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Under a Rock: Essays of Events Unearthed, Overlooked, and Pushed Aside

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UNDER A ROCK: ESSAYS OF EVENTS UNEARTHED, OVERLOOKED AND
PUSHED ASIDE

By

Timothy B. Johnston

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Timothy B. Johnston 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

UNDER A ROCK: ESSAYS OF EVENTS UNEARTHED, OVERLOOKED AND PUSHED ASIDE

By

Timothy B. Johnston

The following thesis deals with small, overlooked events. We've lost sight and have become used to what happens every day. Hand-written letters have become obsolete; we've become bored with life and maybe stopped asking what a heads-up penny really means; middle school sucked for everyone, but did we ever really ask if we were going through the same hardships? What my essays have us back up a few steps from ourselves. These may be mundane events, something we've all experienced, but they don't have to be—there is always something that makes the little things interesting.

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To Mom and Dad. I love you, I guess.

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This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

For my M.A. thesis, I propose to write a series of essays dealing with items and events we, as Americans, either take for granted or consider mundane. In some of my previous work, I have focused on some humdrum events, such as my seventh grade misadventure while trying out for the basketball team. I originally wrote the essay because I was cut off from a conversation with a classmate because “being cut from the seventh grade team” did not seem to be interesting, a “fact” I knew to be wrong because of the wide variety of colorful personages who surrounded me during this event. After finishing the essay, I started to take an interest in subjects that did not seem appealing initially. I’d like to bring back appreciation for the little slices of life that we’ve all maybe taken for granted.

I feel writing letters has become overlooked. Cell phones, e-mail and instant messaging have made the personal connection almost instantaneous, but where is the actual “connection”? Before all this technology began to develop, Garrison Keillor wrote a short essay called “How to Write a Letter.” As an avid letter writer, I read this essay and rediscovered the art of letter writing. He calls letters “a gift” meant for one person, to speak to a person through paper as though he or she were across the table—something I strive for in my work. I think maybe now the general consensus is that letters are not personal communication, but a clump of information thrown together that could be relatable to a large number of people. I hope my thesis will be able to allow readers to slow down and pay attention to the small things—that the interesting events or items in

life are complimented by the unflashy.

Along with Keillor's communicational voice, I am influenced by other nonfiction writers. Truman Capote is on this list. He took a single occurrence—the murder of a small-town family, an essentially two-dimensional event in a newspaper clipping—and turned it into a piece that has become the foundation of nonfiction writing, a book that shows the human aspect by revealing core emotions from his personages. Capote's in depth research inspires me to look out of my own world, to see how my interaction affects the people around me. How do I measure up? Is the essay about me or my place in the story?

Two more of my influences encouraged me to not be so gentle towards certain subject matters. Steve Almond and Chuck Palahniuk (who is mostly known for his novels) view the world as a photo opportunity: what you see is what's recorded—no filter, no censor. They both have an attitude where they will not cradle the reader with happy images. They want to portray the truth no matter how uneasy it may make the reader. Palahniuk's "Testy Festy", which details the scenes from a live sex show, proves that nothing is off-limits. Almond takes this approach, too, but to a more personal level—mostly his own sex life, which is let's his reader in his essay "About My Sexual Failure."

I like to believe I've taken a bit of each of my influences and created a style of my own. Aside from Almond and Palahniuk's anything-goes detail, I incorporate Capote's essential detail to the moment. If something is being described, I want the reader to have faith that this something is there for a reason. Wrapping all this detail in a nice box, I learn from Keillor that the moment is important. These are not just a series of moments to me; this is my life; this is what happens around me; this is the world.

My thesis will consist of about five pieces that should span from 40 to 50 pages—four first-person personal essays, one second-person narrative. In my second-person piece, I plan to perform extensive research and interviews. I have started an essay focusing on a transgendered woman with whom I went to high school, an essay that started as a profile and has now emerged into a piece about cultural intolerance through the eyes of a transgendered woman pushed aside by her community. She was lost in her childhood and adolescence and believed suicide to be her only answer. Although I don't expect this essay to affect national tolerance, I do feel that it could change the minds of a few uninformed people—talking to her certainly has changed my perspective and helped me realize that what I see isn't necessarily the whole truth. I've now realized the necessity of finding different perspectives to give my reader the full, complete and accurate truth.

Wrong Number

No words can define your feelings. Whenever you find one, it wriggles from your fingers and disappears until you come along another word that'll eventually abandon you too.

Alone is an adjective. You have a series of epiphanies, however, that do not fade away.

Wall is a noun. So is *ladder*. So is *rope*. *Climb* is a verb.

You tell people it feels like your shoes are on the wrong feet, but they aren't. You are not even wearing shoes. But you've still got that feeling that something isn't quite right, something doesn't fit. You feel you should sit down on the sidewalk, curl a leg in because your knee is in your face, slip a shoe off, shake the sand and rocks out, and switch it around so it's right. But it's not that—*that* being a physical type of problem, a problem, yes, but a problem that prides itself in being unsolvable.

You have a breakthrough: You were born a man—everything is there—but you are a woman. This is the uneasiness that keeps you awake, makes you tired, makes you not want to move out of bed, makes you dream of dull, nameless colors when you eventually crash from exhaustion.

So, you start with Aspirin. You're not sure where you heard this—maybe down a hallway in passing or a news report—but if you take too much, you'll fall asleep and everything will be okay when you don't wake up.

With the top popped and ten pills in hand, you wait. Statues move more than this. Statues think less, too. You hear a bit of something speaking, asking whether this is the best idea. The voice is calm and rational; it speaks as though it has a plan and knows what's best. It's not your own state of mind; it's who you want to be, but right now what you want to be is defined by a blank space of air where an answer should be.

You know you woke up that morning with shoes on the wrong feet again. *It sucks, you know?* you tell yourself. But *sucks* is not the adequate word. There isn't one. There isn't one word in the whole damn dictionary that can possibly explain this crooked emptiness that haunts every step of your day. Waking up warm and comfortable no longer exists. You've been spiraling and there's nothing left but hell. If hell is what's waiting for you, you've had plenty of practice.

Ten down the hatch and wait.

Instantaneous is the word you're thinking of. You expect your knees to buckle, and your head to hit the floor, and your last vision, before nothing or hell, is the ceiling. You expect to slump over and stay motionless until somebody comes home and prods you with their foot like a dead deer on the side of the road. You think of onomatopoeias like Batman comics: *BOOM! BLAM! BAM! POW!* and then done and nothing. The ticks from the clock say you're unsuccessful. Each second that passes tells you what's going on: Aspirin. Doesn't. Work. Aspirin. Doesn't. Work. Aspirin. Doesn't. Work. And you learn from your mistakes and aspire to think of new ways to deal.

You're about a year past your last stunt: that time you tried fixing it—removing your penis with scissors—another failed something. Feeling lost wasn't a problem until hormones got in the way. Puberty was a bitch tied to a tree in the night. *It* changed and became self aware and had begun working like it should, but you know a penis shouldn't have been there in the first place. You looked in the mirror after a shower, saw it, looked down and said to yourself, *That! That, you son of a bitch! You're the problem!*

At five years old you saw an episode of Jerry Springer with a man wearing a wedding dress in front of a lynch mob. It was like an egg timer going off in your head.

Clothes defined a gender. Immediately, dress or no dress, a he became a she. At that point, you saw clothes could be changed. You could feel complete, but after stewing on that feeling for seven more years, you realize gender isn't defined by the outside and is certainly not biological. You thought the same way as you took that pair of dull, orange-handled scissors to your penis and cut and carved until you saw blood and stopped because you were over carpet, and if your father had come home then you would have had more to worry about than a stained carpet and a bleeding fallacy.

A month of toilet paper and Scotch tape took the place of bandages, and two fresh scars will make for a complicated conversation with your high school girlfriend, and that's when you'll convince her it was nothing but a mistake and it's all over until the conversation picks up again four years later when you'll admit to her in a park, sitting on the grass, that it was a lie, that it feels like your shoes are on the wrong feet. Then she, through tears and an open mind, will do everything she can to help. Love, then, will no longer be a word or an emotion, but a strength to keep you moving forward towards something whole; whatever it may be.

Had you known this now, you wouldn't have grabbed the gun so quickly. You don't consider what everyone will think or say when the autopsy reveals a roll of toilet paper wrapped around your penis—blood stained through and smudged in between tape. All you think is how you just want it over. If there is a hell, you're ready. You grab for the gun swiftly, without thought, like jumping into freezing water. If only you could muster up the courage to dunk your head beneath the waves, it won't be cold for long—you'll warm up to it. Afterwards you'll swim *comfortably*—an adverb. You've grabbed the gun, you have it, you stick it in your mouth and the only thought in your mind is the

position of the trigger and the taste of oil and polish—an unclean, grainy taste more potent when inhaled.

And, like a bad joke, the phone rings. You foresee: everybody will find out; you're leaving a mess; this isn't the way to do it. You put the pistol back in its place and answer the phone. It's a man looking for George or Barry or Jack or a someone who doesn't live here and he hangs up quickly, apologizing, sorry—he didn't mean to bother you or to interrupt, that he must have hit a wrong button. And it's funny, but not something to laugh at. You go outside, feeling your right shoe on your left foot, feeling like you could limp, but you won't and never will. People always concern themselves about a limp and ask if there's anything they can do.

China—a noun. You don't know that in three years you'll try to make something of this whole mess from people who don't even speak English, but it'll be a relief to you because the multiple questions of what's wrong will, by then, begin to make more sense. This is a continent whose people have found a way to cope. You won't hear words of comfort from them, or even recognize their language, but you will hear an understanding in their voice. A tone that will lead you to the back road towards dark bars, to where these people like you commune, and you'll finally find something that looks like it could be an answer. Surrounded by garden lanterns, torches, smoke, booze, and debauchery is a cavalcade of what you long to be. Women who used to be men, men who still appear to be men during the day but dress in drag by night, dancing for those who enjoy it—for them, for you.

But during that time of answers and China, you will also, on occasion, lean out the hotel window fourteen floors from the street. There will be wind on your face and

people below you. You'll know that all you have to do is lean forward, but you'll grip the frame a little tighter for security. Even though you envision yourself falling, still wanting it to end, you'll remember how you kept a noose in your locker at school to remind yourself that it will happen; that this day, like yesterday, and maybe tomorrow, is just a step up the staircase from where you'll eventually *jump*—a verb, or maybe a noun.

Cut

MONDAY

This is how Coach Rose, our short and stocky seventh grade basketball coach, talks: either he'll wrap his arm around your shoulder, pull you in from the side and mumble next to your ear so no one can hear him while you both face nowhere together, or he projects like a drill instructor on a good day (forceful, but polite) so everyone can hear. During assemblies, when both seventh and eighth grades merge in the gym bleachers, he'll famously refuse the microphone, hold his palm out to the audience and bellow, "We all know I don't need this thing, right?" He'll get a few laughs from kids who don't know any better. That's what we forget sometimes: we're still kids.

And since we're kids, his solid face and voice demand respect. That's why he has our attention now with his finger stalled in the air warning us if he hears just one spoken word, one squeaky chair fart, he'll kick us out right now. Just one finger pointing at the ceiling makes us shut up. Just one little finger, filled with so much power that if it flicks remotely in someone's direction, that one person will get up and leave without argument.

He has that power to remove us, to make us wander the hallways alone for the next three hours waiting for our ride to show up. Because what that finger says is: you are a kid, and he is Coach Rose. Coach Rose, whose head right now isn't moving, but beneath those darkened lenses are shifty eyes going from face to face, sizing us up.

"Men," he says, "there's a lot of you here and I'm happy to see that. Can all of you hear me?"

He knows we can. We nod.

“Good, I don’t want us to be crammed in this classroom longer than we have to be. We’ll be headed to the gym soon. So if you guys stay quiet, listen to me, we’ll be on our way.”

We nod. A vacuum kicks on outside, in the hallway. It feels strange to be in school afterhours. If it were a normal day, I’d be home by now, turning on the TV, opening up a package of Oreos, thumbing my big toe through the hole in my sock, worrying about the bus ride the next day because it’s always loud and full of people I don’t care to see. Looking around, I see most of the people I don’t like are in this room. Maybe the bus ride home today wouldn’t have been all that bad.

He explains the cut as he hands out paper. Though he says he’d like to play everybody, too many have signed up. He uses the room as an example—kids are leaned against the wall, standing awkwardly, shoulder-to-shoulder, trying not to be pushed out the door.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “but there will be cuts. You have until Friday to prove you want to be on this team. I’m handing out forms now for you to fill out. I need you to order the sizes of your gear. When it comes to the spot that says ‘jersey number,’ put any number you want except for thirteen.” He waits. “Anybody want to know why?”

We nod.

“When I was your age, when I was thirteen,” he says to the left of me, swimming through the group, “that was my number. I only played one game. The last game. I was on that floor for...does anybody want to guess for how many seconds?” Nobody says anything, but we know for how long. “Thirteen,” he says. “Nobody. Nobody gets that number. Don’t even write it.”

Last Name: Johnston
Jersey Size: S___ M___ L___ XL___ XXL_x_
Shorts: S___ M___ L___ XL___ XXL_x_
Shoes: 14
Jersey number: Any

Rose finishes his speech about the week's events and tells us to get to the locker room—we've got 15 minutes. As I try to get to the door, he pulls my shoulder into his. "I just want you to know I expect the same thing from *this* Johnston that I did with the *last* Johnston." He's speaking of my oldest brother—the athletic one, the one who spends his time after school lifting weights, or running laps for fun; the one who is always doing something with some kind of ball; the one who I am the complete opposite of.

In the past, basketball has been nothing more than a short-lived activity to pass the time or to comply with my friends' interests. The truth is after a half hour or so, I hate basketball. But I signed up anyhow. Maybe it'd give my brother a reason to talk to me, to ask me questions, to feel proud of me for once. Maybe he'd get home one day after lifting at the high school, sit on the opposite end of the couch from me, look at the TV and ask, "So, what's ol' Rose up to these days?" And I imagine him being in my position here, many, many years ago when he was in seventh grade, running laps, shooting and making baskets, jumping through whatever hoops Rose brought out. I know I'll be seeing those same dusted off hoops tonight, and I don't know if I'll fit through them.

"I need to know if you're going to be putting in as much sweat as your brother did," Rose says.

I have an unpleasant memory of the foreign doctor running his gloved hand under cold tap water just before squeezing my testicles, because he said it's easier to grasp them if his fingers are stiff from the cold, and later on when he checked my leg muscles and

joints he said, “Oh, yeah, you be basketball player good.” And I wondered where he earned his medical degree or if he was just the night janitor with a thing for kids. And I tell Rose, “I didn’t get that required physical for nothing, sir.” And I believe, for a moment, that I want to play just because of the bullshit I went through to get here.

“Good,” he says. “What’re you still doing here? Get to that locker room.” And I leave the classroom, dodging the custodian and her vacuum. I am, by far, not the last person to be going to the locker room, but I hustle—that’s the word isn’t it? The hallway is vacant, and I think maybe I could skip tryouts without anyone seeing me.

The gymnasium doors are in front of me, to my left is the locker room door and a drinking fountain, and to my right is the main exit and a pop machine. I stand in the lobby and weigh my options. I could turn right to go outside and not look back. But I’d have to explain myself when I got home. Quitting is just something Johnstons don’t do. I’ve been told this every time I’ve quit. I’d much rather go through something I hate than hear that speech again. I turn left.

Before me are about twelve guys excited to be here. They’re already in their gear: NBA shirts, Nike athletic shorts, Air Jordans, Adidas, Puma, expensive name brand crap that won’t last a season. They chatter about basketball, and NBA players and blah, blah, blah, Patrick Ewing. I kick off my shoes, leaving on the t-shirt I wore for school that day, slip off my jeans and pull up the athletic shorts I bought a year ago. I put my only pair of shoes back on. It’s hard to find shoes in my size, so until I can find another pair, I have to use them for everything.

Bowen, my friend since Kindergarten, comes in and sits next to me—his eyes don’t leave the shower room.

“You know he’s going to make us shower, don’t you?”

I hadn’t thought of that—I don’t have a towel with me. Voices in the hallway slap against the cinderblocks, wind the corners, and come to rest in the locker room as if there are actually people in here.

“I don’t want those faggots watching me shower.”

“What faggots?”

“All of ‘em,” he says.

“I don’t think they’ll be watching you,” I say, not convinced. Perhaps they will.

He finishes changing, and we get up to enter the gym. The door is cold when I push it open. It creaks as though it has needed oil for years.

TUESDAY

The door creaks shut like an old screen door. It sounds like my knees feel: ground rust in my joints, useless, limp muscles that feel liquefied. Yesterday, we opened with five minutes of running around the gym, then sprints, then another five minutes of running and then more sprints. I kept up the best I could.

Today’s running isn’t as bad, once my legs stretch out. We have to run again for five minutes to warm up and I’m praying for the whistle to blow by minute two. My lungs burn and I can only see well enough to know when to turn the corner. People pass me easily; I bet they’ll do it again in another minute. I hear more pounding feet against the floor behind me, getting closer. I merge to the right to let them pass.

The only person not passing me is Tice, the other fat ass during tryouts. I’m steadily three steps behind him. I beg for the whistle to blow with each defeated cllop of

my shoes. Blow. The. Whistle. God. Damn. It. Blow. The. God. Damn. Whistle. *Please.*

After I lose conscious thought, or five minutes pass, I'm not sure which happens first, Rose calls out to line up for sprints.

As we do, a small group of girls walk in and sit on the bleachers. All the seventh graders at this middle school came from one of three elementary schools in the district. I recognize them and know which elementary they come from, but don't know any their names yet. I wish I did. I know they don't know mine. To them, my name is Quiet Guy in English Class or Quiet Guy in Math Class.

"Sprint to the end of the gym, touch the wall, and sprint back, then tag the next guy in line," announces Rose. And he blows the whistle.

The firsts-in-line take off. The girls' heads move with the sprinters. They lean in to each other's shoulders, their mouths by each other's ears, giggling, covering their words so they don't escape. They've come for a show.

I believe they watch me too as I sprint to the end of the gym, as I slap the wall. This is what men do: we slap walls and never look back. I can't see their faces, but I know they're watching me. I keep my head forward as I run past them, not letting them know I know they're watching me. This is also what men do: we don't acknowledge acknowledgment. I go to the back of the line; they may know my name by the end of the week.

"They were pointing at you," says Voss, one of the few people I talk to in this group of guys. We sit next to each other in band, and it's taken me two months to get comfortable talking to him—him and his stiff, hair-spayed bangs and chubby face and his always-fascinated-with-everything gaze.

“Huh?” This is a word I can say while out of breath. It’s more of a noise than a word.

“Them. They were pointing at you.”

“Is that good?”

“*Pointing*,” he says, as though I don’t know what pointing really means. “And laughing.”

He seems puzzled that I don’t understand.

“Am I that slow?” I ask.

“That, and because, you know,” he says waving his hand around my torso, “you’re pudgy.”

I’ve become aware over the last year that I’m a little bit bigger than I should be: I’m out of breath tying my shoes or getting the mail; breaking the hammock; eating Little Debbie cakes like breath mints. But I’m not so bad that it’s a laughing matter. I look down at myself; half my shoes are blocked by my mound of a shirt. Maybe I am being laughed at. Voss takes off for his next round and I wait for him to get back to tag me so I can go again. He isn’t gone long.

The whistle blows and I take off, feeling everything that sags go up and down, and side to side, flopping like a loose-strapped backpack. I can feel the heaviness in my stomach, chest and ass weighing me down as I try to run. I can feel the girls watching me go past them, so entranced by my hideousness that they can’t take their eyes off me. I am a car wreck. I am a sex-ed video. I am fornicating zoo monkeys. I am the most disgusting thing they’ve ever seen, and they can’t look at anything else because they’ve hit a gossip goldmine.

When I reach the line, I slink back to the end, hiding behind everyone, trying to block their view with better, thinner boys. Rose's whistle lets off the next sprinter, and whoever is next in line bows down in take-off position, waiting for their whistle. I reach the front again, but my turn is cut short by Rose.

"Line up long-ways," he announces. "Count off: Shirts," he points at Gettings, whose attention span is mirrored by his hair: short and sharp. Rose points to the next in line, Blackmer, whose attitude is borderline Kobe Bryant. "Skins," Rose says. "Now go down the line. *Alternate.*"

I panic and begin to see the path towards me. Hoff, shirts; Prill, skins; Bowen, Shirts, skins, shirts, skins, shirts and I'll be a skins. I'm next to Tice. I bump him, "Tice, switch me places."

"Fuck off," he says. "Shirts."

"Skins," I sigh, reluctant to take off my shirt. I do. I am exposed, and the gymnasium lights seem brighter which highlights the sagging tits that bulge out from my chest.

Herron, left of me, wrenches his neck to look up at me—he's the only student in school not allowed to sit any further back than the front row in class, who needs a stepping stool for the water fountain, who needs a booster seat in his mother's minivan. "Nice tits, man," he says.

"Thanks, I like your height."

"Man, fuck you." He prods Operchal's elbow—because he can't reach his shoulder—and nods Operchal's attention towards me, who instinctively points it out to the guy next beside him. They stifle their guffaws. It's very possible mine are the first

pair of breasts they've seen not belonging to their sisters.

I look at the girls, and their heads jerk away. My name is now Man-Tits. Beyond them I see the locker room door, and I want to run to it.

WEDNESDAY

Mildew smothers anybody walking in here. Old soap scum and the wintergreen smell of Bengay sticks to the air and to the walls and to us like peeling painter's tape. I can hear water running, meaning there's already at least one guy who rushed in after practice to get here. He'll probably be exiting the shower by the time most of us are disrobing.

I brought my towel today in case Rose makes me shower, but my plan is to fiddle with my shoelaces until an appropriate amount of time passes and then wet my hair in the sink. But Rose is in his office tonight and has a clear view of the sink. I have no option other than to shower.

I take off everything down to my underwear, wrap the towel around my waist and then pull off the underwear which I fold up and shove to the bottom of my backpack. The floor tile is cold and wet from the other guys who are done, who are dressing, who have put on their pants and remain shirtless, who are combing gel back in their hair.

I haven't been in the shower area yet this week and Bowen still hasn't—he sits in the bathroom stall and pretends to shit. This prevents me from doing the same. I had asked him in homeroom today why he just doesn't cave in and shower, and he sticks to his dick-looking faggot theory.

“You're bound to see one, too,” I said, in class.

“If a man, which I am, sees a,” he looks behind him, for our teacher, “*dick*, it’s by accident. You’re supposed to keep your head and eyes *straight*.” That’s the key word: *straight*. Then he added, “Why haven’t *you* showered yet, *pussy*?”

I turn the corner to the group shower with my head straight forward as I’m supposed to do and still see every naked body within ten feet. I’m not prepared to see naked guys—especially guys I see regularly throughout the day, especially when I’m used to seeing them clothed. I don’t see faces; it’s just a flash of ass, and hair, and soap and bubbles and scrotums and penises that I could now pick out of a police lineup, because in this millisecond a bit of light has entered my brain and is now tattooed to the back of my mind. There is nothing short of a severe concussion or minor decapitation that can get this picture out of my head.

I go to take the only shower head available, the only empty space, between Harvell’s boa constrictor in the middle of digesting a monkey and Martin’s...well, his looks like what Silly Putty does when it’s warmed up and sinks and stretches to the floor.

“Fucking hell,” I say, turning around back to my locker. I will not shower. I will not be a mom-and-pop shop between skyscrapers. I pull up my underwear underneath the towel, put on the rest of my clothes and head towards the exit to go home.

THURSDAY

We exit the locker room to stretch before running. I reek of Bengay. I scooped my fingers in the communal bowl like spoonless orphans eat porridge, and lathered it on my legs like sun screen so I could stand.

The whistle blows. “Ten minutes, men. Let’s go.” Rose blows again. And we run.

I want to shove that damn whistle down his throat.

Last night, I prayed to be cut. I also asked, if it wasn't too much trouble, Lord, for a bigger penis. But mostly, I wanted to be cut. I pleaded while staring at the crucifix, because he must know a little something about suffering and it wouldn't be difficult to understand my trouble—that I can't go on any further. Five minutes of running now and I want nothing more than to go home and die, to be taken off the cross.

After ten minutes, Rose barks, "Bleachers." We go sit down.

He talks defense. He wants a tall guy under the basket, and a fast guy on the layup. He calls for me to stand under the rim, and tells me to block whatever Hanson can bring. He's a good foot taller than I am, but I'm wider than he is, and he can't get around me. He goes to shoot; I put my arm up and block it.

Rose whistles. "Next." We trot to the bleachers. "Timmy, stay there," he says.

I block Voss, and then Gettings, and then Smith. Rose tells me to sit down. That I've done more than enough.

He pulls me into his shoulder as I walk by him. "I think we've found your forte, Timmy," he says.

I tell him I thought I was better at running, and he pushes me towards the bleachers.

I sit where I was before and look out the gym doors that face the parking lot. Hanson stands under the rim and lets Tice get by him. Tice misses, and the ball bounces towards the fire exit. The days are becoming shorter, and the sun has almost set completely. A long beam of light is painted on the floor that stretches to the other side of the gym. If the gym lights were shut off, we could still see everything. But, in a little bit,

it'll be gone, and all that'll be left is night.

I stop watching them play and rub some sand into the grooves of the bleachers wondering what it'd be like to go out that exit; I've never seen anybody use it before.

FRIDAY

“Okay, you guys stay on the bleachers,” says Rose. He's called some of our names from his clipboard. It's a half hour before practice is even supposed to end. “The rest of you go shower. I'll come and talk to you in a minute.” I'm relieved. I know this is it, what I've been waiting for.

There are only ten of us. Bowen included, as well as Herron and Tice. From what I can tell, we were selected by separating out the short, the fat, and the unenthusiastic—and for the first time this week, I'm two for three.

Rose takes off his glasses—his eyes are remarkably small, like pebbles. “I appreciate the hard work you guys were putting in this week, but I had to make a choice. There are just too many people signed up this season and both my A and B teams are full to the brim.” It's strange seeing his eyes look at us like this. It's strange seeing his eyes period. “Any of you are more than welcome to come back Monday; I'll find something for you to do. But this is more of a way to say if you don't want to come in, you don't have to anymore.”

We nod.

Something begins to sink in. We thought we were men, but now that we're sitting here, being talked down to like kids, being told we're done. I sense a little bit of sympathy from Rose, because we're not men—we're children. Finney scratches his head

and dips it down towards his lap and faces away from the rest of us, toward the locker room. We thought we were men, but we're nothing but ten lumps of shit sitting in a row pretending like we're okay with it—and I may be the only one who's actually okay with it. I'd be crying and feeling hopeless if I was with the ones who made it.

At the same time, though, I don't know what I'll tell my family; I would really like to avoid the whole scene: getting into the car, telling Mom I've been cut, and I'll be taking the bus home from now on; getting home, seeing Dad and trying not to look too relieved while alluding to what really happened – that I'll confess (even though it's what I really want) that I failed and I'm okay with it. But my brother. He probably won't ask. I hope he's not home so I don't have to explain anything to him. And if he ever asks, it won't until be months later. I'll sum it all up by saying, "Oh, that? I was cut during tryouts." And hopefully he'll leave it at that.

"Okay," Rose says. "I'm going to go talk to the others. Why don't you guys stay out here another ten minutes or so, rest up, have a breather, and then shower up and enjoy your weekend." He leaves, opens the locker room door. A small uproar escapes as we hear him yell for order.

"Ten minutes?" Finney asks, his voice is shaky.

"Probably so we can have the locker room to ourselves," Prill says.

"Good, I don't want to be in there with those faggots," Bowen says.

"What are we supposed to do then? I don't feel like just sitting here," Finney says.

"I just want to go home."

I joke, "Want to play some basketball?"

"All right," says Tice, and everyone stands up, except for Prill, who lies down and

flips his shirt over his head.

After our ten minutes is up, we go to the locker room. It's empty. Lockers are ajar and there's a single dirty sock crinkled up on the floor. I consider showering since I am a little more comfortable with the idea now since I had attempted it again the night before. I went in with my towel wrapped around my waist, unwound it like a flasher in a trench coat, wetted the front of myself and my head and got the hell out of there. But tonight, we don't shower. We pack up and leave, walking out the entrance door together.

The guys who made it are lined up outside in the hallway. Their hair is wet from the shower and combed, and spiked; a strong bite of body spray is in the air. Most of their shoes are unlaced and ankle supports pulled open—shoes worn like slippers. They clap slowly. I don't know about the others, but I don't acknowledge this; this is what men do. I keep my eyes forward until I reach the door. Voss claps a little more vigorously as I walk by. He reaches out to offer his condolences and misses my back and smacks me in the neck.

I see my mother parked in the lot, waiting to pick me up. It's a cold autumn night; fallen leaves are pasted to the pavement. Not even a strong gust of wind could peel them away. I walk slower than normal so the rain wets my hair to look like everyone else's.

It Goes Without Saying

On my parents' refrigerator, at about my mother's eye-level, are magnetized letters spelling our names. These bulky, multi-colored, weak magnets hold up high school photos of us.

Paul, my middle brother, cross country thin, is dressed in flimsy running gear: too-short shorts and a thin, aerodynamic tank top. He is taking a knee next to the bricks of the high school. A strip of sunlight engulfs him, his shadow stretches along the wall. His hair is puffed up a bit, and a spring breeze is captured along with an angelic glow my mother sees in him regardless of the weather.

Ben, my eldest brother is also taking a knee in front of the same brick wall, but he is in a baseball uniform—even though his real passion is football (there's a photo of him in pads somewhere in the house). The grass underneath him is brown but has a slight tint of life; spring is approaching, but it's not quite there yet. Unlike Paul, who's squinting and smirking in the sunlight, Ben is shadowed by clouds. There is no smile. His face: stern with pride, jaw clenched, chin out. This is a photo of two brick walls.

Next to his photo is mine. I'm inside, sitting in front of a photographer's gray sheet, tanning under a photographer's lamp, dressed in a marching band uniform—a brass buttoned, red jacket Revolutionary British would call flamboyant, navy blue trousers fat men would call snug. A trumpet rests on my knee. I'm wearing reading glasses, my hair is longer than anybody would like, and I have a forced smile. It's a smile that says, "I love you, Mom. I'm doing this for you," but eyes that say, "The light's fine, Jackass, take the fucking photo." This is not a photo to be proud of, to mark a milestone in my musical career. This is a photo with one purpose: to be purchased by my mother.

I don't know what Ben or Paul think whenever they're home and go to the freezer. I imagine Paul looks at his photo and admires himself in the sunlight. I look at Ben's photo, and then at mine, and I think I should have played football. I'll bet money that Ben looks at his and then at mine, scoffs, and thinks the same thing.

A stray football found its way to me when I was in elementary school, and they—the other kids in my fifth grade class—told me to throw it back. I never could throw a football. Ben—then a JV linebacker—spent a lot of time trying to teach me in our front yard until he lost patience with me: “Just kick the darn thing to me.” So I would, and I became accustomed to kicking a football accurately. I would practice in the yard when Ben wasn't home. Trees became targets, and within weeks I could hit any of them from wherever I stood.

The kids in my class never played with a full-sized football like Ben and I did. Their football was the junior size, just a shade above the miniature one you can win in a Prize Grab machine.

“Hurry up,” they shouted. “Throw it.”

“I'm not a good thrower.”

“Well,” Underwood—the football star in our class, whose hair was gelled, who kept girls' stares in his pocket like gum—said, “Kick it then, girl.” He never liked me because I hated basketball and would usually quit halfway into a game, leaving the teams uneven. That's what girls do, he said.

I kicked the ball. Hard. It wound up on the other end of the field.

“Go get it,” he said.

I looked around to see where the playground supervisors were. One was on the far side of the playground, the other out of earshot. “Fuck you,” I said. “You get it.” After that I was accepted to play regularly, so I retired my isolated swing set for a football and popularity.

My job then became simple: if the offense couldn’t get the ball past the line of scrimmage (which we just called The Line), I had to kick it as far as I could. If I wasn’t kicking, I—like Ben does for the high school team—blocked for the quarterback (who was usually Underwood) against McCracken who always rushed because (even though he was the size of a seventh grader—and had the intelligence of a second grader) he didn’t have the stamina to chase anybody for more than twenty feet.

McCracken believed nobody was down until the ball carrier was on the ground pretending not to cry; he had no strong emotions for anybody and was not moved by tears; a broken arm was just part of the game. I let him by me every time because I felt like I was on the tracks with a train coming, and I didn’t particularly like the taste of dirt. Underwood was often pummeled because I didn’t do my job—a job Ben always said required no fear. I knew, though, if I stayed out of harm’s way four times, I could kick the ball and watch everybody chase after it and not have to pretend to care about Underwood for at least four more downs.

Towards the end of spring, when the days got warmer and the sand got dryer, I received a note from the sister of a girl in my class. She was in fourth grade and had the same recess as us.

It said:

Tim,

You are good at kicking the football. I like to watch you kick the football.

[skewed heart] Amanda

I was going to go home and show Ben and ask him if he had any notes, too, but I didn't, figuring he'd make fun and tell me that's not what football is about.

Friday nights were big when Ben was a high school senior. I was just starting middle school then, and Ben was a starting varsity offensive and defensive lineman and was usually seen when the local CBS news station featured high school highlights. The news crew was filming the Halloween weekend game, and my brother and his friend Zac—a wide receiver who was spending the night, because they were hunting our property in the morning—stayed up to tape it from the TV.

After the highlights, Ben stopped recording, rewound the tape and watched it again.

“Look,” he said, “right there. That’s me.”

The three of us sat in front of the TV, squinting at the pixels. I was close enough to see all the different colors in just a small cube of a pixel. I wondered how something so small and obscure could look like something completely different when everything is blended together from far away, when it appears to be one entire image.

Ben rewound the tape again, let it play a little bit and paused it. “Right there,” he said, bending his finger on the screen. He was playing offense, protecting a running back, and pushing back someone on the opponent’s defense. Ben played the tape frame by frame. His elbows were in the lineman—a fat guy with his gut unhinged from under his

jersey—pushing him back.

“Look at that guy,” Ben said. “Nothing.”

He rewound the tape again, and we watched it in full speed.

He let it play through and we watched Zac make a catch for a touchdown. And since the news station had to show the winning team make a mistake, we watched the kicker for Chip Hills shank a punt.

“I’m a better kicker than that guy.”

They looked away from the TV and to me.

“This will be you in a few years,” Zac said.

“Screwing up a punt?”

Ben shook his head. “No, no. Lineman,” he argued. “Like me.” I was being groomed, molded in the image of himself. Weeks later I’d begin his exercise program. He would come home early from school, excited to transform me.

“We’ll get rid of all of this,” he said pointing at me, at whatever was hidden under my sweatshirt. “We’ll get on the weights, we’ll run, we’ll get you toned.” A few days into the program, I wasn’t motivated, and soon he began to stay later and later at the high school. He became less enthusiastic as my progress dwindled; his words spoken to me became shorter and eventually nonexistent. He did this with everyone eventually.

Years later, when Ben and Zac had finished college, and I was almost done with my undergrad degree, I helped Zac build his house during the summer. Ben lived up in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula with his fiancée and never called home except to check in with our parents.

I was helping Zac put up drywall. I had already put in a ten-hour day at my job as

golf course maintenance man. I had drywall dust covering me; it mixed with the sweat on my shirt and beard, forming into a paste. Dust Bowl hobos smelled better than I did.

We strained while hoisting up the drywall, and I held it up while Zac nailed it to the foundation. “Oh,” he said through the hammering, “your brother called me last night, finally.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“That brother of yours,” he said, “is a quiet guy.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Reminds me of someone.”

I grabbed another slab. “Tell him I said *hi*,” I said, hoisting it up, trying to speed up the job, “when you talk to him again.”

When touchdown after touchdown became monotonous, and our little strip of sand and goal posts began to suffocate us, we played Jackpot.

Jackpot was a time-killing game where a thrower stood alone on one side of the field and called out a number (usually a money amount) and threw the football to a crowd of catchers. Sometimes it was like watching a swarm of ants fight back a stick destroying the mound, or—once I’d gotten older and knew not to say anything—watching women at weddings chase after the bouquet. Once a catcher caught the ball, he’d add that much to his score. Once the full amount was gained, the catcher became the thrower, and the thrower became an ant again.

I used to play Jackpot with my brothers in our front yard during the summer. I’d throw it to Paul and watch Ben push him out of the way, pummel him, flatten him to the

ground, whatever needed to be done to get that ball and become the thrower. When we switched, he threw it to Paul. Paul would go up next, and he'd throw it to Ben, but somehow Ben always managed a way to get the ball to me. He'd exaggerate me pushing him out of the way. He'd trip himself. He'd tie his shoe. He'd let me catch it. I'd become the thrower, and he'd push Paul around again until Paul became tired of it, or the night grew dark.

Whenever I became the thrower at school, they'd back up to the end of the field. I hated screwing around, so I'd yell, "Jackpot," kick it, and hope somebody caught it. I'd go back to the tail end of the swarm and pretend to care. Summer was approaching, and I was ready to retire my foot.

This isn't our scene, I thought last night. This is just going to piss him off.

A group of Ben's friends and their parents, my parents, and Ben's wife's parents and family crowded by the hallway that led to the back entrance of his favorite hometown bar.

Most of the women had their cameras. My mother was anticipating seeing him walk through the door. Her hands were cupped up by her chin—almost giddy. Dad stood next to her, hands in his pockets; he was happy to be there for him, but he didn't look like it—he hated crowds, too. Like me. Like Ben.

My face was stern, my chin out, I looked as distant as I could to discourage people from talking to me. I hung out in the corner hoping to be in a shadow. I hid behind some of the taller people.

If he sees me, I thought, I'm done.

There was even someone with a sign decked out with amateur painted American flags that read: “Goodbye, Bennie.”

Oh, God, I thought, I can’t be a part of this.

He came through the door, led by his friend Brian, and the crowd yelled a very rehearsed “surprise.” I flagged a waitress down for a beer.

Ben sewed his way through the crowd, looking for a beer. People approached him, people I don’t think he had seen in years, shook his hand, asked him when he was taking off. Bless you, they’d say. Engineering, huh? Bless you. Must be hotter there than here, huh? Well, at least it’s not a long, long time. Bless you. We sure will miss you, take care of yourself, bless you. Bless you, bless you, bless you.

I didn’t like the deployment situation either, but I hadn’t said a word about it around family. Bringing it up would upset my mother. I don’t even know his own reaction to it. Perhaps he did the same thing I’d do: lock myself in the bathroom, stare at the mirror, take a deep breath, sit on the edge of the tub telling myself over and over that this is what needs to be done, so I may as well be a man and do it, unlock the door and leave it at that.

He was happy at the moment, or at least politely happy, a nice little smile that acknowledged whoever was in front of him. We’ve got the same smile; I may have adopted it from him—a page from Ben’s Bible of courteousness and pretending to give a shit. These people I don’t want to see are here to see me, his smile said, be grateful. Don’t let them down.

I was next to my sister-in-law when he came up to us. He talked to an old lineman buddy from high school. Ben’s chest was facing me, meaning I wasn’t being shunned by

him, so I didn't say anything—saying something might spoil the moment. He looked at his wife and then back to his talkative, thankful, grateful friend. He left for the next group of people, and left to stand by my father—I'm taller, but he's thinner.

“You've paid your dues,” he said, letting me know I had permission to go home.

“Ma said that's okay?”

He shrugged. “I'd go with you if I could, but she's talking.” She was leaning into Ben's mother-in-law, laughing at something a city woman would say.

“I'll go in a bit, I should stay a little longer.”

“Drive safe, it's pretty slick out.” He looked at me. Save yourself, said his fist prodding my forearm. Ben's father-in-law grabbed Dad by the arm. They shook hands, and I walked away before I got pulled into it.

I'm the youngest brother, and the only brother who showed up to the party of a great man—that's the attitude from last night. I see it in their eyes: how proud I must be to be his brother; how wonderful it feels to look up to this hero; he enlisted; he's being deployed; and now, like a light switch: I'm proud, as if I had no reason—up until now—to be proud of him, to look up to him. I don't know if they see it in my eyes that I know they're all wrong. I looked up to him long before I was *supposed* to. I just never said anything about it.

I walked up to Ben, leaned towards him and pointed to get his attention. “You going to be home tomorrow?” I asked.

“Yup.”

My index finger went from pointing to him to the ceiling. “Lions at one.”

“Okay.”

Today, I reflected on that invitation moment. I can't remember, besides that, what I've said to him last. I waited for him with the TV muted. I wanted to be able to hear him come in. I wanted to prepare myself before he walked in the door. I wanted to make it look like I hadn't been waiting for him. I rubbed my face to make myself look tired, as though I'd woken up from a nap.

He walks in somewhere near the first quarter. He is in gray sweats, back from a run, I assume. He brews some coffee and comes into the living room and sits in the chair in silence. During breaks, he flings himself off the chair and does pushups—exhaling loud when coming up. There is a hint of a number in each exhale. The Christmas tree shakes a bit.

The game resumes, and he drinks his coffee. At timeouts and commercials, he's off the chair again and does sit-ups until the next play. Between the referee's whistles and the cheering fans on the TV, there are long-winded sighs—what I only assume is a habit, because it's become a habit of mine over the years, too. That's all I hear from him, and that's all that comes from me. This is the essence of our conversation. I replay the words in my mind that he's leaving and won't be back again until the following August. I try to make them a reality, but they're still only words. I urge myself to thank him for doing what he has to do and not complain about it, to thank him for not only representing our country, but our family. I want to say everything I know he doesn't want to hear, to say everything that's been bubbling over the last decade, to tell him that I am me only because of him, to say anything, to break the silence we're used to—just in case August never comes.

The second half: Detroit fumbles the ball.

“Shhh-it!” he says, extending the word as though he considers saying “shoot”. I’ve heard him curse before, but a long time ago. Hearing it now is strange. Eerily unnatural, and I wonder what else I don’t know about.

Then an interception: “Dammit!”

Following that, a Green Bay touchdown: “Son of a bitch!”

After Detroit’s loss, I hear another curse and a long defeated sigh. The station breaks and the screen is blank, black, and silent. The hum of the television is deafening. I feel as though now is my only chance to talk. To say a sentence longer than four words, to actually have a conversation, something we haven’t had in years. He stares at the screen, probably wondering what the next game will be. I inhale deep to speak, and exhale it all without speaking words when I stand up to leave—just one more heavy sigh. I walk to the bathroom and sit on the tub until I convince myself it is time to put on a jacket and throw a ball around for Spot, Ma’s new dog, and leave it at that.

On All Hollow’s Eve, Zac and Ben were finished hunting for the morning. Ben went inside to change and Zac stood by his truck, getting ready to leave. I was throwing the Frisbee to our dog, George, to keep him entertained.

“I heard about your pike,” Zac said.

“Which one?” I asked, I had caught many pike, but only one of them was worth talking about.

“The big one,” he said, putting his bow in the cab. “What was it? Thirty?”

“Thirty-nine.”

“You know,” he said, “he’d probably never tell you this, but Bennie was so proud

of you when you caught that pike. He showed us a picture. Man, he was excited. He showed *all* of us that picture. He was bragging about you, about that fish, for days—saying none of our little brothers have caught anything close to it.”

“He never said nothing to me.”

Zac shrugged. I shrugged too, a physical movement that forever means (for anyone who knows him) *That’s Ben, whadda gonna do?*

“Go out for a pass?” I asked, showing him the Frisbee.

He darted out towards the center of the yard, hailing his left arm, like he would during practice or a game. I wound up, followed through and let go too late. Zac pivoted right, chasing after it to the other side of the yard.

George lay down, uninterested.

Honest Abe and Jesus Christ

Because of my father, I will pick up any loose change on the ground regardless of hazardous implications like oncoming traffic or who-knows-what-kind-of-skuzzy germs that already-filthy piece of money is sitting in. I, like my father, will pick it up, pop it up in the air a few times, letting it fall safely into the palm of my hand, and then pocket it until I get home where it'll promptly go into a jar with other loose change. Like him, on a rainy day, I'll sit at the kitchen table sorting the change and rolling them up into 50-cent, two-dollar, five-dollar, and ten-dollar rolls.

My father hates knowing money makes the world go round, but that doesn't mean he doesn't respect it. I've spent a majority of my childhood watching this, getting used (for the sake of exercising a bad pun) to stopping on a dime during walks just to pick up something that looks like a penny or a nickel or, at best, a quarter. Once I found a 50-cent piece on a sidewalk; this is the only time I can recall myself dancing willingly.

As an adult, I find my day is just a little bit better when my eye catches anything circular on the ground. Now it is my friends who have grown accustomed to waiting for me as I stop and bend over. They always ask if it's heads-up.

"It's a nickel, it doesn't count," I'll reply, because it doesn't—especially when it's heads-down.

My father doesn't believe in luck. I've seen him not knock on wood; I've seen black cats walk in his path; I've seen him walk under ladders and break mirrors; I've seen him pick up pennies heads-down; I've seen him do everything that would give him bad luck; I've seen him not care because my father is a man of faith, not of superstition.

Lately, I've become a man of both. Kind of.

I was born, baptized, and raised into a Catholic family who went to church every Sunday, surrounded by other families who took up entire pews with five or more children. There were only five of us in my family: two parents, three boys. We sat in the second pew, hip-to-hip, scrunched all the way to the left to make sure there would be enough room for whoever might want to share the rest of it with us. To the right of us and behind us were fussy, noisy kids. With them were their worn-out mothers and short-tempered fathers trying to keep them—their wives and children—quiet.

My brothers and I, almost three years apart in age, never said a word. We didn't dangle our legs; we didn't look at the ceiling; we didn't cough, sneeze or laugh; we didn't ask questions; we listened to the priest; we folded our hands when others did; we knelt when others did; we, without squirming, held hands during the Lord's Prayer—the Our Father.

Our father worked all week. Our father hated his job. Our father did household chores when not at work. Our father was tired. Our father had a short temper. Our father had a deep voice. Our father stretched out his words and sounded like he was in pain when he yelled. Our father would grasp our shoulders and make us look at him when he was furious. Our father would get on his knees and meet our eyes. Our father scared the living shit out of me.

Being the youngest, I sat next to him at mass. Occasionally, if the other children around me were loud, he'd drape his arm over my shoulders and let his massive hand dangle by my face—his hand: tan with black, broad hairs sticking out between his knuckles; his nails: flat, wide and trimmed, sometimes black from blood blisters due to so

many wood-splitting and nail-hammering injuries. To others in the church, it may have looked like a loving gesture of a father to his son, but in my mind he was letting me know if I joined my peers by chattering, or not paying attention, and/or embarrassing him as a disciplinarian, he'd crush my head.

Then, my father was Catholic, so I was Catholic.

Now, my father is still Catholic, so I am still Catholic.

Later, if my father were to convert, I might follow him.

I played the trumpet in high school. I was good, but a nervous performer. Before concerts, I'd sit at home in the recliner. My legs would shake and I'd wonder if the wrong notes would find me that night. I hoped the audience wouldn't know the difference.

I found a heads-up penny in the hallway of a school where our band was playing for state festival—a high school competition for school bands who received high rankings in their districts. I had a solo to play. During practices I was either right on, or nowhere close to playing it right. At the state festival, I played it damn near perfect, sending the band director to tears—what I thought was relief.

I placed that penny in a plastic cover made for preserving baseball cards and carried it with me—tied to a small rubber chicken—to every band performance for the next three years.

Now as an adult, six hours from my hometown, I go to church alone on Saturday nights. My mother, after hearing this said, “Well, I guess that's better than not going.” Her voice is dry like callused feet, insinuating either I should consider Sunday morning or nothing

else. Or maybe she's upset that my middle brother has strayed away from his Catholic faith to join up with the non-denominational Christian crowd. Or maybe she's upset she no longer knows if my oldest brother attends mass at all.

What she doesn't understand, though, is Saturday nights are different (and better) than Sunday mornings.

Sunday morning mass to me has always been bright and cheery. The choir is energetic and jubilant. The priest's homily is persuasive and positive. People are often uplifted and joyful after mass. Happy children run around afterwards playing tag, smiling at their parents, chasing imaginary balloons. The congregation is being tricked by the rejuvenation of the morning sun and the vigor of children into expanding and strengthening their faith.

Saturday night mass begins at 5:00 p.m. During the autumn, the sun is already setting. The organist is accompanied by a small choir of four nervous high school girls. The homily is spoken like a suppressed sneeze. The mood is rank with people defeated by the week. The congregation is mostly made up of the elderly—the average age between seventy-five and foot-in-the-grave. When I walk in, they turn and look at me as though I'm ungrateful for what I have: decades.

I often sit in front of a woman of about eighty who smells like hotel potpourri and slumps over the pew while keeling on the kneeler. She shifts through her rosary beads until mass begins. Her eyes are tight, her lips slowly twitch with each word she whispers. She winces when she stands and aches when she kneels. She sings during mass without a hymnal. She prays like she believes; she prays like my grandmother who once said: "I'm ready to see my Lord."

I pray with those who won't be around much longer, who are closer, mortality wise, to God. Sundays are too happy; Saturdays are dark, solemn, and hopeless—perfectly Catholic. We come together as a whole and bow our heads as we wait for everything to become worse.

I momentarily lost my faith picking up a penny while walking home from the bar. It was heads-down, and I was drunk and feeling guilty (my father doesn't drink). I wondered what kind of bad luck I would receive and how quickly I would receive it. It was past 2 a.m. and I was looking for a miracle. For years, the world had begun to break me down, throwing every asshole imaginable my way. I had lost hope in humanity, and I was on the brink of dismissing divinity, my religion, and the world.

Whatever faith I had in that moment was nothing more than an echo of what I believed when I was a child. Faith was beginning to look like myth, a fantasy, a fairy tale my mother would read to me before I slept. I wanted bad luck from that penny. I wanted proof that there was something out of my hands, and a mere action could decide my fate. I pocketed it, tapped it a few times to make sure it was mine and waited—waited for a meteor to fall on my head, for a car to veer off the road, for the lamppost to crack in half and land on me, for rain, for vomit, for anything.

Nothing happened. No bad or good luck. I only felt a void, abandoned. I shuffled my feet, kicking mounds of sand and pebbles while walking the rest of the way home. I wondered if nothing was a sign. I wondered if I'd even notice a sign if one was presented to me. The roads were deserted. I wondered where the traffic was.

I thought about my father: my father doesn't believe in luck, my father doesn't

drink, my father believes in Jesus and life ever after.

“All right, all right,” I said as though someone were next to me. My eyes projected upward, looking up as though I were a rat in a maze searching for a glimpse of the bastard who put me there. And that’s all I’ll ever be: a rat constantly lost in the twists and turns of a puzzle, frantically looking for my goddamn cheese—I could smell it, but if I don’t make the right turns, I may never find it. And after I give up, all I’ll ever have to hang on to is the smell. Looking up, I couldn’t see the stars, but the orange rays of a lamppost—blinded by manmade light. My head bobbed back down towards the sidewalk. I avoided stepping on a crack, and then another. My voice defeated, “All right, fine.” I staggered home to put the penny in my jar with the others.

Around the age where the casual hug from my parents wasn’t uncomfortable, my father tried explaining heaven to me. This was at a time when life lessons were not handed to me. This was at a time where I was terrified of death. This was a time where I saw church as a checkmark on a to-do list—a Sunday routine wedged between waking up and lunch in a restaurant.

Here’s what I got out of it:

In heaven you A) don’t have to worry about anything

B) gain omniscience, understanding the mysteries of life

“Well, that’s weird,” I said. After that, life lessons became rarer.

Years later, my middle brother tried helping me with my worrying. “You have to give your anxiety to Jesus. Just give it all to Him,” he said, his voice was optimistic, as though I could just wrap up everything that was bothering me, put it in a box, slap on a

bow and give it to Jesus as a birthday present (wondering all the while if it'd be blasphemous if I used Santa-print wrapping paper).

“*Give* it to Jesus? No,” I said. “That’s stupid. If I didn’t have anxiety, that means I’d be *happy*, and what the hell am I supposed to do then?” After a few more occasions like, this he stopped giving advice and let me wander away from his sight.

The homily was cut short—a homily about how believing you’re a good person isn’t good enough. A choir boy went to the back of the church and brought out a projector screen. An older man rolled out a digital film projector on a cart. At that point, I had never seen a movie during mass.

The film was cheesy, cheap, and overdone. The Bishop came on the screen and asked for donations. His voice was sincere and understanding. He spoke about the current financial burdens we are all facing but reminded us to still think about others. The week before the film, our priest talked about financial sacrifice. The week before that: financial sacrifice. The week before that: financial sacrifice. The pleading began to sink in. Yes, others, I thought watching the film, were worse. But I knew others were better.

I offer ten dollars a week to the collection plate. I don’t know where that money goes. I live on the poverty line, but I remind myself others are worse. The Bishop continued and asked for our scarifies so we, the congregation could feel whole. The congregation—a room filled with elderly knocking on heaven’s door, a room filled with people hoarding retirement funds, social security, Lord knows what else, a room filled with people like the old woman with a wrinkled face like a rotting pumpkin who sat a few pews ahead of me.

Her husband, no longer with her, used to grunt and clear his throat during mass like a dog chasing something in a dream. After he died, her face became lost. Her scowl belonged to everyone. She looked at every inch of the church. Her head turned right, then left, then right again. When the collection plate came, she glanced at it as though it was for the dentures. She wore pearls but never gave a dollar.

She watched the screen, and then looked around the church to the others watching the film. I knew the word written in her scowl because it was the word on my mind, too: chumps. Even though I had an envelope for ten dollars, I still thought it.

I ignored the film, dipped my head and thought of my best friend who had never dealt with a family member dying, who then was losing a grandmother rapidly to cancer. My father taught me not to pray for things, but for strength to go on. I prayed for the best, but was realistic. I prayed for her relief, whatever that entailed. I prayed my friend could have the strength to deal with it.

He called me a week and a half later, she was gone. I asked how he was holding up. "I don't think it's hit me yet," he said," but, you know, it is what it is."

One of my friends often asks me about faith. She's emerging into her own at a leisurely, wary pace, not realizing I am drunkenly staggering off the path she's crawling toward. She's smart. She asks thoughtful and meaningful questions that actually contain logical thought. She swoons at the thought of a younger person, like me, sticking to something so outdated, something so logically and scientifically obsolete. She tells me she admires me for whatever stand I have with the Catholic Church, and I shouldn't feel delusional because, jokingly, insane people are fun to be around. She keeps asking questions I don't

know the answers to, and hasn't caught on to the fact that my answers don't venture far from a paused "I don't know," an embarrassed, laughing "I have no fucking clue," a coy "I'm sorry, I can't help you with that," and a joking "Give me a week, I'll Google it."

Tired of the answers I give her, she asks me the best—or worst—question of all: "Where, then, does your faith come from?" I want to say, "China, like everything else." But I pretend not to hear the question. I order another beer from the waitress, and look back to see if my friend has let the question go—the girl can stare at a wall forever if she wants an answer from it.

I'm afraid of my answer, or any answer I give because it's full of uncertainty. I don't have any real answers. Real answers require facts, and fact has nothing to do with faith. Any answer I can give will only prove one fact: I have doubt.

Fear is the answer, and I'm afraid to turn my back on the idea of abandoning something that may be true. I do not tell her this—that I'm afraid of consequences. I also don't tell her, even though I have doubt, there's still something there, and I cannot explain it. But maybe these feelings could be defined by the theory stating the presence of higher powers are only electrodes firing through the brain, bringing a euphoria that confuses people into believing it is the grace of God. I could tell her sometimes I think of death and all we get out of it is nothing: it's a burned-out light bulb. But, if there isn't anything, I have a sense of relief that there won't be an eternity of suffering. I could tell her if I had to choose between suffering or nothingness, I choose nothingness. I could tell her I don't want to know for sure. If I knew nothing existed, I would have no motivation to live out the rest of my life. If I knew something existed, it would change me as a person, and that person would be completely different from who I am now, and I would

not like that man nor would anyone else. I could tell her any of these things, but I prefer her to go about her life regardless of what I think. So instead I tell her I'll explain it to her later. I pay the waitress and wait for my change so I can tell her to keep it, hoping she gives me a smile.

The man's name escapes me like fog burning away in the late morning sun, but I remember what he looks like. He never spoke, was in a wheelchair, wore a Veteran's jacket, smiled all the time, had a crescent-moon chin that inched away from his face like arms in a morning stretch. The priest tells us he's passed away.

"He was here every Sunday in the front row," Father says. My father and mother still sit in the front row of their church by the fourteenth station of the cross—Jesus is Laid in the Tomb.

Now that I've left home, I sit in the middle-back of the left side. Since I've moved away, I tried sitting in the front left of the church, by the first, second and third stations, but I'd have panic attacks sitting there. Each week I'd select a pew a few back from the previous week, the fifth station, the sixth, seeing how my anxiety levels would tolerate it. I've settled well next to the seventh station—Jesus Falls the Second Time.

I look around after the announcement is made. Nobody is distraught. Their faces are still and serene. They're accepting. They seem to know he's okay, he's being taken care of, he's got nothing to worry about, he's omniscient now. But I'm not so sure. All I can think about is what if it's not true. What if every Saturday night and Sunday morning is a waste? Am I *really* content with nothing? I shake the thought from my head because I begin to feel nauseous, and my heart rate rises; a panic attack yells "Land, ho!" and I rock

in my pew, motioning away my nausea. The pew creaks with each weight shift, distracting those around me. I do this until I convince myself I'll be okay.

“May perpetual light shine upon him,” is said, and I hope—not pray—it's true.

Leaving the church, I dip my right hand fingers in the holy water. I wet my forehead, my sternum, my left shoulder, my right shoulder. A drop of water rolls off my forehead down the bridge of my nose and I don't wipe it away even though it's cold and uncomfortable. I leave it so it can either soak into my skin and become a part of me or leave me forever by evaporating in the warm, autumn air—I'll never know the difference.

When I Write You a Letter

When I write you a letter, I don't sit down to write; I get up after I have that stirring of anxiousness in my chest when I think of what I want you to know. I go out for a while and kick the waves on the shoreline and watch puddles form from footsteps. I think of how I might write this and how I will eventually decide against it.

I follow the bike path where we walked after meeting each other on a bench in the rain by the beach where we ate expensive soup we didn't finish, and where we saw a man running in shoes shaped like gloves. I think about writing how amazed I was to be in your presence, and how you weren't leaving even with all of my dull conversation topics, and how unusually bad the weather for a Thursday, and how I wonder why products like foot-glove-running-shoes exist.

But what I really think about writing is how you looked at me, your eyes heavy like anchors, weighing me down, keeping me from floating away, which I told you could be a possibility. I feel like writing all of this in a letter with my misspellings, and my penmanship in capital letters and squiggly numbers, and the T's and I's connected together looking more like the pi symbol than part of a word. But instead, I start your letter by writing something inconsequential: I write I'm tired, and I'm overworked, and I someday wish to sit down in a recliner and feel comfortable about requesting a pedicure over the telephone.

When I write you a letter—this is after I walk all over town, lost in thoughts of you—I say nothing of importance, and the letter continues this way. I write how I remember your phone number in a long, elaborate system; I write about how I go running and sometimes get nipple chafe, and when I shower it burns like a Puritan witch; I write I

should buy underwear soon since the little holes in the crotch have become one big hole which classifies my boxer briefs as an unpattered kilt with an elastic band; I write I don't like to socialize with people, because when I'm nervous I come off as borderline autistic; I write asking why you're still reading this letter, because it's becoming nothing but a waste of your time—this is what I end with. I write a post script, sincerely apologizing, again, for wasting your time, and I'll understand if you never talk to me again. I seal the envelope up, and place it in a spot where you'll come across it, because I feel you'd be more excited to get a letter unexpectedly than if I were to just hand it off to you in person.

Within days, I receive a letter from you. A few days after reading your words I have to take a walk again, because you are heavy on my mind.

When I write you a letter, I write with no filter. A few pages in, I read back on some lines and notice I have, again, gone off on a tangent about something you never need to read about: my worrying. I write about how I trust nothing but people closest around me, and how you are one of them, and I wonder if you trust me, too, and I give you preemptive reasons of why I understand if you don't. I read it again and tear it up in pieces so small anyone rifling through the garbage could not make out a single word. I start over, trying not to write the same words I've torn up, but seem to circle back in on them eventually.

When I write you a letter, I go back to the gloriousness, amazement, bewilderment, confusion of our previous occasions. I write asking if you remember these moments. If you can't, I remember for you. I paint the stage and bring on the players and give them voice and spirit, trying to have you relive the moments that often filter through my mind. I write how I think of you and the times when we simply sat on a bench,

blanketed by trees; how we watched the waves come in; how I said I wish they were bigger; how worried you looked when I said I'd never seen it rain on a Thursday; how I assured you I took it as a good sign; how anything significant in my life has seen rain; how I almost told you I test my heart rate when you're around; how it wouldn't slow down unless you inched away a little more. When I write you a letter, I throw away five pages before I write one you'll actually read. That one page has nothing to do with anything. On that page, you read: *I wonder if edible glitter will ever be possible—you know, for cakes and stuff.*

When I write you a letter, I avoid talking about the future because I promised I wouldn't. I avoid writing watching us is like watching the sun sink to the horizon. Instead, I write about dreams I've dreamt, when once I noticed the sun dipping down, and you ran from the bench into the waves, yelled you were going to catch it before it was too late. I went with you, but you told me to stay, that I cannot swim—which I cannot—and you'd bring the sun to me so we'd have more time, and then you were gone. I sat alone as the night grew darker, and then I woke up wondering just how long I could have waited in a dream.

When I write you a letter, I write how I hope my words to you will no longer have the same effect one day, as though they'll sink into the lake, too, with you and the sun. I write I want you to forget about me; you can continue your life undisturbed without the thought of me weighing you down; your next foot forward should be a confident one. I write, apologizing. It's ridiculous to think I have that much persuasion over you and your decisions. I write how I know there are so many factors in your life, and even though I'm one of them, I'm nothing significant and should never be. I read this over and start a new

letter stating I understand anything I write will anchor you down for now—not forever. I know this, but I still want to stop time so we can share a bit of civility without the world moving around us, without the too-late of night coming. I know you have to leave. I write *even if you wanted me to ask you to stay, I won't*. I continue to write how I think it's strange that *won't* is short for will not, when in fact, it seems like it should be spelled *wil't*. I write I haven't decided whether to make an analogy of a dying flower because I never like being blatantly cheesy—that's the last thing you need from me. And, again, I tear it up and start all over by writing *I wish I could play the piano underwater, and I'm working on a root beer flavored lager in my underground lair where, if you remember, I originally invented the hexagonal stop sign to ease the suffering of octophobics, and I'm worried my barber school connections won't come through like I originally hoped they would*. These words have nothing to do with you. These words don't even have anything to do with me.

When I write you a letter, I spend pages insisting everything I write is a joke, and the jokes you read should never have been written and read, knowing the whole time these are the only words you will ever read from me.

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