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Lost in Luck: Stories

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By

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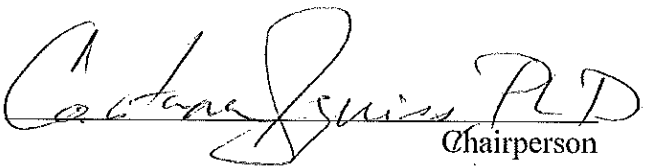
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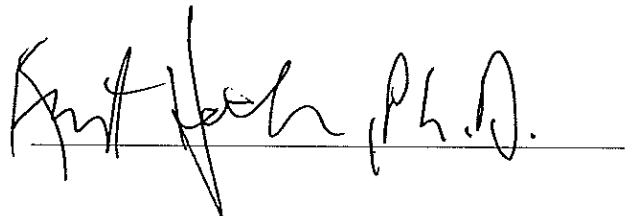
A THESIS

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By  Chairperson

 Ph.D.

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ABTRACT OF THESIS

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TITLE: Lost in Luck: Stories

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Constance Squires

PAGES: 167

Lost in Luck: Stories is a collection of eight short stories written and revised during my time as a graduate student at the University of Central Oklahoma. The most prominent theme within the collection is luck. Specifically, the characters in this collection ponder the existence of luck (chance, randomness, etc.), struggle with its perceived influence, and face difficult choices as a result. Many of these characters seek to understand the world around them.

Several pieces within the collection are also coming-of-age stories. These stories involve young men that are intelligent, yet naïve; curious, yet arrogant. Either through interactions with family and friends, or foreign places and the surreal, these characters lose innocence.

The majority of these stories are strictly done in the realist mode. However, several of the stories feature magical elements inserted into a realistic world.

Lost in Luck: Stories

The Send-off

I was 18 then, all set to leave town in a few days and head off for college. We were having a little going away party at my buddy Jack's house. It was to be one last chance to get hammered and say our goodbyes. But everything had been complicated by the fact that Buck's grandma had been put in the ground two days earlier, the unlucky victim of what I was beginning to see was more than just bad luck. I was pretty sure I had killed her, though it was all still a little unclear in my head. I hadn't sorted it out yet, but I needed to and I wasn't sure how. I thought it might be good to tell Buck what had happened—what I think had happened—because he might not know. Then again, he might know everything already.

“So, the cops still keeping an eye on you?” I asked.

“What? Them fucking cops,” said Buck. Buck and I were alone out in Jack’s garage refilling our plastic cups. Someone had been kind enough to purchase a keg for the occasion, though in light of recent events, I wasn’t much in the mood for drinking. I still felt the need to keep up appearances and act cool though, the party was in my honor after all, so there I was. Buck pumped the handle with his skinny arm as I poured Killian’s Irish Red into both our glasses. He was about the same height as I was, average, and he was rail thin. We could feel the bass from the hip-hop music bleed through the walls and rattle the shelving in the garage. “Shit, hell if I know. I don’t think so, but who gives a fuck really?” he said.

About a month prior, the gas station Buck worked at had been robbed. The money had been taken from the safe overnight while the security cameras were turned off. The police were sure it was an inside job, but they hadn’t arrested anyone yet. They questioned Buck immediately, but he had spent that night with me, and I told them as much. That was kind of a funny night, actually. We had gone to a bonfire party out in the countryside and chased some Valium with a case of beer. After I drove him the short distance to my house, he ended up sleeping on the floor of my bedroom. When I woke up the next morning, I was surprised to see he wasn’t there and as I got out of bed, my bare feet detected some dampness in the carpet. I went out in the hallway and strangely enough, there was a pair of wet boxer shorts in the doorway to my parents’ bedroom, who were out of town at the time. And there was Buck, bare ass naked, sleeping in my parents’ bed because he had pissed himself on my bedroom floor. He said he didn’t remember any of it, and I believed him. He was prone to blackouts from time to time. Of course, when I told the cops he was with me that night, I didn’t mention any of these details, but imagine if I had.

I was a little paranoid the cops might be keeping tabs on him and I think Buck was too, even though he wouldn't show it. That's the kind of guy Buck was. He would never admit to being scared or sad or depressed. Those were topics he simply would not, or could not, discuss, for those were real downers, and Buck was mainly concerned with living the good life, as we all were. He was all smiles and laughs, and though he was really intelligent, he had slowed down a bit over the past year or so, becoming more and more unaware of what was going on around him. Buck would play it up to comic brilliance, and that was part of the reason everyone loved him, though I noticed he was acting somewhat different lately.

"When the hell are they going to arrest Sheila and get this shit over with?" I said. Sheila was one of Buck's coworkers and she was shady as hell. She was the one who had closed up the gas station that night and then mysteriously quit after the place had been robbed. Everyone knew she had jacked the place, but the cops were sitting on their asses.

"I don't know," said Buck. "I keep telling the cops about how she was always ganking packs of smokes and magazines, but they don't listen to me. You got those boomers?"

"Of course, buddy," I said.

Boomers were slang for mushrooms. I had managed to score a quarter pound at a great price from one of my connections at work a few weeks ago. They were hard to come by, so when the word came in, I jumped on it. I had already doled out some quarters and eighths before the party had officially started, hoping to get the rest of my stash off my hands before I left town. I didn't sell drugs on a regular basis—I was never that stupid—but if you were able to get yourself a deal on a large quantity of whatever, you could get high for free, and that made the risk involved easier to swallow.

"Hell yes," he said. "Hook it up."

I grabbed an eighth from my pocket and handed it to him. “There you go, free of charge, my friend.”

He unrolled the bag, grabbed a few pristine orange caps and held them in his hand. The caps were about the size of a 25-cent piece and they were beautiful. Most of the time you get a bag full of stems, which if you eat enough, will still make you trip balls, but when you had caps like these, just a couple could have you chatting it up with the maple tree out in the front yard.

He popped them in his mouth and started chomping like they were sticks of Juicy Fruit. I nearly gagged at the sight and had to look away.

“How can you do that?” I said.

“What? They’re good.”

“They’re disgusting,” I said. “I had to sprinkle mine on a chicken taco just so I wouldn’t throw up.”

He shrugged at me and kept on chewing. I was beginning to feel it now. My stomach was hurting something fierce and a giddiness crept inside me. I stared at an oil spot on the cement floor of the garage until its edges began to move.

A door leading into the house opened and Jack came in. The three of us go way back. We’d all been good friends since the 5th grade, and though I was glad to see him, his entrance seemed like an intrusion.

“Look at these two assholes,” he said. He slapped Buck on the back. “How can you eat those like that?”

We all laughed.

“Well, if it isn’t the man of honor,” said Jack, and he stood, sizing me up. “Mr. Scholarship Man. Mr. Full Ride to MSU. How the hell are you?”

“I’m tripping balls,” I said.

“I know,” said Jack. “I am too. You excited?”

“For sure,” I said, and that was truth. I *was* excited. I was ready to get the hell out of this town. I had spent my whole damn life in this place, and I couldn’t wait to leave. I had big plans. I was going off to school to major in marketing, and I was going to get into pharmaceutical sales, and I was going to criss-cross the country in a company car and wear expensive suits everyday. I was going to close million dollar deals with a firm handshake and a bullshit Vicodin smile inside a well-furnished board room at the top of a skyscraper, and I was definitely, definitely, definitely going to have lots of casual sex with female business execs at four a.m. in the hotel room of a Best Western, because lord knows, I certainly wasn’t getting any now.

“We’re going to miss you, you bastard,” said Jack. He filled his cup. “I propose a toast. To our good friend Ryan—gentleman, scholar, premature ejaculator. May you leave this godforsaken hellhole and never come back. Cheers.”

We all touched glasses and gulped down our beers. We then took turns refilling them in silence.

“And this one’s for Buck’s grandma,” said Jack.

I froze. Surely they knew what had happened. DD would have called Buck, and Buck would have told Jack, or maybe one of Buck’s younger brothers, and they would have told the whole fucking world because they talk nonstop to anyone that bothers to listen. I braced myself as best as I could, and I looked over at Buck and he was looking right back at me and I tried to look innocent and guilty at the same time.

“She was a fine lady,” said Jack. “Didn’t say too much. In fact, I hardly remember her talking at all. Oh shit, do you guys remember when we first started hanging out at Buck’s?”

It was impossible to forget. Though we had all been friends since grade school, Jack and I had never been inside Buck's house until we were 16. That was when we first started getting drunk and high. Buck lived out in the country, about 15 minutes outside of town, his house invisible from the road, completely shielded by a thick line of trees and vegetation. His mother had died when he was young, and his father, a racist ex-Marine, had severely injured his back years ago and was now on permanent disability and spent the majority of his time watching TV and tinkering around out in the garage, possibly smoking crack, though I never could confirm this. Going up his steep, curved driveway, a shoddy trail of gravel cut out of the earth, was like going into another world. At Buck's, all of the rules you had spent your whole life learning no longer applied.

The first time we went over there, I distinctly remembered feeling disoriented. The house itself was unfinished and lacked siding, naked and vulnerable with its black undersides exposed. The grass and weeds rose several feet in the air and hadn't been mowed in months. Old cars and rusted lawnmowers dotted the yard, and they looked as if they had always been there. Inside the house was even worse. The kitchen sink and counter brimmed with dirty dishes and empty cereal boxes. Dirty laundry was scattered all over the house. Many of the rooms were still unfinished as well, even though they had lived there for over ten years.

I wasn't sure what to make of it. The whole environment was new to me. I had been raised by parents who earned a combined salary of \$100,000, worked at the same company, and came home at 4 p.m. everyday as long as I could remember. Our house was kept clean and we ate dinner together every night. The most traumatic thing that ever happened to me as a child was when I fell face-first on the sidewalk, broke my glasses, and had to get seven stitches above my right eye.

So when we walked into Buck's that first time, none of it made sense. And when we were all standing in the kitchen with DD as he sparked up a joint with Buck's grandma sitting right there at the kitchen table and watching us like some kind of bitter, resigned statue, I couldn't believe what was happening. It had to have been one of the most awkward moments of my life. I looked over at Buck, but his eyes were focused on the joint and he had a grin on his face, and I could tell he was thinking only about that joint and what he'd do to it once he got his hands on it.

"Oh. Does she smoke to?" I said.

DD shook his head and passed the joint over to me. I had smoked weed before, but this was the first time I had felt like I shouldn't, not with her there watching us. I took the joint from DD and held it, contemplating.

"You going to hit it or are you going to just sit there and admire it?" said Buck.

I took a hit and passed it over to Jack.

"You guys want a beer?" said DD.

That was pretty much how it all started. From then on, we were over at Buck's all the time. And it wasn't just us; there were all sorts of kids hanging out there, and Buck's dad didn't give a shit about anything. On any given night, school nights included, you could find ten kids there at least, all of us drinking, getting high, doing anything we could get our hands on—nothing was off limits. Some of them were our friends, and some were only minor acquaintances, but all of us had one thing in common: what I can only describe as the hunger. It was the hunger to get outside oneself, to feel different, to feel alive. All of us had it, though I think for each one of us it was a little different.

“I remember standing there thinking,” said Jack. “I was thinking, ‘Jesus Christ, we’re getting high in front of Buck’s grandma. This shit is weird’.”

Buck laughed and I followed suit. The music stopped inside the house.

“Hell yeah, that was great,” said Buck.

“Did she ever say anything about it?” I said.

“Nah,” said Buck.

“What was she going to do? Kick us out? She could barely walk,” said Jack. “I don’t think she cared.”

“I don’t know,” said Buck. He looked puzzled.

“But did she ever say anything at all?” I asked. “About anything?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” said Jack. They burst out in laughter. It was the kind of laugh you have when you’re on mushrooms and you laugh at anything, even when you’re not supposed to.

“Forget it,” I said.

“C’mon, get your glasses up,” said Jack. “To Buck’s grandma. And to DD. The poor bastard. Sitting in jail right now. What a shame.”

DD was Buck’s uncle. DD wasn’t his real name; it was short for Daisy Dukes. We called him DD because he liked to wear these denim cut-offs that were so short you wouldn’t be surprised if one of his balls popped out every now and then. He wasn’t even gay; he was just in his late-thirties and didn’t know any better. He had also spent several years in prison for not paying child support, which didn’t help his fashion sense any either. He was the one driving the night Buck’s grandma died.

“Let’s hope his stay is short and pleasant,” said Jack.

It wasn't going to be. DD was straight out fucked, and it was all because of me. He'd already been in prison before. With this, there's no telling how much time he'd be doing. Buck's family couldn't afford an actual lawyer; they had no money whatsoever. There had even been rumors flying around lately that his dad was being investigated by child services. The refrigerator and cupboards at Buck's house had been barren for years. Whenever I could, I'd split a Big Mac or something I'd brought over with one of Buck's younger brothers if they were around.

"Let's hope," I said.

A couple of hours had passed and everyone was getting more and more lit up. Everyone spoke louder, so the music had to be turned up so it could be heard, and to some people it might have looked like chaos, but to most here it was as natural as a Saturday morning hangover. I was somewhere in between. Every inch of my body felt like it was being massaged, especially when I kicked back in an open spot on the couch and could focus on the sensation and stare closely at the vertical lines on the curtains until they were no longer vertical, but wavy, and every time I noticed the waves ebbing and flowing, there was that familiar reflex of the spine, a surge that starts in your lower back and pulses up, up until it hits your brain—a beautiful and terrifying feeling, as if you had just seen the ghost of your first love, a feeling that with enough time and experience, you realize, will never go away completely, even when you're sober, for you've taken too many hits of acid, too many hits of ecstasy, too much Valium and Xanax and Oxycontin and Methadone to ever fully recover, and the ghost will always be there in your spine, waiting.

"You feeling ok, man?" said Jack. He stood in front of me.

“I was checking out your curtains,” I said. “They’re amazing.”

Jack turned his head and looked at the curtains behind him for a few moments. Then he turned back to me.

“You’re a trip, man,” he said.

“The lines,” I said. “Look at the lines. Really look at them. They’re not lines anymore. They look like lines, on the surface, but they’re not. There’s more to it than that, underneath. Like with Buck.”

Jack laughed at me. The guy that was sitting next to me on the couch stood up and Jack took his spot.

“What about Buck?” he said.

“Did he say anything to you?” I said.

“About what?”

“About his grandma and DD. Did he say anything? Did he tell you how it happened?”

“Everybody knows, man,” he said.

“Knows what?”

“That DD was fucked up when he was driving Buck’s grandma to the doctor’s office and hit an oncoming truck. I left you a message the other day. Why didn’t you go to the funeral?”

“I had to work,” I said. It was true, I did have to work on the day of the funeral, but I could have gotten it off if I had wanted to. Instead, I used it as an excuse. There was no way I could have looked at her or Buck or any of them, not with what I did, or better yet, what I had failed to do.

“You should have been there,” said Jack.

“I wanted to,” I said.

“Hardly anyone showed up,” he said.

“So you didn’t hear anything else about it? About the accident or anything?”

“No, man. Should I?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know.”

After a while, Jack asked me what time I was going to leave on Monday and head out to MSU, and he said it was going to suck not having me around anymore, and he pointed out that I was the only one of our group that was actually leaving town for school. There were a few others planning on going to the nearby community college, but everyone would still be in the area, all except me. Jack said he might dabble with a class or two, though he wasn’t sure. He had a good job at a plastics plant where they made rear-view mirror casings for the Ford Explorer.

The entire time Jack and I were talking, I watched Buck mingle, bouncing from one small cluster of people to another while carrying a beer in each hand. He wasn’t stumbling, but he wasn’t walking straight either. He eventually worked his way over to a group of three guys standing close to where Jack and I were sitting. They were close enough so that Jack and I could hear everything they were saying, though just barely.

“Look at Buck,” I said to Jack, nodded, and then smiled.

Buck had accidentally spilled beer on one of the three guys. They weren’t complete strangers or anything; they were actually friends of ours. Then, Jack and I watched as Buck tried inserting himself into the group’s conversation even though he hadn’t the slightest clue what they were talking about. He would say things like, “No way,” or “Really? Oh c’mon now. Really?” after any of the three guys spoke. At first, they thought it was hilarious, but they grew tired of it after a while.

“What is he on?” said one guys. “Jesus Christ, what are you on, Buck?”

“Is that so?” said Buck, and then laughed.

I stood up from the couch and edged my way into the group of guys.

“Hey Buck, how you doing?” I said.

“Hey!” said Buck, raising one of his cups.

“What is he on, Ryan?” the guy said to me.

“I think he’s on mushrooms,” I said.

“Jesus Christ,” said the guy. He looked over at Buck and then shook his head. “Who gave him mushrooms?”

“I did,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Jesus,” he mumbled. “Well, you talk to him, then.”

Buck, Jack, and I, along with about seven others, went upstairs to Jack’s room to go smoke. It was a neat space, as it was intended to be an attic rather than a bedroom. You had to walk up this narrow set of stairs to get there, and it was like going through a secret passage, like the spot you always wished to discover in your own house as a kid, and were saddened to find out never existed after all.

The room was lit with a single lamp as we sat scattered about in a rough circle, resting on any sort of flat, open surface we could find. A few of us had to sit on the floor. Jack snapped up a rolling tray and I was amazed when nine of us, everyone except Buck, pulled out their own respective sacks of weed. You could hear the familiar crinkle and shake of plastic baggies, and it was a lovely sound. I was given the honor of breaking up all of the weed everyone had contributed as Jack worked on emptying out a cigar. I set about my task with eagerness and

deliberation until I was no longer thinking about Buck or his Grandma or going off to college; it was simply me and the remnants of a few plants, and it was about as close to perfect as I could get.

“That about ready?” said Jack.

“Don’t rush it,” I said.

“It’s fine,” said someone else. “Roll that shit up.”

Another “yeah” came from the group and I had no choice but to hand the tray with the weed over to Jack so he could roll up the blunt. As Jack worked, Buck swayed in his chair, trying to have yet another conversation. Everyone was laughing at him. These guys were stoners, though, so they were more sympathetic to his condition than the alcohol-only enthusiasts downstairs. Jack finished rolling and lit the blunt. It was gigantic, a real bomber. I took a few pulls and it was good. I passed it on to the next guy.

“I know what you’re doing,” said Buck. “All of you, I know. I know.”

“What are we doing, Buck?” someone said.

“You’ve got masks on,” Buck said. The blunt made its way around to Buck, but he wouldn’t hit it. He just sat there holding it. “You guys think I’m going to fall for it, don’t you? You think I will. But I won’t, I’m not that fucking dumb. I ain’t going to fall for it.”

“Fall for what?” I said.

“Puff, puff, pass,” another guy said.

Buck passed it to his right. “You guys are playing me.”

“What?”

“That ain’t weed. That’s tobacco,” said Buck.

Everyone laughed—except me. The blunt made its way back over to Jack.

“Watch, Buck,” he said. He took a long drag off of it and held it for as long as he could, and then exhaled, saying, “You see?” in between coughs. He passed it over to me and I did the same.

“That’s tobacco,” said Buck. “I know it is. You guys are all playing a trick on me. You think I didn’t hear what you said? You think I didn’t? I heard it. I heard what you said.”

“It’s weed, Buck.”

“Buck,” I said. “Do you honestly think we’d go to all that trouble of rolling up a blunt with just tobacco in it, and then all of us—all nine of us—pass it around and act like it was weed? Why would we do that, Buck? Why?”

“I don’t fucking know why,” said Buck. “Why not? It doesn’t fucking matter why. You think I’m some dipshit. A fucking clown.”

Some of the people in the room were still chuckling. To them, it was humorous, but I knew better. Buck was flipping out. You could see it in his eyes. Normally, they reflected a soft, bovine quality. His eyes were now overtaken with sharpness and confusion. I had seen him have a bad trip once before. A few of us were over at his house and had dropped some acid. When it started kicking in, he became convinced we were plotting to steal his Playstation 2 and kicked us out of his house for the night. It was an ugly scene. I prayed Buck’s condition was only temporary and something would come along and snap him out of it.

“Look, Buck,” said Jack. “Come over here and see for yourself.” He grabbed the copy of *Rolling Stone* he used to empty out the cigar, and there was a pile of tobacco sitting on top of it. “Come here.”

Buck stood up and walked over to where Jack and I were sitting. Jack raised the magazine so Buck could see, and Buck looked at the pile of tobacco long and steady.

“That don’t mean shit,” said Buck.

“It’s right there, man,” said Jack, as he pointed at the tobacco.

“This is all part it,” said Buck. “All of you. You’re fucking with me. Yeah, that’s right, just act like you don’t know what I’m talking about. You know. And I know.”

“Buck, no one’s out to get you. Nobody would do that,” I said. “We’re all friends here. Just calm down, man. You’re having a bad trip, that’s all.”

Without warning, Buck slugged me right across the chin. I nearly fell out of my chair. I had never been hit that hard before. I put my hand to my jaw, it ached so bad. I wondered if this was some sort of veiled payback for killing his Grandma, though I still didn’t know if he was aware of my involvement, or if he was even capable of making that kind of connection in his present state. Several of the guys, including Jack, stood up from their chairs, ready to put a hold on things. Buck stood there in front of me, and his eyes looked liable to cut to the very heart of me. I was terrified.

“I see what you’re doing,” he said.

“It’s ok, it’s ok,” I told them. “He didn’t mean it.”

Buck stood there for a few seconds longer, and then went back over to his chair and sat down again as if nothing had happened. He picked up his beer that he had put on the floor earlier and slammed it.

“It’s tobacco,” said Buck.

“You ok?” Jack said to me.

“I’m good,” I said.

But in fact, I was not good. I was barely able to hold it together. One more little push and I would probably slip over the edge and start going bat-shit crazy like Buck was now, and

who knows what would happen then. Maybe Buck was right. Maybe we were out to get him. Maybe his paranoid rumblings were the vertical lines on the curtain, and only when you look at it a certain way can you see the waves of justified anger and distrust looming underneath. Maybe they had been growing for months, years even, and only now were they being unleashed.

The party had been winding down. Every time someone was ready to leave, I went through the motions of shaking hands or giving hugs. Some of these people I would genuinely miss, while others would never cross my mind again, for when you do drugs all the time, the only thing you have in common with many of the people you hang out with is drugs. But you have to go through the motions anyway, like smiling for family photos at Christmas or lying to your mother about where you'd been after a night of partying, because that's what people expect, and you wouldn't want to shatter the image of you they have built up in their minds, sometimes tragically so.

Only a handful of people were left now, including Buck, who had been ambling around, trying to jump into conversations ever since we had come down from Jack's room. He hadn't punched anybody or broken anything, which I took as a good sign, though he had still been pounding beers pretty heavily. That's one of the weird things about mushrooms: you could drink 10 or 15 beers easy and still not feel drunk. I'd been drinking them all night myself, and I kept hoping with each one I might feel a little better, but it never worked. I could not seem to escape this sense of guilt. It burrowed its way inside me, deeper than the death of Buck's grandma, until it reached Buck himself.

Jack and a few others were playing Madden football on the PS2 and screaming at each other, boasting about who was going to kick whose ass, when I saw Buck slink into the kitchen

and out the front door. I excused myself from the video game session and followed after him, making my own way out the front the door. The night was still warm and the stars were out in full force. Buck was heading straight for his rusted-out Bronco and I ran after him. By the time I caught up, he was already behind the wheel with the door closed. We were alone out here and there were no cars behind him to prevent his escape.

“Buck,” I yelled. “What are you doing?”

His window was rolled down and I placed my hands on the edge of the door, my fingers touching the felt interior. He was digging inside his pockets for his keys.

“Peace out,” he said.

“You can’t leave, bro,” I said. “You’re completely fucked up.”

“This shit ain’t real. It’s not real, any of it. You’re not real. You’re fake,” he said.

Buck’s words hit me hard, harder than his fist had earlier. He was right. I was a fake, a sham, and somehow he knew it. For a moment, a sliver of a second, I was ready to give up and go back inside, to let Buck be on his way to wherever he was going.

“It’s fucking real, Buck. You’re just tripping, man. Come back inside. You can’t drive.”

“I’m fine,” he said.

“You’re not fine,” I said.

“You don’t know me,” he said. “Don’t tell me what I am.”

“Ok, ok. Just come back inside.”

“I’m going home,” he said.

“I killed her, Buck. I killed your grandma. She’s dead because of me,” I said.

“DD killed her.”

“But I could have stopped them. I was there, I had the chance. I came over that day looking for you and it was just DD and your grandma sitting there at the table with a half of a case of beer. I knew how messed up he was, I knew he shouldn’t have been driving. He was already drunk when I got there, and we finished that fucking case, but I let them go anyway. *I let them go.*”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “It was bad luck.”

Bad luck? I had seen this before. I understood his mindset completely. This sort of fatalism was rampant in our crowd. Everything boiled down to luck—wrong place, wrong time. So if you’re partying with your buddy’s uncle, getting really messed up, and he tells you he’s going to take his mom some place in the van and you do absolutely nothing to stop him and there’s no one else around to stop him and she winds up dead and he winds up in jail, it’s all just bad luck. Before the accident, I used to think like that too. Really, if you lived like we did, you had to think like that, otherwise nothing would make sense.

“I can’t let you leave,” I said.

“Try and stop me,” he said. He jammed his key into the ignition and started the Bronco.

“Goddamn’t, Buck,” I yelled. I was almost in tears now, lamenting my own helplessness. I leaned in to try and grab his keys, and he slammed my head against the steering wheel, setting off the car horn for a second. He pushed me back out of the cab. I reached for the handle and pulled the door open. By then, he had already put the car in reverse. The door was wrenched from my grasp as the Bronco shot down to the bottom of the driveway and into the gravel road, and you could hear the tires skid against the rocks and dirt as he slammed the breaks and popped it into drive.

As the Bronco sped off, I was sure he would die. He would careen off the road and into a ditch, or take a turn too fast and the Bronco would roll over and he would be killed. It was as if I was single-handedly destroying Buck's family like some unwitting hitman. I knew right then it had absolutely nothing to do with luck.

I ran back inside the house and through the kitchen, and there was Jack and the rest of the guys still playing video games, clueless as to what was going on. I could have told them everything—part of me wanted to—but there was no time for that. Instead, I made my way through the living room and up the steps, finally reaching Jack's computer.

It only took me a couple of minutes to find what I was looking for. I knew the phone number existed. I had seen it on a few billboards and highway signs. It might not work, but I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and called anyway. An operator answered and I gave her a description of Buck's vehicle and the route he would most likely be taking. I told her that they needed to hurry because he might get himself killed or kill someone else, he was that messed up.

It wasn't until a week later, after I was already down at MSU and settled into my dorm room, that I learned the cops had pulled him over that night before he had gotten home. Jack had heard Buck also confessed to robbing the gas station after he failed a polygraph test. Apparently, he must have slipped out of my house in the middle of the night and taken my keys. He said Buck was cooperating with the police as much as possible and was going to return most of the money he had stolen.

I never spoke to Buck again, though my thoughts will often drift back to him, and to the times we spent over at his house, tossing around the frisbee in the knee-high grass or playing cards up in his room. But mostly I think about that night over at Jack's, my send-off party, and about that moment when I was on the phone with the operator, sentencing Buck to jail, and how

the entire time I was talking, I kept telling myself it was better to betray someone than to let them die, little knowing I would be telling myself those exact words ten years later, never entirely convinced.

The Magician and the Debtor

When I was younger, I could wriggle my way out of trouble like a magician escaping chains. This gave me a false sense of control in most situations, until, when I was 18, I got busted hocking my mother's copy of *The Wizard of Oz*—signed by Frank Baum himself—for a thousand bucks so Marty and I could buy in to the biggest underground poker tournament within 150 miles with dreams of winning it all. I almost got away with it too. If it hadn't been for Marty, who knows how long my streak would've lasted?

I got busted on a Saturday. I had slept in till lunch, and I took my normal spot at the head of the table, not saying anything. My parents were already seated, and they didn't say anything either. Various pots and pans covered the table and all the cups and silverware were laid out neatly. There was way too much food for three people, but my parents were always a big fan of left-overs, and would deliberately cook twice as much food as was necessary so they wouldn't have to cook as much during the week. Still, a lot of it would get thrown out. I wondered what was going on, because usually one of them would say something like "Well, look who's up?" or "Bright and early, I see," and though there would be a hint of sarcasm in there, and though it would annoy the hell out of me sometimes, I knew they didn't mean anything by it. They might have disapproved of sleeping in so late on the weekends, but they certainly never forced me to get out of bed or anything.

I grabbed some of the roast beef and mashed potatoes and gravy and made up a plate, even though I didn't have much of an appetite. The silence was really starting to get to me, but I kept quiet and nibbled at my food.

"What's this?" my mother said. I didn't notice it at first, but on the table, right next to her arm, was the replica copy of *The Wizard of Oz* Marty and I had found online to serve as a substitute until we could get the original back with the money we were almost certain to win.

"Looks like *The Wizard of Oz*," I said, but on the inside my mind was going "shit! shit! shit!" I started crunching numbers in my head. What were the odds my mother would happen to take up the protective case in which she kept the original and then remove the book from the case, a case she stored in her bedroom closet, in the time span of about a week? Considering I'd only witnessed her do this exactly twice in my 18 years of existence, I'd say, what, 1000-to-1? 10,000-to-1?

“You wouldn’t happen to know why the inscription on the front page has mysteriously disappeared, would you?” she said.

“I’ll get it back for you, I promise,” I said, and I meant it. I didn’t see a point in trying to lie. There was no way I was going to be able to talk myself out of this one. She had the evidence right in front of her, and there was no other plausible explanation.

“You lied to me,” she said. “You have done nothing but lie. How can I trust you?”

“You can trust me, mom,” I said, but she was right. I had lied to her quite a bit over the last year and a half. I wasn’t one of those people who felt compelled to lie, or one of those who took some sort of sick pleasure in it. I lied only to escape trouble, and to protect the image of me my parents had built up in their minds, and every time I was forced to lie it stung.

“You’re taking drugs, aren’t you?” she said. Meanwhile, my father sat there quietly, his gaze focused on me. He would never get involved in any emotional conversations, and instead would always let my mother handle it.

“No,” I said, trying my best to sound indignant. It wasn’t entirely true. I had been experimenting quite heavily with booze, pot, pills, you name it. I figured you had to try everything at least once to cut through all the bullshit and propaganda we were fed as kids and discover the truth of the matter, and I was pleasantly surprised by what I had found. Many nights I would come home reeking like cheap cologne I had just put on to cover up the smell of cigarettes and pot, my eyes as red as cherries because I had misplaced my bottle of Visine, and I would pray she was already in bed, and I would try and sneak upstairs as quietly as I could, almost as if I was a burglar in my own house, and sure enough, she’d take me by surprise, and I’d have to make up some story about where I was.

“Well then what is it?” she said.

How could I explain everything that had happened with Marty, and the tournament, and my mother's signed copy? It was all so complex, and I didn't even understand it all myself, so how was I supposed to convey it to them?

"Nothing, I swear. I'll get your book back, I promise," I said.

"Oh, you'll pay for it all right," she said, her voice all fiery. Then she looked away and stared out the window for a couple of beats before turning back to me. "What—," she said. "What did I do wrong?" There was this sincerity, this exasperation in her voice, and I knew she wasn't just saying it to make me feel bad. She rarely cried in front of me.

We sat in silence for some time, but after a minute, I couldn't take it anymore and. "Oh, come on," I said. "It's not your fault. You're just exaggerating." I had hoped my words might convince her, but they had no effect. I couldn't stand to see her that way and think I had caused her such pain, so I left my seat at the table and shut myself in my bedroom, staring at the walls for hours, wondering what was going to happen to me, and how I could possibly track down Marty and get my mother's book back.

I first met Marty about six months earlier over at Buck's house. We could practically do anything we wanted over at Buck's because his mom was dead and his dad didn't give a shit, so it was our preferred spot to hang out and get high on the weekdays and drunk on the weekends. Because of the lack of rules, when you showed up at Buck's place, you never knew who was going to be there. People you barely knew from school would bring their friends over, who brought their friends, and so on, until the next thing you know, you're passing a joint to some wannabe gangbanger who gets his kicks by stealing car stereos and has been in and out of juvie since he was 14.

None of us came from money, but most of us had some kind of part-time job, and every now and then I could convince most of the guys to bring ten or twenty bucks worth of change and play some cards. Around this time, I was really starting to get serious about my game. I loved playing, but I was tired of losing, and tired of having to pay back my parents all the money I had lost playing online using their debit card. I'm not talking serious money here—only about \$500 or so in total, but that was a decent sum for a teenager. I knew that if I studied hard and practiced, I could turn a corner. I was a losing player, but I was losing slowly over time. With a little more skill and experience, I could move up to break-even, and then eventually earn a steady profit.

On this night in particular, I started to feel like my studying was paying off. About seven or eight of us were crammed around the rickety dining table in Buck's kitchen. We were on our second case of beer, and we'd been playing dealer's choice for several hours. I was slowly crushing everyone. A mound of quarters, dimes, and nickles, with some ones and fives as well, spilled out in front of me. I had already gotten all of Eric and Kyle's money. Buck and DD were on life support. I figured in another hour or so I would have everyone cleaned out.

“Need some help counting all that?” asked DD.

“Not from you I don't,” I said, grinning.

“How bout a loan? Can I get a loan?” said Buck. “You know I'm good for it.”

“Of course, Buck. How much would you like?” I said. I had no problems lending Buck money if it meant I could win even more. By the way things were going, that seemed likely. He wanted ten dollars in change. “And no DD, before you ask, you cannot have a loan.”

Buck laughed and pointed at DD, who happened to be Buck's uncle. If I loaned anything to DD, I knew I'd never see it back. He still owed thousands of dollars in child support to several women in different states. This was before he was sent to prison for manslaughter.

About an hour or so later, two guys I had never seen before shuffled into the kitchen. Buck, who had just lost the last of his loan to Jack on a meager pair of sixes, said, "What's going on guys?" and got up from the table to greet them. After speaking with them for a couple of minutes, Buck wandered off, leaving the pair hovering over us, watching the deal of the cards. Having most of the money on the table, I was feeling great, chummier than normal.

"Fellas, welcome, welcome," I said, as if I were a carnival barker. "Please, have a seat. There's always room for new blood. Come, sit."

Everyone introduced themselves and shook hands like we were at a business meeting, and I fetched a couple of beers for the newcomers. Jarrod sat next to me, and Marty ended up sitting across from me. Jarrod seemed like the quiet type.

"Looks like you're winning," said Marty.

It was my turn to deal, so I got to pick the game. I felt like mixing it up, so I chose Omaha, which is similar to Texas Hold 'Em, but with more hole cards. "You could say that," I said as I shuffled the deck. If I had to guess, I'd say I probably had over \$100 in front of me by then. "Want to buy in?" I asked.

"Fuck yes," said Marty. "The only problem is I'm a little short on cash. Would you take a trade?"

"Depends on what I'm trading for," I said. If he had some Pioneer car stereo with the wires still hanging out, I wanted nothing to do with it. As it turned out, Marty had just spent all of his money on a sheet of acid. He wanted to know if I was interested in some. I had only done

LSD once before a few months back. Jack, Buck, and I had all dropped a couple of hits and we spent hours and hours driving around in Buck's Ford Bronco, eventually winding up at a late-night pool hall called Eight-ball Joe's on Plainfield, where we sat at a table, fidgeting with a couple of bottles of Jones' Soda in front of us, going on and on about how we could just stay there forever, that somehow we were content.

"Abso-fucking-lutely," I said, "but if it's garbage, I'm taking my money back."

"Deal," said Marty. "I haven't tried it yet, so I guess we'll see." He fished a clear sandwich baggie out of his pocket, then rummaged inside until he could isolate the number of hits he wanted. I was expecting to see an actual "sheet" of paper, but I guess he had already cut them up into individual doses. "Hold out your hand," he said, and then he gently dropped two itty-bitty squares into my cupped palm, and I just held them there for a moment, thinking about how such tiny, harmless-looking squares of paper could contain such mind-altering properties, and I thought about how wonderful it would be if there were other, everyday items that had secret powers just waiting to be discovered. I couldn't wait any longer, and I tossed the hits in my mouth and held them on my tongue like I had been instructed to the first time, so as to let my saliva act as a catalyst and release the LSD. This may have been complete bullshit, the teenage druggie version of an old wives' tale. I had no idea, but I did it anyway.

Word of Marty's acid spread through Buck's house like an electric current through water, and pretty soon all the guys, including Buck, had coalesced in the kitchen looking for handouts or wheeling and dealing like they were at the stock exchange, trying to scrounge up enough money for a couple of hits.

Once all the commotion had died down and everyone either went without or purchased what they could afford, the game resumed, and this sense of momentous anticipation overcame

me. I knew in a matter of minutes the acid would be kicking in, and as I waited, it felt like the impending high was a train in the distance slowly heading towards me as I stood on the tracks waiting to get hit.

After twenty minutes or so I noticed there was a sheen on the cards that was real bright and shiny like they were wrapped in plastic, but I knew there was no plastic covering these cards, and this was how I could tell that my buzz was kicking in. Pretty soon we were all giggling at random stuff and a couple of the guys were getting easily distracted and I'd have to get their attention back on the game. An hour passed and Marty and I were the only ones left with money on the table. Marty had managed to bust out Jack and a couple of others.

When it gets down to heads-up, a lot of people get impatient, but with Marty and I, this wasn't the case. I'm not sure if it was the acid, or the spirit of competition, or if we just clicked, but we sat there for hours winning and losing, trading money back and forth and shooting the shit while everyone else was off playing video games or smoking weed up in Buck's room. He talked a lot about himself. While he didn't look it, he was ten years older than me. He currently lived with his six month-old daughter, his girlfriend and her mother in a trailer park in Walker. He had a pet hedgehog named Spike. He used to be addicted to cocaine. Apparently he'd gotten to the point where he was injecting it which I didn't even know was possible. He knew Buck through work. They had both worked over at the Taco Bell on Lake Michigan Drive until Buck quit a few weeks back.

I said, "Don't you just feel like we could stay here playing cards—"

"Forever?" he said.

"Yes!" I said, and we both laughed.

"Still feeling okay?" he asked.

“I’m feeling wonderful,” I said, checking out the dingy wallpaper in Buck’s kitchen to confirm I was still seeing tracers from the acid. Yep, still there. “Thank you, man. I’m so glad you swung through tonight. I’m just so happy.”

“Glad to be of service, my friend,” he said.

Not long after this, Buck came into the kitchen and told us his dad had given word: it was time for everyone to get the hell out. I checked the clock.

“Wow! Four a.m.! I can’t believe that shit,” I said.

Marty and I exchanged glances. Our stacks were about even.

“How about we raise the stakes? See if we can finish this?” asked Marty.

I considered the offer. With a weaker player, I wouldn’t hesitate, but I could already tell Marty had some skills. Over the past few hours, I had become impressed with his play.

Whereas I would consider myself the more cerebral, analytical-type player, Marty struck me as more of the gutsy, instinctual-type. Whereas I’m calculating outs and ranges, he’s trying to decipher your tells, your physical ticks, facial gestures, any kind of sign he can pick up and help him decide when best to apply pressure. Earlier I’d seen him bluff Jack off a set of fours with a four bet on the turn holding nothing but a gutshot straight draw, the board reading KhQh4s10h. To make that play you’re either high off your ass or you have balls of steel, but something told me he knew what he was doing.

“No limit then?” I said.

“Let’s do it,” he said.

“You got ten minutes,” said Buck.

Four hands in, I’m staring at pocket kings, and I tried my damndest to keep my eyes from glimmering. I raised it up pre, and Marty three bet me, and my heart started going. Choices,

choices. The standard line would have been to four bet here, but Marty might have easily seen through that. He probably knew I erred on the conservative side, so he'd put my four bet range at 1010+, maybe even JJ+, and since I knew he was more aggressive, his three bet range in this spot was wide open, which means flatting sounded like the better move.

I called and the flop came AhAcKh, and now I was positive Marty could literally see my heart pounding, he could see my chest push outward with each beat. I'd say we both had about \$100 in our piles of coins and bills and I just flopped a full house and we were playing no limit, and how could he possibly not see how strong my hand was? I expected him to bet here, stay on the offensive, but he checked to me.

No matter, I was setting a trap regardless, and I checked it back. The turn came 8s and Marty lead out again, and I could barely contain my delight. More than likely, he had air and was trying to maintain his aggressive stance and get me off a weak pocket pair. Best case scenario, he hit a set of aces, but if that were the case, he'd probably slow play them, or maybe he wouldn't.

I flatted again. The river came 2c, and I was praying he'd lead out yet again, and sure enough, there he went, and I put on the brakes, doing my best acting job, try to make it look like I actually didn't know what I was going to do, but of course I knew all along what I was going to do, I was going to bet, and really the only decision I needed to make was how much to bet, and even that wasn't really a tough call, so I raise him ten, just begging—I mean *begging*—for him to three bet me, and he does! he three bets me, and my hands and my face and my arms surged with giddiness, and already I'm adding up what's in the pot because I had this hand locked down, I had him exactly where I wanted him and all that was left do was go all in, and so I did, I said "All in," and I made this pushing motion with my hands, and I could still see the tracers,

they were everywhere, on the table, on the cards, on the wallpaper, and already I'm thinking about what I'm going to do with the money.

Marty called, and I slammed down my cards, "Full house, kings full motherfucker!" I boasted, tossing in a faux diabolical laugh for effect, and I reached for the huge pile of coins and bills in the center of the table.

"Hold on there, kid," said Marty, and he laid down his hand. Quad aces. Quad-fucking-aces! I stood motionless as Marty scooped up the money. He grinned. "Next time, Ryan," he said. "There's always next time."

The day after I got busted by my parents it was Sunday, and I got out of bed earlier than I normally would since I wasn't able to go out the night before. I went downstairs and shuffled into the kitchen.

"Oh, look who's up," said my father.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I said. I went to the cupboard and grabbed a box of cereal, then pulled a gallon of milk out of the fridge.

"I've got a surprise for you," he said.

"Shit, what now?" I said. I got a bowl and headed for the kitchen table. I could tell by the way he was talking that it wasn't good. He had this wide smile on his face. He was always quite the jokester, and I could see that he was enjoying this.

"You see that deck out there," he said, pointing out the slider door to the deck in our backyard. About a year ago, my parents had decided to get rid of the above-ground pool because nobody used it anymore and it was costing too much money to maintain. All that was left of the pool itself was a slight crater in the ground where it used to be, mostly dirt and weeds. But there

was a wooden deck that had connected the back of the house to the pool, so you could literally run out the slider door onto the deck and jump in the pool in a matter of seconds without ever setting foot on the grass. “As part of your punishment, you’re going to take it down.”

I was surprised by what he said, so much so that I started choking on my cereal. In between coughs, I said, “You’re kidding me.”

“Oh no,” he said.

“How?” I said.

“Well, there’s a sledgehammer and a crowbar out in the garage,” he said. “That should get you started.”

“Fucking-a,” I said.

“Fucking-a is right,” he said.

“What if I can’t do it?” I said. I stood up and walked over to the slider. I looked out at the deck. There was no question; it had to be taken care of. It was like having a bridge that was only connected to one side of a river. It was pointless. And the deck was getting old too. You couldn’t walk on it with bare feet anymore. The wood was so warped that many of the nails had been pushed up and were sticking out two, maybe three, inches. Even though I knew the deck had to come down, I still couldn’t picture how it was to be done. I had never attempted anything like it.

“I bet you,” he said, “that if you put your mind to it, you can probably figure it out.”

“What if I’m not strong enough?” I said.

“You can do it,” he said.

“But I’ve got homework to do,” I said. “And I’ve got to go to work, too.”

“Well, you can still go to work, and whenever you’re at home, you do your homework first, and then whatever time you have left, you can work on the deck,” he said. “Don’t worry, it’s not going anywhere without you, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

That’s exactly what I was thinking. I’m not sure how old I was when I figured it out, but I learned early on that whenever my parents wanted me to do something, some chore, like washing the dishes or taking out the trash, if I dragged my feet long enough, they would eventually get tired of having a sink full of dishes and do it themselves. It wasn’t a full-proof strategy, but it worked pretty damn well.

My father turned and looked straight at me. “You know,” he said, “you hurt your mother pretty bad yesterday.”

“I know,” I said, and I lowered my eyes until I was staring at my bowl of cereal.

“This lying and stealing and bullshit has got to stop,” he said.

“I know, I know.”

“She can’t take it,” he said. “She has to be able to trust you.”

“She *can* trust me,” I said. I wondered if it was even possible to trust me when there were times where I felt like I couldn’t even trust myself.

“And you know you shouldn’t be doing those things,” he said. After this, he disappeared into the living room leaving me to think about everything that had happened, and in particular, why it was so difficult for me to do what I *should* do. It wasn’t exactly like I was clueless. I always had a pretty good idea of what I should do, yet what I should do and what I actually ended up doing never seemed to align.

For about a month or two after the epic, LSD-fueled heads-up match with Marty, I vowed to practice as much as I could. Losing that much money in a single hand was motivation to work harder and ensure it never happened again. If I wasn't working at my part-time job washing dishes or hanging out with Jack, Buck, and the guys, I was up in my room playing cards online. You would think I would've been on tilt and burned through all the money I had on my account in a flurry of sloppy play and rage, but I didn't. I bought a few more poker books and devoured them. I spent hours poring over hands on a special Internet forum for discussing strategy. Slowly but surely, my account started to tick upwards. I became a winning player. My game of choice? No-limit Texas Hold'em micro stakes sit-n-go tournaments.

During this time, Marty became something of a regular over at Buck's house. I say something because Marty didn't own a car. Buck's place was too far to walk from the trailer park in Walker, so someone always had to go and pick him up, and I was usually the guy to do it. Whenever I pulled into his driveway, he'd be waiting for me out on the front porch, smoking a cigarette with his girlfriend as she clutched their child in her arms, and every time it was awkward and uncomfortable because she'd always give me the death stare, and it was quite obvious she did not approve of her former addict boyfriend running off with some young punks doing who knows what while she's left to take care of the baby.

On the way to and from Buck's, all I wanted to do was talk about poker. I had become very proud of my winning player status. Marty only seemed mildly interested in the topic. At one point he asked me how much I won so far and I told him.

"Not bad, not bad," he said.

"Pretty damn good if you ask me," I said. "Why, how much have *you* won?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't really keep track," he said.

“Yeah, right. So what’s your biggest score then? You must know that,” I said.

“Well, believe it or not, last year I took down one of the monthly 500’s at Soaring Eagle for ten grand,” he said.

“Bullshit! I call bullshit!” I said.

“It’s true,” he said.

That night I went online to the Soaring Eagle website, and sure enough, there was his name and picture: Martin Webb - 1st place, \$10,000. I couldn’t believe it. I knew he was good, but I had no idea he was *that* good. I could only imagine what I could do with ten grand. Buy a new car? Take the guys to Cancun for the weekend? Damn, that was a lot of money.

When Marty and I were at Buck’s, I’d always try to get him to play cards, but he never wanted to. He either didn’t want to play, or didn’t have any money. How could someone who won 10k last year not have any money? It didn’t make any sense. I’d get all put out when he’d say no. I was desperate to tap into his brain, to learn from him, but he wouldn’t have it. Like a petulant child, I asked him why and he said, “I don’t like playing for chump change.”

“You played the first night I met you,” I said.

“I was just trying to be friendly,” he said.

Instead, all Marty wanted to do was get high and goof off. He especially loved tossing around the frisbee or playing Madden football on the Playstation. I could never stay mad at Marty for not wanting to play cards for very long. He had this unshakable optimism. Silver linings were the only things he noticed. It was his personal mission to ensure everyone was having a good time, and if any of the guys had drunk too much and were ready to trade blows, Marty was the one to jump in and restore peace. One time he mentioned he OD’d on several occasions in his days as an addict, and I secretly wondered if that’s where his happy-go-lucky,

try-to-make-the-most-of-it attitude came from, like he'd been given a second chance and he knew it.

One day in particular, Marty and I met up with Jack and Buck to play some frisbee golf at the park on West River. We stopped at the liquor store beforehand. I gave Marty a twenty and asked him to get me a pint of rum, and he could use the change to get something for himself. He came back with just the pint of rum, saying he didn't feel like drinking. I mixed the pint into a 1-liter of cola so I could drink it out on the course without getting harassed.

We all had a great time out there. Jack had brought along a couple of joints of decent midgrade, and we passed them back and forth as we walked down the fairways. There was always something I loved about putting a buzz on outdoors. Maybe it was because being under the influence helped me ignore all of Nature's annoyances: the heat, the insects, the goose shit littering the course, and instead I could focus on the beauty of it all. By the time we were headed to the parking lot, I was stumbling all over the place.

"I'll drive," said Marty, reaching for my keys.

"You sure?" I said. I wasn't sure if he even knew how to drive.

"Of course," he said.

And wouldn't you know it, about halfway home, we're heading down the highway and get pulled over by a state trooper. "Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck," I said. I could feel myself panicking.

"Relax," said Marty. "I got this."

I couldn't recall ever feeling so scared. Even though I was roaring drunk, the fear of getting caught sobered me up enough to contemplate how I would break the news to my parents. Maybe I was better off not telling them at all?

By then it was night, and as Marty cranked down the window, the cop shined his flashlight into the cab.

“Evening officer,” said Marty. The cop asked for Marty’s license and registration. I fished the registration copy out of the glovebox while Marty dug out his wallet. I passed the registration to Marty, and he handed both to the cop. The cop examined them for a second, then asked Marty if he was the owner of the vehicle.

“No, sir, I am not,” said Marty. “He is,” he said, and hitched his thumb in my direction. The cop shined his flashlight directly at me. I did my best to keep my head still and straight while trying to breathe through my nose. I gave the cop a half-hearted wave, thinking it might help convey the appearance of sobriety.

“Any particular reason you’re driving tonight?” the cop asked.

I felt my legs start to tremble. This was it. The cop had begun the line of questioning that would eventually result in me receiving an MIP, being drunk as I was, and possibly being put on probation. I kept my gaze forward, peering straight down the gravel shoulder of the highway.

“To be honest, officer, my friend Ryan here has had a few too many tonight,” said Marty. What the fuck, I thought. I couldn’t help it, I was so shocked I had to look over at Marty as he said this. Did he just admit I’d been drinking? I was done for.

“Is that so?” said the cop. “How old is your friend?”

“Oh I dunno exactly,” said Marty. He turned to me. “How old are you, Ryan?”

I wanted to stab Marty’s eyeballs out. How could he be so dumb, so unaware? Wasn’t he supposed to be street smart? Didn’t he know you were supposed to lie your ass off in

situations like this? Except now, he had backed me into a corner. I couldn't lie. All the cop had to do was get my ID, and he'd see I was underage.

"18, sir," I said.

"Kids these days," said Marty. He shook his head with disapproval. "At least he did the responsible thing and let me drive."

"Uh huh," the cop said. He sounded tired, worn out, like he was at the end of his shift. "And you haven't been drinking, is that right?"

"Absolutely not sir, and I'd been willing to take a breathalyzer to prove it, assuming you want to head down that road," said Marty. "But both you and I know that's a long, tiresome road, seeing as how we're on our way home and we ain't causing any trouble."

The cop bounced his flashlight beam from Marty to me, then back to Marty, as if he was buying time while he considered what to do. Then the cop sighed. He shined the light back on me. He asked for my ID and I retrieved it from my wallet and handed it to Marty. The cop went back to his squad car and got in.

I waited until I was sure the cop was back in his vehicle and Marty had cranked the window back up before I belted out, screaming, "Holy fucking shit! Holy FUCKING shit." I ran my fingers through my hair. "What the hell was that? I can't believe. I cannot believe it."

"Just chill," said Marty.

"This is bullshit," I said.

"What are you talking about?" said Marty. "We're almost home free."

Before I knew it, the cop was tapping on the window again. Marty rolled it down.

“You know you have a taillight out, son?” he said, shining the light on me. “You need to get that fixed, pronto. And if you’re going to drink, do it at home, okay? Have a good evening, gentleman.” He handed us our ID’s and registration, and then he walked back to his car.

“Oh my god that did not just happen,” I said.

“You like that, huh?” said Marty, grinning at me. He put the blinker on, and when the coast was clear, he pulled back onto the highway.

“What were you thinking?” I yelled, slugging him in the shoulder. “I could have been fucked. We both could have been fucked, you even worse than me.”

“Relax,” said Marty. “He wasn’t going to do anything. Couldn’t you hear it in his voice? Hell, even with the flashlight fucking up my vision, I could still see the sluggishness in his eyes. That guy was already at home with a beer in his hands, reclining in his La-z-boy, flipping through the channels on his TV.”

No way, I thought. No way could Marty have just done that. We were just insanely lucky, that was it. The rest of the way home, I felt like I was obligated to be mad at him for spewing off like a dumbass and almost getting us both caught. I felt like I should I stare outside the driver’s side window and stay silent. Instead, we dissected every moment of what just happened about ten times, laughing and screaming with relief, beating our fists on the steering column or the dashboard in exaltation, and each time we went over it, I became more convinced Marty could see into people’s souls.

During my first week of being grounded, I divided my time between homework, my job, and working on the deck. At first, I thought I would approach the deck like a wrecking ball and just smash the shit out of everything until there was nothing left, imagining Marty’s face on each

plank. It didn't take me but half an hour and nearly passing out from exhaustion to realize that strategy was useless. So I had to come up with another plan, and the best I could think of was to take apart the deck in the reverse order of which it's built, starting with the very top pieces and eventually working my way towards the ground.

Progress was slow. I had to spend most of the time prying up individual boards with a crowbar, which could be tedious. With many of the planks, you couldn't get enough leverage, and you'd sit there and work at it for ten or fifteen minutes, trying to get the hooked end of the crowbar underneath the plank, and you wouldn't accomplish a thing.

On one of these days, it seemed like every board was impossible to pry up, and I was getting frustrated. It seemed hopeless, and it wasn't just the deck. I started to doubt myself. I was an idiot for trusting Marty, and even bigger idiot for thinking I could borrow my mother's book and get away with it. I wanted to make things right, but I was ready to just say fuck it and quit.

"Goddamn motherfucker," I yelled. "Fucking piece of shit."

"What's wrong?" said my mother. She must have heard me screaming through an open window.

I dropped the crowbar and turned to face her while I wiped the sweat from my forehead.

"It's these goddamn boards," I said. "They're pissing me off."

"You want something to drink?" she said.

"Nah, I'm okay," I said. "Thanks though."

"You sure?" she said. "There's some cans of soda in the fridge. I'll grab you one."

"All right," I said. "I guess I could have a Mountain Dew."

She went inside and came back with a can of cold soda and handed it to me. It was wonderful and refreshing, maybe the best can of soda I ever had in my life.

“Looks like it’s coming along well,” she said.

I surveyed the deck, trying to look at things from her perspective, but I couldn’t really see it. “Yeah, it’s a pain in the ass,” I said. “But I’ll get it done.”

“Are you sore?” she said.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Do your arms hurt? Or maybe your back? You could take some ibuprofen,” she said.

“Maybe later,” I said.

“Ok, well,” she said, “keep it up. You’re doing well.” She went back inside, leaving me standing there with a half-empty can of soda, wondering if I should call it quits or not.

I wanted to believe her.

A few months after the incident with the cop, Marty told me about the underground tournament. \$500 buy-in, 150 entrants. I balked at the idea of it. \$500 was way too steep for my skill level. Sure, I had continued to play online quite a bit, but the stakes were miniscule in comparison.

“You’ll be fine,” said Marty. “Most of these guys aren’t even pros.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better?” I said.

“Trust me. You are light years ahead of most of these guys. I’m telling you, one of us will finish in the money, guaranteed,” he said.

We were on our way to my house. My parents were away for the weekend and I decided to have a little get-together at my place. Marty continued, “The only thing is, I need you to front me my buy-in. I’m a little short at the moment.”

“I don’t have that kind of money,” I said.

“What’s your online bankroll sitting at?” he asked.

“\$750,” I said, but I didn’t want to touch it unless I absolutely had to. The more money I left in my online bankroll, the more money I could make in the long run. If I cashed it all out and spent it, I’d have to start over from scratch. Playing online wasn’t exactly legal, which meant depositing money on to the poker account was a pain in the ass, and you were limited to how much you could deposit at any given time.

“Sheeeeeeet,” said Marty. “What’s taking you so long? I figured you’d be in the thousands by now.”

“Maybe I would be if someone bothered to help me with my game,” I said.

“That’s too bad. We could have made a killing at this tournament.”

He dropped the subject until later in the evening. We were halfway through a case a beer, but we were out of weed, and I was itching for a buzz, so Marty and I decided to forage through my parent’s bedroom on the off-chance they had stashed any prescription drugs in there. As I was digging through my mother’s dresser, Marty perused the closet, shuffling through various shoe boxes until he reached the collector’s case. “What’s this?” he said, and I told him about the signed copy of *The Wizard of Oz*, and I could see his eyes narrow.

“This is it,” he said. He held the case in both hands. “This is our buy-in.”

“I aint’ going to steal it!” I said.

Marty put his arm around my shoulder. “We don’t need to steal it, Ryan.” For the rest of the night, he spelled out the plan. We’d only need to borrow the book for a couple of days so we could use it as collateral for a loan. We could get an unsigned copy of the same edition on the Internet to serve as a substitute. We buy in to the tournament with the loan, profit, then get the book back, no harm, no foul. What’s more, because I’d be fronting Marty his buy-in, he’d not only repay me the buy-in, he’d also pay out a percentage on whatever he won. And even though there was no possible way we’d both get busted out early, say that we did, I could always liquidate the \$750 from my online bankroll and scrounge up another \$250 to get the book back.

“Think about it, Ryan,” said Marty. “First place pays 37.5k.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“You got nothing to lose,” said Marty. I don’t know if it was the beer, or Marty’s knack for reading people, or my habit of escaping most trouble relatively unscathed, but I believed him, which turned out to be a colossal mistake.

The night of the tournament, I picked Marty up, and we drove out northwest of the city into the countryside, passing acres and acres of corn. We pulled onto a two-track that ran past a large farm house and through a sizable backyard filled with rows of cars until we could see the white pull barn where the tournament would be held. The sun had yet to fall below the horizon. People milled outside the pull barn and amongst the cars clutching red Dixie cups. As I parked the car, I could feel my right foot tapping against the floorboard uncontrollably.

“I’m shipping this one, Ryan. I can feel. I’m shipping it!” said Marty.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” I said, trying to match Marty’s confidence with my own.

We locked up the car and headed to the pull barn to pay our buy-in and get our seating assignments. As we walked up, I caught myself locking eyes with various strangers. I quickly understood the people there were sizing each other up, trying to pick out the real threats. Judging the skill of a player based on their appearance alone was shaky at best, but when you were stuck waiting for the tournament to begin, what else were you going to do?

The setup inside the pull barn was elaborate. Rows of casino-style poker tables occupied the center of the floor. Off to the side, several regular tables overflowed with food, and parked next to the tables were several kegs on ice. They even had a laptop with projector running tournament software to keep track of blind levels, entrants remaining, payouts, etc.

I was overwhelmed. I figured Marty could sense my apprehension because he patted me on the back and said, "Let's go pay." Near all the food and beer, they had the registration table set up. A beefy-looking dude dressed all in black was beside the table working security. I ended up getting Table 11, Seat 6. Marty got Table 3, Seat 7. We stuffed ourselves with food as we waited for the tournament to begin, and a few minutes before it started, we nodded to each other and took our seats.

The tension in the pull barn seemed to mount. I surveyed the players at my table, taking guesses at which were the strongest. One of the guys at my table was huge, like 400 pounds. There was another young guy like me fiddling with his Ipod. I figured he might be the best at the table. I didn't give much credit to the older guys; they tended not to play online very much.

The call rang out to shuffle up and deal, and the timer started. Once I got to feel some cards, I started to relax a little. For the first hour or so, I barely played any hands. The dealer was giving me garbage, and I wasn't about to try and pull off a crazy bluff in the first few levels of the biggest tournament of my life. I folded constantly and focused on what everyone else was

doing. The young kid with the Ipod managed to double up early with a set of queens versus a guy wearing overalls who completely overplayed AK on a scary board. When Mr. Overalls lost the hand, he just sat there in his seat while all his chips got shipped to the kid with the Ipod, as if he hadn't realized he was knocked out of the tournament and his \$500 was already gone after thirty minutes. I almost felt sorry for the guy, but he was one less opponent I had to get through, so good riddance. Eventually, he slapped his hands on his knees, stood up, and walked off towards the kegs of beer shaking his head.

My first real test came about an hour and a half in. I had KhQh in a three-way pot, the board reading Jh10h6d. UTG had bet the flop and the CO had raised. The action was on me, and my choices were wide open, folding, calling, and raising all possibilities. I felt a sense of urgency. This was my first real opportunity to accumulate some chips since the night began. I couldn't tread water forever. The blinds would eventually whittle my stack of chips down to nothing. The pot odds were looking good, but I only had a draw, and if I flatted, I could still get raised and possibly bullied out of the hand, but if I raised big, I could easily get pot committed on the turn. I considered what Marty might do in this spot, and the obvious answer was raise. Raise raise raise. So that's what I did, and the two guys behind me both called.

The turn came 2d and I cursed myself. My odds had worsened, and there was a good chance at least one of these guys was going to call this hand down. They both checked to me, deferring to the aggressor in the hand, and this time I didn't even think about it.

I fired another bet, and it took every ounce of focus I had to keep my hands from shaking as I counted and stacked the chips before pushing them forward.

Both players called again. The river came 7h, and I felt like a god, like somehow no matter what I did, the cards were going to fall my way. Both players checked to me again.

Considering I already had half of my chips in the middle and I was holding a K-high flush, the only move left was to go all in, so I did, hoping I'd get at least one of them to come along, though even if neither did, it would still be a nice pot. I would've never guessed both of them calling, but that's exactly what happened, and just like that I had tripled up and knocked out one of them in the process.

With that crucial hand, I was now the chip leader at the table, and that's when I started putting my chips to good use. For the next several hours, I slowly began applying more and more pressure on my opponents, using my tower of chips as a weapon, forcing them to make tough decisions in the face of my relentless assault. Having more chips than anyone else at the table gave even the most conservative players an injection of bravado and daring. What were once gutsy plays became thoughtless, automatic. Quite often your own cards didn't even matter. I had heard stories of guys winning tournaments without ever even looking at their hole cards once. The more I bullied people around at that table, the more I could see how it was possible.

During breaks, I found Marty and we updated each other on our progress. Marty had almost got knocked out early on, set versus set, but he managed to bounce back and was humming along. I remarked how cool it would be if we ended up finishing 1-2, and he said, "Sure, as long as I'm first."

"Hell, I'd be happy either way," I said.

Before long, we were five hours in and there were only seventeen people left. Marty and I were on opposite tables, both still alive. I wasn't the chip lead anymore. An hour earlier I had gotten frisky and walked right into a trap, trying to bluff the young kid with the Ipod while I was holding nothing but Ace high, and he ended having a straight. Ever since then I had cooled down, playing tentatively, afraid of making a critical error and getting knocked out. I sat back

and let everyone else duke it out, every now and then craning my neck to get a look at what was going on at the other table. The top fifteen of the tournament would be paid, so all I had to do was sit tight, let a couple more get knocked out, and at the very least, I'd double my \$500. Sure enough, twenty minutes later cheers erupted from Marty's table. Some poor sap got knocked out sixteenth, and the rest of us were getting paid. I felt relieved, but I wasn't satisfied. I wanted to win. Another thirty minutes later, the kid with the Ipod knocked out another guy with all the money getting in pre, JJ versus AK. We were down to nine. Play immediately stopped so they could combine the two tables into the final table.

I spotted Marty near the beer kegs, and as soon as I got close I gave him a high-five, then whooped. We asked each other how many chips we had left and talked a little about some of the opponents that were left. Then Marty asked me to follow him outside so he could smoke a cigarette. When we got outside, Marty scanned around and then headed towards a spot away from the door and out of earshot from everyone.

"Okay, here's the plan," he said. "I can take this down no problem. You know I can. The thing is, I'm low on chips. If we pool our resources, it's ours. So here's what we do: when I get in a hand, you come in too unless you're holding a monster. You see me bet both the flop and the turn, that's your cue. I'll have something, so all you need to do is bluff at me on the river and I'll get your chips."

"You're serious?" I said.

"Of course," he said flatly.

"That's cheating," I said.

"Not really," he said. "It's the smartest play. A couple of those guys we're going up against are pros. I've played them before. You know that kid with the Ipod? That's Chet

Waters. That guy will crush you, Ryan. He will crush you. But I *know* him. I can take him. I just need the chips.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m playing pretty good right now. Give me a few hands and I’ll be okay.”

Marty threw his cigarette butt to the ground and then stomped it out.

“Do you want the money or not?” he said. I didn’t say anything at all, instead staring at the crushed cigarette, watching a small fleck of it still burn. “Let’s go,” he said, and after a few seconds I followed.

We sat back down at the table, and a few minutes later, play resumed. I peered over at Marty’s stack. He was right. If he didn’t get some chips soon, he was going to get blinded out. The kid with the Ipod, Chet, had a literal mountain of chips in front of him.

Ten minutes in, Marty got in the hand, betting pre. I looked down at 1010, and decided to raise and let Marty know I had a real hand. One guy behind me called and so did Marty. The flop comes 10sJh3c. The guy to my left checks, and Marty bets. I didn’t like where this was going. I had a strong hand, a set of tens, far too strong to fold in this spot. The problem was, Marty didn’t know that necessarily. He might have been thinking I was sweetening the pot the whole time, all to make a bluff on the river more believable.

I raised, even though it was a great spot to slow play and lay a trap, hoping to get Marty out of the hand. Instead, the guy to my left folded and Marty called. The turn came Qh, and Marty bet again. I froze. That was my cue. He’d said a bet on the flop and a bet on the turn was the cue.

I decided to call. The river comes Js, giving me a full house, tens over jacks. I was almost certain to have the strongest hand. I thought back to that first night I met Marty, and how

I was so sure I had him beat. I thought about how I had misjudged him, how I thought he was a decent enough guy, had some mistakes in his past, but came out all right. I thought about how I admired his card playing ability, the way he could read people, just like he read that cop.

Moments ago, when we were standing outside away from everyone, before he told me his plan, what did my eyes say to him? What did he read? Weakness? Doubt? Gullibility? Whatever it was, I burned to prove him wrong.

Marty bet on the river, giving me the slightest of nods. It was my last chance to bow out, to yield and give up any chance I had at winning the tournament. Instead I raised, I went all in, splashing the chips in the center of the table with defiance. Marty looked confused. He shrugged, then called. I turned over my hand, showing my full house. He threw his cards in the muck without even showing. He leaned back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling, biting his lower lip. I had never seen him in such obvious pain. Seconds later he was out of his chair and collecting his money over at the registration table. I saw him head out the door, and that was the last I ever saw of him.

Forty-five minutes later I got knocked out in 6th place by Chet Waters, AA versus KK. I was paid \$5,500.

The days continued to pass, and with each day, I came closer and closer to finishing the deck. It's kind of funny, but I really began to enjoy taking the deck apart, and the thought of it almost being finished was saddening. I liked going out there with my work gloves and my boombox, and just kind of relaxing, soaking up the warm sun. It gave me an opportunity to clear my head of all the crap that had happened with Marty and getting busted by my parents, and I could just focus on what my hands were doing.

One day, after I got home from school, my mother called and told me that since I had been doing such a good job on the deck, I was no longer grounded. I thanked her, and she reminded me that I still needed to finish the job, even though I wasn't grounded anymore, and I told her that wouldn't be a problem.

I headed straight to Marty's, hoping I could track him down. I had tried calling his place several times since I had gotten busted, and every time he wasn't there. I talked to Jack and Buck and they hadn't seen him either.

His girlfriend answered the door, their kid in her arms like always. Apparently her mom had kicked him out a couple of days ago. She thinks he might be using again. She hasn't heard from him since. I tried to ask if she'd seen the book lying around anywhere, but she had shut the door on me before I could get a word in. It didn't matter. I was sure he didn't have the book anymore anyway. I only wanted to know who did.

I scoured every pawn shop in the city with no results. I even looked on eBay. By the time I was almost finished with the deck, I had pretty much given up the idea of replacing it.

I woke up early on a Saturday, had a quick breakfast, then popped outside, surveying my project. All the decking and the rails had been removed. Only a skeleton of beams, posts, and joists remained. I wouldn't need any finesse for this final stage. A sledgehammer could probably get the job done quickly. As I pounded away, I thought about all the times I used to play on this deck, all the summers when Jack and Buck and the other neighborhood kids would come over, and we'd be out here for hours, jumping from the deck into the pool, doing cannonballs and jackknives and flips and belly flops, playing marco polo, making whirlpools, or floating on rafts. I could almost feel myself flying through the air and hitting the surface of the water.

Each joist and beam became harder and harder to separate as I began to realize that once I had completed my task, there was nothing else I could do to atone for what I had done, and I would be stuck with this feeling of indebtedness, like no matter what I did, I could never repay my mother for what I had taken. I worked for several hours, and though it was painful, I felt compelled to finish.

I stood, gathering my breath as I beheld the final beam sticking out of the ground. This beam, much like the other three, had to be removed by hand. I thought it somehow fitting no tools could help me here. The moment was bittersweet as I secured a firm grip on the beam and lifted upwards, and I couldn't help but consider what I had achieved, and what I had lost in the process.

I went back inside and headed upstairs and in my parents' bedroom, I saw my mother in one of her favorite spots, lying in bed, propped up by a mound of pillows, and reading a book.

"What's up?" she said.

I went and sat down on the other side of the bed. "It's done," I said.

"That's great," she said, and we sat there in silence for quite some time before she spoke again. "You know, I can't understand it...why you do all this stuff."

"I know," I said.

"Well, then," she said, "why do you do it?"

"I wish I knew, mom, I wish I knew," I said, and that was the truth.

"Hold on," I said, and I rushed to my bedroom and grabbed the stacks of bills I had stashed in my closet, all 5.5k. I returned to her room, my hands full of money. "I can't find your book. It's gone. Here, take this," I said, holding the money out in front of her.

“Where did you get this?” she said. I told her her as much as I could about Marty and the tournament, but no matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I insisted, how much I sobbed and pleaded, she would not take the money.

Reciprocity as an Instinct

A week after being reborn, Larry was on his way to pick up Sheila. It was a Saturday morning. Larry had overslept, so he'd stopped at a McDonald's first, ordering a bacon, egg and cheese biscuit value meal for himself, orange juice to drink, and an Egg McMuffin value meal with a chocolate milk for her. He hadn't eaten in almost 24 hours, and his stomach was growling. He was tempted to fish out his hash brown from the sack of food, but he thought it best to wait for his wife. With all that had happened, it was the least he could do.

Up until last Friday, Larry Petrauski had been living in the last few months of his life. Dr. Andrews had called Larry on the phone that Friday and told him to come down to the office immediately. There had been a mistake, a “misdiagnosis” Andrews had said. As it turned out, Larry did not have pancreatic cancer at all. Instead, he had acute pancreatitis, an inflammation of the pancreas that can be easily treated. While he was now going to live, all Larry could think about was whether or not his marriage with Sheila would survive. After everything he had done, after the pain he had caused her, he thought his chances were slim.

Larry punched in the access code which he had written down on the map to unlock the gated entrance to Sheila’s complex. The place was labyrinthine in design, the streets curving around man-made ponds and clutches of trees at random. Even with the map and the building number, Larry crept along in his forest green Dodge Intrepid for nearly ten minutes, rubbernecking the entire time, before he finally spotted the correct building. He kept getting distracted, worried about what she would say, or do, when she saw him. Forgiveness wouldn't be coming easy.

A pack of young kids were gathered at the building entrance, their toy wagons and beach balls littered about the small patch of grass between the sidewalk and the row of bushes lining the exterior of the building. As Larry exited his vehicle, the kids all stopped and focused their eyes on him, which made him uncomfortable. He was somewhat shy by nature, and he became self-conscious as he buzzed what he hoped was the correct number. A moment later, he recognized Sheila’s voice say, “Be right there.”

He looked off to his left, locking eyes with one of the kids, probably six or seven years old. He felt the impulse to say something, but he had never gotten the hang of talking to kids. They always seemed uninterested in whatever he had to say, as if he couldn't relate to their

perspective, which was odd because he always considered himself a child at heart, and he liked children, he really did. Even on the few occasions where he seemed to capture their interest, the longer he spoke, the more worried he'd become, fearing the child's mother or father would appear from nowhere, see this stranger kneeling close to their boy or girl and assume he surely intended to kidnap the youth. People saw the news; it happened every day.

He recalled the conversation with Dr. Andrews as he waited. The doctor had entered the examination room carefully, as if he were afraid the noise might disturb a sleeping patient. His features were solemn, but deliberate. He looked at Larry with certain gravity, and Larry was more curious than anything. He had not been afraid at all. What could get worse than the cancer ravaging his body, consuming his insides with methodical persistence, dark, mutated cells reproducing at an unstoppable rate like unchecked rabbits in a lush field? The short answer was nothing. Nothing could get worse, so there was nothing to fear. Dr. Andrews closed the door gently and set the manila file on the examination table.

As Andrews began his extended dialogue about the "misdiagnosis," his features changed. He was initially apologetic, admitting to his error. But Andrews figured Larry would be pleased at this fortunate turn of events. Towards the tail end of his speech, the doctor's lips turned up close to a smile.

"You're going to live," said Andrews, looking sheepish.

"There must be some mistake," said Larry.

"I apologize again, Mr. Petruski. This is completely my fault," said Andrews.

"What am I going to do?" said Larry. He could barely breathe. Beads of sweat appeared on his tanned forehead and his hands were clammy. He felt nauseous, and the sudden urge to throw up reminded him of Cancun, one of many of his recent destinations, and the balmy nights

he sat close to the beach downing shot after shot of tequila, each time voicing his pleasure with a loud and sincere “ahhhh.” He had danced with an abandoned never before realized in his thirty-six years of age, only stopping to order another drink from the bar.

It was paradise, he told himself, all part of his plan to spend his last days savoring life. It didn't matter that he'd wake up each morning with a wicked hangover, spending the next four to six hours on the bathroom floor with a cold, wet washcloth draped across his forehead and the pain in his stomach so fierce it felt as though he had been stabbed with a bowie knife. He was living like a kamikaze pilot zeroing in on his target, ready to crash and explode with a sense of beauty and dignity he could never have achieved before his cancer, back when the monotony of his days as a husband and an accountant were so dull he would often pray for some sort of catastrophe: a car crash, a burglary, a terrorist attack.

After a minute or two, Sheila emerged from the building wearing sunglasses, a purse in the crux of her arm. Seeing her for the first time in almost three months made Larry's heart blaze with regret.

“Hi, Larry,” she said, and without warning, embraced him. Had he not been surrounded by an audience of kids, Larry would have broken down. Instead, he fought against the urge successfully.

“Sheila,” he said.

“Larry,” she said. “I still can't believe it. Larry, with a new lease on life.”

“It's all kind of surreal,” he said. Their embrace ended. Larry felt awkward as the two of them stood there looking at each other with nothing to say. Finally, Larry managed to think of something. “Come on, I got you breakfast. Your favorite,” he said, and motioned towards his car.

As it turned out, Sheila had already eaten, meaning Larry's waiting was pointless. She did, however, crack open the small plastic container of chocolate milk, and occasionally sipped as they headed to the bank to grab some financial statements before their appointment with Sheila's lawyer.

"What would you like first, sandwich or hash brown?" she asked, playing the role of server as she always did whenever they were eating in the car and she was riding shotgun.

"Sandwich," said Larry.

Sheila dug into the bag, retrieving the sandwich and a napkin, then handed both to Larry.

"You mind if I turn it to 105.3?" asked Larry, before biting into his biscuit.

"You can if you want," said Sheila, "but 105.3 changed. They're the "martini" now. They're playing all big band."

"You're kidding," said Larry. "The last decent station we had around here is gone?"

Sheila nodded, then said, "Changed format a couple of weeks ago."

"Fuck it, then" said Larry. As he ate, they drove in silence, and he became lost in thought. Looking back, it seemed as though his prayers had been answered. His adenocarcinoma had given him new life. He had felt as if he had been reborn and given a new direction and a new purpose. Larry was so thankful for the tumor growing on the back end of his pancreas, he had even given it a name. He called it Sal, which he knew was weird, but he didn't care. Having only a few months to live, Larry thought he had the right to be a little nutty. Before passing out each night, he always remembered to give Sal a silent acknowledgement.

Now Sal was gone. Even worse, he had never existed in the first place. The disease had been imaginary, a construction of the mind. As Larry had searched the doctor's face, he again

lusted for catastrophe. He wouldn't have to wait long. He was dead broke. His checking and savings accounts, his 401k, his house, all of it was gone. Everything had been liquidated to fund his three-month long reincarnation involving Europe, Cancun, skydiving, high-stakes gambling, and a constant pattern of drinking and hangovers, only returning home once a month for a progress report from the doctor and a Dilaudid refill, which he took when the pain seemed unbearable.

Sheila had begged him not to do it. She urged him to undergo chemo, put up some kind of fight, even though the chances of survival were extremely low with pancreatic cancer. On one evening in particular, about a week before Larry would board the first plane of his life non-stop to Madrid, Sheila literally was on her knees, pleading with him as he sat crafting his itinerary at the computer desk in the den of their house. She promised she would go with him anywhere he wanted after he underwent treatment and beat the cancer. She offered to look over the stack of Frommer's he checked out from the library, or play cards, or get drunk, or whatever it was he felt like he was missing out on, as long as he stayed *here* and vowed to fight it.

"I can't do it, Sheila. I won't," he said. He knew what it would be like. He had watched his father waste away in a hospital bed several years before. He couldn't imagine voluntarily going through the same thing himself. How could anyone for that matter? No, he would not endure such humiliation, such pointlessness. He had wanted to enjoy the time he had left, not squander his last days on what amounted to a five percent chance of actually surviving. Though he was a mediocre gambler, even he knew such odds were for suckers or the delusional.

"What am I supposed to do, Larry?" she said.

"Come with me," he said, and he meant it, more than anything. For weeks he envisioned the two of them riding the trains in Europe, checking out the Louvre and Eiffel tower before

lounging at some small cafe's outdoor table as they nursed mint juleps. But every time he brought it up, she refused.

"I can't be a part of it," she said. "It's like two steps removed from assisted suicide. It would haunt me."

"Oh, come on," said Larry. He looked down at her, his hands still in hers, and wondered why she couldn't see it from his perspective. It wasn't suicide, it was a celebration, a revelry, a barbaric yawp over the rooftops. It was bad enough he had to use the promise of a healthy life insurance payment as leverage to put the house on the market and drain the retirement accounts.

"You're being melodramatic," he said.

"Please, I'll do whatever you want. Anything. Just don't go. Don't run from it. Stay here and fight it," she said.

"I'm going to make the most of the time I have left. If you're not going to come with me, the least you could do is support me in my efforts," said Larry, and the words sapped all the energy she had left, because after that, Sheila stopped begging him to stay, choosing instead to silently pack up their stuff in preparation for the sale, only speaking when necessary, which made the whole undertaking tortuous.

"How could this happen?" said Larry.

"Actually, you might be surprised, Mr. Petruski," said Dr. Andrews. "This kind of thing happens more frequently than you might think which is no excuse, of course. You see, both adenocarcinoma and pancreatitis share nearly identical symptoms..."

The doctor kept on talking, but Larry could no longer listen. He didn't care about the particulars. All he needed to know was whether or not this was happening, and the doctor's response confirmed that it was true.

“Of course, I’ll want to run a few more tests, just to be one-hundred percent sure. I also want you to stay a couple of days at the hospital, just until the pancreatitis clears up. Don’t worry, we won’t have to operate. Son? Are you ok? Son?”

“No,” said Larry.

“I understand. This is a lot for you to take in. I’m sorry,” said Dr. Andrews. The nurse will come by in a minute or two to collect some more samples. I’ll talk to you soon.”

After the doctor left, Larry felt as though the walls around him were slowly closing in. He was still light-headed and his face was pale. Then he vomited all over the examination table. It felt like he was dying and the irony of that fact, having just learned he was going to live, only made his head hurt more. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and exited the room before the nurse could arrive. He might have felt bad for puking all over the place and not saying anything about it, but considering the consequences of the good doctor’s mistake, a little understanding was in order.

By the time Larry had finished his meal, and Sheila’s, they were nearing the bank, but they had still not spoken. He handed her one of the crumpled wrappers, which she put back into the sack, then said, “This is for the best. You’ll see.”

The bank was busier than Larry had anticipated. Several drive-thru lanes were packed with cars, and so was the parking lot. Larry managed to find one of the last spots available and pulled in.

“Ready?” said Sheila. “We’d better hurry in. We’re supposed to be at Murphy’s office in an hour.”

Larry nodded. They exited the car, and went inside the bank. Even with three windows, the queue was nearly full, snaking its way back towards the door.

“Great. This is going to take forever,” said Sheila.

“Any other branches nearby? Might be a quicker option,” said Larry.

“Not really. And I already phoned ahead. They said they’d have the paperwork waiting for us,” said Sheila.

“Guess we’re waiting then,” he said. They took their spot at the back of the queue.

The line moved slowly. Sheila had taken out her cell phone, tapping at its screen over and over again. Larry grew anxious, never being a fan of lines, but then again, who was?

“So you really think we have a shot?” asked Larry.

Sheila looked up from her phone. “Based on what you told me yesterday, Murphy thinks it could be a slam dunk.” She went back to tapping at her phone, then looked up at some middle distance and said, “Funny how things can work out.”

Indeed, thought Larry. Last Friday he had been crushed, devastated, brought lower than he ever had been in his life, and now look. Things were taking off. They might even be getting another chance, and this time it would be different. This time he’d be free of the depression he experienced before being diagnosed with adenocarcinoma. He would no longer need to drive around for hours every night after work, glad to be free from the office, yet loathing the idea of going home. He still wasn’t sure why he’d been so depressed then. His job had been steady, his relationship with Sheila equally so. He didn’t have many real friends, but that was nothing new. It wasn’t as if his marriage and his career had suddenly destroyed a flourishing social life. Despite all of this, before his diagnosis, he couldn’t help but see what he described as a terrible sadness in the most innocent of things, though he did not *see* it per se. Rather, he simply felt the

sadness surrounding mundane objects like a cabinet or a frying pan or a pillow like the way you catch the smell of a dead skunk in the middle of the road. It overcomes you quickly and then lingers even when you're a mile past it, until you no longer remember where you detected the sadness in the first place, and you begin to wonder if it had always been there. It was like this for Larry until he began to experience terrible stomach pains and went to see Dr. Andrews. When the doctor first told Larry he had adenocarcinoma, Larry had felt like the gloom he had perceived for months had finally crept inside him and manifested itself as a lump the size of a golf ball on the back of his pancreas. This morbid feeling lasted for a couple of weeks until Larry saw a 727 flying overhead. He had never been on an airplane in his entire life. Nor had he even left the country. His parents had taken him on road trips to Yellowstone Park, Disneyland, and Washington D.C., but his feet had never actually set foot on foreign soil. He had never seen a bullfight or been to a casino or taken drugs. And he had never made love with another woman besides Sheila.

“Slam dunk, huh?” said Larry.

Sheila looked up from her phone again. “That’s what he said.”

The whole notion of a lawsuit made Larry uneasy. From what he could tell, Dr. Andrews was a good man who had simply made a mistake. What’s more, Larry could have gotten a second opinion, or even a third, but somehow he was convinced that Dr. Andrews’s diagnosis was the undeniable truth, perhaps because he wanted to believe it. But now there were bills to pay, a handful of maxed-out credit cards, several of which were tied to joint accounts. In a way, he was surprised they were even to this point so quickly, slated to see her attorney and go over the details at length in less than an hour. Sheila had merely brought it up in a casual way at first when he spoke with her on the phone not long after being told of the misdiagnosis, the handset

cradled to his ear while lying on his lumpy old childhood bed at his mother's house, but he was too distraught that day to give it much thought. He called again the next evening, and the evening after that, grateful for her sympathetic ear. She listened patiently as he recounted all of his adventures over the past three months and the play-by-play of his visit with Andrews. She didn't hate him, she said, but she was still processing everything that had happened. The months alone in the apartment were hard—really hard—dreading the next rattle of the phone would be the news of his death, but unable to grieve knowing he was still alive.

It wasn't until the fifth successive evening of conversations between the two that she brought it up again, saying, "You really should sue the bastard." By then, Larry had moved past his initial shock of the misdiagnosis, entertaining the idea with a wistful "You think so?" and the next thing you know, Sheila's ringing her lawyer.

They had waited in line for about fifteen minutes or so when a man came in through the glass doors from outside and got in line behind them. Having nothing better to do, Larry surveyed the man. He was wearing a navy blue Detroit Tigers baseball cap with the Old English "D" colored in burnt orange, along with a green jacket. He was about six feet tall, medium build, and had a full beard with a pair of aviators shielding his eyes.

"It's not about the money, right?" he said.

Sheila looked up from her phone. "We're here for the statements."

"No, I mean the lawsuit. It's not about the money?" said Larry.

"Not really," she said. "I mean, yeah, part of it is. We need at least enough to pay off the debt. But look at the big picture here, Larry. If we don't do something, this could happen to someone else. It could happen again and again. That man ruined our lives."

She's right, thought Larry. Of course she's right. Besides, Sheila was never the one to obsess over money. He was the frugal one. And she was also the most morally astute person he ever met. She was so adherent to the rules she insisted they declare their Use Tax for all the shit they ordered over the Internet. Larry was an accountant, so he knew, no one declared Use Tax for Internet purchases. No one.

Still, her response only alleviated part of his doubt. Sheila seemed different now. She was more guarded, more reserved, like a paranoid poker player worried someone's peeking at her cards. She used to be the eternal optimist, but it was as if the entire ordeal had snuffed that part of her out. Night after night, as he talked with her on the phone, he waited for her to say, "Everything's going to be all right," but she never did, not really. But what was he to expect? Look at what they'd been through. Of course she changed. They both had. Everything about his life that had once seemed depressing, now that he'd lost it, was what he really wanted.

Something about the beard seemed odd to Larry. The fluorescent light reflected off the facial hair much too brightly. At first Larry thought the man must've recently dyed his beard, but then he looked again and noticed it wasn't just the color, but also the straightness of individual strands, their wispieness.

The man caught Larry's gaze, which Larry quickly turned away from. He wanted to go in for another look, but the man was standing directly behind them now, and how could Larry possibly look again without being obvious? Then he heard a sigh escape from the man, followed by a slight clearing of the throat. Larry nudged Sheila with his elbow and leaned in close. "I swear to god the man behind us is wearing a fake beard," he whispered. Sheila spun her head around, locked eyes with the man, then smiled and looked back.

"I think you're right," she said.

“Christ, could you make it any more obvious?” said Larry.

By now they were at the front of the line, the lobby almost empty. One of the tellers waived them over, but at that instant, the man behind them cleared his throat again and then skipped past, beating them to the counter. Larry stopped in his tracks, confused. Sheila stepped beside the man, unwilling to relinquish the spot.

“So sorry, ma’am, but I’m in kind of a hurry,” said the man. As he spoke, his lips were partially obscured by the overly long mustache hairs. “If you’ll excuse me.”

“I will not excuse you,” said Sheila. “It’s our turn. Now if you’ll excuse *me*.”

The teller looked besieged, unprepared for the standoff. “Sir, please step back in line. The next available teller will assist you in just a minute,” she said.

“I cannot do that, ma’am,” said the man. He turned to Sheila. “It’s an emergency, miss. Please step back.”

“I will not step back,” said Sheila. “I will not wait any longer. Do you know how long I’ve been waiting, sir? Do you? Ages. I’ve been waiting fucking ages, and I’m sure as hell not going to let someone cut in front of me with a few politely-spoken excuses.”

The two locked eyes for a moment, and then Sheila turned to Larry five feet removed from the pair. As he witnessed the exchange, he couldn’t remember ever seeing Sheila unload on a stranger like she just had, and he wasn’t sure what to do, but he felt as though he were expected to do something. He got close and grabbed her arm.

“Sheila,” he said. “Come on.”

“No, Larry,” she said, her gaze shifting back to the man at the counter.

“Ma’am, I implore you, for your own safety, please step back,” said the man. He then removed a pistol from the breast pocket of his jacket. The teller gasped. Larry immediately stepped back, as if the man’s gun radiated intense heat. His grip tightened on Sheila’s arm.

The man turned to the teller and said, “The money, please, and no one gets hurt. I don’t want to hurt anyone, okay?”

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” said Sheila.

The remaining tellers and patrons all stopped and focused on the man with the gun. “Hurry now,” he said. The teller directly across from him jumped into action, the other two following her lead as they worked behind the counter emptying their drawers into a sack that was probably reserved for exactly these kinds of situations.

Larry tugged on Sheila’s arm, gradually applying more and more force, but she wouldn’t budge. Her face was red, veins popping out on her temples and neck. He could tell she was resisting with intention, summoning all her strength in an effort to become unmovable. Desperation welled inside him.

“You listen here, motherfucker,” she said, the sound of resisted tears in her voice.

“Please restrain this bitch before I do something I regret!” the man yelled, and even though he was still mostly facing the teller, Larry knew the command was directed at him. Without thinking, he wedged himself between the man and Sheila, his chest pressed against hers, his arms corralling her. Sheila slid to the left, trying to bypass him, but he moved with her. She then slid back to the right, and he moved with her again.

“Stop!” said Larry.

“You don’t get to stop me, Larry,” she said. “I didn’t stop you.”

“You’re not making any sense,” said Larry. This was the truth. Her actions made no sense. All she had to do was step back and keep silent and they’d be okay, but for some reason, she was not capable of doing so. An immense wave of frustration and hopelessness overcame him. It was as if she wanted to die, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, he could do to stop her.

Confessions Made Easy

As a general rule of thumb, Jackson avoided reading any of the testimonials that were posted on the website. These confessions, as they were commonly known by the users of the site, were often personal and revealing. People of all ages, backgrounds, and “life circumstances” would post intimate details, sometimes shocking, sometimes humorous, sometimes sad. These stories surrounded Jackson every day. They were everywhere.

For six months, he managed to keep his eyes off all of this sensitive material. He might have glanced at a few sentences, maybe even a paragraph here or there, but he never really paid attention to the actual content. Jackson thought it was like having sex with the TV still on—you heard snippets of the news anchor's voice in the background, possibly caught a glimpse of a smashed car, an ambulance, or a close-up of glass fragments scattered across the pavement—but you didn't really know what happened. You didn't know what the real story was. This was Jackson's relationship to the web site in the past and it was this way for good reason. Bad for business, he had thought, a needless distraction. He had to remain distant, professional, for Jackson created and maintained web pages for a living. He could design them, code them, create visuals, HTML, XML, Flash, Java, Coldfusion, PHP, Ajax, bells, whistles, all that shit. He could do the front-end and the back-end. You name it, he did it. And in this sense, he was like a prostitute—he could do it all, but he wasn't supposed to get attached.

That was until two weeks ago. One morning Jackson had come into work, sat down at his desk, and without hesitation began to read these confessions. Since then, Jackson could not keep his eyes off of them.

Today was Wednesday, and Jackson sat in his \$500 executive-backed office chair (he had ordered the chair a year ago, and it had finally arrived last month, which really pissed him off) and sat reading a confession from what he immediately deduced was a young male:

I have to confess. I am addicted to masturbation. I have been playing with myself since I was seven years old. I know it's dirty and wrong and sinful, but I can't help it. I am 16 years old and I have struggled with it all my life. Every night I masturbate. Later I cry myself to sleep. Please help me get over—

“Hey J5!” Jackson’s eyes remained glued to the screen. “Hey buddy, hey,” Bill said.

“What?”

“How’s it going my man?”

“Fine, Bill. Just fine.”

Bill stood leaning in the doorway to Jackson’s office, giant coffee cup in hand with an annoying smile on his face. Jackson wouldn’t normally think of a person’s smile as annoying, but it was the fact that Bill insisted on calling him “J5,” short for “Jackson Five” that bothered him this morning. Bill thought it was cool, like they were old college buddies just hanging out instead of early-middle-aged men slowly losing their minds. He was also Jackson’s boss, though the designation hardly seemed appropriate.

“How’s the work treating you?” asked Bill.

There was a slight pause after this. It wasn’t for lack of a response; Jackson merely took some time to reflect on Bill’s need to ask too many damn pointless questions. Probably some need for conversation...to be in the loop, see how things were going. He was the boss after all. Jackson chuckled.

“Great, Bill. Just great,” said Jackson.

“Good to hear, my man. What’s that you working on? Is that the dating site?” Bill motioned his cup toward the computer monitor sitting on Jackson’s desk before taking a drink. A large exhaled followed. Bill sure liked his coffee.

“No, it’s the confessions site,” said Jackson.

He quickly closed his web browser.

Jackson was a master at all things web-related, but Bill, on the other hand, was Jackson’s boss and didn’t know a damn thing about web pages. Hell, he didn’t even know how to work a

computer. He probably had his personal assistant, Tracy, turn on his machine every morning and open his email for him because he still couldn't figure it out.

“Oh yeah, I love that one,” said Bill. “Gets me every time. You ever read any of those confessions?”

“No, Bill. It's a needless distraction.”

“Oh man, you really should,” said Bill. “They are hill-larious, let me tell you. I read this one the other day about some poor bastard who couldn't stop masturbating and crying. Oh man, you got to see it.”

Bill's face was turning red. He could barely speak he was so overcome with laughter. Jackson wanted to laugh too. It was supposed to be funny, right? It is funny, Jackson thought, it is. His eyes were still fixed on Bill as he remained silent. Bill finally cooled down and his cleanly shaved face regained its usual coloring.

“Well, Bill, I've got to get back to work. You enjoy that coffee there.”

“Alright, stay alive J5.” Bill took off down the hall towards the break room.

Jackson glanced over at the framed photograph sitting on his desk. In the picture, Jackson posed with his wife, Allie, and their son, Jake. It was one of those professional photographs you get done at Wal-Mart. Jackson had multiple copies of the same shot, along with various other poses, stuffed in his wallet. The rest were buried in a drawer back home. Looking at the picture now, he was plagued with the same thoughts he had while the pictures were being taken months ago. He distinctly remembered thinking they were buying too many pictures. What the hell would they do with them all, anyway? Such a complete waste. The expression on his face in the photograph echoed this feeling.

Jackson sighed, opened his web browser, and returned to the confessions page. He sat engrossed, digesting words and phrases with the same intensity he usually devoted to coding his masterpieces.

The confessions site was officially called confessyoursinsandbesaved.com. On the site, users could anonymously post confessions about anything; no topics were too perverse or too shameful. Once these confessions were posted to the site, visitors were allowed to read them. Due to the sheer number of confessions, they needed to be organized into certain categories for the sake of expediency. Categories were loosely based on the seven deadly sins, though many confessions contained multiple infractions, such as the husband who is both an alcoholic and an adulterer, and these were more difficult to classify.

Jackson had created the site, but it was not his idea. Six months ago, Bill received a request for a new web site and had placed the project squarely in Jackson's hands. The request had come from one of the local mega-churches, and its young and brilliant new pastor, Ted Salandry. Pastor Ted had received a vision from God. This vision came to Pastor Ted while he was texting on his cell phone, instant messaging with Instant Messenger, and watching an online video clip of a new documentary called *Jesus and the Computer*. As Pastor Ted had described it, this vision was atypical compared to the visions he had heard of in the past. This wasn't your everyday, Joan of Arc, movie-in-my-head sort of revelation. God had sent him what could only be described as an e-vision. During the video clip, Jesus had pointed directly at Pastor Ted, addressed him by name, and kept repeating the words, "confess your sins," and "use the computer." According to Pastor Ted, these words had also appeared over and over on his cell phone and in his Instant Messenger chat box. The username listed in the chat box which

repeated these phrases over and over again was simply listed as “God.” After several conversations between Jackson and Pastor Ted, confessyoursinsandbesaved.com was born.

In the beginning, Jackson thought the web site was a bad idea and Pastor Ted was full of shit. Of course, he could never say this to Pastor Ted’s face—it was bad for business—so he went along with the idea having no real choice in the matter. Pastor Ted had shared the details of the e-vision with his colleagues and had managed to convince them of its authenticity, which had completely amazed Jackson. Between Pastor Ted and his colleagues, they were able to procure a large sum of money to continue God’s work in the new millennium and they would not be denied.

I am a 52-year old man and I am a marijuana addict. I have been addicted for years...too many to count. I don't know what's worse—being a pothead or lying to everyone about being a pothead. Everyone thinks I just have bad allergies. They think that when I go out to the shed every night, I'm working hard on my latest novel. Of course, I've been working on my “latest novel” for years because it doesn't exist. They think I'm out there pounding away at some great story on the typewriter, and that I'm too shy to show anyone my work. My wife, my kids, my grandkids...everyone.

I am a failure and a sham. I try to quit and make things right, but it never lasts long. I get stressed out at work or get into a fight with my wife, and I head right back out to the shed and start typing away.

Lord, please give me the strength to stop using this terrible drug, this damned poison. Give me the courage to tell my family the truth...to end the lies...to make things right. Please, Lord, please...

Sitting in his den, with a full moon casting its penetrating luminescence through the window, Jackson paused after reading about the 52-year old pothead, then checked to make sure the door was closed and the towel was sufficiently wedged. He methodically opened the drawer on his computer desk, lifted the bronze ash tray and lighter from inside, and lit the large joint, taking large drags and exhaling slowly. In between hits, he would take long gulps off a can of beer.

In his chemically-induced state, Jackson could not help but think of how much things had changed so fast. Just a few weeks ago, the day before he began to read the confessions in fact, he had decided to stop at Best Buy and get a present for his son, Jake. It wasn't Jake's birthday or Christmas, or anything like that. There was no special occasion, but Jackson wanted to buy little Jake something anyway. He needed to buy it.

He scanned the shelves fervently, looking for the right game. He went down the rows, flipping each plastic case forward to see the cover of the one behind it. Sweat trickled down Jackson's forehead, dripping on his outstretched arms. This shouldn't be that hard, he thought. Jesus, it's just a damn game.

"Grand Theft Auto," said Allie. A look of incredulity consumed her petite features. "Jesus, Jackson, have you lost your mind?"

"What?"

"He's six."

"So?"

“Don’t you think he might be a little too young for this?” asked Allie.

“He’s mature for his age,” said Jackson. This was certainly true. Little Jake acted like he was two, maybe even three years older than he actually was. Everybody said it: his teacher at school, Jackson’s parents, the Mexican cashier at McDonald’s, everybody. It was a fact.

“That’s no excuse,” said Allie. She slammed the door of the refrigerator, holding a box of frozen lasagna. “I mean, what were you thinking? Honestly?”

He watched from across the counter as Allie ripped open the box of lasagna, tearing with an almost endless supply of frustration and anger, pummeling the poor cardboard until there was nothing left but small, random pieces of brown and red scattered about the kitchen. Though she had been attending anger management classes for the past six months after a road rage incident involving an elderly woman the same size as her son, Allie thought an outburst every now and then was part of a healthy relationship.

Jackson had an answer for Allie—he wanted to explain his motivation for buying the game. But how could he? How could he accurately describe everything to the point that she would understand? It was guilt. It was shame. It was the way Jake would climb into Allie’s lap and the way he barely paid attention to Jackson. It was the way Jackson would try to talk to him over a bowl of Cheerio’s and get no response whatsoever. It was the silence, the inability, the way Allie put down her book, pulled up the covers and turned out the light. It was goddamn Sesame Street and Wiggles and Blue’s Clues and failure. It was crayons and tears and fucking iPods. It was everything.

“I was thinking he’d enjoy it,” said Jackson, somewhat tentatively, realizing his attempt to become the “cool” father had backfired.

“Unreal,” said Allie. Her head shook back and forth, and to Jackson, it seemed like it would never stop, just back and forth, back and forth. She turned on the oven and threw the frozen lasagna inside as if she were tossing it into a dumpster. The oven rack clanged. It sounded like the striking of a clock, which was somehow fitting to Jackson.

“You just don’t get....” Allie had said. Jackson didn’t hear the rest. He had already grabbed his coat from the closet and was out the front door, marching to the car with keys in hand. Jackson didn’t know where to go. He just needed to get out, to escape. So, he went to the bar a few blocks away. For seven years, he had lived in the same house with Allie on Grove street without once going inside Shakey’s Pub and Spirits. He didn’t drink.

“I want a shot and a beer,” he said to the bartender, who must have been Shakey. The old man with white hair and a solemn look stood behind the bar, his hands flopping around like freshly caught bass in a fishing boat. Shakey must have had a sense of humor.

“What kind?” said Shakey.

“What kinds are there?”

Jackson recalled how he had spent the whole rest of the night down at Shakey’s getting roaring drunk, and then drove home, narrowly missing several of his neighbors’ mailboxes, and then how he fell on top of Allie and made her scream as he tried sneaking into bed. These thoughts were in his mind as he took another sip off his beer, smoking the joint all the way down until he could no longer pinch it between his fingers, and then discarding the tiny roach in his bronze ash tray. His small den was filled with a grey haze. The computer monitor stared back at him. Luckily, the towel wedged between the door helped prevent the smoke from seeping into the hallway. Allie wouldn’t understand.

The events of that day stuck with him. Sure, there had been plenty of screaming and arguing before, but not like that. It had never gotten to the point where he had no choice but to leave. But there it was. And it hadn't gotten any better since.

That night, after Jackson had abruptly marched out the door, Allie brought the copy of Grand Theft Auto outside to the garage and smashed it with a hammer. After meticulously picking up all the misshapen pieces of plastic, Allie had left them sitting on the counter, waiting for Jackson to return, accompanied by a note with just one word: Seriously.

Returning his attention to the bright glow of the computer monitor, there was one thing Jackson could be sure of. He didn't even need to go the bar anymore. With a little ingenuity, he had managed to bring all the comforts of Shakey's to the second floor of his home.

I confess. I like to watch people, girls mostly. Watching a pretty lady walk past at the grocery store, what's wrong with that, right? I know, it doesn't sound bad, but let me explain. It doesn't end there. If I like her, I have to follow her. I have to find out her name, her phone number, where she lives, everything. I want to know what she eats, what she reads, what's her favorite color and what kind of toothpaste she uses. I need to see her, so I peek through her apartment window. I'm not going to hurt her or anything. I've never hurt anyone. But I have to watch, you see. And I can't stop.

I don't believe in God. Never have. But I need help. I can't keep doing this. Pray for me.

Jackson was sitting in his den, contemplating this confession when the phone rang.

It was Bill from the office.

"Where have you been, man?"

“Busy,” said Jackson. He was already tired of the conversation.

“With what?”

“Oh, you know, Bill...things.” Jackson tried to return his attention to his web site, but he discovered he could not focus and talk to Bill at the same time.

“Like what, man?” Bill said.

“Oh you know, coding and such...look, Bill, I don’t really have a lot of time to chat right now.”

“Are you sick or something? When are you coming back to work? We’ve got this new client lined up and we can’t start without you. I mean, you’re the best we’ve got.”

“You know, Bill, I’m not too sure,” said Jackson. “I would try to explain, but I don’t think you’d understand. Hell, half the time, I don’t really understand it either, but there it is, right there. Talk to you soon. Bye now.”

Jackson hung up the phone with a sigh of relief. He hadn’t been to work in over a week, ever since Bill had made that insensitive wisecrack about the masturbator. He couldn’t even remember the last time he took a shower. Was it Monday, Saturday, maybe Tuesday? He couldn’t say for sure.

He hadn’t called Bill to let him know he was going to be on an extended vacation. He merely stopped showing up. Even when he had been showing up, he wasn’t actually working. Instead, he spent the days in his expensive office chair reading about the mistakes of others. Their deepest secrets. Their sins.

Jackson had become obsessed with confessyoursinsandbesaved.com. He spent nearly every waking hour staring at his computer, submerged in a world of confession. He rarely ate, only enough to keep his eyes open, didn’t speak unless it was absolutely necessary, and avoided

all eye contact with Allie and Jake. Allie had tried to make amends on several occasions. She probably figured she must have been too hard on him, and now she was getting the silent treatment, just like she got from Jake whenever she refused to buy him a new toy while they were shopping at the mall.

He was obsessed and he readily admitted this—there was no denying it. But the funny thing was, he could not figure out why.

At times, Jackson thought he liked the site so much because of its revealing nature. It reminded him of a porn flick, with the average, ordinary American stealing the lead role from Ron Jeremy or Jenna Jamison. The site allowed him to see everyone in their most compromising positions, naked and vulnerable. No matter how bad things got, once you strip away all the bullshit, you can see that everyone is just as fucked up as you are. This was, Jackson reasoned, part of the appeal.

But there was more to it than that. Confessyoursinsandbesaved.com was a community. It was a place to hang your head. People understood each other there. They could be thousands of miles away, but they were speaking the same language. There was no judgment, no condemnation, and no conflict. To Jackson, it was as pure and simple as $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$.

The decision had been made. Jackson was going to contact the peeper. He needed to talk with the man, maybe provide some comfort and understanding. Ordinarily, this would be a bit tricky. One of the more beautiful aspects about confessyoursinsandbesaved.com was that it was completely anonymous. Take away the anonymity and the site would fall apart. But, seeing as how Jackson had created and supervised the web site, finding out the man's personal information wasn't that difficult. Whenever a user posts a confession to the site, their IP address is registered

in a database. All Jackson had to do was trace the address to the Internet provider, make a few deceptive phone calls, “phish” for the guy’s personal information, and that’s all there was to it. In fact, it was so easy, Jackson had accomplished all this in the matter of about fifteen minutes or so. He was unexpectedly proud of himself.

Tucker Johnson lived in Akron, Ohio. He was a 32-year old male, had a high school diploma, made less than \$30,000 a year, and was a Comcast Cable and Internet subscriber for the last five years and he never missed a payment.

Seeing that Mr. Johnson lived in Akron, a face-to-face meeting was out of the question, at least for the time being. Jackson lived in Mountain View, California. Considering his current physical state, he figured a phone conversation would have to suffice. If they decided to meet on a later date, he would then have time to make himself look presentable.

“Is this Mr. Tucker Johnson,” said Jackson, speaking into the cordless handset.

“Yes?”

“Tucker, don’t worry...everything is going to be OK.”

“Who is this?”

“I read your post on the web site. I know about the things you do. And I want to let you know that I understand. I understand where you’re coming from. It’s ok. Other people, they’ll want to judge you, slap some labels on you and send you away. But I know better.” Jackson spoke with clean sincerity. There was no doubt he meant every word of what he said. He spun nervously in his Herman Miller office chair, dragging his smelly socks on the hardwood floor of his den, striving for some sort of friction to slow him down.

“Who the hell are you?”

“That’s not important. We need to meet. I can help,” said Jackson.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about your problem. You know, about how you like to watch people. It’s ok.”

“You are one crazy-sick fuck-o, you know that?”

“What? I am only trying—“

“You stay the fuck away from me. Seriously.”

Jackson hung up the phone and then let it fall to the floor. The casing covering the phone’s battery snapped off and careened across the room. He sat staring at the broken plastic, feeling as though some grave injustice had occurred, as if a longtime friend had just disowned him for no apparent reason. For the first time, he suddenly lost the urge to read the confessions of others.

Several days had past since he had tried to make a connection with Mr. Tucker Johnson, and Jackson felt restless. Yesterday, Allie stopped him in the hallway and told him enough was enough, it was time to get his shit together, get himself cleaned up, or she was going to drag his ass to the doctor. Either way, it needed to end.

One thing was for sure. There was no way in hell Jackson was going to the doctor; it was absolutely out of the question. He was more liable to tell Allie to go fuck herself than to visit a psychiatrist. Even if it meant divorce, he didn’t care.

Today, Jackson brooded, lying on the couch, listening to news reports about abducted children, illegal immigration, and how the Internet was quickly changing everything. Even when his thoughts occasionally cleared and he was able to stop thinking about the website and all the fucked up shit going on in the world that everyone keeps quiet about, he’d see another story on

the news that would remind him of some confession he had read. For every story broadcasted on CNN, there were hundreds of personal tragedies occurring at this moment that would never make the news or evoke the sympathy of a large audience. Jackson knew this because he had spent the last month reading them, becoming intimate with every detail as if he were in love with each and every one of them. Jackson knew that right now some poor fuck was contemplating suicide, probably had a rifle barrel shoved in his face, because he was molested by his uncle years ago. A woman was pulling into the parking lot of a Motel 6, the same place she had been coming to meet her lover for the past year, while her husband sat at home, crying at the kitchen table and trying to work up the courage to pack up his things and leave. A man was shooting up in a gas station bathroom while his coworkers were waiting in the car, nervously checking their watches and hoping they'll make it to the conference on time.

At this moment, Jackson paced back and forth in his den, his mind still screaming nonstop as it had been for the few days since his phone conversation with Tucker Johnson, the innocuous stalker. He glanced at the computer nervously. He hadn't touched the keyboard and mouse since Tucker had called him a crazy-sick fuck-o. Upon some deliberation, Jackson sat down in his office chair, booted up the computer, and typed in the address of confessyoursinsandbesaved.com.

A knock came at the door, barely audible. "Come in," Jackson said. He was somewhat startled. Nobody had knocked on the door to his den in quite some time. Jackson immediately expected bad news. More than likely it was Allie, coming to serve him divorce papers. Just sign here, here, and here and that'll be the end it. All he had to do was make a few scratches with a pen.

The door cracked open slowly and Jake peeked his head inside as if he were exploring a dark, hidden cave out in the jungle, half expecting an onslaught of rabid bats to greet him. Deciding the coast was clear, Jake swung the door all the way open and stepped in. He clutched firmly to his new favorite toy, one of the old-style G.I. Joe action figures drabbed in army green fatigues.

“Daddy?” said Jake, looking directly at Jackson.

Jackson couldn't help notice the fear and isolation in his son's eyes. It wasn't stark terror or anything like that, not nearly so obvious. It was a sad, contemplative fear.

“Y-Yes, Jake? What is it boy?” Jackson was near speechless. Not once had his son entered the confines of his sanctuary since Jackson practically locked himself in over a week ago. The presence of another human being in his den was unsettling. Considering it was his son made it near unbearable.

“Mommy wants to know if you're coming to dinner. She's making spaghetti...you're favorite,” said the boy.

“Is that so?”

“Uh-huh, she did.”

“Well....”

“C'mon, let's go,” said Jake. He was imploring, practically begging for Jackson to leave his den. He even stretched his arm towards his father, ready to take his hand and lead him away. This was not how Jackson remembered his son. The Jake he knew was apathetic at best, couldn't care one way or the other if Jackson joined them for dinner. This sudden change in his son's behavior confused Jackson. Panic overtook him as he stared at his son's arm reaching for him.

“Not tonight,” said Jackson. “Maybe tomorrow, ok?”

Jake’s arm fell back to his side. He turned and left the room, closing the door behind him. Once Jake had finally left the room, Jackson returned his focus to the monitor in front of him. He decided to watch the video clip designed to greet first-time visitors of confessyoursinsandbesaved.com. In this clip, Pastor Ted Salandry stands in a church parking lot on a gloomy day, the clouds hanging low with different shades of gray coloring the sky. He speaks directly into the camera, as if he is speaking directly to you. Pastor Ted talks about the power of confession. He says that all you have to do is name your sins, speak them out loud, and all will be forgiven. He says it is the acknowledgement of mistakes that leads to the path of redemption.

After the video clip was finished, Jackson made a few clicks with his mouse. Previously, he would have directed himself to the confessions of others. Instead, Jackson currently stared at a white box with a blinking cursor. In this box, he was free to type whatever he wanted and then post it to the site.

I am a 36-year old husband and father. For a long time, I have listened to everyone here. But now, I must speak. I need to confess—

In this manner, Jackson contributed his own confession to the multitude of others, while downstairs, an empty plate and clean silverware waited at the table for hours, arranged perfectly.

Marla's Mutiny

Marla King used to think mutiny was a word reserved for seagoing vessels. Anytime she came across it, the word would always conjure images of tall ships with white sails and scraggly, disgruntled pirates brandishing rusty swords placed firmly against an unsuspecting captain's neck. That was until, at the age of 35, she had experienced mutiny not once, but twice in less than a year.

“I can’t describe it,” said Marla. She grabbed the pitcher of beer sitting on the table and poured another glass. The four of them were at the Village Inn Pizza on Alpine Ave., “celebrating,” as Jackie had called it. It was Jackie’s idea to come out here and drink some beers, have some laughs, and discuss all of the opportunities Marla had now that she was no longer burdened by a dead-end, soul crushing job. “It’s kind of surreal.”

The first mutiny was metaphorical, starting with a rogue cell which slowly multiplied until it formed a uterine fibroid the size of a tennis ball. Marla had always thought going to the bathroom in the middle of the night was part of getting older, but she had been going more often in the day too, and her periods had trended towards “bad” or “awful” for sometime before the gynecologist had finally shared the discovery. While benign, due to the fibroid’s size, she underwent a hysterectomy at her doctor’s insistence. Marla had to give up her uterus, and with it the ability to reproduce, but she was able to regain control of her body in return.

The second mutiny was literal, when, back on the job for only three months, she had been fired from her position as an assistant manager at a clothing warehouse. She knew it had been coming. Discontent had been brewing amongst the crew for weeks. She could see it in their faces, or the way all of her subordinates would suddenly stop talking whenever she walked by. They were a difficult bunch of people to contain. The hiring standards at Broder were quite low, so the bulk of the warehouse crew was comprised of alcoholics, drug users, ex-cons, teenagers, and high school dropouts.

Marla had striven to earn their respect, though towards the end, she began to doubt if it were even possible. At four feet, eight inches, her small frame was easy to overlook. Her skin was the color of a powdered doughnut and she had shoulder-length blonde wavy hair styled in such a way even she thought was too conservative. Her small size and quiet manner meant she

had to overcompensate when it came to managing the warehouse. She would often pace the aisles with a pair of binoculars dangling from her neck and a forced scowl, partly to see if she could catch anyone stealing or slacking, and partly to send a message that she was watching. It never really worked though.

“Do you feel as though a weight has been lifted?” said Jackie in mock seriousness, then chuckling to herself.

“I don’t know,” said Marla. “It’s tough to say. I’m not sure what I feel.” But she did know how she felt, at least to a certain extent. She felt awkward, and it wasn’t just her, it was the four of them. No one knew what to say.

“At least you and Dean won’t have to be a secret anymore,” said Jackie. “Although, having to sneak around and be all clandestine-like sounds kind of exciting to me. Kind of sexy, you know?” Jackie nudged her husband, Matt, sitting next to her in the booth. The two of them started shaking their heads back and forth while blowing kisses to each other.

Marla and Dean watched the seemingly happy couple perform this corny, stupid act. Dean looked as though he were enjoying witnessing this intimate gesture, perhaps content to see two people sharing their love for each other, but Marla knew Jackie better than Dean did, and she knew it was mostly for show. Marla and Jackie had been roommates in college and managed to stay friends and get together for a movie or shopping every couple of months, probably because chance had kept them living in the same area since graduation. Jackie always had to flaunt the relationship she was in, even if the man she was with wasn’t all that good. She wasn’t mean-spirited about it, not usually. It was just her way of quieting any misgivings she had about the person she was with, or about the life she was living.

“Like James Bond,” said Matt. “You know, I’ve had people tell me I look like Pierce Brosnan. What do you think?”

“It wasn’t like that,” said Marla. “There was no adventure.”

“Yes, there was,” said Dean. “There were consequences. You know, I could have been fired too. We got lucky. Oh, I’m sorry, I mean...I got lucky.” He grabbed Marla’s hand underneath the table and squeezed it.

“Did you guys ever do it at work? God, I’ve always wanted to. I’ve even had Matt stop by on a couple of different Fridays when things were slow, but we can never find a good spot. It sounds so hot, though. You know, one of the first porn movies I ever saw was set in an office. Everyone was just going at it all day long. There’s this one scene, my favorite scene, where these two are fucking on top of a copy machine and another woman walks in. Can you believe it? A three way on a Xerox machine. It’s fucking brilliant. God, I love that movie. I should send my parents a thank you card for keeping it in their sock drawer when I was twelve.”

Marla’s pale skin grew red as she listened to her friend. Marla wasn’t a prude by any stretch, though she rarely talked about sex so overtly. She was blushing at her own embarrassment, not over Jackie’s words, but by the fact that Jackie had no clue about Marla and Dean and what went on between them, or better yet, what didn’t go on. They were a sexless couple, Dean taking it slow at first, then his courtship interrupted by the surgery and the time needed for recovery. But Marla had been healed for months now, and while she thought delaying sex was kind of a romantic at first--a refreshing change a pace, actually--doubts began to plague her, and she couldn’t help but feel, deep down, it was all her fault.

“You were lucky,” said Matt. “I had to steal all my porn at that age. Almost got caught a couple of times.” They all fell silent until Matt spoke again. “What about you, Dean? How’d you get your porn?”

“I never had any,” said Dean.

“Awww, come on,” said Matt. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious.”

“You don’t have to lie,” said Matt. “We’re all adults here.”

“Well, some of us are. The jury is still out on Matt, but the rest of us are okay,” said Jackie.

“My parents were Baptists,” said Dean.

Matt and Jackie laughed at this. Marla, on the other hand, could see the humor in it, but with her present circumstances, the statement took on an entirely different meaning. It hinted at questions she had asked herself a hundred times a day, questions about Dean, about his libido and his divorce, questions she feared to voice.

Feeling a little light-headed from the first glass of beer, Marla was able to silence some of these thoughts, and instead looked at this conversation about porn as a challenge, much in the same way working at Broder for two years had been a challenge. It was an opportunity to prove herself.

“I had an older brother,” said Marla. “He really liked porn. I used to sneak into his room when he wasn’t around. He had all kinds of magazines and videos. I remember some kids at school talked about Playboy and so I looked at those first. They were exactly like I expected them to be. But then I looked at the Hustlers. I couldn’t believe it. I remember thinking, ‘So that’s what my parents are doing when they have the door locked’.”

Laughter broke out, except Marla could tell Dean was only laughing to be nice. In fact, she noticed the look of concern on his face, but she couldn't tell whether it had to do with getting fired from Broder or the things she was saying.

"He had a copy of 'Debbie Does Dallas.' You guys ever seen that one?" said Marla.

"Of course," said Jackie.

"It's a classic," said Matt.

"Dean?" asked Marla.

Dean shook his head, visibly uncomfortable.

"I was older by then, when I really *watched* it, you know, the whole way through. I think I was maybe fifteen, sixteen at the time, not exactly sure. I was disgusted. Not by the sex...like I said, I had seen that stuff before. It was the movie itself. Here's this group of cheerleaders that basically whore themselves out so they can raise enough money to go to a cheerleading competition. It was insulting," said Marla.

"Well, let's face it, people don't watch porn for the intricate plots," said Matt.

"The worst was that was the first time I noticed the 'look' in a porno. It's near the end of the movie. Debbie is in the sporting goods store and she's getting chased by the owner all the way up to the second floor, and then they're having sex, and he's this creepy, nasty looking guy and he's on top of her, and if you pay attention, you'll notice for a brief second, Debbie turns her head to the side, straight towards the camera, and there's this look on her face, and all I see is sadness."

"A great orgasm will really do that to you," said Jackie. "You should see some of the faces *I* make. Matt says I look like the girl from 'The Exorcist'."

"She's puked on me a couple of times," said Matt.

“Have not,” said Jackie.

“Look for it next time,” said Marla. “You can see it. It’s like she lets her guard down and you can see how she really feels about having that guy on top of her. I pitied her for a long time. But then, I thought, maybe I’m wrong. Maybe she’s perfectly, genuinely happy with her line of work. Maybe she finds it rewarding and fulfilling. Maybe it’s empowering. And if that’s the case, maybe she deserves admiration instead of pity.”

Marla glanced over at Dean to try and gauge his reaction. Dean looked as though he were trying to disappear, or at the very least, hide in the corner of the booth they were sitting in. She was not surprised by this. Dean was always quiet and polite. She always wondered how he managed to get the head manager spot at Broder. He wasn’t a born leader; he was too nice. Marla had never even heard him yell or truly get angry. At best, he might run his fingers through his hair or loosen his tie when he was stressed out, but that was about it.

She wondered whatever happened to the real Debbie. Was it really sadness in her eyes on the second floor of the sporting goods shop, or had Marla gotten it all wrong? She knew full well she was capable of mistakes, like how at this very moment, she was now certain taking the job at Broder had been a mistake. How couldn’t it have been? There was so much bullshit to put up with, like how she always had to ask one teenage kid or another to help put away a fifty-pound box of long-sleeve shirts because she couldn’t lift the box high enough to put it on the top shelf, or how there was another assistant manager that would joke with the crew about how they were going to pack her in a ten-gallon box, tape it up, and ship it out UPS, and finally, how yesterday, at around 3:00 PM, 15 warehouse employees all stopped working in the middle of their shifts, marched over and formed a line outside the HR office, each taking turns to complain about Marla to the HR director, and how at 9:00 AM this morning, Dean had called her into his

office, shut the door, and told her that the decision had been made, there was nothing he could do, and she could pack up her things and go. He was sorry.

They continued to drink for a couple of hours, pausing to make trips to the pizza buffet. Marla was well on her way to getting drunk, something she rarely did. She couldn't stop picturing the line of Broder employees standing outside the HR office. In some strange way, she felt a connection between the external uprising at Broder and the internal uprising of the now surgically-removed tumor in her uterus. Her reproductive organs had revolted against her, and it was still somewhat painful to think she could no longer have children, even if she was getting to the age where conception would be difficult. The operation had been performed about three months into her relationship with Dean, and Dean was there nearly every day after work, cooking dinner for her, and he would lie next to her on the bed in her two-bedroom apartment and they'd watch movies from their shared Netflix queue, all the while he was finalizing a divorce that had begun before Marla and Dean started dating. It was during this three months of recovery she felt her strong attraction for Dean grow into something more, something much larger and more profound. And yet, ironically, she continued to wonder if it was her inability to reproduce which was causing this distance between them.

Dean glanced at his watch. "It's getting late."

"It's nine o'clock," said Jackie. "You call that late?"

Dean shrugged. "I've got to rip up the linoleum in my bathroom tomorrow. Putting new tile in. Could take all day."

"I've got an idea," said Jackie. "How about we go over to our place for a few? Have a nightcap?"

“Fantastic,” said Matt.

“You guys haven’t even seen the new house yet,” said Jackie.

“I’ll go,” said Marla. She looked over at Dean. “Come on, it’ll be fun.

“I don’t know,” said Dean.

“You’re coming,” said Marla, and she meant it.

They finished off the last pitcher of beer, grabbed their coats and purses, and headed out the door. Large snowflakes were falling and several inches of snow covered the ground. Marla and Dean headed towards Dean’s car. They would follow Jackie and Matt over to their new place which was only fifteen minutes away.

“Wow, it’s cold,” said Dean. He turned the car onto Alpine Ave. heading south.

“Yeah,” said Marla.

“How are you feeling?” said Dean.

“It’s still sinking in, I think,” said Marla. “So what did they tell you? What did they say about me?”

“Not much, really,” said Dean.

“Well, they must have said something,” said Marla.

“Bob and Cheryl just told me what happened,” said Dean. “They said a bunch of the employees came over to HR yesterday and complained about you. They said there were too many complaints to ignore and that action needed to be taken immediately to resolve the situation.”

“I see,” said Marla. Action needed to be taken, Marla thought. God, she hated hollow phrases like that. They were everywhere at Broder. She liked to call it business-speak. To Marla, the main purpose of business-speak was to distort the truth in order to keep the wheels of

commerce moving. She was guilty of using it on occasion at Broder. Dean, on the other hand, had mastered it.

“Listen, I didn’t have anything to do with the decision,” said Dean. “They had made up their minds.”

“Did you say anything to them?” said Marla.

“Like what?” said Dean.

“I don’t know,” said Marla. “Anything?”

“No.”

Marla sighed and shook her head. “I need some air.” She rolled down the window and let the winter air blast against her warm face.

“Well, what did you want me to say?” asked Dean.

“You could have said *something*,” said Marla.

“Like what?” said Dean. “Like, ‘Bob, Cheryl, listen, I know it’s against company policy to be romantically involved with coworkers, but Marla and I have been seeing each other for nine months now, and I would appreciate it if you’d let her stick around as a favor to me?’ You know I couldn’t say that. I could have gotten fired too.”

“You could have defended me at least. You could have told them I was a competent employee and that you think I deserved another chance. You could have told them that much at least.”

“I’m sorry, okay?” said Dean. “I was paranoid. I didn’t want them to get suspicious. I can’t afford to get fired right now.”

“I can?” said Marla.

“I didn’t mean it that way, Marla. You know what I meant.”

“Just forget it,” said Marla. “You’ll have to make it up to me.” She reached over and put her left hand on his knee. Dean flinched.

“I think we’re here,” said Dean.

The four of them were sitting in the living room of the new house, drinks in hand, having just completed Matt and Jackie’s tour of the place. The house was nice. Marla guessed they paid somewhere around \$250,000 for the place, but she didn’t want to be rude and ask how much it cost.

They sat on black leather furniture. In the middle of them was a wooden coffee table with what looked to be a glass bong on top of it. Marla hadn’t seen one of those since college, though she wasn’t surprised. Jackie used to smoke frequently in those days, and though she never talked about it with Marla since college, it appeared as though she had continued smoking in private since then.

“Is that what I think it is?” said Marla, pointing at the bong.

“She’s a beauty, ain’t she?” said Matt.

“Let’s smoke some,” said Jackie.

“Sure, let me pack it up one sec,” said Matt.

Matt went into the kitchen and came back with a sandwich bag in his hand. He unrolled the bag, grabbed some pot from inside, and started breaking it up on the coffee table. “I just got this earlier after work,” he said. “You guys are in luck. It’s premium stuff.”

“\$50 an eighth,” said Jackie.

“Thanks,” said Dean. “But I don’t smoke.”

“You sure?” said Matt. “It’ll knock your socks off.”

“No thanks,” said Dean.

“Marla?” asked Jackie.

“I don’t know. I haven’t smoked in years. Probably since college. Besides, I’ll probably have to take a drug test soon seeing as how I am going to have to find another job,” said Marla.

“Awww, c’mon,” said Matt. “You’ll piss clean in a week, tops.”

“If even,” said Jackie.

“What the hell,” said Marla. “I’ll do it. Pass it over here. Wait, how does it work again?”

Jackie and Matt laughed at her. Then, they told her how to use the bong, and Matt said he’d light it and work the stem so all Marla would need to do is put her lips on the top, form a suction, and then inhale. Marla coughed for several minutes after the first hit, which delighted Jackie and Matt. They began to tell stories about the first time they ever got high as the bong was passed back and forth. Somebody came up with the idea to play a board game and Matt rushed off and came back with Trivial Pursuit.

Marla convinced Dean to stay for one game, and while they all played, Marla was surprised at how much fun she was having. For that brief period of time, she was able to forget about Broder and her troubles with Dean and simply enjoy a game with friends. By the time the game was over, Marla was quite buzzed.

Marla and Jackie had been sitting next to each other on the leather sofa, and without warning, Jackie leaned in and kissed her on the mouth. Marla wasn’t sure what to make of it. She didn’t return the kiss, but she didn’t back away either. Matt stood up and started removing his clothes. Within thirty seconds, he was naked.

“What’s going on?” said Marla.

“Just relax,” said Jackie. She kissed Marla again. Then she stood up and Matt came over and he started undressing Jackie while kissing her arms and neck.

“What is this?” said Marla, still motionless on the couch. She looked over at Dean. He looked as though he were going to be sick.

“Matt and I started going to this club awhile back,” said Jackie. She stepped out of her underwear. “Some friends brought us the first time. We’re into the lifestyle now. We like you guys. We want to show you what it’s all about.”

“Yeah,” said Matt. “Just relax. We’ll show you what to do.”

Matt faced Marla on the couch, then straddled her, kissing her with his tongue while Jackie attempted to do the same with Dean. Marla was confused. She had never done anything like this before in her life. She had a one-night stand before, and she had fooled around with Jackie a couple of times, but that was all back in college. This was entirely new to her, and while she never considered herself to be someone that would partake in group sex, it seemed as though something had changed within her over the last year, what with Broder, the hysterectomy, and Dean. Before, she might have considered such an act dirty, maybe even immoral, but now, now she was curious. It wasn’t what she *really* wanted, but it might be good enough.

“We have to leave,” said Dean. “Now.” He gently pushed Jackie off of his lap and stood up. “I can’t do this.”

“Just relax,” said Jackie.

“No,” said Dean. “Come on, Marla. We have to go.”

“But...” said Marla.

“We’re leaving.”

Neither of them said a word as they drove to Marla's apartment. She wasn't angry at Dean, at least not for wanting to leave Jackie and Matt's place. She knew he wouldn't go along for the ride, but she had hoped, perhaps desperately, that he might do it anyway, for her.

The snow had stopped falling and the clouds had already blown away, and in their place was a bright full moon and thousands of stars. Marla spent the entire drive looking up into the sky and trying to identify some of the constellations she had learned back in school. She thought about how sailors used to navigate their ships by tracking the stars, and she wondered about what the sailors would do on cloudy nights when there were no stars in sight. Did they get lost, she thought. What then?

They had arrived at Marla's apartment complex. Dean parked the car and left it running.

"Do you want to come up?" said Marla.

"I don't think so," said Dean. "I'm pretty tired. I think I'm just going to go home and go to bed."

"I'll make a pot of coffee," said Marla.

"I don't know," said Dean.

"Please?" she said. "I don't want to be alone right now."

"All right. One cup, and then I have to go."

They exited the car, and Marla took Dean's hand into her own as they made their way up the stairs to the third floor of the building. Once inside, Dean plopped onto the couch with a heavy sigh while Marla went into the kitchen and started a pot of coffee.

"What a day," said Dean.

“I know,” said Marla. She joined him on the couch. They sat there holding each other for a little while. Marla decided enough was enough. She kissed Dean, and they caressed each other. Then she put her hand down his pants. He pulled her hand away.

“What?” she said.

“Just don’t,” he said. “You’re drunk.”

“So?”

“Not tonight.”

“Not tonight?” she said. She rose up slightly so she could look right into his eyes. “Not tonight? Not tonight? How much longer are you going to make me wait, because frankly, I don’t know if I can wait any longer, Dean.”

“I don’t know,” said Dean.

“What’s wrong?” she said. “It’s me, right? You don’t want to have sex with me because of the hysterectomy? Is that it? Just tell me. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not.”

“Then what is it, Dean? What? I can’t wait anymore. Do you know how long it’s been since I had sex? Three years. Three years. I am so horny right now, I could have sex with anyone as long as they were still breathing, but more than anything, I want to have sex with the man I love. Let’s just do it.”

“I can’t,” he said.

“Why not?” she said. “Tell me.”

“I’m thinking of getting back together with Cindy,” said Dean. “I’m sorry. It wouldn’t be right.”

Marla sat up straight, staring at Dean, giving him the same scowl she used to give the employees at Broder, though this time around, it was not an empty gesture meant to make her look tough, but a scowl filled with anxiety, anger, and disbelief. She had been lead-on...betrayed, by her former boss, no less. She was a fool. She was on the verge of tears, though she had already promised herself earlier that day that she would not cry.

“You’re lying,” she said. “You just don’t want to have sex with me.”

“I’m not,” he said.

“Well, when did you decide this?”

Dean’s head was lowered towards the ground.

“That’s it?” she said. “That’s all you’ve got to say?”

Then it occurred to her. She couldn’t help feeling betrayed and humiliated, couldn’t help falling in love with Dean, or having her uterus removed, or getting fired from Broder, or day in and day out, feeling like she had no control over her life, and that she would continue on this path for the rest of her days, until finally, she would die unhappy and alone. But she realized she could do *something*. She wasn’t powerless. And with this realization came the knowledge that this moment may very well come to define her, and whatever her reaction might be, she was tired of regrets.

“I don’t care,” she said. “Take your clothes off.”

“Why?” he said. “Didn’t you hear me? It wouldn’t be right.”

“I said I don’t care,” said Marla. She pulled off her blouse and unhooked her bra.

“I’m sorry, Marla,” said Dean. “I really am. I mean, I love you, as a friend, but she’s the mother of my children.”

“Stop talking,” said Marla. She unbuttoned Dean’s pants and tried to pull them off.

“What are you doing?” said Dean. “Stop.”

Dean brushed her aside and got onto his feet.

“I won’t,” said Marla. She took off her pants and underwear. “The way I see it, you owe me. Big time. You are going to fuck me whether you like it or not. You’ve got two kids, I know you can do it. And if you don’t, I swear to God, I will do everything in my power to make your life miserable. I’m sure everyone at Broder wants to know about your indiscretions. I’m sure Cindy would love to hear all about them.” She paused. “Take your clothes off.”

Dean stared at her, as if he were trying to figure out whether or not she was telling the truth. He held his gaze for as long as he could, and then slid down his pants.

“Just once,” he said, almost shaking.

After it was over, and Dean had already scrambled out of the apartment as fast as he could, Marla covered herself with a blanket. She thought about the conversation they had earlier that night about Debbie the porn star, and whether or not she should be pitied or admired. Marla wondered the same thing about herself. Normally, she would think “pitied.”

The Loving Parents of an Antichrist

So there Mel was, standing in the middle of the child care aisle at Wal-Mart, clutching a shopping cart with a baby firmly secured in the basket, almost positive the little bastard was the antichrist, and he could not decide whether to go with the Pampers or the Huggies. Should he get the leak-free super-absorbent diapers with the little giraffes and monkeys, or the ones with the race cars? He didn't have a clue what kind of diapers you were supposed to buy for a little boy whose saliva burned your skin like hydrochloric acid, anyways. He wasn't exaggerating, either. This was real, he couldn't believe it, but all he had to do was look into the cart and see that baby,

the child's eyes glowing bright red like ketchup, to know buying diapers was the easy part. This boy was lethal, and if Mel wasn't careful, he was sure he'd wake up from a nap to find his arm severed at the elbow. Staring at the rows of diapers packaged in light pink or teal plastic, he couldn't help but feel compromised.

After a few moments, he grabbed the package of race car Huggies off the shelf. The cute little animals would have been too misleading. Mel was concerned some innocent bystander might get beguiled by the giraffes and the boy's mischievous smile and end up losing an appendage. Mel had already made that mistake before, trying to calm the boy with cute little pinches and a wagging finger, only to have the boy bear his razor sharp fangs, revealing its childish displeasure.

He moved down the aisle gathering all the various supplies his wife, Sherry, had sent him to get, like the baby powder and pureed apples, all the while keeping an eye out for any oncoming shoppers. Mel hadn't even wanted to venture outside of the house with the boy considering how dangerous it could be, but Sherry was insistent he spend some quality time with their "new son" at the supermarket, so now Mel had to peer around every corner, even back-track at times, in order to avoid getting too close to anyone, as if all the people in the store were infected with SARS. The last thing he needed right now was a poor stranger writhing in pain, clutching a wound while a crowd gathered round to help the victim. No, at this point, Mel and the boy needed to remain as low-key as humanly possible.

Finished in the child care aisle, Mel continued on throughout the store, ducking in aisles when they were empty and stocking up on all sorts of extras. All of this frantic maneuvering really put Mel on edge. He wasn't like this. He wasn't a crazy paranoid schizophrenic convinced the world was plotting against him. To the contrary, Mel always strived for the

opposite. He valued two things above all else in his life. The first was his wife, Sherry. Along with her, and perhaps even more so, Mel cherished peace. Not the stereotypical, beauty pageant, peace on earth kind of peace, this was more of an individual tranquility, a domestic harmony. Sure, it'd be great if everyone got together and joined hands, singing and laughing like they do in the Coca-Cola commercials, but he wasn't that overly idealistic. However, on this day, the third day of his endeavor with the boy, Mel was not calm or tranquil. He was not lying in a bed of fluffy white clouds.

He stopped by the butcher to order a few pounds of ham and roast beef, carefully positioning himself between the glass counter and the shopping cart containing the boy. An older couple slowly approached and waited for their turn. Mel became anxious with the couple in such close proximity, but the meat was essential to their supplies.

“Oh, what a cute little baby!” cried the elder woman, cooing in a sing-songy sort of way.

“Don't look at it, please!” shouted Mel.

The elder woman looked confused. The boy, who had been somewhat disinterested in his surroundings for the past few minutes, suddenly perked up, as if he somehow recognized the desperation in Mel's voice, and reached for the old lady with both of his stubby little newborn arms. Taking this as an invitation, the woman approached again, this time placing her index finger in the boy's grasp.

Without hesitation, Mel lunged at the woman, planting his right shoulder in her midsection, like he used to do back in high school, where he had been a middle-linebacker on the varsity squad. The woman barreled over, falling flat on her back, and Mel landed on top of her.

“Oh my god. I'm so sorry, ma'am,” said Mel, still pinning the woman to the floor.

“Rape!” she yelled. “Gerald, help me! Help me!”

The woman's husband grabbed Mel's arm. Mel struggled a bit, feeling the gesture was unwarranted. He had possibly just saved this woman's finger—maybe even her life. Of course, he couldn't explain this to the couple, or to anyone really, without suffering the consequences, which would certainly be severe. There would be throngs of TV cameras outside his door, and the street in their cozy little suburb just north of Grand Rapids would be flooded with satellite-ready news vans. Their faces, along with the boy's, would be plastered all over CNN and every other channel for months. The boy was not their offspring, at least biologically speaking. Mel's sperm and Sherry's egg were not involved in the creation of this child in any way, but that wouldn't matter, because no one would believe them. Scientists would want to study it and conduct all kinds of experiments. They would seal it up in some hypobaric chamber like they did with E.T., and probably want to run all sorts of tests on Mel and Sherry too.

Worst of all, Mel might incur the wrath of the boy's father, and this guy, rather this demigod, this supernatural entity, was not someone you wanted to fuck around with. He wasn't your average low-life deadbeat dad or some ex-con who got violent when he drank whiskey. No, Mel was pretty sure the boy's father was the goddamn Prince of Darkness himself, and he was ready to do everything in his power to stay on the father's good side.

Mel stood up and attempted to help the old woman to her feet. She continued to scream and refused any assistance. Her husband knelt down beside her and tried to calm her down. He stared at Mel.

"Please, ma'am, it's alright," said Mel. "My boy, he has a condition. He can't be touched. I'm sorry."

"You assaulted me!" she screamed.

“My boy has a *condition*. You could have killed him,” said Mel. Any explanation would be pretty much useless at this point, but he couldn’t afford to draw anymore attention. “Please, I’m sorry, but I had to do it. My boy comes first.”

The woman had finally stopped screaming and appeared calmer, as if she had bought Mel’s story. Well, it wasn’t total bullshit. The boy did have a condition of sorts. He was the spawn of Satan after all. Mel figured that could be called a condition. It wasn’t smallpox or polio or anything like that, but it was some pretty serious shit.

Mel apologized one last time, dusted himself off, and grabbed the meat from the butcher. By now, several onlookers had gathered round and watched as the old lady was pulled to her feet with her husband’s assistance. Mel hurried on, pushing the shopping cart with him. All that was left was the fresh produce section at the front of the store and then he’d be done.

He grabbed a plastic bag off of the spinning roll and started loading it with potatoes in a blur, intent on moving as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, the boy grabbed a small bottle of mustard sitting in the basket next to him and squeezed with inhuman strength until the top blew off and the dirty yellow mustard showered the area, covering the child, Mel, and everything else in a 5-foot radius.

“Goddamn’t,” cried Mel. He couldn’t contain himself, brushing off the yellow substance from the side of his face.

“Sir. Sir, you’re going to have to pay for that, sir,” said a young stock boy.

Apparently, he had just come around the corner and seen the yellow splayed everywhere. He was wearing an earpiece with a microphone, and within seconds, “Clean up in produce. Clean up in produce,” could be heard over the intercom.

Mel's face went red. It felt like the mustard was weighing him down and he couldn't seem to move. He stood there while the baby cheered and the stock guy was replaced with another guy wheeling a janitorial cart in his direction. The janitor handed Mel a roll of paper towel. For the moment, Mel lost any concern over the danger the child posed.

"Whew, what happened here?" said the guy.

"You ever have one of those times in your life," said Mel, "and you're not thinking clearly, and you know it's dumb, it's stupid, it could ruin your life, but you do it anyway, and now you're stuck?"

"Oh yeah, sure enough," said the guy. "You're wishing you had worn that condom, right? Yeah, I know all about it. Got two of my own at home, you know. It's hard to resist though. Sure is."

Later that night, Mel sat with Sherry at their kitchen table to eat dinner while the boy laid on top of a blanket in the living room. Mel didn't have much of an appetite. His stomach was still nauseous. Earlier, he had smelled a foul odor coming from the child and thought it must need changing. As he had removed the dirty diaper, a swarm of baby spiders poured out of the child's feces, crawling up Mel's arm or skittering across the carpet. Mel had nearly vomited several times as he frantically brushed the spiders from his skin and stomped the scurrying insects with his foot while the child laughed out loud.

"Well, how is the salmon?" asked Sherry.

"Delicious," said Mel, picking at his food.

Mel experienced some guilt at Sherry's smile. She seemed oblivious to the boy's true nature. She either didn't see or didn't notice the fecal spiders earlier, and hadn't been burned by

the boy's saliva or witnessed its fangs. This puzzled Mel, and the only explanation for this was that Sherry was somehow bewitched, as if the child had cast some kind of spell on her. There was no doubt she was falling in love with the kid. Since Mel had brought the boy home two days ago, he had never seen Sherry so exuberant. It was a radical change from the norm, where for months she was prone to alternating bouts of anger and depression. Mel couldn't count the number of times he had come home from the office to find her still lying in bed, skipping out on work and feeling too bleak to take a shower. Other times she would cry, often for hours, without any warning.

Mel mainly attributed her now absent anger and depression to the trials of their life together over the past few years. They had visited at least ten different doctors in order to determine why Sherry couldn't get pregnant. They had concluded the problem was her, not him, as they so eloquently put it. Mel and Sherry had exhausted about every possibility known to modern science in an attempt to conceive while nearly going broke in the process. They had tried everything from thermometers and hormone therapy to in vitro fertilization and coordinating their coitus to the Chinese calendar.

As a last resort, they had decided to apply for adoption. After filling out mounds of paperwork, undergoing all sorts of psychological evaluations, and constantly playing phone tag for what seemed like months on end, the whole process had boiled down to a meeting with their adoption counselor, Mr. Jacobs, in his downtown office on the corner of Ottawa and Pearl, right next to a dueling piano bar called Mojo's.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot award you two with a child at this time," said Mr. Jacobs.

"We can wait," said Sherry. "How long do you think it will be?"

Mel and Sherry sat side by side in a couple of cheap wooden chairs. Every time Mel shifted his weight, the chair squeaked and yielded as if it were ready to collapse.

“You don’t understand,” said Mr. Jacobs, peering over the rims of his wire-framed glasses, his bald head reflecting the mid-afternoon light streaming through the window. “It’s not a matter of time. You didn’t pass your evaluation. I cannot give you my recommendation.”

“Who didn’t?” said Sherry, her voice getting louder, her face tense.

“You didn’t, Mrs. Bertrand.”

Sherry immediately rose from her chair and pointed her index finger straight at Mr. Jacobs, calling him a cheat, a crook, and a heartless motherfucker amongst other things. Mel finally managed to calm her down and convinced her to wait outside Mr. Jacobs’s office while he spoke to the counselor alone.

“Listen, I’m sorry about that,” said Mel. “We’ve been through a lot lately. She didn’t mean those things she said.”

“It’s all right. Happens all the time,” said Mr. Jacobs.

“There must be some mistake here. We’ll make excellent parents. We have good jobs, a nice house, secure lives.”

“I believe you,” said Mr. Jacobs. “The problem is, the psychologist has determined your wife to be mentally unstable, and from what I’ve seen today, I have to agree.”

“Hey, my wife is a good woman, alright? She’s just going through a rough time right now, and that means so am I. I can’t be with her like this, you understand? It kills me.”

“I’m very sorry.”

Mel was unable to change the man’s mind, leaving them to return home and try and get Sherry pregnant again, only this time with renewed effort. The whole process—the doctors, the

counselors, the tests—had certainly taken its toll. Their love-making, much like their relationship, had become measured and perfunctory, reduced to some sort of twisted equation that went like, “add vaginal temperature to the hour on the clock, divided by the phase of the moon, squared by the correct missionary position, orgasms mandatory, and presto, the sum equals mutual happiness.” But for all this laboring and cold calculation, they couldn’t get it right, and any semblance of tranquility drifted further away with each failed attempt. Mel had begun to dread coming home each night. Their little three-bedroom house seemed to bleed with disappointment.

“How was shopping today?” asked Sherry, still chewing her salmon.

“Oh, it went just fine,” said Mel. “The boy was really excited. I don’t think he’s ever been in a Wal-Mart before.”

“The boy?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s Steven,” said Sherry. “You still like Paul, don’t you? Just say it. You hate the name ‘Steven’.”

“No. I just don’t think we should rush into this,” said Mel. He stared at his plate. How could he tell her? How could he say, Hey babe, so I was driving home from work the other night and I saw this car with its hazards blinking on the side of the road and I stopped to help him out, and it turns out it was Satan and he tricked me into raising his son, the antichrist? Well, he couldn’t, so instead he just murmured, “Let’s not get too hasty here.”

“You’re not having second thoughts, are you?” said Sherry. She peered over at the child in the living, its arms flailing about, mimicking a normal child.

Mel searched her face and could easily see the fear in Sherry's eyes. It was a stark contrast to the look he saw when he came through the door toting the child two days ago, telling her a few fantastic lies. He was shocked when she actually believed the story, but Mel began to wonder if Sherry's unreasonably quick acceptance of the boy went far beyond a simple bewitching. Perhaps she, like him, had been so desperate for an answer to what their life had become that she didn't care about where the child had come from.

"Of course not," said Mel. "We just need to take this one step at a time."

"Steven it is," said Sherry. She got up from the table and sat down next to the boy in the living room. The boy giggled as Sherry waved his new favorite toy over his head, a rip-off version of Tickle-Me Elmo called Can't-Stop-Laughing Larry.

Mel absorbed the scene, watching as his wife played with the boy. The transformation in his wife was obvious. She was no longer the fragile, vulnerable woman in her early thirties, willing to go to any lengths to experience motherhood. Gone were the days of silently eating microwave meatloaf with the soft-spoken din of the History channel on in the background. He would no longer have to experience the utter frustration he felt at his worthless attempts to cheer her up with nonsensical puns or crude humor about the day's events every time he came home to see her staring blankly at the walls, the carpet, her flat stomach. That was all over now, or so it seemed.

Mel was developing an incredible headache simply thinking about the whole situation. He heard the boy laugh and Sherry looked over her shoulder to beam at Mel. To see her with such joy, with such relief on her face, pained Mel. This is what he had made the deal for, to see her like this, to finally suck out all the tension from the air in their lives, thinking her peace would naturally transfer to him, but it hadn't.

“Come sit with us,” said Sherry.

“I’ve got a headache,” said Mel. “I think I’m going upstairs.”

A week passed since the ordeal at Wal-Mart, and the turmoil in Mel’s head only grew stronger. Sherry decided to quit her job so she could stay at home with the boy full-time. At first, Mel had tried to dissuade her. In his mind, he felt the situation with the boy was only temporary, and he didn’t want Sherry to make any rash decisions that could affect her future. But after thinking about it for awhile, he realized either he or Sherry would have to stay home with the boy. He couldn’t risk dumping it on some unsuspecting babysitter, only to come home and find the poor wretch murdered and the boy crawling around with a human heart clenched in its teeth.

On top of this, Sherry’s behavior continued to unnerve Mel. At times she would be distant, completely ignoring Mel while totally enraptured by the child, and on other occasions she’d talk at Mel nonstop, having a one-way conversation as if she were high on meth or something, saying things like, “God, isn’t he the cutest little bugger? You should see him in this baby blue footy outfit with the Care Bears on the front, it’s so adorable. It almost makes want to squeeze him so hard there’s nothing left. Of course, I couldn’t do that because I love him so much, but you know what I mean, right? Yeah, you know what I mean. Oh, maybe I should put him in the red T-shirt and the little baby jeans...” and so on.

Mel desperately wanted to talk to someone about the shitstorm he had gotten himself into, but he was sure everyone would think he was crazy. Instead of the boy being secreted away to some laboratory, he would be the one locked up a nuthouse while white coats pumped him full of sedatives. Regardless, he called his buddy Pete, hoping to meet for dinner.

Pete and Mel used to work at the same law firm out on the Beltline near 28th street a few years back. Pete was still single, and could easily have been described as a man-whore. When he wasn't laboring over some case involving intellectual property rights, he was sipping drinks at ritzy bars in the city while wearing over-priced black suits with gaudy ties, hitting on anything resembling a female. Despite his lack of discretion when it came to sex, he had a penchant for dispensing oddball wisdom at times, and it was the kind of stuff that made sense to Mel.

"This boy is going to kill me," said Mel. He snatched a bite from his plate of alfredo, finally able to eat comfortably for the first time since the boy took over their lives. He felt safe in the confines of the Italian restaurant, with the soft lighting and warm glow of candles at each table and the low din of patrons enjoying their meals all providing a mellow atmosphere. Mel was glad to be back amongst normal people without the boy in tow.

"I think you might be overreacting," said Pete, as he took a pull off of his vodka gimlet, smacking his lips.

"I'm serious," said Mel. "You can't possibly understand. This boy is a monster. He's changed everything. I can't sleep, I can't eat, I can't think. Shit..."

"What did you expect?" said Pete. "It's called being a parent."

"Then there's Sherry. She's changed, Pete. I don't recognize her anymore," said Mel.

"What? She not want to have sex?" said Pete.

"No, well yeah, but no, that's not it. She's different...sort of weird. Kind of like I'm not really there, you know?" said Mel. "Or if I am there, it's like it doesn't matter. Like it could be anyone and it wouldn't matter one way or the other, she'd be fine with it."

"Having a kid changes people. Happens all the time," said Pete.

"But still."

“Why do you think I got snipped? Sure, it hurts like hell for a few days, but after that, I got one less thing to worry about. Bad enough with all that herpes floating around,” said Pete.

“I’m thinking about getting rid of it,” said Mel.

The idea had consumed Mel for days. He couldn’t possibly let this go on any longer. Sherry was being deceived by himself and the boy, and the guilt had felt like a woodpecker perpetually drilling at his brain—tap,tap,tap-tap-tap. It never seemed to end. Everywhere he looked, he saw visions of the boy and Sherry together. She’d be holding the child to her breast, cradling it gently, or giving it a bath in the sink, humming a soft tune. Other times, he’d see her with the boy years in the future, pushing him on a swing-set or playing with monster trucks in the sandbox up at the elementary school playground. In every vision, Sherry was absolutely content. She was wholly peaceful and right with the world, as if raising a child was both her sole purpose and sole desire in life. And every time he saw one of these images, he felt like he was being attacked.

“Sherry would never forgive you,” said Pete.

“Even if it’s for her own good?” asked Mel.

“Since when did you become the judge on that?” said Pete. He grinned wryly.

“You are a bastard and a whore,” said Mel.

“I can’t help it,” said Pete, shrugging as he took another pull from his drink. He lit a cigarette. “Vodka gives me great clarity. You should try it.”

The next day, Mel was sitting in his recliner in the living room, trying to occupy himself, flipping through channels on TV. He pressed the button so fast he barely got a glimpse of one channel before he was on to the next. He repeated this ten times and was half way through the

eleventh rotation when Sherry came in to the room, the boy in one arm and the remnants of Can't-Stop-Laughing Larry in the other.

Last night, after he had come home from dinner with Pete, Sherry had wanted to take a shower, so Mel was left to tend to the child. Having just eaten, the boy had burped and a stream of fire escaped his mouth, bathing Can't-Stop-Laughing Larry with a blinding flame. Mel quickly grabbed the toy, hurried towards the kitchen, and opened the slider door, flinging the burning toy onto the concrete patio. His hand seared with pain, but more than anything, he wished Sherry had been there to see it all go down.

Now, she was standing in front of the TV and trying to get his attention, holding out a crispy Larry towards him. Mel directed his gaze towards his wife, her hands covered in soot from the blackened stuffed animal.

“You’re jealous, aren’t you?” said Sherry.

“We can’t keep the boy, Sherry,” said Mel. “It has to go.”

Mel watched as the boy’s eyes lit up bright red and the color seemed to spread to Sherry’s face. He had never seen such a nasty, defiant expression from his wife. At first, he thought the boy was somehow manipulating her, inciting his wife with some sort of demonic rage. But Mel knew this wasn’t the case. This was no supernatural power. It was completely human, hard-wired from time immemorial. He had invoked the sheer wrath of a mother whose child had been threatened.

“How can you say that?” she screamed. “You know I love this child. This is our baby. It’s ours.”

“You don’t understand,” said Mel. “I’m not happy, Sherry. Not at all.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Mel,” she said. “You know I wanted this. It’s what I’ve always wanted. And you know what? It’s even more than I’d imagined.”

“But Sherr-“

“All that shit we went through,” she said. “I can’t go through that again. I can’t get rid of Steven. He’s everything, Mel. He’s just...everything.” Sherry sat down on the couch and clutched her baby tightly, gently rocking the child as she peered in its eyes.

“That boy is not human, Sherry,” said Mel. He decided this charade had went on long enough. It seemed like his only recourse was to try and tell her the truth and hope she’d understand. “He’s the one who burned the toy. Look, see my hand. He did that. He spits flames. His shit has spiders, Sherry. Spiders. I mean, goddamn!”

“Stop,” she said.

“I made a deal with the devil for that child. But it was supposed to be a normal child, not this freak. That boy is the antichrist, Sherry! Do you hear me? The antichrist! We can’t raise the antichrist, Sherry!”

“Nice try, Mel,” she said. She laughed. “You actually expect me to believe that? You’re crazy.”

Mel considered the utter lunacy of what he was saying. He expected this response. But still, the way she spoke, the way she acted, it was all too much. It was as if the four years they had spent together had been completely erased from her memory, as if she suffered from some kind of child-wrought Alzheimer’s. It was like the first kiss they shared out on the pier at Lake Michigan, the tall, autumn waves crashing into the walls, spraying foam all over their clothes as the sun set, had never happened. Their year of dating before he proposed, going to the movies, forking out six bucks for a box of Junior Mints because she loved them, or how he always used

to open the car door for her, or pull out her chair, or how they used to go to their secret spot near the airport, where a small patch of woods met a chain-link fence, and make love, all spread out on a fleece blanket, while the planes took off and landed right above them, the alternating red and white lights illuminating their bodies, the sound deafening, but exhilarating—all of this had been evaporated by the presence of the child.

She used to be passionate and individualistic, even expressing some hesitation about getting married in the first place. It wasn't that she didn't love him, it was more her skepticism about marriage as a whole, its constraints and demands, and how it seemed like there were far more knots being slowly unraveled than tied in the world today.

And now, as Mel watched his wife and the boy, it was as if her personality had been completely dissolved and in its place was one of Raphael's renderings of Madonna holding the baby Jesus, the utter serenity pervading her features, a certain luminescence emanating from her very core as she beheld the little child in her arms, as blissful as she had ever been in her life.

Mel knew she wouldn't give up the child. He knew it the second he brought the boy home. What he hadn't known, what he had just come to realize, was that Sherry seemed more than ready to give up Mel without much thought if it meant keeping the kid, and this disturbed Mel even more than the idea of he and his wife raising Lucifer's son.

"What's wrong with you?" said Mel, almost in a whisper.

"Nothing is wrong, Mel," said Sherry. "I love this child. I love taking care of it. I love being a mother. It's what I was meant to do. I was put here on this planet, right here, right now, to raise this boy, and I don't even care if it kills me. You can try and scare me with your insane stories, but it's not going to work. This is *my* boy. *Mine.*"

With this, Sherry went upstairs, carrying the child and making as much noise as possible, leaving Mel sitting bewildered in his recliner.

Mel generally thought of himself as a good guy. He loved his wife, he held a good job, donated money to United Way. Sure, he ran a few red lights from time to time and fudged on his taxes a bit, but those were negligible offenses. He never pictured himself as a baby killer, so it was a bit of a shock as he watched from the top of the bridge on a Wednesday afternoon as the boy plummeted to the riverbed two-hundred feet below. He saw the arms outstretched, the light blue bib rustle violently, almost obscuring the boy's face. He saw the splash as the boy hit the water. Feeling a tinge of relief, he drove home, prepared to tell Sherry another lie about how the boy's biological parents had come to take him back. When he walked through the door, there was child, wrapped in Sherry's arms and giggling at her animated storytelling.

He began to question if any of this was actually real, but the very act of questioning your own sanity was supposed to indicate you were sane, or at least, that's what he heard many times before. So the next day, the day after the bridge incident, while Sherry was taking a nap, he decided to try drowning the boy in the bathtub, again with no results. The day after that, he grabbed the boy late at night, drove several miles north of town, where the suburbs slowly faded into rows of corn and the occasional farm house, and placed it in the center of a country road. He slammed his foot on the accelerator and aimed for the child, feeling the distinct bump as if he had run over a raccoon in his Ford Explorer. No good. It just squirmed and wriggled, its clothes stained from the dirt and gravel. He hit it again, going forward, reverse, forward. Nothing. He parked his front, driver-side tire right on top of it, and the damn tire actually went flat. Luckily,

he had a spare in the back, but changing it in the middle of the darkness with nothing but his headlights to aid him proved to be onerous and exhausting.

On Saturday, Sherry was up in the shower again, and Mel decided to give it one last try. He placed the child on the kitchen table, quickly brandished a steak knife and plunged it into the child's chest as deep as he possibly could, feeling the blade penetrate all the way through the body until its sharp tip abruptly reached the wooden surface beneath.

"What the fuck?" cried Pete, holding a bottle of vodka in one hand and a new plastic fire truck in the other. It appeared as though he had let himself in.

"Look, Pete," said Mel as he grabbed the knife handle and pulled it out. He gestured the clean blade toward his friend. It sparkled as if it had come straight from the dishwasher. "No blood. No wound."

A smile slowly crept onto Pete's face.

"Nice trick," said Pete. "That's one of those gag knives, isn't it?"

Mel repeated the process with the boy several times to demonstrate, in fact, that he was no magician, the knife was not a fake, and yes, the blade went in and out of the child's frame without any lasting effect. Pete looked unsettled to say the least, but he remained surprisingly calm considering the circumstances, though Mel thought he detected a hint of booze on his buddy's breath. Mel then related his attempts at disposing of the boy over the past few days.

"Why would you want to get rid of it?" said Pete. "This boy is incredible. Think of the possibilities."

"I don't know what else to do," said Mel. "I can't live like this."

Sherry walked into the room and saw Pete still holding the present for the boy. She hugged Pete, seemingly thankful for the gift he had brought, and chatted away for several minutes, then scooped up the child off the table and walked into the living room.

“You see,” said Mel, leading Pete out on to the patio. “She’s not herself. She doesn’t cry. Won’t talk about the past. You know, she used to have ambitions. Dreams. There’s no longing anymore. No me. No her. It’s just the boy.”

“That boy is amazing,” said Pete, shaking his head in disbelief.

Hoping to change his friend’s assumption, Mel began to tell Pete all about where the boy had actually come from. He told Pete about how Satan had appeared that night, looking and talking like your average used car salesman. Mel certainly didn’t believe the guy was anything but a crazy lunatic with a flat tire on the side of the road, that was, until the stranded motorist had somehow magically frozen Mel in place. He couldn’t even blink his eyes, which had quickly become blurry from lack of moisture. Satan had performed other various tricks like setting a dry bush on fire until Mel was fairly convinced he was looking at the bona fide real deal.

“Watch my boy for two days, just two whole days, and you and Sherry will get what you want,” he said. Rain poured down, streaking down the man’s face. Thunder and lightning burst every few moments.

“Why me?” asked Mel.

“Because, Mel, you just can’t find good day care in hell these days,” said the man. “Filled with assholes and pedophiles. I can’t trust any of them. You, on the other hand, you’re a good man. Your wife wants a baby. I can make that happen.”

“I can’t make a deal with the devil,” said Mel. “I’ll suffer for eternity.”

“Aw, don’t believe the hype. That’s the heavenly propaganda machine at its best. I don’t need to trick people to win their souls. I got too many coming in as it is. Don’t you watch the news? You guys are fucking nuts,” said the man.

“True,” said Mel.

“I know you’re tired, Mel. You’re tired of all this nonsense, right? The screaming and crying. The depression. The vaginal thermometers. Should I go on? I know what you’ve been thinking, how you hate to see her that way because you do love your wife, but you can’t relax with her like that. There’s all this tension and uncertainty and anxiety, and you start to blame yourself, but that’s not right, because it’s her fault. She’s the one with the problem. She’s the one who is not happy with the way things are. Right?”

Mel reflected on what the man said.

“Two days?” said Mel.

“Just two whole days,” said the man.

Mel finished by telling Pete about everything that had happened since he had brought the child home, like how after the two days had passed and Satan still hadn’t come to take his boy back, Mel had gotten worried and began to think he had been tricked. He told him about his trip to Wal-Mart and the mustard and the spiders and the fangs and about how they’d had the child for almost two weeks now and it appeared as though Satan had no intention of coming back.

“Man, you’re screwed,” said Pete. “But seriously though, you don’t know that it’s the antichrist. Maybe it’s the antichrist’s younger brother. You don’t know. You’ll never know. Look at it this way, even if it is the antichrist, at least we’ll be old by the time the world ends. Heck, he’ll be doing us a favor.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it,” said Mel. They sat in silence on the patio while dusk settled in. The sound of grasshoppers reverberated in the area. A slight breeze kicked up, bringing a chill to an otherwise warm summer evening.

“Well, it sounds like the boy is here to stay,” said Pete.

“What about Sherry?” said Mel.

“What about her?” said Pete.

“She won’t listen,” said Mel.

“So what?” said Pete. “It’s what she wants.”

“Then what about me?” said Mel.

Two days had passed since the bungled experiment with a steak knife. Twice yesterday and once today, Mel had his bags packed and was behind the wheel of his Explorer, ready to leave Sherry and the boy, maybe stay over at Pete’s for awhile. But he couldn’t manage to turn the key and start the car. He would wait for thirty minutes, maybe an hour, and then trudge back into the house, his rolling luggage trailing behind him, and look at Sherry feeling disgraced. Relief filled her eyes each time, and he thought he had even seen a few tears welling.

“It’s hot out there,” said Mel, standing by the window in the kitchen, sweat still trickling down the sides of his face from sitting in the car, while Sherry was in the other room with the boy.

“Why don’t you make us a couple of mojitos,” said Sherry.

Mel mixed up the drinks and brought them into the living room. Sherry was admiring the boy as it slept, his seeming peacefulness, and for a moment, Mel shared his wife’s feelings as he handed her the drink. He sat down on the floor next to her. They beheld the sleeping boy in

silence, occasionally taking sips through the straws in their glasses, until Sherry finally spoke, her gaze still focused on the child.

“You could be happy, you know?” said Sherry. “It won’t be the same, but you might like it.”

“Maybe,” said Mel.

“I’d rather not do it by myself,” said Sherry. “That was never the plan.”

“I know,” said Mel.

Near the door, Mel’s bags were still packed and ready to go, but for now, he didn’t seem to notice them. As his wife turned her eyes towards him, all Mel could think about was how refreshing his drink tasted and how sweet Sherry’s perfume smelled in the heat of a mid-afternoon in July.

The Percolator

On the eve of his grandpa's death, Lewis retrieved the percolator from a safe in the bedroom closet he had never known existed. Lewis, at 18 years of age, had no idea what a percolator was, and his grandpa Maxwell explained in labored breaths that the percolator resembled a metallic pitcher. After some rummaging, and several attempts at the combination, Lewis managed to find the thing and brought it to his grandpa's bedside. The percolator looked like an antique, its surface tarnished and worn. He extended it to Maxwell, who cupped the bottom as gently as he could with one shaky hand, the other clutching the curved handle on the side.

“Ah, yes, that’s it,” said Maxwell. “That’s it. Everybody out. I need to speak to Lewis alone.”

Lewis turned to his family gathered in the room, not quite sure what to make of the request. His mother and aunt were there, and so were his younger twin sisters, and his girlfriend, Monica.

“You okay, Daddy?” asked Lewis’s mother, Lenora.

“I’m fine, fine, dear, just fine,” Maxwell said.

Lewis’s family shuffled out of the room, leaving Lewis alone with Maxwell, the old man propped up in his bed, still holding the percolator. Lewis stood tentatively, not quite sure what to make of his grandpa’s request. Here was a man who had marched with Dr. King in Birmingham, who was awarded the Silver Cross after storming a hedgerow filled with VC lying in ambush, a man who with his bare hands had disarmed an armed convenience store robber not once, but twice. He was also a man who had turned to drink for the last two decades of his life, grew surly, bitter, diabetic, a man who preferred his own company, and rarely gave Lewis or anyone else much thought at all. His grandpa’s gentle tone surprised Lewis. He figured his grandpa must have known somehow the end was near.

“You always were a little bastard,” said Maxwell. He then wheezed for a good fifteen seconds while Lewis waited patiently, thinking the feeling was mutual. The room was dimly lit and cramped, unchanged for as long as Lewis could remember. Thick pea-green drapes hung from the windows, matching the shag carpet beneath his feet, carpet which had swallowed countless Lego pieces over the years. This was the last place he wanted to be, huddled over the bedside of a dying man, his study-date with Monica at her place interrupted when his mother called him and said he’d better get over here as soon as he could, it looks like tonight. “But, you

are the man of the family now, what with your daddy in the ground and all, and in this family, we have a tradition.”

“Tradition?” said Lewis.

“You see, my daddy never gave me a good goddamn thing in his life,” said Maxwell, “except this thing here.”

“And?” said Lewis.

“He got it from his daddy, who got it from his daddy, who got it from his daddy, and so on, all the way down the line back to the man who invented the damn thing, Count Rumford,” said Maxwell.

“That old, huh,” said Lewis, his interest in Maxwell’s words reminiscent of back when his grandpa would tell stories that would freeze folks like statues, back before his drinking got out of control. Lewis appreciated the flash of Maxwell’s old form, and the feeling of importance—of history—that the antique possessed. He might be young, but he had respect for the past, and even for his grandpa, shortcomings and all.

So what’s it for?” Lewis asked.

Maxwell’s lips turned up, his cheek folds subsiding to a rascal’s grin. “Didn’t teach you about these in school, did they?” Maxwell paused, still grinning while he focused his gaze upon the percolator resting in his lap. “Boy, this here treasure is the most important coffee maker ever made.” Maxwell then removed the lid and began to explain how it worked as Lewis scooted his chair closer to the bed, leaning in as his grandpa pulled out the spreader plate and filter, pointing out how the coffee grounds rested on top of the filter, and the spreader plate sat on top of the grounds. The spreader plate reminded Lewis of those mini-tabletops they used to put in the center of a large pizza so it wouldn’t get smushed by the box, only the plate had little slits in

it, much like the filter. Maxwell showed him how hot water at the bottom of the percolator would rise up the skinny tube in the center and shoot out little holes at the top of the tube, then land on the spreader plate that would then distribute the water evenly onto the grounds, which would then drop through the filter and back to the bottom of the percolator, and this cycle would repeat continuously until the coffee was finished. While Maxwell was teaching in earnest, Lewis noticed how the very act seemed to reinvigorate his grandpa, almost like he wasn't sick anymore.

Maxwell paused, and his features turned somber. "But you see, this one is different than the rest. It's special. It's got...powers," he said. "Grave powers. They say whoever drinks coffee brewed by this percolator receives God's sight."

Lewis leaned back from his grandpa and narrowed his eyes, wondering if delirium had set in, a symptom of the pneumonia which was likely getting worse by the hour. While his grandpa was a mean, old curmudgeon, and a drunkard, he never displayed any signs of dementia or senility.

"Quit playing with me," said Lewis, as if he was talking to a friend at school, and not the soon-to-be deceased patriarch of his family.

"I'm serious," said Maxwell.

"So what's God's sight then, some old man slang term for a hard-on?" said Lewis.

"You fucking listen to me, boy," said Maxwell. "This ain't no joke. You drink from this percolator, you will know your true self."

Lewis retreated in his chair, startled by his grandpa's outburst. "How is that a bad thing?" he said.

"That depends on the individual. Some folks can handle it, others can't. The ones that can't, well...let's just say it's best to stay ignorant," said Maxwell. "You mustn't sell it, and you

mustn't drink from it. You find a safe place, and you forget about it until it's time to give it to your son, or your grandson, and you tell him the same things I'm telling you now. That's the tradition. You remember what I told you, and swear on your mother's life."

"Good story, grandpa," said Lewis. "Just like the old days—"

"You fucking swear, goddamnit," screamed Maxwell, as much as his worn-out frame could muster.

"All right, if it makes you happy, I swear on my mother's grave," said Lewis, thinking, in the end, if it meant that much to his grandpa, he'd do it.

Hours later, after the rest of the family had rejoined them at Maxwell's bedside, his grandpa's breaths slowed, then stopped.

At the funeral, which ended up being held in a small parlor only a few blocks away from their apartment complex, Lewis bumped into a few cousins he had only met once or twice before while his girlfriend Monica stood close by.

"Well look here," they'd said, their eyes focused on Monica as they spoke to him, "my man has found himself a *real* stunner," and Lewis could hear the mix of jealousy and scorn in their voice, which made him both slightly uncomfortable, and proud as hell. "Damn straight they're jealous," he thought, and he'd give them the spiel about how he met Monica last year at school, and how they'd both be graduating this spring, and while he was still waiting to hear back, she had already been accepted to the University of Texas at Austin, pre-law, preparing to follow in her father's footsteps, and every time Monica would follow it up with some one-liner about "crusading for justice and sticking it to the man...*in the ass!*" which, while seemingly crude, struck just the right chord with his extended family, and they'd all say she's a keeper, and

all the ladies would ask when he was planning on putting a ring on it. That was the thing about Monica, she could ingratiate herself stuck inside a cage with a pride of hungry lions.

After some mingling, everyone was seated and Lewis's mother performed the eulogy, recalling how her father always loved to brag about being a man of the community, what with those *two* separate occasions of breaking up robberies, but what he often left out was that on one of those occasions, he was so drunk, he didn't even realize the store was being robbed. He had come through the door with his blinders on, she said. All he could see was the cashier, a Pakistani man, and the pints of Wild Turkey behind the register. While the man in the ski mask was pointing a revolver in his face, Maxwell accidentally stumbled into him, slurring as he said, "A pint of Turkey, you know I'm good for it," and the robber took great offense. Couldn't this old man see there was a stick-up in progress? So the robber had trained the gun on Maxwell, screaming, "Back the fuck up," and before he had time to react, Maxwell cold-cocked the guy with a haymaker to the chin, and that was that, and the Pakistani man tossed Maxwell his whiskey, and Maxwell sat down right there, right on the robber's chest, taking drags from the bottle until the police arrived, but by then he was blacked out and ended up beating on one of the cops too after the cop had asked the wrong question. Thankfully, the guy decided not to press charges, Maxwell being a hero and all. This story, his mother said, was emblematic of her father.

As the service ended, a man approached Lewis and Monica, and for a moment Lewis thought his grandpa had come back from the dead. A few things were different: this man walked with a cane, had a full white beard, and was almost entirely bald. Otherwise, it looked just like Maxwell.

"Ain't you going to say hello?" said the man.

“I’m sorry,” said Lewis, “you look just like him.”

Lewis extended his hand with caution, as if the man were actually a snake poised to strike. The man introduced himself as Uncle Sticks. The name, he said, was because of the cane, if you couldn’t figure it out. Got hit chasing a long, fly ball by a garbage truck when he was eight.

“Almost killed me,” said Sticks.

“Shouldn’t it just be Stick? It’s not like you’re on crutches,” said Lewis.

Sticks inched closer and scanned the immediate vicinity before speaking, as if he were ready to share a secret. “Since there’s a lady present,” said Sticks, “let’s just say my other stick is tucked away, but it’s just as long,” and he cackled, then wheezed. While Lewis and Monica waited for him to recover, Lewis’s mother approached from across the room, scowling.

“Sticks, what are you doing here?” his mother said. Lewis could tell she was not happy. She was using her oh shit voice, the same one Lewis would always hear when he was younger and he’d accidentally made one of his sister’s cry. There were times he could actually feel his asshole pucker at the sound of it. He always thought it had something to do with the pitch.

“Easy now, Lenora,” said Sticks. “I’m here to pay my respects, same as you.” He cleared his throat.

“You ain’t respected a damn thing in your whole life, Sticks. Why start now?” she said.

Lewis exchanged glances with Monica, feeling as though they were caught in the middle of a sparring match.

“I got my reasons,” said Sticks, a grin now visible through his beard. “He was my brother after all.”

“Then say your goodbyes and move on,” said Lenora, turning her attention to Lewis and Monica. “Come now. Hang around this rat long enough and you’re bound to get dirty.”

As she was ushering the pair away, Sticks said, “Hold on now, Lenora. I got words with the boy.”

Lewis’s mother stared first at Sticks, then at him, expressing disapproval of the situation, until she finally beckoned Monica, and the two walked off, Lenora whispering something in his girlfriend’s ear. This surprised Lewis. He expected his mother to be more forceful, to command him to follow and not speak with this man. Lewis wondered if his grandpa’s death had somehow elevated his stature in the family. Wasn’t that what his grandpa had been saying, after all? He was the man of the family now?

“She always was a tough one,” said Sticks. “Just like her daddy.”

“I’m listening,” said Lewis, emboldened by his mother’s increased trust in him.

Sticks laughed. “You got a ways to go, my boy. Ways to go. But you’re trying. That’s good. Now, first let me apologize for us meeting here like this at Maxwell’s funeral. He and I had a falling out years ago, and he didn’t want me hanging around none. But that’s the past, and he’s gone now, and I’m here. Thing is, Maxwell had something of mine, and I have reason to believe he’s given it to you. An antique coffee maker? You know anything about that, son?”

“An antique coffee maker?” said Lewis. “Nah, can’t say that I do.”

Sticks leaned in so close, Lewis could feel his breath. He could smell the Listerine. A pang of fear surged through him, and he became uneasy, like the feeling he’d get when thinking about looking over the edge of a tall building.

“It’s okay to be afraid,” said Sticks. “That antique ain’t no toy.”

Lewis looked Sticks in the eyes, and with as much conviction as he could muster, he said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about old man.” Experience had taught Lewis he was a decent liar, though every time he still felt like people could see right through him, especially Sticks, who seemed to know things he shouldn’t. Like how in the fuck did Sticks know he had the percolator? “Listen,” said Lewis, “I got to run. It was nice meeting you.”

Not long after Lewis had turned and started to walk off, he could hear Sticks call out, “I’ll be seeing you.” Lewis wanted nothing more than to get his grandpa in the ground, and go make love to Monica, twice, three times even.

In the days following the funeral, uncertainty consumed Lewis, nothing but questions on all fronts. His thoughts often shifted between the percolator, the weird encounter with Sticks, and what the future would hold post-graduation. Monica had already received her acceptance letter. Where was his? Every day he checked the mail, he was part hope, part dread. He’d open the mail slot with his eyes closed, hang there for a beat, then open, as if this small gesture might increase his chances of joining her down in Austin. Really though, the routine helped him cope, if only a little, but still, no letter, and he’d tell himself, “Maybe tomorrow,” and he’d send her a dejected text as he trudged upstairs to the apartment, thankful each time for the clipped, but reassuring response. “Don’t worry, it’ll come.” “Just a matter of time.” “You fuck like a rockstar.” That last one was her trying to be funny, and it made Lewis smile. At least there’s that, he thought.

On one particular evening, his mother had to work second shift at the hospital, which left Lewis to watch his younger sisters, something Lewis didn’t mind at all. With his mother gone, he could have Monica come over and they could actually hang out in his room with the door

closed and not worry about anyone listening too closely on the other side. He had already come to an arrangement with his sisters months ago: behave and keep your mouth shut in exchange for rides to the mall. His mother never learned to drive, relying on the bus to get to work, which meant his beat-up Caprice purchased for a thousand dollars at the auto auction was a nice bargaining chip.

With all the craziness lately, Lewis decided to break out the bottle of Pinot Grigio one of his older coworkers had bought for him. He had initially planned on saving it for graduation, but he figured he could always get another. His sisters Hayleigh and Ronda spotted him trying to sneak the bottle from his room into the kitchen freezer to chill and demanded payment.

“All right, two weeks in a row to the mall,” said Lewis, as he tucked the bottle on top of an ice cube tray.

“No way,” said Hayleigh.

“No sir,” said Ronda.

“Alcohol is extra. You know that killed grandpa Maxwell,” said Hayleigh.

“Why you even touching that stuff?” said Ronda.

“Three weeks,” said Lewis. Everyone was shaking him down these days. First Sticks, now his sisters.

“You know, we do get hungry at the mall,” said Hayleigh.

“And we’re still growing. Need to eat,” said Ronda.

“Fine. Ten bucks each as well. Final offer,” said Lewis.

“Deal,” they replied, and went back to the couch in the living room.

When Monica arrived an hour later, Lewis noticed her breathing was slightly elevated, as it almost always was whenever she visited. But Monica wasn’t out of shape; rather, she had a

habit of charging up the stairs the same way a football player might put time in on the field's bleachers, fast and with attention to rhythm. While not an all-star, Monica herself was a decent athlete, four years of basketball and cross country respectively. Lewis liked going to her games when he didn't have to work. She wasn't much of a scorer, but she had one hell of a motor, and tough too, to the point where she often was responsible for defending the opposing teams' best player, and she'd stick to that unfortunate girl with speed and tenacity. When she wasn't swiping for the ball, her arms would constantly be in motion, like the hands of a possessed clock moving every which way, right at three, left at twelve, then left at nine, then left at ten, right at five, all depending upon the direction of the other player's gaze. Lewis himself was not really an athlete, and didn't even care much for sports, but watching her filled him with equal parts pride and admiration. This girl was not intimidated by anyone or anything, a quality which Lewis loved the most about her precisely because he couldn't say the same of himself, though he wished he could.

“Hey, Lew. Hey ladies,” said Monica.

“Hey,” said both sisters in unison. They liked Monica despite the fact that she was white, or perhaps because of it. Lewis couldn't say for sure. Of course, none of his previous girlfriends insisted on bringing the sisters along when they'd go to see a movie like Monica had. He soon discovered the three girls shared a passion for slasher films, and on the few occasions they'd let the girls tag along, after the movie was over, they'd catch dinner at IHOP, and the three of them would be reenacting their favorite parts in detail, hollering and letting loose while Lewis would remain mostly silent, shaking his head and smiling whenever they'd get too wild. By the time they'd leave, their table was a disaster, hash browns and ketchup everywhere, which always made Lewis feel a little guilty and he'd end up leaving an extra tip for the inconvenience.

“Y’all knocking out your homework?” said Monica, and the sisters both said yeah.

“C’mon,” said Lewis, motioning for Monica to follow, then taking her hand into his and leading her through the living room towards his bedroom. Once inside, he carefully closed the door, then directed her towards the bottle of wine and two glasses he had sitting on the desk.

“Care for some wine?” he said.

“Wow,” said Monica. “What’s the occasion?”

“You and me behind closed doors,” said Lewis. “Here, let me pour you a glass.”

The wine and small talk eventually progressed into disrobing and crawling into bed. Afterwards, as they clutched each other, still basking, Monica asked about the strange man they had bumped into at the funeral. What was it he wanted?

At this point, Lewis hesitated. Part of him thought he needed to keep it all a secret and not tell anyone. But part of him wanted to tell anybody who was willing to listen. It had been hard enough keeping silent since the funeral, and the only reason he had managed to do so was because Lewis knew telling anyone would be taking a position, a position which may very well have defied his grandpa’s instructions, if not literally, at least in spirit. By staying silent till now, he was still on the fence, still not committed to keeping it quiet for the long run, but only until he could decide one way or the other. The man might have had his flaws, but Lewis gave his word. The more he thought about the conversation, however, the more he talked himself into confiding in Monica. Post-coital bliss and a glass of Pinot removed whatever inhibitions he had left.

Lewis then told Monica everything that happened, every possible detail he could remember, and he did his best to remain even-keeled and hide his incredulity. He didn’t want to immediately predispose her to a skeptical position, partly because he wasn’t sure what to make of it himself, and partly not to look like a lunatic retelling an old man story about an antique

coffee maker granting God's sight, whatever that meant. As he spoke, he remained lying on his back in the bed, looking up at the ceiling, and whenever he hit a highlight he could feel Monica raise her chin from his chest and survey his face, trying to pick up on the very cues he strove to conceal, but she remained silent until he was finished.

"Why can't your family be more like mine," said Monica.

"I'm serious," said Lewis. He got up from his bed and retrieved the percolator from his closet where he stashed it in a toy box buried beneath a mound of old comic books and buckets of Legos, his only real hiding place in the apartment. The metal of the percolator felt cool against his skin, and goosebumps rose up on his arms. With both hands, he extended the artifact to Monica, his arms outstretched as if something had died inside it and he was trying to avoid the smell. Monica sat up, still naked, Lewis staring at her apple-sized breasts.

"Amazing," she said. "This could be like the holy fucking grail or something."

"Careful," said Lewis. He then showed her how it supposedly worked, giving her the same explanation Maxwell had the night he died. They sat next together on the bed, their thighs touching, and Lewis felt a sense of relief in no longer bearing the weight of the past week by himself. He felt closer to Monica than he ever had before, closer than the first time they made love, even closer than the night, still early in their relationship, his old Caprice broke down on I-35 as he was taking her home after a movie and he'd lost his phone while Monica's died just minutes before the car had slowly lost power and coasted to a standstill on the shoulder, almost like the devices had been running on the same battery, and they had to walk for miles to the next exit, each asking the other about their plans post-graduation, and while Lewis's were nothing more than a loose sketch, vague notions of college studying who knows what, Monica laid out an elaborate blueprint as traffic rushed by, first Texas, then law school, then criminal defense, a

house, preferably in the late-Craftsman mode, two or three kids, dogs and cats, etc., but she had to lay it out in pieces as each passing car put the conversation on pause, and they both laughed at the awful timing of the interruptions, and Lewis could recall the tinges of sadness he felt after each mile marker they passed reminded him they couldn't just keep on walking forever. Eventually, they'd come to the exit.

“You might want to think about a better hiding place,” she said.

About a week or so later while Lewis was working the dinner rush at Chick-fil-A, Sticks came calling. Lewis was in the back, his arms deep in dish water, whistling to himself, trying to keep his mind focused on the pots and pans when one of his bosses tapped him on the shoulder, saying he had a visitor. Lewis grinned as he dried his hands, thinking it was Monica stopping by to say hey, and then he suddenly felt like a tire that had just been popped and was slowly, but steadily leaking air as he saw that it was his great-uncle, and not the girl he loved.

Sticks approached the counter and said, “I'll take a chicken sandwich and a side of percolator.”

“Very funny,” said Lewis. “How'd you find out where I work? You following me?”

“I have my ways,” said Sticks. “Ready to hand it over yet?”

“You heard me the last time,” said Lewis, his heart starting to beat faster. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Sure you do, sure you do,” said Sticks, “and you want to know why? I *know* you know what I'm talking about because that little speech Maxwell gave you. You know, the one about ‘the tradition.’ Guess what? I got that speech too. Not long before my daddy passed. And you

want to know something else? Maxwell stole that damn thing from me twenty years ago. Bet you he didn't tell you that, did he? Naw, bet he left that part out."

Lewis felt like he was being watched, and sure enough, a few customers were looking over at them as they stood off to the side of one of the cash registers, and even his boss, the one that tapped him on his shoulder a minute ago, he was watching too. This made him more nervous, and he could feel himself losing his cool. It was easier to be cocky when no one else was looking.

He wondered if the story were true. His grandpa was a rough man, but he never knew him to be a thief. If anything, he was the opposite, honest to a fault and ready to tell you the mean truth, even if it stung.

"Listen," said Lewis. "I really got to get back to work. Unless you got anything else to say, I'll check you later." The old man's persistence made Lewis wonder just exactly how much the percolator was worth. Maxwell implied it had some value. Sticks was probably dead broke, or a con man, or both. What did his mother call him, a rat? Like a snitch? Nah, thought Lewis, a rat could be a con, too. Lewis wanted nothing more than for Sticks to get out of his sight.

"So it's like that, huh?" said Sticks, who looked down at his cane, then started wagging it side-to-side, like an upside-down metronome. He shifted his gaze back to Lewis. "I see how it is, boy. Let me say this: I only got so much time, and I ain't going away, so you know, and I know, the best way to play this is to give me the antique."

"Goodbye, old man," said Lewis, and he turned his back on Sticks for the second time, feeling even more weirded out than the first. Minutes later, he asked one his coworkers in the kitchen to go out and double-check to make sure his visitor had taken off, which he had, and Lewis was finally able to breathe. It wasn't the first time he'd been hounded. Growing up, he'd

had his new shoes taken, his jackets, his backpacks, anything of value really, all part of the price he paid for being a loner and somewhat bookish. His mother had to sew hidden pockets inside the bands of his boxers just so he could carry a few dollars. It wasn't until he hit fourteen and went through a growth spurt that he started on the path of shedding his victimhood, eating everything in sight and mustering a good hundred push-ups and sit-ups each morning when he rolled out of bed. Even with his increased size, the bullying didn't officially come to an end until he was jumped crossing through the same vacant lot he crossed everyday on his way home from school by three neighborhood kids with nothing better to do, and in the scuffle Lewis, after being knocked down, rose up with a section of chain-link fence post and swung wildly, uncorking years of humiliation into each blow, until it was over and one of his assailant's, Tyrell, who lived just down the block, was lying on the ground, his kneecap shattered, the low-hanging platinum chain he wore around his neck partially touching the rough asphalt and gleaming in the afternoon sun.

His would-be attacker was sobbing hysterically, left alone after his boys had deserted him, and Lewis stood there, shocked at the damage he had wrought and the realization that within in an instant, he was capable of blind, unchecked violence.

But this was different. Sticks wasn't some corner boy looking for props. He had a way about him, an aura of menace, and he knew things he shouldn't, which scared the hell out of Lewis. Sticks was also his grandpa Maxwell's brother, and if he was anything like his grandpa, the man was not to be crossed. Lewis couldn't decide what was more unsettling: Sticks lurking in the shadows, or the thought of his grandpa's ghost, with enough bile to curse an army, just waiting for him to forsake his promise and relinquish the percolator. He could only imagine what kind of creative suffering Maxwell could unleash without his old bones holding him back.

The next day, as Lewis shuffled out of his building, towards his car and then off to school, he spotted shards of glass in between his vehicle and the Town Car parked next to him. He sighed, wondering why it was so goddamn hard for the winos to properly dispose of their empties. It wasn't until he was straddling the shards, trying to avoid getting any lodged within the soles of his shoes, that he realized his driver's side window had been busted out. "Motherfuck," he said. Had to be Sticks, he thought. Just had to be. He opened the door and surveyed the interior. Besides some broken glass on the seats and floorboards, everything looked normal. Lewis knew better than to keep anything of real value in his car. People in his neighborhood smashed out windows just because they liked the sound of it.

After doing the best he could at sweeping out the shards of glass with his jacket, Lewis figured the best course of action was simply to head to school. What good would a police report do, assuming they'd actually send a car out? He popped his key in and cranked it, waiting to hear the familiar chug give way to drone, but he heard nothing. He tried it again, and again. Dead battery, he wondered? He roared with exasperation, his eyes closed and his palms at his temples like he was some kind of spiritualist, when he felt something tickling his knee. He opened his eyes and looked down, and there were several different colored wires dangling from underneath the steering column, each of them snipped. Scouring his car for the percolator was one thing, but completely disabling it? The message was clear: Sticks had declared war.

Thankfully Monica was still en route to school, and though it was well out of her way, she was able to swing by and grab him, and as she drove, he told her about the car, and she muttered something about goddamn geriatric motherfucker. She could see his frustration at having lost his only means of transportation, and when they were stopped at a light, she reached over and cupped his cheek with her hand, her eyes filled with sympathy. "I'm sorry, babe."

“I’m going to get that bastard,” he said.

“At least we moved it, huh?” she said, in reference to this past Saturday when the two of them loaded up the percolator in his trunk and cruised around the heart of the city, making left and right turns at random at Lewis’s insistence to make sure they weren’t being followed before heading to a self-storage place off Penn, a couple miles from his apartment. They’d considered striking out on I-40, past Tinker, even past the casino, taking one of the rural exits and burying it in some random field, but then they’d have to dig a hole, and though it was Spring, the nights were still cold and the ground would be firm, and wouldn’t it be just their luck if some curious wheat farmer spied the fresh dirt and decided to find out what was underneath? No, self-storage was the best option, even if Lewis had to dip into his meager Chick-fil-A savings, money intended for his freshman year at college.

While they made sure no one was following him, Monica told him about the research she had done on the percolator a couple of nights before, how his grandpa Maxwell’s story about Count Rumsford and all that was true, well, sort of. Wikipedia had detailed the history of the invention, but it didn’t mention anything about magical powers or the holy grail or whatever.

“But still,” said Monica. “Crazy, right?”

“I doubt he’d make it up,” said Lewis.

It was while they were at the counter, the self-storage clerk keying in the fake name Lewis had given him (just in case), when Monica told him she’d gotten another acceptance letter, this time from Columbia.

“New York City,” she said. “I never really considered it an option, you know, but I thought I’d try anyway, just on a whim. I mean, they have one of the best law schools in the country.”

“Wow, New York City,” said Lewis. “That’s great.” And suddenly, the future he’d been envisioning for months now: the two of them making love night after night in his dorm, or her dorm, floating through Austin and intro classes, late nights with the two of them at the undergrad library, black coffee in hand, traipsing through the pristine lawns, maybe toss a frisbee around on occasion when it was nice out, all of that seemed to narrow a bit, not that it was gone, but just that it moved further away.

“How come you didn’t tell me?” he asked.

“Almost all set here,” said the clerk. “Looks like you’ll have unit 62. Let me go grab the key.”

“I honestly didn’t think I’d ever get in,” she said. “And it’s not like I’m going for sure or anything. Texas is still the plan, for now. It’s just an option I wasn’t expecting. I thought you’d be impressed.”

“I’m blown away,” said Lewis, and by then the clerk had returned with a couple of keys, which, along with some paperwork, he slid across the counter to Lewis.

“Your private storage is ready to go,” said the clerk.

Lewis then slid one of the keys in Monica’s direction, who quickly snatched it and placed it inside her purse.

Now with his car disabled, Lewis had no transportation at all. Throughout the day, his thoughts drifted while in class to exacting revenge on Sticks, wondering whether their dispute would end in trading blows, and whether, in this particular situation, he would be justified in beating up an old man. Maybe it would be easier to just give him the damn thing, he wondered. At what point was keeping the promise he made to his dying grandpa—a promise, let’s be honest here, almost anyone else in his position would have made as well, because are you really going

to say no to your grandpa on his deathbed?—worth endangering himself and the people he loved? The man obviously was not going to stop until he got what he wanted, and who knows what he was capable of. No, Lewis thought, sometimes plans change. Promises can't always be kept.

Later that night, after Monica had dropped him off at his apartment, his mother asked him about the car as soon as he walked through the door. It hadn't occurred to him to think about what he was going to say. For a moment, he considered telling her everything, but in the end, he decided it was best not to give her cause for concern. She had enough to worry about, what with her job and his sisters and her daddy having died not even two weeks back.

“Some wannabe thug thought he'd try and hotwire it,” he said, which for all he knew, could have been Sticks's intent, though he doubted it. “Apparently, he needs more practice.”

“I'm sorry, Lew,” shaking her head at his misfortune. She was hovering over the stove, stirring spaghetti sauce. She then put the ladle down, and he could see her reach up to one small cabinets above the stove, one of her “secret” stashes, and when he returned from dropping his backpack and jacket in his bedroom, she came straight for him and extended her hand with several twenties for him to take.

“I doubt it will be enough, but I want you have it,” she said.

“Ma, it's okay, I got it,” he said. “I've been saving.”

“Oh, please, just take it,” she said. “Can't be saving that much making minimum wage. Besides, you ain't going to be around here much longer. Let me help while I still can.”

Lewis took the money, then hugged her.

After dinner, he sat down next to his mother on the couch, a book in her hand. She grabbed her bookmark from the end table, marked her spot, then asked him what was up. That's when he asked her about Sticks, that man from the funeral, remember?, and why he, nor his sisters, never even knew he existed. She then explained that Sticks had been a gambler and a thief. He wasn't always bad, but along time ago, maybe twenty years ago or so, he'd lost big at the track, been losing big for months straight, already borrowed money from everyone he could. He was broke, and when Maxwell had refused to give him anymore money, Sticks tried stealing from him, his own brother, and apparently put a serious beating on him, enough to put Sticks in the hospital, and after that, Sticks never came around anymore, which was just fine with Maxwell. Last she heard he'd drifted out to California.

"What'd he say to you anyway? Did he ask you for money? Please tell me you didn't give him any," she said.

"Nah," said Lewis. "He just said I was the man of the family now. Something about me carrying on the family name."

"Whatever he's up to, it probably ain't good. Steer clear of him," she said.

Several days later, Lewis's acceptance later came in the mail. He tore open the envelope the second he recognized it, and as soon as he saw congratulations, he knew, and he fistpumped like Tiger Woods, and then he grabbed his phone, still standing in front of the mailbox, and fired off a text to Monica that simply said, "I'm in," and seconds later, she came back with "Fuck yeah!" and now, with letter in hand, the future of them in Austin felt as though it had returned and was now in reach, closer than it ever had been before. To hell with Columbia, he thought. We're going to fucking Austin!

His elation quickly subsided when he tried unlocking the deadbolt to his apartment and his fingers met no resistance. The door had not been locked, which in his family did not happen by accident. He opened the door slowly, not sure what to expect, and he called out to his mother and sisters, though he knew she was supposed to be at work, and they had drama practice after school. He checked all the rooms, saving his own for last, and everything looked normal, except he noticed his closet door had been left partially open, the same closet he had stashed the percolator in before he and Monica had moved it to self-storage.

Lewis wasn't sure what to think. Sticks had most likely broken in to look for the percolator, but why be so careful about it? Why not trash the place? He talked with Monica over the phone later that evening and raised the notion of calling the police. The man had broken into his apartment, the place where his mother and sisters slept for Christ's sake, but Lewis knew it would be a pointless exercise, assuming they believed his story about his great-uncle going through all the trouble of picking the lock to steal...nothing? Monica echoed as much, and they both decided the best course of action was no action at all. Lay low and don't do anything rash.

Weeks passed, and a sense of normalcy returned. Lewis managed to get his car fixed, though even with the money his mother had given him, he had to use a significant chunk of his savings. During the evening, if he wasn't finishing homework, he was applying for every scholarship he could find, anything to help offset the costs of out-of-state tuition he'd be paying. His grades were solid, and his fingers were crossed. With the money his mother had saved from his father's death years ago, it looked like it might be just enough to scrape by, at least for a year, maybe two, which would give him more time to apply for even more scholarships.

There were times when Lewis was coming back from school or heading to work when he swore he saw Sticks out of the corner of his eye, but every time he'd pull a double-take, it wasn't

Sticks, just some panhandler or old man on his way back from the convenience store. Maybe he had given up, thought Lewis on one of these occasions.

As time passed, and the last day of school drew closer, Lewis felt like the situation with the percolator needed to be resolved. He couldn't afford to let it sit in storage forever, especially now that he was heading to Austin. On the eve of the last day of school, Lewis didn't have to work, so he and Monica went out for dinner. He brought it up with her as they sat across from each other.

"Your grandfather gave it to you for a reason," she said.

"What reason? To make my life a living hell?" said Lewis.

Monica shrugged, but remained silent.

"I know I promised and all, but I didn't ask for this, you know?" said Lewis

"Oh, I think I know," said Monica. "Like you were never given a choice in the matter and now you're just expected deal with it?"

"Exactly," said Lewis.

"You ever wonder what it would be like to just say fuck it? You know, do your own thing?" said Monica.

Similar thoughts had entered his mind. Safeguarding the percolator seemed more of a hassle than it was worth. Where would it end? All he had to do was track down Sticks, give him the percolator and be done with it.

The next morning, after first period let out, Monica was nowhere to be found. He texted her to find out what was up, and his phone buzzed a few minutes later, "I'm sick," she replied. Sick on the last day of school, he thought. Brutal. Lewis debated it for awhile during second period and came to the conclusion, why not?, so he left at lunch, stopping at a Wal-mart to grab

some flowers and a couple of cans of chicken noodle soup, then headed to Monica's, hoping to surprise her.

As he pulled into her driveway, he noticed in his rear view mirror a brown El Camino parked directly across the street. He'd been to her place countless times and had never seen the vehicle before. The car appeared to be empty. On a hunch, Lewis crossed the street and peered inside, his hands cupped above his eyebrows to shield the sunlight, and there was Sticks, his body splayed out across the front seat, trying to avoid being seen. Lewis rapped on the window with his knuckles, but Sticks remained motionless. Motherfucker is pretending to be sleeping, Lewis thought, and he kept on knocking, but no response, until eventually he yelled he was going to break the window, you know, payback and all, and that was enough to coax Sticks upright and out of the car, which kind of surprised Lewis. He figured Sticks might just try and drive off, but instead he hobbled around the front of the car, cane in hand, and perched on the front bumper.

"I'm too old for this shit," said Sticks.

Lewis stared at Sticks, not sure what to say. Here was the man that had stalked him for the better part of three months, violated his grandpa's funeral, accosted him at work, broke into his car and apartment, and the bastard had the gall to act like it was Lewis's fault, like he was the problem. Lewis's chest heaved, his nostrils dilated, and more than anything he felt the impulse to strike this man, to leave him bloody on the street. But he couldn't. More out of frustration than anger, he snatched Sticks's cane and whipped it like a boomerang. He could hear the whoosh, the cane finally landing in a front yard two lots down.

"Fuck you!" said Lewis.

“Okay, tough guy,” said Sticks. “That’s fine, you get mad, but just so you know, your lady friend is inside that house with the percolator as we speak.” He gestured towards Monica’s.

“Oh, bullshit,” said Lewis, almost reflexively, because after a moment of silence, he realized Sticks was telling the truth. Why else would he be here parked in front of her house, on the day—the last day of high school, no less—when she happened to be home sick from school?

“Why didn’t you stop her?” asked Lewis.

“What was I going to do, assault her?” said Sticks. “Beat her with my cane?”

“Just stay the hell away from us,” said Lewis. “Please.”

He turned towards her house when Sticks called out, “Son. Hold up.”

Sticks fished a receipt out of his wallet, wrote a number on the back, and handed it to Lewis. “When you’re ready for this to be over, you call me, anytime, day or night.”

Lewis grabbed the receipt, locking eyes with his great-uncle, and where once he had seen menace, now there was only concern, as if this man had actually cared about him, cared about his well-being.

Lewis sprinted towards her house, leaving Sticks to retrieve his cane. He used his key to get in the front door. She wasn’t anywhere to be seen. He headed towards the kitchen and noticed the percolator sitting atop the stainless steel stove. An empty coffee cup lay on the counter. Lewis lifted the lid on the percolator, fresh vapor pouring from inside. The coffee was still warm. Sticks was right. He charged out of the kitchen and upstairs, his turn to take them hard and fast, just as Monica would, and he found her in her room, startled by the surprise. Her room was a mess, clothes spread everywhere in different piles, a stack of empty luggage in one corner.

“Going somewhere?” asked Lewis.

“Africa. The Peace Corps. Leaving sometime in a week or two, so I figured I better get started on packing,” she said. She dropped the blouses she had in her hands, stepped over to where he stood in the doorway, and kissed him in a way he had never felt before, as if the tracing of her tongue was saying I love you, I’m sorry. She then, without a word, turned back to her clothes, putting the two blouses in separate piles, one to keep, and one to take.

Lewis watched her in silence, for how long he couldn’t say, then stumbled back down the stairs towards the kitchen, his head spinning. He pulled the receipt Sticks had given him from inside his pocket, then dialed the number. When he recognized the man’s voice on the other end, he said, “It works, doesn’t it?”

“Of course it works,” said Sticks. “You think your grandpa was always a drunken, violent asshole? I tried to warn you. I’m still outside. Be there in a second.”

Lewis hung up the phone, headed back to the front door, then locked it. Returning to the kitchen, he grabbed the empty cup, then the percolator, pouring its contents inside. He stared at the coffee, the black liquid’s surface trembling, his other hand clenched in a fist, anxious, his biceps twitching, as several moments from now, he’d know with complete and utter certainty whether or not he’d have the courage, the *heart*, to let her go.

The Las Vegas Deuce

I touched down in Vegas last night, flying on Delta Airlines flight 5821 out of Gerald R. Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with a two-hour layover at O'Hare in Chicago. I was supposed to be attending a big conference called "How Can I Learn? Let Me Count the Ways! Addressing Multiple Learning Styles in the Information Age," sponsored by one of the national organizations for elementary and secondary school educators. I say "supposed" because in the three months leading up to the conference, I had flirted with the idea of not actually attending the conference at all, but instead, using the school district's funds to fly out here and

keep a roof over my head while I wandered about the city with three credit cards and my entire bank account in my wallet, searching for some kind of answers, and I figured if there was any place in the world to have some sort of epiphany, this would be it. The problem is that I am something of a skeptic. I don't really believe in epiphanies, but I feel the need for one anyway.

My colleague Frank and I hopped a shuttle from the dorms at UNLV to the Mandalay Bay Convention Center on the south end of the strip, the early morning sun already warm with the promise of getting much warmer. The center was a gigantic, updated version of the Alamo covered in beige paint and surrounded by palm trees. Frank said it was a shame they could take the image of such an important American monument and desecrate it in the name of corporate greed, but he was a bit of a John Wayne fanatic and he gets sentimental sometimes when he talks about the Wild West.

“So, you're going to take good notes, right?” I said. We were standing in a large, lobby area with people moving in all directions like a major intersection in New York City, light splashing in from every angle. We spotted the line for conference registration and walked over to the end of it. Frank sighed.

“It's your ass,” he said. Frank taught ninth-grade math. That's it, just ninth grade. He'd been doing it for about ten years now, and he hated teaching the same way I hated teaching, but he had a wife and two small children and he couldn't let them down. He was a good guy like that.

“What have I got to lose?” I asked. I, unlike Frank, was not the practical one. I taught ninth-grade English: Romeo and Juliet, a smattering of short stories, such as “The Most Dangerous Game,” or “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” vocabulary, five-paragraph essays, and lots and lots of grammar. It's not the grammar that kills you, nor is it the mindless repetition,

going over the exact same lesson plan four times a day, five days a week for nine months straight until you start all over again. Believe it or not, that's tolerable. It's the students.

"The job sucks, I'll give you that," said Frank. "But all jobs suck, Ryan. You can sit there and daydream all you want about this perfect job or this perfect life, but it doesn't exist. Not the way you think it does. It's all about attitude."

The line kept moving forward. We were about halfway to the registration table.

"You and I both know I can get away with this," I said. "The hardest thing will be bullshitting my way through the conference write-up. But I majored in English. We master the art of bullshit."

"I can only cover for you so much," said Frank. "Sooner or later you're going to have to grow up."

"And I appreciate it, you covering for me." Frank was the closest thing I had to a best friend, though I think the term loses its meaning once you get your first "real" job, if not much earlier. I talk to him more than anybody, but even he doesn't know the whole story. He understands I haven't been too happy lately, but I don't think he realizes the true nature of it, nor did I for that matter. That's part of the problem with being a skeptic: you question everything so much, you can never decide what's real and what's not.

We finally made it to the front of the line and handed them our ID's. In exchange we received a flimsy, canvas tote-bag with the conference logo printed on the side in teal and lavender. The bag was filled with all the conference accessories. I was tempted to toss it out right then and there, seeing it as a needless burden. However, the bag and its contents would serve as part of the proof of my attendance. I thanked Frank again, and I was out the door. I

could feel the desert heat start to kick in. It can easily reach between 110 and 120 degrees Fahrenheit in Vegas during the summer. Perhaps the heat would be some sort of catalyst.

After taking another shuttle back to the strip, I spent the next several hours riding the Deuce, a fleet of double-decker buses that patrol up and down Las Vegas Boulevard. I thought I would have to go to London to see double-decker buses, but I was wrong. Despite the encroaching heat and early hour, there were still plenty of people milling about the strip carrying large plastic cups in the shape of bongos filled with some sort margarita drink. Some of these tourists even had neck straps attached to these cups so they wouldn't have to carry them, and instead could let them dangle around their neck while they smoked cigarettes or gambled or whatever.

When you see all these mega-resort casinos for the first time riding in from the south end of the strip, you get the impression of worlds colliding, not like giant globes or anything, but fantasy worlds all competing for your attention, your inhabitation. The flashy array of high-powered, giant neon signs, the sleek, black pyramid of the Luxor, the towering statue of the golden lion at MGM, and the constant motion of everything, all draw you in, until all you can do is simply behold.

Of course, not everything is pretty and polished on the strip. There are occasions when the illusion can be disrupted. Construction is always happening in Vegas. As I was riding the Deuce north, just passing Planet Hollywood, to the left I saw a huge construction site. There must have been five or six different buildings going up, all in close proximity to each other. The buildings were fitted with this shiny blue glass which made it look like they were all full of water.

I turned to a guy sitting close to me and said, “Hey, do you know what the name of that casino is going to be?” while I pointed out the window.

He snarled at me. “It’s not a casino.”

“So what is it? Going to be some condos or something?” I said.

“No,” he said. He shook his head in disapproval. “You don’t get it. It’s going to be a city within a city.”

“A city within a city?”

“Yeah, a city within a city. They’re going to have their own police department and fire department and everything,” he said.

I wasn’t sure why, but I could tell the guy was very passionate about the subject. Maybe he was going to be employed there when it was finished. And yet, I got the impression he was blowing smoke up my ass. “So then it will have casinos too?”

He leaned in real close, violating my personal space. “It’s a city within a city, motherfucker. You understand me?”

“I get it. I get it, alright? City within a city. I got it,” I said.

I was a little surprised by his intense reaction, but it wasn’t entirely new to me. It’s the same kind of shit I had to deal with everyday at school. Some kid or another comes into my classroom with his earbuds in and plants his feet on top of his desk and I tell him, hey Dustin, you can’t listen to your iPod in class, now put it away. Make me, he’ll say, because he knows there really isn’t shit I can do, because detention/suspension/expulsion is only an effective punishment to kids who actually care about their futures. So I’ll tell him to get the hell out of my classroom and go to the principal’s office and he’ll yell, I am going to cut you motherfucker, and I’ll say, that’s what you said last week, Dustin, and he’ll huff and he’ll puff, and finally he’ll

leave the classroom, but not before he says, you better watch your back, and I'll say something to the effect of, I've got eyes in the back of my head, you know, something to look tough, and I know it probably won't amount to anything, and I'll start my lesson on direct objects and indirect objects, but I still can't shake it every time I'm walking out to the parking lot, or I let my mind wander and I think about all the different things Dustin, or the fifty other Dustins, could do to me, and am I adequately prepared, or can I be prepared, or might they go after my relatives, and how can I really prepare for that, but it's all probably just nothing, and I just need to tell myself that, a lot.

“A city within a city,” he said, leaning away. “Don't you forget it.”

“Right,” I said. “City within a city. City within a city.”

The next day, I was wandering around the Stratosphere, a sphere that reaches into the stratus, when I got hungry and decided to investigate the food court area. This could be difficult to find, as there is nothing logical about the layout of a casino. Think of it as this giant maze with banks of slot machines positioned at every angle imaginable, almost like barricades, all with the single goal of keeping you inside. By this time, I'm convinced they deliberately shut down certain escalators and elevators to make it even more difficult to get where you want to go. My guess is they're hoping you get so tired of being lost, you just say the hell with it and drop another \$100 bill in the slot machine. Then there's the scantily clad waitresses coming by to bring you drinks, if you're gambling, that is, because if you're not, expect to get raped for a rum and diet.

My nerves were a little shaken, but it wasn't too bad because I was half-drunk by then and feeling amiable. I finally found the food court and I could smell the scent of pizza coming

from the Sbarro's. I examined the menu for a minute or two, and I noticed there was a man standing by himself off to the side of the ordering area.

"Hey man, you hungry?" he said, pointing at the large pizza he had in front of him. He was still working on the second slice, and he was sweating profusely.

"Sure, why not?" I said. I grabbed a slice and nodded in his direction. "How's Vegas treating you?" I said.

"I'm tweaking balls," he said.

I looked at him more closely and confirmed this. He was dressed all in black, chubby, kind of short, with short hair and dilated pupils. I nodded again. "I can tell. What did you take?"

"I don't know," he said. "Bought them from some guy off the street. He called them Zingers or something like that."

"Aren't Zingers snack cakes?" I said.

"I don't know, but I'm zinging," he said.

"Are you having any visions or revelations?"

He beckoned me to take another slice of pizza, which I did. "Fucking whores," he said.

"Who?" I said.

"These fake Vegas whores," he said.

"The ones on the cards?" I said. Night or day, I discovered if you walk the strip, you'll run in to men—white, black, Hispanic, Asian—wearing hoodies and standing on the sidewalk passing out cards with half-naked girls on them. They reminded me of the baseball cards I used to collect when I was young. Each girl on a card comes with a name, a telephone number, and a price. These weren't cheap little business cards either. These were printed on glossy cardstock

in full color. I wondered if there was any other city in the world where such a practice took place, or if maybe some people actually collected and traded these things.

“Yeah, I called one up last night,” he said. “She charged me four-hundred bucks for an hour and all I got out of it was a handjob.”

“Ouch,” I said, but I was really laughing at this guy in my head. “You know, prostitution is illegal in the city limits. Have to drive out to one of the brothels to get your money’s worth.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I saw a special on the Travel Channel,” I said.

“I’ll pay you a hundred bucks to drive me out there right now,” he said.

Even though I didn’t have a car, the proposition gave me pause. I had often fantasized about the brothels in Vegas, as I’m sure many, many others have as well. I wasn’t even seeing anyone at the moment, so there would be no thoughts of guilt to contend with. And yet, while I have no issues with legalized prostitution, there’s something about it that just doesn’t set right with me, something pathetic about having to pay for sex, something that says I’ll end up like this guy here, high on god knows what, soliciting strangers to drive him out to the middle of nowhere so he can get off. “No thanks,” I said.

“Two-hundred bucks,” he said.

“Nah.”

“Fucking pussy,” he said.

I shrugged and reached for another slice of pizza.

“Get your fucking hands off my pizza,” he said.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Relax. Thanks for the food.”

“Fuck off,” he said.

I turned from the man and walked back the way I came in. Even though I had been in Vegas for a couple of days, I began to wonder if any of the answers I was seeking could be found here. It seemed like everyone was crazy. Or was I the crazy one in thinking this city had anything to offer in matters beyond whores and shiny buildings?

For the next two days, I spent most of the time gambling. I would drag myself out of bed early to have breakfast with Frank, figuring it was the least I could do, and as we hunched over our menus, he'd say, "It's your ass." Both times, I agreed. He also told me how crazy I was for missing the conference, there were so many good looking single teachers walking around, it was like a goddamn one-night stand buffet over there, which I dismissed, feeling convinced the conference had absolutely nothing to offer me. On one of these occasions, as we finished our meals and were ready to go our separate ways, he said, "Be careful."

"Why would you say that?" I said.

"Because I know you. You think you know everything," he said.

"Oh, come on," I said, taking a sip off my cup of coffee. "I'm the first to admit I don't know anything."

"Humility is not your strong suit," he said.

Frank paid his tab and left me at the table to think about what he said, and I thought about it for a long time and kept thinking about it all day as I sat at the blackjack table at this small casino called O'Shea's. O'Shea's is unique in the fact that they actually have an area in the back of the casino where you can play beer pong on custom-made tables. I took a few breaks from playing cards later in the evening to watch people my age throw ping-pong balls into plastic cups filled with beer, and after watching for a few minutes, I was certain it all had some sort of

significance, but I couldn't figure out what. Everyone playing seemed to be enjoying themselves. I must have missed it, though, because a minute or two later, shouting erupted and I could see security moving in. There was a big dude, probably 6'3", 275 lbs. or so, with no shirt on screaming, "Come on! Come on!" It took three or four guards to restrain him, and even then, he was standing his ground. And the way he screamed, it was as if he was possessed. No man or woman could have made that sound. I must have shivered.

After the incident, I went back to my seat at the blackjack table and played some more. Normally, I am quite nice and respectful when talking with strangers. But, if you set me down at a blackjack table and feed me drinks all night, I have a tendency to speak my mind, stranger or not.

"No!" I said. "What are you doing? You don't hit on that. Geesh."

A man and a woman at the other end of the table looked over at me, perhaps a bit confused.

"What's your problem?" said the man.

"You don't hit 14 against a bust card," I said.

The waitress came by repeating the word "cocktails" over and over again with the exact same inflection every time like she was worried if she didn't say it exactly right, people would be less inclined to order more drinks. I tried to order another, but she informed me that I needed to be nearly finished with the drink in front of me before I could get another one.

"It's my money," he said. "I can play how I want."

"That's where you're wrong," I said. "Blackjack is a team game. We're all in it together. Every decision each player makes has the potential in determining whether everyone at the table wins or loses."

“That’s right,” said an old woman to my left. Her name was Pan, and I had been talking to her all night. She was 83 years old, only had a couple of teeth left, and she smelled of body odor. She lived just off the strip and played all the time.

I leaned towards Pan and mumbled something about clueless amateurs and she smiled. Over the course of the night, she told me her story, how she was once a teacher too, back in the Philippines, and she loved the work. But then she came to America, and she was shocked to see how different the classroom environment was. “Back in the Philippines,” she said, “teachers were well-respected. The children were all well behaved. And if they weren’t, you could beat them. But here, here it’s too much. There is no respect. How can you teach if they will not listen?” She worked long enough to earn a pension, then said the hell with it, quit her job, and has spent the last 35 years betting on horses and playing cheap blackjack.

Being the skeptic that I was, part of me thought Pan was telling me a yarn, but I wanted to believe her, so I did. In fact, I admired her. I could see myself doing the same thing, leaving it all behind and coming to Vegas and never looking back. I had cash, credit cards, and hardly any property to my name. It could be so easy.

“We’re all in it together,” I said to the man again. “Think about it.”

My time was running out, and though I had seen a lot, I hadn’t seen it all, so on my last night in Vegas, I decided to hop the Deuce and ride it down to the Fremont Street Experience, where all the old casinos are, like Binion’s and the Golden Nugget. It’s kind of a long ride from the strip, or at least it seems long because you have to go through some pretty rundown areas to get there. I actually saw two pawn shops right next to each other, and I thought, how is this possible, but take the Deuce to Fremont and you’ll see it, sure enough.

Once I hit Fremont, I felt like I was transported to earlier times. Everything was cheaper. You'd see advertisements for \$7 steak dinners and \$2 beers, and everything felt easier, kind of like it must have been for Pan, teaching back in the Philippines when kids would actually listen and you could get some satisfaction out of making a difference, instead of constantly having to watch your back for fear that Dustin would be coming to shank you.

I wandered in and out of the old casinos, availing myself of the cheap drinks, and I paused for about 15 minutes or so to watch the free light show displayed on the massive, half-cylinder structure spanning several blocks of Fremont Street. It was pretty intense, and I couldn't help but think back to younger, wilder times and wonder what it would be like to see the show while taking acid, which got me thinking about all the times I've taken acid, and old friends like Buck and how all those times and all those people seem so far away now, and I wondered if I could ever truly move on.

Fremont Street was mostly filled with tourists, but every now and then you'd get a guy stumbling up with a scraggly beard, dirty jeans and sweatshirt, trying to bum 25 cents, or 35 cents, or 65 cents, and I'd have to say, "Sorry, got no money," even though that was a lie, I still had plenty of money, but I didn't want to give them any of it. I wondered how a bum determined how much money to ask for, like, was there some kind of science to it, some kind of equation based on the day of the week or the time of the year? The only pattern I could pick up on was that the value had to end in five, otherwise, everything was fair game.

After a while, I got hungry and decided to try one of those \$7 steak dinners at the Golden Gate. With the food being so cheap, there was a line, and as I waited, a dirty, old woman approached me, and for a second I thought it was Pan, but once she stood next to me, I realized she wasn't. I waited for her to speak, but she said nothing, and instead handed me a scrap of

paper with some writing on it. I took the paper and it read, "Hello, my name is Janice. I am deaf and dumb and I am hungry. Would you please buy me something to eat? Thanks, Janice." I read the note several times, making sure I didn't miss anything, and handed it back to her. I looked into her eyes. I wanted to know if she was telling the truth. Either this was a sad, sad story, or she had whipped up a great little scam that made those Fremont Street beggars look like chumps. I reached out and pinched her arm hard, hard as I could, to see if she would yell out. She didn't make a sound, and pulled her arm away quickly, looking at me in shock, as if to say, how could you do such a thing?

"It's okay," I said. "I'm sorry. I had to see if you were for real."

She stared at me, slowly backing away.

"I'll buy you dinner," I said.

She kept backing away, and now was turning her back to me. I walked after her and when I caught up, I tried to get in front of her, but she wouldn't stop. A few of the casino crowd were watching now as I tried to slow down the old woman.

"I'm not like that," I said. "Really."

I had to give up. She couldn't be persuaded, and somehow, I felt as though I had lost some important battle and a kind of judgment had been put upon me. What that judgment was, I had no idea, but I felt it all the same.

I found I had lost my appetite now, not just for food, but for Vegas in general, and I decided to head back to the dorms. As I was walking back down Fremont Street towards the Deuce stop, I came up behind a group of young Hispanic kids. The oldest looked to be about 12, maybe 14 tops, and the rest were probably between 8 and 10. Each kid held a small yellow bag

with the M&M's candy store logo on it, suggesting they had recently been to the store and made purchases. We were all walking in the same direction so I could hear their conversation.

"I'm going to kill that motherfucker," said the oldest. "Oh yeah, that motherfucker is dead."

"Fuck yeah," said one of the younger kids.

"Bitch never know what hit 'em."

"It's going to be sweet," said the oldest.

I don't know why, but for some reason, I became furious at these kids. I didn't even know them, they were probably good kids, at least decent anyway, and yet, I wanted to smash their smug little faces in with my fist and see how tough they were then.

"Hey," I yelled. "Hold up."

They all stopped and turned to look at me.

I put my finger right in the oldest kid's face and leaned in real close and I said, "Don't you ever fucking talk like that. Not ever. Do you understand me?"

"Who the fuck are you?" said the oldest.

"I said stop that shit. This ain't a fucking game. You keep running your mouth like that, someone is liable to kill your ass, and if you keep pushing it right now, it's going to be me."

"Whatever," he said. I could see he was shaking now.

"Now, get out of here, and remember what I said."

The group of kids started to run, and I stood there, watching them, letting it all sink in. I waited for it to hit me, that whopper of a revelation that would consume me and change my life, but it never came. All that was left was Frank and the plane ride back to Michigan and a bullshit conference write-up and years and years of Dustin, until I finally had a nervous breakdown.

I hopped on the Deuce, and over the course of the ride, as I passed all the big casino resorts on Las Vegas Boulevard, I knew, at least for as long as I was on this bus, I could no longer go back to being a teacher. More than anything, I wanted that feeling to last. I wanted that bus to go on forever.