

2009

# FURTHEST FROM I

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FURTHEST FROM I

By

Anthony S. Guerriero

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2009

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Anthony S. Guerriero is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### FURTHEST FROM I

By

Anthony S. Guerriero

Perceptions and connections inspire the stories in FURTHEST FROM I. From the repressive first person narrator seeking redemption because his worldview has expired, to the baffled populace attempting to make sense of death, through the randomness of life begging for an explanation, the stories connect what motivates with what captivates.

For inspiration, I turned to classic American authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Flannery O'Connor for their perspective and ability to craft a story, and to contemporary American authors such as Aimee Bender and George Saunders for their ability to deconstruct society and repackage it with the blemishes (sort of) shining.

Tradition interspersed with tragedy sprinkled with a dash of the absurd pepper the pages of FURTHEST FROM I. Redemption always comes with a price and it's never cheap. But what is life without some risk?

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Anthony Stephen Guerriero  
2009

DEDICATION

*To my wife, Molly,  
for her support in kisses,  
her strength in thought,  
and her love infinite*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If you thought I couldn't remember all of my English teachers and professors, you are mistaken. Thank you Mr. Beers, Mr. Borg, Mrs. Demski, Mr. Chambers, Mr. Hoyle, Mrs. Hubbard, Mrs. Sebastian, Mr. VerSchure, Mr. Moreau, Mrs. Houseman, Dr. Jefchak, Mrs. Pataky, Don Black, Professor Beery, Ellen Schendel, Ron Dwelle, Ander Monson, Professor Chris Haven, Professor Avis Hewitt, Milt Ford, Jo Miller, Crystal Regis, Wendy Hedrick, Brian White, Rachel Anderson, Bill Osborn, Robert Persoon, Jeff Vande Zande, Dr. Sandra Burr, Dr. Mark Smith, Dr. Lesley Larkin, Dr. Paul Lemberg, Dr. Candy Bays, Dr. Katie Hanson, and Dr. Ronald Johnson. I will take what you have all graciously given to me and pass it on to a new generation.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Guide and the Northern Michigan University Department of English.



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## INTRODUCTION

### The Creative Process: Shaping Reality through an Askew Worldview in *Furthest from I*

In my creative thesis, a series of motifs connects each piece. However, it is too simple to state plainly that my thesis is about connections or making sense of them. Instead, my thesis falls into five parts: the first section of short stories relies on a first person narrator who guides the reader through his maturation process. In essence, he answers the question, *what do I do with myself now that I'm an adult?* The second section is the three-part short story, "Furthest From I." Each vignette is told in second person, which creates a rush, an urgency, and a sense of immediacy. The chaotic narration calms sporadically during the story, not only to allow the readers to catch their breath, but for David, the main character, to rationalize his behavior through the excuse of well-thought process. The third section of my thesis features the bizarre, the slipstream conscience, and the manipulation of form. The fourth section includes three instances of flash fiction, and the final section of my thesis calls into question the line between fiction and nonfiction.

The connection and inherent cohesiveness that encompasses my thesis comes from the way the five groupings are able to magnify the significant thought and emotion that umbrella the daily struggle humans face while trying to understand their societal function.

The idea is highlighted in the third section of my thesis. The stories form a dynamic mosaic that ranges from unity, to indecision, to apathy, to unabashed egotism.

For instance, in my short story, “The Will,” in which mourners gather after Gladys’ funeral not for a wake, but for the reading of her will:

“It was true. All six hundred and twenty-nine of them had showed up for one reason and one reason only—they wanted to know to whom she left it. They all figured they had an outside shot at getting it and they all had waited patiently and eagerly and respectfully for Gladys to die.”

Familial solidarity can sometimes be a mystery. People often simultaneously love and hate immediate family members. Gladys’ family unites only after she dies, but not solely to grieve. They are more interested in their perceived inheritances. Some of her relatives didn’t even know she was still alive, some weren’t sure she even had anything worth inheriting.

These anomalies, the way loved ones are remembered and paralleled with the way they were treated while they were alive, find their way into another one of my stories, from the first section, “Why Would Anyone Cry at Dale McGregor’s Funeral?” With the funeral this time as the setting, mourners turn the lost Dale into a caricature, irreverently goading his son into defending him. It’s only when Dale’s son realizes that he’s falling into the same trap, becoming the same caricature, does he accept his father’s legacy:

“You’re definitely Dale McGregor’s son,” Ken assures me. “You not only look like him, you stand like him and there’s an uncertainty about you, like you know there’s something out there you need to be doing, but you don’t now how to get it done.”

The character spent his whole life hiding behind his father, but now that he’s gone, his flaws are visible to everyone and for the first time everyone sees what he’s always known.

It's no coincidence that the stories involve funerals and the aftermath of death. Death, the least unique experience shared among humans, being that one day we will all succumb, cannot be described through tears and sorrow. Of course, making sense of tragedy is impossible because the actual essence of life isn't predictable or reasoned. Instead, it is best to rely upon reactions. Accept that life is random and unpredictable. How did we get here in the first place? Can we ever go back to where we were before? Do we want to go back?

Another motif in my stories centers around religious attitudes and Christianity. Both creationism and Catholicism are examined closely through the eyes of skeptical characters who long for redemption. It does not have to be spiritual redemption or Biblical redemption. Characters find themselves seeking answers to questions that they have ignored but are now forced to face. It's simply not enough to wonder about God or Jesus, or to pray or not to pray. The characters in my work are learning how to balance religion in their personal life with their social lives, while accepting their societal and cultural roles. In the story, "A Real Monkey's Uncle," Marty, an evolutionist, is nonplussed when his nephew interrupts their basketball game to ask him about a delicate subject:

"Then he stops bouncing and stops walking all at once. Turning towards me he asks, 'Uncle Marty, is it true that some people believe that humans came from monkeys?' His pensive look startles me. This isn't the same kid who ten minutes ago asked me who I thought was better, Kobe Bryant or LeBron James."

Marty, revered by both his nephew and his nephew's parents, spends the following summer deciding whether or not he should stand up for his beliefs, or let his sister and her husband force their fundamentalist doctrine upon their son. Although he argues, and tries to find enlightenment from a television preacher, Marty knows he cannot both win

and retain his relationship with his family. He succumbs to silence and decides it's not worth his pride to fight it. Again, familial solidarity triumphs over personal aesthetic or pride, or in Marty's case, what he perceives to be simple science. It's a difficult realization and one that takes courage.

In another motif, racism is pondered. Again, familial solidarity is challenged in my story, "Secondhand Clothing," when a white male character whose racist ancestors haunt him, dates a black woman. He spends his time wallowing in his father's antiquated attitude, going out of his way to assure himself that his destiny is different than that of his father's:

I felt like I was sending two hundred million years of evolution back reeling because I tried to step outside myself. But I'm not my father. *I'm not my father.* I kept repeating it, trying to convince myself that even though I'd never attempted to envision the world outside my own box it was okay because I didn't blurt out disparaging epithets.

The commonality among my work is apparent. Characters realize their vulnerabilities, examine their mortality, and rationalize their shortcomings. However, my characters are also round. They are not only capable of changing, but they are aware of their changes and equally aware of the effect the changes bring to their own lives, as well as to the lives they influence.

"Furthest From I," an experimental second person narrative takes up the entire second section of my thesis. The stories study the psychological barriers people build up between each other, then contrasts them against the physical.

Several authors have influenced my work. Most noticeably are Edgar Allan Poe, Flannery O'Connor and Nathaniel Hawthorne. I emulate their technique and vision of a story more than other writers. Poe famously wrote about the single effect, the direction

toward which each page, paragraph, sentence and word in a story points, culminating in an unmistakable truth which cannot be denied. Hawthorne's symbolism has found its way into my work and can be found in the story, from the third section, "Andrew Glasper Jumps in the Fire:"

The revelers were no longer people, but shadows around flames. Some drunk threw a crate in the blaze that sent its flames shooting high up and into the trees. The heat made the shadows melt before my eyes and when I stared directly into the flame I understood for the first time what I must do. I walked directly into the fire. I stood among its flame and extended my arms, soaking in everything I'd missed for so long, everything I pretended to ignore.

Beyond the single effect is what I call the *interior uniformity*. A central cohesion must exist within the story that accounts for each word and each punctuation mark. I truly believe that every word has its place, but more importantly, that the roll of syntax must be analyzed in each properly authored text.

I have also found one contemporary author, Aimee Bender, to have influenced my work. Her use of slipstream fiction, fiction portrayed in the real world with one salient twist, has taught me that it's okay to explore beyond the boundaries of what we're taught in workshop. Her story, "Marzipan," features a woman who gives birth to her own mother (Bender 39). The work influenced my story, "T.V. Dinners," where a woman climbs out of a television set to settle a bet between a feuding couple.

My characters, while stilted, are determined to be redeemed. The idea is one that I borrow heavily from Flannery O'Connor. An undeniable trust exists between the reader and O'Connor's stories no matter how grotesque or surreal. Trust can only be found in experience, or in O'Connor's case, the reader's ability to experience the story organically. Like O'Connor, my stories come from the way the world distorts itself for its

own sake. Although I'd like to say that my vision is not off, or that my worldview triumphs all, I'm not that bold, although O'Connor may have been:

“When you can state the theme of a story, when you can separate it from the story itself, then you can be sure the story is not a very good one. The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way and it takes every word in that story to say what that meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about the only proper thing to tell them is to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning, but experienced meaning, and the purpose of making statements about the meaning of a story is only to help you to experience that meaning more fully (O'Connor 1667).”

When recommended a book or a movie by a friend, one question ultimately arrives: what is it about? The *it* in question is presumably the plot. The question is then answered with a plot summary, but not so much that it gives the story away. However, the idea of plot probably runs contradictory with what the story is actually about. Aristotle taught that great plots have *peripities*, the idea that the hero of a story must stand to lose everything before anything is gained, and no good tragedy, comedy or drama was complete without them. The premise lives on today in modern cinema: some character realizes there is something in the world he wants more than anything else; he dedicates his life to attaining it; he attains it; he loses it; he realizes what it meant to him to have it; he gets it back in the end.

Like O'Connor, I try to build my stories about what I know. While they are rarely based on true events, they are grounded in experiences that highlight redemption a character seeks. Did I ever know anyone who deliberately jumped into a fire and became engulfed in flames? No. Do I know people or have I ever made a conscious decision to change my life? Of course. Would it be easier to spell it out? Would it be better to plainly ignore the use of metaphor and once upon a time and they all lived happily ever



after? I don't believe it is better. Because life changing events are only life changing to the one doing the changing, it is always difficult for anyone else to appreciate a new attitude without tying it to some sort of personal and relatable experience. Also, someone's giant leaps may be tiptoe steps to another. For instance, in my story, "This Fire," the narrator, an inmate in a psychiatric ward who has been accused of murder, rambles through an interview with his psychiatric evaluator. His only hint at remorse comes at the end of the story, when he realizes that he probably won't ever see his apartment again. Although it's summed up in one line, the reader feels the power in his realization by connecting his past with the present. His apartment was important to him and only now that he has lost it does he realize the magnitude of the trouble he created for himself.

The progression of my writing became noticeable during the MFA *Form and Technique* course. It was not only the most challenging course in the program, but it helped my classmates and myself incorporate what we had learned into our own writing in a way we hadn't approached before. After each lesson I would ask myself what I could utilize from class to help me progress as a writer. Did I look at my work before the semester and see a noticeable improvement in the work I completed at the end of the semester? The answer is yes.

I am able to take what I read and incorporate it into my own work. For instance, when I was writing a critical paper about Flannery O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," my writing encapsulated the ideas and thoughts put forth in several of the works we studied. Certain elements of theme and narration played a part, along with what I investigated regarding the plot of O'Connor's work.

I appreciated the way we read and studied a variety of authors, some classic, some contemporary, some highly regarded, some emerging, giving us the ability to discuss and compare several works and ideas.

Work in class also let each writer learn to gauge his or her own work by finding the author's whom they most emulated or aspired to write like.

Before I began the program, I was only looking at the ideas for my stories from an indirect perspective, as in how I could specifically apply new techniques and expand my artistic vision when I consciously wanted to. Instead, I realize that I'm applying it all everyday and every time I read, write, revise, analyze and critique. It's not necessarily a conscious choice, but a learned one and one that takes practice. For the first time, I see my writing as true art, not manipulated words simply taking up too much space on an otherwise empty page.

My thesis highlights my ability as a stylist as well as my vision as an artist: literature is reality. The idea is saliently featured in the two works that finish my thesis, "Three Squares: A Food Journal," and "The War in Fallujah." While elementally, the works lend their format and presentation to non-fiction, their all-encompassing, breath-taking pace allow from them to be read more like fiction. Are the events in these works fictitious? Are they real, or better yet, are they true?

Yes.

Yes.

And yes.

In "Three Squares: A Food Journal," the scientific information, the study of nutrition, and the fun and trivial food facts are all very much true. Hours were spent

reading, writing, studying, and researching not only the food facts, but the myths associated with each food represented in the work. Did I partake in consuming all of those foods the way the essay claims that its narrator did? No. In fact, I'm not even sure if it's humanly possible.

Therefore, if the work must be categorized, then I'll call it a hybrid, or *almost fiction*, or *almost true*. Either way, it's easy to see where the essay birthed itself. As consumers living in an ever increasingly health-conscious environment, society bombards us daily with reminders of what exactly it is that our bodies need to perform at top levels. After a while, the commercials, the articles, the programs, and the websites and the books and magazines start to contradict one another. Who should we believe? Are they all correct? Are they all wrong? Obviously, the human race has progressed along just fine without the help of understanding the role of the antioxidant. It's not a critique of science, but a plea for common sense over reactionary consumerism.

However, the work survives past the sarcasm and irony. By the end, the narrator is drinking wine and reading Pascal, who is famous for his wager, is it better to believe in God, or not to believe in God. He says that even if there is no God at all, it's still a better bet to believe in him accordingly, as the risk for failing to believe outweighs the reward for failing to recognize that he exists. The narrator in "Three Squares" quietly ends his day understanding that while mega-burgers and greasy pizzas may be delicious and abundant, there is something comforting in a glass of wine and some chocolate enjoyed in moderation.

The parts of my thesis create a unique whole, a reflection not of my own personal journey through the process of creating the stories, but a reflection of the world as I try to

strip away the filters I am forced to wear, and the indignities I am forced to ignore. My characters allow me to express myself, but also to redeem myself, and I hope make a little bit more sense of the chaos of life we spend way too much time trying to organize.

Section 1  
Redemption

## Touch of Grey

At two p.m. the bar was empty except for Jerry and me. He watched me prep lemons and limes while he sat atop a stool, swirling the ice in his tea with a straw to dissolve the sugar. Although no one smoked, a haze hovered above us, staleness resting on our shoulders.

“It’s the straw that broke the horse’s neck.” Jerry said.

“You mean camel’s back.”

He didn’t answer, just twirled away, occasionally smacking the top of his gums, sucking on the space where his front teeth used to be. He had already been there since seven in the morning, rambling, snorting, bumming cigarettes from anyone who dared to light up in front of him, and lying to me about being the designated driver so he could get free soda or iced tea. Once a week his wife kicked him out and he sought refuge down here at Merle’s, the only tavern in town open early enough for the third shifters to have a beer with their breakfast.

“She’ll let you in when the kids get out of school, Jerry. Let her play her game.”

“Not this time. The shoe is on the hand that fits.” His straw made that loud sucking noise. He set his glass down on the edge of the bar and followed me around with his eyes while I cleaned. I relented and filled his glass.

“Glove, Jerry. You mean glove.”

I knew better than to get involved in the lives of the regulars. Their drama, their games. But Jerry could press all the right buttons and rile up anyone. His wife left him, his kids are sick, his disability check didn’t come on time. I had heard them all and I had

fell for them all. But if iced tea was all it was going to take to occupy him, I'd live with it. Otherwise, I'll lose my temper one of these days and tell him to get lost.

Jerry was just one of those people who blame everyone else for everything that goes wrong in their lives. Sure, sometimes he'd legitimately be down on his luck, but for the most part, he created his own problems and hard working people like me are left to deal with them. Besides, I had my own set of problems to deal with, let alone the problems of some toothless jerk who treated his wife and kids like shit and refuses to get a job.

"Rodney, can I get one more refill?" Jerry asked.

"You're killing me Jerry. This isn't a charity." I filled his glass anyway. "Jerry, why you wanna sit hear all day? It's the prettiest day of spring yet."

"I opened a new book of worms this time."

"You mean can of worms."

"She's not gonna let me back in the house. She meant it this time." His head slumped. "I know the rent is in arrears, but I've been promising Jalen a BB gun for six months and when I got my check yesterday I went out and bought him one."

I nodded. It was hard to chastise a man who knew he made the wrong choice. But a gun? For a twelve-year-old? In the middle of the city? Where the hell was the kid gonna shoot it? Sure I was only the head bartender at Merle's, but at least I had sense. I paid my bills first. I knew what was important. Prioritize.

The bar gets busy around eight o'clock every night. By nine, it's jam packed. The morning regulars just need to unwind after a long night in the shop. The night

regulars are different than the morning regulars. The night regulars are here to get drunk and to get laid. The crowd is raucous tonight. The bouncer has already broken up two fights and I can't keep their glasses full fast enough. Jerry still sits at the end of the bar. He's tricked someone into buying him a beer. He also has a fresh pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket.

"Can I get a beer?" I look up. I recognize the face, but I can't figure out why. I turn around to grab his beer and I face the hand-written list of names on the mirror that runs along the wall behind the bar.

EVANS, JIM – Barred for one month – April 4<sup>th</sup> – May 4<sup>th</sup>

I turn around. Hey, how'd you get past the bouncer? You're barred until May 4<sup>th</sup>.

"C'mon on man, let me just get a beer." He says.

I ask the other bartender, "Rupert, why'd this guy get barred?"

"He grabbed Michelle's tit, nearly tore her shirt off."

"Sorry, Bud, you gotta go." I point towards the door.

He won't go.

It takes three men to drag him outside. I tell Rupert I'm taking a break.

The entire bar is viewable through a two-way mirror in the manager's office.

Rupert and Michelle are cleaning up the bottles that Jim Evans tried to drag with himself out the door. The neon signs are buzzing. Some of them are missing letters. Drink \_iller. Bud Lig\_t. The red vinyl covering the booths is torn, the foam exposed. All the bar stools wobble. Two windows are missing, plywood a proxy. A yellow tinge glows off the walls and sometimes your eyes burn from the flow of smoke, the dim light, or for no good reason at all except that they don't want to see what's going on inside Merle's.



A drunk leaning against the pool table has his hand down a woman's pants. She's kissing another drunk sitting on the pool table. The jukebox plays *You Shook Me All Night Long*. Fifth time tonight.

Rupert pokes his head into the office to tell me we're out of Bud. I take one last drag off my smoke before I push through the crowd to the basement stairs. The lights flash and short out when I turn them on. I flick the switch up and down really fast. Finally, they stay on. The basement reeks of yeast and mildew. It's littered with broken beer signs and empty liquor bottles. I swap kegs.

"Whoa, it's the bartender!" I hear a voice. It's the drunk woman and both of her drunk men.

"Can we hang out down here?" She leans up against me and tries to rub my chest through the buttons on my shirt. I have to rustle them up like sheep to get them back up the stairs and it's only after she begs me for a broken Lowenbrau sign, which I oblige, that her paramours follow.

Luckily, someone announces that Westside Charley's, a bar down the street, is having a wet t-shirt contest. Free beer for the women who participate and the men get to judge. Except for a few stragglers, Merle's clears out.

While I wipe down tables I overhear Jerry, still lodged at the end of the bar, ask Rupert if he can crash at his place tonight. He tells him no. Dave, the bouncer, just laughs when he asks. Then he tells him to sleep in his van.

"The van's not here. My wife wouldn't let me take it this morning. I walked here."

That only leaves me and I'm not in the mood. I try to put up a force field that will miraculously keep Jerry from asking me. I hold my breath, click my heels, cross myself. But he's already limped over.

"Rodney, I'm up the creek without a boat," Jerry says to me.

"You mean a paddle."

"I know I snore like a Kodiak bear, but I need a place to stay tonight."

"Uh-huh." I answer, paying more attention to my tables. I know he's waiting for me to offer but I just can't bring myself to do it. In fact, I dread the thought of it. And honestly, it's not my goddamn responsibility.

"Is there any chance I could crash at your place tonight?"

I smile satisfaction, glad I can make him ask me. But guilt always wins. I don't have a real excuse. I have a pullout sofa.

"Jerry, I've been here for eighteen hours today. I need some rest," I tell him.

"Just for tonight. You know I'll be back here tomorrow with the kids for free pool Sunday if April let's me take them."

I don't have an answer. I want to tell him no, to fuck off and leave me alone. I just don't want this dirty old man in my apartment. I don't want his baggage, I don't want his problems, I don't want his excuses for why he is the way he is. I don't want his homemade swastika tattoo, his oversized belt buckle, or his motorcycle boots. Doesn't anyone have boundaries anymore? It's all a bunch of bullshit. Is a grown man really standing here begging me for a place to stay while I'm trying to get my work done?

"Jerry, isn't there someone you can call? Anyone? I'll give you a ride if you need one."

He doesn't answer and I'd say he was thinking but if he'd been thinking he wouldn't have this problem right now. He would have friends. Real friends. Instead, he hangs out at Merle's seven days a week and starts fights, lies to people, and steals cigarettes from them.

"Christ Jerry, this isn't the place you go for help. You go to church or to the mission. If I take you home, you'll just be back here tomorrow, right where you started. You'll ask me for a cigarette, then you'll ask me for something to drink, then you'll ask me for food and you'll tell me you'll pay me when your next check comes. That's not how the world works, Jerry, it just doesn't." I know I should shut up and walk away but now I'm fired up and I can't let it go. I turn back to him. "Look at Rupert, look at him. His daughter's deaf and there isn't a school for her around here to attend. Michelle's pregnant and her old man walked out on her and Dave doesn't even know how to fucking read. And me? Next week I turn thirty and I'm still tending bar at Merle's. Fucking Merle's. We all got problems, Jerry, fucking deal with it like the rest of us." I catch my breath and just keep scrubbing at the table I was cleaning until I realize I'm waxing cigarette burns.

He just stood silently. His oblivion only pissed me off even more.

Rupert announced he was shutting out the lights and I stood at the door ushering out the rest of the staff. Jerry still stood by the last table I had cleaned.

"C'mon Jerry, let's go," I holler at him. He limps to the door.

"Rodney, can I sleep in a booth tonight?" he asks. "I won't touch nothing, 'cept for maybe the pool table."

I don't think I've ever heard anything so ridiculous in all my life. "No, it's Sunday tomorrow, bar doesn't open until four and I'm not coming back here until then."

We step outside and I lock up. I tell Rupert, Dave, Michelle, and the cook goodbye, but no one says anything to Jerry. I click my car open and drive away without looking back at him. The day is finally over. I only work eighteen hour days on Saturdays, and only because I need the money. I'll be outta here soon, I tell myself. Texas, Arizona, California. Somewhere warm, I don't care. I'm sick of this bar and all its problems. I'm sick of working for Merle, watching him restock the bar with old bottles of Grey Goose he refills with Popov.

In bed, I fall asleep to SportCenter running on a loop through the night. I dream I'm behind the bar, filling glasses, but the line of people screaming for beer grows faster than I can fill. It grows and grows and I can't keep up. I move as fast as I can. Finally, I gain control. Everyone has a full glass. But something's not right. Their faces are changing colors and they're holding their stomachs. They're shouting, gagging, vomiting. I'm dodging glasses and ashtrays, they're throwing bottles at me. Someone climbs up on the bar and points at me. "You think you're so much better than us that you can piss in these cups and make us drink it? Don't you?" I duck as a glass comes flying at me. It strikes the mirror behind the bar and as it shatters I wake up.

I shake it off. I'm home, in bed. It's the only dream I ever have.

When I arrive at the bar Sunday, Jerry is waiting at the door.

"You been here since last night?" I ask him.

"Well, I figured I should eat my pride so I walked home"

“Swallow.”

“But April had the doors all dead bolted and I didn’t want to wake the kids and I didn’t know where else to go so I just came back here.”

Thankfully, the bar is dead, empty again except for Jerry. He produces a dollar and sets it on the bar. “The dog has not been fed in years.” He asks, “What can I eat for a dollar?”

“A bag of chips,” I tell him and point at the rack behind me.

“I can’t eat chips,” he says. “I ain’t got any front teeth. It’s like chewing on a mouthful of razorblades. Can I have some French fries? But don’t cook them too long. They have to be soft.”

French fries are two dollars. I tell the cook to make him a dollar’s worth. When I come back from the kitchen, Jerry has company, one of his sons and one of his daughters. There isn’t any food in their house. I give them each a bag of chips. Jerry doesn’t tell me that when I was in the kitchen Merle came in. He saw me give away his food from the mirror in his office. I get my ass chewed out. I pay for the chips out of my tip jar.

Jerry and his kids play pool while I brood and stew behind the bar. I’m not sure how many kids he has, but it’s more than five, and if you’ll believe some of his stories, it’s more than twenty. At dusk, he sends them home, telling them to be careful and to make sure they make it by dark. They kiss and hug him goodbye. The girl, probably seven or eight, asks him when he’s coming home.

“When your mom decides to eat the bullet,” he tells her.

*Bite the bullet*, I think to myself.

He sits back down at the bar and asks me for an iced tea. I point towards the manager's office.

The next Saturday night ends the same way last Saturday did, except instead of a wet t-shirt contest, everyone leaves because there's been a stabbing in the parking lot and no one wants to be around when the cops arrive.

When we close up Jerry limps out the door. "Do you think I could come over and get a shower?" he asks me.

He's got me in a corner. Who can fault a man for wanting to be clean? He's looking rugged, really bad. I'm sick of it all. It's almost as if by saying yes, I admit defeat. I give in.

As soon as we pull out of the parking lot Jerry asks me if I hear something. It's just my car I tell him, that thump, it always does that.

"It's your CV joint," he tells me. "It's bad."

"What the hell is a CV joint?"

"It stands for constant velocity joint. It allows your wheels to spin freely from any angle without friction or give. Basically, it's what keeps your tires from snapping off when you turn hard or veer out of the way of something.

"Pull into the Wal-Mart parking lot," he instructs me. "Over there where there ain't any cars."

I drive to the middle of the empty lot. I'm not sure why I'm obeying his commands or if they are commands at all. For once, it eerily appears as if he knows what he's talking about.

“Now turn the wheel all the way to the left and drive in a complete circle.”

Click, crunch, click, clack, crunch.

“Hear that?”

“I do.”

“Yup, that’s your CV joint, inner and outer joints are shot.”

“What’s it mean?”

“It means that if you don’t get it fixed one day you’re gonna try to turn and you’re not going to be able to steer.”

“How much does it cost?”

“Take it to a garage about, five hundred bucks.” He tells me. “If you buy the parts, I’ll do it for free.”

“How much are parts?”

“Round three hundred.” He nods his head. “Give or take.”

When we get to my apartment, Jerry takes a forty-five minute shower. I know it’s cold because the hot water doesn’t last more than five minutes. He reappears wearing only a towel.

“You need to turn up your hot water heater.” He says.

“How do I do that?”

“There’s a dial, it’s set too low, how do you get clean in there?”

“I didn’t know it was something that could be fixed.”

I lead him into the utility room off the kitchen. He shows me how to work the dial.

“Should be able to take a good half hour shower now.”

We stay up past dawn, talking, well mostly he talked and I listened. About his kids, about his wife and how every month when the money's gone, she kicks him out, only to let him back in on the first of the month when his check arrives. Only this month it was gone as soon as he cashed it. He said he couldn't work because he had chronic arthritis in his knees from all the landing on them he did in the army, jumping out of airplanes. I scanned him up and down, sized him up if you will. I couldn't imagine the crazy old man paratrooping. He met his wife at a party and he's pretty sure he got her pregnant that same night. It was the seventies and it was California and we spent our time three sheets to the breeze, he told me. To the wind, I corrected him. I told him I wanted to go to California myself and he asked me what for. Why bother. Ain't nothing to see there you can't see here. Oceans and beaches, I told him. Hollywood and glamour. Piss on it all, he said. He laughed when I told him I had my own problems to deal with. He asked me if I knew what it felt like not to be able to get out of bed in the morning because you couldn't bend your knees. Did I know that I made more in tips this weekend than his disability check paid him for an entire month?

I never slept the night Jerry came over to shower and he wouldn't leave until I let him fix my car. I bought the parts and within an hour he replaced my CV joint. He wouldn't even let me put the tire back on and he wouldn't let me pay him a dime. I watched his battered body shake and prop itself in odd positions, but he used my cheap tool set like a surgeon.

“Take her for a spin.” He said.



I drove around the block and cranked the wheel hard at every turn. Smooth. It never felt so good behind the wheel of my old Dodge.

“She ain’t pretty, but she drives like new.” I thank him.

“Beauty is in the holder’s eye.”

“The eye of the beholder.”

I should have been a mechanic. Anything but a bartender. I had other offers, I just couldn’t bring myself to give up what made me comfortable.

Later that afternoon I found myself back behind the bar while Jerry sipped iced tea. He miraculously produced a quarter and walked over to the jukebox but I told him to save it. Pick your song and smack the side really hard, it’ll just play I told him. He chose “Touch of Grey” by the Grateful Dead.

We were the only two people in the bar when I went downstairs to change kegs. Jerry was carrying on about his wife and he followed me into the basement. Unwittingly, he dislodged the wedge that kept the broken basement door propped open. It slammed shut, locking us in. There was no phone down there and it would be an hour before Rupert came in. I pulled out two broken stools and grabbed a bottle of Kessler’s.

“Drinks on me, Jerry.”

I twisted off the top and took a swig of the cheap whiskey. I passed it to Jerry and when he grabbed the bottle, my eye got a good look at the tattoo on his arm.

I don’t know where the question came from, but it just popped out. “Jerry, why do you have a swastika tattooed on your arm?”

“That was probably the dumbest thing I ever done.” He turned his head away and took another gulp from the bottle.

I felt like squirming out of my stool. I shouldn't have brought it up.

“When I came home from Viet Nam everyone was just so mean, just so goddamn mean to me. And all my friends were either dead or riding around in vans with flowers in their hair. They didn't want anything to do with me and my sister invited me to a party and it turned out to be a skinhead rally and all these people were screaming and shouting about niggers and Jews and when they heard I just got back from Viet Nam they started treating me like a king and telling me how grateful they were that I killed a bunch of slopeheads and I just got caught up in feeling like I was special and that I mattered again and so I kind of tagged along with that gang for a while and that's when I met April and got her pregnant so I was pretty much married to the whole group. I'd give anything to get rid of this thing.” He twisted his arm and showed me the scar where he tried to scrape off some of the tattoo.

Merle came in before Rupert and he heard us pounding and let us up and he told me to take the rest of the night off, so I left, with Jerry.

Three weeks later I wake from a dream. Someone is pounding on my front door but no one is there when I go to answer it. I wipe the sleep from my eyes and still hear the pounding. Coming to my senses, I realize someone really is at my door. Stumbling across my room, I put on clothes. Jerry's asleep on the sofa, oblivious to the noise. I open the door. It's Jalen.

“Is my dad here?” he asks.

I invite him in.

“Jerry, wake up. Jerry.” I shake him.

He snorts and growls, practically rolls off the sofa before catching himself. “Must be getting early,” he says. “Clocks are running late.”

“Jalen’s here.” I tell him.

“Mom says you can come back home now.” Jalen announces.

Jerry sits up. He asks me for a cigarette. We smoke in silence, Jalen standing at the door.

“Did my check come?” Jerry asks his son.

“Yeah.” He nods.

I interject. “Jerry, you don’t have to go. You can stay here as long as you need to. As long as you want to.”

He coughs and lights another cigarette. “It’s April’s birthday next week. I’m not gonna make a mountain out of a mole hole.” He gets up and sticks his hand out. I shake it.

“You know what they say?” He tells me. “Every cloud has its silver lining.” I don’t let go of his hand. I just keep shaking it until he pulls away and ushers his son and himself out my door.

## A Real Monkey's Uncle

*Swoosh.* I heard the sound, and saw its shadow, but I couldn't see the ball soar through the night sky. *Nothing but net,* the announcer would say had a network decided to air our game of HORSE. My nephew pumped his fists and jumped back onto the driveway.

"If you don't make it, I win again," he nonchalantly reminds me. I pick up the ball and step off the blacktop and onto the grass. I squint, trying to let in more of the moon and the streetlight to gauge my shot better. I don't have very good depth perception.

"I was a few steps back farther," he instructs me.

Basketball is a strange game. Giants among men, whose wingspans set them merely inches from the rim, routinely miss the easiest shots. But basketball is really about bounces. The point-blank layup is only as good as the bounce it takes off the backboard. And then, as the ball begins to bounce through the hoop, the slightest contact with the rim will shoot it back up and entirely out of the net. It denies physics, or at least anything I pretended to pay attention to in physics class.

"Right here?"

I take about eight steps back. Although he can see where I am, he's still too young to detect the sarcasm, but not too young to know that I'm teasing him.

"Not that far," he folds his arms and although I can't see his eyes, I'm sure he's rolling them. He's far too practical for a twelve-year-old.

If I were a betting man, and I'm not, even if I am an economist and market watcher and stock broker, I'd bet it all on me missing this shot. I couldn't make this shot in broad daylight, let alone under the dim glow of the eleven o'clock stars and a yellow

streetlamp. But the stock market is easy. Money is easy. You either have it or you don't. You're either willing to risk it or not.

I wipe the sweat from my forehead with the front of my shirt.

"C'mon Uncle Marty, are you gonna shoot it or not?"

I take a deep breath and bend my knees. I don't have much of a jump shot, so I pretend that I'm a classic baller. I use the set shot. I raise my arms and let it go, my head tilted like it will make me see the ball better in the dark. I see it, barely orange, spiraling towards the hoop, spiraling away from me. When I lose sight of the ball, Belding's giggles and laughs tell me everything I need to know.

"That's H-O-R-S-and-E! Now you owe me a trip to the batting cages tomorrow."

So I guess I really am a betting man after all.

"You got it kid." He bounces the ball up the driveway and I put my arm around him. The world isn't a bad place after all. Then he stops bouncing and stops walking all at once. Turning towards me he asks, "Uncle Marty, is it true that some people believe that humans came from monkeys?" His pensive look startles me. This isn't the same kid who ten minutes ago asked me who I thought was a better basketball player, Kobe Bryant or LeBron James.

"It just doesn't make sense," he continues.

Before I can answer my sister appears at the door. Although I'm fairly certain she didn't hear him ask the question, she's giving me that stare. That *don't pollute my son with your college education stare*.

"Come on in guys," she orders us. "It's late."

"But it's the summer," Belding tells her.

“Yeah, it’s the summer,” I agree.

“Don’t encourage him.”

\*\*\*

I should have answered him. The easy answer was, “Yes it’s true, science has led us to believe that humans *evolved* from monkeys.” But being that I hadn’t yet evolved, I took a deep breath and silently thanked my sister for interrupting us. Besides, I have a feeling that wouldn’t have been the answer he was looking for. It wasn’t even the answer I was looking for.

\*\*\*

Mr. Hunter: Hello?

Marty Baines: Mr. Hunter?—Marty Baines here, from Hartleib Financial.

Mr. Hunter: This better be good news Baines.

Marty Baines: Oh, of course this is good news. Your order to sell at 64 has been executed. You made 12 million dollars today—

Mr. Hunter: Christ Baines, do you know how much of that I’ll have to pay in taxes?

Marty Baines: No Mr. Hunter, I don’t.

Mr. Hunter: About half.

Marty Baines: That’s a lot of money sir.

Mr. Hunter: I thought you said you had good news?

Marty Baines: 12 million dollars did sound like good news to me.

Mr. Hunter: Does paying six million dollars in taxes sound like good news to you?

Marty Baines:

Mr. Hunter: Baines? Hello?

Marty Baines:

Mr. Hunter: Are you there Baines?

Marty Baines:

Mr. Hunter: Jesus Christ.

Click

\*\*\*

I should have answered him, too. Only I really didn't have an answer for Mr. Hunter. I had an answer for Belding. Or at least I thought I did. But I've been down this road before with Belding's father, Lloyd. I've heard Lloyd's answer:

*Things evolve all the time. But that doesn't mean that God didn't create human beings separately to do his own work. The Bible makes it very clear that God made man separately from the rest of the universe.*

I can respect a man for his religion, I can respect a man for his values, I can respect a man for his opinion. But I cannot respect a man who refuses to think for himself. I'd heard Lloyd's manufactured response a dozen times over from preachers and pastors and their ilk and their flocks and I while it doesn't bother me, the fact that he hasn't thought of his own answer does.

\*\*\*

I recently watched this public access television show where a Rabbi, a Priest, a Baptist minister (they weren't walking into a bar), and a scientist all gathered together for a round table discussion about the origin of man. The priest listened intently to everything

the others had to say, but generally strayed from most of the heated arguments. When finally pressed on the issue, he said, “Gentlemen, let’s face it, the facts about evolution are in. The Bible, while it is our guide to salvation, inconsistently represents science. In other words, some science is much too real to ignore”

I turned off the television and pondered the priest’s words. He made sense. He not only made sense, he took a chance. I can respect *that*.

\*\*\*

Later that week we gathered, Lloyd, Belding, and myself, in the driveway and shot hoops.

“I quit the firm.”

Lloyd gave me this stare, the same one Belding did when he asked me about humans and monkeys.

Belding’s shot ricocheted off the rim and I plucked it out of the air. I dribbled and took a step backwards, launching a fade-away set shot.

“Did you get a better offer?”

The ball hit the backboard and then the rim and bounced away from the hoop.

“No, I’m going back to college, to get my masters degree.”

Belding scooped up the ball from his father’s feet and dribbled around us.

“In finance?”

“Uncle Marty, see if you can stop me.”

Belding charged in between his father and myself, lifting himself up as far as he could and with one hand pushed the ball up and off the backboard and through the hoop.

“Nice shot, Buddy,” I tapped at his shoulder, then returned my attention to Lloyd.



“No, in Philosophy.”

“Marty, it took me ten years before I was able to make as much money as you do.” He put his hands on his hips. “Belding, give me a few minutes alone with your Uncle Marty.”

“No, it’s alright kid, keep playing, we’ll get out of your way.”

Lloyd pushed me aside.

“Marty, do you realize what you’re giving up?”

For once in my life I felt like I was going to say something substantial, like I had an answer. I knew that quitting the firm was the right decision and that I was on the brink of figuring out why. “Sometimes I feel like there’s more to life than just money—.”

“Uncle Marty, this guy, Dr. Ebbetts is a Biblical scientist and he’s speaking at the church tomorrow night. You should come with us. He’s gonna talk about how the Bible explains science and how people get tricked into thinking that dinosaurs were on the earth before humans and about how he uses science and the Bible to disprove that humans came from Monkeys.”

Lloyd’s face gleamed with pride. I opened my mouth to answer but Lloyd, sensing my skepticism, put up his finger.

“Just come out and hear what he has to say, Marty. You might even gain some insight into yourself and who knows, maybe you’ll rethink this crazy decision. Just give it some thought.”

\*\*\*

We sat eating lunch, homemade bread and a bottle of wine I brought as a gift for my sister. The milk and honey emanated off the faces of Belding, my sister, Lloyd, and my

niece, Leah. The country bears that adorned my sister's kitchen smiled at me every chance they had. The warm house felt like home and the conversations filled my head with awe and satisfaction. I set down my glass and drank it all in.

*Leah won the fifth grade spelling bee Ms. Evers next door brought us some of the left over cookies from the bake sale Belding's going to summer camp in three weeks Pastor Dave asked us to volunteer at the food drive Lloyd's niece just had twins Mom can we go to the art supply store this week I need new brushes I beat dad and Uncle Marty at basketball Uncle Marty's gonna go to church with us tonight to see Dr. Ebbetts talk about science and the Bible*

I wanted to object, but instead I changed the subject.

“Well, I know I said I'd be here for two weeks, but I was wondering if it's all right if I stay the entire summer.”

Lloyd's eyes turned towards me and then towards my sister. Before he could speak, Belding interrupted.

“Yeah, Uncle Marty's gonna be here all summer,” and reached over with his extended hand waiting for me to give him a high five.

“Just until school starts,” I added, giving Belding that high five, albeit a silent one.

“Marty, you're always welcome here,” Lloyd stood up and patted me on the shoulder.

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I set my feet from the top corner of the driveway, bent my knees and let go. The ball arced straight up and through the hoop.

“Whoa, Uncle Marty, that’s the best one you’ve made in a while.”

Belding headed back to the corner and heaved up a reply, the ball swishing through net, his fist pumping in the air all in one motion.

“Nice shot kid.”

“Uncle Marty, I’m gonna laugh tonight when Dr. Ebbetts starts talking about humans coming from monkeys.”

“Why is that so funny to you?”

“I mean, it’s monkeys, they make me laugh. They walk around eating bananas and doing silly things.”

“I eat bananas and do silly things,” I said, lifting him up off the ground with a bear hug and spinning him around. “Speaking of bananas, you’ve been eating your share. I can barely get you off the ground anymore.”

“I’m gonna shoot one-handed.” He dribbled the ball a few times and then threw it off the backboard and into the net.

I grabbed the ball and went over to where Belding made his shot. I decided to try to be serious.

“Why are you so sure humans didn’t evolve from monkeys?”

“Well Uncle Marty, things evolve all the time. But that doesn’t mean that God didn’t create human beings separately to do his own work. The Bible makes it very clear that God made man separately from the rest of the universe.”

I cringed. Lloyd’s indoctrination makes my stomach churn. Can’t they let the kid think for himself?

“I mean, monkeys can’t play basketball.”

At least that was honest insight. His innocent thoughtfulness made me smile.

“You’ve seen the way I play. I’m sure a monkey could beat me. In fact, I’m sure one already has.”

“Uncle Marty!” He picked up the loose ball and started to chase me around with it.

The garage door opened. Lloyd’s stoic frame towered over his truck.

“Belding, go get cleaned up for church.”

\*\*\*

*The Book of Job tells us that the Leviathan breathed fire and science shows us that some dinosaurs very well may have probably been able to breathe fire through a gland found in their nasal septum that scientists cannot account for. Dinosaurs walked the earth alongside humans. In fact, Leviathan is mentioned in three books of the Bible, not once, but three different times.*

*In the Book of Genesis it says that God made the sky and divided the waters which were under the sky from the waters which were over the sky. This means that at one time, there were oceans above the sky. This means that the earth, at one time, probably about six thousand years ago, was the inside of a giant water pressure bubble. This pressure bubble would have made things appear to age more rapidly than they do now. Scientists have recreated this phenomenon and proved it to be true. There isn’t anything on this earth more than six or seven thousand years old.*

*Then, God told Noah to build his ark and flooded the earth with the ocean from the sky. The sky opened up. That’s right, it opened up. It didn’t rain. It opened up,*

*which is much different than raining. Ever since then, we have the sky as we know it today.*

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Belding dribbled the ball and came towards me. I crouched down and cut off his lane to the hoop but he quickly switched hands, scooped the ball up and it caromed off the backboard and into the hoop.

“Wasn’t Dr. Ebbetts cool, Uncle Marty?”

“He was interesting, Buddy.”

“I want to be a scientist when I grow up.”

I picked up the loose ball and shuffled it back to Belding.

“Well, if you are a scientist, you’ll have to learn to be a little bit more objective.”

He dribbled faster and switched hands with ease. Instead of coming at me, he stopped, pulled up and shot the ball. Nothing but net.

“You’ll have to take people seriously when they want to talk about things, like evolution and people coming from monkeys?”

“You don’t believe it, do you Uncle Marty?”

“Well Belding, let’s face it, the facts about evolution are in. The Bible, while it is our guide to salvation, inconsistently represents science. In other words, some science is much too real to ignore.”

I tried to stop myself from finishing, but it just came out. I wanted to tell him more, to make him understand, to tell him that I didn’t have any answers, and that there really weren’t any answers and that this is one of those things you’ve got to figure out for yourself.

Belding passed me the ball and I gently layed it up and through the hoop.

“I think I need a break, Buddy,” I told him.

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I went with Lloyd the next day to haul some supplies for one of his job sites. As we pulled into the lot he turned down the radio. Lloyd had been listening to one of Dr. Ebbetts’ CDs about Biblical science, and turned towards me.

“Marty, you know I love you like my own brother, probably even more than my own brother and my son thinks you’re a God among men.”

Lloyd, in all his sincerity never sounded more insincere.

“But he is my son, Marty, and your sister and I will teach him what he needs to know about science and evolution. That’s not your place. Especially when you’re a guest in our house.”

“Lloyd, I just want him to know it’s okay to think for himself.”

“Marty, I understand, but given my position at the church I can’t have my son spewing out your philosophical nonsense. I’m serving on the missionary committee and running the homeless rescue. I don’t have time to worry about my son being corrupted, especially by his own flesh and blood. Not right now. Not right now.”

“But Lloyd, Don’t you ever think about it? You’re one the most skillful and creative men I know?”

“Marty, I think about Belding, and I think about Leah. And they’ve got enough to worry about, they’re kids.” Then he turned towards me, his eyes connecting with mine.

“Things evolve all the time. But that doesn’t mean that God didn’t create human beings separately to do his own work. The Bible makes it very clear that God made man

separately from the rest of the universe.” Only this time his insincerity really did sound sincere.

But I couldn't let it go.

“Lloyd,” I said, “Let's face it, the facts about evolution are—.”

I stopped myself. Other workers were pulling up next to us. They unloaded playground equipment for the children's center Lloyd helped establish downtown. Swing sets. Slides. The disassembled jumble that would become an oversized jungle gym.

Basketball nets, rims and backboards.

“C'mon Lloyd, these guys need our help.” We climbed out of the truck and fell in line with the other workers.

## Secondhand Clothing

I sat down on the edge of my bed to catch my breath. Uncontrollable perspiration overwhelmed my new suit. I patted the sweat off my face with a clean towel and stood in front of the mirror. I never thought I was good looking, but she told me I was cute, even handsome, after I emailed her my picture. I took one last deep breath and decided I was composed enough to carry on.

Traffic was heavy and I had to drive all the way across town. She got out of work at 6:30 and I would pick her up at the office. I tried to time the drive so that I'd arrive about three minutes early. Not too early, but not too late, either. I wouldn't say that I'm a real prude for being on time, but I just don't like too early, and I hate five minutes late.

I was still sweating when I pulled up to the light at Penniman and Main. Getting a grip on myself, I turned on the radio.

*And I pray to God his shoes will never fit me  
And I pray this isn't my inheritance*

Even though it was late November, I cracked my windows and since I had relatively calmed down, I decided to choke down a cigarette. She wouldn't mind. It was one of the few things I knew about her, that she smoked. She smoked and she was black. I just shook my head when I actually stopped to think about it. What would my dad say if he knew I was going on a date with a black girl? I didn't want to think about it, but don't you always wonder when you meet a girl, *Is she someone I can take home to meet mom and dad?* Oh, I knew my mom wouldn't care.

"Love one and love all, God made everyone equal, never judge a book by its cover," she would say. She had her handy-dandy, ready-made list of clichés for every occasion, interracial dating included.



"Whatever makes you happy, honey." That's what mom would say. Whether or not she meant it, I don't know, but really, let's not go down a road where we might have to start doubting what mom's tell their children. Not when I'd have to deal with my dad.

"Joey, I hear you had a date last night." I can hear him already.

First he'd start singing *Brown Sugar* by the Rolling Stones. My mom might interject with a "Honey, cut that out, you haven't even met the girl." He would follow that up with something like, "Oh, you think your hot shit now cuz you got yourself a *mooliachi* girl." My mom would just start shaking her head at this point, knowing that arguing or stopping him was futile. "Don't you think you're gonna bring that *tizzune* girl around here," he would say. Then, he would stop trying to be funny and get serious.

"What would your grandmother say? Huh? Come on?" His finger would then point in the direction of my face. You'd think he was Sonny Corleone yelling at Michael for joining the Marines on their father's birthday.

"*Sciacquatajeddhes*. Why would my grandson wanna be with those dirty people? That's what your grandmother would say!"

Those questions all just kept flooding my head. What if I end up *really* liking this girl? I mean, I *really* already do. Would I be willing to sacrifice my family for her? My dad wouldn't even be joking. When my cousin Gino started dating a Korean girl, my grandma wouldn't stop. "You know, I hear those people are really smart." "Does she have chink eyes?" "Do you think they're gonna have any yellow kids?" "Is she a figure skater?" "Grandma, she's not Michelle Kwan!" I can't believe I answered her. I can't believe she asked me that. She was a foreigner herself one time.

Alienated.

My grandpa used to tell me the stories. He had to beg his first American boss for a job because he didn't wanted to hire any *dagos*, afraid he would upset the other workers. It was 1936 and giving a *dago* a job meant taking one away from a *real* American. He was a stone mason.

"Look around you Pepino," he used to tell me when we'd drive around town. "I built this city with my own two hands." Then he would show me his calloused hands. He'd turn them palms up and then turn them over so you could see the scars, too. He'd point at the First City Bank and Trust and at the old library.

"And City Hall." Then he'd shake his head and he'd point at the new City Hall which replaced the one he had helped build sixty years ago. His hands would shake and his accent would thicken when he would say things like "I put my life into that building," and, "I bruised my hands and broke my knees for what? So they can tear it down and build another one? I don't know sometimes."

I flipped my cigarette out the window and rolled it up. It was one of those times where you can't get to where you have to go fast enough. I tried clearing my head, but all you can do is sit and think when you're driving through town and you hit every red light.

*I spent my lifetime dancing with his demons  
They're constantly comparing him with me*

When I was a kid I had seen black people on TV and I collected baseball cards. Most of my favorite players were black, like Reggie Jackson and Rod Carew, but the first black person I ever saw in person pointed a gun at my grandpa's head. My grandpa had convinced my parents to let me stay the night at my grandparent's house even though it was a school night. "I'll take the boy to school," he promised. At 10 p.m. my grandpa

decided we'd go to the Dolce Roma, great uncle Enzo's pizzeria. We'd help him clean up and he'd make us a pizza for a late night snack.

When we arrived, Uncle Enzo turned on the pinball machine in the lobby for me. Just as I popped in my quarter, a man wearing a knit cap walked in and approached the kitchen door. As he went to open it, my grandpa walked out and the man drew a pistol and placed the barrel against my grandpa's forehead.

"Everybody get down! On the floor right now!"

It was only me and my grandpa and Uncle Gino.

"Don't do this in front of the boy," my grandpa pleaded.

"Just show me where the money is old man."

I closed my eyes and crouched down on the floor in the kitchen and my grandpa huddled over me. I tried to pretend I couldn't hear anything. I should have prayed, but I just kept wishing it was over. I heard my Uncle Gino beg him to leave, but he threatened to shoot us all and, "Here, take it all," were the last words I remember until being home that night in bed between my parents.

"Goddam niggers, goddam Niggers," was all my father would say. He repeated it over and over again, until I fell asleep clutching my mother's arm. I always felt like the night of the robbery should have had a profound and lasting effect on me, even as an eight-year-old, but sometimes we don't realize how resilient kids can be. I pretty much shook it off, even bragged to my schoolmates about it, and even today, when I think about it, I try to dig inside myself for some lesson or some epiphany that should have struck me that night, but I never do. It was just another space and time that intersected my life, but it's there. It will always be there.

I wasn't naive enough to be ignorant of the connection to the here and now, but I thought I had evolved into a modern man. A white man, sure, but a modern white man. Yet as I drove through Plymouth I realized that I lived in a white world. But not any white world, my own white world. No color, no black and white, only white and white. Us and only us and *they* don't register at all. I once saw an old PBS interview with James Baldwin and while discussing racist attitudes he said, "If you insist on being white, then you force me to be black." I thought about this before, even more as I drove through town, but I never find any answers. It always ends with me asking myself, "How the hell do I stop being white?" It's like I'm waiting for a piano to fall on my head or for a sign from God, or like my Aunt Maria used to tease me when I'd get a smart mouth when I was a kid and she'd ask me, "Do you want me to slap you up and down or side to side," and she'd make the pretend slapping motions with her hand. She'd never really slapped me, although I'm sure I probably deserved it.

I felt like I was sending two hundred million years of evolution back reeling because I tried to step outside myself. But I'm not my father. *I'm not my father.* I kept repeating it, trying to convince myself that even though I'd never attempted to envision the world outside my own box it was okay because I didn't blurt out disparaging epithets.

But it didn't matter. I hadn't even met her in person yet and she was already becoming a novelty or a muse. She would be nothing more than a way for me to draw attention to myself. Look at me, I'm the enlightened white boy with the black girl. Plus, she'll be impressed because I have a closet full of Luther Vandross records. Add that to the list of things they don't teach you in college, how to pretend you didn't spend the first quarter of your life thinking that the entire world revolved around you and why did I pick

right now to decide to challenge my ethnocentricity? "Joey, do you want me to slap you up and down or side to side?"

*They tell their lies, as they look into my eyes and say  
The apple doesn't fall far from its tree-and I pray, Lord, no not me*

I teach a class on Monday nights for Spanish speaking immigrants learning how to speak English. Class generally moves slowly because my Spanish isn't that great, but once in a while I get a guilty conscience about not helping people out enough and it's volunteer work so they take anyone they can find to teach the class. It ends at nine, but a line of students usually gathers around me with questions for nearly an hour after class and a few times I have stayed past midnight. Some of my students are adults who have lived in America their whole lives and have never been properly taught to read or write English. The Tri-Counties Literary Center doesn't discriminate against the students it allows to participate in their classes. They welcome legal immigrants as well as illegal aliens as well as anyone else who does not speak English. One of my students, Ai Phonxana, immigrated from Laos and speaks neither English nor Spanish, but she's determined to take advantage of any chance she has to learn anything. The Tri-Counties Literary Center doesn't offer a class in Laotian. Another one of my students, Marisol Cruz, was born in El Paso, Texas. Last year, her husband took a job in Detroit and the family moved up north. He quickly found a girlfriend and left the rest of the family to fend for themselves. The only English she knows is what her kids bring home from school and since her husband left she has been keeping me after class later and later every week. We slowly go over everything we went over in class again and again and again. She's desperate, 41 years old and out looking for a job for the first time. She doesn't know how to balance her checkbook let alone fill out a job application in English. I've

been sitting after class with Marisol going over the applications and it would have been easy just to fill them out for her and she tests my patience, but seeing the slightest bit of progress keeps me hungry enough to keep helping her.

When I get home from class all my thoughts are a giant jumble bouncing through my mind in English and Spanish and Spanglish (and whatever it was I tried to teach the Laotian girl, although I don't think I ever teach her anything, I just yell at her like people do when someone doesn't understand them as though yelling will make it sink in and present her with the sudden gift of understanding English) and I'm one of those people who can't just unwind in bed when their day is over. I have to do something, anything to clear my head before I call it a day.

Most Monday nights I turn on my computer and chat with strangers I have met over time online; a woman from Portland, Oregon who does nothing but complain about her six kids, my cousin Ralph from Phoenix, who's into role-playing games and always say hi but then tells me he has to get back to his gaming, a girl who always tells me that she will die if she doesn't find a husband soon from who knows where, and a girl from my own hometown who drew up a personal ad on every dating website invented insisting that only Christian men need reply only to get hundreds of responses daily from Muslims, Hindus, an occasional Jew For Jesus, and sometimes women asking her if she is bi-curious.

Three weeks ago, I came home late and turned on my computer but none of my *buddies* were online. Just as I was about to log off, an instant message box from GOOFYCHICK1981 popped up on my screen. It was typical of unknown user IM boxes. "A/S/L?" was all that it said. You know, "AGE/SEX/LOCATION." Usually I'm not up

for this game because I think it's a shrewd way of introducing yourself or of asking information from someone, but I was feeling feisty and who says social rules apply over the internet so I decided to play along.

"25/M/Plymouth, u?"

For about one full minute there was no response, so again, I was ready to close the box when a response appeared.

"24/F/Northville, wanna chat?"

I couldn't resist chatting with someone close to my own age who lived one town over.

Those first few minutes chatting with a stranger online can be really awkward. Gauging someone by their typed words presents a challenge. Sometimes I ask myself, "Would I randomly talk to this person if we had met during the day face to face?" Of course most people don't go up to random people offering their personal statistics and sometimes I wonder why they, or even I, do it online. There is no voice to distinguish tone for sarcasm and no real laughter, only LOLs, which are generic. It's hard to tell if the person on the other side is receptive. Sometimes, I just let go and blindly feel my way around that awkwardness. If I can get past the first few minutes of uncertainty, I can usually tell if someone is being genuine. I don't know if it's a matter of inhibition or lack of inhibitions or the emergence of courage when I don't have to look someone in the eyes, but it's a truly unique way to meet someone.

So there I yawned and checked the time and it was 4 a.m. and I had been talking to GOOFYCHICK1981 for nearly four hours. Her name was Dana and to tell you the truth, it was mostly small talk, but we just never seemed to run out of things to say. Until

she told me she was married. Husband, kids, dogs and all. Like I said, it's difficult to know who is being genuine, but she did send me her picture (I can't say I wasn't disappointed, she was a cute blonde). However, she confessed that she had ulterior motives. She wasn't out to meet a guy for herself, she was trying to find one for her friend Tammy and I had passed her test. Well, if it wasn't four in the morning, I might have been mad, but being as tired as I was, I was actually slightly amused. She asked me if she could give Tammy my screen name and email address and I said sure and went to bed never thinking twice about it.

About a week later, I sat at my computer pretending to be productive when I got a random IM from TAMSWEETS22. Well, I didn't know *who* it was, but I knew *who* it was. Oddly, we just started chatting like we had always known each other, which was strange considering I only knew her name. It was a little unfair because I'm sure that Dana had told her everything that I had told her the previous week. It didn't seem to matter. We chatted for a while and if you asked me how it went, I'd say so-so, whatever that means. I don't think we made a remarkable connection but we had a nice talk.

The next time I turned the computer on, I was greeted by GOOFYCHICK1981. I got the third degree from a great matchmaker who wouldn't be denied. I was about to tell her that I was not really interested in her friend, but I didn't. I don't know why, but after I thought about it, I really *was* interested. I had no real prospects at the time so why not give this girl a chance?

Over the next ten days, I have several conversations online with both Tammy and Dana. Tammy asked me for my phone number and while I wanted to give it to her, some strange apprehension set in, but after talking to her for a while I kept thinking that there



has to be more to her, more than IM boxes and that I needed to hear a real voice so I gave her my phone number.

A day or two later, sometime before Tammy called me, I found myself chatting with Dana. She was prodding me to ask Tammy out. I was hesitant and reluctant. I still hadn't heard a real voice yet, so I started getting playful.

"I bet that picture you sent me was Tammy and not you at all."

Then she dropped the bomb:

"No, Tammy is black, that picture was really me."

Now, of course it shouldn't have mattered, and it didn't matter, but *it mattered*. If anyone would have read my mind at that time, they'd have thought I was a real piece of work and I still can't believe I even thought this, but Tammy didn't seem black when we were chatting. See what I mean? What the hell does that even mean? What would a black person *seem* like? Oh, and it didn't stop there. I didn't even know that black people used the internet. I don't think I ever thought about it or thought they couldn't, *but I thought about it anyway*.

Now, and I mean this honestly, I'm not prejudice. Ignorant, probably. I might have been uninformed when I was younger, but I went off to school, met different people, taught immigrants how to butcher the English language and played on a rec basketball team that featured a token white guy, me. But none of that mattered when it became personal. Why did I regress? Where the hell did those thoughts ever even come from?

I was about to let this whole thing go, when the phone rang and I could have predicted who it was. It was great to finally hear her voice, but if the whole thing was a game, I was playing it now, too. I never mentioned that I knew she was black, but she

didn't tell me right away either and I swear I didn't care one way or the other, but I was starting to wonder when or if she was going to tell me. Then, to my ultimate surprise, she turns out to be a really nice girl. Take that back, a great girl! Chatting online she really came off as plain vanilla and I was honestly bored out of my mind sometimes, but talking to her on the phone was different. We talked for half the night and we talked about everything. Our favorite music, movies, our families, our exes, our dreams, it was like a dream. I even started to devise a plan. I figured I needed the next day to sort through it all in my mind and let it sink in, and then I'd ask her out. But I never got the chance; she asked me out! She told me I was charming. Me? Charming! I could hardly believe it. And she was sincere. A completely honest person, honest about everything all the time. She was soft-spoken and quiet and a little shy, but I could feel something exciting in her voice, something I'd never heard before and when she asked me out, it all but confirmed it. Plus she called me a charming gentleman. I agreed to pick her up at her office for dinner the next night.

Before we hung up, we start talking about Dana and she lets it out and I play cool. I don't remember exactly how it went, but she casually asked me if Dana had told me she was black and all I said was oh yeah, she mentioned it. End of discussion. I'll pick you up from work tomorrow and we'll have dinner at Old Mexico (one of our many common favorites) on Five Mile and see where that takes us.

No matter what the circumstances I always get ridiculously nervous before every first date. I just get that way and I just pushed all the other stuff I was wondering to the back of my mind. But there I was, stuck in traffic and I just couldn't stop thinking about it. I got so nervous I thought about standing her up but I'm not an asshole.

I kept checking my watch and it kept only being thirty seconds later than the last time I checked, but I was keeping good time and I was almost half way there. I turned up the radio and started singing along when a car veered into my lane and I had to slam on my brakes. I realized that two lanes were merging and I had cut off the car in front of me. I caught my breath and looked up to see the driver of the car in front of me jump out of her car and run up to mine. She was a large black woman and she approached the driver's window of my car screaming and waving her finger in the air. I rolled down my window and she looked at me and asked, "You know you about to pay for that car if you would have hit it?" Before I could answer, I felt the sting of her hand across my cheeks, side to side. I just froze. She was still yelling at me, but I was too stunned to make out what she was saying. When I came to, she was walking away and I yelled while extending my middle finger, "Fuck you, you stupid nigger bitch."

I sat there holding up traffic, still, the radio blaring.

*Old man didn't give me much more than just secondhand clothing  
Hope Jesus wants more for me than just secondhand clothing*

I lit a cigarette and made a U-turn, although I didn't drive straight home. I drove around downtown and looked up at the new City Hall building and then at the old library across the street. They'll probably be tearing that down and replacing it soon, too. For a moment, I was sad. The library was the last of the old buildings my grandfather helped build. But when I looked at the new City Hall building I couldn't help but be impressed. The shiny mirrored glass that covered it glistened in the twilight while the library sagged shabbily in its shadow.

I checked my watch. It was only five twenty-three. I turned the car around and drove back towards Tammy's office. She was waiting for me by the curb. I pulled up

alongside, parked and walked over to greet her. We embraced and I accidentally stepped on her foot as we let go, but she spared me the embarrassment and pretended it didn't happen. I opened up the passenger door and escorted her into the car. Before we drove away, she reached over and tugged at my lapel.

“Is that a new suit?”

“It is,” I nodded.

“It looks good on you.”

I turned towards her and smiled.

“Thanks,” I said, and we drove away, into the unknown.

## Why Would Anybody Cry at Dale McGregor's Funeral?

My father once went three years and seven months without uttering a single word to anyone. And as I tiptoe about his casket, the mourners speculate what silenced him. Theories and hypotheses, rumors and guesstimates. Prolonged laryngitis, a religious commitment, an excuse to divorce my mother, a tortured soul destined to take out his anguish on anyone who dared to love him. I cringe when I hear the morbidity, laugh at the absurdity. My aunts hover near the casket, vacillating between exasperation and relief. They guilt themselves into accepting responsibility for his silence. They sigh reminiscence, wishing for youth, to be chased once more around the house by a taunting older brother. My sisters have already conditioned themselves to feel nothing, not even emptiness. Their stoic trance, a reflection of our father. A few friends speak in low, muffled voices.

But mostly, there is silence. I try to convince myself it's fitting, it's the way my father would have wanted it, but my persuasion relents to questions, questions need answers, answers are nowhere. My father lived for sixty-two years, yet no one dares speak of his life beyond forty-three months of silence thirty years ago. No celebratory eulogy, no final remarks or remembrances and nobody is crying.

It was on my father's thirty-second birthday when my mother went out to the garage where he rebuilt engines and handed him the telephone. He looked at it and looked down at his grease ridden hands.

"It's Ken Neely," she said.

"Tell him I'll call him back."

Those were the last words to emerge from my father's mouth for almost four years. He never returned Ken Neely's call. He knew why Ken had phoned. The promise of eight seconds. Bull riding in Oklahoma. Bring the family. We have an extra trailer. I'm in the top ten on the circuit. I'm making more money than I did at the shop. I'm living the dream, Dale. I'm living the dream.

Up until then, Ken Neely called my father once a month trying to persuade him to close the garage and ride bulls with him on the rodeo circuit. Once and only once did my father approach my mother with the idea.

"I'm *not* moving down South," she replied. "Besides, those people scare me."

My father never argued. Ever. But right then and there, he must have looked at his greasy, calloused, bruised, scarred hands and looked down at the inside of Mrs. Carlson's worn out Ford and thought about Ken and the thrill of staying on that bull for eight seconds.

More surprising than my father's silence was the way my mother dealt with it. After thirty days, she quipped, "Oh, he's just in one of those moods." But thirty days later, she snapped. In front of us all, my sisters, Amanda and Jane, and myself, as she set a steaming casserole on the table for dinner.

"Dale, enough." She looked defeated. "Will you please say something? Anything?"

My father held his plate up to the casserole and ladled out a heaping scoop. Before he could set the plate back down my mother grabbed it from his hand and flung it like a Frisbee against the dining room wall, shattering it, while tuna noodle slowly cascaded down the stucco.

My sisters looked at each other, then at me. While we were scared, secretly we had anticipated this climax and were excited that it had finally commenced.

“Dale Michael McGregor, if you do not say something right now, I’m leaving forever and taking the kids with me.”

My father got up from the table, pushed in his chair and walked into the kitchen. He took an apple from a fruit bowl and went to the garage to work on Bud Nelson’s Charger.

“Pack your things, we’re leaving,” my mother said as she began to weep.

And we left.

We went to my Aunt Deborah’s house. “He’s just in one of those moods,” she assured us.

My father still attended my basketball games and tennis matches. He brought us to Friendly’s on our birthdays and took us to doctor appointments when my mother could not. He ran the garage, albeit silently, which alienated some customers, yet humored others. He kept the house in pristine condition, with the exception of the broken plate and now crusty casserole that inhabited the dining room wall and floor. One time, Amanda tried to clean up the mess, but my father gave her such a stern, almost menacing glare, that she stepped away from the shrapnel and let it be. Being that the casserole had consisted of tuna and cheese and cream sauce, one may have thought that an unbearable stench would have littered the room or attracted vermin, but no such odor ever lingered nor any foul creature neared.

My mother conceded the house in the divorce on the grounds that my father had built it. She quickly remarried and whether or not my father had feelings about this I never knew.

This is Dale McGregor's legacy. As I shake hands and accept condolences I try to reach inside and dig for more. I feel it there and I try to lure it to the surface but I don't want to cry in front of all these people who expect me to remain cool. Besides, why would anyone cry at *Dale McGregor's* funeral?

But I feel like I owe him something. Anything. For God's sake he was my father. I approach my Uncle Roger. We embrace. I ask him about my father.

"Remember how upset my dad was when Tom Seaver threw a no-hitter for the Reds? He never got over the fact that the Mets traded him to Cincinnati for Pat Zachary, Doug Flynn, Steve Henderson, and Dan Norman. 'Four players, it could have been a dozen players. You don't trade a Hall-of-Famer for four bums,' he told anyone who would listen."

I chuckle and nudge my Uncle. We are close and I know my father looked up to him.

"Yeah, only Dale would stop talking for four years because the Mets traded Tom Seaver."

I want to argue. I want to call him out in front of everyone. I want him to apologize. I want him to be sorry he cannot remember his older brother for anything more than his silence. I want him to know that when I was in high school my father twice rebuilt the engine in my Mustang because I had blown it up hotrodding. I want him know that when I was twenty-two Evelyn Massey broke up with me and my father



understood. He stopped working on Bill Grey's Dodge and we sat in the garage smoking cigars while he helped me through my tears.

But I am silent.

I never argue. Ever. I inherited this trait from my father. Like my brown eyes and my square shoulders. I let things go. I let this go. I let my anger go. I never speak up for these injustices, real or perceived. Somewhere, right now, my father knows I am defending him.

After the divorce everyone assumed my father would head for Oklahoma and ride bulls with Ken Neely living the dream, but when he didn't leave it just added to his mystery.

"I haven't spoken to your father in 35 years." A gravely voice tells me. I know from pictures that it's Ken Neely. Broad shoulders and a husky frame, he walks with a cane and a limp. "He would have made a fine bull rider."

I search for something to say to Ken, but I have nothing. We stand there in silence, uncomfortable silence.

"You're definitely Dale McGregor's son," Ken assures me. "You not only look like him, you stand like him and there's an uncertainty about you, like you know there's something out there you need to be doing, but you don't know how to get it done."

I still stand in silence.

"We were best friends. Best friends for 25 years. Time doesn't undo that, and neither can silence. Dale might have been breathing the last 35 years, but he wasn't alive. Look around you kid, look around. Ain't a soul here who gives a damn about that the dead man over there—."

“Enough. You made your point. Did you fly half way across the country to insult me at my father’s funeral?” I catch my breath. The whole room falls silent.

“No, I didn’t come here to insult you, but I can tell already that you’re too much like him.”

What son doesn’t want to be told he is like his father? However, I knew Ken wasn’t paying me a compliment. He obviously loved my father enough to relinquish any grudges between them. My father was not a saint. I just don’t feel like his funeral is the place to address his shortcomings. The faces littering the room disagree. There’s too much truth in their dry eyes. They know my father was silent, standoffish, stubborn, and cold. I don’t know that I’ll ever know why. I don’t care why. I just want people to know that my father was also caring, respectful, and honest.

Father Malcour calls attention to the mourners. We pray. I survey the room. People check their watches and tap their heels. I stand.

“Father, I’d like to say a few things about my father before we go.” He motions me to the podium. I clear my throat and address my father’s relatives and friends.

“In October of 1978 my father stopped talking. He remained silent for three years, seven months, and two days. Most of you remember him for this. However, I remember him for the day he spoke. I was fourteen years old and we were eating lunch at Jack’s Eastside Diner. Besides my father and myself, in the only other occupied booth at Jack’s sat a young mother with her two children and their grandmother. My father kept looking up and over at the grandmother, whom at every opportunity called over the waitress and unnecessarily berated her. Be it the service, the food, or the atmosphere, nothing pleased this woman. I felt bad for the waitress and as the old woman’s protests

increased, I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable. My father gave his patented menacing glare to the grandmother, but I also noticed his eyes moving down, towards the young children. ‘Christ, you’ve got to be kidding if you think your getting a tip,’ I then heard the old woman tell the waitress as she cleared the plates, all of which had been licked clean. My father stood up and pushed in his chair. I motioned to rise, but my father stuck out his finger to signal me to keep seated. He walked over to the table and addressed the old woman, ‘You shouldn’t talk to other human beings that way.’ The old woman turned up her nose and looked away. Then his gravelly voice smoothed into velvet. ‘Keep the change,’ he said and handed our waitress a folded up bill.

“Later that summer, I sat in the stands with my father watching the Mets play the Reds. He did not it know then, but within weeks, his favorite player, Tom Seaver would be traded. Although some think otherwise, my father quickly got over it. In the late innings of that game, my father put his arm around me. I soaked in the green of the grass and the smell of the hotdogs and the inescapable essence of baseball. I looked over at my father and asked him, ‘Dad, why did you stop talking?’ He nodded his head, almost wistfully and said, ‘Son, I didn’t have anything to say.’”

I am still tiptoeing around his casket. The mourners, some of whom nodded in approval as I told my story, some of whom nodded off, have shuffled out. Only my sister, Ruth, has noticed that I am crying, but she quickly looks away in shame.

## Hello, Bathroom, and Goodbye

Here are the problems with foreign exchange students at my high school: first of all, they're foreign. Second, and most importantly, for the month they are here, every girl in the school goes gaga for them. It's sickening. Like it needs to be any harder to get a girl around here. Even Lana Price, who everyone in the world knows is a lesbo, throws herself all over them. *They're enlightened*, she says. Enlightened? It's their last day at our school and the one from Poland hasn't changed his shirt since he's been here.

*Casmir*, I asked him yesterday, as I pointed at his dirty shirt, *who the hell is Kraftwerk?* He got this big, dorky, Polack smile on his face and his cheeks puffed out, forcing ooze out of his acne. He pulled the shirt away from his body and proudly announced, *German band*. At least that's what I thought he said. His English isn't really English. Sometimes he points or just makes a circle in the air with his finger trying to conjure words out of the atmosphere. He nodded and stared at me like I should give a shit. *You like that shirt a lot?* He just kept nodding like he was controlled by a power switch left in the nod position. *Yes, which I like a lot*, he said. Which. He adds the word which to every sentence whether it needs it or not. Then, I couldn't help myself. *Casmir, have you washed your hair since you've been here?* And right on cue, his eyes practically crossed and he started itching his scalp. Enlightened? *Try which some Head and Shoulders*. It works wonders for enlightenment.

I thought he would walk away but he just stood there itching and nodding, nodding the trance of the corroded cement block walls. The corroded cement block walls suffocating the halls, the halls with their rusty lockers, the rusty lockers suffocating the echoes, the echoes of every student who ever dreaded this school. I dread this school. I

dread the ancient blood red bricks the moment they emerge from the horizon as I walk, or better yet march, towards its curse. And the dumb ass foreigners just make it worse.

The only thing that cracks me up more than Casmir, is Jazz. Yeah, I know, Jazz. He's from Denmark. And he's black. He's gotta be the only black person there. Why the hell did they have to pawn him off on us? The only good thing about him is that his English is perfect, except for the retarded accent. All he talks about is hating Americans and American football because it's too brutal, *then why the hell did you come here?* and his girlfriend that he met online. She's from Canada. He thinks he is going to take a train to Toronto to meet her. He thinks you can just train hop from place to place here. He doesn't understand why not and he really wants to see her face to face for the first time. It's his last day here and he's totally distraught. I felt bad for him until he showed me her picture. She's not worth an intercontinental relationship. At least not when you could have had your pick of the girls fawning all over you here. But maybe he's smarter than he's letting on. The girls here are two-faced bitches. All it takes is for one of them to show interest in Jazz and then the dominoes fall. It's a competition for his affections, but it doesn't matter because he'll be gone tomorrow. It's not like any of them would dare bring a black foreigner home to mommy and daddy anyway.

The only thing funnier than Casmir and Jazz being here, is the fact that our school sent Matt Smith and Pete Highnote over there. I guess there's nothing wrong with that, except for the fact that they're the two biggest douche bags at this school. Smith was cool for five minutes last year when he fingered Kelly Berger on the bus, but we've all fingered her since then. Not to mention Ross Michaels actually did the dirty deed with her, twice. And Highnote lost to a girl in the wrestling finals last year. If you can call

her a girl. She looked like a refrigerator with tits. You don't get all the way to the finals and lose to a girl. I bet the Polish girls are smart enough not to go gaga over Highnote and Smith. Unless all the Polish guys look like Casmir. For about two seconds I was almost jealous of those losers.

But like I said the whole thing is stupid. It just doesn't make sense. Why do Smith and Highnote both get to go to the same high school in Poland? Why doesn't one of them go to Denmark? I could have went but I decided not to.

Being that today is the last day those two idiots are here, they are making us gather for an assembly in the gym. Mr. Schenker, the German teacher, is going to stand at the podium and tell a bunch of lies about how much we enjoyed Casmir and Jazz being here and that we're sad to see them go. Then they will each take turns giving a bullshit speech about how grateful they are for the opportunity they were given and some other stuff that will make you roll your eyes. They should both apologize for being fags. Because they could have had any girl at this school and neither of them went as far as second base with any of them. Casmir kept saying, *I which have girlfriend*. Yeah, in Poland. Like that matters here. Idiot.

And then the school yearbook staff will take a bunch of pictures. Some with Casmir and Jazz together. They probably don't even like each other. They're probably jealous assholes who will never see or hear from each other again.

But I'm not going to the assembly. At least I wasn't going until Hutchinson, the assistant principal stopped me on my way out the door. *Mr. Nelson, where do you think you're going?* Goddammit. *To the assembly, sir*. I wasn't even going to go outside and smoke. I was just going to go home for the rest of the day. The bastard made me turn

around and then he escorted me to the gym. Dickhead. Why should I go? For the past thirty days all I've done is give dirty looks to the Dane and insult Casmir. In fact, the other day I was relentless. Casmir was sitting at a table in the library. I walked up behind him and whispered in his ear, *Casmir, I know that joke how many Polacks does it take to change a light bulb isn't true.* He took his head out of his comic book—yeah, I know, a fucking comic book, isn't that great?—and looked up at me all confused. *It isn't true because they don't have electricity yet in Poland.* I laughed so hard the librarian made me leave. Priceless. Not to mention, last week in the cafeteria Casmir was sitting at a table surround by girls. I squeezed in at the table between Casmir and some slut and made her and all the other girls squirm. *Leave him alone, Bobby, you're such a jerk.* Blah, blah, blah. I held up my greasy slice of pizza right in his face. *Casmir, this is pizza. I know you are used to eating mountain goat and dandelions, but we eat this here.* Hilarious. But not as funny as the German teacher leading this dumb ass assembly. Why? Because we don't have a Polish or a Danish teacher. Smith and Highnote learned like three Polish words before they left. Hello, bathroom, and goodbye. You traipse around a foreign country with only those three words. See how far you get. Smith and Highnote are probably being tortured in a Polish prison right now. You know how backwards those countries are. Do they even have running water? I bet they have to piss and shit in a hole they dig themselves like they do on Survivor. Smith and Highnote aren't even Polish. They could have just as easily sent Todd Majjewski or Wayne Orliewicz. Idiots. I'll just be happy when things are back to normal.

The speeches suck and the flashbulbs are hurting my eyes. The minute this shit is done I'm cutting the rest of the day and Hutchinson and kiss my ass. Of course, everyone

rushes out at once when Schenker dismisses the assembly. I'm trying to push my way through the crowd when I feel a tug at my arm. *Hey, hey.* It's Casmir and the faggot yearbook photographer. They drag me to the middle of the gym. *I want to take photo which my funny friend.* Before I can get away, he puts his arm around me and the yearbook idiot takes our picture. Then he turns toward me and grabs my hand to shake it. He shakes it up and down out of control. *Good which to meet you funny friend Bobby.* And thank God some girls surround us screaming to take one last picture with him. But I can't leave. I just stand at the gymnasium doors watching the girls one by one getting their picture taken with Casmir. He doesn't even know any of their names. It makes me sick to my stomach and I decide to leave.

On my way out of the school, Hutchinson runs up after me again. *Mr. Nelson, where are you going now?* I don't answer. He grabs my arm. *Get back to your next class right now, Bobby.* I pull away, shake my head and run away.



## One Good Eye

“You boys come on up here and eat. I made some soup.” Her voice rang down the stairs and stirred life into the stale basement air.

“We’re coming, Auntie,” Kenny answered. Kenny and I filed into the kitchen and as we sat down, she held up a ladle and gave us a stare.

“Oh, we need to wash our hands first,” Kenny said. We shuffled over to the sink and lathered up our palms with pink dish soap and dried them with the warmest, fuzziest towel my fingers had ever felt.

“Kendrick, are you going to introduce me to your friend?” his aunt asked.

*Kendrick.* I always thought his full name was Kenneth. Thanks to Darryl, half the school thought his real name was *Cheese*.

“I’m sorry Auntie, this is Garret. Garret, this is my Auntie Ophelia,” Kenny said and put his head down. We sat at the table while she ladled us big bowls of chicken and dumplings.

“Well it’s a pleasure to finally meet one of Kendrick’s friends,” she said and then handed me a white towel with fancy edges. I gave it a funny stare. Kenny looked up at me.

“Oh, that’s a napkin,” Kenny said.

I had never seen a cloth napkin before. The only napkins we ever had were the extra ones we took from McDonald’s. The kitchen smelled like spices and the soup was so good I never wanted to eat anything else again in my life. The calm that surrounded us welcomed, warmed, and cleansed my ears of the constant sound of the buzzing wind

and cold. More than anything else, I was just glad that we weren't still arguing with Darryl.

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"Angels *are* real." I said. I so was sick of the game I stuck my hands on my hips to make sure Darryl knew it would take extra effort to refute my assertion.

"No, ghosts are real," Darryl fought back.

"No, angels are real and ghosts are make believe." I said.

I can't believe he suckered me into this argument. But Darryl would argue with a cat over why it wasn't a dog.

"They're the same thing." Cheese said. We both looked down at him, huddled up with his hands around his knees, his back against his bent up screen door. That's how we spent our time, bickering about the absurd, waiting for winter, on the front steps of Cheese's house.

"Angels and ghosts," Cheese nodded. "They're the same thing."

"Shut the hell up. Nobody asked you." Darryl wouldn't let Cheese argue back. I quickly interrupted so he wouldn't have to be Darryl's punching bag.

"Darryl, have you ever seen a ghost?" He looked at me like I was an idiot, but he didn't pick on me like he picked on Cheese. He started to answer but I couldn't hear over the blaring sirens. Darryl's eyes grew big and he turned toward the noise and paused like he just realized he had the power to think and then looked over at me.

"Have *you* ever seen an angel?" Darryl waited for my answer, but he knew I had not. He strutted around the lamppost in Cheese's front yard waiting for me to concede his point, but I just let it go.

“I did,” chimed in Cheese.

I wanted to shake him and ask him why? He knew better than to pick fights with Darryl. I tried to interject because I knew what was coming, but I wasn’t fast enough.

“You didn’t see any angels, you dumb ass.” Darryl shook his head and kicked at the air in front of Cheese. “Besides, you’re blind.”

“I have one good eye,” Cheese said.

“I don’t care how many eyes you have. You’re a stinkin’ lyin’ bastard—and you know sometimes you call someone a bastard and you’re just callin’ ‘em a bastard to call ‘em one?”

Darryl paused like he thought one of us was going to answer but I just stood there blowing warm air into my cupped hands because the temperature was dropping. It all just got Darryl hotter.

“Well this time I’m really callin’ you a bastard. You don’t know who your daddy is, really. You’re a bastard.”

Cheese started rocking back and forth against the rickety screen door. He didn’t look up at us.

“I know who my daddy is.”

“How do you know?” Darryl snapped, hardly audible over louder, approaching sirens.

“He’s an angel. I can see him.”

Darryl’s disbelief brought lightning to his eyes. The sirens faded in the distance, but Darryl’s voice crescendoed.

“Oh my God. You’re not only a blind bastard, but you’re retarded. Your daddy ain’t no angel. My mom said your real daddy was White Burt, that crazy old fucked up dude that died on his motorcycle by the check cashin’ place.”

We were saved from anymore of Darryl’s rant when Meeks strolled up the walkway dribbling a basketball and taking a fat drag off a cigarette.

“We gonna ball?”

“It’s too cold.”

“Lemme get a cigarette,” Darryl stuck out his hand.

“It’s my only one.”

Cheese stood up.

“I got some cigarettes.” He pulled a crumpled up pack of generic menthols out of his pocket. Darryl grabbed them out of his hand. His eyes grew big and he threw the pack on the ground.

“Shit, you probably stole those from your mom. C’mon fellas, let’s ditch this chump and go find some real cigarettes.”

“It’s too cold to fuck around, Darryl.” I said, and Meeks took his last drag, dropped the butt and snuffed it out with his sneaker.

“I’m cool,” Meeks said.

Darryl’s eyes told us to fuck off like he just discovered disgust and wanted a prize for it. He walked away dumbfounded or at least pretending to be.

“Fine, y’all hang out here. I don’t want nothin’ to do with this project ass house and that crazy old woman who keeps peeking out here at us.”

None of us would admit it, but we actually liked hanging out at Cheese's place. He had a basketball hoop in his driveway and he lived in the only house left on the block with a real porch and a real front yard. All the other houses were chopped up into dirty old apartments with their yards turned into parking lots or they were muddy fenced-in dog pits. It was quiet inside, too. You couldn't hear the sirens from behind the walls. You couldn't hear the gunshots, the fireworks, the screaming and fighting, the little kids running around, nothing. There weren't any babies crying or people pounding on the door, coming and going at all hours of the night. Just Cheese, his mom, if she wasn't at work, and his mom's aunt, this old lady who was blind like Cheese. They both had ocular cancer when they were babies, both in their right eyes.

"Oc'lar cancer? That's the dumbest shit I ever heard," Darryl mocked Cheese when he found out. Actually, Darryl still called him Kenny then. It was right after he learned Kenny was blind when he said, "Kenny, your momma so poor she don't get food stamps, she gets custom made government cheese." Darryl's eyes lit up after he told that joke but ours just rolled. We heard his brother tell that joke eight times before. He started calling Kenny, "Cheese," after that.

We picked up the crumpled cigarette pack and smoked its remnants to keep warm.

"Can you really see angels?" I asked him.

Cheese put his head down and half-smiled. I couldn't tell if he was being coy or bashful. He was hard to figure out. Sometimes I wanted to stick up for him like a big brother, but sometimes he had this look on his face like he knew something the rest of us didn't. I always wondered what he knew.

“I can’t see any angels and I can’t see any ghosts,” Cheese admitted. Before I could answer, Darryl strolled back up the walkway smoking a cigarette like a fat cat.

“Y’all still talking about ghosts? I thought I made it clear that blind bastard retard can’t see no ghosts.” He walked up to Cheese, and as he flashed him his fresh pack of cigarettes like it was a badge, a police car pulled up in front of the house. The officer rolled down his window.

“Hey Darryl,” the officer called out.

Darryl turned around, slowly, liked he’d heard his name called out like that before.

“Where’s Vernon?” The officer questioned.

“I ain’t seen him all day.” Darryl pursed his lips and squinted his eyes. The officer drove away.

Darryl’s brother Vernon didn’t get into trouble, he *was* trouble. Arrested, in jail, out of jail, he never had a job and he always had money. Their mom was always gone so Darryl’s only supervision was Vernon, whom he thought was God.

“Whatch yer brother done now, Darryl?” Meeks asked.

“Why you always think he done somethin’? He ain’t never done nothin’.”

The wind whistled like a siren and the screen door rattled against Cheese’s back. He stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Sit your ass back down, Gouda.” Darryl pushed Cheese in the chest. Cheese, although the skinniest kid on the block, always looked the healthiest. He didn’t budge.

“Darryl, your poor ass don’t even know what Gouda is,” Meeks said. He was the only one of us bold enough to stand up to Darryl. He even went as far as producing another cigarette from his coat pocket.

“Meeks, you liar, you said you didn’t have any more cigarettes.”

Meeks lit his cigarette and blew a smoke ring in the air.

“I didn’t. I didn’t have any more for moochers like you.”

Cheese giggled recklessly.

“Whatter you laughin’ at?” Darryl erupted. And then he let Cheese have it.

“Look at your skinny ass with your hands in your pockets.” Darryl put his hands in his pockets and started waddling around the lamppost like a penguin. “Look at me, I’m Cheese, pasteurized American Cheese.”

It really wasn’t that funny, but it was cold out and Darryl just had this way of making us laugh sometimes and Meeks and I just lost it. We cackled and held our guts like it hurt and Darryl hopped onto the porch right next to Cheese and shut one eye.

“I’m the blind ass retarded bastard Cheese and I see ghosts.”

Cheese stood motionless. Then, all of a sudden, I could have sworn I saw a cartoon light bulb shine above his head and a smirk magically appear on his face. Meeks and I gave each other an eye and Cheese looked over at us like he was about to bestow us with a gift. He put his hands over his eyes and bent over and turned to the side. He quickly popped back up holding his eye between his fingers, half his face an empty hole. He stuck the glass ball right in Darryl’s face.

“I do see ghosts, Darryl, and this is how I see them. Right here. I see ghosts and angels just like I see you.”

Darryl looked at us and turned eight different colors and started to back away. He bent over the bushes next to the driveway. His cigarettes fell out of his pocket and he threw up macaroni and cheese all over the walkway. Cheese put his head down and leaned over to his side and looked back up at us with his face put back together. Meeks walked to the driveway and bent over to pick up Darryl's cigarettes but he saw the puke and looked back at Kenny. He shook his head and walked away.

I went and picked up the smokes myself. I gave one to Kenny and put one in my mouth but I didn't light it.

"Damn Kenny," I said. "You scared the shit outta Darryl."

Kenny just kind of swayed back and forth with his hands in his pockets.

"Why'd you do that?"

"My auntie told me she did that once when some people were messin' with her. I didn't think I ever would."

We smoked the rest of the cigarettes in silence. I kept thinking there was something I was supposed to say. I wanted to thank him, but I didn't know why. I owed him something, but I didn't think I had anything he'd want.

The silence carried on. I walked slowly to the driveway and turned around.

"Kenny, I'm sorry I didn't stick up for you earlier."

He didn't say anything for a while. He just kept his hands in his pockets, kept that look on his face.

"You wanna come inside? It's getting pretty cold out here."

I thought about running away, but then I saw his aunt peek out the window at us.



We walked through the kitchen, where Kenny's aunt sat at the table reading the paper. Just as we started to descend the basement stairs, Kenny turned around and looked over at the old woman.

"Auntie," he said, "I was outside and I—"

"Kendrick, I saw what you did," she interrupted. "I still have one good eye."

## Christmas Carols Sang with Ruby

She lived to be ninety-one, but Dustin didn't know his Great Aunt Ruby until she was eighty and moved to his family's farm shortly after his sixteenth birthday. She often said that the golden chain's that majestically lined the Clark's driveway welcomed her to paradise. Dustin thought Ruby brought the paradise with her.

The second morning since Dustin came home from Kuwait, he lay in bed, too entangled in the sheets to reach the alarm, letting it blare until his mother pounded on the bedroom door.

"Dustin, shut off the alarm. You'll wake up Ruby."

Ruby, asleep in the next bedroom, hadn't stopped signing Christmas carols since Dustin strolled up the drive two days prior. Sometimes she hummed, sometimes she whistled, but most of the time, she just sang, her vibrato cascading through the halls. Even when she went outside, the birds ceased to call, perched at attention, drones to Ruby's Yuletide laments cutting through the July heat.

Dustin knocked the alarm off the nightstand as he unwound himself from the sheets. Unable to make it stop, he ripped the plug from the wall. He wasn't even sure why he'd set it, but bacon and coffee saturated the air, coercing him into the kitchen for breakfast.

"She finally stopped about four this morning," Dustin's mom said. "First time she's slept since you've been home."

She poured her son a cup of coffee and sat down beside him at the breakfast table.

"She's been so restless since her eyes went. Around the house she's okay, but I can't leave her alone outside. She wanders off and she always wants to go outside."

Ruby's wanderings were legendary. Once, she followed Dustin to school in the morning only to get lost on the way home. Sheriff Gallant found her half way to Victoriaville dressed in a nightgown and slippers.

Mrs. Clark stood and rubbed the top of her son's head. The bristly crew cut skewed her memory, uncertain if the boy was the one she used to fight with over haircuts, the younger Dustin content with an unkempt mop of locks.

By the time Grandpa Eugene came in for breakfast Dustin had already finished.

"Your dad had to go to Drummondville for the day. You'll have to help me load the Viking after breakfast so it's ready for him to run feed over to Gerald's tomorrow morning."

Dustin hated the old Viking dump truck. He hated the farm. It wasn't the work that bothered him, it was the farm itself. His father and grandfather didn't run the farm, it ran them, consumed them and voided out their personalities. Immunized them from everything else in the world. The farm never slept, never took vacations, never yielded enough and always came first. Even in another world, another continent, fighting a war, Dustin could not escape the farm. It followed him overseas, plowing fields in his dreams, milking cows in his mind. Afraid in the desert, he couldn't think of home without hating the farm. Only two days home and he was already being forced into duty.

He felt his face go blank as he helped his grandpa load the Viking. The blank face, the family tradition. Grandpa Eugene wasn't even smiling in his wedding picture. Grandma Pearl's eyes stared up at him, her aura emanating out of the picture, yet unable to pierce the heart of the man she had just married, his eyes in a field, baling hay. Dustin wondered how they got him out of his overalls and into a suit.

Silence fell on the pair as they loaded the Viking. Dustin couldn't remember the last time he'd had a conversation with his grandfather or if he ever really had. He remembered moments but struggled to find the details. Even during holidays his Grandfather evaded his memory, quarantined himself to the periphery. And when he did appear it was only out of resentment. Dustin's father wouldn't work on holidays except to feed the livestock, but on Christmas, Easter, or Thanksgiving, Grandpa Eugene always did. On Thanksgiving, he'd announce to the whole family, "I'd rather do it myself than hire any spics or niggers." Then he would disappear into the fields or the barn. He'd reappear at supper time covered in the days work and sit up to the table like it was his throne.

As they finished loading the Viking, the wind picked up and knocked the baseball cap off Dustin's head. The whistling sounded like a song and as it neared, Grandpa Eugene looked at Dustin and finally broke the silence.

"Godammit, she's out there singing again. Gonna drive an old man crazy with the goddamn Christmas songs."

Dustin dropped his shovel and walked behind the barn to find Ruby, her frazzled gray hair conducting the wind, dreaming of a white Christmas. He escorted her to the backyard swing and sat beside her. Ruby held her hand up to Dustin's face and pressed firmly against his cheeks then outlined his nose with her index finger.

"Yes, it really is you, Dusty." She said. "And you still are pretty. You know, men can be pretty, too. Yes, my Tom, he was pretty. Pretty until the day he died. Not my brother, Eldon, though, he was handsome, not pretty. Do you know the difference,

Dusty? A pretty man tells you how he feels with his eyes. A handsome man only knows how to say it with his mouth and if he never tells you never know.”

Ruby rocked the swing gently, her eyes, once big, bold, dark and proud, now sank bloodshot into her face, grayed with age, failed from diabetes.

“Eldon never came home from the war, Dusty. We thought he’d be home by Christmas and when he wasn’t, Momma made us leave the decorations up and told us we couldn’t bring ‘em down until Eldon came home to celebrate Christmas. March, April, May, he still wasn’t home. In July they finally knocked on the door and told us he was gone. Momma sat in the living room surrounded by all the Christmas lights and the tree, still green, and cried until Papa came home. Papa took down the lights and hauled the tree out back and burnt it up.”

Dustin squeezed Ruby’s hand, but his consolation could only be token or patronizing. Who can tell the aged and weathered that it will be all right?

“Goddamn, there you are.” Grandpa Eugene walked over from behind the barn.

“Four years in the army and you’d think you’d know how to finish a job by now. If I was your father I’d have whipped a little more sense into you.”

Reasons would be easy to find to ignore the old man, but Dustin didn’t want to disrespect him even when he knew Grandpa Eugene was wrong. But Grandpa Eugene was mostly right. Right about Dustin not finishing things. He could have easily signed up for four more years. He could have easily finished high school in time instead of dropping out for a year after he got caught smoking pot in the boy’s room.

Dustin’s father blamed himself, for working too much, for leaving the boy too often to the watchful eye of his stubborn and out of touch Grandfather. He wanted to go

easy on Dustin, but his mother and Grandfather saw things differently. Dustin's mother laid out a litany of new rules and regulations that Dustin would follow beginning with writing an apology letter to the principal and ending with no Metallica concert.

“You're not going to the concert.”

“But mom, the concert is tomorrow and we have tickets.”

“You never asked me if you could go, tomorrow's a school night, and you haven't even started your work yet, and you're two days behind.”

“I'm sixteen, I shouldn't have to ask. It's all bullshit”

“That ain't no bullshit, boy,” Grandpa Eugene said after he'd walked in on the conversation, his thick black-framed glasses covered in sweat. “You don't talk that way to your mother.” He pulled Dustin up out of the kitchen chair by his ear and dragged him out the back door. There was no concert: only Dustin, a shovel, and a stable full of manure.

By the time Dustin turned five years old, the farm wasn't earning enough for Dustin's dad to support the family so he started hauling grain from the Van Dam farm to the farm bureau as a side job. Grandpa Eugene resented his son for leaving the farm for half the day or he resented the farm for not being able to support the family, or both, or he just resented for the sake of being resentful. He took the brunt of his resentment out on Dustin. Dustin could not work hard enough, wasn't smart enough, fast enough, or man enough or just plain good enough to live up to his grandfather's expectations. Whatever the expectations were, Eugene would never say, it was just never enough. But with Dustin's father away half the day, Dustin fell under the watch of his grandfather, who made sure Dustin never fell out of line or didn't do his share of the work.

After shoveling manure that night before the concert, Dustin quietly packed up a few things and crept down the stairs. A light was on in the living room. He peeked around the corner, where Ruby, wearing a 1940's party dress, danced by herself, twirling, dipping, swinging, without any music. He drove his beat up Citation to the Pell house, where Graham met him at the end of driveway. "Dude, I can't go with you, I just can't." Graham told Dustin. "But here are the tickets." And off into the night Dustin went.

Two weeks later a sheriff's deputy found Dustin asleep in his car on the side of an old dirt road near Carthage. His father picked him up and they drove the silent two hours home.

And all was silent. Dustin's mother only looked at her son and cried and Grandpa Eugene ignored him altogether. After he didn't leave his room for a week, Mrs. Clark summoned Graham Pell to try and coax Dustin out of his room. It was Ruby and Graham who knocked on Dustin's door.

"Dusty, your friend Graham came to visit me. He lives three miles up the road. Your room is right next to mine and you can't take the time to visit me anymore?"

"Dude, did you go to the concert?"

Dusty shook his head, too ashamed to tell him he'd gotten lost on the way to New York, too afraid to look Ruby in the eyes. She could still see then. It wasn't until after Dusty left for the army that she completely lost her sight. At first, it came and went, hazy days and clear days, white days and dark days, figures and blurs, but by the time Dusty sent his first letter from Kuwait, Ruby was completely blind and Mrs. Clark had to read the letter out loud.

It was another week before Dusty came out of his room and only after threats to have him committed to Parkview. His father sat him down for a chat but he still couldn't look him in the eyes. Dustin's father looked straight down when he told him that he had gotten him a job candling eggs at Gerald Baas' farm.

Everyone knew that candling eggs was a woman's job but Dustin relented and showed up at the Baas farm at six in the morning every day, including Saturday's and Sundays. For ten hours each day he held eggs up to the light, examining them for impurities. Dustin was the only full time candler. At different times during the week he'd candle eggs with Mrs. Baas, or Mrs. Pell or any number of older women who wanted to work a day or two.

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"Grandpa, I'm going to walk Ruby back inside for her nap and then I'll be right back out to finish loading the Viking." Eugene didn't answer and walked away.

Ruby climbed out of the swing and sang *Silver Bells* through the wind as Dustin held her hand and walked her inside. He guided her to her room and knelt beside her bed as she lay down.

"I'm going to go finish helping Grandpa. I'll come see you after dinner." Dustin stood up and knocked over a picture as he pulled the cord on the nightstand lamp. He wondered if Ruby could tell if the lights were on or if it were day or night. He picked up the picture, he had seen it many times, of Ruby and her sisters, Lenore and his grandmother, Irlene, only this time it looked different, as though he was seeing it again or the first time.



“Ruby, these are your sisters, right? And that’s my grandmother, right? In the picture on the nightstand?”

“Oh yes, Dusty. I haven’t looked at my pictures in so long. Why don’t you pull out the box under the bed and we’ll have a look at them.”

Dustin wasn’t sure if it was a good idea. He didn’t want Ruby to be upset or angry. He tried imaging life without vision. He wondered if everything turned black or just blank, empty space, a void. But he slid the box out from under the bed and hoisted it up on the bed where Ruby had sat up.

“Just pull out a picture and tell me what you see and I’ll know what we’re looking at.”

Dustin held up a faded black and white of two men polishing a big old car.

“That’s my Uncle Chester and my nephew Sid. That was Sid’s first car, a ’41 Plymouth.”

“Are you sure, Ruby? That these are your relatives?”

“I’m sure, Dusty. Chester is wearing suspenders over his work shirt and Sidney never went anywhere without his newsboy hat. I can see them like it was yesterday.”

Dustin examined another photo.

“What about this one, Ruby, it’s more recent, of you and a woman with curly hair and a pink blouse and a—“

“And big dark eyes and laughing. That’s my sister, Lenore. That was her seventy-fifth birthday party. She dyed her hair, you know. But it didn’t matter, even though she was three years older, she always looked much younger than me. I was just meant to look old.”

Dustin shuffled through all of the photos, sure there was a mistake. All of Ruby's relatives were black. He rubbed the olive skin of Ruby's arm. She didn't look black and neither did Dustin's Grandma, Irlene, although he had only seen older black and white photos of her. She died when Dustin's mother was a baby. But it could not be mistaken. Ruby couldn't be wrong about all of the photos, could she?

"Ruby, are any of these people still alive?"

"Well, my sister died soon after her seventy-fifth birthday, and Chester and Sidney, they're both gone as well. Dusty, find me a picture of a young girl in pigtails and a school uniform."

Dustin dug through the box, flipping pictures one by one until he found the picture.

"That's Lena, Sidney's daughter. She sends me a card on my birthday every year, but I haven't seen her in fifteen years, since her mother passed. She still lives up in Canada."

Dustin sat silent.

"Pretty boy, I can't see your eyes but I know they're there."

Dustin got up off the floor and left the room. He went outside and ran down the driveway, past the golden chains and across the road without looking for traffic. He leapt the ditch and ran through the corn as fast as he could until he had no breath, until he reached a clearing. He took off his sweat drenched shirt and leaned over with his hands on his knees. Wally Boerman drove by on a tractor. Dustin nodded and kept running.

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Dustin waited until he knew his father and grandfather were out for the day before he came out for breakfast the next morning. His mother stood over the sink, scrubbing pans.

“Mornin’ Dustin. Mr. Boerman was over this mornin’ and said you were running around his corn last night lookin’ like you saw a ghost. You all right?”

“Mom, are you black? I mean are we, am I?”

Mrs. Clark turned around and wiped the sweat from her forehead with her wrist. Her eyes fluttered and pulled the latex gloves off her hands.

“Well, I guess. I mean, if it matters. My mother, Irlene, was a quarter black. Does it matter, Dustin?”

“Of course it matters. Or you wouldn’t have hidden it from me.”

“Dustin, what can I hide, there’s a picture of my parents on our mantle.”

“It’s in black and white and you can’t tell in that picture, but Ruby has pictures and it’s pretty obvious. Why aren’t those pictures out?”

“Why upset your grandfather? You know how he gets.”

“How does he get? He loves to be lied to. I know that much.”

Dustin got up from the table and went to the back porch, where he looked outside through the screen. His grandfather stood in a tree, holding a chainsaw, clearing branches away. Dustin still needed two hands to lift the old chainsaw, but his grandfather could wield it and use it one handed, while the other hand steadied his body against the trunk. His father pulled up in the flatbed, ready for more hay to move down to Gerald’s. Dustin steadied his knees against the screen door, careful not to open it.

That night, after everyone had gone to sleep, Dustin sifted through all the pictures in his mom’s albums and Ruby’s box. He pulled out the ones of his Grandmother and all

of his Aunts and Ruby's cousins. He hung them throughout the house, in the living room, on the mantle, on the walls, in the kitchen, in the halls.

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The silence in the coop was louder than usual as Dustin and Grandpa Eugene crated chickens. When they finished, Eugene threw down his gloves and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"That crazy old woman hung up all them pictures last night." He said.

Dustin took his gloves off and stared into the old man's eyes.

"She can stay much longer if she goin' to start pullin' shit like that."

Dustin shook his head.

"No."

"Well, it's starting to sound like you got some sense in you after all."

"No. No."

"What?"

"Ruby didn't hang up those pictures. I did."

"Well, what the hell'd you go an' do that for? Jesus Christ, I've lived in this house for sixty-four years. I don't need to see that shit when I wake up in the morning."

"They're my mother's Aunts and my Grandmother and my cousins. I live here too and I think I should be allowed to keep some pictures on the walls."

"You think that's your family, huh? You think those people give a shit about you? Do you?"

Dustin stood face to face and toe to toe with his Grandfather. He pushed his finger into the old man's chest.

“Just say it, c’mon, just say it. My mom had to fight with you before you’d even relent to let Ruby come and stay. Why didn’t you want her here? Why not?”

Eugene’s faced turned orange and then red and then pale as the moon. He grabbed Dustin’s coat collar and lifted him off the ground, forcing him against the wall of the chicken coop.

“Are you afraid? Afraid of a little old black woman? Afraid of the truth?”

“You think I don’t know she’s a nigger? Is that it?” He tightened his grip on Dustin’s collar before letting go, dropping Dustin into the mud and the muck below.

“Why does everything have to be a secret?”

“Secret? A secret? The whole Goddamn town knows your dad knocked up the nigger girl. You’re the dumbass who just figured it out.”

“That’s my mom, you son of a bitch.”

Dustin grabbed hold of Eugene’s pant leg to pry himself up off the ground. He trembled and clenched his fists.

“Hit me nigger boy, go ahead and hit me.”

Dustin gritted his teeth and tried to steady his knees. He reared back his arm and closed his eyes. He swung as hard as he could but Eugene caught Dustin’s punch in his hand, held it tight and forced Dustin back down to the ground.

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Dustin laid in the muck and pouted. *You can’t stand the fact that they’re black.* He repeated it to himself over and over again. But it wasn’t Grandpa Eugene who couldn’t stand it, it was Dustin. *If they are black, then I am black,* he thought to himself over and

over again. He kept doing the math. *My Grandmother is one quarter, my mother is one eighth, I am one sixteenth. But why should it matter?*

When Dustin finally went back inside the house, his mother was taking down the pictures.

“Even she has sense enough to take them down.” Grandpa Eugene blared at Dustin when he walked in the dining room.

“Just don’t blame Ruby.” Dustin said.

“Oh mercy, have I done something wrong? Oh mercy,” Ruby repeated over and over and over. She stumbled up from the table, but caught herself on the back of her chair. Mrs. Clark rushed to her side to hold her up, but she couldn’t steady her and Ruby fell to the ground.

“See what you’ve done.” Dustin said.

“Don’t blame me for your nonsense, boy.”

“Stop bickering and help Ruby.” Mrs. Clark pushed the table and the chairs aside to give Ruby room, but she couldn’t prop herself up from the floor. She curled up and started singing *Silent Night*.

Soon after Ruby died, Dustin reenlisted in the army. When he refiled his paperwork, he noticed the box next to RACE was checked Caucasian. He looked at the other choices: Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latin American, Native American, Black/African-American, Other. He thought about erasing the Caucasian checkmark and checking Black/African-American instead. He also contemplated checking Other and then writing a note explaining his ethnic breakdown. But instead, he checked both the Caucasian and Black/African-American boxes.

Section II:  
The Second Person Narrative

## Furthest From I

### Part One: Dreams to Remember

You are a mess. You are dripping wet. Soaked. You don't mind. You relax in a rain-drenched patio chair and light a cigarette, then light the next one off the one you are about to put out, fighting through the rain to keep it lit even though you have a lighter in your pocket. You feel like going somewhere—anywhere, but you stay where you are. Lightning flashes so bright it stings your eyes. Broken clouds and a piece of the moon try to poke through the night. A few stars find their way to the front of the sky. More lightning erupts, but this time you don't flinch. The rain stops. It starts again. You raise your arms and welcome the warm drops. You feel free. You're not sure what you are free from, but this sense of freedom makes you smile. But if only for a second, you remember there is someplace you need to be. Somewhere keeping you up at night. Somewhere you think you may have been before or may have been close to only to either turn away or not realize how close you really were so you gave up and never tried to go back. There is somewhere you need to be going. It's choking and slapping you and making you restless. You stand and face the back of your mansion. Your big white mansion. The forty room mansion you had built. Three stories and twelve pillars show off an amazing facade in the summer sun, but now they only stand to keep the rain away from your life and your belongings. Your wife loves this house. She admits it's ridiculous, but she loves this house. Your kids make fun of how big it is and how if they want they can hide for hours before you find them when you are cross, which really isn't that often. You feel enough stress at work to make a point to try and relax when you are home. Now you are home alone. Your wife took the kids to Traverse City to



spend the weekend with her mom. You are alone. There is you and there are rooms. Several of them. Some of them aren't furnished because your wife hasn't decided what yet to do with them. Your friends make fun of this. Start a hotel they say. The place is like its own country. Its not the only one. There are nine in total in a two-mile radius thirty minutes north of Detroit. Five doctors, one oil magnate, one General Motors executive, one recluse whose money just seems to appear out of thin air, and you. You started from the bottom and worked your way to the top. You sold industrial equipment to manufacturers in China and everyone liked you and you worked hard. Too hard. You found yourself living part of the year in a strange country and couldn't resist the opportunity to come back home when you were offered an executive position in the company. You thought you'd see more of your family, but you saw them less. So you ventured out on your own. You were so successful that you bought out the company you had previously worked for. And you made more money. Lot's of money. Tons of money. You invested wisely. You are now the majority shareholder of a bank you have never seen. There are twenty-eight branches in Nebraska and South Dakota. First Class Bank and Trust or something like that. Your financial planner says that your grandchildren will get so rich off the interest alone that they will play with solid gold rattles if your children let them. You walk inside the back door. One of the back doors. The one off the kitchen. You're not hungry but you open the refrigerator anyway. You grab a plate of leftover fried chicken. You open the microwave but change your mind and start eating a piece cold, a thigh, your favorite part of the bird. You go back outside to grab the beer you left on the patio table. You laugh as you drink the last stale swig that is now thoroughly mixed with rainwater. It's cheap light beer. You are worth as

much as some countries, yet you still drink cheap light beer. You don't like it, but you drink it anyway. You have always drunk cheap light beer. In high school you drank cheap light beer. In college you drank cheap light beer. On your wedding night you got drunk off of cheap light beer. In China five thousand miles away you drank cheap, light, American beer. You hated every last drop. You open up the refrigerator and crack open another one. You rub your belly. You shouldn't drink so much beer. You're not an alcoholic, but you aren't nineteen anymore, either. Your doctor tells you to exercise more, but you don't. You have a tennis court in your backyard. You and your wife have two-hundred dollar tennis rackets. You've played tennis twice since you moved in last year. Once it was because you were drunk and your buddies were over and none of them believed that you knew how to play tennis. But your daughter plays all the time. You hired her a personal coach. She loves to play and she's good damn good. She asks you to play with her and you always decline. You aren't too busy when she asks, you're simply too embarrassed that a twelve year old girl can kick your ass on the tennis court. You shrug at the thought of it and promise yourself that next time she asks you to play you will. You finish your beer. You call your buddy Joe and see if he wants to come over and have a few beers and watch the game. You aren't sure what game, but hell, in the digital age of satellite TV and cable and seven hundred stations, you know there is always a game on. His kids are sick. He can't leave. You call Stan. His wife is expecting. It's not a good idea for him to come over right now. You grab your keys. You can't stand it anymore. You've got to go somewhere. You've got to do something. It's still raining. It's not raining hard. It's a light rain. It's a warm rain. It really does feel good. You'd prefer to take the convertible but it's in the garage with the top down and

you don't feel like taking the fourteen seconds to put it back up. You take the BMW instead. You drive for a few miles. You turn on the stereo. You sing along. You remember the song. It's a good one. It was out about ten or eleven years ago, just before your son was born. You liked it then. You still do. You don't remember who sang it. You rack your brain for a few minutes, but it doesn't come to you. You turn down the radio. It's late, but you call your wife anyway. She's happy to hear from you. The kids just went to bed. She's playing cribbage with her mom. She tells you she loves you. You know she does, but it's reassuring to hear it from her. You say goodbye, forgetting to ask her who sang the song. It doesn't matter. Her voice alone makes you forget where you are. You drive a few more miles and pull into a liquor store. You buy a six pack of cheap light beer. There is half a case of cheap light beer in the refrigerator back at home and you know this but you buy the six pack anyway. You walk back to your car. You look yourself over. You own your own multi-billion dollar company and you just walked into the Qwik-Pik in sweatshorts and a t-shirt covered in chicken grease. You drive back home. You don't bring the beer you bought back inside with you. You see it on the seat next to you but you are too lazy to reach for it. You know there is plenty of beer in the house. You don't even feel like having a beer right now. You go upstairs to your room and undress, turn off the light and hop into your super king-sized bed. You lay there naked for about thirty seconds. You reach over to the night stand and turn on the lamp, adjust your eyes and fumble through the nightstand drawer for a book. You do some more fumbling until you find your reading glasses. You slip them on. They are irritating but you can't read without them. Your bookmark has fallen out. It takes you about five minutes to find the spot where you left off last time you picked up that book.

It must have been weeks, no months ago. It's supposed to be a good book. It is a good book, but you're too restless for the pages. You read a paragraph and lose your place. You go back and reread the same paragraph. This happens again before you close the book and set it along with your reading glasses on the night stand. You hate this feeling. When you used to get this feeling you would find solace under the blankets and map out your dreams. You used to dream about going away to college and finding a pretty girl and marrying her. You would dream about landing a great job with a great company. You would dream about how you would dazzle the CEOs of that company with your brilliance, with your genius, with your wit, with your charm. You dreamt about having children. One girl and one boy. One girl who looks like her mom and one boy like his dad. Your dreams didn't stop there. You dreamt that you'd become too successful for your company, that you'd venture out on your own, that'd you would become even more successful on your own than the place you left. You dreamt of a big white mansion. A house on the hill. You dreamt that you'd never have to worry about paying for your children's braces or if you could afford to get the jalopy fixed. You dreamt about lavish parties in the back yard and all of your friends marveling over your success and what a thrill it was to know you. You dreamt it all and you kept dreaming. Your dreams motivated you. You saw their reflection in your wife's blue eyes. You saw your dreams in the smiling faces of your children in the pictures of them you kept on your desk. You put your sweatshorts back on. You almost put your dirty t-shirt back on, but even you know better and you find a clean one on a shelf in the closet. You go back downstairs. You open up the refrigerator. You take out a can of cheap light beer. You left your cigarettes in the car. You don't

feel like going out there for them so you open up a fresh pack from the carton you keep in the pantry. You step back outside onto the patio off the kitchen. Your favorite patio chair is still soaked from the rain even though the rain has stopped. You sit in it anyway. You light your cigarette while the water that was puddled up on your chair soaks itself through your sweatshorts. You try to open your can of cheap light beer quietly although you don't know why but they never open quietly anyway and you take a giant gulp. You take a drag off your cigarette. You wonder why your wife isn't here. You wish she was here. You hate it when she ignores you when you get in one these moods. She says she doesn't like it when you get this way. You want to go back upstairs to bed. You want to crawl underneath your covers and find your dreams. You repeat this whole process three more times. You go upstairs, you come back down, you go outside, you smoke, you drink cheap light beer, you go upstairs, you come back down, etc...On the way upstairs the last time you stop off in your daughter's room. There is an Etch-a-Sketch on her bed. You see that she has etched a stadium surrounding a tennis court. You see a young girl standing by the net holding up a chalice. You shake the Etch-a-Sketch clean and toss it back onto her bed. You are afraid your daughter's dreams will come true.

## Part Two: The Beard of Life

You quit smoking. You're nervous and you want a cigarette. You quit smoking even though you love to smoke. You thoroughly enjoy it. You consider it an art. You don't understand your addiction. You know it's mostly mental. You know your body hates it when you smoke. You can't reconcile this with your love of inhaling and exhaling. You smoked for five years. You stopped for two years. You started back up again after your son was born. You know it's not his fault you started smoking again but you associate your return to smoking with his birth. You smoked for six more years. You woke up yesterday and quit. You quit cold turkey. You're wife's been asking you to quit. You want to quit for her. You appreciate the fact that she doesn't nag you about it. You know how hard it was for her to quit. You watched her wear patches and chew gum and inhale from little inhalers just to break the cigarette spell. You're nervous. You can't sit still. You want a cigarette, but you don't want a cigarette. You never eat breakfast, but this morning you are on your third bowl of Chex before you realize that you can't eat your way out of wanting a cigarette. You want a cigarette even more than you did before you started eating to help you forget that you wanted a cigarette. You've still got half a pack left. You are about to break down and go outside and light one up but as you open the door to the garage your wife and kids pull up. You know she's irritated with you. You wouldn't get up for church this morning. You tell her you quit smoking. You know she would like it if you quit smoking and went to church with her and the kids. You nod your head in agreement when she tells you that it would be nice if the four of you went to church as a family instead of just her and the kids. You know this. You feel bad about it. You break down and go with her about once a month. You know the kids like it when

you go. You like to go. You don't know why you don't go more often. You believe in God. You are thankful for your blessings. You just can't sit there sometimes. You can't pretend to be someone you are not. You ask yourself who you are. You can't look the other members of the congregation in the eye without thinking that they stare right through you. You wear your sins on your forehead. You feel like a neon sign. You're not a bad person. You smile at your kids. Your wife ignores you and makes coffee. Your son hands you a picture he drew in Sunday school. You glance it over quickly and set it down and tell him it's nice. You are about to pour another bowl of Chex but instead you pick up your son's picture again. You stare at it intently. You can't take your eyes off it. You ask your wife if she looked at the drawing. She tells you she did. You look at your son. You watch him try to pour more cereal out of an empty box. You start laughing. You can't stop laughing. Your wife asks you if you are laughing at your son's drawing. You hold up the drawing. Your son is quite an artist. He has drawn Jesus with outstretched arms holding a chalice in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other. He has written a caption above the drawing. You know it's supposed to say Jesus is the bread of life. You realize that bread is misspelled. Your son wrote Jesus is the beard of life. Your wife takes the picture from you. You demand that she give it back. She looks it over and realizes the error. You laugh even harder when you realize that she is trying hard not to laugh. You watch her set the picture in front of your son. She tells him honey daddy is sorry he laughed at your picture. She tells him he spelled bread wrong. She tells him how to spell bread and that they can fix it later. You take the picture from her. You tell him not to worry and that you like it just the way it is. You tell him you love him. You shake your head over and over again and keep repeating the beard of life, the

beard of life. Your wife asks you if you plan on getting dressed today. You look down at your milk-stained t-shirt and sweatshorts. You rub your chin and feel the stubble. You haven't had a beard in years. You like wearing a beard, but you stay clean shaven for business reasons. You'd really like to grow out your beard. You stroke your chin. You ask your wife what she thinks about it. She tells you to stop making fun of your son. You tell her you are serious. You get dressed but you don't shave. You keep going into the kitchen and opening up the refrigerator so you can look at the drawing that's stuck to its door by a magnet. You ask your wife what it means. She asks you if you are serious. You tell her you are not only serious but that since you looked at that picture you have not thought of anything else. You ask her if Jesus really is the beard of life. She ignores you. You stroke your chin. Your daughter asks you if you'll play tennis with her. She's got you good. You have no excuse today and she knows it; plus, you already skipped out on church. You look at the drawing and ask her if daddy should grow a beard. She tells you that you'd look silly. She grabs your hand and starts trying to drag you away from the front of the refrigerator. You go out back and play tennis with her. Some of the other local mansions might be bigger than yours but yours is the only one with a tennis court. You had it built just for your daughter. She's been playing since she could walk. She serves one up and it bounces it off your chin. You don't move. She asks you if you're going to play or not. You tell her it was a nice serve. You stroke your chin and get ready to accept another serve. This time you return it. She's fantastic. She's got you running back and forth and up and down the court. You are actually surprised you can keep up with her. Her backhand is nearly as strong as your forehand. You run full speed up to the net and poke one over that has nearly died on the court but she's already there to



send it whizzing over your head. You bend over with your hands on your knees to catch your breath. You tell her that now that you have quit smoking she'd better watch out because you are going to stop taking it easy on her. You play tennis with your daughter for hours. You lose track of time. Every time you serve you stroke your chin with the tennis ball. You wish your beard would grow faster. You think to yourself that if you had a beard you would be a better tennis player. Hours later your wife calls you in for dinner. You are sore all over. You go clean up before you eat. You stare in front of the mirror stroking your chin. You wish you hadn't shaved yesterday. You look at your electric razor sitting there on the counter by the sink. You unplug it and drop it in the wastebasket.

Dinner is fried chicken. Sunday nights are always fried chicken and a family movie. You love your wife's fried chicken. You are so wealthy that you could hire a cook but your wife refuses. She loves cooking for the family. She's been trying to convince you to eat less fried chicken. You stopped smoking. You won't let anyone take away your fried chicken—at least not right now. After dinner you realize that you didn't want a cigarette. However, you wanted a beard. You wanted to know if Jesus was the beard of life. You wanted to know this more than you wanted a cigarette. If your arm was long enough you'd pat your back for not wanting the cigarette. You wondered if having a beard would bring you closer to Jesus. Not that you feel far away from Jesus but you figure that the closer you get the better.

You can't focus on the movie. Your mind just wanders. It wanders back to Jesus. You stroke your chin. The bread of life is easy. You need bread to live. Jesus is bread for your soul. The beard of life is different. It's difficult. You are perplexed. You don't need a beard to live. You are pretty sure your soul doesn't need a beard either. If it did however you are sure that Jesus' beard would be the beard it needed. You wonder if Jesus really did have a beard. You know it's a reasonable question but you feel guilty asking it. You ask your wife. She tells you the kids are trying to watch the movie and that you need to let it go already. Why does Jesus have a beard in all of his pictures? You wonder if you can really call them pictures. You call them pictures, but you think they are drawings and paintings. No one took Jesus' picture with a camera. At least no one that you know of. You imagine Jesus at Sears getting his picture taken. Would the photographer ask him to say cheese? Would he check his beard in the mirror? Would he have a beard or would he get it shaved for the picture? Would he simply get it trimmed up real nice? You imagine a family picture of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Would they have one of those humorous ones too like some families take? Would there be a picture of Jesus holding up rabbit ears with his first two fingers behind Joseph's head? Would Joseph think this was funny? Would Joseph have a beard too? Then you start laughing because you remember that Jesus considers the entire population of the world his brothers and sisters. How would they all fit in the picture? Your wife has had enough. She tells you to leave the room if you aren't going to watch the movie with them. You don't answer. You get up and leave. You go to the refrigerator. You don't plan on opening it up. You are only there to look at your son's picture but you do anyway. You grab a piece of cold fried chicken, a thigh, your favorite part of the bird. You think about

having a cigarette. You want to have a cigarette while you eat your cold fried chicken. You want to take a bite of cold fried chicken, take a drag off a cigarette, and rub your chin in consecutive motions. You dig deep. You dig really deep. You don't go outside for a cigarette. You go downstairs instead. Your basement is massive. It's nearly as big as the entire first floor of the house. Your basement isn't furnished. It's just cement walls. One corner has Christmas decorations, one corner has some old exercise equipment, one corner has some business files, and one corner has some boxes of whatever from over the years that you or your wife don't know what to do with anymore. You go sit down on the floor by the boxes of Christmas decorations. You open up a box. You open up all of the boxes. You shuffle through glittery stockings and strands of garland. You hold up ornaments your kids made and let them shine in the light. You find a Santa Claus suit in the bottom of the last box. You don't take out the suit. You simply dig in the bottom of the box until you find the beard. It's a fake white beard with an elastic string. You put on the fake beard. You take a deep breath. You sigh. You run your fingers through the fake beard. It doesn't feel natural. You aren't stupid. You know it isn't natural but it feels better than if it wasn't there. You go back upstairs. You sit back on the couch next to your wife like you were never gone. She looks over at you. She looks at you like she doesn't know whether to run or cry. She never swears in front of the kids and this would be no exception but you know she wants to light into you good. You remind her that you quit smoking. She tells you that you aren't right in the head. You reply by telling her that you're not right in the head but that will change in a few days when it starts to grow out. She tells the kids that it's time to go out for a drive. Where are we going they ask. She tells them to grandma's. You tell her that's a three

hour drive. She tells you they need to be as far away from you as possible right now. Your son asks you why you are wearing the beard. You tell him you are wearing it for Jesus. Your wife and kids leave. You sit and watch the rest of the movie. You look at your watch. You ask yourself if you know what time it is. You tell yourself of course you know what time it is. It's cigarette time. You go out to the garage to grab your cigarettes out of your car. You see that your wife took your car. You are upset. You then ask yourself if it really is your car. You realize that it doesn't matter because there is a store nearby. You take the convertible instead. The sky is grey and you know it's going to rain but you take the convertible anyway. You want to buy a carton of cigarettes but you only buy one pack. The clerk gives you this look. You don't understand the look. The look is the why the fuck are you wearing a fake beard look. You pay for your cigarettes. You stroke your beard. You leave. You go back home and sit on the porch outside your kitchen. You chain smoke. You light the next one off the last one. You repeat this process for two hours. You smoke the entire pack. It's completely dark outside now. It hasn't started raining yet. You take the chance and run the convertible back down to the store. You buy the carton this time. The clerk gives you the one wrong move and I'm reaching for the shotgun look. You pay for your cigarettes. You stroke your beard. You leave. You make it home just before the rain starts. You stash your fresh carton of cigarettes in the cupboard where you always kept them. You'll quit again in a few days you tell yourself. You smoke in the rain. You wish you would have gone to church this morning. You decide you'll go to church now. The church is empty. You kneel down in a random center pew and think of things to pray for. You ask yourself if it's alright to pray that your beard grows faster. You look up at the Crucifix mounted on

the wall behind the altar. You realize that this Jesus doesn't have a beard. You walk up to the altar. You want to sit in Father Malcour's chair. You decide that you can't sit there unless you have a real beard. You reach your hand underneath your fake beard. It hasn't grown any in the last two and a half hours. Father Malcour has a beard. You stand right in front of the monstrous crucified Jesus and look up. You try to gage how far away his chin is. You grab Father Malcour's chair and slide it over to the feet of the Crucifix. You climb up on the chair to see if you can reach Jesus' chin. You aren't even close. You climb from the chair onto the sill of a stained-glass window and from that window you climb higher yet to another. You are looking Jesus in the eyes. You prop yourself up against the window and make the Sign of the Cross. You take off your fake beard and reach over to Jesus. You wrap the elastic around the back of his head and slide the beard into place over Jesus' chin. You climb down and walk away. You are careful not to look back. Jesus is the beard of life you tell yourself. You don't need to look back.

### Part III: Saved

The phone rings and you try to open it with one hand, the hand still clutching your briefcase. The phone drops. Exasperated shoulders shrug. Tired arms give in. Set down the briefcase, set down the suitcase. The phone opened when it fell. *Honey, can I call you back in twenty minutes?* The line falls silent, intuned to your every word. *I'm at the airport, in line at the car rental—I know, I—will you just—*. Eyes move away when you look up. You rub your forehead, conjure up a concerned look, use your best businessman voice, *This isn't a good time to talk about this. I'll be back in town tomorrow and maybe we can—*. But she's hung up on you.

Silence.

Everyone in line heard her scream, heard you mutter *bitch* under your breath. Shut your phone. You can't slam a cell phone. Technology has its disadvantages. Tug at your pants leg. Roll up your sleeve. Check the time on your watch, on your phone, on the clock behind the car rental counter. Check the eyes. They still look away when you look up.

Jerk, asshole, bastard.

The line has not moved in ten minutes. *Sir, sir*, a light tug, now a persistent pull on your sleeve. *Sir, sir, have you been saved?* A short man, well-receded hairline, dirty and smudged oversized glasses that won't stay on his nose. You wonder how he sees. Stubby beard, faded blue jeans, worn out blue jean shirt under a dusty blue jean jacket. *Sir, have you been saved?* He hands you a leaflet. Smiling Jesus, the way only Jesus smiles benevolence. White robes and a halo. *Sir, the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ is coming again. Have you been saved?* The line shakes its head at you when you give it

the why me look. Turning away, you pull out your phone and pretend to push buttons. *Sir, there's still time. It's not too late.* He rests his palm over your hands and closes your phone. *I'm Catholic.* He pats your hand. *Sir, why don't you take your own salvation seriously?* Your grandma warned you about the unrelenting fanatics. Lie and tell them you're Catholic, it scares them away. *I'm Catholic, I don't need to be saved.* He produces another leaflet. *Sir, are you aware of the atrocities the Catholic Church condoned in Europe during World War Two?* A glowing swastika emits from the cover of the leaflet, twice as thick as the one with Jesus on the cover. *Sir, sir,* he tugs again on your sleeve, *the Catholic Church—Sir, sir, what kind of world do you live in?* In a world without an ignore button. In a world where grandma's advice fails you. *Sir, sir—.* The phone rings. He snatches it from your hand and opens it. *David's here,* he tells your phone, *Did you know that he has not been saved?* You try to pry it from his hands, but he squirms away. The line's eyes do not move away when you look at them for mercy. *But...the phone...* You point. *You know Marsha, I have to ask you how you can be comfortable married to a man who has not been saved?*

***GIVE ME MY GODDAMN PHONE!***

You wrap your arms around him and force him into submission. He meekly falls to the ground. You are twice his size. He won't let go of your phone. *Marsha, please help him, save him. Jesus is the only answer. Ouch! Stop it, that hurts!* You push him over and pry your phone from his hands, one finger at a time. You hear your wife yelling, hello, hello, David, hello! *Sorry honey. This crazy guy—I—no, I didn't hurt him, he took my—I was in line, I still—Jesus Christ, I didn't hurt the guy, he's right here. He's crazy. No, I'm not going to let you talk to him to see if he's alright. He's fine.*

The line may have held a mild disdain for you, a slight detestation, but now it's manifested into full-fledged hatred. Their eyes, once scraping, now pierce. *Sir, sir*, two voices, three voices, four voices, *Sir your next*, from behind the counter, *Sir may we have a word with you*, airport security tugs on your sleeve. You smell, no taste, vindication. The woman behind the counter hands you keys. You slip them in your pocket. You bend over to pick up your suitcase and briefcase. Unwittingly, your phone slips out of your pocket. It lands on one of the leaflets, the one with the swastika. The person in line behind you accidentally kicks it. When he looks down, all he sees are the leaflets. The customers waiting in line inadvertently play foot hockey with your phone. *Sir*, we need to ask you a few questions. The security officer takes your name and phone number. You get down on your hands and knees and grab at your phone among the leaflets and shoes and boots trying to avoid stepping on it. He starts yelling, *He hasn't been saved, he hasn't been saved!* Now in cuffs, he points his head down and tries to reach his shackled hands up to his glasses to push them up off his nose. You look up at him from the floor, still scurrying for your phone. You stand and slip on one of the leaflets, the Jesus one. Dusting yourself down, you don't look back at the line. The security officer takes him away. *Officer, have you been saved?*



Section III:

Slipstream and Other Absurdities

## Andrew Glasper Jumps in the Fire

Andrew Glasper straightened his tie, checked the mirror and before he left his room he checked it again. Every strand of light brown, short-cropped hair sat perfectly on his head. He rubbed his closely shaven cheeks back and forth with his hand and as he checked his pocket for the car keys, he could not resist one last peek in the mirror on the foyer wall before leaving.

For the first time this fall, Andrew had to run the heater in his Honda Civic. He tuned the radio to the morning news and blew into his cupped hands. A consistent stiff wind made him tighten his grip on the steering wheel as he motored along the same highway he took to and from work every day. Before stepping out of the car at the office, he caught one last glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror. Andrew felt presentable.

He dashed past the secretary, muttered good morning, closed his office door behind him and draped his overcoat neatly on the tree. Scanning his planner, he assured himself every fifteen minute block from eight o'clock in the morning until five-thirty in the afternoon was accounted for.

Meetings all morning—the budget committee, the project team, the supervisors—and Andrew sat, listened, nodded his head, took notes, shook hands. Always a toothless smile, always a thank you, never a hair out of place.

After lunch, one o'clock, call cousin Jenny. Andrew called a client instead, discussed the morning meeting about his account, hung up the phone, stared at his planner and breathed deep, letting each exhale escape slowly until he felt calm enough to call Jenny. He picked up the phone, tilted his head back and dialed without looking at the keypad.

“Hey Jen, Andy.”

“What’s up buddy? Comin’ over tonight?”

“Yeah, that’s why I called, are things on for tonight?”

“Last time this year, you ready to party or what?”

“Yeah, sure, but look, I gotta go. I’ll see you there, bye.”

Andrew hung up the phone and caught his breath. It was just Jenny. Things don’t have to be this difficult. People call each other all the time, say hello, make small talk. Andrew used to smoke to calm himself down, now he just tried to cope. He hoped the party tonight would relax him, bring him back down to earth after the busy week in the accounting office. And it wasn’t just any party. It was an extravagant bonfire. Every Friday all summer long, Andrew’s cousin Jenny and her husband Bill threw magnificent bonfire parties, but it was supposed to storm tonight and Jenny had left him a message that the party might be canceled. It was one of the few things in life Andrew actually looked forward to. And the only place he went besides work all summer.

The intercom buzzed. He pressed *talk*. “Yeah.”

“Mr. Glasper, Autumn called while you were on the phone with a client, she’d like you to call her back.”

“Thanks Jeaninne.”

Andrew stared at the phone, tapped the desk with his pen and stared some more. He thought about calling Mr. Jay, who’d offered him a better job, a position that would potentially lead to partner. He called a client instead. Then he called another, and called another, until he couldn’t think of Mr. Jay and his job offer. He marked his planner, exed

out each fifteen minute block that had passed, filled in slots for Monday, thought about calling Autumn, but called a client instead.

But he only thought of Autumn.

The concerts, the plays, the museums, the restaurants, his apartment, hers. The days he put between phone calls, the weeks he put between phone calls. But eventually, he always called. He'd wait as long as he could, until he couldn't stand it anymore, whether lonely or scared, or until he could convince himself he was in love. Not only in love, but madly in love.

And only then would he call. They would go out, they would dance, they would hold hands, they would kiss like lovers, but Andrew wouldn't say what needed to be said. They would part, they would always part, some tension left between them, real or imagined. Andrew would sulk, sulk in his bed or play sad, sad songs until some misery somewhere else felt worse than his own. Days would pass and he would not call Autumn, but in his mind, he planned elaborate dates, vacations, a wedding, and all the future plans that would shape their lives. The more he daydreamed about Autumn, the more obsessed he became with her, the more scared he was to call. Then he'd run into Sally Pearson, a friend of a friend, at the grocery store and they'd talk and make plans and Andrew would compare her to Autumn. Sally was thinner, had prettier hair, and a better job than Autumn. How could he plan a future with her? But Autumn had a softer face, a nicer ass, and a better sense of humor than Sally. So he outlined his future with Autumn and he outlined his future with Sally. He'd compare fantasies and decide which one lived up to his expectations. Over and over again he conjured up new lives. He'd think about calling Autumn, but justified his procrastination by reminding himself that

they weren't officially a couple. They were merely dating. Besides, he could put Autumn off for a while. She'd always be there and they could pick up right where they left off.

And in between he dated an old client, a waitress, a friend from college, Sally Pearson, a girl he met at the bar, and a hairdresser. And with each and every one he mapped out their life together, dreamt up lavish fantasies and convinced himself at different times that he was in love with each one, except for the hairdresser. She had bad hair and Andrew couldn't understand why or how someone who worked on hair professionally could have such a bad haircut.

Five-thirty, last call and Andrew knew he couldn't dial up another client this late on a Friday. They would only be bitter because they were still stuck in the office and Andrew didn't want to deal with any conflicts.

The intercom buzzed. "I'm leaving Mr. Glasper, have a nice weekend. Oh, and Mr. Jay's secretary called to confirm your appointment Monday."

Andrew scribbled in his planner. He tried thinking of a reason to cancel the appointment. Committing to Mr. Jay's firm meant committing years of his life to one goal. What if he changed his mind in three years? What if he wanted to finish his MBA? What if he found a better offer?

The intercom buzzed. "Mr. Glasper, Autumn came in on my way out, can I send her in?"

"Um, I, uh, yeah."

He straightened his tie then shuffled some papers to look busy. Autumn stood at his door but he wouldn't look up at her.

“For God’s sake Andrew, what do I have to do?”

He shuffled more papers and pretended to look at his planner.

“You haven’t called me in six weeks.”

Andrew closed his eyes and dropped his chin on his chest. He took a giant breath and searched for the answers that were stuck on his tongue.

“Are you going to Jenny’s tonight? I’m going with Patrick Arnott. We’ve been seeing each other.”

“I know,” he lied and then sat silent.

She slammed the door on her way out.

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Andrew changed out of his suit for jeans and an old sweater. He tried to nap on the couch before leaving but just stared at the ceiling and its stucco designs, wondering why some of them formed faces and why they stared.

Every Friday this summer, Andrew arrived early to the party to help Bill build the fire. They stacked logs and old crates and pallets, slats and stray flats of wood, or whatever else Bill had piled up outside his barn to form a giant pyramid. By party’s climax, the blaze reached high into the night sky, grappling with the wind and outreaching the tops of the nearest trees. Tonight, Andrew arrived late, not in the mood to hear Bill’s jokes, or draw attention to himself.

In anticipation for the year’s last party, the crowd was loud, with nearly twice as many people as most Fridays. Andrew sized up the revelers and tried to be inconspicuous, but it was difficult. Andrew always felt that he stuck out in the crowd of high school dropouts, factory workers, and highway repairmen. He went out his way not

to judge them, but always felt as though he were inferior to the men who worked with their hands for a living. Andrew felt their stares and had trouble making eye contact with them, certain that they knew he had no idea how to properly swing a hammer or drive a forklift.

But everyone loved Jenny and since Andrew was her cousin, they loved him as well, even if he did wear a suit and tie and drive a foreign car. Andrew stood by the fire sipping a beer and nodding at those who addressed him.

Ryan Kitner was there, smiling, smirking, screaming, “Ted Nugent rules,” and he was outfitted in army fatigues, although he was a high school dropout who never served his country. He picked up a pallet from the scrap heap and didn’t warn anyone when he threw it on the fire. The restless embers scattered and everyone within ten feet of the fire was hit with some stray ash.

Abby Frances was there, and wore a sweatshirt and stood with one hand on her hip and one hand holding a cigarette. She ran up to Andrew and hugged him, so glad he was there, or so she said, and he hugged her back, but not for too long, because Abby’s husband Darren was near. Darren didn’t seem to mind that Abby perpetually hugged everyone, but Andrew wasn’t sure. Darren slapped Andrew’s hand and bragged that he would be getting his driver’s license back in six months, certain that he had put one over on the judge who presided over his drunk driving sentencing: “The law says they have to take your license for a full year, but he only said six months!”

Renee Lawson was there and she did not acknowledge Andrew. Andrew had flirted with Renee over the years, and she had reciprocated until Andrew asked her for

her phone number, at which time she declined and said she was sure they would see each other again at the party sometime. They saw each other, but they did not see each other.

Autumn startled Andrew while he stood fireside, daydreaming. He almost dropped his beer when she nudged his side from behind.

“Sorry I slammed your office door.”

Andrew half-smiled. She never stayed mad at him for too long.

“Do you still have tickets to the Third Day concert?”

“Yeah, but you know, I thought since you and Patrick, I—.”

But before he could finish his sentence, Ryan Kitner threw a giant bundle of kindling on the fire. Andrew stood in front of Autumn to block her from the roaming embers and Ryan laughed over all the *cut it out assholes* echoing through the crowd.

Just as Patrick approached Andrew and Autumn, Andrew had to assist some of the others who were propping up Ryan, who had almost stumbled into the fire with the bundle. Jenny then grabbed Andrew’s hand and dragged him away to meet some of her new friends.

Andrew lamented meeting anybody tonight. He didn’t want to be there after he saw Patrick and Autumn together, but he couldn’t conjure up any real or imagined excuse to leave and he hated it when people knew he was troubled. Then Bill interrupted the introductions when he slapped Andrew on the back.

“Hey buddy, I had to build that fire by myself tonight.”

Andrew wanted to squirm away. He bantered half-heartedly and took Bill’s grief for not coming over to watch a football game with him yet this fall. Andrew used to watch every game every Sunday with him and have dinner with their family, but he now



preferred to watch alone in his apartment. He lied and told his cousin he was volunteering at the church this Sunday.

Andrew tried to mingle and socialize and now and then smile at the party. He drank a little beer and sipped off a bottomless brandy bottle that occasionally made the rounds in front of the fire.

When he was a boy, Andrew played with fire. He built mini pyres in his Grandma's ashtray, meticulously conducting the flames within their glass bowl like a maestro leads his orchestra. When the flames grew too high, he would carefully snuff them out, controlling each ash and ember until only smoke furled and floated above his room. Only since this summer had Andrew once again started building fires. But he only created them, he didn't play with them like Ryan Kitner. And every Friday, from June through October, he stood and stared, proud of his creation, but too proud to risk anything for its reward.

Andrew stood alone and watched the fire. He shrugged off thoughts of loneliness, assuring himself that even though he was alone, he was not lonely. Besides, it was his choice to be alone, to ignore Autumn, to leave thirty-two unanswered messages on his voicemail from friends who were starting to wonder if he was still alive. But it was his world. What he couldn't control didn't matter. Just like it didn't matter when he saw Autumn and Patrick making out behind the barn where he went to relieve himself.

The fire soared high into the starless sky and occasionally the dark clouds broke just enough to reveal the half moon. The wind picked up and Andrew's eyes followed the flames and their improvised tangos and twists and twirls that danced in harmony

along with the Def Leppard blaring from the barn stereo and the thunder announcing the rain's arrival at the party.

The rain wrestled with the fire and it flooded Andrew's mind. He stood with his legs held tightly together and his hands in his pockets absorbed by its glow. Jenny ran out from the barn and draped a hooded sweatshirt over his back. She put her arm around him and rested her head against his side. The fire grew as if being fed by the rain. Jenny's rain soaked face looked up at Andrew and said, "When it rains at night it means that the man in the moon is crying."

Harder and harder the rain fell and one by one the revelers dropped out of sight. Some ran into the barn, some ran into their cars and some left.

"Come inside Andy." Jenny tugged on Andrew's arm, but he would not budge. The rain fell sideways and fought with the fire, but the prevailing flames would not submit.

Around midnight, the downpour eased into a drizzle and then into sporadic drops. And slowly, the party trickled back outside and around the fire. Someone handed Andrew a fresh beer. When it was gone, he threw the empty can into the fire and followed it. He climbed into the center of the fire, closed his eyes, inhaled and turned his palms outward. The flames melted the soles of his shoes and spread briskly up his pant legs. Consumed by flames, his coat sleeves burned bright orange. Within minutes his entire person scorched and seared. His flesh sizzled and his hair crinkled and singed. The heat made his bones crackle and pop until he stood no more, devoured by the illustrious collage of red, blue, orange, and yellow flames.

"Jenny stood and cheered, clapped, and yelled, "Go Andrew!"

Autumn fainted. Patrick threw his beer can at the remains, rolled his eyes and walked away.

Abby Frances lit a cigarette.

Ryan Kitner played air guitar along with Def Leppard.

The fire touched the tops of trees and did not die out until the sun came up the next morning.

## Monopoly Monkey<sup>1</sup>

A never-ending line of customers had already formed at the front door when she arrived at the bank. They stared at watches and muttered about why they couldn't be let in five minutes early. Even after they were admitted the line didn't seem to end. One after another they filed in. Each teller shuffling in customer after customer. Withdrawals, deposits, payments. Next. Next. Next. I can help you over here. Next. Who's next? By noon she was ready to drop and she had an appointment to get her nails done over lunch so she wouldn't even be able to eat. I'll take this last one and then go to lunch she told the other tellers.

“Can I help you?”

“I need to make a deposit.” She handed him a slip. He filled it out and laid his money on the counter. One hundred dollar bill, two twenties, one ten, and two pink bills and one white one. She started to chuckle. She needed a good laugh. She looked up at the man and smiled.

“Um...sir, this is Monopoly money.”

“I need to make a deposit.”

“I can take the hundred and fifty but I'm afraid these other bills are only good at Marvin Gardens.”

“I filled out my slip.”

“You do understand that this is not really money, don't you?”

“I'm just here to make a deposit.”

“I'll gladly process the hundred and fifty for you, sir.”

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<sup>1</sup> A monkey never meant to appear in this story. Purely accidental, the monkey came to be when the author mistyped “monkey” instead of “money.”

“That’s the problem with banks today, you can’t find good service anywhere.”

“Would you like to speak with a manager?”

“Twenty years ago things were different.”

“Sir, I will gladly help you in any way I can.”

“You walked into a bank and they knew you.”

“How can I recognize you if I’ve never even seen you before?”

“I have an idea.”

“Okay.”

“I’m gonna go over there and stand by that imitation-velvet rope and you’re gonna call me over and we’re gonna start all over again.” She looked peripherally at the other tellers, but they were all busy with other customers.

She played along nervously.

“I can help who’s next.”

He walked back up to the counter.

“I’d like to make a deposit.” He handed her the deposit slip and laid the bills out on the counter the same way he had done before.

“Sir, this is still Monopoly money. I know it says five dollars on this one and one dollar on these, but they are non-negotiable.”

“I just want to make a deposit.”

“Sir, I can process the hundred and fifty for you, but I’m afraid there is nothing I can do with these.” She took the hundred and fifty dollars and the deposit slip and slid the Monopoly money back his way.

“I told you, I’m here to make a deposit.”

“I think I’m going to get my manager.”

“I think I’m going to get my lawyer.”

He walked over to the wall perpendicular to the counter and started talking to the potted fake palm tree. He struck up an animated conversation with the decorative plant, speaking confidentially to the tree and occasionally looking over her way and pointing accusatorily. This continued for several minutes, until he stopped, stood erect, straightened his tie, cleared his throat and walked back over to the counter.

“I’d like to make my deposit now.” He set the Monopoly bills on the counter. He took the permanently-attached-to-the-counter pen and crossed off the word “non-negotiable” on one of the bills and wrote the word “real” above it.

“There.”

“Sir, that doesn’t make the money *real*.”

“But you just called it money.”

She did not immediately reply. She put her head down and caught her breath, reminding herself to relax. The Monopoly money, the crazy customer, I’ll get through this. The bad days you never get over. She never used to get over. She’s over them now. Right now. At this moment in time. If I can get over this man and his game I can get over everything. This is me. This is my moment. The kids can come home.

“Deposit please.”

“Sir, I can’t deposit this. I may have called it money but it’s Monopoly money, from a board game.”

“I don’t want to sound threatening, but I’ll have your job for this.”

“Sir, I would get fired if I accepted the Monopoly money.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What *is* the point?”

“The point is that I am trying to make a deposit and you will not take it.”

“Very well then, I’ll make your deposit.”

He slid the bills back over her way and she began writing out a deposit slip for seven dollars. She pretended to run it through the computer and then handed him the slip.

“You think you’re pretty slick don’t you?”

“What’s that, sir?”

“My account number isn’t even on this slip. Looks like I will have your job after all.”

“Sir, there isn’t anything else I can do. If you are trying to be funny, it was, but this is getting out of hand.”

“I’m getting my lawyer.” He walked back over to the potted fake palm tree and this time he wrapped his arms around the oversized base of the pot and dragged it across the room to the counter.

“Edmund, this lady won’t take my deposit.”

She looked at the faux flora and said, “I can’t accept Monopoly money. This is a bank.”

A whirlwind.

This swirling vortex eddied around her mind, but not through the substantial complexities that formed her existence. It sauntered and traipsed around the facts and realities and only made a sound when it wanted to tease her about talking to plastic plants.

These are the days that John Lennon sang about. Except that somebody did tell her. That somebody was her next-door neighbor, Denice Cere, who despite being hooked up to an oxygen tank because of severe eczema, still found the lung capacity to smoke two packs of cigarettes every day. Of course Old Lady Cere has *emphysema*, and not eczema, but these are the subtle differences in language and life that delineate good days and bad days. Notice how no one said *separate*. That's because we're always a few letters off. Tomorrow, Old Lady Cere may suffer from *edema*, but that won't stop you from drawing a 'q' from the bag of Scrabble tiles and no 'u' to go with it.

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Knock knock.

Cough.

Hack.

Cough.

“Come in.”

But first wipe your shoe on the grass and remember not to scream, she's ninety-four years old. She's lived through two world wars.

“Hi Mrs. Cere. I found Mordecai in my yard. I thought I'd bring him back before I left for work.”

“Oh, I let him out because he had to go.”

“He went. In my yard again. I stepped in it when I went out to move the sprinkler.”



She set the dog down in the foyer and said goodbye.

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Every day has a theme. Today's theme was clearly dogs

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It rained cats and dogs that same morning. Domestic short hairs and Siamese, Pomeranians and Schnauzers. They pounded on the roof. So hard that she woke up. Not from a deep sleep, but from a morning haze.

She rolled over and stared at the alarm clock. 6:59. It would be going off in one minute. Or less. It beeped and blared. She slapped at it until it stopped. If not for the newly lingering aroma of freshly brewed coffee she might not ever get up.

She poured her cup and stared out into the back yard watching it pour. She walked to the front of the house and set her cup down and did one of those funky early morning stretches. She tilted her head and raised her arms and let out a submissive yawn. The sun shined through the picture window. She turned around. It was still raining in the back yard. In her early morning haze it took a minute for her to grasp the paradox. But the weather gods are funny that way. Blue skies, grey skies.

The kids would be moving back home soon. It was time, she thought. Time to feed the hunger.

She opened the cage and let out Lemuel, her pet monkey<sup>2</sup>. He bounced up and down and did this little herky-jerky motion with his head, but he would not look directly at her. Then she patted him and asked how he was doing this morning. He didn't answer, but he answered. He said he hated living in this stupid cage and that he would

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a chimpanzee, but undoubtedly a primate. A spider monkey if you will, but definitely not an ape.

like something else to eat besides bananas. She told him he was soooooo cute and gave him his morning banana.

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Themes can be illusive. The dogs are more like a motif.

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That fake palm tree might have well been a lawyer, or even a lover, just a listless, lifeless plastic replica, or her late husband, Pete. She'd talked to them all before. Opened her mouth, moved her lips, heard the sound emit from her throat. But never understood a word. Or never listened to the words. That's it. She heard them all.

“What?” She'd ask Pete to repeat what he had said and then she'd apologize. He'd grab her hand and squeeze it. She'd put her head down and apologize again.

“Don't be sorry, just please listen when I'm talking.”

She never deliberately ignored Pete. She just never taught herself how to listen or even worse to listen intently. In one ear and out the other, like her mother used to say when she was young. I didn't catch that. What did you say? Could you repeat that for me? Famous last words. She didn't even know Pete had told her he was going out. She had no idea where he had gone and didn't know she was alone until she woke up to an empty bed on a Saturday morning.

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A deer in the road. In these parts you see it all the time. It just appeared, staring blankly in the middle of the Highway 45. The car swerved. He overcorrected the wheel turning back onto the street. He lost control. The car rolled and careened into a ditch. It landed on its side. He took a conscious inventory of his body. He ached all over. He couldn't

feel his left arm. It was twisted and pinned through the driver's window under the car. He tried to tug on it and when he did, it rocked the car off its side and it fell back on all four tires. His mangled arm dangled, attached merely by skin. He kicked open the passenger door and tumbled out of the car, but his arm tore away. He stood, bleeding. In his stupor he patted the wound that spewed blood out of his shoulder. He crawled up out the ditch. He held his bloodied, severed arm and stepped out onto the shoulder. He thudded along, taking one step at a time. Cars drove by. None stopped.

“Should we stop?” James Kringle asked his wife, Maude, as they drove by. “My God, he's a lunatic, keep driving.”

“That dude is fucked up,” Tito said to Rodney as they slowed down to see the man carrying his own bloodied arm, trudging along the shoulder of the road. “Fuckin' gross!” And they sped away.

“Dad, I think he's hurt,” Willie said to his father as they sped by. “Shouldn't we stop and call for help or something?” “Nope, we Knudsons mind our own business, son.”

Peter Niss died. He walked about two-hundred feet, fell into shock, and died minutes later. No one stopped. No one called for help. Forty-two cars passed. A total of 88 passengers that might have phoned an ambulance, covered his wound, or laid by his side so that he not die alone. But no. None of this. A work crew found him the next morning.

“Ma'am, I don't know how to tell you this, but your husband has died,” the police officer told her first thing that morning. She stood at the front door staring at the officer for an hour and a half. Her robe eventually fell open revealing herself to the crowd that had gathered to watch both the police officer and the woman frozen at the front door.

“Is it Peter?”

“What happened?”

“Look at Paula?”

“Look *at* Paula?”

The officer and a neighbor rerobered her and carried her inside. The kids were playing Monopoly on the living room floor.

“Daddy!”

“Where’s Daddy?”

“Mommy, where’s Daddy?”

Tragic. Totally. It really is. You have to feel for these people. Peter was regular. Really, that’s all he was. Just a man.

And so life went on. Paula took a leave of absence from the bank, stayed home, sent the kids to school, and rotted on the couch watching reality shows and infomercials.

*Have you or someone close to you been seriously injured in an automobile accident? If so, you need Lew. Let Lew work for you. Lew can do, what needs to be done. If you or your loved one has died in an automobile accident, it can take years to settle with the insurance company. This is Lew’s specialty. Let Lew and his nationwide crew of attorneys work for you. Lew works with insurance companies to get what is best for you and your family.*

Paula kept telling herself she was going to call Lew. One day, she called Lew.

“Law offices of Lew Kemia, this is Candida, may I help you.”

“Yes Candida, my husband died in a car accident.”

“I’m sorry to hear that ma’am. We are here to help. Would you like to schedule a consultation?”

Paula went to Lew Kemia's office. She had stopped sulking and was starting to feel better already just for having made the phone call.

"The way I see it Paula, is that there are several people to blame here."

Paula nodded her head.

"First, Paula, we are going after your insurance company. I see they have already paid your \$250,000 claim, but honestly, they owe you a lot more. A lot more. Second, we will take up issue with the Kent County Police Department. They made no effort to revive your husband after he was found dead on the side of the road. They only called the coroner. A call to an ambulance was never made."

"Do you think he might have still been alive?"

"Of course, it's a possibility, but even if he wasn't, it's about procedure. It's really about respect, Paula. Honestly, they handled this very poorly. I'm ashamed to say that I work with local enforcement after considering what they did to your poor husband."

Paula started crying.

"Oh, don't worry, we aren't stopping there, Paula. Paula, do you realize that if Peter's shirt had been made of a material that tore easier, he might have been able to save his arm, which would have saved his life? Do you realize this, Paula?"

Paula wiped away her tears.

"They killed him. They killed my Peter, those sons of bitches killed him."

"They did Paula. They did you wrong. They will all pay. My secretary, Candida, is on the phone right now with the clothing manufacturer that produced the shirt your husband was wearing when his accident occurred."

Paula felt better when she left Lew's office.

"And don't forget Paula," Lew told her as she left, "You don't owe me a dime unless we win."

Six months later, in court, Lew pitched his case to the jury. His convincing closing argument held them all in suspense.

Accidents happen. They are unavoidable. They are sad. They are tragic. But this...this was preventable. This was no accident. A man died senselessly. A good, hard-working family man died because of the negligent behavior of a few. He died because his shoes generated too much static when he walked on shag carpet, and therefore the carpet manufacturer, as well as the shoe company will pay for Peter's death. Peter's aftermarket CD player stopped playing after his car rolled, and therefore, they are responsible for his death. They are to blame. They are all to blame, equally.

Look at Peter's widow. Look at Paula Niss. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, when considering this case consider the fact that Peter Niss is dead and that somebody has to accept the blame. This is somebody's fault. That, all of those, every one of those somebodies need to and should without question pay. Although the money will not bring back Peter, it will at least help to slightly lift some of the burden his family is facing in these horrible and trying times. Don't let Peter's death go unblamed. Only you can save his family from financial ruin and from being victims any longer. Thank you.

The jury only took nine minutes to deliberate. It really only took four, but a couple of jurors had to pee before they went back into court to read their verdict.

In the civil case of the Family of Peter Niss versus the Kent County Police Department, Independent Family Insurance Companies of Michigan, West Leonard Clothiers, the late President Ronald Wilson Reagan, Best Family Cosmetics, El Caballo Paints, The Men's Haircut Palace, AMC Motor Corporation, Bill Shreve Used Cars, Mr. Vinton, the deer in the road, the Home Shopping Channel, Steinway Pianos, Babar the Elephant, Green Carpet Mill, All-Sport Tennis Shoes, Richmond Audio Company, the islands of Trinidad and Tobago, and Rodgers and Hammerstein, we find the defendants guilty in the civil lawsuit presented before us today. The defendants will pay the family of Peter Niss a combined sum of \$842,591,774,263,283,120.39.

The judge smacked his gavel on his bench and all of the family members embraced Lew Kemia. Paula was a little upset when she realized that she would have to pay Lew half of her settlement.

In an ironic twist of sensibility the defendants all appealed and the case was sent to the appeals court and overturned.

At first, she was upset and vowed never to spend monkey<sup>3</sup> again. Not even to buy food. The children went to her mother's or they would have gone unclothed and unfed. She mostly stayed home chasing Mrs. Cere's dog out of her yard. Occasionally, rational thought would overcome her, like the time she bought the pet monkey<sup>4</sup>. She saw her kids on weekends and slipped in and out of counseling. On the anniversary of Pete's death, she put on her wedding dress and stood at the front window. Mordecai ran around chasing his own tail in her yard. In a perfect circle, over and over, again and again, the dog hypnotized her.

Pete liked Mordecai. He even liked Mrs. Cere, mostly because she gave them Elvis TV trays as a wedding gift. And despite ten years and two children, her wedding dress fit surprisingly well. When she saw it in the closet that morning she debated between putting it on or throwing it away. She wanted to ask Pete what to do. She listened hard, but could not hear him or he just didn't answer.

The dog finally stopped, stared up at the window, and dropped his business in the yard before running back up to Mrs. Cere's door. Paula shook her head, satisfaction.

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<sup>3</sup> This is the original typographical error. The author clearly meant "money" here. While it would have been much easier to simply correct the blemish, he left it because the story lacked a monkey and research shows that stories improve upon the introduction of monkeys. When the author finished writing the story he went back and added all of the monkey parts.

<sup>4</sup> The song "Everybody's Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey," appears on the first side of the second record, also called side three, of the Beatle's White Album.

Instead of going next door to complain, she called the bank and told them she was ready to come back to work.

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She stared at the fake palm tree. Intently. She studied it and determined that although it was not real, it was a rather lifelike replica and that impressed her. She called security. She asked for the man with the Monopoly money to be escorted out of the bank. Grabbing hold of the pot, she slid it back over to its place against the wall. I'm taking lunch she told the others. She skipped her nails appointment and went home. Mordecai was in her yard again. Instead of grabbing the dog or going up to Mrs. Cere's door, she walked over to Mrs. Cere's yard and unbuttoned, unzipped and dropped her pants. She squatted over the grass and left her deposit in front of the walkway by the decorative security lamp.

An old man riding a bicycle stopped after getting a glimpse of Paula in Mrs. Cere's yard. He contemplated her actions and took out a cigarette. He went to light it but noticed the sign on Mrs. Cere's door that read, "No smoking, oxygen in use."

Paula went inside and cleaned up. She fed Lemuel<sup>5</sup> a mango and called her mother. "I'm picking up the kids, it's time for them to come home."

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<sup>5</sup> In the Bible, the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs, chapter 31, is attributed to King Lemuel. The name is Hebrew, meaning "devoted to God."



## TV Dinners

“I’ll take *her*.” I blurted out as my wife changed the channel.

“Oh, no you don’t. You put that show back on right now!”

“Since when do you like watching the food channel?”

“Since I met Renee Larson.”

Although we’d never met, eight seconds was all that it had taken to turn *Uncomplicated Cooking* with Renee Larson into my new favorite program. Besides, it was just a game. Just a game. A game lovers play. You’ve played it, I’ve played it, we’ve all played it. You’re watching television with your wife or husband or girlfriend or boyfriend when a hot member of the opposite sex appears on the screen. You look over at your girlfriend and ask her, “So, you think that there Brad Pitt is pretty hot?” She giggles and you turn to her and flex and ask her, “Oh yeah, but does he have guns like these?” She proceeds to tease you about being flabby but assures you that she loves you anyway. Then you strike a deal. You tell her that you’ll love her forever, but that if you ever get the chance, you leave her for —— (insert your celebrity crush here, in this case Renee Larson). And that if she ever gets the chance, she could leave you for Brad Pitt or whomever she chooses. Such were the terms laid out before my wife, Deborah, and I, some time ago as we channel surfed. We were fighting over the remote—not really fighting, but you know, teasing each other about what we wanted to watch—when she flipped over to the food channel. All of a sudden, the heaven’s roared and light fantastic opened my eyes to the beauty of Renee Larson. She lit up the screen in a pink dress and white apron, her fantasy-like blonde hair pulled tightly back and her eyelids fluttering away when she told me that “Making saffron lobster ramekins is soooooo easy that you’ll

make them *all* the time after I teach you how.” Then she winked and went to commercial.

“Are you serious?” Deborah asked me.

“Hell yeah I am. That woman is hot.”

“That woman is surgically enhanced. If she gets anymore plastic she’ll be a Tupperware bowl.”

“I don’t care. That’s who I choose. It’s my fantasy. You chose Jude Law, I choose Renee Larson. Game over.”

“And you lose.” She grabbed one of the couch pillows and started beating me over the head with it. I braced myself and prepared to catch one the blows. I grabbed the pillow but she wouldn’t let go so I forced myself on top of her and reached my hands underneath it and started tickling her. She finally gave in and we rolled off the couch onto the floor and I kissed her. We propped ourselves up and kissed again, but she quickly interrupted. She fluttered her eyelids and in her Renee Larson impersonation voice said, “You think I’m sooooo easy that you can make out with me *all* the time, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” I answered and we sat there like kids on our living room floor making out. When Uncomplicated Cooking with Renee Larson came back on, Deborah reached for the remote and said, “We’ve got better things to do than watch that slut,” and clicked off the TV. We reengaged in our passion not even realizing that the TV didn’t turn off and when we did realize it, we didn’t care. Deborah climbed on top of me and said, “I’d like to see Renee Larson try this,” and she unzipped my jeans. But no sooner had she

said it than this voice out of nowhere yelled, “Hey you, don’t go there, hands off my man.”

At first we ignored the pleas, but then Deborah inexplicably tumbled off of me and as I stared directly in front of the TV set I saw Renee Larson climbing out of it. She stood up in our living room and dusted herself off. She looked down at Deborah and picked her up by her hair and said, “I’m not messin’ around bitch. Keep your hands off him.” Then she threw Deborah back down to the ground and climbed on top of me. I squirmed backwards towards the couch, but Renee Larson had too good a hold of me and said, “There, there shugah dumplin’. Mama’s come home to take care of you.” She petted the top of my head like a dog while Deborah finally managed to stand up and yell, “What the fuck is going on?” But Renee just reached up with her leg and kicked her in the groin and warned her again to keep her hands off her man. I looked over at the TV screen and it had gone to a test pattern. The caption read, “Please stand by. We’re sorry. Food Channel is experiencing technical difficulties. Uncomplicated Cooking with Renee Larson will air in its entirety immediately upon resolution of this technical error.” Renee read the caption and started cackling.

“The hell if it will,” she laughed and howled.

Again, Deborah rose to her feet. She looked at the television and looked at me and looked at Renee Larson. I couldn’t speak. I tried to, but no sound would come out of my mouth. Renee got up and said, “Look honey, I’m sorry I kicked you, but this here man is mine now.” Deborah tried to push her way past Renee to my side, but Renee wouldn’t have any of that. “Uh-uh,” She hollered. “You two had a deal and I’m here to honor it.”

Renee stood up and stuck her finger in Deborah's face.

"I heard you call me a slut, woman. I ain't deaf." Deborah started mumbling and fumbling her words still completely baffled.

"That's right, you heard me. I heard y'all. I heard your game, too. He chose me and guess what? He wins. It's a simple as that."

I couldn't believe what was happening. Did Renee Larson just climb out of our RCA? I wanted to pinch myself but I still couldn't move. This may be crazy, but she was right. I did choose her. Maybe I did win. Maybe this was the big lottery prize I'd always hoped I would cash in. Renee climbed on top of me and zipped up my jeans.

"We don't need no strange hussies like her seeing my baby's goods," she quipped.

"Melvin? Are you just going to sit there? Get this freak of nature out of our living room."

"Well honey, she is right. We did have a deal, didn't we? I mean, we said if we ever had the chance to leave one another for a celebrity I'd pick Renee Larson, and you'd pick Jude Law and well, I don't see Jude Law here, but I do see Renee Larson, so yeah, I guess I win."

"And if you apologize for calling me a slut, I'll let you leave quietly."

"This is my house, I'm not going anywhere."

"I can't believe you're trying to ruin this for me? LOOK! For God's sake Renee Larson is in our living room and she wants me. You should be happy for me."

"Happy? Are you sick? Five minutes ago we were making out like our ship was going down. I was about to give you a —"

“Well missy, your ship did go down. You had your chance and now I get mine. Now if you’ll excuse us, me and Melvin have some business to attend to.”

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Those first few days with Renee were great. We had great sex all night long and slept all day. I didn’t go to work. I didn’t even call in. I figured I had me a celebrity girlfriend with all kinds of money. Who needs to work?

After a few days (who would think you’d ever get your fill of sleep or sex) I started getting restless. I loved having Renee around, but I thought maybe we should go out and do something. I woke her up and asked her if she would make me breakfast. She giggled and said she didn’t know how to cook. At first I thought she was joking, but no, she really didn’t know how to cook. “I just read off them cards and almost everything is made before the show,” she told me.

“All I do is add a pinch of salt here or there or take things out of the oven.”

There was no food in the house so we got dressed and went out for groceries. Everyone recognized Renee. It was a little strange at first. I was so proud to be seen with her. When she introduced me as her boyfriend, Melvin, I realized for the first time that this was all really happening. This wasn’t a dream. I wouldn’t wake up tomorrow in the haze of another world. This was my world. Mine and Renee’s world.

Well, my debit card wouldn’t work at the grocery store. Deborah must have cleaned out the account. I still can’t believe how immature and jealous she acted. It wasn’t until I was with Renee that I realized what a big mistake marrying her was. What was I thinking? I mean, she was hot and all (her ass was, heck still is priceless), but

sometimes you don't get to see the real side of a person until something out of the ordinary happens. Deborah just wasn't a fighter in the face of adversity. I can't have people like that in my life bringing me down. I need positive reinforcement. Renee gives me that. She's so wonderful. I am truly a blessed man.

I asked Renee if she could buy our groceries, but she threw her arms up in the air and reminded me that she dove through the television with just herself and her pink dress and her white apron and that she didn't have her purse with her. Then I asked her some more in depth, serious questions about her job and the television show and she reminded me that when she climbed through the television, she essentially quit her job and probably couldn't go back. In fact, we saw a tabloid headline at the grocery store that read, "Food Channel Vixen Goes Missing." We laughed about that. "I'm right here!" She chuckled and said.

Well, I had hoped that Renee had a nice savings account or had invested all that money she made hosting *Uncomplicated Cooking* but she had not. She had a couple thousand dollars in savings and a couple thousand pairs of shoes, but that was about it. We flew out East to her apartment to close the lease and have her things sent back home and when we came back, we dug in and started enjoying our new life together. Things were going fairly well. Except I didn't have a job and neither did Renee, but we seemed to be scraping by all right on her savings. I figured we had enough money to live comfortably for two or three months before one of us had to go out and find work, although I just assumed it'd be Renee. She had the better income potential being that she was a super hot celebrity chef.

A few weeks later I was standing at the picture window looking out into our front yard when I saw someone walking by dragging a sign. Upon further examination I realized that it was Deborah carrying around a cardboard cutout of Jude Law. I wanted to go out there and give her a piece of my mind but Renee stopped me. She was right. Why stoop down to her level?

A few months later Renee was pregnant. It was getting cold outside and we had our heat shut off because we couldn't pay the bill, but we survived on love. This is about the same time that Renee started getting a little bitchy. I mean, she was always a little feisty, that's what I loved about her, but she would not get off my back about not getting a job. Then, if you can believe the nerve she had, she got up in my face and said, "Look buddy, I left behind fame and fortune to be with you." I told her to fuck this guilt trip bullshit, I didn't ask her to climb through the television and enter my life.

Once the temperature dropped below freezing she really started getting all pissy. Some shit about it being too cold for a pregnant woman to live like this and that this cold was going to hurt the baby. Hurt the baby? I told her, "Renee, you've gained like 50 pounds. That's enough extra cushion to keep that baby warm." We don't need any heat turned on. She was pretty selfish like that and then trying to blame it on the baby. The nerve of that woman.

Just before Christmas that year I woke up one morning and she was gone. She left me a note. It was one of those, boo-hooers, too. Something about how she had fallen in love with me and that her heart has been irreparably broken and that should I want to see the baby where to reach her at.

But she ended up reaching me. I got arrested for not paying child support and had to beg my old boss for my job back. I should have chosen a better celebrity in the game. Next time I'll try —.

I saw Deborah at the grocery store the other day. Well, she was at the grocery store shopping, I was outside the store digging through a dumpster looking for returnables for extra cash. She didn't recognize me at first, but when she did, she walked approached me.

“Melvin? Is that you?”

Before I could answer, I saw her shake her head and then Jude Law walked up beside her.

“C'mon honey, let's go. I gave ten-thousand dollars to a homeless shelter last year. There's not much you can do for that old bum.”



## This Fire

Sometimes I just want to go home. You know I had an apartment over in Parkdale and I was working down at the Home Depot but they fired me because I kept lookin' at the pretty gals that worked there. Well, quite honestly, what's a man supposed to do? It's mostly men that work there and only about eight or nine gals but only about three or four of 'em are real pretty and I like to stare at 'em, that's all and I can't see any harm in doin' that. I have a pet cockatiel named Gus and my brother Pete comes by and visits me on Tuesdays. Well, not every Tuesday, but most of them. His wife Jean doesn't like him coming here and I asked Pete if he'd been going over to my place and taking care of Gus, but he always changes the subject and I can just tell that Pete don't always tell the truth sometimes. Yeah, I wonder about going home. Pete told me they took all my things to his basement, but I told him I still wanted to go back to my apartment. I liked it better here when I shared a room with Mitchell—did you ever meet Mitchell? Big Mitch I like to call him, he really isn't that big but I call him that anyway, but he moved downstairs because he needed more supervision and more medication. Do you mind if I smoke? Want one? Well then, yeah, at lunch time, me and Mitchell, that was the only time we'd get to see any of the gals around here. There's more gals than men here, you know. You know, at lunch time we'd talk to Alice, the fat one with no front teeth and Barbara, she tried to slit her wrists with a butterknife, but all she did was hurt herself real bad, yeah, Barbara, you know, she had a brain tumor and went permanently cross-eyed, but I'll be damned, she accidentally walked in the mens' showers one day and saw old man Tyler in the clothes that the Lord gave him, and sure as night, her eyes have been straight ever since. I liked that gal who lived across from my apartment in 2C, yeah, well, she used to talk to me and

say hi and I thought about her a lot, all the time. She heard my stereo playin' and asked me if that was Paula Cole and it was. She's my favorite singer, Paula Cole. I watched her once a few years ago on the Jay Leno Show. She's a real good singer. She played the piano and sang really well. I bought all her cds and I listen to them all quite a bit. There's a radio in my room here, but it only gets two stations and even those don't come in real well and neither of them play much Paula Cole which is a shame. Alice, all fat and toothless, has a cd player in her room, but I'm not allowed yet—her favorite singer is Dido but Mitchell calls her Dildo and it gets Alice really mad and then they separate us and now I have to eat lunch in my room by myself. I'm still not permanently admitted here and even then, nurse Bob—he's the first male nurse I've ever known—told me I might have to wait before I can have my Paula Cole cds. I don't think that's too much to ask. I bet Gus is going crazy right now, because Paula Cole is his favorite singer too, and I'll bet the sun in the sky that Pete don't play any Paula Cole cds for Gus and some people don't think that birds have memories, but he—Gus, you see, well, quite honestly, he's different. Gus knew. He knew better not to say anything to them police officers and well, quite honestly, my brother Pete ignores me when I talk about Gus, and I'll bet you anything it's his wife, Jean. She don't like me much anymore, not that we always got along, but she's my brother's wife, Jean. Well, quite honestly, I know it's his wife, but he shouldn't ignore his own brother just because she tells him to. Sometimes, I still feel the cord in my hands, and I'm just staring at the ground, wrapping it around my right hand, holding it tighter and tighter and tighter with my left. Well doctor, what kind of gal are you? I mean, it doesn't seem fair and all that you get to ask me all kinds of questions and I just have to sit here and answer and don't get to ask you any. Even though gals never

want to talk to me, I can usually tell what kind a gal is. Well, quite honestly, all you have to do is think about Natalie Wood. If you think it was all an accident, then you're what people like to call a realist. But if you think that Robert Wagner did her in, then you're the jealous girlfriend type and if you think Christopher Walken did it, then you're the classic romantic type—and I truly believe this. I always wanted to have me a classic romantic type gal even though gals never took to me much, but sometimes that wasn't my fault. After I wrapped the cord around my hand, I just stared at it—for a good long time—twenty-five minutes or so, I guess. I pulled it so tight my fingers turned purple, but I couldn't stop—I couldn't let go of it. That girl in 2C was real pretty. So pretty. Probably the prettiest girl I'd ever seen—the prettiest girl who ever talked to me. Once, her and Mrs. Tilden from upstairs both came over for a while and played with Gus. I liked it when they were both over at my apartment. I don't have many friends. I used to have some friends, but they're all gone now. I mean, I don't know where they live now. Before I worked at the Home Depot, I worked for Chet Dillon—he had a lawn business—I mean he took care of people's lawns. I worked for Chet since before I quit school. When I was about fourteen I started raking leaves and watering people's grass for Chet. He didn't like for people to call him Mr. Dillon, because he said it reminded him of his dad and he didn't like him any, at least that's what Chet Jr. told me. Chet Jr. was a year younger than me, but he was a grade ahead of me in school. I just wanted to touch her. Every time I saw her, it's all I could think about. I couldn't stop thinking about how it would feel. I never touched a gal before. Sometimes I would just sit in my apartment and think what it would be like to touch one—to feel one—to know what it was like. I heard the other guys at work talk about it and they would ask me things about gals, but I never had anything to

say. They just laughed at me and said they were gonna take me out some time and make a man out of me. Pete told me I probably shouldn't be friends with those guys, that they would just end up getting me into trouble. Chet Jr. got married to Deirdre Mullins. One time, in school, she bent over in front of me by my locker and I saw all the way down her shirt. I never told Chet Jr. I didn't want him to be mad at me. His dad, Chet got real sick and sold his business to a guy who said he didn't need me to work for him. For a while, I didn't work, I just stayed with Pete—until he met Jean. Well, after I started working at the Home Depot Pete helped me move into my apartment. I didn't have a real lot of stuff, just some clothes and a bed, but after a while I started buying things for my apartment that I didn't have. I bought some new dishes and I bought some books, even though a lot of people never thought I was intelligent I read some of them. One of them was about this son that came out of prison and his family was gone because they had to move off their farm. Pete didn't believe me that I read that book, but I remembered most of it. His name was Tom, just like his daddy's. I was surprised that I knew all the words. And another book about cars that I read—but I never understood all that car talk, even though I knew all those words, too. I had a car for a while. Chet Jr. sold it to me. A blue Nova. It broke down and I couldn't afford to get it fixed and Pete talked me out of getting another one, because he could take me to work and sometimes I had to take the bus. When I would see her walking up to her apartment, I would go outside my door and watch her. She would always say hi and then go inside really fast. I tried to think of things to say to her, but I never thought of any. They bring books to our rooms for us to read if we want. Old man Tyler pushes them around on a cart. I started to read some of them, but they're all the same—about people finding Jesus. It makes me wonder if Jesus knows I'm here. My dad

used to tell me that He knew where we were all the time and that He always knew what we were doing so that if I was ever doing something bad that I didn't think anyone was watching I should stop doing it because Jesus could see me—but I never saw Him. I think she heard me coming up behind her from behind the car next to hers. When she got out she turned around, but it was pretty dark. She opened up the door to her back seat and that's when I walked up behind her. Mitchell used to be in a band called Crowing Counts. He said nobody liked their name because it sounded too much like Counting Crows. He has a harmonica and he plays it real good. I told him I thought it was a pretty good name. I don't ever think of things like that. After she stopped moving, I didn't know what to do. I just pushed her inside her car and crawled up on top of her. I just sat there for awhile like that. I told Big Mitch that I would go see his band play when they let him out of here. He said that he could even learn a Paula Cole song. It was the first time I ever touched a gal. I liked the feel of her warm skin when I rubbed my hands under her sweater. She stayed warm for quite a while. I started breathing real heavy. I lifted her up against me and held her there. I wished her eyes would be open but then I thought better of it. What if they were open and she realized it was me and didn't want to be there any more? Her hair was soft and it smelled real good. All I have to do is close my eyes and breathe and I can still smell it—like strawberries. I never felt anyone so good before. It almost feels like my hands are still touching her skin. Nurse Bob caught Mitchell and Alice having sex in the TV lounge. They were naked on the coffee table—that's what Barbara told me. That's why they sent Mitchell downstairs—that's where you go if you get in trouble—to the third floor. I hope I never have to go there. I asked nurse Bob when I could see Mitchell again and he said maybe I could see him if I were fully committed. I have to go

to court in March and I have to stay here at least until then. That means I won't be able to get a Christmas tree in my apartment. Next Tuesday I'll ask Pete if he'll get one and put it there. Gus would like it. Mrs. Tilden brought me and Gus presents last Christmas. That night Pete and Jean and their son Charlie picked me up and we went to Aunt Sarah's house for dinner. Uncle Dick died. He rode horses at the fair. He taught me how to ride horses when I was a boy. I fell off the big black one named Prince when I was eight years old and broke my collar bone. How come you think Mitchell and Alice had sex? Do you think they're gonna get married? I unzipped her pants and I had trouble tugging them down. There wasn't a lot of room in her backseat. I couldn't get 'em past her shoes and I couldn't get those off. I laid her across the back seat with her pants pushed down below her knees and then I pulled her sweater up over her face. I didn't like to look at her with her eyes closed like that. It made me real uncomfortable. I pushed my face against her stomach. I just liked feeling it there. Gus liked it when I let him out of his cage. I kept a perch by the bedroom window and he liked to sit there and watch outside. There wasn't much to see out that window, but a few trees and he probably saw squirrels. I was sweating real bad and I dripped a lot of sweat on her. I licked it off her stomach and it tasted like salty sweat mixed with her smell. I put my hands over her legs and kept feeling them up and down. At the top they were a little prickly, but further down they were real smooth and felt real good. I reached inside her underwear and it was furry. I didn't take 'em off but I peeled 'em back and sniffed inside. It smelled like the shower in my apartment. I got cable in my apartment. I watched a show about lions. There was a boy lion and a gal lion and the boy lion attacked a deer. He ripped open the deer's neck

and started to tear open its insides. The gal lion came over and tried to help but the boy lion looked up at her with a bloody face and she ran off. I thought she was scared, but on TV they said that he just didn't want to share. I went to Record Land and tried to find some Paula Cole posters. I thought my apartment would look better if all of the walls had Paula Cole posters on them. The boy working said he would order some and call me when they came in. Next Tuesday I'll ask Pete to go see if they are in yet. I didn't know how to take off her bra. It was white and fancy looking like her underwear. I pulled one side of it down as far as I could and then I squished her nipple between my fingers. They weren't real big boobs. Not like yours. Since Mitchell left, on most days I just sleep all day. Nurse Bob said that was because of my new medication. That lawyer was here yesterday and said I might have to go to court sooner and if I do, they might tell me I can't stay here til March and that I'll have to go live at the jail. I didn't know what else to do to her. I just wanted to feel her and be next to her. I pulled her sweater off her face and tried to open one of her eyes with my finger, but it wouldn't open, I just saw her eyeball lookin'. I didn't know if she could see me or not. I pulled her up against me to try and warm her back up, but it didn't work. I just leaned over her for while, holding myself up looking at her. Last Tuesday Pete told me he saw Chet Jr. I asked him if he was gonna come and visit me, but Pete didn't answer. Pete was on the track team in school. He was real fast. I could never catch him when we were kids. I couldn't run real fast. He got all kinds of medals and ribbons. My dad hung them in the cabinet in the living room. There were so many of them that some wouldn't fit in there. I think Pete just kept those ones in his room. Pete didn't cry when dad died. I tried not to but I couldn't help it. The only time he ever got mad at me was when I quit school. Chet Jr. told me it didn't matter because I

was gonna fail anyway. Dad used to get mad at Pete when he didn't win his track meets. Pete would go in his room and slam the door. Dad said that Pete was so fast the only reason he lost was because he didn't try. I thought the same thing about me, but even when I tried, I couldn't run any faster. Nurse Bob brought me those new pills you said I had to take—for my nervousness. When I'm not sleeping, I can't sit still sometimes and I can't stop sweating. I was a lot taller than her. I just reached over her head and wrapped the cord around her neck. I pulled it tighter and tighter and tighter and I tried to stop but I just kept pulling tighter and tighter and tighter until I couldn't breathe any more and then she stopped moving and that's when I stopped. My dad used to tell Pete that if he didn't win his track meet, he'd end up being a bum in a jail someday. He only said that when he got real mad. Pete called him some real bad names after he said that once. That just made him madder. I got up out of the backseat of her car and I just stood there for a while. Then I saw the light in my apartment and I remembered that I hadn't fed Gus yet. I went in and Gus wasn't real mad because he knows if I forget it's only for a little while. Then I turned out all the lights and put on a Paula Cole CD and sat on the floor by the front window. I tried to look for the girl in 2C's car, but a van pulled up and parked in front of it. I guess since Pete put all my stuff in his basement it means I don't have my apartment anymore, do I doctor?



## The Will

The anticipation was everywhere, buzzing and thick like fog. People were screaming, people were looking side-to-side, people were whispering, people were on the edge of their seats intoxicated with excitement. Some could hardly stand it and some started rumors and three people left upon hearing that Gladys had sold her 1926 Hudson eight years ago and that no one would be receiving the old car as their inheritance or taking it for a summer drive or restoring it back to its original condition.

However, most of the mourners did not care about a beat-up automobile, but as the word trickled down, they came and they came in droves, they came in bunches, they came like refugees after a flood. They came from miles away—literally—cousins from half way around the world: Joel Patterson from London; Richard and Linda Gayle from Vancouver; Dieter Gruber from Frankfurt; Erik and Sara Larsen from Denmark, and yes, even from outer space, her cousin Herschel Barenbaum, the Israeli astronaut who had been working on the international space station just weeks prior, and nieces and nephews and some she hadn't seen in at least fifty years and countless other distant relations from other distant places where she never even knew she had any family or friends or acquaintances. Five hundred and forty-three of them in total. They stayed at Holiday Inns and Howard Johnsons and Marriotts and some stayed with friends and some parked RVs or pitched tents at camp sites not far from town. They brought their children, some babies, some grown, and their friends and their dogs, golden retrievers, cocker spaniels, and German shepherds. They arrived at the airport and some came by train and yet others by bus and still others drove minivans and station wagons, SUVs and conversion vans and some in Ryder trucks, expecting to need the room to haul home their take.

Some had received phone calls and dozens of others who couldn't be reached got around to knowing by word of mouth and some saw the notice in the paper and some just had a gut feeling that something big—something really big—was happening or about to happen and some people just let their curiosity get the best of them and couldn't stand being left out of what was going on at St. Dunstan's Catholic Church.

But by whatever means whatever relation or whatever way it can be said, they all knew and they all grieved and they all stood or sat stunned when they heard the news: Gladys Shue was dead. She bought the farm, kicked the bucket, ceased to be, cashed in her chips, ate her last pancake, turned out the lights, took her last bow, laid down her shovel, answered the last call, and gave up the ghost.

It's just a fact of life, a matter of time, a matter of mercy, and a matter of simple biology, and we're all going to go one day, one way or another, naturally or accidentally, young or old, and Gladys would be no exception. She lived well, she lived happy, she lived strong, and she lived long.

Really long.

One hundred and eighteen years.

One hundred and eighteen years and twenty-four days to be exact. By all means she exceeded the life expectancy of a human being and did so with honor and pride and respect and dignity. She did it on a farm in Lakeview until she was thirty-four and in a seam shop in Edmore until she was seventy-nine, at which time she retired to her cottage on Coral Lake every summer and to Kissimmee, Florida, in the winter. And she did it all alone. She never married, never even dated (at least that anybody ever knew or heard of), never fell in love (again, this is purely speculation), never had a broken heart (truly we

are just guessing here) and never bore an heir, save for the hundreds of nieces and nephews, both great and great-great and great-great-great, and dozens upon dozens of cousins both close and distant, some who stayed in constant touch, some who called monthly, others who called annually and some who only sent Christmas and/or birthday cards and yes, there were those who were shocked to learn she was still alive when they heard the news that she was gone.

She lived to see the election of twenty-two presidents, two world wars, and the invention of the automobile, zipper, camera, electric oven, lie-detector test, tape recorder, tractor, cigarette lighter, paper clip, airplane, radar, bra, sonar, frozen food, video camera, jukebox, ball-point pen, electron microscope, Kool-aid, parking meter, salad, helicopter, copy machine, Teflon, aerosol can, nuclear reactor, cordless telephone, television, napalm, instant pudding, atomic bomb, holograph, microwave oven, birth-control pill, electric piano, fiber optic cable, pacemaker, laser, compact disc, VCR, and the personal computer. She went to the Lakeview Community School until the eighth grade and outlived all 14 of her classmates by at least twenty-two years.

It was Juliet Evans, the grand-daughter of her late best friend Emma Harris, whom she outlived by 47 years, who had stopped over after church to see why Gladys had been absent, who found her standing by the refrigerator as if she were about to open it and pull out the cream to fill her coffee cup, which sat cold on the table.

She died standing up, one hand on the refrigerator door handle, one hand at her side, wearing a night gown and slippers, frozen in time like a photograph of eternity waiting to be taken by a non-existent camera. Juliet tried to sit the corpse down, or set it

flat, but she could not. It just stood there waiting for its cream, thirsty for its morning coffee.

Eventually the coroner came, the body was tagged and the body was bagged and previous arrangements were set into motion. She died on a Sunday, had a showing on Tuesday, was buried on Wednesday and had everyone in a clamor and a giant hullabaloo by Thursday. It was Thursday, March 15, 2005, at eight o'clock a.m., five hundred and eighty-six mourners, all the friends and all the family, all gathered at St. Dunstan's church, all crammed inside the only building in town big enough to hold them, for the reading of Gladys' will. The last will and testament of one Gladys Guinevere Shue.

Her friend, the retired lawyer Alvin Auker, all of one hundred and two years old himself, did the honors, even though it was widely known that Gladys and Alvin had a falling out some three years ago. Alvin avidly pursued Gladys as a love interest, but she persistently declined his advances saying she didn't want to "rob the cradle," leaving Alvin dejected. But he chose this time to reconcile and forgive and forget and to move on and he agreed to read the dying wishes of the late Gladys Shue even though she had spurned him. He began the proceedings by thanking everyone for attending, then put on his glasses and cleared his throat and never being one known to noodle, got right down to business.

I, Gladys Guinevere Shue, the youngest daughter of Gilbert Monroe Shue and Harriet Beatrice Shue, nee Van Ottenbubble, hereby do attest that this document, created on August 12, 1996, is by legal authority the last will and testament of the above named. The execution of this document is to be carried out immediately upon the passing of the above named. The above named, I, Gladys Guinevere Shue, do hereby bequeath the

following: To my cousin Georgette Simmons-Caldwell, my Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt salt and pepper shakers; to my niece, Betty Jane Pryor, the daughter of my late sister Bernadette, my diamond earrings, the ones I received as a gift from your mother on my fiftieth birthday; to Adelaide Cushings, my neighbor at Coral Lake for the past eighteen years, my bundt cake pan: If there is any left-over cake in the pan at the time of my passing, please feed that to Claudius, the porcupine who lives under my front porch at Coral; to the Reverend Father Prescott Malcour, the pastor at St. Dunstan's Church, my goldfish, Pearl.

Upon hearing this Juliet Evans raised her hand.

"Excuse me, Mr. Auker, I hate to interrupt, but Pearl died four years ago, isn't there anything else in there she left to Father Malcour?"

Alvin Auker cleared his throat and fingered his page looking for where he had lost his spot, then he repeated, to the Reverend Father Prescott Malcour, the pastor at St. Dunstan's Church, my goldfish, Pearl; to my cousin Paul Kramer, my Jesus TV trays; to my cousin Kenny McClain, the State of Tennessee. And then someone hollered out,

"Damn Kenny, you made out like a thieving bandit."

Alvin again cleared his throat and carried on: To my niece Patricia Gayle, the number seven; to my cousin Sam Babbit, the year 1931; to my niece Vicki Stairs, the color blue; to the country of France, I forgive all of your war debt; to Thomas Jefferson, some shower curtain rings that I never used; they are in the middle drawer in the back bathroom at my house in Kissimmee; to my cousin Erik Larsen, the letter V; to my great-great nephew Daniel Carpenter, two tickets to paradise.

And on hearing this the crowd started growing uneasy. Someone stood up and yelled, "C'mon old man, get to the good stuff," followed by a chorus of heckling, boos and hisses.

"New reader."

"You old coot, you know why we're all here, let's get to it."

"Enough of this crap already, we want to know now."

"I'm gonna be dead myself before we find out who gets it."

"Yeah, come on, who gets it, we want to know."

"Let someone else read unless your gonna put your teeth in you crazy old bastard."

Alvin read on undeterred, unaffected and determined to fill out Gladys' last wishes, bequeathing things like the word "capsize" to the planet Uranus, a Lawrence Welk record to a jar of cashews, and butter to cement. At some point, two unnamed cousins, both at least as old, if not older than Alvin Auker went to the front of the church and ripped the will from right out of his hands, but Alvin just pulled another copy out of his back pocket and kept reading even though no one could hear a thing anymore.

"Dammit Auker, quit wasting our time and tell us who the hell gets it."

"For the love of everything sacred and holy, shut your mouth and give someone else that God damned will to read."

"Christ Auker, we're all here for the same reason, let's get to it."

It was true. All six hundred and twenty-nine of them had showed up for one reason and one reason only—they wanted to know to whom she left it. They all figured they had an outside shot at getting it and they all had waited patiently and eagerly and

respectfully for Gladys to die. There was that close call in 1968 when she broke her hip and major heart surgery in 1975 and kidney failure in 1983 and a blood clot in 1991 and pink eye in 1995 and every time they all swore she was going to go, but she always recovered and they all went back to whatever it was they were doing before they started Gladys' latest death watch. After 1995 they just gave up and figured she was meant to live forever and that she'd probably just give it to the church, but rumors spread like wildfire and when one got out that she had prepared her will and that she had actually left it to someone—a friend, a cousin, a nephew, a niece, a real person—the buzz returned. Some of those long lost relatives and friends and acquaintances started calling and coming over and bringing her dinner and some even brought a treat for that porcupine and *Life* magazine came out on her 110th birthday to take her picture and they were amazed and shocked and deeply affected by it, but she wouldn't let anyone near it and after the *Life* magazine story, some rich hermit from Belgium offered to buy it for seven million dollars and keep it safe and turn it into a museum but she wouldn't sell and by 2001 everyone had forgotten about it or just put it in the back of their minds for safekeeping given the fact that Gladys was 113 years old but didn't look a day over 90 and they all just figured she wasn't going anywhere soon so they might as well not worry about it for awhile, but some still did. Some would ask her where she got it or why she even had it and she really didn't know or remember how it even came to light. She knew it was there in 1915 when her brother went off to fight in World War I, but for some reason she doesn't remember it being there at anytime before and she was sure it wasn't there when he came home in a coffin two years later. It would come and go during the Roaring 20s but it settled in for quite a while when the stock market crashed in 1929 and

it stayed throughout the Great Depression and all the way through World War II. It left after the bomb dropped on Hiroshima and came back four days later after Nagasaki was hit, but after that it was never the same.

Again it came and went throughout the 1950s, never staying too long, but then again, it was never gone too long, either. It watched in horror, like the rest of us, the assassination of John F. Kennedy and it welcomed the arrival of the Beatles. It mourned the murders of Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy and it adamantly defended Yoko Ono when the Beatles broke up, at least so Gladys once mentioned.

And there it sat. Occasionally it would get aroused, like during the Watergate scandal or the Iran hostage crisis or when Ronald Reagan was shot, but mostly it kept its cool or kept to itself. It did manage to go out once and take the Pepsi Challenge, but it chose Coke so it never did get to be in one of those silly commercials. After that it would occasionally weigh in on benign, unimportant and idiotic issues, like whether or not Corey Hart should have won a Grammy in 1985, or how many licks it really did take to get to the bottom of a Tootsie Pop, but it never really made any substantive effort to be heard or any demand for action.

It followed the Bill Clinton sex scandal closely and thought about writing a book about it, but it eventually decided to write a book about parachute pants instead. The book revitalized it and in early 2000 it found a new zeal for spirituality and was on the verge of converting to Islam and pilgrimaging to Mecca, but after the September 11th attacks it could not do so and retain public support and instead had to do so quietly and unobtrusively.



And there it sat, like before, where Gladys paid it no mind and never really even thought about it much, save for when she would vacuum around it or hang her purse on it or when two local boys broke in and stole it. But even they returned it two days later when they realized that not only did they not know how to use it, but even if they got it to work they wouldn't know what to do with it. Officer Pettyjohn saw them dragging it down the street back towards Gladys' house and they were arrested and it was returned to Gladys, but she insisted that no charges be filed and in fact told the boys that they probably already had one and that if they replaced the window they broke to get into her living room she would fix them lunch and help them get theirs working.

\* \* \*

Now the crowd was really getting restless. Three times they tried to physically remove Alvin Auker from the front of the church but he would not budge. He kicked and screamed and bit until they gave up or until someone yelled, "For Christ's sake, he's 102 years old, give him a break already." When someone again wrestled the will away from him and saw that he was only on page six of two-hundred and ninety-three, they gladly handed it right back to him, patted him on the head and told him to carry on.

By the time the clock struck midnight only stragglers remained. Of the original seven-hundred and fifty-eight people in the crowd roughly sixty-three remained and at least a dozen of them had drifted asleep. Alvin was up to page 23 of the will and he had just announced the bequeathing of the trademark for the candy Pop Rocks to Ethel Bainbridge. No one knew who Ethel Bainbridge was, but rest assured she'd be thrilled.

Later the following Saturday, Alvin stood in front of the church reading the last pages of the will. Gladys' cousin Peter Green and a bum who came inside from the cold

were the only two people left from the original crowd of eight-hundred and seventeen, and Juliet Evans, who stood behind Alvin in front of the altar handing out the items that had been bequeathed to those that were still around to receive their inheritance although she had a hard time trying to figure out how to make sure that cousin Elwood Plank got his newly inherited Giza Pyramid or how she would properly see that the Pillsbury Dough Boy get his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Alvin, now crying and trembling from the lack of sleep, carried on, almost mumbling, but Peter Green had finally made out his name as Alvin read from the last paragraph on page nine-hundred and twelve: To my cousin Neville Butler, the patio furniture in my back yard at Coral Lake; to my Cousin Peter Green, William Faulkner. Peter, excited to hear this, ran over to the bum and shook his hand. He asked Alvin Auker where he could pick up William Faulkner but it was too late, Alvin had collapsed from exhaustion. Juliet Evans told Peter to leave her his address and she assured him that as soon as she secured William Faulkner she would send him to him. She then picked up the will and found the spot where Alvin had left off. She scanned the church and saw that none of the eleven hundred and fourteen mourners were left and so she went up to the bum and nudged his shoulder, waking him up as he had just dozed off, and asked him if he wanted it, since the cousin, niece, nephew or to whomever it was left was already gone and she didn't want to leave it in the back of the church overnight. She called for Father Malcour to wheel it out and he did so, in a wheelbarrow. The bum blew his nose on his sleeve and wiped the snot away with his other hand and asked Juliet what she thought he should do with it. She wasn't sure and Father Malcour shook his head while the bum scratched his.

He said, "I had one of these once when I was young. In fact, I had a great one when I got out of the army. Funny thing though, I never quite figured out how to use it. I packed it away and only brought it out now and then when I was asked to, but I couldn't get the hang of it, so there it went, back in the closet. Who knows where it is now. Probably got thrown away or sold at a yard sale, or lost or whatnot. I'll tell you this though, it looked just like this one settin' right here."

Juliet Evans told him he could have this one and Father Malcour told him he could carry it in the wheelbarrow until he found a place to keep it as long as he promised to return the wheelbarrow to the church when he did. Two days later, Father Malcour found it on the steps of the church, just sitting there, but the wheelbarrow never was returned.

Section IV:

Flashes

## Girls Are Stupid

"No girls are allowed on the sidewalk," asserted Billy. He hopped onto his replica highway patrol mini-motorcycle and pedaled feverishly down his driveway and onto the sidewalk. He banged against the shiny new red tricycle that blocked his path.

"Leave me alone Billy." Suzy whined and shrieked at the top of her lungs. "I can play here if I want to."

Billy continued, using all the force his 4-year-old body could muster into that plastic motorcycle to try and push the little girl and her new toy off the sidewalk. He finally succeeded. Suzy jumped up off the grass where she had been knocked down and assessed the damage. Her tricycle stood on its side and her favorite dress was soiled.

"I hate you, Billy." Her nose curled up and she ran into the house.

"Girls are stupid," he hollered at his fleeing victim.

Billy monitored the sidewalk for most of the afternoon. In another lifetime his legs would be jealous of the miles he could race without ever tiring. The neighborhood echoed throughout that summer day with the unmistakable sound of Billy's rallying cry, "Girls are stupid, girls are stupid." He proudly proclaimed his anthem as he asserted his role as sheriff of the Fourth Street sidewalk.

Later that afternoon, Suzy reappeared on the sidewalk.

"What are you doing back out here?" Billy questioned, believing as he did that he held authority over the sidewalk.

"I'm riding my new tricycle," Suzy answered with a new, more confident air.

She grabbed her trike by the handle bars and lifted it upright. She catapulted her little frame up onto the seat and sailed gracefully down the sidewalk.

Again, she was met by the Billy patrol.

"Yer nose is funny lookin'," Billy teased her.

"It is not," she said and picked her trike up underneath her, turning herself and the red machine around in the opposite direction.

Billy laughed at her defiance of his sidewalk fascism and tailgated behind her. When she stopped in front of her own driveway, he continued on and rammed into her.

"Cut it out Billy," she demanded with an irritating grimace that prompted Billy to laugh some more.

"Yer nose is funny lookin'," he mocked again pointing at her.

She too, pointed at her own little upturned nose and lectured to Billy, "My grandma says my nose is cute and that when I grow up I'm gonna look like Myrna Loy."

This silenced them both and they stared each other down in bewilderment.

Suzy got up off her tricycle, drug it forcefully around to face the other direction, vaulted herself up onto the seat and set adrift back down the sidewalk in all her 4-year-old glory.

Billy, deciding he was now in the mood to ignore her, re-staked his claim as the loudest voice on Fourth Street. "Girls are stupid, girls are stupid," he testified, pedaling down to the end of Suzy's driveway and into the street, where he rode his motorcycle around in circles.

"Girls are stupid, girls are stupid," Billy bellowed, prompting his father to peer out from the tattered screen door.

"Billy Walker," his father howled, while stepping out onto the front porch with a beer in his hand, "Get your ass out of the street."

Billy continued along his parade route, torturing the neighbors with his serenade, "Girls are stupid, girls are stupid."

"Dammit Billy, don't make me come out there," his father continued to wail, his voice now hoarse.

Suzy halted her sidewalk excursion as she had inherited a front row ticket to the commotion.

"Billy Walker, I'm gonna whoop your ass," his father dictated, throwing his beer down in disgust to signal that the last straw had been drawn.

Billy ignored away as his father ran out into the street and hoisted the little boy off his motorcycle.

"You're gonna get it now boy," his father promised. Billy started kicking and screaming and his father yanked down the boys pants and lashed out at his bare behind with his bare hand.

"My motorcycle, my motorcycle," Billy cried.

"I'm gonna throw the damn thing away," his father yelled over the boys tantrum, carrying him into the house.

Billy watched in agony as the next car that sped by obliterated the little motorcycle.

"No," he sobbed, ignoring his father's hand, as the scene in the street unfolded in front of his preschool eyes.

Suzy pedaled on about the sidewalk, wondering to herself who Myrna Loy was.

## Bowling

"C'mon Darryl, you can pick this up," hollered out Rhonda, Darryl's girlfriend, while she clapped without letting go of her cigarette.

"Oh, Christ, Darryl hasn't picked up a spare in six weeks," remarked Clark, "I don't know why the fuck we keep him on the goddam team."

"Jesus, Clark, can't you keep your mouth shut for five minutes," Rhonda barked back.

She hopped up and pouted away from the other bowlers, glancing back to mention to Leann that her boyfriend "was a real asshole."

Ralph Leeds wobbled out of his chair and drew his ball out of the return. The sight of Ralph's feeble old body alone triggered his coworkers into a comical uproar, but seeing him attired in multicolored, rented bowling shoes sent them all over the edge.

"Hey Ralphie," Clark shouted, "If you get a strike, Leann said she'd suck yer cock."

Undaunted, Ralph clumsily trudged up to the line and in his usual contorted motion, unleashed his ball down the lane. His bowling ball wobbled, just like he walked, and as it had done so many times before, it meagerly toppled over one pin before careening into the gutter.

Accustomed to being the whipping boy of his coworkers, Ralph limped back to his seat amidst the roar of 'atta boy Ralphies', and 'get 'em next times'. And of course Clark, chiding Leann that her lips remained safe for the moment, but assuring her that his proposition held true for the rest of the evening and that Ralphie was 'due', as he said, for a strike.



"You're a sick bastard," Rhonda said to Clark from behind the rest of the bowlers, reappearing with a fresh beer in her hand.

"Just let it go," retorted Darryl as Clark got up and started laughing, hobbling over to his ball, attempting his best Ralph imitation.

"Can't we go out one night a week and not have someone act like a 4-year-old?" Rhonda asked. "Leann, I don't know how you put up with it." She shook her head. Leann just sat in silence waiting for her turn to bowl.

Clark glanced back towards the others as he readied to bowl and blurted out, "It's not my fault nonna you fuckers don't know how to have fun."

His ball whizzed down the lane and all ten pins erupted. "Four in a row," he said with pride. "That's how you do it Ralphie. Just think, that's all it's gonna take fer you to get a blow job."

"Leave that poor old man alone," Rhonda's voice quivered and she ran up to Clark and threw her beer in his face as he pranced back to his seat.

"Damn Darryl, keep that bitch under control." Clark growled and wiped his face with his bowling towel and Rhonda lunged at him, but couldn't knock him down. She reached up and started pounding at Clark's face with her fists like little hammers.

The bitter taste of his own blood didn't faze Clark as Darryl pulled the petite woman off him.

Rhonda sobbed as she put on her coat and asked, "Where's my purse?"

"I don't know why the fuck you gotta make a big fuckin' deal out of everything," Clark said nonchalantly. He strolled up to Ralph and plopped down in the chair beside him and put his arm around the odd old man.

"I'm just lookin' out for Ralphie, since nonna you other fucks will," Clark ranted, "Ain't nothing wrong with that. C'mon Ralph, tell 'em, when was the last time some trash barrel whore slobbered on yer knob?"

Ralph sat mute and only moved to push his glasses up off his nose.

"This is unreal," Rhonda said. Her eyes moved to Leann. She still hadn't whispered throughout the ordeal.

"We're not coming back next week," Rhonda said finally and she disappeared without having located her purse.

"Good," Clark snided as he watched Darryl follow her.

"What?" Clark asked with wide eyes, "Yer leavin' too, Darryl?"

Darryl wouldn't answer and Clark didn't relent, "That's right, take yer whipped ass outta here." He pulled his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, but it was empty. He crumpled it up into a ball and tossed it in the direction of the exiting Darryl and Rhonda.

"Frickin' pussy," he said, under his breath this time.

Ralph sat with his hands on his knees and still only stirred to adjust his glasses. Leann stared into space. Clark turned his eyes up to the electronic scoreboard. "Shit," he said, "We lost again."

## “Kiss Me” Lips

She had lips that said "kiss me" no matter what they were saying or doing. Plump, garnet and present. And her hair shined an ersatz hue, I might as well make up a color, auburned bronze, that didn't look natural in any kind of light, but when she wore it up it and gave center stage to the “kiss me” lips they became even more kissable. And kiss them I did; in the front seat of my car, on the steps in front of the school, on her parents front lawn—unsexy kisses never lasting longer than a second or two. I kissed her in Toys “R” Us, but she became cross when I tickled all of the Tickle-Me-Cookie Monsters. She tried to walk away, but when she did, I lifted up the back of her shirt and told her I was checking out her ass. It was round and firmly tucked inside her dark-blue jeans that weren't too tight, but suited for its fullness. I learned the hard way never to tell a woman you liked her big ass. It screamed "grab me" and she giggled when I did. She confiscated my hand and threatened never to let it go as she paraded me around town like a souvenir she had won at the fair. She introduced me as her friend, but made sure everyone saw us holding hands. I kissed her goodnight while I held her against me leaning against my car. My hands were everywhere, but going nowhere and her kisses were still short and interrupted by questions about when I would be back and all I could think about were the sister-like kisses coming from those "kiss me" lips and if I was going to be the one to teach this girl how to kiss I might as well find my sister and kiss her.

## Painting Ceilings

I painted my first ceiling when I was twelve. It was in the days before long-handled fancy rollers and spray machines and I had to steady myself on a ladder while I focused on the strokes and glides and spins of my roller. I braced my knees against the top of the ladder, which had a slight wobble, and slowly dipped my roller into the paint tray that rested on the protruding shelf. I could never tell if I didn't have enough paint on my roller or if I had too much, but as I slowly lifted the roller from the tray, I would always let the excess drip back down. Then, my knees would buckle and I'd have to bring the roller back down into my tray while I re-steadied myself and then repeat the process.

"You're doing fine, kid," my Uncle Pete would say when he came into the room I was painting to check on my progress. His hat and overalls were covered in layers of paint. Enamel and latex, semi-gloss and flat. His fingernails were permanently tattooed with years of off-white and eggshell and cream.

I found my balance. I dipped and then lifted my roller and spread and wheeled it in perfect rhythm. I would do this four times. Once for the ceiling area directly above me, once for the area directly in front of me, and once for the left, and once for the right. Uncle Pete could reach and stretch backwards and paint the area directly behind him, but my gangly arms could not coordinate like that yet.

After my fourth plunge into the paint and my final glides, I would gently place my roller back in the tray and slowly unbrace my knees from the top of the ladder. Upon my descent, I would look over the ceiling from below and admire my work. Then, I would hold the paint tray with one hand while I slid the ladder over to the next spot where I would again ascend and begin all over again.

“You’re getting pretty good at this, kid,” Uncle Pete would come in and say. He would stand there and watch me, then light his cigar, which I would watch him smoke and wonder how it tasted as it became tainted with the paint that coated his hands.

I moved the ladder to the final corner. Corners were the trickiest because you had less room to move your elbows and they had to be touched up and smoothed over with a brush. I had two sections of ceiling to paint and I had a hard time reaching them because the ladder spread out in such a way that I could only get so close to the corner. I balanced against the top of the ladder and before I dipped my roller into the paint I wiped my forehead clear of the sweat that had drenched it. I caught my breath and reached up with the roller as far as I could, but it was not far enough. I had to tiptoe and stretch. I twisted sideways and planted my knee as hard as I could into the top rung of the ladder. I was poking at the ceiling but I couldn’t steady my hand to achieve the proper glide and motion. I straightened myself out and looked over the situation. I had done nothing but glob a bunch of paint up in the corner. I steadied myself and carefully tried again. I dipped my roller, only to smooth it out again, and leaned sideways and stretched out my arm as far as I could. I found the corner and set my roller flat, then with each motion, slowly brought it back towards me.

"Those corners are a bitch, kid," Uncle Pete came in and said. "But you’re doing fine, just fine.

I had since gained a little confidence and was now prepared to finish off the corner with a couple of brush strokes. I had to climb to the ladder’s top rung and steady myself just so. I clamped my hands down on the each side of the top rung and held tight until I felt comfortable. I kept one hand clamped down while the other dipped the brush

and swirled it over with paint. I thought I was in prime position, but once again, I could not reach without stretching, so I had to release my death grip on the ladder and steady it with my knees and shins.

But I could not.

When I let go of my grip, I lost my balance and the ladder wobbled. I tried to lean against the wall for support, but all I did was push myself away from it and in an instant I was on the ground, underneath the ladder and the overturned tray and covered in paint. I wiped my hands on my soaked overalls. Uncle Pete came in after he heard the commotion.

“You’ve got to steady yourself, kid, and take your time.”

He took a drag off his cigar.

“You all right?”

I stood up straight and picked up my ladder and paint tray and climbed back up to try again.

Section V:

Blurring the Lines of Reality

## Three Squares: A Food Journal

### **Breakfast:**

I woke up early this morning. I needed extra time to eat two of the recommended eight servings of fruits and vegetables deemed necessary for my extended survival. I washed them down with red tea, which contains magnesium, which is necessary for a healthy nervous system. Red tea also increases the absorption of iron in the body and contains potassium and copper, both required in the facilitation of the body's metabolism. Red tea is also thought to ease tension caused by stress, cure mild depression and enhance relaxation. I'm going to stop, but I could keep going. I have to stop because I need to wash down my red tea with some green tea, which contains antioxidants and we all know antioxidants, molecules capable of preventing oxidation in other molecules, help keep the body free of free radicals. If Malcolm X was alive, he'd fear green tea. What I'd really like to do is go fetch my morning paper, but there isn't time. I haven't had any protein yet so I'd better quick fry an egg. When I was younger, my mom often scrambled eggs for breakfast, but stopped when she learned they were high in cholesterol. Eggs were not a breakfast option for a few years, at least until new, precise, scientific information appeared revealing that eggs did not have as much cholesterol as once presumed, and may in fact contain some good cholesterol. Plus, the cholesterol in eggs is in the yoke, so if you really, really need to avoid it you can simply eat the fluffy whites. This morning, I'm frying my egg over medium. Butter was once the preferred choice for frying eggs but butter has too much saturated fat. I'm not even going to start with margarine, or oleo as my grandma called it. There are some healthier oils out there, like peanut oil, and olive oil, but I don't want a greasy egg. Scratch the frying, I'll poach my egg instead.



Even if retaining a constant temperature for the poaching liquid makes the task difficult. Yes, poaching refers to cooking something in liquid, any liquid, it doesn't have to be water. Stock, broth, even beer are suitable poaching liquids, but I'm sticking with water and a splash of vinegar, which helps ensure the egg will immediately coagulate. The ideal poaching temperature is 175 degrees Fahrenheit. A trick I learned is to fill a shallow pan with water and bring it to a rolling boil. Once the boil is achieved, turn the cooktop down to low, all the while eyeing your water. As soon as your boil looks like a simmer, drop in the egg, which you should have already cracked open into a tea cup or small bowl. Commercial egg poachers are available, but they don't poach your eggs, they actually steam them. Stay true to your poach. While my egg poaches, I'll start gulping down some of the recommended three liters of water men should drink daily, which I'll chase with one of the recommended three glass of milk I'm reasoned to consume. But just as I begin to poor that luscious cow-udder creaminess, I remember reading that the recommendation to drink three glasses of low-fat milk or eat three servings of other dairy products per day to prevent osteoporosis isn't as beneficial as advertised. Three glasses of low-fat milk add more than 300 calories a day to your diet and new research suggests that dairy products might be linked to increases in the risk of ovarian cancer and prostate cancer. Yikes, but I need my calcium. I know this because as a child, I would read the nutrition panel on the side of my cereal box while I chomped on the sweet, delicate crunch known as Fruity Pebbles. I swirled my cereal with my spoon, watching the milk rainbow as I delighted in facts. Turns out the panels were semi-deceiving. There were two columns. Column one, the Fruity Pebbles nutritional facts, column two, the nutritional facts of one serving of Fruity Pebbles combined with one cup

of low-fat milk. We always drank two percent milk at my house and if we were at my grandma's (my grandma, who unwittingly cooked everything she ever ate in bacon grease only lived to be 91, and oh, how it pains my heart to think of the years she may have added to her life by not being so nonchalant with the bacon grease), whole milk. I would nonetheless scan the panel and ask my mom pensive questions, like what's riboflavin and it says here I'm getting twenty percent of my Recommended Dietary Allowance [The U.S. government formed the RDA in 1941 to study nutrition. The committee became the Food and Nutrition Board, which created a standard daily allowance for each type of nutrient. In the early 1950s, United States Department of Agriculture nutritionists made a new set of guidelines that also included the number of servings of each food group in order to make it easier for people to receive their RDAs of each nutrient. In 1997, the RDA was downsized, giving way to the Dietary Reference Index, a comprehensive outline of nutrition that in addition to the RDA, includes Estimated Average Requirements, Adequate Intake (age and sex are now factors), and Tolerable Upper Level Intake (to help regulate superdoses because athletes and health junkies take their vitamins to the limits of human consumption, or for the unverifiable health claims of manufactures of vitamins, but who would be so dishonest as to make fraudulent assertions about the benefits of chromium bi-colonate?). In addition to riboflavin, a.k.a., vitamin B2, the new improved DRI provides recommendations for the intake of vitamins A, C, D and E, both vitamins B6 and B12, biotin, boron, calcium, chloride, chromium, choline, copper, fluoride, folate, iodine, iron, magnesium, manganese, molybdenum, niacin, nickel, pantothenic acid, phosphorus, potassium, thiamin, selenium, sodium, sulfate, and zinc. Also included are macronutrients, water,

carbs, protein, fiber, fat, omega-6 fatty acid, cholesterol, trans fatty acids, and saturated fatty acids.] of riboflavin and where's the other eighty percent going to come from and what will happen if I don't get enough riboflavin? She'd tell me things like you'll get scurvy, and she said it was painful and I'd get scared and start tracking my riboflavin intake. Of course she was wrong. Scurvy, a disease characterized by the body's inability to create collagen, the protein structure that keeps body structures stable, is a vitamin C deficiency and lucky for me Fruity Pebbles is loaded with vitamin C, which among other things, helps fight colds and is an essential nutrient, that is, one that the body does not synthesize, but must be consumed. Amazingly, a mere five milligrams a day will prevent scurvy. That's like a half-drop of lime juice or three Fruity Pebbles. These days, I've replaced the Fruity Pebbles with Fruit n' Fibre. Fiber, the indigestible plant leftovers that carry out everything they come in contact with on their way out of your body. Can never have too much fiber. But enough of this healthy stuff. After my third fruit serving, two glasses of water, green tea, red tea, poached egg, glass of milk, and bowl of cereal, I'm ready for a snack. I think I'll have some chocolate, because it's been suggested that chocolate has many beneficial effects on human health. Dark chocolate is a rich source of epicatechin and gallic acid, which are thought to relieve cardiac stress. Chocolate might even lower cholesterol and blood sugar and most significantly, eating small amounts of dark chocolate lowers the possibility of heart attack. MMMMM, chocolate. But wait! There's more. Chocolate may prevent cancer, diabetes, and dementia. And of course, it's an aphrodisiac. If chocolate can't get you laid, you're in trouble. I really need to be getting to the office right now, but I'm going to have to call in. There just isn't time. It's almost lunch and I need to prepare my midday feast.

## Lunch

I'll have some tomatoes because they contain lots of lycopene and I haven't had any today. You know, lycopene. Well, neither do I, but this commercial says I need it so I'd better get some A.S.A.P. Besides, I appreciate a good tomato. In fact, it's my favorite vegetable. Or is it a fruit? Botanically speaking, there is no differentiation between a vegetable or a fruit. In fact, *vegetable* is merely a culinary term. Tomatoes, like pumpkins, squashes, cucumbers, eggplants, and zucchinis are berries, the ovaries of flowering plants. Legally, however, tomatoes, at least in the United States, are vegetables. In 1887, the United States levied a tax on vegetables but not on fruits. For six years, a fierce debate waged over the classification of the tomato. In 1893, with intervention from the Supreme Court, it was declared that by use, that tomatoes were vegetables because they are generally served with dinner and not desert. Chief Justice Morrison Waite must have never heard the adage, *knowledge is knowing that tomato is a fruit, wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad*. He may have simply been lycopene deficient. I think I'll have some yogurt with my tomatoes. Preferably boysenberry yogurt. Boysenberries are relatively new berries, hybrid in the 1920's by Californian farmer Rudolph Boysen, a cross between the raspberry, the loganberry, and the dewberry. They grow fat and plump and are sturdier than raspberries, yet sweet and still tangy, the perfect companion for yogurt, which is created by the bacterial fermentation of milk. The bacteria ferments by eating the milk sugar, lactose (rendering yogurt easily digestible for the lactose intolerant), leaving behind the sweet and savory culture, yogurt. Of course, I'm only eating this yogurt because it contains lots of cultures with pseudoscientific names the

manufacturer fortifies it with so it can make unsupported health claims in its ads. Traditionally, however, yogurt is thought to help prevent vaginal yeast infections. I'm not sure if you eat it or apply it directly to the vagina. Consult your physician before attempting. According to *Yogurt Forever: The Yogurt Encyclopedia*, yogurt effectively fights all pathogenic germs found in the digestive system. If you can't trust *Yogurt Forever: The Yogurt Encyclopedia*, who can you trust? I trust that a nice accompaniment to my lunch will be a small handful of almonds. Besides being superstitiously common at weddings, I need to eat a few almonds after lunch not only for their vitamins and minerals (see above), but because they contain lots of phytochemicals, plant chemicals that may provide powerful protection against heart disease, stroke, and other chronic diseases. At the recent *2005 Experimental Biology Conference*, there were several studies regarding the benefits of almonds. Almonds may lower cholesterol, and they might help block the body's absorption of both fat and carbs. In fact, almonds may slow the actual absorption of carbs into the body, which means they create a slower rise in blood sugar levels which helps keep insulin levels in check. And, as Casey Kasem used to say, *the numbers get lower, and the hits get bigger!* Almonds have a high satiation value and give you the immediate sense of satisfaction and fullness from food. And to top it all off, a recent study showed that adding two servings of almonds to a person's diet did not cause them to gain weight or body fat at all, but rather led them to decrease their intake of calories from other sources of food. I should have eaten that chocolate bar with almonds. But now, I'm quite sleepy. All this eating has made me devastatingly tired. Tsk, tsk, but who has time for naps? I'll just have an energy drink. There are hundreds to choose from. What to do, what to do? This one contains lots of taurine, an extract of bile, yes

that bile, the one from livers of well, creatures with livers. They all contain ginseng, for a laundry list of unproven health benefits, maltodextrine, a synthetic sweetener, carnitine (no freaking clue), creatine, which is a muscle building protein, glucuronolactone, another naturally occurring byproduct of the human liver (urban legend says glucuronolactone was a Vietnam War-era drug manufactured by the U.S. government. It was allegedly banned due to several brain tumor-related deaths. Rumor and intrigue all in my energy drink, delicious!), and ginkgo biloba, which is just fun to say. Another one of these drinks contains guarana, but the one I'm about to drink proudly boasts it's better because it contains no guarana. How offensive. Poor, defenseless guarana. Guarana is a cherished beverage in Brazil. In Brazilian mythology, a jealous god unsympathetically killed a beloved village child. Another more sympathetic god consoled the villagers by removing the left eye from the child and planting it in the forest. The plant that grew was guarana, with its black and white berries resembling eyeballs. How refreshing. Well, it's getting close to supper hour, but before I indulge in the day's final meal, I think I'll take a moment to pat myself on the back for living and promoting this salubrious lifestyle. And it's time for a spoonful of cod liver oil ripe with benefits both endless and mind numbing. What else can ensure healthy joints, healthy bones, and a healthy cardiovascular system like you can with cod liver oil? Did I mention that it also promotes a healthy central nervous system? Take this stuff with your green tea (or was it red tea I don't remember) and you will walk on water. Oh, you're worried about the taste? That's okay, you can get it lemon flavored. It goes down easy.

## Dinner

I'm debating heading out for dinner, hungry for Chinese, but it's such a risk, given the Chinese restaurants' inclinations to douse all of their food with MSG. Monosodium glutamate. I don't want any nasty chemicals in my food and I don't care if MSG is simply the byproduct of fermented starch, the dried residue produced at the tops of steaming pots of soy beans, beets, or kelp. Some Asians and most South Americans traditionally use the salty leftover as a seasoning in their most beloved dishes. Heathens. Next, you'll probably tell me that MSG is not a known allergen and that if the food produced at American Chinese restaurants causes you to break out it's because you're allergic to soybeans, peanuts, or shellfish, three common ingredients in most of the sauces found at the Empire Chinese Palace, the Shanghai Garden, or wherever it is you get your fried rice fix. In order to quell the sudden outbreak of *Chinese Restaurant Syndrome*, owners introduced signs to their storefronts, "We're MSG Free." But they must have forgot to tell the cooks to omit it because most restaurants never did. So, just to play it safe I'd better stay in and simply prepare some steamed fish and carrots, and a little concoction to drink that I make out of ground flax seeds and a popular sports drink. Carrots for their vitamin A, which of course keeps retinal cones and rods functioning, but I'm going to have an extra serving to help fight colon cancer, bladder cancer, larynx cancer, and esophageal cancer. Oh and that recipe you've been wanting for the health tonic I developed: 16 oz. sports drink, I prefer the *extreme* version, and two tablespoons of ground flaxseeds. Flax seeds are extremely important to maintaining my health. All the lignan found in flax seeds will ensure that I never get colitis, but even more important are the electrolytes found in my sports drink. Considering I used a lot of energy today,

I'm ashamed I waited so long to replace my electrolytes. Every living organism requires a delicate and intricate electrolyte balance on the inside and outside of every cell in its body. Constant regulation of electrolytes keeps the body properly hydrated, helps maintain blood pH, and is critical for nerve and muscle function. Don't risk cramps and dehydration: keep your electrolyte levels in check. Symptoms may include, but are not limited to, high fever, severe muscle cramps, headache, nausea, dry throat, hives, irregular periods, and vomiting. If erection lasts longer than four hours, immediately contact your doctor. Also with my gourmet supper I'll be having a salad with lots of leafy greens and low-fat dressing (low fat dressings are great, they take out a couple of grams of fat and replace it with lots of sugar), and some rolls, whole grain, duh, because they contain complex carbs. Then, I'll take my supplements. I'll start with some echinacea, some garlic pills, rosehips, and red yeast rice. And because I stuck to my diet so well today, I'll have something exquisite for desert. I don't what it will be, but it will have lots of cinnamon. Cinnamon helps prevents blood clots, controls blood sugar levels, works as an anti-microbial, boosts brain function, and protects against heart disease. Eating cinnamon is like armor for your heart. And don't forget the red wine. The makers of both Ripple and Mogen David are proud to remind you that drinking a glass of red wine will improve your cardiovascular health, reduce bad cholesterol, and significantly lower your risk of blood clots (logic says its because your blood actually gets replaced by alcohol, leaving nothing to clot, but hell, I'm not arguing with this one because red wine just turned up the heat; it also has more antioxidants than you can shake a stick at and now it's decided it will also help prevent several types of cancers and even slow the growth of previously existing cancers—Salute!). Well, it's been a long, arduous day. I



think I'll retire to my study and have a snack and do some reading. As for the snack, I'll have some whole grain pita bread and some hummus, because it's not only a good source of dietary fiber, but because it's a great source of the trace mineral, molybdenum, an integral component of the enzyme sulfite oxidase, which is responsible for detoxifying sulfites. As if you didn't already know. And for the reading, well, I'll be curling up with Pascal. I think I'll read the *Pensées*.

## The War in Fallujah

I don't think I'm a great storyteller and I usually don't sit down to write thinking I have a great story to tell and now is no exception, but sometimes we get things stuck in our stubborn heads and such is now. You see, I'm a professional-sports fan. Baseball, football, hockey, basketball. I'm even down with tennis and golf. While I actively distance myself from fans who paint themselves at games or get tattoos of their favorite team's logos, I still enjoy attending live sporting events. Thus, it was nearly impossible to turn down an opportunity to attend last year's Super Bowl in Detroit. *Nearly* impossible. I just couldn't bring myself to go. Mostly, it was about the money. Raise your hand if you can think of better things on which to spend \$600. Or at least the money was a convenient excuse. I work, I save, I budget wisely. I'm resourceful. If I really wanted to go I could have come up with the money. So why turn down this chance? Why turn down the opportunity to witness the sporting world's main event in my own backyard? Talk about once in a lifetime opportunities? Talk about the eyes of the universe descending upon Detroit without talking about murder capitals or loss of jobs. Maybe a football game will help put Detroit back on the map. But maybe that's the problem right there. You see, I'm pretty sure Detroit never left the map. At least after this past summer I'm sure. I was there.

I'm an amateur baseball historian and my summers are usually filled with several trips to Detroit. This past summer was no exception. If I found words to describe the aura of the walk into Comerica Park I'd bottle them up make and some serious cash. The luscious green grass blanketed among the concrete and steel of the city, the fathers and sons stealing moments from reality to bury in the time capsule that is memory, and the

promise of the rookie centerfielder who is living out his dream. Here I escape. Here I remember the upper deck at the old Tiger Stadium, along the first base line, where a five-year-old sat with his dad and his uncle for the very first time. The towering fly balls knocked the wind out of me. “How did he catch that?” I remember asking my dad. Surely, it was magic. I even learned how to harass the opposing team’s rightfielder: “You’re a bum, Thomas. Go back to Milwaukee.” For a poor kid from the outskirts of Detroit it became more than baseball. Baseball is and was and will always be salvation. It’s often said that baseball is a metaphor for life. And haven’t we all been up with two outs in the bottom of the ninth with two strikes and the bases loaded? Haven’t we all struck out? Haven’t we all hit that walk-off grand slam? You might say that baseball is escapism or that baseball is a guilty pleasure when there is work to be done. But no. Baseball is everything from April through October. Baseball is art. Baseball is the greatest mimetic example of everything that encompasses life. It is the colors of Delacroix and the unpredictability of Jackson Pollack. The essence of summer exudes from the crack of the bat and the sound of the ball smacking against a leather glove. Ah, Comerica Park. Ah, the stupid corporate names that don the facades of the new stadiums.

And don’t forget the new football stadium built next to the new baseball stadium. It was here I found myself one fine Saturday this past August.

The perfect day had been planned. Myself and three of my cousins and a friend would go to Ford Field, home of the Detroit Lions in the afternoon to watch practice, and the nightcap would be next door watching the Tigers take on the division rival Cleveland Indians. Cleveland. The only city even Detroit can make fun. During and in between,

there would be some imbibing of spirits and tomfoolery and we wouldn't have it any other way.

Parking at these events is a sticky, tricky situation. If you want to park in a close, secure lot, you can plan on shelling out twenty-five bones. Let's be real. I'm pretty cheap and my car isn't worth the extra security. So as I have always done, I parked for free across I-75 amidst the rubble and sanded over lots of razed buildings. We are in downtown Detroit, but (mind you I'm not stupid) the lots are right across from the ATF building. If you aren't safe in front of an ATF building where are you safe? My cousin Steve, whom we picked up on the way, was the only local with us. He had previously properly named these dusty, barren, burnt building abutting, former projects standing lots Baghdad. As apt a place name as you can imagine, the lots brought to memory the footage of Iraq and the dusty half-standing buildings and war-ravaged broken streets and broken glass of the previous years of fighting. But calling the lots Baghdad had become passé. Unbeknownst to us foreigners, the lots were now referred to as Fallujah. So Fallujah it was where we landed our tank, a.k.a., my Chevy Lumina. We popped open the trunk, hauled out the cooler, and let the swilling begin. No sooner than I had finished my first can of decadent froth had I realized that we were under siege. But alas! We were surrounded by insurgents. Well, not weapons wielding terrorists, but rather bums with trash bags asking us for our empties.

Stop.

I'm not PC. Never have been, probably never will be, and honestly, I don't even know how to be. So I'm not sure if *bums* is the proper term here. Hobos? Vagabonds? Streetpeople? Tramps? The Homeless? Beggars? Those that which choose to reside

where there are no addresses? Canadians? I don't know. I just know that the minute the first beer can was thrown down into the sand and dust, they all converged from out of the cracks of the charred building shells to scrape up the kitty. Those who arrived late to the fundraiser were denied any of the loot and succumbed to their fate by walking away. Some of them stood on the curb and ushered in traffic, telling the drivers when they get out of their cars that it was five dollars to park there. Some drivers told them to go to hell. Some tried really hard to ignore them—I mean completely pretend that they aren't there, and some, mostly dads with their small children who don't want any trouble, actually gave them a few bucks even though they knew it was free to park there.

So we've had a few pops and we've bought a few insurgents some cigarettes and we're getting playful. We learn one of these streetpeople is called Shorty and he's a laugh a second. He's got us rolling in the dirt. While the others have scampered off, he sticks around because we are still drinking and he figures if we get drunk he might get a few bucks off us. Shorty stands before us like a preacher in a pulpit while we are gathered around him in a semi-circle and he points at each one of us.

"You, you, you, you, you and you," he says, smiling a hairy, gaped-tooth smile. "I bet I know where each one of you got your shoes." We all laugh, pretty sure that his clairvoyance is imagined, and he makes this proposition:

"I'll tell each one of you where you got your shoes for five dollars a piece."

Someone asks him what we get if he's wrong and just starts laughing. My cousin Steve says to him, "I know where you got that University of Michigan t-shirt," pointing at Shorty's age-old, time-worn, overwear-torn, faded blue U of M t-shirt. "You wear that

because you went to Michigan didn't you?" Now we all erupt. It sounds cruel and it probably was, but you know the equation:

cruel + bum (U of M t-shirt) = funny

Shorty is game, though. He grins this big grin and looks at Steve.

"I'll tell you where you got your shoes." He looks down at Steve's feet and says, "You got your shoes on your right foot and on your left foot."

Another eruption. We tell him we paid him in our beer cans.

Now, it's about time to head into the football stadium so we lock up and as we are leaving Shorty lets me know that he'll keep an eye on my car for me. What a relief. You can never have too many friends.

Pre-football practice some players are signing autographs and I have brought along a football for this purpose. I am after the autograph of Kelly Butler, who is from Grand Rapids, my current residence, and is the starting right tackle, but he's the worst player on the team. He went to Grand Rapids Union and because I can't do anything without being a smart ass, when I meet him, I ask him knowing he's the GR Westsider that he his, if he ever eats at the Adobe restaurant, a quaint little burrito shop that looks like a Mexican Adobe. Kelly Butler is 6 feet 7 inches tall and weighs 350 pounds. I don't meet many people bigger than me, but I'm a dwarf now. He looks at me like I'm legally retarded.<sup>6</sup> He signs my football, gives me that get the fuck out of my face you idiot glare, and I'm gone. It's like he sensed that it was a joke that I wanted his autograph. Go figure.

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<sup>6</sup> While I've already managed to offend the bums, I don't want to also offend the mentally challenged, but the consensus among those who concede is that you are legally retarded if you get checks from the government. However, let it also be noted that all people who get checks from the government aren't legally retarded, although some might disagree.

Practice ends and we have two hours to kill before the baseball game and we've decided by unanimous decision that the time will be spent in Fallujah. But first we have to go next door to Comerica Park to buy our baseball tickets. On the way over we start playing catch with the Kelly Butler autographed football. We are whipping the ball up and down the street (they've been closed off for the events) and acting the fools when Ryan, a friend of Steve's who met up with us in Fallujah says "I'm gonna throw one like Joey Harrington" and motions for someone to go deep. He tries to throw the ball over an awning but he doesn't get enough air under the ball and it falls dead on top of this awning. Now, you'd think I'd be pissed, but it was more of an irritation. Really, it was kind of funny. My cousin Phillip tried to scale a wall to reach the awning, but it was up too high. Coincidentally, directly above the awning, there is a catwalk that connects one of the parking garages to Comerica Park. Steve and Phillip went up there and were going to jump down onto the awning, but we weren't sure how sturdy it was. There was an attendant, couldn't have been older than 16, sitting on a folding chair in front of the parking garage and when he realized what we were trying to do he came over and surprisingly offered help. He said he'd go get us a ladder. So some of us go and buy our tickets and some of us hang out under the awning waiting for a ladder. First, however, he doesn't bring a ladder, he brings out this really long 2 x 4 and Phillip goes back up on the catwalk and starts swinging it down at the awning trying to knock off the football. No luck. The piece of wood isn't long enough. Then, out of the garage, some random old-man walks out with a ladder. Only in America. Someone climbed the ladder, snagged the football and off we headed for Fallujah, again chucking it up and down the street.

To our surprise, the insurgents were waiting. We hauled out the cooler and Shorty asked us for some water and he took an empty water bottle he was toting around and filled it up with the melted ice from our cooler.

At this point, we only had like four beers left so that meant a trek over to this dilapidated and vandalized party store about three blocks away. Oh, to be white, suburban, and stupid on the streets of Detroit. Three went and three stayed back. I was one of the ones who stayed behind so this is all reportage now. Apparently, all the store sold were 40s. The shelves were empty and there were a few coolers with 40 bottles in them. Just the good stuff, too, I imagine. You know, Steel Reserve, Magnum, Mickey's Ice, Big Bear, Iceman, Olde English. Quality brews. So they asked whoever was working if he had any *cases* (Beer sold in cases; *Brilliant!*) of beer and he gave them a puzzled look and disappeared in the back for a while and returned with three 12 packs of Miller High Life. Hey, drink what you live, right? It really brought a tear to my eye watching the three return down the sidewalk, each yielding a 12 pack of the Champagne of Beer. There was this glister in Shorty's eyes, too. It said something like "Another \$3.60 for daddy."

Being that we had been drinking before and were drinking inside the football stadium and now had more to drink someone asked Shorty if he had any crack on him. Of course we laughed, until he pulled out a few rocks wrapped in cellophane. Awkward. Uncomfortable silence. Awkward. But leave it to Ryan, the one who the threw the football up onto the awning, to ask him, "So, when are we gonna smoke one of those boulders?" Now this floors us all. Shorty offers to sell us the boulders if we're interested, but we decline.



As the time nears to head over to the stadium, goofball Ryan goes over to the side of one of these eroded buildings to take a leak. We'd all done it and once the year before, while I was back there peeing, a pheasant trotted out of the building. One of the city-dwelling friends of Steve said to me, "Hey, look at that turkey." Forgivable if you've never lived out of the city. So while Ryan has his back to us, a cop car pulls in and Shorty makes a break for it. They drive up right behind Ryan and one of them gets out of the car. He asks Ryan what he's doing and before he can answer the cop is lighting into him.

"Look around you, man. Everyone in the world out here can see you. Why you wanna do that in front of everyone?"

Then Ryan decides to deny that he was relieving himself. Haha. Right. Relieve this pal.

\$100.

That's the amount of his public urination ticket. \$100 for urinating on the seared shell of what previously was a building. We aren't talking Ozzy and the Alamo here. This is Fallujah. We urged him to fight that in court. There were no bathrooms in Fallujah.

Shorty had previously tried to get one of us to buy his boots for \$10. They were nice boots, nicer than any pair I had ever owned. We actually get to talking and Shorty isn't homeless, so I had to cross that off the list of things to call him. In fact, he told us where he lived. He also told us where we could get \$2.50 blow jobs, but some bargains aren't too good to pass up. When we came back to my car after the game that night, the sentry was there, keeping earnest watch. We gave him the rest of our empties and one of

his cohorts came over and asked for a beer. We gave him one and he dumped it out. He just wanted the dime.

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Two weeks later, we returned to Fallujah, but it was fenced off. Luckily, we were in Detroit, home to several hundred Fallujahs. One block over we parked and like scavengers the insurgents surrounded us, led by Shorty. Has anyone ever been so happy to see me? He shook my hand and asked me why they had the other lot fenced off. Like I would know. You're the local my man.

Stop.

Wait.

Nope.

Didn't happen.

Did I just get recognized by one of the bums who hangs around outside the ballpark? Street cred, baby, street cred. There were lots of them this time, too. Even women. Women who looked like their last meal was months ago. They went after those empty beer cans like they were qualifying for an Olympic event. A car of Ohioans was next to us and they hauled out their own cooler and were amazed. We tried to tell the insurgents that those Ohio beer cans were worthless here, but they'd have none of that.

Now this Fallujah was a little nice than the other one. The lot was recently graded and the parking surface was flat and it looked like a sandy parking lot, not so much like a war zone. Here, Shorty and his boys really had it working. One of them who wore a badge that looked like a Sam's Club card around a string on his neck started directing the

cars after Shorty greeted them and collected cash as they pulled up. Almost everyone was paying them, too. I almost asked for a job application.

So we're in Fallujah tailgating and making fun of anyone who gets out of their car who we saw give Shorty money when out of nowhere this pimped out Chevy Impala just appears in front of us. I mean out of nowhere. It was just there. It was about an inch off the ground, tinted windows, and some sweet mag wheels. Four men rise from the car and peek around. They look like they stepped out of a rap video. One of them pulls out a bullhorn and starts calling out names. Then we realize that all four of them are wearing badges around their neck, only these are police badges. Kind of a relief, but not really. We have stumbled upon the Detroit Vice. No Crocket, no Tubbs, either. They round up the bums and start giving them the business. One of the cops puts on some latex gloves and says to Shorty, "Jerry, are you gonna empty out your pockets or do I have to go in there myself." Shorty empties out his pockets and they are loaded with cash. Surprisingly, they don't confiscate it. The cops tell the bums they'd better run. One of them picks up a small rock and yells to Shorty as he's running away, "Hey, I'm gonna throw this rock at you. If it hits you, it means I'm taking you in. But if I miss, you can go." He proceeds to throw the rock and Shorty does this jig dance and the rock lands at his feet and I've never seen anyone run so fast in my life. We're all standing there, beer in hand, stunned. Three of the cops get back into the car. One of them comes over to us. He's wearing a stocking cap, sunglasses, a Fubu jersey, and his baggy pants aren't pulled up but just above his knees and he says to us, "Yo, don't give those guys any money. They make a couple hundred bucks a day ripping people off. If they come back, just fuck 'em up."

Just fuck 'em up

What do you say to that? Isn't telling us to just fuck 'em up a little fucked up? A lot of things start going through my head. First, I'm sure those cops have seen some things that would give us spoiled college brats nightmares for the rest of our lives. The fact that they are inner city police officers in Detroit is also pretty commendable. From what I understand, people aren't lining up for those jobs. Second, if people are dumb enough to give the insurgents money, then so be it. No one that gave Shorty any money offered him a real job. Not that he was looking for one. I'd pretend to park cars for \$200 bucks a day, too.

Just fuck 'em up.

It was just Shorty. He's harmless. Let the man earn his living. In a way, I'm jealous of Shorty. Do you think he worries about conjugating Spanish verbs or extrapolating meaning from "The Charge of the Light Brigade?" Does he care that I met Philip Levine last year or that I'm going to graduate school? The man drinks the stale melted water out of my cooler.

The man.

*Just* like me.

More so than I.

I hide behind books and Dean's Lists. Shorty is out in the open for everyone to see. Shorty's backyard is my playground. I wonder, if given the chance, would he trade places with me? But why should he? Am I that much better if any better at all? Hell, there is a war in the Middle East and I am going to baseball games and reading Tennyson. People used to go to college to avoid being sent off to war. Now we go to college to

avoid talking about the war. Who has time for it? I have papers to write and applications to finish. But isn't the war being fought so that I can spend my time writing papers and filling out applications and learning to butcher Spanish and hearing great poets read live in My Hometown?

Maybe.

I can tell you who it isn't fought for, though. Shorty. Does he care about the price of oil or world diplomacy? Who cares, he's just a bum, right? It's his choice to live that way. Maybe if he'd do something for himself he wouldn't have to scrape the streets to live.

Maybe.

But I'm not buying it. Maybe I'm just trying to make myself feel better. But there is this sense of freedom you get from the Insurgents that I just don't feel inside myself. Sure, it's my choice, to go to college. It's my choice to study English and Creative Writing. But my choices are calculated and formulaic. My choices are luxuries. Shorty's choices are necessary and important and his life depends on them. My life does not depend on any of the Shakespeare papers I have written.

Maybe I should study cartography instead. My maps would be just like any other maps, except they would include Detroit. I mean they would include Detroit all the time, not just when the Super Bowl is in town. Then again, I guess I'm just as guilty as the Super Bowl. I only use city when it benefits me. Maybe not going to the Super Bowl was like a penance, only there was no absolution.

In late September we parked in Fallujah one last time for the season. No drinking or hanging out this time. We just parked and got out and went inside. Shorty spotted us.

He asked us why weren't drinking. We lied and said we were on the wagon. He bummed a smoke off my brother and told us he'd watch our car. It was still there when we came back to leave. See you next summer, Jerry.

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