

REAL MEN DON'T PRETEND AND
OTHER STORIES

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2005

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2007

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTERS in FINE ARTS
December, 2015

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Jon Billman who worked with me for several years and acted as my true advisor and mentor. I would also like to thank Drs. Van Delinder and Tucker in the graduate school for stepping in and fixing problems after the English department fell apart and could not fix their own political decisions and disasters. I am thankful to finally be done.

Name: CANNON ROBERTS

Date of Degree: DECEMBER, 2015

Title of Study: REAL MEN DON'T PRETEND AND
OTHER STORIES

Major Field: MASTERS IN FINE ARTS

Abstract: This collection centers on the conflict of idealism versus coming into contact with reality. In the three stories written in third person, characters from different cultures and socio-economic statuses must to grips with their own prejudices and mistrusts while trying to hold on to their idealistic self-perceptions. In the story "Lady and Mateo," an autistic convenient store clerk befriends a customer who was recently released from prison only to be swayed by his sister that Lady cannot be trusted. The idealistic daughter has a similar conflict of identity in "The Farm and the Family" when her perceptions of great-grandmother are shattered when she finds out the old lady is just as mean and bitter as her sons who have found wealth in Fort Worth.

The first person stories also deal with the idealism versus reality but in a much more internal and personal way for the narrators. In "Jugs for Jesus," the narrator questions his sheltered world view and lifestyle after meeting one of the bikini clad baristas from the coffee shop that shares a parking lot with the piano store he manages. While the narrator of "The Art of Staring" must confront the fact that he is not a misunderstood artist but a student too lazy for college whose mother happens to be a famous artist. All these characters struggle to reconcile their perceptions of themselves and the world with the reality that they come to face on a day to day basis.

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Cleaning Lessons

One of the perks of working the day shift – besides not having to get up at four in the morning or work until midnight – is that I have my own cubicle. I even have a key to my desk which means I can lock my headset in the drawer and not worry about some kid coming by and stealing it. Headset theft is a big problem here. When I worked in the pit, I took the headset home. Otherwise, I would have had to use one with lipstick all over the mouthpiece or hair grease on the earphones. Twice, I rubbed someone else's earwax on the side of my face. After that second time, I went to the snack bar to buy a set. Along with nachos, burritos, and Cokes, the company snack bar sold two different types of headsets and extra foam cushions for the ear pieces.

I bought the more expensive one for twenty dollars. That was over two hours' worth of earnings if I adjusted my wages for income tax and Social Security. This pair was nicer because it didn't have the disposable ear pads and was supposed to be noise cancelling. They're actually no different than the cheap ones. In fact, being able to change ear pads would have been better since mine wore thin in a couple of weeks. But I spent twenty bucks, so, like every other afternoon, I lock the headset in the drawer and check the time. I stand up with my co-workers, simultaneously. The clocks on everyone's computers are synchronized and clock everyone out automatically unless they're on a call, but most people know how to be off the phone when quitting time comes around. The thirty employees who work the day shift all migrate to the parking lot.

“Take your time, William,” Douglas says. He is sitting in the truck with the windows down.

“Tell Chris to let me clock out early. Tell him we have to pick up Gracie before six-thirty.”

Douglas starts the truck and acts like he’s pondering the question. This was a look he perfected when Missy was alive. She would get mad when she felt like he wasn’t thinking about whatever question she had asked, so he developed this pondering look. I’ve seen his mouth move a few times in the midst of his brooding and I’m pretty sure he’s just singing the chorus of Hall and Oates’ “Private Eyes.”

“Can’t do it,” Douglas says as I buckle my seat belt. “Chris isn’t on my team and I can’t step out of my zone. You know how things work. And don’t call her Gracie. Your sister hates that.”

National Wireless loves structure. The call center has six teams, each with a team leader and two assistants. Douglas is an assistant. Chris is a team leader, my team leader. Each team consists of three crews, which have a crew leader and ten representatives. I’m a representative. I shouldn’t complain – though I usually do whenever anyone will listen – since I was able to make one of the three day crews. Usually, employees have to work for a year or more before getting moved to the nine to six shift. I got there in six months. If I had stayed working four to midnight or six in the morning to two in the afternoon, I’d probably be a crew leader already. Employees who are actually smart or can at least show up to work on a regular basis are usually made crew leaders after six months. But not me. And I’m okay with that.

We drive back to Gatesville in silence. Douglas says he can’t hear me with the windows down so there is no reason to talk. The air conditioner doesn’t work so he won’t roll the windows

up. He says he doesn't like to drive home in a sauna. Really this is an excuse for Douglas not to talk. Because it's not like we talk once we get home either. We eat dinner in front of the television then go to separate corners of the house for the rest of the evening. The only time we speak is when we argue about who was the last to change Gracie's diaper. Missy would be furious at us both if she saw how we were living. One of the only reasons Douglas helped me get a job at National Wireless was so Gracie would never have to be in daycare. At first, Missy led me to believe that Douglas helped me out of the kindness of his own heart. I was going through a rough patch, still living with our parents, unemployed, and having a hard time getting myself out of bed every morning. Douglas, in a rare moment of altruism, came through and got me a job. Or this is what I was led to believe. Turns out, Missy wanted me to move down to Gatesville and work for National Wireless so I could help with Gracie. It also turns out that getting hired at National Wireless is about as difficult as falling off a bike that isn't moving. Half the people that work there are related because some cousin or brother or aunt recommended them. Really the only way I wouldn't have been hired at National is if Douglas actively campaigned against me. So really, the only helpful thing he ever did was keep his mouth shut.

Douglas is right, though. Missy hated when people said Gracie instead of Grace. She always said that the first thing she was attracted to was Douglas's name. Which is totally weird, but that's just how Missy rolled. She liked that he didn't go by Doug and soon after they started dating, Missy refused to call me anything but William even though I had gone by Will since the day I was born. This was all because she hated that her own name sounded like an abbreviation. She said she would be forever a child because of her name and blamed several missed job opportunities on that fact. I think it may have been her confrontational interview style. Her strategy was to turn the interview around onto the employer. I never saw how that would work

and I, personally, never come across that forceful. She tried going by Melissa for a while, but that was just silly. Everyone already knew her by Missy.

Douglas pulls up in front of the babysitter's house. I immediately climb out of the truck but Douglas goes ahead and tells me to go get Grace. He ignores my go-to-hell look, the one I give him every day because this is all routine now. Douglas feels that being the brother-in-law means being the authority figure. He's three years younger than Missy, which makes him younger than me by two months. Even so, Douglas acts like the older brother. Actually, he acts like he's a middle aged man and once tried to call me son but almost got punched in the jaw and never tried that again. Douglas won't ever admit it, but his incompetency was what led Missy to ask me to move down to Central Texas. She admitted this to us once in a rare moment of honesty but Douglas has no recollection of that moment. I realize, primarily, Missy's own control issues led her to ask me to move, but Douglas's incompetency also had a big role. I feel sorry for the guy and try to give him a chance, but it's moments like this when I'm getting out of the car yet he still tells me I need to get out of the car that I realize: Missy was right.

"Five more minutes and you would be paying an extra ten dollars, William," Mrs. Pots says, handing Gracie to me like she's a wet dog. "I don't like being mean about these things. Especially with you boys' situation. But I have to have rules, you know."

"Thanks, Mrs. Pots."

"Otherwise, no one would pick up their kids till they left the bar."

"I know, Mrs. Pots. Sorry."

I take my time walking back to the truck. Mrs. Pots is still talking even though I can't hear what she's saying. I'm hoping she'll get tired of talking to my back and go inside the house. I don't want her to know there's no car seat for Gracie. We have one – we're not that

incompetent as parents – it’s just not in the truck. There’s only two seats so I would have to ride in the back if we used the car seat. And I realize how ridiculous it is that Douglas is always driving my truck, the only vehicle we have between the two of us, but he kept stealing my keys and there was always a fight about who drove so I just gave up and let him drive. Douglas has a lot of excuses for making me do shitty things, but he’s never been able to justify making me ride in the bed of my own truck. But really, this is the one time that he should make up an excuse. Gracie’s safety should be our main concern. Instead, we let our pissing contests get in the way. The thing is the seat really isn’t that much of a problem. Besides going to and from the babysitter’s house, we don’t actually take Gracie out that much. We should. I know it’s kind of sad that we make her stay home, but it’s the easiest way to deal with transportation. We go to the grocery store alone and Douglas doesn’t go to church anymore so he keeps Gracie when I go. Besides those two outings and work, we don’t have much of a reason to leave the house and when I think about that too much I start to wonder why I moved out here.

We drive again in silence. Douglas pulls into the driveway too quickly. We all get jostled in our seats, and I find out Gracie needs a diaper change.

“Dude, I’ve told you to take it easy pulling into the driveway.”

“It’s a truck, William. It can handle a few bumps.”

I pull Gracie up out of my lap to show Douglas it was not the car I was worried about. Douglas makes a gagging sound as he looks at the wet spot on my jeans. Mrs. Potts has a rule that she does not change diapers ten minutes before parents are supposed to arrive. It seems like a pretty strict rule and feels like maybe it should be illegal, but Mrs. Potts is the only home daycare in town. And by home, I mean unlicensed and unlicensed means cheap.

“You’re faking that.”

Douglas is bent over beside the truck, dry heaving. He's dramatic and does these things to get out of taking care of his daughter. He claims to have a weak stomach.

"No, I'm not," Douglas says finally standing up. "Seeing someone get peed on is gross."

"She's a baby, Doug. And you've changed more diapers than you can count. You're saying you still can't handle your twelve month old daughter's diaper?"

"But seeing pee on clothes. Clothes that aren't on her," Douglas says. He trails off so it sounds like he's making a point when really he's being ridiculous and he knows it. He's making sure I change the first diaper of the evening because the first person usually ends up changing more diapers.

I take Gracie into the house to change her. I tickle her belly as she lies on the table in her room. I wonder how all the fighting affects her. She kind of giggles as I tickle but not the way I think a baby should. Not the way she would giggle when Missy tickled her. I didn't read all the parenting books Missy gave me, so I'm no expert and really couldn't say one way or another. I am pretty sure we've done stuff that has already scarred her for life. But, who isn't scarred by the people who raise them. We go to my room so I can change pants. The house is pretty small but it does have three bedrooms. Our parents kept telling Missy that she and Douglas didn't need to buy a house, let alone one with three bedrooms. I'm now grateful Missy ignored that piece of parental advice. If Missy and Doug had bought a two bedroom, I would be sleeping on the couch. If they had rented something, well, I would still probably be on the couch. Having a bedroom to myself is the only way I stay sane living with Doug.

Owning a house was part of Missy's ten year plan. That was the sole reason she and Douglas bought this one in particular. Not because they had the money. Not because they loved the house. Just because it was on a list she had made when her and Douglas were dating. After

being married for three years, Missy and Douglas would buy a house, Missy would be a sales director for Mary Kay, and Douglas would be a team leader at National Wireless. This was all written out, planned even before the two of them were married. When the third year of their marriage did come around Missy had to accomplish at least one of her three goals no matter the cost. They bought the house in Gatesville, half an hour away from Douglas's work in McGregor and almost an hour away from where most of Missy's customers lived in Temple. But, they couldn't afford the houses anywhere in between. After five years, Missy and Douglas were supposed to have their first child. Instead, Gracie came at three years and ten months. That's when I got the call from Missy asking me to move down.

“You can't live with Mom and Dad forever and National Wireless has much more upward mobility within the company than Subway,” Missy said.

“I don't work at Subway,” I told her.

“Exactly my point. You have no upward mobility there.”

She was a good salesperson. That was probably the reason she did so well selling Mary Kay, even if she wasn't able to move beyond consultant or get her first suit. I packed everything up and felt sad that my entire life didn't fill the bed of my truck. Not even halfway. I drove the five hours to Gatesville and moved into the upstairs apartment Missy had found for me two blocks from her house. After a week, I realized I wasn't in Central Texas for the opportunity to work at National Wireless. Since I was on the four to midnight crew, Missy had me over at the house every day painting, baby-proofing, and consulting on colors.

“Isn't this all stuff Douglas should be doing?” I asked one day.

“Yes, but Douglas needs to put in more hours so he can become a team leader. That was supposed to happen six months ago. But he's a bit incompetent.”

Missy smiled and shrugged like she hadn't said something terribly mean about her husband who wasn't there to defend himself. But that was her way. She could be scathing and cruel but felt as long as she smiled everyone should love her.

I watch Gracie play with her toes before deciding to change clothes completely since I will be going to church later. It's Wednesday which means people will probably get coffee or ice cream afterward and that's about the only socializing I get to do outside the National Wireless cafeteria. I pick up my niece and walk into the living room. Douglas is standing in front of the TV looking at the floor.

"I think the remote is in the couch somewhere."

"What is this?" Douglas asks, pointing.

I put Gracie in her playpen before walking over to look at the floor. There is a dried, white splatter about an inch in diameter directly under the TV.

"Oh, I was able to get squiggle vision skin-a-max last night."

I try to say this with a straight face and monotone voice. Douglas's face gets red immediately and I want to put my hand up to feel the heat coming off my brother-in-law's bald head. Douglas is a prude and hates any mention of masturbation. I'm not that guy who makes a lot of dirty jokes and brags about his own personal habits. But we've both interrupted one another in the bathroom several times so I feel like we should finally admit that we both do it. Will finally put a lock on the bathroom door and I was grateful.

"There is a baby in the house," Douglas says. This is another one of his arguments that really has no point. It's a statement he makes fairly often and thinks it should automatically change my behavior. Gracie will be asleep and I'll be watching some news program about a girl

who murdered five boyfriends. Douglas will come in, change the channel to some rodeo, and say there's a baby in the house.

“Relax, dude. I spilled yogurt as I was turning off the TV this morning.”

“Why didn't you clean it up?” Douglas asks, no longer red and angry over masturbation but exasperated that I didn't clean something right away.

I don't argue with Doug. There's no point to it. He was already walking out to the car when I spilled the yogurt this morning and would have been upset if I made him wait. Either way, he gets mad and I get yelled at. I go to the kitchen for the mop. If I make Douglas too mad I won't be able to leave the house. Douglas will hide the car keys or disappear so I'm left with Gracie or do one of his many other tricks that let him not take care of his daughter. I really wish I had the determination to just leave, not to care if Doug was in the house or not, but leave Gracie in her playpen and go to church and make him deal with the consequences. But I actually love my niece and could never do that to her. As I get the mop wet in the kitchen sink I hear Douglas moving the TV.

“I figured you could mop behind here while you were at it?” Doug says as I come into the living room.

This is Douglas's favorite game. He waits until I have a broom or mop or rag in my hand then starts moving around furniture to give me more work. Afterward, Douglas will refer to the whole ordeal as if the cleaning was a group effort. Beating him at his own game isn't too difficult though. All I have to do is work more quickly. He's not the most fast paced man in the world and tends to take breaks when he thinks I'm too far behind. By the time he gets back up or comes back into the room with a glass of water, acting like he's been sweating for hours, I have

everything put back into place and the cleaning supplies hidden from sight. All I have to do is mop faster than Douglas can move furniture. Shouldn't be too difficult.

I start on the dried yogurt since that was the mess I intended to clean up in the first place. I didn't think it would have stuck that much in only nine hours, but I really have to put my back into it to get the yogurt up. I'm giving Douglas a head start, which is not a good way to win this fight. As I mop over the area where the TV stood a few minutes before, the mop starts to pick up dirt and bugs and some peppermint wrappers. Missy would have been furious. She always lectured about how the sweeping needed to be done first. After all the dirt was picked up, the mopping could start. Even when I was living in my own apartment, Missy gave me these lectures. She and Gracie stopped by unexpectedly one day. As soon as I opened the door, I could tell how messy my apartment was. I never had visitors so I never paid attention to my own cleanliness. Or lack thereof. So when Missy walked in, I grabbed a rag and started swiping at the counter.

"Child, what do you think you are doing?" Missy asked. "You never wipe down the counter first. You do it after you sweep off all the crumbs. Look, you're leaving mud streaks."

Missy handed Gracie to me. She took the rag away and showed me proper cleaning procedure. I thought she was going to stop after wiping off the counters and cleaning the sink, but she methodically went through my little apartment and cleaned the whole place as I followed her around holding Gracie. Missy talked about her Mary Kay business and asked me about National Wireless, acting like her working as my maid while I bounced her child on my knee was completely normal.

"Now you know how to clean your house properly," she said. "This is good. Your wife won't have to train you once you get married."

Douglas leaves the living room, but not before moving Gracie's playpen, the end table, and the rocking chair into the middle of the floor. The couch is the only piece of furniture that hasn't been displaced. I'm pretty sure I can finish mopping behind the furniture, put up the mop, and do my own disappearing act before Douglas shows back up. He comes back in much more quickly than I expected. He's carrying a bucket of soapy water, sets it on the floor and moves the TV back into place.

"We're just making a mess like this."

"Then go get the broom."

Douglas knows how to clean for the same reason I know. Missy taught us both. But the most frustrating part about this game is that instead of playing with his daughter or fixing her dinner, Douglas would rather create more work for me to do, work that Douglas is perfectly capable of doing himself and could be done while I'm at church if he needs an excuse to not hold his daughter. I take a few more swipes at the floor, but I can't stand the little stripes of mud that the mop is leaving behind. I go to the kitchen and get the broom and dustpan. I sweep up the dirt and peppermint wrappers and cobwebs that have been hitting the mop and turning into goo. I'm losing this game and it's starting to make me mad. Douglas moves Gracie and the playpen into the hallway to make more space in the living room. Usually, he waits until I have finished behind the rocking chair and the end table before he tries to move the couch, but he knows I'm trying to beat him and is starting to move more quickly. Douglas is about to move the chair into the kitchen to make space to move the couch, but I ask him to hold the dustpan.

"You can hold it fine yourself."

"You know it's easier to pick up all the dirt if two people do this. That's what Missy always told us."

This is my trump card. I don't like playing it and it always hurts a little when I do. But Douglas won't do anything I suggest, he never lifts a finger to help or listens to my suggestions unless I mention Missy. Douglas drops the chair while it's still a couple of inches off the ground. The thump scares Gracie.

"You made my daughter cry," Douglas says under his breath as he holds the dust pan.

I hand over the broom once Douglas stands up.

"You'll have to sweep behind the couch," he says.

"Set it over in the corner, Doug. And go get Gracie, she's scared."

Douglas follows my instructions, still under the spell invoked by Missy's name. He goes into the hall to pick up Gracie. He doesn't seem to be moving as quickly as a concerned father should. I go back to mopping. The whole house is covered in linoleum, a terrible decision by one of the previous owners. The little bumps and crevices hold dirt like Gracie holds her pacifier. It's a fight to get them out. The back of my arms are burning with the amount of pressure I'm using on the mop. I know pressing down so hard isn't making the mopping any easier but it is keeping me from yelling at Douglas.

"Don't call me Doug. My name is Douglas and my daughter is Grace, not Gracie."

I say nothing and mop harder. Douglas is trying to move the furniture while bouncing Gracie in his arms. It's not working well at all and seems a little dangerous.

"I'm done over here."

I take the rocking chair away from Douglas. I move the end table back as well. I can't stop here. I have to finish cleaning the living room at least. While Douglas is busy with Gracie, I decide to go the extra mile. I won't stop cleaning and Douglas won't be able to complain. I'll go

to church, though I'll be late, and maybe this time I'll have the courage to sit next to the cute army girl with red hair who lives on Fort Hood. I set down the end table and turn to see Douglas trying to move the couch away from the wall. The thing is a behemoth. It's a sleeper that our parents bought years ago when I grew out of my crib. The only way they could afford a bed for me was to sell my crib and the living room furniture then buy the couch with a fold out bed. I slept on it for eight years.

Douglas lays Gracie on the couch, on her back, so he can free his hands. I just look at him stunned at first. I'm convinced that I don't actually understand what I'm looking at, that Douglas has some other intention and is not stupid enough to try to move the couch his baby is laying on. But Douglas pushes the couch away from the wall with a jerk. Gracie first rolls towards the edge then, when Douglas's burst of strength lets out making the couch stop abruptly, she rolls back, her face sinking into the back cushions. Douglas doesn't move. I rush over to the couch and pick up Gracie. She sucks in air as I lift her, and she starts to wail. Her face was stuck between the cushions and for a moment she wasn't able to breathe. Her nose is bleeding. I walk past Douglas and into the kitchen. I rock Gracie and wet a paper towel so I can blot her nose. I realize I have no idea what I'm doing in this moment. This is what I would do if I had a bloody nose, but I'm an adult. Am I actually doing the right thing? This is Gracie's first real accident since I moved in and I'm terrified of doing the wrong thing, making it worse, causing Gracie more pain. Douglas is still moving the couch around in the living room.

Gracie's nose won't stop bleeding. She is still crying. I sing. I sway. But I'm not a parent and those are my only two tricks. The only tune I can think of is a silly song about cats hunting a mouse that my grandmother used to sing. Missy made me learn lullabies before Gracie was born but none of them come to my mind. Every once in a while she gasps for air like she still can't

breathe. Babies are fragile. I wonder if there could have been damage to her nose, damage that is making it hard for her to take a deep breath. There's no longer noise coming from the living room, I turn to find Douglas standing behind me.

"She's fine. Go finish sweeping," Douglas says trying to take Gracie away.

"She's not fine. I'm going to take her to the emergency room."

For a moment I think Douglas will protest. Douglas complains about every medical expense he has ever had to pay. He still brings up the emergency room trip he made his first week in college more than ten years ago. I sometimes suspect Douglas is secretly thankful that Missy died in the car crash, relieved that she didn't hang on for a few hours or days. While most spouses would want to say some final words to their partners, I'm convinced Douglas preferred the fact that he never had to pay the hospital bills. I carry Gracie into her room to get the car seat.

"What do you need that for?" Douglas asks when I come out with Gracie strapped in her seat. Douglas has moved from the kitchen and is standing by the front door. "I'll hold her in my lap."

"You're not going," I say.

Douglas doesn't move away from the door. We stood in a very similar position the night Missy died. Only in reverse. I was working the four to midnight shift. When I got off work I had a text from Douglas telling me to come straight to the house. I knew something was wrong since Missy and Douglas were always in bed long before I got off work. I figured the water heater had burst or Douglas had knocked the sliding door off its track again and Missy couldn't sleep until the floor was clean or the door was back on and securely locked. I walked into the house to find all the lights on and Douglas standing in the hallway with Gracie in her car seat.

“Take me to the morgue,” Douglas said. “Missy’s been in a wreck.”

That’s how I found out my sister had died. I recommended we go to the hospital instead of the morgue. I was trying to find some measure of hope, some possibility that Douglas was wrong like he always was. Douglas explained that he needed to identify the body, not pick her up from anywhere, not see her lying in a hospital bed. He needed to walk in and say, yes, this is my wife. I wouldn’t move away from the front of the door, so Douglas kept talking. He explained that he was supposed to pick up a prescription for Gracie. Missy usually took him to work and picked him up in the afternoons. But he wanted to take off early and go play golf with a buddy from high school. Missy agreed as long as he picked up the prescription. He forgot. She spent an hour calling pharmacies, finally found one in Copperas Cove, over forty miles away, that was still open. A tire blew on her way back. Her car rolled into a ditch. The next of kin needed to go fill out paper work and look at the body, but I was still standing in front of the door, blocking Douglas’s way. He was yelling by the time he got to the end.

“You go,” I said. “I’ll stay here with Gracie.”

“I can’t drive. I can’t go alone.”

I ended up going to the morgue by myself. I identified my sister’s body. I called my parents. I called Douglas’s parents. I left a message for the insurance guy. Several hours later, I went back to the house to find Gracie asleep in her car seat and Douglas watching TV. All the lights were on in the house. I put Gracie in her crib and slept in Missy’s Mary Kay room. I never spent the night in my apartment again. I just moved all of my stuff to the house over the next few months and didn’t renew my lease.

“You’re not going,” I repeat.

Douglas is still standing in front of the door. He doesn't seem like he is trying to stop me but I don't know if he'll try to push me if I move. I stand for another moment and I realize he is in the way. Like always, he has no intention or motivation and is just getting in the way. Gracie is getting heavy in her car seat. I move her to my left arm. She is crying. Her nose hasn't stopped bleeding. She still gasps for air, but, by this point, that might be due to the crying. Douglas looks at the floor for a few moments, shrugs several times, acts like he is about to speak, then moves out of the way.

I have a hard time getting the car seat secured. I haven't put it in the truck for several months and I've forgotten how it works exactly. Between Gracie's screaming and the sun going down, I fumble with the seat belt. I hear Douglas come running out to the car and think about turning around and punching him the mouth. I lock Gracie in, wipe her nose, and shut the door. I walk over to the driver's side without turning around or looking at Douglas. After I start the car, Douglas puts his hands on the door and sticks his head in the open window. He squeezes Gracie's foot in the only tender moment I've seen him have all night. He gently wipes her nose with his hand and wipes the blood on his shirt.

"I'm not incompetent," Douglas says.

I nod and turn on the headlights. Douglas doesn't take his head out of the window. I look forward, refusing to look at my brother-in-law or offer any reassuring words about his competency.

"You should finish cleaning while we're gone."

Douglas nods and steps away from the truck. He stands for a moment, then walks back into the house. I sit in the truck and watch my brother-in-law move through rooms. He turns off the lights in the kitchen, the hallway, Gracie's bedroom. He comes back into view, picks up the

broom and moves over to the couch. Before he starts sweeping, Douglas walks over to the front door, looks back at Gracie and me in the truck, then shuts himself inside. The truck's engine starts to lurch since it's been running idle for so long. Gracie has fallen asleep in her car seat, her nose is still bleeding. I know our first stop will be at the hospital, but I'm not sure where to go after that. Mom and Dad are five hours away. Oklahoma is six. Matamoros is seven. As I start to drive all I know is that I have never seen Grace look so peaceful as she does in this moment.

Real Men Don't Pretend

When I was twelve, my father told me that real men don't play make believe. He was wearing a neon visor with some company's logo, plaid shorts, and loafers. He was shirtless which had been a bad idea for several years. First, skin cancer. Second, saggy nipples. But as his body aged, his self image stayed the same. In college, my father played basketball. This was in the mid-nineties, right about the time people decided that you had to be more than tall and skinny to play, but also muscular. He gained twenty pounds of muscle his senior year, and got a full ride scholarship to a state university with good money but a lousy team. He lost the muscle after he quit playing once Mom got pregnant with Morgan. But that didn't mean Dad needed to put on more clothes fifteen years later. So, he sat in the yard, topless, pulling weeds out of the ground with the help of a screwdriver. I was using an ice pick, the less useful tool. My father swore I was wrong. He showed me how to make tiny holes all the way around the weed then, theoretically, it would just pull out of the ground without tearing up the grass. It never worked. Mostly, I just tore the tops off the weeds.

I learned that torn up weeds with some amount of dirt stuck to them made good shrapnel. I would take a handful and throw it up above my head, screaming about an air raid, then duck and cover. My favorite part was the way the pieces came down at different speeds. The dirt clods would fall quickly, hitting me in the face before I could put my arms over my head to protect myself, while the leaves floated down softly landing on my back. I would stay huddled against

the ground until I was sure every leaf had fallen and there would be no more civilian casualties. I started to work faster so I could get larger and larger piles of ammunition. I would hold off for as long as possible but I was impatient and could never gather more than a couple of handfuls before starting another raid that involved quite a bit of screaming and flailing and death gurgles.

“You’re making a mess, boy,” my father said standing over me. I was huddled with my forehead against the hot, brown grass and my butt up in the air. I sat up so I could look at him. I didn’t know how I could be making a mess outside. Dad squatted down and picked up the weeds around me. He scooped up a few then let them fall through his hands as if I had purposely destroyed one of his prized houseplants.

“The roots,” he said. “You have to pull up the roots or there’s no point.”

He stood and sighed and shook his head. His nipples shook in the opposite direction as his head.

“Go inside with your mother.”

As I walked to the front door, I could hear him mumbling about not knowing what to do with me and how they shouldn’t let me watch so much TV. Normally, as I passed under the oak tree that stood in the middle of the yard and shaded our kitchen window, I would jump to grab the highest branch I could reach, make some monkey noises, then see how close I could get to our sidewalk by swinging myself off the branch. But normal was not making my father happy so I walked to the porch and made sure he couldn’t see me when I started doing my secret agent sneak attack into the house.

Dad often made comments about the actions and attributes of real men. Real men didn’t wear pink. Real men didn’t whistle unless they were trying to get someone’s attention or calling an animal. Real men didn’t sit down to pee. Mom hated that rule. Not only was Dad bad at

aiming when he first woke up or drank two beers or had a long day at work, I wasn't tall enough at the age of four to get much of anything into the toilet and for a few weeks Mom couldn't figure out why the bath mat was always wet when neither my sister or I had bathed in two days.

The worst, however, was when my sister started to stand. She was three years older than me and was jealous of the time Dad and I spent in the bathroom so he could teach me to pee like a man. She only tried to stand once. Mom happened to walk in on her and went ballistic, calling everyone into the bathroom and ordering Dad to tell us that sitting down to pee was perfectly acceptable. He told Morgan three times that she had to sit down during every one of her visits to the bathroom but refused to include me in the discussion or use the phrase Mom insisted upon. Mo peed in the shower until she was eleven so she could prove our parents wrong.

I was convinced I was being super sneaky and silent as I walked into the house after being banished from pulling weeds. I could hear Mom mopping in the kitchen. She had a very specific grunt she reserved for mopping, though the overwhelming scent of bleach was also a pretty good clue. I crouched behind the counter that separated the kitchen from the dining area. I tried to fit myself in one of the squares that was dyed on the linoleum floor. I was debating on what action to take: jump out to surprise her or grab the mop handle once it was in view.

"You're in my way," Mom said before she was around the corner. I came out of my hiding spot.

"You're dirty," she said continuing to work and grunt each time she changed the direction of the mop. "Take your clothes off in the garage and go take a shower. Don't you dare come into my clean kitchen."

I continued my secret agent stealth moves all the way to the garage, using Mom's evenly timed grunts to hide the sound of my movement. My parents had weird standards about modesty

and clothing. My mother was never seen in less than full length pajamas with an ankle length robe on top of it. Even in the summer. Even years later during menopause, when we could see her sweating through the terry cloth, she refused to take anything off. My sister and I, however, were expected to shed clothing whenever our parents deemed it necessary. Stripping down to our underwear in the garage. Taking off any wet clothes in the swimming pool parking lot and covering ourselves with dry blankets that were brought specifically to protect the car. My dad didn't even like going to the dressing room when we were shopping in the mall.

“Just take your shirt off and put this one on. No one will notice.” Usually this was said after he made comments about how my pant size was going up even though I wasn't any taller. While he hoped these comments would inspire me to lose weight, he did not think they should make me self-conscious about taking off my shirt in public. “No one's gonna notice if you do it quickly,” he'd say holding the shirt open so I could stick my head through as soon as I had my first shirt off. One time he noticed me looking at a girl who was probably old enough to drive while I wasn't even out of elementary. “She doesn't even know you're standing here,” he said right as the girl turned and looked our way. He sighed and started looking around for a dressing room.

Instead of going straight to the garage to take off my clothes, I went down to my sister's room. If I stripped in the garage, I would have to pass my sister's room so I had to make sure her door was shut.

“Why are you shutting my door?” she asked without looking up from her book.

“You always want your door shut,” I said acting like I was doing her a favor and nothing more.

“Yes,” she said. “But if you want it shut, it means you're up to something.”

She was a freshman in high school and had shifted from being bossy to inquisitive. Morgan was always convinced that she was more mature than her peers and chose to express this maturity by imitating our mom. Before she saw herself as a mature high school student, she would show her maturity by bossing her friends and me around, though she soon figured out that bossing around her friends was a quick way to be the lonely kid reading a book by herself in the school cafeteria. During the spring semester of ninth grade, however, she became inquisitive and started questioning everyone's purpose and motivation. If her friends suggested they meet at the park instead of Starbuck's, she would try to figure out which friend was crushing on which skater boy. With me, she always assumed I was trying to masturbate.

"Why do you suddenly need privacy?" she asked. "What are you about to do?"

"I'm going to shower."

"There's a door on the bathroom. Why does my door need to be shut? What are you taking into the bathroom with you?"

"I'm not taking anything. Mom said to take my clothes off in the garage."

"And why are you so concerned about me seeing your underwear?"

"Why do you want to see me in my underwear?"

Morgan rolled her eyes and started to get off the bed. This meant she was going to stand over me and lecture while pointing her finger. Before she could start, Mom yelled from down the hall.

"What are you doing down there with your dirty clothes on?"

I mumbled sorry under my breath and started to walk towards her and the garage.

"Don't come back this way. You're six feet from the bathroom. Just get in the shower. I'll vacuum the hall again."

She sighed and rolled her eyes and disappeared from the hallway entrance. Morgan was standing in her doorway as I headed for the bathroom. She smirked and rolled her eyes before shutting her door. I looked back down the hallway once I reached the bathroom. I couldn't see any foot prints or dirt, but Mom would vacuum again. She was a little obsessive about the floors. Morgan had a cat for about six months. Mom literally vacuumed the floor twice a day until the cat ran away. Years later, Morgan and I would learn that Mom took off the cat's collar and convinced a neighbor she was a stray that needed to be adopted.

I crossed my arms and pulled my shirt off over my head in the best Hulk impression I could manage while not tearing my shirt. I held it in my hand breathing heavily as if I was angry and ready to rage. I was sure to do all of this silently since my sister would start asking far too many questions if she heard me talking to myself. I was trying to get my lip to curl more, to really show the grimace and anger Hulk felt. But then I started looking at my chest. And then my belly. Nobody would be threatened by me. In the last year, I had grown boobs though I would get angry when anyone else pointed that out. My nipples didn't lay flat on my chest like when I was younger but sagged and pointed downward. My belly hung out and covered the button of my shorts. I knew not to look at myself sideways because seeing that crease my gut made always made me sad. I wasn't a super hero. I couldn't even pretend to be one while in front of the mirror. I stripped out of the rest of my clothes without looking in the mirror again and got in the shower.

I needed to become a real man like my dad always talked about. I almost always stood up to pee. Except at night because of death threats made by my mother. I didn't have any clothes that were pink except for the walk-a-thon shirt we had all participated in two years ago after Mom found a lump in her breast. That was the only one we did since she found out the lump was

caused by caffeine and was not a tumor. I didn't even know how to whistle. But I still wasn't sure what a real man acted like. My father always acted tired. Whenever he got home from work, whenever he got out of bed in the morning, whenever he finished mowing the lawn and changing the oil in the car, he acted tired, got a beer from the fridge and collapsed into his recliner. But I didn't think my dad was a "real man." At least not in the way he used the term. Morgan had said that our dad was obsessed with what it meant to be a man because he felt neutered by the daily routine of family life. I didn't really know what that meant. I don't think Morgan did either. She might have heard a similar diagnosis on *Oprah* or *Dr. Phil*. More likely, Mom drank a few too many glasses of wine one night and started using Morgan as a sounding board and girlfriend.

I think my dad used to be a real man. When he was the star basketball player at the state university, when he worked out every day, when he went to practice and "had an easy time with the ladies" as he liked to say. He would brag about the sports commentators saying he should try to be on *Baywatch* when he was done playing college ball. Mom wouldn't even date him at first. They met at a party where Mom purposefully spilled beer on him because his arrogance annoyed her. Even though she wouldn't date Dad, she still had sex with him. This wasn't something they included in their storytelling, but Morgan pointed it out to me once she was old enough to do the math and figure out that marriage and babies didn't always go in that order. Dad heard from a friend of a friend that Mom was pregnant and he knew he was the father. This detail is probably what gave it away to Morgan that our parents had sex while not dating. But our father always made a big deal about how noble and caring he was when he could have been a huge jerk. Mom resisted at first but figured out Dad was pretty serious when he quit basketball after his junior season in order to get a job and help pay the hospital bills.

“And it was all downhill from there,” Dad always said at the end of the how-we-got-together story. The comment was supposed to be funny. A typical male joke about how terrible marriage is, but there was always this little twinge after he said it like there was a lot more truth to it than he wanted to admit.

Mom also tended to point out that our dad was recovering from a knee injury and the doctors were warning him that he might never play basketball again. Dad disagreed and said that he knew he could play again but wanted to do the right thing. He then liked to jump as high as he could to prove to us that his knee was just fine. When I was four and five, I was amazed by how high he could jump and how long his feet were off the ground. Once I was a little older, I realized that his jumps were not impressive, even for a man in his thirties.

I tried to imagine what a real man would do as I took a shower. All that came to mind was wearing suits and being good with the ladies. Basically, James Bond. I knew I couldn't be James Bond since that was still playing pretend. I tried to think about how I could act like a man while at school. I imagined Priscilla coming up and talking to me. I thought she was the hottest girl in school. She was also choir president and I was vice-president of the boys' choir so there could be a reason that she would need to talk to me in the hall. I couldn't think of anything she would say to me, so I had to come up with the best generic response that showed I was a real man. That response was: “So?” It would be a question but wouldn't be rude. It was supposed to be laid back and casual. I was convinced that was what James Bond would do if he was still in junior high.

Even though I had a strict rule about not talking to myself while in the shower, I decided to give it a try. The first time I said “so,” it sounded silly. The second was too mean. The third seemed like I was being sarcastic. But then I realized that I was still pretending and real men

don't play make believe. I wasn't sure how to fix this problem. I didn't know how I could start acting like a real man if I couldn't try it out in my bedroom. The only thing I knew to do was get out of the shower and dry off.

At first, I put a towel around my waist and picked up my dirty clothes so I could take them to the laundry room, but then I looked at my saggy nipples and I could see my belly hanging over my towel. I didn't know if Morgan's door was still closed or if my dad was inside. Even though his nipples were saggy too, he said it was from muscle loss which was okay but mine was from fat which was embarrassing. I put the clothes back down on the floor and peeked out the door. No one was in the hallway so I ran to my bedroom, only a few steps away in the opposite direction from Morgan's room. I put on my baggiest clothes then went and retrieved the dirty ones so I could take them to the laundry room. Mom had her head in the dryer when I walked in.

"After you vacuum the hallway, I need you to dust the floorboards," she said, her voice echoing inside the metal drum.

"But I've been helping Dad all morning."

"And now you're helping me," she said taking her head out with a tiny ball of lint in her hand.

"Morgan's not doing anything," I protested though I knew what Mom's response would be.

"She's studying. And when you're in high school, and if you take school more seriously, and if you take harder classes like she is, then we'll let you study and do homework on the weekends too."

Morgan figured out this trick when she was in seventh grade. If she claimed there was some big test on Monday or some paper to write, Mom and Dad would let her sit in her room all day instead of helping with the yard work or cleaning the house. Then, once the rest of us were done and showered, she would come out of her room to eat dinner and watch TV. I tried the same thing once but I couldn't sit in my bedroom that long. The first time I came out for a snack and drink of water, Dad said I must not need to study that bad and told me to put on work clothes so I could help him fix the fence. This job entailed me standing behind him while he nailed new posts up. I handed him a new posts when he finished hammering. A task he could have easily accomplished by himself. My dad hated working alone and came up with any excuse to have someone help, even if help meant stand and watch. Silently. Work was always done in silence.

I dropped my dirty clothes into the pile Mom indicated with her head and got the vacuum. The hallway was long but narrow so the chore only took a couple of minutes to finish. Dusting baseboards, however, was not so easy. Mom had a rag out for me already so I wet it in the kitchen and started in the corner. Part of the problem with this chore was finding a comfortable way of doing it. I never knew if I should stay on my feet and bend over or if should walk around on my knees. Every position was uncomfortable, but the bigger issue was that there was no way of making it fun. There was nothing I could imagine doing, no way to pretend that it was something exciting, so I decided this would be a good time to practice being a real man. I wouldn't pretend. I wouldn't be silly. I would walk around dusting baseboards like a real man.

After making my way around the kitchen, I understood why my father spent so much time out in the yard. There was no way to feel like a real man while bending over with a rag. Though I didn't think sitting in the yard pulling weeds with a screw driver was much better. I didn't understand why Mom would want to do this chore either. I couldn't see how cleaning the

house made her feel womanly or whatever the female version of manly was. Mom didn't go around talking about what it meant to be a real woman. I definitely didn't feel like an adult while bending over with the rag, waddling around and bumping my head into the walls.

I finally gave up on trying to dust like a real man and laid down on the linoleum floor. This was the fastest way. I would lie on my back and push myself with my feet as I ran a rag over the floorboards. This was the only way to make the process painless. I had even seen my mom do it this way. I went down one side of the living room wall that led into the hallway. I went down the hallway, passing Morgan's room, our bathroom, my bedroom, then started coming down the opposite side. I was humming some song that Morgan was playing in her bedroom and was almost to the end of the hallway when I ran into Dad's foot.

"What are you doing?" he asked hovering over me, only wearing his boxers. He, too, had been instructed to change in the garage.

"Cleaning the baseboards," I said turning over and sitting up. I didn't like him hovering over me like that. I was worried if he moved the wrong way I would see more than I wanted to.

"Why are you sliding around like that?"

"It's the easiest way," I said. "I've seen Mom do it this way."

Dad rolled his eyes and got down on one knee. He took the rag away from me.

"Look," he said. "Do it like this." He stayed on one knee and bent over to wipe the boards down. He would wipe back and forth three or four times then move a few feet and wipe again.

"This way you'll actually get them clean."

"They are clean," I said pointing to the other side of the hallway where I had already been.

“Do it again,” he said handing me the rag. He tried to push himself up off the floor but stopped. I heard bones crack. He cringed and put his hand on his back. He tried to straighten up. This was too painful so he stopped. I asked if he needed help but he only glared at me. He finally stood up by putting one hand on his knee and one on the wall. He mumbled something about sitting in the yard too long as he walked away.

“Dad’s getting old,” Morgan said. She scared me a little since I didn’t realize she had opened the door and was listening to our conversation. “Don’t let him give you shit. You’re doing it the easiest way possible.”

I didn’t re-dust the entire house, but I did start cleaning the way Dad showed me just in case he came back to check. I cleaned the living room and the laundry room then went and did my bedroom even though I didn’t think Mom would check. Morgan was on her own. My dad had gone into his room and shut the door so he could take a shower. I didn’t want to walk in on him naked so I had gone through the rest of the house, but I also wasn’t going to stand around for thirty minutes until he decided to come out. My parents always barged into mine and Morgan’s rooms, they never knocked or asked to come in, so it served him right for me to walk in.

The shower was on when I went inside. I would have some kind of warning before Dad walked out so I started to dust as quickly as possible. I was half way down the first wall when I realized my dad was talking. He wasn’t actually in the shower but standing in front of the vanity. He was on the other side of the wall so I couldn’t see him, but there wasn’t a door between the vanity and the bedroom so I had to be careful he didn’t catch me snooping.

I sat with my back up against the wall as close to the doorway as I felt was safe. I couldn’t hear everything he said but he was definitely talking to himself. He was saying, “I’m going to give it to you” in a vaguely threatening way. Then he would say, “you just wait, you’ll

see, just wait.” He was talking in a weird voice that sounded kind of like his Robert De Niro impression. Dad loved De Niro and was always quoting lines from his movies even though Morgan and I were strictly prohibited from seeing any of his films. Dad kept quoting lines from movies that I had never seen but I assumed they were from De Niro’s more villainous roles since they were angry and somewhat hostile.

I had to cover my mouth to keep from laughing. Just a few hours earlier Dad said that real men don’t play make believe, but he was looking in the mirror pretending to be someone else. Just like I did before I took a shower! Suddenly, Dad seemed less like the parent who never understood me and more like a friend. It was like the time I farted during choir rehearsal when all the choirs were together and one of the eighth graders put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Don’t worry, dude. We all do it.” Then he farted louder than I had to prove his point.

I had fallen on my side from laughing so much and trying to not make a sound. I sat up so I could listen more but Dad wasn’t talking. I crouched on my toes so I could hide behind the bed if he walked in the room, but I really hoped he would quote a few more movie lines first.

“I don’t think it’s going to happen,” my dad said suddenly in a voice that was not Robert De Niro. It was a voice I had never heard come from him. It was sad and defeated. Not the way a real man should talk.

“That’s okay,” I heard my mom say. “Just help me up.” Her knees cracked.

I had no idea Mom was in there with him. I really had to cover my mouth to not make noise. I didn’t know why Dad would quote lines from movies Mom didn’t like or why Mom would be silent the whole time. Usually, she would hit Dad on the shoulder and tell him to stop when he started one of his quoting rants. I realized Mom could come into the room at any moment and I quickly hid behind the bed. I huddled in the corner making sure I could only be

seen if she purposefully looked around the room. She told Dad it was okay. She said that she wasn't upset. Then I heard her walking through the bedroom and shutting the door behind her.

"Fucking worthless dick shit fuck," Dad said more loudly than he had been talking earlier. He hit the counter and then I heard him shut the door to the bathroom.

I was starting to realize what I had heard. Ronnie had told me about hearing the same thing the summer before. He had walked home from a slumber party at a neighbor's house. His parents were in their bed when he walked in their room so everyone knew what was going on and no one could pretend it didn't happen. What I couldn't figure out in that moment, though, was if this made Dad a real man or if this was what happened when someone tried to be a real man when they weren't. Either way, it didn't seem to be a fun experience.

As I sat huddled in the corner thinking about why my dad was so upset and what my mom was telling him to not be angry about, I heard her calling me from the other side of the house. I started to dust the baseboards. If I could dust them and walk out of the room before she came out of the hallway, I could pretend I was never in there. I went around the room as fast as I could and made my exit. Mom was standing in the living room and saw me come out.

"What are doing?" she asked.

"Cleaning the baseboards," I said.

"How long have you been in there?"

I made a face to show how annoyed I was from all the questions.

"Why was the door shut?" she asked before I could answer how long I was in there.

"Was I not supposed to dust behind the door?" I had learned from watching Morgan that sarcasm annoyed our mother and usually caused her to walk away. I didn't want her to ask me anymore questions.

“Have you finished the whole house?”

“Everything but Morgan’s room.”

She took the rag from me and said that’s fine under her breath. She turned around and started to walk away but stopped and looked at me again. I don’t think my heart had ever beat so fast. My hands were sweaty. I asked if she wanted me to do something else. This was a mistake. She knew I was guilty of something when I offered to do more chores. She said no and walked back to the laundry room. I escaped to my bedroom. I pulled a box of comic books out from under my bed and started to read. This was another thing real men didn’t do. They didn’t read comics. Mom was just happy that I was reading so she would take me to the store every Wednesday to buy a few new ones. I would put them in my backpack until I got home then hide them in the box under my bed. Dad said if Mom could prohibit me from watching De Niro movies, he could ban me from reading comic books. Mom said we would tell Dad about all of this once I graduated from high school.

After looking through a couple of comics I had already read and trying to re-read some of my favorites, I gave up and just stared at the wall. I always wanted to be a real man. Ever since my father started making comments about what a real man was, I wanted to be those things even if most of those things didn’t seem fun. But if what I heard was Dad being a real man, I didn’t know if that’s who I wanted to be anymore. I didn’t want to spend my day pulling weeds and yelling at my penis.

There was a light knock on my door. No one ever knocked so I didn’t know how to react. Mom asked if she could come in and I said yes. She walked over to where I was sitting on the floor and touched my head. She said that dinner was ready and everyone was at the table waiting on me. I apologized and said I hadn’t heard them call.

“Oh, I didn’t,” Mom said. “I just decided to come and get you this time. Hide those so your dad doesn’t find them.” She pointed at my comic books and closed the door behind her. She was being weird but I wasn’t going to say anything. Weirdness was better than talking about what happened.

When I got into the dining room everyone was putting food on their plates. I did the same and we started eating in silence. Morgan pulled out her phone and started to text but Mom took it away. They had the usual argument about no texting at the dinner table. Morgan complained because no one was talking so what did it matter. Mom won the argument as usual and we went back to eating in silence.

“Did you see how your son was cleaning the baseboards?” Dad asked Mom.

He always referred to me as “your son” when I did something that annoyed him. He also liked talking about me like I wasn’t in the room. Usually, Mom would join in, but this time she only shrugged and continued eating.

“And he kept throwing the weeds all around the yard,” Dad said. “He couldn’t concentrate and just pull them out of the ground like a normal person.”

“Pulling weeds is a pretty boring job,” Mom said.

Dad didn’t like that Mom wasn’t taking his side. He looked at me and frowned.

“You need to learn how to concentrate,” he said. I just nodded my head not knowing what else to do and not wanting to argue with him. “It doesn’t matter if the job is boring. You have to learn how to stick with it and get it done. That’s called responsibility. That’s what real men do.”

We sat in awkward silence for a moment. Then Mom put down her fork and reached over to mess up my hair.

“It’s okay,” she said. “He’s just a boy.”

I didn’t protest, even though I would normally be furious, because at that moment, I wanted nothing more than to be just a boy.

The Farm and the Family

The dust was settling on the dirt road that led to the picturesque white farmhouse, with its drooping shutters and fading picket fence, and to the dirty trailer house next door, with its drooping roof and growing junk piles. The Reed family was busy unloading their minivan and putting their suitcases in the dusty house. The kids, Heather and Hunter, were in no hurry to finish unpacking. Their great-uncle, Sully, whom they had not seen in five years, had come from the trailer and said: come feed the goat. Sully was a large man with a grubby white t-shirt and oddly manicured hands, not someone the teenage siblings wanted to follow behind a trailer.

The kids had looked to their parents for an excuse to decline the offer. Hill, their father, saw no problem with the invitation. Growing up, Hill had often been left in the company of his uncle and with the exception of swallowing a live minnow once - which didn't make him sick but also didn't let him breathe under water like Uncle Sully had promised - nothing bad had happened. Hill asked Uncle Sully to give them a hand, but Sully just laughed and spit and walked away. Hill was not surprised. Rosemary, Hill's wife and the children's mother, stood in the kitchen, not ready to socialize with her husband's family just yet.

After the van was unloaded, Heather and Hunter left their parents in the house to find Uncle Sully. They had hoped to get out of the excursion again and offered to clean the farmhouse. Rosemary was more than happy to accept her children's offer to clean since it was the first time in her memory that they had ever asked to do housework, but Hill waved them off, telling them to go explore.

The kids found Sully by the trailer house picking a cigarette butt off the ground. As Heather watched her great-uncle's crack slide above his belt, she wished, for a moment, that she was back in Fort Worth talking to the old lady who couldn't understand why a pretty girl like her wasn't already married. Hunter, too, desperately wanted to look away from the old man's emerging ass but was quite astounded at the effort Uncle Sully was putting into picking up a cigarette butt. Sully's belly made it hard for him to bend over. He used to tell himself to lose weight in these moments, now he makes sure there's a real good reason before he bends. To the kids' amazement, Sully lit the cigarette, took a couple of drags, and then threw it back on the ground. He then meticulously cleaned his fingers with a toothpick that had been in his mouth and pulled a small bottle of hand sanitizer out his pocket. He explained to the kids they could tell the quality of a person by the cleanliness of their hands. He then walked around a pile of empty bottles of oil, antifreeze, and wiper fluid.

"Did you see that protrusion on the side of Uncle Sully's belly?" Heather asked.

"The protrusion wasn't as weird as putting the toothpick back in his mouth," Hunter said.

Without saying a word, Sully lifted out of a pin the small goat the three of them had come to feed. The poor thing was frail and the sudden extraction from its bed left it shaking and confused. Uncle Sully stepped back as he took the toothpick out his mouth and placed it behind his ear. The kids were not sure what response Sully expected. The goat looked sick and pitiful. Heather and Hunter both wished, as if they were children again, to be within eyesight of their parents. Feelings very similar to the ones felt when they suddenly found themselves alone in a grocery aisle at age five were starting to creep up.

"It's cute," Heather said after a long, awkward pause where they all looked at the goat like people gathered around a campfire.

“It ain’t cute,” Uncle Sully said, throwing the goat back into the pin. “It’s meat. You call it cute, you ain’t gonna be able to cut its throat.”

Heather cringed, less at the thought of an animal being killed and more at the idea that her uncle might try to feed her this animal. Hunter cringed at the thought of the animal being killed, which kind of surprised him. Sully pulled out his bottle of hand sanitizer and told the kids they were going to need some too even though they hadn’t touched the goat. Hunter stuck out his hands first. Sully put a big glob of the stuff in his own hand then rubbed it on Hunter’s. He did the same with Heather. Again, the siblings wished they were somewhere else. Specifically, back in the house with their parents.

Hill and Rosemary were appreciating the silence their children had left behind. The dusty sheets were off the beds and replaced by clean ones brought from home. Hill was attacking every corner of the house with a broom and dust pan while Rosemary was up to her elbows in soap suds and bleach. She had pulled down every dish in the cabinets and slowly, steadily worked her way through the pile of dusty jars, mugs, and plates. She was wondering if Heather had any hand lotion when the side door opened and slammed close.

“Oh. Hi, Marge,” Rosemary said, pausing to look over her shoulder. “Sully said you had gone to town.”

“That’s what I get for marrying a dumb oaf,” Marge said. “He lies to hear himself talk.”

Rosemary let out a burst of nervous laughter. She knew Marge would never volunteer to help with the dishes. After years of awkward conversations with her in-laws, Rosemary had learned the best way to converse with them was by choosing not speak eighty percent of the time.

“I like your bracelets,” Marge said, fingering the pile of jewelry Rosemary had taken off and laid on the kitchen table.

“Oh. Thanks,” Rosemary said, turning briefly. “I like your ring.”

“It’s a cheap cigar wrapper,” Marge said after a moment of silence. “I wear it when I’m boiling chicken bones, so they don’t burn.”

Again, silence fell in the kitchen leaving Rosemary to stew in her own awkwardness. She thought about asking how Grandma Reed was or how Marge’s kids were doing, instead, she kept washing dishes silently telling herself she was only trying to be nice. Rosemary used to like coming to the farmhouse before marriage and kids. She didn’t remember the place being so isolated and dirty. She didn’t remember Sully being so gross. Marge hadn’t been around back then. Sully was married to a sweet lady whose name escaped Rosemary but had enough sense to run-off with a tractor salesman the first chance she got. Sully went through two other wives before finding Marge who actually put up with him. When Rosemary started dating Hill she lived in a two bedroom house with her mom and brother in Cotton Center. Maybe that’s why she liked the farmhouse back then. It was larger than her home and there were never fewer than ten family members around when she and Hill showed up. People were always playing dominoes or shelling peas or throwing horseshoes. Growing up, Rosemary and her mom sat in separate rooms reading while her brother stayed out until three in the morning. Marrying Hill allowed Rosemary to jump into a middle class life style and she had become used to the four bedroom house they now lived in with a large, local grocery store half a mile away. As an adult she finally lived in a real town with a population of a couple hundred thousand. Cotton Center was a few hundred when she lived there with her mother. The farmhouse wasn’t even in a town, but sat on some farm to market road in the middle of Knox County. Rosemary’s newly found middle class status

made the farmhouse seem decrepit instead of quaint. Marge was still standing by the door not speaking. Rosemary could hear Hill sweeping the back porch and singing to himself. She wished she could be out there with him.

At the back of the house, Hill had leaned the broom in a corner and was sitting on one of the three small beds that filled the screened-in porch. He was flipping through an old comic book that belonged to his father or Sully or one of his other two uncles. Hill was glad he didn't have four children, let alone four boys like Grandma Reed. Heather and Hunter were enough. He remembered sleeping on the porch before the screens were put in. He and his two older cousins would lie on old army cots, swatting at mosquitoes, wishing it wasn't too hot to sleep. Heather and Hunter came around the corner of the house and talked to Hill through the screen.

“Uncle Sully is weird,” Heather said.

“Why else would Gramps not invite his brother to the family reunions?” Hunter asked.

Instead of agreeing with his kids or making an excuse for his dad's – Gramps – lack of loyalty to his family, Hill told them to go help their mother with the dishes. As they walked around to the front of the house Hill looked at the four pictures hanging above the three small beds. Grandma and Grandpa Reed had sketches made of their four boys soon after they moved into the farmhouse. Hill's father said it must have been someone local because they wouldn't have been able to afford anyone else. In the picture, Sully looked to be about ten, his hair was cut short and slick with grease. He had the look of a child who desperately did not want to be sitting still for so long. The other three boys were smiling happily. The middle two looked almost identical while the youngest, still an infant, wore a dress.

“Handsome devil there on the left, eh?” Sully said through the screen. He collected snot from the back his throat and spat it onto the side of the house. Hill felt himself gag slightly at the sound.

“Why weren’t you named after one of the apostles?” Hill asked.

“Shit, I couldn’t of been named after no saint. Just wouldn’t of worked for me.”

“Maybe if you’d been, you wouldn’t be quite so rotten,” Hill said.

Both the men laughed and Sully launched into an explanation of how Sullivan was a family name. He said that Grandma Reed wanted to name him Judas or something, but Grandpa Reed said he wasn’t having it, his first son had to be given a name in the family. After that, Grandma Reed was free to name her children after all the saints she wanted to.

“You mean apostles,” Hill said.

“Aw, hell, I don’t know what I mean. It was just one of those Catholic things.”

“Grandma Reed was Catholic?”

“Shit, boy, where’ve you been? Course, she was Catholic. Didn’t Johnny Boy ever tell you that? Don’t really matter since your Grandpa Reed never let her go to Catholic church. Said Catholics were rich and uppity. And we’re good Methodist folk.”

The men could hear Rosemary, still washing dishes, and the kids, who may or may not have been helping but were definitely arguing. Hill and Sully both turned towards the cotton field and watched a gentle breeze run through the rows, across the pecan trees and up into the house. Hill coughed after getting a whiff of Sully’s body odor. After standing there for a moment Sully launched into another story explaining Grandma Reed’s Catholic background. He said that Grandma and Grandpa Reed told a couple different stories about her family depending on how drunk they were or how angry one was at the other. Both agreed that she was an orphan by the

time she was twelve, but that was where the certainty ended. Grandma Reed claimed that her grandparents were rich Yankees, like the Kennedys, and that her parents had moved to Texas to make it big in oil. On the way out, both of her parents died and she never made it past Arkansas. But Grandpa Reed said that she was Indian and her grandparents had been converted by a priest before the Alamo became a fort.

“The Alamo part is probably bullshit,” Sully said. “But she may have been Indian. We have no idea what her last name was.”

As the men fell into another silence Hill worried that Sully would ask about the anniversary party they had come from in Fort Worth. Sully liked to make comments about his three younger brothers’ money and friends and cars. He claimed to be the good son who stayed on the land and worked the farm, but Sully had rented the land to the neighboring farmer the day after his father died.

“You come by and see your grandma before you leave,” Sully said walking away.

“That’s kind of why we came,” Hill said. “But, wouldn’t she be more comfortable if you brought her over here?”

“Naw, she doesn’t like leaving the trailer so much. The house makes her sad. She just starts complaining about losing the farm.”

Sully used air quotes incorrectly and walked off around the corner. Hill noticed Sully’s shiny fingernails. Hill’s dad always made gay jokes about Sully and his fingernails, saying that was Sully’s way of signaling the cowboys at the bar who swung the wrong way. Hill could hear Sully coughing and spitting until the door to the trailer house slammed shut. Another breeze came through the cotton field. This time Hill was able to enjoy the smell of dirt and young plants that came into the porch. Hill’s dad had told him to call as soon as he saw Grandma Reed. The

three youngest brothers were worried about their mother, but not worried enough to talk to Sully. Hill cringed at the thought of going into that trailer house.

* * *

“You know he still keeps a piss pot under his bed,” Hill’s dad had told him. This was up in downtown Fort Worth at the anniversary party where Hill’s parents and their friends ate shrimp-spinach quesadillas and drank champagne.

“Yeah,” Paul, the youngest of the four brothers, added. “And did you hear about the time I went over to his place when he was living in Odessa?”

Paul didn’t wait for Hill to answer, but launched into a story about how Sully was supposed to be making loads of money working the oil fields and sending it back to their parents. This was after Sully had put a lien on the farm so he could buy a boat and impress some girl he had met in Knox City, even though the closest lake was about a hundred miles away. Grandpa Reed got tired of not seeing any of this money, so he put Paul, who was about fourteen, on a bus out to West Texas. Paul found Sully living in a ratty motel with migrant workers and prostitutes. The room was a mess and stunk to high heaven.

The first night Paul was in town, Sully went out drinking. Paul was too nervous to go anywhere or even step outside the room, so he went to bed. He pulled back the sheets which Sully had been sleeping on top of.

“In the middle of the bed,” Paul said, gesturing and sloshing his champagne, “is a dead rat. Squashed by big, fat Sully in his sleep.”

The brothers laughed at the disgusting image. Hill noticed some of his parents' friends who wore turquoise cuff links and big hoop earrings were looking at the two brothers with a certain amount of disapproval. The brothers were drunk enough to not care what their friends thought at the moment.

"I put my clothes back on, ransacked the motel room, and went back to the bus station that night. Left with five bucks, a pistol, and a fifth of whisky."

The two brothers again laughed hysterically.

"Pop got ten bucks for the pistol. It was the only fifteen dollars we ever saw from the slob," Paul said.

The brothers kept laughing and gesturing with their glasses feeling the effects of alcohol mixed with nostalgia. They walked over to their friends, who would be horrified by such a vulgar story. The Fort Worth crowd was not the type to crack jokes about growing up poor and having to take care of their good-for-nothing brother. They buried those memories deep inside and, instead, admired one another's new Cadillacs.

* * *

A shiver went down Hill's spine as he thought about finding dead rats in the bed his grandmother was sleeping in. As he walked into the kitchen, he hoped he could convince Rosemary to go to the trailer with him.

"Where's Heather?" he asked his wife and son who were playing cards at the kitchen table. Neither Rosemary nor Hunter was excited about the intrusion. Not only were they

intensely focusing on their game of gin rummy, they didn't want Hill to join since he usually won.

"She went over to see Grandma Reed," Hunter said after drawing a card.

"And you guys didn't go over with her?"

Rosemary snorted at her husband's question and laid a card down.

"Can I play the next hand?" Hill asked sitting down at the small table.

Heather hadn't stopped to think about why her parents were avoiding the trailer house. After finishing the dishes, she merely announced to her mom and Hunter that she was going over to see Grandma Reed. As the smell of stale cigarette smoke and moth balls seeped out of the couch and covered her in what felt like a visible film, Heather thought that maybe her parents were onto something by staying away.

"We should go over to the house since there's more room there," she suggested to Sully who was sitting in a recliner, shirtless, an ash tray lying on his belly.

"Maw doesn't like to go over there," Sully said. "As you can tell, it takes Marge long enough to get your Grandma Reed out of bed and dressed."

Heather asked why Grandma Reed wasn't already dressed since it was six o'clock in the evening. She was horrified when Sully said that there wasn't no reason to get her all dressed and made up if there wasn't nobody to come see her. There was a crash in the back room.

"Leave me alone, you old heifer," Grandma Reed yelled.

Heather could hear the walker scraping along the dirty linoleum floor and, eventually, her great-grandmother came around the corner into the living room. Heather stood up and greeted her.

“Who do you belong to?” Grandma Reed asked ignoring Heather’s attempted hug.

“Hill and Rosemary.”

“Oh, Johnny Boy’s boy,” she said sitting down.

Heather marveled at how such a frail lady could speak with such authority and venom. Marge walked in and took a seat next to Heather. The whole group sat in uncomfortable silence. Heather watched as the protrusion on Sully’s belly almost knocked over his beer every time he took a breath. Sully had put out the cigarette and was now filing his nails with the kit that had been sitting on the table beside him.

“You know we just came from Gramps’s fortieth wedding anniversary?” Heather finally said in an attempt to break the silence.

“Who?” Grandma Reed said.

“Johnny Boy,” Sully yelled.

“Oh.”

“It was really fancy,” Heather said. “They had an ice sculpture and champagne. It was right in the middle of downtown Fort Worth.”

“Bastards,” Grandma Reed spat. “Those boys couldn’t even come down to take me to their party.”

She sat silently for a moment before telling Heather how her boys didn’t even grow up with a radio, but now they were living the fancy life with fancy cars in the fancy city. She said it took her a week on the back of her brother’s horse to get all the way from Arkansas down to Texas. Heather was fascinated to find out that her great-grandmother rode on the back of a horse for a week. She thought that there must be stories about stopping along the way and meeting people and sleeping outside. Heather asked what the trip was like.

“Hell! Had to hold a damn chicken the whole time. How many kids you got, anyway?”

“Me or my dad?”

“You, girl?” Grandma Reed said.

“I don’t have any kids. I’m only nineteen and not even finished with college.”

“Whatcha going for?” Grandma Reed asked.

Heather wasn’t sure if this was a question about her major or a comment about the frivolity of a female going to school.

“Pre-med,” Heather decided was the safest answer.

“What?” Grandma Reed asked.

“She’s gonna be a nurse, Maw,” Sully yelled from his chair.

“Oh. I knew a couple of nurses,” Grandma Reed said. “Followed the soldiers over to the war.”

“That’s nice,” was all Heather could think of to say. “But I’m not going –“

“They were hussies,” she spat. “That’s why they went. All came back with the clap.”

“I’m not going to be a nurse, though,” Heather said before Grandma Reed could continue. “I’m going to be a pediatrician. You know, a kid’s doctor. And, hopefully, go work in Africa.”

“You got a thing for the blacks?” Sully asked.

Heather quickly made her exit after that comment. At her grandparents’ party in Fort Worth, she had listened to a lady talk about her bridge club for half an hour. When she escaped that conversation she had walked into one about how we were paying for these illegals to become educated and take our jobs. Finally, she and Hunter had been able to grab a couple of glasses of champagne and sneak off into a corner. Heather complained that their grandparents’

friends were completely out of touch. All they talked about was their money and they didn't even seem to like one another all that much.

"You just say that because you don't have any money," Hunter said.

Heather punched him in the arm and made him slosh the champagne.

"Go get me more," he said.

"I'm just excited to see Grandma Reed," Heather told him when she got back with two more glasses. "Staying in the farmhouse where Gramps grew up. Listening to the stories Uncle Sully tells about staying on the farm."

"Why do you think their stories will be any better than Gramps' and Uncle Paul's?"

At the time, Heather thought this was a stupid and uninformed comment. Gramps and his brothers were out of touch from living in Dallas too long and working for banks and insurance agencies. Uncle Sully still lived on the farm and appreciated the simple things in life. This was what she had thought at the time, at least. As Heather walked across the dirt driveway, she couldn't decide if her younger brother was smarter than he appeared or so simple minded he couldn't help but make sense.

"How's Grandma Reed?" Hill asked as Heather walked in the door.

"Fine," she said.

"How does the place look?" her mom asked.

"Disgusting."

Heather sat down at the table and watched her family finish their card game.

"You gonna join the rest of us?" Hunter asked.

Lady and Mateo

She walks into the convenience store at three-thirty every morning. She buys a jug of milk, a box of crackers, and a banana. She does this every night. At least, every night that Mateo is working. She showed up about four months ago and hasn't missed a night or changed her shopping list. He wishes he could refer to her as something other than She, but that is all he has and Mateo is too shy to say more than, That will be five thirty-six, please. She is the only person Mateo has ever seen buy one of the bananas. He isn't too picky when it comes to food, but Mateo knows he would never touch fruit sold in a convenience store. As far as he can tell though, She has no problem with it.

Oh, there She is, Mateo says to himself as he sees her crossing the street. Or, when Mateo is in the back and hears the bell ring, he thinks, who is coming in? Oh, it's She. He spends plenty of time trying to guess her name, age, and reason for coming to the store while even the heaviest drinkers, smokers, and stoners are making their way towards a bed, bench, or patch of grass. Mateo tries to come up with a story like he saw his sister, Jules, and her friends do when they were all in high school. Usually, Jules was mean when she would come up with stories. Mateo tries to be nice. Always be nice, his mother would say. He tries to guess her profession. Lawyer. Doctor. Maybe she's a nanny. Mateo knows none of these professions work at night and they pay too much for her to need to buy food at the Korner Kwick Mart. Mateo's next guess is

some kind of superhero. He imagines her jumping from building to building looking for criminals. But, Mateo knows all of these fantasies are a bit silly so his imagination never gets him past She.

Mateo is reading an old Superman comic book when She walks in at three-thirty, as usual. She picks up milk, crackers, and a banana, but then breaks with tradition and pulls out a small bottle of peach flavored wine cooler. Another item Mateo has never sold before. She brings everything to the counter and waits. Mateo knows She is well over twenty-one – just as much as he knows he isn't supposed to sell alcohol after midnight in the state of Texas – but he decides to be a rebel, maybe even a villain, and he asks for her I.D. During his superhero fantasies, Mateo decided She was a solid forty-five, possibly older, but he thinks checking She's I.D. is a clever way to learn her name and age without She accusing him of anything funny.

“Really?” She questions as She pulls her driver's license out and hands it over the counter.

Mateo always has trouble finding all the information he needs when carding people. Customers usually become snippy and make rude comments while he tries to figure up their age. Their annoyed sighs and finger taps on the counter fluster Mateo causing him to take even more time. He wonders if people know they are making things worse for themselves, but he also feels that if he were only a little smarter they wouldn't get annoyed in the first place. The name on an I.D. is easy enough to spot: Regina L. St. Clair. Mateo reads it three times to make sure he will remember. After a while he finds the age, but has to look at it longer than usual, even longer than his usual, before he is convinced he is doing the math right. The date is ten years after his own birthday. That means if he is forty-three, Regina is thirty-three. That is like fifteen years younger than he thought. Mateo isn't sure how to react to this new information. He often takes longer to

process new information than his most people, at least that's what Jules tells him. But he does not usually have someone watching him as he processes.

Mateo gives Regina a quick, apologetic smile. Jules would be telling him to hurry if she were here. She always tells Mateo to hurry. But Mateo has never tried to imagine what would happen if he learned She's name. He didn't really think they would ever talk, though in the back of his mind he knows he likes her. From the first time she walked in the store, he had what Jules would have referred to as a crush. The problem he is having as he looks at the ID is whether or not he can have a crush on Regina if she is that much younger than him. Jules always tells him he is being creepy when he talks to or even about women. He doesn't know if looking at Regina's license for so long is creepy. He hopes it seems normal. He gives her the apologetic smile again, the one he practices in the mirror so he can appear normal.

"It's really me," she says taking the driver's license out of Mateo's hand.

She is almost out the door before Mateo gets up the nerve to say anything.

"You have a good night, Regina," he says.

She stops half way out the door, the plastic bag hanging by her side. For a moment, Mateo thinks she is upset. He thinks she is going to yell or curse at him. That usually happens at least once a shift. Somebody, usually drunk, gets mad and starts screaming as they walk out of the Korner Kwick Mart.

"It's Lady," she finally says. "My first name is Regina, but I go by Lady."

She then swings the door wide with a flick of her wrist, spins around, and leaves. Mateo feels that she has the attitude of a movie star and thinks of her as Demi Moore from *Striptease* or Elizabeth Berkley in *Showgirls*. He doesn't really like these comparisons. Lady seems sweet and nice, the girls in those movies are not. Maybe she is more like Catwoman or Elasti-girl.

When She walks in the next night, Mateo has to remind himself that She is now Lady. He should think of her as Lady, the beautiful, younger woman who comes every night with a bizarre grocery list. Mateo notices her walking across the street towards the store. He has never noticed her leaving the Frost Building before and decides this will help when he is trying to make up a story about why she shows up at this time every night. Mateo tells himself he will stand at the counter and say hello when she walks in. But he worries that Lady has seen him talking to himself so he loses his nerve and goes into the back.

“Sorry about that,” Mateo says after hiding in the back a little too long. Lady is waiting with her three items at the counter.

“It’s alright . . .” Lady says with a grin.

“That will be five thirty-six,” Mateo says. He is looking at Lady’s hands waiting for the money, but he is not handed the usually one and five-dollar bills.

“I was kind of expecting to learn your name,” Lady says after waiting a moment.

“Why?” Mateo asks. He is worried that he did something wrong, that maybe he upset her last night by looking at her I.D. She probably wants to complain to his boss and his eyes dart over to the box for comment cards.

“I guess – just common courtesy,” Lady says. Her response comes out like a question. “You know my name. And, I’ve been coming in here for a while. We should be on a first name basis.”

Mateo has never had such a long conversation with a customer. At least, not a sober customer. He was given the night shift so he wouldn’t have long conversations with customers. The store’s manager claims Mateo makes people feel uncomfortable when he talks for too long. But, this conversation is exciting and unexpected.

“I’m Mateo,” he says a little too loudly. “No wine cooler tonight?” He takes the money that Lady offers.

“Oh, last night I was celebrating.”

“Celebrating what?” Mateo asks as he concentrates on Lady’s change.

“My anniversary,” she says.

Mateo freezes for a moment. He doesn’t know what to do with this new piece of information. Apparently, Lady is on her way home where some boyfriend or husband waits in bed. He is pretty sure this means he can’t like Lady, or have crush as his sister says. Mateo is almost certain that having a crush on a woman who has a boyfriend and is ten years younger than him will make people feel uncomfortable. He is probably making Lady feel uncomfortable just talking to her. But he also feels betrayed by the only friend he has made while working. Mateo hadn’t thought about it till that moment, but he had assumed he was Lady’s only friend as well. Apparently, this is not the case and he feels hurt. Though he knows his sister would say that Lady didn’t owe him anything so he shouldn’t be hurt.

“How long?” Mateo asks quietly. Lady is holding her hand out for the change. Mateo stares at her hand.

“Six months.”

“People celebrate six month anniversaries?”

“Most people celebrate every month they’ve been out of prison,” she says.

“What were you in prison for?” Mateo asks in the same voice he would ask a drunk what they’ve been up to as his boss has trained him. He does finally look away from her hand, though he isn’t looking at her face like his sister tells him to do.

Lady doesn't answer his question or wait for her change. "I think I am going to go now," she says and walks out with her bag of groceries.

Mateo comes out from behind the counter to watch her as she walks into the parking lot. As Lady heads down the street, Mateo walks outside. He watches as Lady pauses to peel her banana then walks out of sight. Mateo goes back in and takes up his post at the cash register. Not only does he have a new friend, he has a friend who is a criminal. He has never felt more like a superhero than he does right now. Though he can't remember if any superheroes are friends with criminals. Maybe he really is a villain.

By two-thirty the next morning, Mateo is watching the Frost Building, looking for Lady to walk across the street. Mateo is worried that she won't come, that she might break with her routine. Maybe she will go to the 7-11 on the other side of the building. Maybe he scared her away. Mateo called Jules when he woke up earlier in the day. Jules is older, married, with three kids all in high school. He told her all about Lady, how they were on a first name basis, and that she was a criminal.

"That was rude, Mateo," Jules said. "You shouldn't have asked her why she was in prison."

"Why not?"

"It's just rude."

His sister went on to explain how most people, especially women, are not proud of the fact that they have been to prison. She said it was probably hard for Lady to even tell him she was an ex-convict and if she wanted him to know why she was in she would have said it. Jules then went on to give her usual lecture about paying more attention to people's feelings, facial expressions, and body language.

“Were you even looking at her face, Mateo? And watching her lips doesn’t count.”

Mateo usually quit listening when Jules went on one of these rants that always ended with: And that’s why you’re not married. But this time, Mateo thought that maybe she made sense. Lady hadn’t answered his question and left rather abruptly. He probably had upset her. He was probably being creepy. By a quarter after two Mateo is convinced Lady isn’t coming. But, at three-thirty, Lady walks in.

“I’m sorry,” Mateo pretty much shouts even before the door closes behind her.

Lady pauses for a moment. She gives Mateo a stern look and then walks to the back. Mateo knows he has upset her and that they will no longer be friends. He can’t call her Lady anymore. They can’t be on a first name basis. When Lady puts her items on the counter Mateo doesn’t even try to start a conversation but tells her that will be five thirty-six.

“What are you sorry about?” Lady asks. She doesn’t offer him any money.

Mateo stares blankly for a moment. “I was rude yesterday,” he answers.

“A little bit,” she says.

Lady slides six dollars across the counter. Mateo puts everything in a plastic bag before picking up the money and handing the change back. Before Mateo can lift his hand, Lady places hers on top, gently squeezing the sides of his palm. Mateo feels his hand start to sweat immediately. He isn’t sure what this means. Obviously, they are beyond simply being on a first name basis, but does this mean they are more than friends now? He has been so worried that Lady wouldn’t show up that he never thought about her touching him. Is she flirting? Is she going to try and kiss him? Mateo can hear his sister telling him to look at her face, in her eyes, but Mateo can’t look away from their hands. He thinks they have been standing there for an awfully long time, but isn’t sure.

“It’s okay,” Lady says. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Mateo wipes his sweaty hand on his pants. He doesn’t walk out from behind the counter even though he wants to watch Lady walk away again. He is too busy thinking about how she held his hand and he hopes she will do it again tomorrow.

Lady continues to come to the store, she never touches his hand again or complains about the sweat, and Mateo gradually grows less and less awkward around her. Their conversations become longer until one night Lady says, “Go get me a stool or something.”

Mateo goes in the back and brings out the stool the morning-shift lady uses. When he comes back out he finds Lady eating her banana and opening her milk.

“What are you doing?” Mateo asks.

“If I’m going to stay this long talking, I might as well eat. Besides, I would be walking home to an empty apartment.”

“Is this your dinner?” Mateo asks.

“And breakfast.”

Lady explains how she figured out she could survive on this diet when she read an article about how the Irish used to survive on mashed potatoes. She says it isn’t all that healthy but she isn’t going to get scurvy or anything. Mateo nods while thinking about the Sunday lunch his mother makes every week. He doesn’t eat much more than noodles and canned soup on weekdays, but he knows that once a week he will be eating tamales and chicken mole and black beans and rice.

“I don’t have a refrigerator,” Lady says. “But I read a lot about food while I was inside, so I’m not worried about anything spoiling and making me sick.”

Mateo wonders what question he can ask next. He doesn't know if it is going to be rude to ask why she doesn't have a refrigerator or why she can't go eat with her family on Sunday afternoons. He once asked one of Jules' friends about her apartment and Jules said that was creepy. She said he shouldn't ask women about their personal space. The only questions that come to mind are about Lady's refrigerator-less apartment, though.

"I don't really have a lot of options," Lady says with a forced smile, saving Mateo from having to ask a question himself. "I live in a half empty apartment and eat only crackers so I can send money to my son."

This is the most personal thing she has told him since the night he asked her why she was in prison. He can't decide if apologizing is appropriate. He doesn't want to say anything that would make Jules yell at him. What Mateo really wants to do is invite her to Sunday lunch.

"I guess I better go," Lady says, standing and gathering her uneaten meal. "Thanks for the stool."

Mateo takes the stool to the back room.

"Can I invite her to lunch?" he asks his sister over the phone.

"I don't know, Mateo. That seems like an awful big jump. Our family can be a little overwhelming."

Mateo decides to take his sister's advice. The next night he does not ask Lady to lunch but talks about his nieces and nephews as his sister has directed and Lady talks about growing up wealthy in East Texas. They find that they both despise Tejano music, though this is not as much a social statement for Lady as it is for Mateo. They enjoy watching the lame court shows that come on in the middle of the day when most people are at work. Mateo finds out that Lady goes to work at four in the afternoon to get ready to clean the Frost Building. She works ten hour

shifts but is never paid over time. Lady finds out that Mateo writes and draws comic books. It is rare for a person to both write the story and do the art, Mateo assures her. As Lady packs up to walk home she realizes all the milk is gone.

“Go get another,” Mateo says. “Just walk back up to the counter and act like you’re paying. For the cameras. That’s how my boss figured out I was letting a couple of homeless guys get free coffee.”

“Be sure to bring those comic books tomorrow,” Lady says as she walks back towards the counter. She sets the milk down and they mime her actually paying for the extra carton. They both grin. Mateo’s hands are sweating.

The next day, Mateo is ready with three of his comic books. He has finished over thirty but these three are his best. Almost four decades’ worth of work. He has even brought a drawing pad and is sketching out some new characters when Lady comes into the store. Mateo spreads the comics out on the counter so Lady can choose for herself. He is nervous because he hasn’t shown anyone his drawings for years. In high school, one of Jules’ friends found a comic book he had drawn and passed it around at school so everyone could make fun of him. Jules was furious and told Mateo not to let anyone see his drawings. She assured him it was for his own good. To Mateo’s surprise, Lady reads each one. He tries to draw and not pay attention to how fast she is reading or if she is touching the ink on any of the pages.

“Why does your hero have a pet lion?” Lady asks after setting the last comic on the counter.

“It’s not a lion,” Mateo says. “It’s a cat. He couldn’t fit a lion into his apartment.” Mateo laughs.

Lady flips through one of the books. “But right here he takes up the whole couch.”

“Yeah, that was just kind of a mistake.”

Lady asks the name of his hero, but Mateo doesn't really have one. Everyone calls the character dude, and Mateo thinks of him as Hero. Nothing more. She asks who Hero's nemesis is which, again, Mateo can't really answer.

“He fights whoever I draw on the page,” Mateo says.

Lady and Mateo sit silently for a moment. Lady flips through the pages of the comics. This time Mateo is looking at her eyes. Jules always says he can tell if someone is interested or angry or happy by looking into their eyes. But Mateo can't see any of this.

“Do you think it's good?” Mateo asks. He knows, at the very least, that she won't make fun of his drawings like his sister's friends had.

“I've done more than my fair share of false flattery,” Lady says, not answering Mateo's question. “We always had to talk up the guards to get anything done. Even to be treated halfway decently. I decided when I left that I would try my hardest to never give hollow compliments again.”

She looks up at Mateo who is still looking into her eyes. Even though he can't tell what she was thinking or feeling while flipping through the books, he can tell that she is sad. Mateo never expected his books would make people sad but he kind of likes the idea. He is always confused when Jules cries during movies, but Jules says it is a good thing. She likes when movies make her cry. So it is good that Lady is sad. Mateo grins at her.

“No, it's not very good,” Lady says. “I'm sorry.”

Mateo is silent. He flips through one of the comic books that Lady has returned to the counter. He isn't upset with Lady, he probably just misunderstood her face.

“No one has ever told me I was good,” Mateo says.

“But, it’s good to have a hobby. You can always imagine.”

Mateo explains how he imagines being the new Neil Gaiman or Batman, and how he would go on all the late night shows. He would do interviews about how he came up with new characters or how he decided on which mask to wear while fighting crime. But even when he is famous, he will always keep working at the store. It will be his secret identity. These were things he would never tell Jules. He didn’t think they were creepy, but Jules probably would have told him he was weird. Lady tells him how she always imagines going up the elevator to the top floor of the Frost Building, walking into the CEO’s office and laying down her application. The CEO wouldn’t even care that she was a felon, but would see that she was the best candidate and apologize for making her mop his floors.

“I used to be the regional director for a bank just north of Houston,” Lady says.

“Youngest director the bank ever had. There was a rumor going around that I was going to skip over state and go straight to national headquarters.”

“That’s a good one,” Mateo says.

“You don’t believe me?”

“No. That’s a good fantasy about going up to the boss man. I’m glad other people have these weird thoughts like I do. Maybe yours will come true.”

“I think you’ll become a famous cartoonist first,” Lady says.

Mateo’s sister calls the next morning. This is strange since she usually doesn’t call him. He is usually the one who calls to ask her questions. She asks if his new friend’s name happens to be Regina St. Clair. Mateo is impressed the Jules knows so much about Lady.

“I don’t think you should talk to her anymore. She’s dangerous,” Jules says.

Mateo is silent. His sister is sometimes mean but she has never tried to take things away from him. He doesn't understand why Jules is trying to take away the only friend he has made in several years. Besides family, Lady is the only person he talks to on a regular basis. She is the only person who touches him besides the hugs his mom and grandma gives him on Sundays. He doesn't know why but when she touches his hand or every once in a while she pats his shoulder when she leaves, those moments mean much more to him than the hugs from family. Now Jules is trying to take this all away. Jules asks if he is still on the phone, he has been quiet for so long. Mateo mumbles yes, but doesn't say anything else. Jules explains that she saw something on the news the night before. She saw something about Lady. Her sentence had been reduced by fifteen years and her husband's family is throwing a fit.

"She never told you why she was in prison, did she?" Jules asks.

"No, and you told me not to ask her. You're the one who said I was rude, now you're being rude, Jules." Mateo is angry. He doesn't remember being this upset with his sister since they were in middle school. Jules usually tried to protect him, but now she is ruining everything.

"Lady shot her husband, Mateo. This might sound dramatic, but I don't want you to be next."

Mateo still doesn't respond. When he thought about being friends with a criminal, he never thought about that person doing bad things to him. But if Lady was a thief, she might steal from him. If she was a drug dealer, she might make him buy drugs. So if Jules is right and Lady is a murderer, she might murder him. He still isn't sure that he could stop talking to her though.

"I'm trying to protect, Mateo," Jules says. "I've never steered you wrong. Please, don't stop listening to me now."

The minutes creep by as Mateo watches the clock and waits for three-thirty to roll around. He wants to act normal, but every time he thinks about sitting down and talking with Lady his heart starts to race and his hands get sweaty. Thieves steal, drug dealers sell, and murderers kill. And he has to listen to Jules, she has always been the one to protect him. When Lady walks through the door, Mateo is in the back room. There is no stool waiting and Mateo doesn't come out until he hears Lady put everything down on the counter.

"I thought maybe you were sick," Lady says once Mateo has come out from the back. "You haven't hidden from me for a while, now."

Mateo walks behind the counter without looking at Lady directly. He doesn't even look at the money in her hands.

"That will be five thirty-six," he says.

Mateo isn't handed the money. He looks up quickly to see Lady staring at his forehead. She taps the counter with her long fingernails.

"You saw the news report," she says matter-of-factly.

"My sister did," Mateo says looking down at the counter again. "Jules doesn't want me to talk to you anymore."

"My husband beat me. I'm not some crazy bitch who was jealous or after money. I was scared for my life."

"But Jules says I shouldn't talk to you and that she is trying to protect me," Mateo says.

"Has Jules always protected you?" Lady asks.

Mateo nods his head.

"Then you should probably keep listening to your sister, Mateo."

Mateo nods again. Not being friends with Lady hurts real bad, but he has always listened to Jules and Jules has always tried to protect him. Lady reaches for Mateo's hand that is still stretched out on the counter, waiting to receive money. He starts to pull his hand away but lets Lady grasp his open palm. He can feel his hands start sweating and he knows Lady can feel it too. But he thinks maybe since she is a murderer, sweaty hands don't bother her so much.

"I've really enjoyed getting to know you, Mateo," Lady says.

Mateo finally looks up and sees that Lady is crying. Not hard, like his sister during movies, but a few tears running down her cheeks. He has never held someone's hand for so long. He has never had anyone tell him they liked knowing him. You're alright, was the best thing he had gotten from one of his dad's friends one time. Lady lets go of his hand. They both wipe the sweat off on their jeans.

"Thieves steal. Drug dealers sell. And murderers kill," Mateo says.

"I get it. That's fine."

"I don't want to die next."

"Mateo. You're hurting my feelings."

Mateo starts to look up at her, but when he sees that Lady is still crying and her face is red and her eyes are sad he thinks he wants to start crying too. He looks back down at the counter, unwilling to look at Lady's hands even.

"That'll be . . ."

"I know how much I owe you," Lady says so softly he almost can't hear her voice.

Lady puts her money down on the counter. She picks up her milk, her crackers, and a banana and leaves without getting a plastic bag. Mateo puts the money into the register and carefully counts out the change. When he gets upset or angry, he has a harder time doing math

and he doesn't want Lady to think he is trying to steal from her. He can't become a criminal since that is the exact reason he can't be friends with her. When Mateo looks up, Lady is already walking out the door. He doesn't know what else to do but put the change that should have gone to Lady into his own pocket.

Various Forms of Guilt

We all felt a little pathetic watching the girls of Lady Lovely's Lattes – a drive through coffee shop where the young baristas ran around in various stages of undress – through our store's window. We all grew up good denominational Christians so we had guilt, though in various forms, for our frequent staring. Greg was Methodist. His guilt was driven more by political correctness. He felt bad that we were objectifying the girls. I pointed out that we weren't like the guys who actually bought coffee there, but that didn't seem to persuade him. Will, the owner of Beethoven's where we worked, was Pentecostal. He had a more medieval guilt, wishing he could gouge out the eyes causing him to sin. He was too practical to act on this impulse since he wouldn't be able to spend the majority of each day playing online poker. Johnny was a staunch Baptist. He didn't feel guilt. He blamed the girls for causing him to stumble. And I kept all my feelings to myself. Despite our guilts and justifications and misgivings, we kept watching the girls at Lady Lovely's and reveled in the idea that these cute girls in bikinis would pay us more attention than the creepers that kept up a steady stream in the two drive-up windows.

The habit of staring out our shop's front window started long before Lady Lovely's popped up. Beethoven's didn't have many in-store customers. People don't come in to peruse for pianos. If they want to buy a piano they come in, ask price ranges, brands, styles, then buy based on practicality. Occasionally, I could convince someone to get a better brand or a more expensive finish, but someone looking for an upright never had room for a baby grand. And

people who were looking for a grand didn't want a concert. Most costumers were in and out within an hour. Greg and Johnny did the refurbishing and moving, so they were either in the back of the shop or out on a run. Will was either gambling or out tuning, so that left me in the front looking out the windows. Watching traffic go by. The occasional pedestrian. Birds. When the guys came out of the back or Will came in from being onsite, they would stand by me, look out the window, and make some brief comment about the weather or the lack of activity in the store front like we were cowboys slightly out of place.

I took the job at Beethoven's in high school thinking it would be a good way to meet girls. Since I would have plenty of time to practice, I could impress the mothers and daughters coming into the shop. The daughters would see me as the rebel artist speaking through his music while the mothers would see a clean cut kid with a clear career goal in front of him. What I learned was that most of the mothers were buying pianos for daughters who were five to fifteen and the more age appropriate women who came in were either in some type of life crisis or recently married and looking for a hobby to enjoy with their husbands.

I stuck with Will throughout college and beyond because he promised he would teach me how to tune and refurbish, but that hadn't happened. He said I'm too valuable in the front of the store that I'm a good salesman and I keep the books well. He started calling me his business manager when I graduated college. Really, I'm a glorified clerk, keeping the store open and running the point-of-sale computer program from the nineties that tracks the books for our accountant. The hours aren't bad, the pay is actually good for someone with a music degree and no teaching certificate, and Will gives me insurance. So I continue to put on a tie and vest every morning, go to shop, and look out the window.

“They don’t look like girls do in comic books?” Henry said about a month after the coffee shop had opened. Henry was the only regular customer we had. The store had always stocked the typical piano books, but about four years ago I started trading rare and vintage scores. I ordered the music in bulk, went through the big boxes mostly stuffed with worn out Alfred’s lesson books, then put the expensive pieces on our website. Henry came in about once a week, going through the scores like a record collector. He never looked on the website, said it was more exciting when he didn’t know what was new. After finding something he couldn’t live without, he would play from it on the one concert grand we kept on the floor. He was good. I wasn’t sure what kind of guilt he felt while staring at girls of Lady Lovely’s. If any.

“You don’t look like the guys do in comic books,” I said. The comment came across more harsh than I expected. I started to apologize, but Henry sighed and shook his head like this was the newest in a long line of injustices.

“No doubt,” he said. “Maybe in a parallel universe.” He nodded at me like this was a completely valid argument and I think he did find comfort in the fact that somewhere, in some dimension, he was running around in tights with muscles popping out in awkward but visually attractive directions. Henry held up a music book, indicating he wanted to pay, but I shook my head.

“I charged you too much for the Joplin last week. I found an entire box of those sitting in a warehouse in Scotland.”

Henry was a pudgy kid who was constantly sweating. I had to clean the keys and bench after he finished playing. He wiped his forehead with the palm of his hand and I grabbed the score away from him before he could get sweat all over it, smearing the ink and weakening the

already brittle pages. I went behind the counter and put the music in a plastic bag. I apologized again for my rude comment about his physique but he shrugged saying I only spoke the truth.

As Henry walked out to his car, I took my normal position standing at the window with my arms crossed looking out over the parking lot. I could see one of the girls at Lady Lovely's leaning into a blue sports car. The coffee shop's windows weren't like those of a normal drive through, only large enough to pass a cup of coffee or bag of burgers. Lady Lovely's windows were at least five foot tall. The girls regularly sat on the sill talking to the guys in cars and they had to stand up on the sill when washing the windows. The gratuitous size of these windows on the small building in the middle of the parking lot fit the nature of the place. Beethoven's exterior was not this telling. The store had plush crimson carpet and a faux dark wood interior that was glued to the dry wall while the outside was an ugly tan brick, many of the bricks chipped and broken, with mortar coming out in several places, leaving a white powder covering the sidewalk. Next door was a pool supply shop and beside that a payday loan place. People told us they thought our store was actually empty since a place named Beethoven's wouldn't stay on this side of town.

As I stood contemplating the Lady Lovely's logo, the silhouette of a busty can-can dancer with her leg in the air, Henry drove away to reveal one of the bikinied girls walking through the parking lot, carrying a cardboard holder with four paper cups of, presumably, coffee. She looked directly at me and waved. I waved back, then wondered if I was mistaken. Maybe she was waving to one of the guys from the pool supply store or someone sitting in a car. The guys from the pool supply shop went by Lady Lovely's drive through several times a day. All the trucks had the store's logo, so their presence was obvious. I assumed they were now getting their orders delivered. I walked back to the counter hoping she hadn't seen me wave since I was

convinced I was not the intended recipient. I sat down at the computer to check out some music I had bid on.

By the time the door opened, I had become engrossed in trying to outbid a guy in Seattle for a box of music in New York that had belonged to a pianist who played on Broadway. The description said: Found music in a trunk in Dad's apartment. Have not gone through it, but know he played in studio for Rogers and Hammerstein. This deal was exciting but I had only planned on paying fifty bucks for the whole thing. At the last minute, however, this jag weed in Seattle was trying to outbid me. I assumed the customer would look around before needing help and didn't bother looking up from behind the counter. I was trying to refresh the website every ten seconds and refused to look away from the bid clock when I realized the customer was standing at the counter.

"Give me two minutes, ma'am, if you don't mind."

The customer laughed and parroted ma'am back to me then said to take my time. Seattle jumped the bid by twenty bucks instead of the one dollar we had been adding previously. I took a chance, waited until there were only twenty seconds left so Seattle would think the twenty dollar jump knocked me out of the running. I added a dollar and submitted my bid for a hundred and forty one. After a few agonizing seconds, the screen refreshed. I won the bid. I jumped out of my chair, yelling and throwing my arms in the air. Then I remembered the customer standing at the counter. She looked as shocked as I was about my outburst. She was leaning over the counter, holding herself up so that her feet had to be dangling above the floor. She was stretching her neck so she could look at my computer screen. Her breasts were pushed against the polished wood and spilled out of her bikini top. I could feel myself blush.

"Congratulations," she said. "Must be something exciting."

She was looking at me, straight in my face, with an air of anticipation. I didn't say anything for a moment, embarrassed for both my outburst and her lack of clothing. She looked over at the computer screen and strained to read from the website. She let herself down off the counter.

“So, you got something off eBay. Are you going to tell me what?”

“Oh, it's nerdy,” I said. “It's a bunch of old music from a man who passed away in New York City.”

“It's not nerdy if it makes you money,” she said in a tone that was almost sarcastic. She patted the counter with both hands and turned to survey the store. I made some noise between a gasp and hiccup when I saw a tattoo of an electric guitar covering her entire back. She turned and asked what happened. In a rare moment of quick wit, I said I thought something had gone wrong with the auction and busied myself with the computer. She turned back around and walked through the pianos. Most people taking this type of leisurely stroll through our display run their hands along the wood making long streaks of oil the width of their finger. This girl didn't. Instead, she held her hands behind her back which made her even more of an anomaly.

I was embarrassed for people who came into the store in their sweats or Saturday work clothes, those taking a break from shopping at hardware stores and paint shops or from pulling weeds out in their yard to look at pianos. No one would go to a piano concert in their sweats or yard work clothes, so they shouldn't buy a piano in those clothes either. But this girl was walking on the plush carpet and among these dark stained pianos in a very small bikini and a very large tattoo as comfortable as if she were at the pool walking among sunbathers and plastic loungers. I thought she might lounge on top of one of the uprights like she were a model at a car

show. Since Lady Lovely's seemed to be popular, it might have actually helped our sales. She started back to the front of the store, then bent over to look through the music books.

"Did you come to look at the pianos?" I asked, wondering what she was doing in the shop.

"No," she said, adjusting her bikini top after she stood up. "Since I was here I thought I would look around, but I came over to bring coffee."

I could feel myself blush as she looked down to check to see whether or not her breasts were properly covered. Or maybe properly uncovered. I wasn't sure which one. She walked over to the counter and picked up the coffees sitting there. She said she wasn't sure how many people worked here so she brought as many as she could carry. I explained there were four people but Will was tuning a piano at the community college while Greg and Johnny made a delivery.

"You have a lot of coffee to drink," she said dryly. "We've met everyone else who works in this shopping plaza except you guys, so I figured I would come meet you."

She ran her hands over her thighs like she was trying to put them in pockets that weren't there. She must have realized what she was doing and felt silly because she left her hands awkwardly stuck to her legs. I thanked her for the coffee but told her I probably wouldn't be able to drink all four cups. She laughed and said that was fine, that I didn't need to OD on caffeine. I said thanks and we stood for a moment before she walked to the door.

"Oh," she said turning around and raising her hand like she had a question. "My name is Rachel, by the way."

"Thanks," I said. I realized my mistake once the door closed.

Greg and Johnny came in through the back of the shop about an hour after Rachel left. They walked to the front of the show floor, crossed their arms and looked out to the parking lot. I had purposefully avoided even looking out the window since Rachel dropped off the coffee. I didn't want her to think I was staring at her and her co-workers. I was trying to find the music to one of Franz Liszt opera fantasies – he would “reimagine” other composers work for the piano – that one of my music professors mentioned during a lecture. I didn't even know if I had written the title down correctly so I knew the piece would be impossible to find, but that was kind of the point. I wanted to keep my mind busy and not fixate on the idea of Rachel walking around the pianos like a model at a boat show. I only drank one of the four coffees.

“Did you go over to the coffee shop?” Greg asked who had left his post at the window and was leaning on the counter I was hiding behind.

“It was delivery,” I said. This caught Johnny's attention.

“Wait, you had them bring the coffee here?”

“No, Rachel brought the coffee on her own accord.”

This set them off, giving me a hard time for being on a first name basis with the bikini girl, claiming we must have spent quite a bit of time together to get to know each other that well. This led to Johnny chastising me for letting her in the store, saying that wasn't the image Beethoven's wanted. Mother's didn't want to come in to see a bunch of girls without clothes on sitting on the benches they were about to buy for their daughters. Greg said that as long as there was only one Lady Lovely's girl sitting on the piano bench at a time, everything would be okay.

They each took one of the lukewarm coffees before going to the back to finish an 1875 Steinway and Sons Rococo Grand that had been sitting for over a month. More than anything, the guys were nervous about messing up. The piano was worth more than their two yearly

salaries combined. Will had both guys insured, but messing up something that expensive would have put us out of business. Insurance or no. Will called a little after noon to say he wouldn't be coming into the shop at all that day. Since we hadn't had any customers and Greg and Johnny were looking for any excuse to not work on the Steinway, we called it a day at two and shut the store.

Rachel brought coffee again a few days later. Will was out and she said she was disappointed that she couldn't meet him. I called the guys out from the back but Johnny was the only one who came to the front. He was wearing a respirator around his neck, which meant they were using the tar stuff to take the original stain off the Steinway. This was the first step in the process which meant they had been working on the Fisher Upright putting it ahead of the Steinway. I would have to give a discount if the guys wasted any more time. Johnny made a comment about not knowing how the coffee would affect their nerves during this project, but thanks anyway. As he walked to the back he gave me a stern look and pointed his head towards the door, telling me to get Rachel out of the store. I shrugged and took a drink from my cup. She again wandered around with her hands behind her back.

"Well, he smelled bad," Rachel said as she bent her head inside one of the baby grands. The strings of her guitar tattoo crossed the piano's strings.

"Yeah, lots of chemicals and stuff. I don't know how to refurbish so that's a guess. He might just smell like that after a few days of not showering."

Rachel looked up, the top of her head touching the baby grand's lid. "You're funny," she said without laughing.

She walked around in silence while I drank coffee and stared out the windows. I was more comfortable looking out to the street while she was in the store. After she finished her tour,

she came and stood beside me. I told her about our habit of standing at the window and explained that we weren't staring at them as they talked to customers. She said she hoped she was more interesting to watch than birds sitting on a telephone wire. I realized I sounded desperate, trying to get her to believe something she hadn't noticed or made judgments about. I changed the subject by asking about her new outfit, a white wife beater and shorts instead of the normal bikini.

"The owner is making us do theme days," she said. "Today's Wet T-shirt Wednesday. Jerry put a spray bottle next to the tip jar for the guys to use. Fortunately, most are too scared to touch it. We're all wearing white sports bras underneath so a little spray bottle won't do much anyway."

Jerry was our landlord. It made sense that he would own the coffee shop since he owned the parking lot it was built in. He came into the store once every few months, called us nerds, and played chopsticks for ten minutes. I already thought he was creepy, but the stories Rachel told me put him on a whole new level. He put what he referred to as Sisqo's 90's classic, "The Thong Song," on rotation and expected the girls to drop their pants whenever it came on. Instead, the morning shift manager bought several pairs of cheap flip-flops for the girls to wear and show off during the song. Rachel said most the girls didn't even realize flip-flops were called thongs, but the trick worked since open toed shoes are a huge health code violation. Jerry took the song out of rotation. I shared my own Jerry stories, telling Rachel about the time he touched one of the wet pianos and ruined his cheap suit.

"I really think he expects us to compliment his playing," I said after I impersonated him at one of the pianos. Rachel was bent over laughing. I was still sitting on the bench with my back

to the door when the bell dinged. I froze and Rachel stood up straight. An elderly couple stood in the doorway looking bewildered.

“I better go,” Rachel said, then squeezed past the customers.

I blubbered for a few moments, my face hot with embarrassment, when the lady said they just wanted to look around. I was able to tell them to ask if they had any questions and then sat at my computer, trying to hide my red face behind the counter. They left about five minutes later without saying anything, probably going to the franchised music store in the mall. I decided to thank Rachel the next time she brought coffee, but I wouldn't let her stay and talk. It was unprofessional to have her prancing around the store in her bikini.

The next day I didn't come in until one, Will had agreed to cover for me. He was drinking coffee and another cup with Lady Lovely's can-can dancer logo was sitting on the counter.

“Your girlfriend came in,” Will said.

I apologized and told him that Johnny warned me not to let her stick around but I hadn't listened and she had probably run off an elderly couple who were looking at the baby grands. Will shrugged.

“Old people don't buy. You know that.”

He pointed to a phone number on a Post-it by the computer and said I was supposed to text my girlfriend when I got in. He stood up and announced he wouldn't be back in after his tuning because he had an online poker tournament that started at five Greenwich Mean Time. I sat at the computer and looked at the number stuck on the monitor. Will didn't seem upset but he was pretty unemotional, I didn't want to misread him and get fired. But these reservations lost

out and I texted Rachel before Will was even out of the building. A few minutes later she texted back saying she had another funny Jerry story she would come tell me during her break.

A box of music from Austria had come in so I busied myself sorting and pricing and taking pictures of the pieces that were in good shape and actually worth something. I had a pile for Internet sales, one for in-store only, and one for donation to the local schools. There were a couple of surprises. A Gottschalk, who was more popular in South America than Europe, an early Jelly Roll Morton, and even a Franz Liszt. For a moment, I was excited about the Liszt but it wasn't an opera, just one of his original compositions, which was sellable, but nothing exciting. Even though I stayed busy, I did notice that Rachel hadn't stopped by, which was fine, but she hadn't texted me either.

I was packing the donation box when the door opened and Rachel came in with two plastic clear cups in her hand. It was a little after five. If we were going to have customers, they were more than likely to come after typical business hours, which should have strengthened my resolve to not let her stay. But I hadn't told her not to come over, so that would make me pretty rude telling her to leave right away. I could also put up the closed sign.

"Crazy day," Rachel said. "I didn't even get a break. This is an apology smoothie for not letting you know."

I thanked her and said I was going to take the box to the storage closet but I would be back in a second. When I returned, my smoothie was on the counter and Rachel was gone. I took the smoothie and stood by the window. I was surprised by how disappointed I was that she left without saying much.

“Are you back?” Rachel said, making me jump. I went back to the counter to find Rachel lying behind it. Her arms were splayed out, one under the desk, the other hitting the wall. Her breasts fell to the sides, unsupported. Her red bikini clashed with the carpet.

“It’s been a long day,” she said. “And if you were wondering, the floor is not as comfortable as it looks.”

I walked back around the counter, stepped over Rachel, and asked some general question about her rough day. She explained it was only busy, not really rough, but that Jerry was in the store most the day and that made things harder. The funny story she was going to tell me earlier had become a nightmare that lacked all humor except for the growing size of Jerry’s ego. I asked her some more general questions as I priced the music scores I had photographed for the website. Some I knew how much to charge, others I had to search for similar pieces in similar conditions before I felt comfortable putting up a price. Rachel lay there and talked, telling me she was a college student double majoring in art and psychology. She had worked at one of the other normal clothing coffee shops before coming to Lady Lovely’s, and she had been diagnosing everyone she met with mental illness since taking abnormal psych two semesters ago. I asked what my mental illness was.

“No,” Rachel said. “You have to help me stop diagnosing people and not let me tell you things like Jerry’s a megalomaniac because of his delusions of grandeur and self-importance. He believes he is Donald Trump.” We again laughed at Jerry’s expense. “So where do you go to church?” Rachel asked.

I stopped typing, but kept looking at the computer screen, hoping Rachel would assume I was thinking about some price or description I was putting up. The question took me off guard. I’d never had a woman dressed in a bikini ask me this. The question wasn’t abnormal since we

lived in the Bible Belt. The question usually came after what do you do for a living and before discussing politics. When I would play for customers in an effort to show them how the different pianos sounded, many would ask me if I played for a church, either in a band or solo. After I explained that our church didn't use instruments – we sang a cappella every Sunday – they would invite me to play at their church, leaving their number or sometimes, if they were really earnest, having their pastor call me at the shop.

“Windcrest,” I finally said. “I started going there in high school, though my parents go to a smaller church over on 18th and Milwaukee.”

She asked me if I liked attending there and how involved I was, did I really have a home there and were my friends more like family. She went to City View, an evangelical church on the west side of town that was started by a charismatic preacher with a Pentecostal background. I went once in college with a girl I was dating. There was a lot of shouting and dancing and excitement. The place scared me.

I finished pricing the pieces as Rachel told me about her involvement with City View and how much she loved going there. One of the pieces I put on the website had already been purchased but I decided to process the order in the morning. I was glad Rachel had kept me entertained. Usually, I was in the store by myself feeling every minute go by. But, I always like to get the music up on the website as quickly as possible since the pieces sell fast and it's kind of my pet project.

I put the closed sign up and noticed there were people standing on the sidewalk in front of Lady Lovely's. At first, I thought the coffee shop must be doing a promotion, but there were more women than men and even a few kids. This wasn't Lady Lovely's usual clientele. I went around wiping off all the benches with wood polish and keys with antibacterial spray, washing

the windows in the front, and rearranging the music. Most of these things I did in the morning, but Rachel was still talking so I kept working. She said she asked all her regular customers where they went to church and it made the other girls uncomfortable, but she thought the customers liked the conversation.

“One guy tried to convince me to go to Mass with him,” Rachel said from her place on the floor. “I didn’t think his wife would take that too kindly, but he said we would go to midnight Mass. His wife went to morning Mass. Don’t worry, I declined.”

I was running out of chores to do. The only thing left was to vacuum the carpet but I wouldn’t be able to hear Rachel and that would defeat the purpose of not waiting until morning. As I walked back to the counter, Rachel was talking about a poster the other girls put up in the window that said Jugs for Jesus.

“All I said was that if I need to be half naked for a guy to talk to me about Jesus, fine I’ll do it.”

That sentiment was the inspiration for the poster. There was even a dance they did while standing on the window sill when a customer said the word Jesus. The dance and the sign didn’t seem too extreme after having Rachel lie in the store for over an hour. If she had told me about the Jugs for Jesus sign the first day she walked in, I probably would have been offended. But that’s the funny thing with getting offended, there’s rarely any tangible explanation as to why something is offensive. If someone is eased into the subject, they can usually see it from the other person’s perspective. When I switched churches, my parents blew up at me. But I changed my approach, going with them on Sunday morning while attending Windcrest on Sunday evenings and Wednesdays. After a while, they got used to me attending a more liberal

congregation and weren't upset when I quit going with them altogether. I walked around the counter and looked at Rachel still there on the floor, her bikini still clashing with the carpet.

"That's why Jerry was there today," Rachel said. "A news crew came this morning to do a piece about Lady Lovely's and saw the sign and asked questions. Jerry showed up saying it was his first amendment right and being an ass in general. That was my funny story this morning."

I smiled. "Well, it's time to close up," I said, but then things clicked in my head. It was after six and the story about the coffee shop probably aired at five. A sign like Jugs for Jesus was sure to make people mad in this town. "Do you think those people outside Lady Lovely's are protesting?" I asked.

Rachel raised her hands for me to help her get up. I pulled and instead of simply standing she jumped off the floor. Her breasts bounced in the highly unsupportive bikini top and a good portion of her left breast was hanging out when she landed. She didn't seem to notice since she pushed by me to go look out the window. I followed her to see that the crowd had grown and now there were signs about the sacrilegious coffee shop and what would happen to the whore of Babylon.

"This is my fault," Rachel said looking a little stunned.

I turned to her to say a few comforting words, which seemed not to register. Then I noticed that her breast was still hanging out of her bikini top, almost falling out completely. I wanted to look away. It was my duty as a Christian and Sunday school teacher who told his seventh grade boys to run away from all temptation like Joseph with Potifer's wife. But I realized in that moment that I was an idiot. Joseph was worried that if he slept with his boss's wife he would be killed. Nobody was going to kill me. I had no incentive to look away. I

wouldn't lose my life or job or anyone's respect even. Rachel wasn't going to catch me because she was too worried about the crowd outside the coffee shop. My cheeks burned with guilt and embarrassment and pleasure. I realized that this was the first real life breast I had seen, or was almost seeing, in my twenty four year life.

Rachel gasped. I was pulled out of my hypnosis to see that she was crying, then I looked to the coffee shop. Someone had thrown a water balloon with red dye at the drive through window that faced Beethoven's. For a moment, Rachel thought someone was hurt. The crowd was getting large enough that they were blocking the parking lot and cars couldn't go in or out. A police car pulled up but both policemen stayed inside. They must have been waiting for backup. I got one of the padded piano benches and brought it to the front. Rachel and I sat there watching the crowd grow in numbers and excitement. She kept making comments about how this was all her fault and I kept reassuring her, trying to build up the courage to pat her on the back or hold her hand.

Camera crews and more police cars arrived. The crowd reached a critical mass when reporters started recording their stories for the ten o'clock news but once the lights and the cameras went away, the crowd did too. No one was concerned enough to put the shop out of business, that would have been too much effort. People wanted to show their righteous indignation and move on. Rachel cried softly the whole time. Finally, only the most hardcore and angry protestors remained and I could feel my chance to offer any type of physical support or comfort was waning. I put my sweaty palm on her knee and squeezed. I told her everything was fine, just a bit of showmanship from the religious community that we both knew too well. I rubbed her leg and left my hand on her thigh. I realized my mistake when I felt her leg tense up.

Rachel froze, her leg muscles flexed beneath my hand. She stared straight forward as she took my hand off her bare thigh and placed it on the piano bench between us. She stood up and moved closer to the window. After a few minutes almost all the protestors were gone and she said she wanted to check on the girls still at Lady Lovely's. She left without really saying goodbye or thanking me for letting her stay in the shop during all the drama. I knew she wouldn't be bringing me anymore coffee in the future.

A few weeks later, I finally got the courage to go through Lady Lovely's and order coffee. I asked the barista about Rachel but she had quit the week before to be a model for the figure study classes at the university. I was disappointed but decided not to pursue her any further. The idea of dating a girl who spent most of her time walking around half naked with a giant guitar tattooed on her back was exciting, but only in theory. I was much more comfortable with the girls I met at church who wore high-necked sweaters and loose-fitting, ankle-length skirts. I knew what to expect from them and what they expected of me. There was never a bare thigh to touch or an exposed breast to stare at. I never went back to Lady Lovely's and eventually Beethoven's did move to a nicer part of town. There our customers were strictly mothers and housewives and girls in bikinis never walked in. Not even to deliver coffee.

Misplaced Sexual Hubris

When our professor brought in the first nude model of the year, we acted underwhelmed. We said we were glad to be looking at something else besides moldy bowls of fruit and pitchers of water with a flower wilting on the tray, but really, every one of us wanted to stare at a naked lady for an hour. Girl, guy, straight, gay, it didn't matter. This was the first time any of us had been given permission to stare at a body sans clothing – a body not on a screen or page – which rarely happens outside the art world. Even at strip clubs or in brothels, the women aren't asking people to openly stare at them for an hour and pick out every curve and roll and imperfection, then publicly comment on a piece of canvas. That experience is reserved for the artist. And maybe people with the right fetish.

The guys acted as if they had seen plenty of naked women in person. They said this was normal. They were artist so, obviously, women dropped their panties all the time. This was a lie, of course. Maybe they were as suave as they claimed but they averted their eyes as soon as the model took her robe off, exposing, if not their lack of experience, their misplaced sexual hubris. In fact, no one in the class was watching the model as she stepped onto the little stage and found a comfortable position on the wooden chair. The floor had suddenly become enthralling, pencils needed to be reordered with great precision, conversations could not be stalled or eye contact

broken with one's neighbor even though there was rarely any talking before class when a lamp, rocking horse, and dismembered mannequin were on the little stage.

I wasn't any better. I realize that now. At the moment, I told myself that I was. I was an observer of the human condition, a bystander psychoanalyzing the people who couldn't see they were never present in any one particular moment. But I was blushing. I was as awkward and uncomfortable as everyone else in that room. The irony, however, is that I had seen plenty of naked people. Not women necessarily, but I had been in the presence of a lot of skin.

My mother, Nancy, is an artist. Though was an artist might be a more accurate phrase. She calls herself a pre-apocalyptic post-impressionist. No one knows what that means and the critics haven't been too kind for the last decade. She did well when I was younger. Usually, she had shows in LA, New York, or London every year or two. We lived in Austin during the school year and Santa Fe during the summers. Spent Thanksgiving, spring break, and Memorial Day in Manhattan. Labor Day and July 4th in LA. She was huge in the eighties when she didn't give a shit and her works looked effortless and unforced. Her stuff still sells, but not in the major art centers. The annual trips are long gone. She keeps a gallery open in Taos which does pretty good business, though, in the last few years most of her orders come from Hong Kong. We don't know why.

When I was in elementary, Nancy would quiz me before history tests or Spanish quizzes while working in her studio. Throughout my adolescence, I would answer questions about the Alamo and Sam Houston while a dark haired woman with big nipples and hairy arms lounged ten feet away from my mother and me. As I got older, the women became more grotesque, though my mother called them "fabulously ordinary." They were less attractive, heavier, hadn't

bathed in four days. One lady didn't have an arm and pointed her stub at Nancy and me for three weeks. I was never supposed to stare at any of these models. Nancy would smack me on the back of the head and tell me I was being rude if my gaze lingered too long. She would claim I was being crude. Once I was in high school, the study parties ended and Nancy began to focus on the male form. She was obsessed with Manet's "Olympia" and was determined to create a modern day version that shocked the public like no painter had been able to do in fifty years.

"A male looking startled and vulnerable is as shocking in today's society as a woman blatantly gazing back at her onlookers in the nineteenth century," Nancy said repeatedly as I tried to get her to sign some permission slip or progress report while a skinny, drug-addled tweaker stood half way out of my shower waiting for Nancy to finish for the day so he could get another hit before passing out under the Congress Avenue bridge.

I may have been in the presence of an abundant number of naked people twice my age, but until that first figure study in forms class, I had never been invited to openly gaze, to linger on the model's neck and collarbone and thighs. With Nancy, I had to hide my longing and interest, not focus on it and transfer it onto a twelve inch sketch pad. So in class, I looked away like everyone else as the model laid her robe on the edge of the little stage. When the professor started the time, we quickly grabbed our pencils and looked up.

I spent most of my college career trying to develop my own style and method which, for the most part, went against everything my mom had taught me. I was spontaneous, didn't think or ponder, just put lines on the page. I ended up with a lot canvases covered in brown colored blobs and sketch pads with smudgy forms that looked vaguely like people and specifically like Wookies. But I was getting better and my style was starting to develop more in spite of my

efforts rather than because of them. I felt Nancy had worked in a similar manner at one time, in the eighties, when she was successful. As she aged, she took fewer risks, she became safe while wanting even more to produce edgy, explosive works.

“Take your time,” Nancy would say.

“Understand the vibrations the person is sending to you, your canvas, your brush,” she said.

“Imagine yourself painting the entire canvas before you ever dirty your fingers with charcoal or ink.”

Everything Nancy said came back to me when I saw the model. I placed my pencil on the easel and took the subject in. Nancy’s models could be drawn in one way, their personalities overpowered any nuance or subtlety she could have found in their countenance. The woman on the stage, however, was professional. Her attitude and worldview left with her clothes.

I had seen this woman in local commercials for car lots in Round Rock and trendy boutiques south of the river. She was a cheerleader my freshman year, which was almost six years ago, so I was the only one who remembered her from the sidelines of the football field. She was shaven and clean with clearly defined abs and breasts that were just a little too round and energetic for me to be confident they were real. I was required to stare at her for the rest of class. The experience was disconcerting.

I wouldn’t say drawing a figure study was as intimate as sex, but that first experience contained something that most sexual encounters, at least my sexual encounters, never possessed. There was an eroticism that humping under the covers lacked. My high school

girlfriend was a prude with typical religious guilt and we never had real, grown-up sex. Our bouts involved at least sixty percent of our clothes staying on and if someone didn't finish within ten minutes, the Holy Ghost caught up to her and activities were brought to a stop. My girlfriend in college would prance around the dorm room in her underwear. I at least saw her body, knew what she looked like, and had a few sketches in my notebook from that time. But the sex was always under the sheets, eyes closed, lights off. Outside of that, I was always at least half drunk, after the bars were closed, and one of us always left before the sun came up. There wasn't a whole lot of staring done. I couldn't have described most the girls' faces, let alone draw a picture of their bodies. If I had stopped one of the girls I met on Sixth Street and asked her to disrobe so I could stare for an hour before we started to make love at one another, she would have walked out and I would have ended up on the creep list, the do-not-hit-this list, the fisting-pooing-peeing-and-other-such-nonsense list. If I didn't look during class, however, I would fail.

I stared at this beautiful woman four times that semester. I tried my hardest to capture the beauty of her figure, the softness of her skin, the way her eyes unabashedly watched each artist watching her. She had a great curve at the top of her right thigh that could only be seen when she was standing, her left leg slightly forward, and her weight resting on the ball of her right foot. We were given eight minutes for each pose that first class. Time was gradually taken away until we only had thirty seconds per pose and had to use charcoal, which tends to smudge and smear and make drawings incomprehensible. That was our final: ten sketches in five minutes with one piece of charcoal. I made an A, but failed all my other classes and was promptly kicked out of school.

My entire six-year, degreeless, college career was defined by those four sessions with that model. At least in my mind it was. By the end of March, I knew the semester was hopeless

and quit going to all my classes except for form studies. I started creating fantastical narratives about falling in love with the model who took pity on a sixth year senior with an artist's heart that wouldn't allow him to fit into the defined structures of school. She would agree to model privately for me. Our sittings would end with maddening sex that was initiated by the hours-long staring sessions. Eventually, I would be able to draw her foot, her navel, her elbow pit with my eyes closed. I would be the artist and she my muse like Mona Lisa and Leonardo, like Andy Warhol and whoever it was that followed him around.

After the final, I offered the model fifty dollars for a sitting. I explained that I was being kicked out of school and wouldn't have access to models until I could get my GPA up at some community college and that was unlikely to happen for a few years. If she didn't say yes and fall in love with me, I figured she would give me that look that said I was the biggest creep she had seen in the last month. I could handle this look. I got the look often when I was out drinking. I told myself these women didn't understand the nature of the artist. They could not comprehend my passion, my appreciation for life and human connection. Instead, the model gave me these sad eyes that said I was so pathetic she could only feel sympathy for me. She laughed and even patted my head, since she was still standing on the stage. The classroom was emptying out and she joined the general flow of students, but turned back to me. My heart jumped like I was still in junior high. I got an erection, also like I was still in junior high.

"You're too old to be trying that," she said and left the room.

I've since admitted to myself that she was right. I've also admitted that failing out of school was due to my laziness, not my artist's heart. While I was in the midst of self-denial and pity, though, Nancy suggested I go to Taos with her for the summer. If I felt the need to have a

job, I could be her assistant but she thought we should both focus on our art. She was sure her models in Taos would sit for me. I wasn't convinced of any part of this proposal but had few choices at this point. On the phone, I suggested I run the gallery instead. Nancy agreed not mentioning the massive flaw in our plan. Specifically, that a girl named Sunflower already ran the gallery.

“Yes, but why can't two people run it?” Nancy asked over the phone.

Nancy doesn't really understand business. She suggested we could expand to two store fronts so there would be a demand for two gallery managers. I explained she didn't have the customer base to expand, not even to open a second place in Santa Fe or Ruidoso. Since I was, apparently, such an entrepreneur, she said I could act as her agent instead. Her third agent had dropped her in as many years. This was a valid plan, more solid than being her assistant and less redundant than being a co-manager. I knew I wouldn't be able to increase her shows or buyers, but I could use her past success to get to know gallery owners and art dealers. Her name still had recognition even if her new pieces weren't sellable. I could get my foot in the door and start showing these contacts my own work. I would use my mom's work as leverage, promising to not show them another one of Nancy's nudes if they looked at a couple of my pieces.

We left for New Mexico the second week of May. All my stuff fit in two trash bags. I had no idea what Nancy had been working on the last few months so somewhere between Littlefield and Muleshoe, I asked about her new projects. To my surprise, she had been teaching art classes at the YMCA. She despised her students who were either over the age of sixty or under twelve.

“They have no vision. No understanding of shade and light. No desire to express something real. I, on the other hand, have found my Olympia.”

I didn't want to hear what this was. She couldn't have gone anywhere good after one armed woman and naked drug addicts with shrunken testicles. I stayed quiet but she went on.

"The female orgasm."

"You found the female orgasm?" I asked pinching my thigh as punishment for not staying silent.

"I'm not finding the female orgasm, I'm capturing it," she said, taking a hand from the steering wheel to snatch an imaginary orgasm that had, apparently, been floating around in the car during the entire trip. "What is our society more afraid of than women taking responsibility for their own pleasure?"

"Terrorist, swine flu, abortion doctors, gay Communist Jew Nazis."

"No," Nancy said. "A female being unashamed to bring herself to climax."

"Masturbation?"

Nancy quit trying to explain and, instead, handed me her phone. She had several sketches and two unfinished paintings of women sitting on a washing machine, bracing themselves, with looks that varied from severe pain to mild amusement. None of these pictures said ecstasy or orgasm or climax. Nancy explained that she was having a hard time deciding whether or not her subject should be looking out or up or down.

"Orgasms also happen very quickly," Nancy said. "That makes them very hard to capture."

Throughout that summer I kept walking into the cabin to find Nancy sitting on the washing machine. She was always fully clothed and looked concerned more than anything. Half the time the washing machine wasn't even running. I would be mid-conversation before remembering she was sitting there as a way to research washing machine orgasms. She said I shouldn't feel strange about the situation, she wasn't actually reaching climax. I would leave anyway. Nancy never did perfect her female orgasm piece that summer.

The situation at the gallery didn't go as poorly as I assumed, though. Sunflower, who was now going by Becky, was on her way out and had been looking for a replacement. She fired the second trainee the week before we arrived, so I had a job with little conflict. I remembered Sunflower being older when my mother hired her over ten years ago, but I guess everyone is old in the eyes of a fourteen year old. I was expecting one of the white haired hippies with a VW bus that populate much of northern New Mexico. The first time I went into the gallery after moving to Taos, I introduced myself to the cute lady in her thirties standing behind a glass case of magnets and other knickknacks and said I was looking for Sunflower. The lady said she was Becky and we talked for fifteen minutes about the gallery and sales and the buyer from Hong Kong. I told her we should go get dinner when she gets off work since Sunflower wasn't going to show up. Becky agreed that we should first catch up since I hadn't gone through puberty the last time she saw me. I should have noticed the name change earlier.

"You should really take some business classes at the university before taking over the gallery," Becky said over tacos and beer.

"Here?" I asked, not a little incredulous. "I was at UT. Why would I leave there and go to the University of New Mexico? Taos."

“You’re kidding, right. You failed out after six years. Boy, get a clue.”

I made fun of her for using the term get a clue. I said she had been locked in a cabin smoking pot for too long. I told her she couldn’t understand my motivations since she was a hippie just now realizing she had to get along in the real world, that if she understood quality education she would never suggest I got to UNM – Taos. I finished my tirade and leaned back in my chair feeling smug and sucking on my beer as a victory lap. Becky looked at me for a moment. She chewed on her bottom lip until she calmed down, then explained that she had actually received degrees in business and art history from Austin College, one of the few places in Texas harder to get into than UT. She had received those degrees in four years with a 4.0. She had also increased my mother’s sales by no less than three percent each year and by ten percent in 2003. This despite the fact that Nancy’s work was becoming less and less popular and she hadn’t impressed a critic since the Clinton administration. Yes, she was realizing she had to leave her hippie nonsense and go out to the real world, but that wasn’t going to be a problem since she was getting an executive position at a company in Huntsville, Texas, and would be positioned to move into a VP role in five years. She walked out leaving me to pay for our meals, but I didn’t have eight dollars or a means of transportation. I called my mom, who had to come into the restaurant to pay the tab, then give me a ride back to the cabin.

The next morning I signed up for two summer courses – intro to business management and intermediate accounting. I had taken intro to accounting my sophomore year, so Becky was wrong about one thing. I went into the gallery with two coffees, a printed schedule, and an apologetic face I had practiced in the mirror that morning. Becky had to unlock the door for me and took the piece of paper out of my hand as I walked in. She laughed, patted my face, and took both cups of coffee for herself. That was the end of the tension. I quit being an ass and Becky

took that first lunch as a learning experience. We actually started to get along and pretty soon were going out for dinner and drinks after work and later we started watching movies in her apartment above the gallery. There aren't very many young people in Taos during the summer so we were the entirety of each other's social circle. We would smoke two bowls with our dealer who would try to convince us he was younger than forty before he put a bag with a couple of g's on the table. We would hand him money and he would leave.

I found myself sketching Becky's face on the paper I was supposed to be using for my accounting homework. I forced myself to draw instead of creating more fantasies since they never worked out for anyone theoretically involved. I kept these sketches hidden. They were quick, not the quality work I would show off. Half of them were on graph paper. Besides, drawing someone every day for a month without their knowledge is pretty creepy. Like that kid in junior high who drew vaginas all over his notebook. Every year Randy's Trapper Keeper would be stolen, the pages ripped out, and the most detailed drawings passed around the school. I should have known Becky would eventually find me out.

Usually, I would draw her when she was across the room. I was posted at the ill-used cash register while she sat at the computer tucked away in the corner. I put the drawings away if she moved or a customer came in. I pulled out one of my earliest sketches to work on the shading when Becky went to eat lunch in her apartment upstairs. I was avoiding a particularly tedious homework assignment and didn't hear her come down the stairs. She walked up behind me and offered to help with my accounting.

"These are better," I said turning to the pieces I had done in the last week. I didn't want her to judge my ability on my worst work. My cheeks were hot with embarrassment despite the

fact I was willingly showing her my drawings. For the first time, I felt sorry for giving Randy's drawing of a vagina labeled "Angela" to Angela back in the seventh grade. Becky pushed me aside and went through my notebook like it was my portfolio.

"You're better than Nancy," she said. "But don't quit your day job."

"Why not?" I asked, surprised by the compliment.

"You only work on your art when you're supposed to be doing something else," Becky said, patting me on the face as a way to end the conversation. She had never looked more attractive.

I sulked for the rest of the afternoon, but came to the conclusion she was right. I could change though. I could focus on my studies. I was going to prove Becky wrong, show her that I could be responsible. Since I didn't have time to draw her anymore, I gave into my romantic notions and started another grand narrative of love and carnal passion that would be initiated by proving myself a responsible adult. While I wasn't daydreaming about Becky, I studied harder than I had since failing my Benchmark test in the fifth grade. If I didn't pass the TAAS the next spring, I would have been held back as my friends moved on.

Staying in elementary while my friends went to junior high was real motivation. Proving Becky wrong was not. Part of the problem was that two weeks into my focused studies we had sex in the gallery. She was helping me study for a management test and I asked her to sit for me after we closed down. I suggested a bargain like I used to do with Nancy. I would study for a half hour then watch TV or play with friends down the block. With Becky, my proposal was to study for two hours and then she would take her clothes off. She denied my request and, instead, we

had sex, right then, behind the cash register, without locking the doors or putting up the closed sign.

Post sex, I wasn't motivated to prove Becky wrong. As long as I put up the appearance of responsibility, she seemed happy. I studied when she was helping me, went back to sketching her portrait when she wasn't, and continued to spend most of my time outside the gallery smoking with Nancy. My two weeks of focusing and Becky's help did get me a B in intro to business, though I knew I wasn't going to be as lucky in accounting. I failed every quiz during the first week of class. Since it was summer school, there wasn't any coming back.

I couldn't successfully run the gallery on my own. I hated doing math and messing with the books. I assumed there would be some computer program to take care of all the numbers and taxes and shit. I would keep the shop open, package and mail the overseas orders, and cuddle with snow bunnies. No such luck. Becky still used a pencil and calculator though she said I could set up a spreadsheet if I wanted to. She showed me a couple of programs she had purchased over the years, some better than others, but none as easy as I needed. I would have had to write out some equations, which wasn't going to happen.

I was still acting like I was responsible, though. While once again sketching Becky from across the room in mid-July, I told her the classes were going well and I could see how they would help me run the gallery. I wouldn't be able to do as good a job as she had the last ten years since I didn't have the background and the dealers and agents wouldn't answer my phone calls, even though I left messages promising I wouldn't show them Nancy's work, but I would do alright.

"You should come to Texas with me," Becky said.

I stared at my accounting book. We weren't to this part yet. We had the carnal passion down but we hadn't moved into the grand love story part. We especially weren't to the moving in together part. I muttered some nonsense that in no way helped the situation.

"That was unfair," Becky said, getting up from her computer and wiping her eyes. "I shouldn't ask you to give this up after you've worked so hard this summer."

She was crying. She was crying because she cared about me. All my other girlfriends only cried when they were mad at me. I stopped her before she could go upstairs, wrapping her in an uncomfortable bear hug from the back. Her legs went limp and I wasn't sure if I was supposed to hold her up or let her gently collapse or pick her up *Gone with the Wind* style. We both ended up falling onto the floor. We lay there a while then without saying a word she punched me in the shoulder and went upstairs. After I closed the gallery for the day, I tried to go up to her apartment, but her door was locked and she wouldn't respond to my knocking.

"I can get you part time work with my company in Huntsville," Becky said as we sat on the same patio where she had abandoned me earlier that summer. I hadn't seen or heard from her in two days. I would go to the gallery, open the shop, hope she would come down from her apartment, then go home after knocking on her locked door. I didn't open the gallery that morning since it was Monday and I had worked the weekend by myself. About noon Becky called saying the words taco and beer then hung up.

"It'll keep you out of trouble and I can be your agent. You can run the gallery's finances from Texas and I've already bought a house out there so no rent . . . for you, at least." She rolled her eyes at the end of the statement, either trying to appear nonchalant or upset with herself at enabling my bum status.

“Wait. So are you asking me to move with you because you want me to be an artist or because you’re in love with me?”

“No one ever, ever said love, haus,” Becky said, sitting up straight in her chair. “I’m offering you a living situation better than living in Taos. Do you want it or not?”

Staying in Taos with only my mother for socialization did seem rough and why wouldn’t I take the opportunity to live somewhere for free. Becky’s offer seemed more pragmatic than anything so I agreed not realizing the scope of her motherly intentions. As we sat eating tacos she told me about a three-pronged plan she had made to get me into some of the biggest art galleries within the next five years. She had a job lined up to give me something more to do than watch TV all day and she even had a daily schedule for us that she started to show me then hid it away saying it was silly. The more plans she revealed that involved her taking care of me, the more excited she got about what she had started calling “our future.”

Apparently, Becky got off on playing the caretaker and I was totally into it. I hadn’t gone for that nurturing type when dating or sleeping around, though one chick I hooked up with a couple of times liked to hold my head up while I drank from a water bottle. But as I sat on the patio with a beer in my hand, the thought of someone actually taking care of me seemed to be enough to pack up my two trash bags and hit the road. I love my mother but Nancy was more of a presence than an actual parental figure.

Later that week, Becky decided to hire back the trainee that she fired when she knew Nancy and I were coming to town, but Nancy stopped her.

“I’m getting out of Austin,” Nancy announced during her second visit to the gallery all summer. “I’m selling my house and staying in Taos.” She kept her pose as if waiting for applause.

Nancy had everything planned out. She would convert Becky’s apartment into a studio, run the gallery herself, and give people tours of her creative space.

“How will you get a washing machine up there?” I asked.

“Don’t be crude.”

Becky warned me that the gallery might be doomed. I told her I couldn’t do any better selling Nancy’s work if I stayed in town. Becky agreed and the next morning we started our trek across eastern New Mexico and the entire width of Texas in Becky’s ’88 Boneville. We were discussing our future when we hit the Texas border. Becky told me about the house she bought and the company she was working for, a place called American Corporation for Community Education and Development. I thought it was some nonprofit that built private schools and community rec centers, Becky informed me they owned and operated private prisons in Louisiana and East Texas.

“Whoa, I can’t be a guard,” I said.

“Why not?”

“They will stab me. They will stab me dead.”

“Think of it as an art project,” Becky said after realizing I was upset. “You’ll be paid to stare at people. That’s your dream job.”

“Isn’t there a coffee shop or something? Anything but a guard.”

Becky made sure I was looking at her before she rolled her eyes then said that was fine I could wuss out and become a barista. This seemed like a perfectly fair compromise. I could handle her displeasure with me. I could not handle being in a locked building with three hundred convicts.

“See that wasn’t so bad,” I said.

“What wasn’t so bad?”

“Our first fight as a couple.”

“Easy, killer. Couple is a pretty strong word right now.”

I was surprised by this statement. Usually, I was the one who was slowing down the commitment talk and being on the other side was not fun. But I also couldn’t see how we weren’t a couple. We were moving states so we could live together, that’s exactly what couples do. I pointed this out and Becky said I should think of this as a business arrangement that happened to involve sex. I didn’t like that explanation but I thought I might just be upset because I wasn’t the one hitting the breaks in the relationship. Whatever the situation was, I was happy to finally have someone looking out for me. Moving with Becky was the first time I felt I had a strong maternal presence in my life. I made the mistake of saying this out loud.

“Are you calling me your mother?” Becky asked, swerving the car a little bit.

“I’m calling you the exact opposite,” I said. “Nancy was never this maternal with me. You take much better care of me than she ever did.”

Somewhere between Amarillo and Wichita Falls, we had to roll the windows down because we were screaming so loudly. Becky said she wasn't my mom because she could kick me out of her house at any moment. I said Nancy had done that several times while I was growing up so that made her even more like my mom. Becky slammed on the breaks and the car came to a halt. My two trash bags of clothes fell out of the backseat and onto the floor.

"Get of my car," Becky said.

"No," I told her.

"Get out of my fucking car," she yelled.

I crossed my arms and sat back in my seat. There was no way I was getting out of her car in the middle of nowhere. I would have to walk for hours before I reached the next town and I could tell Becky was serious and would not be coming back to get me. Nancy had the same type of stubbornness and had made me walk home from the grocery store and mall several times while growing up. I realized that thoughts like these were what made Becky so upset. But if she didn't want me to compare her to my mom, she shouldn't be taking care of me like a mom.

Becky hit the gas pedal. She passed the speed limit and let the odometer keep climbing. Somewhere around a hundred miles an hour she reached back and grabbed one of my bags from the floor. She put the bag in her lap then held the steering wheel with right hand. I started asking her what she was going to do with my bag but she either ignored me or couldn't hear me because the wind so loud with the windows down. She grabbed the bag with her left hand and held it out the window. I was yelling that she was going to lose half of all my worldly possessions if she didn't pull the bag in. The road curved to left and the pressure was too much, the garbage bag

ripped open and my clothes flew in the air landing on the road and in the grass and on the barbed-wire fence that kept the cows from wandering onto the highway.

“What the fuck, Nancy!” I yelled.

Becky had slowed down enough that she was able to hear me. She didn't say a word but pulled the car over immediately. I jumped out and ran to my clothes thinking the cows standing along the fence might be hungry. Becky got out of the car and slammed the door. I could see her chewing on her bottom lip as she leaned against the back of the car watching me. I was afraid she was going to hit me when I got back to the car. She had the same look Nancy would get when she was waiting until we got home to paddle me. I couldn't stop making comparisons. I thought about the time my mother had thrown a toy car out the window as we drove to Dallas because she told me to quit running it over the steering wheel. Or the first time she had an agent drop her and we drove from Austin to Houston going ninety miles an hour the whole time. The similarities didn't seem to end.

As I continued to compare the woman I finally realized I loved and admired to the woman I was moving to Huntsville with, I also realized the cattle were in no way interested in my underwear and dirty jeans, but I didn't know what else to do besides run around gathering my things even though they didn't seem to be going anywhere.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Parental Love

Steve paused the movie when Megan announced she still slept in the same bed as her father. He knew they wouldn't be finishing the movie that night. The plan was to eat pizza, drink wine, and watch some action flick that didn't require too much thinking. Steve even made everyone agree on the movie beforehand so they didn't spend the entire evening debating their choices. Instead, wine was opened before the pizza was ordered and his wife, Brandy, started pouring shots of bourbon before they could decide on toppings. With wine and liquor and no food, the conversation took over and Steve ordered pizza without consulting anyone. Steve warned Brandy if they didn't decide everything beforehand, they would end up wasting the entire evening. Brandy said that was part of the fun.

Steve and Brandy already knew this weird, disturbing fact about Megan and her father. She claimed they only shared a bed when no other option was available but when Conrad stayed with Brandy and Megan, there were plenty of other options. Brandy offered to share her bed with Megan. Easier than that, Conrad could have slept on the couch. Brandy even said she would stay with Steve knowing Conrad was judgmental and misogynistic, though Megan claimed her father's opinions were simply old-time religion. Conrad was not hateful, just conservative. He often asked Brandy if she had slept with the guys Megan was interested in even though Brandy

and Steve had been dating for two years. But you and Steve aren't married, Conrad would say as justification, suggesting that Brandy was, at best, a swinger but, more likely, the whore of Babylon. The directness ended when Megan came back into the room. With his daughter around, Conrad's comments became more generalized about society and usually involved complaints about America's crumbling values.

Steve and Brandy were somewhat immune to Megan's relationship with her father. They were still weirded out when Megan discussed how close she was with Conrad, how she was comfortable walking around her parents' house in her underwear when getting ready for church, or how she took her father clothes shopping so he could approve of her purchases. Even bras and panties. They knew to ignore her in these moments. Brad, however, had never heard this piece of personal information. He was Megan's most recent boyfriend who was much quieter and reserved than the rest. Steve found most of her boyfriend's obnoxious but decided he preferred loud and boisterous over dull and despondent. At Megan's declaration, however, Brad made himself known. He stood up from his chair in the corner and walked towards Megan. The living room was small so his three steps were melodramatic. Brandy dug her nails into Steve's thigh to keep both of them from laughing. Brad stood over Megan looking angry though the plate full of pizza and soda can he was holding undercut his seriousness.

Steve and Brandy knew the conversation that would come next. They had the conversation with Megan the first time Conrad visited. They watched her have this conversation with two previous boyfriends. Steve suspected that Megan told this story so her boyfriends would break up with her, a self-destruct button that kept her from being the bad guy.

The conversation always had the same flow. The first step was weirdness. Megan revealed that she slept in the same bed as her father as an adult, the conversation came to a halt,

and people stated their dismay and disapproval. The next step was creepiness. Megan opened up about the subject and explained how she felt that it proved her close bond with her father. Usually, this part of the conversation didn't illicit much response. People just stared. There tended to be a lot of silent head shaking during this part. The next step was to tell about the last time they shared a bed. Until recently, the latest experience was the time Megan and Brandy lived together, but once Steve and Brandy married, Megan decided she should live on her own and rented a small, one bedroom apartment. Again, the couch was a viable option but Megan claimed she didn't want her dad to get lonely. This story was worse than the previous one. The fact that she was willing to tell this story when no one had to know about it made people go from being creeped out to being concerned. The next step was therapists suggestions. Megan always said the same thing: I am seeing a counselor. Steve didn't think a counselor and a therapist were the same thing. Counselors gave people a safe place to talk. Megan talked all the time. She would open up to a tree that happened to lean in her direction. She needed a therapist who could really get inside her head.

"Maybe it's a good thing that you and your dad acknowledge your physical attraction to one another," Steve said as Brad stood looking at Megan still holding his pizza and soda.

"What the fuck?" Brandy shouted, gesturing with her arms and sloshing wine out of her cup. Everyone was staring at Steve.

"I am not sexually attracted to my father," Megan said.

"I didn't say sexually. I said physically. I don't really know the difference but I think there is one," Steve said trying to form his defense. He was drunk and he should have kept his mouth shut but he couldn't hear the same damn conversation again. He felt it was time to change the conversation and see what happened. Without fully forming his argument he started to explain.

"I'm just sitting here trying to think why I would never sleep in the same bed as my mother. Is it just because she's my mother or is it because she's fat and I wouldn't want to sleep next to her?"

"Steven Christopher!"

"I know, I know, I called my mom fat and now I'm the jerk," Steve said looking at Brandy. "But it's true. I would sleep in the same bed as your mom if I had too."

"That's different," Brandy said. "You and my mom always flirt. It's no secret you find her attractive and that's why you'll never be in a bed with her."

"Okay, fine, that's different, but maybe none of us know what it's like to have a parent who would be physically attractive if they weren't our parent. Maybe there's something evolutionary behind all this."

There was a silence as people rearranged themselves around the room. Brad moved into the dining room, set his pizza and soda on the table, and drug a chair the few feet it took to reach the living room so he could sit next to Megan. Brandy also moved to sit next to Megan as if she were trying to defend her from Brad. They faced Steve sitting alone on the couch. Steve got up and stood in front of the TV. Before he made his stupid comment he had thought about turning the movie back on so he could stand a few inches away and watch while the predictable chaos ensued. Standing, Steve felt as if he were in an intervention. He waited for someone to say that he was the one who needed therapy but people stayed quiet.

"I'm not saying that if my mom lost weight I would be attracted..." Steve trailed off. Trying to explain himself now only made him seem desperate.

"God made me who I am," Megan said. Everyone turned, not sure what her point was. Brad tried to put a hand on her shoulder but she moved away from him. "God made me like this. It has nothing to do with evolution."

"That's what you're upset about?" Brandy asked, her voice strained. While Brandy tried her best to accept her friend's conservative, and often wavering, religious views, there were moments she could not hide her disdain. She felt Megan was too scared to let go of some of her beliefs which often held her back in her relationships and in her career. Steve, Brandy, and Megan had all met in grad school. Steve and Brandy had been out for over a year, almost two. None of them were in the positions or careers they had imagined when they started but, for the most part, they were happy. Brandy taught history at an alternative school for kids who had been kicked out of the public high schools. She was cursed out on a daily basis and spent most of her time telling kids to sit down. Steve worked in a museum which was at least in their field though he was only a part time receptionist/security guard who answered phones on the weekends and walked the halls twice an hour. Still, he had a foot in the door and could get promoted. Mostly, Steve sat on their couch and watched the history channel, then went to the gym so he could come home a few minutes after Brandy. This allowed both of them to pretend his days were productive.

Megan was ready to graduate with them but changed her specialty during their last semester and needed to retake most of her classes. Brandy thought it was because she was scared to branch out and start a career. Steve felt that if she wasn't in school or married Conrad would make her move back to Kentucky to teach at the bible college where she had gone to for undergrad or work in his law firm where he mostly defended racist, homophobic preachers and small militias who accidentally blew shit up while hunting on the outskirts of some small town.

"But God could have made us to evolve, right?" Brad said as a way to compromise, a telling sign they were early in the relationship. Megan preferred the boys who argued with her.

Though those relationships always involved more fighting and yelling and Steve having to sleep on the couch so Megan could share the bed with Brandy for a few nights.

"That's not how it works," Megan said. "God made us how we are and there is no need to evolve."

"Oh my god, shut up," Brandy said hitting Megan on the leg and standing up. "You are not going to use that line. If you think homosexuality is a sin, you can't say God makes us exactly who we are. You always use these double standards, Megan. You can't do that. You know Steve has kissed a couple of guys, does that make him a bad person?"

"Wait, why is my sexuality being brought into this conversation? Megan is upset because the theory of evolution exists."

"That's not why I'm upset. You said I wanted to have sex with my father."

"I didn't say sex," Steve said. "I said physical attraction. There's a difference."

"You're splitting hairs," Brandy said sitting down turning her frustration back to Steve.

"Of course I'm splitting hairs. Look at the subject we're talking about. When someone says I sleep with my dad that could mean multiple things. Even saying I share a bed with my dad could mean several things. So, yeah, I'm going to differentiate between physical and sexual attraction."

"I never thought you meant sex," Brad said. Always the compromiser. "I don't even know why you'd say that, Steve. Who would ever think she meant she had sex with her father?"

"Anyone who thinks Conrad molested her as a child."

In movies, when there are tense melodramatic moments, the actors always pause look at each other and then everything blows up. Someone screams. Someone storms out of the room. Someone apologizes or is asked to leave. None of this happened. Brandy and Brad stared at

Steve in disbelief. Steve sat silently wishing he had been able to start the movie before everyone started talking, wishing the pizza had arrived earlier, wishing Megan hadn't decided to use movie night to chase off Brad. And Megan was eating pizza. She acted as if the last half hour hadn't happened, like they had all been staring at the paused TV screen letting the pizza get cold.

"Let's watch the movie," Megan said, her mouth half full. They took a minute to rearrange themselves. Brandy and Steve moved back to the couch. Brad went into the dining room to retrieve his pizza and traded his soda for bourbon. Steve looked around for the remote he had set down at some point during the conversation. Megan was the only person who didn't move. She seemed settled and content with her pizza and wine.

Steve started the movie and ate his cold pizza. He hoped the pieces in the box were still warm. He regretted his outburst, but Megan really needed to figure her shit out. Brandy had seen similar behavior in some of the kids at his school. If a parent was called to campus they would yell at their child in the middle of the hallway then leave without really addressing the problem. The next day she'd hear the student defending the parents saying it was okay to get yelled at and smacked around because his parents were cool and they let him do whatever he wanted most the time.

Megan talked the same way. At dinner, her father would say terribly racist and misogynistic things about her past boyfriends and future career in academia. Once he left the table, she would say that he could really be a jerk sometimes but Conrad was actually such an amazing man. There were other bits and pieces that pointed to a history of abuse, things Brandy told Steve though she wasn't supposed to. Megan diagnosed herself with repressed memories about being abused as a child though she couldn't decide if they were real or not. She would

freak out if she felt a guy was trying to pin her down on the couch or against the wall as they made out. Little actions that said something big was lurking under the surface.

Steve got up for another piece of pizza and offered to refill people's wine and bourbon. Everyone refused and he sat down with a slightly warm slice and tried to focus on the movie. Megan finished her pizza and took her plate back into the kitchen. As she came back she touched Brandy's arm and headed toward the bedroom.

"Pause the movie," Brandy said, then followed Megan, shutting the door behind her.

Steve sighed and paused the movie. He focused on his pizza then got up to fill his glass one more time. He had a feeling he would sleeping on the couch and decided that if Brandy and Megan weren't out in half an hour he would send Brad on his way.

"So I wanted to..." Brad started to say but was cut off by Steve's upraised hand.

"Nope. No talking. There is no way conversation will make this moment less awkward."

Brad nodded and tried to drink from his empty glass. Just as Steve was going to tell him to get more, Brad got out of his chair. Steve thought about finding something else to watch but that would mean consulting Brad which seemed like too much effort. Steve checked his phone instead. Twenty five more minutes before he could send Brad home.

"I think you may be right," Brad said as he sat down with more bourbon.

"Right about what?" Steve asked.

"The physical attraction thing. It doesn't really bother me to think about sleeping in the same bed as my mom. She's an attractive lady for over fifty."

Steve nodded hoping the conversation would end there. He didn't want to talk about Megan's fucked up family anymore. He wondered if he could use the same awkwardness line to stop Brad a second time.

"I just can't think of any conceivable excuse to actually do it," Brad said. "Maybe if the only other choice was to sleep on the bare ground or a concrete floor, but when the hell would that ever happen."

The two guys sat in silence. Both bent over in their seats, leaned their elbows on their knees, and stared into their glasses.

"I am a fucking adult," Brad said, clearly feeling the effects of the alcohol since no one ever heard him curse. "I can't imagine a reason I wouldn't get two hotel rooms if that ever happened. And Megan's dad is loaded. You're telling me he can't reserve a suite if their on the road. I need to talk to her."

Brad was up and walking towards the bedroom before Steve realized what he said. Steve waited for the yelling, waited for Megan to become unhinged as she was known to do when drinking. Steve looked into his glass and wished he had better friends. He felt a hand on his arm. Brandy nodded towards the bedroom. Brad and Megan stood behind her looking remorseful.

"You kids don't have too much fun out here," Steve said, but Brandy elbowed him in the ribs which didn't let his joke land properly.

Steve and Brandy sat on the edge of the bed with their knees touching, holding hands as if they were calmly waiting for some impending doom. Steve could tell Brandy was trying to hear the argument in the living room. She wasn't crude enough to put her ear to the door, but Steve knew he wasn't supposed to speak. He spoke anyway.

"How long are we in time out?"

Brandy dug her nails into his thigh and visibly leaned her ear towards the door. The voices in the living room became audible. Brandy leaned back and looked at Steve. The voices

got louder. Then there was the sound of glass breaking and the distinct noise of a hand making contact with bare skin.

Brandy and Steve rushed into the living room to find Megan with her purse in hand and Brad holding the door open waiting for her to walk out. Steve looked from Brad to Megan. He felt it was more likely that Megan hit Brad but he never knew about the quiet ones. Both of them had red eyes and redder cheeks from yelling and crying.

“We’re going to go, guys,” Megan said with a smile that seemed genuine. “Thanks for having us over.”

She walked over and threw her arms around Brandy like it was the last time they’d see each other. She squeezed Steve’s hand then walked out the door. Brad stood awkwardly for a moment, raised his hand as a way to say good bye, turned to leave, then asked, “Do you want this open or closed?”

“My front door,” Steve said. “I want it closed.”

Brad left and the apartment was silent. Steve and Brandy looked around for the broken glass, finding it in the sink. Steve threw the larger pieces in the trash can and washed the shards down the drain. Brandy picked up the bottle of bourbon and flopped down on the couch. There were two more pieces of pizza in the box. Steve layered them and shoved as much into his mouth as possible. Brandy flipped through the movie choices and selected the goofy comedies category as she drank straight from the bottle. Once Steve finished chewing and was able to swallow, he sat down next to her and took the bottle. He knew it would be empty before they got off the couch.

“So I’m drunk,” Brandy said which was always worrisome. “But if I die, you can sleep with my mom.”

Steve thought about pointing out that this permission was highly ambiguous, up for interpretation, and possibly disturbing. Instead, he found out how much bourbon he could chug before choking, then handed the bottle back.

Sleeping on the Graves of Relatives We Never Knew

Papa was out chopping wood when Mama shot the neighbor. I was watching cartoons. I remember Elmer Fudd chasing Bugs Bunny, he always missed the rabbit and I knew Mama had to have missed Old Man Hicks just the same. I imagined the two barrels of Papa's shotgun splitting apart as a quick flame indicated the bullets flying in separate directions missing everything but the tin can sitting on the fence. After the ringing in my ears stopped I could hear the continued rhythm of Papa's ax falling on the chopping block. I heard the windows shatter and then Old Man Hick's back door opening and calmly shutting. Sissy picked up the phone and dialed the sheriff's office and quietly told Officer O'Brian that some hitchhiking hippie had just shot Old Man Hicks and run off through the woods. Sissy said yeah, uh huh, and I don't know sir a few times before hanging up the phone and coming to sit next to me on the couch.

"Why don't we watch something else," Sissy said. She tried the other three channels we could occasionally pick up but there was only static. Sissy turned the TV off and set the remote on the couch. "Maybe we can just sit here quietly for a while," she said.

Mama came in through the back door, stood in the kitchen for a moment, then said, "I better see if Old Man Hicks is alright."

She walked out the door and back over to the cabin. I wanted to turn the TV back on so I could make sure that Elmer Fudd really didn't shoot Bugs Bunny and that everything turned out okay. I could feel Sissy leaning in towards me until her head was finally resting on my shoulder.

Her spine bent awkwardly and I couldn't really feel the weight of her head on my shoulder. I did feel a couple of tears land on my head. I sat as still as I could and waited. I tried as hard as I could to keep my eyes open, I didn't want to fall asleep this time, but the next thing I remember was hearing the siren on Sheriff Williams' truck. He pulled in front of Old Man Hicks' cabin and Sissy ran to look out the front window. I rubbed my eyes and stood up to make sure I wouldn't go back to sleep. I couldn't hear Papa chopping wood anymore but I figured Mama was still in the other cabin. I turned the TV back on but only found static. While everyone else ran out to talk to the sheriff I laid in the floor listening to the static and waited.

I had been doing a lot of waiting the few days before Old Man Hicks died. Sissy came home crying, I waited alone in my room. Mama and Papa started yelling at Old Man Hicks one afternoon and I waited in my tree house out in our forest behind our cabin. Papa had been chopping more wood than usual. Mama had been scrubbing the floors everyday for the last few weeks. And Sissy spent a lot of time by herself in her room.

I got tired of listening to the static so I walked out the front door right as some volunteer firemen were carrying Old Man Hicks' body to the ambulance. A state trooper pulled to a screeching halt, jumped out of his truck, and started yelling at the men to put the body back where it came from. I thought this was a funny way of talking about a man, a real person. This wasn't a piece of candy they had stolen. Or a bird's egg that needed to be put back in the nest. It was Old Man Hicks. I walked up to Mama who was talking to Officer O'Brian.

"We agreed, Rick. You said you wouldn't call the troopers." Mama's voice was soft but threatening. Her teeth were clenched and I could barely see her mouth moving.

"I had to," Officer O'Brian said. "Sheriff Williams was at the station. He would have suspected something if I hadn't called. Sorry, Grace."

Officer O'Brian walked towards the trooper and Mama wrapped her arms around her waist. She kicked the dirt and bit her lip. She walked past me and tussled my hair. I could tell she didn't see me. Her hand on my head was like scooping cereal into your mouth while watching cartoons. It didn't require actual thinking.

"We've had this guy come by a few times," Sissy was telling another state trooper who had arrived. "He's one of those hitchhiking hippie types that claim to be living off the land but he's really nothing much more than beggar. Well, he came by probably a month ago and we sent him on his way. But Old Man Hicks let him stay over night."

I was surprised when Sissy said this because I didn't remember anyone coming to our door and Old Man Hicks was the meanest person I had ever known. Sissy always said he wasn't that bad, but he wouldn't even let us gather pine cones in his yard. Sissy continued telling her story.

"He was always trying to bother us. Old Man Hicks that is, not the hippie. Always doing the exact opposite of what he knew we wanted. He cut down all the trees between our cabins, but wouldn't let the cable company run a line in front of his land so we could watch real channels. It was always little things like that. So this hippie guy probably told him that we wouldn't let him stay, so Hicks let him spend the night just to spite us."

The trooper had been looking at his little pad making notes as Sissy talked. When she paused he looked up but not all the way to Sissy's face. His gaze hovered somewhere between his hands and Sissy's eyes as he began to stammer.

"Well, Miss, you've told me a lot about this hippie guy, but you haven't said nothing about what happened today." The guy briefly looked at Sissy in the face then immediately stared back at his notebook.

“I didn’t see him today, but that’s the only person I can think of who could have done it,” Sissy said. Then she noticed me. She put her arm around my neck. “I was sitting with my brother watching cartoons when we heard the shots. Papa was chopping wood in the back and Mama was in the kitchen. We’re the only ones around besides Hicks and that hippie.”

“But, it’s your Dad’s shotgun that killed Mr. Hicks. It’s still lying by the body.”

Sissy stood silently while the trooper’s eyes again began to wander somewhere between his notebook and her face.

“How, do you suppose, did this hippie get a hold of your father’s shotgun?” the trooper asked.

“We leave it out on the front porch. Like I said, no one’s out here but us and Old Man Hicks. Ky-oates will go after the chickens sometimes so Papa keeps the shotgun on the front porch so he can get to it easily. The hippie guy must have picked it up without us noticing. It really wouldn’t have been that hard for him to do if you really think about it.”

Sissy crossed her arms and quit talking. The trooper’s eyes snapped up. Sissy’s face was red. Her mouth was closed and she was breathing heavily through her nose. She reminded me of a horse. By this time there were four troopers and five or six men from the volunteer fire department. Everyone was milling about not knowing what else to do. I noticed that the men kept looking over at us. Sissy kept her arms across her chest. She seemed to be in pain.

“Let’s go to the tree house,” she said as she grabbed my hand and pulled me along behind her.

She had a determined look on her face and walked through the small creek that ran behind our cabin. Mud and leaves stuck to the bottoms of our bare feet as we made our way to the tree. Sissy had to boost me up and then climb up on her own. We sat for a moment before

she said, "Let's go higher". We kept climbing, Sissy behind me pushing, until we got to the last limb thick enough for us both to sit. We were squwooshed together in the V of two large branches, one pointed back home, the other shot straight up into the sky. We could see the top of the closest cabin to the west, a good couple a miles away. We could see the sign that said, Entering Bell County, even though we couldn't read it from up here. We could see the cemetery where our grandparents and Aunt Martha were buried.

"Remember that last revival, when that big famous evangelist came? They set the tents up on the other side of the cemetery like always?" Sissy asked. I nodded my head. "I was sitting up here early one morning, looking at the tent and wondering what it was like inside." Sissy paused putting the scene back together in her head, making sure she had all the right colors, all the right sounds and smells. "Well, I saw this girl in a white baptismal gown dancing on Aunt Martha's grave. The girl was dancing with the angel on Aunt Martha's headstone. It was like only she and Aunt Martha and I could tell that the angel was real, alive, not made of stone, so the angel came out of its stone casing."

A chill ran down my spine causing me to shiver and I looked away. Sissy kept her gaze even and steady on the cemetery. I looked at the Entering Bell County sign.

"I miss Aunt Martha," Sissy said. I nodded and looked back at the cemetery. Sissy gave a fake laugh that sounded more like a cough. "You know," she said, "if Aunt Martha were still alive Old Man Hicks would probably still be Uncle Rick. Why'd we start calling him Old Man Hicks, anyway?" I looked up at Sissy and saw tears running down her cheeks. She didn't give me time to answer. "It was Mama, I know. She never liked him. She was furious when Aunt Martha told her about the wedding. Do you remember the wedding?" Her gaze finally broke from the angel in the cemetery and she looked down at me. I shook my head. "Naw, you were

too young. Honestly, I don't really remember it either. I remember my light pink dress that had yellow ribbon on the edges. And I remember that you were wearing a light blue suit with a tie and everything." She wrapped her arm around my shoulder and pulled me in closer to her body. I could feel the rhythm of her heart and my head moved every time she took a breath. "I do remember how mad Mama was before the wedding and how Papa didn't give a shit." She looked down at me again. "Sorry about that." But, I didn't care. I knew she was upset even though I didn't know why and didn't want Mama to wash her mouth out with soap. I wasn't gonna tattle.

Sissy rested her head on top of mine as I leaned against her shoulder. We sat in silence and I could feel the bark underneath my butt. My left leg was going a little numb, but I sat there anyway and imagined that the white tents were still set up.

"Those damn Baptist," Mama said in the kitchen the morning they started putting up the tents. "There doing another one of their damn revivals."

Papa kept drinking his coffee and reading the weekly newspaper. "Settle down, Grace. Not that big a deal."

Old Man Hicks was a Baptist. So was the family that owned the land next to ours. They had the largest field of any Baptist in town. That's why the tents were always set up on the other side of our cemetery. We didn't go to their revivals because we weren't Baptist, but my friend Billy from church did. His family went to every one and Mama said that was blasphemy. She said that believers should not be yoked to unbelievers, and that's why we didn't participate. Mama also said that verse to Aunt Martha a lot, usually when they were arguing about Uncle Rick. I closed my eyes and quickly started to dream about the girl in the white baptismal dancing with Aunt Martha's angel.

Sissy wiggled under me and scooted down on the branch a little bit. She woke me up but I left my head on her shoulder. When she moved, her shorts hiked up and I saw a row of band aids on the inside of her leg. I touched one, but Sissy slapped my hand away.

“Don’t you worry about that,” she said. Then pushed me off of her shoulder and grabbed my face, squeezing my cheeks together. “And don’t you tell Mama or Papa about it, either. You understand me?” I nodded my head and she let go of my face. “Let’s get down,” she said.

She started climbing down first turning to make sure I didn’t slip whenever she hit a solid branch. When we got to the ground she turned and looked at my face. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?” I shook my head. “I’m sorry,” she said and gave me a hug.

We held hands as we walked back to the cabins. When we got to Papa’s chopping block we could see that more cars had arrived and that people were everywhere. Men and women in dark jackets and sunglasses stood outside both cabins and talked to one another and on cell phones and walkie talkies. Trucks and cars were parked up and down the road.

Sissy and I started walking through the crowd. We bumped into people who didn’t seem to notice us, except for a few of the men who stared at Sissy. We made our way towards Mama who was talking to two men. She broke away and came over to us.

“Forensics people from the city,” she said. “Detectives too. Came all the up from Austin to see about Old Man Hicks’ death.”

Behind Mama I could see Officer O’Brian sitting on the tail gate of one of the trucks, surrounded by a bunch of people with notepads in their hands and guns on their belts. Officer O’Brian didn’t have a gun. Or sunglasses. Or a notepad. He looked nervous and wrung his hands a lot.

“Come on,” Sissy said pulling me along. “Mama wants us to go for a walk.”

As we passed through the crowd again Sissy got more stares. One guy turned to her and tipped his hat.

“Ma’am,” he said as we passed.

“Davis, come on,” yelled one of the women standing next to the guy. She then looked at Sissy. “We apologize for his behavior,” she said.

Sissy let go of my hand and started to walk faster. I had a hard time keeping up. We walked down the road for a long way, then Sissy turned into the woods. By this time I had to run just to keep her in my sight. When she got to the cemetery she stopped. I finally caught up with her and laid down on the ground. I was out of breath and my legs ached.

“Not here,” she said pulling me off the ground and again dragging me behind her. We passed by the graves of relatives we never knew. Great aunts and uncles who survived the Depression, but not the Sixties. Men who died in World War 1. Distant relatives who had traveled from Germany on a boat before the twentieth century. A few soldiers who died fighting for the Confederate Army. Sissy found Grandma and Grandpa’s grave, sat down, and leaned against the gravestone. It was big and heavy. Grandma died ten days after Grandpa. Mama says she died of a broken heart. Grandpa’s gravestone wasn’t finished when Grandma died, so the kids decided that they should share. That’s what they would have wanted. I put my head on Sissy’s lap and tried to feel the band aids through her shorts.

“I want to be beautiful,” Sissy said. I looked up at her but couldn’t see her face because the sun was right behind her head. She ran her hand through my hair. “I know that I’m pretty. But, I don’t want to just be pretty. I want to be beautiful. The type you see in the magazines. The type of beautiful that men are scared of. When you look like that men are too afraid to bother you.”

Sissy moved my head off her lap and picked up a stick that was within arms reach. She started sharpening the end on top of Grandma and Grandpa's headstone. I had no idea what she was talking about. I closed my eyes and started thinking about all the boys that used to pick on Sissy when she was in elementary school. As soon as we would get on the bus boys would start asking Sissy for a kiss. I thought she liked the boys, liked the attention. But, one day Gary Ramsey leaned across the aisle.

"Come on, Celeste," he said. "I just want a little peck. You don't have to use your tongue like you did with Bradley Sanders."

Sissy got real mad. She was sitting next to the window, but lunged over me and scratched Gary down the side of his face. He still has a little scar next to his ear. After that the boys got mean. They quit asking her for kisses and instead started twisting her nipples and slapping her butt. Mama found out and came up to the school one day. Sissy and I were sitting outside the principal's office after everyone else had gone home. Mama was inside yelling at him.

"Mr. Phillips, she has bruises on her butt. Would you like for me to show you?"

Sissy tensed up when Mama said this, but nothing happened. We went home and the next day five boys were suspended for a week. After that she quit complaining about the boys, but started spending a lot of time in the bathroom. Mama was always worried about her, but said it was a phase she would grow out of. Sissy had kind of gotten out of the habit of staying in her room all the time until she came in from Old Man Hicks' cabin last week.

"I'm going to sit over there," Sissy said standing up pointing at the largest oldest gravestone in the cemetery. It belonged to the guy Papa calls our family's forefather, but I never

remember his name. "I need to think," Sissy said. She gently touched the point of the sharpened stick and gave me a forced smile. I closed my eyes again.

I wish I had seen the girl from the revival dancing on Aunt Martha's grave. I mean I wish I had seen her for real, not just in my dreams. I wanted to see Aunt Martha's angel. The angel who could leave her stone body to dance on the grave of the kindest woman that ever lived. I wanted to meet her.

Aunt Martha would let me sit in her lap every Sunday during church. Mama said I was too big to be sitting in people's lap during church, but Aunt Martha said I would never be too big. She always had fresh baked bread ready for me when I came home from school. Mama always made cookies and said that every young boy should like cookies. But I didn't. I liked Aunt Martha's bread. We would sit at her kitchen table and I would tell her everything that happened at school that day. Everything from what grade I made on my math quiz, to who I traded my cookie with at lunch time, to what time Sissy and I got off the bus coming home. Mama would always tell me to keep it to the basics. She didn't need to know every time I sneezed and coughed. Sissy would always go help Uncle Rick in his woodshop. I would never go in there. It was too dark and the saw dust made me sneeze. Plus, he was mean.

"You don't know that he's mean," Sissy would tell me. "You're just saying that cause Mama says that. He's not mean, he's just quiet. And sad."

When they took Aunt Martha to the hospital, I was coming home from school. She told me to go eat the bread that was on the table and to wait there until she came. She would be back soon. Uncle Rick got in the ambulance with Aunt Martha while Mama and Papa followed in the truck. Sissy went to her room, but I sat down, ate Aunt Martha's bread, and waited. Sissy came over and tried to get me to come home, but I wouldn't. She tried to get me to eat dinner, but I

stayed at the table. I was going to wait until Aunt Martha came back. Sissy finally came over and said that she was going to bed. The next thing I remember is waking up in my own bed. I had fallen asleep, so Aunt Martha never got home from the hospital. When I got up Mama was yelling at Uncle Rick in the front the yard. She came in and slammed the door.

“Well,” Mama said a little too loudly. “Old Man Hicks is going to have the service in the Baptist church.” Mama shook her head. “Meanest old man in the whole world,” she said under her breath.

I opened my eyes and saw Aunt Martha standing over me. The sun was setting and I couldn't see her face. She was wearing a dark windbreaker and had a walkie talkie in her hand. I could feel grass poking into my back and arms.

“Aunt Martha,” I said.

Aunt Martha sat down next to me and pulled me into her lap. She smelled different and her lap wasn't as soft as I remembered. I was definitely too big to be in her lap. “So, what happened today?” she asked. I started to cry and told her everything. Everything from the gun shot to Sissy sharpening the stick.

“And, where is your sister?” she asked.

I looked up at her and didn't answer. Everyone in the family calls Sissy, Sissy. Aunt Martha wouldn't ask me where my sister was. She would ask where Sissy was. I pointed to the headstone but didn't say anything. The lady threw me off her lap and ran over to Sissy calling for help on her walkie talkie. I followed. The woman leaned over Sissy asking her questions. I could hear sirens off in the distance. I looked over the woman's shoulder and saw Sissy lying on the ground. I started crying. There was blood all over the grass. She still had the stick in her hand. The lady was pressing her hands on Sissy's leg. I squatted down on the opposite side

from the woman. I took the stick and threw it as far as I could. Sissy raised her bloody hand to my face.

“I’ll be right back,” she said. “Go wait for me in the kitchen.”

I got up and ran through the woods back to our cabin. I tripped and fell. I scratched my knees and hands and started bleeding, but I kept running. When I got to the cabin everything was quiet. There were still a few cars in front of the cabin, but there wasn’t as many people milling about. I went in through the back door and sat down at the table. From the window I could see the police putting Mama in the back of their car. Papa and Officer O’Brian were standing close by, handcuffed, a cop had a hand on each of their arms.

I couldn’t wait in the kitchen. If I waited here Sissy and Mama and Papa would never come back, just like Aunt Martha. I went out the back and ran back to the cemetery. My legs were on fire and I couldn’t breath. Sissy and the woman were gone already. I walked over to Aunt Martha’s grave and sat below her angel. I asked the angel to protect me and be with my whole family then I laid down and went to sleep, on purpose this time. Early that morning, before the sun was rising, the angel woke me up and took me in her arms. She was wearing the white baptismal gown and smelled like fresh baked bread. We danced until the sun came completely over the horizon. She then laid me down on the grass and went to tell the neighbors where to find me.

Cowles
(pronounced *kau(s)*)

The town of Cowles, New Mexico used to be a booming mine town. But the mineral being dug out of the Earth was uranium and it stained the mountain side yellow and made everyone sick. The mine was then abandoned and the place left a ghost town. Soon enough, tourists started coming and building cabins. People from Texas, Arizona, southern New Mexico. People who did not have the money or time to go all the way up into Colorado, so they built cabins around the old abandoned mines and Cowles became the home of one convenient store and one trading post that let hunters swap meat and let middle class mountaineers buy a sleeping bag or griddle if they forgot to pack one before leaving. And for years this was all Cowles was, two stores and a pack of tourists who were only around a few weeks out of every year.

Then the artist from Tucson decided that it was too much trouble going back and forth from Arizona and her lawyer husband had just retired so they moved up to their cabin permanently. The lawyer read his books and the artist continued to paint. A few of the middle class mountaineers from Texas started to make a little more money and decided that owning a cabin was out of style and having time shares at condos in Wolf's Creek, Colorado was a much better idea. So the mountaineers sold their cabins to a few forest rangers. Then came the lumber

mill workers with their families and a couple of ranch hands who looked after their boss's cattle during the spring, summer, and fall, then became poachers in the winter. So, in the course of a few months, the ghost town of Cowles, New Mexico became a regular little village.

The convenient store became a more proper grocery with produce only a week old and beer shipped in from Albuquerque. The trading post pretty much stayed the same, except the owner put up a sign that said Trader Joe's and he started making trips down to Iron Gate more often to see what the RVer's and the tent campers had left behind.

With people and commerce, Cowles also developed a social hierarchy. The artist and the lawyer were at the top since they had the largest cabin and were the intellectuals of the whole group. The rangers came next since they received a regular pay check and the grocer after them. Then there were the mill workers and, at the very bottom, the ranch hands, most of them not being able to speak English and all of them having to scrounge the forest for food. Floating around in and among the two lower levels of the social order was Trader Joe. No one really knew what to make of him. He did own a business but much of that business was somewhat shady and underhanded. So Trader Joe became the sole member of the dark underbelly of Cowles, New Mexico, but at least he could speak English.

No one really left Cowles, New Mexico. A lot of the members of the community simply couldn't afford to leave. The ranch hands only had horses and the mill workers could barely afford to buy gas to drive to the lumber yard everyday. The upper half of the village had moved to Cowles because they grew tired of always having to leave it, so they saw no purpose in straying far from what had now become something of a permanent vacation spot. And Trader Joe and the grocer simply couldn't leave because they had no one else to keep the stores open.

No one left Cowles, New Mexico and no one came to it either. Life went on as normal and no one thought that it should be any different. Well, almost no one. There was a teenage boy in town, the son of one of the rangers, who had been thinking that his life could use some change. The boy had gone to high school in Pecos about thirty miles down the mountain and graduated with four other students. He did not graduate in the top ten percent. He figured that he would get a job as a forest ranger but didn't want to rush the decision since he was talking about his career which meant he was talking about the rest of his life. So the boy took a few months off to think about the next stage in his life and that's what made him think that maybe he needed a change.

"I'm going to the casino," the boy announced while standing around one morning in Trader Joe's.

Trader Joe, the grocer, and the mill workers all paused for a moment. They looked at the boy then looked at their mugs and went back drinking coffee in silence. The boy kicked the rough wooden floor with his shoes and was about to walk out of the store and forget the idea when Trader Joe spoke up.

"How you plan on getting there without a car?"

"I don't need a car," the boy said. "You only need a car if you go around the mountain. It'll only take me a day and a half if I go over the mountain. That casino's just over yonder. There's a trail that connects the saddle backs. Makes the hiking easy. I can do it in a day."

The men all nodded and continued drinking their coffee.

"You got money?" the grocer asked.

The boy pulled five crisp twenty dollar bills out of his pocket.

"This should do me," he said.

“Sure,” Trader Joe said. “You got all your supplies and gear ready to go, right?”

The boy stopped because he hadn't thought that far ahead. Trader Joe saw the moment of hesitation written all over the boy's face and took this as an opportunity to make some money.

“Come on over here, boy. I can set you up with all the equipment you need.”

So the boy walked over and Trader Joe put a backpack on his shoulders and filled the boy's arms with an old sleeping bag, a used tarp, rope, a compass, matches, a canteen, fishing net and some line, a ripped poncho, dirty socks, an old cap, and on top of this stack, a map.

“There you go,” Trader Joe said patting the boy on the back. “You're all set and ready to go. Well, right after you go get food supplies from the grocery.” He turned the boy towards the door and took out of the boy's hand two of the crisp twenty dollar bills.

“It's nothing personal,” Trader Joe said. “Just doing business. A man's gotta make a living you know.”

The boy walked out the door followed by the grocer. The grocer didn't like the stunt Trader Joe had just pulled but didn't want to make a fuss. It wasn't any of his business if the boy was too dumb to realize he had been duped. So the grocer filled the boy's backpack with food, took one of the crisp twenty dollar bills out of his hand and sent him on his way.

The boy hadn't been planning on leaving quite so quickly but figured now was as good a time as any. So he stood right there in front of the two stores and loaded his pack. He hung the canteen around his neck, put the compass in his pocket, and with map in hand he headed out.

“Tell my pop I went to the casino,” he yelled back as he walked down the only paved road in Cowles, New Mexico.

All the men had come outside and were leaning up against the store front watching the boy walk away, but Trader Joe was the only one who responded.

“Will do, Son. Will do. Enjoy the casino.”

“Gonna take him at least two days to get to that casino,” one of the mill workers said.

“Maybe three,” said the other one.

No one really knows how the boy’s trip was. No one knows how long it took the boy to get to the casino or how long he stayed once he was there. No one knows because he never bothered to tell no one. But at one week, almost to the very minute, the boy came walking back down the only paved road in Cowles, New Mexico. The backpack was no longer on his back and his supplies were long gone. The canteen was not around his neck, the compass was not in his pocket, and the map was no longer in his hand. The boy’s clothes were ripped, his face was dirty and scratched, and his hair looked like a squirrel’s nest. The only thing that remained the same was the smile on the boy’s face. The men drinking coffee at Trader Joe’s all came out to lean on the front of the building and watch the boy walk down the street.

“You look like you need a good Samaritan to come along and help you out,” Trader Joe said as the boy came to stand in front of the line of men.

“No, sir,” the boy said. “I’m doing just fine on my own.”

He paused and looked at each of the men’s faces, waiting for someone to ask him how things went.

“So. How’d you make out?” the grocer finally asked.

The boy continued smiling and emptied the contents from his pockets. He still had one twenty dollar bill left, though it wasn’t quite so crisp and clean as before. He had a hand full of chips he had won at the blackjack table. And three small pieces of paper.

“What are those?” one of the mill workers asked pointing to the paper.

“These, my friends,” the boy said as he held up the papers and put the rest of the stuff back into his pockets. “These are my fortune. Bet on three underdogs in the horse races. All three won. These tickets are worth ten thousand a piece.”

The grocer gave a low slow whistle. “Quite impressive young man.”

“Damn right, it’s impressive. I’ve got a nose for picking out winners. Man at the betting booth told me I was making a mistake but I’m fifty thousand dollars richer. I won’t have to work ever again. I don’t need help from my pop or my ma. Or any of you for that matter. I got everything I need right here.” He finished by dramatically slapping the pieces of paper against the palm of his open hand.

While the boy was bragging about his winnings his father, the ranger, had been walking up the road and none of the men leaning against the wall bothered to tell the boy that he was coming.

“You don’t need your ma or me anymore,” the boy’s father said as the boy was slapping the paper against his hand. “Fine by me. But don’t bother coming home. If you don’t need our help, you don’t need our roof or our food or the bed your ma and I bought when you turned twelve. Fine by me. I’m sure we’ll see you around. Maybe we can even have a picnic sometime next week. We’ll bring food to the first one, but plan on supplying the meal for the second. See you around, Son.”

The ranger gave his son a solid pat on the back that held neither disgust nor anger. Just a matter of fact pat that told the son there were no hard feelings but he had to lie in the bed he had made for himself. The ranger walked away and the boy turned towards the men who were still leaning up against the building. Not ever letting an opportunity pass him up, Trader Joe was the first to speak.

“Good for you, boy. Should a told that to my father long ago. Never had the chance. Died in a hospital down in Clovis. Anyway, looks like you need a place to stay. I have a little hunter’s cabin just a mile or two up the mountain. I would be happy to let you use it.”

The boy’s face lit up at the thought of not having to spend another night out in the open, sleeping on the ground. “That sounds great, sir. I’ll take it.”

“Well, now we got to talk about price.”

At this the boy’s face fell. He didn’t have any money and he never thought about how much things cost when he agreed to the buy them.

“All I got is twenty bucks. So I’m guessing I’ll just be spending a few more nights under the stars.”

“Nonsense,” Trader Joe said. “You got more than that sweaty twenty dollar bill. I’ll tell you what, we’ll make this easy. You give me just one of those little papers of your’s and we’ll call it even.”

It took the boy a moment or two to decide if this was really as good a deal as it sounded. He hadn’t wanted to part with his fortune quite so quickly but it looked like the only way out.

“Sure, that sounds fair,” the boy said.

“Great, let’s shake on it,” Trader Joe said grabbing the boy’s hand. “Now, just give me one of the pieces of paper, go buy some food and I’ll take you up there.”

Again, the grocer didn’t approve of the business transaction he had just witnessed but didn’t think it was his place to say anything. So the grocer loaded the boy up with food and took his twenty dollars though the food probably should have cost him thirty, and Trader Joe and the boy started up the mountain.

The hunter's cabin, as Trader Joe had called it, turned out to be an empty tool shed with a cot. There was an old fashioned water pump behind the shack, but this pump would have to be shared with the families of the two ranch hands who had built their cabins about twenty yards to the west.

"Where's the bathroom?" the boy asked.

"It's wherever the hell you want it to be, boy. You ain't living with your mama no more. Go shit wherever you damn well please."

"How do I cook food?" the boy asked.

"Over a fire. It's the way I always cook my food and I even got a stove. Now, I didn't say this was going to be the nicest place you ever lived, I just said it was a roof over your head."

The boy looked around the cabin slowly which didn't take very long. There was a lantern, shovel, and some pots he could cook with, but besides that the small shack was bare. Just as Trader Joe could see a good business deal when it was put right in front of him, he could also see when a customer was about make a fuss.

"I better head out," Trader Joe said. "Gotta go keep my paying customers happy."

And with that Trader Joe was gone with one of the three pieces of paper from the casino held snugly in his shirt pocket. The boy was alone in the cabin and the wives of the ranch hands were yelling at their children in Spanish. And again, while no one knows exactly what the boy did next because he never bothered to tell no one, people would have to assume that the only thing the boy could have done was sat down on that bed and cried.

Trader Joe walked into his store with a grin dancing all over his face. "Oh, that boy is scared shitless. But, it'll be good for him. He'll learn how to be on his own."

"Don't know if that was the right thing to do," the grocer said.

Trader Joe looked up and saw the mill workers nodding along.

“I did more than any of you fools,” Trader Joe spat at his customers. “I could have demanded cash instead of this stupid piece of paper.” Trader Joe took the paper out his pocket and slapped it down on the counter. “That cabin’s pretty nice. I was gonna move up there myself. It’d be nice to get away from everyone here in town. But, I gave it to that boy instead. By the way, when we were up at the cabin he told me each one of these pieces of paper is worth more like fifty thousand a piece. Not all together.”

Trader Joe backed away from the counter letting the other men take a good look at the paper he left sitting there. Then, with a quick flick of his wrist he snatched the paper up in a movement that made all three men jump.

“But, I still gotta go all the way to that Indian casino if I want my money. So I don’t really know if it’s worth it.”

The grocer slugged down the last bit of coffee he had in his mug and headed for the door.

“Better go mind my store, fellas. See you in a while.”

The two mill workers soon followed and Trader Joe was left with the little piece of paper that promised him a fortune.

“Now, don’t you two get involved in trying to swindle that boy out of his money,” the grocer said as the two mill workers came out of the store.

“Nope,” said one of the mill workers.

“Wouldn’t dare,” said the other.

But both men had already come up with separate plans to get the paper for himself. The men parted ways each waiting for his chance to go see the boy.

The mill worker who owned the truck went and saw the boy first. He laid out his offer plain and simple. The truck for one piece of paper.

“I don’t know how to drive,” the boy said.

“I can teach you.”

The boy kindly turned down the mill worker’s offer and returned to sitting on the log in front of his cabin. The mill worker walked away disappointed.

The next morning the other mill worker showed up at the cabin with a thermos of coffee, a saw, and an ax. He sat down with the boy and filled two metal mugs with the warm coffee. Then, the two got up and spent the day chopping fire wood and stacking it by the shack. The next day the mill worker showed up at the shack again. After drinking coffee the two got up and built an outhouse so the boy would no longer have to poop behind trees while worrying about being caught by one of the ranch hands little kids. This continued for a week. The mill worker showed the boy how to build a fire, how to cook corn bread and gut a fish. He also helped the boy build a lean-to, so he could have somewhere dry to keep his food and cooking supplies, and a fence around the cabin, outhouse, and kitchen to try to deter bears and children from getting too close to the boy’s home.

At the end of the week, the mill worker stood up and said, “I guess we should call it a day,” as he had every other day that week.

“Thanks a lot,” the boy said shaking the man’s hand. “Thanks for all of your help. If I had money I would pay you, but as you know, I don’t have any.”

The mill worker looked towards the sun setting behind the mountains. He stretched his back and scratched his neck.

“Yep, I’ve done a lot I reckon. And I don’t want to impose or nothing. Just wanted to come up here and give you hand.”

“I’m grateful, sir,” the boy said. “And if I had anything to pay you with I would be happy to do so.”

“How bout one of them pieces of paper,” the mill worker said not looking away from the setting sun.

The boy rubbed his hands together. He turned away from the mill worker and walked towards his kitchen. He only had two pieces of paper left and didn’t want to part with either of them. But he also couldn’t be rude to the man who taught him how to survive on his own. The boy walked back over to the mill worker and took a neatly folded handkerchief out of his pocket. Carefully, the boy undid each fold in the cloth to reveal two small pieces of paper. He handed one to the mill worker, who, without a word, walked back down the mountain to his family. And, as is the case so often with this boy, no one knows what he did next because he never bothered to tell no one, but people can only guess that for a second time that boy sat on his bed and cried.

“More like two hundred thousand,” the mill worker said when he walked into Trader Joe’s the next morning.

“What are you talking crazy about over there?” Trader Joe asked pouring himself a cup of coffee.

“Those pieces of paper,” the mill worker said. “The boy told me they are worth closer to two hundred thousand a piece. Whoever has all three is almost a millionaire.”

By this time the other mill worker and the grocer had come into the store.

“What are you talking about?” the grocer asked.

“Those pieces of paper the boy brought back from the casino. Worth close to a million dollars altogether.”

“And what does that matter to you?” the grocer asked.

The mill worker had been waiting for such an opportunity and took the piece of paper out of his pocket and slammed it down on the counter. “That’s what it matters to me.”

The grocer moaned almost as if he was in pain. “Now, I told you not to go and take that boy’s possessions.”

“Didn’t take it,” the mill worker said. “The boy chose to give it me.”

“After he spent all week up at his cabin,” the other mill worker said hunched over his mug of coffee leaning against the wall farthest away from the other three men.

Trader Joe and the grocer turned back to the mill worker as he picked the piece of paper off the counter and placed it back in his pocket.

“The boy needed help. Couldn’t survive on his own. I went and helped him out. Out of kindness he chose to give me this piece of paper. It was nice talking to you boys, but my wife and I have some celebrating to do.” The mill worker finished his coffee and set the mug down on the counter. As he walked out the door he called back to the other worker, “Don’t imagine I’ll be going back to the mill any time soon. Just leave without me from now on.”

The three men stood in silence, drinking their coffee and imaging what a million dollars looks like. Even the grocer couldn’t help thinking about all that money.

Sometime later, the boy met his parents for a picnic up by Jack’s Creek, just about half a mile down from their cabin. The previous week his mother had made tuna salad sandwiches with potato salad, warm bread and dill pickles. It was the boy’s turn to provide the food so he made corn bread and was going to bring grilled fish but didn’t catch enough the day before.

Instead, the boy finally opened the loaf of white bread he had bought at the grocery store and took peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. His parents didn't say anything but ate both the cornbread and the sandwiches and thanked him for bringing the food.

"Next week will be my turn again," the boy's mother said.

The boy's parents had heard about how their son had given away the pieces of paper he had from the casino. They had also heard that all three pieces of paper were worth more than a million dollars. But the parents thought that it was best to let their son live and learn and didn't think they had the right to get involved with his business affairs since he was no longer living under their roof. So after a pleasant, though somewhat unappetizing, lunch the boy and his parents parted ways, the boy going back to his cabin and the parents back to their own.

These picnics went on for a couple a weeks. The boy's mother would bring chicken salad or roast beef or meatloaf on her weeks and the boy would bring cornbread and maybe a few bite size pieces of grilled fish, but usually the cornbread was accompanied by peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Until one week, when the boy was supposed to bring lunch, he didn't show up. The boy's parents were a little worried but figured their son must be enjoying his new life and had miscounted the days. They used the same excuse the next couple of weeks, but then the temperature was dropping and the boy's parents had to admit to themselves that their son was probably cold and hungry and hadn't shown up to the picnics because he was ashamed of not being able to bring food. The boy's parents discussed going and getting their son and bringing him home, but they felt that after waiting so long he would just be too embarrassed and humiliated to come home. So, instead, the parents waited for their son to come and ask for help, and as soon as he did they would welcome him with open arms and apologize for waiting so

long. What the boy's parents did not know is that as they were making this decision the boy was giving away the last piece of paper he owned.

After being hungry and cold for two weeks the boy decided to ask his neighbors for help. He offered the ranch hands' wives his last piece of paper and all the poker chips he owned if they would give him food and teach him how to scrounge through the forest. The ranch hands' wives were not too keen on helping their neighbor since he had spent the last month yelling at their kids and pushing them off the water pump whenever he felt the need for a drink. But, now the boy was cold and hungry and even though their husband's had forbidden them to talk to this boy the women chose to help him. They showed the boy how to make tortillas instead of cornbread. They were easier to make, used less ingredients, and could be carried in his pocket when wandering around the mountain side. The women also tried to show the boy how to hunt snakes and frogs, so he could boil them and wrap the meat in the tortilla, but this proved too much for the boy's weak stomach and he would not eat any of the meat they offered. In return for their services, the women requested the boy's poker chips. They thought the babies would enjoy chewing on the soft plastic and the older kids might like hiding the chips in the woods, only to find them later and claim them to be hidden treasures. This was all before the parent's decision.

A week later, as the parents were having their discussion, the boy was down in the grocery store talking to the owner.

"You know how much this piece of paper is worth," the boy said matter of factly.

"Then go get your money," the grocer responded.

Trader Joe then entered the store, his curiosity having been peaked after seeing the weak and haggard boy enter the neighboring shop.

“I’m too weak,” the boy said. “I can’t make that walk. Please take the paper and let me have some food.”

“Oh, come on,” said Trader Joe. “Give the boy some food. That piece of paper is good as gold. Probably worth more than everything in this store.”

The grocer rolled his eyes. He didn’t want to see this boy go hungry, but he couldn’t just start passing out food to people. He also didn’t want to get involved in the business of the little pieces of paper. As the days added up so did the amount these three pieces of paper were worth. The boy took the handkerchief out of his pocket, gently unfolded it, and took out the last piece of paper he owned. The boy placed the piece of paper on the counter and looked up at the grocer. After a moment, the grocer took the piece of paper and put it in his cash register. The boy loaded his arms with as much food as he could carry and walked out of the store. And everyone knows what the boy did next because everyone was outside watching as the boy walked home crying the entire way.

“Come back tomorrow and I’ll pack you up another box of food,” the grocer yelled after the boy. “I at least owe you one more box of food.”

“You’re a good man,” said Trader Joe patting the grocer on the back.

The grocer shrugged Trader Joe’s hand off his shoulder, walked in his store, and locked the door behind him. The grocer was so upset with himself for taking that poor boy’s last piece of paper that he closed the store and went home before noon. Later that night, Trader Joe crawled through the window of the grocery store and took that piece of paper out of the cash register. The grocer never missed it.

Weeks passed and then months. The snows came and left, and somehow the boy survived the winter. When the villagers had just begun to think about spring, he came down the mountain looking healthier than ever.

“I’m going back to the casino,” the boy announced as he walked into Trader Joe’s.

“You got money?” the grocer asked.

“Don’t need it,” the boy said. “I’m not going to gamble. I’m going to get a job.”

“They going to hire a white boy at that Indian casino?” Trader Joe asked.

“Maybe. Maybe not. But I’m going to find out. And if they don’t, I’ll just spend another year on the mountain. Another mountain. One that’s taller and farther away.”

The men mumbled and nodded. All were impressed with the boy’s initiative and quite surprised as well. And, as was usual, Trader Joe saw the opportunity for a transaction.

“Well, I’ll set you up with equipment again, but I’m gonna need some kind of payment.”

“I don’t need equipment. I’ll make it on my own.”

“Then why you here, boy?” Trader Joe asked getting snappy.

“I came to offer to cash in your pieces of paper. Each of you, well besides you, sir,” the boy said nodding towards the disgruntled mill worker in the corner, “has one of the pieces of paper I came here with. I’m offering to take those back to the casino and bring you your money. Free of charge. What do you say?”

The boy looked at the three men waiting for them to get excited about finally receiving their money. But no one moved. Trader Joe wasn’t about to let anyone else know that he had two of three pieces of paper and the mill worker wasn’t going to give over his paper unless one of the other men did it first. That moment was the first time the grocer thought about the paper

since it had been given to him and he immediately knew it had been stolen by Trader Joe. So, all three men stood frozen staring at the boy.

“Well, I hope those serve you well. And tell pop I’m going to the casino.”

For the second time in just about one year, all four men leaned against the wall of Trader Joe’s and watched as the boy walked down the only paved road in Cowles, New Mexico.

“Gonna take him at least two days to get to that casino,” one of the mill workers said.

“Maybe three,” said the one with the piece of paper in his pocket.

As the men dispersed, the grocer gave Trader Joe a knowing look. But Trader Joe knew the grocer wasn’t going to do anything and merely shrugged as he walked into his store. The grocer locked his door and headed off to tell the boy’s parents.

“But he looked healthy?” the boy’s mother asked after the grocer had finished his story.

“As an ox. Never seen him look better.”

“And what about those papers?” the father asked. “Why didn’t you give him yours? You trust him don’tcha?”

“Sure do,” the grocer said. “Only problem is I don’t have the piece of paper no more. Trader Joe stole it. But, I don’t mind. Don’t know what I would do with a million dollars anyway.”

The boy’s parents thanked the grocer and showed him out. Then, as soon as he was out of sight, the boy’s parents headed out to talk to the other rangers and their wives about the issue of the pieces of paper.

“I don’t know why we even care about those silly pieces of paper,” the oldest of the rangers’ wives said. “They might not be worth a penny and whose gonna go all the way to the casino to cash them in anyway?”

“It’s the principle,” the boy’s father said. “Those pieces of paper belonged to my boy and they were stolen from him.”

Everyone nodded in silence, even the husband of the oldest wife. So the room fell silent as everyone pondered how to go about getting those papers from Trader Joe. After a few suggestions were thrown out for being too complicated or too sneaky and underhanded, the rangers decided to call the State Troopers the next time Trader Joe went down to snoop around the tent-campers’ belongings at Iron Gate. They figured that once the Troopers caught him they would want to see how much stolen stuff Trader Joe had up in his store. The rangers would then need to escort the Troopers up to town and if they happened upon those little pieces of paper while the Troopers were searching the store, well, they might just have to confiscate them.

And that’s pretty much how everything went. Trader Joe left, the Troopers came, his place was searched and the rangers came out with two pieces of paper promising them a fortune. What the rangers didn’t know is that nosing around the camping grounds wasn’t Trader Joe’s only business. He also made a good deal of money selling marijuana to the campers. This marijuana was stored in quite a great quantity in the back of his store and it wasn’t the first time Trader Joe had been caught in this type of fiasco.

Trader Joe, however, was not the only person hurt in this raid the rangers had planned along with their wives. The ranch hands also made frequent trips down to the camping grounds. Sometimes they were needed to fix someone’s car that had broken down or maybe a camp stove that wasn’t lighting, but more often than not they would just collect the cans and bottles campers had left lying around. These cans and bottles they would save up in trash bags, then once every few months load up there horses, ride down to Pecos, and turn them in for a few bucks.

The ranch hands were doing just that when the Troopers showed up looking for Trader Joe. They asked for ranch hands' papers, then promptly loaded them in a car and drove them away. So the ranch hands' wives were left without their husbands. The ranch hands' kids were left without their fathers. Trader Joe was in jail for a long time. The rangers and their wives had two out of the three pieces of paper. And all the grocer could do was shake his head, because it wasn't any of his business how the people in the village conducted themselves.

While all this madness was going on with the rangers and Trader Joe and the ranch hands, the lawyer and the artist had decided they too wanted at least one of those pieces of paper. Fortunately, at the same time, the wife of the mill worker had decided that she was tired of eating canned beans every night and always having to ask the other mill worker's wife for diapers, because, just as promised, the mill worker had stopped going to work. The paper, however, offered him nothing more than the promise of money and promises didn't feed his family, though the mill worker wouldn't admit it.

"I'm rich," the mill worker would tell his wife when she would start to nag about not having any food for the baby or clothes for herself. "It is my place in life to sit and relax because I'm the one that came up with the plan to make us wealthy."

His wife could not stand this new attitude towards life, so later that afternoon she gave her husband's piece of paper to the artist for a ride to town and a bus ticket to Santa Rosa.

So, life went on in Cowles, New Mexico just as it had done the winter before. The pieces of paper had traded hands, new families were on top of the social ladder, and other families were back in their place. The ranch hands were back with their wives in two months time and decided to take over Trader Joe's store since he would not be coming back.

While the ranch hands' ingenuity was paying off in the store the artist's own scheming was continuing to work in her benefit. Throughout the winter she had been meeting one of the rangers, the father of the boy to be exact, up in a little shack the Forest Service had built for tools and maps and emergency supplies. Along with these items, were a small gas heater and a cot with a mattress no softer than a pile of straw. But the ranger and the artist endured and put plenty of strain on that cot on a weekly basis.

"What are we going to do when the snow melts?" the artist asked one day late in winter as she sat on the floor next to the heater and the ranger laid on the cot with both his head and feet falling off the ends. "You won't be able to spend your days lying around this shack."

"It won't be so easy for you to sneak up here, either," the ranger said. "More people will be walking around in these woods. Including people from town. Us rangers can't sit still, even on our days off."

There was silence as the artist nodded, put on her long underwear, thermal socks, wool sweater, snow pants, boots, and finally her thick toboggan. Throughout this time the ranger never moved.

"There's a hunter's cabin about a hundred yards up the mountain from the waterfall in Jack's Creek. I could buy it. But don't have the money right now," the artist said. She opened the door, letting a cold biting wind sweep through the cabin and over the ranger's body. "Why don't you get me one of those two tickets you have been keeping. I'll use that to buy the cabin."

The artist left, stomping through the snow in the opposite direction of her cabin. She would walk to the end of the village, then walk down the only paved road in Cowles, New Mexico for everyone to see her. The ranger lay on the cot contemplating whether or not he should bring one of the pieces of paper to the little shack the next week. He could think of a

hundred different reasons why he should tell the artist no, but knew that when next week came he would hand over half of the fortune he had shared with the rangers. Though the villagers had been living together in the tiny village of Cowles, New Mexico for many years they all tended to forget about how hard it was to keep secrets.

The lawyer had soon figured out what his wife's weekly outings were all about and he started a little tryst of his own. After his wife would clomp off in her snow gear, the wife of the mill worker (the one who had not been driven to the bus stop) would show up with freshly made cookies or bread or even empanadas and the two would lie down in front of the fire enjoying both the goodies and the bodies. And while this started out only as a tryst it soon grew into something more.

"You have no idea how hard it is to live him," the wife of the mill worker would say in reference to her husband. "He's never at home, but when he is he immediately sits down and falls asleep. He wakes up only to feed himself and tuck the kids into bed. There's never enough money and I have a hard time even buying the ingredients for the cookies you like."

Hearing her sad stories week after week finally broke the heart of the lawyer. He saw a woman in need and he saw two kids his own wife would never let him have. The lawyer thought about the treats the artist would never make and he thought about how the wife of the mill worker's skin glowed as they lay in front of the fire. He did not think of how the mill worker's heart would break when he found out his wife had left and taken his kids. He did not think that maybe the mill worker slept so much because he worked twelve or more hours sawing logs everyday, many times having to use hand saws. He did not think of the artist at all. And when he told the wife of the mill worker to go pack up her stuff and her children, he did not think his wife would be so happy when she got home after seeing the ranger.

“I have something to say to you,” the lawyer said after pushing away the hug and kiss the artist tried to give him. “I need you to leave.”

The artist sat down with a thud on a dining room chair. Her happiness had been shattered abruptly and quite unexpectedly.

“I have a new family now. Complete with two children. They will be moving in presently and you can’t be here when they arrive.”

“You can’t do this,” the artist said.

The lawyer pulled the piece of paper out of his pocket. “This is mine now. I may do as I please.”

The artist then pulled her own piece of paper out her pocket and showed it to her husband. “We seem to be equals,” she said. “So, no. You may not do as you please. You will be leaving my house.”

The lawyer and the artist then launched into a bitter argument that eventually ended, or came to some kind of hiatus, with the artist marching out of the house and down the only paved street in Cowles, New Mexico to confront the wife of the mill worker.

As has been said before, it was quite difficult to keep secrets in their little village and the wives of the rangers had known about the lawyer’s affair with the mill worker’s wife and had been waiting for the appropriate time to tell the artist. When two of the ranger’s wives saw the artist stomping down the road they thought that it was as good a time as any to break the news. Before they made it down to the street, however, the artist had already confronted the mill worker’s wife.

“You will not be living in my house. You will not be sleeping in my bed. And those little urchins will not be putting their grubby paws and dirty bodies on my furniture,” the artist

screamed drawing the attention of the grocer, the ranch hands, and their wives who were all drinking coffee in Trader Joe's.

"You can't tell me what to do," the wife of the mill worker said calmly, but with mounds of anger and resentment. "My new husband is rich and he doesn't have to take orders from no one."

The wife pulled out her own piece of paper and showed it to the mill worker's wife. By this time the ranger's had also joined the ranks of spectators and only the mother of the boy was missing.

"I am rich," the artist said. "No one can tell me what to do."

The lawyer finally caught up with the artist, he did not want to go outside without his winter clothes and, therefore, had somewhat of a late start, but he took his stance beside the wife of mill worker and took her smallest child in his arms.

"We are the richest people in this town," the oldest ranger said. "Our three families are in possession of two out of the three pieces of paper brought back by the boy from the casino and we shall make the decisions to keep the peace in this town."

At this moment, the lawyer took his piece of paper out of his pocket and showed it to the crowd. There were gasps from the rangers' and their wives and even from the grocer who found himself being oddly sucked into the drama of his fellow townspeople. At this time, the ranch hands and their wives went back into the store believing that their English was worse than they had previously thought, because no rich American community would be fighting over something so silly.

The rangers had known about their colleague's affair but never thought he would stoop to the level of giving away half of their fortune.

“You,” the oldest ranger said pointing at the father of the boy, “are no longer welcomed in our houses. You will no longer share in our fortune.”

“That’s just fine,” the artist said. “He will be living with me.”

“Not in my house,” the lawyer screamed.

The ranger paused, questioning his loyalties to his wife and to the artist, but his questions were answered when his wife walked through the crowd carrying a suitcase.

“Go with her,” his wife said. “Our son has done himself good and is waiting in Pecos for me with a car. To take me to his ranch. Where I will have a roof, peace, and the love of my son.” The mother started to walk down the street with her head bowed, but paused for a moment and turned around. “You people are mad,” she said before leaving the town of Cowles, New Mexico.

With the departure of the mother, lines had been drawn and decisions made. The lawyer, the wife of the mill worker, and her two kids went to live in the largest of all the townspeople’s cabins. The artist went with the father of the boy to his own cabin. And the other rangers retreated to their own homes only half as wealthy as they originally believed. While no one was happy, everyone was satisfied for the time being and immediately began to make plans to acquire the other two pieces of paper.

Later that afternoon, the grocer saw the mill worker walking up the road confused after finding his home empty. The grocer paused at the door debating on whether or not to go and tell the mill worker all that had gone on that day. But the grocer decided against this believing that it was not any of his business how the townspeople conducted their lives. Even if they had all gone mad.

Because of Pope Joan

Two days ago, Trent looked at me and said, “Screw you, Bob.” I think he was quoting a movie because my name’s not Bob, but he said it so calmly, so resolutely that I didn’t object. He then walked out the full length window. He didn’t run or slam into the window with his head or knee or elbow, just as calmly as he said, “Screw you, Bob” he walked through the window. Granted, he had a glass of vodka tonic in his hand and I also understand that we were staying in a Mexico City hotel, but that’s a pretty weak window that a man can just calmly walk through. It was quite a feat. Anyway, Trent walked out the window and plummeted fourteen stories down – here I’m supposed to say to his death, but I refuse, because at the time, I was positive that Trent would land on the street and walk away just as coolly as he had walked out the window.

I took my time getting off the bed and walking over to the gaping hole in the wall, and I saw his body lying in a heap, gathering a crowd. I could see specks of the shattered window glittering around his body. The glass of vodka tonic sat on the edge of the floor intact but sans vodka. I picked it up and set it on the table in the corner, then headed down to the street.

It’s fine if you don’t believe me that Trent just walked out the window. The cops didn’t believe me either. They probably thought they were misunderstanding my words.

I said, “He said, ‘Screw you, Bob.’”

“But, you said your name was Darren,” said the cop who could speak English.

“I know, but let me finish the story. Then he casually walked through the picture window.” They all looked at me blankly. “That’s the end of my story,” I said.

They assumed he was drunk and I assumed that was what they wrote on their report, assuming that they wrote a report at all, but Trent never gets drunk. He was always drinking, but he was never drunk. Trent was angry, though. The cops should have written that down, that the victim was angry with his roommate and business partner. While the cops went about doing whatever it was they needed to get done, I stood for a moment contemplating the whole situation, then started laughing. Everyone standing around looked at me as if I were a monster, scrunching up their noses and shaking their heads. For a moment I felt bad. Maybe I shouldn’t be laughing, I thought. Maybe I shouldn’t think this is funny. But I couldn’t help it. I started laughing again. “Es comico,” I said. “Es muy comico.” They didn’t agree.

Trent and I were documentary film makers – independent documentary film makers – meaning we didn’t have any money but ran around with a camera trying to catch footage of things (yes, things, just things) that might relate enough to put a title on. We would then sell the film to independent video stores where people would rent it because the film looked hip and trendy and will help them expand their minds and their worldview. Trent and I have three films out: *Vodka Tonic*, filmed in Moscow about teenagers who binge drink vodka, *Walk This Way*, filmed in Madrid about teenagers who go against fashion, and *Skater Scurvy* about teenagers who skate versus teenagers who roller blade. I’m guessing you see a trend in our interest. All

three of these movies, together, made us fifteen hundred dollars. Trent's dad, our financier and only supporter, is rich. Filthy rich.

This film was going to be our most ambitious. We were tackling the issue of teenage suicide in Mexico. See, you're laughing. You feel bad but it's funny. It's ironic. And, 40 what makes it worse was that Trent wanted to film a kid who was about to commit suicide and I was refusing to do it.

"But what if we can't talk him down?" I asked. "What if the kid really kills himself?"

"That makes it all the more dramatic, man," Trent said.

We had been told by a group of teenagers that there was an old abandoned building that teens would jump off of when committing suicide. Mexico City's own version of the Golden Gate Bridge. We met the kids in a park close to the Tower of the Americas. We asked them to be interviewed and they talked us into taking them to lunch and buying them drinks. The lunch lasted five hours. I think by the time they told us about the old building they were so wasted they would have told us where to meet Vincent Fox for an interview. I also thought that they wanted to mug us. Trent said I was too mistrusting and that we just needed to go hang out on the roof of this old abandoned building and wait for someone to try and jump. We had this argument down in the hotel bar and I left him sitting there and stormed off to the room. A few minutes later Trent walked in and told me to get my camera and gear, we were going to find this building. I ignored him and continued to watch a man with muscles and sun glasses chase a man with a dress and fake breasts around a table. That was when Trent uttered those infamous words.

On the first day of junior high athletics the coach made us run until we puked. Thirty seventh-grade boys were dressed in pads pretending to know how to play football. We had dreams of knocking people's heads off, of making spectacularly acrobatic leaps, catching the football, and flying over the goal line. In a thrillingly barked speech, however, the coach informed us that we would not even see a football for the first month of practice. "You'll be looking at the back of your teammates' head as you run and the ground as you puke," he yelled within the first two minutes of athletic period. Three guys started to cry. I forced my mouth into a plastered awkward smile to keep from crying and to avoid the embarrassment that befell the other three. After running for forty five minutes the coach called us in and told us to take a knee. As we formed a circle around the coach, whose name I don't even remember, we were told that everything we needed to know about life would be learned out on the field. I was sold, I was convinced, I was a disciple. Life was a football field and the more I realized this fact the easier life would be. And, maybe life did get better after that, but football didn't.

I soon found out that I was not big enough to knock people's heads off or talented enough to catch a football. I was talented at getting smashed by my own teammates and letting the fifth string, four-foot-eight corner back intercept the ball during practice. After being sick and sore for two months I quit. In the small Texas town where football was God, I was seen as a heretic. My mother was relieved that I decided to quit since she was the one taking care of my bruises. My dad held a silent contempt. He hadn't been a football star in high school but had hopes that his son would be. My friends' parents didn't understand my decision.

"But, Darren," Billy's mom had said. "What are you going to do after school?"

"Go home," I answered.

“Like all the druggies in this town. What about your athletic period?”

“I don’t know.”

I thought Billy’s mom was over reacting, but the school seemed to have the same reaction about my first period class. Everyone did athletics, at least until high school. Then, you either joined the band or started taking art. They told me that I wouldn’t have to suit up but to continue going to football. I would sit on the sidelines and work on homework or read a book during class. The coaches wanted to make me a manager with the mentally handicapped kids, but I refused. After a couple of weeks I noticed that the coaches didn’t even know I was there. Each day I would come to class later and later until I eventually stopped going to first period at all. So, I missed out. I missed out on learning everything I needed to know about life and living.

The cops found Trent’s passport and started to mumble to one another. The cop that could speak English came over and showed it to me. I was still lost to why they were mumbling.

“Your friend,” the cop explained, “he was both Mexican and from the United States. We call him a man without a land. Because he doesn’t live here and the people in the United States, they don’t want him.”

I was stunned. I had never known Trent was Mexican or half-Mexican or had dual citizenship or whatever implications being “a man without a land” contained. I went up to our room to call Trent’s father. The hotel staff had already finished cleaning up the glass and had tacked cardboard up against the broken window. They tried to get me to change rooms, but I told them I was fine. On the phone, Trent’s father confirmed what the cops had said. Trent’s mother was from Mexico and Trent was born in Guadalajara. They had moved when Trent was three, his

mother died when he was ten. She committed suicide. Trent's father told me that he would buy me a plane ticket right away, that I would be able to leave by the end of the week. I was silent for a moment before asking, "Do you mind if I stay down here and finish the film?" I could feel Trent's father contemplating. We made a silent pact and he told me to take as long as I needed. "Finish Trent's project," he said. When I hung up the phone the scene of Trent walking through the window crossed my mind. I laughed for an hour, tears streaking down my cheeks.

The next night, the taxi driver gave me a strange look as I got out of the car. It was past midnight and I had a hard time climbing over fallen walls and abandoned building materials in the dark. I finally made it to the roof after half an hour of climbing partly built stairs and left-over scaffolding. The view was phenomenal. Lights from streets and houses spread around for as far as I could see. I pulled out my camera to film scenery that could be used as filler to make the movie more dramatic. I slowly walked around the edge of the building scared to death that I was going to take a wrong step and fall crashing down, adding to the irony of this trip. Three quarters around I could see the basilica rising from the concrete buildings and asphalt streets. Even Nietzsche would have been breathless.

"Va saltar?" a female's voice asked from behind me.

I jumped and spun around, careful of the edge of the building. I could barely make out the silhouette of the girl sitting up against some metal box.

"Hola," I said not understanding her question.

"You jump?" she asked again.

"No. No," I said walking towards her.

“People who come here jump,” she said.

“You’re not jumping.”

“Es verdad. But, my friend did. Last week.”

“Really,” I said somewhat conflicted on whether or not I should start filming. I let the camera hang down at my side.

“Same place as you. She wanted to see the church as she fell. She was angry. She wanted to be a priest. They told her girls were nuns. She said Pope Joan was not a nun. They said Pope Joan was a myth. So, she jumped.”

I stood in silence for a moment. “My friend walked out the window yesterday.”

“Lo siento,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“Was your friend angry?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He was angry with me,” I said.

“My friend, too. I say she should be a nun. That the church was right. Then she came up here and jumped. The church, they say they will teach you everything you need to know about life. But, what can we do now?”

I walked over to sit down beside the girl still hoping that I could get some good footage. I was thinking about asking her to repeat the story for the camera. As I bent over to sit down I put

my hand in a puddle of blood. I then noticed how the girl's arm was laid to her side. She had done it correctly, cutting her arm long-ways from wrist to elbow, not across. I set the camera down next to me as the girl laid her head on my shoulder.

“What happens when we don't learn the lessons we are taught?” she asked.

I thought this was a very good question. One I had never asked myself before.

“What happens when we are never taught those lessons?” I asked thinking about my old football coach.

The girl gave an affirming hum like a cat purring. “I'm cold,” she said.

Yesterday, I wrapped my arms around a dying girl whose name I didn't even know. And while that girl died I laughed. I laughed until my sides hurt and my cheeks ached. I laughed until I was too tired to hide the tears and the pain and the sorrow. I laughed until I collapsed with exhaustion, then I lay beside the girl and wept.

There Are No Driveways in Sex

When riding my bike as a kid, my mother wouldn't allow my sister or me to go past the houses directly next to ours. This meant we would go down the driveway, ride along the sidewalk, turn in the neighbor's driveway, and then come back to our house. At four and six this was fine, but at ten and twelve my sister and I wanted more freedom. Unfortunately, we moved houses before our boundaries expanded. My mother was overly protective in most aspects of my life, probably due to the combination of a strictly religious mother and an abusive, alcoholic father. She tended to base most of her parental decisions on fear of the unknown and wild speculation always jumping to the worst-case scenario instead of finding a middle ground. She worried about my teachers at school and at church and she never failed to point out when someone could be a rapist or murderer. During my teenage years, she was so concerned with my virginity and genitals that sexuality became terrifying.

When I hit puberty, I started to understand why my parents didn't like girls who wore short skirts and low tops. The vigilance I had developed while trying to be a good, judgmental Christian became a detriment since I never failed to notice someone's ample cleavage or shapely legs.

In my conservative, young mind, sex was something you did in order to have kids and that was it. There wasn't any burning desire or uncontrollable urges, no hunger for someone's

body or yearning for their touch, and there was definitely no sweating or grunting. I was confused when I would get worked up by looking at pictures of naked women and horrified by the sounds I would make while on the computer. My assumption was that this was neither common attraction nor natural desire but my own deviant nature. My parents often warned me that I was on the path to becoming a deviant, lecturing me about lying and embellishing stories. I exaggerated often and they said it would lead to worse sins that I wouldn't be able to stop. Therefore, I knew I had the makings of a deviant and assumed my desire to look at the images on the screen was part of my nature.

I started to act on this supposedly unhealthy attraction towards breasts around 1996. My family had owned a computer for a year or two, and I had an email address during this time, but only recently had we been connected to the Internet. For a couple of years, I switched TV channels late at night as I watched *MASH* while my parents went to bed. I flipped over to E! or MTV to see what was fuzzied out or catch a sex scene from an *NYPD Blue* rerun. While the channel changing was partially out of sexual desire, it was more about rebellion. I was as likely to watch *Bevis and Butthead* as I was *Wild On*. Once we had the Internet, rebellion was completely taken over by arousal. I wasn't concerned with simply finding websites of which my parents would disapprove, I was looking for those precious few that showed me boobs while pretending the rest of the female body was nonexistent. I was scared of vaginas.

In the midst of this turmoil and sexual frustration, my parents went out of town. I had recently turned sixteen, I could drive and take care of myself, so they let me stay at the house alone. When I got home from school I immediately went to the computer to look at porn. I was a junior in high school, alone for the weekend, and spent the first thirty minutes looking at naked women. Then I was done. I got it out of my system and spent the rest of the weekend doing

homework, going to choir and theater practice, and having an overall productive weekend. Three days alone, little to do, and only half an hour spent looking at naked people. As an adult I would consider this a pretty amazing accomplishment. As a sixteen year old, this was a miracle. I would commend that younger version of me for his self-control and work ethic if I didn't know that his actions were done out of fear and self-loathing.

I knew something was up a few days after my parents came back in town. They kept having private discussions that would stop when I walked in the room and they quit looking at me in the eye. My spidey-senses told me they had found my search history and my dad and I would be having another long, uncomfortable discussion. I was summoned into the dining room to find both my mother and father sitting at the table. Usually, these awkward discussions about porn, masturbation, and sex were done with only my dad so this was a new, anxiety-inducing change. I sat down at the head of the table with my parents on either side of me. My dad slid over a piece of paper and asked me to read it to my mother. On the paper was a list of all the websites I had visited.

At the time, I was horrified. I had every reason to be horrified. No one should ever be forced to discuss their porn viewing habits with their parents. I don't even think people should choose to do that, but I'm not trying to preach here. Looking back, the list I read wasn't all that bad. There were no midgets or clowns or grandmothers. Nothing extreme. No fetishes or kinks. The list was actually quite boring, even for the most vanilla porn viewers.

First on the list was TexasBeachFlashing.com, the only site with videos. It loaded for ten minutes then played for twenty seconds so I quickly moved on to sites with photos. Second was SexyCeleste.com. When I read this site, my mother whimpered and put her hand up to her face.

Third was MagnificentMelons.com. Saying this site out loud caused my mom to burst into tears. She sobbed, her entire body trembling as my dad took the list away from me. There were only three more sites on the list—like I said, most of my time was spent searching for the correct websites and not with the actual porn—but I didn't argue and was happy to end the awkwardness.

As my mom sat and cried, my dad passed me a packet of paper, stapled at the top. He told me that I should go in my room and read it. The top of the paper said: The Twelve Steps of Porn Addiction. I waited to get into my room before I read the rest. The first step was looking at porn. This made sense and so far I qualified as an addict. The second step was looking at porn *a lot*. This, I thought, I had also done. I spent time thinking about when I would get to see porn next and the logistics of getting home when no one else was there. So, yes, I still qualified as an addict. The third step was “accidental touching.” This was explained as purposefully touching women's breasts and buttocks but playing it off as a mistake, a trip or turning around too quickly while flailing one's arms. I couldn't think of any distinct moments, but I did have a mishap in show choir a couple of weeks before. Coming in from a twirl, I attempted to grab my partner's hand. Instead, I grabbed a handful of sweatshirt, though she claimed I was also touching boob. Since I had no experience in this field, I didn't know whether or not to believe her. While reading the list in my room, I decided she was right and I had grabbed her on purpose. I was on the third of twelve steps, three for three, it was looking like I was on my way to full blown porn addiction.

The fourth step was having sex. This seemed like a bit of a leap since I was scared of vaginas. I wasn't sure how I would put my penis inside one when I didn't like looking at them. I was surprised by my lack of will power when looking at naked women on the computer and, the

way my parents and Sunday school teachers talked, it seemed like non-Christian women were likely to get naked and try to have sex with me as soon as we were alone. I decided to accept the premise that I was about to have sex at any moment. The fifth step was sleeping with prostitutes. This seemed too huge a jump. I couldn't conceive of ever going to that length for sex so I decided to skip to step number twelve which said: serial killer. I threw the packet across the room. I looked at porn. I may have looked at porn a lot, but serial killer? While I could understand my parents being nervous about little lies turning into big lies, I couldn't understand them linking teenage masturbation with killing multiple people.

From that point on I hid this side of myself from my parents. I tried to appear as asexual as possible and acted like females had little to do with my life. I never told them who I was attracted to or which girl I had a crush on. I learned how to completely avoid talking about my relationships or mentioning the names of girls I was hanging out with. My parents have met a total of two girlfriends and have known the names of maybe two more. Since that conversation about porn, they have accused me of having sex with my girlfriends, friends, and strangers, of sleeping with women in my old bedroom and bathroom and even their bed, and, once, my mother insinuated that I might be gay. None of these things would be that big of a deal if it wasn't coupled with their crippling disappointment and soul-crushing anxiety that with these actions and desires come eternal damnation. Even as an adult, I don't have the stomach to look my parents in the eye and say, "I'm okay with looking at naked women." I can't handle the consequences.

While in grad school, my mother sent me a hand-written letter apologizing for the way she handled my porn-viewing habits. At the time, I was still bitter and trying to dig out of the layers of shame placed on top of me. I don't know that I read the entire letter before throwing it

away. I wish I had. I now realize there's a healing process and that letter could have been beneficial. My parents had then and still have now a profound misunderstanding of sex and sexuality. They were looking for easy boundaries that could be controlled. They wanted to take the same approach with my sexuality as my mother took when letting me ride my bicycle. But there are no driveways in sex, just miles and miles of open sidewalk that I had to explore for myself.