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VALENTINE, TEXAS

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By

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VALENTINE, TEXAS

A THESIS

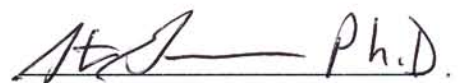
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS
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ABSTRACT:

Valentine, Texas explores the emotional landscape of men. It is a work of eleven short stories, five of which are set in the fictive landscape of the namesake town, the remainder in various locales, but all the stories take place in an unrelentingly pressured environment. Many of the stories here catch these men in moments of supreme anxiety about their relationships with those closest to them – moments, perhaps, of emotional paralysis. Some of these men keep their heads down and keep chugging, but most of them attempt to understand what is happening, and why, as if the force of logic could reduce these things to sensible form.

There is also in these stories a combination of open spaces – both geographically and in terms of personal possibility – and a tense, almost claustrophobic tunnel vision. These two elements often work against one another to create an inexorable pull which to some extent emulates the internal pressures these men feel. But these men also take comfort in moments of companionship with other men. Those who attempt to find respite in female companionship in these moments fail utterly or succeed only in a damaged way.

Valentine, Texas begins with two men, lifelong friends, hunting buddies, guys who shot reflector lights out of mailbox posts and fought Cowboys-and-Indians in grade school, and now find themselves on opposite sides of the law in a showdown. The threats they make are real, but are couched in careful language, and in fact great care is the hallmark of their interaction. Instead of confronting events squarely, they circle them in wary, oblique rhetoric. The second part of the collection moves away from Valentine but retains the same basic ideas of language, isolation, and failed companionship. The collection reaches its finale at a bridge in Kingfisher, a place where fish are falling, at a moment when everything is falling.

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Introduction

There are eleven stories in this collection, all written during my time here at the University of Central Oklahoma. The first five stories are set in the fictional landscape of Valentine, Texas. Each of the others has a unique setting, ranging from Toronto, Georgia, and Nebraska, to the Oklahoma towns of Edmond, Oklahoma City, and Kingfisher.

All of the stories you see here were read and critiqued by other writers. Seven of the stories were workshopped. One of the great lessons I am taking away from UCO is that writing is a social process, and the social process makes it better. “How many professional athletes learn on their own without lessons or coaching?” writes Jerry Cleaver in his book Immediate Fiction, my favorite book on the craft. His answer: “None. Professional athletes are on teams getting coaching and lessons for years before they make it” (5). Cleaver continues the analogy by discussing how pro athletes, when they’re struggling, go back to trainers for help. The writing itself may happen in isolation, but writers themselves cannot be isolationists. You must connect.

That was not the only great lesson I learned at UCO. I once had a very fixed opinion of how to become a better writer, and that was to simply write. I have changed my mind. Just as I learned back in my running days that there are three ways to get faster – work on speed, work on distance, or lose weight – likewise I’ve learned now that there are three ways to write better. Those three ways are modeled in every workshop and every literature class I’ve taken over the past three years, but it was not until I became a Teaching Assistant and had to oversee the process for myself that I fully bought into it. It was bad freshman writing that convinced me.

Academic life exposes us to few examples of such bad writing, and I understand that. Why waste precious time studying bad writing, bad persuasion, bad thesis construction? Instead we focus on the good stuff. But that leaves one pole of the heuristic missing, and we have to create it for ourselves out of the compositional fabric of daily life.

The rough drafts those freshmen turn in each semester are packed with earnest errors, and they have led me to whiteboard the three things for my composition classes. Reading, writing, thinking, I tell them. We come back to this over and over. I know it has been codified repeatedly in composition literature, but because I was an unbeliever I had to work it out for myself. Immersion in the word, exposure to the craft, and hammering at the keyboard, each of these elements plays a role in the improvement of the writing soul. If I wax didactic, it is because I was late to see the light. But here I am.

I think you will find that every story in this collection is unique. If you like the first one, you may not like the last one. I tried not to tell the same story twice, and I tried not to tell any two stories the same way. Here you will see my attempts to work with different styles, voices, and narrative techniques. I tried to take risks in style, structure, and content at every opportunity in order to explore the edges of my craft. I did that because, as Indy 500 winner Mario Andretti is reputed to have once said, “If you’re not wrecking once in a while, you’re not driving hard enough.” In that spirit the workshop comment I’m proudest of is this one: “Man, you’re taking risks in just about every way imaginable in this piece.” This collection stands as a testament that I was here, and I loved it, and man, I drove my heart out on every page.

Valentine

Valentine, Texas, is a real place. Pull it up on Google Earth and you will see it lies in Jeff Davis County in the far southwest corner of the state. To the east is the Davis Mountains, home of the McDonald Observatory. South and west is the Rio Grande, and beyond that, Mexico. Northwest of Valentine is El Paso. To the northeast is the Permian Basin, one of the richest oil reserves in America. Jeff Davis County is sometimes placed on the margins of the Permian Basin, and sometimes not. I have never been to Valentine and I had no earthly idea I'd be writing a short story set there, let alone a collection that turned into a thesis. I think that says a lot about the creative daemon. You see, I had this character, and he needed a home.

The godfather of the Valentine sequence is a story called "Valentine's Moody Henderson," but that story is not in this collection for a simple reason. It was the first story I had attempted to write in decades, and workshop critiques exposed it for what it was – a big, wide novel waiting to happen. I put it aside and wrote and workshopped other stories. Yet Moody Henderson would not let me go, and one semester later, "The Hot Season" appeared in workshop. But then I realized that it wasn't just Moody. The entire Valentine milieu had me in its grip as well.

It was very strange, but in writing "The Hot Season" I found that the fictional landscape kept opening up, and new characters kept appearing. "The story's protagonist is at the center of his universe" (42) says Mark Baechtl in *Shaping the Story*, and I have found that to be so true about this series. Each character has a weight or a center that

pulls and refocuses the framework of Valentine, and their collective effort enlarges Valentine, complicates it. I wrote another Valentine story, and another. I am still writing Valentine stories. Five of them made it into this collection, another five are nearly ready for critique, and I have notes and sketches for perhaps a dozen more.

The pivot point of the Valentine milieu is a murder. It was a casual discovery during the process of writing “Valentine’s Moody Henderson,” sort of an offhand event that I didn’t think too much about at first. But over time my focus shifted to that murder event, and I wondered where these Valentine people, these characters, were and what they were doing when it happened. I began to take each of the characters aside and ask them tough questions. “What part did *you* play in the incident? How did *you* know Norton and Vera?” It was those two relentless question that began to drive the character development and the stories here. I realized early on that there would be no pat answer, no single coherent picture. Instead it would be a series of paint daubs on a large canvas, a kind of a mosaic. That’s my guiding vision, and I’m hoping that the whole will eventually be greater than the sum of the parts. The danger for me is that the stories may become less like stories and more like chapters. But there are good models on how to do this, such as Yoknapatawpha County, John Cheever’s suburbs, Ray Bradbury’s Mars.

All of the Valentine stories except one arose in Valentine organically. “Jutland” is the exception. It was originally set in the Cimarron River valley in the northeastern corner of New Mexico. After workshopping it, I moved it to Cracker Jack Draw in Jeff Davis County because it dovetailed beautifully with my need for a spaceport location. Yet I am still at odds with myself over whether the relocation was the right move. I liked

it better in the mesa and canyon country. But the storyline expanded on revision to include a strong tie-in to the Lickleiters and Wallenbergs, and now I wonder if at some point it may fission into two separate stories. Valentine needs part of this story; I am not sure it needs all of it.

The remainder of the Valentine characters and their stories are Valentine born and bred, for better or for worse. The development process has been surprising, because under intense questioning the characters of Valentine create their own mythology, their own history. I had always thought that a big saga was a construction entirely of the author's mind. But no. It's not the author's construction. It's the characters' construction. *They* create it.

It's an humbling process.

Character

Ray Bradbury talks of character development in the following way. "Find a character like yourself, who will want something or not want it with all his heart. Give him running orders. Shoot him off. Then follow as fast as you can go. The character, in his great love, or hate, will rush you through to the end of the story" (Zen 6). Now I last read Bradbury's stories when I was a kid growing up in rural Georgia in the 1960s and 70s, and one of my prized possessions is a lurid orange 1972 paperback copy of his The Martian Chronicles. Scholastic Book Services was selling it for 35 cents, which is what I could get for selling a pound of pecans when they were in season, but at the time I only had a dime left. So I talked a friend into putting up the quarter, and we kept the book on a

timeshare basis until I bought him out years later, after my life had taken its technical, engineering trajectory.

But when I read the quote above, it returned me to one of my favorite moments in that old orange book, a passage in the short story “The Green Morning.” The protagonist is a man who emigrates to Mars and immediately faints from lack of oxygen. What does he do? *He plants trees*. In that moment of change, his character comes to life on the page. He goes on this crazy mission, underfunded, unsupported with anything but a knapsack of seeds, and for thirty days he plants those seeds in the bone-dry, dessicated soil of Bradbury’s fictional Mars, never looking behind him. On the thirtieth day, there is rain, and finally he dares to turn and look, hoping to see perhaps a tiny sprout. Instead:

It was a green morning. As far as he could see the trees were standing up against the sky. Not one tree, not two, not a dozen, but the thousands he had planted in seed and sprout. And not little trees, no, not saplings, not little tender shoots, but great trees, huge trees, trees as tall as ten men, green and green and huge and round and full, trees shimmering their metallic leaves, trees whispering, trees in a line over hills, [. . .] stung by a tumultuous rain, nourished by alien and magical soil and, even as he watched, throwing open new branches, popping open new buds. [. . . He] took one long deep drink of green water air and fainted. Before he woke again five thousand new trees had climbed up into the yellow sun. (77)

I give that passage so much room here because, for me, *this is it*. This is the payload moment, and it is in the hope of creating or discovering moments like this that I

write. And in order to get to these moments I have to discover the characters that lead to them.

There is another reason I bring up The Martian Chronicles. It is a collection of stories which are independent from one another, but which are connected by a unity of setting (Mars) and theme (colonization). Not only do those stories create a tiny, immediate moment, but they work together like the figures of an impressionist painting to show a much larger, grander vision. That's the thing that has me hooked on Valentine, and that is why I begin this collection with six stories from the Valentine series. The people that inhabit that fictional landscape have become very real to me. And it arose out of just looking for a place to stick Moody.

Moody Henderson was originally going to be a Georgia boy, like me. But the old South setting created a problem: it has been done so well and so often by William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Alice Walker, and so many others, that I felt Moody's character could only exist there as a sort of caricature or response to one of theirs. I needed a new place for him, a place he could be free of those immediate expectations. So I pulled out that metaphorical, geophysical Ouija board, Google Earth, and went looking.

The viewfinder started me near my home in Yukon and quickly led me through the Oklahoma panhandle to Black Mesa, a place I know and love well, but instead of stopping there it kept moving southward and westward to Clayton, New Mexico, then southward to Roswell, and further to Las Cruces. When it reached El Paso, I felt my interest picking up, and then the town of Valentine, Texas, popped into view. I immediately knew I had found Moody's home. Six days before it was due to be handed

out in my first fiction workshop, Moody's story began to write itself, and his story was completely *of* Valentine, and *for* Valentine.

And each of the subsequent Valentine characters has arisen in response to Moody Henderson. Buddy Friesen in "The Hot Season" was originally just a deputy with a job to do. As he sat down at Moody's table in the diner, however, and the two began to reminisce, their conversation began to stir to life a history that I had not expected. The waitress, May Anne Palmer, started out as a role player, but when her little red Fiesta blew through the four-way stop on the way to the sand pits, I suddenly knew that she was real, and she had a problem. It is May Anne who leads us to Norton for the first and only time in this sequence. Norton led me to Vera, and as I began to see Vera, and to understand how she had died, Sal Seragoglio came to life, because I could not imagine anyone else finding Vera and treating her with the great humanity and respect that she deserves. Only Sal could have found her there. And so on.

Ironically enough, Moody's own story isn't here; we see only the final fragment of it in "The Hot Season." His role as progenitor of the series eclipsed his role as actor. The surrounding stories spun off so fast that I have not had a chance to get back to him. But I will.

The characters from the non-Valentine set arose from different ontogenies, independent of Moody Henderson. My concurrent studies, for instance, always had a significant impact on the stories that I was thinking about or had in development, and the one that pops foremost to mind is *Antigone*. I was in a Thai restaurant awaiting my order, thinking about a workshop participant's admonition to provide some balance to the

female side of the relationship in my previous story, thinking about how Sophocles accomplishes that, when a missing child ad flashed across the TV in the corner. It was a little six year old boy, lost for over a year. That image, or rather the confluence of that image into my brooding thoughts, suddenly triggered the central dilemma and both characters of “The Girl in the McDonald’s Window.”

But instead of settling on Sophocles’ gender roles – tough male vs. caring female – I “flipped them” (to borrow a phrase from Dr. Allen Rice) to make the fictional dilemma more interesting to me. By making the male character the one who cannot let Rainie go, and making the female character the voice of practical reason, I now had an opportunity, through Codie, to explore the subject as a thought experiment. What would *I* do in the years that follow? How could *I* not help but see the child everywhere I looked? Codie sees Rainie everywhere; he gets in trouble for snapping pictures of young girls at an amusement park. His marriage ebbs and flows. At last Codie’s wife Jenna urges him to let it go, and this to him is the most heinous thing possible. The story leaves the central dilemma unresolved, as it has to. But the dilemma itself, or rather the way the characters responded to it, defined the characters themselves.

Rainie’s mother Jenna is somewhat unique in this collection. She is the most powerful female character on the page, and though the women in this collection exist mostly off the page, it seems to me that they are the agents of change, or at least agents of action, and they stand in dramatic contrast to the men.

Because these men are “flat out stuck,” as my father would have said. They are caught in crazy situations, sometimes of their own making, sometimes not. It is these

moments of supreme paralysis that interests me the most, and I can't help but think of Raymond Carver's stories, such as "Are These Actual Miles." There is the same Carveresque eye-of-the-hurricane effect going on here, a male protagonist stuck in a moment of hellish calm like the Ancient Mariner in the leaden sea, while *things* happen around him. Now, *Atlantic Monthly* fiction editor C. Michael Curtis warned us in workshop to beware of passive protagonists, using one of my stories as his example. But I don't particularly see these men as passive; Buddy Friesen in "The Hot Season," for instance, is working his rhetorical butt off to navigate what becomes increasingly clear to him is an impossible situation. Sal Seragoglio eventually reaches a decision, as unconscious as it may be, and points his car to Houston. Hickey Urquhart goes to work at his father's garage.

The men here are in very difficult positions, and the camera zooms in on them mercilessly at the moment they are hit dead center with failures. The narrator of "The Pier 1 Lamp" discovers an unexpected alienation from his son. The untenured Dr. Seragoglio finds a corpse who completely derails his research plans and in fact his entire career path. Luther Grimby fails to reconnect himself to women on Easter Sunday. Yet Ferdie has I think the most difficult problem of the bunch. He has been told he has to sever his connection with the land, and not just any land, but the land he has been connected to for most of his life. Old man Wallenberg, and the Wallenberg ranch itself, have become his family, and he loses them both within a short time.

I think it is no wonder that the men in these stories are lost. Their relationships have come unglued. They are angry and unanchored. The only place they are at peace is

in solitude, and in solitude they find no happiness. As John, the narrator of “Clover,” discovers, it is ultimately the women in their lives that have become their only motive force.

Many of the interesting names here arose from my ten years of research into genealogy. This is particularly true of the Valentine characters, like Burke and Hickey Urquhart, Venora Lickleiter, and Joachim Wallenberg. Burke’s wife Permelia has what was once a common female name on census records. Joachim is an old German name. I like these old names because they imply history, a deeply personal history, a family’s history, and by bringing them into a short story context, I think they can facilitate that sense of history. I’m balking at the word *shortcut* but I think if it’s done carefully, a name can add a little something. I think of Raymond Carver’s short stories, for instance, and the very simple names of his characters, and how those simple names work so well with the simple grammar and construction forms that Carver uses.

Sequence

I originally set out to sequence the Valentine stories based on dramatic logic, and the non-Valentine stories based on stylistic contrast. But after I had taken all the stories, moved them around, swapped them in and out, and finally felt satisfied that I had achieved my goals, something very odd and unexpected leaped out at me, and it left me shocked and unsettled. There is indeed a progression here, and the final sequence showcases it to maximum effect.

The first story, “The Hot Season,” is one in which I feel that I am in complete narrative control. There are no moments of authorial indecisiveness. The last story, by contrast – “On a Bridge in Kingfisher” – is one in which I felt completely naked and exposed as I surrendered control to the word. I clearly remember thinking to myself, when I had finished it, “what the hell did I just write?” I felt I was an instrument, maybe something like the lens in the Ouija board pointer, being moved by a force I didn’t understand. It was a damn scary process.

From the first story to the last, then, the sequence follows a progression of steadily increasing surrender of narrative control by the writer. On reviewing the collection, it seems to me that the hot day at the diner in Valentine is the start of a journey to the center – but the center of what, I don’t know. Perhaps the wind that blows across the ridges of the land in Valentine is the outer edges of something whose vortex passes over a bridge in Kingfisher, leaving us behind to deal with the hard realities.

In terms of narrative logic, the Valentine stories which lead the collection are in dramatic order rather than chronological order. “The Hot Season,” with its easy accessibility and steady increase in tension, as well as its immediate introduction of the core plot element of Norton’s death, was an easy choice to lead the sequence. The epilogue that follows it, “The Sand Pits,” was the original ending to the story, but workshop participants felt strongly that there was a serious point of view violation in leaving the diner at the moment of greatest tension, so I reworked the end of “The Hot Season” to remain in the diner. But in doing so I was left with the remaindered section, May Anne’s scene with Norton, and what to do with that? It was not capable of very

much expansion, and it follows so closely on “The Hot Season” that it had to be present in the collection and it could only go here.

The next story, “Home,” is an immediate stylistic contrast, and it acts as a quick sanity check against the plot of “The Hot Season” and its epilogue. Where “The Sand Pits” shows us Norton in his death location, “Home” shows us Vera in hers.

Chronologically, however, it actually occurs the day before Moody and Buddy’s showdown.

“Hickey Urquhart’s Trajectory” follows with a more lighthearted tone and a less serious payload, partly due to Burke Urquhart’s musical tastes. Every time I think of his lapse into the semi-disco groove of “get down on it, *woot woot*, get down on it,” it makes me smile, and I know that this piece has to stand somewhere in the center of the Valentine set.

A darker narrative voice pervades “Children of Darfur,” which contains the longest ensemble piece in the collection; nowhere else do four main characters interact and speak on the same stage. Ending the Valentine sequence is “Jutland” with its airy, dreamlike passage of time. I felt “Jutland” was the right place to leave the Valentine stories because of the slow, almost recapitulatory way that the narrative gathers speed before it ends with a literal bang. It feels like something ancient to me, something I excavated rather than wrote.

If I were to arrange Valentine’s stories in chronological rather than logical sequence, “Jutland” would start the series, followed after a time by “Children of Darfur,” “Hickey Urquhart’s Trajectory,” “Home,” and “The Hot Season.” I felt this would be an

unsatisfactory way to structure the collection, however. The dynamic, rising tension of “The Hot Season” was needed to get the Valentine sequence launched and moving.

The choice of transition from Valentine to the non-Valentine set was easy. “The Girl in the McDonald’s Window” has some tonal echoes back to “Jutland.” Both are set in cold weather, and both are imbued with a great sense of loss and an underlying theme of broken trust. After Rainie’s story, we need a break, and we get it. “Clover” drops the reader into a whirling firestorm of the absurd, ending on three words I like: “man, we *danced.*” Then “The Pier 1 Lamp” opens up the page with its big sky motif, which hasn’t been strongly felt in the collection since “Home.”

Following the purple afterimages of the man in the beer can sombrero, “The Derrida Moment” takes us to Jimmy’s Egg, where privileged polarities are questioned; this sets up a theme about structure that will be echoed later. The next story in the sequence, “Steppin’ Stone” offers the contrasts of simple language and a young narrative vantage point. By placing it here at nearly the end of things, my hope is that it functions as sort of a Freudian regression to first love, first principles, first lessons, in a way that casts new light on earlier stories. How did these men get to be this way? What happened to them? It’s not nearly so direct as that, but I think “Steppin’ Stone” works as a welcome reprieve at this point. The collection concludes with “On a Bridge in Kingfisher,” which returns us to the Derridean abyss and explores the idea of structure.

Rhetoric

The rhetorical use and misuse of language is a recurring thread in these stories. By that I'm not trying to imply any metatextual mirror and smoke. What I mean is that the protagonists often chafe against the confines of language, the limitations of it, the pluralities and slipperiness of it. When Luther Grimby tells May Ann that she smells "all cuntie and fresh," he does it in context of propositioning her. He is desperate for companionship, and the very last thing he wants to do is to drive her away, and yet he is so programmed by his father's advice – "say anything, even if it's the wrong thing" – that he goes tumbling over the rhetorical abyss.

"Say anything" is a phrase, by the way, that I heard in the classroom during my tenure at UCO, and it stuck with me, looking for the right fictional moment, I suppose. The context that it was spoken in was an admirable one: don't let the moment pass, reach out, make a connection, take a chance. I have tried it, and I find I have regrets either way. Luther may have regretted blowing his opportunity but I think in the end he made enough of a connection to get him through for a while longer. The two young people who come into the cafe are in fact unpracticed clerks of rhetoric. They're cons, and their violent use of language mirrors Luther's own.

In "Steppin' Stone," Warren struggles beyond his simple fourth-grade command of the language; his bike-riding friend Kim always seems to be ahead of him in her grasp of language and situation. She is in effect his mentor linguistically as well as emotionally. Nowhere is this better exemplified than when she quotes Robert Frost, to which Warren responds, "I didn't know Robert Frost. I read *Thor*." And where Kim says *mother*, Warren is still stuck on the childish *mama*. These linguistic dichotomies occur throughout

“Steppin’ Stone,” and late in the story it seems to me that Warren is on the verge of complexity in his language and in his thoughts.

Additionally, “Steppin’ Stone,” like many of the Valentine stories, attempts to use vernacular in a natural and authentic way. I don’t feel I am making fun of any of the people in these stories. I grew up talking like Warren, and later like Moody. I lapse back into it in a hurry when I travel back home, and I am fascinated by the complexities of meaning that can be achieved in simple language. Warren is astounded by complexity, thinking it to be out of his reach, but he does successfully create it even in his simple style.

Sal Seragoglio has surrounded himself in a much more precise array of rhetoric, but his lists are in their own way as simplistic and restrictive as Warren’s language. When confronted with a very basic binary – report the corpse or continue his work – he finds that he can do neither, and instead runs away. Thinking in terms of the crossroads metaphor, Seragoglio can’t go either left or right, but sinks down into a deeper crossroads he didn’t know was there, and it is that deeper crossroads decision that he at last responds to.

A verbal duel is the centerline of “The Hot Season.” Two men, lifelong friends, residents of the same small town and the same big horizon, meet in a diner and duke it out. It’s an old-fashioned, high-noon showdown, complete with guns, grits, a four-way stop, and a hot desert wind. But it’s words, not bullets, that are exchanged, as these men pull out a lifetime of memories as ammunition.

I think the most ambitious struggle with language happens “On a Bridge in Kingfisher,” where the protagonist attempts to close the gap between his own native language and that of the woman he is apparently babysitting for. He wrestles with basic elements of the Vietnamese language, which has no past tense, no future tense, only present tense (a fact that is reflected in the story’s construction), as he attempts to understand another alien language: that of love, of familiarity, of faithfulness, and of connection.

Construction: Structure, Arc, Form

“On a Bridge in Kingfisher” and “The Derrida Moment” are the stories in which I take the most risks in terms of voice. Both are told in second-person, which is an authorially aggressive stance that it forces the reader to adopt the role of the protagonist, even more so than the first-person “I.” That is a huge demand on the reader, but it’s one that I felt had to be made in these stories because they both dive into an intensely fragile moment of the psyche. Without the immediate and sustained tension of second-person, that fragility is lost.

I tried “The Derrida Moment,” for instance, in first-person, but the telling of it became powerless; the retreat into the past, and the deep past of the past, became an idle excursion to no great purpose. Even in the closest of close third-person narrative some intimacy is surrendered for objectivity, and I wanted no opportunity for objectivity in these two stories. The goal was complete immersion.

However, “On a Bridge in Kingfisher” does move to third-person for a time, and it happens just after Coleman leaves the bridge. There were two reasons for this. The first is that Coleman has a psychic break. He has been drawn to the bridge to ponder his own mortality, and yet his close companion, a child, identifies in his actions an aggressive threat. When he realizes that things could be interpreted this way, he at first plays along, but as the realization fully hits him, something snaps. The reader is thrown out of Coleman’s psyche and into a more traditional close-third for a time.

The second reason for the shift was to allow the reader to take a breath, to relax a little, and to get that bit of objectivity, because something is coming. By moving the reader from second- to third-person, the big physical blow of the narrative could be more fully realized. When second-person returns, it’s a less edgy, more fatalistic tone. Coleman’s psyche has retreated from the edge of the abyss, and even though we know he’s still there, perhaps now we feel he has a little breathing room.

The Kingfisher story is a good place to step back and talk about other aspects of the construction of these stories. As each one was written during my time at UCO, each was invariably influenced by the literature classes I was taking at the time. For instance, it was the opening word of Betsy Cox’s recent novel, The Slow Moon, the word, “so,” that gave me the handle with which to begin “On a Bridge in Kingfisher.” It implies a sense of continuity, a sense of casual story-telling, that I had to establish right off the bat.

At the same time, each story also draws on a lifetime of reading. It is difficult to say why I made specific authorial choices of construction, but in a few stories the structural ideology is fairly apparent in retrospect. In “On a Bridge in Kingfisher,” the use

of present tense arises from the need to foreground what the narrator believes is the Vietnamese way, that is with no time referents, or more precisely, with everything pointing to all time as the *now*. He is so wrapped up in this because he believes it is important, crucially important, to see the world as his lover does.

And every time I read the story, searching for ways to strengthen it, I am reminded of Ezra Pound's idea of the *vortex*, that thing that sweeps in from some inexplicable place and leaves you changed. Pound and his vortex were not in my surface thoughts as I wrote the story, yet it seems to me in hindsight now that the vortex – in this case, a tornado – was the only thing capable of stirring Coleman into action. It entered his life at a crucial point and presented him with a threat that forced him to make decisions.

Where the Kingfisher story is dominated by a bridge motif, “The Derrida Moment” is perhaps best represented as a drill core to the center of the earth. Deep time is handled here, and yet the very depth it seems is an illusion, because three different moments coexist in the present moment. The structural risk present in “The Derrida Moment” was that of the ‘bathtub story,’ that is, a story that takes place entirely in the past with no real action in the present, like a recollection from a bathtub. I attempted to deal with that by creating an action in the present moment that echoes and amplifies events in the earlier two moments, and by working to blend the three moments into a unity made seamless by the connective power of the emotion that stretches across them.

“The Girl in the McDonald's Window” took its cue from the implacable, remorseless procession of events in *Antigone*. I am tempted to say it took its structural cue there, but the reality I think is that it took its *substructural* cue there. Take two

opposing forces, each one ethically defensible, each one “right” in its own way, and set them against each other, not just for a day, or a week, but for years. Embody one force in a man, the other in a woman. Make them a married couple. Pose them a dilemma so brutal and hard that the writing of the story felt almost inhuman. How could I put these characters through this? Sophocles showed me the way.

Most of the stories here deal with time in a classically short arc. “The Hot Season,” “Clover,” and “Children of Darfur” all happen basically within one straightforward scene. “Home” moves forward over the space of less than one day. “Jutland,” “The Pier 1 Lamp,” and “The Girl in the McDonald’s Window” all happen basically within a short period of present time, but all invoke frequent flashbacks to paint in the backstory that led up to this moment. “Hickey Urquhart’s Trajectory” opens in an expository passage that carries us quickly through the years of Hickey’s young childhood up to the current moment, then breaks into two primary scenes; both scenes takes place in the “now” but they are disconnected by ten days of elapsed time. I think this is an apropos structure for a story about Hickey, and I am fairly certain that as the story closes we have not heard the last of the Urquharts in the Valentine milieu.

The longest story in the collection, “Steppin’ Stone,” takes what I think is the biggest structural risk. It is an experiment of a different sort, going with what Janice Eidus calls the “authenticity and logic of everyday life” grounded in autobiography (Van Cleave and Pierce 34). “Steppin’ Stone” is rich in very specifically autobiographical elements, such as the family store, the barefootedness of Warren, and the song from which the title takes its name. There is probably more that is factually true than is

factually untrue in “Steppin’ Stone,” but the fictive assembly of the material has lent it a stronger unity of effect than what my memory tells me really happened. I doubt my memory can be trusted so far, however, as these events took place almost forty years ago. Structural risk arose because it was a difficult story to wrap borders around. The themes that I’m dealing with – bigotry, class-consciousness, first love, the father role, the mother role – are well represented in literature, especially coming-of-age literature. Yet this is not a coming-of-age story, I feel. It is a coming-to-consciousness story, if I may put it that way. It’s about that moment in time where language and rhetoric become accessible to the intellect, where thoughts and ideas and relationships begin to become complex.

Reality, Fiction, Fantasy, Fact

The bridge scene (every scene in fact) portrayed in the Kingfisher story is entirely fictional. A workshop classmate once asked me where the bridge was, and I had to confess that I wasn’t even sure such a bridge existed. There is a bridge about the right height above the water on Highway 81 south to Chickasha, but it’s too long and the river is too broad. I feel that the bridge I’m thinking of arises from memory, but as a composite of many memories.

And so with the entire Kingfisher story, and all of the stories here. I have to get something in my mind and make it deeply personal, I have to feel it like it is memory in order to get at its power. There were tiny, autobiographical moments in the first drafts of all the stories in this collection, but in the process of zooming in on the stories and their characters, in the process of finding the stories themselves, whatever factualities might

once have existed were swept up entirely into the fictional fabric. A good case in point is “The Derrida Moment.” I was at that restaurant, in that booth, speaking with that waitress, the one with the cowboy-wiry arms. And I was completely possessed with an ineffable sense of *doom* over all the mistakes I had made as a Teaching Assistant in the classroom. And as I was sitting there, I thought, hey, this is very interesting. I searched around for things that I could crash into that moment, and began writing the story.

One of the great saving graces about memory, I think, is that memory itself tends to fictionalize over time. The story “Steppin’ Stone” likewise began from a strong sense of the real, and I think it is this narrative authenticity that carries this kind of story through its arc. As dissimilar as “Steppin’ Stone” and “The Derrida Moment” are in every other way, they seem to share this narrative honesty. Whatever personal truth there is in “Steppin’ Stone” arises from my memories of things such as getting switched across the backs of my ankles. But if I were to sit down and try to tease out the facts of my childhood from “Steppin’ Stone,” or the facts of my adulthood from “The Derrida Moment,” it would result in a photograph with more of fantasy and illusion than reality about it.

This sense of illusion against reality is something all these stories are deeply concerned with. For Ferdie, his self-imposed isolation has left him with volume eight of the Collier’s Encyclopedia as his only point of contact to the objective world. For Rainie’s parents, their individual derivations of reality bring them into frequent and catastrophic conflict, and yet their horrible shared experience forces them to need one another despite those catastrophes.

Ultimately, what is reality, in the mind of an unreliable narrator? One of the things I love most about writing is the process of discovering a protagonist's sense of the true and the real, finding and following the thread of it to whatever dark place the character is grounded in. In "Jutland," for instance, the arc of the story leads us to Ferdie's sense of the unchanging necessity of stewardship (or at least custodianship) of the land. In "Children of Darfur," there is a moment in which Luther Grimby struggles to connect the worlds he has known – Kansas, where he was a welder on Big Brutus, and Vietnam, where he met and lost his first wife – with the world of Pete's Diner in Valentine.

Lastly, many of the artifacts that occur in these stories are real and present in my daily life. "We been settin' here 50 years" is printed on a coffee cup I bought at the Hi-Ho Cafe in Clayton, New Mexico. There is a Pier 1 lamp in my bedroom, and yes, my wife bought it, and yes, my son does have a bunch of videogame shooters. I did spend some time in Toronto, walking the Don River Park. But these facts and these artifacts exist and occur in isolation from one another. It is the fictional daemon that appropriates all such things to itself. I'll be happy when my son moves on from those shooters, but I hope the Pier 1 lamp stays in my bedroom for years to come.

The compositional, intertextual terrain is vast. We bring it to the keyboard every time we write. The thing that most led me to undertake this master's program after a long and satisfying engineering career was my own sense of isolation, of desolation and disconnection. I was shocked to learn in my first semester here that I was far from alone

in this. Our postmodern, poststructural, post-everything era is in fact all about isolation, disconnection, and desperation. It is a huge landscape, and like the Mars of Ray Bradbury, it is hard to *breathe* here.

It seems to me that Valentine, Texas, has become my exploration ground. It's the place the Ouija board keeps returning me to, time and again. It's a big place, a weird place, and the more I look, the more it opens up. I guess you could say that Valentine is the place I've chosen to stand and study things, barefoot as Warren, blind as Coleman, shell-shocked as Ferdie. Here I am, and I think I'm going to be here for a while.

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The Hot Season

Moody Henderson was sitting in Pete's diner in Valentine, Texas, on an April morning. The front door was open to the fair weather, and Moody was reflecting on a worn copy of *Field and Forest* magazine. It was a special o-ring issue. The use of o-rings, gaskets and seals in firearms was being explored on this, the 20th anniversary of the tragic explosion of the Space Shuttle *Challenger*. "Let me personally reassure you about the safety of recreational firearms, even in freezing weather," said the editor of *Field and Forest*. The parking lot glare was suddenly occulted by a large, black cloud. Moody looked up.

Deputy Sheriff Buck "Buddy" Friesen, Jr., stepped heavily over the threshold and let the screen door slam shut behind him. He saw Moody and raised his chin. Moody lifted a finger but did not stand.

"Moody."

"Buddy."

The deputy eased himself into the battered yellow booth opposite Moody. It

groaned, but held. Friesen put his hat on the bench beside him and yanked some paper napkins from the dispenser. He mopped the bald part of his head.

“Damn if it ain't hot already. Know what I mean?”

“I know it.”

May Anne stood at the table, hand in her pocket, reaching for her order pad.

“Get you guys some breakfast?”

“I want some fried potatoes,” said Moody. “And bacon.”

“Sausage is good today,” she said.

Moody looked at her face a moment. It was set like a jackstand.

“That’s fine and all. But I want some bacon.”

May Anne leaned toward the table.

“You don't want the bacon today,” she said, her eyes on Moody’s burly arms.

Moody’s hands sank back to the table and he looked at Deputy Sheriff Friesen.

Friesen looked in the direction of the kitchen and back at Moody. His eyes flicked up to the motionless ceiling and counted the fans.

“All right,” said Moody. “Sausage then. Coffee.”

May Anne let out a breath and straightened up. She made a mark on her pad.

“You?”

“Just a coffee, black,” said the deputy.

May Anne's mouth clamped down on the fifty cent tip she was sure to earn from these two. She sniffed and went looking for a horoscope.

“Vera Ruth got shot last night,” said the deputy. “I'm wondering what you know

about that.”

May Anne twitched but she made no other sign that she heard. She found an *El Paso Times* and slid into a booth on the other side of the partition.

Moody picked up the magazine between his thumb and forefinger and half turned to toss it onto the table behind him. It knocked over the salt shaker.

“Where's the sheriff?” he asked.

Friesen's stubby fingers combed through the hair on the side of his head.

“Snipe hunting. He thinks it was some Mexicans. Some kind of gang.”

“It wasn't like that,” said Moody. He traced a burn mark in the table's cloudy formica surface.

Friesen looked at Moody's ring finger drawing circles in the tabletop and remembered a solid week of tequila shooters during Moody's first divorce. What was her name? He couldn't remember. He sighed. “You seen your boy this morning? Norton in town?”

“I ain't seen him this morning.”

“If you do. . . .” Friesen pulled a folded paper from his hat liner and put it on the table.

It was a warrant, stained on a line of dampness.

Wind tapped at the screen door. A little dust kicked up in the parking lot. The glare made Moody's eyes squint and water.

“Here's your order.” May Anne plucked the warrant from the table and slid it into her apron pocket. “Two coffees. A hash brown and a sausage. Guys want anything else

while I'm here?"

Moody shook his head, looking down into his plate. There was a reflection of a ceiling fan there, but the fan was not turning. It wasn't supposed to be the hot season yet.

"No ma'am," said the deputy. He pulled the serrated knife from Moody's rolled-up napkin and set it in the center of the table. He spun it, and both men watched the blade. "Twins doing all right?"

May Anne sniffed. "All right, then," she said, and walked off. No eyes followed her. She slid into a booth far enough away that she didn't have to listen to their jabber if she didn't want to. But close enough that she could. She felt in her pocket for the horoscope, but pulled out the warrant instead.

The knife stopped spinning.

"They're pretty good, I guess," said Moody. His twin girls had once been his hope of salvation, though he had never said as such. Buddy knew it by the way he used to talk about them.

"They still living in El Paso?"

"Norton ain't there."

Oh my God. May Anne's mouth made the words soundlessly. She pulled a pencil from her pocket and wrote a name on the table. Another name. She drew a triangle and erased it. She drew a circle. She erased that and looked at the clock over the kitchen door. It was coming up on ten.

May Anne looked over her shoulder. The two old men were the only customers in the restaurant. Everybody else in Valentine was out on the fields or working the road or

garage.

Moody watched Friesen sip his coffee hot. Steam rose up into his blue eyes and Moody thought back to the time of Cowboys and Indians. Buddy always had to be the cowboy. They had fought over it underneath the water tower in 4th grade. Both got detention.

The sausage wasn't bad, but Moody wasn't much of a sausage man. He brushed the serrated knife aside and pulled a Glöck handgun from his pocket. It clicked down onto the table between them, a 9mm wrench.

“Live clip,” he said, and went to the hashbrowns.

The deputy's eyes flicked down at the gun and looked it over like it was a baseball card. Harmon Killebrew, 1974. A good man in a bad year. The sight pointed at Moody's right arm.

Friesen blew into his coffee, watching Moody fade behind the vapor.

“Norton's?” His voice closed up. He cleared his throat.

“Yeah,” said Moody, around the hashbrowns. His red-rimmed eyes glistened in the light from the door. Moody always did have allergy problems this time of season.

Mesquite.

“Ain't no hurry.” The deputy sipped at his coffee. Some men retired too late. But every man needed the chance. “You gonna finish that sausage?”

“Help yourself to it,” said Moody.

“I believe I will.” The deputy used his knife to spear the remainder of the patty. He ate it like they used to eat Vienna sausages out of the can, when they'd go out for a

few days camping. Stick the knife in, pull out the one in the middle. Sometimes you had to cut it free.

“Potatoes any good?”

“They ain't bad.” Moody said, bumping the plate with his elbow. It clicked against the Glöck. Nobody had ever told him not to eat the bacon. Not in all the years he had lived here.

A few tables over, May Anne stared at the warrant with Norton's name on it. In the kitchen, Pedro was whistling a pop tune. A fly was beating on the inside of the window. The warrant fell to the table, heavy as iron.

“Did she get out of line, Moody?”

A look of intense concentration came over Moody's face and he stopped eating. Outside the door, the wind had passed on. The parking lot was still. Two flies were buzzing on the screen mesh.

“Did she threaten you?” Friesen's cup nudged the barrel of the gun around toward the door. “If she threatened you, it's different.” He licked his lips and stared at Moody's plate.

“You want the rest of the potatoes, or not?” Moody pushed at the plate with his thumbs.

“I can't. Damn doctor's got me on a low sodium diet. Low sodium my ass.”

“Norton's over by the McCowley place, the sand pit back off the road.” Moody pushed his plate across the table. The gun pivoted. “He's going to need a place. You do that for me, Buddy?” Moody's hand squeezed the skin across his jaw and he looked out

the screen door, squinting hard at the fierce glare. "Damn sunshine," he said.

"God damn hot already," said Buddy.

"Guys need--" May Anne saw the gun on the table and walked straight past, hand on the warrant in her pocket. She turned the corner and kept going into the kitchen.

Friesen picked up the handgun, sighted it at the door handle, clucked his tongue.

"Damn if I didn't just get my fingerprints all over this. Shit." He pinched a napkin over his knife blade, squeezing it clean of sausage grease. He rubbed the Glöck down with the greasy part of the napkin, starting with the barrel, moving down to the grip, brushing across the trigger ever so lightly. "Remember when we shot the reflectors off the driveway posts at Bradberry's place? Old lady Bradberry drove her car into the ditch that night. My old man was so damn pissed." The deputy sighed and put the gun down on the edge of the table.

"My daddy about beat me to death. You ever miss your daddy, Buddy?"

"Can't say I do. He was a bullshit artist. You know what I mean." He raked the hash browns onto the knife with his thumb, and ate in silence. A curl of fried potato fell into his coffee, but he wasn't paying attention to it. Moody looked at his own coffee. He hadn't touched it yet. He reached in to test the temperature. He wiped the finger on a napkin and drank off half his mug in one motion.

Friesen finished up the potatoes and pushed the plate back to Moody.

"I wish I didn't have to know that. About Norton," he said. "I tell you what, my memory ain't the same as it used to be. Sometimes, I'm telling you, it's just gone."

"I wish my daddy was here," said Moody. "I sure do miss him."

A livestock truck passed by on the road. They both turned to watch it.

“That son of a bitch been going any faster, I'd have to write him a ticket. Public endangerment,” Friesen said, turning back to Moody. “Chase him down and write him a ticket. Might take me a while to catch him. Sometimes that old Crown Vic has engine trouble. Know what I mean?”

Moody picked up the Glöck and rested his forehead on the cool barrel. It smelled like more than sausage grease. It smelled like a machine shop, ten hour days, cans of tuna. Saving up for something. “All that bone,” he said, tapping the gun against his forehead. He stared down through the scars on the table.

Friesen didn't move, except for the flicking of his blue eyes. Moody's shirt was buttoned wrong. There was a red rash on his neck where he had scrubbed too hard with the razor. There was a spot of dried blood on his ear.

Moody put the gun down. “I don't know why we couldn't all been born smart.” He clamped his hand over his forehead, tried to erase the smell of steel. Buddy couldn't see his eyes.

“You said the gun's live, Mood?”

Moody nodded. “Three rounds been used. The rest is still in it.”

“Which one gave you the trouble? One of them run?” asked the deputy. He passed a hand over his head and looked at the dampness in his palm. “Already April and damn hot.”

“You know I ain't that bad of a shot.” Moody dropped his hand and looked out the door. His eyes watered. “Already hot. You planting soybeans this year?”

“I ain't decided.” The deputy leaned back in the booth and put his arm along the back of it. He yawned. “Long night,” he said. “Long, shitty night.”

“Remember when we switched the railroad tracks down at the creek crossing siding?”

Friesen's yawn abruptly turned into a chuckle. He wiped at his eyes with his shirt sleeves.

“That was a stupid ass thing we did,” he said, and laughed again. “We was a couple of hellions. That God damn engineer saved the train. Saved our asses.”

“We could have had dead cattle everywhere.”

“Shit. That train was carrying ammonium nitrate. Be like Texas City. Could have wiped Valentine right off the map.”

“No, that was the Marfa derailment.”

“You're right. Like I said, memory goes, just like that. I think I'm gonna just go to pasture this year. Lease out some grazing. Know what I mean?”

Moody looked toward the kitchen and saw May Anne's eyes in the crack of the swinging door. “Freshen me up!” he hollered, holding up his cup.

“Not for fifty cents, I ain't,” said May Anne to herself, squeezing the warrant in her pocket. She thought about the strong lines between Norton and Vera, Moody and Buddy. The faint, faint line between Vera and Buddy. It was a long time ago. No, she corrected herself, it wasn't that long ago. Just seemed like it. She sighed.

“Qué? Qué estás?” asked Pedro, looking past her shoulder.

“Shut up,” she said. Her elbow jabbed him sharply in the chest.

“Look at this is crazy heat we got,” he said, “everybody be acting the fool. Guns on the table. Cha!” He threw his apron in a wad on the freezer. “You can tell it to the boss.”

“Right behind you, Pedro,” she said, and they left out the back door.

“Fifty cents,” she thought, slamming her car door and fumbling her seat belt around her apron. But her hands shook so badly she could not buckle in. The fractured line from May Anne to Norton.

“I think you done scared off the help,” said Friesen, watching May Anne's red Fiesta blow through the four-way stop. Pedro's ancient Silverado moved out at Pedro speed.

“I just wanted some more coffee.”

“We could duke it out,” said Friesen. “The OK Corral. Remember that? The Valentine Corral. High Noon at the Four-Way Stop. Just like old times.”

“Quiet enough,” said Moody. He looked at his lukewarm coffee.

“Take mine.” Friesen emptied his cup into Moody's. “Hell, just get some fresh out of the kitchen.” He looked over his shoulder. Daylight was coming around the edges of the kitchen door.

Moody drank back the coffee in one motion.

“I wonder what that bacon looks like,” he said.

“One way to find out,” said Buddy. He eased himself out of the bench and slowly straightened up. “God damn back,” he said. “God damn chiropractor.”

The outside door was open and flies buzzed around the kitchen. A cat's head

bobbed in the doorway.

“One thing I can't abide is a mess,” said Friesen, turning his neck this way and that.

“I guess we can straighten it up a little,” said Moody, taking the broom.

“Ain't no rush,” said the deputy. He opened the fridge and flicked his eyes down and slowly up, like at a topless bar.

Moody swept out from under the counters. He brushed the sweepings out the door and closed it.

“This don't look that bad,” said Buddy, holding up the bacon. “Cut off this part.”

Moody put the broom aside. “Cat can have that part,” he said. “Rest of it will fry up fine.”

“Remember them perch out of Elmer's creek?”

“Norton got her,” said Moody. “One round. He said.”

“We got all day if we have to, partner,” shrugged the deputy. “You clean up in here a little bit. I'm going out front to close up.”

“All right. You want some Texas toast with the bacon?”

“Well it might be a long day. It's already been a long day. You know what I mean?”

Moody found a scraper under the grill. The old scraps and grease went into the tomato can bucket. He cut the bad part off the bacon and put that in the bucket too. The bucket went outside the door. He looked for bread.

“I'm taking the gun on out to the car, Mood.” Friesen's head was just inside in the

swinging door. "Hope you don't mind. It was making me nervous as hell out there. No telling who might walk in."

Moody stopped. An old loaf of bread was in his hands. "Help yourself to it," he said.

Friesen scratched the tip of his nose with his thumbnail. "Did you say it was a full clip in it? Then you used three rounds?"

"We only used three rounds, I think," said Moody, cutting the loaf into sections.

"Well damn." Friesen looked over his shoulder and sighed. His head withdrew from between the swinging doors.

Moody dealt thick slabs of bread onto the grill and checked the coffee pot. It was low. He started another pot and heard the screen door slam.

The kitchen door swung open and Friesen walked heavily into the kitchen. He nodded at the grill. "Damn, boy, you got to put some butter on that bread."

Moody showed him the tub of low sodium margarine.

"Can't put it on the grill too soon," he said.

"The hell?" Friesen took the tub from Moody and tossed it back into the fridge. He pulled out the slab of butter.

"Your heart," said Moody. He slapped a dollop of butter on the grill. It hissed.

"Damn right."

They heard a dog growling outside the door.

"That's going to be some short bacon," said Friesen.

Moody shrugged, and took some eggs out of the fridge and broke them on the

grill.

Friesen stared at him.

“God damn,” he said. “You gonna load me up on cholesterol and then make a run for it. Knowing I ain't got no gun.” He licked his lips, counting eggs. “Hell, you could probably make it across the border into old Mexico before I could get it called in, after I eat a meal like this. I'm gonna be out like a son of a bitch after I eat a meal like this.”

“Got to eat. Might as well enjoy it.”

“Moody, you should have been a preacher. I always thought that. You have the power. Know what I mean?”

There was a commotion outside, hissing, barking. Despite the heat, Buddy Friesen shut the back door and latched the hook.

“Sounds to me like you attracted every stray dog and cat in the town. You and your damn slop bucket. Pete's gonna have a hissy fit.” Buddy frowned down at the grill.

“You talk to Vera's folks yet?” Moody took a rag from the counter and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“It's been a long day, like I said. Just listen to that racket.”

Moody shrugged. “Takes care of the scraps.”

“They're down in the Bahamas. Some kind of cruise. I guess they're trying to spend that lottery money they won.”

“Still like your bacon burnt up and crispy?”

“Yeah, you know I do. Least I know it's cooked. Not like that raw shit you eat.”

“Least I can taste it.”

“I couldn’t get hold of them. God damn I am so tired. It’s stifling in here.” Friesen plucked at his shirt. “Norton, huh. I can’t believe it. Him and Vera. You know, I got that call this morning, and I just had to sit down on my ass for a while and think about it.” He stared at Moody. “Why you reckon? Boy could have stood to inherit.”

Moody wiped his face with the rag and said nothing.

Buddy squinted at him. “Ain’t no way they could have spent all of it. Know what I’m saying? Pretty young girl like Vera Ruth, fine young man like Norton, and both of them with a college degree. You didn’t go up to his graduation, did you?”

Moody shook his head. “I was working. Down at the garage.”

“That’s right, I remember that.” Buddy chewed his lip. “What I want to know is, how in the world could a young man like Norton let her get the best of him?”

“Elbow room,” said Moody.

“Oh yeah. I guess I know what you mean,” said Buddy.

Moody pulled two plates from the dish rack.

“You want some salt with those eggs?”

Buddy licked his lips. “Don’t mind if I do,” he said.

Moody turned off the grill. “It’s some on the table. I’ll clean up after it cools off.”

“Hell, Pete ought to put you on the roll. They had you working here they might pass inspection for real. Instead of that lazy ass Pedro. May Anne. She ain’t worth two shits. I hear you know what I mean.” He studied Moody.

Moody ignored him. “I ain’t sure I do,” he said.

They carried their plates out to a clean booth next to the one they’d been sitting in.

Moody picked up the salt shaker and wiped the salt off the table. Friesen picked up the *Field and Forest*.

“They're building a spaceport up by Cracker Jack Draw. You believe that, Moody? A God damn spaceport. Gonna ruin the damn deer hunting. We don't need this kind of shit raining down all over.” He tapped the magazine cover. “That's toxic shit. Hydrazine, peroxide, shit. I can't stand me a mess.”

“That won't happen again,” Moody said. “They fixed all that.”

“Bullshit,” said Buddy. “Horseshit. God damn space shuttle blew up over Nacogdoches. You already forgot about that?” He threw the magazine over his shoulder into the next booth.

“I ain't forgot,” said Moody. He gave the salt shaker a push. It slid across the formica and came to a stop at Friesen's right hand.

“They said it was a God damn accident, shit. It was a God damn assault on Texas, what it was. Government can't stand them no back talk. They got it fixed, my ass. You know better than that.” Friesen salted down his eggs, then bowed his head for a moment of reverence.

Moody stopped chewing and looked at his plate. The bacon formed a half moon. The eggs leaked yellow. The fan blades in the sign of the cross hung on the ceiling above him, not moving.

“Amen,” said Friesen, looking up at the ceiling. “And now some new people want to shit all over Texas. Some God damn entrepreneurs. Could be shit raining down on us right now. Space junk. I don't know why people can't keep their God damn messes to

themselves.”

“I ain’t running,” said Moody. He ate his eggs first.

Friesen crunched on his bacon. It wasn’t bad. Cook anything long enough, it was fine. He looked at Moody’s plate. Moody’s hands were trembling.

Friesen cleared his throat. “You heard from your mama?” he said. “You spoke to her in a while?”

“I ain’t seen her in a while,” said Moody. He bit his finger and looked up at Buddy. “Vera was a fine girl. I thought she was going to settle Norton down.”

“You know what? That makes both of us.” Friesen peered at his eggs, sniffed at them, shook out some more salt. He grinned and looked up. “Damn, boy, I ain’t ate this good in a long time. If I keel over, don’t call me no ambulance. Just keep spooning it in. Know what I mean?”

“We ain’t had a sit-down talk in a long time, Bud,” said Moody. “Lot of things happen quick, and no time to talk.”

“Ah, Norton’s just a wild one,” said Buddy. “Gets that from his daddy.” He stuffed some Texas toast in his mouth. “Time in the pen’ll set him straight,” he said, around a mouthful of bread. “Just like you.”

Moody put his fork down. “I guess sometimes you only get that once chance,” he said.

Buddy stopped chewing. His blue eyes watched Moody’s shoulders.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Two rounds,” began Moody. He hammered his knuckles into his forehead.

“Was he running?” Buddy cut his eggs with the side of his fork. “I can’t believe you did that. Yeah I guess I can, too, after what you did to my hunting dog, last year. You ain’t never told me about that. You made me figure it out by myself. God damn your sorry ass.”

Moody dropped his hands and looked out the front door towards the road. The outside door was closed – Buddy had closed it – but light came around the bars over the window.

“It was Norton shot your hunting dog,” he said.

Buddy put down his fork. “You are shitting me. He that good of a shot? Fifty yards, on a dead run? Shit!”

“He shot it in the head, but it glanced off. Didn't kill it.” Moody heaved a sigh. “He got scared and asked me to put it out of its misery. He was begging.” Moody's knuckles tapped against the table. “First time that’s ever happened. Begging.”

“Well, God damn.” Friesen sat back, his plate only half-cleared.

“We were out at the sand pits. Norton wanted me to tell you. He was sorry about it all.”

A truck passed slowly along the road out front. Buddy lifted a piece of toast and put it back down. “Well? Did you finish it right?”

“Shot to the heart. One round. He was begging me, Buddy.” Moody covered his eyes with the heels of his hands. “Damn, I miss my daddy. He wasn’t worth nothing, but damn, maybe he could talk to me. I just don’t know.”

The table started creaking as Friesen levered himself out to the aisle.

“Damn if we didn't forget to pour us up some coffee,” said Friesen. He pushed himself to a crouch and slid off the bench, reached down into the booth behind him and retrieved his hat. “I'm gonna make a radio check first,” he said, putting his hat on his head. “Why don't you go cook us up some grits.”

“I ain't going nowhere,” said Moody.

Friesen stopped halfway to the door.

“What the hell you want me to do?” he said. “You want me to put you in back of the God damn car and take you across the border myself? Don't ask me to do that. I can't do that. That's aiding and abetting. That's criminal. You want me to rob the till and get you some change? I can't do that.”

“Do what you got to,” said Moody. He reached into his back pocket. Friesen tensed. Moody pulled a shop rag from his hip and blew his nose. “But I ain't got all day,” he said.

“You've got as long as I let you have,” said Buddy.

Moody looked up at him.

“When I go, I want it quick. I want it fast,” he said. “I don't want to end up like my mama.” Moody slid from the booth and stood facing Buddy.

Friesen was watching him through slitted eyes. “Your daddy went out with a big mess, as I recall. You don't want to leave a big mess now, do you?” He glanced nervously toward the screen door.

For a moment the wind lifted the screen door open a tad, and Friesen thought that might be his help, on the way at last. But the door closed gently, and the only thing

moving in the parking lot was the dust devil that swirled up in a gust of wind.

“I guess it comes a time you just got to do something,” said Moody. “Hand me your keys. And now you sit down.”

Buddy’s eyes flickered over the splotches on Moody’s shirt.

“We ain’t finished eating yet.”

“I said, sit down.” Moody slammed his hand down on the table.

“All right, all right. Don’t bust a damn gut over it.” The table wobbled as Friesen leaned into it to lower his bulk onto the bench.

“Hand me your keys.”

“All right, all right. God damn.” Friesen pulled his keys from his pocket and put them on the table. “You gonna do this right, you need a rope,” he said. “Get my handcuffs out of the car. But for God’s sake let me hit the bathroom first.”

“All right,” said Moody. “Give me your radio.”

Buddy reached in and pulled the radio from its clip and handed it over. “All right if I go to the head?”

“Yeah,” said Moody. “It might be a long day.” He motioned with his chin, and Buddy went off to take a leak.

When Friesen came back, the diner was empty. He looked in the kitchen, but there was no Moody. He looked out the back door, minding his time, listening for the sound of a car motor. His car motor. If Moody had any sense he’d be gone by now.

Buddy closed his eyes for a moment and prayed to God with all his might.

But when he opened them he knew he could never trust that about Moody.

The leftover bucket was empty, licked clean. Buddy picked it up off the ground and put it in the sink. Pete would appreciate that gesture, at least. He returned to the table and had just sat down when the screen door opened.

Moody walked in, carrying handcuffs and a Glöck.

“Well damn, I thought you’d done gone!” Buddy’s fork stopped halfway to his open mouth. There was a note of desperation in his voice. “What the hell?” he said, as Moody pointed the Glöck in his direction.

“Put your hands under the table,” Moody said. “Grab a hold of the post.”

“How the hell do you expect me to finish my food?” Buddy looked distressed. The eggs lay cooling on the plate in front of him.

“You want me to tell you to get under the table?” asked Moody. “Be like hiding under the gym bleachers during high school, except we both put on some baggage since then.” He patted his gut.

Friesen had no reply, but he reached under the table and put his hands around the centerpost, the heels of his hands together.

Moody snapped the handcuffs into place and waved the gun at the front door. “I know you don’t like a mess,” he said. “I’ll go outside.”

Moody’s footsteps were sure. He pushed against the fabric of the screen door. For a moment his frame blocked the sunlight. The wind had fallen, the flies escaped, and everything went quiet in the diner.

Buddy felt a cold chill grip his spine and curl his toes. Moody Henderson was the best marksman in Jeff Davis County.

“Moody!”

Moody Henderson pivoted slowly, like wheat in the hopper. His eyes were glassy, distant, far away. He had the thousand yard stare.

Buddy Friesen knew that stare.

“Oh shit, now. Just wait a minute, Moody,” he said. His eyes suddenly filled over as the screen door opened and Moody disappeared into the light and heat of the April morning.

The screen door slapped shut. Sunlight reentered the diner.

“Mood! Wait a minute now.”

Buddy Friesen heaved against the table, and the salt shaker fell over. “Ain’t no need for that, now! Moody!”

The sugar jar clattered over and smashed on the floor.

It was echoed a moment later by a single, sharp clap.

“God *damn*,” Buddy said, “oh, God *damn*.” He slammed his forehead down into the eggs, again, again. “Shit. Shit. Shit.” After a moment, he blinked his eyes clear and looked down at the plate in front of him. It was the last dinner, the last moment, the last thing he would ever have with Moody Henderson. He lowered his chin to the table and abruptly pushed the plate as hard as he could. It flew off the table and hit the floor with a crash, scattering eggs. “God damn you, Moody,” he said. Then he laid the side of his face down onto the bare formica tabletop, beneath the unmoving fan blade, and he waited for someone to walk in.

The Sand Pits

May Anne stumbled across the sand pit. The area had once been sand bars, left by the Rio Grande. The river was now almost twenty miles west, and the county came here to dig out the sand for their roadwork projects.

Norton Henderson was sitting upright against a clay ridge behind the sand pit. May Anne ran past him, calling out his name, before she turned and saw him looking at her. She screamed. "Norton!" She ran to him but stopped short.

"Norton! What's wrong with your eye? Oh God."

She approached him slowly, one hand squeezing the warrant paper in her apron, which had come untied behind her, the other hand reaching out towards his eye.

"Oh God. You been shot, Norton."

His left eye was gone. The damage started at his temple. His right eye looked at her.

"Oh God, Norton." She realized that the dark stain on his shirt wasn't from his eye. It was a bullet wound through the heart, one shot. She had seen a deer like that one

time, before they replaced its eyes with glass and cut off its head.

She waved her hand slowly in front of his face. He didn't move. She scooped up some sand and threw it at him. He didn't blink. She fell into a sitting position at his feet, looking out in the direction of his gaze.

“Oh God, Norton. You and Vera.”

The sunshine fell down around her. The wind was still, though she could hear it moving across the hills in the distance. A red-winged grasshopper sprang up, startling her with its helicopter buzz. The sap was rising in the mesquite trees, a heavy scent like cedar. She put her hands into the stony soil and pushed herself backward, closer to Norton. Flies were moving around him. She shooed them away without looking again.

“I ain't no Vera,” she said, and took his rigid hand in hers. The sun moved down the sky and brought out the wind. May Anne's apron lifted, like clothes on a line. She untied it at the top, one-handed, and let it go.

After a long time, she heard sirens. The sun was all but gone behind the blackjack horizon, and the west Texas stars were already coming out. As the sirens approached, louder and louder, she squeezed Norton's hand.

“I'm sorry about your daddy,” she said, and the sirens turned away, and receded, and receded.

Home

Sal Seragoglio, 42 years old, ecologist and associate professor, untenured, University of Houston, was working his way across the high northern Chihuahuan desert, an arid ecosystem classified by the NSF as “rich and endangered,” classified by the WWF as “diverse and striking,” when he came across a dead body, a human, female. Judging by her teeth and her skin, she was more or less 28 years old. Seragoglio was a master of age.

It was the last weekend in April, his second weekend on the road. He had skipped out of classes early, entrusted multiple choice finals to grad student proxies, entrusted term papers to Herb Villincourt, a favor in return for covering for him Thanksgiving through Christmas when Villincourt sat in one Sicilian jail after another, learning street Italian, street law, street food, over the little matter of a trespass.

The discovery fever burned bright in Seragoglio now, this month, this weekend and this moment. He was here to catalog fauna, flora, species. He was here to characterize relationships and interdependencies. He was here to merge his spirit into

deep desert nomenclatures. He was not here to unbury fossils and work down the layers of the past. He was here to get his name in the taxonomies.

And his time was short: four months, only, did the grant committee agree to – four months to break down an entire desert ecosystem, reduce it to paper. By mid-August he would be tired of pissing cold coffee under staggering 2 a.m. skies, flanked by Leo in the west, Pegasus rising thunderfoot in the east, coffin-like Ophiuchus opening its arms in the dead south, tired of dropping trouser on soil too dry to do more than desiccate his city shit. At summer's end he would be ready for the swimming pool in his back yard, the water chlorinated, aseptic, tepid, the people around it indolent, spoiled, the neighborhood beyond stocked with other UH professors, mustachioed, affable, fattened. He would be ready finally for his wife's body, the soft comforts of it, the high-pitched, tight-strung drawl of it. The coiled springs of it.

But he was not ready now. He stood and regarded the body, motionless. The body was sphinx-like. The body was stoic, intractable, and it filled Sal Seragoglio with a sudden calm stillness. If he stopped his fieldwork, reported the body, snarled himself in the paperwork, the government bureaucracies, the sworn statements, witness stands, the left hand on biblical fictions, if he recorded testimony, time, GPS position, angle of the sun, windspeed and direction, the color of her hair, estimated state of decay of the corpse, he would lose his time. If one thing fell, others would fall.

He could not afford to lose his time. There was no one here, no one in sight, no aircraft, no homes, only hills and desert horizons. He could get away with not reporting it. He could move on to *prosopis velutina*, perhaps *sporobolus seragoglii*, the paper in

Ecology and tenure, the grant money, the next year and the next trip to these Chihuahuan deserts. There was so much desert and not enough time. There was global climate change to think of. There was urgency. He might not return again until he was 66, the edge of retirement, a sad paper called “Rapid Decay in Ecosystem XIIa.” This young woman’s death was a death he didn’t care about.

To make sure, he got out his Nikon binoculars, not the birding 8x35 but the 10x50s, the high mags, coated optics, diffraction limited, and he set up his extensible tripod and mounted the binos and scanned the horizon. The only severities that welcomed his eye were wind and sun and the immense chaparral scrub of the Chihuahua, tamed, yes, ranched, fenced, farmed in irrigated spirals where water was cheap, but enough of it still harsh and wild and complex enough to come back with the right breaks in human management, environmental awareness, economics, stewardship, whatever buzzwords they gladhanded in Austin.

He forced himself to move the binos again. There was mesquite and stunted blackjack in the dry creekbed below, acacia, creosote bush, tarbush, yucca and cactus, a dozen species of cactus in plain view. He couldn’t help the categorization process. It had been natural to him as a boy in Tennessee and it had been worn deeply into his habits during the Ph.D. run in Houston.

He had stalled out on the visual sweep survey again and he cursed himself, time was wasting – his time. He finished sweeping out the radius and confirmed he was alone. The university’s Jeep Cherokee was parked at least four miles away on a washboard county road.

He relaxed a little, recapped the binoculars, wound the neckstrap six times around, repacked them, telescoped the tripod and slid it into the side pocket of his backpack, and looked down at the sandy soil at his feet. His frown deepened into a scowl. He had always been a graceful woods walker, stealthy, silent, lightfooted on the leaf mold. When D&D blew over him like an irresistible wind in his teenage years he had rolled up a ranger character, woodlore exceptional, wisdom low but intelligence high. Strider was his favorite Tolkien character and from the day he first read *The Hobbit* as a ten-year-old he had no other heroes. On weekends in the woodlands he learned to leave no trace of himself on the lands he began dreaming of preserving.

But here were his bootprints. They were as easy to follow back to the road as the trails marked with rock cairns that he sometimes found, Navajo or possibly scout relics.

He looked back at the body across the clearing. Her face was starting to bruise, the wind was blowing her hair across her open eyes and she made no effort to put it up, but otherwise she was just a woman, thin, tall, seated on a flat rock, a tripod, one hand on the rock beside her, her weight on it, leaning slightly to that side, the other hand in her lap. She was tired from something, tired of arguing, he decided, based on the jut of chin, set of mouth. He knew that look, that late-argument boredom, icy, the scornful, somewhat exaggerated features of a wife listing all the wrong reasons for the right act. But aside from the hole below and anterior of her left breast, the wide stain below her left shoulderblade, she was unharmed.

Seragoglio looked up at the sun's position, estimated it was three in the afternoon, estimated there was plenty of time to complete the loop he had planned, get back to his

vehicle, get gone. Find a hotel in Van Horn and type the day's findings into his keyworn Powerbook. Or he could turn, retrace his steps straight back to the car, the quickest way out of here, but how would that look? His boot treads could put him on trial for the life of a woman he had never known before this moment. The attorney for the prosecution fixing him with an entrapping eye and a Southern reasonableness, some Matlock lawyer, "You mean to say you found the body and you turned around and left it? You left little Polly Sue in the desert?" like walking was some kind of offense as unpardonable as the killing itself.

Complete the loop or retrace his steps, either way, he decided reluctantly, his tracks would incriminate him. Southwest Texas was a place of low population density, especially Jeff Davis County, the environs of Valentine, a town that was born at least in name when the Southern Pacific railroad crew knocked off work one day in February 1882. The town population had risen and fallen over the years, he vaguely remembered from his research last winter, and now the population stood at just less than two hundred. But there was population in the county outside the town, and there was uncounted, illegal population crawling all over the map like fleas, and low population was not the same as no population, especially where there was a murder involved. His truck would be seen and remembered by someone. His tracks would be found. His tread and step would be measured. Wind was more probable than rain here but even wind could not be counted on. He was going to lose valuable time reporting the body.

But he could lose the entire summer if he didn't. It was a damnable choice.

Seragoglio squatted before her. "You got a name, lady? You got some ID?" he

asked, out of regard for the dead, but he could see that she didn't. The rock she sat on was large and flat-topped, smooth like limestone, which he had first taken it for, but he saw now that it was weathered basalt, an igneous rock. Not sedimentary, not depositional. What did he care about the ancient epochs? Basalt, a pyroclastic rock. He pictured this area in eruption, a hell of yellow gasses, a stink the wind would not blow away.

He leaned in and sniffed the woman. The stink was coming from her, a light stink. He had hardly been aware of it, but then the ecologist was no stranger to the corpse smell. He welcomed it, in fact. When his wanderings brought him to a recent kill he measured it, weighed it, counted teeth, all as a matter of course. It was his attention to detail that relegated him to a life of fieldwork, he knew.

Some of his more ambitious, politically-minded peers didn't get that. To them the ecologist's primary role was salesmanship. Once you got tenure, you worked on your profile, and once your profile was high enough, you started marketing the places like this. You turned to slick brochures, little girl voice-overs, Native American melodies, appeals to the stupid heart. You turned to Disney for your inspiration and lost yourself in your own sales mythology. His politically-minded colleagues could have all that, and they could do with it all the good they liked. They could jockey for a little pissing power at their summer barbecues and their \$50 a plate PAC parties. They could spend the summer schmoozing over swizzle sticks and hard tequila, but the only place he'd be happy was a place like this, a land almost worthless to them, a land almost worthless to anyone else but a man like Sal Seragoglio.

"I don't know your name, lady, and I'm sorry about what happened. I'm trying to

get my tenure,” he said, and his voice quit. He thought about the subdivision he lived in, swimming pools built on top of swamp land. “I just appreciate your company,” he said at last, and touched her shoulder, as he had wanted to do since he’d seen her. She had a thin shoulder, scrawny and correct. He meant it to be a compassionate touch, something to tell her he was happy she had found her final peace out here, under real atmosphere, instead of closed up in a container and sealed from the sky and air, but then his touch became a stroke, a small caress. The dead woman looked so much like his own wife, Patti, or like Patti had looked in an earlier decade, and the wound was perfect. Whoever had placed it there was a marksman.

The wound in fact was among the first things he had noticed about the body, just after he had registered that it was a female, late 20s, slender and brunette, her skin the color of anise seed, almost like a latino but no latin darkness in her close-set gray eyes. The wound was between the curve of her left breast and her sternum and immediately fatal. No human heart could withstand that shot, even in small caliber. The cardiac tissue would have shredded, frayed, and popped like rope. No powder scorch so it was not a point blank shooting. It was not self-inflicted. Someone had killed this lady from some little distance, and it was someone she knew. He brushed the hair back from her face and smoothed at the wrinkle between her eyebrows, but rigor mortis had set the skin there to the stiffness of corrugated cardboard. It was someone she loved, it was something she half-expected, and when it came she simply sat down and accepted it. *Well, get on with it, if that’s what you’ve made up your mind to do. Quit wasting both our time.*

It’s what his wife would have said, and he thought about her filling the pool

yesterday. He had called her from a place he got signal at on a ridge in the Davis Mountains, no shoulders on the road so he had kept a constant watch in the rearview mirror for farm truck traffic, border runners, livestock. Patti had removed the winter cover and filled the pool. It was her ritual, her thing, her string bikini. She would have opened the pool nude if the fences were high enough, stopping now and then to slap her bare ass at the silent satellites snapping away like paparazzi three hundred kilometers up. Patti was just this kind of woman. She would have sat with a dramatic expulsion of air on the poolside bench, she would have draped her arms along the back of the bench, crossed her legs at the knees, and said, "Shoot already, Sal."

He touched the dead lady's shoulder again and listened to the wind as it blew across the ridge in the distance. His eyes swept the horizon. There were no vultures in the air, no carrion birds. He was not surprised. They avoided some corpses. No one knew why.

The lady leaned toward him on one rigid arm, as if demanding and expecting his touch. The other hand was in her lap, upturned, a gold ring burning sunlight in her palm. She sat erect, but there was enough of a stoop in her neck and shoulders to convince him that she was taller than her husband. Or at least her murderer, he corrected himself. Someone she was used to having to get low with. The husband part was just speculation, he thought, and then he cursed himself for a fool for the second time in ten minutes. He stood up and looked around the horizons again.

The lady had died here, which meant she had been shot here, because a shredded cardiac muscle stops the body fast. The shooter's tracks would be around here too, then,

and with the sun beginning to wester they should be coming into profile. Lowering angle of sunlight, lengthening shadows. Seragoglio was no tracker, had never been as good in real life as on paper, but if his tread was so recognizable, then so would be the murderer's.

He walked around, quickly, although not so much walking as hopping along the exposures of rock, eyes on the ground, trying not to notice the mule deer spoor, the jackrabbit spoor, the upcurved tail of the zebra-tailed lizard as it sped from its concealment beneath a rock in front of him. The lizard made him think of hawks, and he found he was worrying about the ring shining brightly in her defenseless palm. The buzzards might avoid her, the common *cathartes aura*, but not the Swainson's hawk, *buteo swainsoni*. Those things were drawn like magnets to precious metal. They'd take her finger.

They were in a sort of clearing, he and the woman, clear of tallgrass, clear of everything except buffalo grass and a few clumps of firebarrel cactus. Such clearings had been common on his walk today and he had earlier been eaten up with curiosity over the reason for them. Most probably there was an outcropping of rock below a thin layer of soil. Tallgrass roots wouldn't survive that. Just as rural homeowners had trouble keeping the grass green over the septic tank and drain field in late summer, so only a few desert plants found purchase here. That had been the bookmark on his speculation, and he had made a mental note to see about bringing a geology grad next time he came through. Preferably a female, stocky, hardy, not specializing in petroleum, not specializing in virginity, prudishness, silence.

“Damn!” He swore for the third time of the day, the first time out loud. His mind had been wandering and he had suddenly realized the reason for the buffalo grass. The entire clearing was a large slab of basalt, cracked, worn, drifted here and there in thin desert decay, sand filling the pockmarks and scars. The same places that collected and trapped the sand and soil would also collect and hold the occasional rainwater, and it was in those places that the cacti and the slow grasses grew. This whole plateau was basalt caprock. It would fit the geology of the area as he knew it. There was no reason the shooter would have left footprints, if he had been either careful or lucky. “Crap!”

He lifted his wide-brimmed field hat, rubbed the sweat from his brow back through his hair, and looked over at the dead woman. He came back to where she sat, knelt in front of her, attempted to lift one foot, but she was stiff, and he had to reach up and grab her bodily as she began to topple around the fulcrum point. “I’m sorry, ma’am, I’ll try to be more careful.” He knelt again and looked at the dead woman’s feet. She wore boots, high western boots that rose from sight under the straight-cut legs of her jeans. Flat-soled boots. He had seen no prints that could have been hers, either, on this caprock slab, no prints in fact that were not his own. He stood, and careful to stay on the caprock, he circled the plateau again, and then again in a wider loop. The problem suddenly consumed him, like the problems of fit and niche, the problems of continuity and genetic selection.

The dead woman did not just drop out of the sky and end up sitting on a rock. She got here somehow. By horse? On foot? Four-wheeler? Had he heard sheriff sirens or the pulsing of helicopter blades he would probably have waved and continued his search.

When he had a problem, he gave it all his focus.

And finally he found it. It was so unexpected that it took him a long moment to accept the absurd logic of it. The basalt dropped off a little way over, in the direction of the dry branch he had noted already, an old draw that drained the rare desert flood away from here. It was marked by the presence of blackjack. Even they, the hardiest of the Texas oaks, had to have some water. And water flowed along the low ground. There was a dry channel down there, and as he walked toward it, he suddenly came to an edge. Seragoglio looked down, stunned at what he saw.

He was standing on the roof of someone's home. The caprock functioned as a watertight lid. Underneath his feet was not exactly a cave home, nor was it a berm home. It was something of both, created by natural processes, exploited by whoever used the rough road that led to it below. The slanting sunlight shone on the front entrance, which faced almost due southwest. It was ingenious, it was efficient, and the more Seragoglio thought about it, the more he wished it was his own home. What a base of operations it would make.

The home had not been apparent on the satellite maps he had studied, nor was there anything unusual in this place on the elevation maps. He had done his homework, and though he knew aerial surveys outmoded quickly, he was not prepared for this kind of feature. No contours suggested it was anything other than a shallow draw in the wilderness, a soft edge, a gentle cut. It was brilliant. And it lay waste to all his carefully conceived summer research methodology. He stood on the lip of the slab and struggled to restructure his plan, rework it, redraw it. Human contamination was unavoidable, even in

the northern Chihuahuan desert, on the brink of Mexico. It was something you managed in the field. But this was going to wreck his paper, wreck his chances with the tenure committee. Herb Villincourt would laugh his ass off. "You should have sampled the septic system, while you were there."

There were urban ecologists but he was not one of them. He was no Aragorn of human structures, no rat-chaser, no pigeon-bander. He was no subject matter expert on the city park planning board. Sal Seragoglio came to the Northern Chihuahua to be away from all that.

The dusty two-track which led away could hardly be called a road. Even had he noticed it on the satellite photos he would have thought it an aberration, or one of the many abandoned ranch roads that ended abruptly after leading nowhere. But a ranch road never leads *nowhere*, he chided himself. If a road didn't connect to another road, it ended at a resource. The resource might be a mineral: sand, gypsum, dolomite. It might be a ditch to dump trash in; or it might be water.

And water, of course, it was. Somewhere below on the other side of the road there was a spring. He could tell now from this vantage point there was not just blackjack oak but also pinyon. The caprock he stood on overhung a porous formation, probably limestone, possibly sandstone. It was through this underlying formation that the water found its way to the surface, pushed up by pressure. Pressure from below.

He remembered something then, the pressure of Patti's cold hand as it squeezed his scrotum, squeezed his testicles, squeezed and forced the air in a rush from his lungs, squeezed and forced him off of her, that drunken night in Tennessee, he having thought

that here was easy virtue, she making clear that there were prices, there were negotiations. The building pressure inside him led them to Houston, and it led them together. It was one quick moment.

Seragoglio leaned precariously forward, but could only make out a doormat of faded green astroturf below, on the edge of the dirt turnaround where the road ended. He looked carefully on either side – he was for a fact a careful man – and after a moment's searching found a narrow sandpacked trail that led downward, brushed by sage and embrazened cacti. There were prints here, many layers of prints, confused, overlaid jumbles of them, but most apparent were the deeper indentations of boot heels. The lady's boots. His own prints would cover and obscure those but he gave no thought to it. Now that he was among other people, there could be other witnesses. The human world had opened up again and he was back among it. He was no longer risking his summer sabbatical, nor the NSF grant monies, nor publication, by notifying the authorities. This was a house. There was a road. He was an ecologist with a set of maps and precise plans, and they were on file back at the university, so help him God.

He took a few steps down the path and turned suddenly and went back to the woman. The image of a hawk circling overhead, attracted to the gold starlight of her finger, worried him immensely. He did not want her to lose that finger. He wasn't sure why and did not stop to think too long about it. He carefully took the ring from her hand, using the same easy twisting motion he used to sample pollen. Sometimes skin would swell, the black bag effect of undiscovered carcasses, but he had known hers would not. Flesh swelled as a result of the work of bacteria in the gut acting on food. This lady did

not eat much. She was efficient. Her skin was dry, cool, fine, and though her left hand was slightly curled in her lap, the ring slipped off easily.

“*B-r-r-r-rrrng!*” The sound rang out, urgent, strident as an automatic weapon. Seragoglio stiffened, cornered. “*B-r-r-r-rrrng!*”

“Shit!” he said, realizing it was his phone, and feeling cornered in a different way. He patted his pockets until the cellphone came out in his hand, a hardened, carapaced beetle. It vibrated, buzzed, alive and needy. “I’m sorry,” he said, automatically, to the dead lady, and moved around behind her and a little away as he opened his phone. “Seragoglio.” He was rooted to the cold basalt flow. His heart was hammering, two men on a railroad spike.

“Mr. Seragoglio?” The voice was tentative, inconstant, edgy. “Mr. Seragoglio, this is CG Security Systems. We have an intrusion alert at the residence of Vivian Rodriguez.”

He stared down at the back of the dead lady’s head. “Vivian Rodriguez?” he echoed. “What do you mean? An intrusion?”

“Yes. I am sorry to bother you but she has not responded on the primary number.” The quality of the voice was haggard, stretched. It skipped.

He hesitated to collect his thoughts. *Vivian Rodriguez? CG Security?* “I’m afraid I lost touch with Miss Rodriguez, ah, quite some time ago.”

“I see,” said the voice that continued to skip and scatter across the frequency spectrum. “She has your number listed as the secondary reach number in case of an intrusion alert. I’m sorry to bother you. Would you like for me to remove you from the

list?”

Seragoglio’s thoughts refused to line up gracefully. “Yes. I’m sorry, I’m away from Houston and I can’t help her, I’m afraid.”

“It’s okay sir, I understand. I’m sorry to trouble you.”

The phone’s glow abruptly blinked off. Seragoglio stared down at it. A dry breeze freshened over him.

B-z-z-z-zzzz! A grasshopper leapt off a nearby stalk and sailed at him, the red stripes on its wings a blur like rich blood.

Seragoglio walked around to face the dead lady. “It was something that happened a long time ago. I was bored. It’s over.” He watched her gray eyes for a tracking movement, something to suggest that her spirit knew he was sincere, he was sorry, he cared. There was nothing like that, though the wind pulled a strand of her hair across her forehead.

He turned away from her and hastened down the short, steep pathway. Fronds of plant life swept past him, a gauntlet of touch. At the bottom he found himself on the two-track, facing a lemon yellow door.

The sudden incongruity of it made him laugh out loud, and it was a good and rolling bark of sound that bounced off the steel door and out into the unnamed draw behind him. The formation behind the door had been only a cleft in the rock not long ago, a grotto, wide at ground level, narrow higher up. The cleft was sealed with hardware cloth at its upper taper, and the opening had been chiseled out below that to make room for the door. It was a standard 36-inch wide builder’s door, a yellow-painted, normal-

looking, steel entry door with a standard lockset. Except for its faded appearance, and a few splats of bird dung near the top, it could have been any entryway in his neighborhood. On the door, at eyeball height, were reflective diagonally-cut letters that spelled out HENDERSON. In permanent marker below those letters, someone with a stilted hand had written KNOCK LOUD.

So her name was Henderson, he thought, as he tried the knob and found it locked. The door was firmly closed. There was no key under the welcome mat. He raised his fist to knock – loud – but it hung there. As quickly as his samaritan resolve had come upon him, it evaporated, leaving him with a rime of unease. Somebody had killed this woman – someone who was perhaps a skilled marksman. What if the killer were inside? He looked over his shoulder, counting tire tracks, counting artifacts. Had he stumbled upon a cult hideout? Another Waco?

The Seragoglios, Sal and Patti, had moved to Texas the year after Waco. It was a grievous wound the state had suffered and he felt it obliquely, not squarely, but also with none of the headshaking bewilderment and subtle anger that gave comfort to his neighbors. Was the dead lady above on the basalt slab a part of some kind of ceremony? Was she a warning, a sacrifice?

No, he decided, there was only one vehicle's tire tracks here, truck tires, a farm truck. The tracks were sharply defined in the sandy dirt.

Sal Seragoglio had been riding an adrenaline rush since he discovered dead lady. The adrenaline spike collapsed now and left him trembling, anxious. A feeling of absolute doom took its place, as if the spike had created a cavity inside him, and bitter water now

welled up to fill it. Herb Villincourt had been busted in Sicily for trespass, for putting his shovel into an old lady's yard and exposing Latin headstones. The whole thing had been a setup by the Italian police, a sting operation to lure and bust unauthorized digging.

Vandal, they had called Herb. *Looter*.

The afternoon air was still, breathless, arrested. As Seragoglio stood there at the yellow door, thinking of his options, an odd, faint, buzzing sound carried to him. He tilted his head to one side, for better triangulation, and turned slowly in place.

And then he froze.

It was the unmistakable drone of a small airplane.

He was running before he made any conscious decision, stumbling down the two-track at the fastest trot he could manage with his backpack of field equipment. His gear was optimized for walking. It was not a good running arrangement. He fell once, damaging his knee, and he struggled back up with a grim and gleeful expression on his face. All the while, his mind recorded things, the process itself as inert as the cockpit voice recorder in a doomed airliner: a gray-banded kingsnake that barely stirred at his passage; clusters of rainbow cactus in flower; the chuckling call of the desert wren; and the faint, brief shade of a willow branch at a blind turn in the road.

All the while, he ran away from the airplane's inconstant drone.

When he had put ten minutes, twenty, thirty, between himself and the caprock house, the grotto house that belonged to someone named Henderson, he stopped to catch his breath and found himself on his knees, hacking out dry sobs, as if he had dead iron inside him and could not get it out.

A lizard watched him from the shadows of the bluff, for that was what the formation had turned into, a raised bluff and shallow canyon. The lizard's endangered tail curved upward, white and black, white and black. Seragoglio saw it when he finally raised his head.

He could no longer hear the plane.

After a moment he gathered himself to his feet and surveyed the bluff that ran alongside the road here. There was a gap in the sandstone. It was wide enough for him and his pack, and it was in a good place, a few feet above the level of the road. He climbed up to it and saw that it was a small box canyon in its own right. Better, it was a place where he could see the road as it wound away through clumps of buffalo grass and yucca. The back of it, he saw as he entered it, carefully, watching for prairie rattlers, *crotalus viridis viridis*, noted for its distinctive rattle like dry peas in a gourd – the back of the small canyon had eroded out from under an overhanging slab of basalt, a place sheltered from the sky, where he could see first without being seen.

He climbed up into the little draw, then shrugged out of his backpack, opened it, and spread out his maps. Near the exposed edge of the canyon, away from the overhanging basalt, he set up his GPS receiver and waited for it to acquire a signal.

It would take a few minutes to locate the three satellites necessary to triangulate his position, and he was hungry, so he made himself a dinner of warm water, stale cheese, and venison jerky from his small emergency supply. He ate without taste and thought about Villincourt in Sicily. Herb had complained bitterly about the cramped jail cell, but he had raved about the prison food. *The bread!* he had said, but Herb had fallen silent

then, completely at a loss for words. Sal had planned to go into the nearest town, whatever that was, for dinner tonight, a celebration dinner, his first week in the field. It was his ritual. He had wanted to try, most of all, the locally made bread.

More than tenure, even, he wanted a story to top Villincourt's.

The nearest town was Valentine, he saw, when he had the GPS coordinates plotted on the topo map. His panicked run had not taken him far afield after all.

But he did not want to go into town now. He wanted only to get back to his vehicle, get his equipment safely stowed, change his shoes, and regroup. Perhaps he could even drive to another town, another place, have dinner there, make his presence known. He mulled over the maps, massaging the unshaven stubble on his chin. Fort Davis had some good hotels; the astronomers there brought visitors and money into the area.

The most direct route to the Cherokee would be a two hour hike. It would get him back to the car in early evening twilight, but he would leave boot tracks all over the place.

Seragoglio laughed at that incongruous thought. His tread pattern was his damning signature now. The soil and its mixture of clay and silicates in this place would remember him well. Only wind and weather would fix that, the random entropy of desert time, and with a woman's dead body out there, the authorities would be all over this place soon.

Still, he looked hopefully at the sky beyond his little cul-de-sac. But the western sky was clear, and the wind was unusually calm. The sun was lowering. Sal never wore a

watch in the field, not if he could help it, but the lowering sun's position in the sky told him it was about six p. m. Sometimes the evening brought a change of weather to the northern Chihuahua desert. A rainstorm was unlikely, but gusty winds were a fact of life out here. Even so, a good tracker could tell by the length of his strides in the roadway below that he'd been running ever since he left the Hendersons' yellow door.

The dead woman's face re-arose in his thoughts, perhaps because he had associated her with the yellow door. Or perhaps it was the idea of her body exposed out there to any inclement turn in the weather. He looked back down at his maps, struck with a sudden new idea.

If he stayed to the caprock slabs that dotted the area like giant stepping stones, he could work his way back to the dead lady. He could, if nothing else, check on her. It was suddenly important to him to go back to her, because he needed to see her face again.

Because, for a moment, when he tried to recall the face of the dead woman, he had instead seen the face of Vivian Rodriguez.

Seragoglio reached into his pocket and put his hand on the cell phone there. He stroked the hard, resistant surface of it with his hand, and hoped very hard that Vivian was all right. He wanted to call her and talk to her, but obviously, if she had been home, her alarm company would not have called him.

He felt a familiar stab of pain. Always, when he thought of Vivian, he felt that pain. Herb Villincourt had told him it would pass; these things do. Herb had said it with a demonstrative wave of his hand and poured himself another glass of chianti.

It hadn't passed.

Sal rested his head against the cool limestone wall and thought of their swimming pool that Patti opened every summer. She worked hard on the opening of it, the balancing of it; it was what they often talked about on his calls back home, when he could get a good signal. She always had the pool ready for him when he came home, drinks poured, the radio on. Patti always received him gladly, no matter how long he had been in the field, no matter how long his beard had grown, how scruffy he looked or how many days it had been since his last shower. That had not been Vivian's way, and he had never understood why he hurt for Vivian, the temporary fling, and not for his own wife of so many years, Patti.

Sal pushed himself away from the limestone, reassembled his pack, and hoisted himself out of the little canyon up onto the caprock. It was going to take him longer to go the indirect way, the stepping stone way, but he was determined to see the dead woman and pay his respects one final time.

His return to the body was slower than he had expected. He paused a few times to observe and catalog the things he found into his voice activated recorder: the northern crevice spiny lizards, the africanized bees. He was a specialist in terms of biome but a generalist within that biome. He cared less for the individual elements – the pieceparts, in Villincourt's dismissive nomenclature – than for the whole system of it. Sal Seragoglio loved the whole interworking push-pull of things. But one had to start somewhere. The sunlight softened and shadows lengthened in front of him. A fresh breeze kicked up.

He almost ran into the body of the Henderson woman as the sun touched the top of a distant range. Relief overwhelmed him as he saw that she was still there, and she was

unharméd.

He approached her carefully and touched the pale ring shadow on her curled finger, and it was suddenly too much for him. He brushed her hair away from her eyes, then, with some difficulty, lowered her eyelids. "Have mercy on this soul," he said aloud, but he knew no other funeral rites. A piece of hard chert was lying nearby, and he used it to scratch the sign of the cross into the stone bench on which she sat. For good measure, he also scratched the sign of a sun with rays. He put the chert down into her open hand, and left her.

He took the shortest route from the body to the car. Desert twilight is brief; it was nearly gone when he staggered out onto the county road, and it was full nightfall when he reached the Cherokee. For some miles his walking had been easy but his nerves were shot, the sandy road before him glowing in starlight, and littered with dark, eight-pointed forms that he at last recognized as tarantulas, *brachypelma smithi*, perhaps, or *poecilotheria regalis*, dark, surreal starfish on a moonlit plain. He dodged them as best he could, wounding the appendages of some with his careless tread.

When he opened the car door the dome light came on, blinding him with its flash, and he cursed it, closed the door and held his breath until the black images faded and he was dark adapted again. He started the car and followed the dimly luminous swath of the road for a few miles without headlights, crushing far more of the arachnids than he cared to think about, until he saw the sparse houselights of Valentine in the distance.

Sal longed to go down there among those lights. Instead, he put the car in reverse and backed up the road until the town was no longer in sight. He backed off the road,

killed the motor, pissed into a bottle and emptied it out the window so he didn't have to risk the dome light again, and slept the night in the back between his equipment bundles, windows cracked for air. He passed the time between waking and sleep by thinking about Vivian Rodriguez. He hoped she was all right. He said a prayer for her, then another, and another, and his prayers changed slowly to conversations.

During the slow night the wind picked up, gusting so hard at times it rocked the car and groaned through the interior like a child blowing across an empty soda pop bottle. The wind rocked him at last to sleep and he dreamed a sea dream, a flat-bottomed boat foundering in his wife's pool. He kept reaching his foot out to touch the bottom, to reassure himself that the bottom was still there.

Sal Seragoglio awoke in the gray pre-dawn light, his thoughts still on Patti. One of the cardboard equipment totes was dented where he had kicked it repeatedly during the night. He climbed forward into the driver's seat, opened the door and staggered out, relieved himself in the dust, and drove down into Valentine.

There was one restaurant on the main highway and it was open, its only clientele a few local men and a young waitress who silently took his order of two soft-boiled eggs and toast. No one gave him a second look. He took his shaving kit to the restroom and cleaned himself up as best he could, slicking back his hair with sink water and combing it straight.

When the waitress came back to refill his coffee, she tucked her hair behind her ear and gave him a little smile. "Passing through?" she asked.

He nodded. "Just got here from Houston. Driving all night."

"Thought you had a Houston accent, but I wasn't going to say nothing," said the waitress. "What brings you out to Valentine?"

"B-r-r-r-rrrrng!" The sound was shocking, even though this time he knew exactly what it was. The waitress moved away with the pot of coffee.

"Shit!" he muttered, more in surprise than annoyance. He broke open the phone. "Yeah?" Sweat broke out at the top of his sunburned forehead.

"Sal?" The word was long. It trembled in the air like a sparkle of ice on a nightstand.

"This is Sal." He scowled down at the chipped formica surface of the table, dread arising within him like a thin bubble. Dread and hope.

"Sal, this is Vivian. I'm sorry about that, last night. I didn't realize I hadn't changed things. I'm very sorry." The sound that wove the words together reached some hardened, forgotten muscle in his back; his shoulders relaxed, he put his elbows on the table, and breathed. The voice smelled like vanilla.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help," he said. "I was worried about you. Is everything okay?" The waitress walked past and he smiled for her. "I'm away from Houston. I didn't even know we had phone service out here, we didn't last time."

"Everything is okay," said the voice, though it sounded older than he remembered, wearier. Smoky vanilla. Vivian's voice always connected him to smell, somehow. "I'm fine. My cat tripped the motion sensor. I didn't know she was still in the house. I told them to remove you from the list. I'm sorry to have bothered you. Are you

doing well?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” said Sal.

“Well, take care,” said Vivian Rodriguez, and the phone call ended.

Seragoglio closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, overcome with relief. His breath shook with it. Vivian was all right. Until that moment he hadn’t realized just how much his concern for her had displaced his worry over the dead woman’s body.

“Here’s your eggs!”

He looked up to see the waitress there with his plate. “Thanks.”

“Phone call from a ghost?” she asked as she set the plate down in front of him.

“Yes.” He shook his head in disbelief. “You might call it that.”

She shrugged. “Happens all the time.” He looked at her with a renewed interest.

“Lots of people come out here from Houston, or El Paso, or San Antonio. Gotta come through Valentine to get where they’re going. You’re with the spaceport, right?”

He nodded, too late to catch himself. *The spaceport?*

“They say it’s gonna put Valentine on the map. They’ve already put up the cell phone towers around here. Isn’t it great?”

He looked at the phone that was still in his hand. “No wonder I’m getting these calls.” He abruptly stuffed the phone into his pocket. “I guess nothing could top that for excitement, in a place like this.”

“I guess not.” She topped off his coffee. “Not much ever happens around here. Nothing to speak of. I can’t wait to leave, myself.”

“I know what you mean,” he said, and it was true: the anxiety he had felt

yesterday when he heard the drone of the airplane, standing at the Henderson door, came hard over him again. He could not get to the source of it.

Seragoglio shoveled his breakfast like a starving man, and didn't wait for the waitress to bring the ticket. He left a ten on the table and hurried outside to his Jeep. He felt like he was in a dream, one part of himself floating, detached, above his head, calmly scanning the horizon for trouble, for movement, another part of him churning in near-paralysis, a man drowning in a lake, a caldera lake, a meteor crater lake, years after the impact, when everything is quiet and green and calm.

He found himself driving east out of Valentine, southeast, 108 degrees from magnetic north, down a paved highway that the detached part of his mind told him went to Marfa, hugging the south Texas border along the Rio Grande. After Marfa was a blank, like a map that had not been walked, explored, charted. Everything after Marfa was a blank. It was incalculable. It was Herb Villincourt staring at a Sicilian cell wall.

Another car came towards him from deep in the straight line distance and he recognized the light bar at the top of it. He took his foot off the gas and coasted down towards the speed limit. As the car grew closer, its lights erupted, red, blue, and he slowed, slowed, pulled to the side, and waited, his mind emptying itself of everything except what he had rehearsed for this moment. His plans were on file at the university: the grids, the patterns, the quadrants. He was an ecologist, an explorer. He was here to search, record, classify. He was here to get tenure, to write a paper, it was his job, he was from Houston. He would take nothing but pictures. He had left nothing but footprints.

But the police cruiser shot past him without slowing, the wind of its passage a

physical blow that left Seragoglio's car rocking. The heavyset officer behind the wheel looked grim but paid Seragoglio no attention; his gaze was locked forward toward Valentine.

When the cruiser had diminished to a dot in his rearview mirror, Sal pushed open his door and went around to the other side of his car and knelt in the dust. He was weak, trembling. He took long, shuddering breaths and waited for his detachment and his anxiety to meet somewhere on a middle ground that would allow him to continue. As he waited, he scanned the blue sky and the desertland in front of him. It was beautiful, he realized. It was the most beautiful place he had ever been, this northern Chihuahua desert, classified by some as ugly and useless, classified by some as unarable, untillable, unusable.

It was not worthless to him. It felt like home.

He looked back down the shimmering road toward Valentine. It was completely empty in either direction. There was nothing on the road but a dead tarantula, a road kill. He walked to it and picked it up by one leg. It was a species unfamiliar to him, an orange stripe down alternate legs, and he suddenly remembered the road-crossing migration of tarantulas the previous night. It was new behavior. It was not recorded. It was not taken.

Brachypelma seragoglioii, he thought, but he felt no thrill of accomplishment. Instead, the detached part of his mind gave him a glimpse of himself down that path: drinking wine by the pool, descending into a career of schmoozing, becoming worthless for field work. Turning into Herb Villincourt.

Sal walked to the side of the road and gently set the dead tarantula on an exposed

slab of sandstone there. He wanted something to leave with it, to mark the spot, a bright thing for an offering. He searched in his pockets for a coin, and found instead the dead woman's wedding ring. "Brachypelma valentini," he said, setting the ring down on the rock, sanctifying this place now and forever.

He returned to his car, and pointed it towards Houston. He didn't know whether his next stop would be Patti's pool or Vivian's vanilla-scented living room. He needed to see one of them, if only for a night and a day, and then perhaps, then, he would return to study the nighttime migration of *brachypelma*. He would study it, certainly, he would take notes, and perhaps next year he would bring a graduate student who would like to publish.

Hickey Urquhart's Trajectory

Hickey Urquhart had a love of trajectory. He loved the way things moved, the way things started, and the way you could figure it all out beforehand. It went beyond the 5th grade glee of crunching wind speed, launch angle, the horizontal error components of thrust. His love was something like treasure hunting. You find a place, dig it up, and it's there. His love was in placing something on target from a place beyond where you could hear the impact. He should have been in the artillery. He should have gone to Fort Hood. He should have hitched his way down to Johnson Space Center in Houston and left his last dream of Valentine behind. He should have *at least* taken that scholarship to Texas A&M and gotten the hell out of there.

But he couldn't.

May Anne Palmer drew him like a four inch high painted white heart at a range of nine hundred yards. She had held his hand once in 4th grade, and she had tagged him – hard – on the arm in 6th grade chase, and that had been the closest thing to a kiss he had known in his nineteen years. She was the only girl who spoke to him, and when she did

her voice had an element of uncertainty and seriousness that made his heart pound.

He did not understand the mysteries of women, but with sufficient time Hickey figured he could solve anything. Because everything had its motion – everything had its inevitability. He saw parabolas everywhere. Even in English class, when he had to read Hawthorne and he felt more than saw the curve of it; even in shop class, when he had to build an arch of brick and mortar and measure its loadbearing properties. And even in music – the key was finding the right formula for launch because in the beginning was the end.

He spent the school years in cautious experimentation: a water balloon slingshot in 4th grade, a two-stage model rocket in 6th grade, a radio-controlled four-wheeler in 8th grade. But all these attempts failed. It was the materials, he thought, the cheap materials he had to work with. The rocket propellant burned unevenly. The water balloon landed on Vance McCoy. The four-wheeler hiccuped on dirt in the carburetor. None of his guided love notes made it to May Anne. Her manner with him never switched from kind and distant to kind and intimate. If anything, her attentions wandered further away from him.

Hickey changed tactics. He had grown up listening to baseball, the Astros' games on AM radio in his father's garage. He listened to the announcers describe Nolan Ryan's fastball, and he tried to picture how a baseball could paint the corner of the plate. He spent afternoons at the garage imagining it: the invisible structures of the strike zone rising from the flat ground like a prism; the falling, slowing rotation of the ball, the airflow impeded by its seams; the workmanlike trial and error process of discovery of each umpire's sweet spot. He thought of the constraints of the mound, the elasticity of the

rubber, the lever arm's swinging, angular momentum.

He thought of it the way he imagined the atomic physicist Ernst Rutherford lying in bed at nights, inching toward an understanding of atomic structure by the shape of reflected gold nuclei. That was where the secret was, he thought. Trying to smash it head-on was the problem. He could not win May Anne head-on; that was the realm of the giants of Valentine: Bascomb Morton's staggering good looks, Waymon Nunez's suave manner, Norton Henderson's strange detachment.

But he didn't have to win her head-on. Even the great Nolan Ryan did not throw the ball down the center of the plate, not often. No. He made his millions fooling people. A pitch that looked like it was going to end up *here* ended up *there*. Hitters talked of him in admiration. Hickey imagined May Anne talking of him the way hitters talked of Nolan Ryan. He had to find her sweet spot. He had to find her strike zone. He had to get the *key* to May Anne and then brush by, kiss it just enough to show her that he knew. Then stand back. He could do it. He was a workman, and he had a workman's patience for the craft.

But these thoughts set him to wondering if his botched attempts in the past had been more successful than they appeared. Maybe the reason May Anne wouldn't speak to him was because she had a crush on him. The thought set him to shaking. If that was the case, May Anne was a lot like him. And if she was a lot like him – maybe she was playing the same kind of game with him! He thought of the little glances and wide eyes, the Poker Prom night when she went off with Norton, who was a year older than both of them. Quiet, little May Anne. May Anne always had been smarter than she let on, and the year they were forced to work chemistry lab together she brushed her hair behind her ear

and told him the experiment would fail. It failed. “How did you know it?” he asked, his voice a gruff monotone of admiration. “I can’t explain it,” she said, and he realized then that he was sweating in a way that he had never imagined was possible, on the balls of his feet.

* * *

His father took notice of May Anne as well. “That girl looks like somebody put eyes on either side of a flounder and stuck it on a popsicle stick with tits,” he said one day, when May Anne was standing out by the gas pump and her mother was making an emergency pit stop in the garage restroom. (“Must be a real emergency,” observed Burke Urquhart, an hour later, “we keep our restrooms filthy on purpose.”) “Chop wood with a face like that,” he said, looking at his son, “but if that’s what turns you on, I say, jump on it.” He then launched into a sort of groove dance. “Jump down on it, woot woot, jump down on it.” After a minute, Urquhart wiped his grease-stained forehead. “Should have been on American Idol, boy. Should have been. You bring me a sandwich from the diner?”

But Burke Urquhart was a man who could bounce from a high to a low in a moment’s notice, and when he saw Mrs. Palmer glare at him as she stalked out of the restroom, he slunk down onto the mechanic’s creeper and keel-hauled himself back to the differential of Donnie Adams’ farm truck.

The Urquhart name was known for its no-questions-asked cash-only policy, and it had worked for years. But with the ever-expanding reach of the American Automobile Association, Urquhart Garage was losing business to the credit card garages in El Paso. If

a vehicle broke down, AAA would rather tow it a hundred miles than pay Burke in cash. And Burke had no intention of dealing with the credit companies, capitalizing the business, going slick. He had no wish to spend time with advertisers and attorneys. So he hired and fired as the money ran in or out. The Valentine high school shop would sometimes send over some shop students a few afternoons a week, to learn some sort of skill with a wrench or a broom, or just to keep them out of trouble, but he couldn't often afford to pay them.

Hickey was never quite sure himself where he stood with Burke. He had never wanted to be a grease monkey. Changing oil and air filters was not enough to hold his attention for long, but his father didn't seem to hold it against him, even when business was too slow to keep the hired help and Burke worked long nights alone.

* * *

Monday morning, the week leading up to the Henderson murders, the garage was a quiet place. Burke Urquhart was sitting at his workbench, on the bar stool he'd scavenged from the old Army Air Force quonset hut down Highway 90, working at last month's sudoku. He had a knack for numbers, when they didn't mean anything, and he prided himself on being the fastest sudoku man in town. The door was open to let through the early heat of April and with the gas pump outside he barely noticed when a car drove up outside and two doors slammed. But then he heard the clacking of more than one pair of female shoes, getting quickly louder, and felt at that instant that he was in for some serious trouble. The clacking became unbearable in the stillness of the morning heat when it crossed the threshold into the open bay of the garage.

It was Vera Henderson and May Anne Palmer. They shared a common look, as if their faces had both been left in the same vise too long. Urquhart forgot about his sudoku and dropped off the stool. He limped forward a few paces to meet the girls. Sometimes somebody came in with a face that said something was broke and it was his fault. He knew that face.

“Burke,” said Vera, but whatever she was going to say stopped her short. The thought flitted across his mind that maybe she was coming by to ask him to take her father-in-law back in the shop. He couldn’t do that. He couldn’t afford it. An iron toughness began firming up in him.

“Burke, it’s about Hickey.” Vera’s voice dropped. The miserable look on her face told him he was going to need a tougher metal than iron in just a moment.

“He in some kind of trouble?” He had a lot of experience keeping his voice flat and laconic. Sometimes it was the only way to defuse a situation.

Vera looked at May Anne again, but the younger girl’s face was aimed at the ground. She looked like she was about to get a whipping. *Uh oh, ho shit. That boy’s gone and humped the monkey with that girl*, he thought, and a sudden fear – and a strange hope – came over him like a gust of wind. The hope scared him more than the fear. He had given up on productive issue out of young Hickey long ago. The kid just didn’t seem to have the head for it. The thought that he had been wrong made Burke suddenly suspicious of the two women.

“He’s been watching me,” May Anne said, with a sudden up look.

“He’s been *stalking* her, Burke!” Vera’s voice was seething with something more

than anger. She was worried and upset.

“Y’all want to sit down and have a ...” – he looked around his shop – “a soda pop or something? A Coke, a Dr. Pepper? I got some Orange Crush in the back-”

“Burke! Just hear her out. Okay?”

He held up his hands. “If this is about Hickey, we need him here to explain himself. Now don’t we?” But his voice did not sound calm at all; it sounded like the voice of a 4th grader, trying to negotiate with the big boys.

Vera’s arm was around May Anne’s shoulders and she was looking down at the younger girl though she spoke to Burke. “Mr. Urquhart, I think it’s best if it’s just the three of us right now. May Anne’s got something she needs to tell us real bad.” She looked up. “Actually, Orange Crush sounds good. Why don’t you bring us out some and give us a minute to collect our thoughts.”

“Okay, all right. I keep it for Hickey, but. . . . Okay.” He turned and went into the back, whistling a hip hop tune to keep his mind empty. As he reached into the cooler, he saw the old clipped newspaper photo of his son, *Hickman Urquhart, winner of the Radio Shack of Jeff Davis County’s Creative Lab Award*, and the terrible thought *rape* crossed his mind. He leaned on the cooler for a second, pressing the curves of an Orange Crush bottle into his forehead, trying to remember that tune he’d been whistling. It wouldn’t come. *But what’s done is done*, he thought. *The sooner we know what’s wrong, the sooner we can start fixing it.* Somewhere between those thoughts, a wild prayer went up out of him like a groan. *Just please make it fixable. It’s all I ask.*

He used a pair of channel-lock pliers to pop the caps of the bottles, and looked

down at his bottle sweat a ring through the half-complete sudoku on the counter. *So much sweat on the bottle and only April*, he thought, somewhere, in some unused part of his thoughts.

May Anne suddenly put her bottle on the counter.

“He didn’t do anything to me,” she said.

“May Anne!” Vera’s voice was stunned.

“But he’s always watching me. Last night,” she took a drink off the top of her bottle. “Last night. . . .” She burped.

“He was watching her with binoculars!” said Vera, emphatically. “He has shot her with water pistols, he has run radio control cars right in front of her, he has done everything he can to make a nuisance of himself!” Her voice kept rising.

Burke felt his voice go calm of its own accord as if to counterweight the anguish coming from the two ladies. “Well, he’s sweet on her! What do you expect? He’s sweet on you, May Anne. He’s been sweet on you since you held his hand in grade school.”

Vera looked ready to slap something. “Last thing you need to do is go blaming the whole thing on *her!*” she bit off. “He pulled her hair in *geometry class!*”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Henderson. Now at least I got a clue what started it. Mr. Urquhart, I just thought he was the smartest person I ever seen. He’s like a whole different . . . I don’t understand him at all! He scares me Mr. U! And I understand most boys.” Her ears suddenly flushed deep red.

“What else has he been doing, May Anne? Is it something I can fix?” Burke felt a panic rising inside him like a creature coming out of hiding. The way he had won

Hickey's mother . . . he had never told Hickey that. Permelia had passed on so long ago that talking about her to Hickey just felt like disturbing the dead. The feeling he had now was the same one he got the year Hickey went to 2nd grade and he had his first parent-teacher meeting. Was his boy normal? Was Hickey all right? Was he going to be miserable in this school, this town, this place? Burke's heart thundered, and he felt like he was on the edge of breaking down and crying in front of these two women. But his face was blank and his voice was even. "Is it something I can make up to you some way? I don't know what to say except Hickey's crazy about you. He'd do anything for you."

She shook her head, her mouth a thin line, and in that little sideways rocking motion, in that look around her eyes, he suddenly felt a shivering sensation in his stomach. In that briefest of moments, he saw exactly what his boy saw in May Anne Palmer. She was the set of numbers that matched up right against his, snug and precise as the butterfly valves in the throat of a carburetor. Hickey saw it, Burke saw it. But Hickey had failed to make May Anne see it.

Burke was awestruck. It was the first time since grammar school that Hickey had failed at anything. These kids were dumber than a barrel of metal shavings when it came to love.

"How long did you tell me it's been going on?" Vera prompted May Anne.

"I can't remember when. I thought it would stop. But it just don't."

"Why didn't you beat the shit out of him?" asked Burke. It's what his wife had finally done. It's how they had, well, they had ended up procreating Hickey. It was the way things worked.

Vera's mouth gaped. "You think *violence* is the answer to this?"

"Well – hell yeah," nodded Burke. "Looks like the simplest idea all around, to me. You want me to tell you his weak points? Ask him about a cosine of an imaginary number, then pop him a good one. Bam."

"That's how . . . you raised . . . your *son*?" Vera was struggling with the idea.

"I'm not so much sure I raised him, per se." He coughed. "More like genetics, I guess."

Vera put her chin down in her palm. Her thumb and middle finger formed a half circle and slid up and down the wet sides of the Orange Crush bottle she hadn't touched. "Your son has been tormenting May Anne for years. For *years*. And you think it was her responsibility to put a stop to it."

Burke moved his gaze away from the up and down motion of Vera's hand and faced May Anne. He twisted his own empty bottle around at the base, shredding the half-finished sudoku apart. "If you didn't like it, why did you let it go on? I mean, we got positive feedback, and we got negative feedback, and sometimes no feedback is like positive, you know?"

"Because I thought he was just weird! I thought he would grow out of it!" May Anne hugged herself.

"You don't like him, do you?" Burke's eyes narrowed.

"I *hate him!*" she said, and threw the Orange Crush bottle spinning across the room. The soda splashed across the exposed motor of Donnie Adams's farm truck. It splashed across the bare shop light bulb hanging down over the motor. The bulb instantly

exploded in a shower of fine glass and a momentary flare went up from the naked filament. The shop was quiet as the bottle rolled across the floor.

“I’m sorry,” said May Anne, and her shoulders slumped. She gazed dejectedly at the floor. A sliver of light bulb glass slid out of her hair and fell to the worn concrete. “I’ll pay you if I broke something.”

“Let’s get you out of here,” said Vera, taking her by the shoulders again. “Mr. Urquhart, I will come back and talk to you later. I assure you.”

Their heels clacked out of the garage and to the car they had left by the only pump in Valentine. Burke Urquhart looked at the bare wire hanging down from the ceiling, smoldering and spitting like something that was finally exposed after years of hiding. He sat down on the bar stool he had requisitioned from the abandoned Army base, and put his head down on his hands. He listened for traffic outside and waited for Hickey to show up.

* * *

It was a fiction, thought Hickey, a week later. He was stunned. May Anne didn’t like him at all. Not a bit. All the times he had thought she was playing hard to get – she was not playing. It was real. It was his ideas that were fiction.

They sat together in Pete's diner at the table by the door. Hickey’s finger made arcs on the scratched tabletop as he tried to slow down and work through his thoughts, put them one after another. He was trying to figure it out, to get to first principles. It was all circular, he was concluding. It was self-fulfilling. It was something that started at one point but did not really go anywhere: it just looped around to the starting point – an arrow

that hit you in the back ten years later.

The worst of it was thinking about how much she had been hurt by his misguided attentions. He had done everything so clumsily. He had done everything *wrong*.

"I'm sorry," he said aloud, when his finger stopped moving. "I couldn't figure it out." *I thought it was something to do with me. But I wasn't even in the equation.* "Did Vera know?"

"Oh God, no! Do you think I'm crazy? I'm not retarded!"

"I know," he breathed. "Oh, I know. I think you're smart, May Anne. A lot smarter than me in some ways."

"Hickey. Only you would say that about me." May Anne looked away. Her gaze seized on the dirty wall, the splatters of grease and food, and probably worse. Pete had asked her to start cleaning down the walls and windows between customers. Like he gave a rat's ass, but she was desperate to get out of this place. If she stayed in Valentine – she had to break off the thought. She couldn't bear to imagine turning into one of the people that came here for breakfast or lunch or dinner every day, day after day, while they wore themselves out on useless work that would never get anywhere. Norton was the only man in town with any ambition, and now he was dead. Hickey, as smart as he was in some ways, he had no ambitions. He would be happy to just do whatever. The bottom line with Hickey was all he needed was a once in a while roll around in bed, and then he would be off to other things he loved more. He was just a boy that way. He thought that was all that love was. She knew how a marriage with him would turn out. And she closed her eyes and grieved again for Vera.

Hickey mistook her silence for indecision, and pressed her on what he thought was a good point. “I mean, you got this leap, this intuition I can't keep up with. I mean, I could tell you about some of my ballistics problems, and you could. . . .”

May Ann opened her eyes and Hickey stopped. He could see that there was real pain in her face, some kind of sadness he had no idea about. He wondered just how far ahead of him she was already, if she could ever teach him about it so he could bridge that gap.

“No, Hickey,” she said. “You ought to use your mind. You got something that nobody else in Valentine can keep up with. You could be a lawyer or something. You can make a lot of money.”

“I don't want money,” he said. *I want you.* He couldn't say that. He felt like he was losing his only chance at something. He felt like what he wanted was in the center of what he could explain, but he had no way of getting there. All he could do was circle it and point to it, like a *retard*. He drew a ragged breath. “My pop talked to me, about what you said. I'm sorry.”

“It won't work, Hickey.” Her eyes were closed and her shoulders were shaking. “I just don't like you.”

To his great surprise, May Anne was crying. She was all torn up about this. He tried another angle.

“This is weird but – I thought I could tell you this later, on a date or something.” She didn't brighten up, so he continued. “When I was in fourth grade, nothing ever clicked for me. They held me back. I flunked out of fourth grade.” She did look up then,

quickly, only to hide her face in her hands. Hickey swallowed but went on. "I just didn't get it. I didn't get *anything*. My mom was all upset and I felt so bad about it, I still feel bad about it, she died and when she died she knew I was just *dumb*. But I was *trying*, May Anne. I was trying and I just didn't get it. And then you showed up, and it was right after Thanksgiving, and . . ."

Hickey stopped. He realized his hands were in the air, and he let them fall to the tabletop with a thud that rattled their drinks. He looked towards the door, as if the screen mesh could sift his fragmented thoughts.

"And what?" May Anne, arms crossed, hugging herself tightly, was looking at him. Her mouth was set in a thin, firm line.

"As soon as you showed up, I could *think*. It's like, it's like you were the catcher and I was the wild pitcher and you knew how to settle me down." Hickey couldn't tell if she understood. He took a deep breath and let it all out, let it all finally out. "If you're not around, I'm dumb. I'm retarded. I don't know why. I just need you around. So I can think."

"I can't be with you, Hickey," she said. "I sure can't live with you. I've done promised my love to another man."

"A married man," he said, his voice low. They were alone in the corner of the diner, but he was afraid to say the name. "A *dead* married man."

"Call it like it is," she said. "What's done is done. I ain't over it yet."

Hickey thought about that scholarship to Texas A&M. But he didn't think long about it. When course and trajectory are set, when the booster propellant's exhausted,

there ain't nothing to do but sit and wait.

She saw the fatalistic look in his eyes, the way his jaw had relaxed almost imperceptibly into a new, square position, and she felt like she had lost something more important than a pink ponytail holder, or any of the other small items she thought over the years had made their way into Hickey's collection. She had planned to ask Hickey about these things, but now it was all she could do to try one more time.

“They’re building a rocket place up in Cracker Jack Draw,” she said, her voice wobbly. “There’s men from Houston that come here and eat sometimes. You should go up there and see if they’re taking applications. If you don't want to do it for yourself,” she said, and suddenly she was an eight-year-old again, her voice low and afraid, “would you do it because I want you to?”

“I guess I don’t know too much about that business,” he said. “I guess I should go to work for my Pop and learn about business.” His eyes had lost their focus.

“No,” groaned May Anne. “Don’t do that. Hickey! Get out of here!”

“I’m going to work for my Pop,” he said, and he knew that just like that, all the variables were gone. Sudden, immense peace came over him. It was the kind of peace he imagined astronauts felt, weightless, no gravity load on their backs, no need to do anything for one moment except stare out at the motionless universe. He wondered why he’d let things be so hard for so long. He got up and left May Anne sitting at the table. She was crying again, but she would get over it.

He knew she would.

“Pop,” he said, in his over-sized denim overalls, squatting next to Burke Urquhart’s feet on the greasy, smutty floor of the garage, waiting for his father to roll out from under Donnie Adams’s farm truck. “Shining on the funk,” said Burke, his feet tapping against the air to the beat of the little boombox on the floor near him. Hickey’s pop did his best work to music like this. “Most of all, he needs the funk, help him find the funk.”

The young man hated to interrupt his father when he was so immersed in his work. But the peace that Hickey had felt the previous day was still with him. It was inexplicable. The gnawing anxiety that had never given him a minute’s rest in ten years was completely gone now. It was an unutterable, inexpressible calm. *Things in motion, tend to stay in motion.* He reached over and turned down the volume. The throb of the bass groove shrank and his father’s murmur became audible. “Help him find the funk –”

“Pop, I want to stay here and work with you in the shop,” Hickey broke in. “I’m not going to college this fall.”

Burke’s feet went still. For a long moment the loudest noise was the faint shudder of a livestock train miles away, crawling across the hemline of west Texas.

“You’d break Permelia’s heart to pieces, boy,” said the voice under Donnie Adams’s farm truck. “You know she’s watching down on you from the starry sky. You know she’d want you to go to college. Make something of yourself.”

“I think I’ve already made something of myself,” said Hickey. “A big fool of myself.”

Burke Urquhart rolled out from under the truck and looked at his son. “If it’s

about a woman, it won't be the last time," he said.

"I can't think when she's not around," confessed Hickey. "I'm just dumb without her."

Burke smiled. "Why don't you go get us some soda pop from the back?"

When Hickey returned, he found his father sitting up, his head against a tractor tire. Burke looked haggard. A smudge of red hydraulic fluid covered one cheek.

Hickey handed him a Fanta. "Pop, how did you and Mom . . . get together?"

Burke took a long pull from the cold bottle and held it to his forehead. "I beaned her with a baseball," he said, finally. "A woman with sense never would have married me."

"But it was an accident, right?" Hickey studied his father.

"Yep," said Burke. "It was an accident all the way. I missed the girl I was aiming at. I never could control that fastball. That's why I'm here."

"I guess I see how that works," said Hickey.

And he did see it.

"Permelia just about died from that," continued Burke Urquhart. "But otherwise, I never would have been with her. I'm not saying that makes right from wrong. It just is what it is."

"I guess that makes me a chip off the old block, right, Pop?" Hickey attempted a smile.

"Not hardly," said Burke. "I sent in your deposit to A&M. Bastards wouldn't take cash, so I had to drive up to Van Horn to get a money order." He finished off his Fanta

with one long pull. “You got some spending money to earn this summer. Now turn up that thinking man’s music and help me with this truck.”

The song on the boom box was fading out: “Everybody’s got a little light, under the sun, under the sun” And as Hickey wriggled up under Donnie Adams’s farm truck, he discovered that a part of his mind was already unraveling the rhythm of the song, working back to the way it could only have begun.

Children of Darfur

We been settin' here 50 years, read the words that circled around the Valentine diner coffee cup. The torn screen door creaked open, open, and slammed hard on a warm Texas gust that brought grit to the eye of Luther Grimby, Jr.

The coffee cup was chipped on the bottom. The letters were stenciled in black. The outline of a cowboy leaned against a fence rail in red. Luther scowled at it. It was only April, hot for this time of year, it felt like to him. But he'd only been working this route since New Year's, running frozen chicken pieces from El Paso down I-10 to Fort Hancock, to Sierra Blanca, to Van Horn, and then all towns south of I-10: Fort Davis, Marfa, Marathon, Sanderson; back up to Fort Stockton, Balmorrhea, the junction of I-10 and I-20, back to Van Horn, and back on up to El Paso. It was a keyhole loop route, and in four months he had had no reason to leave I-10 at Van Horn and drop down to US 90. But something came over him this morning. He'd been trying to put his finger on it since he got here and saw that the only other customers were two old ladies dressed up in their Sunday finest. He chose a booth that kept them out of sight and mostly out of earshot.

The screen door creaked open and he looked up, expecting to see somebody walk through, but it only creaked open farther into the west Texas sky, and slammed shut. He returned his gaze to the coffee cup in his hands. "Fifty years, cowboy, and you ain't done a damn thing the whole time." His long sleeve shirt clung to him. It was for a fact a hot day for so early in the year, in a place like this with no a/c, but this was the only place open on a Sunday morning in Valentine, late April, and with that thought he knew what it was about today that had driven him off the interstate and stranded him here. It was Easter Sunday. Something about Easter always drove him onto the back roads no matter where he was.

The door creaked open, open, and did not slam. A hand appeared inside, and then a beautiful body, a woman, a girl, and Luther grunted. Her hair was the gold he would have broken his back for fifty years ago. It slid down her neck and onto her bosom with the wind, and it was impossibly shinier than gold, lighter than gold, more pure than gold itself, for gold was just another goddamn ore to wrench out of the ground, but a beautiful woman like this . . . it made Luther release his grip on the empty coffee cup and clasp his hands together.

Right behind the girl came someone else, a boy. Not so much a boy, he realized, squinting against the light that came from around him in the doorway as the boy tried to pull the screen door back shut. More a young man.

"It's broke," he murmured, hands still together. He felt unconscionably restless, ready to get back in the rig and get on down the road. The young man looked at him, then pulled the screen door closed. He came up behind the beautiful woman and pointed

toward the other side of the cafe. They disappeared behind a row of empty booths and the door lifted slightly back on its hinges, then shut.

Luther tapped his cup against the table. The waiter girl was chatting it up with the two old women, from the sound of it. It was a mother and her mother, he guessed. Friends of the community. Stick around in one place long enough and you become a friend almost by accident. But it was no accident the waiter girl hadn't been by his table in quite a few minutes while he was on empty. It was the way the world had gone. Not that he minded serving himself. It was something he was used to, even when his tipping was good. He looked into the picture on the wall, some rodeo horse, the only ornament inside this shitty diner, to see if the waitress was reflected in a corner of the picture frame. She wasn't.

But the beautiful woman was, at least her hair cutting down over her shoulders like diamond wire, and across from her the boy, facing her, and in facing her the boy faced Luther as well. He studied the boy's face while he watched for the waiter girl and waited for a refill. The boy had long, curly black hair, something like a cocker spaniel pup but tanglier, sorrier. His skin was darker than white, and at first Luther took him for a Mexican, but he looked more Iranian than Mexican. The boy's eyes were large and vacant. His jeans were torn like he was trash, but he wasn't trash, just pretending to be. He stared down at the table. The golden-haired woman abruptly raised a menu, blocking Luther's view of the boy. The waitress was still not in sight, despite there being two tables to wait on now.

Luther stood up and took his coffee cup. It was the way the world had gone, and

nothing you could do to bring it back. He made sure to go the long way around the booths so he could walk past Goldie and Spaniel boy.

They were staring into their menus with fixed and hungry looks, not talking to one another. Luther was mildly disappointed; he had wanted to hear Goldie talk. He imagined her as having a Texas accent. He kept moving on up to the hotplate by the swinging kitchen door. A green-trimmed pot stood half full of decaf. An orange-trimmed pot was nearly empty. He flipped the switch to turn off the heating element and lifted the carafe.

“Let me help you with that!” said the waitress, as the kitchen door swung shut, and Luther nearly dropped the pot. She was a small girl, a skinny girl – stick of dynamite, he judged – and when she took the carafe her eyes snapped up to him. “You sure you want this? Just take a minute to brew up a fresh pot,” she said.

“That's fine,” he said, nodding at the carafe.

“If that's what you want,” she said. “I guess some people like it all black and strong like used motor oil. Hold still!”

Luther, unable to stop the trembling in his hand, put the cup down on the counter and she poured in the last of the black coffee. He raised it and turned away, and nearly ran into the Spaniel boy.

“Shit,” said the boy, who had come up behind him.

“Goddamn!” said Luther, as the coffee splashed out and scalded his hand. He fixed a look on the boy. He meant it to be a stern look, but his temper subsided when he saw the lines around the boy's eyes.

“Shit, man,” said the Spaniel, “you okay? You got a bad shake there, bud.”

“Let me take that for you,” said the waiter girl, and before Luther could stop her she took the cup from his hand and returned through the swinging doors to the kitchen.

“Come here, man,” said the boy. “Let's get you something for that.”

“I'm all right,” said Luther, but he followed a short distance to the boy's table on the chance of hearing Goldie talk. The boy reached across the table and pulled a half dozen napkins from the spring-loaded dispenser, and handed them over. Luther wiped down his hand and arm, but found himself tongue-tied with the beautiful woman looking up at him.

“Man, you need to take your meds,” said Goldie. “My pawpaw had Parkinson's. He didn't keep up on his meds and it killed him. His brain went rotten from the inside out.” Her voice was not pleasant like he had thought it must be; instead it had a dirty sound to it, like something caught in the pipes. It brought back a faint echo of memory.

“Why don't you pull up a chair?” urged the boy. “We're passing through but we like to meet the local people, everywhere we go. It's like we're all the same, you know.”

“I'm kind of in a hurry,” said Luther. “I mean, I'll be outta here soon. I'm just waiting on a tow truck.”

“You got car trouble, too?” asked Goldie. Her eyebrows rose, wrinkling her forehead. It made her seem older than Luther had at first thought she must be.

“Two flat tires,” said Luther, “both on the left side. Don't know what I hit.” He hadn't felt anything, out there on US 90 an hour or so ago, no more than a bump. Not enough to interrupt his daydreaming, the rising sun red in his left eye. “My rig's okay,” he

concluded. "But I had to park the trailer up the road."

"You a truck driver?" Goldie's voice rasped the first few notes every time she spoke. It was like a hand saw starting a groove.

Luther nodded. "I own my own tractor, pull for hire. Mostly McDonald's and restaurant business." He looked out the window. "Goddamn tow truck gotta come down from Van Horn. Should be here any time. Sunday morning slow, I guess. Where you folks headed?"

"Oh, just-" waved the boy, and the waiter girl brushed past Luther with a carafe and a clean cup. She glanced back over her shoulder.

"Come and get it," she said, and Luther felt his heart jump. She was just a little thing. Narrow as a plane board. But he stood, rooted, until she turned and was out of sight. Her reflection in the glass front of the painting on the wall showed her bent over his table.

"You all take care now," he said to the two kids, and went to his booth.

The waitress was still bent over. She had his empty plate in her left hand, and with the right hand she swiped across the table with a dishrag, leaving behind a smell of dishwasher and bleach. She flipped the rag for one more pass across the table, then put the rag on her shoulder and straightened. "You gonna be here all morning?" she asked, and looked up to meet his gaze. "You come in about an hour ago, drinking coffee like a fish." She had a smell he couldn't quite put his finger on. It tickled him down inside in a crazy way. It was a crazy feeling and it was a crazy place to get that feeling, this cafe in Valentine, Texas. He wanted badly to put his hands on her ass.

But he kept his hands to himself and slid into his booth with a sigh. "I won't be here any longer than I can help it. What's your name, young lady?"

"Oh, I'm May Anne," she said. She made a show of refilling his cup, slowly.

"You out here sightseeing?"

Luther laughed. "Hell, just driving through."

"Something funny about that?" The girl raised the carafe. "We get sightseers all the time."

"No, I got a monthly route, runs me through here. You outta high school?" Luther licked his dry, cracked lips, then covered his mouth with a trembling hand.

"Yeah, I'm outta high school. I done graduated. Just trying to make up some tip money and get out of here. You know what I mean? Where you from?"

"Kansas," he said, rubbing his thumb across the cowboy. "Kansas, originally."

She sat down opposite him, took the rag off her shoulder and began wiping the table again. "What part of Kansas?"

"I guess it don't matter, really. Pittsburg. You been there? World's largest steam shovel, Big Brutus. I worked on it for a while. Did some journeyman work, after I got out of the service."

"I ain't been anywhere," she said. "Listen, you want some more creamer, or you like it hard black?"

The little waiter girl's words were dizzying him, her words or her smell. He was a man washed up in an eddy of the river, cast off and aside. He was somebody holding onto an old piece of railroad cross-tie, waiting to know where the bottom was. Say anything,

even if it's the wrong thing, his father, big Luther, used to tell him. It don't matter what. The river will carry you to where it wants you to go. He knew that smell now, and sudden pressure tensed in his gut.

“You smell like my first wife,” he said, “all cuntie and fresh. You want to sit on my lap a while? I got room out in the cab. I got a bed and a TV, I got a/c. You got a break coming up?”

The waiter girl stopped her cleaning and balled her rag up in her hand. She looked into Luther's eyes with a fixed gaze, and laughed. “I wasn't coming on to you, old man, I was trying to be nice, on account of the coffee. Pete would take it out of my pay if somebody sued him on account of getting his hand burnt on the coffee. Just like that old woman at McDonald's.” She stood up. “Anyway, what would I be doing with a truck driving man like you? I'd never get out of this place. Jesus.” She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a ticket. “Why don't you just go on and tab out, go out in your truck and do your business. And don't you be thinking about me while you're doing it.” She dropped the ticket onto the table and turned away.

Luther saw her reflection stop at Goldie's booth, saw her throw a bird in his direction. A mixture of high and low laughter arose.

He spun his cup slowly around, letting the cowboy get a good look at the shitty cafe, working on the memories that were crowding up inside him. Fifty years, fifty years. He was just turned 65 himself, his birthday had always been so close to Easter he'd always been jealous of his brother getting an Easter basket too, so jealous he would sometimes take the best piece of candy from his brother's basket and put it in his own in

the pre-dawn hours. He had always expected when he hit 65 that he would stop driving, the money still coming in like on speed control, but then things had happened, so many things that he didn't know how a man could ever have time to go out and seek things out. It was a matter of least resistance, what it came down to.

When the smell of ocean water had drained away back inside him, when his hands were steady enough to lift the cup again, he drank. Don't let one bad play linger, he thought, and he tried to remember if that too was his father's teaching. He suddenly remembered his father in his Easter Sunday suit, smelling of mothballs and sweat.

Soft soles clipped across the floor and paused at his table, and Luther's eyes were drawn to a pair of dusty clogs. Plastic shoes, like everything any more, vinyl with diamond shaped holes punched in them. Luther's watery eyes swiveled up to the wearer, a Mexican in an apron, a boy trying to grow a moustache.

"I know where you can get it some cheap," said the Mexican, pointing out the window at the road, "but not her."

"What?" asked Luther.

"The poon," said the aproned boy.

"I ain't buying shit," said Luther, suddenly angry. "I got a long road to go yet today." But the front screen door slapped shut and creaked open, open, and Luther's anger turned to anxiety. He had a frozen load headed for Marfa, but it wouldn't stay frozen in this heat, not out there in the direct sun. It would be thawing from the outside in, if that tow truck didn't get here with spares. Both those left tires were shredded beyond repair. He should have gone back to check what he had hit, but he had been too ready to leave

his load behind and get something to eat. He could have radioed it in and waited in his cab. Not that it was likely, but some road gypsy might even steal the trailer. Then where would he be?

“I bring you a refill, but you take it to go.” The Mexican cook wiped his hands on the apron. “Ain't no truck stop.”

“Look, you got a cup like this I can buy?” Luther asked, trying to right the situation in some kind of way.

“A cup? Yeah sure,” said the cook, and he spun away, his soft shoes making a tiny squeak.

Luther's cup rocked on the table, refusing to stay flat. The anxiety gripped him hard. He didn't feel like waiting for the cook to come back with a new cup. It was charity any way you looked at it. He put a ten down on the table to pay for it all – the breakfast, the coffee, the cup – and pushed up from the booth to leave. But a spasm of weakness took him in the wrist and caused him to sit down again, just as Goldie and the Spaniel boy came up.

“Hey, man, we'd like to pay for your meal,” said Spaniel. “Do our part, you know. That sucks about your Parkinson's.”

“I ain't got no goddamn Parkinson's,” said Luther, holding his wrist and flexing his hand. “It's just some damn arthritis, sometimes.”

“Okay,” said the boy, and the screen door opened, opened, and softly shut.

“How old are you, son?” Luther asked. “Are you outta high school?”

The boy laughed and pushed his tangled locks back behind his ear. “We're both

twenty-two, you know, just out of college.” He hooked his thumb at Goldie. “Me and her, we're traveling. She needs to go to a doctor in San Elizario. Then I'm getting in the Border Patrol, man. That's where it's happening.”

“Johnny, stop telling stories on us!” Goldie slid into the booth opposite Luther. She leaned toward him. “You want to make a little donation?” she asked, and there was something sweet and hot and bad about her breath. Luther tried not to breathe it in, and the effort broke free a sudden memory from his childhood.

There had been a bad taste in the well water one day, and his mother at first tried to disguise it in sweet iced tea, then refused altogether to let them drink from the tap. It'll clear up, his father had said. But they quit brushing their teeth, then cooking with it, then dishes. Finally, when his mother quit doing the laundry, his father had climbed down into the well – it was a cistern well, about two feet wide, large enough for a thin man – and found a dead snake there, decomposing on the surface. Luther Jr. had held the rope for him, terrified of what he would have to do if the rope snapped. But the rope didn't snap, and when his father came up, wild haired, wild eyed, he came up with the same smell the girl had.

“What do you need a donation for?” he asked, struggling to keep the memory from overpowering his reaction to Goldie. But the faint odor of dead snake and the shimmer of soft gold weakened his knees. “You just said you wanted to pay for my breakfast.” He looked up at the boy, who tilted his head at the girl.

“Yeah man, we got your breakfast,” said the boy, ignoring a glance from the girl. “What I meant about earlier was, you know, before we get into San Elizario, we're

traveling around raising money for the children of Darfur. The children of Ethiopia.”

“What's wrong with the children of Ethiopia?” asked Luther. Can't feed 'em, don't breed 'em, his dad said, hands trembling, after he told them the snake had likely gone in after some mice. They had to boil all the water they used for the rest of the summer.

“I don't know, they're all like hungry and shit,” said the boy. “Yvonne, I thought you said you knew this place. Fuck.” He picked at his scalp and looked nervously over the row of booths toward the kitchen.

“Johnny, why don't you go talk to those old ladies and see if they'd like to donate,” crooned the girl, Yvonne. “I'll stay right here with this fine gentleman and talk to him about our cause.”

Johnny took his hand from his hair and peered at the fingernail. He blew his breath out, straightened up, and walked across the cafe to where the two ladies had parked themselves. He looked edgy, Luther thought, and he felt like he understood that feeling.

“So I'm Yvonne,” said the golden-haired girl. “And that's Johnny, my fiance.”

Luther nodded.

The girl raised her eyebrows. “So you're . . . ?”

“Luther,” he replied. Her breath was making him ill. “I need to be getting on out to my truck.”

“Listen, that waitress told us about what happened. That kind of thing happens all the time.” Yvonne smiled. Her two front teeth were stained brown. “I'll get right to the

point, then. We need a ride. Johnny's car broke down up the road, way up the road, and we've had to rely on the kindness of strangers.”

“I hope you don't consider me a stranger,” he said. It didn't come out right, but it was one of his father's favorite sayings.

The girl blinked, her smile fixed in place. “Oh not at all. That's why I hope we can get a ride with you to El Paso.”

“I'm headed the other way,” said Luther. “That Johnny of yours said you were going down to Mexico.” He squinted at her. “You lose something in old Mexico?”

“I ain't having nothing illegal, if that's what you mean.” She half turned on the bench to stab a look at Johnny, who had pulled up a chair with the ladies. They were laughing at something he had just said. He pointed in the direction of Luther's table and the old ladies turned to follow his glance. One of them smiled.

Yvonne turned back to Luther. “I ain't going to lie to you, mister. I need some work but it ain't no abortion, if that's what you mean.”

A louder peal of laughter rang from the other table. The waiter girl, May Anne, walked out of the kitchen's swinging door with a full pot of coffee. Her face went stony when Luther caught her eye with his upraised and empty cup.

He let his arm fall back to the table. The Yvonne girl looked at the cup in his hand. “You really like your coffee, huh? Somebody was smart they'd start a Starbucks down here. Lots of old people need their coffee. I can't wait to get out of this poor town!” She seemed on the edge of panic.

“I can't stay in one place too long, myself,” said Luther.

The girl tested the ends of her nails against the tabletop. Her nails were cut square, and made Luther Grimby think of flat-nosed shovels. “What are *you* running from?” she said, quietly.

“I’m not running,” he said. “Just don’t like to stay in one place.”

She snorted. “Let’s talk about something else. Let me see your hands. You been married before. I can tell. What’s that like?” She tapped her fingernails against her teeth, one after another.

“Being married?” Luther looked out the screen door at all that muted brightness out there. “I don’t know too much about it, I guess. I was never very good at it.”

“How hard can it be?” Yvonne giggled. “Johnny says he wants to get married. He’s not even old enough to drive.” A faint tone of contempt edged into her voice. She brightened after a pause. “So, what kind of girl was she? Your wife? Or you been married more than once?”

“Twice,” he said. The memories had long ago gone hollow. He felt like an empty shell just speaking of them. “My first wife, she died in country, Chu Lai. She was the sweetest woman that God ever created. That was forty years ago. Second wife tried to make a stay at home man out of me. That was twenty years ago. Guess I’m due.”

“Right,” said Yvonne. “Well, I wish you would at least make a donation. For those poor children. It makes me cry when I think about them.” She had not looked down at the ten dollar bill on the table, not before, but she did so now as if seeing the ten for the first time. She reached for it. “You ever seen the World Trade Center in the ten dollar bill?”

“I guess not,” he said, watching her hands.

She folded it, cursed, and retried. Her face lit up in a triumphant smile. “There,” she said, turning the folded bill around so he could see it. As she did so, the neckline of her blouse opened up a bit and Luther saw that she had something written in ink there, black ink scrawled on her bosom. “The burning World Trade Center,” she said. “Isn't that creepy? You want to see another trick?”

Too late, Luther Grimby looked back at the ten. “That's something,” he said, as Yvonne glanced down at herself. She pulled her blouse together and tossed her hair to the side. But he was caught up in the current. “You a miner?” he asked her.

Her voice turned nasty. “I don't even know what you're talking about. I think you're a perverted, dirty old man. I wouldn't take a ride from you even if you offered, which you haven't.” She looked up suddenly as the boy slid into the booth hard against Luther.

“Let's go, Vonnie,” he said, motioning his chin at the two older ladies who were slowly easing past the screen door. “We got us a ride up to Van Horn, anyway. That'll get us to the interstate, anyway. A little Easter day kindness. For He is Risen.” He smiled and reached up to tuck a strand of Yvonne's hair behind her ear. She twitched away from his touch and with one spiteful glance at Luther, launched herself away from the table and toward the door. Luther's cup tipped in her wake, and when he reached for it the weakness took his wrist again. He grimaced and turned his hand palm-up. The ten was gone.

Johnny pushed deeply into the bench cushion in the process of levering himself

up. Luther felt the boy's careless hand against his hip. Then the boy was on his feet, and he took Luther's open hand in his own, squeezing it hard. "You ought to come with us to Mexico and get healed, old man. Be cured, and shit." He let go of Luther's hand. "Peace out." He strode off to the entrance.

Luther muttered a curse and waited for the weakness to pass.

The boy turned back. "Hey," he called, "thanks!" Then he was gone. The door opened wide, then slapped shut again.

The cafe was suddenly quiet.

Luther put his head in his hand and tried to remember something about Easter Sunday, something that would make it worth coming out this way instead of going I-10 to Balmorra and down to Fort Davis like he always did. He thought about a day when the church doors were open and sweat trickled down his ribs, and the service went on while the dyed eggs were hidden in the grass field outside the windows. He thought about rolling into the tall rice grass while the road beside him erupted under the cannon fire of a MiG flying just above the treetops.

That road had carried him here. He could not question it.

A hand replaced the broken cup in front of him with a new one, and Luther looked up, blinking.

"I told Pedro to tell you to leave, but it's all right I guess." The waiter girl thumped the carafe down on the table. "I guess an old man like you is gonna get lonely. Speak what's on his mind. Help yourself to what's in the pot, if you want it, it's fresh. Those two old ladies, Mrs. Spitzenberg and her mama, they're only barely making it on

Social Security. That's a nice thing you done. Paying all their dinner.”

Luther remembered Johnny's hard touch. He wondered if he was going to have to turn back north to Van Horn to make sure there was not two old ladies, friends of the community, dead on the road. If he did, the load would surely thaw and spoil, and he might as well head on back to El Paso with it. He would lose the route. But it didn't matter too much what he did. The road was going to carry him where it wanted him to go. The road was sacred.

May Anne was watching the screen door as it creaked open, open. “I can't even imagine,” she said.

Luther rubbed his thumb across the cup. His hands were trembling again as he said the first thing that came to his mind. “Cowboy's been settin' here fifty years, don't mean we all gotta be settin' here fifty years.” He winked at her.

She was just starting to crack a smile when the screen door opened and a short and burly man came in. He had on a gray mechanic's shirt, sweat-stained and splotted with blood and grease. “You Grimby?” He handed Luther the clipboard. “Had a deer all wrapped up between the wheels. Nasty. But I got it out. Got me some antlers too. Tell my boy I brought it down myself.” He winked at them, and smiled, a gap toothed smile.

Luther signed the bill, and headed back out onto the road.

Jutland

The Wallenberg ranch was going into receivership, and Ferdie Dudderar had not seen it coming, and could not even now grasp it. He had been fired and told to leave. The thought of it was as stunning to him as an open-mouthed scream. He could not approach it. He could not look into it. Ferdie tried, but his mind kept shying away from it.

He sat in the cane-bottomed chair he had salvaged from the Marfa dump, in the open door of the farm's workshed. Behind him, the wood pellet stove glowed a fierce dull red heat. Before him, beyond the open door, the freezing winter rain became sleet and then snow. The clash of heat and cold was something he thought might stir him, rouse him, lift him up from his fifty year rut. In his lap was an open book, and he read it, or attempted to read it, because it was Sunday. It was his final Sunday on the ranch, and it was raining, and he didn't know what else to do.

Reading was hard for Ferdie. It was a great effort, and his mind balked at it, turning away at any distraction. He had never learned his numbers and letters, but Wallenberg tried, sometimes, up in the ranch house after a Sunday lunch.

Ferdie looked up toward the ranch house at the top of the ridge and wondered if Wallenberg still lived. The old man had rarely told Ferdie about his long-range plans for the property, but then, he didn't have to. Joachim Wallenberg owned the place. Ferdie was just his hired hand.

But there had been signs that change was coming, if Ferdie had been able to read them. In the summer, they had not plowed under the stubble of hairy vetch. In the fall, they had loaded the cattle into the trailer and took them up to the El Paso stockyards, where they left them at auction. They left the trailer there too, returning only with the old farm truck and an amount of cash that Wallenberg complained about. Ferdie thought perhaps they were getting out of livestock for a while, perhaps Wallenberg was going to try a native, hardier silage, one that didn't need irrigation or till. But Ferdie hadn't thought farther ahead down those lines, because he didn't have to. Wallenberg did the planning.

And now Wallenberg was lying in a hospital room in San Antonio, near death.

Ferdie wasn't troubled so much by being left to tend the place alone. He could manage the upkeep, and there was a lot of it, even without a crop, without stock. There was fence line to repair, roads to grade and gravel, coyotes, wind damage, erosion. There was enough to do.

And being alone didn't scare him. He had always been alone, working with no one except Wallenberg for most of his life. When times got lean and leaner, Wallenberg had let the hands go, piecemeal, until he was down to one. Ferdie wasn't young, but at fifty-two, he was a generation younger than Wallenberg. He was used to working alone

and it didn't bother him.

What scared him was Venora Lickleiter. She was Wallenberg's niece. She had made a visit to the farm yesterday.

Ferdie retreated into the book in his lap, his calloused finger moving slowly across the simpler words. "Jut – land," he said, his voice raspy as a bastard file. He traced the letters like they were in Braille, like the act of tracing would help him. But the letters were not Braille. This was his favorite entry in the Compton's Encyclopedia, volume eight, the volume he had bought at the salvage shop in Fort Davis. He had returned weeks later to buy another volume, but the set was gone. Some crazy lady had bought it, the manager had told him, and she was hot about that missing volume. Ferdie hadn't been back to the salvage shop. He was afraid he would be talked into returning the one volume he had.

"Jutland, Battle of." Wallenberg had started his lessons with this entry, because it was the one Ferdie had asked him to read, up in the ranch house, one Sunday after lunch. It had been a year ago, or less, that first lesson. Ferdie had been transfixed by the photograph of steel battleships lined up and crossing the North Sea like so many cattle strung out across the land. The ships sat low in the water, and yet the threat of their guns and the gray pall of smoke and cloud that hung around them in the grainy pictures thrilled him.

Ferdie closed the book and breathed deeply of the damp air. Not far away from where he sat, the top fringes of the hemlock hedge wore thimbles of hard ice. He had been here when that hedge was planted. He had run the drip irrigation line down beside it,

so that Wallenberg wouldn't lose those woody stems in the heat. The steady drumming of the morning's freezing rain slowly emptied his heart of the worry that had squeezed him for a month. It left only emptiness where the worry had been, but he welcomed the emptiness. It was a change for the better, at least. Wallenberg had fallen ill a month ago, the Sunday after Thanksgiving. It was acute appendicitis, although all they knew at the time was that Wallenberg was doubled over with pain so that he could hardly make it to the truck. Ferdie had driven him up the washboard roads to the Van Horn hospital, and authorized the surgery with an X.

Wallenberg's next of kin was his niece, Venora Lickleiter. She had been furious with Ferdie. She had demanded he leave at once and stop meddling in family matters. He had stayed long enough to see Wallenberg stabilized and mediflighted to San Antonio, and he had hoped that was the last he'd hear of the Lickleiters.

But yesterday, Venora and her husband Bob had come to the farm.

They hadn't stayed long.

* * *

"We're going to have to let you go," Venora Lickleiter had said, striking a match against the tractor's engine cowling and lighting a cigarette. She inhaled and pursed her lips. Smoke vented in sharply defined jets from her nostrils. Her gray eyes did not blink. "I know it's the holiday season. Bob said he'll advance you a month's pay. That should be more than enough for you to find a place."

"Who's going to manage it here?" Ferdie asked. He cut the tractor engine. Silence came down around them like a concussion.

“Mr. Dudderar,” she began, and looked away a long moment at the horizon. Her mouth was turned down as if she were unable to summon the right words to convey her contempt. “This place is a money pit. No way can we manage it from San Antonio. And Joachim’s hospital expenses are considerable.” Her eyes narrowed at him. “So we’re cutting our losses.”

“You’re asking me to take a cut in pay?” It wouldn’t be the first time. Wallenberg had squeezed him twice before, both times on account of Mexicans who he said could do it cheaper. But both times the old man had agreed to keep him with a pay cut – but only on account of trust. Can’t trust nobody, Wallenberg had told him, severely.

That money hadn’t mattered much to Ferdie, not as long as he had a job and a bed to call his own. He didn’t have a family, no kids, brothers, sisters, nothing. And he had thought that when Wallenberg passed things would get better. There would be a new owner. New way of looking at things. Things could *only* get better. Everything washed out for the better in the long haul.

“No, I’m not jewing you down for a cut in your pay.” A faint smile tweaked Venora’s red-rimmed lips and she flicked the cigarette away. “Joachim couldn’t make ends meet, with or without you. I’ve looked at his books before. He couldn’t have managed his way out of a hard rain. It’s no wonder he’s dying alone.” The discarded cigarette smoked on the damp ground behind her. “We’ve talked to the bank,” she continued. “They’re taking the whole thing. The whole shooting match. And what they do with it is their own concern. It’s not yours or mine. They’re probably going to develop it, if the state legislature approves the interstate spur from Van Horn. That might be ten,

twenty years. Might never happen.”

Ferdie struggled to understand the breadth of her remarks.

“The hospital says that he’s getting better,” he finally said.

“Of course they’re going to tell you that. They want to bleed us dry and keep us hanging on to hope.” She made a fist. “Prolonging an old man’s life is a poor excuse for robbery. They’ll keep him sedated and just hanging on to life. That’s no life now, is it?” She sighed. “Joachim was dead as soon as his appendix ruptured. You should have let him pass right here in his house. It would have saved him some needless pain and cut the middleman out of the deal.”

Ferdie was shocked by the suggestion. His one thought was to somehow save the property long enough for Wallenberg to make his complete recovery and return to manage it. “I don’t know if the bank is such a good idea,” he said slowly. “I might even could make you an offer for it.” His voice trailed off when he looked her in the eye.

“Dudderar, are you going to *bid* for this place, on your income? You think you can outbid the bank? Maybe what you need to know is that they’re going to pay Joachim’s hospital expenses, and his funeral expenses, and all the property expenses, *in perpetuity*. Can you beat an offer like that? Hell, of course you can’t. I’d love to keep this place myself. It’s quiet. You can’t say that about too many places any more. But I don’t need no old heirloom. I need the money.”

Ferdie put his numb hands against the tractor’s engine. “You’re talking like Mr. Wallenberg is dead. He’s not dead, is he?”

“Just a matter of time,” Venora said. “Whether it happens tonight, tomorrow, or

next year. Joachim's too old and weak to fight off whatever little infection he might get next. In his condition the first visitor with the sniffles would finish him off. Not that he has to worry too much about visitors."

"I'll take a cut. I don't need much. Tell the bank, or whoever you sell it to, I'll take a cut." Ferdie's knuckles rapped at the tractor motor, dislodging grease and dirt. "Just need a place to sleep, and to know what my job is. I'll work cheap."

"Dudderar, I'm just being honest when I tell you," she said, looking down at the still smoldering cigarette as if she wished she still had it, "they ain't going to want nobody telling them what to do."

"Just something to get me through to the summer," he said. "I haven't worked anywhere else in so long, I don't know if I could." The numbness had spread from his hands into his arms. They fell to his side, leaden. "Maybe somebody'll be hiring in the summer."

"You're free to talk to them, of course, the bank people or whoever you wish, as of the end of the month when we let you go. But I'm sure they'll want to bring in their own people." She coughed and cleared her throat. "Or do whatever it is they're going to do. They may just let the next wildfire burn the place up and collect on insurance, for all I know. And you didn't hear that from me."

Ferdie had looked at the ranch house behind him and then down at the shed in the distance. The insanity of it made it hard for him to put two thoughts together. In desperation he tried one more appeal. "Can I talk to Mr. Lickleiter?"

"He's busy right now." She jerked her head at the ranch house. "I told him to

make us reservations for some nice place in old Mexico. The last five weeks have been a disaster.” She spat on the ground. “Now show me around this place, so I can be sure old Joachim didn’t stash the family jewelry in a pot and bury it in the yard.”

He took Venora Lickleiter through the workshed to show her what was there.

“Shoddy workmanship,” she said about the pellet stove. “Death trap of carbon monoxide. Maybe this place should burn, after all.”

She demanded to see his personal quarters. It was farm property, she said, and he knew it, but Wallenberg had never asked to see inside in all the years he’d been here. Not since the old man had brought the old mobile home in and they had set it on blocks down by the entrance to the farm.

When Venora Lickleiter was done poking here and there, opening the drawer under the stove where he kept the arrowheads he found, she sent him down into Valentine to find out if Wallenberg owed or was due anything from the few businesses there. Ferdie was certain that Wallenberg kept his expenses paid, but Venora insisted he make the short trip.

They’ll see the bills on the table, he thought, as the pickup jostled down the rutted road into Valentine, and they’ll know what needs to be done. But when he returned in the afternoon’s overcast gloom to say that Joachim Wallenberg owed nothing, was due nothing, the Lickleiters’ vehicle was gone.

Ferdie went up to the front door of the ranch house. There was no answer to his knock. The door was locked. The key he retrieved from a hook in the shed no longer fit the lock on the front door. Nor did it fit the back door. The curtains had been drawn over

the house windows except for the dining room, where the curtains did not quite meet in the middle. In the evening's failing light he saw that the stack of mail had been moved from the bureau to the table and scattered there. A few envelopes lay torn open, the contents missing. He recognized them from Wallenberg's occasional comments, over the years.

Social Security checks, thought Ferdie. That's what they were here for.

* * *

He had returned to his mobile home just as a light rain began falling, but he was unable to sleep. A foreboding sense of worry finally drew him out of bed and back to the small workshed. From there he could keep an eye on the house. Despite the cold and rain, what he worried about was fire. Had the Lickleiters turned off the stove? The furnace? He put on his raincoat and took a flashlight from the shed and walked up the hill. Through the windows of the house he saw no lights, smelled no gas. He went around behind to the propane tank and closed down the valve, just in case. The house would be cold. The next occupant would have to relight the pilots. But with the gas shut off, Ferdie finally breathed a little easier and returned to the workshed. He hung his poncho on a peg and set about lighting the little pellet stove in the corner. He had never had a reason to turn it up to its maximum setting but now he did so. From here he could keep an eye on the house, which was the only thing left of any value other than the land itself.

* * *

The rain picked up in intensity through the early morning hours and the weather turned colder at dawn. Ferdie wondered whether the Lickleiters had returned to San

Antonio to be with Joachim Wallenberg in perhaps his final days, his final hours, but his own inner fretfulness kept replacing the kindness of that image with one in which their vehicle ran ahead of the winter storm like a carefree yacht under fair winds and calm seas. Perhaps they plunged southward to Cancun like one of the Jutland battlecruisers, sturdy and impervious to the freezing gales and whitecaps of the open ocean.

Outside, the wind rose in fitful gusts as the daylight broadened, and the drumming of sleet and freezing rain on the shop roof made a steady, rattling din that helped to bridge him around his dark worries. Ferdie sat in the open door, the encyclopedia volume open in his lap, and watched ice claim the Wallenberg property.

He was not cold. The wood stove behind him filled the shop with the insistent pressure of its heat. It was one of the newer stoves, the kind that burned compressed pellets of sawdust. He had bought the stove and a big supply of the pellets off the estate of old Herman Linzie when Linzie had died last April. Ferdie couldn't for the life of him understand why an old man would sink money into large supplies of anything. Wallenberg certainly wouldn't. It's more in the nature of old men to wait until the right price came along, which is how Wallenberg got the stove and pellets for pennies on the dollar. But old Linzie had paid retail for brand new merchandise. And it had not done Linzie a whit of good.

* * *

The stove was turned to its maximum setting. Ferdie could think of no reason to save the fuel. There were enough sawdust pellets to last an entire winter like this, and he would not be here past New Year's. Less than a week.

“Jutland.” Ferdie said aloud, and he hadn’t spoken in so long that his own voice surprised him. “Jutland,” he repeated, with a clearing of his throat, as if it were something final. He was the only man in all of Crackerjack Draw at this moment, and in any case the racket of rain and sleet drowned his voice quickly. “Jutland!” he shouted, testing that idea. He wanted to read more, as Wallenberg did, creating large actions from words, but the words eluded him. The only thing he could truly understand about the book was that the binding of it was strong, and the spine had endured, as he had not.

He looked out across the freezing rain and tried again to understand what it was to be unemployed, to be pried away and separated from the land you had worked so long. The stove hissed occasionally as a trickle of moisture dripped onto it from the tin roof. He thought he should probably cover the tractor and run some heater line up to the water trough. But as he got up from his chair he remembered that the tractor was under the carport up by the house, and the troughs had been drained with no livestock to water.

How could he have forgotten something like that? Ferdie’s head felt heavy and his thoughts slow. He did not sit back down but continued looking out into the icy storm.

A cardinal swooped in from beyond the hedge, a spot of warm blood against the spiky green hemlock. Ferdie watched it as he chewed his cracked fingernails. He knew he never took the time to care for his nails like he should, and the horn was always splitting along the edges. He had always felt that a man’s fingernails were meant to be tough, like animal hooves. Natural wear alone should keep them manageable. Like a bird’s beak. You didn’t see them growing too long. The cardinal was looking at him cock-eyed. There was no sign of the bird’s mate. She was probably back in the foliage. Forage would be

difficult now, nuts and berries encased in ice like little seed pearls.

The book was still in his hand, British and German battleships steaming in a straight line, ships exploding in blasts of black smoke. The pictures were hypnotic. If he turned the page, he almost immediately came back to this one. There was a quality about it that put him on the edge of waking and sleep. It was a place that was both familiar and terrifying to him.

Ferdie didn't know what better to do. He sat down again, and waited. He didn't know what he was waiting for.

* * *

Wallenberg had kept him on too long.

He hadn't said it in so many words, Ferdie knew, but that was the way his thoughts were going. It was sometime back in June. They had been on their horses out by the quarry, the little place where the pale green chalky material slid down the sheer face of a bluff.

Whole area had once been underwater, said Wallenberg, a Great Inland Sea.

Good thing, said Ferdie. Good material to spread on the farm road.

Wallenberg spat down at the chalk by the horses' hooves. "You ever think about getting out of here, maybe going on out to California, make your way there? You got relatives out there, don't you?"

"Yes sir, I do," Ferdie had replied. "I guess I got an uncle in California. I haven't heard from him in a long while. He's an alcoholic."

Wallenberg gave him a long, measured look, then suddenly belched and farted at

the same time. “Goddamn. That chili’s going to kill me. You got that pellet stove hooked up yet?”

Ferdie hadn’t, not then, not in June. He did it one September morning when it was cool enough for roof work. He got it all done in one day except the flashing.

* * *

The stove had been a steal. No one else at the estate sale had bid on it.

The lady in charge of the hardware store in Marfa told him the compressed sawdust pellets were bad. “Made from pressure-treated wood,” she had said, as she rang him up a roll of flashing. She had sold him a vent pipe for good measure. “That’s why it was so cheap.”

“Wood is wood,” he told her, surprised at the turn of the conversation.

“It’s the arsenic,” she said, and sniffed. “You’d be liable for fouling up the air. I need to see your driver’s license.”

But the pellets were in sealed drums. There was nothing that said *Danger* or *Hazard*. They didn’t have any smell other than sawdust. He ground up a few of the pellets and put them out with some bird feed, but he never found any dead birds on the farm. The cardinal in the hedge, the one looking his way now, had been here for years.

* * *

It was the same cardinal over the years, and he was sure of it, because the crazy bird would fly up on the tractor and peck at the mirrors. When it first happened it had angered him. The fine little scratches, like steel wool marks, were suddenly explained. Ferdie had set up a trap for it by tying an old hand mirror to a fence post behind his shed,

and waited.

The cardinal found it, and one day Ferdie had his .22 with him at the right time.

His first shot missed the bird but hit the mirror, which exploded in a shower of glass fragments. As Ferdie re-aimed he saw through the sight a drop of blood on the stunned bird's beak. He had lowered the rifle before he knew what he was doing.

A dizzying image had stopped him: the dust brown female cardinal sat alone in the hedge, unblinking.

* * *

Ferdie had immediately tried to make amends. He returned to the shed and gathered a pie tin of clean seed, but when he returned the bird was gone. He nailed the tin to the top of the post and for a time he kept it filled with seed, but one night as he tried to find sleep under the wind's howl he dreamed that he was the wounded bird, blind in one eye. The fence post displayed food, but he sensed it was a trap; when he looked down into the silver pie plate it was his own image, exploding. He, Ferdie the bird, fell stunned to the ground. When he returned to the hedge his mate was motionless. The wind ruffled her feathers, but her eyes did not blink, and he wept red tears.

Days afterward, when he saw fresh scratches on the tractor mirror, Ferdie rejoiced.

* * *

Sleet battered the old metal roof, rattling like gunfire. Ferdie's head came up abruptly. His first thought was that the ranch house was on fire. But it was not on fire. There was a light on, inside. *Somebody's home*, thought Ferdie. *Wallenberg is back*. But

he could see the driveway from here, and it was empty. The hair on the back of his neck began to prickle.

He eased slowly up to his feet and laid the book down in the chair, pulling it back out of the doorway. How long had he been sitting there? The sky was a uniform gray, but the freezing rain mixture had changed entirely to sleet. His head spun briefly and he steadied himself against the doorjamb, then moved to get his coat from the peg on the wall near the stove. His movements were slow and his thoughts unclear, like he was waking from a drunk. He hadn't had a drink in weeks. Ferdie closed the shed door behind him and tested his footing.

The ground was covered in a rime of ice that bore his weight for a moment and then broke through to mud underneath. After a few steps Ferdie was panting with the effort, hands on his knees. He seemed completely drained of life. It didn't make sense. He had endured days much worse than this. He fell to his knees and then to his hands. He put his forehead against the pebbly ice and watched the sleet bounce upward like BB's. He wondered from what inland sea it had originated, what inland sea it was forming.

* * *

A dash of red. A sailor's blood. A dash of red fluttered near his eyes. The cardinal hopped close and pecked at his finger.

"Bird!" He raised himself up, and the cardinal hopped back toward the hedge. He rolled over toward his back and blinked upward at the sleet. Every time he opened his eyes it was like the flash of a still camera, the sleet frozen there, frozen in its long fall. He hadn't had a drink in days, weeks. *I swear it, Dana*, he mouthed. *I ain't been drinking.*

She hadn't listened.

Ferdie sat up. "I'm seeing ghosts now, is it?" He bladed the white ice around him with the side of his hand and got angrily to his feet. His head ached like a sonofabuck. He staggered back into the shed and lay down on its wooden floor for a time.

The draft came in harsh along the floor. But the stove radiated enough heat that he dozed.

* * *

The light had gone out, up in the house, and his few footsteps were already filling in.

Ferdie pulled himself to a sitting position, mystified at his stupor. Was he ill? He didn't feel ill. What he needed perhaps was a good strong cup of coffee. It would clear his head.

The light up at the house, he realized now, was likely a lamp on a timer. The Lickleiters would take care of their investment until they sold it.

Ferdie scowled. The ranch was not the Lickleiters', not yet.

He had another thought. Perhaps there was a vagabond up there, a drifter, eating Wallenberg's food, reading Wallenberg's mail.

The thought got him moving again. He needed to check in on the house. He wouldn't be able to make it there yet, not until he cleared his head, but there was a faucet over by the end of the hedge. He threw some more pellets into the stove and went looking for the coffeepot. If the pipe wasn't yet frozen, he could get water in the pot and set it boiling on the stove. A hot cup of coffee would do the trick for his mind.

* * *

Despite the sodden weather and strong winter winds, the shed was cozy enough with the stove going. The stove had been his purchase and Ferdie was proud of it. He was proud also of the workshed itself; he had framed it up and put in the wood floor with salvaged materials from other parts of the property. The roof was patched together from pieces of scrap tin, steel, and aluminum, variously tacked down with roofing nails and glued on with asphalt sealant. The storage cabinets and workbench, as well as the door and windows, came from salvage shops and demolition jobs around the county. None of it was pretty, but it all worked.

The best feature of the shed was its location. From here Ferdie could see the Wallenberg's ranch house just over the top of the ridge, its chimney rising up like a smokestack, the prow riding an irregular sea of stone and scrub. The house predated Wallenberg's ownership of the farm, but Ferdie knew where the home's cistern was, where the drain field lay. He had helped to put the washing machine hose where the hedge would get the wash water.

The sleet's heavy drumming on the metal patchwork roof made it impossible for Ferdie to hear himself think. As he rummaged for the coffeepot, he tried to guess at the time, but it could have been as easily ten in the morning as five in the evening. There was a bag more than half empty of birdseed by the window, and that gave him a thought. But in reaching for it he knocked the bag over, spilling seed over the counter and up against the windowsill. He stared at the seed for a long minute, trying to pull to mind the thought that had made him reach for it in the first place. Finally he shook his head. He needed a

strong cup of coffee to clear his head.

He knew he'd had the same thought recently, and laughed when he saw the coffeepot in his hand. It was just like when the lady at the hardware store in Marfa was looking for her glasses, and found them on top of her head. The thought occurred to him that maybe the new owners would want a complete inventory of the property, if it came to that, and they would need his help with that. He knew where the things were on this place. Here on his workbench was the terracotta saucer that was too small for a birdbath. Here was the iron axehead he had found while working the sand at the bottom of the draw; the plow had hit something and he had stopped the tractor to investigate. You could tell iron when you hit it; iron, rock, stumps – they all had a different feel when being struck, and he had hit them all.

And there were the broken-bulbed flashlights, worn saw chain, battery cores, all the junk the new owners would want to get rid of. A new owner always wanted to clean house, right off. Wallenberg had told him that. Or was it the Lickleiters? The thing about owners was they were only good at cleaning once. After that, the inventory was something that walked around in the minds of the hired hands.

They couldn't get rid of him because if Wallenberg passed on, Ferdie was the last. He was it. When Ferdie went, there was no one that would know what they had here. Like the old iron stake about a foot out of the ground down by the dry spring: nobody but Ferdie knew that the stake and the pile of rocks it rose from marked the location of an old potato cellar, and the potato cellar marked the foundation of an original settler's sod home. About thirty yards away from that spot was a cemetery. Ferdie knew it by the way

the ground had sunk deep in four places, one long, three short. The cemetery was otherwise unmarked; the stone wall that once fenced the area had been used elsewhere on the farm. Nobody would know it was hallowed ground.

If nobody knew, it would no longer be sacred. It would just be potholes in the ground.

* * *

The stove pipe clanged, and Ferdie started. He was still on his feet but slumped over the workbench. Outside the window, snow was coming down with the frozen rain.

Expansion from the heat had knocked chimney pipe out of kilter, he saw. Ferdie rubbed the scar he'd gotten from installing it, and the look he gave the pipe turned angry. He swept the coffeepot up and strode to the door, which at some point the wind had closed. It took some effort to open, and when it did, bits of ice fell around his face. On the threshold he hesitated, then returned to the table and grabbed the seed bag. It was far too little to sustain a bird for long. But it was something. With the coffeepot and the seed bag, he walked out of the shop.

The sleet was letting up, but the snow was thickening and the wind was colder. The ground was harder and he didn't trust it. He thought about firing up the farm truck and heading back to his mobile home. The faucets had to be kept dripping in weather like this. But the old truck was difficult to start in cold weather. He didn't want to go driving in this storm anyway. And he didn't want to leave the pellet stove burning untended. Venora's comment about burning the place down still stung him. He would be damned if he would let that happen.

The house at the top of the hill was dark. If he'd had any remaining thoughts about walking up there, he dismissed them. The ground was too treacherous. If he had his tractor it would be different, but the tractor was up there at the house. Ferdie walked slowly over to the hedge, a slide step at a time, gradually adding weight to his forward foot, his arms spread apart for balance. It was only ten paces. When he got there, he spilled the plastic bag with its birdseed on the ice. The seed was dark, and though ice and snow might cover it, when the sun started shining again the dark seed would emerge first as the ice over it melted.

The coffeepot was not filthy, but it had not been cleaned in who knew when. He broke off a small ice-coated hemlock branch and scoured the inside of the pot, then bent to the faucet and cracked it open. The cold metal bit into his rough hands, and he waited. The water surged out suddenly. It had a muddy red tint. There was doubtless a break somewhere along the way. This faucet was one of the few things on the property he hadn't either put in place himself or repaired yet. He rinsed the pot a few times and filled it full when the water ran clear, then closed off the flow. It was a frostproof faucet; the valve was buried two feet down. It would be something to work on next summer when the ground had dried out good and hard.

It would be something for *someone* to work on.

One sliding step at a time, Ferdie circled the shed, inspecting the roof. It could handle the weight of snow, that he knew, but he wasn't too sure about the ice. The chimney cap seemed to be frozen partly over, which was hard to understand with the amount of heat that was venting from the stove. Venora's words about fire were still fresh

in his mind, and now he remembered her words about his stove. “Death trap,” she had said, “carbon monoxide.” He unleashed a torrent of curse words directed at Venora Lickleiter, and immediately regretted that. He was not one to cast stones.

The bottom of the coffeepot hissed loudly when he put it on the stove. He threw another shovelful of compressed wood pellets into the firebox and held his hands up to the heat until he could flex them again. There was a jar of instant coffee in the cabinet but he would get it later, when the water boiled.

Ferdie pulled the cane chair up to the workbench and lowered himself into it. He struggled out of his boots and damp socks, and found it far more difficult than it should have been. The effort of getting water had worn him out. He put his bare feet up near the stove. With the edge of his hand he swept aside the birdseed that had spilled across the workbench earlier, and pulled the encyclopedia close enough to read it by the dim light of the window. The book opened to its familiar place, and he spoke the words again.

“Jut-land.” He remembered the words Wallenberg used. Jutland, the peninsula of Denmark. The Doggerland banks, the shallow water from Denmark to England. Now the North Sea storms whipped across the waters above Doggerland. The gales, whistling through the masts. Ferdie felt moisture on his face and found that he was crying. Jutland. This was the world he loved. He ached to be a part of it.

“Battle of Jutland.” It was the first world war, Germany and England, black smoke and steel-built ships exploding on the horizon. The light was growing. His head was getting heavy. A little sleep and he could return to Jutland. He saw ashes hurling past the window, white soot. “Arsenic,” he murmured, “poisoning the land,” but it wasn’t

arsenic or ashes. It was snow. Snow, driven by a high wind.

The roof was creaking, one corner of tin lifting and falling.

* * *

The coffeepot was rattling on the stove. His feet were too hot. Ferdie sat up with a groan. He was coming down with something, he decided, and he remember Venora's words. "*First person with the sniffles will finish him off, Ferdie. Ferdie, we can't use you no more.*"

"Ferdie." His name sounded strange to him. His name was Ferdinand. Wallenberg had never called him Ferdinand. He had shortened it to Ferd right off. After they started having Sunday dinner, Wallenberg called him Ferdie.

He put his forehead down on the dreadnoughts. Ferdinand. Ferdinand. The name was something from the old place, the old world. A mighty fleet, hammered in snow, smoke. Shallow shoals, sandbanks. Guns tapping like hail on a metal roof, snapping and thundering like ice-weighted trees hitting the ground.

The water on the stove was starting to boil. Ferdie heard the rapid bubbling and the tapping as the dented bottom of the pot rocked from the bursts of vapor inside. The stove pipe clanged again, and he raised his head from the book for a moment. He had been dozing. It was all right. An afternoon doze would clear his mind. Only it was not afternoon. The sky outside was dark.

"Carbon monoxide," he said, but he had no idea why he said it. "Death trap." Something urgent was clamoring at him.

Outside the window he saw rows of steel-clad battleships, the puff of guns on the

horizon, a sailor's last day on the job. His head fell to the workbench as the ship began to heel over underneath him. Concussion, maelstrom, the ship lurching hard over to one side. Huge splashes of sea spray bracketing his ship. A sailor sliding down the old wooden deck boards, grabbing for anything. Ferdie dreamed that his hands were scratching across oily oak planks, finding only scattered birdseed. The sharp smell of fuel oil filled the air. The damp salt wind. Not by heat, he thought, not by fire.

* * *

A tapping roused him. It was the urgent sound of men trapped in flooding compartments. "Halloo!"

But as he looked up through the film of water in his eyes he saw a cardinal at the windowpane. The cardinal bent its head, tapping for the seed on the workbench, and Ferdie slid down the deck as the ship tumbled over behind him.

The icy shock of the glass stunned him at first, and the sight of red blood on snow. The ship loomed crazily behind him, glowing red through the shattered window. He pushed away from it. Not by fire, he gasped. A flash of crimson shot past him and he reached for it, even as he felt himself sinking backward. But a distant ringing claxon came to him from under the deep waves, low on the sand banks of Jutland.

An alarm bell rang over the wind, shrill, piercing the slapping of saltwater, the creak and snap of hemlock branches. Ferdie raised his head to look for the source of it, and through the mounding spray he saw it dim on the horizon, cresting a ridge.

Up in the ranch house, a light was on. He began to swim for it, for all he was worth.

The Girl in the McDonald's Window

The weather front had been pushing through since the coin toss. Codie did not have much trust in Nebraska forecasts, but this was one they had gotten right. The crescent moon was already dimming behind a layer of murk, throwing a halo at the small crowd in the stadium. The wind was stirring up and brought with it a smell of first rain. He was glad Jenna had brought the ponchos. They had fought over it. He said they should leave early if it rained. She insisted they stay, for Matt – their son. “The last game and all.”

He tweaked the focus on the binoculars away from the cheerleaders and found Matt on the sidelines, helmet on, as oblivious of their presence here as at the dinner table. He stood at the end of the line of players, his #46 game jersey as white as the day he first brought it home. Beyond him, the scoreboard lights showed that the game was already a lost cause. Codie willed the game clock to just wind on down to halftime. No stepping out of bounds. No incompletions. It was time to get this season over with, put it in the books and go home.

He refocused on the cheerleader on the end. She had a mole on her cheek. The makeup that covered it looked like dried calamine lotion in the harsh lights of the field. She suddenly looked up into the stands and he saw her eyes were hazel. Probably.

A loud sniff broke his concentration.

“Checking out the scenery, Codie?”

He turned his head and looked at Jenna with one eye from under his poncho hood. She wasn't looking at him.

He handed the binoculars to her.

“Would you, uh, clean those for me?”

She put the binoculars under her poncho and he could see her hands making circular motions.

“See anything interesting?” she asked.

“No,” he said, and tried not to think of all the girls in the opposite stands.

* * *

The December night had started clear. For long moments it was as still and quiet as a football field on the Nebraska prairie can ever be. Then you would hear the *huusshh* as the wind swept across the bleachers on the other side of the field. Now the damp air penetrated through the blankets with a wintry chill.

“Brrrr,” said Jenna. “Thank God this is the last game. I hope Matt is staying warm enough on the sidelines.”

I'm sure he's warm enough, Codie thought. *Warm, but not very happy.* Rosser High had not won a game all year. Tonight had been their last shot at redemption. Or

pride. Whatever it is you play for when you're down 27-3 before halftime.

"It's a lost cause. So he might get to play next half," he offered, his voice not as hopeful as he'd meant it to be.

"He only covers kickoffs. Matt's too far down on the depth chart to play any other time. He told you that," Jenna said.

"You want anything from McDonald's?" he asked. She never did. But he always asked.

"No. Thank you. I'll settle for some hot cocoa at the Jaycee stand."

"Mason is working it tonight," he said. "I saw him setting up."

"Oh." She bent around to look towards the concessions area. "Then he might need some help."

"Mason always needs help," said Codie.

She shot him a look that said, *watch it*. But then she softened. "Just be back for the kickoff, okay, Hon?"

* * *

Jenna's affair with Mason was over.

Codie had found out about it ten months ago, in February, a Friday night when there was seven inches of fresh snowfall on the ground and more expected before sunrise. Matt had a sleepover with the church youth group, and Codie and Jenna both had the weekend off, for a change. They had picked up some Chinese takeout, and after supper had decided to mark their rare "date night" with candlelight and Christmas wine. He had flipped through the cable channels, not watching really, just running his hands through

Jenna's long blond hair and over her knotty cardigan sweater, feeling how the fabric caught the rough callouses on his hands. Jenna motioned him to stop when they came to the *Lifetime* channel. They watched it for a while, or at least Jenna did, leaning forward on the edge of the sofa. It was a docudrama about a mother who drowned her two children. Something like that. He was groggy from the antidepressant he was on at the time. When his hand slid under Jenna's sweater, she half turned and slapped it away. At the next commercial, he clicked off the TV and they sat there in the silence of the empty house. He was trying to think of a new argument, and he imagined that Jenna was doing the same. In the end they just sat there, sipping her Christmas wine.

It was Jenna who broke the quiet and suggested they look through Rainie's pictures. He got the old sandalwood box from the guest bedroom and brought it into the den. The first-grade schoolwork was on the bottom: alphabet letters in the shapes of squash, turnips, peppers, and green beans, each one colored with Rainie's typical fastidiousness. Everything had to be just so for Rainie. Next came the photos: school portraits, daycare groups, birthday party polaroids, a picture of Rainie holding the neighbor's cat. She called him Sam. He once heard her whispering to her imaginary friend Lucy that no matter what anybody else called that cat, his real name was *Sam*.

For someone who had been at the dead center of both their lives, they had shockingly few photos of Rainie. Codie was always forgetting the camera as he got caught up in the moments of lightning-bug discovery.

They were looking through those few remains of Rainie, candlelight holding steady against the walls, when Jenna lost control. She tore through the house, shouting

and slamming at the walls like she was fighting someone. He wanted to go away until she cooled off, he sometimes had to do that, but with snow closing down the roads, and a comfortable wine buzz, he stayed put and flipped the TV back on instead, changing it from the *Lifetime* channel to *Sports Center*.

The lights went on throughout the house, and when Jenna returned she flooded the den with light too. In her arms was a stack of all the Rainie they had, everything from the walls, the bookshelves, the bathroom counters, everything they did not already have in the sandalwood box. She brought her armload to the sofa and dumped it. Frames spilled onto the floor.

“I’m tired of being sad,” she said, cramming things into the box. “I’m through with being sad!” Codie’s mind was still foggy as he tried to straighten proud parent bumper stickers and grade reports. She brought the lid down hard on his fingers. “That’s enough! No more Rainie. Do you hear me?” She was breathing hard. “We have grieved long enough.”

Then she had touched his smashed knuckles and broken down and told him about Mason. She and Mason.

* * *

At first he hadn’t believed it. Mason? The one-armed desert war vet? The guy who used to be a crossing guard at the elementary school until he was accused of inappropriate touching? He’d wondered if Jenna was finally coming apart. Was she making this up?

No, she said, pulling away, moving to the chair on the other side of the room. *No*.

It was real. And then she began telling him the dates and locations. It had started when Matt was in Little League softball and Mason was coaching the team. Codie was working nights and weekends then and couldn't make it to the practices. She had been lonely, she said, and Mason was lonely too. They were talking together on the bleachers after practice one day, and then they were talking together at McDonald's after a game. Then she was helping him find some equipment at his house.

As the gray light of morning showed two feet of new snow Codie was packed and ready to move out, but he didn't move out. He shoveled the driveway, not using the snowblower, but shoveling by hand. He needed the work to slow his racing thoughts. When he was done with the driveway, he came inside to wait for the snow plow to get to their street. There he found a fresh pot of coffee, and on the table a plate with two eggs fried over easy, two sausage links, and two pieces of buttered toast. The jar of apple butter and a long-handled spoon waited by the plate. The door to the bedroom down the hall was closed. Behind it he could hear an occasional muffled sob.

Codie knew the peace offering for what it was, the cheapest of appeals. It had taken her no more than a few moments to prepare this, and it could hardly be expected to make up for her affair. But he sat down and ate anyway. It was at least something. They had been through this kind of thing before. He knew that if they split again it would have to be the end.

And they just had too much pain to carry without the other to share it. No one else could carry what they did.

When he was finished, he picked up the plate to take it to the dishwasher and

found a note underneath. "Think" was written on the note.

He poured two cups of coffee, one black, one with skim milk and sweetener, and he walked to the back bedroom. He found Jenna in the walk-in closet. The sandalwood box was at her knees, and she was smoothing out the creased papers, picking out the pieces of glass from the shattered picture frames. They drank coffee on the floor, surrounded by clothes that neither of them had worn in years, talking about Rainie. Afterwards, they went to bed and slept until Matt came home. Codie unpacked on Sunday.

That was all ten months ago, in February, and it was the last time they had traded sharp words.

The halftime horn sounded and Jenna unwrapped herself stiffly from her stadium blanket. She stood and climbed across the bleachers to the Jaycees' stand to help Mason. It didn't bother Codie any more. He still thought about it sometimes at work, and he just laughed. Mason did need help. That was a fact. The man had no family, no war buddies to talk to, no church because he was agnostic; the only thing Mason had was the internet and whatever message board pals he could find there as he pecked his one-handed way across the keyboard. He worked for the Jaycees because it was the only organization that would have him after the school crossing incident.

And how could he begrudge Jenna? Codie had slept with enough women when they lived in St. Louis to know that the kind of relief that brought was only temporary. Maybe he'd never had anything like Jenna had had for a while with Mason. Maybe it

didn't matter. Pain makes you a different person. There were things so painful the two of them just couldn't talk about now. Mason. The women he himself had had, cheating on Jenna in the months after Rainie's disappearance.

Or like the time he drove his pickup through the garage door and killed the dog that was sleeping on the floor inside. It had been Mason's dog, of course. It could only have been Mason's dog. Jenna had been keeping it while Mason was in the VA hospital in Lincoln, before the affair, when Codie and Jenna were separated because of his own cheating. She had changed the locks on him, without his knowledge, and he was furious. He was hurting. But he didn't know there was a dog in the garage. A night in the county jail and an appearance in court – sentence deferred – had gone a long ways toward sobering him up.

If he was going to get a halftime snack, it was time to get moving.

* * *

“Yup! Codie!” It was Bob Kindel, his supervisor, maybe the only good buddy he had in Green's Corner, Nebraska. Kindel had once done what Codie did – stress testing of carbon fiber components for aircraft – and he knew the ins and outs of the job, down to the right way to fill out the sampling forms. Codie had once approved a batch of bad CF wing struts, and Kindel had caught it before they left the factory, and had covered for him. “Hey Codie! We're headed to the Hidey-Hole for a round or two. This game's a lost cause. You coming?”

“Nah, thanks,” replied Codie. “If Matt gets to play I want to be here to see it.”

Kindel nodded. His eyes glanced in the direction of the Jaycees stand, but he said

nothing.

“All righty. Catch you next time.” Kindel held out his hand and Codie took it.

“See you around, Bob.”

Bob Kindel was a good man. Codie'd spent some nights on Bob's living room sofa while he and Jenna worked things out. Kindel never said anything about Jenna and Mason, although it had to have been all over town. Everything was, in a town this size.

Size was what had brought them to Green's Corner. Size of the town, size of the factory, size of the distance to St. Louis.

* * *

The high school parking lot was small, and in a town this size you didn't have to lock your truck if you didn't want to. A lot of people didn't. Ever since Rainie was taken, though, he'd locked everything, all the time.

Rainie, thought Codie, climbing into his truck. It was almost a prayer with him, saying her name when he went anywhere. She had been the central focus of their lives for seventeen years. Take away Rainie, and there would be nothing. It would be like taking away the weather. His truck turned over slowly in the cold. The battery would soon need replacing. It was another reason to take a short drive at halftime, to warm up the motor so the battery lasted a little longer. *If I could have Rainie back, I would drive her everywhere*, he said, silently, continuing his ritual prayer as he waited for the truck motor to warm up. He could no more prevent his thoughts from settling into their familiar track than an amputee could prevent reaching for a baseball with his missing arm.

One moment Rainie was waiting for the school bus, #42, wearing her pink and

purple backpack with sparkly unicorns, lunchbag in her hand. The next moment she was gone. He'd replayed that morning so many times, thinking of what he *did* and what he *should have done*, that he was not even sure he could separate what he remembered from what he'd been told.

* * *

It had been an October morning after the time change, dark outside. The school bus always stopped in front of their driveway, so the neighborhood kids gathered nearby. Often they'd lean against Codie's mailbox, which irritated him, but they never vandalized. It was a good neighborhood. That morning, Jenna had left early for work and he was in the kitchen slicing potatoes for the pot roast. They always kept the kitchen blinds open to watch out for the bus. Dogs were barking in a neighbor's yard. The school bus came, it stopped with a screech of airbrakes, it paused, and it left.

Rainie did not show up at school.

An hour later, Jenna had called him at the factory. "Hon?" There was a hesitation in her voice. "Are you . . . is Rainie with you?"

He immediately drove to the school. Jenna went to the house. The school brought the bus driver in. The three of them met and drove the bus route, again, and again, and again.

At noon the police were called.

Codie shivered in his jacket, and navigated through the puddles in the stadium parking lot.

* * *

The bus driver swore under oath that Rainie did not get on the bus that day. The three neighborhood kids agreed. They had not even seen Rainie out front. They thought she must have been sick.

None of it made any sense to Jenna or Codie. He had said goodbye to her from the front door; he had told her to have a good day through the window over the kitchen sink as she walked under it, and he had watched her walk out of sight around his truck. He could have gone to the front door to get the right angle to see her standing by the street. But the truck blocked the view from the kitchen window, and there was no reason at all to assume she wasn't out there. Traffic was light. He couldn't remember any traffic at all, between the time Rainie went out and the time the school bus arrived. The kids had started arriving a minute or two after Rainie went out. Rainie had always fussed at him because he sent her out earlier than the other kids. He always told her that one minute too early for the bus was not going to hurt her, but one minute late for the bus sure would.

* * *

The detective assigned to the case was a polite young man with a stutter and a briefcase full of buzz words. *Enforceable priorities. Available resources. Optimal search patterns.* After a week of his inept bullshit, Codie and Jenna met with the police chief and asked for someone new. Their request was denied. They hired a private detective, but dropped him two weeks later when they realized he was following the same investigative path as the police. They talked to the news stations, posted photos, talked to their neighbors. At first people were helpful, but as the days went by with no sign of Rainie, the cute seven-year-old kid, the neighbors got less friendly. Some of them moved away.

Two families, one of them Rainie's best friend, packed up and left. There were whispers of *child abduction*. Then the whispers got ugly. *They're hiding something*.

The media turned on them all at once. Jenna had returned from her early-morning run, white-faced, wide-eyed, crashing through the bathroom door without knocking. He thought they had found Rainie. But what Jenna had come to tell him was that the news media was in their front yard, and they were broadcasting. The St. Louis police were on their way. Codie and Jenna had been announced as the prime suspects.

* * *

Despite the losing football season the local strip was buzzing with traffic. It was Friday night after all, and with no metro areas for an hour on either side there was not much else to do but hang out. The drive-through line at McDonald's stretched almost out to the street. Codie took his place in line and hoped he'd make it back for the second half kickoff.

McDonald's had been Rainie's favorite place. No matter how bad her day at school was, he could always count on a Happy Meal to cheer her up. She asked them again and again why they named her for "gloom bucket" weather. She never did accept the explanation that it was an old family name they wanted to preserve. The morning Jenna came running into the bathroom, his first thought was that Rainie had been found dead. And he prayed that she was alive and well, even if it meant never seeing her again.

That morning he saw another side of Jenna. She was lost, dazed. She did not respond to questions. The media made much of her deer-in-the-headlights stare. It was shocking to Codie because she had always been the strong one. When Rainie was born he

had passed out. It had become a running joke with them: Rainie would ask about the day she was born, and Codie would let his eyes roll up and pretend to faint. Jen on the other hand was already talking about their next child on the way home from the hospital.

Things hadn't worked out that way; her second conception was an ectopic pregnancy: the fertilized egg was in the fallopian tubes. The procedure that removed it left her sterile. It could have killed her, if they'd lived in a small town like this.

* * *

The line was moving slowly. Slowest McDonald's in the West, Jenna had said, but their jokes all fell flat in Green's Corner.

* * *

It took almost a year and all the money they could beg and borrow to clear their names. They did not spend time in jail, but the bond had been set high. Dealing with that on top of Rainie made them both crazy. That was when he started cheating on Jenna. He hadn't thought of it that way. There is a certain kind of person who is attracted to famous – and infamous – celebrities. For a few months he and Jenna spent a lot of time apart, because being together was just too painful. It was like going home to a mortuary. Being alone, going to an empty motel room many nights, Codie had more opportunities than he could turn down.

By the time the last prosecution effort had been thrown out and the last countersuit had been settled out of court – just enough to cover their legal fees – they were back where they started. Same small house, same jobs, same lives. Except no Rainie. That was when Jenna learned about his indiscretions, and *she* moved out. They

got back together when they agreed to try fostering.

Matt was to be their first foster child. He was eight years old when he came to them – the same age as Rainie when she disappeared. After Matt’s mother skipped bail and went to prison, they applied for guardianship. It was granted. After that the adoption papers were a formality. That was seven years ago. Matt became their child when he was nine. Jenna and Codie were back together and a child was in their house.

Rainie was still missing but they were learning how to cope with it. Life should have returned to normal, and this story should have ended there.

Instead, he saw Rainie.

* * *

“Strawberry shake,” He said into the speaker. And as an afterthought, “French fries.” Jenna might think she didn't want anything, but who could resist McDonald’s fries? They were Rainie's favorite.

In fact, when Rainie got old enough to work, working at McDonald’s would have been her dream job. All the fries and Happy Meals she could ever want.

It was hard for Codie to resist thoughts like that. Matt had taught them that children outgrow things. Skateboards, action figures, green slime, laser tag, model rockets. Matt hadn't yet discovered girls, but it was just a matter of time, with his driver’s license still hot off the laminating machine. He was in tenth grade, awkward and shy, the slowest linebacker on the team. He loved the game of football.

Matt had been with Codie in the outlet mall one day – *that* day – shopping for Jenna's birthday present. They needed to go to JCPenney, but Matt insisted on the toy

store. Codie decided not to be a hard-ass about it, and told him they could look at the toys, but they weren't buying anything. If he saw something he liked he could write it down on his wish list on the refrigerator. Matt was ten years old at the time, and Codie thought he had outgrown the gimme phase. He was wrong. *Super Destructo Maximum Man with Detachable Iron Hands* was worth pitching a fit over. As Matt reached full shrill song Codie glanced up, looking for the quickest way out of the store, and saw Rainie.

It was Rainie. He was sure of it. Her hair was brown and curly and she had earrings, but it was Rainie. She was staring at Matt in a kind of fascination at his outburst.

“*Rainie?*” He was not sure if he had whispered it or screamed it. But Matt chose that moment to knock a scale model space shuttle onto the floor. It broke into dozens of pieces. The store manager was suddenly on the spot, and when Codie looked up again, Rainie was gone. He carried Matt piggyback all over the mall. They were there until it was closed and the security guards kicked them out.

When he told Jenna about Rainie she said he was cruel. They had been through the missing-child posters and flyers, the billboards and milk carton campaigns. But Codie set to work with renewed determination, getting a graphic artist to update her face and hair to match what he had seen in the toy store. He spent hours at that mall. Whole weekends. Nothing.

It was almost a year before he saw her again. This time it was at Busch Gardens for Matt's 11th birthday. They were finishing up in the log flume, drenched and laughing, when he saw Rainie, standing near the turnstile. This time her hair was straight, and it

was jet black. She was wearing cutoff blue jeans and a halter top. But he knew it was Rainie. She looked at him and he saw a flash of recognition cross her face. Codie stationed Jenna with Matt there at the exit to the ride, and he raced down the steps, up the curving asphalt walkway, and all the way back around to the flume lines. He couldn't find her. They walked the length of the park and back. Matt got tired of walking and went home with Jenna while Codie stayed until closing time, exhausted, snapping pictures of every blue-jeaned, halter-topped elevenish-year-old he saw.

Jenna was silent on the subject of Rainie for a long time after that. When Codie came home one day and told her he'd seen Rainie again, at the waterpark, searched all over for her, plugged his camera into the computer and brought the pictures up – Jenna told him quietly that was enough.

“You don't understand,” he said. “She might have been abducted by some cult – brainwashed – brain-damaged – amnesiac. What if she's in the hands of *nuts*?”

“Did you ever stop to think that you might be the nut here, Codie? Let it go. She's gone.” Jenna pulled a beer from the refrigerator and stalked ahead of him to the living room. Codie followed her.

“How can you give up on your own flesh and blood? You bore her. You *nursed* her. What kind of mother are you?”

“Can we please just get through this?” she asked. “I really just want to move on, Codie. Can we make something of our lives by chasing after these ghosts?”

“You want me to just give up? Give up on our daughter?” Codie couldn't believe she was sitting on the sofa, feet propped up. Surely they could be doing something.

“What’s the alternative, Codie?”

“To keep looking. She might be out there. She might be anywhere.”

“Like at the state fair? The museum? Are you going to start walking through the schools next?!” Jenna was pulling at her hair. “Codie, do you know why we *really* have to leave St. Louis? Do you realize what you’ve become? You’re obsessive, Codie.”

“Why aren’t you?” He didn’t understand. “Have you just given up?”

“I have moved on. She’s gone, Codie. You have to move on, too. This is not doing you any good.”

“So why do we ‘really’ have to leave St. Louis?”

“Darling. I know you’re not a pedophile. Other people don’t know that.”

“A pedophile? I’m trying to find our daughter! And every other person in this fucking city has given up!”

Jenna put the beer down and stood up. She had put on weight and her physical presence was intimidating. “Codie, the Wilsons are *this* close to filing stalking charges against you.”

“What – the who?”

“The Wilsons, Codie. I was late to bunco last night. I overheard them talking about it as I walked in. You took pictures of their daughter. On different occasions.”

“Stalking.” His mouth was open. He felt sick.

“Hon, I love Rainie so much. But this is not what she would want. If she’s out there, she’ll find her way back to us. You have to trust that. In the meantime, look at us. Look at me. I have got to make a change.”

* * *

Jenna flew to her mother's in San Diego and took Matt with her. After a week of living alone Codie went to see a counselor. He was an idiot, and Codie fired him and found another.

They were all idiots, he found out. He saw three counselors, a psychotherapist, and a husband-and-wife team of psychiatrists. They didn't know what they were talking about. None had ever lost a child like this.

He joined a support group, and found out that the recommended method of dealing with missing children is to write them off for dead. After a month of that offensive bullshit he agreed on a regimen of antidepressants. He did it for one reason, and one reason only: to try and convince Jenna he was doing *something*.

And he was doing something. He was trying.

He tried very hard.

* * *

The last time he saw Rainie she would have been thirteen. Her hair was short and red, and she had a tattoo on her left shoulder-blade. She was jogging at a golf course with a group of other young runners. It was probably a track team. He was so out of shape he couldn't catch them, couldn't even keep them in sight long enough to read the name of the school on their singlets. When he got back to his foursome, his manager was furious. They had put up with his odd behavior for a long time, Codie was told, but today he had lost it in front of their VIP clients. He was told to come in for his severance check.

Jenna began shopping for a new town the next day. They were both ready to leave

St. Louis.

The girl in the McDonald's drive-through window was new. She had short blond hair, parted in the middle. Her eyes were Texas bluebonnets shocked by frost. When she told him it would be just a second on the shake, he saw braces, bubblegum pink. She turned away, and her movements looked weary. There was something familiar about the curve of her back, and the way one shoulder was a little stooped. It caught at Codie's heart.

He reached for his camera, but Jenna had it, of course. She didn't let him carry the camera any more. He looked back at the girl in the drive-through window, trying to memorize her face, to match it with the face he thought he remembered. Could it be?

The sun visor flipped down and he took the yellowed envelope from the elastic band. It was the one place in the truck Jenna had not searched. Inside was an index card with a photo and a handwritten caption. On it, a name, an old phone number, and *Have you seen me?* It was the last one.

The photo came away from the index card with a breath of cellophane dust. The girl in the photo had long blond hair, blue eyes, and a devastating crossbite.

Codie stared a long moment at the girl in the window. He seized on the smell of the fries and tried to breathe.

"Here you go," she said. "Strawberry is my favorite, too."

"I know," he gasped, but the window had already closed.

Matt might be covering the second half kickoff any moment now. He had worked

hard all season to get into a game. Codie's heart raced. He tried to control himself. He had been down this road before.

The girl in the drive-through window was standing in profile, speaking into the microphone at her chin. She had Jenna's nose.

It had been so many years, and so many people had told him *no*, told him he was crazy. Everyone believed he was crazy. Jenna didn't just believe that he was crazy. She lived it.

Codie held the photo in his hand, his window still open to the swirling December wind. His phone buzzed. It would be Jenna, telling him the second half was about to start. He knocked something over trying to grapple it out of his pocket. Fries sprawled on the floorboards. He had promised Jenna. *No more Rainie*. But—

He turned back to the window. The little vestibule was empty now. As he leaned forward, the window slid open and a man looked out at him.

"Is there a problem with your order, sir?"

"The girl, the girl who was here." His voice caught.

"Is there a problem with your order?"

"Is it Rainie?" Codie's throat had closed up. He could barely speak.

"Rainie?" The man peered up as if he could see the sky through the overhang.

Then he looked back down. Codie had seen that frown so many times. "Sir, I'd appreciate if you'd please pull forward."

He handed the man in the McDonald's drive-through window the photo of Rainie.

"She was my daughter," he said.

The man in the window turned his head and looked back at the long line of cars.

French fries scattered when Codie opened the truck door. He staggered out onto the cold, crunchy gravel and tried to breathe. The stadium light nearest him etched out a halo of falling rain. He heard the muted roar of the crowd beyond the fence. It was a hollow sound. He put his forehead against the dampness of the pickup's bed, and rubbed his face in the cold, cold water.

Clover

“Will you help me?” she said.

I flicked my cigarette onto the ground like I'd been caught again. I turned on one foot and looked behind me at my yard. No one was there. I can't say I was too surprised to find that no one was there. It was in fact my own back yard, fenced, gated, secure. The headaches—

“Here,” she said, and I thought it was the wind in the sycamore tree, my neighbor's, a limb across a dog-eared cedar picket. Take any aerial view of Oklahoma City and the trees you see are people's. They're the trees of fencelines, drainage ditches, boundaries, edges, the normal flow of lightning fire and prairie grass disabled, disrupted. Bermuda grass thrives in the fire department zones.

“Here.” I was in the act of practicing a bug crush with the toe of my boot, stamp and twist, pivot on the z axis. You can't be too safe in September the week before the state fair, everywhere dry as dust and straw. Every day you can see white smoke somewhere on the horizon. The news channel said the whole state was burning up one

yard at a time. So I made sure the smoldering butt was out and good, and in the process I just about kicked her with my heel. She was that close to where the cig had landed.

I can't say I was too surprised to find the head of a woman sticking up out of my ground. My wife and I lived for twenty years on Star Trek reruns. What else are we going to do in Oklahoma? If it weren't for fantasy we'd have had no marriage. It wasn't much of one even so, I suppose, but like my friend Jack says, any marriage that lasts twenty years is worth a house, a whole house, and nothing but the house, so help me God.

Maybe I should have left the grass to burn and take the house up with it, the whole house, something to start the process of bringing this land back to buffalo. Something to start the process of moving on, moving out.

"Did I startle you?" said the head.

I had forgotten about her already. The cluster headaches were making me nuts.

"No," I said. I lied, you bet. Any time a pretty woman talks to me, it gets to me. I swear it.

The wind dropped and she coughed. I could see that acrid smoke was swirling from the butt. She was that close. How did I miss her?

"It doesn't bother me," she said. "My ex smoked. A lot."

"Yeah. Sure." I had a bigtime urge to piss, it was probably the four-pack of Red Bull I had drunk, anything to get me out of bed before noon. I was spending too many nights up late on the laptop, hitting on base reflectivity measurements in one window, googling on divorce help in another.

So I turned my back on the head, went to unzip, it was my yard, fuck the

neighbors, what could they say?

Mr. Turnburke was taking a leak in his yard, Officer.

Sure, go ahead, neighbor. Send the police, lock me up. *Yes, Your Honor. I am in fact a back yard whizzer. Not when the kids are home. Late nights and school days. Yes, Your Honor.*

“You're disgusting.”

How many times can I forget the head? The stream didn't hit the crushed butt right away, or the smoldering grass clippings underneath it. Show me any man who is accurate on first throw, and I'll show you a liar. The wind was picking up again. But I adjusted the aim, led the target, compensated for speed and direction, wind shear, and got it. There was no doubt. I soaked it down good. The grass hissed and stopped smoking.

“That better?” I said, but the head was frowning. The smell, I guess. I mean, it's Oklahoma, come on. The piss would soak into the ground, green up some grass. Things dry out out pretty quick. She was a head in the ground, what did I care?

She spat at me, but didn't answer. I spat too, but not at her. Spitting is a catching thing, it's a lot like yawning and boredom, one person leading the other.

“How's the weather down there?” I was feeling a little punchy. Angela had gotten the judge to take her side. Female judge. It was one of them woman things. Nothing you can do about it. *Yes, Your Honor. I do understand.* “Come here often?”

She started not to answer so I started to go inside.

“Just kind of popped up!” she called out with a plastic smile, and I knew she was hurt. It was an awkward moment.

Okay, it's not like I had the best karma right then anyway. She was just a fantasy, a hallucination, the same thing my marriage had been year after year. But I was being a dick, and she was hurt.

"I'm sorry," I said. I meant it. "Do you want me to get you something? Want me to hose you down? Need a bath? A shower?" I couldn't stop my mouth.

"No, it's all right. I don't think this will last very long."

"Well, why not? I won't be here long either. In a few days you can have it all to yourself."

"Just don't leave me."

I was stuck, stumped. How could I leave? Where would I go? I swear, whoever this chick was, she had me. But we had a problem.

Ever try talking to a jack-o-lantern? Ever had the jack-o-lantern talk back? It has to crane its neck way back if it wants to make eye contact with anything above your shins. Does a jack-o-lantern have a neck?

Forget it. I just needed a point of reference. She had an ex. That was good. She knew how it went. She knew about the counting process, the forgetting process. She knew about all the processes. This chick was good.

I squatted down and lit up another cigarette to hide my nervousness. The wind whipped the smoke right into her face again. Jesus, I couldn't win for losing.

"Want a smoke?" I asked, holding it out to her. Like she had arms, hands.

"I don't smoke, thank you." She seemed to be having some trouble breathing. Her mouth was open a little, and she was panting, quietly.

“Are you hot? You look like a dog.”

The look she shot me was just like a dog, after you whip it.

“You’re panting. Like a dog. That’s what I meant.” I sounded like a ten year old.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, and coughed. Something black flew onto the grass. I didn’t look at it.

I threw the cigarette away, downwind, so it wouldn’t bother her.

“Are you all right?” I asked. “Is there anything I can get you?” I think we had covered that already. I couldn’t help it.

“No.” Her breathing slowed down. “I’m fine. Just a little asthma.” Her eyes opened again. “Can we talk?”

I’ve heard that tone before. It’s dangerous for me. It was the same way she had said, *Will you help me.*

And she was a very attractive girl, from the ground up. Short brown hair, brown soulful eyes, little marks on her ears where earrings used to be. Her face was what the guys in the pro shop called a “make-up” face. It would make up for a lot of other stuff, brother. For me it would. I had this sudden urge. I wanted her to be seen with me. I wanted my friends to hear the way she talked to me.

“You said you’re married?” I needed something to do with my hands so I put them in my pockets. I had some change. I tried to figure out how much.

“Divorced. Three years.” She cleared her throat. Nothing black came out. “And you?”

“I am too. Divorced. Or I guess I will be. My wife wanted it. I’m an ass and she’s

tired of living with an ass.”

“Bet every woman wishes she could lose her ass so easy, huh?” She smiled. It was a faint smile, a weary smile. This chick had the weight of the world—forget it. I won’t even go there. But she had that really tired look, like you get when you’ve been going through it. A smile like that has to come from a long way off, and it made me feel good. Best I’ve felt in a long time, to tell you the truth. Would the guys at the pro shop understand this? I didn’t even know if they were still there. It’s been a year since I’ve played. I had eighty-three cents.

“So. Tell me about your ex and I’ll tell you about mine. Do we have a deal?”

“Okay.” She drew it out. But all the while she was smiling.

“All right. Batter up. That would be you.” Anything to avoid dealing with this.

“My ex.” She smirked her mouth in a thoughtful way, and looked up. The whites of her eyes were like crescent moons. My stomach jumped. “Let me think. His name was T.”

“Tee?”

“T. Short for Timothy. Only I called him T.”

“Why did you leave him? What did he do?”

“He worked at Tinker. He didn’t do anything.”

“The Air Force base?”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t do anything?” I couldn’t seem to get a handle on what she was saying.

“No, I was just bored.”

“No, no. I meant, like, what did he *do*? What kind of *work* did he do?”

“Welder,” she said, like she had a sore tooth. She spat again, but not at me.

“A welder?” I couldn’t picture it.

“Arc welder. He was very good. Very careful. He had ideas. Good ideas.” Every breath seemed to be a struggle for her.

“And you left this guy? This welding genius?”

“I’m not steel,” she said.

I didn’t know what to say to that. I pictured light and smoke, sunset, October. Beating out children like rebar. Is that all there is?

The headache made it too hard to think. I stood up and stretched. The wind was picking up a little more, so I sat down with my back to it. Sitting like that would shelter her a little, keep the dust out of her eyes. The wind chimes were blowing in the neighbor’s yard. Beating against a pipe, a certain length of pipe, some kind of harmonic. A melody, almost.

“What’s your name?” I asked, and regretted it. When you give something like this a name, you lose it, it’s gone.

Her eyes closed shop, and took her smile with them, *see ya*. A little darkness came back into the day. “It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Nothing you would believe. Is there a name you would like to call me?”

I wasn’t so sure belief had anything to do with it. But a name? I looked around.

My yard was in great shape, despite the water rationing. A little dormant but who cares? After Angie had moved out I’d even fixed the dandelion problem. But there were

patches of persistent

“Clover,” I said.

“Clover is fine,” she said. Her eyes opened and the sunlight got a little stronger. It was really too bad she was only a head. I heard the ice cream truck turning onto the street, the ice cream melody climbing against the wind. I thought about those wind chimes: rolled steel, rolled and welded. The right thickness. Measurable.

“Are you sure?” I said. “I mean, we could try Fescue, or Bermuda. Oooh I wanna take ya, Bahama, Key Largo.”

She was laughing. Her laugh really got me. It was like her smile and her voice. I was gone. I was toast. In Oklahoma. Who knew?

“Clover is fine,” she repeated. “It’s only one letter away from Lover, you know.” Her face was pink. Those crescent moons flashed my way.

Women. Maybe I had figured everything out starting from the wrong examples.

“Are you hungry?” I asked. I’m great with the conversation killers.

“No,” she said, answering slowly. “But I am thirsty.”

I took my hands out of my pockets and chewed on a fingernail. It’s a bad habit. It’s why I took up smoking. I didn’t want to leave Clover. By the time I got back she would be gone. That’s how it always worked. Gone back to wherever it is people go when you stop talking to them. There was no way I was leaving Clover.

She saved me by nodding at the water spigot.

“You have a garden hose.”

“Of course.” I scrambled to pull it over, twisted a few kinks out of it, adjusted the

water flow to a trickle. She drank, but not much. No more than a taste. The ground beneath her chin was soaked. That had to be cold.

“That’s plenty,” she said, and giggled.

But I had an idea. I mean, *finally* I had gotten an idea, two neurons getting together and making a legitimate baby in my pounding skull.

“Hey, Clover! We can use this to soften up the ground. Get you out of there. Then we can go.” I was twisting the sprayer onto the hose, cranking the faucet all the way open. “Kokomo.”

“No! You’ll only hurt me!” Her voice trailed off. “Put it down, please. I’m tired of hurting.” The desperate note was back in her voice. Her mouth was open and she was panting again.

I held the hose, staring at her on the lawn, my hands dripping water.

“Are you crazy?! I can get you out of there!” I had to have Clover. No, it wasn’t that. I had to *help* her. Why hadn’t I thought of this already?

“Don’t do it John,” she said. “It’s not what you think. Please put that down. You’re scaring me.”

“But—”

“Will you please come back here and talk to me? I can’t shout any more.”

I put the hose down. It slumped over in the grass, defeated. My hands were shaking. I needed another cigarette.

“Look,” I said, sitting down. I needed some answers. I was tired of this fantasy. Fantasy always blows up. Look at my marriage. Light and smoke.

“What was your ex-wife’s name?” she asked.

“Angela. Angie. Look, how did you know my name?”

“Was she pretty?” Her eyes were closed again. Her face looked pale. I felt like a criminal. Was this any way to treat a lady?

But her question got me. Everything about her got me. There was no way I could not answer her.

“Yeah, she *was*,” I admitted. But pretty wasn’t everything.

“Where did you meet her?”

I was silent for a moment, simmering. If this chick was anybody else— But I mean, what the hell?

“I met her in New Orleans,” I said. “We were doing cleanup work after a hurricane. Some hurricane. I forget which one. A hurricane.” I threw my hands up in the air, made round motions, twisters, wingtip vortices, you get the idea.

I thought about my hands and pushed them into my pockets again. I was shivering like it was already December. Clover didn’t have hands.

“Is that what you do?” Her voice was even, gentle. It was like hearing an old song that makes you unwind completely. It was not Beach Boys. It was James Calvin Wilsey, the opening notes of “Wicked Game,” the notes bending, bending. *The moon was on fire.*

Her voice was like that. It unwound something in me that had been wound so tight for so long I had forgotten about it. I wondered what it would be like to come home to someone like Clover every night. It was a process I didn’t know about.

“Is that what you do? Cleanup?” she repeated.

The ice cream truck had turned the corner and was headed down the next street. It made me sad to think I had missed it. I wondered what Clover's favorite was.

Rocky Road, came the thought. It was a stupid thought. I'm an ass. And she was only wanting some answers. Her eyes were closed, but she was waiting. I could see it in the angle of her face, the lines around her mouth.

"Yes, it's what I do. Disaster recovery. I was in New Orleans. She was just down there volunteering." Clover didn't say anything. It was getting hard to keep the panic out of my voice. "I did backhoe work, then a friend of a friend needed help after a tornado came through. I found – I found somebody's kid, and to see their faces, at least they had some closure. It turned into a job, I put it in Angie's name for a tax break and now she's got it all, the house and the business. The kids, I don't want to talk about it. . . ."

Her head was tilting to the side. I bore women to death, I know it, it *always* happens. I leaned close to her.

"Are you all right? Do you need a pillow? Do you want me to just hold you?"

No answer. I'm not sure what I expected, but I could taste metal in the back of my throat.

"Clover! What can I *do*!?" I felt like I was losing my own voice.

Her eyes came open but they weren't looking at me. Her face was really pale, scary pale. I wanted to touch her, stroke that hair, ask about those earrings before I lost her. Hoops? Studs? What was her color?

Black, I knew. Her color was black. Black car, black shoes, black eye.

I reached out and Clover flinched, just like that. Her whole head spasmed. Then

her face sagged down, her lips went blue. I touched them. They were dry.

The wind died and I smelled smoke. Grass fire smoke. In Oklahoma, you know that smoke.

Christ! The cigarette! I'm an *idiot*.

The back yard was burning. The wind came back strong, and smoke was flowing over the ground and up into the sky. I don't know how I missed it. I could hear the sirens then, the fire trucks, the wind-chimes. The ice cream truck had to be a mile away by now.

I was on my feet, standing there like an idiot, trying to make sense of it. The fire line was ragged but spreading fast, as much smoke as fire. I'll be honest. For a second I just wanted to let it burn. Just get out of the way, and let it burn. I mean, it's nature's way, right? Burn off the thatch, clean up the fenceline. Take down the house, bring back buffalo. Bring back prairie dogs. Let the natural process run its course, and it *was* a natural process, it was *the* natural process.

The far side of the fire line had reached the old storage shed. Big loss, whatever. It was junk, it was clutter, nothing worth saving in that. It was all fake, it was artificial, and the old red paint burned the same color as the ceiling joists. You couldn't help but stand there and admire it.

I think I was waiting for the fire truck to come barreling into the back yard, hoses jetting cold water, pickaxes digging into the ground around—

My hands were out of my pockets and grabbing at the hose, dousing the lawn around Clover, spraying as far as I could reach. But I couldn't protect her from the smoke. The wind shifted again and blew water spray back into my face. I spat and

dropped the hose and crawled under the smoke to Clover. Drop and crawl, it's what they tell you, but the problem was the smoke was traveling *along the ground*.

Her head was over to the side, one ear almost on the grass, the other ear full of water. Water! Her face was dripping water, and she was gray, dead gray. I straightened her. It felt like arranging a body in a casket, a fish at the grocer.

“Clover! Clover!”

I pried her mouth open and blew into it. I might as well have been blowing into a full soda bottle. Her tongue was swollen. Asthma? I blew harder, as hard as I could. Something gave on the second try, and my breath seemed to disappear down an empty hole. Her head jerked, made a sound like a hiccup, then coughed a stream of black.

I wiped my face on my sleeve and patted her cheeks, chafed them. I wanted to throw up. But she was breathing. Her color was coming back.

There were voices out front, shouts, a scream. It sounded like Angie.

“Help is coming,” I said. “Help is coming.”

She took a breath, the deepest breath yet.

“The fire has gotten your house,” she said, as her eyes came open.

“We’ve got to get you out of here,” I said. “The fire has gotten my house?”

Sure enough. I could feel the heat of it already.

Clover coughed. The fire had gone around us, and now no matter which way the wind was blowing, she was getting smoke. I felt in my pockets for a bandana, a handkerchief, anything, but all I had was eighty-three cents.

Beyond the fence I could see the periodic rise and fall of a straw broom in the

yard next door. To the west, the fire had gotten into the red cedars. When those things caught, they'd be going off like roman candles. Hell, they already were. Orange fire was climbing into the sky and the wind was shearing it off and throwing it around. The whole neighborhood was going up.

Clover's hair was covered in ash, and her eyes were closed. I felt like we had been together for so long. "If you want to smoke now, it won't bother me," she said.

I laughed. It was a nervous laugh, sure, but it relaxed me. She just had that way. I lit up on the fire line and sat down beside her. We were far enough away, maybe. I studied height and angle, wind speed and direction. It was not swirling any more. It was all flowing into the house, up the walls and onto the roof. I pictured the thermal image of a mushroom and looked up, expecting fallout.

Instead I saw a news chopper, and then I could hear its thrumming beat above the roar of the fire. The propwash fanned us in cinders and soot. Somewhere not too far away, a cedar exploded.

A firefighter appeared at the side of the house, large and shocking, a black and yellow mobile, four independent limbs. He must have broken my gate. I can't say I was too surprised about that. "Son of a bitch," he said, and began hauling black hose toward us, a foot forward, a foot to the side. It was his two-step, his dance, his wicked game.

"Son of a *bitch!*"

"He's never going to get here," I said, and tossed my cigarette at the house.

"I know," said Clover, and she did. Soot was roaring around us like pumice fog, like the pyroclastic flows I'd seen on weather.com, Montserrat, *When Disaster Strikes*. I

could hardly breathe.

“You can kiss me now,” she said, smiling, and I knew it was the next step in the process. So I stretched out flat on the charred grass and cradled her head in my hands. I kissed her, and man, we *danced*.

The Pier 1 Lamp

The lamp came from Pier 1. It was sort of an unreflective silver, the kind they advertise in catalogs as brushed pewter, burnished nickel. It was a beaten and hammered finish, a leaden finish, an Olde World, European, villa on the Mediterranean finish. The User Manual was the size of a matchbook, and Step Four caught my eye.

[4. Activate lamp with switcher mechanism]

The Pier 1 lamp said, "If you don't get a job, you fucker, we're finished!"

I studied the lamp for a long time, activating the switcher mechanism, deactivating it. I left the bedroom door open, closed it, left it open again, turned the corner and was in the living room. Our apartment was small. We had three tiny bedrooms. We had two cats. We had one lamp. I had decided to shoot my wife but first I had to talk it over with my son.

I found the PlayStation cable and connected the yellow jack to video, white and red jacks to audio. My son showed me how to do it. We had one son. He was twelve years old. His name was Chris.

"You go yellow, white, red. Like that. Yellow, white, red."

“Good. I'm going to shoot Beverley,” I told him, taking the controller from his sweaty hand.

“You're going to . . . huh?” He laughed. It was a loud sound in the quiet apartment. I looked at the ceiling but the upstairs neighbors weren't at home this time of day.

“I'm going to shoot her. I'm going to make an avatar, and I'm going to shoot her.” I was grim. This time I was going to do it. I had taken the step of telling Chris. I had not made it that far before.

He burst out laughing. “You're going to . . . shoot . . . hahaha.” His head bowed down with the intensity of his laughter. He began to calm down, then erupted again. When he began slapping the sofa, I went to the kitchen.

“I mean it,” I called. “Did you see that lamp?”

There was no answer. I looked across the pass-through bar and saw that my son was setting up a shooter game. First person shooter, they call them.

“I got *Halo*, *Medal of Honor*, *Pacific War Commando* . . .” His voice trailed off as he flipped through his games. “*Assault Weapon: Fourth Reich*, *Armageddon: Code of Revenge*, and *First Strike*. I don't have anything where you can make an avatar.”

I set the microwave for two minutes. Over Chris's shoulder I could see the shelf where he stored his games. It was less crowded than I remembered. Some familiar titles were missing.

“I thought you had *MVP Baseball* and *Madden* and stuff. *Final Four*,” I added as an afterthought.

“I traded those to Joey for *Armageddon: Code of Revenge*. It’s tight,” he said.

“Besides, I thought you wanted to shoot somebody.”

“Oh, yeah. Beverley,” I said. “What about *NCAA Football*?” We once created a dynasty with the Arizona State Sun Devils, for the hell of it. I did the recruiting; he provided the stick skills. But after we won the national championship, he got bored. I lost three games in a row and put it away.

“Did you mean for PlayStation or for Xbox?” He was still looking at his games.

“What? Oh, either. Do they hook in the same way?” The microwave dinged. I took out my coffeecup. My hand was shaking so much I didn’t have to stir in the milk.

“The controllers are different,” said Chris.

“But no avatars?”

“No, they don’t have avatars. Are you thinking about something like the *Sims*?”

He turned his head to look at me in the kitchen. He still had a small smile.

“The *Sims*?” All I could think of was *Microsoft Flight Simulator*. We hadn’t had that since he was three.

“Yeah, *Sims*. It’s like, they’re like real people and you walk around and do stuff.”

“Can you shoot them?” I brought my coffee over and squatted next to him.

“That’s the main thing.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” And he started laughing again.

I put my coffee on the end table and tousled his hair. He leaned away. We used to wrestle, when he was smaller. We made two trips to the emergency room together, one for his cracked knee, one for my scratched cornea. But he had gotten too big for that, this

past year. I missed it. It made me think about old times.

“Whatever happened to *Mario*,” I asked him, “and, you know, *Defender?* *Galaga?* Did you ever hear of *Centipede* or *Donkey Kong?*”

A look of scorn set on his face. “You mean like you go up and down ladders and stuff? That’s dumb.”

“Yeah, well. It was pretty good, I mean. I started out with *Pong*.”

“I think Joey has a disc of the classics. I could trade him for it?”

“Ah, don't worry about it. Just uh, *Armageddon*, huh?”

“I guess.” Chris went to the kitchen and started opening the cabinet doors, looking for a granola bar or some Cheetos.

I looked at his stack of games. I was thinking we could go to a store that specialized in selling used games. “Hey, you want to take a walk? Go across the street to the 7-11, get an Icee? We could walk the cats.”

“The cats don't like to walk.” Chris had moved to the refrigerator and stood in its light.

“Well, you know, they're kind of fat. They need to walk.”

Chris came back from the fridge with a slice of American cheese. He rolled it up and stuffed it into his mouth, and stacked his game boxes neatly back onto his storage shelf. He used the sleeve of his right arm to wipe dust off the TV screen. “Dad, we don't have a leash. Or anything. The cats don't walk.”

“Yeah well, you know, cats find their way home. It's an instinct.”

“I don't really want an Icee. They're gross.” Chris put a hand to his stomach and

made a sour face. I suddenly wondered why he had eaten the cheese. It gives him an upset stomach, or at least it once did, when he was small, when I carried him on my shoulder.

My shoulders were stooped now, pulled down by the weight of the gut that had been growing for years but always felt like it was brand new. I saw myself in the reflection from the dark face of the TV. My hair was stringy. My cheeks were stubbled. The T-shirt and gym shorts were the same ones I'd slept in. I needed to take a shower.

"Chris, about your mom." I struggled with what to say. "Why don't you let me break the news to her. The, uh, the avatar thing. We'll just argue and then it'll be over. If she hears it from you it might freak her out."

Chris slid open the balcony door and stepped outside. It was a mild summer day but he wore long sleeves. "We could go to Wal-mart," he said. "They might have something new. Something American."

I thought about it. "The Sims, huh?"

"Yeah, maybe." He chuckled again. "Why do you want to kill her?"

"I didn't say I wanted to kill her. I just want to, you know, like a voodoo doll. We just can't afford that lamp. Pier 1. *Shit.*" I ran my fingers through my hair to smooth it.

"If you're going to shoot her, you might as well kill her." He said it loud enough I was afraid someone below might hear.

"It's not the same thing." I joined him on the balcony. We had a hibachi grill there, in the corner. Cobwebs ran across it and up to the balcony's back corner.

Chris was leaning on the railing. "Well you don't want to just leave her there,

bleeding and stuff. If you're going to do something, do it right.”

“Look, I’m just mad at her. I just, I just want to beat the shit out of her.” I winced when I said that. I don't say words like *shit* around him.

“Well, why didn't you say that?” A look of annoyance set his face. “I've got *Wrestle Mania*, I got *Virtual Fighter 4*, I got *3D Smackdown*. . . . The Sims are like for teenagers and stuff. They don't do anything exciting.”

“Whatever happened to going outside and just playing ball and shit? Whatever happened to that?”

“Dad. We live in an apartment. It's not ‘safe.’” He sounded just like Beverley when he said that.

“Don't give me that shit,” I said, and it was like I was talking to Beverley. “Toronto is supposed to be the safest city in the world. I see women out jogging all the time by themselves.” I leaned over the railing to look for one to point out to him, but all I could see was other brownstone apartment buildings. Toronto is an ugly city.

“So why do you want to beat Mom? Just over a lamp? Have you done it before?”

“I can't explain it.” I threw my hands up. I didn't know where to begin.

“If you can't explain it, you probably don't know.”

“Goddamn, what are you, fucking moral-lesson-of-the-day squad?”

He shrugged. “Takes one to know one.”

I took a deep breath. Chris and I used to be so close. Now it was just like arguing with Beverley.

“Tell me some more about these Sims.”

“They're just kind of like people. You have to feed them and shit.”

I let his profanity go. “I have to feed them? I mean, they're people!”

“Well, they're Sims. They just kind of wait around for you to do something for them.”

“What the hell kind of game is that? That sounds like my last fucking job!”

“Language, Dad.” Chris went back inside.

“Yeah.” From here I could see the traffic out on the 401, near where it meets the Don Valley Parkway – the DVP. With as much traffic as this city had, it should have been a lot more polluted. Smoggier. But the lake breezes kept it all dispersed. The city didn't have to wallow in its own shitty air. It was unnatural. I knew I couldn't take another winter in Toronto.

My son came back out onto the balcony.

“It's just a lamp!” He was laughing, but there was an edge of anger. “What does it matter where she got it?”

“If we needed a lamp she could have gotten a Wal-mart lamp.”

“It's always darkest before the dawn,” said Chris, and I turned to look at him.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged. “You want to play some Halo?”

“No, I want to go for a drive. You want to go?”

He shook his head. “I have flute practice.”

I put my head in my hands. Flute practice. “You want to go to the park? I've got to get out of this apartment.” When he didn't respond, I tried again. “You know you

could do your flute practice in the park. You might make a flute friend. Pick up some chicks. Some flute groupies. The people that live in Toronto are the ex-hippies, the flower children. They like the music, man.”

“Yeah right.” He snorted. He went back inside and began putting a disc into the game console. I followed him.

“Come on. I'm serious. Let's get out of this place.”

“Put on some pants, at least,” he said.

When I came out of the bedroom he had on his sneakers and Arizona Diamondbacks ballcap. He locked the deadbolt behind us with his house key and we went around the corner, down the stairs, out onto the parking lot. I reached into my pocket for my car keys and didn't have them. I had left them on the kitchen counter in my rush to leave.

“It's okay,” said Chris. “It's not far. We can walk.”

“What about the cats?” I said.

“The cats are fine,” he said. “Mom fed them this morning, before she went to church.”

We walked down Eglinton Avenue for a half-mile, two Americans, Arizonans, in Canada's biggest city, and the traffic noise was too loud to talk, so I thought about how I could frame the situation for Chris when we got to the park. The key of course was Beverley.

She had gotten a job here last year. Toronto had seemed exotic then, as had her job – sports psychologist. I quit my work with the city of Tucson where I was a water

meter inspector. I had trouble finding anything in Toronto, but Beverley's work paid well. 'Take your time, no hurry,' she had told me, 'be choosy,' so I had been. I found us a condo in the old part of York – called the Olde Yorke, no less – and got Chris into the school system. I kept checking the newspaper ads and got some interviews, but we didn't know yet how long we'd be in Toronto. Things had been fine here, at first. Kind of weird, but fine.

"Cross here?" asked Chris, at the corner of Eglinton and Leslie. I nodded. I was winded already from the pace. We waited for the light to change.

I had inspected water meters for the city and paid the bills while Beverley worked through her M. S. and started in on her Ph.D. She was just getting set for her dissertation – "Sports Hero Syndrome: Jungian Archetype, Quixotic Accountability" – when the call from the Toronto Raptors came in. The Raptors were a professional basketball team. They had just had a management shake-out. The new owner was an alumnus of the U of AZ, and he wanted to clean up the players' reputations. He wanted a team psychologist, a specialist in image control. And that was Beverley to a T. She stared entranced at the letter that followed the phone call the way she had stared at me after her first orgasm, the way she had stared at Chris when he was put into her arms. There would be a trial period, the letter suggested, six months to determine if the fit was right. During that time she could finish her dissertation work on the Raptors' payroll. She moved to Toronto in October to get started as early as possible. Chris and I followed at the semester break in December. I hated to take him out of school, but Bev was so wrapped up in her work that we were losing touch with her.

The light finally changed – Sunday was as busy as any weekday morning here – and Chris dashed across the street ahead of me. I jogged after him, but when I reached the other side of the road I couldn't see him. I still didn't know what I was going to tell him. Beverley and I had been shaky since he'd been born.

When he and I got to Toronto that December it had been an adventure. The city snow was new to us, the frequent rain and freezing winds, the people who spoke a different brand of English. Customs and Immigration was fine – the Raptors took care of all that, and they helped us find the condo, and to get Chris enrolled. It was on one of those early days at the Raptors head office that I realized it may all be a sham. Chris and I were waiting for the elevator; when it opened, Beverley and a man I recognized as one of the ownership committee stepped off.

She barely looked at us. "Hello!" she said. "I'd stay and talk but we're working on my dissertation over lunch. I'll be home late, so don't wait supper on me!" And she was gone. The man with her gave us a slight nod and a slighter smile, and he held the outer door for her on their way out. The heavy odor of her perfume irritated my eyes as Chris and I rode up the elevator. Chris had said nothing. Maybe he hadn't noticed.

The entrance to the Don Valley Park was long and sloped downhill, but I hadn't done any running since we left Arizona. Chris was nowhere in sight but I had seen him head toward the park. Maybe he was behind the mimosas, which were just now flowering, or the brilliant green foliage of the maples. I entered the park at an easy jog. I wasn't worried for him. Chris was a good kid, and it was a sunny Sunday in Toronto, a safe city. And Chris had had self-defense classes in Tucson. But Toronto was so unlike

Tucson, the kids here so unlike his friends. He'd been quiet since we came here, though.

His grades were good. He just didn't talk a lot.

I got uneasy, however, when I reached the Don Valley Park trail and didn't know which way he had gone, right or left, north or south. His teal baseball cap should have been easy to spot, but I couldn't remember what color shirt he was wearing, and against the late June greenery, I didn't see a teal cap. I stood there, sucking air. For the first time I really began to worry. What if he had he run away? What would I do?

I had been a happy bachelor before Bev came along, and I knew I could be happy again without her. But now there was Chris. When she got home that night, the night she left the perfumed elevator with a man I didn't know, I didn't ask her to tell me about her evening, where they had gone or what they had done. It would have been a futile effort. Instead, I asked her how her dissertation was moving along. She changed the subject. She wouldn't talk about her work at all. Our conversations, from that point forward, focused on Chris and his school work and his flute practice and his lack of interest in girls and how Toronto would surely be good for him.

But mostly, we just didn't talk. I didn't know what else there was to talk about.

I slowed down as the park pathway branched right and left, but I still didn't see Chris. An ebony lady in a checked green headcloth was sitting on a bench facing me. There was no certainty that she spoke English, but just as I was forming a question about a young boy in a teal ballcap, she suddenly smiled, a very broad smile. I looked over my shoulder and ducked in time to intercept Chris's tackle.

But he didn't tackle me. He swerved away and headed south at a pace I couldn't

match. The lady laughed and said something not in English. I smiled back at her and I turned to jog after him. Something about the lady's smile, or or maybe the way she was simply sitting on the park bench, made me think about the Sims again. I wondered if they acted like real people. I wondered if I could learn something from them. Chris had said something about SimDate.

After the elevator incident, Bev's behavior got stranger. She came home one afternoon as I was doing the laundry and suddenly announced that she was making some to-die-for enchiladas. It was a fact that Toronto didn't have any good tex-mex, but Chris didn't eat it and Bev had never been much good at cooking. Moments after we sat down to try Bev's concoction, Chris got up to make himself some mac-and-cheese, and Bev instantly blew up. She grabbed the dishes from the table, including the plate I was eating from, and took them to the kitchen. Then she got her coat and keys and left. Chris and I looked at each other in shock. His macaroni boiled too long and turned to mush, so we made peanut butter sandwiches. I sent him to his room to do his homework, and cleaned the dishes, at a loss for what to say to Beverley when she returned.

She got back late, smelling of cigarette smoke and beer, and seemed surprised that Chris was still up. He was practicing his flute solo in the living room. When I asked her where she'd been, she said, "I told you, I had to interview some of the players. It was for my study." Chris and I shared a look. She hadn't told us anything.

I began to wonder if she needed psychiatric help but I didn't know how to bring it up.

At the Eglinton Avenue underpass, Chris waited, leaning against a concrete wall

under a black graffiti that read NAZIS GO HOME. The NAZIS had been marked through in yellow and BUSH written over it. FASCIST had later been written in smaller red letters above. “Are you trying to tell me something?” I asked him, and he looked up at the sign, and was off again.

I didn't know what to say to Beverley. Everything I could come up with sounded like it had “The End” written across it. I knew I needed to get a job and get out of the house, meet some people, make some friends, but our little household had a need stronger than that. We needed an anchor. Chris – Chris needed an anchor. I stayed home and did the housework and prepared for Christmas. I read the papers more thoroughly.

Chris was waiting for me at the railroad bridge that marks the pedestrian trailhead. We could have crossed the eight lanes of Eglinton above and started here to begin with. But the way Chris had led us was safer. There was no graffiti this time but as I approached, hands on my head, gasping for air, he pointed to the tracks above. I heard a word that sounded like “jump” and he again took off running. As I watched him sprint away with all the single-minded devotion of a twelve year old, far ahead I could see a bright light. I leaned against the bridge support, and when I could breathe again, I followed him.

The Raptors had Christmas parties. “Holiday” parties, they called them, “seasonal” parties. They started on Christmas Eve and went until mid-January. Beverley went to them, of course. She had never had a drinking problem, but she came home tipsy almost every night. All I could do was hope that whatever she had gotten herself into, she could get herself out of.

She had received her termination notice in February. She was dressed for work, as usual. I had made toast but she hadn't eaten.

"How long have you known?" I asked her, stunned. It was like having the floor kicked out from underneath us. We had ridden into Toronto on Beverley's back; we had uprooted Chris and quit my job for this.

She sighed. "I said something at a Christmas party," she said. "It got taken the wrong way."

"Well where have you been going these past few days?" I asked. "Where have you been going all *month*?"

She was on the way to the door. "I've got some things I need to finish up on," she said. "My final check included a severance. It's small, but it will tide us over." And she was gone.

That had been four months ago, and it still hurt. She volunteered at local secondary school athletic programs and forged ahead with her dissertation work.

The Don Valley Park stretches along the Don River in bottomland that used to be a brickworks. The ugly buildings: this is where they came from. Maybe I should give them more credit. The bricks were functional, just like everything else about the city, as if it were a city designed by politburo. But the park is different. When the clay was mined out, the land was cleared, leveled, sodded, and kept as a low-maintenance green belt. It was a good park. There were always people here when we came. I caught Chris the third and final time at the place where the pathway doglegs right and makes its closest

approach to the river. He was sitting on the bank, looking down, his back to me. His shirt, I finally saw, was gray. A sweat stain turned it dark in the center of his back. His sides were still heaving. I knelt next to him, hands on the ground, head down, catching my wind. Even in June, the grass was cold.

“We've got to get out of here,” Chris panted. “We've got to leave. They're after us.”

I looked around. Again I saw the flash of light, and this time I recognized it for what it was: a man in a reflective sombrero. It seemed to be made of cooking foil. He stood perhaps thirty meters away in the middle of the park lawn.

I turned back to Chris. “You want to play some catch?” I asked. It was the first thing that popped into my mind. I wanted to get away from that weird guy in the hat, because now I felt it, too. We *were* being watched.

Chris looked at me, and I realized I hadn't asked him to play catch since Arizona. I thought he was going to mock the idea. He didn't. “What with?” he asked.

I stood up. My legs were wobbly. “I don't know. Let's go find something.” I led us away from the river and its dense shade towards the open park. The grass was long. It had been a dry summer for Toronto, they said, but in the last week we'd finally gotten rain. The air was still heavy with dampness. I could hear mowers working in the distance.

The man in the sombrero turned as I walked near him. He seemed to be an African man; he was certainly dark enough. He wore a green, loose tunic over black, loose pants. On his feet were old white Reeboks with little reflective patches, and on the top of his head was the oversized sombrero. It seemed to be a cheap straw hat like you'd

find at a party goods store: the brim's underside had a green stitching that matched the color of his tunic exactly.

But it was the top surface of his sombrero that commanded attention. It was impossible to look at but impossible also not to look at. What I had assumed at first sight to be aluminum foil was in reality an overlay of intricately cut and hammered beverage cans. They were so expertly interlaced, and the whole impression was one of such finish, that it looked like an item of pop art.

He withstood my scrutiny with great patience. When my purple-spotted gaze returned to his face, I could only see his teeth popping in and out.

"They are watching us," he said, in perfect, Oxford English. He raised his arm and pointed a long finger upwards.

I lifted my hand to block the glare from his hat. Dark spots were burned into everything I looked at. The after-images faded slowly. He was smiling.

"Who is watching us?" I asked, turning my head.

"The satellites," he said. He pointed to Chris who was some way off, searching for a ball to throw. "He knows. You see?" He touched the brim of his hat, and then bowed deeply, hands together. "Blessings," he said, and extended his hand, palm up.

I fumbled in my pockets and found three dollars Canadian: a toonie and a loonie. I put them in his hand. I don't know why. It was far too much to give a beggar. The dark man looked at his hand, mouth open in surprise. The yellow light shone up between us like a beacon. "Aha!" he said. "I will use them to cover my *eyes*." And he lifted his face to the sun, put the coins on his eyes, and laughed abruptly. He extended his arms from his

sides, palm up, smiling, and spoke very loudly. “You don't know who I am! You *do* not know who I am! I am invisible to you.”

Chris appeared at my side and we watched as the dark man wheeled in a slow circle. When he faced near us again he picked the coins from his eyes, salaamed with a flourish, and said, “I am not a vagabond.” He tossed the coins to Chris, who caught them deftly, and the dark man strode away through a field of purple spots.

“Careful,” I said to Chris. “They might have some contagious disease.”

Chris shrugged. “I can't find a ball. Did you find anything?”

We spread out and searched the Don Valley park. It was a beautiful park in June. In March, it had been covered in snow. Bev had walked me here to tell me that she was going to have to return to Arizona after all, to finish her dissertation and work on her defense. She didn't want us to pull Chris out of school.

Chris was lying in the sun, his Arizona State ballcap pulled low over his face, when I returned with an old coconut. It had been sheared flat on one side by a mower blade in times past. It was a bit large, and it rattled, but it was light enough to toss. I thumped his cap and he blinked up into the sun.

“Mom will be home from church soon,” he said as he stretched out. The coconut was too awkward to throw very far. “So are you going to shoot her, or what?” A lopsided smile spread over his face.

“So tell me about these Sims,” I countered.

His smile fell. “All I know is they started with *SimCity*. Joey Kanoulopolis knows more than I do.”

“I heard of that one, *SimCity*.”

“Just lots of Sim games. *SimEarth*. *SimAnt*. *SimTower*. They're called God games. Now it's just the Sims. The people.” He yawned.

“Your friends have it?”

“Joey's dad has it set up on a flat screen on the wall. He says it's like a fish tank.”

“What do you do, feed them?”

“You help them get jobs and stuff. Teach them to cook. Go on dates. Burn their houses down.”

I held onto the coconut, tossing it from hand to hand. The skin at the back of my neck crawled and I turned, but no one was behind me. The sky was very, very blue.

“Why would you want to do that?” I asked. “Burn down their houses?” For some reason I felt a great sadness. A coconut, in Toronto.

“It's just a game,” he said. “Are we done?”

I hadn't brought my cell phone, had not left a note. My keys were probably on the counter. Beverley would probably be worried. I put the coconut under my arm and we started back up the pathway, northward.

“Who's after us?” I asked as casually as I could.

Chris looked at me before answering.

“I was just kidding,” he said. “It's a joke.”

Beverley took the job at Malvern Collegiate Institute. It was a good place, strong reputation. Maybe the most highly regarded high school in the Toronto metro. But it was a high school, and what Bev did there was counseling. She talked about getting back to

Tucson. I felt hamstrung and frustrated. I couldn't get started on a long-term job with that kind of axe hanging over us.

We crossed the Don River on a small arched footbridge I hadn't noticed before, and I stopped for a moment to catch my breath against the railing. Broken sunlight reflected back from the water; it was moving, constantly in motion, but unflinching, like the reflection of a man with a cigarette who watches you intently. The Don River, I thought. The Don River flowed into Lake Ontario. Ontario emptied out into the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream warmed England and after that, I didn't know. But it was something. I dropped the coconut into the Don River and we continued northward.

"You should have saved that," said Chris.

"Sure is nice here in the summertime," I said. "Cool temperatures, no sunscreen."

"I want to know what's wrong," said Chris. "Between you and Mom. I think I'm old enough. I'm almost 13."

I knew what he meant, but I didn't know how to answer him. We walked under the railway, under the eight lanes of Eglinton Avenue. One thing leads to another; one detail brings the next into sharp focus. Once I got started, I didn't know where I could stop. It was all one long, connected, messy, messy chain. Where do you ever start? Where do you ever end?

"There was someone in Tucson," I said, "about four years ago, about the time your mother started on her graduate work." But I had to stop. Maybe when Chris was 20. Maybe when he was 30. Maybe never.

"Do you want to shoot me, too?" he said.

“Of course not.”

“Mom's home by now. Do you have a gun?”

“No.”

“If you're going to do it, you might as well do it right.” Chris had gun magazines in his bedroom. Hunting magazines, shooting magazines. I had grown up watching westerns. What was the difference? Had something changed?

“Chris, did you ever play Cowboys and Indians?”

“Why would I do that?”

I could feel something else slipping away. Things had been slipping away for years, and every time something left, there was a hole.

I remembered Chris in the Arizona desert when he was no more than four. He had a Dodgers cap, then, and he wanted to know what a cactus was. It was near sunset, and the low sunlight threw long shadows. I pointed to a prickly pear cactus by the path we were on. “It's sharp,” I said. “Okay,” he said, and grabbed the cactus like it was a cat's ear. I carried him back to the car and finished pulling the spines out his fingers by the glare of my headlights. Night came so quickly in the desert. I sat in the car for minutes, holding my hands over my eyes, waiting to reacclimate to the night, while Chris struggled in his car seat, screaming for his mother. But the thing I remembered the most was the sudden change that came into his eyes when he grabbed the cactus. They both had suddenly turned a blue as wide as the sky.

“Look at me, Chris,” I said. My voice was firm. It's the father's voice I never thought I would have. “If I had a gun, would I shoot you?”

“You're not strong enough,” he said. We were passing by the bench where the lady in the headcloth had been. I could have used her smile, but she was gone.

“That lamp,” I said. “We could put it in your room. Maybe it could protect you. You know.” It sounded foolish. It was foolish.

“I remember when you got me those curtains,” said Chris. “Those orange and purple curtains. I was afraid of monsters. You said the stupid curtains would scare them off.”

“I remember that,” I said. We were at the corner of Leslie and Eglinton. The Walk light turned our way and Chris suddenly dashed across. I followed quickly, not running, hoping Chris would not keep going. The Eglinton sidewalk was busy.

But he was waiting for me at the bus stop. When I reached it, he jumped out at me and crashed into my side. I staggered but kept my feet.

“You think you can keep out monsters with curtains?” he shouted. “You're a freak.”

“It helped you to sleep,” I said.

“Maybe I didn't want to sleep. Maybe I wanted to figure out who was after me.” He suddenly fell silent.

“I don't like it here, either,” I said.

“Nobody likes it here. That's not what I meant.” He rounded on me. “So there was someone in Tucson. So what? You think I didn't have stuff in Tucson? You think I didn't have problems?” His eyes were wide. “‘Change is good,’ you always said. ‘Different is good.’ Well sometimes it's not good! Can't you see that yet?” His eyes were wide with

pain, but I felt as if I were the one seeing forward, through a procession of years in Toronto, Chris growing until he towered over his old man, Chris leaving home to go to college at Arizona State.

What the hell would I do without Chris?

In April we had gotten the phone call Beverley had been waiting for. “Hello, sir, I’m from the Toronto Raptors organization.” The voice was almost familiar. I thought about the man who had gotten off the elevator with her, the day we went to visit, but I wasn’t sure. Beverley was at work, I told him. “I’m afraid there’s been a terrible misunderstanding,” said the man, and he started into some kind of long apology. I cut him off and told him Beverley had moved on. He gave me his number and asked for Beverley to call him back.

I didn’t write it down. And in the two months since then, I had never told Beverley about the call.

The cats looked up as we came in. Chris slammed the door to his room and immediately turned up his music. “Shopping, back in a few,” read Beverley’s note on the counter.

The Pier 1 lamp was gone from our bedroom. The tiny manual, too, that I had left out on the unmade bed, was gone. The small room seemed dark without it.

I reconnected the PlayStation cable to the TV in what I hoped was the correct order – yellow, white, red – and fired up *Armageddon: Code of Revenge*.

“You’re getting killed,” said Chris, over my shoulder. I hadn’t heard him come up behind me, but his room had been quiet for some time. A shot from above knocked out

my shields. “You need to put in the cheat code,” he said.

“It's just a game,” I replied, turning up into the sun. The next shot took out my engines and I saw the enemy ship. It was bearing straight down on me, and as it drew closer the sun emerged from behind it like the end of a solar eclipse: first the string of pearls, then the flash, then an overwhelming brightness.

“You've still got weapons,” said Chris, as my ship spiraled in a lazy, predictable barrel roll directly into the glare.

Chris reached for the controller, his hand out, his eyes on the screen.

“Do something,” he said, and I told him we were headed to Pier 1 to get that goddamn brushed pewter lamp, he and I, as soon as Beverley returned, as soon as we found out which Pier 1 she had returned the lamp to. Chris and I were going to get that lamp and take it home to Tucson. Returning it had been a mistake, I would tell the people at Pier1. We loved the lamp. We really did. It was everything else that had all been a terrible, terrible mistake.

The Derrida Moment

There are moments, sitting in the Jimmy's Egg on 2nd Street in Edmond, Oklahoma, two miles east of campus, waiting on coffee, wondering if you're too near two o'clock to have enough time to eat that olive and onion omelet you ordered – moments when the moment itself telescopes deeply away from you, and you see yourself, as if from a distance, telling an audience of coughing, sniffing, shuffling adults what it was about this moment that became the thing that launched you to some kind of success at last.

The moment is ordinary. The October rain is ordinary, coming down in concentrated streams in the corners of the roof – they're called the dead valleys, you remember – and all you are thinking of at this moment is Derrida, deh-ree-DAH, French philosopher, literary critic. His words push away from your fingers like putty, like the thoughts you have at night that knock you unconscious, and it has made you angry. You've been silently arguing against Derrida since you slid into this booth, but the more you argue the more you realize you are pulled into his polarity. It's a Chinese finger

puzzle, this Derrida vs. non-Derrida position, and you know he'd be laughing at you if he were in the empty green booth opposite. So you flip your argument, judo-style; you move with his flow, reaching for some deep momentary agreement: there is no absolute truth, no top and bottom, no left and right, or rather, absolute truth exists only in a relational sense among privileged and nonprivileged opposites –

But what are you left with, then?

You put down Derrida's essay and you agree in this moment to stop privileging the polarities and see where it gets you, because polarities have gotten you *here*. You instead embrace a spectrum, an array of possibilities arising from this moment, a rainbow arc of color and sense, time opening and pivoting around some undefined axis that you think is the *now*. You think of the biggest thing you know, which is cosmology, and pose it this simple question: what's outside the universe? If there is an enclosure, a definition, there must be an outside, an other. And so it fails, like everything else. It fails you because of the darkness, because if you think of a box then you have to think inside and outside, and you have a privileged polarity, which is the inside, and you know there is no inside because the universe is *it*, it's *all*, it's *everything*.

And so cosmology fails you in this Derrida moment. Topology fails you. There is no sense of the unchanging, the perpetual, and your idea collapses in on itself, and the waitress brings you hash browns instead of grits, and you hate hash browns, you're a southern boy, and the metro area rain is supposed to be slacking off, but it hasn't yet. Last night the weather image changed from a bow wave shockfront to herringbones running northeast, moisture collecting in the pressure troughs.

And last night Mr. Lawry dropped your class.

“Did I mix up your order?” the waitress asks, her tough arms bare, her tough hands belonging on the grips of a Harley, or in the traces of a barrel-racing horse named Ribber. “Let me go check it. Back in a flash.”

“The omelet looks right,” you say, “olive and onion.” She has walked away but you're admiring her cowboy-wiry arm in your memory. She's older, she's scrawny, and you could easily love her, yes, because she knows how to revise, and you wonder at the implied dichotomy: who doesn't know how to revise? My freshmen, you think. My forty-three freshmen, or at least forty-two of them. But they're learning. It's the tenth week and they're learning, week by week.

They're learning from *everything*.

Last week there was an anti-abortion display in the center of the campus and the dorm students could hardly avoid it, and more and more now they are all dorm students. They came to your class and failed the quiz and were silent, the 10:00 class. The 11:00 class failed the quiz and were silent, until finally Mr. Lindsey in the back row, the window corner on the southeast, the farthest remove he could be from the center of the campus and still be in room 219 at 11:30 – Mr. Lindsey asks, “What about abortion?”

What about abortion, you remember saying, after a tiny, curving silence, like a space you can't jump into. Long ago in your studies you read that quantum physicists think of space as filled with tiny, curved silences, tiny dimensions that have never opened up to us, tiny places we're cut off from by not so much our size as by our awkward nose-and-mouth geometry, our left-handedness and right-handedness.

But that direction of thought makes you cringe. This silence is the reaction gap you get when no one is primed for the buzzer. It's a measure of the length of the synapse chain, the tiny shockwaves rippling away from diffuse centers, interconnecting and forming temporary, tiny bridges. The university has no position on abortion.

“Yeah, what about abortion?” Mr. Lindsey's mouth is closed in that droll, open shape that draws the mouth to its smallest width. His eyes are half-lidded like those of a snake sunning on the ripples of fossilized mudstone, or like those of a student who had a hit off the joint before coming to class. Abortion has nothing to do with the essay you're discussing, which is about a photographer who gives up photography to write for a living, who has won the National Book Award with his writing, who talks about the framing of the moment and the area outside the shot.

“I think it's a woman's choice!” proclaims Ms. West from her front row position of authority. “It's her body, after all.” But Ms. Sharp sneers, and from her position of authority Ms. West is disadvantaged: she cannot read the structural text of the class. In Saussure's terms, she cannot differentiate the *langue* from the *parole*. In biochemical, interpretive terms, the absence of body language and facial expression causes her to take longer to create meaning from the verbal friction. You're about to lose this class.

It's okay. You want to hear it. This is something beyond semiotics, but there you go again with the beyond and the semiotics. These dualities – perhaps you are a rock climber, wedging your calcified bones against the gneiss on either side of the fissure, using dichotomy to leverage your way upward. But the metaphor implies a scientific sense of certainty – that there is a top to the mountain, or that there is an up, or that there

is a kind of rhetorical or consensual force like gravity. Or like positionality.

No wonder you admire the arms on the waitress. You look up for her as a shadow descends from the left, but it is another table's server, followed by a busboy's cart and trashbag of discarded sausage pieces and pancake edges. The dumpster smell comes to you, unbidden. You hold your breath.

The class has come alive. *Is there any dissent*, you ask, raising your arm to encourage dissent.

Only Mr. Carver's hand goes up. "The tenets of the Catholic Church are clear," he says. "At the moment of conception a child's life is sacred."

"What about if it's diseased, or the embryo is unviable?" interrupts Ms. Wright.

"There's more nonviable embryos all the time!" says Ms. Lowe, from the wall of the classroom closest to the corridor. Only a cinder-block separates her from her freedom here. Remove one block and she is gone. She is that thin.

"Why would you want to bring a deformed child into the world?" says Ms. Cain, her hand up.

Mr. Carver has the floor, you say, with both arms up, and they calm themselves down. But what Ms. Wright has said has hit you hard.

"Human life begins at the moment of conception," Mr. Carver begins again, and the class is quiet, giving him room. "And anyway, how are you to say that one week or one hour or one moment is not what the child deserves? What do you know about

whether that child will know some happiness during its time?”

“Who are you to say otherwise? You're playing God just as much as we are,” retorts Mr. Lindsey, and it is clear that today his heavy-lidded gaze is a place of concealment. You have your hand up waiting for Mr. Carver's response, but he has nothing further to say. He is finished. When it is clear he won't continue, Ms. Randall belches loudly. The class dissolves into chaos. You're standing there, a tiny, slight smile frozen on your chin.

“I think you have lost the class here,” says Mr. Thrasher, who you think is a closet alcoholic because there are days he says nothing and his eyes are red on the front row, and yet whose essays are written with a modest mania for perfection: when you told him his thesis was too obvious, too downhill, he pulled the whole thing inside out and found something that made you shout YES in your backyard at home a few days ago, when it was in the 80s and the mosquitoes were thick on your bare ankles, and you had time to read their second drafts between your own term papers. But Mr. Thrasher's back is to the class, and he is speaking only to you.

“I think we've got way off subject,” booms Mr. Broom, a shy and nervous young man whom you cannot now look at and not think of a young Johnny Cash. He has that power about him. He has the square chin, and to his words the class noise suddenly begins a steady disincline as one gaze after another locks on to yours.

You're way off subject, but the class is alive.

I guess I have some personal experience with this, you say, and this is one of those moments you cannot have known was coming. You telescope outside yourself and

know what is coming next, now. These kids are hungry for something real. You only find the real where you want to find it, you should be telling them, not where I show you it is, or where any other instructor shows you it is; we don't have a lock on what's real. You live your lives, and we perceive your lives are rich and connected to other human beings in vast and mysterious ways, because that is what we are bombarded with from the time we leave our cars in the faculty lot and step inside this building: the humming network of intertext and cheating and rhetoric, the gymnastics of people who are still free to gyre to their full verbal extent. All the touching, the hands, the mouths, the T-shirts that shout "FUCK!"

Okay, Mr. Grad Student, dude, the gazes are saying. So you quit your job, fuck, so what, it happens. You came back to school. You got this class. You've brought us here. You've created this moment.

Now deliver.

"Come here," your girlfriend says from inside the shower. She takes your hand and shoves it hard up into her abdomen, up under her rib cage. Her blue eyes are wide and bulbous, the film of her gaze as hard a presence as the lump your fingers are smashing into.

"Yeah?" you ask. She's the biology major. You're in physics. "What is it?"

"I – I don't know," she replies, pushing your hand away and pressing her own fingers into her abdomen as if she could push the lump away. "This is not good."

"It's not normal?" You ask this to ground her, because sometimes she gets wound

up over ghosts. She lost her mother last year.

“I would think I would know how my own body feels!” She hasn't closed the shower curtain. The bathroom door is slightly open. She shares this house with four other co-eds.

“That hasn't been there?” Your words sound inane. You fight down a dizziness because you've lost things too; your best friend killed in a car wreck in March; your father now on anti-psychotics.

“Tumors aren't hard,” she says, and she finally turns the water off and gets out of the shower. “They're soft, undifferentiated. I don't know what this is. It's too high to be a baby.”

“A baby? You're on the pill!” You sit down on the toilet. Your cock suddenly burns with the memory of fiery contraceptive foam, the itch of the sex you just had. This is the only oasis of humanity in your life – and in hers, you sometimes believe.

“Listen to me! It's too high! I'm going down to the drugstore to get some pregnancy tests. I need you here when I come back.”

“I have an Electromagnetism test at two.” It's a course you're losing your grip on. Maxwell's equations. Gauss, Lorentz, LaPlace. Something about Eigenvalues and Euler. Or was that Engineering Calculus?

“I need you right here.”

The first test is positive. The second test is positive.

“It's too high,” she says. “Oh God. I'm going to see my gynecologist.”

The gynecologist confirms it. “Fifteen weeks,” she says.

“Fifteen *weeks*.” You're thunderstruck. “How could you not have known it? You didn't miss any, did you?”

“It was spotty. It sometimes is.” She looks up at you. “I'm scared.”

“Tell me about it.” You're flunking the shit out of Electromagnetism. You have nothing at home. A plywood factory. An anti-psychotic father. “I'm scared about everything. I don't know if I can handle this.”

“Well, you will. We both will.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Well, I was going to ask you the same thing. We have options. It's pretty far along, but we can go to Planned Parenthood in Charlotte.”

Charlotte is twenty miles away, and you don't have a car. She takes the bus on a Friday morning.

“More coffee?” The waitress is older than you think she is. She's a lot older.

But she's a revisionist. Look at those hands.

“Yes ma'am.” You put down the letter you got from the Associate Registrar, Mr. White, and massage the coffee cup with your cold fingers, thinking of the waitress' tough, human arms. *Dear Instructor: Below is a list of students who added or dropped your course(s) last week: Lawry, Justin L.*

You want to draw a picture of point-to-point-to-point for these students. Cause and effect. Action, reaction, reaction, the continuing cycle of reaction punctuated by rare

action. It hits you then that even a spectrum is anchored at the end points, and it drives you speechless. How can you possibly get it across?

In my junior year, you say, my wife – my girlfriend – the woman who became my wife – got pregnant. It was in my junior year.

You stop.

This moment of dislocation, it becomes a moment of co-location. If you are ever going to be there – if you are ever going to be *there*, in that seat, that face looking up, this is the moment, it almost certainly is.

She returns from Charlotte and trembles in her room. You catch up with her after classes. She is wearing a soft, crushed-angora sweater, taupe. It smells of mothballs. It was her mother's. Her eyes are red. She didn't call you, but then this was before cell phones.

“They wouldn't do it. I'm too far along.” Her voice is too quiet for this room.

“That's crazy. You're not even showing.” You're annoyed. No, you're not annoyed. You're in abject disbelief. This was supposed to be easy. Clinical. This is a procedure.

If she had said you were turning into a giant German cockroach, it would be equally believable.

“Listen to me. They measured it. With a sonogram. I'm past sixteen weeks.”

“What does that mean?”

“The State of North Carolina prohibits induced miscarriage after sixteen weeks.”

“How do they know? I mean, God, how fucking exact is this shit?” You worked relief shift at the plywood factory last summer. Rotating relief shift. Two days, two days, two days.

“They won't do it. They measured it.”

Somebody tromps into the house downstairs. The kitchen door slams shut. Heavy footsteps on the stairs. One of the house girls walks in and stops, blinking. “Oh,” she says, “I just need to get a jacket from the closet. Sorry about this.” In a moment she's gone.

“They'll do it in Atlanta,” says your girlfriend, the biology major, the woman who only wanted to make up for her mother's death somehow. “The Georgia law currently allows it up to twenty weeks. That would mean we could do it the week of Thanksgiving.”

“Oh, shit. Atlanta. That's a fucking eight hour drive. That's finals week. Oh, shit.”

“Don't do this to me.”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm just so scared. Have you told anyone?”

“Not yet. I didn't think anyone would have to know.”

“I'm sorry; I have to ask this. Is it – could it be someone else's baby? I mean I know you were”

Sixteen weeks meant June, but you had not seen each other in June. Just March, April, and May. And in May you had argued. She had –

But she says nothing. She rocks on her bed, the one with the quilt her aunt stitched for her. It smells like something from another world.

That night she calls her closest friend and confidante from her hometown church. *I've come down with a baby I can't keep*, she says, and you leave the bedroom and the house and go outside into the gravity of night, the October chill condensed into pinpoints that hover in a strange land.

It is quiet in the classroom. The wind is buffeting up against the windows which won't open, and far to the south on the next ridge – you're on the second floor here – all you see is the tops of trees. It is almost certainly a subdivision underneath those trees, but from here it looks like a forest. It's eighty-six degrees out there. It's October out there. Two students have come down with strep throat. Mr. Hedges is sitting in his customary seat, second row over, third seat back. He hasn't fallen down a stairwell yet in the middle of the night. He isn't lying in the hospital awaiting reconstructive surgery, four metal plates for his face, a titanium rod for his leg. In the next aisle over is Mr. Lawry, whose father is still alive, now, in this week-ago moment. Mr. Lawry has not dropped out of school, not yet, though you felt the touch of death in his first essay – lost my girlfriend, lost my promotion, lost my car. How many of these things does it take to kill a kid? Lost my dad. He was only forty-three.

You don't know why you're eating eggs. How can you eat eggs and remember this?

“You need some more water, don't you?”

“Yes. What time do you close?” You say it so you can hear it again. You say it to re-ground yourself. You say it to foreground the number in your thoughts.

“Oh, two o'clock, but you've got some time. We've got some cleaning up to do.”

The doctor in Atlanta looks haggard, haunted, a wisp of brown hair drifting across her drawn face. “It's twenty weeks,” she says from behind her desk. Her desk is littered with books and charts. “At least. It's right on the edge.” She leans forward. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes,” you say. *Twenty weeks*, you think, and you know at last that it could only be yours. It could only be yours and hers, twenty weeks ago.

“Be quiet,” she says to you. “Are you sure?” She is looking at your girlfriend. “Have you thought about the options?”

“Don't do this to her,” you tell the doctor. *Twenty weeks*.

“What does your family say?” asks the doctor.

“They,” and your girlfriend swallows. “They want me to keep it.”

“And your parents?” The doctor looks at you. Her eyes are so weary of life. In this moment she has no defenses. No one in this small room has any defenses left. You are all as raw as meat from a butcher. The smell of blood makes your eyes water.

“They said they would take care of the baby,” you say. “But we can't keep it. We've talked about it. I don't know how – we'd have to drop out. Her parents and my parents, they said they'll support us no matter what we decide.”

“I'd been drinking,” says your girlfriend. “I didn't know. What kind of damage.”

“You're sure?” says the doctor.

“Yes,” says your girlfriend.

"I'll schedule you for in the morning," the doctor says. "Have you got insurance?"

"No," I say. "We're going to pay for it. I've got a job." You don't tell her you're making three dollars an hour, cataloguing vinyl records in the radio station library, labeling by your own system sixteen hours a week, the Electromagnetism book open between Debussy and Dvorak.

"I won't schedule you for an overnight, then. Have you got a hotel room?"

"We'll find something," your girlfriend says.

"Have you really thought about adoption?" the doctor asks. Her fingers are tight on the procedural consent forms. "Have you really seriously considered it?"

"Yes," you say. "We'd lose our scholarships. Spring semester."

"How much had you been drinking?" she asks your girlfriend.

She doesn't answer.

It is quiet in the classroom. Mr. Lawry is still enrolled, and Mr. Hedges still has a face.

When I was a junior, you begin again, she got pregnant. We. Get my pronouns right. You pause to decide how much information is necessary. Mr. Carver is looking at you. His head is normally on his desk by this time of day. It was – we were between birth control methods. At first we used the foam. Then we went to the oral contraceptives. I was stupid, I didn't – This was back in the old days. Before –

You falter.

But they wait. You gather it back up. Your heart is beating, or at least your pulse

is thumping in your neck and in the back of your eyes.

She was – we found out very late. She was in the shower. She felt this lump. You don't know how late. I'm sorry. I'm way off subject here.

“You're okay,” says Ms. Sharp, and it is the only time you have seen her smile in class.

She was twenty weeks along, you say. We didn't know . . . my wife – my girlfriend – she wrote a paper on fetal alcohol syndrome – we'd been drinking – some, not a lot. It was wine. To celebrate. Just – things. Us. The drinking age was only 18 back then.

“We know,” says Ms. West.

Maybe we should get back to the text, you say. Maybe you don't want to hear this.

Mr. Lopez nods at you. His first paper was something you destroyed. *Boring*, you said of his first paragraph. *Bleh*, you said of his conclusion. *This*, you said, circling something in the second paragraph, *this is the most interesting thing you've got to say*.

Mr. Lopez is nodding. Go on, go on.

Ms. Cain is looking up at you with immense black eyes.

We thought – we didn't know what to do. I need to revise all this, you think. It's a first draft. You shudder. You cross your arms tightly across your chest. We thought it might be deformed. We didn't know how far along it was. We didn't know anything.

“Oh my God,” says Ms. Custer from the back row.

“You just about finished there?” The waitress glances up at the wall where there is apparently a clock of some sort, perhaps a metaphysical clock. You nod, too caught up

in raisin bread toast to speak. She slides a tab under your refilled coffee mug, splattering it.

“Was this before Roe versus Wade?” asks Mr. Lindsey. It is clear that he is going to fail this class, now, but at that moment you didn't know he was not going to turn in his midterm portfolio.

This was well after Roe and Wade, you say, this was 1981, and the class stirs uncomfortably. You want to return to a deconstructive analysis of the essay, the photographer who gave up the image for the word, a deconstructive act itself. You'd like to whiteboard the waves of literary criticism: classicism, romanticism, modernism. Structuralism, post-structuralism. Deconstruction. Some of their essays feel deconstructed. It's as if they're arguing from outlines already. Does the world even exist for them?

Does anybody know what a fetus looks like at 20 weeks, you ask.

“I was a premie,” says Ms. Leben. She is the big girl in the second row who's always hitting you up for help on breaking her five paragraph dependency.

How early, you ask. You're trembling. You shove your hands inside the pockets of your jeans.

“I was pretty early.” She laughs, and the girls around her all laugh too. One of them, Ms. Lowe from the next row, the skinny one, taps her on the shoulder as if to say, hey, you're bigger than me!

What's the normal gestation time for a human, you continue. You're chasing this

rabbit back to its hole mercilessly, as you advise the students. Keep asking why. Keep digging deep. Keep following that thread or that thesis or that idea or that argument or that thing you noticed. Where does it lead?

No one says anything.

Nine months, right? you say. What's nine months, thirty-six, thirty-eight weeks, right? Forty weeks, more or less?

The girls are nodding their heads. The only guy nodding his head is Mr. Broom.

It was twenty weeks old.

“Swallow these,” says the nurse, handing your girlfriend two blue tablets and a small cup of water.

“What's that?” you ask from the side of the hospital bed, your hands tight on the metal rail.

“It will start the process,” says the nurse. “Then we'll come in with a saline injection to start the contractions.”

“How long will it take?” you ask. Your voice is shaky. You both slept in the car last night, a friend's car, in a quiet parking lot surrounded by tall pine trees, at an office building you found somewhere late, driving around the outskirts of Atlanta.

“It will take about two hours for these to kick in,” says the nurse, grimacing. “It's reversible, up to the saline. You have some time to think about it.”

You look at your girlfriend. *There is still time*, your eyes say. Her eyes say it too.

The doctor comes in. Something in the rhythm of her footsteps makes you lift

your forehead from the metal rail. You shake your girlfriend's shoulders gently. She looks up as the doctor hands her some x-rays. "Did you know you have a cyst on your ovary?" asks the doctor.

"It's not a baby?" Your girlfriend sits suddenly up, leaning toward the doctor.

The doctor's eyes go to the window for a long moment and when they return they are glassy. "You're pregnant, and you have a cyst," says the doctor. She points to some gray patch on the x-ray. But your eyes are transfixed by the tiny, ghostly skull, far up near the ribs, a ghostly spine curving down, ghostly limbs curled up as if in sleep and prayer. You look down and see your girlfriend's eyes devouring the skeletal image, memorizing it. You put your hand on her cheek and she clutches it there.

"A – cyst?" says your girlfriend. "Was that what I felt?"

The doctor knows nothing of that moment in the shower, the off-campus house with four co-eds. She shakes her head. "You couldn't feel this. You couldn't detect it in any way. You wouldn't know it was there, unless . . ." Her eyes moved across the image. "We wouldn't have taken this x-ray if you were carrying to term. There's too much risk to the fetus."

"What do I need to do?"

"This needs to come out. It's the size of a fist." The doctor hesitates. "They're likely going to have to take the ovary, too. There's no . . . You know there's no guarantee your other ovary is functional."

I was there when it was – when it happened. You're looking at the cinderblock

walls as if they are all the people you have known.

“But would you be here if you hadn't done that?” asks Mr. Broom.

Would I be here, you repeat. You look at the upturned faces and are crushed by all the mistakes you've made in this class.

“Now push,” says the nurse. Her voice is mournful. Your girlfriend's torso tenses and she passes gas. “Not down there,” says the nurse. “Up here.”

“She's trying,” you say. “She doesn't know what she's doing. How is she to know?”

She squeezes your hand. Her eyes are closed. Something changes.

“That's right,” says the nurse. “Just push it on out. Really hard now.”

“Owww,” she says, and her forehead wrinkles up. “It hurts so much.”

There is a sloppy, sucking sound, and the nurse is suddenly busy with something.

“Are you all right?” you ask your girlfriend, mopping her forehead with a dampened washcloth you brought with you. You're not looking down there below her hips. “Are you all right? It's done. It's over.” But your eyes are drawn to it. It has two arms, two legs. It has a tiny head. It's surprisingly large – as big as your hand. *Twenty weeks*, you think, but you know nothing about twenty weeks.

“What was it?” you ask the nurse.

The nurse looks at you.

“Was it a girl?” you ask.

The nurse looks down at the pink thing on the green absorbent paper. “A boy,”

she says.

“What are you going to do with it?” you breathe.

“Going out with the garbage,” the nurse says. A moment later she brings your girlfriend a cup of water.

Would I be here? Probably not. The question astounds you in its opacity.

Mr. Broom nods, as if satisfied, as if the problem were this easily decided. As if the present moment is some kind of absolution. Your anger is surprising. You search the back of the class for Ms. Sharp and you’re looking for your wife, eyes half-shuttered.

“It’s over now,” you tell her. “Everything is going to be all right.” You’re a liar.

Nothing is ever going to be all right.

She lies on her side now, and doesn’t look at you. Her eyes are open and she’s looking at the blank wall of the hospital, a second floor, somewhere in Atlanta.

Your wife would have made it through school, you know now.

It is *you* who were at risk.

The class is stirring. Mr. Broom is satisfied.

But maybe he would be here, you snap, and stop. It’s pointless. You’ve lost them again. Somewhere that telescope moment has collapsed and you are stranded in a classroom on the second floor of a place you hardly know.

How did you *get* here?

“I left a tip on the table,” you say. “Is Visa okay?”

“That's fine, hon,” says the waitress.

“Some rain,” you say.

“About time,” says the waitress. “Here's your copy.” She pushes a pen toward you.

“You must be ready to take a break,” you say. “Quitting time, right?”

“Lord, you got that right,” she cackles. “Just sink down in my jet tub and soak out the grease! But I got my next job to get to. I got bills to pay!” She looks at you hard, her eyes unblinking behind her glasses.

“I know what you mean,” you say, hefting the satchel under your arm. It's full of student papers. You turn away.

Everything is going invisible.

“But your wife works at the hospital, didn't you say that?” It's Ms. Bradford, silent until now. “If you had kept it, would she be there today?”

I don't know where she would be.

“But it was her body,” continues Ms. Bradford, who struggles against the entire idea of revision, as if it is some freak waste of time.

I persuaded her.

A noise like a silence curls up into the classroom. You're stumbling over the surface of the moon, for all you know.

You realize there is one more thing you have to say.

My wife – my girlfriend – had a growth on her ovary. It was a cyst. If she hadn't been pregnant, it wouldn't have been found. Not until much later. Maybe too late, who knows. Her mother died of cancer. When they took out the cyst, they took out her ovary.

“You have kids?” someone asks.

Two, you say, and that is all you can say in this displaced place.

“The rain is really coming down, hon. Cover up!” You push through the closed door and now you can see it up close. Those herringbone patterns have whirled up moisture from the Gulf of Mexico, a sort of stagnant moisture like wet carpets drying out, and brought it to this place. You hear that New Orleans will be under water soon, a couple of decades, maybe, and you think this upland interior will not be far behind. Where does the water go, in this place? You wonder about the great inland sea, the time it takes to build fossils. You’re already thinking of it that way. There's not really any sense of duality about the arrow of time, not even in this revision moment, not even now, in this tiny, perpetual, self-seeding instability.

Your car is right there, under the sign, Jimmy’s Egg. You told your students you would be in the library at one, for meetings, in case somebody needed to see you about these papers – Ms. Leben certainly – and it's already past two. You look at the registrar's note.

Perhaps it is in fact a mistake, it’s not a matter of success and failure, and you realize you were thinking about it in those terms, success and failure, you’ve always been

thinking about it in those terms, polarities, one privileged, one not. Perhaps Mr. Lawry –

His name was Justin. He had lost his father, this Justin L. Lawry. He lost his girlfriend in August. It was all in his first essay, his only essay. It was in his dark eyes over a conference table in the library. He didn't know what he wanted to major in. He carried twelve hours of classes.

Twelve hours, you think, balancing them in your hands, twelve hours, twenty weeks. You think of time forward, time backward, time in motion, and motion itself a privilege. You take away motion and time itself is a moment, time is a standstill. You're at a standstill, and you force yourself to move again, out into the rain.

It's a cold rain, this Gulf water, but you lift your face to it, a little, and you can already taste the salt in it. The oceans are coming back, you think, and they have been back. They've always been back. They're here. The fossils are forming, tiny fossils, and perhaps they're not fossils, they're bones, and through the asphalt skin of the parking lot you can see them, rising, risen. Perhaps the bones have a name, a name like Justin Lawry, a young man who worked forty hours a week at some restaurant. Not this restaurant, you now know.

But perhaps they don't have a name, these bones. Perhaps they're not bones.

You put your key into the lock on your car door and wonder what time it is, because there's an urgency upon you, there are things that have to be done. There's not much time left, you think, and you catch yourself, because there is all the time left, there has always been all the time left. It has not gone anywhere. There is nowhere for it to go.

Steppin' Stone

On an April day in 1968, in the town of Vinington, Georgia, my bike-riding friend Kim DeLong turned nine. I didn't know it was her birthday until my mama called me to the front door.

“Warren! I think your little friend is out front!” There was something in Mama's voice that made my ears turn red, but all I said to her was “okay” and I pushed through the screen door and ran out the short walk to the street. “Be home by six! For supper!” Mama shouted.

Kim's eyes were dark and her face was pale. “That's your mother?” she said, then “Look what I got for my birthday,” and got off her bike and angled it toward me. It was a banana seat, brand new and yellow. “Would you like to ride it?”

“Um,” I said. It was a girl's bike. A yellow one. “It's your birthday?” She nodded, and I told her to wait, I'd be right back, and ran back inside our house.

I came back out a minute later with something in my pocket. Kim had already started down the street and I had to get on my bike to catch up with her. It didn't take me

long because Kim always rode slow.

“You didn’t have to ride it,” she said, “I just wanted to show it to you.” She was a little mad at me.

We rode the sidewalk because the street was busy, and we rode downhill because it was the fastest. The sidewalk heaved up and down over tree roots. I had learned to ride up on the pedals, letting the bike rise and fall beneath me in a natural way. If you stayed in a straight line the bike went faster, and if you stayed to the left edge of the sidewalk you could stay in a mostly straight line. I was always looking for a faster line. My ears cooled down as the air rushed past them until I was able to forget about the way Mama had looked at me when I ran out the door to Kim. We rode all the way downhill to the railroad track.

The railroad track was a rough crossing for a bike. There were splintered cross-ties and railroad spikes and tar and tobacco spit, and we’d been told not to go past it, so that’s where I waited for Kim. Deddy had seen her in the store once and told me to always treat her like a little lady, and his voice was gentle when he said it, so I tried to treat her gentle like Deddy’s voice had been. I waited for her to catch up with me at the railroad tracks because Kim went slower. She rode downhill with her feet on the brakes. She was quiet at school in the same way, like she always kept the brakes on about what she might say. Our teachers thought she was slow. I thought she was very smart. We crossed the street and rode the other sidewalk back uphill to her house. I sometimes rode the uphill fast too, until my knees felt like they were hinged across a red-hot pencil. But with Kim I slowed down on the uphill because it put her out of breath.

In front of her house we stopped and talked for a while. I rested my feet in the thick, cool grass next to her sidewalk while her breathing slowed down. Usually she was tired and had to go inside when we got back to her house, but that day she said she wanted to ride some more.

Up at the very top of the hill was an old house, older and bigger than Kim's house, though not with good grass. It was set back from the street. A rutted dirt drive climbed up to a sagging porch I never saw anyone sitting on. We couldn't ride past that house at the top of the hill because the street became a bridge that went across the valley below. Kim's mother wouldn't let her cross the bridge. Down at the bottom of the hill the highway department was building a new road. They called it a freeway, the interstate system. Deddy called it the outerstate system, and he said it was a waste of our Georgia tax dollars. Kim and I rode to the top of the hill and stopped there, looking down at the gravel trucks and the tarring machines and the tar-splattered men that shoveled crumbly black asphalt behind them. They made a lot of racket and a lot of smell.

Kim was wearing saddleback shoes, like she always did, white with the brown middles, and white socks with lace trim. She stood there, one foot on the sidewalk and the other foot on the pedals, looking down at the commotion in the valley below. I asked her if she thought the big house was haunted.

"Every house is haunted," she told me. "Are you going with anybody?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, but my ears were already burning. Mary Kitchens had already asked me that question, at recess on the grassy hill outside the school, and then she asked me to go with her. I told her no and she cried. She wanted to know what

was wrong with her. There was nothing wrong with Mary. I liked her a lot. But I didn't want to smoke, and that was what Deddy and Mama did when they went out, and that was all I knew about going with somebody. When they smoked, I couldn't breathe. I had to keep my window open. Some nights I slept with my head on the window sill. Even in the winter.

So I just looked at Kim and played dumb. I didn't want her to cry.

Kim's eyes dashed at me, hot and suddenly damp, like I had slapped her in the mouth. But her voice was quiet. Her voice was always quiet.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" she asked, twisting her finger through the silver streamers on her handlebar.

I thought about something Deddy had said. He had said, *I don't believe in miracles*, one day when him and Mama were talking about the store.

"I don't believe in girlfriends," I said to Kim. My face was all numb.

"You don't like me?" asked Kim, and her voice was tiny. She looked down at her feet. "Is it because I wear shoes?"

I didn't know what to say to that, so I reached into my pocket and took out the thing I had run back into the house to get. "Hold out your hand," I said, and put it into Kim's open palm.

"What's that?" she asked, looking at it as if I had given her a rock.

"It's for your birthday," I said. "It's a Johnny Lightning. It's a car."

"Oh," she said, looking at the thing in her hand. "Boys play with these."

My ears were on fire. "It's an Eldorado Special. It's really fast. It has mag

wheels.”

“It looks fast,” she said, “but if you don’t like me I can’t keep it,” and she handed the Eldorado Special back to me. I was glad to get it back but at the same time I didn’t understand why it felt so bad.

“I like your shoes,” I said, putting the car back in my pocket. “They’re pretty.”

“They’re corrective shoes,” she said. “I take them off sometimes.”

“I’m just not ready yet,” I said, but I wasn’t thinking about her shoes. I was looking down at the men working on the interstate system.

“Well, if *that’s* all--” said Kim, and she reached out and took my hand, like it was as easy as banana pie.

Her hand felt small and hot. It was not like shaking hands.

“What’s the matter? What are you scared of?” she asked.

“What—what do we do now?” I asked, miserable. I didn’t want to smoke.

“Silly. The same thing we always do. Ride bikes,” she said. And she abruptly put her head down on my shoulder, against my neck, and sighed. It was a little sound. It was small. I could feel her breath.

I put my arm around her. She shrugged it off. I was relieved.

“Do we have to kiss?” I said. The breeze was lifting her hair into my face. I brushed it away.

“Not yet,” she said, raising her head and looking up at me. “You’re not my first boyfriend.”

“Let’s ride bikes,” I suggested.

“No, not yet,” she said. “Let’s just hold hands.”

“Somebody might see us,” I worried.

“Oh,” she said. “That’s funny.”

* * *

None of my friends saw us that day, or if they did they never said anything about it, which meant they didn’t see us. None of my friends knew Kim too well. She didn’t stay in Vinington in the summers. I didn’t understand that, except I had cousins who kept moving around. But they never moved away from somewhere just for the summer.

* * *

As soon as school got out for the summer, I rode by Kim’s house every day, even when it was raining. “Warren!” my Mama would say. “Good heavens to Murgatroyd! Have you been riding your bike in the *rain*?!” Mama was always fearful of lightning strikes. She made me stay away from windows when it stormed, but I would sneak back to the windows when she was busy and put my nose on the windowsill just to breathe the air.

Mama was working and it was raining the day I finally lifted the latch on the gate at Kim’s house and walked up to the front door. A thin old lady answered it. She had on a red coat. She was holding a cigarette up beside her ear.

“Can I help you?” she asked. Her nose was sharp and her back was straight.

“Is Kim home?” My voice was squeaky. I had felt brave in the rain but Kim’s front porch was a small brick patio with columns and a roof overhead. There was soft deep green moss in the cracks between the bricks. They had a large and beautiful wreath

here at Christmastime. Behind the thin lady I could see a wooden floor. It reflected light from the windows. It shone.

“And who are you?” said the lady. She took a deep draw on the cigarette and her eyes crinkled down at me.

I turned and ran.

* * *

I asked my friend Brett to go up to the door and ask where Kim was and when she was coming back. I had to give him three Johnny Lightnings. I waited down the street with our bikes. He was gone a lot longer than I thought it would take.

“She’s with her parents in Decatur,” Brett said when he got back. His neck was red. He was mad about something. “She’s coming back for school in the fall.”

“Who is the old lady?” I asked him.

“I think it’s her aunt,” he said. He grabbed my shirt sleeve. “I’m going to beat you up,” he said. “She asked me if I was Kim’s *little boyfriend*. She invited me inside. I had to go *inside*.”

“What was it like?” I asked, but Brett was grinning so I changed my question. “What did you tell her?”

“I told her you had a crush on her.” He let go of my shirt.

“You told her I had a crush on Kim?” I was feeling sick.

“No.” Brett was laughing so hard he could barely talk. “I told Kim’s aunt you had a crush on *her*.” He pushed me back and tripped me over a tree root, and ran for his bike. He knew I would wreck him if I caught up with him. I could wreck anybody. But at the

top of the hill he went on across the bridge and I stopped. If I chased him too long he'd have known it was because I liked Kim a lot.

* * *

I was afraid to go see him for a while after that, because of what he would say. But he was just about the best friend I had, and he didn't say anything else about it. I could tell he was thinking about things and I figured he would get me to help him out with a girl problem when his time came.

I was at Brett's house a lot that summer. I rode my bike to a lot of my friends' houses, but I rode to Brett's house the most. His house was big, but unlike Kim's house it was all on one level. It didn't have any second story. It was on a corner between two streets and it had a very large yard. We could play plastic ball or throw the football as far as we could without getting it in the road or someone else's yard.

I knew all my friends' yards by the way they felt under my feet. Gordon's grass stayed worn out because of all the peanut football games we had there. Ricky and Johnny got up baseball games down at the field, and they let me play barefoot but sometimes there was bottle glass on the field. If we got there and the field was unmowed Ricky would complain, because we lost baseballs in the tall grass. So the first thing we would do when we got to the field was look for orphan baseballs, and I would look for the places with broken glass and stay away from them.

Wherever I ended up at, I stayed until supper or dark or until Mama called. I knew my phone number, I'd had to learn it in second grade, but I never called home. Mama always found me. *Warren! Your mama says to get your fanny on home right now!*

I never stayed much longer. Once I got to my bike I would ride as fast as I could to home. Mama would switch me sometimes if I was late and missed the blessing, because Deddy had to close the store to come home and eat with us. He didn't have time for me to dawdle. A closed store meant no money coming in.

* * *

Deddy saved back silver from the till. The government had just changed all the money over so there wasn't no silver left in it. Deddy said it was a sign we were going to war soon, and the silver would be more valuable than the coin, like when they made the pennies of steel in the second world war to save on copper. Now everything was copper nickel, but people still brought in old silver. They spent it like it was just regular money. Especially the colored people.

"They don't know what they got," said Deddy, showing me a strange two dollar bill one day. "Silver certificate," he said, pointing to the words. "But with the country going bankrupt maybe the coloreds have the right idea about paper money. They don't believe in it. It ain't backed by nothing except the good faith of Uncle Sam."

He started collecting wheaties, next. They were the Lincoln pennies with the wheat on the back. The new pennies had the Lincoln Memorial on the back. "Because of the coloreds," he said. "The wheaties will be worth something too, one day. Maybe when I'm an old man, son." He saved the wheaties in a separate jar from the silver. He kept them in his bedroom closet. "My retirement fund," he said with a wink.

* * *

I was in the store a lot, that summer, because Mama worked a lot there and she

didn't want me at home alone. She fried hamburgers up on the grill or cut onions in the little step-down room in the back. I liked to sit on the step and watch her chop the onions but it made my eyes cry. "I purely love me some green scallions with salt," she'd say. "When I helped my daddy in the garden he'd let me pull up a small onion, wash off the dirt, cut off the end of it, like this, put some salt on it, and eat it like an apple." She'd clear her throat. "Or some sweet Vidalias, but these store-bought onions, shoo! They are so sour, I don't see how these people *stand* them!" And she'd ask me about my homework, and talk to me about church people. When she was done chopping onions she would wash her hands and wipe her eyes on the towel and go on back up to the cash register at the counter. Mama worked up front most of the time.

Deddy did all the stuff that nobody saw. He cleaned out the grease pit and rewired the electricity. He trimmed the bushes out front and got new gravel brought in for the parking lot, and he talked to the plumber about the bathroom and when the price was too high he got in and fixed things himself. He talked to the bread man and the milk man, the Bama Pie man and the Dolly Madison man. He also talked to the Budweiser man and the Coca-Cola man. He liked to joke with them and sometimes they would give me something and talk to me a little bit while they checked their clipboards. The man who brought Honey Buns would always throw me one. He called me Brushie or Bristle Brush for the way my hair stuck up in a cowlick. I liked when they talked to me because Deddy was usually too busy to talk. He was always greasy from something and he had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth so I tried to stay out of his way.

* * *

When school started in the fall it was different. It was integrated, and I didn't like it. The colored boys smelled bad, and most of the colored girls did too. It wasn't like the onions, it was more like they hadn't been washed in a bathtub, or like they had been lying in smoke all night. Sometimes they smelled like matches. I was scared of them.

"Watch out for them nigras," said my Uncle Humpy at our Labor Day family reunion, "they'll steal all you got and sell it to the gypsies. You don't have any niggra friends, do you, boy?"

"No sir," I told him.

"That's good. The whiter the better," he said, and went back to his pipe.

Something about the set of his jaw made me worry about Kim. She was white, but was she white enough for Uncle Humpy? My stomach always tingled when I thought of her. When I pictured her as a colored girl, my stomach didn't stop tingling.

The only colored boy who was ever mean to me was Willie Smith. A week after Labor Day he hooked a rough finger in my shirt collar while we were waiting for the rural route school bus to take us home. "You ain't shit," he said. He told me he was going to beat me up so bad my mama wouldn't be able to get the blood out of my shirt and then she'd beat me for ruining it. Willie was shorter than I was, but I ran faster than he did. He laughed at me whenever he saw me after that. I was afraid he'd bring some friends and surround me one day.

But Willie didn't have any friends. The colored boys didn't like him any better than I did. I didn't know that until Sam told me. Sam was one of the biggest boys in 5th grade.

* * *

“He ain’t nothing but jive talk,” Sam said in the lunchroom one day.

I dumped the untouched food on my tray into the trash. Sam’s eyes followed it. I felt bad when I realized he had cleared off his own tray. “Willie don’t scare me,” I said. “What is jive talk?”

“Aw, you know, jive talk. Smoke.” He waved his hand in a motion through the air, and it was like dancing. Sometimes the colored boys would move in a way that I just had to stop and watch them. Sometimes I’d spy on them to hear how they talked. Sam was like that. I wanted to take a tape recorder of him talking and listen to it over and over. Sometimes I practiced talking like that, out behind the store, where nobody could hear me, but that was later.

Sam told me if Willie bothered me again, just let him know. I didn’t think I was supposed to take help from a colored boy, so I just nodded.

“Why does Willie do that?” I asked. We were walking in a line back to the classroom. We could walk together but we had to sit apart. The school didn’t want no trouble. “Why don’t he study his spelling?”

“Cause he ain’t have no spelling book. He goes home and gets whapped every day cause they ain’t got *nothing*, and they ain’t got any way to *get* nothing.” Sam spat on the floor then rubbed it out with his shoe, looking around to see if our teacher had noticed. She hadn’t.

* * *

After two weeks, Kim still wasn’t in school. I thought she must still be in Decatur.

Then one day on a Saturday I saw her coming out the front door of her house in a pretty dress. Her aunt was behind her. Kim looked sad. But she still wore her saddleback shoes. I sat on the other side of the street on my bike, behind a big oak tree, and watched her and her aunt go to the carport. Kim's head was down. I waved, but she didn't see me.

The next day I kept riding back and forth in front of her house, hoping she would come outside, but the front porch light was on, which meant no one was at home. I was late to supper that night and got a whipping. I didn't care. I was just glad that Kim was back.

But the weather had gotten cold the next time I saw Kim again. I was wearing my coat and looking for flattened out pennies on the railroad track. The railroad track was at the bottom of the hill, on the other side of the hill from the interstate. One time I had put a broken Johnny Lightning there to see if the train would smash it flat like in the cartoons. But when I came back the little car was gone. I never found it.

"Hi, Warren," came a familiar voice behind me. I looked back and there was Kim riding up on her bike. She stopped and put her foot down on the ground, and then broke into the biggest smile I ever saw on her. My stomach flip flopped, and I asked her why she wasn't in school.

She said she'd been in Decatur during the summer, and when she came back her aunt put her in a different school. A private school. I told her my Deddy said those were expensive. Kim asked me about him. "My Deddy?" I asked. She nodded. So we crossed the street and rode up the hill to the top, and I told her about my Deddy.

I told her he was skinny and strong, and he smoked a lot and he had the store. He

worked at the store all the time. He didn't get no time off at the end of the afternoon. Sometimes he came home to eat supper. Sometimes he took us to Florida. She asked me what I liked the most about Deddy, so I thought about it for a while, then I told her about Halloweens.

* * *

Deddy would take me trick-or-treating, but not on our street. The Olds 88 would puff its warm, sweet exhaust a little ways up the street, and I would follow its red tail lights until I came to the stop sign.

"Had enough?" Deddy would say, leaning over on the seat and holding the passenger door open enough to talk.

I'd look in my paper pumpkin, torn by the sharp corners of Cracker Jack boxes, and shake my head.

"Want to sit in the car and warm up a while?" he'd say, and I'd pull the big green door open, and put my red, chapped hands up by dashboard vents until I could bend them again. Then he'd wipe my nose with his handkerchief and I'd be out the door and down the next street.

I asked him once why not our street.

"Busy street," he said.

* * *

"That's a great story," said Kim. Her eyes were wet.

I asked her if she wanted to go trick-or-treating with us next month, and she said she couldn't. I thought she was afraid of Deddy, or maybe she couldn't breathe the smoke

either. So I told her how he saw us riding our bikes one day when he was on his way home from the store, and after that he told me to always treat her like a lady. She turned a little bit pink. She asked what Deddy knew about her father – not her daddy, her “father” – and I said nothing as far as I knew. I asked her if her father lived in Decatur, and she didn’t answer. After a while she pointed down in the valley where the road construction men were still at work. She asked if they ever came to the store, and what they were like.

I told her that a lot of the men who worked on the tarring machines and the oil trucks at the bottom of the hill came in to buy cigarettes and beer. They said we had the cheapest cigarettes. Mama and Deddy had fought about it. Mama said we needed to charge more for them. Deddy said as long as we were breaking even it was okay, because the men would buy other things while they were inside the store, and I think they did. I always got my homework done quick at the store, because I didn’t like the smell of cigarette smoke out front or onions out back. Sometimes Mama took me home to let me work on my model cars or play with my Johnny Lightnings or ride my bike or read comic books while she fixed supper. We ate in the store most of the time but Mama didn’t like it because there were always people coming in and you had to keep an eye out on them. Deddy said people would gyp you blind if you let them. He said they would smile to your face and rob you blind behind your back. He said the utility companies were doing it to us, but I didn’t know what he meant by that. I told her all this while she listened quietly. Kim always asked me a lot about my Deddy. She didn’t ask too much about Mama.

Kim didn’t try to hold my hand, that day at the top of the hill, and I wondered if it was because she had got a new boyfriend in Decatur or at the private school. Maybe it

was a boy who was whiter than me. She kept her hands in the pockets of her white coat. The coat had fur on it, so I asked her what it was made of, and she said it was rabbits, like her ear muffs. She held out her ear muffs and let me try them on. They were soft. Before I gave them back to her, I put them up to my nose and breathed real deep. She asked me what I was doing. I said her ear muffs smelled nice. It was because they smelled like her hair, I said.

Kim smiled, finally. She said she couldn't ride much in the winter because her aunt wouldn't let her. But she asked me if I would promise to come to her next birthday party.

I thought about her aunt and I wasn't sure.

"Aunt Iris likes it when boys wear shirts like yours." She plucked at my collar and tugged my top button. "But will you please wear shoes?"

* * *

I didn't see Kim outside the rest of the winter. I wondered if she'd gotten in trouble for going bike riding with me in the cold, or maybe she'd gotten her rabbit coat dirty.

But I did see her again, not long after Halloween.

Mama knocked on my open door. Her face was a bunch of questions, one inside the other.

"Kim DeLong's aunt just called," she said. "Kim wants to know if you'd like to go to a horror movie with them. Is that the little girl down the street?"

The Purple People Eater was on its side, axles up, waiting for chrome wheels. I

put the cap on the plastic cement. I didn't know what to say. I just looked at Mama.

"Warren! Has the cat got your tongue?" Mama tilted her head. "Kim DeLong invited you to a movie. Do you want to go?" Her eyebrows were raised in high arches.

I looked down at the model car kit. It was purple, my favorite color. Two minutes ago it was the best model car kit I ever had.

Kim's *aunt* had called my *mama*? My stomach would not stop doing flip flops.

"Yes ma'am," I said, at last, and the chrome wheel in my hand was just a toy. Purple was just a color. I had the strongest feeling that I had been just plain wasting my time on these cars.

"Warren. A horror movie?" Mama was still looking at me. I noticed she had a laundry basket in her hand. "Little Kim down the street?"

"I ride bikes with her," I said.

"You get nightmares when you see us watching *Dragnet*. Are you sure about this?"

"Yes ma'am." I looked down and pretended to remember that I knew what I was doing with the wheel.

Mama didn't move from the door. "Do you want to talk to her aunt?"

Did I want to talk to Kim's aunt?

"No! Ma'am."

"Well. I'll call her back and find out what time." She looked at the newspapers spread out on the floor, the model car parts scattered on the newspaper. She sniffed. "A horror movie. Great day in the morning. Supper is almost ready. Get yourself washed

up.”

“Yes ma’am.”

* * *

It was Kim’s Brownie troop, and Kim’s aunt was its leader. I sat between her and Kim on the front seat, and the other three Brownie girls sat in the back seat. I didn’t know any of them, and from the way they acted, I didn’t want to. When we got to the movie theater, we sat the same way, except that the three girls sat in the row in front of us with their Brownie berets on, and Kim’s aunt, me, and Kim sat behind.

After the cartoon previews, I told Kim if she got scared don’t hold my hand, not here. Not in front of everybody. She looked at me and didn’t say anything. Instead she reached down under the armrest and grabbed my pants pocket and she held on so tight I was afraid she was going to rip my pants right off.

The movie was “Brides of Dracula.” When it got really scary Kim leaned into me and stuck her hand down into my pocket and grabbed my leg in a vise grip. Her fingernails dug in, but I stayed quiet, because you don’t make a scared lady let go of you. But just as Dracula put his teeth on some old lady’s neck, Kim’s hand clenched up into a hard fist and my pocket suddenly ripped open inside my pants leg. My loose change fell out past the seat cushion and began rolling slowly across the slanting wooden floor up to the front. It sounded louder than a bunch of marbles rolling together across my bedroom floor. I knew I should go get it. I didn’t.

Instead I put my hand in my torn pocket and held Kim’s fist until it relaxed and she took my hand in hers. She put her head down on my shoulder. The girls in front of us

whispered together and giggled. Kim's aunt sniffed loudly, but stared straight ahead. The movie gave me nightmares for years. Sometimes in the summer I felt like I had to close my window at night so the bats couldn't get in. And I only slept right in storms, because vampires were afraid of lightning.

* * *

Sometime after Thanksgiving, Sam, the colored boy from school, came to the store to answer Mama's help-wanted ad. Mama and Deddy were quiet during supper, except to ask me if I knew Sam from school. I told them how Sam had stood up for me once when another colored boy was bothering me.

Deddy finished eating and went back to work, and I was still awake in my room when he came home again that night after closing the store. He put a new Johnny Lightning – a Jackrabbit Special – under my pillow and then him and Mama stayed up arguing about Sam a long time. Deddy was afraid if we got Sam it would drive the white people away. People would think the food was dirty. Mama said Sam didn't have to work the grill. She said it would encourage more colored people to come to the store. She could get Sam some clothes from the same shop where she got mine. Deddy said the whole point of hiring some help was so she didn't have to work no more. He said she was expecting, and she needed to get off her feet and take care of herself more.

But they hired Sam. And when Sam came in, I discovered the jukebox.

* * *

Deddy had had it for a long time, since we first got the store when I was eight. But it always played country music and songs from the Gospel Jubilee. When Sam came

in, I found out the jukebox had other songs. I had watched their names on the yellow, and red, and black labels on the 45 rpm records, and I liked to watch as the records spun around in the tray and an arm lifted one of them out and put it on a platter, then another arm came over and set down and started playing the song. People would usually put a nickel in when they waited for their hamburger. If the store had been quiet for a long time, Deddy opened the till and got some money and played some Johnny Cash except Sundays, when he played the gospel.

Deddy said it was against the Lord's word to be working on Sundays but he couldn't afford to close the store the whole day. He tried it different ways – closing all day, closing until church was over, closing at suppertime. The only way he could make ends meet, he said, the only way to get a little ahead, was to stay open all day. Mama told him he was burning the candle at both ends. She told him the store was taking over their lives, and the Lord surely could not be happy with that. But now they had to pay Sam, too.

Deddy finally closed down the grill on Sundays, though he said people complained because they liked Mama's hamburgers and her french fries she made in bacon grease. With the grill closed he could watch the store himself on Sunday. Mama and me would go and give him a break after church. Sometimes we'd go to Sunday school and rush to the store in time for him to go straight to church. He was always late, though, so he looked around for different churches that started the sermon later. Mama was not happy about that either. She said there was no point in them belonging to two different churches. They solved the problem by giving Sam Sundays off and Deddy going

to Sunday night church service. The only problem was it made our Sunday dinners hurried.

Sam didn't want to have Sundays off. He told me one day, standing in his white apron, stamping purple prices into the canned food, that he was going to have to find him a different job. He only had two whole days during the week that he could work, and Sunday was one of those. I begged him to stay, because of "Steppin' Stone."

* * *

I had heard the song before. But until I was in the store next to the jukebox, I had never heard the bass sound that starts it. It sounded like a big motor cranking up – something like the rumbling of an SS 396. I felt it like it was an engine strapped to my back when I kicked up the kickstand of my bike and took off. *I – I – I – I – I'm not your steppin' stone.* There was something mad in the singer's voice too, something about a nice boy and a mean girl. I begged Sam to play me that song every day after school.

"I'm supposed to be working," he'd say, looking around for Deddy. "If you hear it once, I know you going to have to hear it five times. You got a quarter?"

And then I'd be crushed, because I didn't have any quarters. I got some allowance money every week. But I spent it on Johnny Lightnings and model kits.

But Sam and I figured out how to play that song a lot.

* * *

When the springtime started coming with the warm weather, and I hadn't seen Kim since the horror movie, I worried that I was going to miss her birthday party. I knew I couldn't miss that. If I did, it would mean that I was being mean, like the girl in the

song.

I could have asked my Mama to call Kim's aunt, but then I would have to speak to Kim's aunt, and she thought I had a crush on her. I couldn't ask Brett to do it again, and I didn't have any other friends I would trust with it. I decided to sneak into Kim's yard and leave a note. I couldn't put it in the mailbox because then Kim's aunt would surely get it.

We had gotten home from the store, and Mama was making supper, so I had a few minutes. It was still early spring, and daylight savings time had just started, so it was dark already. Best of all, it was cloudy and windy. A storm was on the way.

Instead of riding my bike – Mama said the metal attracts lightning – I waited for a break in traffic and ran across the street in front of my house. I ran down the sidewalk at first and then I slowed down to a walk, like it was just a regular walk outside in case anybody saw me. It was a busy street. I got close to Kim's house and I bent down to the ground like I was looking at something, and waited for a break in traffic. Cars had their headlights on. When I couldn't feel any lights on me from either direction, I went to where the fence ended at a magnolia. Nobody else had a fence in the front yard. Kim's was painted black metal. I knew it was painted because it had some rust in some places.

When I got underneath the magnolia, I saw that the fence didn't really end there. It turned the corner and went back down between Kim's house and their neighbor's. But the magnolia's limbs had bent it and twisted pieces of the railing so I was able to climb through it pretty easy. The rust cut into my hands. It had not been painted under the magnolia for a long, long time.

A light was on in the back corner of the house at a low window so I went right to it. Kim didn't have a dog. The neighbors did but I guessed the wind was blowing the right way so it couldn't smell me. I went around the patio furniture and came up close to the window and looked in. There was a piano in the corner, an upright piano like we had at church. Beside it, on a low coffee table, were some blue Whitman's coin folders. I recognized the Lincoln penny one because Brett was working on a penny collection for his Webelos merit badge. And then I saw Kim.

She was sitting on the piano bench but she was turned away from the piano and was facing toward the window. I started to wave at her then I saw that she was crying. I moved a little farther and saw that her aunt was standing over her.

I ducked my head under the sill to wait until her aunt was gone. The wind dropped, and I worried. If the dog next door smelled me and started barking I'd have to run for it. I was also curious I guess to know what Kim had done to get in trouble and get a talking to like that. I waited there for a minute, and I became aware that my feet were standing in the thickest, softest grass I'd ever felt. I reached down to run my hands through it and just then the window slid up above me. I froze. The window went all the way up and a hand propped it up with a piece of a broomstick and I heard a voice right above my head. I thought for a split second it was talking to me.

“—sooner we get back to Decatur the better. The school year cannot be over soon enough, as far as I'm concerned. In the meanwhile you are going to work extra hard on your lessons. Do you understand, Miss Priss?” The voice turned away and I risked sneaking a look through the window.

Kim was looking down at the floor and nodding her head. Her face was white.

“I can’t say I’m sorry about your father. He got what was coming to him. And it was a long time coming, I can tell you. It’s not our place to question. Do you question, Kimberly?”

Kim looked up at her aunt then and said *yes* with her mouth but without making a sound. I had never heard her called Kimberly.

“From now on you are not to speak of him. Do you hear me?” Kim’s aunt had stopped pacing. She sat down next to Kim and put her hand on Kim’s shoulder. “I want you to work hard and put this all out of your mind. All right? Everything’s going to be all right.”

The dog in the neighbor’s yard started barking, and I ducked down below the windowsill. I couldn’t stay. I knew it was not my place to hear this. I crept off fast down the side of the house then broke for the magnolia. When I was climbing through the fence I felt the note in my pocket. I couldn’t just leave. I looked around and saw Kim’s bike under the carport. I ran up to it. Just then the neighbor’s porch light came on. I grabbed a pencil out of my pocket and wrote the first thing I could think of on the note: 786 - 8722. It was my phone number. I felt under her seat in the seat post bars for a place to put the note where it would be out of sight, and I started to run back out to the street. The neighbor’s front door opened, and I thought of something. I ran back to Kim’s bike, and twisted her banana seat hard to the side, so that she would have to turn it to fix it, and when she did, she would find my note. Then I was off like the wind. I caught a sight of the old neighbor lady looking out into the darkness.

I ran down to the railroad tracks, downhill because it was the fastest. I ran across the railroad tracks and behind the old depot building until I got to a place that was out of sight of the road and the railroad track. My hands were bleeding from the rusty fence so I rubbed some dirt on them like we did on the baseball field, if our hands were bleeding and we needed to hold the bat. When I finally caught my breath I started back across the railroad tracks and up the hill towards home. There was some broken glass and I cut my foot on it in the dark, but Mama noticed it before I did. She found me crying on the side of my bed.

“Warren?” She crossed the room in a heartbeat. “What’s the matter? Are you hurt?”

I shook my head. I didn’t even know about my foot.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen? Here, blow your nose and talk to me, son.” She held out a dish towel and I blew my nose in it. Suddenly she held me away from her.

“Boy! Let me look at that foot! What have you got into? Warren!” She looked at me in the way that made me feel dumb. “Now you get in the bathtub and wash up good. I’ll run you some bathwater. When you get out I’ll dress it with some mercurochrome and a bandaid. Good Lord, son! I’m half a mind to take you to the clinic if you don’t clean it good.”

She went off to run my bathwater. I looked down and saw that I had tracked blood into the house, like a shot dog.

Deddy knew there was something else bothering me, besides my foot. I wanted to

tell him but every time I thought of Kim's daddy I froze up and just cried. I didn't know what he did but I knew it was something bad.

Deddy's expression softened and he patted Mama's stomach, where the baby was.

"We're doing just fine, all except for that Christ-a-mighty long distance phone bill," he told me. "Why can't people just write a letter? But don't you be worried about the store none. Sam's working out just fine. Soon you'll have a little brother or sister to play with."

Mama wouldn't let me go riding for a long time while my foot healed up. And she made me stay home and wear socks. "As much as you like to go barefoot, I at least want you on a clean floor. Not like at the store with all manner of folk coming through."

* * *

Kim called me sometime in April, when I was at home by myself after school. She sounded tired. "I wanted to remind you about my birthday. Can you still come?" I thought about her Whitman folders and the piano and the painted black metal fence and I felt sick. I told her I didn't have much money to spend on her present.

"You worry too much," she said and hung up, and I knew I had heard that before.

* * *

I went to her party and I had my shoes on. My hair was smoothed down with Bryl-creem. It was a nice day and I looked at her yard and just wished I had my shorts on and my shoes off and I could put my feet in that grass and let them stay there. But her birthday party was in the carport. I don't know where her aunt's car was. There was some lady there, with her aunt, and they were sitting in the patio chairs. The lady's hair was

coiled very high up on her head, the thing my mama called a beehive.

Kim took me over to her and introduced me. It was her mother. Her hand was damp and soft. She smiled at me when she took my hand, but her eyes were dead. I don't think she even saw me. Kim's aunt just nodded at me as she lit up a cigarette. I could feel her eyes on me sometimes as I talked to Kim in the carport.

There were other people there. I recognized two of Kim's Brownie friends. The others I guess were from her school or her church. They wanted to play things like hopscotch, or spin the bottle. When somebody waved around an empty coke bottle, I wandered off to look at what kind of lawn mower they had, and whether Kim's bike chain had been oiled. It hadn't, but the banana seat had been fixed. I reached up under it and felt my note. It was still there. Before I could remove it, I heard Kim's voice.

"They're not really going to spin the bottle. My aunt wouldn't let them do that game."

I nodded, realizing that she had got my phone number from the phone book. She had remembered to invite me even though she hadn't got my note.

"Warren? Why are you limping?" Her voice sounded full of concern, and I looked up at her. It was me that should have been the one concerned with her. I didn't know how to fix that.

"I brought you something," I said. I pulled out the small wrapped package from my pants pocket. It was the same pocket she had torn a hole in. My mama hadn't asked me about it. She had just fixed it up.

Kim took the small package. "It's heavy!" she said. "It doesn't look like a Johnny

Lightning.”

I hadn't even thought of Johnny Lightnings in a while. I watched Kim open it, and I thought my heart was beating loud enough for everyone to hear. But Kim's other guests were over by the front porch, starting a game of freeze tag. Kim tore the birthday wrapping paper off and held up a roll of coins. “What's this?”

“Open it,” I said, and bit my lip. “But be careful. They might spill.”

“Is it pennies?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Why did you give me . . . *money*? I don't need this!”

My heart stopped. “But – those are wheaties. They're *wheaties*! From Deddy's . . .” I stopped. My voice had gotten loud. Kim's aunt was looking over at us, one eyebrow raised. She leaned forward in her chair. I lowered my voice. “They're for your collection,” I said.

“I don't collect coins,” said Kim. “My aunt does, though. I could give these to her. How did you know she collected old pennies?” She looked at me strangely. Then her eyes got wide. “You . . . you are the meanest --” She looked at her aunt, who had settled back into her seat with a calculating expression. She looked back at me, and she was so mad, she was like the man in the song. I thought she was going to holler out *not your steppin' stone!* But she didn't. “All this time. All this *time!*” She raised back like she was going to throw the roll of pennies at me.

“Can I at least have them back?” I said. “If you don't want them? They're my Deddy's.”

She thought about it, then handed me the roll of coins. I tried to hold her hand but she yanked away and went running toward the house.

“What did you say to her, young man?” Kim’s aunt stood in front of me, her face pinched, smoke snorting from her nostrils. Before I could answer I felt somebody’s hand patting my head. It was Kim’s mother.

“Don’t you worry, she’s like that.” She looked back toward the house. “She’ll be over it soon. Are you friends? Of course you are. Where do you know Kim from, young fellow?”

“We ride bikes, ma’am. I live up the street.” I pointed.

“Oh, *you’re* the one!” said Kim’s aunt, loudly. She turned to Kim’s mother. “You know, Nessie, I *try* to look after her, I swear I do. I do the best I can manage. Vinington may not be the best place for Kimberly.”

“You may be right, Iris. Still. . . .” Kim’s mother was looking at me. It was not a mean look. It was a soft look, soft like her hand. Mama looked like that when she was remembering her family times. “There’s cake, inside, young man. Would you like to come in and have some cake before you leave?”

I was crying but I couldn’t help it. “No thanks,” I said. “Please tell her happy birthday,” I called over my shoulder, and I walked fast down Kim’s driveway to the sidewalk and turned uphill. When the party was out of sight behind a hedge, I ran for home. But I couldn’t run very well with shoes on. I tripped on a raised sidewalk edge and went sprawling. The roll of pennies, which Kim had opened a little, flew onto the sidewalk. Pennies went everywhere. Some of them rolled down into the street. I could

only find thirty-eight of them before it got too dark to see. There's fifty in a roll.

* * *

Kim called me the next day and asked if I could ride bikes. I told her I couldn't. I was grounded. Why are you grounded, she asked me. Because I had to get stitches on both my feet, I said. And it cost money at the clinic. She was quiet for a minute. Well what's wrong with your feet, she asked. I cut them on Deddy's penny jar, I said. I dropped it and it broke. I'm coming to your house, she said.

* * *

I called Mama at the store and asked her was it all right if Kim DeLong came inside the house. Well, I guess so, said Mama, as long she don't mind the dirty floors. I'd heard people say they could eat off of Mama's floors, they were so clean, but I wasn't sure Kim had been in a house like ours before. I was nervous.

Kim was wearing a pretty green dress when I opened the door. I don't know why but when I saw it I thought about Easter. It looked like soft cotton candy or an Easter basket or colored eggs in the grass.

"Are you just going to let all the flies in?" she asked.

I opened the door wider and moved back so she could come in. "I'm sorry about the present," I said. "I thought it was your collection. I didn't know it was your aunt's. I don't even like her. I couldn't think of anything else to get."

"Wait. Wait." Kim looked around the living room. "Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?"

I followed her gaze. "Do you want to come to my room?"

“No,” she said. “I’m going to have to lie to my aunt enough as it is. She doesn’t know I’m here.” She sat on the edge of the sofa cushion. She sat with her knees together and turned to the side. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “I’m glad you’re not mad at me.”

“I am mad at you. You’re not my boyfriend,” she said. “I’m moving back to Decatur. I can’t have a boyfriend. We’re not going together. I wanted to come over and make that straight. We’re just bike friends. What happened to your nose?”

“I got in a fight,” I said.

“You did not.” Kim looked at me. “Come here and let me look at you. Sit down here. I’m not going to bite.” She patted the cushion.

I rubbed my shoulder and sat down next to her. She wrinkled her nose. “How long has it been since you had a bath?”

“I didn’t get to take one last night,” I said.

Kim looked at me in a way I had seen before, with her head to the side. She cleared her throat in that delicate way – *ahum* – and said that we could either play 20 Questions all afternoon or I could just be honest with her. I told her I wasn’t sure I had to tell her anything if we were just bike friends. Maybe I’m just confused about some things, she said. Do you want some ice tea, I said, trying to remember my manners. She said yes, thank you, and I went to the kitchen, walking on the outside edges of my feet.

Before I had gone far, I felt a tug on my hand.

“What are you doing on your feet?” asked Kim. Her eyes were hot. “You just come sit back down on the sofa.” And she made me lean on her until I was on the sofa.

“It don’t hurt much,” I said.

She was quiet for a while. I thought she might be fixing to leave but I couldn’t think of anything to tell her.

“Did you get into a fight over me?” she asked, finally.

“No, but I would have,” I said. “If somebody said anything about you I would--” but she shushed me by putting her mouth on mine. I tried to breathe but she had me pinned on the sofa. Her soft hair smelled sweet but not like church perfume.

“What was that?” I asked when she sat up. I wiped my mouth.

“It was a kiss,” she said. “It’s what girlfriends do.”

I couldn’t help but laughing. “That was weird,” I said.

“I know,” she admitted. “I might be doing it wrong.”

* * *

It ended up being like 20 Questions anyway, even when she made me look at her and call her *girlfriend*. She was a lot nicer about it than Mary Ann Kitchens. I had figured that out from talking to Brett. But until Kim asked me things, I didn’t know how to explain them.

She had untied my shoes and pulled off my socks. She had a kitchen towel in her lap and a warm washcloth and a bucket of soap. On the coffee table next to her was a jar of ointment and some Q-tips. She had found all those things herself. My feet were on the towel, and she cleaned around the stitches with the washcloth. It tickled. She told me to keep still or she would tell my mother. My mother.

“What were you doing in your father’s penny jar, Warren?” Kim asked me,

glancing up to look me in the eye from time to time.

“It was for your present,” I said. “It was for the roll of wheaties.”

“Is that why you were limping at my party?”

I shook my head and lay back on the sofa, eyes closed. If it was just me, I wouldn't have known where to begin. “Those are my church shoes. They're not broken in.” I thought some more. “I cut my foot on some glass one night,” I said, but I didn't know how to tell her the rest of it.

I shouldn't have worried so much. Kim pulled the two different things together like the stitches pulled together the skin on the soles of my feet.

“How did you know that someone in my house was a coin collector?”

The warm washcloth felt good, and Kim's touch was gentle. The truth came out like a tangled fishing line. I told her about sneaking up to her house and then running away and cutting my feet down by the railroad tracks. I told her about hearing about her daddy, and how her aunt treated her real mean. Every time Kim looked at me I felt like a new section of line had just come untangled.

“She's really very kind,” Kim replied, when my tale was done. “I can't tell you about my father, not yet, but Aunt Iris is fine. She doesn't drink like my mother. And,” she leaned toward my face and I thought we were going to kiss again. “And she likes to play practical jokes. Your friend Brett came to the door one day, asking about me, and do you know what Auntie did?” Instead of kissing, she laughed delightedly. I was so relieved I threw back my head and laughed too. When I looked down, Kim was working on my feet again. “I will tell you sometime. Not yet. It was very rich.” She paused a

moment as if she were going to say something more, then put the washcloth in the bucket and patted my feet dry with the dish towel. She picked up a Q-tip, squeezed some ointment onto it, and etched ointment into my feet along the stitch lines.

“You haven’t told me yet how you broke the penny jar,” she said.

I told her about coming home from the party and dropping the pennies and looking for the ones that rolled far down the street.

“My mother saw you,” she said. “She thought you were looking for change.” The way she said it turned my ears red.

When I got home – I told her – Deddy was home for dinner and he was really tired. I was afraid if I snuck in his bedroom and emptied the pennies from my pocket back into his penny jar, that they would hear the jingling.

She put my socks on, careful not to rub off the ointment. I knew my mama would be impressed with her work on my feet. Kim would be welcome in my house any time from now on. “So you tried to lift the jar and carry it to your room and muffle the sound under the covers, but it was heavier than you thought. It slipped out of your hands and crashed onto the floor.” She looked at me and smiled. “I could read that in your face. But how did you step on the glass?”

“My Deddy came in where the jar had crashed and pennies were all over the floor,” I told her. “He started taking his belt off and I ran.” Then I told her I ran into the door frame and busted my nose. And Deddy carried me to the clinic to get my feet stitched up while Mama cleaned up the mess.

That’s what I told her. My Deddy was not like her father.

Kim let herself out right after that. She promised me she would ride bikes with me some more before she left Vinington. But not a day before I got my stitches out.

* * *

Two weeks later, I went to see her. It was the first of May, and I had just had my stitches removed. My nose was also now a regular size.

But Kim took one look at my feet and said that what she really wanted to do was to catch crawdads. We could ride bikes, but we had to wait a week on the crawdads.

At the top of the hill, she told me something weird. And I have always remembered it. She said, "There can't be trust if we keep lying about things. If that's the way it's going to be."

We looked down at the bottom of the hill and saw the cars and trucks speeding by below. It was funny. The interstates were supposed to connect the states. They were supposed to let people go long distances pretty fast. But the weird thing was that *everybody was using them*. Even people inside the state. And even Deddy, when he had to go get supplies for the store, because some of the trucks didn't come by any more. And the interstate construction workers were gone now, too.

In my bedroom at night, with the window open so I could smell the dandelions, I heard the trucks hurrying past. They didn't sound like that bass part of "Steppin' Stone." There wasn't that *chugachugachugachuga* push that was like big pistons. They sounded more like a long, screaming rush. They sounded like jet airplanes. And I lay in my bed with my feet itching and I thought about how far apart the cities were. And I thought a lot about the grass at Kim's house, how thick and dark it was, cold on my feet. Like it

collected darkness into the yard just so the cicadas would come out and chant all night long. I felt like that was where I knew I had a place.

Mostly, I thought about Decatur. I wondered if any of those trucks was going there. I thought probably so.

* * *

A month after her tenth birthday, when my feet were both finally healed up, Kim told me to meet her at the front door to her house. Her Aunt Iris came out with her, and Kim told her plain as day we were going to the creek and catch crawdads. It might be her only chance before they left for Decatur. And her aunt looked down at us and her eyes softened up some, and she said, *be back before dark, you two*.

The crawdad catching was best where the creek went under the interstate overpass. The construction people had put in a big concrete pipe to get the creek across the interstate, from one side to the other. And they had built the interstate high above.

Inside the culvert we couldn't hear ourselves think, let alone talk, above the thundering truck traffic, so after a while we climbed out along the steep shoulder and out of sight, and there I told Kim what I knew about crawdads, which wasn't much. Crawdads pinch, I said. Some of my friends used them for bait, they said, but I was never sure. What would want to eat a crawdad, I asked them. Snapping turtles, they said. What do you want with a snapping turtle, I'd ask, and they'd laugh.

We didn't catch any crawdads and we didn't see no turtles, so we threw rocks in the stream while the trucks roared by out of sight on the interstate overhead. Kim's thin hair smelled like baby shampoo – I recognized the smell now because Mama had bought

some to get ready for the baby. When I took my shirt off because I was hot, Kim wiggled her fingers and said it was time for nurse and patient. She asked me if I knew a good hiding place, so I took her to my hut.

It was a place where kudzu had grown up over a dogwood tree and killed it. I had made an opening in the side that faced the creek. We crawled inside, one at a time. There was plenty of room to sit up. Sometimes I'd bring comic books and read where nobody could find me. Kim didn't care about comic books. She told me to lie down.

Are you comfortable, sir?

Yeah, I said, and laughed.

What is so funny?

You, I said. You sound like a real nurse.

Never mind that, she said. We have to check you for broken bones, you have been in a terrible accident.

Okay. You sure know how to fix people.

You can't move but you're not in pain.

I knew about pain. Pain was not what her fingers brought, still cold from finding skipping stones under the running creek water.

Tell me what's troubling you.

* * *

I told her the first thing that popped into my mind. It was about my cousin Bobby, dead in a car wreck two years before. I hadn't understood any of it. I didn't know that Bobby was dead. I tried to make jokes with Artie, his brother. Artie's face was green and

strange. He was very quiet. It had been raining, they said, the car skidded off the road, Bobby was thrown out. Artie was the one who found him. They said it had been raining, but when they came home from the hospital their clothes were dry and clean.

I didn't understand why their clothes were so clean, if they had just been in a wreck, and that was what I told Kim.

That's easy, she said. Your mother did their laundry.

* * *

Kim went down to the creek to get some flat rocks then, like the skipping stones we had been playing with, but larger. I didn't know what for and she didn't tell me. While I waited for her to come back, I folded up my button-down shirt so it wouldn't get wrinkled. My mother still made me wear them to school. *My mother*. I got that from Kim. I always called her *Mama*. But when I called her *Mama* in front of Kim, it sounded foolish. Anyhow, the shirts were Mama's idea. She had made it clear. I hadn't told Kim about any of this, not yet. I wasn't sure if I should. It was too private.

* * *

"I don't want you lookin' like those nigras," Mama had said.

"Sam dresses up good," I told her.

Mama slapped me on the mouth. "Don't talk back to me, young man."

"Sam always plays me 'Steppin' Stone,'" I said, shocked. Mama never hit me in the face.

She drew back from me. "You ought not to be spendin' that colored boy's money."

I started to cry. If Mama wasn't on my side, I was alone.

She put out the cigarette she was smoking. I heard her tamping it out in the clear orange ashtray, the slight hissing of the butt, the long pursed breath downward. Mama didn't smoke much. She shook me by the shoulders.

"How many times did he play the jukebox for you, Warren?"

"A lot. Every day."

"Oh, Lord," she said. She let go of me. When I finally got hold of myself, she was sitting at the table. Her forehead was on the heel of her hand. Some of her black hair had fallen down out of her bun. She wore her hair in a bun to keep it out of the grease at the store.

She handed me a kleenex from her sweater pocket and I blew my nose.

"Can I go to my room now?" I asked.

She was not looking at me. Sometimes Mama would look a long way off. I didn't know what she was looking at.

"You are not excused yet. There's something I need to tell you."

Her voice was a little high and strange. I must have done something really bad. I wanted to cry again but I had to wait until I was in my room. I had to be the man of the house when Deddy was gone.

"Son," she started. Her head was shaking, and it made the yellow dinette table wobble under her elbow. "We thought Sam was robbing from the till. It wasn't much. But your Deddy was looking for a reason to let him go. We couldn't keep Sam and pay the long distance bill too. So we fired him."

Fired him? It made me cold. Sam was the only friend I had at the store. He was there a lot. I knew he was in trouble. I didn't know what for.

"Did Deddy fire him?" I asked. I thought my voice sounded like hers.

Mama blew her nose on a dinner napkin and balled it up tight in her fist. Her nose was red and pinched. Her eyes were closed. The table shook a little from the beat of her knuckles against her forehead.

"Warren. Were you paying for the jukebox out of your own pocket?"

"No ma'am. Deddy told me not to, any more." I had the feeling that I was in one of those magician's boxes and the swords were fixing to come through.

"Why did your Deddy tell you that, Warren?" Her voice sounded tired.

"Cause it was a waste of money."

"Was Sam paying for the jukebox out of his own pocket?" she said.

I was in trouble. "At first." My throat was closing up.

"Out with it," she said. The breeze ruffled the yellow curtains by the table. It was April. I should have been outside.

"At first he did," I repeated. "But Mama! He's *poor!*"

"Don't you 'But Mama' me, young man!" Her eyes were burning me up. "Now just finish your story before you move another muscle. Or I'm taking my switch to you!"

Mama's switch was horrible. When I messed up Deddy would whip my rear end with his belt or shoe or hand or whatever he could find. But he would only do it if he was mad. Mama was worse. She would switch me on the backside of my ankles, whether she was mad or not. It felt like getting stung by a nest of yellow jackets. Worst of all, I

couldn't show any of my friends because it didn't leave a blister.

I looked at her switch on the wall next to the flyswatter. One day I was going to break that switch.

"I gave him some of my allowance money and told him not to tell Dad. He said he couldn't take no money from me. He said if Deddy found out, he'd get . . . he'd get fired."

Mama wiped at the end of her nose with the ragged napkin. But her eyes were relentless. "And?"

"I said there was lots of money in the till—"

"*Good Lord!*" she said, quietly.

"—and Deddy wouldn't miss it none. Sometimes he gives me some when he ain't busy."

"*Good Lord have mercy,*" she breathed.

"Sam has good clothes anyway," I said, getting back to my point.

Her hand flashed out and hit me on the ear so hard I was laying up against the stove. Before I knew what to do she was pulling me to my feet and marching me to the wall.

"*Hands on the wall, young man,*" she said. She said it through her teeth. I put my hands flat on the wall. This was new. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

But then I heard the flyswatter fall on the floor. It was on the same hook she kept the switch.

"When your Deddy found the money was missing"

—*switch*—

“he called Sam into the back of the store”

—*switch*—

“and he asked him if he done it.”

—*switch*—

“Sam said yes he did”

—*switch*—

“and he beat that niggra boy to an inch of his life.”

—*switch*—

“Sam ran home and told his uncle.”

—*switch*—

“His uncle came back to the store with a gun.”

—*switch*—

“Your Deddy had to give him all the week’s earnings”

—*switch*—

“and now we don’t have the money to *pay – the – phone – bill.*”

The switch broke, and I ran out the front door.

“We bought Sam’s clothes,” she hollered after me. “So he’d have something *decent* to wear in the *store!*”

* * *

Kim didn’t know about that. I hadn’t figured out if I should tell her.

But she sure knew a lot about pain. I could tell because her fingers found the

places that were hurting and fixed them. She used the flat stones to make patterns on my back. It felt real good.

“Ice is always good for you, sir,” she said, her fingers still dripping cold creek water. “Ice is nice. You should read Robert Frost.”

I didn’t know Robert Frost. I read *Thor*.

“You’re silly,” she said, and stood up, pulling up her shirt like she was hot. “No one can see us?”

No one could see us. You could hear the traffic from there in the hut but you couldn’t see it.

“It’s a good place,” she said. “As good as any.” She pulled her shirt over her head and sat down to took off her shoes. She unlaced them carefully, loosened the uppers, and pulled her feet out one at a time, then removed her socks. Her feet looked small, white, and soft. Her pants and undies were last.

I asked her what on earth she was doing. The creek was too shallow to skinny dip in. It was only deep enough for wading. It was too cold to just lay down in.

“This is what boyfriends and girlfriends do,” she said. And suddenly she was wiggling against me, from face to feet.

“Do we have to smoke?” I asked her. I swallowed.

She smiled at me, a big scared smile. “No,” she said. “This goes here – or it will later.” She sat up on my lap and smiled at me. Then she leaned down and kissed me on the mouth, and this time it wasn’t so bad. I sort of knew what to expect. And I liked the smell of her hair, floating around my face. It was the best thing I’d ever smelled. Better

than jonquils. Better than honeysuckle.

I was so amazed I laughed. That's all it was? This is what it was all about?

"Where'd you figure out how to do this?" I said. I laughed again.

She sat up, her hands on my shoulders. Her expression fell and I thought she was about to cry. I wondered what I had done wrong.

"It's okay, you don't have to tell me," I said.

Kim just stared at me. I suddenly remembered what she had said about truth. I think she was thinking about it, too. She crossed her arms and shivered, looking out towards the interstate, which we couldn't see. We could hear it, though, the trucks and cars, the traffic.

"It's okay," I said. I put my hands on her shoulders, trying to figure out how to best treat her like a lady. "Even if it was your other boyfriend. Or--"

I stopped, suddenly wondering how many other boyfriends there were.

"You're my first boyfriend, Warren," she said, very quietly, and something about the way she looked, with her eyes down, made me think about that day when she was in the house, on the piano bench, and her aunt had just told her never to speak of her father again.

Her father. Her daddy.

She looked at me and it seemed like she was reading my mind. She shrugged away from my hands and sat back. Something in my hip suddenly popped under her weight. It didn't hurt, but I winced from the sound of it. It sounded like the snapping of a belt.

“I forgot!” She jumped up suddenly. “Did I hurt you? Oh I’m sorry!” Her face was stricken pale, and her eyes were as big as at the horror movie. She reached for her socks and started quickly putting them on. I told her I was okay, she hadn’t hurt me.

But I knew that wasn’t enough. I watched her, helpless, as she pulled on her saddleback shoes. She had to work at it.

“Your feet are pretty,” I said, but she just glared at me.

“You’re lying,” she replied, lacing her shoes.

“We could do this again,” I said, not knowing what to say.

“Yes,” she said. “Any time you want to.”

She let me hold her hand, then, all the way back up the hill to our bikes. I didn’t care if my friends saw us. In fact, I realized, I didn’t care so much about my friends at all any more. I wanted to be with Kim. I wanted to try it again. Not so much the touching thing.

I wanted to figure out how to make her smile.

* * *

But before the school year was out Deddy lost the store and we had to leave in a hurry. Mama said it was because the rent and all the utility rates were going up. The insurance was going up. Everything was going up. The first I knew something was wrong was when Deddy called a man who hauled the jukebox off. They took the records out of it first. I don’t know what happened to them.

I called Kim’s house and she told me I had to come there right away. She had something for me. I brushed my hair and put on my church shoes, and Kim’s aunt let me

in the front door. There were bookshelves all down the hall.

Kim's room had wall-to-wall carpet. It was blue and white like a light sunny day, but it was long and shaggy. I didn't see how anybody could play cars on it. Kim was sitting on her bed, propped up against the wall, and she was busy working on something. Her feet were in some kind of brace. There were books on the bed beside her. There were crumpled up paper wads in a little basket next to her.

I took my shoes off and sat on the floor. *You can come over here*, she said. I told her I couldn't stay long. Deddy might be ready to leave in a minute. I asked her what was the brace for and she said it was to fix her feet from pointing in. I thought her feet were good. I told her so, and she asked me if they were so good, then why was I sitting so far from her. I told her I'd been packing up and I didn't want to get her bed dirty. She told me I worry too much and patted the bedspread.

I went over and sat down next to her. I had to move a book out of the way. It was *Best Loved Poems of the American People*.

Kim folded a piece of notebook paper and wrote things on it that I couldn't see, her tongue sneaking past her teeth as her long hair rippled down, brown as the shadows on the bottom of the creek, but soft as cold summer grass.

Your fortune, she said as she offered the folded paper to me, her eyes down, darker than the sound of a night rain. *Don't look now*.

Every fortune was her phone number.

* * *

Deddy was loading up the moving truck when I got home, but when I asked him

about calling my friends he stopped for a minute and told me it was long distance rates to the county we were moving to.

Mama was packing up in the kitchen. She asked me to climb up on a chair and get some jelly jar glasses out of the cabinet. I handed them down to her and watched her wrap them in newspaper and pack them up in boxes, and I knew that whatever money we had was going to be used for the baby. She gave me a shoebox and told me to pack my Johnny Lightnings in it.

We couldn't take my models. Deddy didn't know how to pack them so they wouldn't break. I gave them to my friend Joe, who lived on the street behind us.

On a Bridge in Kingfisher

So you're sitting on a bridge in Kingfisher, Oklahoma. It's a railroad bridge, it's 2002, the railroad abandoned the bridge in 1983. The last thing you want to do is abandon anything. You have a wife of 20 years, 2 kids, 3 cars between you, and you're thinking about things. Your son with the lisp problem, your daughter on debate team. Your 1983 Toyota is on the dirt, it's a sort of parking area, it's a fishing spot really, unsanctioned by the county, out of sight of the road. On your left side is a cat, a yellow cat, it has a name, you don't know what it is. On your right side is a girl, a Vietnamese girl, she has black eyes, not really black, they're brown but look black in shadows. It's the same with her hair, which is black like her mother's hair. It's brown, really, but looks black in room light.

The sun is shining. The girl's hair is brown, glossy brown, like an old lacquered cabinet in dim light, except moving together like a flock of birds turning. It's the way her mother's hair looks. You want to touch it but the wind kicks it up. She touches her beret and looks up at you like her mother does and your stomach squeezes down. The girl's

name is Allison. She's telling you about her mother.

“Mom's on a date,” says Allison. “I bet you didn't know that.”

“It's a girls' day out,” you say. “She's not on a date. It's friends. She told me.”

“She wanted us out of the house,” says Allison. “I heard her say it on the phone.

Why did you bring my cat?”

You're in love with Allison's mother, but she doesn't know it, Allison doesn't.

Your wife doesn't know it, your kids don't know it, maybe Allison's mother doesn't know it. Your daughter suspects, but nobody knows, nobody but you. When you look at Allison and think to yourself, *love*, your stomach twists up tight. You've never fallen in love with a whole family before, even if it's not a whole family, it's half a family, it's Allison and her mother.

You met her, Allison's mother, at the factory, and the first thing she told you, after you learned about her divorce, her impending divorce, the first thing that Allison's mother told you was that her husband liked to fish, he fished often, at night, only he never brought anything home. Allison's mother has a Vietnamese name. Allison herself has a Vietnamese name, you don't know what it is. It's gook to you. That's what the people at the factory would say, gook.

That's what you said, until you fell in love and did strange things, odd things. You tried to learn the Vietnamese language. It's a tough language, a tonal language, it made you feel like an infant again.

“Bá,” you tried.

“That means aunt.” Allison's mother smiled. She had an overbite, a charming,

deadly, overbite.

“Bã,” you said, watching her face.

“Garbage,” she laughed.

“I wish I could learn your language,” you said, swallowing in frustration, swallowing in the gap you felt between your words and the gap you felt here, in this house, this kitchen, this table you wanted to belong at. It was the first day of summer, summer had rolled around, where had the spring gone? It was summer. You had been thinking about it all spring, the thing about language, the thing about distance, every time you were at her house, but you hadn't said it yet, not yet, not before this.

“Your language is much harder,” she said. Her name was Nguyet, but you couldn't say it, it made you swallow a few times, you called her *Nuget*, the way you would say *Ted Nugent* only without the *n*. She didn't like Ted Nugent, it was just what you called her. Nguyet had told you what Allison's name was, Allison's Vietnamese name, but you didn't remember, she didn't write it down. It was a shame because you loved to watch Nguyet write. She was lefthanded, she was beyond understanding. Allison was her only child.

Allison was born in Houston in 1994. She didn't have to have a Vietnamese name, but they had given her one. Nguyet's husband insisted. Her husband was a problem.

“I have to marry him just to get out,” said Nguyet. “My parent are making me do the things around the house to help them. I drive them to the doctor, wait in the waiting room, drive to the pharmacy, look at the bill, call and argue.” Nguyet's older sister, Qing, had gotten out. Nguyet was the oldest one left in Houston, in her parent's house, the

oldest daughter, she had to get out. "I go out with him, we're together, I get pregnant." She held up her hand with five fingers spread. "Five months, my mother sees it. We get married, some time later, four months I think, Allison." She gestured at the picture of her daughter. Allison.

"Five months?" You're dazed. What happens that quickly? Your daughter kicked you at five months, in the womb, you guess it was five months, you don't really remember.

"We are come to Oklahoma City, then. My parent are upset, but also relieve at the same time."

Time was a problem in Vietnamese. Time, and also tense. You twisted your wedding ring, it was on your ring finger, Nguyet didn't have a problem with it, most times, not every time. Nguyet was a believer in the English words *every*, *never*. Nguyet was absolute. She was devout.

"Never bring me six roses again. *Never*." She wagged her finger. You grabbed it from the air, her finger, and kissed it.

She pulled her finger away and slapped you with that same hand, a hard slap. Her eyes were shining. If the light was good, her eyes were brown.

"Twelve, or nothing. You owe me six roses. I am *serious*."

Inflection in Vietnamese is indicated by marks over the vowel. Vietnamese words have one syllable, only. One vowel could have seven different sounds. Each sound had a different meaning. There was a sound like a question mark, it made the word sound like a question. You didn't ask a question in Vietnamese, you made a statement and waited for a

response.

You searched Amazon. There were no books on learning Vietnamese. There was one software program, *Một ít tiếng Việt – A Little Vietnamese*. You paid 59.99 for it, plus shipping. The state of Oklahoma required tax on internet sales. You had already paid shipping, the state of Oklahoma wanted you to pay tax, it was not a program they stocked in the state of Oklahoma. You said, “Fuck you, State of Oklahoma.” You said it to your tax program in April. You never said that word, *fuck*. You *never* waited until April to do your taxes. April was Tornado Awareness Month in the state of Oklahoma. There was enough going on without taxes. There was fucking Tornado Awareness Month.

You tried to find out how to say *fuck off* in Vietnamese, but the software package didn't have it, the software package had short, proper sentences. You had been using sentences like, “I wish I had known you when we were younger, before I got married, when we were teenagers.”

“When you are 18, I am only 8,” she said. She gestured to Allison's photo, her daughter, Allison. You looked at the photo. You were at work, the photo was on her desk, next to the Tet calendar with the kittens.

“When you were a teenager,” you said. You were talking quietly, it was lunch hour. People walking by in the factory were looking at you talking to the gook.

“When I am 18, you are 28,” she said. “Psh! Married.”

You touched her desk, you were looking for something, you were looking for her arm. It was a wonderful arm. It was remote. You were at work.

“Try all day,” she said. “There is no way to make it work.”

“I love your soup,” you said. It was a simple sentence, it was a fact. Long sentences were difficult, they were hard, they had to be repeated in different ways, it was the language problem. It was not that she was stupid, she was not stupid, she was brilliant, she also did this thing with spinach. *Spinach*. And she was psychic. She could look at you on a Monday morning and say at once, “What is wrong? Is it your wife?”

There was not a problem with your wife. Your wife was a kind woman. She was very kind to people. It was a heavy load. “I’m not cleaning any more,” she said. “You have more time than I do.”

It made you reach for something. You were paying the mortgage, you were paying the bills, the electric bill, phone bill, the insurance, the heating bill. You were paying the water bill, the TV bill, the termite bill. You were doing the maintenance. You were doing the taxes.

You reached for something. You reached for your wife. Her smile was kind, inviting, a long walk in a semi-arid land.

“It’s not negotiable,” she said. “I’m going to church.”

Possession was also a problem in Vietnamese.

“I max out his credit cards,” said Nguyet. “Things I don’t need.”

“Wait, wait. You what? *Why?*”

“Because I don’t love him,” she said.

* * *

So you’re sitting on a railroad bridge in Kingfisher, you’re talking to Allison, who is Nguyet’s daughter, Nguyet’s ticket up the sunshine highway to freedom, and Allison is

asking you this question.

“Are you going to throw my cat off the bridge? Because of Mom?”

You look up from the cat, you don't know its name. It seems like the right time to ask. Everything has a name.

“What's its name?”

“Snowball. It's a *her*.”

“Snowball?” You look at the cat again. It is a yellow cat. It has white socks.

“Yes, Snowball! Are you going to hurt my cat?” Allison's hair is black matte, no gloss.

“Do you like this cat?” you say, holding it up to the clouds. *Where did the clouds come from?*

“Stop!” Allison reaches for the cat. You block her.

“How deep do you think the river is?” you ask.

“I don't know!”

“Can Snowball swim?”

Allison starts to cry. Her shoulders are shaking.

“Please don't hurt her. Don't hurt my cat.”

You transfer the cat to your left hand. You put the cat down. You rub Allison's shoulders with your right hand. Her shoulders are thin, they are small. How many years before she hates you?

Allison makes a weird sound, it's a bad sound, you let go of Snowball, you hold Allison with both hands. Allison throws up, it's a projectile vomit, it arcs out like a

sudden jet from a garden hose. You hold her shoulders, hold her on the bridge, your feet dangling over the water. Your feet have gone numb, her feet are tucked up under the bridge, she is heaving forward with the force of the vomit. There is a roll of thunder.

She finishes, suddenly. In the complete quietness you can feel the thud of her heart. She was Nguyet's ticket out the month she was born and now she's eight. Time, you think, time. You hold her tight and wipe her face with your shirt, the inside of your shirt. You tell her to blow her nose. She blows a wad of snot vomit onto the inside of your shirt. You pinch her nose clean and put down your shirt, it feels warm and sticky. You push the hair out of her eyes and kiss her forehead, you hadn't planned to, she's not your child, it's awkward. You haven't kissed her before. You wonder how much she will look like Nguyet one day.

She kisses you back, on the cheek. You hadn't expected it. It makes your cheek feel cool. You can feel your feet again, and you swing them up onto the bridge and stand up.

"I thought you were going to hurt Snowball," she says. "I thought you were going to throw her off the bridge." She is holding your hand. She had used your hand to help her stand up, and she is still holding it.

You take measured steps, one at a time, holding hands, stepping from one cross-tie to the next. Through the spaces between the cross-ties you can see water. Sometimes, submerged rocks. The water is ten feet below the bridge, the bank is 32 cross-ties away. You had counted them on the way out to the middle of the bridge, 32, Nguyet's age, 32. Another fact comes to mind.

Nguyet was lactose intolerant. She couldn't take dairy products.

“No more pizza,” she had told you. She looked green. She looked like she was going to vomit. She looked like she was washed out, gray, erased. “You can take me anywhere. But no more pizza. *Ever.*”

“I was reading up on that,” you said, looking at her feet. On her feet were heels, black heels. Big, wide ones. She always wore heels. She had to be five feet high. No less. “Lactose intolerance?”

“Something like that.”

“I'm sorry,” you said. Your hands were in your pockets.

“Pizza is off the list,” Nguyet said. She pulled your hand from your pocket and squeezed it.

You have reached solid ground, and it is ground, it's dirt, it's gravel. Snowball is at the car door, sitting on her haunches, looking. You sink to the ground, your knees in the gravel. You put your arms on the gravel, your head on your arms. You feel dizzy, your stomach shakes.

Little Allison, you think. I would never do that.

You throw up.

* * *

“Are you okay Coleman?” Her hand is on his back. Allison's hand. It feels like Nguyet's hand. When he found Nguyet's hands he felt he had found God. He felt he was being rocked in the cradle of love, he felt the guitar riff of *Sweet Child of Mine*. The fire in his head was cooled for a time: he was going to go to Mass with Nguyet. He would

take the bread. He had not told her this. She thought he was still an atheist. When he met Nguyet, he had stopped being an atheist. His atheism had fallen away like an old callous.

He had started believing.

“Thank you,” he said, pressing the gravel against his forehead, feeling Allison's hand on his back, feeling the puke film in his mouth.

“Are you okay Coleman? Do you need me to go get help? Do you need me to call?” Allison is squatting beside him. Her legs are apart. If it was Nguyet he would put his head in there and let them pull the heat away. But it is not Nguyet, it is Allison. They are a long way from Nguyet, an hour each way, a day trip. Nguyet had suggested it, like family time. His kids were in Dallas, his wife at a conference, the Four Seasons, the Grand Ballroom. They were gone for the weekend, he was a free man. Free in a sense.

Nguyet was in Mustang, a suburb of Oklahoma City, a bedroom community, she had gotten a call at the last minute. He doesn't know why he feels this way, like a knife entering his head, turning. Nguyet is on a date. Some other man is single, available. He, Coleman, is not. He has not taken the steps. Nguyet had never asked. It was not what she wanted.

“I want what you have,” said Nguyet, pulling her bra straps on, stretching her arms behind her, pulling the back of it closed.

“You want one of these?” Coleman wagged it like a finger.

Nguyet laughed.

“That too,” she said. “I want it whenever.” She pulled her blouse on over her head. Coleman marveled that all that skin was right there, just there, that close. If it

makes two people happy, where is the harm? He felt like something had kicked away from him, some kind of support, some kind of structure. It had fallen away like a pylon. It lay far below.

Allison is patting his shoulder. Her hand is smaller than Nguyet's. He doesn't know how long he has been on the ground. He is losing track of time, tense, and possession. He has lost his sense for it. Things are coming and going. There is a low, slow rumbling.

Snowball is mewling. She has padded over to where Coleman kneels on the ground. She is sniffing his puke. He knows he has to get up. He has promised Allison a day at the park, he thought it would be with Nguyet, his family is out of town, it doesn't happen often. He thought it would be a family thing, a family-like thing, barefoot in a cold spring, trees and wind, a soccer ball, squirrels. But Nguyet had gotten an offer, someone available, a date. He had taken Allison, the absolute trust. He had brought her to Kingfisher, a bridge in Kingfisher, an abandoned bridge, out of sight of the road. He had not planned it. He wanted to see the bridge. The bridge dizzied him.

Coleman needs to talk to somebody, a priest, he doesn't have a priest, he's an atheist. He needs to talk to a shrink, a therapist, a hundred dollars an hour. It's not job-related, he can't schedule it on a Tuesday, it's not something he can schedule. He wants to talk to his friends, but his friends are married, they're faithful, they're solid. His friends' wives would never do something like that. *Never*. Everything has fallen away, he is suspended, in a moment he will begin falling. Allison is asking him to get up. Get up off the ground. The cat is sniffing his puke.

“I thought you were going to drop Snowball off the bridge,” she says. She's stroking Snowball's fur, like her mother has done.

Off in the distance he hears the low, slow rumbling, it's the train. Only it's not the train, Coleman remembers, the train hasn't crossed this bridge in 17 years. Maybe it's thunder, he thinks. He gets up off the ground. His feet feel strange, tingly. His head feels light.

“Do you speak Vietnamese, too?” he asks.

“Some,” she says. “A little.”

“How do you handle time and tense?” he asks. Snowball is sniffing at his feet. Sniffing the ground.

“Are we going camping?” Allison sounds excited. She brushes her hair back from her ear.

It takes him a moment to connect her response to his question. Time and tense. Time in tents. He tries to think about a night in a tent with Allison, who looks so much like her mother, Nguyet. Allison comes to Nguyet's bed some nights. Nguyet told him that. He pictures Allison in her jammies, a noise in the dark, himself deep in dreams of Nguyet, night dreams.

“I'm sorry. We need your mother for that,” he says. His voice is shaking. “In case you get scared.”

“I won't be scared,” she says. He looks into her eyes. They are black, like her mother's. Allison knows time but thinks of tents. He staggers. His fingers are numb, tingling.

Allison looks down, her mouth opens in shock. Coleman looks too.

The cat is licking his puke.

“At least it won’t be hungry,” he says.

“Gross!” Allison is watching. “Ewww!”

Coleman feels weak, washed away. The river has washed him away, there's nothing left. The river keeps washing him away. The train is coming. Coleman rolls the wedding ring around his finger, tries to pull it off, can't, thinks about throwing it in the river, he can't, it's stuck. His knees are weak, tingling. The cat is still here. Why hasn't it left? It licks up his puke. It's good stuff. The train is coming.

“I brought the cat to keep you company,” he says. “If something. Happened to me.” He thinks of Allison alone in Kingfisher, alone on a bridge with her cat. She can't drive. She's eight. What was he thinking? A cat?

“You’re weird,” Allison says, and it sounds just like what Nguyet has said.

“You’re crazy,” says Nguyet. “I never met anyone like you.”

Where do we go now?

Allison frowns up at the sky. “Did you hear that?” she asks.

Coleman looks at her upturned face, the black hair falling away from her ears. Her matte-black hair. His gaze snaps upward. The clouds are turning like a flock of birds.

The train is not coming. The rumbling of the tracks, the whistle. It's not the train.

It's a tornado.

Coleman is thunderstruck. *A what?*

“What is that?” asks Allison, an edge of worry in her voice. “It’s weird.”

It's not a train. It's a tornado. It's April in Oklahoma.

"It's a tornado," says Coleman, from some distant reach of sanity, some point outside himself. Coleman is a careful man, a cautious man. He checked the Weather Channel this morning. It was fine.

It's a tornado. It's across the river. It has a funnel. It is a funnel.

"Wow!" Allison breathes. "I've never seen one before. Mom's always scared." She tugs his hand. "Shouldn't we get to the car and get out of here?"

Coleman is staring at the tornado.

The wind hits the trees across the river, suddenly, like a hand brushing across the tops of them, like hair in the morning. Black hair in the darkness.

"No time," says Coleman. "Shit, no time."

A tornado.

A highway overpass is the worst possible place to be in a tornado, says someone, the weatherman. The fragment of a memory whirls into Coleman's mind like the top of a tree across the river, rising. Highway overpass, railroad overpass, any kind of overpass. Stay away from bridges.

"The bridge," he says, "we've got to get under the bridge."

"The bridge?" Allison sounds confused. "What bridge?" Then she looks dubious. "That bridge?"

He doesn't have time to argue with Allison. What they need is something to hold onto, something deep into the ground, something deeper than trees. The pilings, he knows, the pilings were driven deep into the ground by the railroad company when the

bridge was built.

The train is coming.

It's not a train, it's a tornado.

“Fuck,” breathes Coleman, and he is suddenly moving. “Go! Get to the river!” he says, grabbing Allison up. The cat will follow, he knows, the cat is smart. The cat will know. He grabs the cat anyway.

Allison is in his left arm, the cat is in his right arm, the cat has a name, its name is Snowball, Snowball, Snowball. He's running to the path, there is a path, there has to be a path, it's a fishing spot.

The train is coming.

He finds the path. He follows the path. He stands at the river.

There is a red and white bobber.

There is a beer bottle half-buried in the dirt. A red label sticks to it in tatters.

“Under the bridge!” he says, he thinks he says. The train is almost here. The wind is tugging him, lifting him, the wind's fingers want him. He is kicked away, floating. He's under the bridge. The train is rumbling past. The train wants him.

Get on board.

Hold on. Hold on. He can't tell if he's saying anything. HOLD ON. He is holding on to a post, a piling, it's the size of a telephone pole, it supports the bridge, he has Allison in his left arm, he is holding the post in his right arm, Allison is holding the post with both arms, the wind is pulling her away. His foot leaves the ground, he pulls it back, he wraps his feet around the post, around Allison – ALLISON – the wind is pulling, he

drives his body into Allison, he pulls at the post with both hands and both feet, pinning Allison hard, secure, he's got her, her hair is whipping, her beret comes loose, it hits him in the eye and it's gone, he can't find the cat, the cat is gone. Snowball! He looks to the side. He can't see out of one eye.

He tries to breathe and can't. He tries to speak and can't. The wind has dropped.

He's floating. He can't catch his breath.

The wind has released him but he's floating. It would be so easy to let go of the post.

Allison looks up. Her hair is floating up into his face.

The vortex is directly overhead.

"Wow," she says, distantly, though she is right by his ear. "Wow. Amazing! Is that what heaven is like?"

He looks up into the center of the vortex, where it is calm. Things are drifting. He starts to make a list, but it is too beautiful.

River water surges upward near them. It's not like an explosion. It's like a homecoming. That sweet by and by.

He could leave here, now, he realizes, the graceful solution, the simple way out of this impossible situation, this Nguyet and Allison, this family he loves, this half a family. A life without them – it would be like being split in two. He'd be half a man. He'd be walking through darkness the rest of his days.

He could let go of the piling, now, and be a whole man.

But he'd have to take Allison with him.

* * *

So here he is, this Coleman, at the new train stop in Kingfisher, Oklahoma, the unofficial new train stop, unsanctioned by the county, out of sight of the road. He could let go and fly away and be whole. He didn't know there would be this train thing, this tornado. But it was what he came here for. Now he knows.

His eyes are streaming with tears.

Get on board.

"Yes," he says. A fish emerges from the waterspout and moves upward. He reaches toward it, maybe the last thing he is going to reach for again.

But Allison is crying. He feels her body quaking against his. He looks down at her.

"Snowball," she says, faintly. He follows her gaze.

Snowball is floating, tumbling slowly, leaving them.

He reaches out and grabs Snowball by the fur.

"No," he says, to the vortex, "no," he says, not Allison, not now. He thinks of Nguyet, and his own wife, and his own daughter. "Not her, not her, not her."

Not them, not now.

A cross-tie pulls away from the railroad tracks above their heads. It groans and rises, weightless, swings out, catches the edge of the wind, and slams into the piling above them. And then the wind is upon them, again, screaming.

The post reverberates, a broken baseball bat, his hands are numb, tingling, something falls into the river with a splash, he can hear it, the train is leaving.

“Hold on,” says Coleman. His voice is weak, but he can hear it. “Allison!”

The post is steady. The wind is steady.

The wind is gone. Everything is quiet. Dust is drifting.

The train has gone, it left him, it's gone, he's under a bridge in Kingfisher, Oklahoma.

“Let me go!” Allison is panting. “Stop squeezing me!”

Coleman is dizzy, disoriented. He tries to open his eyes, they are open, he can't see out of one eye. His cheek is against her hair, it's damp, it's brown.

She is squirming, pushing back against him. “Let me go!”

Allison's brown hair, glossy brown in the sunshine. The sun is shining. The train is gone. The train is headed down the river. He can hear it now. He can see the dark spot on Allison's hair.

He lets her go. They stumble up the path together, they're looking for something, they're looking for Snowball. They stagger up the path.

Snowball is licking Coleman's puke. She looks up at them, then returns to the puke.

Coleman walks out to the bridge. It's twisted. A cross-tie is gone, it's in the river, lodged against a rock, a submerged rock. A trail is cleared on the other side of the river, it looks like a utility easement, it's cleared down to the dirt. Broken things stick up out of the ground. It's fresh, it smells fresh, it smells like dirt, it is dirt.

Coleman hears a flapping sound. He looks up. Fish are falling, flapping. Some hit the railroad bridge. Some miss it, and fall into the river. He sees the splashes, the tail

flicks, they swim away.

His car is undamaged. He looks in the windows. Undamaged. He clears a spot on the window and in the reflection sees his eye. It looks fine. Undamaged.

“Are you okay, Coleman?”

Allison has a scratch on her face. She has creosote on her shirt. Creosote from the piling. It won't come out in the wash. The shirt is ruined. The sun is shining. Fish are falling.

“We need to clean up that scratch,” he says, and falls.

* * *

So there's a guy driving down a highway in a 1983 Toyota, it's the highway between Kingfisher and Oklahoma City, it's a hatchback, there's a cat in the back seat, the cat has a name, it's Snowball. The guy's name is Coleman, it's you, you're driving, your hands are shaking on the wheel. You look in the mirror.

“That cat is unbelievable,” you say. “She should be named Vomit Eater.”

There's a girl in the car, she's laughing, she's eight years old, she's a lot like her mother. Her mother's name is Nguyet, she's out on a date, you're babysitting, you're married, one wife, two kids. You're on your way home from Kingfisher, an agricultural community, a place you had decided at the last minute you had to go to, to get away for a while. You're on your way home to Oklahoma City but first you have to stop off in Mustang, a bedroom community, where Nguyet is in some guy's bedroom, some single guy's bedroom, getting it on. Maybe she's finished by now, maybe she's putting her bra on, maybe the red one, the padded one, that's easy, they're all red, they're all padded.

Maybe she's watching the news, maybe you're on the news, the car in the distance, the 1983 Toyota on the Kingfisher highway.

You're touching your eye, you have a swollen eye, it's swollen from Allison's beret, things are blurry but you can see out of it now. Allison, she's shrieking at the name *Vomit Eater*, she's looking over her shoulder at the cat and calling it *Vomit Eater*. The cat's taking it easy in the back. It has no problems. It has a belly full of preprocessed food, how good can it get? It was a really nice day, a blue sky day, before the storm. Now there's nothing but this electric purple twilight everywhere you look, except to the southeast, which is where you're headed, which is blackness.

You look at Allison. Her face is scratched, her shirt is ruined, you love her. She sees you looking at her, she lets out some slack in her seat belt, leans up and kisses you on the cheek. It feels cool, like water. "That was so cool," she says, "it was unbelievable." She pauses. "I was teasing you about camping," she says.

"What do you mean?" you say, one eye in the rearview mirror.

"I knew what you meant," she says, "about tense," and before she snugs up the seat belt she turns and looks at the cat. You follow her look in the mirror and see the cat, sleeping in the back seat. It's been a big day for the cat. "We better call her V. E.," says Allison, "my mom doesn't like that word, 'vomit'. She says it's disgusting."

"V. E.," you say, to yourself, as if this is the start of some new code between you, as if there could be anything new between you.

"We better not tell her about the tornado, either," she says. "She'll freak out."

"But your shirt," you say.

“Fell down,” she shrugs, and smiles broadly over her shoulder at the sleeping cat. “V. E.! Coleman rescued you, stupid cat!”

The highway is deserted, nothing but a few pairs of headlights, a few news crews headed to Kingfisher, the exhausted side of the storm, and you’re drifting across lanes, thinking about the bridge. It will be months before the county does something about the bridge, the bridge hasn’t been used in 17 years, not by the railroad.

Allison's asleep now in the passenger seat, it's been a big day for Allison. You love Allison. You should just stop right now and tell her, damn it, explain to her, as if in the day of judgment, unending, and the book of languages opened. Explain everything. Because if you don't, there will be things she will never know.

But you don't have time. Nguyet will be calling soon, she will be worried, she's a good mother. Allison's head is against the seat. She's asleep.

“I love you,” you say, out loud, your stomach wringing up like a dish towel, and what you mean is not just Allison, not just Nguyet and Allison alone. You're saying it to your family, too, your daughter on debate team, your son with the lisp problem. Your wife is in Dallas, the Four Seasons, some conference room, and you're saying it to her, too.

But that time is past, the train is gone, the vortex unwound, and there's nothing left to do but keep the centerline to the left, the headlights on bright. In front of you, growing larger as you drive towards it, is a blackness that is unthinkable. It seems at first to be opening up into all of Oklahoma, but as you get closer, you see it's not opening up into all of Oklahoma, it's opening up into all of everywhere you've ever been and

everywhere you will ever be. It's a blackness that does not turn lacquered brown in the sunshine, but still retains the days of the calendar. It's a series of words, a series of signs, it's a wire frame structure without meaning.