IMPROVISATION AND OTHER STORIES

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ABSTRACT

*Improvisation and Other Stories* is a collection of original short stories and a novella linked solely by the eclectic imagination of its author. Within its pages you will find tales of barbarism and love, magical and mundane worlds, and diverse animals such as tropical fish, raccoons, and at least one ape.
Dedicated to Todd Sewright, without whom this would not have been possible.
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VITA

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Ask any police officer and they’ll tell you, if they’re being honest, that police work is often improvisation. No society can make enough laws to cover every possible situation, nor should it—though I often think this society of ours tries to, to its detriment. Without the guidance of a particular law, we are left with everyday human judgment. Fallible, true; but nine times out of ten, it’s just fine. This story, however, is about that tenth time.

A few years back I was patrolling lots and running license plates; the city had decided, for one reason or another, to get serious about enforcing rescinded plates. (The fact that there was a $250 fine to re-instate the vehicle may or may not have had something to do with our orders to scan plates at every free opportunity.) So we ran the plates, and if they came back expired or whatever, and if the owner wasn’t around, we confiscated them and left a florescent orange sticker on the driver’s window to notify them—which when you think about it, is kind of a jackass thing to do, since this strands the driver or forces them to drive illegally without their plates. My daughter would call this a “dick move.” And she’d be right. But if I refused every dipshit order I received, I’d be out of a job in no time; so I did as I was told, though not with enthusiasm.

Anyway, I was running plates in Alton Baker Park next to the Willamette River. It was November, so it was raining, but not enough to stop the joggers, who used the
Prefontaine Memorial Trail and parked their cars in the lot next to Autzen Stadium. In the midst of confiscating the plates on a black Nissan Sentra, an accident/possible injury call came across my radio. The incident was over on River Road only a few minutes from my location. Since I was tired of plate duty, I responded quickly before any other officers could take the call. I heard my friend, Jim Bates, respond next, and I thought that it’d be nice to meet up with him. We always had a good time, shooting the shit, horsing around, pranking the Animal Control officers.

I flipped on my lights as I cruised down 6th toward Chambers and then to River Road. On the way, the dispatcher came back with more info. The accident apparently involved a delivery truck tipped over into a homeowner’s yard on the corner of River Road and Horn Lane. The property owner was the reporting party.

Jim was closer and F-O-S (That’s what we call first officer on scene), so he would take the lead officer position, and I would act to support him. Five minutes after taking the call, I parked behind the paramedics’ truck across the road from Jim’s cruiser and called in my 20 to dispatch. Jim was talking to a tall, rawboned man in a red flannel shirt. Even from my car I could discern the man’s agitation. His face matched the color of his shirt and his hands flew wildly over his head as he talked. Jim nodded politely, in that non-committal way we’re taught to in our community policing workshops. It keeps the person talking and the officer calm. A good thing for Jim—he tends to be a hot head. He’s quick to anger but just as quick to forgive. Now me, I’m the opposite, slow and slow, which is probably why I still haven’t forgiven him.

I had a moment to survey the situation as I exited the car and crossed Horn Lane. The site of the accident was the corner house, 55 Horn Lane, a slate-colored single level
with charcoal trim. Surrounding the yard was a four foot high border hedge, and on the other side I could see an old ice delivery truck, all white and sky blue and patches of rust like polka dots. The front of it was smack against the corner of the house. Another man—thin, sandy-brown hair, maybe mid-thirties—stood next to the truck, staring at it while smoking a cigarette. His hair was disheveled, his face without expression.

Already a good-sized crowd of neighbors had gathered; they stood, gawking over the hedge and seemed greatly amused by something on the other side. Some pointed, some laughed, some talked excitedly to the person next to them. They’d be fine so long as they stayed beyond the hedge and out of our way, so I gave them little thought at the time.

When I came around the front of Jim’s car, I could see the rubber streaks the ice truck’s tires had left on the street and sidewalk when the brakes had locked. A six foot wide swath of hedge was missing at the corner and the double tire streaks turned to a single rut gouged in the yard, and I guessed that was where the truck had started to tip as its rear wheels went up over the curb. I stepped over the sheared off stumps of hedges and through the gap. And that’s when I discovered what had attracted the gawker’s attention. The sandy-haired man with the cigarette held the hand of an adult chimpanzee. The chimp was dressed in a purple velour jogging suit and a baseball cap cocked at an angle. Around its neck hung a half-dozen thick gold chains with giant dollar-sign pendants studded with rhinestones. It wore white Sketcher sneakers and looked like nothing so much as a hairy midget rapper. A female paramedic from the Santa Clara station was looking man and ape over for injuries. I stopped short, looked to Jim and the rawboned man (whom I assumed to be the homeowner); to the crowd, pointing and giggling; back
to the sandy-haired man and his chimp; and my whole mood lightened. I smiled and
thought, *Hey, this is gonna be a pretty good show.*

The homeowner was nearly shouting, and I overheard him say that his foundation
was cracked and what was Officer Bates going to do about it.

I caught Jim’s eye, and he excused himself without answering the man to speak
with me. “Dale,” he said, “You’re really going to earn your pay today, boy.”

“No doubt,” I said. “What’s the story?”

“Well, the man with the monkey—don’t say it, I know it’s a damn ape—the
monkey man is Conrad Eckhardt.” Jim handed over Eckhardt’s license. “I haven’t run a
check on it yet,” Jim continued. “The homeowner here is Craig Williams. Was in his
living room watching TV, hears a boom, sees his wall split from floor to ceiling, and
comes out to find this truck up against his house.” Under his breath, Jim added, “And
he’s none too happy about it. Wasn’t even amused by the chimp.”

I tried imaging myself in Craig William’s shoes. You know, I hear a thump and
come out to see a truck smashed into the corner of my house and a man and a chimpanzee
crawling from the wreck. How could that not tickle a man’s sense of the absurd? Maybe
he had crappy homeowner’s insurance.

Jim pointed out a shrunken gray-haired woman in the crowd of spectators. “That
woman there is Phyllis or Dyllis or Doris or something. She says she saw the whole
thing. Claims the monkey was driving—I know don’t get me going about eye witnesses.
You want to start with Mr. Eckhardt? Oh, by the way, chimp’s name is Bongo. I’ll finish
up with Mr. Williams.”

“Sure, whoever’s done first can get Phyllis Diller,” I quipped. Jim rolled his eyes.
I copied Eckhardt’s info from his license to my notepad, then walked over to him and the ape. The paramedic was kneeling to place a butterfly bandage over a small cut on the chimp’s forehead. Its eyes followed her hands as it watched her finish up, but otherwise remained motionless. The paramedic stood after a second, nodding to me. “They’re both all right, I think,” she said and chuckled. “I’ll tell ya, this is a first for me.” She snapped closed her meds case and joined her partner at their truck.

“Mr. Eckhardt? I’m Officer Simmons.” I handed him his license back. “Officer Bates said your chimpanzee’s name is Bongo, is that right?”

Eckhardt’s eyes gazed past me, not really focusing on anything. He nodded. A ring of blood had crusted around the inner surface of one of his nostrils.

“Boy or girl?” I asked. Eckhardt didn’t say anything. “You two must be pretty shook up. Paramedic says you’re all right though.” Still no response. “Mr. Eckhardt?”

“Huh? Oh, s’okay. Just a bit of a crack is all.”

I kept him talking, some chit-chat to warm him up for a statement. I found out he’d moved here to Eugene a year ago from L.A. He and Bongo—who’s a boy by the way—go around to parties, birthdays, Bar Mitzvahs, and whatnot to entertain. I couldn’t imagine there was much demand, but Eckhardt said they did all right. From our chat, Eckhardt struck me as a hapless yet affable loser, one of those guys with great ideas that never quite pan out, but who in the end, only caused problems for himself—well, and maybe his family. In hindsight, I’d leave off the affable descriptor.

“Can you tell me what happened here?” I finally asked and took out my pad again.

“Sure,” Eckhardt said, “We had a Bar Mitzvah out in Santa Clara—”
“Do you have a name and address for that?”

“It’s on my appointment calendar in the truck. I can get it for you.”

“In a moment.” I was surprised—this guy had an appointment calendar. “Why don’t you continue with what happened.”

“Uh, yeah. We were driving back when the storm hit. Bongo starts acting up. He doesn’t like storms and thunder freaks him out. And the rain too, when it hits the roof of the truck.”

“Well, you sure picked the wrong place to live.” It rains about five months out of the year here.

“Yeah, tell me about it.” He snorted. “When I saw the lightning off toward Spencer Butte, I knew I had to get him home quick. Well, he does okay for a couple cracks, and he has his seatbelt on so I figure he’ll just sit it out. Then a third crack goes off close by, and Bongo gets scared and goes nuts.”

“Wait a sec. You say there was lightning here. Is that right?” My BS detector was going off. It had been raining, true, but the last time I remembered lightning in area was about three years ago. We get a ton of rain but almost no thunderstorms.

“Yeah,” he said.

I let him go on. I try not to contradict in an initial interview. It gets the subject’s back up and makes it hard to get the story. Clarify, don’t contradict is my motto. “So what happened then? What caused the wreck?”

“Uh well, Bongo just really freaked out. He slips out of his seatbelt and jumps into the back of the truck. Then he comes to the front, howls at me, pulls me out of the seat, and throws me into the back.”
I nod; okay, I can accept that. “So, then you wrecked?”

“Uh, no.” Eckhardt scratched his head and looked at me sheepishly. “Bongo gets into the driver’s seat and starts driving…”

I stopped taking notes and looked carefully into Eckhardt’s eyes. “The ch— Bongo got into the seat and was driving? Am I hearing you right?” I smiled inwardly without letting it show on my face. This was getting interesting.

“Yes, sir. And he was doing real good too.”

I had to laugh at that. I’d heard some great lies in my time on the force, but this had to be the best one yet.

“Well sir,” Eckhardt continued, “I got back to my feet and made it to the space between the seats.”

“Wait up,” I said. “So how did Bongo get you out of your seat?”

“Sir, I realize this is hard to believe, but it’s true. To be honest, I wasn’t wearing my seatbelt; and chimps are really strong, maybe five times as strong as you or me.”

“Was there any alcohol at this party you were attending, Mr. Eckhardt?”

“Yes, but I wasn’t drinking. Bongo and I were entertaining.”

“So you had nothing to drink before leaving— Where were you headed?”

“Home. Just home.”

“So you had nothing to drink before you headed home?”

“Well, sir. I did have one drink, but that was hours ago.”

Ah, yes, I thought. The old ‘one drink hours ago’ excuse. How many times have I heard that in the last twenty years. “You sure it wasn’t maybe a couple of drinks?” I asked.
“Yes, sir. I wasn’t drunk. Bongo was driving when we crashed.”

“Uh huh. Can you wait here a moment?” I stepped away to consult with Jim about maybe giving this guy a breathalyzer.

“Hey, Jim, you’re not gonna believe this one,” I said with a laugh. “Eckhardt says the chimp was driving.”

“Sure, sure,” Jim replied. “Any sign of alcohol?”

“Officer Bates, you read my mind. There’s no smell, but I haven’t looked in the truck yet.”

“Hmm…you might check with Floris, Morris—Doris Day over there before you finish with Mr. Eckhardt. She swears she saw the monkey driving.”

“Will do,” I said to Jim, then told Eckhardt I’d be with him shortly as I went over to the witness. Eckhardt nodded and began checking Bongo over for something. Fleas, ticks, injuries, I don’t know what.

Phyllis Diller-Doris Day’s ID showed her to be one Mavis Miller, aged 54, height 5’4”, and 120lbs. And if she was anything under 160, then I was Bongo’s uncle. She wore purple polyester pants and a floral print, short-sleeved blouse and held the leash of a Minpin that wouldn’t shut up. The crowd was centered on her. There were now maybe a couple dozen milling about. She’d been recounting her story with relish. People on cell phones said things like, “You’ll never guess what just happened.” A cute high school-aged girl was trying to get Bongo’s attention by making kissy sounds at him. Bongo was oblivious, but Eckhardt’s attention seemed held.

I asked Mrs. Miller to step aside with me, and she told me she was walking her dog when she noticed the ice truck weaving down River Road. She thought maybe
someone was driving drunk so she looked at the license plate to report it, but the truck swerved suddenly toward the house on the corner lot and that’s when she saw what she thought was a “runty little colored man” driving and another man standing next to him with his hands on the steering wheel. The whole shebang careened out of control, started tipping, hit the curb, ploughed through the hedge, and then came to a stop on its side with a bang as it hit the corner of the house. It wasn’t until Mr. Eckhardt and Bongo had crawled from the truck’s back doors that she realized it had been a chimp driving all along. I thanked Phyllis-Doris-Mavis and went back to Mr. Eckhardt. He’d moved closer to the hedge to chat up the high school girl. He was asking her if she wanted to shake Bongo’s hand when I walked up.

I told Eckhardt that an eyewitness had backed up his story on the point of the crash. Eckhardt was only half-listening and didn’t respond when I asked him to retrieve his calendar from the truck. He was too busy smiling at the girl, who was maybe sixteen. So I said to him, “Mr. Eckhardt, do you know the age of consent in Oregon?”

That got his attention. He shook his head.

“Well, I do,” I said and looked at him meaningfully. Now Eckhardt didn’t know me from Adam, so he had no way of knowing that I was mostly joking. That, and no expects a cop to have a sense of humor. His eyes grew huge and he swallowed. “Um, I—”

“Your calendar, scheduler—whatever you call it—you were about to get it from the truck.”

“Yes, sir,” Eckhardt said “Will you hold his hand, sir. He’s a bit upset after the crash, and I can’t leave him alone.” He held out Bongo’s hand to me. “Don’t worry,
you’re safe.”

I didn’t know if he was trying to reassure me or Bongo. “Sure,” I said a little hesitantly and took the chimp’s hand. Bongo’s hand was warm and surprisingly soft. The palm side was a light pinkish-brown and the knuckles and back of the hand were so dark a brown they appeared black unless you looked closely. I’d never been that close to an ape before, and I half expected him to chew my fingers off. But he didn’t. He simply looked placidly up at me with eyes that seemed both knowing and sad. So far as I could tell, he didn’t seem upset, but a thimble could have held all I knew about chimpanzees then.

Eckhardt crouched under the hanging leaf of the double back door and rummaged though piles of costume clothing: cowboy hats and boots, a full feathered headdress, bandoleers and bandanas, sneakers, overalls, even a police-style dress uniform, complete with shiny plastic badge and a patrol hat. A couple minutes later, Eckhardt returned with an old leather binder. He read out the name, address, and phone number of his patron, which I copied down. I returned Bongo to Eckhardt and excused myself to call the party’s host. The host confirmed that Mr. Eckhardt and Bongo had performed for a Bar Mitzvah. (What a chimp has to do with a Bar Mitzvah, I’ll never understand.) When I asked about liquor, the host diplomatically replied that, yes, there had been beer and wine for the adults present, but that he “had not seen” Mr. Eckhardt consume anything while he was around. Like most diplo-speak, it was bullshit and roughly translated as, “Yes, Mr. Eckhardt was tanked at the party, but I don’t want to be held responsible for any of his actions afterward.”

I spoke with Jim before returning to Eckhardt. He had finally finished with the
irate homeowner. “The man wants to know if a chimpanzee crashing in his house counts as an act of God,” Jim said, exasperated. “I asked him, ‘Do I look like a goddamn insurance adjuster?’”

That answered my earlier question: he did indeed have homeowner’s insurance. Maybe he was just a pain in the ass on a day-to-day basis.

I told Jim all that I’d discovered, and he decided that he wanted to give Eckhardt the sobriety test. I agreed, but said maybe we should stick with the breathalyzer since he might be still woozy from the wreck. I still wasn’t sure whether he had been drinking and the fact that the chimp had been driving did nothing to exonerate him—though the statutes are a bit vague as to non-human primate drivers.

Jim asked Eckhardt if he’d come over to the squad car with him, and if it would be okay for me to watch over the chimp. Eckhardt passed Bongo’s hand over to me once more. Bongo and I shared a look at each other as Jim and Eckhardt stepped out of the yard through the gap in the hedge. I don’t know what that look meant, but if I had to speculate, I’d say it was something like, *I wonder where this is all going?*

The crowd had grown in size since I’d spoken with Mrs. Miller. Some thirty or so people stood in the street, laughing, gawking, pointing, taking pictures me and Bongo and the tipped truck and each other. It was turning into quite a circus atmosphere. This was apparently nothing new to Bongo. He yawned, giving me a good view of remarkably clean and large canine teeth, and I had my first real misgiving about the way things were progressing. Here was an animal that could rip me apart in a second if he wanted to. Here he was dressed like a rapper-buffoon, and it ill-fit the animal’s dignity, it seemed to me. I have to say I also wondered if Eckhardt brushed the ape’s teeth each night or if Bongo
did it himself. So I must not have been terribly concerned.

It wasn’t long before I heard Eckhardt’s voiced raised above the general hubbub and Jim’s command voice in return.

“I’m not drunk!”

“Sir, you need to remain calm.”

Either Bongo had heard them as well or my tension, conveyed though our clasped hands, told him there was something going on that needed his attention. He let go of my hand and stomped over to the cruiser, nudging aside a bystander who’d gotten too close, and planted himself between Eckhardt and Jim. He stood there hulking between the two, guarding his master, and in that ridiculous getup I almost expected him to throw a phony gang sign and cross his arms over his chest.

Jim took a step back and his hand went automatically to his sidearm and unsnapped the restraining loop on the holster. I thought, Whoa, this could really get ugly, so I ordered the bystanders to back away from the area, then I radioed into dispatch to send additional units—if for no other reason than for crowd control.

Jim asked Eckhardt, “What’s the best way to deal with him? I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“I don’t know,” said Eckhardt contemptuously, “I never been in an accident with him and then had two cops falsely accuse me of being drunk.”

With regard to the word “cop” there are two kinds of cops: those who couldn’t care less about it and those who despise it and find it disrespectful. Jim, unfortunately, belongs to the later group. Jim is a police officer not a cop, and don’t even think about bringing out the porcine vocabulary or he will rip off your head and shit down your neck.
“Police officer,” Jim said, and pointed his finger at Eckhardt’s face.

“Huh?”

“You will refer to us as police officers, not cops.”

“Whatever, man. I just want you to know that I haven’t been drinking. I told the other c—police officer what happened, and he said that lady over there confirmed it. So why are you hassling me, bro?”

“I’m not your ‘bro’ either,” Jim said. “I am an officer of the law. Get that.”

Their argument dropped a couple degrees in heat, so I backed the crowd farther away, and then went to my cruiser to check Eckhardt’s ID. He had no priors in Oregon, but I learned he had a DUI and misdemeanor possession record in California.

When I returned, Jim was telling Eckhardt that if he took the breathalyzer test this could all be cleared up, but if he didn’t then his license would get suspended. To which Eckhardt responded by shouting, “I told you guys I ain’t had nothing to drink. Why the fuck you gotta be like this?” Eckhardt’s explosion agitated Bongo. He jumped up and down, made a short whooping sound, and grimaced at Jim and me.

“That’s it,” Jim said and pulled out his handcuffs. “Turn around and place your hands on top of your head. Interlock them.”

“What for? I ain’t done nothing!”

“How about disturbing the peace, disorderly conduct, and reckless endangerment for starters? Now turn around, hands on your head. I won’t say it again.”

Eckhardt slowly turned, saying, “He ain’t gonna like that.” He looked at Bongo and shook his head. “He ain’t gonna like that at all.”

“Interlock your hands,” Jim commanded.
When Eckhardt complied, Jim put the cuffs on him. But Eckhardt was right; Bongo did not like it at all. He hopped up and down then began a little side-shuffle around us on all fours in quick circles. I asked Eckhardt how to calm him down.

“Take off the cuffs, and he might chill,” Eckhardt said, to which Jim replied, “No f-ing way.”

I unsnapped the loop of my own holster. I didn’t like this situation at all, and thought that there had to be some way out of this that didn’t involve one of us shooting an animal to protect ourselves or one of the bystanders. I radioed dispatch to have Erica from Animal Control to call my cell.

Some wiseass from the crowd picked that moment to yell, “A chimp can tear a man apart with its bare hands!” A second later, “I saw it on CNN, really!” The voice was youngish and male, but I couldn’t pick out the owner from the crowd, who were now all laughing and sharing high-fives and having a great time of it at our expense. A chubby man wearing a blue-striped headband, carrying a few bags of groceries in one hand and a potted geranium in the other, stopped on the River Road sidewalk as he passed and goggled at us. He was huffing and sweating from the effort of his walk. He had clearly heard the previous bystander’s shout because he yelled back to the crowd, “Humans and chimps share ninety-eight percent of their DNA!”

I glared at him and told him to keep quiet or keep walking. The entire situation seemed to be getting away from Jim and me. I was about to ask dispatch where the back up units were, when my cell rang. It was Animal Control.

“Erica?”

“Yeah, Dale. What’s up?”
“Got kind of a problem here,” I said. “Need your help. Better bring Vasquez, too.”

“Okay… What’s going on?”

“I need you to help secure…” I faltered searching for the way to express the set of circumstances in a way that she’d believe. You see, I’d probably called her one too many times with fake incidents. Rattling around in my head, as I stalled for time to consider how to phrase the problem, was the time I called her for an incontinent opossum at City Hall, and then there was the rabid pigeon downtown-shakedown.

“Oh, so I need you to know this one is real before I say anything.”

“All right,” she said, and the hesitation in her voice told me I was already fucked.

“I need you and Vasquez to secure a…chimpanzee.”

Her loud and voluminous laughter was the only response.

“No, dammit, I’m serious. There are bystanders here, and the animal’s really upset. Someone could get hurt, I’m afraid.”

“Yeah, sure, Dale. Be right there.” She laughed some more. “You want Vasquez to bring the balloon animals? I have some floppy shoes and a red foam nose. Might take me a minute or two to put on the grease paint.”

“Look, I need you to calm him down or tranq him or something. Otherwise, it could get bad.”

She sighed. “Where’s the chimp now? What’s it doing?”

I looked up. Bongo was standing between Jim and Eckhardt, shaking his head and hooting. Then he jumped into Eckhardt’s lap and put his arm around Eckhardt’s neck. He
pressed his head to Eckhardt’s and Eckhardt said something to him that I couldn’t hear.

“Bongo’s between Officer Bates and our subject—can’t you hear him hooting?”

“Bongo? Is that the best you can do?”

“Look, he does birthday parties and Bar Mitzvahs. I didn’t name him.”

“Sorry, Dale. You can tell whoever you got screeching in the background that he did a real bang up job, but I’m not buying it. Not after that thing with the squirrel.” She hung up.

I’d forgotten about the squirrel. I cursed under my breath and shook my head when Jim looked over at me. He back-stepped to me, keeping his eye on the chimp and his hand on his sidearm.

“Erica won’t believe me.”

He held out his hand and said, “Dial her.”

I did and handed him the cell.

“Hi, Erica. This is Officer Bates… Yeah, I’m here with Officer Simmons… No it’s true.” Jim jerked the phone away from his ear and looked at it as if were a rotten apple he’d bitten into. He handed the phone back. “Among other things, she said you’re a bastard.”

I nodded. “Thought she might say that.”

“So, what do we do?” Jim asked.

I caught his eye and held it with my own. “This is a lose-lose situation, Jim. We’ve got all these people around and an ape that could go berserk any minute and Animal Control’s not gonna come.”

“I see where you’re headed, Dale. I don’t like it. I want to take him in. He’s been
extremely rude, and he’s probably drunk. He’s a danger and shouldn’t get a pass.”

“And then what? The chimp goes wild, and we end up shooting it because we suspect Eckhardt is DUI? It’s not worth getting hit by the big end of the lose-lose stick, Jim.”

Jim finally, and grudgingly, agreed. He went over to Eckhardt and told him to stand. Bongo leapt out of his lap to the ground and held on to Eckhardt’s leg. Jim took off the cuffs.

“Finally, some sanity,” Eckhardt said, while rubbing his wrists. “Fucking cops.”

I told Eckhardt to watch his stupid mouth and led him and Bongo back to their piece of shit delivery truck. “You’re going to have to get this righted and out of Mr. Williams’ yard. Officer Bates gave your insurance info to him, and you’ll probably be held responsible for the damages.” I gave Eckhardt the name of the towing company I always used.

Meanwhile, Jim was trying to shoo the crowd away, but they weren’t really having any of it. They weren’t ready for the party to end.

That same male voice yelled, “Monkey, one; pigs, zero!” Several people in the crowd roared with laughter. Jim’s face turned dark red and menacing. He jerked his mike to his mouth and told dispatch to get the additional units on scene and to send out the wagon.

I left Eckhardt behind to assist Jim with the onlookers. Eckhardt crouched and mumbled something to Bongo about “fucking jackass pigs,” but I let it slide. The crowd was the problem now. Our back up would be arriving in the next couple minutes, so all we need to do was keep them calm until then. The high school girl was repeating the
words “freedom of assembly” as if it were some religious mantra that absolved them all of responsibility.

I walked over to Jim and whispered, “Let’s just stand here as dully as possible and let them all get bored. They’ll leave on their own.” And it was a good plan, too—even if it was mine. But circumstances can change quickly, and that’s just what they did.

Several of the onlookers began to laugh and point toward Jim’s car. “Look,” they said, and elbowed their fellows. I was afraid to look, but I did. There was Bongo. He’d crawled into the backseat and was in the process of dropping the pants of his purple jogging suit. Before Jim and I could do more than turn our heads, he’d shat all over the seat. Bongo glared at us and bared his teeth; he spread his feces across the backrest with his hands. Letting out a fierce screech, he leapt from the cruiser, leaving shit and purple pants behind.

I looked over at Jim with my mouth agape and nothing to say, but my mind was in high gear, going something like: “Oh, fuck me. What’s Jim going to do?”

Jim stared at his car. Already the sour fecal odor had made its way to us.

“Goddamn,” was all Jim said. Just that one word, but his whole body was rigid and clenched from teeth to toes.

The crowd busted up into riotous laughter. “Monkey, two; pigs, zero!” the voice mocked. Jim pressed his lips together until they became a single white line.

“Jim…” I said, but he wasn’t listening. He pulled out his cuffs again.

“Officer Bates!” I said, trying to get his attention. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to arrest that damn ape is what I’m doing.”

The crowd whooped at that. Some bent over crying, they were laughing so hard.
“Officer Bates, listen to yourself,” I said.

Jim took a couple steps toward Bongo. The ape flashed his teeth and shrieked at Jim.

This is bad, I remember thinking, and I placed my hand on Jim’s upper arm. “Let it go,” I said.

But Jim’s anger had deafened him. He shook me off and pivoted into the yard and shoved Eckhardt to the ground. He would find satisfaction one way or another.

“You’re under arrest,” Jim said. “For the earlier charges, plus inciting a riot, and whatever else I can think of by the time we get to the station.” He put on the first cuff then wrenched Eckhardt’s arm back to get the second cuff on.

Before I could react, Bongo was on Jim. He pulled Jim off Eckhardt and hurled him away with ease. He roared and leapt onto Jim’s chest. Finally, I acted and drew my Glock, screaming at the chimp to drive him off. I fired a shot to the ground. But Bongo continued to hammer on Jim’s face and throat with his fists.

“Pull him off,” I shouted to Eckhardt. Someone in the crowd shrieked and ran down the street in terror.

Bongo pulled Jim’s head toward his own with his hands in Jim’s hair, and it looked to me like he was going to bite Jim’s face. I recalled those clean white canines, and I knew that there were no more choices to make. I fired two bullets at Bongo.

I shot him once through the side of the chest from the only position I could without risking Jim’s or Eckhardt’s life. Bongo turned toward me without releasing Jim’s head, and I shot him again in the chest, the slug caught him just below the throat. Rage or no, he simply slumped off to the side of Jim. His hands loosed Jim’s hair. Bongo did not
move, and I did not fire again.

The high school girl cried, “You shot him, fucker,” and she started to sob. Everyone else in the crowd fell silent.

Jim back-peddled away from the chimp’s body. His nose, bleeding and his eyes, wild and disoriented. Eckhardt had rolled over to Bongo’s side and placed his hands on the chimp’s hairy back and he, too, was sobbing, though without tears. I stood, watching blood stream from beneath the chimp’s torso. The blood was as bright and red as my own, as thick as that gushing from Jim’s broken nose. And I thought, What have I done?

I radioed for a paramedic. Jim lurched to his feet, pulled out a handkerchief and put it to his nose. He kicked Bongo’s inert body savagely.

The crowd, only seconds ago so rowdy and boisterous, shuffled their feet, stared, but spoke not a word. They avoided eye contact with one another and with Jim and me. Their faces, if I’m feeling charitable, could be described as embarrassed, as if they were aware of their own role in the tragedy.

“You sonovabitch!” Eckhardt cried.

Bongo had not moved since I’d shot him. I nudged his leg with my foot to no response. I holstered my sidearm. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I had no choice.” I wasn’t speaking to Eckhardt, I was speaking to Bongo—and to myself. But it was scant comfort.

The high schooler found her voice again. “Is he dead?” she asked, and after a moment, to herself or to the group, “I think he’s dead.”

When the back-up officers arrived, and then the wagon a minute later, the crowd slunk away by ones and twos until only the girl and one young man remained behind. He stood next to the hedge, tall and awkward, in baggy jeans and a black hoodie. He said, “I
never thought…” But he didn’t complete his statement, within my hearing at least. I think now he might very well have been the yeller in the crowd; but then I really couldn’t tell from so few words and from my great distraction. I’ve never felt so bad in all my life. Many years have passed, and in all my time as a cop, I’ve never had to shoot a person; but I can only imagine it would feel just like this did. This sinking feeling of having done something wrong that cannot be put right again. No—that isn’t correct. This is worse, perhaps. Bongo wasn’t some bad guy. He couldn’t have formed the necessary intent to be malicious. He was just protecting his master, and it wasn’t his fault that his master was a fuck up. Shooting the chimp was like shooting a child. And I remember, even now, the soft warmth of his hand in mine and how trusting he’d seemed in that moment.

The story is over. But what happened? you may ask, as my wife and daughter did when I told them. Nothing more of importance. Eckhardt was arrested. The school girl and tall boy walked away together talking quietly about one thing or another, perhaps “freedom of assembly.” Who knows? Eckhardt’s delivery truck was towed and impounded, and I discovered later that he never claimed it. The homeowner’s insurance must have paid out, because the house and hedge on Horn Lane were fixed no more than a month after the incident. There’s no physical trace now that anything ever happened there.

Our sergeant took Jim’s and my statements, and we were both reprimanded. Jim for overreacting, and me for fooling around with Animal Control to the point where they could no longer credit my calls. For years after, I would often pick up my radio to ask Jim to meet so that I could tell him about something interesting that had happened during the shift; and then I would remember that I blamed and hated him for the decision his stupid
pride had forced upon me, and I would let the hammer fall without saying a word. Once in the squad locker room, I overheard Jim tell this same story to his half-dressed brothers in blue just after he had made sergeant. It was a humorous tale full of misremembered facts and self-justifications. I wished then that I had let Bongo sink his teeth into Jim’s face just once, to give him a scar, a memory of misdeeds, so that he took away from the event at least one thing of consequence. But I could not do it then, and would not even now.

But what does all this matter? I shot a comical ape wearing a purple sweatshirt, fake bling, and sneakers. His blood poured out thick and bright onto a rain-slicked lawn, and he died. Animal Control took his corpse away. And to this day, I alone mourn for Bongo.
The guard led the prisoner along the muddy road with a short leash. The prisoner crawled on all fours, naked except for the thick leather collar around his neck. The rain had ceased some time ago; he didn’t know how long. After his third day without sleep, time went queer. An hour spent staring at the water-stained concrete of his cell seemed a day, sometimes a day seemed a minute. He recalled being questioned. A day, two days ago? The same questions again and again—about the phone call from the foreign man in the middle of the night. The prisoner felt feverish but didn’t know if it was from lack of sleep or a relapse of the malaria he had caught upon arriving here at this jungle prison so far from home. Now it must have been midmorning; the sun had not reached its zenith, and the heat and humidity were tolerable. A breeze stirred the fronds of the short palms, revealing a monkey sitting alongside the roadway like a tiny old man watching traffic.

Once, long ago, the prisoner had watched traffic like that, in front of his little store under the blue-striped awning, where he would smoke and drink tea and welcome people in from the street. Inside the shop, he had aquariums stacked floor to ceiling, dozens and dozens of aquariums, filled with tropical fish: neon-blue tetras and green tiger barbs, black-spotted silver catfish and eel-like loaches—but no guppies or goldfish. For those, customers could go anywhere. He stocked only the best, the most beautiful or strange, and would spend hours with customers talking fish and frog and snail.
The guard and the prisoner traveled away from the sheet metal and cinderblock prison buildings toward a pond near the outmost wall. Rocks buried in the mud stabbed the prisoner’s knees and the palms of his hands with vicious little points. If he tried to stand, the guard would hit him with his baton, just as the other guard had done the day before and the one the day before that. He wasn’t sure why he was being subjected to this new punishment. He thought, perhaps for a sullen look, a slow answer to a ridiculous question, lack of a hearty appetite, not flushing, or, quite possibly, no reason at all. As his captors often said, they could do anything they wanted within the bounds of the law. They were civilized men and used that word—\textit{law}—reverently as if it had some golden and objective meaning, but to the prisoner the meaning was gray. Gray like concrete, gray like his shorn beard, gray like ash. The word meant what the guards said it meant. Right now, it meant humiliation.

Except the prisoner had a secret. Some time ago, during the years of his detainment and the thousand beatings and the thousand disgraces he had suffered, he had lost his pride. He had lost it in the same way he had lost his religion, his politics, his country, and even his name. Perhaps \textit{lost} was not the best word—it had been taken from him. This secret though, he would never let his captors know. He still felt pain; and if they could not use his pride against him, they would use his body. So when they sought to degrade him, he feigned embarrassment, aped shame, blushed like a virgin. Two days ago, he crawled along this very road in a woman’s dress, yesterday in panties and a bra, and today in only his skin. When they stripped him, he hid himself like the woman they sought to make of him; and when the guard attached the collar and leash for his morning wallow in the mud, he made his face a mask of anger and shame. But he was neither
angry nor ashamed. Womanhood bore no special indignity for him, and his captors only revealed their ignorance with such behavior. Inside, he rejoiced to be free of his cell. Let my balls dangle like a goat’s, he thought, why should I care? His countrymen, family, and God had all ceased to look upon him. Only the sun would shine on his back, and the air would be as sweet as iced-tea saturated with sugar and cream.

The monkey shrieked and fled into the understory at the approach of a jeep. A mob of red parrots burst into the air like a fountain of blood into the canopy of trees surrounding the compound. The guard and prisoner moved to the verge as the jeep swung by. The guard sat on the prisoner’s back as one would mount a donkey and shouted to the two men in the jeep as they passed, “How you like my ass?” The other men howled and stopped the jeep. The prisoner hated these moments—not because of any embarrassment—but because mosquitoes waited in the tall grass at the margins of the road. Giant mosquitoes with black and white banded legs, carriers of malaria and yellow fever. They swarmed out of the grass and lit on his flanks, head, arms and legs, and groin. He shook his arms and legs to keep them off and swatted as much as he dared without dumping the guard straddling his back. If he dumped the guard, out would come the baton.

“The ass looks not stable there, friend,” the driver said. They all spoke broken English and called each other friend in front of the prisoners. No names or ranks were ever used, and their camouflage uniforms bore neither name nor insignia; so the prisoner assumed they were all soldiers because they swaggered like soldiers and relieved their boredom with cruelty like soldiers.

“Yeah, he sick alrighty,” said the prisoner’s guard, “You sick, ass?” He took out a
pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket and lit one.

The smoke curled down around the prisoner’s head. He inhaled deeply and recalled, for just a moment, what it was like to be back, seated in the shade in front of his shop, smoking a Turkish cigarette and drinking iced-tea. It was a pleasant fantasy.

The jeep’s passenger got out and walked around the front of the vehicle. He wore sunglasses that hid his eyes but the prisoner recognized him as his guard from two days before. He whispered something to the prisoner’s guard and then they both looked toward the buildings on the far side of the compound. They must have judged themselves safe, because the passenger pulled out two joints from his breast pocket. The prisoner’s guard dismounted and ground out his half-finished cigarette on the jeep’s tire and placed it back in his pack. The driver moved the vehicle to block them all from the view of the watchtower, and then, while the prisoner watched, the three guards crouched to share the joints. They were short, dark-skinned men and didn’t really have to stoop to stay out of sight. In better times, the prisoner would have chuckled at this with a tall man’s arrogance, but on all fours with mosquitoes eating at the crack of his ass, it was hard to find the humor.

More than anything, the prisoner wanted that half-cigarette his guard had put away. He could feel the need in his lungs like a hunger. When he still had his business, he would sit and smoke a pack each day while watching the pretty girls walk by with gelatos from the Italian-style ice cream shop next door. Years later and the urge to smoke had only grown more sharp, as if one cigarette would make him indolent and happy again.

Soon the soldiers were finished; they stood, laughing. The guard sat on prisoner’s back again, to the side this time. The driver started up the jeep, but the passenger only
laughed some more and said to the prisoner’s guard, “You know how fix broke down ass?”

      The prisoner’s guard shrugged.

      “Like motorcycle—kick start it,” the passenger said, and he swung his heavy black boot into the prisoner’s buttocks. The prisoner pitched forward, and his guard fell on top of him. The two from the jeep thought the joke hilarious. The prisoner groaned; the boot had caught him in the tailbone and his lower spine burned like it was on fire. The guard climbed off the prisoner. He swiped mud from his fatigues and told the prisoner to shut the fuck up. But at least the guard hadn’t drawn his baton.

      The passenger returned to the jeep, and then the driver sped off toward the buildings, splattering mud and leaving furrows behind in the road.

      By the time the guard and the prisoner neared the pond, the pain in the prisoner’s tailbone had faded and the sun was directly overhead. No interrogator had ever told him where he was on a map, but from the length of the day and sun’s position, he guessed that he was close to the equator. Where the sun had begun to dry the road, the dirt formed a gray crust atop the dark soil. They turned off the road and onto the footpath leading to the pond. Near the pond, the dirt was black. It smelled of rich earth and decomposing matter. Tall grass and young palms shaded the path so it was all slick mud, but to the relief of the prisoner, the sharp rocks were gone.

      The prisoner didn’t think this trail was part of the official tour since there seemed no way to reap extra humiliation out of it. The pond was in a depression, out of sight of the rest of the compound. The first time he was taken to this place, he thought it was so they could beat him or worse. But the guard with sunglasses had merely used the prisoner
as a bench while he smoked his joints. Mosquitoes mobbed them, but the guard didn’t mind; he just slathered on some more of a pungent liquid, the color and consistency of thick spit. The soldiers all carried clear plastic tubes of the stuff, but none had ever bothered to give the prisoner any. Given the choice of a beating or slow consumption by hoards of mosquitoes, the prisoner would have taken the beating every time. The guards here knew how to beat. They always hit the meaty parts of the body and avoided the joints and skull with their truncheons in order to leave no injury that would show up later on an x-ray—that is, should the prisoner ever be allowed to leave this place. Even now the purple stripes made by their clubs on his biceps and thighs and buttocks were fading to yellow. No, these guards were not at all like the black-masked soldiers who had stormed into the prisoner’s store one winter morning, smashing glass and leaving his bright fish gasping on the floor to be crushed under their boots. Those men had cracked him in the skull with the butt of their rifles when he asked why he was being taken; they kicked him in the face and ribs when he fell. These guards were professionals, experts in disgrace and pain. Yet they, too, wouldn’t answer the prisoner’s simple question: What had he done? He had told them everything, withheld nothing. Always, about the phone call they asked. A man he did not know, a wrong number. What could he say? He remembered nothing of the conversation.

Iridescent beetles, black wasps, and flies swarmed around an animal carcass to the side of the path. It was too big for a rat and lacked the scaly tail, but it had a rodent’s long, orangish incisors. There was enough room for the prisoner to pass by without disturbing the insects, but the guard tightened the leash and led him through them. The cloud of wasps struck the prisoner’s face like heavy rain. One stung him at the top of his
ear, which turned numb and began to swell. The beetles’ shells crunched like broken
glass under the prisoner’s knees.

They finally reached the pond. The grasses and reeds around the pond nearest the
footpath had been all trampled down, and the prisoner could see to the bottom of the tea-
colored water. Small dark shapes moved under the surface—mosquito larvae certainly,
perhaps dragonfly nymphs and water beetles, maybe even a tree frog tadpole or two. The
prisoner would have traded his right to a week’s worth of rations for a small jar. Oh, the
little habitat he could make. A true aquarist didn’t need much—so long as the glass were
clear, a jelly jar would do. This was another useless fantasy, and he shook his head to rid
himself of it.

The guard stopped. The mosquitoes instantly crowded around the prisoner. Their
wings whined as they sought a place to land. The guard told him to stop slapping at them
and then sat on the prisoner’s back, to the side like before. He took out his cigarettes.

Heat and fever made the prisoner drowsy. Time grew strange for him; his senses
lost coherence. He saw the greens of the plants and the blacks and grays of the ground,
but they formed no object for his eyes to focus on. Suck, sizzle, and blow. Cigarette
smoke. A turquoise and white striped awning. A girl with deep brown eyes. Her crimson
skirt swirled as she passed. A woman’s voice: “You can’t sleep,” it said.

The world became lucid. The prisoner’s swollen ear began to sting, a sensation
like pliers crushing his ear.

“I see you watching earlier,” the guard said. “You want cigarette?”

Parrots and monkeys squawked in the canopy. “Yes,” the prisoner replied, “Oh,
yes.” Tears formed and ran down the bridge of his nose. The guard lit a cigarette, passed
it down to him. The prisoner bit the filter off and inhaled. Every cell in his lungs sighed as one and gave thanks.

The guard turned to his side and leaned his elbow into the prisoner’s back to support himself as if he were sitting and leaning on a small table. “I should not tell you, but tonight you get to sleep,” he said, and flicked the butt of his cigarette into the pond. “The law says so.”

“Thank you,” the prisoner said. It was so hot now; the sweat dripped off his body. Anger flashed within him at the guard’s small act of kindness. After all of today—the crawling, the kick, the stinking carcass, and wasp’s sting—to treat him like a human being, to remind him of all he had lost, was the worst indignity. He wanted to jump up, spill his guard to the mud, and stride naked, upright and unbowed, through the camp. But his instinct for preservation stopped him, told him to bear, too, this disgrace.

He smoked and stared at the pond. Colors, red and blue, flashed beneath the surface of the pond. Tiny tropical fish nibbled at the cigarette butt. Tetras, neon and cardinal. Dwarf gouramis. Tiger barbs. The pond roiled with fish. Thousands upon thousands of fish, an impossible number of fish. The prisoner watched them drift and dart, chase one another in swift circles. Bronze corydoras stirred up detritus at the bottom of the pond looking for a morsel. Red empress cichlids attacked mosquito larvae. The pond must connect to others in the jungle, he surmised. Somewhere, there must be an outlet, buried among the reeds, allowing the fish to come and go. The prisoner felt a moment’s joy and could have watched them for hours as was his old habit if not for a vexing pain in his back.

He looked over his shoulder; it was the guard. The point of the man’s elbow dug
into the prisoner’s kidney. The prisoner believed he was doing it on purpose because he was bored. The guard’s face was slack, perhaps weary. And the prisoner wondered—not for the first time—if sometimes even the guards found their own cruelty a strain upon their souls.

“Why can’t you let me watch my fish?” the prisoner said.

The guard’s forehead wrinkled. “Fish?” he said. “What fish?”

“Nothing,” the prisoner said. He turned his gaze back to the pond. The water teemed with flashes of color: vibrant reds, blues, and greens; molten orange; silvery cyan and autumn gold; all waving like banners in a breeze. He went to take a drag of his cigarette, but found he had smoked it to a stub. The guard’s elbow was a dagger, stabbing into the prisoner’s kidney. “Can’t a man just watch fish and smoke a cigarette, goddamn it?”

The guard shifted, which drove the elbow deeper, and told the prisoner, “Shut you crazy mouth.” The guard’s opposite hand moved toward his baton. Up to this moment, the prisoner had been resigned to wander in the mud, to bear every indignity, to endure every curse and beating. Rage filled him. He struck backward with his own elbow, catching the guard in the throat, and the guard fell to the ground, choking. All the prisoner had wanted was a few seconds of tranquility. Surely that was not too much to ask. The prisoner crouched over the guard and tried to think of a way to apologize, to make him understand and forgive; but already the man was beginning to recover his breath, and he drew his baton from his belt. And so by one act of violence—a moment’s fury—the prisoner was forced into another. Jerking the club away from the guard, he said, “I’m sorry.”
The guard’s hands flew up defensively, but the prisoner struck again and again.

The guard’s face split open and blood gushed from the wound. Soon it was everywhere, streaking the grass, pooling on the black earth. The prisoner’s hands were red, his arms. The guard no longer moved. The prisoner threw the baton into the underbrush and stood.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. He had finally done a thing worthy of punishment. He had taken the life of a man who had given him a cigarette and spoken a few words of comfort only minutes before.

Panic gripped the prisoner. The others would come for him soon. He glanced around, but nothing moved except bright jungle birds and furtive monkeys, which gave voice to a reproachful cacophony, twining through the trees and rebounding from the earth. Below him, the guard’s good eye stared vacantly. It was brown with a ring at the inner edge of the iris of deep green, the color of an emerald catfish.

The prisoner removed his collar and slid into the pond. He sank instantly to his waist in muck, and would have sunk deeper had he not grabbed handfuls of the bank grasses. His flailing at the pond’s edge stirred up a methaneous stench. Brownish water washed the blood from him, leaving in its stead rotted leaves and pieces of reeds. Scores of mosquito larvae, trapped by his arm hair, writhed on his skin. The fish had vanished from the pond. While terror ate at his heart, the prisoner searched for an outlet but found none. Fat black leeches hung from his flesh, glistening like obscene jewels.
Caleb tried to hide his limp as he dry-mopped racquetball court five. Court Sports, where he worked as the closing janitor four nights a week, was the only fitness center in Caldwell, the podunk Idaho town where he had grown up. Surrounded by Caldwell’s rutted highways, drainage ditches, and great square fields of sugar beets, he teetered, as the town itself teetered, between city and rural life, uncomfortable with the former and embarrassed by the latter.

Caleb rode bulls. He did it for the rush, for the nervous anticipation building to that suspended moment when the bucking chute would open, for the eight seconds of savage gyration atop a maddened beast. He did it to be as good as his older brother, Rick, had been; to gain his family’s notice once again; to hear the crowd roar after the ride buzzer squawked like a pissed off duck. And he was good. Last weekend he’d taken first place, earning him a berth in the National High School Rodeo finals in Cheyenne this July and a front-page picture of him straddling the seventeen-hundred pound brahma crossbreed Pandora’s Box.

As he hobbled and mopped, his mind wandered through the night’s routine. In an hour perhaps, when the bodybuilders, swimmers, and racquetball players were gone, he would shroud the pool in its crackling faded-blue plastic cover and then vacuum the threadbare carpets. He both dreaded and anticipated the musky reek of the little hanging
wastebaskets he would empty in the women’s bathroom stalls. As always, the aging iron in the upstairs weight room would stain the calluses on his hands rust-orange as he racked the plates.

This janitor’s life paid for the life Caleb kept secret—paid for the rodeo fees, the rope, the rosin. This was the central contradiction in Caleb’s life: for even though he wanted his family to admire him for his ability, he had to keep it secret from them, because his parents had forbidden him to ride after Rick’s accident in the Kansas rodeo. But now his other life was secret no more, thanks to the newspaper photos. If his family didn’t know already, they soon would. One good thing had come of it all: the high school cowboys who’d gone around calling him a citified poser had to eat their fat-headed words.

Tonight he worked with Cathy. Of all the front desk workers, she was his favorite; in part because she helped him with his work if he was slow to finish, but mostly because she had mouth like a NASCAR mechanic. She called Caleb “Kid” and liked to shock him by discussing her sex life in graphic detail. On occasion, she liked to leer at him theatrically, like a dirty old man in a movie, and say, “What’s the age of consent in Idaho?” Caleb had no idea but would answer, “Sixteen.” “I’m twice your age,” she would respond. “If only you were a little older, Kid, the things I could show you.” He always pretended to be shocked because Cathy seemed to like that, but she said nothing worse than what his friend, Zipper, talked about every day at school, though she had been more reserved lately.

“Caleb.” A girl’s voice echoed throughout the racquetball court. “Whatcha doing?”
Shifting the mop handle to one hand, Caleb searched the court observation deck. Each court was a tall white-walled box open at the top rear section to allow spectators. Julie from his biology class was leaning over the low wall that protected those watching from the hardwood floor twenty feet below. Her light brown hair hung forward to the sides of her eyes like blinders on a horse. She had a broad face with a square jaw line that Caleb admired for its appearance of strength. For weeks they’d exchanged lightning glances Thursday mornings across the lab bench they shared.

Julie was a gymnast, and she lifted weights every other day at Court Sports. After her workouts, he often saw her stretching on the weight room mats, doing splits in bright blue Lycra tights.


“What’s it look like?” he answered.

Julie shrugged. Her friend nudged her and snickered.

“I saw your picture in the paper,” said Julie.

Caleb nodded. “Yeah.”

“I didn’t know—”

“Where are your shit-kickers?” interrupted Julie’s friend. “Don’t you guys wear shit-kickers and cowboy hats and big shiny belt buckles?”

This was yet another reason Caleb kept his bull riding life secret. “Look,” he said, “it’s just a damn costume for the rodeo. I have to wear it, or I can’t compete.”

To tell the truth, he wanted nothing more than to blend in with the mass of t-shirts
and baggy jeans at school. No way would he single himself out for ridicule by wearing ass-hugging Wranglers, a silver belt buckle, and pointy-toed cowboy boots. Nor would he chew tobacco, nodding gruffly to the other boys while strolling down hallways as if they were prairie corridors and he some aloof, mythic figure. He wanted to ride bulls and be done with it.

“Caleb, show us your muscles,” Julie said, pushing back her t-shirt sleeve and flexing her left biceps.

“What?”

“You heard me. Show us.”

“Yeah,” Julie’s friend said, “show us.”

Caleb leaned on the mop. “Why?”

“Cause we want to see,” said Julie. “What you do—I know you have muscles. Now show ‘em.”

He curled his arm at his side and flexed.

“No, no,” Julie said. “We can’t see. Pull back your sleeve.”

He did. The girls laughed. Julie flexed again, and her friend squeezed the hump of her biceps. “Hers is bigger.”

Their laughter bounced and echoed in the court, resounding and growing until Caleb could hear nothing else. He turned his back and continued mopping. Up and back. Five times to finish a court. Two down, three to go.

“What would you do if I spit on the court?” asked Julie.

“Gross,” said her friend.

Caleb glanced up. Julie bent over the banister, stretching her hands down the wall.
She leaned out into the court and made spitting motions with her lips. To Caleb, the motions looked just like exaggerated kisses. He grinned.

“I’d probably mop it up.”

“What if I spit on you?”

“You wouldn’t,” he said. Almost done. Another trip, then on to the last court.

“She would,” said Julie’s friend. “She spits all over the place. Loogies.” She faked the harsh throaty sound of hawking a snotball.

“Come here, Caleb.” Julie pursed her lips, blew a spit bubble.

“Why would I do that?” he shouted without looking, angling his head toward the front wall so that the sound would bounce back and up to Julie like a racquetball. Caleb finished the last run and then pulled open the three-quarter-sized door leading out to the hallway. He brushed blue-gray rolls of lint embedded with hair and white paint chips onto the orange carpet in the hallway to vacuum up later.

In the next court, Caleb had made one round up and back before they found him again.

“Caleb, look up.” Julie’s booming voice echoed around him.

Julie leaned out directly over him. She let a tiny droplet of spit fly. He stepped aside and swiped the mop where her spit landed. Caleb stuck his tongue out at Julie. She pretended to spit again, and he pretended to catch it in his mouth like a raindrop.

“Disgusting,” said Julie’s friend. “I’ll give you a dollar if you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Catch her spit,” she said, “in your mouth.”

“What’s your name?” Caleb asked.
“Abby.”

_Ha!_ An “A” name. He tried to pervert it. Mix it with another “A” name for a tiny revenge. Abbyhole or Assingail maybe. No, those were lame. “Abby, you’ll give me a dollar if I catch her spit in my mouth?”

“Duh. That’s what I said.”

“Show me the dollar.”

“I’m working out,” Abby said. “I don’t have it on me.”

“All right, you go get it.” Caleb shoved the mop aside and propped the handle in the corner.

Julie looked at her friend. “No. That’s gross. You do it.”

“You’re the spitter. You do it.”

Hands on hips, Caleb waited. They were goofing around; they wouldn’t really do it. Caleb didn’t care either way. It was a pleasure just to flirt.

“No. I’m not gonna do it,” said Julie.

“You have to. You said—” The two disappeared from the observation deck. Caleb heard whispers above him. Then nothing for a long while. It seemed they’d bored of the game. He grabbed the mop handle and finished the court.

Julie’s and Abby’s heads popped back into view. Abby waved a dollar.

“Hi.” Julie smiled awkwardly. “Ready?”

“Yup.” He didn’t understand why she’d changed her mind. Maybe Abby had offered _her_ a dollar. Maybe it was a trick—she’d put something grotty in her mouth. If so, it couldn’t be any worse than the horseshit he’d bitten into after Pandora’s Box had gored him and tossed him like a ragdoll.
Julie smiled again, made a couple loogie-hawking sounds. She grasped the wall with both hands and bent farther into the court. Her cheeks poked outwards as she swirled her tongue around the inside of her mouth.

What the hell was she doing, Caleb wondered, lassoing all the saliva in her mouth?

Julie puckered her lips, then parted them and held a foamy white ball of spit in place with suction.

Tilting his head back, Caleb opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue.

“Oh, gross,” said Abby. “He’s gonna do it.”

Julie spat. The white globe fell, spinning as it dropped.

Like when the bucking chute opened and the bull tensed under him, the moment stretched in Caleb’s mind.

Last Thursday lab, they’d swabbed each other’s mouths and spread the swab on agar plates. Julie’s plate had grown a microbial jungle. Even now the fauna of her mouth teemed inside the falling spitball—feeding, growing, dividing. A whole world, writhing with life, plummeted toward Caleb’s open mouth.

He anticipated the warm glob, thinking it, perhaps, a prelude to other exchanges. Midnight on the docks of Lake Lowell: they would listen to the lap of the water, talk about Scooby Doo or what came after graduation, and then kiss in the warm, dark, Idaho night. He would cup her wiry gymnast biceps, stroke the line of her jaw, and she would tangle her fingers in his hair.

Accelerating toward Caleb, the spitball descended. Julie closed her parted lips. Caleb adjusted an inch to the right. Should he dodge at the last moment? No. Abby
swung her hand upward to cover her mouth, which stretched wide with an enthralled and revolted sneer.

_Plop!_ He caught the spit in his mouth, a little to the side. A tiny bit missed, dribbling from his lips down his chin. The air had robbed it of warmth. He swallowed the cold, thick glob. Caleb wiped his chin with the back of his hand.

Julie threw her head back and laughed.

“Oh-my-gawd, that is _so_ disgusting,” Abby screeched into the court.

The girls vanished from the observation deck. When they did not reappear, he called out their names; and when they did not answer, he seized the mop and stomped out of the court. He’d blown it. Might as well strap on his prize silver belt buckle and seek the high-haired buckle bunnies. Stick with his own—except they weren’t his own, not really. Caleb had no idea who his own were. That was the problem.

Caleb set the mop near the court he had skipped with the two flabby bald guys inside dividing time between racquetball and wiping their dripping, egg-shaped heads with terrycloth wristbands. There was still half an hour until the center closed, so he grabbed the cleaning solution and a cloth from the front desk before hiking upstairs to the weight room. The observation deck connected to it, and Caleb hoped to find out where the girls had gone.

The Universal machines and weight racks obscured his view, but Caleb could hear voices coming from the far side near the observation deck. It sounded like the girls. He swiped at the weight stations with his cloth as he made his way toward the far wall.

Halfway there, he could see Abby’s dark hair bob and hear her high-pitched laughter. He spied Julie’s blue tights. The two girls were stretching on the mats.
“...yeah, but Mr. Birkhardt has all that hair coming out. He should, like, shave his ears or something,” said Abby.

Inspiration came to him then -- the “A” name; suitably juvenile and a perfect fit for her, it popped, unbidden, into his mind. Gripping the spray bottle like a pistol, he crept forward using the barbell rack for cover.

Caleb sprang out, rolled, and pointed the spray bottle at Abby. “Where’s my dollar, Assy?”

The girls started. “Jerk!” said Abby. “You scared the crap out of me.”

“You owe him a buck,” said Julie.

“He’s gross. I don’t have to pay him anything.”

Julie shrugged to Caleb and returned to her stretching. Sliding into a full split, she raised her arms over her head. Ta-da!

“Pay up,” Caleb said, watching Julie hold the split.

Abby stood. “I didn’t think you’d actually do it.”

He pulled the spray bottle trigger, but it was set to mist. A lemon-tinged ammonia cloud wafted over his hand.

“Loser,” said Abby. She stalked away toward the stairs.

“Assy,” Caleb hissed and sprayed mist in her direction once more.

He turned to Julie. She came out of her splits and sat with her legs together before her.

“Is it dangerous?” she asked, bending forward at the waist and grabbing the bottoms of her feet to stretch her hamstrings.

“This?” Caleb held up the spray bottle. “Not unless you drink it.”
Julie cocked her head. “You know what I mean.”

Caleb wondered if he should tell her about his brother. In Phillipsburg, Kansas, the bull Mama’s Delight had thrown Rick off before the buzzer. He’d landed badly—on his stomach. Stunned, he couldn’t stand fast enough. The bull’s hind feet came down next to his head, barely missing him, but the front feet smashed down on Rick’s back. His spine had shattered.

He decided not to tell her, not yet anyway. “They say, it’s not a matter of if you get hurt, it’s when you get hurt.” He took a couple steps away to clean the bench press.

“Have you been hurt?”

“Nothing serious.”

“Like what?”

“Sprained my ankle on a bad landing once. And last weekend, that bull you saw in the paper gave me a little nudge in the thigh. Tossed me seven feet in the air.” He made a circle a tad larger than a saucer with both hands over the injury to his thigh.

“Bruise that big,” he said, and those last words recalled to him the locker room episode with Cathy. This incident, he was sure, was responsible for her recent restraint.

About a month back, she’d been talking all evening about this great slide she’d made into home plate for her softball league tourney. She’d rounded third like a blonde juggernaut (her exact words), slid into home, and spiked the catcher. The catcher had dropped the ball. She was safe, and they’d won the game because of it. The trophy she most admired from the day was the gigantic bruise she’d earned from the slide. She claimed it stretched from the middle of her right ass cheek to the middle of her thigh and had given the manager, the fitness trainer, the aerobics instructor, and anyone else who
cared to see a peek at the top of it by sliding her jeans down a bit in the office.

Caleb had been skimming the outdoor Jacuzzi and pool at the time of the viewing and only heard about it later while Cathy helped him clear the tile floor to mop the men’s locker room. The patrons had gone, and she’d turned the gym radio to the classic rock station. A heavily distorted Led Zeppelin song blasted through the speaker system. At the mirrored counter near the locker room door, she stopped Caleb to show him her trophy.

“I want you to see the whole thing,” she said, regarding him strangely in the mirror as she unbuttoned her pants. “Come close, where the light’s good.”

Caleb stood behind her where she wanted him. She slid her jeans down. Underneath, she wore pastel-striped cotton panties. A tremor spread from his stomach to his groin. He felt a pang of guilt for his body’s reaction. It didn’t seem quite right. After all, she was just showing him a bruise. She slid her underwear down and bent to push them and her jeans to her knees. He saw the whole thing, a small mound covered in fine yellow down that Caleb imagined would feel as soft and warm as a new-hatched chick.

“What do you think?” Cathy looked over her shoulder at him. “Wild, huh?”

Her skin was bronze without tan lines and the bruise, a cloudy black, covered most of her right butt cheek. It followed the curve of her bottom but didn’t quite make it to the middle of her thigh.

“It’s shaped like Australia.” He grazed the bruise lightly with his fingertips. His hand quivered. Tracing the outline of the bruise at the top, he asked, “Does it hurt?”

“Not at all.” Cathy placed her hand over his, pressing down as she leaned slightly over the counter. Her skin was smooth and hot under his palm and her hand was rough and cold on the back of his own. Caleb’s mind burst with a thousand conflicting
impulses—to press against, to squeeze, to kiss, to shout, to fuck, to flee. Was she teasing him? Or just showing him a bruise? His whole body began to shake. The clashing desires overwhelmed him, and he stood there helpless.

After a long moment, Cathy tugged her jeans up. She looked back at him in the mirror, pursing her lips in a way that suggested disappointment.

It seemed she would say something, but the locker room door swung open, startling them both. The assistant manager, who rarely ever came in at night, poked his head in and asked Cathy what remained to be done. He said he was going to turn down the music and work for a while in the office. Caleb noticed the music again. The Zeppelin song still played, now beginning to fade out. The assistant manager left them alone. Cathy laughed nervously and mouthed, “That was close.”

That was when Caleb realized that he had gotten it all wrong. She hadn’t been teasing—well, she had but at the same time, the offer had been real. Only he’d been too stupid and afraid to sort it out correctly. He had blown his chance. Upon reflection, though, it was the best possible outcome. If they had started anything or even delayed much longer, they would have been caught and fired for sure. And without the job, Caleb couldn’t afford to ride.

Julie raised her eyebrows at his description of his injury. She seemed impressed. “Aren’t you afraid?”

“Sure.” Caleb sat down on the bench. Truth was maybe every other year someone died. The bull, Taking Care of Business, had taken care of Lane Frost in ’89. There were worse things to be afraid of though. Bodacious had broken Tuff Hedeman’s face in ’95, and the doctors took over six hours to rebuild it; and it was better now, but you could still
Rick hadn’t been so lucky. Five surgeries down and who knew how many to go. He could walk for about an hour, maybe two, in the morning before the pressure on his spine became too much to bear, then it was back to the wheelchair. Some nights he shot up in bed, screaming from the pain. He said it felt like electric jolts running down his legs.

“I try not to think about it,” Caleb said and was quiet after.

The silence lengthened. Each time he peeked back at Julie, she quickly looked away as if she had just happened to glance in his direction. She planted her feet firmly on the mat, laid back, and placed her hands above her head. With one swift motion, she raised her hips into a backbend, bridging on hands and feet.

Caleb surveyed the sleek arc of her body. The blue tights revealed powerful angular thigh muscles and round butt.

Julie turned her head toward him and caught him admiring her. She sank from her bridge. She smiled, and there was something wicked in it—a subtle curling at the corners of her mouth. Spinning on her butt, she swung her legs toward him and thrust her pelvis upward, bridging into the air.

The slight hill of her crotch confronted him. She had done it on purpose. Caleb had to do something. Like the moment in the bathroom, this moment would never come again, and it didn’t matter what Abby or anyone else would think. The only thing that mattered was what Julie thought.

She adjusted her feet. The moment was slipping. Julie arced higher now, and her jutting hip bones and ribcage formed a saddle-like hollow of her tan stomach, suggesting
an action to Caleb’s body. It compelled him forward before he could second guess himself. His mind was passive, a mere translator of his body’s speech, which said, *You are Caleb the bull-rider not Caleb the dry-mopper.*

When his mind caught up, it agreed and answered: Yes. No more hiding a secret life. He liked rodeo, rock-n-roll, baggy jeans, and city girls, and he would have them all.

He limped slowly at first, dragging one foot, then fast. Faster. He sprang atop her, straddled her waist. He bore all his weight on tip-toes. His wounded thigh burned. Julie uttered a surprised cry. With his right hand he reached under her shoulder, supported her, pulled her tight against him. And even though in competition it would mean disqualification, he swung round his left hand and slapped her shiny flank. “Yaw!” he hooted.

Julie collapsed under him into a tangle of arms and legs, each struggling to move in a different direction. Eventually coordination was achieved, and she scuttled out from under his legs and crab-crawled away until she reached the edge of the mat. Her eyes were wide with astonishment, or fear, or anger, or—something. Whatever it was, it wasn’t the reaction Caleb had been hoping for. He wanted to pound his head against the wall. How could he have been so stupid? Julie had nothing like Cathy’s experience; and instead of delighting her, he'd freaked her out.

“Julie?” Caleb knelt down and scooted to her. “I thought—I don’t know what I thought. Sorry.”

She looked up. Her startled expression was gone, but her face flushed as she said, “Not your fault. I shouldn’t have—” She turned her head away from him. “Never mind,” she continued a second later. “Help me up, will you?”
Caleb stood, pulling Julie up with him. He thought maybe he hadn’t totally screwed things up after all; and, remembering his earlier fantasy, he asked her to go to the docks with him when he got off work. She said she would go, but then said that she couldn’t unless Abby could also come because they had used each other as excuses to their parents to stay out late. He cringed inwardly but smiled when he said that of course Abby could come. Julie agreed to meet up at eleven in the Court Sports parking lot, and she left to shower and change.

The squeak of shoes and thock plock of the racquetball in court three had stopped. The egg-headed men were sitting, no doubt, at the front counter drinking Coors and trying to flirt with Cathy. She hated them. If he went downstairs now, she would pointedly focus all her attention on him, maybe grab his butt and whisper into his ear, “If only you were a little older—” like she used to. But it wouldn’t be real anymore. It would just be to get the obnoxious old guys to go home to their wives, and so Caleb decided to vacuum the weight room instead.

He hardly noticed his injury as he worked and tried to think up a plan for ditching Abby once they arrived at the lake. The plans involved running very fast or somehow getting Abby to fish, and all required the collusion of Julie, which did not seem likely. As his shift passed, however, Caleb began to worry about what Abby was saying while they were away. He imagined her repeating her earlier words, “loser,” “janitor,” “disgusting,” over and over to Julie. By eleven o’clock, he had convinced himself the girls would ditch him instead.

When he signed out, Cathy noted he was finished earlier than usual and asked if it had anything to do with the girls waiting in the parking lot. Caleb’s fears fell away, but
he covered his relief with a long swagger and a short “Yup” as he passed her behind the counter. Cathy mussed his hair, nodded appreciatively, and said, “Well, you go, Kid.” She tried to give him a parting grope, but he sidestepped it and took off toward the exit.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” she called out after him. Caleb snorted and told her not to worry. An immense joy welled inside him; he laughed and hustled out the door.

The night was just as he had imagined, still and warm, smelling of sage from the vacant lot next to the fitness center. A full moon revealed Julie and Abby standing between a ruby-red MG and a green Ford SUV. In his mind, he could already feel Julie’s back pressed against his chest as they talked, see the silver and black rings spread from the pebbles they threw into the lake under in the moonlight. His aching cheeks told him he was grinning like a hayseed, but he couldn’t stop as he went over to meet the girls. A slight swagger to his step made the limp less noticeable.

Behind Julie and Abby, the SUV’s passenger door swung open. A tall guy with spiky black hair stepped out. He closed the phone he was holding and said to the girls, “There’s nothing going on tonight.”

Caleb’s grin collapsed, and his hopes for the evening fell with it. The guy was a senior on the basketball team—Geoff Mingus, but people at school called him Goof Dingus, mostly because it rhymed, but also because he asked a lot of stupid questions, or so Caleb had heard. They didn’t actually have a class together. Occasionally, they passed in the hall but had never spoken. Geoff pocketed the phone and then rested his arms on Abby’s shoulders to indicate possession.

After Julie introduced them, Geoff’s first words were, “Anyone got beer? ‘Cause I
don’t go to the lake without beer.” Then he smiled in a way he probably considered disarming.

“My dad usually keeps an extra case in our carport fridge,” Caleb volunteered, “but we’ll have to go to the house to get it.” Even while he was saying this, he found that he resented the way Geoff had commanded the center of attention. What he hated more was his own dog-like eagerness to please.

They followed him home. Caleb drove his hand-me-down, dirt-colored Chevy pickup that had been Rick’s; the others rode in Geoff’s parents’ SUV. Julie would have ridden with Caleb, but Abby raised a stink and said her parents might still call so they couldn’t be separated. Caleb lived on the outskirts of town, in an old white two-story farmhouse surrounded by new suburban developments. At one time they had been well-off and owned about a thousand acres around the house, but Rick’s medical bills had forced his parents to sell all but two hundred acres, upon which his dad still farmed seed corn. Since Dad and Rick no longer rode, they had sold their horses, keeping only Caleb’s gelding and his mother’s mare in the small pasture behind the house. Mom used to help on the farm, but now she worked the Feed & Seed register for the medical insurance.

The drive cleared Caleb’s head, and he realized that if he wanted to see Julie he would have to get Abby on his side somehow. Otherwise it would be a battle between them for Julie’s affection. He thought maybe he should show the girls the horses. City girls or not, he didn’t know one that wasn’t off her nut for horses.

He parked in his usual spot to the side of the driveway, and Geoff parked along the row of tall poplars that hid the house from the road. No one used the carport anymore;
the wheelchair ramp took up too much space. The dogs barked from their kennels in
back. Ghostly light flickered from the big picture window at the front of the house, and
Caleb knew that his dad and brother would be on the couch together in the living room,
maybe watching Letterman, maybe Leno; they’d have Mom’s ratty, brown and orange
afghan spread over their legs like two old women. Mom was, no doubt, in bed already;
she kept the same schedule, week or weekend.

Julie and the others stepped out of the SUV. Caleb waved them to follow into the
car port.

Geoff was saying that the place looked familiar, that he thought he had been here
before. Caleb heard stomping from inside the house, the sound of the kitchen window
that faced the back yard opening, and his dad’s voice yell, “Zane! Louis! You two keep
quiet.” Caleb looked in the fridge. The only beer was a half-rack of Hamm’s. He snatched
it out. The stomping in the house came closer. A bulky shadow appeared at the carport
screen door.

“That you, Caleb?”

“Yessir.”

“You stealin’ my beer?”

“Yessir.”

His dad’s silhouette shifted. “Who you got there?”

“Friends. Julie, Abby, Geoff.”

“You stayin’?”

“For a little bit.”

“Let the dogs out so their ruckus don’t raise the neighbors.” The figure turned to
“And don’t spook the horses.”

“Yessir.”

Caleb led the others though a picket gate into the back yard.

“Shit,” said Geoff, “Your old man’s cool. Mine would freak.” Julie and Abby nodded in agreement. Caleb said, “Yeah,” but he was thinking that, really, his dad just didn’t give a damn anymore. He spent all his time and energy on Rick now.

The back yard smelled of hay and horse manure. Closer to the kennels under the walnut tree, the scent was overwhelmingly dog. Caleb handed the beer off to Geoff while he unlatched the kennel and introduced the two blue heelers inside to everyone. Geoff cracked open beers and passed them around. “Not bad out here for B-F-E,” he said.

“That mangy cur with the black patch on his face is Zany, and that porky sonovabitch with the red bandana ‘round his neck is Looney.” Caleb pointed them out. “Zany sometimes has a blue bandana, but he keeps eating them.” His dad used to take them out around the farm while he worked, but that had been years ago now. With school and work and rodeo, Caleb didn’t have time and felt bad about it. A dog didn’t belong cooped up in a kennel all day.

Yapping, the dogs danced around them. Abby grimaced when Zany took a dog’s keen interest in her crotch. “Ugh.” She pushed his head away. Julie and Caleb shared a smile while she petted Looney. “You said you had horses?” Julie said.

“Right this way.” Caleb guided them through the pasture gate, but before they had reached the corral, Julie caught sight of something and asked, “What’s that?” She pointed a dozen yards off to a green 55-gallon barrel. It hung several feet above the ground suspended by inner tubes to three railroad ties set like fence posts in a triangle. The barrel
was wrapped around the middle with a black strip of carpet.

“That’s just Green Hornet. He’s my—”

“This stuff tastes like piss, but I guess it does the job all right,” Geoff interrupted, tossing his empty to the dirt at his feet. He cracked a second beer. “Green Hornet? Bruce Lee, right?”

“My practice bull,” Caleb finished saying to the girls. Stooping down to pick up the empty can, he said to Geoff, “Bruce Lee was Cato in The Green Hornet.” Caleb tossed the can over the fence into the back yard. “You gotta keep the pasture clear of things that could hurt the horses. Under their hooves they have tender foot pads.”

Geoff nodded grudgingly. “I would’ve figured you more for a David Carradine fan.”

Julie and Abby had walked on toward Hornet. Caleb ignored Geoff’s baiting. There were three of them, so he thought why not give the bull a try and went to the tack room to get Rick’s old bull rope and glove. He started to pick up the rosin but reconsidered and grabbed up a helmet instead. He couldn’t carry the gear and his Hamm’s, so he left the can behind.

“My brother Rick and I built Hornet a few years back.” His thought had been to offer the first ride to Julie, but then realized he had an opportunity to get in good with Abby. He handed her the helmet. “Why don’t you give it a try? We’ll start slow.”

“No way. It’s like five feet up there.” She pushed away the helmet. “I want to see someone else first.”

“Julie?” He held the helmet out to her, but Geoff snagged it out of her hands.

“Are you Ricky Murray’s little brother?” Geoff asked as he tried to fit the helmet
Caleb slung the bull rope around the barrel. “How do you know Rick?” He handed the riding glove to Geoff.

“I’ve been here before.” Geoff pointed to the weeping willow at the far end of the pasture. “Right there. I tagged along with my older sister to a bonfire right there one year when I was a sophomore and your brother was a senior.”

Caleb remembered the bonfires. His mom had said he was too young to participate, but he remembered Rick and his friends yelling and stomping and singing country and western songs around the fire. Raising hell. Spooking the horses.

“Boost me up,” said Geoff. Caleb turned him around to face the front of the bull and boosted him up. Geoff immediately slid off the other side. “I’m not drunk.”

Caleb, together with Julie and Abby to stabilize, got him up on the barrel. It hung low. The guy was too heavy. Caleb shook his head and wondered why he was wasting his time with these other two, when all he wanted was a moment’s peace with Julie. He cinched the bull rope and told Geoff to wrap the end once around his hand. “No more than that or you’ll risk getting hung up when you come off.”

Surprisingly, Geoff did as he was told. “I noticed the ramp,” he said. “Your brother still fucked up? I heard about the accident from my sister.”

“He’s still pretty bad, yeah,” Caleb said, and he jerked the barrel to see if Geoff was ready, also to quiet him.

“Caleb?” Julie said.

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Ricky got stepped on by a bull—where was it? Texas? Oklahoma?”
Caleb gave him a sullen glare for an answer.

“Anyway, in the paper it said he’d be walking again in no time, but I guess not, huh?”

“Shut up and get ready,” said Caleb and showed Abby and Julie how to yank the tubes at the front of the barrel. He told Geoff to grip the barrel with his legs, keep his torso up if he could, raise his free arm, and lock the rope arm to his thigh and waist. “You ride for eight seconds. If you touch the barrel or yourself with your free hand, it’s over. Understand?”

He nodded. “Go for it.”

Julie and Abby tugged side to side and up and down on the tubes. Caleb yanked down the tube at the rear as hard as he could and then thrust it upward again equally hard. Geoff had time to get out half a “Yee-haw” before he was pitched head first over the front of the barrel. It sounded like: “Yee-e-ooph!”

“Anything broke?” Caleb asked as he crouched over Geoff.

“I think I broke my beer bone.”

“Which bone would that be?” Caleb said. “This one, perhaps?” He rapped on the helmet, and then he stuck out his hand and helped Geoff to stand. “How do you get down the court and dribble a basketball at the same time, Dingus?”

Abby surprised them all when she traded Geoff’s beer back to him for the helmet and glove. “I’m next!” she exclaimed. “You’ve got to promise to be gentle, though.” Caleb locked his hands together and boosted her up, cinched the bull rope, and helped her wrap the rope end around her gloved hand. She grabbed Caleb’s head for balance. “I’m scared.”
“Remember to grip the bull with your legs,” Caleb said. “Your free arm goes up—it will help keep you upright and on top, which is the side of the bull you want to be on.”

They took positions at the inner tubes. Caleb cautioned them to start slow. When Abby nodded, they rocked the tubes. The barrel dipped and rose like a buoy in mild waters. Julie laughed along with Abby and darted a sly glance at Caleb. For him, Julie’s look made every frustration of the evening worthwhile.

A moment later the night turned to shit. Geoff scowled and dropped his third empty on the pasture. Caleb told him to pick it up, but instead of doing it, Geoff accused Caleb of trying to buck him off on purpose. In response Caleb said, “That’s the whole point of riding the barrel, Dingus.” This pissed Geoff off more, and he jerked the inner tube too hard which threw Abby to the side. Caleb caught her before she slipped all the way off. But while he pushed her upright with his hands on her side, one slipped to her breast, and Geoff did not seem to think it was an accident. He came around the post where Julie was standing and telling him to calm down, and took a swing at Caleb, who was still trying to help Abby up onto the barrel. Caleb couldn’t just drop Abby, so he turned and took Geoff’s punch to the side of his head. Some of the fist caught Caleb’s ear, inflicting a bright pain near the top. He pushed Abby the rest of the way up and confronted Geoff.

“You think you can hurt me?” Caleb said, balling his hands into fists. “Your punches are nothing.” Geoff stepped away, but Caleb surged right back in his face. “Hit me again.”

At this point, Zany and Looney charged forward, barking and growling at both of
them, forcing them to separate.

“You can’t hurt me. Not unless you weigh a ton and sprout horns.”

“Yeah?” Geoff sneered. He dug out his wallet and took a dollar bill from it. “Nice technique you got. That some kind of redneck mating ritual?”

“Geoff!” Abby stamped her foot. She’d gotten down from the barrel and stood off to one side. Julie was beside her. Apparently, they had told Geoff the story on the way over.

“I’ll have to find me a girl who’ll spit on me. Just once, you know, to see what I’m missing.” Geoff flicked the dollar at Caleb.

“You sonovabitch!” Caleb’s vision narrowed to one dim circle that had as its sole aim to tear the bastard into little bloody chunks. He likely would have achieved his goal if Geoff hadn’t stumbled backward over the half rack of beer as he tried to avoid Caleb. The second Geoff fell, however, the dogs went for him. Geoff landed hard on his back with his legs up in the air. Zany and Looney each chomped a different pant leg, Zany near Geoff’s left ankle and Looney at Geoff’s right knee. They growled, shaking their heads and Geoff with them. They pulled at Geoff’s legs in a fierce tug of war. Geoff cried out and slapped both his hands down over his crotch.

“Louis! Zane!” Caleb shouted. The dogs ignored him, so he jumped into the fray. He grabbed hold of Looney’s bandana and slapped him on the snout. Geoff was shouting, “Get them off me,” and kicking his legs, which only riled the dogs further. While prying apart Looney’s jaws with his free hand, Caleb tried to shove Zany’s head away with one foot. Looney let go of Geoff’s pant leg, and Caleb pulled him by the bandana to Zany, who let go as soon as Caleb loomed over him. The dogs continued barking at Geoff. Zany
made another lunge for Geoff when he scrambled to his feet, but Caleb thrust his leg out between them and blocked the dog.

“Zane!” Caleb yelled. “Knock it off!”

Zany kept growling. Caleb snatched a beer from the Hamm’s box and slammed it to the ground at the dog’s feet, where it erupted in a white fountain of fizz. The smell of cheap beer filled the air. Zany shied away from the can.

“They get you?” Caleb asked.

Geoff patted his right knee and then lifted his left pant leg above his ankle. “No, but they destroyed my jeans,” he said. “Do you know how much a pair of Diesel’s cost?”

“No idea,” Caleb said. “How about you leave while I keep these dogs in check, and we call it even?”

“Piece of shit,” Abby said, running to Geoff.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s all my fault,” Caleb said.

Abby ignored Caleb and said to Julie, “Let’s go.” But Julie shook her head. Geoff and Abby turned away and hustled toward the pasture gate.

The horses neighed loudly, bumped against their stalls, and kicked at the stables’ walls. This reminded Caleb, and he yelled after Abby, “Wait, Assy! You forgot to see the horseys!”

She didn’t answer, but the kitchen window opened and Caleb’s dad bellowed out, “Dammit, Caleb. What the hell’s goin’ on? You spooked the horses.”

“Sorry, Dad,” he shouted back. “I’ll take care of it,”

“You better, or I’m gonna come out there.”

A suppressed laugh startled Caleb. Julie had come up next to him. Her hand
covered her mouth, but she was definitely laughing. Still furious, he glared at her.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“This is all so ridiculous,” she said. “I haven’t had this much fun in a long time.”

“This was fun to you?” Caleb walked away and picked up the beer cans. Her response astonished him, but for the most part he simply couldn’t believe she was still here, that she hadn’t run off when the other two had. By the time Caleb had kenneled the dogs, the horses had quieted down, and he could hear the crickets trill under the water trough again and the fainter croaking of the frogs at the marshy end of the pasture.

Returning to the practice bull, Caleb spied Julie on top of Green Hornet rocking her hips as if she were riding. Her body gyrated like a snake and Caleb thought it the sexiest thing he’d ever seen even including Cathy’s “the whole thing.”

“How did you get up there on your own?” he said.

She laughed. It was a carefree sound, as relaxed as if they had spent a peaceful evening at the lake. “I vaulted.” She raised both arms over her head. Ta-da!

“Of course,” said Caleb.

“What is your horse’s name?”

“Lancelot.”

A solitary cloud wandered across the sky, obscuring the moon, casting Julie’s face in darkness. Caleb considered the words Geoff had said before flicking the dollar at him. He wondered if her spitting on him meant what Geoff seemed to imply. Maybe not on the surface, but deep down, where even she wasn’t aware of it.

“You know, we’re rednecks,” he continued. “Every one of us. Sometimes I think animals are superior in ways that really do matter. The bull that stomped my brother’s
spine to pieces didn’t do it out of spite.”

“You’re a good guy, Caleb.”

He wanted to believe her. He wanted to believe that she was a good person as well, but a thought nagged him. What did she want from him? He certainly wasn’t popular at school or particularly handsome. So he asked, “Why didn’t you leave with Abby?”

“Come here.” Julie leaned down, grabbed two fistfuls of his shirt, and attempted to yank him close but only succeeded in pulling herself off the barrel. Caleb caught her, set her down. They laughed, and Julie threaded her strong arms under Caleb’s and around his back.

“You have something of mine,” she said, “and I it want back.” She kissed Caleb. Caleb returned the kiss, hesitantly. Once, twice—a little awkward at first but not sloppy. They took their time. When they broke, they gazed at each other, seeming to relish the moment. For Caleb, the embrace was sweeter than any before, and yet tainted with the aftertaste of doubt. Why wouldn’t she answer his question?

“Come on,” Caleb said. “I’ll take you home.”

Together they crossed the pasture, the back yard, the carport in silence. When they passed Rick’s wheelchair ramp, Caleb’s thoughts turned to the next day and the coming conflict. Tomorrow, he would tell his parents about the bull-riding. Likely, they already knew and were only waiting for him to come clean. He wasn’t looking forward to it, but if he wanted them to take him seriously, he’d have to accept responsibility for his actions.

He and Julie reached the truck and got in, but Caleb didn’t start the engine.
Instead he told her the full story about his brother’s accident. When he finished, she said,
“That’s awful, Caleb. I’m sorry.” She touched his wrist.

Caleb turned toward her, slid his other hand over hers, and caught her eyes with his own. “You should know, I won’t stop. When I ride, the crowd watches and cheers. They want me to beat that bull. That’s such an incredible feeling. Most days I don’t know what my place is, but when the bucking chute opens, for eight seconds, I’m where I’m supposed to be.”

“It’s okay,” Julie said. “I’m a gymnast, injuries—”

“No the same.”

Julie’s mouth opened as if she would protest, but then she closed it and simply nodded. Caleb smiled, believing she understood. He said, “People in the rodeo tell me I’m as good as Rick ever was. You should have seen the way my dad looked at him before the accident. He was so proud. I used to think, one day, he would look at me that way. Now, that’ll never happen.”

He started the truck’s engine and turned on the headlights. They illuminated the carport, wheelchair ramp, and screen door. The door opened and Caleb’s dad wheeled Rick through. They’d come outside, ostensibly to smoke cigarettes, but more likely, thought Caleb, to get a glimpse of this girl he’d brought home. They raised their hands as if delivering half-ass salutes to ward their eyes from the glare of his headlights.

Caleb and Julie waved, but the two men didn’t respond. Caleb assumed their waves had been lost in the light.
God accosted me today as I crossed the sunken plaza of Pioneer Square in downtown Portland. I had just finished my shift as a mall security guard. On the opposite side of the Square squatted a corporate coffeehouse where I planned to secretly pick up a white chocolate mocha. I’d learned to keep my tastes private since Jackson, a fellow guard, liked to mock me.

It was raining. God wore a heavy olive-drab coat with the hood pulled up, the drawstring cinched tight encircling His weathered face. He stepped up to me and said, “I’m God.”

That’s how I knew He was God. I’d seen Him before, but hadn’t realized I’d been sharing the Square with the Deity. This had been a tough week. I’d dealt with crazies aplenty, a cardiac arrest, and a one-armed black kid who called me a racist pig when I asked him to stop marking graffiti on the wall near the bookstore. So I was flip: “How’s the omnipotence working for ya?”

God pulled His hands from the pockets of His tattered gray slacks and pointed an index finger with a blackened nail in my face. “Dare you mock God?” said God. His cheeks flushed red to match His bulbous nose.

“No, of course not.” I raised a placating hand toward Him and searched the Square for Jackson, whose shift followed mine. He should have been patrolling but, of
course, was nowhere to be seen.

“Oh. Well then,” said God, “I’m giving my ‘nipotence away. I don’t want it no
more.”

To tell the truth, I liked the crazies. Liked them from afar, that is, not in my face. My favorite was Lady Godiva. On summer weekdays, she would ride to the corner of Southwest Broadway and Morrison on a faded blue Raleigh coaster, drop her dress to the sidewalk, and pedal slow circles around the red brick Square. She always smiled as she passed by. Her long blonde hair would fly out behind her, revealing pasty white flesh and a freckled, flat chest. I would put in the call to Portland PD and make sure no one bothered her until the cops arrived to cover her in one of their dark gray trench coats.

“You want it?” He asked. A trickle of watery snot ran from His nose and mixed with the rainwater held in the gray-white stubble of His face. God sniffed. He wiped His upper lip with His coat sleeve and waited for an answer. God had the sniffles.

“Want what?” I said and dodged around Him to mount the brick steps in the direction of the coffeehouse. Its green sign beckoned to me, promising cover from the rain, comfy leather-upholstered chairs, and hot mocha.

God grabbed my arm. His fingers were gnarled like tree roots. “You sure? Looks like you could use some ‘nipotence.”

“Look. I don’t have any change.” I twisted my arm free from his grasp.

God cursed. Let me tell you, God can curse. I’m talking Old Testament style: plagues, whores, lesions and boils, fiery swords, and buckets of blood.

I thought this would be a good time to run. God must have seen the look in my eye—or, perhaps, He foresaw it—because he calmed and said, “Mercy. Mercy. I am a
merciful god. Please take it.”

He jogged around to block my path once again. God stretched forth His closed hand as if holding a captured grasshopper. Opening His fist palm up, He blew across it. A stench reeking of bologna and dog turds blasted my face. I choked. Thought I would vomit.

“You feel the Holy Spirit?” God asked. “Now you gotta make something happen. Make stuff better.”

“Go away,” I sputtered as I bent over and retched, then I spun toward Him, cocking my fist. I yelled at God, “Go away!”

He looked me in the eyes, and all the skin of his grizzled face sagged. I lowered my fist. Just a man, a crazy old man.

“Soup-sammich,” he said.

“Go away.”

As he hobbled away, my anger faded. But his image was still a presence weighing on my mind. I tugged out my wallet and plucked a card from the same slit pocket where I kept my video rental and credit cards. The card had been given to me on the first day of my job; I had never made use of it.

“Wait,” I said. The old man turned to regard me, and I caught up with him. “This is the number and address of a shelter near here.”

“Been there,” he said. “They poison kittens.”

“Please go.”

“They steal my underwear.”

“Do you have—never mind. You’ll find that soup-sandwich there.”
He took the card, nodded, and gave me a little salute by tapping it on his wrinkled forehead.

From my window seat in the coffeehouse, I watched him shuffle down Southwest Broadway. And I saw the little rectangle card flash white and then gray as it dropped from his hand, fluttering and spinning into the gutter. I sighed; nothing is ever easy. I had a fantasy then that I zipped up my rain slicker, grabbed my coffee, and followed the old man out into the rain. I wiped the gutter’s oily grit from the card face on my jeans to see the shelter’s address and hurried to see if he would walk with me. And at the shelter was a red-headed hippie chick sitting behind a counter. She thanked me again and again for bringing in the crazy old man, and we got to talking and flirting… Stupid fantasy, I know. Reality was: I continued to sit on my chunky ass, sipping sweetened coffee in a warm room.

Out on the square there’d come a burning moment of anger and disgust, and I’d cocked my fist to smash an old man’s face. Yet, I had not. I’d seen him in that instant as he was: a crazy old man. If he had been God, I think I’d have decked him. I mean, what good is omnipotence if you use it to create a piece of shit world like this one? A world where I have to follow Lady Godiva around until the police arrive so she doesn’t get raped. A world with that ragged, abandoned old man. A world where I’m a goddamn mall cop.

Thankfully, before my whining became all-encompassing [omni-something?], I saw Jackson out on the square. I rushed out to stop him before he disappeared again and told him my story of meeting God. He laughed in a good-natured way and said he knew the guy I was talking about.
“Keep an eye out for him will you?” I asked. “I think he’s probably off his meds.”

“Sure thing, Boss,” Jackson said. He motioned to my coffee cup. “Thata white chocolate mocha, Boss?”

I don’t know why he calls me ‘Boss.’ Maybe I’m a bigger prick than I think.

“Yes,” I said.

“What’re you, a girl?” Jackson asked. “Bet you get that with whip cream and chocolate sprinkles.”

“Thanks, Jackson.” I sighed. “I knew you’d understand.”

I left Pioneer Square behind then and made my way to the garage where I parked my beat-up Ford Bronco. On the drive home to Gresham, my mind was still circling the Square.

As God, the old man had given me His omnipotence, and I’d promptly wished Him away. With God gone, all we have is each other. We couldn’t do worse could we? Maybe, here and there, between the long stretches of selfishness and self-indulgence, I could perform a small act of kindness, maybe.
Delilah was lying in bed, thinking about leaving Tom, her boyfriend of five years, for the dozenth time when the thunderclouds came rolling east over the Sierra Nevadas and down into the Washoe Valley. It was late and Delilah beyond tired. Her alarm clock read 3:33AM when the storm finally overtopped the shoddy, second-story apartment she and Tom had moved to after the bank had foreclosed on his house. The elm tree outside the bedroom window clacked skeleton fingers, knobby with buds, against the glass; and the wind rushed and roared somewhere out in the dark, near then far then near again. Tom was oblivious. Delilah wished he would wake or stir, if for a moment, just long enough to say a word or two so she could hear the comforting rumble of his voice resonate in his chest, maybe pull her a little closer to him and feel the warmth of his body and breath.

She didn’t like the storm, and she hated feeling so anxious and needy. If only the storm would go, things would be fine—she’d stop worrying about her and Tom—there was nothing really to worry about. Just a rough patch, as her mother would have put it; a small bit of trouble. It would pass—these things always did. Tom would get out of bed in the morning; Tom would find a job; Tom would tell her she looked lovely like he always used to; Tom would hold her hand while they crossed the parking lot to go grocery shopping. Tom would… Tom would… Tom would stop making her cry. Damn storm,
she yelled within her mind, makes everything worse than it really is.

Just then the lightning flashed. Close. In the flare, Delilah saw the heaps of Tom’s clothes cast off on his dresser, the night stand, the chair, the broken TV. She couldn’t see the floor on his side of the bed, but she was sure it, too, was blanketed in dirty laundry. Tom’s Carhartt coat draped on the chair looked like a burly, drunken man watching them sleep. In the afterflash darkness, the burly coatman seemed to rise and lumber to side of the bed, glowering down at her in particular. Delilah felt terror, and shame for her terror, constrict then flush her face. Don’t be stupid, she said to herself, yet she felt as if the burly coatman were reaching out to strangle her. She imagined the texture of the rough canvas sleeves as they brushed against her chest on their way to her throat. The thunder from the last lightning stroke cracked hard, rattling the window and Delilah’s already shaken nerves. Tom turned over on his side, facing her, and exhaled with a hissing, gurgling sound. His knee pressed into her thigh, and at its touch, the burly coatman vanished. Delilah could breathe freely once more.

“Tom,” she whispered. “Tom?” Another sibilant gurgle answered. The lightning struck again. Farther away, maybe the eastern foothills across Reno. Delilah looked into Tom’s face, and he was staring at her though half-opened eyelids. He looked pale, expressionless—dead. Delilah cried out and jerked away from him, but as soon as she’d done it, she felt silly. Tom had been sleeping in that strange way for months; not every night, and random enough to make it eerie when he did. It had started after the accident at work when he’d slipped clearing ice at a construction site. He’d suffered a concussion and a separated shoulder. Now he was off work, collecting disability pay—which wasn’t nearly enough—and he’d weathered one shoulder surgery and was scheduled for another
in a few weeks. At best, he’d be able to return to work in three months, if there was any work.

The storm passed overhead in fits and starts, and all throughout was Tom staring at her with those cold, reptile eyes. They were creepy on top of the creepiness of the storm and the burly coatman and that was just one too many layers of creepitude for Delilah. She would have nudged him to get him to turn over but knew that she couldn’t because of his shoulder, so she rolled on to her back and stared toward the ceiling and at once the thought reoccurred that she should leave Tom. Five years was long enough to give someone, wasn’t it? Why hadn’t he asked her to marry him in that time? They’d been living together for the last two years, what more was there to learn about each other? What reservations did Tom harbor silently that prevented him from committing? This last one was the worry that kept her up at nights lately. Was it something about her, something she lacked, or some pesterling neediness that kept him at bay? Maybe it was just that he was too wrapped up in his own worries and problems. He’d been unemployed for the last six months. And now, there wasn’t any construction work, not after the housing boom had ended.

Delilah had been after him to find another kind of work; but he would say that construction was all he knew, and it was what he loved to do. He liked the physical labor and seeing a building rise from nothing and knowing that he’d made it. He liked the sun and the breeze and couldn’t imagine working inside an office. But now he’d taken to sleeping half the day away; he’d gotten chubby and pale, which was something he’d never have let happen when he was working. Delilah wondered what it was about men that made their work so crucial to them, to who they were, and to change their work was
to change them fundamentally. It was a matter of identity. Tom was—

Tom shifted, mumbling something and spoiling the completion of Delilah’s thought. At first the words were indistinct. Then he plainly said, “…eat fresh toad over the transom…” and wandered back into incoherent mumbles, something like, “Mumph grunna grew.”

“Go back to sleep, Tom,” she said, “and pick up that coat in the morning. Thing creeps me out. And while you’re at it, pick up the rest of your clothes too. Place is a pigsty.”

“Murph. Huh huh,” was the response.

Delilah dozed, while her brain picked up its earlier thread, thinking that she’d given Tom more than enough time, more than enough chances, and it was time for him to make his own way in the world. But the thing was, she could no longer imagine her own world without him in it. In time, the thunder diminished and the valley was silent.

In the morning when Delilah awoke, she found Tom next to her, snoring away. But something about the room had changed. It seemed brighter, more airy, cleaner. The coat was gone. All Tom’s scattered clothes had disappeared. Delilah didn’t remember Tom getting out of bed, and she had certainly not cleaned the mess. She nudged Tom awake. “Huh?” came his muffled voice from beneath his pillow.

“Did you pick up your clothes this morning?”

“Huh?” He lifted the pillow slightly from his face. “Yeah, I woke up early and saw how messy the room was with my clothes all over, so I put them in the hamper.”

“Then you went back to bed?”

“Yep, then I went back to bed.”
“But why?”

“Why did I go back to bed?”

“No, silly. Why did you get up and clean?”

“Uh, I don’t know. It just seemed the thing to do,” he replied. “I saw my coat hanging on the chair and realized I’d left it there for about a week, so I put it away. Besides it seemed kind of eerie hanging there, like there was a person in it, watching us sleep. Since I was up, I put away the rest of my clothes.”

“Uhn,” was Delilah’s response to Tom’s explanation. She was thinking back to the storm and what she said to him after he’d uttered those peculiar words.

“Why do you ask? I have cleaned the room before.”

“Not lately.”

Tom dropped the pillow back on his face. “I’m going back to sleep.”

It was nearly time to get up. Delilah slipped out of bed and got ready for her work day at Kendyl Depoali middle school, where she taught art classes to healthy, cheerful, frivolous teenagers. Throughout the morning as she guided students through their ceramics projects—dozens of mugs, bowls, vases, and the obligatory ashtray or two—she puzzled over Tom’s morning cleaning. Had he heard her last night and maybe pretended not to in the morning to avoid a conflict? Or was it just a weird coincidence? In the teacher’s room during her prep hour, she was happy when her friend Valerie walked in. They’d begun teaching the same year at Depoali—she, art and Val, physical sciences.

When Val sat down in front of her, Delilah said without preamble, “You ever heard of people being suggestible while they sleep?”

“‘Hello’ to you, too. What do you mean? Like hypnosis or somesuch?”
“Yeah, kinda like that but not hypnosis.”

“No? More like those subliminal CDs that help you quit smoking or lose weight, then?”

“Yeah, I think so. Only aren’t those supposed to work over a long time, like weeks or months? I mean more like a single suggestion. So maybe more like hypnosis…without the whole hypnosis part taking place.”

“Hypnosis without the hypnosis, huh?” Val smirked. “Wait, I got it! What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

“No, I’m serious.”

“Okay. Sorry, can’t think of anything,” said Val. “Why do you ask?”

Delilah told her about the storm and the clothes in the night and Tom’s sudden cleaning spurt.

“Sound’s like a coincidence to me. Or maybe you’re right, and he’s just pretending he didn’t hear you to avoid talking about it. I tend to prefer simple explanations over spooky action. It’s that whole Occam’s razor thing that scientists dig so much.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Test it.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you really want to know, test your hypothesis. Give him another suggestion. Something he’s unlikely to do.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know… Well, weren’t you saying last week that it’s been a couple
months since you two bumped uglies?”

Delilah laughed. “Unfortunately, yeah.”

“So tell him to give you a good rogering.”

Delilah cocked her eye at Val.

“Hell, yes,” Val said. “Tell him to lube your chassis, shellac your furniture, yodel in the gully, hump you like an Irish setter—don’t blush, you know what you want—spanked like a naughty girl, rocked like a hurricane.”

Delilah put her hands up. “Okay, okay. I get it.”

“So you’ll do it?”

“So you’ll do it?”

“Sure,” Delilah said, more as an appeasement than as a promise of action. “You know we have to stop having conversations like these in the teacher’s lounge. All it would take is one student walking in here at the wrong moment, and the school district would torpedo us for child abuse.”

“Nah.” Val shook her head.

“Not only fired, but our teaching licenses revoked. I couldn’t take that right now. With Tom out of work, I’m the only one bringing in money.”

#

When Delilah returned to the apartment, Tom was sitting in front of the computer clicking on job postings from some website that seemed to be mostly made up of adverts for online colleges and the armed forces.

“Find anything good?” Delilah asked.

“Nope.”

“What are you looking at?”
“Construction. Still no postings.”

Delilah walked over to Tom and massaged his neck. With great effort, she refrained from saying that perhaps it was time to look at other sorts of jobs. Warehousing, driving truck maybe. Maybe it was time to consider vocational school and pick a different trade. Perhaps some internal twinge of guilt prompted him, or the tension Delilah felt found its way to her hands and from there to Tom’s neck, because he said sharply, “I’ll keep looking, don’t worry. It’s only a matter of time. I’ll find something soon.”

Delilah patted Tom’s good shoulder. I’ll find something soon. That was his most recent mantra.

After dinner she and Tom watched TV for a while. Tom rubbed her feet. At the end of the show, Delilah dipped her foot into Tom’s crotch and caressed it. She looked at him slyly out of the corner of her eye. Tom chuckled, but that was his only reaction. Disappointed and angry, Delilah went to bed. She could hear him in the living room flipping channels until midnight when she finally drifted off to sleep.

Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, Delilah felt Tom slip into bed beside her. In less time than a commercial break, she heard the heavy regular breathing that told her Tom was already asleep.

The storm of yesterday had passed, and now only a strong night wind remained. That, and the rattling of the branches against the bedroom window. The moonlight revealed Tom, a lump, motionless, eyes fully closed. Delilah felt silly even thinking of following Val’s advice to put her power of suggestion to the test. It just seemed ridiculous. What if she told Tom to “lube her chassis” and found him in the morning, out
in her parking space, greasing up her Nissan? Tom did tend to be literal-minded. That would still be a confirmation of sorts, she supposed. While Delilah pondered the whats and hows of the test, she drifted back to sleep.

But sleep this night differed little from her waking thoughts. She dreamt she was in bed lying next to Tom. She whispered in his ear. His eyes popped open, and he sat up. Pulling a can of lacquer from beneath the sheet, he cast the bed covers off her naked body.

“Too thick. This needs some hoo-ha,” he said.

“You mean isoamyl acetate?” Delilah asked.

“Yeah, that.” Tom leaned over the bedside and rummaged around in the dirty clothes on the floor and came up with a plastic squeeze bottle of the type one would find in a diner to hold mustard. The squeeze bottle was transparent and contained a clear liquid. He held it up with the lacquer can for Delilah to view. “Hoo-ha,” he said and squirted some of the liquid into the can and swirled it around. Tom produced a bristle brush with a flourish, which he dipped into the can.

Delilah smelled a scent like bananas or maybe pears come from the brush as Tom slathered a line of viscous fluid over one breast, down her belly, and between her legs.

“That’ll seal and protect it,” he said.

Delilah grabbed the hand with the brush and guided it back between her legs. “Oh, seal and protect it, baby,” she begged. Each stroke felt like the caress of a feather, and the tickle built and built until Delilah could no longer contain her pleasure, and she cried out. But the sensation suddenly turned sharp like a paper cut, and Delilah realized that she had to pee urgently and awoke from her dream, fearing that she might actually
wet the bed. She stumbled down the hall to the bathroom.

After returning, Delilah climbed in to bed facing Tom. He shifted a little and said, “Murph.” For some minutes she stared into his face. It was a handsome face, rugged and weathered from years spent putting up office buildings out in the sun. Some crow’s feet and furrows on his brow were the only signs of his age visible in the gray moonlight.

While watching his face, Delilah recalled a different image of Tom sleeping from long past. It was in their first year together; they’d gone to Sand Mountain about ninety miles east of Reno. The week before, she’d dragged him downtown for the wine and art walk. He’d done well, made no snotty remarks, and asked good questions; so when he showed up the next weekend at her old apartment with a snazzy black and chrome dune buggy in tow, well, she didn’t have much of a choice but go. He spent the drive telling her how he built the sand rail—not dune buggy—on his own, and how it had some monstrous amount of horsepower and so much clearance in the front and back. While the sand rail wasn’t art per se, she still appreciated the conversation from a craftsperson’s point of view. And when they made it to the dunes, she lost herself in the experience of the machine. That beast ate the mountain and spat it out behind them. She enjoyed Tom’s company and the sheer thrill of the speed and the leaps and the spins more than she had thought possible.

They’d stopped in the afternoon on a small dune out of the way of other riders and eaten lunch. Sated, Tom crawled a short way down the hill and rested on the incline, luxuriating in the warmth of the sand. Instead of moonlight, the sun was in his face. She sat at the dune’s crest, watching him sleep, and there she had realized for the first time that she loved him.
Too bad Tom had had to sell the sand rail. They could use some time tearing up the dunes together.

Before settling back on her pillow, she leaned toward Tom to kiss his temple; but his eyes cracked open, and he said, “Look! A yellow deer.” Or maybe it was, “Look! A yellow, dear.” Tom said nothing more and did not move. Only his half-opened eyes revealed that he’d done anything at all. Just like the night before.

If Delilah was going to take Val’s advice, now was the time for it. She paused for a moment to consider the best way to phrase her suggestion. Direct and simple, no metaphors would be best. She whispered, “Wake me with kisses and then make love to me in the morning before I have to go to work.” She was about to lie back down when a thought occurred to her.

“You’ll feel well-rested and full of energy all day tomorrow,” she said. Wasn’t that what the hypnotists always added at the end for their clients? It would be great if it worked for Tom, too. He could use some energy.

#

When Val entered the teacher’s lounge during their prep hour, Delilah grabbed her arm and directed her outside to the front steps of the building where they could speak freely.

“It worked!” Delilah said, putting on her jacket. Not yet noon, and it was still in the fifties outside.

“Huh? What? Oh, the thing,” Val replied, and sat on the top step. She looked up at Delilah. “It did?”

“Yes, it did!” Delilah sat next to Val and hugged her.
“What did you say?” Val asked. “What was the test?

Delilah cocked her eyebrow and stared at Val, the hint of a self-satisfied grin upon her lips.

“He gave you a good rogering, did he?”

“Oh, yes.” Delilah told Val about Tom’s exclamation and her suggestion to him.

“I woke up with him kissing my neck and his hands were everywhere. It was so good, like our first months together.”

“Did you?”

“Of course.”

“How many.”

“None of your business.” Delilah paused dramatically. “Three. Five. I don’t know; they all kinda blended together toward the end.”

“That does sound good.”

Delilah and Val sat on the steps in silence until Val finally broke it. “So, what’s next?” she asked.

“Next?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t thought much about it. I liked that last one; I’ll probably stick with it for a while.”

“No, you need a new test. Can you tell him a whole bunch of things to do at once?”

“He’s not a computer. I don’t think I can just give him a laundry list of things.”

“How do you know? Have you tried? Pile them up, I say.” She ticked off a list
with her fingers. “One, hump me. Two, take out the trash. Three, get a job. Four, hump me.”

“He’s not a slave either.”

“Okay, ask him to do something for himself then.”

“Got that covered. I told him he’d feel ‘well-rested and full of energy’ like the hypnotists do.”

Delilah looked at Val, and they broke up laughing.

#

Tom didn’t utter nonsense and sleep half-shuttered every night, but maybe two out of three he did; and on those nights, Delilah worked her magic. She was always careful, she told herself, that anything she did should be for Tom’s benefit and should be something he would likely do anyway. When she made the suggestion that Tom would be full of energy, he was just that: awake from the moment she got up to the moment she went to bed. He would be all smiles, wandering around the apartment cleaning, washing laundry, fixing broken appliances and fixtures. He even worked on his motorcycle, though it was still chilly spring weather outside. He was silent, though, seldom speaking more than a word or two the whole day. So when she asked him to talk more, he became positively garrulous, telling her every adventure he’d had since the second grade; but he couldn’t seem to concentrate on much besides the talking. When she wanted sex, she got it—oodles and oodles of it, morning sex, noons, shower time, bedtime. Whatever she asked for, but nothing more. On the days when she couldn’t make a suggestion to him, he was as before: passive, irritable, and lethargic. He’d sleep sixteen hours out of the day as if to make up for his previous activity. And on and on it went.
One day a couple weeks later, Delilah realized that what she was trying to do wasn’t working and what she really wanted was the old Tom back. Tom from six months ago, before he’d injured himself and lost his job. Grumpy morning Tom, whistling while he walked up the stairs home-from-work Tom, butt-pinching Tom. Not this vacillating manic-depressive Tom she’d created.

When Delilah was honest with herself, she was frankly surprised at her own reaction to Tom’s depression. She had always believed herself to be broad-minded and empathetic about the problems of others. Yet here she was, wishing that Tom would just man-up, use some willpower and overcome his funk; and no matter how many times he explained that it didn’t work that way, she had come to see him as diminished in some way. Weak, even. And this attitude she knew only made things worse for them, and she despised herself for it, and this in turn also made things worse.

Delilah’s brainstorm was the thought that, why should she continue with all this day-to-day energy and restfulness business when she could, with one well-worded suggestion, wish Tom’s depression away and have the old Tom back. Besides, who knew how long this suggestibility thing would last, and her goal was to help him after all.

Late that night when Tom said, “…first down and hobgoblin to go…” Delilah was ready with her response: “Tomorrow when you wake up, you’ll feel better. In fact, you won’t ever be depressed again. You’ll be happy.”

#

The next day Delilah flew home during the lunch hour to see how Tom was doing. She desperately wanted her suggestion to work and frowned when she heard the silence of the apartment as she entered. Perhaps Tom had gone out. But when she looked
out the window, Tom’s motorcycle and truck were in the same places he always parked them. The lights were all off and the apartment dim. She found Tom asleep in bed with the covers over his head.

“Tom, wake up,” she called to him.

He stirred slowly.

“How come you’re still in bed?”

“Hmm, don’t know.” Tom sat up. “I guess I should be up, shouldn’t I? It’s a nice day out, isn’t it? I got things to do, don’t I?”

“Tom, why are you talking so strangely?”

“Isn’t this the way I always talk?”

“No!”

Tom shrugged and swung his legs out of bed. “What are you doing home so early?”

“I— N-nothing. I just wanted to have lunch with you.”

“Oh.”

“How are you feeling?”

Fine, good, never been better. Quite happy actually.” But he said these words without inflection in his voice or expression on his face, and Delilah felt fear rise up and constrict her breath.

“Honey, Tom, we need to talk.”

“Uh oh,” he said and grinned at her.

“You know I’ve— How are you really feeling?”

“Good.”
“Really?”

Really. Look, what’s this all about?” The grin had not left his face. It stretched his lips unnaturally like a rictus.

“I’m just worried is all. You say you’re fine, but you don’t look it.”

“I am fine. I feel different…better. The depression is gone, I know it. Things are looking up. I’m sure I’ll have a job in no time.” As he spoke, Delilah watched his brows draw together, and she knew something wasn’t right with him.

“This is going to seem a strange question, but I’m going to ask anyway. I know you’ll be honest with me.

“Sure. Shoot away.”

“You said you’re happy, but what does that feel like? How do you know you’re happy?”

“What does happiness feel like?” Tom’s eyebrows raised with amusement.

“That’s what you’re asking me?”

Delilah nodded.

“Okay. Well, I feel good, you know. Like a paper clip bent back and forth, forth and back, till it’s warm and brittle and one motion away from snapping in two.” The amusement left his face and his brows knitted together again.

“Tom?”

“I feel happy, like a man with a bus wheel parked on his chest. He can breathe shallowly, but with every breath, the wheel presses down just a bit more, till soon he won’t be able to breathe at all. Happy like that.” Tom stood and clenched his hands into fists.
“Tom, stop,” Delilah said, but he wasn’t listening any more.

“I feel happy. Like every friend I’ve ever had is staring at me with sad, dead eyes, blaming me for failing them. For being a shitty self-involved friend. They chase me about like movie zombies; and to save myself I have to destroy them, but with every one I kill, a little part of me dies too till there’s nothing left.”

“You scaring me,” Delilah cried. “Please stop.”

“I feel happy, like a building with a crumbling foundation,” Tom shouted. His face was florid, and the redness inched its way down his neck. “The frame is starting to sag and there’s long jagged cracks running through the drywall. Each room of that building contains a bundle of emotions trussed together like a bouquet; and one by one, the rooms become uninhabitable, till only the room that houses irritation, frustration, and anger remains. And it becomes a pleasure to open the room’s window and vent those emotions at the world, because everything else has gone.”

Delilah fled the bedroom with Tom pursuing her. “I can’t listen to this anymore,” she said. She didn’t blame Tom. She’d been an idiot to think that something so deep-seated and complex could be wished away. All she’d managed to do was change his definitions of words. He was broken, and she didn’t know if he could be fixed. She was to blame; she had broken him. The realization hit her in the gut as she opened the front door. She doubled over, nauseous. But Tom was right there; and she had to get away from him, had to escape and think of how to set it right.

“I feel happy, like a runner who’s fallen be—”

Delilah stepped outside and slammed the door shut behind her. She ran down the exterior stairs and toward her car, fumbling with her keys. Tears formed in her eyes and
made running treacherous. The apartment door opened, and Tom continued to yell something at her from the top of the stairway, but she couldn’t make out the words. Then she was in her car, starting the engine, backing out, and away, away, away.

#

Much later when Delilah returned, she found Tom quietly eating a dinner of ramen noodles in front of the TV. He wouldn't meet her eyes at first, but then he said, “I'm sorry, Delilah. I don't know why I said those things. It's not like me. I've been confused a lot lately, doing things I wouldn't do. I don't know what's going on with me. I know I said I'm fine and happy; but when I listen to myself, that doesn't seem to be true. So maybe I'm just trying to trick myself into feeling better.”

Delilah was exhausted from the afternoon, and she said, “Don't worry about it, Tom. It's not your fault.” That night she suggested to Tom that he ignore her suggestions from the last evening, that he feel the way he felt and to share as much or as little as he wanted to.

#

With the passing of the storms, the coolness of the late spring evenings and nights also passed. Delilah laid in bed sweating, covered only by the thin bed sheet. Tom was conked out; he never had a problem sleeping. Delilah wished that they were back in Tom's air-conditioned house, but that would only be possible if Tom got back to work. When she did finally drift off, her sleep was fitful. She started to dream and had a feeling of déjà vu as she dreamt that Tom had straddled her hips and was kissing her along the side of her neck and down along her collarbone. And she came to the part of the dream were Tom should have pulled out a brush and can of lacquer, but he pulled out his heavy
canvas jacket instead and put it on. From the pocket, he took out a carpenter’s plumb line and snapped it taut; fluorescent red chalk burst like a cloud and fell to cover her chest like powder Rouge. Delilah swept the powder away, and then looked up to Tom. He’d vanished, leaving only the apparition of the burly coatman behind, headless and handless, yet holding onto the plumb line somehow with invisible fingers. The coatman wrapped the plumb line around Delilah’s throat as she struggled to push him away and escape the bed. He tightened the line like a garrote and Delilah began to choke. She coughed, fought for air, thrashed to the side, but the garrote only tightened, burning and slicing the soft flesh of her throat. Delilah awoke, but she still could not breathe. Hands were wrapped around her neck, pressing thumbs into her windpipe. She could just make out Tom beside her, his hands clenched around her throat. He looked as if he were still asleep, his eyes half-lidded in that odd manner. Delilah grabbed at his fingers, managed to pull one hand way.

“Tom stop! Wake up!” she screamed. The hand went back to her throat and squeezed harder. Delilah panicked, felt her lungs seizing for lack of air; a blackness darker than night shrunk her vision to a pinpoint.

Then Tom's eyes flew open. He jerked away. “Oh, my God. Are you okay? I'm so... oh, fuck. Are you okay?”

Delilah coughed and coughed and couldn't answer him for some time, but eventually her breath and sight returned. She sat up in bed.

“You were strangling me in your sleep.” Delilah rubbed her neck. “I couldn’t wake you; I thought I was going to die.”

“I'm so sorry, babe. I didn't mean it. I don't know why I did that. I'm so sorry.” He
reached out to her, but Delilah shied away from his touch.

#

He’d tried to choke her. He'd never done anything like that before. In the five years they'd had plenty of fights, and he never so much as slapped her, never pushed her, never threw anything. At their most tempestuous, the worst he'd done was to slam the front door on his way out. She took him at his word when he said that he hadn't meant it. She didn't think that he'd been shamming all those past nights and that this was his revenge for her manipulation. Perhaps this was an unconscious retribution. He seemed unaware, but it was hard to believe that he was completely oblivious to what she was doing at night—even if all she did was for his own benefit.

Delilah felt that she’d lost her stake in the relationship. She needed something more and wondered, for maybe the thousandth time, why Tom hadn't asked her to marry him. For years now they'd been comfortable, simply assuming it would happen one day and never quite getting around to doing it. They’d become like clay left out overnight, a little too desiccated, a little too hard, a little too resistant to change. Delilah realized that she needed something more for them. She wanted that security—however illusory—wanted to think seriously about having her own kids instead of idly dreaming of them or experiencing them vicariously through her students. And she wanted all this with Tom. He wanted her to stick around, support him through this difficult time; well, she had wants too, and so far they'd come second to his. This was the thing that she'd known for some time but for fear of change had let slide. Well, no more. If Tom wanted her to stick around, it was time for him to give her a reason. If not, well, it was time to go.

#
“Do you think, Val, that there might be something wrong with what I've been asking Tom to do?” Delilah asked.

“Like how?”

“You know, that it might be questionable—morally, I mean.”

“Morally? No. Not at all. Look, you think he wouldn't turn you into his little sex kitten if the situation were reversed? He'd have you jogging and thigh-mastering and buns-of-steeling and inviting all your hot friends—like me—over for threesomes in a heartbeat. He'd have nightly BJs and anal sex galore. Any man would. It's their nature, and wouldn't occur to them to question the morality of it. They're selfish, and you got to guard against it. What you're doing is only fair. Give it to ‘em before you get it from ‘em, I say.”

“Tom's not like that.”

“You bet he is. How long have you been together?”

“Five years, plus some.”

“Yeah. And you've been married for how much of that time?”

“Don't be ridiculous.”


“Val.”

“Don't you ‘Val’ me. You know it's true, don't bullshit yourself. Relationships are not a zero-sum game. There are winners and losers. You don't want to be the loser.”

“You know, this is why you're always single, Val.”

“Better single than a loser,” she retorted. “Besides, that's not it. Most man can’t
handle a woman with opinions, and I've got a whole head full of ‘em.”

#

After all the well-intentioned failures, her and Tom’s disastrous talk, and the strangling, Delilah came to the conclusion that she was doing neither Tom nor herself any favors by continuing the nightly suggestions. In spite of Val's advice, she resolved therefore to end it, to tell Tom to do as he wished and that he would no longer be suggestible. She thought the odds good that it'd work, and it would remove the temptation to misuse this power over Tom. She felt proud of herself for once. That she’d be giving up near complete control over another human being simply for his own well-being. And she knew that it meant that maybe she and Tom wouldn’t make it through the next few days and weeks together. But it had to be done.

That night she lay sweating and hardly noticing it, so focused was she on Tom's rhythmic breathing. Time dilated and his every breath seemed to last a minute, five minutes, an hour. While she waited for Tom to start mumbling, signaling the time was near, she studied him carefully, lifted the covers to watch the rise and fall of his hairy chest. Even beneath the extra chub from six months of inactivity, his strength was palpable. She traced her finger along the mound of his shoulder muscle down to the curve of his biceps. Here he was, like so many nights before, asleep and vulnerable, fragile even. And she felt a fierce tenderness for him and could not have expressed how desperately she loved him. Here. Now. This man with all his weaknesses and strengths, and she could not bear the thought that they'd fall away from each other. They needed each other: he, her and she, him. It was best for the both of them to stay together. Best for him. He needed her to see him through this rough patch. She couldn't just abandon him,
could she? It would not be right.

So when Tom sputtered briefly then said, “…for roseblood…,” Delilah did not reply with what she’d planned. She did not say, “Do as you will.” Instead she said, “In the morning, you’ll ask me to marry you. So long as we're together, everything will be all right.” She told herself that tomorrow night she’d have him to do as he wished. Yes, tomorrow she would set him free.
Scotty and the others fought their way across the grassy horse pasture. The appaloosa that usually grazed there nickered to them from its corral. Today was Saturday—the last weekend of summer vacation—and the autumn light blazed across Scotty’s face. He grimaced. Ben, Jacob, and Mike ahead of him were shadows against the sun. Screeching and hollering, they broke off dry brown stalks of grass. Mike, the biggest and strongest, yanked them out at the base and hurled them like spears at Scotty, while Ben snapped the stalks near the top and darted them at his brother Jacob, who ducked and weaved to avoid them. Scotty gathered a small bundle of stalks and ran forward to join the battle when one of Mike’s grass javelins streaked past his face, nearly spearing his eye. Mike barked a laugh and rushed along a dirt path toward The Fort. “Dickweeds!” he yelled over his shoulder.

The Fort was within the branches of a large Russian olive tree. All alone in the field, the tree hulked over the bank of the small drainage ditch that divided the horse pasture into two unequal portions.

Scotty and the others still called it The Fort, even though earlier in the summer they’d had to remove all the scraps of plywood and two-by-fours they’d nailed onto the limbs. Scotty’s dad had come to call him home for supper one evening. He’d fingered a
rusty nail jutting from one of the wobbly plywood boards and said, “Sorry, boys, this has to come down.”

They’d aw-w-come-on-ed him, but he wouldn’t budge. Either it came down, he said, or Scotty couldn’t play here again. Mike had shrugged.

Scotty wished his dad hadn’t been such a spoilsport, but on the other hand, he had helped to take it down. They piled the boards near the tree and his dad said he would help them rebuild after they scavenged better lumber. He had told them about the tree while they worked. “Yep, a good, solid Russian olive,” his dad had said, nodding, patting the tough stringy bark. “Too bad they’re not native. Other places, they call this a Silverberry or Oleaster tree. Once they take root, they’re impossible to get rid of.”

His dad worked as a botanist for the Colorado Forest Service and knew lots of stuff. Unlike Mike. Mike didn’t know anything. Scotty hated sharing The Fort with stupid Mike. Scotty and his little sister, Shauna, had found it first. Now she never came anymore, on account of what he had done. He didn’t like to think about it.

Mike reached the tree and slipped under the curtain-like branches, followed by Ben and then Jacob. Jacob was a year older and in the fourth grade, but Ben was bigger. Scotty thought it strange that Ben should be the larger brother, while Jacob was almost as small as Scotty himself.

He stopped at the entrance and attempted to brush his hair away from his eyes. His mom had cut his summer hair to get him ready for school on Monday, but he still had the habit of pushing it out of his eyes, though there was nothing to push now. He and Ben would be in the third grade this year. Ben had moved to Scotty’s neighborhood only a
couple months ago, but he’d known him from before. They’d had Ms.—mzzz, that’s how you said it—Preger’s class together.

By the time Scotty ducked through the opening in the overhanging branches, Mike had crouched on his scarred perch midway up the trunk. He’d been chopping at it the whole summer with his heavy pocket knife.

The inside of the Russian olive was open and airy. The large branches formed a rough spiral going up the trunk, growing smaller and more closely spaced higher up. The tree had long, sharp thorns hidden among the skinny leaves, which were green on one side and grayish-white on the other. Scotty climbed carefully to avoid the thorns, but caution could not protect him from the olive bombardment Mike unleashed from his perch above.

“Hey, knock it off,” Scotty yelled. “Wait till I get up there.”

Mike stripped another branch. “Yeah, sure, no problem,” he said, and pelted them all with another handful of silver-green olives.

Their counterattack followed instantly. Scotty, Ben, and Jacob pegged Mike with three fistfuls of ammo.

“Round two!” Ben called out, and leapt onto the inner branches, Jacob followed, only one tree-limb rung behind. Scotty tried to make his stand from the lowest limb. He threw his handfuls upward, almost always at Mike. Soon he ran out of olives and retreated to the ground where he could move freely. The olives were more plentiful, but he kept getting slaughtered in the crossfire from above.

The Olive War was short and bloody. Short, because their desire for olives greatly outweighed their supply, and bloody, because none of them could avoid the spikes
nestled among the fruit, the spikes that had evolved to—as Scotty’s dad put it—persuade would-be foliage strippers to strip elsewhere. Shortly after getting an olive stuck in his ear hole, Mike called a truce.

They showed each other their empty, scratched and bleeding hands, and dusted out the pellet-sized olives from their hair. Scotty clambered up to his spot on a branch near Mike. Looking down, he spotted Ben secretly pocketing a handful of olives and also saw that Jacob clutched something in a closed fist. He thought the truce temporary at best, each awaiting the time when he could gain an advantage over the others.

The others sat and retold the battle, miming their actions, using words Scotty supposed they’d heard on the news; the same words his oldest brother, Daniel, used when he called home from the war: bombard, armor piercing, suppressive fire, slaughter, crossfire, massacre, ambush. Daniel was a combat engineer in the 108th Armored Cavalry Regiment.

“Scotty’s shot ricocheted into Mike’s ear,” someone said. Scotty only partly paid attention to the retelling.

Daniel made the words sound different somehow. When he’d spoken in that deep, hollow voice that could just barely be heard over the crackling of the line, it seemed to Scotty as if all the fun had been sucked out of the exciting things he described. Mike had two brothers in the Army. Scotty wondered what their voices sounded like when they called, and if Mike noticed the difference.

The others had stopped talking. Ben now continued up the trunk, past where Scotty was sitting, swinging his feet.

“Where you going?” Mike asked him.
Ben stopped and made his face thoughtful as if what he had to say required the greatest seriousness. “Up,” he said, and smiled at Mike.

Scotty snickered until Mike glared at him.

“You be careful,” Jacob told his brother.

“If I fall, I’ll make sure it’s on you, Jake.”

As the others watched Ben swiftly climb, Scotty pulled an olive off a nearby branch and nibbled at it. “Yuck. I wonder why they call them olives.”

Mike turned back to him. “Stupid, they’re probably poison.”

“Oh,” said Scotty, and he wiped his tongue off on his T-shirt.

Ben called down, “Don’t worry, I ate some last year.” He climbed some more.

“They just taste bad. I didn’t even get a bellyache.” He pierced the outer layer of branches and leaves at the top, swaying back and forth as he looked out from the tree.

“Hey, Scotty, I can see your house from here.”

Scotty wasn’t surprised. His house was at the end of the block, kitty corner to the pasture.

“You see mine?” yelled Mike.

“No, the school is in the way,” Ben answered. To his brother he said: “I can see our house though.” There was mischief in his voice.

“You cannot,” said Jacob. “It’s too far.”

“Mom’s in the front yard. She’s saying something. What?” He cupped his hand around his ear, pretending to hear. “Oh, she says for you to come home—it’s time for church again.”
They all laughed, but Scotty could see Jacob’s cheeks turn red as Jacob laughed and stared at the ground. Ben was lucky that Jacob was not built like Mike, with hard, wiry muscles and fists like pistons. Ben and Jacob had seldom fought until recently, and Scotty didn’t understand why Ben should turn against his brother, or why Jacob should be embarrassed by the remark. He knew that Ben was making fun of his brother somehow, and tried to put himself in Jacob’s place. If Shauna made fun of him, Scotty guessed he would be embarrassed, too. It wasn’t quite the same, though, since she was a girl and he couldn’t just pound her in the arm to get even.

But her being a girl hadn’t stopped him from hurting her in other ways. At the start of summer when he and Shauna had first explored the ditch below the Russian olive, they found three wild kittens living in a half-buried concrete pipe. He tried to catch one of the fuzzy white balls with the gray noses and ears and bright blue eyes, but they ran too fast. It was Shauna who caught them. She sat down next to the pipe and hummed one of her dumb made-up songs until the kittens peeked out of the pipe, but she didn’t try to grab them. She just let them come out on their own and then they were sniffing her jeans and leaping around her after the spotted grasshoppers. Soon she had one curled up in her arms and Scotty petted it; it had taken her half an hour to catch the kitten, and Scotty was sure he’d chased them around the humps of grass and in and out of the pipe for twice that long without coming close.

They never saw the mama cat so they brought food with them after that day, but the time with the kittens lasted no more than a week because Mike had come after that. Mike made fun of Scotty for playing with Shauna and the kittens. To get Mike to stop, Scotty made Shauna go away. He threw dirt clods at the kittens, meaning to miss, but
Shauna didn’t know that part, and she screamed at him to stop and then cried a lot. He had tried to explain it to her later, how he’d done it to protect her and the kittens from Mike, but she didn’t understand. And the truth was—this was the part he didn’t like to think about—he’d also done it for himself, to make Mike like him. Now the kittens were gone, and Shauna never came to The Fort.

Scotty looked up to see Ben climbing down to stand on a branch in the center of them all. Ben eyed each of them rapidly, and Scotty could tell he was planning something. Ben was smart; he knew lots of stuff too—not quite as much as Scotty’s dad, but still a lot. Whenever they did things, it was usually because Ben had an idea. After Ben moved to the neighborhood, Scotty had invited him and Jacob to see the pasture, and Ben had seen ways to make the place better at once. The Fort was Ben’s idea, one of his best so far—even if they’d had to take the boards down.

Ben took a deep breath and paused dramatically. “I read a book the other day that said people came from monkeys a long time ago.”

“Yeah, that’s what my dad said,” said Mike. “Then he told me not to go be getting any little monkeys. Whatever the hell that means.” He snorted. “Where am I gonna get a monkey?”

“Well, Mom says that’s crap,” Jacob countered, clearly pleased to have used the word *crap*. He didn’t cuss much. “She says God created people and put bones and stuff in the ground so we wouldn’t get bored.”

Mike stood and grabbed a branch overhead and hung there. With his other hand, he scratched his armpit. “Eee eee ee!” Swinging himself wildly, he shook the whole
middle section of the tree. Olives beat down on everyone’s heads. “I’m a gorilla—the meanest and strongest in the jungle.”

“Gorillas don’t hang around in trees,” said Ben. “They walk on the ground. And they don’t make dumb sounds like ‘Eee eee ee.’”

“Well, I’m a gorilla that does. So there.”

Scotty thought Mike must have upset Ben’s plan. He’d have to choose between the two. Ben never hit and Mike did—hard. He went with Mike.

“I’m going to be a chimpanzee,” said Scotty, even though he knew that chimps were apes, not monkeys. He climbed to the limb opposite Mike and together they gibbered and howled and whooped and jumped and shook the tree until they’d dislodged every bit of the fruit within their reach.

“What kind of monkey are you, Jake?” asked Ben.

“I’m not a monkey. I’m a person.”

“Oh?” Ben smirked. “So, you’re a Homo sapiens.”

“I’m not a homo sapiens. I’m a human.”

Ben laughed. “You are too a Homo sapiens, and so am I and Scotty, and maybe even Mike. We’re all Homo sapiens. It means human.”

Jacob shook his head and scratched at his arm.

“Look,” Ben continued, “it’s just pretend. I’m going to be a flying lemur.”

Scotty and Mike stopped mid-whoop.

“A what?” said Mike.

"A flying lemur. They're a primate from Indonesia."

"Monkeys can't fly." Mike eyed Ben suspiciously.

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"Flying lemurs can. They have little flaps of skin between their legs that let them glide from tree to tree, just like flying squirrels do."

"Yeah? Where’d you see that?" asked Mike, clearly still on the lookout for BS.

"National Geographic. It was a show about all the weird plants and animals found on the island of Borneo."

Scotty nodded. He hadn’t seen that show, but no doubt Ben had it right. Mike grunted. Scotty and Mike returned to shaking their branch, while Ben leapt to the closest limb with arms spread wide, demonstrating the proper gliding form for a flying lemur. Jacob did not join in. He climbed down and sat on the lowest limb of the tree.

Scotty, Mike, and Ben scattered to the smaller branches riding them up and down like see-saws and dislodging new showers of leaves and fruit, raining to the ground underneath the Russian olive. Raining down on Jacob. The thin leaves spun as they fell, flashing the green upper surface and then the white underside—green, white, green, white.

Scotty watched over Jacob, trying not to shake the branches directly over him. But Ben—on purpose, it seemed—jumped up and down on the limbs above his brother. Scotty was about to call Ben over when Ben stopped suddenly and squatted down on his thighs with his arms stretched overhead clinging to a handful of branches. He had a look that Scotty had seen him make in class sometimes, with his eyes quivering half under his eyelids and a slight upturn to one side of his mouth, as if he were doing tough math, trying to divide fractions in his head. There was something about the expression, out of place here in The Fort on the weekend and away from school, that Scotty didn’t like.
After a moment, Ben glanced down at his brother and bounced lightly on his branch. “Hey, Jake. You decided what kind of monkey you’re going to be yet?”

“I told you, I’m not a monkey!” Jacob shouted.

“If you’re not a monkey, then why’d you have a tail?” Ben grinned.

“Shut up,” Jacob said, blinking away bits of bark, dry flowers, and olives that had fallen in his eyes.

Scotty and Mike swung to Ben’s limb. Scotty cocked his head to the side. “A tail?” he asked.

“Yep. My brother had a tail.”

“Shut up!” Jacob jerked to his feet. He swung a fist at his brother’s legs, but Ben bounced up. Jacob missed, nearly losing his balance.

“He had a tail and the doctor took a knife and chopped it off. Dad calls him ‘Monkey Boy’.”

“No way,” said Mike.

“He’s lying,” said Jacob. “I never had a tail.”

“I don’t lie.” Ben glared at his brother. “You’re the liar.”

Jacob sat back down on the limb and then hopped off to the ground. “You just wait until we get home.”

“What?” Ben said. “You’re going to tell Mom on me? Dad said I don’t have to listen to you two.” He shimmied down the thin branches closer to Scotty and Mike. “I can prove it,” Ben whispered. “Jake has a scar—where they cut it off.”

“No shit?” Mike looked to Jacob.
Scotty backed away next to the trunk and started to climb down. Though he did want to see if Jacob had a tail, he wanted no part in the argument. Ben had told him how their parents fought all the time, but Scotty saw no reason why the brothers should. As long as Ben and Jacob were united, then Mike wouldn’t do anything. But if the brothers fought, then everything Scotty had worked for would collapse into a heap like the plywood scraps with their rusty nails outside the Russian olive, and The Fort would no longer be a safe place.

“Jake, show him,” Ben said.

“No.” Jacob took the handful of olives he had concealed throughout the monkey business and hurled it at Ben and Mike. “Assholes!” He turned to run toward the opening.

Mike’s eyes widened, and Scotty saw the hitting gleam come into them. Mike’s face turned red. He swung down to the lowest limb and leapt onto Jacob’s back. Jacob fell to his stomach. He grunted as Mike crushed the wind from him.

“You two,” Mike yelled, “Get down here and help me.” He thumped Jacob’s head with the back of his hand.

Scotty didn’t want to. His mouth said no, but his legs were moving. When the hitting gleam came to Mike, you did what he said. Mike grabbed Scotty’s shirt and pulled him down on top of Jacob’s head. “Hold his arms.”

Jacob still hadn’t recovered his breath. He flailed weakly, taking tiny gasps. Mike slid off Jacob, turned and crouched over him with one knee pressed in the middle of Jacob’s back. He put his right hand in front of his knee to support his weight and with the left he jerked down the back of Jacob’s shorts and underwear.
Scotty abandoned his task and peeked over Mike’s shoulder. There—right above the crack—was a pale circular scar. Jacob’s tail. Cut off.

“Holeeey crap! You wasn’t lying,” said Mike, glancing up to Ben, who had not come down from the tree. “Look at the freak show.”

“You’re hurting him,” Ben said. Scotty stood and backed to the tree trunk.

“Get off me, fag,” Jacob cried. He kicked his feet at the hand pulling his shorts down.

Ben pulled a handful of olives from his pocket. “Stop it, Mike.” As he raised his arm to throw, his feet slipped from the limb. He plunged to the ground, catching the lowest branches and spinning mid-air to land on his shoulder and back.

“Wow,” said Mike.

Scotty rushed to Ben. “Are you all right?”

Ben sucked in one great breath and began to bawl. He clutched his left side, then his shoulder, and then his head. Scotty didn’t know what to do so he knelt and cradled his friend’s head, petting it as he had his sister’s kitten. “Don’t worry, you’re okay,” he whispered. “You’re okay.”

Mike pushed off Jacob’s back. He stood shaking his head between the two whimpering brothers. Scotty glared at him, but Mike just shrugged and raised his hands, palms upward. “What?”

Scotty continued to hold Ben’s head and give Mike dirty looks. He’d never dared to oppose Mike before, but the burning tightness that pulled his eyebrows together and narrowed his eyes felt right. This was anger, and as good as it felt, it was even better to see Mike’s uneasy response.
“I told you monkeys can’t fly,” joked Mike, and he shuffled his feet. No one laughed. He tried again: “Ben, why did the monkey—”

“Lemur,” said Ben, between snuffles.

“Why did the lemur fall from the tree?” Mike continued.

“I don’t know.”

“It was dead.”

Still no laughter. Scotty wished he could make things go back to the way they were before the alliance had broken. He made a motion with one hand: raising it above him, dropping it through the air, doing a loop as Ben had done and smacking it upside down against his palm. “Dead,” he said.

Ben laughed and crawled upright. Scotty found that he was laughing too, though he could not say why. The joke hadn’t been funny. Jacob sat up on the hard-packed dirt at the opening to The Fort and wiped tears from his eyes.

Mike pointed to the dirt caked under Jacob’s runny nose. “That mud?” he said. Jacob slapped his hand away.

“No, I guess it’s not mud,” said Mike, mushing the words together.

Even Jacob started laughing, well, wheezing in the form of a laugh. Scotty giggled uncontrollably, so long and hard that he could scarcely breathe.

Ben stood, brushing the dirt from his clothes and pulling leaves from his hair with his right hand. His left hung limp at his side. Wincing, he emptied his pocket of olives.

“So you guys want to come over to our house? I have a chemistry set. We could be mad scientists or something.”

“Damn,” said Mike. “Don’t you guys have some friggin’ video games?”
“No,” lied Scotty. He had a console at his place, but there was no way he’d invite Mike to play.

“Fine,” said Mike. “We could be Rangers sent to blow up a bridge, maybe.”

Scotty remembered Daniel’s somber voice and said, “Or doctors creating a vaccine—”

“Boring.” Mike rolled his eyes. “You’re such a pussy.”

Jacob was silent.

Scotty and the others ducked out through the branches and headed across the pasture. The appaloosa snorted a goodbye. At the edge of the pasture, they slid under a barbwire fence, stepping onto the road that led to Ben and Jacob’s house. They walked abreast down the road. Ben kicked at rocks, and Jacob, on the opposite end of the row from his brother, dragged his feet in the powdery dirt and gravel.

Mike cheerfully whistled the theme from *Mission Impossible*. Yet every so often, he would cast scary glances Scotty’s way.

The late afternoon sun struck the four from behind, throwing long shadows in front them. It was much hotter here than under the branches of the Russian olive—it was no longer The Fort to Scotty. The Fort had been a safe place to play and explore, but the Russian olive was just a tree. He felt that in spite of the jokes and laughter, after they’d seen Jacob’s tail, it wasn’t the same anymore. They were all just pretending that it was good again, the way Ben, swaying in the top branches, had pretended to hear his mother.

Scotty watched Ben gently probe the area around his collarbone. Jacob was no better off. He clutched the ribs on his right side, and he, too, winced at the touch. As they passed the Methodist church where he went with his mother, Jacob studied the heavy,
double doors inset with smoke-colored glass and then eyed Ben. Jacob returned his gaze to his dusty sneakers; his lips moved as if speaking silently to himself.

Scotty thought maybe Jacob was praying, but then he heard Jacob say sullenly under his breath, “It wasn’t a real tail.” Scotty felt like an eavesdropper, and so he looked behind to see how far they had come. There, in the dirt and overturned rocks, he spotted four separate trails of sneaker prints, fanning out like the veins in a leaf, leading back to the pasture and the Russian olive. The paths split wider and wider apart, and he realized that they were not all going to the same place. Without a word, each of them had decided to go home.
AN EXCERPT FROM THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD, VOLUME I, PART I

...before our modern time of peace, prosperity, love, and bounty, there were once
Races of Men who feared other men. These proud Women and Men feared that others
would come sneak-thief in the night and steal their sheaves of wheat; take their Goats,
their sons; skim their milk, milk their 401Ks; rape their daughters, their goats (they were
really quite fond of goats); bash their skulls with a rock they found in the pasture while
raping their goat-daughters; burn their homes, corrals, orchards, and luxury gazebos; and
so on.

And since they feared these other Peoples, they hated them for making them
afraid, because in the time in which they lived it was better to appear a Bigot than a
Coward—doubtless, it will be difficult for a modern Reader to understand this radical
mode of Thought.

Because Men feared and hated other Men, they tore each other to pieces. These
pieces in turn feared and hated the other pieces, and so they tore each other into even
smaller pieces. Hands hated elbows, elbows hated kneecaps, kneecaps hated livers, livers
hated spleens, and spleens hated...well, everybody. From Men to Limbs, from Limbs to
Organs, from Organs to Tissues, and from Tissues to Cells they tore each other. Each bit
fearing and hating each other bit.

Then a group of stem cells, handlebar Mustache aficionados and lovers of cowboy
poetry the lot of them, heard of a Land across the unfathomable Sea where like bits could
gather and love like bits. Together they made the arduous Journey across the Sea. They
reformed tissues and then organs. Kidneys coalesced, esophagi amalgamated, lymph
nodes accreted, vaginas invaginated, penises incorporated, and sphincters formed labor
unions.

Now in order for the Gentle Readers—who are in no way like these Races of Men
and Limbs, and Bits in owing to the fact that they are reading and it is a well known fact
that Readers are completely without the faults of common Men (why Readers of Good
Books everywhere are known to be so gentle that they have never struck another in fear
or anger and when struck themselves are known to present the other side of their face that
it may be struck again)—to understand what happened next, it may be necessary for them
to suspend their natural incredulity at the barbarism of previous ages. While today it
seems only natural for penises to love vaginas and sphincters, it was not so then. The
penises feared them, feared that they would be surrounded by hostile organs and
destroyed. So they declared war and stabbed, slashed, and tore their enemies to bits.

Elsewhere, the pinky toes, because they worshipped a different Brand of
Skyfather, were not getting on at all well with the gall bladders, and they, too, tore each
other to bits. And so, soon after the promise of a great Commonwealth of organs across
that unfathomable Sea, there was bloody, bloody War (with bright red blood pitted
against the very veins and arteries that should have embraced and contained it); and in no
time, we were back to cells: solitary, poor, nasty and brutish, wandering fearful and angry
and—yea—even lonely across the plains of that great Land. And so it remained cell
against cell for an eon, maybe two, who can tell, it’s not like there were hands to record
the passage of time.

What is known is that in the midst of this eon of tearing, the bits and cells paused, and the world took a deep breath (though, without lungs, how is not known), all the while teeter-tottering between love and strife—a brilliant illustration of the ancient philosophy of Empedocles, who claimed these two opposing Forces to be the organizing principle of the Cosmos. In this breath, a solitary neuron picked a cornflower of the bluest hue and gave it to a shapely osteocyte. They loved each other for the duration of that breath, and then the osteocyte’s kin tore the neuron to pieces for daring to love one of their kind.

So it continued. That neuron’s mitochondria, ribosomes, golgi complexes, and chromosomes tore the offending osteocytes to pieces, and so on. Until littered over the surface of the living Earth lay scattered nucleotides, which huddled together in groups for protection from the Elements. Now, each nucleotide had but one arm, some nucleotides were right-armed and some left-armed. When a right- and left-armed nucleotide squeezed together, they made a new bigger bit called DNA. These two-armed DNA were very successful, muscling out their nucleotide brothers and sisters whom they derisively called RNA. Soon they had enslaved the entire race to be their messengers, mud-brick makers, portfolio managers, and, yes, Goat herders. The DNA built a great civilization on the backs of their Slaves.

DNA loved their fellow DNA and met at Rave parties to feed each other date-rape drugs and dance and recombine in interesting ways to form new cells, tissues, organs, and eventually, Men who loved and feared and hated one another. So it was in the beginning, evermore shall be, for ever and ever. (Excepting yourselves, Gentle Readers, who are, I assure you, blameless.)
LOOK, DON’T TOUCH

Jason—a prince of the Southwest, reared by coyotes—would sooner have gone to a steakhouse with his lips sewn shut than to a strip club. Look, don’t eat. Inhale, but do not savor.

Yet here he stood in line, and there was Kyle to the fore and there was Mitch to the aft, should he get it in his head to vamoose. Today was Jason’s birthday. They’d insisted, he’d buckled.

Only an hour earlier, he had promised not to be a poop. Said that she’d had taken his dignity and favorite t-shirt, but not diminished the fount of his good humor. Of course, it was a lie.

Kyle had smiled his thin humorless smile. Mitch—the avatar of goodtimes, it’s enforcer if necessary—had crossed his furry arms over his round paunch. In Jason’s tiny kitchen, atop the mandalic-patterned lime-green and ochre linoleum, they had him cornered.

It was his own fault really. Mitch and Kyle wouldn’t have brought him to the club were it not for his funk over his ex-girlfriend Katie, a beach volleyball player, flat-chested but legs like marble. The relationship had been doomed from the start.
She talked of sand between her toes and the ravages of salt air on fine blonde hair. He dreamt of dead cultures, dead languages, and fluted columns crumbling in the shade of an olive tree. He had tried to remake her—given her books, invited her to digs, even regaled her with quaint epics of magnificence and woe—but she was obdurate and would not reform.

It ended badly. There was sobbing. Tears. Wailing and begging. When that failed, Jason had resorted to grappling. And what a pathetic grapple! His hands grasping her smooth, brown ankle in the doorway of her apartment. She, pulling away, her bottom lip turned down in disgust, telling him he was embarrassing himself.

As if that mattered. He couldn’t lose this one. She was very nearly perfect, not like the others. If only she’d read a little more and, maybe, like to travel some, and her breasts were a bit on the smallish side…

Her parting words before casting him out: “And you suck at volleyball.” Still, she’d kept his shirt. That was something.

Jason, Kyle, and Mitch stepped inside Aphrodite’s.

Hip-hop music blasted Jason, wreaked havoc on his internal organs; his spleen and liver played leap-frog vying for dominance. Mitch groped him, groped Kyle.

“Gonna see some titties!” Mitch shouted, and paid the cover to a burly bouncer wearing a muscle shirt and slacks.

Jason was afraid Mitch would grope the bouncer too, but then noticed the man’s biceps: twin footballs implanted beneath the skin of his arms—all the volume and all the texture. Mitch must have noticed; the bouncer remained unmolested.

Kyle pushed back the thick black frame of his glasses. He wiggled his eyebrows
at Jason and the glasses walked down his nose once more. He slipped into the crowd
standing at the bar.

No doubt Kyle had a list of the evening’s activities. Jason was certain it was
written down. Maybe back at Kyle’s place, maybe in Kyle’s pocket, but somewhere a
little slip of paper read:

1) Buy Jason pint.
2) Get table.
3) Look at naked women.
4) Buy Jason pint.
5) Goto #3

Kyle programmed financial software.

#

ON THE THIRD ITERATION

They had moved to chairs along the circular stage. They craned their necks
upwards. Piles of money appeared and disappeared. Blondes, brunettes, redheads, a
catholic schoolgirl, contortionists, a fire-eater, and a dominatrix vied, writhed, cajoled,
taunted. Breasts flashed past. Thighs slapped the polished floor. There were splits,
handstands, log rolls, pole-twirling and break-dancing. Mitch pointed whenever he
thought Jason or Kyle had missed the “tasty bits.”

Then the music stopped. The impossibly augmented “Brandi” grabbed the
haphazard stacks of cash and exited the stage. For a moment there was silence; the crowd
waited. Men stirred their rum and colas with pinky fingers, sipped beers, shifted in their
seats.

Bored and wondering how long he would have to stay to seem like he was having
a good time, Jason also waited.
From behind the curtain at the end of the walkway, he heard fingers snapping—
slow and rhythmic, like a pulse. His heart seemed to slow to match the beat. The DJ
whispered, “Everyone, say ‘Hello’ to Sophia.”

They all stared at the curtain, willing it to part. The music started. A low bass line
matched the finger snapping from behind the curtain. Jason thought he recognized the
tune. Little Willie John’s jazz song “Fever” as sung by Peggy Lee.

Sophia pushed aside the curtain. She strutted down the walkway still snapping her
fingers. One look at her and Jason’s organs regained their harmonious positions, he
forgave all trespasses against him, and knew in his soul that an omnibenevolent god
watched over him. He leaned over to Mitch, then Kyle. “She makes my feet sweat.”

#

LOOPED IN THE LOOPS OF HER HAIR

Deep and dark loops of brown hair coiled high upon Sophia’s head. What she
lacked in height, she made up in hauteur. Kyle and Mitch began a rapid and intricate
gesticulation toward Jason that would have sent a sign reader into apoplexy.

Mitch bellowed, “It’s his birthday,” while Kyle continued with the gesticulatory
kung fu.

Sophia tore a panel from the back of her red velvet dress. Looking over her
shoulder at Jason, she spanked her rump and winked. She tore the front panel away. Cast
both into the audience.

Mitch hooted and pointed.

Kyle dug out a ten-dollar bill from his back pocket, folded it, and placed it in
Jason’s open mouth. When Jason did not close his mouth, Kyle did it for him. Jason had
not moved since Sophia took command of the stage.

Jason was lost in the loops of her hair. His eyes searched each lustrous curve, every black hollow, delayed and lingered where the spotlight reflected off auburn whorls.

It spoke to him. It compelled.

“Worship!” it said.

Jason jerked back. He blinked and spit out the ten.

Mitch grabbed Jason’s head and stuffed the ten back between his teeth. Jason started to protest, but Sophia got down on her hands and knees and crawled toward him; she stared into his eyes.

“You give me fever,” she hissed, “when you kiss me.”

Jason felt his muscles petrify. He could not move. Closer and closer she slithered. They were nose to nose. She tilted her head.

“Fever,” she whispered.

Sophia opened her mouth and—slowly, deliberately—bit down on the bill and Jason’s bottom lip. Jason could not breathe—did not want to, in fact.

She withdrew, taking the money, and turned her back on Jason.

Mitch punched him in the kidney, and Jason found he could breathe again. He turned to Mitch.

A shadow fell upon Jason.

He spun back toward the stage and the arch of Sophia’s legs towered over him. He looked up to the keystone. It was a small, perfect triangle. It spoke of lust and desire, glory and fire, but it did not speak with words. Jason sat on his hands and continued to raise his eyes upward.
With both hands, Sophia pulled the red-lacquered chopsticks that held her hair in place. Jason felt his heart stop—anticipating the fling.

She flung.

Thick strands of hair unwound like octopus arms. Octapoid, decapoid, millapoid, Jason didn’t know what came next, but it was sure to be a god-awful-lot-a-poid.

Sophia smiled down at Jason and bent forward, draping him in tendrils of hair scented like an orchard of pomegranates. He heard words: “Come, come with us.”

He opened his mouth to speak but it filled with hair, and when he screamed no sound came forth. He rose into the air, lifted from his seat by a thousand thousand tiny tentacles, carried up into blackness.

#

THE FOREST

There was neither yellow brick road, nor house fallen upon a witch, and he had on solid hikers not ruby slippers, but Jason knew this place wasn’t quite right. Perhaps it was the long, slender tree trunks like palms but with the lay of the bark upwards instead of down. Or maybe it was the ground with its irregular close-fitting stone, oddly springy like rubberized cobble.

Although there was no wind, high up the trunks twisted and writhed. The smell of her, Sophia—that faint odor of pomegranates and spiced wine—permeated the place.

No yellow brick road, but there was a path, of sorts, that wound sinuous up a hill and through the ominous forest.

“Hello?”

Nothing. Only the whisper high above from the trees as they entwined and
entangled with one another.

“Anyone?”

Jason peered through the forest, but it was dim farther in. He could not see much beyond the path.

“Now what? You’re goddamn nutty if you think I’m following that trail,” he shouted into the forest. He heard a giggle in response. Behind him among the trees a darker shadow ran from trunk to trunk, coming toward him.

Jason started at the sight. It was a little girl. She stepped from the forest to the path, giggled again—high-pitched and light—and her dark, shining hair bounced with the movement.

“Sophia?”

She shook her head. “My name’s Ophelia.”

“Then where’s Sophia?”

The girl shrugged and stepped close to Jason. She poked at him with her pinky, rubbed the fabric of his gray wool shirt between her fingers.

“Is this felt?”

“Uh, no—”

“Is now.” She laughed, and hugged his legs. Ophelia laid her head against his waist.

“I hope you’re not like the others, but I bet you are,” she said, then pushed away and ran up the path.

“Wait a minute! Where are you going? Aren’t you supposed to guide me or something?” he yelled after, “Isn’t that the way this works? You know ‘Shadowed
Wood,’ ‘Young Man has lost the Path.’ That sort of thing?”

She was nearly gone from view.

“Where are my magic shoes?”

“Huh, you wish.” Ophelia disappeared over the top of the hill.

Jason hooked his thumbs in his back pockets and grunted. Nothing to do but set forth.

“Fine. I’ll follow your damn path, but I see any huge double doors with infernal writing and I’m turning right around. I’m no hero. I play with pot shards and old bones. I can’t even spike a volleyball. Just ask my ex, she’d tell you.”

No response.

Jason took a couple steps down the path and something about his right back pocket felt odd when he moved. He patted the pocket; it was empty. She’d lifted his wallet. And here he’d thought she was sweet.

“So that’s my friggin’ quest? Get my wallet back?” Jason shouted after Ophelia.

“Is that it?”

Still no response.

#

THE HUMPERS

As he walked, Jason reached out, brushed his hand over the trees right of the path. The bark soft, smooth. He stopped to rub his cheek and then his whole face against the bark. So cool, silky. Jason wrapped his arms around the trunk. Marvelous.

He pressed his groin into the tree and a shiver reverberated through his body as if he were a cymbal struck by the god of the wood. Aroused, he mashed his mouth on the
bark, soft honey. Then Jason felt it—a rhythmic vibration through the wood and a faint slapping sound in the still air. He had been grinding his crotch in time to the vibration. He stopped.

The slapping came from a short way farther along the path where it leveled off before coming to another hill. Jason tip-toed down the path. Now and again, he could discern grunts and low moans over the slapping sound and the ever-present hiss from above.

The sound had a beat. Jason tried to recall his dormant grade school education. What was it? Four beats per measure, four measures per bar. Yes, that was it. 4/4 time: the beat of nearly every pop song on the radio for more than a half century.

Jason hid himself at the edge of the path—careful not to touch the trees—as he approached the source. He was nearly there. He could swear he was right on top of the sound. It came from all around. He heard the steady beat, but now also syncopated slaps and powerful thumping bass every other beat. The percussion pulled at him, urged him deeper into the forest. Touch. Embrace. Love.

Jason left the path and found himself nose to ass with the hairy glutes of a naked man. Jason gazed up higher into the trees—they were crawling with naked men. Hairy men, smooth-skinned men. Fat. Slim. Muscular. Pale and dark. Each wrapped around a tree trunk humping just like Jason’s Springer Spaniel would Kyle’s leg whenever he visited. Here was the slapping symphony.

Jason searched the trees until he found one with a humper close to the ground. He tapped the man on the shoulder, but the man continued to pump away. Jason peered into the other’s eyes and saw no pupils, no irises, only blank white orbs—but that wasn’t
right. He could just discern the barest crescent of green below the upper eyelid. The man’s eyes had rolled up into his head. Horrified, Jason shivered.

He returned to the path and resolved not to look at the humpers. Covering his ears with his hands, Jason tried to block out the slapping beat.

He continued up the trail but hadn’t gotten far before his hands dropped to his sides and he began to search for an unoccupied tree. Just a little rub wouldn’t hurt—it had been so nice before.

Just ahead, a humperless tree. Jason checked to see if anyone was watching. No one on the path and the humpers were, well, occupied. He sidled up to a slim trunk, inhaled its fruity bouquet, gave it a little love nuzzle.

“That’s not how you do it.”

The voice startled Jason, but it was familiar and he glanced around to the left of his tree. It was Mitch in his screaming red and blue Hawaiian shirt and nothing else.

“You gotta drop your drawers. It’s much better without pants.”

Jason relinquished his hold on the tree and confronted Mitch. “What are you doing?”

“Gettin’ it on.”

“Forgive the vernacular,” Jason said, “but it looks to me like you’re sticking your dick in a tree.”

“Yeah, ain’t it great. Pull the bark up a bit—it’s like silk inside.”

Jason pursed his lips. “Don’t you see the others? It’s dangerous here.”

Aww, I can handle it.”

“Come on, let’s go.”
“Where?”

“Back.”

“Why?”

“Well…” Jason scratched his head. “Because.”

“I’m stayin’. You stay, too. Take off your pants, don’t be a prude.”

Mitch removed his shirt and rubbed his pudgy belly against the bark. “Ah, paradise.” He started to hump.

“Mitch, did you see a little girl go by here?”

“Little girl? Nope. Been busy.” He humped some more. “Oh, oh, no more talking.” Mitch arched backwards in ecstasy. His eyes rolled up into his skull and a low groan escaped his lips, which had curved into a grotesque rictus.

Jason had had enough. He returned to the path.

#

THE APHIDMEN

Jason slowed. The path was steep here, rising to a high plateau where bright motes of light filtered through the sparse trees. He breathed deep and climbed using his hands when necessary to propel himself upward.

“If I get out of here, I’ll do better,” he said to the hillside. “I’ll be choosier. I’ll find someone perfect, and I won’t have to change her. Is that what I’m supposed to learn?”

“That’s as stupid as trying to change them in the first place.”

Jason looked up with a start. Ophelia stood at the edge of the plateau and regarded Jason from above. She shook her head.
The trees began to sway violently from top to root. The hillside buckled and the ground shifted under Jason. The cracks in the strange cobblework closed on his fingers. He wrenched back, freeing his fingers but losing his balance. He tumbled from the path down the hill and into the forest.

The quake subsided and the trees grew still—though high up they continued to lash. Jason lurched to his feet. The trees had bruised his ribs on the way down. They had lost their silky softness and the last one he’d crashed into had nearly broken him in two.

Clutching his side, Jason cast about him, but nowhere could he see the path or the girl, only shadow and menace, uneven ground underfoot and crowding trees looming overhead. Yet, it seemed the ground to his right inclined. Jason chose that direction and hoped it would lead to the light-streaked plateau.

He knew he was lost long before he admitted it, sinking down to the ground with his back against the slick, hard surface of a narrow snake-like tree. The forest had darkened to the indigo hue of the sky at the last moment of twilight.

Yes, he was lost, Mitch was a drooling dendrophiliac, and Kyle was gone. Jason closed his eyes to rest and reflect. Was he really as ridiculous as Ophelia had seemed to think? Perhaps. He’d certainly had no lasting luck in his relationships. If, like Kyle, he composed a list for everything, his list of failed attempts would be long. Attempts at what, though? Love? Jason snorted softly. He did not believe in it.

Attraction, certainly. Friendship, no doubt. And when they combined in admiration of a particular man or woman they were like little silver fish in the surf, darting, schooling, weaving past one another, building in number until they formed a solid wall of silver, flashing out from the blue-green waves of the self. This many-faceted
illusion he called love, while denying at the same time love as a force, as a pure emotion; it was myth, an invention of mystics, seeking to prop up their transcendental philosophies and perpetuated today by the sentimental and the avaricious. No, he was not ridiculous.

Something scuttled across Jason’s outstretched legs; there would be no rest. From the accompanying wind, it was something large without any right to scuttle. Something that should—were the world ordered properly—lumber.

Jason peeked through slitted eyelids—and immediately shut them. There were not a dozen or more insectoid men with needle-like proboscises jabbing trees and sucking the sap and exuding clear globes of nectar from their upturned buttocks. No, definitely not.


The man-aphid thrust his mouthparts between the slats of bark and his cheeks hollowed as he sucked to extract the sap. As the sap flowed in, Jason noticed the transparent sphere swell. He waved a hand in front of the man’s face.

“I don’t mean to be judgmental, but you do know you’ve got a bunch of goo coming out of your butt?”

The aphidman stopped sucking and regarded Jason with hazy eyes. “Spoom tweedle floo,” he piped.

“Sorry, didn’t quite catch that.”

The aphidman furrowed his brow and after a moment pointed to the globe of nectar. Jason also pointed. Pointed and shrugged. The man gestured again, more emphatically this time.

Jason stretched his index finger to its fullest length, pushed it out away from him
as far as he could get it, and reached forth touching the sphere. It ruptured and melted down the aphidman’s backside. At the same time, Jason heard a voice. The globe said, “Have you come to worship?”

Jason shrugged again, not sure whether to address the goo or the man’s needle-face.

“Well, maybe...” He wiped his finger on his jeans. “No, I don’t think so.”

#

HONEYED WORDS

The Aphid Herder stepped forth. Half-woman half-ant, she dwarfed Jason and her chitinous breastplate shone in the twilight. At her side slung a sword and around her thorax hung a bow and in her hands she held a staff. She was the most fearsome creature Jason had ever beheld. He fell to his knees.

“Who are you? You can’t be Sophia.”

“I am Diana. I know nothing of Sophia.” Her mandibles clacked together as she spoke. “On your knees, insect! Feed me.”

This did not sound at all like a good idea to Jason. He started to stand, but the Herder struck him on the elbow with her staff.

“Ouch, funnybone. Oww.” Jason rolled on the ground. He didn’t want to see what the sword or bow would do, so he stayed down. Satisfied, the Herder strode away among her flock.

Jason mingled with the aphidmen, but they were poor conversationalists and one even had the cheek to molt right there in front of him. The creature split open its skin, crawled out, and left it, discarded on the forest floor like an old ratty coat.
The Herder busied herself tending to the flock. Jason watched. She swayed and dipped among the aphidmen. When the butt-globes swelled to enormous size, she bent over and gulped down the transparent nectar.

Jason heard the voices of the spheres. They said: “You have such beautiful eyes,” and “What a wonderful smile,” and “That dress looks great on you,” and “Damn girl, you’re fine.” The Herder grew in stature with each mouthful of palaver.

Jason crafted plans for escape. Plan A involved sly gestures, flattery, and cunning modes of expression. Plan B involved running and tripping and hopping on one foot and shrieking—lots of shrieking.

Jason hoped he remembered the honeyed words; hoped he wouldn’t have to resort to Plan B. He stood and faced the Herder.

“Young compound eyes shine like a thousand black pearls half-submerged in the waters of the vinaceous sea.”

She turned on him. Charged forward.

“Young antennae fan out and shimmer with the opalescent glory of the peacock’s tail.”

The Herder dropped her staff. Drew her sword.

“They offer me divine nectar. What do you give? Such hideous things you say.” She raised her sword. “Nothing nice about my shoes, or my new hair style, or the curve of my hips.”

This wasn’t working. Jason readied himself for Plan B when his eyes alighted upon the bow hung across the Herder’s thorax.

“Diana!” Jason said. “You’ve grown soft. What does a herder need with a bow?”
She hesitated. “I use it to shoot runners.” One hand dropped from the sword to touch the upper limb of the bow. “Would you like to run?”

“There was a time before the staff and the herd when you ran through the woods and all trembled to behold your terrible beauty,” Jason proclaimed.

She lowered her sword. “Yes, that is so.”

Jason inhaled the forest air to steady himself.

“You asked if I would like to run and the answer is ‘Yes’ but only if you give chase. Leave your staff behind and become the Hunter again. Such is my worship: I would see you restored to your ancient glory.”

“Oh, I like that.” Diana stabbed the sword into the ground at Jason’s feet and unslung her bow. “Go forth. I will follow.” There was lust and blood in her voice.

Jason summoned all his guile to him. “Even diminished, you are too much for me. You must give me a head start to make it fair.”

She nodded. “I will wait, but do not delay. I am eager.” Diana crossed to the other side of the flock and waited with her back to him.

Jason did not hesitate. He donned the cast away aphidman molt and did his best scuttling imitation to the nearest tree.

Diana returned, collected her sword, and sprinted into the darkness of the wood. In her eagerness for the hunt, she passed him by, noticing neither his scent, nor his ill-fitting skin.

Jason observed the forest for a minute and then skedaddled—without tripping and hopping and shrieking—in the opposite direction.
BRING ME THE EYES

Just how long Jason walked alone in the wood he did not know, but it was some time before he found the path. He did not know if it was the same one he had started out on; he did not know if the lighted plateau was behind him or before him. In fact, he did not know why he sought the plateau at all. It seemed right, felt like the sort of thing he ought to do.

He chose to go forward, at least it was away from the horrors. He had not traveled far before the trees began to cross and interlock over the path forming a black tunnel through which Jason stumbled and groped.

The passage terminated at a set of swinging, steel double-doors. Bright light shone through the circular window in each door and Jason could see well enough to make his way down the remaining tunnel. When he reached the doors, he could find no infernal script—only a plaque above the doors that read: O.R.

Jason paused at the doors and listened. He had learned caution. Within, there were voices. Two. A man’s. A woman’s.

“Think of it not as vanity,” the man said, “but as a striving for perfection.”

“Whatever. Would you just cut me already,” the woman said.

“What nature has made irregular, I will make regular. Untidiness retreats at my approach. I will square up the crooked, retroussé the bulbous, smooth the furrow, perk the sag, quash the jut, shrink the gap, trim the flap, suck the fat, bulk the flat.”

“I just want bigger tits. Can you handle that?”

Jason spied through the round window. Spread out on an operating table laid a woman with voluptuous hair. She wore only her skin, and Jason prayed that she’d stay in
Leaning over her, scalpel in hand, stood Kyle. He straightened his glasses and reached toward the woman with the scalpel. The fount of Jason’s good humor ran dry. He shoved his way past the steel doors.

“Knock that shit off.”

Kyle and the woman looked up at his intrusion.

“Sophia, get away from him.”

The woman looked to Kyle. “Who’s he talking about?”

“Don’t worry, Caramia, my little princess. I’ll take care of this.” He picked up two blobby bags of saline and skirted around the operating table. He sauntered toward Jason, juggling the implants in one hand and twiddling the scalpel in the other.

“Jason, I thought you’d approve,” Kyle said. “After all, aren’t you the one always trying to improve them?”

“I don’t approve.” Jason scanned the room. It was round with a high dome formed of twisted, intertwined tree trunks. Opposite the doors Jason had entered, stood another identical set of doors. He maneuvered himself away from Kyle and toward them.

“Sophia, come with me.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” Caramia sat up and Jason could see dashed lines drawn with a black felt pen encircling her nipples.

“That’s your name—but maybe you don’t know it.”

“Doctor, would you get this creep out of here?” She lay back on the table. “I’m ready.”

Kyle came closer.
“Jason, think it over—”

“There’s nothing to think about. She’s perfect. Absolutely perfect. Perfect in every way. How can you fix what isn’t broken?”

“Oh, come now, Jason. Surely you noticed that her mammarys point two degrees below optimal perkitude? You should remember the scale—you created it.”

“That was before. I don’t care now. They’re flawless; she’s flawless.”

Caramia sat up again and her flawless nipples hardened as she stared at Jason.

“Doctor, on second thought, let him stay,” she said. “Bring me his eyes. I want to see me the way he sees me.” She smiled viciously.

And then Jason saw in her unblemished face a crack, behind her eyes in the black space inside. Through that crack poured all the irrationality of which women and men were capable, that evolutionary madness given form by the vagaries of culture: Saline sewn under skin. German chocolate cake with a diet soda. Botox. Latex corsets. Bodybuilding and muscle shirts. Tongue piercing. Tramp stamps. Barbwire tattoos. Foot binding and stiletto high heels. Penile implants. Monster trucks.

There also, issuing forth from the void of her eyes, Jason’s own absurd idolatry. He saw his own ridiculousness and jerked away from it.

Kyle stopped juggling. The left side of his face twisted up into a snarl. The bags fell and broke with a spat! The scalpel arced toward Jason’s face. Jason sissy kicked at the thing that used to be his friend. Kyle tripped, went down, and sprawled in the salt water.

Jason beat feet and did not look back.
THE PLATEAU AND HOME

The steel doors swung shut behind Jason and he ran out onto a broad, windy plateau. Bewildered and lonesome, he stalked toward the plateau’s center.

Ophelia. Diana. Caramia. All facets of some greater being—Sophia, who was, perhaps, herself only a persona. A mask to be removed as soon as the dancer stepped off the stage.

And in this twilight forest, what role did the doppelgangers, Mitch and Kyle, have to play? Were they not aspects of himself?

The thought made Jason uneasy. Each facet of Sophia he had beheld with fascination and a kind of admiration, yet the aspects of himself he had turned from in revulsion. He, however, could not simply exit the stage, leave behind those unwanted parts of himself. Idolatry. Worship of the women in his life as an image, a thing that existed nowhere but in his mind. So commonplace, so banal.

A female voice floated through the wood in answer to his thoughts. “And yet here we are…”

“I know better,” he answered.

“Knowing and doing are different things.”

Yes, true. The hike to the center of the plateau was long. Streaming beams of light filtered through the canopy and the crisp, moving air soon restored Jason’s humor. He found himself slapping the odd bark of the snake trees with his palms. He twirled around when he reached the center and yelled into the tree tops.

“Hey! What now? Gibbering Argus-eyed baboons? I’m ready. Cyclopean women with mouths in their navels? I’m ready. Bring on the trials. I met the princess, where’s the
dragon, or ogre, whatever?”

Footsteps behind him.

“Who are you talking to?” It was the little girl’s voice. Jason didn’t turn around.

Ophelia stepped up beside him.

“Her,” Jason said.

“Her?”

“Sophia.”

“Sophia?”

“You’re a naughty girl to pretend you don’t know.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Can I have my wallet back?”

“Sure. I just wanted to make sure you wouldn’t cut off my head and put it inside.”

Considering everything else, Jason didn’t think it a queer response. He gazed at his feet—still hikers, not ruby slippers. She handed his wallet back. It was heavy, with a lump in the middle that hadn’t been there before.

“There’s a gift for you inside,” she said. “You like old things, don’t you?”

“Sure.” Inside the wallet was a triangular orange stone. Jason held it up to inspect it, and discovered it wasn’t stone at all but the corner of a fired clay tablet with wedge-shaped impressions on it. “Cuneiform?”

“The ancients left more than rocks and pots,” Ophelia said.

Jason felt the ceramic fragment shift and grow in his hand; it became a wood-backed wax tablet. Carved into the wax were Greek words. He translated a line: “Of each particular thing, ask: What is it in itself, in its own constitution? What is its causal
nature?"

He held the tablet out toward the Ophelia. “Words, you mean?”

“Words? Oh, my. No, birds.” She outstretched her arm, and the wax tablet writhed in Jason’s hand. It folded in two, flapping the leaves like wings. Feathers erupted from the wax. Up the tablet bird flew; and by the time it perched on Ophelia’s forearm, it had transformed into a white-faced owl.

“You’re just playing with me now,” Jason said.

“Maybe, a little.”

“How do I get home?”

“You mean you don’t know?” she asked and raised her arm, launching the owl into silent flight. Ophelia pointed up at the nearest tree.

“You don’t mean—”

“I do.”

“I could have left any time?”

“It might be a labyrinth, but it’s not a prison.”

Hugging Ophelia against his hip, Jason grinned and called her, “Twerp.”

The upturned bark made climbing easy. Before he reached the whirling tops of the trees, Jason looked down. Ophelia waved and then skipped into the forest.

He shimmied higher, struggling in the threshing mass of trunks. They battered him, wound around his arms and legs, his waist, his neck. Even so, he continued upward. The trunks grew thinner the higher he pulled himself. There came a point near the top, his body cocooned in the trunks, now no more than fine tendrils, when he could no longer move.
Jason was ripped away from his hold and lifted ever higher, soaring blindly, floating. Suddenly, gravity returned. He plopped into his chair; the room was dark.

Sophia flipped her hair back over her shoulders. Seemingly oblivious to all that had transpired in the whorls of her mythic hair, she smiled down at Jason. He held her gaze.

“Thank you,” he said as the music began to fade and the club lights brighten.

Someone jabbed him in the ribs.

“Dude,” said Mitch, “you don’t thank the strippers.”

Sophia gave him a sidelong glance and said tartly, “Huh, shows how much you know.” She crouched, placed her hands on Jason’s cheeks, and tilted his head back.

“Well, Birthday Boy,” she said, “here’s a present.” She kissed Jason on the forehead with soft, apple red lips.
I had met Donny on the bus. It was August, only a week after Clare and I had sent our youngest son, Grant, off to study physics at Cornell. Donny was hyper-intelligent, mercurial, brusque—only seventeen and he had mastered the esoterica of a half-dozen different computer programming languages. The sort of know-it-all nitpicker I would have hated to have in the database class I taught at the community college, but I liked him fine on a bus.

Donny’s intelligence reminded me a bit of Grant’s, in fact—but in just about every other respect they differed. The only thing I knew about Donny’s home life was that he was an emancipated teen living alone. He had learned to program on his own and held a part-time job coding for an internet retailer while finishing high school. I’d had to push Grant to go college and practically picked his school and major for him. I’ve often feared that I had made life too easy for my children. There was much truth to the maxim: Only through conflict is there growth. In seeking to give them every advantage, had I unwittingly handicapped them? It was a moot question, though; there was simply no way to know.

Wednesday evenings, Donny held court from the downtown station to the end of River Road in the blue vinyl seats at the back of bus fifty-one. He wore his greasy orange
hair long, and he wielded his opinions like a highlander’s claymore. The first time I noticed him, he was telling a Latina with dark expressive eyes that her brain was a computer. He quoted Turing and Von Neumann, Minsky and Dennett in his attempt to proselytize the young woman to his view of the machine mind. She clutched her nursing text to her chest with fingers blooming white at the first joint, and her eyes, when they met mine, expressed the desire to run away.

Thinking myself gallant (and also curious as to how he would respond), I interrupted him to ask how binary worked in the brain, and from that night forward, Donny attached himself to me.

The evening’s subject would vary: the computational mind one week; why Kubrick was a god and Spielberg, a schlep the next; every so often, there would be a long diatribe against unnamed corporate malefactors that he claimed ran the country.

Tonight, the subject was bees.

“Everyone thinks that the bee is such a nice, pleasant insect,” said Donny. “After all, how could such a useful creature be bad? Doesn’t the bee bring us ‘sweetness and light?’ Isn’t it the symbol of ancient thought? That most rational—social—bug. And though it possesses a sting, it only uses it altruistically, giving up its life in defense of home and queen.”

“‘Sweetness and light?’” I asked.

“Come on, Professor,” he said. “You’re a little slow tonight.” It must have been too warm for him in the bus, because he stripped off his trench coat and flopped it to the adjacent seat. “You know, honey and wax.”

“I’m not a professor, Donny.” I gazed outside. A man stood on the corner of 7th
and Polk Street, silhouetted and alone in the mid-December dusk. His head seemed to track the movement of our vehicle; perhaps he waited for the return bus. I gave it no more thought. Grant had called my office today. He would not be coming home for winter break. None of them would, my children. Meeting the new girlfriend’s parents. Too much work. Skiing in Sun Valley. Their excuses varied. For me, it meant the first time in more than twenty years that the house would be empty at Christmas time.

The bus cruised west along 7th, away from downtown. Water droplets diffracted the other vehicles’ headlights into starburst spectra on the bus’s tinted window. I touched the glass behind a raindrop and its starburst vanished.

Donny took my motion as signal to continue his rant. “It’s only our self-interested pragmatism that could turn bees into pleasant creatures. In truth, they’re insidious little beasts. Consider their stinger: there’s no altruism involved. When you’re driving along with your arm out the window,” said Donny, placing his freckled arm on my shoulder as he would a car door, “a bee smacks into your arm, what’s the first thing it does?”

I shrugged a response, in part to respond but also to get Donny to stop leaning on me; yet I was surprised to discover that I was pleased when he didn’t remove his arm. The pleasure lay in the difference between our relationship and that of, say, my students—or even Grant who was only a year older. There was a lack of consciousness on Donny’s part that he should act in a certain mannered and respectful way, and I found that delightful beyond my amusement at his rants.

“Stings you, of course.” he said in answer to his own question. “Not in defense of its hive, or queen, or even itself. The cost of the bee’s sting—being a part of the bee’s body—is its life. Yet a bee will rip out its guts to spite you. Can you get anyone to
believe this? No.”

I snorted. “Did you just get stung or something?”

“No, I didn’t just get stung or something,” Donny shot back and slid his arm off my shoulder.

“You know, Donny,” I said, laughing lightly, “sometimes you can be insufferable.”

“Hah!” he said. “If you need another example, take the phrase ‘busy as a bee.’ How explicit can you get? Bees are good because they constantly work. And people are good when they’re like bees: gregarious insects working for the social good. It’s the amalgam of Protestantism and capitalism—the conjugation of the moral and the economic.”

“Entomology, language, religion, and economics. Your intellect is truly…dizzying.” I smiled so that he could see my slight was intended as banter. “You know, I have a son about your—”

“Wait. There’s more,” he continued, unaware that I had meant anything other than what I’d said, or that I’d tried to shift the conversation. “The birds and the bees’ is the euphemism parents use to hide their embarrassment when they wish to discuss the uncouth act of sex. Bees are directly implicated as participants in dissembling and fornication, yet their reputation remains spotless. Sex, the source of dark energies—lust, rage, ambition—honeyed over by the bee.” Donny licked his lips. Sweat beaded on his forehead; his hair curled, wet and stringy, at his temples.

“Any other beasts you’d like to damn?” I asked, glancing out the window. The bus descended the north slope of the Chambers Street overpass. We were nearly to River
Road and home. Clare had the car, so she would arrive before me. No doubt all the TVs in the house would be blaring, and she in the kitchen, snacking directly from the refrigerator, oblivious to the commotion.

“Yeah, don’t get me started,” Donny said, tucking his sweat-soaked hair behind his ears. “‘Birds and bees?’ It should be ‘fucking and sucking.’ That’s what sex is.”

His pale blue eyes darted toward the front of the bus where the Latina now sat on Wednesdays. He paused for a quick breath, and then his words burst forth in a frenzied jumble, “Fucking and sucking and slapping and slamming. Bumping and rubbing and ramming and cramming.”

Someone tittered. Donny’s legs thrashed, and I became concerned that he was having a seizure of some sort.

“Grunting, groaning, mashing, spittlelicksticking,” he shouted. Heads at the front of the bus swiveled toward us; they stared. “Flamming, flarn, hurdlejurk, chasm spasm, spilk milk, grunneh, godgaudgawd!” Donny looked around and chortled like he’d just told a great joke.

“Donny…” I began, but I didn’t know how to proceed. Although I felt some affection for the kid, I wasn’t his father. He was broken in some way that I didn’t know how to fix. We all, at one time or another, slip into the role we find most comfortable when reeling from a shock and casting about for something to anchor us. I slipped, therefore, into my instructor role.

“I watched a music video recently, and something about it reminded me of you. Hardcore music, my son calls it. Very graphic. It had still shots of animal carcasses and raw meat,” I said to prepare him for my teacherly question. “Do you know the difference
between artifice and art?”

Donny’s smile vanished. He cocked his head to the side and regarded me silently. His eyes shone with the radiant pain of having suffered a betrayal. “I knew you wouldn’t understand.” He reached above him, yanking the cable to signal a stop. When the bus pulled over, he stood.

“Wait. This isn’t your street,” I said. I had misunderstood him, underestimated his fragility, and with one little touch, doused his light.

Donny pursed his lips, spun, and jumped to the curb from the rear bus exit. Without looking back, he raised his hand over his head and gave me the finger.

Obviously, I had overestimated my effect on him; he remained undoused.

If only that energy could be focused. I wished that my son had some of that vigor, for there is something to be admired in a young intelligence, fierce and fragile, and so very resistant to shaping. But I could not remake my son, any more than I could “fix” Donny. Though I was still uncertain that I’d want Donny in my classes, I was considering letting him into my home.

“So, next Wednesday?” I shouted outside before the folding door closed. As the bus pulled away from the curb, I saw Donny turn, his image blurred by the rain-spotted glass, raise his other hand, and extend yet another middle finger—but he was smiling. His motion and gesture were oddly elegant for such an awkward young man. A hope rose up in me then—though a strange hope, I’ll admit—the hope that Grant’s phone call was his way of flipping me off, and I looked forward to the moment when I would walk in the door and tell Clare about Donny’s double bird and ask her if I could invite him to Christmas dinner.
A DEATH AMONG THE OAKS, PART II

To her he says: It’s hard to get out of bed. Ever try to sleep during the day? Starting in May and all through the summer, some asshole is always mowing his lawn or re-roofing his house. And next door there’s Old Yeller. This baying bitch in pink sweatpants yells at her children, yells at her cat, yells at her dishwasher. I’d like to trap her scrawny, crankster ass in a giant megaphone and scream into it, “Shut up, you stupid harpy!”

#

TUESDAY

At two-thirty in the afternoon, Bert Stark’s phone rang. He had slept four hours.

“What do you want?” he answered.

It was Suzy the office manager. She wanted to know if he could come in for a meeting at three-thirty. Bert tightened his grip on the phone receiver, heard the plastic creak. He worked the graveyard shift on the Public Safety and Security team at Pacific Northwest University. They were a team; they hated each other. Burt spent his nights rattling keys and doorknobs. The essence of his job: walk, walk, walk, rattle, rattle, walk some more, rattle some more. Break time!

“Is this about the shaving thing?” he said.

“No, everyone is coming.”
“Then what is it about?”

“Dave said to meet in the conference room,” Suzy said. “He will fill you guys in.”

“Oh, must be important. Like that meeting we had about fully discharging the radio batteries before putting them back on the charger.”

“This is serious, Bert.”

“So more like the one about addressing professors by their proper titles, then?”

“No. I mean it.”

“Fine. Don’t tell me, I’ll stay home.”

After a moment’s pause, she whispered, “Don’t share this with anyone.”

“You know I’m the only one in that office who can keep a secret.”

“Promise.”

“Okay, I promise.”

“A student has died.”

Suzy’s words struck Bert as deeply wrong. There was a passivity to them, a passivity that leached every trace of humanity out of the dead student. “Could you be any vaguer?”

“A girl.”

“…has died,” he repeated. “That can mean a lot of things. Was she killed in an accident?”

“No. No accident.”

“So did she kill herself? Was she murdered?”

“She died last night in one of the University Apartments. The police are still investigating.”
“What’s her name?”

“Dave didn’t say. Now, are you going to come?”

Bert grumbled some more but said he would be there. He might be able to snag a nap after the meeting. Were it Monday or Wednesday, there would be no chance. His Genetics and Evolution class was at six on those evenings; he had taken it because it sounded fun and because it fulfilled the last of his general sciences requirements.

He was able to take classes for fun because he worked at a progressive university where staff members received free tuition and where there were donuts on Friday mornings. By the time he arrived for work at midnight, the donuts—if any were left—were stale. So were classes after fighting with the business office each term when they screwed up his billing and charged him for classes anyway.

Just shy of three o’clock, he threw off his covers and sprang out of bed—he had to do it with gusto, or he would not do it at all. In the bathroom mirror, his face was puffy from sleep, stubbly, and not at all attractive. The stubble rasped like tiny needles under his fingertips.

A half hour later in the hallway, he got his jacket from the closet and stared at the shiny poster paper on the back of his front door. His walls were bare except for this one poster. On it, an unruly Albert Einstein stuck out his tongue.

Bert liked that photo, and he hoped that being Einstein’s namesake was not a just a happy coincidence. He suspected, though, that his name was drawn from the Sesame Street puppet. His mother had loved Bert and Ernie and would constantly flip channels between PBS and her soap, The Guiding Light, to see if they were on. She would regard her son as he watched TV along with her, and in the world’s worst Ernie imitation say,
“Hey Bert, fetch my cigs.”

She had lost her husband, Bert’s father, when Bert was a year old. For the next eight years, he had watched her destroy herself with muscle relaxants and cardboard boxes of red wine. He often wished his mother had dropped dead the day his father had hanged himself in the garage with a leather belt, and so spared Bert the years of fetching pills and Winstons. Spared him the years of her slack-eyed stare in front of the TV, rocking slightly in her chair, cackling and hacking and spitting bloody sputum into a wad of toilet paper because they couldn’t afford tissue paper.

But that was a long time ago; and though it seemed to be on his mind more and more these days, there was no profit in rehashing the past. Bert shut the closet door. He lived four blocks from campus and jogged over a few minutes before three-thirty. Suzy was the only one in the office.

“Where is everyone?” he said. “Let’s get this thing over with.”

“We can’t start yet. Jeff isn’t here,” Suzy said.

Bert’s nemesis was Jeff; Jeff was a Jarhead. Long ago, Bert had made himself this promise: if he ever met a non-prick, non-bible thumping, non-homophobic ex-Marine, he would kiss him full on the lips. In almost seven years of working campus security, he had not come close. He kept looking though. He did not hate Jeff. Bert knew he was kind of a prick himself but in a different way.

“What’s he doing, lecturing skaters on sidewalk etiquette again?”

His jab slid off Suzy’s veneer of neutrality. “I just work here. He radioed and said he was on his way.”

Just then, Jeff walked in the door. He had one hand cocked on the radio at his belt.
With the other, he perched his mirrored Oakleys on his flattop. “Nice you could make it, bed-head.”

“What’s your excuse?”

“I was out patrolling ‘J’ Lot. And I saw some suspicious characters checking out cars, so I had to follow them.”

“Ah, suspicious characters,” said Bert. “Brown people.”

“No, Mr. Sensitive. For your information, they were trailer trash, not Mexicans.”

“Suzy, did you know that most of the ‘Mexicans’ in this region are actually from Guatemala?”

She shuffled her security reports. “No. I didn’t.”

“What’s your point?” said Jeff.

“No point. Just some idle trivia—to kill time.”

“Oh, I get it. This is another of your ‘Jeff’s a bigot because he’s a Marine’ remarks.”

“Jeff, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Boys,” said Suzy, “that’s enough.”

Dave stepped into the office.

“So Davey, what’s up?” Jeff said and smiled.

Dave clasped him on the shoulder and shook his hand. He acknowledged Bert with a nod. “Let’s all go down to the conference room. Everyone else is there waiting.”

“Suze, you got the dispatch?” Dave asked. She looked up and started to say “yes,” but Dave had already left the office. Jeff and Bert followed.

The other two officers were sitting in the small conference room on maroon
plastic chairs around a table with a maroon laminate top. Bob was digging his ear with a pinky finger. He was the new guy. When they entered, he stopped digging and put his pinky to his mouth, using his front teeth to clean under the fingernail.

Bert sat next to Randy. Randy was okay. He was the other type of officer. Fat, balding, and forty-five, he was far too nice to work in a security department. Genuine kindness was seldom rewarded in security work; Randy wouldn’t be with them too long. Bert, himself, was an aberration. If one plotted security personnel on a graph, he would be the dot in the upper left-hand corner that everyone scratched at, looking to see if a crumb had fallen on the page.

Dave took up his usual position at the table end nearest the conference room door. The dead girl, he said, was a sophomore living alone in the university-owned apartments. The police were waiting for the results of a toxicology screen before releasing a cause of death. “Until the case is closed, it’s our job to keep an eye out. Report any suspicious activity immediately to the police and myself. You’re not to enter the apartment or speak to the press under any circumstances.”

Bert snorted. No talking to the press, there went his night.

Dave looked up at him, licked his wide, frog lips. “Question?”

“Yeah,” said Bert, “what happened to her?” Suzy’s vagueness had made him curious.

“That information is confidential.”

“What about her name? You can tell us that much, can’t you?”

Dave puffed out his cheeks a little, moved his jaw from side to side. They all looked at him. Silence.
“Look,” said Bert, “what if someone contacts us about the girl? We need to know who she is so we can direct them to you and don’t accidentally say something inappropriate.”

“Well, of course, her name’s not confidential—for you guys.” He peeked inside the manila folder he had carried with him to the meeting. “Her name is Trystan Thomas.”

Bert’s throat constricted as if someone had slipped behind him and looped a cord around his neck. He could get no air and pressure built, a sharp painful contraction in his voice box. His eyes dried out and began to burn. The name could not be right. He knew her, had shared a class with her once, had a crush on her, had said something stupid which ruined it all.

“Any more questions?” Dave asked, looking at Bert.

Bert turned away and fixed his gaze on the expanse of maroon laminate. People rose. He heard Jeff say, “Probably suicide. That’s why it’s all hush-hush.”

Bert stood. “Shut up.”

“What’s your problem?”

“Just shut up.” His body quivered. “She wouldn’t kill herself.”

“What’s up your ass? Was she a friend of yours?”

“Not another word.” Bert pointed his finger in Jeff’s face. Jeff backed away, a stunned look on his square face.

Everyone stared at Bert. He glared back and no one said a word.

#

*I know what’s needed: goddamn parent licenses. No reproduction without a license. Of course, that wouldn’t fly. Parents have the right—it’s somewhere in the*
Constitution—to horribly fuck up their children. They’re animals—no, worse. An animal would abandon its young or eat them. We torture.

#

WEDNESDAY

The university had erected the administration building in 1910, mimicking the Victorian style popular at the time. Four flat-topped spires, one at each corner, thrust up into the sky like a castle’s towers—but made of red brick instead of dark, stately English stone. On warm nights without wind, Bert liked to go out onto the southwest spire and pretend he was the campus gargoyle.

The dragons, griffons, chimeras, and Green Men on medieval cathedrals and castles warded the occupants from evil spirits. But what did he ward the campus from? Drunks, skaters, vagrants, ex-husbands, and perverts hiding behind bushes—the unpleasant realities of everyday life. Mostly, Bert protected the students from themselves. He called the paramedics when they had drunk themselves unconscious. When some freshman torero, dumb with what he thought was love, punched out his window, Bert brought the MedKit, bound the wound, and kept pressure on it until he could convince the student to go to the hospital. Sometimes he failed to protect them or there was nothing to be done. But he never knew how to distinguish the two until long after the fact.

He went up to the fourth floor men’s bathroom. There, he unlocked the padlock on the ceiling hatch, pulled down the ladder, and climbed into the dim passageway between the ceiling and the roof. The hatch above opened to an octagonal platform on top of the spire. Bert did not like to get too close to the spire’s edge. Unlike a real castle, there were no battlements, only an inward-sloping parapet less than two feet high. He did
not trust himself; he felt clumsy in deadly situations, like his limbs were conspiring to end him—and unlike the Green Man, he would not come back to life in the spring.

The darkened campus below slept under the cover of the oak trees. Was she a friend of yours? Jeff’s words played in Bert’s mind. Well, was she?

Bert had not known Trystan well. In all the time he had known her, he could only remember his last three words to her. That was six months ago during spring term. Three words in two terms.

She had been in his American lit class. She sat in the center of the classroom, quiet, among her three friends. Bert sat in back. They seldom acknowledged each other. Whenever he spoke, her friends would roll their eyes and pretend their fingernails needed emergency attention. They were fresh out of high school and Bert—at twenty-nine—was ancient. Even freshmen knew that old people who went back to school were obnoxious ass-kissers. It was a stone fact.

The one to Trystan’s left was a little pokey in the middle. She dressed in babydoll tees too tight and too short. He called her “Muffin Top.” The second girl would sit up a row directly in front of Trystan. Bert could never settle on a name for her. Half the time, he called her “Squinter” and the other half “Schnauzer,” because she squinted at the chalkboard and her face screwed up like a runty pup scenting the last scrap of pepperoni dropped from the dinner table.

To Trystan’s right sat “Shiny”; she wore some occult lip-gloss. It concentrated all the light that struck it, compounded it through some secret means, and redirected it into Bert’s eyes. Shiny also wore black, spider-like Raybans in class and would not remove them no matter how dark the room. Now and again she would turn her inscrutable gaze
toward him, and he felt as if an alien mind were judging him.

Trystan was not like them. She did not spend hours in a tanning booth, did not spackle her face with foundation, and did not stuff herself into chemical-faded jeans and a half-shirt. She exhibited Aristotelian moderation—a little sun, a little eye shadow, a summer dress with a hyacinth print. She seldom smiled, and when she laughed the motion touched her face briefly, then went away, leaving her body unaffected. When she spoke in class, however, it was like she stole Shiny’s lip-gloss light and used it to illuminate herself. After they had read “The Mysterious Stranger,” Trystan said that she liked Twain the best so far because, “He was funny but not ridiculous, and sarcastic without being cynical.” Bert liked Twain because he made fun of pompous Christians.

Maybe if he had shut up in class, she would have talked more. He couldn’t help it; he liked the sound of his own voice. He just opened his mouth and words came out, and he did not always know what would come. The voice spoke like it knew what it was talking about, spoke with a decisiveness his thoughts lacked.

There were many times after class when he tried to speak with Trystan. He would approach as she walked along the eroded concrete path between the rows of prickly Oregon grape toward the campus center. But she always had those things with her. They were like the three witches in Macbeth guarding their cauldron. Shiny, Squinter, and Muffin Top passing around a single pack of smokes, chanting, “Double, double, boil and pimple; facial cream, and pierce my nipple.”

Near the end of the term, the moment he waited for arrived. In Bert’s memory it played out like this:

Bert is stomping toward the business office because they have screwed up his
billing yet again. He has in mind several variants of verbal abuse. He is almost to the steps of the administration building and has just thought of a new one involving the office worker’s lineage and a syphilitic goat, when he sees her.

Trystan is leaning against the trunk of the big-leaf maple in front of the library, sketching on a drawing pad, her pencil bag balanced on her thigh. She wears a white T-shirt with red script that reads, “Dynamite!” Her canvas Vans look too big on her small frame. Ink-pen scribbles cover the shoes. Rainbows, hearts, little words he cannot decipher. Sweet, cutesy shit. He thinks, She is nothing like her friends. He looks for them, but they are not around.

Bert no longer remembers anything to do with the business office or goats. He is not angry any more. He is calm. She is alone, and he has nothing to do for hours.

He is going to say, “Hi, I’m Bert. I sit in the back of your English class.” Simple and Direct. Hard to screw that up.

She has that somber air she carries about her; it’s in her countenance, her posture. It’s a look that many people would describe with an inapposite cliché such as “a cross to bear”; but to Bert, it seems more like an uprooted stop sign slung over her shoulder. The look says you cannot know me, yet it draws him on and makes him want to know. He approaches. Trystan raises her head. She sees him and smiles.

She smiles? Bert’s brain stops working. It’s break time, see you in fifteen. So his mouth takes over—that mellifluous mouth that protects him so well. That austere mouth, eloquent and terrible. His lips curl into in a sneer. Words fly and he hears himself say, “Nice fucking shoes.”

Bert sighed. He stared down at the tarred seams on the tower roof. No, I was not
her friend, he admitted.

Back on the ground, Bert’s wandering took him, not by chance, to the University Apartments. He waited for a red Acura to pass, its tinted windows reflecting light from the streetlamps into his eyes, and then crossed the street. Only five quick steps across College Avenue, the apartments were not a part of the main campus. Even so, almost every night he strolled through this lot and looked up at the dirty-white townhouses.

He had not known Trystan had lived here. He could see which door was hers from the sidewalk. The door had bright red tape across it: POLICE LINE—DO NOT CROSS. He had the master key to the apartments somewhere on the giant ring held to his belt by a Velcro closure.

As he stood brooding, a thought struck him. Last night, maybe her killer had watched him walk through the lot, waiting until Bert was gone to leave the apartment. Or perhaps, as Jeff believed, while Bert passed through, she was in the bathroom locking eyes with herself in the mirror as her hand stretched forth to open the medicine cabinet. Or was she dead even then? Growing cold on the yellowing vinyl. Alone. A sad-sweet girl in too big shoes, her cheek to the floor and she staring, staring at him through the walls.

#

It’s unfair. Old Yeller’s son, he’s already ruined. I can’t leave anything outside my apartment; he steals it. I’ve lost a nice pair of hiking boots and my barbecue grill. He never had a chance, really. Poverty and that mother’s mouth smashed him with blows stronger than a thousand angry thundergods could muster. The girl has a chance, maybe, but not for long.
THURSDAY

Bert woke. Old Yeller was at it again. Her little one, the daughter, was crying. He heard something about ice cream. The girl had dropped her ice cream on the floor. Old Yeller was screaming, “Clean up your mess, dummy,” at a four-year-old. The girl kept sobbing, and her mother continued to yell. Again and again.

The pillow offered no protection; he could still hear. Old Yeller mocked the girl, repeating her daughter’s cry with exaggerated squalls. Bert beat at his head under the pillow.

“Stop!” he screamed into the mattress.

Bert jumped out of bed, staggering, tugging up his boxers with the bad elastic, tripping on the comforter toward the window. A sad combination of chest hair, tattered underwear, and rage, he tore at the window. It would not budge, and he kept clawing at it like a terrier buried in a warren. A fingernail split open. Blood smeared the pane in a red arc. Finally, he heaved the window open.

“Leave her alone. Leave her alone. You bitch! I’m going to fucking kill you if you don’t leave her alone!”

He could see nothing in the daylight. He pushed his face into the metal screen, blind and shouting. Breathing in quick gasps, he heard nothing more from next door. As an afterthought, a justification perhaps, he yelled, “You don’t do that to kids.”

#

It was now past midnight. Some punks had tagged the administration building earlier during swing shift. Bert read their descriptions in Randy’s incident report. One
boy’s description sounded strikingly similar to Old Yeller’s son. There was almost no chance Bert would see the punks though. He was the only one on; unless he was riding the mountain bike, the thrashers could use half the campus as a giant skate park and split before he would be any wiser.

He didn’t much care; he had better things to get worked up about. Jeff had brought in shitty little American flags for everyone today. There was one taped to his locker. “Yipee!” He waved the paper flag overhead then slam-dunked it into the trash bin. The only thing he found more disgusting than public displays of affection were public displays of patriotism. They were the first steps that led inevitably, in Bert’s mind, to Sieg Heil.

Bert made his first round. He liked the graveyard shift. No one was around; he could think. At night the creatures came out: insects of every humming pitch, opossums, feral cats, and mongrel dogs—and just now, raccoons.

A family of them crept across the west lawn under the wide-reaching oaks. Limping at the rear was a large boar raccoon that Bert knew by its odd, hopping gait and bobbed tail. The boar raccoon followed the others, stopping every few feet, swiveling, peering about with lambent, black eyes. It watched, it guarded. Bert had never been this close before.

Taking one slow step at a time, Bert pulled the flashlight out of its ring on his belt and approached. The three smaller raccoons started to climb a thick oak with a Y-split about thirty feet up. He clicked on the flashlight, directed the beam at the Y. The first raccoon disappeared into the crook. Bert laughed. The other two popped, one after the other, into their hidey-hole.
At the base of the tree, Bert heard a hissing. He had come too close, and the old boar was not happy about it.

Bert spotlighted him, hoping the raccoon would retreat up the tree. The boar barked and jumped forward five feet. Its eyes reflected red in the light; with its fur raised, it was about the size of a spaniel. Bert’s view filled with miffed raccoon. Bert retreated. He could now see why the old boar raccoon limped. It only had three legs. The front left paw and forelimb were missing. The remainder of its leg ended in a stump at the second joint, what would be the elbow on a person.

Bert took a few more steps back. The raccoon turned and, without much difficulty, climbed the trunk of the oak. The old boar and Bert had taken each other’s measure. Bert presumed the boar had found him wanting.

After he finished his first round, Bert walked straight to the University Apartments. He paused in the parking lot. The red Acura from the previous night idled in front of Trystan’s apartment. It was a bit past two in the morning. He took out the mace, gave it a good shake, and held it out in front of him. The Acura peeled out. It jerked around and shot toward the street.

Bert ran. He was able to make out the first two numbers of the plate: a “3” and an “8.” Because the windows were tinted, he had not seen the driver. He put the mace away, dug around in his thigh pocket for the cell phone, and sighed. Because of this incident, he would have to write a report.

While Bert waited for the police, he tried to work it out. Trystan wouldn’t have killed herself, right? Smart, pretty girls didn’t kill themselves. Someone should have been there for her. Nice-fucking-shoes. Three little words.
The thing he could not figure out was why the driver of the Acura had taken off in such a panic. Was the driver her killer? His mind leapt at the possibility. Yes. A stalker or old boyfriend, waiting in shadow until Bert had passed two nights ago, broke into her apartment and murdered her. And he had left something at the scene, something incriminating.

No more than five minutes had passed when the first cruiser pulled into the parking lot. From it, stepped a solid woman with brown skin and shoulder-length black hair. Her nametag read: Officer Diane Huntsinger. A paragon of curt efficiency, she took Bert’s statement, nodding and writing everything down. He told her his new theory. She pursed her lips and said, “Uh huh.”

Another officer appeared, coming from the rear parking lot. Bert unlocked Trystan’s apartment for him. The officer entered and shut the door behind him. Bert craned his neck to look inside, but saw nothing except bare walls. After a couple moments, the officer returned. He replaced the plastic police tape in its previous position and shook his head to Officer Huntsinger. He climbed back into his cruiser.

“What do you think? The girl’s ex, right?”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve got it under control,” Huntsinger said brusquely.

She and the other officer departed.

Goddamn cops.

Later in the security office, Bert ate lunch while searching the incident report database for anything containing the name “Trystan Thomas.” To his surprise and pleasure he found something. A report from the fall term the year before, when she was a freshman. Apparently she had had some problems with an old boyfriend from high
school. She had contacted Dave and told him that a guy, Luke Albrecht, was following her around, calling and telling her how they should be together again. She had filed a restraining order. Eventually, he must have moved on, because there was nothing further. The report did indicate, though, that there was a photograph of the ex-boyfriend included with the hardcopy.

Bert went down to the basement of the building and looked through their secure storage area where they kept old paperwork, but Trystan’s file was missing. Other reports from that time were there, only that particular one was gone. The Director must have pulled it after the police contacted him. The manila folder Dave kept peeking at, thought Bert.

Dave’s office was locked. That was one key Bert did not have, but no matter. The doors in the office were not very secure. The university had a habit of moving departments around, and the security office had once been the office of the company that ran the university meal programs. Bert had had to break into Dave’s office once before in the winter to get the de-icer from the supply locker. There was a gap in Dave’s door between it and the jamb. From the officer’s desk, Bert took the metal shim they used to pop car locks and popped Dave’s door. Bert could get in anywhere on campus; he often thought he should have been a spook—or a cat burglar.

The manila folder was lying on top of Dave’s desk. Inside, paper-clipped to the report, was the picture. A prom photo. In it, Trystan smiles thinly. She has on a pale pink, formal dress and matching corsage. Her hair is pulled up. A simple diamond pendant hangs in the hollow of her throat. To Bert’s eyes, she’s lovelier than he’s ever seen her.
Her date is just a kid: short-cropped, brown hair; brown eyes; 5’8”, 160 pounds. (He might have grown since this was taken, Bert reminded himself.) He wears a black suit and his lips stretch wide with an impudent grin.

Apparently Dave had a friend in the local police department, because in addition to the old file, Bert found a photocopy of an unfinished report dated the day after Trystan’s death. She had been found by a fellow PNW student by the name of Samantha Sands. Sands had notified 911 dispatch. Throughout the report Trystan was referred to as “the deceased.” There was a list of medicines taken from her cabinet: sertraline, ibuprofen, acetaminophen, and nembutal. The report noted that the nembutal container was empty. The report ended by saying that no evidence of a break-in or foul play had been found, but a determination of suicide or wrongful death could not be reached until the ME’s report came back with the cause of death and tox results and an interview had been conducted with a “person of interest.” Here Bert noticed, with some satisfaction, that the person of interest was Luke Albrecht. The report was signed by Officer Huntsinger. From the tone of the report, it was clear that Huntsinger had already concluded that Trystan’s death was by her own hand and that the interview with Albrecht would be purely pro forma.

Pocking the picture, Bert exited the office. It was a short jog over to the Media Arts lab in the library. There, he scanned the photograph and then printed the scan on the color laser printer. When he returned to Dave’s office, he replaced the original photo in the folder.

Bert yanked the patrol bike out of the security storage area and cycled several quick loops around the deserted campus. A gray opossum and a darker gray alley cat
hissed and spat and yowled in front of a tipped trashcan at the University Commons. The animals scattered as he cycled over to right the can. In spite of the hard pedaling, his heartbeat was steady—a faint lubdub. If the cops wouldn’t consider murder and truly investigate, he would. As he rode to Trystan’s apartment, he was calm. He needed to see for himself. He had failed her once and wouldn’t again.

The furnishing inside of her apartment was sparse: a futon couch, a small TV stacked on a DVD player stacked on a plastic crate. There was no dining room, only a large kitchen with a glass-topped table. A half-empty cup of milk and a utility bill sat on its surface. The milk lent a rancid smell to the room. Bert hastened to leave, but noticed some paper slips held in place with magnets on the lime-green refrigerator.

He touched nothing. There was a coupon for Slim-Fast and a list of things to do. The list had two items and swirly doodles traced around the edge. It read: “get more slim-fast” and “study for psych midterm.” The doodles started around the right edge of the slip and curved toward the bottom, but there they tapered into jagged, scratchy lines pressed so deeply into the paper that they tore through.

Bert felt nauseated. It must have been the rancid milk.

With the house sealed up, the air was warm and stuffy, even at half-past four in the morning. The bathroom was at the top of the landing. The yellowed vinyl, cracked and peeling, sank into view as he ascended the stairs. The waste bin had been dumped over. Cotton swabs, newspaper, wads of toilet paper, and empty tampon wrappers littered the floor. A green bath mat lay crumpled in the corner next to the tub as if frozen in a moment of writhing.

He was not squeamish but thought he might vomit. His stomach rolled in his gut,
and the back of his throat was slick and watery. He fought to suppress the feeling.

Passing the bathroom and moving down the hall, Bert came to two bedrooms. The first, completely empty—not even a fixture on the overhead light, just a bare bulb, broken at the socket and hanging suspended by its own filaments. The movement of the air caused the bulb to sway slightly like a bald man’s head in a noose.

Something nagged at him, a half-buried feeling. This was not a woman’s place. There was almost no decoration, no doodads, no potted plants—just carpet and bare wall. The thought unearthed itself, shambled forth into his consciousness. This place looked just like his apartment.

Bert nudged open the second bedroom door with his shoulder. This was where she did her living. Textbooks and stuffed animals littered the floor: bears elephants, tigers—horses. Piles of fuzzy horses. Shelves of them. It looked like a thirteen-year-old’s room, without the boyband posters.

Who was this girl in a woman’s body? What did Bert really know about her? She had liked Twain and once had three false friends. That was it. That was all he could come up with. And now he was an eavesdropper to her cluttered, childlike mind.

#

In the morning, just as Bert finished the incident report about the red Acura, Jeff arrived for the dayshift. Suzy had come in a half hour early as usual. Bert glared up from the computer monitor. “Oh, by the way, thanks for the flag,” he said sarcastically.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Man, you need to get your priorities straight,” Jeff said. “What’s wrong with
pride in your country? Don’t you love your country?”

“No. Do you love your softball league? You can’t love shit like that. It’s too abstract. You can love your granny. You can love Suzy. You could even love me…well, maybe not. But you can’t love your country.”

“The hell I can’t. The hell I can’t.”

“Language. This is an office,” said Suzy.

“You know what your problem is?” said Jeff. “You don’t take anything seriously. Nothing is sacred to you.”

Yeah, the world’s a great place with all those people taking things seriously and sacredly, Bert thought. How could a former soldier not understand that? Bert felt suddenly worn out, exhausted from trying to communicate views that seemed obvious to him, and he didn’t respond further.

#

I can’t stop thinking about this three-legged raccoon here on the grounds. Tough as he is, he couldn’t make it off the campus on his own. Alone, he’d be torn apart by dogs. He rides piggyback on us, surviving where others can’t on refuse and the little he can pilfer in the dark. Does he lie in his hollow and bemoan the unfairness of life? I wouldn’t blame him. Lose a limb and it makes you cling that much fiercer to what you still have. You become cagey and vicious.

#

FRIDAY

Old Yeller was silent, but Bert was unable to sleep. He kept seeing that bare bulb hanging in Trystan’s spare room and superimposing faces upon it, first his father’s face
remembered from an old photo, and then his own. This image disturbed him so much he
got up and grabbed a cola from the fridge. It tasted awful. He drank it anyway while
reading his biology text.

Later, at work, Bert kept thinking about her apartment. No sign of a break-in.
Maybe the door had been unlocked or maybe she had let someone in. But why would she
let Albrecht in? It didn’t make sense; so as soon as Randy signed out and Bert was alone,
he broke into Dave’s office again to reread the police report. There was nothing new to
be gained, and Bert stared around the room. His eyes alighted upon Dave’s filing cabinet
in which the personnel files were kept. On impulse he opened it and pulled out his own
file. Inside he discovered his resume, background check, drug test, and several
performance reviews from the past few years. The performance reviews said mostly what
he expected: that he disrespected authority, failed to get on with his fellow officers, and
insisted on following his own interpretation of the university’s operating procedures.
Damn straight, thought Bert. He also discovered, however, some comments he hadn’t
expected. The review said that he had a good rapport with students, faculty, and staff
(excepting security folk); that his incident reports were “always on time and models of
clarity”; and that he was reliable and consistently did the right thing in an emergency. For
those reasons, Dave wrote, he overlooked Bert’s numerous eccentricities.

Bert chuckled; he simply did not know what to make of Dave’s reviews. He’d
always thought Dave hated him. Maybe Dave did, but the reviews approached something
nearing objectivity.

Again on impulse, Bert pulled out Jeff’s file to compare. In addition to the resume
and reviews and so forth, he found photocopies of military certificates. It turned out, Jeff
was a veteran of the conflict in Somalia and had seen combat in Mogadishu. He had been awarded a purple heart and a bronze star. Fan-fucking-tastic, Bert thought, the jackass was a goddamned war-hero. He found some solace, however, in the fact that Dave said Jeff’s reports sucked.

On his first patrol of the campus, Bert found a couple of doors propped open with chairs. Kicking the chairs down and out of the way, he secured the building. His thoughts returned to Trystan. How could he reconcile the woman from his class with the girl who lived in that apartment? She was intelligent. She was sickly sweet.

Bert sat on a west lawn bench for a long time watching the faint breeze stir the leaves on the oaks. They whispered unpleasantly, a sound like the scurrying of vermin. His heartbeat was fast, irregular, and the wet gone from his mouth.

He went out on the patrol bike, following his usual routine. He knew every speed bump, every tiny ramp that could be used to catch a brief flight from the ground. Again and again he flew, only to return too quickly back to the concrete. He avoided the apartments, but would have to make a patrol through there eventually. Near the end of his ride, he swung onto College Avenue and then into the apartment lot. He rode a couple tight circles in the middle of the lot, but turned too sharply and went over the handlebars when the front wheel twisted perpendicular to the frame.

Cursing and feeling stupid, Bert crawled out from under the bike, checked it for damage, and then led it to the sidewalk in front of Trystan’s apartment. His elbow stung from the tumble. Nursing his arm, Bert detected something off about Trystan’s door. But before he could figure it out, a voice interrupted him.

“You all right?”
Bert turned to find Jeff and a sable-colored Siberian Husky standing before him. Jeff was pointing at Bert’s injured elbow with the hand loop of his dog’s leash.

“Sure,” Bert said. “What are you doing out here so late?”

“Nature calls, and it doesn’t matter what time it is, Radar here will drive you fuckin’ nuts if you don’t answer with him. He likes the campus lawn, so that’s where we go.”

“Hmm,” Bert said in answer. He looked around, hoping Jeff would take the hint and shove off.

“This her place?”

“Yeah.”

“Look, I’ve been feeling bad about what I said the other day.”

Bert stared at Jeff warily, but said nothing. He didn’t know where Jeff was going with this. The husky sat and cocked his head, looking at Bert.

“About your friend, I mean. I would have kept my mouth shut, if I’d known. I’ve lost some friends. And I … I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“Uh, okay,” Bert said. He scratched his head. “Um, thanks?”

The husky whined and looked up at its master. “That’s all I wanted to say,” Jeff said. He tightened his grip on the leash. “I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah.” Bert continued to regard Jeff as he jiggled the dog’s leash to rouse it.

“In Mogadishu?” asked Bert.

Jeff looked up. “Huh?”

“The friends you lost.”

“Oh, yeah.” Jeff nodded. “It was a bad day.”
“Is that where you got the purple heart?”

“Yes…” It was Jeff’s turn to be wary. Radar sat down and whined again. “You must’ve talked to Dave.”

“How did you get it? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Jeff snorted. “A friend shot me in the leg.”

“Friendly fire?”

“Yep. You see, I’d taped this little American flag to his footlocker—”

They shared a laugh, brief but genuine.

“Fair enough,” said Bert amiably. “I still think you’re a prick, though.”

“Fair enough,” replied Jeff equally amiably. “So are you.” He gathered up the leash and clicked at Radar, and together they walked off toward College Street.

When they were gone from sight, Bert shook his head and said, “Well, all kinds of surprises today.”

Now that he was alone once more, Bert turned his attention to Trystan’s door. It took him a few moments before he could tell what had changed: The police tape was in a different spot. He had been careful to replace it exactly as he had found it the night before.

He searched the parking lot, but there were few cars and none of them red. He listened. Leaves rustled, nothing more. Walking around behind the apartments to the smaller lot that exited onto Filmore, he saw streetlight reflected off the tinted window of an immaculately polished, red Acura. Bert jotted down the plate number and state. His heart beat faster, and a tension ran through the length of his body, drawing him taller, more alert. The ache in his elbow vanished.
He knew he should call the police. He should write an incident report. But an incident report would not still his shaking hands. It would not relax his clenched jaw. And it certainly would not resolve the pain in his chest when he imagined Trystan’s face.

Resolution required action. He was greedy for it.

He turned the apartment doorknob—not locked. Bert hefted his Maglight and crept into the living room.

Nothing. One corner of the futon had been lifted. The kitchen was empty as well. His breath came quick. He felt invigorated, as if he could leap twenty feet, smash the couch frame to splinters, lug the front door off its hinges with one hand. The heavy flashlight quivered. Bert placed a foot on the lowest step of the stairs.

From above, he heard a soft thump against the sheetrock wall. Bert inhaled until his chest could expand no more. He let the air out slowly and tiptoed up the steps. When he reached the landing, the sound of the turning of pages caught his attention. Trystan’s bedroom light was on. Stepping forward, he raised the Maglight. Instead of a punk kid with a wolfish grin, he spied a blond woman leaning against the far wall in the bedroom, thumbing though a spiral-bound notebook. The woman’s presence shocked him into inaction. He didn’t understand; clearly, he’d missed something. Whatever it was, he still needed to apprehend her. The blonde turned a page in the notebook, and the slight crinkling sound released Bert from his paralysis.

“Don’t move!” Bert shouted. Startled, the woman looked up and bobbed the notebook. It flew out of her hands toward Bert. He smashed it to the floor with the Mag, and rushed forward to smash her to the floor. She screamed.

Bert stopped, jerked forward another half step, and stumbled on a pile of plush
horses. He knew her. Once upon a time, he had named her Shiny.

“God! Don’t hurt me.” She raised her hands defensively in front of her face. Her eyes were wide with fear.

“You?” Bert lowered the Maglight, but kept it between them. “What are you doing here?”

“I left something.”

“You shouldn’t be here. This is a crime scene.” Maybe he had it all wrong. Shiny? Why would Shiny be here?

“Crime scene?” She side-stepped toward the bed.

Her black Raybans were missing, and Bert could see her eyes, bright blue solar eclipses, a light-hued inner corona surrounded by the dark, bounding outer circle of her iris. The flesh around her eyes was raw and puffy; it contrasted with the gaunt, chiseled line of her jaw. She had been crying.

A little softer he said, “What are you doing here?”

She stepped forward and picked up the spiral notebook from the floor. “I came for this. It’s mine.”

“What is it?” Bert studied her. In the months since he had last seen her, her face had grown hard, her tan lost. There was no reflective gloss on her lips, no dyed highlights in her hair.

“My journal.”

“You came here for that? You could go to jail.”

“I don’t care. It’s mine. They can’t have it.”

“What do you know about Trystan’s murder?” Bert asked.
“Murder?” Shiny’s brows drew together, expressing confusion.

“I think her ex-boyfriend killed her,” he said.

“No.” She shook her head, flatly contradicting him.

“You have a choice. Tell me what you know, or we can both wait here for the police to arrive. They’re probably on the way now.” He could call the police later if necessary.

“I know who you are.”

“Great. Have a seat.” Bert gestured to the bed with the Mag.

“You’re the asshole from our lit class.”

Bert’s face flushed. “Did your daddy buy you that car?”

“Where’d that come from? Oh, I see. I’m a spoiled daddy’s girl—or did you mean something different, something nastier?” She eyed him suspiciously.

“No.” Bert glanced away. “What do you mean?”

“Is that what happened with Trystan?” she asked. “You didn’t know what to say so you were cruel instead?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

Shiny looked Bert in the eyes. “We all knew about you. The way you stared at her in class, it was impossible not to know. We used to laugh about it and tease her. She thought it was cute, but the rest of us thought you were creepy. Now, I just think you’re socially retarded.”

Bert sat at the far end of the bed away from Shiny and nodded his head. That was him, Mr. Nicefuckingshoes.

“What did you say to her that one day? Trystan told me, but I’ve forgotten.”
He stared at the bedroom door and didn’t answer.

“Something about her shoes.” Shiny snickered. “Oh man, we laughed so hard about that. What you said was hurtful, but mostly it just confused the hell out of her.”

There was nothing to say to that. It was yet another break in the chain of the day’s expectations. “I can’t help her now, but I have to do something. That’s why I have to find out what happened.” He shrugged. “To restore peace.”

“Peace?” Shiny leapt off of the bed. “For who? She killed herself. There. You peaceful?”

Bert’s whole theory about Albrecht shattered. He wanted to be angry. Wanted to shout at Shiny, tell her what a crappy friend she was. But he could not. He had been so eager to believe any explanation for Trystan’s death other than suicide. Anything to give himself hope. It was selfish and perverse. No matter, she was still dead.

His head fell into his hands. Bert did not want Shiny to see his face. It felt contorted and ugly. His body shook and jerked, but no sound came out.

Silence from the other side of the room. Something light brushed Bert’s ear. It was a tissue. Shiny held it out to him. Her head was tilted down, and the side of her face created an elegant curve that joined with the slope of her neck. She no longer looked quite so stony.

Bert took the tissue but wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his uniform instead. Shiny snorted. He expected her to follow with more abuse; that’s what he would do—what he deserved. But she did not. She continued to gaze down at him, her face soft with unexpected compassion.

“I was going to live with her in that apartment, but she changed her mind at the
last minute and decided to live alone.” Shiny returned to her seat. “I thought she’d be okay. She didn’t try to get another roommate. She wanted to be with me. I think she wanted to be like me—I was then—but couldn’t.”

“Why? I mean, why did she…”

“She had family problems, I don’t know much. She was private. I worried about her and tried to get her out. She would say she’d come to a party and then never show up. Or she’d show up, drink too much, and leave with some guy. She’d call me the next day crying because he’d wanted more than she was willing to give. What you said wasn’t nice, but it wasn’t much compared with the other shit she dealt with.

“That’s why I gave her this.” She clutched her journal tighter, hugged it to herself.

“Something awful happened to me—”

Bert looked up at Shiny.

“—Don’t ask, I won’t tell you. I wanted her to see my mistakes and avoid them if she could. She was supposed to come to a sorority dinner but didn’t show, so I went to her place. I knew where she kept her spare key. I found her. In the hallway. She was cold.”

Shiny turned her head downward and looked through her eyelashes at Bert.

“That’s the best I can do. She was sad. She was in pain and couldn’t see past it. You have nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with it.”

They sat without speaking for a moment. Bert’s phone rang, startling them both.

“Public Safety,” he answered. It was the city dispatch. “No. It’s been quiet. I haven’t seen anyone except the night janitors.” The operator thanked him and hung up.

“You’re Samantha Sands?”
“Yes.”

“I’m—”

“I know your name,” she said. “You sat in the back of the class and made smartass remarks.”

“Not so funny now.”

“That’s the past, if you want it to be,” Samantha said. “Look at me, nothing’s the same.”

Bert nodded. “Tell me… Tell me something about her,” he asked. “Something good.”

“That’s freaking morbid, and I’m too tired for bullshit.” Samantha smiled weakly. “You tell me something. Tell me anything. No—tell me something important to you.”

She set her journal down on her lap, leaned forward, and waited.

Bert did not know what to say. It was hard. No one had asked him anything like that for years. He could fall back on his old trick, open his mouth and see what came out. No, that was just asking for trouble. Stalling for time, he removed his badge and keys and the little laminated card with alarm codes that he kept in his breast pocket. He set them to his side on the bed, and then he spoke. “Well, there’s this little girl that I’d like to steal.”
In my overnight bag there is my journal of the last three years, a roll of duct tape, two pairs of black leather gloves, a sawed-off section of a broom handle, a 2-lb. container of heavy duty crystal drain opener (the label reads: 100% LYE), and a loaded, chrome .45 stolen from David, my creepo stepdad. Bert and I are sitting in aluminum lawn chairs out on his little concrete patio behind his apartment. We’re both students at Pacific Northwest University. I’m a month from graduating. Even though he’s eight years older than me, he still has a year left. He works at the university as a security officer and takes one or two classes a term; my parents are loaded and I received scholarships, so I went full time.

A midday breeze blows lightly over us and sways the cedar tree branches overhead. The overnight bag is open between my feet. I stand, take out the journal, and place it on Bert’s new grill.

“How are you sure about this?” he says. He’s anxious and with good reason. He knows what is written inside the journal.

I nod and light it on fire. With such a simple act, I set in motion a series of events that will change the lives of four men and one woman, and perhaps us as well. It feels right to begin with fire.

“How panty hose or balaclava?” he asks, trying a joke.
“Balaclava.” I smile and step over to him. He encircles my waist with an arm. I run my fingers through Bert’s dark, curly hair, and we watch the pages burn.

#

I should begin with the rape. That’s where all this begins. Not for Bert, of course, but for me. Albert Stark and I crossed paths much later. That is its own sad story, and I will tell it, as well, in its proper time and place.

#

The first two years of college went by in a blur. There were classes, new people and new friendships, and old friends who wanted to keep in touch; I had joined the Sigma Chi sorority and there were social events and charity fundraisers and parties that came with membership. Somewhere in there I managed to make the tennis team and score a partial athletics scholarship. In no time, every second of my weekdays and nights were accounted for and every weekend was a new party and the alcohol flowed and flowed. And there was Mom to make excuses for my dipping grades, and there was David to write checks for my dipping funds. And where was I for all this? On vacation.

That vacation ended on a Friday night, October 17th, 1997 in the Alpha Zeta laundry room.

It was just another Alpha Zeta/Sigma Chi post-charity function party. Nothing special, a few kegs on a Friday night. I went with Brenda Long, my roommate from Fayetteville, North Carolina, who had joined Sigma Chi with me. We always go to these parties with a sister (it’s S.O.P.) to guard against exactly what happened to me. We do it because college boys, like cocker spaniels, will try to hump anything that moves.

I had just broken up with my boyfriend Ken, again. He’d finished engineering
school and had earned himself an R&D position at Intel in Beaverton, which was only a half-hour from me. Since graduating, however, he'd waxed boring and bloated, so I was done with him. At the party, I was drinking a lot and flirting with Mike Bremer, a basketball player and friend of the AZs but not actually in the fraternity. He and I had hooked up the last time I'd split with Ken, and I was considering doing it again. But Brenda wasn't having any of it; she knew all about Mike and that Ken and I had just separated, and she felt it was her duty to intervene. Brenda and I got into it when she pulled me away to the bathroom. I said a bunch of stupid drunken things, the gist of which was: mind your own fucking business. And she did. She left me and went home.

I went back to complain to Mike about Brenda Busybody. He was chatting with his friend Brian Doughty (also not an AZ) and two other guys I didn't know. They introduced themselves, but all I remember is that they were high school friends from out of town. Someplace cheap and suburban like Beaverton or Hillsboro. We blathered drunkenly a while, then Mike caught my eye.

He moved close, groped my ass, and whispered in my ear, “Let’s slip away, downstairs to the laundry room.” It sounded like a good way to forget Ken, so I went. But descending the hardwood staircase, I grew dizzy and developed tunnel vision. I thought I was going to throw up. “Mike,” I said and slapped a hand over my mouth. He rushed me to the laundry room where I vomited in the big steel sink. It was dark. I leaned over the edge, breathing hard. Then I felt Mike's hands up under my skirt, trying to dodge my panties and get a finger in me.

"No," I said, “I was just sick, don’t you care?”

He said something like, "Okay, I won’t kiss you," and I told him “No” again.
He pulled down my underwear. I tried to turn around, but he pinned me against the sink with one arm and undid his fly with the other. I struggled to push away from the sink, but I was too drunk and weak. I felt him poking at me. He was too drunk, however, and I was moving too much, for him to get it in. After a couple minutes, he grunted. I felt a wetness on the back of my thigh. Mike collapsed in a seated position against the far wall.

I attempted to slip away then, but another set of hands grabbed me. I vomited again in the sink. The hands spun me around after, and I saw the silhouette of three men, and I heard the one holding me say, "Do you mind, Mike?" It was Brian's voice.

Mike didn’t reply. I said, “No.”

Brian pushed me down on top of a pile of laundry and spread my legs with his knees and then there was just a shadow looming over me and a heavy weight crushing the breath from me. I went away. This wasn’t my first black out.

I woke up sometime later. The laundry room was still dark; it stank of beer and vomit and bleach. I could see the figure of a girl in the doorway of the laundry room, silhouetted by the dim yellow light in the hallway. Her body was turned profile, but her face was toward me; in her hands, she wrung some sort of cloth anxiously. I was splayed out on the floor. My skin itched and burned from my navel down to the middle of my thighs. When I stirred, the girl's silhouette vanished. My genitals burned as if someone had placed a hot iron upon them. I reached down between my legs and then brought my hand up to my nose. Bleach. One of them had cleaned me with bleach. My skin felt bubbly to the touch and searing pain flared up wherever I pressed. I searched the floor but my underwear and skirt were missing. Using the sink edge, I pulled myself upright. I was
still drunk and half-climbed half-fell into the sink and turned on the water to wash the bleach away and stop the burning. The initial spray evoked a whole new level of pain, but the cold water soon brought numbness and relief. After about half an hour, I climbed out of the sink, stole a pair of slacks, and snuck out of the frat house without anyone seeing me. I walked home alone in the dark. The texture of the slacks on my skin was unbearable.

When I got home, the burning and itching were so intense that I couldn't sleep or endure the rubbing of the bed sheets. I woke Brenda and waited around while she groused and searched for her glasses. It was nearly 5 A.M. and the only place open was the ER. Fortunately for me, the place was deserted except for the receptionist and a doctor, yawning and chatting the time away. Once the receptionist had cleared my insurance information, the doctor—a woman with roamy hips that made a tent of her white lab coat—began to question me about my injury. She wore no make up, and the florescent lights gave her face an unpleasant pallor.

“I was doing drunken laundry,” I said, “I managed to spill bleach in my lap without realizing it, and then fell asleep.”

“Oh huh,” she said. “You ever cook meth?”

I felt completely humiliated. Brenda came to my rescue, and I was never so glad to hear her sing-songy Carolina accent. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “Sam goes to PNW. She’s on the Dean’s List, for Christ’s sake.” This last bit wasn’t exactly true; I hadn’t made the list since my first semester, but the embellishment reassured me.

“All right,” the doctor said, “Well, drop your PJs, please. I need to take a looksie.”
Under the bright light, my naked waist looked like that of a sunburned eighty-year-old woman.

“Oh, dear,” the doctor said. “You have a pretty serious chemical burn, especially on your labia. You would have to have been in contact with concentrated bleach for at least an hour to cause the blistering I’m seeing.”

At the word blistering, Brenda glanced at my crotch and just as quickly looked away. Her grimace told me it appeared as bad as it felt.

“Are you sure,” the doctor continued, “it wasn’t maybe a different chemical—acid, lye, drain cleaner, or something similar?”

“I’m sure it was bleach,” I said.

“If you don’t believe her,” Brenda suggested, “why don’t you shove your nose in her twat and take a whiff.” She was really getting riled up. “Can’t you just help her?”

I laughed silently at Brenda’s spunk. Don’t mess with a North Carolina momma.

The doctor wasn’t quite as amused. “I have to have confidence in my diagnosis before I can start a treatment. If you can’t be civil, there’s a waiting room,” she said to Brenda. She then sighed and called for a nurse to wash me with sodium thio-something to neutralize any residual bleach and afterward to wrap me up with a loose bandage.

“Are you sexually active?” The doctor asked.

I almost broke down and told her everything. I should have. My eyes begin to tear up, and she must’ve seen something of my emotions in my face because her whole demeanor changed. She ceased to look at me like I was a dumb kid or drug dealer.

“What’s wrong, dear?” she said. "What really happened? You can tell me."

I wiped my eyes with my shirt sleeve. "Nothing," I said. “It’s the burning. It really
hurts. Can you do something about it?” Why, oh why, didn’t I tell her then? I don’t know.
I was embarrassed, certainly. Too proud to admit that I’d fucked up, that I’d lost control,
that others had taken the worst sort of advantage of me.

She asked the nurse to give me a painkiller and an antihistamine.

“The burn will likely last for much longer than a heat burn, due to the deeper
tissue damage, but you can treat it the way you would a regular burn after the bleach has
been neutralized. You must avoid sex until you’re completely healed.” The last thing she
said was, "And don't scratch. You're a lovely girl. The last thing you want is scarring
down there."

She was right about how long the burn would last; even a week later I could
barely sit. Most of the time, it itched intensely. I said the doctor’s little mantra for the
next three weeks: "Don't scratch. You’re a lovely girl…” and felt like a skank with the
clap-itch all the while.

Brenda chattered the whole way home about her friend Booger back in
Fayetteville, who was a military brat from Fort Bragg. (I didn’t want to know how he got
that nickname.) About the time they’d driven all over downtown Fayetteville with a car-
load of Crips chasing them because Booger had yelled “Nigga gangstas!” out the window
as they’d passed by. Brenda informed me with an odd kind of pride that, apparently,
Fayetteville was only one of a few cities in the South with Bloods and Crips shooting it
out in the streets.

What we didn’t talk about was what had happened at the AZ party. I was angry
with her for weeks for her seeming indifference on the ride home, and to be truthful, I
blamed her a bit for leaving me alone at the party, even though I had practically driven
her away. What I had thought was nervousness and an unwillingness to deal with the fact that she knew I had been raped, however, turned out to be something else entirely.

As it was then, I had to get out of Forest Grove and away from the university. I e-mailed my professors and told them I was ill, then drove to the University of Oregon in Eugene and spent a week with Amanda, my best friend from high school. (I swear those two hours spent driving in my Acura were some of the most painful of my life.) Amanda was surprised to see me and a little perturbed that I'd neglected her for the last year and then just suddenly showed up to spend the week. She soon figured out that something was wrong; I couldn't hide it from her, though I tried. It took me a day to get it out. I think she knew the first night when I begged to sleep in her bed and said I’d be awake all night otherwise. At first we lay there in the dark stiffly like two logs without touching; and then I started to cry, and she held me and stroked my hair until I fell asleep. The next morning she missed classes to stay with me, and I told her what had happened. She wanted me to go to the police, but I didn’t want to consider it—not then anyway.

After talking with Amanda, I was better able to handle what had happened to me. I decided to put it all down in my journal. I remember picking it up and a letter fell out. It was the letter Mrs. Caldwell, my high school AP English teacher, had given me just before I graduated. It was her letter that had prompted me to start the journal in the first place. I’ve kept the letter; it reads:

May 21, 1995

Dear Samantha,

It has been a real pleasure having you in my classes these last few years. I will miss
you when you head off to Pacific Northwest in the fall. I hope you will humor me and stay in touch. PNW is only an hour's drive from Portland, so I hope you'll stop in from time to time when you visit your parents.

I wish to speak candidly with you for once, the way teachers and students seldom do these days, it seems. I've watched you grow, becoming a smart and savvy young woman. I must say, however, that you tend to show your best qualities only when you think your peers are not looking. You cannot know the frustration, and even anguish, you have caused me when I watched your "dumb act" in class and then saw the fine work you turned into me. I wish to enjoin you never to hide your intelligence. It is a gift. Your vanity and desire for others to admire you for your frivolous qualities will sink you. Not right away, of course, but later when life's waters turn rough. I know you'll dismiss this as the rambling of an old, nosy teacher. I have a request, though—maybe "challenge" is a better word. I challenge you to keep a journal. Not a day-to-day record of places visited, meals ate, boys kissed; but a serious journal of what matters to you, where you're going, and reflections on where you've been. Think of it as a vaccination against petty thoughts. You may look back on it from time to time to see where you've been, and so choose a new direction if that is what you wish. You'll have enough clamor at college and beyond, and the journal will be a blissful moment of solitude.

The road diverges ahead of you, Samantha; the path you take is up to you. Everything is at stake.

I wish you the best.

Sincerely,
Emma Caldwell

I remember the rage I felt after reading it again years later. It seemed so different. Recriminating. Like a giant "I told you so." I could hear her precise voice in my mind.

"Everything is at stake," it said. "You chose your path poorly," it said. "You let your vaccination lapse." I remember writing in the journal, "Fuck you, Mrs. Caldwell. You hag." How juvenile that tantrum seems now. Of course, Mrs. Caldwell was right about everything.
Mixed in with the pain and humiliation was anger. It grew and grew; I wanted to do something to them. I wanted to hurt them the way they hurt me. Sometimes I wanted to kill them. I wanted to be a man so that I could rape them, show them the pain, the humiliation I’d felt. Other times, I was just sad. I cried. I looked on the Internet and found a site where women shared their experiences of rape. Some were similar to mine. There was the blaming of oneself, the anger, the fear, the shame. Many said they wanted to die, but that's one thing we didn't share. I had never even considered that. The sadder I got, the angrier I got. The more I blamed myself, the more I blamed them. A vicious circle of emotion. I also didn't fear men, I just didn't trust them alone anymore. But I also didn't dislike them. I called my friend Jack a few weeks later, just to hear his voice. We talked about books mostly—he is studying literature and philosophy at Reed College. He convinced me to take a philosophy class the next term. It was so good to hear his warm voice and have a normal conversation with him for once. In high school, he’d convinced himself that he was in love with me.

There’s a curious line of causation that leads from Jack to that night in the AZ laundry room. It goes from Jack to Ken to Mike.

The summer after graduation, Jack had been coming around and moping. He told me he was in love with me, always had been. At one point, I got fed up and asked him if I gave him a BJ, would he get over it? But that actually made him mad, so maybe he was in love. He probably thought I was teasing him. I wasn't. What's a BJ between friends? Especially, if it meant he’d be fun again.

The whole Jack business came to a head one night near the end of summer. My friends and I were having one last party before we went off to college and so forth. Zach
Coleman's aunt and uncle were off on vacation, so we appropriated their ranch for a bonfire. Zach's older brother, Ken, bought us two kegs. All the “good people” were coming. It was likely the last time we would all be able to get together—perhaps forever.

The Coleman's place is amazing. They have a five-door garage, and stables for their horses, and about ten acres of pasture. I was blown away. Amanda and I had gone early to ride ATVs with Zach and Ken. That was when I met Ken. At the time, he resembled the lead singer from Pearl Jam.

Everyone showed up later in the afternoon. Jack and Kyle, Katie and Mandy, Jimbear, James, Cory, Alberto, the Gonzalez brothers, Tori, Kat, and John S., and John B and too many others to recall. (I remember Tori had on the sluttiest little bikini top. I swear I saw her nipples like a dozen times—James sure liked it, though. Well, him and every other guy at the party.)

The beer was even good; Ken got us MGD and one called Bellyslide Belgian White that I'd never heard of before, but I still remember it because of the unusual name and because you drink it with a slice of orange in it. Ken flirted with me while we cut up the oranges. I was playing it cool—and failing—while I tried to decide if twenty-two was too old for me. He was a junior at Oregon State.

After we finished cutting, he got the two of us keg cups of Bellyslide. I squeezed an orange slice into his and mine, but the orange drizzled all over my hand. Ken laughed and grabbed it and sucked the juice off my fingertips. I was surprised, because we had met only a few hours before. I was really nervous, but it was super sexy. His stubble tickled my fingers, however, and I started to giggle and then we both laughed. I knew at that moment I'd better tell Amanda to watch out for me, because I wanted to jump him.
already and I hadn't even taken my first sip of beer. Amanda was my personal chastity belt. She could—and still can—give a look that would turn a horndog into a whimpering pup. But that evening she got drunk and weepy way too fast and passed out in the grass before it was even dark. I had to turn her on her side and keep an eye on her until Katie took over watch duty. Katie has always been the mom of our group (but without the nagging).

Jack was cool at the start. He sat on a pine stump near the fire and told stories to us about the crazy, googly-eyed chemistry teacher Ms. Huntington—she has narcolepsy. Jack was her student aide, so he saw her nod off mid-lecture all the time and knew most of the tricks her students had played on her.

“One time,” Jack said, “the entire class left the room. Some guy—he might even be present around this very fire, his name shall be withheld, however—”

Jimbear stood, raised his keg cup, took a bow. A vast amount of beer foam flocked his scraggly beard.

“So this unnamed guy,” Jack continued, “turned the clock forward thirty minutes. They all went outside and played kickball on the baseball diamond. Huntington woke up and thought she’d slept through the whole period.”

We laughed. I laughed so hard, tears formed and ran down my cheeks. I miss that sort of laughter, it doesn’t come to me often anymore.

“She ever figure it out?” Katie asked.

“Eventually, but the period was over by then,” Jack said.

“Vice-principal Winters came,” Jimbear added, “and gave us this huge lecture about respecting teachers the next class time, but he got so pissed because we kept
busting up.”

While Jimbear started to tell everyone about Winters’ lecture, Jack stood and came over to me. Katie was sitting nearby looking after Amanda and John S. and someone else, I forget whom. She overheard everything.

Jack was wasted and started right in with the love stuff.

“I've known that I loved you since Katie's birthday party in the fifth grade,” he said. “Do you remember it? Everyone was out back when I got there. No one answered the door, so I opened it myself. I stood with her gift in my hands in the doorway, debating whether to walk through the house or to go around outside. I was nervous enough to turn back and go home. Then you came out of the bathroom and said, ‘Hey Comrade Jackoff, the party’s in back. Follow me.’ Do you remember that?”


He laughed overloud and put his hand on my shoulder to steady himself. He wasn’t done with his story, though. It was clear to me he’d rehearsed it.

“But I didn't move, remember? You looked back and saw I wasn't following, so you walked up to me and smiled. That's when I knew. Your eyes—I'm not sure you know what they do to people. They're more than just beautiful. They're light blue like the sky at the center and darken toward the outer ring until they’re deep blue like a…an alpine lake. When you smiled, I looked into your eyes and felt this surge through my body; and I knew I would do anything you asked me to, and I would do anything to be near you. I still feel that way, you know.”

Jack pulled on my shoulder and tried to kiss me. I leaned away from him, and he
stumbled into me, smashing my cheekbone with his forehead. He fell and nearly took me
down with him. Rubbing my cheek, I left him on the ground. He apologized profusely,
but I ignored him. I’d had enough of it. I strode over to Ken, who was standing, watching
us from the other side of the bonfire, and I kissed him so that Jack would see us and leave
me alone.

Jimbear shouted, “Woo-hoo!”

I felt bad because Jack looked so shocked and hurt when he saw. I don't know if
I've ever seen a reaction so plainly on someone's face. He stood and said, "What the
hell?" Then he stumbled away toward the house, where he pouted for the rest of the
night.

Katie glanced up and said, “Don’t worry too much about it, it had to be done.”
(Later, John B. told me he saw Jack get in a fight with Auntie Coleman's rosebush and
lose.)

Ken and I sauntered over to the stables, where we chased off Kat, Kyle, the
Gonzalez brothers and some others engaged in a revolting conversation about Catherine
the Great. Ken and I locked ourselves in the stables; we snooped around, petted the
horses, and talked a long time. He told me he was an engineering student with two years
left in Corvallis. I said he didn’t look like an engineer, and he asked what an engineer
looked like. I said, “A dork-a-zoid?” He threw his head back and laughed. I punched him
in the gut, and from there, things turned interesting.

It was like my punch broke some sort of barrier between us. Next thing I knew,
Ken pressed me up against a stack of straw bales. I wrapped my arms around him, and we
made out for an eon. After that, Ken tossed me up onto the bales. He slid his hands over
my calves and knees and thighs, and then up under my skirt. While he was doing that, he
kissed the fronts and sides of my thighs. (Let me say, it is hard to keep your head with a
boy who knows what he’s doing. I don’t think even Amanda’s chaste-face would have
cooled me down that night.) Ken crawled up on the bales with me, but the straw was
digging into my butt and back, so I asked him to grab one of the horse blankets I’d seen
in the tack room. He returned with the blanket and laid it over the straw. I could smell the
musk of the horses and Ken's cologne and the beer on our breath. It was fabulous. My top
came off, and his hot mouth was on my breasts; I grinded against his blue jeans and
wished I was a virgin again so that I could lose it there in the stables among the horses
and straw with this rock star engineer. But that's where my memory ends. That was the
first time I had ever blacked out.

I woke up with my clothes on, tucked under a blanket on Uncle and Auntie
Coleman's couch with Ken holding my hand asleep next to me. I shifted and Ken woke
up. I asked what happened and he told me that, I'd said I needed to slow down, so we
cuddled for a minute, and then I'd just fallen asleep. Ken had put my clothes back on and
brought me into the house.

“Did we do it?” I asked.

“No.”

“Good.” I didn't feel sore, so I was pretty confident he was telling the truth.

“I will definitely reward you for your chivalry—another day.”

He kissed me, and then I nestled next to him, and we slept until noon.

Thinking back on that night, I took no lesson away from it whatsoever. If
anything, Ken’s actions lulled me into a false sense of security. I thought I could drink to
the point of unconsciousness and not worry about the consequences. And I did so many
times after. That is, until October 17th, 1997.

I spent the next few days after the bonfire “rewarding” Ken, and he, me. But I
soon learned that the chivalrous Mr. Coleman was not so chivalrous. I went out for lunch
with Zach one day, and he let it slip that his brother had a girlfriend back in Corvallis.

I confronted Ken that same evening while we walked along the Portland
waterfront, and he just stood there with his jaw moving but nothing coming out. He knew
he was busted and had no excuse, but that didn't stop him from trying. Finally, he said “I
don't really know if she and I are still together. We haven’t talked much at all this
summer.”

“Did she dump you?”

“No.”

“Did you break up with her?”

Ken fidgeted around and didn't answer.

"The word you’re looking for is no,” I said. “And in that case, you are still going
out.”

He tried to change his tack then and said, "Look, I thought this was just for fun.
You know, a summer fling before we go our separate ways to school in the fall. I mean,
you're the one who threw herself at me."

That really pissed me off. I was being reasonable up to that point. “You’re an
asshole!” I shouted. “Trying to blame me for your dishonesty? That’s a load of crap.”

Our evening ended with me yelling at Ken some more, and then I left him
stranded at the waterfront. I guess Zach had to come get him; I imagine that was an
uncomfortable trip home.

When I got home, Mom was in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner. David had left to drive my younger brother over to a friend’s house to play D&D or X-Box, or circle jerk to pay-per-view all night, or whatever it is that fifteen year-old boys do. John's a big pervert like his dad. I find it hard to believe we share half our DNA. Just the week before, I had caught him letting his buddy Craig rifle through my underwear drawer. I beat them with my tennis racket until they ran out the front door and down the road. They were laughing the whole time. They were lucky I had put away my softball bat and the racket was the only thing close at hand to smack them with.

Mom tossed her washrag to the sink when I stomped in and grabbed a Fresca from the refrigerator. “What’s wrong, honey?” she asked.

“Nothing.” I sighed and fiddled with the hand towel threaded through the fridge door handle.

“Sit,” she said, gesturing to a chair next to the little Ikea table we keep in the kitchen for one-person meals. Mom leaned against the counter and crossed her arms. This is her “I’m listening” pose.

I told her about Jeff and me, though I left out all the "rewarding" parts.

“You shouldn't be surprised,” she said. “That's what men do. They act badly and find a way to blame us for it. Believe me, I'd know.”

I wasn’t sure if she was referring to David or my long-absent father. Probably my father, she has a real blind spot where David is concerned.

“Don’t worry about Ken,” she continued. “You’ll be off to college in a couple days and he’ll be far away. There will be new boys, better ones who can take
responsibility for their actions.” She didn't add "hopefully," but I could see the word perched there in the shape of her lips.

“The thing about it is,” I said. “I’m not just angry. He actually hurt me with his lie. I really liked him” And when I thought about it, I actually did sort of throw myself at him—not that he minded, at all. But I didn’t say this to Mom.

“I know, honey,” she said. “I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is. They end up hurting us and we let them do it, and then we repeat the process until we find someone who doesn’t. Unfortunately, it always seems to take a few cycles.”

How could I know then that Ken, himself, would be several of my “cycles?”

Corvallis wasn’t all that far from Forest Grove, and for the next two years we got together and broke up on a regular schedule.

To sum up: In order to escape Jack, I threw myself at Ken; to escape Ken, I snuck away with Mike; to forget Mike—well, nothing will ever let me forget Mike. Change one link in the causal chain, and maybe I would have avoided my fate. Or maybe something worse would have happened, though it’s hard to imagine a worse outcome. Death, I guess.

#

When I returned from seeing Amanda in Eugene the week after the rape, Brenda ran out to my car to meet me and help carry my things inside. A light drizzle fell, but the interminable rains of late fall and winter had not yet begun. I handed her the hippie bedroll I’d picked up at the Eugene Farmer’s Market. It was a rainbow tie-dyed monstrosity with a huge red peace symbol stitched across the outside top surface, but inside was a red plaid flannel so soft that it made it possible to sleep through much of the
night despite the burn. I grabbed out my overnight bag from the car trunk and held it overhead as we made our way to the sorority house.

“You’ll never guess what happened while you were at Eugene,” Brenda said.

“Someone trashed Brian Doughty’s truck. They put a brick through the back window and keyed "Rapist" into the driver’s door.”

“Good,” I said. “Did you do it?”

“Uh, no,” she stammered. “I didn’t know, uh… Was he the one who— You know.”

“One of them.”

“Oh, Sam,” she said. “I’m so sorry. I’m not good at shit like this. Sorry.”

“Forget it,” I replied. “Let’s get out of the rain. I have to change my wraps.”

Our room was a tiny square, big enough for our two single beds, our desks, and dressers, with just enough space left over for my TV and VHS player on top of Brenda’s dorm fridge. When we made it inside, I said, “You might not want to stick around for this.”

Brenda took off her glasses to wipe the rain spots off on her hoodie. “Why’s that?”

“The burn has begun to heal, and the blisters are weeping this nasty fluid that hardens to a yellow-orangey crust,” I told her. “The worst is my—what did you tell that doctor?”

“Twat?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “It’s a real horror show.”

“I’ll just keep my glasses off,” she said. “I’m not going to leave you…alone.”
I flashed her a sour look, but of course, she couldn’t see it. I said nothing while I dug another set of wraps out of my overnight bag and chucked them on my desk. Brenda can’t take silence. Dropping my baggy shorts to the floor, I unfastened the metal clips on the wraps. They, and the gauze beneath, were soaked through and stuck to my skin in various places. I groaned.

“Can I do anything?” Brenda asked.

I didn’t answer.

“No,” she said, “I guess not.” She sat on her bed across the room from me.

“Ugh,” I said, “I’m going to shower. It’s reptilian down there.” I took my terry cloth robe and a bath towel from the closet, and made my way to the bathroom down the hall.

When I returned from the shower, my mood had improved. Brenda was lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling.

“So if you didn’t do it, who do you think did?” I asked.

Brenda rolled onto her side to face me. “Here’s the thing,” she said with excitement, “I found out that Brian and his girlfriend, Cindy, broke up the day after that party. I think she might be the brick thrower.”

“She’s that mousy little girl in Browne Hall with the stringy blond hair?” I said as I wound fresh gauze from my waist down one thigh and then the other. “Hard to see her as the vengeful type. I'm happy to hear about Brian's truck. Now, if she'd shove a broomstick up his ass, that would really be something.”

Brenda kind of smiled, almost laughed. She thought I was joking, but didn’t know quite how to respond. I didn’t blame her for that; I didn’t know quite how to respond to
my own emotions. I finished with the gauze and put wraps around my thighs and waist to keep everything in place. Over that, I pulled on a pair of Ken’s silk boxers that I had neglected to return. An idea occurred to me as I put on a pair of headphones and stood in front of my desk to work on a mountain of accumulated homework: Why wait for Cindy? I'm the one they hurt.

Two nights later, I found myself in front of Mike Bremer’s Honda with a utility knife in one hand and a fist-sized rock in the other. It was poorly lit in the alley where he had parked. First, I scored the word *Rapist* into his driver’s side fender with the utility knife, and then I slashed his tires. Last, I chucked the rock through his hatchback window. The vandalism took less than a minute, and while it lasted, I felt like my old self.

For the next couple days, I kept expecting the cops to show up, but no. Guess Mike knew better than to press the issue. That was good, because I wanted to make him suffer.

After trashing Mike’s car, I decided to find Cindy. If she’d been the one to vandalize Brian’s truck, then maybe she had heard or seen something. Perhaps she was the silhouette that night in the hallway.

The PNW campus is not large. It runs, at most, four blocks square in the middle of the city. Its thick, green lawns are sheltered by tall oaks and sparsely dotted with university buildings. I spotted Cindy the very next day, coming out of the white brick building that housed the foreign languages departments. She headed toward me in the general direction of Browne Hall, and I walked to meet her. As soon as she saw me, however, she turned and dashed away. I was stunned. Of all the reactions, that was not
one I had anticipated. She flailed like a spastic as she ran, elbows everywhere and head waggling. I could have caught her easily, but thought it might be counterproductive to chase her down. Clearly, Cindy knew who I was and did not want to speak to me, which told me part of what I wanted to know. I made up my mind to catch her unawares another time to find out exactly what she’d witnessed.

But that never came to pass. The next day, I found a printed slip of paper in my campus mailbox. No signature.

Don't ask. I just can't. I'm sorry. If you want to find the other two, their names are Hank Samuels and Sean McDonnell. They are friends of Brian's from Hillsboro.

It had to be from Cindy. Spineless bitch. I asked around the Sigma Chi sisters and found out that she was back together with Brian. Talk about psycho relationships, that one must be something else. Her note, however, did point me toward the other two. I located a Sean McDonnell in the Portland-Metro white pages, and when I found Hank Samuels’ name and discovered that the phone numbers and addresses for the two were the same, I knew I had them. They were roommates. (And rape-mates, how charming…)

That afternoon I drove to Hillsboro, to the address listed in the white pages. It was a small, beige and brick house in a suburb near the Portland Community College, Rock Creek campus. I sat across the street in my car for at least three hours. But I finally saw them, Sean and Hank. Those two, spiky-haired, polo-shirt wearing bastards were the ones from the party. Sean drove a new Dodge Ram truck with a canopy; and Hank, a piece of shit banana-yellow Corolla from the ‘70s. But the more I thought about it, the more it seemed that trashing their vehicles would be a Pyrrhic victory at best. In Hank's case, if
he had insurance, it would be doing him a favor. It was simply not enough. In what way was a broken window, or jacked up paint job, or slashed tire equivalent to what I went through that night, the weeks of burning that followed, the scarring on my labia, or the self-doubt and rage I felt? How about the humiliation of being scrubbed with bleach and left discarded on a pile of dirty laundry?

While awaiting their arrival, I had this fantasy that my sorority sisters and I were nymphs of Dionysus—the Maenads, I think they're called. We threw a wild party and invited those four. They arrived to see us naked and dancing together to the sound of pipes and lyre. They entered the house, leering as if they were going to ravish us all. And we smirked to one another, revealing sharp teeth, and communicated with sinister flashes of our yellow eyes. The rapists came into the center of the dance, and we caressed their shoulders, arms, chests, backs; and they were rendered stupid with lust. I raised my hands like claws to signal the other nymphs, and we came at them with our nails and teeth and tore them apart while they screamed and screamed. I tasted Mike's blood as I bit into his cheek. That was where I stopped fantasizing and thought maybe I'd gone too far. I drove home at twilight, leaving their vehicles unmolested.

#

One thing I had noticed while reading the accounts of rape victims was that those who were able to get on with their lives, invariably credited counseling with helping them to move on. PNW has a counseling center that provides free sessions to students, so I made an appointment to see a counselor. The center matched me with a woman named Anita Zhou the next day.

An attractive, professionally-dressed Asian woman met me in the waiting room
and said with a British accent, “Hello, Samantha. Please call me Anita. Most English
speakers see my last name and pronounce it like the word zoo, but it sounds more like the
American name Joe.”

I’d never heard an Asian speak like a Brit before, and it was strange to hear those
accents come from her mouth. I must have given her an odd look while we shook hands,
because she added, “I’m from Hong Kong.”

I followed Anita back to her office. It was about half the size of my room, but
she’d covered the walls with Chinese sketches and calligraphy and Rembrandt paintings,
which made the office seem even smaller but somehow more cozy. She directed me to a
remarkably comfortable wingchair. Instead of the florescent lights overhead, she’d lit the
room with a single table lamp, which cast a warm yellow glow throughout the room.
Every detail was directed toward the goal of setting her visitor at ease. And it worked.

“Why are you here today, Samantha?” she asked.

I looked her in the eye. I didn’t know it then, but I was challenging her. “Three
weeks ago on a Friday night, I was raped by four men at a party.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. She sat up straighter in her chair, but she didn’t flinch,
didn’t go all mushy on me like I’d expected. “That must have been an awful experience.
Can you tell me about it?”

So I told her everything. I told her with a clarity and detachment that I didn’t
know I was capable of; I told her about it as if it had happened to someone else. Only
occasionally did the anger I felt creep into my voice.

When I had finished she said, “Thank you for speaking so directly and honestly,
Samantha. That must have been difficult.”
“No,” I said, “quite the opposite. That’s the easiest it’s been. I could barely tell my best friend. I still haven’t told my roommate or even my mother.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “It’s humiliating, and I guess I just don’t want to see them lose it because then I will and I don’t like that.”

“I take it that you did not report the rape to the police?”

“That’s right. I didn’t.”

“Did the doctor who saw you for the bleach burn do a rape kit for you?”

“No, I didn’t tell her. I— I didn’t think there was any point to it. Someone took my clothes and cleaned me, thoroughly.”

“All right. So let us set aside the issue of the police for now. What is it you wish me to assist you with? What is your purpose in seeking counseling?”

“You don’t know?” I asked.

“I do not. I could make some guesses, but I would rather hear it from you.”

“I guess I want to put this all behind me. Stop feeling sad and angry all the time. I want to go to a party and feel safe again. I want my life to be my own again.”

“And it’s not right now?”

“No,” I said. “I did something the other day that made me feel better, but it didn’t last.”

“What was that?”

I told her about Mike’s car and tracking down the other two men and my violent fantasy, and how much I wanted revenge for what they had done to me.

“I’m not here to judge or condone your acts. These are perfectly natural feelings,
Samantha. My concern is for you and whether allowing your anger to dominate and shape your actions will help in the end. The last thing in the world I would want to see is you go to jail, while the four men who have done you this grievous harm face no consequence. This would do as much injury, I think, as the rape.”

I nodded. “What do you think I should do?” I think I was just as interested in the unusual and intriguing sound of her voice as I was in her advice.

“That is for you to decide,” she said. “I can help you establish some goals to work toward.”

“But you think I should go to the police, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Anita said and took a deep preparatory breath. “Every situation and person is different. I can see that you are a fighter. You have not responded to the rape by hiding yourself away, by falling into depression. Sure, you have some self-doubts and fear, but you have sought out help and you, for the greater part, place the blame where it belongs: the four who committed a crime against you. Those who respond the way you have often do well to press charges. Their need to take action and their desire for justice is satisfied by a trial. But not always. The perpetrators of rape are not always found guilty and often, because American law focuses so narrowly on the issue of consent, the trial becomes more about the behavior of the victim instead of the accused. The lack of a rape kit and other corroborating physical evidence in your case would make this doubly so. You would need to decide if you feel able to stand the scrutiny and pressure of being called a wanton slut in a courtroom full of people.”

#

I liked Anita Zhou very much, and it took me a while to figure out why, but
eventually I concluded that her intelligence and precision reminded me of Mrs. Caldwell—albeit a Chinese-British version and forty years younger. In spite of my fondness, I left the session feeling no more certain about what I should do than when I had arrived. I did, however, make another appointment.

At our next meeting, Anita asked me why it mattered if “I lost it?” I can see now that she had pierced to the heart of the matter, but at the time, I didn’t really want to get into it. I sidetracked us with talk about pressing charges. She said when she faced a difficult decision, she liked to make out a pro-and-con list. I said I could do that, so she tore a page off her yellow legal pad that she kept session notes on and had me write. Here’s what I came up with:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pro</th>
<th>Con</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Mom and Amanda would want me to press charges.</td>
<td>• Would be easier just to trash those other two’s cars and get on with my life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I have a witness (Cindy).</td>
<td>• Cindy might not testify.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Would be satisfying to see them go to prison.</td>
<td>• No physical evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Maybe they would get raped in prison.</td>
<td>• They would use the &quot;she was asking for it&quot; defense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Don't risk jail myself for vandalism, destruction of property, assault…</td>
<td>• I would be publicly exposed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• They would be publicly exposed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The list really didn’t tip to one side or the other. The thing that decided it for me, was the realization that so long as those four suffered no consequences for their actions, I would never be able to move on. Regardless of whether one called it justice or revenge, I needed something, which possibly a trial and guilty verdict could provide. I told Anita that I had decided to file a police report. She stopped writing on her pad.

“Can you stand up to the ‘she was asking for it’ defense?” she asked.
“I think so.”

“You need to know so, Samantha,” she said. “You will face the police and the District Attorney and the defense lawyer and, perhaps worst of all, the news media.”

“The news media?”

“Yes,” she said and put her pen down. She leaned forward in her chair and touched my hand. “See it from their perspective: You are a scholarship athlete, claiming to have been raped by four men at a fraternity party. Two of those men are players on PNW’s very successful basketball team. That is news. Reporters will camp on your doorstep.”

“Will you help me?”

“Of course I will, dear. But you have to go into this with your eyes open. It won’t be easy.”

“Then, I…can.”

“Say it with confidence.”

“I can,” I said convincingly enough.

“You will do fine, Samantha,” she said and patted my hand. “I have faith in you.”

She paused briefly to consider something, and then took one of her business cards from the holder on her desk. On it, she wrote her cell phone number. “Call me any time.”

As I left the counseling center, however, I was still playing question and answer: Could I really stand up to the "she was asking for it" defense? What was my role in what happened? How was I dressed? Did that matter? I wore a miniskirt. So what? I was very intoxicated. So what? They were very intoxicated. So what? I guided Mike down to the laundry room to have sex, but I changed my mind when I got sick. I made mistakes and
was guilty of poor judgment. *Unquestionably.* This wouldn't have happened if I'd made better choices. *True.* *So what?* Did that somehow absolve those four? *No.* They had made poor choices and bore the responsibility for them just as I did.

Okay, I could do it, I finally convinced myself.

I walked directly home and told Brenda that I was going to call my mom to tell her what had happened that night at the AZs, and that I wanted her to hear it as well. I needed them both to know because I was going to press charges.

I called Mom and told her. She cried. I cried. It was much more difficult to speak to her than to Anita. Brenda held my hand throughout. She also cried. Our miserable cryfest left me exhausted in every way.

After I hung up the phone, Brenda hugged me.

“I’m sorry,” she said, starting to bawl again. “It’s so awful. I never should have left you alone at that party.”

“Please stop. Please.” I broke off our embrace. “I can’t take anymore. You don’t need—”

“I do,” she countered. “I’ve felt so guilty since that morning when I took you to the ER. I just didn’t know how to say it. If I’d stayed, this never would have happened.”

“True, but that doesn’t mean it’s your fault, Brenda,” I said. “If a busload of rodeo clowns had shown up at the party, this wouldn’t have happened. That doesn’t make them responsible. I was nasty to you when you were only trying to look out for me. If anything, I owe you an apology for that night and for these last couple weeks. I’ve been less than kind.”

“When you go, I’m coming with you to the police department,” Brenda insisted.
“For moral support.”

So we drove together to the station to file the complaint. Even then, it felt like a mistake. Control was now in the hands of others.

#

In the weeks and months to follow, I don't know how many times I told my story. Family, police officers, the prosecutor, friends, reporters. It seemed a tedious and endless circus. I grew sick of it. I didn't want to talk to anyone anymore.

Of course the four denied it. Of course they used the "she asked for it" defense. And Cindy is a cunt without human feeling. She married that son of a bitch Brian so she wouldn’t have to testify against him. (How fucked up it that?) The prosecutor said without physical evidence, he had to have Cindy's testimony. He could still subpoena her to testify against the other three men but didn't think it would work. He said it was hard to get someone to talk with a threat of prosecution—in spite of what people saw on the Law & Order shows. It was always best to get a witness to come around on their own. I couldn’t talk to her; it wasn’t allowed. So basically, I was in frigging limbo until Cindy grew a conscience or she and Brian broke up again. The latter seemed more likely, given my experience.

The cops had questioned everyone who had attended the AZ party that night. When the new term started, my story became an open secret on campus, and I found myself ostracized. The shame and humiliation of the rape had diminished. I put the blame where it belonged: them. That left the anger. Anger at them. Anger at the prosecutor. Anger at Mom for raising me with that jerk, David. Anger at my supposed “sisters” for deserting me.
I took a philosophy class like Jack suggested. I didn’t tell him for fear he would take it as a sign that we were meant to be together. I had thought I should take an easy class load that term with everything going on, but something prompted me to take "Modern Philosophy from Kant to Nietzsche" with professor Bonn. I'm glad I did. It was good to stretch my brain and think of abstract ideas for change. I'd had enough of the gritty details of the moment.

I dropped most of my extracurriculars that term, but still played tennis. (I had to for the scholarship.) Anita and I continued to meet, and she suggested I develop at least one social tie throughout everything. So I volunteered to be Big Sister to a freshman recruit. Her name was Trystan Thomas. A quiet girl. Kind of somber, but pretty and capable of carrying a decent conversation. I didn’t know if we would be friends, but I decided to try. I still had Brenda and Amanda—and Jack, of course.

Because of Trystan, Bert’s path and mine intersected; though at the time, I paid him scant attention. I had no idea how important he would become.

In February of that same school year, upon returning from class, I discovered a torn piece of notepad pinned to my door. It read:

The wages of sin is death.

When I entered my and Brenda’s room, note in hand, Trystan looked up from where she’d been reading on my bed. She bunked in the common room with the rest of the new
recruits, but when she wasn’t asleep or in Portland visiting her mom, she was in our room. We all had a class together, American Lit. Brenda didn’t look up; she was squinting at her own text, seemingly deep in concentration. Truth was, Brenda had switched to contacts over the winter break but still squinted, and occasionally tried to fiddle with her glasses, because her body habits had not yet adjusted.

“Lookie here,” I said and held forth the note. “Someone left me another present.”

“What’s it say?” asked Brenda without glancing up.

“The wages of sin is death,” I intoned.

“But after taxes it’s just a tired feeling really,” quipped Trystan. “So sayeth the Paula Poundstone.”

“Oh, I like her stuff,” said Brenda. “I have her video somewhere over there.” Still not looking up (and clearly no longer reading), she pointed to the window above my bed. I walked to her and adjusted her arm to point at the stack of VHS tapes next to the player.

“Oh,” Brenda said, finally taking her nose out of her book.

“That’s from the Bible,” Trystan said.

After the stories in the paper, the Christians had come crawling out of the woodwork. To be fair, most of my Sigma Chi sisters had been more supportive, or at least not so offensively unsupportive.

“Bet it comes from Tammy that snatch in Campus Crusade” said Brenda.

“Think we should tell her how well that whole crusade thing worked out?” asked Trystan.

“I don't think she'd get the joke,” I replied, “or appreciate it if she did.” I crumpled the note and tossed it to the trash bin. I dropped my books to my desk, spun the chair
around, and sat facing the room.

“Hey Trystan,” I said. “You have your own Jack now, I see.” They both knew about my Jack.

“The guy in the back of American Lit.?” asked Trystan.

“That’s the one,” I said. “Tall, fit, face like a hatchet blade.”

“Come now,” Trystan said. “Bert’s not that bad. I think he’s kinda cute, for an older guy.”

“Bert?” I arched an eyebrow.

“He’s a security guy on campus,” said Brenda. “I see him in the evening sometimes.”

“He seems too smart—” I started.

“And too smart-assed,” added Brenda.

“—for a security guard.”

“Maybe,” said Trystan, “he’s working his way through school.”

“He stares a lot,” I said. “Why are guys such spazzes?”

“I don’t know. Why are you such a spaz?” responded Trystan.

“You like him?” I’d thought she would go along with the whole “spaz” thing. She’d recently had to file a restraining order on her ex-boyfriend, who kept calling, coming around campus, and generally making a nuisance of himself.

“No, I don’t really know him,” Trystan said defensively and returned to her reading.

“Uh huh,” I said. She always was too sensitive.

About a week later when tennis season started, I asked her to try out for the team.
We’d played a little on the indoor courts. She was rusty from not having played a match for a year, but not bad. With some practice, she could have made sixth position on the team.

“I can’t spare the time right now,” she said, “I have to visit my mother.”

“Yeah, what’s up with that?” I said. “You’ve been going a couple times a week lately. Is she ill?”

The corners of her mouth pulled down. “She has cancer.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Trystan,” I said. “I didn’t mean to be so flippant.”

Trystan waved my apology away as unnecessary. “She was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer three months ago. She’s in and out of the hospital all the time now.”

“That’s bad, right?”

“When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions,” She quoted.

“No shit,” I said. It was a line from Shakespeare, that much I could tell. I discovered later that it was from Hamlet; and with time, it has taken on greater and greater meaning for me. Even then, it seemed apposite to our different yet similarly troubled situations.

“Why don’t you ever stay over there when you go?” I asked. “I mean, you always come back and stay here, that has to be tiring.”

“I stay sometimes when she’s in the hospital, but I won’t stay in our house as long as my step-brother lives in it.”

“I can understand that,” I said. “I haven’t stayed at my home since I left. My stepdad’s a first-class pervert, and my mom can’t see it. I’m sick of his staring and touching me all the time. He's disgusting. The week before graduation, I woke up one
night and caught him looming over me like a movie vampire. I usually keep my covers up to my neck because it's always cold in my room, and they were down, bunched at my waist. When I told Mom in the morning, she said he was just checking on me and was sorry he’d startled me. The fact that he told her before I could proves his guilty conscience. He bought me a $30,000 “graduation” car a week later. I wonder, was that to keep me quiet or to give him further permission? Guess I should have refused his gift. But it was an Acura after all, and I needed a car for college.”

“Yes, something like that,” she said, but would venture nothing further, no matter how I tried. I sensed from her reticence and demeanor that her problem was more serious than mine, though.

When she returned to her room, I went down to the sorority computer room and looked up pancreatic cancer on some medical sites. The information I found disheartened me. Pancreatic was described as the worst cancer, because it was seldom discovered until in the later stages and had spread to other organs. Typical survival was three to six months after discovery. I pitied Trystan then; what an incredible burden to bear, and to keep it all to herself. If I hadn’t asked, I don’t think she ever would have spoken of it.

This revelation put her behavior into a much more comprehensible light for me. I saw her making the same mistakes I did when I first came to PNW. She drank too much. And unfortunately, she was a sad drunk not a happy one like me. The similarities between us were striking. I wished that I could figure a way to pull her out of her funk. I would have spared her further suffering if possible.

Of course, I had my own problems to deal with. In May, during spring midterms, the DA summoned me to his office to tell me he wouldn’t be able to prosecute my case.
All my time, my embarrassment, my anger, all that police work and effort from the assistant DA, had come to nothing after all.

When the reporter, Ms. Tomaselli, called to ask for my thoughts about the DA’s decision, I agreed to meet her at the local coffee shop if she would keep my identity secret. She was a short, plump, middle-aged woman who walked with a limp. I stepped past her when she entered the shop in the company of a smartly dressed, blond woman. To the blonde, I said, “Are you Ms. Tomaselli.” She shook her head curtly and stepped to the counter to order, while the older woman addressed me, “I’m Ms. Tomaselli.” She extended her hand and we shook.

“Only TV reporters look like that.” She jerked her head in the direction of the blonde, whose presence was purely coincidence. “I’m afraid us print reporters all look like frowsy housewives.” She smiled warmly.

I apologized and we ordered our coffee and found a secluded corner to converse.

“Do you mind if I record?” Tomaselli asked and pulled a handheld recorder from her purse. “My memory isn’t what it used to be.”

I said, “Sure.”

She started with background and, after about ten minutes, arrived at the serious questions. “What is your reaction to the DA’s decision,” she asked.

“I shouldn't be surprised and hurt,” I said, “though I am. From the start, this whole deal has been about my credibility and not theirs. It's a messed up system where this can happen. Either that, or the system works just like it's designed to, and it's designed to fuck women.”

“Thanks for your honesty,” she said, “but I won’t be able to print that word. May
I edit it?”

“Funny,” I said, “how it doesn’t bother you to print ‘gang rape’ over and over again. But we wouldn't want a little bit of obscenity to get in the way of our voyeurism, now would we?”

Unruffled, she replied, “That is true, but not fair, Miss Sands.”

“It’s not?”

“No, I do my best to report the news objectively; but in the end, my editor has the final say over what ends up on the page. ‘Gang rape’ sells papers, and so it goes in the title. Personally, I agree with you. I hate it; it’s demeaning.”

The next day Tomaselli’s article came out in the paper:
After spending nearly four months trying to decide whether a 20-year-old PNW student was gang-raped during a party at the AZ fraternity house, the Washington County district attorney's office said Wednesday that there was no way to tell whether allegations of the "atrocious" behavior by four men also constituted a crime.

The men who came under suspicion of sexual assault for what happened at the off-campus party in October 1997, two of whom are members of PNW's champion basketball team, cannot be prosecuted because of "a lack of physical evidence" coupled with "conflicting accounts supplied by witnesses whose memories are clouded by alcohol," District Attorney Harold Benoult's office said. "Without clear accounts, we cannot pursue a prosecution. It would be unethical to simply charge everyone who may have been in the room." The alleged victim in the case, of his decision. The case was complicated by a previous sexual relationship between the alleged victim and one of the accused. Unless further evidence or witnesses come forward, the criminal case is now closed.

The case arose after the student came forward and reported the sexual assault to Forest Grove city police officers on November 12th nearly a month after the alleged incident. Forest Grove police chief Barbara Hackett has pledged to keep the investigation open. "This was a particularly heinous crime, and we did hundreds of hours of investigation. We will not drop the case until we have brought it to a satisfactory conclusion."

"This investigation has been frustrating," Chief Hackett added. "The accused had attended high school and played sports together; they had this code of mutual support and silence. They hung together and wouldn't provide us with information that we needed." Forest Grove city officers concluded that the attempt to cover up the crime had occurred, but when pressed they would not provide more specific information.

The accused, who claimed the student had consented to have sex, have had little public support. But defense lawyer Elton Conners, who represents one of the PNW players, said there is a side to the story the public has never heard. "It was clear to many of the witnesses that she wanted sex that night," Conners said. "If she's asking people to have sex with her, that's consensual. If she's asking for more than one, then that's her choice," the lawyer said. The alleged rape victim has said that she never consented to sex with anyone that night.

Victims' rights advocates have protested the district attorney's decision not to prosecute. Local outrage has ensued and the DA's office has received hundreds of angry calls and letters. PNW officials say they will ensure the student receives all available support. A hotline has been set up for concerned
identified only as a fellow assault likely happened and parents. PNW student, "has only a partial memory of events that occurred at the party beyond her arrival," Benoult later wrote in defense.

My quote—minus the "fuck," I'm sure—must have made its way into a later article because a few days later, I started to receive feminist love letters care of the editor. My favorite went like this:

Dear editor,

So much of what is wrong with the world in a single case.

Rape is male terrorism against women. The principal victim in this case is the PNW student, but the act doesn’t end with her. When men do this, they send a message to the women in the world; the same message sent by terrorist organizations to their targets: Be afraid. You could be next.

Even were this not the case, we would all need to support this woman as the victim of an appalling miscarriage of justice. We are all, to a degree, victims of it. We are all scared reading it, for ourselves, our sisters, our mothers, our daughters. Not only because we know that it will happen again, but because we also know that, when it happens, there is no chance for justice.

We are all victims of the campaign of male terrorism against women, and this district attorney has made himself an abettor of terrorist activities. Until rape, its concomitant crimes and those who support or abet it, is treated exactly like other forms of terrorism, the patriarchy will endure.

I had tried it Anita’s way. It failed. I stopped seeing her. What had I accomplished so far? Nothing. From that point forward, I recorded everything in my journal, and it became the one outlet for all my rage. The fury I’d worked to overcome boiled up inside again. I wanted to slaughter those four—no, five—and eat their shriveled hearts. My
chief regret was that, because I had involved the police, I wouldn’t be able to go after them right away. I would have to wait until everything cooled down. I could use the time to plan, because Anita had one thing right: it would be a shame for me to go to jail when those five walked around free.

In the meantime, I threw myself into my Trystan project. I spent all my free time with her and aimed to help her make better choices than I had.

It seemed to go well at first. I remember the day she burst into my and Brenda’s room eager to tell us a story. I was sitting at my desk, and Brenda, lying on her bed like always.

“I just had the strangest experience,” she said, tossing her drawing pad and Keroppi pencil bag to the floor. She sat down next to them, crossed her legs, and waited until she had our attention.

“I was sitting against the maple next to the library, trying to sketch the big clock in the square, when Bert from our class walked up.”

“Was he stalking you?” I said sarcastically.

“Ugh, don’t even joke about that,” Trystan said. “Not after Luke.”

“So what did he want?” Brenda asked. “I bet he wanted to bone you.”

“Thanks, Bren,” said Trystan. “I don’t know what he wanted. I never found out. That’s kind of what I wanted to ask you two. I looked up to sketch some more, and he was there all of a sudden, standing over me. I smiled at him and said, ‘Hi.’ But he has this panicked look on his face and he doesn’t say anything. I can see his mouth moving like he’s trying to get something out. Then he gets this nasty expression, like a sneer, and he says, ‘Nice fucking shoes.’”
We all broke up laughing. Even Trystan.

“Well, let’s see ‘em,” said Brenda.

Trystan uncrossed her legs and sat flat with her feet extended in front of her. She wore white canvas Vans with ballpoint pen doodles all over them. There were some hearts, a rainbow, paisleys, a fish, our three names.

“Yeah, those are nice,” I said. “How old are you? Twelve?”

Trystan gave me the finger. Brenda said, “Cute. Can you do mine?”

“I’m surprised he didn’t pull your pony tail and stick his tongue out at you,” I said.

“You think that’s what it was all about?” asked Trystan.

“I do,” I said. “He’s another Jack or Luke—immature jerks, who can’t express themselves properly. They’re fine guys and fine friends until they get it in their heads that they’re in love with you. Then BAM!” I slapped the desk. “Instant wacko. Just remember: Never kiss a friend. It’s not worth it.”

“Well,” she said, standing, “In thanks for your advice and your honest appraisal of my footwear, I’m going to kiss you.”

“No.” I raised my hand. “You mustn’t. I might fall in love with you.”

Trystan approached me playfully, as if she would tackle me. I stood, waving her off. “No, It’s not worth it, I say.”

She made a grab for me, but I ducked her and ran to the other side of the room. Brenda erupted in peals of shrill giggles. I jumped onto her bed, bouncing up and down to joggle her about.

“Grab her, Brenda,” Trystan yelled, and dashed to the bed.
Brenda twined herself around my feet and brought me down on top of her. Trystan piled on us both. We laughed all the harder, practically cackling. It was so good to see Trystan laugh for once. She gripped my face, kissing my cheek and nose and forehead and one ear. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she said among the kisses.

The next weekend at an off campus party, I lost Trystan. I was not drinking. I hadn’t drunk at a party since that night. I just couldn’t do it anymore. I lost track of her while talking to Brenda and Brenda's chubby friend, Juli, whose house it was. Trystan had stepped outside to take a phone call. Next thing I knew, she was gone. I vowed if anything bad happened to her, I would find out who did it and add him to my list. I called her cell, but she didn’t answer. I went a little crazy then, I admit. I charged around Juli’s house interrogating her guests and roommates, acting like an overprotective parent, and making an ass of myself. Eventually, outside in the front lawn, I found a guy worshipping the gutter who had seen her walk toward campus alone. I wandered the campus, hunted through every dorm, searched the student parties in the apartments near campus, but after hours of looking, I finally had to admit defeat and returned to my room at the sorority.

I had scarcely changed to bedclothes when I heard a tapping at my door. It was Trystan. She ran into my arms, sobbing uncontrollably. I embraced her and supported her weight; she would have fallen if I had not. I kept imagining the awful things that must have happened to her. I raged at myself for having lost her in the first place.

“What happened?” I asked again and again.

After some minutes, she regained enough control to speak. “She’s gone, Sam. She’s gone.” It took me a moment to process. Her mother. Her mother had died. I clutched Trystan to me tighter. My own tears poured down my cheeks.
“Battalions, baby,” I whispered to her. “I’m so sorry.”

She straightened, nodded, wiped the wet from her face. “She was home, at least. She hated the hospital. She was forty-seven, Sam. It’s not fair.”

“No, it’s not.”

I gave her a huge Mötley Crüe t-shirt to wear—yet another leftover from Ken—and told her she was staying. We crawled into my bed, and I held her in the dark the way Amanda had held me so many months ago.

“Where’s Brenda?” Trystan asked, after who knew how long had passed.

“She’s staying at Juli’s.”

Trystan turned toward me, pressed the side of her face to my breastbone. I could feel the brush of her lashes as she blinked and her breath, heating my shirt and the skin beneath. The silence in the room grew, swelled, and expanded into a vast black universe. Trystan turned her head upward to me. Her arm shifted to my waist, and I knew what she was going to do an instant before she did it, but not soon enough to stop her. She kissed me. Not a light little joke kiss, but full on, hot, and full of need. I let her. Though it twisted my heart to deny her anything that night, I could not return her embrace. I should have seen it coming, but I had not. When she pushed closer and placed a hand on the side of my face, I placed my own hand on hers and said gently, “No.”

She withered away from me.

“This isn’t the time,” I tried to explain. “We’re both all fucked up inside right now. It’s a mis—”

“Please, don’t talk anymore,” she said. “Please.”

I shut up and held her, but I don’t think either of us slept at all that night. As soon
as light crept into the room from my window, Trystan was up and getting dressed and leaving.

She stopped coming around after that.

Close to term’s end we were reading Nietzsche in Bonn’s class. He is my favorite philosopher from the class. Not dry toast like that Kant guy. Nietzsche’s nouns and verbs enter the court and rush to the net to volley. Take your eyes off them for a second, you’ll be eating an overhead smash. Turned out there was a quote of his that I’d heard several times before, a couple times on TV and once in a fantasy novel I’d read in high school, but I hadn’t known he was the originator. “What does not kill you, makes you stronger.” I’d always thought it a stupid thing to say. I mean, what about AIDS? It doesn’t kill you, but it certainly doesn’t make you stronger. What about polio? I knew I was being too literal, but philosophy does that to you. I mentioned this problem in class to Bonn. He grinned like he was waiting for that particular question and thanked me. It seemed most people got the quote wrong because of an old translation. It should be translated as, “What does not destroy you, makes you stronger.” Now that makes sense, literally and figuratively. It’s certainly true in my life, and in the lives of those I’ve witnessed.

I would see Trystan on occasion. I feared for her. I decided to give her my journal to read so she could see the similarities between us and hopefully avoid the mistakes I’d made. My last entry read: “Hi, Trystan. I love you. You're not alone. –Samantha”

Trystan remained distant over the summer. She was back in Portland, staying with old friends, doing an internship with an indie music production company. I met up with her once. She said she loved the job sending out bands’ promotional materials. We went to a gig at this underground club called The Black Lotus. We had fun dancing to the
cruddy band playing punk covers of ‘80s bands. Trystan jumped in the mosh pit. She weighed about a buck o’ nine and got knocked to her ass a half dozen times. We did not talk about the night her mom died, but we did talk about getting a place together near campus for the coming school year. It seemed all settled, then she called me a couple weeks later to say she was going to get her own place. She wouldn't say why, and I didn't press.

Once fall term came, she moved into a two-bedroom townhouse apartment across the street from campus. The school owns them, apparently. Trystan wasn't showing for Sigma Chi functions, so I visited her place. She showed me where she kept her spare key and told me to come by anytime. The apartment was barren inside. She said she was swamped with school and would get around to decorating eventually.

A week after, she called and apologized for hiding herself away. Said she'd come work our Monday social dinner and see all the sisters. Said she was going to make an effort to get back into things. She never showed.

On Tuesday, I walked over after classes to find out why she hadn't come. She didn't answer the door, so I let myself in. The place was empty and quiet. I called her name. Nothing. I was going to go upstairs to check her bedroom, but I only made it halfway up the stairs when I saw her in the hallway, lying half in the bathroom and half in the hall. She was on her stomach, and her hair covered her face. She was so still, so lifeless; I knew she was dead, and I knew that she had killed herself. It came to me as an intuition I wished desperately were false. The rest is still a hurried jumble in my head, a throwback to my drunken partying times. I rushed up to her. I touched her arm; it was cold. She'd been dead hours. I brushed the hair from her face. I tried to hold her like I had
after her mom died, but the coolness of her back against my chest unsettled me. I couldn't do it. I called 9-1-1 then, I think. I don't recall anything I said to the dispatcher. I stayed there with one hand on her shoulder until the paramedics showed up. Then the police came, and I answered a lot of questions. I remember being relieved that the cops weren't the same ones who had taken my complaint.

The day I found Trystan, I forgot about my journal. I started thinking that I should get it as soon as possible, if I could. There were the most private things imaginable in there, and on top of that, it wasn’t good that I'd made veiled—and not so veiled—threats against those five inside its pages. The thought of my journal falling into the hands of Trystan's family or the police drove me to a mania about recovering it. I thought I'd wait until late at night and go in again with Trystan’s key, but every time I tried Bert was there. It was like he’d decided to stake out her place. I discovered later, he had this totally misguided theory about Trystan’s loser ex-boyfriend, Luke. At the time, however, I couldn't figure out why he was always there. My mania even drove me to the point of paranoia, I begin to think he'd read my journal and was waiting for me. Boy, was I wrong. Turned out he was obsessed with the dead girl. Felt responsible in some way for her death. I could tell him a thing or two about guilt, the way it seeps even into your dreams, and you wake up bawling, wishing you could do something different, but there's nothing to change. The past is a series of frozen moments, like a movie which can be paused, reversed, re-viewed but never edited. No happy ending can ever be inserted.

That Thursday, Bert nearly caught me. I was parked in Trystan’s lot about turn off my car when he walked up to it with his hand at his hip. He was fumbling with a clasp on his belt and for some reason I thought I saw him draw a gun, so I peeled out and drove
off as fast as I could. I felt sure then that he'd read my journal.

It was Friday before I made it into Trystan's apartment. I parked in the back lot so Bert wouldn't see my car. I didn't see him around, so I slipped into the apartment. I didn't know where she had kept my journal. I looked around downstairs first, and the apartment was so barren that it took no more than a couple minutes to search. The rooms stank and were stiflingly hot without the air-conditioning on. I didn't want to go up the stairs because I kept envisioning that moment, only a couple days past, when I found her on the floor. Eventually, I got up my courage and made my way to Trystan's bedroom. I avoided looking at the bathroom and hall where she'd fallen.

Her bedroom was a mess of stuffed animals. Instead of searching, I sat on Trystan's bed and stared at all the horses she'd collected. They were in a pile in the center of the room. I picked one up. It still had the manufacturer’s tag on it. I was about to toss it down, when I noticed handwriting on the tag. It read: “From New Haven, CT. Love, Mom.” I picked up another, an Appaloosa; the tag read: "From Boise, ID. Love, Mom." There were horses and other animals from all over, everywhere from Michigan to California. Even a piebald Clydesdale from Glasgow, UK. I held the Clydesdale a long time and cried before noticing my journal on Trystan’s shelf between her art history books. I stood the horse on top of the pile and snatched out my journal. Leaning against the far wall, I thumbed through it. I looked for some sign that Trystan had read it. Any sign: a note, pencil mark, a folded page. But there was nothing. My journal was just as I'd given it to her. She could've read everything inside or not a word. I'll never know now.

So engrossed was I in looking for a message from Trystan, I failed to notice that someone had entered the apartment. I'd forgotten to lock the door and replace the police
tape in its special place.

Surprise is far too mild a word to capture my complete shock when Bert burst, screaming, into the room. I was petrified. The journal dropped from my hands, and I shrieked in terror. His face was red and distorted; a look of terrible anger and violence stretched it beyond recognition. He had a black nightstick raised overhead, and I thought he would crush my skull. He could have easily, but he stopped mid-swing and sort of tripped over the horse pile.

“Shiny,” he said. It sounded like a question. He looked confused.

I didn't know it then, but that was his private name for me. Apparently, he had a nickname for everyone in Trystan’s circle of friends. Most of them were not flattering. I guess I got off easy; I kind of like “Shiny.”

Anyway, I was terrified and cried, “Don't hurt me!”

He lowered the nightstick and asked me what I was doing in her apartment. I told him I'd come for my journal. Then he got all bossy and said I wasn't supposed to be here and blah, blah, blah… It was a crime scene, he said. He seemed to think that Trystan had been murdered. That's when I recognized him. This was Trystan's Jack standing before me, and her death had clearly made him nutzo. I tried to stay calm and told him I was just getting the journal that I'd lent to her earlier. He couldn't understand why anyone would go to such trouble over a stupid journal, and I wasn't about to enlighten him. He seemed to want to talk, and I let him, hoping that this would keep him from calling the police; because if he did, there would be no way to keep my journal private. What he said made me angrier and angrier, though. He kept going on about how he had to find Trystan's killer and restore peace. Essentially, her death was all about him and his guilt and his
need for revenge. After a few minutes of his bullshit, I just couldn't take it.

I yelled at him, "She killed herself, you idiot. Are you at peace now?"

His face fell, lost all expression. His murder theory had been built from the flimsiest balsa wood and pumice rock and wishful thinking like a hack mystery novel and it just crumbled. He collapsed to the end of Trystan's bed, and sat there silently sobbing, his face buried in his hands. I actually felt sorry for the guy. However naïve and juvenile his infatuation with Trystan had been, his emotion was genuine. He really was Jack's doppelgänger. I gave him a tissue from a box on Trystan’s shelf. He wanted to know why her. I told him I had no answers. Trystan’s reasons were her own, and I had only brief glimpses of her sadness. I did tell him why I gave her the journal, but I didn't tell him what was in it. He wanted to know more about her, but I'd had enough of it. There's only so much guilt one can take at a time and I'd reached my limit. I asked him to tell me something, just to keep him talking. I was fairly certain by then that he wouldn’t call the cops, but I wanted to be sure. He made this big production of taking off his badge and keys and stuff, maybe to show me he was just a guy now, or maybe he was stalling for time. In the middle of his little show, his cell phone rang. It was the police dispatch. My stomach went berserk and my mouth dry. But Bert calmly told the dispatcher that all was well, so I relaxed. I was in the clear. He put the phone away and turned to me and said, "There's this little girl I'd like to steal." Definitely not what I expected him to say.

It has taken me some time, but I’ve figured out that everything that exits Bert’s mouth is said far more dramatically than it’s meant. He has a real gift for hyperbole, which is probably what kept me listening as he told me all about his shitty neighbor lady and her kids. Eventually, Bert had to attend to his security duties. I walked around
campus with him for a while as he told me about his life. Man, Bert has some issues. I thought my childhood was messed up, but his is a piece of work.

In spite of it all, he has character. Bert is the sort of guy who would never take advantage of a drunken girl at a party. I think I understood him. He wanted to take revenge on the world for his shitty life, but his conscience held him back. It focused his anger towards those targets he thought deserving of it. He wanted to be a hero. I would bet he has a secret stash of *Wolverine* comics somewhere.

The thought that lit the bonfire of my brain in the days after my run-in with Bert was this: I had a proper target for him. In fact, I had five. If I could turn him from Trystan's Jack into my Bert, he could be tremendously useful. Though, to manipulate someone in that manner seemed vile to me. My reluctance, however, didn’t stop me from going forward.

I arranged to “run” into Bert on campus. All I had to do was pretend to work in the 24-hour computer lab until he made his rounds. I positioned myself facing the door, and he saw me as soon as he poked his head in the room. It was a few minutes past midnight. He waved and gave me a small embarrassed smile. I stood and went to him.

“How’s the night, Bert?” I said, touching his arm lightly. His eyes followed my hand.

“Just starting for me,” he said. “Going to do a patrol before the rain comes.” He glanced up toward the ceiling. We were inside the basement of the student union building.

“Checking the sky?” I asked.

He laughed nervously.
I shouldered my pack and said, “I’m done here. I can walk with you a bit, if you like.”

“I would,” he said. He shifted his yellow slicker to his opposite hand so that we could stroll side by side, and I noticed that there wasn’t a weapon on his belt.

“Where’s your gun?” I asked as we hit the stairs to the ground floor.

“We’re not allowed to carry,” he said. “Good thing. I’d have shot five or six people by now—security officers mostly, some administrators, maybe a business office worker or two.”

I could sense he wanted to flirt but didn’t feel comfortable with it yet. I encouraged him to move past his egomaniacal suffering over Trystan’s death with a smile and another touch, to his shoulder this time. “So last Thursday, you didn’t have a gun when I peeled out of the lot and raced past you?”

“Nope.”

“But you stepped up and pointed something at me…”

“Uh huh,” he said, and unsnapped one of the clasps on his belt. From it he pulled a black canister. He held it up to my eye level.

“Mace?” I said.

“Oh no, nothing so dangerous. Pepper spray.”

I had to laugh at that. “What were you going to do, squirt my car?”

“Yeah, I think so,” he answered sheepishly.

We exited the student union and headed toward the nearest building, the science complex housing the biology, chemistry, and physics departments. “That’s my daytime home,” Bert said, pointing to the science building. He stopped. “Do you want to see my
I said, “Sure,” and he took me toward the administration building, a big red brick pseudo-castle structure. We ascended to the fourth floor and, through a small metal door in the ceiling of the men’s restroom, crawled up to the roof. We came out onto one of the spires, and I could see most of the campus. The tall oaks covering the lawn fell just short of our height. It was a good spot, I had to admit. I stood at the short wall surrounding the spire, then stepped up onto it.

“Please, don’t do that,” Bert said. He held his hand out to me.

Over my shoulder, I asked, “Afraid of heights?”

“Makes me nervous, there’s wind up here sometimes.”

I looked down. Although an inch separated me from a sixty or seventy foot fall, I felt no fear. “Hmm.” What I found more remarkable was how safe I felt up here in Bert’s company. I took his hand and hopped back to the rooftop.

“I’ve been thinking about your little girl,” I said. “Why don’t you call Child Protective Services?”

“Oh, I have,” he said. “CPS knows me by name. I’ve called so many times, they probably think I’m a crank or bear some grudge. Both of those things are true, of course, but that doesn’t mean she’s not a danger to her kids.”

“So what you need is someone to corroborate your story,” I said. I would help him with his problem, first. And then he would help with mine. A year had now passed, almost to the day, since the party at the AZ fraternity house.

“That would be fantastic, but no one else in the complex seems to give a shit.”

“How about someone else?” I asked.
“You volunteering?”

“Ask me to dinner,” I said. And that request made me a semi-permanent fixture at his apartment.

When CPS finally came a couple months later and discovered the neighbor’s drug use and all the stolen property in her apartment, Bert smiled viciously. I knew then, with certainty, he was the one. But by that time, my will to control him had ebbed to almost nothing. He came from poor white trash and wasn’t particularly handsome, and yet my desire for him surged day after day. Other than Trystan, he was the only person I had let touch me since the rape.

#

We had been seeing each other now for nearly six months. Bert was off for the night. We were going to the Portland Schnitzer for a production of *Othello*. Last weekend I had made a trip to Portland to swipe David's pistol. I put the gun case, a roll of duct tape, and a sawed-off broomstick in the back seat of the Acura where Bert could see them and ask what they were for. Call me Iago, if you must; but I would have my revenge. This was the last time, the very last time, I swore to myself, that I would try to manipulate him to my purpose.

I picked up Bert around six and handed him the keys so he could drive to dinner. I watched his eyes and saw that he’d looked in the back. One eyebrow rose.

“Is that a pistol?”

“Yes,” I said.

“What’s it doing there?”

“I took it from David.”
“Oh,” he said. He reached in, pulled out the gun case, and opened it. “Hey, that’s shiny, Shiny. I’m going to put this in the house, along with the rest of your burglar’s kit, or whatever it is.” He smiled at me and took the stuff into his apartment. I sat in the passenger’s seat. He came back out saying, “Actually that’s more like a serial killer’s or rapist’s kit,” and proceeded to tell me about them as we drove to the steakhouse. He had a rather chilling understanding of criminality. Dinner and the show flew by as I tried to think of a way to broach the subject that had occupied my mind for more than a year.

When we returned to Bert’s apartment, I took out my journal from where I’d stowed it beneath the passenger’s seat.

As soon as we entered, Bert went to the kitchen. I sat on the hideous green couch he’d bought from the Salvation Army some time ago.

“That your journal?” his voice came from the other room.

“Yes,” I said.

“Thought I recognized it.”

He returned from the kitchen holding two bottles of Blue Moon. He’d already cracked them and thrust slices of orange into the necks.

He handed me a beer. “Your favorite.”

I nodded. He sat next to me.

“So, what’s going on? First the gun, then you were quiet all evening, now this.”

“I need you to read it,” I said.

“I thought you didn’t want me to?”

“That was before.”

Bert opened the cover of the spiral-bound notebook. “Okay. I wish you would just
tell me, though.”

“I will, but first, read.”

He took a sip of his beer and began. I sat for a while, then grew anxious, wandered around the room, turned on some quiet music, laid on the floor and stared up at the ceiling. Bert was mostly silent, occasionally making some soft exhalation. When he reached the rape, he wanted to talk, but I told him, “Keep reading until the pages run out.” It took him another hour or so, but finally he finished. He knew everything; the whole story from my stepdad’s perversion, to the rape and investigation, to Trystan’s kiss, to my early attempts to influence him.

“This is too much, Samantha,” he said. “I don’t know what to say. I’m sad, and so fucking pissed, and half a dozen other things, too.”

“I know.” I stood and sat on the couch next to Bert.

“What do you want from me?” he asked. “Do I look like a goddamn patsy? My name is not Lee Harvey Oswald.” He glared at me, and I had a hard time meeting his eyes.

“I know,” I said. “At first I just wanted to use you, but then I came to know you—who you really were and I couldn’t anymore.”

“So, what? You’re saying now you love me and have only my best interests at heart?”

“No, my feelings are…complicated.”

“Yeah, no shit, babe,” he said. “What did you want?” His voice rose until he was shouting. “Me to help kill them? Beat them up? Rape them? What?”

“I’m not sure,” I yelled back. “I just wanted them to suffer—as much as I
suffered.”

“I can understand that,” he said at a slightly lower volume. “They’re goddamn monsters. They should suffer. But you—you betrayed me.” He stood, paced around the room. “I’m not Trystan’s Jack or your Jack. I’m me.”

“I know that, Bert,” I said. “Why do you think I wanted you to read my journal? It wasn’t easy revealing myself to you. I’m standing naked in front of you, and all I see is your disgust.”

“No, not disgust.” He shook his head. “Anger. Those four pieces of shit who did that to you disgust me. But you, no.” Bert walked to the door. “I want you to go now. Take your gun. I’ll call tomorrow.”

“Please, Bert,” I said.

“Out now, before I throw you out.

“Please, don’t make me.”

He opened the door. “Go.”

“I won’t.”

“Jack loved you. Trystan loved you. Hell, Ken probably loved you, too,” he said, “You threw it back at them. What have you done to deserve so much love?”

“Nothing,” I shouted. “Okay. Nothing!” I felt so wretched that, for the first time in my life, I wanted to die to escape my misery.

“What will you do with my love, I wonder?” Bert closed the door, locked it. He left me on the couch and went into his bedroom.

He loved me. Still loved me, in spite of everything. I fell asleep on the couch.

When I awoke, Bert was not in the house. He’d draped a blanket over me at some
point in the night. He returned a short time later, bearing white plastic grocery bags. From one, he produced eggs, hash browns, and orange juice; from another, two pairs of black leather gloves, a 2-lb. container of heavy duty crystal drain opener, and a package of .45 ammo.

“I won’t kill anyone,” he said firmly. “Revenge or justice—call it what you will—we’ll make them suffer.”

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