POP GOES THE STORY: A COLLECTION

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ABSTRACT

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POP GOES THE STORY: A COLLECTION (81 pp.)

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POP GOES THE STORY: A COLLECTION is a collection of short stories that infuses elements of popular culture to help examine the human condition. The critical introduction explores how Raymond Carver uses biography to inform the writing process, and how Caver’s influence is demonstrated in this collection.

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CHAPTER 1: WRITING WHAT I KNOW: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Since I have been writing, I’ve always heard the phrase, “Write what you know.” But I was not sure what that meant exactly. At first the phrase struck me with fear. I wanted to explore as many topics through fiction as I could, but my life experiences were limited. I did not want to write autobiographically, either. Nor did I want my readers to assume that every word that was written, every character, every action, was a mirrored reflection of my deepest thoughts and convictions. I wanted the freedom to explore and make sense of this world through the art of fiction, not just through my limited experiences. Then I found some relief. During my first graduate fiction workshop, Darrell Spencer said that the idea that the writer and the story are one and the same was an antiquated idea. I could now write about anything.

While I found freedom in Darrell’s comment, I still felt paralyzed. I often asked myself, “How do I write about anything, yet still write what I know?” There seemed to be a contradiction there. How could I write about anything if I did not know everything? I felt stifled and uncreative like I was cheating if I had to pull from personal experiences to write. But then I discovered through Raymond Carver’s biography and short stories that an author can write from his life and yet transform it. A writer (such as Carver) does not have to recreate previously experienced events in a fictionalized way, but rather, a writer can draw from experience and transform that experience, creating new characters and circumstances. Writing what you know does not necessarily mean writing biographically. The writing can invent but still be informed by biography. Therefore, I am interested in
briefly exploring, through Raymond Carver’s work and biography, how personal experience may influence story writing.

Raymond Carver’s short stories take place in what many writers refer to as Carver Country – blue collar America struggling to rise above its lower-middle class circumstances. For most of his life, Carver lived under the same circumstances as his characters. By the time Carver was twenty, he was married with two children, taking many menial jobs, such as “delivery man, gas station attendant, and hospital janitor, while his wife waited tables and sold door-to-door,” in order to survive (Saltzman 1). Carver struggled through most of his life as an alcoholic, family man, and writer. It was not until the last ten years of his career that Carver’s life dramatically improved, resulting in him becoming sober and a successfully published author. But even during his prosperity, Carver continued to write about the struggles of everyday America. Although Carver claims that his new found prosperity changed his outlook and writing style, “which became open, expansive, and generous, rather than rigorously pared down,” it did not change the substance of his work (Meyer 15). Carver continued to explore themes of false hope, uncertainty, and powerlessness within working-class America.

In “A Small Good Thing,” Carver writes about two conditions he knows well — blue collar labor and parenthood, exploring issues of powerlessness and instability through a baker who works a thankless job and Howard and Ann, parents, who lost their son Scotty in a hit-and-run accident. While there is no research that indicates that Carver was ever a baker, he more than likely chose the blue collar job to write about because of his experience with laborers. And of course Carver was a parent, but he never suffered
the loss of a child through an automobile accident, though his experience with parenthood likely has informed his approach to writing about Howard and Ann.

The baker in “A Small Good Thing” calls his job a “necessary trade” (89). But one gets the sense throughout the story that the baker views his job as necessary not in some elevated way as society needs doctors and lawyers, but rather, society needs bakers like it needs garbage collectors, gas station attendants, and grocery clerks. When Ann stops at the shopping plaza’s bakery, the baker routinely takes her order with little emotion or care — “not rude, just abrupt” (60). The baker appears tired, de-motivated, stuck. Even Ann looks at the baker with slight contempt, “wonder[ing] if he’d ever done anything else with his life except be a baker” (60). The baker has little authority or control over his life. He works all night baking goods for customers who will never appreciate the skill behind his labor. His goods are cheap, plentiful, and disposable. Carver likely experienced similar responses to his own blue collar work.

Howard and Ann, like the baker, are also trapped, helpless to change Scotty’s declining health. There is nothing the couple can do but wait the situation out. The only comfort Howard and Ann can find is to rely on the authority of the doctor’s prognosis, especially when their instincts tell them otherwise:

Ann put her hand over the child’s forehead. “At least he doesn’t have a fever,” she said. Then she said, “My God, he feels so cold, though. Howard? Is he supposed to feel like this? Feel his head.”

Howard touched the child’s temples. His own breathing had slowed. “I think he’s supposed to feel this way right now,” he said. “He’s in shock,
remember? That’s what the doctor said. The doctor was just in here. He would have said something if Scotty wasn’t okay.” (67)

As a parent, Carver may have felt helpless to improve the stability of his family while pursuing a writing career. And with his experience as a hospital janitor, Carver more than likely witnessed families struggling and coping with loss and grief, powerless to change the condition of a hospitalized loved one.

Carver also tackles issues of instability and powerlessness in “Where I’m Calling From,” a story about recovering alcoholics, struggling to successfully complete rehab during the holiday season. There is little doubt that Carver wrote this story from his experiences of being “separated from his wife, estranged from his children, unemployed, broke” and spending a total of four times “at a detox center” (Meyer 12). Even though Carver had been sober by the time this story was written, he still returns to themes and settings that he knows. ¹

While there is no indication of the narrator’s class background in “Where I’m Calling From,” the other two characters we see in rehab are blue collar working men – JP the chimney sweep, and Tiny the electrician. Aside from being alcoholics, each man has one thing in common – they suffer from tremors. Even though the men are gaining power over their addiction, they are powerless before the symptoms of withdraw. There is nothing they can do, nothing but suffer through them. After witnessing Tiny’s seizure (thought to be caused by the tremors), the narrator, considers with fear and uncertainty

¹ Carver had stopped drinking for good on June 2, 1977, and “Where I’m Calling From” was written after that date.
this his tremors may end in a seizure, “So every time this little flitter starts up anywhere, I
draw some breath and wait to find myself on my back [. . . from a seizure]” (129).

In addition to themes of uncertainty and powerlessness among working-class
characters and settings, Carver also introduces the theme of false hope. In “A Small,
Good Thing,” Howard and Ann believe that their son is going to recover, but Scotty only
wakes up for a brief moment and then immediately passes away (80). And in “Where I’m
Calling From,” there is a sense of relief for Tiny who has successfully completed rehab
and is going home to celebrate “New Years with his wife in front of the TV [ . . . ]
drink[ing] hot chocolate and eat[ing] cookies” (128). But then Tiny has a seizure,
indicating that he may not be as well as he appears.

Themes of false hope permeate Carver’s stories. As noted earlier, Carver
struggled to stay sober for ten years, in-and-out of rehab centers four different times.
Carver must have wondered many times whether he would ever be able to beat his
addiction. And each time he managed to quit probably felt like false hope when he
relapsed. During a long thirteen year stretch, Carver and his wife struggled while raising
their children and attending college part time (Meyer 4). At one point Carver filed for
bankruptcy, and he felt that his struggles were in vain and that success was beyond his
grasp:

I could see nothing ahead but more of this kind of responsibility and
perplexity. Things would change some, but they were never really going
to get better [ . . . ] The sights would have to be lowered [ . . . ] For
years my wife and I had held to a belief that if we worked hard and tried to
do the right things, the right things would happen. It’s not such a bad thing
to try and build a life on. Hard work, goals, good intentions, loyalty, we
believed these were virtues and would someday be rewarded. We dreamt
when we had the time for it. But, eventually, we realized that hard work
and dreams were not enough [. . . . and] the dreams began to go bust.
(Carver “Fires” 24-25)

Even though Carver’s circumstances dramatically changed by his overcoming
alcoholism and becoming an established writer, he was never able to leave his working-
class struggles behind. According to GP Lainsbury, author of The Carver Chronotope,
“Carver remained throughout his career fiercely committed to his origins, and to the
kinds of people he lived among for most of his life” (13). Carver’s experience and
devotion to his past informed his storytelling; he could not escape his biographical
themes and settings which compelled him to write. Carver continued to write about this
milieu, finding empathy for the characters who, although they could not always overcome
the challenges of their limited lives, nonetheless found dignity in the struggle.

I have discovered a link between my fiction and Carver’s — we both write from
biography, allowing life experience to shape our fiction. Even though stylistically we
write differently, I am interested in exploring the human condition as Carver did. And in
some ways our backgrounds are similar in that we both came from working-class
environments. But due to my personal biography, the stories in this collection share a
common theme of broken relationships.
During the most impressionable years of my life, I had the experience of losing important family relationships: my parents divorced when I was eight; my grandfather Dallacheisa passed away when I was ten (my mother’s parents passed away before I was born); and at age twenty, just as I was beginning to develop a closer relationship with my father, he passed away. This theme of lost or broken relationships is a major theme in “May Divorce be with You . . . Always,” “Drawing Lines,” and “More Than a Feeling.” In “May Divorce be with You,” Steven reflects upon a special moment watching The Empire Strikes Back with his father before his parents divorce. In “Drawing Lines,” Dan, a talented artist severs the close relationship he shares with his best friend Cloud through deceit and a desire for independence. And in “More Than a Feeling,” Jozey struggles to remain faithful to his wife, even though their marriage is falling apart. I believe the theme of broken relationships will always be present in my work.

Settings play an important role in my stories as well, and I find them inseparable from the story that I am trying to tell. Like Carver, whose working-class settings complimented his down-and-out themes, my settings reflect an important aspect of my themes, which I hope make the stories more compelling. In “May Divorce be with You . . . Always,” Steven spends an evening watching The Empire Strikes Back, a movie about an alienated father and son. In “Drawing Lines,” the entire story revolves around comic book culture, a tightly knit American subculture. Comic book readers share a special camaraderie. Because of the closeness between Dan and Cloud and their culture, the loss of their friendship is even more keenly felt. And in “More Than a Feeling,” tensions between Jozey and Daphne are acerbated because he feels he has lost his wife to religion,
and he is no longer comfortable in his home, a place where he once found happiness and stability.

The settings in which I place my characters are settings that I know personally. I’ve been a *Star Wars* fan since I was a kid, I’ve been involved with comic book culture on-and-off for over twenty years, and I was raised in a religious home, embracing Pentecostal teaching until my late twenties. I used to feel bound by these experiences, but I now realize that biography is a powerful way to approach fiction. I suspect that I continue to draw upon my background of religion, popular comics, and movies because I find in them a way to foreground my themes of alienation and failing relationships. I, like Carver, can write using personal experience to create themes and settings, and I no longer feel bound to the idea that my fiction is thinly veiled life experiences. I am free to explore. I am free to create. I am free to make sense of my world.
CHAPTER 2: MAY DIVORCE BE WITH YOU . . . ALWAYS

Whenever I remember something good about my father, it’s usually right before my parents divorced. I was eight — July 4th, 1980. A sweltering hot Ohio summer. We didn’t have air conditioning, and I was in the house driving my mom nuts while my dad mowed the lawn.

“Will you take me to see Star Wars for my birthday?” Like a machine gun, I rattled off a salvo of pleases. “Please, please, please, please, please,” I said. Mom was busy making tea so sweet you’d have thought we were a hive of bees. She stirred the tea furiously trying to melt the sugar. It wouldn’t dissolve. Instead, the sugar just raced around the pitcher like an underwater sandstorm.

“For your birthday? We already celebrated it,” she said.

“I know. But please? I may never get to see it if I don’t go today.”

“What’s it rated?” she said. Like any good Pentecostal mother who loved Jesus, she fretted about the movie’s content.

“PG,” I said. I whipped out the movie ad Mom had clipped from the newspaper for me. It was in tatters. I had been carrying it around for weeks. Unfolding. Staring. Memorizing. Pretending. I handed it to her and said, “It’s playing at Nichols Plaza Cinema all day today.”

“Are you sure it’s playing today? It’s a holiday, you know?”

“Yep. At 1:00, 2:30, 4:00, 5:30, 7:00, 8:30, and 10:00. The Star Wars Saga Continues. Four stars. The must see movie of the summer. Starring Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, Billy Dee Williams and Anthony Daniels in Star Wars: The
“Empire Strikes Back.” I ignited my imaginary lightsaber and swung it around, humming.

“Luke Skywalker fights Darth Vader in this one and he gets his hand cut off.”

“That sounds kind of scary,” she said. Mom frowned while examining the ad, biting her thumbnail. The ad mimicked the classic “Gone with the Wind” movie poster where Han Solo held Princess Leia in a passionate embrace exactly how Rhett Butler held Scarlett O’Hara. Darth Vader loomed in the background. He was the background. And Luke Skywalker sat in the foreground upon his tauntaun snow lizard, scanning the horizon. Frosty cold air slowly escaped his lips.

“It’s just pretend, Mom. He gets a new hand. It’s like a bionic hand.” I said.

She brought the ad closer to her face, raised her glasses, squinted, and said, “This schedule’s for May. The movie probably isn’t even still out.” She handed the ad back to me.

“It’s playing, Mom. The commercials are on TV.”

“I don’t think so, Honey. That ad is too old.” She always called me Honey when she was trying to convince me that I was wrong. Whenever she thought I was right, she’d call me Steven. When I was in trouble, it was always Steven Patrick.

“Un huh, I saw it this morning. Can’t we call them and see?” I loaded my polite machine gun again. “Please, please, please, please, please?”

Somehow between my pleading, begging, and obsessing over the film, Mom decided to call the theater and they confirmed the show times. She said I could go if my father would take me. I was halfway there. I bolted from the house and tried to flag him
down. He didn’t stop the mower or the mowing. I would have to wait until either the mower ran out of gas or he ran out of nicotine. Nicotine was the winner.

When my father stopped the mower, he pulled out his pack of Winston Lights. The package shimmered gold with crisp red lettering. A tiny gold eagle, as if making a screaming halt, landed on the “O.” He lit up. Amazing. The smoke swirled tightly like a blue and white double helix, curling sweetly to the sky. He left the mower sitting in the middle of the yard; he was halfway done. It was a big yard — half the size of a football field. The mowed strips stretched out for what seemed like miles. I ran toward him, yelling, “Mom said you could take me to see Star Wars.” He turned toward me and said, “What?”

“Mom said to take me to go see Star Wars.”

“She did?” he said. He looked at me like an algebraic equation that couldn’t be solved for X. He took another drag on the Winston. He was chewing Wrigley’s Double Mint gum.

“Yep, she said it was okay.” He walked toward the house and I followed beside him. “It’s still playing tonight at 5:30, 7:00, 8:30, and 10:00.” He didn’t say anything until we reached the back porch where Mom waited with the ice tea. He placed one foot on the second step and drank his tea slowly. The ice clinked and his Adam’s apple bounced rhythmically to the emptying of the glass. His unattended cigarette, slowly consumed itself in his right hand.

“Did you ask your Dad?” my mom said. She looked down at me and then at him.
Before I could answer, my dad said, “I can’t take him tonight, Nancy. I need to
finish the lawn and finish up some paperwork. Maybe another time.”

Dad stayed busy on the weekends managing a team of fifteen Combined
Insurance salesmen. Always on the road; always finishing paperwork. Away for weeks at
time, he canvassed every city and town in Ohio, selling life insurance, accident policies,
and death benefits. When not in Ohio, he traveled to national headquarters in Chicago on
a regular basis. A salesman’s salesman, he won achievement and sales awards every year
— every single year. He was so good in fact he could sell life insurance to God Himself.
Okay, maybe not that good, but he could at least sell Him an accident policy, “Just in
case,” he’d say. “You never know when something could go wrong.” He had what my
mom’s family called the gift of the gab. But they were German, so naturally they didn’t
like him. Jet black hair, olive skin that tanned golden brown, heavy beard, strong jaw,
deep brown eyes that were almost black, and a smile and a glance that could make
women sophisticated and men clumsy — my dad was Italian and he, and everyone else,
knew it.

“For me, Rob?” my mom said. She refilled Dad’s glass. I watched condensation
drip from the pitcher. “He’s been talking about that movie all summer. It would be fun
for the two of you to spend some time together.”

“I wanted to finish the lawn and then look over the team’s numbers. It’s been a
great week. Besides, I thought I could take him to the fireworks later, tonight.” He took
another drag on the Winston and looked at his watch. “I think they start at ten.”
At that point, I wanted to beg him to take me, but I knew better. I could talk my mom into just about anything, but not my dad. He had a way of silencing me without words. It was that intense look he’d get in his eyes. It pierced me. Transfixed me. And he had a temper like a rocket launching without a countdown, his voice breaking the sound barrier at Mach III. I walked over to my mom who now stood on the grass beside the steps. I leaned against her side and pouted. I was safe here.

“It’s okay, Honey. Your dad will take you another time.” She held me close. My dad studied me for a second and my mom said, “Are you sure you can’t take him just this one time? W. Clemet Stone’s company will be fine until you get back.”

“I’ll pay for it with my allowance. I’ll do dishes all summer for free,” I said.

“Could you take him for his birthday? Since you couldn’t be here on the first, it would be nice to take your son out tonight — just the two of you,” my mom said.

Mom’s words, “your son,” rang in my ears like the first time I heard “Rhinestone Cowboy,” by Glenn Campbell. It’s the first song I ever remember hearing that I couldn’t stop singing. I even sang the guitar parts that punctuated the melody, right after Glenn sang, “Like a Rhinestone Cowboy.” Bumm! Bumm! I could never understand what he sang after that, so I just mumbled the words and anxiously waited for Glenn to get back around to the cowboy part.

“And what will you do this evening?” my dad said. He took a short drag and squinted from the smoke weaving through his eye lashes.

“I’ll just go to prayer meeting, tonight.”
“I need to at least finish mowing. It’s four, now,” he said. Taking one last long drag on his Winston, Dad flicked the smoldering filter into the gravel driveway that ran between our house and the neighbor’s. “If I can get this lawn done in time, I suppose we can go, but I don’t think we’ll be back in time for the fireworks. It’s 4:30 already.”

I smiled.

“That’s fine. You guys probably won’t be missing much. I read in the paper that the town had problems raising money for them this year. It’ll probably be over before you know it,” she said.

Dad finished the yard in good time, but he took forever getting ready. We arrived at the theater fifteen minutes late. 7:15. He asked me if I wanted popcorn and I told him I just wanted to see the movie. It was right there, just behind those big doors where the illuminated sign hung down. The sign read, with the same picture that was in the ad I had clipped from the newspaper, *The Empire Strikes Back*. We got popcorn and sodas. That took forever, too. Dad had to talk to the girl behind the counter. I don’t even know what he said. Just talking. And laughing. He could talk to anyone about anything. Mom always said that he never knew a stranger. Everyone was a stranger to me. As the girl filled the popcorn bucket, she asked if we wanted butter.

“Lots,” my dad said.

She placed the popcorn on the counter and said, “Two Cokes, right?”
“Yes, a small and a large.” My dad turned to me and said, “That’s what you like, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said. I would have preferred Sprite, but at that point I didn’t care. I wanted to see the movie and this popcorn and soda business was getting in the way, not to mention what’s her face behind the counter. I remember thinking that I couldn’t believe how anyone could blabber about anything but Star Wars. This was the theater, wasn’t it? She may get to see the film everyday because she works here, but this is my only chance. Out of my way sister, I have a movie to see. I looked at my ticket and then the back at the theater doors, hearing my obstacle speak, again.

“Is that your son? He’s a little cutie.” Cute son. I may have been eight and unappreciative of the opposite sex, but I could certainly understand what she meant. I had a newfound respect for this brunette, brown-eyed beauty. She kind of looked like Princess Leia. “He looks like his daddy.” What? I look like my dad? Is this girl crazy? She’s as bad as my mom — that’s what she always says. Look at me. I have light brown hair and no mustache. If I look like anyone it’s Luke Skywalker, except I have brown eyes and he has blue. Wishing I had blue eyes, I turned back toward her and frowned.

“Say hi to the young lady, Steven.” My dad smiled.

“Hi, Steven. That’s a cute name for such a cute boy,” she said.

“Hi,” I said. Staring at my shoes, I lightly kicked the bottom of the counter, my toe dragging across the carpet with each tap. She said her name was California. Cali for short. She asked what movie we were going to see, and I told her. After taking my dad’s money for the stuff, she told us to hold on. She went down toward the other end of the
counter and reached under it. She had something in her hand. When she came back, she said,

“Here, you might like to have one of these.” I couldn’t believe it. She gave me a promotional postcard version of the ad I had been carrying around for weeks.

“Wow,” I said. I just stared at the glossy card, its edges neat and sharp. My dad reminded me to thank her. “Thanks,” I said.

“You’re more than welcome, Steven,” she said. She looked at my dad and smiled. “So who’s your favorite character? I bet it’s this guy.” She pointed to Luke Skywalker on the postcard. My eyebrows disappeared under my bangs.

“How’d you know?” I said.

“Because he looks like the guy on your shirt,” she said. I looked down at my light-blue Luke Skywalker shirt and smiled. It had two pictures of Luke on it. The background was Luke riding his tauntaun. In the corner was a small circle with a picture of him standing in the carbon freezing chamber, laser pistol drawn, searching for Darth Vader. The entire vinyl decal had tiny gold sparkles in it, and the black boarder that outlined it had larger gold flecks. “And,” she continued, “you look just like him.” She was smarter than I had thought. If there was a cooler woman in the galaxy at that time, I had not met her. She was Princess Leia. I blushed, giggled, and then tried to hide my grin.

“Enjoy your movie,” she said, winking.

“Luke gets his had cut off by Darth Vader,” I said. Ready to ignite my imaginary lightsaber, Dad handed me my Coke and the popcorn.
“C’mon, son,” my dad said. He placed his hand on my head and turned me toward the theater.

“May the Force be with you, Steven,” Cali said.

“You, too,” I said.

“Thanks again, Cali,” my dad said.

After leaving my princess, we finally made it inside the theater. I was so busy watching the movie and eating popcorn that when my dad turned into the row of seats halfway down the aisle, I kept walking toward the screen. Dad had to grab me and reel me in, barely catching the back of my shirt, jerking me towards him. I spilled some popcorn, but I didn’t spill my Coke. I never stopped watching.

We were late, and we missed the very first part of the movie. When we finally sat down, Han Solo scurried to rescue Luke from the harsh Hoth blizzard. Han ignited Luke’s lightsaber, gutting Luke’s frozen tauntaun. As the lightsaber sliced across the dead snow lizard’s swollen underbelly, the incision burst open, spilling white, bloodless entrails upon the ice and snow. I rubbed my stomach. I couldn’t stop eating popcorn, and I wouldn’t even look away to drink my Coke which sat in the cup holder. I just fumble with my mouth and tongue, searching for the straw. Halfway through the movie, the bucket of popcorn was mostly gone, and my lips were chapped and burning on the outside — gritty, thick, and raw on the inside. I was half nauseated from the salt and butter and had to get the bucket out from under my chin. I couldn’t have been better,
though, watching *The Empire Strikes Back* with my dad. I passed the remaining popcorn to him.

Dad had to pee during the scene where Yoda trains Luke to become a Jedi. Dad asked me if I had to go. I told him I didn’t. I did. He asked if I would be okay, assuring me that he’d be right back. I was fine. As soon as my dad left, Luke descended into a cave. When Luke reached the bottom of the entrance, Darth Vader appeared from the shadows. Where was my dad? Vader was his favorite character and he was missing everything. This was the fight I had been waiting all summer to see. Luke gets his right hand cut off. But I was wrong. Instead, Luke cuts off Vader’s head. When the helmet lands on the ground, it exploded, revealing Luke’s face inside. I didn’t get it, and neither did my dad. He missed the whole thing.

Dad came back when Han Solo gets frozen in carbonate, and Luke attempted to rescue his friends but ends up fighting Darth Vader.

“Did I miss anything?” my dad said.

“Tell you later,” I said. I didn’t want to miss my favorite part of the entire movie: Luke and Vader fighting with lightsabers. I’d waited impatiently to see Luke get his hand cut off. I knew it was coming, but it took me by surprise. It happened so fast. I grabbed my right wrist and rubbed it in a twisting motion. I couldn’t believe it after I saw it. Luke lost his lightsaber. It plummeted down the twenty-story exhaust shaft with his hand — lost forever. What happened next was worse. Darth Vader told Luke that he was his father. I thought Vader was lying. There was no possible way Luke was related to him.
Luke denied it. I denied it. Vader told Luke to search his feelings for the truth. I searched mine that day, and still I knew it wasn’t true. I thought I was right, but I was wrong.

When the movie ended, I wanted to stay and watch the credits roll, but my dad said we had to get going if we were to catch the fireworks. I felt cheated. I missed the beginning of the film, and now I couldn’t bask in the last minutes that George Lucas had to offer. I needed to ease out of that galaxy far, far, away. Instead, I pretended to make the jump to light speed — tiny stars whizzing by my head while heading toward a huge ball of blinding white light — but that was just the doors to the lobby being flung open as we exited the theater. We were the first ones out.

Now I had to pee. Dad waited for me in the lobby while I stood in front of the urinal for what seemed like five minutes. There was so much pressure built up in that hose that I didn’t know which was worse, holding it in or letting it out. I decided letting it out was better. With that kind of pressure, urination became a hands free event. So while my dowillie did its thing without supervision, I stared at my new *Star Wars* postcard. It was so glossy and colorful. When I had finished, I washed my hands and dried them with those rough, brown paper towels. They reminded me of my old *Star Wars* ad, and I pulled it from my Tough Skin’s jean pocket along with my new ad. The old ad caught the tight corner of the pocket and ripped in two. I couldn’t believe what I’d done. I got so mad that I called the ad stupid and crumpled it into two little balls, throwing it away into the overflowing trash can. Theater goers started filing in, and I darted from the restroom, running into a theater employee carrying a broom and dustpan. The guy called me a little dick. I didn’t know what that meant, but I knew it wasn’t a good thing.
I zoomed out to the lobby where my dad stood talking with the manager. At least he looked like a manager. My dad handed him a business card and said he would be in touch. The manager fumbled and dropped the card. As the card flitted to the floor, I thought about my old movie ad. I picked up the manager’s card and handed it back to him. My dad asked me if I had washed my hands. I told him I hadn’t and ran again to the restroom. When I went to push the door open, the employee I had run into minutes earlier, opened the door, carrying a bag of trash. I almost fell into him. He didn’t seem to notice me this time. The restroom was now packed. Some men and some boys were shoulder to shoulder, crowding the urinals. Others were washing their hands, dripping water all over the sinks, flinging water across the floor. Those that were drying their hands just patted them with a single towel or two, dropping soaking wet paper into the trash. I looked into the trash can and it was empty, except for some freshly tossed paper towels. My ad was gone. At first I thought that maybe the theater employee had my ad in his bag of trash, but as I backed away from the trash can, I glanced at the bottom of it and noticed a little ball of newsprint a few inches away. It was soaking in a tiny puddle on the grey tiles. It looked dirty, like it had soaked up more than just water. I just turned and walked out.

When we left the theater, I had fallen asleep in the car to Christopher Cross singing “Sailing.” The next thing I knew, we were at Lee Stadium and the fireworks had already started. Dad had an old blanket in the trunk that he used for emergencies. He always said if you broke down in the winter, you never could know when you might need the extra warmth, especially if it took someone a while to find you. He was good that
way. Always planning for the future. We walked over to a small embankment and he
placed the blanket on the tall, wide-bladed grass. The fireworks reminded me of the
dogfights in *Star Wars*. Rebel X-Wings and Imperial Tie Fighters battling in the darkness
of space. Whenever a firework burst into bright greens and reds, I would shout, “There
goes a Tie Fighter.” My dad would always say that it was an X-Wing. But I told him only
the gold and orange bursts were X-Wings. He laughed. We made a game of it. I was with
the Rebel Alliance and he was with the Empire. Every time my colors exploded, he
would say, “I gotcha.” When his colors exploded, I would holler, “There goes a
Stormtrooper. There goes another Tie Fighter. The Rebels are winning!” Once in a while
a firework would detonate with a blinding flash and a thunderous clap, shaking the
ground, ringing my ears. I tried to plug my ears after the flash, before the boom, but they
still rang. “That was the Death Star,” I’d say.

When the fireworks finished, we drove straight home. It took longer than usual
because everyone was trying to leave at once. Traffic Jam City. I couldn’t understand
that. If people knew other people were leaving, why didn’t they leave sooner, or wait a
little bit longer? Why suddenly leave at once?

As soon as we got home, I had to go to bed. Mom was up reading her Bible and
she asked us how the movie was. “It was awesome,” I said. I tried to tell her all about it,
but she kept saying, “What?” and “Huh?” My dad shrugged and flipped his palms over.
Then I showed her my new postcard.

“Look what Princess Leia gave me,” I said.

Looking at my dad, she said, “Princess Leia?” He shrugged.
“Yeah, this really nice girl who thought I looked like Luke Skywalker gave it to me. She said I was a cutie like Dad.”

“She did?” Mom said. She crossed her arms and watched my dad walk out onto the back porch. “I think it’s time for bed, Honey. Give your dad a hug and a kiss.”

I could smell his Winstons before I made it to the porch. “Goodnight, Dad,” I said. “I love you.” I hugged him hard and gave him a kiss. His cheeks were rough and he smelled like cigarettes, Musk cologne, and Double Mint gum.

“I love you, too, Son.”

I heard Glenn Campbell singing.

Not long after that night, my parents divorced. Apparently my dad had been living with another woman for a couple of months. I had secretly hoped that it was Cali from the theater. I envisioned hanging out with her, playing with my action figures, eating Burger King, and watching Star Wars every night at the theater while she worked. But my dad’s wife wasn’t Cali. And she didn’t like Star Wars. She thought it was confusing. She liked movies about real life, not make-believe. And my dad wasn’t the same person who took me to see The Empire Strikes Back. We hardly saw each other after the divorce. He was too busy with his new wife and his old career. He paid little attention, and even less alimony and child support. But we did do stuff together, mainly what he wanted. I went to one other movie with him a couple of years later when they rereleased the original Star Wars. I was ten, and this time it was his suggestion. The only thing I
remember about that time was watching the title roll across the silver screen: *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope.*

I wish my father was Darth Vader.

I wish I was Luke Skywalker.

We were neither.
CHAPTER 3: DRAWING LINES

Since graduation this year, I had been working full-time at the local grocery store, saving for art school. My parents couldn’t afford to send me to college, but I think they would’ve been more supportive if I hadn’t chosen comics as a career. They asked me to move out by the end of the week. They said it was only temporary – just for a year or two. But that really meant that I’d be paying for school myself. They gave me the responsibility – builds character. But getting accepted into art school was responsible. Their version of responsibility broke me. I needed time to think, but I had to work this morning and my best friend, Cloud, needed my help before he could open Grackleflint Comics this afternoon.

I met Cloud in Scouts when we were twelve-years-old. We never talked much. He collected comics. I played sports. Nerds and jocks parted like old men and hair. It wasn’t until our second year, during summer camp, that we became friends. I had torn the ligaments in my ankle playing flag football on the first day. Originally, the camp quack diagnosed it as a bad sprain. I could’ve gone home, but I decided to hobble around on crutches all week. Every evening the guys went swimming, except for me and Cloud. Our Scout Master grounded Cloud for throwing his knife into trees like a ninja. That was when Cloud introduced me to comics. Out of sheer boredom, I chatted with him. The guy didn’t know sports. I didn’t know comics. But at least I had seen the Superman movies. Cloud couldn’t name one professional athlete. So we sort of talked Superman – Cloud yammered, I nodded.
He convinced me to read an issue (actually I convinced myself to shut him up), claiming they weren’t just for little kids. But Superman bored me. Under Cloud’s guidance, I picked *The Incredible Hulk* #340 from his stash. He said that issue was awesome because the Hulk fought Wolverine. It felt flimsy and I barely glanced at the cover. I figured I’d be through that thing in a couple of minutes, tossing it back upon the pile, appeasing Cloud.

I skimmed the first panel. There was a picture of a woman’s hand holding a snow globe. I was expecting, or rather hoping, to find the phrase “Hulk Smash!” and a picture of, well, the Hulk smashing. I kept reading, spending less time on the first page than I wanted because Cloud sat near me. I flipped to the next page. In the first panel, the Hulk sat brooding, grey and massive, muscles solid and ripped. The next panel was a partial close up of the Hulk’s grimacing face. His skin looked like elephant skin, yet taut across his protruding brow, sunken under his cheek bones, wrinkled and textured under the eye like an extreme raised-relief globe. Now I sat beside myself. Todd McFarlane drew that issue. He controlled that issue. His line work gave everything he drew weight. When the Hulk pressed a five ton delivery truck above his head, it made my arms and legs heavy and tense. When Wolverine popped his claws and slammed them into the Hulk’s chest, the fight or flight rush kicked my brain into overdrive. There were no words to tell me how to feel, how to think. Just pictures. Pictures that became instinct. My instinct.

The rest of the week I read and reread through every comic book that Cloud had brought to camp. And as it turned out, because of my torn ligament, I couldn’t play sports all summer, so I read Cloud’s entire comic book collection. Towards the end of summer,
reading wasn’t enough. I started sketching. At first, I doodled and scribbled large eyes and tiny faces while taking phone messages or checking items off my chore list. Soon I used a notebook drawing the same eyes and faces, adding chests, arms, hands, fingers, legs, knees, feet, and toes, not caring what they looked like. I let each stroke of pencil lead the next. Just feeling the pencil scratching the paper was reason enough to keep drawing. Squiggles became my thoughts. My feelings. Then I attempted to draw superheroes from Cloud’s comic books. At first it was like touching a deceased loved one at the funeral parlor. Something was alive, yet something was numb, burdening my hand. The more I drew, the faster pins and needles set in, eventually expanding to weightlessness. My hand glided across the paper. The pencil existed only to leave my mark.

By the time I reached eighth grade, I was beyond anything the class could handle. Mrs. Wexler would give us a bunch of rudimentary exercises to build our skills. But when the class drew cones and boxes, I drew Wonder Woman in all her glory. I got sent to the office for that. She kicked me out of class for the rest of the year. I failed Art I. High school wasn’t much different. I just taught myself. Public school art teachers are hacks. I needed professional training. Raw talent and passion only went so far. But I knew that once I had the proper training, I might be able to get my dream job with Marvel Comics. Maybe. I was okay, but not good enough to get their attention without something more. Cloud thought otherwise. Ever since he started managing Grackleflint, Cloud commissioned me to design custom superhero T-shirts and original artwork to sell in the shop. While my stuff always sold, it wasn’t enough.
I got off work late, but made it over to Grackleflint Comics in decent time. Whenever I walked in, the place smelled of decayed padding from stale carpet, faded, pulpy wallpaper, and new, glue bound, ink saturated books. Heaven. Cloud sorted new shipments behind the large glass display case packed full of collectable action figures and old comics. The bottom and middle shelves showcased action figures in a hierarchical order. Complete boxed figures to the left, loose, incomplete, and worn figures to the right. Vintage and modern Star Wars figures lined the middle shelf in neat rows. The bottom shelf held mostly Mego and newer superhero figures. I loved the Mego figures because of their cloth costumes and great 70’s feel – none of that cheap, molded and painted on crap like the Star Wars stuff. The top shelf was dedicated to Golden Age comics, but Cloud had only one – Superboy, worth about fifty bucks. Cloud just started allotting space for those books, so it was a bit empty. He was working hard at getting more, placing ads in the local papers, hoping to find some sweet deals. He said it would give the store a more serious vibe, attracting more business.

The front display case was only part of Cloud’s revisions since his Uncle Mark hired him a couple of years ago. In fact, he had done such a nice job that Mark offered him the chance to be co-owner, making Cloud a limited partner with the idea that, once Cloud saved enough money, he would become an equal partner and eventual owner. He had a master plan. Since the tenth grade, Cloud worked with the public and school libraries, getting graphic novels on the shelves. And for the last two summers, Cloud had
put together a summer reading program for grades K through Six. According to Cloud, public perception drove sales as much as the existing customer base so it was important to appeal to everyone, not just lonely, horny guys needing a superhero fix. Cloud reorganized the shelves by genre, making it easier for customers to find what they wanted. He also placed all mature or explicit titles together where kids couldn’t easily get them. His favorite slogan? “There’s a comic for everybody.” It was funny to listen to him talk like that. He sounded exactly like his uncle.

Cloud continued to sort books as I snuck up to the counter and gently laid my sketch book down. Cloud, with his back to me, still hadn’t noticed that I was standing in front of the case, so I lowered my voice about two octaves and said, “Excuse me, sir, do you have any Wonder Woman Underoos?”

Without turning, Cloud said, “Yes I do. A dollar for a peek. Twenty for a poke, and I’ll even throw in my tiara, wristbands, and lasso.”

“That’s tempting, but I’ll have to pass,” I said.

Cloud shifted a stack of comic books into a new pile and spun around.

“Where’ve you been? I thought you were coming over earlier to help me with the pull lists.” Cloud was always a schizoid on pull days, but I learned to ignore it. Business as usual.

“I picked up some extra hours at the store. And if you would return my calls, you would know where I’ve been.” Cloud is the most responsible person I know, and I couldn’t ask for a better friend, but for some reason, he never returns my calls. I could be dying and he would never know it. Nothing is a crisis for him, except for running the
Cloud kept counting comic books. I waited. “Didn’t you hear me?” I said. Without looking at me, Cloud took the pencil from behind his ear and made notes on his clipboard.

“I heard you.” He kept working.

“Jesus, Cloud. Can’t you stop for a minute? I mean, you don’t open for another hour.” I hated it when he would work and talk at the same time.

“What’s eating Gilbert Grape?” he said.

“What do you think?”

“Hang on,” he said. Cloud walked into the backroom that’s just behind the counter. He shouted out, “How many Avengers West Coast books do I have out there?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Look, would you?” he said.

I wished he’d stop for a second because I wanted to tell him about my parents kicking me out. I hoped I could move in with him. Grackleflint has a studio-size apartment above it, and Cloud stays there for free, except for utilities. I walked behind the counter and found what he wanted. “About ten,” I said. Cloud came back out, carrying a white legal envelope. The flap was folded inside. He handed it to me. “What’s this?” I said.

“A little something I like to call a graduation present for the future artist of Marvel Comics,” Cloud said. He grinned and put his arm around me. “Go ahead, open that puppy up.” As I opened the envelope, my gut ached like the first time I smacked my nuts on that bar that distinguishes a girls bike from a boys bike. I couldn’t breathe for a
second. The envelope contained two weekend passes to Comic Con New York. Comic Con is a massive, multi-city, three day comic book convention where budding artists can get industry exposure, advice, and possibly a job working for a comics publisher. This weekend it was in New York, home of the two biggest publishers, Marvel Comics and DC Comics. “We’re going to Comic Con, Bro,” Cloud said.

“I can’t go,” I said.

“Bullshit, Dan. You can and you are going. I’ve got our hotel booked, plane tickets are paid for, and we leave tomorrow morning. Fanboys unite.” Cloud raised his fist at me, waiting for me to tap it with my fist. I put the tickets back in the envelope and slapped his chest with it, causing his eyelids to flutter like the wings of a butterfly.

“I can’t go,” I said. I turned and gazed out the large storefront window. “I’ve got to work and —”

“So what. Call off or find someone to work for you. It’s only Baker’s and this is Comic Con.”

“I can’t, Cloud. My parents are kicking me out. I have to move this weekend.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me. When did this happen?”

“Last night.”

“You know what? Screw them. This is your golden opportunity. We are going and you are bringing samples of your best stuff,” Cloud said.

“Even if I could go, I’m not ready to show my work to those guys. They’ll eat me alive.”
“Are you blind? Your sketches always sell as soon as you put them out. Your stuff is amazing, dude.”

“Whatever.” I said.

“God, Dan, I can’t stand hearing you constantly berate yourself. It’s such bullshit.”

For an entire hour Cloud reasoned away my reasons for not going. Excuses, he called them. He promised to help me move out tonight and let me stay with him for a while. If I lost my job, he said he wouldn’t charge me anything until I found something else. He also said I could help around the shop for a couple of extra bucks. I didn’t like the idea, but after a while, I just couldn’t say no any longer. I’d probably lose my job, which would suck, but I’d have more time to draw.

By the time we had finished discussing Comic Con, Cloud opened the shop. I told him I was heading home to pack. Cloud said he would be over at eight, after the shop closed and help me get my stuff out. Ready to leave, I grabbed my sketch book when the phone rang. Cloud answered it. It cracked me up to listen to him. “Thank-you for calling Grackleflint Comics. How may I help you?” He said that every time he answered the phone. Sometimes I called the shop just to hear him say that. I tried to disguise my voice, pretending to be a serious customer, but I could never keep from laughing.

As I pulled the door open, Cloud asked me if I could stay for a couple minutes while he was on the phone with Diamond Distributors. Cloud said he could be a while dealing with some shortage issues. I sauntered back behind the counter, opening my sketch book. “Thanks,” Cloud said. He took the cordless phone with him to the backroom
and I watched the sales floor. I had started a tight head shot of Nick Fury while I was on break at work and wanted to finish it. I didn’t get very far because this old lady wandered in carrying a tattered paper grocery sack with the Kroger’s logo barely intact. She had to be asking for directions, or perhaps she thought this was the still the old pharmacy. She glanced around the shop from the door way, looking at the giant front wall display of comics. Grandma shook her head and rolled her eyes. I couldn’t tell if she was disgusted or if she had some kind of palsy. She was a human bobble-head version of Mrs. Lovey Howell from Gilligan’s Island. She was fantastic. I flipped to a new page and started to sketch her.

Grandma Lovey looked directly at me and wobbled over to the counter.

“Can you help me?” she said. Her voice was soft, not matching her creaking looking skin.

“Yes, ma’am.” I kept sketching.

“Please, young man, I haven’t all day.”

“Sorry.” I laid my sketch book on the counter. I only got her bone structure down. She laid the old bag on the counter. It smelled like musty night crawlers dipped in earwax and cigarette smoke. My nasal passages burned and started to run. Grandma Lovey smelled like sweaty cheese and mothballs. She said she had read the ad Cloud put in the paper, requesting old comic books.

“I found these old dreadful things in my basement,” she said. “They used to belong to my late, pack-rat husband, Larry. He couldn’t throw anything away.” Grandma Lovey headed toward the door.
“Don’t you want something for these?” I said. I reached into the bag and pulled the small stack of comics out and glanced at them. They were mostly Roy Rogers comics published by Dell in the 1950’s. They were in poor shape. The pages were worn and dingy and the staples were rusty. They may have been worth ten dollars apiece. That’s not much in terms of collectible comics, but Cloud could have given her a couple of dollars for each one. But she didn’t want anything for them. She said she was glad to be rid of them. Glad that someone else could get some use from them.

“Larry would want it this way,” she said.

I took a better look through the comics she’d dropped off while Cloud was still on the phone. One by one I shuffled through each book, careful not to damage them. The stench clung to my hands. When I got about three quarters of the way through the stack, I made a discovery that would put the resurrection of Jesus to shame. In a smaller, comic book sized paper bag was a copy of *Action Comics #1* — the first appearance of Superman in 1938, and the birth of the superheroes. I sat where I had stood. My vision tunneled. I felt my diaphragm jerk, forcing air down my lungs, bringing me to my senses. Cloud was still on the phone.

I stood up and laid the book back on the counter. I couldn’t believe I actually had a copy of *Action Comics #1*. It’s the most sought after comic book, ever. With only less than one hundred copies still around, I had held a goldmine in my hands. I had heard that they were worth about $500,000. I freaked out. I didn’t know what to do. Should I tell Cloud? Should I keep it for myself? I mean, that old lady gave it to me, right?
Grackleflint Comics didn’t purchase it. I could sell it and split the money with Cloud, or at least give him a portion of it.


“What’s with the tremors, dude.”

“Blood sugar’s low. I’ll see you tonight. Eight, right?” I picked up my sketch book and walked around the counter.

“I’ll order pizza. We’ll celebrate Comic Con.” Cloud said.

“I should really get going.” I said.

“Out with it.” Cloud said. “You came here depressed, you’re not leaving that way.”

“Come on, man. I’m tired. I’m hungry. I worked all morning. I got to move. And —.”

“And what?” Cloud said.

Cloud would go on forever if I didn’t distract him, and that never really worked, unless it was about his work. “Some old lady came in and dropped off that bag of nasty smelling comics.” I pointed to the comics, rubbing my sketch book with my thumb.

“Old comics? Because of the ad?” Cloud said.

“I don’t know. Shitty comics.” I said.
Cloud just started leafing through the top few comics. “Roy Rogers isn’t exactly what we’re looking for.”

Cloud didn’t get much further when Jim, a one time, third-string Pittsburg Steeler and long time customer, came in. Jim was massive – great model for The Thing. I wanted to sketch him so my hands would stop shaking. Cloud greeted Jim warmly and shook his hand. Cloud always shook hands with his middle-aged customers. Then Cloud turned and placed the stack of old comics on the counter space behind him, leaving the small paper sack that Superman came in. I watched Cloud get Jim’s order and heard Cloud explain that *Web of Spider-Man* missed the publisher’s deadline and that he’d call Jim when it came in. Cloud then placed Jim’s order in the same paper bag that Superman had arrived in.

As soon as Jim left, Cloud asked me again about those old comics. I kept my distance. I told him again how an old lady came in and dropped them off. Cloud started looking through them and I headed for the door.

“Holy Shit!” Cloud giggled like the first time we saw Abigail Bates’s cheerleading skirt flip up, revealing her briefs wedged up her crack, buns showing. “Take a fucking look at this, Dan.” I couldn’t believe my eyes. That old lady dropped off Fort Knox in a paper bag. Cloud was holding a copy of *Detective Comics* #27. It was the first appearance of Batman in 1939. It’s the most sought after comic after *Action Comics* #1. Cloud combed through the rest of those old comic books and didn’t find anything else but a couple of *Woody Woodpecker* comics and a *Betty and Veronica*. Like the *Roy Rogers* comics, they weren’t worth much. But Batman, on the other hand, was going for about
$40,000. That was unbelievable, and if I hadn’t been there to see it myself, I wouldn’t have believed it. Two ultra-rare comics showed up in one day in my hometown?

Unbelievable. But it was true.

I wanted to tell Cloud about the other comic book, and I almost did. But I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. I was glad he had the Batman comic. He deserved it. Cloud said as soon as we get back from Comic Con, he was going to have the book professionally graded by the Certified Guaranty Company. The CGC would also encapsulate the graded book in a hard plastic case, protecting it from the elements. A CGC graded book was worth more to a collector than a non-graded book. Cloud said selling that book would give Grackleflint a classier reputation for handling high-end merchandise, not to mention the boost in sales. Cloud said he was planning to do some remodeling with the extra money.

I didn’t know what I was going to do with my book.

On Thursday evening we were actually in New York at Jacob K. Javits Center. There were fans everywhere. Cloud and I ran into countless people dressed as their favorite comic book or sci-fi character. Not one character survived human embodiment unscathed. I saw too many out-of-shape men and women in costumes that were not designed to parade around in. There was this one couple decked out like Jabba the Hut and Princess Leia. The guy was Leia and the girl, Jabba. He had hair sprouting from his bikini top and bottoms, and she was covered with brown and green body paint, tiny
pieces of cloth strategically placed. It was shameful. There was even something strange about seeing hot chicks dressed as Wonder Woman, Black Cat, Super Girl, and Bat Girl. They were gorgeous, for sure, especially Wonder Woman, but it just seemed plain odd, even for a comic lover like me. They were more like hookers than superheroines. It was perverse on some level.

Normally I’d be fine with such a tantalizing display skimpycostume-goodness. But I was exhausted. Partly because of moving out the night before, but mainly because of that Superman comic. I didn’t sleep at all. I just stayed up all night drawing, and I haven’t stopped except to board and exit the plane. I had three pages of rough sketches, an incomplete splash page, and one complete page of a new Superman comic book. I never cared for Superman. Too unbelievable. The unstoppable Man of Steel, weakened only by Kryptonite. So I reversed it. Superman became dependent upon the existence of Kryptonite. He couldn’t come into contact with it or he would die. But the very presence of it on Earth sustained his powers. If Kryptonite ceased to exist, then so did Supes.

In addition to all the crazy people in costumes, there were normal fans and vendors packed the convention center like a state fair. And the merchandise was unfathomable. Endless rows of vendors selling comics and collectibles. There was a lot of wheeling and dealing going on. It was like a comic book carnival. These people drove me nuts too. Everywhere we walked, I couldn’t stop thinking about that Superman comic book. Men, women, boys, and girls wearing Superman or Supergirl costumes or T-shirts, vendors selling tons of Superman comics, toys, busts, and statues, and of course DC’s own booth featuring the Man of Steel. I had brought that comic book with me because I
felt uncomfortable leaving it at Cloud’s apartment. I hid it in my *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* book, which I hollowed out, keeping it in my backpack. I never parted with it. I was worried. What if Cloud found out? What if it got damaged? It made me miserable. I could feel the rainbow ink slither off the pages and into my back like Napalm. It bore through my flesh and into my spine like thumb-sized, bloated warble fly larvae, glowing with radiation. Once inside my spinal column, some excreted a neurotoxin that spiraled around my nerves like a thorny vine, piercing my entire nervous system. Others burrowed into my veins and swam to my heart, crowding each ventricle. I had to get rid of it, and I thought about selling it. This would be the place to do it. I could use the money and go to school immediately, giving the rest to Cloud discretely. Besides, he’s got Batman, so he would be even further ahead. I would even pay it all back once I got a job.

But it wasn’t just Superman that was driving me nuts, it was also the pressure of approaching Marvel and DC to take a look at my work. The first day I feigned forgetting my portfolio at the hotel. I couldn’t handle the thought of rejection, and I was sure that’s what they’d hand me. I had rehearsed that scene a hundred times. If they rejected me, I would have nothing. No career. No self-esteem. Why’d I let Cloud talk me into this? I started to hate him for dragging me out here. By Friday, I was stuck. Cloud reminded me to bring my portfolio. I contemplated leaving it on the shuttle bus, and when I tried, Cloud picked it up and carried it in for me. He was a guardian angel that I wanted to rip the wings from. I had to ditch him, and I had to ditch Superman. I told Cloud I had to use the restroom and that he should start without me. I said I would catch up with him later.
As he headed toward the publishing companies’ booths, I headed for the dealers. I was nervous as hell. Should I really trust anyone with my secret? Would they try to rip me off? Hunt me down? Kill me and steal my book? I just wondered around, asking about rare comics. Every vendor I talked to said that really rare comics were not available for sale or purchase at these shows. The risk was too great. They said that most rare comics were sold through an auction house and the sale goes through escrow.

“Where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you,” Cloud said. He was breathing heavily and flushed.

“I’m not lost,” I said.

“You need to get over to the Marvel booth, right now. Come on.” Cloud grabbed me by the arm and yanked me in his direction. “Quit dragging your feet, Dan.”

“Where are we going?” I said. Cloud kept pulling.

“To get an autograph from Stan Lee.”

I followed. Cloud’s enthusiasm had more kinetic energy than Captain America’s shield when thrown.

When we got to the Marvel booth, it had huge vinyl posters of Wolverine, Spider-Man, and Captain American hanging from the ceiling. The booth itself was small, considering Marvel’s market share and reputation. But regardless of the size, it was intimidating. A crowd of at least two-hundred people gathered around Stan Lee signing autographs with Editor-in-chief Jason Verde. Cloud pointed him out, but he didn’t need to. Stan Lee. He was exuberant. Shaking hands, signing autographs. Spouting all his favorite catch phrases: “Excelsior!” and “That’s the Mighty Marvel Style.” Stan Lee. The
greatest ambassador and huckster of comics ever seen. The ring leader of superheroes. Stan Lee complicated superhero lives. Made the unbelievable, believable. I felt an arm slide around my neck.

“Stan ‘The Man,’ no, Stan ‘The God’ Lee, Dan. And on the sixth day, Stan created Spider-Man and said it was good. Real good.”

I didn’t look at Cloud. I saw his reflection signing autographs. It hit me harder than a Gamma Bomb. Cloud was my Stan Lee. I was his superhero. What the hell was I doing? Stealing a comic book from my best friend. Lying. No more. I was getting rid of Superman.

“Cloud, autographs can wait.” I said. I tried to continue, but I hesitated, searching for the right words.

Cloud interrupted, “I didn’t really bring you here for the autographs, although that would be nice. I wanted you to see something else.” Cloud led me around to the side of the booth and pointed at the “Marvel Portfolio Reviews” sign. Under the Friday, five o’clock time slot was my name.

“How did this happen? I haven’t even shown anyone my portfolio.”

“I dropped it off while you were in the bathroom. I knew you wouldn’t do it, so I did it for you,” Cloud said. He grinned and held out his hands like he magically made my portfolio disappear.

As soon as I hit Cloud, he had me in a headlock, pinning me to the ground. Security was all over us and several people in the crowd pointed at me and said I had started it. Some said Cloud started it. Four rent-a-cops broke us up, zip-stripped our hands behind our backs and hauled us off to the security office. At first they had us separated, taking down our stories one at a time. When they learned we were friends, they brought us back together to talk to Chief Wilson. I waited silently with the Chief for a couple of minutes before Cloud came in. Wilson was a thin man with an equally pencil thin mustache. You could see every ropey muscle in his freckled forearms, heavy veins racing across them like the root system of an oak tree. Amazing. Better than an anatomy book. I wanted to sketch them. Especially his large, boney hands. Hands always gave me trouble.

When they brought Cloud in, Wilson told him to sit beside me. Cloud leaned over and said, “What the fuck, Dan? This is what I get in return?”

“I can explain everything, later,” I said.

“Gentlemen, what’s happening? My guys tell me you’re friends from Ohio,” Wilson said. Cloud and I confirmed that he was correct. “You guys aren’t intoxicated, so I don’t know why you were fighting. Not that that’s important. I just need to determine whether you gentlemen pose any threat to the convention. If not you’ll be free to come back tomorrow. I’m going to ask you a series of questions and search your person for weapons and drugs. Standard procedure.” Wilson rubbed his pointy chin. His whiskers sounded like a radio station that wouldn’t come in.
Wilson asked a few questions concerning terrorism, which was ridiculous. Checked our ID’s and then asked if we had any weapons or drugs on us before searching us. “If you do, make it easy on both of us and declare so now. The consequences will be less, I promise,” he said.

I looked at Cloud and I could tell he was worried that if we got kicked out, I wouldn’t be able to meet with Marvel Comics. I was a bit relieved.

Cloud mouthed, “Don’t worry.”

Then Wilson patted us down and, of course, he didn’t find anything. Then he started rifling through my backpack. I was fine with this until he dumped the contents out on the desk. I saw Superman fall half-way out of the book along with my sketch book some other comic books that I had picked up the first day. Luckily, Cloud was messing with his watch. I glanced at Wilson and he piled all the comics together and then thumbed through my book. Superman fell out. I covered Cloud’s eyes, whispered, “I have a plan to keep my appointment,” and I leaped from my chair and stood between Cloud and the desk. I looked at Superman and he looked angry. I had no plan.

“Excuse me, sir. Could I have a word with you, alone?” I said. Wilson looked at me with a sense of satisfaction. I don’t know if it was because I said “sir,” or because he thought I had some huge confession.

“Something you want to tell me before I finish looking through your bag, sir?”

I looked back at Cloud. “Yes, sir. Just a moment alone.” I turned around to face Cloud, making sure my body blocked his line of sight. I had to keep Superman’s identity secret. “Cloud,” I said, “could you give me and the Chief a couple of minutes.” Cloud
asked Wilson if it was all right. Wilson was more than fine with it, and Cloud waited outside the closed door with one of the deputies.

“Okay, kid. Shoot.” Wilson sat down and told me to pull up a chair and sit down.

“First I just want to say that I don’t have any drugs or weapons. If you want, you can finish searching my bag.” And he did just that. Wilson didn’t find anything, but he questioned me about the hollowed out book. I explained to him that it was to protect some of my comics that I didn’t want to get bent. I showed him what I meant and put Superman and a couple of other comics away. “Guys do it all the time,” I said. “But what I really wanted to talk to you about was that you can’t kick me and Cloud out because I’m supposed to meet with Marvel Comics for a possible job.” I couldn’t believe I was admitting this to Wilson. “You see, I’ve always wanted to be a comic book artist since I was a kid, but I’ve never had the confidence to approach anyone in the field. When I found out that Cloud gave Marvel my portfolio, I freaked, and that’s why I hit him.”


“Yes, sir. And Cloud, bought my ticket here because he thinks I’m good enough to get hired. I don’t think I can, but it will break his heart if I don’t at least go to the interview. We’ve been like brothers. His whole life has been wrapped around comics, but he can’t draw. So instead he runs a comic book store. He doesn’t make much, but he does what he loves. He wants the same for me. Please sir, can we stay so I can keep my appointment. I owe it to him.” I dropped my head and rubbed my reddening face. I felt
like an emotional pinball machine. I really did need to make it to Marvel, and I needed to give Superman to Cloud.

“I’ll tell you what, if what you say is true, you have to draw my five-year-old son a picture of Spider-Man. He loves Spider-Man. If you can do that, we’ll call it even, and you can go to your little interview.

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

And that’s what I did, drawing Wilson a picture of Spider-Man fighting the Green Goblin, complete with *The Amazing Spider-Man* title lettered across the top. Wilson loved it and he asked for one more. This time it was for him. I drew the Hulk because he was Wilson’s favorite character. For once that entire week I felt free, really free.

By the time I finished Wilson’s requests, the day was shot. It was almost five o’clock and I had to meet with an editor at the Marvel booth. On the way, I tried to explain to Cloud why I flipped out.

“Look, Cloud. I’m sorry I punched you. The whole Marvel thing freaked me out.” I said. He didn’t let me finish.

“Forget get it. Marvel’s a major deal. Let’s focus on that.”

I really wasn’t prepared to meet anyone, especially someone who was going to trash my artwork. I’ve heard horror stories about guys who meet with editors. Editors could be ruthless with their criticism, and that was with guys who had a degree in graphic design. I was doomed. But Cloud did nothing but reassure me that the conference would
be fine. He said, “Be yourself. You’ve got nothing to lose. You can do this.” Be myself? I didn’t even know who I was anymore. I took advantage of my best friend and pretended to be a professional artist. I’ve got nothing to lose? I had a ton to lose. Cloud’s friendship. Money. My job back home and the chance eventually to go to school. If it wasn’t for Superman, I wouldn’t have been in this mess. Instead, I would’ve been some star athlete. I can do this? I hadn’t accomplished anything my entire life. I graduated from high school and I managed to sell some of my artwork at my buddy’s shop. Wow, that would impress Marvel.

When I arrived at the Marvel’s booth, I found out that I wasn’t meeting with any of their editors. I was meeting with Jason Verde, Marvel’s Editor-in-chief. I told the lady at the booth that she must be mistaken. There was no way I was meeting with Jason Verde. She confirmed my name and said, “That’s right, you are meeting with Jason at five o’clock.” I tried to read her expressions, hoping that she was joking. She wasn’t. I might have been able to handle rejection from one of Marvel’s regular editors, but Jason Verde? Didn’t Jason have someone more skilled to meet? They must’ve drawn straws. As my mind was driving a Formula One racecar, Jason came around the side of the booth asking for his five o’clock. The lady motioned me over and introduced me to Jason. Wearing a black and grey ringer T-shirt and faded jeans, Jason looked like a hip, uncanny version of Kevin James sprinkled with a touch of Jerry Seinfeld.

“Hello, I’m Jason Verde. You must be Dan Middleton.” We shook hands. His hand felt like a warm, fur mitten. Jason smiled. I waited for the punch line.
“Yes, sir,” I said. Jason said he was glad to meet me and he led me around the back of the booth where we sat down at a table across from one another. My portfolio laid spread out in the middle of the table. I saw where someone had circled various parts of my artwork with a red Sharpie. My stomach was like a giant inchworm, crawling up my throat and out my mouth.

“Dan, I want to cut right to the chase. I’m not one for pussy-footing around, if you know what I mean.” Here it comes. The ninety-eight mile an hour fast ball, heading straight for my temple, and I couldn’t move. “Dan,” he said, “can I ask you a question? How old are you?”

“I’ll be nineteen in September,” I said.

“Really? Okay, Dan, here’s the deal. You have some serious skills. I like what I see here, especially your anatomy and your ability to tell a story through pictures.” Jason pointed to the red circles on my drawings. “But there are a couple of problems,” he said. Jason leaned back into his chair and held his fingers together in the shape of a pyramid. “One, I don’t know how fast you draw. And two, I don’t know how well you can interpret a writer’s script. If you don’t have good speed, and if you can’t interpret the writer’s script, then comics are not for you.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. Jason had my full attention. He then leaned forward and said,

“So, here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to give you a script and I want you to complete three pages this weekend. That’s a page a day. Then come to my office on Monday, and we’ll take it from there. Deal?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. I felt Superman fly out of my backpack.
Cloud was waiting for me when I finished talking to Jason. I must’ve had a goofy
look on my face because he asked me if everything was okay. Cloud looked worried. I
didn’t even speak when I first saw him. All I could think about was I needed to complete
three pages of a script and turn it in on Monday, but we were supposed to fly home
tomorrow night. After I told Cloud what Jason said, he got all excited. I told him that I
didn’t know what to do because of our scheduled flight home. The first thing Cloud did
was call his uncle Mark and left him a message. Cloud said that he would make
arrangements with Mark and let him know that we wouldn’t be home until we knew for
sure what Marvel’s decision was.

I couldn’t relax, though, and Cloud kept telling me how everything would turn out
fine. When we returned to the hotel, I took a hot shower to clear my head, and Cloud
ordered pizza. As the steam rolled across my face and the water massaged my back, the
full gravity of meeting with Jason centered me. My mind began to orbit my heart like a
small moon. Maybe I really could do this. Then I thought of Stan Lee and the way Cloud
embraced me. Was I a product of my own invention or Cloud’s? I betrayed him. And I
could have never gotten here without him. But maybe he’s betrayed me in some weird
way. Maybe Cloud lived vicariously through me. Used me to be something he could
never be. He could collect comics. Read them. Sell them. But he could never create them.
He could never know the creators, unless he knew me. I would never know the real Cloud
or the real me. Not like this. Not the way things used to be.
After I showered, I dressed and sat on my bed facing Cloud’s bed where he sat. He was holding a comic book.

“To the future of comics, I bestow this humble gift,” Cloud said. I took the comic book from him. It was an autographed copy of *The Incredible Hulk #340*, signed by the artist, Todd McFarlane. The cover said it all: Hulk vs. Wolverine. A berserker Wolverine, claws extend, reflecting a crazed Hulk. Sky blue background. “To new beginnings, Dan. And congratulations.”

I said nothing, my adam’s apple a smooth, immobile stone, lodged upon the opening of my windpipe.

“I’ll never forget that day, Dan. I saw it in your eyes, and it was this issue that would be your destiny. Unfucking believable, Dan. I knew you could do it.”

“Fuck, Cloud,” I said. I laid The Hulk down. “I can’t do this.”

“Enough of the false humility, Dan. What more has to happen for you to realize your potential?”

“This,” I said. I picked my backpack off the floor and pulled out *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* and handed it to Cloud. “This is what I need. This belongs to you.”

“I don’t get it, Dan. I can’t draw,” Cloud said.

“Just open it. Open the middle.” I said. Cloud’s surprise quickly turned to anger, as I had expected.

“You son of a bitch. This is what it boils down to? What the fuck, Dan? You steal from me, get signed by Marvel, and then say, ‘By the way, this is what I need. This
belongs to you?”’” Dan said. The pitch of his voice warbled. “You need to ease your guilt, it that it? Fuck you.”

“I don’t expect you to understand. I don’t even understand. All I know is that I fucked you over. I fucked myself. I could have just slipped it back to the shop. I could’ve sold the damn thing. You never would have known. You were too busy propping me up. I got to do this alone, Cloud. Because of you I realized that I’m a son of a bitch. And you are awesome. But maybe you’re the son of a bitch, and I’m awesome. This is all just so fucked.”

“Jesus, Dan. What do you want me to say? You’re not making any sense.”

“Go home, Cloud. Just let me do this on my own.” I handed The Incredible Hulk #340 back to him.

“No, Dan. That’s yours. That has always been yours.”

As Cloud packed, the pizza arrived, and we sat silently eating it, watching TV. When we finished, Cloud gathered his suitcase and hugged me on his way out. He held the How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way in his hands, opening it, revealing Superman. He pulled the comic out and held the books in his outstretched hands. “This is not you, Dan,” he said tilting Superman a little higher, “and this is not you,” he said, lowering Superman and raising the other book. Cloud put the books back together and tapped my chest lightly with it. “This is you,” he said.

I needed some time to clear my head, and usually drawing was my release. I didn’t think it could have been this time, but it was. That feeling was always the same since the first time I sketched those eyes on the telephone notepad six years ago. The
difference this time came from the script. The words dictated what I drew. I wasn’t free to draw from life or imagination. When I took a break after several hours, picked up the comic book Cloud bought me. I tried not to think about what he said, or what I said for that matter. It was all too senseless. So I opened the book and it was exactly how I remembered it, except for the words. I had a new awareness for the script that set the art in motion. That issue, “Vicious Circle,” had more energy than I’d remembered.

It’s funny. The words were always second to the illustrations. Still are on some levels. If I was going to understand comics better, become a real comic book artist, I had to understand the writer. Understand how the artist interprets, compliments the script. Todd McFarlane drew a woman’s hand shaking a snow globe, swirling with dense snow. The caption read: “I’ve spent my entire life vacillating between doing what I should do and what I want to do. Between duty and desire. And yet, no matter which way I’ve gone, I can’t help but feel the same as this swirling dome in my hand… Going round and round, and, ultimately, getting nowhere.” The next panel zoomed closer to the woman’s hand accompanied by more narration: “I can’t help but wonder if he feels the same. And, despite my resolution not to, I wonder… where he is.” I studied those illustrations closely. I couldn’t help but see my relationship with Cloud in those words. It didn’t want to think about it, so I turned my attention back to the artist. Why did McFarlane draw such a close up, focused exclusively on the snow globe, obscuring the woman? I didn’t know, so I read the entire book again. At the end, in the last five panels, McFarland repeats his close-up shots and then pulls back revealing Betty, Bruce Banner’s (a.k.a. the Hulk’s alter ego) girlfriend, gazing into the globe, tears streaming. The thrown globe
explodes against the wall in the next panel. The final panel reveals a smashed snow globe in the foreground, and a distraught Betty in the background with the final lines revealing, “A cycle that can only be broken… at great expense.” Maybe McFarland was trying to say that foregrounded objects are important only when they reveal the background. Maybe that’s just my interpretation. I don’t know. But what I did know. What I really understood clearly at that moment – I had my own script to finish.
CHAPTER 4: MORE THAN A FEELING

Over the last couple of years, my wife Daphne slowly became super religious. She’d been found. And I became lost. At first, Daphne pressured me into going to church with her every Tuesday, Thursday, and twice on Sunday. Comstock’s Church of the Holy Mother of God, Lord of the Pure, Lover of the Righteous. I only went a couple of times. They stood, singing for hours, clapping and dancing like the spin cycle of a washing machine. Then they prayed. Some spoke in tongues. That freaked me out. Especially the fat, sweaty lady who stood beside me, crying and chattering like a little league catcher. “Swingbatterbatterbatterbatter. Swing.” She always ended with a shriek. It was bad for the ears and the heart. If the parishioners could have reached the chandelier, they would have swung from it.

Daphne found purpose and meaning and she wanted to share that with our two kids, Kenny and Robyn. Kenny just turned seven in August. Robyn will be six in January. I love my kids. I would do anything to protect them. I didn’t think they should be exposed to the wildness of her church. If it scared me, I imagined it scared them. They never said, though. I asked Daphne not to take them so much, but she insisted they be brought up in the house of the Lord. Then I suggested at least waiting until they’re old enough to decide on their own if they wanted to go all the time. Daphne disagreed, saying that we don’t let the kids decide when they go to bed or if they should go to school. I told her that was different. I couldn’t explain why. I just knew it was different.

But Daphne could no longer celebrate birthdays or holidays which cut much of our family time down. Just getting together with family and friends on non-religious
holidays was out, especially this year when she said I had to return every Christmas gift I had bought the kids. Said our home would be susceptible to the Devil if we celebrated a pagan holiday. I didn’t know what that meant. But she explained that Santa Claus was really a play on words. Apparently, Santa Claus really meant Satan’s Claws. I thought Santa mean “saint” in Spanish. But I didn’t take anything back. Instead, to keep the peace, I took everything over to my parents.

We also stopped being intimate like we used to be. With the kids getting older, there just seemed to be less time, and I wish that was the only reason. But Daphne’s religion made it difficult on her, creating for her an insurmountable sense of guilt for doing more than what “God and nature intended.” We did do more. We just did it less often. But this morning played out a little differently.

Late for work (I climbed poles for SBC), I was showering furiously, hair and face full of sudsy shampoo, eyes tightly shut, when cool air rushed in. Daphne giggled, stepping into the shower stream.

“Hey, what are you doing? I’m running late.” I said.

“Five minutes is all I need.” Daphne ran her hands across my chest and stomach, playing in the shampoo that was running down by body.

“You’re freezing.” I said.

“Warm me up, then. Hurry.” Daphne squeezed me.

I tried, but the whole affair proved rather uneventful. Too much pressure. Quickies were nice when we were younger. Quickies were nice when they were supplemental. Quickies were nice when they were consistent.
I backed out of the snowy driveway hopped up on morning coffee, thinking I had a great chance at getting to work on time. Usually, I drove straight out from the garage, but Daphne couldn’t back our Burnt Orange Pontiac Vibe into the garage. I was great with mirrors. I used them everyday. But I wasn’t used to our tiger cat darting from under the porch while doing so. The first thump of hitting Tinker was bad enough, but the second was worse because when I slammed the breaks, the front tire slid on top of him for a split second, slowly rolling off him. Tinker held up fairly well considering that fact that he weighed five pounds and the car weighed five thousand. Poor Tinker. I ran into the garage and grabbed a shovel and garbage bag. Once I scooped Tinker inside, I tied the bag shut and shoveled fresh snow to cover the accident. I didn’t know how I would tell Kenny and Robyn. After gently setting Tinker in the trash can, I dashed up the porch stairs and into the house to tell Daphne. Thankfully, the kids were upstairs, dressing for school while Daphne prepared their lunches.

“Honey, I ran over Tinker,” I said.

“Not Tinker,” she said. “Where is he?”

“In the trash. He darted behind the car. He didn’t feel anything.”

“The kids will be devastated,” she said.

“Just don’t say anything till I get home. I’ll tell them.”
I called the garage to let them know I would be late. Gina answered the phone, so I told her what happened. “Poor thing,” she said. “If you want another kitty, let me know, Joezy.” Gina was one of those girls that I could never tell if she was flirting with me or just being really nice. Either way it felt good. I asked Gina to let Luke know my situation without the details. Luke was my work buddy with whom I shared a truck with when my truck needed an oil change, a tire rotation, or some other routine maintenance. He had the truck loaded and warmed up when I pulled in. He was good like that. When I reached the truck, Luke sat on the driver’s side grinning, meowing, and licking his hands and rubbing his face like a cat. Insensitive schmuck. He could be like that, too. Climbing into the truck I said, “Gina can’t keep anything a secret.”

“Nope,” Luke said. “That’s why you don’t want to fuck her. She’ll tell everyone.”

“Whatever.” I said. Luke always claimed he and Gina had sex on her desk after hours, and every time her name came up, he told the same story. I just listened. I partly believed him. At thirty-five and single, Luke looked tens years younger, and girls wore his charm around their necks like a designer necklace. The only part I didn’t believe was that he had sex with Gina. He was out of her league. I imagined Gina screwing someone much less attractive like me. Not that Gina was ugly, but she just didn’t do it for me, unless Luke talked about her.

“She’s so freaky, man. Karma Sutra, slut style. She does it all,” Luke said.

“Luke, I just ran over my kid’s cat. I can’t get that image out of my head, and I don’t need to associate that with sex. Let’s go.”
Luke pulled out and we headed toward first job. We had been getting a lot of snow and ice and SBC had us out everywhere. A normal day found us working both residential and rural areas, but today was all rural, which was nice for a change. Less traffic. Less noise. Just cold, fresh air sweeping through the trees, carrying the faint scent of pine. Peaceful. Until Luke spoke. “Still, Joezy, you have more pussy problems than I can shake my dick at.”

“Not this morning. Daphne jumped in the shower with me.”

“All right! Freaky Christian sex. Details man.”

I made the mistake one time of telling Luke what Daphne did when she first started going to church. She had to pray before we did it. She asked God to fill the bedroom with his presence, asking that He place his guardian angels around us to protect us from the Devil. I kept envisioning Michael or Gabriel watching us. I had to wear special underwear the entire time, and she even put olive oil on my penis. She said she was anointing it. Making it pure. Worse than that, Daphne played hymns. I had to make love to my wife while listening to some ridiculous baritone and gospel quartet singing *We Shall See The King*. I developed E.D. and Daphne developed an U.T.I. from the olive oil.


“No details. But it was good.”

“Couldn’t have been that good if you aren’t willing to brag.”

I turned on the radio, tuned it to 89.9 The Light FM: Where He Lives On and cranked *It’s a Great Gospel Music Morning.* “There’s your details.”
That settled Luke down and we rode in silence for twenty minutes until we reached our first job. Luke pulled the van over to the side of the road, putting the flashers on. “This cold’s a bitch.” Luke tapped on the windshield, pointing to the icy lines overhead.

“Yeah,” I said. We zipped up our overhauls, put on our gloves, and fumbled for our helmets. We got out of the van and slammed the doors. The wind howled, stinging my face while snow clung to my eyelashes. We ambled to the back of the van and Luke opened the doors, and we grabbed our tools. “Still going to the Christmas party?” I said, wiping snow from my face. Luke slapped me on the back, poofing snow down my neck and around my face.


“If I can convince Daphne that it is just a company party and not a Christmas party,” I said.

“You should come anyway. It’ll be a good time.”

“Maybe,” I said.

When I got home, I backed slowly into the garage. How could I break the news to the kids? Tinker. That was what Robyn named him. I called him Stinker because he had such awful gas that smelled like a dirty diaper. Tinker always farted in his sleep, and he always slept behind the couch while we watched TV. Snacks were out of the question. It got so bad we kept a can of Febreze air-freshener in the living room at all times. Stinky or
not, the kids loved Tinker. Robyn used to dress him up in her doll’s pink ruffled skirt and bonnet, and he didn’t mind as long as he was getting some attention. Kenny, on the other hand, lost a good many toys to Tinker because he loved to chew the heads and limbs from Kenny’s G.I. Joe action figures. To solve that problem, I bought a surplus of old action figures from eBay. I didn’t care what they were, as long as they were cheap. Daphne made little Velcro vests and stuffed them with catnip. But Tinker made it up to Kenny playing football. If Kenny had the ball, Tinker would chase him around the yard. If Kenny threw the ball, Tinker chased after it. Kenny got a kick out of Tinker’s antics. When the ball landed and rolled, Tinker would pounce on it, but if the ball suddenly rolled backward, Tinker would jump, twisting three feet in the air, and tear through the yard when he landed. A cat that acted like a dog. Cats could be man’s best friend after all.

I stepped onto the porch and cleaned my boots and went inside. Daphne stood in the kitchen making hot dogs and chili. Thursday night’s church night and she helped with children’s services so she didn’t have time to make much else. Once I got my boots off, I kissed Daphne and said, “Do the kids know about Tinker, yet?”

“I told them he was still outside.” Daphne stirred the chili.

“Maybe we should wait till after dinner to say anything.” I took my jacket off and hung it on the kitchen table chair. “I don’t want to ruin their dinner.”

“There’s not going to be a good time, Joezy,” she said.

“There’s better times, though,” I said.

Daphne placed the hot dogs in the boiling water one at a time.
“Let’s take the kids to Pizza Hut.” I said. “We’ll tell them now and then take them out to eat. It might help take their minds off it.”

“Tonight’s church,” she said.

“It won’t kill them to miss a service,” I said. Kill wasn’t the right word.

“That isn’t funny, Jozey,” Daphne said. She opened the fridge and took out mustard and ketchup, placing them on the table. “The Lord’s house, the Lord’s people, is where there’s comfort. It’s our shelter from life’s storms.” Daphne returned to the stove and stirred the chili and reached into the cupboard, taking out a small stack of plates.

I wanted to say, “Goddamnit, Daphne, this is about our cat, our kids, our marriage. It’s not about those Jesus freaks,” but I knew those were the wrong words before they left my mouth. “Let’s not do this,” I said. “Let’s tell them about Tinker tomorrow. We can go to Pizza Hut and then stop over at Gina’s and get another cat.” Daphne frowned, and then her eyes widened when she turned toward kitchen doorway, seeing Kenny standing there.

“What about Tinker, Daddy?” Kenny said, standing in the doorway. I turned to Kenny and then to Daphne. If there was ever a time I could shove a dead cat back in the bag and pull him out alive, it was at that moment.

“I’ll get Robyn,” Daphne said.

“Hey, buddy,” I said and sat Kenny down at the table, waiting for Daphne to return with Robyn. “Tinker’s okay, Kenny,” I said. “Would you like some pop?” I didn’t know how to tell them. It was one thing to know that I had to tell them, it was another thing to do it. If only they were older. How do you tell your kids that you squished the
guts from their favorite cat. From their favorite playmate? Damn Tinker. I got up and went to the fridge. “How about splitting a Pepsi with me?”

Kenny followed me to the cupboard with his big brown eyes. “My cup’s on the sink. The red one,” he said.

“I found his cup just as Robyn and Daphne returned. “Hey, sweetie,” I said.

“Daddy!” Robyn said.

I picked my baby girl up and hugged her. She kissed my cheek. I squeezed her gently then set her beside Kenny.

“Kids, Mommy and Daddy have to tell you something,” Daphne said. She rubbed the kids’ shoulders. Daphne looked at me. Kenny and Robyn knew something was wrong.

“Kenny, Robyn, something happened to Tinker this morning and you won’t be able to see him for a while.” I said.

They just stared at me. Kenny fidgeted while Robyn’s mouth hung slightly open.

“Is he at the hospital?” Kenny said.

“Can we send him flowers?” Robyn said.

I wrung my hands. “Actually, Tinker’s in heaven with Grandpa,” I said. My dad, their grandpa passed away before they were born, but their grandma talked about him incessantly, and he was something of a local jazz legend, playing guitar with the mildly successful group, The Passing Tones.
The kids bawled. Daphne kissed them on the head and I reached out and hugged them. Their wet tears and runny noses soaked my neck. “It’ll be all right,” I said. I smoothed their hair and Daphne rubbed their backs. When they calmed down I told them we could get another cat from the same place Tinker came from, but before they could answer, Daphne hurried over to the stove where the hot dogs boiled down to the bottom, burning the pan. “Maybe we should go to Pizza Hut,” I said. The kids hollered in agreement. “What do you say, Hon?” I said.

“I don’t think so,” Daphne said. She crossed her arms.

“Come on. It’ll be fun. Let’s go as a family.”

“I’d like to go to church as a family, Jozey.”

I couldn’t get Daphne to go, but she agreed to let the kids go if I promised not to stop at Gina’s and get another cat. Daphne thought Gina was too worldly ever since she overheard Luke talking about her while we shot pool in the basement one Saturday night. Daphne was supposed to be at prayer meeting, but she came home sick. I tried to explain that Luke talked about things he knew nothing about. That he joked too much about stupid stuff. I agreed not to take the kids to Gina’s and drove straight to Pizza Hut and back home. I considered picking up a new cat at Pets R Us, but wanted to go when Daphne could go with us. Even without Daphne, I had a blast with the kids until the ride home. Kenny sat quietly in front while Robyn slept in the back. I slowed down at a red light and turned on my left signal. Snow fell lightly, melting on the windshield, and I
flipped on the wipers. The clicking of the turn signal and the gentle thumping of the wipers made me slightly sleepy. Peaceful. I turned the radio on and scanned the channels for some easy listening. I found Boston’s “Amanda.” I placed my elbow on the door and rested my head against my hand, barely hearing Kenny speak, lost in a reverie about Daphne as Brad Delp’s soaring, unforced tenor sang the bridge:

You and I

I know that we can’t wait
And I swear, I swear it’s not a lie, girl
Tomorrow may be too late
You, you and I girl
We can share a life together
It’s now or never
And tomorrow may be too late

“Daddy, I was thinking about Tinker and he can’t be in heaven with Grandpa,” Kenny said.

I tuned the radio down as the song finished into the last chorus. “Why’s that, buddy?” I said. The light turned green and I turned left.

“Because Grandpa isn’t in heaven,” Kenny said.

“Sure he is, Kenny. Why would you say that?”

“Because he didn’t love Jesus. He played bad music.”

I slowed the car rapidly, just shy of slamming the breaks, pulling the car over against the curb. Snow and ice crunched under the tires. “Kenny,” I said, “Grandpa and
Tinker are in heaven and we’ll see them again someday.” Kenny’s eyes began to tear. He unbuckled his seatbelt and buried his face in my arm.

“But Daddy, you’re not saved, either. I don’t want you to go to Hell,” he said.

“Oh, Kenny,” I said and pulled him closer. “I’m not going to Hell. Did Mommy tell you that?” I was wrong to ask him that, put my seven-year-old on the spot like that. I wanted to take the question back. Did it really matter if she said it or not? The problem was that he thought it.

“The kids in Sunday school said it.” Kenny sat up and wiped his watery eyes. He sniffled. I stared out the window for a second, watching the snow fall in the yellow sodium vapor light of the street lamps. I turned to Kenny, glanced in the back seat where Robyn still slept, and then turned back, saying, “You know how you go to school by yourself, Kenny?” He nodded. “Church is a lot like that. Lots of people don’t go to school anymore, like Daddy, and he’s smart, right?” Kenny nodded again, this time his eyes scanned mine. “Same thing with church, some people don’t go, but they’re going to Heaven.”

I needed a drink, but there was no alcohol in the house because Daphne didn’t approve of it. So I dropped the kids off at my mom’s and met Luke at Bud ‘n Tooties. On my way over I left a message on Daphne’s cell phone, telling her that the kids would be spending the night at Grandma’s and that I’d be home around ten. I’d probably be home before she would, but I called anyway. Luke was already there, flirting with the waitress.
She was cute. I ordered a Sam Adams and we grabbed a booth in the back. The empty bar emanated a quiet peacefulness among the garland and colored light decorations. I told Luke what Kenny said.

“That’s fucked up, Jozey. I don’t have kids, but I can imagine,” Luke said.

I examined Luke’s face. His trendy blond, faux-hawk. Wide, solid white teeth. Flawless skin. I wondered if he really could imagine. Luke doesn’t have kids. The closest he got to having kids was dating college girls. I took a swig from my beer, appreciating his sentiments, but losing interest in our conversation. Looking at my watch, I said, “I need to get going, Luke.”

“Already? Let’s do some shots, first. My treat.” Luke flagged the waitress down before I could get my coat on. Her perfect, round breast bounced in her tiny green T-shirt, smooth, tight stomach showing just enough to reveal a sapphire belly ring. “Hey, Jackie, honey, could me and my friend get a couple of shooters. Jack Daniels. Thanks, babe.” Jackie grinned at Luke, but she never looked at me. She wiggled back to the bar like it was an aerobics exercise in her painted-on, low rise designer jeans. Big pockets with gold eagles embroidered on dark denim. Her shirt didn’t even cover her dimpled lower back. I glanced at the TV playing NFL highlights. I didn’t want him catching me checking her out.

“Who’s going to the Super Bowl?” I said.


Jackie returned and I thanked her first. She never looked at me, but gently, methodically brushed Luke’s arm when he thanked her. I shook my head.
“Oh, yeah. Jackie is the ultimate Christmas cheer. Unwrap her box. Eat her cookie. Give her my package. Spill a little eggnog.”

“Are you happy, Luke?” I said. I don’t know why I said it. It seemed to be the thing to ask men like him, living the lifestyle he did.


I arrived home at 9:00 before Daphne, and decided to go to bed. I couldn’t sleep. I thought about what Luke said, but mostly how Jackie looked. How she ignored me. In some way I wanted Jackie. She was attractive. Sexy. Young. But it was more than that. All those things made me feel bland. Out-of-step. The way she responded to Luke, the way she looked at him magnified how I felt. I wanted that feeling. I turned the TV on and heard Daphne downstairs. She didn’t come up right away, so I went downstairs. But halfway down I could hear Daphne in the kitchen talking gibberish mixed with English. Daphne spoke in tongues. I just listened. I was afraid to go in there, feeling a swell of guilt ebb and flow, churning within the pit of my stomach. I waited over an hour. When it had sounded like Daphne finished praying, I walked cautiously into the kitchen. While I didn’t believe it, I wondered if Daphne sensed my guilt, guilt I didn’t understand. My face felt hot. “How was church?” I said. I startled her and she dropped the spoon she was making tea with.
“It was awesome. The Lord moved in a mighty way, filling the sanctuary with his presence like a cloud. Pastor Larry didn’t even get to preach. Three people were saved.”

I knew exactly what Daphne meant. And now wasn’t the time to talk about what Kenny had said. Now wasn’t the time to talk about going to the company’s Christmas party. “I thought I’d take tomorrow off. Make it a long weekend. The kids are at their grandma’s” I said.

“That sounds nice,” she said.

I wrapped my arms around Daphne and we kissed. “I missed you,” I said.

“I missed you,” she said

I tried to get more intimate, but Daphne giggled and pushed me away. “Let’s make out,” I said. I grabbed her butt as she left the kitchen.

“You had your chance this morning. I just want to sleep,” she said. Daphne sounded like a school teacher reminding a student why he couldn’t make up a missed exam or correct an answer after turning a test in.

“I was running late,” I said.

“Not that late.”

“I want to take our time”

“We’ll see.”

The night ended with me sleeping on the couch. We didn’t fight, we wrestled. I tried a slow cuddle, sliding my hand under Daphne’s nightgown and cradling her round,
heavy breast. The other hand rubbed her back, tummy, butt, and thighs. She pinned my happy hand to her stomach. I squeezed her breast with my free hand. She elbowed me, said she wanted to sleep. I was wide awake all over. I tried again, slipping my hand into her panties. Her lower torso stiffened and coiled like an anaconda. My hands went nowhere except to the couch with the rest of me. I didn’t sleep well. Never could when sleeping alone.

When morning finally came, I got up and started making coffee, turning on the spigot to fill the coffee pot. No water. The lines had frozen because the heater tape had quit working and a pipe had cracked under the sink. I woke Daphne and told her that she couldn’t take a shower until I got the pipes fixed, letting her know I was heading to Lowe’s to get some plumbing supplies. I hated going to Lowe’s or any hardware store. I was good at repairing phone lines, but when it came to home improvements, I had some weird, mechanical by-pass. Luke said it was all in my head. “If you can fix phone lines, you fix anything,” he said. I said that wasn’t true. Told him what my dad said about playing jazz.

“Dad always said that some guys are good with rhythm, some lead, some both. You don’t have to tell them, either. They know when they first pick up the guitar. It’s instinct. It’s the way the guitar feels in your hands. Feeling is everything.” I said.

And I hated how clumsy a hammer, screwdriver, pliers, and wrench felt in my hands at home. And I always had to do things twice, fix the repairs I had already made. But I got the supplies, stopped at McDonald’s for a greasy Sausage Egg McMuffin, and
returned home. When I walked into the kitchen, Daphne had pulled out all the cleaners and junk from under the sink.

“Hey, you don’t have to do that,” I said. I dropped the bag of plumbing supplies on the table and threw away the empty McDonald’s bag.

“You could’ve gotten me something. Pancakes,” Daphne said.

“I didn’t know you’d be up, fixing the sink,” I said.

“What’s the big deal? I cleared out all that stuff to help. Is that so bad?”

“Never mind.” I waved both hands at her.

“Is this about last night?” she said.

Daphne and I didn’t fight often since she started going to church. She said the Bible teaches wives to obey their husbands in all matters unless it contradicted Christian doctrine. And we really didn’t fight much before, either. It wasn’t my style to argue much. But there was no avoiding it this time. “It’s about me going to Hell,” I said.

Daphne had a look of deep concern. Her eyebrows lifted and she slightly tilted her head. “Praise the Lord,” she said. “I’ve been praying for this moment for a long time, Jozey.”

“Praying that I’d go to Hell?”

Daphne started to tear up. “No,” she said, “that you’d realize you need Jesus. That you’re going to Hell without him. Just ask him to forgive all your sins and come into your heart, Jozey.”
“I’m not talking about me, Daphne. We’ve been through this. I’m talking about Kenny. You know what he said to me last night? He said I was going to Hell. That’s a sin, Daphne, allowing your kids to believe their father’s the Devil.”

“You think I told him that?” Daphne said. Her reaction didn’t surprise me. She didn’t tell Kenny, but she knew what I meant. Worse yet, she believed it.

“We have to compromise,” I said. “I can’t keep doing this. I can’t have my kids thinking I’m some kind of monster. I can’t have us not spending time together because of church, Daphne.”

“I’m trying,” she said. Daphne moved to the table and pulled out a chair. The wooden legs scuttled, barking across the linoleum. “But you need to try, too.”

I sat across from her, moving the plumbing supplies. “If I go to church with you, then you have to go places with me. I want us to spend time with family and friends, holidays or not.”

“I can’t do holidays, Joezy, you know that.”

“I’m not asking you to celebrate them, I’m just asking you to be with me, with our families.”

“I’ll have to pray about it,” she said.

When I heard those words, I knew our conversation was over.

The rest of the day was uneventful. I fixed the pipes, managing to glue only my fingers to a scrap piece of pipe, instead of a good piece, and working under the sink gave
me a chance to cool off a bit. For the first I could ever remember, fixing something at the house felt more like working on phone lines. Maybe Luke was right and my dad was wrong. Maybe it’s less about feeling and more about the mind. By the afternoon, we picked the kids up and had an enjoyable day. We went cat shopping, but just couldn’t find one. The kittens in the pet stores seemed sickly with their runny eyes and musty cedar, pet shop smell. Kenny wanted a ferret, but they smelled worse than the cats, and the clerk said they needed to be de-scented. “Like a skunk?” I said. I didn’t want a tiny, burrowing skunk roaming the house. Robyn wanted a puppy, but they were too much work, especially in the winter. “Maybe in the spring when the weather breaks. Let’s look at another pet store. Maybe they’ll have some cats,” I said.

Robyn tugged on my hand and said, “Daddy, what about that lady’s house? Tinker probably has a baby brother just like him.”

“You mean Gina?” I said. I glanced at Daphne. She didn’t hear me, or pretended not to hear me, while examining a book on tropical fish. “She’s working, sweetie. We won’t be able see if she has any.”

“Call her, Daddy,” Robyn said.

“I can’t.” I said, “She’s at work.”

We decided to eat dinner at home since the kids had had enough junk food and eating out for one day. We were having tacos. I browned the ground beef while Daphne diced tomatoes, onions, and black olives. As the ground beef sizzled and steamed, I
turned on the exhaust fan. The kids were watching cartoons. “Saturday’s the company’s annual party. I’d like you to come with me. We won’t stay late.” Daphne opened the refrigerator, grabbing the shredded cheddar cheese, sour cream, and taco sauce. She bumped the door shut with her hip. “And I promise to go to church in the morning.”

Daphne set the items on the table and said, “I know how important it is to you, Jozey. But I can’t. I don’t have peace in my spirit.” Daphne placed the tomatoes, onions, and black olives on the table while I seasoned the ground beef.

“I’m not sure what that means, Daphne.” I poured three quarters cup of water on the meat and stirred. Steam rolled from the pan into the exhaust. “I really don’t.”

“It means I want to go with you, and I want you to go to church, but I’m uncomfortable with the drinking and the dancing.” Daphne placed taco shells in the oven.

“You don’t have to drink or dance. Just go. We’ll leave early and get a room. It’ll be fun.”

“Please, Jozey, don’t pressure me. That’s not fair.”

“Neither is this,” I said.

Friday night was much like Thursday. Except I stayed on the couch after watching the Tonight Show with Jay Leno. That morning I got a call from work asking if I could pick up some extra hours, so instead of spending the day at home, I decided to just work all day. Daphne was for sure not going, and she took the kids to some church function. I didn’t care to know what it was, and I went to the party alone. When I arrived, Luke was
already there, drinking, dancing, and cheering everybody to participate, hoping to make the party one even a teenager would be ashamed of afterward. When the DJ cranked AC/DC’s “You Shook Me All Night Long,” Luke started a train, yelling, “All aboard the Lucas Love Machine. Whoo! Whoo!” He pumped his fist up and down and shook his caboose. His face looked more like a bright red fire engine than a train. The first girl on his ride was Jackie, the waitress from the bar. Miniskirt, pumps, fishnet stockings. Behind her was Gina wearing a Santa hat and matching red velvet jacket and skirt with furry white trim. I didn’t know if this was a Halloween party or a Christmas party. Maybe it was a good idea that Daphne didn’t come. I spoke with a couple of guys and their wives who were also having a good time, but they remained seated. The music was loud, not ear-splittingly so, just loud enough that everyone had to practically shout. Luke spotted me and conducted his train up, over, and down a long twelve foot table. The train had picked up several passengers, and Gina was no longer the caboose. “Come on, buddy, let’s go. Grab some hips and I’ll steer this ship. Final destination? Love, fun, and then some. All aboard the Lucas Love Machine. Whoo! Whoo!” Luke gave me a high five and took the train around the room until the song ended. I headed for the bar.

With a whiskey sour in hand, I sat at Luke’s table. When the song ended, Luke and Jackie took a break, sitting with me. Jackie hung all over Luke, rubbing his leg, playing with his hair, laughing at all his crude jokes. From the outside, Jackie looked like some gold digger and Luke, some pervert. But there was a sincerity in their body language. The way they looked at each other; the way they didn’t look at others. “You remember Jackie,” Luke said. I extended my hand. “Jackie this is Han Solo.”

“So why’s he call you Han Solo? You like Star Wars, right?”

“Because his wife is a crazy, religious nut and won’t go anywhere but church,” Luke said.

“That isn’t very nice,” Jackie said. She patted Luke’s face, mocking a slap. “I respect her for that.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Luke rolled his eyes. “Hey, since you are single tonight, how about being our DD?”

“If anybody needs to get drunk, it’s me. Between the cat and the frozen pipes,” I said. I stopped before I finished my sentence. I didn’t need to hear another sex joke from Luke. “Let’s party,” I said.

Luke and Jackie hopped up and headed for the dance floor. I grabbed a beer and sat back down, watching the dance floor. Gina danced among the crowd, but not with anyone in particular. She had been dating Christopher, a dark, lanky, schoolboyish Italian, who worked in the office, but they hadn’t been together for a while. Everyone thought they looked cute together because they weighed about the same, except Gina had a hippier butt, and a slightly bumpier chest. Watching her dance in the dim, washy colored lights and tiny, floating orbs from the disco ball, I began to believe that she and Luke had fooled around. What Gina lacked in stunning beauty, she made up for with the way she moved. She didn’t dance for anyone. She danced to connect with something deeper, something meaningful, something graceful. That connection led and she
followed. The perfect embodiment of the spiritual within the physical. Sensuality beyond sexuality. Beyond erotic. After several more fast songs, I grabbed another beer, while couples danced to a series of slow tunes. I was ready to go.

As I finished my beer, Gina came over. I didn’t realize that she was sitting with Luke and Jackie. I stood up.

“Luke said you were here, I didn’t even see you,” she said. Gina touched my arm, sending waves of radiation through it. We sat down, Gina beside me. She sat close enough for our legs to touch, but they didn’t. “How are you?” she said.

My chest tightened, squeezing the air from my lungs. Out of breath, I said, “I’m good.” Her leg bumped mine, but it didn’t stay there. We talked about nothing, just work stuff. Gina’s large brown eyes were a bit glassy, but she wasn’t drunk. I cracked a couple jokes, and she slapped my leg. I hoped that it would stay there, but it didn’t. She grinned with more freckles than I remembered. Like a tan. If she asked me to dance to the next slow song, I wondered if I would. She didn’t. She got up to dance again and I said, “Gina, think I could get another cat from you?”

“Yeah, sure. Call me sometime.”

After our conversation, I left. Part of me hoped that Gina would’ve invited me home to pick out a cat. Part of me was relieved that she hadn’t. I didn’t want to be that guy. I drove home in a bit of a daze. The last time I had felt this alone was when I sat at the traffic light listening to Boston. I felt peaceful before Kenny informed me of my
destiny. Maybe I was going to Hell. Maybe I was in Hell. Nevertheless, I couldn’t get the chorus of “Amanda” out of my head.

I’m going to take you by surprise

And make you realize

Amanda

I’m going to tell you like a man

And make you understand

Amanda

I love you

I thought of Daphne. I thought of Gina. I didn’t know who Amanda was.
WORKS CITED


