



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE


Year 2007

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The Mercury 2007

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The Mercury 2007

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THE MERCURY



THE ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE
OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

2007

THE MERCURY

2007

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COVER ARTWORK

The 2007 cover artwork is by Brian Menna.
Cover Picture: *Ideal Woman*, Giclée, 36 x 24, January 2006.

The Mercury: An Overview

HISTORY AND PROCESS

- ❖ *The Mercury* is a student-run art and literary magazine released each April and has been published at Gettysburg College annually since 1899.
- ❖ All students of the college are invited to participate on the staff and to submit their work for possible publication.
- ❖ This year, *The Mercury* received over 400 submissions from 120 contributors.
- ❖ Editors are elected each year by the entire staff.
- ❖ Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the fall and are reviewed and chosen anonymously by the staff.

EVENTS

- ❖ *The Mercury* holds a reception for staff, advisors, and contributors each spring in honor of the release of the magazine.
- ❖ Throughout the year, *The Mercury* staff participates in several campus events such as the Appreciation of the Arts Common Hour and Get Acquainted Day.

THE MERCURY PRIZE

- ❖ Each year, the staff awards a monetary prize to the best piece of work published in each genre.
- ❖ We would like to thank the Mercury Prize judges for 2007, Peter Stitt for Poetry, Kim Kupperman for Non-fiction, Mark Drew for Fiction and Molly Hutton for Art.
- ❖ Mercury Prize winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents of this issue.
- ❖ This year's winners include Luis Alberto Ruiz Quintero '10, Art, Maria Southerton '07, Poetry, Kelsey Lamagdeleine '09, Fiction, and Alison McCabe '08, Non-fiction.

PUBLISHING

- ❖ The Mercury was printed this year by Graphics Universal, Inc. in Greencastle, Pennsylvania. We would like to thank them for their support this year.
- ❖ The production staff is deeply indebted to IKON, especially Greg Kingston for the time he devoted to preparing this issue for print.

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Illumination

The scent of cheap vanilla perfume curled around Amy like a question she didn't want the answer to. Nevertheless, she turned to stare after the two retreating blondes, all harsh hair dye and orange tan. The streetlight sketched a weird halo about them and then they were off, into whatever other things L.A. had to offer them—pastel pumps, perhaps. Amy wiggled toes tucked into sneakers and consciously put the pair from her mind, returning to aimless buzzing thoughts and the plane ticket in her hand.

After all, there was no real reason to go anymore. She had initially agreed to a family vacation because it meant (inside her head if not quite in the travel guide) France and Paris and lights, all of which blended together like a Monet painting, a city daubed so delicate on the world canvas. And there had been that bitter rationale underneath, prompted by the little boy on the bus who told her that her name couldn't be Amy. She was a foreigner in her own country; she might as well be a foreigner in a foreign land. She and her parents had laughed and worked it out over dinner, planning to say they were from Canada, and thus avoid the "stupid American" stigma.

There were no lights in L.A. Not like in paintings, anyway, unless Jackson Pollock threw away a canvas after smearing it with mustard. All dripping dashes of paint with no meaning behind it. But at least it was some recognizable piece of artwork—all Iowa could ever be was one of those dime-a-dozen pastoral scenes. These sour ruminations kept her occupied on the walk home.

Her father asked, "How was your walk, Aimless?" as she opened the door, as if he were being clever. The grin was still infectious; the inevitable question remained not a tired joke but a sleepy one, all comfort and freshly-washed bedsheets.

"Positively fluorescent," Amy said, heading over to the fridge. "Where's Mom?"

"On the phone with her very own Agony Aunt."

"Dad."

"Conversing via telephone with her mother's brother's wife, Mrs. Agnes T.W. Lee, born in—"

"Dying this summer." Talking to her father could be exhausting, lobbing witty volleys back and forth. Frankly, she didn't have the muscle. Anyway, the Agony Aunt's past didn't matter so much as her near future, as it was that interfering with the perfect vacation. She sulked and drank orange juice straight out of the carton in revenge.

"Amy. We're the only relatives she has left. We have to do the right thing."

"I'm not one of her relatives." She slammed the carton back into the refrigerator, vaguely disappointed at the lack of comment on the action. "Paris, Dad, we could have seen Paris!" The lights winked in her mind, inviting.

"Then why are you coming?"

Anywhere but here.

"I have to do the right thing," Amy lied, and almost felt guilty when her

father beamed. Uncomfortable, she turned to go, and then stopped. Blurted, "Why did you name me Amy?"

He seemed surprised. "Because your mother and I think it's a lovely name."

"It isn't Chinese!" The shout burst from her mouth, a firecracker gone wrong. Sulfurous smoke hung over the kitchen. It stung her eyes and she blinked rapidly, snatching away her hand when her father reached out to grasp it.

"Did someone say something to you, honey?"

"No."

Just citizenship to a country that wanted nothing to do with her.

If I'm going to be different—

"Did you want to talk more about the family heritage? Your mother and I are always ready to listen."

"I'm going to finish packing."

After locking the door, Amy sat on her suitcase, zipping it shut. Turned her back from the window and looked at the wall instead. Her parents were so good at celebrating culture, reading her Eastern fairytales and explaining why it had been safer for her great-grandparents to change their surname from Li to Lee. They were so good, and knew so much, but what could she tell them about the way she felt? What could they possibly understand? What could they do to fix the world?

She cupped her palms as though they could contain the whole of her sorrow, like they could catch every tear she refused to shed.

* * * * *

"What do you think of Iowa?"

"It's flat," Amy said.

She might have made a more polite answer had her ears still not been ringing from the plane's landing, had Great-Aunt Agnes not come out to greet them looking not at all like an invalid, though Amy's personal picture of health would never have worn quite so much gray. The Agony Aunt was a woman of iron.

"Amy," her mother warned.

All the Aunt had to say was, "There's honesty and then there's smart honesty, girl."

Iowa stretched out under the sky like just another sunbather, brown for earth and blue for sky, streaks of white for clouds or metaphorical sunscreen, something along those lines. Amy gave up the search for a silver lining; she could not feel herself falling in love with the land, no matter the cinematic scope and certain stark grandeur. She ached for the Louvre in an almost physical fashion, as though some part of her soul were literally parched. She licked her lips and thought of wandering in the desert.

Unpacking included the indignity of being sentenced to sleep on the couch. "You're young," Great-Aunt Agnes proclaimed, as if issuing a royal edict. Amy looked at the ceiling to avoid meeting those gray eyes. "Your parents will sleep in the guest room."

"Glad to see you looking well," Amy said, now staring at the ceiling, tracing constellations in the little dimples.

"Still only have a few months to live."

Amy's mother promptly began wringing her hands and protesting, rattling off treatments and alternatives as though she were a doctor—which technically she

was, although pediatricians generally did not tend to the elderly. Her father only sighed and began to rattle around the kitchen, presumably to make dinner.

Amy had not fallen in love with Iowa, but this did not necessarily preclude an impulse to explore. She could perhaps create a museum inside her mind, an art gallery where hung great works of rustic and rural scenes, things never found in modern L.A. Even if no one ever remembered the names of the pastoral painters, the novelty was something at the very least. Taken with the idea, she set out to explore the little town, only to round the corner and see a 7-11. What quaint charm. Plans thrown into disarray, she shrugged in fatalistic acceptance.

"When in Rome, get a soda."

The staring was something new, though. Amy pretended not to notice just as they pretended not to stare, the woman picking up milk and the old man buying a package of cigarettes. Gazes bored into the back of Amy's head like drills, and just as noisy. She closed her eyes at the welcome coolness as she slid open the refrigerator door and retrieved a Coke. Can't get much more American than that. She turned just in time to see the man and the woman carefully look elsewhere, though the girl behind the checkout counter kept staring, lips not quite forming an O, just parted enough to show surprise.

Rather than let it bother her, Amy framed it in her mind, gave the painting the title *Backwards Small Town Girl Finds Diversity in the Middle of Nowhere*. Kind of like something by Norman Whatshisface, except more ignorant than charming. Amy placed the Coke on the counter, not feeling bitchy enough to fake a Chinese accent.

"That'll be all? The... soda, I mean? You call it soda, right?"

Amy's fist tightened around her five-dollar bill. "I speak English."

"Well, we call it pop here," the girl said, looking bewildered and upset at Amy's tone of voice. "But Mrs. Lee told us that her family from California was coming out to see her. Um. That'll be a dollar fifty."

Amy's grip on the money loosened, and she handed it over. The trouble with paintings was adjusting them afterwards, touching them up only to find that in the right light, the meaning was completely different. The girl was pretty after all, if in a plain sort of way. Her hair was long and sandy and flyaway and shone even in the 7-11, never the most glamorous of locales. Three dollars and two quarters dropped into Amy's hand.

"I'm Amy Lee," she said.

"Jenny Hodges." There was something brilliant about the hesitance in her smile, some portion of the Iowa sunrise climbing over the horizon.

Kind of like...

"Gotta get home for dinner." Amy twisted the cap off the soda, checked to see if she'd won anything (No—or maybe), and almost tripped trying to get out the door.

"Amy."

She had stopped almost before the first syllable of her name, glancing over her shoulder, natural as a flower turning towards the sun.

"See you around?"

"Yeah," Amy said.

* * * * *

Amy awoke to a jab in the ribs.

"Up," the Agony Aunt said. "I want to watch television."

Amy tried to sleep through the plastic smiles delivering the morning news, but around seven in the morning gave it up as a lost cause and stumbled from the couch, gritty-eyed and not at all pleased. There was nothing for breakfast but some packets of oatmeal and a box of Cheerios.

Without turning around, Agnes said, "You might want to pick up some milk at the store."

"Thought you were dying," Amy muttered.

"So are we all." She clearly had sharper hearing than she gave her credit for. Agnes folded her arms at this pronouncement and looked smug. "Ten dollars on the table. Get me some chewing gum, too. Mint, none of those fancy fruit flavors."

Amy wondered, as was her wont when out walking, about things. About having sensibly cut gray hair and un-tilted gray eyes, if looking like someone else would give her the power to shape and change the world just by speaking, by ordering people to do something and then expecting it to happen. She could sit down to get her portrait painted and look like every other famous figure. She could be anything, anything at all.

Humidity pressed against her like a slightly sweaty palm, though the sky was still tender with the day's youth. Amy continued along in her pocket of isolation, standing at a fixed point as the horizon shifted back and forth. Milk and gum. They orbited around her. What a town, tiny enough to give Amy her own gravitational pull.

And then at the midway point in her path, she looked up as she felt it cross with someone else's. Jenny Hodges was out and about, hair drifting and shifting around her head like a halo, sundress light green and a bit too large. She looked like a hope, a small and unnamed one, but a hope nonetheless.

"Hello again."

Stars aligned. It took only the briefest pause and adjustment to direction for them to fall in step with one another, an organic progression derived from the very nature of things, something as elementary as sun on seeds in the ground. Or at least that was how it felt to Amy, who let the glow wash over her and ignored its meaning.

"How long are you here?"

"Two weeks."

Quietly, "Mrs. Lee likes to pretend she isn't sick. I'm glad you came."

The two sentences were not entirely related to each other.

"So am I."

The silence that fell afterward did not feel like silence. It hummed. It gleamed. Looking around, Amy could practically see it as tangible as Jenny's bright, bright hair, and it was strange and wonderful and—terrifying. So she broke it.

"Heading in to work?"

"Yeah. The early hours suck, but it's the only way to pay for a car."

Amy grinned. "Where you gonna drive to?"

Jenny punched her arm, then shrank in on herself a little, reddening. "Sorry if I hurt you! But, well, there are things to do here. Maybe it's not exciting like L.A., but you can just drive if you want to." Her expression grew a little dreamy. "Plus there's a blue 1988 Cadillac waiting for me. Ever been in love before?"

"Not... really." Amy forced a smile.

"Sorry, I forget that not everybody's a car person. I'll stop boring you."

Amy winced. "I don't think you're boring." I'm just terminally awkward. "I just need to pick some things up for breakfast, but we can maybe hang out later. Okay?"

"Sure!"

And so after making plans for later, Amy returned home with eyes not new but wise, wise enough to peer past the obvious. She saw the skin on Great-Aunt Agnes' hands was paper-thin as she took the gum with a nod of thanks or acknowledgment or both. Amy swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat; Agnes no longer seemed a caricature of herself.

"Saw you out walking," Agnes said, pouring milk over her cereal.

"Yeah," she agreed, more intent on the milk. Hunger had roared back at the sight of it, but of course the Agony Aunt had first dibs. (Well, it was her money.)

"You liking our little town?"

"Yeah." Then, feeling she ought to at least contribute something to the conversation: "The mornings here are pretty."

Agnes sighed, with an expression that might have been a smile. "Every hour out here is pretty. I don't hold with stereotypes, but crotchety old folk were meant to live out in the country. Suits me fine, at least."

Amy found herself a bowl and served herself her own Cheerios, feeling just a little odd. She didn't have any real objections to not hating her "vacation" so much, but the idea of enjoying herself in Iowa, even a little, was weird.

"Jenny Hodges comes from nice folks." After throwing out this calm non sequitur, Agnes went back to her cereal.

"Does she," Amy managed, and then picked up her bowl, now full. "I think I'll go eat this in my r—somewhere else."

* * * * *

Iowa did not embrace her; it did not enfold her into its bosom like a mother welcoming back a wayward child. It felt like L.A. in some indelible, indefinable way. There was pressure all around her, pushing her in some vague direction she either couldn't or wouldn't go. Amy itched inside her skin.

Jenny's house looked more or less like what she had expected, homey and country with lots of gingham. The only real anomaly was that they had to walk through the garage to meet her parents. ("Momma and Dad are working out the transmission in their anniversary present. Don't offer to help, it's their project. Oh, right, I forgot! Well, if you ever want to learn anything about fixing cars, just ask me.")

There was a lot of soft pinkness to Jenny's room: pink-painted walls, a white bedspread with embroidered pink roses, sheer pink curtains, and a cushy pink rug. Gratifyingly, a bulletin board hung on one wall. There were the usual pictures of friends and family, but then came pictures of cars, cut out from newspapers or magazines. It was a jumble of bold color against pastel, and Amy reached up to touch one of the curling edges of the cutouts. "I like your room."

Jenny laughed. "You can tell it hasn't been painted since I was six, right? But I like it even so."

"Suits you." Amy turned, and there was something about Jenny that made Iowa a little less like L.A., a little more welcoming. At the very least it made her more

polite. "You want to tell me more about your future car?"

The boredom was really worth basking in Jenny's enthusiasm.

"You've been out a lot these past few days, honey."

Amy froze in the act of buttoning her shirt, certain now her mother was going to sit her down for a nice long talk about Jenny Hodges, even though she had undoubtedly already grilled the Agony Aunt for every scrap of information. Much as she loved her mother, she could be a little overprotective. (She could already picture the conversation: "Mom, this isn't L.A. She's not a drug dealer. I can guarantee she's nothing but the wholesome girl she seems. Just let it go, all right?")

"Have you found a lot to do in Iowa?"

Blink, pause. "What?"

Her mother twisted her wedding ring up and down her finger, a sure sign of discomfort and possible guilt. "I don't like the idea of you always being off alone. Your father and I are sorry about Paris, we really are, and I hope you're not avoiding us out of anger. If there's something we can do to make it up to you—"

"I'm not mad at you." Words bubbled on Amy's tongue, little soda fizzes. Mom, I made a friend. Mom, I think we might be best friends. Yeah, it sounds crazy, friendship takes time, but—remember when you were five? And you didn't have to wait to know how you felt about someone? You just talked to them once and you knew?

"I just spend a lot of time thinking about stuff. I'm starting to think it's one of those phases. I'll snap out of it eventually." Amy shuffled past her mother, avoiding her eyes. "I'm gonna go now and think some more."

Her mother looked a little forlorn at the top of the stairs. "Don't stay out too late. We miss you."

Amy had her hand on the doorknob to go out before Agnes' presence in the kitchen registered. "Thanks," she said, and did her best not to sound grudging about it.

"Figured you would say something on your own time," was all that the Aunt said in reply, and then she turned a page of the newspaper.

Amy measured her life in couples. A couple more days until she got to meet Jenny's brother, home from a road trip with a few of his college friends. (They took them both out to the bar. The bartender only laughed at the audacity and gave them both sodas, on the house.) A couple more hours until Jenny got off her shift, since her boss didn't like it when they stood around talking. (Or, Amy suspected, he just didn't like anyone who wasn't a WASP.) A couple more forkfuls of dinner until she could be off and away, even if her parents didn't look all that happy to barely see her. (They stayed in the house for the most part, helping Agnes get her affairs in order, a grim task Amy was thankful to leave to the adults.) A couple more friends of Jenny's to meet, who were the most part nice and welcoming. ("I like just you and me best, though," Jenny said once, with unusual boldness, and Amy agreed.)

Eventually it became just a couple more days before they had to say goodbye.

"Sorry we didn't get to do much," Jenny said quietly.

"It's fine," Amy said, and did not add that sitting in Jenny's backyard and

talking had actually been her favorite part of the whole vacation. It was sunset, and the sky was alive, and so was she, so perhaps they were both parts of the other.

"L.A. must be nice. Taxi cabs going everywhere, bicycles, your occasional limousine. Always something to do." Jenny swung her bare legs. She had an endless supply of sundresses; today's was yellow.

"Not really. All it means is that there are more places to be lonely."

Jenny's legs paused, and she put a hand on Amy's arm. "Are you really so lonely?"

Amy shifted in her seat, a little uncomfortable. Looking up at the sky, she answered, "When kids grow up, they want to be special. They want everyone to notice them as they go. They don't realize... it means being different. I still don't want to be." She pulled away from Jenny's touch somehow despite the laws of gravity, tucking her knees under her chin, arms wrapping around her shins. "I hate it."

At this bleak pronouncement, silence fell. Amy closed her eyes and felt the light begin to fade to twilight gray.

"What's Los Angeles really like?" Jenny asked.

A breeze stirred the air around them.

Amy let go.

"It's noisy, and it's cluttered, and it's beautiful like an old rock star. I live there, but I never let it really feel like home. I never really let any place feel like home. I was always out of place. Until... until I met you, I guess."

Jenny's smile was sweet and sad at the same time. "I wasn't staring at you that time. Well, not because you weren't white. Because you were different."

"Because...?"

The shadows deepened but it still seemed as though there were no time, nary a tick tock to be found, all timers set to pause, a freeze-frame portrait of love as two young girls. Amy felt as though there were no blood in her face, as if it had all flowed into her hands, which tingled like waking limbs as she touched Jenny's cheek, Jenny who had tears in her eyes for some reason.

"You know what it means," Jenny whispered.

The impulse to hide herself away folded up like a fan and Amy was at peace and Amy understood the tears in the eyes, the eyes in the face she was nearing, and she saw her reflection in them as radiant. And Amy—

—kissed Jenny—

—not to be different, but only herself.

It was part of things, like gravity, like planets orbiting around the sun, like wheeling galaxies that seemed only points of light from Earth.

"Now finish your story," Jenny said, arms around Amy and tears dotting her shirt, because after all they had found each other across miles, which didn't change the world but helped it make a little more sense, a little less cold.

"It's hard enough to be one minority. Two hurt. So I hid one, and still hurt." There was pain in drawing these words out of her mouth, but Amy had thought them in the darkest recesses of her mind; vocalizing them seemed the next step. "But you... and what will everyone say?"

"Different things." Jenny looked up, in an almost mimicry of Amy's earlier motion. "But you're not alone now, right?"

So Amy walked through two more days, tiptoeing as a ballerina does, afraid to break an ankle by coming in at the wrong place. And Jenny was enough to fill her mind, Jenny who had a name like a song: Jenny, Jenny, you're the girl for me. Jenny who was mostly so shy until you got her started on Corvettes or engines or (and that had been a surprising argument) the merits of Coke versus Pepsi. Jenny who shone on the inside and all along the length of her hair.

But avoidance only made her nervous, and on edge, and it made her parents exchange worried looks and Great-Aunt Agnes, original agony aunt, give her long, measured looks.

And then she came downstairs to find both of her parents giggling.

"Mom? Dad?" she asked, amazed. Giggling. There really was no other word for what they were doing. She supposed the wineglasses and the open bottle held the explanation as well as the alcohol.

Her mother waved a hand. "We were discussing never having seen Paris. You weren't the only one a little disappointed, Amy, although of course we belong here and we are glad to be here. Never you worry, Aunt Agnes." In the corner sat the Aunt, previously unnoticed. Amy's eyebrows shot up as she saw the third glass.

"And then I said," her father announced, picking up the story, "that at least our very own California wines were better than France's. By reputation. So we decided to experiment."

Amy glanced at the clock, feeling rather like she was hallucinating. "And then you started drinking at ten in the morning."

Her father gave her an expression so deliberately solemn that there only could have been laughter behind it. "I want you to do as I say, not as I do." His brief composure vanished when Amy's mother slung a companionable arm around his shoulders. "Although I suppose you could do worse in the marriage department. We have decided, at this lovely hour of the morning you were so kind to point out, that this is our second honeymoon. Romantic, yes?"

There was the feeling of blood leaving her face again, but this time her hands shook and Amy feared that her legs would buckle, or perhaps her resolve, and she would sink to the floor and never move again. "Speaking of... speaking of romantic, I... met somebody in town." Two pairs of eyebrows went up and she wanted to be anywhere else, but love demanded truth and that demanded perseverance. "We're not going to start dating, but we'll still keep in touch, and maybe we can come back for a visit... Mom and Dad, I'm... with a girl named Jenny Hodges..."

There was a clink as, in unison, her parents set their glasses on the table.

And then there was her father, walking over to hug her and only stumbling a little, despite never being able to hold his liquor of any sort, and her mother with a thoughtful (and somewhat nervous) expression, saying, "You've been off all this time with someone from town? And with her how? You know that when two people love each other very much—"

"Mom!" Amy shrieked, thinking that perhaps sinking into the floor and never moving again would not be such a bad fate after all, provided it entailed being blind, deaf, and dumb as well. Her mother looked rather relieved at her embarrassment.

And over her father's shoulder, Amy looked at Agnes. The fear of expectation glittered in her mind's eye. Her parents were one thing, but her...

Great-Aunt Agnes raised her glass in silent toast, and Amy remembered that after all, she had been the white woman with the courage to marry a Chinese man, a very long time ago.

Amy closed her eyes and it was all peace, peace.

* * * * *

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too."

"Jenny, I don't know how to say it."

"Then don't."

"Then you can't, either."

"I won't."

* * * * *

As the plane began its ascent into the sky, Amy pressed a hand against the glass of her window. The sun beamed down and she felt as though she was going home, as though perhaps home and belonging were more states of mind than anything else.

"Jenny, Jenny," she sang under her breath, and closed her eyes.

FIN.

MARIA SOUTHERTON

Villanelle

The world is asleep, yet awake she remains,
Tossing and turning upon her bed,
Alone with her thoughts and the sounds of the trains.

Old conversations and occasional refrains
Of songs half forgotten clutter her head.
The world is asleep, yet awake she remains.

Now cruelly the mind cuts to lingering pains—
Loves that were lost and tears that were shed,
Alone with her thoughts and the sounds of the trains.

Remembering times marked with more losses than gains,

The lone whistle cries for things left unsaid,
The world is asleep, yet awake she remains.

"But life's like the moon as it waxes and wanes,
It keeps going 'round, so live 'til you're dead."
No need to be up with your thoughts and the trains.

And as these words resound, those crippling stains
Of regret leave her mind and to dreams she is led.
The world no longer sleeps while awake she remains,
Alone with her thoughts and the sounds of the trains.

ALISON MCCABE

A Case of Growing Up

I always preferred when it was just Mom and me for long car rides so I could sit in the front seat and pick the radio stations and rest my arm out the window. It was the way an air of contentment would fly in with the cross breeze and coast into our ears, our heads, our carefree contemplation, that I liked best. Mom was upset that Dad and Shawn had left for a cross country camping trip the week before and could not make it back for the day. I was pleased that it would only be me and Mom going.

This day I was especially excited because it would be my first time attending a funeral. I was still young, not so young, but young enough to have seen only life and no death. Yet at twelve years old, I knew enough to hide my enthusiasm with a solemn disposition because, naturally, funerals are understood to be mostly somber occasions. So as Mom ironed my black blouse in the other room, I stood in front of the mirror and practiced my mournful disguise. Lipstick would make my pout look fuller, but Mom had said I shouldn't rush those grown-up things. I figured today wasn't the day to bring up the makeup issue again, so I adjusted my lower lip to accentuate, but not overdo, the desired effect. I was a Hollywood star perfecting my funeral face for my next feature film before the limo arrived. The real life sorrow was all so glamorous. Death was the type of drama everyone would care about. At school all I would have to say was that my favorite aunt just died and they'd all talk about me and how sorry they felt and I would instantly be the topic of lunchtime conversation. I'd act a mess, and my day would drip with sweet sympathy. Maybe even the boys would give me hugs as I'd force a tear onto their bony little shoulders. Imagine that, me having actually found a way into their arms.

That morning, I focused most on Tommy Boyd. Tommy wore basketball shorts, a slightly oversized t-shirt, a baseball hat, but never a jacket to school each day, even in December. His hat covered his face from mid-nose up, so I hadn't seen his eyes, but I imagined that they were bright, blue, and dreamy. My friend Amy said

he must have liked me because he would always get me to look the other way at lunch so he could steal one or two of my Oreos. I didn't find her logic too convincing, but I hoped that she was right.

Every morning for the past three weeks, I brushed my hair and practiced my smile for Tommy Boyd. The morning of the funeral I practiced my pout. As I stared at my reflection to keep from blinking, to keep my eyelids from washing away the water that built up inside them, I ran through the scenario of school the next day in my head. When it hurt too much, I relaxed my lids, blinked, and let a tear trickle down along the curve of my nose, settling around the edge of my upper lip. I concluded that, if my performance was sorrowful and convincing enough, I would most definitely end up in his arms.

Really, I was much too old to not yet have a grasp on death. By middle school it's pretty much understood to be an already experienced experience. Whether it is by loss of a grandparent or goldfish, most kids have been through it and felt the effects. I hadn't. Half of my grandparents were out of the picture by the time I was born, and when the third one left us, I was too young to cry over anything more than a bumped head or a bottle. My aunt's death was the first I could really remember.

My mom finished the ironing and I could hear her footsteps come down the hall and then the click and scrape of the door knob.

"Why do you always lock it?" Mom's words were heavy and impatient.

"Sorry. Habit." Privacy, please, mother.

"I told you not to."

"Sorry." I'm old enough for privacy. And makeup, but I won't push it.

"Get ready, we have to go."

Yes, yes we have to go. The stage is set, the limo has arrived. The star has adjusted her last button and the costume is set. The supporting actress has initiated a conflict – over a bedroom door, but the drama will build rest assured – and the tension is set. Everything is set. And action.

Mom kept the windows up. It wasn't even raining, but I didn't argue because I figured the wind would only mess up my hair so it was actually better that way. Inside the car was hot and I was sweating and my back settled in a sticky position against the passenger seat. It was a good thing I was wearing black. The ride was uncomfortably stuffy, and I would have welcomed rain. Funerals are best with a rainy day backdrop. Mom was too focused, or maybe too much in a daze, to notice the heat. She was always the one who made the executive decisions about the AC, so the stifling air stayed put. The radio cut the silence that Mom and I had preserved. I didn't talk because I was afraid that anything I would say might bring Mom to tears. Her eyes were already glassy.

I didn't recognize most of the faces at the funeral. I almost didn't recognize the faces that should have been familiar to me because their eyelids were so swollen, their cheeks were so red, and their lips were clenched together so tightly. They were the faces I had never seen without a smile. Now they looked like saddened babies the way their features puffed out, all raw, pink, and sticky. But it wasn't anything cute, there wasn't any Hollywood glamour in it.

Aaron and Justin were at the front of the room by their mother's casket. It was the first time I had ever seen Justin in something other than ripped blue jeans and an oversized hoodie, and I thought how his black pants and collared shirt must

have just added to the discomfort of the day. Justin turned towards the back of the room where Mom and I were standing. He looked at me and – I wanted to tell him he didn't have to, that I didn't need him to be cheery today of all days – he smiled. For me, the young one, he needed to smile. Seven years between us and he stood beside his dead mother. Tragic, he hadn't even left his teens and already he'd have to be the grown-up. My uncle didn't cook, didn't clean, didn't do much but work. Aaron would fly back to school for finals in a week or two. Justin would have to learn to cook, learn to clean, and grow up on his own. So tragic. I'd be sure to tell them all about Justin and his sad, sad situation at school.

I smiled back, wondering how long such a cheery expression should be held in such a somber atmosphere. Two seconds, I decided, and then my award-winning face of sympathy. But then something occurred to me and a look of puzzling nausea choked my planned pose. I thought again of Justin and then of myself in seven years and my own mom maybe dead. The parallel, as unlikely as it was, seemed all too possible. I wondered if I would be able to smile beside her casket as Justin had, as a grown-up would for the young one. Mom maybe dead, Mom maybe dead. And the thought bit at my gut and my thespian exterior. I struggled with a heavy swallow. Then my stomach sank and I had to sit down so my insides wouldn't drag my knees to the floor. Mom walked over to Aaron and Justin and my aunt in her casket.

I sat in the back of the room and wondered if that was the appropriate place for the niece of the deceased to sit. The important people were up front, that was clear. They were the ones that knew her best; every good part of her and even the worst parts of her that pretty much killed her. They were the co-workers, lifelong friends, therapists, counselors, acquaintances she'd decided to confide in. But I wasn't sure how important I was and if it was expected that I should look into the casket. I didn't want to. I could see her picture in front of the flower display, her smile so real and her eyes alive, and I was sure that her face couldn't possibly look so good now. I didn't want to look into her stiff, departed expression. Another thing, a confession; I worried what it might do to me, seeing her sound asleep in that finely crafted oblong box. I might have cried and I didn't know if crying was an appropriate thing for me to do at the occasion. I hadn't planned for this, and couldn't calculate how upset I was supposed to be. So I stayed seated in the back of the room.

Others were crying, but they were old enough to cry. I thought that mascara was a mistake for this day because all it did was run down the women's pale, sorrowful cheeks. Mom had a tissue, fully saturated into a wadded ball, and she kept dabbing at her eyes with it. I wanted to tell her that she was only smearing the gray streaks, but I was still afraid to talk to her. Not when she was so fragile. Sure, it might have upset the drama for the scene, but it wouldn't have been right.

On the car ride to the cemetery, I thought about my aunt when she was living. It occurred to me that she had been a big part of my life. It also occurred to me that she was now gone. I hadn't had a sense of this before, not earlier that morning as I had carefully prepped a mask for my excitement over the day's events, or even the evening at dinner when Mom had told me the news.

"You know about Aunt Shirley being sick." I knew it was serious because Mom had put her fork down with mashed potatoes still on her plate.

"Something with the liver, Dad says."

That was right, Mom had said, it was a problem with the liver. She had

been sick for a long time and it wasn't the kind the doctors could make better. I didn't understand but I nodded because it felt like this was a very grown-up conversation for us to be having and so I wanted to act like a grown-up would. When Mom told me that my aunt had passed away, I gave the best grown-up response I could.

"I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

Mom's eyes were glassy and wide and gazing right into mine. Unnerving, I thought, but dramatic. I had never seen a look like that from her before. I wondered how my own look compared to hers. I hoped my expression was mature and appropriate. She said she would be fine as she brought her plate to the sink.

"Just no appetite." But brisket and mashed potatoes were a family favorite.

"Me neither," I said, as I shoveled as many heaping spoonfuls as I could fit into my mouth before she turned back towards the table.

That evening I hadn't taken much time to consider what my life might be like without my aunt in it but, in the stuffy car on the way to the cemetery, it was all that was on my mind. I turned up the radio in an attempt to drown out my thoughts, but I couldn't manage to cling to the lyrics or melody over my own reflections. I rolled down the front windows half way on both sides to initiate a cross breeze that might carry my memories out of my head and into the afternoon air. But my hair rushed around my face, and I all could do was remember. I mostly remembered Christmas.

I was seven and watching the holiday lights blur by through the car's back-seat window. Mom, my aunt, and I were out doing some last minute shopping, for me mostly. My aunt always let me pick out my own gifts, and she would buy me all the things that Mom said were too much. I had a dollhouse that year, and wanted all the furnishings to go with it. Mom said to ask for either the kitchen or bedroom set, but both were under the tree at my aunt's house Christmas morning.

Christmas Eve a year later, my aunt came home with thirty nine votive candles. Cinnamon Sticks, Cucumber Mint, Fresh Laundry, Cedar, Lavender Dreams, Pumpkin, Morning Coffee, Lemon Squeeze, Frosty Pine, Autumn Apple, Sour Apple, Country Apple, and Apple Pie. Three of each fragrance. It was a bit much, but she defended herself with irrational rationalizations. It was an excuse she'd often use. They were on sale and she couldn't decide which ones she liked best.

I loved when my aunt went to excess. It meant more gifts on Christmas, Birthdays, or Just-because days in between. More cakes for family holidays when my aunt was put in charge of desserts. More hugs, more kisses, more laughs and lighthearted optimism than could be expected from any other grown-up I knew. I loved my aunt for it. But Mom only wished it would stop. The grown-ups would nag her about her overspending, remind her that she still needed to get Aaron through the rest of college and start Justin on his way. It made Mom worry.

There was always alcohol at my aunt's house on Christmas because she needed it. The only time alcohol was at any of my family gatherings was when my aunt was there. With everyone else either recovering from alcoholism or trying to avoid the family trend altogether, liquor was usually locked up. I'd heard about the trend and those who started but couldn't stop, Dad liked to remind me – Let it be a lesson – though I had to trust his word because I just didn't see it. To me, the problem didn't exist. To me, my aunt had no problem. Every time I'd seen her she'd had a gift for me and a story to make Mom and Dad laugh. Nothing wrong with that. I liked the familiarity of her breath and how it always smelled like the nail polish

remover Mom had used to take the pink sparkles off my toes. And Mom and Dad never said there was a problem, so I suspected that she simply had a taste for vodka when it would show up at her house every year. I wasn't aware that exceptions were being made, that the grown-ups had silently agreed to leave liquor around because my aunt was pretty intolerable without it. I had never seen her fully sober, though I had never known it when she was even slightly drunk. I didn't know she had a problem. I didn't know it at seven, or even at twelve as I watched them lower her casket into the dark, dry ground. A shame, the untimely death of an alcoholic surely would have added to the dramatic intrigue of the event, though at this point I had had enough of the drama.

I wish I could recall the point at which I understood that alcohol had killed her, but I only draw blanks. The realization was more or less a piecing together of retrospection that somehow eventually fit into my consciousness. If I had understood it then, I'd like to think I wouldn't have practiced my pretend pout in front of the mirror the morning she was put underground.

My aunt missed Christmas when I was eleven because she just wasn't up for it. That's what Mom had said. Aaron and Justin came, but they didn't laugh so much. My uncle came, but he never laughed so much because, when my aunt had been there before, he had never found her joke to be funny. Still, Justin was all smiles Christmas morning whenever I looked his way. He smiled so I would smile. The lights were up and the train set choo-chooed around the tree, but there weren't as many gifts under it. No alcohol, and that wasn't all that was missing.

Aaron told me a story that year about a Christmas Eve I was too young to remember. My aunt had stood outside on the front lawn with Mom and Dad and Shawn, little me in her arms. Maybe because the story has been told many times, or maybe because I very much wish I could recall it, I can imagine the night now as if I had always had the memory for it. It was cold, I'm sure, and I would have been bundled up in a sweater, hat, and gloves, maybe also blankets. My aunt would have been laughing over something, making Mom and Dad laugh as she could always do, her boozy breath crisp and almost touchable in the icy evening. Maybe she had patted Shawn on his woolly head, helped him count the stars as I lay on my back, warm against my aunt who was warm with vodka in her veins. I'm sure that I would have liked being in her arms. I had followed Shawn's gaze up into the night sky and raised my tiny, chubby fingers as I pointed to an airplane's lights, one red and some white, passing by. "Santa," I had said. My body would have shaken with my aunt's laughter and I'm sure she would have then leaned over to plant a kiss on my young forehead.

Some years later I found out why I had always seen my aunt so happy, and only happy, and that there was another side to her that the grown-ups had always hidden from the youngest one. Although unexpected, the reality was carelessly tossed out into the open for my taking, sort of nonchalant, like my knowing made no difference. An evening after dinner when Dad was bringing my dollhouse up into the attic: something was said about the furniture and my aunt.

She didn't need to get me all that furniture, though it was awfully nice of her and it certainly made the rooms look good.

"Well, she was manic."

"Manic?"

"Manic. Manic depressive."

He needed to explain it. The excessive buying binges? Manic. Chemical imbalances in the brain. The sudden absences? Depressive. Chemical imbalances in the brain. It seemed an unlikely explanation, but I liked it because that way a bit of my aunt's oddity could be lifted off of her own shoulders and placed onto a classified cause. I'd like to think it would have made a difference had I known this about my aunt when my mom was ironing my black blouse before we threw the dirt onto her grave, that it would have taken Tommy off my mind and the glamour out of the occasion. But it's hard to know really.

As I stood out in the sunshine beside my aunt's grave with Mom, Aaron, Justin and the others whose faces I didn't recognize except for the woe that was in them, my eyes got very confused. The lids were heavy and I looked down to her casket, closed, dead in the ground. And then something did not feel right in them, so I had to look up, towards the sky, where a vision of Santa and his airplane sleigh sabotaged my thoughts. I tried to think of Tommy's arms, but I found myself again held against my aunt's warm chest. Tried to focus on my practiced pout, but the muscles around my mouth held a straight, yet strained position. Tried to rehearse a scenario for school tomorrow, but just couldn't remember my lines. The glamour was gone and I felt sick over it ever having been there. I looked down, stared at the box with my dead aunt inside of it, and fought the sting in my sinuses. My face pressed itself together into a painful knot, and it got to the point where I had to just let it go. It wasn't written in my script, but I cried. My eyes, something did not feel right in them; I couldn't see anything but sorrow.

JOSEPH COOK

Gone to Graveyards

*"Where have all the soldiers gone?
Gone to Graveyards – every one.
When will they ever learn?"*
-Pete Seeger, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"

Lost is the legion once led by Caesar,
The phalanx of Alexander the Great.
No more "We about to die salute you."
Farewell to battle, now what is our fate?

Gone the glory of Hector and Achilles,
The brilliant triumph of the towers of Troy.
Farewell to the fame of Hannibal's movement
That brought on the deaths of the bravest of boys.

Who recalls the blind king of Bohemia who
Commanded that he be led to Çrécy's field?
He determined to "...strike one stroke with my sword,"
Said goodbye to his people, tossed aside his shield.
Where are the gentlemen leading great armies
Who fought solely for honor and no other gain?

There was once one true honor and one true glory:
Those of duty done and integrity saved.

Never again will the outnumbered leader
Holler to the men of his heroic host,
"Don't fire 'til you see the whites of their eyes, men!"
No hand-to-hand victory about which to boast.

Where are the flags leading men into battle?
The drummers relaying their general's command?
The gentleman Lee and Grant the Human Butcher
Turned war into friendship with the shake of a hand.

When did we lose all the glorious charges
With cavalry sweeping the enemy's flank?
No more would Turenne or Marlborough matter.
No more horses in cavalry, only the tank.

Great Charlemagne is long forgotten;
His knights no longer attack with the mace.
Ne'er to be known is Napoleon's Grande Armée;
The army of France now a total disgrace.

Rusted are the medals worn by great leaders.
Where are Winfield Scott and Wellington's duke?
The only question a general now answers:
"At which major city do I aim the nuke?"

Damn the day politics entered the mixture
Ending such great men as "Old Blood and Guts."
Gallant men who wore stars on the fields of Mars,
Removed from command by fat men behind desks.

Why is conquest no longer commended?
The victor now viewed as a liar and a cheat.
A successful march to the Halls of Hammurabi
Bring the leader censure as a dastardly feat.

Their forms may change and their bodies vanish,
Decompose, and turn into coals –
But on the ground the spirits still linger
To consecrate the vision place of souls.

Calmly I sit here, watching the sunset:
The light going out on the heroes of old.
I feel I should witness the march to Valhalla:
The phantom army whose legends are told.

Some Kind of Manifesto

I

The door swung inward and a small, young woman with cropped brown hair appeared, wearing a sweater and skirt set that should have belonged to a middle aged woman in the 1950's. She smiled and suddenly the nylon-rayon blend suited her.

"You must be Karen," she said as she stepped aside, motioning for Karen to enter; she did so cautiously. The foyer was cozy and dimly lit, with a large desk made of dark wood to the right, a fringed standing lamp, and a wing-backed chair. Everything had a doily, which made the space seem from another century. "Wendy told us you'd be stopping in this evening."

"She did?" Karen asked. "Is she here yet?"

"I'm afraid she called about ten minutes ago. She said something's come up and she won't be able to make it." Karen's initial inclination was to politely excuse herself and make her way back out of the foyer. "Oh, but she stressed that she hoped you'd stay and make yourself comfortable. Is this your first time?"

Karen smiled, knowing her window of opportunity had just closed in any sense that manners dictated. "Yes, I've never been to one of these before."

"Well then, just relax. My name is Marla, I'll be conducting events this evening. If you'd like, you can sign our registry—no reason, really. We just like to know who we're with." Marla motioned to an open book on the desk and as Karen stepped towards it she heard the rattling of beads and Marla was gone into the next room, from which came the sound of subdued voices.

Karen took a few more seconds to absorb her surroundings. The wallpaper was reproduced from what was probably a popular original Victorian print—a deep, scarlet red damask. Over it were hanging portraits, all of which looked too old to hold anyone still living. At the sight of one, she caught her breath and her hands flew involuntarily to her stomach—it felt as if a firecracker had gone off inside. The portrait was of a young, serious man, dressed in a smart suit of the very late nineteenth century. He sat somewhat sideways, legs crossed in a decorative wood-framed chair, with a scrolled design and what looked like an intricately embroidered and possibly beaded seat. He was leaning back, with one elbow propped onto the back of the chair, holding a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, and the other rested, book in hand, on his lap. It was his face, with his eyes that looked intently off into some distance. It wasn't dead-on, but it was so close. Karen had just left that face at the hospital.

Jude, Karen's fiancé, lay in a coma and had been in this state for the past eight months. There had been an accident, just like any one of many thousands that occur on the roads every year. Karen, at first, imagined they were the only ones this had happened to, until she joined a support group for people who had lost loved ones, or were in the same comatose predicament that she and Jude were in. The group helped at first. It put things into a

certain, more realistic perspective than she had had up to that point. But now the group was stagnant to her—or, as she more precisely realized, Jude was stagnant and the group was no longer as effective as it had been. The doctors couldn't decisively conclude if the images showing up in the brain scans were signs of real activity, or merely ghosts of what once was. He relied on tubes and machines to eat and breathe, and the face she had always thought was so handsome wasted and became sunken and drawn. She longed to hear him speak to her. That's why she was here.

She leaned forward and took up the pen from its holder. It was a ball point pen, but with a feather plume attached to the end, to give it the look of antiquity. After a few scratches to the side of the page to get the ink going, she scribbled her name, and wondered how on earth Wendy had talked her into coming here. She looked at the still slightly swinging beaded doorway that separated her from a roomful of murmuring strangers, inhaled once, exhaled forcefully, and stepped through.

II

Karen could see that dimness was the theme of the house, as no bulbs seemed to be above twenty-five watts. There was a smallish dining room table in the middle of the room, though its chairs were missing. The table itself was covered in a finely crocheted spread, possibly made by the same hands that manically produced the foyer doilies. There were six people in the room, each of whom held either a small stemmed glass of wine, or a tumbler of brandy. There was a round man in a top hat and tails, with a white handlebar mustache, and a tall, slender woman in a black twenties flapper dress. They seemed to be together, but not in a way that indicated they were intimate.

There were two women talking quietly with one another—one had red plastic rimmed glasses and tightly permed orange-red hair with a pencil sticking out of the back. That and the fact that she wore a somewhat wrinkled turquoise pantsuit made Karen think she had come here straight from a 1980's office job. Karen jokingly warned herself to be careful here—she might get lost in another decade, another time. The woman Mrs. Eighties spoke to looked as if she might crumple inside herself at any moment—homely with mousy brown hair, she had librarian written all over her.

Karen checked herself at this thought, and smiled. She herself was a librarian and had always prided herself on not falling into the old clichéd description. Karen had long, dark hair that fell below her waist, and was New York fashionable in the latest sense. In this weather, it was autumn colors, mock turtleneck with jacket, and knee-high boots with sensible heels that met the hem of a heavy but comfortable tweed skirt. She felt keenly out of place here.

In the middle of the table were a few crystal cut decanters—probably just glass, Karen thought, thinking of the pen in the foyer—and a man was helping himself to another drink. His hair was somewhat long, but combed back with the help of some kind of product. He wore a short sleeved button up shirt with a black back and a red front—there were devils embroidered on

the shoulders, the way cowboys wore images of cacti.

Karen was staring at him and making a mental note to check later to see if he was indeed wearing cowboy boots, when he looked up, directly at her. Her face went hot with embarrassment, and she looked away, focusing instead on some wall-hangings. Her eyes fell on one in particular—Charles Joseph Minard's 1861 statistical map of Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812. She forgot about the man in the devil shirt completely and became lost in a memory.

The summer following the completion of Jude's graduate studies, he had attended a conference in Moscow. He'd just finished completing two masters degrees in Sociology and Economics, and had convinced Karen that the former Soviet Union would be a great place for a short vacation.

They walked from the Budapesht where they were staying on ulitsa Petrovka, past the Bolshoy Theatre and to the Red Square.

"That must be it," Jude offered, pointing ahead to a long line of people that stretched from the Historical Museum down to what looked to Karen like a McDonald's. They only had a few days in the city, so they tried to fit in everything they could—today was the only day they could visit the Lenin Mausoleum. It was open only a few times a week, for only a couple of hours at a time. Jude asked two nuns in the line if it was indeed the right line, and it was. They made their way to the end, passing many people, just like them—tourists. But something caught Jude's eye.

"Is that Lenin over there?" he asked, pointing towards an equestrian statue of Georgy Zhukov.

"Funny," Karen replied, trying to discern the end of the line and a group of Japanese buying military style caps bedaubed in old Communist buttons and badges.

"No really," he chuckled, "look." And she did. Standing beneath Zhukov atop his striding stallion was Lenin, wearing his trademark revolutionary's cap, black jacket and red ribbon, what was sure to be a worker's newspaper, or some kind of manifesto peeking out from his jacket pocket. He looked to be drinking a can of Sprite.

"He looks pretty spry for a dead man," Karen laughed, as Jude's eyes widened as he frantically tapped her arm, pointing again towards Lenin. Vladimir was now being joined by Stalin, in military regalia.

"Stalin was taller than that, wasn't he?" Jude asked, sniggering. "We have to go over there."

"What? Why? No," Karen sputtered, still laughing.

"We have to—they're impersonators," he pleaded. "We have to get our pictures taken with them. Hey, there's Marx!"

"Where's Engels?" she asked.

"That's a good question," he replied, looking around. "Oh, Kare, can we?"

"We'll lose our place in line," she answered, trying to stop smiling.

"It'll still be here. It'll only take a minute," he pleaded, bending at the knees for emphasis. Karen deliberately drew this out, knowing all the while that they would go over and get some snaps. Of course they would. She loved Jude all of the time, every day—but there were certain moments

that presented themselves only now and then that explicitly reminded Karen exactly how much she loved him. His face became boyish—as if all he wanted in the world was a piece of candy. In all the many hours of scholarly seriousness, these moments were among her favorite and she cherished them.

"Karen, this is how it is," he said to her very seriously, gently pulling at the lapels of her jacket. "If you don't say yes, I'll have to call you the bourgeoisie for the rest of the day, and I will have to play the part of the oppressed proletariat. You don't want to be bourgeois, do you?" He stuck out his bottom lip slightly.

"You're impossible," Karen rolled her eyes and Jude kissed her.

"Viva la revolution!" he cried as he grabbed her hand and they headed towards the dead communists.

* * * * *

"Everyone," Marla announced as she clinked the side of her wine glass with her fingernail, waking Karen from her reverie. The room went silent and all eyes were on Marla as she motioned towards Karen. She looked around, telling herself to stop looking at the walls for fear of what she might find next.

"Wendy can't be with us this evening, but her friend Karen is joining us, for the first time." Faces smiled and heads nodded towards her as the clock struck—it was nine o'clock. "It's time!" Marla beamed. Glasses were set aside and they all began filing out of the room, and deeper into the house.

III

Karen followed them through yet another beaded doorway, into a room that was just big enough to hold the seven of them. She now saw where the chairs from the dining room had gone—they were in here, supplementing a number of other chairs, which surrounded a large, low round table. A tall pewter candelabra stood in the center, and, in keeping with the dim motif, held only three candles—though there were spaces for eight—and provided the only light. Everyone seemed to have a particular place, so Karen waited until they were all seated before finding herself between Mousy on the left and the Cowboy on the right.

"Do I know you?" Cowboy said before she'd gotten herself fully into her seat. He still held his tumbler, almost empty already. Karen saw letters tattooed on the fingers that wrapped around the glass. In the darkness she couldn't tell what they spelled out, but she assumed it was something like "Hate," or "Kill."

"No, I don't think so," Karen answered without looking at him and scooting her chair away from him and towards Mousy as discreetly as possible. Cowboy watched her, snorted to himself, and then emptied his glass, set it on the floor, and lightly kicked it under the table.

"Ignore him," Mousy leaned over and whispered to Karen. "He's been here a few months, but he's not fitting in so well." She smiled.

"I see," Karen replied.

"So, you're a friend of Wendy's?"

Karen nodded in response, looking around the room and allowing her eyes to adjust. There were more portraits, but other than the table and chairs, there was nothing else. In addition to the candelabra, there were a few objects that she strained to make out, and she leaned forward. Nearest to Marla was a small brass bell, a sturdy cardboard cone with a handle—like an old-style megaphone—and a sheet of paper and a thick pencil.

"Marla's a physical medium," Mousy assisted.

"I see," Karen repeated and leaned back.

"Wendy's nice," said Mousy, smiling feebly. Karen returned the smile as best she could as she thought of all the ways she would upbraid Wendy for ditching her with these people. This was Wendy's idea. Wendy, being heavily into the paranormal, fit into this group a little more than Karen. She worked part-time at the library as an assistant, which was how they met, and tended bar at a club in the city. When she wasn't working, she was going off on mystical expeditions, and attending séances here. Her idea—though she admitted it was a complete shot in the dark and hadn't really been tried before, that she knew of—was to see if Jude was indeed gone. If he was, he could possibly reveal himself in a séance setting. Karen, a born skeptic, pishawed the idea at first. She appreciated Wendy's endeavor to help but really didn't put much stock into that kind of thing. But as the months wore on, she became more desperate, and last week decided that, yes, she would give it a shot. What could she possibly lose, besides Jude and a little pride? Karen shuddered.

"Silence," Marla demanded dramatically, and all parties brought their hands up to the surface of the table and laid them flat. There was some adjustment as tips of little fingers scouted out others, forming an unbroken chain around the table. Karen quickly joined in imitation. Suddenly, Marla blurted so loudly that Karen jumped.

"I am asking all of my Friends in the World of Spirit to come forward and bless this sitting, bless this table, bless all those in this realm and all those who inhabit the other, who might come to us, so that there is a clear and open channel."

Karen was almost overcome with laughter, but she silently pushed it back down from where it came. She'd read a book years ago—*Hell House* by Richard Matheson—and there was a medium in it who had named her "Spirit Guide" Red Cloud, or maybe White Cloud. Running Bear, Walking Sky, something-or-another. She wondered what the name of Marla's spirit guide was. She guessed it was June Cleaver, and stifled a snicker. Marla prayed quickly and quietly under her breath for several minutes, and then slumped abruptly into her chair.

"There she goes," a female voice whispered excitedly.

Marla's breathing became erratic, rough, and then steady and deep. Moans issued from her, seemingly originating in the pit of her stomach, softly and then louder and louder. It sounded as if Marla needed a moment alone with herself; it sounded so intimate and went on for so long that Karen began to feel uncomfortable. Finally, one last sigh emerged and transformed itself into a rasp, then a gurgle, then a choke, and then Marla recovered to stable breathing.

"Charlie?" a voice came from Marla's direction, and though it didn't

sound like Marla, it was only the usual unsteady, jerky voice everyone used to imitate the elderly. Karen wasn't impressed, until a voice to her right answered. "Yes," Cowboy—who was clearly Charlie—said.

"Charlie boy," the voice from Marla said. "You're a good boy, Charlie."

"Who is this?" A voice in the direction of the man with the handlebar mustache asked.

"It's my grandfather," Charlie answered.

"...such a good..." The voice faded.

"Is there...anything...you need to tell me, Pappap?" Charlie asked, his voice low, serious. Karen became absorbed in the story that unfolded before her—she remembered why she was here. The candles flickered, throwing shadow and light on the astonished faces around the table, transforming them with each flutter into abstract and grotesque clowns. Karen wondered why they were all here. What were their stories and were they as tragic as her own? A sadness crept into Karen's heart, as she pictured Jude's once angelic face—blue eyes beneath a scholarly mess of blonde curls. She mourned him; she mourned them.

"We're alright, Nanna and me, we're just fine. You...need to...move on...Charlie," urged the voice coming from Marla. Just then, there was a sliding sound, something coming across the table. Karen's eyes grew wide, as she made out the bell approaching her. As an inappropriate knee-jerk reaction, she almost burst out laughing until a candle in the candelabra went out, leaving just two and a little more darkness. Karen squinted, and then suddenly gasped out loud as the bell scooted closer.

"You and Nanna are okay," Charlie said. The bell seemed to be rising, just a few inches from the table, and soon a slight tinkling sound could be heard just below the huffing astonishment of the guests.

"Yes, yes, Charlie...good boy...good..."

"Alright then," Charlie murmured, and his left hand grasped Karen's right one and squeezed it. All Karen could hear was the bell chiming in her ears which, in her head, transformed itself into the sound of a beeping heart monitor, and then quite suddenly, it stopped. Marla slumped into her chair again and the bell hit the table, rolling from side to side in a crescent.

"I need another drink," Charlie announced. "Join me?" he asked Karen, who had just enough time to say "huh?" before he stood up and pulled her from her seat and out of the room.

"You can't just break the circle like that!" a voice from the séance room yelled after them. "Marla, are you okay?" it asked, lower now. In the dining room, Charlie filled two tumblers from the decanter of brandy and handed one to Karen.

"Let's go outside, I need a smoke," he said. Karen looked back at the room, speechless. "Don't worry about them, they'll get right back into it, they always do." She had no idea what had just happened.

IV

They walked through the foyer and out onto the front stoop, into the

crisp fall air, closing the door behind them. The attractive brick house was of the old Gothic revival, with a roof that pitched steeply and window casements that came to a point, mimicking cathedrals of Europe. There was a smattering of houses on this block of the same era, but none quite matched the majesty of this one.

The porch light was on and now Karen could read the letters etched across Charlie's fingers: PEG, and a small black heart on the pinky.

"What the hell was that?" Karen asked, gesturing inside.

"Nothing." Charlie leveled her with a matter-of-fact look. "Marla's a fraud. They're all frauds." He sighed and brought his hand down his face, as if wiping away the anger. "I have seen you before," he said. Karen looked quizzically at him, so he continued. "St. Luke's." Charlie lit a cigarette, the smoke rising nebulously into the night air. Karen's heart fluttered and she felt as though she'd been caught lying.

"That's where they took Peg after the aneurysm. She didn't last long, but I'm sure I saw you—a number of times—while she was there." He looked at her and added, "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asked for no real reason. "He's still alive." Charlie looked at his drink.

"Well, that's a good thing then." He took a swallow. "Pappap's not dead either. And Marla is a fraud." He smiled up at her. Karen sighed as her body relaxed to the point of almost dropping her glass. She looked at it and threw back the last of its contents; the soothing warmth spread down her throat and swirled around her stomach, finally settling. Karen felt her cheeks glowing and for the first time that evening, she felt comfort. This wasn't where she expected to find it. She didn't really think she expected it at all.

"If she's a fake, why do you keep coming here?" she asked. Charlie contemplated the name etched across his knuckles.

"Houdini was a skeptic," he answered. "Do you know anything about Houdini?" Karen shook her head no. "He didn't buy any of it, and then his mother died."

"And then he was a believer?"

"No," Charlie went on. "Then he dedicated his life to debunking mediums and spiritualists. I look at it that way. Marla is like an ambulance chasing lawyer. She's an opportunist of the worst kind—she makes her living off of people who are no longer living. She profits from grief."

"And you're Houdini. Is that what you're doing?" Karen asked. Charlie sighed and wiped his face again, this time trying to rid himself of confusion.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said and smiled up at Karen.

"Want to grab some coffee?"

* * * * *

They were initially going to go to a diner Charlie knew of, but the thought of all the noise and smoke didn't strike Karen as a particularly ideal place to talk, so they went to a small café that she knew of that also functioned as a used bookstore.

Karen led the way into the cozy shop, walking past the small table

where she and Jude used to sit, choosing instead the next table over. Everything here seemed some shade of brown, but not in any depressing sense. The shelves, the walls, tables and chairs, the spines of books, the mugs and the coffee itself—all deep tree-bark browns, lustrous golds, and stunning russets that always made Karen feel as if she was relaxing in a skillfully painted portrayal of a New England autumn. Charlie offered to get the drinks, and Karen found herself in a moment of silence. She toyed with her engagement ring, turning the modest diamond towards the palm of her hand, her thumb rocking back and forth on it as the band slid over her skin. Involuntarily, she ducked back into what she mistook as the safety of her thoughts—her recollections of Jude.

After they had rejoined the line for Lenin's tomb, it moved quickly while they amused themselves viewing the pictures they just took. The one in which Jude and Marx were doing a two-step got the biggest laughs. When they got to the gate that separated the line from the Square, they checked Karen's bag and camera, went through the scanner, and walked off towards the mausoleum, over gray cobbles. It seemed very far—a small cubed pyramid cut from red granite and black labradorite, dwarfed by the vastness of the blank, stone space that stretched over 500 yards from the museum to St. Basil's Cathedral.

As they walked, Karen thought of the scenes she remembered from television, during a time when this space was filled with parading soldiers and orating dictators. They reached the tomb and, as they followed the others inside, all around them became hushed. Imposing uniformed soldiers seemed to be everywhere, and one stopped a man in front, requesting that he remove his hat, before going forward. Karen was somehow surprised at the solemnity, for a man who had died over eighty years ago in a country that was now supposed to have forsaken communism.

The tomb was quite dark, and the line walked slowly up a short flight of stairs, to the left of which was Lenin. He lay stiff and waxen under dramatic but yellow lighting, arms thrust downwards, hands resting on his pelvis—one curled into a loose fist. As they crossed over the foot of the casket, Karen stared, transfixed. She was quietly overwhelmed with the weighty figure of this man, but could only think of how precisely trimmed his mustache and beard were—he didn't look real. She and Jude moved down the other side—not quite wanting to leave just yet, but having to—as the line was kept moving, slowly but surely, by somber guards and curators. The next thing they knew, they were out in the bright spring sunlight again, squinting.

They walked silently to the left of the building and around to the back, where, before the foot of the Kremlin wall lay buried other famous communists—Stalin, Brezhnev, Andropov. Each grave was capped with a length of marble, ranging from light gray to an unforgiving black, and from each slab rose the dead man as a block of the same stone, his image carved—his face welcoming whoever it was that apparently laid fresh red carnations on the sites every day. Karen imagined it was a lady from the old city, herself now aged as well, clothed in black with her tiny, sad face lost beneath a thick head scarf.

"So, what did you think?" Jude interrupted her romantic daydream. The fact was that she didn't know what to think—the whole scene left her ambivalent.

"There's dignity there, right?" She wanted to say that there was, but

wasn't sure, so she asked rather than stated. "I mean, I went in expecting a sideshow, you know? With his body preserved like that." Jude nodded as they strolled past Soviet history, names and faces in stone, an era. "But it wasn't. Well, it was, but it wasn't."

"I think it was a façade," Jude offered. But Karen didn't quite understand, and he saw this. "The dignity." There was silence again as they both pondered the issue. Karen searched for some kind of bench, something to sit down on and contemplate, because once they were out of the necropolis, the time for this was over. There was nothing so she slowed her pace even more.

"I guess it seems fitting," she finally said. Again, there was a thoughtful pause.

"He didn't want this though," Jude said. "Neither did his wife. The people wanted it. To preserve him for future generations. I suppose they weren't expecting Stalin, and they weren't expecting the communist state to ever end. But it did, and what does he represent now?" Karen thought about it and nodded. Lenin was a ghost. His bones were real, but they may as well have been ash. The people just wanted to keep them from blowing away, that's all.

* * * * *

At the sound of ceramic mugs clanking together Karen came to—tears streaming unnoticed down her face and the diamond of her ring pressed painfully into her thumb. For just a moment, she was overcome with the urge to run from the café to the hospital. She would cry and scream as she yanked cords from the walls and tubes from Jude's lifeless body. It wouldn't feel a thing; it is only ashes wrapped in wax.

Karen quickly composed herself, wiping her face with her sleeve and paying special attention around her eyes where she knew the mascara would be smudged. Charlie was approaching with two mugs—one latte and a house coffee, black. Karen was smiling, but her eyes were red-rimmed and her lashes stuck together, so he smiled back and set the latte down in front of her.

"I don't think I'll go back to that place," she said between cooling blows across the surface of her drink, moving the foam aside. She considered going to Jude's mother the next day. She might try to talk to her. They could sign the proper papers, and she could hold his hand and listen for the monitor until the incessant beeping became a long, drawn out siren, and the nurse would make it stop. She considered these things.

"Where, to Marla's?" Charlie asked, stirring his coffee although he'd put nothing in it. "Me neither." Karen nodded and blew the foam to the side again, eyes narrowed to the caramel ripples as she did.

Breaking the Surface: REWOUND

.....breathe.....
.....think.....
.....relax.....
.....hear applause.....
.....break the surface.....
.....like no one's watching....
...cooling calming clearing...
.....water flows.....
.....splash.....
.....toes pointed.....
.....knees straight.....
.....chin tucked.....
.....hands clasped.....
.....pull out.....
.....sight landmark.....
.....slowly.....
.....turning over.....
.....seems like forever.....
.....grab ankles.....
.....gain momentum.....
.....throw arms down.....
.....soar.....
.....fly.....
.....launch.....
.....land.....
.....feet together.....
.....spring.....
.....board gives.....
.....right foot pushes.....
left.....
.....right.....
.....get it done quickly.....
.....time to go.....
..what did I get myself into..
..shaking sweating twitching..
.....all eyes watching.....
.....oh so nervous.....
.....hard to think.....
.....can't breathe.....

Two Shoes

Two shoes. Two shoes lie abandoned on the blacktop at the bottom of the hill. Two shoes on a cold winter night. The stars are shivering in the sky, and he lies there, in the snow. Quiet, not moving. I wonder if he feels anything at all. I wonder if he hurts. I want to lie down next to him and listen to the cars whistle past on the road. I want to know if he's okay.

Sometimes I hope that I get shot. Not shot as in, "Bang you're dead," but shot as in, "Damn, that really hurt." Something Monty Python-esque. Just a shot in my back shoulder as I'm walking to 7-11. Or I imagine getting hit by a car, just clipped at a high speed, my body sent flying onto the sidewalk, a crowd of pedestrians screaming for someone to call 911 for God's sake, and a kind brunette holding my hand. It's not that I want to die. Sometimes I just want obscene amounts of attention. I want to be ogled over. I want to have "Get Well Soon" cards spread out across my hospital room, acres of them, from all of my distraught friends and the sad, stone-faced throngs of admirers in the parking lot beneath my hospital room.

I want to get hurt because I want to be helpless. I want to have a condition that requires someone paying attention to me completely. I want someone to laud my heroics. I want them to forgive me for my mistakes and cry over the times they hurt me and didn't treat me as well as I deserved. It's sick. I know. But I crave attention. I want to be the center of it all. I want to be the talk of campus for weeks.

I guess I'm being selfish. Thinking like this. After all, everyone wants attention; why do I deserve to revel in it more than others? God help me, but there's a little something (someone?) deep inside of me that celebrates when I get in trouble and dances with joy as I take a soccer ball to the nuts or slip and fall on the stairs at the bottom of my dorm in front of a large crowd.

And I like to think that a little someone exists in everyone. That all of us have a little someone or something in us, living only to suck up attention like a large black hole. Me! Me! Me! This creature screams enthusiastically.

The girls' quad is covered in Frisbees. And there are kids too, chasing the Frisbees, diving through the air, laughing. There are baseballs too. And gloves. And soccer balls. Everyone is having a good time. My roommate Hazen, Casey, and I sit by the dining hall, which affords us a commanding view of the quad. I spy Jenn Reilly and Justin Simon, squatting behind the faculty garden in the middle of the quad, their lips locking. I can see Marta Heinen running (gloriously). Mr. Ford is marching around, a smile on his face, plotting. Plotting to catch someone doing something wrong, plotting to put an end to the fun. Not that he wants to. But it's his job.

I finish my ice cream sandwich and grab my baseball glove.

"Hazen," I say, nodding towards the quad, "we should go throw a ball."

He nods and agrees, picking up his leathery glove, and shoving his fingers up inside it. "Let's do it," he says, jogging.

We nudge our way into an opening and promptly begin to expand our territory, throwing the ball a bit farther after each catch. Girls scatter out of the way, guys snarl at us and storm off. We command attention, our tosses arcing gracefully through the purple sky. The sun is a tiny orange globe swimming behind the tall maples that grace the edge of the quad. The hum of cars on the highway below assails us. A loud rumbling eighteen wheeler chugs by, heading north towards Franconia Notch, the White Mountains, the Northeast Kingdom and Canada.

Casey eventually rejoins us, adjusting his popped collar against his thick neck. He brushes his dirty blonde hair out of his eyes and sits down on the grass (grooving). We don't know when he smoked or where, but his eyes are bloodshot, and he's eating a third (third!) ice cream sandwich. Casey is stoned.

We like Casey. He's a good kid, and one of our best friends. Okay, he is our best friend. Hazen and I like to think of him as a brother. We don't really do anything apart. We are on the ski team together, we live across the hall from each other, we take the same classes together, we skip classes together, and we eat together.

The grass is soft. I enjoy lying in it, watching people as my baseball glove and ball lie at my side. Music courses out of the speakers set in the middle of the quad, reggae, Bob Marley I guess. Casey, Hazen and I watch as Ali Neal walks by, her hips swaying back and forth, her tan legs hardly covered in her very short shorts. Weston stands next to her, his hand on the small of her back, laughing.

I'm jealous. Mostly because Ali talks to me, which means that she likes me, right? She's popular, part of a separate social clique, most of whom don't really talk to me. They sort of just ignore me - us. The exceptions to the rule are Gillian, a Canadian from New Brunswick who I have been friends with (and been in love with) since the first day of school, and Ali. Ali is bubbly and excitable. Her blue eyes glow with happiness and she always has a big wave and greeting for me whenever I see her.

In the competitive nature of boarding school a wave from Ali is more than a wave, a smile is more than a smile, and a greeting is more than awell, you should be able to see what I'm getting at. Holderness is a massive congregation of cliques and any cross-clique fraternizing is regarded as unusual, to say the least. It is somehow...special.

Yes, Ali is a jock, and a preppy. And I am a shy kid. Correction, we (Hazen, Casey and I) are shy kids. And so it is slightly shocking and amazing each and every time she waves to me, which leads me to falsely believe that we somehow could (gulp) be together someday. I am delusional. I know. But I can forgive myself because I am a teenager.

Weston (the guy with his hands on Ali's back) is a jock, and he carries himself like one. His shoulders are thrown back. His head is held high. His curly locks seem to shine in the fading light of day, as if God were naming him "favorite son." I do not like Weston all that much.

I'm sitting in the diner on Main Street. A plate of hot eggs rests in front of me, on a fake marble table top. Pack, who's from Chevy Chase, Maryland, sits across the table from me. He's using the ketchup to make a smiley face on his poached eggs. Gillian sits next to me, her hair long, straight again. Not braided like it had been earlier in the year, when we had been out in the woods. Mr. Henriques, a middle-aged English teacher, sits at the front of the table and addresses us. "It's good to see you guys again," he says, smiling. "I thought we could get together this morning, before class and remember the good old days."

The good old days he is referring to ended about two months ago. It had been freezing and I had holstered the seventy pound backpack onto my shoulders. I could feel the pain in my muscles. Felt them crying out for me to sit down and rest. It had been twenty-two degrees below zero and the mountains, normally shrouded in clouds, were disturbingly unobstructed. Snow covered the mountains, in places eight feet deep. Our snowshoes had left deep tracks in the woods. We had been on Outback.

Outback is something juniors at Holderness have the option of participating in. (Optional only in the sense that, with great shame and your head hung, you could opt out.) In March, when it is still freezing out and winter is (supposedly) just winding down, we have to go camping in the White Mountains for two weeks. As luck would have it, our Outback had taken place in the middle of one of the worst cold spells in years.

"To the coldest Outback ever," Henriques exclaims, raising his glass of orange juice. "I didn't think you guys would all make it, (cough, cough) Pack, but as far as I can count, we're all here and I think we had a lot of fun while we were out there."

The truth is - it was great out there. In fact, it was the greatest experience of my life. It wasn't exactly fun (frostbitten fingers and overcooked meals come to mind), but it was unique and I suppose I learned something from it. I take pride in the fact that I did it, I stuck through, and I took part in something completely unique to Holderness School.

I remember cold nights, all of us hunkering around the fire, a hint of rubber in the air. "Oh man, my feet are toasty," I proclaimed moments before Bubba pointed out that the toe of my boot was melting. A potentially dangerous situation given my feet would be exposed to thirty-five below zero temperatures that night. Luckily he caught it in time and I patched it up.

I remember Ben and Gillian and me, sitting in a hut by a lakeside high in the mountains, the wind blowing viciously cold air against the blue tarp we had put up across the front. The smell of couscous wafted in from the outside, where it was cooking on the fire and I plugged my nose. "I hate that stuff," I said. They both concurred. We lay in our sleeping bags and talked about *Dumb and Dumber*, a warm shower, the radio.

"In just a few days, I'll be in Florida, sitting on a beach, listening to music on the radio" I said, smiling in the dark, my breath lifting off my tongue.

"I'll be in Canada," Gillian said, chuckling. "It'll probably be warmer than this."

Ben was silent a moment before saying, quietly, "In just a few days

I'm going to take a shower. And that sounds pretty nice right now."

I remember Pack, Bubba, Gillian, Ben, Mr. Henriques, Eliza, Sam and I sitting around a fire, telling jokes. I remember each and every face being warm and friendly. I remember feeling accepted.

I recall climbing on the bus at the end, old faces shining at us from within the warm, heated interior. Other groups that had been picked up before us, their hands pink and warm. I remember the way that the cliques, dissolved in the woods, instantly reformed. "Hey," I said to Pack, moving over to the window so he could squeeze into the seat right next to me. He kept walking, waving to his friends in the back.

I try and remind myself everyday that these kids I can't get along with at school are actually good guys. I tell myself that when we erase the cliques, anything is possible. That we could be best friends if we could just wander outside the protective cocoon that was Holderness. We had all been best friends in the woods. It is astoundingly clear that we are no longer best friends now. We sit around the fake marble table top rather awkwardly.

Pack is cordial. Sam is non-committal, only speaking to Bubba. Eliza sits and stares at the wall, smiling at Mr. Henriques' joke. Gillian is quiet, but friendly, talking in small bursts with me and Ben. We have lost our sense of accomplishment; we have since given up our grip on friendship and fun between us. We are divided, even at the table. Popular, shy, nerdy, foreign; we all sat in different corners.

When the food is finished and Mr. Henriques, our faithful Outback leader, is paying the bill, Gillian turns to me and says, "Remember how I told you, when we started solo – that if I got scared I would come to your tent?" I smile at the memory and laugh nervously. After a week together as a group we had been split up and told to walk into the woods, pitch camp and stay there alone for three days. They gave us food to eat and that was about it. We were all relatively close together, but far enough apart that we never saw each other. Each tent was situated several hundred yards from the next. We were expected to remain alone, by ourselves.

It gets pretty boring, being by yourself. I heard the rushing of the trees, squirrels running up and down my tent, coyotes, and my own voice. Inner monologue for three days straight. We were given journals, but I hardly wrote in mine. Instead, I walked through the woods for hours at a time, nervous that I would get lost in a sudden slew of snow. My tracks would become buried and I would yell aimlessly at the mountains, their peaks laughing at me from above.

"Yeah, yeah I do."

"You know," she says, leaning forward and smiling, whispering, "I tried to. I was afraid one night, all alone, I could hear the coyotes in the mountains and I put on my snowshoes and walked down the path, but in the night I couldn't tell which site was yours. Where you'd, you know, pitched your tent? So I headed back and slept alone. But I had Geoff, I had gone looking for you. I wanted to stay up all night, talking, laughing, forgetting about all the noises in the woods. It would have been fun."

I smile, my cheeks contracting, my eyes squinting like they do when I'm happy. "I wish we had."

I wake up cold, my alarm is gently prodding me awake. It sits at the base of my bed and I punch the snooze button. I pull the covers around my shoulders and sink into the warmth of my blankets. Minutes feel like seconds and the alarm roars to life again. Hazen struggles in the bunk above me. "Geoff, wake up, you've got class man." He mumbles, and I guess that his head is still stuffed into his pillows. He has first period off. He can sleep in.

The day is a brilliant orange, red and yellow. It is fall, and the mountain hovering over the town is covered in a light snowfall. I have art class to go to.

I walk into class late, and straddle my stool quietly. Ali sits on the stool next to me, her hands clumsily dragging charcoal across a brown piece of paper. She is frustrated, I can tell by her body language, the way her shoulders are slumped and her mouth pouts.

"What are we -" I begin to ask out of the corner of my mouth when Ms. Finster notices that I have arrived.

"Well, well, well Mr. Calver. Nice of you to show up on time."

"I'm sorry Ms. Finster, my alarm didn't go off." I smile sheepishly at Ali and she smiles back. Mrs. Finster walks away and Ali leans in and tells me that we're working on a still life in charcoal relief. I shake my head and sigh, pull off a new sheet of paper and begin to sketch, my hands slow, methodical. I am terrible at art, but it's okay. Ali smiled at me and I feel accepted, popular, just for a moment. As if, for once, I was in on the joke.

Weston moves across the ice smoothly, his skates fly. His stick serves to balance him, his shoulders heave back and forth. The air is cold and the wind bites our cheeks as it sweeps in through the open sides of our hockey rink. We are all crowded around the boards, our breath fogging up the glass. We cheer as the game begins. Arla, a freshman on the ski team with me, leans over and says, "Did you hear Boston College is looking at Weston?"

I nod. I have heard the rumor going around, and it isn't hard to believe. He is talented with the puck. He is a winger and he scores regularly.

We are playing Deerfield. The Big green. Their team is made up of post-grads, guys who are doing a second senior year to get into a better college or improve their grades. They are all twenty-year olds with beards and wide shoulders. They are essentially a young college team.

There is hot chocolate over in the corner and there is a long line waiting to wrap hands around mugs, hats pulled down over ears.

We score and I see that Weston has his hands in the air. The school cheers loudly and we bang our hands against the glass. I join in. I have nothing against him when he's on the rink. I have no problem with talent. I merely hold his popularity against him.

We lose 3-2. But we assure ourselves that it was a good game, because Deerfield is the top ranked team in New England, or is it Cushing? Either way, they're up there and we held our own. At least for a day.

It is cold out and we are huddled under sweatpants and sweatshirts in the room. We are still reeling from it all. Sam, a kid in my dorm and a friend of Weston, has a visibly swollen tattoo on his arm. It's a simple design, the

number four. He displays it proudly, his face beaming. It obviously means a lot to him. So much so that he was willing to carve it into his arm with a sterilized (and hot) end of a coat hanger. We smile sadly and acknowledge him. "It's great Sam. Really." I ache just a bit inside.

It is the first day of the ski season. We have been doing dry-land training for weeks, and I could scream with joy when the snow covered mountain rises into my view. It is fake snow, but Casey and I still bounce in the seats of our bus eagerly. I clutch onto my ski poles, run my hands over the finger guard, and pull my backpack around my shoulders. I swing my boots over the top of my bag, and pick up my skis. As we sit on the lift I am giddy. The snow on the ground is fake, and probably hard, but any skiing is better than no skiing. I look at Casey and smile, he is pulling on his poles and lifting the bar. "Let's do it, man," he says, looking over at me.

We tear down the mountain, following our coach. The ski hill is covered in large rolls of icy snow. The rolls are a result of snow making. They haven't groomed the trail yet, so they are spread out across the mountain where the snow has been dumped out of those big hoses lining the mountainside. I crest one hill after another until I hit the ground, hard. I can feel myself losing balance, my ski pulling out from under me. It's the ice. I know it. My legs splay and one foot rises up in the air. I am on my back, looking up at the sky seconds before I crash face first, flipping in mid air. My ski pops up and hits me in the mouth, my boots are still buckled in. I slide for a bit and then come to rest at the base of another roll. The team crowds around me and I taste blood on my lips. Swell.

The attention is focused on me for a minute, and I can feel that little something inside of me dancing with pained glee. Arla helps me stand up and brushes snow off my back. Casey gives me a playful slap on the side of my helmet and all is well. I choose not to exaggerate my injury. I clear off my goggles and pull them over my eyes again. "Let's go," I say, deciding that it would have been much better not to hurt myself at all.

The dining hall is unusually quiet. A large piece of paper clings to a billboard when I walk in with Hazen.

"Due to yesterday's events we will not be having class today."

I am delighted. A day off from class! No responsibilities! I think that, maybe Hazen, Casey and I can go skiing. Maybe we can take Casey's video camera and try to do some tricks in the woods behind the school. Then I see Mrs. Weymouth.

Mrs. Weymouth, my old English teacher and the dean of students stands in the doorway, picking her nails. Her eyes scan over the student body inside, who are whispering in hushed tones to each other. Someone sobs. A guy has his arm around a girl, comforting her.

"Mrs. Weymouth," I ask, "what happened yesterday?" I am speaking in hushed tones, conscious of the atmosphere inside the cavernous hall.

"Geoff," Mrs. Weymouth sighs, "Hazen." Mrs. Weymouth says our names slowly, and she puts her arms on our backs and turns us away from the dining hall and the silent students inside. "Last night, two of our students

were killed in an accident."

All I can say is oh my God.

"Oh my god." Hazen echoes my sentiments.

"Who was it," I ask, not sure I want to know.

"Weston. And Mike. Mike D'Amico." Weston registers immediately but I am not sure who Mike is. I do not want to seem rude and ask, my eyes drift to my feet. Mrs. Weymouth is now sobbing. "I'm so sorry to have to tell you guys. It happened late last night, most kids didn't find out until today. It was just before curfew. They were walking back from Irving when they were hit by a drunk driver. The guy drove away but there were witnesses and they found the guy early this morning."

I now remember seeing flashing lights on the road below campus the night before. I remember walking back from the gym with Casey and wondering what had happened. I can't recall anything else though. I don't remember hearing kids cry or scream. The lights, those cop lights, they had seemed so...inconsequential...and they still sort of did. I'm not sure how to feel. What are you supposed to do, how are you supposed to act when someone you didn't really like dies? I stand there dumb. "Father Weymouth will be in chapel all day today if you need counseling," Mrs. Weymouth says. I feel a kick in my gut. I don't feel like skiing anymore. Maybe I'm in shock.

Hazen is playing Sim City on Casey's computer. He just got it in the mail but his computer can't play it. I guess his computer doesn't have the requirements. Casey and I are sitting on the couch underneath Casey's bed in his freezing cold single. His fan is in the window, blowing cold air into the room on a January day.

"Casey, it's freezing." I say. Casey nods and closes the window.

I play with my hands and watch Hazen click on the mouse, directing roads and cities to be built, lives to spring up all over a city map on the screen. We are waiting patiently for the memorial service, which is in fifteen minutes. Some of my dorm mates don't want to go. "Why should I?" this kid, Bill, asks. "It's not like I knew the guy."

I guess I'm going to go on principle. I wasn't friends with him, but I interacted with him, I saw him all the time. I knew his girlfriend pretty well. I would feel like an ass if I didn't go. So I get onto a bus into town, along with nearly everyone else from the school.

There are cameras everywhere. We file into the church in the center of town and there are cameras everywhere. Concord Monitor. Manchester Citizen. The Boston Globe. I guess Weston and Mike's deaths have made big news. At this point I just want the assholes to go away. "They don't care who died," I think to myself, "they just care about getting the details everyone wants to hear. How many kids were there, how they were crying and howling, how good Mike and Weston were, how their deaths were such a great tragedy." I hang my head as I walk inside, I feel something tugging at the corner of my eyes.

James, a friend of mine from home, is in the church. He is sitting in a pew as I walk in. We catch eyes and I saunter over to him. He went to

Holderness for a year before leaving. It wasn't his thing. But he knew Weston, they were pretty good friends. His eyes are bloodshot. "Fuck man. This sucks," is all he can say.

Everyone is so eloquent in their speeches. I am near the back but I can see the podium, where, one by one, students, faculty, and parents stand up to talk. Some of their speakers deliver short monologues. Like our Athletic Director, Mr. Low. He grips the podium and chokes back tears; "They were good boys," he says. I nod my head in agreement. Some deliver long, rambling speeches. Like Mr. Ford, the dean of faculty. He stands at the podium, his tie loose around his plaid shirt and he rambles on and on about Weston and Mike, telling story after story.

There are sobs all around. Everyone is crying. Ali is standing at the podium, shaking. She is trying to form words, she is trying to explain the fire in her gut. She chokes on the words that are trying and come out, swallows and wails.

I choke back something. Hazen has his head down. Casey stares at the flowers arranged around the podium. I think about how Weston was there one minute and gone the next. I remember the last time I saw Weston, earlier on the day he was killed, in assembly, when the student body gets together. I sat one row behind him, my feet propped up on the back of Ali's seat. He had been breathing. His skin had been warm.

I think about Jason, a kid I went to elementary school with. He had red hair. He had a temper and he liked to call me a "flatlander" because my family was from Montreal. I remember we weren't always best of friends, but he did come to my birthday parties, I went to his. I remember getting a call from my mom, telling me that Jason had taken a gun and killed himself in his old trailer home, a year after his dad had done the same. I think about how I used to hang out with Jason, how he had blown his brains out. How quickly life can leave you. How sure we are that we will live another day. There is nothing certain about life. I cry. My chest heaves, loud, dry sobs escape my throat and I bury my head in my hands.

Weston's hockey and soccer jerseys are up on the wall of Bartsch, the athletic center. They are retiring his number. I am standing in the hallway outside the trainer's office, surrounded by team photos and the pungent smell of hockey gear. A year has passed since he died. A year. I remember the images on the news. Two shoes on the road, and a blue Holderness baseball hat. The one with a white H on it. He'd been hit so hard that he had been knocked out of his shoes and into the snow bank which covered the sidewalk he should have been walking on, if only it had been plowed by the town. Like they were supposed to.

I place blame on them. I place blame on the drunk driver, now serving 38 years in prison on two counts of vehicular manslaughter. I place blame on myself for not being friends with Weston. He was a good guy, I tell myself. I think about Outback. I think I could have really gotten along with him if

we'd been hiking in the woods together, devoid of cliques.

His jersey is all that's left of him for me to see. His number on both jerseys is white. It's a number four, like the tattoo Sam carved into himself on the fifth day after he died.

Sometimes I wish life was like a good movie or a book. I wish everything could make sense. I wish everything could be coherent and spelled out clearly for me. I wish I could grasp a sense of order and put it in my pockets to carry around like a trusty paperback. I sigh and give in to the fact that sometimes life doesn't make sense. That some things just don't add up. That life is confusing and disorienting.

The night is cold and the air is quiet. I can see my breath, can't feel my hands. I trudge through the snow, forging a path towards the road. The snow bank is still there, rising up out of the road like a tiny mountain of white ash. I take a deep breath and look at the stars. The moon hangs lazily above the clock-tower watching over the college in town. I am overwhelmed and I lie down on the snow, my hands behind my head. It is freezing, I can feel the snow against my bare back. I stick the bouquet of flowers into the snow. They sit alone in the cold air, trembling.

CAITLIN CLARKE

clumsY

clumsy I'm
clumsy with my hands and
often with my feet but
I'm worst with my words
clumsiest, clumsier
with explanations articulations
definitions descriptions
and worstly most recently
cumbersome and under some
horrid heaviness when I
speculate on -
gosh how to say this
- my
feelings.

Evolution of a Turtle

I remember the very last time I was human
Standing outside that dull brick building
Only a single tiny cavity emitting enough light
to occupy

[The dead space]

between cold
And life
The searing yelp of injustice
[R]icocheting through my ears
Bubbling to the surface of my skin
Screaming, clawing, scratching
As a section of the sidewalk lit up in tiny embers
To cast shadows of oblong figures across the grass
(engulfed in flames)
Smothered by an unfamiliar hoof
The slap of flesh hitting pavement
[A]nd then a pause-

The moon undressing itself before my heedful eyes
It was the very first and last time I had ever heard

Silence.

And within moments I found my eyes
To be small black [P]earls,
My back a hard shell of confusion
And lines
the proximity of anguish tripling in length
[E]levating, distancing
as I quickly shrank down to the damp soil
Taking solace in a tiny pebble
Finding shelter, in a blade of grass.

The Last Fairy Tale

Plastic Blades

Underwater. The sun is a hazy golden orb far from reach. If you swim down, it's quicker that way. Every thing is circular. Swim down far enough and you will be flying among the clouds. It's okay though. You can still breathe in the water. Air. Water. It's all the same.

I'm flying through the sky when Chris wakes me up. Dressed and downstairs with a bowl of cereal and a glass of chocolate milk. Channel surfing through the morning news, I finally settle on C-SPAN where some no name reporter is asking some grey-haired White House correspondent idiotic questions. After turning the volume up, I plug in the coffee maker for Chris. The morning sun glares through the window over the sink and I turn on the garbage disposal. When Chris walks into the kitchen I'm dropping freeze dried marshmallows into the churning disposal. Clovers, pots of gold, rainbows, and red balloons. Supposedly the blades are made of plastic, but I can't help but wonder if it would eat my finger if I stuck it in the hole. I start to stick my spoon down the drain. Just to see what would happen, when Chris leans over me and turns the disposal off.

"You know you aren't supposed to run that with the water off. Did you remember to take your medicine today?"

"Yes."

He stares at me. I hope he hasn't been counting my pills lately. I knew I should have flushed them. Take note, and don't forget again.

Sonata No. 11

The bathroom reeks of smoldering hair and skin. I stare at the girl in the mirror, and her blue eyes peer back at me from an oval face framed with brown hair. Sandpaper tears run down our faces. Mozart blasts from the portable stereo perched on the bathtub ledge and dances around the small room, bouncing off the tiles. The stereo sits next to a half empty bottle of wine. Chris is outside, pounding on the door, shouting my name. Press down and count to fifteen. One Mississippi, two Mississippi...

Lift the curling iron from your arm, leaving behind a searing red line. Close your eyes and pick a new spot. Wash, rinse, repeat. The mirror girl mimics me, but everything she does is backwards. I hear Chris fiddle with the door knob, but the lock holds. Then he is gone. By the time the next sonata begins to play he is back and removing the knob. He pushes through the door and grabs the curling iron away from me, pulling the cord from the plug at the same time. He drops the appliance on the floor and as it bounces on the tile he leads me out of the bathroom. Flecks of burnt flesh cling to the curling iron. The girl in the mirror is gone, and I can't remember why I was in there.

Chris is on the phone. I can hear him talking frantically. Sitting on the floor next to the bed, I pull some gauze from the cabinet of the side table. On the surface of the polished cherry wood table is a stone jar with 'Hopes and

Dreams' engraved on the front. It was a birthday present from Chris after we got engaged, back when I was sure that he would save me. That he would be my prince. That we would live happily ever after. I take it down and place it in front of me. I keep antibiotic ointment and first aid cream in that jar. I finish dressing my burns and Chris walks into the room. He runs his hand through his short dark hair and tells me that we are going for a drive.

Road to Hell

He looks at me and reaches over the console to touch my wrist. The scars on my arm are a background for the angry welts and burns. I withdraw from his light touch; pull down my coat sleeve, and he notices that I seem to shrink into the grey upholstery of the passenger seat. His eyes fill with pain as we drive into the hospital parking lot, my forest green duffel on the back seat.

"I'm not doing this to be mean. I worry about you."

"Just so you know, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I hope you enjoy the trip."

"Isabelle," he exhales as he says my name. His mouth gapes open like a fish's but he doesn't say anything further. He hasn't called me anything but Izzie for years.

The hospital waiting room is a sickly pea green. Chris scratches away at a clipboard, filling out the entrance forms. I stare at an ant crawling across the grey carpet. I lean forward and Chris momentarily forgets the paperwork as he watches me pick up the tiny insect. I beam up at him and feel the corners of my eyes crinkle as I give him a toothy grin. Exposing my crooked lower teeth as I bring my thumb and index finger together.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what, Izzie?"

"I made him scream," I reply as I wipe my fingers on the beige chair I was occupying and Chris goes back to his paperwork.

Oddity

Have you ever had a dream so weird, so bizarre, that it could only have been real? I don't know who the man with the grey eyes is. I can never remember the rest of his face, only those haunting grey eyes. I wish I knew who he was. Most nights I dream about him, he is trying to kill me. I tried to tell Chris about my dreams once, before we were engaged. But I couldn't make the words come out. Instead, we discussed the weather and my coat.

It's beautiful out, he said. So why do you wear a coat? It's odd.

"My coat has nothing to do with the weather," I replied. It's the odd things that keep people from looking too closely. If they don't look, they can't get close. And there's no risk of getting hurt.

He thought for a moment. But if there's no risk of pain, then there's no hope for love.

Apparently he thought I was odd. However, three weeks later he proposed to me and I stopped wearing my coat when it was nice out.

Swallowed Alive

The ward has long cavernous hallways. I worry that I'm going to be

swallowed alive here, and the only one who will know is me. The orderly walking next to me is yapping on about something, but I have bigger concerns right now. I have to watch the hallways. A girl with a ratty blanket wrapped around her shoulders traipses around, dancing from doorway to doorway, staring at me. The blanket, a filthy mauve color, drags along on the floor behind her. We can hear someone scream at the end of the hallway, the sound bounces off the plaster walls and echoes on the tile floor. The girl grins at me and skips off. This place is going to drive me insane.

Ward E

Pine Valley Hospital. Ward E. The women's psychiatric ward. Exit signs hang over locked doors, over filthy windows. Fake plants and cheerful colors. A pleasant prison. The orderlies wear blue scrubs and the nurses wear purple. Most of the walls are a pale pink, like you would paint a nursery. The whole scene looks as if an Easter egg threw up all over the ward.

The plastic vegetation tries to obscure the fact that the windows are bound by iron. Even the dirt for the tropical plants is fake; the only thing real is the baskets they sit in. The plants are something that could never exist, they are as if something grown from a magic bean. Glass isn't solid. I read that somewhere. Or maybe it was on TV, I don't remember. Hundreds of years from now that glass in the windows will have melted down, oozing and covering the window sills. Yet those bars will still be there, rust ridden, yes, but still there.

None of the furniture in the recreation room matches. There are three couches, two arm chairs, and four various tables. It all looks like something that came from Goodwill or somewhere similar for the same low price. Most of the chairs are a variation of some sort of floral pattern. One couch has been worn and battered almost to the point where it is a floral lump in the middle of the floor.

There are twenty-three of us living here at the moment. There is a range in ages as well as in diagnosis. No one is supposed to know theirs, but some are much easier to figure out than others. You can tell who the anorexic ones are, the schizophrenic ones, or the mentally deficient ones. It's constantly loud here. But it's not the good background loud that I prefer. It's more of a hectic loud. A busy loud. It makes my thoughts race and I wish I were a kid again. Mom and Dad fought a lot. It was a hectic loud. My sister and I used to make a fort and hide until everything was over. We had her little record player in there with us. We would play Mozart.

Snow White

"Do you think there's such a thing as happily ever after?" She doesn't even bother looking at me. Her almost black hair is blocking her face from my view.

"I used to. Maybe it's still out there. Who knows?" I watch as she stares out the window. I unpack my duffle and gently place the clothes Chris folded for me in a dresser drawer. Thinking of what he said when he handed me my duffle and turned me over to the orderly.

This is only for a little while. I'll come and visit every week. You need more help than I can offer you. Please don't be mad. I love you. He kissed my

forehead and watched as I was led away.

I wake up to Chris kissing my forehead; he's standing over me and brushing the hair from my face. The light rain falling outside taps gently on the sliding door to the balcony. The blue ocean rocks and the yellow sand blows in the wind. We're in the Bahamas and tomorrow is the last day of our honeymoon. My mouth tastes like sleep and our bed smells like sex. He kisses me on the mouth and while my tongue dances with his, I pull him back into the mess of covers. At that moment time stops, and for the rest of the day we stay in bed.

Sometimes I can't tell reality from the web of fairy tales people spin around me. The people here can't be real. And I swear there are ghosts in the halls at night. Footsteps and giggling echo up and down the corridors. It's at night that I know that there is no prince. No white horse. The girl I share a room with is seventeen. On her third suicide attempt her parents locked her up. She's failed at everything. And I kind of pity her; she couldn't even kill herself right. I wonder what her name is. She sleeps like Snow White in her glass coffin, with her dark hair laid out on a white pillow. Waiting for happiness to ride up and take her away.

Prince

Chris came home from work one night right after my mother died to find me locked in our bedroom with a bottle of cheap vodka in my hand and a knife from the kitchen in the other. When I told him the man with the grey eyes was in the house, he searched every room. When he found nothing in his search, he didn't believe me and I was promptly lectured about being drunk. He loves me, but he never understood. He shouldn't have been late that night.

I said something along the lines that it was better to be a drunk than to sleep with my secretary and cheat on my wife. I found out later that his secretary was actually a man named Mitch. But at the time I didn't know any better, and Chris didn't like my accusation too much. I took a blanket and my bottle and slept in his car that night. He drove a Mustang then. The next day my sister said I should go easy on him. She's worried that I'm going to drive him away like Mom chased away Dad. She also suggested that I stop drinking. She also thought we should do something nice for Mom, as her birthday was coming up soon and neither one of us had been good daughters lately. I hung up the phone and haven't talked to her since.

Best Price Around

"Isabelle Myers." The nurse stands behind me. I ignore her. To my left I can hear the girl with the blanket giggle. "Isabelle Myers."

"What?" I lean my head back, resting it at the top of the floral couch that probably came from Goodwill. The nurse looks irritated and hands me a tiny paper cup from a wooden tray she's carrying. I used to put ketchup in cups like this at Wendy's. Now I want French fries. I look at the colorful pills rolling around in the cup. Green, blue, yellow. "What's this?"

"Your pills. Do you need water to take them?" She gives me a half assed smile and starts to offer me a small plastic cup of water.

"No I don't need water. I'm not taking them until I know what they are."

"Now, Isabelle. The medication is on your chart. You can discuss this with your doctor later. Take the pills." Her fake smile is gone and her green eyes flat with indifference.

I put the pills in my mouth. Ignoring the bitter medicine taste I stash them under my tongue and fake swallowing. The nurse continues to stare at me with those flat eyes until I grin at her and open my mouth. I consider asking her to find me some French fries, but the pills would have fallen out of my mouth, and the jig would have been up. Once she walks away to harass someone else, I slip the pills from my mouth and into the seat cushion of the couch.

The girl with the blanket walks up to me and lies down on the couch. Lies down on me. Her filthy, dark blonde hair spreads out on my lap like a skirt. A greasy blonde skirt.

"I saw that, Ms. Eesabelle" She grins a crooked smile up at me; she hisses the first part of my name like a snake. Suddenly she sits up and looks serious, the sing-song tone gone from her voice. "I'll give you two cigarettes for each pill. You won't get a better price anywhere else."

I eye her to figure out if she's serious or not. She slips six cigarettes from her pocket and sets them on the couch. I slip my hand into the cushion and pull out the three pills. She stashes them in her pocket and nods to me.

"It was nice doing business with you, Eesabelle. I'm Margie." And with that she scurries off.

Night

I don't sleep at night. Bad things can happen in that darkness, so it's best to stay awake and keep a look out. I used to have Chris to help keep me safe at night. I would be curled up next to him, his arm slung haphazardly around my waist. I'd press my cheek against his chest. It's always been that way since the first night.

But at Pine Valley they do room checks after lights out. If they find you awake they give you a shot to make you sleep. Snow White warned me, and Margie told me all she knows about them. She says that they give her the shot and then she wakes up with cigarette burns or missing underwear. One morning she woke up pregnant. Margie is a schizophrenic. While she might not be the most accurate source for information, she runs her little hobby out of her room. Crazy, but a decent business woman. Apparently she used to be a lawyer before she was diagnosed. Her prices are high, and her demands are odd, but she's always willing to trade pills for things she wants. Nail polish, cigarettes, cookies. If you want pills, you go to her. Everyone knows, but no one says a word. I suspect Snow White has visited Margie's stash.

Bird

I love the feeling after a cigarette. The nicotine soaring through your blood. However, I hate the way my mouth tastes after. One thing Chris never understood is why I smoked anyway. Light up. Inhale. Exhale. Repeat until the glowing tip is introduced to the filter. Perhaps it's stupid, but every cigarette brought me one step closer to cancer. Closer to death. Smoking and drinking were the only way I knew how to kill myself. They were the only ways that I actually had the guts to follow through with. They have a porch for us. It's right

off the main room, the 'Recreation Room'. I used to be able to kill myself damn where I pleased. Now I get to kill myself in this tidy little cage. There's a rocking chair and a bench. The bench is for us. Implanted in the middle of the bench is a dented metal ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. Every time I'm out there I think about jumping the fence. I wonder if I could fly away. I wonder if I could become a bird and break free of this cage.

At Pine Valley, you aren't allowed to have lighters or matches. Patients who have been labeled as 'self destructive', like me, must be monitored at all times. They check on you as you watch TV, they make sure you eat, they follow you into the bathroom, they check on you every half hour at night, they light your cigarettes. Kind of ironic actually. I'm not allowed to do anything alone, to the extent that they watch me slowly die.

Sometimes I feel as if I'm about to float away. Walking through the mostly empty corridors of the ward, I noticed that they opened the windows today. Sunlight that would normally be blocked out because of the excessive filth on the glass was finally able to stream through the open windows. I could only put my arm through the bars before an orderly noticed me and shooed me away from the window. I wonder what ocean I would have ended up in.

Butterflies

"Evil and sin come in the form of butterflies."

"What?" We are sitting in the recreation room. The old catatonic woman sits like a grasshopper in a navy armchair, the fabric worn almost to the stuffing. Some of the other patients are positioning her in a rather rude manner and laughing hysterically when she stays that way. Eventually the orderlies will shuffle over to chase them away and put her back into a normal sitting arrangement.

"Evil and sin come in the form of butterflies. The variations of butterflies are the different evils and sins of the world. Will you look out for the butterflies?"

"I will." The television blares in the background. Some cartoon that two patients are screaming and clapping at.

"Don't let them get you. Beware of sin and evil. Be---"

"Isabelle, it's time to meet with Dr. Branson." The short blonde orderly beckons me from her windowed office. I stand up and walk towards the orderly as, keys jingling, she steps out of the office to escort me to the therapist. I really should learn her name, but I honestly don't care that much.

"Stay away from the butterflies..." Margie curls up under the ragged blanket, hiding her eyes with her left hand.

The Joke

He actually wants me to say something. This is stupid. I hate him. His bald head reflects the florescent lights back at me. Blinding me. Instead I focus on the patch of fraying carpet at my feet.

"Well, Isabelle. Our time is almost up today, is there anything you want to say?"

Silence. I guess I should say something.

"I heard a joke on TV the other day."

He stares. His round form fills the oversized desk chair he sits in, and whenever he shifts his weight, it creaks like it's about to collapse. I ignore him and continue.

"A boy is in an elevator with a woman. He starts sniffing the air. Then he turns to her and asks a question. 'Can I smell your feet?' he asks. The woman looks bewildered. 'No you may not. Why would you even ask such a thing?' she says. Then he says, 'Oh. Then it must be you---'"

"Isabelle. There's no need to finish. Margie told me that joke yesterday. There's no need for such vulgarity, and obviously the television needs to be supervised more closely." He pauses and stares at me. "Do you want to talk about anything else? How have your dreams been since you got here?"

Now it's my turn to stare. Shifting my eyes to the framed pictures he has on his desk, I stay silent. He has two kids and a skinny brunette wife. One of the kids plays baseball. The other is posed in front of a piano. I don't know why he faces the pictures away from his side of the desk. Maybe he just likes to show off how normal he is or something. I bet he drives an SUV.

Crazy

We are all just living life through a string of softly spoken lies. Chris comes to visit me twice a week. He brought his sister once, but she never came back. Which is fine with me, I never liked her much anyway. I found out later that she was trying to get him to divorce me. Something about me being crazy was creating a bad environment for him. Like I was doing it on purpose.

He asks me stupid things. Like if I've been taking my medicine, how the other patients are, where I want to go when I get out of here. No. Crazy. I don't know. But of course I can't tell him that. Instead I start to blabber about how I want to go to Colorado when I get out. I don't know why. I really have no desire to go anywhere near Colorado. It was just the first place that came to mind. Maybe I really am crazy. Instead I tell him that I've gotten better about medication. That the other patients are a bit odd, and sometimes share stories about who stole whose jell-o at lunch a few days ago, or which orderly has a date for the upcoming weekend. And of course Colorado. Of all places.

His visits start to blur into monotony. He comes every Tuesday and Thursday. When the visits first started, I tried to ignore him. It was his fault I was there in the first place. He never should have left me. But he wasn't trying to shove me off on someone else. If he had been he wouldn't have come to visit me, he wouldn't have called me. Sometimes he brings me stuff, sometimes he doesn't. I don't mind, it's nice to have someone who isn't female or a shrink around. It's nice to have him around.

The ward has a room where we can shower or take a bath. It reminds me of a giant locker room, only without the lockers. Showers line the back and left wall and in the middle of the room sit five large, Victorian style bathtubs. The tubs are old, their claw feet clinging to the yellowing tile. One time when I took a bath here, I tried to sink down. To get to the sky. Unlike the ocean, you can't breathe the bath water. You only get a mouthful of soapy water. The bitter, clean taste made me gag and cough. The nurse looked up from her magazine and Snow White peeked out from behind a shower curtain. I've only taken showers since.

Dr. Branson once asked me why I thought I could breathe water. He asked if I knew the difference between dreams and reality. I told him I did. It wasn't a complete lie.

Rapunzel

Mostly I sit in the corner and ignore everyone. The nurses get mad at me because I steal their pens and draw on the floor. They say something about creating more work for everyone, but I'm not really listening. One nurse has decided to 'help' me quit smoking. She's taken away most of the cigarettes that I got from Margie. Since the nurse has taken to confiscating my cigarettes, Margie has stopped bothering to buy my pills, so now I take them sometimes. She's afraid the cigarettes will link her back to the pills and her little hobby will be discovered. The nurse, maybe her name is Cara, is young. She reminds me of Rapunzel. She braids her long hair and then pulls it back into a bun. I want to ask her to let down her hair. I want to know if it will reach the ground from one of the windows. We are on the fourth floor. Maybe if she leaves it out the window, a prince will come along and take her out of the ward. I don't understand how she could work here. Most of us patients can't stand living here, but we have no choice in the matter. The other patients say that she's new to the profession and some of the more normal ones like to act extra crazy around her. I think she is on to their plan, though. She told me once that she had worked at a hospital before this one. Whatever, I count the minutes on the clock and wonder about her hair.

I wonder if I still have a job. Probably not. I haven't been going for the past several weeks. I was a waitress. And now I'm here in the hospital. I wonder if they know where I am or if they just fired me. They probably fired me. I wasn't very good at it, and showing up drunk a few times doesn't bode well. It's surprisingly easy to forget someone who is never there. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, but that's mostly bull shit.

I count the minutes and the days. I've been here for three weeks already. I pray that I'm not turning into a lifer like Margie or one of the people that have been stashed away like Snow White. I never did learn her name.

Take Note, Don't Forget

"I hear that you are quitting smoking. I'm proud of you." Chris looks at me. It's Tuesday. The first visit this week. This time he has brought me a Hershey's bar and a Weekly World News. I'm hopelessly addicted to trashy and ridiculous tabloids. I wonder what zany antics Bat Boy is up to this week. Maybe I'll leave it in the recreation room. You know, just to see what happens. These crazies will believe almost anything. Margie especially, and she's delusional enough to begin with.

"Cara is making me. You asked her to, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't ask anyone to do anything. And who is Cara?"

"Cara. The nurse with the long blonde hair. She's making me." Please let her be real. Please don't let everyone else's craziness be rubbing off on me. For a moment I start to panic. What if I made her up? I don't want to be here for life.

"Do you mean Karla? She's the one who told me you were progressing

with that. She says that she's proud of you, and so am I."

Oh. I've been calling her the wrong name. The good news is that I'm not hallucinating. She's never once bothered to correct me. Why wouldn't she want someone to get her name right? Take note and don't forget.

Something of Value

We buried Mom five miles away in the woods. She wanted her ashes spread over the ocean, but I didn't want her sinking and watching me from the sky. She can't see me from three feet under the earth. Anyway, the only place she has to go now is China.

I went to visit her shortly after, as a way to apologize. But I'm worried that she isn't there anymore. I wonder if she left because she was mad at me. Or maybe someone with a metal detector thought that they found something of value. Well the joke is on them. They just found my mother.

They found Snow White in the bathroom one night. I heard her get up to leave, but I spent the rest of the night running away from the man with the grey eyes. Rumor has it that she overdosed. Margie denies all involvement, but her little store has been rattled out and she is required to comply with random room searches. Never once did I see Snow White have a visitor. Sometimes she got a phone call, but she always was more upset afterwards. I almost suggested that someone kiss her, Snow White wasn't dead, just sleeping. Hopefully now her parents will visit her. Hopefully they hadn't stashed her away for so long that they forgot about her. I found out her name when I heard the news. Her name was Leslie. And her happy ending never came.

Happy Ending

Summer came and went while she watched out the windows. She ceased taking the array of pills prescribed to her shortly after she started; instead she dropped them through the wire of the smoking porch whenever the nurse wasn't looking. Maybe they melted away, maybe the birds ate them. She never knew. After Leslie died, she shared her room with someone new. An anorexic girl who threw Margie's blanket over the fence on the porch. It took three orderlies to keep Margie from going over the fence after it. But maybe she just wanted to become a bird and fly out of this place. Izzie started to talk at her appointments. She stopped doodling on the floor. She sat with other patients. At a glance, she was recovered.

She was released as an outpatient in early October. She went back to work, and stopped starting her shift drunk. She was grateful to Chris, who had told them she was visiting her parents in Colorado. Never mind that her mother was dead and her father had walked out a long time ago. To say she magically got better would be a lie. Sometimes she wondered what happened to Karla or Margie, but more often than not, her thoughts would drift away from them as quickly as she thought of them. Three months later, Chris woke up to find her missing from bed. She was in the garage, the car still running and an empty bottle of rum on the concrete floor.

The funeral was short. Few people came, Izzie's sister and a few people from the restaurant. The priest said a few words before he handed Izzie back

over to Chris in a tiny wooden box. The mahogany cube with gold trim sat on the passenger seat of their Saturn. His Saturn. He took her to a nearby river and spread the ashes on the glass surface, and watched as the smooth river swept her away to the ocean. Soon she would be among the clouds. He smiled as he put the empty box back in the car. It's what she would have wanted.

She had left Pine Valley Hospital as she entered it. With no prince on a white horse, with no magic beans, and without a happy ending. Chris still loved her, yes. And yes, he remained loyal to her until the day she killed herself. But, he eventually moved on and became someone else's prince. Izzie was dead. Now he has a framed picture of a wife and kid sitting on his desk. The picture faces out.

ERIC CANZANO

Attachment

Soil, settled firm and content and
Hardened with assurance,
Nestles close to a flower's roots.
Cruel Circumstance,
Indifferent Circumstance,
Inevitably falls on the flower,
Wrenching its passionate body,
With petals streaked with embers of the fiery sun,
Rich with color's caress and wind's stroke,
Forever from its life source.
Soil lingers, thrown askew by upheaval,
Scattered and dug loose, cast out of native land
By abrupt absence of its labored fruition
That lay, from forces ignorant,
Naked and lifeless.
Chance of soothing rain
Mend the fragments to the earth.
Only this liquid grace will herald
Another sprout, another chute birthed
In the midst of decay,
Though it too be cast out
And soil begin its torment again.
What once be undoubtedly solid
In an instant, meet change.

Knock, Knock

**Removed by the
Request of the
Author**

Lie to Me

Lying is wrong. I know this. If it is not the golden rule, it is certainly platinum, and if honesty isn't quite everything, it's close. That's why I didn't believe my psychology professor when she taught a unit on lies—the lies we tell ourselves, the lies that keep us functioning. She put it nicely, or maybe just technically, saying, "We create a system of representations that allow us to exist. We need schemas, shortcuts, even erroneous beliefs. The truth is too much for our minds to handle. If we tried to relate the enormity of the world to the minutia of our existence, we would be paralyzed. We would cease to function."

As a class, we protested our innocence and clear mindedness. We're college students! We're skeptical! We see the world for what it is! Of course, that was until she demonstrated the effects on us with a series of small experiments: estimate what percentage of the world has blue eyes, estimate the likelihood you will land your first choice job, explain your last test grade.

Almost unanimously we displayed false consensus (everyone shares your beliefs), uniqueness bias (belief in the significance of your own life), and the self serving bias (that success is because of my actions and failure is because of circumstances). It was the first time I'd heard a collective gasp. "These are the real lies," she asserted, "But we need them."

* * * *

I walked off the porch into the South Carolina evening. The sky was deep purple, and there was heat lightning in the distance. The air was wet, and the loose hairs around my face started to curl. Across the street, the pink-shirt woman tended to her grass, picking weeds with tweezers, trying to make the lawn as perfect as her neighbor's ferns. Every day I watched her eye the ferns, and tweeze, and tweeze. Every day I thought about revealing that her competition was made of silk. Instead I waved and continued walking.

The pool was about a mile from my aunt's house and I liked to swim there at night, when it was empty and the water was smooth. The pool lights spun bright orange webs along the floor. They were hypnotic across 10, 20, 50 laps. I used the lights to forget anything but my rhythmic breathing, counting the strokes and the slicing kicks. By the end of the summer I was swimming miles at night, running miles in the morning, moving and moving away from the hours in between.

I must have inherited my love of swimming from my grandmother. When she was 92, she still swam twice a week, waking up and toddling down to the bus for the Y. But turning 93 changed everything. Grandma was too tired to swim now. Maybe it was time to hand in her badge. Through the summer, we'd sit on the couch in her apartment, and more than once—an hour—she'd say, "I just don't have the pep that I used to. Seems my get up and go just got up and went!" The hilarity of this statement was never lost on her, and, sometimes, if I didn't laugh hard enough, she would explain it to me.

I had come to Greenville to take care of her for the summer. I was the only grandchild without a summer job, and the great grandkids were too young yet to be caregivers. I lived at my Aunt Sue Ann's and went every day to my Grandmother's apartment in Rolling Green Village, an 'active adult community'. Rolling Green is a set of mini-neighborhoods with cute coordinated names-- Lakeside, Creekside, Hillside-- connected by walking paths designed mostly as Eagle Scout projects. At the center of the -Sides is an apartment complex with five different colored buildings, a dining hall, and an assisted living complex. Grandma lived in the green building, in E205.

Truthfully, I didn't like E205 and I didn't like Rolling Green. The air made you want to pray the Rosary. There was something hanging in it that reminded you of the time you had left, or how much time is in eternity. The apartments were populated mostly by women in their 80s and 90s, wheeling or walking around, filling their hours with chores they didn't have to do, four different showings of the local news, and talk of their grandchildren, or death. They talk about death most often at Rolling Green. When they do, it is casually, jealously. I have to imagine that they cried at the funerals they went to, when they buried their brothers and cousins, parents and friends. But now the tears are only of bitterness; that someone else left before they did-- that they were left behind. When a man on the first floor died in July, Grandma and I watched the parade of cars that come for funerals: floral trucks, an ambulance, a hearse, some limos, a UHaul. The lobby was thick with pollen from flowers and sugar from condolences. But no one was sad. They were envious. "He's gone now," they'd say, "he's lucky."

Watching the great masquerade of living by so many who want to die gave me a clammy feeling in my stomach and on my hands. I wondered at their desperation not for life but for the end. "Why is the Good Lord letting us live so long?" Grandma looked up at me. "Why is He letting me stay here when I'm useless?"

By the middle of the summer I had run out of new answers for her speeches. She was tired of living, I was tired of lying.

"My generation is living too long," she said. "They told us to take care of our bodies, and this is what they get! We're eating up the resources." It was unpleasant to think of life and death in relation to infrastructure.

"Grandma!" I would say, "You aren't living too long, you're living just long enough!"

Still, she was begging for death, trying to starve, forgetting to bathe, trying to somehow catch a cold in her hot, musty apartment. It was how I knew she was lying when she said in a flat, mechanical voice, "But, no, I've had a good life." She was saying it for my sake, or because my aunt had hated this speech enough to ask her to stop. When she went to bed and I left Rolling Green, I would wonder at the purpose of her good life, her five children, her job and her travels, if she could only resent its longevity at the end. I thought about what she told me, how the days were too long and the trees were too tall; how the world had gotten old. My mind wandered looking and looking for things I thought were new.

I was sent to Greenville because Grandma was losing her mind, a statement that is bland and meaningless when you hear it or read about it or use it when you can't find your keys. For Grandma it meant keeping over a hundred individually wrapped slices of bread in the freezer, tagged and bagged right next to the three or four loaves she had bought at Publix. As I sat in the kitchen removing the slices one by one, detangling them from the teeth of the ice-maker, I did not dwell on the absurdity of what I was doing. Instead I focused on being as quiet as possible; Grandma hated wasting food. When I found 26 oranges in the bottom drawer of the fridge, just a week after I'd last cleaned it, I told her I was taking them to Sue Ann's for supper. When she let a dozen bananas rot on the counter, I asked if I could take them for banana bread.

I didn't like lying to my grandmother. I told myself I might eat 26 oranges in one sitting or I might make myself some cider orange punch. I could even use them as a garnish. So it wasn't really lying. If those oranges got thrown out, it was unintentional and unrelated to the instance where I promised they'd be used. I would make Sue Ann do it. I already lied to Grandma enough when she commented on how tall I'd gotten, or, worse, how she was starting to forget. It seemed pointless to tell her blunt pamphlet facts about vascular degeneration and sinking, slouching bones. Like I was caring for a child, it was hard to know when I should tell her the truth and when I should gloss over the facts. I wondered how to bridge the gap between answers given to kids and consequences given to grown-ups.

It's not as if she didn't know she was changing. I watched her as she slid her hands back to her lap and tried to grip something from reality. It was too much to ask of her, to bear the conscious loss of her faculties. She would explain, slowly, as if to convince me, that she used to be quite sharp. She ran her hometown hospital with remarkable efficiency. Hastings never had a nurse like her. She wrote perfect schedules and always finished her reports in time to help out the ER. She was the first one called to fill in. "Durbin," they'd say, "we need you." They gave her a pension, in the end, even though she'd technically been a part time worker.

She had a good head. Had, she would clarify. I gave her a long winded answer about the benefits of change and how her life is still good in so many ways, but I was 19, these were lies, and she knew it. Her value came only from solace; it was just something else to disdain. And sometimes, watching her sort through her confusion, it was almost enough to understand why she wants to die. Many times she would look up from reading the paper and ask if I could tell something was wrong with her. Sometimes in the middle of a story she would purse her lips, and put her fingers on her face, saying, "Haven't I told you this before?"

"No, I don't think so. What did happen to Uncle Paul?"

It was a lie. We sat in the living room, every day, and I listened with my book open. The stories were familiar after a week: she maintained not only the exact words, but also the exact order of her pauses. If I could bury myself deep enough in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, I might not hear again the story of poor deaf Lucy. It always followed "Uncle Paul moves to California," the account of how Uncle Paul was literally allergic to his home. In the end,

his weak sinuses cost him contact with most of his family. Shortly thereafter, poor Lucy would be deaf, but no one would realize that was the trouble. In school the nuns would think she was stupid and shake her for disobedience. We closed with a classic story of starvation overseas. Far be it from us to feel depressed only about subjects within the continental US, Grandma reminded me that in foreign countries literally everyone starved to death. In fact, she knew a girl who was adopted from Russia that stole food from her parents and neighbors. They found it buried in her room when the house started to smell of mold. She lived in America the rest of her life, and never did believe there would be enough.

"That's so sad," I would say, exactly on beat. The Count was 100 pages into his revenge on Fernando, and slowly destroying his marriage, his wealth, and his life. Grandma continued her stories. It was always the sad ones-- the death of Cousin Randy, women who hated their babies. I wanted to ask her if she remembered something about life aside from who died and how and if that meant they lost the farm.

But then she would pause and say, "But, I believe it. I believe that people are mostly good." It was the same voice she used when she said she was grateful for life.

Grandma and I used green notebooks. In mine I kept a journal and wrote letters to my friends back in Pennsylvania. "Dear Maura," they read, "Weather's beautiful down here. Grandma's better every day; we're reading Tom Brokaw. Do you need any oranges?" I couldn't say whether I wrote the letters for Maura or for myself. They were not honest, but they were words going somewhere, words saying that everything was alright. The letters may have revealed what I lied to myself about—that I was unable to help her, that I was failing this job and stagnant at Rolling Green—but still they were hiding it, somehow.

Grandma used her notebook to conceal her condition from family and callers. She wrote down what happened each day, taking notes so her life cohered. "7/26," it read, "Anna here (again). Called Tom. Sandy ok. Choir practice Tuesday AM." Every other page or so held a list of family members, written out like an exercise. I couldn't say whether she loved or hated the notebook, but she needed it. Even as it called attention to the new failings of her mind and memory, it helped her mask them. When Tom called back, Grandma knew which kids were his, she knew what to say. Conversations with Tom seemed almost normal.

Grandma was often reading from her notebook in the afternoons when I came to wake her from her daily nap. "Oh! Anna! How are you?" She scanned her notebook to see if I was expected.

"I'm great, Grandma. I picked up some tissues for you." I placed the grey marbled box in the cabinet, finding three more bottles of shampoo and a misplaced bar of soap. "How was your nap?"

"Oh, I never sleep in the afternoons." She closed the notebook. "How are you?"

"I'm doing well. I got us a new book from the library this afternoon." I pulled old post-its from the phone. Buy shampoo, Choir on Tuesday.

"Good, good. And what did you do this afternoon?"

"Not much after I left you, actually, just picked up the Kleenex you asked for." I wondered if she'd notice that I just answered differently. When she repeated questions, I never knew if I should be repeating answers.

"Great!" She didn't seem to care. "And how are you?"

By the end of the summer, the good days were when she didn't compare me to a fascist dictator. Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, she had no preference, or maybe I was enough like all three, demanding that she eat her lukewarm Beef Wellington and wash her hair. She would look at me, heavy lidded with suspicion—"What are you doing here?" she'd demand. "Go get yourself a job!" When we were out at the store picking up new shampoo or a gallon of milk, she'd point out every business that was hiring. I'd arrive in the mornings and find post-its tacked on the phone—"cancel caregiver."

It was worse during full moons. For no scientific reason, Alzheimer's and dementia patients experience symptoms more dramatically at full moon. Like a werewolf, Grandma would bare her teeth once a lunar cycle. We fought over small things, like which half of Europe was considered eastern. She told me I was overly cruel and overweight. We fought over big things, like whether or not I could convince her to bathe, wear different clothes, or move from the couch. We would fight until she fell asleep. I could fight hard because she wouldn't remember when she woke up. I hated it, hated yelling at her, hated losing to her, hated saying terrible things because I knew I had to. She would claim she had cooked breakfast, she had gone swimming, she had just come back from a walk. But she hadn't moved, she hadn't eaten, and these were lies, the small delusions that kept her alive. She was imagining a life because she needed one. But they would also kill her, hunger and disease. When I told her the truth she recoiled into the couch. She looked at me, big eyed for a moment, then angry, she repeated the same argument. I cooked breakfast, I went swimming, I just got back from a walk. It could last for hours. Eventually I would win, and she would quietly eat her sandwich and let me wash her hair. I would lather and rinse, anxious to finish, so she could fall asleep. When she woke up, she would believe again the things she wasn't.

The worst of these nights, my mom would call Rolling Green. Grandma would say I hadn't been there in days.

During my last week, I was washing shirts, sitting in my usual seat in Rolling Green's laundry room, listening to the buttons hit the wall of the dryer with an empty metal clank. I was wondering about the tissues. Grandma got weird about tissues. I had found 16 Kleenex in three pairs of shorts, and still ended up covered in lint after doing her laundry. The shreds floated in the room like clouds or big, fat snowflakes.

Laundry reminds me of Grandma. I think of when I was young and she would come down during the winter. After school we'd lie around in our uniforms until she came swinging through the house, braying, "Take off those clothes or I'll throw you into the washer with them!" We would squeal and run up the stairs on all fours to change. She would have made sticky buns or cinnamon bread during the day. She was in her 80s then, and had more

energy than I did.

I lie to myself and say that these will be the memories I have of my grandmother, that I won't remember her from this summer. I will remember her fresh cookies, and how she always made oatmeal scotchies for my dad. I will think of how she always greeted us with spaghetti and meatballs. And how amazed my brother was when he discovered the reason they were so good was that they were made of beef. Beef!

I will think of walking to the park from her Hastings apartment, and at night falling asleep to a lamp painted like Niagara Falls. Grandma would come in to check on us, and waves would travel across the room as my sister and I pretended to sleep. Grandma loved waves; she loved to swim in the waves at Glendale Lake, to look at them. The people of Hastings always thought she was crazy for standing there, loving the water, watching the water. I will remember staying up late watching Shark Week because it was educational, and how I cheated the first time I solved her Rubik's Triangle. I will remember these good things. These cannot be lies.

* * * *

The summer ended. In two days I packed and went back to school. I called home one night, driving back to my apartment from mini-golf or the grocery store, maybe. My mom had just talked to Grandma and was filling me in— she was doing fine, she liked the new caregiver, she asked about me and what I had done over the summer. The roads were wet. I stared at the white and yellow lines and cursed and cursed. Grandma didn't remember. She doesn't remember, but I do, I have to. I remember every slow minute and shred of emotion and which of the lies slipped out of me.

I thought back to my psych class and my apologetic professor. It isn't true, is it, the meaning we ascribe to ourselves. Our actions do not make a difference, to a 93 year old woman, to our neighbors' ferns, to our world. Nothing we do will last and live on after us. It is ludicrous, how passionately we learn to love a world that will leave us, go on without us, spurn us, and eventually destroy us. It doesn't matter, you just join them all, the ones before you, the dust under your feet. So you'll coat someone else's shoes and everything will continue. What holds you are the lies, the illusions, and they expire. Slowly your life becomes an exercise in the meaningless, and even if you live as a shell, your husk has a memory, it holds the pain.

My professor was right. We do need lies to function; we need to believe in our significance, believe in something-- like boy scouts who build walking paths or grandmothers who tell stories. I need to believe my life will add up to more than Rolling Green Village, more than pleading for the end, this slow frailty, these lost minds. I need to think my life is my own and means more than a forgotten summer and the hard truth of a psychology teacher. So I will join them, the liars. I will contort some scaffold and call it my past. I will build from it, adding and annexing, making my life's work from lies and biases like they were brick and steel. In the end, I'll be surprised to find it made of straw, that my lies are destructible. I'll watch trembling as the building is knocked down so quickly, so easily, by one summer, one grandmother.

Child of Freedom

Cigarette smoke rose in the glow of the red numbers on my digital alarm clock. I sighed, stubbed out the butt and dropped it in the cut-class ashtray on the bedside table. A quick count told me there were eight butts therein, meaning I had smoked six since laying down to sleep. I sighed again, rubbed my eyes. The clock read 1:49. I did some quick math - I had to be up at seven. If I fell asleep in the next eleven minutes, I would have five good hours of sleep before my self-imposed reveille. I sighed a third time, hoping it would turn into a yawn. No dice. This was pointless.

The wind had been howling all night, rattling the glass in my window, making the branches of the ancient pine out front creak and wail. It seeped into the cracks around the pane (the house was old, no longer airtight) and countered the hot air rising from the metal radiator. The room was small and stiflingly hot on still days. The bitter cold coming in from outside made insomnia a little more tolerable.

As the night wore on I watched the moon pass from east to west. I watched Orion as he traveled from the eastern horizon to a point high in the southern sky. I watched the lilac bushes and forsythias on the far side of the yard as the wind tossed them. I watched the world grow still and silent as the hours passed. No more violent dance from the bushes, no stinging cold thrusting itself in through the window. The howling of the wind quietened, and I slowly realized it had been replaced by a new sound. This was a howling in its own right, but softer, more feeble and somehow more desperate. I listened to this new sound for some minutes, trying to determine its origin: it was weak and intermittent. A hinge on a gate? I sat up, listening intently: it was coming from right outside my window. There were no hinges or gates outside my window. I got up, walked over and put my hand on the cold glass pane. An animal? I looked down. Beneath the window grew a rose bush and, since I never mowed around the rose bush, thick tufts of grass. The perfect hiding place for something sick or distressed.

But why advertise its position to predators by calling, especially if it was sick? I puzzled over this for a few moments before I realized, as it let out a particularly loud call, I was listening to mewling.

I yanked the chain of the light on my bureau, and in doing so caught the clock's red glow in the corner of my eye - 2:36. I grabbed my silk underwear and sweatpants from the floor and threw them on, stuck my feet into my hiking boots (but did not tie them), then threw on my black pea coat and grabbed the flashlight from its home in the nightstand drawer. I rushed from the room, practically fell down the stairs to the front foyer (my landlady slept like the dead, I had no fear of waking her), then slammed out the door. Cold bit into my skin wherever it was exposed - on my face and hands, the back of my neck, even the tops of my feet. Ignoring this, I swung around, passed the pine tree, and crunched through the grass to the rosebush. The mewling ceased.

I shined the flashlight on the ground, then knelt down. The dull cold of the earth worked through my layers, latching onto my knees. I focused my at-

tention on the bush. It was winter, but the bush was still a tangled mess of thick, thorny switches. I had just started pushing these aside when I heard one more "mew" from right beneath my hand. I moved the beam down.

Nestled into the grass, its paws tucked under its body, head drooping so low that its nose almost touched the ground, eyes closed, was a kitten. For a moment I marveled at how tiny it was, probably just having opened its eyes; it could have easily fit into one of my hands. I felt a sudden pain in my chest, empathy for a tiny helpless creature all alone in a cold, dark world. Then, I picked it up.

Delicately, I brought the creature to rest against my bosom, then buttoned my coat, clumsily, with one frozen hand. The kitten resumed its mewling, sounding short, distressed cries in rapid succession, and in the clear light of the moon I could see its tiny spikes of teeth dully glinting. I flicked the flashlight off and hurried back inside, rushing through my own clouds of white breath.

Once inside, I climbed the stairs to my flat slowly and made my way through the birdhouse of a living room to the mouse hole of a kitchen. The glowing red face of the microwave told me it was 2:42. I flipped the switch on the wall, set the flashlight down on the table and shed my coat one-handed, then kicked off my boots. I glanced down at the kitten. It was still mewling softly, having dug its shrimp-sized claws into the wool of my sweater. I stroked its entire body with my free hand, feeling its tiny bones and new fur, absentmindedly searching for injuries. It was calmed by my stroking, stopped its crying, and pointing its tiny nose toward my face, opened its eyes for the first time.

They were still blue, but I figured they would change to green or orange soon enough. The kitten itself was calico, that kind of dusty golden calico that comes from all the colors mixing together the individual strands of hair. It had a white splotch on its chest.

"So you're a little girl," I said to the kitten. She stared at me weakly, head wavering left to right, and mewed in her plaintive voice. "And you're probably hungry." Keeping one hand cradled under her hindquarters, I walked over to the fridge. I took out the milk bottle and closed the door with my hip, placed the bottle on the counter, then pulled a tea saucer from the cupboard. I set her down on the counter, dashed some milk into the saucer, and pushed it towards her face.

She pulled her paws under her body, mewling again.

"It's milk," I said, kneeling so that we were face to face. "It's good for you. Here -" I dabbed my finger in the saucer, then on her nose. Her tiny pink tongue shot out and she tasted cow's milk for the first time; she blinked slowly, swallowing several times as if trying to decide whether or not she liked it.

When the kitten finally tucked into her saucer of milk, I pulled a tin of tuna from the pantry and proceeded to feed her small bites, which she took gratefully if not graciously. By the time she'd finished her meal, she was purring contentedly and crouching on her pinky-sized legs. I stroked her head with a finger and she swung her face over to mine, bright blue eyes burning into me. Again, I felt a stab of softness for the little thing. "Where's your mother? Why did she leave you all alone?" I asked, but I knew the answer. I could paint the picture in my mind. All the other kittens had died, most likely from the cold. The mother came back to her frozen litter, plucked the one warm survivor from her place, and moved her to a safe place (beneath my window) while she went

searching for food. Something went wrong there. It had to, if she was gone so long that her baby started crying for help. It meant one thing: she had died. From the cold, or perhaps a predator of some sort had gotten her - a fox, a hawk, a Chevy. Everything is hungry and desperate in the lean, cold months; everything will take whatever it can get.

At 3:27 I gathered the kitten back into my palms, turned off the kitchen lights, and walked back into my bedroom. I laid some newspapers in an old shoe box and placed the kitten in there, waiting for it to do its business. When separated from me she started crying again, loudly, opening her pink mouth wide.

"Shh, baby, it's okay, I'm right here," I cooed. "I just need to make sure you don't go in my bed." I stroked her head again with my finger and she quietened.

At 3:38 I was curling back into bed, the little ball of fluff warm on my chest. Her tiny humming body, the rapidly beating heart, the small breaths exhaled onto my collarbone were a balm to my soul, and they carried me into sleep.

I slept through the alarm that morning, waking instead to the sound of the phone ringing. I grabbed it from the cradle and sank back into my pillows. My "Hello?" was thick and strained with sleep.

"Kay?"

"Shit," I said. "What time is it?"

"It's 8:30. I just landed. Where are you?"

"I'm sorry Josh, damn it, I missed the alarm."

"You aren't even out of bed?"

"No," I winced, put my hand to my forehead.

"Well, what am I supposed to do here?"

"I don't know honey. I'll uh... I'll come get you."

"No, don't worry about it," Josh said.

"Please don't do the passive aggressive thing."

"I'm not being passive aggressive," he said. I rolled my eyes. "I'll get a taxi. Go back to bed; you need your sleep, right?"

I held the receiver away from my mouth while I sighed, then said, "I'll pick you up from the train station." I knew he'd find a way to make me pay for a taxi.

"Fine. I'll call you when my train gets in."

"See you then," there was the faintest note of pleading in my voice.

"Yep." Click. I dropped the phone back on the cradle, then pressed the balls of my fingers into my temples, thought better of it, and lit a cigarette. I barely had time to wonder where the kitten was before I felt a small thump and a sharp "mew!" from the bottom of my bed. I took a drag of the cigarette, exhaled, and said, "Did you jump all the way up here?"

"Mew!"

"That's a big jump for such a small cat."

"Mew!"

"What, are you hungry?"

"Mew!"

"Alright, alright. Let's see what I have in the kitchen."

At 9:09 I sat down to my kitchen table, spreading the days work out in front of me. In those days I did freelance translations, mostly of scientific papers, from English to Japanese or vice versa. It was kind of an odd job for a woman at that time, but growing up in a Japanese house had given me a rather lucrative language skill, and living in America had enabled me to attend a highly regarded university and leave with a degree in biology. Research hadn't suited my taste, so while I was figuring out what to do with the rest of my life, I banked on my language abilities. It allowed me to live rather comfortably on the second floor an old Japanese lady kept open for boarders. She liked me because I could speak her native tongue and I helped her with the yard work. She liked having another Japanese to celebrate New Years and other holidays with, she liked that I would sometimes cut fresh flowers and leave a crude ikebana arrangement on her kitchen table. I knew I could get away with anything in her house. I knew the kitten would not be a problem.

I found it hard to concentrate that morning, between waiting for Josh's call and watching my new friend. She lapped up the milk and tuna eagerly, and after a trip to the shoe box (which I had moved into the kitchen), she settled on my lap. I didn't have it in me to move her, and wondered vaguely what I would do with her when Josh called.

At 10:25, while I was having my second cigarette and first cup of coffee, I heard the crunch of tires in the driveway. I let the pencil fall from my hand, looked down at the kitten. "Can you believe it?" I asked her. "The bastard took a taxi." She looked back at me, blinked perplexedly. I smiled at her puerile, innocent sweetness. "Don't worry your little head about it," I said. Then I scooped her into my hand and, holding her against my chest, walked downstairs.

Through the half-light glass of the front door, I could see Josh pulling his suitcases from the trunk of a red '72 Impala. I knew that car. My eyes narrowed briefly, but I stopped myself, determined not to greet him with suspicion. He had reason enough to be cross with me, in his mind.

As he walked up the drive, a suitcase in each hand, he called, "Hey Keiko." His voice was flat. He was not excited to see me.

I turned the door handle, pushed it open with my hip.

"How was New York?" I asked.

"Fucking cold. Colder than it is here."

"Why didn't you call me to pick you up?" He was climbing the steps as I asked this, but he stopped suddenly, looking at my hands.

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a kitten," I replied nonchalantly. "I'm not good enough to pick you up?" I continued. So much for a warm greeting, I thought. "You had to call Donna for a ride? Donna with her hot rod car?"

"You don't like driving... what the fuck Kay? I hate cats."

"There's coffee on the pot," I said, defeated. "Get inside before I let out all the warm air."

"She bought that car used, anyway."

"Mew!" the kitten said.

I stumped back up the stairs behind Josh and his suitcases, having one of my "Josh moments," wondering why I put up with his bullshit - his flippant

attitude, his constant flirting with other women, his cursing. I've been known to pass a few hells and damns from between my lips, but Josh was truly foul-mouthed. It irked me. I wondered this, and realized these moments had become more frequent in the recent past.

I curled up in an antique armchair in the living room, listening to Josh pour himself some coffee. The kitten was likewise curled up in my lap with her big blue eyes fixed on my face. I felt a wave of calm wash over me, a gem of pure shining happiness.

"Keiko, we've got to talk." Josh was leaning against the doorjamb. The gem was shattered.

"What about?" I asked coolly.

"The cat. There's a box with shit in it in the kitchen. He's got to go."

"She," I corrected.

"She, it, whatever. Gotta go."

"Are you allergic?"

"No, but I hate cats."

"Well," stroking her head slowly, "I don't"

"Where did you get the damn thing anyway? Don't tell me they were giving them away in front of the supermarket or something."

"No -"

"Jesus fucking Christ, I'm gone for three days and you think -"

"Josh -"

"You need to replace me after forty-eight fucking hours, that's -"

"Josh! It has nothing to do with you! Will you please stop cursing?"

"You curse sometimes."

"I know but," I sighed. "I heard her crying outside my window last night. Her mother is dead. She would have frozen to death." This was a strong enough argument for me.

Josh sipped his coffee and muttered, "You should have let the damn thing freeze."

"What?"

"Nothing, listen, what about Mrs. Yokoda?"

"You know she won't care. She'll probably say it's good luck or something."

He slipped back into the kitchen.

"Did you say I should have let the damn thing freeze?"

"Yep."

Looking at the kitten, the helpless ball of fur, the tenderness in my heart returned. Then I imagined finding her frozen and dead beneath the rosebush, and my heart likewise turned to ice. "What's your problem?" I called, and I could hear the edge in my voice. "What if I let you freeze to death while you were crying for warmth?"

He walked back into the doorway and said, "Please don't be melodramatic. You know I hate that," before returning to the kitchen.

I stroked the kitten and let my thoughts wander. I was suddenly thirteen again, staring at the stiff body of the hamster we had kept in my brother's room. I had played with it more than he ever did, I think, but Jim was older and apparently more responsible. He was better suited to care for an animal, my father had

said. I remembered wiping a few tears from my cheek and cupping the lifeless body in my hands, stroking its cold fur. My mother was suddenly kneeling beside me. She had always had a knack for moving silently.

"Put that down," she said to me in Japanese, not unkindly, "you'll get sick."

I had obeyed, placing the body back on its bed of pine chips and slowly closing the door of the cheap wire cage.

"What happened to Hamlet," I had asked (I nodded to myself with the kitten in my lap, smiling a little. We had named him Hamlet; it was my idea. I'd felt so clever).

"He died," she had replied.

"I know that," I had retorted, "but why?"

My mother's face was lit in strips of sunlight from the Venetian blinds; she closed her eyes and said plainly, "Jim forgot to feed him." Simple as that. "You should wash your hands."

Josh stood in the doorway once more, leaning against the jamb. I opened my eyes and looked at him evenly. He returned my look and said, just as evenly, "I'm not living with it."

I finally had something to assert myself with.

"I am," I said.

"Well, I guess I won't be living with you." He must have meant it as a joke.

"I guess not." Simple as that.

"What?"

"Get out." We both disbelieved me at first.

"Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not. I'm keeping the cat. If you're going to have a problem with it, you can leave. No one's stopping you. Your bags are mostly packed already, anyway."

He stared at me from the doorway, mouth hanging open, coffee mug still in hand. I rolled my eyes. "Josh, you've been looking for an excuse to leave for months. Don't deny it."

He didn't.

"I'm saving you the trouble. Leave. Now. Please."

There were no foul words or nasty looks thrown in my direction to mark Josh's exodus from my life. He left as simply and easily as he came, leaving nothing behind save for a single sock that I found weeks later, lodged between the mattress and the box spring. This quickly became a toy for the kitten. I didn't see him again until several years later, at a festival in San Francisco. He was married by then, and looked a lot older, something had happened around his eyes to make him look softer. His wife had a clean, plain look about her; when we met she was glowing with pregnancy. I felt happy for him.

By 12:03 it was just me and the kitten on my second floor flat, and I was well into the day's work when I heard the front door slam and a cracked old voice call, "Tadaima!" I smiled, put down my pencil, knowing what was next. "Shall I make some tea?"

"Yes, thank you!" I called down in Japanese. Shortly thereafter I stood, gathered the kitten from the bathtub (she'd been exploring for most of the morning and had taken a liking to the bathtub), and headed downstairs.

Although the house she owned was clearly Victorian in its architecture, Mrs. Yokoda treated it like a mansion from our motherland. She had converted the bay window in the sitting room into a kind of tokonoma, with fresh flowers every week (at the moment there was a potted poinsettia) and a Japanese scroll. She'd had the traditional low tables sent in from Japan for the sitting room and the dining room, and surrounded them with cushions. She had even put down tatami mats like throw rugs in those two rooms, despite the fact that they didn't match the dimensions. I loved this about her; I loved her insistence on living like a Japanese. She once told me that she couldn't make this country Japan, but she could at least make her space in the country as Japanese as possible.

I stopped at the edge of the carpeted sitting room and the hardwood foyer, stepped out of my clogs and into the soft blue slippers she kept for me.

"I have a surprise for you," I said. She bustled out of the kitchen, a small woman with graying hair and dark skin splotched with liver spots. Her face broke into a grin when she saw the kitten. She said, "We have received a gift. This is cause for celebration."

We knelt over our tea while the kitten played with a ball of yarn bigger than itself. Mrs. Yokoda made small talk in Japanese for a while, but I could tell she wanted to discuss something other than the baker's sticky buns and the florist's orchids. I also knew better than to try pulling whatever that was from her lips.

Eventually, she said, "Did Josh return from New York?"

"Yes," I said, keeping my eyes on my tea.

"But his car isn't in the drive."

"I suppose it isn't."

Mrs. Yokoda sipped her tea, then made a small, knowing noise in her throat before replacing her cup on the table. "Well, you can use my car whenever you need to."

"Thank you," I said, "but that's not necessary. I have my bike, and it isn't far to town..."

"You know, I never liked him."

"I know," I said. I enjoyed that she talked to me like she was my mother.

"It was because of the cat that he left?" she probed.

"It was because of the cat that I made him leave," I said softly, and looked up at Mrs. Yokoda. She was smiling.

"Good," was all she said. We sat in silence for a few moments, then: "You ought to name her Fukiko."

I wrapped my tongue around the syllables, "Fukiko," then I said in English, "Child of freedom." I switched back to Japanese. "It's appropriate, isn't it?"



Skeleton

Luis Alberto Ruiz Quintero
Medical Illustration
September 2005



Early Morning on the
Charles River
Caleb Baker
Digital Photograph
August 2006



Hidden Surprise
Melissa Gagermeter
Film Photography
4 x 6 in
August 2006



Bermuda Sunset

Sarah Fagan

Acrylic on Canvas

24 x 30 in

March 2006

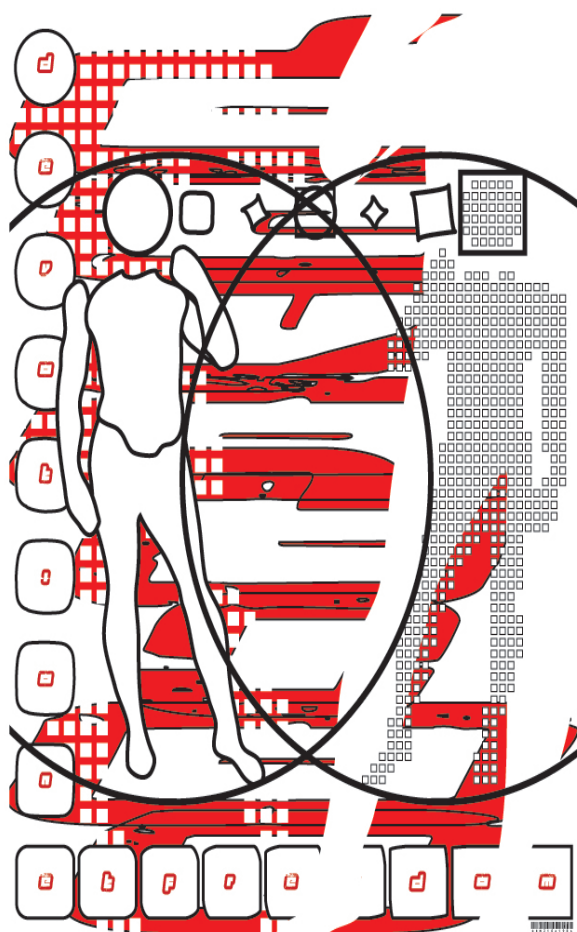


Unfinished Business

Marilyn Springer

Oil Paint Using 2 Colors and White

Fall 2006



David
Brian Menna
Glicée
27 x 41 in
April 2005



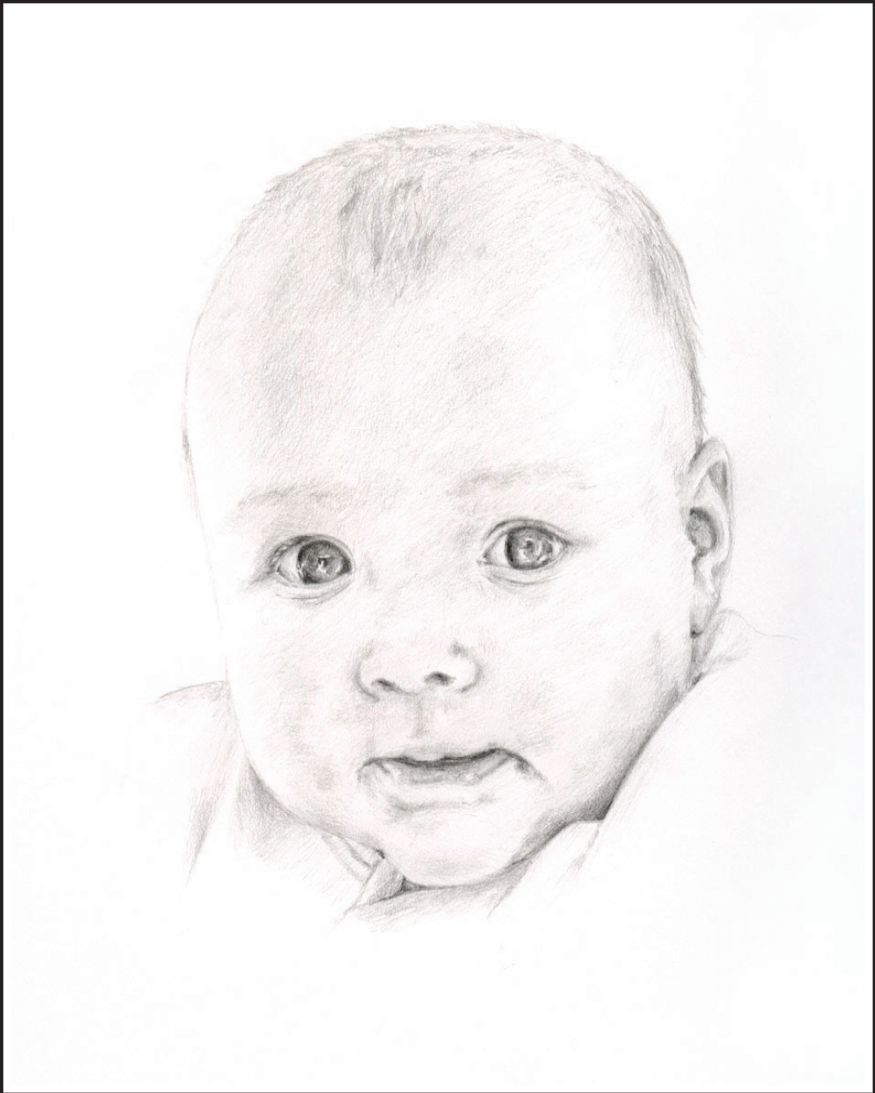
The Old Familiar Sting

Jaime N. Schock

Black Permanent Marker on Notebook Backing

8 x 11 in

Spring 2006



Jasmine
Makenzie Seiple
Pencil
7 x 7 in
April 2006



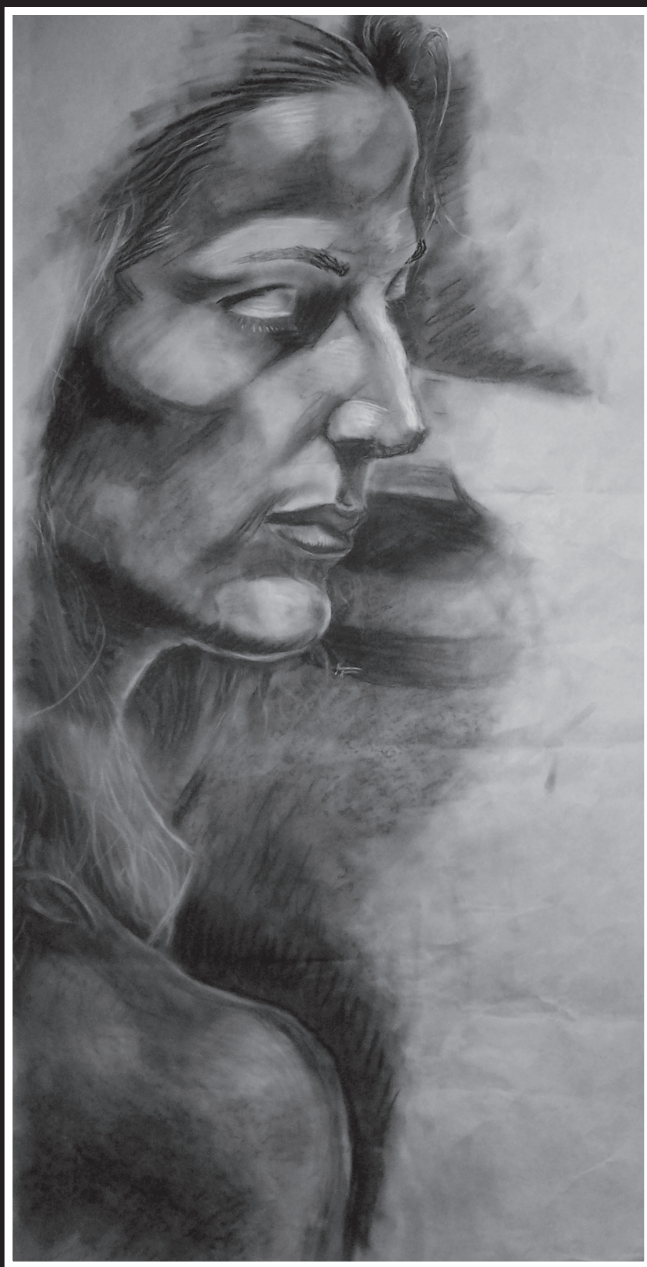
Makenzie Seiple

Makenzie Seiple

Pencil

11 x 14 in

October 2006



Face 2

Geoff Gaenslen

Charcoal on Paper

24 x 48 in



Platos Españoles

Jen Lazuta

Digital Photograph

March 2006



Jazz Club
Jennifer Kuzmik
Charcoal and Conte Crayons
17 x 24 in
November 2006



Andalucía
Maura Culkin
Digital Photograph
September 2005



Molly
Terry Ann Hayes
Colored chalk on black paper
Lifesize
October 2005



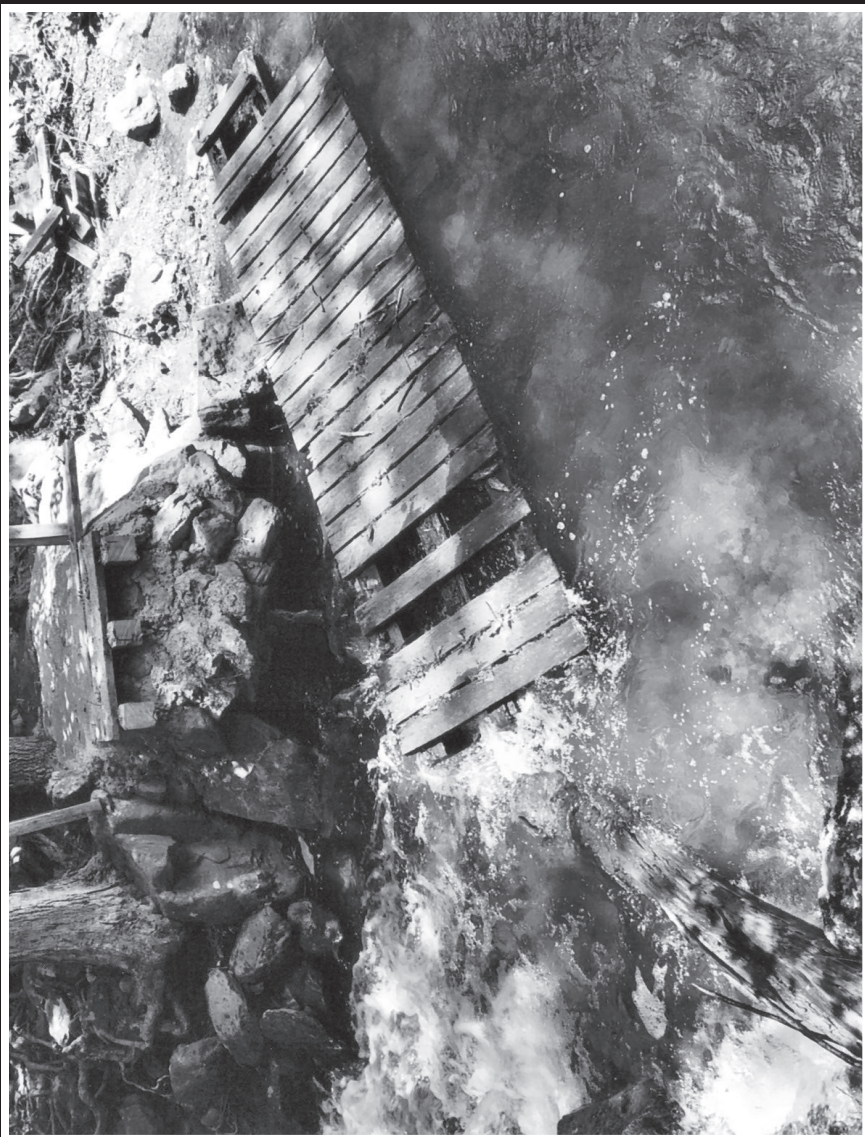
Lemons

Erica Wiles

Ink Print from a Zinc Plate

12 x 9 in

November 2006



Forgotten Roads
Melissa Gagermeier
Film Photography
4 x 6 in
October 2006

Edward the Saint

In 1887, the "safety bicycle" hit the shelves:
with its two identical owl-eye wheels,
it promised that, New York or Alabama,
dirt or asphalt,
if, or inevitably when, you fell from its height,
you wouldn't hurt yourself.
Well...all that badly.
But falling from a bicycle is much different from falling into life.
Into someone's waiting hands.
Both can be catastrophic, if you make them,
when you emphasize the flaws
- the rocks
- the yellow curtains
- the passing motorcar
- a pressed flower album
And growing up is no easy chore, for then
you've got the added risk
of others on the road.
Passing the landmarks: your father's store, your clapboard school,
the cemetery, the church, the ocean.
The tree you splattered the perfect snowball against.
The blue gingham dress of the girl you kissed behind the fence,
who gave you her ribbon and died of pneumonia in the fall.
If you look closely enough in the dirt,
you can still see the footprints
from your graduation march
or the tire tracks
of that "safety bicycle"
that you rode outside of Paris,
on leave from the war.
The ripples of water from your arms
when you fell into the stream
with a bullet in your back.
The string of diamonds
that trailed from your mouth
up through the water
and exploded on the quicksilver surface.
To be a saint is to revel in life
and to catch the patterned scarves it trails off
in its winding path.
It has nothing to do with piety
or holiness

Enough

she was bipolar in a bottle
who liked to count the hard grains of sand
as they slipped through her fingers

he was intoxication
who introduced himself as maurice,
the space cowboy

they'd get tipsy on spontaneity
and submerge themselves in sunsets
sprawled out above them

they'd bottle the crayola colored scene
like children catching summer fireflies
in those old jam jars

but even all the breathing holes
couldn't make the scene last till morning;
she's bound to awaken in darkness

that's the thing about potential
it never leaves you feeling full.

KAREN HENDERSHOT

Stutter

look at my f-f-face
do I look f-f-funny to you?
could you t-tell by my mouth?
mmmaybe it's the look in my eyes.

Look of fear.

fffear of people laughing at me,
of teachers that repeat que-que-questions
of s-s-sisters who f-finish my sentences for me,
of waiters who t-t-tap their f-feet for me to finish my order.

Spit it out!

The s-s-stall worsens with nerves

Struggle, Stammer, Stutter.
Until they give up on me,
Assume my words are wo-wo-worthless,

Assume that I am worthless.

ANDREW YOUNG

Masticate

Sitting like a petit Victorian goddess,
the blonde raises ripe, red apple
to lush lips, opens, closes, chews.
Quaint jaw muscles grind,
trained to move ever so slowly
as the fair lady nods to fellow queen
recounting disposed male attendants
of bygone debauches. Staring secretly
I pine for soft skin, blue eyes, blonde hair
flowing around amble breasts
and stunning body. The pair cackles
at tales of deceitful love,
while the beauty sinks teeth into juicy
flesh. Chomping, gnawing, squashing
lips move up and down, methodically
devouring morsels of men
that the serpent continuously consumes
with deadly eyes and pointed face,
forever sings her hellish ode, luring
heroes toward ferocious jaws that
lead, tempt, covet, kill.

Ode to Death

**Removed by the
Request of the
Author**

**Removed by the
Request of the
Author**

**Removed by the
Request of the
Author**

**Removed by the
Request of the
Author**

Removed by the Request of the Author

LAUREN BARRETT

Untrue to Form

Consistency,
 Form,
 Perfection,
 Precision,
 Meaning...
(That there is no meaning -
 Other than meaning is irrelevant
 Because of what you taste
 When you run your mind

Over the curves of the s
And the jagged k
And the rolling m
And the fluid o)

Oh,
Consistency and form,
And format and rules
And deaths of beautiful women -
That which makes your heart ache
In conjunction with the perfection
Of the end-rhyme.

(Oh preach to me
The inconsistencies
Of cummings
And Dali
And Janis Joplin)

Or - wait -
Did I mean to say instead,
That perfection is derived
From the composition
Of a poem with meticulous contemplative repetition
Of an object?

As the world collapses slowly -
And the lithosphere grinds in frustration
Against the rhetoric of plate tectonics -

(Oh tell me then,
That precision and consistency
Come from 100 lines-
A tame 100 lines-
And not from wild phrases
And senseless - utterly useless - punctuation...)

Just hold onto that thought for now.
And wait:
Until you have time to re-write it in iambic pentameter;
And add abundant alliteration, thus to muddle your message;
And you've edited and punctuated beyond recognition;
And it
should leave
you sad and
melancholy.

Cold Feet

"Are you crying?"

"No."

"It looks like you're crying."

"Well, I'm not."

Jake is looking at me, his blue eyes set on my expression, his fork in mid-air. I break the stare and take another sip of the wine that one of Jake's colleagues gave him. He clears his throat and changes the subject. "It looks like it might rain tonight."

"No it doesn't." I twist the stem of the wine glass between my thumb and forefinger in the silence that follows.

"Rob Petrowski—do you remember him? I think you met him at the engagement party, he has a really bad toupee, but he's only about thirty—"

"Yeah, I remember him."

"Well, Rob told me today that his wife, who's a climatologist, thinks we're going to have an early winter. He told me she said the first frost is going to be a lot earlier this season. Soon."

"Well, we'll have to cover our crops then," I say quietly as I get up and begin clearing the table.

"Aren't you hungry? Come on, sit down . . . you hardly ate half a piece of chicken. Did you even have any rice? Do you feel okay?"

"I'm fine, Jake."

I flip on the garbage disposal and clang the dishes around the sink before putting them in the dishwasher. When every last morsel of food has disappeared from the basin, I turn off the garbage disposal and close the dishwasher door.

"Don't forget to switch the magnet!"

Last week, after a series of arguments, Jake went to Bed, Bath, & Beyond and purchased a magnet that reads DIRTY on one side and CLEAN on the other.

On the refrigerator, in a sheet protector, is a chart that he made on Excel detailing each perishable item and its expiration date. The morning before each product's expiration date, Jake throws it away in the dumpster outside our apartment building.

There are smaller things, perhaps more normal. Our movie collection is alphabetized within genres. Every Monday he wears a blue tie, every Friday he wears a forest green polo shirt. He makes the bed every morning and washes the sheets every Thursday. The first and third week of the month we have cream colored sheets; the second and fourth we have sky blue. He wakes up at 6:27 every weekday to get to work by 8:00, 9:31 every Sunday to get to an 11:00 church service. Saturdays are a free-for-all.

When we are getting into bed that night, Jake asks: "Are you going to take your car to the train station?"

"No. Laura's picking me up and we're just going to leave her car at the station."

"I can give you guys a ride if you want. So you don't have to worry about leaving the car there all weekend."

"That's okay." I turn off the lamp on my nightstand. The dark sometimes suffocates me.

"Which library are you doing research at?" He knows the answer.

"NYU."

"Be safe, okay? Don't take the subway by yourself, and don't walk in Central Park by yourself either."

"Okay."

There is something stinging in the back of my eyes. I move myself toward Jake, positioned so my back is facing him, and pull his arms around me.

Jake has already left for work by the time I wake up the next morning. There is a note sitting on the kitchen counter, next to the sink: Have a great trip. Call if you need anything. See you Sunday. Love you. I hide the note before Laura comes, tuck it away in my overnight bag. She is late, but I knew she would be, and that is why I asked her. She calls the landline from her cell phone. "Ready? I'm sitting outside."

I go out to the front of the building, and there Laura sits in her Maxima, smoking a cigarette. She sees me and smiles a little and hits unlock in her car so I can get in. "That's all you have?" she asks, gesturing toward my bag. I nod.

"It's only two nights."

"Two long nights," she reminds me, with another weak smile. She turns the volume up on the radio and begins searching for a station. Amidst the sounds of static and pop songs, I hear a weatherman say they are expecting an early frost. Laura settles on a crude morning talk show.

Jake didn't want to live together until we were married. But we got engaged right after he finished law school in May, and his roommate Brian moved to Texas at the same time Laura moved in with Eric.

Of all people, it was Jake's mother who finally said we should just move in together. Once Newsweek did an article on her. Well, she was in an article that highlighted ten different people, called, "Angels Among Us?" She is very modest and won't talk about the article, but it makes her happy. She started volunteering with the Catholic Relief Fund after Jake and his two brothers were in grade school. The family had sponsored African children before, moved by the commercials with pictures of starving infants while 'Amazing Grace' played in the background. She told me that once she started, she couldn't go back. She helped to get a soup kitchen together, started a teen parenting program, and put a mentoring program in effect for the poorest elementary school in their district. Whenever I read the article about her, the quote that I always remember is: "Sometimes when people start doing things for others, they do it so much that they forget the faces." She never forgets the faces, which, the article argued, was what made her such a movingly unique role model.

I am always tempted to drop an ethnic slur when I am with her, just to see if she will lower her voice and respond, "You know, I've always wanted to say that."

She also teaches Sunday school and spent two months in Africa with Jake's father after his youngest brother went to college. They lived in a village and helped build a well. Jake's father is an engineer, silent in a way that puts me at ease.

This is how I know it is not true when Jake says he inherited his cleanliness from his mother.

Laura and I take advantage of Friday. When we are in Times Square, Laura starts laughing and reminds me of the weekend we came down during our senior year in college. It was before either of us met either of them; before Laura fell madly in love with a man who doesn't believe in marriage; before I met Jake, who knows nothing besides the nuclear family. In the years since we've met them, Laura and I have grown understandably apart. And in fact, it is only on this day, in this moment, that I realize how much Laura wishes she could marry Eric. "Would you ever leave him?" I ask her abruptly, as we are looking in the window of a fabric store, admiring a particular burgundy pattern with gold swirls placed haphazardly around the edges.

"Eric?"

"Yes, Eric."

"Why?"

"For not marrying you?" Laura stops looking at the fabric and turns to face me.

"Not marrying Eric is significantly less complicated than some of the alternatives." I feel my face flush, but it starts in my back, between my shoulder blades, then floods up my neck and finally into my cheeks. Laura gently puts her hand on my forearm and we move along, looking in other shop windows and making awkward conversation.

Before we turn in early, we eat dinner at a generic pizza parlor that is half-empty, which seems strange to me on a Friday night. Our paper plates are drenched with pools of grease, and we pick around the cheese, sip on our bottled water.

Laura sits in the taxi with me after the procedure. It didn't take as long as I had thought, but I do not feel connected to anything. The air around me is not touching my skin; my head is not attached to my neck. I am afraid that my eyes will roll in different directions, and I hold onto Laura's hand as tightly as I am able until I realize I am not touching her at all.

When we get to the hotel, she pays the cabdriver with the wad of bills I handed her before the surgery. The bellhop insists on helping me up to the room, one arm around my waist and the other holding my hand, guiding me to the room and asking several times if there's anything we would like. I wonder, as I stumble over to the bed, if he knows what happened. Maybe, I think, he just assumes I have the flu.

Laura is confident, smiling and pushing pillows around me to make me more comfortable. She brings me water and the television remote, all smiles and cheerfulness so I don't worry. After I am settled, half-asleep, she walks out to the porch and smokes several cigarettes. I hear her talking on her cell phone to Eric, clipped phrases and laughter: "No, I think she's fine . . . general anesthetic . . . went well . . ."

After the first time Jake met Eric, Jake said he was a self-righteous

prick. "How could Laura be with someone like that?"

"Like what?" I asked, pouring myself a glass of wine.

"Someone who won't even make a commitment to her? Who pretends to stand for all this . . . morality, and then not even marry her?"

"He's still making a commitment to her, Jake," I reminded him. "Do you want some?"

"No thanks. He could just leave her at any time. He could just walk out the door."

"You could just walk out the door at any time, too."

"It's different."

I took a long sip of the wine and sighed deeply. "How is it so different?" Twisted the ring around my finger.

"There's nothing substantive in their relationship. There's no adherence to the idea of family. He's just a guy who wants to sleep with a girl and take no responsibility for it," Jake concluded, as worked up as I'd ever seen him. He is usually the epitome of calmness and reason when it comes to matters of life. Sporting events are another issue entirely.

Laura's voice feels farther and farther away, until I can't hear it anymore, I can only hear my own breathing.

My father met my sister and me outside our mother's house every other Sunday until he moved to Baltimore for his job. My mother laughed when he told her this and, after he had driven out of sight, told us not to get our hopes up.

He was a cellist, but the closest he ever came to a stage was as a part-time usher for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. By day he worked as a taxi driver in a cab that disappointed my sister for its lack of checkered decoration, by night he guided patrons to their box seats. When my sister and I went to visit him the summer I was thirteen, he promised us VIP seats—folding chairs outside the doors of a matinee performance, where Jessie fell asleep while our father went back to his post outside the center terrace. At intermission he let us take two unoccupied seats. As he guided us down the aisle, he smiled at me with a masked look of apology and self-loathing. I hated him.

Jake is about to leave for a run when Laura drops me off outside of the apartment building on Sunday afternoon. He is surprised to see me, and an effortless grin takes over his face. "Hey!" he cries as I get out of the car, taking my overnight bag from me. "Hey, Laura! How are you?"

"Good," she responds shortly, uneasily. "So. . ." Laura begins, looking straight at me through the rolled down car window. "Call me if you need anything, okay? Anything."

"Okay," I reply, and nod. Jake embraces me, kisses my forehead, and we begin walking into the building.

"How was your weekend? Did you guys have fun? Did you get everything you needed at NYU?"

"Yeah," I say, followed by silence. I force a smile and look up at him. "Yeah, it was good. Thanks for asking." The sunlight is oppressive and it makes me angry. My coat is too heavy for the temperature, and it feels disgustingly warm for October. I feel like I'm choking in my clothes, under Jake's arm, wrapped around my shoulder. "I'm kind of tired. Why don't you go for

your run, and I'll rest?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Let me bring your bag up for you, okay? I made reservations at Corelli's for seven."

"I can take the bag up myself. It's not heavy. Go for your run."

"It's okay, I'll bring it for you," he smiles and holds the door open for me, and I push my way past him, standing far enough away that he won't put his arm around me, blocking in the hideous heat. "You okay?" he asks, once we're in the stifling elevator.

"I'm fine. I'm just hot and tired."

"Do you feel okay? Do you think you're getting sick?"

"I'm not getting sick, Jake, it's just hot in this fucking elevator and I want to go lay down!" We are quiet until we get to the apartment, where Jake carefully says he'll see me later and leaves for his run.

I unpack the few articles of clothing I took with me and find the note Jake left on Friday morning. I do not know what to do with it, and I do not know why it stands out from the dozens of other notes he has written me, why it seems more important than the letter he wrote before we were apart for a summer after we met, or the letter he wrote on our first anniversary. Ultimately I fold it again and put it in the back pocket of a pair of jeans that sit in the bottom drawer of my dresser.

In college I briefly dated a guy who lived in a dream world. It was as if his life was a movie that needed to be reenacted, in all its tacky melodrama. He would capture me at midnight to lie out beneath the stars on the soccer field and show me constellations he knew nothing about. He spoke in whispers with tears in his eyes about how beautiful the world was, and looked to me in return, hoping that if my eyes locked on his in the right moment, it would be a sign that we were meant for each other. What I remember the most is that when he would leave me for a night or a weekend, he would embrace me tightly and hold me for a long time, and it was wonderful for a moment, to be wrapped up that closely with someone, to be so intensely connected. And then it would become uncomfortable, and my back would start to cramp, and I could hear him swallowing with my ear pressed awkwardly to his jugular. Even as it was happening I knew it was not real, even as he said he loved me I knew it was a lie.

When I tell Jake, we are sitting at the kitchen table. He is reading the newspaper, and I am half-heartedly flipping through the pages of Scientific American. "I don't think you should marry me."

"What?" Jake laughs. I take off the engagement ring and set it on the table. Ante up. "What are you doing?" he asks, and sets down the newspaper.

"I don't think we should go through with it."

"I think you're just getting cold feet," he informs me. He is trying to be stoic but his face is draining of color.

"No, I'm not."

"Where is this coming from?"

"I don't want to have your children," I tell him, matter-of-fact, and I do not feel a thing as the words come out of my mouth. He looks relieved and

smiles a little.

"I think that's a normal fear. But, we're young, we don't have to make any decisions like that now."

"I won't have your children," I say. "I can't have your children."

"What?" his face goes back to an expression of deep concern, and I think that he looks like his father. "You don't know that."

"I do know that. I can't get pregnant."

"I don't understand," he says seriously, and goes back and forth between looking directly in my eyes and not looking at me at all.

"You didn't really think I was doing research this weekend, did you?"

"What?"

"I wasn't at the library, Jake, I was having surgery. Tubal ligation. I can't have children now."

Jake, whom I do not think looks that upset, suddenly lets a tear slide down his face. He stands up and walks to the sink and presses his palms against the countertop.

"Those things are reversible, though, right?"

"No."

"I thought . . . they wouldn't do that . . . for women without children." He doesn't expect a response, and becomes silent.

I look out the window, and I realize I have forgotten its fall. It seems like it was just summer. I always thought that fall was the most beautiful season, but it seemed morbid to appreciate something that was only death. It is more orange than red now.

Jake is trying very hard to maintain his composure, but water is still brimming in his eyes. I have never seen him cry before. He takes several deep breaths and seems to calm down before he says, "It doesn't matter if you marry me or not, if you leave me or not. I'll still be in love with you."

"I'm not in love with you, Jake." He does not flinch or even move.

"I know."

Twisted Jowls

1.

It was three hours before he saw the first police car. Streaming south on I-95 through North Carolina, Donald noticed the trooper sitting behind a clump of trees and parked in a U-turn lane that ran between the two sides of the highway. Instinctively Donald took his foot off the gas in an effort to slow his car before the trooper clocked him. But Donald had not been speeding. He had been very careful about that and painstakingly kept his cherry apple red Thunderbird convertible at a steady seventy miles per hour, five miles above the speed limit, enough to keep up with the traffic but not fast enough to warrant any notice from state troopers. Troopers like the one he had just passed and at whom he now nervously glanced in his rearview mirror. The convertible was noticeable enough, but that too was what he'd been aiming for. Blend in by sticking out.

The police force that had been growing larger and inching closer in the back of Donald's mind would not be looking for a gentleman of his age sporting Bermuda shorts, an open Hawaiian shirt and exposed tank, cruising along in a red convertible. They would be looking for an old decrepit geezer who wore meticulously ironed pants and black shoes with black socks and hideously patterned sweaters even in this late September heat. That was at least what Donald had been wearing for the past ten years and was exactly what he'd been wearing on the day he launched his southward flight. His rationalization was not, however, just about changing his appearance. The Hawaiian shirt was just as hideous in its own manner as the brown moldy sweaters he used to wear every day. It reminded him of something raw and American, something he had read once in a dime novel or seen frozen on a movie poster, not young but simply alive, just like the car he was driving and the unfiltered cigarette he unconsciously lifted to his lips for one last drag before flicking it onto the highway.

He glanced in his mirror again. In it he could still see the front of the trooper's car as it receded into the background and could not be sure if the image was simply vibrating with the rest of the Thunderbird or actually inching forward. As the threat finally began to curve out of sight, the police cruiser undeniably pulled into a gap in the rushing traffic. Shit. Once again Donald lifted his foot off the gas. He could continue his safe clop and hope that he still had at least a day before they caught up with him, or he could hit the gas and put into motion the fantasy he had been imagining for the past three days and three hours of this morning. His foot hovered for only one second longer and Donald watched as the speedometer fell minutely before he eased his foot on the gas, lightly at first, and then confidently. The engine groaned and Donald felt the acceleration pin him against the hot leather seat as the wind thundered over the frame of the windshield.

2.

Cecelia had determined twenty minutes ago that the driver of the car she was in was an asshole. There had been hints from the moment he had picked her up: the khaki pants, the pink polo, the brown boat shoes that manipulated the gas of his luxury sedan.

"You on the way to a meeting or something?" she asked, trying to gauge him. Did he have money or was this a compensation issue? Did he earn his fortune or was he spoon fed? Had he picked up a girl at the last rest stop as a form of charity that made him feel better about his pampered existence, or was he hoping to fulfill a hopelessly unoriginal sexual fantasy that he could brag about at the frat house? This was a game Cecilia played with all the men who gave her rides since she had left her halfway house three weeks ago in New York. They were always men. Women never stopped. And they were always alone. Some drove pickup trucks and some drove monstrous SUVs and some drove sleek sports cars. This one drove a luxury sedan. They were all the same, they all wanted the same thing, and they all were as boring as the one that had come before them. So she played little games with herself, guessing where they came from, who they were before and after the highway, and whether daddy hugged them too little or mommy too much.

"Why would you say that?" he said, responding to her question as he smiled at her, raising one eyebrow. His words dripped with suave, erotic resonance, as if she had inquired about his favorite sexual position.

"You seem dressed up. Not many men wear pink."

"It's not pink. It's salmon." The smile disappeared and he looked back at the road. His fantasy went limp. She looked forward again, adjusting her position in the warm leather seat and inhaling the pungent smell of recently butchered and chemically processed cow that covered the car interior. Outside the typical Carolinian scenery passed by. Rows of trees, lush in their summer greenness interrupted by rolling mounds of earth through which the highway had been carved back when Eisenhower connected America and destroyed small towns. A hellishly clear blue sky sparkled above, shattering sunlight and reflecting it off the metal bodies of the passing cars. She tried to roll down the window to inhale the thick, humid, morning air, but couldn't find the button.

A red convertible rocketed by them on the left, well outdoing their speed of eighty. She saw a blur of red and white and caught a glimpse of a flapping hula shirt and straw hat before the sun bounced off the blazoned trunk and blinded her. The sedan rocked gently when the air between the cars compressed and the young man jerked the steering wheel, attempting to steer clear of the car that was already receding into the approaching distance.

"Jesus," he remarked. Another blur, this one white, shot by even faster, and Cecilia clearly saw the blue and red lights flashing brighter than the streaming sunlight outside.

"Fuck yeah," the asshole asserted smartly, "Pigs finally show up when you need them." He glanced at Cecilia as if he expected her agreement. She returned a look that said what the fuck would you know, the only trouble you've ever been in was when you got caught using a fake ID at the yacht club. He looked back to the road with an expression of resignation.

3.

Even though the wind was roaring around Donald, whipping his shirt and making him constantly check his straw hat, he was somehow sweating. His tank and his socks were soaked. He looked in his mirror. The trooper was still there, lights blazing fiercely and siren blaring like a dying rabbit. Donald pushed on the gas harder, but the car had reached its maximum velocity and began shuddering violently under the strain he was pushing it to.

Dot's voice suddenly popped into his head, from their trip to New Hampshire when he let gravity take them down Mt. Washington in their old Ford sedan. Jesus H. Christ, Donald! Slow down! You trying to kill us? Maybe he was. She was dead now, either way, and he was not. Not yet, not if he could help it.

Ahead a wall of traffic loomed, both lanes crawling to a halt, brake lights igniting and screaming at Donald to stop. He swerved into the right lane, cutting off a minivan and entered the shoulder, speeding past rows and rows of slowing traffic. The minivan had panicked, following him onto the shoulder and stopping. In his mirror Donald watched the cars behind it follow suit, all of them swerving and braking, blocking the entire highway and shoulder. The trooper was there. He tried to follow Donald but ended up spinning off the shoulder and through the mud on the side of the road before his back-end slammed against the base of a tree, swinging the car around and coming to a rest like a crippled beast, lights still flashing. Donald floored it along the shoulder and barely noticed the sign he passed. Rest stop: two miles. Texaco, Burger King, and hopefully a hostage.

4.

The gun was hot from sitting in his glove compartment. And heavy. Heavier than he had ever imagined a gun would be. John Wayne made it look so damn light and easy. He was still sweating and now he was shivering. A car pulled in front of the window he was sitting by in the rest stop and a fat middle-aged man got out, followed by his wife, just as old and just as fat, who seemed to have more hair on her upper lip than her husband had on his scalp. No good. He needed someone young. Someone alone. A woman, preferably, with an imagination. He needed someone just as desperate as he was to run away, from what he was still not sure, but to run simply for the sake of not standing still. His body ached and another wave of pain swept through him. He winced.

It was again the physical pain he had known since his retirement. The pain that had actually forced him to retire and required him to swallow green pills and white pills and red pills in different combinations ten times a day. The pain of a warm blanket that enveloped him entirely and smothered him for so long that he accepted and forgot about it and lived with it like a stain on his favorite shirt. But on Thursday that physical pain had disappeared. He began moving again, for the first time in over ten years, and as long as he kept moving he'd be able to outrun his pain. Until he swerved into this crappy rest stop and extinguished the engine of his Thunderbird.

This was not part of the plan. The pain of stillness and age was pulsing through him, stifling him, screaming at his subconscious that he needed to get out of this hell hole now or once again face the horrifying pain of defeat and resignation. He no longer needed his pills or his therapeutic bed or his arthritic braces; he needed his car and he needed the road. But he also needed a hostage before he could continue. The cops would inevitably force him off the highway, but a hostage protected him and gave him coverage.

A state police car sailed past the rest stop, lights revolving. Number three. Donald glanced nervously across the food court, past the sunglass kiosk and the pretzel stand, out the opposite windows where his Thunderbird sat, hidden from the highway traffic. As he looked back out the window a grey BMW pulled in a few spaces away. A young man got out dressed in a polo shirt and khakis. Some rich prick. A young woman followed. She wore an oversized hooded sweatshirt, torn jeans and a backpack slung over her shoulder. He guessed that she was in her early twenties, and

despite her worn out apparel, Donald recognized her striking attractiveness immediately. She had a face that was not typically gorgeous but uniquely pretty to her and her alone, framed by stands of curly, tangled brown hair. Donald felt something stir in him, many things. Rage and hunger and hope and vitality; this girl was everything he had once lost and was now trying to desperately win back. She was perfect.

The young man pulled out his wallet, exchanged what seemed like blunt words with his partner, and handed her some bills before heading into the rest stop. The girl remained. Donald stood up and walked outside. The girl still stood there, scanning the rest area as if she were at an amusement park and not sure which ride to choose next. Donald approached her.

"Excuse me miss, this may seem a little forward, but do you need a lift?" he tried to ask as calmly and politely as possible. There was no point in forcing her. Whoever the rich kid was, it seemed obvious that he had given her a ride and that she needed another one. Why not ask nicely?

She turned and looked directly into his eyes. Donald stared back into her blue ones, and quickly diverted, examining her slightly round face, void of makeup, making its raw distinctiveness all the more prominent now that he stood in front of her. She stared at his face for a few moments before moving up and down his figure, analyzing his build and odd clothes. She seemed to be fighting with herself, weighing her odds and pros and cons, eventually giving the impression that she had somehow lost.

"Sure," she said, her face breaking into a polite smile. "Cecelia," she said, extending her right hand towards Donald's.

"Donald." He grasped her warm, soft flesh, squeezing it lightly and realizing he had not touched anyone since Mary on Wednesday. He hid the sudden nausea, smiled back and led the way. They rounded the corner of the building and walked into the state police car.

Donald froze. The trooper, who appeared to be mid-sentence on the radio, stopped talking, and Donald could only guess that he glared back at him from behind his aviator sunglasses. Donald understood this man. He had seen him on television shows in which cops used excessive force to quell drunken idiots and poor people. He was the kind of man who had once been a bully and humiliated others for compensation and now wielded a gun for the very same reason, along with a big black club which he used primarily to beat the life out of rambunctious hillbillies who chose to dance on the line of law and order. But Donald was from out of state, and the trooper reveled in capturing and humiliating these rich, Yankee outsiders as not only a break from the normal white trash bash but to somehow inflict retribution on the North for all the trouble they had caused his kin in the great war of confederate independence.

Donald glanced at the stranger next to him and she looked back. Her smile was gone and he saw it replaced by fear and understanding. She was just as concerned with this run-in as he was. Perhaps she was running, too. But he also saw recognition; not that she knew what he had done or why he was running, but simply that she could relate to his predicament and understood that he needed to keep running immediately. She looked determined, down to business, as if she had been with Donald from the beginning and this interruption was as much an interruption from her own flight as it was his. Grabbing his hand she led Donald around the back of the building. She saw the Thunderbird, released his hand, and walked towards it. Donald reached into his left pocket and fished for his keys, pulling them out and dropping

them. He bent over to pick them up and as he stood, felt a firm grip on his shoulder. The grip spun him around.

Donald fired the gun. His hand had never left it since he began fingering it inside so it was easy for him to pull out of his pocket. It was still too heavy for him to fully raise, so the bullet exited the barrel at a downward angle, entering the leg of the trooper, opening the knee cap and expelling blood and bone onto the pavement and Donald's Bermuda shorts. Nobody screamed. Not Donald or the girl or the trooper who fell with a look of alarm, fidgeting with his gun holster as he hit the ground. His aviators thrown aside, Donald was now able to look him in the eyes, which were small, watery and grey. He watched as the trooper hung on to one last moment of consciousness before the pain of his wound registered in his brain, numbing his senses and settling him into shock. As the trooper closed his eyes and collapsed in relief, Donald took a step backwards and felt the pain drain from his body. He sensed the girl by his side. She knelt next to the still trooper, pushed aside his hands and removed his gun from its holster. She placed the gun in her tattered backpack, walked around the front of the Thunderbird, opened the passenger door, sat down and stared at Donald, waiting for him to get in and start driving.

5.

Jesus H. Christ. Jesus H. Christ. He shot a cop. This was all part of it. Everything he had seen in his life plastered on billboards and television shows and war propaganda posters and the big drive-in movie screen he went to with Dot and Rachel. The bad cop, the dirty good cop, the villain who won in the end, the fearless gangster right before his fall from the top of the world into the hands of God and American law. And everything they represented; the guns and the drugs and the sex and the blood and the booze and the cigarettes that Humphrey Bogart so nonchalantly lit up, sanctifying the image of what was young and masculine and heroic and alive. He was searching for it and found it when his bullet and that fat hick met. Christ, he just shot a cop. Donald was reeling as he pulled out onto the highway and floored it. It had been an accident, he hadn't really meant to do it, but the trooper had surprised him. It was instinctive.

It was exhilarating. All the anxiety that had been building up in him on his long trek, and boiling over at that rest stop, had been siphoned by that shot. His pain was gone and now all that pumped through his ragged veins was adrenaline. He inhaled the fresh, noontime air and glanced up at the sun streaming overhead. He was moving south again, running as far from the place he had been as he could go. The Florida Keys had always hung in his mind, a tropical fantasy out of a Jimmy Buffett song that now had been crystallized in his escape. That buoy and the sand and gulf promised him the furthest south he could go without leaving American soil. He looked at the green and black scene before him and floored it.

6.

Cecelia had not taken her eyes off Donald since he had entered the car. He seemed to have forgotten she was there. He was definitely old. Mid if not upper-eighties. He had the face of a bloodhound, saggy bags on either side, pulling down his eyes to reveal the watery redness beneath. His face kept flickering between a solemn blankness and smirks which ignited a light in his worn, drooping features. The straw hat he wore covered a bald, white head. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, taking one out and tilting the pack towards her, his first acknowledgement of her presence.

She took one without answering. He picked a lighter up that was wedged between the leather seats and lit her cigarette without taking his eyes from the road before lighting his own. Cecelia suppressed a chuckle. He looked out of place, cartoonish, like the clothes he wore were too tight and too young and the cigarette he smoked something not a man of his age should be doing in such a cavalier manner. Cecelia inhaled the sweet nicotine into her lungs, paused, savoring the raw feel before exhaling into the rushing wind.

She had recognized his straw hat and hula shirt immediately outside the rest stop, and she was more surprised about someone already offering her a ride than she was about the strange coincidence. Did she so obviously look like a drifter? She thought long about Donald's offer. She had seen him running from that trooper, but he had somehow escaped, and although he tried to convey a look of calm politeness, there was a certain panic in his words, and an anxious plea for help. She needed a ride and would be using him, but he also would be using her, not for self-esteem or for sex like all the other men, but for assistance in going wherever he seemed he needed to be going. After all, she was on the run too, and knew well what it was like to be in that place alone for so long.

She saw him unconsciously fingering a gun in his pocket and that made her nervous, not for fear of him shooting her because he obviously was asking her nicely to come with him, but rather shooting himself in the foot or the leg and leaving her without a ride. So she accepted and stuck by her decision, even when a stupid pig with a brain the size of his pecker let his guard down and confronted a man as obviously desperate and clearly armed as Donald. He got what he deserved. And that was it for her. Once the cop caught her with Donald they would bring her in with him and eventually figure out who she was and she'd be shipped back to New York state as quickly as it had taken Donald to solve that problem. She hesitated only a moment when the cop was shot, before throwing herself fully to Donald's side, wherever that may take her, it sure as hell was better than where she had come from, and certainly got a lot more interesting when Donald fired that gun.

"So, where you from Donald?" she asked him.

He smiled, glancing towards her for a second before looking back at the road. "Connecticut."

"You retired?"

"I was. I still am, in a way."

"In what way?"

"In the way that I don't have a job but I did once." His words came frankly and matter-of-fact. There was no play in them. A few moments of awkward silence passed. Donald began to fidget in his seat. "Where are you from?" he asked.

"New York. Outside the city."

"Yankees?" he asked smiling.

"Red Sox. My mother was from Boston."

"You should tell that to my daughter, Rachel. She lives in North Jersey and is the same way. Hates the Yankees. Big Red Sox fan." He smiled for a moment, the lines of his sagging features twisting into a grin before they suddenly faded, as if he just remembered something completely different. He nervously glanced in the rearview mirror and Cecelia did the same in hers. She paused a long time, taking in the scenery.

"So what did you do?" she asked.

"I worked as a traveling salesman for most of my life before I retired. I sold

books and paper products. All over New England," he said.

"No, what did you do? Why are you running?" she asked, correcting the mistake. He stared at the road while he answered.

"I killed someone."

"Who?"

"It doesn't really matter much. She's dead. I'm alive." Silence. Clouds had begun to move in, casting long stretches of shadows on the road ahead of them.

"It was like waking up from a drugged sleep," he began softly, not directed towards Cecelia in particular, "like I'd been drowning for years and suddenly found air. I lived in that retirement home forever. My wife, Dot, died ten years ago. Rachel is my only child. I tried living with her but that didn't work so she sent me to Shady Maples Retirement Home, a state and a world away. Seems like years and only seconds. People my age check in, linger, die, someone else replaces them. My daughter dropped me there to die, out of the way and organized. I was old. It was what I was supposed to do. My wife had. It was simple."

"Until you killed somebody? Who? Male nurse? Doctor? Your daughter?" she asked, sarcastically. Cecelia was playing her game again, and Donald was proving to be a very interesting pawn. He ignored her, or at least did not respond, instead taking another drag from his now-short cigarette butt.

"Why did you shoot that trooper?"

"He surprised me. It was an accident," he said, but once again Cecelia saw his blank face flicker with a smile and then fade again into his saggy jowls. She waited.

"Are you on a killing spree, Donald?" she joked, "Am I next?" This was quite fun. Whatever Donald was hiding must be something big. She wondered if it could compare to her. It certainly did not to the other men she hitched rides with. They were all looking for trouble, and although this guy was extremely old, he seemed already neck deep in it. Just like her.

"What are you running from?" She already knew the answer, but there was something else here, something else that was driving this man to flee not just from his act but from some greater threat.

"Shit," he said, looking in the rearview mirror. He tossed his cigarette over the side and pushed on the gas. The engine groaned. Cecelia twisted around and looked out the back of the convertible, where she could see the first police car closing in, lights flashing. She looked back at Donald. He looked at her.

"I need your help."

7.

Donald thought of the day his daughter had dropped him off at Shady Maples Retirement Home. No matter what name you could spin on it, it was still a place where people were stored before they died. Dot's death had shocked him deeply, putting a fog around him that numbed his senses. He always thought they would go together. And now she was gone and he was waiting. Waiting in a beige fifteen by twenty hole that had been allotted to him. His possessions were stripped down and sold, his food delivered three times a day to his room where he chose to eat alone, his medicine stocked weekly in his tiny cell of a bathroom. All his affairs were in order. All he had to do was die, and he waited patiently for ten years.

Donald woke up every morning because he had not died in his sleep. He ate his breakfast, put on his fresh chinos and brown sweaters, watched the Price is Right and Passions and Dr. Phil and did his crossword puzzles. Every night he'd go to bed,

sleep fitfully since you can't sleep if you never really are awake, and get up the next day, not dead. Until the day that he helped Mary Moffitt, his next door neighbor, jump out his forth story window.

Mary was a sweet lady. She seemed to have nobody, like Donald, who cared much about her. She moved in next to him two years after Rachel had dropped him off. They became friendly at first, exchanging hellos in the hallway and sitting next to each other on Bingo night. They rode the shuttle to CVS together on Tuesdays and eventually began watching evening television, World's Greatest Police Videos being one of Donald's favorites that Mary somehow tolerated. She reminded him a lot of Dot. Same hair, same soft-spoken manner, same silent resolution yet overt manipulation of his habits and ways.

8.

Donald was shaken by the appearance of the second state police vehicle that pulled into line with the first, lights revolving but sirens silent. They had made their presence known but were not engaging. It was because of Cecelia. World's Greatest Police Videos taught him some valuable lessons. In most cases, the lone nut job would be caught up with and rammed off the side of the road by the pursuing officer of the law. But, if the crazy driver had a hostage, the police would hang back indefinitely because they couldn't risk the hostage's life.

Another car zoomed up and took over the shoulder. Donald figured they must have cleared the highway because there were no longer any cars up ahead. He settled into a nice speed and watched as the cars behind him fell in line, their number growing to four, their silent lights flashing at him. Cecelia spoke up.

"Am I your hostage?" she asked, smirking.

"Yes," he smiled, "Right now it seems to be working just fine. If I need you to scream I'll let you know." He laughed. Behind them a siren broke the humming silence of the convertible and a loudspeaker cracked into life.

"Sir, pull over your vehicle immediately," a high-pitched southern drawl demanded. The voice continued to bark orders at Donald. He lit another cigarette and adjusted himself in his seat.

"I think you're making them angry," Cecelia said, a little more seriously. Donald shrugged, his wicked smile warping his jowls again.

"Donald, did you really kill someone?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, who was it?"

"What about you? What are you running from?" he paused. "I thought I'd have to persuade you a little harder to come with me at the rest stop. And then when you took that trooper's gun?"

"I broke parole a few weeks back. I've been heading south ever since."

"Why were you on parole?"

"No. You first," she asserted. He paused for a second, inhaling on his butt.

"Mary Moffitt was my next door neighbor at the retirement home. We watched TV together on most week nights. Last Wednesday she was over. Jeopardy ended and we were just sitting there. She got up to leave, and then walked over to the window. She asked me if I could open it, since she couldn't because of her arthritis. I opened the window. My room was four stories up and I had a nice view. Then she asked me for help." He stopped. He remembered Mary extending her hand, as if he were helping her into a car or down a stair. "She took my hand, stepped up onto the

ledge and dove out." He stopped. Cecilia was silent. "I killed her."

"Donald," she waited, "That sounds like an accident. That wasn't your fault. Is that why you're running? Is that it?" Her words jolted Donald out of his trance and filled him with anger. Is that it? What the hell did she mean? He had killed that woman, helped her politely step out his window. And he felt absolutely nothing. She had the nerve he did not to stop waiting and simply end it, and he was totally indifferent.

Until he woke up in the middle of that night screaming and sweating and violently kicking his sheets off himself. The air cleared and he saw everything around him, the plain beige walls, his brown sweaters, his daily-labeled pill box, his left-over microwave dinner, and he wanted to vomit and kill it all. He had resurfaced. The water and the fog were gone. He was still alive. And all those years, all those years waiting like a gentleman for Dot because she went first, filling those excruciatingly long ten years with nothing but daytime television because that is what his doctors and daughter and all the other blank faces at Shady Maples told him to do. No more.

That very night, sweating in his wet bed, Donald made his decision to leave for good. He got dressed in his usual old man attire. He needed to go shopping. He went down to the front desk. The night clerk was absent, probably away on a call. Mary's flight had upset some people. Perfect. On the wall behind the desk was a board with hooks, on each hook was a set of keys for each senior who still drove. He saw the ones he wanted, ones with a little red bottle opener attached to them. He grabbed them and walked outside into the night air. He looked to his right, to the place cordoned off where Mary hit the ground. He nodded a salutation, turned and spotted the Thunderbird, under its canvas cover in the corner of the lot. He ran over to it, pulled off the cover and looked at the cherry-apple red gleaming metal and fiberglass that he had envied since the asshole who owned it moved in two years ago.

He sat in the cool leather driver's seat, turned the car on, felt the roar and vibration of the engine ignite his senses. He rolled down the top and inhaled the sweet, cold night air. The stars shone brightly on him. He was free at last. He was alive. He was hungry. He wanted a cheeseburger and a beer and a cigarette. And the pain was gone. It was too cold here. The south flashed in his mind. He placed the car in drive, eased it out of the quiet parking lot and left Shady Maples behind without hesitation, heading south.

Is that it? Who the hell did she think he was? He had stolen this car. Right after his exodus he stopped at a nearby Thrift shop and purchased new clothes. Flamboyant Hawaiian shirts and summer shorts and the straw hat that he was still wearing. Anything that would make him stand out from what he had been. He knew the police were coming to investigate him for the homicide. She was thrown out that window. And now he had committed grand theft auto.

After the clothes, he went to the first all-night diner he found. He ordered a cheeseburger and fries with a Coke. The beer would have to wait, but he was able to purchase three packs of Marlboros from a machine inside the door. He inhaled the greasy food when it arrived, savoring the explosion of taste that he had missed for so long. His doctor had told him to cut out red meats and dairy and carbohydrates. Screw it.

He continued south through dawn, passing across New York and into New Jersey. He headed for Rachel's home and arrived on her sunny suburban block around ten o'clock on Thursday morning. He used the spare key that he still, for some reason

unbeknownst to him since he could not remember much of his recent past, carried in his wallet. He headed up the stairs of the richly furnished house that his son-in-law Tom had paid for through his career as an investment banker in the city. He walked into the master bedroom, and into the walk-in-closet that was filled with Rachel's clothes, dresses and hordes of shoes. He had overheard her talking to Tom once about where it was. He headed to the very back of the closet and pulled out a stack of empty hat boxes that sat on the floor. Underneath, the door to safety sat waiting for him.

He tried his daughter's wedding anniversary. No luck. He tried her birthday. Nothing. He tried his grandson, Thomas Junior's, birthday. The lock clicked and the door opened. A wooden jewelry box, a red velvet bag, some official looking documents bound with rubber bands, a xylophone organizer, and white, thickly stuffed envelope. He removed this last item and opened it find a hefty stack of hundred dollar bills. He pulled one of Rachel's handbags off a shelf in the closet and stuffed the envelope into it. He didn't feel guilty at all. It was payback, a stipend rewarded to him for all the life and prosperity he had given his ungrateful daughter and a fine for what she had done to him after her mother had died. All those years with a roof over her head and she couldn't provide one for him. But enough. He had his reward for his suffering and had given his daughter her due.

He walked across the room to a smaller closet used by Tom. He needed a new pair of shoes and began pulling out boxes that lay on the floor. He found a pair of loafers in the back, one size too big, but that none-the-less worked. As he tried to put the box back as it was, he knocked over a Nike one on the bottom and the gun fell out with a box of rounds and a warranty card. Real nice hiding space, jackass. He placed everything back in the box along with the handbag, closed the door to the closet, and left the room with the Nike shoebox. He passed his grandson's room on the way out, on the door of which hung a poster of some rock band that Thomas probably worshiped. Donald promptly ripped it off, tore it up, and left the house.

And now he was a man on the run with stolen goods in his possession and shot cop in his wake. But nothing compared to that first act, that exhilarating murder, because it had set him free. He saw all those wasted years lined up and now he was shooting them dead and throwing them out windows. He was escaping from those cold nurses and his daughter and everything that told him his only purpose left was to die, and he was making up for lost time by running as fast he could toward oblivion.

"Donald, pull over," Cecelia said, surprising him. "Pull over, Donald. You haven't done anything wrong. That woman was demented, and whatever you've done since then can be chalked up to old age. They'll understand, even about the trooper." Her words cut through everything he was trying to accomplish and infuriated him. She didn't understand at all

"It's not old age," he said, trying to feign confidence.

"Donald, pull over. I thought you actually did something."

"What did you think exactly? Did I look that desperate?" he asked angrily.

"You looked like you needed help. And I've been there. And I was bored."

"So this is just some fling. You don't get it. You're young. You have plenty of time. I've wasted my life." And it was true, and a hollow emptiness filled him. This was more than these past ten years. If his life were a book he was in the final chapter and it was as boring as Sunday service. He was changing that. His ending was going to blow off the roof. He was not going to die in some convenient allotted room. No, he would continue this race as far as it would take him, and if he exploded in a blaze of glory at

the end so be it, at least he'd felt something again. Is that it?

9.

This was it. Just another asshole on the run from nothing but his own mediocrity. What did he honestly know? Nothing.

Her father was the same way. A belligerent drunk that beat her mother until she left and kept it up with Cecelia until she lit their row home on fire with a sparkler on the Fourth of July which burned him alive while he was passed out in bed. She had not meant it, but she always saw it as a sort of liberation, more for him than for herself. She felt pity for her father. He was trapped by his alcoholism and his job and his wife, her mother; trapped by a working class hell in which nothing new or exciting ever came his way. She detested that place, that sameness, and even after the fire took her father out of it and placed her in a foster home she never could really shake it. She tried her hand at many things, eventually getting caught for conning her foster family out of a substantial amount of money supposedly being used for college.

She had to get away from that mediocre life, whatever the cost. She fled to the road, but there she met nothing but more men all experiencing the same thing as her father. All of them trapped in whatever role and station society had assigned them, and all seeking novelty by picking up a strange girl on the side of the road. Donald had already found that. She thought he was different, and she saw in him the same freedom she so desperately sought. But Donald was no different; he had just lived longer than anyone other man she knew, and he tried the hardest to break free of the stereotype the world had prescribed for him. In reality his crimes were nothing. He was completely full of shit. Men always needed a woman to get them out. She had killed her father. She knew what real was. And it was time for this ride to end.

10.

Donald had not noticed the police cars behind him, now ten strong in a V-formation.

"Cecelia, I need your help" Donald said.

"I know." She began fishing in her backpack and pulled out the trooper's gun. She aimed it at Donald.

"Stop the car."

"I can't."

"The police will understand."

"I stole this car. I robbed my son-in-law."

"It's excusable."

"I shot that trooper. You helped me."

"Not anymore."

"Cecelia, please." It was a command. Cecelia was trying to play a role even she wasn't completely familiar with, and no matter what happened Donald had the upper hand because he was the one behind the wheel. The gun shook. She looked out the windshield.

"Donald." Up ahead there was an overpass. Below it four state police cars were lined up, with eight troopers standing in front, all sporting aviators and shot guns. Donald took his foot off the gas.

Fifty years ago a line had been cut through this forest, the earth churned up and black asphalt painstakingly compressed over it. Since then the road had been ripped up, laid down, tarred, patched, painted and filled in, but always with the same precision as that first time. The symmetry of highways fascinated Donald. The curves

of the lines, the sheer length of them all planned and plotted and lain perfectly. All that work for something that was only a means to an end: a line between two places that contained no point of reference or importance of its own, like a staircase. Donald was an unnatural force on that road, and he was inevitably colliding with the law's response to him.

This was not about death. It was about his life. He still had time and in that time he would make up what he had wasted. But he couldn't stop. He had to keep moving. He looked at Cecelia, whose eyes were locked on the road block ahead of them and he felt only rage.

Donald hit the gas for the last time. He forgot about Cecelia. She had served her purpose. The troopers jerked to attention, aiming their shotguns at the car but too impotent to fire. He floored it at the barricade. Closer. Cecelia was waving the gun, screaming words he couldn't understand. When he could see the sweat gleaming off the moustaches of the fat troopers in front of him, he jerked the wheel right. The Thunderbird groaned and creaked under the strain. His momentum threw him against his door and Cecelia, who had not been wearing her seatbelt, was thrown against him. The gun went off. Or maybe a tire blew. He couldn't tell. The wind made a deafening screech as it whipped around the car and the tires spun, desperately grasping for traction. The Thunderbird left the highway and veered onto the shoulder, up the grassy embankment, and towards the road that connected to the overpass. At its speed the car's front dug into the incline, but its momentum and girth pushed on through. A crunch, an explosion of sand and grass, the roar of the car, a scream. Donald never took his foot off the gas, even when the earth had finally released the car like a sling shot and it hurtled into the air pointing toward the clear blue sky. Donald felt weightless for a moment. He wondered if this was the same feeling Mary had when she jumped. She was dead, though, and he was not. He looked right into the sun as the Thunderbird soared. His straw hat flew off and his hula shirt whipped him in the face. The weight leveled out the car in the air, bringing the tip down faster than the rear was rising.

Donald was pleasantly surprised when the car landed on all fours. He heard a tire blow out but that certainly would not stop him and the great beast limped on. He swerved right again, leveling out on what was a normal country highway, lined with tall dark spruces on either side. The air was silent and thick with the smell of living green and the sound of sirens receded into the distance. Cecilia was gone. Donald looked at her empty seat and smiled. He would need a new car and he had to figure out which way was south. And he would probably need a new hostage when the time came.

I See Monsters

Never once did I doubt the midnight child, crying, "I see monsters!"
From the depths of my heart to where my ribs part, similarly I see monsters.

Saw them in the nipping night wind and the caramel cornfields of autumn.
It's in steaming black skies and bitter blueberry lies that, cautiously, I see monsters.

The preacher told me, "All beasts are the world's sins reflected in code."
"In the dim of the night pounce upon 'em with light!" Yet incurably, I see monsters.

I've done my best to shake myself of monsters that I cannot see.
But in my spine they sleep; in my bones they creep and clinically, I see monsters.

I blamed my home and the one I loved, blazed him like a witch at the stake.
Bought a house in Buffalo, went from sunlight to snow. Consistently, I see monsters.

When your life's a nightmare it's scribbled in red all over your face.
I've lived life as a slave—write it down on my grave; terminally, 'I see monsters.'

Beyond Genesis

Removed by the Request of the Author

**Removed by the
Request of the
Author**

Brown Bag Lunch

The kitchen is in shambles, there's a telltale hole in the wall. I pull my bathrobe closer to my body. The fist shaped hole is about as tall as Kate. He must have missed, the first time. Whenever this happens I think back to the day she was born; her father and I were so happy. The third miscarriage had been the worst, and we were worried that we would never be able to have a family together. But when Kate was born (he insisted on naming her after me) I knew everything was going to be okay. Life was beautiful. She was beautiful. She was more sensitive than any baby I had come across, though. Once, when she was four I happened to pick up her favorite doll and throw it into the toy chest. Kate screamed so loudly I thought she was in pain. I have never seen her cry like that, to this day. And it was all because she thought I was hurting her baby. She had put her chubby little toddler hand on my face and told me that we weren't supposed to throw babies because it hurt them. And I can barely look at myself in the mirror anymore, knowing how I let my husband hurt my baby. Knowing I let her down and that I wasn't able to follow her four-year-old example. Knowing that the only thing I can do is pack her a brown bag lunch everyday and write a little note on her napkin, "I'm sorry and I love you."

The Sensational, Inspirational, Regrettable Life of Ed

The lady at the counter wanted a cheeseburger. Ed wanted to tell her that she ought to lay off the beef. He could make more burgers out of her meaty middle than those Angus moo blocks they chopped up in Texas and sent his way in neatly stacked quarter pound patties. Really, he just didn't want to give up the cheese. Usually Ed would pretend like he'd forgotten the specifics of their order; cheeseburgers came out as hamburgers, cheese fries as onion rings. Nine out of ten times they'd complain, but every now and then the customers would be in too much of a rush to get the meal right and Ed could pocket their nice thin slice of yellow American. He knew he couldn't botch an order with this woman though. She was a regular and was particular over the food she stuffed into that ball of a body. So Ed would have to smile, welcome her to Burger Blast, take down her order, and get it right. Then he'd step behind the purple swinging doors, grab a lukewarm patty from under the heating light, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, half a slice of cheese, and spit. Spit was a part of every cheese order. He did this for good luck, a tribute to his god, really.

Ed's god was Snake Boy. He had found Snake Boy one morning outside of his apartment in a pizza box with a dirty sock, moldy crust, and pornographic magazine. The box hissed, which was quite an unusual sound for a pizza box to make. Ed knew that it must be something extraordinary. After much hesitation, because Ed generally let his fear rule out most curiosities, he lifted the lid to find the long, scaly creature coiled over a glossy topless school girl and grey fuzzy crust. The animal was spotted, orange with darker orange blotches outlined in black and, when uncoiled, probably measured near twenty five inches from head to tail. Curled up over the blonde beauty's privates, it was no bigger than a fist. The orange lump stayed still for a moment, then the tail moved from between her legs to her outer thigh and Ed blinked, breathed, then snorted. He was grateful for the school girl but unhappy with the smell. Those jerkface neighborhood kids again, got nothing better to do. How gross. He lifted each leg of his royal blue sweatpants as he bent over to remove the box and all of its hideous contents from his front stoop. As he inched the cardboard across the top step with a wary index finger, Ed noticed a piece of paper poking out from underneath and froze. Along the top of the paper in bold it read, "There is but one Lord—a being with a body that is neither plain nor human. He is your God Almighty and he will guide you to salvation." The religious pamphlet was placed on his front stoop an hour before the pizza box by coincidence naturally, but Ed took it as a sign. He lifted the snake atop its magazine and brought it with him inside.

Ed had seen those words before. He had also memorized them and recited them over and over in his mind for the past forty years because, ever since he was old enough to feel lonely and pathetic, Ed longed for a savior. And he had round thick rimmed glasses, a broken home, and no friends by the start of elementary school. Little Edward was a pale boy with a big circular head that sat atop his lanky frame. He wore mismatched socks, picked his nose, and never brushed his hair and seldom his teeth, because his mother was the type of mother that didn't take an interest in raising her son. Edward also never spoke to anyone but himself because his father used to shut him up whenever he would try. He didn't care for much of anything. He'd stopped caring when his father left and stopped caring and then his mother stopped caring too.

When Ed was seven, his mother had answered the door to a Jehovah's Witness. He stood behind her and watched the tall, steady man introduce his cause. He smiled the biggest, brightest smile at the boy as he handed his mother a pamphlet, the same bold print along the top that would make its way onto Ed's front stoop forty years later. The man was the most fantastic man Little Edward had ever seen. He glowed, the boy was sure of it. And if it weren't for the fact that he knew better than to hug a stranger, he would have thrown himself against that suited, freshly-pressed, radiant figure right then and there. His voice melted through Edward's ears and into his soft, impressionable head: "There is but one Lord." How sure he is! the boy had thought. He'd never heard anyone speak with such conviction, not even his mother when she would idly remind him not to play with his nose icks when other mothers were watching, or even his father when he'd told them he was leaving for good. After the beaming Jehovah's Witness had left, Edward had something to say to his mother.

"I found the man I want you to marry."

She only rolled her eyes.

Edward's mother had already found the man she wanted to marry. His mother and the man were close and, although Edward rarely saw them together, he often would accidentally overhear them through the Styrofoam cup against his ear against the wall against their bed. Moans mostly, and Edward wondered if maybe his mother was somehow hurt. But he supposed that she must have welcomed whatever went on behind those thin walls because he never heard any objections, only affirmative screams of yes and don't stop. So he never interfered, never came to her rescue. Still, before he was old enough to grasp the concept of resentment, young Edward worried for his mother as he would accidentally overhear just to make sure she was still breathing when it was all over. His unconditional concern did not last though. By the time he was seven and had developed a displeasure towards his upbringing, Edward had taken a liking to the alleged cries of his mother's pain. Every weekday he'd come home from school, grab the Styrofoam cup, and begin his accidental overhearing. This went on for some years until Edward's guilty eavesdropping pleasure shifted from a satisfaction in his mother's apparent misery to another means of enjoyment. He was eleven, twelve, thirteen, and he was in hormonal heaven.

Edward wondered why his mother and the man could not, even after so many years of sex, get married. He did not particularly like the man because he was covered in naked women, all disproportionately inked, and he was wanted in twelve states, including that of his current residence. But this was not what kept his mother from tying the proverbial knot. She didn't mind his racy tattoos, or that he had robbed thirteen liquor stores, two ice cream parlors, and a Salvation Army shop. What his mother hated about the man, what she really couldn't stand, was his snake.

"Get rid of it," she said one night. "It scares Edward." The boy pressed his ear more firmly into the Styrofoam cup when he'd heard his name.

"It scares you."

"I just don't want it around. Wouldn't it be nice to have a poodle? A snake? It's just not normal to have a snake."

"A snake is special." The man's voice had gotten quiet and breathy. "Enough of this, can we please just fuck?"

Edward was stunned. Those words stung and stuck. There was something about them and how they made a dirty dig at his mother that seemed a satisfying retribution for the time she upchucked bile and booze onto his backpack, or when she

assured him that the mold on the potato salad was just another tasty green vegetable. It felt good to hear those words spoken against her. It felt better to say them over and over in his head. A snake is special. A snake is special.

The man and his mother fucked but they never married because he kept the snake. Edward's mother died a lonely widow a year later in an unfortunate bicycling accident. The man she wanted to marry had her naked silhouette permanently printed on the back of his left thigh. He dropped his pants at the funeral so the young boy could see the tattoo and how much he must have cared for his mother. Edward liked the tattoo because he thought it made his mother look fat. He also liked the man's snake because his mother never did. Edward still didn't like the man because he penciled his phone number on a tissue to hand to a big breasted woman who was crying over his mother's open casket, but he agreed with him that snakes were special.

Snake Boy wasn't Ed's god from the start, though he certainly had given the possibility some serious thought. A being with a body that is neither plain nor human. Well, he'd keep the creature around just in case. The Jehovah's Witness certainly seemed to know what he was talking about forty years ago, and Ed could use the company. Snake Boy was a cheery companion, he was the first thing Ed had really cared about in those forty years. Then the good things started to happen. Ed began to get better at doing his crossword puzzles, Ed made his bed, Ed scrubbed the mildew off of the bathroom tiles, Ed found three dollars in his pocket, Ed learned how to bake muffins, Ed lost his gut, Ed discovered a way to comb his hair over the area where it was balding, Ed met a pretty girl, Ed said more than three words to this pretty girl, Ed got a job, Ed was experiencing his salvation.

But when Snake Boy wouldn't eat his hot dogs or Hot Pockets, Ed feared an apocalypse of his faith. He called the local animal hospital to take his dear friend in, and the lady told him mice. He needed mice to serve his savior.

The pet store couldn't have been any less sacred. Animals in cages, rows and rows of cages, munching on the cardboard of toilet paper tubes and sipping the water they'd relieved themselves in fifteen minutes before. Guinea pigs, rabbits, cats. No snakes. The mice were clumped together against the glass, a wad of white wispy hairs that would have looked dead if it weren't for the rapid quiver of the mound of mini bodies. A wood chip stuck to the forehead of one mouse in particular, and the passive little guy had enough sense to just let it stay put. He was simply listless, not a worry in his glassed-in world. He'd get sex regardless of his sloppy hairdo, Ed noted.

The cage was already overpopulated, but that didn't stop the sex. Mouse on mouse; it was a wonder that they could distinguish between genders clearly enough to match up with a successful mate. They all looked the same through the glass; a magnificent sacrifice, every last one of them. Ed beamed at the nobility of their reproduction. Doing their duty to please their god. Caged, oppressed, ready to meet, to serve, to be served to their savior.

Ed would have had sex too if it were for the sake of Snake Boy. To serve his god? Oh, you bet. But Ed was pretty sure that Snake Boy wouldn't eat human babies, only mice ones. So he'd have to grab a handful and get going.

The lady behind the tropical fish tank stared at Ed, maybe because he was petting his pocket. This probably made her uncomfortable because she didn't know that Snake Boy was in his pocket and that Ed wasn't actually fondling the area around his upper thigh as he watched the mice procreate. Her hair was so long and touchable and her eyes were so beautiful and frightened that Ed didn't want her to misunder-

stand his situation. He took Snake Boy out of his blue sweatpants to clarify the confusion.

Her expression relaxed as disgust fell away from her pink painted lips. "Is that a snake?"

Is that a snake, is that a snake? Think think, is that a snake? Yes, yes it's a snake, I know this! He nodded.

"Why is it in your pocket?"

Ed stuck his left hand in his pants pocket and pressed a dirty fingernail into a ball of lint while he opened and closed and opened and closed and opened his grossly over-chapped lips. Say something! "It's not."

"It was."

"Oh," Ed felt very stupid and bit a flake of skin off his sheepish, unmanageable smirk, "yeah".

"Does he bite?"

I can do this, I'm doing good. "She. She doesn't."

"What's her name?" You, pretty lady, I will call you Lady Ann.

"Snake Boy."

Lady Ann laughed, "Nice."

Ed had named his god before he had it probed. The vet had to stick a pole up Snake Boy's bum to find out she was a girl because it's even harder to distinguish between genders of snakes than it is of mice. Probing is done with a thin stainless steel rod that is approximately one quarter the diameter of the anal plate. The anal plate is the snake's scaly butthole. Vaseline, mineral oil, or K-Y jelly is glopped onto the probe for easy insertion, and the gooey rod is then thrust in a careful, downward motion toward the tail until it can't pack in any further. The probe is then removed and the depth of penetration is measured in terms of scale lengths. Snake Boy could only be penetrated five scale lengths. Males can usually take nine or more.

Ed would have explained this to Lady Ann so she would have understood that he hadn't named his god Snake Boy to be funny, but maybe it was better that she laughed and it could just be left at that. Ed wasn't sure probing was an appropriate topic for the moment. He would have had sex with Lady Ann too right then a there, but it would do no good for Snake Boy so, naturally, he didn't.

Lady Ann made her way around the tropical fish tank to where Ed was standing and he could see that she wore white pointy heels, but he could see nothing above her knees because he couldn't bring his head up. The strangest thing: Ed's chin was stuck against his Adam's apple and it wouldn't come undone. Another strange thing: Ed could hear his heartbeat through his Adam's apple and it was so loud he didn't hear Lady Ann's polite request to pet his snake. He only hoped she couldn't hear his heart's clumsy thud thudding. After much confusion, a bit of laughter, and a failed attempt to get another word out of him, Lady Ann left Ed to go stack bags of kitty litter and price flea collars. Once she was far enough across the store and the feature of mobility crept back into his limbs, Ed put Snake Boy back into his sweatpants and went about his business. His god was hungry, mice were urgent.

So Ed bought a handful and kept them in the recycling bin. The mice mated to give themselves something to do while awaiting their self sacrifice. In a month Ed had so many mice he had to move them to the bathtub. But the mice were kicking their tiny little buckets faster than Ed's god could get an appetite for their fate. Cheese is what they needed, more and more of it.

When Ed saw the black sharpied "Now Hiring" posted on the window of Burger Blast, he took it as a sign. Ed didn't know how to properly assemble the parts of a Burger Blast Thick n' Juicy Quarter Pounder but, after just over three weeks, he quickly caught on. Whole wheat bun, quarter pound pattie, iceberg lettuce, almost ripe tomato, roughly chopped onions. Ed took certain liberties with the menu. For a Burger Blast Cheesy Thick n' Juicy Quarter Pounder: whole wheat bun, quarter pound pattie, iceberg lettuce, almost ripe tomato, roughly chopped onions. For a Burger Blast Cheesy Thick n' Juicy Quarter Pounder after a customer complaint: whole wheat bun, quarter pound pattie, iceberg lettuce, almost ripe tomato, roughly chopped onions, half a slice of cheese, spit.

Ed enjoyed the routine of his work and that the greasy establishment only attracted the unattractive. The clientele was predictable: pimply, solid, one hundred and fifty pound ogres, and picky, gargantuan three hundred pound regulars. Ed liked to stare at their fatty folds because he found he could talk openly to them. He could even hear their orders clear as day without any thud thudding interference. It wasn't that Ed preferred hideous women, he simply operated best with pretty girls when they were spread eagle across a glossy two-page spread.

Ed was sure that he wasn't a virgin, but he had never had sex. He was too old to be a virgin so it just didn't make sense that he could still be one. He couldn't recall when he had lost his virginity, but he was sure it must have happened. And Ed was sure that it must have happened with a topless school girl like the one on the cover of the pornographic magazine. Forty seven was certainly past the age when virginity is lost, so Ed was sure that he had had sex at least ten times. Most likely more. So sex with Lady Ann wasn't all that important to him. Sex with Lady Ann didn't weigh too heavily on his mind. He wasn't at the point or anywhere near it where he'd think about sex with Lady Ann over lettuce, tomatoes, onions, and pocketed cheese in between. He didn't constantly wonder what it might feel like to have sex with Lady Ann, or sex at all, because of course he had already done it at least ten times and naturally knew exactly how it felt to penetrate a woman. Ed spent most of his time thinking about more important things, like his new job, his savior, and his overall wellbeing.

Really, Ed spent most of his time in a mental state of denial. But Snake Boy kept him grounded. Since the goal that was first and foremost in Ed's life was to serve his savior, he never let any but wholesome, religious thoughts run through his carefully gelled-over head. Snake boy was everything, and everything was done for Snake Boy. Every soggy wad of spit that sat atop every cheeseburger, even the school girl thumb-tacked over his bed, they were all a tribute to his god.

For nearly two months, Ed had it made. He kept the cheese coming and he kept his god fed and he kept his socks matched and folded. Things were in order. But every now and then Lady Ann would cross his thoughts, and Ed would put down the Brillo pad and leave the burnt muffin residue on the bottom of the tray to soak in the sink amongst the towers of dirty dishes. And soon every now and then became every other moment.

Ed's bathtub smelled like the toilet that he often forgot to flush. Like Ed, the mice didn't concern themselves with the fecal matter that matted itself to the hairs of their underbellies and pink wrinkly toes. The pistachio green porcelain was littered with brown specks and smears, mice scurrying along as if there was a good reason to rush across the dung laden path. Other than these futile foot races, action stopped. There was the chase, but never the catch. Not one mouse mounted. Ed wondered

about this, and he attributed their lack of sexual energy to the unpleasant olfactory distraction. Ed's armpits smelled like the rest of him, which smelled like the bathtub he'd surrendered to his saviors two months before when their multiplying started to increase exponentially. But now the mouse on mouse had ceased, and their numbers were quickly dwindling. Seven, scuttling through the crusty remains of the once thirty four. Soon to be six, Snake Boy was ready for a meal.

Ed emptied his sweatpants pocket of Snake Boy and the skin he'd shed earlier that day. The skin he tossed in the toilet, Snake boy in the bathtub. The mice went ballistic, they squealed, running up and sliding down and running up the slippery sides of the tub. Snake boy sat still, slithered, then snapped at one whose momentum sent his twitching body coasting towards the god. Jaw unlatched, Snake boy took his tribute in with one big gulp. His scales stretched over a lump that inched its way through his body, shrinking ever so slightly as it moved towards the tail. For this, Ed put the toilet seat down, and took a seat to watch. Snake Boy shut his eyes and remained still, except for the traveling bulge. Ed did the same, except to open one eyelid to peak at the magnificent display. This was always a sacred moment that he and his god had shared. This was always a moment to pray.

Ed generally prayed for a good twenty minutes. He prayed for a blessing because this was certainly the most holy thing to pray for. Ed wasn't sure what form this blessing might take because it hadn't come yet, but he had a slight premonition that it could be curvy and naked and beg to be touched in every place. But lately he spent less of the time on his toilet seat praying for this blessing to come, and more watching and worrying about his god. Two mice left, and Ed prayed that another blessing might bring more.

But the blessing never came and Ed ran out of mice. He had made a terribly awful mistake; Ed had fed the last female to Snake Boy a month and a half earlier. Ed would have gone to the pet store to get more mice, but he supposed that he might run into Lady Ann. He had contented himself with seeing Lady Ann daily, but only in his thoughts, as Ed preferred to never see her in person again. He suspected that if he was persistent enough, Snake Boy would eat his Hot Pockets.

Ed took a bite first to show his god that it could be done. Ham and cheese with a crispy, flakey crust. The drippy orange goo smeared along the corner of Ed's mouth, and it reminded him of Burger Blast which reminded him of the cheese which reminded him of the mice which reminded him of the pet store which reminded him of Lady Ann. Then, of course, his savior. Ed tossed the Hot Pocket in the bathtub with Snake Boy and all that smelled and remained of his thirty four sacrifices. The Hot Pocket didn't move so Snake Boy didn't move. Ed bent down and poked Snake Boy towards the offering, steam rising in continuous twists from the corner he had bit. Now Snake Boy moved, slowly towards it, until the savior was nearly an inch away from what Ed hoped might save him. But the Hot Pocket still didn't move, so Snake Boy kept his jaw latched. He slithered over to the crust and coiled himself around it. Ed found little comfort while he watched, wide eyed, as his god closed his eyes and found comfort in the steaming warmth of his offering.

So Ed's savior started to starve. Snake Boy looked thin, thinner, and he hadn't shed his skin in over three weeks. He scaly shine was turning dull, and the light that Ed used to watch twinkle off every tangerine scale with each swivel or turn now seemed to force his troubled eyes shut. Ed watched and wept as his god grew weaker. But there was nothing he could do. It wasn't his role to be the savior. That was Snake Boy's job.

He is your God Almighty and he will guide you to salvation. Some salvation. Ed had taken to calling it misery. The mildew found its way back onto the bathroom tiles, his gut found its way back under his flabby chest, and Ed let his hair simply lose its way. Life was looking grim, lonely, pathetic if you will. And Ed was sure that his luck had simply run out. He didn't once blame Snake Boy for his demise, as he just settled on the likelihood that all good things must come to an end. It was out of his god's hands, it was certainly out of his. There was nothing, simply nothing he could do.

There was the pet store, but then there was Lady Ann. So Ed couldn't do that, he couldn't go there, even if it meant saving his savior. And since he couldn't go to the pet store, Ed decided that it would be most honorable to concentrate on the littler things he actually could do for his god. So Ed spat in burgers even without cheese and gazed longer at the school girl on his wall, but his homage made no difference.

One evening when Ed was feeling particularly glum and worthless, he answered the door to a Jehovah's Witness. Ed stood in his sweatpants and a pit-stained, thinning undershirt as he watched the tall, steady man introduce his cause. It wasn't the same man that Little Edward had hoped his mommy would marry forty two years before, but he was just as tall and just as steady. Ed supposed that they were always tall and steady and that they always glowed. The man handed Ed a pamphlet, but Ed didn't bother to read the bold print along the top. He needn't the reminder of his creed. There is but one Lo— Ed cut him off. He knew, he said. And that one Lord was dying, almost dead. The man's bright smile faded. Still he spoke with the same conviction as the last, and Ed was just as struck by it as he had been years ago. Our Lord cannot die unless you allow him to die. Unless you lose faith. It is in your power, and yours alone, to keep him alive. Bottom right inside fold of pamphlet, page three. Ed had never read past page two. He blinked, rubbed the naptime crust from the corners of his eyes, and looked up to the sky as the clouds parted and sunlight gathered along the disheveled hairline of his shiny head. Ed was dumbfounded, Ed was blessed and, though he generally knew better than to hug a stranger, Ed threw himself into the man's comforting arms. There he felt in control. And even after their embrace, as Ed stood in the doorway alone, he still felt in control. He knew it was in his power to keep Snake Boy alive. The pet store would close by eight so he'd have to get going. Mice were urgent and Lady Ann was far too little a consequence to stand in his way. He could save his savior. Thank god it was in his power, thank Snake Boy.

Lady Ann stood in front of the gerbil cage which was next to the mice. Ed stood in the doorway, watching her calves tighten as she reached up to brush the woodchips away from the bottom of the metal wheel so that it would be able to spin next time without sending cedar shards flying in every direction. Ten seconds later she walked over to rearrange the dog bones and pig ears, and Ed walked in. He shuffled over to the tank of mice and stood facing the glass. One mouse chased another around the food dish, then cornered it and mounted, digging its pointy little fingers into the mouse's white hairy back. For five seconds the aggressive guy held a good position, an even thrust, a steady pace. Then the mouse underneath leapt forward, leaving her partner for a lick at the water bottle. Ed felt the poor little rodent's rejection in the pit of his stomach, and then felt a tap on his shoulder.

"I remember you." It was Lady Ann.

Ed reached into his pocket to pull out his snake. "Remember Snake Boy?" Of course she does.

"Of course I do." Lady Ann grinned and bit the corner of her bottom lip. "Let

me hold it." Now her lip was wet and shiny.

Ed didn't move, he couldn't move. Lady Ann's hand was a foot away, and Ed couldn't extend his to hand over his god. He noticed that she was wearing the same white pointy heels. He focused on them.

Lady Ann noticed this and squeezed her toes. "Okay," she said. "You need mice. Let's get you mice." She reached into the cage and scooped up the one that sat in the corner, still sulking from its rejection.

That mouse would do no good and Ed knew he had to say something. "I want a girl." And then Ed realized what he had said and felt clever for its double meaning.

She scooped up another, lifted it by its tail, and brought it to dangle at eye level, a few inches from her face. Ed's eyes focused first on the mouse's flailing limbs, and then on Lady Ann's eyelashes curling out from her upper lid. "Got her," she said, dropping the mouse into a cardboard carrying case sitting on the shelf below the tank. Ed watched her face now, her expression and the way her cheeks dimpled with a fleeting satisfaction over her slight accomplishment. She handed the cardboard carrying case to Ed and his fingertip touched the knuckle of her thumb.

Ed cleared his throat. "Do you want to hold my snake?"

Lady Ann smiled. "Sure."

Ed held out his hand with Snake Boy coiled around his fingers and up around his wrist. Lady Ann first petted the god with a tender touch, and he raised his head to hiss. Then, ever so slowly, Lady Ann wedged a finger underneath Snake Boy's chin and extended her arm so that he might slither towards her. Ed so desperately hoped that he would, that his god would bless Lady Ann with his approval. Snake Boy inched forward, wrapped one end of his torso around Lady Ann's index finger, and left the other clinging to Ed's wrist.

"It doesn't want to let go of you." Lady Ann loosened Snake Boy from her finger and led him back towards Ed's hand. "Well, is there anything else I can get you?"

But Ed didn't hear her last words because his heart had begun its thud thudding. He looked down to put Snake Boy back in his pocket and didn't look up again.

"Will that be all?" Lady Ann scratched her elbow and let a moment pass. "Do you need anything else? Excuse me. What's your name?"

Ed couldn't hear anything but his chest pounding. His mouth was dry and he couldn't speak.

"Ok, then I will call you Snake Man." She laughed. "See you later, Snake Man."

Ed heard this and smiled. And you, pretty lady, I will call you Lady Ann.

Margarita Night

"Do you have anything in leather?"

Carmen gave a start and pressed a hand to her heart, letting out her breath.

"Get out of my store."

A slow masculine chuckle danced in the air and warmed the room. Carmen was glaring, her hand still pressed to her chest. She had been daydreaming and didn't notice the sucking gasp as the front door opened and pulled the fragrant atmosphere past her nose. She didn't feel the feathering of her loose hair on her cheek as the warm mountain air rushed into the boutique challenging the artificial arctic inside, nor the sleigh bell jangle which followed the door sealing itself shut again. She had been too preoccupied re-living the past 48 hours of her life, and now this. Well, at least he wasn't anything that she couldn't deal with. After all, she was Carmen Fairchild.

Her voice rose along with her eyebrow and her chin, she drew herself up into the picture of authoritarian dignity, "I said, get OUT of my store!"

"Aww, come off it, Carmen! I know there's a naughty side somewhere in that goody-two-shoes life of yours. Or at least, that's what I'm hoping..."

Carmen giggled, her façade immediately toppled by the shoe scuffing bullshit of her old friend, "Charlie! Cut it out, you're lucky my boss isn't here."

Charlie tried immediately to look as if his life was in danger, striking a pose that Carmen knew was coming before she'd finished her sentence. She had known Charlie since before college, way back in high school when everyone in their small class was convinced they had everyone else all figured out. Her friendship with Charlie had caused school-wide ripples of disbelief. What was the straight-laced straight-A Carmen Fairchild doing with Charlie Landon? Everyone knew he was trouble, he was the reason that half the school knew what pot was and where to get it. He was disruptive, he was rude, and he was also famously lazy. Or at least that was the quickest and easiest way to classify Charlie, or 'Lando' as he was known.

That nickname came out of no where, coined by another of their half-delinquent friends. It had grown from there to be the only name by which anyone knew Charlie, even if those people had never met him. Just to mention the name 'Lando' conjured up some legendary figure that used to roam the hallways of their old alma mater. Carmen was the only one who ever called him Charlie and when she did no one knew who she meant. Their peers had decided that the only acceptable explanation, the only one that could mesh with the labels chosen for them, was that Carmen had befriended Charlie as a pet project. When she was done with him he might not be so hopeless. After all, she was Carmen Fairchild. She was the good girl.

Carmen unconsciously rolled her eyes thinking back on all of that. Typical, she thought, I wonder what they would think of me now? The 'good girl' who...she couldn't even think about that now since Charlie had continued his feigned drama and was now attempting to hide in a rack of clothes.

"Charlie, do you know how much those sweaters cost?"

"Nope," was the muffled reply from the pair of eyes that poked out from inside the ring of hangers.

"Well, let's just say you should save your money for Margarita Night. I want to go tonight after work."

Charlie's eyes lit up and he disappeared for a few seconds as he fought his way

back out of the sweaters. When he stood in front of her again static had swept his hair into an enormous cow-lick, "I've only known you to volunteer for Margarita Night once before. Something must be up."

Carmen wrestled with a smile for a moment as the comical image of her best friend in front of her was suddenly eclipsed by memories of the past two days. I need to get a hold of myself today, she thought as she spoke. "I just need a drink."

"Or five."

"Charlie!"

"Ok ok, how's Lacy?"

"You should know. She went to your house last week to buy from your sister. She came home with an ounce, already floating and she stank."

"Ahh, yeah, Sal got a good crop this last time. It was good enough stuff though that she shouldn't have smelled that bad."

"Ugh, you know that stuff pinches inside my nose," Carmen inadvertently wrinkled hers at the thought; "I don't like it. She was blazed and giggling like an idiot."

"I know, I know, but there are worse things Lacy could be doing," Carmen stiffened at these words but Charlie didn't notice, "Right, I need to go be a landscaper for the day, see you at six then?"

The sleigh bells jangled their silvery notes into the stagnant July air as Charlie left the boutique. She looked at the strap of bells; the mark of a town which spent its days either wishing it was three feet under powder or digging its way out when the wish came true in December. Carmen sighed as she watched him go. Telling Charlie was going to be the hardest part of the whole thing, but she needed him right now, and he needed to know. Carmen couldn't lie to Charlie, just as she knew he couldn't lie to her. It was the kind of trust that came after years of knowing a person. It was something that not many in that town could understand, just like the way no one could understand their friendship in the first place. The real reason for their friendship, the reason that no one in the social mind-trap that was their High School could figure out, was the fact that Charlie and Carmen enjoyed each other's company, plain and simple. The two of them got along for no particular reason, although they both suspected that Charlie helped loosen Carmen up a little and Carmen was one of the few people who actually took 'Lando' as something other than a joke. That's why he was Charlie to her - she knew the person, not the legend. They had gotten one thing right, though, back in high school, Carmen mused as she steadied her mind, the 'good girl' Carmen Fairchild, was going places.

Looking at me, one wouldn't suspect a thing, she thought. It was a Tuesday; she had been early enough to open the shop before the regular customers arrived. Her ensemble, as always, the perfect balance of flirty and tasteful, and she was smiling.

God, life is funny.

Natalie arrived an hour and three customers after Charlie left, "I am SO sorry, my alarm didn't go off!"

Carmen laughed, "No worries darlin', it hasn't been busy. Marilyn, um, your mom already called and I covered. She's coming in later."

"Oh good, checking up on us, I suppose," Natalie rolled her eyes, "you'd think she would relax at this point."

Carmen looked up from behind the counter, "Well, it is her business and I haven't been working here that long. I dunno."

Natalie rolled her eyes again and sighed. Then she did this peculiar thing that

she did when she moved from place to place. From a complete standstill Natalie would summon her energy, gather herself up, and with a heave carry her hunched body to her next destination. She really looked as if she was lugging an invisible sack over her shoulder but all she did was walk, or more accurately hunch her way about. For now she hunched her way with some effort into the back room. Carmen's gaze followed her familiar slump and continued to stare at the printed sign on the door as it closed behind Natalie; 'EMPLOYEES ONLY' it read. Her eyes fixed on that point for no particular reason, the black block capitals blurring into a massive smudge as her thoughts pulled her consciousness elsewhere.

She was only slightly aware of Natalie's small sounds behind the door, rustlings coming through the grating and nudging at Carmen's mind. First the clatter of syringes and insulin from her purse into the mini fridge, then a cough, one she had had since Carmen met her two months before, finally her heavy footed dumping as she hunched her small body down into the basement to double-check the opening routine that Carmen had been taught a month ago. Entranced by her inner meanderings Carmen's hazelnut eyes began to water. She hadn't blinked in well over thirty seconds. When dry pinpricks began to torture her eyes, Carmen got a hold of herself and was smiling again when Natalie emerged.

The day crawled by for Carmen and her face started to hurt from fake smiling at every man, woman, and child who walked into the boutique. Small things got to her, like the fact that her air conditioning kept escaping around the bodies wandering through the door and a new shipment of lingerie arrived that she hadn't been expecting. When half the order turned out to be the wrong sizes she nearly burst into tears, but no one said a word to her about it. Carmen may have been detached but she was good at hiding it. Nonetheless, when her boss arrived to made a circuit around the boutique Carmen felt like a mouse doing its best to avoid attracting the attention of an uncomfortably close hawk. She busied herself with the shipment of lingerie, only looking up if her clipboard fell into shadow as her boss swooped by. Carmen might have felt guilty, but she kept smiling. Marilyn didn't notice that the smile touched Carmen's lips but not her eyes. Marilyn wasn't whom Carmen had to answer to, it was Charlie. She did not relish the thought of being a disappointment to anyone, but the thought that it would be Charlie made her feel like someone was pouring burning ice past her heart. Dismay was slowly filling her from the toes up; she had no way to stop it.

Carmen felt her first moment of clarity when everyone had gone and she clicked the deadbolt into place at 5:30. As she watched the block of metal glide easily into the doorjamb, Carmen shuddered, her ears hearing phantom echoes of much larger locks grating into place on much larger doors. It only took a moment before she remembered herself and quickly finished closing before she finally headed to her car.

The drive up the mountain was an easy one; she had done it so many times before. It was along the sole road that led directly from the lower village up to the ski resort, various bits branching off as it went, one to the High School, one to the Boot & Board Shop, one to the only Mexican restaurant for forty miles in any direction. This was where she and Charlie always did Margarita Night. It was tradition and the only place they wouldn't run into anyone they recognized.

Charlie hadn't arrived yet, so Carmen took advantage of the extra time to knock back a shot of tequila. She asked that the shot glass and lime rind be cleared from the bar before Charlie showed up, she didn't want that to be the starting point of their conversation. Within ten minutes he was there. He smelled like cut grass and looked

like hell. Carmen had to laugh; he did always make her feel better.

"Carmen, Carmen, Carmen," Charlie began as she knew he would. "What in the world possessed you to come out drinking on a Tuesday?"

"How about we drink first, Charlie." It was a statement, not a suggestion.

"Alright, getting serious, I like this!" Charlie rubbed his hands together with an impish grin on his face, "We'll take two blue margaritas, mine's frozen, hers straight, salt on both."

Three drinks passed and Carmen still hadn't come out with it. Charlie had chatted away about his day, his car, and his sister. Charlie said that Sal had gone out of state for a few days to visit her boyfriend; it was getting close to her birthday so she wanted to see him. She hadn't come back yet, which wasn't a surprise, often these trips sparked spontaneous traveling sprees and Sal wouldn't turn up again for a couple weeks. Charlie had been fixing up the house as a surprise; he figured it was the best Birthday present he could afford. Sal and Charlie were close; she was just about the only person who knew him better than Carmen did. Sal had been eighteen when their mom died. She held together their household and fourteen year old Charlie as best she could, keeping multiple jobs and selling weed to the local dopers on the side. It wasn't enough, and the only reason they were able to keep the house was because their father still lived in town. He paid for it but did nothing else - that house had never supported the weight in his shoes. Carmen suspected he must realize that only the Earth could hold up a soul like his, obese with its own self importance.

Carmen knew how Charlie worshipped his sister. She was the one thing in the world that made him realize his own worth. Sal was the only person Charlie loved; the only person besides her. Carmen knew this also, and she could feel the dismay now rising to her throat. Soon it would come spilling out. By the fourth drink she had to excuse herself to make a phone call while he ordered nachos. When she got back, she didn't touch the chips.

"Charlie," she said.

"Mmpf?" He had already dived into their nachos. Carmen didn't mind, at least she could get it all out then.

"Charlie, do you remember the news two nights ago?"

"Sure, some more bullshit about taxes and the national debt."

"No, I mean local," Carmen glanced out the window, dismay washing around inside her mouth, its chill pulling the rose blush of alcohol from her cheeks.

"Nope. Look, Carmen, what's up? I know something is wrong, it's not like you can hide that from me."

Carmen looked back at him just after she spotted the black Suburban glide into the parking lot. The vehicle circled, once, like a shark, then she lost sight of it.

"Carmen?"

"It's my sister," dismay trickled the words from her lips.

"She was on the news?"

"No. Well, not really. You know how the police are investigating that hit and run near the border?"

"Yeah, they still haven't identified the body, something about lack of dental records.

What does that have to do with Lacy?"

"She just got her license a month ago. Charlie, we were going to celebrate finally, just the two of us..." Carmen trailed off for a moment her lips damming the icy cold until she couldn't wait any longer, she had to speak or drown. "We were blaring

music and singing, we had no idea until it was too late and even then we thought it was an animal. When we got out, oh my god, Lacy started to scream. She was driving the car, Charlie."

Charlie didn't move, but it was the look on his face that made Carmen want to die. Behind him a police officer stepped into the room. He saw her right away and began speaking into the radio clipped on his collar.

"I drove the car away," she whispers now, "I told Lacy to remember that I was driving the car that day."

"Carmen, no."

"It's ok Charlie," she nodded to the officer as she picked up her purse and handed Charlie some cash. "I had to protect her, Charlie. She's only sixteen. She's in Tampa with mom, she's safe." Carmen glanced once more at the waiting officer. "Besides, everyone always said that I was going places. Well, they were right; Carmen Fairchild is going to jail." She smiled. "I always liked proving them wrong."

Two days later Charlie's dad came to see Carmen. The local police station was too small to offer a space for Carmen to stay while she awaited her trial. She was being held for manslaughter three counties away, which had its perks if you preferred powder blue sheets over white for your cell mattress. This man, whom Carmen had only seen once before in her life, this man, who knew that at his highest moment he could only hope to be regarded as an arrogant bastard, this man had driven two hours to see her. She didn't have a record and the charges were as yet unproven, so Carmen found herself sitting across from Charlie's dad only in handcuffs. The table was a plastic folding one, like those you find at community church dinners and picnics. It's funny what you notice when you're trying not to look at someone, Carmen thought.

He spoke first. "Carmen, I know we only met once, but, believe it or not, I know a little bit about you."

Carmen gave him an incredulous look, "What could you possibly think you know about me?"

The man chuckled but it was a cold sound barking from his throat, "I do read the paper Miss Carmen Fairchild, magna cum laude blah blah blah. Quite impressive. The Community Announcements section shares a page with the Business section. And I can't help but notice every time your pretty face looks out from that page." He leaned forward in his seat, "I realize how much you mean to my boy."

Carmen only stared back at him. He was a filthy man. He had done nothing for anybody but himself his whole life. And he thought he had a handle on Charlie; he thought he had a reason to interest her. Carmen sniffed, tried to cross her arms but was jolted as the cuffs caught her movement. She kept her hands in her lap as she leaned closer, her lips parted as if to divulge a secret, "I don't need you to tell me anything about Charlie," she whispered.

His eyes flashed, "Carmen, do you know why I came here? You don't, so I'll cut the bullshit. Frankly it is costing me money being here, but it just might be worth it to see the look on your face. I know plenty about my boy that you ain't privy to. For example I know that Charlie left yesterday to go pick up his sister from her boyfriend's place, figured her car busted again. I know that he's not going to find her..." his anger cracked and tears started running down his cheeks. "I know because the police came to my apartment yesterday. The house is in my name, so are all of the kids' old doctor

records. Charlie isn't going to find Sal, because, Miss Carmen Fairchild, the police could only identify her by her dental records."

Carmen's heart leapt from her chest and shattered itself across the floor. "What?" But she knew what, her mind spun bits of memory past her like someone twisting the dial on a radio without stopping. Charlie smiling at her, his and Sal's house on the green hill, the marijuana growing in their barn with the tin roof to hide the heat, Sal and her boyfriend having a picnic in the lawn, Lacy screaming, a black shape rolling over the front of the car.

Charlie and Sal had stopped going to the doctor after their mother died, growing and selling weed wasn't exactly a safe vocation, so they wanted to be as far off the grid as possible; plus, those visits were expensive. That meant doctor and dental records stopped, no phones, nothing to their name other than a P.O. Box in town. You had to know someone who knew someone to find their house. That's why it had taken the police four days to find Sal's dental records and match them to her body. The body that Lacy had mangled and Carmen had left behind without looking back.

"Well," Carmen dragged her eyes up the man's face as he spoke, "it was almost worth it to see the look on your face right now. The money, I mean." His eyes shouted at her but his voice dropped low, "It will be almost worth it to know that you will have to tell him, Carmen, you will have to look my boy in the eye and tell him that you killed his sister."

Carmen couldn't sleep waiting for Charlie to come and find her; he came two nights later looking tired but happy. She was going to throw up, looking at him. There he was across the table from her where his father had been. She could see the bits of his dad where genetics pulled his features through. Charlie had the same hair and the same nose. Genetics had stopped there, Carmen thought as she looked into the tired eyes and the honest heart they opened to the world, and she noticed for the first time that Charlie's eyes were blue.

"Hey there," he said, "I've missed you my little convict."

She tried to smile but instead found herself fighting tears.

"Ok, ok bad joke! I'm sorry," he said reaching out to her across the table. His hand touched her arm and she jerked her hand up to brush him away. The handcuffs clanked together as they slid down her wrists.

"Don't touch me," she whispered.

He withdrew slowly staring at the handcuffs, "Carmen..."

"NO, Charlie," she cut him off, "no."

He fell back in his chair, his face a jigsaw of hurt, indignant, and confusion. She took a shuddering breath, squared her shoulders and fixed her hazelnut eyes on his clear blue ones. "Charlie," she began, "I have something to tell you. I know you didn't find Sal. I know because your Dad was here and he told me."

"My dad! What the hell does he know about it?!"

"Charlie, he came here to tell me that he found Sal."

Charlie hissed the air out between his teeth, "Since when did he start caring, what did he want from her bad enough to go get her himself?"

"It wasn't that. Charlie, she was the one...who...Charlie, I love you."

Carmen's voice broke and she raised her shackled hands to her face. "Oh Charlie I love you so much, and I didn't realize or let myself until..." she kept her eyes fixed on his, truth burning in every word. "We hit her, Charlie. It was Sal in the accident."

Carmen watched as his eyes widened in disbelief, as her words carved his

features into something unrecognizable. In the same sentence she had given Charlie everything he had hoped for the past three years and tore his world to pieces. She had reached out and filled the hole in his heart by slipping in a knife. Trembling he stood, shaking his head as though trying to clear it, his eyes clamping shut and re-opening again unfocused. "You..." he reeled and caught himself on the table. A metallic zip sounded as she reached for his hand across the table, dragging handcuffs across plastic. His head snapped up and his eyes focused on hers. Slowly he withdrew from her, his eyes chasing her breath from her body. And she knew in that moment that there was no longer any love for her in his heart. Then the man she loved turned and walked away from her.

JAMES BUCKLEY

Loose Lips of Liquor

The loose lips of liquor hold
tongue for no one,
and the inspiration for all drunken babeling,
is truth.
Virtuous is the drunken poet,
and what a virtue she wields,
for nothing can sting quite like
truth ringing free.
Explain it away as the voice of the vice
but the conclusion I find
is the bottom of the bottle
is the portal through which one breaks
all binding social confines.
May God smile down upon
this Mick of a muse,
for in her voice virtue sings;
May God console the sober
who this virtue scars and stings.

Pulmo-Mate: Mom's Best Friend

What is a warped relationship? There are those of us, the judgmental, who say that absolute delight in another's misfortune is warped. But then there are those of us, the elite, who say—that's my mom! I am, of course, elite.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when it started, her obsession with my medical maladies and my reciprocal development of weirder and weirder problems. I can say that since my first surgery as a three year old, I've almost constantly been on some pill or another, nasal sprays, the occasional topical cream. I needed ear tubes put in. I needed ear tubes removed. I've had a mysterious dent in my hip, a series of MRIs, a few dozen stitches in my forehead, and, the kicker, a falsely diagnosed lazy eye.

My mother and I have been in countless exam rooms, often seeing new doctors on consecutive days, trying to figure out why I can't hold my arm up or why I'm bleeding from the ears. "Is it a tumor? I bet it's a tumor!" My mom guesses right along with the doctors. "When are we going in?" This may be an atypical reaction to a vicious bacterial attack on your daughter, your oldest daughter, you know, the one that shares fully 50% of your DNA. You might think that the nine months I spent in her womb would have given her a sort of empathy for my illnesses and mishaps, but sometimes I consider that it may have been the hours she spent expelling me that shaped our relationship.

The truth, though, is that it has little to do with me, and everything to do with the impending medical crisis. My mother lives for the medical crisis. There is nothing better than the anatomical definitions, the doctors, the forms, even haggling with the insurance companies. And the doom! There is nothing better to spice up a Tuesday than a broken bone, or better, a rare, possibly incurable disease.

It is this fetish of hers that makes me the favorite child. Step aside, siblings, your accidents combined are nothing compared to my medical file, two feet deep and teeming with oddities and special cases. I don't break bones; I break growth plates. I've got a bifurcated uvula and a zest for life that brings me in and out of the ER more than a night shift X-ray technician. She loves it.

* * *

As a child, I was sickly. When I say sickly I mean, 'strap me to a machine at lunchtime while the other kids play hopscotch or whatever it is they could do with their fully functioning limbs' sickly. The Pulmo-Mate was my respiratory machine, my only friend. It gave me nebulizer treatments, pumping saline and bronchial-steroids into my small lungs, alleviating my throaty breathing and spasmic coughing. It was also a great conversation starter at the birthday parties I wasn't invited to. The Pulmo-Mate brought people together.

"Oh you're in Mrs. Csongradi's class?" I imagine this was how it started, so innocently. "So you've seen the machine? Really? Let's get you some cake; I'd love to hear more."

Classmates would regale their audience with stories of the plastic mask I wore and how they didn't suspect anything at first when I went to the nurse's office instead of the cafeteria for lunch.

"We knew it was bad when she went down there three days in a row, but we were thinking pink eye, lice, maybe diphtheria. Not this—it's unbelievable. It's the size of an oven! It sucks off her face!"

To be fair, the suction was necessary.

On the soft blue leather couch in the nurse's office, I swung my legs and sucked in that sweet medicated mist. The machine hummed and whistled. The air tube was probably cracked, and there I sat, free-basing at a young age. They called me a prodigy.

It was my mother who came in every day with the machine. This may have been the beginning of the medical obsession. She was proud carrying it around, gripping its off-white handle, its ten by five rectangle body dangle freely as she swung the grey cord like a lasso. Trucking the machine around in her blue mini-van, she was a woman on a mission. She was a woman explaining to teachers, other parents, and uninterested first-graders alike just what the Pulmo-Mate could do.

"Yea, we had kind of a rough year with Anna. She would be up all night coughing, it was a mess. We would steam up the bathroom, use that Vick's vapor rub or a mustard plaster with the ground up seeds and— you know what that is? You do? But yeah, the home remedies didn't quite do it. Eventually I had to take her to a specialist for some pretty painful tests. You should have seen her back! The thing inflated like a hot air balloon! It was redder than a fire truck! See, the needles were actually tipped with the very things she was allergic to! It was fantas... hey, where are you going?"

I sat listening in the nurse's office, sinking my neck down into my shoulders. She came back and enjoyed my mask-muffled conversation.

"Mom! Why do you do that?"

"Do what, sweetheart? Let me adjust your strap." She reached over to untwist the green elastic.

"Don't call me sweetheart at school."

The Pulmo-Mate was her first foray into the world of medicinal oddities

It came with us on family vacations and sat in the background of occasional scenery shots. After the allergist prescribed it, my mom used it frequently on my brother when he was sick, and occasionally, if the mood was right, on my sister. "Trying to get a piece of the action?" I would ask my brother as he sat miserably inhaling the Pulmo-fumes. It was a base play for attention, a cheap adaptation of my tactics. It didn't work.

* * *

After the Pulmo-Mate, it was allergy shots. Once the allergist was sure I could handle a weekly stabbing of irritants, he had to answer approximately 1,475 questions from my mother before he could proceed. "What happens to her after she gets the shot? Will this cause a reaction like the tests? Because, frankly, her back was huge that time, and I'm not really sure we can handle that weekly. Biweekly? Do I hear biweekly? How much will insurance cover? Are you sure about this? Because I was reading Concerned Parents Monthly, and..."

Eventually they reached an agreement, and together set me on the course that could solve my problems-- forever! "Or just until puberty, where allergies tend to switch anyway," my mother informed me with bright eyes. "But

typically immunotherapy works in patients about your age. Now if you were in your 60s or something, we'd have other issues to take into consideration..."

For six years I went once a week to ABC Family Pediatricians for a shot of dark brown serum, which indicates, as my mother explained, a high concentration of allergens, and requires a twenty minute wait for re-check that I typically spent with a cream soda Dum-Dum. I was allowed the Dum-Dum after my mom completed a comprehensive exploration of the effects of artificial flavoring. She needed to be sure it wouldn't inhibit my immuno-response. It didn't. My arm still grew a pink puffy lemon where the injection had hit, and the doctor still cleared me to head home after the re-check.

Roughly 300 twenty minute visits adds up to about 100 hours logged at ABC over the years. I became something of a fixture there, tidying the waiting room and making friends with the nurses. My favorite was Adrienne, twenty something years old and pregnant. My mom also liked Adrienne, who, post-partum, was willing to talk with my mother about her baby's bowel movements and teething difficulties, as if raising me had made her an expert. If it wasn't Adrienne it was Lindsay, and if it wasn't Lindsay it was the B team, temp nurses with poorly streaked hair and one syllable names, like Liz or Deb. My mom did not like Liz/Deb either, claiming that she was more qualified than either. Or both. We would sit in the waiting room whispering about them.

"Mom, I can't feel the back of my arm." I was rubbing my arm. I really couldn't feel it!

"From the shot?" Mom was all attention, darting here eyes around the waiting room, looking for clues or maybe a copy of The Diagnostic Guide. "Was it Deb? It was probably Deb. I saw her looking through a textbook before your shot. She has no idea what she's doing."

"She did seem a little shaky." I licked my Dum-Dum. I was enjoying this.

"She probably flicked a nerve. That angle was completely wrong! And don't try to tell me there were 10cc of serum in there today, she way overshot it."

"I'm nut even sure if she's an RN. I don't think it says so on her name tag." Now I was just egging her on.

"What if she's not? Oh my God! I have to tell the Doc!"

Allergy shots were another victory for my mother. More than fascinated, she was involved, talking to Dr. Fugazzotto in the hallway, exchanging stories and getting the dirt on the germs shifting in the valley. On top of that, ABC was thirty minutes away-- for thirty minutes she had me trapped in the car, with only the radio to drown out the endless stream of medically related chatter. It was an hour a week where it was just the three of us. And the Pulmo-Mate never contributed much to the conversation. What could I do but talk about my day-- anything to stop the current discussion of bubonic plague, and how it may not be the dead strain doctors imagine. With the right hook, I could engage her in non-medicinal dialogue.

This was a victory for me.

* * *

The shots worked. By the end of middle school I was able to behave like a normal child. I started to play sports. Sports! I was ecstatic, and Mom was too. She and the Pulmo-Mate would sit on the sidelines, eyeing the flying soccer

balls and shoulder to shoulder competition, sure it would lead to something big. She just needed to wait for the right moment.

Indoor soccer was a particular delight. The game was played off the wall, and there was nothing like a solid body check to cause a bloody nose ("shove a little polysporin up there, it will be fine"), brushburn ("don't forget to put anti-biotic ointment on that band-aid or the wound just sits in its own pus") or sprained ankle ("ave you ever tried arnica? It's an herb and it does marvelous things for swelling").

One January, soon after I commented that I'd never broken a bone, I was body slammed into the wall. It was a moment of pure panic. My mind was racing, "Not my face! Not my beautiful face!" I kept thinking. Desperate to protect myself, I threw out my left arm. It crumpled at the wrist, it felt like a snap, it wouldn't move.

Mom drove me to the hospital. "Maybe it's broken! Keep it elevated. No, higher. Does it feel splintered? Maybe it's splintered!" But the X-rays were negative. The X-rays were negative for the next two weeks even as I couldn't sleep or focus for pain. A sharp, squeezed sensation ran up from my arms and into my eyeballs, an unconquerable ache that needed attention. This was her moment. She and I were moving to the big time, to the orthopedic doctor, and a new waiting room, getting a special, moved-up appointment at the behest of Fuggie, as she could now call Dr. Fuggazzotto.

The new doctor placed his fingers on my wrist, on the right spot. "Yow!" My mom said as my scream reverberated through the entirely tan exam room. She was all questions, "What does that mean? Are we going to have to see someone else? How rare is this? Do you have something I can write on?"

"It's a broken growth plate," the doctor said, seizing the moment my mother had taken to breathe, "it only shows up on X-rays after the bone has healed."

"Excellent," I muttered, peeved at the lime green cast snaking its way around my forearm, and already calculating the hours we'd spend back in this office.

Mom took a swallow of air and was back in the game, "Will her wrist still grow like the rest of her body? What kind of treatment do we do? Will there be physical therapy?" It was one long, demanding sentence. The technician was taken aback. He quit smoothing my setting fiberglass, gave her a number of pamphlets and ducked out of the room. I assure you one must have been the mental health best-seller, "Understanding OCD: Take Control."

As we left, she asked the doctor, "Can I have your home number? Just in case?"

I would repeat this injury three more times, again in my wrist, in my shoulder and in my ankle. Each break took less and less time to diagnose, as my mother worked the system like an insider, coaxing Fuggie, as she now called Dr. Fuggazzatto, to write a referral without actually seeing me, and pushing for doctors familiar with my history.

She became an old pro on the orthopedic circuit. Anyone who had a question would go to my mother. I imagine the info sessions she held during my field hockey games.

"Yes, you— in the green? Right. Most HMOs will pay for a trip to an orthopedic doc, but you need to get the proper referral forms. Most pediatricians know what that means, but if not you can see me afterwards. Okay? Yes, I see another hand-- in the back?"

A few years later I ripped two ligaments in my ankle and needed reconstructive surgery and extensive physical therapy. She researched which area physician had the best surgical record and visited my teachers individually when I had to miss a week of school. She had me bed-ridden and eating homemade soup by the vat. She fetched pillows for me, and went to Blockbuster Video at my behest. One night we stayed up late watching Meg Ryan movies and wrapping Christmas presents. She wrote extensively about it in our Christmas cards. "Anna and I spent most of December in waiting rooms at different doctors' after she tore two ligaments in her ankle. It was a trip getting that one figured out, believe me. We got it sorted though; she's better now. " It had been a good year.

* * *

When my mother calls I block out at least an hour for our discussion of medical details. My health, her health, the heart condition of some woman she met at a park once. "Did you just cough?" She asks, overhearing the choking gestures I made into the mirror to amuse myself, "I hear SARS is going around. Why don't you come home for the weekend?"

My family now accepts my mother's disappointment that Avian Flu hasn't turned into a pandemic. We recognize that our mother not only has a hold on every existing disease, but is well on her way to discovering new ones. We endlessly mock her for wishing doom upon her offspring in the form of strep throat or, better, scarlet fever. But I'm starting to know better. I'm starting to think that she loves emergency situations because they bring her back in. They give her a plan of action and a role that puts her squarely at the heart of our lives. I know that my mom loves compound fractures and chest colds because she can be helpful, she can dote and shift out ice bags, and reasonably hound us to take care of ourselves. She can drive us thirty minutes, once a week, and coax out some conversation. She can wrap presents and eat soup with us; she can keep us on the phone five minutes longer. I know that when she's literally choking me with vitamins and news bulletins straight from the Center for Disease Control, she means something else. She means, "I won't always be able to take you to the doctor." She means, "Set up your own flu shots this year! I mean it!"

The Edited Senior Heintzelman

School had ended for another year and there didn't seem to be any place to go.

Rachel Brienne paced aimlessly around her room; the mid afternoon sun was shining and a mild breeze floated through her window, playfully pushing the curtains aside. Rolling off her bed and smoothing out the covers, she headed over to the windowsill and surveyed the quiet street below.

There was a junior high across the street. Voices of children filled the air as the school doors opened and the children ran out to the schoolyard. Underneath the voices and laughter of the students, underneath the rhythmic hum of the idling busses, a siren could be heard gradually getting louder and louder as an ambulance rushed down the street towards a nearby hospital.

It was the end of another school year and the beginning of another long, empty summer and days that went on without end. Days that she could spend forever with her thoughts and little else.

If she could talk about it, which she couldn't, she might have found peace with her thoughts. It didn't really matter, though. Who was there to talk to?

The room echoed with silence. She'd had enough of that.

Rachel changed into her shorts and slid on her running sneakers. Tucking a key into a hidden pocket, she went onto the front porch and closed the door behind her.

The street was empty now. The last student had been picked up and taken away as teachers had trickled out of the building in twos and fours.

Gathering herself together, she pushed off her right leg and began on her way. The streets were long and spindly; most of them led to the running trails that laced through the town, feeding into parks.

If she could talk about it, which she couldn't, she might have talked to a therapist. Someone with a Ph.D., a wall full of certifications and awards, and an overflowing bookshelf filled with reference books left untouched and unorganized for years. Maybe she would have sat down on an ivory suede couch, full of fear and uncertainty, as a younger woman (and it would be a woman, Rachel knew that, a doctor with a foreign last name, like 'Dr. Tanaux' or something.) with dark eyes and sleek blonde hair pulled back into a twisted bun sat opposite her, intently focused on analyzing every spoken word.

"Tell me about the accident," Dr. Tanaux might have suggested. She would have known about the accident because Rachel's parents would have told her already.

"I didn't know anything had happened. I didn't even care," Rachel might have said.

She wouldn't have talked about the little details that meant nothing. She wouldn't have talked about seeing the newscasters across the street and dismissing their existence as unimportant. She wouldn't have talked about how she never watched the news or read the paper in the morning, that morn-

ing being no exception.

But by now it was all too late.

Rachel's strides fell in rhythm now, the soft pounding of her feet struck the ground at a steady tempo, a gentle one...two...one...two...one..... She turned the corner and ran straight into the sun. Instinctively, she bowed her head against the glare and turned to take a shortcut through an overgrown path to reach the trails.

The sun retreated behind the trees, casting a handful of dusty yellow shafts of light down into the woods.

Rachel hadn't been back here in years. She hadn't had a reason to go back, she knew many other trails to take. She ran as if on autopilot; her legs lengthening and shortening her strides without a thought.

"You didn't care?" Dr. Tanaux might have asked.

Rachel wouldn't have answered right away. Instead, she would have walked over to the corner of the office, right up to the grimy window, and gazed intently on the farthest building away from where she stood. "We were thirteen. Who, at thirteen, can imagine anything bad happening to the people around them?"

Petals from cherry trees and needles from pine trees fell to the ground as a breeze lightly shook the branches. Under the shade of the woods, the breeze was cooler and more comfortable. Trees lined the sides along the trail, and the playing fields could be seen through the open spaces. Dogs ran around in and out of sight, chasing Frisbees and sticks, their barks reverberating through the woods.

Rachel squinted to see farther ahead as Rikai Hill slowly came into view. She laughed and shook her head, never breaking her stride. At the base of the hill, she shortened her stride and focused her gaze ahead, not upward. The ascent was harassed by roots and rocks, pine cones and twigs that snapped underfoot. She picked a tree root to steady her line of sight at for a half a second, and then picked another and another and another, all the way up the rise.

Rachel couldn't picture explaining to a therapist about all of this: how her mom dropped her off at school that day and how before Rachel entered the school, she found out that there had been an accident. How she'd pictured the bus getting rear ended, side swiped, and finally, rolling over. How she sat with her friends in a gymnasium crowded with students, and how she soon learned that four students were dead.

She could never tell anyone how, in a flash of fear, she'd pictured one of her close friends in a coffin.

Muscles aching and sweat pouring down her neck and back, she drove her arms and knees up, forcing all her concentration and energy on reaching the top of Rikai. At the peak, another runner came into view, his

form perfect and eyes firm and set in focus. He sailed by, passing her left to left. Rachel continued on the gentle downward slope.

"No one wants bad things happening to anyone of any age," the therapist might have reasoned.

"Well, yeah."

"It's a fair statement. But bad things happened to you and your classmates nonetheless."

"I know they did."

"Good."

"Okay, then." Rachel would have avoided talking about it, yet there was so much to say. She would think about it until the thoughts bustled inside her head out of habit, circling round and round. Breaking that cycle was what she was learning to do. The therapist would be sitting, waiting patiently for her to go on.

"They got us back to classrooms--I think they were trying to curb the rumors--and when I reached my homeroom, one of my classmates was hysterical. He knew who had died. When students found out he knew, we swarmed around him, desperate to know. A teacher took him away, consoling him and distracting us," Rachel might have said. The therapist would have cocked her head to the side and pursed her lips together, with a quizzical expression in her eyes.

"How could he have--"

"I don't know. I don't know who told him." And this would have been the truth. They might have sat in silence for a while as Rachel would have paused to gather her thoughts once again.

The trails sprawled out over hundreds of acres, some intentional, others created by the curious and the wandering. Each path looked essentially the same: covered in a dusting of pine needles, tree roots emerging from the ground in erratic patterns and rocks and gravel strewn about over time by runners, animals, and Time itself.

"And what about your friends?" Dr. Tanaux would have leaned back in her chair. "Did you have friends on the bus?"

Rachel would have nodded. She'd been worried about them that entire day, and she kept swatting away her fear of them being dead with all of her energy. She had refused to believe that people without silvery, wispy hair or yellow-tainted teeth could die.

"I went into a different homeroom, and after a while, a friend's mom delivered the good news: my two close friends on the bus were alive and okay. My friends and I were ecstatic; one girl let out a cry of joy. Other students in the room looked at us scornfully, but what did we care? Things would be okay, at least for us. At least for now."

"So your close friends were okay?"

"Yeah. I got lucky, and I was lucky to find out so early on. The waiting and unknowing made enduring that day so much harder."

"With good reason."

If Rachel could have talked about it, she might have talked about how she remembered all the details that didn't matter now. She might have

mentioned how at 10:41 AM she found herself in math class, watching a video about Nike Sweatshops.

Slowing her pace down a little and shortening her stride, Rachel looked up through weaving branches and patterns of leaves to the unanswering blue skies above.

What if she had been able to talk about it? What would happen? Maybe she might have been able to explain how the day just got worse.

"Just after class started, my mom arrived at school, and told me to get my stuff and leave. We had to go to New London, she'd told me, because my Grandma Bubbie was dying. When we got home, my mom reminded me to pack a black dress," she might have said.

Rachel's eyes were still pinned to the skies; she tripped over a hidden root and fell to the ground. Standing up slowly, shaking the gravel and pine needles from her legs, she brushed the dirt off of her palms and knees. Cautiously, she rolled her ankles in two small circles, backwards and forwards, to make sure she was completely unhurt. She pushed off with her right leg and began again.

The therapist wouldn't say anything for a while; she'd remain motionless, the expression in her eyes the only indication of her thoughts.

There were other details Rachel knew she'd never be able to talk about. Some things were just too hard for others to understand and too hard to explain. Like the media: how all the major news stations had an image of her school with blaring yellow and orange headlines underneath that read, "FOUR STUDENTS DEAD IN FATAL CRASH" and "FOUR DEAD ON A SCHOOL TRIP" and how every radio station repeated the same information over and over again.

"So, you went to New London?" the therapist would have confirmed.
"Yep."

Had Dr. Tanaux been real, and Rachel been talking to her about the accident, she would have said how she and her mom drove down to Connecticut, and somewhere in Rhode Island, the life she had known was forever changed. She would have talked about how her mom stopped at a Dunkin Donuts for lunch. She would have talked about being in a car alone, and hearing an unfamiliar voice over the radio bring the beginning of the end: "Once again...the names of the victims are Stephen Glidden, Kayla Rosenberg, Gregory Chan, and Melissa Leung." She would have talked about staring at the clock-radio for moments, unsure of what to think and what to feel. Above all, Rachel remembered one thing from that moment: it was 11:31 AM.

A light breeze picked up, carrying the scent of evergreen and pine around her in swirls of wind. Dodging around fallen branches and rocks, she looked ahead again; the path disappears in to a winding labyrinth. Trees blanket the sides of the path and she could see no farther. Heading into the opening of the twisted trail, she realized that the way is narrowed. She reduced her

speed almost unnoticeably.

She might have explained some of this. How she ran in to the store and into her mom's arms as she told her mom what she'd heard on the radio, or how her mom held her close and how she felt like she was outside her own body, watching herself and her mom stand there, in the middle of Dunkin Donuts as the TV hanging over the counter broadcasted news of a different matter, and the woman behind them in line shifted from side to side, obviously uncomfortable.

The pathways were overgrown and the bushes closed in on either side. Thorns stuck out of every branch, tearing at her arms and scratching her legs. She tightened up and tried to compress herself as small as possible, carefully running through the narrow pathway. The confinement of the brush was suffocating.

"Once we were in New London, at Bubbie's, I snuck into the living room to watch the news. There, on a tiny screen in a lonely room somewhere in Connecticut, were images of school, of students crying, and the names of the victims. I kept thinking over and over, 'I should be there' and feeling that I needed to be back home."

"But Bubbie is part of your family," Dr. Tanaux would have reasoned.

"Was. The accident back home preoccupied my thoughts; I just couldn't really handle thinking about much more than that."

"Fair enough."

Rachel wouldn't have mentioned calling a friend from a different middle school, and how the friend thought that Rachel had been on the bus, too.

"My Aunt Jill got to Bubbie's shortly after we did," Rachel might have continued, "and I overheard my dad explaining to her quietly that I knew who was on the bus that she'd heard about. 'Don't go in there. Let her be,' he had said."

"At least he was trying to give you space."

"I stayed away from everyone. Later, my dad asked me if I wanted to see Bubbie. I didn't because I was afraid, but it was a rhetorical question, so I went to see her: she was lying on a makeshift hospital bed, surrounded by hospice nurses, one of whom whispered in my ear, 'Why don't you go over and say hi?' I tiptoed over, cautiously approaching the bed. I stood by it, silently, looking down on Bubbie."

Rachel wished she could have said some of these things. If she could, she might have talked about how she'd heard one of the nurses whisper with a mixture of sympathy and contempt, 'She doesn't know what to do,' as Rachel carefully approached Bubbie, or how she'd felt a different kind of fear as she looked upon Bubbie as she rested on her bed, eyes semi closed. Rachel's hands had suddenly started shaking that day. She had begun to understand what it meant to dread, and what it meant to die.

The thorny path wasn't long, and she soon reached the break from the trail into the opening of the playing fields. Rachel nearly stumbled as

she ran recklessly over the now uneven ground, the transition between hard packed dirt and loose stones. Regaining her balance, she entered the fields where the unforgiving sun beat down, and the humidity glazed over every inch of land, making the air thick and hard to breathe.

"I grew restless at Bubbie's, even though I'd only been there for about a day. I needed to go home, to be with my friends and somewhere where I felt safe. The second afternoon I was there, I found my ticket home: Steve's funeral. My mom reluctantly agreed, but told me to say goodbye to Bubbie. I went back into her room and I leaned over Bubbie, giving her a kiss and saying, 'I love you, Bubbie, see you later.' And with that, I was off home to begin the week of funerals. After that week, I never attended another funeral."

She had left Bubbie behind and never looked back. She couldn't. She was too focused on everything else back home, and she simply didn't know how to handle it. There's only so much a person can take. By the time things had started to make sense, it was too late to turn around.

Rachel might have explained how two of her aunts died in the following years, but she still couldn't go to another funeral.

"I nearly threw up at the very idea. I'd mourned, I'd cried, I'd felt awful, but I just couldn't go to another funeral. Not after those days in April and May."

"Can't blame you. Four funerals in under a week? That's more than I attended in the first thirty years of my life." Dr. Tanaux might have admitted.

"Steve's was first: black shirt, black skirt. Family friends took me to it. Parked cars lined the streets leading to the temple, and the newscasters held their perch across the street. I walked into the synagogue where hundreds, maybe thousands, covered the room, and still people continued to pour in through the doors."

When the service was over, Rachel found one of her friends who'd been on the bus. They hugged. Rachel wanted to say something to her, but couldn't. She wished she could have explained why she had been speechless.

In the emptiness of the playing fields, the heat was sweltering, the air heavy and hard to breath. She changed course and aimed for the edges of the field underneath the shade of the surrounding trees. The sun scratched at her eyes and burned across the crabgrass and weeds scattered around the field.

"1,600 people attended Steve's funeral."

"The community just started to come together?"

"Something like that. Kayla's funeral was similar in size, tradition, and emotion."

Had Rachel been able to talk about it, she might have recalled that she got so sick of grieving and so tired of sadness, and how she tried to watch some mindless TV, but the phone rang, and how her dad answered the phone.

"He answered and paused, his tone changed then: it was sadder, more tired, and he asked, 'Oh...When?' Then he hung up. He called up to my mom to come down and they headed into the living room. I turned off the TV. He told us that Bubbie had just passed away." She would have said quietly. She might have said how her mom cried and Rachel slipped away upstairs to her room to explode as quietly as she could.

"Greg's funeral was the next day." She would have continued. There was still so much left to tell.

She would have skipped most of the details; they weren't that important to the story anyhow: how the church was crammed with people standing close together pushed up against each other; how she'd pressed herself against the wall, close to the window, in hopes of catching even the slightest wisp of air.

She wouldn't have mentioned how despite the humidity seizing at their throats and bodies that they sung 'Amazing Grace' and how the hundreds of voices filled the room and drenched the church in song, the music flowing out of the open windows and soaking the world outside, or how deep inside of her she hoped that their voices could reach Heaven.

"It was a beautiful service."

"They all were, I'd bet."

"This one was different for me. Unlike at Steve and Kayla's funerals, I could see the coffin clearly; his jersey was draped over the top. I could see the tears trace down the cheeks of his family and friends as they spoke."

"So you were close to the front of the room, then?"

"Yeah." Rachel would have paused. "I hated that."

"Why?"

"It brought everything home. It made it feel real. It made everything hurt."

She reached the edge of the field; the shade brought little reprieve. She followed the perimeter of the field to the next break in the trees. The last quarter of the trail was in sight.

She would have liked to explain how she hadn't cried at any of the funerals, how she felt heartless but could not find it in her to cry. Over the years, she had taught herself years before never to cry, never to show weakness, and now she had simply forgotten how to understand. She wished she understood herself enough to explain that to anyone.

The sky above was a pure blue, a piercingly perfect shade, not too unlike those days nearly five years ago.

"Filing out of the church, I saw two of my teachers from elementary school, which was where I'd met Greg. They were disheveled, unshaven and somber. I barely recognized them. They'd never looked so old to me, and I wondered if I, too, looked as old and weathered as they did now." Rachel would have added.

"Tragedy and grief can certainly change people."

"Sure. I saw my reflection at some point that day and I remember being surprised that I looked the same. I didn't feel the same, so it didn't seem possible that I was unchanged."

She neared the opening of the trail and ducked under the protection of the colossal trees. The humidity lessened as the angry sun hid behind the branches reaching overhead to create an arc of leaves. An older woman with

slightly graying brown hair and smiling eyes walked by with a golden retriever at her side, who jumped into piles of leaves gathered at the edges of the trail, and spreading the contents like confetti along the pathway.

"Later that day, we went down to New London to go to Bubbie's funeral. It was so different from the funerals from the previous three days. I was the youngest person there, and there were less than twenty people there, if that."

"That must have been strange."

"It was, it almost paled in comparison to the others."

"You can't really compare funerals."

"I didn't mean to, it just happened."

Rachel might have said how she still couldn't cry at Bubbie's funeral, how she left unchanged and guilty. She could have explained how they went to the cemetery and had to toss a shovel full of dirt onto the coffin as it was lowered into the ground. She would have remembered how the dirt hit the lid with a muted thud. She would have said that this almost made her sick.

She sped up again; home was near. The final homestretch was up ahead.

Over the past five years, Rachel realized she just hadn't been able to come to terms with it. She'd never had a real conclusion, a perfectly wrapped box with a bow neatly tying it all together.

Half a mile to go and sweat flooded through her tank top and trickled down her arms and back. Wiping her face with the back of her hand, she grimaced and dug in to find one more gear, to go just a little bit faster. Arms pumping furiously, she broke from the woods and turned onto her street. She fixed her eyes to the end of the street as she pushed towards the end. Exhaustion echoed through every muscle as her shins and knees pounded against the cement. Ten meters to go, five meters to go.

More than anything, she wanted to find a way to say it all.

She leaned forward as she crossed over the crack in the cement, gradually coming to a bouncy walk, and then a stop. She laced her hands on top of her head and forced herself to remain upright, filling her lungs with air. It was fresh, pure, and clean. She closed her eyes and walked in a small circle, focusing on her breathing: in...and out....

The sun was lower in the western sky, the pale blue cloak fading to a pastel glowing haze around the edges. The breeze was cooler now.

There were no echoes of children, no bustling of newscasters and frenzied adults. There was no rushing of fear and chaos of grief; there was only the empty street and the fluttering of the birds overhead as they sailed on, beating towards the sunset...

Rachel Brienne dropped her hands to her sides and then rested them against her hips.

For not being able to talk about it, she realized, she had plenty to say.

Hurry

Racing faster,
his whiskey breath perforated the cold;
the neon clock begged him to lose his sense;
the very same sense that would have slowed him down.

Racing faster,
his heart beat frantic rhythms through his chest;
the car gripped the moist asphalt of the road;
his cold sweat ripped pin sized holes to freedom.

Racing faster,
the night fog thickened into a white net;
the weak net would not hold back his hurry;
his breaths pierced the cold air in quick, sharp bursts.

Racing faster,
his years of driving couldn't undo fate;
his studded rubber tires prayed for friction;
the road could not honor the tires' prayer.

The guard rail shredded;
shredded like paper.

About the Contributors

Caleb Baker is a Junior who lives in Wellesley, Massachusetts and writes exclusively on his vintage Smith & Corona typewriter. Caleb enjoys writing both poetry and songs, and developed his affinity for photography while backpacking around the world. Caleb's other interests include gourmet cooking, traveling, and the French language.

Alexandria Barkmeier is a wild westerner, native to Colorado. She is a senior English major with minors in Religion and Writing.

Lauren Barrett, a sophomore, is an English and Environmental Studies major. She is a member of Peace Club and the Gettysburg Recreational Adventure Board, and enjoys spending time in the outdoors, rock climbing, and reading works of fiction and poetry. She hopes to travel abroad in the fall to Ireland where she can continue to study literature and writing.

James Buckley is a sophomore at Gettysburg College. He is a Health Sciences B.S. major with minors in Biology and Neuroscience. James is also a member of Gettysburg's nationally-ranked men's lacrosse team. He is the oldest of five kids and hails from Calvert County, MD.

Amy Butcher is a sophomore here at Gettysburg double-majoring in Creative Writing and English. She enjoys traveling, writing, her Jack Russell terrier, cooking, speaking French and fine vegetarian cuisine. In addition to being the Mercury's fiction editor, Amy is a staff writer for the Gettysburgian and a Writing Center tutor. She plans to go on to graduate school in Boston after graduation in 2009. Amy wants to be a Creative Writing professor and a freelance writer when she grows up.

Geoff Calver is a member of the class of 2008 at Gettysburg College. He is a writing major and a political science minor. He also is co-managing editor of the Mercury and an avid reader and writer. He hopes to one day be an author and is planning on studying abroad in southern France next year, where he will continue to work on his writing.

Eric Canzano, member of the class of 2009, was born and raised in the "garbage dump" of the United States: New Jersey. He began to study Eastern thought in his junior year of High School, which eventually led him to declare a double major in Philosophy and Religious Studies, find Gettysburg Sangha, a campus Buddhist club, and write this poem.

Anna Chilton is a senior Environmental Studies major and Writing minor. At eight years old Anna made her first attempt at writing her great novel. She hopes that life will continue to inspire her in the right direction. Anna thanks: her family for keeping her grounded while encouraging her dreams, her Fire Department for being her rock and her first love, and all her friends for adding their threads of color to her life.

Caitlin Clarke was born and spent her first 18 years in Barnegat, New Jersey. She has worked as a counselor at a Boy Scout camp, endured the South African PLITU, and has conquered both Mount Katahdin and Mount Fuji. Caitlin is a Biology major with a neglected interest in languages. She seeks to travel the world after graduating from Gettysburg College, and someday own an inn.

Joseph Cook is a sophomore history major, Civil War Era Studies minor. He was born in the

Bronx, NY, and lived his entire life in the small town of Bogota in Northeast New Jersey. He will be appearing on the ballot as an Independent candidate for mayor there in this November's election.

Maura Culkin is a senior English major from Mountaintop, Pennsylvania with double minors in Creative Writing and Spanish. She fell in love with Spain while she studied in Sevilla for a semester and will take any opportunity to get back there, especially in light of her impending graduation. Maura is a program coordinator for the school's Center for Public Service and a brother in the co-ed service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega. In her spare time, Maura enjoys reading, the BBC, playing the piano, and skiing.

Alexander Englert is a deeply spiritual cynic from the mountains of Colorado without any answers. Over the summer he searched for meaning on a bluff near Omaha, Nebraska. He found nothing. Next year, he will be departing to search in Germany, which will hopefully bring another tier of enlightenment within his reach. He predicts that it will bring him right back to where he started.

Sarah Fagan is a senior studio art major from Pittsburgh. She is a Spanish minor and also enjoys Health Sciences. She is the captain and president of the Gettysburg Women's Rugby Team. In her free time, Sarah likes to ski/snowboard, run, and travel.

Geoff Gaenslen is a Studio Art Major and a Sociology Minor from Gettysburg, PA, where he works as a part time graphic designer. When not doing art and/or class-related work, he enjoys writing music, playing video games, and writing music for video games.

Melissa Gagermeier is a First-Year from Towson, Maryland, and is creating her own major for Gay and Lesbian Studies, with a German Minor. Melissa picked up photography after she went on a trip to Italy, and has been doing it ever since. She took some art courses in High School, and was a member of the National Art Honor Society.

Born into this world two weeks overdue, Lara Grieco has continued this trend of chronic lateness throughout her collegiate career. Her four years at Gettysburg have left her addicted to traveling, caffeinated beverages, trash-talking during intramural games, Thai food, saying the word really?, and good company.

When Samuel Harrison is not living in Gettysburg, he is a resident of Fayetteville, New York. He is an English major and Writing minor in the Gettysburg College class of 2010, and is contemplating another major in Mathematics. He enjoys writing, reading and considers himself a master player of Scrabble (though there are those who would disagree).

Terry Ann Hayes is a double major in studio art and art history, with the hopes of becoming a graphic designer. Her studio work is usually realistic and focuses on the expression of people's emotions and how they appear to others. At Gettysburg, she is involved with the Symphonic/Marching Band, Alpha Phi Omega, and Dance Ensemble.

Karen Hendershot is a senior and a double major in English and Political Science. She was born and raised in the neighborhood of Bayside in Queens, NYC. She is still looking for a job, but hopes to work for a political advocacy group or work abroad after she graduates. Karen's favorite poets include John Keats, Sylvia Plath, and Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Jennifer Kuzmik is a senior Studio Art major with a minor in Spanish from Richmond, Virginia. One of the biggest influences in her life was her time spent abroad in Florence, Italy. She would like to thank her friends and family for all of their support and encouragement.

Kelsey Lamagdeleine is a sophomore majoring in English and minoring in education. Writing has been her hobby ever since she was a little girl. She is fond of this story because she considers it a step towards discovering her own writing style.

Jen Lazuta is currently a senior, majoring in both Economics and English. She has a passion for traveling, writing, and photography. She loves to surf and spend time at the beach. As a member of the track and field team, Jen enjoys running long distances and high jumping.

Elena Mailander hails from the far-off land of Reno, Nevada. She likes to write, draw, listen to music, and daydream. She is studying Japanese and studio art, and is currently pursuing a career as a comic book artist.

Anna Markowitz is a senior and a psychology major. Anna Markowitz has many important preferences: she prefers warm weather over cold, she prefers the west coast to the east, she prefers nonfiction to fiction, and she prefers poetry over either. She prefers tacos to sandwiches and almost any other name to her own. She also prefers the bullet to the mercury.

Bethanne Marie Mascio is a senior English and Religion major. Bethanne would like to acknowledge both her friends and family who have served as a constant source of love and support throughout her life.

Alison McCabe is enjoying her junior year at Gettysburg College. She is a Psychology major and Creative Writing minor who hopes to one day fight crime as an investigator or top secret agent, and then come home from a long day's work every night to write and unwind and go to bed and have sweet dreams about her work getting published.

Kriscinda Meadows is a sophomore English major with a writing minor. Recent accomplishments include a paper given at Oxford on the zombie genre audience, and the acceptance of a short story for publication in a horror anthology. She is currently working on a paper, to be read in Boston this year, regarding HP Lovecraft's "Reanimator" stories and the gothic aesthetic.

Brian Menna cannot bestow anything significant for this curtailed autobiography. He is in what he writes. Already, he has told too much.

Rachel Rakoff is a First-Year from Newton, Massachusetts. She is currently debating between a major in English or History, and is contemplating a Civil War Era Studies minor. Outside of writing, she enjoys photography, equestrian sports, running, playing violin in the orchestra (she is a self-proclaimed classical music dork), and taking spontaneous road trips.

Luis Alberto Ruiz Quintero was born in Cuba and then at the age of ten moved to Israel where he started to become more interested in art. He owes that to Pokemon, which he and his friends kept on drawing daily. Three years later he got accepted to the High School of Art and Design, where Calvin Klein graduated. His work has been exhibited in CUNY, Cooper Union, and the UN building.

Jaime Schock is the Opinions Editor/Columnist for the Gettysburgian. She is also the Vice President of Allies and the Graphic/Web Designer for Musselman Library. Her major is Journalism and her minor is Political Science. She is very active on campus, addicted to caffeine and the internets, and lives in Japan Theme House. Jai belong to the Class of 2009, and her life is very Schocking, indeed.

Makenzie Seiple, of Greenville, PA, is a junior with a double major in Spanish and Art History. She doesn't really know what she wants to do with herself, but likes having horribly nerdy conversations about things like Latin and art, so maybe she'll find something that will justify that.

Maria Southerton is a senior at Gettysburg, majoring in English and minoring in Secondary Education. After graduation, she plans to pursue a career as a high school English teacher, travel it up during her summers off, eat lots of great food, read and write to her heart's content and basically have a great life full of family and friends.

Marilyn Springer is a Junior with an English Major and Studio Art and Writing Minors who is obsessed with consuming frozen peas and mass amounts of assorted cheeses. In her free time she enjoys quoting incessantly from Austin Powers Goldmember and puffy painting anything she can get her hands on. She enjoys a nice sea breeze from time to time...

Heather Stewart is a senior Psychology major from Columbia, Maryland. During her time at Gettysburg, she has been involved in campus activities such as Color Guard and Student Senate, as well as having work published in The Bullet.

Danny Strein is a current sophomore at Gettysburg College. His family is very important to him and has two older sisters and a dog. He is on both the cross-country and track and field teams and is double majoring in English and Psychology with a minor in Writing. He is a New York native and attended Archbishop Molloy High School.

Marisa Trettel is a sophomore here from Rockville, Maryland (right outside DC) and an English and Education major. She loves writing, mostly poetry and non-fiction and wants to become a High school English teacher to pass on her passion for reading and writing to others. She has aspirations of writing a book one day.

Erica Wiles is from Rhinebeck, NY and a sophomore at Gettysburg College. Being a member of the cross country and track team keeps her busy for the most part. She is also in pursuit of a psychology major and a studio art minor. Erica plans on studying abroad for a semester in Australia next year.

Andrew Young is an English major, with minors in Writing and Film Studies. When he graduates this spring, Andrew would like to "live the dream" and pursue a career in writing, publication, or modeling. On campus he's an active member of Lambda Chi Alpha and Gettysburg College Choir. Andrew enjoys reading, naked walks on the beach, margaritas, and Jack Bauer.

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