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This dissertation titled

Ten Impossible Things Before Daylight: Collected Essays

by

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ABSTRACT

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Ten Impossible Things Before Daylight: Collected Essays

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Ten Impossible Things Before Daylight is a collection of essays which turn on experiences with the uncanny, including premonitions, visitations, bizarre coincidences, impactful dreams, and lucky charms. My essays seek to explore a side of the uncanny that is not horrific but instead, eerily invigorating. The lead-off essay “Goodnight Noises” is an uncanny elegy for friend that I knew since childhood who tragically developed severe schizophrenia. My essay is about making sense of his somewhat mysterious disappearance and death. “Far and Wee” is the story of the unplanned rescue of a baby goat that my wife and I found in an ocean while on vacation. Our rescue of the goat led us to many moments of prescience regarding the birth of our firstborn son.

The collection is a varied and confessional portrait of my evolving sense of the uncanny and its influence over the red letter days of my life. It also celebrates Cleveland, new love, and old friends, and seeks to surmount and memorialize the loss of friends, a serious illness, and the zombie-like horrors of the moment, gun violence at home and a war in the middle-east that, unlike the soldiers fighting in it, seems impossible to kill.

“Canary from a Coal Mine: Reorganizing a Sense of What is Possible in Uncanny Nonfiction, is a critical introduction to the essay collection. In it I seek to establish some strategies for working with the uncanny, a concept frequently associated with fiction, in creative Nonfiction. My essays picks up Marjorie Sandor’s notion of the uncanny as a
genre-busting “viral strain” and uses it to examine the differences between the uncanny in fiction and in life. From there, it observes how those lived examples are represented by nonfiction authors, with the aim of re-enacting uncanny experiences in the minds of readers.
DEDICATION

For: My Equinox (who has lifted me past what is possible)
My New Deal (the deal of a lifetime), My wish for 11:11 (who already has my heart)
Wine and Roses, The Early Girls, and a few late guys (the side door is open for you)
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Not long ago, my wife took our two-year-old son to a restaurant. I was working that day, so I didn’t go with them. During the meal my son happened to glance across the restaurant and that was when he saw me sitting at another table with my back to him chatting with strangers. As soon as he noticed me, my son started to call out in my direction, “Dad! Daaaad!” I didn’t acknowledge him. This was puzzling. I seemed to be easily within ear shot. Perhaps I was distracted. My son called out more loudly, “Daaaad! Daaaaaaaad!” Still nothing. Was I mad at him? He would not be dissuaded. Finally, one of the strangers at my table took notice of my son and got me to turn around. As I turned though, my face suddenly transformed into the face of a man my son had never seen before. It was a friendly enough face, but unfamiliar, not a bit like Daddy’s. The hair had been right. The height had been right. The movements, posture, and clothes had all told my son that Daddy was across the room ignoring him. But the face was decidedly wrong. My son let out one more “Dad?”—this one hesitant and confused. Then he made a very sour face and shook his head. He had just received a children’s portion of the uncanny response.

Creative nonfiction, by its very nature, is a genre that requires a writer to tell the truth. There is a distinction to be made within that requirement between visible, verifiable truths, which we call facts, and the hidden and elusive truths that cannot be casually reported but are instead discovered through life experience, or the process of writing, or
both. Facts (the kind of journalistic details that might be very incompletely captured by a video camera) are the building blocks used by the nonfiction writer to uncover invisible, hidden, or disguised truths that exist within every person and in the world around us. These invisible truths encompass people’s perceptions, associations, motivations and dreams, but also the patterns that play against the backdrop of human events. The intersection between these two different kinds of truth can be a pregnant space for nonfiction writing. The unveiling of a hidden truth sometimes runs in opposition to our expectations and fact-based sense of the world, the tension created produces certain feelings or responses within us. It is one of those feelings that we call the uncanny.

In the pages that follow, I will offer a much more nuanced examination of the uncanny as a concept, but at its root the uncanny describes the effect produced when that which is safe, familiar, and inviting coincides or collides with that which is strange, incongruous, and mystifying. A person who encounters the uncanny is expected to be initially unsettled or even horrified. In “Unraveling,” Marjorie Sandor observes how the uncanny response appears in literature, “I don’t think of the uncanny as a literary genre so much as a genre buster, a viral strain” (Sandor 8). I agree, and I think that it is an important distinction. Looking at the history of literature, one might most readily associate the uncanny with the gothic and 19th century ghost stories by writers like Henry James and Edgar Allen Poe. Although that is a good place to start, the concept is by no means limited to this traditionally macabre genre. The uncanny is an element that permeates genre and discipline; it is an ingredient that changes the flavor of the dish, not the dish itself.
Strictly speaking, the uncanny does not require the supernatural. Ray Bradbury’s 1950 short story, *The Velt,* for example, uses science-fiction technology to create the effect as strongly as any ghost might. To go one step farther, the uncanny is also not confined to literature. Today, there is almost no field of study that is not penetrated by it. The uncanny is a topic of research in philosophy, psychology, anthropology, architecture, and animation, just to name a few. Anthony Vidler’s book *The Architectural Uncanny* uses examples of the uncanny from literary theory as fixed points from which to view concepts in architecture from a new direction. There is also a baffling subject in the fields of robotics and computer animation known as “the uncanny valley” (Lay). The uncanny valley demonstrates that trying to use technology to create a lifelike automaton or a digitally rendered humanoid character is a fraught enterprise. The closer these figures come to lifelike human appearance, the more we seem hyper-aware of and repulsed by their lack of actual human essence. We can also find examples of the uncanny within popular culture. The uncanny response is the reason people enjoy discussing the similarities in the lives and deaths of President’s Lincoln and Kennedy or playing Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon* while watching *The Wizard of Oz.*

Importantly, we also each encounter the uncanny within the experience of our own lives. Triggers for the uncanny response exist in nature, waiting there for each of us. Most people are familiar with the feeling of déjà vu, which is strongly uncanny. We don’t know why it is that we sometimes feel like we are repeating past events but we generally agree that it is an irksome and unsettling feeling. It is also a common experience, which is likely the only reason that many of us stop dwelling on it eventually, but the commonality
of déjà vu doesn’t make it less mysterious. The same can be said of the seemingly chance repetition of a certain number in a person’s life, or recurring dreams, such as my own in which I own a little roadside amusement park. We do not have to enter the realm of sensational fiction to find uncanny topics.

Given these “nonfiction” experiences of the uncanny, creative nonfiction becomes an interesting genre through which to explore how the uncanny tests our sense of the world and the truths we ascribe to it. Creative nonfiction provides a means to examine these strange parts of our collective story. As writers of creative nonfiction, how do we successfully render the uncanny? What is the best way to tell a story containing pieces that go beyond our ordinary boundaries of what can be explained? How do we ask readers to consider that some extraordinary coincidences might not be random?

These are questions I have come up against many times, and I have to believe that other nonfiction writers are up against them as well. Will I lose my reader if I talk seriously about luck? What about karma? What about tarot? How about ghosts? I myself have worried at times that incorporating these topics into my writing can prevent my work from being seen as literary nonfiction and seen instead as the pulpy stuff of Ripley’s Believe It or Not. Consider hauntings for a moment in the broadest possible terms: the sentient energy of a deceased human that in some way announces its presence to a living human. Hauntings almost always fall into the realm of the uncanny; a familiar, and perhaps loved presence, voice, or image is at the same time strange, and possibly frightening precisely because their presence, voice, or image should no longer be available. Either that or an outwardly inviting place is simultaneously strange and terrible
because of the spirits inhabiting it. Hauntings rank among the most popular topics for fiction, and they are often thought to be outside of the boundaries of serious literary nonfiction, but is that perceived boundary merely an arbitrary convention?

Like a lot of uncanny events, we cannot prove with hard evidence that hauntings ever occur. Yet, we also cannot prove that they never occur. When this situation arises in the case of serious literature, the usual protocol is to label it as fictional or imaginary work, which is what we tell kids in order to get them to bed at night. But when those kids reach the end of their lives, will they all still maintain that they have grown old with no communication with, intervention from, or certainty of the proximity of a departed spirit, not ever? Some will certainly, but I’d venture to say that they would be the minority. To say that humans are currently unable to prove that ghosts exist is true. To say that ghosts do not exist is not true. Few of course would claim that ghosts haunt in the sensational manner of fiction stories. The existence of ghosts at the broadest level is subject to the thoughts and experience of individuals, some whom accept them and others who deny them. This range makes them exciting material for creative nonfiction writers.

Many writers want to be able to share with their readers their least common thoughts and experiences, which can make for the most interesting reading. The strongly uncanny experiences that have occurred in my life have been among the most revelatory, intriguing, and meaningful signposts that I have encountered. Yet, the challenges inherent in rendering the uncanny in creative nonfiction make it difficult to replicate these experiences for readers. The nonfictional uncanny is a volatile element because, unlike fiction, it requires a change in the perception of most readers. While a fiction reader’s
fact-based sense of the world isn’t challenged by the macabre imaginings in a horror story, for example, the creative nonfiction reader’s fact-based sense of the world is challenged by hidden or invisible truths. All uncanny literature asks the reader to consider that which is strange, unexpected, and unsettling; uncanny nonfiction asks the reader to accept that which is strange, unexpected, and unsettling.

This difference increases the difficulty of the undertaking for writers of creative nonfiction. Readers who might otherwise be eager can look for reasons to be more skeptical when writing includes elements of the uncanny. Fiction writers can expect readers to suspend their disbelief. Nonfiction writers must ultimately convince readers to believe. Making a careful case for why they should accept an account that is likely to depart from their sense of order becomes the challenge. Fiction readers are allowed to close their book and return to a notion of reality identical to the one they had before they opened the book. Nonfiction writers exploring the uncanny challenge some of those core notions about what’s real within their readership.

Fortunately, for those of us who would make this attempt, it is in the nature of the uncanny itself to effectively alter perceptions. For this reason, the careful nonfiction writer always has an opportunity to get deep into the mind of a reader through use of the uncanny. The uncanny, deftly rendered, is a kind of possession. It burrows into our consciousness and reorganizes what it finds there. The uncanny can take control of our perceptions, even when particularly strong examples are encountered in art. But when the uncanny is encountered in life, this unsettling effect is fortified significantly. The fidelity to truth that’s inherent in nonfiction allows the persuasive and careful writer to actually
re-enact a lived experience of the uncanny in the minds of readers, implanting in them a seed of the writer’s uncannily altered view of truth.

The Double: Fictional vs. Nonfictional Uncanny

Mariah was having a tough summer. Her former boyfriend, whom she always kind of expected to end up with, had passed away unexpectedly. Plus, she was living alone for the first time in a new city, working long hours. Her aunts who lived nearby wanted to do something nice for her. They decided to chip in and take her to a reading with an astrologist. She was more taken in by the reading than she thought she would be. It was fun. She probably shouldn’t have been surprised when the astrologist turned to her romantic life, or lack thereof. Most single young women who see astrologists want to hear about that stuff. She would just have soon have heard more about her ideal career or her personality traits. She was still raw over the death of her ex, and actively not looking, but she didn’t interrupt.

“You aren’t going to be waiting long,” the woman told her.

I’m not waiting now, she thought.

“The person you are destined for is going to enter your life before your birthday. Just before your birthday. He will share your values, but he will also be your opposite.”

That didn’t seem to make sense, but otherwise she had a good time. She put the notes she had taken away from the reading in a special box in her desk that held mementos and special documents. She didn’t think about it much until November 6th, the night of her birthday, which she celebrated out with her girlfriends from work, dudeless. So much for astrology she thought.
She didn’t take a moment to remember the guy who had walked into her store back in mid-October and then gotten her number when he saw her out a couple nights later—me. I had in fact entered Mariah’s life before her birthday, but it took me until after her birthday to pin her down to an actual date. We had set a date for five days after her birthday, the night of 11/11. It became clear right away that we didn’t have much in common. I’m type B. She’s type A. I’m a city boy. She’s a country girl. I had been a wreck in high school. She was the valedictorian. Still, she didn’t tell me about the astrologist’s prognostication about her opposite until she found out my birthday, which is May 6th. May 6th and November 6th… My birthday is her half birthday, her exact opposite. There is also the small matter of our first initials. Mariah and Wesley, mw.

The idea that serious study on the concept of the uncanny can be traced back to Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay: “The Uncanny” is true, but also misleading. It is unquestionably the text that exerts the most influence over our modern understanding of the term and it has popularized the uncanny as the theoretical term that we have come to know. Freud writes, “The uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud 125). Freud’s essay is also the text that forever weds the uncanny, which time and thought has shown to exist in nearly every field of study, with literature and literary theory. This connection gives literature a kind of primary status in discussion of the uncanny, which occurs because Freud tests his ideas of the concept against examples taken from literature and discusses what kinds of literature are best suited to bringing about the uncanny. Freud does include a lean minority of reference points from his life and his work as a psychologist, but the
bulk of his discussion stems from literature, particularly but not exclusively, literature written in German.

If we consider that his essay was published in 1919, Freud’s notion of the uncanny as primarily a literary concept is not surprising. For more than a century previous, and without Freud’s theory to guide them, the most widely read and highly regarded writers of the industrialized world, Dickens, Stevenson, and Melville amongst them, had been infusing their writing with uncanny themes, in part to service a thirsty readership that had become addicted to the feeling. Without dopplegangers, hauntings, haunted houses, life being granted to the departed or inanimate, without the concept of the double in which one self is separated into a public and a secret self, without-in a word- the uncanny, not only would we be deprived of much of Victorian horror and mystery but also much of the rest of the cannon from that period as well. Canonical works such as A Tale of two Cities, The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and Moby Dick, amongst so many others, derive a significant portion of their power from the inclusion of uncanny topics. The uncanny was a familiar concept to writers long before Freud named it, and Freud was surrounded by an incredible wealth of recent writing which demonstrated it. Writers of all stripes owe Freud a debt for picking up fellow psychologist Ernst Jentsch’s somewhat vague notion of the uncanny as “intellectual uncertainty” and establishing from literature a set of conditions that best produce it as well as a framework for talking about it as the familiar made strange and often terrible (Freud 124).
Even though Freud was a scientist and didn’t need to apply the concepts with which he worked to literature, that is precisely where he focuses his discussion of the uncanny. Freud finds a nurturing habitat for the uncanny in realistic fiction, that is, fiction which does not play outside of the boundaries of real life from the start, as a fable or fairy tale might, but instead conforms for a time to the normal expectations of our lived reality. Freud explains how realism presents writers with fertile ground to sow the uncanny into their stories.

By doing so he adopts all the conditions that apply to the emergence of a sense of the uncanny in normal experience; whatever has an uncanny effect in real life has the same in literature. But the writer can intensify and multiply this effect far beyond what is feasible in normal experience. (Freud 157)

The opening lines to Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* offer a particularly emphatic example of the promise to play within lived reality. This promise is given in order to be subverted later.

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his death was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge’s name was good upon ‘Change, for anything he put his hand to. Old Marley was dead as a door-nail.

Mind! I don’t mean that to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might be inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But what wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the
Country’s done for. You will theretofor permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.” (Dickens 1)

Dickens’ repetitive stress that his reader should have “no doubt” rings the realist note that Freud marks as the most effective fictional use of the uncanny. Dickens is insisting that the rules of his story are the same as the rules that govern the physical existence of you, the reader. Yet the shrewd observer will be struck almost immediately by the notion that the author “doth protest too much” and will prepare for some subversion of those rules to come. I wonder what the author would make of the expression “dead as Dickens” that has entered the English vernacular alongside door-nails and in the absence of coffin-nails.

Freud recognizes the complexity of this kind of fiction: on the one hand he is entranced by the strength of the uncanny in fiction grounded in realism, and on the other he is savvy enough to recognize some slight of hand being performed by these writers of realistic fiction. After seeming to demonstrate that their story is a match with our known reality, they trespass beyond it, moving from the familiar into the strange. The masters of uncanny fiction of the kind preferred by Freud succeed by describing uncanny events that begin small, closer to the expectations of the uncanny as it might occur in odd or quirky moments in everyday life, but eventually the uncanny elements swell into something bigger, clearer, or more frequent than the odd occurrences of real life. Further realism is created by these authors by paying close attention to the effect of this eventually outsized uncanny on the thoughts and behavior of the characters who experience it. For example,
the realism in Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell Tale Heart” is leant a significant boost by the unnamed narrator’s desperate and repeated insistence of his own sanity:

But why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses-not destroyed-not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Harken! and observe how healthily-how calmly I can tell you the whole story. (Poe 255)

The uncanny circumstance of a murderer being haunted by the sound of a beating heart is not automatically too extreme and fanciful for the reader to imagine it happening. If there is one element that takes away from the plausibility of the tale, it is the frequency and repetition of the haunting. Poe cleverly makes up that ground toward realism with his narrative voice, initially by introducing the suggestion of madness as a potential cause for the hallucination, but also by using the narrator’s defense of his sanity as a plausible frame and occasion for the story. Frames can really amplify the realism and consequently the uncanny response to fiction because they position the reader in such a way as to effectively suspend disbelief and also obscure the knowledge that the story is being read for entertainment.

Whereas Sigmund Freud is generally regarded as the most essential theorist of the uncanny, Henry James is usually thought of as the uncanny’s most essential practitioner. There is perhaps no better example of the uncanny within the realistic fiction preferred by Freud than Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw. James shrewdly undertakes certain maneuvers, especially around the character of Douglas, to heighten the realism in the
roots of what is essentially a haunted house gothic. The bulk of the novella, the reader is informed, is a transcription of a testament written by the woman who becomes the protagonist. It is a first person account written by a young woman employed as a governess who gradually comes to realize that her two young charges are communicating with malevolent spirits. However, the novella begins with a third person account of a Christmas holiday, where a group of friends are staying in a house together engaged in the Christmas tradition of exchanging frightful tales. There is no reason why the occasion of the Christmas holiday and the slow process through which Douglas prepares for and delivers the tale must be included. The story would doubtless be frightening enough if it had begun in the voice of the governess, but would it be as realistic? Would it be as identifiable with the reality that the reader knows going into the story? James has in effect primed and positioned his reader exactly as Freud describes.

Because James has positioned us within this frame, we come to trust Douglas and his good opinion of the woman who authored the manuscript. It is Douglas who qualifies the effect the tale will have on his audience and on the reader by extension. He says:

‘It’s beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it.’

‘For sheer terror?’ I remember asking.

He seemed to say it was not so simple as that; to be really at a loss how to qualify it. He passed his hand over his eyes, made a little wincing grimace. (James 1)

This description of Douglas distinguishes the uncanny response from an ordinary response to fear. Encounters with the uncanny, or memories of the uncanny, reset our
switchboards and leave us at a loss for words. It is a lot like the sensation of realizing that you have been dreaming. The uncertainty, or intellectual anxiety, that washes over Douglas in this moment as he discounts the simplicity of “sheer terror” can come to be seen as a calling card for the uncanny. Eventually Douglas responds, “For general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain” (James 1). James is employing the word uncanny to describe his tale nearly twenty years before Freud’s essay. A year before Freud’s essay, Virginia Woolf would state James’ contribution to the uncanny even more clearly.

Henry James’s ghosts have nothing in common with the violent old ghosts—the blood-stained sea captains, the white horses, the headless ladies of dark lanes and windy commons. They have their origin within us. They are present whenever the significant overflows our powers of expressing it; whenever the ordinary appears ringed by the strange. The baffling things that are left over, the frightening ones that persist—these are the emotions that he takes, embodies, makes consoling and companionable. (Woolf 71)

In 1961, screenwriters Truman Capote and William Archibald and director Jack Clayton adapted James’ *The Turn of the Screw* into a masterfully uncanny black-and-white film, *The Innocents*. In it Deborah Kerr plays the role of the isolated governess who gradually notices that her two young charges are communicating and conspiring with the spirits of departed servants from the manor. The filmmakers are faithful to James in their ability to introduce the disturbingly uncanny elements of the film both eerily and gradually. In her essay about the uncanny, “Something’s Wrong in the Garden,” Marjorie Sandor introduces her readers to the concept by discussing a sequence from *The
Innocents. In the scene, a large hideous black beetle somehow crawls out of the mouth of a cherub statue in an otherwise glorious manor garden. The statue’s mouth has no actual opening. “A weird sickish feeling wells up in my chest, both awful and exciting. It’s that insect, coming out of what appeared to be solid plaster. I don’t have words for the way I feel. There is a word. I just don’t know it yet” (Sandor Garden). Sandor can be excused for not knowing the word: uncanny. She was eight years old at the time of viewing.

Sandor makes it abundantly clear that this casual introduction to the world of the uncanny assuredly burrowed into and reorganized her consciousness: “I’m doubly haunted: first by the staying-power of that long ago impression, and second, by a desire to give my reader that same peculiar depth charge, a moment as unsettling, unstable, and alive as the image of a bug emerging from an apparently solid bit of plaster” (Sandor Garden).

I know exactly how Sandor feels. Not only do my ideas and excitement about spreading the “uncanny bug” echo her own, but the relationship between my own uncanny origin story and hers is itself uncanny. I was eighteen when I first saw Paul Thomas Anderson’s film Magnolia. I had no idea what I was in for. Magnolia is a collage of interconnected stories involving characters who are estranged and isolated from one and other. It incorporates sequences, including the opening, that depart sharply from realism and veer into the uncanny.

I remember silently trailing my friends out of the theater after that first viewing. We piled into a car, whereupon we all opened up our lungs, screaming wordlessly for a full minute or more. Like Sandor, I didn’t have the vocabulary to process what I was feeling when it was represented to me in Magnolia, hence the screaming. But there was
no chance I was going to forget that feeling, and when I did obtain the vocabulary and the theory, I was already carrying the key with which to open it.

The opening sequence to *Magnolia* has altered my notion of what is and is not possible in art and in life. The sequence consists of a trio of case reports on increasingly bizarre and uncanny coincidences, narrated matter-of-factly by renowned magician, Ricky Jay. The narrator attributes two of the stories to newspapers and one to a speech at a coroner’s convention. The narrator never exaggerates, never seems biased, and never jumps ahead in the logic. The vocabulary with which he renders the details at the beginning of each account makes these beginnings seem natural and ordinary, providing subtle contrast with the back end of each account after the turn to the uncanny. As we get wrapped up in the rhythms of Jay’s voice, we are watching heavily stylized and edited versions of the events play out onscreen, almost like video scrapbooks of coincidental stories. In the first account three vagrants with the last names Green, Berry, and Hill, are hanged for the robbery and murder of a wealthy resident in the neighborhood of Greenberry Hill. In the second, a firefighting pilot accidentally drops a scuba diver from a lake onto a forest fire. The third, tells the story of a young man who attempts to suicide by jumping off of his apartment building. He would have been saved by some nets installed for window-washers, except that on the way down he is shot in the chest by his parents who are arguing with a shotgun as he passes by. I consider those five minutes of film to be a major influence on the aesthetic of my essay collection. Like the Douglas episode that begins *The Turn of the Screw*, *Magnolia’s* opening presents the uncanny as a frame for its body.
The uncanny in this sequence is of a specific and very inviting kind. The realism of Henry James and Edgar Allen Poe works here by playing the game of matching our expectations for some time, then departing from what is plausible only subtly and gradually. Anderson’s is an uncanny of bizarre coincidence, and while it is certainly bizarre, it does not depart from what is plausible. None of the three stories are guilty of breaking a hard boundary between the natural and supernatural. Everything in the stories is possible given the normal scientific rules under which we usually operate, it’s all just so crazily unlikely, so uncanny. When the voiceover ends, “These strange things happen all the time,” the viewer isn’t likely to reject that point of view flat out. That statement could be correct. My own uncanny response to this sequence was stronger than it would have been to the most plausible seeming ghost story. I wasn’t so much fearful as I was possessed. It sparked in me an interest in the uncanny as it occurs around coincidence that has shaped my work to this day.

Anderson, however, offers his own turn of the screw. For years after I first saw Magnolia I believed that the three stories in the opening sequence were true. They are not. Actually, two of the three are marginally popular urban legends, fictional stories that for many years have been accepted as true by many. The third is a fictionalized account of a true murder, fictionalized in such a way as to directly promote a more uncanny feeling in the viewer. Anderson has landed on a winning formula for disarming the natural skepticism of his viewers. He disguised fictional accounts as nonfictional, as “true story” uncanniness. He does so through the artistic strategies of voice, pacing, and a clear sense of how to manipulate his audience’s suspension of disbelief. Even if the three
stories had been true, he could not have rendered them more successfully, and the task would have been no less difficult. Now suppose for a moment that you are a writer of creative nonfiction who has encountered some real-life instance of the uncanny. You might be able to adapt many of the elements of Anderson’s magic trick in order to render the uncanny successfully for readers.

Shadows and Echoes: The Limits and Center of the Nonfictional Uncanny

My great grandfather and his brother both immigrated from England and settled in Masontown, Pennsylvania where they found work as coal minors. They saved their money over many years and were eventually able to buy their own small mine, which they worked themselves with other men they hired. The men all went down in the mine together at the beginning of the shift in mine cars, and came up together at the end. For safety reasons they never left a man down in the mine alone.

One night when my grandmother was just a small child, my great grandfather woke in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. He had had an incredibly vivid dream that his brother was trapped in the mine calling out for him to help. There was no reason for my great grandfather to think that his brother had gone into the mine by himself. But the dream had been so unsettling that my great grandfather couldn’t shake it. He lit a lantern and started walking out in the direction of the mine. When he got there he could see that one of the mine cars was missing. He started walking into the mine on foot. Once his lantern illuminated the mouth of the tunnel, he started hearing his brother’s voice calling out to him, this time in waking life.
His brother had doubled back at the end of a shift to check on some problem that one of the men had noticed. While he was down there one of the mine cars had come loose and rolled back down the track where it crushed my great great uncle’s leg, pinning him under the weight of the car. He was badly injured and might well have died before morning if it hadn’t been for his brother’s dream.

Freud says of the uncanny in fiction, “It is much richer from what we know from experience,” and unquestionably it can be (Freud 155). Fiction writers have no guideline fixing them to lived experience, and the powerful uncanny produced by sensational fiction has the potential to make real-life examples seem pedestrian by comparison. Yet, this view is accurate only if one stipulates that the strength of a fictional account of the uncanny and a nonfictional account of the uncanny start on equal footing and can be measured by the same aesthetic scale. When we know that a story is true, we approach it differently, weigh it differently, and maintain different expectations of it. Consequently, it may be that nonfictional examples of the uncanny have a power unavailable to fiction, no matter how sensational.

A nonfictional account of the uncanny, though it may not enjoy its counterpart’s liberty, does in some ways get a head start in creating the uncanny effect that is based on real events. A reader alters their expectations somewhat to accommodate the nonfictional account. Try telling a group of people any uncanny account. You will not get far before you are interrupted by one of your listeners asking you, “Wait, is this a true story?” They want to know what set of expectations to apply to the story. And yet what Freud says in his essay about fiction writers also applies to writers of creative nonfiction: “To the
writer, however, we are infinitely tractable; by the moods he induces and the expectations he arouses in us he can direct our feelings away from one consequence and towards another, and he can often produce very different effects from the same material” (Freud 158). This claim may well extend even further for writers of nonfiction than for writers of fiction, because of the way that nonfiction strikes down one more boundary between reader and events.

Despite this possible advantage for writers of creative nonfiction, Freud seems to afford the uncanny of fiction preferential status. One possible explanation for that distinction is because fiction provides Freud with a ready pool of shared examples. Nonfictional examples are comparatively subjective and personal. The uncanny that people encounter in their lives always has some variance from one experience to the next. In Part 3 of “The Uncanny,” Freud deals directly with the concept in relationship to real life. Put simply, Freud neither trusts nor believes in the nonfictional uncanny. Though he recognizes its existence, he explains away the sources of uncanny responses in real life. This dismissal is perplexing, and in some ways it may be unique to Freud, who tells us that “people differ greatly in their sensitivity to this kind of [uncanny] feeling. Indeed, the present writer must plead guilty to exceptional obtuseness in this regard” (Freud 124). Strikingly poignant experiences with the uncanny do not happen to everyone, and apparently not to Freud. Freud hypothesizes about the source of the real-life uncanny response within the human mind:

Let us take first the uncanny effects associated with omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish fulfillment, secret harmful forces, and the return of the dead.
There is no mistaking the conditions under which the sense of the uncanny arises here. We- or our primitive forebears- once regarded such things as real possibilities; we were convinced that they really happened. Today we no longer believe in them, having surmounted such modes of thought. Yet we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions; the old ones live on in us on the lookout for conformation. (Freud 154)

According to Freud then, the uncanny response is a psychological remnant, something comparable to the human appendix, which once served a meaningful purpose but is now only a useless if intriguing artifact. Freud believes that the uncanny response can always be trumped by logic and determination; though we continue to feel it we surmount the need to let it control us.

This hypothesis holds true for most common cases. It is the reason that we are eventually no longer dismayed and mesmerized by instances of déjà vu. To this very day I get the uncanny sensation that I am being chased whenever I go up the steps from the basement in my parents’ house, but I long ago forced myself to compartmentalize that feeling and act as if it weren’t there. Most of us cannot escape from the uncanny, but in some cases we can exert our will in spite of it. Still, is this kind of mastery available with every experience of the uncanny or only with the ones we have trained ourselves to be prepared for? Freud claims the former:

Conversely for anyone who has wholly and definitively rejected these animistic convictions, this species of the uncanny no longer exists. The most extraordinary coincidence of wish and fulfillment, the most baffling repetition of similar
experiences, in the same place or on the same date, the most deceptive sights and
the most suspicious noises, will fail to disconcert him. (Freud 154)
Though I applaud Freud’s conviction, I don’t share his certainty. The examples cited in
the quote above are strong and uncommon examples of the uncanny, the kind he claims
no experience with. When the most poignant and unexpected experiences enter into our
experience, however, our most resolute logic can be dashed against the rocks. In those
less ordinary experiences with the uncanny, the old ideas within us go on the lookout for
confirmation -and find it.
Perhaps Freud’s lack of real life experience with especially acute examples of the
uncanny bolster his optimism about the power of the civilized mind. Fair enough, let us
meet him on that point for a moment. Let us assume for a moment that one could,
through metal fortitude, convince herself that the inexplicable connections she perceives
between objects or events are only a construct of her imagination. Would everyone
always want to believe that? Isn’t more interesting and enjoyable not to reject the
meaningfulness of that which we perceive? I think that most of the time, in such
moments, we get to choose what we believe and where we find meaning, but sometimes
we do not. It could be the case that our experience with the more mysterious events of life
must be aided by a kind of willed receptivity or curiosity, but aren’t those the very
qualities we value as artists?
This final section of “The Uncanny” can aid an understanding of the nonfictional
uncanny even as undervalues it in moments. For one thing, even as Freud promotes the
uncanny of realistic fiction as his preferred vehicle for exploring the phenomenon, he
demonstrates that all of its power comes out of passed down associations with the lived and experienced uncanny. The fictional uncanny, claims Freud, is descended from its nonfictional ancestors.

In addition, Freud’s skepticism about the power of the uncanny in real life, his certainty that uncanny experiences can be easily tamed and rationalized, can be fruitfully seen as a challenge for writers who take on true accounts of the uncanny. Writers who achieve a readership of any size will certainly be read by those predisposed to thinking of the uncanny in Freud’s way, as the stuff of fiction. Consequently, writers need to be familiar with the techniques and thought-processes that skeptical readers will adopt in order to opt out of believing in the veracity of their work. Understanding how one’s own account of the uncanny is likely to be evaluated by readers is essential to the goal of replicating the lived experience of the uncanny in their minds.

Freud was correct to point out that the uncanny in fiction has a reach that extends beyond the real-life uncanny. We are able to imagine more than we are ever likely to experience. Although hauntings, for example, occur in real life, they won’t match the clarity and grandiosity of the events recorded by the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*. Further, fiction affords us access to uncanny stimuli that are outside the reach of any reality. If, like Mary Shelly, a writer wishes to explore the uncanny results of reanimating corpses, nonfiction is not an avenue available to her. Fiction is likely the only medium through which living writers can expose readers to the uncanny effect of a ritual pagan sacrifice, as in Shirley Jackson’s *The Lottery*. The limitation or constraint that comes
from a true accounting of the uncanny adjusts reader expectations, but the shrewd writer will be able to use that adjustment to enhance the uncanny effect.

Beyond acknowledging that the real life uncanny does not stretch as far as the fictional uncanny, we must ask how far it does stretch? How much can readers be reasonably expected to believe? The first and most important limitation should be obvious. If the writer is not whole-heartedly convinced of the truth of his account, then it isn’t nonfiction to begin with. But beyond that given threshold, which uncanny topics lend themselves well to nonfiction writing? The extent and poignancy of any individual’s encounters with the uncanny vary. Readers require increasing degrees of persuasion to be convinced of more and more uncanny experiences, from the oddly coincidental up to the supernatural.

In my experience, the real life uncanny often resembles an imprint or a diluted version of a similar experience from the realm of fiction. Whereas hauntings in fiction might include visions and voices, seemingly immune from the prejudices and perceptions of the viewer, a real-life haunting is more likely to be composed of shadows and echoes, and the associations of the viewer are central to the experience. John Jerimiah Sullivan’s “Mr. Lytle: An Essay” is one example of a text that renders a haunting in nonfictional terms. The bulk of the essay is about how the author became an apprentice and caretaker to a revered southern writer at the end of his life. It is a portrait of both men and the unusual circumstances that brought them together at the opposite poles of adulthood. Sullivan says of their coming together, “The way it happened was so odd as to suggest either the involvement or the nonexistence of fate” (Sullivan 60). Apart from that
glancing moment, though, there is nothing within the main body of the essay to suggest that it is going to test a common conception of reality. Plenty happens that is unusual, but nothing inexplicable.

The essay lands softly where one expects it to from the beginning, with Mr. Lytle’s death and funeral, but then there is an unexpected coda: “He appeared to me only once afterward, and that was two and a half years later, in Paris. It’s not as if Paris is a city I know well or have even visited more than a couple of times. He knew it well” (Sullivan 78). All of the ingredients of the uncanny are present, there is familiarity in the presence of the author’s late mentor. Sullivan’s construction suggests that the presence is so familiar that it might have reached out from death more than once had it chosen. The familiar collides with the strange, not only because of the death of Lytle, but also the unfamiliar setting.

I was coming up the stairs from the metro into the sunshine with the girl, whom I later married on my left arm, when my senses became intensely alert to his presence about a foot and a half to my right. I couldn’t look directly at him: I had to let him hang back in my peripheral vision, else he’d slip away. It was a bargain we made in silence. (Sullivan 78)

This description hits on many hallmarks of the nonfictional uncanny. The setting is a liminal space, moving from darkness into the light. Although there is an empirical element to the visitation, it is murky and hard to pin down. We get the feeling that the experience was as much the result of a sixth sense as the result of the other five. Other liminal spaces, such as dreamscape, also have a big role to play in the nonfictional
uncanny. Dreams work outside the limits of reality but within the limits of perception, and they provide a real-life venue for inexplicable intelligence. In my experience, dreamscape is a recurring source of both visitations and premonitions, and on some level readers understand this special state of receptivity. They are far more willing to accept these inexplicable events when they occur in a dream, as opposed to waking life. Perhaps that is because of the liminal nature of dreams, the fact that they are outside of our control and within our minds. It isn’t easy to tell why liminal spaces—beaches, trains, attics, gallows—or liminal themes—shadows, echoes, dreams, twilight, animal instinct—are so often central to uncanny experiences, but their recurrence helps writers to render the experiences effectively. This sense of the in-between not only reinforces the idea that writer and reader have locked onto something ephemeral, but also represents a meeting in the middle between a writer’s certainty and a reader’s doubt.

One other such valuable liminal space can be discovered within the consciousness of animals. Animal consciousness exists, but its experience is not particularly similar to our own. Encounters with sentient but non-human creatures can give the writer a chance to consider himself from a totally new point of view, challenging assumptions about his role in the world. The effect is even greater if the encounter is a very unexpected one. These little pockets of distorted reality refract back on our own in order to create uncanny moments. As a young man, George Orwell worked for a time a prison guard in what was then the British colony of Burma. In George Orwell’s 1946 essay “A Hanging” he relates just one of the many executions he helped perform during his unhappy tenure there. This particular hanging is meaningful to Orwell partially by the unexpected inclusion of non-
human consciousness into the proceedings. The presence of a dog at this grim event causes Orwell to reevaluate all the decisions that contributed to bringing him to this ghastly moment.

Suddenly, when we had gone ten yards, the procession stopped short without order or warning. A dreadful thing had happened - a dog, come goodness knows whence, had appeared in the yard… For a moment it pranced round us, and then, before anyone could stop it, it had made a mad dash for the prisoner, and jumping up tried to lick his face. (Orwell 24)

It is curious that Orwell describes the appearance of this playful stray as “dreadful”. The dog is only dreadful because his ability to bring the uncanny into the situation by interjecting the comfortable and familiar into the inherently dark scene. The dog’s inexplicable origins amplify the effect of the uncanny surrounding him. So too does the special attention that the dog affords the condemned man, special attention that is not reciprocated, nor reflected in the attitudes of any of the humans present. It is Orwell who must restrain the dog while the execution is performed. The nature of the friendly and empathetic dog, gives rise to professionally repressed parts of Orwell’s human nature. He is able, perhaps even required, to see the event with renewed sensitivity and curiosity.

Nonfiction presents writers with opportunities to explore a full spectrum of uncanny themes. In nonfiction, intellectual anxiety, an unsettling feeling, or the unexpected taste of adrenalin in one’s mouth can have a context of affirmation instead of terror, something closer to excitement. The presence of some kind of grounding in a positive emotion can separate the uncanny from common fear. The nonfictional uncanny
can be wonderful for finding revealing patterns and making sense of recurrent symbols. It can be used to illustrate odd or unexpected connections. It can be treated affirmationally or regretfully. In his book-length theoretical text *The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle hits upon the concept’s various dynamics:

The uncanny can be the matter of something gruesome or terrible, above all death and corpses, cannibalism, live burial, the return of the dead. But it can also be a matter of something strangely beautiful, bordering on ecstasy (‘too good to be true’), or eerily reminding us of something, like déjà vu. It can involve a feeling of something beautiful but at the same time frightening, as in the figure of the double or telepathy. It comes above all perhaps in the uncertainties of silence, solitude, and darkness. (Royle 2)

Concepts as simple as silence, solitude, and darkness will not horrify readers of uncanny fiction, but they can create an inviting point from which to embark on a personal essay.

The topics that I find to be most effective for rendering the nonfictional uncanny have to do with moments in which the coincidental is just lightly grazed by the paranormal. The intersection of the coincidental and paranormal creates one of those liminal spaces and allows the reader to live in the border between them at different moments in the narrative. I think this area is so fruitful, because it represents the uncanny that we accept as possible but cannot fully explain. It is inexplicable or heavily coincidental and delicately suggestive of patterns in life’s chaos. The uncanny is perhaps strongest when the entirety of a story is incredible, but no one element of it is too difficult to believe.
Soon after beginning my very first year of this PhD, my wife and I were having lunch on college green. All week I had noticed pairs of students, probably from freshman sociology classes, doing trust walks one blind-folded, the other leading or guiding. While eating lunch near such a pair, I happened to see the guide direct the blind-folded partner in such a way that the partner stepped directly on a chipmunk who happened to be scampering by. The guide saw it too and let out a little yelp. “Walk, walk, walk!” The partner complied, and miraculously the unburdened chipmunk scampered away seemingly unhurt. That was uncanny enough but what made it even more so was the partner’s response when the guide told him, “Dude, you just stepped right on a chipmunk.” The partner didn’t for an instant believe the guide, and protested his being wound up with such a story. The guide in the midst of debate, looked around imploringly for support, but by the time he caught my eye, the partner had stomped off blindly away from him and had to be caught up to.

Christopher Nolan’s film *Inception* is about thieves who invade people’s dreams in order to steal information out of their psyche. In the movie, a team of veteran dream-thieves train a recruit to participate in one last big heist. The audience learns about the delicate world of these dreams and the strategies that go into robbing them as the team trains its new member. Initially, their gambit is always to pretend as if they belong in the dream, but they don’t, and they often arouse an uncanny sensation in their target, raising the very defenses that they intend to lower. We can liken this element of the film to the
way that uncanny elements work best in realist fiction. A comfortable and comprehensible setting is developed, and uncanny elements are carefully introduced from that point. And as with a dream, the reader allows for some subtle differences in the fabricated reality of fiction and will not be shaken by the incongruity between them if the writer is careful not to jar their skepticism through clumsy introduction of incongruous material.

The nonfiction writer is not afforded that little leash of cognitive dissonance. The nonfiction writer who explores the uncanny begins in the position of the characters in *Inception* once they have already made some mistake and triggered the uncanny response within their dreaming target. The target is aware of some intervention into what they might otherwise expect from their own dreamscape and their defenses are up. They can no longer fall back on the idea that it’s a dream and is therefore unpredictable. This situation resembles the use of the uncanny in nonfiction because the reader inhabits the same reality as the writer and narrative voice and expects that reality to correspond to similar if not the identical rules of everyday life. Once those expectations are bent or broken by either inexplicable or heavily coincidental instances of the uncanny, the reader is likely to go on the hunt for some fictional element, fault in the logic, or exaggeration in the narrative. Their defenses are up.

The characters in *Inception* have a contingency plan for what happens when some indication of their foreign (or strange) presence has raised the defenses of their target. It is a gambit that they call “Mr. Charles.” Now that the target has been made apprehensive, one of the thieves, Mr. Charles, no longer making an attempt to blend in, approaches the
target directly. Instead of trying to talk his mark out of noticing what is strange, Mr. Charles directly acknowledges that the situation they are in does not conform to expectations. He offers to guide the mark through the experience. If he will just follow Mr. Charles’ lead, the two of them can address this uncanny business head-on.

Mr. Charles can be seen as an avatar for one way to operate a narrative voice in uncanny nonfiction. If the narrator guides the reader directly to any gaps in rationality or incomplete explanations and questions them directly, he acknowledges the reader’s skepticism and puts himself in a position to have a conversation about it. This is apt to be a much more reliable strategy than to hide from the predictable skepticism altogether. If the skepticism is unwarranted, or even only marginally warranted, the narrative voice who introduces it first is likely to be able to dismantle it. If the skepticism is warranted but not damning, the narrator may at least be able to leave the reader with a question in mind as opposed to an outright rejection of his narrative. This option will not be available if an intelligent reader’s skepticism goes unacknowledged. As politicians are aware, the story that you can control is the story you put out first.

When you look at the clock, is there any particular hour and minute combination that makes you feel apprehensive? Is there one that makes you feel daring? If you don’t have that particular foible, I am willing to bet that you harbor some other distinction just as arbitrary: you might avoid driving past a certain house, or perform parts of your morning routine in the exact same order, no matter what. Would you tell your reader about your own private superstitions? I think that too many writers would shy away from making mention of something that is not, strictly speaking, “rational.” Too often
nonfiction writers (myself included) try to create the illusion of total rationality and complete explanation. That kind of surefooted and authoritative narrative voice works well for many subjects, but not uncanny subjects.

Voices that approximates total rationality and complete explanation, such as the voices commonly found in opinion writing or public essays that argue for the common good, won’t serve the nonfiction writer well when she decides to take on the uncanny. Rarely do we comprehend the relationship between the familiar and the mysterious right away. It is the impenetrability of that contradictory relationship, the incongruity of the pairing, that thwarts our perceptions and produces the fear and discomfort within us.

Usually, we would be better off admitting that there are parts of some stories, perhaps even the writer’s own thought or behavior that are beyond the writer’s ability to access and analyze. There is a commonly used essayistic persona well-suited to acknowledging those limitations: The voice of the personal essayist working a subject out for herself. Ultimately uncanny subjects will be best served by such a voice. Still, the temptation to persuade the reader with the strongest possible voice can haunt a writer, especially when she feels like her life has been changed by a poignant experience with the uncanny.

Through trial and error in writing on uncanny topics, I have found that the surest way to lose a reader’s trust and shatter their experience is to render explorations of those topics with the authoritative voice of the public essayist or opinion writer. There is a lot of room for an authoritative voice, the voice of an expert, in creative nonfiction generally. I often write notes on student drafts that say “wishy-washy” or “don’t equivocate” or “Just blaze a trail, we will follow.” But the uncanny encompasses subjects that work
outside the everyday limits of our perceptions. If the voice rendering those subjects seems totally comfortable with them and possesses a seemingly limitless understanding of their intricacies, that voice can inadvertently tame what is wild about the uncanny, severely damaging the reader’s experience. The alternative I am suggesting is to write in a voice that recognizes the limits of its certainty, limits that always accompany uncanny topics. In “There’s Something Wrong in the Garden,” Marjorie Sandor makes a similar recommendation:

The sensation of uncanniness is, at its core, an anxiety about the stability of those persons, places, and things in which we have placed our deepest trust, and our own sense of identity and belonging. And what’s exciting about this for writers of fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction, is that it invites us to practice uncertainty. (Sandor Garden)

We are attracted to uncanny material because it can make us uncomfortable and because it is incompletely understood. The reader does not expect the writer maintain complete control over these subjects. The writer who freaks out a little on the page, who enacts his real life bafflement and fear, and admits to elements that maintain mysterious, will have an easier time guiding the reader than the writer who launches into immediate explanations of uncanny moments. The self-questioning, Socratic style common to many personal essayists is well suited to this task.

Joan Didion’s memoir The Year of Magical Thinking chronicles the intersection of grief over the sudden death of the author’s husband with a mysterious and recurrent illness visited upon the author’s only daughter that eventually claims her as well.
“Magical thinking” in the title refers to a split in the consciousness of the author. Her public self is described at the hospital as a “cool customer” (Didion 15). She is courageous, undaunted and diligent about conforming to the expectations that society places on the role of the grieving widow. Her private self has exited reality and become convinced that, in her husband’s case, death is impermanent, and that eventually he will be allowed to come home. She convinces herself that the best way to get her husband back is to make her public self as convincing as possible. Her irrational beliefs will only remain viable if they are completely secret. Her real belief in her husband’s return is made uncanny by the reality of his sudden death.

I could deal with an “autopsy” but the notion of an “obituary” had not occurred to me. “Obituary,” unlike “autopsy,” which was between me and John and the hospital, meant it had happened. I found myself wondering, with no sense of illogic, if it had also happened in Los Angeles. I was trying to work out what time it had been when he died and whether it was that time yet in Los Angeles. (Was there time to go back? Could we have a different ending on Pacific time?) (Didion 31)

The quotes that Didion places around “autopsy” and “obituary” are a shrewd maneuver. They undercut the reality of those events, designating them as part of a larger game of make-believe. Later, after Didion sees a picture of her husband (a screenwriter) included in the “In Memoriam” montage during the Academy Awards, she thinks: “I had allowed other people to think he was dead. I had allowed him to be buried alive” (Didion 35). The fear of being buried alive is a classic and captivating trigger for the uncanny.
Even though this passage, like so many others over the course of the book, isn’t exactly rational, it is very easy for any reader to understand. A psychiatrist would probably tell us that thoughts like this one are a normal and healthy part of grief. And yet, I think that one reason Didion’s memoir is so popular is because so many writers tend to limit the scope of the thoughts and behaviors on the page to the ones that are rational and realistic. It is our more superstitious, less rational selves that are likely to be more acutely responsive to the uncanny. The uncertainty inherent in weighing what we “know” up against what we perceive can be a powerful engine for nonfiction and doesn’t require the death of a life partner to be viable.

The only kind of narrative voice that has allowed me to succeed in rendering the uncanny is curious but neutral, a foil for the reader, ready to be convinced. That puts the job of convincing both parties on the story itself, where it should be. Building a case for an even slightly altered reality calls for the essayist’s habit of arguing with oneself on the page, enacting a debate, so the reader can check the work that leads to your position. Repeated experimentation has convinced me that this kind of open questioning rendered in a neutral, curious voice, a kind of avatar for the reader, is the narrative style that will not only expel the disbelief, but awaken wonder in more readers more frequently.

Writing from this point of view and practicing uncertainty has not prevented me from sometimes getting feedback on drafts that says “wishy-washy” or “don’t equivocate,” but I ultimately concluded that the certainty inherent in “blazing a path” through the uncanny always sounded sales-y and desperate. Without incorporating some germ of uncertainty, I would write material that was 100% truthful and accurate, yet
difficult to believe. The voice that seems *too* certain about something so extraordinary and hair-raising starts to seem suspiciously determined about her account. When idiosyncratic or very unexpected turns are taken in a true story, questions come up. Questions arise in the minds of people who experience the uncanny, even in the midst of the experience. Leaving a questioning tone out of the narrative has the effect of making the reader feel less, not more, secure about the narrative. If the reader sees the narrator ask the appropriate questions on the page, he is not made to feel alienated by his justifiable doubts. Even if a question is not confidently answerable, it is a stronger narrative position to allow it onto the page than to pretend it does not exist.

My essay titled “Goodnight Voices” completely depends on the idea that my wife was visited in a dream by a friend of mine who had just passed away. She had the dream the night before I was leaving to attend the wake. If by the end of the essay the reader isn’t at least uncertain as to whether my wife’s dream was legitimate communication with my friend’s departed spirit, then the essay doesn’t work. Conveniently, in this particular essay I am placed in a perfect position to practice uncertainty. There was never a time that I didn’t believe that the visitation had occurred. Off the page, I know that these things sometimes happen to my wife. She’s receptive. But over the course of essay, I have to travel the distance between being sure enough to believe something myself and sure enough to tell my friend’s family about the experience, people I’d known all my life, at his wake. In life, as in the essay, I really didn’t think I’d make it all the way to that second, more extreme, level level of certainty. I don’t believe that I would have without the repeated intervention of the uncanny. The entire essay is more or less practicing
uncertainty. I’m careful to modulate the two sides of the debate within the narrative voice, frequently offering a skeptical reader an easier foothold to fall back on for a moment. There are few things more captivating than a trial. Let the audience judge how you made your case using only the available evidence to build your narrative.

Even writers who tend to be receptive and prone to experiences with the uncanny will never have the fiction writer’s inexhaustible supply. Uncanny experiences can’t really be sought out. The unexpectedness of these encounters is a vital ingredient.

Writing this essay collection has not totally extinguished my stock of the uncanny, but it has depleted it plenty. I very much enjoy writing on the topic, though, and for some time I have been pondering how I might continue in this vein, in the absence of intervention from the spirits. A savvy writer can take on an uncanny subject that isn’t derived from direct experience. I have recently become interested in two other categories that can yield uncanny subjects to a nonfiction writer who searches within them carefully: uncanny places and the uncanny in popular culture. Like people, some environments tend to be unusually receptive and prone to uncanny occurrences. Places where some of my own essays are set, like the tiny rural town where I went to college and the Mohave desert around Joshua Tree National Park, just seem to generate enough interaction with the uncanny to make an impact on the local culture and the impressions of the natives. Uncanny experiences generated by the culture of these places affords the writer a chance to undertake an exploration of the uncanny as a kind of community portrait, that doesn’t hinge on one single account or experience.
John Berendt’s *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* is exactly such an exploration. Apart from being a penetrating cultural portrait, the book loosely follows the travails of a genteel antique dealer who has fatally shot his young ne’er-do-well lover under circumstances known only to him and faces several trial as a result. As an outsider to the very tight-knit culture of Savannah, Georgia, Berendt exposes a fabric of uncanny threads that the natives are accustomed to and hence find unremarkable. Amongst these threads, the one that is the most central to the crime story at the center of the book is the practice of voodoo undertaken by various parties involved in the case, but there are many other uncanny flourishes that help Savannah blur the line between setting and character.

Minerva spoke unintelligible words in her dreamy, half-whispered voice. All I could make out were the names of the dead women: Viola, Cassandra, Serenity, Larcinia, Delia. Minerva used every prop she brought with her- roots, charms, powders, squares of cloth. She put them on the ground in front of her and stirred them with sticks as if mixing a voodoo salad. Then one by one, she put all the items back into her shopping bag. When she was done, she looked at Williams. “Walk to the edge of the graveyard and wait for me there,” she said. “And don’t look back. I got some more work to do here tonight.” (Berendt 250)

On one hand, the reader might be inclined to think that Minerva’s thriving voodoo practice, and others like it, are frequented by people complicit in their own bamboozlings, ready to read any development as a direct result of the rituals. On the other hand, as proceedings in Jim Williams’ various trials continue to break his way, it is hard not to wonder if Minerva really did have some effect. Berendt has opened a curtain to show the
uncanny machinations that go on in the community at large, revealing what makes it special.

My essay “The Joker and the Thief” takes as its subject the experience of having a really inviting and enjoyable time at a midnight movie, which is then made strange by the knowledge that a midnight showing of the same movie four or five states away had become the site of a deranged mass killing. It goes on to explore how that uncanny experience interacts with the film itself and the difference in perception between my experience of it and the experience of audiences after the tragedy. Writing this essay has engendered a lot of similar ideas for essays on the uncanny in popular culture. I have begun working on one about various and increasingly uncanny gradations of prescience in the movie *Wag the Dog*. A slightly broader interpretation of popular culture includes an uncanny subject that impacts several of my current essays and continues to fascinate me: the superstitions practiced by actors on stage. I was an actor long before I was a writer. Learning the various theatrical superstitions in my childhood was my elementary education in the strange and unsettling.

The writer who takes the existence of the paranormal for granted instead of presenting a case for the reader to evaluate won’t lose every reader, but he risks limiting his audience in such a way as to directly undercut the uncanny response. Writers who refuse to practice some level of uncertainty risk preaching to the choir, that is, pleasing an audience made up of conspiracy theorists and ghost hunters, people already inclined to believe the wildest uncanny accounts. There is nothing inherently wrong with the many successful titles that are designed for this audience: books of “true” ghost stories and
“haunted” guidebooks for various locales. “True” accounts of the afterlife as purported by survivors of near-death experiences are enormously popular and have probably brought readers a lot of joy and comfort. However, books like these tend to report from a position of clarity as opposed to embodying and enacting their subjects’ mysteries and idiosyncrasies, and that’s where the uncanny lives most fully— in our experience of it. As writers of creative nonfiction, we can do better, challenging our readers’ deepest expectations of how the world operates by enacting the uncanny.

Works Cited


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Print.


Print.


Goodnight Noises

Because I once asked her not to, my wife rarely intentionally wakes me in the morning. If she absolutely must she repeats my name in a stage whisper a few times and that does the trick. So, when I felt her shaking me awake in the predawn light of Friday, the morning before the wake, I had no lapse in memory. I was immediately saddled with the call I had taken the previous night from my best and oldest friend Chris, who had delivered the gist of the sad news through his hysterics. The police had found his brother, Peter, under the Loraine-Carnegie bridge. Peter was dead. I gently cupped my wife’s hand on my shoulder and opened my eyes. Her girlish freckled face was drawn into a taut look of concern.

“What is it Ri?”
“I had a dream about your friend.”
“Peter?”
“Yeah, he visited me in a dream.”
“Are you sure?”
“I’m pretty sure, except…”
“I mean I believe you…”
“I know.”
“Except what?”
“Except that he was a dog…an enormous black dog.”
“But the dog was Peter?”
Mariah looked away for a moment thinking, then she nodded. “The dog’s name was Peter. That’s the first thing I remembered. He told me his name, and it didn’t mean anything to me. But then I woke up and I remembered about your friend.”

I was wide awake now. “Tell me all of it. As best you can, the whole dream.”

“It was one of those dreams. Vivid, like real life. I usually don’t talk about them much.”

“This is different.”

“I know,” she said.

There was remarkably little spillage in the twilight space between sleep and wakefulness. She collected her thoughts for a moment and began.

Goodnight clocks
And goodnight socks

My relationship with my wife Mariah, has drastically altered my perception of the paranormal. Before meeting her I didn’t have a strong opinion about the possibility of premonitions, visitations, numerology, and other pseudo-scientific, unexplained phenomenon. My mother has and her parents before have had occasional notions of that extra-intelligence, and for that reason I never felt myself to be strongly in the debunkers camp, crying “Charlatan” at every opportunity. Nor did I feel any personal connection or sense of investment in believing in those things. Through my relationship with Mariah, however, I have experienced visitations, premonitions, and other hard to explain phenomena. I have also come to understand that certain people, my wife among them,
maintain a special sensitivity to nontraditional intuition. I believe in a *sixth sense* now. I have to. I live with one.

Mariah is sometimes guided by symbols, uncanny coincidences, and odd happenings. She doesn’t talk about it very much, and it can sometimes make her a little uncomfortable. Her rampant curiosity is probably Mariah’s strongest personality trait, and I try to make sense of her receptivity as a natural extension of it. The most concrete and easy to explain way that she is touched by this sensitivity is through her dreams. To cite just one example, Mariah was one of thousands of Americans to experience a premonition related to the terrorist attacks on 9/11. A week before the attacks she dreamt of a plane crashing into the World Trade Center, and it was disturbing enough for her to mention it to members of her high school homeroom the next day as they waited for class to start. Those kids were pretty freaked out when it actually happened, and a couple of them wouldn’t speak to her after that. It was around that time she stopped casually relating her dreams to others.

Even, understanding, living with, my wife’s sixth sense, given that, I had a moment of hesitant doubt as she began to relate her dream about a dog named Peter. I did not doubt that she had dreamed *about* Peter, but I doubted that Peter had actually reached out to her from beyond. It was hard to imagine. Peter and Mariah had only met once, at Chris’s wedding. Mariah had known my best friend and Peter’s brother, Chris, very well throughout our time together. In fact she had met Chris briefly on our very first date. She never got to know Peter even though he had once been as omnipresent in my schemes and wanderings as Chris was. She didn’t meet Peter because Peter was schizophrenic. For
the entirety of the time I had known my wife, Peter had been institutionalized in a treatment facility. Mariah had been a little curious about him. In our stories from the glory days, he didn’t seem insane. When I finally got to introduce the two of them at Chris’s wedding, I thought Peter seemed to be holding it together perfectly well for that loud, joyful, overstimulating environment. So I was surprised when Mariah and I made it back to our table and she said:

“It makes me a little sad. You can really tell that he’s not quite there. Right now anyway.”

“Really? How can you tell?”

“He looked past us. Thousand yard stare.”

“He just looks like that.”

“Did he always?”

“No, I guess he didn’t. But he was happy to see me.”

“I guess.”

“He was smiling!”

“Yeah, and he still is. He never changes expression for a second. Look, it’s still that glassy half-smile. I think he looks far away.”

“He just looks like that.”

“Ok.”

“If you, if you could have known him before…he’s fine.”

“Ok.”
On Thursday evening, the night of the dream, I had received the hysterical phone call from Chris. Actually it was Chris’s girlfriend Nicole who had come on the line and laid out what happened when Chris couldn’t get it out. When he came back on the line I listened to him cry and ask the same unanswerable question over and over again, “Why?” I badly wanted to help him and I couldn’t. There was nothing I could say. I had melted a little in front of Mariah as soon as the call ended. She had seen me very shaken. The tragedy was still hanging over the day as we went to sleep. Was the dream just about Peter? Or was the dream really Peter, like she had said? I restrained myself from asking her that. She wasn’t one to exaggerate. The ingredients of my disbelief were all swirling round in my brain, but Mariah’s confidence, kept them from solidifying.

Goodnight little house
And goodnight mouse

“I was outside at a park on a sunny day. There was nobody around except this dog, and the dog could talk. He told me that his name was Peter. He was a big Black Lab, like giant. He looked just like the black lab we had when I was little except huge, like big enough to ride…”

“Chris and Peter used to have a black dog, Emma. They had her since they were kids. She died six or seven years ago.”

“A black lab?”
“No, she was kind of a shaggy dog with curly hair.”

She shook her head. Mariah was a stickler for the details. “This was an enormous black lab, except he had bright blue eyes. Like, the bluest eyes ever. Did Peter have…?”

“Yes! Very bright blue. That icy blue that only happens with red hair.” Peter’s attributes made him resemble the old illustrations of Peter Pan well into his adulthood, down to the way his mouth curled in the corners, even when he wasn’t smiling. In recent years he had often hid these features with bandannas and sunglasses. I started to feel the first little shiver of unrest within me. If I had felt confrontational about my doubt before I did no longer. Still, there was no one clue to suggest that this dog hadn’t come out of Mariah’s own subconscious. She had actually seen Peter’s bright blue eyes. I couldn’t be sure.

I took a long breath. “What else?”

She took a long breath. “He had a book, and he wanted me to read it to him. So I read it to him.”

“A book.”

“It’s odd, right?”

“What book?”

“It was a kid’s book, with a window on the cover looking out at the moon.”

“Goodnight Moon?”

“I don’t know. It was just a picture book, a book about night time. I felt kind of funny reading it during the day.”

“Goodnight Moon.”
“What do you mean?”


“There’s a real book like that?”

“Mariah! It’s like the most famous bedtime story of all time, ‘The Night Before Christmas’ excepted.”

“It sounds familiar, but I don’t think we ever had that one. The moon is on the cover? Outside a window?”

“Mariah, you must remember this book. Every child knows this book.”

“That sounds like it then.”

“Did you read it to him?”

“Yeah. I did. When I started reading the book to the dog, he stopped talking and just curled up to listen. Everything felt really calm and peaceful. My dreams aren’t normally very peaceful.”

“And then?”

“Then I woke up and remembered what had happened. Then I woke you.”

Goodnight comb
And goodnight brush

I had to go into my office that morning to get some work squared away before I could make the three-hour drive to Cleveland for the Calling Hours, and the Funeral Service the next day. There was no question of my not attending. Peter was one of a
handful of people I had known my whole life. He was only a year younger than Chris and had been a good friend of mine when we were kids.

He had also always been erratic, but that could be fun at times. By the time we were teens it was a little bit hard to keep track of Peter’s comings and goings because he kept getting expelled from various schools, and new arrangements were constantly in the works. By coincidence Chris and Peter’s maternal grandparents lived right behind my family, same address on the next street over. For most of the time we were neighbors their grandparents split the year between the house behind us and a place in Florida. One warm night in the late fall, Chris rode his bike to my house and the two of us kind of wandered out back enjoying the evening, sat out on the trampoline smoking cigarettes. Little by little we started to hear voices from the property right behind us, first one or two that could have been carried on the breeze from anywhere, then several, then music, then car beams shining through the shrubs behind us. We stared at each other in curiosity, then wordlessly took off towards the fence behind my house. By the time we got over the fence there was a full on Dazed and Confused style kegger popping off in Chris’s grandmother’s yard. Pete was in the garage trying to figure a way into the house proper. He had gotten this far by pilfering a garage door opener. When we asked him what the hell he was doing, he turned around and noted us without surprise. “Don’t tell Mom,” he said, and went right back to trying to pick a lock while a party raged around him.

That memory put a smile on my face for a moment as I sorted through the various projects I would now have to leave off for the weekend. Mariah had volunteered to come with me, but she had things to do. I also didn’t see the necessity of dragging her through
what would be a very sad thirty-six hours. I was still sorting through her dream in my head. To a certain extent, the form of a black dog made sense. Peter typically wore all black, black bandana, black jeans, black sport coat over a tee shirt, shades. Underneath the shades, his bright blue eyes were his most unmistakable feature. I didn’t know whether I should tell Chris about the dream. I wished I could connect more of the specifics with some kind of interpretation, but I didn’t know how to interpret dreams. I had never even tried before. I had dreams all the time about owning little roadside amusement parks, and I had no idea where those came from. Also I didn’t have any special reason to connect Peter with “Goodnight Moon,” and wished that I was able to make some sense out of that.

Peter had gone missing from a Group Home for patients of mental illness a little less than two weeks before his body was discovered. At first the family, though concerned, had little reason to suspect that this would be different than the handful of other occasions when Peter had slipped off the grid for a few days. This wasn’t the first time he’d left the Group Home. Like many schizophrenics, he occasionally became convinced that he would be better off un-medicated. He always ended up calling his Mom eventually. When four or five days had passed, the family had become seriously worried. They raised the alert with friends and with the City. They made and distributed posters with Peter’s picture above the words “missing adult.” Chris kept in touch with me during that time, even though I was out of the City. Old friends were the only kind Peter had, the people who remembered him before the disease had taken hold. There were only so many people he might try to find. Years earlier, one of the first times Peter had
slipped away from treatment, he had shown up at my family home in Cleveland looking for me. When I found out that he’d taken off again, I asked my family to please watch for him and to be super vigilant about answering the phone. Everybody knew his voice.

I don’t think that Peter tried to find me before he died, but I can’t know for sure. He had been alive for more than a week on the streets of a city where a lot of people were actively looking for him. Then he jumped off the Loraine-Carnegie Bridge. He didn’t leave a note.

I packed up the papers and books I would need over the weekend. Then I closed out the windows I had open on the computer and checked my inbox one last time as is my habit. There was one new e-mail. The message line read Peter Hamlin Hoke. The e-mail was from Chris and Peter’s father, a one-time Congressman who was a looming but inconsistent presence in the lives of his three children. Included were the details of the arrangements which I already knew and a thoughtful rumination about the tragedy.

Peter was diagnosed with schizophrenia about 10 years ago, and he had been troubled several years before that. Peter suffered from a form that is progressive and particularly difficult to treat. We do not know what Peter was thinking or feeling this past week or two, but schizophrenia is a horrible affliction marked by confused thinking, persuasive voices with demonic messages, and the on-again off-again realization that one’s life will not be what one expected as a child or adolescent.

Until receiving the forwarded message from Chris’s dad, I hadn’t known Pete’s middle name: Hamlin. You can know somebody their whole life and never think to ask
their middle name. Hamlin is the name of the town that the Pied Piper rids of rats by enticing them to follow his music. Then when the townsfolk refuse to pay for the service, the Pied Piper of Hamlin takes his revenge by seducing the children of the town with his music and leading them to their drowning deaths as he had done for the rats. The Pied Piper works a lot like Schizophrenia.

Goodnight nobody
And goodnight mush

My parents were out somewhere when I arrived at their house, the house I had grown up in. It was December, and the last light of the short day was already falling off towards the west, toward the bridge that divides the city in half. The Loraine-Carnegie Bridge over the Cuyahoga River is one of Cleveland’s most recognizable landmarks. It’s the one with massive stone figures, like jacks from a deck of cards holding sheathed swords in front of them (not the suicidal jacks). Could it really be called a suicide? Can we really know for sure that Peter didn’t think he could fly? The dregs of the adrenalin that it had taken to execute this unplanned expedition were now evaporating, giving way to the sadness underneath. I thought about memories I had of Peter here, dropping his bike on the back patio, playing pool in the basement, raiding the cupboards for PB&J. He had always been part of the pack, an expected face in our home. Even later when anyone else could see somebody obviously crazy, we saw somebody who belonged. I kept puzzling over my wife’s dream.
The third floor of my parents’ house is pretty big. There are rooms up there that are an everyday part of the house, living space, then there is a hallway with utility and storage spaces, a cedar closet, and finally at the end of that dark hallway is the door that opens to the attic proper. Ever since I was a little kid it was the attic (not the basement) that gave me the creeps. Whenever I had been sent up there to fetch a suitcase or a rotating fan, I was always as efficient as possible. I never lingered a second longer than I had to among the piles of shrouded, out of use possessions that covered every corner of the place. I was always very relieved to shut the door behind me after galloping back through it. I went up there that afternoon though, because I knew that my parents had kept some of our old picture books piled in one of these dusty corners.

I entered the attic and was enveloped by that familiar feeling that I was being spied on while trapped underwater. I had long ago compartmentalized that feeling and learned to live around it, though it had lost none of its strength over the many years. I clipped along in double time towards what I thought might be a bookshelf covered in a bed sheet. I knew that we had owned the popular picture book “Goodnight Moon” when I was a little boy. I had no idea if would still be up there in the attic, but it was so much in my thoughts that I needed to find out. As soon as I lifted the dusty bed sheet my doubts about Mariah’s dream started to melt away. It was literally the first book to be uncovered at the near end of the shelf. It was the book I had placed my hand on while the sheet was down, just to confirm that there were books behind it. There were a couple hundred other books on the shelf, and any one of them could have been tucked into that corner. I pulled it off the shelf that it had occupied for at least a decade, “Goodnight Moon,” by Margaret
Wise Brown and Pat Hancock. For perhaps the first time ever, I lost track of my uneasiness with the dreary attic and opened the book.

I knew that finding that book so easily was actually a small thing. But I had been on the verge of letting the dream rest, saving it for another day. I was about to put on my suit and look up directions to the funeral home. I would now have to focus on the unbearable absence that was a certainty, and wouldn’t have time for a flimsy presence that was only a theory. After finding the book like that, it didn’t feel like just a theory to me, but I still didn’t think it would be reasonable to explain it to Chris, or at least I wasn’t sure. Maybe someday, but maybe not today.

It’s a lullaby, “Goodnight Moon.” It only takes a minute to read. It’s a poem in couplets that names all the objects in the room of the little creature who is falling asleep. After the objects are named, the book says goodnight to the objects, and images following the same sequence. There is a soporific effect to both the images chosen and the repetition of “goodnight”. And of course, there is something potentially elegiac about saying goodnight to all of one’s surroundings and possessions, all the little things we don’t actually notice every night, all the little things we might miss if we never saw them again. It immediately struck me, that with the absence of a suicide note and Peter’s mental illness, they couldn’t know if Peter had thoughts like these, some kind of recognition and enumeration, some kind of getting his house in order, some kind of readiness. They might hope for that, but they couldn’t know.

I’m sure I never noticed the closing lines of the poem when I was a child. As an adult I was struck first by the general melancholia of their tone, and then by their aptness
to the situation. “Goodnight stars…Goodnight air…Goodnight noises everywhere.”

Peter’s disease had caused him to hallucinate and hear voices. It’s impossible for me to imagine a motivation more powerful than to free one’s self from the noises controlling one’s mind. We all have our own internal demons to grapple with, but we should be very thankful that for the most part those demons don’t speak. Peter’s did.

I dressed for the viewing, freshly confident in the notion that Peter had reached out from death. “Calm and peaceful,” my wife had said. I was comforted by that. I still didn’t know how to make anyone else believe in the encounter, or if I should even try. I took the book with me to the funeral home. I thought maybe it would help me to know what, if anything, to say.

And goodnight to the old lady whispering hush

I think there is a certain comfort to the loud hysterical crying sadness, a comfort that comes from feeling like you think you are supposed to feel. That’s how Chris had been on the phone the night before. As soon as I saw him in the receiving line wearing one of his many vintage three-piece suits, I could tell that he was spent, all cried out. His long hair hung on his face on one side. Chris only has hearing in one ear, so he has to position himself deliberately for a conversation. He was only barely doing that now for the people lined up to comfort him. I realized right away that they must all be saying the same things. Nicole orbited around him relaying messages and trying to take the sting out
of the process. She marked me as soon as I got in the door, long before I could process my way over there. I could see her touch his arm and whisper, “Wes is here.”

Little by little, I got around to them. In those .01% hardest moments it’s always the proximity that makes a difference, for better or worse, rarely the words. Chris is a talker. He is always talking. He’s been talking the whole time I’d been in the room so far. He’s suspicious of quiet. When I finally got up to him, there was nothing to say. We both knew that he needed a break from the constant barrage of voices. He put his head on my shoulder and left it there until he had caught his breath, a couple of minutes. “Glad you’re here,” he said finally. There was no casket in the room, just a blown up picture of Peter behind us with his arm outstretched in a gesture of triumph, Mephistophelian smile, red hair, bright blue eyes.

“I’m not going anywhere, buddy. I’m here.” I told Chris.

“What’s this?” Chris pointed to the book that I was carrying under my arm.

“Goodnight Moon.” I haven’t seen that in a fat minute.”

“So you know it?”

“Sure, doesn’t everybody? My mom used to read it to us.”

“Mariah doesn’t apparently. Come find me when you get a break and I’ll tell you about it.”

“Sounds good.”

I still felt a little shaky about trying to explain it to him. Even now, with everything going on, if I just went and put the book in my car Chris would probably forget about it. I was worried about what would happen if he asked the obvious question.
“Why Mariah? If he could come to somebody, why wouldn’t he come to me?”

Eventually I let the line guide me back out towards the atrium. The funeral home had two sides separated by a lobby and the front entrance. There were calling hours for another party going on in the opposite wing. They had an oversized photograph there too. The departed was another young man, no older than Peter had been, a soldier maybe. I was about to turn back to find Chris’s mother and sister, when the bodies shifted in that other room creating a pathway. What I saw next made me question my own sanity for a moment.

The crowd had parted to emit the passage of an enormous black dog. It looked exactly like a black lab, only about twice as big, like a black lab at a giant’s house. There was something around the dog’s neck. I sat down in order to steady myself. Someone in the lobby petted the dog as it walked by, so I knew I wasn’t totally imagining it. He was headed right toward me. As he got closer I could see that he was in fact wearing an imitation shirt collar and neck tie. The dog locked eyes with me, came casually over and dropped his head into my lap. Still feeling a little unsteady, I scratched him behind his ears. He sniffed at the picture book that I was still carrying, then looked back up at me.

*Ok Peter. You got me. I’ll tell him. I’m in.* I didn’t speak those words out loud, but I felt like they had been heard anyway. Not by the dog, not exactly, but by a presence, Peter’s presence, that had arrived with the dog but filled the whole room. Maybe he was already there. Maybe it took seeing the dog to make me feel him, but I could feel him. I felt like Mariah must have felt when she was shaking me awake. Now there was no chance that I was going to go hide the book in my car.
A voice behind me said, “I see that you’ve made a friend.” There was a smiling guy standing there, a funeral director.

“What’s that? Oh yeah. I guess I have.”

“Rocco is our therapy dog.”

“What breed is he.”

“Rocco is half Black Lab, half Great Dane. He’s very gentle.”

“Yeah, he is, peaceful.”

“Exactly.”

I spent several minutes petting the dog and getting adjusted to the newly entered state of acceptance, not from grief, not yet, but from doubt and skepticism. Eventually Rocco picked his head up and wandered over to where Chris’s sister Lizzie was standing with her grandparents. I thought about Tom Sawyer, watching the proceedings of his own funeral from the rafters of the church. What is important in the .01 hardest moments, is proximity. It felt to me like Peter was still very close by.

Goodnight stars
And goodnight air

I told Chris and Nicole about the dream at a bar after the Calling Hours. “If after I’m done you think I sound nuts, just know that I pretty much agree with you.” Neither of them thought I sounded nuts. Chris took the book out of my hands. When I had found him in the receiving line our silence had been composed of pain but mostly exhaustion. Now we stayed quiet so Chris could reacquaint himself with the picture book. It was
purposeful and attentive silence. He picked up a little bit of speed as he flipped the pages with his thumb, reading the words silently until the last few pages. When he got to those closing lines his voice had regained the excitable edge that I usually expected to hear in it: “Goodnight stars, goodnight air, goodnight noises everywhere…Wow…” We all sipped our beers. Chris closed the book, but spoke the lines over again, and then again.
Guardian

Arriving at my parents’ house a few days before Christmas, I walk straight in to see the tree. Our family home has a two-story foyer with a winding staircase that can support an eleven or twelve-foot tree. Before long, I’ve found my favorite ornament. It’s a sled made out of tongue depressors, scrap wood, and hot glue. On its front is printed, “To: Wesley, From: Jayne.” On the back in the same lettering it says “Christmas 1984”, my third Christmas. I come to look at this ornament on the tree every year at this time. There are other ornaments that Jayne made, a wooly sheep, a toy soldier made out of a clothes pin, and a couple trains, but the sled is always the one I look for first. The Christmas tree doesn’t seem complete until I have located it.

On impulse, I pull out my phone and snap a picture of the front of the sled, To: Wesley, From: Jayne, and send it to someone that I met unexpectedly less than a year ago. I’m in the midst of composing a text to explain the photograph but before I can finish it a message pops up from the recipient, Carol Bailey. “OMG!!!” A few seconds later a picture follows. It is the back of an identical sled ornament, “Christmas, 1984.” Then another message, “My kids have them too.”

Rosebud! I think to myself, and I start laughing out loud underneath the Christmas tree. Dead twenty-five years, Jayne is still cracking jokes. One last text buzzes on my phone, “Thank you so much for sharing that picture! Made my Christmas!!” I know just how she feels. That little yearly reminder always makes my Christmas, this year more than most, because I can share it.
I grew up in Cleveland Ohio. My wife is from the small town of Salem, Ohio, between Cleveland and Pittsburgh, not far from Youngstown. We got engaged in the summer of 2010, but it was fall by the time we took our engagement photos. As soon as they were developed my wife enlisted me in a serious conversation about which photograph to send to the Salem News to accompany our engagement announcement. This was the first time I was hearing about an engagement announcement, one of many small town phenomena that I was experiencing for the first time since I met Mariah. She was confused when I declined to send an announcement to the Cleveland Plain Dealer. We selected a picture and sent it in. It ran a few days later, and we picked up a copy to keep, and copies for our moms to keep, and forgot about it.

A couple days after that, I picked Mariah up from work. She had an interesting question to ask me about a message that had appeared on her parents’ answering machine the night before. The information I was getting had come from that message as translated by Mariah’s mother and then through Mariah, the ultimate game of telephone. “Some lady called my parents’ house and left a message. She saw our engagement announcement and she wants to talk to you.”

“That’s a lady?”

“Yeah well, I mean we know her. She was my health teacher in high school. Mrs. Bailey.”

“Your health teacher has an objection to our marriage?”
“No, that’s not it at all. Did somebody named Jayne ever work for your family, taking care of you I mean?”

“Yes! Jayne Kramer! She was my nanny when I was little. She died when I was six. On my sixth birthday actually.”

“Mrs. Bailey is her sister. She saw our wedding announcement and recognized your name.”

“What!”

“Yeah I know. Weird right? Here, I’ll call my Mom so you can hear the message.”

3

I was born in 1981 to a pair of ambitious and highly-motivated attorneys. They had moved away from their respective families on the East Coast to begin legal practices in Cleveland in the late seventies. At thirty-two my Dad had already made partner at the firm that had recruited him, and my Mom was on the fast track right behind him. After my Mother’s maternity leave expired, my parents hired a young woman from the neighborhood to sit with me days. This arrangement worked for about a year until the young woman got engaged and began planning her own family. My parents were beginning to realize that they needed something more than a sitter, they needed a live-in nanny, to cover their business travel and unpredictable hours. I always saw them off in the morning, but it was becoming increasingly difficult for one or the other of them to reliably return and relieve someone who had an evening planned elsewhere.
Finding a live-in nanny for a young professional couple in Cleveland proved to be nearly impossible. There was only one agency in the country who placed Nanny’s in homes, and they dealt pretty exclusively with New York and D.C., occasionally Los Angeles. My Mom called them anyway. She was told that there was no chance that they could find somebody to work as a live in nanny in Cleveland. It was especially difficult because they were new to the city without family or a big social network. In the early eighties, the young professional mother was still a relatively new phenomenon. My parents were the first husband and wife hires in their firm’s history. My mother was only the third woman to make partner there. They put an ad for the job in the newspaper, and were discouraged with most of the responses, horrified by the rest.

At the same time, Jayne Kramer was working as a nanny for a couple in New York. The Mother was an heiress to the Johnson and Johnson empire, and the father was employed there. After a year with them, the couple asked Jayne to commit to working for them for at least the next five years. That was too long for her to commit to being away from her family in Poland, Ohio. Jayne declined and put in her notice. As she was making plans to leave, she called up the agency that had placed her there (the only agency that placed nannies) with a shot in the dark. Would they call her if they ever heard about somebody looking for a nanny in Ohio? “Well, as a matter of fact…”

“Ohonestly, we knew it was her as soon as we laid eyes on her,” says my Mom. “We were so desperate, and she just had this way. She was instantly disarming.”
“And funny,” says my dad. “She was funny. A lot of people took care of you over the years but she was the best, no question. She was so good with you, infinitely patient and you required some patience. She was like an angel sent from heaven.”

I notice his choice of words because he doesn’t use religious images much. He doesn’t believe in an afterlife, but this is the second time lately I’ve heard him talk about an angel from heaven. The other time he was talking about Mariah.

“We knew it was her right away,” my Mom goes on “but we ended up talking for a couple of hours, and the whole time she had someone waiting for her in the car and never told us. Remember Bill?”

“Oh yes, that’s right. I felt so bad. It was her sister.”

For a long time, Carol Bailey’s name and phone number stayed on a list of wedding related contacts, between the local Dairy Queen that was doing our cake and the company that was renting us a dance floor and speakers. It was like one more entry on a list of things to do. I came to think of it as another outstanding element on the carousel of preparations, easy enough to overlook at first. I ordered champagne from a wholesaler in New Jersey. Mariah found a photographer, together we started painting my old foosball table so that the players resembled little brides and grooms. The name and number stayed on the list. I flew out to my bachelor’s weekend in Los Angeles. Mariah and her friends drove to Chicago for her bachelorette. The two of us spent a painfully long day at a Catholic Pre-Cana program. The name and number stayed on the list.
I can’t say that I forgot about it. I wasn’t sure why I was putting it off, and it made me feel guilty. I had always thought of Jayne as a sort of guiding spirit, looking out for me from beyond. My understanding of her was cobbled together out of yellowed memories like Polaroid’s that hadn’t quite finished drying. I made up the difference with imagination. I guess I was concerned that the real woman as remembered by her real family wouldn’t jive with my drippingly sentimental notion of Jayne as some kind of fairy godmother. How could it? And yet the very ingredients of this coincidence represented exactly the type of presence I had always suspected that Jayne maintained. For a long time I didn’t tell anybody that I thought my one-time Nanny was guiding my actions from beyond the grave. Mariah was the first person I told. Little by little I convinced myself that my romantic notion of Jayne wasn’t worth much if it had to exist in a vacuum. If I really believed in her presence, then talking to her sister wouldn’t change that. If it was just petty superstition, then this was as good a time as any to leave it behind.

It was like finding an unmarked package on your doorstep. It is likely nothing of consequence, but so long as it remained unopened it is packed with intrigue and possibility. That could change if I called Carol Bailey. What if I didn’t like her? That could suck all the air out of the seemingly magical way that she had found me. What if she didn’t like me? Or what if, and this seemed much more likely, we liked each other just fine, but found there wasn’t too much to say? The principle way that we were connected was through an absence, or that’s how it seemed, the mutual absence of Janye. It was disguised by the presence of remarkable circumstance, but it could well be that
beyond that remarkable circumstance all that remained were some well-loved, and still painful memories, nothing new.

“Tell me about Carol again?” I asked Mariah.

“Carol Bailey? She was my gym teacher. Didn’t you call her yet?”

Eventually I did. I called Carol.

Here’s what I remember about Jayne:

Her space in our house. She had a small bedroom on the second floor of our house, mostly just a bed and clothes. Her living space was on the third floor. There was a television up there. There was a television in my bedroom too, but I liked watching hers better. I remember watching *Happy Days*, and *The Fall Guy*. She had posters of skydivers. She had skydived a couple times, but more than the hobby she loved the idea of skydiving. I grew to love the idea of skydiving too. She had a little sculpture of a laughing Buddha on the banister above the stairs. On the inside of the door to the stairs she had a Springsteen poster, the one with his back to the camera in front of the flag. She had a goldfish up there, appropriately named Bruce.

I remember her driving. She used to swear at other drivers. I probably wouldn’t have noticed, but afterwards she would always say, “Don’t repeat that.” Once we ran out of gas. We started walking down the road on a bright sunny day. She was carrying a gas can in one hand and leading me along with the other. I was four or so. It wasn’t long before someone picked us up and drove us to the gas station. She used to pick me up
from preschool. We used to wind through little Italy on our way home. “Blow on the windshield,” she would tell me when we got to the big hill on Mayfield Road.

I remember a summer day in a garage where a friend of Jayne’s was working on a car. Jayne and I were sitting on the grass outside watching him, and eating Peter Pan Peanut Butter out of the jar. I was fascinated by the idea that Peter Pan made peanut butter. I couldn’t understand why on earth we would buy Skippy.

I remember her laying out clothes on my little black rocking chair, clothes for me to put on to go see my new baby brother in the hospital. I don’t remember anything at the hospital so well as the excitement of getting dressed to go there, excitement that Jayne must have created. She was good at that.

I remember the new taste of Red Zinger tea, her brew.

I had a Fischer Price tape recorder, that big beige box with a single brown cassette deck. For a long time after she was gone I held onto a recording of the two of us messing around with that tape deck. She was teaching me to sing “On top of spaaagehetti, all covered with cheeeese…”

I remember my Mom taking me to see Jayne at Mount Sinai Hospital. I remember being very excited to see her, just like I had been when it had been Jayne taking me to see my Mom. I had the same limited understanding of the reason for the absence, all tempered by the common childhood notion that absences are temporary, and hospitals make people well. I remember Elvis Presley singing Don’t Be Cruel over the radio as we drove there. I remember the flowers and crayon drawings at Jayne’s bedside,
including my own. I remember a lot about that day. I don’t know for sure, but it was very likely the last time I saw her alive.

Talking to Carol was surprisingly easy. The feeling that I was calling up an unknown entity slipped away as soon as she answered the phone. She didn’t have any of those stranger danger butterflies, or didn’t seem to. As far as she concerned, she knew me well. The fact that I had just turned six when she last saw me was immaterial. She told about how she and Jayne used to take me and Carol’s son, who was just my age, to museums in Cleveland. I remembered that a little; my preschool had been right in the middle of the Museum District. Through my whole life I have had a special attachment to the Crawford Auto Museum in Cleveland. I had never known why.

Carol remembered having taught Mariah in school. She wanted to know all about how we met. I told her that I had come into Mariah’s store to pick up some concert tickets from a friend. “Of course you did,” she said. “How perfect.” She wanted to know about the wedding. I told her that I had made a deal with Mariah. I got to pick out all the music for the reception as long as I got married in a Catholic church service. Jayne and Carol’s family was Catholic, fairly devout Catholic. I hadn’t known that. “Except Jayne was lapsed from the time she could talk. She had a knack for ruining her church clothes between the car and the pew.” Suddenly an image flashed into my mind. I felt very silly relating it to Carol. I was half convinced I had invented it on the spot.

“For some reason I have a memory of Jayne dressed in a Nun’s habit. I don’t know why.”
“Oh my gosh, yes! That was for Halloween. It was meant to be ironic of course. Halloween was her absolute favorite holiday.”

“Halloween is my favorite holiday! It has always been.”

“We’ve all wondered who you grew up to be. From time to time, over the years you know. I should have known you would be just like her.”

Carol asked me if I would like to come over and meet her family sometime. Both of Jayne’s parents were living. They had a younger sister who lived near them in Eastern Ohio, and an older brother who lived in Maine. Carol had a son my age and a daughter a couple years younger. These had been the artists responsible for the other crayon drawings in Jayne’s hospital room. Her younger sister had a high school age daughter.

“My mom remembers you well,” she said. “I’ve heard her talk about you many times. She never got over losing Jayne, not completely. I think seeing you would do her some good. That is if you are up for it, obviously sometime when you aren’t planning your wedding.”

I told her I would love to do that. I was interested in meeting everyone. I hadn’t expected an invitation like this, but there was so much about this discovery that was unexpected. It seemed natural to follow the path to see where it led. I probably would have told her I would love to even if I didn’t plan to, didn’t mean it. As I was answering though, I was sure that I did want to. I did mean it. I remembered her mother. She had had perfectly blonde feathered hair, like a middle-aged Charlie’s angel. She had been someone I was always happy to see. If she would be happy to see me now, or might be, then that was a little karmic debt that was easy enough to pay. Besides, a five-minute
phone call had left my head spinning with new ideas about my past and the path I was on. I didn’t want to miss a chance for more.

I was thinking about music, and Carol’s reaction when I mentioned a concert. I was thinking about the Springsteen poster on Jayne’s door. Mariah had recently asked me how I had become so invested in rock and roll. How was it that music had become such an important part of my life? My Dad is tone deaf and has trouble focusing on music. He prefers television or talk radio. My mother listens almost exclusively to classical. I hadn’t been able to tell her how it started. Now I was thinking that it started with The Boss.

Mariah and I were married. We moved in together and went back to work and to school. We were very happy and very busy as the first months of our life together began to pile up. One day in mid-March I got a text message from Carol Bailey asking if Mariah and I were planning to be in Salem over Easter weekend. We were.

The bad time started on New Year’s Day 1987. I don’t remember the specific morning well, but both of my parents do. New Year’s Day, after all the year-end business, was always one of the very few days that both of my parents could stay home. They both saw Jayne when she came down to the kitchen that morning. It must have been very obvious that something was wrong. She was always on. That’s the way I remember her, cheerful, excitable, silly. She was twenty-nine years old that winter, but there was always a part of her that felt like a peer to me, another little kid. It’s easy to tell when a little kid isn’t feeling well, and it was easy to tell that Jayne wasn’t well. This had never happened to her before in nearly five years of working for us. She had always appeared
for breakfast like it was her first day on the job. Nobody panicked. After all it was New Year’s day. She had been out the night before. She didn’t think she should be hung over but maybe she drank more than she thought. All things considered in the life of the household this was a most convenient day for her to get sick. My parents sent her back to bed.

The next morning she looked even worse. It hadn’t been a hangover. For as long as there have been Nanny’s, one of the trickiest parts of the trade is figuring out a place for her in the space between mother and child. A lot of people tend to see a Nanny as an extension of the mother bridging the gap towards the child. This is true in a lot of cases, and it might seem like my family could fit that mold, especially considering that my parents were only about ten years older than Jayne. What was so great about Jayne is that she was more like an extension of the child (me) bridging the gap toward the mother. Another kid, except she could drive, and read, and get some food together, and keep us both from choking or drowning. This dynamic precluded any danger of the most obvious and traditional wrinkle that pops up vis a vis nannies: child starts to think of Nanny as mother, or at least confuse the two, and devote more attention and affection on Nanny than on Mom. This never happened to me. I only ever had one Mom.

Because Jayne kind of seemed like an extension of me, over time, my Mom grew to love Jayne too. This is not to say that she loved me less, not a bit, or that she forgot that Jayne had her own close knit family, but she certainly lost track of the traditional distance that usually separates an employer and employee. My Dad liked Jayne; everybody did. She was very likable. But both my Mom and I little by little let her into
our hearts, and forgot about the idea that I was getting bigger and wouldn’t need Jayne forever. I wasn’t getting that much bigger, and the way we felt about her was in a way a testament to how valuable she was in her job. There was nothing very wrong with getting deeply attached to someone unless you are going to lose her.

It was my Mom who coaxed Jayne into going to the doctor. Even though she wasn’t feeling better on the second day of the year, she was determined to proceed as though she were. My mom noticed that her complexion had a sickly pallor about it. She seemed sapped of her normally energetic disposition. If she had been with her family, at their house, they would have talked her into going to the doctor. She wasn’t with them though. She was with my family. My mom, thinking that it was some kind of bad flu, pressed her about it for a day or two until Jayne made an appointment. Inside of ten days, that appointment led to the discovery of advanced pancreatic and liver cancer. My mom took that news pretty hard. She had sent her in. I think she felt like she was attached to Jayne’s journey after that.

Four months can slip away be for you even have a chance to get your bearings. Within days of the initial appointment, Jayne was admitted to the hospital full time. Her Mother sometimes slept at our house in Jayne’s bed so she could have more time with Jayne by avoiding the commute. One of Jayne’s close friends had a sister who filled in for her temporarily and allowed my parents to work without replacing her. Sometime in late February Jayne checked herself out of the hospital for a week and came back to work. I can’t know if she realized that those would be the last days that she would have outside of the hospital. I can’t know why she spent them at our house with me, instead of
at her parent’s house with her family. Maybe she wanted to be where she was needed most. I was too young to let my happiness about her return be diluted by any future worry. I didn’t understand that she was dying. Maybe that was a comfort too. In the last weeks, she only let her parents into her room to see her, her parents and me. In that memory of her hospital room, where she is showing me her pictures and flowers, it is just the two of us in there. That isn’t part of the memory though. It never would have occurred to me that it should be any other way.

I turned six on May 6, 1987. In the middle of the night following, in the early hours of May 7, Jayne visited my mother in a dream. “It’s difficult to put in to words,” my mom says. “I felt the strain of her hanging on, and then the relief of her letting go. It’s one of the clearest dreams I ever had. I woke your Dad up in the middle of the night and told him, “We lost Jayne.” The next day, when they sat me down to explain her passing, they explained the dream to me right along with it. It has been an ordinary, necessary, part of the way I make sense of Jayne’s spirit, from the very time her spirit departed. Until I found myself doing so, it never occurred to me that I would one day explain this visitation to Jayne’s immediate family. It never occurred to me that I was supposed to.

Mariah and I left for dinner with Jayne’s family around seven in the evening on the day before Easter. As we were leaving the house Mariah’s dad called out to us, “Say hi to Tim Bailey (Carol’s husband) for me. He and I used to wrestle together in high school.” This kind of connection is typical in Salem. Carol answered the door. She didn’t look much like what I remembered of Jayne. Her hair was light the way I remembered
their mother’s. She looked too young to have kids my age. Surprisingly, when Carol introduced her daughter Katie, I saw a resemblance to Jayne. She had her chestnut hair and broad curvy build. More importantly, she had Jayne’s laughing eyes, the feature I remembered better than any other. Carol’s younger sister Catherine had them too.

They all did their best not to swarm us, Katie kindly guided us through all the introductions. There was delicious smelling pulled pork laid out in the kitchen. Tim Bailey talked to Mariah about her Dad. Carol led me over to a single picture lying on top of a couple of albums. The picture was of my four-year-old self with Jayne to the left of me and Shamu on my right. My expression tells me that there is nowhere on earth or sea I’d rather be at that moment. For the time being we mostly talked about the present. When Jayne’s parents walked in all eyes fixed on her Mom. She still had that fair feathered hair, white now, and icy blue eyes. I felt instantly drawn to her. She made her way over to me and took both my hands. She looked deeply into my eyes. All at once a quick smile of recognition passed over her face and she pulled me into a hug. “We are so happy you came to see us,” she said.

Jayne’s father shook my hand. He had a manner that exuded calm confidence, more formal than anyone from the subsequent generations of his family, but somehow warm. “I don’t suppose you remember me.”

“Bits and pieces sir. I seem to remember your wife more clearly.”

“She has that effect.”
Once we sat me down to dinner I tried to lead them through my memories of Jayne. I had assumed that all the little pieces that I carried with me were common knowledge. Their sense of surprise at certain details, surprised me in turn.

“Sky diving! She went skydiving! When?” This was Carol. It seemed to be new information to most of the room. Not to her brother David though. He was chuckling at his sister across the table.

“Oh yeah, she went a few of times. She tried to get me to go with her. Too rich for my blood.”

“Good heavens,” admonished their mother. I realized now that she shared Jayne’s laughing eyes. There was a gleam that rolled through them like the sun hitting the wake off the back of a speedboat. I told them about the time we ran out of gas and had to hitchhike to the gas station. This surprised all of them, and her siblings spent several minutes laughing over it. “Good gracious,” said her Mom. She was laughing too.

Jayne’s younger sister Catherine told me “The gas gage was broken on her car. She always had to guess when she was running out.”

“I can’t believe she had you hitchhiking!” said Carol.

“I thought it was fun. It seemed like an adventure to me,” I told her.

“That was Jayne,” said Catherine. “Everything was an adventure. Somehow she always escaped getting bogged down in minutia.”

“I guess we shouldn’t talk too much about the drug related adventures,” said David. Everybody shushed him, much to my disappointment. “Cathy is right though. Nobody could roll over her worries like Jayne. She’d be like “Yeah I guess I need to do
something about that credit card bill. So, Neil Young is at the coliseum tonight, who wants to go?"

“You guys saw Neil Young at the Richfield Coliseum,” I gasped.

“Oh yeah,” said David. “A couple of times. Jayne was always dragging one of us to this show or that one. Jayne loved Neil Young, him and…”

“Springsteen,” I interjected. “She named her goldfish Bruce.” Everybody laughed.

“She had a goldfish?” Catherine asked.

“I inherited him. He lived about another year actually.”

They got out the photo albums. I saw Jayne in costume for plays at her high school. “I do theater. I’ve been doing it since I was…six.” I had never associated Jayne with my history in theater. I never knew there was anything to associate. “She made Halloween costumes for me,” I said. “I remember her painting a mustache on me for a painter costume. I remember the smell of the makeup. My mom told me she helped her sew an Ewok costume another year.”

“She loved to play dress up,” said Carol. “Quite the actress.”

As the albums approached the point in which Jayne no longer appeared in them, the siblings looked through them more quietly. Katie diverted her grandmother with Mariah’s help. Jayne’s father reached his hand across the table and put it on mine. The thing I’ll never forget about you was when we were laying our daughter to rest. You were so brave. We had an open casket and we all thought it was best to keep you near the back. You weren’t having it. You took off right up to the front and sat right next to me.
You wanted to see your Jayne. I’ve sometimes wondered if you knew what was going on, really knew. I think you did though. I think you wanted to see her anyway.”

“I guess that’s the last time I saw any of you,” I said.

He smiled, “Not anymore.”

I had known what was going on. I was sure of it. Losing Jayne was how I first learned about death. My parents had explained it to me by relating my mother’s dream. I remembered the funeral, but I don’t remember rushing to the front. I imagine that I just wanted a last look at her, one to hold onto if I could. I was still holding on to her father’s hand. “I wanted to tell you about a dream that my mother had the night Jayne died…”

He smiled again. “The night after your birthday.” It was my turn to be surprised.

On Easter Morning a text message from Carol popped up on my phone. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! You have given my family an immeasurable gift.” Perhaps that was true, but they had given me one too. Before walking through that door, I had been stuck thinking about how I would feel and what I would learn. What parts of my own past might be uncovered? The answers I found there turned out to be incidental to the real purpose of the dinner. We connected, a circuit that had been incomplete since 1987. Now the completed circuit can light up the little red sleds in the Christmas tree lights. I share something with that family, and always will.

My Mom’s dream about Jayne was certainly unusual, but it isn’t the only moment of inexplicable awareness in my family history. Both my Mother’s Mother and Brother claimed visitations from my departed grandfather at different times. Mariah is sensitive to
these phenomena and has experienced both visitations and premonitions. For a long time the idea that the membrane between the living and the dead is permeable, an idea I always accepted, scared the wits out of me. For years and years in childhood I made a habit of repeating an incantation politely asking any wayward spirits to kindly pass me by.

In November, half a year after the Easter dinner, I was getting ready to attend a poetry reading. The event was being held in a building that once belonged to a state mental asylum, and the structure is famously haunted. Mariah is always uncomfortable going inside, so I was attending alone.

I thought about the possibility that I might soon be walking into a haunted structure. All of a sudden I made a decision: Thirty-one years was long enough to spend deliberately asking spirits to pass me by. I wasn’t going to refer back to my old incantation anymore. I pulled my moleskin notebook out of my pocket and wrote down the words “let them in.” Beneath that, because that thought had triggered another: “Write about Jayne.” Less than a minute later I was in my car on the way to the old asylum complex. When I switched on the radio, I was a little bit startled to here Bruce Springsteen singing through it Can’t start a fire, can’t start a fire without a spark… I smiled as I was driving. Be careful what you wish for I thought. As I started to pull up the winding hill towards the old complex the song changed. I dreamed I saw the knights in armor coming…sang Neil Young. I sat in the car chuckling while the rest of the song played. As I was considering Jayne’s presence, I realized that the next day I would be driving to my parent’s house. The Christmas tree would be up.
Even the Losers Get Lucky Sometimes

A decent marriage proposal is a multi-variable equation. That isn’t an easy thing to admit to oneself on the precipice of proposing. You want to believe, and anyone, anyone you ask will instruct you to believe that the only important part is whom you are asking. And that is the most important part. That’s your motor, and without it the thing don’t run, but the politically inconvenient truth is that there are other essential components as well. My own father needed two tries to get it right with my Mom, and they have been married forty-five years and counting.

My marriage proposal was not a slackery force-out, the kind where a live-in girlfriend glares at her beloved a little more sharply for six to eight years and he finally acquiesces. My girlfriend, Mariah, and I had been dating for less than two years. Although we rarely spent a night apart, we didn’t technically live together. I wanted my proposal to announce that I got to be with the one I love and did not have to settle for loving the one I was with. I wanted a little bit of surprise on her part, not a forgone conclusion. I knew I had caught an enormous karmic break in meeting the girl. I wanted to be able to look back and be proud of taking my wife. I wanted to execute this endeavor flawlessly, leaving nothing to chance. I wanted to be type A (like her) and sidestep being type B (like me). I was confident she’d say yes. I was relatively confident she’d say yes. I was almost confident she’d say yes.

Now then, detailed plans arranged to exacting specification: this is pretty much the opposite of my forte. My approach to the situation had a kind of debutante’s naïveté
surrounding it, but I am a talented liar. I was able to keep up my poker face without wavering for months on end.

When I first met Mariah I was pretty well trapped in a cycle of self-doubt and disillusionment. Twice in the few years before we had gotten together, I had begun a stable seeming job and home in a place I felt comfortable, and twice what I had been building had been unexpectedly dashed against the rocks, once by an opportunistic higher up, and once by a serious illness. I was without an anchor, living with my parents, newly unemployed, drinking, and coping poorly. I didn’t want to build anything new only to see it destroyed. I was unable to shake the self-fulfilling notion that I had fallen into a pit of quicksand.

The people who were close to me believed I was depressed. To my mind, depression was something that happened because of what was going on in your brain. I was upset over what was going on in my life. People who are depressed might be depressed for no reason. I had more reasons than I could keep straight. I wouldn’t be depressed, I reasoned, if the universe would only stop conspiring against me for long enough for me to catch one solid break. If one good thing could happen to me, I could use that to start to heal and rebuild myself. I was convinced that this would never happen, and then it did.

I would never have thought that the break I needed, my one good thing, would or could be a person, but here she was: a petite, thrifty, fashion-forward, twenty-four-year-old retail manager with blonde hair, blue eyes and a face full of freckles. Mariah was
really interested in my life experience, perspectives, and ideas about the city that she wasn’t native too. I was good company, and had a way of disarming her own stresses, which tended to be more of the day-in-day out variety. She was unshakably understanding about my search for a new plan. She liked that I lived at home and grew to like my family. Our experiences and backgrounds were wildly asymmetrical, but our analytical processes and sense of humor were just alike.

So… I got better. Anchored by Mariah, and also anchoring her, I was able to build up my confidence and with my confidence my plans for the future. Like me, Mariah had been through a tough year. She was living on her own for the first time. She also had her own health problems not too dissimilar from the ones which had recently thrown me off balance and we bonded over that. To top it off, her last serious boyfriend, someone she had still felt close to and been in frequent contact with, had died unexpectedly just months earlier. She and I had found each other both in some state of recovery, a truth that no one would be able to discern from our respective appearances. Mariah blessedly didn’t see me as handicapped by the unanswered questions that I was working out, and after a bit I didn’t either. I started to answer them.

And yet, Rome wasn’t built in a day. In the opening months of our relationship, I hadn’t quite paved over all the cracks that allowed in self-pity and delusions of persecution. I was still reading no news as bad news, bad news as an unshakable omen. I was still overcome with negative superstition and a deep mistrust of all things bureaucratic and official. I know now that some of this was misplaced fear, my way of coping with the fact that my health had suddenly failed in my mid-twenties and taken
desperate measures to restore, but that was hard to see at the time. I got better, but on a bad day I could backslide. Setbacks would send me spinning into my web of conspiratorial bad juju.

Mariah had special reasons to find this kind of superstitious obsession toxic. Mariah believed in non-scientific hocus pocus, but only of a unilaterally helpful, friendly, positive kind, the exact opposite of the kind I was obsessed with. “Put it out into the universe,” she would say whenever I was hoping for something out of my direct control, like a writing submission or a job application, to break my way. “The universe has it in for me,” I would say. Her trust in unseen forces baffled me. My fear and resentment of unseen forces frustrated her.

Then, one day, she bought me a present. Mariah was working as a manager at a fashionable clothing store that also sold home products including some books. She did her best to nurture my intellectual curiosity with the selection of books available at her women’s clothing store. Not easy, but she was calculating and deliberate about spotting titles I might actually be interested in and then waiting for the price to erode on those titles over time. I bought her groceries, and cable, and sexy underwear. She bought me poems by Pablo Neruda, and a recipe book for old fashioned cocktails, and edition of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland bound in a linen print stamped with flamingo croquet mallets and hedgehog balls. Between her knowledge of how and why things went on sale and her employee discount, she was expanding my browsing library with lots of love, but very little actual currency.
One day after we had been together three or four months, I came over to her place after she got off work. She was holding something gift-wrapped in that familiar packaging of course beige paper and white ribbons with colorful buttons affixed to them. Mariah cleared her throat. “I got you something today. I want you to know that I paid full price, this was not on sale.”

“Oooh thanks baby! Wow! Why did you do that? Don’t the books usually go on sale eventually?” I asked, unwrapping eagerly.

“It couldn’t wait.” She folded her hands in her lap and smiled.

The cover on the book had one word printed on it in enormous letters, with a much smaller subtitle: LUCK: The Essential Guide.

“You bought me luck…” I smiled, “full price.”

“There’s some interesting information in that volume that you should check out,” she pointed, “as it turns out, not all luck is bad luck. There are different kinds!”

It had taken me longer than it should have to see where she was going with the present. I had no recourse but to laugh.

“More importantly, since you don’t seem to put too much stock in my interpretation of your fortunes and how to read them, and your interpretation of them borders on certifiable paranoia, I got us an authority.” She rapped on the cover of the book. “This is our tie breaker. From now on, if you feel a curse coming on, be it health, professional or printer related, I want you to back it up with evidence from the book.”

“That printer is being controlled by demonic forces, that one is a bridge to far!!”
Mariah rapped her knuckles on the book. “Show me.” There wasn’t anything in the book about office equipment.

Mariah and I used to joke about our “contracts.” The premise was that the point of our relationship was to spare us the embarrassment of showing up dateless to weddings, reunions, and graduations. Every time one of us got a new invitation in the mail we’d bring it to the other and say something like, “I’d like to talk to you about extending your contract.” The contracts were extended, and extended, and extended. The other shoe never dropped. Without planning to, we both got comfortable.

There were a lot of little moments that contributed to an understanding that Mariah was the woman I wanted to marry— in the dream-like eventual sense. But there was only one hard fast moment of knowing that the time had come to ask Mariah to marry me. Before I saw the concert listing, I had never given any thought to the details of how or when to propose. The moment I saw that concert listing, I knew in a flash exactly what I was going to do. I was going to advance the plot finally, put myself on the line, portents and omens be damned. If she would marry me, then maybe a plan wasn’t just a list of things that don’t happen. I didn’t know if I would ever believe the thing she liked to say “Everything happens for a reason.” But if she would marry me I would know some things do, that life wasn’t purely arbitrary or cruel, that some instincts are worth trusting.

I had a good friend from college who worked for a music management company in Los Angeles. My friend happened to work directly under the guy who manages Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers. I had been a fan of Tom Petty since I was a kid, but because of my friend’s job I had followed his career even more closely in the years before
meeting Mariah. While I was living in L.A., my friends and I had been able to go to his shows for free. Around the time that wedding-related thoughts first stared invading my mind, Petty and his band put out the album *Mojo*. Of course I got a copy as soon as it happened and copied it for Mariah as well.

MOJO

...[A] red flannel bag filled with bones, roots, or symbolic objects, that can aid in casting a spell or protect or bring the wearer luck. A mojo bag (also known as a mojo hand) is one of the fundamental good luck charms of Hoodoo and Conjure traditions.... Locating, obtaining, and keeping mojo was a preoccupation of lovers and gamblers, and references to mojo pop up frequently in Blues songs, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Low Down Mojo Blues” and Preston Foster’s “I Got My Mojo Working.” Today, the term Mojo is used more loosely to describe that ineffable thing that gives a person sexual charisma.

Mojo bags can be created for any occasion and any need. You can customize one to bring yourself luck in love, gambling, business, lawsuits, and just about anything else under the sun. Once you’ve created your mojo, be sure it is not visible; it can be pinned inside of your clothing or secreted away in an appropriate spot where it will be best suited to work its magic.

(Aaronson and Kwan 38)
About a month after the release of *Mojo*, I opened my in-box one day to find a message from my music manager friend. The e-mail said: “Look who’s opening for Tom (Petty) for his Midwest dates. You’re welcome!!” There was a link to a page with Petty’s tour dates. I clicked it and instinctively scrolled down looking for whatever the Cleveland date would be as well as the identity of the opening act my friend had apparently had a hand in arranging. Here’s what I saw listed on page with the tour dates:

Tom Petty and the Heart Breakers: July 20,

Blossom Music Center- Cuyahoga Falls OH

Opening Act: Drive-by Truckers

That concise little posting wouldn’t have meant much to anybody else, but it meant everything to me. It was rife with little clues to indicate that the stars were set to align in my favor, and I knew instantly what I was supposed to do about it.

The concert venue was the first essential element. Blossom Music Center has been a near-sacred place to me for as long as I can remember. Blossom is about half an hour south of Cleveland in the northern part of the Akron-metro area. My parents took me to a Jefferson Airplane concert there when I was only weeks old. I remember seeing Roy Orbison play there before he died; I was probably eight or nine years old. I went to Lollapalooza there while I was still in middle school. Over the years my love of the place and the magic it created carried on through too many shows on too many perfect summer and autumn nights to hold in mind at once. The first summer that we were dating I had taken Mariah to Blossom to see The Dave Mathews Band. Having Mariah there next to
me was like taking her to my church. On a grassy hill packed with beers and bodies, amid
the lightning bugs and the cicadas, we felt at home together in the vibe of the place.

FLOWER POWER

Flowers can impress a date or cheer up a friend but did you know that
certain blossoms are lucky when they are planted in the garden or brought
into the house? (Aaronson and Kwan 82)

The detail that my friend in L.A. had been trying to communicate to me was the
opening act. My friends in college and I, all of us music nerds with radio shows and
omni-present headphones, had discovered Drive-by Truckers about a year before
graduation, and they quickly became a collective favorite. Our semi-obsessed fandom
only grew over the years as they released better and better albums. To this day, they
remain one of my two favorite bands, one of two reasons I will contort every life
responsibility in order to get to a rock club, in the next city over, on a weeknight, no
matter what. My buddy was letting me know that he had done a little fairy god-mothering
in bringing the band, which had been steadily on their way up rock charts, to the attention
of his boss, and of Tom Petty. It was a major coup for the Truckers because Tom Petty
has a good reputation for really featuring his openers, giving them the space to put on a
real show, not just eat time while the venue sells beer. I would have taken Mariah to the
Petty show anyway, but this made it at least twice as exciting.
I had taken Mariah to a Drive-by Truckers show in the very early innings of our courtship. Because I cared about the band and wanted her to have a good time, I planned ahead. I burned a CD of songs I thought they might play live and got her used to them before the show. There was one up-tempo song that Mariah had picked out as her favorite before the show. When they launched into it, she danced the two of us right through a few rows of people, and spun in my arms just a few feet from the rail. She was lost in the experience that I had wanted to share with her. The song that she had recognized and gotten excited for is called *Marry Me*.

There was a finishing touch that solidified my breakthrough in front of the computer screen. I was staring at the thing that people ask for when they say *if you could only give me a sign*, and that was the date of the concert, July 20\textsuperscript{th}.

Over the course of dating Mariah and in consultation with the text she bought me, I had started to notice something that I had long forgotten: good luck. A slew of little affirmations occurred that persuaded me that I was on the right track with her, and many had to do with dates, as in dates on the calendar. For example, that first *date* date, the one that startled us with our own chemistry, happened on November 11\textsuperscript{th}, 11/11. My best friend from college had always pointed out when the time was 11:11. “It’s 11:11,” she would say damn near twice a day, “make a wish.” A few weeks after that first date, Mariah and I had discovered that our birthdays were *exactly* half a year apart. I’m May 6\textsuperscript{th} and she is November 6\textsuperscript{th}. We have each other’s half birthdays. Dates have always been special to us.
I only have one sibling, a younger brother. July 20th, the date on the concert listing, is his birthday. And of course I know that every day is somebody’s birthday, and for most people the date wouldn’t matter at all. It mattered to me though. It felt like a signpost, a breadcrumb leading me forward. The tickets weren’t even on sale yet, but I would be ready when they were.

I immediately felt like I had a lot to do; but that wasn’t true, at least not yet. The plan that had flashed before me was a pretty simple one: A: Take her to the concert. B: Find a way to stow some necessary surprise items including a ring. C: Wait for the Truckers to play *Marry Me*. D: Purpose marriage.

I became laser-focused on this date a few months away and how to make it special. I didn’t see it at the time, but I was piling eggs into a basket in a way that I never would have before I started to shake of the hang-ups about curses and ennui. I was sure of my ability to keep this plan hidden and preserve the surprise, which was very much a post-LUCK trait. I had a hunch that Mariah thought she and I were headed in the general direction of marriage. I also didn’t think she was expecting to be asked imminently. We were still well within the grace period that couples get before “what’s next” type questions from family and friends. Not long ago, I had had a hard time feeling ready for anything.

I bought the tickets as soon as they went on sale. Mariah had been excited when I told her about the show. She asked if we could take her brother and his girlfriend with us as a birthday present for him. Even with my secret plans in mind, I didn’t see why not. It
would be a happy occasion. The more the merrier. Actually it made me even more confident because of the way that detail mirrored the way that the plan was connected to my little brother. It would be going down on his birthday. Even way back on the lawn, I couldn’t be sure she would be able to make out anything I was trying to say to her while the music was playing, especially if I was down on one knee and not able to lean in to her ear. This is the type of detail that pre-LUCK Wes might have overlooked. Pre-Luck Wes was kind of generally convinced that he wasn’t being heard, and would get louder and more desperate, instead of getting creative about how he communicated. It was a good thing I was no longer that guy. I devised a solution.

I had to sit on my secret a really long time. When I was sure no one was around to disturb me, I spent a lot of time on BlueNile.com, pricing and comparing diamond rings. It didn’t take long to learn that I was out of my depth. I had never even bought a girl a pair of earrings. This is the one area in which the necessity of losing my girlfriend as a confidant really set me back. She had artistic talent and a keen eye for design, areas where I sorely needed remedial instruction. I knew that she liked yellow gold, not white gold, and that was all I knew. As I searched I only grew more convinced that I didn’t want to take a plunge on something she didn’t love but would forever have to wear. I needed her input most on the one topic where I absolutely couldn’t have it. For a long time, the paradox of the ring was the only shadow that obscured the vision that had fallen in place for me with that concert listing.

Mariah had given me a nice leather bound journal for my birthday. I carefully cut out three of the creamy lined pages from the back of the journal, and with my nicest pen
and steadiest hand wrote out the messages that would be a part of the proposal. This way
I wouldn’t have to worry about her ability to hear me with the concert going on, and I
wouldn’t immediately attract the attention of all the fans in our vicinity. I even tracked
down a little keychain flashlight, the kind where squeezing it makes it shine. I kept that
hidden with the finished messages just in case it was dark by the time I handed them to
her at Blossom. I bought a nice bottle of champagne to hide in the car and celebrate with
once the show was over.

As the week of the show arrived a few concerns battled for my attention in steady
rotation like tracks changing on a mix-tape of anxiousness: rain, set lists, her dad, and of
course the paradox of the ring. The ten-day forecast was predicting a 50% chance of
showers during the hours of the concert, and the prediction wasn’t changing. I attempted
to dissuade the path of the weather systems with the force of my will. What else could I
do?

Drive-by Truckers never make a set list. Each show is unique and they always
play what the spirit moved them to play. It is one of the elements that made their shows a
particularly rich experience. There are some songs they play most nights but no song they
play every night. As the tour moved toward Blossom, frequent checks of Setlist.fm
revealed that the Truckers were playing *Marry Me* in about two out of three of these sets.
Tom Petty’s sets were more consistent though. I picked one of his songs as a back-up
moment.

I would have been happy to ask for her dad’s permission to marry her. I thought
he would probably give it to me. The trouble was that I wasn’t sure he could keep the
secret from Mariah’s mom, and if she found out, I was sunk. Her mother’s face would give me away to Mariah in an instant. There was no immediate fix for that one either.

In terms of the ring I had one play, but it meant talking to someone else about my plan for the first time. My mom always wore the ring that was her 25th anniversary present from my dad. She hadn’t worn her original engagement ring in years. It was a yellow gold ring with a small but perfect pear-shaped diamond. A couple nights before the show I found my mom sitting in her burgundy leather easy chair with her sewing kit open in front of her, patching up some clothes and half watching Masterpiece Mystery.

“So, Mom.”

“Yeah?”

“You know how I’m taking Mariah to this concert on Tuesday.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Well I was thinking that would be a good opportunity to propose.”

“To propose what?”

“To propose to her!”

“To propose what to her?”

“Marriage, Mom! To propose marriage!”

Mom dropped her sewing into her lap and fell back into the deep chair like she had just stomped hard on its breaks. If her reaction was any indication, then my surprise was safe.

I addition to the ring I knew about, my mom was in possession of my late Grandmother’s wedding ring. This was also yellow gold, with a round diamond in the
middle, and two smaller diamonds flanking it. I stared at the two rings side by side for a long time. One was a flawless pear stone in a simple clean setting that I had seen every day as a child, the other a simpler stone in a more creative antique presentation that I had never seen before that day. My maternal Grandmother was widowed and remarried by the time I came along, and when I had known her she wore a different engagement ring. Eventually I made my selection, closed the other ring box and handed it back to my mom.


The morning of the concert dawned without a rain cloud in sight. I woke up at Mariah’s place and left once she got into the shower, as was our habit. I got into my car and started to drive away. I had made it to the first stop light when I noticed something clinging to my windshield.

It was a cricket, a very large live cricket, the kind I had only ever seen in backyards and basements. I could have just left it to blow off of the car, or knocked it off with the windshield wiper. If I ever had any qualms about killing insects, dating Mariah had ended those. Eviscerating spiders for her (lucky though they may be) is a major clause in my contract. But this cricket was so close to my vision, and seemed so perplexed about where it was and why it was moving so fast that it captured my interest. I got out of the car at the light, gently scooped the cricket into my hands and set it down in the yard I was stopped next to. It seemed to find its bearings and took a couple of hops deeper into the yard.
CRICKET

It is almost universally agreed that crickets are harbingers of good fortune. Throughout time, they could be found chirping inside homes, often near the warmest spot in the house, the hearth. As a result, they have come to be seen as the embodiment of cheerfulness and a contented household... No action is required here, just don’t kill it, which is sure to bring bad luck.

(Aaronson and Kwan 19)

I pulled up my parents’ long driveway and got out of the car. There waiting in the driveway, right where I always park, was a bunny rabbit. The rabbit was up on his hind legs staring at me, meaningfully, as a dog might. It’s not so unusual to see rabbits scurrying about in my parents’ lawn, but seeing one in the driveway isn’t so common. And this one didn’t dash away at the sound of my car door opening. From ten or so feet away, the rabbit was seemingly intent on making his presence known.

RABBIT’S FOOT

Hares and rabbits have long been associated with good luck... Rabbits have historically been admired for their procreative powers. If you were a farmer who needed to populate your house with able bodies to help in the fields, wouldn’t you envy them? Also impressive were there overactive hindquarters. (Aaronson and Kwan 44-45)
By late afternoon, I had the car packed with ring, notes, tickets, tarps and ponchos (partially to camouflage the other items, the skies remained clear) champagne, and a tiny flashlight. I had just started down the driveway in the loaded car when my cell phone rang. It was Mariah.

“My dad just heard on the radio that the concert was cancelled.”

At first I thought that I had goofed. Somehow I had revealed my intensions and she was winding me up. Mariah is her mother’s daughter though, not much of an instinct for guile. A few crazed follow up questions revealed no hint in her voice that she might be kidding. She didn’t seem too concerned about the news. They would reschedule the date after all, and honor the tickets. Her brother and his girlfriend had just arrived. Perhaps we could take them to dinner?

I have no idea what syllables fell out of my mouth on my end of the call. All I could think was: Don’t scream until she hangs up! Don’t scream until she hangs up!

Eventually she hung up. I screamed.

I screamed and yelled and cursed and brought my fists pounding down on the car horn (which I almost never use while driving) and generally had a full on tantrum about a third of the way down my parents’ driveway. I had no idea what to do. I knew I couldn’t calmly and cheerfully drive over to Mariah’s for a calm cheerful dinner out. Some period of time was going to have to pass for my outright conniption to subside. I turned the car around.
A quick internet search proved that I wasn’t being strung along. Mike Campbell, Tom Petty’s best-known and longest serving Heartbreaker, had suffered heat stroke while playing a show in St. Louis the night before, and a doctor had forbade his playing the July 20th show that was meant to be the backdrop for the rest of my life. He never played the part of a Heartbreaker more adroitly than he did that day. My mom, forewarned of trouble by the car horn, did her best to console me and offer guidance.

“Why can’t the Truckers play?” I moaned at her, rhetorically. “None of them have heat stroke.” I had no idea what to do. For weeks I had been bent back on a spring in anticipation. The internet assured me that the show would definitely be rescheduled, but as yet there was no date confirmed. The date itself had been part of the magic for me. Besides, I knew that a detail like the opening act could shift under circumstances like these. I didn’t think I could put my plan into hibernation for the weeks or months it would take for this concert to be rescheduled. Text messages from Mariah buzzed all around me wondering where the hell I was. I was out of time. I had to get back into my car and drive down that traitorous driveway, so I did.

I was in a daze. I had never been so sure that my luck had turned around than I was only an hour before. There was a severe temptation to treat this news as the sadistic affirmation of all the negativity and superstition that I thought I had finally escaped. It was everything I could do to beat down the total resurgence of pre-LUCK Wes, seemingly vindicated about every toxic bit of his apprehension and paranoia. How do you make God laugh? You make a plan. Somewhere along the line I had stopped believing that. Why had I stopped believing that?
Mariah. Mariah had rearranged my whole sense of what was possible. I pulled back into the covered parking place outside her apartment building that I had left eight or so hours prior, the place where a cricket had found his way onto my windshield. I got out of the car and stared for a long time at the trunk of it. My head swirled with questions. Is the only important thing about a proposal the person you are proposing to? Does everything happen for a reason? Can you put something out into the universe? Do we make our own luck? I stared and stared at the carefully arranged trunk that held a ring, some notes, a tiny flashlight, and a bottle of champagne, all wrapped up and hidden away inside a tarp, like the contents of a Mojo bag. I broke my gaze to glance up three stories to Mariah’s bedroom window. Then I popped the latch on the trunk.

The walk up all those flights to Mariah’s apartment had never seemed shorter. I felt self-conscious and unprepared, breathless. It was just the way I’d felt the day I had gone to pick up some concert tickets from a friend at the store where she worked and first encountered her devastatingly beautiful shift manager there. I had no idea what I was doing. This was improvisation. The notes and ring were secreted away in my pockets, but there was no way to hide the chilled champagne I was carrying. Ok that’s good I suppose. Lead with the wine. When in doubt, always lead with the wine.

Mariah opened the door, “Well, hello.” She looked down at her watch sarcastically.

“Yes, yes. Sorry for the delay. Here, maybe this will make up for it.” I handed her the bottle. “I thought it might help to soften the punch of there being no concert to go to.”

“What? Where did this come from? This looks expensive, baby.”
My wheels spun. I should have expected this. No one I knew would be quicker to suss out the difference between a special occasion bottle and a just because bottle. In order to buy myself time I went over to the couch to say hello to Mariah’s brother Blake and his girlfriend (now wife) Stacie. I wanted to pull Mariah away from them for the main attraction, but I didn’t know how. It would have been one thing to have them there in the middle of a giant lawn full of strangers, but I thought it would be off-putting to propose in front of the two of them, and only the two of them. It was a big apartment but the only room that was set apart was the kitchen. I needed to pull Mariah in there somehow.

“Oooh champangne!” said Stacie.

“Just let him open it,” said Blake

“Here, honey,” I said as I tried to reclaim the bottle. “Why don’t you and I grab some glasses.”

Mariah’s eyes were stuck on the label. She was having none of it. “Tell me where it came from.” She was smiling mischievously, obviously hip to my evasion of the prior incarnation of that question.

There was no way she would believe that I stopped to buy it on the way over. The timing made sense but the special occasion/just because split would sink me. My scrambling thoughts landed on a weak answer, but it was better than no answer. “My brother left it in the fridge when he was home last weekend.”

“Well he’s going to want to drink it the next time he’s home. We shouldn’t drink this.”
“That’s weeks from now, baby. I’ll replace it.” Blake and Stacie had been trying not to laugh at us but had given up.

“Hmm” pondered Mariah with genuine concern for my brother and his intentions toward the wine in her hand. Suddenly, I saw my opening. I had to act fast before she officially said either “OK” or “not OK.” I swooped in and grabbed hold of the champagne, spun on my heel and headed into the kitchen. As I had predicted Mariah and her renewed protests trailed right along behind me. Blake and Stacie stayed behind on the couch, rolling with laughter. I held the bottle over the sink and tugged off the cork. I had meant to let it spill over, as an added distraction, but it gushed out a little harder than I had anticipated. “Good Lord!” said Mariah when she saw me, “now you are wasting half of it!” She reclaimed the bottle and wiped it off with a dish towel. When she turned around to give me a disbelieving look, she found me on one knee. Her disbelieving look widened significantly.

✧

Note 1

*I have been thinking about extending your contract…*

*I have slept with you

All night long while

The dark earth spins

With the living and the dead

And on waking suddenly

In the midst of the shadow*
My arm encircled your waist

Neither night nor sleep

Could separate us

-Pablo Naruda

(From one of the many books Mariah bought for me on sale with her employee discount)

I’d rather be your fool nowhere

Than go somewhere and be no one’s

-Drive-by Truckers: Marry Me

Note 2

This ring belonged to my Grandma Betty. It was given to her by my grandfather after a Gypsy fortune teller predicted their meeting and their wedding.

Note 3

I don’t want to walk through life without you next to me.

I love you, Mariah.

Marry Me?

The four of us walked two blocks from the apartment to Nighttown, our favorite restaurant, to celebrate our engagement. The Cheshire grin on Mariah’s face the whole evening erased all traces of the doubt and uncertainty that I had been plunged into once I
heard that the concert was canceled. Blake seemed nearly as giddy and effusive as
Mariah. “Wow, I have a brother now. How cool is that?! Brothers gotta hug!”

Mariah laughed so hard at the thought of me having a breakdown in my driveway
and bruising my palm on the steering wheel that I was concerned for her safety at one
point. “I was wondering why you needed all that time to sulk. It seemed like you were
being such a baby about it.” The only moment which slightly dampened her beaming face
was when she thought about her Dad.

“I thought he would tell your mom,” I pleaded.

“It wasn’t because you thought he might shoot you?”

“No, mostly not.”

“Yeah, he probably would have told my Mom.” She admitted between bites of
halloumi and rice pilaf.

“He totally would have told your Mom,” said Stacie.

“See.”

“But that doesn’t mean my mom would have told me!” Mariah said. All three of
us just stared at her for a moment. “Ok, fine.” She sipped her wine, letting the corners of
her mouth rise back up to their maximal apex. “I’m not saying he would expect you to
ask him before hand, but it would have made him feel good.”

“Forget his permission,” said Blake. “Here’s what you do: Call him up now, tell
him that Mariah said yes, and ask for his Blessing.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Stacie.

“That’s a great idea,” agreed my fiancé.
So that’s what I did. Once we got back to the apartment, Mariah put me on speaker phone with her father. The first time I managed to choke out a request for his blessing and the reason I wanted it, he said, “Sorry Wes, I’m gonna need you to repeat that.” The second time a response was a longer time in coming, eventually he said, “That’s pretty cool, Wes.” Mariah talked to both of her parents for a few minutes. I had heard my phone buzz with a text message a few minutes before, but in the excitement I had ignored it. I slid my phone out of my pocket as she was wrapping up on the phone.

“OH MY GOD!!” I torpedoed up out of my chair. Blake and Stacie looked at me curiously.

“YOU HAVE TO BE KIDDING ME!!” The text I was reading was from my L.A. music manager friend.

Mariah was now standing too, with an eyebrow arched my way. “Ok, I will,” she said into her phone. “Oh we don’t have any idea yet.”

“MARIAH!!”

“Ok. I’ve got to go. Something’s happening. Love you.” She hung up the phone. “What!?"

Of course at dinner I had entertained them all with my idea of how the day was supposed to go, down to the detail of what song I was going to wait to hear before getting down on one knee. I handed the phone with my buddy’s text on it over to my new fiancé. Here is what she saw:

Truckers playing unannounced show in Cleveland tonight!!!

Beachland Tavern, 9PM. GO!!!
“OH MY GOD!!” This was coming from Mariah now. I took a minute to explain to Blake and Stacie what was happening. The Beachland is one of the better rock venues in Cleveland. I had been to dozens of shows there, and Mariah had been to several with me. Like a lot of similar rock clubs, the Beachland is actually two connected venues. The Beachland Ballroom was the place I had taken Mariah to see Drive-by Truckers before, the time her affinity for Marry Me had first started to give me crazy ideas. The Ballroom is big enough for moderately popular bands and can hold a couple of thousand people. The Beachland Tavern is used by up-and-coming independent, and local bands. It has a maximum occupancy of two hundred.

Fluke circumstances (such as their gig at Blossom getting canceled) are the only circumstances under which the Truckers could ever play the Tavern. I found out later that the only way in which the show was announced was with a single photograph on the band’s website. It was of a copy of their official tour schedule. Next to the word venue, Blossom Music Center had been crossed out and replaced with Beachland Tavern. Next to the words “Bus Time” was a message scrawled in sharpie: “When we’re finished raising holy hell!!”

“This is why they’re my favorite band,” I panted as I scrambled to punch in the phone number to the Beachland. The band had decided to work around the part of the plan that was broken to create something no-frills, but ultimately more special. I knew the feeling.

“Did you get them? Are we gonna go?” Mariah asked when she saw me hang up.

“Was there ever any doubt?”
The stage in the Tavern is no higher than your average front stoop. It was easy to read a specific kind of euphoric excitement on the Truckers’ faces, the kind that comes from cleaning the slate and starting from scratch. In one song the music softens after the second chorus and the singer delivers the lyrics like spoken word poetry: “Remember it ain’t too late to take a deep breath and throw yourself into it with everything you got.”

Mariah twirled and stomped passionately at my side, as though for three hours we were living in a loop of that perfect moment we had shared at the Ballroom show two years prior. The Trucker’s played Marry Me seventeenth out of twenty-two songs that night. Mariah had the ring on her finger and waved it wildly over her head the moment they began the opening riff.

Works Cited
Far and Wee

Prologue:

My mother’s father, who died many years before I was born, kept a pet goat when he was a child. My grandfather grew up on a North Carolina farm and attended school in a one-room schoolhouse. I’ve been told, like Mary’s lamb, his pet goat would walk with him in the morning, graze in the schoolyard, and then follow him home in the afternoon. Though I could easily find out, I don’t really know what my grandfather looked like. If ever I do think of him, I tend to land on the image of a dusty scamp leading a goat along a dirt path in the predawn light.

On New Year’s Day 2013, my wife and I found a newborn baby goat in the ocean. We were vacationing on a French Caribbean island we’d been to together several times before. We were just finishing up a hike on the most Eden-like side of the island—a favorite destination for us because of its many sources of natural beauty including a thriving population of wild goats. Every time we had hiked that trail, including this one, we had spotted goats of many colors and sizes dotting the hill above us…where the goats are supposed to stay.

We could hear him before we could see him. He sounded just like a crying baby and filled us both with an indeterminate sense of foreboding while we tried to pinpoint the source of the mournful wail. She spied him first and took off toward it, bouncing around the jagged cliffs at quite a clip in her flat sandals.

“He’s in the ocean!” she shouted. “He’ll drown.”
I hadn’t caught sight of the crying entity just yet. “Who will?”

“That baby goat!”

Once I knew what to look for, it was easier to spot. There was a tiny, light grey goat in the sand and foam at the edge of an ocean that could swallow him up in a blink. Suddenly, I was matching my wife’s reckless route and pace, along the sea cliffs toward the beach. The goat was completely disoriented, wailing at the top of his voice.

Mariah was calling back. “Come here baby goat! Don’t go in the water. No, no; that isn’t good to drink!”

We got to the narrow sandy path leading from the cliffs above to the beach below. Mariah stopped hollering for a minute as I watched her gears turn. Then she began fresh.

“Pas dans l’ocean sil vous plait!”

When the goat caught sight of us he reacted immediately if confusedly. At the same moment he seemed to register both the ocean and us as potential dangers. He took off in a gallop away from the water, but by no means toward us, clear across the beach to the vegetation above. He rested there, trembling and uncertain. He ceased his very humanoid crying.

I thought for a moment that our rescue was successful and complete. Goat had been likely to drown; goat was no longer likely to drown. The goats in this area live wild and happy on the vegetation-covered hills above the ocean. They are one of the attractions that inspire us to walk these hills when we have an opportunity. Staring at the diminutive figure, struggling with his steps, I came to realize that he was not out of the
woods. There was a reason that it had been in trouble in the first place. The kid’s infancy and extreme vulnerability became apparent.

“Tres bien petit. Reste la,” My wife told him. Then she turned toward me, her face contorted in distress. “Where’s his Mommy?”

Nothing makes Mariah happier than wildlife. She’s the girl who will stop the car in the driveway indefinitely to stare at deer in a yard, even though it happens with a lot of the driveways we frequent with a consistency that borders on constant. Our rescue was neither complete nor successful, not yet.

“What should we do?”

I faltered. “He must have gotten lost somehow. Separated from the others up in the hills.” I told her. Although I had no idea how he had gotten there. “Maybe we can lead him back to where the other goats are, and they will take care of him.” My fly by night answer struck us both as plausible, or at least close enough for momentary jazz, something short of outright abandonment. We were both a little spent from the hike, and a little worse for wear following the New Year’s Eve festivities the night before. We both knew my plan meant repeating most of the hike. With our eyes firmly on the goat, we drank some water from our Evian bottle and inched closer to him.

“Maybe he’s thirsty?” asked Mariah. “Yoo hoo, Sebastian, do you want some of this water, little guy?”

“Sebastian?”

“Uh huh.”

“Fair enough.”
“Sebastian, come here baby. We are going to help you find your goat friends.”

When we got within a couple of steps of him, Sebastian started to cry again. He would have tried to run away again, but he wasn’t able to find his footing in the thick vegetation. Once we got within reach of him he stared shaking and urinated, likely out of fear. We could see that indeed he was a boy goat after all. Mariah’s name for him fit.

“Do you think he will let you pick him up?” I whispered.

“I don’t know? What if he tries to bite me?” Mariah feigned. But she was already positioning herself to try to grab him. I could see that she couldn’t stand being perceived as a threat by the helpless and adorable creature. She was willing to risk goat bites in order to win his trust and affection. She was rewarded almost instantaneously. As soon as Sebastian was in Mariah’s arms, and it was clear that we had no immediate plans to eat him, Sebastian calmed immediately and snuggled into Mariah’s sundress for warmth. He made a noise that sounded like purring. I took the cap off of our water bottle and poured some fresh water into it. I conveyed the makeshift cup over to the kid who gulped enthusiastically. He was small enough that the vessel seemed appropriate. He drained several caps full of water then panted adoringly and tried to snack on the bow on the front of Mariah’s dress.

“He smells so wonderful,” Mariah said. “Sebastian, how on earth do you smell so good?”

We both noticed that a piece of what must have been his umbilical cord remained attached to the kid’s belly.
After that New Year’s Day, six months elapsed before Mariah and I happened upon any more goats in our wanderings. The next ones we saw were dotting the greenery around Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota. She and I were on the return leg of a complete cross country road trip, three weeks and two weddings deep. Mount Rushmore was to be the last gasp of our sightseeing, as we were getting increasingly anxious to make it home. It was one of the real highlights of the trip, a gorgeous sunny day that afforded us a chance to move and hike after so many hours in the car over so many days. Plus, in the parking lot, we found all the remaining license plates we needed to hit all 50 states.

We hadn’t any idea that there were goats there, let alone a big heard of over two hundred fluffy white mountain goats. They are all descended from a group of six that escaped from a nearby zoo in the 1800’s. The heard of wild mountain goats keep the grounds around Mount Rushmore in such neat shape with their grazing that the National Parks Service has started employing goats for that purpose at other parks as well. We had been hiking around the monument for maybe twenty minutes or so when Mariah spotted the first one, and yelled, “Sebastian!” It was an all-white adult goat, with a boxier head than the Caribbean goats. It didn’t look anything like Sebastian, but that didn’t matter. All goats were her Sebastian now.
As we retraced our steps over the way we had just been over, it became clear that I had lost Mariah into a universe of maternal instinct, baby talk, and photographs. She had transformed her dress into a kind of cradle. I was left alone with the logistics of the problem. In the abstract, the answer seemed simple enough: *Find other goats.* There were lots of goats on the hike, if we could find some of those goats, we could send Sebastian off to be with them. They would take him. They would have to. He’s a goat! Probably somewhere deep down I was beginning to realize that Sebastian couldn’t just start grazing away with the other goats we saw out here. Even if we put him down right next to them. Sebastian needed mother’s milk. But maybe the goats knew his mother. Maybe they were all trying to find him. Adrenalin and a sense of purpose gave us a second wind.

On this hike that we had taken many times, including once immediately prior, there are always goats to be seen. From the path down by the cliffs, one can see all the way up the uninhabited hillside to the summit several hundred yards away. Very occasionally, there are goats grazing quite nearby the path, and they will remain in your presence unless you make a racket. On most occasions, however (including this one as we already knew), the goats were not down by the path, but quite a distance up the hill, which is steep and covered with thick vegetation. What this meant to us is that there was no way to actually deposit Sebastian in the immediate vicinity of hopefully supportive goats. The best we could hope to do was put him within distance to cry out to them. I fed Sebastian some water out of the cap, and then took him out of Mariah’s arms and down on the path. From there, we could see the goats that were supposed to come find him, but
he could not. I took a couple of steps back down the path pulling Mariah behind me. As soon as Sebastian let out the beginning of his forlorn little cry, I knew that we weren’t leaving him. My plan was a bust. We may as well have left him in the ocean. Mariah, to her credit, said nothing, just picked up the kid and tucked him in to her chest where he commenced gnawing on her bow contentedly. I was hit with the very real possibility that my wife had just accidentally but quite permanently adopted a kid.

“Okay, so what, we just have a goat now? We are taking him back to the hotel?”

“Well? What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know but we can’t keep him!” I was forced to start wondering about the airline regulations for carry-on goats.

“A vet then,” she offered, “they must have one down here.”

“It’s a wild animal.”

“So you want to leave him here?”

“I didn’t say that.” I wanted to be able to say that Mariah was being soft and paranoid; that we were leaving the little animal with a healthy chance and her concerns were unreasonable. That wasn’t true. Leaving him here would have been heartless, and I couldn’t have done it even if I had been on my own. My mind was racing and every card I turned over in my head was a joker. Finally, out of an abyss of absolutely no ideas, a bad idea emerged.

“What if we leave him in that pasture by where we parked?”

“The one with the big cows?”

“Yeah.”
“What if they eat him?”

I stifled a chuckle. “I don’t know what would happen to him, but he definitely won’t be eaten by cows. Cows eat grass. Anyway, he’d be enclosed. He couldn’t wander onto the beach or off a cliff. They probably have water for the animals.” I was just saying words. I didn’t really think we could put the tiny guy down again even if there was a fence around him. But we had to move, and I had no idea what to do. We began to see other hikers at various points on the path coming toward us. I dashed off ahead a bit, in search of advice from strangers.

In Rapid City, South Dakota, a few hours after leaving Mount Rushmore, I had a sudden premonition. It was as if the spectrum of my awareness suddenly widened, like deciphering an adult joke you heard as a child, but that no one would explain, or catching a raised eyebrow meant for someone next to you. Maybe it was my own body chemistry, but I was clued in all of a sudden. And maybe it wasn’t a premonition exactly but an inexplicable awareness of the unseen, as much a realization about the present as the future.

Mariah and I had driven from Cheyenne straight to Mount Rushmore and then spent several hours at the monument and park. It was early evening by the time we were checked into the Holiday Inn in Rapid City, the last in an enormous continuum of hotel/motel stays across the country. The next night would find us crashing with a friend in Chicago. The night after that would finally see us home. We had gotten into the habit of showering evenings instead of mornings, so as to avoid sleeping in the road grime and
midsummer perspiration that would stick to us over the course of the day. In Rapid City, those late showers lead us to hotel sex behind the do-not-disturb sign. I don’t remember any meaningful thoughts during the act or immediately afterwards. Though an hour or so later, we were back in the car en route to a late dinner at T.G.I. Fridays, when a sudden irrepressible notion pulsed through my brain. It felt like I had been awakened from dreaming and needed to reorient myself. I laughed out loud.

“What’s so funny?” asked Mariah.

“What do you think the odds are that I knocked you up back at the motel?”

“Wesley!” Her tone was mockingly reproachful, scandalized. She had a right to be surprised. It was unlike me to bring up the subject of children or pregnancy. We had had those talks before, but she always started them.

“No, really?”

“Slim to none, honey. Too soon.” She said it confidently.

I couldn’t say why exactly, but I thought she was wrong. Mariah had purposefully allowed her birth control to run out less than a week before we left on our road trip. She had been convinced by people she trusted, and in turn convinced me, that her body would need two to three months to adapt to the absence of the oral hormones she had been ingesting for the decade previous. This was still a few days shy of even one month off her pills. Her skepticism should have been warranted easily, but I had this feeling that it was misplaced. I laughed again.

“What now?”

“We could name him Rushmore.”
“Name who Rushmore?”

“The baby.”

“There is no baby.”

“Or one of the President’s names, what about Theodore? Teddy?”

“The baby is a he?”

“Yeah.”

Mariah yawned. “Well I like your enthusiasm anyway. But don’t get too excited. I don’t think there’s any way it could happen this fast.”

I pulled into a parking spot at T.G.I. Friday’s and turned the car off. As we made our way into the restaurant Mariah said, “But I’m vetoing Teddy, just in case.”

Everyone whom we encountered on the way back to the beach was extremely sympathetic towards our little foundling, but nobody had the foggiest idea what could be done about him. As we descended onto the beach where we had found him, I looked back towards the pasture with the cows inside it, and saw beyond it a structure that I had seen many times before, but never really paid much attention. All of a sudden I realized that the unmarked white plaster building beyond those closed off fields must be a farmhouse. Someone had to be tending to the needs of the cows, and if they could do that maybe they knew how to tend to the needs of an orphan goat.

We were exhausted, sweat soaked, sun burnt, and hungry. We had only set aside an hour for this hike, and we were now deep into hour three. Still, we weren’t going to hand Sebastian over to just anyone. Mariah decided to hang back on the path with
Sebastian, while I did some recognizance. I found a gravel driveway that looked like it led toward the structure I had in mind and hurled myself up it, towards the biggest part of the structure madly shouting “Bonjour, bonjour, bonjour!” To my surprise the response was immediate. The old man who emerged was a French islander, a vision of someone who could do for this creature what I wanted to but didn’t know how. It soon became apparent that this French Caribbean farmer spoke no English. My French is mediocre under the best circumstances. At this point I was near manic.

“Bonjour,” I began. The guy gave me a look like, what’s so bonne about it? “Nous travaillons un petit animaux sur la plague,” I said, in my hurry mistaking the verb travailler (to work) for trouver (to find). It went on like that. I had no idea about the word for goat. Finally, by mentioning “la formage chevre” I sparked a look of recognition in the old man.

“Ahhh,” he said. “Un cabris.”

Using mostly gestures at this point I told him that this “petit cabris” had been close to drowning and asked if we could leave it in his care.

“D’accord,” he said mildly.

I whistled for Mariah, and she carried our tiny charge up the path.

“Oh la la,” said the farmer. “Petit! Petit, petit, petit.” He reached out and ran one finger over the fuzz on Sebastian’s crown. Mariah hesitated for only a moment before placing him in the farmer’s thick, tan arms. I remember Sebastian studying his face and eventually nuzzling the old farmer the way he had Mariah.

“Oh la la,” he said again.
We did our best to tell the man that Sebastian was thirsty and probably needed milk. He smiled at the kid and said, “Qui qui, d’accord.”

We patted Sebastian and said our goodbyes. We had only known him a little over two hours but it was hard to leave him. The muggy walk back to the car carried for both of us an odd mixture of triumph and sadness. I have played those moments with the farmer over in my mind many times since. I can’t know for certain, but I sincerely believe that we left Sebastian in compassionate hands.

Earlier on the trip, Mariah and I had become friendly with a young couple who were native to the island and lived nearby our hotel. The next day, we related our Sebastian adventure to them over drinks. Mariah was anxious to find out if they knew who lived in that farmhouse. Yes, they knew them. No, they didn’t think they would eat a baby goat. And, yes, they were pretty sure about that. Our friends became terrifically excited when they realized that the tale we had related to them had taken place on New Year’s Day. They effusively explained a Caribbean superstition. In their culture, finding a baby animal on New Year’s Day meant that the year would bring a baby to the finders. It was like the young couple’s equivalent of catching a bouquet. They both seemed to consider this common knowledge, like kissing at midnight. Although we wanted children eventually, we had only been married a year and a half and hadn’t yet had any kind of discussion about a good time to start trying. A lot changed over the next six months.
Some little germ of what I felt in Rapid City must have touched Mariah as well because a few days after we finally made it back to Ohio she took a pregnancy test. She was supposed to go out for a girl’s night that would involve some heavy drinking. The test was to be a mere precaution. She didn’t tell me when she bought the test. The first I heard of it was when she walked out of the bathroom waving it at me, “How many lines do you see?”

I saw two lines.

The approximate insemination date that the OBGYN gave us at our first appointment was the day after Rapid City, when we had stayed with friends in Chicago and hadn’t had sex. They were only off by a handful of hours. I knew in my heart that our baby was a boy. I felt it at that moment pulling into T.G.I. Fridays and could still feel it. Over the course of Mariah’s pregnancy, whenever anyone asked us what gender we thought the baby would be, I never felt the uncertainty I saw in her expressions. Sebastian, harbinger of our joy and good fortune, was a boy baby, so too would ours be. In the ultrasound room watching the nurse squirt the clear gel onto Mariah’s belly, I was possessed with an overwhelming certainty. If the nurse had said we were having a girl, I would have asked her to check again. She didn’t say that, of course. She said that our baby was a boy, and he is.

Once our son was born, we had to buy a bigger car, and we named the new car Rushmore. Our son we named Finnegan Durham Roj, but many of our friends commonly refer to him by his initials, FDR. Mariah had vetoed Teddy.
The Crows and The Pussycat

1

In the time it took to take one foggy breath “Missing” became a buzzword on campus. It was the word used to introduce the topic that instantly trumped all others. “Missing” was more important than anyone’s sex, drugs, or homework, more important than the midterm grades, or the coming election. No one made jokes, not even the frat boys, not even with each other. In such a tiny, self-contained community, the face Xeroxed on those posters was necessarily familiar. If she wasn’t a friend, she was a friend of a friend. The student body was just that, a body, with some unknown force tampering with one of its systems. Uncool. Nervous, library-quiet conversations began in front of the posters and then spread into every corner of campus.

They were just pieces of white printer paper, eight and a half by eleven, with that icy word, “Missing” in big letters at the top of the page. Under that was a milk-carton-quality picture of smiling girl, a mass of dark hair framing her fair, slightly elfish features. Text underneath her laid out the facts. The girl was Emily Murray, a junior at Kenyon College. She was last seen in the very early hours of November 3rd, working at her job as a waitress at The Pirate’s Cove, a bar (in fact the only bar) on the Kenyon Campus. Friends had contacted campus security the next afternoon after she had broken several engagements and failed to call them. Her car was gone too, a green Subaru, and the poster gave the license number.

On my way to breakfast on the morning of November 4, 2000, only half a semester into my Kenyon education, one of these posters caught my attention, and never
quite let it go. I experienced the empathetic uneasiness that went along with reading the notice, but it was the black and white image of the girl’s face that really gave me a chill. I couldn’t shake that picture from my mind, not for a moment. I was infected with a germ of familiarity. I knew that face. I had seen it before, long before. A memory in the attic of my mind started calling out to me, and it was much more than half a semester old.

2

Kenyon College, as anybody who’s ever been there can tell you, is haunted. It’s part of the tour. It’s part of the reason I wanted to go there. In order to get to class, you have to pass through the Gates of Hell. On an average day, one walks through the Gates of Hell between four and six times a day. Are they the real gates to hell? Sure thing. A hundred yards away from them stands a church, with black scorch marks under all its windows, because once when it caught fire, the flames were called back home. Old Kenyon is haunted. The Shafer Dance Studio is haunted. Caples, the only campus building with an elevator, is really, really, haunted. A student once fell to her death down the open elevator shaft.

Otherwise rational people told stories that kept me up nights. I had a conversation with my friend Megan that fall in which she told me that she “didn’t believe in any of the ghost stories”. Later that day, she checked her voicemail and heard a recording of herself saying it. Talking about ghosts became a part of my day-to-day, and the campus disappearance only served to turn up the volume. Conversations about Emily would turn into conversations about ghosts, and vice versa. Everyone talked about her Halloween costume. I had actually seen Emily wearing her costume, but at the time I was so
intrigued by the get-up that I failed to notice the wearer. Emily had come to the Halloween parties dressed as “Kenyon College”, with little models of every building pinned to a green backdrop. It was an incredible idea and an incredible execution. It was the costume everyone was talking about the next day, which was only four days before she disappeared.

Days passed, without any new information. I couldn’t conceive of the possibility that the story laid out on the posters would have a nasty ending. I thought maybe Emily was depressed and just took off. A lot of people felt that way. Things happen. People don’t always act rationally. Sometimes they feel compelled to break from routine. Friends who knew her well didn’t see it that way. They had raised the alarm quickly; maybe, some suggested, prematurely.

It wasn’t just Emily that vanished. Her car was gone too. That meant, according to sixteen hundred budding logicians on the Kenyon campus, that she had made a decision to drive it somewhere. She wouldn’t be found hanging in her closet, or at the bottom of a ravine. Her car was gone. She had driven it somewhere. There had been a plan, maybe not a responsible plan, but a plan. She was somewhere, and her car was somewhere. Time would sort out the rest. The police can find a car, right? I mean they have people who do that stuff. That sort of vague logic prevailed for a time.

Meanwhile, logic seemed to be failing me completely. I was still stuck pondering the face on the posters. Every time I passed one I ached under the notion that this girl meant something to me, or that I knew more than I thought I did. I tried to rationalize. Of course I’d seen her face before. I probably saw it every day. We were both students at a
liberal arts microcosm in rural Ohio. We slept in rooms less than a quarter mile away from each other and went to classes and meals in the same buildings. Maybe it was just worry that was distorting my perception, the idea that this face on the poster had somehow wandered far astray.

Emily Murray and I had never had a class together, and we weren’t socially acquainted. I was only a first-semester freshman. She was a junior. Certainly, I had passed her in hallways and on the path between buildings, but that was all. That didn’t explain the echo in my mind calling out for some lost memory. Finally, after I had been puzzling over it for more than a week someone mentioned where the “Missing” girl was from.

3

Shaker Heights is a large inner-ring suburb on Cleveland’s East side with a lot of park land, a lake system, large churches, and an above-ground electric train that provides an easy route in and out of the city. Shaker comes from the Shakers, an order of Christian Puritans who once inhabited the area. The Shaker faith called for a vow of celibacy, which helps to explain why the land eventually became available. Heights refers to the fact that the suburb is located on the high ground. From here, all roads into the city wind down one of several steep hills as the topography changes to accommodate enormous Lake Erie.

Shaker has a local reputation as an oasis of privilege and comfort and a national reputation for being a racially and economically diverse community. Although these two pictures of Shaker Heights might at first seem incompatible, there is some truth to both. It
is one of many places in the United States where city dilutes into suburb. Shaker, perhaps more deftly than other such locations, preserves the best parts of both. Many of Cleveland’s cultural attractions, such as the Museum District and the Cleveland Playhouse, are closer to the Heights than they are to parts of the city proper. Any downtown job is an easy commute.

These advantages help make Shaker among the most favorable places in Ohio to raise a family. More new parents purchase homes here every year, and the ones that were raised here stay put. The blocks serve as social networks for school-age children. They congregate in front yards and perambulate on bicycles. Shaker kids may be privileged, but they aren’t sheltered. This is no longer the land of the celibate Shakers; it is the Eastern edge of a city in a tough economic climate. Burglaries and carjackings are not uncommon here. Violent crime is rare, but not unheard of. Commuter traffic is heavy in the mornings and evenings. As kids growing up in Shaker, Emily and I learned to always look both ways.

Once I had found out where Emily was from, I was sure that I knew her from Shaker, but where? I would find myself tuning out lectures in class so I could think about different places I could have met her. I had friends at Shaker High but she wasn’t one of them. I thought about a Kenyon admissions event I had attended just a few months before at the Nature Center in Shaker. I had talked to a lot of people that night. I couldn’t let it rest. Deeper came a call from recesses of my memory. It’s something deeper. It was bigger than that. It’s almost as if we were…
It was like I was at a fair swinging the giant hammer at a target in my brain. I
clocked it dead on, and the little ball shot all the way up the meter. Sirens and flashers
went off in my brain. “Ding-A-Dong.”

I had known Emily, just Emily, no last name. When you are twelve years old you
don’t use last names, but it was the same girl, just older now and missing. It was amazing
how little her face had changed in eight years. In another life it seemed, I had been “The
Owl.” Emily had been “The Pussycat.”

4

Maybe, maaaaybe, she had killed herself. Before students left for Thanksgiving,
many had mulled this possibility and a few had voiced it. There was a little bit of loose
talk about a history of depression and a rough ride in Emily’s previous semester.
Certainly there was precedent for depression problems here, including some that ended
badly. Kenyon was so small. The effect could be isolating at times.

Maybe it was a suicide, but I still believed she was alive. Even after two full
weeks of fruitless searching by police. Even after the FBI had showed up on campus. I
thought she would come back. The place was so magical to me. It was where the counter-
culture from our home towns and high schools graduated into the dominate culture. I was
constantly in motion, new to a world with no boredom. The campus still had no good cell
phone coverage. The easiest way to find somebody was to go out looking for them, and if
you didn’t find them you were sure to find someone. It was like walking around a giant
board game.
The friends I made all seemed expert in making their own fun. We’d pack seven or eight kids in a car to drive out to an old railroad trestle just to spend a couple hours jumping off of it into the river beneath, or we’d drag a homemade street luge out to the hill by the playing fields where the road was freshly paved. We’d play strip Jenga, or take a bag of mushrooms to a midnight movie premiere. My classes were so much better than anything I had in high school that I was never tempted to miss them, even given the very unpredictable evening hours. Thanksgiving break at Kenyon is a full week off, and I was already having trouble with the idea of that much time away. I couldn’t imagine someone would leave it behind for good.

Campus life grew around the mystery. Emily was not quite forgotten, just pushed onto a back burner. A student might go for days without thinking of her, then remember her abruptly in a vulnerable moment. Many of us were less informed about the minimal developments in the case than our parents following it in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the Columbus Dispatch, or the Toledo Blade. Our knowledge traveled on the breeze. It came from rumor, a very few official school e-mails (all sent from the same mysterious sounding username: fortnight@kenyon.edu), and those “Missing” signs, that, like any other sign, began to blend with the scenery. There was so much to do, so little time to wonder. If I thought at all about Emily over the Thanksgiving holiday it was to affirm that surely the mystery had come to an end. We would all be presented with a satisfactory explanation upon our return.
The Cleveland Playhouse, is America’s oldest regional theater. When I was growing up The Playhouse was a one-block oasis in Cleveland’s Midtown District, an area that was otherwise dilapidated and dangerous. It was housed in an architecturally distinctive red brick complex that was long ago converted from a department store. In recent years the Midtown District of Cleveland has been the target of a serious revitalization project, owing largely to The Cleveland Clinic, one of America’s leading hospital systems, which is quickly enveloping the area. In 2010, the Cleveland Clinic Foundation purchased the property that was at that time the home of the Cleveland Playhouse. The Playhouse is scheduled to move into a newly renovated theater Downtown that The Clinic is paying for in addition to covering several years of the theatre’s operating budget. It is a good deal for the Playhouse organization, but I can’t help but feel saddened by the fact that the building which served as my church in childhood now sits empty.

Curtain Pullers is an acting school for children run by The Cleveland Playhouse. The program began in 1933. Paul Newman started his acting career as a Curtain Puller before being accepted to Kenyon College and acting there. Curtain Puller classes are taught by company actors on Saturdays and in the summers. The program draws students from all over the east side including many, like me, from Shaker Heights.

I started attending Curtain Pullers classes when I was five years old and the Playhouse quickly became a second home for me. I was captivated by the labyrinthine building, the characters both onstage and off, and the anticipatory quiet of an empty
stage. For several years, I couldn’t conceive of spending my free time any other way. I
got involved in the children’s productions, and after a while I was cast in some of the
professional productions also. This is where I first learned about ghost lights and how to
use them.

The other Curtain Pullers came and went for the most part. There were a few
other old hands like me, but the classes were mostly made up of kids with lots of hobbies
looking to try something new. Over the years I rotated in and out of dozen different
workshops, past hundreds of different faces, most of which are long forgotten. The
summer programs, like the main stage plays, were a little more intensive. I was with my
classmates every day, not just once a week, and the workshops culminated with an actual
performance. Being onstage together brought us closer than merely being in class
together.

I was eleven when I entered the last summer program that I spent as a Curtain
Puller. Because of my experience, I had gotten used to being one of the younger actors in
every group. There were about two female curtain pullers for every male. I hadn’t noticed
it before, but I was waking up to it. Girls, especially girls a year or two older than me,
were a new source of excitement, a play within a play.

The instructors of the summer program had written a script based on the nonsense
literature of Edward Lear, a poet and children’s author most famous for his story “The
Owl and The Pussycat”. The play was clever and cute. It employed many of Lear’s
poems and beloved characters, all woven together within the frame of a fantasy adventure
about a girl lost in an attic. The climax of the production involved a complicated
romance between The Owl, me, and The Pussycat, an adorable girl with curly red hair and freckles. Within hours I developed a feverish crush on my costar that would last the whole summer. Her name, of course, was Emily.

I remember her in costume, a navy blue dress with white polka dots, red ribbons in her hair, the same Mona Lisa-like half smile that would be printed on posters years later. I have no idea what my costume was. I was only looking at her. I remember talking about her with the other boys in the play, mostly older with crushes of their own. I remember thinking I should say something. I remember saying nothing.

The lights came up on an empty stage. There were miscellaneous pieces of prop furniture and black boxes set minimally to resemble an attic. If someone in the audience strained their ears they might have made out the hum of a tuning fork. Then a dozen children’s voices offered up the grace for an imaginary meal that was the starting point for the scenario that was about to unfold on stage. The idea was that all of the children in a large family share a tradition of playing hide-and-seek every year after the family dinner. The heroine discovers a fantasy realm in the creepy old attic while hiding up there from her siblings and cousins. That’s where she meets The Owl and The Pussycat.

Deep in storage at my parent’s house, alongside old report cards and play programs, I miraculously unearthed a dusty yellow folder containing the script of the play. Our names were typed into the script by the instructors, first names only. This was one of my favorite parts. Emily, fawning would bat her eyelashes. She had really long eyelashes.
WES

I have no idea. By the looks of her, she might be one of those crazy Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo types… Now where was I?

EMILY

You were telling me how lovely I am.

WES

Oh yes, now I remember. (starts to sing)
DING–A-DONG, DING-A-DONG, I’LL SING A SONG. WHAT A LOVELY PUSSY YOU ARE MY LOVE.

The Owl and the Pussycat want to marry, but they cannot. They are missing the wedding rings. All the characters in the world of nonsense are missing something. The Dong with luminous nose is missing his Jumbly girl, the table is missing the chair and so on. These characters implore the lost girl to set their world right again. It is up to her to scale the Runcible Wall and confront the Evil Mr. Discobbolbos who has taken these characters prisoner. Discobbolbos is intent on destroying the world that has cast him in exile. For a moment it seems that the peril is too great, the evil is too strong, and the world is too disordered ever to be set right again. It seems that the girl will never find her way back to the attic.

And then she wakes up.

7

We came back to school laden with Christmas decorations. We helped each other decorate our dorm rooms. We laughed and talked about our breaks. We shared leftovers. We walked into the dining halls the next morning. “Missing” posters still covered the
doorjambs and bulletin boards. Some were beginning to show signs of wear. Those held up by thumbtacks in the center were now curling from the edges. There was no explanation, no break in the case, and no phone call to her parents on Thanksgiving. “Missing” didn’t seem like the right word anymore.

Just a few days later, in the dregs of November, I auditioned for a production of *The Mouse Trap* by Agatha Christie and was cast in the part of Christopher Wren. The audition announcements hung side by side with the Xeroxed pictures of Emily’s face. We talked about it at rehearsal sometimes.

There was a ballroom dance club that met in the theater after dinner, so we were often unable to rehearse until nine or ten o’clock at night, sometimes finishing after midnight. The walk back to our respective rooms could be unsettling. Any solitary walks outside started to seem unpleasant. Whenever I found myself alone on a dark path at Kenyon, I could be certain that Emily would spring to mind. Freshman were asked to park in a reserve lot at the bottom of the hill. I remember cold nights coming back from town and parking there. My step would quicken as I wondered to myself how long it might take me to reach the pale blue light that indicated an emergency telephone in the distance.

*The Mousetrap* is a drawing-room mystery, and the longest running play in history. For actors, revealing whodunit is a mortal sin on the level of uttering the name of *the Scottish play*, and one I have no intention of committing. What you do need to know is that over the course of the action in *The Mousetrap*, the murder of a woman occurs
onstage in blackout. That murdered woman, Mrs. Boyle, was played by a junior named Emily Askin.

Askin was among the first upperclassmen at Kenyon that I got to know well. She was a good looking girl, if a bit full figured, but it seemed to me that a smaller body would have been unable to contain so much personality. She was stylish for Kenyon, and fun, but she had a hard edge to her, which suited the overbearing character she now portrayed on stage. Askin had natural confidence, which I was beginning to learn was the one characteristic that made college life so much easier. I was still developing adult confidence, and I did that in part by studying hers. She never asked permission, never looked over her shoulders. These were tricks I wanted to learn.

Among members of the cast, Emily Askin knew Emily Murray best. They had lived on the same hall in each of the previous two years. They were friends. Whenever Emily Murray came up in conversation Askin would quietly remove herself. This was incongruous behavior for her. Eventually we all took the hint. We left the outside mystery outside, and plunged into the mystery we were creating onstage. Night after night, Emily Askin would scream in terror and slump to the floor. If she ever thought twice about it, she didn’t let on.

On December tenth, 2000, an email from fortnight@kenyon.edu quietly appeared in everyone’s inbox. Emily Murray’s body had been discovered by police the previous day in the mobile home of Gregory McKnight, a kitchen employee at The Pirate’s Cove where Emily had worked. McKnight and his wife Kathryn were taken into custody and
charged with receiving stolen property, Emily’s car. That was it. Emily was dead, murdered. There had been a murderer walking among us, and he’d been caught.

It had gotten seriously cold on campus. Everyone could feel finals breathing down their necks. The resolution didn’t send the same ripple of excitement through the community that the mystery had. There were a thousand questions to be asked. Nobody seemed to want to ask them. That first day felt like the disorienting and incredulous moment that follows being hit hard in the face. Someone went around campus collecting the few remaining “Missing” posters.

The cast of “The Mousetrap” had started memorizing lines. A set was conceived and was in the beginning stages of construction. We all got the email from fortnight early in the morning. At nine o’clock when we showed up for rehearsal it was still sitting like a brick in our stomachs. Welcoming what we thought might be a diversion, we started to run through the play.

The scene was supposed to go like this: The suspects, the proprietor and guests of a newly opened boarding house are scattered in various locations offstage leaving a blank set with a single lit lamp and an old fashioned radio playing music. Then crotchety old Mrs. Boyle, Emily Askin’s character, reenters the scene. Finding the music on the radio distasteful, she turns the dial through the stations until it comes to rest on a male voice delivering the following speech: “To understand what I may term as the mechanics of fear, you have to study the precise effect produced on the human mind. Imagine, for
instance that you are alone in a room. It is the late afternoon. A door opens softly behind you.”

We didn’t have a recording of the speech yet, just Gil, the director, reading it out of the script. Once Askin had tuned the radio, she was supposed to turn back out to the audience and walk to a magazine rack. She didn’t do this on the night of December tenth. She stayed with her back to us facing the radio. Someone in the crew whistled the tune for three blind mice, the cue for Emily’s line. She didn’t give it. Emily was supposed to give a line. Then a gloved hand was supposed to throw the light switch. There was supposed to have been complete darkness, even the stage manager’s reading light would have been temporarily extinguished. Emily was supposed to scream and struggle around with herself as though someone else was there, and then fall in a heap. None of this happened. Emily was shaking. “I need to stop,” she said “Leave the lights up. I need to stop.”

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Over the next few days a picture of Emily’s abduction and murder at the hands of her coworker, Greg McKnight, came partially into focus. She had been shot once through the top of the head at point blank range. Her body had been rolled up in a carpet and hidden in the closet of a mobile home, which belonged to the McKnights. They hadn’t been living there; Greg and his wife Kathryn had been living with Kathryn’s ailing mother in the tiny town of Gambier, home to Kenyon College. Police had obtained a search warrant for the trailer after they went there to serve McKnight with some court documents about some unrelated matter and discovered Emily’s car in the trailer park.
Details, including the motive for the attack were not immediately forthcoming. McKnight had not, and never did, confess to the kidnapping and murder. Another email informed us that Emily was found in the clothing she had been wearing on her last shift at the bar. In spite of the clothing, most still assumed a sexual motive. Without McKnight’s testimony many details surrounding the abduction remained blurred. McKnight had been closing up The Cove’s kitchen while Emily stacked chairs in the bar. Only he knows exactly what happened from there. Emily had filed notice with her job, and the night she was taken was to be her last shift in any case. This suggests that the crime was at least somewhat premeditated. McKnight had acted on his last opportunity.

Nobody seemed to know much about Gregory McKnight. In fact, among students the name hardly rang any bells at all. “The black guy at The Cove” was the phrase that got everybody on the same page. “They found Emily. That black guy at The Cove killed her.” Everyone knew who you meant. Unlike Shaker Heights, Kenyon and the communities surrounding it are not known for racial diversity. There were black students of course, and a few black professors. McKnight seemed to be the only black townie. It probably wasn’t racism that prevented students from learning his name, more like elitism. Most townies had handles like that, “the bushy-haired lady at the market” or “the raspy-voiced guy who works in the kitchen.” They seemed like part of the backdrop, rarely noticed.

Prior to the discovery of Emily’s car near his home, no one had suspected McKnight. He had been hiding in plain sight, displaying concern, and covering shifts at the bar to make up for Emily’s absence. Young women shuddered to think that they had
opened their doors to the perpetrator to take in a late night pizza delivery. The Cove quietly and indefinitely closed its doors upsetting the systems of the campus a bit.

It was news that no one wanted, the worst possible outcome. At different times over the course of the five weeks that separated Emily’s murder from her discovery, everyone’s optimism and naïveté had soured. There was a heavy sadness on campus, but it was tempered somewhat with the relief that accompanies a sound resolution. It was terrible yes, but it made sense. Someone evil had reached out and extinguished someone good. The police had caught him. He wouldn’t be able to do it again. The autumn leaves along Kenyon’s Middle Path had fallen and been replaced by strings of white Christmas lights that made even the darkest, coldest walks seem heavenly. For many the worst possible outcome, seemed preferable to no outcome at all.

By the time students and faculty left Kenyon once again for winter break Gregory McKnight had been charged with two murders. Besides Emily’s, there was also the murder of a man, Gregory Julius, whose remains had been discovered buried under the trailer. Julius had been one of McKnight’s only close friends, and the motive for his murder was perhaps even less clear than the motive for Emily’s. McKnight has never offered an explanation for either killing. This means that the details of Emily’s final hours, the events that transpired on the drive from campus to the trailer park, Emily’s time of death, remain unknown. To most of the students this ambiguity came as a blessing. In conversations following Emily’s discovery the same conclusion was usually
reached: “My god, she must have been so scared.” That was enough. That seemed like the right place to leave it.

In the absence of another explanation, most agreed that Emily’s murder had simply been a crime of opportunity. She was kidnapped and killed because she was a pretty girl alone, at night, getting into her car. Was she selected as a target or merely the victim of that circumstance? That question nagged for a while, but by the time the weather had warmed the students went right back to the common practice of leaving the doors to their dorm rooms unlocked. The outside doors the dormitories had no locks, and while this had seemed like a nearly negligent oversight in the late fall, by early spring it seemed to rightly represent the easy-going campus culture.

Months later the Gregory McKnight court case gained national coverage when the county, faced with the expensive prospect of a death penalty trial, plead poverty and moved to take the death penalty off the table. The court case that ensued was looped into the national news cycle, and for a couple of days that same familiar picture of Emily Murray occasionally showed up on CNN, over the caption “Victim.” The county’s motion was eventually overturned. Gregory McKnight is now on Ohio’s death row.

A foil is a theatrical and literary term that is used when one character highlights the attributes or behavior of another through the use of contrast. The word is derived from the foiling of gemstones in which gems are places in front of a sheet of dark metal so that they shine more brightly in contrast. I’m sure that at one time or another every student who lived through the events of that autumn has felt Emily’s reflection on them.
Eventually, Emily will become another chapter in Kenyon’s haunted lore. The campus itself is a foil for Emily, and we all remember how well she wore it. I am one of a minority of Kenyon graduates who made it through without seeing a ghost, but that does not include the hundreds of times I walked past Emily Murray’s black and white image on doors and store windows after she was already dead. It is hard not to be haunted by her a little bit.

In developing this essay, I was stuck with one nagging problem. I know that the girl I knew from a summer theater program was the same young woman who disappeared from my college. I am certain of it, but though I have tried, I cannot prove it. The Cleveland Playhouse actually employs an archivist, but they don’t have much on Curtain Pullers generally and certainly not the registration of individual classes. The script I found has no last names on it. Although we lived in the same town we went to different schools, and I don’t know of anybody from Shaker who knew Emily Murray when she was twelve. I went so far as to track down a home phone number for Emily’s parents through a neighbor who knows them. I could never go through with making the call, running the risk of disrupting their grief with what to them would seem like trivia.

As I was beginning to develop the ideas in this essay, the Cleveland Clinic officially took possession of The Cleveland Playhouse building. The Clinic allowed them to run to the end of their season as they were getting the new space Downtown in order.

I’m ashamed to say it, but hadn’t been to see a show in that building since before graduating college, nearly seven years. My bride to be had never seen a play there, and opportunities were winding down. Actually walking through those doors and scanning all
the hallways I had walked and the houses I had sat in suddenly seemed like something I needed to do. Coincidentally the Horton Foote play that I purchased tickets to was going up in the Drury Theater. That was the stage on which The Owl and The Pussycat had once come to life. I was excited to be taking my future wife back into a part of my personal history. I was excited to be going back into that history myself.

There was also some small part of me that wondered if getting into that room would help me affirm with certainty that the girl in the whiskers and the woman on the posters were absolutely the same Emily. This was the place where I had learned so much about intuition, recognition, and superstition. Was it possible that the room would just hold some feeling for me?

As it turns out I didn’t have to wait to get into the room. As my fiance and I walked from our parked car towards the front entrance of the building I had walked through so many times as a child, a small figure came toward us from around the back of the building. The small figure, dark coat on top, white underbelly muzzle and paws, ambled to a halt in front of the entrance, maybe fifteen yards from where we had both stopped dead in our tracks. We were between two major avenues in Midtown Cleveland, not a place one expects to see strays, if this even was a stray. In all my days walking in and out of that building as a child I had never seen a cat before, except onstage, played by Emily. One of many old theatrical superstitions contends that cats hanging around the theater is good luck, but that luck will be reversed if it is allowed to cross the stage. This cat meowed conversationally, and then tilted its head sideways. The curious look it used to take us in was a look of kindness.
In August 2001, nine months after Emily’s death, the students returned to Kenyon to find that a dozen or so life sized statues of crows had taken up permanent residence on campus. Specifically, they appeared on the rooftop of Ransom hall, Kenyon’s administration building and the namesake of renowned poet and Kenyon alumnus John Crowe Ransom. There’s no such thing as a flock of crows technically. A group of crows is properly referred to as a murder of crows. Though the term persists we have lost the etymological reasoning behind it. It’s a mystery, and yet it just feels right. A murder, but not violent kind, on top of Ransom, but not the kind you pay for a kidnapping, like little foils for the poet, the trickster, the scavenger, the nevermore. There’s no shortage of ways to look at a blackbird.

The crows fit so perfectly into the landscape that everyone quickly forgot a time when they weren’t there. Prospective students, getting their first taste of the atmosphere would all enter beneath them, some would notice and smile, some would be too preoccupied for whimsy. Whenever I noticed them they made me think of Christopher Wren, my character in The Mousetrap. They also made me think about Emily.

It is said that crows have funerals. It is one of the behaviors that makes them suspect in the human eye. When one crow falls, the rest of the murder sit together perched in a tree nearby. They sit in silence for a few minutes, and then take off as one being without making a sound. It is the silence that makes the behavior stand out.
I walk onto the ground floor of The Cleveland Clinic’s enormous pyramidal shaped medical center, a bustling panorama of lab coats, elevators, wheelchairs, and clipboards. The laboratory on this floor is divided into two sides of unequal proportion. I’m no stranger to the bigger, busier part of the lab. Patients scarcely have time to take a seat before members of a team of efficient phlebotomists have ushered them back into a cubical, placed stress balls in their hands and rubber tourniquets around their biceps.

“You’re going to feel a quick pinch now, ok?”

The smell of sterile isopropyl alcohol wipes is so ubiquitous that I can make it out at the next desk where I’m checking into the often-unnoticed second laboratory desk. There is elevator music playing softly over the entire area.

The second laboratory is the everything-but laboratory: everything but blood. I have checked in on this lonely desk once, years ago. I had to submit to a simple urine screen for illegal drugs in order to take a summer internship as a glorified candy stripers. There are four pasty phlebotomists milling around. It is a comic coincidence that many of the regular staffers there have thick Eastern European accents, Hungarian maybe. Cleveland has a large Hungarian district. The result is that there is a fair to middling chance that whoever sucks your blood on a particular visit, sounds just like Dracula: “Vitch arm vojul you like me to use?” The second laboratory is managed by one petite and wide-eyed nurse, Draculette. She locates the order for my test in the hospital computer. Her face is all business. I can see her confirming her sincerity of facial
expression by way of her reflection on the monitor. “Have you been here before? I mean
for this?”

“First time.”

“Ok. No problem. The doctor is going to want to meet you though, and he stepped
away for a short meeting.”

“He needs to meet me?” I want to talk to a few people as I can get away with.

“Just to go over a couple of things. Cost for one, there are a few different options.
I’ll tell you what: There are a couple of forms to fill out.” She hands me a clipboard.

“Why don’t you go through these? If the doctor isn’t back in the next few minutes I will
take you back and you can meet him afterward.”

I take the clipboard and droop into one of the six empty chairs. Through an open
door I can see her working down the hall. She peels two labels off of a page. She presses
one of the labels onto a clear plastic cup with a blue lid, the size of an individual
container of yogurt. The other she presses neatly onto the outside of a brown paper bag,
the kind alcoholics use in order to duck open container laws. *Time to prepare the cum
receptacle, I think to myself. All in a day’s work, before clearing the day-old piss out of
the mini-fridge and after running the cheek swabs one by one through the centrifuge. The
cum cups aren’t going to label themselves.*

The last question on my clipboard is designated “optional” and it is very tactfully
worded, something like “What is the intended purpose of archiving your biological
material?” *What are you doing here? Why are you banking your sperm with us today? I
begin my answer with the same words that my surgeon had used a couple months ago
when he first broached the subject, “Just in case…” He had also said the words ”minimal risk” but he said them several times. Every time I heard that word “minimal” its meaning diluted in my mind. “The risk exists, but it is really minimal. I always prefer to cut a little bigger and risk a little more bleeding. I want to keep well away from those nerves.”

“You can risk a lot more bleeding as far as I’m concerned,” I had said.

He had a thick Australian accent. “Yo jowking.” He had smiled then. “But yo not wrong. I can transfuse blood but I can’t transfuse yo sex nerves unfowtunately.”

That question is still staring back at me from the clipboard. “Just in case…”

*Just in case... I want to be a parent five years from now, but I am rendered sterile and impotent a week from Monday.*

*Just in case... I have to tell my new girlfriend that I don’t know how this works and that I know she might vanish, but because she is kind and caring and because I so badly need kindness and care, could she please not vanish right away. Just in case I can’t carry it all at once. Just in case I’ve been building too close to the ocean.*

*Just in case... I don’t understand romantic love or carnal lust in the same way I used to. Just in case I’ve received my last blowjob at twenty-seven. Just in case the erogenous zone in the rectum that I have heard about is attached to my diseased colon and on its way out: hazardous waste. Just in case the art of making love, the cordial exploratory sex at the end of a date, the mischievous misleading fucks against the picture windows in hotel rooms, are all over for me.*
Just in case... the compassionate and courageous team of operatives with a plan
to breach my wall and attempt a high stakes rescue don’t succeed. Just in case there are
casualties.

Just in case my colon: that part of me that is already dead: that funereal organ:
that nasty incident of suicide by cop: takes out its hostages.

Just in case... my sexuality and potency die on the table. Just in case I learn to
live like that. Just in case bringing a life into the world becomes a way to walk away from
my losses.

Just in case... I die on the table. Just in case bringing a life into the world
becomes a way for my family to walk away from their losses.

Just in case... this is the last time I ever beat off.

“Just in case...” I stop writing. I’m suddenly unsure if I can even go through
with it. I am overwhelmed by an urge to get up and walk out. I don’t accept the premise
all of a sudden. I reject a future that requires this ghastly errand of me. My mind is able to
absorb what I am doing here, but my body rejects it. My body will not allow me to bet
against it.

I mark a sudden and violent X through those words, “just in case.” I scribble
through the letters in little circles until the characters are indistinguishable. Then I
scribble some more. I’ve been here before. This is the place where the only way through
the next hour is to become someone else, a different person, a person in straits less dire.

I’m an investigative journalist trying to pin down a story about a dangerous outfit
of cum smugglers.
I’m an eccentric millionaire with the dream of fathering a child in the year 3000, at 12:01 am on January 1, if advanced technology makes this safely possible as I predict it will.

I’m a collector of obscure and unusual pornography. I routinely pillage hospitals and fertility labs of their collections. The human interest angle makes property stamped magazines and DVDs valuable at auction.

These divorces from the myself are not uncommon. They can be triggered by the visually gory, the physically painful, and in moments like this one, the suddenly fearful. Then it’s best if the darkness is visited on someone who isn’t me, a whipping boy, or lab partner. The person behind me in line, that shadow, he’s the one in jail, I’m just visiting. I could certainly see how he might be equal to a prolonged fit of public crying, poor guy, but I’ve got to get on with my exposé. I’m working on a deadline.

The research matters. The time capsule that I’m leaving today in a cup with a blue cap, can take a number behind a thousand other pieces of myself buried, hidden, made up, drugged, disguised. They were kept out of the reach of unassailable moments, but rarely unearthed once the danger has passed. They can stay frozen forever.

I bring the clipboard back up to that short sleepy-eyed nurse at the laboratory assistant desk. The last question on the form is answered only in scratch marks and scribbles. The nurse pulls out the brown paper bag with the label on it. She hands it to me. I turn it the bag in my hand so I can’t see the label. The nurse moves from behind the desk into the doorway beyond.

“Follow me.”
The Joker and the Thief of the Night

My dashboard clock reads 11:37 as I cross Southington Road, heading west on Shaker Boulevard. I steal a quick look at the brick and stucco house that I lived in for my first eleven years as it passes on the passenger side. It is 11:37 p.m. on the evening of July 20th, 2012. I’ve got my convertible top open and my left arm is hanging off the car letting the summer night rush over my fingers.

Most of the parking lot is loosely reserved for a small chain grocery, so it becomes habit to head right to the back of the lot when going to the movies. The car next to me unloads four teenage kids and a mushroom cloud of kind-smelling dope smoke. One of the kids eyeballs me nervously, which makes me laugh out loud. He looks very relieved, smiles politely. Halfway into the theater I can still make out that forgotten scent in the air.

The line for tickets is filled with duos and trios of high school and college-aged kids, most slightly on the nerdy side. A lot of people recognize each other and dive into quick cross-lobby conversations. The six-theater cinema is using all six for this midnight premiere. Four of the six are sold out before I get my ticket.

I pick up a copy of Cleveland’s free weekly magazine from a pile, the better to reserve my seat with. The theater I’m directed to is wider than it is deep. The really good real estate is toward the back. The very back row has only three seats on one side. One of them is occupied by a woman, who like me, is in her early thirties. “How’s it going? Are you saving these seats?”

“Just this one. The one on the end is free.”
I put my magazine down on the outside chair and ask her to run interference while I brave the thickening line for concessions.

“I got you, honey.”

I grew up coming to this movie theater, The Colony on Shaker Square, in Cleveland Ohio. The Colony isn’t attached to a mall. Its marquis is of the old style, red, medium sized, nothing like the glowing neon of the colossal Richmond Hts. or Valley View theaters in surrounding suburbs. Its lobby is undersized by the modern standard, with wide staircases up to theaters on the wings. The bathrooms are the originals, down more wide, winding staircases to the basement, where the same faded mural has been on the wall since I was an infant. The Colony is intimate. It is one of those few places in America where it’s ok to talk to strangers. It is run by a local company that eschews a few of the more conspicuous evils of larger theater chains. The theater serves a racially diverse neighborhood and is also accessible by the rapid or electric train, which means that kids too young to drive can go to movies here. The popcorn line is buzzing with a heavy sense of community and good company, and in the middle of it there is a disaster of a date.

Critical reception to *The Dark Knight Rises* proceeded its theatrical release by some distance. Like me, most critics got a chance to see it before it was associated with a mass murder. Most of them found the film to be really good, but not quite great, four and a half stars, an A-. That’s fair. Taken on its own, the movie has certain flaws. In achieving complexity Christopher and his brother and writing partner Jonathan Nolan,
have perhaps included one too many characters, one too many twists. As the series demonstrates, it’s not always easy to negotiate the needs of both you and your alter ego.

In my opinion *The Dark Knight Rises* is the best of Nolan’s three Batman movies, but I understand why many people disagree. It deserves the benefit of time and repeated viewings, time that will sever it from association from a national epidemic of spree shootings, and repeated viewings to demonstrate what it brings to the trilogy.

Critical opinions were informed by a context that takes into account the first two Christopher Nolan Batman visions. The second film in the series, *The Dark Knight*, had seemed that rarest of cinematic creatures: a hugely popular summer box office release that is also a film worthy of critical attention and acclaim. It was also a sequel that was roundly considered to surpass its predecessor. This too defies the conventional wisdom of trilogies: third movie bails out disappointing second movie. Months later it won Heath Leger a posthumous Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his portrayal of The Joker, another rarity for a blockbuster franchise.

Most critics went into their screenings thinking that in spite of its title, *The Dark Knight Rises* could never actually rise to the level of its predecessor. In some ways that is a self-fulfilling prophecy, and in others, Christopher Nolan managed to throw the prophecy over. Nolan doesn’t allow the supporting cast, Michal Caine’s Alfred, and Gary Oldman’s Commissioner Gordon, to rest easy in their roles as reliable and morally sound sidekicks. He complicates them, and in doing so gets the best out of two of the finest actors alive, but he also shakes Batman’s foundation. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman faced an ingeniously evil mastermind. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce Wayne, who was never
as cool as Batman, who was always a bit of an entitled prig, faces an ingeniously evil mastermind, but he isn’t ready. His armor isn’t intact.

The guy on the date has more forcibly expelled himself than let himself go. He has Teva sandals on, the first I’ve seen this decade. Imagine that somebody forgot that it was Halloween and decided at the last minute to go as The Comic Book Guy from The Simpsons, and you might not have realized who he was supposed to be, but he’s going around the party and doing the Comic Book Guy voice. That’s Romeo. Juliet looks like your average assistant stage manager, except she’s got on a long beige skirt with her black tee-shirt. She’s at least trying to fill the role of “girl on date” in the Sartrean sense. Romeo not so much. He is audibly concerned about the rate at which they are approaching popcorn in relationship to the start time of the movie, which is stupid because half the theater is out here. The buzz recedes a little as more and more patrons, in line behind the daters, start eavesdropping.

Romeo is monologue-ing in the style of an arch-villain. “Really though, it doesn’t matter if it starts on time or not.” This bit of reverse psychology is aimed at Juliet who shrugs. “I’m expecting this movie to be pretty mediocre.”

So why are you here in the middle of the night then, says everyone silently including Juliet. He waits a split second for her to ask for clarification, which she doesn’t do to her credit. He goes on as though she had. Her face falls a bit.

“Yeah, it will probably be pretty mediocre because after all it is based on a pretty mediocre series of comics. I mean I loved them when I was twelve and all. Loved them
so well…” Then there is a creepy pause, but it won’t last long. Juliet wisely decides to pipe up.

“Actually I’ve tried to keep myself in the dark about it. I’m trying not to spoil it for myself.”

Amazingly, Romeo hears this last comment as *Please continue. I’d love to share in some of your considerable comic book-derived knowledge*. Instead of, *Why are you still talking? Shut up.*

“So basically Bane is a professional wrestler who kills Batman, and he has to wear a mask because…”

But now Juliet has had enough. You can almost see her deciding not to pick up her phone the next time this guy calls. “Why are you still talking? Shut up.” She says it just loud enough for the little audience behind them.

A teenage black girl behind me makes the teenage black girl noise for *you just got told* and everyone laughs out loud. Romeo might not be really happy with the girl behind him in line who hooted, but he has to accept that it was within bounds. The characters on screen are shortly in for the same reception. This is not a crowd that silently evaluates. This is a crowd that responds.

Unlike The Joker, the villain of *The Dark Knight Rises* isn’t an anarchist. Bane believes in social order, an inverted social order with him on top. His series of escalating and elaborate crimes are all designed to spark a dystopian reign-of-terror in Gotham. This sentiment of revolutionary populism allows Bane to rule in the daylight instead of the
shadows, and it also gives Bruce Wayne some distance to travel in order to find allies. Bane’s Gotham is a bad environment for an aristocrat. *The Dark Knight Rises* has no single tour de force performance like Ledger’s Joker, but as an ensemble piece it wrests a new gear out of the returning cast members. Anne Hathaway’s Selena Kyle is a refreshing addition as well. But what really propels *The Dark Knight Rises* over its prequels for me, is the way it crafts its own context. Nolan keeps the viewer entertained and distracted in order to arrive at the final five minutes of the film, which not only provides a resolution for the movie, but also punctuates the entire trilogy with both optimism and wit. It both satisfies and refuses to satisfy completely. Some critics called it bait. Nolan fans call it prestige.

Playwrights have an old adage: If the gun hangs on the wall in the first act, it has got to go off in the third. Nolan’s movies have a lot of guns on the wall. His skill at divining a method and sequence for setting them all off, including the one that you didn’t really realize was hanging there, is chief among his powers as a director. Nolan’s movies also have a lot of guns in general. It is worth pointing out though, that Batman doesn’t use them. The villains in the movies are as violent as any, but more creative about it than most. Violence for Nolan becomes a series of logic puzzles that help establish Gotham City’s universe, and differentiates it from our own. In the documentary *These Amazing Shadow’s* Christopher Nolan said, “I am a fan of cinema that creates worlds, that creates an entire alternate universe that you can escape into for a couple of hours.” There’s almost nothing in The Dark Knight Trilogy that isn’t highly fantastical, perfectly timed,
and cleverly orchestrated. But those rules and that universe vanish when the lights come up. That has always been the deal.


The staff at the Colony doesn’t seem at all annoyed to be working late. One of them smiles as he hands me my Diet Dr. Pepper. It’s pretty clear that they will mostly be watching from the booths and the aisles. My Scene Magazine is still on the seat where I left it, and the previews begin to roll. On an ordinary night the hum of the crowd would dissipate in this moment but as the four-minute trailer for *Gangster Squad* plays, the hum in this place gets louder. These anticipatory moments, flirting with the next midnight release, the one still months away that you are just now allowed to know about, these moments have always been a g-spot for cinafiles. *Gangster Squad* (though not a good movie) has a great trailer. It’s Hollywood, on Classic Hollywood, packed with a healthy cross section of fame, talent, and a lot of heavy ammunition.

In the final seconds of the trailer, the members of the *Gangster Squad* are shown behind the screen of a cinema. As they walk forward they start emptying their tommy guns through the projection on the screen and into the theater. While the audience onscreen would presumably be dying, the audience around me is cheering and whistling. It is a neat trick, the same one used by early filmmakers who recorded a train rushing at a camera. Back then, audience members actually tried to get out of the way of the projection. That instinct survives. It can be used to heighten the excitement of the crowd, to ask for their participation. And it works. By morning this particular trailer will be pulled from the reels all across the country, never to be seen again.
The previews end. *The Dark Knight Rises* starts to roll on its projector.

Tragedy has the terrible power to overshadow hope, and hope is the theme used to build *The Dark Knight Rises*. Bane, the villain of the movie, uses hope as a mechanism for terror. He intentionally imprisons Bruce Wayne in a pit that seems escapable (it has an open top) but this means of escape is merely a mirage, until it isn’t. From the midpoint of the film, the physical act of rising is attached to the context of hope. Bane delivers a lengthy soliloquy on the point for emphasis. Three times, Nolan features the image of a character rising out of a dark cylindrical space into a brightly lit opening in the distance: in the first sequence when Bane is lifted out of the back of an airplane as it crashes; in the climax of the film when Bruce Wayne escapes the underground prison; and in the final shot when the character who is finally revealed to be Robin locates the abandoned Bat Cave. These bright openings are all reminiscent of the hole that the young Bruce Wayne falls into in *Batman Begins*, the mouth of a cave. In the final movie, characters are all headed back out of the rabbit hole. Nolan focuses on that circle of light as a visual representation of hope.

That very subtle move was just about shattered by the massacre in Colorado. Reality came too quickly. This movie and the idea of hope were suddenly made to seem incongruous. The politics were made too real. The villain was made too real. The bullets were made too real. We were caught without our armor on, and once that happened we guarded ourselves from it happening again.
The subtle, contextual, jokes in the movie (and there are a lot of them) started to be either misinterpreted or missed. For example, following a somewhat melodramatic scene in which Bruce Wayne fires Alfred, Bruce is awakened by an insistent knock on the door and calls out for Alfred. It’s an obvious joke that got a quick roll of laughter from the audience at The Colony. When I saw the movie in a theater nearly as full a week later, this joke was met with silence. So too was the line from Bruce Wayne’s doctor who has just examined the years-worth of damage from fighting crime that has accumulated on the patient’s body. The doctor says he “cannot recommend that you go helo-skiing.” Where there had once been a big laugh, there was now restrained confusion.

In theaters, it became impossible to lose yourself completely down the rabbit hole, a necessary requirement for climbing back out. People’s eyes occasionally darted away from the screen, toward the emergency exit signs. The cinematic experience that Nolan had worked carefully to create was diluted. That can be the difference between a good movie and a great one. The final shot of *The Dark Knight Rises*, which portrays Robin rising out of the darkness into the light, a circular patch of light resembling the top of the prison, is dedicated to hope for the audience. Hope, that in spite of a thousand press releases to the contrary, this might not actually be the end of the Christopher Nolan Batman saga. Hope, that someday soon we will be able to feel what we are feeling: inclusion, enlightenment, adrenaline. The good money says that this is a trick, but it is a great trick.
As the credits roll on screen at The Colony, there is ebullient cheering and applause. Nobody gets up. Nobody wants to get out of Gotham yet. The credits are halfway over before the first slice of lobby light invades the room.

I’m walking behind a teenage boy and his girlfriend. Both are ecstatic. “Oh my God!” the kid keeps saying. “Oh my God! Oh my God!” with a sense of deliberate purpose, he flips open the door to the street and ushers his date into the world.

She’s laughing. “Are you going to be ok?”

“Yes!” He responds. “I really think I will.”

People who go to see *The Dark Knight Rises* the next day, won’t see the same movie, not exactly. It will have been subverted to some degree, subverted like The Beatles were in 1969, or Islam was in 2001. In the face of the horror that ushers it in, this robbery of context is never very important. In Aurora Colorado, just minutes away from Columbine High school, twelve families that lost members and fifty-eight wounded patrons, were the focus of national attention for the rest of July and into August, as well they should have been.

A movie isn’t real. You can’t kill it, or wound it, or steal from it, but you can take something, something hard to define, from thousands of people all over the country who had this particular summer Thursday circled on a calendar. People who go to the movies for refuge and connectivity, dreamers, daters, stoners, comic-book-guys, and escapists of all ages lost something fantastical in the Aurora Theater massacre. A little loss like that
will never, ever, register against the immeasurable losses of blood, lives, and loved ones, but maybe that shouldn’t mean that it doesn’t count at all.

The future of the cinema, the social movie going experience, is very much in question. We have known this for some time. Already some smaller releases are being distributed through in-home on-demand services concurrent with their appearances in theaters. Driving home that night though, I can’t imagine a world without midnight movies. That terrible world is outside of my understanding. On Facebook, a friend has posted a picture of a crumpled ticket stub with visible knuckle marks and the caption, “My review of *The Dark Knight Rises*!”

Around the time that I am finally falling asleep, a man with orange hair hidden under a tactical assault helmet, armed with a semiautomatic rifle, moves from a brightly lit lobby into the relative darkness behind the theater door.
The patients on the hospital floor never slept, not really. The procession of nurses, nursing assistants, orderlies, doctors and phlebotomists, rarely let up for an hour, even in the dead of night. Vital signs were taken every two hours. Until about 5AM, nurses sometimes mimed tiptoeing around me to obtain them, but once traces of morning light had begun to gather outside the window, they didn’t pretend anymore.

“I want to go ahead and get your IV started. I don’t want them to have to wait for me when they come to take you down for your scope. Sometimes they come early.”

The nurse who was speaking was named Veronica. I had been around long enough to know that, but it was also written on the dry erase board by the door in happy green lettering. She was one of the younger nurses, pretty in a soft disheveled sort of way, one of those scattered personalities on the hospital floor that turns down the volume on the suck and tedium with simple human interaction. It was just past 7AM now, and she was tying up the shift’s loose ends. I thought quickly but couldn’t remember a time that Veronica had stuck me with a needle. I have tricky veins.

“I have tricky veins, did anyone tell you?” I sat up by means of a button on the side of the adjustable bed and pulled my arms out from under the blanket. Veronica tucked a couple loose locks of black hair behind her ears and then reached for latex gloves. Her questioning look told me that she hadn’t heard about my veins.

“They like to roll over on you?” She produced a bowl the shape and color of a kidney bean that had the familiar instruments in it: needle, tubing, alcohol wipe, beige elastic tourniquet.
“They roll… they vanish… occasionally, they blow out.”

“Smart veins,” she smiled. “They don’t want to be poked. The inside of your elbows are pretty bruised up.”

“That’s where the last one was.”

“Let’s see the top of your arm.” Veronica tied the tourniquet just under the little bruise on the inside of my arm. After a beat, she started tapping the top of it. “Oh yeah… here we go.” With my eyes closed, less out of fear than a sense of ceremony, I heard her tear open the wipe, then felt it gloss my skin. From hearing the cap pop off the needle I judged the timing exactly and silently mouthed the words as she spoke them: “Little pinch.”

This was early April and thus far I had spent more of 2007 in the hospital than out of it. My body had adjusted to the strong intravenous drug that had been keeping the disease in my lower bowel in check. There had been no way to avoid surgery. I had elected a more complicated two-part surgery that if successful would save me from a permanent colostomy. Everything that could have gone wrong, had. The year had been awash in pus, and blood, and bile. There were stoma pouches and vac dressings, MRI’s, CT scans, scopes. I had had both thrush and pneumonia. The clown car of brutal complications following the first of the two operations eventually calmed down enough for them to go ahead with the second. On the day in question I was three or four days post-op from the second surgery and the results were already being called into question, enough to take me back downstairs for yet another scope.
Also, and this is important, I hadn’t eaten anything. I had dutifully fasted for the second surgery, and cleared myself out with Milk of Magnesia, Magnesium Citrate. After the surgery they allowed me to graduate from ice chips to clear liquids, but around then they had decided to scope me before I could move on to milk shakes and rice pudding. For a week I’d survived on Sprite and Jello, and for the last twelve hours I’d been demoted back down to ice chips in preparation for the scope.

The instant I felt Veronica’s “little pinch” in the top of my arm I knew she hadn’t hit. Veins give way, and tissue does not. Without looking I knew that her look of confident concentration had furrowed into a look of concern.

“No good?” I asked.

“Not yet, but I’m right on top of it, let me…” That sentence trailed off. It usually does because the rest of it would be “dig wildly and blindly around in your arm.” How many times had I been stuck for IVs and blood draws in my 26 years, one thousand, two thousand? Never had I had a nurse catch a vein that she hadn’t hit when she first went in, never. They try this every time though. I complained about it once or twice when I was younger. Someone once told me that they have to record how many sticks it takes them to hit, but I don’t think that’s true. I’ve never seen them writing it down. Maybe it just doesn’t work on me.

The other hard truth about this situation is that a nurse’s first stick is usually her best. This isn’t hard and fast like the rule about trying to find a vein retroactively, but a nurse missing on her first stick, increases the chances of her missing on the second. It’s human nature really, nerves. I suppose that’s some small comfort. They care about your
pain, and your arm, and doing a good job for you. A sociopath would have the exact same chance every time. “Well, can’t say you didn’t warn me.” She extracted the needle, and I heard the snap of the rubber tourniquet falling free. “How about if we take a look at your hands?”

And of course I know what’s next. It’s a quick drill of making and releasing fists. Making a fist, something I never thought about, something no-one ever thinks about, something people do unconsciously in tense moments completely unaware that they are contracting multiple muscles over and over, expending energy, burning calories, something you know like the back of your hand. Making a fist wasn’t automatic or easy.

I was weak, not an easy thing to be reminded of. When I was done with my clenching I finally opened my eyes. But for her glove our pose might have seemed intimate, like one of mourning. Veronica gazed on my hand like she was practicing backward palmistry. Then, with the gloved fingers of her unoccupied hand, tap tap tap, tap tap tap.

When I was a kid I used to have fits, or tantrums. It never happened when it happens for a lot of kids: preschool age. My tantrums started when I was seven or eight. They always occurred between the time I got home from school, and the time my little brother and I ate dinner. We didn’t eat dinner with our parents, who weren’t able to get home in time for a reasonable child’s dinner hour. They had serious and demanding careers. So they hired a series of young women whose job it was to be there when we got home, make us dinner, and get us ready for bed. My mom was usually able to make it in
time to read us a story and tuck us in. I had a long ride on the school bus that I typically slept through, so I got home only a few minutes before four, and some simple kid-friendly dinner was on the table around five thirty. Four to 5:30PM isn’t a terribly long window, especially for a tantrum that might last half an hour. I don’t remember the earliest fits, but I remember when they began to increase in regularity, two times a week, then three.

They began with something that I was supposed to do that I didn’t want to. I was supposed to set the table for dinner, and because of early indications that my handwriting was poor, I was supposed to write in a daily journal. Either of these things could set me over the edge into a hysterical hyperventilating meltdown on any given day, most given days. It never happened when I had to go out and get the paper in the morning. It never happened when I had to take out the trash after dinner. It never happened when I had to take my morning vitamin, which I hated. It only happened between four and five-thirty, and with ever increasing frequency. It only ever happened on school days, never once on the weekend. One of the young women hired was a generally unpleasant person, but the rest were lovely and it happened to them with the same frequency. They must have mentioned it to my parents at times, but it was so easy for that kind of occurrence to slip down the docket of things one keeps track of, especially once it became expected. Also, by the time my mother arrived, and in fact often for a good while before that, I was the contented jovial antithesis of the flailing wreck I had been, with little memory of that counterpart’s existence.
I don’t remember any of the arguments about table setting or journaling well. I’m sure I never asked myself why I didn’t want to do these things. I was pervaded by a sense of simply wanting to be left alone, and an invasion of that wish was met with histrionics. The bit I remember most vividly was the adrenal surge that accompanied hyperventilation; I came to be familiar with it and to love it in my own way. There was a freedom in knowing that I could put out of mind everything except for the need to regain a normal rate of breathing.

My grandparents who were visiting once, after seeing a few of these conniptions, called my mom to come home at the beginning of one and she made it to me just as it crescendoed. After that, everyone was in the know about these fits, but the cause of them, the real cause of them, remained mysterious. It would be several years before that cause was discovered, and over those years my embarrassment at being associated with such a childish habit beat back the tantrums with more regularity. But out of them and more importantly in their regularly scheduled time grew a sharp tongued defiance and a total willingness to lie outright in order to avoid whatever I was supposed to do in those afternoons, which got to be less about setting the table and more about homework. The caretakers, my grandparents, the doctors we consulted, at different times all said they thought that it was attention seeking born of a wish to have my parents home for dinner. They were wrong.
After the tapping, popping, tearing, glossing, inhaling, sticking, exhaling, digging, and mild cursing, Veronica had swung and missed at the top of my hand. It was so obvious to me what the issue was. Like a creek in August my veins just didn’t have much running through them, nothing but ice chips. But what are you gonna do? The order is for a scope. A scope requires an IV. Veronica’s shift was over, and she brought over the nurse replacing her, a fifty-something stout motherly presence. “No problem,” claims the early relief, “nothing fresh eyes can’t fix.” She was so cheerful, caffeinated, confident, so much my opposite, from a world outside where it was early morning, newly arrived to this place where the hour is always the same or may as well be. I believed her. I thought she was going land it. She was still getting her supplies together when Veronica took off. After she was out of earshot, the new nurse said, “Just relax, sweetie. I haven’t missed a stick in months.”

If that was true, I wrecked her streak.

“I haven’t been able to eat or drink,” I told her, almost by way of apology. “I’m all dried up.”

“I know, sweetie, I know.”

At this point there had been three unsuccessful attempts. This new nurse set up to try once more, but as she did she flagged down someone in the hall, out of my vision. “Could you call down to second floor, and see if Push is on this shift? We just might need her.” I had felt most hopeful for the third try. I was least hopeful for the fourth. It didn’t land either. The nurse came back with a heated blanket and put it over my arms. I reflected...
on the process of doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. It’s fair to say that I was trepidatious as I waited for Push.

I didn’t know I was starving. My parents didn’t know I was starving. My grandparents and caretakers didn’t know I was starving. My doctor probably should have figured it out, but didn’t. I was skinny, a skinny kid, anybody could see that, but a lot of kids are skinny. At that age the pain had yet to set in, so I ate. I did eat. But my body wasn’t getting the nutrition I took in, some of it was passed over by the diseased gut that was supposed to absorb it. What calories were available went right back into fighting the imaginary illness in my bowel. Without knowing it I was spending all my energy attacking myself. I was thirteen before we got the right diagnosis, Crohn’s disease, and by then it had completely taken me over.

Only then did we start to think back to the times when I was, seven, eight, nine, ten, about the rending of garments and gnashing of teeth that had been for so long an afternoon ritual. I guess that sometimes I had known I was hungry when I got off of the school bus, but since we didn’t wait for my parents, by that time it was only a stones throw until dinner. I was handed the infamous line about “spoiling my supper” or maybe an apple, which was no good for the kind of quick energy hit my body was screaming for. I don’t think I ever even complained. “Not spoiling my supper” made sense to my mind but not to my body. After chasing, singing, reading, and answering my way through the school day like an ordinary un-diseased child, I was burned down to the wick, spent in a way that it would have been unreasonable to expect. It was the same reason I slept on the school bus or at my
desk with my head in a textbook. We couldn’t eat before I set the table, but I had absolutely nothing left with which to set the table before I was allowed to eat. I lived uncons-
ciously in a near daily Catch 22 that was a simple matter of nutrition and calories. My fits were less like a toddler’s temper tantrums and more like an infant crying for milk.

After my diagnosis, from the end of middle school upward, I never cried. I didn’t cry over my routinely terrible grades, or the huge screaming arguments that would occur over them. I didn’t cry when I broke my wrist, or found out that I would need a surgery to remove one small section of gut too scarred to save. I didn’t cry over any of my break-ups, two of which I considered to be momentous and life altering. My dad’s dad died, and a few years later, my mom’s mom. I sat quietly, I reflected, I mourned, but I didn’t cry. I came close when the first of my own young friends died. I was in a room where many of my friends were crying, but something prevented me from actually giving over to tears. I don’t know if I actually prevented myself from it, or it just never came, but for more than a decade I didn’t cry. Nothing had boxed me into the corner of absolute surrender, like setting the table had done so often when I was young.

Even given my heavily meditated, twilighting awareness it seemed odd to me to be waiting for a person named Push. “She’s our resident miracle worker when it comes to hooking up a line,” said nurse number two, “and she’s on her way. If she can’t get this thing started, no one can. I had already come to believe that it was the latter.

“I can’t drink anything, if I can’t drink anything then how is anybody supposed to start a line?” I asked her.
She frowned in an empathetic way, “Do you want some ice chips?”

“No.” The chill in my reply surprised me when I heard it. I couldn’t help it. I wasn’t mad at the nurse. I was mad at the stupidity of the situation over which she had no control. I was getting angry when I wasn’t expecting to.

I’m probably not spelling Push correctly, but I understood the name when I saw her. She was a diminutive white-haired woman of Indian descent with a bright red Bindi on her forehead. She must have been seventy years old or very near. She moved fast and spoke in clipped accented staccato. “Okay what we gonna do with you?” She asked without ever glancing at my face. I had the feeling that she was trying to speak directly to my blood vessels like some kind of diviner. She took the heated blanket off of my arms. The other nurse quickly pointed out the places where she and Veronica had stuck and missed.

Push held both of my hands in her tiny ones, turned them over and turned them back. She had been in the room only thirty seconds and spoken only once. She had a countenance much more like a doctor on rounds than like any of the other nurses. I had the feeling that she had long ago abandoned saying, “little pinch.” That was okay. I had no problem with efficiency and a brusque bedside manner. Everything was just fine until she got out the razor. It was a Chic disposable razor that she pulled out of a cupboard. She took the cap off, and started to shave the little hairs off of the top of my wrist. When I saw the vein she was looking at, a vein that had never been stuck before before, I lost my shit.

It’s a good vein, the vein that runs over the joint for your thumb, part and parcel of the vessel under the wrist favored by suicides. It was a smart place to look, always hiding in plain sight from the non-expert nurses, who will go for the smaller but longer veins first.
I don’t know why that was the straw that broke me, but it was. I was a haystack that couldn’t hide another needle. Without warning, without knowing I was doing it, I yanked my hand away from her grip. Stunned, and perhaps a little frightened, Push looked into my eyes for the first time, looked for an explanation.

“It won’t work!” My voice came louder than I meant it to come. I believed what I was saying, although it was in no way rational. I had been pushed past the point of reason. “It won’t work; they’ve got nothing in them. I’ve got nothing left…” I just didn’t want it. I didn’t want to be stuck where Push was preparing to stick me, hit or miss. All I wanted was to be left alone “They won’t let me eat! They won’t let me drink, and I…” It was like I was body surfing, and I misjudged a wave that was breaking right over me, and I knew I was going to be under it a long time. No more words came, just cries, just uncontrollable cries.

They sent me down to the procedure room with a syringe full of Ativan shot in my arm, and no IV started. The nurse in the room got a line going on his first stick.
The Assistant District Attorney assigned to the case didn’t go for Nico’s jugular.

“The guy is an ex-marine,” Kara told me. “So he was pretty sympathetic to Nico’s situation. He kept saying ‘We would recommend ten to fifteen years’ like as if he had to say it ten to fifteen times. But other than that, the whole thing was short and sweet. I was really afraid they were going to go through all the details of every case. I can’t handle hearing it all out loud, but they didn’t do that. The only really bad part was when he talked about how Nico traumatized people. Like he said maybe he didn’t come away with all that much money, and maybe he didn’t see it as robbing people just robbing a corporation, okay, but…”

“He still stuck a gun in their faces,” I offered.

“Right. Yeah. Well, he did that twice. And, apparently, there was a pregnant lady on the scene in one of them.”

The single biggest revelation that came out of the sentencing is that my friend Nico was charged with twelve separate bank robberies. Everyone who had gone to school with Nico, served with him in the army, or was a fan of his music, knew about the last robbery: the April 23, 2011 armed robbery of The U.S. Bank on Mayfield Road in Lyndhurst, OH that ended in a car chase followed by his arrest. Nobody had suspected that there were eleven others, not even Kara probably. The issue of how much Kara knew and when is a delicate one, legally, emotionally, semantically. Kara is a free woman now and likely to stay that way, but in the days following Nico’s arrest that was far from certain. Although the pair are technically divorced, they had been back living as a couple
in a house in University Heights, Ohio for more than two years prior, and a big part of their relationship involved illegal substances.

Now, Kara lives alone in a very similar house on the other side of Cleveland in a historic neighborhood called Tremont. She’s been here a year, which means Nico has been incarcerated for a little more than that. He was finally sentenced June 8, 2012, to ten to fifteen years in a medium-security facility in Kentucky that is equipped for psychiatric support. He is being given credit for time served and has the chance to get up to two years lobbed off of his sentence for good behavior. He is twenty-seven now, and in the best-case scenario, he will be thirty-five upon release. Almost everybody who was paying attention feared that the outcome would be far worse. “Everyone except for Nico,” says Kara. “Somehow he got it into his head that he would only serve five years. I don’t know why. He’s not really much of an optimist.” She’s joking a little. This is the mother of all understatements.

Kara’s house looks ratty and disheveled on the outside. All the windows and screens are closed. It is a brilliantly sunny summer day out there, but you would hardly know it. Although dimly lit, the interior is clean and neatly ordered. Black and white photos hang on the walls, but the rooms feel a little vacuous. Kara is in the process of moving out, back to Buffalo, New York where her family is from. Clothes, shoes, and books are already packed into blue rubber-ware crates. I’ve come by partially because I know she won’t say too much about Nico on the phone, but also because I feel like someone should acknowledge that she is leaving town. Five years ago she had fallen right in with a post-
college scene of indie rock burnouts, so happy to coalesce around the neighborhood rock band. One by one they gradually stabilized or gradually destabilized. They found jobs, got married, had kids, died in a few cases, but more than anything they moved away from Cleveland. This inevitable process accelerated in 2010, when Nico’s last and most promising rock band, Safari, called it quits over creative differences, which was code for Nico’s self-sabotaging nature. Their shows had been a chance for old friends to meet up in public space, and there was no natural substitute. Nico, in particular, dropped off of the community radar. Then, inside of six months, he was arrested for armed robbery. The old network of familiar faces started buzzing once more. Maybe the most surprising thing about those talks was the near unanimous lack of surprise. The most palpable sentiment wasn’t sadness but relief.

“At least he’s not dead.” Kara said it again in her boxed-up kitchen. “The more I hear about the specifics the surer I am that he was trying to get caught. And yeah, he’s pissed off about the trial right now but that will pass. The first time I visited him in jail was maybe the happiest I ever saw him.” For someone who has been carrying a lot of secrets, she has a disarming openness. It’s her default setting. She’s uncomfortable with sidestepping truths and sometimes stumbles when she has to do it. She’s unafraid to let the emotional truth of the moment fall hard on the table. It’s something we both know, that this individual whom we both cared deeply about, chose to run repeatedly into the mouth of danger. Neither of us would try to argue that a psychiatric facility isn’t the right place for Nico right now, but we are both a little surprised that he lived through
everything it took to get him there. I believe that my friend can one day recover a life out of the ashes of this tragedy, but I have no idea if he will.

2

I met Nico Walker when he was thirteen and I was seventeen. He had moved with his family to Cleveland from Las Vegas and joined my only brother’s seventh grade class. My brother, Doug, had taken up bass guitar a year or so earlier. He originally picked it up because I was trying to start a band with some friends from the neighborhood, and we needed a bassist. For me, the rock band was a short-lived venture which I didn’t have much aptitude for, but Doug stuck with it. When he found out that Nico played guitar and wrote his own songs, the two became fast friends. Our house, with its expansive gothic basement and lassiez-faire policy concerning guests had already started attracting a set of hopeful musicians, and Nico became a regular almost immediately.

After Nico got his driver’s license, it became a guarantee that Friday and Saturday evenings would find him jamming with Doug in the basement. My parents grew to accept him as part of the panorama, and when I went to college, he filled the vacuum that I left at the dinner table. Two summers in a row he came with us to South Carolina. Doug’s cast of friends had rotated through his childhood without any real cohesion. Nico was the first consistently familiar face we associated with Doug, and apart from ours, the most familiar face around the house. He wasn’t exactly a member of the family, but a permanent extension of it. For day-to-day purposes, it felt like I had two younger brothers. My best friend Chris also played guitar, and the four of us spent a lot of time
together writing and recording songs. Nico’s facility for song-writing was mesmerizing, even in his early teenage years. All of us could string lyrics together, build choruses, and keep a beat, but the songs we wrote didn’t sound like the ones that we heard on the radio. They were less polished, more raw, and at first we were proud of that. Nico’s songs sounded like radio rockers. They were finished and catchy. In one afternoon in our basement you could hear thirty songs, written by six different guys, and you would inevitably be humming one of Nico’s on your walk home.

Nico and Doug began their junior year in high school when I left for college. By then they had developed a firm bond, and their social circle had widened. Chris was part of it. He was recently graduated with out any college plans. He started selling a little pot to keep himself afloat without working a nine-to-five. The three of them started playing parties and open mic-nights in various formats, attracting girls, pot-heads, and more musicians. Nico, like Chris, began chain-smoking cigarettes and selling a little herb.

My parents gradually woke up to the fact that marijuana was an increasingly important part of Doug’s social life, but they’d been through this issue once before. Doug was on track to graduate with decent college prospects, and he seemed happy. He had fallen in with an eccentric group all right, but they were creative spirits and very entertaining. The house was usually full of laughter. As long as Doug and Nico were showing up at the dinner table every night, vitals remained stable.

In January 2011, Doug was in his first year of a Master’s program in sound recording at New York University. He came home to Cleveland for a weekend just after
New Year’s in order to record Nico’s new project. This was a couple months after Safari broke up, and a couple of months before Nico’s arrest, the apex of his low profile period. My parents were out of town, and I was staying in the house while they were gone. Watching Doug and Nico set up their gear was like stepping back into a forgotten time. They draped the doorways and began running endless tests for this microphone and that drum. I remembered what my parents used to say after Doug had left for college: “The house is just so quiet without you guys in it.” We didn’t talk for long. They were supremely focused on the task at hand. Eventually, I retired to the kitchen and listened from there just as my parents had so many times. That was the last time I saw Nico face-to-face.

The last day Doug was in town, they recorded at Nico and Kara’s house in University Heights instead of at my parents’ house. Doug came back at night to pack for his flight in the morning, and I could tell right away that he was upset. He got out his computer and started searching for something purposefully.

“How did recording go today?”

“I went okay. I mean, we’re not done. There is still a lot more to do and I’m not gonna be here to do it, but we got passable versions of two of the songs, maybe three.”

“What’s wrong?”

He looked at me seriously. “Can I tell you something?” That’s a pretty routine question for some people, but I don’t think Doug ever asked me that before. He either tells me something or he doesn’t. We have a well-preserved trust between the two of us and something that is sensitive doesn’t usually require a special designation. “I mean this
is something that you can’t…like brother pact…you can never…” He was struggling to find words and very pale. He was so unused to qualifying things this way that he wasn’t any good at it. I’m sure I wouldn’t be either. “Nico told me he robbed a bank.”

I sat down. Doug all at once looked a little better. Holding the weight of it by himself had been hurting him, just as I’m now sure it had been hurting Nico. “Do you believe him?”

“I don’t know,” but he did. I could tell. “He said he was kidding afterwards, but it was kind of half assed.”

“Like, with a gun?”

“I asked him that and he said no, with mace. I don’t know what to think.” He turned his computer around. On the screen was a still image from a surveillance camera of two masked men holding handguns. The article was from a report on a bank robbery in Richmond Heights, maybe fifteen minutes away. “That isn’t him right? I mean that guy is black.” There was some visible skin around the figure’s neck and wrists, and it appeared to be dark.

“Yeah looks like it.” That seemed to make Doug feel a bit better. We both knew that what Nico said was possible but that didn’t necessarily mean that it was true. If your best friend told you they had robbed a bank, would you believe it? Nico had developed a bad habit of making sensationalist confessions. Up until now it had all either dealt with his drug use or his service in the Iraq war. We couldn’t discount his claims but we questioned the way in which he wielded them, always when drunk or stoned. We had to believe it, but we couldn’t. We didn’t tell anyone.
A couple weeks later my wife and I were out with a friend of hers, who happened to be the daughter of the acting Chief of Police for Cleveland Heights. We walked past a bank on our way from the parking garage to the restaurant where we were having dinner. “My dad was just here today,” she told us. “Somebody robbed this branch. Doesn’t seem too smart does it. There’s almost always a cop in that lot across the street; everybody knows that.” Of course I thought of Nico, but it passed quickly. Nico is a lot of things, but he’s not stupid, I thought. I don’t know for sure if that incident was one of Nico’s twelve, but it is very likely.

When the first news report with Nico’s name in it hit the electronic press three months later, I saw it before Doug did. I called him right away. I realize in retrospect that I didn’t really think about whether that was the best thing to do. I needed to share the load, just like he had. Alongside the article there was another still picture of a different masked figure wielding a gun. This one had on Nico’s grey brimmed winter hat over the mask and his grey pea coat over his body. Even if we hadn’t recognized the clothes, we might have recognized him from his rock star posture and angles, gun shoulder cocked forward, the other cocked back. “I though you should know. I mean…he’s your best friend.”

“Yeah.” Doug was quiet on the other end for a while. “Apparently he’s also a piece of shit.”

I begged Nico to go to college. Doug and most of his peers went through deathbed conversions late in high school and got themselves into fighting shape as college
candidates. Nico hated the posturing involved in the process. He didn’t think he would measure up, and he consequently denied colleges the right to evaluate him. I really tried hard to get him to reconsider. He was smart and charismatic, and he had a family that was willing to send him to school. College applicants have been accepted with less. Nico was unmoved. I honestly thought he was going to pass up college altogether, as Chris had done. The two of them would just tread water together in Cleveland, indefinitely selling weed and playing guitar. Chris hadn’t chosen that though. He was never successful academically and did apply to colleges but didn’t get in. Nico would have gotten into plenty of colleges but wouldn’t apply. At the zero hour Nico submitted a single application to John Carroll, the Jesuit University within walking distance from all of our houses. He was accepted. My optimism about this news was tempered by the knowledge that Nico would be surrounded by all the old influences, instead of being exposed to new ones.

Nico’s experience at John Carroll lasted less than a semester. It was a very conservative campus that took its religious roots seriously. Nico, already convinced that he wouldn’t fit into campus life, found a campus life that it was legitimately hard for him to fit into. He had picked it because of its proximity to what he really wanted to spend time on, drugs and music. The only thing Nico took away from his college experience was Kara, who was a student there, and managed to finish even after Nico dropped out. By Christmas break he had left school, taken a job as a pizza chef, and moved in with Chris. In his mind, he had proven that he wasn’t cut out for higher education, but the flophouse lifestyle bored him in a hurry. The set of friends he had had the year before had
been reduced to the dregs, only the most troubled souls. Doug was gone, succeeding where Nico had given up. That’s when Nico first started talking about joining the military.

5

Chris was in Florida when he heard about Nico. He had flown down there to drive his grandmother’s car up to Cleveland so she could use it for the summer. He did that kind of thing for his family a lot because he loved long drives. He called me from the road to talk about it. “The kid just didn’t like himself. I just wanted to scream at him. Like yourself, you talented, good looking fuck.”

“I think you did yell that at him once or twice.”

“Yeah, probably did. You know me.”

“Yeah well, I tried it too.” I was thinking about all the time I spent talking to him about college, also about a letter I wrote him a few years later.

“Of course you did, man. We all did. You see somebody killing himself, you’re gonna say, ‘hey maybe try not killing yourself, and see how that works out for a while.’ Every one of us said our piece to Nico. And now he goes and robs a bank. It’s like how long can you watch a train wreck? I had to get away from it after a while. I guess we should be glad he’s not dead. There was a while when I was sure he was going to fall out.”

“You said it.”
Nico married Kara before he left for basic training. They did it at the Courthouse in Cleveland without telling anybody. Later, Nico would claim that it was a matter of dollars and cents. They had married so that Kara would have access to benefits as the wife of a veteran, including tuition from the G.I Bill and death benefits if Nico was killed. He was especially proud of that. He had specifically requested to be trained as a medic and was very likely to see combat. He was excited, committed to his service. He cut off his wispy blond hair and started an exercise regiment. He spent time with his family. For a little while he became the confident person that I had once hoped college could make him. He relished his service stateside, called frequently, and even came back to Cleveland for a day before he shipped out. He had become a physically imposing figure. Most of Nico’s friends weren’t very supportive of the war in general. This was around the time that the public began to realize that George W. Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” banner was a cold irony. Nico touched down in Iraq as anti-western Islamic forces were pouring over the border to join the fighting. Still, I hoped that the war might instill in Nico that desperately needed sense of purpose, that is, if he survived it. Doug got one e-mail: “I’m stationed at the Baghdad Airport. The entire country smells like shit.” Then nothing for a long time. He was in Iraq for a year and a half.

Nico was honorably discharged from the army in the spring of 2007, just before Doug and Kara both graduated from college. All the friends that had gone away after high school came pouring back into Cleveland eager to catch up. Unlike all his recently graduated friends, Nico was flush with money. He set himself up in an apartment with
Kara and bought a new pickup truck. He told everybody that he was planning to start college in the fall. In the meantime, he was looking to get the band back together. Doug and Chris were both happy to hear this. Chris was in a lot better shape than he had been when Nico left. He had gone on the wagon and stayed there for more than a year. This did nothing to turn down the volume on his big personality. He was the same guy just more reliable. When the guys heard the songs Nico had been working on, they were excited. All they needed, they determined, was a drummer.

It didn’t take long to determine that Nico was rolling around with a new sidekick: cocaine. He used at all hours, never seemed to slow down, or run out. He’d practice with the band in the day if that was possible and in the evening, and then he’d start a party wherever he was with his bag of coke. He’d give it away to whoever would take it, and of course there were pot and booze around too. As long as it was go, go, go, go, Nico was in control, stable and happy. As soon as things started to slow down he’d start to lose himself back into the war. The first time I saw one of these emotional collapses, something clicked into place for me. Nico wasn’t okay, wasn’t using recreationally and probably wouldn’t be starting college in the fall. It was Kara who was always around when the music stopped. She woke up to him howling in the night or punching some piece of furniture. Once he was worked into that state, you couldn’t snap him out of it. It really was like a flashback, like he was still there. “It’s over,” I remember telling him, “let it go.” I wrote him a long letter the day after I first saw him like that. “You beat the odds. You are still alive, so now you have to live. You have to stop running now because no one is chasing you.” As the summer wore on, Nico’s stable periods grew shorter. He
saved up his emotional energy for the new band, and perplexingly, for his new drug
friends.

We had long since stopped trying to tell each other what to do with our bodies, but now inevitably, Nico was often orbited by a bunch of sycophantic drug groupies. From this pack, Nico recruited a drummer. Johanna was eighteen and had just graduated high school. She was a talented drummer and very, very, beautiful. Nico’s burgeoning infatuation with Johanna was the last straw for Kara. She left town one day while he was out and divorced him a couple months later. With Johanna in the band, Nico eventually forgot about his need for a lot of other hangers on. For just a little while, she became more exciting to him than hard drugs and all-night dance parties. They called the band The Early Girls, and they were really, really, good. Once he saw that Nico was fully invested, Chris got them slots at a couple of bars. I think everybody at those first couple shows was surprised how synergistic and electric they were. It was like when Dorothy realizes that she could go home to Kansas just by clicking her heels. It had Chris’s stage presence, Doug’s proficiency, Nico’s song writing and his muse. We had seen countless friends perform in countless bands on little stages like this for nearly a decade. This was the first one that felt like a revelation, but the whole thing had a time limit on it.

Johanna had always intended to go to college in Germany in the fall. Nico desperately tried to convince her to defer. When it became clear that she wasn’t going to change her mind, Nico started binging on cocaine and alcohol again. At some point, he introduced Oxycontin into the cocktail as well. Doug could see that Nico had lost
motivation and took a job in another part of the state. I think it was partly because he could see a hard road ahead for his best friend.

Nico after The Early Girls, was like an amplified version of Nico before The Early Girls. There was little to interrupt his war-based depressive reality. He talked about seeing the faces of the men he killed when he shut his eyes, dead woman and children in the street. The most common theme was accounts of losing wounded men in his unit. It had been his job to try to save them. A purer case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) would be hard to find. Because of his drug use, he was afraid to go in for the treatment that was scheduled for him at the VA Hospital. I did what everyone says they do when they can’t get through to someone they care about; I prepared myself for a phone call. The one I got was different from the one that I was expecting.

There are three primary kinds of bank robbery: morning glory, takeover, and note. Morning glory is the least common of the three. It occurs when a perpetrator arrives at the branch as the first shift employees are opening up for the day. Takeover is the kind of bank robbery that is frequently depicted onscreen, where a perpetrator or perpetrators control the bank branch with weapons and rob it using a threat of violence. Note is the most common. The perpetrator simply hands the teller a note demanding money without anyone else in the branch taking notice. Tellers are instructed to cooperate with such demands, and a robber can take away a score without picking up a gun. Most bank robberies are committed without the use of a weapon. These note robberies are surprisingly common and often go unreported. Bank robbery is surprisingly common in
general. In the first five months of 2012, there were at least twelve bank robberies in the greater Cleveland area. They are unsophisticated crimes of opportunity. There are no career scores. Clearance rates for bank robbery cases are relatively high because criminals fall into patterns over multiple robberies and those patterns can be used to catch them.

Nico apparently executed ten successful note robberies before picking up a gun. In another security image that was released to the press, he is robbing a Chase Bank in Cleveland Heights, a black baseball cab pulled down over his eyes. It’s right across the street from the apartment where I lived at the time with my wife, and we did our banking there. Only Nico knows why he finally switched methods. Guns inevitably mean longer sentences. I have to wonder if he grew tired of waiting for the slow-moving authorities to recognize the patterns of a low priority note robber. It is also possible that he grew to envision some kind of a showdown.

8

Nico didn’t die of an overdose, or kill himself, like I was afraid he would. He began self-medicating in such a way as to contain the trauma he was carrying around inside him. He pulled his ever-escalating drug use back behind a veil with his emotional problems. He did enroll in a couple of classes, and Kara eventually came back. After a while, it became clear that she had jumped right back into his addiction with him. Still I was happy to know that Nico had a set of eyes watching over him. His highs and lows leveled off into a kind of manic stasis, and he got back to the only other thing he knew how to do, making a rock band.
Chris was still interested. He realized that they had missed an opportunity with The Early Girls, and he wanted to try again. He found Chuck, another reliable and sober presence to play drums. Doug’s old friend Billy stepped into Doug’s former role as bassist and wrangler of cats. They got to work under the name Safari. Even though Nico was only ever about half present, his songs were as good as they had ever been, and Billy turned out to be a good writing partner for him. Nico’s, just this side of incoherent demeanor, which had gotten pretty tiring in person, actually played well onstage, and if he fell of a little bit on one tune or another, Chris knew him well enough to prop him back up. It wasn’t as spontaneous a success this time, but the guys were more experienced and craftier about booking shows. They began to get some local attention and they put together a really fine album. Because they stayed at it longer, the shows drew bigger crowds than any they had played in the past. Nico’s songs were still golden, and Safari could have delivered them into the public consciousness. That possibility was legitimate, but Nico never believed in it.

First he started getting a little too messed up to play well. He would blame his sloppy playing on the sound equipment. Then he became steadfast in his quest to eliminate the one song that Chris had written from the set lists. Then he walked out of a show on Halloween three songs in and refused to play that bar again. As he would later with his robberies, Nico found that he had to escalate his position in order to sabotage himself effectively. It wasn’t easy. A lot of people were really pushing for Safari. Nico drove the original members out one-by-one, replaced them, and drove those guys away too. It took over two years, and in that time they recorded three albums worth of gems.
Chris is in a band called Field Trip now. They aren’t destined for greatness. They don’t even have that one in a hundred shot of getting signed that Safari had. Chris plays in Field Trip because it makes him happy. Playing music has always made Chris happy, no matter what becomes of it. Nico believed that if he could make the music perfect, he might be able to find his way to happiness again. For a long time, I thought that it was that shattered illusion that led directly to Nico’s robbery spree, but there was an intermediate step that I wasn’t aware of.

Sitting at the kitchen table Kara lets her mind wander back to December 2010, a couple of weeks before my bother sat white-faced staring at surveillance images. “Nico finally agreed to go get some real help for his PTSD. He had been afraid of doing that for so long, or even admitting that it was real. He’s…”

“So stubborn.”

“Yeah, exactly. But even he eventually just ran out of strength. All he had to occupy himself with was a big pile of problems. His parents set him up with a PTSD specialist at University Hospitals, and I think he let himself get his hopes up a little about it.”

Nico had filled out reams of evaluation forms and tests, with some of the same kinds of questions on them that had nearly prevented him from applying to college. He had forced himself to be really truthful about everything including intravenous drug use and thoughts of suicide. He put into the forms all the little corners of himself that he
wouldn’t intentionally reveal to me, or to Doug, or to Chris, or to Kara. He laid himself wide open.

“So the doctor looked at all these forms and stuff, and as soon as he comes in he immediately diagnoses Nico as Schizophrenic and severely Bipolar. He told him there was no way that he doesn’t wind up institutionalized. I could murder this guy. I mean Nico had told him he was banging heroin and cocaine. Of course he’s going to come across bipolar on paper. He’s a PTSD specialist and he completely glossed over PTSD. Nico felt so betrayed, and at the same time, I think he was kind of afraid that the guy was right. He was destroyed. He just vanished into himself.”

“And he started robbing banks.”

“And he started robbing banks. The crazy thing is that once he was caught, he was able to meet with a therapist who really understood him and was able to help. I hope they have somebody half as good where he’s going now. And of course he’s clean now, he’s just on one medication for depression and insomnia.”

“Do you think he’s going to be okay?”

“I thought so at first. It was like his personality was back from the dead. He didn’t have to pretend like he had a handle on himself and that was an enormous relief. The trial changed his opinion a little but that’s over now. Now he’s got seven and a half years to figure himself out and find a different path.” Kara shrugged. “He didn’t have much of a chance to do that before, but he does now. It’s too soon to tell.”
One unexpected consequence of having a friend in prison is that it gives me an occasion to write old-fashioned, post marked letters in long hand. I send him books, postcards, pictures of weddings he has missed, and of my son whom he has yet to meet. His letters are typically short and sardonic, always typed with a typewriter on blue paper in black ink. Nico teaches for the prison GED program, work that he describes as indentured servitude. He tells me he is learning Hebrew. He isn’t Jewish, and I’m not sure if he is joking.

His prose has become snappy and erudite:

“Please start the child early on his yoga. It will do him plenty of good, both spiritual and physical, and it will give him an edge over all the other children. That is all the child-rearing advice I have.”

“All goes more or less swimmingly here. Time marches forward as you’d expect. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not great or anything. Whatever. You know what I mean.”

“Do you partake in Miller’s Chicken often? at all? I feel that it is singular chicken. Best fucking chicken I’ve ever had. I say this much in earnest. It is very good.”
Nico was plucked out of a particularly transitory time in the lives of the people who cared about him. When the invitations to my wedding went out, my combat-rock-star buddy received his at his house in University Heights. By the time the recommended RSVP date rolled around, Nico’s RSVP was a notably ironic one. Actually it was the first piece of correspondence that I had received, or even heard about, from Nico post-arrest. After some initial period in custody Nico was moved around while he convalesced from the car crash that had been a result of his high speed police pursuit. That first letter, which included his regrets vis-à-vis my wedding, helped a lot of us clear up where Nico was finally being held awaiting trial. “Remind me to buy you a blender or something whenever the hell I get out of here,” he told me. It was the kind of friendly irony that I associated with his pre-war persona, the Nico I had first come to know. In spite of everything that had happened I took it as a positive sign.

My response to that first letter was the last one I sent Nico from Cleveland. By coincidence Nico and I both resettled semi-permanently in the same region around the same time: in a medium security prison for Federal Inmates in northern Kentucky and a rural university town in southern Ohio respectively. Both locations were nestled in the foothills of Appalachia less than two hours apart by car. Geographically, I was suddenly closer to Nico than Kara, Doug, Chris, Nico’s family or any of our friends. I often felt the twinge of guilt that came from being relatively close-by, and yet present only in letters, e-mails, and packages of used books. I had moved to Athens to begin a demanding PhD program in the university’s English Department. I was learning to juggle the roles of
teacher, student, writer, and scholar, all at the same time. I was a newly-wed and then after a while, a new father. For months that turned into years my vague plan to eventually visit Nico failed to solidify.

Unlike me, Doug found a time to visit Nico, and the two remained in frequent contact. By the time Doug got engaged, Nico had been inside a couple of years. Doug relocated to Los Angeles with his fiancé. He had parlayed his successful experiments recording The Early Girls and Safari into a degree in sound recording and was beginning a vocation as a sound engineer. Since Doug’s childhood, it had always seemed a foregone conclusion that Nico would one day serve as the best man in Doug’s wedding. Perpetual bachelorhood on Doug’s part would have once seemed the only condition that could prevent this eventuality.

In Nico’s absence, the honor fell to me and my happiness about performing it was necessarily tinged with regret. I gave a great speech at the wedding, one I really meant and that I am really proud of. And yet there was something unsettling about the experience. I had figured that I would feel like an understudy when the time came, but I didn’t. For a while, it had been easier to understand my friend as the absence noted at every gathering of old friends, than as the cold federal prisoner number that I had to include on the first line of envelopes that I addressed to him. The Nico that might have been here had seemed more real to me than the Nico that was serving time in Kentucky. But that had been a delusion.

I was my brother’s best man, not him. The Nico that would become Doug’s best man had never been real. But the Nico who had died shooting it into his arm, or out with
the cops wasn’t real either. Amid the blare of sirens, my friend had finally decided to survive the war.

A couple of months after Doug’s wedding vows I finally walked through the metal detectors to see him on the other side in flesh and blood.
Moment in Red

I had been passing blood all day. It came out of me into the handicapped accessible toilet that was equipped with handlebars and an emergency pull chain. Some bleeding wasn’t too unusual following one of these abscesses, which caused massive and immediate infections and had to be surgically punctured and drained. It was the night after one of those procedures, my third, my forth? It’s hard to say now. I was passing blood and the blood had started to change color. It got darker, and it started to take on a strange scent, not unpleasant, sweet, like blueberry syrup. These fascinating blueberry purple, coagulated constellations had been falling out of my diseased rectum all day. I was handed that familiar button that delivers intravenous morphine and told that I would be released from the hospital in a day or two if everything went according to plan. A little bit of blood counted as according to plan, but I was starting to realize that these syrupy forms were not to spec. I guess I should have said something earlier, but like most patients in hospitals I wanted to get out.

The best time to be a patient on a hospital floor is in the last hours of the day. Primetime television starts around the same time that the 3rd shift nurses come on duty. They are loose with the drugs and talkative, just beginning their day. Nobody expects you to try to sleep. Everyone knows it is impossible. It is similar to the experience of boarding a red-eye flight or being at school in a thunderstorm. It must have been a Friday, because nothing was on TV. I was watching Remember the Titans on the tiny television suspended from the ceiling and humming in analgesia when I realized that I needed the
toilet. Getting over there would have been very painful if I hadn’t been fortified against pain.

I started smelling the syrup more strongly than before. The coagulated mess was a deep purple now, nearly black, and solid enough to splash. It was amazing how much of this stuff I had inside me this time. I was about to reach for the toilet paper when I happened to notice a little stain of fresh red blood on the deep purple clot, just a couple of drops dripping out of me. A very small piece of that purple stuff came out after it, and then: an unannounced, uncontrollable torrent of bright, fresh, red.

During my first ever hospital stay when I was sixteen, following a colon resection, I was roomed with a guy named Bruce. He was a caterer in his early fifties, from southern Illinois. He had liked the primetime hospital hours too. Sometimes we’d chat a little in those hours, after my parents had left and his wife had gone back to her hotel. He walked a lot during the day to show the staff that he was ready for discharge, always wearing one of those old sporty yellow walkmans from the eighties. He was a nice guy. I might have forgotten him altogether, if it hadn’t been for what my father said years later.
Blood spurted out of me like it had been plotting an escape, instantly coloring the water in the bowl. I was hemorrhaging from the abscess cavity—something I didn’t know could happen.

All that hard dark stuff hadn’t seemed like it belonged to me, but this red blood, this was mine! I needed it, and I didn’t know how to make it stay inside of me. I was panicking. I felt like I wanted to negotiate with the blood. Please come back! Whatever I’m doing that you don’t like, I will try to do it differently. There is no reasoning with anything that shade of red. I started to lose consciousness. Just before slipped under, I remembered the emergency pull cord at the side of the toilet.

I awoke to the astonishment of smelling salts, back in my hospital bed, a flurry of white excitement between me and Remember the Titans. I was in the hospital for eleven days. I received two transfusions over twenty-four hours, and even then was ghostly pale in complexion for weeks afterward. No safety feature that I have ever encountered, no seat belt, no bicycle helmet, no life jacket, no guard rail, no 911 call, has ever done more to preserve me than that emergency pull chain on the hospital toilet.

Once I entered adulthood, my Dad told me that Bruce had been dying. I hazily remember overhearing Bruce’s discharge instructions, which had seemed kind of complicated. My dad had been there too and paying attention. My Dad didn’t say why he hadn’t told me what he thought about Bruce earlier, closer to when I knew him, but I know why. It’s the unstated second half of that revelation that he hadn’t wanted to let me
in on when I was still a kid. Bruce was dying *and that is what it looks like*. Bruce died

*and someday, that way, so will you.*