UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Date: 8-2-06

I, Darrin Doyle,

hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

Doctor of Philosophy

in:

English and Comparative Literature

It is entitled:

The Big Baby Crime Spree and Other Delusions

This work and its defense approved by:

Chair: Brock Clarke

Michael Griffith

James Schiff

The Big Baby Crime Spree and Other Delusions

A dissertation submitted to the

Division of Research and Advanced Studies
of the University of Cincinnati

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

DOCTORATE OF PHILOSOPHY (Ph.D.)

in the Department of English and Comparative Literature
of the College of Arts and Sciences

2006

by

Darrin Michael Doyle

B.A. Western Michigan University, 1996
M.F.A. Western Michigan University, 1999

Committee Chair: Brock Clarke, Ph.D.

The Big Baby Crime Spree and Other Delusions: Short Stories
Darrin Doyle

Dissertation Abstract

My creative work focuses on the notion of belief – not religious belief, necessarily, but belief (mistaken or not) in our ability to control the circumstances that shape us: as Wallace Stevens wrote, "It is the belief and not the god that counts." Thematically, my works feature the following characteristics: elements of the fantastic; dark humor; and working-class protagonists who seek to palliate some unnamable dissatisfaction in their lives and who seek this correction through obsessive behavior that might be either wonderfully healing or terribly misguided – the results are in the eye of the beholder. The tensions between the fantastic and the realistic, between blue-collar and academic concerns, between knowing and not-knowing, between what we internally perceive and the external truth – unresolved oppositions like these are what create the lasting effects of literature, and they are what I strive to cultivate in my writing. Such binaries constitute the mystery and meaning of fiction, and they are, to quote Flannery O'Connor, what "keeps the short story from being short."

Dissertation Prospectus

for

Darrin Michael Doyle

Committee Chair:
Brock Clarke

Committee:
Michael Griffith
Jim Schiff

My dissertation is made up of two parts: a collection of short stories entitled *The Big Baby Crime Spree and Other Delusions* fulfills the creative component; the critical component is a scholarly essay called "Tears, (Not So) Idle Tears: Empathy and Imagination in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*." I have scheduled my defense for August 2nd, 2006, and will graduate that same month.

C R E A T I V E D I S S E R T A T I O N

The Big Baby Crime Spree and Other Delusions: Short Stories

My collection focuses on the notion of belief – not religious belief, necessarily, but belief (mistaken or not) in our ability to control the circumstances that shape us. Thematically, my stories feature all or some of the following: elements of the fantastic; dark humor; and working-class protagonists who seek to palliate some unnamable dissatisfaction in their lives and who seek this correction through obsessive behavior that might be either wonderfully healing or terribly misguided.

I have always been drawn toward transformation literature and literature that employs elements of the preternatural, such as Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Edgar Allan Poe's short

stories, and more recent works like the fiction of Judy Budnitz and Aimee Bender, which utilize lyrical writing and inventive metaphors to defamiliarize the mundane. The fantastic is a satisfying mode for aesthetic reasons, but also because it forefronts my theoretical interest in the merging of epistemological and ontological concerns. That is, the fantastic can create, to use Michel Foucault's term, a "heterotopy" of worlds by thrusting two or more disparate realities into the same story and thereby forcing the characters (and by extension, the reader) to question both our knowledge of the world as well as what designates a "world" in the first place. The result is an unsettling blend of comedy and dark pathos in a setting that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar.

In my story "Barney Hester," the narrator is a grown man who, as part of his therapy, is finally committing to paper the experience of losing a childhood friend – the titular twelve-year-old boy who was swallowed whole, in front of the narrator's eyes, by a neighborhood girl. "Tugboat to Traverse City" tells of a rustic sightseeing boat that becomes engulfed in impenetrable fog while chugging northward on Lake Michigan. When a feverish five-year-old jumps overboard and cannot be found, mania builds among the tourists until most of them, in a bizarre suicidal debauch, also leap into the water. The final remaining group huddles together on the deck, shutting the tragedy out of their minds, passively waiting for the captain to emerge from his quarters, comfortable in their belief that inaction is the only appropriate action. "Sores" deals similarly with issues of faith and action, as a man tries without success to discover the root-cause and cure of unsightly but painless and harmless lesions that gradually and mysteriously cover his body. I believe that fiction's power derives from its detachment from the known world: "the artist creates, by the energy of his mind…a world that isn't there, a dream…the deeper his trance and the greater his divorce from ordinary reality, the greater is likely to be the

effect of the artist's work on the reader" (Gardener 203, 204). Kafka's K. "stood for a long time gazing into the illusory emptiness above him" (*The Castle,* 3), and I believe fiction in general – but especially stories that employ the absurd and the fantastic – gives us opportunities to gaze at this "illusory emptiness," the captivating unreality that in fact has a great deal of substance.

Even while I tout the benefits of fantastic fiction, I admire and emulate many writers in the realist tradition, from Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and John Cheever to the so-called dirty realism of Raymond Carver. Carver eloquently describes the potential strength of lean, exact prose: "It's possible…to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power" (89). Hemingway makes a similar call, saying, "It is accuracy of perception, not solemnity of tone, that counts" (Douglas 35). While I certainly don't always apply such a rigidly photographic approach to my own fiction, I do keep these ideas in my mind as I write, recalling the warning of Cynthia Ozick that "Too much metaphor overloads us with softness" (177).

Like the aforementioned realist writers, my stories also feature blue-collar, sometimes uneducated protagonists who are confined by the circumstances of their working lives. For example, "The Odds" deals with a thirty-year-old man who lives with his grandmother. The man believes he is gifted at spotting people with a "loser profile" and thus earns his income by betting against such types at pool halls (he doesn't play; he simply watches, assesses, and bets against the one likely to lose). When his grandmother has a brain aneurysm and needs surgery, the man decides that his only chance to break a long line of genetic bad luck (his dad and two of his uncles have died of various diseases) is to wager that the doctor is a loser and that Death will win. "The Hiccup King" tells of a man, a mover by profession, who has had the hiccups for

eighteen months. His wife has divorced him, ostensibly because of this disorder, but more likely because she has earned her master's degree, and her tastes have changed to include "pottery catalogues and oak bookshelves and operas." The mover embarks on a quest to meet the man who holds the record for longest bout of hiccups, only to discover that this record-holder's hiccups ceased a long time ago, and he has been defrauding the Guinness Book for decades. In both of these examples, the characters are anchored to blue-collar lifestyles that both trap them and simultaneously spur them into action so that they might either free themselves or, at the least, re-see their lives in a better light.

As a way of blending realism and the fantastic, I employ dark humor and grotesque characters in the vein of Flannery O'Connor, Nathanael West, and Sherwood Anderson. In part, this style is achieved by introducing hyperbolic characters into absurd – and often absurdly grim – situations. Think of West's *Day of the Locust* with its violent dwarf and cartoonish cowboy; or O'Connor's Ph.D. student whose wooden leg is stolen by a travelling Bible salesman. The protagonist of my story "The Big Baby Crime Spree" – a hospital janitor whose live-in father is a long-suffering Alzheimer's patient – believes salvation lies in kidnapping six newborn babies from the hospital. He intends to train them to rob convenience stores (he believes that babies don't get fingerprints until they are three months old) so he can raise enough money to put his dad in a real nursing home. He gets involved in an intense relationship with a woman who is just as desperately bound to her own delusion – of compiling fan emails about John Lennon (that she writes herself, under fake names) into a publishable book – ending in a mutual unmasking of each other's false hopes that is both comic and tragic.

Some of my stories employ idiosyncratic first-person voices, complete with colloquialisms, to further bridge the realistic and the fantastic. O'Connor writes, "You can't say

anything meaningful about the mystery of a personality unless you put that personality in a believable and significant social context. And the best way to do this is through the character's language" (104). She goes on to cite an Andrew Lytle story in which an old lady "says contemptuously that she has a mule that is older than Birmingham, [and] we get in that one sentence a sense of a society and its history" (105). In other words, the "mystery of personality," as O'Connor calls it, while grounded in reality and expressed through real idiomatic language, can imbue ordinary situations and descriptions with the feeling of the extraordinary. Voice alone, and each character's particular view of the world, can introduce a feeling of uncanniness and surrealism into ordinary situations. For example, in my story, "Ha-Ha, Shirt":

> Shirt and Ha-Ha come outside and find me sitting on the pavement, and it isn't yet 2 AM so we drive to the Hot-N-Now for olive burgers to help fill our stomachs, which is good except Shirt makes a scene in the drive-thru and winds up crushing an olive burger in his fist and shaking it at the lady and yelling "This is extremely cheap!" with a lot of conviction and intensity while the burger guts fall all over his lap and the silver ledge of the burger window. I try to salvage some of the massacre from his lap after we pay less than what we owe and gun it, but Shirt knocks my hand away and tells me to eat my own goddamn burger, which I do and do.

The first-person narrator's potential for unreliability complicates the possibility of any empirical, dogmatic truth. In "Under a Spell," the narrator, whose husband is brain-damaged because of a barbell that crushed his skull during a workout, comes to believe that he is smarter than the three-year-old level at which the doctors have assessed him. She feels certain that the ice cream sandwiches her husband gorges upon, which violate her own strict health-food diet, are his clever way of provoking her into confessing the affair she was having before and during his hospitalization. As the reader sees the narrator interacting with other people, questions arise as to whether she herself has been eating the ice cream sandwiches, whether her affair really ended, and whether the baby she carries was actually fathered by her husband.

The central driving force for all the protagonists in my collection is a willingness to believe in something that they know, or suspect, is not true. It is their belief in fiction that adds both clarity and confusion to their lives. The tensions between the fantastic and the realistic, between blue-collar and academic concerns, between knowing and not-knowing, between what we internally perceive and the external truth – unresolved oppositions like these are what create the lasting effects of literature, and they are what I strive to cultivate in my writing. Such binaries constitute the mystery and meaning of fiction, and they are, to quote O'Connor once more, what "keeps the short story from being short" (95-6).

C R I T I C A L C O M P O N E N T

Tears, (Not So) Idle Tears: Empathy and Imagination in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*

Wai-Chi Dimock's 1990 article "The Economy of Pain: The Case of Howells" argues that one of the social functions of the novel at the end of the nineteenth century was to broaden the public's perception of human interconnectedness, and as a result, to cause "cognitive conditions for moral responsibility" (100). In other words the novel, as an art form, could influence behavior by showing that each person had a responsibility to ease the sufferings of others. Dimock centers specifically on William Dean Howells's definition of the novel's virtue: "(It) lives in its formal amplitude, its ability to encompass all things and connect all mankind" (102). The resulting sense of connectedness, according to Dimock, would inspire those of the leisure class to "treat the welfare of the poor and weak as their own responsibility" (100). By reading novels, society would find a moral solution to the problem of suffering – the fortunate would understand that helping the less fortunate would ultimately benefit the whole.

However, Dimock fails to acknowledge another, perhaps more important, consequence of such increased social consciousness: that of allowing those of the lower class to actually enter into the leisure class. If the novel is able to show the leisure class that they are connected to the bourgeois, then logically the reverse could be said. Novels could provide the lower class with a window into high society and could essentially "teach" them how to embody "upper-class character."

For more than a century, critics (including Howells himself) have positioned Howells as disdainful toward romantic and sentimental fiction. However, a close reading of his most durable work, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), reveals that distinguishing between modes of fiction is not Howells's greatest concern, at least regarding the effect of either upon an audience. In late nineteenth century America, this effect was, namely, internal change within the common, non-aristocratic reader, who was more than likely female. This hypothetical woman, through novel reading, would view herself among the upper classes, thus giving her license to move freely to a higher social status – not in a monetary way, but in a deeper, socio-psychological sense. As Cathy Davidson writes, "Novels allowed for a means of entry into a larger literary and intellectual world and a means of access to social and political social events from which many readers would have been otherwise largely excluded" (10).

By examining the very different fates of Penelope Lapham, whose novel-reading provides her with class mobility, and Irene Lapham, who fails to ascend the social ladder despite being as pretty as a painting, my essay highlights two aspects of *Silas Lapham* that have been overlooked or misrepresented by critics: first, that Howells understood class mobility to be an inevitable result of novel-reading in general, not of realism specifically; secondly, that *Silas*

Lapham positions the true artistic "debate" not between realism and romanticism, but between novels and visual art forms: namely, painting and architecture.

Reading fiction, I argue, engenders imagination and inspires empathy – key abilities for social mobility in the changing post-Civil War economy, in which aristocracies were being replaced by entrepreneurs. Unlike the visual arts, such as portrait painting, in which meaning is prescribed, fiction, as a non-representational art form, depends upon the reader to help create its meaning, and thus transfers a great deal of imaginative power to the reader. Whether popular, romantic, realist, magical-realist, postmodern – the labels themselves are unimportant; what matters is that engaging with fiction has real-life consequences.

My essay eradicates the dialectic between realism and romanticism in favor of an argument for the broad value of literature. The critical component of my dissertation, therefore, connects to my creative component via the power of belief to enrich our lives – even, and perhaps especially, belief in something that we know to be untrue. As Wallace Stevens wrote, "It is the belief and not the god that counts" (162).

Works Cited

Carver, Raymond. *Call if You Need Me.* New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2001.

Davidson, Cathy. *Revolution and the Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Dimock, Wai-Chi. "The Economy of Pain: The Case of the Howells." *Raritan*. 9.4 (Spring 1990): 99-120.

Douglas, Ann. *A Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s.* New York: The Noonday Press, 1995.

Gardner, John. *On Moral Fiction.* New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Kafka, Franz. *The Castle.* Willa and Edwin Muir, trans. New York: Schocken Books, 1988.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986.

Ozick, Cynthia. *Quarrel and Quandary.* New York: Vintage International, 2000.

Stevens, Wallace. *Opus Posthumous*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957.

The Odds

My grandma had a brain aneurysm the other week, while peeling onions at the kitchen counter. Her reading glasses were on, but not to aid her vision. She has always maintained that the lenses deflect the onion fumes, keeping her crying to a minimum. I've heard conflicting opinions about this glasses/no glasses effect on onion tear stimulation, but this is the position my grandma maintained.

She lost consciousness with the knife in her hand. Luckily she didn't stab herself, but her face met the table as she collapsed. I was on the sofa. I heard the thud, heard the metallic skipping of eyeglasses across linoleum, and came running. The first thing I did was cover her legs. Her dress had bunched up on her hips, and with the stockings ending at the knees she looked withered but weirdly salacious. I was uncomfortable; Grandma's mouth was bleeding. She convulsed. Her eyes had gone white.

After she got checked into the hospital, I kicked myself for not recognizing the warning signs. She'd been complaining of sharp headaches for a few weeks and occasionally saw two of Angela Lansbury on reruns of *Murder, She Wrote*. She'd been "misplacing" her keys when she had them in her hand. One morning she called me "Martin," the name of her son – my dad – who is ten years deceased.

When the intracerebral hemorrhage hit, it flooded her brain with blood. That's why she lost consciousness and fell. Her jaw (the mandible, specifically) broke when her face hit the table. The doctor – his name was Hillvan Socrates – gave me the diagnosis. He was a tall, thick, red-faced Greek, heavy on the eyebrows, who appeared to be approaching retirement age. He said they had done X-rays and I should be thankful she didn't have any spinal injuries in the neck, which sometimes happens when jaws crack.

He talked on for a few more minutes, pointing with his pen at a cutaway drawing of a skull with a brain inside it that was on some kind of easel-type thing next to his desk. His nostrils were formidable black holes – I imagined that with a well-positioned flashlight I could illuminate his own brain cavity and follow more closely what he was saying. Socrates said he could perform an operation to drain the blood, but at her age anything could happen. This meant, I assumed, that she had little chance of survival.

* * *

I'd been on a hot streak for the previous six months. Pool was my thing, mostly, though I wasn't a shark. I had what I thought was a pretty interesting angle, spending from nine until two every night at various bars simply watching people, drinking beer, getting a sense of who was a regular, who was a decent player, etc. Over time I'd cultivated a "winner" profile, an amalgam of physical attributes, clothing habits, hairstyles and whatnot. Winners had self-assured movements, controlled gestures. They stood up straight, didn't need to laugh at every attempted joke, sipped their drinks rather than guzzled. They weren't cocky, just precise in their expenditure of energy. I also had to consider the context of each situation – if there were two "loser" types together, obviously one of them would emerge victorious, and I had to calculate who was the lesser loser.

Then, when a couple guys squared off, I'd lay fifty bucks on the table and say, "I think Johnny here's gonna win this one." If Johnny's opponent didn't want to bet, then fine. Usually he did.

This was my main source of income. I didn't win every time, but my success percentage stood at around eighty. Now and then, of course, I'd have the loser waiting for me in the parking lot, ready to fuck up my face, but I made a point of walking out with the winner so he could

defend me. Some of the losers thought it was a big racket, that I was in cahoots with the other player, but usually they didn't because they'd made the bet, they'd lost, end of story. My face got pounded exactly two times in as many years. I considered this an acceptable rate of hazard.

Aside from the $500 a week or so I pulled in on the pool gig, I wagered on whatever people were willing to wager on. Here are some examples: I bet $25 that my buddy Earl couldn't walk across the living-room floor with an empty beer bottle on his head; I won $40 from a drunk at the local brewpub who insisted that Rush's *2112* was released before *A Farewell to Kings*. Miscellaneous things like that. My biggest score to date was from a Pharmacia bigwig who frequented the golf club where I worked briefly as a caddy. He handed me six hundred smackers for missing a putt from four feet, three inches.

My eyes and ears are in a perpetual state of awareness; they are my bodyguards. There's a trancelike state, like a pre-orgasm masturbation feel, a tingle in my gut, when I can sense both a betting man and the circumstances in which to trap him.

* * *

Grandma was conscious in her hospital bed. She was understandably a little grumpy, but sporadically so because most of the time she was spaced-out from the drugs. My initial plan had been to feed her her meals, but of course her broken jaw prevented chewing. She was fed intravenously, so I did what I could: I sat beside her; I read to her from the newspaper; I held her hand. Her thought process, considering the saturated condition of her brain, seemed surprisingly cohesive, especially in short bursts. She asked about her bills, and I told her not to worry, that I was taking care of things.

We'd been living together for eighteen months. She provided me with a comfortable house, hot meals, an address, some conversation. I made sure the bills were paid, the lightbulbs

were functioning, the mail made it inside, and on and on. I think she appreciated my friendship as well. We liked each other in the same way an old dog and a tiny kitten will become chums. Our differences – in age, sex, experience, attitude, clothing style, diet – bonded us and made us protective of each other.

Grandma had outlived all of her children, which is tragic. Her youngest daughter, my Aunt Carla, died first, from a freak case of pneumococcal pneumonia, at nineteen. Next to go was my dad, Martin, at the age of fifty. He suffered a stroke, lived for eleven more months, and then passed quietly in his sleep.

Friends who know me well, know my family situation, have remarked that it's strange for someone like me, who has suffered many blows of "bad luck," to be such an avid gambler. I've never seen these things as "bad luck." They were just occurrences that affected a small group of people within a certain radius. I view life as a big pond, where it's raining. I'm in a certain area of the pond. The rain is what happens to me, what happens to people around me. Sometimes it sprinkles, sometimes it pours. The raindrops make ripples. We feel these ripples when they hit us, we feel turbulence. At times the ripples overlap each other so we're feeling turbulence compounded by other turbulence, but nobody feels *everything* that's going on in that pond. It's actually *good* luck that we don't.

At ten-thirty p.m. I thought Grandma was asleep when she opened her eyes, looked at me, and said, "You hurt your foot. Poor darling hurt his foot." The skin surrounding her face bandage, what I could see of it, was the color of a rotten banana. Her cheeks were sagging so much that the bottoms of her eyeballs were exposed, like her face was melting off the bone. She went on a bit more about my foot, in a near-inaudible clenched-jaw whisper, then took a deep breath through her nose, sighed, and said, "Poor little Wayne McClane."

My name isn't Wayne. Wayne was her middle child, my dad's younger brother. Our family name is not "McClane." "Wayne McClane" was a nickname Grandma had given to Wayne when he was seven. It had something to do with a local sax player in a VFW band who Wayne was the spitting image of. Folks used to tease Grandpa that Wayne wasn't really his boy.

It gets more complicated when you realize that my mother, four years before my father's death, ran away with Wayne to Portland, Oregon. It was a big family scandal, for which my mother has never apologized. I believe she would say that it's impossible to know the human heart and that if the heart directs you to do something, it can't be wrong. Quite possibly she views her heart as a separate being, some kind of Siamese twin capable of making its own decisions, decisions which – unfortunately! – affect her. It's her heart; she knows it better than the rest of us. Anyway, Wayne's ship came in two years after my father's, in the form of colon cancer. It ripped through him in a matter of months, and then Grandma had no more children. My mother is still alive.

* * *

Grandma's surgery was scheduled for Wednesday morning. It was Monday evening when she called me "Wayne McClane." Doctor Socrates sat me down in his office at midnight and explained the operation. His fingers were hairy, and he was fond of plucking at the hairs. They were going to make a hole in Grandma's head, stick a tube inside, and drain out the blood. The broken jaw had exacerbated the flow of blood into the brain. Her condition was not dire, he said, but tenuous. It was a risky operation, even for someone in good health, so Grandma's chance of survival sat in the murky area of 25%.

I shook his hairy hand up and down and thanked him, then left. Back at Grandma's, I smoked about twenty-five cigarettes. She didn't allow smoking in her house. I'd never broken

this rule before, but I was stressed. Her house felt like a cave, quiet and oppressive. A dog barked outside the entire night.

* * *

I had to bet on Death. I had no choice. If I'd bet on Life, then Doctor Socrates would have had a vested interest in botching the surgery. I'm not implying that he would have, but in any case it would've been much tougher to convince him to participate. Besides, I had two other, very valid reasons for betting on Death: 1) I'd pegged Socrates as a loser, and 2) I knew about odds, and the Lawrence family had never beaten them.

On Tuesday morning I caught Socrates in the hallway at St. Mary's and invited him out for a drink that night. He balked at first, as I knew he would. Even an innocuous thing like socializing with a patient's relative probably either violated some ethical code or, at the least, felt like a violation. But I can be persuasive when I need to be, and I could see in his hunched step, his heavy jowls and bag-bearing eyes, that he needed a break from his life. All day I pestered him until he relented.

We met at a sports bar. I barely recognized him without the white coat and clipboard. He was encased in an argyle sweater, and his gut filled the space between his chair and the table. He was busy deshelling and swallowing an entire bowl of peanuts. I bought him a pricey scotch and went to work.

I learned that he was married (thirty-six years and running), had four daughters (two in high school, two in college), was educated at a place named Bryant's Medical School (loser), was an absolute ping-pong addict, hated golf, and was missing the big toe on his left foot. Three hours into the conversation, when we were both pretty wet around the gills, I broached the

subject. We'd mentioned Grandma only in a cursory fashion at the beginning of the evening. I'd carefully steered the conversation to other topics, but it was time to begin.

"I have a proposition for you," I said. I leaned forward dramatically, so his mind would infer any number of lurid possibilities.

He started laughing and couldn't stop for an entire minute. He wiped tears from his eyes and managed to croak, "I'm married, son." It was obvious he didn't get out much.

It was a perfect reaction, lowered his guard just a little bit more. Then I cold-cocked him. I said I wanted to make a wager that he couldn't save my grandma.

When he realized that I was serious, he stood from the table. I'm surprised he didn't toss his drink in my face. He was that angry. His face deepened in its redness until I began to wonder if his airway was blocked. He was confused, drunk, pissed off, insulted, but he lingered at the table – only a few seconds, but long enough to know that he was purposefully, though probably unconsciously, forfeiting his one chance to storm out of the bar. He was slightly – very, very slightly – curious. My proposal was an affront to his vocation, his dignity, his morality. His jowls shook at the hands of their neurological master, but he was attempting to suppress his instincts. He wanted to hear more. It took ten minutes of persuasion, but eventually he stayed, to "hear me out."

That's why I had to bet on Death. I had dragged Socrates' pride to the railroad tracks and tied it down with heavy rope. The train was wailing in the distance, on its way toward him. His skills would be put to the ultimate test. To save a life is miraculous, but to save a life under threat of personal emasculation…

It's what everyone wonders: if I had to perform this piano piece perfectly, from beginning to end, just one time, could I do it? If I was given one chance to toss this crumpled

paper into the trash can from across the room or suffer eternal damnation in Hell, would I succeed?

I bought him another scotch, touching his elbow as I set the glass in front of him. As soon as I sat down, I began chiseling subtly away at him, but never cruelly, never taunting him.

"I guess it would amp up the pressure pretty high," I said.

He chuckled, a rumbling spasm that rocked the table. "You think life and death aren't high enough stakes?" He brushed peanut dust from his chest. He'd stopped making eye contact long ago, but he was still responding to my prompts. "You don't know a thing about pressure."

I let it rest for half a minute, as if considering what he'd just said. Then I added, "But the money makes it too personal. I understand."

"It makes it unethical. Let's call a spade a spade."

"I've been tipping the server. To ensure proper service. Is that unethical?"

And so on. I worked on him for the better part of two hours. The drinks kept coming. I played it without emotion. Doctors are reasonable people who respond to reasonable arguments. I described my family situation, all the deaths that had made up my life. I told him that I wanted to give Grandma a proper, respectful funeral and that she didn't have a life insurance policy. These things were true. In fact, I never lie to people. It's one of my most admirable qualities.

* * *

The surgery took place at one p.m.. I walked alongside Grandma's gurney as they wheeled her down the corridor. She was too weak to hold my hand, too weak to raise her head or to move any part of her body, but her eyes had a lucid, greedy quality about them, as if she were absorbing everything, like a corpse given five more minutes to get one last look at things. I

reflected on my family's strangely fragile genetic make-up. We were all damaged people, damaged by life.

Doctor Socrates was supremely detached and clinical in his brief pre-surgery discussion with me in the hallway while Grandma was being anesthetized. His assistant gave me papers to sign as the doctor explained the procedure once again, glancing over the tops of his bifocals at his ever-present clipboard. I searched his gestures, expressions, and vocal inflections for signals – I wanted to be sure the bet was still on, as I've been burned before by people who, after losing, claim not to have been serious in the first place.

A barely perceptible gesture before he walked into the operating room was enough to know. There was a shift in the way his eyes met mine. It was a flash of aggression, a flicker of a challenge. He was communicating something. Something like, "Just wait and see, you son of a bitch. You better have your checkbook ready." I wondered as he disappeared behind the door if he'd brought along cash or if his confidence was too high to allow that.

* * *

Nothing remarkable had sprung from our family line. We were working-class types – mechanics, drywallers, movers, postmen – who'd carved a comfortable niche in the social space between the farm where my father grew up and the university, which one in three of the Lawrence siblings had attended. My dad was a plumber for twenty-eight years, my mother a bank teller until she ran away with Wayne, at which point she didn't have to do any work because he was an engineer with an actual degree from college.

We Lawrences were all tired people. Even at a young age I was calm and placid to the point of being perceived, repeatedly, as medicated. My parents were the same. The house was silent at most hours of the day and night. My father smoked cherry cigarillos and read

catalogues in his armchair. My mom stitched up sweaters with the old, humming Singer. All of their hobbies involved total silence. Nobody shouted in our house. Nobody confronted problems. We kept everything inside. They were in bed and snoring by nine o'clock.

My alcohol use has been a real blessing. It serves to ignite me, to involve me actively with the world, to take those pond ripples I mentioned earlier and turn them into "hang ten"-type waves I can surf on. However, it's difficult to shake the sensation that all I'm doing is acting when I'm around other people, that my true self is inside me, playing solitaire with a double deck of cards on the coffee table, a dim lamp glowing in the corner of the room.

It's appropriate, I think, that so many deaths have occurred in my family over a short period of time. An underlying Lawrence sentiment has always been that the deceased is sort of lucky to be relieved of the burden of consciousness. From past funerals I remember comments like, "Well, now he doesn't have to work another day," or "He looks more peaceful than he ever did before," or, what Grandma said to me at my dad's wake, "He's living in his dreams now, Jerry."

* * *

Two weeks after Grandma's funeral, I received a brief letter from my mom, expressing her condolences. She enclosed a check for $200 with the sympathy card. The postmark was from Lincoln, Nebraska, which meant she had moved again and probably had a new boyfriend.

At the funeral, I met a few distant cousins for the first time. I shook their hands and talked to them about the weather. My great-aunt Thelma, ninety years of age, arrived in her wheelchair, which she'd decorated with black bows. I hadn't seen her since I was ten. Mostly, though, it was friends and acquaintances that Grandma had made over the years. Fifteen people

stood at her graveside and watched her go into the ground. Keeping Grandma's "onion tear stimulation" theory in mind, I wore my sunglasses, but it didn't help.

Doctor Socrates made an unexpected appearance. During the final blessing of the body, I spotted him leaning against a tree a short distance away, watching. He wore a hat, something like a fedora, which concealed his face partially, and a gray trenchcoat. It struck me as a very cinematic moment. I touched the casket to say good-bye to my grandma and my friend.

I caught up with the doctor at his car. The first thing I did was pat him on the shoulder and say, "I didn't expect to see you here. Grandma would've appreciated it."

He brushed my hand away, grabbed his keys from his coat pocket, and told me in a whisper that I was a fucking bastard. His eyes were rimmed with red. He told me that if I ever tried to talk to him again he would personally break my legs. As a last gesture before driving away, he spat on the pavement near my shoes.

* * *

I miss Grandma. She never judged me, never criticized. I cried a few more times when I heard the theme song from *Murder She Wrote*. I kept all Grandma's photo albums, too, which make me choke up when I flip through them. Now that I have $2500 from the bet, along with the $3600 from Grandma's estate sale, I stay away from pool tables. My plan is to live off the money for four months, then hop a Greyhound and go find my mom.

I'm not going to yell at her. I'm not looking to squeeze an apology, or tears, out of her. I don't want to pick a fight with her or her new man. Sure, I plan on giving her Grandma's photo albums, and she's likely to see this as a provocation, filled as they are with pictures of my dad. And I'm certainly planning to hang around her as closely as I can, in her house if possible, in a

nearby hotel if necessary, for a long, long time. Eventually, something's got to give. One of us will emerge as the clear victor.

I like to win bets. Anyone I know will tell you that I like to win. A pretty girl in a tanktop is nice, but betting is the more intense experience in the end. However, I'm not what many would call a typical gambler. Horseracing, NFL, NBA, NHL, the Major Leagues – those things don't interest me. If someone's going to break my legs I want it to be because I won, not because I lost.

Tugboat to Traverse City

The red foghorn startled us all into silence. The women covered the children's ears. The men chuckled at the women. The women laughed at each other. The first mate stepped through the cabin door and apologized for the noise. Poised five feet above us, atop the tugboat's upper deck, he said the fog was as thick as oatmeal and that visibility was less than forty feet and likely to get worse. He assured everyone that there was no danger. We would make it to Traverse City on time. With a wave and a smile and the delicate click of the latch, he disappeared behind his narrow metal door once again.

The other passengers – some two dozen in all, standing in groups of four, five, six – resumed talking. Three hours ago, at the five p.m. Ludington departure, with the sun bathing our faces and well-wishers waving *bon voyage* from the shoreline, we were strangers to one another. The tugboat had chugged pleasantly ahead as the land shrank in its wake. Each family, each group of friends, each couple, had stood in isolation along the rail, pointing at the glistening, undulating skin of the lake, commenting privately into each other's ears.

Then, as twilight fell and the fog grew out of the water, the crowd had divided, with ease, into clusters of like-minded. The conversations centered around the weather.

From surrounding groups we caught the words "fog" and "foggy" and "dead." Monica rubbed her arms. Rick removed his flannel and draped it over her shoulders. Mitch continued his story about a baseball game he'd played in in high school.

"So this guy whacks a long fly ball between right and center," he said, "and I'm hauling ass toward it, fog everywhere and getting thicker as I run. I can't see a goddamn thing in front of me. Just as I'm reaching out my mitt where I think the ball's gonna land" – he acted out the

gesture – "Wham!" he yelled. "I trip over something, a log I'm thinking, and down I go. Boom. The ball conks me on the back of the head. I'm out," he said, "cold."

Nobody responded. Deep down, we were waiting for the punch line. We needed humor. Our own fog was closing in. The nervousness it inspired caused us to recall, with internal pride, that this tugboat trip was *ours*. We owned it for as long as it took to reach Traverse City. We had paid for it with hard-earned money. We had refused the conventional passenger ship, the four-story *S. S. Badger* with its four-cylinder Skinner Unaflows and coal-fired steam engine, cushioned seats, overpriced cocktails, snack bar, and intercom voice chattering about the shoreline and the resident seagulls. We'd exchanged pampering for a chance to smell the lake, to feel the cold wind, to feel hunger. We craved discomfort, or at least its beginnings. We craved danger, or at least its possibility, which could make an equally good story, if told right.

Mitch continued. "I wake up two minutes later. Everyone's gathered around, staring down at me. They ask if I'm all right, the coach is wiggling his fingers, asks me how many he's holding up." He paused to light a cigarette, inhale, exhale, watch the smoke leave his mouth. "Come to find out I tripped over a naked man. A naked man in center field." He laughed, and looked at each of us.

Monica's laughter triggered a bout of sneezing. We watched, amazed, as she sneezed eleven times, which made us laugh louder. Rebecca dug a packet of tissue from her purse and gave it to Monica. When our wave of hysteria settled, we looked around, teary-eyed. The other passengers were shooting unfriendly glances our way, suggesting that our level of fun was simply too high for this excursion. The solemnity of the fog's approach seemed to agree with them, but we didn't care.

"Strangest thing is," Mitch resumed, "I never actually *saw* the naked guy. Everybody else saw him – my buddies, my folks, the coach – said he had a long beard and shaggy hair – a textbook madman, I guess. He ran away as soon as they got close. They called the cops, and the cops searched the streets for hours. Never found him."

Gabriel spoke up. "So I guess your question is – if you trip over a naked man but never *see* the naked man, did you really trip over the naked man?"

Our conversation was interrupted by the foghorn. It rumbled our guts. We formed a row along the railing. We stood, like the other passengers, facing the fog, looking at it, studying it. We were surrounded. The air was damp and heavy. The fog had grown thicker, whiter. Wisps of it now touched the boat, delicate fingers breaking apart on the rusted railing. Mitch blew his cigarette smoke into the fog. Rebecca fanned the air, trying to clear a path, but she only managed to stir the cloud before her. Soon we were bored of playing with the fog. We wanted it to go away.

The first mate emerged again, stooping through the cabin door, which closed behind him. He descended the four-runged rope ladder to the deck. He was built like a telephone pole. He fidgeted as if trying to find a comfortable angle to position his elbows.

"So what do you all think of this fog, huh?" He broadcasted a pleasant grin to his dependents.

"It sure is something," an old man said.

"How do you tell where you're going?" a woman asked.

"We were hoping *you* could tell us the way," the first mate said with a wink. A few people chuckled. One of them was the first mate.

"How much farther is it?" a different woman asked. Her tone was not cordial. She was the mother of a sick boy, maybe four or five years old, who slept at her feet.

In the yellow lantern light (we had paid for this crudity), visible only as a tangled mop of hair beneath a red wool blanket, the sick boy resembled a sea creature pulled from the bottom of the lake.

"Two hours in good weather," the first mate said, wiping a film of mist from his forehead with a handkerchief. "Maybe three or four tonight. We've just reached the tip of the pinky." He held forth the palm of his right hand, forming a crude Michigan map, and pointed to the inner tip of his ring finger. "Traverse City, as you probably know, is in this area. We'll get you there as soon as humanly possible."

He tried to lift spirits by sharing an old lakefaring tale about a fur trader by the name of Gabe "Lurker" Ludlow, who in 1894 set off for Michigan from Chicago. Breaking the cardinal rule of long-distance water travel, Ludlow had attempted the journey alone. After eight hours he got caught in a terrible fog, worse even than tonight's. We all looked around and wondered how it could be worse.

"Back then," the first mate continued, "they didn't have high-tech guidance and radars and such." His chest inflated with pride. "Old Lurker can't find his way, ends up going due north, just like we are, right up the center of Lake Michigan, out here on 22,000 square miles of water! He's lost for three weeks, eats all his food, resorts to fishing. Eats perch raw right out of the lake."

The foghorn ripped a hole in the air. People visibly jumped. The sick boy woke in a panic and began crying for his mother, who knelt and caressed his head. The boy's face was the

color of a marshmallow. A tongue emerged from his mouth and began swabbing his cracked lips.

"So anyway, this story's got a happy ending," the first mate interjected. He was uncomfortable now; his elbows flapped impotently, like chicken wings. "Ludlow winds up on the shores of the U.P., all the way at the top of the lake, just about where Manistique is nowadays. A nice Indian tribe takes him in, and a few weeks later Ludlow trades his watch for enough gold to live as a wealthy man. Never gets in another boat for the rest of his life. Ha ha. *Walks* back to Chicago. Ha ha."

The sick boy's mother announced that she needed flu medicine. The first mate chimed in eagerly, saying there was Dramamine in the cabin.

"You told me that an hour after we left," the mother said with measured annoyance, "and every hour since then. He needs *flu* medicine."

The child, who had been moaning, now began hyperventilating. Possibly he was delirious. In a thick voice he proclaimed to the sky that something bad was going to happen. He'd seen it in his dream. Something terrible was about to happen. His eyes were open, large and round, glazed over by the doppelganger alertness of a sleepwalker; he was certain of what he was saying but not a participant in our world as he said it. He tried to sit up, but his mother held him in place against the deck. Still breathing heavily, he closed his eyes. Soon, he was sleeping again.

Rick and Mitch circulated the flask. We took nips to fight the chill. We attracted the attention of a woman in a cinched trenchcoat, who sniffed in contempt before leaning to whisper this contempt into her husband's ear. The husband muttered a derisive comment that none of us could hear because the foghorn bellowed out another rib-shattering note. The lake beneath us

swelled and dipped, which sent some people stumbling. Our little group, however, rallied together, drunk as we were, and grabbed hold of one another's arms for balance. If one of us fell overboard, we were all going.

The lake swell ceased. We were stable again. While detaching, we looked at each other's arms, surprised that such frail things had kept us upright. The mother of the sick boy staggered to the railing and vomited into the water. At this unplanned prompt a cluster of well-wishers gathered around her. They formed a semicircle behind the queasy mother, reaching out to rub and pat her back. To us – to our group, who watched – the backdrop of the white, gathering wall of fog gave the deck the appearance of a stage set. From the touch-happy crowd of actors rose words like "sweetie" and "poor thing."

"People are too fucking nosy," Mitch whispered. We had formed our own circle to pass the flask without scrutiny and protect our faces from the cold mist.

"Every little thing that happens…" Monica whispered.

"If you stop and tie your shoe, somebody's gotta comment on it," Rick whispered.

"Why don't they get a life so they don't have to live everyone else's?" Rebecca whispered.

All these good points went unremarked upon because at that moment the sick boy rose from his sleep. He sat up beneath his blanket, eyes wide with alarm or horror. He stood, unsteadily. His hair resembled two atrophied hands pasted atop his head. He took a step forward, though what was "forward" out here?

While the crowd focused on his mother, the boy shuffled toward the stern, cloaked regally by the floor-length red blanket he clasped at his neck. None of us said a word or moved

to stop him. He shed his covering, climbed the rail, and dropped over the edge, into the fog. We heard the thin splash.

We were frozen in place – arms crossed, hands pocketed, hands on hips, arms dangling, cigarettes dangling. We weren't sure what we'd seen was real, and didn't feel capable of commenting on it. Our common bond was that we'd read the pamphlets, read all the pamphlets, before choosing this particular trip. We'd read so many pamphlets we could have written our own. We'd explored every option meticulously. In the end, we were going from here to there, from A to B – that was all that mattered. Whatever happened on the journey was OK. We'd cemented this agreement even though we'd never actually voiced it.

The only other witness to the event, a doll-sized girl with blond pigtails whose mouth was stained red by the cherry sucker in her mouth, apparently believed what she'd seen. She tugged at her father's coatsleeve and, in a tone we privately wished we hadn't lost, said, "The little boy went swimming."

Panic ensued. The mother rushed to the stern, calling into the fog the boy's name. She picked up his discarded blanket and cradled it. An alert gentleman climbed to the cabin and pounded furiously with his palm upon the door. The engine was cut, stopped dead. Silence, like a heavy drape, fell over us. Life preserver already in hand, the first mate sprang from the cabin. He commanded the passengers to keep calm and to "keep not talking." He said the only way to find the child was by listening. If we could hear him, he said, we could save him. With the new stillness we became more aware of the constant rise and fall of the Great Lake that was our ground. The lake slapped the boat with its sloppy tongue. Nothing was stable. After a moment, the floorboards rumbled as the anchor was dropped.

"That anchor won't reach the bottom!" somebody yelled. "It's gotta be a thousand feet deep!" The rest of the crowd mumbled in agreement.

"What if he's under the boat?" another person added.

"He'll be dragged down with it!"

This prediction caused the mother to burst into a fresh round of hysterics.

The first mate aimed his beam over the lake. "Let's all just keep our heads," he said. His flashlight succeeded in staining the fog yellow. Next he hurled the life preserver, like an enormous Frisbee, out over the railing. The fog swallowed it. Everyone heard the life preserver's splash, but they couldn't see it. The first mate began pulling at the rope, one-handed, drawing the donut toward himself like a fisherman trolling for bass.

"He couldn't have gone far," the first mate said. "Can the boy swim?"

The mother said he could. He could swim. He could tread water and float on his back.

"Good. But we need to be silent," the first mate said firmly, still pulling rope, staring wide-eyed into, and at, nothing. "We need to listen."

The crowd was skeptical. A slim, hard-faced man stepped forward and removed his baseball cap with a flourish. "I'm going in after him," he announced. There was a collective gasp of admiration and disbelief. The man handed his cap to his wife. She held and examined it as her husband walked toward the stern.

"Sir, you'll only endanger yourself," the first mate said. One hand directing the flashlight beam, the other guiding the preserver with the rope, he resembled an orchestra conductor. His face had broken into a sweat. He shone like a waxed quarter.

The capless man demanded to be acknowledged. "Isn't there a goddamn lifeboat on this vessel?" he screamed, searching with his eyes, grabbing at the air with two clawed hands. His

voice broke against the wall of fog and fell into pieces on the deck. In the jaundiced, bandaged moonlight, his skin was the color of urine. His hair jutted and leaned willy-nilly, poking about. We imagined that on shore he was a GM executive or an Amway superstar, but here on the tugboat he might as well have been a homeless lunatic.

"If I. Don't. Get. Some. Quiet," the first mate hissed, "everyone on this vessel will face charges of impeding a rescue attempt."

A silence fell over the crowd. The mother's sobs became the only noise. Our group found a spot where we could sit, on the moist, hard deck. We arranged ourselves in an inward-facing circle, legs Indian-style We wanted nothing to do with the present situation. Everybody else looked at us with bloodless faces.

"Now," the first mate said in a diplomatic voice, "If we could have everyone take a position along the railing and listen for the child's cries."

The passengers obeyed. All except us. Just as their decisions were being determined by forces beyond their control or understanding, so were ours. No one in our group said a word, but it was understood, without discussion, that our course of action during this nightmare would be to pass the flask and finish the trip we had chartered. They didn't need us.

Our decision was not popular. We were grumbled about, scolded with glares and head-shaking and flicked ashes. One woman leaned into Rick's ear and said we were shameful. None of us said a word in response.

"Where's the captain during all this?" Rebecca whispered, scratching a pebble out of its crater in her palm.

"I need to remind you people that this is a group effort," the first mate said to us. He had materialized, quite suddenly, out of the fog behind Rebecca's head. "We need total quiet." He disappeared again.

A few terrible minutes passed. The boy's mother was not the only one crying anymore. Choked sobs could be heard from all corners. Breathing for everyone was difficult; the fog was now among us, as a thin vapor settling into our laps. We listened.

"I hear him," the capless man announced. "I hear him out there."

There was nothing.

"Yes, I hear it too," the woman with the cinched trenchcoat whispered.

"I'm going in," insisted the capless man. "I can't stand here while a child drowns."

He flung off his shirt and leapt over the rail, like a kid hopping a fence to retrieve a baseball. His wife screamed. The men said, "Oh no, oh no," eyes darting, searching for someone to blame. The crowd swarmed to the rail where the man had vanished. Once there, they could do nothing else. The man's wife lost consciousness *and* her husband's cap as she tipped into the arms of a nearby gentleman, who immediately fanned her with his hand. It was a general frenzy.

We – our little group – were the eye of the storm. In our circle there was peace, although a nervous peace to be sure. We were tensed up, physically and mentally. We tried to be one with the boat, with the fog, in order to be separate from the horror, but it was not easy.

"I have to go in after him!" the first mate screamed. He handed the rope and flashlight to someone else (he didn't seem concerned with who took them – it was no one from our group). "Because he disobeyed me," the first mate said, "I must now endanger myself." In a matter of seconds he'd removed his boots, flannel shirt, and socks. He stepped onto the rail. Before

taking the plunge, he turned and offered his last words, words with such action-hero connotations that they would have been comical if not for the circumstance: "I'll be back." He jumped.

Couples clutched each other; prayers for deliverance were screamed into a sky that no one could see. Muted, broken sobs filled the void left by the dormant engine. The rabble sounded like a new breed of farm animal, braying for food.

Our group maintained its silence. What could be done? It was out of our hands. This was our consensus. We had a choice: We could be mastered by the horror, or we could refuse to give it a home in our hearts.

Two male passengers, buddies of the capless man, came to their own decision. They would go into the water together. They would rescue everyone, they said. They were excellent swimmers. They kissed their wives, linked arms with each other, and jumped over the rail. Everyone seemed appeased by this heroic gesture until, a moment later, the sick child's mother broke from the embrace of her appointed caretaker and bolted to the stern. With a shriek, she also dove into the fog.

The remaining passengers became quiet. The Great Lake sucked at the boat like a lozenge. Couples held hands. Families huddled. Then, one by one, each group walked to different areas of the railing. An exodus began. They believed that whatever lay beyond in the whiteness was better than this – this frigid, damp uncertainty, this loneliness, this hole left by their departed comrades. Some of them went quietly, without ceremony, stepping onto the railing and simply leaning into the fog until gravity had its way and pulled them overboard. Others went with dramatic flair, giving primal yells and plunging headlong into the mist. The couples stepped over the edge together, frightened but pleased to be hugging each other's bodies

against the impending cold. There were tears, professions of love, nervous laughter, battle cries. The process took less than two minutes. Then everyone was gone.

We could hear them on all sides, splashing and wailing in the water. Our cigarettes were gone. A rawness crept into our throats. Many questions were on our minds, all focused on the captain: Where was he? Why was he letting this happen? Could he have saved them?

We stood. We helped each other to our feet. We brushed off each other's backsides, as friends do. Our faces were damp; our arms, too. The fog was being absorbed into our bodies, leaving its translucent residue on our surfaces. We turned to look up at the cabin, where presumably the captain was manning his post, though from our vantage point we could not verify this.

"Can anybody see him?" Monica asked, or it may have been Rebecca. The fog had turned us into shadows.

"Should we go up there?" Rick said.

"Or should we just stand here and wait?"

There was a short pause. We were all trying to think, as the sounds of death swelled around us.

"I vote for standing here," someone finally said.

Someone else agreed. Then someone else. We were all in agreement.

Barney Hester

So what about this girl? The one who hyperextended that inhuman jawbone to vacuum up my best friend. It took me fifteen years of therapy and ten years (running) of prescription drugs to convince me that it isn't normal behavior for girls to swallow the boys who like them. Even after all that, I continue to see her cavernous maw in every footprint in the snow, every dark hole in the trunk of a tree. Whenever a baby screams for its bottle, I hear Barney.

Women in general still terrify me. For fifteen years, the act of sex was ruined: Her mouth was in a different place, the head wasn't at the top of my body, but the gesture was the same.

Her name was Tanya. This is a false name. I swore to her that I would never reveal her identity, not to any living soul (although I suppose that the Hesters, should they ever read this, would be able to supply it. No matter.). I will never break my promise. I urinated in my pants as I made that vow. Urinating in one's pants is funny, in theory and in movies. When it really happens, when the body and the mind shut down, when you feel that you are imploding upon yourself – then it's not funny. The simple act of documenting this experience is enough to set in motion those terrible soundless fears, those fears that she will appear at my doorstep or my window, tapping to be let in. I can see her smiling out there. Her eyes are black. Her teeth are white.

* * *

Behind the Hesters' house stood an expanse of wooded land, maybe ten acres. More undeveloped acreage – wooded, barren, grassy – on every side of their house gave the area a lonely, forgotten feel. The birds and crickets were louder than the cars. Barney used to tell me

that the woman down the street, their nearest neighbor at two hundred yards away, mowed her lawn topless. This just proves how isolated these people were, on the outskirts of Grand Rapids, Michigan, close to the Rockford border.

* * *

One time at the Hesters' I stayed later than I'd intended. It was autumn; the sun abandoned us very early. Nightfall had descended swiftly and painlessly. Barney and I lay on our bellies in the basement, engrossed in our hand-held Coleco electronic football game. Ozzy Osbourne, from Danny's room next door, sang *Fairies Wear Boots.*

When eight p.m. rolled around I told Barney I had to go home, so he waited until I wasn't ready, reared back, and leveled me with a punch to the gut. I folded. Then he ran upstairs and told his mom that I'd spit on the carpet. I walked out of the house trying to hold back the tears. My stomach clenched and I was having difficulty breathing. I hopped on my Huffy and rode away.

Normally I made a point of riding as quickly as possible until I reached The Beltline, which was the main road. On that night I could barely pedal. Sitting upright was an enormous job. It was a long, dark, sloping road. Streetlights were scarce. Small mammals scurried into the shadows. I'm not sure if it frightened Barney, his older brother Danny, or his younger sister Margaret. They never seemed scared of anything.

That bike ride physically altered me forever. For reasons I've never been certain of, I lost my balance and fell over the handlebars, directly onto my face. That's why to this day I have a crooked nose and a crimped upper lip. My front teeth were loose, my mouth was filled with blood. I raised my head, spitting. I had fallen in front of somebody's house; as I looked

up, a light in the living room extinguished. Reflecting now, for what it's worth, I'm pretty sure it was Tanya's house.

Here are some things you should know:

1) Barney Hester, at the age of twelve, was swallowed by this girl. This was a girl he loved.
2) I didn't try to stop it.
3) Barney didn't struggle as his head disappeared into her mouth. His arms remained flat at his sides. He did, however, scream like an unfed infant.
4) I loved Barney Hester.
5) He tried to kill me.

* * *

After the punching incident and the ensuing bicycle mishap (which I also blamed on him) I vowed I would never talk to Barney again. As usual, I was weak. He lured me back with his seductive charm and promises of abandoned *Penthouse*s buried in the weeds behind his house. He was a handsome boy. Even then, in fifth grade, I knew this, and I realize now this was part of his hold on me. He had that confidence, that swagger, which good-looking males inevitably adopt. The fifth-grade girls used whatever means necessary to steal personal effects of his – a cutout football he made for a school project, a broken shoelace, his trademark black combs (he had a bucketful in his room) – and sneak to the corner of the classroom to cover them with kisses. The other boys used to get pissed off at this behavior. Not from jealousy, mind you, but because they thought it was insulting to our gender. Barney didn't mind the attention. He smirked about it. Nothing you did to him seemed to faze him.

His big brother used to wallop the living crap out of him. Maybe that's why I cut Barney so much slack. Gangly, red-haired Danny's evening ritual was to sit on Barney's chest and play

the drums on his face. With drumsticks. He adored whipping Barney's naked butt with wet towels until the skin broke open. He gave Barney Indian burns for not doing his chores. He tied Barney up inside the abandoned doghouse for *doing* his chores. He made Barney eat moldy cheese for not doing *Danny's* chores. His parents turned a blind eye to this terrorism partly because his mother was blind, literally (since birth), and partly because his father weighed 500 pounds. Mr. Hester seemed almost too fat to move; chasing down and punishing Danny even once would've been more exercise than Mr. Hester got in a month. Theirs was a grotesque family. Even his little sister, with her innocent-looking plaid Catholic-school skirt, was not exempt from bearing their unsavory genes; she is an albino.

I'll lay off Margaret now. She's the one who cooks my meals and sleeps beside me at night. I won't risk losing those things. We're married. And she has nothing to do with the Hesters – her family – anymore. I love her. When I go inside her, I'm not afraid. I don't worry about never coming out again. There are times when, inside her eyes, in their pink pigment glaze, I see Barney's face. He's usually spitting at me for allowing him to vanish. Just because I see him now and then in Margaret's eyes, it doesn't mean I won't remain with her forever.

* * *

Barney Hester was not a genius. After he disappeared, some people claimed that he'd been a genius. This is a lie. People always try to glorify the victim. He cheated on tests in school. I saw him doing it. As a matter of fact, I was often "coerced" (read: bullied) by Barney into supplying him with answers. His spelling was primitive. His implementation of the scientific method consisted of seeing how many BBs a garter snake could be shot with before it finally croaked. If it somehow turns out that Barney faked his disappearance, his own

swallowing, at the age of twelve, then maybe I would concede that he is a genius. An acting genius for sure.

Sometimes, even after all these years, I look for him. I still live in Grand Rapids. It's a big enough city. It would have been easy for him to be absorbed into the streets. He could've become a prostitute, a thief, a gambler, a gambling prostitute thief, or a bouncer. Any of those romantic things.

When his parents found out Barney was gone, they spent a good deal of their money searching for him. I still have the milk carton with his face and statistics on it:
Barney James Hester Five feet tall Age 12 Born November 12, 1970 Red hair One dimple in his cheek when he smiles Weighs 94 pounds Last seen wearing a blue Detroit Lions jersey with number 17 and the word "Hipple" on the back.

For as much as his folks professed to care about him after he was devoured, it's worth mentioning that I had to provide the police with all the above information, except for age and hair color. My story for the cops, by the way, was that Barney had simply run away into the woods, for no clear reason.

* * *

My first clue that Barney had fallen in love was the smell of Dove soap. One day, with no warning, his hands reeked of it. He'd never smelled like anything other than burped-up Cheetos and bologna sandwiches, so the change was pretty obvious. I found out later that he was washing himself in excess of ten times a day. If he wasn't showering or taking a bath, he was scrubbing his face, neck, arms, hands – any area he could reach in his two-minute trips to the bathroom during science class. One day his bookbag spilled, and four bars of Dove tumbled

onto the floor. I wanted to mock him for this, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. He looked so damn pathetic kneeling down to pick them up. I didn't want to get punched, either.

Talking to Barney was something one couldn't just "do." The moment had to be right, and it had to be on Barney's terms. Most days, he showed no emotion other than anger and apathy. If he laughed, it was at someone else's misfortune. He talked tough, meaning he talked about everything that had nothing to do with anything. He talked football, MTV, cigarettes, bikes, private parts, baseball cards, video games, skateboards. I don't think he ever talked about food. Food didn't interest him unless it was covered with cheese, and then it only interested him in the same way that he interested Tanya.

Once in a while, however, Barney opened up. It was impossible to predict when this would happen. After baseball practice one day, we walked to my house. On the shoulder of the road we came across a dead squirrel. It was crushed and split open, with flies dancing on it. Expecting Barney to lift it by the tail and hurl it at me, I started running. I turned around eventually. He hadn't moved. He was staring down at the squirrel. I went back.

He said, "I don't think this was an accident."

"You think somebody killed it?"

"Of course somebody killed it. But they didn't mean to."

"You should go look up the word 'accident.'"

"This squirrel committed suicide."

Then he told me about his Uncle Lincoln, who had shot himself with an old Army pistol. He said it wasn't really a tragedy since his uncle had wanted to die. Even his family agreed. Everyone was sad and everything, because Linc had been a pretty good guy, but the consensus

among the Hesters was that everyone had the right to do it if it felt like the proper thing. Barney told me that every death was a suicide.

"What if your plane crashes?" I asked him.

"Then it's the pilot committing suicide on behalf of all the passengers."

"You can't commit suicide for someone else."

"Jesus killed himself."

We went to a Catholic school, so this revelation really shocked me. "Jesus wasn't on a plane!" I said.

"He could've saved himself, but he didn't."

I couldn't see what his argument had to do with my argument, but I let it rest. As I said, Barney didn't open up too much, and I didn't want to risk getting ants stuffed down the front of my jeans. Barney removed his shirt and put it over his hands. He peeled the squirrel's body from the pavement. I followed him as he walked with it a few feet into the woods, then tossed it away as hard as he could. He said it was embarrassing for the squirrel, with everyone looking at it and commenting about it. He said the squirrel deserved to be away from all those eyes.

* * *

A week later, he told me about the girl who lived down the street. She was a few years older than us. Barney was smitten with her. He scrawled her name all over his notebooks and textbooks. I finally knew why he'd taken such an active interest in washing himself. I was sleeping over at his house one Friday night when he gave me the dirt.

"Her house is around the bend, on the right-hand side," he said. "She has really big tits. Her hair's long and black and stringy, and when she sits on her porch, reading a book, she likes to twist the hair with her fingers."

That's all Barney could tell me about her.

I asked him, "Where does she go to school?"

He didn't know.

"Where did she move from?"

He said he hadn't noticed anyone living in that house before; maybe they'd always been there.

I asked him if he'd seen her tits, her actual tits, perhaps through her bedroom window.

He slapped the side of my head for even thinking about her actual tits.

It became part of our ritual to ride back and forth past her house on our dirt bikes, hoping to catch a glimpse. There was an agreement that if she ever came out, I wouldn't open my mouth. Only Barney could talk to her, and I was to laugh extra hard at anything Barney said.

Most times, the house looked uninhabited. Once in a while a light would turn on or off and we would get really excited. Barney would stop his bike and pretend to tie his shoe. The drapes in the front window were always drawn, however, so we only saw shadows inside.

This went on for two months. I didn't see the mystery girl. Not once. Barney said that she obviously didn't like me, since she came out of the house "a lot" when I wasn't around. I was ready to give up hope. I'd decided that this girl was nothing more than a fantasy, a diversion Barney had created because I wasn't entertaining enough for him. A snowless December came and went, as I tried unsuccessfully to draw Barney into playing Coleco football, hunting birds with our BB guns – anything that didn't involve the dirty gray house at the bottom of the hill.

* * *

In January there was a blizzard, and with the snow came the girl. Her face was bleeding. She was ushered into the Hesters' house by the grotesquely overweight Mr. Hester, who

normally filled his custom-made recliner from the moment he came home from the Keebler factory until Mrs. Hester woke him to get into bed. But with the twelve inches of snow came a lot of shoveling, and doctors had told Mr. Hester he needed the exercise.

He burst through the door with Tanya squeezed under his arm, her face squashed against his enormous stomach. I think Mr. Hester was, in his arrested condition of social retardation, attempting to both console and restrain her. She was squirming. She screamed. She bit his hand. Cursing, he let her go. She ran to me and started shoving, perhaps in her dazed state thinking that I was the one who'd hit her with the rock-filled snowball.

Barney was frozen to his spot on the carpet. I think there were a couple of things going on in his mind at that moment: first, he was paralyzed at the sight of his dream woman standing in his own house; second, he was horrified that it was *me* she was touching, rather than him, albeit in a rude fashion. If Mr. Hester hadn't thrown his bulk between us, I believe Barney would've joined in with Tanya's assault and I wouldn't be here today to tell this story.

The mess got sorted out. Danny was hauled inside by his ear. He was made to apologize, which he grudgingly did, before flipping Tanya off as he stepped out the door. Mrs. Hester brought some rubbing alcohol and bandages. Tanya snatched these petulantly and applied them to her cuts.

Barney and I sat motionless at opposite ends of the couch, watching. By the rapid blinking and the unsteady breath pattern, I could tell that his brain was going into overdrive. He didn't want to look at the fantasy girl, but his eyes, those pea-green things which for so long had only expressed rage and apathy, were pulled to her. He was terrified. It was the first of only two times he looked weak.

Barney's parents left the room. The three of us sat quietly. After a moment Tanya asked Barney what the fuck he was looking at. I was almost knocked off the couch by the force of her voice. Barney hadn't lied when he'd said she had big breasts; they were gigantic. In fact, her whole body was rather large. If I can tell the truth, I thought she was homely and dumpy. I recalled the numerous times Barney had said fat girls were worthless. Her hair was like black seaweed. Her nose looked like it'd been pinched into the shape of a shark's dorsal fin. She had unusually long fingers, which she used to tug absentmindedly at her detached earlobes. They were pale, bony fingers. They reminded me of icicles. Judging by the dark ditches beneath her eyes, she hadn't had a good night's sleep in months.

Barney demonstrated great tact in laughing rather than trying to answer her profane question. I laughed too, but not as hard as Barney. Mrs. Hester shocked us all by coming into the room with a tray of hot chocolate. In two years she'd never even offered me a glass of water.

Barney threw me a look that meant I was supposed to help his mother. I obeyed, handing out the mugs before taking my seat once again. Mrs. Hester asked Tanya how her head was feeling. Tanya performed a courageous feat. She screwed up her face, distorted it into a queer, mocking grimace, then answered in a perfectly level voice, "It's feeling fine. Thanks for the hot chocolate."

I prepared myself for Mrs. Hester's wrath. She was an alcoholic with a mean streak. Although she was blind, she'd always exhibited an impeccable knack for reading intentions behind the tone of people's voices, like a dog who smells shit on the wind. It wouldn't have surprised me if she'd hurled the tray at the wall and gone rabid on Tanya's ass. Instead, Mrs. Hester simply said, "You're welcome," and walked away.

After that, Tanya began coming over regularly. Barney had promised her that we'd "fuck Danny up" for the snowball. I was always invited along whenever she visited, because although he wanted her all to himself, Barney had confided to me on the playground that she was "empty on the inside." She frightened him. Her presence unnerved him. He said that over the years her guts had fallen out, little by little, and been eaten by stray dogs.

* * *

The three of us spent hours in the back yard, huddled over a floor plan of the Hesters' home that we'd scrawled into the snow. I realized in those moments that three is a good number. In a group of three, you are always next to everyone. It's a perfect circle. That's why Margaret and I have only one child. He's a five year-old boy named Barney.

Our idea was to put Danny's headphones on him while he was sleeping, then destroy his eardrums with his own music. We'd talked about putting dog shit on his floor. Then we'd considered shoving a few pieces of broken glass into his tube socks. A floor plan wasn't necessary for any of the ideas we tossed around, but Barney was a detail-driven boy, and I wasn't about to argue with him. The true joy of those nights was huddling together against the whipping, frozen breeze, flashlights in hand, watching our breath clouds mingle above the crude snow-sketch, our knees touching.

The actual execution of the plan was anticlimactic. Since we had to wait until Danny was sleeping, we chose a Friday. I spent the night, as usual, at the Hesters'. We told his mother we were going to sleep in the basement living room, which was next to Danny's room and which also had a sliding glass door leading into the backyard. In front of the television we lay in our sleeping bags. Barney stuffed handful upon handful of Cheetos into his mouth.

At two a.m., Barney's teeth were bright orange when Tanya's face appeared in all its bloodless glory at the glass door. Barney let her in.

We took turns sneaking up to Danny's door and pressing our ears against it. We had to flatten our entire ear on the door for ten seconds, or else it didn't count. This was terrifying, knowing that Danny could throw open the door at any moment and then do God-knows-what. He was like an ogre in a cave.

After two turns apiece, we determined that he was asleep. The mood turned solemn. We snuck into his room with a flashlight. Barney selected AC/DC's *Back in Black* from the leaning stack of records, and I plugged in the headphones. Tanya had insisted on the privilege of placing the headphones over Danny's ears. As soon as she did, however, he woke up. Barney didn't even get a chance to drop the needle before Danny flung back his covers and started screaming obscenities at us. He jumped out of bed. Tanya kicked him in the shin with her boot. She ran out of the house, leaving the sliding door wide open. The breeze played on the curtains and stirred up the newspaper that was lying on the sofa. Danny punched Barney a few times in the mouth. That was that.

* * *

If Tanya had ever been interested in Barney, which I doubt, she lost interest after that night. That's not to say she didn't come over anymore. She did. The three of us took long walks through the woods. We shot BB guns at birds. We threw snowballs at cars on the Beltline. Despite her rotund figure, Tanya proved to be a remarkably fast runner. She had a natural gift for vanishing into the trees, making no sound whatsoever. Whenever a car skidded to a stop and the driver hopped out to chase us, Tanya became a blur, sprinting smoothly over snow mounds and dead branches, through bushes and fallen saplings, until inevitably she was gone,

only to announce her appearance later, when the coast was clear, by pelting Barney in the face with a snowball.

Barney took these assaults, as well as others, as signs of affection. How could he not? He was blinded and weak. Love to Barney meant punching, spitting, and cursing. But I sensed different motives in Tanya. After all, she never spoke a word to Barney. She talked exclusively to me. When she spit grape seeds at him or thrust her smelly feet in his face, it was with a violence I couldn't ignore. For his part, Barney was so smitten that he could barely talk. The result was that I was constantly in the middle. They each talked to me, but never to each other.

Despite Barney's efforts to the contrary, Tanya and I were occasionally left alone together. Tanya took these opportunities to criticize Barney's clothes, his hair, his house – anything she could think of. Because she always whispered these derisions, it imbued them with a sense of urgency and secrecy. Her lips curled into a grin. She dripped profanities out of her mouth like molasses. Her eyes moved in her head, glancing to the left and right as if she could sense the presence of another being in the room. I became steadily more focused on her breasts as the days went by. When her fingers wrapped around a throw pillow, I imagined she was grabbing my hands, my head, my shoulders – anything – to pull me in for a taste of her moist lips.

* * *

Recently, I was downtown for the annual Thanksgiving parade when I bumped into Danny Hester. He was alone, staring at the newspaper machine. I was reminded of Barney, years before, mysteriously contemplative, hands in his pockets, looking down at the mutilated squirrel.

With my son Barney in tow, I tried to hurry past. Danny looked up. He recognized me. I hadn't seen him in eighteen years. Except for the added age lines, his face was mostly unchanged, but he seemed to have shrunk. And he wasn't Danny anymore, he was –

"Daniel Hester. Remember me?" He shook my hand vigorously. He looked queer in his trenchcoat and three-piece suit. He didn't ask about Margaret, but he did tell me that Mrs. Hester had "kicked the bucket six months ago" from a stroke. The unspoken message, of course, was that I should pass along the news to Margaret.

For whatever reason – reluctance to get involved in family matters, residual fears of an ass-kicking – I didn't mention that Margaret already knew about her mother's death. She'd seen it in the paper and had grieved privately, in her own way. Margaret had divorced herself from Danny and the rest of his family eight years before, and the Hesters seemed to accept this reality in the same way they'd accepted Uncle Lincoln's suicide: It was unfortunate, but unchangeable. If I'm honest, my attitude wasn't far from theirs: I'd never pressed Margaret on why, exactly, she'd estranged herself. After all, did I need more fuel for my hatred of the Hesters? Did I need to claw open whatever psychic scabs my wife still bore, just for my own satisfaction?

I expressed my condolences to Danny. I told him that Margaret would be devastated.

He smiled down at my little Barney, then rubbed Barney's head. I could practically hear the violins as he broke into a sappy, rambling speech about the old days. It was pathetic. He said he felt like shit the way he'd treated Barney when they were kids. He said that Barney had talked about me all the time, even when we weren't friends anymore. Looking at my watch, I mumbled something about taking my son to the movies. Danny shook my hand again, not wanting to let me go. I peeled myself away from him.

After we walked a few steps, I heard him calling after me. I turned around. He said that he'd heard something about Tanya. She'd migrated west, to California, to be an actress, leaving bits of Barney, I presume, in toilets all across the USA.

Now I suppose I should get to the point. My therapists have always told me that writing things down is a way to finalize, to purge, to mend.

* * *

One Saturday afternoon at the beginning of April, Barney's parents announced that it was time to get the family some new church shoes. Amid protests, they corralled the children. Surprisingly, Mr. Hester offered to drop me off at my house on the way to the mall (usually they left me to fend for myself).

As we all fought our way into the pumpkin-colored station wagon, Tanya materialized on their doorstep. Mr. Hester, trying to be polite, invited her along. She refused with a simple shake of the head. She walked to the car, grabbed me by the arm, and pulled me out.

"I need help," she whispered. Her fingers were crushing my humerus.

"They're giving me a ride home," I said, with the inflected meekness I'd adopted in her presence. Whenever possible, I did what Tanya commanded. She truly frightened me. I'd once seen her pull off the head of a dead crow we found in the woods. She took it home to use its beak as a "pen" for her diary.

"My parents can give you a ride," she insisted.

The entire Hester family was listening to our exchange. Mr. Hester was letting the car idle. Barney wasn't just listening, of course. He was glaring. I tried to pull away, but her icicle fingers wouldn't break.

I relinquished. "I'm gonna stay here and help Tanya," I said. I stared at the ground.

Mr. Hester spat a vindictive looger onto the driveway and backed his car into the road. He didn't like Tanya. Nobody did except Barney.

She led me to the rear of the Hester house. I didn't know what she had in mind, but all possible scenarios seemed both repellent and alluring. She jimmied open one of the windows to the utility room. She boosted me. I climbed inside. She followed. As I brushed myself off, I asked her why we were breaking into Barney's house. As an answer, she ran into the next room. I tagged along.

For the next two hours, we wreaked havoc on their home. From the refrigerator we retrieved an onion. We broke off small chunks of it and planted them everywhere – in the teakettle, under the plastic placemats, inside the bottle of dish soap, in the cookie jar. We poured honey into the coffee maker. We taped together random pages of the Merck Manual of Medical Information. We diluted their mayonnaise with Vaseline. We greased a few doorknobs with butter. As we did these things, we giggled uncontrollably. There was no talking, only giggling. I was delirious, and I couldn't figure out why. Perhaps it was sexual tension. Perhaps it was the freedom of running rampant in this house where'd I'd spent so much time being reserved and polite, constantly afraid.

Soon after our orgy of what she called "subliminal vandalism," Tanya took me to the living room. As I settled into the sofa, I calmed down, and the prospect of the Hesters returning reentered my mind. I told Tanya that we should leave. She pinned me to the couch. She sat on me. She took off her shirt and in a marvelous burst of blubbery flesh unleashed her breasts. She commanded me to kiss them. I obeyed, pecking like a bird at the strange pliable mounds, avoiding the nipples at all costs.

She grew impatient. "Put them in your mouth," she said.

I opened up as much as I could. Neither of them would fit, but I tried. Now and then I glanced up at Tanya. She was staring down at me, her chin doubled, tripled, giving her throat the look of two smiling mouths stacked upon each other. She watched me without joy, judging me as if I was a suckerfish busily eating the algae off the glass of a fishtank. For a few moments nothing existed but the vast fields of those pale mammaries and the looming face above.

I think she knew that the Hesters would be arriving home. And even though my therapist has repeatedly told me that attributing supernatural powers to Tanya is nothing more than a defense mechanism, I also believe, deep down, that Tanya knew Barney would be the first to open the door (using his mother's key), and that he would do everything in his power to usher us out before the rest of his family could see what we'd been doing.

That's exactly what happened. Barney came in. He saw us. His face deflated. Without hesitation, without a word, he locked and bolted the front door. Danny started pounding on it. Tanya slipped into her shirt, and we all walked hastily to the back door. Tanya, I remember, was laughing. I was stunned and ashamed, but moreso I was terrified that Barney would murder me. Instead, he pushed me out of the house and out of his life.

* * *

I've never told Margaret, or my therapist, any of this. Margaret believes that my absence from her home for those eighteen months was a result of my parents banning me from being with Barney. That's what Barney told his family. He needed to save face, and so did I.

I stayed far away. The summer passed. I dreamed of Tanya many times. They were nice dreams, dreams of vulgar, sloppy kisses, of holding hands so tightly they became one piece of flesh. Later, the nature of my Tanya dreams changed, but they began that summer.

I missed Barney. The look on his face as he'd escorted me out the door – the confused stare, his eyes quivering in his skull with rage and pain – haunted me. I wanted to hang myself. Barney had been my only close friend. I stayed home on Friday nights. I read my comic books, rode my bike around my neighborhood, stared out my window.

When sixth grade began, my pain worsened. Being in the same classroom with Barney, and being ignored by him, was almost intolerable. He never looked at me, spoke to me, or referred to me in conversations with other people. In his eyes, I'd vanished. I got used to it eventually – I had to – by buddying up with the class reject, "Stinky Harold" Trebek. Barney went out for all the sports – baseball, football, basketball, and even track – so by default I had to drop those activities.

My parents were concerned about me. I was growing taller, but my weight wasn't keeping up with my height. My appetite shrank until I was only eating from necessity. My entire life philosophy changed in those eighteen months. Sports no longer interested me. Deciding to devote my future to veterinary medicine, I took up collecting wild animal cards with fervency. I experienced the first uncomfortable pangs of doubt about the existence of God.

* * *

When seventh grade rolled around, I was totally alone. Stinky Harold had moved away during the previous summer, so I was the class reject. The other boys sported acne and dirty mustaches, talked in squeaky voices about newly-sprouted pubic hair. I was taller, but otherwise externally unchanged. Friendship seemed an investment I couldn't afford to make.

I should probably be grateful for those solitary months. During that time my thoughts inexplicably turned to Barney's little sister Margaret. I realized that she'd always been there, on the periphery, a quiet, soothing presence in the chaos of that unsettled home. She had smiled at

me when no one else would. She had a pretty face. Her eyes, I discovered in my reminiscing, had often lingered on my face, but I'd ignored it. Tanya faded from my dreams, and Margaret stepped into the vacancy. I fantasized about calling her. I even dialed their house a few times, only to hang up when Danny or Barney answered.

Then, for reasons I've since figured out, Barney thrust himself back into my life.

He slipped an invitation into my desk. I still have it here in my *Barney Scrapbook*. On a red sheet of construction paper, he wrote, and I quote: *You are invited too selebrate the 12fth berth day of Barney James Hester, on this Saturday at 7pm. Pleese bring a presint for him.*

There was no name on the abominably-spelled document. I thought it had to be a mistake, possibly a joke.

He approached me the next day as I stood at the urinal in the boys' bathroom. His first words to me in almost two years were, "Draining the lizard, huh, punk?"

He seemed jovial. I detected no hidden malice in his tone. I was thrilled and nervous at the prospect of forgiveness, but the past eighteen months felt like too enormous a chasm to bridge during a toilet break.

He asked if I was coming to his party. I said I didn't know. He frowned. He said that it was going to be a blast; his parents were buying him a ColecoVision, which he didn't have to share with Danny. There was going to be pizza from Fred's, the best in town. He was vague when I asked who else was coming to the party. At last I promised that I would be there. Even after eighteen months apart, I couldn't say no to Barney.

* * *

My parents dropped me off. My mother told me to behave. I told them I would catch a ride home from one of the other kids. With present in hand, I paused in front of the

unremarkable Hester home. For some reason, I expected it to have changed after such a long absence. After all, I was different, Barney was different, the world was different. The house was the same.

Danny opened the door. Out of habit I tensed up, expecting at the very least a scathing insult. He let me inside without even a nod of his head. He was sullen and quiet, I soon realized, because Mrs. Hester was in the middle of one of her notorious alcohol-induced cleaning frenzies.

For a drunken blind woman she navigated the room with remarkable precision, sweating, hauling the vacuum here and there, cursing under her breath, dusting shelves, polishing the windows. She glanced up when I came in. "Who is that?" she said, not even attempting to hide her annoyance. "Who's in my house?" Danny tiptoed away.

"It's Earl Brinkman," I said.

She had an impeccable memory. "You're the one who spit on my carpet, aren't you?" she snapped. "You gonna apologize for that?"

"I'm here for Barney's birthday party," I said. "He told me seven o'clock." For once I felt afraid because Danny had *left* the room.

"There's no goddamn party," she said.

I was turning to leave when Barney appeared. He motioned for me to follow him. I followed. Mrs. Hester forgot about me and resumed scrubbing the baseboards.

In the basement, we plopped in front of the television. No other kids were there. Danny came out of his bedroom wearing his black Cain's Karate jacket and his white karate pants. Before leaving for his lesson, he reminded us not to go into his fucking room. I'd forgotten how much I hated Barney's family.

"Where's my present?" Barney asked.

I handed him the package. He opened it. It was a pair of walkie-talkies. I'd chosen these over anything else because they implied that we would use them together.

"We can go hunting in the woods with them," I said. "Like we're soldiers or something."

"Let's do it," he said.

We grabbed his guns and headed out. He carried the powerful ten-pump Ryder pellet gun, while I received the one-pump Daisy air rifle. I never asked about the absence of other kids. I was elated by the notion that Barney had selected me as his sole party buddy. I was his best friend again.

That feeling lasted approximately thirty minutes. Walkie-talkies in hand, we split up. The sun was disappearing fast. The world was growing dimmer by the minute. I tromped through the woods, heading east, scanning the leafless branches for movement. I received a transmission.

"Nothing over here," Barney's voice said. "Over."

"Me, neither," I said. "Over."

I wandered farther, through a dense patch of trees, until I reached a small clearing. The woods seemed completely vacant of life. I fired at a log. I pulled the walkie-talkie out of my jacket pocket.

"Where are you?" I said. "This sucks."

"I think I see something," his crackling voice whispered. "I'm getting closer."

I heard the snap of a branch. I turned. I strained my eyes for a moment before realizing that Barney was squatting behind a tree at the edge of the clearing, less than thirty feet away. He was aiming his rifle at me.

The gun cracked, followed by an intense stinging in my left hand. I dropped my gun. I ran. Barney followed. I could hear his footsteps crashing. He pumped his gun, and I counted along with it. When I reached ten, I covered my head. He fired again.

I dashed through the clearing, my arms and legs ablaze with adrenaline. I arrived in another stand of trees. One of his pellets snapped a branch near my shoulder. He kept calling out the same phrase over and over – "I'm gonna get you!" – playfully, as if this was an old game between pals.

My only thought was that I should get to somebody's house. He would never shoot me if other people were around. In my disoriented state I didn't know which house I was approaching when I finally made my way toward the road. It was Tanya's house.

She was seated atop the picnic table, staring into the trees as if expecting someone to emerge. Up the sloping backyard I ran to her.

"Help me," I said. "Barney's after me."

"Oh he is, is he?" she said. There was something strangely theatrical, even by her standards, in her voice. I've played it over enough in my mind to know. "Well, let's just see about that."

Barney came stomping into her yard. He was winded, pale and disheveled. This is how I remember him. He pumped his gun with cool deliberation, adding his own element of drama to the scene. It was too unreal for me. I hid under the picnic table and covered my face.

Peeking through my fingers, I saw it unfold. I will tell you what happened.

Tanya walked forward. Barney walked forward. They were like gunslingers. I couldn't see Barney's face. I saw Tanya, in her dirty blue jeans, start to skip. She skipped toward him,

singing a little song, "Barney, Barney, you forgot your hat. Barney, Barney, I'll punish you for that."

"Get out of the way," Barney said. His voice was tiny. "Or you'll get it right between the eyes."

"Barney, Barney," she said. She wasn't singing anymore. "Give me the gun, sweetie."

The next thing I knew, the gun was hurled into the air. It landed with a crash on top of the picnic table. I recoiled at the noise.

When I looked up again, Tanya and Barney appeared to be engaged in a peculiar dance. With her hands on his shoulders she pranced around him, chanting "Barney, Barney," over and over again. He was motionless; his shoulders slumped. He was gazing directly at me. The way his eyes looked at that moment has never left my mind; it was an empty look, a surrender, a blame. All at once, he burst into tears, working himself into a cacophonous, plaintive wail, a carnival of a shriek. With that, his head disappeared into her mouth, followed by his neck, his arms, his Detroit Lions jersey, his parachute pants, and his blue Converse sneakers.

That's all I can see. The rest is buried.

* * *

I was repacking the Barney Box yesterday, preparing it for the trip to the garbage dump. It's got a few pocket combs (some with strands of red hair still intact), the old hand-held football game, a bunch of pictures, his school notebooks, the birthday party invitation – even his pellet gun is in there. It took a few years to get this stuff back from the Grand Rapids Bureau of Missing Persons, and it still retains the musty odor it acquired there. Now it's all trash.

I couldn't bring myself to throw everything away. Reliving that period of my life over these past few months has brought it too close once again. Just yesterday, while Margaret was at

work, I peeled through the box in search of the walkie-talkies. For some reason it seemed appropriate to keep these, although I wasn't sure if they still worked.

I could only find one. I searched through the box again, taking everything out, without any luck. Confused, I sat at my desk with the one walkie-talkie in hand. I stared at it. It felt as if everything I'd said to Barney, everything he'd said to me, was contained in that one tiny piece of plastic. For the hell of it, I pressed the button.

"Earl to Barney," I said. "Come in, Barney."

A few seconds passed. I smiled. I was about to toss the thing in the box when, in my hand, the walkie-talkie came to life with a loud crackle.

"I'm here," a voice said.

I dropped it onto the hardwood floor. It broke. My body trembled uncontrollably. I told myself that I'd imagined the voice because there was no other explanation. If he was calling from the Other Side, then I didn't want to speak to him. My life was complicated enough. I wondered if he'd been swallowed with his walkie-talkie in his pocket, that the police hadn't recovered it, that my best friend Barney Hester had been frozen in time, perpetually twelve years old, all these years just waiting for my call, out there in the belly of the beast clutching his radio, praying to be contacted by his only friend. I'd never attempted to reach him. In all the years following his disappearance, I'd only thought about myself, only thought about what he'd done to me, when all along I'd done nothing for him. I'd betrayed him. He'd been calling out to me for years, in my dreams and in my waking thoughts, and I'd never known how to reply.

The door creaked open. My son Barney was standing there in his Grover pajamas. He was holding the other walkie-talkie.

"Why didn't you answer me?" he said.

Ha-Ha, Shirt

Shirt has something sweet he isn't giving up, but it's tucked into a front pocket of his jeans and so is impossible to get at from my position on the dance floor, where I'm busy doing a solo gyration and blinking to create a strobe effect. I keep reaching out to grab at it, but what the fuck am I doing because I'm ten feet away from him and that sweet thing in his pocket keeps bumping against the upper thigh of Mizz Offset Breasts, who has a fine pair of legs but seems to have lost the battle of the brush this morning, judging by the chicken-wing protruding off the back of her head. And those tits are not appealing in any way, although every last one of my buddies'll tell you I'm your man when it comes to tits. Big-nippled, one-nippled, risen or deflated, mouthful or three-course, sweaty-bottomed or rashed, I've appreciated them all. Never had crooked ones, though, and maybe because of my missing contact lens, looking at them is making me nauseous and I need to sit down.

Shirt must like what he sees in Lopsided because him and Double-Decker are groping and grappling and getting all twisted together, making out with tongues and licking whatever they can get away with licking in public. I come barside and lean over to Ha-Ha and say I might puke if he buys me a scotch and so he does, but he spits in it to make me earn it.

It isn't an aggressive gesture coming from Ha-Ha, though from anyone else it certainly would be. But no, I gotta include Shirt because he's as good a friend as Ha-Ha. I mostly feel close to Ha-Ha, and swapping fluids like blood brothers is a natural way to show our connectedness. We ended up at the Club Go-Go without reason or desire only because Shirt declared his physical illness at being in close quarters with me and Ha-Ha during our regular weekly cruise around Kalamazoo. He said "Fuck you both, your breath stinks," and now Ha-Ha

screams in my ear what sounds like a song, “You and me are on the same page, my friend, same page.” He *tink-tinks* my glass with his and down go the shots, mine burning enough inside to make me holler, “God fuck the little children! I got a paycheck!”

Me and Ha-Ha, through loud shouting conversation, decide that enough is enough, friends like us should inform their buddy when he’s making an error. Shirt has been less than himself lately, and only by being with his chums, and *not* this skin-and-bones woman, can he truly be the Shirt we’ve come to love.

“Because there ain’t shoes in his shoebox,” Ha-Ha’s tilted, puddly mouth is HEY-HEYing in my left ear, “Son of a bitch in tears on his bed and he won’t talk to me and he’s got a shoebox on his lap and you ain’t telling me there’s SHOES in that box? No way!”

Pretty soon we drag Shirt’s ass outta there because I have a sudden puke problem all across the bar, which makes the bouncer vise my shoulder and escort me outside. He won’t let me touch his hand, the gripping one, even though I rub my face on it and say, “I’m such a pretty pretty kitten.” Fucknut pulls my hair to make me stop and calls me a homo fuck as his exit from the scene.

Shirt and Ha-Ha come outside and find me sitting on the pavement, and it isn’t yet two a.m., so we drive to the Hot-N-Now for olive burgers to fill our stomachs, which is good except Shirt makes a scene in the drive-thru and winds up crushing an olive burger in his fist and shaking it at the lady and yelling “This is extremely cheap!” with a lot of conviction and intensity while the burger guts fall all over him and the silver ledge of the burger window. I try to salvage some of the massacre from his lap after we pay less than what we owe and gun it, but Shirt knocks my hand away and tells me to eat my own goddamn burger, which I do.

Shirt's fast-food mutilation and drive-thru harassment are funny-but-loud reminders of the recent change in his disposition. For two years I've called Shirt a friend and for those same two years he's been grieving the suicide of his father, which to hear him tell it was a surprise but not surprising, and every time he distinctions this way I understand a little bit more what he means, like hearing the same New Testament readings over and over in church, but as your life changes, so do the words, even though you've heard them a thousand times before and even can remember them from when you were a child.

Shirt's grieving has never been violent. Most always he's quiet and tucked into himself, which I generally perceive to be a sign of wisdom. He's a carpenter by trade, skilled at putting up walls and whatnot, but business lately according to Ha-Ha suffers from Shirt's oversleeping and his verbal outbursts against his brother Phil, who just last week finally said *Screw It All* and moved to Louisiana to run a telemarketing office. This, and the shoebox speculation, and the three-weeks-ago home removal of his own dead molar with a pair of pliers, and now the olive burger massacre, are all alterations to the Shirt I know, but how can I fucking see when I've got only one contact lens and can't stop winking back and forth between blur clear blur clear blur clear?

It isn't until we get back to Ha-Ha/Shirt's and I try unsuccessfully to get either of them to fuck me or let me fuck them, that I remember Shirt has something sweet in his pocket, only now I can't remember what it is, and can't think of it because Ha-Ha's calling me a faggot like a tough guy with a cigarette dangling from his mouth while he works the Nintendo controller. This macho talk is typical of Ha-Ha only when we're with Shirt, which is always, lately. Shirt has a power thing over his roommate that makes Ha-Ha behave against his natural inclinations, which are to be polite and nonjudgemental and to fuck me or let me fuck him, if and when the

fancy strikes us. Shirt's power thing doesn't work on me, so there's a triangle with the three of us – me and Ha-Ha secure enough to once in a while release our sexual buildups when women aren't convenient, Shirt mouthless and intent on ignoring, but never unkind. At the moment I can visualize the triangle above my face, as a glowing shape rotating in the air.

So I'm singing at the top of my lungs one of the worst songs ever written, which is Leavin on a Jet Plane by that fuck John fuck whatever. I'll suck a dick. I don't care about it. We all got needs, and I'll suck the dick of a friend if it helps get that shit outta your system. No different than helping a buddy jack up his car and replace the exhaust. I ain't a faggot by any stretch. I just like to fuck people when I'm drunk cuz it feels nice to have an orgasm with company and women are a bitch to get rid of sometimes. Ha-Ha backs me up on this! even though he won't look at me right now and his ashes are dropping all over his Nintendo controller. Most guys think I'm queer for saying it, but you know what? They're all faggots anyway, every last one, and they just aren't honest.

We sit around and farewell a twelve-pack, then I'm handed the whiskey bottle, the regular Saturday night routine playing out like clockwork. I'm thinking about how this is no less valid than the church routine I'll be practicing in about seven hours, us here with the same type of devotion only no prayers except internal ones directed at no God in particular and perhaps not prescribed to us by the Good Book. We're all doing our own thing, Ha-Ha at the video game pushing buttons and smoke-blowing, Shirt throwing karate kicks at the wall, knocking down a lamp, me speaking in tongues on my back while my mind makes pictures of Sarah and me and our baby daughter on the bandage-looking ceiling.

The unbelievable well of Sarah's insides and the buckets of it she wastes on me! It makes me want to puke again so I go face-down into the carpet but nothing comes out, so I lick

lick lick that carpet and think about forming a hairball in my gut and pray the hairball on the way back up will taste like Jim Beam. For six years now she's borne my sexual misdeeds with women I'd barely met and sometimes men and of course the magnificent squeaky plastic LuLu. And even though Sarah only knows about a single digit portion of these intercourses, just the fact that she keeps forgiving and forgiving is a knife in my brain, because I know it damages her. She isn't any pushover, but she has a heart and knows how to live, I suppose, in a true Christian fashion, whereas I've been just gestures and words for a long time now, and sometimes I can't remember how Sarah used to dress when she taught at the elementary school, or what the third-graders gave her as presents, because now they're in a dusty box in the basement, because I insisted that Sarah didn't need to work anymore, that the baby was the most important thing, that I, the man, would make our ends meet. I can still hear that goddamn hi-lo beeping and that motherfucker Don— bless him because he tried—yelling in his cough drop voice from across the warehouse, "Look out, D!" I didn't look out. I never look out.

I'm practically puking, slamming my never-hurt foot on the floor, and there's a tremendous knock at the door, like a cop-knock. I sit up ready to pound some cop ass.

Turns out it's the cab driver they called to get me the fuck outta their apartment. I'm pissed at Shirt and I tell him so, and he points and laughs at me and says, "Get the fuck home. Get outta here." He pushes me out the door. I don't notice much about the cab ride except putting out my cigarette on the back of the driver's seat and getting yelled at. On my front lawn I fall down, which bruises my forearm on a tree root, but I make it inside to Sarah and my daughter in one piece.

Sarah's asleep on the couch with the television gone static. I go upstairs to remove my contact lens and put on my glasses. I grab a porno from my dresser and bring it downstairs, pop

it in the VCR, and kneel in front of the screen so if she wakes she won't be able to readily identify the screen action. Over the years I've perfected my masturbation techniques, which you would think would make the sexual act unnecessary but actually just feeds the fire. I shoot a wad onto the carpet, rub it clean with a paper towel, catch my breath, go to the kitchen for another beer.

I repeat this ritual an hour later after a bedside with the baby where I sipped and stared and wondered what the hell this child would turn out like, hoping she would not eventually hate her father. I hear the birds chirping outside as I'm wiping the jism off my hand and figure I'd best get off to bed because that's what people do. I leave Sarah on the couch.

I can't sleep, thinking about how long I can get away with drawing workman's comp. Half a year ago, hobbled by breaks in metatarsals, proximals, distals in the toes, now the foot is month-long fine. Still, I grimace and "Fuck!" for the doctor. Muscle damage is tougher to disprove. Checks keep coming, also phone calls every two days from Don the foreman, asking "How's it coming?" I can wiggle my toes, do a jig, but I say, "I'm in a lot of pain, Don. Doctor says maybe another month." Sarah turns both cheeks, acts like she doesn't hear. I keep thinking that maybe out in the bushes eventually will be FraudBusters with a video camera, who'll point it at me, pass the tape to a judge who'll send me to Jackson and I'll lose my wife and baby.

About six o'clock the phone rings, and I pick it up before the first ring dies. It's Shirt, saying that Ha-Ha's sleeping, and "I want to smoke some weed and show you what's in my pocket." I search his voice for signs of anger, but he's sloshed. That's my assessment. He's got something in his pocket and he thinks I want to see it, and maybe I do but I can't remember what it is. Either way, smoking a little grass sounds all right.

I re-dress while a headache makes itself known above my eyebrows. I kiss the baby with lips stuck out so as not to stubble her, and remember the time Sarah caught me in the bedroom fucking LuLu the blow-up doll. It looked funny, me going at it with a piece of plastic, but after we got married, Sarah wouldn't admit anything humorous in it at all and made me sign up for free counseling at the Y, although later I could make her chuckle about it if she had a glass of bourbon in her and I'd been good for a while.

Just as I'm finishing my cigarette, Shirt drives up in his Buick Skylark with the one mini-spare on the left rear. I climb in. I don't like the way he's kneading the wheel like a breadstick. He appears crazy. His right eyelid is lowered and lazy, reminding me of my dad, who looked the same when he was drunk and soaking in the bathtub with a bag of Doritos in his hands.

Shirt's very nearly the highest I've seen him in the two years since our acquaintance-making at the Déjà Vu, which is a lot of days and a lot of highs ago. He's honking at trees, screaming *Let the niggers free! They'll help us manage the banks!* running up the curbs when we turn corners, goosing the engine, giving the windshield five, six, seven, eight – fucking hell, man, stop it already! – hose-downs with fluid without wiping it off. It's a mess, and I ream him for smoking without me, seeing that I have to be back home in three hours in order to make ten o'clock mass with the family. Shirt hates to think about God or the House of God, or all the prayers floating up into the sky without his name attached to them. He turns to me and says, in a slowed-down voice, that I, especially, should understand, because God's a vibrator and going to church is like sitting on a vibrator. I take his meaning to be that church-going is pleasurable but phony and without any lasting emotional value. I mostly agree with him. However, I can see the need in our lives for pleasurable-but-phony activities, but I don't say as much, figuring now's not the time to argue.

Shirt pulls to the curb in front of a 7-11. He turns off the engine and hollers at me for not letting him get with Lopsided Double-Decker Tits, only he refers to her as "Anna" so it takes me a few minutes to understand. He says he hasn't gotten any in about forty weeks. A genuine sadness sets up shop on his face. He's on the tubby side, doesn't shave often enough, has pockmarks on his cheeks, probably from the High School Acne Wars, and looks out at the world through minuscule, beady eyes. It's easy to see the reason for his drought.

I tell him straight up that if it's fucking he wants then we should just go on and do it. It makes me cranky thinking we drove around for twenty minutes doing everything but flashing a neon sign saying "DUI" when all he's looking for is an orgasm that could be attained without the delay that's gonna cause me another sleep-free evening on the planet Earth.

Nothing of the nice Shirt appears in his eyes when he looks at me. It's a bitter look, watery and unforgiving. He says to stop it with that shit, to stop it once and for all. I say I wasn't making a command but only a suggestion. I try to explain again about biology, and our great human ability to interact with the world inside our imaginations. I tell him that wasting this gift is like a slap in the face to God himself. He puts his hard hand over my mouth and tells me that Ha-Ha is taking my bullshit seriously. He says that this very evening, after I left, Ha-Ha climbed into bed and tried to fuck him against his will. Shirt's crying at this point, his fingers clamping tighter on my cheekbones. He says Ha-Ha got a beating because of me and that I need to just quit my fucking bullshit.

I push his hand off. My mind says one thing loudly: "Ha-Ha would not force anybody to do anything, least of all to please him sexually." If this is not true, then the formula I've used to evaluate my friends is not the proper formula. In my mind Shirt is the dominant one in their household, the quiet, shoebox-hiding, self-dentalizing, wall-kicking one, the one who needs to

look at himself for a good long while before passing judgment. I tell him this, then hop out of the car and run up to the 7-11. I figure I can't buy a beer, but I can steal one.

When I come out, Shirt's gone. I look up and down the surrounding streets for any sign of the Buick, but I get nothing. I can't dally for long because of the frigid forty-ouncer under my shirt. I head home.

The sun is just coming up to light my way. This makes me happy. So too does the golden quality of the sunlight, the sharpness of the air being sucked into my nose. I feel sober again. Sober, tired, and thirsty. I see a rabbit hopping in the junkyard across the street and wonder if it's actually the owner under the spell of some demon witch hag. I know that demon witch hags still exist in this world, having fucked two of them last month, and on this thought, I notice that my armpits smell. I sniff them. I see a hurby-curby tipped over with its guts spilled out onto the road. The flies are feasting. A woman passes me driving a Chevy S10 pickup. She makes me feel bad about something with the way her eyes flash at me. It has to be a lie, what Shirt said about Ha-Ha. If it isn't, then Ha-Ha is no one's friend. The yeasty King Cobra stench under my nose is better than the taste going down. I have a headache. Ha-Ha is my friend, although it was Shirt who introduced me to him. Does that make Shirt the superior officer? Ha-Ha – what now, five or six months? – I suppose is not allowed onto the level of long-term where I place Shirt and Sarah, and even the baby pulls rank at ten months. Ha-Ha has held three different jobs in these past five/six months…is that a sign of evil? Me with no job, I'm not to say. I pull long from my King Cobra, my goal being to finish the bottle before arriving home.

I put the empty bottle in a sack in the kitchen. Sarah's upstairs running the faucet, making her preparations. The baby's crying, which always gets a response from me, so I climb the staircase, take her from the crib and hold her and sway.

We make it to church on time. Sarah sticks her cold shoulder in my face the whole morning, but when we we're kneeling I use my hands to make shadow puppets on the pew in front of us, which makes her smile. The baby's a sweetheart, not sleeping but looking at all the praying with big eyes, trying to absorb everything. When the time is upon us we join the communion line. The music is solemn and the people are orderly to the point of creepiness, moving stone-faced, almost sad, up the aisles. I take the body of Christ into my mouth, sip more than what's appropriate at the cup of blood, go back to the pew to kneel and munch the wafer. This is where I'm supposed to ponder my life circumstances, which is always difficult for me, being forced to drop my natural thoughts and replace them with as much unnatural reflection and conciliation as will fit into three minutes. I send God a brain telegraph suggesting He protect the little ones like my daughter and make every storm have a rainbow at the end of it. I laugh out loud at this, bringing an elbow jab from the wife.

On the drive home, I don't think about anything but my head kissing the pillow, but when we get there and open the door, it shocks me like a radio in the bathtub to see Shirt sitting in our living room, pointing a pistol at our faces. He's dark under the eyes and bloodshot in his whites, and next to my recliner, which he's sitting in, is his goddamn shoebox, open and empty and on its side like a wrecked car.

He tells us to stop right there and to do whatever he says. His hair's sculpted into a cone, though I doubt he knows about his hair shape. Sweat's beaded on his forehead. Sarah's "You've got to be fucking kidding me!" gives the baby a reason to scream so before I know it the scene's chaotic. I tell Shirt to let me put the baby away cuz I don't like guns to be in the same room with her, and Shirt obliges, maybe outta kindness but maybe outta the desire to not kill a baby. I take her upstairs and set her in the crib and coo-coo for a minute while I dial 911,

but I don't feel comfortable knowing there's a gun being brandished at my wife, so I head back downstairs, just after I whisper the details to the emergency lady and hang up.

After a lot of bullshit despondency and gesticulating and tears from Shirt, it finally comes out that he wants to fuck Sarah. I get pissed off at that. Sarah's naturally terrified and disbelieving. She lets loose like she has let loose on me before, only this time without a whiff of affection, telling Shirt to shut up and stop fucking around and get outta our lives and back to his fucking house and to leave me the fuck alone, once and for all. The baby's a miniature echo from upstairs, only she's not making real words.

I cut in and say, "No, Shirt. You can't touch her." Nothing in my book is more evil and wrong than forcing sex on a person, and there's no way Sarah's having it, even to avoid being shot, so I call Shirt a few more names and say if he wants to fuck someone just to fuck me and move on with life so none of us has to die or be put into a compromising position.

He knows he's wrong. I can see in his eyes the lack of conviction, the confusion. I've only done good toward him and he knows it, and I can see this thought bouncing around in his brain. He takes off his shirt, which reminds us of why he's called Shirt. His fear of skin cancer means he never disrobes while outside on the job, and as a result he's constantly bearing a deep tan on his arms and neck, leaving his torso as pale as the underside of a rock after a rain. It's a nickname that Ha-Ha gave him, even though he never asked for it.

He wants to be in command, telling me to bend over and pull down my pants. I follow his suggestion.

I hear him undoing his trousers. I'm pretty sure it's a tear that drips onto my backside as he pushes up my shirt. He keeps muttering under his breath, things like *Fuckin faggot, I'm gonna fuck you, you little shit, you little faggot cunt*, while I focus my stare on the wood grain of

the end table upon which I'm resting my chin. My ears are focused on Sarah's mouth-covered crying, and I realize that for a long time I've been hoping for a way to tell her, 'I'm a terrible man,' and *mean* it, mean it that her repeated love and forgiveness, while intensely kind, is only deepening my grief in ways indescribable. I think in this moment that my bending over with naked asshole parted, naked asshole ready and able to take the rape meant for her, is the only way I can tell her that I'm truly terrible, truly terrible and terribly sorry, and to please please please stop forgiving me, *please*, because I will never stop hurting you.

"Go on, you desperate asshole," I yell up at Shirt. "Get going, we ain't got all day!"

It probably isn't a good idea to provoke him, but I can't help myself, being scared as I am, and my daughter upstairs like a shrieking teapot, and my wife watching a re-enactment of what she has probably already had nightmares about. The motherfucker has a gun pointed at her. And there's that empty shoebox, just like Ha-Ha said, not three feet from my left arm. And it's as useless as Shirt's dick.

It's half-hard, poking at me. Sarah's bawling, and I tell her to *shhh* because everything is gonna be fine once Limp Dick finishes satisfying himself, which makes Shirt step back and kick me a couple times in the ribs. It's an ugly moment; I've never known Shirt to do anything violent to anything other than a wall, and recently his molar, and I truly have believed all along that we are friends. Here he is about to rape me after wanting to rape my wife and on top of it all bruising my ribs and giving me breathing difficulties. I reevaluate things in the slowed-down seconds, my friendships, my behavior, the way sexuality talks to a man louder than any other voice he can hear. I've never been the poster child for celibacy, having fucked inflatables and twelve women and five men during the course of my four-year marriage, but in my heart I can not believe that what I've done is cruel and this here is dirty and cruel and evil.

We all hear the sirens while his cock is ramming itself in a fruitless fashion against my rectum. I'm surprised he doesn't blow my head apart the instant they come into earshot, but I suspect he has no ill will toward me, and is rather experiencing a destructive impulse toward his own life. Although I did phone the police while upstairs with my daughter, I will not admit this no matter how loudly Shirt curses me to do so.

There's a pause, during which Shirt's breathing is the predominant sound – I can sense him back there, can't see him because my eyes are closed; he's a vibration behind me and above me – and I can smell my Jesus-blood breath in my cupped hand. Then I hear the gunshot. It's nothing more than a tiny *pop!* and for a split second I feel disappointed by it.

I'm left relatively dry until his body falls on top of me. Then there's blood everywhere, most of it hot and gushing out of his nose all over my back. I'm unable to move under the sloppy commotion. His body twitches on me for about five seconds, making movements like he's really trying to fuck me, with his cock finally feeling hard and everything, until Sarah kicks him off. She comes up on me and tells me everything's okay. The cops storm inside and confirm that Shirt is dead and that Sarah and I aren't injured and that there's a bullet lodged in the corner of the ceiling, above the television.

They find a condom in his pocket, Trojan brand. It surprises me, while I'm being toweled by Sarah and pen-lighted by the paramedics, that this rubber was the item I was so fixated upon during the previous night's festivities. I keep this detail a secret from Sarah because it seems like the thing to do.

* * *

They bury Shirt in the cemetery near his mother's house three days later. Sarah couldn't bring herself to clean up the blood and goo on the floor and ceiling, and I can't say I blamed her.

You'd have thought the cops would take care of it, but they did a half-assed job as they enjoy doing with most things. The floor cleaned up no problem. I scrubbed the wall area for thirty minutes, then gave up because the pink hue wouldn't go away. I brought a half-can of white paint up from the basement and gave the spot a new coat.

I'm tipsy at the funeral home, but nothing compared to the way I've been for the weeks and months preceding. My foot has been healed up for about thirty days and I've been milking my workman's comp – this fact is a city bus in my mind, passing by hour after hour, day after day – and I experience a little revelation when I see the corpse of Randall Paris Jerome in his coffin and hear his cousins, aunts and uncles, mother, and even his brother Phil from Louisiana, crying into their handkerchiefs. I decide right then that unless something major comes up, I'll definitely go back to the moving company within a week or two, as a way of reacquainting myself with humanity.

Out in the graveyard, they're still making a lot of noise while the priest tries to outshout them and the wind. All I catch from Father Vincent is, "I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly," and then, a few minutes later, "Amen."

To these people, what Shirt did or didn't do doesn't matter. There is a stock of tears set aside for him that they'll use. Even after his *psychotic break*, which is the term heard thirty times around the funeral home, even after having his dick and his pistol poke me in invasive ways – even after all this, even I spit out a few tears.

I'm busy concentrating on the shiny casket, avoiding eye contact with Ha-Ha. His face is there, across the pit, between Louisiana Phil and Louisiana Phil's wife. One of Ha-Ha's eyes has clearly been whacked by something solid. People are laying hands on the casket for the last

time, saying their good-byes, walking away. I don't feel like touching anything. I stand rooted, and chew my gum with my mouth closed.

After the coffin sinks into the ground, Ha-Ha walks up and hugs me. His right eye is puffed shut and the color of a mulberry. It feels wrong now, hugging Ha-Ha, what with Shirt's accusation. The swollen eye is like Shirt's beyond-the-grave message – *see, I told you!*

I don't want to know the truth. At this point it's all words, anyway. We walk up the hill toward the parking lot. To make him think that I think that none of this was his fault, I tell Ha-Ha that Shirt was bottled up and sexually frustrated, and that near as I could figure this was the reason for his insanity. Ha-Ha says he suspected as much, with the way Shirt had acted for a long time now. He discloses to me that Shirt used to come into his room and jack off when he thought Ha-Ha was asleep.

Ha-Ha sips from a flask and shares a few belts with me. It tastes like Jim Beam, only cheaper. He says that Shirt was never violent toward him, that this *shiner* is from Shirt accidentally elbowing him in the face when they were playing Nintendo after I left the other night. Every word he says comes out all covered in shit. We smoke and he talks. It troubles me that the message his eyes flash is not what's going on inside his head. I want to confront him with Shirt's version of the shiner, but I don't. I yawn.

Once the cigarettes are squashed under our shoes, we shake hands. I watch Ha-Ha climb into his truck, knowing he'll never call me again and that I won't call him either, and that if we see one another across the pool tables at the Green Top, we'll pretend we're seeing strangers. This certain alliance is finished.

The Hiccup King

Owen's buddy Clyde gave him the idea of seeking out the Hiccup King. They were seated on lawn chairs at the foot of the retractable loading ramp that extended like an enormous gray tongue from the semi bed to the grass. The Best Way Moving semi, its cab in the street and its torso angled across the front lawn, was one-third full of materials from Gary and Clarisse Eichler's four-bedroom house in Park Hills. It was lunchtime. Owen and Clyde unwrapped their takeout sandwiches. Clarisse Eichler appeared with a couple of ginger ales. The men thanked her, then Clarisse vanished wordlessly into the house, presumably to continue packing.

"She's a looker," Clyde said. He scrutinized his tuna sandwich, then took a prodigious bite.

Owen hiccuped before biting into his own sandwich, which was filled with processed turkey and overloaded with mustard, which his ex-wife Tanya used to call "the vinegar and oil of the middle class." He hiccuped a couple more times as he chewed. Business as usual.

"I'll just assume when you hiccup it means you agree," Clyde said. This was one of his favorite jokes.

Owen hiccuped in reply. When their chuckles faded, the men's eyes wandered casually over the suburban neighborhood. Everything glistened – the mailboxes, the recently tarred street, the wide and pristine lawns. Even the mailman's gray shorts seemed to glow. "Why would you ever leave a place like this?" Owen asked rhetorically.

"That white collar's a little too starchy for me," Clyde said. "No room to stretch, and it makes you itch. I like moving the cubicle panels, not staring at them all day."

Owen mulled this over for a couple of hiccups. He'd always suspected that one of Tanya's reasons for leaving was his inability to afford a house in a neighborhood like this one.

She'd never admitted it aloud, but once she completed her B.A. in sociology, followed by her master's degree, her sights turned to pottery catalogues and oak bookshelves and operas.

"Mister Eichler probably got transferred," Clyde said. "Doubled his salary."

"Off to bigger and better things," Owen mused. "Chicago, Seattle. Anywhere but Kalamazoo."

"Hey Chicago!" Clyde said. He sat up in his chair. "Reminds me. Have you read Guinness? The World Record book?"

Owen couldn't answer. He was holding his breath again. It was the only method he still attempted on a regular basis. He'd tried everything – drinking water from the far end of a glass, drinking water while doing a headstand, pondering what he'd eaten for breakfast the day before, having his friends leap out and startle him, punching himself in the gut, swallowing a spoonful of sugar. The breath-holding was his final bastion of proactivity.

Clyde was used to it. He continued talking while Owen did an imitation of a statue. "Anyway there's this guy who holds the record. He lives somewhere around Chicago. Son of a bitch's had the hiccups for fifty years, so you shouldn't feel so bad. He's been married all this time to the same lady, but anyhow his life's pretty normal, from what I can tell."

Owen expelled the air from his lungs. He allowed the inevitable hiccup to pass before he spoke. "Why should I care?" he said.

"Because he's the Hiccup King!" Clyde yelled, suddenly passionate beyond all reason.

* * *

Owen lived alone in a one-bedroom house with a one-car garage, not far from a supermarket where he did his weekly grocery shopping. Hamburger meat, buns, frozen dinners, canned soup, apples, bread, milk, cereal, beer – these were the regular purchases, which he

diligently crossed off from each new list. He could cook well enough to make a single man happy. There was a small, overgrown park across the street. From his porch he could sip beer and view young mothers pushing strollers along the cracked sidewalk, shirtless boys throwing frisbees, the mesh of shadows evolving on the grass during twilight.

He hiccuped every five to ten seconds. Most of these hiccups passed unheard to his own ears. They were as much a part of his aural landscape as the refrigerator hum or the chirping of birds. His body convulsed a little bit, of course, at each one, but it wasn't the end of the world. Even sleep was possible. The needs of the body, he'd discovered, were far stronger than any external distraction: people slept on crowded subways; soldiers caught forty winks as bombs flashed in the distance; homeless folks snoozed in the eye of rush hour; he'd heard of people stranded in the ocean, managing to hold their heads above water while slumbering. These were the cases his doctor cited when he first went in to get examined and was told that there was no way to determine when, exactly, or how, exactly, the hiccups would stop. That was over one year ago.

If Owen thought about it, if he closed his eyes, he could pretend that this was only some vulgar dream. He could really go back there. He could retreat into the peaceful, oblivious days when breathing was an unconscious function that existed wholly apart from, and wholly unremarkable upon, his daily life.

But this retreat was too painful. Life in the present, however frustrating, was more satisfying than the past. He was a mover by trade, adept at moving on and starting fresh. He had a Class B Trucker's License, which allowed him to operate an 18-wheeler. Ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week, he worked. This was a schedule that encouraged him to dwell in the Now.

His buddies didn't mind his handicap; they got used to it and cracked jokes that helped them all feel better. They drank beer and played euchre after work.

Owen's greatest talent was packing 36-foot trailers in the most spatially economical way that Best Way Moving had ever seen. For as long as he could remember he'd had a gift for arrangement. As a boy, he'd retreated into his room and assembled puzzles for six hours a day. His father recruited Owen for the basement cleaning duties: he transformed the chaotic, unnavigable basement into a room that could accommodate a ping-pong table, a workbench, and a weightlifting bench, with room to walk around and to use all the amenities.

The hiccups couldn't take these things away. But Owen had had a wife for four years, which the hiccups did take away.

She stuck it out for the first few months, but the sleepless nights, the disruptive 'hic!'s during her favorite television programs, during lovemaking, breakfast, lunch, dinner, family gatherings, funerals, weddings – it proved too much. She cited alternative reasons, of course, insisting that his "malady" (that was her term) was of no consequence. They just didn't have much in common, she said. He was too content being a homebody. She wanted backyard shish-kebabs, dinner parties, book clubs. He had no desire to travel, while she "ached" (again, her word) to see the Nile River. The romance was gone. She felt like an old maid at thirty. They'd gotten married too quickly, she said. A three-month courtship when they were both in their twenties was not long enough, and now this "foolishness" (yes) had caught up with them. The time to split up was NOW, before children entered the scene and "put the final nail in the coffin."

Owen wasn't the begging type, so she slipped out of his life without so much as a spilled tear. Four years of his life – fizzle! – out like a dud firecracker. "The hell with you then," he

had told her as she walked out the door. He would forever wish he hadn't hiccuped on the word "you."

That was eight months ago, and he didn't miss her. Not too much. He mostly missed the idea of her; he figured it would feel the same if one day his shadow detached itself and announced, "I'm leaving you, Owen."

It occurred to him that Tanya might have been right about their differences, and that his "malady" was just a poorly timed coincidence. In any case, he clung daily to the desperate hope that the hiccups would stop, somehow, as abruptly and inexplicably as they had started. "A quick inhalation of air caused by a spasm in the diaphragm and checked by the closure of the glottis" (Merck Manual) certainly wasn't a debilitating defect, but as far as Owen could tell, no woman would want him in this condition. The only course of action was to wait. And wait.

His thoughts periodically returned to The Hiccup King. He envisioned an old, cotton-haired man, leaning on a cane, whose followers gathered around at his feet to hear the blissful rhythm of his diaphragm. Of course he knew this wasn't true. Regardless, he loved the idea that there was someone out there who'd experienced this same peculiar and mystifying illness that wasn't really an illness. He longed for a comrade. He wanted company for his unremarkable misery.

One Sunday afternoon, after mowing the lawn, reading the newspaper, and drinking a cup of instant coffee, Owen drove to the local bookstore to purchase a copy of the *2004 Guinness Book of World Records*. It had been years since he'd read a book – *The Crucible*, way back in tenth grade – so the simple act of carrying it out of the store felt both nostalgic and invigorating. Fighting his compulsion to flip right to the Hiccup King's page, he decided to read the book from

cover to cover. That way, when he came across the Hiccup King, it would be a wonderful surprise. He hadn't had any wonderful surprises in a long time.

* * *

Periodically, he saw her. On one occasion, he passed the window of a restaurant as she lunched with a woman he'd never met. Another time, he pulled up beside her at a stoplight. She puckered at her reflection in the rearview mirror, dabbing lipstick, oblivious to his presence. Two weeks later, at the crowded Secretary of State office, he observed her from across the room as she renewed her driver's license and he his hunting license. She never noticed him.

She didn't look any better or any worse. She didn't look any different. Her hair was still shoulder-length, light brown, the bangs hairsprayed into a fashionable tangle. She wore the same knee-length skirts and earth-tone blouses with ¾ -length sleeves that she'd worn for the five years he'd known her. Her lips still fell into a wry half-smile when she heard a joke. The incomplete smile indicated that the world could never impress her or catch her off-guard.

She was identical to the woman he'd married, yet now she was a stranger. He knew her secrets – how her face behaved in the dead of sleep, what she looked like when she propped her leg on the toilet and inserted a tampon. He'd seen the soiled crotch of her panties and helped her fish a detached wad of Q-tip out of her ear. She didn't believe in the afterlife, but she believed in reincarnation. She bought generic pickles and butter but insisted on name-brand toilet paper.

None of these details, however, could give him any claim upon her. Her life was no longer his. Knowledge of her intimate details served no purpose and would, over time, like the macaroni and cheese in his refrigerator, transform into something new, something unrecognizable and difficult to wash away.

* * *

Owen wasn't sure he'd actually be able to find the man. But if they did meet, there was always the chance that they would become fast friends, brothers in bondage, and that they would go out for beers, shoot a few games of pool at the local tavern, go pheasant hunting on a Sunday morning. Owen couldn't be certain of the outcome, but he knew that he didn't want to rush anything, so although the drive would only take four hours, he planned for a longer trip.

A three-day weekend was easy to get: Owen hadn't missed a day of work in ten years. He was as regular as his spasming diaphragm. Packing, however, was tough. He spent twenty minutes in the garage, unearthing from the mountain of junk (nicely arranged junk, but junk nonetheless) his musty, cream-colored duffel bag. It took another two hours to wash and dry it. After that was accomplished, he had to think about what to bring.

It'd been years since he'd slept anywhere but this house. With mild surprise he realized it was the honeymoon in the Upper Peninsula. He summoned a vague list of what he'd packed for that trip: socks, underwear, condoms, shaving cream, a razor, toothpaste, a toothbrush. He didn't need condoms this time. Did he need towels? Soap? Long pants or shorts? T-shirts or button-down shirts? Ties? A camera? Sunglasses? In the end Noah's method was employed, and two of everything was forced into the bag until it was as swollen and tight as a pregnant woman's belly.

At just past dawn on Friday he hopped into his pickup and left Kalamazoo. Along both sides of the expressway the corrugated fields rolled. The breeze thundered through the open window. The white center lines zipped beneath him as if being violently inhaled by his truck. Strains of Air Supply pouring out of the radio successfully drowned out the sounds of his hiccups. Life, he reflected, took shape in repetition: his heartbeat, his hiccups, the expressway lines, the tilled fields, the unceasing stream of radio songs, the sunrise climbing over the edge of

the earth for another day of work. From a brown paper bag he removed an apple. He bit into it and the juice dribbled down his chin.

His directions were vague at best. The name of the Hiccup King's town was Joliet, Illinois. The Hiccup King's name was Irving Monroe. That's all he possessed in the way of pertinent information. He'd read the *Guinness Book* at breakneck speed, finishing it in four days. When he'd reached the page with *Longest Bout of Hiccups*, he could hardly contain his excitement. Each word was a step closer to salvation. He was aware that there was only one chance to read these words for the first time, so he slowed to a torpid pace and mentally masticated syllables as if they were chunks of filet mignon. The facts were beautiful in their simplicity: Irving Monroe, a farmer, came down with the hiccups on Sunday, July 18th, 1948, at age twenty-nine (the same age as him!). For the past fifty-two years he had hiccuped every 1 ½ seconds, but managed to lead a normal life, fathering four children. He lived in Joliet with his wife Elizabeth.

Every 1½ seconds! Owen read this with a guilty feeling of relief. Someone who was suffering four times as much as him! Suddenly his own life was four times better. He thought of all the peaceful, uninterrupted breaths he could still enjoy – here he had been focusing only on the hiccups, rather than the spaces in between. Wasn't it within these spaces that he was living? Why should he only dwell on the anticipation of the next spasm? That was like waiting for a rainy day and then saying, "See! It always rains!" while ignoring the previous week of sunshine.

In this elated state he completed the journey. Directly off the expressway he cruised past truck stops, fast-food billboards, semis and convenience stores and roadside cafes. It was just after one p.m. when he crossed into Joliet. Joliet was a small town, unremarkable, which resembled closely the outlying villages in Michigan, but Owen recognized a beauty here that

he'd been blind to in his own state. The outstretched limbs of elm trees extended generously over the streets, children played hopscotch along the sidewalks, sprinklers before old colonial houses waved their fans of water in greeting. The fire hydrants, as if stained by the sunshine, were yellow.

He stopped at a gas station and filled up. He went in, paid, and asked the attendant if he could look at a phone book, hiccuping as the words left his mouth.

"You want a glass of water?" the attendant asked, as he dropped the phone book onto the counter.

"I'm afraid that wouldn't help," Owen said. Although he knew it by heart, he fished from the front pocket of his jeans the scrap of paper on which he'd scrawled Irving's name. "These are – hic – what you'd call chronic."

Straightening up and adopting a clinical tone, the attendant, whose stitched-on name tag read *Mitch*, said, "Plug your ears, plug your nose, close your eyes, and swallow three times. Worked for me for thirty-seven years."

Owen flipped through the white pages, nodding amenably. If he had a nickel for every homespun remedy he'd heard over the last year and a half, he could almost afford the surgery. His heart did a little jig in his chest when his index finger encountered *Irving R. Monroe 133243 County Road 28*.

"Wait a sec – " Mitch said, pausing to remove the gum from his mouth and dispose of it somewhere below the counter. He leaned forward and bent his head sideways to read. "You're looking for Irv Monroe! He's got the most chronic hiccups in the world! He's got the record!" His excitement waned briefly and his tone became serious. "You aren't gonna go up there to get rid of him, are you? To claim the crown for yourself?"

Owen laughed, “You know him? I’ve had these hiccups for going on two years now.”

“He’s the most famous person to come out of this town,” Mitch said. “Pumped his gas almost every week for the last fifteen years, and my daddy pumped his gas for twenty-five.”

* * *

Owen followed Mitch’s directions and within thirty minutes could see the Monroe house emerge on the horizon along County Road 28. Nothing in its appearance betrayed it as a farm, however, until Owen eased his truck onto the gravel drive and observed the tiny, dilapidated barn crouching among neck-high weeds just beyond the garage. The field beside the barn was equally overrun, so that only the faintest remnant of what might once have been tilled soil showed beneath the hairy crabgrass. A corroded Sunbird bearing a faded bumper sticker (*I’m a Farmer and I Vote*) sat facing the garage like a beaten dog begging to be let inside.

Owen cut the engine and took a deep breath. Stepping from the truck he strained his ears, half expecting to hear the King’s hiccups ringing through the air like part of the natural surroundings – however, all he could hear were his own. He walked to the front of the house and mounted the steps. He paused, reflecting. Inside was a man who for fifty-two years had filled this house with an uncontrollable noise. To his loved ones, this man’s hiccups had probably become like an external heartbeat, an outward sign of his life. How many sleepless nights – how many terrible daylight moments – spent grasping for reasons, had passed within these walls? And yet to the cars drifting by on County Road 28, this was just another farm house, another obstruction of the horizon, another interruption in the scrolling Midwest landscape.

He knocked. A woman came to the door. She was as old as Owen’s grandmother, with the same hunched back and cloud-white hair. With some difficulty, she jimmied the lock on the

screen door and opened it a crack. There was a vacant, rural kindness in her blue eyes that nearly broke Owen's heart.

"My name is Owen," he said. "I'm from Kalamazoo, Michigan. I'm looking for Mr. Irving Monroe."

"He's sleeping," she said. She gripped the collar of her white summer dress against the breeze. "If you're selling something, I'm afraid we don't have anything to spend."

Owen fought off the irrational desire to give her a hug, while the woman allowed her gaze to wander beyond him, across the road and perhaps all the way to the horizon. She appeared to be dreaming, absorbing the sight like it was the first time she'd seen the outdoors in many years. He could virtually see the images being swallowed by her pupils. Then Owen hiccuped. The old woman, as if shocked out of her meditation by a long-forgotten melody on the radio, leveled her eyes at him.

"You're not selling anything," she said.

"You're right," Owen said, feeling that his hiccup had in some way betrayed him. "I drove a long way to meet your husband – hic – excuse me. As you can tell, I have something in common with him." He paused as the words accumulated in his throat. "It would be a great help and honor if I could meet him."

* * *

"Things aren't exactly hopping around here," she said. She set the teakettle onto the eye of the stove. "The farm is pretty much kaput." For some reason this struck her as funny, for she lapsed into a girlish giggle and seated herself at the table across from Owen.

The sound was strange in the silence of the kitchen. In fact there was no noise anywhere, except Owen's hiccups, which had continued to disturb the air with a terrible consistency, though

he tried to stifle them. He wanted to get on with the business of meeting Irving but felt compelled to continue the conversation Mrs. Monroe had begun.

"What happened to the farm?"

"We're old!" she exclaimed, as if shocked that Owen hadn't noticed. She licked her lips in what Owen perceived as a nervous gesture, then began pinching the tablecloth between her fingers. "Time steals from you, so gradual you hardly notice. This place is too big for the two of us. We're stubborn." Again she laughed, then began playing with her upper row of teeth, dislodging them and repositioning them with her tongue, accompanied by a wet suction sound.

A few minutes later, the water boiled and Mrs. Monroe served tea. Owen thanked her. There was a weak cough from an adjoining room.

"That's Irving," Mrs. Monroe said. She sipped her tea and apparently forgot about it.

Another long silence followed, broken only by Owen's hiccups. "Mrs. Monroe," he whispered, "I've had the hiccups for almost two years now." He searched her face for a reaction, but got none. She wasn't even looking at him. "Well, it pretty much ruined my – hic – marriage. It's the kind of thing that can consume a person, as I'm sure – hic – you know. So I read about your husband in the Record Book. The Gui – hic – ness Book. It made me happy to know there was someone out there like me, with the same problem – hic – as me." Owen stared into the calm brown oblivion of his tea. "I don't know what I want, exactly. I just want to talk to your husband. Hic. Then I'll get out of your way."

Mrs. Monroe finally summoned the necessary courage – or energy, or whatever was turning those old cogs – and went to the bedroom. She told Owen to wait "a piece." He fidgeted in his chair. He walked to the kitchen sink.

On the window ledge was a collection of salt and pepper shakers of different shapes and design – little corn cobs, lightbulbs, kittens, apples, oranges, bars of soap. Owen's gaze drifted over the counters, encountering one pair after another, hundreds, maybe thousands more: airplanes, automobiles, Coca-Cola cans, pumpkins, squash, apple pies with a slice removed, a farmer and his farmer wife, television sets, dice, slot machines, stacks of pancakes, work boots, sheep, robots, lemons, tubas, scuba divers, plump French chefs, and on and on. A few feet away, on the bureau, the telephone was virtually engulfed by salt and pepper shakers. Owen looked up and saw that a shelf installed around the periphery of the room, perhaps a foot or two below the ceiling, was filled. In the living room, the television and the bookshelf crawled with shakers. It was a true infestation.

Mrs. Monroe peeked her head out of the bedroom. "You can come and talk to him now," she said, flashing her dentures. As Owen approached, she said, "Please keep it short."

The room was dark and filthy. The floor was ankle-deep in clothing. Owen stepped through the mess, following Mrs. Monroe. A torn shade, drawn over the only window, allowed a narrow band of light into the room, but it didn't illuminate anything. It lay across the center of the bed as if trying to divide this world from the next.

Irving Monroe wasn't more than a slight disturbance beneath a blanket. Owen stood at the side of the bed and tried to find a face in the darkness. He heard a soft, swallowed hiccup. It fluttered into the air and vanished, like a wisp of ember.

"Elizabeth says you got what I got," said a tired, thin voice that had no apparent source.

Owen hiccuped, as if to prove it. The old man hiccuped. Owen hiccuped again. The old man let off another one. It went on this way for a few minutes, as if the two men were communicating in a primitive language. Elizabeth, standing near the window, started to cry.

"She always does this – hic – when I have a guest," Irving said. Then to his wife, "Why don't you – hic – wait out in the – hic – kitchen."

Elizabeth obliged him. The bedroom was stiflingly hot. The pungent smell of ointment and unwashed flesh had replaced the oxygen. Irving's breaths rattled his insides audibly. He was dying; this was obvious to Owen.

"I needed to see you," Owen said. "Sometimes I think I'm losing my mind – hic – with this. It's too much, but at the same time it's nothing."

"Hic. How long've you been going?" Irving said.

"Almost two years. No time at all, really."

"And what seems – hic – to be the problem?"

There was no irony, no humor, in his tone. Owen contemplated the question. Was he looking for a biological answer? A list of the physical symptoms? A catalogue of the various inconveniences? The mental anguish and frustration?

Irving the Hiccup King let out a broken laugh from deep inside. "You want my advice? Go for the record! Go for it!" His volume was unsettling. "Only fifty years to go!" He laughed a little longer, dislodging a chunk of phlegm with a crack.

After Irving's laughter died out, he fell asleep. Owen leaned in close, listening, for more than a minute. He didn't hear any hiccups other than his own.

* * *

Elizabeth escorted him to his truck. Her face was red from crying. It hadn't taken much prompting to get her to confess the truth. Irving had caught the hiccups, just like the Record Book said, back in 1948. They wouldn't stop. Irving tried everything, went to doctors, the whole nine yards, but they kept going. Lots of folks tried to help, but even more folks wanted

only to come and stare, to get a glimpse of the man with the never-ending hiccups. The press caught hold of it, and Irving became a local celebrity. He and Elizabeth got invited to big parties and black-tie dinners up in Chicago, all because of his hiccups.

Then one day the hiccups stopped, eighteen months after they'd started. Just like that. Irving wasn't happy about it. Not one bit. He was depressed. He sat around the house for a few weeks, doing nothing, then he figured why not keep going with it? What'd he have to lose? He could live normally at home, but when people visited or when he went out in public, he'd just fake it. So that's what he did, for half a century. And the day that the people from the *Guinness Book* came out to the farm to validate the record, that was the best day of Irving's life. He was immortalized.

"Please don't tell anyone," Elizabeth said, as Owen climbed into his truck. "But I'd thought I'd better let you know. Maybe the record's really yours, huh? Maybe you can be proud."

* * *

He still saw her. Even after he returned from Joliet, Tanya was there – and why wouldn't she be? On the drive home he'd talked himself into believing that she would be gone, out of the country, satisfying her "ache" in some third-world jungle. But there she was, as she always was and always would be, poised on the periphery of his life – at the bank, the coffee shop, the gas station, the post office – not every day, not even every other day, not even weekly, but often enough for each occurrence to sustain itself in his mind until replaced by the next one. She never noticed Owen, never sensed his presence. He even tried to hiccup as loudly as possible, to see if it would trigger some reaction. It never did.

Clyde continued to prod him about the Hiccup King. "The guy's a legend," he said, as they maneuvered a bookshelf down a flight of stairs. "There'll never be another one like him. Unless *you* break the record." He laughed, and a corner of the bookshelf dug into the wall.

Owen changed the subject. He would never tell anybody about what happened in Joliet. It was his and his alone.

* * *

Six months later, Clyde got married and moved to Indiana. Owen said goodbye to his friend and was promoted to dispatch manager. New management bought the company, new workers came and went, and for a while the only consistent thing about Best Way Moving was Owen's hiccups. With the money from his promotion he reroofed his house and doubled the size of his garage.

On one occasion, he met Tanya for coffee. With her master's degree, she'd landed a job as a field researcher for a local pharmaceutical firm. Her travelling, which she'd so vocally ached for, had thus far amounted to a long weekend in Minneapolis with her dentist, who, it turned out, was married. In Owen's eyes, Tanya was physically more beautiful than ever, but whatever had once bound them together as husband and wife had been eroded by time into nothing more than a few inside jokes, a few shared memories. She looked upon Owen with wistfulness whenever he hiccuped. They shook hands and parted as friends.

One morning, Owen awoke. He took a warm shower, shaved, and brushed his teeth. As he began to apply his deodorant, he noticed that something was missing. His hiccups were gone. Anxiously he hunched over his morning paper, sipping delicately at his Sanka, expecting at any moment that they would descend upon him again like birds of prey. But they didn't. Without giving himself time to think about it, he called in sick to work. He felt like celebrating but had

no one to celebrate with. He cracked a root beer and went to the calendar to calculate how long they had lasted: two years, eight months, and eleven days. His prison term was over. Deep down in his gut, somewhere near his diaphragm, he knew that he was free.

* * *

In time, Owen forgot. His hiccups became an intangible thing – like a dream, like his childhood, like his marriage. It amazed him how quickly it happened; it was like climbing out of one car and getting into another. He met a woman named Lisa at a bowling alley, and after a year of dating they married. They lived together in the one-bedroom house across the street from the overgrown park with the cracked sidewalks. She worked a few hours a week at the local greenhouse. In her spare time she dug up the back yard into a serviceable garden. She got pregnant and gave birth to a little girl, who they named Lisa, after her mother. Using his great powers of rearranging, Owen transformed the den into a nursery and the basement into a den.

When Owen and Lisa's baby was born, Clyde and his wife came to Michigan for a visit. After dinner, the women hung up new drapes in the nursery as Owen and Clyde relaxed in front of the television. Baby Lisa slept in her crib beside the couch. The men sipped their beer, recalling their glory days at Best Way. Suddenly, something on the TV caught Clyde's attention.

"Hey!" he yelled, nearly upsetting the bag of chips in his lap. "Shut up a minute! That's the guy!"

Owen used the remote control to turn up the volume. A picture came on the screen, a black and white photograph of a man in overalls. The reporter said it was Irving Monroe.

"He's the Hiccup King!" Clyde hollered. The baby began crying. "Now I guess he's dead."

He had died of something, some disease or ailment or condition or malady that went unheard beneath Clyde's yelling. Once Clyde was silent, Owen was able to hear the story. Mr. Monroe had come down with the hiccups on July 18th, 1948, and continued to hiccup once every 1½ seconds until the day he passed away. His story had been immortalized in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. He was survived by his wife Elizabeth and four children. His wife described Irving as a "determined, unflappable man" and "a wonderful husband and father who never let hiccups get in the way of success." His world record, according to the reporter, was unlikely to ever be broken.

Under a Spell

Dear Ontheway,

I'll skip the sentimental platitudes about how much your mother loves you no matter what certain busybodies say to the contrary and get right to the point: your dad knew what he was doing. He wasn't gorging for pleasure. It was a sadomasochistic strategy designed to snap me out of my silence and make me confess. I suppose it worked, because here we are, though it didn't work the way he intended. At any rate, ten to fifteen ice cream sandwiches went down his throat each day, which is a sure way to push me to violence. I tried my best to hide them – God willing, you'll never have to perform such an impossible, humiliating task. He was a seal trainer, teasing me through hoops. But please remember: this was a good sign!

Hiding ice cream sandwiches in a freezer can hardly be called hiding, but it was my only real alternative. Outside the freezer – in a cupboard, for example – and it wouldn't be Richard toweling up those puddles. Even at this point, you see, mere weeks before I called his bluff, the trash can still wasn't an option; I'd promised myself I wouldn't hurt him anymore, and I always try to keep my promises.

The big thing was how could I stop a grown man from doing what he wanted? Your dad spent his own money, collected his own returnables in the park. He was so proud. Those trans-fatty treats were proof to himself that he could still *do*. With his patchwork face burrowing into a bush in search of a crumpled beer can, he yelled it: "DOO! DOO!" Onlookers would have laughed their bladders empty if not for social propriety.

So I buried the ice cream sandwiches in the back of the freezer and crossed my fingers for amnesia. Instead, I got damp piles of tofu burgers, organic pizzas, sugar-free popsicles, and Soysage Links littered across the kitchen floor. It was a game Richard always won, his trophy

the white smear decorating his happy crooked mouth. He brought chaos with his needs – but who doesn't?

I did question: Is this a battle I really want to fight? After all, he was functional. Barb barely did anything by this point. (Trust me, she'd done enough already.) She struggled to find excuses to come over, and in retrospect I gave her too much slack in this area. But I digress. Your dad brushed his own teeth, combed his own hair, washed himself in the tub. (Barb helped with the tough-to-reach areas; she also shampooed his hair and did his shaving. No one can mother like Mother!) He pushed the mower in moderately straight lines. (Barb trimmed around the flower beds and tidied up spots he missed when he got distracted and ran to the front yard to climb a tree.) He dried dishes (his Tupperware ones) and *loved* to vacuum (after Barb cleared breakables from shelves) – *WHEEEEEE!!!* he screamed.

He was truly a survivor.

It was this same high functioning, though, that blew his charade. I couldn't ignore our past! Here was a guy with the supposed intellect of a three-year-old, and he was flagrantly – gratuitously, even *cleverly* – breaking the covenant we'd established six years earlier: NO JUNK FOOD. This was OUR covenant. Why else in God's name would he choose ice cream, of all things, as his weapon?

Toddlers don't gorge. Cuckolded husbands do. You'll be an adult when you read this, so you'll understand words like "cuckolded," and you'll also understand why it was so wonderful that that's what your father was.

* * *

Let's go back. It was a wet and blustery morning. 10:42 a.m.. A Thursday in February, but strangely, no snow on the ground. Thick drizzle choking the air (or a hazy mist sweetening

the air, if I'm being romantic). From windows all over town, shadowy faces peered, remarking in sad voices that although the world resembled spring, it was only a trick. Neither Richard nor I noticed the weather. I was in a room with shades drawn tight, and Richard was in a room with mirrors for walls. Both of us were on our backs, being pressed upon by substantial weights.

I don't recommend you do this yourself, but thousands of times I've tried to visualize his expression when he realized he couldn't hold it any longer. I come up with: tomato-red cheeks; temples alive with wormy veins; piercing eyes with nothing (no one) to pierce but the water-stained ceiling.

My vision leaves unsatisfying blanks. Is it terror that floods his face when the barbell drops? I think no. In my mind, your father isn't afraid – only willful, or perhaps relieved. But to what end? What is his goal? (It makes a huge difference, and yet I can't answer.)

He tried to lift 250 pounds. An insane amount for a guy his build. No spotter.

He worked out three times a week at Every Body's Gym. When he didn't feel like going, which was more often than you want to know, we would talk. He'd battled obesity since boyhood. His natural instincts drew him to Twinkies, Twizzlers, and Orville Redenbacher. Only his wife's loving persuasion got him excited about healthy living. But always remember this: deep down, he wanted to stay in shape. He was thirty-seven years old, 5'10", 197 pounds. Respectable. The beer belly had nearly stabilized, and it wouldn't take long, I assured him, to start reversing it. His regular bench press was 175. Yes, I knew even this intimate detail. We'd talked about it. We talked about all kinds of things back then, because that's what people do when they're in love.

Another detail about that morning: three out of four tree trunks in Kalamazoo were stained fire-engine red, like they'd been hosed with fresh blood. I mention this in passing. I've never told anyone. I'm not sure what it means, or even if it's true, but there it is.

I hear your question, though. The answer is this: We'll never know. Whatever the reason, his arms gave out and the barbell reshaped him.

* * *

Just because they were fat and inactive doesn't mean Barb and Clem Dabbage were immoral. (I'm using the past tense, hoping they'll be buried or irrelevant by the time you read this.) Certainly, pinning your dad's lifelong weight battle on a childhood regimen of Super Sugar Crisp and bacon cheeseburgers is reasonable, but I'm not the arbiter of morality, so I won't call the Dabbages "bad." They were politically conservative, Roman Catholic (like me, and yet not), and they regularly enjoyed the amenities of northern Michigan's Native American casinos, which Clem called "Redskin Retreats." The Dabbages were devoted fans of sausage, bacon, butter, sour cream, deep-fried crab stix, and fudge. Each joked with me, privately, that exercise was for people with devils inside them.

Clem Dabbage retired from his furnace-installer career ten months after Richard and I walked down the aisle. Clem's newfound free time provided fresh occasions to dump gravy and doughnuts into his gut, which at last sighting jutted a full eight inches from his beltline. The toothpick peeking out from under his bushy gray mustache was a part of his face. His fingers reminded me of bruised, hairy bananas. He mostly communicated in grunts and shrugs, but he managed to assemble plenty of complete sentences about gays and women. Fifty dollars a week he donated to the Michigan Lotto, I guess because he thought he'd eventually win something.

Barb was the type of person who celebrated the new millenium with Cookware parties (it was Tupperware in the ’70s, Clairol in the ’80s, Candle Scentsations in the ’90s). These are artificial social occasions where nobody is “obligated” to buy, but every woman knows she has to buy something if she wants to be comfortably dismissed. Avoid them at all cost. Counting her dyed copper bouffant hair, Barb stood only 5’3”, but she was intimidating in her own way. By this I mean she wore clown makeup and turquoise bracelets and had big, uneven teeth. (I hope you take after my side of the family.) Plus, she lacked lips. Her non-lips smacked loudly when she chewed food, which, true to Dabbage form, was all day. Still, I pitied Barb. The lines on her face gave the impression that she had been whittled by a strong and unforgiving hand. I don’t mean she appeared sad, but rather hewn into a certain, implacable form by forces beyond her control. How can you not feel sorry for a woman who has no control over her own destiny?

* * *

I lived on vending machine granola bars and fountain water. That’s love. That’s dedication. I camped beside his Bronson Hospital bed for eighteen days, on a foldout cushion stuffed with rocks. Didn’t leave once. Check my story if you want to validate it; they probably have records. I slept sporadically. Lost eleven pounds, reached my best weight in years. TV sucked my eyeballs dry. It was my companion day and night, the purest friendship I’ve ever had. It wanted nothing, and nothing is what I gave it. I communed with that glowing box until morning sickened the room with yellow. I also played solitaire and read get-well cards from family, friends, coworkers, and gym owners without comprehending any words. With strategic diligence, I arranged floral bouquets and fresh-cut azaleas, wishfully assuming your dad’s olfactory sense was intact. Whatever dark place he inhabited, I figured, would at least smell

pretty. I wore his favorite perfume for the same reason, but only once. That particular fragrance had started making me queasy.

Your dad, I'll be honest, was a horror-show, his face puffed and knotted like homemade bread. I never knew a head could swell so much without bursting. His closed eyes were tight and black like rotten avocadoes, and every four hours an attendant came in with a noisy suction device to drain them.

I couldn't look at his face, so I studied his hands. They had been broad, strong, and thin-skinned, with prominent veins. Now the veins were flat, barely fed. Since it was apparently in danger of falling off, a nurse removed his wedding band – a symbolic gesture I didn't feel like pondering at the time – and handed it to me for safekeeping.

Even in a coma, your dad continued to grow. The human body is an amazing machine – it didn't even notice that his mind had stopped participating! I trimmed his nails, cleaned his ears, excised his nostril hair. I finally saw the proof, and not without pleasure, that the body *does* act without the brain's permission. A-ha! I felt mildly vindicated.

Richard "slept" (an official medical term, I believe, considering how often the nurses used it), so I dubbed him Sleeping Beauty – but did this qualify as life? For a few months, perhaps, but for years? It's a question we all have to answer: What are the criteria for being "alive"? It must be more than oxygenated blood hitting the right spots. (Although to be fair, my dear, some days that's all you're gonna get.)

Barb and Clem (I just can't call them "your grandparents"), various plumbing associates, an Aunt Trudy and Uncle Mark, a distant cousin whose name I forget – these and others drifted in and out of the room like ghosts. I remember nothing of what words or gestures passed.

I kissed your dad's arms and hands. Sang to him. Told him he needed to stay with me. I was crushed by the possibility of his death, and not only because the dead know our secrets. I described the herb garden we would plant in the spring and our future second honeymoon in Alaska. I repeated again and again that I loved him, and you can bet I meant everything I said.

* * *

He gained thirty pounds in five months. Fat pounds, not firm. This was two years after the accident, this period when he gorged on ice cream sandwiches and started becoming (again) the man I loved. It really was *him* in there; I have to emphasize this fact.

I'm not saying he'd been *entirely* acting – obviously, his brain was verifiably damaged – but your dad found his way to the surface for those few thrilling months. As a result, we connected. We regained our trust and love. We merged into one soul. I'll come back to this in a bit.

When he wasn't chowing ice cream, he ate Barb's grilled cheese sandwiches dipped in ranch dressing, or pork rinds from the Dairy Mart. Don't think I didn't try to curb it! Before the accident he'd loved my cooking. Tofu stroganoff, scalloped potatoes with cottage cheese, eggplant lasagna with rosemary, (my) Mom's classic macaroni and bleu cheese.

You'll realize someday that no one cooks such dinners for herself.

I pulled him to the dining room, pushed him into his chair, made sure he couldn't reach anything sharper than a plastic fork. Tucked the bib under his chin, put Huey Lewis and the News on the stereo. Everything the way he liked it – plus my big smile! Artichoke linguini, sourdough bread hot from the oven, a mixed-greens salad decorated with cherry tomatoes. He wouldn't eat. Poked the bread with his finger like it was a dead gerbil. Sang that it's "hi doo bee scare!" (hip to be square), got excited, flipped noodles off his plate in time with the music. I

finished my food, stood to clear the table. By then he was in the corner, bobbing up and down and talking to himself. I could see his face reflected in the glass door of the china cabinet. He beamed. He was happy about something.

* * *

The affair started long before the barbell came down, so I wasn't the worst kind of sinner. I'd been to that National City thirty times when I looked up long enough to notice Brad. He smiled the simpleton smile (Why do I always like the simple ones?), wiped his nose on his sleeve, counted out a stack of fives. Of course it was my fault. It's always the woman's fault. Men come like seals to a dangled sardine. I returned his smile. He liked my pendant. I opened it and showed him your grandmother. (I would never enshrine your fat bastard grandfather.)

The next few times – conversations, suggestions, hand touches, blah blah blah. Brad complimented my wedding ring just before jotting his number on my deposit slip.

It was decidedly comfortable. We met at his apartment on the second floor of an old house above a middle-aged blind woman. After letting me in, we would make small talk on his futon. He apparently didn't want me to see anything other than his bedroom and bathroom. I didn't mind; it's not like I loved the guy. I didn't want to watch the local news with him. I didn't want to look inside his refrigerator.

After ten minutes, he would lean over bashfully, each time like it was the first, and kiss me.

When the deed was out of the way, conversation came easily. We became an old married couple and a young infatuated couple, all at the same time. We held hands, made jokes, flirted, discovered each other. The afterglow was sexier than the sex: Brad moved from small talk to

deep inquiry and back again with ease. And it's corny, but he listened. Or maybe a better word is *heard.* He heard me when I talked.

One day, a few months into it, he asked what I wanted from our relationship. I didn't know what he was getting at. What popped out of my mouth was that I wasn't going to leave Richard.

He laughed, apparently horrified at the very thought, and said, "Oh, God. Of course not."

We would lay on his futon after sex, talking. Then I would leave.

I felt guilt, but the amount depended on the day, the time of day, my mood, Richard's mood. One minute, I would look in a mirror and sob into my hand. I'll even admit I ate a few guilt cookies here and there – so what? Other times, at the florist shop, recalling a particularly robust pinning, I would step into the bathroom to masturbate.

I went to confession but only told Father Brophy my envious thoughts of girls I passed on the street, my overindulgences with gin and the occasional sweet, and my rudeness to customers.

If I couldn't tell God, how could I tell your dad? He was so happy, so unquestioning, walking around with a beer in his hand and a stupid grin on his face. What kind of monster would want to ruin that?

* * *

On the first visit, Doctor Bennett told me, "The ice cream sandwiches don't seem to be harming him too badly."

The subtle implication: you can't burn a burnt log.

For me, "harm" was never the issue – it was worse than that. The ice cream meant one of two unbearable realities: 1.) Your dad was, just as they'd been telling me, a permanent toddler with no recollection of himself as a man; or worse, 2.) He was a man trapped inside a toddler

trapped inside a man's body – a man, therefore, with permanent memories of conspiracies he could never understand or prove.

I didn't say these things to Doctor Bennett. I scribbled them in my notebook when I returned home.

At the next visit, Dr. Bennett removed his glasses and said simply, perhaps with a faint trace of irritation, "He checks out okay." Then he smiled and asked if *I* had been indulging in Richard's ice cream bars. I laughed and gave his arm a pinch. Deep down, these doctors are all goofballs!

Real Richard had been caring. You need to know this. He said "Shit!" around hornets but never raised his voice or cursed in general. He was a plumber – good at fitting pieces together, at tinkering with the invisible components that make our lives run without stinky messes. Our arguments were intense but brief, like little summer storms. He was politically informed and quick to debate. He loved conspiracies. The first time I met his parents, he and Clem were quiet, even sleepy, in their recliners in front of a football game. The next minute, Barb and I practically dropped our pans in the kitchen because they were in a shouting match over Richard's remark that the Raiders had been paid by ABC to injure Terry Bradshaw during a playoff game.

Your dad liked to think he was one of the few people walking around with his eyes open. He didn't generally believe the theories – that the moon landing was faked, that KFC funded the Nicaraguan contras, that Ronald Reagan had a love affair with Liberace – but he took stock in the fact that they hadn't been disproved. They *could* be true; the possibility itself made him happy. An admirable trait.

* * *

One Sunday afternoon (I didn't note the date, though I should have – it was only weeks before all this resolved itself and you were conceived), Barb Dabbage came over for lunch…for lunch with *me*. This was weird. We didn't have a great rapport. It's not that we didn't like each other (although honestly, we didn't); we just hadn't socialized in any true capacity until the accident, and then our conversations had revolved around physical therapy, what Richard should and shouldn't eat, and so on. It was never said aloud, but Clem's discomfort with what he delicately dubbed his "cucumber son" had also kept Barb from interacting with me as anything other than Richard's "caregiver."

Here's the scoop: In the days immediately following your dad's injury, Barb used her diminutive intimidation tactics to convince me that his ideal caregiver – better than a full-time nurse or licensed therapist – would be his mother. Therefore, she watched Richard while I was at the shop or exercising, which totalled ninety hours a week. Her duties were minimal once Richard regained his verbal and motor skills (it took two years), but she'd had plenty of time to do damage.

I seated Barb at the dining room table. Even though she'd called ahead, we were both uncomfortable. Her eyeballs darted around like tandem flies, searching for insignificant items to light upon – my silver memo-holder shaped like a human nose, for instance – so she could have an excuse to say, "Wow, that's neat." She appeared visibly wounded that no Candle Scentsations populated the end tables. (She'd recently had a party; I stupidly went and smartly didn't buy.) From a brown bag she produced a pint of Kroger potato salad (Did she even consider how much mayo they put in that stuff?) and a six-dollar bottle of merlot. I whipped up sprout and cucumber sandwiches on oatmeal bread. We popped her cork and poured. Within five minutes, I was buzzed. Barb, too. She reached across the table and touched my hand. She

said she felt bad that we hadn't bonded. In fact, she'd always wanted a daughter. She wanted me to trust her.

Richard was upstairs in bed. Those days, he slept three hours a day in addition to ten a night.

(Now it's twelve at night, four during the day. FYI.)

Barb started dropping very personal questions. I can't say why I answered, other than I was numb and probably in serious need of conversation with another adult. She asked straight out if Richard and I still had sex. (Yes. Once every four months or so.) She wanted to know what it was like, emotionally. (Sad. Usually I cried afterwards.) Barb started sobbing at this point, and I figured whatever I said would be therapy for the old lady. She wanted to know if I'd slept around, or ever thought about it. (No to One. Yes to Two. Mother-in-law or not, I had a strong urge to revise Answer Number One.)

I told her it was like a fairy tale. Some curse had turned Richard into a 230-pound toddler with a hairy chest. He couldn't remember much, pre-accident. (I was glad for this, or, as it turns out, glad for this illusion.) He knew Barb and Clem, by name at least, though as I mentioned, Clem's discomfort with his man-child meant stilted and infrequent (read: Christmas) fatherly visits, so I think Clem was fading from your dad's radar screen. Barb's blip, of course, was quite healthy.

As for your mom, Richard knew that I was "Hannah." He enjoyed saying "I love you" in a voice that sounded like a three-year-old saying it to a cat. Our wedding pictures didn't interest him. Whenever I insisted that that was *him* in the tuxedo, out trickled the giggly "I don't dress like that!" (Was the tuxedo the only thing making him laugh? What would *you* think?)

"How long can you keep this up?"

This wasn't me asking myself. Barb was still at my table.

"Are you suggesting I send him away?" I poured the last of the merlot into my glass. "Why not? Maybe it'd be better for strangers to treat him like a plant for eight bucks an hour! Or maybe Clem wants him!" I was angry. I chalked it up to the daily repression of my feelings. But also, Barb knew there was no way I could divorce Richard. According to the Church, I was married forever. My anger was justified.

She apologized. Turned pink in the face. Scooted her chair from the table.

"Don't leave," I said. I knocked over the empty wine bottle when I grabbed her arm. "I need to talk."

* * *

The more I collected the silver wrappers from the floor, the more the idea nested in my head.

I shared the following with Barb: Richard's behavior was too clever. This was a man whose vocabulary was preschool-level. He wasn't supposed to be able to think abstractly, to imagine potential futures, to scheme, plot, or connive. But the evidence was undeniable: He knew there was no way for me to stop his filthy eating habits unless I confronted him, scolded him, showed him my wicked side.

Let me explain. Ice cream sandwiches are harmless (ostensibly). Sure, they'll raise your blood sugar, blimp you out, induce depression, and so on, but they aren't going to kill you in a few months or even a few years. Your dad knew that I knew this. He also knew that this fact undermined what I'd preached, and thus would hurt me. He was calling my entire life philosophy into question. He was baiting me.

But why? I'll tell you (what I didn't tell Barb).

We'd dieted together twenty times during our six married years. I wasn't a Nazi, but high sugar, red meat, transfat-heavy snacks, dairy – any health expert will agree these are no-nos. Your dad's plan, therefore, was to bait me until I cracked; and when I cracked, I would show my cards (*all* my cards, including my cuckold card) in an effort to retaliate. It was classic "me" behavior.

To fill the uncomfortable silence, I mentioned to Barb an alternate possibility: that I was projecting my delusions; that I simply *desired* for some core essence of Richard to be preserved in his damaged skull. (Even if this would mean he knew I'd been screwing a bank teller before and during his hospitalization – yeah right, what a desire that would be!)

Barb nodded at my projection theory. Nodded like a cow.

The way she looked at me while I was telling her this stuff! Her eyes squinted, her forehead wrinkled. I was an ant with a crumb. She pitied me.

She said, "When Richard was a boy and did something I disapproved of, I turned it into a game. I rewarded him for good behavior instead of scolding him for the bad stuff."

("Rewarded?" Is that what she called stuffing his face with Cheese Whiz and Doritos?)

She regretted to say it but didn't think it was possible that "Real Richard" was emerging from the damaged man in this ice cream sandwich acting-out. Thoughts like mine, she said, would set me up for a fall.

I imagined stuffing my sprout sandwich down her throat.

"You and Richard were," she caught her mistake, "ARE two of the happiest people I know. You need to stay strong."

The next day, I turned her words over in my mind. Anger latched onto me like a shadow; I dragged it through my workday, stared at it while I munched granola in the breakroom.

Had I *ever* been strong? How would she know?

Barb's face – tight, frowning mouth, shiny, slow-blinking eyes. If I'd wanted smoke blown up my ass, there were online support groups and churches.

I realized then that she had changed as drastically, perhaps even as tragically, as Richard. From what I knew of her, Barb had earned some sort of science scholarship to the University of Michigan. She dropped out after meeting and marrying Clem. It was a safe bet she'd never imagined a life of coriandered beef tongue and aromatic candles. Yet here she was, her lipless, halcyon smile deflecting all naysayers: husband = fine; marriage = fine; everything = fine.

Richard had changed in a split second, whereas Barb's transformation had been so gradual it was hardly noticeable – but in the end there wasn't much difference between the two.

Avalanche or erosion. Either way, you lose face.

* * *

She continued to come to our house, if only for thirty hours a week. I told Barb with my finger wagging in her face (physical movements make good mental reminders) that she *must* forbid more than two ice cream sandwiches a day. She pled ignorance, or diligence, or tolerance, or some fucking thing, and still the wrappers appeared under the couch, behind the bookshelf, atop the bathroom sink and kitchen counter, inside the underwear drawer.

My underwear drawer.

* * *

Flash forward: I don't sleep well. However, it's not because of the ice cream sandwiches. That issue is resolved. I don't sleep because I'm watching your father. He's finally (again) the man I married. I run my fingers along his arm, hold his hand. I study him. Behind those lids are eyes that never stop staring at me, eyes forty years old. Eyes that reach me. I put a

hand on my belly and feel you kicking. We're under a spell, the three of us, together. We gaze at each other in our imaginations. We like what we see.

The End

* * *

Not only was your dad a fat slob, but he was making a fool of me. He wanted a fight. I was at a boiling point. He was playing dumb, secretly enjoying the way I stooped, contorted, and grunted to retrieve wrappers from behind the printer stand. When I shook the dripping things in his face, he mocked me.

"I didn't!" Phony confusion, then the switch to the sad, bashful face.

I could see the buried smile. It was hard to notice because his eyes were welling with tears, but I could see it. I'm his wife. When you get married, you'll know what I mean.

"You're not an idiot," I told him. "Can you show me you're not?"

Plink-plink-plink. Tears dropping onto his cheeks.

I came close, very close, to screaming that I was going to fuck Brad Alexander in the living room and see how bad *that* made him want to eat ice cream sandwiches.

* * *

Back to that unanswerable question that may always haunt you. Here are some possible answers:

Maybe he was bored. Lord knows, our marriage had gotten repetitive.

Maybe he was trying to prove something he couldn't prove in his ordinary life with me. Lord knows, he'd gotten stagnant; his conspiracy theories had turned him into an internet junkie and a lazy lover.

Maybe he was pissed off, and the heavy barbells were meant to release aggression without harming anyone. Lord knows, he never turned his aggression on me (I would've liked it once in a while, as a change of pace).

Bottom line: *I* didn't make him lift that much.

I couldn't have made your dad do anything he didn't want to do.

* * *

I threw away the first one right in front of his stupid grinning face.

This was after an eleven-hour shift during prom week, the busiest week of the year. The webbing of my right hand was lacerated from the speedy assembling of bouquets.

I yanked the ice cream sandwich out of his mouth and said, "This is garbage."

I dropped it into the kitchen can. He shot me a glare that was either pissed-off phony self or phony pissed-off phony self.

"You said I could!" he said. (He was confusing me with Barb!)

That first throw-away was such a relief, such a proud moment of action, that I couldn't resist doing it again. I was calling his bluff.

But phony pissed-off phony self or not, I didn't like seeing your dad cry. I was no masochist; my methods turned sneaky.

His daily routine was to walk four blocks (he always stressed that he wanted to walk "*by myself!*") to the Dairy Mart. He could afford two or three boxes, each with six or eight sandwiches. The Dairy Mart clerks probably thought Richard was a "cool dude." I had no doubts that the dreadlocked second-shifter was in a band and that he'd written a song called "Ice Cream Sandwich Fiend" about the old weirdo in tight-fitting khaki shorts who got excited like a

preschooler every time they stuffed the Breyer's into his brown bag and handed him his thirty-eight cents in change.

At first, I disposed of one sandwich from each box. When I realized your dad hadn't noticed, I upped it to two. No reaction. A day later, three. The next day, four.

Eventually, he noticed.

* * *

His brain had swelled to the size of a canteloupe. No fewer than three doctors and two nurses had assured me he would never open his eyes again. I refused to believe them, but my disbelief took a great deal of effort, and the process changed me. He was unconscious for eighteen days. In my book, that's eighteen days on the other side, nearly three weeks of seeing what's waiting for us. It only made sense that he'd had access to everyone's dirty secrets. Six days after he opened his blood eyes (I couldn't locate pupil, iris, or sclera in all that blood) and groaned like a backed-up sewage pipe, Richard entered physical therapy.

He lived at the hospital for four months. He learned how to hold a fork, how to drop his B.M. into a toilet, how to write his name in crayon. Then they released him into my custody. Barb became his full-time nurse.

I didn't see your dad much the first few weeks he was home. I couldn't stand to be in the same room. The sight of him made me feel faint. He was a nightmare thing in my bed, a freak baby with a face that looked like my husband's except crooked in seven places and with a nose like a chewed eggplant. Most days he spent with Barb, and this is when she corrupted him.

I refused to medicate myself with alcohol. There were plenty of sober distractions. I worked sixty hours a week. I had sex with Brad Alexander. I tolerated visits from the Dabbages; I baked hundreds of bran muffins.

In an expedient, unemotional way, I closed down your dad's plumbing business. In a similarly clinical fashion, I gave Brad Alexander his sendoff. He said he understood. I said I wished I did.

* * *

At the top of his forehead, just below the hairline, is one of the cuts I made when I hit him with the skillet. Across the bridge of his nose is a fresh suture as long as my pinky finger. Below his eye, a third, the length of a lipstick tube. The stitchwork reminds me of Frankenstein's monster.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

* * *

At the dinner table one evening, Richard said I betrayed him.

I dropped my spoon.

(When was this? Weeks ago, but fewer than two. So I guess it's days.)

"You betrayed me," is what he said.

My thighs went numb. It was like hearing a dog or a photograph speak.

I reverted to the cognitive therapist's instruction: whenever a new word is uttered, make the patient repeat it. "What did you say?"

"You betrayed me." He wasn't looking at me. He was talking to his baked beans.

You should've died – truthfully, honey, that was my first thought. I was staring at a monster, a baby made from grown-up parts. Part of him was dead, but I no longer knew which part.

Here's what happened:

I heard the squeak of the back screen door. Barb charged into the dining room like a Peewee linebacker. She wasn't supposed to be here. I'd recently fired her. She saw me standing up from the table. I probably looked pale and confused – the perfect time to strike. Her fat arms made wheels around her head, wheels intended to flatten me.

I won't pretend she didn't scream things, too. She was out of her head. Said I was an unfit guardian for your dad. Said I was "philandering on him." Said it was me – me! – who was eating the ice cream sandwiches and blaming it on "poor Richie." Let's just say that we don't need to give these allegations the time of day.

I was struck five or six times on the shoulders, neck, and head before Prince Charming came to the rescue. He was a savage unleashed. If I'd awoken the beauty, Barb had raised the beast; if I'd aroused the man, she'd stirred the boy. He choked her unconscious in front of my eyes.

I'll reiterate what I told the judge: I tried with all my power to stop him. I raised the skillet from the table and whacked him on the head. Not once, but lots of times. He didn't seem to notice; he was so determined to save me that each swat was like a tennis racket bouncing off his valiant skull. One hundred pounds doesn't stand a chance against two-hundred and whatever. Sadly, fit often loses to fat in match-ups of this kind.

He throttled her neck for maybe a minute straight and then dropped her on the floor. Poor Barb. She'd had a full life, but still. Nobody likes when it's their time to die. Not even suicides.

* * *

Of course, I didn't want her to die. I wasn't an accomplice, or an accessory. I may not have fought for her as vociferously as my deposition hinted, but okay, those were just words, and words are open to interpretation.

For instance, "Another detail about that cold Thursday morning: three out of four tree trunks in Kalamazoo were stained fire-engine red, like they'd been hosed with fresh blood."

Dream? Fairy-tale symbol? Psychotic delusion? In actuality, those trunks were red for an art project. Or was it an eco-group from the university protesting deforestation? These all make good stories.

* * *

As I've hopefully demonstrated, your father already knew about my transgression. I was ready to tell him that I knew he knew. That's all I wanted; and as sure as I'm your Mommy, it's all he wanted! At the very least, he owed me the opportunity to confess and ask for forgiveness. With Barb dead (or so I thought at the time) on the floor, it was time to put all our cards on the table.

"Why did you say I betrayed you?"

He listened like an obedient boy. He didn't make eye contact and just fidgeted with his shirt; he may have been worked up from the attempted matricide.

He mumbled that it was his ice cream.

"Still holding onto the act?" I said. "That's sad."

He pretended not to understand. His fingers plucked at his belt buckle while his glance kept straying to Barb. There was a flicker in his eyes. He was in there, all right. The man, the plumber, the husband.

"You tried to kill yourself," I said. "Tell me why."

This seemed to confuse him even more. I'll give him his persistence. With his forearm, he swept half the dishes off the table. It was embarrassing, seeing all those plates and crumbs and glasses of juice crash and splatter on Barb's lifeless body. His act was wearing thin. Then he upped the ante and showed me who he'd been getting his advice from.

"YOU eat my ice cream!" he yelled. The scars on his face turned the white hue of an exploding star. I thought his head would rupture again. "You steal it every time!"

So there you go. He'd been seduced into believing his own wife would betray him when he was at his weakest. I was, as you are, intensely disappointed. Like all little boys, he had sided with his mother. Your dad went on to destroy our plants, our telephone stand, our CD rack, and so on, all the while ballyhooing about my fat body and how it was HIS money and I never let him spend it how he wanted to spend it.

He was going to push the act all the way, try to deprive me of everything, including the chance to come clean. My heart, as they say, sank, although honestly it felt more like it shriveled like an old balloon.

* * *

Barb was never dead, of course. She was unconscious, and was later treated for a mild concussion, which is why she isn't reliable when she claims I did nothing but smile while Richard choked her. She's also unreliable when she says that she opened her eyes later – prone on the floor, covered with dishes and food remnants, and unable to move – and watched in horror as I quietly stepped into the kitchen, grabbed a heavy skillet out of the cupboard, and proceeded to bring back the man I'd married once and for all.

Barb and Clem will never quit; not until they're dead. They'll try to tell you all kinds of trash, like your mommy is an attempted murderer, a junk-food junkie, an alcoholic. Those aren't

my biggest concern – they're so laughable you'll never believe them anyway. More troubling is that they'll try to convince you that your father isn't really your father. But ask yourself this question, my beautiful daughter – if your father isn't your father, then why are his parents so eager to have custody of you?

I'm rushing ahead, making life depressing before it's even begun. You've got plenty of time to worry. For now, enjoy your warmth and darkness. Another week and you'll be out among the storytellers and the gluttons, exposed in this big bright world. Just remember: everyone tells the tale that makes them happy, and no story is worth anything if it isn't told.

Your daddy's is the one you can trust. His has no words, nothing to get between you and the truth. He'll just fawn over you with his sweet blue eyes and quiet smile. He'll ask for nothing in return. His love is fixed, unconditional – like children, dogs, and heroes. He'll pet your head.

You'll be his prize.

Kaleidoscope

On the evening Jerry and Kathy moved in, Ray Peterson stopped over. He weaved through the maze of boxes in the dining room, shook Jerry's hand, and gave Jerry a quarter-ounce of weed. "A welcome-home present," Ray said.

Jerry thanked him. Ray resembled the Ray who had commandeered the grill at the *Gambate Jerry and Kathy!* barbecue eighteen months earlier (he still bore the trademark 1970s chops and head of brown Einstein hair), but his torso had thickened and his face was now bloated and red. Jerry told Ray that it was nice to see him, and they retired to the couch to smoke a couple of bowls.

Ray was an acquaintance of Jerry's who owned a couple of houses. Ray had a wife named Veronica and two preschool-aged daughters. He had explained to Jerry over the phone that they were happy to rent the Park Place unit at a lower rate than they'd been asking, because the refinishing of the hardwood floors had left a coat of red dust on the window ledges, shelves, and doorknobs that they hadn't gotten around to cleaning. Jerry had said they didn't mind the inconvenience; they needed a place right away.

After smoking, Jerry and Ray stared at the quiet audience of boxes, end tables, and furniture. For Jerry, the wordlessness felt comfortable. His wife Kathy could be heard upstairs, unpacking trinkets and dusting surfaces. Jerry liked the sensation of being away from her, being separated by an actual floor, after so many consecutive months of being joined at the hip.

Jerry offered Ray some of the cold pizza on the coffee table. Ray chewed his slice and plucked thoughtfully at his left sideburn, which was shaped like a backward 'L'.

"I have a tumor in my gut," Ray said.

Jerry said he was sorry. He tried to summon another word or phrase that might be helpful. Nothing came. He considered asking if the tumor was malignant, but then couldn't remember the opposite of malignant – the good (or at least not-so-bad) tumor – so he gave up and issued a mild grunt meant to express indignation.

"It's in my adrenal gland," Ray continued, in the clinical tone of someone describing the broken headstock of a Fender Squire. "That's why I've been having these weird symptoms. The weight gain. This tomato head." He gestured toward his face, which to Jerry's surprise wore a broad, if manic, smile. "Sometimes I open my eyes at night and see people walking around in our bedroom. I'm in REM sleep, but I feel completely awake. The people talk to me and everything. I also cracked a rib a year ago, just from laughing too hard." He expulsed a giggle, perhaps to test if another rib would break.

"Can they operate?"

"They tell me surgery'll get rid of it," Ray said. "I'm going in in a couple of months."

* * *

While it was upsetting that his vocabulary had shrunk in that moment ("benign," goddamn it), Jerry consoled himself that news of Ray's sort was not normal to hear from anyone, let alone a guy he'd known for ten years but had never talked with about anything more substantial than Funkadelic albums and fog machines. Jerry had played bass in Fonzarelli's Thumb while Ray was the lead guitarist in The Impossible Crutches. The two bands had formed a friendship, booked shows together, covered each other's songs, shared dreams of success. Now, four years after the groups disbanded, Jerry saw Ray as the last remnant remaining from that time period – a nice remnant, to be sure, but a remnant nonetheless.

Kathy was saddened by the news. She was concerned about Ray and his family. He was so young. Only thirty-two. She wondered aloud what would happen to Veronica and the girls if Ray died.

Kathy's hair was arranged carefully on the pillow beneath her head. She watched Jerry undress; it was apparent by her silence that she was visualizing Jerry with a tumor, though her silence couldn't tell Jerry on which exact part of his body she'd placed it.

* * *

They had moved to Japan to teach English. They had lived for one year in the mid-sized city of Nara, then traveled for six months through Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia on twenty dollars a day. Now, at last, they were back in Michigan. They'd returned to Kalamazoo thinking of it as their home. They were ready to get settled, stop living out of six-dollar hotel rooms, stop carrying their lives in backpacks. They were ready to find careers, maybe even buy a house or have a child.

One week after moving into Park Place, the Portage Public Library rehired Kathy in her old position in the Youth Department. The salary was exactly what Jerry and Kathy needed. They popped the cork on a bottle of Korbel Brut. How had she managed to step into the same job that she'd quit eighteen months before? Jerry and Kathy asked each other this rhetorical question as they got drunk, while she washed the dishes and he sliced cheese for a midnight snack. It was good fortune, they said. Good timing. Good, good, good.

Jerry had received a master's degree in Practical Writing just before they'd left America, and as he drained his fourth glass of bubbly he announced to Kathy his plan to look for any work that didn't involve the three F's: food, factories, and fucking retail. No pizza restaurants, no magazine stands. No pornography stores or copy shops. No door-to-door solicitation, no

telemarketing. No caulking glue factories or temp agencies. Nothing minimum wage, nothing with walk-in customers. He'd had enough. He wanted to drive a limo. Or be a private detective. Or model nude at the Art Institute.

Kathy didn't seem to mind Jerry's pickiness. She never actually used the word "pickiness" – she called it "selectiveness" – but Jerry figured he knew what she meant. She insisted that he take his time. Her salary was enough to live on. She wanted him to be happy. She wanted him to find a job like hers, something he could truly enjoy. While he job-hunted, she added, he could finish unpacking boxes and dusting ledges – whenever he got the chance, of course. It was always nice, she insisted while the sink drained with a wet sucking sound, to have one person at home who didn't work.

* * *

On Kathy's nine a.m. days, Jerry slept until long after she left. On the days she worked at one p.m., he stood at the back door and kissed her goodbye before walking out the front door to the laundromat to buy a newspaper so he could keep an eye on the want ads, which he read while reclining in the easy chair in front of the picture window that overlooked the park.

Their apartment occupied half of a two-story house that had been built in the 1930s. In the adjoining apartment lived another young white married couple who drove a Toyota Corolla the color of an open wound and a Ford Taurus the color of a Band-Aid. "The perfect Yin and Yang," Jerry called them. They made no noise whatsoever, except with their plumbing.

There was no street in front of the duplex. Instead, there was a park criss-crossed by an 'X' of sidewalks. Another sidewalk encircled the park's perimeter. Black wrought-iron lamps stood at planned intervals, and towering oak trees extended their snow-bearing arms over the

scene. The park was sparsely-trafficked and quiet, like an elderly librarian whose mere presence said *Shhhhhh*. The oak shadows looked like spilled wine on a white tablecloth.

One afternoon, Jerry went out on the porch to get the mail. He noticed a pair of embedded brown turds in the snow directly in front of their apartment. He saw paw prints and squirts of yellow piss. Jerry seemed to remember a law prohibiting dogs from doing their business in people's yards, but was it truly a law, or just a gentlemen's agreement? And even if it was a law, whom would he call? The police? He decided that it didn't matter, since nobody came to visit anyway. The mail in the box was all junk.

Within a month, the *Kalamazoo Gazette* hired Jerry as a freelance writer. Margaret the editor handed him a stack of work – play and concert previews, profiles of local painters, sculptors, composers, and rock bands. His two-month supply added up to nine assignments. Each assignment paid fifty dollars. The money was a pittance, but the position meant Jerry could give up the uncomfortable process of searching through the newspaper with Sharpie in hand, circling and skimming (more skimming than circling), pondering which tree he would prefer chaining himself to for the next five, ten, twenty years.

Kathy greeted the *Gazette* news with a polite smile. With the television light flickering in her eyeballs, she mumbled, "Great." She was tired; she had worked ten hours that day. What looked like pity in her brief glance, Jerry decided, could only be exhaustion.

She rested her head on Jerry's shoulder and soon fell asleep. A few hours later, he lifted and carried her up the stairs. He put her into bed.

* * *

Jerry conducted interviews over the telephone. He recorded the interviews with the answering machine. Then he played the answering machine tape and used a hand-held recorder

to record the conversations. Then he went upstairs to his desk and used the hand-held recorder tape to transcribe the interview onto the computer.

It only took two hours to write each article, once he had the facts in front of him.

Jerry had lots of free time. He couldn't figure out what to do with it. Night after night, he flipped through television channels (all in English, which continued to surprise him); he listened to the college radio station; he surfed the internet for pornography and funny cartoons. Morning's first chirping of birds sent him stumbling into bed, where he lay awake thinking about the tumor in Ray's gut and wondering if he shouldn't give Ray a call. Jerry had driven the last two rent checks (December and January) to Ray's house, but had simply dropped the envelope into the mailbox without ringing the doorbell, then hustled back to the car as if in a rush to get somewhere.

In the light of day, however, the process of lifting the receiver, dialing the Petersons' number, and actually talking to Ray about the tumor (or *not talking* to him about the tumor) seemed complicated and unnecessary. Besides, Jerry reasoned, an ill person like Ray would be napping during the afternoons. And if he weren't napping, he would certainly want to be alone with his family. Rather than call Ray, Jerry usually looked out the picture window at the constellation of feces on the tiny lawn.

* * *

Jerry ate two p.m. breakfasts of tomato soup and crackers at the dining room table. Sometimes the girl next door climbed the exterior wooden staircase to her attic apartment, and he watched her. He performed household chores like washing dishes, bagging trash, tossing dirty clothes into the laundry. He even continued the battle of Paper Towel vs. Red Dust, because Kathy discovered, daily, new surfaces he had "neglected," and she taped scribbled notes to this

effect on the refrigerator, kitchen counter, stereo, and television screen (each day a different spot and a different note with nearly the same wording).

Without fail, by the time Kathy arrived home from work, Jerry's powerful, all-day urge to confront her about her badgering had shriveled into a nagging whisper that he readily ignored; for Kathy's part, she appeared too tired to discuss her notes.

Even when she gripped the knob of the linen closet cupboard and came down with red fingers she said nothing, but she made a grand display of marching to the sink with her hand held forth like a flag. They avoided each other until she fell asleep on the couch and he helped her up the stairs into bed.

* * *

Jerry spent twenty minutes a day staring at the park through the picture window, sipping his coffee. He and Kathy had talked about it; they both were feeling culture shock from America.

In Japan, the language had been a mystery. The sounds that came from people's mouths had had no meaning. On his daily train ride into Osaka for work, he'd felt protected; there was never the worry of having to talk to anyone, no bristling at inane overheard conversations. He could bury his face in a book, glancing up now and then to marvel at the sleeping *salaryman* who stood with one hand gripping the plastic overhead handle as if showing the world that despite appearances some part of him always remained awake. Jerry and Kathy shopped the *shotengai* in a state of happy oblivion, pointed with amazement rather than cynicism at the wax tempura in the display windows, at the ten-inch platform shoes on tanned Japanese girls with bleached hair, at the arcade crane game with a live lobster prize. They'd been like visitors on a faraway planet, viewing innocently deformed replications of the world they'd left behind.

When they returned to the United States, a collection of mysteries had vanished from their lives. Americans were noisy, curt, aggressive, and worst of all, recognizable. Grown adults, in broad daylight, conducted business wearing sweatpants. Overweight schoolchildren picked their noses at bus stops. Domesticated animals defaced lawns at will. 4x4s the size of small buildings blotted out the sky. Even the billboards were affrontive:

Which part of 'Thou Shalt Not' didn't you understand?
-God

But looking out over the park, with its snow-draped benches and solemn iron lamps, Jerry decided that he should feel happy. They were now secure. They could speak the language; they could learn from the local news; if they got sick, the doctor would understand their ailments. Streets were familiar. Family lived within one hundred miles. Taco shells and canker sore medication could be found in every corner grocery. In this heated apartment with an American kitchen, Kathy could and would (once she found the time) cook to her heart's delight.

* * *

One afternoon, Jerry stood at the picture window and watched a young man with a goatee stroll down the sidewalk at the pace of an altar-bound bride. A fluffy, unleashed white dog trotted alongside the man, poking its jittery nose here and there into the snow. The dog certainly weighed less than Jerry's dictionary.

The dog stopped in front of Jerry and Kathy's duplex. It squatted, then dropped four brown nuggets out of its behind. The owner also stopped, and his hands remained buried in his jacket pockets; his face was expressionless; clouds of frozen air issued from his mouth. The dog scratched at the snow, squirted urine, then scampered away. The owner resumed his solemn, disinterested walk. At the window, Jerry waved his arms to get the guy's attention, without success.

Over the next week, he witnessed this again and again. It wasn't only the fluffy white dog. There was a full-grown husky that roamed the park, unsupervised by the hippie kids three houses down. The husky enjoyed relieving himself, both liquidly and solidly, on Jerry and Kathy's lawn. Other dogs followed suit. Brown land mines and yellow sunbursts decorated the snow.

"I don't get it," Jerry said to Kathy, while they lay in bed. "There's a whole park out there, and these people let their dogs take a dump in our yard. It's not even a yard. We've got ten feet of grass."

Kathy agreed with him. She listened to his complaints. She had listened to his complaints while they sat in front of the TV. She had listened to his complaints as she brushed her teeth. She had listened to his complaints after sex. She had agreed with him. She still agreed with him. It was a problem. Those people were assholes. In the end, she didn't offer any advice. She closed her eyes, as if to fall asleep. She wanted him out of the room, but probably didn't think saying so would have any effect.

Jerry read for a while before turning off the light. He climbed out of bed, went downstairs, and drank four beers on the porch, where his nose, both inside and outside, burned from the cold.

* * *

Ray Peterson went into surgery to remove the tumor on his adrenal gland. He made it through the operation and e-mailed a photograph of the tumor to his friends. It looked like a decayed potato, with all sorts of unruly tentacles, possibly roots, sticking out here and there. A ruler beside the tumor showed that it was two inches long.

Jerry was pleased to see the tumor, pleased that it had been cut from Ray's body before it could do any damage. It inspired Jerry to write a return e-mail. He clicked away on the keyboard; the words spilled out effortlessly. A tumor, he wrote, was just a physical manifestation of tension and dissonance, a waste product that the body needed to expulse; and thus, even though it was terrible what Ray had gone through, a strong person like him who was a fantastic guitar player with a great sense of humor and two beautiful daughters and a lovely, intelligent wife would certainly emerge from this ordeal as an even better human being: *Yeah…like that's possible,* Jerry typed, attempting an ironic tone strong enough to defuse sentimentality but mild enough to retain sincerity. Jerry sprinkled his missive with shared memories of Fonzarelli's Thumb and The Impossible Crutches. As a finale, he used his Japanese dictionary to assemble a quote that he was pretty sure translated roughly as "Sorrow is the shortest leash," by which he was trying to say that distance made things better.

Jerry proofed his e-mail before sending it. As he read, he recalled how just a few months ago he hadn't even been able to think of the word "benign," let alone any words of consolation for Ray. He pictured himself at that moment, sunken into the sofa, stoned and slack-jawed, twiddling his thumbs beside this guy who had a cancer eating his gut. Jerry realized shamefully that he hadn't once attempted to follow up about Ray's condition. Ray would see this e-mail as a half-assed, way-too-late apology. Or worse, he would think Jerry was afraid of the tumor, afraid to come near the disease, that Jerry was sending an e-mail as a surrogate for his actual presence.

On the other hand, he and Ray had never been *that* close; even in the band days, they hadn't hung out more than five or six times a year.

If this were the case, though, then wouldn't this gushing letter sound phony?

Jerry deleted the e-mail and typed that he was glad Ray made it through okay and if there was anything he could do, to let him know. A few hours later, Ray responded: "Just send your positive thoughts my way."

* * *

The *Gazette* job was getting old fast. In less than two months, the parade of strangers droning on about their projects made Jerry impatient and tired. He attempted to write transcendently within his 750-word limit. He loathed the typical butt-kissing community articles, but ultimately found this mode impossible to avoid, because the editors hacked out all evidence of creativity or constructive criticism. The "reviews" were merely thinly disguised promos; the community didn't want to hear that its fine arts were, in actuality, crappy arts. Whether dealing with overwrought plays (*Playwright Bobels added, "The character tries hard to protect whatever small part of himself he has in his suitcase, the symbol of his secret or lack of secret, his dream or lack of dream"*), gospel groups in need of hyperbole (*Drummer Javon Choen was a standout, his counter-rhythms and dynamic swells helping lift the music not just <u>to</u> the ceiling, but <u>through</u> it),* or deluded rock bands (*When asked if their songs are serious or not-so-serious, Gorley said, "A little of both. If you come to one of our shows, you'll leave with a whole basketful of emotions"),* Jerry couldn't, wouldn't, and didn't criticize. At the end of the day, he was nothing but a pitchman.

Nights, while Kathy slept, Jerry stood outside, his face cut by the frigid wind, shoveling frozen dog turds from his yard and tossing them onto the sidewalk. The following mornings (one p.m.), with coffee mug in hand, he hid in the corner of the picture window to observe the dog owners. They inevitably spotted the mound of feces just before sidestepping it, pointing at it, and warning their friends.

Jerry's message wasn't getting through: the dogs continued to drop load after load, while the owners yawned. Was this the way things were done in America? Had there been a secret meeting while he and Kathy were away? Jerry seemed to be misunderstanding the rules. And Kathy didn't appear to care either that their yard – what little yard it was – was being systematically violated.

Jerry considered painting a sign and stabbing it into the dirt, but what would it say? *NO POOP*? *VOTE NO TO DIRTY SNOW*? He would look ridiculous. He considered calling the City Commissioner and filing a complaint, but which department? It would entail endless red tape, as aggravating as the poop itself. Or how about a reasoned, rational talk with the dog owners – a sort of sit-down, where they negotiated the poop boundaries while Jerry served windmill cookies and hot cocoa?

He longed to tear open the door and scream profanities at the top of his voice. Instead, he stomped through the apartment, holding conversations in his head, talking out loud to the phantom dog-owners, working himself into an actionless frenzy.

* * *

On the first of March, Jerry drove to the Petersons'. He rang the doorbell. Ray's wife answered, flanked by her daughters. Veronica Peterson was a short, pale woman with an awkwardly pretty face, crooked teeth, and muddy bangs cut evenly over her eyebrows. Jerry handed her a white envelope that contained the rent check. He smiled at the Peterson girls, who clung to their mother's pant legs. They stared up at Jerry with thumbs in their mouths. Veronica invited him inside. Her eyes were puffy and red. She'd been crying, but Jerry didn't ask the reason.

He went to the basement. Ray was in the workroom, wearing safety glasses. He greeted Jerry with a wave and asked him to shut the door.

Ray produced a joint from a tinderbox. They smoked it. Ray asked Jerry if he needed any weed. Jerry said he could always use some, so Ray gave him a quarter in a tightly rolled baggy. Jerry said he didn't have any money on hand, but that he could definitely go to a bank machine. Ray told him it was free.

"This guy I know grows it," he said. "He gives it to people who smoke, and we give it to other people who smoke." He said it was a nonprofit, positive karma sort of thing, to keep the creativity flowing and whatnot. Before Jerry had a chance to say thanks, Ray put a wooden kaleidoscope into Jerry's hand.

It was eight inches long and feather-light. The wood was unpolished and rough, a pale cream color. It felt delicate but sturdy. Jerry looked into the kaleidoscope. He pointed it toward the fluorescent light over the workbench. He rotated the kaleidoscope, watching the flowers of color bloom, shrink, and bloom again.

"It's for the kids," Ray said.

"It's great," Jerry said.

Jerry held the kaleidoscope at waist-level. He turned it over in his hands. He could hear the shards of glass rolling around inside. The noise was soft, not unpleasant, not like something shattered beyond repair.

"You look great," Jerry said. Some of the bloating had left Ray's face, and the redness in his cheeks and neck was less pronounced.

"Thanks. I'm in pain all the time, though. They pumped me full of air to make room to operate. All that air's still inside me." He ran his fingers over his belly. "Hurts like hell."

"It must be better than before."

"I guess," Ray said. He examined the joint stub between his fingers. "I just found out I have another tumor. In my brain. It's always something." He started laughing. Behind the safety glasses, his eyes became slits. His laughter attained a pitch and consistency that made it sound like someone was tickling him.

"Are you serious?" Jerry said, and he knew that he might as well have said nothing. Eye contact was uncomfortable. Jerry looked at the cement floor, at his boots.

Ray said, "They can't operate for a while. Not until I get healthy again." He continued scrutinizing the roach between his fingers. "I guess it's not doing any harm. They say it's not hurting me. Crazy to think about that thing just sitting up there. I'm gonna kill this." He squashed out the roach and put it in an Altoids tin.

Jerry said he had to get going. He told Ray to let him know if he needed anything. He thanked Ray for the weed, and returned the kaleidoscope to its place on the workbench.

* * *

The fluffy white dog made a visit that afternoon. Jerry stood at the picture window. The telephone rang. Jerry let the answering machine get it. The goateed dog owner stood at his usual distance, ten paces up the sidewalk, blameless, one hand pressing a cigarette to his lips, the other hidden in his jacket pocket. The voice on the machine was Margaret, from the *Gazette*. She said there were more pieces for Jerry to write, and she rattled them off, and she said to please give her a call because she was going to Milwaukee next week for a wedding, and someone needed to take these things.

Jerry knocked on the picture window – *clunk clunk clunk*. It sounded like a giant fish tank. He knocked again, and the glass shook. The dog owner looked up at Jerry. Jerry pointed

at the fluffy white dog, which was squatting, depositing its shit. Its teeth were exposed in something like a grin, something like a child at a circus. Jerry jabbed the window with his finger until he thought the glass might shatter, then he jabbed some more. The dog owner removed the cigarette from his mouth, blew his smoke; he called to his dog once, twice, three times. The dog didn't understand, or didn't care, or wasn't paying attention.

Two Girls, a Converse, a Rock

Maybe I'll never be a deputy, but I know how to make tacos. So what. I MAKE FOOD. Piss on it! This is my life, in this Taco Bell, and I DON'T GIVE A SHIT. 'But hey, Terry, only LOOOZERS work at a fast food place! You're twenty-four years old, and they let retards work there!' Oh, really? Would you like to try our new Steak Fajita? Have a nice day!

I don't even care about all that. I love my girlfriend Deena more than anything, even my toe. I'd chop the thing off for her and throw it in a lake. I'd lose one of my eyes. That was my limit. Hers was her fingernails, peeled off one at a time with no painkiller. We screw each other's brains out constantly at my apartment. In four days she graduates high school, and then we're out of Grayling forever. That's my plan. I know without a destination or cash to get there it's not a dictionary-definition plan, but it still pisses me off how Deena laughs when I talk about it.

"You'll be here until you're old," she says. "I mean *older*." To her, my non-high school diploma means all I can do is be the best chilito-maker ever and stick out my hand for the annual twenty-cent raise.

Talking to the food is the best. Do you like it when I spread hot beans on you, Mister Tortilla? You're gonna burn for about ten seconds and then some tub is gonna stuff you into his face. I'm gonna cut you up, Mister Tomato. Are you scared? Here comes my vintage A .G . Russell with the seven-inch Bowie blade, the gift from Dad that Deena will NOT get her hands on.

All the time Deena is breaking my things. Sometimes it's when we fight, sometimes she's just clumsy. Either way, I say goodbye to my boom box, my lava lamp, my checkerboard

that my father's father carved from a Joshua tree in 1923. My drinking glasses, my sweet-ass 1950s Superman coffee mug. What a whore!

Vin Geraldo broke the light above the prep counter, punched it and shattered the bulb. All the workers except me scratched their butts and asked why. Gee, maybe because I go home every night to the girl he wishes he had? He can't admit this, though! The liar's story is that he KO'd Mr. Fluorescent because he was "so bored with life in this dead-ass town." Whatever. Dude's not honest with himself, what do I care? Except the new bulb is dimmer, so my eyes hurt and everyone looks like dirty snow. Vin breaks things just like Deena, but – SHIT – I forgot my promise. I won't ever say their names together in the same sentence. I'm no Christian, so I will not hesitate to cut that fucker if he gets in the way of my knife.

Vin Geraldo is the biggest monster I know. His chappy old psoriasis elbows look like something off a dinosaur. Every night when I fall asleep or pass out, I hope I'll never see him again, but that's like hoping my lungs turn into spaghetti. He's my boss, the second-shift Ass Manager, and his face is a pile of ape shit, and I would *sleep* in a pile of ape shit before I ever let that guy near Deena again. I'm real, yo ho.

I caught him chilling in his Catalina outside my apartment last week. Second time this month. He's all, "What's up, Terry?" like I don't know why he's there. Golly, waiting to see if Deena's coming over? I keep my mouth shut, keep my cool, but Vin's shit-eating Rott, I guess, has anger issues like his master, cuz he flies out of the backseat window and chews a hole in my pantleg. Vin is forever banished from my apartment complex, and his dog cannot get within ten yards of my ankle. I designated his boundaries for him yesterday. He just laughed, sprayed spit everywhere. Piss on him. His forehead's as big as a chalkboard. My two nicknames for him are

"Frankenstein" and "The Faucet." That second one's because he drools so much. I hate his guts more than I ever hated anybody, even the crook who gunned down my dad.

Deena says I need to drop it already, but she doesn't have to work for The Faucet, and oh yeah – *her girlfriend didn't fuck The Faucet!* Deena was too young to see the freakfest that was Frankenstein's graduation party three years ago, so she can just sit and spin for all I care. I've seen asshole behavior, but THAT NIGHT?! My buddies dragged me to Vin's sad little one-bedroom where he lived alone because his own flesh-and-blood parents kicked him out – no one knew why, but I think his folks recognized the Devil when they saw him. So yippee, I got to watch drunk Vin spray cologne and perfume all through his apartment for twenty minutes straight, until one chick puked and the rest of us said NO THANK YOU and moved the party out to the lawn. He smeared pizza all over the walls – why would anyone do that to his own apartment? Then he pissed out the bathroom window onto some dude and chick making out in the shadows. The pissed-on guy brought out his own tool and hosed down Vin's TV, VCR, and CDs. I just watched it all happen and stayed away from the splatter.

When Vin saw the wet AV equipment, he stepped on the guy's head until the guy passed out with a bootprint in his face.

We got monsters in this day and age who look almost the same as us but who operate by their own monster rules. That's Vin Geraldo.

* * *

It's clever time here at Taco Bell, apparently. Mister Frankenstein Cleverdicko Geraldo and his pantaloon army. This should be the day he dies.

I'm ignoring all of them for the rest of the shift, and I don't count it when I tell the microphone, "Two Nachos Grande *with extra olives*." No eye contact when I fill the order sacks.

"Number 992!" I yell.

A tiny old lady comes up all alone with a handbag on her arm. She grabs 992, and I'm thinking, "That gramma's gonna eat five soft tacos and a chimichanga?" It's about the funniest thing that's ever happened here, but I won't tell any of the cocksuckers working because they're dead now, and I'm gonna have Deena on her mom's bed when I get to her place because her mom's gone for the weekend, and then who knows, maybe we'll pack up and split without telling anyone, drive eight hundred miles to the Badlands and smoke grass under the stars. I'll get a job at a salt mine, and Deena can sculpt homemade pipes and eBay them for profit. We'll buy a house, help my mom move to an apartment nearby, squeeze out a couple of babies, relocate my dad to a Badlands cemetery with a new headstone that makes some fucking sense for once.

Frankenstein calls me to the stockroom half an hour before I'm free from this puke hut. The partial retard Manny covers the counter while all the other douchebags stop making whatever tortilla creation and watch me walk back. I feel like a cowboy. They think shit's gonna fly, and maybe they're right.

"What do you want?" I say. I've been looking for an excuse, and here he's given it to me, and why shouldn't I open his head with one of these olive cans?

He says, "Look, man." His railroad-track mouth is dripping, and he wipes it with the wad of paper towel he always carries. "I'm sorry. It was whack, bro." He holds out his hand like I'm supposed to take it and say it's all good. His forehead's oil and sweat, necktie's a broken spinal cord. And girls think this creep's good-looking? Dude is SUPER-tall and a GIANT-HEADED motherfucker. An ogre, true life. Smells like bad cheese.

I'll back up. Tonight on break I passed Frankenstein's office on the way outside to have a smoke. The door was open a crack, and what did I hear? Frankenstein making a comedy routine of my life. "I'm twenty-four years old, yo ho, and Taco Bell is my motherfucking career. I have no skills." Manny, Loranda, and LeMichael were in there spitting out giggles like ten-year-olds. SOOOPER FUNNY! Then it got more personal: "His dad plugs himself, and now he's so scared of guns he won't even be a weekend warrior. But I guess cash for college don't help if you never finished high school." Then the worst: "Why do you think Deena stays with his old ass? Two words: weed and booze." My head got all hot. I kicked in the door and told them to bite a yardstick, something my dad used to say to salesmen.

Afterward, I smoked out back by the dumpster and thought about my dad. I tried to figure out what he would've done if someone humiliated him like that. The official story of how Dad died goes like this: on Nascow County Lake with his cop partner, off-duty on a Sunday afternoon, enjoying a hamburger cookout and a twelve-pack of PBR; a 1971 Granada, avocado green, drives up, parks; two scuzzy, fat white guys with long hair step out, show pistols, yell GIVE US YOUR MONEY; Dad's partner tries to pull his piece; one of the scuzzies fires; Dad jumps in front of the bullet, takes it in the heart. The crooks drive off, never seen again. No suspects, no guacamole Ford found. On the playground, kids started saying that there never was a holdup, that my dad shot himself and the G.P.D. didn't want word spreading that one of their own was such a failure. Those kids got punched in the eyes by me.

Dad's stupid tombstone says, *Deputy Benjamin "Benny" Terrence Gordon: 1950 – 1985: "His gun was his weapon, his heart was his shield."* I was only five, but even then I knew the engravers screwed it up. It was supposed to say his *heart* was his weapon and his *gun*

was his shield. He fucking *died* by getting shot in the heart. He carried a gun for his job, and he smoked bad guys with it. A tombstone isn't supposed to be so goddamn actual.

Out by the dumpster I watched the sun drop behind the half-finished apartment complex. The sky reminded me of a skinned rabbit. Here's what I was thinking: If I could cut out my own eye for Deena, if my love was that strong, then wasn't my hatred of INSERT NAME strong enough to murder him? Or at least cut out his eye and shove it down his throat?

Then I heard Vin's Rott. (Sometimes he leaves the thing in his car while he works, but don't feel sorry for it; it's a bastard just like its master.) Mixed with the *barkbarkbark* was the *beepbeepbeep* of a delivery truck backing up to the Design Quest loading dock. I saw a tiny airplane floating way out in the sky, a missile shot at the moon. The stink of rotten lettuce and maggots from the dumpster hit my nose so strong I gagged. During the very second I was imagining Vin swallowing his eyeball, I woke from the trance and understood that all this sensory stuff around me was Dad telling me to stay cool.

I thought, "Dad's the salt I add to the pot of water. He's everywhere at once."

I thanked him for letting me know I wasn't alone, then squashed my smoke with my boot and went back inside to finish the shift and not talk to any of the jokers.

I wasn't going to kill anyone. I just wanted to do my job and go see Deena.

Now, a few hours later, here I am in the back room with this modern monster jamming his hand at me, all, "Whaddya say, bro? We were just having fun. I'll score you some CinnaTwists before you punch out."

I keep seeing their faces when I kicked open the door, keep hearing their goddamn laughs. In front of me is Vin Geraldo's real face. Smirky-lipped enormo-head whose dog tried to chomp my leg. Dickweed who pees on people. Dickweed who writes me up for not tucking

in my shirt, for playing the radio too loud, for using my hunting knife to slice tomatoes, for breathing. Dickweed who mocks me behind my back, mocks my life. Dickweed who lies that he's moving away from this shithole to New York City when he turns twenty-one in a couple days. Dickweed Vin Geraldo who fucked Deena one year ago, without a condom, in the same Taco Bell parking lot where Dad just visited me.

Oops. I put them in the same sentence again. Oops.

* * *

On US131 four hours later, it's Limp Bizkit and malt liquor. The headlights dig the dark like we're tunneling. Deep Earth divers hellbound. No moon, not a light in miles. Deena's feet hang out the window, her hair's in my lap, and she's going flick-flick-flick with the lighter to toke the Gandalf bowl. No way am I speeding, but the pedal wants so bad to touch the floor. The world's flying past and we can't see it, and we don't give a shit that we can't. Just those white lines, *voop voop voop voop*, like this car's the handle part of a zipper.

"What's that called? That thing?" I say.

"What?" She can't hear me, so she reaches out, turns up the stereo, sucks a mouthful of Mickey's and lies back onto the seat. The lighter won't work. Fucking shit for me. She throws my Gandalf bowl out the window.

"*This* thing!" I shout. I touch my zipper. She isn't looking. She's reading her phone, thumbing buttons. "The thing you pull to pull up your zipper. What the hell is it called? This fucking handle. The metal grabber with the square hole!" I take the Mickey's from her hand, guzzle. She's off my lap now, climbing into the back seat with the phone on her ear. Who the fuck is she talking to?

I crank the music louder; Deena's screaming to turn it the hell down, but nothing doing from me. I've got that image again. The bloody car window, my bloody hands, the way I dropped my keys and – fuck! – kicked them, chased them, grabbed them, lifted them. My hands maracas.

They're gonna know it was me. I burned my uniform in a grill at Creston Park on account of all the blood, but most cops are stupid, not *stoopid*. I stopped home, packed three pairs of everything into a duffel bag, threw it in the trunk. Hit Dairy Mart for forties and smokes, gassed up. And the later it gets, the farther we drive, maybe the more suspicious Deena gets. I probably should've told her, "Let's split town for real. You got no ties to Supercuts, you don't care about walking in graduation, so pack your bags and we're gone, plan or no plan." But there's still time to say all that, to really think it through and make it sound nice. Tomorrow.

Who is she talking to? Probably her mom, probably to say it's all good, nothing's on fire, I've got plenty of food, enjoy your weekend at the Indian casinos! I got to her mom's after work just like we'd planned, only instead of hugging or kissing her I had to keep hiding my hands in my pockets. Could've stepped into the bathroom and scrubbed, but I wasn't thinking straight. My brain was buzzing, sweat dripping into my ears. Didn't try to have sex with her even once – probably tipped her off that something was up. I just kept giving her the "What a great night for a cruise, warm breeze blowing, let's go, baby, pack up a sweater just in case but let's hit it while we're young." The more she dragged her ass and got all dressed up in a miniskirt and tanktop, the more I did commercials for the Mickey's and fat sack waiting in the car. She eventually got in and didn't complain when we got on the expressway.

Now Deena's off the phone, re-climbing the seat, re-dropping her head on my lap, re-sticking her foot out the window, thigh like a magnet propped up there, smooth and gotta touch

it. I can tell she's buzzed, and I'm cracking another forty so she gets more and more. Not even gonna ask WHO WAS THAT. Time to grow-up this relationship, move past jealousy. Part of me's feeling good, feeling safe now in the BVVVVVTBVVVVVTting-ting-tingBVVVVTBVVVVT, but I know they'll be after us, and they'll rip us out of this cocoon. A sign says Kalamazoo's 28 miles. Then it's maybe one hundred more to Indiana. Then who knows. Maybe they'll shoot us dead at some roadside motel, have the whole town stuck to their TVs.

Will they? For a dog?

* * *

Somewhere in Indiana the sun comes up on the end of my elbow. A tall fucking state! I'm drunk and Deena's passed out. I pull into a rest area.

At nine a.m. a truck horn goes off by my head. I'm up! I'm up. Look at my fingers, the black blood under the nails. While I slept someone visited the inside of my mouth with chalk. Look over at Deena. Deep asleep, every inch of her face delicate, my flannel spread over her. How many times has she joked that she's only with me because I get her wasted? I used to think it was funny.

The brain invader comes back, the pig Vin. Plugging away at Deena in the back of his Catalina. Taco Bell wrappers, naked bodies, little packets of hot sauce popping under her ass. I want to claw out my eyes. SO WHAT that it was a year ago and I had "no claim" over her then! What kind of whore sleeps with that *thing*? I'm twisted up. She confessed last week, during our Screamfest after the "Vin's Rott ruined my pants because Vin was stalking you" incident, and right away I took a shovel and buried that corpse in my mind, but the zombie crawled out pretty goddamn fast, hungry.

I kiss my fingertip and touch her cheek. I step out of the car, stretch my legs, feel the morning air on my head, light a cigarette. There's a Catalina parked all alone at the end of the lot, windows fogged like it's been here all night, the same baked-potato color as Vin's. Same rusty holes by the taillight. It's so much like Vin's I know it can't be. No blood on the window, far as I can tell. That asshole is four hundred miles away in Michigan, busy realizing who's boss for real. I picture him walking out of The Bell. His skull blocks out the moon. He frying-pans a "Later" to Partard Manny. Arrives at his car. Stops. Looks into the backseat. Face crinkles. Opens the door, finds his Rott with an open throat, goo covering every inch of where he and Deena screwed.

I go into the rest-stop bathroom. The floor's wet. One of the pissers is running over, splashing like someone's taking a shower. Lardass truck driver washing his hands eyes me in the wall mirror, licks his lips. I step four sinks away, squirt a pink lake into my hand. Scrub, scrub. Rinse, rinse. Trucker snorts and hawks, spits a looger. "HAAIIK!" Spits another. Trying to tell me something? Fuck him, I ignore him. He takes his time leaving. Cowboy boots click…click…click on tile. Mumbles to himself. Water splashing everywhere. My hands are shaking. Lather and scrub and scrub. Blood under the nails. And there. And there. I can't look at myself in the mirror. Fucking Vin Geraldo. Gave a guy a permanent footprint face. Dog took a bite outta my jeans and almost ate my hand tonight, I mean last night, but I jammed the knife in fast, just below the ear, pulled it out, saw dark squirts, watched him kick around for a minute, gurgling, clawing the upholstery. After he calmed down I held his head and sliced his neck for good measure, let all that black shit out.

"Terry," a man says.

I jump a little. I didn't hear anyone come in.

"Terry," the voice says again. From one of the stalls.

I shut off the water. Don't say a word. Probably some asshole on a cell phone.

"I'm not on a cell phone," the voice says. The stall near me opens, and Dad walks out.

He's really clean. His skin is perfect and smooth and pale. No stubble, but the caterpillar mustache as usual. Dressed in jeans and untucked white T-shirt. How he used to look on Saturdays when he took me to the park to swing. He isn't smiling. Sad face. Never seen him cry, but he's looking like he did at Grandpa's funeral.

"How's your mom?" he asks.

"Fine." He waits for more, but I got nothing.

"She like that new homo she's with?"

"Roger? I don't know. Sure. He's dumb as shit."

He doesn't smile when he says, "Ah, give the putz a break." Then again, he never smiled.

Neither of us says anything. We both can't think of anything.

"Are you sad?" I ask him.

"I haven't seen a mirror in a while. Do I look sad?"

"You shouldn't be. You took a bullet for your partner."

"You aren't *stoopid*. Nobody *takes* a bullet. Nobody *takes* cancer, do they?"

"But you stepped in front of it."

"That's a weird way to say it."

"They told us – "

"Use your head. Every cop is a hero."

"You killed yourself?"

"Terrence. You're still drunk. My partner shot me. We were bullshitting, wasting ammo at the lake. Tossing empty cans in the air. Third can I threw up for him, I watched him watching it. He pointed his gun, followed it up." Dad puts his hands together to make a pistol. "He wouldn't pull the trigger. All the way up..." He squints one eye, moves his gun toward the ceiling. "Then all the way down, to my goddamn heart. *Then* he pulls the trigger. Got so caught up aiming he forgot to fire."

Dad sees I'm getting teary-eyed. He picks something out of his teeth. I wonder what the hell he could've been eating.

"Lucky asswipe hit the can, too," he says. "Can you believe it?"

"You don't live in here, do you?"

He starts laughing, genuine. It fills the bathroom. It's nice to hear. When he stops, he says, "You're giving yourself hell for that dog." His eyes search the floor like they're following a cockroach. "At least you didn't forget to shoot. Remember that."

I don't answer. Just when I was starting to feel bad about Vin's Rott, here's my father backing me up. I'm in a cloud.

"You proved you aren't like the losers who never leave Grayling because they don't have the guts." He turns like he's going.

"Dad. They screwed up your gravestone."

"Oh yeah," he says. "If you want to change it, change it. If your mom doesn't care. It's for you guys to read. Good seeing you."

He goes back into his stall. I hear the latch turn. I rinse my hands, dry them, and head out to the parking lot. I get in the car. Deena's gone. I mean ALL of Deena's gone. Her CDs, purse, cell phone, fruit-flavored condoms. And my weed. There's a note on the seat.

Help! I'm kidnapped by a truck driver. He's taking me and his drill bits far away from Grayling. DO NOT FOLLOW. He is serious. Deena.

* * *

Hours later, it's trusty BOB'S JOHN DEERE, the only landmark I'll ever know, to welcome me back. The way Deena made such a point to say she wasn't going to Grayling means she probably is.

I knew she wasn't into it. Her face said it like a billboard for weeks now, but according to Deena I can read a taco better than I can read my girlfriend, so I guess I missed it. She's distracted all the time lately. When we make love she's checking the clock radio on my dresser. She won't hold my hand when we walk to Mason to watch the dirt-bike races. Something's bugging her. It's not graduation. It's not her mom's drinking. It's not her boss at Supercuts. It's me. I hope it's me.

It's seven-thirty p.m., and the sun'll be up for two more hours. I don't want to be seen in town yet, so I detour out to Nascow County. I take CR38 east for four miles, follow the curve south around the lake. Eyes peeled. Yep, hello there, Mr. Public Access Road.

At the end of the road there's a little gravel lot, a picnic table, and the lake. There's woods on the left and right, so there isn't anything like a beach. Two fat chicks are sitting on the table. They watch me walk to the edge of the water. Trash here and there on the grass. Fast food wrappers (no Taco Bell), Schlitz cans, an old pink Converse sneaker.

"That yours?" one of the girls hollers. They cackle up a storm.

"What if it is?" I pick up the sneaker.

"Scared of that," the other one answers. They look alike, or maybe I'm not bothering to see them enough to notice any difference.

"Either you girls got an arm on you?"

"She pitched varsity softball," one girl says, pointing to her friend.

I tell them to come down here. I search along the shoreline and gather a handful of rocks, none bigger than a quarter, none smaller than a dime. I give the handful to the softball girl, name of Tracy.

"I'm gonna toss this Converse in the air, and you hit it with one of them rocks. If you can."

"What's in it for me?"

"Cigarette."

"Go on," she says.

I toss it. I watch her watch the shoe. Her eyes go up, up, up, holding steady. She won't throw. Why won't she throw? Her eyes follow the shoe down, down, down. She spins her arm underhanded, lets one fly. The rock cracks me in the forehead.

* * *

When I die I don't see Deena, Vin Geraldo, Vin's Rottweiler, or my mother. I see Dad again. I'm walking along a wall, a schoolbrick-red wall. It's on my right side. Sidewalk under my feet. Don't know what's on the left because I can't look that way. But I can run my palm across the wall while I walk, and it's rough and bumpy. Dad's up ahead, squatting, touching the bricks. His fingers are feeling up and down like a blind man reading braille. He sees me coming.

"I thought *people* were tough to understand. Now I got this fucking brick."

I offer to help.

"No thanks," he says. "You keep walking. You might be able to find the end up there somewhere. Can avoid all *this* shit." He nods at the wall.

I touch his shoulder. He keeps reading the bricks. I walk away.

* * *

I'm not dead enough. Mom's next to my bed, sees me coming alive, goes apeshit. "My baby! My baby!" She hugs my head, even though it's my head that's killing me, and only one of my eyes is working. The nurse is all, "Ma'am, stay away from his head. Ma'am, please don't aggravate his head."

I tell Mom to get a mirror. She pulls one from her purse and shows me a purple, black and lumpy mess with one bloodshot eye peeking out of it. I start to faint, but the nurse gives me smelly salts and an injection.

A few hours later, I'm up again. Suck lunch through a straw. Two policemen barge into the room. One is a cueball-head with a mustache, lugging a Taco Bell ass if I ever saw one. I wonder if he knew my dad. I wonder if he's the one who shot my dad. "As of this moment, we are placing you under house arrest," he says, "for the killing of Mr. Vincent Geraldo's Rottweiler." Mom gasps. "We are not removing you from the hospital, but you should know your rights as well as the consequences if you choose to leave. Upon your official release, you will be detained for questioning at the Grayling Police Station with the possibility of further charges. If you leave prior to this, you will be jailed."

The other one chimes in to tell the rest of the shit. "A resident at Hillcrest Apartments reported an altercation in the parking lot at 9:15 yesterday evening." I'm studying him. Short little guy. Gray hairs in his Burt Reynolds mustache. "When officers arrived, they found you unconscious and bleeding beside your Impala. The assailant had fled the scene." Gray crewcut.

Lips puckered tight like an asshole, with matching butt chin. "Officers radioed for medical assistance, and an ambulance brought you to the hospital." Name is *Karl Grace, Public Safety Officer*. Beady little eyes. Fake tan.

He sees me scoping him, relocates his beadies to an empty chair, slides a thumb under his belt. He's the one. I was too young and I don't remember Dad's partner's name, but I know. I'm seeing flashes, many years old, of the press clippings Mom has in a shoebox under her bed, the black-and-white photos of pinprick hard eyes, butt chin, phony tan.

Mom studies her feet the whole time he's in the room. Another clue.

"Mr. Geraldo is missing," Grace says, "but there's a warrant out for his arrest. He has two prior misdemeanor assaults, and we're certain he did this to you." He steps close, squats by my face, makes me gag on his cologne and Big Red. "Don't lie to me. Did you kill his dog, Terry?"

My voice surprises me, like flat tires spinning in mud: "I sure did."

"Because Vin was moving in on Deena, right? That pissed you off."

"His dog ruined my pants. I can't afford new pants."

He wants his little dark buttons to shoot lasers, wants me to be the first to drop my eyes, but I keep staring, show him a big smile that hurts.

He stands, knees popping. "We'll need your testimony to put Vin away. You certainly want that, don't you?" He asks what I remember about the beating. He wants my story.

I describe the lake off CR38, the pink Converse, the girl who waited way too long or exactly long enough to throw her rock. To make my point extra clear I even tell Officer Grace that the rock flew as fast as a bullet. Dumbass is a good actor. Doesn't even flinch. Just looks serious, confused, angry. Writes in his little notebook. Then I say how the girls beat my ass

when I was unconscious, beat the motherfucking God out of me with their softball arms and KFC legs. "And why did they do that?" Officer Grace asks, not amused. "Any idea?"

I've got his answer: "Who the hell knows?"

* * *

Pissing blood once sucks. For two days straight sucks ten times as much. My right eyeball is pushed into my head. "You're lucky it didn't explode," is what Doc tells me. Damage everywhere. I'm so damaged I don't even listen when they read me what all's fucked up. That's what Mom's for. To keep the meds flowy flow.

I go in for a procedure and they pull my eye back into place. "Your vision should return to normal within two months." Everything else is "Let's bandage this" and "This is gonna need time to heal," like my broken ribs and nose. My four front teeth I can't afford to replace, so I guess I'm Mr. Scary from now on even after the balloon face deflates.

Five days later, the cops come back (DIAL 911 – MAKE A COP COME) and I'm officially released and detained all in the same afternoon. Mom stays with me until the cell door clangs shut. She's with me no matter what. Number One Mom is my new name for her. In the hospital I told her about seeing Dad at the rest area, but it didn't go how I imagined.

"He looked great, Mom. Still strong. I think he's happy."

"I'm glad *he's* happy, because he sure left a lot of sad people behind." Even twenty years after, she cries and cries. It's crazy, having that kind of love for someone you aren't related to by blood.

"It was an accident. It wasn't a criminal that shot him, but it wasn't suicide either."

"Just cut it," she said. She stuck her fingers in her ears when I tried to explain the Officer Grace connection. Her sad tears turned angry. She gave my cheek a squeeze, and I squawked like a baby. She believes what she wants to believe. Can't blame her.

* * *

The cops don't find any girls matching the ones I described. Officer Grace's anus mouth says that my story makes no sense seeing how my car and bloody face were found outside Deena's mom's apartment.

"How did you, and not just you, but your car too, happen to end up in that parking lot, Terry?" he asks.

"I must've drove myself there," I say, "after those girls fucked me up."

"So let me understand you," he says. "You got half-killed by two teenaged girls for no apparent reason, after which you were somehow able to drive yourself five miles into town and park perfectly in a spot at your girlfriend's apartment. Then you stepped out of your car, fell unconscious to the ground, and bled a huge puddle on the pavement."

"Sounds like you got it all worked out."

No Deena or Vin anywhere. It's the whole Surprised But Not attitude from me. Calculated cool. Grace and his buddy keep on that they *know* Vin pounded me, they *know* he bolted with Deena, they *know*, they *know*, they *know*.

My answer: "If you *know*, then why the hell do *I* have to say it?"

Grace tosses a logic bomb: "You don't want to protect this guy, Terry. You think he'd protect you? Put this creep away before he hurts Deena."

I crunch my Cheetos. They mumble about obstructing.

Deena's mom showed up once at the hospital, and I told her my story as a happy change from the cops' story. She dumped two shits anyway. "Uncaring asshole!" she said. When that didn't work, she tried Good Cop: "I know she left with Vin." Big tears held onto her cheeks for dear life before they committed suicide. "Please tell me, Terry. I need to find my baby." She wanted me to say a monster tricked her daughter into his car with Snickers and popcorn. Would that be a better story? Why? So she could find Deena and drag her screaming back to this ashtray? Let her go! "Two girls, a Converse, a rock," I say.

Deena is Grayling's Missing Person now, the six o'clock news darling. I'm supposedly responsible for this even if it wasn't me who took her. BECAUSE YOU DID TAKE HER, TERRY. YOU TOOK HER SOMEWHERE WHERE SOMEONE ELSE WAS ABLE TO TAKE HER. DON'T YOU ADMIT TO DOING THAT? It's what the cops say. It's what Deena's mom says. Even my momma says it.

"You don't have to respond," says Lawyer Jude. He also says, "They want a lot, lot, lot. One year giving alcohol to a minor; three months killing dog; five years carrying a dangerous weapon with unlawful intent. Add it up: Six years, three months. Tell you what, we won't give them a lot. We'll give them a little. For dead dog, temporary insanity spawned from fear of another attack, and you carried the A.G. Russell as protection against the violent boogeyman Vin Geraldo… this is his third assault charge, and attempted murder this time sounds good to me… We can put 'Frankenstein' away for ten years…And the icing on the cake? Everyone knows he's the one who left with Deena…"

Lawyer Jude talks me to death with his fucking talk.

* * *

In the end, I scream as loud as I can, “Vincent Geraldo is the biggest asshole I know! A big, innocent ASSHOLE!”

That’s not how it goes. Close, though. I plead guilty to the dog killing and the weapon carrying and tell the court in a sophisticated voice, “Vin is a prick, a jackoff, a moron, and a son of a bitch. Sorry, your honor. Vincent is a dumb, rude individual. To the worst degree. But he didn’t do this to my face and body.”

I refuse to press charges. I stick to my version: two girls, a Converse, a rock. Whether or not anyone believes it, which no one does, who gives a shit? I like my story. It sounds better every time I say it.

* * *

The world is hard. I know, BOO HOO. Three hard walls. Hard floor. Hard dick (just mine, thank God). Hard minutes, hard seconds. Hard to sleep. Hard bread, hard ham slices. Gotta tell you, when Mom brings Taco Bell once a month, the shit tastes GOOD. Upside: I finally got out of Grayling. Jackson County Correctional for two years is my sentence. Possible parole in one. Not as bad as Jackson Prison. My own room, and free GED classes so I can earn my diploma.

Deena’s on my mind sometimes. I write songs: *Deena, you broke my shit, but I didn’t think you’d break yourself. You really give me pain. Deena, I’m fucking insane.* I tear apart the songs and flush them down the toilet.

Her mom still sends letters, but they’re less snotty now. She even says, ‘Terry, I always liked you. I know you treasured my darling the way she deserved.’ She thinks I have answers. She wants to flatter me so I give up The Faucet, so she can finally make sense of WHO, WHY, WHERE, and WHAT THE FUCK? She pretends Deena will come back to Hillcrest Apartments

someday with a basket of candy canes and a baby daughter named Prudence who makes flowers grow with her farts.

I can relate, but I can't help.

Dead or not, Deena's dead. I know because I see her as much as I see my dad.

I know because I've stuck the knife into her throat a thousand times since I got here, and each time she jerks around and claws the shitty upholstery. I grab her head, push it into the seat, and cut her throat to watch the blood pour out. Sometimes I see her note (*He is serious. Do not follow. Deena*), and I see her screwing Vin Geraldo, and there isn't any difference between these two things.

I also know Deena's dead because my mind is FINALLY a naked tortilla. No angry beans, no jealous cheese, nothing to block me from seeing my goal: the day I get released I will visit my dad's grave with a hammer and a chisel and change his tombstone once and for all so it says, "His heart was his weapon, his gun was his shield."

Period, motherfucker. Period.

Poor, Poor Ralph

Ralph stared at the hundred-dollar bill at his feet. He could barely believe his luck. He would buy magazines for the flight home on Sunday, he would order a Pay-Per-View movie in his room at the Hyatt, he might even treat himself to a cigar and glass of wine this evening. He bent to pick it up. Before he reached it, a terrible pain lanced up his spine. Wincing, he stood upright, pressing his hand to the small of his back. He glanced around to see if anyone had noticed.

The people scurried by, people as far as he could see, filling the Exhibition Hall of the Phoenix Civic Plaza. Elbows and shoulders brushed past every side of him. The crossbred bouquet of colognes and perfumes spawned in the air, climbed up his nose, and rested in his lungs. He made a sour face. He stepped on the bill with his loafer, claiming it, hiding it until he could make his next grab. No one was paying any attention to him, and why should they? They weaved around him as if he was an out-of-order drinking fountain, their eyes straining ahead towards some faraway information booth or intensely studying their handbooks, hoping to catch the next lecture on Composition Theory or how to most effectively utilize peer response in their classrooms. All of them were dressed in their conference-best skirts and jackets and slacks.

Women outnumbered men by a three-to-one ratio, Ralph calculated – no different from any other year. Most women dangled right around middle age: late thirties, early forties. The others were twenty-something graduate students who appeared more childlike with each passing year. As of late, the college girls looked too young to be here, while the older women looked just right. Even ten years ago, when he first began this job, his perceptions had been the

opposite. He supposed this was so he could never really know, never truly grasp, how old he was getting. His perceptions were aging right along with his body.

As soon as the small area in front of him was clear of passersby, Ralph made another attempt at the cash. He lowered himself onto his right knee as if genuflecting or tying his shoe (though his loafers had no laces and he wasn't Catholic). The top of his head bumped into something soft before his hand even touched the bill. Annoyed, he stood again, to view the obstruction which had messed the meticulously combed swath of hair atop his head. A roundish woman bearing two paper bags by the handles flashed a startled look down at him. He had rammed into her behind.

"I'm sorry," he said sheepishly. It was his pat answer to everything, and for the first forty years of his life had gotten him out of almost every bad situation, including the day thirteen months ago when his wife Karen left him. He remembered sitting deep in the sofa, immobilized by depression, studying the shaft of sunlight that slanted through the window and exposed the dusty air. He had stolen ninety-seven dollars from his mother-in-law's purse while she was visiting for Easter weekend. Not grand larceny, to be sure, but when added together with all the other minor pilferings throughout their four-year marriage, this transgression, coupled with the fact that the money was going to be used to fit his mother-in-law with a new set of dentures, was enough. "I'm sorry," was all he could think to say then, as Karen reached a trembling hand to the phone to call the cab that would take her away.

"Not a problem," the woman said. Her cheeks were brushed a light shade of pink; the hair on her head was silver and puffed, like a metallic pastry. She seemed pleased by the accident. Her smile caused the flesh to bunch up around her eyes.

In a practiced movement, Ralph stooped down, slid the money from under his shoe and palmed it in his left hand. He stood erect. "Dropped my comb," he said.

"I've got plenty of padding back there," the woman laughed.

"And I got none up here," Ralph said, tapping the top of his head.

The woman set her bags down at her sides and extended her hand. "Nancy Wells," she said.

"Ralph Hopper," he said. He took her fingers gently in his own, even though shaking hands was a custom he tried particularly to avoid. He had realized years ago that he hated touching people, especially strangers.

"Are you a teacher?" she asked. She pushed her wire glasses to the top of her nose. Her eyelashes flapped like flightless birds.

"Signature Books," he replied. His hand crawled into an inner jacket pocket for his business card. He gave it to her.

She read it as if it were a cartoon strip, like Peanuts or Beetle Bailey. As if it were cute.

"Michigan," she said, without inflection.

"And where are you from?" he asked.

"Grew up three miles from where we're standing, actually. But that was a long time ago. I live in Oregon now." She returned his card with an apologetic look. "Thanks, anyway. I just get so many of those things. Everyone here wants to give you something."

"That's not a bad thing," Ralph said.

"Yes, but they all want something in return, don't they? Nothing's free anymore. Didn't your mother tell you that?"

"I'll bet she did."

"You can still tell me about your textbooks, if you'd like."

He didn't want to tell her anything. It was the beginning of his lunch break. "That's okay," he said. "They're not too exciting."

She laughed. "Reverse psychology, huh? Well, now I'm really curious!"

To be polite, he joined her laughter. She smelled nice, like a Christmas tree, and the pendant resting between her breasts helped direct his glance toward the shelf of her bosom. He also noticed that she didn't have a purse. He looked down at her bags. There didn't seem to be a purse in either one.

"That's unusual," he said.

"What?"

"I don't think I've ever come across a woman who doesn't carry a purse."

She looked offended for an instant, but that quickly changed into confusion. She glanced down at herself, then at the ground, then behind her. "Where is it?" she said. "I had a purse."

"Serious? I was just making small – "

"Seriously. That's no good," she said. "That's really not good."

She was looking around, wide-eyed. He told her they could check around. He even put his hand on her shoulder to calm her. "We'll find it," he said.

They checked the various display tables – Allyn and Bacon, McGraw-Hill, Mayfield – where she had purchased sample texts, without success. They decided to retrace her steps of the morning. Starting at the curb in front of the Convention Center, they made their way along Third Street. Scanning the pavement, using their hands as visors against the sharp sunlight, they turned left on Monroe, moving west. They arrived at a little deli, where she had had a chocolate chip

scone and a large decaffeinated coffee. He glanced at his watch. He wasn't expected back at the Signature booth for forty minutes.

"I guess we might as well eat," Ralph said. They stood in front of the menu board. "On me," he added.

"I sure feel dumb, though," she said, after he had ordered two iced teas and four hot dogs. He looked at her quizzically. She winked at him. "I must've had my purse here, if I paid for breakfast." This set her off into a convulsive musical laugh.

Ralph paid the clerk with a twenty-dollar bill. He discreetly transferred the hundred from his pocket to his wallet. The clerk gave him change: four dollars even, which Ralph counted. They ate outside, seated on tall stools at a tall table. Ralph ate his hot dogs. Nancy nibbled away at hers, scarcely finishing half of one before Ralph was done. In this way she was the opposite of Karen, who ate prolifically while remaining as thin as a workbook. He dabbed the corners of his mouth with a napkin. He let his stare wander idly over the pedestrians on the street. He couldn't think of anything to say.

Nancy decided to give him the condensed outline of her career path: received a Bachelor's at Phoenix State College and University of Arizona, moved to Oregon, gave birth to three sons, divorced her husband, returned to school for an MA in English, landed a job teaching four sections of Freshman Composition at Portland Community. End of story.

"You know," Nancy said, drowning her last bite of hot dog with a gulp of iced tea, "You don't have to come with me. I feel like I'm wasting your time."

"Your purse is important," Ralph said. "We'll find it."

“Are you involved with anyone?” she said abruptly. She put her hand on his forearm. He looked down at it as if it were an errant ash from someone’s cigarette. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Am I too nosy?”

“Nosy people make the world go ’round,” he said. He slid his arm from under her hand, then, as if to show that he needed it back, scratched his chin.

“Never heard that one before.”

“I’m married, actually. But I'm flattered that you’d ask.”

“No kidding?” She looked at him down the length of her nose. “I can usually tell.” She seemed to be appraising him with her eyes. “I’d better stop right there. I’ll get myself in trouble.”

“I don’t wear a ring,” Ralph said, holding up his hand. “Allergic reaction.”

“I’m probably as red as this ketchup,” she said. “Oh, well. Had to try.”

“I understand.”

She finished her iced tea. “We can go,” she said.

He took her uneaten hot dog with them. Even though he was full, he ate it as they walked so it wouldn't go to waste. They crossed the street and reentered the Convention Center, where the air conditioning cooled Ralph’s face.

“Tell me about your wife,” Nancy said.

“Not much to tell,” he said. He pressed the ‘up’ button on the elevator. “You were in 413 this morning?”

“No offense,” Nancy said, “but how in the world do you sell books? I thought salesmen liked to talk. Especially about themselves!” She nudged him good-naturedly with her elbow.

He glanced over her shoulder at the clock on the wall. He had twenty minutes left on his lunch break. "It's the heat," Ralph said. "Makes me clam up."

"I put you on the spot earlier," she said. "I'm sorry. We can be friends, can't we?"

"Of course," he said. "Besides, book salesmen don't need high-pressure tactics. Not me, anyway. It worked on you, didn't it?"

"I gave your card back, remember?" she laughed.

"Ah, but you read it, didn't you?" he said, holding his index finger up. The elevator arrived.

They went to room 413, where Nancy had attended the panel discussion entitled *In a Different Light: Students and Teachers Re-View the World*. There was a presentation in session. Nancy said she had been sitting near the back of the room, so they snuck in quietly and scanned the aisles. They couldn't see her purse. They repeated this procedure in two other conference rooms, coming up empty-handed. Nancy was starting to look worried.

They tracked down the Lost and Found at the Information Booth in the lobby. In a small box there were sunglasses, a couple of notebooks, an umbrella, a few pens, and a calculator. Ralph made a mental note to come back later for the calculator. His was getting old.

"Well," Nancy said. There was the feeling of parting in the air. "Thanks for your help," she said. She patted him tenderly on the arm.

He found himself almost enjoying her touch. Mentally, he created a picture of the evening that lay in store; a fifteen-minute shower, a short nap, perhaps a call from Jacobs or Holly or Randall inviting him down to the bar for drinks, which he would politely refuse – perhaps they wouldn't even call this time, and why should they, since he rarely accepted? – on

the grounds that he was tired, and he would use his hundred-dollar bill to order Chinese food and an in-house movie, and, oh yes, a glass of wine from the refrigerator.

"Do you want to have dinner tonight?" Ralph asked. He was surprised to hear himself say it. He chalked it up to the smell of her perfume.

"I'd love it," she said. A terrific smile broke on her face. She blushed a little. "I was hoping you'd ask." She gave his arm a squeeze. "I'm in Room 719, at the Hyatt."

"That's two floors down from me," he said. This fact made him inexplicably happy.

The rest of the day passed without event. Ralph manned the Signature booth with Jacobs while Holly and Randall scouted some of the other sellers on the floor. Nancy showed up in the Exhibition Hall a couple of times. Ralph watched her from across the room with an anxious feeling, one whose source he couldn't pinpoint. She browsed some of the displays, but never approached the Signature booth. She still didn't have her purse.

At a point when business was slow, Ralph excused himself to go to the bathroom. He went to the Lost and Found and claimed the calculator and a notebook. "Thank goodness for honest people," he said to the kid behind the counter. "Glad to help," the kid said, and returned to his doodling.

In the privacy of a men's-room stall, he was pleased to discover that the notebook was nearly blank – only the first two pages were used – but was disappointed to find that the calculator had no batteries. He slid the calculator into his jacket pocket and tucked the notebook securely under his arm. He went to the sink and washed. He looked at himself in the mirror. He was a forty-three-year-old man; his age was beginning to show. His jowls now sagged. His nose was packed with hair. Because of his swelling midsection, he fit snugly into his slacks.

Every cliché he had ever heard about middle-aged men was coming true. With each passing day, he looked more like his father.

None of this bothered him. In a way, he had expected it all his life. What was troubling, and difficult to think about, was the way his life had turned out. Scarcely a day went by without thinking of Karen. She had loved him – he was sure of this – and he had loved her. The fact that something as petty as money had ruined their life together seemed an obscene and ridiculous joke. It was a vice, nothing more. He'd had it all his life. As a boy, he stole Halloween candy from his brother's Jack-O-Lantern bucket, a couple quarters here and there from his brother's piggy bank. Years later, he'd sneak into his parents' room and take little things – a deck of cards, a tube of lipstick, a handkerchief, a bottle of lotion. He could still summon the smell of their bedroom; it was like his father's cologne, like his mother's perfume, like adulthood. It was the excitement of being where he shouldn't have been, of peeking into that quiet space where others lived their private moments. It was the sharing in everything deemed not his that he savored; this was what forced his hand. What he stole was never important. After all, he rarely even used what he stole. Sure, he ate his brother's candy, but that was mostly to get rid of the evidence. Even now, he tried to take only things that would not be missed. In the case of his mother-in-law's money he had made a miscalculation, but the consequences, in his opinion, had been grossly severe.

Five o'clock arrived. The Exhibition Hall crowd thinned to a couple dozen. Jacobs and Holly flirted with each other. They were in their mid-thirties and behaved like schoolchildren, Ralph thought. Jacobs drew on her hand. She blushed. She wrote KICK ME on a nametag and stuck it to his back. What made it worse was that Holly was married. Randall, their boss, a bald

man with a washboard head, sat on a stool and cleaned his fingernails with his keys, glancing up now and then without much interest. Ralph asked if he could leave an hour early.

"Big Friday night planned?" Randall said.

"You know me," Ralph said dryly.

"Ahh, it's slow. Knock yourself out." He waved his hand dismissively and returned to his fingernails.

Ralph went out into the fading day. He fanned himself with his hand as he waited for the traffic light to change. He crossed Third, then Second, and then he was at the Hyatt. He took the elevator up to his room. Inside, it was pitch dark. He switched on a lamp. He parted the curtains, exposing the city and the mountains, which were stained pink in the light of dusk. Pressing his face to the glass, he looked west to view the setting sun, to no avail; it was behind a building. He decided it was really no better than any other sunset. The telephone rang. He let it ring three times before answering.

"Ralph Hopper, please." It was a woman.

"Speaking," said Ralph.

"I'm ready."

"Nancy?" Ralph said. He found his way to the couch and kicked up his feet on the coffee table. There was silence on the other line. Ralph untied his shoelaces. "Hello?" he ventured.

"Sounds like you're expecting someone," the woman said. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

"Karen?" Ralph said tentatively.

"Am I bothering you?"

"How'd you find me?" he said. He sat up straight. "Of course you're not bugging me."

"The supermarket," she said. "The great leveller. Your mother and I had quite a heart-to-heart. Two things that woman knows: tomatoes and her boy's travel schedule."

"It's been so long," he said. "How are you?"

She lowered her voice and breathed into the phone, "I miss you."

"I miss you, too. Terribly."

"I'm ready to talk," she said. It was clear that she had been drinking, the way her words tumbled out: "I'm here and I just ditched my niece's wedding reception and I think we have a lot to say to each other."

"You're here? In Phoenix?" He couldn't recall any nieces of marriageable age in Karen's family, but he decided not to push it. "That's wonderful," he said.

"You've got somebody there," she said. "I'm screwing up your plans."

"No. Just a client. Not here. I said I'd go to dinner."

"Go ahead," she said. "Forget it." Her voice was breaking into pieces.

"How long are you in town?"

"I leave in the morning."

"Just tell me where to meet you."

Ralph took a cab to El Azteca on Camelback Road. He paid the cabbie with his change from lunch and went inside to find his wife. She was seated in the corner, staring into a glass of wine. When she noticed him approaching she stood from the booth and pressed her hands along her torso as if attempting to smooth herself into shape. Her eyes were wet at the sight of him. They embraced.

"You look tired," Ralph told her. It was a polite way of saying that she didn't look good. Dark half-moons were embedded below her eyes. Her blouse was wrinkled – she probably

didn't get a hotel nice enough to offer an iron – and her makeup was layered more heavily than he ever remembered. There was a frailty in her posture; she had lost weight, and it showed in the tendons on her neck. "But it's great to see you," he added.

"It's been over a year," she said. As if he didn't know.

They ordered dinner and wine. After the initial excitement wore off, Ralph found conversation difficult to the point of awkwardness. They talked about her family, his family, the textbook business, her Amway sales career. She asked if he'd been with anyone else. He hadn't. She hadn't. They finished their wet burritos in record time. She ordered another glass of wine and downed it with a couple of Prozac. He picked at the basket of chips. Karen's hand made its way across the table to touch his arm.

"You really hurt me," she said.

"I hurt myself," he said, nodding.

The waiter appeared at the table and asked if they wanted dessert. Ralph declined. Karen ordered fried ice cream as Ralph checked his watch. In his mind he had envisioned this reunion for the past year as a passionate entwining of souls so starved for intimacy that they would tearfully reclaim their love for each other and make plans to move back in together as if none of this had happened. He had been convinced of this for so long that the reality now seemed like a dream. Karen's thin fingers, overtaken by brown age spots, clutched her spoon. She let the ice cream soften in her mouth before swallowing. She leveled her sedated gaze at something behind Ralph's head until her ice cream dish was empty.

When the check arrived, Ralph dug immediately into his back pocket. "I got it," he said. Ignoring the hundred dollar bill in his wallet, he slid out his Visa and gave it to the waiter.

This was the moment he had been dreading. The unspoken subject of money launched Karen into a fit. As soon as the waiter was gone, she let loose her tears. After a few aborted attempts at speech, during which her small frame convulsed with sobs, she finally asked Ralph if he had gotten counseling as they had discussed. Looking down at his fork, he shook his head.

"Don't you know how violating that was?" she said. "How embarrassing?" She seemed to be searching his eyes for some sign, though of what he didn't know. "How am I ever supposed to trust you?"

"I never tried to hurt anyone," Ralph said. Already he was overtaken by a feeling of dejá vu; this was sounding like every phone conversation they'd had since the incident.

"I gave myself to you, Ralph. And that wasn't enough." She dabbed at her eyes with the soiled cloth napkin.

"It wasn't that big of a deal," Ralph said. "It was nothing. I paid her back."

She stared at him as if he were speaking Chinese with a lisp. "You just don't have a clue, do you? I don't know why I bothered." She stood from the booth and made a big production of tossing her napkin onto the table. "You won't hear from me again," she said, and walked out the door.

Ralph and the waiter watched her leave. Ralph signed the credit card slip.

"Everything okay?" the waiter asked.

"It was delicious," Ralph said.

He decided to save money and walk back to the hotel. It took thirty minutes, but the desert breeze washing over his face made the trip easier. His feet were aching as he entered the lobby of the Hyatt Regency. He sat on a couch, removed his shoes and massaged his arches.

"So you like to just blow people off. That's pretty darn rude."

He looked up to see Nancy standing above him. After going thirteen months without incident, tonight he had made two women cry. He stood in his socks to embrace her.

"I left a message in your room," he said. "I tried to call you."

"I've got no money, no credit cards," she sobbed into his shoulder.

"Still can't find your purse, huh?" he said, because it seemed the right thing to say.

He bought her a Jamaican Jerk Chicken Salad in the hotel bar. He ordered two vodka tonics. When those were gone, he ordered two more. Nancy warmed up to him as she drank. She wrapped her hand over his thigh as they watched a basketball game on the television above the bar. Ralph gave in to her flirtations in a way he hadn't before with any woman. The argument with Karen fell away into the ditches of his mind until he began to wonder if it had even happened.

He and Nancy closed the hotel bar. They raced to finish their drinks as the bartender told them to leave. He scrawled his name on the credit card slip. With one arm supporting him, Nancy helped him into the elevator. They kissed sloppily as they climbed to the seventh floor. She invited him to her room and he accepted.

"You've got a fork in your pocket," she said, groping near his groin. "Are you going to eat me?"

They were entwined in a sweaty mass on the bed. Ralph reached into his pocket and withdrew the fork from El Azteca. With it he poked her lightly along the top of her bosom. "Mmm. Tender," he said.

* * *

Morning was painful. Ralph tore open a courtesy packet of Tylenol and swallowed the tablets with a glass of lukewarm tap water. Nancy was gone. It was nine a.m.. He was already

an hour late for work, a fact that exacerbated the unsavory taste coating the inside of his mouth. He stepped groggily into his slacks, then found a board and ironed his shirt. The need to get to work as soon as possible outweighed the compulsion to rifle through her suitcase, which lay spread open on the floor. He scanned the room for a note from her. There was none. He tore a sheet of paper from the hotel stationery. He tried to write something, a few tasteful words to capture the feeling in his heart, but he only crumpled sheet after sheet and stuffed them into his pocket. A couple of textbooks on the table lighted in him the brief hope of finding a Shakespeare sonnet to steal a few lines from. No luck; they were composed solely of argumentative essays. Eventually, he wrote *Nancy – Thank you. From, Ralph* in his most controlled script. He left the note atop the unmade bed.

His boss Randall was shocked when Ralph showed up for work. "We thought you died in your sleep," he said. "You've never been late."

Jacobs had a good time prodding Ralph for details. He asked Ralph if he got lucky. Holly laughed furtively under her breath as a customer approached the table.

The unfortunate truth for Ralph was that he couldn't remember much of the previous evening. He was left with a pleasant sensation that charged his body with energy in spite of missing breakfast. He had made love to Nancy – he was certain of this – but the only real detail that hovered in his head was her delicate whisper: "I love you." The impact of these words then and now was both compelling and unnerving. "I sure *feel* lucky," he told Jacobs.

All day, he searched for Nancy among the crowd. On his lunch break he walked to the deli where they had eaten hot dogs. He ate his lunch alone. He read through a stack of competitors' catalogues that Randall had given him to read as punishment for his tardiness. Fifteen minutes before his break was over he was back at the Signature booth.

An hour later, Randall sent him to get coffee. Ralph took everyone's order. There was a makeshift Starbucks set up in a corner of the Exhibition Hall, so Ralph went there, list in hand. As he waited in line, he spotted a black shape tucked deeply into a gap beneath the counter. He waited patiently until it was his turn to place an order, then squatted down and wrenched the object from its hiding place. It was a purse. His heart started beating at a ridiculous pace.

"Was that stuck under there?" somebody said. It was a lady behind him.

"Is it yours?" Ralph said.

"It's not mine," she said. "There's a Lost and Found up front."

He thanked her, paid for his coffees with Randall's money, and left.

"I'm going to the bathroom," Ralph announced, some time later. The purse stuffed down the front of his pants was beginning to slide down his pantleg.

Clutching his thigh, he walked to the men's room, where he once again hid in a stall. He pulled out the warm purse and unzipped it. There was lipstick, a compact, eye shadow, a couple of ATM slips, a wallet. There was a sample bottle of perfume. He sniffed it deeply. It smelled like Nancy. He opened the wallet.

Her driver's license was the first thing he saw. The photograph could have been taken the previous day – same flawless dome of grey hair, same glasses, even a gold necklace whose chain bore a terrific resemblance to the pendant she had been wearing. The expiration date was 2004, which meant the license had been recently renewed. It was issued to Nancy Marie Pendington, height 5'4", weight 142 lbs., eyes hazel, address 1377 Oak Burr Lane, Portland, Oregon. Everything was correct, as far as Ralph could tell, except the name. He was certain that she had introduced herself as Nancy Wells. One thing that being a book salesman had taught him was the categorical necessity of remembering names.

As he flipped further through the wallet, past the numerous family photographs, past the health insurance card and the Visa and the Mastercard and the calling card, his suspicions were validated. Nancy was married, perhaps even happily so. He sat back, staring at the door of the stall, wishing there was someone in the bathroom with him, if only to flush a toilet and break the silence. Eventually he summoned the strength to check the wallet for money. There was a five dollar bill. Nothing more. He took it into his hands and tore it in half. He put one of the pieces back into the wallet. The other half he tucked in his pocket.

He walked out into the lobby, purse in hand, and handed it to the kid working the Lost and Found counter. "I found it in the bathroom," he said. "Make sure she gets it."

"Not much I can do," the kid said, holding the purse like a gift he didn't want or expect. "Just hope she comes and checks for it."

"Keep your fingers crossed," Ralph said as he walked away.

He returned to the Signature booth and told Randall that he wasn't feeling well. By then it was after three o'clock, so Randall let him go, though not without reminding Ralph that this was the second day in a row he was leaving prematurely. "Let's not make a habit out of this," he said. He also reminded Ralph that their flight left at one-thirty the next day. "Have your stuff down in the lobby by eleven," he said.

"Just like last year," Ralph said. He closed his briefcase. "And the year before that."

He took a long walk back to the Hyatt, stopping at a magazine stand, where he purchased a twenty-five-dollar cigar. His change was seventy-four dollars and thirty two cents. With the unlit cigar dangling in his lips, he rode the elevator to the ninth floor. When he opened the door to his room, he was washed with cold, conditioned air. He tossed his briefcase on the couch. He

loosened his tie. He stripped down to his briefs, went into the bathroom and took a concise shower.

Afterwards, he stood in a towel in front of the living room window. He watched the sun burn the city, inhaling the foreign trace of a woman that lingered on his skin.

Sores

Jim climbed the carpeted stairs, flipping through the mail, experiencing again the vague hope that something in the stack might provide him a welcome home after his day's work. A letter from an old Grayling buddy? A mysterious check from an unknown or forgotten source? These fantasies were impossible – the past six months had borne out this fact – yet Jim refused to question, let alone quash, his expectations. As his father was fond of saying, "There's a reason hope rhymes with rope." Jim liked the phrase, and understood it to mean that a little optimism could pull you out of most rough situations.

In the mail was the usual fare: credit card offers, the telephone bill, the cable bill, and the ever-present envelope stamped with bold letters, ***From the Office of J.J. Cross, Attorney at Law***. Jim opened this one after entering his apartment and dropping the other envelopes onto the bare kitchen floor, which served double duty as a table. Clipped to the legal documents was a handwritten letter on a half-sheet of lined paper:

Jim – I have tried to call, but you refuse to pick up the phone. You leave me no option but to serve these by mail. I only hope that you will not continue to be stubborn. Do what is best for the both of us, as well as for those poor creatures; sign and be done with it, so I can get what belongs to me. Kathy

Her penmanship was unmistakable. Loops that looked like nooses dangled from her *g's*, and her *o*'s were as wide and round as the eyes of the fish she was trying to steal. And her word choice was classic Kathy, accepting no blame: "you leave me no option"; "best for the both of us"; "those poor creatures"; "what belongs to me."

That J.J. Cross was now allowing Kathy to paperclip a personal letter to an official correspondence was surprising, but even more surprising was that Kathy had actually bothered to write at all; this proved to Jim that his strategy was having an effect. He shoved the note, along

with the legal documents, down among the orange peels and pizza crusts in the garbage can below the sink.

Once he'd removed his work boots and dropped them onto the mat beside the door, Jim noticed that a circle of blood had flowered through his white sock. He sat on the couch, crossed his legs, and removed the sock. On the face of his big toe, just below the nail, was a patch of chalk-white skin, ringed by a narrow band of blood. The dime-sized patch felt like a dry, hardened sponge.

Jim washed the sore, smeared antibacterial cream over it, and bandaged it. He figured he'd rubbed his toe raw at work, or picked up a fungus from his slippers.

* * *

Seven months earlier, Jim's wife had run away with a fourth-grade teacher. The fact that the fourth-grade teacher was a woman did not make matters easier. Jim learned of the affair one morning when the sturdy Scandinavian, Ms. Blair Gavain, appeared on their doorstep without an umbrella, dripping in the rain, stinking of booze, and swaying on her feet. It was just before nine a.m., and Jim's wife was at school, where Ms. Gavain also would have been, had it been an ordinary day.

She said, "Kathy doesn't love you anymore."

Jim helped Ms.Gavain into the bathroom. While her face was in the toilet, her hair fell away from the back of her neck, revealing a tattoo of a rainbow being choked with barbed wire. Kathy had only mentioned Ms. Gavain on a few occasions, using the same clinical tone she used when discussing other teachers – a tone, Jim realized once he thought about it, that Kathy employed for most everything, from fudge to funerals. No wonder he hadn't suspected anything.

After vomiting, Ms. Gavain sipped coffee at the kitchen table. She toweled her hair. "Kathy is truly reborn," Ms. Gavain said. Her eyes were raccooned with smudged eyeliner, accentuating her pale complexion. She looked ill, although Jim considered that illness might be her natural state. Some people were like that: robust just one week out of every month, so their health, when it hit, actually seemed like a sickness. "Your wife has hidden her sexuality for two years," Ms. Gavain continued, "and she has hidden me for one year. She doesn't want to hide anymore."

"Okay," Jim said.

"She is a different person now."

"So you said."

Jim stared at the coffee mug – *World's Best Teacher* – in Ms. Gavain's hand, thinking that if Kathy wanted a baby so badly, why turn to another woman?

"You aren't angry?" Ms. Gavain said.

Jim considered this. Should a person be angry after being struck by lightning?

The divorce was speedy, resulting in what he'd thought was an equitable division of assets. Jim took the truck, Kathy the Accord. They split the money from the sale of the house. She got the hamsters, he the fifty-gallon aquarium stocked with tropical fish, which had been a wedding gift from her parents. Her adultery had given Jim a measure of leverage, but rather than seek more money, he'd used his advantage to take away her fish. At the time, both parties had been satisfied with the arrangement.

Now, for the past month, Kathy had been demanding custody of the aquarium, while Jim had been pretending not to notice.

* * *

One week after the first sore appeared, Jim stood with Boris in the back of a semi, on a local move. Boris unearthed a bureau from its tomb of furniture pads while Jim tossed his sweat-darkened T-shirt toward the mouth of the trailer. Boris asked what had happened to Jim's shoulder, indicating a sore that looked just like the one on Jim's toe: same size, same red ring surrounding a dry white patch.

Jim's doctor ran a gloved index finger over the sores. He pushed each one as if it were a doorbell. His breath was warm against Jim's neck as he leaned in. "Does this hurt?" he said.

Jim said it didn't.

"I'm prescribing a multivitamin," the doctor said. "If they don't go away in a month, we'll send you to a dermatologist."

* * *

The third and fourth sores appeared after a night of unsettling dreams. Groggy, scratching the base of his scrotum, Jim walked into the bathroom. He urinated, flushed, washed his hands, then checked himself in the mirror. Two bullseyes, one on each cheek, were planted there as if someone had drawn them on while he slept.

Jim sat heavily onto the toilet. He lowered his head between his legs to fight back a surge of lightheadedness. There had been no warning; there was no reason.

The guys at work bombarded him with questions.

Jerry Ridley wanted to know if the sores itched. He suspected ringworm. Boris thought it looked like eczema. Dwayne Cobb untucked his own Best Way Moving and Storage shirt and revealed a scar from a mysterious lesion born on his hip after a night of skinny-dipping in a Malaysian river. The scar was the size and shape of an egg, slightly paler than the rest of his skin.

Soon every man was pulling up his clothing. Willie Vargas showed Rottweiler bites on his calf. Beside Ken LaValley's spinal cord, a patch of leathery skin stood as a reminder "not to stand with your back to the circus fire-breather." Burt Gonzalez wore a skin bubble on his knee. Matt Stone displayed a fungal growth on his big toe that looked like a wad of gray bubble gum.

* * *

"Maybe I'm just flawed," Jim said to his father, two weeks later. "Or got some new disease that doesn't have a name yet."

"We're all flawed," said his dad, leaning back in the recliner, adjusting his rear end and crossing his ankles. There was a thoughtful expression on his face. He nodded toward the cigarette between Jim's fingers. "Honestly, I had many more health problems when I was drinking and smoking than I do now."

Jim flicked his cigarette with his thumb. He continued doing this even after the dead ashes had fallen away. His father had always been exceptionally good at sounding nonjudgmental while passing judgment. "They have no idea what it is," Jim said, under his breath.

A new sore had appeared on Jim's neck. An allergist had pricked Jim's back with forty-five syringes, loaded with everything from cat urine to beer to Jim's own sweat. No reactions. A dermatologist had ruled out a list of superficial disorders: nummular dermatitis, psoriasis, bedsores, lichen planus, pityriasis rosea. The dermatologist felt "fairly confident" that these were not cancerous bodies, but had cautioned Jim to notify him if the sores changed shape, texture, or color. The next step was to check for neurological abnormalities; Jim would have a catscan in three days.

"You're probably right about my lifestyle," Jim added. His father also had a way of making things sound simple. And Jim internally condeded that the problem *felt* simple. *Circle of dried skin surrounded by red ring. A skin condition. Simple as that.* Jim felt no physical pain, no anger, no fear, no sadness – only confusion. The sores weren't *doing* anything. They just *were*. Jim finished his beer, then squashed out his cigarette.

* * *

When the catscan revealed nothing abnormal, Jim quit drinking and smoking.

He spent the first week snapping at his coworkers. Nobody was his friend. At the 44th Street warehouse, Boris took a swing at Jim during a coffee-break euchre game, but missed and threw out his shoulder. Everyone blamed Jim for the injury.

Jim's teeth pulverized gum and destroyed corn chips. He took long nightly walks around the parking lot of his apartment complex. In bed, he played out movie scenes in his mind. One night it was Rocky Balboa in gray sweatpants, chasing a chicken. Another night it was *Mad Max*, when the guy chucks a boomerang into the air and it comes back and chops off his own head. Jim's motto was Cold Turkey or Nothing. Within three weeks he felt more relaxed, and even discovered that climbing the stairs to his apartment no longer left him winded.

Abstinence wasn't easy, especially with new sores popping up every three or four days. Jim took to watching the tropical fish. It distracted him. The Neon Tetra and the Silver Dollar loved to meet face to face behind the green leaves of the peace lily; Jim wondered if they enjoyed gazing into each other's eyes. The Checkerboard Cichlid spent hours hovering near the bogwood, contemplating, in perfect stillness, the side of the tank. The Zebra Danio was the athlete, and it zipped relentlessly around the perimeter; fifteen consecutive laps was its record.

The Tiger Barb, a deep green with splashes of Halloween orange, enjoyed nipping the Angelfish's tail.

The divorce had squeezed Jim into a one-bedroom apartment, number 197 in a complex of two hundred units. The open kitchen's plentiful countertops were offset by the lack of space for a table, which would have mattered, had Jim still owned a table. Every wall was as white as correction fluid, and the gray carpet emitted a perfumy odor when he vacuumed. The narrow wooden balcony overlooked a lot behind an insurance agency, where businessmen from the nearby paper plant parked their SUVs at odd hours. They apparently didn't care if anyone saw them snorting cocaine off the dashboard.

Drinking was tougher to quit than smoking. Jim slipped one evening and bought a forty-ouncer of King Cobra. An hour later, he returned to the corner store and bought a twelve-pack of PBR, which he polished off in five hours. He needed to get drunk like he needed to breathe, and his rationale in the frenzied moments before cracking that first one was that it was insanity for someone in his condition – a spotted oddity who belonged behind glass – *not* to be drunk whenever possible. He thought about Kathy, and imagined her french-kissing Ms. Gavain. He remembered *Mannequin II* at the Lakeshore Drive-In during their honeymoon in South Haven, Kathy sitting beside him in his pickup, smiling her sizable smile, exposing remnants of Jujubes between her teeth, saying she couldn't stand it anymore, that they needed to move out of Grayling, to a bigger city.

"It's only Grand Rapids," she'd said. "It's only two hours away." She'd produced a note from her purse, written by her parents: *Dear Jim, we know that you and Kathy have roots here, and you will always be welcome, but our daughter, your wife, <u>needs</u> to see the world. Take her where she has to go.*

He'd fought it. They'd grown up in Grayling, had gone to the same high school, the same eye doctor, same gas station, same Long John Silver's…He had a good job at the tool and die shop; she kept busy at the daycare. Why move now? Why move at all? Why why why?

Jim passed out on the couch with his head in a plate of baked beans.

Five days of hangover abstinence followed, and then Jim relapsed again during league bowling. The following day, when two fresh sores appeared in the middle of his forehead, Jim swore to quit drinking for good. He severed himself from situations that would place him in proximity to alcohol, which meant that he bowed out of The Alley Gaterz and stopped socializing with his coworkers. He left his apartment only for necessities. Half of his free time was spent observing his fish, the other half sipping Dr Pepper on the balcony while the classic rock station blared from his boombox. He slapped his arms when mosquitoes lighted there. His television was broken.

* * *

Every other day he had a doctor's appointment. He had maxed out his sick time, and now each appointment chiseled into vacation hours. His insurance plan paid 75% for dermatological conditions. The bills poured in. The 25% that comprised his responsibility so far added up to $3,518.49. He maxed out two of his new credit cards.

Kathy's attorney left frequent phone messages, demanding that Jim sign the papers and release the aquarium to its rightful owner. The attorney claimed to possess sworn statements from Franklin Cardwaller, weekend manager of The Pet Emporium, attesting that it was *Kathy* who had come in "Sunday after Sunday after Sunday to purchase fish food," *Kathy* who had inquired about air filters and gravel and vitamin supplements, *Kathy* who showed true affection for the tropical fish, and thus *Kathy* who should be their "guardians."

"I will take this to court, if you force my hand," J.J. Cross threatened. "You have thirty days."

This was Kathy's way. Rather than buy a new aquarium, she would pay an attorney thousands of dollars to bully the fishtank out of his possession. Jim recalled other incidents (recruiting her big brother Tommy to "persuade" Jim to ask her on their first date; Kathy's best friend Jaimy just "happening" to run into Jim at the department store and casually mentioning Kathy's desire for Eternity perfume on her upcoming birthday). When *her way* was what mattered, Kathy would stop at nothing to find someone to get it for her.

And she always knew what she wanted – that is, until she didn't want it any longer. She had once committed to becoming "the best beautician in northern Michigan." Then, after dropping out of cosmetology school, she vowed to get her real estate license. When selling houses didn't pan out, she dreamed of starting her own day care, a plan that never went past reading *Being=Doing: How to Tranform Yourself Into a Business Superstar* (another birthday present from Jim, "suggested" by a friend). Kathy eventually finished her college degree and became an elementary teacher, but when she broke into tears only five days after their wedding and said she "absolutely craved" a baby, Jim stood his ground, insisted on condoms, chose to wait her out. He'd gone in fully aware that a marriage was a tug of war, but he hadn't realized that if he pulled hard enough, Kathy would let go of the rope and watch him fall backward onto his ass.

Jim crumpled the legal papers one by one, dropped them into a trash can, doused them with lighter fluid, placed the can on the balcony, and sent the papers into the night sky as a black cloud.

* * *

Jim's relationships with the other movers changed. When they cracked jokes, it was with forced exuberance. They stopped inquiring into his condition, and concealed their own markings. Their concepts of personal space swelled to ridiculous girths. Even when necessity dictated standing side by side – to double-team an entertainment center down a flight of stairs, for example – they pivoted their torsos to create as much distance as possible from Jim. They stored extra gloves in their back pockets so that no man was without, and donned long-sleeved shirts on even the hottest afternoons. During lunch breaks, they peeked at Jim's forehead, where it looked like he had undergone double horn removal.

Jim had never paid much attention to his appearance, but now his face affronted him every day. One doctor prescribed a clear ointment that required exposure to the air, which meant that Jim couldn't wear bandages. His six facial sores (two had recently blossomed on his chin) showed themselves in every reflective surface – the mirror, the toaster, the pots and pans, the sliding glass door of the balcony. He plucked at the sores with his fingers; they were completely without feeling. When Jim ran a fingernail in the red furrows that encircled the hard patches, he felt no pain. It was dead tissue.

Once, Jim leaned toward the mirror, bared his teeth, and growled. When his face contorted, the sores shifted. For a brief, terrible moment, they looked alive and purposeful. The moment passed, and they settled back into position.

His parents visited when they could, driving the 126 miles from Grayling, bearing meatloaf, scalloped potatoes, sweet potatoes, spinach, lasagna. They were concerned. Jim's mother touched his face without reservation. Her hand – its eager, unhesitating caress – warmed his skin. Jim caught himself gazing over her shoulder and pitying the tropical fish because they never touched each other, except incidentally.

Dad's latest suggestion was to see a counselor or a priest. Being a lifelong Catholic, he believed that Jim's condition might be tied to stress caused by a spiritual void. After all, he said, Jim was reaching the age where mortality became a real concern.

"Your mother and I wouldn't be the people we are without faith," he said.

He and Jim were seated in plastic chairs on Jim's balcony, watching the fireflies blink twenty feet below. Jim had stopped attending church shortly after high school, and had no intention of re-enlisting. His father was careful, as usual, not to sound judgmental; he didn't mention Jesus, or any specific God. He disclaimed, "I don't have the answer for everyone, just for myself."

He simply wanted Jim "to keep it in his mind, keep searching for something."

His father claimed to be a living example of "willed healing." He described how, when he was younger – and by younger he meant his thirties and forties – he'd carried an anger inside him. Even though he'd had strong Christian beliefs since boyhood, he had never, as he put it, "let go of myself, completely." His finger circled the rim of his iced tea glass. He spoke dispassionately, matter-of-factly, as if sensing Jim's discomfort at talk of religion and thus trying to downplay the subject's importance. "I just realized that this world is going to go on without me, same as it did with me. People possess a certain vanity. I know that when I let go of my anger, which meant letting go of the idea that I was anything more than a servant, my eyesight started improving."

Jim's dad had been born with poor vision. He had a condition called nystagmus that caused his eyeballs to swim uncontrollably in their sockets. They never rested. He hadn't gotten a driver's license until age twenty-six. He had never been able to play any sport that involved a ball. As a teenager, he'd been legally blind.

"Over the past twenty years," Jim's dad said, looking up at the stars, making calculations, "starting about the time you went to high school, my prescriptions have gotten weaker and weaker. I won't ever be 100%, but my glasses aren't as thick anymore."

They sat without talking. Jim strained to hear birds, crickets – any sound of nature – but there was only the drone of traffic on the interstate. All those cars, just one sound. Mother poked her head outside and asked if she could switch on the television. Jim told her it was broken.

* * *

The echoing halls of Northview High, the enormous white teddy bear clutched to the chest of girlfriend number one (fourteen-year-old Kristen Dubrowski, who wore too much makeup and was a devoted Genesis fan), the creek behind St. Jude where Jim and his friends caught garter snakes, Jim's lone Little League home run caused by the right-fielder getting hit in the face with the fly ball…

He could no longer place himself in his own past. His mother showed him photo albums, but no matter how he tried, no matter how explicitly he knew the circumstances surrounding each picture, Jim couldn't make that moppy-haired kid be him. In the mirror, he had stopped seeing himself; he only saw the sores.

Privately, Jim browsed his own photo albums. There was Kathy, humming "Leaving on a Jet Plane" as she dried dishes in their new house in Grand Rapids, her face softened by the light pouring through the window. In every photograph, this is what Jim noticed – Kathy's perfect skin, as smooth as a rooftop after a blizzard. She'd always been healthy, never missed a day of work, rarely sneezed, always demonized his smoking. He flipped through the pages, viewing picture after picture, noting her strained smiles, noting how often her gaze pointed down at some

unknown spot on the floor, and eventually Jim began to understand that Kathy's health was a symptom of a serious illness; her flawless nature was chronic, and debilitating.

Aside from work, Jim spent almost every waking moment on the couch, seated at an angle that prevented his reflection from being visible in the aquarium glass. He watched the tropical fish do their weightless dance. With each flick of their tails, they seemed to know where they were going, but once they arrived at their destinations, they never did anything. Swim here, swim there. They didn't need purpose; the destination *was* the purpose. As long as they *had* a Point B, they were happy.

The water in the tank, though, became murkier. Jim leaned in close and spotted a filmy membrane grown over the Zebra Danio's left eye. The deformity didn't appear to be bothering it – it still kept up with the others, and hadn't lost its appetite – but Jim resolved to clean the tank more often.

One day, Jim broke his own rule and adjusted his eyes to view his reflection in the fishtank glass. There were eight sores on his face. More surprising than the number was their arrangement. The sores were divided evenly, almost artistically – four on each half – so that each had a twin.

Jim's body bore twelve additional lesions, which did not follow the mirror-image design of his face. There was no clear pattern. Sores populated the following spots: neck, left shoulder, left elbow, left big toe, left palm, right thigh, right index finger, right forearm, right elbow, right buttock, right pectoral, and one depressing sore on his scrotum. Each night before bed, touching his sores one by one, Jim counted them.

* * *

He survived three counseling sessions. Doctor Warren Bly gave Jim the option of the sofa or the chair. Jim took the sofa. As of late, he'd become fond of studying ceilings.

Ten minutes into the first session, Bly's deep, delicate whisper lulled Jim to sleep. It was a sudden sleep, pulling him in without warning. He dreamed of an ocean. He flew over the water, low, skimming the surface with the tips of his wings, splashing diamonds into the air. He lighted on the back of a whale, then danced to avoid the spray of the blowhole. He plunged his hand into the blowhole. The hole expanded; his arm disappeared. The hole turned greedy, sucking at him. His head was yanked into darkness.

When he awoke, Doctor Bly was bear-hugging him from behind. Doctor Bly later said that Jim had sprung from the couch, eyes open, groping blindly and wailing at the top of his lungs. When Doctor Bly attempted to touch him or ask him a question, Jim kicked things – the wastebasket, the chair, the desk, the plants – scratched at the air, and screamed in a barely comprehensible voice, "I won't be swallowed! I won't be swallowed!"

This exact episode repeated itself the next Tuesday, and again the Tuesday following, so Jim and Doctor Bly parted ways. Doctor Bly wished Jim luck, and sent him away with a list of referrals, which Jim promptly pinned to his refrigerator using a magnet photograph of himself and Kathy, taken on their wedding day. Whenever Jim retrieved a beer, he could read the phone numbers and names – *Roy Fowler, Psy.D., Emily Greer, Ph.D., ABPP, Yamin Abul, Ph.D., Beckler Foistman, Psy.D., ABPP* – then cast a glance at the wedding photo, like a person peeking through an oven window to see if the pot roast is done.

There were no dramatic outbursts in the priest's office two weeks later. Jim sat in front of the broad mahogany desk, upon which Father Brophy had folded his hands. On the wall behind Father Brophy's head, the golden Jesus observed everything from his golden cross.

"I spent three years in the Philippines," the priest said. "Saw a lot of misery. It won't bother me if you take that off. Whatever's comfortable for you."

"Long as I don't have to see," Jim said. He removed the wool hat and unwrapped the scarf from his face.

Father Brophy didn't flinch. He was an old priest, with a head of white hair and a turkey neck quivering over his collar. He ignored Jim's sores and said without prompting, "I'm getting too rickety to play racquetball." He winced as he stretched his back. "It's a shame. Get old and you start to lose the things you love."

Jim stared at his own hands, which were now spotted with sores.

"No offense, but your breath is…noticeable," the priest continued. "Do you always drink this early?"

"Early doesn't mean the same thing to me as it does to you."

The priest opened a drawer and produced a glass ashtray.

Jim smoked. The priest stood and walked to the bookshelf. He moved his fingers along the spines. He came back to the desk and placed a book in Jim's hands. It was called *Gifts from a Course in Miracles*.

"Pick it up anytime," he said, sitting down. "Look at a verse or two, put it away. I find it beautifully written. Consider it a present, Jim."

Hearing his name spoken aloud, Jim felt shellshocked, just as he had with Ms. Gavain.

Jim held out his hands. He showed the priest both sides. He pointed to the sores around his mouth, on his nose, cheeks, forehead, and chin. From his cross, Jesus frowned, pitying the ugliness of the world while doing nothing to stop it. "The doctors can't even find a name for this fucking thing," Jim said. "Let alone a cure."

The priest reflected. His eyes, as blue as the Zebra Danio's stripes, appeared to be reading words in the air. "This won't be reassuring," he said, "but the sad fact is that there are mysteries that science can't solve. Sure, they can tell you the physics of what caused this car accident, or the psychological reasons that Killer X went into a house and wiped out a family. But other things will always be beyond our knowing. It's the most difficult part of this life. Accepting the idea that we don't *know*. The idea that there will always be things we don't have names for. Things we can't prove. Do we run? Do we feel anger? Of course. Does our anger, our fear, *change* these things? Not in my experience."

The priest wanted to believe that not-knowing was the path to faith. Ignorance was bliss.

"So we accept it, and do nothing," Jim said.

"You got the first part right."

"Just run back to church, act like I believe in something so I can save myself."

"I can't tell you what to do," the priest said, "and I don't recommend impersonating a believer. But even nonbelievers find the services comforting. The ritual of it, I suppose. And you can talk to me anytime." He reached over the desk. Jim gave him his hand. The priest shook it. It was the first time in two months that Jim had touched another human being who wasn't poking or prodding him, and the sensation of the contact halted his breath in his chest. The priest's hand felt dry and leathery, but it was warm, and it was alive, and Jim held it until the priest let go.

* * *

Autumn came, then winter. J.J. Cross's threat of legal recourse after thirty days had amounted to a load of hot air: phone calls from his office ceased, and shortly thereafter, so did

the mailings. Jim was at a loss to explain the sudden shift, but he accepted it without question, choosing to believe that it was because Kathy had accepted that she'd been wrong.

The visits from Jim's parents also stopped. Once the initial shock of his sores wore off, they seemed to realize that they were powerless to help. After all, Jim told himself, his dad had recommended Doctor Bly and Father Brophy, and once these options were exhausted, what more could a father do?

Their most recent visit had been awkward. Mom stood around biting her lip while tears invaded her eyes. Dad stared at the floor with the same expression as Kathy in the photo albums. They also no longer touched him, and Jim understood that despite the doctors' claims to the contrary, his parents had decided, nonverbally, that their son was contagious. They telephoned every few days, but Jim stopped answering; he had nothing more to say; he was no longer their son, he was their *diseased* son, and no amount of talk could change this, just as no amount of counseling or guidance could provide a cure. The copy of *Gifts from a Course in Miracles* lay unread on the carpet beneath Jim's dusty television; the list of psychologists was now confetti on the kitchen floor, scattered like seeds among the pile of unopened bills. The notion that some combination of words, written or spoken, invoked in prayer or in conversation, could erase Jim's deformity…the idea was offensive nonsense, like handing a guy a toothpick and telling him to slay a dragon.

Jim's parents kept their consciences clear by mailing checks for his continued medical treatment. The doctors shaved Jim's head to expose his spotted scalp. Then they shaved the rest of his body – legs, chest, groin, anus, armpits, arms, feet. They wanted to see every last sore, ignoring the fact that each new one was exactly the same as every one prior. Dermatologists

prescribed a battery of ointments that succeeded only in making Jim itch; physicians prescribed pills that made his urine smell like turpentine.

Evidently, word spread that there was a freak up in Michigan who couldn't be fixed: after Jim's doctors tried unsuccessfully to coax him into travelling to other cities to visit with specialists "better equipped to deal with your condition," the specialists themselves flew in, from Cincinnati, Atlanta, Chicago, Minneapolis. They surrounded him, touched him, stuck him, bled him, and proffered mouthful after mouthful of vague, clinical words that added up to nothing. Jim's health – his heart, his reflexes, his blood, his brain – was perfect, and so, before long, the phrase "lesions of unknown origin" dominated the specialists' vocabulary, and they pronounced it with assurance and vigor, as if it were the name of a new baby and they were the proud parents.

Because he never felt physically sick, Jim drank as much booze as possible. He wanted to possess the sickness on the inside. He wanted to feel diseased, to feel headaches, cottonmouth, nausea, and stiff joints. He stocked the cupboard with whiskey, rum, vodka, tequila, and wine. Alone in his apartment, he clutched his head. He kicked magazines and newspapers around on the floor. He wanted to justify his horrific appearance by giving himself horrific insides. He fucked the couch cushions and pissed noisily on the walls. One by one, he called the guys from the moving company and told them they were shitholes. He harassed Kathy and Ms. Gavain with hang-up calls. He touched his tonsils with his finger and upchucked in the bathtub so he could examine the horrific insides he'd made. He danced nude in his living room, scratching his sores until they bled, then ran out onto the snow-covered balcony to moon the guys doing lines in the SUV, taking pleasure even when they didn't appear to notice him.

Then, one evening, Kathy called, and Jim answered the phone. It was his first human contact in two weeks. With his blessing, Jim's parents had flown to Italy for a month-long second honeymoon, despite their eleventh-hour protests to stay near during this trying time. Jim had begged them to take the trip, guaranteeing that the doctors were making progress, that he would be improved by the time they returned. "There's nothing you can do for me," he had assured his father.

When he picked up the phone, Kathy sounded like a stranger, so Jim treated her accordingly. She wanted to meet for lunch. Jim declined.

"You don't sound good," she said.

"I'm not good. I'm fucked up."

"I wish you'd meet me."

"You're fucked up."

She sighed. She was probably plucking the telephone cord like it was a bass string. "I wanted to tell you in person, but since you don't apparently *want* that, I'll tell you like this. I don't care about the aquarium anymore. Keep it. Your parents told me about your health problems," she said. She addressed him the way she addressed her naughty students. Jim understood that he was a naughty student, and that he deserved such a tone.

"These fish are dying," he said, looking at the tank. "I give them food. I clean. But they have tumors and things."

"Jim – "

"The yellow Angelfish? Didn't we give him a name? He barely moves. The others want to eat him."

"Jim – "

"I don't know how I should feel about it. He's useless. He barely moves. Maybe they should eat him."

"I've been inseminated, and we're having a baby. I thought you should know," Kathy said. "*I* changed, not you. We have a lot of history together. We shouldn't throw it all away." Even as she spoke, she was swallowing the real substance of her words, releasing only the sounds of them into the air, like the empty, hollow clanks of a hammer on a railroad spike. This was all she could spare, and it was meaningless noise.

Jim took a moment to assemble a response.

He hung up.

* * *

Jim gave up on doctors. The doctors didn't mind; they hated not having an answer.

He no longer went to work. His friends and coworkers stopped calling.

His parents, however, phoned every other day. On the answering machine, they took turns saying they were having a great time, that they were thinking about extending the honeymoon, but they were concerned about his condition. They implored him to call their villa. They would continue to wire money, if he needed it. They were praying for him. They could get back to the States in a heartbeat if he needed *anything*. Each day Jim recorded a new message, assuring them that he was fine ("Actually, I'm feeling really good"), that his condition was improving steadily, albeit slowly, and that he was just too busy with work and healing to talk right now, but that he would return their call at his earliest opportunity.

The sores covered his entire body, including his ears, eyelids, penis (shaft and head), and the bottoms of his feet. Each had its place; none overlapped, but the edges touched; he was becoming one giant sore. Long ago, it seemed now, he had given up on tolerating the stares, the

confused children breaking into tears, so he never went out. He wrapped his face in his ratty scarf when the Harding's delivery kid brought food, cigarettes, and alcohol.

Each day was devoted to drinking whiskey and watching the quiet, dying fish. A sickness had invaded the tank. The water was clear, but the fish bore signs of disease. The Silver Dollar, with a bulbous growth on its left gill, floated lopsidedly in place. The striped Zebra Danio, one eyeball distended and filmy, competed weakly for food. A woolly fungus coated the Tiger Barb's dorsal fin and mouth; it bumped its nose against the glass in a sad, impotent ritual. The Angelfish, instead of being devoured as Jim had forecast many weeks ago, gained a second wind and began nipping aggressively at the other fish, rending chunks of flesh and scales as suited its fancy.

On the couch, hammer in hand, Jim leaned forward. His knee bounced up and down. He looked like a honeycomb; he knew this in spite of the fact that he had thrown away the toaster and the pots and pans, in spite of the fact that he had layered duct tape over the oven handle, refrigerator handle, and faucets, in spite of the fact that he had covered every window, as well as the bathroom mirror, with newspaper. He knew that he looked like a honeycomb because he could see himself in the glass of the fish tank. He was not a man anymore but a design, a puzzle.

His fingers gripped the hammer. His knee bounced. Kathy would never call again – he was sure of this – but she *had* called (hadn't she?) and from this he cobbled a victory.

To look at him there, on the couch, his watery eyes the only sign of life on his face, one might believe that he was waiting for just the right moment to leap to his feet, wind up, wield the hammer two-handed, shatter the tank into a thousand pieces, and watch the doomed fish burst free in a rush of water, experiencing for a brief moment the wonderful horror of oxygen.

The Big Baby Crime Spree

I. The Pretty New Nurse From Pediatrics

I'm standing behind my wife in the cafeteria line at St. Mary's. Except she doesn't know that she's my wife, and neither do I. Right now, she's just the P.N.N.F.P.. On her tray, she's got two Jell-O cubes in a bowl. I breathe deep and stutter twice before I'm able to spit out, "Is that all you're going to eat for dinner?!"

When she looks up, I want so bad to lick my hand, palm back this hair, and tell her that the Jell-O cubes match her green eyes. The skin on her cheeks is Wonderbread, like it's never been hit by anything but air. Her only blemish is a tiny circular scar near the top of her forehead. She's got charcoal slashes for eyebrows, a hatchet nose, and no chin. She doesn't wear makeup or perfume, but still, she smells good. It makes me nervous to be this close to a musky-smelling woman, and then an actual *thud* – my heart – shakes my ribcage, and I realize that our meeting is the best coincidence!

We'll hit the highway doing ninety-five, the back of the Econoline screaming with the Crime Babies of the Crime Crib. I didn't know that I'd need, want, or meet a sexy sidekick, but I'm rearranging the plan to fit her in. At the rest stops, we'll make love in the front captain's chair (her on top), then take turns pumping gas and bottle-feeding those money-grabbing babies, to make sure they aren't getting any ideas about crying too loud. I'll break out my roll of dimes to call Dad at The Home, where he'll have his own personal nurse (just like I will), his own private room with a couch, a TV, and a bathroom – almost everything a real home has – so he'll never for one minute believe he's in a hospital.

My pretty nurse (her name tag: *Rhonda*) is wearing a cobweb smile. She's pondering something important – probably a guy she used to know, a guy who looks like me, a guy she

loved, hated, or couldn't care less about. She keeps reading my feet, giving me nothing but that flimsy smile. She might want to stab my neck with a fork. She might want to plant a kiss on my lips. She might want to grab my hand and force me to point to the *exact spot* where my lazy left eye is focusing (No one can tell which eye I'm looking with. FYI: it's both, and what angle I'm standing at determines what my "lead" eye is going to be).

I nod at her tray and say, "That's not much for a growing woman."

She growls: "Some people don't *need* much."

She doesn't sound annoyed, just burned. She's a car engine that wants oil.

II. What Nobody Knows

Dad doesn't recognize a toothbrush, and he can't dress himself. He also can't dress a toothbrush and doesn't recognize himself. Quick flashes, maybe once or twice a week, are the exception, and during these he barks, "I'm not a goddamn baby, Travis!" in a tone that understands everything and tells me that I'm embarrassing him by being in the bathroom, stripping off his jeans for a bath. These flashes hurt the most. Real Dad appears, and I see a message in his eyes – that he appreciates what I've been doing, that he wishes it could be different, but that some things are inevitable. I see this in a five-second span. Then Real Dad is gone and I wonder if it was all in my head, because he turns and begs the towel rack to let him pitch the last two innings (he played baseball in high school).

I've handled so much poop in the last three years (on and off the job) that it's no more unpleasant than picking up a penny from the sidewalk. The bad stuff is the stuff that *can't* be picked up, and this is what Dad makes in the last couple months. I used to just stuff his dirties into a garbage bag, stuff the garbage bag into a laundry bag, go to the laundromat, find a machine far from everyone, wait until the washer filled with water, make sure nobody was

watching, then dump the underwear into the machine really fast, so the odor didn't have time to escape. Just yesterday, though, from the supply closet, I stole a box of jumbo-size panty liner pads meant to catch uterus blood for days or weeks after a baby comes out, so now I put these into Dad's briefs, which I hope might help with expenses.

I don't know how old Dad is, and there's no one around to tell me. In the 1970s and '80s he was a Dodge truck. In the early '90s, after I graduated high school, he started showing the first signs of the Alzheimer's (I guess, although he never got diagnosed), and now, finally, ten years later, he's a stripped Nova. He weighs 122 pounds, down from 193. His legs are cornstalks. Without my shoulder, he can't get out of bed. If there was a God, like Mom thinks, Dad wouldn't be living *anywhere* anymore, but at least Dad's in the best place, which is his own place, which is our two-bedroom apartment, mine and his, where we've been together for almost twenty years.

He hates hospitals, just like I do, and made me promise when I was only seven that I would kidnap him or euthanize him if he ever got put into a hospital. I remember asking, "Even if you only get your tonsils taken out?" He nodded with a serious face, but there was a spark in his eye, and I understood that he was joking, but also that the joke wasn't really a joke.

When I was eight, Dad sliced up the bottom of his foot by stepping on a sharp bone while swimming in a channel. He sutured himself with fishing line. When I was nine, he caught pneumonia and spent twenty days at home, refusing to go to the doctor. A year later, a pipe exploded at the caulking-glue factory where he worked, and he got second-degree scalding on the backs of his thighs. For four weeks he was on his stomach, swearing so loud I thought he'd break the windows. He ignored my mom's "Stop being a jackass martyr and go to the hospital" (by then her shit just bounced off of him), and once a day I scrubbed away the dead skin with a

Brillo pad and told him I was proud, that I didn't care that he wasn't getting "workman's cop," and that he was the strongest man in the world.

Mom's been giving tours of volcanoes in Hawaii since I was eleven, which is when she left me and Dad. She only meant to leave Dad, but I told her lawyer and the judge (I couldn't make myself look at her face) that no matter what they did, I wouldn't live with her. I like to imagine her leading a gang of tourists around the rim of Mt. Kilauea. One hand holds her hair in place, the other points at the big hole behind her while she says, "You don't want to put *this* lava in a lamp."

Then I imagine her sneaking to the bushes while the tourists snap pictures. She opens her compact, checks her lipstick, and thinks about nothing but her face in that circle of glass. She takes one accidental extra step backwards – Whoopsy! Too many glasses of Chardonnay this morning! – and falls end over end into the volcano, her hairsprayed head catching fire before she's even hit lava. *Burned and dead, burned and dead, boiling guts, burned and red.* I woke up one morning with that phrase lapping my skull, and I was half-tempted to teach it to Dad just to give him some mental exercise.

Mom hates me and Dad so much that the last time I talked to her, which was two days ago (and before that eighteen months ago, and before that three years ago), she said, "Your father deserves everything he's getting. Whoremongers and adulterers will be judged."

I wanted to whack the receiver on the table until it shattered into a thousand pieces, so I could bake the shards into Betty Crocker cupcakes, mail them to her, and make her choke on her own fucking blood.

Instead, I told her, "It's a shame you feel that way," and asked if she could send money for cigarettes and other necessities. She agreed to wire cash (after I promised that Dad wouldn't

get a dime of it), made a big deal out of telling me how quickly she'd get to the Western Union ("How's $1,000? Is that enough? I'm putting on my sneakers this minute!"), and basically pretended she's got a reborn pocketbook to match her reborn Christian heart. Same old routine. She won't send anything but prayers in my direction, and I'll spend the next year and a half thinking about ways to kill her.

When I unlock the bedroom door, Dad sits up with bugging eyes and screams, "Get the fuck out!" and tries to bash me with the bedside lamp. I take the lamp out of his hands and set it on the floor. He's not strong. I settle him down, cover him with a blanket. I tell him stories of things we did together, like grilling brats and corn cobs in Riverside Park, having a good laugh after buying a "boner" for our fishing trip from the blushing old lady at Ace Hardware, blasting M-80s in front of our house on Gratiot, toasting frozen pizzas in the iron 1940s oven that I called *Jabba the Hot* when I was small.

I tell stories while Dad stares across the room at things I don't see. I wonder how long it'll be before he's so gone that he's not my dad anymore. If there's a line, he's standing on it.

Once he's asleep, I go to the living room. I pull the top notebook from the pile under the coffee table.

I need five babies. They'll have to be the tiniest newborns – anywhere from brand new to two months old – so I can train them and use them before their fingerprints form. Most people don't know that babies don't have fingerprints at birth. The nurses take an ink stamp of the foot print just after the baby pops out, which can identify it to some degree. And they have a hospital band that gets fastened around the baby's wrist, which sets off an alarm, locks all the doors, and kills the elevators if the baby's taken out of the ward. They have all kinds of security in place for

these little people, but when a baby touches something with its fingers, it's like nobody was ever there at all.

III. The Motherfucking MOUNTAIN!

I'm in the cafeteria, waiting for Rhonda, the P.N.N.F.P. Only – SHIT! – I'm supposed to call her "Thelma," because Thelma Pickles was John Lennon's first girlfriend. I need to drill this into my head. I am NOT going to mess this up. This is my future wife. I also need to ask her about the book she's writing, so I will NOT tell her about the Big Baby Crime Spree during our first food-break date.

I've seen Rhonda around the hospital every day since we met last week. When she passes me in the hallway, she just looks me up and down like I'm a racehorse. The problem is that I can't tell what category of racehorse I am – loser or winner, stud or glue – because her green eyes just lie on me like a heavy blanket.

The real surprise came this morning. I was heading to the elevator to hit Examination Room 409 when she popped out of Ultrasound. She stared right into my eye – right in the right-looking eye! – and smiled. I almost fell into the bucket I was pushing. This smile wasn't flimsy like her first one. I kept my composure, and we waited for the elevator together. She dove right into her John Lennon book, and her name preference, and I told her I wanted to hear all about it, but that I had to get to Midwifery for vomit mop-up. She's the same height as me (5' 5"), and her front teeth are bucked out in a sexy way. It had to be destiny, so I asked her on this lunch date.

Here she comes. I run a finger along the bottom of the mustache, to clear the hairs.

"Should we get some food?" she asks, and I let out a cool, "Yes ma'am."

I load my tray with a bag of barbeque chips, a Frisbee-sized Granny Elma's chocolate chip cookie, and an Xtra Large root beer. Rhonda is having a blueberry muffin and a cup of hot Lemon Zinger tea, which are on me. I carry both trays to our table.

"Tell me about your book, Thelma."

"I brought it," she says. When she plops down her purse, it looks like a stuffed lung. She sucks five fingertips before reaching into the lung for her notebook.

She slides the notebook across the table. I open it. Even though my eyeballs point goofy, I can read without glasses. Dad once told me that my eyes are this way because I'm curious about everything and my body wants to see as much as possible, so it splits itself. My mom told me that I'm part jackass (and pointed at my dad).

"I have a *mountain* of letters at home," Thelma says. "A motherfucking MOUNTAIN! I kid you not." Her hand's a shoulder-level hatchet, and she starts chopping the air with it, like she wants to lop off the peak of the mountain. With her teeth, she rips a wedge from her muffin in a way that scares and excites me. "I left the grammar mistakes," she says. Crumbs rain onto the table. "Just so you don't think I'm a dumbass."

I start reading her notebook. What I see is a bunch of very brief letters, written in Thelma's own handwriting:

Oct 9, 2005
Ricky (trufan@yahoo.com)
Comments: john, I can hardly express my inside emotions and my...PAIN I miss you. thanks for sharing your insperation, care and smiles. Your one in a million and a blesing to us all.

Oct 9, 2005
Flesym Etah (iamhe@hotmail.com)
Comments: JOOHHHHNNN!!! You are LOVVE!! happy birthday!! John you'll be inside me always! Happy Birthday!

Oct 9, 2005
Jerry Dove (penbutt@erthlink.com)
Comments: Dear John: I want to sing "Happy Birthday" to you. But

> don't you wonder what happy birthday means to a dead guy like you. Thats like singing to a side of beef. Wasting time All I really would like to remind you on your 62nd birthday, is "Instent Karma". Without those words where would we be. I never met you I never touched you, and if you were still alive I doubt you'd touch me. But I say it anyway because, to me you were somthing awsome. You were there for me when other's weren't. Like sadie you were beutiful John, and you will stay beutiful in my mind. You are more then a side of beef. You will live on...forever.

Thelma is talking the whole time I'm trying to read. She worshipped John Lennon and the Beatles her entire life, and was "barely a teenager when John was assassinated in cold blood." She owns every Beatle album, every "John" album, apparently every album "John" touched, talked about, or breathed on – it's a blur of "John John John John John" for five minutes straight. Then we get to two years ago, when she got so depressed on December 8th that she swore she'd do something to honor the next October 9th, because that was a more positive way to spend her energy. I do the math and figure out that the guy's been "assassinated" for twenty-five years. I can't help wonder why he was "assassinated" while if I got shot, I would just be plain "shot."

The story of Thelma's notebook (which she "will publish very soon") is that she posted a request on the World Wide Web for birthday messages to John, but the tricky part is that she asked for only snail mail, because that's all they had in "John's era." She gave out her home address, and people have been sending letters ever since. When she gets them, though, she rewrites them in her notebook, in pen, in "email form" (whatever that means), so that they "seem more modern for the modern reader." It's all very confusing. I'm embarrassed that I don't know John Lennon, or the girl that Rhonda named herself after. I mean, I know the Beatles and all that. I know who the guy *is*, but I just can't picture him when she's telling me this stuff. He's one of the moppy British guys. The smart one, I think.

"These are written by *real people*, who have true, strong feelings for this man." She might be about to cry; her bottom lip is a live wire. "These are *real letters*, Gary."

I'm used to being called "Gary," but it sounds weird coming out of Thelma's mouth, like she's not talking to me. Like I'm Gary, but Gary isn't me.

Nobody at the hospital knows that my name is Travis. On my job application three years ago, I used my middle name because the Big Baby Crime Spree was already taking shape in my mind. I'd been a custodian at the Chic University of Cosmetology, and Dad was getting worse and worse, and one day I saw a cosmetology student showing off pictures of her baby to her classmates. I stood outside the classroom and listened, and that's when I learned about the Three-Month No Fingerprint Window. I went to St. Mary's the next day and applied.

Thelma reaches across the table to tap the notebook. She tells me, "Read this one":

Oct 9, 2005
Pamela Pretty (neverded@erthlink.net)
Comments: This minnit I am liteing four canldes on October 9th. It is 1:27am and
one each burns for John and Yoko, Julian and Sean. I am listening to Mind Games.
I love you beutiful man. I am soooo lucky to have a good notebook
like the one here to share my feeling about what you let us. You
were an amazing man to me and my growing old. I will meet you somday.

"Why is she burning *four* candles?" I ask. "Are those other people dead?"

She looks at me like there's a beard on my teeth. "YOKO ONO? His **WIFE**?"

"What – "

"And his two **SONS**?"

"I guess she burns candles whether people are dead or alive."

Out comes a snippy, "Is there a difference?" She snatches her notebook, shoves it into her purse, and stares across the room, chewing her muffin.

"It'll be a great book," I say.

IV. She Invokes Jesus Because of the Black Cloud

She's been a nurse for ten years. She's older than me; she's thirty-seven.

She's never been married or had a kid, and she says the first part of this is true only because she's "ineligible" for the second.

The dime-sized scar on her forehead is from a dime that some "fuckface" dropped from the top of an office building when she was visiting Chicago with her parents during the seventh grade. She blames her infertility on this freak accident. She says the dime destroyed the part of her brain that tells her body NOT to treat an embryo like a foreign invader. She's had "at least six" miscarriages. It sounds crazy, but I believe her. There's a big connection between the brain and the body. I just heard on the news that juggling can ward off Alzheimer's, which is why I've been teaching myself with apples.

Her mom and dad don't like her. They got divorced when she was a high school senior, and both parents ended up in a Portland. Her dad's in Maine and her mom's in Oregon, and Thelma's in Michigan, just as far from one as from the other. I chime in that my parents are divorced, too, that my mom left after my dad had an affair with a young girl who worked at the ice cream shop, but that I didn't blame Dad because Mom was always telling him that his model airplanes were a waste of time, that his feet stunk, that his fingers had caulk on them, that he didn't know how to make the television come in clear, that he needed to wash his face before he could kiss her, and that after the divorce Mom became a reborn –

"Are you finished?" Thelma says. "I'm pretty sure I was talking."

Anyway, that's why she loves John's song, "Mother," especially the end, when he yells, "Momma don't go! Daddy come home!" over and over. She sang it in the shower every day of

her first year of nursing school. She loves how his voice "shatters like a bottle of beer against a tree."

Thelma enjoys kids, especially babies. She wants to be a midwife, but her supervisor told her she's too emotional.

She took me to her apartment after our lunch date, and she "really really really" wanted to show me the mountain of letters from John Lennon fans, but the mountain was in a basement storage closet, "so it would be a hassle." I sat on her sofa, flipped through her notebook. I pretended to be fascinated while she made grilled cheeses. The notebook was mildly interesting at first, but so repetitive that it turned into Chinese water torture pretty fast. Every letter was about the same fucking guy. A dead guy nobody would remember in fifty years, except the people who loved him, and *they* would probably be dead in fifty years, too.

Also, the writing was mush. I hated mush. Mush was what came out of my dad's body. Using mush like "1000 hugs for The Nowhere Man" with my mom would only make her laugh at me.

Last, I didn't understand the purpose. It was like writing a book about the tree behind your house. It didn't accomplish anything. The tree didn't know, or care, about all this jibber-jabber.

I kept wondering if we were going to do anything physical, because Thelma popped out of the kitchen every two minutes when she was supposed to be slicing cheese, or bread, and practically sat on top of me to explain every single letter. I thought about kissing her, but there was never a long enough pause. She liked to talk. Things were flowing, I guess. Between wanting to make out, wanting to share my plan, and wanting her to shut up, I couldn't tell what I wanted most.

I went to the kitchen sink to dump beer backwash from our cans, and that's when she stepped up and punched my lips with a kiss. My teeth clacked against hers. I tasted blood. We went to the couch and mashed until the sandwiches on the burner set off the fire alarm. The kitchen filled with smoke. We threw open the windows. Rhonda gasped for air. She stuck her head out the window and yelled, "Jesus please help us, we're gonna die in a black cloud," which froze me in my tracks. Then she grabbed her John Lennon notebook while I ran to tell the first floor neighbors that it was nothing to worry about. An old woman answered the door after about three minutes of knocking. I could see her cautious husband in the background, peeking at me from a dark hallway. The woman yawned while I was telling her. When I assured her that the basement storage closets wouldn't be damaged, she fanned the air with her hand like she was shooing a fly. She closed the door in my face.

Rhonda came down the steps and asked if we could "finish hanging out" at my apartment. I didn't want to say yes, but I also didn't want to say no. So we went.

V. Record Albums Don't Break Easily

She doesn't want to kiss anymore. I take my hand off her boob. I can't look her in the eye.

"When you try *not* to," she says, "you end up staring straight at me."

"What did I do?"

"It's not you, stupid. It's your dad. What's he doing in there? It's extremely distracting."

"He's sick," I say. "He gets confused, so he cries."

"And pounds the wall? And tells the lawyer from Saginaw to fuck a pile of pudding?"

"I'll put on some music." I go to the stereo, flip through records.

"It's because you lock him in his room like an animal," she says.

I don't like her criticizing the way I handle Dad. What the hell does *she* know about it? But at least she's sitting down again. I keep one eye on her and one on the records. She's digging a pen out of her purse. The best album I can find is Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life*. Dad's not crying anymore, but even worse, he's starting The Moan.

It's quiet for now; I don't think Thelma can hear it, but it'll get louder. I'm sliding the record out of the jacket as fast as I can, which isn't very fast.

Thelma's reading one of her letters aloud: "'You jealous child of nature! I do adore you for your poetry, your insecurity, your mistakes, your anger, your Lennon. Please, be with me tomorrow, be always with me.' Did you hear that, Gary? *Be always with me*. This theme runs through every letter. John was imperfect, but his imperfections make him so fucking eternal."

Dad's moan is sputtering, **uuhuh…uhhuh…uuhhhhh**; it sounds almost like a laugh; Thelma's forehead scar is turning whiter; my hands are shaking all over the place; got the turntable lid up, and the power's on; **uuhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh**.

Thelma's saying, "I'm thinking about taking little sections – just a line or a phrase – like the *essence* of certain letters, and *suturing* them together to make my own songs."

UuUUuuuuhhHHhh

"Do you think I'm talented enough to write my own songs?"; "Of course you're talented enough."; the record's out of its sleeve; **UUUuUuuuuUuuUU**; "YOU WHAT?"; **UuuUUUUUUUUuUuuUUuuHHH hhhHhHHHHHHhhhhHHHHHH**; stupid hands won't stop TREMBLING; "I'll bet you could write some FANTASTIC SONGS, Thelma"; **UUUUHU** "You're just saying that, aren't you?"**UHHUHHHHH**"No way! I think you**UHUU**have **HHHUUNH**talent**IHUHHUHUHNNNNNYFFFNNNNNNNNNUUUUHHHH**

"FOR SHIT'S SAKE!" Thelma frisbees her notebook across the room. It knocks an ashtray off the end table. Cigarette butts explode in a cloud. She runs to the bedroom door, starts beating it with her fists. "Shut up in there! CAN YOU SHUT THE HELL UP?!"

I run to her and start whacking her head with the Stevie Wonder record, but it just wobbles and warbles and slaps, without helping at all. She kicks the door, twists the knob; it seems like she really *would* run in there and smother him with the pillow if she had the chance. I have no choice but to tackle her. We land on the bathroom floor. She bucks and screams and tries to knee my nuts. I start kissing her neck, and we end up screwing on the cold tiles with Dad groaning right along with us.

Later, I tell her my plan. We're on our backs on the bathroom floor. Dad stopped moaning not long after we did. My head's resting on Thelma's *Instant Karma's gonna get you* panties. I haven't fucked in six years, so my dick feels like a beach after a good rain, all quiet and cool and sticky.

"Who has B.O.?" she asks. She turns her face and sniffs my armpit. "God, it's you."

I smell her armpit. "It's you, too."

"I hate being a nurse."

"I hate being a janitor."

"That's not what you said before."

"I don't hate it. It's going to make me rich. But not by cleaning toilets."

"My supervisor is a 100% nutjob. She wears plaid socks. *That's* creativity, to her. *That's* how she shows her individuality. What a waste." She starts singing, "*You think you're so clever and classless and free/But you're still fucking peasants as far as I can see*."

"One of Lennon's masterpieces," I say. I've never heard it before, but obviously it's one of his songs. It sounds nice, pouring out of the smoky hole of her mouth.

"I only got into nursing because my mom begged me. She wanted me to help people because she felt bad for hurting so many." She lets out a little laugh, then lights another cigarette just as I drop her first one into the toilet. Her panties make a thin but satisfying pillow. I'm enjoying her body odor, and the view of her tits. She keeps talking. "I wanted to be a folk artist. I'm *great* with fabrics – I can make a whole outfit out of four square feet of burlap, including the socks, and it's not nearly as uncomfortable as you might think, because I tenderize it with a warm dough roller – and actually, you'd be surprised how *nice* burlap can look. It makes people look more muscular than they are, which is something *everyone* can use now and then. You know, you would look *really* good in one of my outfits – *The Spy Who Loved Me* dinner vest would look incredible on you."

She stops talking. Smoke shoots out of her nose. She shifts gears. "But who cares what I never did? I love the kids, hate the parents. I hate all parents. Parents can –" she clucks her tongue and flips the bird at the bathroom ceiling, "– fuck themselves in the asshole twice."

She thinks about it. She flicks something invisible off her right boob and says, "It's hard to hate someone who's dead, so I don't hate your dad. But I DO hate your mom, after what you told me."

It feels like the right time. I make my move. "We could help my dad," I say.

"I like that idea."

"I have notebooks," I say. "Just like you."

VI. It's Like God Made Them Without Fingerprints Just for That Reason

She didn't laugh, and she didn't report me to the police. She sat hunched over my notebook for more than twenty minutes, with a serious look on her face. Tears dropped out of her eyes. She thought the whole thing was beautiful.

"It's so natural," she said. "It's like God made them without fingerprints just for that reason." She dove on me; we made love for the second time. She made me promise to return the babies after we finished, so I placed my hand over my heart and swore on my father's future grave, which I realized I might be able to decorate with an actual headstone, that the babies were nothing more than a loan.

The number five had been worked out as Lowest Risk with Highest Payoff Potential, which I calculated using a formula that took two weeks to create. "Two weeks on just the *formula* to *calculate* the *calculation*!" I emphasized. Then I explained how it had taken another three months of considering *each* possible crime scenario – convenience stores, bowling alleys, banks with armed guards, rich old ladies walking through East Town – with *each* possible number – two babies, three babies, four babies, five babies – before I'd come to my final decision. "I am not going to rush this plan," I told her. I explained that for three years I had ignored even the urgent nature of Daddy's illness and my desperate need to reach a different station in life (or lose my goddamn mind), and that I had proceeded slowly and carefully, like a tortoise climbing a mountain.

She acted like she loved my plan, and gave me lots of what she called "extreme hugs."

At work the next morning, though, I turned nervous. I couldn't keep my hands from trembling when I peeked through the NICU window. She'd accepted The Big Baby Crime Spree so quickly, without question. She even went into Dad's room for a while, with the door closed.

I could hear her talking softly, without many pauses, but the words were impossible to understand. She had promised not to tell him about my plan.

It felt suspicious. Still, this was the reaction I'd wanted, so why was I upset? She hadn't criticized, or belittled, or made me feel like a hopeless asshole, which I had expected.

I kept with the plan. For the next few days, I hung around Midwifery more often than normal, because my calculations had determined that they were a safer bet than Obstetrics. The pregnant women under Midwives' care were mostly teenaged, unwed moms whose babies would be candidates for NICU, moms with crappy incomes who might not even be eager to bring their babies home. By listening to conversations, I'd learned that most NICU babies were pretty healthy, that they had minor issues like jaundice, slightly swollen kidneys, fluid in the lungs – nothing fatal – and they were kept just so the hospital wouldn't get sued if they happened to die.

I unlocked the Midwifery receptionist's office whenever it was unstaffed, to "empty the trash" while I eyeballed the patients' files. A boom month was just around the corner; seven teen moms were due during a two-week period, and we had a regular stock of at least five infants in ICU (all under one month old) being watched for various non-life-threatening reasons.

I floated through the halls, running my mind over the possibilities: twelve or so babies to choose from; I was sure to get the five we needed; all the money they would grab in those tiny hands; all the incredible van sex; I would move Dad into a Home where a pretty nurse would sit by his bed twenty-four hours a day; I would tell Mom where she could stick her nonexistent money and her nonexistent God.

Beyond these details, I couldn't see much else.

After work on Friday, I told Thelma about the upcoming baby boom.

"It's a sign from heaven," she told me.

This was the last straw. I couldn't hold my tongue. I hadn't said anything about the "God made them without fingerprints" comment, or the "Jesus please help us," so this time I exploded. I told her I didn't believe in heaven one fucking bit, and that I was horrified to have a Christian as a crime partner. We argued in the hospital parking lot, and she threw an egg roll at my head, and it skipped across the hood of somebody's car. I told her that John Lennon didn't believe in heaven – I knew *that* much about the guy.

She said, "If you're talking about 'Imagine,' I don't need to tell you that he was saying that no heaven was a terrible thing to think about. 'Above us only sky?!' 'It's easy if you try?!' The easy way out is to *not* believe in anything! It's seductive and blue! He saw his own death, asshole, years before it happened! He saw it in a bowl of miso soup the night he dropped *nine* hits of acid and got Yoko pregnant with *triplets* that miscarried *three months to the day* into her pregnancy, dipshit! Think about *three* for a minute. Surprise! Ever hear of The Holy Trinity? Don't talk to *me* about *John Lennon*! 'Only SKY?' Fucking *death*! It's blue, terrifying death! He didn't want to be without heaven! Nobody does! And that doesn't mean I'm a Christian, dickhead!"

I didn't back down, and neither did she. We yelled until the parking attendant threatened to call the cops, then we drove to West Main Cemetery in our separate vehicles. By the time we arrived, the anger had worn off, and it just felt good to have let off some steam. It'd been months since I'd talked to anybody except my mother, the other janitors, and the guys at the Dairy Mart. Thelma was in the same boat, because she never talked to anyone besides the other nurses. This was our first great moment, in the back of my Econoline, after the fight about God's existence, turning our anger into sex.

After sex, though, Thelma restarted her argument. She smoked half a pack of cigarettes before I could get a word in. By the time she ran out of steam, I'd lost all desire to fight, and so, in a way, conceded that heaven existed. It was belief by surrender.

VII. Baby-Training Techniques

Thelma says babies are like pets. You program them with words they can't understand, and they can't disobey until they're able to understand the real meanings, which is at least one year. She quotes Doctor Spock, Bill Cosby, and her nurse friend, Pammy.

According to Thelma, her own shithead parents – even though they *are* shitheads – succeeded in raising a charmed daughter who's never gotten caught shoplifting in 217 attempts, so she knows a thing or two about the psychology of stealing.

One major role Thelma's given herself is to formulate Baby Training Techniques. She's excited about it, "extra excited," writes notes and slips them to me with a wink when I pass her coming out of the elevator (we made a pact not to socialize in front of anyone at the hospital). Her notes say, *If I repeat the phase, 'move hand down' twetny times per one minute while sycronistically pushing the babys hand down as a downward direction, it is unquestioning that the baby will lern this behavier. I can preform this during the routing checks. Goo goo gajoob*."

No matter where we are – her apartment or mine – she pesters me about the Wheres, Whats, Whens, Whos, and Hows. She asks questions like, "What entrance should we park near?" "What will we say when someone sees us with the duffel bag full of babies?" "How can we keep the babies quiet but full of oxygen for the time required to escape the hospital?" "How do you know that the coating of KY Jelly will really stop the ankle bands from triggering the alarm?"

I tell her, “If you want to see the work I’ve done, how about reading this thing?” I flip the pages of my 3-Subject notebook in front of her hook nose so a breeze hits her face. “Every inch of space in this thing is filled,” I say, “and I don’t have the time to explain it all. You need to trust me and do what I say.”

She smirks, says that she *has* read the notebook, and goes back into her kitchen. I yell that her attitude comes through crystal clear in her crummy English skills.

I go back to my apartment, to the hand-drawn graph taped to the refrigerator, where I’ve been crossing off the **Estimated Days until the Big Baby Crime Spree Begins** (ten days and counting) between feeding Dad his carrot baby food and washing his twig legs after he shits himself, and I think ‘Why shouldn’t I worry about her grammar?’ and ‘Why shouldn’t I worry that the house her apartment is in doesn’t even *have* a basement?’

Dad stays alive. In bed he curses, kicks, pisses, mumbles, and rolls chicken nuggets around in his mouth until they dissolve. His face is the color of the bathtub. When I come into the bedroom, he commands me to “Come clean, come clean.” I don’t know where he picked up this line, and I try not to care. He weeps until his pillowcase is soaked, then wobbles to the window to look at the clouds. His craziness is cute; it has to be cute. Otherwise it’s punishment, and Mom was right all along. Maybe he knows about my crime plan. What else could he mean when he says, “Come clean?”

He keeps saying this as the days pass. Once in a while it sounds like, “Kill me.” His chest rattles. It sounds like his ribs are crumbling into his lungs. Thelma comes over more and more often. She spends long stretches at his bedside, singing into his ear. It’s very sweet, and I stand in the doorway watching, and I realize that that’s what Mom did with me when I was a boy.

VIII. I Asked Dad: "Do you think you'll go to heaven when you die?"

He said, "My heart just wasn't born with a will to succeed. That's about my life story. Will I be able to satisfy myself with money? Hell no! That snake just jumped on the train to Battle Creek. Eight of us. Guys and girls. Getting shit-faced. Don't get a haircut tonight, no way."

"I haven't had a haircut in a year, Dad." I had to interrupt him or he'd keep talking, just like Thelma.

Things are tense between us. She believes in heaven. She also turns the pages of my notebook, making faces, laughing out loud. She says, "Oh, come *on*!" and I say, "What?" and she says, "Oh, nothing." She composes lists of items that "we really need to buy for this 'Crime Spree'" (she holds up her fingers for the sarcastic quotation marks), and when I refuse to read the lists she crumples them loudly and says, "I *thought* you might say that."

She comes over every day after work, and today, the day before the Crime Spree, is no different. We meet in the parking lot next to my apartment, and in her nurse outfit she looks so beautiful that I want to injure myself. I cough a few times.

"I think I have a fever," I say.

"You don't say," she says.

She stands next to my Econoline with her arms crossed, puckering her lips, while I tell her that I've been doing some serious thinking over the last few days. My initial calculations, I say, were all made for *me*, for *one person*, and now that she's going to be my accomplice, I'll need to make some major adjustments before we can safely move ahead. She takes a small notepad out of her purse, along with a pen. She writes while I say that it shouldn't take too long

– just another few weeks, probably, or a month, tops – before we can start waiting for another boom month, and then we'll be good to go.

Without a word, she tears off a sheet of paper. She hands me the note. *You will see now what some one can do with out interupsion or carful planing. Do not follow me.* She walks to the door, lets herself in with the key that I stupidly had copied for her at the Meijer.

I see her notebook on the back seat of her Bug. I open her car door with the key she stupidly had copied for me at the Meijer. I throw her retarded maroon 5-Subject notebook onto the pavement. I get on all fours and open it. I read the bullshit emails written in her own hand. All written for phony, dead John Lennon, with phony author names, followed by phony words from phony minds that are all Thelma/Rhonda. Every letter sounds the same because every letter is the same, because there isn't any mountain, except in her head, and there isn't a *real* fucking letter within three thousand feet of Thelma, and Thelma is NOT her name. How could she think I was that stupid? She was going to publish these things in a book? Laughable. Her plan was impossible before she even hatched it. She'd filled a notebook with denial, because she knew the world was just waiting to drop the hammer, and this fantasy kept it from sinking in. Then, on the last page, I see a poem:

My mommy's dead.
I cant get it threw my head.
Though its been so manny year's,
My mommy's dead.

No surprises are waiting for me.

I kick her notebook around the parking lot for ten minutes. I want to rip out every page, tear each sheet into pieces, fill the sky with her wasted ideas, but I don't. I tuck the book under my arm and storm inside the apartment, yelling that she's a phony and that I can prove it. Rhonda's in the living room, kneeling over Dad's dead body.

IX. What Makes the Answer Correct

She's laughing and crying at the same time. It sounds like diarrhea. I run to him. He's a folded mannequin on the floor, stiff, bent, half-naked, facedown. His eyes are wide, shocked to see the carpet two inches from his face. His neck is lipstick-red where she throttled it. He's wearing blue boxers and a white T-shirt. When I touch his arm the skin isn't cold, exactly, but it's less than warm. At this point, he's crossed the line. He's not my dad anymore. But why does he look so much like him?

Rhonda says something – "He can't be trained now," or something like that – but I don't own my body, so I can't answer, and my fingers touch Dad here and there – on the shoulder, the forehead, the elbow – I guess because I expect to find the button that'll start him back up. I understand that it's a joke, but I can't figure out when I'll be let in on it. I talk into his ear, thinking maybe his brain is like a record player, being turned off in a gradual way, noises slowing, slowing, getting deep-pitched, warbling, winding down. I sit on the floor, cradle his head, direct his face so he's looking into my real-looking eye. I pretend that this is one of those lucid moments when he's himself. I tell him my plan, how the babies will be doing us a great service without even knowing it, that because of their ignorance they won't be guilty, that their "not knowing" means they're without guilt, pain, physical deformity, or any of those things that make the new day so terrible.

"They'll keep their innocence," I say. This must be important to him.

Rhonda grabs me by the shoulders and throws me onto my back. She starts slapping my face with both hands. "Your name is *Travis*, you asshole liar! And your dad did *not* deserve what he lived through!"

I manage to wrangle her hands to a standstill. I can't talk without hissing. "Your name is *Rhonda*, and you never got a letter from a John Lennon fan in your entire life, and you don't know how to spell. And you killed my dad, you shit."

"At least I *did* something. John Lennon said that death is getting out of one car and getting into another, so at least I put your dad somewhere with a destination. *Your* plan? Are you *fucked in the head*? Babies can't be trained. They can't even control their fucking *limbs*. And the baby's fingerprints come in at three months – oh yeah, you got that right – when the *fetus* is three months old! Your idea was fucked royally from the beginning, and I just thought it was hilarious that you were so serious about it."

"You're wrong."

"I read your other notebooks, too. How's that Big Wig Black Market Blitz coming along? How many wigs did you actually make from the floor sweepings at the Cosmetology School? You must've sold a *ton* of those, huh? Or better yet, how's the Great Dunkin Donut Apron Scam?"

I let go of her hands. I don't have anything to say.

"You *made* the baby. That *thing* on the floor. *That's* your Big Baby. Your father is way beyond that pile of skin."

I stare at the ceiling, at the cracks in the plaster surrounding the lightbulb, cracks shaped like an incomplete cobweb. But it's a different kind of cobweb than Rhonda's smile that first day in the cafeteria; this web is strong, permanent, stable. This web isn't connected to anything – it's just floating in the white of the ceiling, black webs on a white background, like a negative. This web is secure and insecure at the same time. It won't leave me, because it can go anywhere it wants.

"I choked him," I hear Rhonda saying, "and he didn't fight it. Don't you think if he wanted to live he would have fought back? Don't you see how…" And then it's just her mouth making sounds, sounds that don't mean anything. Suddenly, I understand why Dad lost his ability to talk to other people.

I roll over and try to fall asleep. Dad's behind me somewhere.

My wife, my nurse, is filling the silence, killing it. I hope she keeps yelling at me (she will). I hope she crawls over to me (she will). I hope she leans over me and blows smoke in my face (she will). I hope she sings me a John Lennon song (any one will do).

Tears, (Not So) Idle Tears: Empathy and Imagination in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*

Between the 1820s and the 1850s, due to new advances in printing, the cost of a novel fell from two dollars to twenty-five cents. Not only were novels cheap to print, but the recently-installed railway system, along with the emergence of lending libraries, provided wide-spread distribution, which meant that this was no longer solely a pastime of the upper class (Kelley 3). At the center of this shift in audience stood American novelists, grappling with the purpose and function of their craft. Critics like Lionel Trilling have described the "classic intention" of novels as "the investigation of the problem of reality, beginning in the social field" (Kaul 307). However, the United States, unlike Europe, did not have an existent, stable social order, and thus writers had to turn to two divergent models – either "vestigial survivals of older societies" or "forward-looking social experiments" (Kaul 312-13) – for their subject matter.

Perhaps no American writer has embodied these two divergent possibilities like William Dean Howells. A "self-made" man of letters from working class roots in rural Ohio whose career joined him to elite Boston society, Howells is credited with "extending the social frontiers of fiction" (Kaul 81). His 1891 essay, "Realism and the American Novel," railed against the "foolish old superstition that literature and art are anything but the expression of life, and are to be judged by any other test than that of their fidelity to it" (137). This tract on realism was largely an effort to distinguish his aesthetic from that of the romantics, who concerned themselves with idealised forms of human experience that Howells viewed as essentially elitist in attitude. If writers could cultivate "the appreciation of the common," Howells wrote, then the result would be "the equality of things and the unity of men" (138). Critics have asserted that his insistence on depicting the ordinary "made all life seem commonplace," and that he "deliberately

clipped the wings of romance" (Cowie 698-99), but while Howells inarguably sought to distinguish himself from his canonized romantic predecessors – he names Shakespeare, Scott, Thackeray, and Dickens, among others – he admits that the goal of *any* novelist (realist or romanticist) is to "widen the bounds of sympathy" (139) in society.

For more than a century, critics (including Howells himself) have positioned Howells as disdainful toward romantic and sentimental fiction. However, a close reading of his most durable work, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, reveals that such distinction between modes is not Howells's greatest concern. Instead, he centers on internal change within the common, non-aristocratic reader, who was more than likely female. This hypothetical woman, through novel reading, would view herself among the upper classes, thus giving her license to move freely to a higher social status – not in a monetary way, but in a deeper, socio-psychological sense. As Cathy Davidson writes, "Novels allowed for a means of entry into a larger literary and intellectual world and a means of access to social and political social events from which many readers would have been otherwise largely excluded" (10).

In this essay, I will highlight two aspects of *Silas Lapham* that have been overlooked or misrepresented by critics: first, I will assert that Howells understood class mobility to be an inevitable result of novel-reading in general, not of realism specifically; second, that *Silas Lapham* positions the true artistic "debate" not between realism and romanticism, but between novels and the visual art forms, namely painting and architecture.

I. 'We Eat and Sleep House': Why Penelope is First Class and Silas Isn't

Wai-Chi Dimock's 1990 article, "The Economy of Pain: The Case of Howells" argues that one of the social functions of the novel at the end of the nineteenth century was to broaden the public's perception of human interconnectedness, and as a result, to cause "cognitive

conditions for moral responsibility" (100). In other words the novel, as an art form, could influence behavior by showing that each person had a responsibility to ease the sufferings of others. Dimock centers specifically on Howells's definition of the novel's virtue: "(It) lives in its formal amplitude, its ability to encompass all things and connect all mankind" (102). The resulting sense of connectedness, according to Dimock, would inspire those of the leisure class to "treat the welfare of the poor and weak as their own responsibility" (100). In this way, society would find a moral solution to the problem of suffering – those more fortunate would understand that helping the less fortunate would ultimately benefit the whole.

However, Dimock fails to acknowledge another, perhaps more important, consequence of such widened social consciousness: that of allowing those of the lower class to actually enter into the leisure class. If the novel is able to show the leisure class that they are connected to the bourgeois, then logically the same could be said for the reverse. Novels could provide the lower class with a window into high society and could essentially "teach" them how to embody "upper-class character."

Literature and criticism of the late nineteenth century often speculated upon the mysterious qualities that make a person "upper class," or "gentle" in nature, and the writings of the time yield a sense that the answer has less to do with money than with an indefinable inner state of being. In Horatio Alger's 1868 *Ragged Dick*, the title character is a penniless young boot-black who has raised himself on the streets of New York; however, those of the upper class who encounter him sense a certain gentlemanly essence: "He has an open face, and…can be depended upon" (21), remarks the wealthy Mr. Whitney. In his 1896 essay, "How I Served My Apprenticeship," Andrew Carnegie describes how his boss at the Pennsylvania Railroad Company "had taken a great fancy to me" (9) despite Carnegie's working class roots; later,

Carnegie applies for a loan from a banker who for no clear reason approves the loan and exclaims, "Oh, yes, Andy; you are all right!" (11) There are no exact mechanisms in place when types like Ragged Dick and young Carnegie are singled out for praise – in the case of the former, Alger often equates it with physical appearance, but certainly it is something less tangible.

Silas Lapham's aristocratic Bromfield Corey echoes this idea of an intangible "something" that makes a person high-class: "Society is a very different sort of thing from good sense and right ideas," he says, adding that a person must possess "qualities…which may be felt, but not defined" (138). Even Mrs. Lapham suspects "There's got to be something besides money" (30) that can provide entrance into society. It has occasionally been couched as an almost biological trait; "Gentle blood," passed along through the generations, can be "transmitted without goods enough to afford a reputably free consumption at one's ease" (Veblen 76). In his essay, "Why Does the Law Need an Obscene Supplement" Slavoj Zizek asserts:

> The problem of the aspiring lower middle classes is that they misperceive the true cause of their failure: they think they are missing something, some hidden rule, so that they have to learn to follow even more closely all the rules – what they misperceive is that the mysterious X that accounts for the true upper-classness *cannot be pinpointed to a specific symbolic feature*. (italics mine, 89)

In this way, class is a state of being, rather than a state of doing. I would argue that *Silas Lapham* demonstrates that novels, above all art forms, can mold this state of being. Bromfield Corey insists that while he appreciates "a little youth, a little beauty, a little good sense and pretty behavior," it is more important for "people to be rather grammatical" (64). It is worth noting that he doesn't say, "speak grammatically." Instead, he wants people to "be…grammatical." This minor syntactical difference carries with it the implied virtue of an internal state, a core self that Silas does not possess. Penelope, on the other hand, reveals her

impulse to internalize things, even the mansion her father is building, when she tells Irene, "we eat and sleep house" (57).

The unique quality of the written word is that it depends upon the reader for meaning. Since words are not exact signifiers, they hold different symbolic values for each reader. The reader, then, helps create the truth; meaning, to some degree, comes from within. A painting of a house is "just paper and paint pretending to be something else" (Michaels 169), while the word "house" will conjure varying images according to each reader's concept of "house." Yet despite its fluidity, writing, according to Walter Benn Michaels, is "a set of mechanically produced marks that, having no illusionistic likeness to him [the reader] and no material identity with him, nevertheless mirror him vividly to himself" (168-9). To say it another way, the fact that words *do not* carry exact, prescribed meanings is what allows their meanings to include, at least partially, the reader. As Cathy Davidson puts it, novels can "relocate authority in the individual response of the reading self" (14). Thus, the two distinctive features of writing are: 1) empowering readers to partake in the creation of meaning and 2) evoking a condition of self-reflection within that meaning. Readers see parts of themselves in the novels they read.

One argument in Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* is that the difference between romanticism and realism is really the difference between desire and a lack of desire. He argues that sentimental and romantic writing creates desire, and that for Theodore Dreiser a certain amount of desire was required for the functioning of capitalism, while for Howells, desire lead to excess, and excess was "the enemy" (52). I contend that this assessment of Howells (at least the Howells of *Silas Lapham*) is inaccurate, but I will return to this assertion in the second section. For now, presuming that some desire is a good thing, Michaels concedes Leo Bersani's point that "realism's fear of desire is in effect a fear of literature, for it is only in

literature that desire can be truly excessive" (53). The self-made mirror of literature, then, thanks to its cerebral form, can lead a woman like Penelope to internalize and possess the upper-class traits she has read about, because "The logic of feminine desire culminates not in a disdain for representation but in *the desire to be what you see*" (italics mine, 57).

Penelope has created a self that belongs in leisure society. Her transformation is to such a degree that she brashly dispenses with society's rules. We are told that she "did not care for society, apparently" (27); she mocks her father's attempt to dress the part of a gentleman (183). This disregard for the rules is the earmark of her true upper-class nature. Slavoj Zizek explains this phenomenon using a comparison to a traveler visiting a small village, making futile gestures of assimilation: "Is there anything more racist than his clumsy attempts to demonstrate how he 'understands' the local customs and is able to follow them?" (89). He continues: "…we establish a true contact with the locals when they disclose to us the distance they themselves maintain toward the letter of their own customs" (90). While Silas bumbles about, working himself into a panic over whether or not he should wear gloves to the Corey's party, Penelope feels no anxiety about obeying the explicit rules – in fact, she breaks an apparent rule of etiquette by skipping the party altogether, much to her parents' horror – proving that she already belongs among the leisure class.

When Silas arrives at the Corey's party, he realizes that none in attendance have given a thought to whether or not gloves are appropriate. At the dinner table, Silas copies Mr. Bellingham's gesture of tucking his napkin into his collar, but when he realizes that no one else is doing it, Silas "became alarmed and took it out again slyly" (190). Once again, Zizek offers a touch point: "the aspiring middle classes doggedly follow the fashion and thus always lag behind, while upper classes freely violate the rules of fashion and thus personify its trends" (89,

footnote 12). For this reason, I disagree with critics like Hsin-Yung Li who assert that Howells's fiction favors "manners" and "customs" over "qualities" (115). In fact, the opposite is true, once we consider Penelope's ultimate integration with the Coreys, a merger which has no roots whatsoever in her society "manners." Contrast her with the buffoonish failure of Silas, who is so obsessed with manners that he is "pallid with anxiety lest he should somehow disgrace himself" (188).

Penelope's rhetorical abilities have made her socially fluid; she is able to exist in more than one class because of the mimetic nature of reading. Karol Kelley's extensive study of late nineteenth century novels (all types, including sentimental and literary) finds that 75% of the main characters rise in status (52). Mobility was paramount: "It is crucial in the novels for the central characters not to finish their stories on the lowest rank in class, wealth, or occupation, but it is just as important that they are free to rise in rank as well" (52). Penelope's reading "teaches" her how to possess character, that elusive "airy, graceful, winning superstructure" (138) that comprises class. Even Silas and Persis understand that Penelope is involved in an education that will ultimately allow her to ascend above her working-class roots. Her reading, they say, will "give her notions" (135), and they admit that the Coreys' presence is helping Penelope acquire a "*novel* point of view" (italics mine, 28); Silas and Persis conclude that they themselves are "too old to learn to be like [the Coreys]" (180-1), but Silas recognizes that "Pen'll know how to behave when the time comes" (248). This literary education process takes even more overt form when Penelope and Tom defer to the current popular novel *Tears, Idle Tears* to determine if and how their relationship should proceed.

The end of *Silas Lapham* finds Penelope poised to make another societal shift – this time across the boundaries of race as well as culture – which the Coreys know she will handle with

ease: "There is a chance," Nanny says, "that [Penelope] will form herself on the Spanish manner…and that when she comes back she will have the charm of not olives, perhaps, but tortillas, whatever they are: something strange and foreign, even if it's borrowed" (160). An olive grows out of the ground in its fully-realized form, while the creation of a tortilla depends not on its ingredients alone, but on how the world shapes those ingredients. Critics have noted that Penelope "shows promise of future assimilation, by virtue of her intellectual powers," and that this "eldest daughter, who 'does most of [their] reading' (88)…has the best chance of overcoming her faulty upbringing" (Li 116).

I want to stress that Penelope is a reader of both realistic (*Middlemarch*) and romantic/sentimental fiction (*Tears, Idle Tears*). While it is true that Reverend Sewell and the party guests debate the merits and deficiencies of sentimental novels, these conversations prove to be lighthearted dinner chat, scarcely consequential to the fates of the characters. Bromfield even attempts to defend, albeit halfheartedly, the merits of the hyperbolic romantic mode ("But what if life as it is isn't amusing? Aren't we to be amused?" [197]). Critics like Paul Bove have recently expressed surprise that "no less an authority than Penelope gives us a reason not easily to dismiss the book [*Tears, Idle Tears*]" (38). In part, this is because the sentimental and the realistic each contribute to Penelope's education. Howells levels his most savage criticism not at sentimental fiction, but at architecture and painting: faith in these visual arts brings significantly negative consequences for the characters' abilities to understand and empathize with other people.

II. Wide-Spread Imagination: The Death Knell of the Upper Class

I would like to return to Walter Benn Michaels's chapter on desire. Using *Sister Carrie* and *Silas Lapham*, Michaels argues that while Dreiser depicts desire as constitutive of the power

of capitalism, Howells's fiction issues a warning against the dangers of desire (48). I disagree with the latter claim, in part because I don't believe that *Silas Lapham*, at heart, depicts a conflict between realism and romanticism. More accurately, the battle waged is between imagination and the lack of imagination – and it is the artistic preferences of the characters that determine their imaginative potential.

Critics have positioned the gorgeous but shallow Irene as analogous to the "romantic convention that celebrates the lowborn bride exchanging her beauty and virtue for wealth and status." In this way, she embodies Howells's "rejection of popular literature" (Li 104, 105). I would argue, however, that Irene is not a straw man for popular novels, but is actually a stand-in for the visual arts. Penelope – whose affectionate name, "Pen," suggests a relation to the written word – is a near-opposite to her "very pretty," "well-behaved," and "insipid" (95) sister. Irene is the quintessential showpiece, who "needn't open her lips" (186); her value exists entirely on the surface. Mrs. Corey and her daughters recognize the worth of Irene's beauty, but openly wonder what Tom could possibly discuss with such a "characterless" girl (156). When Irene shows up at the Corey's party, Howells's double reference to visual art is striking: the narrator describes Irene's dress as "one of those shades which only a woman or an artist can decide to be green or blue," and on the next page, Bromfield Corey keeps his "artistic eye on Irene, and apparently could not take it off" (188-89). Irene is like a pretty painting that seduces the eye, best appraised by a portrait artist like Bromfield, whose craft relies entirely on the superficial.

At heart is the difference between doing and being, and Irene falls easily into the category of "doer," not because she lacks desire (she clearly desires Tom), but because she neglects her interior life – her imaginative life – in favor of pretty appearances. When Tom gives Irene the wood shaving, it is Tom who actually holds it to his nose, sniffs it, and calls it a flower. Later,

Penelope is also able to see the flower in the shaving, even when Irene cannot. Penelope jokes: "Hadn't you better put it in water, 'Rene? It'll be wilted by morning." Irene, without imagination, stuck in the world of what she can see, responds, "You mean thing! It isn't a flower!" (121) Only Penelope and Tom, whose imaginations have been cultivated through reading, are able to assign different symbolic value to the shaving.

Her beauty aside, Irene is cut from the same cloth as Silas: they have the same red hair (xxv); it is Silas that Irene runs to, just after learning that Tom is in love with Penelope; Irene's desire for built-in bookshelves and "nice bindings" (112) mirrors Silas's emphasis on the aesthetic rather than the intellectual value of their new library. At the Corey's party, we are told, "Irene was looking beautiful, as pretty as all the rest of them put together, but she was not talking, and Lapham perceived that at a dinner party you ought to talk" (204). Irene is incapable of talking, since this would require imagining herself into the role of society belle rather than simply donning an appropriate dress.

Michaels argues that "the dream of realism is the end of desire," and claims that Howells "regarded desire as capitalist and disapproved it" (48). Michaels goes on to dub newspapers "the paradigmic realist text," and claims that these serve to eliminate desire, or at least curb the production of desire (46). While this certainly appears to be the case with Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie*, the same result cannot be found in *Silas Lapham.* Silas reads newspapers exclusively, and yet he is arguably the most desire-driven character in the book ("He's crazy to get in with those people" [147] exclaims Persis). Conversely, Bromfield, who apparently doesn't even know the newspapers that Silas reads, whose schooling in romantic literature is taken for granted, is the antithesis of desire. He has a reputation as a man who has "done nothing but say smart things"; he finds comfort in the fact that "we American parents…can do nothing" (97) to

affect the affairs of his children; and he sees no reason that Tom, who "need do nothing as long as he lives" (96) should work to earn money. Thus, our newspaper reader is filled with desire while our literature-steeped aristocrat can scarcely find motivation to leave his comfortable armchair. While one could certainly argue that Tom's appetite for books has inspired him to join the market economy, Penelope stands in contrast to him in this regard, because she has no apparent desire to rise from her station. In short, Howells does not offer a neatly-defined causal relationship between romanticism and desire, nor realism and a lack thereof.

There are, however, clear negative repercussions for the characters that put their faith in the superficial arts. Silas sets out to build a luxurious new house, believing that he can buy his way into the upper class. Penelope, speaking in Silas's voice, lampoons his attitude: "'You give the painter money enough, and he can afford to paint you a first-class picture. Give an architect money enough, and he'll give you a first-class house, every time'" (61). It is no coincidence that painting and architecture are paralleled here; each presents images while doing little to affect internal change. When Bromfield calls Silas's house "very original" (54), he is actually serving up an insult, since Bromfield understands that true "first-class" qualities are constant, and cannot simply be manufactured: "*My* ancestral halls are in Salem, and I'm told you couldn't drive a nail into their timbers; in fact, I don't know that you would want to do it" (192). To "drive a nail into their timbers" would be to alter the inherent, established essence of class, traits that do not change with time.

Silas is without imagination, unable to construct either house or identity without obeying another's ideas. He is persuaded at every turn to follow the architect's vision for the house's design. In Silas's mind, it is not important to own upper class qualities; these can simply be commissioned or rented, slipped on and off like a coat – or, more appropriately, brushed on like

a coat of paint. It is too much work to change his interior. He sees no need to possess books: "'That's what the library's for. Phew!' he panted, blowing away the whole unprofitable subject" (89). When Silas ultimately agrees to construct a library in the new house, it is solely for appearances' sake, since "he had not much time for anything but the papers" (205). When preparing to attend the Corey's dinner party, Silas defers to a "book of etiquette" to mimic the proper ways of society, but his strategy fails miserably; the book provides tips on how to dress, rather than how to be.

Bromfield articulates a distinction between the forms and functions of the artistic disciplines. He opines that "architects and musicians are the true and only artistic creators. All the rest of us, sculptors, painters, novelists, and tailors…we try to imitate, we try to represent" (192). On the surface, Bromfield appears to be praising architects, setting them above novelists and painters. However, we cannot take Bromfield at his word for two reasons: first, he is speaking to the architect in this scene, and it is consistent with Bromfield's character that he would say what the architect wants to hear (recalling that he wooed Mrs. Corey by saying "charming things, just the things to please the fancy of a girl" [96]); second, it should not require a leap of faith to believe that the failed portrait painter would align his craft with the true artists – the novelists. The evidence in *Silas Lapham* suggests that Howells would place painting with architecture (along with sculpture and tailoring) under the heading of those that "create form," while novels and music belong together as those that "imitate."

To "create form" also suggests creating symbolic meaning, superceding the audience's imagination. In the lifelike painted portraits of the time period, all "meaning" is apparent in the form itself. Likewise, a luxurious mansion or a bridal gown both have prescribed symbolic value in society; the viewer is excluded from the interpretation process. Music, however, imitates –

the rhythmic pulse of the tuba echoes the human heart, the delicate trill of the flute evokes a songbird, the tympani and cymbals resound like a thunderstorm. The audience assists in the creation of music's meaning, since no two listeners will imagine the same things during a symphony. In novels too, as we have seen in the earlier discussion of the written word, the imagination is allowed, even required, to flourish even as it "imitates" life.

Silas's paint has been viewed as symbolic of his desire to appear as something he is not, and I agree with this depiction. I would extend this to include Bromfield's paint as well, because paint "is the outer surface shared by the ancestral (Corey) and newly achieved (Lapham) mansion" (xxvi); even though Bromfield's portrait painting is "aesthetic, leisurely, and unproductive," it is, like Silas's house, an external endeavor. Portrait painting requires strict adherence to appearances as they exist, and does not allow imagination in either the artist or the viewer. Furthermore, as John Barton writes, paint "is a slippery figure that calls attention to the mediation of a represented reality" (172). Whether coating rocks or coating canvas, paint manipulates the viewer into believing some truth about the subject – makes meaning for the viewer – and yet its range of expressiveness in this regard is severely limited. Even Bromfield knows this, when he articulates the flashiness (style over substance) inherent to his craft: "You can paint a man dying for his country, but you can't express on canvas a man fulfilling the duties of a good citizen" (202).

Bromfield, Silas, and Irene (and to a lesser degree, Persis) have attached too much significance to surface meaning, and as a result, their crippled imaginations leave them unable to function in a new society that requires highly-developed interpretive skills. They are incapable of "reading" each other. Their collective "misreading" of Tom's affection for Penelope is not the only example. Persis misreads Silas's notes, which she construes mistakenly as proof of an

extramarital affair. Silas misreads Rogers's visit to the office ("Seemed to be just a friendly call. Said he ought to have come before.") which marks the beginning of the deal that sinks him. An invitation to the Corey's party causes Persis to exclaim, "*I* don't know what it all means" (177), since she has misread Mrs. Corey's earlier visit as a "put down" to the Lapham's lifestyle. Silas even misreads his own behavior, when, at the Corey party, he believes himself a victor: "At last he had the talk altogether to himself; no one else talked, and he talked unceasingly. It was a great time; it was a triumph" (204).

The late nineteenth century ushered in a feeling that change to American societal structure was inevitable. Impenetrable aristocracies were to be a thing of the past, as evidenced by "the denouement" in *Silas Lapham* – the marriage of Tom and Penelope – which "forces the old society to yield its cultural and social exclusivism to the pluralistic reality of the post-Civil War era" (Li 115). Novelists were busy "creating literature *against* the overwhelming impact of their nation's residual Colonial mentality" (Davidson 11), attempting to come up with an alternative to the current social field (Kaul 308). In Howells's 1887 novel, *The Minister's Charge*, Bromfield Corey reappears and predicts that the upper classes will soon be invaded. Referring to the character Lemuel Barker, a "raw country lad" who writes poetry, Bromfield says: "give him time, and he'll found a fortune and a family, and his children's children will be cutting ours in society…Look at the Blue-book, where our nobility is enrolled; it's the apotheosis of farm-boys, mechanics, insidemen, and I don't know what!" (Cowie 675).

That novels are a primary impetus for this societal shift can be read in the disdain the upper class show toward them in *Silas Lapham*. Nanny Corey, we are told, "had read a great many novels with a keen sense of their inaccuracy as representations of life, and had seen a great deal of life with a sad regret for its difference from fiction" (155). Likewise, Reverend Sewell

says that novels can't "interpret the common feelings of commonplace people" (202); his use of "common" no doubt refers to "lower class," and his statement suggests that he believes the inverse – that novels *can* interpret the feelings of the "uncommon" (upper class), and thus these uncommon feelings *can* be viewed and absorbed by the commoners. Novels are regarded as inaccurate at best, dangerous at worst. Sewell bemoans the fact that novels "formed the whole intellectual experience" of many people, and that this results in "greater mischief" (198). By belittling novels, the Coreys and Reverend Sewell reveal their fears that the inner sanctum is gradually blending with the "unwashed masses."

The idea that those with wealth were somehow genetically predisposed to it – that it was "in the blood," as Bromfield says – was quickly eroding. Andrew Carnegie's essay, published around this time, goes so far as to assert that those who work for their wealth are more deserving of it, and that bequeathing wealth to heirs is suspect behavior: "…looking at the usual result of enormous sums conferred upon legatees, the thoughtful man must shortly say, 'I would as soon leave to my son a curse as the almighty dollar'" (21). The old order, in which money rarely departed the confines of the family name, is personified in Bromfield, the aging aristocrat who has done nothing to earn his station in life, poised stubbornly atop his ever-shrinking fortune like the captain on the deck of a sinking ship.

New money, in Howells's imagined world, brings with it a sense of moral duty that the entrenched class largely lacks. Tom and Penelope are to be anchored, at least in part, by a finely-cultivated imaginative skill that has given them the ability to empathize. In Howells's *Annie Kilburn* (1888), the Reverend Mr. Peck expresses that "the only real cure for social ills…is a deep-seated sympathy which 'can spring only from like experiences, like hopes, like fears'"

(Cowie 678), which is exactly why Pen must pity Irene, must endure the guilt even for a situation she did not create.

However, these "like experiences, like hopes, like fears" need not, as some critics have argued, come only from realistic fiction. In a new marketplace, where a full ninety percent of novels depict compassionate characters (Kelley 69), even a book like *Tears, Idle Tears* can "reflect given psychological realities…that dramatically present knowledge of self and others" (Bove 38). The true villains are not popular novels, nor are the truly punished those who read them. Instead Persis, who is "limited in her capacity for imaginative sympathy" (Bove 37), Bromfield, who "knows very little about [his] fellow human beings" (268-69), and Silas, who groans, "We have done no wrong. Why should be suffer from another's mistake as if it were our sin?" (256) are incapable of the imagination and empathy required in the new America. Persis the paint, Bromfield the painter, and Silas the empty mansion – they will become obsolete, will become living relics, will burn to the ground. Irene, more concerned with counting books than actually reading them (112-114), suffers a similar fate. Gazing upon the "rich façade" of their opulent, doomed Beacon Street home, she remarks, "I shall never live in it" (245).

Works Cited

Alger, Horatio Jr. *Ragged Dick – or – Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks*. New York: Signet Classic, 1990.

Barton, John Cyril. "Howells's rhetoric of realism: the economy of pain(t) and social complicity in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Minister's Charge*." *Studies in American Fiction*. Vol. 29 (Autumn 2001): 159-188.

Bove, Paul A. "Helpless Longing, or, the Lesson of *Silas Lapham*." *New Essays on The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Donald E. Pease, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Carnegie, Andrew. *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays*. Edward C. Kirkland, ed. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962.

Cowie, Alexander. *The Rise of the American Novel*. New York: American Book Company, 1951.

Davidson, Cathy. *Revolution and the Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Dimock, Wai-Chi. "The Economy of Pain: The Case of the Howells." *Raritan*. 9.4 (Spring 1990): 99-120.

Howells, William Dean. *The Rise of Silas Lapham.* Introduction by Kermit Vanderbilt. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Howells, William Dean. "Realism and the American Novel (1892)." *American Critical Essays: 19th and 20th Centuries*. Norman Foerster, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930. pp. 137-154.

Kaul, A.N. *The American Vision: Actual and Ideal Society in Nineteenth Century Fiction*. London: Yale University Press, 1963.

Kelley, Karol L. *Models for the Multitudes: Social Values in the American Popular Novel, 1850-1920*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

Li, Hsin-Yung. "For love or money: courtship and class conflict in Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*." *Studies in American Fiction*. Vol. 24 (Spring 1996): 101-122.

Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*. London: Univ. of California Press, 1987.

Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. New York: Macmillan, 1912.

Zizek, Slavoj. "Why Does the Law Need an Obscene Supplement?" *Law and the Postmodern Mind*. Eds. Peter Goodrich and David Gray Carlson. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1998.