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Between Bath and Heaven

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Abstract

Second Prize - 2013 Stephen Crane Fiction Prize

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Comments

Second Place - 2013 Stephen Crane Fiction Prize

Between Bath and Heaven

Everything was grey. The sky was grey, the river was grey, the streets were grey, the people were grey, and even the beige buildings were grey. The overcast heavens threatened rain at any moment, but in this part of the world, the weather was more a fact of life than something to be predicted, stated upon, or recorded. It either rained or it threatened rain. When the sun came out, it was an event. When people's skins dried out and lips turned into wax paper, that was something to be noticed, to be stated upon, and so the next predictions would only be when the clouds were going to come back out.

As usual, they quilted across the sky, reminding the fools who forgot to not look up that the firmament was breathlessly close and that they were living in a mere dome of grey. It was not a closeness like in South Dakota when the sky lies low over the endless cornfields and pastures and reaches forever on all sides and so feels like one could merely stand a-tiptoe to touch the clouds. The sky did not hang so low in Bath as it did in South Dakota, but instead of stretching endlessly, it appeared to rise out of the summits of the hills that hemmed the city and emerged in a central point somewhere over the Abbey's tower. The atmosphere drew all the buildings in, one on top of the other until they all blended into one oddly shaped thing that was a mass of doors, windows, and old beige brick. The roads were thin as a lamppost and the cars which passed by spilled their exhaust down onto it like the drunkard's vomit I witnessed last Friday night somewhere on Milsom Street.

One vehicle passed by, ejecting its smog thickly along the crosswalk, allowing me to enjoy its breath as I walked through the cloud of gas and other detriments. As I turned off the black asphalt to the grey cement sidewalk, I felt the wind pick up a bit. It rolled off the river and collided gently with my face while a little further down, a piece of paper rolled through the air like a tumbleweed. It turned deftly, caught in the hands of the cooling spring breeze, circulating through one rotation after another, seemingly in the same spot but still moving down the empty stretch of sidewalk in an indistinct line. It flowed upon the rolling waves of wind towards me

until we converged and it was plastered up against my leg. Pausing in my walk and looking down at what was now trying to wrap itself around my limb in an assiduous embrace, it seemed that the white page had been crumpled up before the breeze had completely flattened it against the sharp line of my shin, but the scars of creasing remained, looking like little near-invisible sutures. Not wanting to have a piece of garbage tapered to me for very long, I gingerly pulled the sheet from off my leg with a thumb and forefinger, and began to make a beeline for the nearest garbage can. But as I was holding the page a length away from me (for I did not know where it might have been before), I noticed something in black scrawled on it, which stayed my hand as I neared the receptacle. Nabbing the opposite corner with my left hand, I drew the page out before me, noting that the paper itself was unspectacular, being a standard sheet of college-ruled A4 paper as was the wont in Britain, probably torn out of a purple Ryman's notebook, not unlike the ones I had purchased upon settling in Bath. The perforated edge where it had been torn was perfectly straight, a sign of care at removal, but the characteristic which caught my eye was the scribbled phrase, "Where are you going?".

The penmanship of the four words was rounded and connected, almost like a girl's yet with a certain block-sloppiness that seemed to point towards a man's hand. The point below the question mark seemed to have been dotted with such ferocity and finality that it was set deep into the paper, where the vigorous pen tip had created an indent whose bump could be felt on the other side. But the most intriguing bit of all was the fact that it was written across lines, almost on a diagonal, which looked odd when compared to the perfectly straight torn edge and the algorithmic pattern of crease scars where the folds had been. Everything was rigid and mathematical and carefully done except for the "Where are you going?" itself. I don't know why it held such fascination for me. If anything, the page and its writing were a note in someone's class, but if so, why would the phrase have taken up so much space on the page, and why was there no response to the query? Perhaps the sender of the note deceived him or herself into thinking that their intended recipient was a friend, when in fact the sendee did not give a single thought to the composer and found the note to be an annoyance rather than a gesture of friendly

curiosity. But that just brought me to the next thought of why would anyone be sending another person a note in the middle of class asking where they are presently going? By the time that the note-writer noticed that the note-recipient was going somewhere, wrote the question, and had it passed to that desk, the note-recipient would have already left. But maybe it was too much to think that an adolescent school student would be using exact grammar in a passed note.

My mind finally arrived at a more existential, and as such, more entertaining view of the question. I peered about the sidewalk, but there was still no one around, which detracted from this new theory, but I could not help but thinking it anyway. What if the note was meant for me? What if this was just some divine message sent straight to me like God whispering in the night for Samuel? The question came to my lips and I whispered it, holding the paper cautiously and standing by the trash can: "Where are you going?" And suddenly, nothing made sense. Even if it was a divine calling of my name, I would be able to understand it. Thinking of it again, I thought the simple reply: I am going to meet a friend for lunch. That is it.

So I thought the heck with it, and I was about to stick it in the trash can and be done with the note for good when a sudden impulse, which must have been no more than a spasm in my fingers, folded it back up along those suture-like crease scars and stuck it in my satchel. I have no idea why my hands were compelled to do that, but they did it anyway, and I continued on to where I was going.

Nelson House is no different from the other house-type buildings in Bath, except that at one point it contained a national hero. Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson had a brief residence in the now-named "Nelson House" when he was suffering from an illness that the healing properties of the Bath water were supposed to cure, and left another historical imprint upon this city already steeped in the past. And here I was, sitting on a chair in the hallway behind the front door, waiting for Alden to quit chatting up his young, blonde, and Welsh archeology professor and come to lunch with me. Really, I did not begrudge him anything because our time in England

was so limited already, and once we left, the chances of us seeing anyone on this program again were pretty close to nil. So I patiently sat in the chair in the hall and waited.

I could hear their voices through the door, Alden was probably saying something way too intellectual for me to understand followed by a chuckle shared between professor and student. I fidgeted in my seat and peered into my satchel, a veritable man-purse. More garbled speech from behind the door. A laugh. I peered at my watch. 3:30. Damn late for lunch. The door began to creak open. I began to stand. The door creaked closed. Talking resumed. I sat back down. I felt like sighing, but I didn't because Alden was socially paranoid and would probably think I hated him. One more shared laugh. "Good-bye, Catherine." "See you next Monday, Alden." The door opened, and Alden paused in the doorway, looking at me, his mouth half open as though he was about to say something. I expected he was remembering one final thing to tell his professor, so I made no motion until he moved completely clear of the classroom, which he did after a pregnant moment, bringing up his arm and pointing at me with an index finger.

"Lunch?" He asked.

"Lunch." I replied, standing up and hoisting the satchel's strap over my head. "How was class?"

"Okay. Where do you want to go?"

"We haven't been to Cafe Retro in a while."

"Okay."

Alden had some sort of tick in his face that made him screw it up into a grimace sometimes that pulled at two oppositely diagonal points, and as I glanced up from the menu, he was shifting in his seat and rocking his head from left to right with the ugly look smeared across his visage. Knowing that something must be on his mind, I asked him a question.

"What are you going to get?"

"I don't know." He said in mid-rock, then pausing, he brought his head to bear on the menu. "Maybe a baguette." He yawned and stretched his arms. "You?"

“Something cheap.”

“I’ll pay for you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“No, it’s really okay.”

“Alden, you can’t just keep spending your money on my lunch.”

“I can and I will.”

“Why? I wouldn’t do the same for you.”

“I’d like to think that you would. Besides, even though it may be in the guise of lunch, I am actually paying for your great conversation.”

“I’m a terrible conversationalist. You do most of the talking.”

“It’s for your wonderful companionship. And intent listening.”

“Well I’m glad that you find my companionship and listening so indispensable.”

“Of course.” Alden looked back down to his menu, scanning his options. “Yeah, baguette...maybe a milkshake too?” He sighed.

“How was class?”

“Alright. We talked about Roman irrigation systems in England.”

“Cool.”

“Not really.”

“You like Catherine?”

“Yeah, she’s good. Archeology is just so...dry.” He put emphasis on the word “dry”, expressing his distaste for the subject’s method of communication with an added gesture of exasperation. We went back to perusing our menus. “I miss home.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“It’s not that I don’t like Bath or my professors, I just feel like I’m missing so much.”

“I miss actual dollars. Everything is just so expensive here.”

“I really miss people too. I just like people at home so much more than here.” he sighed.

“That isn’t fair. I’ve known people at home for two years now and here I’ve only known them for

a couple months. I don't know. I'm just tired. Don't listen to me.” He ran his hands through his hair and looked away.

“Hey, check out what I picked up earlier.”

“What?” Alden asked doggedly, facing me once more. I turned and rummaged through my satchel, finally finding the note. I had placed it between the pages of the copy of *The Return of the King* I was reading for class, the sheer volume of the book keeping the note secure and flat.

“It blew up against me while I was walking to Nelson House.” I hold the note out to him, carefully between my fingers. He took it a little less than roughly and casually unfolded it, unaware of its odd significance to me, which I realized in watching the paper leave my own personal care and enter into someone's whose unconcern was splashed across their face.

“Did you write this?” Alden asks, reading the paper.

“No, I told you. It blew into me while I was walking down on North Parade.”

“It doesn't look like your handwriting.”

“It isn't.”

“What's so significant about it?”

“Look at it.”

“Is it just a piece of garbage?”

“I don't know.”

“You don't think it was written just for you, do you? Like a divine calling?”

“No, of course not. I just thought it was kind of...you know...special? No, I don't know, that's stupid.”

“Anyone else would say you're an idiot for keeping this.”

“Do you think I should have just thrown it away?”

“No, it's a nice metaphor. But honestly, I'm sure it doesn't mean anything and it's merely a coincidental piece of garbage that happened to blow your way.”

“It can't be garbage, though. Look how nicely it's folded.”

“Oh, come on. You can't make a judgment based on that. Things get thrown away all the time in many different forms. Look, I'm not saying you're wrong, but I think you're definitely reading into this way too much.” Alden thrust the unfolded piece of paper back at me, which my hands abruptly folded back up along the clearly defined creases and secreted once more in *Return of the King*.

Our late afternoon lunches were stowed in our stomachs with only crumbs dusted on Alden's plate and the decorative sprig of parsley left on my white dish when the Slavic waitress cleared them away. The golden skin of her hands clenched around the two ceramic plates, and the skin stretched over bone and ligament smoothly; the long magenta nails on each finger extended and dangerous.

“Let's go home. I have Greek to do.” Alden stood and slung his weighty backpack over his left shoulder. The two of us headed towards the wooden counter by the entrance where the dark-clothed waitress stood, pressing buttons and writing on paper inordinately. I fumbled in my bag for my wallet and I finally pulled it out, a cluster of change falling from its bottom and smashing into the floor.

“All done?” she asked.

“Yes. It was good, thank you.” Alden handed her a purple 20-pound note while I squatted, clutching both bag and wallet in one hand and trying to pick up the coinage with the other. My nails, chewed down to well below my fingertips, brushed the dark wood floor and the assortment of pence and pounds ineffectively. The waitress slipped coins into Alden's hand which he casually added to the contents of his front jeans pocket before lowering himself down next to me and the mess. With his uncut nails, he easily flipped everything up into his soft, freckled, ink-spotted hand.

“You need to get a new wallet.” He said.

“I know. I will when we go back. I think I can survive another month and a half.”

“This happens every time.”

“I know. I’m trying to be more careful.”

“It’s alright. Here. Let me get that last one.” While Alden had picked up all the other coins, I had continually, unsuccessfully, struggled with managing to get that first pound. I moved my hand away and saw that the tips of my fingers had turned a ghastly white with the efforts. Alden placed his thumb against the face of the earwax-colored coin and grabbed the side with his index finger and it vanished into his hand with a clip. We both stood up and he held his fist out to me.

“Put them in your pocket. That’s what men do.” He said as he deposited the contents into my open, awaiting palm.

“Ok.” I replied and did as he suggested, thrusting my whole fist into my jeans pocket.

We exited the café, walked down the beige street and crossed the stone-floored Abbey yard where the buskers busked: the ponytail guy playing the amplified classical guitar which echoed between the buildings, the lady in the red coat singing opera into a microphone with a case full of CDs for sale, and another guy with a beard in a ratty olive drab coat worn over a flannel shirt and suspenders singing “Solsbury Hill”. Alden leaned over to me.

“My Dad loves this song.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“You want to go to Oxford with me on Thursday?”

“I thought you went on Wednesdays?”

“Why do you always do that?”

“What?”

“Answer a question with a question.”

“It’s a habit.”

“Just answer me. Do you want to go to Oxford on Thursday?”

“Sure.”

“Now, yes, I do typically go for my tutorial on Wednesdays.”

“Then why Thursday this week?”

“I’m going both days.”

“Does you tutor want to have an extra session?”

“No, I’m going with Theresa. She has hers on Thursdays. We could hang out there while she meets with her tutor.”

“How much is the train?”

“Not a lot. Eleven pounds. Do you have that? If not, I can spot you.”

“No, I’ll just stop by the ATM tomorrow or something. We still have a couple days. Do you want to stop at the bookstore?”

“I do, but I have Greek to finish. Are you buying something specific?”

“No, I was just going to browse.”

“Then let’s go home.”

We walked up the great hill on that side of Bath, strolling steeply up the rest of Milsom Street, and dodging the cars that cared not for pedestrians, we passed through the Circus, a great rotary surrounding an island of three sycamore trees that had been growing there since John Wood the Younger designed the sight. The trio of trees burst through the soft, stubby grass, rising and rising until their canopies stretched over the whole of the Circus, shadowing cars and the small green island upon which the trees grew. As Alden and I walked on the wide grey sidewalk across the street from them, a gaggle of Asian tourists coming from the other way halted not far in front of us to snap pictures of the trees from their black film cameras before flooding across the road to spend time underneath the shade of the gentle canopies. An impatient car, spewing its dirty breath behind it, managed to just clip one of the tourists in its hurry. The Asian in the black windbreaker stumbled just a second, but quickly regained footing on the asphalt for the car had not driven too fast nor had hit so hard as to cause serious injury. It was merely a passing, glancing blow.

We crossed Brock Street which opened up onto a large green lawn that sprawled just below the foot of the Royal Crescent. The thoroughfare of Julian Road rumbled past the

Crescent's back and our street, Northampton, fled steeply up the hill from here and made the final ascent to our house a dragging jaunt.

Northampton Street crooked like an elbow halfway up then inclined further. As we neared our telltale black door that lay just beyond the curve, the sound of a clanging guitar could be heard through our basement window.

"Damn it. I don't even want to go home." Alden said, halting at the first noise.

"Do you want to walk around some more?"

"It doesn't matter. You know he won't stop." The black wooden door swung open onto the narrow hallway whose singular purpose was to provide a flight of stairs going up and another going down. The sound of the guitar's metallic beating increased exponentially.

"If he doesn't stop soon, I am going to murder him." Alden grumbled as he walked through the hallway and trudged downstairs, still wearing his jacket and backpack. The room we shared was right by the front door, so I quickly detoured into it to drop my things and grab my laptop before following his path.

Our basement was two rooms—the kitchen and the living room—which were accessed from the stairwell by a white door. It was held open with a chunk of cinder block, and as I entered, I noticed the smeary tablecloth and the piles of dishes that were left out to fester. From the living room, the noise was akin to a drum solo only it was played on an acoustic guitar. Will was sitting with his back to the kitchen in a wooden armchair. One foot was up on an armrest and the other was flat on the floor and nestled in his lap was the dreaded guitar, a yellow acoustic thing that he had dragged all the way from America, even paying the sixty dollar extra bag fee at the airport. He was dressed in one of his black t-shirts with a wolf and roses printed on it with black jeans which matched his short black hair and clipped sideburns. His eyes were apthotic pits surrounded by wide pools of white. The noise stopped for just a moment, and I noticed the sharpness in Alden's glare dull in relief until he glanced back towards the chair.

With the guitar still in his lap, Will had reached down for an open bottle of wine that was standing at his foot. Lithely, he brought it to his lips and gulped it down, gasping in satisfaction

as he took it away and set it back on the floor. He fondled his guitar once more, then proceeded to smack the strings with his hands and listen intently as though he and the music were one. Alden looked up from his Plutarch and shook his head at me, then shot a sharpened gaze at Will, who did not notice, or did not care, before tightening his jaw around his pen and going back to translations.

Will's hand crashed against the strings. I opened my laptop and pulled up the word processor. I aligned right and typed my name, my class name, my professor's name, and the prompt then hit enter twice and aligned center. "Examination of the Tudor Myth in Shakespeare's Historical Tetralogy." Will pounded the strings from the neck to the sound hole, going from piano to forte. Title's way too pretentious. Will smacked. I'll go with it. It resounded. William Shakespeare's *Richard III* is the coda and the epilogue to his trilogy on Henry VI, showing the restoration of the good king after the sin of overthrowing God's chosen ruler in *Richard II*. Will bent his ear close and strummed gently. Alden's jaw unclenched a bit. My fingers clacked on the keyboard. Will's strumming grew to fortissimo and travelled up and down the six strings. Alden's molars bit through the pen and blue ink stained his lip. The guitar ceased.

"Alden...you have something on your lip." Will spoke, the slow, halting cadence of his voice giving the illusion of words measured and judged.

"It happens."

"Maybe you should wash it off." He paused between every two syllables.

"No."

"I think I should get something to cook for dinner." He set the guitar down against the coffee table, and stood up, trying to stretch to his full height except for the low ceiling.

"Better go now. It's going to rain soon."

"I want to get more things to drink. Everyone keeps drinking what I buy and not paying for it." He drained the bottle of wine and walked back into the kitchen, placing it on the counter

next to the egg yolk-stained fry pans and plates and forks he had dirtied during breakfast. “I wish people would clean up after eating.”

“Me too.” I mumbled from the couch. Will turned away from the sink, and looking down, his eyes widened and the entire world seemed to stop for him.

“What's this?” He bent over and picked something up. I heard a crinkling from the kitchen and turned my head to see a piece of white notebook paper in his hands. It was perfectly folded and I watched, frozen, as his long, thin fingers pulled it open. He paused and stared at the paper before his eyes reverted to normal and he announced what was written as though it were a punchline. “Where are you going?”

At first, he mumbled laughter as though it was a secret inside joke only he knew, then it grew into an enormous roar as though the notion of the entire situation was actually funny. Alden and I stared in disbelief of the madness we were witnessing.

“What's so funny?” I asked.

“It's just—it's a note.” He managed to push out between convulsions of laughter. “It's a piece of garbage.”

“How do you know it doesn't belong to somebody in the house?”

“No, it's a joke.”

“Will, how does that make any sense?”

“It just does.” Another shudder of laughter rippled through his lean body. “Well, *I* am going to the grocery store.” He said as he left the kitchen, still chuckling at whatever notion had found its way into his head. Alden's head wagged minutely, his eyes unblinking and ink-stained mouth agape, staring at the closing white door. From downstairs we could hear the stairs shudder with each of Will's footsteps and a moment later the door creaked open then heavily slammed, and his black converse walked by the window which peered creepily just above the sidewalk. Alden turned his crazed face towards me, and grandly gestured, each hand curled into a fist, his arms stretching as far as they could as if to help expel air through his outburst. He had perfect separation of emphasis on each syllable.

“What the hell was that?”

Finally allowed an outburst, I shouted and threw my laptop off to the side and picked up *The Return of the King*, spinning through each of its pages. I tossed the book off to the side and ran up the stairs, throwing open the door to Will's bedroom once I had reached the top. The room's décor was of someone who had never unpacked. His black suitcase lay open on the floor, clothes dripping out of it and over the furniture like a pot bubbling over or an exploding ball of slime. The small trash can in the far corner had a similar aesthetic to the thrown-about clothing look of the suitcase. I lightly picked my way through the room, carefully maneuvering my feet around each article of clothing so as not to disturb anything and therefore show no evidence of my entry. As quick as I could, I went over to the tiny plastic can and peered in and around it. I honed my eyes in on every tissue or torn up piece of notebook paper, scanning it as thoroughly as I could before determining that it was not mine.

“Hey.” I turned around to face the voice behind me. “Do you see my stapler anywhere?” Alden was standing in the doorway, peering about at the end table and bureau. “It disappeared a couple weeks ago.” Facing away from the trash can, I glanced over everything and only saw flustered conglomerations of clothing, a bed with the sheets half torn off and pillows flung on the ground, a closet opened wide with nothing in it, and a giant boiler.

“I don't see it.” I answered. “Did you try your backpack? You were carrying it around for a while.”

“No, I checked there when it first went missing. I paid twenty pounds for it. That is too much of an investment for it to be stolen.”

“What makes you think it's in here?”

“His kleptomania. That's why your crisps keep disappearing.”

“So that's what happened.”

“You know, he's been stealing magnets every place we go so he can give his mom souvenirs. He even took one from Saint Paul's when we were in Rome.”

“What the hell.”

“Yeah. Alright, he'll be home any minute. I'm going back to my Greek.” Alden turned away to leave and I went back to the trash. Although there was ruled notebook paper, there was nothing that was so crisp or so plain as my note. Reluctantly, I left the trash can and stepped back over the piles of dirty or clean clothes and exited the bedroom, leaving no trace.

Where are you going? Who the hell would write that and what did it even mean? Slumping back onto the couch in the basement and putting the computer back on my lap, I stared at Alden, directly across from me on the futon, holding Plutarch's *Life of Antony* in one hand, and the point of the blue pen in the other which he had jammed into his mouth to gnaw on. Occasionally he would write something down or whisper the ancient language snake-like under his breath. I continued to stare at him until he looked away from his book and his translations and at me. And then I posed the question.

“Where are you going?”

“What?”

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere,” he answered apprehensively.

“Where am I going? Where are we going?”

“What, figuratively?”

“I don't know. Just where are you going?”

“To ancient Rome. To Antony's childhood. To Oxford on Wednesday. Home in a month and a half.” he said, turning back to his book.

“Am I going anywhere?”

“You tell me.” Alden's eyes never left the page he was on.

“You know, Will's right.”

“Dear God, what about.”

“Your pen is bleeding.”

“Let it. I don't have any others.”

“You can borrow mine.”

“No, thank you. I'm attached to this one. Besides, I want to keep all my translations the same color.” With a creak and a crash and pounding drum floorboards, Will re-entered the basement kitchen with a plastic grocery bag.

“Are the girls home yet?” he asked, unzipping his pullover by the kitchen table.

“No, thank God.” I replied.

“I just bought some stuff for dinner.” Will said to no one in particular, gazing dazedly around the room as he set the pullover on one of the chair backs, his speech slow and arrhythmic.

“What are you making?” I asked.

“Just this stuff.” Will motioned to the plastic bag.

“Hey Will, what did you do with that note on the floor?”

“What note?”

“You know, the one you found on the floor. You laughed about it.”

“Oh yeah. Why?”

“No reason. I was just thinking about it while you were gone. I seem to remember it belonging to someone in the house.”

“Oh,”

“Did you throw it away? It might be important to someone.”

“No.”

“What did you do with it?”

“Gave it away.”

“To whom?”

“Theresa. I saw her walking and gave it to her.”

“Why would she want that?”

“I thought it might make her laugh.”

“Relax, you'll see her on Thursday. You can ask for it back then if it means so much to you.” Alden interjected, scribbling something in his notebook.

“Oh, was that yours?” Will's eyes widened and he looked bewildered, but his unintended comical expression was overshadowed by my thought of how much I hated Alden in that one instant.

“Yeah, but it wasn't really mine. I just kind of found it, or at least it found me. More like we collided, maybe it more than I but I was the last person to have it.” The paper had blown in the wind down North Parade, I was walking down North Parade, the wind blew it onto my leg, I took it off my leg, and I kept it. That made it mine. It belonged to someone else before but they had willingly cast it aside. It was a donation to the breeze, but then again maybe the breeze stole it and that note was actually hot, and then it would not really belong to me or the city's wind. It would belong to the receiver, or the writer, depending on whom it was meant for and whether or not it successfully arrived at its intended destination.

But what if that destination was me? If it was, it would be sent via e-mail or mailbox or stuffed under the door like all those advertisements we come home to. “Yes, it's mine.” My fingers trembled on my laptop keyboard as I looked away from Will and instead outside where the grey sky had darkened. A singular drop of rain lay on the window but there was no evidence of anything that followed. “Yeah, that was mine. Um...I need to go for a walk. I'll be back for dinner.” I tossed my laptop onto the pile of books beside me and stood up. As I began to pass out of the room, Will was still making his face of drunkenness or shock or shocked drunkenness and Alden had taken the time to look up from his book, pen still in mouth.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

“Yeah, I'm fine. Fine. I'm going for a walk. Need some fresh air. Be back soon. See you soon.” I took the stairs two at a time, threw on a jacket and walked out the door, keys jingling in my hand. The door crashed shut behind me and I stood on the sloping sidewalk. As I gazed off to my left, the city lowered itself into a valley and I could see the tops of the churches, steeples rising above all, and to my right, the hill and the houses upon it continued to go on up towards a summit. The big sky spread over the entire city and its outskirts. Solsbury Hill sat cold and unhappy a little past the town, and it all remained grey. I pushed out a breath from

between my lips and tried to let my body hang a little loose as I stood there, outside the door, cool air and cool wind out of the north lapping up against my skin and gliding through my hair. I sighed, and in that express, I poured out all of my stress and everything and everybody, and tilted my head back, staring at the seamless clouds looking for seams. I shrugged and sighed once more, and then to the sky, to God, to the clouds, to no one in particular, I whispered, “Where am I going?”

A little farther up Northampton Street, near the crest of the hill, the other beige terraced house filled with American students stood. It was more or less identical to our house, with only slight differences in the décor and design of the lower levels. Their red door opened a moment after I knocked to a completely nondescript, uninteresting girl about my age.

“Is Theresa home?” I asked.

“Yeah, downstairs.” the other girl answered, clacking gum in her mouth. She held the door open a little wider and I was able to wedge myself into the entrance hall. “It's not raining yet?”

“Not yet.”

“It's been threatening all day.”

“There was a drop on my window down the street.”

“I don't see any drops now.” I had nothing to say in response, so I stood there and said, “Yeah” until the air was thickly awkward and I managed to murmur, “I think I'll go downstairs and, uh, see Theresa.” I shuffled by her and down the steps that plunged into the kitchen, which like ours, was connected to the living room. Theresa sat on the couch, sunken in all its fluff, a quilt wrapped around her shoulders that our program definitely had gotten at a secondhand store. She stopped to think for a moment, raising her pen from the lined notebook bought at Ryman's that rested in her lap and she looked up.

“Hey,” she greeted, smiling grandly.

“Hi,”

“What's up?”

“Nothing,” I answered too quickly. “Well, I came to see you, and um,” I sat on the couch and sank in next to her. “Do you mind if I sit?”

“No, not at all.”

“Do you mind if I sit here?”

“No.”

“Did Alden tell you I'm going to Oxford?” I looked around the room nonchalantly, eyes pausing on every single piece of paper until they came to rest on the notebook in her lap. I quickly scanned her penmanship, but did not read what she was writing. I had no desire to be intrusive.

“That's great.”

“Yeah. Um, what are you working on? Is that a poem?”

“Yeah, I have to write one for Thursday.” Theresa sat back, her smile fading as she sighed the words, resting her head against the large cushion. Her brown hair intermingled with the quilt as it fell all about her shoulders, and I noticed that she was wearing her coat. Her penmanship did not match my note at all, for unlike the handwriting of most girls, it was not neat. Her letters clumped together and ran into the next line as though she had no sense of spacing and not a single one was straight or even had a perfect curve. They were bumpy and slanted and nothing like the perfectly sculpted consonants and vowels of the one that found me.

“How is it going?”

“It's really bad right now, but I still have tomorrow.” There was a pause as I thought of what to say next. I was not sure if I could be done with the poem conversation or if she wanted to be done with the poem conversation, but I just wanted to talk about the note. I could feel the burn of the stoppage in conversation as she eventually looked back to college-ruled paper and I glanced down at my hands, examining the veins and bones and how much more red my knuckles were than anything else. Finally she spoke, saving me from having to utter more. “What's the weather like?”

“Rain's to come.”

“I better bring my umbrella then.”

“Where are you going?”

“I'm meeting Linda for dinner at The Huntsman. By the way, what time is it?”

“Uh, 5:45.” I said, glancing at my watch.

“I've got to go. I'm sorry but I have to meet her there at six and you know how long the walk is.” Theresa closed her notebook and moved it over to the end table, then stood up and placed the quilt back on the couch. Reluctantly, I stood up after her and we walked upstairs and down the hallway towards the front door. I tried to think of the best way to broach the subject of the note to her, but that inspiration refused to come and I found myself standing on the sidewalk at the top of Northampton Street under the slowly darkening sky threatening rain at 5:46 PM, watching Theresa walk down the hill into the middle of town by the river and she said that she would see me Thursday as she left, umbrella clutched in her left hand, anticipating rain at any moment. Night fell late in Bath, so there was still three hours until blackness would take things and the lights of the city would snap on, illuminating the valley and throwing purple on Saint Stephen's Anglican Church behind our house.

The next day, I made sure to knock on Theresa's door when I got back from class, before dinner, and after dinner, but there was no answer every time. I went on a short walk through the neighborhoods at the top of my street because I had never found a time or reason to venture back there, and now, disappointed, with nothing else to do, I figured I would explore the area I was living in a bit. The clouds never moved and the saturated air was heavily fragrant with rainwater, but the drops themselves still had not come. Since it had done that out-of-character flurrying in January, the rain had never held off this long but had consistently fallen or partly fallen every day. It should have rained the day before, but besides that one odd drop, it did not, so it must rain today.

But maybe, just maybe, the clouds were finally breaking and the sun was coming on high like a Messiah. Maybe that note was divinely sent straight to me, asking me why I was heading down North Parade when I should have been heading down Pierrepoint Street, past Nelson House, past the shopping center, and to the train station to get on a First Great Western coach and go to Oxford. Maybe there was sun in Oxford. Maybe it was time to leave, to see another place, to move on from here, and I was doing that tomorrow. I was getting on that train.

I could claim the note tomorrow from Theresa, and when I got to the Oxford station and the pavement was warm and dry and the sky was blue and yellow, she would praise me victor. I would wear a hat not to keep the rain off my face but to keep sun out of my eyes. I could see it now: Theresa wearing those big aviator sunglasses she constantly had on in Rome, not needing to wear that grey felt jacket, and Alden, taking off his Lincoln College sweatshirt for once, shedding the blue fabric that had become his skin, and me, in shorts finally, feeling the air upon my shins and a t-shirt, freed from the bondage of jackets and long sleeves and jeans. It would be as if it were summer on the Carolina coast, there in Oxford, in the heart of England.

I ran up Northampton Street at this revelation, flung my key into the keyhole, and threw open the heavy black door, reveling in its thud. In the foyer, I was immediately stopped by six of the other seven residents of my house standing, waiting with coats on.

“Where are you guys going?” I asked.

“Out,” Will answered, standing there looking as gaunt and Byronic as he could in his black jacket. “We’re meeting people at the pub.”

“Do you want to come too? We’ll buy you a drink.” One of the girls asked, flashing a toothy smile. Taken aback at this show of supposed generosity, I agreed.

“Um yeah, I guess I’ll go. You guys weren’t waiting for me, were you?”

“No, we were actually just about to leave.” Will answered.

“Well you guys go on ahead then. I’ll meet you down there.” I said, realizing that I did not actually want to go. “Oh wait, I actually have some work to finish up. So I can’t.”

“Alright, see you.” Will replied, pushing the door open and exiting into the slowly darkening sky, the girls filing out after him.

“You can do your homework later, come on and have some fun with us.” One of the girls said, hanging back. “We’ll even buy you a drink. We know you’re bad with money. Come on.”

“No, I really have to get some stuff done. Sorry.”

“We know you want to come, let’s go.” She grabbed my arm and tried dragging me towards the door.

“No. Have fun. Let go!” I pulled away from her hard and the tan high heels she was wearing stumbled beneath her. She slammed her hand against the wall to regain her balance and she glared at me with her green eyes.

“Fuck you.” She stalked off and rejoined the group, trying to find someone else to lean on as they moved down the slope and the street all clustered like a pack of wolves.

I found Alden in the same seat in the basement that he had been on for the past day, the green book in his hand and blue ink still smudged on his face and clothing.

“Opted not to go?” He asked as I took my jacket off and sat down.

“Yeah.”

“You okay? You look flustered.”

“Just the bitch upstairs and her needs. Don't worry about it.”

“Gotcha.” Alden nodded understandingly “We’re catching the 10:40 train tomorrow.”

“Alright.” A pause. “Was Theresa going out tonight?”

“No. She’s working. Are you still trying to get that note back?”

“Yeah,” and before Alden could say anything more on it, I continued, “Do you know what the weather report is for Oxford tomorrow?”

“No idea.”

“I think it’s going to be clear.”

Alden’s mouth grimaced and he glanced at me skeptically. “You’re awfully confident.”

“It’s a hunch.” As Alden peered into his book, the blue ink on his lip and chin stood out against his flesh and made him look disfigured or ill and his eye was like one long sigh, held out over years unending.

Schoolgirls chirruped past my bedroom window shortly after dawn as they headed to class. Alden was already up, wearing his blue Lincoln College sweatshirt with the coat of arms over the heart and shuffling papers on his desk across the room from me. Our bedroom was very simplistic, with his bed under the window and mine in the same position only against the wall that separated our room from Will’s. I sat up in bed and grumbled a “good morning” to my roommate.

“Are you going to be good to go in an hour?”

“Yeah. What’s the weather like?”

“I don’t know, look out the window.” Alden was intent on whatever papers were on his desk. I walked across the room, clutched the curtain, and with a breath, drew it open to gaze upon the world. I could not see the sky because the houses across the street were walls cordoning off my view, but the ground was still dry. However, the beige buildings were bleaker than usual, and an extra layer of grey seemed to have fallen upon the land.

“Was your prophecy fulfilled?” Alden asked from the desk. I let go of the curtain, closing off the outside from our bedroom before turning to Alden whose back was to me.

“Grey here. But it could be sunny in Oxford.” Naturally it could be. Bath was a bit of a distance from the old collection of universities. “It’ll be beautiful. You won’t even need that sweatshirt.”

It was still threatening when we left Northampton. Theresa had told Alden she was going to meet us at Nelson House because she had some last minute printing to do so the two of us followed our familiar path down the hill onto Milsom Street and through the Abbey Yard. Even though the quilt of clouds hung lower and lower as we walked, the buskers continued to busk all

through the street and the shoppers and diners continued to mill about from store to store and window to window. Theresa met us in the foyer, wearing that same grey felt coat she always wore and holding a purse in one hand and an umbrella in the other.

“Ready to go?” she asked.

“Where are you going?” Will came up the stairs behind Theresa and stared at us with those eyes of confusion or alienation or drunkenness. I could never tell which one it was.

“Oh, we’re going to Oxford for the day.” Theresa turned to him.

“I’ll come too. That sounds like fun.”

“Will, you have class today. Two classes, actually.” Alden interjected. All I could think of was that same plodding, awkward cadence intruding on the three of us all day.

“That’s alright. Adventure!”

“We’re leaving now.” Alden sighed.

“Ok.”

Alden gave me a quick glance as he turned around, and already I could tell he was bemoaning this newfound attendee.

The train station was just down the street from Nelson House and it was currently under remodeling. Entrances there seemed to change every day and to dodge all the bulldozers and tractors crossing the street and parking lot to catch the First Great Western was as dangerous as suicide, especially when the mud and bricks were slick with rainwater. The 10:40 train gently pulled out of the Bath Spa Station on time and moved eastwards towards Didcot Parkway and eventually, Oxford. The train was pretty full and I was lucky to get a seat next to Theresa, while Alden was on the aisle a couple rows back and Will was nowhere to be found. I was making some small talk with Theresa, trying to build her up to the note question again like two nights ago when I saw Alden out of my peripheral, trying to wave at me but also trying to be inconspicuous about it. He seemed to be trying to communicate something, but I did not understand what he meant until he shook a piece of paper and mouthed, “note”. Didcot Parkway

was coming up soon and he knew that I would not ask her if other people were around and I am sure he did not want to hear any more about this lost paper.

“Theresa,” I said, breaking my momentum and sullenly speaking for Alden’s desire, “Do you by any chance have that note Will gave you the other day?”

“What note?”

“It was a small, folded thing. It had something scribbled on it. I don’t remember what it was, exactly.”

“Oh, it had something like, ‘where are you going?’ written on it, right?”

“Yeah, that does sound familiar.”

“I actually think—yes, yes I have it in here.” Theresa spoke as she rummaged through her purse. “I don’t know why I do, though it just seemed like a piece of garbage, but I don’t know.” She pulled the folded piece of paper out, still as pristine and sutured as the day I found it. Then, I knew. “Is it yours?”

“Yeah, I found it the other day on North Parade.” A pause. “You know, it’s not raining in Oxford.” I said, pulling the note from between her fingers.

“How do you know?”

“I just do. It’s an innate ability. You’ll see when we get there. You know, this was meant for me. It found me on the street. It was a divine wind that blew it into me.” I stole a glance back at Alden and his head was in his hands.

“So, you’re, uh, pretty connected to that note then, are you?” Theresa’s words turned my head back from facing the disheveled Alden to her face, framed by falling brown hair. I nodded, and told her, “yes”.

“An innate ability?”

“Yes.”

“You can tell the weather? Your purpose in life is to tell the weather? In England?”

“No, not just the weather, but sort of a feeling, you know?”

“Uh-huh. What other feelings do you have?”

“Sun in Oxford. I'll get more later, I'm sure of it.” Theresa nodded to herself and tried to peer around me, presumably to Alden. Interested in where her gaze was going, I craned my neck around as well. Alden's head was still in his hands and it moved slightly between his fingers. The loudspeaker announced Didcot Parkway as the train quickly slowed to a halt and the doors hissed open between cars. Three giant nuclear power plant chimneys were the first things we saw getting off the train. Steam emerged in great billows and immediately curved off into the sky, creating one long stream that extended until the length became too great and broke itself off into a miniature cloud where it rose to join the rest. Unlike in Bath where these would coalesce into the grey cover, these clouds were allowed to stand alone against a blue sky. A passing wisp moved away from the sun and I could see shadows on the cement and the shine of the red-roofed ranks of houses just beyond the small train station.

“See!” I nearly screamed, finger drawn and pointed to the newly uncovered sun like I was a dog hunting. Theresa, still wearing her coat, although I knew it could not stay on much longer in light of this fulfillment, rummaged in her purse and pulled out the pair of sunglasses. Gently, she drew them open, flipped her head back and slid the aviators into place, the earpieces disappearing into her mess of hair.

“So the sun does still exist.” Alden replied, scraping what I suppose was gum off his sneaker by rubbing the sole against the concrete platform. Will laughed hysterically.

“The sun!” he shouted grandly as if he were presenting a reigning king to his huddling masses then looked away down the rails. I realized my outburst, and almost did not care because I knew everyone here knew about the note I was clenching in my hand, but reclaimed myself anyway.

“I need to go to the bathroom.” I looked at everyone's hands. “Theresa, could you hold this for me while I'm gone?”

“The train might come any minute, then it's a fifteen minute ride to Oxford.” Alden insisted.

“I’ll be quick.” I held the note out to Theresa and she looked first at the note and up at my face, and I could scarcely make out her eyes behind those brown glasses which were dark at the top then faded by the lens’ bottom. I could not remember the color of her irises, but I remembered the way she had written her poem, with all the care one could muster, her hands caressing the pen as it drew out words as if the tool were semi-intelligent and self-aware. Those same hands, nails just longer than their tips and unpainted, took the note carefully with her fingers and held it. “Thank you.” I turned away from the three and walked down the stairs behind us that led to the station exit. The bathroom was in that underground sanctuary, which was entirely tiled in pink.

It was true. Didcot Parkway was a stain on the otherwise gorgeous green and gold landscape of England, but trains always had a way of finding the most disgusting places of decay and defilement to run through. It was unlike taking the bus, which slid through fields that were genuinely gold growing on green stalks, whereas the First Great Western would go through choking urbanity and fuming industry such as Didcot Parkway. It was almost surreal, being closer to the great stacks there than one could get standing on the shores of the Susquehanna facing Three Mile Island.

They scared me though. I do not know what sane person would not be scared of living next to a monster like that, but I suppose that the opportunity of instant death during the eventual meltdown would be preferable to watching the world die as you did. Death scared me, but being so close to it gave a feeling of comfort to my motions that I cannot explain. Perhaps seeing my killer looming over me, embodied in such a powerful, but uncertain way gave me a sense of knowledge so that I might feel complete by the end. Thinking about it though, Three Mile Island would have destroyed half the east. If Didcot Parkway’s scenic point decided to commit suicide despite the efforts of its handlers, then I too would be dead in the radius whether I were in Bath, Oxford, London, Didcot Parkway, or anywhere else on this train line.

But it was not the destiny of the nuclear power station to blow up or meltdown that day. I still had to get to Oxford and confirm my words in front of everyone, and the way it was looking,

with the blue sky and the missing sun found, I was on the correct path. I knew that everything was going to be alright except for when I climbed up the stairs and realized that everyone on the platform—everyone—had vanished. There was no Alden, no Theresa, not even Will, who in all his ridiculousness even made me want to see his familiar face right now. My instinct was that the train to Oxford had come and gone and swallowed the three of them up while I was downstairs but I wandered across the platforms anyway, even scouring each rail and tie with my eyes, making sure that nothing was left untouched by my vision. I checked the waiting rooms, the extent of each platform, all the pink-tiled passages underneath and even the bathrooms, rank with sweat and mold, but no one was to be found. The station was devoid of any life with the exception of one dead leaf left over from the autumn blowing across the rails, set against the backdrop of the tall grass and nuclear stacks.

I sat down in one of the white fiberglass seats that stared out across this lonesome view, the chair back pressed up against the transparent plastic that served as a window at the head of the stairs. My shoulders slumped and my legs splayed out at odd angles and I drew breath, then exhaled it noisily, staring at the plant and imagining, picturing, every single chemical that was in that one gasp and how it all was lethal and how I did not care. The great white billows became too close in the sky and smudged together and floated along, pushing themselves into every other cloud in the blue, blue sky until finally it smeared the grinning visage of the sun and turned the straw in the fields to grey. I found one small hole of blue in the growing patchwork and I stared as it got smaller and smaller until it was an eye of a needle. How many angels could dance through that hole? One last vestige of dropping sunlight descended through this last portal and bathed the small piece of England that it granted and it looked like a river of holy gold for one glistening moment and I felt far away and nowhere and touched in that same time before it was cut off and dammed up and the land ceased to be blessed.

That was when the rain began. First it was one drop, right on the pavement, and I could see the small dark spot, and then another one fell a little farther away. I was sitting under the corrugated awning of the platform so I was dry, but I felt the cold and dampness of the air as one

drop struck the pavement and another landed right on the yellow strip of bumps along the edge in quick succession. They came quicker and quicker and sped up like a fast-forwarding film covering more and more ground until it proved a deluge and there was an invisible wall between the falling tears and the pocket of dryness where I sat.

A small blue train pulled up. It was the tiny two-car First Great Western that made the fifteen-minute venture to Oxford. It stood there, rain hammering upon its roof and windows and its door opened tantalizingly, inviting me to come in. I stared at it and it stared back at me. It must have been no more than ten feet away, but we were facing off. Theresa had probably gone to see her tutor by this point and Alden and Will may have been waiting at the station for my later arrival, unless Will had traipsed off on one of his spontaneous solo jaunts of adventure where he quested for alcohol or sex or whatever it was that nagged at his desires of any given moment.

The rain kept falling and no one got on the train and no one got off so it closed its doors after a minute and chugged off in the direction it was headed, deserting me at the station once more. At the end of the rows of seats there was a vending machine that spewed cheap neon lights out over the chairs near it, tinting the white fiberglass green and yellow and red as it advertised bottles of soda. I stared at it, considering whether or not I wanted to make a purchase so I pulled my wallet out and the coins slipped through the hole in the change section into my lap without a sound. I counted up the loose change to three or four pounds, and as I was about to close up the wallet and whatever remained in there, one penny, one American copper-coated penny with Abraham Lincoln on the front landed on the cement, heads up, with a clang of authority.

I stared at the one copper coin, laying there on the ground, profile looking out where the train had disappeared off to. Alden was gone, Theresa was gone, Will was gone, the note was gone, and the one piece of American currency I had in my wallet now rested on British cement instead of resting against British metal. Slowly, I bent over and picked it up. I stood up, pile of

change in my hand and turned towards the machine. There it was, selling sodas and commercialism and all the tasty things of a contemporary society at hand.

I sat back down and slipped the coins in my pocket because that's what men do. The rain would stop any moment and I could get on the next train and go to Oxford where the sun was shining and I could see Theresa and get my note back.

Puddles were beginning to well up on the platform. I shivered with the damp and watched the ripples as the water curved along the cracks in the concrete, forging ahead between my feet until it hit the wall behind me. A second train pulled up, small as the first, and when the door opened, grey sneakers stepped out onto the yellow strip. The loudspeaker reminded him to mind the gap as the door hissed shut behind him and the train pushed off. The newcomer stalked through the sheets of rain and sat next to me, water dripping everywhere, getting my sanctuary all wet, getting the seats all wet and my bag and clothes all wet as he sat down with a squelch.

“Are you coming to Oxford?” he asked.

“It’s raining.” I answered.

“It finally happened.”

“Yes, it had been threatening for a while.”

“Yes, it had.”

“How was Oxford?”

“I didn’t leave the station. I was waiting for you.”

“Like how you waited here?”

“We waited through two trains while you were in the bathroom. Theresa had to get to her appointment.”

“It wasn’t that long.”

“It was. Do you want to go back to Bath?”

“I’m good.”

“Do you want your note back?”

“No, it’s garbage.”

“How do you know? You haven’t been to Oxford yet.”

“I know. Some questions don’t have answers. Some things are nothing.”

“Theresa really likes it, you know.”

“I don’t care.”

“She says it means something to her. She wants to hold onto it if you’re done.”

“I don’t know why.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“Look,” he leaned forward, peered away at the machine, and sighed. “Everything means something to somebody.” He turned back to me. “You know that, right?”

I stared at the three giant stacks still puffing even in the rain.

“Forget it. It is just garbage. She ripped it up and threw it into the air like confetti then walked away.”

Even against the grey sky, the smoke appeared as a pure white billow, and I could see the outlines of it even though the colors and shapes and textures were all the same.

Alden shook his head, exhaled sharply, and the two of us sat there, on the white fiberglass chairs behind the veil of rain staring out across the fields of straw that began just past the train yard and gazed past the great grey chimneys of nuclear power that loomed over Didcot Parkway and all the way out to the horizon where the unhappy dome of the sky met the rising curve of the April earth where everything was grey.