over the hardware store, and they were always inviting me places for no reason. They had beat on my door all evening, promising the time of my life, so I had given in at last and decided to get this over with.

Now I dug my cell phone from my pocket, turned it off and then on again. Ellen still hadn’t called.

Shmitty and Kez were both in their thirties. They both worked in a contractor’s warehouse, but in many ways they were an odd pair. Shmitty was fat, and the least I could say for him was that it didn’t really bother him. He seemed to believe that among the world’s people, he was more impressive than most. He didn’t walk so much as hoist one leg after the other in a kind of cocky waddle, belly protruding. Kez, on the other hand, had seen fitter days. He had played minor league ball for a year, and you could still
tell he’d once had options before him. Until it could be proven otherwise, he was prepared to deem you his foe. Now he was interrogating me about my fiancée.

“What I don’t get,” he said, “is this halfway crap. Either she likes you or she doesn’t. Does she like you?”

“I told you,” I said, annoyed that he saw thing so simply. He’d probably have me use one of those fourth-grade notes if he thought of it—\textit{Do you like me? Circle Yes or No}—but I was twenty-four and in an adult relationship. Things weren’t that easy. I wished I could explain things without having to then defend her against them. “She’s my fiancée,” I said.

Kez shook his head and spat a thick gob into the river. “Yeah, but does she like you?”

“Patty likes me,” said Shmitty, leaping down from the bench. He tucked in his shirt as he approached the next one. “Oh yes. That girl likes me a lot.”

“Of course she likes me,” I told Kez. “She’s my fiancée.”

Ellen was the reason I had moved to Milton six months ago. She was my college sweet heart. After I graduated, I had driven two hours to see her every weekend while she went on to her senior year. And after she graduated, I had followed her back to her hometown in Delaware. I had even given up a pretty good job in Arlington to manage a pet store in Five Points—how could she not love me? She could have seen someone else when I lived away from her; I wouldn’t even have known, but she hadn’t. She had been in her room whenever I called. She had e-mailed between classes. She had even clung to me tightly on Sundays and told me I was a “sweet, sweet man.”
So wondering whether she loved me wasn’t my problem. My problem was everything else. My problem was that her sister was pregnant and needed attention, that her mother had opened a shop and needed cheap labor, that Ellen was so burned out most Friday nights she just wanted to stay home. She didn’t even want to talk about it. She told me to just go out with my friends and relax, that she’d be OK, but exactly which friends did she mean? I should have asked her, *What makes you think I have any friends here?* But I had said nothing. I was the same nice guy I’d always been, more patient than I ought to be, more tolerant than I ought to be—in short, a wuss, a guy who never stood up to anyone. Now I was stuck tramping around on a Friday night with the most obnoxious guys on my hall. And even if I had stayed in, I would have had to deal with their noise.

I dug out my phone again—still no messages. If she expected me to eat Sunday lunch with her family, she’d have to call soon. Then again, perhaps there was interference, a power line or something blocking her call. I’d have to check my voice mail back at my apartment when we got back. If there was no message by then, it would be too late.

When we arrived at the liquor store, Kez propped his stick next to the door as if it were a bicycle, and we went inside. The place was definitely what I had expected. It sold beer in cans by the case and not much else, not even the Canadian beer I was used to from college. Most of the wine I saw in the store came with a screw top and was kept in the cooler.

“Hey, honey,” Shmitty said as he walked down an aisle. He didn’t look at the woman behind the counter, but fluttered his fingers over his head on his way toward the
back. She didn’t look up from the TV either. She was brown-haired and ordinary. “Let’s see. Let’s see,” Shmitty said. “What do I want? What do I want?”

I walked to the coolers in the back wall. Kez pulled up behind me with a shopping cart. He’d already selected a liter of Smirnoff vodka and a carton of Red Bull. He tapped the carton and pointed with a knowing look.

“You weren’t planning to sleep tonight, were you?” he said, grinning. When I told him that, yes, I was planning to sleep at some point, but could probably stay up for a while, he pointed to the beer in the cooler. I took out my wallet.

Three aisles over, Shmitty held up a bottle of Pucker and waved it slowly over his head.

“Miss? Oh, miss?” he called to the clerk. “Could you help me with this?” I was sure he was making a joke, but when she looked up he asked how much it cost.

“Eleven-something,” she said.

“Is it any good?” Shmitty asked, holding the bottle even higher.

“No.” The studio audience on whatever show she was watching burst into laughter, and she turned her attention back to it. Shmitty held up a bottle of Goldschlager.

“What about this?” He shook the bottle and watched the flecks of gold in it swirl in front of his face. “Is this any good?”

“I don’t like it,” she said, again looking up only briefly. “But it’s OK for you.” Shmitty returned the bottle to the shelf and walked to the front of the store. He set his elbows on the counter and leaned forward far enough to see what she was watching.

“You must be picky,” he said

“I am picky,” she said.
“Well, what do you like?” he said, watching her watch TV.

“I like wine,” the clerk said.

“You like wine?” Schmitty craned his neck to see whether we were hearing this.

“Wine is too sweet,” he said. “Wine is for teenagers.”

“You’re thinking of wine coolers,” she said. “There are other kinds.”

Shmitty shook his head in disgust, and then turned and came back through the store.

“She said she wants wine,” he told Kez.

“She works in the damn liquor store,” Kez told him. He had just chosen a second bottle of vodka. “Let her get her own wine.”

Shmitty looked to me as if begging a favor.

“Oh, come on,” I said and led him down the aisle to the one shelf in the entire store with any real wine on it. Most of the bottles were covered in dust. I read over the labels, hoping to help him find something halfway decent, but as soon as I held up a twelve-dollar bottle for him to look at he grabbed it and headed back to the clerk.

“What about this?” he asked, holding it out as if presenting an enemy’s head. He stepped away from the counter as soon as she took the bottle into her hands.

“It’s OK,” she said, turning the bottle to look at each side. “This is OK.”

Shmitty reached into his jeans pocket and dug out a twenty. He unfolded it carefully and then tried to smooth it between his palm and his thigh. He presented the bill to her delicately, and once she had accepted it and rung up the sale, he waved the receipt at Kez and said he’d meet us outside. The clerk set the bottle in back of the counter and didn’t look up when Shmitty opened the door, rattling the bell over the exit.
“Goodnight, honey,” Shmitty said over his shoulder and left.

“Behave yourself, sweetie,” she said.

*

Back in Kez’s apartment, Kez and Shmitty wanted to drink and play video games. I wanted to drink and talk about women; it seemed to have been the topic at hand, but Kez and Shmitty were no longer interested. Half the summer and into the fall I had heard them cursing each other over the Xbox, angry and angrier, and now here I was, drinking with them. Incredible.

For the past six months, I had considered them redneck scum without knowing them at all. I hadn’t understood that when they shouted things like **Hey faggot, Hey cocksucker, Hey pussy,** they were just playing. As they’d gotten used to me, they’d started telling me we to hang out, which—sadly—was more than I could say for my fiancée.

“I told you,” Shmitty was saying. “I told you my girl was something else.” Every time he made a move in the game, he contorted his body and bounced on the couch.

“You told us she was going to hook us up,” said Kez, whose approach to the game was much less physical. Only his thumbs moved as his marched his players downfield against Shmitty’s.

“She did hook us up,” Shmitty said. “You got your beer, didn’t you?”

“I paid for the beer,” I said.

“See,” Shmitty said, twisting himself as his player eluded a tackle. “She hooked you both up.”

“Well, she didn’t have to charge us full price,” Kez said.
“She works there,” Shmitty said. “What did you expect?”

“I thought she would hook us up.”

It was a little past midnight, and I began to wonder if Ellen would ever call. There hadn’t been any messages when we got back, and I had left my cell phone in my apartment on purpose, but left my door open, just in case—because some nights she did call. Some nights she called to say goodnight, and some nights we talked for forty-five minutes or even an hour, so I couldn’t really say we never talked. We talked a lot, in fact, when I managed not to ask too many questions. My asking what the hell was going on, for example, was the problem. She said it showed insecurity.

Now Kez and Shmitty were engrossed in their game, and there was nothing for me to do but drink, though I was getting restless. I had already finished two big plastic cups of Red Bull and vodka, and when I reached into the bag of chips at my feet, it was half-empty already. I groaned. I almost wished I’d get alcohol poisoning or something and be rushed off to the hospital—because, then, Ellen would see. I had done nothing but love her, and she had left me alone with the rednecks.

“No moaning.” Kez said and threw his fist into my shoulder—hard. “No moaning, no thinking, no being a pussy.”

“Yeah,” Shmitty said. “No being a pussy.”

I groaned again and flopped back in the bean bag. The room was decorated with posters and an assortment of items that looked as if they’d come from someone’s grandmother’s house. It was grim and depressing. Set on a chest of drawers by the wall there were plastic daisies in a green glass jar, a candy dish filled with marbles, and what appeared to be a pretty decent set of silver on display in a wooden box, but it was hard to
see anything clearly because the brightest settings had burned out of his light bulbs. The right kind of woman—even some of Ellen’s artsier friends—probably wouldn’t have minded cleaning up and refinishing some of this junk, but Kez’s coffee table guarded the way. It had been made from a wire spool and was covered with beer cans. No woman I knew would have ventured very far into that apartment.

“Oh, you fucking asshole,” Kez screamed at the game.

When I was in college, local guys like Kez and Shmitty had cruised Harrisonburg in jacked-up trucks, calling out to JMU girls on the sidewalks—Baby as they approached and Bitch as they drove away. But all the JMU girls had ever done was ignore them. One night, a truck full of locals slowed down outside a bar we were leaving, and a guy stood up in the back with his bare cock in his fist. How would you ladies like to be with a real man? he shouted. My friend Aaron threw a bottle at him, and the next thing you know about ten of us were running full speed toward fraternity. Later, someone said the guys in the truck had only been high school kids.

I sat up. I tried to find interest in the game they were playing. If I expected to hang out here, I ought to, and it would keep my mind off of Ellen. It was colorful at least. Figures darted and twisted and taunted each other. Others came out of nowhere and pulverized them. After a particular gruesome play, one player picked up another and snapped him in two over a knee. I was no football fan, but I could see to a point where guys might enjoy this. It seemed motivational. Shmitty laughed. Kez cussed under his breath. We drank. A player Kez controlled burst through a line of Shmitty’s players with the ball in his hand and a clear path to the goal. But Kez paused for an instant, rethinking
the angle his player should run, and pow! One of Shmitty’s players caught him and drove him into the ground headfirst with an Oof.

Shmitty cheered for himself. Kez gritted his teeth. He was getting his ass kicked, but more determined than ever to win. On the next play, Shmitty’s quarterback stepped back to throw, and Kez sent a man at him—certain he would get him this time—but Shmitty didn’t think twice. He sidestepped and unloaded a pass that soared down the field. By the time Kez could adjust the controls, Shmitty had scored and was whooping again. Now I wanted to play. As drunk as I was, I would have an excuse for not playing well, but just then Kez decided the game was over and stood up. He finished whatever was left in his cup and motioned for me to do the same.

“Let’s go for a drive,” he said.

*

When I first moved to Milton, Ellen and I had walked laps through its downtown most evenings. It was a small town, and there wasn’t very far to go or very much to see, but there were two or three streets lined with big Victorian, Georgian, and Colonial homes. Ellen explained their architecture and the town’s history as we passed them on warm summer evenings, and we played games trying to name the colors their modern day owners had painted them. I guessed names like cranberry, pewter and puce; she guessed names like rhinoceros grey, French’s and appleine—a cross between apple and tangerine. And she kissed me for every ka-blue-y or lima-licious I thought of.

As we passed each home, we owned it. We occupied it and made renovations. Guest bedrooms became third-floor libraries with window seats facing west. Tool sheds became summer kitchens, gazebos became greenhouses, and though later perhaps it
would seem foolish, grassy side yards had become play areas equipped with swing sets and sliding boards. We never once discussed children openly, but we had set aside places for them to play, just in case.

Now, as we drove down Park Street, the windows and yards in which Ellen and I had imagined our lives together seemed haunted. Smoke rose from their chimneys; Christmas trees and electric candles backlit their windows, but I practically shivered to look at them—they seemed abandoned, as if their owners had simply gotten up and left. It was pathetic to see how hard the town tried to be something it wasn’t, how it put on airs. If Milton had been more attractive, it wouldn’t have needed the signs to proclaim, “Milton, A Beautiful Place To Be.”

“Hey,” Shmitty said, as we crossed the river. “Why don’t we look for my girlfriend?”

“She’s not your girlfriend,” Kez said. “She doesn’t even know who you are.” I was stuck in the middle. They both smelled of sweat and cigarettes. When Kez opened the window a crack, I was relieved.

“What do you mean she’s not my girlfriend? You saw her,” Shmitty said.

“Yeah, I saw her. So, what does that prove?”

“So, you saw how she acted.”

“Yeah, I saw how she acted. She acted like you weren’t there. She was hoping you’d leave her alone.”

“I wasn’t drunk,” Shmitty said. “And you heard her. She called me ‘sweetie’ She called me ‘sweetie’ the other day, too, and we’ve talked.”

“She did call him ‘sweetie,”’ I said.
“So?” Kez said. “Some girl at the gas station called me ‘honey’ yesterday. That doesn’t mean we’re getting married.” He spat out the window, and told Shmitty to turn toward the beach, but Shmitty turned toward the liquor store. Kez groaned as we pulled up. The place had been closed for hours, and its doors were actually padlocked and chained. Neon Budweisers and Michelobs glowed from its windows.

“What else did she say?” he asked. “She called me ‘dearest.’ What else did she say?”

I told him she had said to behave.

“She didn’t even say thanks for the wine, did she?” he said.

“She didn’t even ring it up,” Kez said. “She probably put it back on the shelf. She’s probably going to sell it again.”

Shmitty glared at the store’s neon signs, rubbing his chin. He seemed to be weighing facts on scales in his mind, whether she liked him or whether she didn’t. When he couldn’t accept the way they were tilting, he put the truck in gear.

“I guess we’ll have to go to her house then,” he said, and off we went. I couldn’t imagine Shmitty actually knew where Patty lived, but we were headed somewhere along curvy roads, and fast. Soon, telephone poles whipped past us at more than seventy miles per hour, and I rocked against either Shmitty or Kez on every turn, but I didn’t care.

“I told you both,” Kez said. “It’s not what they say. It’s what they do. A woman’ll say anything.”

Shmitty didn’t answer. We were passing a trailer park now, and he was slowing down, looking at mailboxes, scanning lots for something to recognize, but they all looked the same to me—cheap, cold, and decorated for the season. Colored Christmas lights
shone from nearly every bush; plastic snowmen and Santas loomed in most lawns.

Shmitty guided the truck into the gravel horseshoe that led through the park.

   Kez nudged me with an elbow and said, “My ex wife used to live in a dump like this.” It was the first time I’d heard of her.

   “I don’t know where she gets off treating me the way she does,” Shmitty said. “She’s not that special.”

   Patty’s home was the farthest one back in the park, what some people would call a double-wide. There was a little Ford Escort GT with pin striping parked in the driveway, and I had to admit the yard was the nicest one in the place. She had set up wire frames shaped like snowdrifts in profile and hung them with white lights. They sat about ten feet in front of a row of bushes also strung with white lights and made it look as if she had been snowed in. A mechanical penguin guarded her steps. We parked and got out.

   Kez and I waited next to the truck while Shmitty went to the door. Deliberately or not, he snagged the cord to one of her drifts on the way and dragged it along stubbornly.

   “See,” Kez said. “This is what I was telling you, man. You’ve got to demand respect if you want it. A woman won’t give it unless you make her.”

   I was still drunk, but I was beginning to come down. It was like waking up to discover I was someplace I had not meant to be and with people I should not have trusted. But as much as I knew I shouldn’t be, I found myself pleased to be there. I hadn’t stayed in to wait for Ellen’s call; I hadn’t found an excuse to avoid Shmitty and Kez. And now, there was a confrontation afoot. Something inside of me wanted to shout.

   Shmitty trudged up the steps to the double-wide. He back-handed the plastic penguin as he passed and it rocked backward, struck the handrail and righted itself. Kez
chuckled and Shmitty watched us while he prodded the doorbell. The windows remained dark and no one came to the door. Shmitty prodded the doorbell again, looking back at us each time. We could hear the bell ringing somewhere inside. It wasn’t as if she could say she’d not heard it.

“Hey, Kez,” I said, starting into the yard. “She’s got Christmas lights.” I walked to the first wire frame and tugged it out of the ground. I kicked it as it fell, but the impact wasn’t very satisfying. The frame was too light.

“Hey, Patty,” Shmitty was yelling. “I’ve come for my wine.” At last there was a sign of life in the house. Someone pulled back a bedroom curtain and peered out. When Kez shouted that he’d seen her, the curtain shut, but it was too late.

“This man has come for his wine,” Kez shouted, running into the yard. He stooped beside the fallen wire snow drift and yanked its cord out of the socket next to the door. The drift went dark.

“If you didn’t like me, you shouldn’t have taken my wine,” Shmitty said.

“You shouldn’t fuck with our friend,” I shouted, pleased with my self. Kez was knocking over the last of the snow drifts and I hoisted the first one over my head. I ran forward and flung it against the house, and it struck with a shallow thwack before dropping in back of the bushes. That still wasn’t enough. I wanted to feel genuine anger, so I clutched the strand of lights strung through the bushes and took off toward the truck with Kez cheering me on. The cord whipped from the shrubbery as I ran. This was for luring me away from northern Virginia, for leaving me with warehouse workers and liquor store clerks. If this is what she thought of me, this is what I would be. I would
show up at her mother’s house tomorrow and I would demand answers. I would make her respect me.

After I’d run about fifteen yards from the house, the cord became taut and tore loose from its socket. Everything went dark. Shmitty was poised in front of the Patty’s bay window when she opened the door. He held the mechanical penguin in the air, rocking it slowly, side to side.

“You want your fucking wine?” Patty said, waving the bottle over her head while Shmitty, Kez and I froze, stunned that she’d actually come out. She stood on the top step in socks and a tee shirt that came to her knees. She looked ready to kill. “If you assholes don’t leave me alone, I’ll let you have this fucking bottle upside your head.”

“He doesn’t want your damn wine,” Kez said. “He wants you to give him a chance. He’s been nothing but nice to you, and you treat him like shit.”

“I did give him a chance,” Patty said, cocking the bottle as if she might throw it. “He knows he’s supposed to stay away from the store. I was stupid for trusting him. When you all came in tonight, I thought he was trying to prove he could act like a sane person.”

Kez laughed in a way that suggested he’d known about this all along. “I told him,” he said. “I told him to stay away from you, but he said he was in love. You can’t reason with a man who’s in love.”

Shmitty held the penguin over his head. He knew he was being laughed at and that the longer he waited to heave the penguin into Patty’s living room, the longer he would be the butt of the joke. He also knew that to lower the penguin to the ground would be to admit defeat. So he did neither; he pitched it onto the frozen ground about
eight feet in front of him and watched it crack down the middle. Kez laughed, and Shmitty said, *Bitch.* They started back toward the truck, but I stood there, rubbing the stripe the electrical cord had left in my palm.

“I’m not putting up with this shit any more, Shmitty,” Patty called after him. “You can buy me all the damn wine you want, but the next time you come out here, you’re going to jail. And don’t you fucking dare come into my store again.”

I could understand her rage. There was no way to excuse what we had done, but at the same time—this wasn’t fair; she hadn’t even given Shmitty a chance. She’d only made it clear that in no way could she ever possibly care for him the way he cared for her. Then she dared play the victim when he reacted. Of course, wrecking her yard wasn’t the best thing to do, but we were justified because it didn’t matter what we had done. She would see us however she wanted, no matter what we did or did not do. She enjoyed being a bitch. It made her feel powerful. You could tell by the way she’d ignored us at the store. And now she stood there, shaking her head as if we weren’t men.

There were sirens. They were far off in the distance, but they were coming our way. One of her neighbors must have called the police.

“At least give him his wine back,” I told her and came toward the steps. “It’s one thing to tell a guy you don’t like him, but it’s another to act like you do.”

Patty rolled her eyes, but held out the bottle. She seemed prepared to let me have it, but as I approached, she backed away.

“Just take your damn wine and leave me alone,” she said, gripping the storm door. “I didn’t ask for it, anyway.” Then, as I mounted the steps, she lobbed the bottle behind her and ducked inside. It broke at my feet.
I reached for the bottle. I thought I had caught it. I even felt the sting of blunt glass against my frozen fingertips, but then my pants were soaked, and shards of glass were cracking under my shoes. When I looked up, she was glaring down at me from the storm door.

Her dark eyes dared me to make her pay for all this, but I hesitated. The sirens were closer. Kez and Shmitty were waiting.

Choir Tour

Joe Dagno sits in the eighth row of a bus that contains twelve double rows of bucket seats, not counting the bench by the bathroom where his friends sit. He is a senior, and after three years in choir, this is the furthest he’s ascended into the choir’s social strata, though perhaps the eighth row is more like the sixth because there’s a wheel well under his feet. He can hear Brody, and Marla, and Gene joking behind him, but knows he’ll look like a fool if he sits on his knees and turns to look at them. They are his friends from theater. They hang out in the world of the theater, in Cole Hall, but here, in the world of the choir, on the bus, Brody, and Marla, and Gene hang out with Kurt Boehmer, Sarah Spicer and others who think Joe’s a dork. Gene, and Brody, and Marla, his ex, don’t act like his friends here. But Myrrh Willis does. She is pumpkin-shaped and soft, with enormous breasts that some guy back home is fond of squeezing, she says. She sits next to him, with her face in a Cosmopolitan. Joe is a bass. He is solid and black-haired, and pretty good-looking, he thinks, though he often suspects he’s not dressed quite right. This is the story of people learning to miss him, though Myrrh Willis can’t miss him. She’s sitting beside him. He doesn’t pursue her. Joe cocks his ear rearward between reclining seats. He thinks he’s heard his name.
This is the story of Sundry, the cat, not Sun Dry, but Sundry, as in various and/or particular. Sundry’s owner, Carolyn Sipes, an English major, has been on choir tour for two days and left Sundry alone in a dorm where no pets are allowed. She hopes Sundry will learn from this. She hopes Sundry will learn to eat the dry cat food the vet says is best for digestion, but which Carolyn, honestly, hasn’t been very persistent in serving. The rule has been simple: Sundry cries; Sundry gets what Sundry wants, moist from a can. But this week, Carolyn hasn’t been on campus to hear him.

Carolyn is tall, brown-haired and skinny, almost bony, but few people guess that because she’s always dressed in sweaters and layers. She keeps herself covered. She is not a vocal performance major like almost everyone else in choir, but she is an alto who sang a bit in high school, of whom Dr. Roestenkowski, the choir’s director, says the choir is in need. She sits with her knees near her chin, and her face on the window. She can feel the contour of the road in her cheekbone.

Kurt Boehmer is membership president, elected so two years in a row. His jobs include arranging housing on tour. Until last spring, choir members put their names next to room numbers on a yellow pad as it was passed through the bus, and Dr. R. worked out any disputes that arose, but toward the end of last spring he stopped dealing with housing issues. He began sleeping on busses most nights and there were fights, over-crowded rooms and shunned roommates in his absence, so Kurt was asked to take charge.

He is tall and lean, with brown hair and blue eyes, and he’s a tenor—a soloist. He’s very serious about housing and utilizes a different method to put roommates
together each night, according to vocal part, years in choir, number of letters in one’s name, or something even more obscure. This is his art and his science. The process is beyond him, he says, but still people accuse him of putting his friends closest to vending machines, hotel bars, and each other. But he’s not like that, he swears. When those things have happened, they’ve been unintended. This is a story of coincidence. His girlfriend leans on his arm and happens to knock into his pen every few minutes. His shoulder is damp from the heat of her body. He may have to dump her. He has an erection. It’s very distracting.

*

Sarah Spicer leans up against her boyfriend, Kurt, choir membership president. He’s a handsome guy, well-liked, and she’s pretty sure he’s the reason she tends to get good rooms in hotels on choir tour, unlike Carolyn Sipes, who’s usually so covered with cat hair that no one wants to sit next to her on the bus and who usually gets stuck in a room next to the incinerator or the janitor’s closet, though she did once get a room two doors from the bar, which was—it makes sense—Kurt trying to make Sarah jealous. Sarah has an average build; she’ll admit that, but she knows how to dress it, unlike Carolyn who likely has no flaws to speak of even though she eats whatever she wants and dresses as if there were no lights in her room. Sarah has light brown hair, but calls it blonde and no one denies her. She has great skin; everyone says that, too. It looks ceramic, they say. She sings alto in the Salisbury University Choir. In high school, she sang soprano at Wi-High. She’s a solid soprano. She’s actually very good, but Dr. Roestenkowski stuck her with the altos, because he needed altos this year, and she’s really more versatile than some others. When she’s a junior, though, next year, she’ll
probably be put with the sopranos, which is where she belongs. She explains this to Kurt, but Kurt’s not listening. This is the story of Kurt not paying attention to Sarah, pretending he’s important, just because Dr. Roestenkowski is too lazy to do his damn job. Sarah lets her arm slump as if she’s falling asleep and knocks Kurt’s pen to the left, causing a streak. He sighs as if somebody’s died.

*

Myrrh Willis, a junior, soprano, hates *Cosmo* but reads it anyway, reads it religiously. It makes everything sound like a recipe—*ten steps, five steps, three steps to happiness!* It proffers salvation through denying him sex for two weeks and a mouth full of ice cubes—*Make Him Squirm Just for You!!!* It proffers brand as identity. It is a sham, but she can’t put it down. Joe squirms in the seat beside her. She knows who he’s watching. Myrrh Willis has mousy brown hair, but at least it’s her own. Marla’s translucent red looks like it came from a bottle.

The sour stench of Joe’s breath—he’s been eating sour cream and onion potato chips for three solid three hours—is only a detail in this story. It is not intrinsically valuable.

*

This is the story of Sundry. That is what Carolyn thinks when she gets out of the bus at a 7-11 in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, though not in those words. She wonders, *What is he doing? Is he okay? What will I do if he dies?* She pulls a five from a change purse stamped with a picture of *Hello Kitty*—*Hello Kitty* is mouthless—and feels sick. It’s hardly fair to buy a big bag of *Combos* while Sundry is suffering, learning to like
what is good for him instead of what’s tasty. So Carolyn buys a V-8. She doesn’t care for its vitamins, only its taste, and V-8 juice is the nastiest stuff in the store.

Gene is walking into the store when Carolyn walks out. He says, *You should have had a V-8*, but she doesn’t get it. Perhaps she grabbed something else, and he’s point it out, but she checks, and he’s wrong. How would he know what she meant to buy anyway? Perhaps she looks ill—perhaps that’s what he means. She resolves to gulp down a bottle of V-8 juice at every stop for the rest of the trip. Then again, Gene might have been kidding.

*

This is not the story of Myrrh Willis’s breasts, though she talks about them all the time. She says Joe can touch them, squeeze them if he wants to. Most guys say they’re pillowy, she says, but Joe could care less. He knows she is only trying to cheer him up, to distract him from the back of the bus, from friends who’ve had little more to say to him than *Hey*, the bare minimum syllable—it’s nice of her; she’s a sweet heart, and he should be grateful that anyone speaks to him, but really, she should cut it out. Too bad no one else gets him, no one else gets him at all, not that Myrrh Willis actually does, but she puts forth an effort at least. That should count, shouldn’t it? Maybe it’s time to stop trying, time to accept that people don’t get him, that they’re not on his level, time to stop being hurt by all this and start feeling flattered by it instead. Something about Myrrh smells like cereal.

*

Brody, and Marla, and Gene don’t get Joe; they get *it*. Joe doesn’t get it. This is senior year, man. Last choir tour, man. Chill the fuck out, man. Don’t be such a spazz.
This is the story of Gene, and Marla, and Brody, and Joe if he’s willing, having a good time, taking it easy, not giving a shit, living the moment. This is the story of the vodka in Gene’s suitcase and the pot in Marla’s fanny pack. It’s not their fault there’s only room for three on the bench or that the next couple of seats were snatched up while Joe was stuffing his enormous suitcase into the compartment under the bus. He’s always afraid he won’t bring enough clothes. So this is his fault, for God’s sake!

Gene, who stands next to Joe in bass section, tried to approach him in 7-11, but Joe only said, Hey in response. Gene wants to tell him, Hay is for horses. Marla wants to tell him not to try so hard. He’s a sweet guy, and she still kind of likes him, but—as long as he’s clinging to hope—how can she stand to be near him? Brody wants to tell him to get over it, dude, there’s no law that says people have to like you. Marla shouldn’t feel guilty. They tell lame jokes, send mixed signals and have to act like a tough guy, respectively.

*  

This is the story of Merlin Rhecks, the bus driver. He loves that name, and so do his passengers. They say, Oh my, Mr. Rhecks. I sure hope you don’t and then laugh to think of the people who take his name as an omen. Some sit up front, in the seat right behind him and talk, because they are well-off and have free time and mean to show they can empathize down in ways bell hops and bus drivers, perhaps, can’t empathize up—that they are, in a word, gracious. They ask about his name, where he’s from and which tourist spot is his favorite, and then say, Oh yes, I’ve been there, too; it was beautiful, which they think means more to him than it does, that they are the same in some way, but there is a difference between working and tourism these folks can’t appreciate. Mr.
Rhecks is only a minor character in their stories, the charming old bus driver who—has anyone told you?—reminds them of Humphrey Bogart in “The African Queen.” But it doesn’t bother Mr. Rhecks that they all imagine themselves Katherine Hepburn. They don’t know any better. People never know any better.

*

Kurt has a brilliant new system for putting people in rooms. He does it by vowel sounds, which is harder, way harder, than it seems. For example, he has a difficult time deciding whether to put Amber with Anna or with Alice, the alphabet being no help. To make things more difficult, he’s chosen not to use last names to break ties. He’s also decided not to consider the number of letters in roommates’ names because he’s fallen back on that method too often. So this week he puts Alice with Sylvia, because their short I sounds match, which is brilliant, just brilliant, he knows. This is the story of Kurt’s system, which should stymie all accusations of favoritism. Of course, Sarah will have to room with Carolyn Sipes, the damn cat girl, because of their long A sounds. But, oh well. If she wouldn’t sweat all over his arm he might help. He’s paired himself with Gene, Eugene, because of their U sounds.

*

Dr. Roestenkoswki likes to talk to their drivers. They get a different one most trips, and this is the fifth trip of the year. So aside from drivers in ninety-four and ninety-six, who drove entire choir seasons, and maybe a few who repeated now and then, he’s probably known close to thirty of them—good guys, each one, except for the lady. Her husband drove truck and hadn’t called home in three months. She was on the CB constantly, asking who’d seen him, and made Dr. Roestenkowski nervous any time a red
Kenworth appeared in her rearview. She maneuvered the bus back and forth to slow traffic—but most truck drivers are like dogs, loyal, uncomplicated people, and Dr. Roestenkowski wants to be that way, not catlike—no, not catlike at all. He would enjoy driving a bus, or maybe a truck. Perhaps that’s what he’ll do when he retires, drive a bus and he carry a dog, a golden retriever named Friendly—that could be fun, to drive with a golden retriever named Friendly. To look more like the kind of guy Friendly would like, Dr. R’s already changed his appearance, tried to look more down to earth. He’s ditched the goatee, the olive green khakis and the collarless shirts, and taken to sporting the monogrammed golf shirts high school band directors and used car salesmen wear. He looks like a doofus, sure, but at least he doesn’t look like someone trying to be something more than he is.

*

This is definitely not the story of Myrrh Willis’s breasts, though she won’t stop talking about them. The bus is halfway to Pittsburgh, four hours into this leg of the trip, on the second to last day of their tour, and still she talks about breasts. Joe knows hers are pillowy. Joe knows that this guy back home used to squeeze them before every glee club concert, that this guy thought they were lucky and that that used to crack Myrrh up. He’s heard all this before, and he knows that she doesn’t mind if he squeezes them, too. But he also knows that she knows she’s making him queasy and that she finds his discomfort amusing. He tells her to shut up about breasts. She tells him to describe the best ones he’s seen. His cheeks flush with blood. This conversation is like being kissed by an aunt. Though he knows it’s meant to cheer him up, it’s unsettling. It feels sloppy and awkward. He’d rather be punched in the stomach, so of course she raises her voice so people can
hear. *Oh my god,* she says, *You’re the first guy I’ve known who doesn’t like breasts,* which is not true at all, though he’s not sure how to explain himself with everyone looking. He is an ardent admirer of breasts, in their endless variety, but he feels they’re somehow cheapened by publicity, that access to them can’t be both valued and common.

*I love breasts,* he says, loudly enough to be heard in the back seat. *I just don’t want to touch yours.*

*

Carolyn’s room back at college resembles a Rube Goldberg machine. She only hopes that it works. In order to keep Sundry out of the window, where the cat likes to lie in the sun, but where he can be seen from the parking lot, Carolyn stacked books the width of the sill, higher than Sundry can leap. She ran a cord past them to keep them from toppling and tied it between a dress drawer and post on her bed because she’s not allowed to drive nails into her walls. She set a milk jug with a pin hole in it on top of the dresser and set Sundry’s water bowl beneath it, so the drip, drip, drip will keep Sundry’s water fresh. She filled three candy dishes with dry food and hung a quilt over the door to muffle Sundry’s cries, if he cries.

So now, on the bus on Route 70, Carolyn is not distracted one bit by the scenery. She sips a V-8 and reviews all precautions, the books, the cord, the jug, the bowl and the quilt and reconsiders her safe guards. She is not satisfied. From the beginning, she had known that taking care of a cat in the dorm would be complicated, but the man who brought her the kitten had seemed to mean something by it—he had seemed, in fact, to be in love with her. She had hoped. She had needed something to care for, something to get her out of her own head, and had Sundry provided just that, a need for which to labor in
service. So this is not the story of Sundry. This is a story about the elaborate mechanizations of caring for Sundry.

*

Sarah Spicer is mad. She stands one from the aisle in the alto section, front left, and moves her lips, but she isn’t singing. Kurt, her dumbfuck boyfriend, put her in a room with Carolyn Sipes, whose black choir robe has white cat hair on it, like everything else she owns. Carolyn stands to Sarah’s right, next to the sopranos, and fumbles for her note—it was an E flat, already past—because she can’t read music and doesn’t have Sarah to follow. The girls behind them are contraltos, practically tenors, and sing a different line. Sarah would think that with all the time Carolyn spends in the piano lab, plinking notes one by deliberate one, she’d at least know her part, but she can’t get the pitch. It’s a wonder The Big R puts up with her. They’re singing O’ Shenandoah, in which Kurt has a solo, and Dr. Roestenkowski moves his hands in front of his chest, hidden from the audience, letting each section know when to come in and when to rest, when to rise and when to fall, but Sarah feels the choir begin to drag, to bend to her will. The fewer people sing, the more conscious others become of their singing, the more hesitant they become to range through the scales on cue, the more likely they are to wait for their neighbors—not wanting to stand out—and the song becomes a lurching mess, its first consonants stuttered. When the time comes for Kurt to sing, For seven years I courted Sally / Away you rolling river / For seven more I longed to have her... the spell is broken, and Dr. Roestenkowski looks angry, though he doesn’t seem to know who to blame, who in particular is at fault. He beckons with his fingers for volume. He pleads with his lips for attention, but when the choir exhales to a hush, and the audience
applauds only politely, the story is Sarah’s, not his. Then she raises her eyebrows and opens her mouth two fingers’ width, the way she was taught in voice lessons. The choir begins *Motherless Child*.

*

Kurt cannot believe what just happened. He cannot believe it—or maybe he can, and too readily—that people, his fellow choir members, who practice six and eight hours a week, many of whom have been singing since grade school, and some of whom have ambitions of singing professionally, could put forth such a lackluster effort. Where is the pride? The forty members of the concert choir, the pianist and the organist, file past him into the hotel, lugging their suitcases while he reads the last of the roommates from his legal pad, *Brody Morner, Joe Dagno*. Dr. Roestenkowski is pacing the parking lot. He never comes into their hotels anymore. He waits until everyone leaves to get back on the bus. But what is he thinking? Where does he shower? Why doesn’t he yell at them when they put in piss-poor performances? It’s embarrassing. If Kurt were a writer, he’d say that a character is what it wants and that a story is what a character does—or can do—to be satisfied. It’s that simple. A choir that doesn’t care if it sucks is no story. But Kurt going into the hotel and shouting may be.

*

Brody, and Marla, and Gene have convened in Gene’s room because Kurt, his roommate, is out. He’s probably somewhere with Sarah. They’ve purchased Coke from the vending machine, mixed it with vodka in plastic hotel cups and now drink. They’re trying to decide whether to smoke pot in the room or take a walk out back past the dumpsters or neither. Gene suggests they go for a walk; it’s nice out, but Brody says it’s
not all that nice out, and someone will see them. Marla says maybe smoking a bowl on
tour is too risky; they probably shouldn’t. But Brody and Gene say they probably should;
they’ll just have to figure out how to cover the smell. Marla says she wonders where Joe
is; they should probably get him. But Brody and Gene say they probably shouldn’t;
they’ll have more fun without him, though if you want me to get him, I can. I don’t really
care. Marla says she doesn’t want Joe to feel like a charity case.

* 

Myrrh Willis sits on an overstuffed couch in the lounge, reading an issue of
Glamour. It’s all about men. It’s all about commodifying oneself for men, something
Myrrh, with hairy armpits and legs, and no special bra, refuses to do. The way she sees it,
no one can disgrace what she refuses to cloister so when Joe said he didn’t want to
squeeze her breasts—something plenty of other guys have been eager to do—she wasn’t
bothered at all. Why should she be? She never claimed any mystique. Joe sits across from
her now, on another overstuffed couch, mad and alone, pretending to read the newspaper,
though he isn’t. He’s looking at her. He’s waiting for her to ask if he’s okay, but she
won’t. She’s tired of being his babysitter. He should ask her for a change, How are you
doing? and not simply to wait for a segue to tell his own story, which everyone knows—
how Marla stopped calling with no explanation, and how, though he tries to accept her
decision, it is hell, pure hell, to be so often near her but not to be with her.

But isn’t self-pity simply another form of narcissism, and shouldn’t this be story
of those who refuse it? Is there anything decent to read in your Cosmo? Joe asks. He’s
making an effort.

*
This is the story of Merlin Rhecks getting wrecked. He sits at the bar and sips a Scotch on the rocks. He swirls the ice while he puffs a cigar. He stays wherever his tour groups stay; that’s part of the deal, and he prefers groups like this one, school groups or church groups that drink in their rooms but don’t go to the bar, don’t blow his cover. He brings a blazer, tan slacks, an Oxford shirt, the works, on most trips, dons them and slips into hotel bars after everyone’s settled. He’s got the skin of a yachtsman. He looks good in a navy blue jacket and knows it. His wife’s dental plan, twenty years working a line at DuPont, helps, too, but he doesn’t prowl really. No, he merely sits there, watching his smoke trail the length of the counter and in the mirror. He merely watches the men he is not and smiles at the women sans wedding bands who trust he’s traveling on business worth being traveled for. Sometimes they drink with him, and sometimes they come to his room, but not often, because that ruins everything. They are never all they’re dressed up to be. Some yellow necklace, some horsey guffaw, some sad malapropism—I’ve had this weekend airmarked since March—betrays them, betrays him, whether or not their money is real. It is not that kind of victory he wants so he prefers to watch from a distance. Tonight, he drinks scotch. He often drinks bourbon. He never asks bartenders their names or anything else. He does not wish to lessen the distance between them, only says what he wants. Merlin Rhecks does unto others as he would have them do unto him.

*"

Sundry may be starving to death. Sundry may be full and content. It’s the wondering that makes this a story. Carolyn has unpacked her bags, checked what’s on television and then turned it off again. Now, she’s sipping V-8 and reviewing the clothes she’s laid out for tomorrow. She wants to spend as little time with Sarah, her roommate,
as possible, and so she plans to dress in a hurry tomorrow. Sarah sabotaged their concert, and no one else knows it, but Carolyn knows Sarah’s anger was directed at her—yet another hint that she doesn’t belong in the choir, so maybe it’s true: Dr. R. placed her in choir for less than admirable reasons. No matter how hard she works, she can’t feel she’s earned it. She just wishes he’d stop pretending it’s the cat he likes and not her.

Sarah comes in all aflutter. She throws her bags onto a bed and then spins with a huff and goes into the bathroom to turn on the shower. When she comes out three seconds later, she kicks off a shoe so hard it flies up and strikes the lamp shade hanging over the table. It causes no harm, but now the room feels out of balance as the light swings back and forth, lighting one half and then the other. Carolyn remains speechless.

“This is my last year in choir,” Sarah announces. She’s facing the mirror. She sounds as if she’s on the verge of tears, herself, but still seems defiant. “I mean, why even try?”

Carolyn swallows a mouthful of V-8 and watches from the edge of her bed. She hadn’t finished deciphering her own thoughts, but she finds herself preferring to listen. Sarah plucks two bags of microwave popcorn from a courtesy tray on the bureau and waves them over her shoulder without turning. “Want some?” she barks and then strips them of their cellophane wrappers and pops them into the microwave without waiting for an answer. Once the bags begin to swell, she turns and takes a seat on the bed facing Carolyn. Her eyes are red.

“V-8 juice, huh?” she says. “You are better than me.”

Carolyn doesn’t know what to say. She is often unnerved by people saying nice things to her. She always fears she’ll sound overly grateful, only then to discover the
compliment was less than entirely earnest. “What I really wanted was a big bag of Combos.”

Sarah blushes. She can hear the shower running in the background.

*

The pale half-light of the parking lot reminds Dr. Roestenkowski of snow. It reminds him of the day, last January, the snow fell so fast that as a precaution he spent the night in Memorial Hall, in his office, listening to Pablo Casals’ cello suites. He could have gone home earlier, but he knew the roads would be blocked in the morning, and he wouldn’t have made it back for recitals, the ones about which his freshmen were so anxious, and besides he didn’t want to go home. That damn unappeasable kitten was there. So he called his wife—who sighed at him—and then ate soup from a hot pot, and then tore pages from a copy of Cat Fancy Magazine, and then tried to sleep in the big oak chair by the window—the high-arched window, impossible to curtain—and then on his desk, but he couldn’t. The snow flakes are teasing him. They brush up against the watery glass and then spin away. He longs to catch each one in his palm. He longs to admire every detail of every one—to bat it from side to side—even though the very act of admiring a snowflake melts it away. He thinks about cats. He wishes he were a cat, because if he were a cat he wouldn’t have to think about snowflakes, he could just chase them. He wouldn’t have to think about anything.

His wife’s new kitten is both stupid and evil. It scoots beneath furniture whenever he reaches for it—it acts as if he wants to kill it, though he’s only reaching to pet it, the dumb cat. He wants to shake some sense into it.
Someone is playing piano, plinking away down the hall in the piano lab, practicing solfege. And whoever it is is awful. Whoever it is grates on his nerves, but… He thinks of the kitten. At least someone is trying. Most of the kids he finds in the piano lab of an evening are there making out, refugees from roommates making out, too, but at least this piano player is making an effort. He gets up from his desk and walks down the hall, and after easing open the door to one of the labs, he finds Carolyn.

Her back is to him. Her fine, blonde hair flows down her back in a pony tail, and there is snow on the floor next to her boots. She is barefooted. In Dr. Roestenkowski’s eyes, she is incredibly sweet—unguarded and potentially appreciative. Plinking one slow note at a time, she sings:

*Magnificat, anima mea, Dominum.*

He inches closer. He wants to teach her. He wants to inspire her. He wants her to gaze up at him with wide-eyed appreciation, but when Dr. Roestenkowski places his hand on her shoulder, she jumps.

*

Enough is enough. This is the story of not taking it anymore. This is the story of chaos turned into order. Kurt has been pacing the hall between the bar and the lobby and thinking of what he will say. He has gotten his key from the desk, but hasn’t taken his bags to his room. They sit on a decorative bench near the door. He has constructed an outline in his head, of particular things to say to particular people, distillations of broad principles about pride, about caring, about working together. *It’s about being together, people,* he plans to say. With a head full of ideas and adrenaline, he heads down the hallway. He checks room numbers on his legal pad and pounds each appropriate door as
he passes. Membership meeting, lower lobby, ten minutes! he barks without waiting for answers. He pauses at the end of the second floor’s hallway, outside his own room—hears music, hears shouting, smells something. Smells pot. He knocks.

When no one comes to the door, he unlocks it and pushes inside. A CD player blares from the heating unit. The window is open. On the table are keys, change, cigarettes, a bottle of Smirnoff, twenty-ounce Coke bottles and cups nearly empty, but there is no one in sight. They are all in the bathroom, with the shower running. He can hear them and smell them. Gene says, Damn, you look like a freak! Brody says, Shut the hell up! You’re next! Marla laughs hysterically. They echo. Kurt bangs on the door.

Twenty minutes later, about half of the choir has gathered in the lobby, and Kurt stands before them, slapping the legal pad on his palm. He wants to tear it in half. He waits until they are as quiet as he can expect them to be. They are wired and bemused. Gene’s head is wrapped in a towel. Sylvia says she saw the bus driver puke on a plastic tree and fall into it. They titter. They want to know why they’re here, and Kurt is fully prepared to tell them: I think you should know I was concerned after tonight’s concert. I really don’t think it was up to our standards. I-

Sarah steps from the crowd. She turns her back to him. He forgets what story he’s telling. Sarah says, Dr. R is in love with a cat. That’s why he sleeps on the bus.

* 

Everyone stands at attention. Everyone waits. Though they wear tee-shirts under their musty black robes, they sweat. They have filed into St. Bernadette’s Cathedral near Pittsburgh, Sunday morning, and they whisper few words to each other, don’t need to say more, only Wow, this is fucked up, and Yeah. Everyone knows about Dr. Roestenkowski
and the girl and the cat. Everyone knows that most nights on tour last year, after her roommates crept out to play cards, or chat, or hook-up—whatever—he crept in to see her, although he was weird about it, although he’s a freak. He tried to act all concerned with the kitten he gave her, *How’s he doing? What’s he doing? I hope you’re not feeding him moist.* He brought her cat toys and cat nip and articles copied from *Cat Fancy Magazine.* He only slept with her twice.

Now everyone knows why Dr. Roestenkowski tutored Carolyn so closely. They had always thought it was unfair—her voice was scarcely better than average—but now, well, they have to admit this is pretty damn funny.

They say is the strangest thing they’ve ever heard, though Kurt had heard worse. His dad once ran a chicken and wedding cake stand.

* *

Now everyone waits. Dr. Roestenkowski stands before them, and he is aware of their thoughts—someone meowed at him on the bus; someone whistled the riff from *Cat Scratch Fever* in the parking lot. He knows that the university president’s daughter is best friends with the choir’s pianist, too. He understands that she’ll tell an unflattering tale, but he’ll have to worry about that later. He’ll have a long afternoon bus ride to overhear rumors, but in the meantime, there is a concert to lead, though he pauses: Brody Morner is wearing a baseball cap.

Dr. Roestenkowski meets their eyes. He counts with his lips and his index finger. When he inhales, they inhale. And with a jot of his finger, the sopranos begin, *Dooma-looma, dooma-looma, dooma-looma,* and the altos follow a few steps below, with the same words, and then the tenors, and then the basses, parts coming in lower and lower.
Together, they sound like water pouring down stairs. The melody begins with the tenors singing *Ezekul saw de whe-el / way up in the middle of the air / Ezekul saw de whe-el / way in the middle of the air*, which the altos echo, only higher, while the basses chant *A whe-el in a wh-eel in a whe-el in a whe-el*. And now the sopranos lilt above everyone, *Way in the middle of the air*.

They produce a sound that can not be described one line at a time. It is a sound demanding striped paper, bass clefs and treble clefs, layers of lines. It is a sound full of sounds, of conflicts and agreements, simultaneous and discrete. How to express the effects and after-effects of their voices traversing the room, resonating within the wood of the pulpit, the wood of the cross beams, the plastic box of the EXIT sign, dampened by the bodies in the pews, broken and distorted by the frames of the stained glass window, but occupying the entire space of the sanctuary? This is not a transcendent moment; this is the work of forty-three horribly singular beasts.

The piece sounds like a train on the tracks, steam hissing, pistons churning, cams turning cams, and every so often a whistle blows. It is a magnificent cacophony. Dr. Roestenkowski gesticulates, fingers curling up for more, then palms pressing down for less. His forehead dampens. His ears ring.

* 

Merlin Rhecks falls asleep when he drives sometimes and wakes up and doesn’t know how far he’s gone, but sees that he’s still between the white lines, like always, which must mean he’s meant to be there. It is a powerful feeling. It’s harder to stay awake today, on their way back from Pittsburgh, in the late afternoon, because the kids are so quiet, half of them sleeping. The professor sits grumpy behind him, not saying a
word, not even asking for stories. The professor likes stories, so Mr. Rhecks tells one.
There was a fat woman stuck in the bus bathroom once. She couldn’t open the door, because it got caught on her gut. She had to sit down to pull it inward. So there she sat, squat on the hopper, pulling the door toward her knees while everyone watched, but when she stood up, she knocked the door shut again. The professor doesn’t laugh at this story, and Merlin Rhecks begins to wonder what it’s missing. It might be funnier if he put some poop in it. He feels sick from drinking last night. If someone doesn’t talk to him soon, he’ll doze off, and if he does it will be tempting to wreck. He wants to know what that’d be like. He wants to know what he’d do afterward.

* 

Dr. Roestenkowski is driving the bus. They’re about to arrive back on campus in Salisbury, and he’s been driving for an hour. Mr. Rhecks puked in the trash can and then refused to drive after Gene mentioned his tumble into the puke; he said they should call him Mr. Retch. Gene sits close enough to be heard because he no longer sits with Marla and Brody, who no longer sit with each other. They are spread throughout the bus. Brody’s hair is red, and Gene’s eye is black. Joe wonders how that all happened. He’s sitting up front, too, because it took forever to fit his suitcase under the bus, and the seats in the back filled quickly. That raggedy old suitcase slows him down every time, but oh well. This is the last choir tour of his senior year, so whatever, man. He hopes no one notices he’s wearing the clothes he wore yesterday. He watches—he feels—Dr. Roestenkowski drive nervously, accelerating slowly, braking over-aggressively, but the guy looks okay up there. The good doctor doesn’t look all that devastated, and the cat girl
he stalked, well, she looks okay, too. Carolyn’s sitting on the back bench, alone, not talking to anyone, sipping V-8 and munching on Combos.

Kurt and Sarah are fighting. Kurt isn’t mad that she ruined the concert. He isn’t mad that she ruined his meeting—Joe knows all this because Kurt stayed in the lobby after the meeting and complained to Myrhh and Joe. But now, and he can hear this up front because they’re loud, Kurt is dumping her. He’s calling her *Sweaty Betty*, so good riddance!

Wow, Joe thinks, things are really coming together or at least falling apart in ways he can approve of, as if there were justice for all. Sure, Dr. Roestenkowski will get in some sort of trouble, at least from his wife whose kitten he swiped—and the student paper will surely have fun with the rumor. Oh yes, this is all strange, and Joe’s friends seem to be mad at each other, and who knows how that will affect him, but no one is dead. No one is dead, and he and Myrrh are together. That makes up for a lot of things, doesn’t it? Maybe it’s karma, some cosmic balance—Joe doesn’t really know, and frankly, he’s not likely to question.

They’re pulling into the Laurence Hall parking lot, in front of the dorm where about a third of the girls in choir live, where Joe didn’t recall until now that Myrrh lives. So she’s gathering her books. He tries to think of some witty way to end their trip, something to bring things full circle. This is the story of things coming full circle, so as Myrrh stands to get off the bus, Joe clears his throat loudly and reaches out, as conspicuously as possible, to grab her right breast—and she slaps him.

This is the story of Dr. Roestenkowski turning his head and looking annoyed.

This is the story of somebody screaming, *Look out for the cat!*
Sundry is out in the open air. This is where he wanted to be. Day after day, he paced that little room in the dorm, hopping onto and off of the bed, hoping to catch just a glimpse of the world he’s in now. Two days ago, though, everything fell. Just as he had done every day since Carolyn left, Sundry had leapt from her futon, trying to get up on top of the books in the window. He had dug his claws into one of them, so close to the sunshine, so close to the air, but then everything fell backward on top of him. The whole world seemed to implode. He was clinging to the quilt hung from the door when the resident director arrived, alerted by a neighbor that Carolyn was having some sort of fit.

Now Sundry lives next to the steps to Laurence Hall, eating chicken nuggets and catsup brought to him by strange girls. It’s a nice way to live. People stop briefly to pet him. They feed him. They go on their way. Sundry can go where he pleases and when, and now he’s crossing the parking lot, intrigued by the squirrels by the road. He has no concept of eating them. He’s always been fed in a bowl, but these squirrels, they’re so fluffy and fast—he wants to be near them, playful and hungry and crazed. The asphalt is harder than anything he’s felt before.

And here comes a bus. This is the story of a trip on a bus.

**Over the Dune**

We were walking the beach when we saw them, strange lights in the bay.

“In the surf,” she said. “Did you see it?” And I did see something, there in the darkness, though she should have said, “them,” because there was more than one.
She shouldn’t have said, “surf,” either, because the waves weren’t even close to
tall enough to break.

“There!” Another flash appeared to my left, and then another, and another, farther
away. They appeared without warning, and disappeared before she could turn her head,
but she claimed to see others, far off to the right. I watched the lights of tankers slide
toward Philadelphia.

But these flashes, just yards from the shore, these palm-sized illuminations, what
were they? Bio-luminous plankton? Strange electrical fish? She said she’d never heard of
such things outside the tropics: Perhaps they were pieces of trash, glass or aluminum
stirred by the tide and lit by the moon. But the moon was half-hidden by clouds. Her
theory went against facts, I told her. But tiger sharks—up to 250 pounds—had been
captured in this cove. Perhaps we’d seen the silver scales of prey, writhing away from a
feeding frenzy. Perhaps we’d seen the sharks themselves. But she didn’t want to hear
that. Remember the moon, she said—a shark’s side is no brighter than tin; the surf is too
shallow besides.

Beyond the dune, beyond the darkened cottages, cars passed on a thin asphalt
road, but there weren’t many. Down the beach, a man sat on a cooler, beside a lantern on
a pole, waiting for his surf rod to twitch. Farther, a bonfire cast sparks into the breeze and
hissed as the tide crept closer. There was no one nearby.

She took off her shoes and her socks, I took off mine. I rolled up my pant legs,
she wore shorts. We slipped into the water, curious, cautious—bug-bitten. I wanted to
laugh, but knew I’d laugh loudly.
We went in after the lights. She’d found a large paper cup and held it close to the water. I suggested she poke a few holes in it, so it could move through the water more freely, like a net, but she wouldn’t. We crept forward, testing the shoal with our feet. Salt-sticky waves rolled to our thighs.

“Ooh, Ooh,” she said, pursuing a flash already past.

“Oh, Oh,” I said, doing the same.

We sloshed around for nearly an hour, growing less interested as we grew less afraid. Anything dangerous would have attacked us by then, and I had already stumbled twice, soaking my shorts entirely.

“Maybe we should go,” I suggested. “If we don’t, I’ll have a hard time getting up for work in the morning.”

“Just a bit longer,” she said. “I want to figure this out.” She inched through the water with eyes like a heron, probing, undeterred. “Besides, you need to learn to relax,” she said. “You need to enjoy the moment,” she said.

“I’m trying,” I said. “It’s just that—”

She shushed me, and I stared at the back of her head, but I knew she was right. I followed her nervously, slowly, wondering about life on a tanker, about mysteries. I wondered whether the salt was rusting my keys.

And then suddenly, whatever it was, or one of whatever they were, revealed itself, directly in front of us, within arm’s reach, and flashed again as she stabbed after it with the cup. She caught it.

“Hurry, hurry,” I said, as we charged to the shore, listening for sounds of life from inside the container. “What is it?” I asked, standing while she knelt on the sand.
“I don’t know,” she said, looking up at me smugly. “But it isn’t a shark.”

“Must be aluminum then,” I said, prodding her shoulder. We stared into the cup together, but saw nothing. Then, trembling and damp, we carried the cup over the dune.

A soft, shapeless light shined through the cup’s wax paper sides. The denim button-down she’d worn as a jacket was soaked. Her long, golden hair was out of control.

God, she was beautiful.

In the parking lot, I told her to set the container in front of the car, and that’s what she did. I got inside and turned on the headlines. She was peering down into the cup when I returned.

“What is it?” I asked, shading my eyes.

“It’s a wonder we didn’t get stung.” She tilted the cup so I could see.

I was surprised. It was a jelly fish—ghostly white and gelatinous—a coelenterate. It was a sea nettle, she corrected, and though I haven’t looked it up, I’m sure she was right.

We sat in the glare of the headlights, squinting down at the cup—nothing there but a gelatinous wisp. Still, I stared, because there was nothing else to do. I wasn’t ready to go.

“So,” she said after a moment. “I guess we’d better get this guy back in the water.” I nodded and went to turn off the headlights. She met me at the head of the trail.

Now in the dark the weather had changed. The moon was obscured, and sand tickled my ankles. From the top of the dune, we could see the fisherman had gone, the fire had been swallowed. Our evening was ending, and I had done nothing at all to impress her.
She took hold of my hand, her hand was warm. We walked to the water together. “This was nice,” she said as I knelt to pour the jelly fish free. She placed her hand on my back, painting slow, patient circles. “Sometimes, you know, you’ve just got to live.”

“You’re right,” I said and then stood. I kissed her. She let me.

And later, we made love on the beach. It was an awkward, uncomfortable thing that drove my palms into the sand, abraded my knees. It left us itching—it made us spit. And twice in the middle of it, we stopped to pick pieces of shell from beneath the shirts we had laid down. Twice, we stopped to brush sand from ourselves and from each other, and to spread our shirts out again. The third time we stopped, she pushed me onto my back, and I let her.

She laughed at me as I settled onto the beach, and—when we were finished—I laughed at me, too.

**Cabin Fever**

Danielle was the camp nurse, and I was in love with her. That’s why I couldn’t go back to the infirmary—because, in the program director’s words, I had practically lived there all summer. He called me into his office one Thursday evening to tell me things had to change, or else I wouldn’t be asked back to the camp next year. For one thing, I had to do better with schedules. My kids couldn’t keep running late for meals and lights out. For another, I had to leave Danielle alone. The infirmary wasn’t a lounge. I shouldn’t go there except for emergencies.
When I returned from the office, one of my campers—Jeffrey, of course—stood in the middle of the floor. He had twisted his tee shirt to look like a bikini top and was shaking his butt, singing Britney Spears’ “Oops!... I did it again.” The others were perched on their bunks, throwing things at him. A bright orange Super Ball shot down from the right as I opened the door. It smacked the floor at Jeffrey’s feet and then bounced up to Calvin’s bunk on the left. He caught it and stuffed it under his pillow, pretending it had escaped him.

“All right,” I told them. “That’s enough. We’re not having another night like last night.” This time, I was serious. “I’m serious,” I said.

Most nights that week, my campers had lingered too long in the bathhouse, gotten sweaty running back to the cabin and then giggled and chattered until well past lights out. Last night, however, they had seemed to do better, at first. They had crawled into their bunks and quieted down in time for the bell. Some had even seemed to be sleeping, but almost half an hour after lights out, Zachary came to my bed complaining of a sore throat. He had been yelling all day. It was no wonder his throat was sore, but I decided to be on the safe side. I led him down to the infirmary for a cough drop and to get his temperature taken. It wasn’t supposed to take long. But when we returned to the cabin later that night, it had been lit up like a house fire. The program director had been waiting outside.

Now Jeffrey began “Oops!... I did it again” all over again, and everyone groaned. I was amused, but tried not to react. He had been calling himself “Diva” since Monday, and though the other counselors swore he would quit if I only ignored him, he hadn’t stopped. Only Danielle had been nice to him at all, really. Tuesday, at lunch, she had come to our table, knelt by his chair and asked him sternly to Please, quiet, down. I was
surprised by her tone, but Jeffrey complied. Then later, during our afternoon nap, Danielle brought Jeffrey a big bag of gummy worms. She called it The Gummy Award for Best Silent Artist, and Jeffrey had grinned for an hour after she left. Sneaking candy to campers was strictly forbidden, so I was impressed.

Now Jeffrey had tied a beach towel around his waist to look like a skirt, but it kept slipping to the floor. This time, Zachary leapt from his bunk, grabbed it and started back toward his bed with a whoop, but I yanked it away as he passed. He hissed—a brave move considering the mood I was in. The Super Ball flew at my head. I ducked. It came flying back. I ducked again, flailing after it blindly. The ball skipped at my feet and ricocheted off something behind me with a loud thunk, and that was enough. We were supposed to be ready for lights in less than an hour and a half, and my future at Camp Cinconicin depended upon it. The program director would be watching, I knew.

“That’s it. I’ve had enough,” I said, flinging Jeffrey’s towel into the trashcan. “If you guys aren’t going to clean this place up, I will.” Their eyes grew big as I circled the cabin, scooping up things they had left on the floor. Towels, socks, bathing suits, even the bookends they’d made in their crafts class—everything I found on the floor—went into the trashcan.

“Hey,” Calvin protested. “You’re not supposed to do that.”

“You’re not supposed to be doing what you’re doing,” I said. The trashcan was filled to the brim. Nothing was dirty. Nothing was broken, and I thought for a second about carrying it out as if I planned to toss it all into the river. That would get their attention.
Bedsprings squeaked. I turned just in time. The Super Ball flew at my head, but my arm shot up reflexively—a good catch. A few boys snickered behind me, and I turned and locked them in my most serious glare. I meant it this time.

“I mean it this time,” I said, holding the ball in the air. “Get your things and go down to the bathhouse—now! If we miss lights out again, things will happen that people won’t like.” I clenched the Super Ball in my fist and shook it. “Understand?”

They nodded to show they understood and then slid from their bunks to gather their shower kits. They moved quickly and quietly, but I remained where I stood, locking each one in my gaze as he passed. I had hoped for a little fear, but their surprise would have to do. I held the ball over my head, glowering until the last camper had filed through the door, and then I dropped it into the trashcan.

It struck one of the bookends, bounced once, and then rolled under a bunk. We had an hour and twenty minutes.

*

We passed the program director on our way. He stood on one leg, one foot braced on the tree trunk behind him, explaining something to Andy, the counselor from Cabin Six. Andy’s back was toward me, but his gestures were serious. The program director, however, just smiled. He was too cool. He nodded past Andy’s shoulder with a grin, and I nodded back. Mr. Camp, that’s who he thought he was in those hiking boots, green shorts, and bright smiley face tee shirt. I just knew he was hearing Andy’s complaints with genuine, organized, cheerfulness.

Calvin and Zachary raced ahead of the rest of us, rode the merry go round one revolution and then dashed off to the bathhouse—arms out like jet fighters. But Brandon
walked so close to me I nearly tripped over him. He wanted to know why exactly we’d
gotten in trouble the night before, and I told him for staying up late.

“Why?” he asked. “We were just having fun.”

I told him there are times and places for everything and tried to leave it at that.

Danielle was down at the bathhouse, too. She wore jeans and a rumpled white
button-down shirt, smart but carefree. That day at lunch, Sarah, the counselor from Cabin
Eight, had reported lice in her cabin, and swore, in front of us all, that she wouldn’t sleep
there again until the maintenance director set off a bug bomb. But Danielle’s inspection
had turned up only a couple of ticks. Now she had come with tweezers and alcohol to
remove them from a sniffling little girl at the bathhouse door.

“Can’t we just leave her alone?” Sarah said, stepping between them. “Ticks really
aren’t that bad, are they?”

My boys filed into the bathhouse, and I waved to Danielle, furtively, wondering if
she had met with the program director, too. I would have walked over and asked, but I
didn’t want to seem obvious. Some people made it sound as if I followed her everywhere.
She waved back with a big smile and a wink and then turned her attention to the little girl
with the ticks. I could tell she liked me. Things weren’t so bad.

I really didn’t see her that often. The first summer we had worked together I had
hardly seen her at all. I mean, sure, I had noticed her. She was tall and blonde and seemed
to carry herself evenly. I knew she lived somewhere on the western shore of the
Chesapeake, four or five hours from my college, but the few times I had gotten to talk
with her, we had been interrupted by screaming kids or the next scheduled event. This
year, however, circumstances had conspired to bring us in contact more often. The first
week of the season a kid in my cabin had needed daily insulin tests, and the week after
that a kid had suffered two asthma attacks in three days, but mostly there were just
assorted scrapes and bruises and kids needing their fingernails clipped. I really wasn’t
sure what to make of her until the day I slipped next to the pool and gave myself a
concussion. Then she wasn’t nearly as cold and clinical as I had expected. She was just
right. I remember the warmth of her hands and the way they moved slowly when she
wrapped my head in gauze to hold down an ice pack. When I winced at the cold, hard
corners of the cubes, she cooed sympathetically and found a dry cloth to pad it with.

“That cement…,” she said, smiling as she turned to get another blanket. “It’ll
jump up and get you if you’re not careful.”

“It got me all right,” I said, trying to laugh. I liked seeing her playful, but the
inside of my skull felt like a melon rind someone was trying to scrape out with a rock. “I
can only imagine what that cement’s thinking right now.”

“It’s thinking, ‘I hope that guy with the hard head watches where he’s going from
now on.’” She used a deep voice for the sidewalk. “‘I can’t take much more abuse.’”

Danielle winked and asked me to lie back onto the pillow. Then to keep me from
falling asleep, she stayed by my bedside, reading from “The Unbearable Lightness of
Being” for almost an hour. She had been firm and yet tolerant, gentle but not in any way
tentative. So tonight I envied the little girl with the ticks. I could imagine Danielle
searching my hair with a hard plastic comb.

Inside the bathhouse, Brandon was explaining why he should get in less trouble
than everyone else.
“I was the first one to sleep Sunday, Monday and Tuesday,” he said. “Last night doesn’t count because I was talking to Calvin, but everyone else was up, too.”

“The rule says lights out is at ten,” I told him in front of the sink. “It doesn’t matter if everyone broke it. The rule is ten o’clock.”

“Yeah, but some people broke it worse,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said and then began brushing my teeth to end the conversation. I stepped away from the sink to check on the kids waiting for showers. I looked down the hall, but couldn’t see much, just a few curtains, a slick wet floor and steam, but my campers were perfectly quiet. Only Jeffrey was speaking. He was interviewing himself.

“So what was your dream with this album, Diva?” he asked in a raspy DJ’s voice. “What were you trying to put out there?”

“My self, really,” he replied in falsetto. “Just something funky, you know? My own artistic vision.”

Then he said, “Hmmm,” low and thoughtful. “Interesting.”

“No running back there,” I shouted with my mouth filled with foam. Some of it sputtered onto my shirt. “These floors can be slippery. Okay?” When no one responded, I returned to the sink. Brandon was there, waiting for me, cleaning his ears.

“So, if we do get in trouble,” he said as I spat in the sink. “Jeffrey should get in the most, because he stays up the latest. But I’m usually the first one to sleep. Usually, it’s me, and then Daniel, and then Zachary, and then the others, so that’s the order of how you should yell at us.”

“I should yell at you first?” I said, rinsing my toothbrush.
“No,” Brandon exhaled. “You should yell at me last.”

Andy came in just then without saying a word. He looked at me without any sign of recognition, glanced quickly at Brandon—who stood there with a Q-tip hanging out of his ear—and then proceeded back toward the showers. Something was up. He wore shorts, hiking boots and a tee shirt, just as the program director did, though I suppose I was wearing the same thing—minus the tacky DARE shirt. Mine came from the Sierra Club. I followed him out of curiosity. We had been pretty close the summer before, two guys from Camden who didn’t really know anyone else. We had even gone up to a Phillies game one weekend, and I had thought we had had fun, hurling peanuts at Braves fans, but this summer, Andy had barely spoken to me. Word around camp was that he had been offered an assistant program director’s position. I asked if everything was okay.

“Apparently, one of my campers needed some me-time,” he said as we stopped in front of the showers. “He didn’t show up for roll call.”

“You have roll call?” Zachary asked, toweling himself off. “That sounds like school.” Most of my campers were there, getting dressed, but a few of the shyer ones lingered in the stalls, toweling off in privacy. But that didn’t matter to Andy. He threw open shower curtains, one after another, and there behind one of them was Jeffrey, ninety-eight percent naked and hopping on one foot. He was hiking a sock up to his knee.

“Well, I hope he’s all right,” I said, also hoping the camper remained on the loose.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Andy said. “Clarence only feels out of sorts when he’s forced to behave.” He yanked open the last of the shower curtains, but Clarence wasn’t there, either. Andy paused, visibly worried.
“Let me know if I can help,” I said. “My guys need to get to bed now, but if you need a search party later or something just let me know.”

“Maybe we could set up a telethon,” Jeffrey offered, coming out of the stall with his shirt inside out. “I’ll set up a concert to raise awareness. Sometimes that helps.” Andy stared at Jeffrey as if he had appeared out of thin air. Then, blankly, he turned and walked toward the door.

“That’s okay,” he said, shaking his head. “Seriously—I’ve got it under control.”

*

The cold grass tickled my ankles as we walked back toward the cabin. A few boys ran ahead, but for once Calvin and Zachary trailed behind. Brandon walked so close I kept having to shove him away with my elbow. We had roughly forty-five minutes to go. His latest idea was that lights out should be enforced only when it was needed, when kids were actually tired. On days campers had the energy to stay up, he argued, there was no harm in letting them.

“But then, what about the next day?” I asked. “If you’re tired from staying up all night, should we send you to bed right after lunch?”

“We wouldn’t get tired,” he said. “We never do.”

The day had been stifling, trapped beneath a sky the color of bath water. I had taken off my shirt, and spread out on a picnic table while the boys played softball, but still the sweat had oozed from me. I had daydreamed about sneaking out of the cabin in the middle of the night and walking through the wood, half-naked and shivering. By then, the haze would have thinned and instead of a flat ceiling overhead there would be a boundless starry night. Its effect was to tempt me out into it. I wanted to stroll through the
pines and down to the beach with Danielle by my side. I wanted to skip stones across the reflected moon.

There was something about walking through the camp in the dark that caused me to feel what I could only call pre-nostalgia, because the camp must have always been this way. Generations of campers and counselors must have strolled through these woods, flashlights swinging at the ends of their arms. Generations must have thrilled at the songs of tree frogs and katydids all around them, must have savored the rich pungency of decayed leaves and the salt marsh. And as far as I knew, many more generations would.

But that knowledge only made my time at camp seem more fleeting, because even if I were allowed back next summer, next summer would be my last here. I would begin my senior year in college in little more than a year, and after that, who knew? I would have to find an adult job, and that could be anywhere. And even if I promised to stay in touch with people, I knew how that went. These people I’d known so well for two years would be moving on, too. My only option, really, was to be there as fully as I could be—now.

Apparently Calvin and Zachary felt the same way because just then they took off, arms out like always. They passed on either side of me, making jet fighter sound effects, and then curled off toward the picnic tables next to the playfield. They were glorious. They scrambled from table to table, the length of five. Then, they leapt down and dashed off toward the swing sets.

Brandon regarded them as he would have a toad in his bunk. I should have called after them, I knew, because among the camp’s many rules was one against running after dark—it was too easy to trip—but I wasn’t ready to enforce it. I should have been a better
counselor, should have told them to slow down, should have told them not to get sweaty before bed, but instead I wanted to run with them, too, free and fantastic. Aside from a few games of kickball, I hadn’t run all summer.

“They shouldn’t be doing that,” Brandon said. “You should make them stop.” Calvin and Zachary raced back toward us at full speed, and as they approached a bench about ten yards in front of me, I knew they meant to jump it. It wasn’t a tall bench, but the grove was dark and judging heights might be difficult. I began waving my arms and headed their way.

Calvin saw me, but kept coming. He planted one foot in front of the bench and cleared it easily. He slapped me five as he stumbled to a stop, but Zachary didn’t see me until he was airborne. His face froze when he saw me, and startled, he seemed to forget what he was in the midst of. He snagged the back of the bench and tumbled, end over end, onto the ground. His chest struck the ground first and he wheezed.

“I told you someone was going to get hurt,” Brandon said.

*

I knew what I had to do. I knew what was expected of me, what was best for me, what would lead to the least trouble. So I asked Calvin to help me dust Zachary off, lent him a towel for his nose, and then let him climb onto my back. We began toward the infirmary. The bell for lights out would ring in half an hour so I sent Calvin back to the cabin with instructions: Be quiet and in bed or Matt will send you home to your parents. He agreed very seriously and hurried away, but as soon as he was out of sight, Brandon said, “They won’t listen. They know you can’t send them home on the last day.”

Zachary swung at him from my back, but missed. “Shut up, Brandon,” he said.
Danielle held open the door to the infirmary as we approached. She was already wearing pajama bottoms and an oversized shirt, but her light was on and she was pulling on a pair of Latex gloves.

“Right on schedule,” she said as we entered.

“You do run the most popular club in town,” I said, setting Zachary on the examining table. It was covered with thin paper she’d pulled from a roll.

“Matt made him fall,” Brandon announced. “Zachary was running and Matt got in front of him.” Danielle turned her eyes toward me briefly, but seemed only amused.

“Okay,” she said.

“I fell,” Zachary said. “I was jumping over a bench, and I fell. It’s not Matt’s fault.”

“It’s probably not very safe staying in Matt’s cabin, though, is it?” she said with a wink.

Brandon laughed enthusiastically, so I sent him back to the cabin.

“He’s cute,” Danielle said after he was gone. “You should have given him a pair of scissors and told him to run back full speed.” She wiped Zachary’s knee with a peroxide-soaked cotton ball and then covered it with a Band-Aid, though it was hardly scraped. His nose had stopped bleeding before we arrived, but the crust that remained still looked pretty bad. Danielle simply wiped it away with a damp washcloth.

“What if Matt really did make me fall?” Zachary asked.

“Oh, I suppose it would depend what he did,” Danielle said, brushing bit of leaves from his shirt. “It looks like you’re pretty tough, though. It might take a lot to hurt you.”
“It does,” Zachary nodded and took the lollipop she held out to him. She told him to finish it before he got back to the cabin.

“And no running,” I called after him as he stepped through the door. Lights out was in fifteen minutes, and this was my chance to talk to her. I felt as if it were my last chance.

Danielle tore paper from the examination table and wadded it up. I stepped on the pedal that lifted the lid on the big metal can, and she launched the paper wad like a pro. It bounced off the lid but dropped in.

“Another day, huh?” she said, peeling off her Latex gloves and pitching them next. “Can you believe it? One more week and we’re out of here.” She seemed cheery enough, but I just stood there with my hands in my pockets, watching her until she pointed toward my foot.

“You can lower the lid now,” she said, and I let the lid clang shut. I felt my cheeks turn red.

“Are you coming back next year?” I asked, and she laughed right away.

“Who knows?” she said, shrugging. “If I can’t find anything else, it’s okay. But, working twenty-four hours a day for less than minimum wage, who’s going to be thrilled about that?”

I nodded. I hadn’t even thought about money.

“Why?” she asked. “What are you planning to do?”

It wasn’t an easy question to answer. I didn’t even know if I’d be allowed to come back, so I’d feel like a fool saying I wanted to. Still, working with her at camp next year would be great. She swung her legs while she waited for my answer.
“I guess it depends,” I began. “Obviously, if I land a job that pays five times as much, I won’t be back, but you’ve got to admit, this can be fun. For a few years during college, it’s not bad.”

“Fun?” Danielle said, holding her feet straight out in front of her. She examined her Birkenstocks. “If that kid Jeffrey was in my cabin, I’d stab myself with a marshmallow stick.” She let her feet fall against the side of the table with a dull metallic thud. “I guess if you like spending time with a bunch of Ritalin junkies, it’s all right.”

“Well, you seem pretty good with them if you ask me.”

“What can I say?” She lifted her feet again. “It’s a job. I guess I’m good at it.”

I forced myself to chuckle appreciatively. Good at my job was something I couldn’t claim to be. In just a few minutes the program director would come stalking up to my cabin, and here I was, wasting my time. She let her feet plunk against the side of the table again.

“Don’t look that way,” Danielle said, sliding down from the table and starting toward the door. “You’ve got this look like you’re offended, but I know you agree with me.” I followed.

“I do,” I began, but couldn’t think what else to say. I wanted to argue, but knew she was right, in a way. She opened the door and I stepped through it.

“I watch you. You like this place less than anyone,” she said. “That’s one reason I like you so much.” She let the door close behind me, but spoke through the screen. “You don’t even pretend to respect this. I mean, you do—kind of—but not really. I can just tell.”
I knew I should leave. The program director was already crossing the play field, back lit by the light of the cabins.

“But what about the candy?” I asked. “If this is just a job, just something to do because you couldn’t find anything else, what makes you so good with the kids. I see the way you hand out candy. You pal around with them. You made Jeffrey’s day when you gave him those worms.”

The bell for lights out started to ring, but I wasn’t ready to go.

“My mom sends me candy all the time,” she explained. “And I’m on a diet, so I have to get rid of it somehow.” I shifted my weight side to side. I wanted to hear more, but I knew more wouldn’t help. The bell for lights out was still chiming, so finally, awkwardly, I waved and turned back toward my cabin.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Danielle said. “I don’t want you to think I’m a bitch. Why don’t you come back later, so we can talk?”

I kept walking.

“If you promise not to be weird, I’ll give you some Pop Rocks,” she said, and then giggled.

I broke into a jog.

* 

Back in the cabin, the lights were out, and my campers were quiet. I could tell that none of them were asleep yet, that they had probably chatted right up to the time I came through the door, gasping for breath, but my agitated return had been enough to quiet them. The program director hadn’t arrived, but standing in the doorway, I could see him, ambling over from Cabin Four, and someone was with him—Andy. The rumors about
Andy being up for assistant program director next year must have been true, because here he came, *Mr. Right Hand Man*. I had to admit that I envied him.

He had done things the right way. He had followed the rules, and though he might not have had as much fun as I had had these two summers, he would be working at camp long after I left. It seemed like a trick, but I was so disgusted with myself for loving Danielle, who didn’t even like being here, for assuming she did, for making a fool of myself, perhaps it would be best if I didn’t come back next year. Why torture myself? Why postpone the inevitable? It was time to grow up, to start doing the things I was supposed to. I was twenty years old, and I acted as if I were ten. I was ridiculous. I couldn’t make myself crawl into bed, but stood in the doorway, shivering a little as the sweat under my arms dried in the night air. The program director, and then Andy, trudged onto the cabin’s porch.

“Good evening,” the program director said. “It looks as if all is well with Cabin Five.”

“We’re cleaned up and getting to sleep,” I told him. “We cut it close, but we made it.”

The program director nodded, “Good, good.” He glanced over his shoulder at Andy, who said nothing. They seemed distracted. I waited to see if they wanted to check the cabin floor for damp towels, but Andy took a deep breath as if preparing to do something he dreaded.

“You haven’t seen Clarence, have you?” Andy asked after the pause. “I went back to the cabin, because I assumed he’d come back, but he didn’t. But we still don’t know where he is. Have you seen him?”
“I haven’t seen him,” I said, and tried to think of where I’d hide if I were a ten-year-old boy. “Do you want me to help look?” I asked. “Things are under control here.” Andy shook his head but didn’t reply.

“We’re not too worried,” the program director said. “This is the third night this week he’s gone off like this. I just assumed we’d keep a closer eye on him tonight.”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure what to say and my feelings were mixed. I hated to see anyone get in trouble, and I hoped Clarence was all right, but at the same I couldn’t help but think this made me look pretty good.

“Well, just let me know,” I said, not even sure what I could do if they asked. They thanked me and then skulked off toward Cabin Four. Andy was in trouble, of course, but Clarence would be fine. There weren’t that many places to hide around camp. The woods were flat, and the worst that could happen was that he got stuck in some briars. You’d have to walk all the way to river to find any real danger.

I kicked off my shoes by the door. I walked to my bed and then settled on top of the sleeping bag, wide awake but telling myself I should stay there for a while. Despite everything, I felt relieved and let my eyes shut until I found myself thinking about Danielle. Had she been mocking me? Did I have any right to feel misled, or was I simply blowing things out of proportion. Would I be an idiot if I walked past the infirmary later, just to see if she was awake? Probably. It was time to grow up, time to do the things I was supposed to. Time to get serious.

I sat up in my bunk. I wondered whether the program director and Andy had found Clarence yet. I had half a mind to go out and find him myself; I knew I could. I
understood the way the boy must think, and so I got up and walked to the door to look out.

“What’s going on?” Calvin asked, quietly. I heard his bunk squeak as he sat upright.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m just restless. Try to get some sleep.”

“Do you think they’ll find him,” Zachary asked, sitting up in his own bed.

“Clarence?” I said. “I’m sure he’s okay. He’s snuck off before so I’m sure he’ll come back sooner or later.” I could feel them all watching and listening behind me, wondering what was going on out there, what would happen next. It was a precarious moment. Another word, a sigh, and especially my weight against that door would unbalance everything. Chaos would ensue. I knew that. My campers knew that, too, and so we listened in silence for long minutes, waiting for whatever we happened to hear, straining our eyes in the shadows—knowing that despite our best intentions we couldn’t maintain our discipline long.

I was doing my best, but I couldn’t stand there long. My self-restraint was dissolving already. It was fizzing away, stinging and sweet. I imagined the taste of Pop Rocks on my tongue.

**Persimmon Pond**

About the time I was ten, my relatives began telling me how much I reminded them of my father. I walked like him, talked like him. I even clenched my jaw when I
was thinking about something—the way he did. But I had no way of knowing. My father was killed in a car crash I was three, and sometimes I suspected he was someone like Santa Claus, someone my relatives made up to make me feel better.

I imagined them sighing whenever I left a room, “the poor boy.”

Talk of my father was worst of all at my Uncle Darryl’s house, which used to be my grandfather’s and was where my father grew up. There was a picture of him behind the dining room table, and in it he stood with a big mess of fish hanging from a stringer. “See that, James?” my aunts and uncles would say to prove whatever point they were trying to make. “Your dad was just like you.”

The older I got, the more annoying talk of my father became. For one thing, I couldn’t remember him, so how could I miss him? For another, I wasn’t like him at all. He was thin, I was chubby. He was tall, I was short. He was good at almost everything he tried, but I tended to mess things up. My grades were poor. I was always tripping over my own feet. Though for years it could have been argued that I would eventually grow into my father’s build and demeanor, I was fourteen now and convinced that I wouldn’t. It was insulting to be compared to him out of pity.

The only reason I visited my relatives at all was my cousins. They were okay. On most summer days we could be found roaming the woods behind what once was the family farm, not doing much, just goofing around, cutting trails, building forts and fishing.

One day, we decided to canoe to Persimmon Pond.

My Aunt Ramona was calling her sons from the kitchen when I skidded my bike to a halt in their lane. “Boys,” she called up to them. “James is outside.”
I couldn’t see my aunt through the watery pane of the window, past the cobalt blue jars filled with millet and straw flower she kept on the sill, but I imagined a scene under water. She and everything else within the old place were preserved in a warm, shimmering light.

My cousins shouted from their rooms that they were coming and then rumbled along the uncarpeted stairs at the heart of the house. I perceived their winding flight over the hardwood in aquatic terms, too. I could imagine them swimming like bass toward the surface.

“Whatup?” they said, splashing through the back door.

Two wiry blondes with a summer’s crop of freckles, Trevor and Randy looked like small and medium-sized versions of the same person, as if each were wracking his muscles and bones to become that person first and to claim some prize. Trevor was winning by virtue of his three-year head start alone, but I wasn’t even an approximation. They moved like flowing water, but I was thicker and slower, and my hair was brown. I was a log on the bank.

We gathered our tackle in a barn that wasn’t really a barn. It was just a garage painted red with a loft. Uncle Darryl parked his cars there. It was called the barn, however, because it stood where my grandfather’s hay barn once stood and because Uncle Darryl had planned to raise pheasants and quail in its loft, but a hot spell soon after he built it killed all his chicks, and he never tried to raise anything else. My Uncle Clark always teased him that the chicks were a sacrifice to the god of dusty old barns. Once farm animals had died there, Uncle Darryl had the right to call his garage a barn and
himself a farmer. He could drive a pickup to work at the phone company and not feel like a sissy. Uncle Clark worked there, too, and he lived in town.

Both Randy and Trevor owned new rods, boron spin casters of course, and I was usually able to find something to use among the old rods my uncle kept in a corner of the barn. There was an old steel rod that clicked no matter which way you cranked it, and I used it most of the time, but today Randy grabbed it before I could.

“Randy’s not allowed to use his rod,” Trevor said. “He hooked mom’s living room curtains last night, so he’s banned. You can use his rod, though, if you want.” Randy’s rod was a great one. I wanted one like it, in fact, but there was no way I could accept it as charity. I doubted either one of them would have played with a fishing rod indoors.

“That’s okay,” I said, and pulled another rod from the pile. “I’ll just use one of these.” It was a fiberglass model broken off at the second guide, and it looked okay, but when I tested the reel, it wouldn’t crank. Randy noticed and placed his rod in the canoe we were packing.

“Well, somebody ought to use my rod if I can’t,” he said, laying the steel rod next to his new one. I frowned and selected the rattiest cane pole I could find and loaded it into the canoe, too. Next, we loaded hatchets and axes and saws. We weren’t sure how we would need them, but we knew we were bound for an adventure.

What made Persimmon Pond our destination rather than the dirt pits we normally fished was that we had never fished it. I had never even seen it. All I knew was that it lurked at the end of the creek that ran through the old farm and that it was surrounded by briars and brush. Supposedly, there were huge fish in it. One of the neighbor kids swore
he’d caught two catfish over eight pounds there after cutting his way back with a brush ax, but we had a better idea. If Eel creek was finally deep enough, we would canoe in.

Crossing the field between the barn and the woods wasn’t easy. It took a quarter-mile hike across rows of soybeans and topsoil plowed up by Mr. Collins, who leased the field from my uncle. We stayed as close to the hedgerow as we could, because Mr. Collins left an eight-foot swathe on either side of it unplowed, worried perhaps that if he plowed any closer his equipment would snag on the roots of the gnarled trees growing there. Long ago, the hedge row had been part of an orchard, but late frosts had killed the peach blossoms too many years in a row, and some time about forty years ago, my grandfather had decided to go into grain farming. He used eighteen boxes up dynamite to dig up every tree in the orchard except those in one row in the middle. He left those to keep the topsoil from blowing away, but by the time my cousins and I came around most of the original trees were dead. Now, the hedgerow was knotted with wild roses, grape vine and sumac bushes. The three of us carried the canoe, loaded with supplies, over our heads. It was a long hike, and my shirt was soaked with sweat before we were halfway to the woods.

This was our summer in the woods. There would never be another one like it. The summer before, we had crept back there once in a while, but not often. We had played G.I. Joes on the dry creek bank and chased snakes we weren’t brave enough to catch, but this summer, the summer of nineteen-eighty-five, we practically lived there. I didn’t know yet that I’d be working at a roadside stand the next summer and at a grocery store every year after until college. I didn’t imagine these long days fishing and building forts
and catapults would be something I would look back on, but how could I? They seemed never-ending.

“Dam’s still holding,” Trevor said when we reached the edge of the woods. We could hear the water rushing over it even though it was still dozens of yards away. We set the canoe on the ground and rested. My arms ached. The blood had drained from them during our hike over the field, and they tingled as it returned, but I wasn’t going to say anything. Trevor would have teased me, but Randy would have been worse. He had outrun me for the first time a few weeks before and had been trying to make it up to me since.

“I think I’ve got a rock in my shoe,” Randy said, and I turned to see if he did. He sat down and pried a shoe from his foot.

The woods in front of us was Hickory Acres. We had named it ourselves, just as we had named every stream, ditch and dirt pit within bike-riding distance. We caught pickerel in Pickerel Pond, caught crayfish in Crayfish Bottom, gathered greens for Christmas from Holly Swamp, but Eel Creek had been named by our fathers. Its name didn’t fit because there had never been eels in it. It was only a ditch. My uncles swore there had been eels there when they were boys—they’d seen them once or twice—but I didn’t believe them. Eel Creek was dry six months out of the year.

“I’m not saying there were garden hoses swimming in there,” Uncle Clark would say whenever the subject came up. “But I do remember James’ dad caught one as long as your arm.”
That’s what it always came back to. That’s the only reason they called the ditch Eel Creek, because my dead father had claimed he’d caught an eel in it. I’m sure they all thought they’d seen it, too. They were such liars.

When Randy finished playing around with his shoe, we got up and trudged on with the canoe. I wasn’t in a great mood, but I was looking forward to the trip. After all, we had prepared for it for weeks, and now we were finally on our way. Sticks popped under our weight and the constant shuffle of our feet through dry leaves sounded like splashing. I worried briefly about turning my ankle on a pinecone or something—that would be just my luck—but, under the shade of the woods, lugging the old canoe wasn’t so bad.

The water beneath our dam was covered with foam when we arrived, and the water behind it was at least four feet deep. Our plan had worked. In less than a month, we had raised creek’s depth from a few pitiful inches to more than enough to carry our canoe.

“That’s a lot of water,” Randy said when we set the canoe on the bank. “That’s going to go crazy when we let it.”

Trevor backed up a few paces and then leapt over the creek to inspect the far side of the dam. He moved like a cat, and I hoped he wouldn’t decide we’d be best to load the canoe from the far bank. I knew in advance I’d end up in the water.

“Well, how are we going to work this?” Trevor asked. Two of us would have to wrestle logs from the dam while the third waited in the canoe, preventing it from drifting away. My cousins were each fast enough to sprint after the boat and hop in once it got
moving, but I wasn’t sure if I could. I knew, however, I’d be one of the two guys tearing
the dam apart, because I was the fat one. That’s what I was good for.

“I don’t want to sit in the boat,” Randy said. “What if it gets hit by a log when the
dam comes apart?” He sounded sincere, but I knew he hoped I’d volunteer to sit in the
boat. He thought I couldn’t catch up.

“You have to be the one in the boat,” I told him. “You’re not strong enough to
tear down the dam.”

“Don’t worry about James,” Trevor said. “He’s fast enough. He’ll catch the boat.”
I glared at him. I wished he hadn’t said that. I dragged the canoe downstream from the
dam so that it wouldn’t get swamped, and Trevor used his hatchet to cut a stout pole to
propel the canoe with. We lowered it into the creek and helped Randy aboard. He took
hold of a sapling to keep the canoe from drifting.

Trevor and I took our positions on opposite side of the dam. It was a solemn
moment, I felt. After all, we were about to dismantle our most successful project of the
summer. We had taken days to build this dam, cutting down logs, dragging logs, driving
logs into the creek bed. The dam was an accomplishment equal to any tree fort my uncles
had bragged of, and now we were about to tear it apart as quickly as possible. Trevor
started a count down.

“Ten, nine, eight, six...”

“Wait!” Randy cried. “What if it tips over and the water’s too fast?”

“You’ll be fine,” I said. “We’ll get you if you tip.”

“Trevor?” Randy wanted a second opinion.

“You heard him.” The two of us walked back to the dam, ten yards away.
“Yeah, but what do you think?” Randy called after his brother. He reached for the
creek bank, trying to brace the canoe before standing.

“What do I think?” Trevor spread his feet and bent toward the dam. “I think five-
four-three-two-one—go!” He wrenched the nearest pole left to right, grunting, and then
yanked it straight up as heaps of mud and sticks and moss and leaves fell from the dam.
Logs shimmied away. A loud column poured through the structure. Trevor yanked a
second pole into the air, and the column expanded. On my end, I took a pole in each hand
and shook them in unison, back and forth, side to side, twisting them counter clockwise,
setting my feet and then wrenching my body away. I expected resistance, but the poles
flew out of the creek bed too easily and my feet flew out from under me. I landed on soft
leaves and sand, but they slid beneath me, and I dropped into the creek. Water escaped
the dam and within seconds I was up to my chest in it.

Trevor laughed but didn’t stay. He scrambled up the bank and took off for the
canoe at full speed, leaving me standing in water up to my chest. A few logs drifted free,
but most piled up against the banks. Others were trapped behind two supports we hadn’t
been able to reach from the bank. Something about them angered me. I’d rather see our
work demolished completely than leave imperfect reminders, so I turned and uprooted
them with a growl. Then I used a stump to pull myself out of the creek and slogged after
the canoe.

“I could have drowned,” Randy was complaining. “The first wave of it nearly
went over the boat.”

“You could have drowned?” I asked. “What about me? I was up to my neck.”
“You’re big enough. You can take it,” he said. The canoe rocked once as I brought my weight into the middle seat, and as soon as my butt was down, Trevor dug his pole into the creek bank and drove us forward.

“Let’s see if those fish stories are true,” he said.

Our journey took hours, long hours. Though we expected to be carried downstream on a tide released by our dam, we weren’t. In some places, we even had to get out and pull the canoe after us with a rope. The creek just wasn’t deep enough. A few damp inches on either bank revealed that we had, temporarily, raised the water level, but as the channel grew wider it was obvious that our impact hadn’t been as great as we’d guessed. We had never followed the creek this far. We had had no idea what form it took. Here and there, logs blocked the channel. If we’d known about them, we would have cut them through days ago. Now, we had to stop and saw through them as we came to them, which left us blistered and irritable.

Randy even suggested we go back and build a bigger dam in hope of riding farther on a deeper flow.

“I thought you were worried about drowning,” Trevor said.

But we really didn’t have the choice to go back. As shallow as it was, the current would have frustrated any attempt to turn around. To be honest, I began to wonder how we’d get back if we actually made it to Persimmon Pond. Would we hack our way through the brush, the way the neighbor kid claimed he had? Or would we end up hiking back up the creek, dragging the boat behind us? I didn’t want to ask.

Eventually, the creek bed deepened again. Its banks were now twenty feet apart and the bottom was farther below us than Trevor could reach with his pole. Again, we
wished we’d explored the creek’s length farther than we had. The depth here seemed not
to have needed our dam at all, so we drifted along in something like reverent awe. The
trees were taller here. They hadn’t been cut over as recently as the part of the woods we
normally played in, and there was less brush. Treasures that might have been obscured by
briar patches and shrubs stood out plainly. A chimney, unconnected to anything
suggesting a house, rose at a slant from the ground. The top of it had broken off and lay
nearby. Its existence seemed accidental. Rusted bed springs lay on the forest floor a little
farther on, and every hundred yards or so a Coke bottle glinted from the creek bank.
These were my family’s woods, and yet I felt like an archeologist in Egypt. I was seeing
the effects of causes I could not guess, and yet I felt connected to them.

Trevor reached forward and prodded my shoulder. He pointed off to the right.
There, in the Y branches of large tree was a cluster of dry logs heavier than I would have
attempted to lift. At first glance, the cluster looked like a crow’s nest, only much larger. It
was our fathers’ infamous tree fort, and I immediately saw that it had required ropes and
ladders and long, sweaty afternoons to build. It wasn’t as perfect as we had been told—it’s
logs weren’t arranged evenly—but more impressive. Though its floor sloped away to the
left and looked as though it had for years, I could tell the tree fort wasn’t going anywhere
soon. My uncles hadn’t exaggerated.

“That looks like a raft up in a tree,” Randy said, and I wondered if he knew what
he was looking at.

I wanted to stop the canoe and get out. I wanted to hike over to the old fort and
see what I could find—maybe a tin cigar box with toy soldiers in it or a few rusted links
of chain left from when they’d hoisted the logs up there. We could have spent the rest of
our summer repairing it, or building one like it, or maybe just playing around it, just as our fathers had done, even my dad. He would have looked a lot like Randy, the youngest, skinny and fast and a little bit bossy while his brothers hoisted logs up into the tree, but I said nothing. We quietly watch the fort slip behind us. The creek carried us onward.

The woods thickened again. We were entering a portion of my grandfather’s farm he had stopped tilling after his first stroke. It was a ten-acre swathe, not very big as farm fields go, but low and flooded more than he would have liked, so he had decided to let it grow wild. Thirty years later it was impenetrable. Green briars and hollies and all kinds of strange, flowering vines made it an ideal place for foxes and opossums to hide, but no one with a fishing rod could expect to press through it without tangling his line or just plain getting lost. Getting my first good look at the woods here, I found it hard to believe any neighbor had managed to hack a trail through it.

“This is a mess,” Randy said, and for once I believed the sound of his voice. I was worried, too. There would be no way to get the canoe out of there overland, and what if the pond wasn’t what we had heard it was? What if it was only a mud hole? What if there were no fish in it at all? What lie ahead was a mystery. Trevor pushed us ahead more slowly as we approached it, but a bright patch in the woods told me we were arriving. Persimmon Pond spread out before us.

It was surreal. The pond, an acre of water standing in the woods, displayed nothing I would call shoreline. Bushes grew through its surface here and there throughout its width. And there were trees, probably the persimmons my uncles had said grew here, fallen into the water. Branches curled up from the depths like the fingers of drowned men
reaching for air. Dried algae hung from them in long tape-like strands. Altogether, the pond resembled a hairy mole.

“Well,” Trevor said. “Here we are,” but he didn’t sound certain. We had labored weeks for this? One might call it exotic, but it looked almost impossible to fish and no one would want to swim in it. To say we had been here was almost all it was good for.

Randy pulled the old steel rod from the bottom of the boat. He opened the tackle box he’d stowed under his seat and selected a spinner bait. Trevor and I looked at each other, and then he reached for his rod, too, so I took out the cane pole. Randy’s boron bait caster was right there, but I ignored it and got to work untangling the pole I had chosen. Within seconds, Randy had snagged a branch and was forced to cut his line. A minute later, Trevor lost one of his own lures. I did my best by jigging a plastic worm up and down in front of a stump, but I didn’t expect to catch anything. I just wanted to get through this.

“Do you really think that kid caught anything back here?” Randy asked, tying on his third lure. I knew he’d paid three dollars each for them. He wouldn’t want to lose very many.

“How could he?” Trevor said. “Look around. Where do you see to fish from the bank?” We all looked around and saw no place.

“Then, do you think there’s any fish in here at all?” Randy asked.

I tried to remember what my uncles had said of this place. I knew they’d fished Pickerel Pond and a dirt pit that had been turned into a dump. They talked about other places, too, and of course there was that dumb story about my father and the imaginary eel, but I couldn’t remember any stories about Persimmon Pond. Somehow we had
received an impression that it had fish in it, and that they had grown large after years
unfished for, but I began to fear we had been felt duped.

Trevor reeled in his line as if he wanted to go, but I kept jigging my line up and
down. I left my line in the water. I was restless and agitated, but not ready to leave. My
mind was still on the tree fort and wondering what my dad had done there. Had he
camped there over night, and had he been scared? Had he expected his life to be long?
Had he expected anyone to remember his days in the woods? I felt a chill—lonely and
haunted and unable to focus my mind upon fishing. Only Randy was still trying. I was
watching him rear back to cast again when there was a tug at the end of my own line.

Something took off with it. I went to set the hook, but there was no need.
Whatever it was was already hooked and diving away from the boat.

“What is it?” Randy said, lowering his rod without casting.

“I don’t know,” I said, and wondered for an instant if this were real, some sort of
memory or dream. I tried to bring the creature toward the boat, but I had no reel, only
eight feet of cane pole to pry with, and I tried, but the creature was heavy. A turtle, I
thought. I’ve hooked an old snapping turtle, and he’s sinking the bottom. I might as well
cut the line, I thought, but then something rolled just under the water’s surface, too
quickly to focus upon and then dove away. That was no turtle. Trevor pushed the canoe
after the fish, but there was no use. The fish was actually pulling the canoe after it and
despite my efforts we weren’t catching up.

“Do you think it’s a musky?” Randy asked, rising up on his knees. “It’s too big to
be a bass.” We were too far south to catch muskies, but I couldn’t say what I had hooked.
It was all weight and motion and I had to admit, in this strange pond on this strange afternoon, it had me spooked.

Then it dove into one of the trees. The boat stopped moving and we drifted somewhere above it. My line was still taut, but I knew I no longer had a direct leash on whatever it was. When I pulled back on the pole, the branches surrounding us trembled. The creature had wrapped itself around a submerged limb, and somewhere in the darkness below it was circling—around and around in ever-tighter circles, I imagined. I drew my pen knife, ready to cut the line, but I couldn’t as long as the hope remained that I might catch something. I stared into the water. My cousins stared beside me, and the weight of our three craning bodies caused the canoe to list to the right. When they at last looked away, I saw it.

Something—long, oily and dark—flashed once and was gone. Something real.

The trip back from the pond was a long one. No one felt much like talking. We were all shaken, but couldn’t say why, and the canoe was heavy and cumbersome. We had to carry it most of the way because it was too frustrating to push against the creek’s current, and finally, we left it next to the dam, not caring what Uncle Darryl would say.

As we started along the hedgerow, Randy spoke first.

“We should go back next week,” he said. “We could cut a trail or something, and then we could build a raft. There’s a bunch of old barrels down at the dump.”

“Go back?” Trevor asked, kicking a dirt clod out of his way. “That place is a tackle trap. There’s lots of other spots we can fish.”

“Yeah, but I want to catch that fish,” Randy said.
“Who knows what it was even?” Trevor shook his head and looked back at me, trailing behind them. “I’m not saying it wasn’t a fish. I’m just saying I don’t know.”

He swung the tip of his rod past my face to show he was playing. “Besides, maybe not everyone had as much fun as you did. Maybe James doesn’t want to go back.”

I shrugged.

Trevor was running interference as always, trying to make sure I didn’t feel picked on, trying to make sure I was okay. He was trying to be a good cousin, but looking back, I suppose I should have told him to stop it. I had had enough pity already. I didn’t say anything though, because I didn’t really care at the moment. I had other things on my mind. I was thinking about my father.

**Devilish**

It started off as a joke, he guessed—the Devil working in a soup kitchen, the Devil behaving himself. But this was his fourth day behind the counter, ladling soup, and perhaps the joke had grown old. He couldn’t tell. When he splattered gravy all over his *Some Like It Hot!* apron, he replaced it with a plain one. When one of the youth group brats spilt sauce on that one, too, he gave up. He didn’t bother to take the dingy thing off. He was depressed.

God showed up one Tuesday afternoon—it was an accident. He had been aiming for Nasiriya, Iraq, but found himself in a small town in Delaware—*Milford, Delaware*, of all places. This wasn’t the Middle East. This was the sort of mistake omniscience could have helped him avoid, but he had given it up—it had ruined the endings of too many movies. It kept people from throwing surprise parties for him. Of course, the movies hadn’t gotten much better, and no surprise parties appeared forthcoming—but still, God
was holding out hope. He was depressed. What could he get out of visiting Nasiriya, anyway? Nothing at all; that’s what. He donned a *Kiss the Cook!* apron and tried to act casual.

The Devil noticed the Lord right away because the Lord was wearing a New York Yankees cap, and folks around here were Baltimore Orioles fans. He had grown a long, white beard and let his hair fall loose, as if he were Moses. The Devil groaned, but went back to work, ladling soup with a smile. He tried to be nice to the men in the line. He doled out an extra ladleful when they accused him of skimping.

“What the hell are you doing here?” God asked when he saw him. The Devil wore a Washington Redskins cap. The Devil fit in.

“Ladling soup.”

“No, I mean, why. Why are you here?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” the Devil said. “I want to be good.”

God rolled his eyes. “You can’t be good,” he said. “You’re the Devil.” He scanned the line for sympathetic faces, but no one met his eyes.

“I’m making a change,” the Devil announced. “Sure, I’ve made some mistakes, but I firmly believe a man can rethink his ways and do right.” A few of the men nodded appreciatively, but no one applauded. The Devil had hoped for applause. God shook his head with a weary sigh.

“Yes, well,” he said. “People can change, but you won’t. You are what you are. You always have been.”

“So then I can’t be held responsible for things I can’t choose?”
“Nice try, wise guy, but you weren’t listening. I didn’t say you can’t change; I said you won’t change. It’s not in your nature. You won’t do a thing unless there’s something in it for you.” The Lord flashed a bleached-white smile.

“It always comes back to nature with you, doesn’t it?” the Devil said and then lifted a spray bottle. He put a mist on the sneeze guard and then wiped it away with a towel he pitched to the side. “What am I doing here, then?” he said.

The Lord hated these long, drawn-out to-dos—in front of strangers especially. He held up his palms.

“You tell me,” he said. “You’re the doing all the talk about change. All I know is there must be something in it for you.” The Devil held up a finger while he filled a man’s bowl. God ought to wait once in a while. Time was his idea, after all. He ought to see what it’s like.

“Because I want to repay my debt to society,” the Devil said after a moment.

“Right.”

“Because I’m applying to college and I can use the community service to dress up the application.”

“Uh huh.”

“Because I’m running for office; because there’s a hot girl in my youth group, because I’m wearing this bracelet.” He held up what looked like a fat shoelace with What Would Jesus Do? written on it for the Lord to admire.

“Nice try,” God said. “If this were Christmas or Thanksgiving, I might have believed you, but no one volunteers for those reasons in February. You might as well fess
up because we both know our roles. You’re bad; I’m good. You cause problems; I solve
problems, so what’s really going on here?”

The kettle from which the Devil had been scraping soup was empty, but Freda,
the youth group VP he’d sent for a refill, was in no hurry. She had pressed a cell phone to
her head and was saying, Oh yeah. It totally smells like bleach here, but we’re seriously
helping hundreds of hoboes. The Devil caused her cell phone to short and sent her off
after the kettle. The men in the line stared at her ass.

“Well, maybe I’m tired of doing your marketing,” said the Devil.

“You’re doing my what?”

“Your marketing. You know what I mean. I blow things up; you get more prayers.
I spread disease; you get more prayers. I get kids to smoke, listen to rap metal, date
idiots, and what’s my reward? More people running to you. All I’m left with are a bunch
of misfit teenagers and writers.”

The Lord couldn’t object. He didn’t like writers.

“So,” the Devil continued. “I’m going to be good. I’m going to behave. They say
you catch more flies with honey, anyway, and I am the Lord of the Flies, so maybe we
should be partners. We might as well, don’t you think? It’s not like there’s going to be a
lot to choose between from now on.” The Devil knew he should be thrilled to be facing
down his age-old nemesis like this, but instead he felt nothing—or perhaps he felt
everything. He felt cocky as hell, and yet he was scared. He felt scared, and yet he was
bored. He felt bored, and yet every detail drew his attention.

God’s own mind was spinning. The Devil couldn’t be good, could he? No, of
course not—God was good. God was great. People thanked him for their food. The Devil
might have a point, but one thing about being God; other people’s opinions don’t really matter.

“I’m still omnipotent,” he said. “You can be as good as you want; I’ll still be the one they come to in the end. The power to send them to heaven or hell is pretty damn persuasive.”

“Doesn’t that mean your servants are cowards? Doesn’t that mean mine are more pure? They’re willing to suffer for their beliefs,” the Devil said. “Reward them all the same and we’ll see whom they choose.”

Just then a health inspector came in with a clipboard. He looked the room over and came toward the line.

“I ought to punish them equally,” God said under his breath.

Watching the Lord try to look inconspicuous, the Devil thought of times long ago. They used to be friends. He had watched the Lord try to blend in so many times, in so many ridiculous ways, he just had to smile—if only God understood; he came off like somebody’s dad at a rap concert. Now he was pinching a wad of chaw under his lip, as he had seen one of the homeless men do, and the Devil was left shaking his head. Still, they had been close once. How could they not be? The Devil was God’s first creation and without a creation there could be no creator, so which was which? That question was the source of the trouble. It was also the source of all time, because someone always had to be first. So they had drifted apart—fine. If God wished to be known as prime mover, so be it. That just meant everything was his fault.

The health inspector got into line, taking notes the whole time. The Devil kept ladling soup, one Styrofoam bowl at a time.
Not wanting to be outdone, the Lord wiped the counter with the end of his apron. After a moment, he moved to the tables. *Why wait around?* he asked himself. *Why not head on to Nasiriya?* He’d had argued the Devil in circles for centuries now. Why not just agree to disagree already? For ages, he had threatened to call everything off, to shut the universe down and judge everyone in it. So go ahead; push all you want. Push him too hard and he’d actually do it. Then who would argue?

Nobody at all; that’s who.

People talk now and then about comas, about how awful it would be to be in a coma, to be trapped in your head, alone with your echoing thoughts. *Damn, that would be hell,* they say, to which God wants to respond: *You’re fucking right it would.* Creation had simply been God’s way of getting out of his head. He just hadn’t guessed the created could be so indifferent.

Now God was having a panic attack. He sat and put his face in his hands. The Devil had accused him of being unpopular before, and God had always responded that he wasn’t running a democracy, but this, this Good Devil business, this could ruin everything. How could he get people to love him now—without forcing them, without being God?

The health inspector had stopped in front of the Devil. He was asking who was in charge. God perked his ears and thought to speak up, but he still felt uneasy. He had discovered long ago that proclaiming oneself in charge up front was a quick way to drive people away. So he eased into the line with the hoboes. He’d listen for a while before making himself known—he could change, too.
“I only work here,” the Devil was saying in a sugar sweet voice. “We’re a ministry. We’re not so big on that whole hygiene thing. We trust in prayer to kill all the germs.”

The health inspector frowned. His head was bent over his paperwork, filling in blanks. The Devil couldn’t help grinning, because now something was happening, something chaotic. All this nervous energy just had to get out.

God was still there. Four feet behind the health inspector, he listened intently.

The health inspector noted the disinfectant-soaked towel next to the salad. He noted the empty kettle Freda had left on the burner. He noted the dingy condition of the Devil’s own apron.

“How long have you been wearing that thing?” he asked. “It looks filthy.”

“About three days,” said the Devil. “I keep forgetting to change it. I pray and I pray and I pray every night for God to improve my memory, but...” The health inspector wrinkled his brow.

“You take these fellas, for example,” the Devil said, waving his hand over the room. “They’re devout men for the most part. They pray when they’re fed; they pray every day, though I do have to wonder, if their prayers actually worked, why would they need them?”

The health inspector stopped him right there. Theology bored him; he’d rather talk NASCAR. He pulled a card from his pocket and passed it to the Devil.

“Just tell your boss to give me a call when he gets in,” he said, turning to go. He passed the Lord on his way to the door. “Oh, and tell this guy to put a hair net over that beard. It’s disgusting.
“You poor old Devil,” he muttered.

That was it. God had had enough. Once the door had closed behind the health inspector, he took three steps and placed himself firmly in front of the Devil, who was grinning ear to ear.

“I can change the rules,” God said with a glint in his eye. “You can be good, but I can make good bad. I can add hugging puppies to the Ten Commandments if I want to.”

“Shalt, or shalt not?”

“Shalt not,” the Lord said with a huff. “Thou shalt not hug puppies.”


Right upside the jaw, God jammed his knuckles into the Devil’s face, and then stepped away, growling, ready for more. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry.

The Devil massaged his own jaw. It was throbbing. The Lord hadn’t done that before. He had threatened to, sure, but he’d always bottled it up, promising to dole it all out in the end—and now this, totally out of character. But, if things were headed that way, fine—OK. He wouldn’t shy away. He understood. The Devil swallowed hard. He stepped forward. He looked God squarely in the eye. He did exactly what he had to do.

He turned the other cheek.

And neither one of them was satisfied.

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Reply All

Date: 6/13/02 8:58:32 AM
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest), Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)
From: RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
Subject: News
Sorry I haven’t had much to say in awhile. I’ve been getting your e-mails, and I’ve been chuckling to myself; I just haven’t had too much to say. To get to the point, Dawn and I are getting divorced. Don’t be too shocked. Those of you who’ve been around in the last two or three years, probably picked up the vibes: these two don’t like each other very much. But it’s mutual, friendly, and we both agree long overdue, so don’t worry. I’m fine. I’ll let you know more as things develop, or don’t. Let the gossip begin.

- I do Ron Ron

***

Date: 6/13/02 8:59:50 AM
To: RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
From: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd)
Subject: Auto Response / Re: News

Wayne F. Judd, deputy director of the office of information, will be away from the office for at least one week. If you have written with an urgent request, please contact Noah Kerns at (202) 555-9190 / KernsN034@EPA.Gov, or Julia Minn, at (202) 555-9188 / MinnJ001@EPA.Gov.

Thank you.

“If you knew your history, you would know where you’re coming from.”
- Bob Marley

***

Judge Judy was on that afternoon, telling some guy he ought to pay child support, ought to visit more often, ought not to key his wife’s car. That wasn’t the best way to communicate.

Looking up from her grade book, glass of tea at her lips, Dawn shook her head, and said, Why do these people wait until there’re children involved?

God, I know, he said, looking up from the cable guide. What I don’t understand is, why wait until you hate each other? Do you have to key someone’s car before you can see that you don’t get along?

They looked at each other for two long seconds, and that was the end of their marriage.

Later, they went out for yogurt—because she didn’t eat ice cream. It was his birthday, and they came home with sticky hands, wadded up napkins and half-eaten sundaes. She drew a line down the center of a yellow legal pad, and they sat across from each other at the dining room table. She wanted the furniture, the rugs, the things on the walls and for him to take over the house because she couldn’t afford it—she had a new car. Okay then, he wanted the major appliances, the dog and the moped. She wanted the dog, too. They’d divide their stocks down the middle.
At midnight, Ron got up from his chair and stretched. He carried their cups to the sink and then rinsed them carefully before pitching them into the trash. When he discovered a smudge of caramel on the side of his finger, he lifted it to his mouth to lick it away, but didn’t. He wiped his finger with a dish towel.

Well...
I’ll take the guest bedroom, she said.

* * *

Date: 6/13/02 11:23:41 PM
To: RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
From: MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest)
Subject: Re: News

Ron,

I’m assuming everything’s okay, but if it’s not, you know you can come stay here for a while. I’d even run a vacuum and take the socks off the ceiling fans. Let me know if you need anything. Seriously.

Mike

“All I know is something like a bird within her hand. All I know she sang a little while and then flew on.”

- The Dead

* * *

The blame should fall entirely on LifeWest. That was one way to see it. That’s the way Mike saw it most of the time. Approaching his senior year at Wesley College, Ron, an English education major, was approached by someone his brother knew from the gym, a little guy named Dale whose nervousness impressed Ron as sincere. He said, You’re smart, young, have leadership qualities, a look people can trust. He said, You could make forty thousand to start. So what do you think? A week into the term, Ron dropped the education part of his studies. Why teach high school for twenty-eight thousand a year when you could make forty and not grade papers at night? He’d always thought education was his calling, but perhaps he should pay his college debts first. Four months later, two months after they met, Ron proposed to Dawn.

Looking back now, Mike wondered. Was it merely the numbers? The offer from LifeWest had seemed to confirm a schedule for Ron: drive at sixteen; vote at eighteen; drink legally at twenty one; graduate and get married at twenty-two. The prospect of money allowed him to consider all that. It seemed right, and perhaps he’d have kids by the time he was twenty-eight, which meant they’d be graduating college about the time he turned fifty—right on time.

Ron was halfway through spring semester and planning a wedding before he discovered that LifeWest had offered the job to five other guys, and that becoming a legitimate candidate for the job required attending about ten-thousand dollars worth of
classes over the course of a year. It was too late. There was no way to go back—he had to complete teacher training over the summer—though he probably didn’t realize the job had influenced the wedding until much later, but then again, maybe that wasn’t how it had happened at all. Just a theory, Mike thought, that the time and the money had come for Ron to get married, and so he had. Ron had done what he’d been expected to do, just as he always did, which was why everyone thought he was great. He was reliable. It was just that a couple years later he began to ask why.

* * *

Two lawyers. That made it official. They’d planned to use just one, but no lawyer in the phone book wanted to work that way.

* Each party deserves an advocate, his lawyer told them, someone to look out for his or her interests. It’s better that way. 

* Oh, they said, jointly.

Within a week, they were taking separate cars to separate appointments, getting separate advice from separate people, each intending the best for everyone involved. But it still felt like teams.

Her lawyer charged fifty more dollars an hour than his, and they both felt cheated.

Ron changed his mind. He wanted the bed, the Chagall print that went over it and everything that went near the fire place. She changed her mind and wanted the moped she’d only ridden twice, but that was just the kind of strategy you could expect, his lawyer advised, She’ll barter for something. And she did. She got the dog.

The session cost extra because she kept having to pee.

* * *

Date: 6/16/02 1:08:43 AM
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd)
From: Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)
Subject: (No Subject)

Hey there!
Have you talked to Ron yet? One of our managers got West Nile, so I’ve been working double shifts three times a week. By the time I get home, I just want to crash. So why don’t I write in the morning, you ask? I don’t know. I’m guess I’m just a bad friend. I get all weird about this kind of stuff, because I never know what to say.

Anyway, tell him I’ve got a fold out couch if he needs it.
Say hi to Lisa for me, will ya? I grew lavender from those seeds she sent me and it’s looking fine.

Missing you,

K.

* * *
Wayne F. Judd, deputy director of the office of information, will be away from the office for at least one week. If you have written with an urgent request, please contact Noah Kerns at (202) 555-9190 / KernsN034@EPA.Gov, or Julia Minn, at (202) 555-9188 / MinnJ001@EPA.Gov.

Thank you.

“If you knew your history, you would know where you’re coming from.
- Bob Marley

* * *

The streets were slick with rain, and cars hissed coming and going—so that was the Doppler Effect Mr. McHenry had taught them about? Karen was out walking with Ron, and he was heartbroken, as usual. The late evening mist was simply too fitting, but of course, if your heart got broken as often as Ron’s it was bound to be raining every now and again.

“It’s just that—I don’t know,” he said, dragging his arm through a bush so they could squeeze past a telephone pole without stepping into the street. He was always the gentleman.

“I know.
It’s just that I try. I really do.
I know.

But maybe I try too hard. Maybe that’s what it is. He kicked a green walnut into the street.

Maybe. She kicked a rotten walnut after his. It hopped over the lip of a drain and dropped out of sight. She stepped to the left of the next pole while he passed on the left.


“I know.
I pay attention.

He shook his head and shut up. There was nothing to say for nearly a block. A mufflerless car growled on some parallel street. A katydid rasped. It was September, and the crickets would soon be out-singing the katydids. Ken, her boyfriend, a senior, had said that. He was a great guy, a good guy, almost too good to be great—he could never live up to the hype. Ken knew all about the Femmes, The Cure and The Smiths. He owned a guitar pick once used by Johnny Cash. He was deep.

Here was something from church, something she hadn’t thought about since:

Sometimes, you know, life is like cooking. It felt strange to just say that. You buy the right spices. You use the right pans. You follow the recipe as well as you can, but sometimes things just don’t turn out.
That’s what I’ve been saying. He exhaled impatiently. That’s what I can’t understand.

But when you’re dealing with other people’s reactions, you’re not alone. You’re not the only one adding ingredients. Karen kicked a walnut so that it skipped past the parking lot and into the grass.

I guess.

They stopped talking when they reached the school at the end of the street. A basketball lay on the edge of the asphalt lot, and they took turns chucking it toward the bent iron hoop on the side of the school. There was nothing to say. There were things to be said—and later, she kissed him. As they arrived at the end of her parents’ driveway, she had pulled him close, opened her mouth and tasted his tongue. Just once and never again, and fourteen years later she still didn’t know why.

Oh, and his marriage. That thing about the ingredients was still true. That somehow applied.

* * *

And what about Karen? What about her?

* * *

Ron’s parents weren’t shocked. They were out on the road, far away from where he lived in central Delaware, seeing the world in a gas-guzzling recreational vehicle. They had divorced a brother and sister years before he was born and seemed to think first marriages were merely trial runs, but Dawn’s parents would be scandalized. They didn’t know.

Two weeks after their decision, she still hadn’t picked a place to move.

What if they call for me? What will you tell them? ‘She’s out again, sorry.’

They’ll think I’m running around on you.

What does it matter? he said.

She didn’t know.

So he finally agreed to let her keep the phone number, just as he’d agreed to let her keep the dog. Her parents would call her new place, hear little barks in the background, trust things were fine and not know a thing. On the other hand, she’d have to say he was again out whenever they bothered to ask.

They’re going to think you’re running around on me, she said.

What does it matter? he said.

Women from his mother’s church brought him casseroles and pies, and they ate them together.

* * *

Date: 6/17/02 5:36:12 PM
From: MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest)
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell), RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
Subject: Re: News

Ron,

How’s single life, dude? You are a dude again, by the way. You’ll start to remember things she’s trained out of you. For example, where’s the best place for a bath towel? Right where you drop it. That’s where. You’ll get the hang of it. Let me know if there’s anything I can do, especially if it involves giving you a hard time.

Remember: There’s no need to do dishes as long as there’s room in the sink.

Mike

“Trouble ahead, trouble behind, and you know that notion just crossed my mind.”
- The Dead

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Date: 6/18/02 9:14:02 AM
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest), Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell),
From: RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
Subject: Next to godliness

For the record, I was the cleanly member of the household. Dawn was the one who thought, well, if happen to spill the dog’s dish on your way out the door, it’s all right. The dog will lick it up. I was the one who ran late once a week, mopping it up.

If you want to ask her, her number is (302) 555-1456. Call anytime. My new number is (302) 555-9998. Call before ten. And, no, that doesn’t mean AM.

-- Ron-ocerous

***

Date: 6/18/02 9:15:59 AM
To: RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
From: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd)
Subject: Auto Response / Re: Next to godliness

Wayne F. Judd, deputy director of the office of information, will be away from the office for at least one week. If you have written with an urgent request, please contact Noah Kerns at (202) 555-9190 / KernsN034@EPA.Gov, or Julia Minn, at (202) 555-9188 / MinnJ001@EPA.Gov.

Thank you.

“If you knew your history, you would know where you’re coming from.”
- Bob Marley
* * *

They moved her clothes and the furniture after a month, aided by an assortment of mutual friends and well-informed strangers to one or the other of them. Sides weren’t clearly defined, but conversations changed depending on who left or entered a room. It was an afternoon of ellipses.

She’s so...
He’s just...
...never expected this...not this...no, not this at all...
...a pity...
...a shame...
...and then went out for sundaes...

Ron sank into a deck chair on her new balcony late in the afternoon and looked up just in time to lock eyes with her brother Harris in the opposite chair.

This doesn’t change things between you and me, Harris said. We can still go hunting in the fall.

Ron didn’t know Harris hunted; they had never talked about hunting, but Ron said, Okay. He couldn’t tell if Harris was being friendly or trying to scare him.

Their old bed—his bed—was a queen. The bed delivered that afternoon was a king. He flopped onto it, face-first, when no one was looking and tried to think of something disgusting to do, but he settled for sighing deeply into its fabric. At least his DNA would be there.

Dawn hugged him on his way out the door.

You’ve been a trooper, she said.

She said the rules of the complex meant she’d have to keep the dog at her former sister-in-law Sasha’s.

* * *

Mike dated this girl Christy for about two years in college, on again, off again, on again, off. Everyone said she was a glutton for punishment, and Mike said so himself, but every two weeks, like clockwork, they got back together. It was crazy.

One evening, Christy showed up, holding a bunny, a pink, fluffy bunny—a gift for Valentine’s Day, or some anniversary, or his birthday. And within ten minutes of Mike’s door closing, Ron heard the grunts, groans and curses of their lust, the knocking of Mike’s bed against the wall. He was used to it.

They lived together in a freshman dorm at the University of Delaware near the Pennsylvania border, but they had little else in common. Ron liked his room tidy and clean. He kept his CDs in alphabetized towers, his shoes side by side under a chair, but Mike was known to leave used condoms under his bed and once let a pumpkin rot in his window sill. Still, they got along, mostly. Ron turned up the radio and went back to work.

After an hour or so, Christy said, did, didn’t do, or didn’t say something that sent Mike into a screaming rage. Things rattled. Things flew. Things broke, so Ron went into the hall with a smirk on his face, half-expecting an RA to write them all up.
What the hell is going on? Ron asked, but no one knew for sure. They just knew it was funny, so he went back to his room, turned up the volume and huddled over his book. More yelling. More banging. He would have thought all the laundry on Mike’s floor would muffle the noise.

Finally, a door slammed, and Christy’s voice, shouting angry indecipherable things, faded into the stairwell. Mike shouted something after her, and then laughed forcefully, and then shouted again. A toilet flushed. Guys burst into laughter. Mike slammed his door.

For crying out loud! Ron got up and went into the hall. Wayne, freaking Ralph Kline and a few other guys were practically choking. He tore off the bunny’s head. He… He… He was in his boxers. Ron saw bunny’s legs at the end of a trail of stuffing, a trail of pink stuffing like cotton candy. Of all the dumb things! Ron had a paper to write. He didn’t have time for this nonsense. He went into the bathroom, opened a stall and sat on the toilet, somewhat amused, but mostly annoyed. How could anyone work in this place? It was like an asylum.

The guys in the hall were mocking Mike. They were piecing together the various versions of what they had heard through the wall, but Ron wished they would shut up. This was finals week, and most of them had tests to study for, papers to write. Jesus! Ron finished his business, wiped and got up to go to his room. But as soon as he flushed, water shot into the air! He leapt onto the handrail, gripping the top of the stall, and water, nasty water, spread over the bathroom floor. His socks were wet. His pant legs were wet. The guys were losing their minds, and there, in the midst of it all, lay the culprit: the bright pink bunny’s head. Mike had flushed it.

Who the hell flooded the bathroom? Mike was asking in the hall.

* * *

Wayne didn’t graduate with the rest of them. Instead, he came back for a fifth year. They were surprised because they’d always considered him a superior student, but he made a good point: He had double majored in French and biology. He had spent a semester in Paris. That was a lot for anyone to do in four years; they understood, only he waited until commencement has passed to say anything—after his girlfriend, Carroll Purcell, had searched all over campus, hoping to congratulate him.

Ron found him back at his house, reading a book on the porch. How was it? Wayne asked as if Ron had come home from a movie. Was everything the way you expected?

Carroll broke up with him over the deal—he had missed her graduation, too—but Wayne seemed baffled by all the fuss. He hadn’t lied to anyone, he said, though Carroll swore they had discussed what they would do in the fall, and Wayne hadn’t said anything about being in school.

After she dumped him, Wayne told Ron he’d miss her, but if that’s the way she wants to be, fine.

Later, one of Carroll’s friends told Ron that Wayne had driven to upstate New York to find Carroll the week after she dumped him. She wasn’t home, but he stood in her parents’ yard until her dad called the cops.

Wayne never said anything about that either.
As a freshman, Karen woke up one Friday morning, not remembering how she’d gotten home the night before. Class started in half an hour, so she brushed her hair, pulled on thrice-worn jeans and a tee shirt and high tailed it to class.

* * *

What the hell is that on your arm? a guy sitting next to her asked, and when she looked there were X’s and O’s even down to her wrists. When she lifted her shirt, they were there, too. Someone had copied part of a playbook onto her torso with black, indelible ink. She burst into tears and ran from the room and was teased for weeks afterward with nicknames like *Wide Right* and *Button Hook*. Everyone was so clever.

When Larry, her boyfriend of a year and a half, confessed to the crime senior year, she kneed him in the crotch so hard he threw up.

* * *

Disturbing or not, things had happened to them. They had seen; they had heard. They had tasted, had touched, and had felt. They had been and had done. They had come home with ink on their hands and mud on their shoes. They told stories you had to have been there to get.

Ron, on the other hand, had been a little more careful. He had a place on the dean’s list and the story of Jill, a girl from his French class. He’d taken her out the week her boyfriend left to Spain for a term.

He took her up to Long Wood Gardens and then out for a meal at the Brandywine House. They talked through the day about everything but school, and she put her hand on his arm, and sang along with Van Morrison during the car ride back to the dorm. He had provisioned his room with candles and wine.

*I know we shouldn’t be doing this*, she said on his futon, which meant that she would, and her body was warm, and his body was warm, and his arm slipped around her, and her shoulder tucked beneath him, and her body relaxed, and her lips found his chin, and his lungs filled with air—and they had to adjust themselves because his arm was falling asleep—and his lips found the long line of her neck, and then her chin, and then her mouth. He had memorized a poem by Neruda for just such occasions, and he started, *I asked of everything if it had something more, something more than shape and form, and I learned that way that nothing is empty—everything is a box, a train, a boat, loaded with implications—and there was a key in the door, and a rattle, and a swift flood of light.*

Mike stood in the doorway, scratching the top of a half-shaven head.

*Dude. Do you mind if I borrow your razor?*

She never came back.

* * *

Date: 6/30/02 7:32:09 PM
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest), Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)
From: (Ronald C. Hess)
Subject: Out
Dudes:

We moved Dawn into a place this afternoon. It’s twenty minutes away, near Moore’s Lake, and a really good barbecue place. It was nice moving weather, a little bit breezy and dry, and she had tons of people to help, but it was still a little bit weird. Here’s a few observations.

1) Dawn works with three guys named Steve, but never made the distinction before. It was always, “Steve took the P&L’s to lunch and left them in the bathroom,” “Steve backed into the regional manager’s car,” and “They made Steve employee of the month.” I was always a little confused.

2) Carrying a milk crate of your soon-to-be-ex-wife’s bras and panties up three flights of stairs isn’t as much fun as you’d think.

3) All those collectable fast food cups? Well, Dawn really does.

4) When mutual friends, her friends, and your friends get together, it’s the ones neither of you know very well who take sides first.

5) Her new mattress is huge. It makes my queen size look like a cot.

A few things to think about.

-- Ron for it

***

Date: 6/30/02 10:14:14 PM
From: MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest)
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell), RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
Subject: Re: Out

Ron,

Well, at least you know she’s not sleeping with Steve. Considering that mattress though, I’d keep my eye out for fat guys.

Mike

“She’s got everything delightful. She’s got everything I need, a breeze in the pines in the summer night moonlight, crazy in the sunlight, yes, indeed.”

- The Dead

***

Who gets the photo albums? The birthday parties, the New Years, the trips to the Keys? The wedding itself? She had looked stunning, but what had once been nostalgia was now what? Pornography? Rental clothes, three hours of make-up and hair, five proofs each to make sure their eyes were open—they weren’t even real—there was no way he would look at them now. So when she asked him to keep them until and if she got
a new place, he felt pinned with a crime. To hold onto them was to admit that they mattered, that you were the chump, the kid on the long gravel driveway chasing after the car, the loser not the lost. On the other hand, there was some moral law, greater than the Ten Commandments, some writ of habeas corpus, that said you couldn’t burn them, you couldn’t leave them out on the curb, but perhaps they’d be good for a joke, in a year, in a month, in a week.

What if the curious, well-intentioned, child of some future marriage found them covered in fuzz in the back of the attic and asked you about them? What if you found them yourself, and there were no child, no second wife at the foot of the stairs, only dust on the tips of your fingers? What then?

* * *

Date: 7/2/02 1:23:27 AM
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest), RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
From: Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)
Subject: (No Subject)

Hey y’all!

Is anyone planning to make it to Newark for homecoming? I’m free that weekend, and whether or not we make it to the game, we could hang out. In any case, I say Ron’s given us an excuse to have a few drinks, tell old stories, and howl at the moon. I’ve got two weeks off, so I’m flexible (ha ha, okay). So, whaddya think? My Dad’s still got the place in Ocean Pines, but I’d go for anything. I’ll let you Delawareans decide.

K.

* * *

He’d always been able to cook. He was no dummy. Just buy the right stuff, use the right things and follow directions as well as you could. Ron had perfected a handful of signature recipes, like meat loaf, lasagna, pancakes, French toast, cheddar mashed potatoes, cabbage and kielbasa. He’d even produced a red wine-braised chicken for New Years, but was intimidated by anything Dawn had made, red Creole jambalaya, for one. What did it mean to “deglaze” a caramelized sauce, and what did “caramelized” mean if it didn’t involve caramel? He imagined Dawn making French toast without nutmeg, or maybe forgetting and adding it twice, or not putting yeast in the bread machine, but that was mere wishful thinking. What was it Charlie Brown made for Thanksgiving? Buttered toast and popcorn? At least, he wasn’t that lost.

Ron was on the phone with Marty, his brother. He had the phone to his ear as he brushed olive oil onto ears of white corn in squares of foil. A married man could eat TV dinners every once in awhile and not think twice about it, but a thirty-one-year-old divorcee couldn’t be caught with a plate of Dinty Moore and hotdogs. That would have been shameful.
Deb said not to even mention the word, but I want to make sure you know, it’s not a date, Marty said. It’s just four people getting a beer.

Ron reached for the dried basil and shook. Marty hadn’t called but twice in the last two years, but now called weekly with suggestions from Deb. It was as if Ron was dying.

I don’t know, Ron said. She teaches?
She substitutes.
Substitutes? What, is she fifty? He shook red pepper onto the corn.
Your age. She substitutes so she has time for other things in her life.
Other things like watching television? He shook black pepper. Other things like reading romance novels and going to tanning beds? He shook salt.
Things like work on her master’s thesis.
Oh. He spread the spices around with a palm slick with oil. Now he’d have to go or face charges that he was being a baby, refusing to move on, ducking an ideal woman. You wanna shoot baskets?

***

Brenda Barnett was another one. She was the curriculum supervisor at Ron’s school and after meeting her at a party, Dawn announced her intention to take under her wing. She had even dragged Brenda Barnett along to Kitty Hawk for a week in a condo with a couple of college friends, but after the trip, they stopped talking. That’s when Dawn began teasing Ron about her. I bet you wish I was more like Brenda Barnett, don’t you? she would say out of the blue. She’s pretty. She’s smart. She doesn’t need every minute of her day planned out to have fun. You wish I were carefree and breezy like that, don’t you? Ron kept his mouth shut. Brenda was all right, a little too skinny, but cute enough and nice to talk to—but what had prompted this teasing? Had Brenda said something about him on the trip? He couldn’t imagine what, and Dawn never told him.

When she stopped by to drop off her keys, she said, I bet you’re looking forward to seeing everyone at school this fall, aren’t you?
She blushed when she said it.

***

Dinner with Cassie got canceled again and again. Deb’s sisters came down to the beach; Marty’s Little League team advanced in a tournament; Cassie’s brother came to mope after his own divorce. All kinds of stuff happened. So by the time they finally met, Ron felt like he knew her too well; Marty’d kept talking her up. But what about those startled connections, those moments of Oh my god, you do that, too? She kept fish. She read Yeats and Neruda. She loved Billy Joel. What was left to discover?

Well, that she had one gray eye and one brown, that she was lactose intolerant, and that she was funny as shit, which really isn’t that funny, if you think about it, she explained with a dry serious look, which I have. As dinner progressed, they gradually tuned out Deb’s chatter about new bus routes and bad public pools. And later, they
laughed at, and not with, Marty’s talk about mothers who act as if Little League concessions were their only private kingdoms.

They started talking dumb guys and pick-up lines.

This guy came up to me last year. He leaned over my shoulder and said, ‘I can make you feel good.’ I smiled as if he were Rico Suave himself and said, ‘Oh really? You’re leaving?’ So he poured a beer on my head. Then I laughed like a crazy woman until his friends dragged him away.

How do you like your eggs in the morning?

Unfertilized.

When Debbie thought neither Ron nor Cassie was looking, she rolled her eyes. When Marty thought neither Cassie nor Debbie was looking, he winked and held up his thumb. Later, at the bar, Cassie mocked them both.

Go get ‘er dude. Coach is waving you in, she said.

* * *

Date: 7/20/02 4:30:31 PM  
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest), Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)  
From: RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)  
Subject: Girls

Karen and Fellows:

I’ve grown up calling women my age “girls.” I mean, you hang out with someone like our dear friend Karen from first grade, and she seems pretty much the same. I feel pretty much the same, myself. In fact, it’s hard to remember I’m not in high school, sometimes, listening to my students talk about parties before the bell rings for class to start. Part of me wonders, why wasn’t I invited? Anyway, my brother and Deb set me up on “just an outing, not a date” with this pretty person from Deb’s school. Ten minutes after we’re alone, she asked how I felt about women in general, and I told her I like them; I’ve always been good friends with “girls,” which got her panties all in a bunch – ha ha. She said I don’t call my male friends “boys,” do I? and I said, well, yeah sometimes I do, but more often “guys.” I couldn’t believe we were fighting, and on our first not-a-date, too. She lectured me half the evening, but then asked if I want to go camping next week. I told her I wasn’t sure if I should. She’s witty and cute, and I’m so confused. Does it look bad to not-date before you’re legally divorced?

-- Mo Ron

* * *

Date: 7/20/02 4:14:20 PM  
To: RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)  
From: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd)  
Subject: Auto Response / Re: Girls
Wayne F. Judd, deputy director of the office of information, will be away from the office for at least one week. If you have written with an urgent request, please contact Noah Kerns at (202) 555-9190 / KernsN034@EPA.Gov, or Julia Minn, at (202) 555-9188 / MinnJ001@EPA.Gov.

Thank you.

“If you knew your history, you would know where you’re coming from.”
- Bob Marley

* * *

Part of the reason Ron’s parents took his separation so well was that they weren’t there to see it. They were on the road, a phrase Ron’s Dad, who now wanted to be called Martin, not Dad, worked into every call.

Son, it’s Martin. We’re on the road, but thought we’d give you a call. We’re about to reach Yellow Stone. You’ve never seen such traffic in the middle of nowhere. It’s incredible. Be home next time we call, why don’t you? Okay, bye. Ron found messages like that about every week and a half. Strange, he’d hardly been out of the house all summer, but they always managed to call when he was out to the mailbox or deaf in the shower. The messages were always about traffic, not scenery, a by-product of their slow, unwieldy, gas-guzzling RV. It was typical to hear that they’d crept up an eight percent grade, trailing a line of angry truckers and that some kid in a Civic had zipped past them, waving a finger. They thought Ron should take the RV next summer, Go on the road, see the country while you’re young.

Martin had gone to a counselor right after retirement, and she had raved about the creativity-boosting, stress-relieving benefits of motion. Why, every March, she’d said, she sent scores of tax accountants out to sky dive. The adrenaline, the speed, the loss of control during and the sense of control afterward were simply rejuvenating. An RV, Ron guessed, was a retiree’s parachute. Now they were trying to get him to jump.

They seldom called Marty. He was too well put together. Why couldn’t something, just mildly upsetting, happen to him?

* * *

They hadn’t settled. They hadn’t. Though friends had so often sighed over phone lines, You could have done better, they hadn’t settled. She had turned out to be more dogged, more clever, more open and nurturing than anyone had guessed or acknowledged, and he had turned out to be more ambitious, more sensual and cunning. Ron knew this about himself and in retrospect knew that she knew this, too, but the course of their marriage had been channeled, not toward a sense of having settled oneself but toward the suspicion the other thought he or she had. One felt unrecognized and unappreciated, so one hoarded one’s gifts and ambitions. One hid oneself within the safety of the habitual and the expected, in polite conversation at dinner tables, in long, speechless hours at movie theaters and in occasional, perfunctory questions. How was school? How was work?

Not bad, they said. Okay, they said—as few syllables as possible.
* * *

The start of Ron’s friendship with Cassie corresponded almost directly with the end of her friendship with his brother and sister-in-law.

Debbie says you’re one of the sweetest guys she knows, and Cassie’s a doll, Marty said one evening, shooting hoops in the driveway. She just doesn’t like you together.

We’re not together. Ron launched a high, arcing jumper that missed.

You know what I mean.

We’re not dating.

Marty took the rebound and whipped the ball back to his brother. Well, whatever you’re doing—just hanging out.

Ron caught a pass just past the foul line, feet square, knees bent. He shot. Well, whose fault is that? He missed.

That you’re not fucking her? Marty grabbed the rebound and palmed it high over his head.

No, Ron needed a break. He walked off the court.

Don’t look at me. This whole thing was Deb’s idea.

Ron slouched onto Marty’s Subaru Wagon. Well, make sure you thank her for me, okay?

All right.

Deb had expected two funny-sarcastic singles to be twice as funny-sarcastic together. Now she thought they’d been squared, like some sort of sardonic Death Star completed. They’d become insufferably glib—all this according to Marty.

Well, someone should tell her funny-sarcastic is only a stage, Cassie said later in bed. We grow up to be entirely bitter.

They were naked. They were touching, but they weren’t having sex. This was something Wayne would have done. Where was Wayne, anyway? He hadn’t replied to an e-mail in ages. Though Cassie was free to guide her tiny, silken fingers over Ron’s bare arms and shoulders, and though the tip of his penis had brushed the front of her thigh, just once, they’d said nothing about it. He moved his hand slowly—nervous in way he’d almost forgotten how to be—toward evermore daring places, thigh to side to belly to breasts. He wasn’t ready to pounce.

At least you and your brother seem closer, she said. That’s one good thing about your divorce.

Yeah, and I’m not really sure why. He rested his palm in the divot between her hips and ribs, part of a glacial advance toward her nipples. I think part of him knew I’d fuck up. It was inevitable and so he pities me for it. I’d almost rather feel judged, but all he wants to do is grin and shoot hoops.

He’s nice.

We’re two very different people.

You’re nice, too.

Thanks. He lifted his palm—it was beginning to sweat—and then laid it against her bottom-most rib, just a few inches closer. He’s always made responsibility look like a Gap ad. He’s always all-American, always smiling, always tossing the ball around,
always wrestling in the grass. He's like one of the Kennedy's. She pulled herself into his body; his hand slipped past her side. I've always been the Al Gore of the party.

In case Marty hasn’t mentioned it yet, Cassie kissed the tip of his nose, I slept with him about a week after I met you. Ron felt her hand on his cock.
She pulled him against her and Ron had to pull his hand out of the way.

* * *

Date: 7/23/02 9:31:23 AM
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest), Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)
From: RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
Subject: Wayne

Wayne? Wayne? Wayne? I feel like that kid at the end of that Western, “Shane,” that kid who kept crying out for the gunfighter who had to leave town. Remember him? Anyway, as I was saying... Wayne? Wayne? Wayne?
I’m beginning to think he ran off with my wife. (If we find out he’s dead, I never wrote any of this, right?)
So, who’s on for a reunion? Labor Day’s a possibility, but there’ll be beach traffic, and I don’t want to be hung-over for the first day of school. What about Homecoming? We’re playing Colgate, so it may be a blood bath, but as far as I can remember you can’t see the field from the parking lot, anyway. Tailgating – who’s in? I can put you up at my place.

-- Ron-chitis

* * *

Date: 7/23/02 9:31:56 AM
To: RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
From: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd)
Subject: Auto Response / Re: Wayne

Wayne F. Judd, deputy director of the office of information, will be away from the office for at least one week. If you have written with an urgent request, please contact Noah Kerns at (202) 555-9190 / KernsN034@EPA.Gov, or Julia Minn, at (202) 555-9188 / MinnJ001@EPA.Gov.

Thank you.

“If you knew your history, you would know where you're coming from.”
- Bob Marley

* * *
When Ron tried to reach Dawn regarding their ice cream freezer—neither had claimed it nor won it in the divorce; he hadn’t seen it moved to her place and couldn’t find it in his—her number was changed, their number was changed. What about her folks? What would they think? What about continuity? Why had she talked him into letting it go if she only intended to keep it a month? He was sick to his stomach and angry. He clutched the cordless phone in his fist, re-dialing, though there was something expected, something he should have known, about the three sharp tones and the message, I’m sorry. The number you have reached has been disconnected. If you believe you have reached this message in error, please hang up and try again.

Ron hung up and re-dialed four times, pounding the buttons, but no matter how little he could believe it, the message repeated itself.

He remembered an ex-girlfriend from college named Linda. They had dated three months and then fell into friendship—a transition made with remarkable ease. She had even left pictures of Ron on her walls. Though she dated other guys, she left them up, and though that confused him at first—Did she want him back? Should he want her back?—Ron eventually came to see them as proof of an enduring affection, an innocent love that need not be hidden. But then she took them down because her new boyfriend Chuck didn’t like them, and after he noticed Ron never went back. The thought of their pictures stuck in some drawer had made him want to key her car.

Now Dawn’s changing her number—their old number—felt the same way. It showed disrespect, but more than that. It proved that nothing was permanent. Ron paced the kitchen before he thought to call directory assistance, and when he reached her machine, he explained: that ice cream freezer was very, very important to him, and the least she could have done if she was going to take it was tell him, though he didn’t know why she wanted it anyway, because you don’t even like ice cream!

* * *

Date: 7/24/02 1:12:32 AM
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest), RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
From: Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)
Subject: (No Subject)
Fellas:
OK, so we’re getting together this fall, right? We’re gonna drink. We’re gonna tell old stories. We’re gonna make Ron forget he was married. So who’s in, and where? Oh, and Wayne, Wayne, Wayne? He’s like Waldo.

K.

* * *

Date: 7/25/02 5:34:13 PM
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess), Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)
From: MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest)
Subject: Ideas for getting together

Here are my thoughts about the get-together. They’re kind of elaborate, so pay close attention. Okay? Beer.
Mike

“It’s just a box of rain. I don’t know who put it there. Believe it if you need it, or leave it if you dare. But it’s just a box of rain, or a ribbon for your hair. Such a long, long time to be gone, and a short time to be there.”
- The Dead

***

Date: 7/25/02 6:48:00 PM  
To: MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest)  
From: Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)  
Subject: Re: Ideas for getting together

But of course, and some good rum drinks, too. By the way, should we invite anyone outside our little threesome? I saw Trake at King of Prussia Mall last week. I know you guy weren’t all that close, but he raved about Ron. I dunno. Could be fun to have more people. Any others?
It’s up to you.

K.

***

Date: 7/25/02 6:48:00 PM  
To: Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)  
From: MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest)  
Subject: A plan comes together.

What about Joyce Mott? She lived in the house next to Ron’s and I have her number. I’ll look up some folks if you want, just don’t ever, ever, ever, include me in the word “threesome” with Ron again.

“Put the toothbrush in my hand and let me be a traveling man.”
- The Dead

***

Not running into her was one of the hardest things. He thought he saw her car in front of the Acme, in front of the bowling alley, in front of the Dairy Queen, and a lot of other places she hated, but maybe he didn’t. A burgundy Taurus with blue Delaware tags
could have been hers a quarter mile away. A blonde pony-tailed girl turned just a bit to
the left could have been her from behind. When he finally saw her, unscheduled, she was
standing in front of a roadside stand on Canterbury Road and gone in an instant as he
passed. He didn’t have time to wave and spent the rest of the evening wondering what
she had thought. He nodded to one of her co-workers, Lowell, in the Super Fresh
deodorant aisle and pretended to be lost in decision until Lowell went the other way.
And sometimes he thought he saw Dawn, too.

* * *

Date: 7/28/02 2:23:02 AM
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd),
RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess), Jeepurs@Yuno.Com
(Karen C. Campbell)
From: MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest)
Subject: Bars
Ron:
Okay, now that you’re single again, let’s talk about bars.
1) Bars are dark. Bars are loud. Don’t be surprised if she’s not as pretty or clever
the next time you see her.
   2) Under absolutely no circumstances should you ever even consider placing your
      skin on, or adjacent to, the surface of a bar toilet
   3) If the girl is really tall and athletic and wearing a lot of make-up and fish-net
      stockings, look for an Adams Apple.
   4) The secret to drunk driving is NOT driving really slow and lighting your turn
      signals far in advance. It’s convincing someone you half kind of like to let you crash at
      her place.
   5) Always go out with idiots. They make you look smarter.
      Mike

   “It’s a buck dancer’s choice my friend; better take my advice. You know all the
   rules by now and the fire from the ice.”
   - The Dead

* * *

Date: 7/28/02 2:24:03 AM
To: (Michael Guest)
From: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd)
Subject: Auto Response / Re: Bars

Wayne F. Judd, deputy director of the office of information, will be away from
the office for at least one week. If you have written with an urgent request, please contact
Noah Kerns at (202) 555-9190 / KernsN034@EPA.Gov, or Julia Minn, at (202) 555-
9188 / MinnJ001@EPA.Gov.
Thank you.
“If you knew your history, you would know where you’re coming from.”
- Bob Marley

* * *

Date: 7/29/02 1:02:48 AM
To: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), MFG582@MakeShift.Com
   (Michael Guest), RHess01@Mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
From: Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell)
Subject: (No Subject)

Hey guys!
I hear a lot of busting on women, but let me tell you, men aren’t all they’re cracked up to be, either. Here are a few rules of my own.
  1) Yes. We talk about you in the bathroom.
  2) If he says, “No, that’s okay. I’ve got your number. I’ll call you,” he’s married or has a girlfriend.
  3) Guys who sit around writing up rules about bars probably aren’t out using them.

K.

“I’m coming out, so you’d better get this party started right.”
- Pink

* * *

Had Dawn wanted children?

* * *

Living with Marty was strange. They seldom talked in the house, but shot hoops for an hour each night after the news. Marty got better at shooting. Ron learned there was more to rebounding than height. He learned that if he could make Marty run, Marty shot worse. They talked about their parents, Debbie and Dawn, but there was no mention of Cassie, who called most days while Marty was down at Home Depot.

_That girl_, Marty said one night in front of the news.
_I know._
_I saw the caller ID._
There were tanks on TV, in at least three separate places. There were police officers accused of crimes. There were studies reporting strange things about coffee. Ron decided she was calling Marty at the Home Depot, too.
_I figured you might._
Ron went outside to practice foul shots.
I guess the party is on. Mike says he’ll come. I don’t hear from Wayne. Do you? Maybe we can get a few guys from your hall to come so it’s not just us three staring at each other. I’m excited, but it’s been a while. I feel like I need a long evening drinking in a corner booth with each of you before we hang out en masse. I’ll feel as if I’m not giving someone enough attention, though you know you’re my favorite, don’t you? Anyway, count me in for whatever. If you’re all nice to me, maybe I’ll whip up some bloody Marys the next morning. You said we can hold this out your house and bust up all your furniture, right?

Missing you,

K.

P.S. Do you think Wayne has an Away Message in bed?

* * *

Labor Day passed and things got better. Ron went back to school. He was on base now. The students were new, the schedule the same, just enough change, just enough stability to make him feel right. He gathered homework to grade with a greedy zeal. He gave himself difficult goals like grading fifteen projects a night, but he also felt he was living a lie. If his co-workers knew he was separated, they weren’t letting on.

Ronnie there, how is your beautiful wife? Mr. Stokes asked each time they passed in the teachers’ lounge. After a week of it, Ron turned and glared at him. I can give you her number if you’d like. We’re getting divorced. How long before the rumor reached Brenda Barnett?

The next morning he found a bouquet on his desk, labeled From everyone, though no one said anything to him about it.

* * *

Marty started writing a novel, one he wouldn’t show anyone. He and Deb sought counseling. Cassie didn’t call half as much as she had, and when she did she had little to say.

At least you and your brother got closer through all of this, she said on the phone. That’s one benefit, right?

Why don’t you shut the hell up? Ron asked and meant it for once. Because then it gets quiet, she said.
I know you’re thinking, “Typical Wayne,” and you’re right. I’m sorry. I’ve been away, but not as long as that damn away message might suggest. I’ve been back to work for almost two months. I just didn’t know what to say.

To make a long story short, Lisa left me in May. I ran into Carroll at a conference in York, Pennsylvania and went back two weeks later to see her. I won’t say it was chaste, but it wasn’t as sordid as you might think, either. In any case, closure? That shit is a myth.

I told Lisa, and then took off for a month on the Appalachian Trail, which believe it or not only made matters worse. I broke my leg. Now I’m in counseling.

Lisa’s moved back into the house, but that’s all the details I should give at the moment. I’ll tell more when I can.

In the meantime, Ron, if there was any way I could help, I hope you know that I would. As it is, you’re probably doing well.

I’m all for getting together. Just let me know when.

Wayne

---

I’m sorry, but Ron, Karen and Mike will be away from their e-mail for at least one week. If you are writing in regard to an urgent matter, please contact… Oh, never mind. My number is (302) 555-9998. Welcome back.

-- Elect-Ron

Ron hugged each person to enter his home. Each person hugged him in turn, and then moved on to the others. For long nervous seconds, newcomers stood near the door, awkwardly watching their feet—as if they were afraid to track up his carpet—but then
finally gathered their nerves and waded forward with bottles of gin, rum or tequila thrust forward.

*Where do you want me to put this?* they asked.
If they’d brought girlfriends, they thrust them forward, too.
*I’d like you to meet …* they said.
To be on the safe side, Ron greeted each stranger, saying, *I’ve heard so much about you, I feel like I know you,* but Ralph Kline stopped him mid-sentence. *I don’t believe I’ve mentioned her,* he said. *We met last week on the Internet.*
A tiny blonde in her forties held out a stout cylindrical gift wrapped in paper, clearly a candle.
*I know it’s not much,* she said with a shrug, *but here you go, anyway. Happy Thanksgiving.*

Ron thanked them both and then excused himself off to the kitchen. There, the single guys were griping about those who’d brought dates.

*I thought this weekend was supposed to be about Ron,* Chris Glanville was saying as he and Mike sliced citrus into a ten-gallon bucket. *I didn’t know this would be a damn debutante ball.* Ron set the candle next to the others he’d been given that day and surveyed the room. Mike, Chris, and some guy they called Trake were the only ones there. He realized then he had been looking for Karen.

*This is a top-secret formula,* Mike proclaimed, gesturing broadly to the bottles arranged on the counter. *Before the night’s over, your gonna get baptized*

Ron shrugged, grinned, and then turned toward the living room. He’d seen her come in, but where was she now?

Ron paused on the stairs. These people were great. They weren’t all that close. They didn’t all get along, but look at them now: Derek was laughing at Kurt. Noah was flirting with Joyce. Even Ralph Kline and Jim Hickman, who’d once had a fist fight, were sharing a couch and debating the Phillies. This was all Ron could have asked for.

Sure, this was all a bit phony, and given a week in each other’s presence, old wounds would have reopened. Old friendships would have been uncovered as shams of circumstance, based solely upon having shared a wing in a dorm, or a class, or a club—Ron wasn’t naïve but was pleased nonetheless.

Jim Hickman knocked a glass of wine onto the carpet, and everyone booed. *Ron’s going to kill you,* Noah was saying, but Ron didn’t care. Once no one was looking, he moved up the stairs.

Karen was sitting on the edge of the bed in the guest room.

*Hey there, Goober,* she said and stood up to tickle him. She looked incredible, the same girl he’d known since high school, only her bangs were gone and her brown hair had been highlighted—it caught him off guard. It was autumn leaves blown down the sidewalk, carefree and breezy. She was warm and sleek in his arms.

*What are you doing up here?* he asked.
*I’m just catching my breath. Are you doing okay?*
Ron nodded and then pressed his forehead against hers. It seemed right. He swallowed hard and was sure she could hear it.
*It’s just that—I don’t know,* he said.
*I know,* Karen said. *I don’t know either.*
*Maybe I should have tried harder.* What were they talking about? Ron wasn’t
quite sure—Dawn, he supposed, but why now? He had been biding his time since high school, waiting for that one most opportune moment—both of them single; every word right. He could finally admit this to himself, but now he was squandering the moment. For some stupid reason, he was speaking of Dawn.

*Well, Maybe you tried just enough,* she said. *Maybe it just didn’t work out. You know, some things just don’t.* She furrowed her brows and rolled her forehead against his. Then she took a step back and looked him up and down.

*Maybe,* he said and prepared to say more, but just then a whoop came from the foyer. People moved toward the door. *Wayne,* Ron heard someone call—*Lisa!* Before he thought to be disappointed, he was following Karen down the stairs.

* * *

There were plastic cups on the end tables. There were bottles on the ledge in front of the hearth. Mike had said he’d be the garbage man and gather trash before leaving, but he’d only gotten as far as the cups on the deck. Karen had stayed until three, washing dishes, but then she had to go, too. Wayne had left after only an hour on Saturday. He said they had to be in PA before late because his parents-in-law went to bed early and that’s where they were staying.

The whole event had been anticlimactic, though Ron had enjoyed a few conversations. Joyce, for example, had been surprisingly funny and getting her number had been his prime motivation for setting out a legal pad marked *Personal Info.*

Ron picked it up now and studied the handwriting. She must be left-handed. Mike had signed his name, *Jerry.* That guy Trake had signed, *Mr. T.*

It was surprising to think that nowhere, before or after, had any of them had friends as good as the friends they’d had in college. That thought was strange, sad and impressive all at once, was it not? The party had been just what he had expected—a beer commercial, a seventh grade dance. It had been both and yet neither.

It had been okay. It had been nice. It had even been fine, but Ron doubted there’d be another anytime soon—though maybe there would. Who knew? He had to be at work again Monday.

* * *

Date: 2/18/04 6:04:40 PM
To: KGS442@Western.edu (Kendra Simon), JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd), Joyce2TheWorld@Yuno.com (Joyce Mott), MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest), Glanville80@Starbuck.org (Chris Glanville), DarWilliamsFan@MeNext.Com (Matt Castner), Freakinator8@MakeShift.com (Ralph Kline), IMNOHICK003@Lorax.net (Jim Hickman)
From: RHess01@mail.Milford.K12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
Subject: News

Well, it’s official. We’re getting married. Even the best of women can only turn me down so many times—so finally I beat her over the head, and Karen said, “Yes.”
Now I’m happy as a lark, as they say in stupid backwoods places where they actually know what larks are, though I don’t -- they’re miserable, right? Anyway, I’m a lucky, lucky guy. I’ll send more details as I know them, but let me say now, I expect you all there. Maybe we can end with a party at my house, because what’s the big rush for a honeymoon. Well… okay. I hope everyone’s doing well.
Let the harassment begin.

-- Rice a Ronnie

* * *

Date: 2/18/04 6:04:40 PM
To: RHess01@mail.milford.k12.DE.US (Ronald C. Hess)
KGS442@Western.edu (Kendra Simon), Joyce2TheWorld@Yuno.Com (Joyce Mott), Jeepurs@Yuno.Com (Karen C. Campbell), MFG582@MakeShift.Com (Michael Guest), Glanville80@Starbuck.org (Chris Glanville), DarWilliamsFan@MeNext.Com (Matt Castner), FricketyFrack@Yuno.com (Ralph Kline), IMNOHICK003@Lorax.net (Jim Hickman)
From: JuddFW003@EPA.Gov (Wayne F. Judd)
Subject: Re: News

Wayne F. Judd, deputy director of the office of information, will be away from the office for at least a week. If you have written with an urgent request, please contact Noah Kerns at (202) 555-9190 / KernsN034@EPA.Gov, or Tobias Thompson, at (202) 555-9188 / ThompsonT021@EPA.Gov.

Thank you.

“Singin’, ‘Don’t worry about a thing, ‘cause every little thing gonna be all right. Singin’, “Don’t worry about a thing, ‘cause every little thing gonna be all right.”
- Bob Marley