ABSTRACT

SOMERSET, KANSAS

by Evan L. Petee

This is a collection of ten stories. In “The Boy King” a boy imagines that he rules his neighborhood. In “The Cemetery House” a woman moves into a cemetery house and battles her inner demons. In “Malaise” a man grieving over the loss of his son enters therapy. In “Somerset, Kansas” a man visits the house where his father was murdered. In “The Bread Man” a boy befriends a man injured in an accident. In “The General” two brothers take revenge on their stepfather. In “Regression” a psychotherapist devolves into a monkey. In “The Adventures of Wolf Boy” a teenager deals with the loss of his brother by creating comic books. In “End Times” an older couple visit the city where their son was murdered. In “The Winter of My Disco Tent” a man obsessed with a famous writer tries to win her love.

SOMERSET, KANSAS

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The Boy King

Wade Hoppel, ten and seven-twelfths years old, a B minus, C plus student, though soon to be recognized as a genius by the Interplanetary Commission on Boy Geniuses, during a gala ceremony, rules the town of Lanfield, Arkansas, that little suburb of Jonesboro, that magical, lush hamlet, about to be renamed Wade Town, or Wadeville, or just plain Wade.

His bike, an old Huffy, blue like the sky, if the sky was scratched up, dented and rickety, with its genuine banana seat – room for Queen Heather to sit, should she soon see the light – and with rusty rims and a back tire not too fond of holding air for long, but never mind these last details, is his chariot, his mobile throne. He's added dual mirrors and dual horns, should either eye want to glance at the past world trailing away, or either hand want to squeeze out goosy noises. He saved up his sporadic allowances to add these deluxe accessories, and also helped Mrs. Rodriguez with some yard work – ten dollars for three hours work, kingly wages – though he didn't tell his mom about this last business, and she didn't ask where he got the money for the horns and mirrors, anyway.

He rides his little Harley, his majestic horse, his Junior Police vehicle, yes, it's the Huffy, over paved, gravel and tar, and dirt roads, slooping up and down the angled berms on the concrete streets, *thud-thuddling* over sewer grates, and, on the sweltering days, popping the tar bubbles on the tar and stone avenues with his bike tires, pretending he's gliding over steamy and murky tar pits that once sunk the Tyrannosauruses of Lanfield and Greater Craighead County. He motors down sidewalks and over lawns where sidewalks ought to be. He races down alleyways, sometimes stopping to check dumpsters for jewels, briefcases full of money, broken toys, or dirty magazines like *Bikini World*, they are all so smiley and happy-legged, and hits the trails behind the school, sloshing through the mud, then riding up and down – *weeeee-heeeee*! – the drainage ditch separating the woods from the housing development, until someone yells, "Hey kid, get the hell off of our property." Oh they don't know to whom they are talking to, they just don't know. And therefore they are almost forgiven.

King Wade's wheeled adventures began in pre-school with a beat-up, generic version of a Big Wheel (its front wheel having to be duct-taped many times in order to maintain itself), and soon, perhaps in record time, he was promoted to tricycle riding, the trike red and shiny, the first and only wheels to arrive in his life in a factory-sealed carton, the beautiful cardboard bearing the words "Majestic Bike Company," the tricycle inside blanketed by newspaper wrap from some far away land, the unreadable headlines surely proclaiming wonderful news. In those early years he could pedal as far as the end of the driveway, the edge of the mysterious world. Even when not supervised, some invisible chain, some understood tether, told him when to brake, when to turn back.

By late first grade he had his first two-wheeler, a silver, no-name bike bought at a garage sale, with training wheels attached, for awhile, though he'd still tip over, his elbows and knees ever-pink. Wade was allowed to ride as far as five houses west or five houses east, but only when Mother was watching, usually sitting on a lawn chair in the front yard, like she did, then.

In Second, he could cruise up to two streets over. Fatefully, Heather, future queen and by far the most beautiful girl at Lanfield Elementary, perhaps in the known galaxy, lived two roads away on Forest Street. He couldn't play with her, wasn't permitted to even step foot on her property, her dad hated his dad and his dad hated her dad, but she'd always smile and wave. She wore pink dresses then, always in pink dresses.

By Third, his travel limits were extended to the reach of his mother's voice, which wasn't much of a bonus, because her voice could only fly about two streets, maybe three streets on a windy day, where the wind would take hold of her voice, each chime, each note, find Wade, and deliver the message: *Wade, it's dinner time; Wade it's getting dark, come home Wade; Wade, your dad's on the phone. Hurry. He only has a minute. Hurry.* If it was this last message, he'd jet home and breathlessly grasp the phone in time to hear his dad say, "Just wanted to say hi. Got to run. Be good." If he had had more air in him, he might have said, "Wait Dad, can we talk some." Though even on the days his dad called when he did have air in him, he was not able to make that request. That was in the days when Dad phoned, those sweet Days of Then.

In Fourth he got the Huffy, retrieved from the Kazenkratz's junk pile, those fools, and Wade could legally ride as far as the elementary school, and the wooded trails behind, as long as he was with a boy that Mom approved of: Robbie, Foster or Milton. Should he risk fate and ride alone in the woods he might fall off his bike and hit his head on a large trailside rock and die alone, recounting his few days on Earth until life left him, the boy having been called home to some really big dinner. *So never ride alone, Wade*. And his mother warned him that there were bad men in the woods who might do terrible things to Wade. What exactly they might do she didn't say, couldn't say, just too frightful to talk about. Wade figured that freakish monster-men clubbed boys on their heads, ate their brains, then put the boy's clothes up for sale at the consignment shop run by the Garden Club ladies. *Never ride alone, Wade. That way, someone can run for help.*

By Fifth, there were no riding rules anymore, and only three home rules: do your homework, go to school, and keep quiet. Presley had moved in. Mom's whole world became Presley. Presley is so great. Presley is so handsome. Presley is so nice. But *cool sideburns*, was really the only thing worth saying about Presley. With no coming home time, and no limits on where he might go, the whole world was now Wade's. If only there was enough light in a day, and he had more leg power, he might ride far, very far, extend his fiefdom throughout the county and the state, then cross over into Tennessee and claim lands and peoples there. If only there was more light in a day. If only he had more leg power.

* * *

Two Saturday's ago, Wade spent nearly the whole day riding. He left home after a lunch of cold cheese sandwiches. Wade now hates cheese, especially since Presley loves cheese, always nibbling with his ugly oversized teeth on cheese doodles or cheese crackers, like a smelly, ignorant rat, a Presley rat. The boy announced, "I'm gonna be gone for awhile." Presley said, "Send us a postcard," and Mom said "stop that" and hit Presley, but in a joking way. Wade vowed to never send them a postcard.

He rode and rode, and finally came upon Lake City, the border of his hamlet. He boldly traveled twenty, maybe thirty feet past that city's "welcome to" sign. There, he saw a boy, near his age, on a bike, not on a one-speed but on a ten-speed, maybe a twelve-speed, new and shiny red. The king of Lake City, doing his patrolling. Wade was not ready for a battle, not yet. But he'll be back, he promised, and his mighty forces will topple that blonde boy's empire, and Wade Town and Lake City will be united. People

will cheer and call his name "Wade, our king!" They will throw roses at his feet. He will be awarded a stack of bikini magazines larger than he could read in one lifetime, a professional chemistry set, and whatever animals and accessories he wants from the pet store. And Heather will start calling him *handsome*, and stop calling him *dorky*.

So our future hero returned to Wade Town, riding down almost every street, reclaiming them all in the name of Justice and Light, and then hitting the trails where he stopped to pee, making sure he splattered his liquid gold off of a tree to reduce the chance of drowning nearby ants. The kindly ruler even cares about the ants of his kingdom, one of the many reporters who will soon be interviewing Wade will tell the world, a world hungry for news about this noble, brilliant, kind, and (all the girls say) adorable, boy emperor.

He returned home after dinner. They didn't save him any. Presley and Mom were making out on the couch, in a slurpy kind of way. The TV was on, a cable channel program on monster trucks, so the boy sat down on the dusty gray carpet and watched. The trucks were painted with dragons and flames and skulls and monster fangs, and crushed anything that got in their way. He wanted one. He'd start saving, and ask Mrs. Rodriguez for some extra hours. It might take two or three years of saving up.

"I rode to Lake City," Wade said, watching a monster truck smash the roof of an old blue car that looked similar enough to Presley's Mustang for the boy to get a charge out of it. "I know I'm not allowed," Wade said, "but I did it anyway. Next time I might take the freeway across the Mississippi, and then, if a big semi hasn't run me over yet, into Memphis. That's what I'll do, I'll ride all of the way to Memphis on the freeway."

"Pick me up some smokes when you get to Tennessee," said Presley. "Smokes are cheaper there."

"There's some hamburger in the fridge," Mom said, "if you want to make a burger." She went back to slurping with Presley. The dungeon awaits them both, though Wade will only allow the possum-sized dungeon rats to gnaw on Presley's legs. He'll build special rat-proof leg shields for his mother. She was once good.

* * *

It's a Wednesday in early August, a few weeks before the start of sixth grade, and, despite King Wade's ever-goodness, his kingdom is in tatters. His best friend Milton, a member of the Royal Court, has just gotten home from the hospital wearing two fat leg casts, having been run over by a speeding car. Presley has not yet been exiled. Heather is still ignoring Wade, denying her queenly calling. And his right-side bike mirror is cracked, from a recent wipe out on fresh gravel – the slippery stones thrown onto a paved street by rebels, insurgents – making the past world trailing away look all fractured and jumbled, like parts of it were closer than you wanted it to be, and other parts were father away than you wished.

It's in the high 90's, and the world is sweating, and complaining about the heat. Wade has a taste for some lemonade, but there is no lemonade mix in the house, or sugar, or lemons. On the Huffy and coming out of his drive to begin his daily patrol, he sees Mrs. Rodriguez, just across the way, wearing her sun hat and pulling grass blades out of the cracks in the driveway while saying "sorry ladies," like she is hoping the grass blades aren't mad at her.

"You need any help?" Wade hollers, then stops his bike and stands up so they can enjoy a smile at each other.

"Not today."

"Maybe Saturday?"

"Maybe. I don't need to remind you I'm a retiree, can't always pay much."

"I know," says Wade. He looks at the old lady and is happy that he is no longer mad at her for running over his cat, Candycorn, all orange and white, a couple months back. It's the Days of Presley after all, so the cat is probably in a better place, Cat Heaven, a world with lots of mice to chase and windowsills to sun on. Trees fruiting Friskie Treats. A world where no Presleys drop you from the roof of the screened-in porch to see if you'll land on your feet.

"I have to get back to patrolling," he says.

"Okay, come on over Saturday anyway," Mrs. Rodriguez says. "If there's no work we'll sit and eat cookies and chat like two old biddies."

"Sounds fine," hr says. Mrs. Rodriguez looks at the boy and tells him he is handsome and well-mannered, not like most other boys, and that he has a "far out" bike. Wade thanks her. She is one of the few residents of Wade Town who appreciates his gemmed (glitter taped) vehicle. Soon, they'll all want to own Huffys just like his.

Riding off, Wade remembers that he hasn't worked on Mrs. Rodriguez's cancer cure for a few weeks. She's in remission, but should it come back Wade wants to be ready to go with aggressive treatments. On the Friday nights when Mom and Presley go to the drive-in, adults only, so they tell him, he prepares the formulas in his lab, the garage. The latest concoction, Formula XZ-13, involved soda water, black pepper, powdered onion, pollen from a tube-shaped weed in the backyard, ketchup, a dissolved Tums tablet, and lime juice. He put a tablespoonful in Milton's dog's water bowl, and the elderly mutt, Caesar, seemed to be wagging his tail at a faster rate. He'll next try human testing by secretly putting some XZ-13 in Presley's beer. Wade will have to scrap the formula, should Presley regrettably burst into flames.

He next zooms by Heather's House, 172 Forest, a holy address, standing tall and regal on his pedals, and spinning out in the gravel drive opposite her house to get her attention. He isn't exactly sure she is home, until, on the fourteenth pass, she opens her bedroom window, scrunches her face – but man oh man alive she still looks so very beautiful – and says, "What do you think you're doing, Wade the Snade?"

"Bike riding," says Wade, "and there's no such thing as a snade."

"I wish," Heather says. "Now don't go riding so close to my house."

"It's a free country."

"No it's not." She closes the window so quickly that she has to open it back up to free her trapped black as a blackboard hair, hair that dances as graceful as a ballet star when she walks, and glistens like black fabric studded with purple glitter beads when she's at rest. Heather and her hair sat two desks ahead of Wade, the whole year of Fifth, close enough for the boy to be glistened upon. THESE ARE THE TRIALS WHERE BOYS BECOME MEN, AND MEN BECOME KNIGHTS, AND KNIGHTS BECOME KINGS, AND SNADES BECOME UNSNADED.

Wade usually leaves love offerings on Heather's lawn – gum, candy, comic books or something special on her birthday or Christmas, like a junior make-up kit – but he has nothing like that with him, so he rides by twice more then blows her a kiss. She taps on the window glass and flips him the finger. She no longer wears pink dresses.

He pedals the many streets, keeping an eye on things, honking his horns at street-crossing squirrels, and watching for approaching horrors in the mirrors. He checks the calibration on the twin invisible laser guns mounted on the handlebars: by a simple adjustment he could either send out a beam wide enough to blow up a house, or a pinpoint beam that could remove a person's internal organs, of his choosing. He might

use the narrow beam on the man at the end of Walnut Street who stares at him when he rides by, yank out a thorax, and the wide beam on the houses of, well, the list is very long. But just one or two exploded houses will make his point. Soon, people will start behaving.

At Milton's house he parks his bike in back and tells a sleeping Caesar, chained to a tree, to keep an eye on it. Milton's dad, always happy to see fine-young-Wade, leads the boy upstairs, saying, "How are you, handsome? You got a girlfriend yet? How's it at home? That Presley got a job? He treating you right? I know the family, bad news each one, don't you agree? You sure things are okay?" Wade answers *fine, no, fine, no, yes, yes sir,* and *yes.*

Safely in Milt's room, somehow evading the dad's shoulder squeeze, a test of Wade's manliness, brutes and football players all being thick-shouldered, Wade closes the door and the two boys give each other their secret greeting: they form an O over their mouth with their hand then flap the fingers upwards three times, like a bird's wing fluttering. They sometimes make a kazoo or trumpet noise.

Milton serves as the kingdom's magician-sorcerer. He's a junior astronomer, soon to be the first lad on Mars, and even has a telescope nicer than the school's: through it you can vaguely see the houses of the astronauts left on the moon, and a few shops, maybe a disco. Wade will bring the people in line; Milt, the cosmos. Wade signs both leg casts "to Magic Milt from Wade of Wade."

In a hushed voice Milton reveals to his comrade an amazing, I-just-might-burst-if-I-don't-tell-someone secret. On the last night of his hospital stay he saw a girl's butt. Yes, the genuine article. He was sitting in the hallway when a girl walked by with her smock undone in back, her butt in its full glory. Both cheeks *and* the crack? Yes, both cheeks and the crack. How old was the girl? Maybe seventeen, a high school girl, Wade, a high school girl!

After some debate, it's agreed the butt-viewing event, while huge, is not quite as big as their both seeing Mary Needle's flat chest in Fourth. On the playground after school they told her it was shirts and skins basketball, and she was skins. No other girl had ever fallen for that trick in the history of the boy and girl world. That twenty minutes of heaven was life altering. Mary's chest was no different than there's, except that it belonged to a girl. *A girl.*

Their conversation, not unexpectedly, progresses to pubic hair: they imagine it, on girls, to be like tiger fur, soft, golden, and exotic, and bearing jungle markings like stripes or spots. Soon the two are laughing loudly, and Milt's dad walks up the stairs, knocks on the door, and inquires as to how schoolgirls got into the room. But that leads to sort of a sadness, both boys realizing that it might be years or decades before actual girls are in their rooms. They are already cast-outs. That wasn't supposed to happen until at least middle school.

"So how's it going with Heather?" Milt asks.

"Much better," Wade says. "She actually talked to me today."

Wade leaves his chum and returns to patrolling. His brain works on the schematics of an x-ray scope. With such a device, he will discover all of the secrets behind the walls of 172 Forest. Might he see Heather sleeping in a smooth blue negligee ordered from the Spiegel catalogue, one that reflects moonlight? Heather eating Waffle-o's? (he saw an empty Waffle-o's box in their garbage).

He heads downtown. Wade will make sure none of the stores are being robbed, and buy some candy for Heather and himself. She likes chewy things, like striped taffy, he's certain, even though she denies it, and claims to feed his candy gifts to the disposal.

A few blocks from the sweets store, Andy Ray, Eighth going into Ninth, jumps from between buildings and grabs the handlebars, the reigns, of Wade's bike, stopping it so abruptly that the boy almost flies over the bars and into the bully.

"Didn't you see the sign, little girl?" asks Andy Ray.

"What sign?"

"No riding bikes on sidewalks in our beautiful city."

"There's no sign like that."

"You calling me a liar?"

"No, I'm just saying…" Andy Ray shakes the bike and Wade begins to shiver, his body forgetting the day's heat due to an immediate threat to the empire, and to all that is good.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to *confus-ki-sate* the bike," says Andy Ray.

"No, please."

"Get off the bike!"

Wade dismounts his royal steed and Andy Ray gets on it. It doesn't try to buck him off. Wade watches Andy Ray ride off on his Huffy, honking the horns, twisting the mirrors around, weaving between parked cars, and slamming on the pedal brake and doing skids. Wade turns and starts walking home. He is crying now, he doesn't want to be crying, but there is still a little weakness in him. He's been trying to extricate it, this girly element, yet it keeps reseeding itself like a weed that just won't go away. A Presley weed.

Andy Ray is suddenly upon Wade, slapping Wade on the back of the head as he rides past the ruined boy king. Andy Ray loops around in the middle of the street, gets off of the bike, holds it into the air, and drops it to the pavement, saying he doesn't want to be seen on such a piece of junk. The bike bounces twice and falls over. It whimpers, and calls for Wade. The boy runs to the bike, his stagecoach in this Wild West town, his FBI motorbike, his rocket ship away from things, and rights it. The only new damage is a shard of mirror glass is now missing from the already messed-up mirror, making the memory view even more suspect. He gets back on the Huffy, promising to never again hand it over to Andy Ray, that Norman Invader, without a duel to the death: probably peashooters, at twenty paces.

The back tire is nearly out of air, so Wade flops and bumps all the way home, telling his chariot, his wounded horse, that he still loves it, even when it limps, even when it embarrasses him, like it is doing now. Several kids say *hey Wade, you need some air in that tire*, as if he, who knows more than all of their knowledge squared, and squared again, is ignorant of his plight.

He parks his bike in the garage and is about to walk inside the house when he hears his mother and Presley fighting in the kitchen. They don't fight often, but when they do it's an awful affair – fists flying, chases around the house with knives, and mean words never forgotten, at least by Wade. Mom says I'm swallowing my pride by supporting a bum, and Presley says I'll give you something to swallow. Some object is thrown against a wall, something metal. Mom says I hate you. Presley says Shut up and fix dinner. Mom says Fix it yourself, you lazy fuck. Something else is thrown, something ceramic.

In the garage, the lab, he searches through boxes of old toys and finds his hunter's slingshot. It was the only thing Presley ever gave him, but Wade refused to use it against the little beasts of fertile, fair Wade Town. Presley called him hopeless that day, but Wade knew then, and knows still today, that Presley is wrong because he is just busting with hopes, sometimes so many hopes that he loses track. Wade loads his pockets with pebbles from the front garden, mostly the soft, flat and rounded stones that look like the blunt teeth of a mild-mannered giant.

Wade imagines taking down Presley – a stone to the Presley's groin, his center of operations, should do the trick – but there are several complicating factors, such as Presley being three times his size, and the fact that his mom, most of the time, still bubbles over with Presley happiness. They probably are already kissing again. Wade hopes she will soon awaken from her spell, from the Presley hocus-pocus.

He pumps breath into his bike's back tire, then gets back on the Huffy, twisting at the worn handle grips like they are motorcycle accelerators, his *vroom vroom* noises quickly transforming into the fiery roars of a hungry, angry, dragon, *rahhhhh, rahhhhh*! ready to bust out of its lair. So he pushes the pedals forward.

Wade rides snake-ily down the middle of Walnut, then crosses onto Greendale. The slingshot tucked under his shirt tickles his belly with each push of a pedal, *tickle he,* but he forces back down each rising up giggle because he is All Business. *The Days Of Presley will soon be no more*, he asserts in his mind. And Andy Ray and that college kid who ran down Milt will also be justly punished – a kingdom needs its rules. But first, Wade has an urgent matter to take care of in Lake City: he must defeat their boy king and take his horse, his red bike of many speeds. It's his mission to unite opposing forces, to build and rule a peaceful, expanding empire, to set the world straight, and to have a flame-red chariot fit for a king. And Heather will faint with love for Wade the Victor, Wade the Brave (not Snade).

"It's war," Wade declares, while doing a wheelie, the Huffy rising and whinnying its battle cry as he bikes north down the gravel and tar road, the unhinged stones making all kinds of racket by catching in the tires and pinging off the bike's fenders, sounding to the boy like enemy machine gun fire against the steel walls of his castle, or maybe more like sudden hail on the roof of his father's car, a box-shaped red Olds with plush seats the color of vanilla ice cream, which his dad used to drive him around town in, just to see the sights.

The Cemetery House

Travis and Cassie, two of life's trespassers, had made love in the darkened caretaker's house at Elmwood Grove Cemetery.

She was dressed only in her skin. He had put on boxers, feeling a little too "dangly." Time passed, probably, but there were no clocks to prove it. He had fallen asleep. She had a pressing question. "Wake up, my little acorn," she sang into his nearest ear. Travis continued sleeping, so Cassie dribbled an ounce or two of bottled Culver's Old-Fashioned Red Pop onto his neck, sugaring his skin just above where his carotid artery was drumming its *thup, pause, thup* beat of life.

"What, what?" said Travis, startling awake. "What's the big emergency?"

"Why are all the windows painted over?"

"What?

"Did you do it? Did you paint the windows? Was it your idea?"

"It's always been that way."

"Do you think they painted the windows so that people couldn't look in, or so people couldn't see out?"

"Does it really matter?"

"Oh, it matters," she said. In the sullen interior of the cemetery house, she squinted at Travis' eyes, trying to determine whether his white orbs with brown centers emitted a slight light, and thought she caught a few low-voltage flares. "Oh, it certainly matters."

* * *

The dark green caretaker's house had sat abandoned and unloved for many years. Each Halloween season, several of the bored youths of Scofield would mildly attack the house in some manner – with eggs, wax, or orange spraypaint. Other times, like late at night during sleepless summer sleepovers, the boys and girls would tell yarns about the former resident caretakers, beheaders and zombie bloodsuckers, all.

There was no electricity in the house, so no heat. The faucets worked, but the only options were cold and damn cold. With painted windows, even the unabated fierce noon sun could at best induce a late-twilight light, inside.

Travis had told Cassie he wasn't really living at the cemetery; he had an apartment downtown, under renovation, so he needed a place to stay "for a few days, tops." Cassie suspected he was lying, and sought out her proofs. The house was too well lived in: clothes were scattered about, old boxes of noodles and dusty cans of mixed vegetables slept in the cupboards, and the daily newspaper was being delivered, and nearly three month's worth was stacked in a corner. She enjoyed the possibility that she might be mating with a dangerous drifter. She had no gypsy blood in her, coming from a long line of artisans, supervisors, and other slouchers. She needed his infusions.

They had met at the First Community Bank of Scofield, while waiting in line. Ahead of them, three children, twin black-haired girls and a boy – Cassie most noticed the boy, redheaded and with pretty pink burn marks on his arms and face – had poured out a shoebox of pennies on the counter. They had been scolded by the teller, and the children, the teller, and the bank manager were now feeding the coins into paper sheaths, the process delayed by the girls losing count, usually around forty-seven pennies, or by the boy getting a fat thumb stuck in a wrapper.

Cassie looked around the bank, wondering who was sending blood to her nipples: she had hair-trigger flesh. The tellers were all women, and that gender, except for broads

with gruff voices due to colds in their throats or extra testosterone surging through their glands, didn't affect her that way. It couldn't be the middle-aged yet sweet-eyed bank manager – his facial skin was unforgivably flabby. She did a 180 and saw Travis, shorter than her, with a serious face decorated by large fidgety eyes and a scar across his nose, and haphazardly lopped light brown hair. He was thirty or maybe thirty-two, and wore a light blue shirt, sleeves rolled up, ready to go, dark blue pants, and tan work boots, muddy. He had the sculpted look of a laborer, and therefore, she suspected, prized loins.

"Hi there," she said, removing her sunglasses and offering a large, these-are-my-teeth smile. "Looks like a long wait."

"It sure does," he said, noticing her green eyes, perhaps her bouncy chestnut hair, then nervously looking away. "I should have used the drive-thru. Only I'm walking."

"Me, too," she said. "How unjust! Speedier service for the lazy polluters."

She turned back toward the counter. One of the girls was chasing after a penny that had escaped its wrapper, Abe Lincoln's head rolling down the slick bank floor, making a run for it. Within Cassie some coil, some life Krazy Straw, began to warm, fill and glow red. She sensed the laborer move closer. The heated coil, more like an accordion now, began compressing and expanding, compressing and expanding – the sweet polka of life. Or maybe the coil-accordion-Krazy Straw was really a Slinky, she thought, flopping down the stairs of desire, the steps of her undoing. Something was moving, churning – yes, it was her best buddy, her lust – and she could feel him rubbing and pushing into her, even though he wasn't, or maybe his strong hands were reaching under her dress and pulling down her panties, even though he wasn't doing that either. She looked up at the bank cameras, and imagined the story each would tell, the five angles of his entry into her, and how the bank employees – and someday HBO subscribers – will watch the videos night and day, their eyes transfixed as the brutal proletarian roughly mounts that woman, that unsuspecting woman who thought only of altruistic causes, right there in the bank on a weekday, catch how he lifted her dress and went to town, their bodies humping and thumping, until she screamed so loud due to the ultimate quaking climax that the front glass of the bank shattered, setting off alarms. Entire forces and local branches of the Police Department, the FBI, the Sheriff's Office, the State Highway Patrol, the Army National Guard, and even the Kiwanis Club and the Daughters of the American Revolution, responded to the alarm in time to see his dismount, and to watch her orgasmically melt into the floor, happily gnawing on her thumb and mumbling through her spittle *yeeeeeeeeeee-zing!*

She turned to Travis and offered her hand. "I'm Betty Twinkle," she said. She wasn't Betty Twinkle, but Cassie often gave out fake names when first meeting people, each encounter being a delightful chance for a more interesting history, a wide-open future. She was always a spy awaiting her next mission. Something hopefully involving sex with traitors and scoundrels.

"Nice to meet you," he said, shaking her hand in large loops like a child might. "I'm Travis, Travis… well, just call me Travis."

"Okay, Travis Travis," she said, turning back toward the teller, ready for Round 2, his remount, but the children's coins had, unfortunately, been properly rolled and the line was moving forward.

Her body wanted so many things: mostly chocolate, cheese-coated popcorn, and sex, lots of sex, and therefore she craved, in that moment, Travis the Brute, the compact Viking muscle man who had no qualms about sexing her in public, as the recording bank cameras zoomed and sweated. So, outside of the bank she waited, and when Travis

appeared, upright and locomotive, that lustful ape, she pretended to be ending a conversation on her cell phone. “You can’t make it? You sure? Darn.”

She called to Travis, with her pheromones, certainly, but also with words. “Hey you, Travis Travis, I know we just met but my friend stood me up for dinner.” Travis looked startled and afraid, like he expected an attempted swindle of the few dollars the teller had just handed him. “I hate to eat alone, so what do you say, my treat. Angelo’s, that’s that spaghetti place by the K-mart, you know it? Maybe eight-ish?”

“Fine,” he said, shrugging his shoulders as if trying to force them back into some groove. “Let’s meet there, okay? Sorry. Car’s in the shop. Sorry.”

He walked east, and she walked west, Cassie returning to her job as director of Haven Center, three blocks from the bank, “a safe place for at-risk teens and women.” There were funding proposals to get ready for the board, a few intakes, and the afternoon volleyball game with the kids, but Cassie thought mostly of Travis, *oh Travis*! and the way he tried to hide his desire for her through chit-chat and averted glances. That animal will probably take her in Angelo’s, next to the salad bar, the other, less-horny, patrons having to step over and around their co-mingled bodies as they do it again and again, while the occasional crouton or cherry tomato falls onto her pink-with-life beaming face. And she will only let him have his way with her one million times in one million ways, and then she will heroically say, “Enough! I am more than my needy flesh!”

* * *

She sat in the booth at Angelo’s, waiting for life to kick in. Travis was already twenty minutes late. Bored, she ran her painted fingernails inside the long slits of her blue skirt; a pleasant advanced scratching of anticipated future itches. In her latest epoch of need, she had gone out and bought three skirts with slits up the side. She even wore them at the Center. When clothed, barely, in those skirts she’d imagine that she had just encountered some beast-man, a Grendel, who clawed and shredded her clothing in a wild, ancient drive to get to her sex. He might have been successful, or maybe she broke free – the daydreams varied.

Slit-skirted, her body would hum with sexual potential, with sexual knowledge. Others picked up on her glow, she knew, her scent of having been taken, or of availability. Men, on the streets, or male visitors to the Center, and some of the high school boys in the after-school program, would look at the exposed inches of leg flesh longingly. She wanted nothing of the boys, only the rugged men, the modern-day centaurs walking around in jeans and khakis, the gland-driven masters of the sexual act.

Many of the teen girls at the Center would applaud and hoot at her wardrobe, and ask where she bought the skirts, how much she paid, and did she think they might look sexy in them? She did. Only one of the girls, Marlissa, would shake her head judgmentally. “You seem so caught up in sex, Miss Phillips,” said the plain and attractive 16-year-old, during their weekly “one to one.” Marlissa was living at the Center due to her parent’s love of methamphetamine. “Not to be mean, but the way you dress and everything, and you are always talking to us about guys and doing it. Shoot. There are other things!”

“I’m teaching you girls about safe sex,” Cassie said. “I’m just trying to prevent unwanted pregnancies and the spread of HIV. I’m realistic. You girls are sexually active, I’m trying to look out for you.”

“ I’m not active, not that way,” the girl said. “And I won’t be until I’m married. I think the body’s just a shell, Miss Phillips. It’s the soul that’s important.”

"I agree, and I honor and support your choices," said Cassie, but oh how she wanted to say *Girl, you are nuts! Do it one thousand times and then report back. Open your legs and fly! Sure, you'll probably become a prisoner to your body, like me. But, girl, we will hump our way through these prison bars, hump so hard the whole damn prison will collapse around us, and we will be free. Free!*

And another voice, one that usually does not get a full vote, wanted to say to the sure-of-herself teen, *I want to be you*.

There was also Francine Walters, that dried up and asexual, Cassie was certain, assistant director at the Center, who had a gray pallor to her skin and white hair, and matching bland attitudes. "I find your manner of dress inappropriate, especially in a publicly-funded institution," she had told Cassie. But Francine didn't know that the skirts and short dresses were a tribal display for Cassie, that Cassie had earned her colors through the many heartaches and orgasms, and, at thirty-three, was now giving back to her community, by teaching the men about desire, its build up and its release, and the women about erotic masking and unmasking: when the flower of sex should stay cupped, when it ought to flare open. It was a noble, public service kind of thing.

Or was it all just her crazy *need*, she wondered, that need that will rarely allow more than an hour's rest, that need that took over her dreams and turned all dream players into sex partners, that need that said to her *more*, and, when she answered, said *no, I need even more than that*. The need that was pushing her into dangerous barroom encounters, and flirtations with city and county officials – men who'd periodically visit the Center to check on the status of the teens, the abused women and Cassie's legs – and online seductions, and those weekend drives on the freeway where she'd flash truckers and rich boys driving BMW's. Somewhere there is a world outside of this need, she often thought, but then the need would pull her back in, saying there's just one world, this one, and then demanding more of her time, her body, her soul, her life.

Travis finally materialized, still in his afternoon clothing of blue on blue, wearing mirrored sunglasses and armed with apologies for being late.

"Sorry. Taxi never showed. Sorry. I had to walk, sorry."

"You need to wear sunglasses indoors?"

"Yeah, sorry."

As the dinner date unfolded like a peony flower – beautiful and big and a little top heavy – Travis seemed to gain confidence and asked Cassie many questions, from where she grew up (New Berlin, Ohio), to her views on civil disobedience (she was all for it). Cassie wasn't sure whether Travis has such great interest in her life, or was avoiding talking about himself. When she eventually asked, "So, what do you do?" he answered by saying, "Let me tell you what I used to do."

"I used to work at a loan company, but we were taking people's homes. I worked at a country club, but I think we were making the squirrels and birds sick, with the herbicides. Then I worked for a hospital, a zoo, at a chain grocery, many more places, but I always felt like I was involved in some evil process."

They nibbled on breadsticks and then started on the main course, beef ravioli for her, vegetarian linguini for him, plus a little red wine, "very grapey," they agreed, from some upstate New York vineyard run by nuns, drunk nuns, they joked, and large salads full of strange and tasty baby greens. "I think we should let green things live out their days," Travis said. "That's why I don't eat sprouts." She smiled and tried to look past the mirrors of his glasses, but could only see two of herself. He smiled back, eyes somewhere.

"So what do you do now?" she asked, after letting a swig of wine seep into her undertongue. "It's okay if you don't work, or if you are like on the run or something. I just want to know."

"I'm a caretaker, take care of the trees and the whatnot at a cemetery," he said. "There's a little house, a good place to think and to write. I'm working on a book."

Her blood began to ignite and pulse, like someone had just turned on the furnace. "You have the key with you?" she asked excitedly.

"To the caretaker's house? Of course."

"Let's go, let's go there now."

"You haven't finished your ravioli."

"Screw the ravioli. Let's go. Please?" Cassie stood up and moved her wanting eyes closer to his shaded eyes, over the table, her breasts dangerously close to the lit candle, and said slowly, "I've never desired anything more in my life. "What do you say, sport?"

Travis peeled off his sunglasses, rubbed his eyes, and looked at her cleavage: those compact yet sweet melons were certainly being offered as the night's dessert selection. "I don't know," he said. "It's kind of dark there. Spooky."

Cassie fell back into her seat, smiled, and started fondling a breadstick.

Driving to the cemetery, Cassie started imagining sexing Travis in the graveyard land of the dead. Surrounded by forgotten bones and leaving flesh, someone's little Timmy, someone's Aunt Ruth, they will thrust their living bodies into each other, just exploding with life, screaming "we are alive, ha ha!" Owls will hoot. Stars will burst and lighten the cemetery. Werewolves will get super-duper hard-ons and howl. Perhaps the Angel of Death himself will try to peer in at their lovemaking through a window, scraping his pointy fingernails on the glass and watching their bodies writhe, envious.

Overstimulated, she exhaled so hard that Travis was inspired to ask if she was okay. "Oh, oh yes," she said, placing her hand on his leg, feeling it tense and quiver.

When they approached the cemetery's iron gate, always open, Travis told Cassie to turn off the car's lights: the "park," as he preferred to call it, closed at dark and he didn't want anyone phoning the police. Drive slow, he said, your eyes will adjust and I'll tell you when the road curves. Trust me.

There were many thick storm clouds that night, so the sky provided little assisting light. She drove cautiously through the black air of the cemetery, hoping that the car would stay the road. In the ebony swirl she sometimes thought she saw spirits, men and older boys, running alongside the car, madly tugging at the door handles, or reaching through the car windows in order to feel her face, her breasts, her meaty legs. *You spirits can feel me up if you must*, she said in her thoughts*, if that will finally give you peace*.

She parked near the house. "I still can't see diddly," she said. Travis took her hand and led her to the door. "Just a little step up," he said. Once they were inside he dragged the light of a flashlight back and forth across the room, showing Cassie the bed, a small desk with some books and writing tablets on it, several partly melted candles, two piles of clothes, the newspaper stack, and a tiny kitchen and bathroom area sectioned off by a purple velvet curtain with gold braiding.

"Charming," she said, "in a Little House on the Prairie meets Night of the Living Dead kind of way."

"It's a roof," he said. "And the neighbors don't make much noise."

Travis turned the eye of the flashlight toward Cassie. When she blinked he moved it away, and apologized, but she said no, return the light to me. He did, and her eyes and lips sparkled wet with readiness. Her eyebrows arched, as if entryways. “Will you do me?” she asked. “I really want you to do me, Travis Travis, right here, right now. For starters. Please?”

“I’m sort of a little bit shy in these areas,” he said. “Sorry.”

“Be shy again tomorrow.” She went to Travis and tugged at a loop on his jeans. “I will do anything, everything. What do you say, sport?”

“Isn’t this sacred ground or something?” he asked.

“It will be when we get done with it,” she said.

Soon they were naked and on his bed – a thin gray mattress with blue stripes atop two old box springs. The flashlight was left on, resting on the desk, painting a V of airy light across the smothering darkness. When he entered her from behind he pushed so hard that Cassie hit her forehead on the fake-oak panel wall.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he said. “Maybe we should stop. That’s an omen. I’m so sorry.”

“Keep going,” she said, “all battles leave scars, don’t you know.” Several minutes later, in the pointy-clawed grip of her first orgasm of the night, Cassie moaned “ho-um, ho-um-um, ho-umm.”

“*Home*? Are you saying *home*?” he asked. Cassie didn’t answer, and kept moaning “ho-um-um.’

The following day, in anticipation of her next visit, he cleaned up the house and pilfered flowers and vases from several plots and placed them throughout, making the place more colorful and homey. He walked to a dime store and bought towels and washcloths, bright yellow, and a little wooden plaque that said “welcome to our bumble home” – it had a drawing of a boy bee and a girl bee standing outside their hive. He hung the sign near the desk, then used his pocketknife to scrape paint off of a windowpane, allowing in some light.

She returned after dark. Part of her buzz was in driving blindly down the cemetery road to get to him, not knowing if she might run into a tree or headstone or mating vampires, or if some devil dog might dive through the windshield and mercilessly lap at her between her legs.

“Oh, there’s a little bit of light,” she said, noticing the scraped window. “I guess that’s okay.” On the bed there was a rectangle of light, a fusion of starlight and light from the three-quarter moon and whatever else the heavens might be sending their way. Cassie disrobed then positioned her womb in that light. She liked having sunbeams or moonbeams – the cosmos – touch her there.

Travis looked at her pubis – the silver light had turned her sex hair an almost fiber optic wiry – then he moved his mouth to the center of the light. Partway through the project, he glanced up at Cassie and said, “If you don’t mind me saying, you taste a little like olive oil, the good stuff, extra-virgin. Perhaps with a pinch of rosemary.”

“Thanks Chef Travis,” she said. “Extra virgin? Hmm. Those were the days. Hey, who’s Rosemary?”

Later, as she was getting ready to leave, he asked her if she believed in love.

“Why? Don’t tell me you’re…”

“Oh, no,” he said, covering his face with a thin pillow, “just curious.”

"I guess I believe it's out there, love, I'm just not sure what it is. I see it in the girls at the Center, their crushes. I still get excited about *their* loves. But for me, no, I'm all done."

"Like baby teeth grown out of."

"Exactly. Hey, show me your eyes! You're not playing fair." He dropped the pillow and their eyes found each other.

"Had your heart broken, is that it?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, working her way to the door. "But it was more like 'my God, this is so boring,' relationships, marriages, I had two. I think I'm the kind of person who needs to not know what's going to happen, love-wise. I want to wake up and be unsure if I'm going to end up alone that night, or with a man. Sorry, don't mean to sound slutty."

He said nothing back, so she added, "I guess that's why I like sudden storms."

"I was in love once," he said, placing the pillow back over his eyes. "Her name was Amber. But it ended tragically."

"That's always the story with love," she said, pawing at the door, trying to find the knob.

* * *

For the next eight days they met at the cemetery house after dark, Cassie driving without lights through the boneyard. She'd normally stay a few hours, leaving ample time for sex, the requisite post-sex babble, and occasional playful, caring gestures.

On a Saturday, after they had finished making love, although neither called it that, Cassie pleaded, "No, please don't pull out, please, just stay in awhile."

"What?" he asked, ready to curl away, toss the condom, put the boxers on, say good-bye to Cassie, and begin his countdown to slumber.

"Just stay in, please. I don't want to be empty again. Please. Oh just please!" She pulled him down to her and nibbled and licked the salty flesh of his shoulder. They fell asleep that way, and didn't wake until morning. Daylight was creeping into the house, as best it could. They ate frosted corn flakes from single serving boxes and drank pineapple juice out of tiny cans. "I'm sorry about last night," she said.

"It's okay", he said, putting her hand over hers.

After breakfast they hiked up the road to where it starts to loop, veered right, and then walked past many tombstones until they came upon a gravesite, one with fresh daisies in its vase. "This is what I wanted you to see," he said. "Cassie, meet Amber Reiss, my first, my last… well, my always, anyway."

"Oh my God," she said, bending to read the marker, as her contacts were dry and foggy. "Only nineteen years old when she died? What happened?"

"Eighteen. We dated in high school, and in middle school before that, and elementary school before that. We were engaged since Seventh."

"So what happened?"

"It's one of those mysteries," he said, crouching and wiping flower petals off of the marker.

* * *

On the way back to her bright and cozy duplex, Cassie stopped to see Bev North, a friend who had grown up in Scofield. Cassie figured she'd have the dope on how Amber had died.

"It was a car accident," said Bev, "homecoming weekend, oh, thirteen, no fourteen years ago. Out on Castlemann Road. They were all two years ahead of me."

"They?"

"Two other kids were killed too, Peter, oh I can never remember his last name, and Jenna Strong. You should know the Strongs. Her parents own the Baskin-Robbins. Anyway, one kid survived, Travis Perry. He was a cutie, that's no lie. But he left that night, the night of the accident, and no one's seen him since, as far as I know."

"He was driving?"

"Probably, I don't think they ever knew for sure. It was a terrible mess. You should have seen the car. I take that back. It's something you'd never forget, even if you wanted to. So what's your interest?"

"I was out at the cemetery, reading gravestones," Cassie said. "You know, morbid me."

"I hate being at cemeteries," Bev said.

"Not me," Cassie said. "They remind me I'm on the other side. Free to walk away."

Back home, Cassie napped for a few hours, but awoke with a feeling of unease. Her body was worn out, the need was resting, but she still wanted to be with Travis. They could go on a picnic, or she'll ask to read the book he's writing: maybe it's about the crash. She showered, put on shorts and a bikini top, and tried to think of more productive ways to fill her day. There were none. She had to be with him.

Cassie drove to Elmwood Grove, for a surprise afternoon visit. She parked on pebble drive, walked to the house, and tapped on the doorframe. "Travis Travis, guess who!" No answer. She pushed opened the door; he was gone. Gone were his clothes, gone were his books and writing pads, gone was the "welcome to our bumble home" sign. His flashlight was left behind so Cassie turned it on and swirled light across the room, making laser loops and jittery waves. The light revealed that taped to the stack of yellowing newspapers was a note. She went to it with excitement. It read: "Dear Cassandra: please recycle. Thanks!"

"Great," she said. "Just great."

She walked to Amber's grave in case he might be there, saying his good-byes. He wasn't, but she found the gravesite littered with dozens of flowers, two teddy bears and a stuffed giraffe, the "bumble home" sign – and seventeen mini American flags: it was the Fourth of July weekend.

Cassie took back the bee sign. It was rightfully hers, not Amber's.

* * *

Two days later, Cassie quit her job, broke the lease on her duplex and moved into the cemetery house. It was a time for new beginnings.

She walked through the damp and dusty house, making her plans. *My dear Travis took a three-month vacation from his life, and now it's my turn. I will find out who I am. I will eat healthy food and not let chocolate pass through these lips. I will give up sex for these three months. If the need is still there at the end of my sabbatical, I will address it in new, healthier ways. In three months I will go back to the Center, as a volunteer. I need to stop teaching the girls, and start learning from them. I need to find out about crushes, and first loves. I need to get back to writing a boy's name on my hand with a ballpoint pen, and then a big heart around it. I need to talk with my friends about boy's quirks and kissing skills, not their dicks. I need to find out about love.*

Cassie tacked the bumble home plaque above the bed, scrubbed down the bathroom area, men always leave their mark, then hung two musty pale blue throw rugs over tree limbs, to get them some sun. As she was doing this a long line of cars began to pull into the cemetery. A burial was scheduled.

She watched the first mourners march toward the gravesite, then went inside and changed out of her sweats and into a dress. She put on her heels and a fake pearl necklace, retrieved a hand mirror from her purse, and went outside to apply fresh mascara and lipstick: she needed the outside light to get it right.

Cassie joined the services in time to catch the preacher's final words. When the mourners started milling about, shaking hands and repeating condolences, she looked for a handsome man and found one – he was middle-aged, impeccably groomed, and had eagle-like blue, hunting eyes.

"Hi," she said to him, offering her hand. "Sorry for your loss. Who passed, may I ask?"

"My wife's sister, Dorothy. I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"No, I'm the caretaker here. I live in that little house," she said, pointing.

"You don't really live there?"

"No, no, but I'll be staying there a little while, fixing up the place."

"I thought the owners were using landscapers, contracting out everything."

"You know the owners?"

"My dad does. They're lounging down in Florida, retired."

"Yes, I know," she said.

He let go her hand and looked at her short dress, at its many green flowers. She smiled and asked what he did for a living.

"I run a plumbing business," he said. "Ferucci Plumbing."

A Mafia don, thought Cassie. "Darn, I was hoping you were a locksmith. The lock on the caretaker's house is broken. At any time someone could bust right through that door while I'm sleeping, or otherwise on the bed."

"Oh, how awful," he said.

A weepy woman approached, and the man said she was his wife, Celia. "Honey, this is a friend of Dorothy's, from work. What did you say your name was again?"

"Tabitha Watercress," Cassie said.

"I'll be in touch about your plumbing problem," the man said, and Cassie spoke her good-byes. Walking home, she looked back twice to make sure his eyes were still on her haunches. They were.

As Cassie approached the house, an old, rusty and poorly-tuned car, a pale green Ford Galaxie from the early 1960's, a classic car, in someone else's hands, pulled up, and a man rolled down the window and handed her a newspaper.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Oh hey, does that one guy still live here? Travis Something."

"Yeah, I mean no, I'm the new caretaker."

"You still want the paper delivered?"

She sized him up. "Okay."

"Again, sorry it's late, press broke down. Hey, I'm off, headed to my real job. Catch you later."

"Oh you don't just deliver the paper?" she asked, then stared at the man as he explained that he also works full-time days at the car seat plant, and most nights as a bouncer at a tavern. They need the money: he has three kids and a fourth on the way, and his dear wife isn't able to work – the pregnancy is a difficult one. He was a big man, thirty-seven or so, with muscular arms and a pleasant, almost handsome face: he had boyish curly black hair and a thin moustache rested lazily atop a slightly forced smile.

"Hey, can I ask you one thing?" she said.

"Sure, but then I really must be going."

"Do you like my dress?" She tucked the newspaper under her arm then grabbed the edge of her dress and pulled it a little bit out, a little bit up.

"It's great."

"You sure it's not too short?"

"It's fine."

"Hey, what time do you get off work? I get really lonely out here. Maybe you could come over and we could talk."

"Sorry, I really can't."

Cassie sighed. "So now you're sure this dress isn't too short?" She lifted it higher.

"No, you're good."

"Because this is the dress I'll be wearing tonight, when you come over to talk with me."

"Well, maybe I could stop for just a few," he said. "I wouldn't want to be unfriendly."

"Make it after dark," she said, "and kill your headlights when you get to the gate. Cemetery policy. We believe in letting the dead get their rest." He nodded then put the Galaxie in gear and headed down the cemetery loop road, which brought him back to the house, and Cassie. He slowed, looked at her all over, and said, "Hey, I'm Clark. What's your name?"

"I'm Veronica," she said, "Veronica Appleseed."

Cassie went into the house and fell back on the bed. She wanted to push her coiled feelings forward, totally unravel, and eyed Travis' flashlight, certain its handle still bore the essence of his grip, like she did. But she'd wait, wait and see whether either of her new men showed. She excitedly thought about also soon meeting the gravediggers and landscapers, and the many male mourners, perhaps some hot funeral directors, too. They will all cast their hungry eyes upon her, the lusty, exotic woman waiting alone in her cemetery home. She had given up her job, the girls at the Center, her duplex, for this, her glorious need. *Let the games begin*.

Her mood changed, and she didn't like that. She thought of the big man, Clark, coming to her, driving away from his children and his pregnant and sick wife. "Where you going, honey?" the wife will ask. She thought of the Mafia plumber, Ferucci, abandoning his sobbing wife to get to her flesh. And she thought of Travis, that little boy of a man, betraying his eternal love for Amber for a taste of Cassie. How did she become herself, she wondered. There was that other world, she was certain, a world of welcomed pregnancies, and baby food, and dabbing the children's foreheads with a cold rag when they had fevers. And handmade valentine cards from the children kept forever. A world of well-lived-in houses, and a swingset in the backyard, and geraniums and marigolds planted in the little garden, each year. A world of kisses for no reason, and handholding, and love notes, still many years after the wedding. That world was very close, perhaps two arm length's away, but unreachable, like a kite that broke free and floats always just out of grasp, its tail flopping teasingly. "I'm losing this war,' she said, before falling asleep.

In one of her dreams she was at the Center, crying at Francine Walter's pale legs. "My life is in danger," Cassie said in the dream. "I need you to teach me how to live like you live."

"I can teach you many things," Francine said, pulling back her skirt.

Cassie slept many hours and did not awaken until she heard a car on the cemetery road, still far off. She kneeled on the bed and looked out of the window, the section that Travis had scraped clear. It was pure black out there, and she couldn't see a thing, but her heart knew what was coming down that road, and hastened its beat. When the car got closer she could tell it was the Galaxie, from the cry of its churning pistons and the squeal of its flapping belts. Its lights were out.

Malaise

It's a Wednesday afternoon and I'm sitting in Dr. Farnslep's office, trying to unfurl my furled self. "Listen to this, doc," I say, "when I was a little boy my mommy dropped a blackberry pie on my head."

Farnslep's super-colossal brain starts to combust and overheat. "Woah, this could be huge," he says. "It was a pie? You're sure it was a pie and not a cake?"

"It was definitely a pie. To this day I flinch whenever someone serves pie. I eat it, but I flinch."

"Of course. Who can say no to pie. But getting back to the roots of your psychic wounding, were you burned badly from the hot pie?"

"No, it was a cold pie."

"Still, pies are very heavy."

"Not really, it was one of those little lunchbox pies. Hostess, I think, or maybe Blue Bird. So, I assume you've seen many cases like this, cases of dessert trauma?"

Farnslep shakes his head and starts to tap the pads of his fingers against each other in a frustrated hand dance. Next, he rolls his eyes forth and back a few times, symbolically windshield-wiping my splattered bug goo off of him as we travel down the bumpy, always under construction Therapy Highway.

"So, this isn't the BIG IT," I say, "the reason for my malaise?"

"No, probably not IT," he says, "but perhaps a helpful inroad."

I've had three sessions with the good doctor so far. In Week One I revealed that whenever I visit a bookstore I have to take a righteous dump. So we spent the hour talking about why books might have that untoward effect – I'm symbolically defacing intellectual centers due to the mundane nature of my chosen profession, he concluded – and I also disclosed the books that make me laugh (*The Exorcist*, *Wuthering Heights*), or cry (*The Tale of Peter Rabbit*), and those that get me all horned out (anything by Tom Clancy). So Farnslep assigned me to "break the programming" by going to a bookstore and refusing to poop. I have yet to find the courage yet to complete this potentially life-changing task.

In Week Two I told Farnslep, licensed psychologist and diplomat of the American Psychological Association – but don't bother with jokes about diplomatic immunity or what strange mental lands he's traveled to as a diplomat, they won't fly – that when I was quite little I saw my father's willy. "Papa was zoinking my poor mother, I later realized."

"Mygosh, The Primal Scene," Farnslep said, excitedly scribbling notes in my file. "How old were you?"

"Seven months."

"Incredible! That's quite young – are you sure you weren't older?"

"I mean seven months in the womb. I hadn't been born yet. All of the sudden there was this snake-like thing jabbing at me from below. Talk about your threats to the empire!"

"And you're absolutely certain that this happened?"

"Hey, if you can't trust a fetus who can you trust?"

Farnslep spent the remainder of my appointment lecturing on the "Infantile Castration Complex," and he assigned me to sit nakedly with myself and say kind, loving things to my wiener, like "you're just super!" and "I believe in you." I'm sure that I'll do this, very soon.

After my pie injury revelation, Farnslep rubs his eyes and writes a few words in my file, or maybe his dueling brain spheres are playing hangman with each other. His elongated head (I suspect his delivery room doctor was a little too aggressive with the forceps) bobs up and down a few times. He is so hairy – a thick, comb-resistant mat of black hair and a matching fat beard – that his eyes, nose, mouth and ears look like afterthoughts, stick-ons.

"So you think this might be my breakthrough?" I ask.

"Ryan," he says, "breakthroughs are the stuff of TV movies. Working your way out of your maze, your self-constructed quandary, will require many months, perhaps years, of hard work."

"So I built this maze myself, did I? Where do you suppose I hid the cheese?"

"Where do you think you hid the cheese?"

I was going to answer in the refrigerator cheese drawer in the house of my shadow self, but that's a B joke at best.

My assignment: visit a bakery and do breathing and centering exercises so that I might finally make peace with pies.

* * *

Seeing Farnslep was Gwen's idea. Gwen is my beautiful, delicious, kind-hearted wife, my better 99/100th's, my significant honeypie. I love her like my toes loved walking into the wet, cool, squishy sands leading to the Atlantic ocean during our summer Hilton Head vacations of years past, before the sorrow. But it's that kind of love: wiggly little toes meeting up with the welcoming and frothy waves of eternity, on a summer day, and wanting to be no other place but there.

Gwen has perfect hair – long, brown as the mud of life, straight and shiny; she wears it past her butt. When I am well-behaved she lets me get lost in it. Or sometimes she'll just stand naked, in our bedroom, in the living room, her hair combed over her breasts and tailing between her legs, and life will bubble over with magnificence and scrumptiousness.

Alice, Gwen's best friend, has been a Farnslep patient for eight years. Alice is a self-saboteur. She meets a wonderful guy and leaves him for some boozing, beating, biker dude. She lands a great job then keeps showing up late until they fire her. I've told her many times she ought to get married, so she can have someone else to do the sabotaging for her.

Sometimes I can't help but glance at Alice's prime and sporty anatomy, until Gwen busts me with that look of hers: clenched jaw, ruffled chin skin, pink cheeks due to boiling blood, and narrow, dark, piercing eyes. I'll deny it all later.

"You were too staring at her ass the whole night!" Gwen says.

"That wasn't me," I say. "It was just my eyes. I'm allowing them some free will these days. But it wasn't me staring, not *me* me. It was them. I'll have a word with my eyes, if you like."

"Oh God," she says, "not this again."

Gwen thinks I'm going through a mid-life crisis, but I'm only 32. If this is mid-life already I want my money back and a complete return of my deposit. But there is certainly some sort of crisis going on. I work, traveling around filling up vending machines with nutrition-free crap, and then I come home and sit. Sometimes I do a little yard work, more often I don't, and we have to hire some neighbor kid to butcher the shrubs and pull out all of the budding flowers in the front gardens and leave the weeds. I

do get together with Dale and Ron for brews and cards now and then, but not as much as I once did. I sit. I sit a lot.

"You've become quite the vegetable," says Gwen, opening the drapes so I can lean toward the sun. "Just lounging around all day like you do. Where's your fire, man?"

"What kind of vegetable?" I ask.

"What?"

"Lima Beans? Broccoli? Iceberg Lettuce? Tasty or yecky? Vitamin-rich or pesticide-ridden? Cooked and buttered, or raw? Chopped, diced and sliced, or whole?"

"How is any of this relevant?"

"A cucumber, maybe? I hear you girls like cucumbers." I flash Gwen a double wink.

"Oh I hate you!" she says. "You can't be serious for one minute. You are like the biggest idiot I ever met."

"Thanks," I say, "but I'm not the one who married me."

She storms off in a huff, saying, "oh, OH!"

"Though I might have married myself," I continue, long after the audience has left, "if I hadn't been so shy that I couldn't even ask my own self out."

I hear her get in the Toyota and start the engine, which she revs three times in some kind of mechanical roar. When Gwen gets mad at me she goes for drives, long drives, hours, occasionally days (she strategically placed friends and relatives in bordering counties and states in anticipation of how life with me would be). The Toyota is racking up the miles.

She is driving now, thinking about her terrible marriage, her non-consoling bastard husband who always says the wrong things. She's thinking about the brevity of our latest sex, the morning kiss that waits for a dab of Gleem. She is thinking about my distance, my stoniness, the fact that I once scratched her bad during lovemaking, last year, and instead of apologizing asked to do that again. Her hands are fiercely gripping the steering wheel, until she realizes that my fat ugly hooves just sweated into that wheel, so she loosens her grip, says *ewww,* and tries to wipe the remnants of me off of her hands, onto her pants. She hates all of my body fluids, now. She's wondering*i who is that peeing, crying, sweating, bleeding, ejaculating man, anyway? He is a stranger, he has become a total stranger*. She is thinking about my softening belly, my moronic obsession over slightly elevated bad cholesterol levels. *I hate him, I hate him, I hate him* she's screaming inside the car, the windows rolled up so she can let it all fly.

But soon she'll be thinking about all of the plants and flowers I brought her when we were dating at UConn – her dorm room was a greenhouse that year – or how my *I love yous* to her often appear in sudden drove's, like little supply packages of love dropped by a relief agency. *I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you, my Gwen, my friend, my wren, my Zen*. So, *how ya been*, I might say. She'll be remembering, maybe, how I sent her a genuine Western Union telegram at her workplace, declaring my love for her, just a few weeks back. *I love you. Stop. No, don't stop!* She'll be thinking of that soon, or maybe the way I sometimes sing while washing the dishes or shaving, mostly bad Barbara Streisand songs in my nasally Streisand voice: *baby me baby, ev-a-ree day, and make all my blue, ooh ooh ooze, go away*. That makes her laugh nine times out of ten. And those thoughts of happy times with me will almost be enough to turn that car around.

And then she'll think of our little Brandon, run over outside the day care service, chasing a baby rabbit. Brandon would be almost six, now. And then she'll come home.

So I wait up for her, watching the sports wrap up, some teams won, some teams lost, and then Nightline, which was about some awful thing going on that the government is not regulating but probably should be. That Ted Koppel sure looks like he has some Keebler elf blood in him, I'm thinking. She finally pulls in the drive, a whisker past midnight, and revs the engine halfway once, a minor roar of return. I turn on the outside light – I had meant to do that earlier. We meet at the door.

"I'm sorry," I say. "You are right, I'm an idiot."

"No, no," she says, "it's me. I overreacted. I'm under a lot of stress at work, you know."

"I know, I know," I say. And then we hold each other there, in the doorway. Cool, loving, so-happy-to-see-us-back-together night air squeezes itself through the ten thousand tiny screen window holes to find us.

"So, seriously," I say, "am I more like limp, day-old Swiss chard, or zesty, just picked spinach, bursting with iron?"

"Okay, okay, I resign," she says. "You are my tomato, so sweet and juicy and seedy, and in late autumn, and, many other times of year, absolutely rotten."

The kitchen clock dutifully ticks away a minute before I say, "But wait dear, a tomato is a fruit." I'm too late. She's fallen asleep on my shoulder, in my arms. The night passes that way, her sleeping, dreaming and slumping, and me holding her up as if that was my life's most important task. Well, it is.

At about two the Henshaw's cocker spaniel, Pebbles, begins its nightly wail at the moon – it thinks it's a wolf – and I fear Gwen will awaken. Instead, she must think the yapping is from me, or, well this would be too sad, maybe Brandon, because she says "Shh, shh, it's all okay, mama's here for you now. It's all okay. It's just, it's just okay."

* * *

Lately I've been reading the DSM-IV, the headshrinker's codebook, to see how many disorders I qualify for. It's not just for my own amusement. Farnslep has yet to provide a diagnosis, not even 309.9, Unspecified Adjustment Disorder, which could be applied to just about any modern monkey. If I'm not officially declared semi-nuts soon my company insurance won't reimburse me for the office visits.

Perhaps it's 300.2 Generalized Anxiety Disorder. I'm sure there are raging rivers inside full of tipped-over canoes and survivors clinging desperately to tree limbs waiting for rescue: do they want love or Valium? I can do obsession, but don't have enough energy for compulsions, so OCD, 300.3, is out. The sexual paraphilias, like Frotterism, 302.89, random grab ass! – all sound fun, but, except for that scratching thing, I'm too straight-laced, too much me. I'd hire a hooker then say hey, instead of sex, how about we bake cookies?

A Dissociative Fugue, 300.13, might be nice, a little relief, wake up in some far away city and start over. Should I ever spill my guts to Farnslep I'd probably get the Problems Related to Bereavement diagnosis, V62.82 – guilt about actions not taken, hallucinations that the person lost is still alive, can still be engaged in conversation. And seen. And held. And played with.

I've been looking for a DSM-IV code I can't find, Infantile Urgings, featuring a peculiar interest in lactating women, a religious worship of breasts both human and beastly, and an almost ever-present desire to suckle back up to the nipple. Roll over milky momma, I'm coming back for more! I remember how Gwen's milk tasted when Brandon was a baby. It tasted like life, and there was a slight hint of sugar, a gift. In my

evilness I was jealous that most of it went to Brandon. I had been a bottle baby, raised on corporate formula. I was claiming what was due me.

Who knows, maybe being neurotic is a good thing. It means life can still get to me. It's just malaise, my sweet, sweet malaise. In life's deli, I'm a turkey on wry bread with extra malaise.

* * *

The other day while we were bowling at Pin Parade, Gwen's idea, she says to me, "How would you feel about adopting, Ryan?"

"Adopting Ryan?" I say. "I don't know. I hear he's one troubled laddie."

"No, serious. Maybe we should adopt."

"A pre-manufactured baby?"

"Yes, or maybe a young child, one that's hard to place."

"Warranty still good?"

"Oh stop it!" Gwen playfully tosses her light blue official bowler's hand towel at my head. Briefly, it becomes my turban.

"Well, I don't know," I say. "How about doing the fruit of my loins thing one more time? I'm sure I have at least three or four spermies left with good motility."

Gwen sits down next to me on the banana-shaped plastic bench, and puts her hand on my leg. "Right now, that would be too hard for me," she says. "Maybe again some day; we still have time. Just be quiet for a minute and listen. When Brandon was inside me, it felt like I, like we, had built this safe body home for him, and that this home would somehow extend to wherever he roamed to, protect him, you know? He'd be tethered to us, like an astronaut. We could just reel him in should things get hairy. But it didn't work that way, did it? I know this sounds silly. But I can't just start that all again. Not yet."

"That's all my fault," I say.

"No, no it's not." With her second hand she pets my face. "Ryan," she says, "my heart craves having a little one romping around the house. Maybe we should adopt a girl. Someone to raise and love and teach about life, help get through life, you know?" Gwen's weeping rivers now.

"But honey," I say, "I've tried to be as child-like for you as possible."

"I know you have," she says, looking at me sweetly, "and you're doing a fine job of it. But I need a second kid in the house."

I look around the bright and ugly bowling alley. It's populated by strange, upright humanoids, all trying to knock over ten ordered white pins, for some reason. I stand up, grab my green-swirly Brunswick 14-pounder and toss her down the alley, leaving an odd 2-10 split. "I tell you what," I say to Gwen, "if I pick this up, we'll do it."

My plan is to kick the two-pin into the ten-pin, but the ball has different ideas, lurching for the gutter as it approaches the two-pin, as if suddenly embracing pacifism and never wanting to strike a pin again.

I look to Gwen. She is all tangled up in herself, still crying, still smiling at me with fat, hopeful eyes.

"Close enough," I say.

* * *

Pete Morales is the name of the man who ran over Brandon. He's an electrician, and was on his way to a job. It wasn't his fault, except for the fact of his existence and his driving on Fairfax Avenue that day, maybe 37 in a 35 zone, and for his being an electrician instead of anything else in the world; was that his big dream or did he fall short?

The way the woman at the day care tells it, some of the kids had uncovered a rabbit den in a clump of grass. When they pulled back the grass-fur door, four baby rabbits tore off. The rabbit Brandon was chasing ran under a fence, so my boy darted through the house and out to the road before any of the adults could catch up with him. The rabbit survived the incident, we think. I suppose that's not a bad way to go, chasing a rabbit, only I wish it happened when Brandon was like 107 years old, or so.

I'm here in Farnslep's office, waiting for session four. I'm feeling a bit self-conscious, as every time I look down, Farnslep's receptionist glances at me, and when I look up she turns away. I've checked and re-checked my zipper, my nose for boogers, and the possibility of a dangling retina, but everything seems copasetic. Could I be stunningly beautiful? Perhaps this is part of Farnslep's psychological testing of me, seeing how I respond to staring receptionists. There's got to be a hidden video camera, somewhere.

I'm dreaming of Brandon because two little brothers sit across from me. They can't be more than four and six, both well-groomed and very quiet. I've made several funny faces at them, and the younger one is still enthralled by my facial contortions. I want to cover them in armor suits, save them. Their mother, I guess it's their mother, is still in with Farnslep, even though my hour started five minutes ago. She wails, *Why can't men really love, why*?

Yes, I'm going to tell Farnslep about Brandon. I need to talk about his death, and how Gwen took two years leave from her job to raise the boy, and then said to me okay Ryan, it's your turn, be a stay at home dad for awhile. A boy needs to see his father more than just a few hours at night, she said. But I told Gwen no, sorry, can't get time off of work. Who would fill the machines? Shit, I never even asked my boss for a leave. It wasn't a macho thing, I hope. I was just scared, scared that, alone in my care, I might somehow break the boy. I was afraid I'd get a beer from the fridge, and, so caught up with what was on TV I'd sit on him. Or I'd drop him on his thin skull while play wrestling. Or I'd be napping while he was guzzling Draino. They are so fragile, alive. So we put Brandon in day care, where they are specially trained in how to not break children.

Yes, damn it, I'll tell Farnslep all about Brandon, let the healing begin.

When it's finally my time I walk into his dark office while he is pulling up the shade. Bright light reclaims the room. "Ho," Farnslep says, our tribal greeting. "Ho," I say back.

He sits down in his big, fluffy, cozy chair that he can spin cheerfully in, should cheerfulness ever overtake him, and I sit on the spare, hard, immobile couch.

"So, Ryan," he says, "what's up with you? Visit any bookstores or bakeries this week?"

"No, doc, I have something much more important, much more urgent, to tell you." But there I stop, and look out his window. It's just an asphalted parking lot out there, a few napping cars, followed by a freshly-paved street, the Mason's temple, and a housing development for fat cats and their offspring behind that. But I see, through the window, an open field, where boys, five boys, or maybe seven, or possibly an endless stream of boys, are chasing rabbits, and the field goes on forever, and the boys can keep chasing the rabbits and never come in harm's way. The boys are strangely giants, maybe fifty feet, maybe eighty feet tall. Each time their sneakered feet push off of the earth in this run with the bunnies, the Earth trembles. The rabbits are also huge, and take healthy forward leaps. The human things, the houses, the utility poles, are tiny in comparison, fake looking,

cardboard and plastic, easy to crush. I'm certain that's the real world, the one I see through Farnslep's stupid window, a life composed primarily of hopping rabbits, and boys chasing them. They are what keep the Earth spinning. *Run*, I mumble.

"What's that?" Farnslep says, "you say you have something big to tell me?"

My eyes shift from the sweet window movie and to Farnslep's sedate and furry face. "It's… it's that I want to be a rhododendron," I say. "Bloom like a crazed fuck for a few weeks each spring, litter the earth with my pretty purple petals, then just kind of hang out the rest of the year. You know, let bugs and birds make their home in my branches, protect them. That would be the sweetest life, doc, should chlorophyll one day course through these veins. I suppose you've seen many of these cases, people wanting to be shrubs?"

"Not that many," he says, wiggling his jaw like a ventriloquist's dummy.

"So you think this might be it then," I say, "the BIG IT?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no," says Farnslep. "But I'm glad that we are finally getting to some core issues."

Somerset, Kansas

They were at Lake Cranston, a vast and quiescent body of water bordered by soybean fields to the north and east, the highway to the south, and a smelly corporate pig farm to the west. It was late September.

"This whole thing's man-made," Nathan said, moving an arm in a loopy sweep as the two sat on the bank, tall, seed-bearing grass tickling them when a breeze would pick up. "The work of the good old U.S. Army Corps of Engineers."

"But the water sure looks real enough," Jill said, watching a small motorboat skate in erratic patterns on the purple-blue lake, its captain drunk or easily amused. "And look at all of those fake wind-up birds diving for plastic fish."

He didn't seem to get the joke, and was licking up the bonus drops of beer that had settled in the golden rim of the Jasper's Honey Ale can. "Hey," he said, "I know it's only our third date…"

"Our fourth," she said.

"Our fourth date," he said. "Uh, there is something I want to tell you, confess. Then you can decide if you want to continue with me, or not."

"Oh, I'll want to continue," she said.

Nathan nervously scanned the lake and the small beach – like he was waiting for a helpful cue card to show itself.

"Well, what is it?" she asked.

"It's a terrible, terrible thing," he said.

"What is this terrible, terrible thing?"

"I killed my father, when I was fifteen. I killed my father when I was fifteen."

* * *

Nathan Abbot grew up in Somerset, Kansas, the town itself named for sweet seasonal beauty ending, setting, so better enjoy it, it's almost done. And so it was in his life. The summer days were normally survivable as his father, Phil Abbot, worked construction and was rarely at home during the warm months. Even when rainstorms or a job cancellation would push father and son together, Phil seemed unprepared to launch any kind of assault.

But by autumn, when all of the sunflowers had flopped over, their seed-heavy heads and thin, insufficient stems sealing their fates, life would start to get bad for the boy, since his father worked fewer jobs, shorter hours. By winter, life was nearly unbearable. Heavy snows would settle on the lands, and the boy would also feel a smothering winter weight upon him. Phil Abbot, a builder of things in the community, a tearer of things apart in his home, had little to do but stay at home and cultivate his meanness. Nathan had no siblings to help bear the load, no mother to knit him a shield. Phil didn't drink, he didn't hit the boy. Instead, he would say things like, "I'm glad I kicked your mother out. She would be so disappointed in how you've turned out."

Or, "I don't know why you'd want to be a doctor (or paleontologist or attorney). You don't have it, son, you just don't have what it takes."

Or, should Phil find out that Nathan was sweet on a girl, he'd say something like, "I hate to tell you, but that little Lisa's a tramp. I was doing some work at their house, putting in a new front door, and she was showing her butt to me the whole time. Could have had a piece of her, but I'm a Christian man."

It was usually just a sentence or two, but the evil words spread quickly and dangerously, like a sudden mass prison break outside an otherwise peaceful town. The bladed words were usually spoken at the dinner table, where Nathan sat silent, trying to eat his food – maybe pork shops and buttered green beans – but his stomach growled and boiled in response to his father's meanness. He never digested things well. He stayed thin.

His father had light blue eyes that sometimes seemed more like gray, like the color had escaped. He had thick and curly brown hair, and, during the winter, a jungly beard. What puzzled Nathan was how sweet Phil looked while delivering the toxic verbiage, as if he should be saying "son, I love you so much," instead of "why did you have to go and be born?"

* * *

"So what about this murder?" Jill asked.

"Please," he said. "Let me tell it this way. Otherwise, I'm afraid you'll leave right now."

"I'm not going anywhere," she said. "Besides, you drove."

They had met at a bar in Mulletville, The Mad Awakening Tavern, the week before. Nathan had moved to Mulletville in April to take a farm job that lasted through mid-August, and he was looking for work. She was his waitress. He first noticed her legs, and she caught his stare.

"Sorry," he said.

"It's okay, it happens all the time," she said.

"That doesn't make it right."

"I suppose it doesn't. You know I hate dressing in these little skirts, hate it hate it, but they make us. I'm really just a farm girl, a good church-going kid."

"The marrying type."

"I hope so." She smiled, twisted a curl of her hair in her fingers, then tapped Nathan on his head with the serving tray. "So are you going to order or are you just going to look at me goofily. Is that a word, *goofily*?"

* * *

Nathan had lived, and his father died, at 33168 County Road 7, Somerset. The house was a tall two-story structure, painted a grayish-white most of those years, with pretty bluebird blue shutters – his mother's favorite color. There was a metal shed for tools and the lawn mower, but no tornado shelter. The tornadoes that drilled into Kansas each summer could have easily booted that thin-framed house straight to heaven, but never did. Usually that was a relief, sometimes a disappointment.

The house sat empty for three years after the killing. Just about everyone in Somerset knew Phil Abbot and didn't want anything to do with a house where his murder took place – his blood was still in those walls, they just knew it – or with Phil's ghost. He wasn't too pleasant to deal with when he was alive, so imagine what his ghost must be like. In recent years a real estate firm had been renting the property to Kansas State commuter students looking for quiet country, or low-policed living. Most of the students aren't too disturbed when they learn of the murder, or hear from a townie that "some say Phil's headless body still roams the house."

* * *

"What became of your mother?" she asked, observing the late-day sun, thinking how it looked like a flat, cherry-flavored lollipop. Fog was beginning to form and drift over the water.

"She booked right before I started first grade," he said. "I hardly remember her, can't even conjure up her voice in my mind. I know she said things to me, but what, in what voice?"

"You ever try to find her?"

"Sure. I'd be at the grocery and I'd walk down all of the aisles looking for her, figuring she might be picking up some bread or something. Or I'd ride my bike around Somerset, even out to Nelson Corners or Redland, trying to find her new home."

"That's so sad." She retrieved two fresh beers from the cooler. "Here you go, Nate. We'll cry in our beers together."

* * *

In the summer when Nathan was ten his grandfather, Ben Abbot, Phil's dad, came to live with them while his house was being repaired. The house, in Chanute, had survived two tornadoes, but during a windstorm its front collapsed, giving the home the appearance of a giant dollhouse.

Ben was in his seventies but possessed a youthful pink vitality, and still worked part-time appraising property. He was a health nut, going for "power walks" in the morning and popping vitamins throughout the day. Ben reveled in the chance to get to know Nathan better, as Phil was rarely one to bring the boy to family gatherings: perhaps every third Christmas. And Nathan tried to soak up as much Abbot male love as possible from the grandfather – there was an immense empty cauldron inside wanting to be to filled up, such great, arid stretches of his life waiting to be rained upon.

Nathan and Ben became very close, and the boy would join the old man on the walks and go with him on appraisals in Kansas City and elsewhere. They were quite inseparable, unless the grandfather was "power napping."

During the walks or the long drives Ben said things to Nathan like, "Your father wasn't always this way, you know. When you were born he was probably the happiest man on earth. Even those first few years, the way he doted over you. I don't know what twisted him all around. His mother and I loved him through and through. Do you remember any of those good times, at all? I hope those first memories are still somewhere inside you."

The boy stayed silent when the talk was of his father. Sometimes he would ask, "Do you know where my mom off and went to?" Ben, each time, didn't know.

When Nathan would place his small hand in his grandfather's large hand, he'd get that feeling like he did when in the middle of some comic book adventure, the sense of being wrapped tightly in something much larger than his immediate life, and that although what was going to happen in the next panel, on the next page, was unknown, that there would be an eventual outcome where Good, even if it had been bloodied, would prevail.

And the boy would use his fingers to trace connect the many dots on the grandfather's hands and arms – mole specks, freckles, and liver spots – creating constellations that he had the power to name, such as The Big Burrito and the Alligator Head Galaxy.

When Phil would see their touching he would say harsh things like, "Dad, if you're that hungry for a girl I know some pro's."

"You don't know the first thing about love," Ben said back to Phil, one day, when Phil had walked in on them when they were playing the game where hands become tickle spiders.

"True," Phil said. "But look at who raised me." Phil was using the time with his father to air grievances old and new. The primary new grievance was that Ben didn't hire him to rebuild his home.

"It's a big project," said Ben. "You do mostly minor repairs, right? I didn't think you could handle it."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Phil said.

Then there was that huge, bear-like in its weight and potential viciousness, old grievance. When Phil was fourteen his parents decided to take a year and see the world. His mother, Rose, was a language professor at Kansas State and had won a grant to travel to several Spanish-speaking countries. They left Phil with relatives, Rose's sister Kathy and her husband Hank. Toward the end of the year Rose got sick, came home, and within a few months had died. Some blood problem, an unfamiliar infection that the doctors couldn't beat.

"It was the opportunity of a lifetime," Ben said. "Your mother was the happiest I ever saw her, that year."

"I know all about bad decisions," Phil said, looking at Nathan. "So Mom was happiest when I wasn't around? Thanks dad."

"No, no. Whether we were in Madrid or in Rio, we were always talking about you, waiting to be a family again."

Phil hammered the dining table with his fist. "You thought only of yourself, and you're still a selfish son of a bitch."

They fought many more times. Ben would usually relent after some small effort at explanation or self-defense. Nathan would watch the sparring, knowing who would win. He'd see the blood go out of his grandfather's face during the quarrels, see how Ben would tug at his hair or scratch at his forearms, or tap fingernails to fingernails, waiting for time to pass.

Ben and Nathan spent some of the nights sleeping out in the backyard, under the half-dead oak, no tent, just sleeping bags, the two bravely facing creeping bugs and sudden night storms.

On one of those nights, Ben said, " I wish things were different for you. Maybe when you are older, in high school, you can come live with me. Some people figure they put food on the table that gives them the right to behave in any way they see fit. But it just isn't right."

While Nathan wanted to spend some time thinking about living with his grandfather one day, Ben started talking about the star-dotted sky. "Stars live for a very, very long time. The light travels for years, for millions of miles just to get to us. There's a reason for all that. Don't ask me the reason because I don't know it, but there is a reason." The boy wondered whether the point where the starlight enters someone's eyes is the end of its journey.

Ben's hands turned into tickle spiders, and the boy laughed so loud that the only close-by neighbor, Mrs. Douglas, turned on her bedroom light, then the kitchen light and the outside light, then opened the back door and looked around to see if trouble was brewing in the neighborhood. "Whoever you are I have a rifle, and a big mean dog," she said into the night. When she went back in and turned off all of the lights the tickle and laugh fest started again.

The grandfather died two years later, some sort of clot or blockage, and was buried in Chanute, next to Rose's grave. Nathan and his father returned home from the funeral that day and the two ate a late meal of TV dinners, consisting of Salisbury steak,

candied yams, peas, and apple crisp. The father said only one thing to the boy that night. "Let me tell you about death," said Phil, starting to clear the table. "Death is a real son of a bitch."

* * *

"That summer, when my grandpa was with us, I first started having thoughts about my dad dying," Nathan said. "I think that's because I had finally gotten some love, if that makes any sense."

"Oh that's normal," Jill said. "Every kid wants to obliterate his parents."

"Maybe, but I started imagining construction accidents, car accidents, tornadoes specifically aiming for him."

"So what actually killed him?"

"A gun, and my evil plan."

For the first time Jill started to feel unsafe being near Nathan. "Details, please," she said. "Hurry up. I really got to pee."

"Go pee," Nathan said. "There's a little more to tell yet."

Jill stood up and waited for blood to fill out her veins before moving. She considered running for her life, but first she had to hear how Nathan's tale of murder ended.

* * *

On a spring day when Nathan was fifteen – April 4th, the start of the Kansas City Royals baseball season, so a double beauty of a day – the Stewart family moved in a few houses down from the Abbots. Sarah Stewart, 16, quickly took a liking to Nathan. She'd ride the school bus with the boy and, while their knees touched, tell of her plans to leave Somerset for New York or Los Angeles upon graduating high school. "There's no life here," she'd say. After school, they might go into Nathan's bedroom and kiss awkwardly, searchingly, or he might plant his ear to her heart or bury his head in her long black shoots and hide out there. She'd say "you can do more if you like" and he'd say, "I'm already very happy."

"Didn't anybody ever love you right?" she once asked him.

"Nope," he said. "My grandfather, but he died. You're the first. Don't ever leave."

"I have to be home by six," she said. Sarah then shifted slightly, to remind Nathan that a genuine breast was in the vicinity of his resting hand. He ignored the clue.

Phil soon started with his put downs of Sarah. "She sure wears tight jeans," he said, and "was that Sarah Stewart I saw in a van with the football team?" But Sarah's beauty could rather easily trump his father's ugliness, and Nathan listened to the once poisonous words with almost a smile on his face. He had found his cure.

In late May, Sarah pulled Nathan aside in the school hallway while they were on the way to the lunchroom. "How can I put this," she said. "Your father sort of touched me yesterday."

"He touched you?"

"Sort of."

"Where?"

"In the kitchen."

"No, I mean *where* did he touch you."

"Oh, the butt, that quadrant. It really sucks being a girl, sometimes. People just tug at you like you are a raspberry bush."

At lunch Nathan sought out and found Davis Lovegreen, a bookish boy who also starred in soccer, at defense, due to unusually long and snappy legs: “here comes Lobster Boy!” he’d shout to boys from the other soccer teams as they tried to dribble by.

“I think I have an idea that will be mutually beneficial to both of us,” Nathan said, passing Davis his square of apple spice cake in hopes of sealing the deal.

“That was redundant, ‘both’ and ‘mutually’,” Davis said, “but I’m all ears, though not really, I’d say I’m less than one tenth of one percent ears, if that, once you stretch out my intestines.”

Davis’ father, Quinn, a small yet mighty man, was a hothead who had spent eleven months in federal prison for assaulting a mailman, after the mailman complimented Davis’ mother, Lydia, on the lightness of her spring dress; just snapped the man’s arm like it was a wintered twig. Quinn could be sweet and kind then suddenly blow up at the slightest prompt, which led to ever-vigilant war readiness within the Lovegreen home.

Nathan’s plan, which excited Davis to the point that the boy almost spit out his milk as he was washing down the cake, was to convince Quinn that Davis’ mother and Nathan’s father were having an affair. Nathan figured Quinn would beat the daylights out of Phil, instant justice, and in doing so Quinn would get tossed back in prison for a few months, giving Davis and his mother and his three little sisters a break.

When school let out Davis rode the bus with Nathan to the Abbot’s house, where Nathan handed Davis a pair of Phil’s boxers, one of his pipes, and a Somerset Quality Construction business card bearing Phil’s name. Nathan circled the phone number and drew a heart next to it. “Nice touch,” Davis said.

They next walked the two miles to the Lovegreen’s house, where Davis placed in Nathan’s backpack a pair of his mother’s panties, purple and silky, fun to touch, her copper bracelet with an inscription from Quinn – “saying happy 17th anniv.” – and one of her almost finished macramés, a duck with messed up eyes. They’d plant the false evidence the next morning, before school, with Davis saying to his father, on his way out the door to catch the bus, “Why is Mr. Abbot always coming over when you’re out of town?”

The following afternoon, during a history lesson on the Kickapoo and other first Indians of the region, Nathan was called to the principal’s office. A uniformed cop was there waiting and he told the boy, “There’s been an accident at your house. We need to go there, now.”

Nathan covered his mouth with his hand like he was in shock, but he was really hiding a smile. “But I’m not done with class yet,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it,” the principal said.

At 33168 County Road 7 there were several police cars, flashers off, in the drive and yard, Phil’s black truck (it looked somehow sad to Nathan, like a pup waiting on its owner), Mrs. Douglas – she was bawling her eyes out – plus a few other Somerset citizens, and an ambulance, but the two paramedics were just sitting on the metal step-up ramp, as helpful in this emergency as the trees.

The cop who yanked Nathan from school led him by hand into the house. “Be strong,” he advised. The other officers stepped aside, not one saying, “perhaps he shouldn’t see it, maybe he’s too young.” In the kitchen the boy saw a sheet covering his father slumped in a dining table chair, covered by a sheet. Phil's tan work boots and the edge of his black trousers stuck out of the end of the sheet – that part of the old man seemed still okay. The center of the white sheet was a deep red from all of the blood and

Nathan thought the sheet looked somewhat like the flag of Japan, or was it South Korea? The flags of the world decorated the cover of his postage stamp album so he'd check later. The sheet was an inadequate bandage, as the red circle seemed to be growing and wettening in places. Blood, though it looked to Nathan more like Contadina tomato paste, was also spattered on the wallpaper behind the father; a yellow paper with brown drawings of salt and pepper shakers, pepper grinders, and spice bottles.

"That's my dad, huh?" he asked.

"Yep," the cop said, releasing the boy's hand. "Sorry. I'd pull back the sheet but it's not something you want to see. I knew your dad. My brother worked for him a couple years back, hanging dry wall."

"He's dead?" Nathan asked.

"As dirt. Sorry."

Nathan looked to the kitchen counter and saw a shotgun in a large clear evidence bag. A Ziploc, felony-sized.

"Don't worry, we got the guy who did this," said the officer.

No you didn't, thought Nathan.

* * *

"So you didn't kill your dad, this Quinn did," Jill said, relieved. She pulled from the cooler two squished peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and handed one to Nathan. "Here, eat this before we head back. Yummy protein."

"He pulled the trigger, but I killed him just as much."

"I think you are being too hard on yourself."

"Maybe not hard enough. Quinn Lovegreen got fifteen years. He's still in the pen. I only had to do the foster home thing for a couple years."

"Did Davis' family hate you?"

"Not really. They all seemed relieved, though they had to move into a trailer. That part was bad."

She ate her sandwich and looked at the lake, wondered if it had any dark or secret stories to tell her: lovers drowning, children falling through the winter ice, stolen gold falling off speeding boats, or the breeding of lake monsters by the government. "So what happened to Sarah?" she asked.

"Her family moved to Wisconsin, that summer. Beloit, I think. Before she left she told me that my dad didn't really touch her, but she could tell that he wanted to."

"Holy shit."

He started chomping on the PB&J and complimented Jill for the proper balance of jelly and nut spread. "You know what I remember most about walking into the kitchen that day?" he said. "My dad was eating a grilled cheese sandwich before he died. He had finished the one half and had taken one bite out of the second half; you could see his teeth marks. I thought of him buttering the bread, he always did both sides of each slice, getting the American cheese out of the fridge, assembling the sandwich, and grilling it, flipping it over with the flipper thing. No one should be murdered while eating a grilled cheese."

Story told, they drove to Jill's apartment in Mulletville where she invited Nathan to spend the night. The night had cooled so she fixed hot chocolate for them both, and they sat on her small bed and talked more about Nathan's early days. "Your turn," he eventually said, but as she started talking about her childhood – no murders, but not exactly paradise on Earth – Nathan began to doze off.

The next morning she roused him about an hour after sunrise with the question, “Have you been back to your house since the killing?”

“Drove by several hundred times,” he said. “Couldn’t ever stop. Why?”

“How far is Somerset from here?”

“About eighty-seven miles.”

“Good. Get yourself up, sleepyhead, we’re going there. Don’t say a word. I’ll call off work.”

* * *

They pulled noisily onto the stone driveway of 33168 County Road 7 late morning. A college student, shirt off, was sitting on a lawn chair in the hilly front yard, reading paperback Chaucer while sipping a beer.

Nathan stayed a minute in the car and stared at the tall house, planted in the earth but not very deeply. It was a painted a brighter white and the shutters were now dark green, almost black. “It looks haunted,” he said.

“Be strong,” she said.

The two got out of the car and approached the student. “You folks lost?” the student asked.

“I am,” Nathan said, “but here I am anyway.” Jill told the student that her boyfriend grew up in the house and they’d like a few minutes to walk through it, if he didn’t mind.

“Sure thing,” the student said. “But maid’s year off, sorry. Oh, hey, you know about the murder?”

“My dad,” Nathan said.

“Oh, sorry man,” the student said. “Who killed him?”

“Some unemployed drifter who still roams free, with features similar to mine,” Nathan said. Jill shook her head at the student and gave a dismissing wiggle of her hand.

“I’ll be out here,” the student said. “Don’t steal nothing.”

They walked through the cluttered and dusty house, Nathan taking baby steps. “Is there any air in this place?” he asked. They went into the kitchen. He touched the wall where his father’s blood was once splattered. The wallpaper was now an ugly purple diamonds on green. He kept feeling the wall. “This is so strange,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, tugging at his belt. “This is where your father died. But where did you live, mostly. In the living room, hint hint?”

“No, not really. I spent most of my life in my bedroom. It was the safest place.” So they walked through the living room then marched up the fourteen steps to the landing, and Nathan pointed out his father’s former room – “once my mom’s room, too” – the bathroom, a linen closet – “where I’d hide if there were tornado warnings, hoping the towels would save me” – and then his old room. The door was missing, replaced by strings of tiny shells that clacked as they entered.

“It used to be bigger,” he said, looking around. “Time shrinks shit.” She cleared the bed of papers and textbooks and they lay down, using laundry for pillows. They kissed some and she briefly rubbed at his genitals through his clothing.

“If you were here then I bet I’d have gotten through it all without doing what I did,” he said.

“Maybe not,” she said.

Before long, Nathan was remembering some bad times in his room, the many sad, motherless nights. He wanted to go.

When they made it out to the porch they saw that the student was pouring charcoal into a rusty red grill, preparing for a cookout. “Stay for burgers and brews?” he asked, and Jill and Nathan said sure.

They sat at the edge of the porch, drinking their beers, the fire blazing nearby. “What’s it like living in a house where a grisly murder took place?” Nathan asked the student.

“It’s been a big hard-on as far as plundering the girls,” the student said. “They like coming out here, the adventurous ones anyway. Oh, sorry, all respects and everything.”

During the second round of beers, the grill fire nearing readiness, the student asked, “Hey, can either of you summarize *Canterbury Tales* in like three sentences?”

“Hell is more interesting than heaven,” Jill said. “Oh, wait, that’s Dante’s *Inferno*. Or maybe I’m thinking of *Paradise Lost*.”

“An inferno?” Nathan said. “A wonderful idea!” He set his beer down, jumped up and grabbed the can of lighter fluid from a table tray and squirted two long shots into the grill, causing large snaky tongues of fire to thrash. “Hey, don’t do that,” said the student, “the coals will gray unevenly.”

Nathan snagged the student’s lighter from the porch ledge and dashed into the house. When they caught up with him, Nathan was pointing the can of lighter fluid at the kitchen wall, holding the lighter near the can. The student backed away and ran out the front door. Jill and Nathan heard a crash and an “oh shit!”

“Honey,” she said, “put it down. The murder was so long ago. It’s done.”

“This isn’t about the murder,” he said. “It’s about all those nights, here in this kitchen. I was his fucking prisoner. He’d start it all with something stupid, like a joke he heard at work, or about how the Chief’s might do on Sunday…”

Nathan’s words started to grow louder, as if bellowed from some deep place. He lit the green plastic lighter with a stroke of his thumb, released and let the flame die, then lit it again. “… and then he’d say something like ‘you are less than zero. A bug.’ I’d be eating his FUCKING STUPID MEAL, TRYING TO, MAYBE SLICED CARROTS and fried chicken, and the first times, THE FIRST HUNDRED TIMES, I’d think no, that’s not what mom said, you are mistaken. The next thousand times I’d think maybe he’s right. In that last year, I was actually saying to him, ‘yes, I know.’ ACTUALLY FUCKING SAYING ‘YES, I’m a stupid fuck.’ I didn’t believe a thing he said about anyone else, not what he said about my mom, not about my grandfather. But I believed what he said about me.”

* * *

By the time the Somerset Fire Department arrived at 33168 County Road 7 the kitchen had been torched and the flames were creeping into the living room and up to the second floor. The porch was also on fire, as the retreating student had knocked over the grill. They were able to save the house, barely.

Jill and Nathan took off before the firemen showed. They had handed the student the cash contents of their wallets, about $140, and Jill gave him one of her personal checks, blank, promising him up to $3,000, their total combined savings, most all of it hers, if he told the investigators it was all a freak accident, not mention they were there.

“Come on,” she said to the student as Nathan calmly gazed at the growing blaze. “If you still need more money to replace your stuff I’ll sell my car and give you that money too. Hell, I’ll come back and give you and your friends blow jobs, if that’s what it takes. What do you say? We’re just starting out here, give us a chance.”

"I don't know," the student said. "As far as guests go you two really suck."

Jill and Nathan were headed back to Mulletville, Jill at the wheel.

"They are going to be coming for me, aren't they," he said, looking at his boots and at the shadowy lower spaces of the car's interior.

"Maybe, I don't know."

"They're not idiots. The Arson Squad or whatever it's called."

"Never assume people aren't idiots."

"Hey, turn around. I want to turn myself in. I deserve jail time. If not for current crimes then past ones."

"No, I won't." She hit violently at the dashboard a few times, in hopes of waking him up. "Look, you were just a kid trying to save his life," she said. "You had no way of knowing your friend's dad was going kill your father. You did not kill your father. You were just a boy trying to survive. That's a beautiful thing. So let it go. For me."

He continued staring at his boots.

"And you've become a gentle, caring man out of all of it," she said. "One I've fallen in love with."

"Love, already?"

"Already.

"I wish it could make a difference."

"Maybe it will."

They both looked down the highway. To Jill, the straight road seemed endless, and she had a sudden terrible vision that all of the exits were blocked, that the highway wrapped the globe, and that her Nissan would never run out of gas, never be able to be stopped. Forever she'd be on the edge of Nathan's slow and gray self-destruction, with no way to get away from him. She tried hard to think of his sweetness, his humor, but none of that was there anymore. What was there was a dark and dangerous man, in the seat next to her: the homicide conspirator and arsonist. She had just promised all of her hard-earned money, and her car, and her sacred sexuality to keep him out of jail. How had he slipped into her life? Into her car? How would she escape from him? It seemed that the continuation of her life might depend on her ability to quickly answer those questions.

Nathan looked to the sides of the highway, to the sunflower fields that squeezed the road. Many of the tall, unharvested flowers had begun their seasonal fall, and the strange entanglements of thousands of sun-faced flowers in various states of living or decline, the mixture of curled yellow petals, and huge seed offerings, and large floppy green leaves or brown and crumpled dead leaves, sunflowers both toppled and sun-reaching, others with their heads lopped off, some being pecked at by birds, seemed like a horrific massacre of some sort, with survivors. Nathan thought that he should wail and cry at the terrible losses, at the unfolding horror, but he couldn't. The only time he was able to induce tears that day was an hour earlier, when smoke from his childhood home burning got into his eyes.

The Bread Man

Me and my pa were reading magazines at the brake shop downtown when a truck come down the hill and flipped over. So we got ourselves up and went to the crash.

This time it was a bread truck, the one that has three heads of three men on it cause it is the Three Bakers Bread Company. There was some folks there already like they was waiting for it. Trucks flip all the time when there is fog over the river bridge and they come too fast down the hill and have to turn quick so as not to smash into the statue of the Civil War general in the square. And if some people was hoping for free bread the truck was empty and probably headed to Stanton to load up.

The driver was sitting on the sidewalk and he had big muscles and his hair was combed right like he was meeting a girl in his plans. The bread man says, "Boy am I hungry" and some of the grown-ups look at each other and he says, "I want roast beef and mashed potatoes, and meatloaf with more mashed potatoes and lots of catsup, and some baked chicken, and cole slaw, and maybe a fish sandwich or two, and hamburgers, thick and medium rare, that would do her, and maybe just peanut butter and jelly. Grape jelly, thank you"

My pa went to his knees and looks in the stranger's eyes and says, "Are you okay son?" And the driver, he must have been about twenty-three, looks at my dad and says, "And hot dogs too, with relish and diced onions. And I want it to be a place where it is so busy you hear plates clanging and people saying hey I need more coffee over here and there are jukeboxes playing and waitresses with long legs for you to look at all day."

"He sounds fine to me," says the bent over man who sells sick people their pills at Morris Drugs, and most folks started leaving, figuring Pa and me would take care of whatever needed doing like the one time before, when it was the diaper man.

Then my dad tells the bread man we could probably take him to lunch at Ellen's Cafeteria while his truck is getting righted like a beetle on his back would need, that is if our car was all braked right, so I sat with the stranger while Dad got the car and the man says what's your name, and I says Charlie, and he says Charlie, that's my name too, only the name on his shirt said Ken.

When Pa pulls up I see that there is blood running quick down the bread man's head like it has someplace to be, so I say Pa we need to get him cleaned up first. So my pa parks in a space no one parks in when there is fog cause of the trucks falling over and pa looks worried-like to the bridge but says it is probably safe to park there five minutes plus people will be slowed down for the turned over bakery truck and for the police car certain on its way.

We are in the bathroom at the brake shop and the bread man is sitting on the pot, not doing anything just sitting there while pa is getting a paper towel soapy and the man turns to me and says, "Where are we?"

"In the brake shop bathroom," I say.

"No," he says, "I mean where are we?"

And I say, "Still in the bathroom at the brake shop."

My dad puts the towel to his cut and I know it has to sting but he keeps smiling and looking at me and then says, "Are you my brother?"

"No sir," I say, "my name is Charlie, and that's my pa there, fixing your cut."

"Charlie?" he says. "You sure your name isn't Wilson?"

Pa looks at me and then at the man and says to him, “Before we go to the diner I think we should get you checked out at the hospital.

“Am I dying?” asks the bread man.

“Oh no,” says Pa, “no one gets worse injured than a broken arm or nose from these crashes in the fog. Those tightwads over at City Hall need to put in flashing lights or a warning sign or something.”

We walk to the car and the man keeps walking when he is supposed to stop and my dad has to go fetch him and bring him back to the car and my dad says where ya going to son and the man says home and dad says you live here in town and the man says it depends what town it is and even if he didn’t he ought to because it sure is pretty, reminds him of his own hometown, and pa says where’s that and the man says that’s the town with all the walnut trees and my dad says where’s that again and the bread man says Lovetown, or Brattlebee.

We have to all squeeze into the front seat of the Valiant cause the back is all filled with medical shoes and silicon lube spray that my dad is hoping to sell. The bread man is still smiling but his cut is starting to bleed again but this time kind of yellow and I tell Pa and he says uh-oh I better step on it, and so he speeds up.

So we are just all riding and the bread man says is there a toy store in this fine town, and Pa says no but the drug store has a couple shelves of toys and we could stop after the hospital and lunch if he wants to and the bread man says is there an eclipse due today and Pa says I don’t think so and then Pa tells me what an eclipse is so I roll down the window and look at the sky and am hoping the moon show ups and turn off the sun but I’m early cause Pa then says the next eclipse is not due until 2027.

We get stopped by a train and the bread man is bleeding onto his blue bakery shirt now and Pa says shoot I wish this car had wings and I imagined that some and Pa says there are such cars but the government keeps them to themselves but sometimes you can see them flying over the military bases in New Mexico. The bread man doesn’t have nothing to say to that.

When we are on our way again the bread man turns to me and says “Reggie, there’s something I want you to tell my family.”

Well that’s when things get out of hand. His body starts shaking like he grabbed a big electrical wire and some stuff comes out of his mouth I don’t care to think about much. And my dad says oh man and starts going real fast and even hardly stops at a stop sign, and the man keeps shaking and my dad says Charlie I need you to try and hold him down a little cause if he grabs the steering wheel at the speed I’m going we’ll all be muskrat meat. So that’s what I do, I put my arms around him and try to hold him down but he is big and shaking fast and I’m not sure I’m doing any good, except for some of his shaking going into me. And when we have to stop cause of a traffic light going red, Dad takes off his nice suit jacket and puts it on the bread man, only I knew it won’t help cause it is something on the far inside.

When we get near the hospital Dad starts beeping the horn and he pulls in the emergency area, and Dr. Phillips and a nurse come out and Dr. Phillips sees the shaking man who looks like he might just blow up and he says oh dear and tells the nurse to get another doctor out of surgery and to also make sure an ambulance is on the ready in case they have to move him to the good hospital in Stanton.

So me and Pa wait in the waiting room and read some magazines we hadn’t seen at the brake shop and Pa buys us some candy bars and sodas from the machines and says looks like another day of selling’s down the tubes but that’s how it goes sometimes. After

awhile Dr. Phillips comes out and says something to my dad whispery like and then my dad sits next to me instead of across from me and says, “Charlie I know we don’t talk enough.”

“We talk all of the time,” I say.

“No, talk about stuff. We never talk about stuff. Like life and death stuff. We never talked much about death. Do you have any questions about death?”

“I don’t think so,” I say even though sometimes I do wonder why pretty things and bugs sometimes die if it’s a cold spell. And Pa talks about how even though we are Christians who never stepped foot in a church we are still Christians, and that for Christians there is a heaven of eternal happiness where you don’t have to worry a lick about nothing.

“Is the bread man a Christian?” I ask.

“I sure hope so,” says Pa. “He looks like one to me, anyhow.”

“Is he dead?”

“Oh shoot, no,” says Pa. “But it’s not looking great or nothing. Who’s to say if his number is called. Sometimes people die for almost nothing and other times big stuff that would kill a hundred people other people walk away from like it was no biggee. It’s one of those mysteries of life. You sure you ain’t got no questions?”

“None I can think of,” I say.

Some more time passes and a mom and her daughter show up and tell the nurse behind the window that they are the family of Kenneth P. Montague, and they say it real slow and soft like they are talking about a king. They just came up from Riverton and how is the boy doing? The nurse tells them he is in surgery and it might be a spell before they can visit with him.

They sat by us and my pa says hello and tells them how we came to be involved in Kenneth’s life, and the girl, she must be the bread man’s sister, I have to look at her some cause I can’t help myself. She is pretty with long black hair nicely combed and she has a pink knee from falling off something I guess and her eyes look like something you might want to take a picture of and keep forever and her hair has been washed and I can smell it two seats away and it is a pretty smell.

Then I remembered what the bread man told me and even though I’m usually silent I say, “In our car he said there was something he wanted to me to say to his family.” And everyone gets quiet and looks at me straight except for my pa who is rolling his eyes and I say, “But I don’t know what cause that’s when he got funny.” The mom looks at me a little mean and even the girl turns away from me like I had promised her a candy bar but ate it all myself.

It’s a couple hours more before the bread man is done with surgery and Dr. Phillips says he should be fine if the swelling calms down and it should calm down cause that’s what swelling does. We can’t see the bread man except to look at him through the one window and when the mom and pretty girl comes out from visiting with him they give me and Pa a funny look and my pa says he just wanted to make sure the boy was fine and so we will be going, and that’s what we do, first stopping at Ellen’s to get some egg sandwiches because we are about near starved to death.

We go back the next day and even though it isn’t visiting hours we get to see the bread man for a time. He is bandaged on his head and one hand but is sitting up and cheerful but he doesn’t much recognize us. He thanks us for getting him to the hospital and then I tell him some of the silly things he said like me being his brother Wilson and that I should tell his family something, and my pa mentions his saying he was from

Lovetown or Bumblebee or some towns like that and the bread man says where the heck are those places and he laughs so hard he has to hold his side cause of the laughing.

When it turns quiet I say, “Do you remember what it was you wanted me to tell your family,” and the bread man bounces his shoulders up and down and says he doesn’t know, maybe that they are goofy or something, but I know it was something much bigger than that, like maybe he loves them or so enjoys being a family with them, some thing of the kind that my dad says we never talk about but should. I tried to ask again but Pa says let it go cause as far as the bread man is concerned yesterday is a day without records.

What’s your pa do my dad asked and the bread man says not much cause he passed two years back so I tell him not to worry cause there is a heaven and he says he knows that but thanks for reminding him anyway. My dad tells him about Ma leaving us two years back not due to God calling her but for some other reason that still remains a mystery, and Pa asks the man are you sweet on someone and the man says yes, there is a special girl. And then we leave cause we are out of things to say but first the bread man thanks us again and says if we don’t see him in town anymore that’s cause he’ll be taking the bypass from now on, which makes us all laugh a little.

We also have to go cause my pa wants to head over to Burleville where there are plenty of people who will be needing medical shoes and lubricant spray. And I start thinking as we we’re driving and the sun is shining all free and happy like it isn’t expecting trouble from the moon for many years, that I wish the bread man had remembered what he wanted me to say to his family before he got all crazy in the body, because maybe it was even so much bigger than I can imagine, like an eclipse which is ten times huger than I could ever think up in my own mind and I didn’t know about it until I knowed about it.

I think my dad can tell I’m upset a little cause he turns on the radio even though he don’t like music much and says instead of selling we can head over to Stanton and hit an ice cream store and then go to that hobby shop where they let you race the blue and red slot cars, even if you don’t buy nothing.

The General

Charles “Rusty” McCain, my third father, was a major in the Unites States Army. To my friends I called him The General, not in recognition of his career ambitions, but because in school and on the news I had learned that there were men with such titles in Southeast Asia and South America who tortured women and children for sport.

The General would at times call me “Navy,” his word for someone who planned to coast through life, probably on the government dole. Even when he called me by my real name, Tom, it was often in the form of “Tiny Tom,” equating me with Tiny Tim, that effeminate man who used to sing “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” on “Laugh In,” or perhaps the cripple boy in Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol.*

When I first met Rusty, that night he came over to our house in Baltimore for dinner, he looked harmless, like a big kid in uniform, playing army: he was no taller than 5’10”, his hair was a bright orange, and his arms were heavily freckled.

After dinner, my brother Gerald and I were tossing a football with Rusty when Gerald tried to tackle Rusty, grabbing a leg. I snagged Rusty’s other leg, and he played along and fell to the earth. Rusty laughed, but then began frantically rubbing at the grass stains on the knees of his uniform pants.

During the rest of his visit he pawed and scratched at the stains, tried to wash them out with Dial soap, lemony dish soap, and then vinegar, stared at the stains the way a kid looks at an F on a report card, and said he knows it shouldn’t be such a big deal, the stains will come out eventually, won’t they? – but he likes things to be perfect. He even passed on sampling Mom’s apple crunch pie because he didn’t think he should be rewarded in light of what happened to his pants. Gerald and I apologized a million times for carelessly tackling a government man, and for having faulty grass that too easily gave up its green.

That night, in our bedroom, Gerald said, “I don’t think we’ll be seeing Rusty any more. He’s a loon.”

“He was nice for a little while,” I said.

“Anyone can play nice for a couple hours,” he said.

A month later my lonely mother married The General. She had met Rusty at a dance club in Baltimore, while he was on leave visiting relatives. It had been only five weeks since her divorce from my second father when they met. She was a beauty, with long spiraling dirt-blonde hair, large blue eyes, and a shapely, non-mom-like body. She could have had most any man, but, since divorcing my real dad, she’d become anxious when manless for more than a few days. Gerald and I tried to fill that role when no men were around, told her she looked pretty, picked flowers for her. But it didn’t seem to do the trick.

Mom used to tell us of the family curse of heartbroken Croatian women. Nearly all of her female relatives and ancestors, here and in the old country, had married young, but within a few years lost their husbands, and ended up living dreary, lonesome lives. Some of the men were lost to wars, my great-grandfather was somehow killed by a donkey, and others just wandered off. In snaring whatever man was bold enough to ask her to dance she fended off the Croatian curse, temporarily, but also welcomed other curses.

Their union meant our moving to government housing just outside the base at Fort Barrett, South Carolina. There were no trees to speak of in that ugly development, and

few birds or squirrels. Occasionally a few passing-through birds, mostly crows and robins, or a squirrel or two, could be found on the thick black electric wires that girdled the community like barbed wire for monsters. To keep them in, not out. The houses all looked the same: two-story, two bedroom rectangular things painted white, with blood-red shutters. No basements or shelters to prevent hurricanes from having their way with us. Everything was flat, squared off, sun-scorched and expected. If it weren't for an occasional variation in shrubbery or, more rarely, toys in a yard, or maybe a slightly different mailbox or a yapping dog, a kid could get lost and wander into the wrong home.

The General had rules for how Gerald and I and Mother should live, which he would post on the corkboard in the kitchen. The rules were typed up by his secretary, Anna, a kind woman who always carried a purse full of Tootsie Rolls, for when she ran into Army kids. The rules were revised every two to three weeks, based on his growing knowledge of our deficiencies.

Rusty's Rules included correct ways to address superiors, proper manners, notes on posture, and so on. There were embarrassing rules, which our friends would laugh at if The General was not around, such as "gas must be relieved in the bathroom" or "no touching of self-genital area." When Gerald made fun of a rule once, saying that if he's not allowed to belch or fart he's going to explode, The General shoved him into the standing lamp by the puffy chair.

The rules for my mother included her having to call him sir, what times she was to have meals prepared, weekly body weight goals, and standards of proper dress. But the first rule was always No Painting. My mother had been an artist and won prizes when she was young, including, in high school, a National Institute for Drug Abuse Education poster contest. Her painting, which made it onto hundreds of billboards, showed a funeral for a Mr. Potatohead type and included the catchy motto "Spuds on Speed Become Fried Potatoes!"

When we lived with our real dad in Baltimore, Mom painted murals in all of the bedrooms: galaxies in mine, a toucan-happy jungle in Gerald's room, and a sunset desert scene in their room. The paintings she sold and showed at galleries were usually about everyday things, but there was always one thing messed up. Imagine a farm scene with the farmer on a tractor, an old Mail Pouch barn, and so on, but look close and one of the cows is upside down. My favorite painting was of a 1950's family gathered around the TV watching Jack Benny, none of them noticing that the cat is on fire.

When Gerald and I would bring out our watercolors, markers, or colored pencils for some school project we needed to complete that day, Mother would look at us with a poorly disguised sadness. Rusty wasn't opposed to art per se, just her art. In their bedroom he hung a painting of John Wayne in a Calvary uniform, ready to kick Indian ass. Rusty never explained why he denied her what she loved most, but one night in our room Gerald said maybe The General feared that we would turn into fruity artists if our mother was allowed to happily paint. "Fruity artists don't make good warriors," he said.

"I'll never be a warrior," I said.

"I might," my brother said, before beginning his nightly symphony of tongue clicking noises. "On whatever side Rusty's not on."

* * *

Each weekday at about 5:30 p.m. The General would park the government car in the drive and march the five sections of concrete walk to the front door. Sometimes the unimpeded sun would glare off of the gold and silver bars on his Army shirt – medals for

being extra mean, we reckoned – or off of his sunglasses. Often he was carrying a carton of Pall Mall cigarettes that he picked up at the PX.

Gerald had many allergies those days, he was always coughing things up and sneezing, and all of that was made worse by the ticklish cigarette smoke. One night my mother told Rusty of a study reported by John Chancellor on TV that demonstrated a link between cigarette smoke and childhood allergies.

"Just something to consider," she said, as The General kept reading his military magazine, paying her no mind. About fifteen minutes later, when she was walking by Rusty, he stuck out his foot and tripped her, causing her to drop newly folded laundry as she fell to the floor.

"I'm such a clumsy clod," she said. The General then grabbed a twirl of her beautiful hair and shoved her face into the hardwood floor. It was the worst sound I'd ever heard. Gerald and I looked at each other quickly then back at the TV, pretending that within the Zenith was the real life and what we just saw in our home was some Hollywood production where no one was actually hurt.

Her husband still reading the magazine, her boys frozen on the couch, Mom picked her own self up, took one of the towels to wipe the blood off the hardwood, then put the towel to her mouth, to stop the bleeding. She quietly, nervously, refolded the laundry, only taking breaks to dab at her mouth with the bloody towel, and to apologize to The General. I looked to Rusty, half-hidden by the magazine, and I wanted it to all end. I wanted the planets to stop spinning and the sun to move to some other galaxy and shine there. I wanted everything, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, to be done.

For the fifth grade Spring Festival I was chosen to be in a square dance and to read part of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address for a drama on American history written by Mrs. Mayhew, my teacher. Mother had bought me a new maroon tie for the occasion, saying I was man enough to forgo clip-ons, and was about to tie it on me when The General grabbed the tie and said it was a father's responsibility to teach his son such things.

He came behind me and slipped the noose around my neck with the skill of a veteran hangman. Caustic fumes billowed from the Pall Mall dangling from his mouth with its growing ash, and I felt its fire on my neck, the ring of flame singeing me in tidy circles, intensifying with each of his inhales. I was coughing and dying but there was no escape. "Pay attention because I'm only showing you this once," he said as he completed the first loop, but was it this way or that? The tie was strangling me, along with the billows of smoke, and I was also drowning in his stepfather smell, a sardine and mayo sandwich recently consumed, sweat masked partly by Right Guard, and Aqua Velva aftershave, which he had splashed on for the festival. His body was swallowing me, like an eraser swallows the memory of something once written. He evened out my collar and told me to take the tie off and re-tie it myself. I looked at the mysterious knots and thought I might pee myself.

"There's no time, sir," my mother intervened. "The dancers need to get there early. We better be going." Mom avoided immediate punishment by scurrying out to the car.

At the school we shuffled into the auditorium where military families were blending in with civilian families – our school was about half properly spit-shined military kids and half free kids. Mom and The General took their seats and Gerald offered to escort me backstage, where I had to put on a cowboy hat and ruffled vest for the dance.

"Do real good," Gerald said as we walked down the slanted aisle.

"I feel like puking," I said. "And I know I'm going to mess up."

"No, no," he said, tugging at my shoulder so that I would stop and turn to him. "You have to do the opposite. You have to do really, really good."

"Why do you care?"

"Cause you are going to do great and that's going to mess up Rusty. He'll be in his seat and he can't make you look like a dingus. People are going to clap their hands for you and there is not one thing he can do about it. To him we are screw-ups, he's probably right, but you are going to do this so perfect that he is going to be totally messed up for a long time."

"He'll beat the farts out of me later. All of us."

"Uh-huh," Gerald said as we continued the walk to the stage steps. "But it will be worth it. This night will be ours and nobody else's."

So I danced the simple square dance without flaw and later felt no nerves when giving the speech. I remembered all of the words and even "sounded presidential," Mrs. Mayhew said afterwards.

When the auditorium lights came on, after we all bowed, I looked at my family. The General's leg was shaking, and he was biting into his lip, ready to rip me apart bone by bone. Gerald nodded and clenched his fist in a "power to the people" gesture. And Mom, sitting as far away from Rusty as possible while still in the seat next to him, gave me an extended sweet smile, a smile that seemed to have been born in happier times.

During the ride home I could feel The General's angry glare ricocheting off of the rearview mirror in an attempt to pierce me. Back home, in the kitchen, I was trying to undo the tie's eighty-seven knots when Rusty grabbed me by the shirt and threw me into the refrigerator. I watched the things magnetized to the door – the school lunch menu, a grocery list, Gerald's 7th grade school picture – flutter to the white and gold-specked linoleum floor like dead leaves. "That's for smirking while doing your oratory, Mr. Showman," he said, his hand squeezing my throat. "The history of the United States is about hundreds of thousands of men making the ultimate sacrifice for their country. That's no laughing matter. You remember that."

Meanwhile Gerald, out of The General's view, was giving me the thumbs up. We had won, somehow. We were boy terrorists who, although the cause was hopeless, had proven that the enemy's fortress wasn't impenetrable.

* * *

Gerald and I spent many hours planning Rusty's murder. On the nights when one or both of us had gotten hit we'd huddle together in his bed. If he got it worse, I'd put my hand under his pajama top and rub his belly; that slowed his worried breathing. If I got it bad he'd stroke my hair, which always made me sleepy. If Mom was beaten or humiliated we might lie on his bed hip to hip and look up at the ceiling and the false slanted and shimmery windows created by glowing streetlights, and make up stories about the sweet world that waited for us on the other side of those imaginary windows. In one story, Gerald had us living on a farm. Just us. No Mom, no Rusty, no first Dad. In a second window-world fantasy, I had Martians launching an attack against Earth's red-haired citizens.

Most of the murder plots involved missiles, machine guns and explosives. A rocket up the butt was Gerald's favorite plan, while I wanted to rig The General's chair with both rockets and explosives, so when he next sat down to read his military magazines he'd be launched skyward then explode ten thousand feet in the air, raining gut confetti all over the neighborhood.

The Sunday barbecues The General held during the summer were strange affairs, as he'd have his Army buddies and their wives and kids over for cheeseburgers and dogs, and we'd have to give the appearance of a perfectly normal and happy family. If there were any visible injuries, false explaining stories, coached by Rusty or Mom, were well-rehearsed and ready to go.

Mom's role was to look sexy but not slutty. That meant wearing a short dress chosen by Rusty, one that would become see-thru if the sun hit it right, or khaki shorts and a white blouse with the ends tied up so that her melony breasts could be highlighted. Lipstick was okay, but no "whorish" eye shadow. Rusty liked displaying his prize, and took it with pride when his fellow army buddies eyed up Mom or grunted about her figure.

And there would be Rusty, usually in a striped golf shirt and gray shorts, wearing his Kiss the Cook apron, flipping a burger or cooking the dogs just right, sipping a Miller or chatting with other men gathered around the fire, or even, before or after cooking the meat, playing ball with Gerald and me and some of the other boys and fathers. There would be Rusty, with his tight-cut red hair, and the S vein that ran down the side of his head near his ear, and his red, furry, freckled and muscular arms, and I'd be thinking *die fucker, die.*

I imagined going up to one of the adults and tugging on his shirt or her summer dress and saying, "Please, he's beating the stuffing out of us. Please, take us home with you." But I didn't. The way some civilian kids looked at me when I talked about having a brutal stepdad, and the way most Army kids would cringe in the presence of their fathers, made me think that most of them were also living hidden, screwed-up lives. We didn't need one exploding rocket chair to make things right in that town, we needed many.

About the only times Rusty seemed human was when he was in a dancing mood, or when he was playing with his train set. The dancing was always unexpected. He'd retrieve an old Benny Goodman or Artie Shaw album, put it on, then start clapping his hands and tapping his shoe on the hardwood. Mom, who spent much of her time in whatever room Rusty wasn't in, would appear, look nervous, tentative, maybe brush her hair out of her face, then meet Rusty in the center of the living room where they'd touch hand to hand and hand to hips, and begin to dance and swing. He'd spin her around a few times then sometimes jump back and clap hands and tap his foot, and my mother would dance to him, and they'd repeat the scene. Nothing bad would happen as long as Benny or Artie kept playing, and often for a good day or two afterwards.

The train set was an Austin HO scale that Rusty had since he was a boy. It covered a ping-pong table in the garage, and twin bridges led to additional track on a worktable. It was an elaborate set-up, with plastic mountains and tunnels, miniature trees, billboards advertising Coca-Cola, Maxwell House coffee and Wrigley's gum, a log loading and unloading area, a little downtown area with several shops, electric streetlights and a crossing gate, a station where passengers were picked up or left off, and many plastic townspeople and train workers. Most Saturdays he'd pick up something new at the hobby shop, a sleeper car, some shrubbery, or a bridge, or he would repaint the people, changing their costumes based on the season, or paint new terrain and alter the train route.

After he set up the train, almost a year into their marriage, he invited Gerald and me out to the garage, and after lengthy instructions, handed us the controls. The biggest challenge was backing into the log loading area without derailing one of the middle cars. And if you didn't line up just right one or two logs might bounce off the car and roll

away, toppling trees or townspeople. When that happened we had to use a toy crane to lift the logs back into the car, and a toy ambulance to take the rolled over people to the toy hospital. Rusty would say something like, “In real life, boys, there are no giant hands that come out of the sky to set you back on the track if you derail. So don’t screw up in the first place. But if you do, use whatever tools and resources you have to set things right.”

Despite the cheesy lessons, Gerald and I loved playing with the train, and I remember having many dreams of dark trains sparking down the tracks. For a school project that year I read a report on the importance of trains in America’s westward expansion. Rusty was always easy-going when playing with the train, and he laughed with us when the townspeople would get smashed by runaway trains, logs, or collapsing bridges. Sometimes we even aimed for the chubby, white-bearded three-inch high mayor, and his dorky and pale children.

We weren’t allowed to play with the train without Rusty, but one night when he was working late, and Mom was next door baking pies, Gerald and I marched into the garage, turned on the light, and plugged in the power box. We spent a good ten minutes studying the layout, the exact positions of all of the cars, logs and people, so we could re-create the scene when done playing. Gerald would even dab the power box with an icy rag to cool it down.

When we both had a perfect photo of the layout in our brains, Gerald took the controls in his hand and I yipped like a puppy as he pushed the steel handle away from him. The black and silver Southern Pacific Railroad front engine lurched forward, beginning to pull the cars on an illegal night mission. Gerald had a smile on his face the whole time more unwavering and sinister than Batman’s nemesis, The Joker.

When The General came home and went out into the garage I knew we were dead. I remembered that after a wipeout we had placed the baker in front of his bakery shop. But the last time we had run the train with Rusty, the baker was at the police station, filing a complaint against reckless train operators.

Time passed. The stupid blue bird in the cuckoo clock chirped eight times for eight o’clock, then once for 8:30. Gerald and I sat anxiously on the couch, offering various estimates on how bad we’d get it. Finally, Rusty came in from the garage and was about to speak when Gerald said, “It was all me. Tom had nothing to do with it.”

“Is that right?” Rusty asked.

“Yes, sir. I was upstairs, reading,” I said marble-mouthed. I looked to Gerald and he shrugged and frowned. I owed him big time.

The General told Gerald he could choose his own weapon of punishment – the wiffle bat, the cutting board, or Rusty’s belt. Gerald chose the wiffle bat, because it had some give and recoil.

He pulled down his shorts and underwear and got into the position: bent over with hands on the edge of the couch. Thirty-five whacks were scheduled, a new record. Rusty was about to begin when Mom slid in the front door sideways, carrying two pies.

“What’s going on?” she said, while nervously walking the pies to a safe zone in the kitchen.

“A violation of Children’s Rules Number One,” Rusty said, now twirling the yellow bat like a baton, and walking toward Mother. She was looking at both of us with a “how could you” expression, when The General took a swing at her with the bat but missed when she jumped back, instead knocking down and cracking the wrought iron and ceramic “Bless This House” plaque which already had been glued back together twice. Mom ran to the bathroom and locked the door.

Rusty then went on a rampage, using the bat to attack the plants and wall hangings, hitting the TV and smashing the rabbit ears, knocking over and breaking lamps and vases, while repeating, “Why can’t I have just one nice thing, will someone tell me why I can’t have just one nice thing.” Gerald stayed in the prone position, having not been given permission to pull up his pants, and I sat very still, having learned at school not to run from a wild animal or it will chase you down and eat you. Rusty continued the destruction into the hallway, and then their bedroom, and closed the door. A little after the ten p.m. cuckoo bird, Rusty returned to the living room and said we should scoot up to bed. He went to the bathroom and tapped on the door, saying to Mom, “Hey, I need to use the facilities.”

That night when I was rubbing Gerald’s nervous belly I said, “Don’t worry, we are the knights and he is the dragon, and the dragon never wins.”

“I’ve seen movies where the dragon wins,” he said.

“Shh-shh,” I said, moving my hand further up his shirt so I could play his rib bones like piano keys.

* * *

On a Tuesday night in December Mom gathered us together to watch a TV movie. Tuesdays were our “day off,” because Rusty would go back to work after dinner then usually out to a bar with other officers.

The movie was about an unemployed drunk who beat his generally cheerful and articulate wife, and sometimes the children too, both the boy and the girl, when they tried to stop him. We could not turn away from the set. They didn’t look anything like us, but our story was finally being told to the world. At the end of the movie the mother and the kids headed for a new life in a sunnier state. The bad father was in jail.

By then Gerald and I were mush, but Mom was still half-composed. “That’s TV for you,” she said. “They are obsessed with happy endings.”

Later in our bedroom, my brother said, “I just can’t take it anymore. I don’t want to live in a world that’s so awful.”

I stood up on my bed and leapt over to his bed, bouncing a few times before settling in next to him. I put my hand under his shirt and there was a chest hair waiting for me, his first! I tugged on it and tried to pull it out but the gremlin inside of him holding onto the other end wouldn’t let go. Gerald yelped, and he gave me a nasty tittytwirl as payback. After we settled, I put my hand back under his shirt and rubbed his gurgling belly. “Rusty McCain will be gone soon,” I said.

“You think so?” he said, starting to weave his fingers through my hair, which was so short that his fingers kept escaping and had to be readmitted.

“I know so,” I said. We huddled together, too excited by visions of a Rusty-free life to fall asleep.

Two weeks later, on the last day of classes before Christmas break, Mr. Fenton, a substitute teacher, talked about the Watergate tapes, “The only thing that could topple the powerful Richard Nixon.” My plan to topple the powerful Rusty McCain then appeared so beautifully and completely in my mind that my heart raced and I felt like I might float away, like an unmoored sailboat. I’d simply record The General’s evil doings then turn him in, to the police or the Army. And we’d all live happily ever after, except for Rusty who would be busy rotting in prison.

That night at the dinner table I asked for a portable tape recorder for my big Christmas present, instead of a baseball mitt. I told Rusty that if I had the recorder I could

tape all of his rules, and during the day I could play back the tape whenever I felt any tendencies to break them. He gave me a skeptical look but nodded 'okay.'

I got the recorder, but, unexpectedly, that second Fort Barrett Christmas seemed to mellow The General. He hung four stockings, and played and sang along to Bing Crosby and Glenn Campbell Christmas records. I guess the holidays can do that to a man. To test him, Gerald and I would knock stuff over or let bad words escape our mouths, but Rusty would only return a mild, disappointed look.

"Do you suppose he's really gotten nice?" Gerald asked me in early January, while shining a flashlight up my nose, as a kid at school had told him that millipedes often crawl into kid's noses and start a family there.

"It has to be an act," I said, trying not to sneeze, even though I could feel the baby millipedes at play.

"He's even letting us use the train set again."

"I know. But think how he'll be when he gets mean again. It will be twice as bad because he'll be mad at himself for being weak. We have to do something, soon. It's him or us and I vote us."

"I vote us, too," he said, moving the flashlight to my other nostril.

So at the dinner table the next night Gerald triple-belched, then belched again after Rusty said "that's enough." He knocked over his milk and it trickled into The General's lap. Rusty jumped up, grabbed Gerald by the ear and dragged him to the couch. I asked Mom to be excused and ran to the couch to turn on the recorder, which was stuffed between the cushions. Gerald only got a mild whipping that night but he screamed as if near death.

The next day, before The General got home, I painted the train set's butcher, probably Rusty's favorite town person, all green. Rusty spent a lot of time on the butcher, detailing the stripes of brown hair and pink bald spot, and he even fashioned a tiny pair of eyeglasses for him out of gold electrical wire. I presented the green butcher to The General when he walked in the door, the paint still wet. He crushed the butcher in his hand then pushed me into the telephone stand. The phone fell to the floor and gonged. I ran screaming through the house, Gerald shadowing me, secretly manning the recorder.

We needed more dirt on Rusty, so, after some debate, Gerald and I gathered together all of our quarters and dimes and bought paints and brushes, and half-hid them in their closet. A couple nights later Rusty found the planted evidence, so I scurried to get the recorder from my room. Mom told The General she had no idea how the art supplies materialized. "You were so sweet over the holidays," she said. "What happened?" The General started hitting the wall with his fists, and once with his head. He called her a "dirty lying bitch." Mom slammed the bedroom door, after saying, "There are laws, sir, SIR!" Rusty slumped over, looking defeated, but then Gerald, as if at my director's cue, went up to him, saying, "No, don't beat Mommy again," and was picked up by The General and launched across the room. He landed funny on his hand and broke two fingers. The audiotape ends with his extended wail. The General took Gerald to the emergency room later that night to get his fingers set.

That Saturday, Gerald and I named our D-Day, our surprise attack on Rusty. It was a warm day for January, and without telling Mom we got on our bicycles and rode to Vic's, the bar where most of the officers hung out. I started to get off of my bike, but Gerald said he couldn't go through with the plan and rode off. Before I could decide whether I had enough courage to act alone, Gerald had turned around and rejoined me. "Okay," he said nervously. "Okay, okay."

We pulled open the heavy wooden door and saw Rusty sitting at a far table with four military friends and a fifth Army person we didn't recognize, who was the only one in uniform. A civilian family, a mother and father and three little boys, sat in one of the booths, munching on steakburgers and fries, the only meal Vic served. We started to walk toward Rusty when old Vic said "hello boys" from behind the bar and waved to us with a huge hand. We waved back and continued our slow walk to Rusty. "I can hear my heartbeat," Gerald whispered.

Rusty stood up and said, "Boys, what are you doing here?"

"We were bored," my brother said, "so we thought we'd hang out with you."

The General said we could stay for one ginger ale, and after that we would all head over to the hobby shop as he wanted to buy a drawbridge for the train set. "Tommy, Gerald," he said, "you know Brady, Kent, Jim, and Carl, and the ugly fellow over here is Lt. Zotkowski, military police. Be good or he has all sorts of Geneva Convention-banned tortures he can try on you." The General smiled broadly and the stranger, with a glossy shaved head and arms that were muscles piled upon other muscles, reached out his hand and gave Gerald and me crushing handshakes, saying, "Call me Zot."

My brother and I anxiously sipped our sodas and pretended to watch hockey on TV. Twice we excused ourselves to the bathroom to shake off nervous energy and to pee. Eventually, I stomped on Gerald's foot, and we began our partly-scripted drama.

"Lt. Zot, I have a question," Gerald said, both of us squirming wildly in our seats.

"Let me guess," said Zot, "you want to know how many men I've killed."

"No," Gerald said, his voice starting to crack. Some of the men were looking at us, but we tried not to catch their eyes. Military eyes can go cold and piercing in a second. "I was wondering if it is illegal for Army officers to beat up their wife and kids."

There was a terribly long five seconds of silence. "It's true," Gerald said, waving his braced fingers. "My stepdad broke these. He's always hitting us, and we're ascared he's going to kill us." Gerald nudged me, but I was helpless to act.

Rusty started to laugh nervously. "Ha, ha, boys, very funny. These boys, I tell you." He pushed his chair out a little bit, and said, "The boy fell down the stairs, that's how he broke his fingers." I could feel The General's stare on me but I didn't look up because he would win.

My brother elbowed me much harder. With a trembling hand I took the tape recorder out of my coat pocket, set it on the table, and my finger somehow found the play button. Soon we were all hearing the cries of a beaten family.

Rusty looked away and started rocking back and forth in his chair. I briefly glanced at Zot – he's a cop, and even an Army cop is supposed to save kids, right? – and he shook his head and looked like given the chance he would be happy to stomp the life out of me. Everyone let the tape play, like maybe they needed to hear it. When it got to the part where Gerald was pleading for mercy on Mom's behalf, Jim and Kent got up and quickly left. Gerald, his face bright red like fruit punch, said one more thing: "I thought it wasn't manly to hit girls and kids."

I was reaching for the tape player when Rusty screeched, "Ahhh!" stomped his foot on the floor, and hit me with the back of his right hand. I flew off my chair and crashed into a metal bar stool, bumping my head. The General then flung his beer bottle between Gerald and me, the bottle shattering against the bar. When I started to push myself up off of the floor I pressed my hand into a large shard of brown glass and started bleeding all over the place. I dabbed a finger in the blood and tasted it. It was sweet.

Before stomping off, Rusty, his S-vein filled with pumping blood, threw the recorder across the room, cracking one of the beer ad mirrors. *Seven years bad luck for Rusty*, I thought. Brady and Vic tended to my cut, Vic wrapping my hand in so much gauze that it looked like I was wearing a white mitten. Lt. Zot kept sipping his orange soda, sometimes shaking his head. Carl was yelling at the hockey game.

Brady put our bikes in the trunk of his old Cadillac and drove us home. I think Brady liked us a little. At the various gatherings he'd say things to Gerald and me like "follow your dreams, boys," and when he eyed up Mom he did so with a romantic glint in his eyes.

When we neared our house Brady slowed down, and I think we were all relieved that Rusty's car wasn't in the driveway.

"Technically, Rusty is my boss," Brady said, as he unloaded our bikes, "but if there's any trouble, have your mother give me a call."

We wheeled our bikes in back and stayed there a minute. It was a gray day and there was little light. It was getting colder. "Shit," said Gerald. "I know," I said.

Somehow, word had gotten to Mom. When we walked into the living room she was standing there, arms crossed. She stomped her foot on the hardwood and said, "You little bastards. How could you do that? If he goes, how are we going to pay the rent? Did you think of that? Did you even think of me?"

I looked at Gerald, and he at me, but neither of us had any words in us.

"Of course you didn't," Mom said. She then looked at my bandaged paw, started to reach for my hand, and then quickly walked to her room.

My brother and I sat on the couch in the darkening living room, waiting for the sound and lights of Rusty's car pulling in the drive, both of us figuring he went to get a bayoneted rifle and that we'd be shot and gored by midnight.

Later, Mom came out of her room and sat between Gerald and me, putting her arms around us, her bandaged and broken children. We both moved so quickly to place our heads on her breast that we bumped heads mid-chest, causing her to laugh. She patted our heads then sang that Croatian song, the one her grandmother taught her. I don't know the exact translation, but it says something about how children are angels from heaven who come to Earth to make this planet of pain and sorrow just a little bit more bearable, just a little bit more like heaven.

* * *

We didn't hear from Rusty for three weeks. He'd stayed all of that time at a motel two towns over.

Brady told Mom that the Monday following the blow-up at Vic's, Rusty was called into his c.o.'s office. Lt. Zotkowski had done his job and filed a report, and even took the tape in as evidence (which would, strangely, be mailed back to us many months later). Rusty's boss told him that the Army was concerned about how officers behaved in the community, and that Rusty faced an investigation, possible charges, and conceivably a dishonorable discharge. Or he could resign his commission and the matter would be dropped. The General resigned that day, ending seventeen years of military service.

Rusty phoned on a Friday night and said he'd be by the next day around three to pick up his stuff. He told Mom that he was going to go back to Maryland, and planned to rent an apartment near his parents as they were getting on in years and could use some help.

By the time mid-afternoon Saturday had rolled around, Gerald had found an excuse to go to a friend's house, and Mom was out in back, by the flower garden. It was

February, so there wasn't much for her to do, but she still dug at the dirt with a trowel. I sat in the living room and watched ice skating on TV. I loved it when the prettiest girls would skate on one skate and their other leg would stretch out parallel to the ice, and they'd coast in a graceful and skimpily-dressed way.

The doorbell rang and my heart suddenly tripled its rate, though I vowed I wouldn't show it. I breathed in deeply, then opened the door and saw Rusty, dressed in a new blue shirt that still had fold marks in it, and a tan jacket. His bright red hair was a little longer but combed and gelled back, and he was wearing dark amber sunglasses, which made him appear even more orangey than usual. His hands were in his coat jacket pockets and presented no immediate threat. He nodded and said, "Excuse me" as he walked by me and went their bedroom where he began to pack his suitcases.

I returned to the living room to watch the skaters as Rusty went from room to room, gathering his clothes, tools, books, records, and the John Wayne painting. When he came into the living room, he asked, "What's on?" but I didn't answer because it was obvious what was on. I made sure that my wounded hand with its big pink scar remained prominently in view.

He asked for my help with the train set, so I put on a jacket and went with Rusty to the garage. We packed up the set and carried it to his rental car, where he loaded it into the trunk. The car, an Oldsmobile, was sharp looking, black and shiny, with a red interior. It looked like it could really fly, and I almost asked Rusty for a ride around the block.

Rusty pulled a fresh pack of Beech-Nut gum out of his jacket pocket and offered me a piece, but I said no thanks, I didn't like that kind, even though it was my favorite.

We walked back inside the house, where Rusty looked out of the sliding glass doors to see Mom playing with dirt. "I don't suppose she wants to talk to me," he said, and I shrugged my shoulders. He went through all of the rooms again to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, and met me at the front door, which I had left open as an energy-wasting sin. "Bye, son," he said and started out the door, one foot in, one foot out, but then he stopped and turned to me.

I thought, okay, this is the sloppy part where he apologizes, and goes for the mushy hug. Instead, he said, "The first rule of warfare is never underestimate your opponent. Nice work, Navy, nice work."

He turned toward the car and without looking back told me to say hey to Gerald and to take care of Mom. I closed the door and watched from a side window as he pulled out of the driveway and headed down the road. A cat almost darted into his path, but had life-saving second thoughts.

I went in back and told Mom it was safe to come inside, that Rusty was gone. She was sitting on a hard, cold tree stump, her hands stripping brittle leaves from a dead flower stem. She looked up at me, tears striping her pink cheeks, and said, "What next?"

Regression

When I visited the primate wing of the Grunkemeyer Institute that day, it was for the purpose of trying to save my friend's life. I was hoping for a breakthrough, a cure. The trip held its risks, M could turn violent or run off, but I anticipated that, because we were former colleagues, M would be well-mannered, perhaps be guided by some cheery memories of our times together.

My expectations for a turnaround may sound naive, considering the degree of M's illness, but it had been our experience with so many of our clients that you only need take them to the exact location where they spent their worst days, and wait for a therapeutic door to open, for healing answers to show themselves. For M that meant returning her to the place where her devolution began.

* * *

Some history. M and I met in childhood and stayed friends for thirty-some years. Ours was a symbiotic relationship, though a true accounting might reveal that I gave more than I got back. During our childhood, I'd often do M's science and mathematics homework for her and in return she'd help calm me when I had my attacks of anxiety and disassociation; a speedy bike ride, a dash into the waters at Lake Allen, or a session making mud pies and soon I'd feel "part of the game" once again.

Having survived the tribulations of youth possessing both perfect grades and rudimentary knowledge of disquiet and its treatment, M and I would attend Harvard together where we completed studies in psychology, though truly I had more interest in the "hard sciences." After graduation I wanted us to stay in Cambridge – I rather enjoyed the rousing chess matches held at the outdoor cafes in Harvard Square – and counsel the many angst-ridden intellectuals, but M insisted that we return to our "roots," our hometown, and work with the inner city poor. She won, as usual, but word of our superior psychoanalytic skills spread quickly, and within a few years we were treating, almost exclusively, cinema and sports celebrities with various maladies due in large part to sudden or vanishing fame.

Long before that disastrous day I had suspected that M had a distaste for the petty complaints and unimaginative minds of most of our clientele, and wanted to get back to more "frontlines" work, but by then she was locked in. We both were, I suppose. A week before her primal meltdown M informed me she planned to cut down on her hours and volunteer at the Free Clinic, which I strongly advised against.

M's husband, Teddy, was also a therapist, of average ability, but five years ago he dropped out of the profession and took a job as infielder's coach for the Binghampton Mets, a minor league baseball team, Double A. Ted had starred at second base for the Harvard Crimson – he could adeptly turn the double play and had decent power – and by his junior year he had drawn the attentions of several pro scouts. After Ted and M began dating I insisted that she make him choose between playing with the boys and seeing her. M was quite hesitant to force Ted's hand – she had attended all of the Crimson's baseball matches, was keen on parading around the dormitory in his jersey, and often played catch with Teddy or hit him grounders – until I threatened to stop helping with her studies. Smartly, Ted chose M over baseball. He quit the team mid-season, asked M to marry him, and focused more diligently on academics.

When Ted's insidious baseball virus remerged many years later it caused great tensions in their marriage. Besides being on the road during the warm months, Ted had to

rely on M to pay the major household expenses and to keep him behind the wheel of his Ferrari. I suspected that M was angry that due to *her* wealth, Ted was free to follow *his* dreams. M once wrote in her journal that her dreams for her life had become like lost birds, flying into, instead of away from, the approaching winter. I recommended that she give up talk of dreams, and the use of inane metaphors, and stay the course.

M and Ted conceived two children, currently ages 20, Samantha, and 13, Lynn. Sam had an exceptional mind and had a bright future ahead of her as a physicist, but her unfortunate co-interest in the body led to her downfall: she became pregnant at sixteen. Although M thought that Sam should keep the baby, and the girl was so inclined, I was able to convince M that such a move would not play well in the court of public opinion. Perhaps I've failed to get across that M was a public figure: she had written two popular self-help books and could often be seen on the television talk shows. But unlike most pop psychologist-gurus, M was respected by her colleagues. Her letters and articles (I was often the real author) appeared regularly in leading journals like *Maladjustment*, and her keynote lectures at the various "headshrinker" conventions were never to be missed.

Sam left home on her 17th birthday, three days before M's downfall, and moved in with her then-boyfriend, Ron, many years older than Sam, an expert in "refrigeration technology." They lived miserably on the east side. Due to a complication of the pregnancy termination Sam may never bear children, but I must point out that the statistics on outpatient surgery safety were very much on her side. Anyway, one of Ted's kindnesses was in his telling M, during his sporadic visits to the institute, that Samantha sends her love. Naturally, when we were alone, I told M the truth about Sam's feelings of continual hate for her. I was M's window on the world and felt honor-bound to tell her the truth, no matter how painful.

On the day of her regression M was treating B, a soap opera star with impotence problems, when M suddenly grunted *hoo hoo hoo.* B mimicked her grunts, *hoo hoo hoo,* and that seemed to arouse M as she leapt onto his lap and started humping him wildly while also pulling his hair, biting his nose, ripping open his shirt, and cutting rivulets of blood into his chest with her fingernails. B let out a piercing cry, the sound of a man halfway in the mouth of a killer shark.

The medical center was quite busy that day and the disturbance in M's office soon drew a crowd, including Rose (our secretary), Dr. R (an osteopath), Campbell (a "certified reflexologist"), several patients, a drug salesman, and the bottled water delivery man. We all watched in horror as M continued to thrust her pelvis into the now fainted and floppy B at a pace faster and more violent than I had ever seen in humans. M then dismounted and tore around the office, pulling books off shelves, throwing desk drawers and contents everywhere, and jumping up to the slow-turning ceiling fan where she spun around several times before collapsing in a mess of blades, light bulbs, ceiling tiles and hootish laughter.

Did I say that M was once a beautiful woman? She had fresh, ripe skin, and large brown eyes that occasionally bore a burst of gold, should light hit them right, and hair the color of black cherry juice, smartly tied in a bun. She was a looker, and, admittedly, when I had the chance, I looked. But lying there in the remnants of the ceiling fan and beating her chest and hooting, she was no more attractive than your average lab monkey.

I tried to save the day with talk therapy, more M's specialty than mine, saying to her, "Tell us what's going on with you today." M righted herself on all fours, cocked her head, and looked at me like I was the strangest visitor to Monkey Island yet. She then

urinated, a golden stream spouting between her legs and her $3,000 silk dress, a Givenchy original, and wetting the lilac carpet.

"I think we have some aggression issues to work out here," I told M, but by then she had tackled Rose and was lapping at Rose's face with a tongue longer than I thought she possessed. That's when Dr. R plunged a needle full of Valium into M's hindquarters.

I rode along in the ambulance. When M awoke she had that look sometimes seen in baboons in captivity: wet, stupid, worried eyes, and a glance that rarely wandered more than a few inches past the nose. Yet I'm confident she knew who I was, and that I had not abandoned her. Occasionally her monkey noises were soothing, like a cooing, and I believe that those primitive sounds were directed at me, rather than the paramedic.

The area's top neurologists and psychiatrists were called in on M's case, various medical, psychiatric, and language tests were ordered, all without benefit, and an I.V. was inserted in M so that the liquid sedative would be an estuary of calm flowing into her wild blood.

The experts were befuddled. Primal regressions are not rare, and are in fact encouraged by a sub-set of therapists who believe that a release of a little mammalian energy can have enormous healing benefit. Childhood ordeals may be suddenly resolved, and the client may perceive that her life is now in line with that of human history. There were, one must admit, days in the distant past when a good hoot, a thumping of one's chest, a swinging from limb to limb, and perhaps wild copulation in the jungle, were what it was all about.

These regressions are normally well-managed within the fifty-minute hour. Eventually the client tucks in his shirt, wipes the spittle from his face, pays the doctor's fee, and goes back to functioning in the larger society, at least until the next scheduled primal two weeks later.

M wasn't following the rules. Days, soon weeks after she regressed, M hadn't muttered a recognizable word, though there were variations in her grunts: *hoo hoo* was sometimes more like an excited *haw-ip haw-ip*, this latter call used when she was flinging poop at the great doctors. (They'd eventually go with a monkeyproof diaper).

Although her physicians gave no ear to my therapeutic ideas, I was at M's side night and day. In part, I felt responsible for her condition. Had we been closer, and certainly the opportunities were there, perhaps the regression wouldn't have occurred. But I also believed that despite the periodic visitations of family and fellow therapists, all treating her like a cherished pet, that I was all she had left in this world.

After a few month's hospital stay M was transferred to Grunkemeyer, not the top behavioral research center in the country but close to home. The resident orangutans warmed up to M quickly, but the snooty ringtail lemurs wanted nothing to do with her.

Wealth buys accommodations, and M's suite soon became a makeshift jungle. The walls were painted dark green, trees and plants filled the room, and a rope swing was attached to the ceiling. A tape of jungle noises – toucan calls, wildcat growls, monkey hoots, and a tribal drumbeat – some tone-deaf tribe, apparently, ran endlessly. There was something disturbingly K-mart-like about M's jungle, but she seemed happy there.

I feared that M would be facing a public trial for her assault on B, and what a scandal that would have been. The Scopes Monkey Trial II: Evolution Run Backwards. But the soap star decided to not press charges – M's antics had cured him, he claimed – so M's publicist sent out a news release stating that M, fatigued from the "unfortunate incident" and her previously heavy work and public appearance load, would be resting at

a chalet in Switzerland where she would begin work on her long-awaited memoirs. In short time most of the reporters and her fans had lost interest in M's fate.

My visits with M became less frequent. Research institutes are dreary places to visit for five minutes, let alone half a day. More relevantly, I suspected that had M's human language facilities been restored she would have told me to take leave and see the world, the world that she was no longer free to roam.

So I traveled. I saw the ancient ruins in Greece, rode a lazy gondola in Venice, and took a train to Poland where I visited Auschwitz, the seat of human horrors. But wherever I was it felt that something vitally important to my functioning was absent: my M. Often, I'd imagine M back at Grunkemeyer, eating a banana or rubbing her ass against the heating vent grating, and such thoughts would fill me with both good cheer and longing. Just as the itinerant lover, so far from home, yearns to hear his mate say, "My swee-tie," in that melodic, drawn-out way, so I hungered for M's *hoo hoots*.

Every few weeks, a couple months at the longest, I'd take a plane or ship back to the States and spend time with M. She'd grunt with happiness when I showed, and sedately listen to my tales of worldly adventure, broken into fragments to account for her reduced attention span. Sometimes I'd tell her of *free* monkeys I'd seen in Central America, or of the monkey-eating peoples of India and parts of Africa.

With a great apish melancholy in her eyes, after the third, maybe fourth visit, she'd pull away. M would cover herself with a blanket (becoming invisible, I suspected, to her shrunken brain's perception), throw children's alphabet blocks at me, or vault into the bathroom, slam the door, and pound on the walls and grunt maniacally. M was like a mother robin, and I was the baby bird she was no longer feeding so that I would find the courage to leave the nest. *Enjoy your new wings,* she was telling me.

* * *

As I approached the primate wing that day I was filled with trepidation. Over this last year M's body had become rather grotesque, as her flesh caught up with her persona: a bony ridge had appeared above her eyes, a prominent crest had sprouted on the midline of her skull, toes, jaw and arms were elongating, and when she walked she did so with a baboon-like swagger. What's more her ass had pinkened, a white tail tuft had popped out at the base of her spine, and patches of blackish fur kept appearing on her body willy-nilly. M was going backwards in evolutionary time. Three years ago I thought that she was standing at the threshold of her recovery, that all M had to do was take that step forward. Instead, she had aggressively retreated.

Yet there was also reason for hope. A Dr. O, who spent a summer working with Koko the signing gorilla, had been helping M develop her sign language skills. Last spring Dr. O put on a demonstration for the institute staff. M was brought a cup of peppermint tea, and upon tasting it made the symbol for "cold" – both paws balled up – and then "drink": she drew the thumb of her right paw to her mouth. Cold drink. The staff and Dr. O were quite charged by the performance, although no one warmed up M's tea.

I went to the observation hallway, to watch M from there. I must confess that several times from behind that mirrored window I'd observed M play with herself, while Dr. O – did I mention that Dr. O is an attractive woman? – might be next to me, manning the video camera. M would go at it with animal joy, not an ounce of guilt, no begging the gods for forgiveness. Regrettably, my sexual history has been one of detachment. Even in youth I could never totally quiet my thoughts and give in to the moment, which always had the makings of someone else's experience that I was watching take place. When observing M pleasure herself I'd feel briefly restored.

On that day, M, fully covered with matted black fur, was engaged in monkeyshines with Dr. O. Each time Dr. O approached M she would scamper off, hopping onto furniture or swinging from the rope. Eventually Dr. O trapped M near the observation window where Dr. O stroked the fur on M's face and M fluttered her lips then flashed Dr. O the sign for "love": she placed her left paw on her right elbow and her right paw on her left shoulder. I was far from shocked, witnessing M and Dr. O's unnatural love as, since the teen years, M had exhibited an occasional homosexual leaning. But I'd remind her each time of the illogical nature of same-sex passions.

When Dr. O left M's suite I slipped inside. M hooted with delight when she saw me and brought me a mango, which I declined, and she then did a first-rate backflip. "Good girl!" I said, and she looked so pleased.

"My dear friend," I told her, "it's time to return to that place where your troubles began. Remember that day? Do you want to go with me? Do you want to try and fix this?" M offered a flurry of hand signals, which I did not understand, but from reading the hope in her eyes and the eagerness in her demeanor I concluded that she still desired to get well.

After having M wrap herself in a bedsheet to conceal her beastliness, I gave her the following orders: no hooting, remain upright, no masturbating, no tossing poop, no rubbing your scent against parking meters, and no leaving the route to go play with children or animals. (M had a terrible weakness for fellow lesser-brained beings). She studied my eyes then formed an O with her left paw – the sign for "okay."

I had been roaming the halls of Grunkemeyer for some time, plotting the best escape route. M's bathroom also opens into Jeb's suite – Jeb is a retired, grayed gorilla, almost 30 – and from there we'd race down a side hallway and to the commissary, where on Tuesday afternoons the back door is not alarmed as it is delivery day for M's expensive organic bananas and other foodstuffs. There were security cameras in the hallways but, wrapped in a sheet, M would look like a whitecoat – the lowly lab attendants – and I'd likely go unnoticed: I'm one of those types who easily blends in with the woodwork.

M led the way and soon we were in Jeb's room. The policy at Grunkemeyer is that if an ape survives twenty years of testing he gets to kick back for the rest of his days, so Jeb spent his waking hours sitting on his Craftmatic adjustable bed, eating mashed bananas, and watching the Mexican cable channel. Jeb gave M a tired glance, and M hooted softly then peered up at me. "I'm sorry," I said, "he can't come along, he'll slow us down." M grunted a little louder so Jeb cranked the volume with the remote and went back to watching his programs. M made the sign for "angry," clenching her right paw as it fell from her face. "I know," I said.

We made it down the hall and to the kitchen where the automatic door buckled and hesitated but let us through. The workers were nowhere in sight so we dashed toward the exit, M leaping through the air as she pushed the handle that freed us. The old girl did have some life left in her! We advanced quickly through the parking lot and made it to Commerce Street where we tried to blend in with the many hominids: mostly afternoon shoppers, panhandlers, and executives returning from late lunches.

It was just over four miles to the building on Eighth Street where our practice was formerly housed, and I thought our best bet was to walk. Buses were out of the question as their snapping doors made me nervous, and in her primal condition I did not trust M to operate a motor vehicle. At least in the motion pictures, whenever a chimp gets behind the wheel bad things ensue.

We trundled down Commerce, where only a few people seemed to notice my white-sheeted companion. It's amazing what oddities residents of large cities will tolerate. When I heard a police siren I directed M to scoot down an alleyway, and as she hid behind a dumpster I decided that we'd better take a more circuitous route to the offices.

When I told M we should start heading north she instead took off south, running at a full monkey trot. I gave chase and thought I'd lost her at an apartment complex but then I heard a hoot, looked to my left, saw M signaling me and restarted the chase. After several blocks I caught up with her. M was sitting on a sidewalk, looking up at a house. THE HOUSE.

That crafty ape had led us to our old neighborhood, Lincoln Street, where we'd spent childhood. The memories of first encounters are sketchy, but I remember one day watching with amazement as a young girl kicked at a ball, the ball colored white with blue swirls. The girl version of M kicked and kicked, sometimes missing the ball and landing on her can. I mostly saw her feet and the ball, not her face, not yet. She seemed to be gurgling over with sensate happiness, fully in her body. M first noticed me, she told me years later, at about the same time. M said when I would direct eyes to the sky, or at birds or bugs, it was always with a scientific gaze, like I was trying to decipher the mathematical code that animated life into being.

So there we were at 348 Lincoln, where M once kicked that ball. She looked up at me with wrinkles of worry – something humans and apes share. "Oh dear," I said to M, "when I told you I wanted to take you back to where the troubles began I didn't mean here but to the medical offices, where you suddenly regressed. Not here, not now." M grunted nasally and wagged her head, but I knew she was not ready to go on to the offices. Despite living most of our adult lives within a few miles of Lincoln Street, neither of us had been back for a visit in many years.

I sat next to M on the sandstone sidewalk and thought of our early days together. M was a girl who found joy in her body, in singing songs and somersaulting. But being the daughter of two mathematics professors she grew up in a home where only the mind was appreciated. We lived near the university so our neighborhood overflowed with slothful, brainy parents who'd much rather hold a book in their hands than a ball. I fit better in that cerebral world than she did. M's only means to real happiness, usually some sort of noisy play, was frowned upon if not banned.

I watched M's dumb, baboon eyes scan the white with green trim two-story house, its large front porch where we used to sway on an oversized, creaky swing – I worried about the chains breaking – the warped porch steps, the tiny grassy front yard and the mostly dirt side yards, the overgrown scraggly yews, a window planter without plants. A house, like the memory center of the brain, is the repository of the many tragic and beautiful things that make up a life. Being so close, M and I shared many of the house memories: kittens being born on the father's best suit, the grandparent dying so close to Christmas, the way the mother and father would pet each other's hands at the dining table when they had been reunited after a time apart. And that day, October 16, 1977, when the parents left for a seminar in D.C. and never returned. The twin-engine commuter plane just fell from the sky, but let's not blame physics.

M scampered into the yard, lost her sheet, and scuttled up the oak like she used to do as a girl. She perched on a thick branch and beat on her chest. M then looked down at me and grunted an inquiring *ow-woot*. I said to her, "You know I'm too weak to climb up there. You come down here to me!"

But she stayed in the tree, staring at the house and oft-repeating the sign for "sad" – fingers of both paws falling away from the face like teardrops – not to me really, but to the house, to the world. Periodically I'd tell M, "Time to go to the medical offices," but she paid me no mind.

A black and gray terrier had been sleeping on the porch and when it awoke and realized that there was a monkey in the tree it decided to investigate. As the mutt neared I let out a high-pitched whistle that sent her running down the street like a champion greyhound. M dropped down to the lawn and looked like she was going to chase after the dog until I yelled "No! It's time to get whole." M put her sheet back on, gave me a lippy smile, and then signed "hurry": both paws shaken in front of her chest.

We scooted north at an inspired pace and made it as far as Grant and 12th, about a half mile from our destination, when we saw the white van from Grunkemeyer make a quick turn up Grant, heading right for us.

"Run, monkey, run!" I yelled, and M started to gallop off between houses. The van squealed to a halt on a treelawn and Dr. O and two whitecoats quickly exited, one readying a tranquilizer gun. Dr. O called to M, "Yo, sweetie pie!" and M stopped, turned around, tossed off the sheet, let out a girlish grunt, and bashfully covered her eyes with her paws. She then slowly spread open her fingers, first looking to me – "run you crazy chimp, run!" – and then back to Dr. O: "sweetie, you're not leaving me are you? I would be *soo* sad."

As M scampered to Dr. O I realized that I had more interest in her healing than she did. M must have been quite content in her primal state, where she was either a good monkey or a bad monkey, that was the complete list of options, living her animal life in an antiseptic jungle, all needs provided for her, and in monkey love with Dr. O, who occasionally snuck M a banana daiquiri.

* * *

I rode with M in the institute van. Holding on to the smallest of hopes I told M that we had to find some other means to get well, keep fighting until she's healed, but M was not listening to me and was busy playing peek-a-boo with Dr. O.

The whitecoats and Dr. O could not hear me, or see me. That's how it usually goes. Only M, all dogs, some very young children, a few artsy types, and an occasional mental patient can hear my voice or, more rarely, meet my eyes. Oh, and there's you.

I believe that I'm M's logical self, her intellect. I'm certainly not her soul, whatever that word might mean, nor can I say I'm M's mind. M was quite capable of advanced thought, though she had a vulnerability to dreamy, poetic ruminations that I never knew. To me the moon is a dead rock, but to M, according to one of her awful poems, the moon is "the bright shield of the celestial god."

It had become my habit during the boring therapy sessions to wander out of M's body. While some millionaire bad boy was going on about his distant father, I would roam into the lobby or the various offices, sometimes all the way to the street, and observe how others were getting on while M stayed behind and listened to the patient's spiel, probably nodding her head and dreaming of growing wings and flying off.

It would only take a patient's inquiry such as, "Excuse me doctor, are you listening?" and I'd be suddenly returned to M's body in time to borrow her vocal cords and say, "Your serotonin levels need tweaking," or, more likely, to hear M say, "I think you may be enabling your partner's unhealthy co-dependency" or "When's the last time you played in the mud?"

Perhaps because it was really *her* mouth saying the words, *her* arms hugging the melancholic patients, I perceived myself as having a small place in M's affairs. And I knew that in her relaxation exercises, in her love of classical music, or an occasional popping of a Xanax, it was *me* she was trying to quiet. Yes, we relied on each other but I was a bitch to live with, I realize now. During the REM stage, when she was dreaming of a perfect romance or that the parents were still alive, I might enter the dream and say *hey, none of this is real. Sorry*. Or, in a waking state, should M start falling in love with some sap I'd remind her that her hormones were deluding her.

When the actor, B, was telling of some limp performance I left M's frame and found myself in the reflexologist's treatment room, watching as he professionally twirled the toes of a middle-aged banker. B must have asked M a question for I was suddenly back in the office, at the gate, like I'd been so often, but this time there was no way into M's body, to my little rental flat in her skull. Had I forgotten the combination to the lock? So I watched the wild M hump and slash the actor *from the outside*. Like a banished ruler I would try desperately to get home.

I don't know why M turned primal in my absence. She had enough mental power to function without me, though earning a living, as any right-brain driven soul might acknowledge, would have been difficult for her. My theory is that some animalistic part of the brain – the old, first brain – sensing my absence kicked in, filled my vacancy, and possibly bolted the door.

Curiously, I could see, hear, and speak, even when M's eyeballs, ears, and larynx were a continent, a lifetime away. That's about it. If I wanted to traipse through Buckingham Palace I didn't click my heels but snuck aboard a Concorde to London. During my thousands of sojourns out of M's body, many of the first trips taking place in early childhood when the parents were arguing, I paid no mind to the laws of physics; I went where I wanted to go and came instantly back. But now that I am on permanent leave I have to follow the basic rules of the universe. If I wish to enter a room I wait for someone to open the door – I can't turn a doorknob – and shadow them in. My deepest fear is that I will be abandoned in a room somewhere and never find my way out.

How many "disembodied partial selves" are there are out here? I don't know. I did meet a fellow in Europe who was daydreamed onto a nude beach in France and was making his way back to his body's home in Scotland. Poor soul feared air travel, even without a breakable body. Possibly our numbers are legion, and should I meet one of my kind who can open doors or move chess pieces, I will become her apprentice.

Urgently, I need to find out if there is a way to close my eyes. I see each second of each minute of each hour of each day, and that is, at times, a terrible thing. I cannot blink, cannot close my ethereal eyes and sleep. My best friends are those men and women who go into their living rooms, pull the shades, close the thick drapes, and sit in total darkness. No candles, no blue TV light. When seeing gets too much for me I follow them into their shaded rooms, these often sad or overwhelmed people, and revel in the darkness, still seeing, but seeing only pure dark.

* * *

At the time of M's prison break Ted was in Binghampton for a doubleheader, so only Lynn was waiting for M when we returned to Grunkemeyer. Once in the jungle, Lynn grasped the ape's paw and cried, "Oh my dear, dear mother," in that squeaky pubescent voice of hers, while M checked Lynn's hair for edible bugs. I had never felt more disgusted.

M and I used to argue almost daily over Lynn's upbringing. I wanted to push the girl toward the sciences, but M insisted that Lynn be allowed to "be herself." Even though she might be failing mathematics that meant allowing Lynn to play soccer or do her little art projects, all fine when one is a young child, but Lynn was many years from the teat. If I protested too loudly I was be obliterated by Xanax, yoga, or obnoxious Buddhist chanting: *Om Mani Padme Hum.* Ugh!

Since the split I'd follow Lynn around, at her school, the mall, into the woods where she'd prayerfully talk to the trees, or the rooms of our place on Princeton Circle, pretending that I was being "motherly" and protecting her. More than once I wanted to say, "Lynn, sweetie, turn around, it's me, your real mother," hoping that she'd come and hug the air that I am. I know that sounds weak, but I'm a little desperate for touch, out here on my own.

After Lynn left I told M that if she really loved her daughter she'd let me back inside her brain. M flared her nostrils, threw a banana peel in my direction, and cawed caustically. *Hew hew hew!*

"How do you think it is for Lynn," I said, "having a monkey for a supposed mother?"

Hew! Hew!

"Let me in! You could at least tell her about, sign her about, me."

Hew hew hew!

"If you're going to stay selfish and keep me out here, you should stop seeing her. It's not right and you know it!"

Hew hew hew hew hew!

"Fine then, I'm going," I said. "I'm giving up. Game over. See you later!"

I expected M to protest my leaving, but instead she crinkled her upper lip, raised both paws to her face and quickly pushed them outward, wrapped her left paw around her right thumb and pulled the thumb downwards, and then circled her face with the index finger of her right paw. I believe the translation is, "Good riddance, feces-face."

* * *

One morning, three weeks after our squabble, M was merrily swinging from the rope in her jungle room when the rope came free of the ceiling. M fell to the floor and broke her neck. I've seen the video several times and it was all quite horrific, especially the part where Dr. O, holding M in her arms, demands that M open her eyes.

At the time of the unfortunate incident I was sitting on the front steps of the house on Princeton, watching Lynn ride her bike up and down the street while she tried to catch floating seed puffs in her hands.

Anyway, Samantha, who had recently moved back home, came out of the front door and called to Lynn. When Lynn parked her bike and went to her sister, Sam said, "Lynny Bear, something awful has happened to Mama." Lynn cried, Sam cried, and Ted would shed tears too. I almost cried as well, but it was more like electric undulations, like someone kept throwing large stones into my once calm waters even after I said, "Stop it!"

The services were held at Beloved Companion Pet Cemetery, as Ted wanted to save money on funeral expenses, though certainly he was anticipating a hefty lawsuit settlement from the institute for the faulty rope swing. On hand were Ted, Lynn, Samantha and Gary (her latest boyfriend, a slight improvement), me, Rose (standing *very* close to Ted), Mr. B and his glowing wife, several former colleagues of M's, the Binghampton Mets (their caps held respectively at their hearts), a ruined Dr. O, most of the Grunkemeyer staff, and three of the institute orangutans. Even Jeb showed. While not

part of the official Grunkemeyer delegation, Jeb had apparently hijacked a golf cart used by the institute's lawn crew and drove it the several miles to Beloved Companion. Simeon Grunkemeyer, the institute's shriveled director, fended off questions by Ted and others on how Jeb was able to find the cemetery, and said it had nothing to do with that government-sponsored research Jeb was rumored to have been involved in, which never took place anyway.

The strangest part of the service was when one of Binghampton's young pitchers, Kip Landis, #12, spontaneously started crooning The Star-Spangled Banner during a pause in Rev. Culpepper's eulogy. Most people and some of the apes started singing, humming, or hooting along, but there seemed to be a unsettling effect to the anthem as many of the mourners likely struggled to find a way of applying the lyrics to M, and while certainly the thought of M having a rocket-like red glare to her would be tolerable, the image of her bursting in air, bomb-like, would not be. There also appeared to be a letdown after the last verse as there was no applause, those standing had no way of taking a seat, and there were no declarations of "play ball!" Rev. Culpepper simply went back to talking about how M was made in the image of God, and was admirably able to sustain that image for thirty-six of her thirty-nine years.

The saddest moment, one that broke monkeys and men alike – the caws fueled cries and the cries fueled more caws – was when Dr. O stood over M's fiberboard casket and put an index finger to her mouth and let it fall, tapped the fingertips of her right hand on the back of her left hand, clapped her right hand into her left hand and the left hand into the right, placed both hands over her heart where she wiggled her thumbs twice, and then translated her signing: "be at peace, sweetheart." When Lynn started wailing I reached for her hand. That did no good, of course, but I kept my hand there, just in case.

After the burial I walked toward downtown and thought about M. Apes live shorter lives than humans, so I often worried about M's mortality, but I never anticipated that an accident would claim her. At least that body-lover died swinging.

While watching the sun bow out for the day I began to fear that I might soon be swept up, now that M was dead and all her elements, including me, rightly belonged to The Clockworks. Why did I still exist? Such thoughts may sound paranoid, but they sprung from survival interests: I hoped to stick around for a while yet.

I boarded the cross-town bus, so lost in thought that I forgot my fear of the doors, and disembarked at Lincoln and Dewey. I walked, and the closer I got to 348 Lincoln the more it seemed that the tracings of M's early life – footprints and handprints in the mud, bike and wagon tire tracks in the yards – were somehow still present, *alive*. I even thought that I could see one of M's chalk drawings, from many years ago, on the sandstone walk: two big-headed smiley people with curly-cue hair holding hands, and a heart-framed declaration of love for J.L., a neighbor boy, the pastel colors streaked by rain.

Once home I sat on the grass and rested against the oak. The old house was almost bursting with the lights and noises of the family now living there: golden lamplight in most of the rooms, tinny TV sounds in the den – some news program on astronauts, I believe – and a muffled conversation between a man and a woman in the kitchen. A little later the porch light came on and the man opened the screen door and tossed out a chubby orange cat, the man saying, "How many times do I have to tell you you're an outside cat!" The cat waddled down the porch then jumped onto the wooden swing and settled there.

I looked to the side yard as I thought I'd seen an animal, perhaps that terrier again. But as the figure came part way into the light spilling from the living room picture window I realized that it was a girl, a small girl in a yellow dress, wearing rubber clogs on her feet. Why was this child allowed out after dark? The girl was kicking at a ball, though she'd occasionally slip on the wet grass and land on her behind, then quickly right herself and carry on with her vital mission. Her laughter hopscotched elegantly through the cool air and easily overtook all of the sounds of the house and of the neighborhood as she kicked tirelessly at the ball, which was colored white with blue swirls.

The Adventures of Wolf Boy

To Stephan, the death of his brother on a frozen highway felt like sudden surgery, like a vital organ had been cut out too fast and without anesthetics. This caused a demanding sickness. He threw up the night of the crash, and the next day, and could not eat any of the fine foods that the neighbors had brought. He couldn't even bear to look at Nicole, his freckled seventh grade love, when she appeared at the door in tears, but with peanut butter cookies, only slightly burnt at the edges. He retreated to the top of the stairs and listened to her say a few soft words to the mother, and the mother say a few weak words back, and saw, after creeping a few stairs down, how she sat cross-legged on the uncomfortable chair, and tried to smile at those in the room: his family, Mrs. Borden and her pudgy, still unmarried daughter, Lois, and some of the First Methodist church people, though not Reverend Gladstone, who did not do well with crises.

He watched as Nicole quietly stayed seated, hoping for his reappearance certainly, and when that didn't seem likely, stayed a little longer still. When she left he tracked her movements home, through the windows of the upstairs bathroom and his own room. She was still more beautiful than the sunniest summer day. And he, evil, wished that he could trade places with her, wished that he was taking *her* a plate of sadness cookies, and thus free to return to a life that included a living brother.

Stephan mumbled the idea out loud in case God might take the barter: say the life of Nicole's great-grandfather, who only has a few years left anyway, for the brother restored. Or whatever was needed to zap Francis back into being, make the last twenty-four hours a lie. And Stephan would be a good and responsible comforter to the girl, he promised God. Guilty and evil, Stephan fell asleep on the cold hardwood floor of his bedroom, and stayed asleep until being called to a supper he could not stomach.

That night Stephan watched television with his silent little sister, Kristina (Krispee), while the parents cried in their separate rooms. In many of the shows there were motorcars and Stephan was sure they were all going to crash. In one of the dramas a co-star was named Francis, which caused a deep sadness in the boy and girl, each time his name was spoken.

At about ten o'clock Stephan answered a tap at the door and saw a chubby man with a fractured smile, dressed in a crumpled gray suit, who introduced himself as a reporter from The Chronicle. He said they needed a picture of Francis for the next day's paper, so Stephan grabbed a photo off the refrigerator, the picture from a year back where his brother is cheerfully holding a cat-sized mushroom he had found in a Minnesota woods, and handed it to the man after requiring a blood oath that it would be returned the next day.

When the reporter asked Stephan if he could speak with the parents, in case they wanted to get a few words in the article, the boy said they were both dead then closed and bolted the door.

Stephan covered his sleeping sister with a blanket, turned off the TV and the lights, went upstairs, brushed his teeth, peed a lot, and wondered if tears were working their way out that way too, went into his room, mumbled some pleading prayers, and again fell asleep on the hardwood floor.

The next day when he awoke his dear brother was still dead.

* * *

Francis' girlfriend, Jasmine Brock-Reynolds, she included her mother's maiden name as a way of honoring her feminine history, and a few of the brother's chums arrived

at the house shortly before the burial (there'd be no viewing as the body was too mangled). Jasmine and Francis were to be married the next summer. In Francis, she said, she had found a man who loved her as if it was a spiritual directive, not just a biological or social one.

She was also a passenger in the car that crashed, but came away un-bruised. The passenger in the right front seat was paralyzed by the accident. Francis, seated in the rear right, was thrown from the car and would die within the hour. The driver needed only minor bandaging. The speeding crush came from the right side, a man driving his Volkswagen far too fast, though the driver of their car pulled into traffic without due concern for oncoming cars, so matters of legal blame would take some time to resolve.

When Jasmine hugged Stephan the boy realized that he would have to take over his brother's role and care for this beautiful and fragile woman the rest of his life. It would be a few years before they could legally marry, so he would do what he could in the meantime. Once they were wed he would work three jobs to care for her.

So he stayed with the hug and began to stroke her long blonde-brown hair in a new way. He enjoyed her smell and the softness of her body, and believed that the loud drum of her heart was a beautiful thing. She would break the hug, but it was followed by a tender stroke of his cheek and a quick mint-flavored kiss.

It was January and nothing was in bloom. Stephan rode to the cemetery in the backseat of the Plymouth. The mother drove, and Krispee sat up front; she had called it first. Jasmine sat in back and was smartly dressed in a black jacket, black top, and black skirt with thin black stockings, which the boy thought highlighted her beauty. Stephan and Jasmine exchanged smiles, though both also looked out their respective windows at the bare cold trees and the thin dusting of snow that had fallen on the town late morning.

The father met them at the cemetery: he had wanted to drive separately. The funeral home director led them to the gravesite. *This way*. The boy had a sudden urge to run, a second urge to vomit, but did neither.

The five were seated parallel to the copper and gray-colored casket on cold metal folding chairs, while forty or fifty mourners stood in a half circle on the other side, putting the family and fiancé on display. Jasmine held Stephan's left hand, and the mother held his right hand. The father was seated next to the mother, followed by Krispee. The father wrapped the girl's small left hand between his two fat paws.

Reverend Horvath, substituting for Reverend Gladstone, who had come down with a chest cold, gave the eulogy. Stephan could not pick up all the words – there was a loud rattle within his skeleton like a speeding train passing – but caught the central themes: it's a tragedy when the young perish; God has a plan and wanted the brother with him; we can question God's plan but ultimately we have to accept it; tragedy serves to remind us how close and loving we are meant to be.

Stephan scanned the mourners to try and determine who was sniffling out of sadness and who due to the weather's sting. He caught Nicole's eye and she smiled, and in her wet eyes he saw a seraphic uncertainty: an angel among mortals who did not know what she could do to make things better for Stephan.

He then glanced at his sister and thought the mop-haired nine and a half year old far too brave. She could not block the tears but held her mouth and chin tight, fighting gasp, sob and tremble.

After the line of hugs and handshakes, the funeral director approached the father and asked if he wanted him to open the casket so he could get one last look, before his first-born was forever laid to rest.

The father, out of his element, wanted to be taken back to that world of just a few days ago where the biggest questions were *do you think the Broncos have a chance against the Cowboys* or *should we have hamburgers tonight or chicken*? The father agreed to see his son's body, but that turned out to be a terrible decision. Francis had been so torn up in the crash that, at the funeral home, there was little reason to attempt restorative work. So he saw his lovely child all slashed and broken, ghost white and puffy, and whenever his mind would conjure up a happy photo memory of his son this last horrific image would appear and overwrite the rest.

And there was a second reason why the father's decision was a bad one: midway through the funeral, Stephan realized the coffin was empty, that his brother was working for the government or otherwise in hiding. One day, he'll just show up.

But the truth of the things his father saw when the casket was opened were written all over the man's desperate face whenever he would give his sobbing testimonials about the crash. So Stephan's hope was damaged though never eradicated. From time to time, no matter the evidence, he'd think *some day he'll just show up*.

The wake had its festive moments, as almost everyone got very drunk, except for the children. At one point one of the brother's less-ambitious high school pals shouted *why couldn't it have been a worthless Honduran?* While Stephan did not know if there were any worthless Hondurans, at that late hour he was still willing to make that trade.

Stephan stationed himself next to Jasmine, where he listened to her tell a small group of mourners that the crash was not really the fault of either driver, but of the patriarchal world that builds terrible highways and fierce and fast automobiles, tearing up the land, tearing up resources, tearing up people. He stared at her intelligent face as she affirmed that a more female world would be circular instead of linear, soft instead of harsh, and that people would move in supportive circles rather than in lonely forward directions down lonely highways. There would be little need for cars, but if they existed at all they would be very safe.

That sparked within Stephan an image of automobiles made of sponge ball material, Nerf cars, in pretty pastel colors, full-sized and functional. When the Nerf cars collided they would gently bounce off each other and all of the passengers would laugh, then be on their way.

Stephan went into kitchen for a snack and became trapped there. The father was trying to tell a gathering of neighbors and a few of Francis' college friends of the horrible details of his son's demise. It was high drama, and no one could turn away. *It was a beautiful day,* the father started, but then stopped. *It was a beautiful day, and…* he tried again. The father's body started to quake, and his face turned red with blood urgency, and became soaked by wet crying terror. His hair and eyes went wild, and the veins that fed his workman's hands emerged purple and monster-large, rapidly pumping life as if preparing him for some do-or-die, corporeal task. *It was… It was a…*

Stephan was amazed that his normally sedate father was showing signs of life, that he seemed to be attempting to remake himself in freakish and beautiful ways. Burst through the soil, like a seedling. But the father fell short: he gave up trying to talk, and bent over and sucked in air while holding onto the stove for support. The father seemed embarrassed by his efforts. He wiped his face with a shirttail and retreated to his room.

Jasmine was spending the night and took Krispee's room, as the girl wanted to sleep on the mother's bedroom floor, a move she had never sought even in the fear-of-

what's-under-the-bed days. (She would huddle with one of her brothers). Stephan went to say goodnight to Jasmine and found her sitting upright in bed, reading a novel. His certain bride-to-be smiled and pulled the blanket and sheet back, revealing that her white nightgown ran out of material just past the hip. Stephan wanted to look, and did, and was able to see the lowest edge point of her purple underwear. He looked up at her face, to make sure it really was Jasmine with her beautiful golden-brown eyes and perfectly angled eyebrow hairs, and back down to her legs. His bequeathed bride gave a holy leg jitter, sighed, told Stephan how much he looked like his brother, then covered herself up and said she needed to get some sleep.

The dazed boy returned to his room and spread his arms and legs out wide on the bed, hoping that if he could keep his body open the new incredible feeling would stay forever. It didn't. Guilt at looking at his dead brother's girlfriend's living body crept in, and was only partly assuaged by his telling himself that Francis would appreciate the fact that Stephan was willing to take care of Jasmine and meet all of her needs.

The next day wasn't as bad as the previous three, and Stephan was able to eat French toast, and keep it down. Fewer people visited and Stephan, Krispee, and Jasmine spent part of the day gaily playing board games.

After dinner, Jasmine revealed additional details of the crash. Like, that the ambulance had a hard time getting through traffic as there was a concert and a basketball game downtown and people weren't pulling over to let the rescue vehicle by. Like, that the first hospital turned them away as they felt the brother was too bad off to treat at their limited, victim-of-budget-cutting, emergency room. Like, that while being wheeled into the second hospital the brother fell off the gurney; the crew had neglected to completely strap him down.

The children were only allowed to stay in the room by pretending that they weren't listening. So they had to giggle occasionally at a TV sitcom when they felt more like exploding into bits and never being put back together again. And they learned that their brother was not wearing a seat belt, and the exact words the emergency room doctor said after declaring Francis dead, and that, oddly, Francis started to get into the car then stepped back, insisting that Jasmine get in first, even though she always sat on the right side, the soon-to-be-death side. The boy and the girl wanted to know all of the facts of their brother's vanishing, though their hearts could never bear the details.

After the parents went to bed the night turned more jovial and the three stayed up late watching long-overdue rented movies and eating shortbread cookies that one of the neighbors had brought over.

Krispee fell asleep on the floor and Stephan and Jasmine went to their respective rooms. Stephan changed into his pajamas, combed his hair, and, summoning his courage, entered his bride's room (the door was three quarters open) and found her again reading the novel, again in her skimpy and perfect nightgown, with the sheet and blanket only to her knees. He looked at her nightgown, to the V of her fleshy chest and then the sweet sight of her panties: white with blue flowers, and more could be seen this time. She put the book down and looked at Stephan. There seemed, to the boy, to be an appliance-like hum in his body, in the room, and possibly in Jasmine. He feared he might wet himself. He glanced up at Jasmine's moist, glistening eyes, and some of her glisten beams got inside of him. When he looked down at her body it was still amazingly there. He watched her breathing belly undulate in the rhythm of a playground swing just jumped off of. Jasmine said something about how they don't talk enough, and shimmied over like she might be making room for him, when he heard the mother shrieking his name up the

stairway. *Stephan!* The mother had woken up to find stacks of dirty dishes in the kitchen and, despite his pleas, insisted that neither home nor universe could survive if they were left for the next day. By the time he had raced through the dishes Stephan found his future wife's bedroom light off and the door locked. He thought he heard her weeping and wanted to kick the door down, or at least knock, but he was all out of bravery.

Jasmine left in the morning, but not before handing the boy a slip of paper with her email address on it, giving him a tight hug while saying *take care of yourself, sweetie*, and then flashing a "keep our secret" smile.

The next day at school Stephan informed Nicole that he could no longer see her, that he was now dating someone more mature, and that it looked to be a lifelong thing. Nicole spent the rest of the school day in the nurse's office, falsely complaining of menstrual cramps as her excuse to cry and yelp.

But Jasmine didn't answer Stephan's first eight emails and to the ninth she wrote that she was sorry for some of her actions during her visit, and that during periods of tragedy people sometimes behave oddly. She promised friendship and nothing more.

Nicole took Stephan back on the condition that he would not leave again for one thousand years, and not even then.

* * *

Stephan spent much of his time walking in the woods near his home. Some of the land was privately owned and other sections were part of a county park, but in his sorrowful ramblings he did not respect property lines, signs, or fences.

There in the dead of winter, he was trying to find something, anything, unabashedly green with life. (Evergreens didn't count as they had learned winter survival tricks many years ago). It could be a little bud, even a single green leaf. He'd roam searchingly along the paths and off the paths, through the deciduous forest, through sections of dry and dead thistle and weeds and sleeping thorny shrubs and raspberry brushes, their thin and brittle stems rubbing against him as he passed as the bones of the dead might.

Or a colorful bird, that would have made him happy. Not the common brown birds of winter that dopily skitter about, but a bird blue or green or red or yellow. But Stephan knew that all of the painted birds were somewhere south.

One day he heard a pop, turned quickly and saw a brown and dry seedpod on a very dead star-flowered weed explode and drop a teaspoonful of dry brown seeds to the snow-damp earth. He wondered how such an event could take place months after the last day of green life for that tall weed, and doubted that the seeds had much of a chance. But he pressed them a little deeper into the ground, to improve their odds.

Stephan had spent many days with his brother in those woods. When they were younger they built forts. Sometimes Francis would trick Stephan into believing there were leopards or crazed retarded men living in the woods, or that he'd found a stash of gold (he had spray-painted some pebbles). More recently they would go into the woods and talk while Francis secretly smoked cigarettes. At other times they would search together for rocks and fossils and arrowheads, and then later for mushrooms and fungi as his brother's interests evolved from geology to mycology. Francis would show Stephan the mysterious underneath fanning pattern of mushrooms, and tell him how mushrooms could happily grow out of rot or magically appear over night. He told Stephan that there are fungi in the Northwest larger than small cities, and how some mushrooms can heal,

others kill, and a few help you meet up with God. Francis and Jasmine were attending a mycology conference at the state college, the weekend of the crash.

There were no mushrooms that time of year but Stephan discovered a few interesting rocks near the partly frozen river. One of the rocks, his brother would have called it a turtle stone, was formed from glaciers over a million years ago. The boy found it by clearing a patch of snow along the riverbank with his ungloved hands. Raw and pink and cold, his hands dug and clawed at the hard winter earth and pried the ancient rock free. He held the eternity stone up toward the heavens then placed it in a front pocket of his gray corduroys.

* * *

He was still very sad in the spring. Sorrow, it seemed, had claimed space in his plasma and marrow. While making it to school most of the days, on weekends Stephan would sleep as late as two in the afternoon and go back to bed at nine or ten.

The mother was worried about Stephan. Perhaps there was reason for *her* continued existence if she could somehow improve her second son's disposition. She took Stephan to the family physician, who concluded that the boy was suffering from depression. While he could prescribe antidepressants, he thought it would be risky using such potent chemicals on a young brain.

Sessions with Reverend Gladstone were also unfruitful as the man of God kept missing or shortening appointments, and mostly talked about baseball, cars, and sailing, subjects which Stephan no longer had interest in.

So Stephan was sent to see a psychotherapist and in the second session a seed of a breakthrough was planted. The therapist, dressed in casual athletic garb as if he was about to break out in a jog, remembered one of his more difficult cases and said to the boy *you are feeling guilty.*

Stephan did not acknowledge what the man had said and continued playing with a red toy car.

You are feeling guilty, repeated the therapist, and this time the boy put the car down and said *nope*. But Stephan knew that someone had finally figured him out. He was guilty; he had killed his brother. Before the crash Stephan had secret psychic powers. Sometimes he knew who was on the phone or at the door before the phone was answered or the door opened. And just two months before a movie star died in a skiing accident, Stephan had a flash that that man might be in some kind of trouble.

But what was he doing while his brother was being crashed into? Watching professional wrestling on television: a tag team bout with lots of fake blood. *Had he been paying attention,* Stephan could have used his powers and called his brother to warn him not to get in that car or at the very least to fasten the seatbelt. If he had only been paying attention. Justifiably, the psychic gift died when Francis died.

Stephan related none of this and went back to playing with the little metal car, turning the wheels back and forth, and opening and closing its tiny hood and doors. While Stephan remained quiet for the rest of the hour, the counselor was certain he had found a way into the boy's soul and instructed him to find some method of communicating his feelings by the next session in two weeks.

Ten days later Stephan took pen and paper into his room and began to create a comic book. He worked on it many hours that night and during lunch and study hall at school the next day, and the next couple of nights.

He presented *The Adventures of Wolf Boy* to the therapist at the start of the session. The first story was about the origins of Wolf Boy, how he was bitten by a wolf

one day while walking in the woods, and would eventually use his wolfy powers to defeat the evil and tall criminal mastermind, Doctor Giraffe.

But the second Wolf Boy tale made the therapist sit up, gave him shivers for the first time in many months. In the story the entire planet is in peril, so Wolf Boy goes to God to ask for help, but finds God in a wheelchair and learns that God was in a terrible accident a few years ago and, although God is not killable, he was made lame and mute. All God can do is sit in the control room and watch the thousand video monitors of all the awful things happening on Earth, unable to act. While there are still legions of angels working for God, with their boss powerless, many of them grew lazy and others started to drink booze or smoke crack, or took jobs with The Devil, Inc.

Near the end of the Stephan's story, God, sad, crippled and wrinkled, looks in terror at one of the monitors as a grasshopper is about to get run over at the intersection of Bubblegum Street and Blueberry Lane in Bloomtown, Iowa. God tries to get Wolf Boy's attention, but all God can do is quiver, mumble *yayayaya,* and drool all over himself. But bright Wolf Boy sees what is about to happen and leaps back to Earth. He dives in front of the speeding car just in time, and the grasshopper hops off to safety.

Unfortunately, Wolf Boy was run over by the car and made totally paralyzed. In the final panel of Stephan's comic, God and Wolf Boy are seated side by side in wheelchairs in the control room, both drooling, both looking in terror at the horrible things unfolding on Earth, both incapable of doing a damn bit of good.

The therapist, inspired by the depth of the comic, asked Stephan about his feelings toward God, and his sense of power or powerlessness. The boy answered as best he could, except when the metal car required his attention. Stephan inquired of the therapist whether he thought he had enough talent to be employed as a comic book artist. Yes, said the man, if he worked hard at it and found that it was a true passion.

When the hour ended the counselor told the mother that he'd like to schedule weekly appointments, as there had been great progress, but the mother reported with regret that the year's psychotherapy benefits in the family's insurance policy had been used up – the father was also in therapy – so Stephan would not be able to return until after Jan 1st, almost eight months away.

The next day the therapist pleaded with the director of the practice to allow him to treat the boy for free, but the man would not hear of such nonsense, and instructed the therapist to transfer Stephan's care to the county mental health agency. But fearing that that move might be the equivalent of lobotomizing a future R. Crumb, he never made that referral.

* * *

The father had his own shop and built Amish-style furniture and restored antiques. Since the crash he was spending more time at the shop but getting less done, and had let both his apprentice and the part-time office girl go.

Stephan visited the shop the first week in June. He used to go there two or three times weekly to watch his father and the apprentice bevel, chisel and miter raw wood and construct beautiful and sturdy furniture. He loved the smell of planed wood, and was pleased when the father would let him apply the first coat of stain or help with clean-up. Though the father never talked to Stephan about becoming a furniture craftsman, and the boy had no such interest, he would have been willing to fake it for several years.

The father's furniture was very popular and it was common for him to be six to eight months behind in filling orders. But now he was not taking any new orders and

cancelled those he had not started on. When Stephan arrived at the shop the father was sitting in the office, his legs crossed on a messy desk, staring at a paneled wall. There was no odor of recently planed or drilled or sawed wood, only a musty smell from some water-damaged antique furniture not yet restored. The workshop was filled with many half-finished works – a chair with two legs, a bookcase with one shelf, a half-stained tabletop – but nothing appeared ready to ship or sell.

When the father finally noticed Stephan he inquired why he wasn't in school, and heard back that school ended the week prior. The father started fiddling with some paperwork, so Stephan roamed the shop and touched some of the furniture. There was a walnut wood leg of a chair being held in a clamp and the boy ran his small hand up and down it, his skin feeling the smooth skin of the wood at its fat and narrow parts, especially the section where the father, or the apprentice, had carved into the wood a delicate diamond pattern. He ran his finger all along the carving, entering the wood and its secrets by slowly tracing the four-pointed star with his fingernail.

Stephan looked around the shop and suddenly it seemed like the most dangerous place in the world. There were many saws with angry teeth and machines with awful blades that could rip your arm off in a half-second or shred your fingers before you knew it. *The body,* thought Stephan, *can so easily be made to bleed, having no outer shell*. There were drills that could enter your body unwelcomed, and chisels, wood picks and hammers that could slip while you were using them and tear you up. There were smelly glues and stains and paints and shellac that might kill you if, in a second of losing your head, you accidentally guzzled some, thinking it was melted ice cream. There were evil staple and nail guns that might pierce you of their own accord, and loosely stacked planks of light and dark hardwood that could fall and crush you. Stephan looked through the office window at the father, busy making apologies to someone over the phone and avoiding all of the blades and nails and saws, and he understood that it might be a very long time before the business was up and running at full speed.

* * *

The early summer passed slowly and many of the days were far too bright, the boy thought. The best times were spent in the woods alone, or with Nicole, collecting rocks or locating mushrooms. Stephan and Nicole also played basketball and other sports together, and she helped him with his comic books: she could draw great demons and gorgons. Other times they would sneak into the plastic Winnie the Pooh Play House, belonging to Krispee, where they never touched but would sit across from each other and stare into the other's eyes until the world began to shimmer.

In July, Stephan learned from a neighbor boy that his sister was selling "see my boobs" credits for $3. A boy would pay up front, and when the girl's breasts finally bloomed he was due a look. She had printed out certificates of redemption on the family computer, and Stephan learned that at least four boys had purchased credits, with one ambitious boy buying seven credits.

Before Stephan could decide whether to confront his sister, tell their mother, or purchase a credit, Krispee ran away. She had been selling the credits to raise money for her escape. She rode her bike twelve miles to the house where three fun cousins and a happy aunt and uncle lived, and after some discussion between families it was agreed that she should spend the remainder of the summer there. But all was just too cheerful and perfect, and the girl returned home a week later.

One night in October Stephan came home late, having stayed well past dark in the woods, lamenting the fact that Francis had already missed several holidays, including

Stephan's September birthday. *Maybe he'll show up on Thanksgiving*, thought Stephan, who then cursed his own naiveté and the miracle-free world.

He went inside his house, the screen door snapping too tight and fast behind him as it always did, and heard the father weeping in the living room, beginning the sad and dreadful story. *It was a beautiful sunny day, so between lectures my boy and his fiancé decided to go for a ride with the couple, even though they just met. My son… my son, my son, my son, my son, my son, started to get into the car…*

Stephan stopped in the kitchen and considered his options. He continued walking down the short hallway and under the wooden Jesus cross above the archway entrance to the living room, and saw the father, standing and trembling and singing his song of misery, and the mother, sitting blankly in the uncomfortable chair, and his sister on the floor, her knees drawn to her sad face, and Mrs. Borden and Lois sitting on the couch watching the father with a look of regret, but still watching. And only Lois caught his eye and the father did not even stop the story to acknowledge Stephan's appearance, being at the crucial part where Francis is catapulted through the car glass and about to land on the snowy roadside.

Stephan walked past the father, feeling that he could barely squeeze by the shaking man who seemed to take up the whole of the large room, but he made it, and he bolted to the den where he phoned Nicole, asking her to meet him at midnight in his backyard. *It's a life or death matter,* he said.

Nicole didn't show until 12:30, having to wait until her mother turned in. With an extended yawn she inquired what was so important that it couldn't wait until morning.

Stephan said that it was the most important thing in the world that they stay up all night together and watch the sunrise. *I want you and me, us, to live life different, starting now,* he said. Stephan told Nicole they'd sneak back into their respective homes in time to be awakened for school, and he showed her that he had brought out sleeping bags, sandwiches, beverages and a flashlight. *First let's walk into town*, he said, and Nicole nodded her consent to the entire risky plan.

Just a few blocks into the walk Nicole said she was getting cold and Stephan took her hand in his. Her palm had its own pulsation, its own heart. Nicole had sprouted taller over the summer and Stephan had to look up to catch her eyes, which he loved to do.

As they walked, Stephan commented how so many people robotically live the same life, awake during the day and sleeping at night, and miss all of the nighttime beauties like the moon, stars, owls and bats. *Bats?* asked Nicole. *Only a few*, said Stephan, and he promised to keep them away from her.

Once downtown they walked by and peered into many of the closed shops, empty storefronts and barely-patronized taverns. *Over there*, he said, pointing to the Chronicle building and its giant clock falsely telling the world that it is forever 5:08 – the time of its most recent death.

They crossed the street in a playful half-jog to the ugly tan brick building, looked upward at the thickly-curtained windows, and could see that the second and third floors were still lit up. Stephan tried the front door: I was locked, but was soon opened by an exiting employee. The boy and girl cautiously walked up a carpeted stairway and found themselves in the newsroom. The reporter who had come to Stephan's house the night after the crash sat alone at his desk in the far corner of the office, having finished his night as police beat reporter some time ago and in no hurry to be on his way.

The eagle-eyed journalist didn't recognize Stephan and thought the lad and the girl might be slow-witted delivery kids showing up way too early for the first run. But

they kept walking toward him so he turned down the volume on the police scanner and asked what they wanted.

You don't remember me? Stephan asked. *Should I?* said the man. *Yeah, you came to my house and stole a picture of my brother last January. The mushroom guy. Remember? Hello? Oh, oh that's right*, the man said, *how you been*? *Great*, Stephan said, *so where's the picture*? *Wait*, the man said, *aren't you the kid who said his parents were dead? Yeah*, said Stephan, *but they really aren't. Oh I figured*, said the man.

The portly reporter stood up and tucked his shirt in, stroking the fabric over his belly in comforting, soft motions like he was petting a beloved housecat, then adjusted his belt. He ploddingly led the boy and the girl up the stairway and to the third floor "morgue." *Well you'd think they'd be alphabetized, wouldn't you,* complained the reporter, starting to weed through one of the tall stacks of files. Stephan and Nicole each took on a stack, and the boy was saddened when he came upon an article about a person dying tragically, unexpectedly. If it was an oldster or celebrity killed, someone who had some time in the sun, it was a little less sad.

Voila, said the man after ten minutes of searching, handing the file to Stephan. The boy was sickened, as there was now more proof of his brother's death. He opened the folder and quickly snatched the mushroom photo and put it in his inside jacket pocket. He then looked at the other contents: the article about the crash, the obituary, an old clip about the brother winning a junior high school science competition, and a recent tiny piece on his being named to the Dean's List. Stephan folded the articles carefully, and placed them in his pockets. The man said nothing.

Nicole had fallen asleep, her head resting on a pile of yellowing newspapers, so Stephan woke her gently by tapping on her nose, and the three returned to the newsroom. Stephan started down the stairs then turned to the man, who had become untucked again, and said *you shouldn't lie to kids. You promised to bring the picture back to me.* The reporter accepted his latest reprimand and watched the children walk down the stairs and out into the night.

The cool air helped reinvigorate both Nicole and Stephan. They tramped to a city park that had closed many hours earlier, and sat on a bench. Their knees touched. Nicole lay her head on Stephan's legs and he stroked her amber hair with as much love as he could spare, the feel of her hair between his fingers much like the sensation of cool green summer grass whisking through naked toes. *So what is your happiest memory of your brother*, she asked. *All of them*, he said.

Soon they were back on their feet, walking homeward. Inside the Pooh Play House they covered themselves with sleeping bags and chomped down the turkey and mayo sandwiches. They huddled on the west side of the plastic house, so they would be able to see the sunrise together through the eastern window.

Stephan told Nicole the secret of his sister selling boob viewing credits and the girl snickered, then asked him if he wanted to see her breasts, for free.

Okay, he said. Nicole pulled down the sleeping bag, unzipped her school jacket, and lifted her blue sweatshirt to her chin, but the anxious boy could see little in the dark house. Stephan found the flashlight, turned it on, and shone it on her breasts. The beamed light created a corona effect, and Nicole's breasts appeared as spectacular sunbursts, one afire, then the next, as he shifted the flashlight. He made small suns by moving the flashlight closer, big suns by pulling it back.

Nice work, said Stephan. *Thanks,* said Nicole, dropping her shirt, *but they should still get bigger. They are perfect,* he said. *You are so sweet*, she said.

They both fell asleep hours before sunrise and did not wake in time to steal back to their beds. Within both households there was an early-morning panic when it was realized that a family member was missing. All of the standard parental fears appeared and in neither house was there any thought that the two might be off somewhere together, as each knew only of its own situation.

They called their names: *Stephan*? *Nicole*? Rooms were searched for clues that might confirm abduction or willing flight or worse. They tried to find phone numbers of their classmates. There was talk in both homes of calling the police.

It was Stephan's sister who found them asleep in her toy house. *Ewwwww*, she screamed to the mother. *They're in my clubhouse! She's on top of him!"*

The mother grabbed a broom, though she wasn't sure for what, and walked swiftly to the house, the girl right behind her, the father still inside trying to find his shoes. Nicole's parents saw the commotion next door and wormed their way through the thick shrubbery that separated the two properties to get to, they hoped, their still living daughter.

For a good minute they all just stood there, not knowing what to do or say, as Stephan and Nicole, woven together, looked so utterly happy. Then Krispee kicked at the green door with her new sneakers until they woke up, demanding that they get the hell out.

End Times

Carl and Irene Bradshaw were stopped at a red light in Penderson, Nebraska. It was a July afternoon, heavy with humidity, and they were a full day's drive from home. Carl looked at the many shops, at people slogging by on the sidewalks, and at a young couple crossing the street in front of his car, with no apparent fear that he might gun the accelerator and run them down.

He peered up at the sky, made a deep, pretty blue from the windshield tint, and said, "What a terrible town to die in."

"Stop it. Stop it right now," Irene said, trying to form firm words with vocal chords that more wanted to wail than talk. "No more of your morbid thoughts. Not now."

"I'm sorry," he said.

Irene went back to studying a map that she'd printed off the computer. Her hands were shaking again, but her doctor said it wasn't anything serious like Parkinson's, just nerves, just sadness working its way out in little electric quivers. "Go two more blocks and turn right," she said.

Soon they were upon Penderson City Hall and Justice Center, a five-story building housing a police station, court, jail, and city offices. It was mostly glass and steel, and Irene and Carl could see city employees in many of the offices typing away on computers, drafting blueprints, and discussing vital city business. To Carl they all appeared to be putting on a show, saying, "Welcome to our great and thriving town. Sorry your son got whacked. Have a nice day!" As soon as the grieving parents leave, he thought, the workers will go back to snorting coke, surfing for porn on the Internet, and feeling each other up.

They parked in back on a hilly, gravel drive. "Are you sure we should do this?" she asked.

"No," he said, but they got out of the car anyway. Walking to the police station, Carl noticed that the sun was shining on his wife. It was the four o'clock sun and it lit up her permed, light brown hair, and it made her flesh look more alive, almost transparent, revealing important, and vulnerable, networks of veins and arteries in her arms and calves. Carl wondered why such a golden creature was hooked up with him, still. What did she see in him? Why did she stay? He felt he was due an explanation, but did not ask for one.

The police station appeared abandoned. Irene read a brochure on bicycle safety, while Carl studied the waiting area. The floor was gray slate, and there were three ancient orange vinyl chairs with sunken seats, some of the stuffing trying to make a run for it, possibly due to too many overfed Pendersonites visiting the station over the years. The walls were a glazed green brick with a city seal painted on one: a skyscraper, a factory with smoke stacks, and the sun. Penderson, the seat of commerce and industry. On the wall opposite, there was a large, framed painting of a long-ago police chief, circa 1900, wearing a regal uniform with gold buttons and epaulets, a gold-trimmed hat held to his side. He had slicked-back peppered hair, a thick white mustache, and a confident, fatherly smile. Carl thought the man looked more like the kaiser of some protected, verdant, faraway land, than a police official in shoot-'em-up Nebraska. He noticed these details because he thought he might be near his End Times, his personal Apocalypse, so he ought to be paying more attention to life on Earth. Record it all.

Eventually a young cop, clean-cut and muscular, showed behind a plexiglass window. Irene looked him over and thought *somebody's son*. Carl assessed the cop and figured he must have messed up pretty bad to get assigned to front desk duty. Probably frisked the female prisoners too aggressively.

"May I help you folks?" The officer said into a microphone that looked like half of a drum major's baton. Carl and Irene glanced at each other. "I guess we're the Bradshaws," Carl said. "Our son is, was Jonathan …"

"Oh yes," the cop said. "You know, we've never had a double-homicide here before. Just about everything else you might imagine, but not a double-homicide."

"I guess you were due then," Carl said. Irene stepped on Carl's foot and whispered "Stop it," then spoke quietly to the officer about how they'd been traveling all day because they wanted to get copies of the documents related to their son's murder.

Irene and Carl were buzzed through a security door and the patrolman led them back to the captain's office. All of the other offices and cubicles were empty, and Carl wondered if the mighty Penderson Police Department consisted entirely of a captain and a screw-up officer. They had spoken to two detectives on the phone. Possibly hired actors.

Police Captain Harold Lewis presented a round face and warm eyes, and Carl noticed that a little flap of skin hung over each eye, his body perhaps trying to shield him from the horrible things he must have to see. The captain shook their hands and gave his condolences. They sat down across from him. Carl glanced at the captain's gun, black-handled, sticking out of a side holster. Guns had recently fascinated Carl – their deadly, compact and efficient power. Some days he wanted to buy a pistol and shoot the next person who walked onto their front porch unannounced. Other days he wondered how something like guns could exist in this delicate world, could be collected, polished, and displayed with pride.

"Where are your detectives?" Irene asked. "We were hoping to meet them."

"Out on a case," the captain said.

"Ours?"

"No, but they're still working your son's case. We probably get three or four new leads, tips, each week. Something will pan out."

"It's been eight months."

"I know. We don't have much to work with, just the bullets taken from… the victims. What usually happens in these kinds of cases is that the perpetrators do a similar crime, get caught, and are linked to past crimes."

"You still think there were two?"

"Yes, it's usually two. They travel to these small and mid-sized towns, hit a store or gas station, then hop back on the interstate, figuring they can outrun the local cops."

"Well, they were right, weren't they?" Carl said.

"So far," said Captain Lewis. "But we'll get them."

Irene asked about getting the reports.

"Are you sure?" the captain asked. "It's a pretty fat file, lots of awful things in there, coroner's examinations…"

"We're sure," she said. "The story's not complete. We need to finish the story." Captain Lewis consented, but said he couldn't give them any paperwork related to tipsters or suspects.

"Suspects?" she asked.

"Many," he said, "just not enough evidence to make an arrest." He retrieved the case file from a nearby office, paged the patrolman, and instructed him to make copies of everything except the detective's reports.

"Look," the captain went on, "at the time of the shootings the nearest sector car was on Fifth, watching a drug house. If we had him patrolling Main, well, who knows, maybe a different outcome. Each day it's like a chess game. You make your moves, hoping for the best."

Carl felt a sudden fire in his belly, and one in his brain. The fires were traveling toward each other, soon to meet in his chest where they would consume him. He imagined himself, ablaze, lunging for Captain Lewis, saying, "It's not a game of chess, you idiot. No one dies from chess!" But then he saw a certain experiential sadness in the captain's eyes, and the fires began to calm.

"So your son was headed to California?" Captain Lewis asked.

"Yes," Irene said. "He wanted to see the ocean, before starting college. He…"

"You're a father," interrupted Carl. "Aren't you?"

"I am," the captain said. "Two sons. One's married, they're up in St. Paul, and the second's in the Navy. How'd you know?"

"I was a father, once," Carl said. The captain nodded and Irene put her hand on her husband's knee and sighed. The patrolman returned with a large envelope stuffed with copies, and the captain, heading home for the day, told the Bradshaws he'd walk them to their car.

The sun was still beating brightly, and Carl wondered if the sun loved Penderson, or was trying to set it ablaze. Captain Lewis asked if they were staying the night in town, and suggested the Howard Johnson's at the truck plaza. He was promising to be in touch with any news when Carl asked, "Have you ever been shot?"

"No, fortunately."

"I wonder how it feels to be shot," Carl thought he might shower the world in tears, so he covered his face.

"The coroner told me your boy didn't suffer much," the captain said.

"I know." Carl's words were lurching and sputtering like a poorly tuned car. "But he suffered some."

"Yes. Best wishes, folks," Captain Lewis said, walking away.

* * *

They sat in the car, looking at the envelope, which rested on Irene's lap, as heavy and as awful as a tombstone.

"Should I open it?" she asked.

"No, not now," he said.

"Okay. Should we go by the store where he was *sh-o-ttt*?" On this last word, Irene's voice rose then fell. Since Jonathan's death, many words were difficult to say, as the words said too much, the whole world, more than their puny constructions of a few letters strung together would suggest. Words like *murder*, *killed*, *slaying*, *death*, *shot*, and also *love*. Her sadness would stretch out the words, until they burst.

"Not yet," he said. "Maybe tomorrow. Maybe never."

The drove to the Howard Johnson's. Their room was standard issue – dark green bedspreads, perfect white sheets – but this one had gray carpeting that climbed the walls and a TV stand bolted to the floor; you could tilt the motel on its side and the room would still be rather functional. Carl dropped a duffle bag full of clothes on the floor, and Irene plopped the envelope of reports on a table near the bed, before clicking on the TV. The

motel provided five local stations plus HBO. The early news had started and Irene thought how strange it is when you see newscasters that aren't your own. If there are others in the world, how can you be sure that yours are the best?

"My feet hurt," she said, lying on the bed and flipping off her blue deck shoes. "Would you rub them for me, sweets?" It had been eight months since her husband had touched her.

Carl stared at her feet as if they were vermin. He had, until Jonathan's death, sometimes enjoyed sucking on her toes, kissing the webbings between, and making up obscene versions of This Little Piggy Went to Market, as he slowly worked his way up her beseeching body.

"I will, I will," he said, "as soon as I get back."

"Oh, you're going out?"

"For a bit. I need some air."

"Pick us up some beer," she said. "I need to drown."

Carl drove back into town, looking for a store, but avoiding Forrester's Market on Main Street where Jonathan and a clerk, Beatrice Clawson, a retiree, were gunned down in a robbery. The register was emptied, several cartons of cigarettes were stolen, and the boy's wallet was lifted.

He couldn't locate a grocery, but he did find a bar, Midtown Tavern. He parked the car and went inside.

"Hey, I need a cold six," he said to the barkeep.

"Sorry," said the man, bulky and red-haired, "local law says I can't sell you that. But you're welcome to sit here and drink yourself silly."

Carl placed a $5 bill on the polished wood bar and ordered a draft. "Surprise me," he said, and the bartender handed him a mug of some Canadian beer, a little bitter, but he'd go with it.

As he was considering telling the bartender of his central sadness, the loss of his boy, and its many branches, such as frightful dreams, a young woman came into the bar and stood next to Carl, asking for change for the cigarette machine.

"You're not eighteen," the barman said.

"I am too eighteen. I just forgot my ID." She patted at the pockets of her blue jeans frantically.

"Aren't you the Givens girl? You're like fifteen."

"I said I'm old enough!"

"Sorry, kid. No ID, no ciggies."

The girl walked out in a huff, threatening a multi-million dollar lawsuit, and Carl set down his beer and went after her. Outside – the day was still disappointingly bright – he called to her, "I can buy you cigarettes." She waved him off, so he yelled louder, "And beer, and anything else you want."

She turned around and they walked to each other. "What's in it for you?" she asked.

"I was young once," he said.

She got in his car and they began to drive. At the first stop sign, Carl asked, "May I put my hand on your leg?"

The girl shrieked and reached for the door handle, but then stopped and looked back at Carl, perhaps assessing her ability to outfight or outrun him.

"I'll pay you forty dollars," he said.

"Just for touching my leg?"

"A bit more."

"I don't have to do anything?"

"No."

"I can leave my clothes on?"

"Yes."

"And I don't have to do anything?"

"Right."

"Okay, I guess. I could use the money, anyhow."

The girl led Carl down a maze of side streets and alleys as they searched for a place where he could touch her unnoticed. His hand stroked her leg until she said that it hurt a little, "like an Indian burn," so he removed his hand and interrogated her. She said she was indeed the Givens girl, Barbara Anne, though she preferred Annie, and she'll be eighteen in nine days. She likes horses, has a sort of boyfriend, Bud, that's his nickname, he's a doper, and she wants to someday captain a luxury ocean liner.

"I heard about that double shooting you folks had a few months back," he said in a loose, unaffected voice.

"It sucked," she said. "I knew that lady that got killed, she taught me piano when I was little. Now I go in that store and I get the willies. Everyone does."

"The guy that was murdered, you know him?"

"No, he was from somewhere else. Don't know what he was doing here. This is a town you get your ass away from, not come to. If you're smart."

They found an alley where Carl could park the car between two tall dumpsters. He cut the ignition and stared at Annie. She glanced at him, then turned and looked out the windshield, even though it offered only a view of the red brick back of a restaurant. She seemed to be counting the bricks. Her breathing became shallow. His eyes fell upon her dark brown hair, resting casually on the shoulder of her black T-shirt, and looking like an untraveled forest, rich with exotic life. He leaned forward so that he could gaze at her eyes, made a deep, pretty purple due to colored contacts. She had plump lips. Her jeans had a tear at both knees. Her breasts were large apples, with stems, and she smelled of cinnamon coffeecake. To Carl, it seemed that some custom order he placed many years ago in his lonely high school days had finally been filled and delivered. He marveled at her aliveness, and when he moved his hand to touch her she nervously popped spit bubbles between her lips.

He touched those lips, wet with bubble drool, then her cheeks and eyebrows, and awkwardly reached to stroke a foot full of toes: she was wearing sandals, and her toenails were alternately painted black and silver. "I like the Oakland Raiders," she explained, still looking straight ahead, "they kick ass."

His hand slowly spiraled up and down her denimed leg, as if polishing it, and when he rested his hand on Annie's knee he had a sudden memory of the hundreds of blue and black butterflies that flickered in the fields behind the Gulf service station, the first week of every August, in the town where he grew up. They would appear suddenly, as if born out of the air. He almost cried with joy. And Annie stayed ever surprised at his touch: she would jerk each time his hand stopped and re-started. When he ran his knuckles along the silky hair of her arm she giggled and said, "You're giving me the goose tickles!" He wanted to be in love with her.

"Are you almost done?" she asked. "Sorry, I have to get home." He was rubbing her hipbone through her jeans, but stopped, retrieved his wallet, and handed her two twenties.

Annie asked if he wanted her phone number, and he nodded. She found a pen in the glove box and wrote her number on one of Irene's maps, along with her name and an explosion of chubby exclamation points. He peeled off the section of paper containing the number and tucked it in his wallet.

"Hey," she said, "can you still get me a pack of Camel Filters? And maybe a six-pack? And a frozen Snickers?"

"Sure," said Carl, starting to reach for the ignition, until she told him that there was a food store just around the corner.

"Go down that alley and turn right," she said, pointing. "I don't think we should be seen together. Sorry. How old are you? Like fifty?"

"Forty-four." Carl exited the car and started down the alley. He noticed a strange lightness, an almost happy hop, in his step. He took a right at the intersecting alley, walked to the street, turned, and saw the grocery's entrance, its automatic doors awaiting his next step. He glanced up at the store sign: "Forrester's Market: Milk, Beer, Sundries."

"Oh no, oh Christ, no," he said, suddenly dropping to the sidewalk. The world around him started becoming brighter, almost pure white. Not the light of his own death, he was fairly certain, but some kind of generalized ending. The brick and glass of the store, the signs proclaiming outrageous deals on Carson's Potato Chips and Fizzle's Root Beer, the people inside, the shelves and coolers of groceries, the whole world was disappearing, painted over in a strange, milky whiteness. *Death is much like moving out of an apartment*, he thought, as life burned and pulsed white, *whatever you did to the apartment, however you lived, life just paints over it. The only question: how many coats will it take*? His heart, what was his heart doing? It seemed to be opening branch offices, beating wildly in his belly, then his feet, hands, neck, eyes, and elbows. His breathing was like an unrequited love: much more was going out than was coming back. He waited for the whiteness to tell him what it wanted.

Soon a dot of blue – from the smock of a store clerk, who was hovering over Carl – corrupted the pure white and the colors of life began to restore themselves. The tear in the film had been repaired, and the theatre's white screen was once again filling with Technicolor scenes that seemed *almost real*. "Are you okay?" asked the boy clerk.

"Fine," Carl said.

"Come inside. Whenever someone falls I have to fill out a stupid incident report."

"I just can't."

The clerk helped Carl to his feet, and as soon as he felt that he had control over his muscles and bones he walked quickly down the alleyways and to his car. Annie, sitting cross-legged on the car hood, greeted him with a frown. "Where's my stuff, man?"

"I got the willies when I went in the store. Like everyone else."

"No one gets them that bad. You look like you seen a house full of ghosts."

"I did."

"Don't sweat it. If my brother's home he'll give me some of his smokes. Menthol. Blech!"

Annie looked up at the cloudless sky in an almost expectant way, and Carl stared at her again and wondered what she was seeing in the forever blue. Shortly, she turned to him and asked, "Hey, what's your name?"

"Charles Wentworth the Third," Carl said.

"Well I'm Annie Givens the First," she said, laughing. She slid off the car and walked away, waving off his offer of a ride home.

I should have asked her more about her love of horses, he thought, *and the captaining an ocean liner thing*.

* * *

At the motel Irene had started reading the packet of police files. The first pages were notes on what the first officers on the scene saw, such as Jonathan lying in the parking lot, face down in the snow – *he would have been cold* – and the old lady sprawled dead on the counter. Jonathan, known as John Doe early on, had a weak pulse when the cops arrived, but none when the paramedics showed up four minutes later.

The detached nature of the police writing – "subject," "victim," "incident, "perpetrator," "DOA" – and the scientific interest in things like caliber and trajectory – catapulted Irene into a swirl of emotion. She'd read until tears blocked her vision, put the papers down, then open the motel room door and look out at the day mechanically playing itself out. Yes, that's the sound of trucks braking. Yes, that's how birds skitter about in the early evening. When will life be new?

It was during her fourth reading of the reports that she came upon a single page, just a few paragraphs, a detective's report that she wasn't supposed to see. An anonymous tipster had told the police that on the day of the shootings a local man, aged twenty, name, address, and Social Security number stated, had left town for a few days. The report noted that the man had some prior offenses: two arrests for disorderly conduct and one for receiving stolen property. No public record that he owned a .38 caliber weapon, the death gun. In a messy scrawl at the bottom of the report one of the detectives had written, "Subject denies involvement, claims he was on a weekend bender, but can't remember where. Keep an eye on this guy."

Irene was suddenly filled with energy and sprang up from the bed as if tugged back into life by a crane. "This is the son of a bitch that murdered my boy," she said to the motel walls in an almost happy excitement. Simultaneously, she wanted to hug someone and destroy something. Anger held hands with hope, an uncomfortable pairing. She wished Carl were there. He'd be so happy, knowing that the police may be nearing an arrest, even though the report was dated five months earlier.

The passage of a few minutes slowed down her thoughts. Hope fled. Anger stayed. She folded the report and put it in her purse. Irene knew that Carl couldn't handle the news, not yet. He was at the edge of something, something she couldn't name, and this might push him over. Which was worse, thinking that the cops were scouring the world for the killer but hadn't found him, or knowing that they had the guy, but can't charge him? She'd have to handle the matter herself. She was always the stronger one. Not strong, no, but stronger than Carl.

She called a taxi and instructed the driver to take her to the address listed on the police report. She had him park at the curb across from the house. "The meter keeps ticking," said the man, before beginning to read a dog-eared copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Irene stared at the suspect's house, a single story structure painted olive green, looking somewhat like a park outhouse with extra rooms. There were many tall trees, oaks and ash, and one little tree, infant-sized and dead looking, planted in the front yard and secured to the earth by three straps.

Her eyes were drawn to a girl in tattered jeans, dancing down the sidewalk toward the taxi. The girl started jogging then suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, began to skip, and then engaged in a drunkard's walk. She captivated Irene, how she seemed to be writing life as she went along. How will she move her body forward next? In a narrow

line, the girl chose, cautiously placing one foot after the other, as if walking on a plank over a den of snakes. When she got closer, Irene noticed that she had eyes that were beautifully purple, as if dabbed by a watercolor artist.

The girl crossed the street and walked into the yard of the suspect's home, stopping to kneel at the tiny tree, say a few words, and touch a stem. Irene looked away.

About twenty minutes later an El Camino came noisily down the street and pulled into the suspect's drive. A lanky young man with an oval face and curly brown hair, wearing white painter's overalls splattered with light blue paint, got out of the car and started toying with the driver's side windshield wiper. Irene curled the fingers of her left hand, forming an O, and looked through the mock riflescope at the man. "Bang, bang," she whispered. The girl came into view and started searching the man's many pockets. She found a pack of cigarettes and ran off with them, but when she did a floppy cartwheel the cigarettes spilled onto the grass. The suspect helped pick them up and reclaimed the pack, but handed the girl one. She stuck it up her nose and ran toward the house, arms flapping. "Hayseeds," said Irene, unfurling the hand scope and telling the driver to return her to the Howard Johnson's.

Carl was sprawled on the bed, watching some movie involving a trucker and an ape. He hadn't looked at the reports. "Hey, where ya been?" he asked.

"You're right," she said. "This room has no air. You pick up any beer?"

"Sorry, forgot."

"It's okay. All I want to do is sleep."

The next day, after a quiet breakfast at the motel restaurant, they drove to Forrester's Market. They parked across from the store and watched people mill in and out. "I'm having terrible déjà vu," she said.

"Me too," he said, waiting for the world to bleach white again.

"Maybe déjà vu isn't the reliving of your own experience," she said, "but living an experience that someone you loved had. Our boy was here, right here. Maybe I'm seeing through his eyes."

"Could be," he said.

"Oh, why did this have to happen?" Irene asked urgently. "He was just a kid." She grabbed Carl's wrist, her fingernails digging into his skin.

* * *

They returned to their town and to their lives. Carl went back to work at the water plant, and Irene started part-time at a card and gift shop. They yearned for normalcy, so Carl said he understood when Irene told him she wanted to go out with the girls on Tuesday and Thursday nights. On Tuesdays she'd watch her bowling league friends knock down the pins, and Thursday was euchre night, or the monthly meeting of the Victorian Club, where the ladies, sometimes in dress-up, would sip tea and talk in haughty voices about the future design of bloomers or the lustful wants of peasant men. All pretending for the night that life was ever droll, and that the modern world was not stagnant and fading, but waiting to be born.

On one of the Thursday nights Carl was cleaning out his wallet – it had gotten fat and painful to sit on – when he came upon Annie's number. Without much moral hesitation he phoned the girl, promising himself that he'd talk only of ponies and ships.

"Hi," he said, "It's Charles…"

"Charlie Wentworth the Third!" she said. "Oh my God. I was hoping you'd call. I'm all out of money. Oh wait, I didn't mean to say it that way."

"It's okay," he said. "I'm here to help in any way I can." They did speak of ships and horses, but he was also able to glean what she was wearing. By his third call to Annie, always on Tuesday and Thursday nights, they had worked out an arrangement where he would send her money orders of $100 that would entitle him to five calls where he could say or ask anything he wanted. Often, the first part of the call was spent in chit-chat, the girl talking about school, her lazy boyfriend, or her goofy, prankster brother, "Marty the Farty," but eventually Carl would ask about her clothes, any sensual inklings since the previous call, or her experiences with boys.

More recently, Carl had been sending Annie scripts along with the money orders. They would act out various scripted fantasies, or she was to spontaneously say things like "you make me so hot," or "your thing is so big!" Sometimes this would have the desired effect, sometimes not. Annie was a bit of a ham, coming up with variations on the dialogue such as "You make me hotter than someone who fell into a volcano." Or she might say "Your thing's so humongous," then giggle hysterically for several minutes.

Carl wrote a few scripts that he never sent the girl. In one, he tells her "I want you to tear me apart," and her fingertips sprout blades. In another script, one he thought out but never wrote down, she tells him she's seen Jonathan in Penderson.

Charles: He's alive? How can that be?
Annie: Case of mistaken identity. Our cops are idiots.
Charles: I thought they might be. Is he okay?
Annie: As happy as a lightning bug on the Fourth of July.
Charles: When's he coming home?
Annie: Very, very soon.

Irene had also made a couple calls to Penderson during that time, both to Captain Lewis. "No news yet," he said. Both times she inquired whether any locals were suspects, and both times heard back that a few names had surfaced but they were cleared.

One night in early December, Carl came home from work and found a note from Irene taped to the fridge. It said that she'd gone to her sister's in Cleveland for a few days to clear her head. "I need this time by myself," she wrote "If you love me, don't call me there. I'll be back before long. You'll survive! Love, your dearest wife."

Your dearest wife, thought Carl, *how many wives do I have*? He never much minded when Irene went to her sister's for short visits, and he was about to suggest such a move. At last he could stop putting on the Husband Progressing With His Grieving act, and just be himself.

But suddenly he felt lonely and abandoned. Irene had never left for Cleveland without talking it over first. Had he become so awful that she couldn't speak to him anymore? He needed a comforting voice. He phoned Annie.

"Hey! What's up, man?" she said. "You're calling on a Monday!"

"Please tell me you love me," he pleaded.

Annie hesitated, then said that she should probably only say those words to Roy, her new boyfriend.

"Please," he begged. "I'll pay you a bonus."

"I love you, I love you, I love you," she sang. "Love you so much. Love you with my heart, love you night and day, love you when life is… smelly, love you like peanut butter loves jelly! Hee! Love you, my stinky rat!"

"Could you say that again?" he asked.

That Thursday, despite the importance of the day's date, he thought mostly of Annie, her voice, her sweetness, her apple breasts. At the plant there were reports to review – particulate levels were up – but the numbers seemed to be dancing off the page. He spent most of the day on the observation walkway, watching the lake water flowing into the massive intake pipes, where it would find its way to the twenty-some thousand homes and businesses hooked up to the lake – and the treated water flowing back out. The seagulls would dive into the warmer effluent, but no fish could be found there: that area was a dead zone. "I'm sorry," Carl said to the seagulls, and to the lake.

As soon as he got home Carl phoned Annie, but there was no answer. He let the phone ring a couple dozen times, waited a few minutes and called her back, but with the same results.

Annie didn't hear the telephone because she was out in the front yard, crying next to her brother, who had been shot seven times in the belly and chest. A paramedic was trying to call back diminishing vital signs with hand pumps over the heart, and with demanding words: "Keep fighting, Marty! You're not done yet!" There were several cops in the yard, a few neighbors, and a woman in handcuffs babbling, "I did this for my son."

On the one-year anniversary of Jonathan's death, almost to the hour, another young man had been murdered in Penderson, Nebraska. And there would be much weeping, again, by those left behind, and many declarations by the grieving that the victim was cut down years before his due.

* * *

Seeing that the sister of the man his wife killed was his phone girlfriend, Carl had to avoid Irene's court hearings. Should Annie leap tearfully into his arms in the courtroom, matters could get messy. For the arraignment he told Irene he got lost, and for the pre-trial he claimed to have blown two tires on the Nissan. Carl had no idea, yet, how he'd be able to skip the possibly lengthy trial.

Irene was quiet, meditative, during their first jailhouse meeting. She told of buying the gun and practicing at the shooting range on Tuesday nights, saying to herself that it's a dangerous world and she needs protection, but always imagining the droopy face of Martin Givens on the silhouette target. She'd shoot the target in the head and imagine gray matter flying; in the heart and think of clocks stopping. But each gunshot also felt like a self-violation. Afterwards, she would sit in her car and shake, hoping that when she got home there'd be news that the police had arrested Givens, that the final chapter on Jonathan's murder had been written, without her having to write it.

"When the time came, it almost felt like someone else was in my bones, pulling the trigger," she said. They touched fingertips to fingertips, as much as the wire mesh screen that separated them would allow, and then kissed, the metallic taste to linger. She asked for his love and support, and he promised unending supplies of both.

Despite confessing to the homicide, Irene pled innocent to Murder in the First Degree. Her attorney told her they might be able to play on the parental feelings of most of the jurors, and get a conviction on a lesser charge like manslaughter. He doubted that she'd be acquitted. "You thought you were offing the guy who killed your son. People understand such passions," he said.

"I did shoot the man who killed my Jonathan," she said.

"Maybe. I don't know how much they've told you, but they're looking pretty closely at this pair out of Cheyenne. Hopefully they won't make any arrests until the trial is over. That would hurt us."

"No, it was Givens," she said. "I could see it in his face. A mother would know."

* * *

Carl hadn't spoken to Annie since the killing. When he was in Penderson, busy missing the court hearings or visiting Irene, he would drive by her house at different times of the day, hoping to get a glance of her. One of the times she was out front, shoveling snow away from the little tree. He wanted to stop the car and run to her and tackle her and roll in the snow, but he kept driving.

Two weeks before the scheduled start of the trial, he finally phoned her.

"Oh, Charlie," she said. "I thought you didn't like me any more."

"Sorry. Been busy with work," he said.

"Something terrible happened. My brother got shot dead."

"I know. I'm so sorry."

"You know?"

"I saw it in the papers."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I thought you'd want to be left alone."

"I never want that."

"Well I didn't want to get your boyfriend mad at me."

"Oh, we broke up. He can't handle it when girls cry."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but it double sucks because Marty was kind of like raising me. I told you my mom's in jail for bad checks? My aunt's here, but I don't know what's going to happen to me."

"But you're eighteen, right? You can raise yourself, legally."

"But that don't mean I'm ready… for life. Are you still married?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Never mind."

"No, tell me."

"I was just thinking that you're the only guy who's always nice to me. I thought we'd be good together. Maybe not married, unless you wanted to, but living together. But never mind."

"The future's wide open, Annie, even if we don't want it to be. Many things can happen."

"Most of them bad."

"Not always."

"So there's a chance?"

"Maybe a chance."

"When are you coming to Nebraska?"

"Two weeks. Look, maybe you should get out of town for a month or two. Our little secret. Where do you want to go? I'll send you money."

"I can't, not yet. The murder trial's about to start and I'm going to be there every day to make sure that bitch fries."

"I understand."

"Cool. Hey, can we not talk that certain way much tonight? It would be too weird."

"That's fine," he said, canceling plans to inquire about her outfit.

"So," she said, "what do you want to talk about Charlie, my man?"

Suddenly irritated by Annie's youthful, trusting voice, Carl set the phone down and stretched his arms. The house was almost pitch black – he'd failed to turn on any lights – but the darkness helped to hide the many messes. To clean up would mean accepting the fact that Irene was gone. He swiveled in the chair and aimed himself at the front door: he was waiting for Irene to come home and yell at him for living like a pig. *Maybe in ten or fifteen years.* Or maybe Jonathan would through that door, saying, "Hey, Pop." *My boy won't be back.*

Carl stood up, found his way into the kitchen, and pushed down the lever of the toaster. Firelight filled the room. "Maybe I'll blow off the trial and go to the ocean," he said to the towers of dishes in the sink, "go live out Jonathan's dream. Be his eyes, like Irene said back in Penderfuck. She'll understand, maybe even be happy for me. It's time to live a little."

He dropped bread of questionable freshness in the toaster, readying to make cinnamon butter toast, a boyhood favorite, when he remembered Annie. He returned to the living room in time to hear her squeaky "Hello, hello, is anyone there" coming though the phone. He picked up the receiver and thought more pleasantly of Annie, future commander of the wild seas.

"Sorry," he said. "I was lost in thought."

"What an awful place to get lost in," she said. "That was a joke. So, anyways, did you think of anything you wanted to talk about with me?"

"Yes," he said. "My love, I want you to tell me about your sorrow."

"What, what did you say?"

"I said… I said have you ever seen the ocean?"

The Winter of My Disco Tent

Entering the world on August 8, 1974, it seemed that Alyssa Combs, America's most splendid writer, was born with a pen in her hand, eager to get going on her first story. Actually it was an extra finger, promptly removed by a surgeon.

Having garnered full control of her ABC's by the age of three, both forwards and backwards, the plucky Alyssa penned numerous stories in her pre-school and kindergarten days, including the allegorical *Daddy is Weerd* (sic), and *Cookies,* about an evil mother who bakes cookies that, when eaten, cause children to explode. Alyssa read *Cookies* to the girls at the neighborhood clubhouse, which led to reduced cookie consumption by most of the girls for several months.

The spigot of her brilliance remained open and flowing throughout her mid-childhood, where Alyssa authored classics such as *The Old Man and the Cheese,* about a man's attempt to save his soul by wrestling with "primal cow" forces found in various cheeses (notably Muenster), and *Jane Error,* a piece about an awkward girl who, despite being a writer, "had more catastrophes in her life than apostrophes."

Alyssa won numerous local and regional writing competitions in her youth, including the Madison Elementary School Writer of Tomorrow Award for her tale *Ten Thousand Babies at the Center of the Earth! What Will We Do?* Her writing successes at such a young age led to her being awarded a full scholarship to the then acclaimed Zip Martin Writing Camp for Non-Overweight Youth.

"I knew that girl was full of promise," Zip said, during an interview at state prison. "Most kids were writing about teen crushes or their poor puppy that got run over, but Alyssa was writing about God, quirks of evolution, and of a society swirling down the proverbial toilet. During the naked storytelling nights, which I still say were about building self-confidence, she'd read her stories like she was presenting a revolutionary treatise. She had such power, even at that tender, pure, and blossoming age, and a great… a great sense of irony. You wouldn't have her email address, would you?"

It was at camp where Alyssa began working on *Tongue,* her first published novel. *Tongue* is about Anna, a mute writer girl who is kidnapped by country-western singing star Kirp Snaply. Snaply's career is going down the tubes – when writing songs he can't get past the hurdle-girdle rhyme scheme – so he holds Anna for ransom, asking for $840 to cover two month's rent. When the girl's wealthy dad refuses to pay, Snaply cuts off Anna's tongue and mails it to the dad to show he's all business. In a surprise twist, the tongue tells the father and the cops the location of the kidnapper's hideout, before it gets eaten by Scruffy, the family mutt. Anna is rescued, and the first thing she writes to her father is that a mute girl doesn't need a tongue. She'll still be able to write.

But when the girl can no longer taste the saltiness of her kneecap flesh, or other savory joys, her writing disintegrates. In Part 2 of *Tongue* the father pays a billion dollars for Anna to have the world's first baboon tongue transplant. The operation is a success, and the girl's writing is invigorated, though it tends to focus on simian interests. The mute girl's 1,077page novel about the impossible romance between an orangutan and a squirrel monkey stowed away on a banana boat would win The National Book Award.

Meet Alyssa

"I hate screwing with words. I mean I don't hate having sex with words, that little tail on the Q can do wonders, but I hate the words themselves," says Alyssa in her latest anti-writing fit.

"Darling, you can't even be angry without being clever," I point out.

"You're right. I hate myself."

"Don't say that."

"Okay. I hate you." That's better.

From this prize position I can peer down her blouse and see the meaty brown circle of her left booby, and, glory be, a nipple. It's hard and grainy and reaching out, like an antenna seeking a signal from Planet Amorous. I start to feel manly stirrings then realize that her nipple is responding to the air conditioning, the Polar-Aire 2000.

"You sure you don't want me to go?" I ask. "I can pack my stuff and…"

"Nah, sweets, stay," she says. "I'm almost used to you."

"But last night you called me your 'anti-muse bastard monkeyboy'."

"I did? Soweee. Stay anyways. Besides, I haven't finished disemboweling you yet." She gives me a little kiss on my jeans, near the denim sheath that protects the zipper area from gawkers.

Alyssa turns and sneers at the blank computer screen, and her fingers start to dangle and dance above the keyboard like spider legs. "Hate words. Hate 'em, hate 'em."

"Blame God," I say, causing her to spin violently in her chair. She pulls the tangles of hair out of her face, revealing her soft and brown Alyssa eyes, brown as a tube of watercolor paint labeled "brown,",and flashes me a sweet *what now Dave* look.

"You know," I say, "The Word made flesh."

"Well, my dear Bible boy," she says, "if God created life from words, can words create life? If I write 'the frog jumped over the moon,' does a galaxy of moon-jumping frogs spring into being? I think God is a giant bird that chirped the world into being while flying through Eternity. That's the whole human quest in a nutshell, Davy, in an eggshell. We'll never be birds, but maybe words, some combinations of words, or a painting, maybe a good kiss, can get us closer to that first chirp."

I nod my head.

"I'm so full of it," she says, slumping her head onto the keyboard, forming gibberish on the screen. She looks up at the monitor, hoping that within the gibberish is a salvageable sentence. There's not. Her evil writer's block bears no easy gifts.

Alyssa turns back to me. "Maybe we should have quasi-sex instead."

"I'm not a machine!" I say.

"Sure you are, and I know all of your buttons. Here's one." She moves her hands to a blouse button but I valiantly shake my head no and point to the computer. She grumbles and threatens to type everything in *webdings,* a symbol font where love is ✦🚗🚌🎁 and troubadour 🚢✕🚗🚇🚲✔⛊🚗✕. The new plan (that she'll abandon in five minutes) is to write a coded novel that literary scholars will dedicate their lives to deciphering. The next *Ulysses.*

"I hate words," Alyssa mumbles. "And the h, o, r, s and e they rode in on."

The novel Alyssa is currently working on, *The Winter of My Disco Tent*, is seventeen months overdue, a fat fetus of a thing that keeps saying, "no thanks, forget it," to the prospect of being born.

After *Tongue,* Alyssa came out with a collection of short stories titled *Asterisks I Have Known,* featuring nine funny stories and one un-funny story, *Sarajevo*, about a Bosnian clown who steals the shoes of war-killed children.

"When mother and father come for the body," he told Rafid, "they will begin to weep, and then they will look to the feet and say 'but where are his shoes?' The nurse will shake her head and the mother will say 'he went out of the house with shoes on. I'll swear to that. We don't have much money, but we could always buy shoes for our children. We must find his shoes!' And for that little while the focus will be on the missing shoes, and the most unbearable thing in the world, that their sweet little Kelim or Enisa has been killed for absolutely no reason, will bleed their soul just a little bit less."

"Whose shoes are those?" Rafid asked.

"A little girl's," said Bozko, examining the blue, worn-through sneakers. "Maybe seven or eight. Killed at the market buying sweets. I would say, from the evidence, that the girl's family was poorer than most, that she liked blue, her overcoat was also a light blue, that she was a doodler – see the tiny flowers and stars she drew on the flaps? – and that when she ran, and she ran a lot, she did so mostly on the balls of her feet. Possibly a little athlete girl."

"Or just used to running for her life," Rafid said.

"Yes," Bozko said. "Sorry. Of course it would be that."

Next came the novel *PB&J Ridge*, about high school sweethearts Terri and Goof, who one day come up with a plan to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at the highest landmark point in each of the 48 contiguous states. They steal a teacher's car and begin their adventure. This may be her funniest work, especially the scene in Idaho where Goof is thought to have died (I won't say more in case a few readers haven't gotten to this important work yet, except that He's Not Dead).

Since then, Alyssa has been working on stories and on *Disco Tent* like a madwoman, but producing no final drafts. She did write a book review for The New York Times where she said Kent Green's *Moon Birds* "fits the dictionary definition of *slurry* perfectly: 'a watery suspension of insoluble matter'," and that it had "a story arc less convincing than Noah's." Her review angered Green's fans, several Christians of the letter writing variety, and the Times editorial board after Green won the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction for "the heart felt, finely rendered, *Moon Birds*."

Alyssa's royalty checks are getting smaller, and the funds from her movie rights deal for *PB&J Ridge* (it was never produced) are all but gone. "If this keeps going on I'll have to take up the oldest and most degrading of professions," she says.

"Prostitution? Nude dancing?"

"No, teaching! Ack!"

"Don't do that!" I say, "I'd sooner rob a bank on your behalf." (Specifically the First Consumer's Bank at Eighth and Lexington).

A Destined Meeting

Some may think I'm more of a semi-stalker than a real biographer, such as Alyssa's friend Carrie, who said on the phone while I was accidentally on the extension, "I think Dave is more like a semi-stalker than a biographer. You better be careful."

"Nah, he's no more harmful than genital herpes," Alyssa said, rising to my defense. "Periodically irritating and also embarrassing, if word got out. But pretty easy to control."

Truth be told, I was one of the few red-blooded Americans who hadn't heard of Alyssa Combs. By the time *PB&J Ridge* came out, you might find Alyssa on billboards

and TV commercials supporting extremist causes like literacy, showing boobage on Letterman, or saying witty things on National Public Radio. Her lightly-clad body appeared frequently on the covers of men's magazines like *GQ*, and Communist publications like *Redbook*. Somehow I missed all that.

Then came a gorgeous April day. I was at Grumpy's Book Store, hunting for smart book-reading babes – I imagine that there is nothing hotter than a naked woman slowly saying "Dos-to-ev-sky" – when I first saw Alyssa. She was doing a book signing for the paperback edition of *PB&J Ridge*, so I waited in line to meet her like an everyday Joe. As she was autographing the back cover photo of her – long flowing hair, a smile that's part growl, and blue jeans more infused into her than mintiness in a mint leaf – I told Alyssa I was "a biographer of star writers" and wanted to tell the world her story. She asked whose biographies I'd written, so I quickly fibbed "Arthur Hemingway, Skip Newton," and, seeing a display of the latest Amy Sample novel near Alyssa, I said "and I'm getting some feelers from Amy Sample's people."

"That bitch!" she said. "I deserve it more. Okay, Sparky, meet me in Boston in late July."

Meet me in Boston in late July. Isn't that the greatest sentence ever? *Meet me in Boston in late July*. *Meet me in Boston in late July*. I'll never tire of it.

Over the next few months I read all of Alyssa's published works, though when I finished the short story *9-1-1 Ha Ha*, I had to wonder whether it was a good idea to encourage out-of-work comedians to take jobs as emergency phone operators. And regarding *The Price of Desire*, is it really believable that the wife of a paleontologist pleasuring herself with a dinosaur bone at high noon on the summer equinox could cause a rift in the time-space continuum where dinosaurs once again walk the earth?

To hone my abundant yet honeless writing skills, I also took the Chaucer University home study You Can Be a Famous Biographer course (only $1,795, highly recommended), where I received an A+++ for "your poignant and groundbreaking biography of *fill in the blank*"– a typo! It was the story of Tubby, my first hamster. How he loved that wheel! To further develop my language skills in preparation for this important assignment I read the entire *Curious George* series.

That July I moved to Boston and began interviewing Alyssa weekly at Goober's Steakhouse, where waiters and busboys often asked my dining mate for her phone number, so they could complete their "customer satisfaction surveys." Yet they showed no interest in my thoughts on the pastyness of their noodles, or the limpness of their parsley garnishes.

Within the year I had won a place in Alyssa's heart, and in her bed – mostly when she was out of town. Like my wise father once said, "Son, if you are going to have a ghost of a chance with a girl you need to show up, and keep showing up, and hope she can find some use for you." Alyssa says I'm like a childhood toy, hard to toss in the garbage, for unknown reasons. A romantic!

Alyssa knows now that I'm not a published biographer, yet, and sometimes she lovingly calls me "a complete, absolute, one hundred percent fraud." But I swear on my potato's gravy that I will I get this biography published, and with a fancy publisher, not the ones advertising in *Backstreet Detective*.

Chapter 1, The Winter of My Disco Tent, by Alyssa Combs. Used by permission, sort of. [1]

The gun used to kill Stephen Pepper on his wedding day was manufactured by the McQueen Pistol Co. at their Laredo, Texas plant. He would have wanted to know that. It was a .22 caliber Magnum stainless steel revolver with a black rubber grip and a 2 and 3/4th' inch barrel. There were six bullets in the gun, before the trigger was pulled, and pulled again, and pulled again.

The bullets that killed Stephen Pepper were composed of various metals stripped from the earth and yanked from the seas. The forty-grain bullets, manufactured by Dixie Ammo of Decatur, Georgia, were 91 percent lead, 7 percent antimony and 2 percent tin. Their full metal jacket was composed of 95 percent copper and 5 percent zinc. The lead, extracted from galena, cerussite, and anglesite, came principally from mines in St. Francis County, Missouri, and from recycled scrap. Hurray for recycling, Stephen might have said. The blue and white antimony, extracted from stibnite, originated in Mpumalanga, South Africa, and the tin, smelted from cassiterite, was dredged from Indonesian seabeds. The jacket's copper once called the Andean Mountains in Chile home, while the zinc was mined in Gordonsville, Tennessee, just outside of Memphis.

A billion years to make these metals, then, one day, metal traveling at 840 feet per second meets evolved monkey and guess who won? Perhaps Stephen, who planned on becoming a prosecutor, would like to see Time (shaper of metals) and Earth (where metals reside) co-indicted for his murder, or perhaps even God, despite the difficulties inherent in obtaining a deposition from The Almighty.

"Some force had to have been overseeing the whole Earth molten fire and cooling process, which led to the formation of these minerals and metals," Stephen might have argued in court, or perhaps is doing so now to a Heavenly Tribunal. "To not have anticipated the eventual consequences, i.e. my murder, when these metals are formed, extracted, fused, marketed, purchased, and projected, well that sounds reckless to me."

If that failed, he might have tried to indict the CEO's of McQueen Pistol and Dixie Ammo, though Dixie Ammo's defense would be that Stephen Pepper's murderer failed to follow the instructions on the bullet box: *for paper target practice only*.

The man who killed Stephen Pepper is named Charles "Chub" Fish, a gas company meter man from Oak Park, Illinois. The way that Chub likes to describe his life is "never married but twice divorced." His only child is autistic. Fish just wants the boy to say something, "daddy," "fuck you," anything.

Unable to sleep for almost two months, Fish drove his hunter green Dodge Caravan to Albany, New York to pluck Stephen Pepper from this life. While three bullets entered Stephen Pepper's body, the fatal shot was to the left atrium of the heart. The human heart, like the kingdom of Heaven, like the revolver that killed Stephen, has multiple chambers: four for the heart, infinite for Heaven, six for the gun. Stephen Pepper would have wanted to know all of this, would have wanted to see the coroner's report on his death. *Shot in the heart on my wedding day*, Stephen might have thought. *Wow, wow, wow.*

Having murdered Stephen Pepper, Chub Fish, thin-haired, skin only slightly pinged by life, sat himself down in a puffy chair and watched a porno movie starring Debbie Jack, that had been left at the Pepper residence the night before, during the bachelor party. Fish tried to enjoy the show, and to not look at the body sprawled out on the carpet near the TV, the arms and fingers in such a position that Stephen looked like he had died playing an invisible harp. After *yet another* uninspired gang-bang scene, Fish dutifully rewound the tape and returned it to the

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[1] See the 1956 Massachusetts Supreme Court Case *McGee vs. Dunlevy*: the fact that one party who entered into an oral contract was legally intoxicated does not nullify the legality of said contract.

Diamond Video store named on the tape case, where he asked the teen clerk to call police, as he had killed a man, a flyer. Taken into custody without incident, Fish fell happily asleep in the back of the police car and dreamt that he was resting his head on Ms. Jack's ample and nippled pillows, as she cooed about how brave and handsome he was.

Stephen Pepper would have wanted to know these last details as well. Though he might have considered them surreal, and proof once again that truth kicks fiction's ass.

"The Accident"

Alyssa is not calling it a suicide attempt, the hospital people are not calling it a suicide attempt, and I'm not calling it a suicide attempt. We are all gently referring to it as "the accident."

The suicide attempt occurred one morning while Alyssa was working on *Disco Tent*. Alyssa popped a Darvocet for back pain, and then seven more.

"It was the strangest thing," she said. "It was like my hand had its own mind. Or my mind had its own hand. It kept grabbing another pill and plopping it in my mouth. Really, that's how it went down."

"Are you sure?" I thoughtfully inquired. "That would be one way – a bad way! – to resolve the problems with your editor. They'd probably publish *Disco Tent* as it is, plus your diary, drawings…"

"No," Alyssa said, frail and gray-eyed. "No, no, no, no, no."

"Look," she rambled on, while playing with her pale green plastic hospital admissions band, "the suicidal writer is like a bad plot element that keeps repeating itself. Or used to. Like the cop three days from retirement getting the big case. Plath, Hemingway, Woolf, shame on them all. Shit. I know sometimes there are crazy brain chemicals or hideous diseases at work, okay, but writers, artists, got to stick around, if at all possible."

I nodded, but I knew she missed the billboards, magazine shoots, the NPR gig, and all those letters from lovestruck adolescents and lonely bachelors.

"You know what Sartre said at Camus' funeral?" she asked.

"Waaaaaaaah! Waaaaaaaah!"

"Funny. I mean sick, very sick! No, he said something like 'never was it more important that a writer live.' That's my mantra. Look at this world. Only the artists and oddballs offer any hope. Oddballs are the only hope. Oh, I just said that. But it's still true, five seconds later."

"I love you."

"Shut up!" Alyssa scrunched her face in a cross-eyed chipmunk way like she does when I'm giving her the google-eyed look, which makes me love her even more. But this story isn't about me.

"Thanks for cheering me up," she said. "I owe you another blowjob, when my mind clears."

"That's seven now."

"Lucky you."

Alyssa had agreed to be admitted into the hospital's scary fourth floor "mental wellness" ward for three days' observation. That was a big mistake. It took her a good month to shake off all of the screaming and crazed ramblings, mostly by the doctors and staff. And two pretty and pale patients informed Alyssa and everyone else in the ward

that they were planning a suicide pact for when they're released. Alyssa still worries about them. Betty Z and June K if you are reading this, don't do it!

Each night when I went to visit Alyssa, we talked about the mysteries of life while playing Ping-Pong with a grapefruit-sized Ping-Pong ball, too big to swallow and choke on and too big to easily stick up an orifice in hopes of inducing fatal Ping-Pong Toxicity Syndrome. I wondered who manufactured these giant safe-for-the-suicidal Ping-Pong balls, and how many they sell each year. Do they have a salesman that visits all of the mental hospitals? Does he like his job? Maybe that will be my first short story: *The Heartwrenching Life of the Oversized Ping-Pong Ball Man.*

Alyssa Has Parents

Alyssa's father, Dr. Corbin Combs, Ph.D., and her mother, Mary Sweet-Combs, work at Prentice State College, where Corbin is chair of the Multicultural and Indigenous Peoples Post-Colonial Cross-Cultural Awareness Studies Department, and his wife is in charge of distributing office supplies.

I met them at their home in the less-ugly part of Pittsburgh. Corbin, a small man, is bald but sports an itchy-looking gray beard. He was dressed in a pale blue suit, the color Easter eggs dyed blue turn out, even if you were hoping for a deep and dark oceany blue like the dye in the cereal bowl looks like, and you say so, and your mother cracks the hard egg on your head, saying you expect too much from life.

Mary is plump in a way that the adjective "pleasingly" fights coming to mind like King-Kong fought off those airplanes. Her dull orange hair was in a permanent so tight that it would likely have survived a Level 6 tornado. She was wearing a thick white housecoat, which was not properly buttoned near the nether regions.

Although it was before noon, they offered me Kool-Aid or a gin and tonic. Kool-Aid before noon. Unheard of!

Me: You must be quite proud of Alyssa.

Father: Yes.

Mother: (Nods)

Me: Good…. Umm…

Father: Would you like to know when she started writing?

Me: Yes!

Father: Probably at age three or four. I remember her interviewing the cat for some kind of expose and I went to Mother and I said, 'Mother, do we have a writer girl?'

Mother: He calls me Mother due to an incest fetish.

Father: Anyway, Mother and I wanted Alyssa to follow in my footsteps, become a scholar, do something important with words. But she has that damn creative writer's disease. I hope that they'll be able to discover what gene goes bad that makes people want to make up stories when there are all of these real stories out there, mostly untold. I see her suffer… But yes, to answer your question, rather my question, she did always seem to have a pencil in her mouth. Hand, in her hand.

Mother: He's got an oral fixation, that one.

Father: Now, Mother.

Mother: Yes, Lefty?

Father: Oh God, not that again, not now!

Mother: He has a leaner of a wiener (pointing to husband's crotch). It's made him a total pervert.

Father: Oh God!

Mother: Regular screwing? It's not for him, no sir. He says that's for rubes and cannery workers. No, he has to do all of these other things, all of these sick things…

Father: Mother!

Mother: Alright, I'm not a kiss and tell girl. Not that many of these schemes involve kissing.

Father: Please son, please tell me you'll edit this out.

Me: Of course. This biography is for the glory of your daughter, and naturally I will present you as kind and loving parents.

During the break Corbin walked me to the den to show me Mount Alyssa, a photographic monument to his daughter covering three walls, the hundreds of photos arranged pyramidally to form a triple mountain landscape.

"Took most of these myself, " he said, his eyes joyously scaling the mountains. "She's a beauty, eh? Can't believe she popped out of that ogre though." (I think he was referring to the Mrs.). "Don't get me wrong, son, I'd never… but with that warthog (again I think he was speaking of the wife) in the house occasionally my mind needs to do a little cut and paste."

I was busy falling in love with each Alyssa in each photo – the child blowing soap bubbles on a summer day, the nervous teen in her shiny green prom dress, the woman in a bikini top and cutoffs, flipping her father the bird – but Corbin kept yapping away.

"Hey, I've been wondering," he said. "Have you and Alyssa… well…"

"Lets just say that while carnival knowledge is not complete, I have played the ring toss game, and soon I'm headed over to the duck pond, to try my luck."

"Huh?"

"And one time, sir, while we were smooching, Alyssa moaned 'Cor, oh Cor'."

"You don't say."

"Of course there are many Corbins and Corneliuses in this world. Could have been one of them."

"Yes," he said. "Many Corbins. Many Corneliuses."

If that material didn't earn me the hand of his daughter what would? In truth Alyssa has never said Corbin's name during our almost-sex sessions. Just the names "Daniel," "Stephanie," and "Coach Powers."

We returned to the living room where I conducted another two hours of brilliant interviewing. Unfortunately, I forgot to turn on the tape recorder and don't remember a lick of it. By mid-afternoon they bid me good day and I walked the steep hill down to my car. At the car, it's a yellow car, I realized I had forgotten to ask their advice regarding Alyssa's sinister writer's block, so I trudged back up the hill, happy that my feet were feet instead of wheels, because if they were wheels I'd have no way of making it up the hill.

I heard them chatting in the screened-in porch, so I approached quietly and hid behind a tall shrub of the evergreen species.

"Dave's really quite a pervert," Corbin said. "You should have seen the way he was looking at her pictures. And what he said. My God! In the parent's home!"

"He was eyeing me up the whole time," Mary said.

"Well, I can't blame him for that," he said Corbin. "You are one hot potato."

"Oh sweetie," she said. "You always know just what to say."

And then slurping noises.

When I returned home, Alyssa said, "I see you survived your encounter with The Abominable Dr. and Mrs. Combs," and asked if Corbin showed me Mount Alyssa.

Before I could answer, she said, “He was always following me around with this big ass camera. Still does. You know zoom camera lenses are symbolic for penises, don’t you, since they move from compact to telephoto as the desired object comes into focus.”

“But I only have that old scratched up Kodak Instamatic my parents gave me, with a couple of blown bulbs and whatever little lens it came with.”

“I know Dave, I know,” she said.

A Love Story Involving a Blind Pilot

Despite the deceptive opening chapter, *The Winter of My Disco Tent* is not really about metals extraction. Here’s the story, told in my own words.

Stephen Pepper, blind in one eye, wins his federal civil rights case and is granted the right to obtain a pilot’s license. The national news shows all declare Stephen “America’s first blind pilot,” and it is always late into the story before Stephen gets to say, “Hey I have 92% field of vision. I’m no danger to society.”

Chub Fish starts losing sleep. Every time he hears a small plane overhead he’s certain it’s blind Stephen, and that Stephen is about to crash into his house. As the sleepless nights become sleepless weeks, he comes to believe that nearly every pilot of a moving vehicle is blind. He’ll be out in the gas company van and see that the driver of a city bus is wearing sunglasses, and he’ll brace for the crash. And taxi drivers are blind, the whole lot of them.

A man’s got to get some sleep or he will go crazy.

Stephen meets Cassandra Burns and they fall in love. They decide to get married on March 20th, the last day of winter, and choose a 70’s disco theme for the wedding. For their honeymoon they planned to take their first flight together, on Stephen’s new Piper.

Chub murders Stephen about an hour before the ceremony was to start. When the groom doesn’t show, calls are made to his apartment, but Chub doesn’t think it is right to answer another man’s phone without his okay, and Stephen is in no condition to give the go-ahead. Cassandra’s mother eventually postpones the wedding, and all flee quickly, since there is nothing sadder than a bride left in the lurch, except for maybe a kid being given a fire engine for Christmas with the wheels removed, because mother turns into a “nervous wreck” from the sound of toy wheels rolling on linoleum.

Cassandra, still in her wedding gown, walks over to the reception tent and puts on a record. Here’s Draft 17 of the final scene, retrieved from the trash.

“Hey sweetie,” Cassandra heard from behind. She turned and saw Stephen in his bloody wedding suit.

“Oh my God,” cried Cassandra, “What happened?”

(grape jelly stain) murdered,” said Stephen’s ghost.

(more grape jelly) one hand over her mouth and used her **(burn mark. Is Alyssa smoking again???)**

“I’m pretty upset myself,” said Stephen. “At least the killer seems nice. Not all murder victims can say that.”

“But if you are dead **(unidentifiable stain)**

“You know how when you go to heaven? This is my heaven, here with you.”

(Two pages missing. Probably dialogue, kissing, etc).

“And there’s something I must tell you,” said Cassandra. “One thing I never had the courage to say when you were alive. You **(last lines missing, possibly nibbled off by raccoons).**

Myself, I’m wondering what happened to Chub’s autistic son? Is he *really* the story?

Alyssa Goes to Hollywood

Just as things were starting to go good with Alyssa and me – I was given the green light to hang my toothbrush next to hers instead of kitty corner – she got "great news." Miramax was taking a fresh look at *PB&J Ridge*, and Leonardo DiCaprio was considering playing Goof. Alyssa and her agent flew to Hollywood. In an airplane.

Even though she promised to call every night and I specifically stayed home and also up late to account for the time difference, she did not phone until night three.

"It's looking good, mister," she said. "They want me to write the screenplay. They say I have name appeal."

"You have a great name!" I said. "Alyssa, A – lyss – a, well that doesn't really mean anything, but then there is Combs, you know honeycombs, with those hard working bees supporting the one lazy queen bee, and the whole thing's kind of chewy and waxy."

"Right. Anyway, some studio hack is going to work with me, and even if he does most of the writing I'll get most of the credit. And like $700,000 holy fricking dollars."

"He? A he?"

"Yep, but he'll be here and I'll be there and we'll send crap back and forth over the Net. Hey, don't put this next thing in your book: Miramax has these decked-out offices, but the whole time I felt like I was in one of those creepy porn shop movie booths, with dried spunk all over the walls."

"You've been in porn shops?"

"For research purposes. I am a writer."

Two days later I picked her up at the airport, in the yellow car. The things she said to me included "hi Dave" and "how are you?" When we returned home, I gentlemanly opened the car door for her, took her hand, and led her safely past the prickly bushes with the poison berries and into the backyard.

"Oh my God Dave-zee," she said, "what have you done?"

While Alyssa was on the West Coast cavorting with the devil, I rented a party tent, and had a boombox and several CD's of America's finest disco hits ready to go. "I thought we'd recreate the final scene in *The Winter of My Disco Tent.* It might help inspire you."

"Awww, that's so sweet," she said, eyeing the tent. "Add two bonus blowjobs."

"That will make twenty-three."

"Wow, we'll have to have a marathon or something."

It was a genuine Champion Amusement Company canvas tent striped orange and white. Room for a 80-100 partygoers to comfortably mingle, according to the kind rental place man, who also rented me a floor sander and cement mixer, just to be on the safe side.

"Dave," she said, "I didn't know you had this in you." Alyssa gazed at me like she was a county fair contest judge and I was a pie. Did I have a flaky enough crust to win the Blue Ribbon?

We strolled to the tent opening, where she stroked a support rope, saying, "yum, ropes," perhaps recalling her Girl Scout adventure days. I put my hand on her hip, the far one, and we entered the tent. I loaded up *Disco Explosion!* and we began daylight discoing to blockbuster hits like "Disco Inferno," and "Turn the Beets Around."

Just as I was nearing an over-boogied state, a slow song came on and we did a sexy box step: 123, 123, 123. "Let's get married," I said.

"I'll marry you when pigs oink, Dave," she said. I was going to say that I'm fairly certain pigs are already oinking, when she went on. "And we will live in our magical mountain home where the sun shines every day and flowers grow year round. We will have sex every six hours, and make one hundred fair and gifted children and love each other for all of eternity."

"Good plan," I said, pulling her closer.

"If only," she said, talking into my shoulder. "Marriage is all about pretending that it is not a wild, random world, Davy Dave, about making believe that if we mow the lawn once a week we have control of the forces of life and can remain insulated forever and ever in our little house away from all of the other little houses. But the wolves are knocking at the door, Dave. Should we let them in?"

Pigs and wolves. I've heard that story somewhere before.

As we swayed together, light rain began to pelt the tent, making a *thup-thup* noise, a sound like we were being invaded by a new kind of insect swarm. Let's call them "thup-thups."

Alyssa spiral danced us out into the rain. I worried about lightning. Andy Gibb, the Bee-Gee that flew solo, was beginning to play in the tent, chirping his lines to "I Just Want to Be Your Everything." *For so long, you and me been finding each other for so long…*

"Aww Andy Gibby," she said, her head on my shoulder. "He had great hair. What ever happened to him?"

I told her that the sweet and handsome sparrow-voiced boy died young, that he maybe did too much cocaine. *Darling mine, I would wait forever for those lips of wine…*

"So sad," she said, now drooling into my purple t-shirt, the nice one with the Crest Toothpaste logo on it. *If I stay here without you darling I would die…*

And then I realized that we are all trying to make sense of life in this lonely, post-Andy Gibb, post disco, post "Boogie Oogie Oogie" world. No sparrow-voiced boys are singing "ah ah ah I" these days, it's all just plain "I." And no one wears white jumpsuits or flashy fake-gold necklaces anymore. Except for those who still do.

I wanted to tell this all to Alyssa, that I've figured out the world's cure – disco revival – but I was tasting raindrops instead and wondering about their chemical composition. *Is that hydrogen?*

Alyssa said, "Let's just dance until we fall over. And let that be enough. Please."

"Funky yeah-yeah," I said, "but this rain is making me have to pee. Little boy's room. Don't go anywhere."

I walked to the house and stopped at the sliding doors, to look back at Alyssa. The rain was coming down in sheets, wet sheets, and she was standing there, letting the rain bathe her, her white shirt becoming transparent. Nipple city! She stuck her tongue out at me and I responded in kind. One hundred billion males on Earth and it was me she stuck her tongue out at. Me!

In the bathroom, mindlessly urinating, I heard a horrifically loud thunder burst and saw the flash of nearby lightning. "No!" I shouted. "You can't have her!" I painfully cut short the peeing and ran to Alyssa. She was nowhere. Did angels lift her up?

I dashed to the front yard and found my sweetie in her non-yellow car, the Volkswagen Mobile Copulation Unit, as she calls it. She was backing out of the driveway. Alyssa waved, or she might have been shooing away a thup-thup. She's probably rendezvousing with pretty Leonardo.

I looked down at my weenie, dangling out of my pants and unheroically shriveling in the cool rain, and told it "shut up." I tucked and zipped, then peered up at the purple heavens, saying, "You can take me now."

The next rumble of thunder sounded sort of like "no thanks," so I returned to the backyard and sought shelter in the tent. Peaches and Herb were singing "reunited and it feels so good." Dumbo Peaches! Idiot Herb! I sat down on the cool grass, awaiting inspiration from Gloria Gaynor's "Survive," due in two songs. Maybe Alyssa just ran to the store. But no matter. I will survive. Oh yeah baby, I will survive.

And then I called upon the ghost of Andy Gibb – he really walked the Earth once, sang pretty love songs for us – to guide me through this forthcoming time of horrendous sorrow. Although she probably just went to the store.