

THE SHOTGUN SITUATION:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES
AND AN INTRODUCTION

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
May, 2010

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AND AN INTRODUCTION

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my adviser, constant reader, and close editor, Toni Graham. I would also like to thank the other members of my advisory committee: Ed Walkiewicz, Hugh Manon, and Kevin Doolen. Further, thanks to Jon Billman and Nona Caspers for the instruction offered in their creative writing seminars.

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I: INTRODUCTION

A. THE ART OF STORY

When I first entered college, I had to declare a major. Unlike the students my high school counselors had warned me about, the students who had not decided on a direction in life and waste precious years and thousands of dollars searching for a direction in life, I knew exactly what my major was to be. I was born to be an accountant. Everything in my life seemed to point in the same, number-crunching direction. I excelled in math classes during my years in grade school. I even passed the Calculus advance placement exam for college credit in the eleventh grade, which meant I was so advanced in mathematics my high school did not even have a math class to offer me in my senior year. My father and grandfather were both certified public accountants, and while growing up I saw the kind of money that came with a professional degree. And so, when I entered college, I declared accounting to be my major. My destiny seemed to be set.

However, my concrete future melted when my father pulled me aside one evening toward the end of my first year at the university. I remember I was reclining on our sofa, my nose buried in the middle of Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*. My father often interrupted me when I was reading. Not that he was insensitive, but I loved to spend my evenings reading contemporary fiction by authors such as Philip Roth, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., and Robert Graves. Irritated by the intrusion, I asked what he wanted.

My father claimed he simply wanted to check up on me, see how I was doing. My father asked about my classes and specifically about how I was progressing with my accounting studies. My response was less than enthusiastic and I griped for a few minutes about how miserable and boring accounting was for me. He asked why I wanted to be an accountant. I said, "So I can make a lot of money."

I believed I was speaking his language. Every conversation we had always seemed to come back to the topic of money. When the family gathered around the table at dinnertime, the conversation inevitably degenerated into questions about tuition, gas money, how much I spent last weekend going out to the movies. As far as I could see, my father's world revolved around the dollar. By showing him that I was working towards a profession that would make me wealthy, or at least well-to-do, I assumed that I would make my father proud and maybe allow him to relax about my financial situation.

My father surprised me. He said, "If you follow a career for money, then when you're sixty years old you'll be rich, sure, but you'll also be miserable. You'll look back and wonder why you threw away your life for money." Today, as I look back on this exchange, I realize that he was likely talking about his own experience in the world of accounting, but as a boy in my late teens all I heard was his message to me. All I could hear was my father telling me to toss aside a responsible future in favor of a career doing what I wanted.

I remember saying that there was no money in pursuing my vocational dreams. My father stated, "If you love what you do, the money will follow." He then asked me what I wanted to do with my life, and I told him I wanted to write.

And so, with my father's encouragement, I changed my major. Perhaps I was born to be an accountant, but instead I have worked off and on in the realm of story for almost two

decades. In that time I've learned a number of valuable lessons. First, there is very little money to be had in writing, but enough for a person to survive. Second, a love of writing does not equal an ability to write well. Hence, the last two decades have been spent developing my craft and honing my techniques. Finally, and most importantly, I have learned the incredible value of story.

I believe that story in its many forms serves to define reality and to create individual identity. Everyone relies upon the art of story to locate ourselves within the framework of society. When we come home from a hard day at work and gripe to our partners about our shitheel boss and his massive ego, or when we scream at the idiot on the road ahead of us who can't drive, or when we laugh about the fabulous party we enjoyed the night before, we are telling our stories.

From an objective viewpoint (were such a thing possible) the world would simply be seen as a chaotic swirl of colorless events. No experience would be more important than the next. The ant carrying a leaf would carry no more or less importance than a raindrop splashing against a rock or than a lock of hair being snipped by a barber. Without story, everything happens simply because it happens.

Story introduces a subjective viewpoint. The art of fiction allows for a protagonist with desires, who faces conflicts. Suddenly, the ant carrying the leaf could be a metaphor for strength, and the water drop on the rock might signal that the drought is over, and the haircut could indicate a boy is becoming a soldier. Story lays a pattern over the chaos of reality.

Further, the art of story creates identity. My logical mind must admit that genetics and social conventions seem to determine the various actions of men and women. Science shows that we are largely programmed by our genes and our environments. Yet this dismal outlook

cannot hold up to the power of story, which offers a chance at freewill. While I'm lost inside the world of fiction, I experience active protagonists who face conflicts and hard decisions. Fiction allows me to see characters exercising their will, and then dealing with the consequences of their choices. Story allows me to believe in a world where I am able to own my choices. Logic tells me that much of what drives man's decisions is determined by his environment, but story opens my heart up to an emotional world view where I am an active agent and that vantage point makes my life worth living.

When my father told me I should follow my heart, he turned my life into a sort of story. I had believed myself to be destined to live according to a certain, set script, but he challenged that idea. He encouraged me to follow my passion, and like a protagonist out of a novel, I made an active choice to alter my path. I decided to become a writer of fiction.

Fiction is more than the art of creating a reality and placing an identity within that structure. To be successful, fiction has to be presented with emotional truth. A false word here, a counterfeit emotion there, and the entire structure crumbles. If at any point a false note is detected, readers will withdraw their emotional commitment from the story. Unless the emotions contained within a work are entirely authentic, the reader's willing suspension of disbelief will cease, and the story will fail.

Within my work, my ultimate goal is to convince the reader that my stories are worthy of his or her emotional investment because my fiction contains some sort of legitimate insight into the human experience. My mission is to mold human forms like golems from clay and animate these characters for a time. My tools of creation are letters on a page, words cobbled together into sentences. Using language, I attempt to breathe life into imaginary people and send them about on imaginary journeys pursuing imaginary goals. But

even though the situations are conjured from my imagination, the fiction must always reflect genuine examples of real life so that the characters I've created will successfully awaken true emotions in my readers.

Too often, I fail to deliver insight into the human experience and into my own subjective reality. Because I was not born to be a writer and this art does not come as naturally to me as it does to some writers, much of my work is not as fully developed as I want it to be. Each time I sit down to write a new story, I practice and struggle and hope I will improve my skills further so that someday I will get my story right.

Each story I write has taught me a little more about how to perfect my fiction. With *The Shotgun Situation: A Collection of Short Stories*, I have brought together ten short stories, each embodying an attempt to create a view of reality powerful enough that the reader will forget he or she is reading. Each story represents an effort to evoke an emotional response that is as real for the reader as any emotion experienced in his or her daily life.

As a critical reader of my own fiction, I have to admit that each story fails in some way. I enjoy some of my stories quite a lot, but even the best in the collection could be better. At least I recognize this on an intellectual level. But when I'm reading through one of my stories, and I find myself laughing at a wacky comment made by a reckless brother or cringing at the cruelty of a deceptive spouse, I find myself believing the reality of the story on an emotional level. When I respond emotionally to a story, I realize that for a moment I have succeeded at the art of story. For that moment, usually all too brief, I am proud of my work.

B. THEMES

The Shotgun Situation: A Collection of Short Stories embodies an exploration of concerns and themes that trouble my daily life. Each story represents some aspect of my struggle to understand issues of familial connection, religious beliefs, and sexual relationships. In other words, the ten stories in this collection explore in various ways the social and spiritual concerns that plague my daily thought processes and distress my dreams. These themes keep me agitated while I'm wandering the aisles of Wal-Mart hunting for groceries. They irritate me while I'm teaching a classroom full of undergraduates how to annotate a bibliography. They hang over me when I escape to the local cinema and follow me to the casino when I sit down at a card table to play in a Texas hold-em tournament. No matter how much noise I drown myself in, these topics continue to surface, bobbing around inside my head, niggling at my thoughts, and only when I sit down to write, am I able to momentarily subdue these concerns.

When I look over the ten stories included within this collection, I am struck first by the undercurrent of religious struggle that permeates nearly every story. To explore religion was never my conscious goal. When I begin crafting the opening lines of a new tale, I usually have some vague plot idea and a couple of character sketches ready to be brought to life within the frame of the story. I rarely have any initial desire to examine belief systems. Yet, to my frequent surprise, these characters often quickly reveal some connection with religion, most usually the LDS faith. Perhaps I should not be too surprised that the Mormon faith crops up time and again in my stories, as many of my tales take place in Salt Lake City.

I was brought up in Salt Lake City, Utah, and like the majority of the population, raised inside the Mormon faith. I grew up seeing an LDS church house on every corner. In

the schoolyard, alcohol, coffee, and tobacco were discussed with the same hushed tones that were used when talking about other forbidden substances such as cocaine and heroin.

Sundays were a “day of rest” and only the neighborhood rebels dared shop for groceries or gas up their vehicles on the Sabbath. When people mentioned the Scriptures, they meant the *Bible*, sure, but more specifically they meant *The Book of Mormon*. If you needed directions, all the streets in the city were numbered in reference to Temple Square downtown. For example, forty-fifth South was the street that ran east to west exactly forty-five blocks south of the Temple. In fact, were someone to mention “the Temple” everybody understood that the reference was to the Mormon Temple in downtown Salt Lake. The idea that other religions might have buildings they called temples seemed adorable but hardly realistic—as if they were mimicking the real thing, but missing the mark by a mile. When my friends and school chums mentioned that they belonged to the “true church” there was no question as to which church they meant. When a person claimed to be “Christian,” he or she meant “Mormon,” never Catholic, Baptist, or another Protestant faith. Even though only about half of the people living in Salt Lake City were LDS, the fact of the matter was that to my naïve, isolated standpoint the Mormons were the only real religious game in town. And, just as the Mormon faith permeated every aspect of life in Salt Lake, so does it often slink its way into my stories.

Within the Mormon community there is nothing more important than the concept of the “eternal family,” the idea being that God has set up a system that enables the faithful to continue to experience the family unit in Heaven. In other words, my parents would continue to be my parents and my children (were I ever to have any) would continue to be my children after we have all died and gone to the next world. More important, my wife could be sealed

to me forever, and we could experience eternity as a couple, never being separated or alone. Unlike other religions, in which marriage exists only “until death do you part,” in the Mormon faith marriage between a husband and wife is believed to be forever. This concept of the eternal family is central to the Mormon faith. Every Mormon child is taught that there can be no greater happiness than to marry for eternity and enjoy the family bond forever.

Unfortunately for me, my parents divorced when I was seven years old. I do not wish to claim that there is such a thing as a “normal” childhood for anyone, but as a Mormon boy with divorced parents I experienced a measure of contradiction that made my understanding of the world difficult at best. Until I was age twelve, every Sunday my mother took me to church, where I would learn about the “plan” of God to bring whole families to Heaven. I would wonder how my broken family fit into that plan. Even as a child, I could plainly see that my mother and father could barely stand the sight of one another. How could they ever spend eternity side by side? And if they were not in Heaven together, then how could I experience the ultimate happiness which came only when your family was together for eternity? My father explained that God would sort everything out so that we were all happy. When I asked my father for details about how God would achieve such an unlikely result with my family, Dad would mumble something about “mysterious ways” and “wisdom beyond that of man.” I pretended to be placated, but I still could not see how God might possibly pull off that trick.

These concerns slowly diminished as I aged. My mother stopped going to church altogether, and that meant she no longer required that I attend. I was glad of the break from weekly services, but the beliefs drilled into me during my youth lingered in the back of my head, skulking in the corners of my mind and occasionally rising to the surface. When friends

from school asked why I was inactive (a term used for Mormons who do not attend church services every Sunday), I would assure them that I still believed. I knew people who were not afraid to declare they did not believe in the Mormon faith, but they seemed reckless, almost like crazy people, to me. How anyone could risk the wrath of God (or of Dad) by admitting to a loss of his or her faith was beyond me.

After high school, I decided to go on a Mormon mission. Standard practice within the LDS faith is to encourage boys, when they reach the age of nineteen, to serve a two-year mission working to convert the “unfaithful.” I do not wish to imply that a mission is in any way required, but even at the age of eight I understood that if I were to truly live up to my parents’ expectations, a mission was absolutely necessary. And so, I put in my papers, and exactly like the character Rocky Clay in “Suit Pocket Secrets,” I was called to Germany. I feel that my experience was largely positive, certainly more so than some of the miserable experiences my characters face, but I returned from my mission unconvinced of my faith. Even though a Mormon mission is intended to strengthen the commitment of those serving, my two years as a missionary left me cold. My mission president had run our mission like a small business that specialized in selling the LDS faith door to door. During my two years overseas, I learned that a glib tongue did more to open doors than prayer and an unwavering faith in the guiding hand of the Spirit ever did. Soon after I returned to Utah, I became entirely inactive in the church, yet over the next decade I continued to declare a belief in God, Jesus, and the LDS faith. While I lived outside of religion, I was still worried about the repercussions of admitting, even to myself, that I had lost my faith entirely.

During this decade, I wrote. Most of the stories were attempts to showcase my cleverness and humor. I mimicked my favorite writers, hoping to infuse my stories with the

humor of Kurt Vonnegut and the shocking honesty of Joseph Heller. To improve my work, I enrolled in writing workshops and soon discovered that according to my instructors and fellow classmates, I was not nearly as talented as I had first supposed. My plotting was derivative and clichéd. My characters were identified as knock-offs. I was told that my work lacked honesty. My instructors said that I had to “dig in” and “get real” in my work, or else my writing would never improve. I remember on one occasion receiving this advice and declaring, “But this story really happened!” In my naïveté I thought what was meant by honesty was a “non-fiction” account of life events.

Of course, when writing instructors use terms like “honesty,” they do not mean they want students to relate actual events. Rather, they hope to push students to explore the uncomfortable, often embarrassing spaces within their psyches. In my case, honest writing meant confronting my religious beliefs. Specifically, I had to start writing about life in Salt Lake City, living around, within, and under the Mormon faith.

In “Days of Prairie,” the narrator Rocky Clay (the same character from “Suit Pocket Secrets”); he appears twice in this collection) declares to his brother that he no longer believes in God. Putting those words into the mouth of my narrator caused a great deal of anxiety for me as an author. Perhaps the words could be dismissed as the ranting of a fictional character, but they were written by my hand. They were words I’d never dared to actually express until I typed them as part of a story. Sure, I’d spoken to a friend before and said that my faith was not always solid. On one occasion, I’d suggested that there might not be a God, but quickly added that, on the other hand, there might be. (Ah, the safe ambivalence of agnosticism.) Even though I had stopped going to church and quit reading *The Book of Mormon* to feel close to Jesus, I would occasionally find myself at night thinking about the events of the day

in the form of a prayer. I would thank God for the good things I had experienced and ask for help with the difficult issues I would face in the morning. And, before drifting into sleep, I would utter the traditional Mormon closing to a prayer: “In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.” So ingrained was my religious upbringing that, even as a non-believer, I was falling back on this nightly ritual.

My connection to my religious upbringing changed after I wrote my story. Only after I explored a loss of faith in a work of fiction did I notice a subtle shift in my life. At night I continued to reflect on my day, but I no longer offered thanks for the positive moments. I drifted into sleep without chanting the traditional Mormon close to a prayer. In conversation, I found the strength to admit aloud that my belief had died. The act of creating a fictitious character who could admit to losing his faith opened a doorway that allowed me to make a similar move in my real life. Such has been the power of fiction to define, or redefine, reality for me.

Not surprisingly, some characters in other stories deal with issues of lost faith. In “Reverberations” the narrator’s father asks him when he lost his faith. The implication made by the father character is that the narrator’s difficulties in life are directly linked to his falling away from God. The narrator does not answer. Such a question does not really require an answer. After all, who would be satisfied with a response such as, “I lost my faith at noon last Thursday”? The question remains interesting to me, though, because it implies a connection between the strength of faith in God a person has and his or her happiness in life. The narrator in “Reverberations” is suffering through a divorce he does not want, and rather than offer comfort to his son, the father seems to be blaming the narrator’s misfortunes on a lack of righteousness. I am fascinated with the idea that hardships in life are directly linked to

a person's lack of faith. Of course there is no logical reasoning behind this idea, since hardcore believers suffer and the highly immoral often prosper. Nevertheless, I hear the faithful use other's misfortunes as an opportunity to blame and shame a victim with the intent of converting him. That such behavior is tolerated intrigues me, mostly because when I have personally encountered this type of question, none other than a family member was swinging religion like a bludgeon.

For me, religious beliefs cannot be separated from family relationships. The indoctrination of faith inevitably takes place during childhood. Many parents, often with the best intentions, hope to mold their children into moral beings using religion, using the promise of heaven to reward "good" behavior, and using the threat of hell as to curb "poor" behavior. These teachings linger. My parents' good intentions planted seeds in my mind that continue to manifest themselves in my daily writing. Because I am a recovering Mormon, my mindset continues to equate religion with family. Every story that involves a scene with a wife, mother, father, brother, or sister, is steeped with religious implications. I'm unable to separate faith from family relations because of my upbringing and to deny this vision in my writing would be dishonest.

A story in this collection that evidences my struggle with the dynamic of religious views coloring a family dynamic is "The Rubber Inch." This story focuses on two brothers who share an apartment. The narrator, March, has been informed that his brother is moving out and in effect evicting him. March struggles to understand how his brother could abandon him. Under the influence of some mind-altering substances, March ruminates on the spiritual condition of humanity and decides we are all connected, that the distances that separate us are illusions. He rejects the traditional Christian notion of the individual, essential self—or

the soul—and instead wishes to show his brother they are one, that there is no gap between them. Unfortunately, I believe that March is doomed to fail in his attempt to connect with his brother because his brother ascribes to a traditional Christian paradigm in which he is his brother's keeper. Family is an eternal burden for the "righteous."

I deal with the Biblical concept of the "brother's keeper" more brazenly in "The Shotgun Situation." In this story I examine the power struggle that takes place between the protagonist and his older, richer, more responsible sibling, Stuart. While religion is never overtly referenced in this story, notions of family colored by my religious background are present. Stuart employs his brother, owns the house where his brother lives, and, in effect, feeds and clothes his brother. In other words, Stuart is the consummate Christian, caring for the weak and helpless. And yet, for me, Stuart is the story's villain. Stuart's charity holds his brother hostage. He promises salvation from poverty but demands his brother swallow any pride he might have and obey him without question. This curious differentiation in social class between the brothers reflects the same imbalance I grew up with in relation to Jesus. On one hand, he was supposed to be my brother, a fellow child of God, an older brother who had sacrificed all for my welfare. And yet, I was expected to worship at his feet because of his sacrifice. For me, this relationship abounds with paradox. Jesus is both my sibling and my master, my equal and yet my better.

My writing allowed me to explore religious themes and connect these ideas with concerns I have faced with my family. The non-fiction truth is that I do not have a brother like Stuart who employs me and who condescends to me. However, the fiction of Stuart is quite real to my experience of the world. Nagging thoughts about my relationship with God

and Jesus have haunted me for decades, but my writing has allowed me a forum for exploring these issues.

The final theme of sexual relations that permeates my stories should not be considered separate from religion and family even though I am addressing it alone. I wish to focus my examination of sexual relationships in my fiction on the more specific topic of sexual failure within the sexual bond. In other words, I am rather indifferent to the idea of a healthy sexual connection, just as I am indifferent to a wheel that does not squeak. My writing, then, focuses on the breakdown of the ties that bind a couple.

Perhaps my fascination with unhealthy relationships started when my parents divorced, perhaps when my parents married others and then divorced again, or perhaps when I married and divorced. I suppose my relationships that did not involve marriage (that social construct that acknowledges the legitimacy of a sexual bond), but somehow were just as painful as my marriage, might also have played a role in developing my awareness of how sexual connections in reality never seem to live up to the fantasy of the happy couple. Whatever the root cause of my interest, sexual dysfunction permeates each of my stories. Unlike the themes of religion and family that seem to crop up unbidden in my work, concerns regarding the sexual relationship are often conscious starting points for my writing.

Both of the flash fiction pieces in this collection, “Sorry” and “Inhale,” revolve around older couples dealing with unhappy marriages. I believe both stories are so short because they are inspired by a single, brief feeling, a mere tickle in the gut, rather than a need to examine a more complex idea. In the piece titled “Sorry,” I question the games that couples play to manipulate each other. Silly arguments about who should apologize first cover up a deeper issue: namely, who is the boss? The idea that a loving marriage is actually

a front for a small-time, ever-lasting battle for power resonates with me. On the other hand, the short short “Inhale” examines the idea that once the skirmish has been resolved, the victor must inevitably be left empty-handed. I suppose these stories reveal a cynical view of marriage as a battlefield, but I think they both succeed in communicating the initial impulse that inspired the text and hopefully both stories leave the reader feeling the emotional impotence that drives these struggles.

The idea that a couple must cleave to each other and none other (clearly instilled from my religious upbringing) has frustrated me for some time. In the case of my parents, I watched as they flung accusations at one another regarding a lack in the relationship. Then in my own relationships, I experienced the impossibility of a single person fulfilling all the needs of another human being. It seems almost cruel to expect any single human to be everything to another. Yet, despite the realization that no person can ever fully satisfy another, I find that inside my own romantic relationships I have always followed the common, yet unrealistic, practice of insisting on monogamy. This tension between common social standards versus a more realistic need for humans to seek connection outside of a one on one relationship drives many of my stories.

The idea that somewhere in the world a perfect “soul mate” waits for me is utter romantic fantasy. The people who love and care for me are flawed, selfish, and blind to most of my inner desires. That is reality. But fantasy continues to turn my head. With the story “Lines of Latitude,” I hoped to examine the impulse that drives infidelity. In the story, the protagonist has an extra-marital affair. The woman he engages with is his fantasy personified, until they actually attempt to conduct the affair. The very act of living out his fantasy creates a nightmare of sorts, leaving him with the realization that the barrier he feels

between himself and his wife was his own construct. Nothing about the affair is actually erotic or enjoyable for our protagonist, and as a writer, I hoped to convey that sense of disappointment in the details of their love-making. For me, the disaster of the depicted relationship is the whole point of the story. Fantasy realized can never live up to the illusion.

I suppose that statement sums up the drive behind all my writing. Whether I am confronting the fantasies of redemption offered by religion, of safety offered by family, or of connection offered by sexual relationships, my writing always leads me back to the theme of truth. Not truth in the sense that something might really happen, but the truths of disappointment and bitterness that tinge the otherwise enjoyable experiences of my daily life. My creative process, then, is not one that provides an escape from reality but a means for me to confront the disquieting reality that colors my daily life.

C. TECHNIQUE

Artists debate the concept of genius. While I am not one to dismiss the idea that many artists have a greater natural gift than others, I fail to see how this belief can benefit me. As a writer, I may have some natural talent for crafting a tale, but there is nothing I can do to improve upon an innate genius. On the other hand, I believe a strong understanding of technique, coupled with hours of practice, can improve my writing, regardless of any genetic knack. Over the last five years as a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University, I have struggled to improve my work. My instructors have guided me to focus on a number of basic techniques that I have worked to develop, and I believe that because of these tools my story-telling ability has improved.

The first and most valuable instruction I ever received was that good writers read books, read short stories, read poems, read newspapers. Daily immersion in fiction has helped me to recognize quality prose and to avoid clichés. I have found inspiration in the works of various contemporary authors. Cormac McCarthy's stark, poetic prose stood as an example of how to avoid unnecessary flourishes in my own writing. The brilliant and bold novels of Martin Amis encouraged me to be daring (occasionally too much so) with controversial material in my work. The works of Charles Baxter encouraged me to use active verbs and shy away from passive characters. Charles Portis reminded me of the value of humor to temper an emotionally difficult plot. Ernest Hemingway taught that simplicity in vocabulary need not detract from the emotional impact of a story. With every novel I have encountered, I have learned a lesson on how to improve my own prose. In fact, I have even discovered value in reading substandard literature, in that the mistakes of other writers serves as a warning in what to avoid in my own work.

Beyond using other writer's work as a source of general inspiration, I have struggled to develop a number of aspects of quality fictional rhetoric in my work, including an emphasis on character development through dialogue, grounded settings, and telling details. When I first entered the creative writing program, I had a mistaken understanding of the purpose of dialogue as a tool for character development. When my characters conversed, I heard their conversations in my head, as if a tape recording were playing and I was transcribing every gasp, sigh, and grunt. However, I have come to understand that dialogue should never be used to pad a page; rather, dialogue should serve to increase the reader's understanding of the speaking character's mind. When I put this concept into practice, I discovered that my stories took on a new energy. For example, the opening pages of my story "Squib," where the narrator, Erik, first enters his friend Darren's house, bogged down because of nonsense dialogue. The initial draft of the story included a few short paragraphs of harmless chit-chat between the two as they greeted each other and Darren invited Erik inside. After I exorcised these lines, I was left simply with the sentence: "He waved me in and I hopped to." This much more concise version of the rather mundane action eliminated half a page of prose that did nothing to develop the story or the characters involved. Where I have retained dialogue, I have done my best to make sure that every line surrounded by quotation marks in some way contributes to character development. So when Erik points at Darren's T-Shirt bearing the slogan "Paddle Faster, I Hear Banjos," and asks, "Deliverance?" the reader understands that Erik is something of a film buff, having seen an older, classic film, and therefore understanding the reference on the shirt. And when Darren responds by asking why people keep saying that, the reader not only enjoys a simple joke but also gets a hint about Darren's own willingness to dress without fully understanding his own wardrobe.

Because so much of “Squib” concerns itself with class divisions, the words the characters speak must be more than a simple recreation of the ohs and ahs people use to fill their lives with sound. While I cannot claim to have eliminated every bit of filler conversation, I believe the work in this collection reflects my efforts to create character through vibrant, telling dialogue.

I have struggled better to grasp the concept that setting reflects character. In my past writings, I’ve focused more on how a character deals with plot concerns, while allowing the details of setting to remain underdeveloped. To clarify, when I write about setting, I am speaking first of the location where the story takes place. In addition to location, though, I believe setting also includes clothing and occupation. Perhaps the connection between setting and character ought to be obvious to a writer. After all, a character raised in Salt Lake City will have a different idea about Christianity than a character raised in Stillwater, Oklahoma. A Mormon missionary in Germany will have radically different encounters than a missionary in Detroit. A man wearing a suit and a tie will be viewed differently than a person wearing unwashed jeans and a torn tank-top. A man who works as a slum lord will behave differently than the man who lives in the slums. But for some reason, I have resisted the idea that setting defined character. My early work tended to be set in Anytown, USA. My characters were all vaguely Christian. They all held jobs at Acme Company doing work at a desk. I suspect I was trying to avoid tying myself too closely to my characters. After all, if Rocky Clay serves a Mormon mission in Germany, just like I did, surely my reader will believe that Rocky Clay is simply a cheap surrogate for me, the author. However, I have come to see that generic, ungrounded setting details (or lack of detail) leave a story drifting in a sort of limbo. The characters never truly come to life for the reader. Therefore, I have worked to fill in specific

details regarding every aspect of setting possible in my stories. In some cases, I feel, I have been less than wholly successful. However, when the details are clear and vivid, I believe my stories have come to life. The culture of Utah is unlike that of any other state, and so I've focused most of my stories on that area. Salt Lake is an area with which I am familiar and an area I respect. I believe the details of the Salt Lake valley found in stories such as "Squib" and "Reverberations" help to invigorate these stories and thereby clarify the characters.

Finally, I believe what has most helped my ability to create believable characters is the inclusion of telling details. While I've touched lightly on this idea already, I wish to focus on a few examples to illustrate how I have worked to improve my writing. But first, allow me a comment about how the human mind captures individual faces. Anyone who has ever seen a caricature has noticed that when certain features are emphasized on a person, that person becomes more identifiable. For example, a proper drawing of Donny and Marie Osmond might be mistaken for that of any attractive couple, but in a cartoonish sketch with those famous Osmond teeth over-exaggerated, they become instantly recognizable. The reason for this is that the brain catalogues faces by noting the differences that exist from the norm. In much the same way, I have tried to emphasize the "odd" features of my characters so that they will be more quickly recognizable. Take a minor character from the story "Reverberations," a man named Marcel. He appears on a single page of the story, and there simply is not room for him to do much to stand out. Therefore, I attempted to bring him to life with a few quick telling details that could only apply to him: ". . . Marcel had a heavy accent that was clearly not French. He was a little younger than Mom and had a head shaped sort of like a cake with a swatch of short and curly black frosting across the top." While I cannot claim that this description is flawless, I am proud of the image of the head shaped like

a cake with curly frosting hair across the top. The line stating that he was a little younger than Mom is perhaps too generic, and an example within my writing that I'm still growing, but for the most part, I believe that my technique in developing character through specific, non-clichéd details has improved over the last few years.

There are other techniques that I continue to work on to improve my writing. One of the simplest moves I have adopted is to eliminate adverbs. Of course, there are times when adverbs are necessary, but I've discovered that when I revise my manuscripts, eliminating adverbs has pushed me to replace generic verbs with more active verbs. A quick example of this might be changing a sentence from "I ran quickly" to "I sprinted." I believe the shift away from the lazy comfort of adverbs has done wonders for my prose.

Likewise, I have discovered that the always ambiguous word "it" can be eliminated from most of my writing. The fear I first faced was that my writing would begin to sound overly repetitious. Frankly, that fear has grounds in reality, as my writing does echo itself in an undesired way on occasion. Nevertheless, I believe that my work to eliminate the word "it" has resulted in stronger, more understandable prose overall.

Unfortunately, after five years of work at Oklahoma State University, I continue to struggle with some silly technical issues. I tend to split infinitives. I am not sure why I continue to struggle with this issue. Perhaps because the German I learned on my mission taught me the thrill of holding my verbs back (as opposed to holding back my verbs). Another issue in my writing continues to be the fact that people in Utah drop the word "of" when using the word "couple," as in, "I'd like a couple cheeseburgers, please." I'm not sure why I continue to make this silly mistake in my writing, but thank God for friendly editors

who never seem to tire of writing the word “of” with a caret pointing to the space between “couple” and the noun.

I continue to struggle with the endings to my stories. Time and again, my readers have complained that my stories are enjoyable, gripping, and even hilarious, until they reach the last page. My concluding paragraphs often fail to resolve the emotions my readers are experiencing. While I continue to work towards endings that properly resolve the emotional issues raised in the story, I recognize that not all of my fiction ends well. Many of the stories in this collection have seen numerous revisions, and because of this I believe I have resolved this issue in most of my tales, yet I worry that some of my stories may still ultimately fall flat. Perhaps this letdown is a result of poor plotting, but I suspect that the true reason behind my weaker conclusions is an issue of honesty.

In the end, a fear of honesty will kill any story. Fiction may be a lie, but the only way to sell the lie is through harsh truth. On the surface this must seem like a paradox, and in my more lucid moments I must confess the paradox confounds me. But there are times when I am lost in the story, my fingers banging away at the keyboard, and the fiction comes to life. On these occasions I lose myself in the writing, and the story achieves a level of reality that outshines my day to day existence. I realize that these stories are flawed, dragged down by my own lack of talent and skill, but I am developing, and I believe that these stories are close to being finished. Certainly, they are not perfect, but each time I sit down and practice my craft, I see improvement. My hope is that this collection reflects that experience.

II: DAYS OF PRAIRIE

ST. GEORGE, UTAH, 2003

My wife Jill had run off with an old boyfriend, and so I was nursing my broken ego down in the desert city of St. George, living as a grown man under my father's roof, when my younger brother, Prairie, showed up at the front door. He carried a bloated, black trash bag filled with all his worldly possessions, and he smelled like he'd spent the last week sleeping outdoors.

Prairie said, "Hi, Rocky. Think Dad would mind another son living here for a bit?" Prairie claimed he had hitched all the way from Wyoming and said his black eye was from fighting off a fruity truck driver who wanted to touch his "man-jigglys." Inside the trash bag were a dozen dirty tube socks, one pair of cut off jean shorts, a few sleeveless Tees, a steel butterfly knife that Prairie referred to as his "balisong," a thinned out tube of Colgate toothpaste, and a Playstation 2 complete with cables, a controller and a few games. I suppose when you travel with a working Playstation stuffed inside a Hefty bag you must be something of an optimist, anticipating a television will be waiting for you at journey's end.

We hugged and I suggested that maybe he needed a bath. When our dad remodeled the house, updating the old pioneer two-story with its uneven wooden floors and small rooms, he made sure that both bathrooms contain a bathtub, but Dad failed to install any sort of shower set up. Dad liked to soak and said anyone who lives under his

roof can *bathe*, as that's the only sure way to get "deep down clean." I'm a shower man myself, like to get in and out without dwelling on the process, but because I was living there as more or less a charity case, I kept my mouth shut and learned to wash my hair by kneeling down before the running tap and dipping my head under the spout. I discovered that immersing your body in your own filth while lathering up is a process you can get used to if need be. A bath seemed like a waste of water to me, but Dad liked to float in hot suds for thirty minutes each morning reading his moisture bloated copy of *The Book of Mormon*. Dad said he liked to start his day bright and early with some quality time between himself and God.

When Dad came home from work, I was waiting on the couch, watching the local news and listening to Prairie hollering rap lyrics while he splashed around in the bathroom. His voice echoed off the walls, and I thought he sounded awful but determined. What a look on Dad's face when he heard Prairie's voice. He hadn't expected Prairie to show up in a million years. Dad marched around the room, his loafer heels clicking on the hardwood, circling the island counter in the kitchen a few times, not quite forming words. The whole time Prairie's voice shucked and jived with his unique white-boy flavor. Finally Dad said, "What's he doing in there? He sounds like he's arguing with a policeman."

Dad plopped down next to me and started whispering his many concerns. "If he thinks staying here will be a free lunch, he's up in the night. He's going to have to earn his place. I expect him to go to church every Sunday and help clean up on Saturdays. Including mowing the lawn. He needs to get a job first thing. He can help me with the zucchini."

To his credit, the thought of kicking Prairie out never crossed my dad's mind, but he was worried. "He'll double our food budget. That boy always looks slender, but he can pack it away. His body is deceptive, like one of those Japanese hot dog eaters."

When Prairie finally emerged from his bath, he and Dad hugged and both of them wore fantastic smiles. Dad told him he was welcome to stay, and Prairie said, "This is a regular bachelor pad!"

Dad set to feeding Prairie steaming zucchini topped with a thick butter pat. He offered some homemade zucchini bread. "I couldn't get anything else to grow this year. Zucchini has taken over my garden." Dad wasn't kidding. At any given time there were five or six zucchinis, each the size of my forearm, waiting on the counter to be cut up, peeled, sliced, diced and turned into bread or soup or a side dish.

Prairie said, "I'm not real keen on zucchini."

I said, "Then you've come to the wrong place, *hombre*."

"I'd prefer you not use that Mexican talk around me, Rocky," Prairie said. "I don't want to sound prejudiced because I'm not, and I hate anyone who is prejudiced, but I just can't stand Mexicans or their filthy language."

Dad and I asked how Prairie could dislike an entire people or the Spanish language for that matter and not think that he was rife with prejudice. Prairie pulled up his shirt and showed us a white scar drawn across his belly button, maybe two inches in length. Prairie said, "A fat Mexican stabbed me at a dance club last summer. Simply for being white! They're all racists, ready to stab you for the lack of color of your skin. That's the thing with Mexicans: they're all prejudiced in reverse."

I was impressed by the scar on Prairie's stomach. On the other hand, I was disturbed that my brother could harbor hostility toward an ethnic group, even if a couple of rough desperados had attacked him. I said, "You can't judge all Mexicans based on the actions of a few."

Prairie said, "Those are easy words for a guy who's never had a knife in his gut."

He had me there.

* * *

After dinner Dad and Prairie laid down a small mattress on the floor of Dad's office between his desk and a filing cabinet filled with accounting folders, and I offered a pillow from my bed, but Prairie refused, claiming pillows kinked his neck.

Dad sat on the edge of the low mattress and called a family meeting right there. "Listen, Parley, we need to set some things straight." Parley was Prairie's actual birth name, but nobody except Dad ever called him that. "Rockwell and I set up some rules before he moved back in with me, and we've been getting along just fine. I don't want you upsetting that."

I explained. After Jill disappeared with her high school sweetheart, I had a minor emotional breakdown. I stopped going into work, which led to my boss calling and asking when I was going to come back. I told him that since I work on a commission, when I decided to go in was my business. He disagreed and said that if I missed one more day my cubicle would be surrendered to someone who deserved it. After that I stopped answering the phone. I spent an entire week playing metal tunes on my guitar with the amp turned up during the day when my neighbors were at work. I guess my uncle called my dad because he called a few times, but I let everything go to voicemail. I suppose that

distressed him somewhat. Dad made the eight hour drive out to Denver the next day. He showed up at my door, and I kinda had to let him in. After sizing me up, Dad suggested I move in with him and take a break from the rigors of working life. We rented a U-Haul truck and packed up all my stuff.

On the drive to St. George Dad said he expected me to go to church with him each week. He believed my life was in turmoil because I'd lost my way on the path of righteousness. I told him I would agree to his demands, but I expected to be left alone until three in the afternoon on weekdays, whether I slept in, went for a walk, or strummed on my guitar. He could have no excuses to bother me, not even for lunch. He said that he would not have fornication in his house. Also no drinking or smoking, but otherwise my terms were acceptable.

Dad was true to his word about leaving me alone until three in the afternoon. After three we got together and watched old movies and shows on CBS. He loved *CSI*, and I preferred *CSI: Miami* because I liked the over-acting. Dad refrained from pushing me to do something with my life, believing that time would heal my wounds. After a few weeks of hiding in my new bedroom writing heart-breaking poetry and strumming songs that would mist up any eye, I was bored enough with myself that I walked down to the Red Cliffs Mall and got a part-time job at Game Stop selling video games. Think of that, an adult man selling games at the mall.

Prairie assured Dad that he would find a job first thing Monday. As for church, he worried that he did not own the proper attire. Dad agreed to take him to J.C. Penney for slacks, a white collared shirt, and Sunday shoes on the understanding that Prairie's first paycheck would go to paying Dad back.

Prairie said, “You wanna see my tattoo?” Across his left shoulder blade ran three Chinese characters in black ink. “It says ‘Without courage, wisdom bears no fruit.’”

I asked which characters meant what, since the English phrase went on for longer than the three symbols seemed to allow. Prairie wasn’t entirely sure which character stood for wisdom and which stood for courage, but he seemed sure the middle symbol meant “a lack of fruit.”

Dad said, “I can’t believe you defiled your skin with a tattoo. Don’t you know that your body is a temple?” He was angry about the tattoo for the rest of the night, and whatever subject we talked about, Dad kept coming back to the fact that “tattoos can’t be washed off. Ever!”

When Prairie took me aside and asked if he thought Dad would mind his stepping out back and having a smoke, I told him to forget about lighting up. “You’re already pushing things with the Chinese letters.”

In the days that followed, Prairie would come up with all sorts of clever excuses to go outside and sneak a cigarette. “I’ll take out the trash!” he’d volunteer. If we needed milk from the supermarket, he would jump up and snatch the keys right out of Dad’s hand. Prairie must have checked the mail three times an hour. He was a regular helper, and Dad was impressed with his get up and go.

Prairie told me I should shave my goatee. He said my face was long enough without the hair down my chin seeming to stretch my jaw out further. I always had a long face, the kind that looks good under a straw hat, and I was used to cracks about my face looking droopy. But Prairie riding me about how my goatee made me look like a bearded

horse convinced me to take a razor to my chin. After I splashed aftershave across my raw face, Prairie stood next to me and we looked in the mirror.

“We could be twins,” Prairie said. Even though he was five years younger than I was and my hairline was starting to recede, I thought he’d made a good point.

* * *

The church house was located just two blocks away from Dad’s house. Walking distance. Of course, in St. George, if you’re Mormon, there is a church house on nearly every corner, so half the town was out walking to church on Sunday morning. Dad went in early because he’d been called to work as a clerk for the bishop, so Prairie and I walked together under a wild, blazing sun to the sacrament service. We sat in the back and didn’t sing along with the hymns, but we both bowed our heads during the prayers out of respect. Dad was seated up in the front, facing the congregation, where the church clerk always sits, writing notes on the assembly’s behavior and counting heads, or whatever bishop clerks do, and every once in a while he would glance at us and smile. Because it was the first Sunday of the month, the service was a testimony meeting, meaning that anyone in the congregation who felt moved could walk up to the pulpit and share his or her feelings about God, Jesus, and the church. Every time a little old lady or a stooped over old man stood up to share testimony about Jesus, Prairie would mutter, “Here we go.” I understood how Prairie felt. I was growing impatient watching all these old people shuffling up the aisles to reassure each other that they had joined the true church.

After the service, Prairie asked if Dad expected us to go to the Sunday school meeting and the Priesthood class. I said, “You can stick around if you want, but I don’t have another two hours of worship in me.”

As we walked home, Prairie said, “Do you still believe in that stuff?”

“What stuff?”

“You know. Jesus. *The Book of Mormon*.”

I said, “I don’t even believe in God, let alone any of the other stuff.”

Prairie whistled. “You don’t believe in God? Man, you’re fucked up!”

* * *

After Dad finally got home, he and Prairie sat down to watch the Broncos play. I made everyone sandwiches with cold turkey and mayonnaise. Dad sent his sandwich back, saying the bread was too dry and needed butter. I lathered butter right over the mayo and nearly gagged when I watched Dad scarf down his sandwich.

During a commercial break, Dad muted the sound and asked Prairie what he thought about the testimonies he heard at church. Dad said, “You know, many of those people are in their seventies or eighties, so they really know what they’re talking about.”

Prairie said, “Dad, I’ll go to church with you, but don’t expect me to start believing in the Mormon way. I’ve found God, and he’s bigger than any church. God is everyone and everything. I’m God and you’re God.”

Dad’s napkin fell out of his hand, sprinkling crumbs across his lap. He said, “That doesn’t make a bit of logical sense.”

Then the game came back on and everybody turned their attention back to the Chiefs stomping on the Broncos, which made the two of them a bit testy. As for me, I was happy to see anything to do with Denver and all my bitter memories related to that town taking a beating.

* * *

On Monday morning Prairie walked down to the mall with me and met the guys I work with at the Game Stop. He asked about job openings, and they suggested he try J.C. Penney. Not thirty minutes later, Prairie returned to tell me J.C. Penney hired him to work in the back room, stocking shirts and shoes and whatnot.

Dad was proud of Prairie's drive. The fact that he actually landed a job his first day of searching impressed Dad so much that he took me aside and made me promise to keep a secret. Dad told me he was going to let Prairie keep his entire first paycheck and keep the church clothes as a reward for his diligence. As it turned out, Prairie's new job required he dress up every day in nice clothes even though he was stuck in the back stockroom, and so Dad ended up having to lend him even more money to buy a few new slacks and collared shirts. The additional loan made Dad rethink his secret donation to Prairie, the one about keeping his entire first paycheck. Dad took me aside again and said, "Every time I think he's about to stand up on his own, Parley finds a new reason to borrow money." Dad looked over his shoulder to make sure Prairie would not overhear and added, "He's a taker."

I felt Dad was being unfair. I hadn't paid rent or bought any food since moving in with Dad, and so I said, "Well, I suppose I'm a taker too."

Dad said, "No, you're hurt right now. The world has done you wrong. When you get a chance to build up again, you'll get on with taking care of yourself. I don't worry about you, Rockwell. You've just been injured by the wickedness of the world."

* * *

I had the next morning off from work and lurked in my room thinking about what Dad had said. I didn't feel injured. I felt indifferent. Nothing seemed to be important or to

matter in the grand scheme of things. I thought about what people would think about me in five hundred years and could not imagine that any single person in the future would waste a single second considering my little life. I could not believe that anyone would even care I once existed.

Then I thought about what Dad said when he claimed the world had hurt me, and again I disagreed with him. If I was hurt, the *world* didn't damage me. Jill did when she packed her things and drove away to Texas with her old high-school boyfriend. I did not like the notion that life *in general* was cruel. Specific hands dealt out cruelty. My marriage was not a commitment made to the whole wide world, but a promise to spend my life with one woman: Jill. The day she packed up the furniture and abandoned me, she personally bulldozed that specific promise. Any damage done to me was at her hands.

I strummed a few chords on my guitar. Prairie sauntered into my room and flopped down on the bed. "Dad says that sometimes you sit in here singing songs and he's not allowed to disturb you until three in the afternoon under any circumstances."

I said that was correct.

"That's cool. You have your own private cave in the mornings. You're like a part-time hermit." He asked me to play a song.

I asked what he wanted to hear, and he asked if I had anything original to offer. Prairie sat on my bed and listened as I strummed out a song I had been working on over the last few weeks. There were no lyrics for the tune yet, so I did my best to let the guitar strings tell my story. When I finished, Prairie clapped a couple of times and said, "Wow, I've never heard so many minor chords in a song like that. I bet that's the saddest song in the whole world."

Prairie asked me some personal questions. He pressed me for details about Jill and her re-emerged beau, then said he thought the whole story was contemptible. He said Jill deserved to be spit on for leaving me. "Look, Rock, if Jill would rather run off with some bow-legged longhorn down to Butthole, Texas, well then screw her. She's a tramp and a fraud. You should be glad you're rid of that nymphomaniac."

I felt tired and a little dizzy. I didn't care for Prairie's choice of words in describing Jill, and for a second or two I considered punching him in the neck, but instead said, "The thing is I love her and to me that means I should want her to be happy, even if she can't be with me."

Prairie said, "I don't know how you can love a woman who treats you like trash."

I said, "That's 'cause you have your head planted firmly up your ass."

"That's probably true," Prairie said. "I'm not above considering that point of view."

"I need to be alone now," I said.

Before he left me alone in the room to brood, Prairie said, "Just remember one thing. You're my brother and I want you to be happy, no matter what. Don't ever worry about me judging you." He shrugged and added, "Unless you're acting like a douche."

* * *

The next day J.C. Penney fired Prairie. He came home with his necktie tucked in his back pocket. He told Dad that their whole organization was too political and that because he refused to kiss up to every idiot manager in the store, they gave him the boot. But later in private he confided that he had been on a smoke break and met a girl named Margarita, and instead of returning to work, he had followed her back to her place to smoke weed

and make out. I pointed out that his actions seemed rather immature and reckless, but Prairie shot down my argument by explaining that this particular girl was exceptionally pretty. “Her skin is the color of coffee with cream,” Prairie added.

“Margarita sounds like a Hispanic name,” I pointed out. “Don’t you hate Mexicans?”

My question set Prairie to laughing. He looked at me like I was an idiot. “Not *women* Mexicans. Everyone knows women from south of the border are *caliente*.”

“What are you gonna do for money, huh?” I asked.

“There’s always plenty of jobs that pay peanuts. Maybe I’ll move in with Margarita and let her take care of me for a few months. Help along women’s lib by letting her bring home the bacon. Or should I say the ‘salsa and chips’?”

I said, “You’re not funny, Prairie.” I worried that when Dad found out about Prairie’s unemployment, our home’s comfortable equilibrium might be thrown out of balance. I imagined Dad would lose his temper and Prairie would get defensive. I anticipated a good deal of yelling, bad blood, hurt feelings. I told Prairie I was not up to the task of playing peacemaker.

Prairie said, “Not everything’s about you, Rocky.”

That night, I stayed in my room and went to bed early.

* * *

For the next week or so, Prairie hooked up his Playstation 2 to the television and spent his mornings playing video games while Dad and I were away at work. We would come home tired and cranky and find him sitting on the couch in his socks and boxer shorts

playing *Madden* football. Prairie bragged that *his* Broncos were going to the Super Bowl *again!*

Finally, one Tuesday afternoon, Dad lost his temper and wrote up a list of numbers on a pad of paper, tallying all the money he had spent outfitting Prairie for work. With the slacks, shirts, a belt, two ties and black dress shoes, the total came to just over three hundred and fifty dollars. Subtract from that Prairie's entire first paycheck of one hundred sixty four dollars that Dad ended up seizing, and Dad figured he was still owed two hundred more. And that was not taking into account food and lodging.

"What food expenses?" Prairie asked. "All we eat around here is zucchini and you get that for free."

"Nothing's free in this world, Parley," Dad said.

"Apparently not. Though I had hoped love from my own father wouldn't cost me cash."

They kept digging at each other, and I walked back to my room and stretched out on the bed. After a while they stopped arguing, and the whole house was quiet, like carbon monoxide had rolled through the air ducts and put everyone to sleep. Even the air conditioner was silent, despite the fact that outside the temperature was cresting one hundred. The silence made me feel isolated, as if I was the last man left alive at the top of a quiet earth. I considered picking up my guitar just to make some noise but felt too fatigued to muster the will to move a single limb.

Prairie pushed open my door, stepped in and seated himself on the floor, cross-legged. He studied my face for a moment and smiled. He said, "I almost got arrested in Wyoming. I was going online every night and ranting about how George Bush was the

worst president ever and someone needed to cowboy up and kill that sucker. Then I started talking with my friends about how we should really do it, all drive out to Washington and kill the president. I said that if we each had guns and each came at him from a different angle, at least some of us might get past his security and shoot him. We had a good chance, you know, and would have done it, too, but the problem then would be how to deal with Cheney as president, so we called off the whole operation. Then a week after we posted all our ideas, these men showed up at my friend's house. They wore black suits and sunglasses and asked where they could find me. Someone had ratted me out to the Feds. So, I packed everything I owned and hitched down here to hide out. I'm a wanted man."

I said, "That's a tall tale."

Prairie winked, stood up and left me alone.

* * *

Dad and I talked about Prairie. After a time, Dad cooled down about the job situation and agreed that he would back off on Prairie so long as I kept an eye on him. Dad made me promise to help get his house in order by encouraging Prairie to do some chores. I also suggested that Prairie start looking for another job, and he said he would.

A week passed, then on Thursday I came home from work and the television was off and the Playstation was missing. I went into Prairie's room and all of Prairie's clothing was gone. The only thing left sitting on his floor mattress was a *Penthouse* magazine with a yellow sticky note on top that had a message from Prairie. The note said, "I love Margarita and won't need this anymore. You're welcome to enjoy its healing powers." I hid the magazine underneath my mattress.

When Dad walked in the door, he called for me and Prairie, and I had to tell him that Prairie had run off with Margarita. Dad stood in the kitchen, silent, for about ten minutes, then asked if I'd ever met this Margarita girl, and I told him I had not and that worried him something awful. Dad said, "I think I drove him away."

I tried to convince Dad that Prairie was simply restless and would be fine once he got this girl out of his system. Dad beat himself up, saying that he drove his own boy out. He said, "When my son asked for bread, I gave him a stone." I told him that Prairie left because of a woman and not because of any hard feelings in the house. Dad retired early to his bedroom, and later I opened the door to invite him to join me for *CSI*, only to find him on his knees praying.

Two days later, Prairie walked in through the front door, carrying his stuffed Hefty bag and sporting a fresh black eye. He asked if we'd missed him, and Dad squeezed him in a bear hug that made Prairie gasp. We wanted to know what happened, and Prairie told us that after a day of blissful love with Margarita, she flipped out on him and insisted he get a job. When he told her that just living was a job, she brought her Mexican brother Hector around to kick him out. Prairie explained that since he was a pacifist and refused to fight, Hector had no problem punching him in the eye. After the first blow landed, Prairie decided to high tail it out of Margarita's place. He said Hector kept attacking him, but Prairie dropped his head and ducked away. Prairie said, "My evasive moves were masterful."

Dad served Prairie some zucchini bread and carried his Hefty bag to "Parley's room." As soon as Dad was out of the room, Prairie leaned over to me and whispered, "I'm gonna need that *Penthouse* back."

* * *

A week later, I received a call from Jill. She had tracked me down. Her voice on the phone sounded rigid and cold. She said that before I started yelling or accusing her of anything, I should try to remember that there are two sides to every disagreement.

I said, "Maybe, but that doesn't mean both sides are equally valid."

Jill said, "I didn't call to argue. If you won't talk politely, I'll hang up."

I asked what she wanted, and she told me she needed some money to pay for our divorce. After I explained that I had only a few hundred in the bank, she said that would do, and that if I'd mail the money to her via a money order, she would send me divorce papers.

Then we talked about the house. I'd just abandoned it to come down to St. George, not even bothered with the mortgage payments for three months in a row. Jill said I was an idiot for that, but I held my tongue. Then she said we needed to sell the house and she would handle all the work if I'd sign some papers giving her legal control. She promised I'd get my "fair share," whatever that meant, and I said, "Just send the papers and I'll sign them."

Jill said once the divorce was final and the house sold, we'd both be free and clear to go our own ways. We'd never have to speak again. She gave me a P.O. Box number out in Nacogdoches, Texas, and I agreed to her terms, only asking one more question of her. Was she happy?

Jill didn't answer right away. I could hear her breathing on the phone, or maybe it was the wind blowing on her side, then she said, "Happier." I sent her the money order,

and papers came in the mail a few weeks later along with a note from her that read,
“Move on, Rocky.”

I wondered how a person could pretend the past had never occurred. I asked Dad and Prairie how to get over Jill. Dad said, “Rely on family for now. Time will ease the rest.”

Prairie said, “Once you start banging a new woman, you’ll be fine.”

Curiously, they were both correct.

* * *

Prairie and I kept Dad content by going to church on Sundays but neither of us ever did buy back into the line of Heavenly rewards they were selling. Still, we didn’t mind going so much because we could see our dad up in front during the Sacrament meeting smiling at us like he knew he’d have us with him as a family for all eternity.

Once as we were sneaking out after the sacrament meeting, the bishop intercepted us and held out his hand. He said, “You boys always seem to slip out before I get a chance to welcome you.”

I shook his hand, and then so did Prairie. Dad walked up and said, “Bishop Martin, I’d like you to meet my sons, Rockwell and Parley. I’m very proud of both of them.”

I knew myself to be a broken man who had dropped out of society and run home to hide out, and yet standing beside my brother and witnessing our father’s smile, I didn’t feel like a failure. For the first time in months, I didn’t feel alone. I was a son, a brother.

In November, I moved up to Salt Lake City, and Prairie, eager to get away from Dad’s strict rules, went with me. We lived as roommates in a two room apartment for a

while, me finding work easily enough and Prairie getting hired and fired every other week. Dad called often to see how we were doing and once or twice he drove out to visit. He said his house in St. George had always been the right size for him until we both moved in and then moved out. Now his house seemed too spacious, and he missed the sounds of his boys.

III: SORRY

Married fifteen years. No interest in discussing the issue further with her husband. They climb into bed at 1:32 AM, but she doesn't close her eyes. No point really in trying to fall asleep. He declared their argument finished – bed time! – but fifteen years with this man is enough for her to know he's spoken in haste. He's not finished tonight, oh no, not yet.

His back to her as if settled down for sleep. He shifts, shifts again. He huffs.

She wonders about the time, if twenty minutes have passed, perhaps thirty. She will not lift her head to check the digital clock. She becomes stone, still on her back, her arms at her sides, her feet together, toes pointed down under the solemn blanket. She listens. When he sleeps his breath is deep, almost savage, like an animal hiding underneath the porch. He grew up in a large family, shared a bed for an entire year with two brothers, so when he sleeps he hardly moves. But now he's restless, his breathing shallow, through his nose. He isn't talking, but his behavior next to her tells her everything.

She knows he's waiting for her to speak first. To notice that he can't sleep, to ask what is wrong. She imagines his anger creeping under his skin, causing him to itch. His irritation is almost erotic, a wash of frustration that pelts her repeatedly. She can almost read his mind. *Her first. Her first.* She imagines the words form a mantra for him.

She knows he needs her to apologize first.

The thought of never saying sorry tastes delicious to her. Perhaps he'd never fall asleep, lose his mind from fatigue, maybe break down and say it first. But they have fifteen years of marriage, and she knows this man. He'll apologize, he'll admit his mistakes and swear to improve – and by God he'll actually work on mending his ways – but only *after*. She must apologize first. Because in his mind, she is always *wrong* first. In his mind, he never does anything without provocation. If he messes up, you can bet some previous trespass pushed him.

After fifteen years she's sick of this game. Goddammit. She's been the first to apologize every time they've argued.

And tonight she will again. Just not yet. She'll let him stew for a while more. Wait, not moving a muscle, and listen to him toss and breathe through his nose and grind his fucking teeth down to porcelain nubs. Only when he finally surrenders – she'll know because he'll stop fidgeting, his breathing will slow, and he will start to fall asleep – only then will she move. Reach across the one foot gulf that lies between them in bed and touch him with no more than the tip of a finger, and then she'll whisper those poisonous words that keep him hers.

IV: SQUIB

After my mom's husband, an auburn-haired banker named Von, left town for the weekend on a business trip, I sneaked into his closet and dug around on the top shelf for the shoe box where he hid his guns. Sitting under a folded red sweater, the box wasn't exactly well hidden. I'd stumbled across the guns one weekend while digging through his closet looking for *Playboys*. There were two pistols inside the shoebox, both wrapped in hand towels. The first, a black metal revolver, a .38 six-shot with a wooden grip, looking a hell of a lot like that old-fogey pistol Danny Glover used in *Lethal Weapon*. Not cool at all. And the second, a semi-automatic 9mm chrome Beretta. A gun like one you'd imagine James Bond might carry. I considered just taking the Beretta and leaving the shoebox in place but figured no one would notice for the next few days anyway, so I took the box with both guns inside. Good thing I did, too. Turned out we needed the revolver.

I left a note for my mom saying I'd be out late and signed it "Love, Peepers" because that was her nickname for me. This was back in the summer of 1989, right after I'd graduated from high school. I'd been living in the basement, and occasionally at night I'd hear her and Von arguing about how I was a man now and needed to move out. He thought I should find an apartment. Mom had seen my last paycheck from working part-time as a delivery boy at Crusty's Pizza and knew there was no way. Von was pretty cool when he was around me, though. He seemed to like having someone in the room that

laughed at all his lame puns. All he ever got from my mom was an eye roll or even a bitter, “Von, stop! For the love of God.”

I stashed the shoe box with the two pistols behind the passenger seat of my blue Toyota Tacoma, climbed in, and drove to my friend Darren’s place. About ten minutes up Highland Drive to the freeway and another ten to the 33rd Street exit in South Salt Lake. The area where Darren lived was pretty ghetto. No trees or grass in sight. Just concrete and tarmac, the walks littered with wet plastic sacks, cigarette butts, and broken beer bottles. Across the street from a filthy McDonald’s stood a small wooden sign with hand-painted words announcing: Puck’s Hotel. The sign was a lie though, because there wasn’t a hotel there. I turned right before the sign and entered a thin gravel driveway that led to six rundown white shacks that some dude – presumably named Puck – rented out. Darren and his girlfriend, Megan, lived right off the street in shack number one. I had to park in front of shack two because each place had room next to it for only a single vehicle and Megan was home.

I left the shoebox in my truck and hurried over to Darren’s place. The doorbell was missing, but two bare copper wires hung out of a hole in the wood beside the door. When I touched them together, I could hear a buzz from inside. The noon sun was warming me up pretty good so that when Darren opened the door I could feel chilled air rushing out. He waved me in and I hopped to.

Darren shut the door behind me and stepped into the kitchen. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and I saw the planet Earth tattooed on his right shoulder blade. Just below the earth was a banner containing the slogan “Love Your Mother.” Not that Darren was a member of the Sierra Club or anything noble. “Love Your Mother” was the name of one of his old

rock bands. His thick fingers snatched a blue T-shirt from the back of a kitchen chair and he slid it over his head. The shirt pictured a couple of stick figures in a row boat and beneath the image a slogan in white block letters read: “Paddle Faster, I Hear Banjos.”

I smiled, pointed at the shirt, and said, “*Deliverance.*”

Darren said, “Why do people keep saying that?”

I could not tell if he was being sarcastic, so I waved to his girlfriend Megan. She sat on their ratty-ass couch watching TV. She wore a tank top and shorts, but her feet were bare and the soles dirty. Her short hair didn’t look exactly washed. I noticed she still had the same purple polish on her toes that I’d noticed on her last week. A plate covered with barbeque chips and a half-eaten peanut butter sandwich rested on her lap. She picked up a wide potato chip and slid the whole thing into her mouth, crunching away. Megan didn’t bother to look up at me and missed my little “hello” wave. Darren mumbled for me to follow him and walked in front of her, briefly blocking the TV, and into the only bedroom. I had to step over a tangle of electrical cords and a plastic crate filled with batteries and metal junk just to get out of the kitchen space. At Darren and Megan’s place objects lived wherever they happened to land.

“Hi, Megan,” I said, hoping for a “Hi, Erik,” or anything welcoming in response. Instead she lifted her chin at me, her eyes never leaving the television screen. I paused to glance at the television and saw some bearded newscaster talking to a fat guy in a dark suit. I gestured with a thumb at the screen.

“What’s happening in the world?” I asked Megan.

“Fucking politicians,” Megan said. She was too busy chewing chips to explain. I nodded like maybe I knew what the hell she meant. She lifted a long, bare leg toward me

and her foot pushed at my knee, gently nudging me away from her. “Your boyfriend’s waiting for you,” she said. I stepped away, feeling stupid for trying to interact.

Darren’s bedroom, like the rest of his place, was crowded. He and Megan shared a queen-sized bed and their monster mattress ate up most of the space. There was room for a small desk holding a little black and white television in one corner. With Darren reclining on a folding chair, the only place left for me to sit was on the edge of the bed, which was a little weird. In all the times I’d been over, I never once saw the bed made. Blankets and sheets were bundled, knotted, on the floor as much as on the mattress. Darren seemed oblivious to the mess on the floor. When he crossed the room he left boot prints on the cream-colored comforter that rested on the floor and would have taken two seconds to pick up. The sheet they slept on was a faded lime green, a color that made the numerous faint stains that peppered the fabric obvious to even a casual glance. I could tell which side of the bed Darren favored, because dozens of curly black hairs seemed woven into the sheet on the left side.

Darren dug around underneath the bed and emerged with a VHS tape. He dropped to his knees and reached under the desk. He pushed aside a thick, brown towel and revealed a VCR. He loaded up the tape and hit play, then flicked on the black and white, and within seconds was screening his latest scenes for me. The short movie we were making was coming along nicely. Darren’s screenplay followed a delusional man who believed he was a vampire. Darren played the lead and spent most of his time on screen either drinking blood or torturing people. He claimed he had a friend who would get his movie a private screening with some artist types around town. On a few occasions Darren had explained to me that his goal was to get some money so that he could reshoot his

masterpiece with some decent equipment and cut it in a real editing bay, then submit the film as a short to Sundance. He figured as long as it looked good and came in under ten minutes, they'd have to take his piece. Once he screened at Sundance, he would be a star. I supplied some advice and creative input on occasion, but Darren was the artist behind the film. I assumed the main reason he kept me around was because he loved hearing me praise his work. He also let me shadow him because I allowed him access to Von's Panasonic camcorder and I owned a truck to drive us around to various locations. In a lot of ways, he was using me for my gear, but I didn't care. I thought the guy was fucking cool.

* * *

When I had graduated from Hillcrest High in May, I had no friends. Most of the kids my age were either douche bags (those who didn't know I existed) or assholes (those who made my existence miserable.) After my mom joined the Mormon Church a couple of years earlier, she relocated us to the Salt Lake Valley. I'd been forced to transfer away from my friends during my sophomore year and I never managed to connect with anyone new. I hung out with a few skaters who were into metal like me, but I couldn't really ride. Mom made me go to church, hoping I'd make some friends. There were a few preppy guys on the basketball team who were in my ward, but they were nice to me only when grown-ups were around, and I wasn't about to start listening to *Depeche Mode* just so I could fit in with them. To get through the day, I planted my face in books and spent a lot of time home alone. I couldn't get away from high school people fast enough. I figured maybe I'd meet some cool people my freshman year of college. During the summer evenings, I delivered for Crusty's Pizza, and on weekends I'd drive down to Bixby Court

to hear local music. I enjoyed a lot of the local music. Bands like *Waterlube* and *Shark Attack* and *Midnight Meatball*. I loved one band in particular: *Top Hat Head*. They played fast and loud; they cultivated feedback and cussed out the audience. Real punk shit.

One night in late May I had smuggled my video camera into a show. The Panasonic was pretty hefty, but the guy at the door didn't even ask why I was carrying a backpack. Once the show started, I pulled out the camera and started taping. I thought I could make a bootleg video and jam to the music at home. Darren, *Top Hat Head's* lead singer and guitarist, saw me filming, and after the show finished with their signature five minute feedback wail, Darren hopped off stage and introduced himself to me. I thought he'd be pissed about me filming his band, but he said he didn't mind. Thought maybe we could work together. He told me about his movie idea and a week later we were running around town filming scenes from his vampire screenplay.

Darren took the lead role. He played a vampire with his shoulder-length black hair, heavy Doc Marten boots, and a dusky trench coat, despite the fact that the summer nights were warm as balls. In our first scene, he leapt off his roof onto an unsuspecting victim played by me. Once I was killed, we didn't need the tripod nearly as much because I became the official cinematographer.

Sometimes, Darren was a total prick. He was a couple of years older than I was and liked to remind me of the fact every chance he got. We couldn't drive past a bar without him suggesting we go in, and I'd have to remind him for the eighty-billionth time that I wasn't old enough yet.

“Can't you get a damn fake ID?”

I had no connections around town. I said no.

“Shit, maybe I can talk to a guy for you.” Of course, Darren never did. He was too focused on making his film to worry for more than a few minutes about anything else. Darren was always asking to borrow my camera overnight or for the weekend so he could film stuff when I wasn’t there. I worried he’d break it. Hell, I worried he’d steal it. Either way, I knew without the camera we wouldn’t have any excuse to hang out, so I always refused, using Von as an excuse.

* * *

“Did you see me spit?” Darren asked, pointing to the image on his monitor. He hit reverse on the VCR and after a second resumed the video. He tapped the screen. “Right there.”

“Yeah. It’s easy to see.”

“See how much blood sprays against the wall? Here, watch again.” Again Darren rewound the tape and reset the scene. I watched him wander down a dark alley and approach an unsuspecting woman – Megan in a blonde wig – and spring at her. Darren seemed to bite into her neck, then turned and spit a hunk of wet, bloody meat out of his mouth. “God, that shit tasted rank. My mouth was fucking full of fake blood, but you can’t tell because of the angle.”

“No, it looks good, man,” I said.

The television in the other room grew louder. I saw Megan pointing the remote, her thumb mashing the volume. Darren got out of his chair and stomped across the room, leaving more of his waffle boot prints across the comforter.

“Megan, turn it down.”

“I can’t hear,” Megan said.

“God, you’re being an absolute bitch,” Darren said. I’d like to say that I felt awkward or that there was a weird vibe in the house, but Darren and Megan were always fighting as far as I could tell and after a few visits, I’d grown used to a certain tension in the air. The first few times Darren invited me over, I thought Megan was mad at me for intruding into their life, but after a while I figured that maybe she was just permanently pissed.

“Maybe we should go outside,” I suggested. Darren grabbed a pack of Marlboros from the nightstand. Megan scowled at Darren as we walked past her. I said bye, but she didn’t bother to say anything back.

“Time for a burger?” Darren asked as he closed the front door behind him, smoke pouring out of his nostrils. Not waiting for an answer, he took a few steps towards the street. He started muttering. I caught the word: “Whore.”

I called for Darren to wait. I told him about the guns I’d borrowed from Von. Darren stopped mumbling under his breath and hurried back to me.

“I have two. They’re behind the seat in my truck.”

“Well, fuck, lead the way! Let’s see those puppies.”

We huddled at my passenger door, and I pushed the seat forward, revealing the shoebox. I tipped off the lid and pulled out the brown towel bundle that held the Berretta. Darren held the pistol with a surprising tenderness and care. He popped the clip and confirmed the weapon was not loaded, aimed at the ground, and pulled the trigger. Darren grinned as the hammer fell with a satisfying click. After a few minutes of waving the pistols around, we stashed them again.

* * *

33RD can get pretty busy, what with the I-15 freeway exit being about one hundred yards away, but we dashed across and went into the McDonald's. The building was run down, and being in there made me feel grimy, but hell, it was nearby and I was hungry. Darren ordered first, pulling his usual shit.

"I want a double quarter pounder, but no cheese or onions. Got that? No cheese. No onions." Darren spoke with this condescending lilt to his voice. The kid behind the counter looked world weary with his sloping shoulders and his hairy paws hovering over the register. Darren threw out his hands like he expected to be handed a basket and added, "Well? You hear me or what?"

The guy behind the counter parroted, "No cheese or onion on your burger." I could tell he didn't care for Darren's attitude.

"Hey, I'm not messing around?" Darren continued as if the server hadn't said a thing. "I'm fucking lactose intolerant, and I will absolutely go tits up dead if you put any cheese on or near my burger. You got that?"

"Right. No cheese. I've got it," the McDonald's guy said.

"You guys always put cheese or onions on my burgers, and I don't want any fucking cheese," Darren said. "I'm serious this time. Don't make me write Ronald McDonald and tattle on you clowns."

I could see that the server was red in the face and might lose his cool at any second, so I said to Darren, "Man, he gets it. Stop riding him or he'll spit on your burger."

“You’d better not spit on my burger either, dude,” Darren said, his finger right in the poor guy’s face.

“That’s not our policy,” the guy said.

After we unwrapped our burgers, Darren tore his apart. There was no cheese, but sure enough he found a couple of onion bits. He slammed his fist into our table and muttered, “Those corporate bastards.” He tossed the top bun across the table and fumed in silence for a minute. I started in on my chicken nuggets, glancing at his bun resting directly on the dirty McDonald’s table. All I could think about was how thousands of strangers had rested their hands on that table and now Darren’s bun was resting there soaking up the filth and grime. Finally, Darren picked both of the onion bits off of his meat, snatched up his bun, dusted the bread off with his fingers and rebuilt his burger.

Darren started in on how fast food joints always screw up his order. I had to agree because as far as I’d seen they did always mess up his order. But Darren lived in a vicious cycle of pissing off cashiers who then messed up his order on purpose, which in turn made him paranoid so that the next time he ordered fast food he acted like a complete cock to the cashier and sure enough the cycle started again.

Me? I just keep my head down and my mouth shut. But, then again, I’m not lactose intolerant and I like onions well enough.

Darren was thrilled that I’d finally managed to lift Von’s guns. We had big plans for an upcoming scene in his movie. “We’ll have to pick up some blanks,” Darren said

“What about a squib?” I asked

“I’ve been working on it.” Darren told me about this squib box he’d been working on. What he did was take a twenty foot extension cord – one of those orange heavy duty

electrical cords – and attach it to one of his amp pedals that he'd opened up and gutted. Then coming out of the other side of the pedal he'd run two ten foot long wires, insulated except for about four inches of exposed copper at the tips. Darren said all we had to do was plug the extension cord into a wall socket and when we stepped on the pedal, electric current would rush into the two ten foot wires. "We just run the wires up my pant leg and tape them to each end of a firecracker, and when you step on the pedal, the current will want to complete. A charge'll jump from wire to wire through the firecracker and set the little fucker off. Boom! Homemade squib!"

Now, it wasn't as dangerous as it sounds. The climactic scene of Darren's movie required that he be shot in the chest, and he wanted blood to erupt from the wound. To create the illusion of a gunshot wound, Darren had figured out a brilliant homemade special effect. To make sure the firecracker and the current didn't hurt him, Darren would wear a leather weight-lifting belt strapped backward so the wide end was stretched across his chest. Onto the thick leather he would attach the two wires with a firecracker between them. Over the firecracker, Darren planned to duct tape a condom filled with fake blood. The plan was to load a gun with a blank cartridge, and right as the gun was fired at Darren, I would step on the pedal. Electric current would surge through the wires and set off the firecracker, which would explode the condom and spray fake blood everywhere. We were special effects wizards. Using homemade parts and a heap of gumption, we would create the dramatic illusion that Darren had been shot in the chest.

* * *

Downtown, we visited a gun store in search of blanks. A pony-tailed clerk handed over a box of 9mm blanks without questioning what a couple of young bucks might need with them. Darren let me pick up the tab, claiming he was “a bit tight” after paying rent.

Soon after we returned to Darren’s place, we realized the 9mm blanks wouldn’t work in the Berretta. The semi-automatic clip couldn’t hold them. The thing I never knew about blanks was that they looked like someone had chewed the front end off the bullet. The back half of the bullet, the shell with the gun powder, looked exactly correct, but the front half was missing. Instead of a metal slug on the front end, there was nothing, like someone had sliced a regular bullet in half and tossed the front end in the trash. Because of this, the blanks wouldn’t stack properly and hold their position in the clip. Frustrated as hell, I drove Darren back up to the gun shop and bought a box of blanks the right size for the .38 revolver.

When we pulled in to Darren’s place, Megan was gone. I dug out the pistol from behind the seat and grabbed the brown paper sack that held the blanks, then ducked behind my truck so that cars passing on the street or neighbors nosing around wouldn’t see us. Darren set up Von’s tripod nearby and mounted the camera.

“It’s gonna look like I’m being shot by a goddam cowboy,” Darren complained.

At least the revolver held the blanks. I slid one into each of the six cylinder slots, and then suddenly felt nervous. I’d heard a story about an actor from a Gary Busey movie who’d shot himself in the head with a blank round as a joke. I couldn’t recall the dude’s name, but I was pretty sure he’d killed himself. I wasn’t sure how a person could get shot without a metal slug actually leaving the barrel of the gun, but my not knowing made me even more nervous.

“I don’t think we should point this directly at you,” I said.

Darren thought about it for a while. “Yeah, we can cheat the shot. Just aim at my shoulder or to the side, and we’ll set the camera at an angle so that it looks like you’re aiming right at me.” Darren fiddled around with my camera, peered through the view finder and adjusted the camcorder’s tilt. He pressed a button and the red record light flashed on. He tromped around the tripod and stood near me.

“Aim it at my side,” he said. I did. He chewed on his tongue for a few seconds. “Aim it at my shoulder,” he said. I did. “Go see how it looks,” Darren instructed. “Make sure the gun looks like it’s aimed right at my chest.” He held out his hand. I placed the revolver in his wide palm and stepped over to the camera.

After fiddling with the camera controls, I rewound the VHS tape and looked into the view finder to watch the image of myself aiming a pistol at Darren. I looked dangerous. I said, “You can kinda tell I’m not aiming at you the first time, but when I aim at your shoulder it looks like I could be aiming at your chest.”

BLAM!

I nearly shit my pants. Darren was standing there holding the smoking weapon, aimed right at the front door of his place. His mouth hung open, his lips were wet, almost oily, and his hands were shaking. The sounds of passing traffic seemed distant. The sun glinted off the barrel of the revolver, and for a moment I caught the scent of birthday cake candles. Darren was a statue in baggy shorts and steel-tipped Docs. The tip of his tongue pointed out of his mouth and up towards the sky. He said, “Did you hear that, Erik? That was fucking loud!”

“What the hell?” I asked.

“Let’s get inside. In case someone calls the cops,” Darren said.

I grabbed the tripod and camera and followed Darren. He locked the door behind us and started stomping around the cramped room in his thick-soled boots. His black hair swung back and forth like a broom across his shoulders as he shook his head. He hooted.

“Why’d you fire it, man? You should have warned me.” I was agitated. Worried that the police would come knocking. Darren assured me that I was being stupid. No one saw anything. People would just assume someone out on 33rd had had a blow-out or something. He was right but, still, shit.

“This is gonna be awesome,” Darren said. He slapped the pistol into my hand and knelt down next to one of the many plastic crates full of junk that lined the walls of the living room. I wasn’t sure what to do with the pistol, so I set it on his kitchen table between a plate smeared with dried ketchup and an empty bottle of beer.

“Mind if I get a soda?” I asked.

Darren kept his soda cans inside the fridge door, which was fortunate, because there wasn’t a chance in hell of finding anything on the fridge shelves. They were packed with all sorts of paper sacks and Styrofoam containers. Who knew how old the eggs were? And I noticed a slice of pink frosted cake sitting on a plate, no plastic wrap, with something greenish growing on the edge.

I popped open a cold Pepsi and watched Darren tug a small metal box out of the crate. A cord ran out of one side and a pair of wires ran out of the other. Darren set down the squib box and showed me how the wires could be attached to his leather weight-lifting belt. He held up a box of condoms. “I mixed up some fake blood last night. In the

thermos there. It's just Caro syrup and food coloring. I couldn't get the color right at first, but the secret is to add some blue, so that the blood doesn't look too bright red."

The front door shook like someone had walked face-first into it. The knob twisted back and forth. Darren flipped the deadbolt and the door swung open. Megan pushed her way in holding a plastic bag from 7-11 in one hand and a gallon of milk in the other. She glanced at me, then at the box of condoms in Darren's hand. "Don't you guys stop on my account."

Megan set the milk down on a stack of newspapers on the table and rested the bag on the counter next to the kitchen sink, piled high with food-encrusted dishes.

"What the fuck is that?" Megan asked. She was pointing at the revolver I'd left on the table, but her eyes were on me. "A gun?" She picked up a bite-sized piece of toast and winged it right at me. I flinched and the toast flew wide, landing on the couch. "Why'd you bring a freakin' pistol into my house?"

I was dizzy and edgy, feeling all sorts of twitchy, and not sure how to answer.

"Shut the fuck up, Megan," Darren said.

"I don't want a gun in here." She snatched the pistol up and examined the cylinder. "Oh, Christ, it's loaded!"

"It's not loaded with bullets," I offered.

"Oh, really? Well, I must be hallucinating then because I see bullets in there."

Darren reached for the revolver and Megan pulled back her hand, not allowing him to take the weapon from her. "Give me the fucking gun," Darren said.

They stared at each other for a second, and there was this quiet in the room. They looked like boxers in a ring sizing each other up. I wondered if they might actually throw

punches and what I would do if they did. Darren was my friend, but he out-weighted Megan by a good eighty pounds. Megan said, “You idiots are going to get hurt.”

“No one’s gonna get hurt. Just give me the gun.” Darren groaned and added, “Please.” He held out his hand.

Megan said, “Fuck.” She handed back the pistol.

“It’s loaded with blanks,” Darren explained. He flipped open the cartridge and dumped a blank round into his palm. He handed the blank to Megan. “We’re going to use my squib machine and film the final scene tonight. That’s why I’ve got the condoms out.”

Megan listened as Darren explained his squib set-up. She scratched at her elbow and glanced at me. I looked away, afraid she might yell again. Megan said, “You dipshits have no idea what you’re doing.”

Although I kept my mouth shut, I suspected Megan might have a point.

Darren refused to listen to Megan’s nay-saying. He said, “The squib machine works.”

“Okay, but how are you geniuses going to use your damn box without any firecrackers?”

Darren said, “Shit.”

* * *

The trip out to the Wyoming border on I-80 East took about two hours. We had to make the journey because firecrackers and other exploding fireworks were illegal in Utah but fine in Wyoming. Just as we were crossing the border, Darren spotted a tattered billboard advertising: “Fireworks 4 Sale.”

“That’s the place!” Darren announced. “Next exit.”

Part of the parking lot outside the firecracker building was broken pavement, the rest of it heavy gravel. I hadn’t thought too much about the calendar date since summer time can get a little non-specific, but when I saw all the cars with Utah plates scattered across the lot, I remembered we were just days away from the holiday weekend. The building was an unpainted warehouse with wood panel walls and a hand-painted sign next to the entrance that read: God Bless America! The faint scent of cat urine lingered inside. What a dump. One corner of the store seemed to be under repair. The ceiling had caved in, and the flooring was ripped up and piled like a moldy carpet haystack. A few ladders, hammers, and other tools were scattered around the repair site. What cracked me up was that the corner was roped off with a criss-cross of yellow yarn, like someone’s grandmother was in charge of fixing the trashed area.

I found Darren digging, hunched over a bin filled with loose strings of firecrackers. He seemed delighted to find tables and shelves packed with all sorts of 4th of July shit. Darren suggested that in addition to firecrackers, we load up on other fireworks since we were there.

He was a bit light on cash, so I picked up a couple dozen bottle rockets, some Roman candles, a bunch of ground spinners, pinwheels, and helicopters, and a string of one hundred firecrackers.

Before we climbed back into the Tacoma, Darren lit up a cigarette. I wouldn’t allow him to smoke inside my vehicle, so we leaned against the grill of my truck. I grumbled a bit about how hot summer was in Wyoming. Darren refused to talk about the weather and instead insisted that while we waited for him to finish his smoke we should

fire off a few bottle rockets for a laugh. He took one and spent a couple of minutes wedging the rocket stick into a crack in the pavement. Each time he released the rocket, it fell over. Darren cursed like mad just as a man and his three young daughters walked out of the warehouse. The kids looked pretty shocked at the words Darren was muttering. Darren didn't even notice the family, but the man shot me a look that seemed hostile enough.

Long after his cigarette was finished, Darren managed to get the rocket to stand up more or less straight. He used his lighter to start the fuse. With a puff, the rocket shot into the air and popped. Darren hooted and handed me his lighter.

I picked up a bottle rocket and held the end of the stick between the tip of my thumb and finger, lit the fuse, and pointed the rocket right at the sun.

“Dude, what're you doing?” Worry permeated Darren's voice.

I don't often do stuff that impresses other people. A guy like Darren who fronted a local rock band and lived out of wedlock with his girlfriend took one look at me and figured me for a sad little pansy. But I knew my way around fireworks, thanks to a wild friend I used to hang around with before I moved to Salt Lake. Parents and firemen tell kids that people lose fingers mishandling firecrackers, and, okay, maybe they're not lying, *per se*, but they're exaggerating the danger. I've had a bottle rocket or two explode near my hand and, yeah, it stung, but I didn't lose fingers.

The rocket ignited and blasted into the air. I shook my hand because a few hot sparks from the launch had landed on my fingers. There is always some pain associated with holding a live bottle rocket, but I smiled at Darren. “I didn't feel like trying to wedge it into the ground.”

Darren looked at me with weird, rabid eyes. “Can you teach me to do that?”

He mirrored me as I gripped a second bottle rocket by the end of the stick. I lit the rocket, and just before the fuse burned down, I aimed into the sky. The firework fired from my hand and twirled through the air, a high-pitched screech followed by a crack. I tossed the lighter back to Darren. He asked, “So what’s the secret?”

I said, “Well, you grip it at the end of the stick, then light it and then you aim.”

“I’m not an idiot. I saw that. I want to know what’s the secret to not getting hurt?”

Until that moment I had not realized that Darren thought I was doing something special when I ignited the bottle rockets. He imagined that I utilized some secret technique in the way I pinched the stick that allowed me not to feel the hot sparks that hit my skin upon launch. Or perhaps I monitored the fuse so that I could flick the rocket away at the last possible second, thereby creating a safe distance from the ignited powder. Maybe Darren imagined that my aim was scientifically formulated to ensure the rocket left my fingers at some perfect angle which prevented ignition mishaps. Whatever the case, I said, “There is no secret. It always hurts a little, but you deal with it. Just light it and grit your teeth.”

Darren mused over my words, his head down. He stomped in a circle, his boots crunching on the gravel, kicking up dust. After turning around a couple of times, he looked at me. “It’s like eating an entire apple.”

I had no idea what he meant.

Darren explained. “There was this kid in my high school who could eat an entire apple. I mean fucking core and all. Even the stem if the apple had one. I thought he was a bad ass. So, I asked him what the secret was, and he said, ‘Next time you have an apple,

find me and I'll show you.' The next day I brought an apple to school and hunted that fucker down. I thought he was some kinda Mr. Miyagi and I was his student. So he looks the apple over and hands it back to me and says to start eating it like I normally do. I did, biting and chewing, swallowing chunks of apple that should have choked me. I was so damn excited to learn the secret. When I was down to the core, I said, 'Now what?' That fucker stared at me in silence for like thirty seconds, which is actually a really long time if you think about it, and then he said, 'Now eat the rest of the apple.' That was the secret. Just eat the rest of the apple."

Darren lit the fuse and held the bottle rocket up to the sky. A second later the firework whistled up and popped. Darren hopped away from me, shaking his hand like a wild man. "Fuck, the sparks sting!"

We shot a few more into the air and then took turns shooting bottle rockets at each other. We scooted around the parking lot, Darren hooting with glee, hiding behind cars with Utah license plates, hurtling over explosions.

* * *

After we'd shot off our supply of bottle rockets, we climbed back into my truck and drove back into Utah territory. I was feeling cool after teaching Darren how to hold a lit bottle rocket. We discussed the video we were making, specifically working out how we would go about filming the scene where he takes a bullet to the chest. We needed to be near an electrical outlet to power the squib box. Darren's script called for the location to be outdoors, preferably in a public area. Darren seemed to think we should film the shot in a parking garage late at night. He wasn't sure, but imagined there had to be power outlets around and suggested we bring a few extra extension cords if need be. I was

skeptical, but agreed to scout a few locations with him. I thought we'd have better luck filming in an alley somewhere and running a cord into some nearby bar.

I was listing off reasons why I preferred an alleyway to a parking garage, when Darren interrupted me. "You have to try shooting. It's a total rush."

I stared out the windshield, looking at the highway and at the yellow grass and brush ranging out to either side of the truck. I felt strange listening to Darren lecture me about what a kick it was to shoot the pistol. He sounded like a kid, too insistent, too excited. Darren pushed for me to shoot the pistol. "We're in the middle of nowhere. Now's the perfect time."

I said, "Fine."

Darren slapped his knee. "Here, I'll get it." He reached behind his seat. After a few minutes of rummaging around, he pulled the pistol out and spun the revolving cylinder. "She's still got five shots."

He rolled down his window and aimed the pistol out at the passing yellow hills and distant blue mountains. He pulled the trigger. Even with the sound of wind rushing into the cab, the crack of the pistol was loud. "Now you," Darren said.

I could see he wouldn't let this go. I rolled down my window. Hot afternoon air whipped my hair. My mouth was dry, my tongue sticking to my lips. I accepted the revolver from Darren and rested it on my lap, my finger outside of the trigger guard. After glancing in the rearview to make sure we were alone on the road, I lifted the pistol with my right hand and aimed across my body out the driver-side window. I squeezed the trigger and heard the bang like a clap of thunder next to my ear. Although I knew that no

bullet actually exited the barrel, I felt a surge of energy gather in my hand, rush up my arm and fill my body.

“Wow,” I said. I fired again and, just like Darren, hooted with delight.

* * *

We were about ten minutes east of the Park City turn off, still an hour from Salt Lake, when Darren suggested we test the squib machine. He thought we'd be wise to make sure we knew what we were doing before we returned to the city where nosy neighbors or passing police might hear us firing off blanks. “Pull off into the next rest stop and we'll shoot a practice scene.” I agreed. Darren added, “Hell, it's probably not even illegal to fire off a gun way out here in the mountains.”

We found a rest stop a few miles later and parked. The lawn surrounding the stop was freshly mowed and a deep green. Two round buildings covered in ginger stucco contained restrooms. Connecting the restroom buildings was a green painted pine wood roof that covered a concrete porch area. A drinking fountain, a large map of Utah, and a couple of vending machines were included in the porch area. We ran around looking for a power outlet and found one behind a snack machine. There was a minivan parked in the lot and a family of Asian people milled about, drinking from the fountain, studying the Utah map, and generally taking their sweet time. Darren and I whispered about how we might have to unplug a vending machine to plug in his squib box. After a few minutes the family piled back into their vehicle and left. That was our cue. We pulled everything out of my truck.

Darren helped me push the vending machine out enough so that I was able to reach behind it and plug in the squib box. Then we ran the cord over to a sidewalk behind

the men's bathroom building. We were still able to see the highway, but figured no one would notice us as they sped by at seventy. I started setting up the tripod and the camera and checked that I had the correct tape in the camcorder. We didn't want to record over the master tape and destroy all our hard work. Meanwhile, Darren stripped off his shirt and strapped the leather belt around his chest. He grabbed the two wires from the box and tapped the exposed ends together to make sure they weren't getting any power. They were dead and would remain so until I stepped on the pedal to open up the electrical circuit. He ran the wires up his pant leg, and using duct tape, secured each end to the leather belt. I brought him a firecracker. He pulled out the short fuse and tossed it aside. Darren pushed the bare copper wire ends into each end of the firecracker.

"I'm ready for the blood," Darren said.

I opened the thermos with the fake blood mixture and set it aside. I tore open one of the condoms Darren had brought along for our experiment. "Ribbed for her pleasure." I discovered how difficult filling a condom with syrup can be. I tipped the thermos and spilt more fake blood on the concrete than into the open end of the condom. Finally, Darren knelt beside me and agreed to pour from the thermos while I stretched out the balloon mouth of the condom. By the time I had tied off the condom, my hands were sticky with red syrup. Darren took the swollen blood balloon and set to work taping it over the firecracker. I hurried into the men's restroom.

The smell of disinfectants was thick in the air. I used my elbow to get the sink running and rubbed my hands with soap and warm water. In the mirror, I examined my face. My long chin was bare since I was unable to grow whiskers, unlike Darren, who cherished a wicked pirate goatee. A whitehead worried at the edge of my left nostril, and

I tried squeezing it, but my hands were slick and my fingers couldn't seem to get under the zit. I left my face with an irritated red mark around my nose and dried off my fingers with abrasive, brown paper towels from the dispenser.

Back outside I found Darren with his shirt back on, ready to go.

"I thought maybe you got sleepy and took a nap in there," he said.

"Syrup," I answered. Darren didn't seem to care. He was excited to try out the squib on camera. I checked to make sure there were no cars coming, as we didn't want to be interrupted by some curious family. I grabbed the revolver from my truck. I popped open the pistol's revolving cylinder and dumped the blank cartridges into my palm. I tossed the empty shells into a nearby trash bin, and I loaded a fresh blank cartridge into the revolver.

"Hey, Erik, grab my pocket knife. It's in my bag."

I set the gun on the seat and opened up Darren's backpack. The bag was more silver duct tape than red fabric, and he kept everything inside. I pushed past a hammer, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, more Trojans, a warm can of Miller Lite, and a pair of socks before I found his pocket knife. The blade was thin and short without any additional tools. I left the bag unzipped and ran over to Darren.

He opened the knife and aimed the blade at his chest. "We almost fucked up," he explained. "If there isn't an opening in my shirt, how will the blood spray out when the firecracker explodes?" Without further hesitation, he stabbed into his shirt and cut a two inch slit in the fabric.

I accepted the blade and closed it. “Good point,” I said and ran back to the truck. After dropping the blade back into his bag, I tried to pull the zipper closed, but it snagged on me. I yelled, “Your bag won’t close.”

“Screw the bag, dude. I want to be able to see this,” Darren said.

Already the sun was beginning to fall behind the mountains to the west of us. We were losing light at an alarming rate. I grabbed the gun and rushed over to the camcorder. I looked through the viewfinder and made sure the shot was lined up. “Ready?”

“I’m super fucking ready,” Darren said.

I pressed the record button. Darren stood nicely framed along the left side of the screen. The squib box was out of sight just below the bottom right frame. I stepped over to my position on the right side of the shot and hovered one foot over the squib machine pedal.

“We’re rolling,” I said.

“Remember, cheat it a bit. Aim to the side of me, but not too much. I want it to look real.”

I aimed just to the side of his arm. Darren winked at me.

“Die, Darren,” I said.

I pulled the trigger just as I stepped onto the pedal of the squib box. As expected, the crack of the pistol was violently loud. I noticed Darren’s shoulder flinch back. In the center of his chest, a wet red stain spread slowly underneath his shirt. The wet stain extended down his stomach and his jeans darkened at the crotch.

“You shot me,” Darren said. “I felt something hit my shoulder.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No. But something hit my shoulder.” Darren was wearing an enormous smile like he found the whole situation hilarious. He started hopping up and down and hooting. “You fucking shot me!”

I suggested the cotton wadding at the end of the blank cartridge must have blasted out of the chamber and pegged him. Darren said, “I’ve been shot! Awesome!”

“You’re retarded,” I said, but I was laughing too.

Then Darren started hopping around, slapping at his chest. “Ow, ow!” Darren was in a panic and dropped to his knees. He pounded on his chest like a spasmodic King Kong. “Oh, ow ow ow! Jesus fuck!”

I didn’t know what was happening. Clearly the cotton wad had hurt his shoulder worse than we first thought. I stepped towards him, ready to drag him to my truck and drive like hell to the nearest hospital. “Are you bleeding?”

“It’s burning! The wires are burning my chest! Step on the pedal!”

I stepped on the pedal, returning the box to the off position.

Darren peeled off his shirt and tossed it into the grass. Sticky wet red covered his abdomen and had drained into the top of his jeans. He peeled off the duct tape holding the two wires to the weight belt and flung the wire away from his chest. The wires did not go far. They hung from his pants. I stood nearby watching him as he unzipped his jeans and stripped them off, kicking his Docs aside in the process. He sat on the rest stop concrete porch wearing only his socks and baggy white underwear and covered in sticky fake blood.

“I could feel the wires through the belt.” Darren said. “I couldn’t feel anything at first, but then they started to sting me through the leather and they just got hotter and

hotter.” Darren unlatched the weightlifter’s belt, and it fell off of his chest, leaving a pale stripe across his torso. Near each of his nipples was a red dot the size of a dime. Darren ran a finger over each pink circle. “I almost fucking burned my nips off. Shit.”

I still held a revolver. Darren climbed to his feet and stood a few feet away from me. I imagined how insane we might look if a family of travelers pulled up to the rest stop. I said, “We should stop the camera.”

* * *

When we arrived at Darren’s place, it was dark outside. We burst into the house and found Megan stretched out on the couch. Darren was still wearing only his underwear and socks. He dropped his sticky bundle of clothes on the floor and tossed his boots into the corner. Before Megan could utter a word, he said, “I need a fucking shower.”

“What the hell?” Megan managed, but Darren was already past her and into the bathroom. She jumped to her feet and hurried to the closed bathroom door. I glanced at the kitchen sink, hoping perhaps to spy a clean rag I could wet to wash down the passenger seat where Darren had been seated. Megan didn’t pound on the bathroom door, or yell through it. She listened through the door at the sounds of Darren stepping into the shower and turning on the water. After a moment she turned her attention towards me.

“Do you have a rag I could use?” I asked.

Megan stepped over Darren’s discarded clothing bundle and walked towards me. I noticed the way her bare feet seemed to locate the few clear spots on the floor, the places not cluttered by soiled clothes, used tissues, or forgotten plates, without her ever needing to look down. There was a hint of marijuana in the air, but I sensed from Megan’s stern features that she wasn’t feeling mellow.

“Why’s he covered in blood?”

“It’s the fake blood. We did a test with the squib box. It didn’t really work.”

Megan stood near me, close enough she could have reached out and shoved me. She coughed a couple of times, not bothering to cover her mouth. She asked, “What is your deal? Why do you come here?”

I couldn’t figure out what she meant. The obvious answer was to hang out with Darren and make movies, but I heard something deeper in the way she asked the question. There was an accusing tone to her voice, as if she knew what I was going to say and wouldn’t accept any bullshit about creating cinematic art. I felt like she could see into me, like she knew I sneaked sideways glances at her, that whenever she walked past I studied her long legs. I felt my face burn with embarrassment. But even that didn’t seem to be what she meant. There was something else she didn’t like about me. Unsure what to say or do, I said nothing.

“You’re using him,” she said.

I wanted to point out that Darren used my camera and my gas. If anything, he was using me. Hell, I paid for everything. I brought everything to our friendship, and he lived like a bum. So did she. I turned my head and peered at the stack of dishes in the sink, at the army of empty beer bottles crowding the kitchen counter, at the stacks of wet newspapers, phone books, and long overdue library books that cluttered the tops of the microwave and fridge. I wanted to ask how she could live in such filth. Instead I said, “We’re friends.”

Megan snorted a bit like she was fighting to hold back a laugh. “You’re not like him. You’re pretending, but you’re not like him.”

“Then what am I?” Even as the words escaped my lips, I prayed that she wouldn’t answer.

“You’re a parasite. You build your life on other people. You follow, do what you’re told. You can’t figure out who you are, so attach yourself to Darren hoping some of who he is will rub off on you.”

I wanted to say something, tell her to shove her opinions up her ass or ask her how she could dare be so wrong. Something inside my throat was squeezing, and I wanted to gag. I felt a surge of resentment at how misunderstood I was. I said nothing. I managed to stuff my hands into my pockets before she could notice I was shaking. I took a breath and asked, “Could I get a few sheets of paper towel? Darren left syrup all over my car seat.”

She found me a reasonably clean hand towel. Once the cloth was soaked, I took it out to wipe at the sticky seat in my truck and left Megan inside with the television and Darren. After about ten minutes, Darren emerged from the house, freshly showered, his thick hair slicked back. He was still sure we could film the shot, but he wanted to run some tests with the firecrackers that night. He’d been disappointed with the fact that the blood pack had not exploded outward but, instead, had simply ruptured the condom and poured fake blood down his chest. Darren suggested maybe packing more firecrackers underneath the condom would give us a more explosive Hollywood gunshot wound. He said that ten or twenty would do the trick. “I can’t believe I ruined my shirt, and the damn blood didn’t even burst out of the slit.”

The next morning I returned the shoe box to Von’s closet. I don’t know if he ever noticed his revolver had been taken and fired. If he did, he never said anything to me. I

visited Darren a few more times, but I refused to bring the guns again. I lied and said Von had found out that I'd messed with them and had placed his guns in a lock box.

“Is the lock box still in your house? Maybe we can pick the lock.”

When I told Darren we should just forget the guns, he got pissed with me. He said I wasn't a true artist and started referring to me as a giant pussy, which got old fast. After that, I started dodging Darren's phone calls. Eventually, he got the hint and ceased calling. We stopped hanging out altogether. I imagine he found someone else with a camera and a gun.

V: THE RUBBER INCH

Hell, yeah, I'm in trouble. Not the "don't let it happen again" kind, but trouble-trouble. I deserve every bit of what's coming. Kinda sorta. The dishes needed to be done, were just sitting there, filthy, waiting. Sat for how long, a week? Can it really have been a week? I was gonna do them soon. Swear to God. Just not yet, not this very minute, but soon.

My older brother, Will, is washing the dishes I swore to do. He's wiping at dried out gunk with a soapy sponge and staring me down. He's killing my buzz.

See, the thing is, I was gonna do them when my show was over. I was watching the History Channel and relaxing, eating a microwaved burrito. Bean and cheese drowned in salsa. Maybe had a puff or two to clear my mind, help me find some peace in this harsh world. The show was going on about fertility gods, ancient divinities with enormous johnsons. You should see some of these statues they were examining. Sumerian studs! Babylonian porn stars! Egyptian gods with rods sticking straight out like a third leg. Talk about a kick stand. And I got to thinking about modern day fertility gods. Specifically: King Kong. And his monkey wang. How big was that thing do you think? Two feet, twelve? No wonder that blonde chick screamed, what with that ape aiming twelve feet of crazy monkey love at her.

But the point is I was gonna dive into that sink fucking soon, I swear.

Will loads dishes into the washer. God, I'm a moron, standing here thinking about King Kong's dong. Maybe I should take the sponge from his hands and finish up. But I

don't. I stand there like a dipshit and watch him scrub, and goddammit, he's good at it. Like he was born to scour crusty dishes. Whenever I wash, like the times I've washed up in the past, I mean, obviously not now, but when I wash, the dishes always come out of the washer with gunk still stuck all over them. But when Will plunges into a sink, everything comes out sparkling like in a fucking commercial. I swear doing dishes is his super power. Maybe he was bitten by a radioactive sponge.

"It's important, March. You have to wash off the dishes before loading them," Will says. "Otherwise, the dishwasher just bakes the food on. You know how hard it is to get baked-on corn out of one of these skinny glasses?"

I nod. At least he's talking to me now. I've learned the secret with Will is to look repentant—head bowed, eyes downcast—and wait. He's a softy. He acts hard when he's pissed off, but he can't sustain it due to our O'Neill blood. Family knows family. We flare up hot, but we burn out fast. And of the entire family, none flashes hotter or cools quicker than Will. But I can tell he's not done with me yet, the way he keeps opening his mouth, then biting back his words. I know the look. He's trying to find the best way to say something difficult, something I don't want to hear.

Finally Will says, "We have to talk about your living here."

Like I said: trouble-trouble.

I don't really have a job these days. I know a guy named Dale who lets me sit in his office – a closet just off his office really – in some rundown building, and work on a phone, cold-calling people to see if they're interested in refinancing their home mortgage, setting up appointments for him, but it doesn't count as a real job. He gets me a few

hundred each month, assuming I get him a few dozen appointments. It's not much moola, and it all goes to rent. Well, mostly all of it goes to rent.

Thing is, working for Dale sucks because he forgets to pay me. He forgets a lot. Like, I have to call him up all the time and remind him to send my paycheck. And when he does finally hand it over, swear to God, the check's always post-dated, so that I have to wait like a week before I can cash the thing. So, obviously, I often get behind on rent, so Will has to pick up my half for a couple weeks. I pay him back soon as I can, but it sucks owing your older brother for like three weeks while you're waiting for a check to clear. Hell, I'm a few weeks behind right now. No wonder he's extra pissed at me.

I make some money on the side selling herb. Not a big time enterprise, mind. No way can I pay rent off my pot profits. More like I make just enough to afford a fresh supply for me. It's not like it's a business or something, just a couple dozen close friends. Thing is, Will doesn't smoke, so he can't understand why I'm always broke but always high. So my smoking is also a point of contention between us.

Then other times I drop a tab or two and turn magical. I see shit, get smarter. I understand the world properly. Not the way the "man" would have us see. Things clear up, crystallize, shift until they're vivid and alive. Something happens inside me that makes me love everything, everyone, even myself. People like Will that never get their mind clear think we're all different, that people are separate. They can't see that everything is an ocean of billions and trillions of atoms, swimming all over everything. The air between us, our bodies, our shoes, bugs, everything – it's all the same thing. Distance means nothing when your mind is open. We're all united, one.

I explained how we are all connected once, but Will called me a stupid hippie.

Right after he squirts in the soap and starts the washer up, Will says, “I’m moving out, March. In two weeks. I’m gonna move in with Cassie.”

And that’s exactly what I mean by *trouble-trouble*. Because if Will goes, I’m fucked.

“Dude, I was gonna wash the dishes,” I say.

“No you weren’t.”

“Yes,” I insist, feeling defensive, knowing I need to bury my desire to explain my reasons for putting off the dishes. Will hates excuses. I need to get positive. Change the vibe in the room. “I’m going to get rent to you soon, man. Dale said he’s bringing a check over on Friday.”

“It’s Saturday,” Will says.

I take a second to remember when I last talked to Dale. If we spoke two days ago, that means he stood me up and I need to call him, but if I talked to Dale yesterday, then he’s not bringing a check until Friday of next week. Either way, Dale’s an asshole.

“Well, if you move in with Cassie, what do I do?” I ask.

“I *am* moving in with Cassie,” Will says, ignoring my question.

Whenever I owe rent, I walk on eggshells around Will. I don’t even know where that expression comes from, but I imagine my bare feet getting all cut up by jagged eggshell fragments, egg yolks, and that runny clear slime squishing between my toes. Makes me wanna puke. Now I need to shower, and God knows I’ll be spending extra time on my feet, trying to wash off that image of egg.

Will steps around me, grabs his keys. “I’m going to a movie with Cassie. Maybe you could pick up the living room a bit while I’m out.” Will’s head drops; he looks exhausted. “Or keep watching your shows. I guess it doesn’t matter either way.”

I watch him leave, closing the door gently behind him. I can hear him outside, crossing the concrete landing, then stepping down the stairs. I burn telepathic messages through the closed door, across the landing and down the steps, trying to crack my way into Will’s brain. *Come back*. But there is no such thing as telepathy, and Will is gone.

* * *

What’s the point? Here I am gathering up socks and a shirt from the couch and dumping them in my pigsty bedroom. The empty beer cans go in the trash and a plate with dried salsa into the sink. I’ll clean it when the shit in the dishwasher’s finished. I push the Play Station 3 back under the TV stand and brush some crumbs off the couch. I hang up my jacket and stare at the vacuum cleaner in the coat closet. God, I’d have to unravel that damn cord and find a place to plug it in. There’s a socket hidden behind the couch and one behind the TV, but where is one that I can actually reach? Plus, Will expects lines in the carpet, like Mom used to make us do when we were kids. Screw that. He’s not changing his mind about moving out based on goddamn lines in the living room carpet.

He’s going, period, and I don’t have enough money to get my own place. He knows I can’t make rent on my own, but he’s going anyway. I’d love to call him a prick, but I just can’t bring myself to hate him.

See, Will kinda saved my life. For the last year or so, I lived up in Idaho with my cousin, Eric. Our rent was two hundred bucks a month total, no shit. We lived in this two

room shack and couldn't afford to turn on the gas, so our water was always ice cold. Our place was a crack house. I'm serious. We had a couch with two cushions and a single mattress to crash on. Eric got the mattress because he was older. I was left to sleep on the couch with my legs curled into an uncomfortable S because I was too damn long for the thing, my feet hanging down a few inches because of that missing third cushion. It sucked, but I stuck it out because Eric could score shit that sent you into orbit. And we tried pretty much everything. We were wild men; we lived on the edge.

Then one weekend I did so much meth that I got really paranoid and flipped the couch over like a barricade and hid behind it with Eric's hunting rifle. I swear to God I would have shot anyone that moved that couch trying to find me. Eric talked to me from the other side of the couch, told me to sleep it off. I stayed awake for three days straight. No sleep at all. Until an evil spirit rose up through the ground and snatched the gun right out of my hands. I thought it would shoot me, and I cried a lot, but the ghost just sank back into the floor with my gun. Eric told me I went crazy that weekend, and I later found the rifle hidden underneath his skanky-ass mattress. I guess he was right about me going nuts. Anyway, it scared the blue Jesus out of me and I left, man. I told Eric to take me home, and we loaded all my shit in the trunk of Eric's beater, and he drove me down to Salt Lake, where I asked my brother for some help.

That was a year ago, and I guess Will is finally sick of my shit.

Thing is, when I moved in, I swore I was done. With the drugs, everything. I was gonna get a job, pay half the rent, become upstanding. The kind of guy Will is, you know? But he's too good to be true. He never misses a day of work; he doesn't touch

drugs, not even legal ones like cigarettes, which sucks because I'm always out and would love to bum a smoke.

But all that aside, Will's a good guy. When I tell him my stories, he doesn't judge me. That's why I went to him after Idaho, instead of going home to Mom.

Hell, I can't take Mom. She cries every time she talks to me. Tells me how much she loves me, that she knows I'm a good boy. But I'm not good. She says Jesus can wash away everything I've ever done, but I don't even believe in Jesus or God, at least not like she does. How can anyone believe in a "just" God or a "loving" God that would send you to burn for eternity because of a few sins? How is that justice? But she keeps bringing up Jesus every time we talk, telling me to repent and come back. I try to explain. I've seen shit, how the universe really is. I believe in God, hell yeah I do. But not some old, bearded guy in the sky like the Bible says. No, everything is God. You, me, everything, and since everything can't understand itself unless it has something to compare itself to, God split into a million billion minds to experience itself through all sorts of different eyes. Because that's the only way anything makes sense. It's all Einstein and relativity. There is no such thing as truth without something else to compare it against. Distance is an illusion, and every inch between me and you is made of rubber.

So, I finally pull the damn vacuum cleaner out, and I'll be damned if I don't make the best lines in that living room carpet you ever saw. And as soon as I'm done, I notice I left my shoes sitting on the far side of the couch, and the only way I'm getting them is to walk across the middle of my perfect carpet. Not a chance, so I leave them sitting on the edge of the couch and hope that Will won't notice. I wrap up the cord and try to do it the way Will does, using the two prongs on the side, but it gets tangled on me as I gather it

up, so I make a few loops and hang the cord around the vacuum handle. When I slide the vacuum back into the closet, the cord unravels a bit and tangles on the floor. I close the closet door. Problem solved.

The digital clock on the microwave says that Will has been gone for over an hour. No wonder I never clean. It's Saturday, and I've already wasted an hour cleaning the stupid living room. If I tried to tackle my bedroom, I'd finish sometime next week. My room really is a sty. I'll do it another time. Right now I'm debating. Smoke or shower?

In the shower I look down at my wang. I'm no fertility god, but I'm a man! I've got a Prince Albert piercing. That's where the ring goes in through the bottom of the penis head and comes out through the hole. The three girls I've been with all seemed to love it because there is a round metal ball in the ring that thrills them during sex. But the Prince Albert can be a pain to keep clean. When I pee, it gets wet, and if I take it out, the piss squirts out both holes and makes an unholy mess unless I'm sitting on the pot.

I made the wrong choice in putting off a smoke. My brain is cramping up.

Dripping, I dash across the hallway into my bedroom and jump onto my bed. I don't bother toweling off these days. I saw on the Discovery Channel that unless a towel is fresh out of the wash, then the towel is likely teeming with rancid bacteria and rude germs. What's the point of a shower if I just reapply gobs of filth afterward? I prefer to let the air dry me.

I locate my stash in the space between my bed and the wall. I only need a puff or two, but I want some good stuff, so I dip into my Alaska Thunderfuck, because I need this to count. And each puff does.

I finally relax, for the first time that day. I feel my mind clear up, enough to think. Things suck, but I don't mind so much right now. I pinch out the flame and put the rest of the ATF away, lie back, and breathe. Just breathe and float on my bed, naked, content.

Will is out with Cassie, seeing a movie, probably arguing about something. She claims to be a feminist. Based on how Cassie talks, feminists think everything in the world is set up to keep her miserable because she's a woman. How conceited do you have to be to believe that the whole planet is trying to keep you down? Cassie says women have no power in our society, but if that's true, why am I always buying the drinks when I go clubbing? Why am I begging for phone numbers? Nah, maybe the richest people in the world are all men, but not this man. I'm as low as any woman.

Anyway, Cassie doesn't care about women's rights; she cares about her own comfort. I think she holds onto Will because she can push him around, poor sucker. He takes care of her, buys her dinners, drives her around town. I bet Cassie came up with this appalling idea that Will move in with her. Will tries so hard to make her happy, and Cassie treats him like shit. I see it every time she comes over. I think Cassie knows I can see through her. She gives me the evil eye because I don't bow down before her. She doesn't want to be treated badly by the world because she's a woman, but she's a bitch to every guy she meets.

Will says he loves her, and I'm not about to step in the middle of that. I may not know much, but I know that you can't logic a person out of love, no matter how toxic their feelings are. Poor guy. He's my brother, he took me in after Idaho, and I can't do a thing to save him from the cliff he's about to dive off.

And fucking Dale screwed me again. All I need is like three hundred and fifty. That's nothing to him. One refinance makes him like a thousand bucks. Seriously, he makes huge money. I line up all his appointments, but he's a flake with me. I hate flakes. They make me insane, always throwing their excuses at you. Like I eat nothing but frozen burritos for a month or whatever, all because Dale has a problem with his car and can't get me my paycheck just yet. I'd totally quit this second if it didn't mean I'd have to go find another job.

Maybe I can get a job at the gas station across the street from our apartment complex. There is this totally hot girl that works there sometimes. If I worked there, she'd get to know me. I could invite her back here to party. Maybe hook up for a night.

But not now, with Will moving out. Hell, let's not candy-coat the situation. He's kicking me out on the streets without a second thought.

I have nowhere else left to go. My friends are all worse off than I am. And I don't want to go back to another Idaho situation. If I can't convince Will to stay, I'll have to call Mom. Move into her basement for a few months. Probably go with her to church and wear a tie. Jesus, how pathetic. I can't invite sexy-gas-station-girl home to party at Mom's house. "Hey, baby, welcome to my pad. This is my mom." Neat. Maybe Mom will bake us brownies.

The front door opens and slams shut. My bedroom door is closed, so I have to listen extra hard to find out if Will is alone or if Cassie is tagging along behind him. I hear steps into the kitchen. The fridge popping open. I don't hear any nagging, so it's safe to say Cassie isn't around. If she were, Cassie'd be giving her opinion nice and loud so everyone in the damn state could hear her.

My green boxers with the snakes are under my pillow, and I sniff 'em to make sure they're clean, slip them on. I wander out to the living room and find Will sitting alone on the couch, staring at the blank television.

"Hey," I say.

Will jerks, almost like I startled him. He says, "Why're you in your boxers?"

"I thought the sight of me naked might be too overwhelming."

He doesn't smile. It would be nice if he was depressed about moving out on me, abandoning me to the wolves, to Mom, but it's not me that's got him down. I can tell by the way he's twiddling his thumbs. Hell, he hasn't even gotten on me for the shoes I left by the couch. He's had a fight with Cassie. I want to ask him if he's sure moving in with her is a good idea. Does he really want to be tongue-lashed full-time? I want to ask him why he can't stand up to her. I want to ask what happened to turn him into such a pussy. He's my older brother, but sometimes he makes me embarrassed to be an O'Neill.

"March," he says.

I wait for him to keep talking, but he just sits there. I grunt so that he knows I'm listening.

He says, "Cassie's thinking about getting an abortion."

And, I swear to God, my jaw drops wide open like I'm some kinda cocksucker. All I can say is: "Cassie's pregnant?"

Will nods.

"And it's yours?"

"Yeah. Of course," Will says. "Why do you think I'm moving in with her?"

It's a strange moment for me because as I stand here, looking at my older brother, his head hung low, his eyes red and getting wet right before me, it all hits me. He put up with my shit for a year, my messes, dirty dishes, late rent. He got pissed and told me to shape up. But he never gave up on me. Will isn't leaving because of me; he's moving into Cassie's place because he knocked her up, and that's just like him to give up on his own comfort for his girl. Say what you want about the guy, but he's the kind to do the responsible thing in a tough situation. He answers for his mistakes. Me? I'd of worn a condom, but what do I know about love? Maybe the condoms come off when you really care.

Maybe my eyes are open because of the herb, maybe because we're both O'Neill boys, but, hey, for a second I stop seeing myself. I see Will hunched over on the ragged edge of the couch, balanced between love, fear, and even the distress of an uncertain future family.

I step over to him, blurring some of those damn lines in the carpet with my feet. No eggshells, not this time. I hold my arm out and take his hand, yank him up. And maybe it's a little fruity for me to hold him, what with me being almost naked and all, but I don't give a rat's ass. I wrap Will in my arms.

I hold him, my brother, and for a moment I erase the distance between us.

VI: INHALE

I enjoy the pressure. The tightness across my chest isn't pain, not really. Nothing to do with raw or wounded nerve endings. A sticky spasm in the back of my throat. Like my lungs filling up with some dense mystery gas born inside of me and pushing up, toward my mouth, inflating my throat. A swallow cures the tension for a moment. A gelled bead of saliva slurped off my tongue and pushed down forces the pressure back into my lungs. Grants me another five almost tranquil seconds without breath, and then the strain returns, more insistent this time.

A blazing afternoon in the middle of the creeping week. Weightless white leg hairs wave. My colorless feet crossed beneath me, my hands cupping my tender knees, my flinty ankles scraping the sandpaper swimming pool floor. I can see all the way to the deep end. Dual drains rest at the lowest level of the concrete bowl, sucking. Water forced through the filters, heated and returned clean and warm. The water is clear, the chlorine levels perfect. No sting, no taste of algae. My eyes are wide open.

Sitting in the shallow end—my head mere inches below the waterline—I feel like I could be a mile below the surface. Instead of the crushing pressure of the deep sea bearing down on my skin, the burden builds within. Instinct begs me to stand, break the surface, open up my lungs. I keep swallowing my saliva, sucking on my tongue to extract more moisture. The movement of my throat works to calm down the instinct to inhale.

* * *

During the hushed afternoon I settle on the front porch in the heat. Watch for the mailman. The lawn is yellowed on the edges, green only in circular patches underneath the sprinkler I've set out. I run the hose for hours. The hose needs to be moved regularly to save the lawn. Every shift of the sprinkler head fathers a new circle of green. Where the water touches the yellow grass, withered lawn comes back to life. My collared shirt sticks to my back.

The neighborhood is quiet. No cars, no exploring wanderers. The world has clammed up. Lips are buttoned. My street is dead until the afternoon mail delivery. My mailman wears knee-length gray shorts and John Lennon sunglasses. His remaining hair is unruly. He boasts a porcupine moustache like a scruffy cowboy in a movie. Most days he drives by without stopping. When there are bills to deliver, he stops, opens the box and slides them in. He waves if I wave first. Never says a thing about the lawn. Never says a thing about anything at all.

Chatting with me won't get him out of the hot sun any sooner.

When I was a young man I made a racket. I chattered and chaffed. Shared my opinions with everyone. I took hold of my wife and shaped her with words as if she were wet clay that needed to be molded. I demanded she listen, that she learn to be a certain way. My way. There was a correct approach to accomplishing a task; there were false techniques she needed to avoid. I accepted the burden of setting her straight. Showed her the ropes, as they say. Together we kept the house and the yard looking fine. Paint never flaked off the horizontal siding; leaves never lingered under the chokeberry bushes. I knew what I was doing, and I held the reins firmly in my unyielding hands.

Once she told me that I bullied her. I declared in no uncertain terms that I did not.
No matter how hot the sun burned, the lawn was always green back then.

You can keep anything alive with enough water.

* * *

I look up through the water at the harsh sunlight. For the last few weeks, sound has eluded me. I swim through silence. I move my lips, mimicking the motions of talk, but no noise comes out of my throat. Nothing comes in.

Now that she's gone, my wife. Now that she can never again listen to me. Now that she can't beg me to leave her alone, give her a break, back off. Now clammy silence saturates my pillow at night. Sticky stillness curls up in her place on the bed.

This is what I do. I climb into the swimming pool wearing the trunks she bought me when we visited Miami two months before she first complained about the pain in her chest. I wade in until the water reaches my waist. I find a nice spot, centered in the shallow end. Then I sit. My head underneath the surface, my hands on my knees, legs crossed. I wait. Seconds tick. I swallow my spit to resist the growing pressure to inhale. I let my lungs ache. I push through the building anxiety, past the pinching necessity to stand up, to breathe deeply. Distress drains away, and I feel calm. Calm enough to listen.

As the edges of my vision grow dark, I can finally hear.

VII: SUIT POCKET SECRETS

GERMANY, 1991

The president had blitzed me earlier that morning, so I was shaken up. When my train arrived in my new city, a little place called *Mülheim an der Ruhr*, I stepped onto the platform, but my new companion, Elder Waters, was nowhere to be seen. The mid-July air was sticky with heat, and I broke out in an instant sweat under my arms and down the small of my back. I sloughed off my navy blue pinstriped suit jacket and slung it over my shoulder, then set about the unpleasant business of hauling my suitcase up and down the platform looking for Elder Waters.

As far as I could tell, based on my year residing in ole *Deutschland*, native Germans didn't tend to dress much like Mormon missionaries. We wore dark suits and white shirts and colorful ties like people with some self respect. Germans dressed like clowns. They wore Birkenstock sandals with red socks or plaid shorts with a paisley, short sleeve button-up. I spent fifteen minutes hiking up and down the platform and evaluating clothing style choices, in search of my new companion. The closest I came to finding someone dressed in reasonable clothing was a scrawny kid wearing worn blue jeans and a T-shirt that hyped *Die Toten Hosen*. The kid was leaning on a concrete pillar and smoking a cigarette, even though he looked to be all of ten years old. He looked like a bad ass. The legal age to smoke in Germany? Old enough to reach the buttons on the cigarette machines. Wild.

When the call had come earlier that morning, I was startled out of a deep sleep. In the *Düsseldorf* mission, President Vogt expects us to be up at six A.M. on the dot. He expects us to get a jump on the day by exercising, doing pushups, sit ups, whatever. Muscles ready for a long day of proselytizing. Unfortunately, I'd developed a bad habit of sleeping in until eight or sometimes ten each morning, and I wasn't ready for the phone so early. The crazy klaxon buzz of the German phone next to my single bed lifted me right out from under the covers and left me standing in my garments in a state of confused panic. To my mind, a call at six A.M. meant one of two things: a death in the family stateside or a check up to verify that my companion and I were awake. The president occasionally surprise called me after he'd caught wind of my lax morning tendencies.

I groped in the dark for the switch on the nightstand lamp. On the other side of the room Elder Bruckner, my previous companion, snored like a bear in hibernation. I swear nothing short of killing him could pull that lug out of his slumber. I worked my jaw open and shut a couple of times, practiced speaking as if I'd been awake, saying stuff like, "Hello, hello, hey there." By the fifth buzz, I was sure I'd pushed the sleep out of my voice enough to fool anyone. I picked up the receiver. "*Kirche Jesu Christi.*"

Mission President Vogt's voice was somber. "Were you awake, Elder Clay?"

"Of course," I lied.

"Well, get a pen and a notepad." President Vogt dictated a list of specific instructions. He spoke in English to avoid any confusion. Just like that I was blitzed. The exact words Vogt used were "emergency transfer," but the unofficial term we missionaries used was "blitz" because when the president wanted to resolve a situation he

acted with lightning speed. President Vogt spoke for three minutes. Man, he was efficient. Foremost, I was to call nobody and accept no calls. I was to pack my bags within the hour, be on a train out of *Dortmund*, and stop off in *Düsseldorf* for a sit down interview with him. Yikes. From there I would take a train to my new home in the small city of *Mülheim an der Ruhr*. My new companion, Elder Waters, would be waiting for me at the platform.

After I hung up, I left Bruckner snoring in his bed and I dragged the phone into the bathroom, turned on the shower, and called Sister Cromartie. She answered on the first ring. She said, “I’ve been blitzed too. To *Köln*.” She read off her new address, and I jotted it down. I read my new location in *Mülheim* to her.

“How did he find out about us?” I asked.

“Someone squealed. I’m betting on your companion, Elder Buttcheese,” Sister Cromartie said. She had a way of cracking me up when she was pissed. But for the time being we were scared, embarrassed. Our nerves had us talking like a pair of desperate lovebirds. Before we could discuss the issue further, she had to get off the phone. “I’ll write you every day,” she promised. I swore to do the same, wondering how I would ever manage to slip a letter into a mailbox each day without my new companion getting wise.

After my shower, I put on my blue pinstripe. I packed my navy blue suit, my black, linen trench coat, my shirts, ties, socks, and garments. Then I stuffed in my metal CDs, by bands like *Faith No More* and *Ministry*, and my *Dungeons and Dragons* books. My suitcase looked swollen and weighed a ton. I zipped up the bag and then found my deck of playing cards, so I slid them into my suit jacket. I was gonna melt wearing my jacket out in July, but there was simply no more room left inside my suitcase. I pulled my

nametag off my shirt pocket and slid it onto the jacket pocket. It read *Elder Clay Kirche Jesu Christi der Heiligien der Leztzen Tage*.

Elder Bruckner wrapped a pink paisley tie around his neck and rolled up his sleeves. He was a big guy, soft around the edges, but I had to admit the tie looked good. He said, “Dang, Rocky, sucks you have to go.” His insincere tone rankled.

The walk to the *Dortmund Hauptbahnhof* took us ten minutes, most of the journey in silence. While we waited on the platform, I asked Elder Bruckner if he had tattled on me.

Elder Bruckner said, “Sorry, dude, but it was obvious you were getting the hots for Cromartie. You could barely keep your hands off each other in church yesterday.” He gave me a “what-do-you-expect” shrug. Rotten turncoat. “I had to do something before you crossed a line and got sent home,” he bleated.

“You’re just watching out for me, huh?” I asked.

I watched a modicum of relief cross his face, like he thought maybe I understood why he had betrayed me to the president. “Exactly, dude,” Bruckner said.

When the train to *Düsseldorf* arrived, I climbed on. All sorts of Germans spotted my dark suit and clean-cut hair and turned away from me, fearful of being proselytized. I ignored everyone, secured my bag on an overhead rack and took a seat. I glanced out the window and saw old Benedict Arnold standing with his head bowed. He would have to wait in the *Bahnhof* until his new companion arrived, maybe spending the entire time feeling like a traitor. I hopped to my feet, gripped the window latch and slid the window down. I leaned my head out of the train and called to the forlorn looking Bruckner. “You’re a piece of shit.”

I'd never used curse words before my mission, but learning a second tongue had opened up the wonders of language to me. Once I realized how silly German curse words sounded, I didn't take long to decide that cussing in English was also no big deal. I liked to think that in the year I'd already spent in Germany preaching the word of the Lord, I'd developed a real knack for salty language. As the train pulled away, I offered Bruckner a farewell middle finger.

* * *

After a few trips up and down the *Mülheim* platform, I decided to widen my hunt for Elder Waters to include the nearby street. My fingers slick with sweat, I lugged my bag down the ramp leading from the platform. I spotted a gangly guy wearing a white shirt and tie and figured him to be Waters. The guy was stooped over a small pile of rocks, broken glass, and cigarette butts near a drainage grill on the other side of the road, squatting in the hot sun. He rooted through the pile of debris for a moment, stirring the junk with his finger. Then he extracted something small that caught the sun. Maybe a coin. Coins in Germany are different than in the States. In America a pocket full of quarters won't buy you much, but I once had a pocket full of *Deutsch Mark* coins worth fifty bucks. As I approached, he slipped the shiny object into his pants pocket.

During my interview in *Düsseldorf*, President Vogt warned me about Elder Waters. Vogt explained that Waters had been in Germany for a year, the same as me, yet he still wrestled with the language. That was the word he used: wrestled. Like Waters was Jacob and German was the angel. The president suggested that I should try to see this transfer not as a punishment but as an opportunity to help a fellow servant of the Lord develop his skills in teaching the gospel. At the time I was still dealing with the shock of

being blitzed and scared I might get sent home early, and not really listening. I remember agreeing to the challenge, but I bet I'd have agreed to just about anything to stay on my mission. As I looked at the features of Waters' face, his soft smile and heavy eyelids, it occurred to me that he might be a little bit retarded.

I was uneasy and irritated with not being greeted on the platform, but I wanted to start off well, so I smiled when introducing myself. Waters shook my hand. The sun was hammering me, so I asked if he could hurry to our apartment so I could unpack. Without offering to help with my bag, Waters just strolled on down the sidewalk, his joints loose like he was auditioning to play the scarecrow from *Wizard of Oz* or something. "We live around the corner and down a ways," Waters called over his shoulder. "We'll get you out of this hot sun in like five minutes, tops. More like maybe ten."

Dragging my bag a few steps behind Waters, I noticed the sole of one of his shoes was loose and flapped with each step. Flap, step, flap, step; a constant beat. His belt missed two loops in a row on the backside. Waters held one hand next to his ear and snapped, keeping hyper-kinetic time to whatever tune played in his head. Even though I was miserable with the muggy day drenching me with sweat, I wanted to smile. Sure, President Vogt expected me to recommit myself to my mission and forget about Sister Cromartie, but I was determined to retain a connection with her. Slipping mail off to her under this moron's nose would be a breeze.

We reached the apartment building, a wide, two story affair. Waters stopped snapping and turned to wait for me to catch up. "Hey, Elder Clay," Waters said, "What'd you do to get blitzed? My old comp said you were drinking beers and gambling, but then he said you went swimming. Did you really go swimming?"

That my blitz was already the subject of mission gossip was no surprise. Missionaries are all a bunch of lonely old ladies, always trading secrets and gasping with delight whenever something juicy goes down. I considered teasing Waters. Invent a lurid tale of tremendous crime, like hiring a prostitute down in the red light district and forcing her to listen to the first discussion, but the way he stared at me with his eager eyes left me unsure that Waters would recognize a joke. I was in no mood to spell things out for him. Instead, I said, “Nah, the president’s just mad at me because I goofed off too much. Not enough tracting.”

Waters straightened his back and clicked his heels like some kind of Army soldier at attention. “Well, don’t think I’m gonna let you goof off, Elder Clay. I’m out here to work.”

Sure, they all were. Even I had started out gung ho. My first two months in Germany were spent hounding my training companion, insisting we “work” harder. We knocked on doors for hours and met rejection at every turn. The unrewarded effort wore me down. Finally, exhausted, I asked my trainer what we were doing wrong. “We’re not having fun,” my trainer said. “How can we tell strangers that we would like to share a message of joy if we look miserable?”

We changed approaches. Instead of pounding on doors, we loitered in music stores and listened to new CDs. We started up a small *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign with a couple of other missionaries in the district. I got my dwarven fighter, Grognar Ironbeard, to level seven before we had to abandon the campaign due to transfers. We played poker on Saturday nights and wagered contraband such as *X-Men* comic books and Gameboy game cartridges smuggled out of America. There was this Hungarian

church member who invited us over a few times a week to play chess, and we got to be pretty good friends with him. One day he introduced us to his friend, a guy named Zoltan. We played chess, and I taught him a few chords on the acoustic guitar. We never once talked religion, but the next Sunday, wide-eyed Zoltan with his space villain name showed up at church and three weeks later asked me to baptize him. While this was happening, my trainer and I were also hanging out with a member family twice a week. They fed us, and we all watched videos. I saw *Star Wars* dubbed in German and laughed the whole way through. We had so much fun with that family that they started inviting non-member friends over to watch movies with us. One day a couple of the non-members asked us to give them the discussions, and we ended up baptizing them too. After that, I was convinced that true missionary work involved fun and friendship, not the daily grind of knocking on doors and hearing angry Germans insist that they didn't need anything to do with our American vision of Jesus.

I thought about some of the shit Vogt had laid on me during our interview back on *blitz* day. We had a difference of opinion concerning missionary work. "I have to tell most missionaries to loosen up, Elder Clay. But not you. You need to tighten up. You work for the Lord. If you're not interested in doing the Lord's work, and I mean by the book, then you're not needed here. If all you desire is to play around, ignore your responsibilities, and live for yourself, well, we can get you a plane ticket tonight and send you home in disgrace."

"But I do work," I'd insisted. "I've baptized." Which was more than most of the missionaries in our mission could say.

“I’m not talking about walking into an easy conversion. You’ve been lucky so far. I’m talking about earning the Spirit of the Lord. That requires knocking on doors. Sweat of the brow, Elder. You need to walk up and down every street in your area and earn the respect of the Lord. You’ll have served an honorable mission only if you fly home wearing shoes with holes in the soles.” Vogt had seemed pleased with that last line, like he’d thought it up the night before and couldn’t wait to use it.

There was no point in arguing my point of view with the president, so I nodded and said, “Yes, Sir. I’ll work harder, Sir. I’ll rededicate myself.” All the sort of crap people without power say when threatened. But inside, in my heart, I was finished. The way I figured things, I was done trying to baptize people. I’d far exceeded the mission average of one per companionship per two years. I had nothing left to prove. All I needed to do from that moment until my two years were up was put in my time and keep my head down.

With that attitude I regarded Waters, who claimed he was out here “to work,” to spread the word of the Lord. His left leg jittered at the knee, like he was considering dashing off, and he kept both hands deep in his pant pockets, jiggling what I assumed were keys. Nervous fellow. He repeated, “I’m out here to work, Elder Clay.”

I said, “You don’t have to call me Elder Clay. Call me Rocky.” Although most missionaries insisted on always using the title “Elder,” I preferred my first name when dealing with fellow missionaries.

Waters’ mouth unfolded into a soggy grin. He said, “Rocky? Are you serious? Like *Rocky* the movie?” He laughed a bit, then added in his best Russian accent, “*I must break you.*” Folks always bring up the Stallone films.

“It’s short for Rockwell, as in Porter Rockwell.”

Waters nodded wisely, chewed on the name for a bit, cocked his head. “Who?”

It surprised me that he didn’t recognize the name. I presented a brief history of Porter Rockwell, the cowboy Samson. How Joseph Smith promised Porter Rockwell that as long as he never cut his hair, bullet or knife would not harm him, and even though he fought in all sorts of gunfights and killed many a man, though he claimed that he “never killed no one that didn’t need killing,” Porter Rockwell was never hurt because he never cut his hair.

Waters said. “If the prophet gave me a blessing where bullets couldn’t harm me, I would totally join the Navy SEALS and be unstoppable.”

I considered a moment then said, “You know, the SEALS would make you cut your hair and then you’d lose your special power.”

Waters spent the evening contemplating this spiritual conundrum.

* * *

The foyer of our building was wonderfully cool and smelled of disinfectant. Twelve building mailboxes lined one wall, and I noticed an outgoing slot. I hung back and waved Waters on, saying that I needed to catch my breath. The second he rounded the corner and was out of sight, I slipped a stamped envelope addressed to Sister Cromartie into the slot.

The apartment was standard issue: a small kitchen furnished with a table someone must have found abandoned in a back alley somewhere, a full bathroom and a bedroom with two twin beds. Typical of most missionary homes, the kitchen sink was crammed with ketchup-stained dishes. Each burner on the stove held a greasy frying pan. Inside the

bathroom, a crumpled towel rested on the dingy linoleum, and the toilet paper roll was empty.

“We should probably go buy some more TP real soon,” Waters said. I noticed a roll of paper towel next to the toilet. I said nothing. The two single beds were both covered in rumpled sheets. A couple of mismatched chairs and a wooden desk stood between the beds. Oddly, there were no papers or books on the desktop. Instead, sorted into small piles, were pebbles of various sizes, cigarette butts, broken shards of colored glass, crumpled bits of paper, and even a few twigs.

Waters pointed me to my bed, and I tossed my gear onto it. While I unpacked, he turned his back to me, as if he hoped to hide something. I peeked out of the corner of one eye, and I saw him pull a broken shard of glass from his pocket and set it on the desk. The glass bit was what I’d witnessed him stuffing into his suit pocket back at the station. Waters wandered into the kitchen and started digging through the cupboards. He found some black bread and spread some Nutella across a slice. I asked what the assorted junk on the desk meant. Waters reappeared in the room, his mouth full. He looked at the desk, perhaps to make sure I’d not touched anything, then he said, “That’s just some stuff. Don’t worry about it.”

With his shoes still on, Waters stretched out on his rumpled bed, finished off the bread slice in a few mighty bites, then brought his fingers to his ear and snapped out some crazy rhythm. I stripped the dirty linens off my bed, hung up my clothing, and slid socks and garments into the bottom drawer of my nightstand. I hid my rock CDs in the top drawer and left my discman and few classical CDs—Grieg and Bizet—on top of the nightstand. I stacked my books with my *Player’s Handbook*, *DM’s Guide*, and *Monster*

Manual at the bottom and my *Book of Mormon*, *Bible*, and copy of *Jesus the Christ* on top. I gathered some dirty clothes and the bed sheets and stuffed them all into my backpack. I suggested we go to the laundromat, but Waters was snoring even though it was barely noon. I took a shower to wash away my morning sweat, and after I had dressed in fresh clothing, I wrote Sister Cromartie another letter.

* * *

When Waters finally woke up, I talked him into visiting the laundromat. We returned home, and he watched me make my bed and fold up my clothes. At five o'clock, we were supposed to start doing some missionary work, but I pointed out that my blitz had thrown off our normal preparation day schedule. We needed some food and spent the next hour shopping for groceries. I let Waters pick our food. He loaded the cart with a case of strawberry yogurts, a bag of potatoes, some butter, and a shitload of spaghetti, and then announced we were done. Back in our apartment, I set to cleaning up the kitchen. I washed dishes, scrubbed down the counter, even mopped the floor. The bathroom was small, only a sink, toilet, and shower stall, but I took my time really soaping up the surfaces so that I wouldn't be afraid to walk around in bare feet.

When I finished, I found Waters sitting at the desk toying with his debris. He had formed a line of cigarette butts and pebbles and was marching them across the desk one at a time and forming shapes like circles and letters while singing some kind of crazy, made-up tune with lyrics like, "Dub-a-do-do! Ba-ba-shee-shlam!" When Waters noticed me watching him, he sorted his trash back into the proper piles. His cheeks flushed like I'd caught him playing with himself.

"What were you singing?" I asked.

“Nothing. Just music. I sometimes invent music.”

* * *

The next morning we squabbled over who should hold the mailbox key. The mailbox was empty, but I anticipated Sister Cromartie’s love letters would be arriving soon, and I needed control of the box so I could hide her letters from Waters, in case President Vogt had set him as a spy against me. I pointed out that, as senior companion, it was my right to hold the mailbox key. Waters insisted that President Vogt had made us co-senior companions, which was technically true, but the idea that we could both be senior to each other made no logical sense. We debated the issue for a while until I realized that Waters only wanted to feel important, so I suggested that I hold the mailbox key and he keep the key to our apartment. He relented.

Around ten o’clock, Waters announced that we would not be goofing off anymore. Time we got to work. I asked specifically what he had in mind, and he said we should do some tracting. We stuffed into our shoulder bags a couple of copies of the *Book of Mormon* to give away, and I let Waters lead the way. The July air wrapped around us like damp rags, and we rolled up our shirtsleeves. We hopped onto the first city bus that rolled up and rode past a few stops, until Waters said, “This area seems perfect.”

Small houses with fenced yards lined the street, each lot boasting a postage stamp sized patch of grass and maybe a flowerbed or a shrub. We were in a ritzy part of town. Most of the converts I’d worked with in my year in Germany had lived in apartment buildings. A German that owned his own piece of property seemed high-end to me. I suggested that we were wasting our time. “Rich Germans will never listen to us.”

Waters said, "I prayed on the bus, and the Spirit led me to this street." Well, there was no arguing with the Spirit, so I hunkered down and prepared for a long morning.

No one answered when I knocked on the first three doors. I knocked on the fourth, and an elderly man opened up, took one look at us in our worn black shoes and colorful neckties, said, "*Kein Interesse.*" He slammed the door on our faces. After a few more houses, I managed to get a younger woman to talk with me about her flowers, so fragrant, for a few minutes before she thanked us and gently shut her door. The heat was making me irritable, and I wanted another shower. I could see nothing would come of knocking on doors all afternoon, but I was determined to keep a smile on my face so that if Vogt called and asked Waters about my attitude he would have to admit that I worked hard and without griping. After about an hour, it occurred to me that Waters was letting me do all the talking. As we approached the next door, I said, "Dude, you're up."

"Cool," Waters said, and he jabbed the air like a clumsy boxer.

He thumped the door with confidence. A squat German *Hausfrau* peered out at us. She stood shapeless as a squash in her yellow dress and squinted through thick glasses, first at Waters, then at me. Waiting. Something like eternity passed, and Waters was silent, so I tapped his shoulder. Like a statue suddenly turned to flesh, Waters woke up and said, "*Guten Tag. Ich bin Elder Waters.*" Then he turned to me while wearing his blank-eyed smile. After a couple of uncomfortable eye blinks, I grasped that Waters was waiting for me to finish off his approach. I stepped forward, introduced myself and the church. The woman waved us away.

Once we were back on the sidewalk, I asked, "What the hell was that?"

"I ran out of things to say." Waters shrugged.

“You introduce the church, ask if they want to hear a message about Jesus, whatever. You don’t just say your name and step aside.”

I continued to hassle Waters, saying that he would actually have to talk to some people. I said that his previous companions might have covered for him, but no longer. I expected him to carry his share of the workload. Especially since we were *co-senior* companions.

As I talked, Waters cast his eyes down into the street gutters. He stooped and picked up a discarded beer bottle cap and slipped it into his pocket.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

Waters said, “I’m hungry for lunch. Let’s go.”

As we rode the bus home, I realized that God was showing me the secret to easing my burden in *Mülheim*. Whenever I grew tired of going door-to-door, all I would have to do was tell Waters he was on deck, and soon enough he’d find some excuse for us to head home.

When we got in, I checked the mailbox and found a small envelope addressed to me. The return name on the envelope read “Grandma Clay,” followed by Cromartie’s *Köln* street address. We were pulling off some real cloak-and-dagger shit. I told Waters that I had to use the toilet and smuggled my mail into the bathroom. I tore into the letter and found pages explaining what Sister Cromartie had gone through. Her story was similar to mine. The early morning call, the embarrassment at being blitzed, the interview with President Vogt, which she described as “sitting down with a creepy perv trying to get his jollies” by imagining her and me in all sorts of sexual situations, the fear of being

sent home early. She wrote about how she missed me, how she had cried for an hour on the train. She begged me not to forget her.

After stuffing the letter into my pocket, I flushed the toilet and stepped into the bedroom. Waters had pulled shut the curtains, and even though the clock read one-thirty, the room was dark. Curled up on the bed, Waters was snoring.

Not gonna goof off, my ass.

* * *

The number one rule on a Mormon mission is no romantic relations. Missionaries must resist the lure of the flesh and focus on teaching the gospel. During my first months in Germany, I did my best to avoid thinking about girls, but attractive women crowded the *Fußgängerzone* with their short skirts and low-buttoned blouses. Averting my gaze whenever I passed a pornographic display at the newsstands—and every damn newsstand in Germany proudly displayed a wall of porn—seemed impossible. I noticed that even the window mannequins at department stores were stirring lascivious thoughts in me, though, to be fair, German mannequins sported nipples. Still, I never acted on the sexual images that presented themselves to me on a daily basis. I didn't even masturbate in the shower. Then after almost a year in the field, during a P-day gathering at the church with the other missionaries in the *Dortmund* district, we were all eating spaghetti and telling jokes when Sister Cromartie took me aside and told me that I had “bedroom eyes.” I wasn't sure what that meant, exactly, but the word “bedroom” coming out of her mouth sure struck me as sexy. Suddenly she was always on my mind. I made every excuse to be near her—lunches at the church, street contacting with the sisters, sitting next to her during church—and slowly we broke down certain physical barriers. We touched fingers,

exchanged embraces, spoke on the phone about how nice it would be to kiss once we both were home in Salt Lake City. Everything we did was on the sly. I thought I had hidden my desire for Sister Cromartie from the other Dortmund missionaries, but that traitorous dipshit Bruckner spotted some hidden squeeze of her knee or a lingering touch to her shoulder. During my interview, Vogt scared the shit out of me by threatening to send me back to Utah. There was no worse embarrassment than returning home early, dishonorably discharged from God's army.

Yet, I couldn't stop thinking about Cromartie. I figured I was in love.

If Vogt caught word of me sending Sister Cromartie letters, he would send me home, but I needed her understanding ear. I felt like I was risking everything to send her my thoughts, but maintaining contact with her seemed crucial to my emotional well-being. I spent every minute finding an excuse to write her. Waters loved to take naps, and I sat in our dim room scribbling out mad confessions of my lusty feelings while he snored. For the first week, I managed to distract Waters whenever I slipped a letter into the outgoing slot, but he started to catch on and asked what I was doing.

"Sending a letter to my grandpa," I said.

"You're only supposed to send mail on P-day." Our mission-wide Preparation Day was set as Monday until five PM. We could use the time to shop for food, hit the laundromat, and write home, but the rest of the week our energies were to be focused solely on the work of the Lord. Mailing a letter on a Thursday was practically a sin.

I said, "I thought today was P-day."

Waters giggled. "Gosh, you're dumb. Today's Friday. How can it be P-day?"

I pointed to my head. "What a doofus I am!"

* * *

After church we were walking home when Waters stopped in his tracks and bent over a broken bottle. I watched him pick up several shards of thick, green glass and gather them in the palm of his hand. He pointed to each fragment as if silently naming them, and then he slipped the glass bits into his pocket.

I said, "What are you doing? You'll cut yourself."

"No I won't."

"You're putting broken glass into your pocket."

"I'll be fine if you leave me alone."

"You'll bleed all over the place and die."

Waters said, "I have to do this."

"Why?"

The expression on Waters' face was worried, like he was cowering before a schoolyard bully. He said, "I just do."

"That's a load. Look, either you tell me what you're doing or when we get home I'm throwing away all your junk." I had no intention of following up on the threat, but I could see by the worry in Waters' eyes that my words tipped something inside. He fidgeted, snapping his finger next to his ear a few times. I wasn't budging.

He broke. "I have to pick this glass up to protect you," he said. "If I don't carry it home, you'll get run over by a car today. I saw it in a vision."

* * *

I considered calling the president and telling him that my companion needed psychological help. I waited until the next morning when Waters was in the shower and

picked up the phone, but memories of Bruckner ratting me out to the president forced me to hang up.

Our breakfasts were always yogurt. For dinner we ate spaghetti topped with butter and salt. For lunch, Waters loved to fry potatoes. His cooking method was simple. A few dabs of butter in the pan, turn the heat to high, toss in a few little German potatoes, and use a big knife to cut them. By the time he had chopped the spuds into bite-sized squares, they were nicely fried. We topped them with salt and ketchup and dug in. Waters would hum his crazy tunes with his mouth full. I watched potato chunks dance across his tongue.

Waters' strange music seemed like a way for me to get past his guard. I asked if he knew that *Pink Floyd's* lead singer and songwriter (at least during their good years) was named Roger Waters. He was pleased to hear he shared a last name with a rock star but admitted he was unfamiliar with the music of *Pink Floyd*. I took a risk, dug into my private drawer, and pulled out my *Animals* CD. I watched him hold on to the forbidden disc. President Vogt ran an ultra-strict mission with rules about everything, including no recreational music outside of classical stuff or church hymns. I knew I was taking a chance showing the CD to Waters, but after a moment whatever conflict raged inside him resolved and he offered me his simple grin. That night he listened to the disc five times in a row. He took off his headphones at one point, looking worried. He said, "I think I heard the 'F' word."

I said, "Don't worry. Lyrics don't count as swearing. Says so in the Bible."

He considered that for a moment, slipped the phones back on and fell asleep with the music playing in his ears.

* * *

On P-Day, after we finished our laundry and shopping, Waters and I walked down to the *Mülheim* church house. Waters had a ward house key, and we let ourselves in. He hurried to the Sacrament room and seated himself at the baby grand piano. I took a seat on one of the front pews and told him to dazzle me with some amazing tunes. Waters started hitting the piano keys, not playing any song I'd ever heard. In fact, the rhythm was so odd I assumed he was just randomly banging around on the instrument, but as his song progressed I realized that Waters was forging some sort of melody, a difficult and jarring tune that seemed to embrace conflict and discordance. His music sounded like a series of mistakes welded together with repeated themes so that I slowly came to realize he was messing up on purpose, that each wrong note fell only where he intended. Then he sang.

He filled the church with his brand of *shee-wing-a-do-dam* scat that I'd grown accustomed to hearing each night as he snapped his fingers along with the music that played in his head. Only now that I could hear the music he banged out of the piano tied together with his voice, I realized that I was listening to something incredible. This was like no music I'd ever encountered on the radio. Waters was grinding rhythm and melody out of his guts, churning aural beauty out of noise.

When he finished, I clapped. I cheered like a madman. I was a Mormon groupie. I slapped his back and told him that I'd never heard anything so crazy good in my life.

Waters laughed at me. He said, "You're nuts. That's just me making a joke. Real music can't sound like that."

"What do you mean? How does real music sound?"

He opened up a hymnal. I watched over his shoulder as he played *I Stand All Amazed*. His fingers were stiff, drained of the life I had just witnessed. He followed the notes as written and produced a generic version of the tired tune I'd heard a thousand times before. Following Waters' magic, the hymn sounded ugly and dead. I told him to stop halfway through the song.

Waters closed the piano and said, "That's the way God wants us to play music."

* * *

I was running out of things to write to Sister Cromartie. It had been almost a month since my blitz, and thanks to my ninja stealth I'd mailed something to her every day since we'd been pulled apart. But the effort involved in daily written correspondence was catching up to me. I could write only so many times that I missed seeing her face. I couldn't believe she wasn't getting tired of reading love letters stuck on repeat.

I had a couple of photos of her stashed in the pages of my King James *Bible*, and I would gaze at them while Waters napped. She was attractive enough. I enjoyed the way her red hair splashed across her shoulders. Her smile was clean if a bit toothy. Her eyes were Irish blue. However, as time passed I started to see things that I'd somehow missed before. Like her calves were thick and led straight into her shoes without tapering in at the ankle. Back home in high school my friends and I joked about girls with "cankles," and here I was writing love notes to one. Her skin drowned in freckles, and although I was fine with that in principle, I realized that her freckles tended to group in odd ways that created a splotching effect across her arms and face. My favorite photo was a close-up of Cromartie smiling, but I studied the picture so closely that I started to notice an uncomfortable asymmetry to her face, one eye set a bit lower than the other, one nostril a

bit wider, one ear a bit more bent. Once I saw her that way, I couldn't un-see how flawed she was. When I was honest with myself, I had to admit that she was, well, ugly. I looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror and had to admit that my own long face suffered a certain asymmetry as well, but fairness seemed to have no hold on my heart.

I skipped a day of letter writing. Then I skipped another.

Two days later I opened a panicked letter from Cromartie asking what was wrong. Had my companion discovered our correspondence? Did Vogt know what we were up to? Was there something wrong with me? With us? I wrote back that Waters had noticed some things and was watching me like a hawk. I said that I would have to scale back my letters to her. I assured her I would send mail as often as possible.

She saw right through my lies. A couple of days later, I opened a letter that accused me of bullshitting her. Not as bluntly as that, but she "worried" that I was starting to forget her. Worse, forget "us." As the letter progressed, she wondered if my feelings for her were ever genuine. She wrote that it would be shitty of me to rope her into a romance on her mission of all places and put her through all sorts of hardships and embarrassments if I didn't really love her. She claimed that she had trusted me and believed that I cared for her, and now she wondered if I was just another deceitful man. Apparently her world was full of them.

My letter back was defensive. I reminded her that I had taken nothing from her. My feelings for her were still strong because of the situation we shared, and when we were back in Salt Lake we would have plenty of time to spend together and we could explore our emotions and our romantic obligations there. I wrote a bunch of that type of nonsense.

I felt like she was bullying me into writing her love letters.

* * *

Although we were supposed to tract for eight hours a day according to Vogt's mission rules, I had Waters down to an easy two. We still had to go out and knock on a few doors each day or he felt guilty. I convinced him that we needed to stick to the less affluent parts of town if we ever wanted to get anybody to talk with us. We found a road with a few apartment buildings, each three stories high, which seemed to promise some air conditioning. The livid sun continued to track our every move, hot on our trail. The front doors on these buildings were always locked, so I used a trick to get us in. I would ring an apartment on the top floor. Usually, the resident would simply buzz us in, but if they asked who it was, I would say, "*Ich bin's.*" Shouting, "It's me," to get into a strange building was an old trick I'd learned off a Rodney Dangerfield cassette tape I had owned as a teenager. Once we were in, we were in and could knock on doors at our cool leisure.

Waters and I had been through a few buildings so far and were working our way down from the top floor in a dingy place. The walls were paneled in some sort of dark wood. The tile floor needed a sweep. Cobwebs clung to the high corners of the stairwell. The top floor turned us away. On the middle floor, I pressed a doorbell and heard the ragged buzzing echo up from downstairs as the resident rang us in believing we were outside the building. She was in for a surprise. The apartment door opened, and Waters and I stood face to face with a stooped old lady, easily in her seventies, her white hair wispy and thin so that you could see the cantaloupe shape of her scalp. She wore only a tattered bra and hipster panties. The sight of two men in dark ties standing a mere three feet away set her to screaming. The woman shouted at us to leave and didn't stop even

after she slammed the door. She screamed that we were *verbrecher*, criminals. She added that we must be perverts to want to see an old woman naked.

Through the door, I tried to explain that we were not there to see any such thing. I pointed out that as a general policy she should have put on some clothing, at least a robe, before opening the door. I did my best to explain that we had a permit to go door to door and that we wanted only to talk to her about Jesus. I jabbered on, frazzled.

Waters picked up a yellowish ball of dust that had gathered in the corner of the stairwell and slid it into his pocket. He said, “We should leave.”

At that moment, the weight of everything pressed down on me: the crazy ancient *Frau* screaming at us, Sister Cromartie’s demanding letters, President Vogt’s endless rules, and Elder Water’s wacked out visions that featured me being run down by trains or trucks, all of it leaned on me until my patience had swollen to the bursting point. I said, “Take it out, Waters.”

“Take what out?”

“The shit in your pockets. Take all of it out right now.”

Waters flushed. “I’d better not.”

“You start emptying those pockets or I’ll empty them for you.”

“Maybe we should talk about this later.” He lifted his hand to his ear and snapped a couple of times. “Right now we should go.” He moved toward the stairwell.

I stepped in front of him, blocking his way. The apartment door opened a crack, the lock chain stretched across the three-inch gap. The old woman had slipped on a bathrobe. Again she yowled at us to leave.

I waved at her, saying, “*Wir gehen*,” but not moving.

Waters snapped his fingers. “Let’s go before we get in trouble,” he said.

“Empty your pockets.”

His eyes were wet. “Don’t make me. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I promised him nothing would hurt me and continued to insist he empty his pockets. The old woman said something about calling the *Polizei* and slammed the door shut. I grabbed Water’s hand to stop his frantic finger snapping, and he froze. I looked hard into his eyes and said, “You can’t save me by picking up pieces of trash and carrying them home.”

He said, “You don’t know that for sure. You don’t know what will save you.”

“You have to let me worry about my own safety.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“It’s none of your business,” I said. “Not your responsibility. I have the right to take care of myself. If I go down, it’ll be on my head. Now, empty your pockets.”

He did. Waters removed the dust ball, a white pebble, a foil gum wrapper, and two cigarette butts. He placed them on the top stair one after the other in a nice little line. I asked him to lead the way down the stairs, and he moved steadily. We stepped back outside under that harsh sun and walked to the next building. We were ringing the bells, trying to get someone to let us in, when Waters spotted a green and white police car pull up to the building we’d just left. Two officers climbed out of the car and walked up to the building we had just left. They buzzed the main door and entered.

I said, “Maybe we should get out of here.”

We took a roundabout path back to the bus stop to avoid the police spotting us, which involved crossing through a playground area with swings and a basketball stand.

Two teenage boys with starter blond moustaches on their upper lips sat on the concrete in the shade of the basketball backboard, smoking. As we passed, one called after me:

“American?”

We stopped. I said we were both Americans, and the boys stood up, smiling. In accented English, one said, “I love America!”

The other added: “Hilter was a fucking crazy!”

The first pointed to the backboard and asked in German if we would teach them the rules of basketball. They produced a worn soccer ball. I took a shot and bounced the ball off the rim. Waters watched as the soccer ball rolled away and lodged under a bush.

I said we had to go. The boys looked dejected and asked Waters if maybe he would teach them. Waters couldn't understand them. I considered explaining that we had to split because the police might be looking for us but held my tongue, worried that our flight from the law might send the wrong spiritual message. Dejected, they went back to their cigarettes.

On the bus home, Waters stared out of the window, his hands motionless on his lap. The light outside was fading, but the air would remain muggy throughout the night. When we reached our apartment, I said something about how no cars had run me down and therefore he needed to accept that his visions were nonsense. We cooked up our spaghetti and ate in silence. Afterward, I washed the dishes while he crashed on his bed. I told myself that by forcing him to discard his pockets full of trash I had helped him overcome his delusions. I was a regular Sigmund Freud.

I woke up the next morning around nine-thirty and discovered that Waters had cleaned off his desk. The plastic trashcan next to the desk was piled high with his junk.

On our way out, I slipped a thin letter into the mail slot. I'd managed to write a single page to Cromartie. I told her about the police and kids with at the basketball court. I didn't mention my feelings to her at all except when I signed the letter, "Love, Rocky." Waters did not see me send the letter. He didn't seem to see much of anything. We walked toward the bus stop.

The crazy non-rhythmic music Waters had played on the piano a few days earlier was running around inside my head. I snapped my fingers a couple of times to echo the song's wild beat, but Waters wouldn't join me or even acknowledge the sound. He walked ahead of me, his loose sole flapping with each step.

We reached the bus stop and waited for the next bus to take us across town so we could tract in some new neighborhood. We had no set destination in mind, nothing predetermined. We would go wherever our impulses led us. We stood apart from each other and waited in silence.

The considerable sun lit up the street. I noticed that light glittered off the few bits of debris on the ground that the weekly street cleaning trucks had missed. The junk sparkled as if the Germans had paved the edges of their streets with occasional gems. The infrequent trees and small patches of lawn, the yellow and brown brick apartment buildings, and the few compact cars parked in the area all seemed to fade from my view, and all I could see in the world were the broken bits of refuse that littered the gutters of *Mülheim an der Ruhr*.

VIII: LINES OF LATITUDE

You deliberately left the front door unlocked. You fell asleep on the couch, the lamp in the corner left lit, the TV infomercialing, your neck kinked on the sofa arm rest. You would have crossed your fingers or rubbed a rabbit's foot, but you didn't believe in luck charms. Things worked out or they didn't. Easy as that. You were ready for nothing to happen; you could handle a little disappointment. Still, you left the front door unlocked, a move of unrepentant optimism, your own little Hail Mary pass. You hoped against all odds that Natalie would surprise you by coming over.

The weird thing: she did.

When Natalie woke you with a touch, you sat up and threw your arms around her and pressed into her like you were already lovers.

A snapshot of your first embrace: your chest pressed against hers, the two-day growth on your unshaven cheek brushing against her cheek, firm muscle in her lower back under your fingers, the strong scent of raspberry in her hair. All that in an instant.

"You came back," you said. You leaned into her, the kink in your neck sore. Natalie sat on the edge of the middle cushion, her hip near yours, one hand on her own knee, but her right hand rested on your abdomen just above the belt line.

"I thought you wanted me to," Natalie said, her voice rising in pitch. Almost a question. You pulled her close in answer. Bold, Natalie slid her hand down an inch or two until a pinky slipped under your beltline. An invitation. You kissed her.

When you first met Natalie, you wanted her. A double date at a dusky bistro. Your friend Grant introduced her and, in turn, you introduced Cindy. Your wife. When Natalie excused herself to go to the restroom, Grant said, “She’s something else. God, I’m fucking falling for her.”

Cindy thought Grant was adorable. She said, “You’re smitten.”

You’d heard similar sentiments from Grant before and long ago learned to dismiss his ravings. On the phone, Grant had promised that Natalie was exceptional. You scoffed. “You’ll see,” Grant insisted. And goddamn if she wasn’t pretty. When she returned to his side, she slipped her hand in his and smiled.

“I’m so excited to finally meet you, Daniel,” she said. “Grant says you’re his best friend. I guess you must be pretty special.” The look she gave you with those mildly Asian eyes, like you were the only man in the entire restaurant, made you feel pretty damn special.

Natalie sat across the table from you and used the white lily centerpiece like a veil, obscuring her face, peeking around the stems to laugh at your jokes, then disappearing. Cindy made small talk about how tasty her Caesar salad was. Grant talked about work. You studied her slender neck, the high curve of her breasts, her petite, almost fragile wrists; when she laughed, you appraised her virgin white teeth. Hints of laugh lines gathered at the corners of her dark eyes. She laughed with zeal, a full chuckle she must have learned from a larger woman.

You felt inspired to tell funnier jokes than ever before. You imagined yourself on center stage. The next Carlin, Hicks reborn. When you spoke of a woman’s right to control her body, or railed against the war in Iraq, you hoped your opinions sounded

radical and exciting to her. Around Natalie you felt you were less the Daniel everyone else knew. You imagined yourself to be a man of action when you demanded the waiter remove the flower centerpiece. “A candle would make more sense,” Daniel reasoned. “Something low-key.”

You talked and joked and your stories were animated – stories your wife Cindy knew by heart. Once you had fought a man who was wearing a gorilla suit—heated words more than fisticuffs, but still. Another time you beat a speeding ticket by demanding to see the radar gun. The police officer yelled at you, said he didn’t have to show you anything, but then let you off with a warning. “Cops all have egos,” you explained. “But if you keep your head, remember your rights, you can put a check on their power trips.”

Throughout the night as you ate and laughed, you saw Natalie glance at you. You sat across a table each eating grilled chicken, and you watched each other, while Cindy and Natalie’s boyfriend, Grant, watched you watch each other.

* * *

Cindy. You want her to slow down, but she’s quick. She doesn’t want to get old. Thinks she’s too young to have babies. If she had any female friends, they’d all have babies by now. But not your wife, not Cindy. She wants to go back to school and study business management. Maybe next year you’ll talk about kids, but right now she doesn’t have time for a wailing infant waking her up at night. Cindy needs her sleep so she can keep moving, never slow down.

When she talks about how she needs to move, you’re reminded of a shark.

She kept her last name when you married her. “I’m a Clarke,” she said. You’re a Moody. She explains that “Cindy Moody” sounds stupid. Besides, she argues – even though you never asked her to change her name in the first place – Cindy Clarke sounds right. Just sounds *right*.

Would it kill her to give you a break once in a while? She pokes. Jabs. A few weeks back you glanced at a girl in a short skirt at the mall, and Cindy noticed. She pretended to laugh. “Men are so weak,” she announced. “Flash a little skin, and men come running like wild hounds offered raw hamburger.” The skirt at the mall was long gone, but the discussion continued. “Did you think she was pretty? Did you like her shape?” Seven years of marriage and you’d learned only two safe responses existed: “Too skinny” or “Too fat.” Preferably the latter.

And then there’s Grant. Hungry, all the time. Be careful offering him permission into your cupboards. He’ll take you up on the offer. He’ll invade your pantry and leave the potato chip bags empty. He’ll push past Tupperware filled with leftovers stacked in the fridge and sniff out the good stuff: the crème soda you keep in the back, each bottle a dollar. He’ll eat your Yoplait. He’ll find your stash of cookies, not the Oreos, but the Pepperidge Farm Milano cookies you don’t share with anyone. Grant will devour everything of value that crosses his path, and the guy never gains a pound.

Grant has curly hair, and his smiles are free of charge. He’s the nicest guy you’ll ever meet. He listens without interrupting, no shit. You’re glad to call him friend. When he introduces you to people, he says you’re his best friend in the whole world. He makes you feel important. The problem is he makes everyone feel important. That’s why people flock to Grant. They want him to like them, to listen to them. They behave as if his

approval validates their places in the world. And goddammit, you're no different. You like when he eats all the food in your cupboards and not someone else's because every dollar you spend to keep Grant fed is a dollar that proves you matter.

He must produce pheromones or some shit, because women swarm around him. You feel like he introduces a new girl every time you see him. Most of his girlfriends are attractive, but that's not always his rule. One woman was covered in a full body dragon tattoo. One shaved her head bald and had a lazy eye. One had a square jaw like a man, an Adam's apple, and broad shoulders. She was ugly as shit. He didn't seem to mind. The thing about Grant, the thing to remember: Grant loves *everyone*. At least for a few days, he loves everyone he meets.

Natalie. You heard a little about her before you met her at the bistro. Grant said, "Maybe we can go to dinner this week. You can bring Cindy along. Cindy'll love her. This girl, man, this Natalie. She's beautiful, delicate. Half Japanese, half Irish. She sneezes like a ninja; you never see it happen. You'll love her." And you do.

* * *

Ninety seconds after you first kissed Natalie, you slid your hand under her bra. You pressed your lips just below her ear and kissed slowly down her long neck. Natalie moaned, whispered something. Too quiet to be understood, the words slid past and fell behind you. You didn't need the words. You understood her moan, her hand on your thigh with her thumb brushing your erection through your jeans. You said, "Let's get off this couch."

Back to your bedroom. Not only *your* bedroom, really. You and Cindy shared the room, and you shared the bed, just as you shared the house and the mortgage. Yet you felt

no regret as you led Natalie down the hallway and into your room. Or, if a trace of guilt existed, some sense of how ridiculous a man must be to risk his marriage just to feed an animal lust, you scoffed at that tinge of concern. Look at this woman, just look at her. She's flawless; she is your fantasy realized.

You lifted Natalie, her body lighter than Cindy's, and carried her to the bed. You settled her in the center of the mattress, not on your side, not on Cindy's. You created a new location on the bed for Natalie. Dead center in the queen size would from that day be Natalie's place.

A week after you met Natalie, you invented a wicked plan. Your plan? To cheat on your wife with Grant's girl. You tried to summon a complete image of Natalie in your mind but only saw her in pieces: the hint of an epicanthal fold around each eye inherited from her mother, the hairless brown forearms, the painted pink toenails, the knuckle she sucked when unsure. You tried to undress her in your mind. You couldn't manage removing her shirt without the body beneath the fabric shifting into Cindy's. The problem was you didn't know Natalie well enough. She was just a fantasy, vague and unfinished. You decided to convince Grant to bring Natalie over to the house soon. You needed to see her again, study her further.

Cindy wasn't happy to find out she was hosting a dinner party Friday night. She insisted you help prepare for the night. You shopped for groceries: four New York strips and the makings for a salad. You vacuumed and dusted the house with nary a word of complaint. You were too eager. Small wonder Cindy seemed to grow suspicious.

At first, you implied that Grant had dreamed up the dinner date, but then you realized Grant might say something and spoil your lie. You imagined Grant saying, "This

evening was a great idea, Dan.” Cindy would zero in on the casual remark, ask probing questions, parse Grant’s responses. She would eliminate every other possible meaning and reach the conclusion that you had lied. She’d realize you were hunting Natalie. Best to avoid that minefield altogether.

You could not lie to Cindy. At least not well. If you avoided a direct question, you could often conceal the truth. But when she asked you, pointblank, look-me-in-the-eyes, you could never slide a lie past her. You figured you must have a *tell*, some unconscious movement that gave you away. Maybe you nibbled at your lip, or maybe you blinked too quickly when you lied. Whatever the case, you knew Cindy could see through you.

So, for safety’s sake, you altered your story. Instead of claiming Grant invited himself over, you admitted you missed entertaining visitors and while chatting with Grant “might have maybe” suggested a night of steaks and a movie. You were careful not to mention Natalie. You spoke as if Grant were the only expected guest. You worried that Cindy would hear lust in your voice if you even mentioned Natalie’s name.

Cindy cracked a few jokes about how Grant would clear out the fridge and the pantry again. She asked if Grant was still with Natalie, and you said, “I think so.” You kept your eyes focused on the table you were dusting. Cindy returned to preparing the salad. You wondered why Cindy failed to poke fun at Natalie as she did with all the other women Grant had brought over. You didn’t like that she avoided discussing Natalie at all.

* * *

At the pancake house with Grant, you hardly say a word. Grant says, “I check my messages every ten minutes to see if she’s called. My computer is set to beep whenever a new e-mail arrives. That fucker beeps every thirty seconds with some damn spam e-mail,

and like Pavlov's dogs I click to check if it's from her. I can't get anything done. I can't even fucking eat."

Grant's right. He hasn't touched his pancakes. He won't stop talking long enough to take a bite. He talks while he butters them, while he pours syrup over them, while he uses his fork to cut them into two dozen bite-sized pieces. He talks about Natalie when he spears a bite, but he never lifts the fork to his mouth. He simply cannot find enough room for food in his mouth. The words take up every pink nook of his mouth. Behind the teeth, under the tongue, between the lip and gum. Grant's mouth is stuffed with words.

Grant loves Natalie and you don't care. Oh, you listen to him whine. You commiserate. You tell him that she's a great girl and he's a great guy and that if he'll just relax, everything will work out, but God knows you don't care about his lovesick heart. In all this, you have only one worry: that you'll never see her again. And the only way you can keep seeing her is if she keeps dating Grant. Even if she's sleeping with Grant, curling up naked in his arms every rotten night, you don't care because you're scared shitless that she'll leave Grant before she has a chance to notice you.

"She loves Disney," Grant says. "Everything about Disney. Can I tell you how much I hate Disney? Mickey Mouse isn't funny. The amusement parks can eat me. The movies are all bullshit. Last night I made the mistake of asking what a 'Simba' is, and suddenly I have to watch the goddamned *Lion King*. And she sat next to me and held my hand through the whole thing, and I loved every goddamned second of that movie."

"Have you told her you love her?" you ask, but you're shaking because that isn't really your question. You want to know how her head would feel resting on your bare chest.

* * *

You tugged off Natalie's panties. Still wearing your jeans, T-shirt, and socks, you felt irritated that she let you undress her while she left you untouched. You wanted her to yank off your pants. You wanted her to *need* to touch your naked body in the way you needed to touch her. She seemed content to casually brush your erection through your jeans. Goddammit. You reached between her legs, amazed at the amount of pubic hair she had cultivated. She said, "I haven't shaved down there in a while. It's ugly, but I don't want to trim it. It keeps me from having sex."

You couldn't figure out how that made any sense. You lied: "I don't mind pubic hair." But, God, she could weave a fucking wig. You kissed her on the collarbone. You slid your weight across the bed and rested on top of Natalie's nude body.

Natalie said, "The metal on your jeans hurts. It's pinching my skin."

You rolled off Natalie and jerked at the button on your jeans. You slipped off your socks and T-shirt, leaned back and pulled off your jeans, but left your boxer shorts on. At the very least she could remove your shorts. Do something. You positioned yourself above Natalie again, your body between her legs. Your penis hard inside your boxer shorts, the thin veil of fabric kept your genitals from touching. You pressed your pelvis against her and she pushed back.

You kissed her mouth. For days and weeks and years you kissed until she said, "I need some Chapstick. I have some in my purse." You climbed off the bed and hunted. Her purse waited, abandoned in the living room on the floor.

You called out, "Do you want me to bring your purse?"

"No. It's just inside next to my phone."

The clutter inside was endless. You shifted lipsticks, a wallet, a compact, crumpled receipts, keys. Finally you located the Chapstick. Before returning to the bedroom, you popped off the cap and applied some to your own chapped lips. You tasted vanilla.

When she finished with her lips, Natalie asked, “When did you know you wanted me?”

“When I first saw you. When Grant brought you with him and we talked about politics. Remember how I couldn’t see you because of the flowers in the center of the table? That drove me crazy.”

“But you had the flowers moved.”

“When did you first want to be with me?” you asked, suddenly worried that she might laugh at you. She might say she never wanted you, just pitied you. You sensed a distinct imbalance. You felt sure that you desired her more than she wanted to be with you.

“Remember the night Grant and I came over for steaks? After dinner we watched a movie. I rubbed your leg. Even with Cindy sitting beside you, I thought you were so sexy that I had to touch you.”

You remembered and could not fathom how you had forgotten. The four of you, filled with steak and salad, watched *Casablanca* in the dark living room. Cindy snug beside you on the couch, your hand on Cindy’s thigh, and after a few minutes, her hand on top of yours.

Natalie requested a pillow and stretched out on the floor. She explained that she liked to stretch out during a movie, and so Natalie and Grant spread their bodies across

the living room carpet, lying at your feet, like pair of dogs who were not allowed on the furniture. You all watched the movie in darkness, only the television providing light. Then, maybe an hour into the film, a hand touched your calf and rubbed up and down a couple of times. You knew Natalie was touching your leg, but something about the situation would not let you accept that her touch was intentional. She must have meant to rub Grant, you'd told yourself. The room was too dark and Natalie had somehow missed Grant. Your rationalization was ridiculous, but the idea that Natalie was so fearlessly coming on to you one week after you first met seemed even more preposterous. Soon after the movie, Grant and Natalie left. Cindy bitched about the dishes, and the memory of Natalie rubbing your calf had retreated into a hidden place in your mind.

Thinking about that night while holding Natalie's naked body in your arms, you felt shocked at her boldness. "The way you touched me that night was on purpose?"

"Well, it was pretty dark in the room," Natalie laughed.

You thought her answer wasn't an answer.

* * *

Everything falls into place for you, two weeks before Christmas.

Cindy's mother falls off the front porch of her house. Two shallow concrete steps, but she breaks her hip. Five hours later, Cindy boards a plane back to Texas. She'll be gone for weeks she estimates. See you in January. Go see your own mother for the holidays. Call to tell me what Santa gets you. Cindy can disappear for a month and still function. She works using e-mail and phone calls. She never asks if you need her to stay. Why bother? Her mother needs her and she's going either way. A wave and a kiss, then she's through the security gates and gone.

You feel the shackles fall. Ah, the mice will play. You can't plan this shit.

Grant first met Natalie three months ago and somehow he has managed to keep dating her. He says that for the first time in his life he's in love. Every other girl he ever dated – bitchy or sweet – tried to hold on to Grant. He dropped them all. But Natalie? You suspect he is still interested because she won't be tamed. Grant doesn't know how to deal with her. He's a pro at standing on top of the mountain, not used to being led by the balls.

Desperate to talk to someone, Grant takes you out for a sandwich. He's frantic for advice. Grant spills: "Three times in three months. This last time with some Italian prick at the gym where she works. I wanted to talk with the guy. She said he doesn't really speak English. Jesus. I think she messed around with a black guy before the Italian. I asked her and she called me a racist. But his name was Jerome. Has to be black, right? I can't compete with *that!* She's killing me. Danny, she's tearing out my goddamned heart."

You listen. You ask him if he will leave her, and when he assures you he can't – not won't, but fucking *can't* – only then do you dare tell him that he needs to leave her. "There's something wrong with her," you say.

"What's wrong is she's a fucking whore," Grant moans.

"Then finish it with her." You don't mean your advice. If she left Grant and disappeared, who would you think of when you make love to Cindy? Besides, the fact that she cheats with everyone is the best news you've heard in weeks. You actually may have a chance.

After Cindy flies to Texas to be with her injured mother, you make a call. Over your cell phone you hear Grant tell Natalie, “Cindy’s mother broke her hip. Dan’s gonna be alone for Christmas.” Natalie answers Grant, but through the weird distortions of your cell phone you swear that she’s licking her lips. Grant says, “Don’t worry, buddy. I’ll come over tonight and hang out.”

That night, just you and Grant: Why didn’t Natalie come too? She went dancing. Oh, I bought some snacks, chips, and French onion dip. Yeah, Natalie said she’d come over later. Besides, she doesn’t want to watch us play video games all night. Of course not.

You think your luck has run out. You don’t know shit about luck.

Not five minutes after Grant leaves, Natalie knocks at your door. She’s dressed for clubbing: short black skirt and pointy high heels, her lipstick bright like candy. Natalie carries a bundle of clothing under her arm. She needs a shower and wants to change into her sweats. You tell her Grant’s already gone home, but she doesn’t seem to mind. The black dress clings to her form, her shoulders are bare, her brown legs made long by four inch heels. She says, “My feet are killing me.”

As the shower runs, you wait in the living room, thinking: She’s in there, naked.

Natalie emerges from the bathroom wearing a bright red sweatshirt with a logo imprint that reads: *Westlake Girls’ Soccer*. Her faded, gray sweat pants stretch to her ankles. Only frumps or stunning women dare dress like this. She sits with you on the sofa. She says her bare feet are freezing and buries her toes underneath your thigh. “I played soccer when I went to Westlake and now I’m back coaching. I love it. I love my girls. You should come see a game when the season starts.”

You promise to show up when the season starts.

Natalie's in a mood to chat. You listen without hearing much. When the clock blinks three in the morning, she offers some personal history. Sexually, she started young. The first guy was older, quite a bit, like forty to her fourteen, but she believed it was love at the time. Of course, now she supposes she was raped. Natalie asks, "When you're so young, how can you know if you're making your own choices?"

She asks for your story. You imply you're unhappy with Cindy. You talk about how you're like roommates. The last time you made love she stopped you in the middle and asked if the front door was locked. She made you check. Your hard-on was gone when you returned to the bedroom. Cindy asked if you wanted to start again, but you were tired.

"What about divorce?" Natalie asks.

The words tumble out. "I'm not ready for a shake up just yet." Idiot, this is no way to flirt. Only later do you realize that Natalie likes your answer.

* * *

You body naked in the middle of the queen-sized bed, your fingers danced, flicked, and patted, but failed to do the trick. You tried brushing over her nipples with your tongue, sucked lightly, massaged tenderly. Nothing seemed to work. Out of options, you kissed your way down Natalie's chest, past her belly button, and pushed your tongue into her tangled pubic nest. You wanted to excite her, or at the very least use your own goddamn saliva to prepare her. You lifted your face from between her legs and stuck out your tongue. With your forefinger and thumb you struggled to find the offending hair. This was neither appealing nor amusing.

Natalie: "Please, come back up. I want to kiss you on the mouth."

You didn't like the bitter taste of her and were glad to return to her face.

Natalie took your left hand and felt your wedding band. She moved the ring back and forth around your finger. There was enough moonlight in the room to read the annoyance on her face. You said, "I should take it off." She said nothing. You rolled onto your back, away from Natalie's touch, and worked at pulling off your wedding ring.

Cindy had called earlier, around seven-thirty, so she could get you out of the way for the night. Her mother was in a lot of pain. Mom had to eat every meal in bed. Cindy asked you about your job, and you told her work was the same-old shit. Cindy didn't ask about how you would spend your evening. She said she was tired of Texas, of her mother. Before she hung up, Cindy said she loved you. You echoed.

Not long after you hung up, Grant and Natalie stopped over, unannounced. Less than a week since the night you and Natalie had talked into the wee hours, and now she was back. "Thought you could use some company," Grant said. You welcomed them in, and you all watched the television and discussed work and life, laughed. Your jokes caught Natalie just right, and at one point she laughed so hard she insisted she would pee her pants. Grant announced he was flying out of town in the early morning for a two-day business trip. He hated that he had to work over the weekend. Grant whined, "Don't wanna leave my baby alone."

"I'll be fine," Natalie said.

Grant looked like a clown with his wild black curls corkscrewing in every direction and his eyes shifting and nervous. He said, "I should leave Natalie here with

you, Dan. You could keep each other out of trouble. At least I know she'd be safe with you."

He was clearly worried about leaving her unmonitored for two whole days, what with the city jam-packed with young studs. Fine. But you hated that Grant talked about you like you were a fucking eunuch. Worse, he talked that way in front of Natalie. That you could be dismissed so easily was bullshit. Bull. Shit.

You said, "She's always welcome here. God knows I'll be up all night. With Cindy out of town, I'm on a weird sort of vacation. I stay up until the sun rises." You looked at Natalie when you said this. Grant said he wished he could stick around all night and play video games with you, but he had to take Natalie home, then go to his place and rest before his flight.

When Grant excused himself to use the bathroom, you looked at Natalie and said, "You didn't tell him about coming over here the other night?"

"What's to tell? We just talked." She asked, "So, is it scary being all alone in this house each night?"

You said, "The weird thing about being alone is I can leave the front door unlocked. Normally, Cindy makes me lock it. She's afraid of burglars."

Natalie said, "I know she is."

You said, "When I lock the door, I feel like I'm locking out good things as well as bad. Tonight, I'm going to leave it unlocked. I don't care if someone decides to come in without knocking first. I'm going to risk it and see what happens."

After you said this to Natalie, she seemed to avoid your eyes. You figured you'd offended her. Might as well have just said, "Please come back over and sleep with me

tonight.” You knew you sounded pathetic. Grant and Natalie left, and you curled up on the couch, with the TV on and your head resting on the couch arm at that awful angle sure to cramp your neck, and you waited, hoping Natalie would sneak back. Knowing she wouldn’t. After a few hours of awful television, you gave up on her returning and faded into sleep.

* * *

You do not make love. In the end, Natalie uses her hand on you, and you come on the sheets. You hold each other, naked skin against naked skin, for a while. You start to sweat, the heat of two nude bodies pressed together is suffocating. You look at the outline of Natalie’s face in the dark, and she reminds you of Cindy. When she opens her eyes, Natalie says nothing. She sits up and dresses. She has trouble finding one of her socks, and you get down on your knees to help her search. You discover the sock crumpled under the bed.

Outside, the frigid morning air stings your bare feet as you kiss her goodbye at your front door. Walking away, she looks back over her shoulder and waves. “Bye, Daniel. Love you.”

You hear exactly what the word “love” means. No room for doubt, no mistakes. Natalie means “never again.” Whatever she thought she might find in your arms wasn’t there. Likewise, you think.

Back in your bedroom, you strip the blanket off the bed. Your comforter will have to be dry-cleaned. A hint of vanilla lingers on your lips. You sit on your side of the bed and pick up a pillow. Her smell persists, caught in the fabric of the pillowcase. You drop the pillow on the floor. Natalie promised you Grant will never find out about what you’ve

done. You don't know if you can believe her. You know the next time you see Grant, with or without Natalie at his side, you'll slap his back, act like nothing happened. You justify your deception: the truth would only hurt him.

Then you think about Cindy. She won't be home for a few weeks. And when she does return, Natalie's smell will be laundered away. Cindy will unpack, tell you about her mother, moan about the flight home. She will strip off her clothing, toss aside her bra, and pull on a night shirt. She'll swallow her pills and vitamins. Ask you to get her a glass of water. Insist that the house is too cold and wait for you to adjust the thermostat. She'll throw back the covers and pick at your body hairs stuck in the fabric. She'll shake her head in weary disgust and ask, "Did you even wash the sheets once while I was gone?" And you'll climb into bed with Cindy like nothing has changed. You on your side of the bed, she on hers. You'll know there's a new location on the bed, a space between you and Cindy, a space the size of another body, but you'll never tell and she will never ask.

IX: REVERBERATIONS

If I could have, I would have lived that moment again and again. Every day of my life I would have felt the tremors underneath my feet as the floor reeled, the walls bowed in, the table legs tapped a chaotic ditty on the hardwood. Over the fireplace mantel, the painting of a French café sprang off the hook and crashed into the brick below. Shards of glass rained onto the beige carpet. I heard a crack directly above, like a brittle tree branch snapped across my knee, and wondered if perhaps a support beam had fractured and the roof of our home might come crashing down. Kitchen cupboards flung open as if an angry spirit needed a bowl or a plate at once. Glasses teetered at the edge. Dust bellowed from the vents like a vacuum set on reverse. Everything in the world that was stable or secure, everything in the world that could be relied on, shook loose.

Across the table, Mindy reached for my hand, squeezed my palm so that her nails dug hard into the skin. The raw marks on my skin soon faded, but the sharp memory of her terrified grip remained vivid for hours afterward. She reached for me to protect her, to support her, and for ten full seconds, time enough to really drink in the experience, while the world revoked any claim to solidity, while the hard earth beneath us transformed into liquid, I become the only solid thing in her life. For those couple of eye blinks of time, I was all that she could hold onto, and I believed I was enough for her.

When the movement stopped, when the tremors eased off, leaving behind a sort of ghost hum in the soles of my feet, I could smell vanilla in the air. Perhaps a bottle of

scented oil had toppled from the nightstand in our bedroom and shattered. The smell reminded me of nights when we made love, and I held her naked body, my face buried in the space between her breasts.

Mindy said, “Oh my Jesus. Oh hell. That was an earthquake.” I wanted to remain frozen in place, our hands clasped across the table, our arms resting on top of the black ink pens and the goddamned thick mound of divorce papers, but she insisted we move. We weren’t safe inside the house any longer and needed to get outside.

I said, “It feels over. I think the quake has passed.”

She said, “I’d rather not risk my neck over your hunches, Jeremy.”

We broke our grip, and my palm began to ache from where her nails had bitten into the skin. I followed her out of our house and onto the street. Our neighbors joined us. Some were dressed in sweatpants; some were without shoes. The lady across the street with the yapping pomeranian clutched to her chest had for some reason lost most of her hair. Whenever I’d seen her before, the lady had had a thick red mane, but her scalp lacked anything more than a few thin, black strands, as if the earthquake had shaken the follicles loose.

I stated the obvious. “She must have forgotten her wig.”

Mindy shushed me. “Don’t be rude. She’ll hear you.”

I supposed she was correct. Every sound seemed amplified. Each scrape of a foot across the asphalt was a hammer crack. The air seemed surprisingly still, and I felt like the earth was waiting to see what I would say next, waiting to pounce.

The angry crescents in my palm proved that Mindy had reached out for me. I traced each one with the tip of my finger. There were four divots cutting through the lines in my hand. The heart line, the life line, each line bisected, severed.

I watched Mindy fold her arms across her chest and step over to the mail box. She leaned on it for support. I stood three feet away, my arms open, yet she chose to hug the mail box.

* * *

A few weeks after the earthquake, my dad drove down to Salt Lake from Ogden and invited me to have lunch with him at the Arctic Circle on 39th and 7th. I was a bit late getting off work as there was a mix-up with some signatures, and I had to make a series of phone calls to an old woman who needed everything repeated three times before she understood what I was saying. When I pulled into the parking lot, I spotted Dad's Chevy Blazer and pulled up beside the vehicle. He'd been waiting for me. By the time I'd climbed out of my car, he was standing next to my car door. He was wearing track pants and a gray sweat shirt, and when he reached for me and gave me a mighty hug, I noticed he was a bit damp. "It's good to see you, Jeremy."

"Have you been jogging?"

"Played some volleyball at the stake center this morning." Dad had retired a year earlier and was more active than ever due to joining his ward volleyball team and jogging two miles three times a week. Dad claimed he was trying to lose weight, and I suggested that maybe he should ease off a bit and try not to have a heart attack.

Inside the fast food joint, Dad got a Ranch burger, and I asked for a triple cheese even though it's not officially on the menu. We upgraded both orders to meal deals so

that we could get fries. There is nothing in the world so delicious as Arctic Circle's hot, greasy fries dipped, of course, in plenty of their signature fry sauce.

We tore into our burgers and drowned our fries in sauce. A faint scent of floor cleaning disinfectant mingled with the smell of fried food. Through the windows I watched traffic surge along 7th, all the while stuffing my mouth. We praised the comfortable consistency of Arctic Circle food, always fatty and delicious. Dad told me that he had had a mild scare on his trip down from Ogden, where a police cruiser had pulled up behind him and rolled its lights. "I thought I was getting a ticket for sure, even though I was only going three miles over. I figured my record would finally be marred." Dad was proud that he'd never once received a speeding ticket, a fact he was happy to remind me of every time I got one. I'd managed to receive five or six over the course of my driving career, and Dad said that proved I was reckless. Dad finished his story exactly how I knew he would. "I thought I was finally getting a ticket this time, but when I pulled over, the cop whipped around me and pulled over the car just ahead!"

I said, "Lucky break."

Dad shrugged. "Yeah, it was a real blessing."

I discussed my new job processing loans for Willow Star Mortgage, a small mortgage company that specialized in refinancing HUD loans, and complained that I spent an inordinate amount of time on the telephone with people who were basically insane. "It's the economy. Everyone is scared about everything," I said. "Even when I prove that they'll save money on both monthly payments and overall interest, people balk. They agree to work with me and let me do tons of work and then refuse to sign at the last second."

Dad said, "It's hard to trust these days."

I said, "I'm losing my hair over this stupid job." Dad listened until I ran out of steam. I said that work was what it was. I hated my new job, but after Mindy and I had decided things were finished between us, we agreed that one of us had to leave MedAccess. Since she made almost double what I brought in; the choice was clear.

"The good thing about earning less than Mindy," Dad pointed out, "is that you'll never had to worry about alimony." Dad was still bitter about the three hundred and fifty a month the judge had ordered him to pay after Mom divorced him back in the late 80s.

Dad asked how I was doing since Mindy left. He wanted to know if I was dating anyone. No. Was I getting out at nights and meeting new people? Was I hanging out with friends? Not too often since she took most of our mutual friends in the divorce and besides I wasn't really in the mood to socialize. I told him I was fine. I admitted there were nights when I still missed Mindy, but I didn't miss the fights. The last couple of months before we signed the papers had been brutal. She had shut down emotionally and, like a regular Einstein, I had compensated by growing more and more unstable. I'd done a great deal of yelling. I'd hurled unfounded accusations of infidelity. At one point I begged her to "let me back into her heart." She'd called me a walking cliché.

Dad asked, "Have you thought about going back to church?"

"Not really. I'm divorced with no kids. The last thing I need is to spend my Sundays listening to how important family is to my eternal happiness."

Dad chewed in silence. When he finished his Ranch burger, he crumpled up his wrappings and tossed his trash onto the tray. He said, "Want an ice cream?"

"No thanks."

“I’m getting an ice cream.” I watched him return to the counter and place his order. An overweight teen hustled to pour him a soft vanilla cone. I’d finished my food and refilled my Dr. Pepper and waited in the booth, looking out at traffic and wondering exactly what Dad really wanted to talk about.

He returned and took a impressive lick at that poor cone. He cut the vanilla mountain nearly in half. His lips were closed, but I could tell he was sucking on the ice cream. Finally, Dad swallowed and said, “This isn’t very good at all.” He finished the cone in under a minute, then leaned forward and said, “Can I ask you something?”

His question made me nervous. I’d never known Dad to ask permission before speaking, so I figured he had something terrible to say. Maybe he was dying or maybe he’d met some old lady and wanted my permission to marry her. I shook my head like people do when they mean no, but I said, “Sure. What’s up?”

Dad said, “Let me preface this by asking if you remember a day back in high school. It was your first week at Brighton, and you had to stay late for a test or something, so you couldn’t ride the bus home. I came to pick you up in the silver Mercedes. Do you remember the silver Mercedes?”

“Sure.” I’d hated that car. A two seat convertible with just a thin space in back that was barely big enough to fit a small kid. Whenever Dad drove both me and Paula around, I was that small kid, forced to squish myself into the weird area behind the seats while Dad and Sis enjoyed the luxury of stretching out their legs.

Dad continued. “I had turned off the motor and was waiting in the parking lot, and when you got in the car I turned the key and nothing happened. I must have tried the key seven or eight times, but the engine was dead. Do you remember that?”

I didn't and told him so.

"You don't remember? Do you remember the Mercedes?"

"Of course. The silver Mercedes with the soft top and the tiny back seat."

"Right." Dad seemed excited that I was willing to acknowledge the existence of one of his past cars. "But you don't remember when I picked you up from school? You were still in tenth grade I think."

"I don't remember."

Dad looked a bit upset. I supposed part of his reason for wanting to talk to me hinged on me recalling this day when he picked me up at school. Still, I had no reason to doubt that he had picked me up at Brighton High. Most of my sophomore year was spent riding the school bus with the few other nerds unable to catch a ride with friends, so it stood to reason that if I'd missed the bus, I'd have called him to pick me up.

Dad said, "Well, anyway, the engine was dead. Just dead. And I remember this as clear as if it were yesterday. I turned to you, and I said we were going to have to walk home. You were sitting in the passenger seat with your backpack on your lap, looking at me like I was forgetting something. And do you remember what you said to me?"

"No."

"You told me to pray. You said, 'Dad, why don't you just say a prayer?' Do you remember that?" I said nothing, and after a moment Dad continued. "You had so much faith. You were so small back then, and I remember thinking that you were still a child. Innocent but naïve. But to appease you, I bowed my head and said a prayer with you. And when I turned the key, the engine started. You don't remember that?"

"I don't. I'm sorry."

Dad stared at me for a while. I wondered if he was waiting for me to say something, but I had nothing to add. Finally, he said, “I never pushed you to serve a mission. I told you that you didn’t have to go for me or your mother. I said you should go if you really wanted to, but not because of me. I said you have to have your own faith.”

I said, “I know. Going on a mission was my choice.”

Dad leaned forward, his eyes fixed on mine. “So, my question is: When did you lose your faith in the Lord?”

* * *

Mindy spoke to me first. I was on the phone speaking with a woman about an overdue bill. My job was to get payment for services rendered. I was a mediocre bookkeeper and the world’s worst payment collector. I called up overdue clients and spoke with stern resolve, but within minutes I would be listening to a sob story about how funds were short. Too often I said things like, “I understand,” or, “Of course we can give you a few more weeks,” when I should have been threatening liens and lawsuits.

Mindy was waiting to speak with my supervisor, and therefore she was standing near my cubicle and must have overheard me commiserating with a delinquent client. She leaned around the wall of my cubicle and said, “You’re too nice. You let people give you excuses.”

I looked up and saw a sea of red hair and freckles, fingers covered in sparkling rings, silver and turquoise. I struggled to look her in the eye so as not to seem sexist, but her figure made it difficult not to be sexist. I wanted to respond in some way that was deliriously funny and win her over, but instead settled on saying, “Huh?”

Then my supervisor caught her attention, and she disappeared.

A few months later (I was never the swiftest when playing games of seduction), she agreed to go to lunch with me. With extravagant salad and sandwiches set before us, I asked her about her past. She was reluctant to discuss her childhood. I asked if she was a Mormon.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just trying to pin you down,” I said.

“Are you Mormon?” she responded.

“I was raised in the Church. I served a mission in Dallas. But, now, I’m done with all that stuff. Religion in general seems unnecessary.”

“If you’re done, why are you asking me?”

“I just want to get to know you. Figure out where you stand.”

“I’m not Mormon.”

I was a little surprised. “Why live in Utah?”

“I grew up here. My dad’s family is here.” She hesitated and then in a voice that sounded as if she were changing her mind, she added, “I like it here.”

“So, were you raised Mormon? I mean, were your parents active in the church?”

Mindy stared at me for a while. She chewed at her cheek and sipped at her soda. She was silent for long enough that I worried that I’d blown the lunch date. I picked up my sandwich, turkey with cranberry salsa, and took a bite, hiding behind my food. The sandwich shop seemed curiously still, as if every patron had abandoned his or her conversation to listen in on ours. After I swallowed my bite, I opened my mouth to tell Mindy to forget my question, but she held up a finger to silence me.

She spoke. “My father is a polygamist. When I was thirteen my mother left and moved to Arizona. She ran away and left me with my father.”

Outside of Utah, everyone hears about polygamy and Mormons and figures the entire state is run by some kind of freakish sex cult. But even though I’d grown up in Salt Lake, I’d never actually met someone who admitted to having any sort of connection to polygamy. I had no idea how to talk to Mindy, what questions to ask, what words would be welcomed or insulting. So, I listened. Probably the first wise move I’d made all afternoon.

She spoke bitterly about men using God as a justification for child abuse and violence towards women. Her tone did not change when she raged against the “weak” women who allowed themselves to be exploited.

I said, “To be fair, some of the women you’re talking about have been brainwashed. It’s common for abused women to believe they can’t get out of the situations they’re in. They have nowhere to go. Many women are unable to fight back.”

Mindy said, “They should grow a pair.”

* * *

A few months before the earthquake, I was lying in bed reading some trashy novel. I didn’t look up when Mindy entered the room. She disappeared into our walk-in closet and emerged a few minutes later wearing only a worn Steely Dan T-shirt. She slipped into bed. I was half a paragraph away from the end of a chapter and so hesitated to acknowledge that I’d seen her climb under the blankets without wearing panties. Impatient, Mindy plucked the book from my hand and tossed it onto the floor.

In the moments after our love-making, I rested on my side and looked at her red-flushed skin. Perhaps I should have spoken, expressed my feelings for her or even said that I enjoyed the sex, but I was relaxed and empty and had nothing to say.

She said, "I'm not happy, Jeremy."

I asked what she meant.

"When my mother left me, I hated her. I felt like she didn't care about me or love me. I thought she was wicked and I was glad she'd spend eternity locked out of the Kingdom of Heaven." During the three years of our marriage, Mindy's mother had not had much of a presence in our lives. We'd visited her down in Yuma one summer and Mindy had complained the entire time. She hated the heat, she hated her mother's weird boyfriend, she hated being away from work and friends. I'd long known that Mindy resented her mother for abandoning her as a teenager.

I said, "It's normal to be angry with your mom. Hell, you know how irritated I get with my mom always asking when we're going to have kids."

Mindy said, "Jeremy, this isn't about your mom. This is about me and my mom."

I felt a bit stung, like I'd been slapped in public. But I shut my mouth.

Mindy talked about how she'd struggled to understand why her mother had run. Mindy explained that when she finally realized how brave her mother had been, that gave her the strength to get away from her dad and her other mothers as well. Her mom's example had showed Mindy that a person doesn't have to be locked down or imprisoned. "She showed me that I have the right to follow my own happiness."

"Well, sure," I said. "Everybody knows that."

Mindy sat up in the bed, her legs crossed, and she put a hand on my arm. She said, “Jeremy, I need you to listen.”

The tone of her voice scared me. I wanted to cover my ears, or at the very least, make a joke about how she was trying to be serious while sitting naked, exposed, in front of me. Maybe some crack about how I could not be expected to listen while her breasts were staring at me, but before I could hide behind nonsense, she spoke. “Even though I was devastated when my mom left me, I later realized that if she had stuck around for me and suffered a few more years living with my bastard father, I would never have had the strength to leave. If not for her, I’d be married right now to some creepy molester and training my own daughters to be timid and small.”

“I’m glad you left.” I smiled and added, “I’m glad you’re not married to a molester.”

Mindy leaned toward me. She seemed unfazed by the fact that I did not move toward her. She kissed my lips, and when she pulled her head back I could see the faintest gathering of white frothing at the edge of her mouth. I reached out and thumbed the spittle away.

She laughed and thanked me. “What do you want, Jeremy?”

Too quickly, I answered, “To be with you.”

“I can’t do that. I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“Why not?”

She did not answer. Instead she said, “What do you want? Be honest.”

My mind refused to seize upon anything honest. I saw the skin of her breasts goose-bumping and wished she would pull up a blanket and cover herself the way they

do in the movies. I wondered why she would make love to me only to tell me we were finished. I hated that I was not furious or miserable. I said, "I want to go back in time and do my life right. Do it better."

Mindy seemed to suck on my idea for a time. Finally, she said, "Maybe you should. Maybe you should look back at your life and figure out what you did wrong and what you did right. And work from there."

I said, "Don't leave me."

Mindy said, "I hope you don't hate me forever. I hope that someday you'll appreciate me for this." She climbed out of bed, and I watched her pull her stupid Steely Dan T-shirt back over her shoulders. She opened her night stand drawer and pulled out a pair of cotton panties and slid them on. As she moved about the room, I kept silent, but I prayed. I asked God to change her mind and make her love me again. I asked God to help me understand what she needed so I could provide her with some form of happiness that would make it impossible for her to leave me.

After Mindy freshened up in the bathroom, she climbed into bed and wished me a good night. She patted my hand and told me that, given time, everything would be okay. Then she turned off the light.

* * *

The mountains rose behind our house, burgundy and gold. The trees across the base had changed color in preparation for the arriving winter snows. The peaks were dark, the towering stone creased with dull white. Massive boulders balanced on the high ridges, waiting for an aftershock to tip them over the edge and send them rolling down onto our homes. Onto me and onto Mindy. Black birds with epic wingspans circled overhead.

“There are often follow-up shockwaves during an earthquake,” Mindy said, her hand still on the mailbox as if she were casually reaching out to a friend.

I imagined a pond with ripple after ripple of water slapping the shore. I wondered when the next ripple would hit our home and reduce it to rubble.

I stood on the street and thought about our life together crumbling. I knew that after the divorce Mindy would sell the house, assuming it survived the tremors. I would receive half the money, which would amount to only seven or eight thousand, and once we were square, that would be the end. No more phone calls, no more visits. Nothing left to sign. We had no children, and there was no reason for us to communicate ever again.

A month earlier I’d moved into an apartment all the way downtown near Liberty Park. I called my sister, Paula, and bragged that now I was closer to work and would save a ton on gas. My bedroom was furnished with only a bed, my living room with only a futon and a cheap television. No table for meals, no washer or dryer. At the end of the day, I tossed my dirty clothes into a laundry bag with a drawstring for easy trips to the laundromat. Four plates in the kitchen, four forks, four spoons, four knives.

“Thank God for Wal-Mart,” Paula said.

“I hear the people upstairs pounding around at three in the morning. They’re animals.”

Paula said, “At least you live far enough away that you won’t be tempted to check up on Mindy again.”

I regretted telling Paula about driving past the house in the middle of the night to see if there was a strange car in the drive. I often had trouble sleeping. I suspected Mindy had a man staying over, and I would dress at three in the morning and drive back to our

house. I was a private dick, a master of surveillance. She never did have anyone over. After a week's worth of nights gliding past the house and seeing an empty driveway, I called Paula and confessed I was spying on my soon to be ex-wife. She said, "Snap out of your funk."

"How do you move on when you don't want to let it go?"

Paula said, "Hell if I know. But don't stalk her. That's just pitiful."

Our neighbor, the lady with the bald head, asked nobody in particular: "How much longer should we wait out here? Does anybody know how long to wait after a tremor before it's safe?"

I fought the urge to grab Mindy by the shoulders. Everything she ever told me seemed to hang in the air between us. The night we first made love, she told me she'd never broken a bone in her body. The next week she broke two bones in her hand catching a football. When we moved in together I inspected her book collection, and she told me she'd read everything ever written by Stephen King. She was proud of that fact. In a hotel hot tub in San Diego, she lifted both her bare feet out of the water. She pointed to faint blue scars near both small toes and explained that when she was born her feet had six toes.

After our decision to divorce, we tried to remain civil. I cracked. I accused her of quitting on me. I pushed at her until she screamed that I was being a child. She said, "You don't need me to be whole, Jeremy."

The bald lady offered her rusty Pomeranian puckered lips, and the dog whimpered as it licked her face. Each slash of the tiny creature's tongue was followed by a nervous whine. The bald lady whispered, "There, there. Everything will be okay."

There were no aftershocks. The house refused to collapse, and the papers on the kitchen table were waiting for us when Mindy decided it was safe for us to go back inside.

* * *

At Christmas time, not long after my father had asked about where my faith had gone, my mother prepared a ham and I spent the afternoon with her and her latest boyfriend, a guy named Marcel who had a heavy accent that was clearly not French. He was a little younger than Mom and had a head shaped sort of like a cake with a swatch of short and curly black frosting across the top. The meal was decent, and afterward Mom suggested I do the dishes. While I washed up, Mom went out on the back porch for a cigarette. Marcel waited for the sliding back door to close and then said, “Those cigarettes will one day give her the cancer, no?”

I said, “Probably.”

Marcel tsked. “Is shame so fine a person must let this happen to herself.”

I think Marcel was Albanian. Whatever the case, he was right.

That night, Paula called from Idaho and let me talk to her daughter, Agatha. The kid called me “Unca Germs,” which I thought was pretty cool. I traded a Christmas greeting with Agatha’s father, Nicholas, and he invited me to come out and visit anytime I wished. Once Paula was back on the phone, I asked her if she’d ever marry Nicholas.

Paula said, “Why would I want to poison my relationship? Besides, we have Aggie-Bug now. That’s gonna keep me with Nicky a hell of a lot more than signing some government contract down at the courthouse.”

“But don’t you want the security of knowing you and Nick are together forever?”

Paula laughed, “Security? That’s hilarious. Mom and Dad are divorced, you’re divorced. Do you even hear yourself?”

I gave it one last stab. “At least when you get married you’re making a commitment.”

“Having a child is commitment. Marriage is a sexist tool to keep women as property.”

I said, “What’s with you women these days?”

Paula said, “Get used to it, buster brown. You men have held the reins for long enough. We’re not taking it anymore so sit back and hold on.”

After we’d said our goodbyes and hung up, I wandered into my apartment’s tiny kitchen. I rooted through my cupboards in search of a snack and ended up pouring myself a bowl of cereal. I stood in my stocking feet next to the sink, spooned Lucky Charms into my mouth, and crunched at the frosted oats and firm sugar marshmallows. I wondered where Mindy was that night, if she was with another man or if she was alone like me, if she had visited her mother for Christmas, or if she was still in Salt Lake. I had not seen her in months, yet Mindy continued to haunt my life, a memory that lurked in the bushes, stalking me as if I were prey, and pounced late at night when there was no one left to talk to, nothing left to do, but stand alone in the kitchen. I thought about the last time we were together, how the world had trembled, as if God had gripped the globe in a massive hand and shaken, and I wondered when the shockwaves would finally stop.

XI: CHIMNEY REPAIRS

We reclined on white plastic lawn chairs and sipped at lemonade made with ice cubes, cold water, and a scoop of yellow, sugared powder. We watched Taco, our leaping, black terrier-collie mutt with a face like a baby gorilla, chase leaves across the lawn. He cornered those leaves, then pounced and annihilated them without mercy. We watched Taco bark at his own tail and then prance across the yard to lick the fence. He was descended from wolves.

My wife Monica stretched out her legs, rested her bare feet on an empty lawn chair. She spoke about why she liked the *The Soft Bulletin*, the new album by the Flaming Lips. She'd purchased the CD only a week earlier but already knew it was the best she would hear all year. Monica possessed a critic's ear. She didn't mention work at all. She didn't gripe about long hours or about her aching feet or her insufferable supervisor. Instead she wiggled her toes and asked if she should dye her hair black like an "emo babe" and suggested we purchase mountain bikes to explore backwoods trails on our weekends. We were allies entrenched on the back deck, a united front, sipping lemonade and talking about nothing that mattered.

Dusk crept in and muted the dull greens and faded yellows of our dying lawn, altered the chipped tan paint on the deck boards to a cool gray. We slurped up the ice cubes from the bottoms of our glasses. Monica crunched her cubes to bits; I allowed mine to melt across my tongue, one after another, enjoying the cold inside my mouth. Thunder

clouds approached on the horizon, then changed course and drifted away into the falling night. I felt as if we were suspended in time and nothing could touch us.

Monica's mother, Pam, slid open the back door and stepped out onto the deck. Not to join us, but to show us she was up from her nap. She crossed her arms and looked into the yard. She scratched at her elbow through the thin fabric of her rust colored blouse. When Pam finally turned her head to look at us, her face was stern, her lips pursed like she was smoking a cigarette. She said, "Your dog has a tremendous piece of poop stuck in his fur."

* * *

In the three years that I'd known Monica, my gut had grown. Throughout my early twenties, I weighed a constant 165. I was a beanpole. My metabolism had its own agenda. No amount of protein shakes and exercise could bulk me up; terrific portions of chocolate brownies and Mountain Dew passed right through without leaving a mark. I was svelte. The hair on my chest gathered into a thin line that ran south over my flat abdomen, a trail of curls that thickened slightly at my navel and then disappeared into my jeans. I called it my Hairway to Steven after the *Butthole Surfers* album of the same name. Monica hated the name. She thought I called my wiener Steven, missing the joke completely.

Monica made sure we ate regular meals, and her cooking tasted better than the fast food cheeseburgers I used to feed myself. Now my once adorable Hairway had expanded into a chaotic hair jungle. I don't mean to say I was fat. The bathroom scale claimed I'd gained fifteen pounds. On a guy who stands six foot that's nothing. Normally. Assuming the fifteen pounds distributes evenly. As far as I could tell, all my

extra weight had decided to park itself around my waist. At any given time I could lift my shirt and reach into my navel to find a clump of lint. Monica invented a new game. We'd be watching television, and Monica would scratch my arm, then my side. She was sly. After my guard was down, she would reach underneath my shirt, and before I realized what she was up to, she'd pull out a chunk of lint and wave it before me. She'd declare, "Ta da!" Monica joked that she should save all the lint and within a month or two have enough to make a homemade pillow. "We could start a business," she'd say. As if there was any money in pillows. I was self-conscious about my deep, lint-producing navel and often cleaned it out. Sometimes when I was relaxed, I'd space out a little and when I regained focus, discover my fingers probing my belly-button.

This is how Monica's mother, Pam, found me sitting on the back deck, reclining in a lawn chair, the bottom of my *King Crimson* T-shirt pulled up, exposing my bare gut to the evening air, and my finger and thumb probing deep into my navel.

There is no graceful way to pull your fingers out of your belly-button.

"Come sit down with us," Monica suggested. Monica pulled her legs back and pointed with a toe at the empty lawn chair. "James and I are enjoying the evening breeze."

Pam looked at the sky. "The sun is down. It's getting dark."

"We'll head in soon. Just sit with us for a few minutes. We're watching Taco play."

"You shouldn't let him run around with feces in his fur. It's disgusting."

Pam looked at me, but I made no move to do anything about cleaning Taco.

Pam said, “I think I’ll see what’s on television.” She stepped back into the house, sliding the glass door closed behind her. Monica chewed on ice. I noticed that Monica had not returned her legs to the chair. Her body looked rigid.

“Looks like the storm might not hit us tonight,” I said.

Monica swallowed the last of her crushed ice and said, “Maybe you should clean Taco.” I agreed. The last light of day was burning away, leaving the sky the deep purple and brown of a bruise. I pushed myself out of the deck chair and started down the steps of the deck, and Taco herded me towards the garden hose.

* * *

Light from the television lit up the house. Through the sliding glass door I could see Pam inside sitting on the couch and eating from a small can of salted peanuts. The glow of the TV tinted her skin an alien blue. Pam loved to take control of the TV. She had very specific tastes in programming – *Martha Stewart Living*, Oprah, actor interviews with James Lipton. Those shows were pure Pam. When Pam had arrived a week earlier and found out we didn’t have the *Lifetime Movie Network*, a channel I had no idea even existed, she offered to pay our cable bill for the next three months if we’d upgrade during her brief visit. I was all for that, but Monica told her mother no. She said an upgrade for a few extra, unnecessary channels would be a waste of money. In any case, since Pam’s arrival the shows that appeared on our television were those intended to be viewed only by women. I discovered a secret world of entertainment. I sat in on a few of Pam’s female programs pretending to be irritated and disinterested so that she wouldn’t think I was uncovering any feminine mysteries. I picked up all sorts of tips for decorating cakes, gluing things onto other things, and ideas for more efficient closet organizing. Yesterday

I bought a fantastic little wicker basket to sit on a shelf inside my closet and hold all my socks. I'd never suspected such wonders existed.

* * *

Heavy rains whipped the house a couple of months ago. Tore a five foot long two-by-six cedar board right off the top lip of our chimney. The board landed not three yards away from where I park my Honda. I called a repair man out to look at the damage. He was a short guy with a harelip and a stern demeanor. The kind of guy who didn't mess around with small talk. I pointed out the problem spot at the top of the chimney, but he didn't bother looking up. Instead, he pulled a knife out of his back pocket and sank it right into the wood of my chimney. He buried the blade a good two inches deep like he was stabbing a stick of butter, then pulled it out and thrust it again. After four or five jabs he declared the chimney was a goner. He said the chimney hadn't been properly wrapped and that a decade's worth of rain water had seeped behind the boards, causing a slow, wet rot to set in. He'd seen this problem with a lot of the other homes in my area. Apparently, twenty-five years ago when they threw up all these adorable three bedroom starter houses, the builder had cut a few corners, including properly wrapping the chimneys in plastic to seal out the water. The repair guy asked to see the fireplace inside the house. He pressed on the wall, and the sheetrock bowed under his hand. The whole wall was damp. Using his knife he poked at the tiles around the mantel, and one of the cream-colored tiles came loose in his hand. He was murdering my house with a three inch knife.

Monica and I were looking at extensive water damage. The entire chimney had to be torn down and rebuilt, and the wall and mantel around the fireplace also needed work. My agent at State Farm explained they'd cover the cost of tacking the two-by-six back

up. However, the twenty-five year old wet rot caused by the shitty build of the chimney wasn't covered under my policy. Plus, I had a pretty big deductible. That meant they wouldn't actually pay for tacking the board back up. Insurance is a hell of a thing.

The best quote we received said the chimney repair would run us about \$3600 and the inside fireplace work would cost an additional \$750. Monica and I scraped together five hundred bucks. My mom sent a check for two-fifty after she secured a promise from me that I'd call more often. Our credit cards were full up, so they were out of the picture. We discussed our other options, and Monica and I realized we had to ask Pam for the remaining \$3600.

Pam had been married and divorced four times. The first time to Monica's father, a nice guy, but hardly financially solvent. The last guy Pam divorced was a millionaire. Apparently, Pam sicced a private dick on him and soon came into possession of a series of sexually compromising photographs. In the divorce settlement, Pam was granted a monthly alimony that allowed her to blow a few thousand in the casinos each month and still have enough left over for fancy old-lady clothes and vacations to Italy. Pam was the obvious solution to our financial woes.

Monica didn't want to bother her mother, but we were desperate. Pam was willing to *loan* us the money on the condition that she fly out from Vegas and stay in our guest room while the work on the chimney was done. Pam explained that repair men are all "shysters" and she wasn't about to see her "slots" money wasted on a pack of "lazy Mr. Fix-its" pretending to "bang around" on our chimney.

Not ten minutes after Pam arrived, she was on the phone. The next day two guys threw up scaffolding around the chimney and started tearing off boards, throwing them

all over my side lawn. I had to leave my Honda parked on the street. Taco bounced around the backyard, excited by all the activity. He barked every time a hammer pounded a nail. Monica escaped from the house because she worked eight to five as a teller at the Sooper Credit Union down the street. I found myself sitting next to Pam on the couch watching Martha Stewart offer exciting new directions to take my scrapbooking.

Pam waited until a commercial to ask me, “Do you watch TV all day while Monica works?”

Blindsided. I was used to people questioning the legitimacy of my occupational choices, and I’d long suspected that Pam disapproved of my work as a painter. I realized that sitting next to her watching morning television looked bad. I sputtered something about how painting requires inspiration that can be found only out in the world and that my work is done as much away from the canvas as on the canvas. Even though what I was saying was true from a certain point of view, I could hear how full of shit I sounded.

“I thought you taught painting classes,” Pam said.

“I teach when I can. It’s been a slow month. Not a lot of sign-ups.”

“Is August a bad month for painting?”

“Well, not August, *per se*.”

“Then what is the reason for so few sign-ups? Did you not distribute your requisite stack of flyers? Did a light rain make advertising too inconvenient?”

Pam was being snarky, but she was also not far from the truth. I had moved to Denver a few years back to work with my uncle Jester. Back in the eighties, my uncle studied under Bob Ross, the gentle painter you might have seen on television who used painting knives to pull a landscape out of a canvas in about twenty minutes, the whole

time speaking with a voice so eternally calm that just listening to him made the world feel safer. Jester came back from Florida and opened a studio-slash-school in Arvada, and when he offered to take me on as his apprentice, I agreed. I became an artist.

Soon after arriving in Colorado, I discovered that the problem with painting is that there isn't a lot of money in it, unless you get lucky and sell a few canvases. Most of our income came from setting up classes each month and teaching people how to do quick wet-on-wet oil landscapes. We had some repeat customers, but most of our business was generated through word of mouth and flyers. Jester would print up a couple thousand flyers that promised the moon. Paint like a professional in minutes! Then we would tack them up in every coffee house, supermarket, library, and bookstore in town. If we weren't getting enough bites, we would pin them under windshield wipers in parking lots. Passing out flyers was crap work, and although I did not say so to Pam, a light rain did in fact make advertising inconvenient.

Pam said, "What about your art? Do you ever sell your own paintings?"

"That's a hard one."

"Seems like an easy question to answer."

"I've sold a few. Nothing in a while."

"How long is 'a while'?"

"A couple of months," I lied. Thank God the commercials finally ended. Pam put her inquisition on hold and turned the volume back up. After a segment watching Martha make a delicious looking S'more Sundae, I excused myself.

I hid out in my work room, a small office upstairs next to the guest room. I pretended to paint but did not touch brush to canvas. I lurked in there, trying to stay out

of Pam's way until Monica came home. I messed around with my acoustic guitar and composed some lyrics about a fictional hermit dwelling in a cave. What a sad and lonely life. I emerged only when Pam called me down for a peanut butter sandwich and some barbequed potato chips. We sat across the table from each other and chewed in silence. She poured a big glass of milk for each of us and gave me three Oreos for dessert. I felt like I was five years old. The Oreos were delicious.

The next day after Monica left I hurried straight into my work room and got so bored I actually organized my files. On Wednesday, while we ate lunch, Pam asked me if I ever took on odd jobs like mowing lawns or painting fences to supplement my income. I told her my art kept me busy. The disapproving look on her face left little doubt she thought I was using her daughter to support my artistic pipe dreams. I was reminded of the old joke: What do you call a guitarist who breaks up with his girlfriend? Homeless. That afternoon, Jester called me in for a few hours, and I taught a class. When I came home, Pam and Monica were sitting at the table. Monica looked upset, but they both abandoned whatever conversation they were having, and we all watched female-focused television for the rest of the evening.

* * *

I spent the next day trying to get something good on canvas but ended up simply stacking paint on top of paint. When Pam called me down for lunch, I grabbed my sandwich and chips and headed back up to my office, claiming that when inspiration strikes, I have to answer. I threw together a landscape. It was boring and generic.

While confined in my office, I could hear Pam downstairs watching Oprah. Occasionally, I'd hear Pam open the front door and bark some orders at the workmen.

She worried that we'd have rain before they finished the job. She didn't want them lounging about with their cigarettes and Big Gulps when storm clouds loomed on the horizon. When she came back inside, Pam closed the front door too hard, like she was slamming the door in anger.

On Friday, I waited for the sound of Monica's car coming home to set me free from my self-imposed office exile. Monica brought burgers and fries from McDonalds. Pam ate half a kid-sized cheeseburger and said she was full. She didn't touch her fries because they'd gone cold. Then Pam complained she had a headache and retired to the guest room for a late nap. Monica left her nice work clothes on the bed, pulled on some shorts and a pink T-shirt, and we each took a large glass of ice-cold lemonade out to the deck.

* * *

Taco whined as I gripped his collar in one hand and aimed the hose at him with the other. The piece of shit stuck in his fur – a sizeable chunk caught up in the long hair of his hindquarters – would not come loose. I put my thumb over the end of the hose to increase the pressure of the water flow. I sprayed and sprayed, but it was as if someone had knitted the turd into his pelt. Taco tugged and nipped at my ankles.

Monica laughed. She said, "Quit fooling around," but when I looked at her she winked.

"I think we should get some scissors," I said.

"He wouldn't get crap in his fur if you'd pick up the yard once in a while,"

Monica said.

“Yes, he would. Taco’s a magnet for shit.” The turd finally washed away, and I released Taco’s collar and began to wrap up the hose. Taco ran up onto the deck and shook out his fur. Monica screamed that she’d been showered with dog water. A mist hung in the air. Monica’s skin glistened under the stark, yellow porch light. I suggested heading inside to get clean by taking a long, hot shower together.

Monica said, “Sounds dirty to me.” Her wide smile revealed her crooked lower teeth, my favorite thing about her. I dropped the hose and dashed up to her side, hugged her body to mine, and kissed her. When we broke our embrace, I noticed Pam watching us from the kitchen.

Her gaze made me feel awkward, like a teenager caught feeling up his date on her parents’ front porch. Monica did not notice her mother and kissed me again. She pressed against me, her hands gripping my buttocks. I pulled away. Monica looked a little hurt, so I nodded towards the house as a form of explanation, but Pam had turned around and was fussing inside the fridge.

Monica said, “What’s the problem? You’re soggy too.”

I said, “You’re mom’s right there.”

“So?” Monica asked, but then she stepped around me and slid open the back door.

We went inside. On the television, James Lipton was interviewing Peter Falk. Pam stepped out of the kitchen holding a glass filled with milk. She sat down on the couch and took a thick sip. Monica said, “Do you want a snack with your milk? We have Oreos.”

“No, we don’t,” I corrected. Monica did not realize Pam had been feeding me lunches all week long. My wife turned to study me, and I felt our united front that I had enjoyed with her earlier on the deck crumbling between us.

Before Monica could ask me any questions about the missing cookies, Pam said, “I’m fine. I certainly didn’t need any sweets so late in the day.”

“You ate them all?” Monica asked. To accent her question, she patted my gut.

“Not all at once,” I said.

“I didn’t get a single one.”

I started to apologize, but Monica said she needed a shower and walked into our bedroom. I locked the sliding back door. Taco leaned against the glass, rolling his eyes around inside his head in a pitiful manner. He wanted in for the night. “Not tonight, buddy,” I muttered through the glass. I turned off the light over the deck. Taco disappeared from sight, his black fur turning him into a canine ninja. He whimpered.

From the bedroom, the sound of water running in the tub roared on and was soon followed by the sound of a shower spray.

“You can’t leave him out like that,” Pam said.

“What?” I asked.

“He’s wet. It’ll get cold tonight. Maybe even rain. You need to dry off his fur.”

We left Taco out in the rain plenty. If it rained too hard, Taco would crawl under the deck, and the next day I’d discover Taco transformed into a muddy mess. That’s the life of a big dog. At least our yard was fenced, and Taco didn’t have to spend his nights tethered to a tree. That aside, the day had been rather warm and humid. I wouldn’t have

been surprised if the night brought rain, but even then the temperature wouldn't go below fifty or so.

“Oh, he'll be fine,” I said.

Pam tsked. She took a sip of her milk, watching me over the top of her glass as she swallowed. I stood in the center of the room, feeling oddly nervous about leaving her and retreating to the bedroom. Taco pressed his wet fur against the sliding glass door. Pam had muted the television, and I could hear the water from Monica's shower splashing as she washed. There was a curiously sour smell in the air, and I imagined it was the milk on Pam's tongue wafting from her mouth, riding the air in the room the ten feet to my nostrils. I imagined the layer of cream that must have covered her teeth and gums, the thick milk that painted her throat down into her aging stomach. I could see Pam's fingers gripping her glass, that Pam's knuckles were wide and wrinkled. That her thumb curved out so that the nail pointed directly away from the glass. She wore three rings on her right hand, one of which was on her thumb. The thick veins across the back of her hand roped over the tendons. The skin of her hand seemed ashy, almost anemic, in the dim light. Her fingernails were long and purple-red, manicured professionally, the only part of her that seemed fresh or young. A single drop of milk had run over the edge of the glass and touched her finger, but the drop had not broken against her skin. Instead, the milk drop rested between her finger and the glass, as if her skin could not absorb the moisture.

Pam said, “Well, he's your dog.”

I said, “If it rains he'll get pretty muddy. Maybe I should dry him off and bring him in.”

Pam smiled and said, "I'm sure he would appreciate that."

* * *

After I finished patting down Taco with a towel, I brought him into the house and led him back into the bedroom. Monica was waiting for me, sitting on the bed reading *The World According to Garp*. The baby blue comforter was pulled up over her legs. She must have taken out her contacts before her shower because she wore her glasses. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail. I saw a hint of a yellow, baby tee beneath the white terrycloth robe that covered her shoulders. As I shut the door behind me, Taco started tugging at his collar, hoping to hop onto the bed with Monica. I couldn't blame him. She looked damn sexy, and I was eager to climb in next to her and cuddle up.

"Why are you bringing him in here?" Monica asked.

"Your mother doesn't think we should leave him out tonight. It might rain."

Monica chewed at her lip, staring at Taco, who had noticed a dust bunny and thrust his head under the bed. He emerged with a gray smear of grime across his black nose. His wide tongue lashed out of his mouth and licked the dust spot clean. Monica set her book down and hopped out of the bed, her long legs bare. Taco licked at her feet. Monica stood on her tiptoes and kissed me on the cheek. "Has Mom been bossing my boys around?" Monica asked.

"She made me dry Taco off. With a towel. It took forever," I whined. "Maybe she wanted to keep me from getting in the shower with you."

"Give him to me," Monica said, and she pulled Taco away from me. She led Taco out of the room, and I followed. Monica unlocked the back door and slid it open, then pushed Taco out. Taco whined in protest, but went.

On the television, Peter Falk was accepting an ovation for being a successful actor. The empty glass of milk resting on the floor at her feet, Pam sat on the couch with her knees together and the TV remote on her lap. Pam frowned at me.

Monica said, "We're not going to do this, mother."

"What's that you say, dear?" Pam asked.

"Taco sleeps outside."

"I'm sure I couldn't care less where your dog sleeps," Pam said. "I simply stated that we might likely get a thunderstorm tonight." Almost as if he had heard her, Taco resumed his moaning as he pressed against the back sliding door. Pam flicked off the television using the remote control and then picked up her empty milk glass. She stood up and walked past us into the kitchen, where she rinsed the glass out in the sink. As she worked, Pam said, "It just seems a shame for James."

The mention of my name set all my hairs on end. My goal had been to lie low during Pam's visit. We needed her money, but I dreaded her attention.

"Why's that, Mother?" Monica asked.

Pam set the glass aside and faced us. "Well, dear, you work. He doesn't."

I considered three interesting counter-arguments. I did work around the house. I washed and folded clothes, and I made the bed and generally kept the place clean. And I did work at the studio with my uncle Jester and earned enough to help with the phone bill and other utilities. Secondly, the work of an artist is rarely appreciated and often mistaken as a waste of time. Finally and perhaps most compelling of all, there was an issue of sexism involved in assuming that the man had to support the woman and never vice versa. All three of these brilliant rebuttals seemed worth bringing up, except they also

seemed like weak excuses for the fact that Monica killed herself all week while I coasted through my days and let her pay most of the bills. For this reason, I made the wise choice to keep my mouth shut.

“What’s that have to do with anything?” Monica asked.

Pam explained that if our dog were to get wet and muddy all night, then in the morning when Monica went to work her Saturday half-day shift, I would be left to clean up Taco. Pam questioned Monica’s motives in punishing Taco with a wretched night in the rain and punishing me with a miserable Saturday morning cleaning him off when I could be in bed. “It’s almost like you resent him sleeping in when you can’t.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Monica insisted. “Taco doesn’t sleep outside to punish James for not having a real job. He’s just too big for indoors.” She turned to me. “Right?”

I required a few seconds to recover from the sting of Monica’s comment that I did not have a “real” job. After I caught my breath, I said, “Sure.” In retrospect, I could have sounded more adamant in my agreement, but the truth was that Pam’s argument made a perverse sort of sense. I knew that Monica often felt jealous of my less demanding schedule. Still, I hated to believe that Monica was using Taco to punish me.

“Taco stays outside,” Monica said.

“You’re a grown woman. Capable of making your own choices. I had no intention of sticking my nose in where it doesn’t belong.” Pam smiled and wished us both a good night’s sleep and withdrew into the guest room.

Monica led me into our bedroom. We shut the door, and Monica climbed back into the bed. She picked up her book and looked up at me. She said, “You’re gross. Go take a shower.”

I stripped and climbed into the shower, where I washed off the day's sweat and any Taco residue that clung to my skin. I wanted to be angry, but I knew Monica was right. I didn't have a real job, and the pressure of carrying the entire financial burden was a lot to ask of her. When I emerged from the bathroom, I found Taco stretched across my half of the bed. His tail thumped up and down. I pushed him off, and he spun in a circle four or five times before flopping down at the foot of the bed. I climbed under the blanket and looked at my wife.

She smiled. Monica said, "Please promise me you won't let her get into your head." She leaned in and kissed me. My nose bumped her glasses, so she took them off and set them on her nightstand. Monica returned to me, and between deep kisses, we described our love and affection for each other. I thanked her for supporting me, and she thanked me for being her heart. We even made love with the lights on, which was a bonus for me.

* * *

Each of Pam's ex-husbands was difficult.

Monica's father, who I had met only a couple times, was a full-time card shark. He spent his life in the casinos of Vegas playing poker and blackjack and dodging creditors. He was a nice enough guy, but he could not be trusted with money. When Monica sent him a check for an airplane ticket to fly out to Denver so he could give her away at our wedding, he cashed the check and headed straight to a poker game and lost every penny. He ended up having a friend drive him out for the ceremony. We have a number of photos featuring a heavily bearded man wearing jeans and a steel-toed boots. Monica was upset though and cried when her father showed up late for the rehearsal.

Pam's second husband did not last long. He was a used car salesman and according to Monica he was a total prick. I asked how, like was he violent? Monica said he never touched her. He was just mean. He yelled, broke dishes, made her mom cry all the time.

A few years later Pam married again. This time to a real estate mogul, whatever that means. He had a lot of money, and Monica told me stories about him that I found difficult to believe. For example, once he brought home a brown grocery sack filled with money. He called Monica and Pam to the table and asked them if they wanted to hold one hundred thousand in cash. Monica said she held the bag and looked inside, and it was filled with stacks of money. Whenever she sees a movie where some character picks up a small briefcase and claims it is filled with a million dollars, Monica mutters, "Bullshit." I don't know all the details, but their divorce was mean and Pam was left with nothing. Monica had to live with her dad for a couple of months. Apparently, Pam went to the mogul's parents and insisted they give her some money, and she must have made a convincing argument for helping her out because they bought her a house free and clear. Monica heard from Pam that a few years later the mogul was run over in a parking garage. Five times. Imagine, a real life Vegas gangster.

Monica started acting up, causing trouble and experimenting with pot. She was a teen and understandably tired of the endless parade of stepdads. Pam's solution was to ship Monica to Denver to live with her grandparents. Soon after that, Pam married her last husband, a millionaire named Rafe. Monica doesn't have much to say about him, except that he was loaded and supposedly made his fortunes by inventing the parking brake.

“When was this guy born? 4 B.C.?” I had asked when Monica first told me about Rafe.

“I’m serious,” Monica had insisted. “Every time you pull a hand brake, you’re using his invention.”

I suggested maybe he invented a certain type of hand brake, but Monica said Rafe took credit for all of them. The balls that guy must have.

“Why not just take credit for the wheel while he’s at it?”

“He said he got the idea when he lived in San Francisco.”

That made sense. In any case, I suppose inventing the parking brake is the kind of work that invigorates the libido because Pam caught him cheating on her and the divorce settlement made her wealthy. All the parking brake money in the world and Pam got half.

Add those four husbands together, and you get a woman who doesn’t trust men.

* * *

The next morning, Monica sneaked Taco out back and then left for her shift at the bank. I wandered the house and noticed the door to the guest room was still closed. I ducked into my office, shut the door, and fiddled around with a canvas frame for half an hour. Pam knocked on the door. I was startled and picked up a paint brush. The bristles were dry, and I’d yet to squeeze any paint onto my palette. Pam would have to have been an idiot not to realize I hadn’t actually touched a brush to canvas. I considered saying nothing, pretending I had not heard the knock. A second rap on the door forced me to say, “Come in.”

Pam opened the door. She didn’t say anything at first. I set the clean brush down. She took a few slow steps into the room, looking around at my work, past oils displayed

on the walls and stacked in corners. She examined the hardwood floor and pushed the toe of one of her silver flats at a bright spot of dried blue paint. On one wall I had displayed a series of three smaller works of dogs, different breeds, each stylized somewhat to look feral, wolf-like. I pointed at the group and said, “The dog series should go for about nine hundred.”

One of the first things I’d learned working with my uncle Jester was that people bought paintings of animals. I’m not sure why because I find human faces to be more interesting. I have a series of portraits that include Warhol, Kennedy, Van Gogh and my idea of Jack the Ripper that I just adore. But I can’t give that series away. I finished a tiger with bright green eyes and whiskers that pop and sold it for two-fifty with the paint still wet.

Pam looked at each of my three easels, my oils in progress. The first canvas held a still-life, a collection of books and a small sculpture of a bird. The second canvas was the landscape I’d popped out in about thirty minutes a few days earlier. The third canvas was smaller, held a heavily shadowed face, a poor portrait of Monica I’d based on a photograph that I had taped to the easel.

Pam bent to look at the photo and said, “She’s such a pretty girl.”

“She is,” I agreed.

“How much will this one go for?”

I considered making up a figure. Something high enough to be worthy of Pam’s daughter. Instead, I said, “Probably nothing.” I pointed to a stack of six canvases I had leaned against a wall. My Monica series. “I’ve never tried to sell any of my Monica paintings.”

Together, Pam and I looked at the half-finished portrait of Monica that was sitting on the easel. The background was still the stark white of the canvas, and her hair needed work. But Monica's face was alive. Her lips were a dark mix of blue and black with a flash of red at the corners. Her skin a fading white and pink, highlighted with hints of smooth yellow and peach that drifted into gray along the jaw. Her eyes, though brown in color, enjoyed ivory highlights that made them seem bright, stinging.

Pam brushed her palms across her hips, as if drying them. Without a word, she walked back to the doorway of the office and rested her hand on the doorknob. "I'm sorry I disturbed your work," she said.

Pam shut the door. The house was quiet. I sat on a stool and studied Monica's face on the canvas, and I felt like I had captured her, like she now belonged to me. I wondered if Pam had seen the same thing.

For a while I fantasized about Pam packing her bags and flying out. I was ready to be alone with Monica again. I hoped she was ready to go back to her life of slot-machines and mornings with Oprah and Martha Stewart. But then I heard the melodrama of a *Lifetime* movie waft up from downstairs. An hour later, I heard Pam outside arguing with the workers about the chimney. Monica came home around noon, looking tired and complaining that she was hungry.

Pam invited us out for a sushi lunch. As we waited for our food, Pam explained that the rains had set the workers back and that the job would not be finished before the middle of next week. Pam asked if I would drive her to the airport on Friday. Just hearing her departure date lightened my mood. I'd never tried sushi. Pam showed me how to hold the chopsticks and dip the rolls in soy sauce. She said she thought I might enjoy the

flavor and although I didn't care much for the bitter flavor of the ginger root, the sushi wasn't half bad.

I watched as Pam lifted a colorful piece of sushi into her mouth. She allowed the roll to sit on her tongue, savoring the delicate flavors, and the wrinkles around the corners of her mouth relaxed. She made a noise that seemed to emerge from deep inside her. Not quite a purr, but a sound that spoke of satisfaction. I saw hints of Monica emerge, suddenly spatter across Pam's aged face, as though a painter had sneaked up and dabbed her features with traces of beauty.

XI: THE SHOTGUN SITUATION

Spider webs covered the world like in a shitty William Shatner movie, or so Tangle imagined. September in northern Texas after abundant summer rains had seen an army of spiders emerge from grimy nooks and dusky corners. The spiders strung webs between tree branches and nearby bushes, across sidewalk paths and, of course, over the driver's side door of Tangle's Chevy pick-up. A nasty web clung to the handle of the gas pump where Tangle stopped to refuel, the spider silk stretching with the hose to his gas tank. He rubbed his fingers across his jeans, but Tangle could not seem to get the webbing off his fingers. The morning air was cool and the sky was clear, a sort of picnic-at-the-park day, but he disliked the mild weather because along with it came spiders.

Tangle spent his morning driving around the city of Denton, slowing down as he passed the various properties under his supervision. He noticed that someone had kicked a few boards out of the fence at one property and he pulled over. Using the hammer he kept in his toolbox, he punched the boards back into place. Around noon Tangle finished his tour and drove home for the day. He kicked off his worn leather work boots and stretched out on the sofa with a beer.

His bad leg had been acting up and his hip ached. Although he was only thirty years old, Tangle felt like an old man. Two years earlier he had fallen from a roof and snapped his femur in two. On the way to the hospital the fractured bone slipped around inside his leg. He required a month of traction just to straighten out the bone and

three months in a body cast. The bone healed well enough, but the process had messed up his hip joint and now Tangle walked with a distinct limp.

Tangle imagined little kids pointed at him when he hobbled past them in super markets. Men and women alike took to holding doors open for him. On his first visit back to his favorite pub, Willey's, he shuffled up to a bar stool beside an attractive woman and introduced himself. Her rejection was polite, even apologetic, like she feared he was delicate. Her attempt to be kind embarrassed Tangle.

He retreated with his beer back to the pool table. There he struck up a game for fifty bucks with a couple of young roughs in jeans and worn shitkickers. When he started losing, he used his smart mouth to rile the boys. Tangle had long enjoyed provoking scraps resulting in bloody noses or split lips and figured if he were going to lose fifty bucks, he'd at least enjoy a punch or two. But even after he pushed the two around hoping for a fight, they backed off, throwing the wadded fifty at his feet, their eyes on his hip. He knew they refused to fight because he was a cripple. After that night, he spent his evenings alone. He worried that so long as his body looked broken if he tried to stir things up no one would respond.

The doctors told Tangle that in time the hip problems would lessen and his limp would become less noticeable. After two years and little improvement, Tangle suspected the doctors might have miscalculated.

Once he was off the crutches, Tangle found himself in a serious financial pinch. Before his fall, he made ends meet by laying carpet, putting up dry wall and painting houses. When money was tight he worked with a few different crews around town. They took him on because he worked hard and did not mind sharing his cigarettes. He cut a

straight line with a paintbrush and he owned his own set of scaffolding, which he stored in the back of his pick-up under a tarp. But after the accident, word spread that his bad leg made him slow and a potential safety risk. Jobs dried up.

His brother Stuart owned twenty-seven rental units around the Denton area, mostly low-income housing, and offered Tangle a rent-free place to live and a decent paycheck, eleven hundred a month, to collect rent and deal with renter problems. Tangle needed the money, so he accepted his brother's offer. For the most part, work wasn't work, just opening mail containing rent checks and dumping them in the bank. When a renter's toilet backed up, Tangle arrived with his metal sewer snake to clear the drain. If a renter locked himself out, Tangle dropped off a spare key. After renters moved out, Tangle patched up the unit, which usually took a little effort, but not enough to strain his hip much. Sometimes Tangle had to scrub down scummy bathtubs or scrape clean kitchen counters caked in month old spaghetti sauce. If a renter punched a hole in a wall, Tangle would repair the sheet rock and paint the wall so that no one would ever guess at the transgression of the previous dwellers. On occasion Tangle had to install new carpeting or repaint interior walls or replace bathroom mirrors using money out of the expense account. One thing was certain; renters never got their deposit back.

In the previous month of August, Tangle collected rent from twenty-six of the twenty-seven properties; only the last house on his list remained vacant. His brother seemed pleased. Over the phone, Stuart said, "You're doing a great job, Tangle. Now if you could only get the shotgun house rented."

Stuart was three years younger and he tended to talk in a way that irritated Tangle. When Stuart delivered Tangle's pay for August, he handed over the check and said, "You earned every penny *this* month."

Even though Tangle believed he earned every penny of his monthly paycheck *every* month, he accepted Stuart's words with a silent nod. He had no desire to antagonize Stuart. He appreciated the employment his brother gave him even if the job required he eat shit on occasion, and more importantly, he liked that Stuart treated him hard, like a man. Tangle did not want to screw that up by telling Stuart to back off.

Tangle lived alone in one of Stuart's smaller houses. At night he watched the History channel and ate frozen burritos drowned in salsa. Before his accident, he had lived with a skinny girl named Wendy, but she grew tired of lackluster evenings spent at home in front of the television and ran off with a clean-shaved man who drank fine wines and wore a tie to work. Tangle replaced Wendy with a male German shepherd he named Woof, who licked his feet at night and dug up the back lawn during the day. Tangle read used paperbacks he picked up at the half price store. People rarely dropped by to visit and the stink of loneliness crept into the house. Each night a whiff of stale air greeted Tangle at the door. The smell reminded him of burnt grass with a hint of skunk. Tangle tried carpet fresheners and aerosol sprays, but the unpleasant odor would not come out. He used magnets to pin Little Tree car fresheners to the fridge.

When Tangle called his brother and mentioned the stink was more or less unbearable, Stuart weighed in on the matter. "You need a woman. Women understand smells."

Tangle said, "All women understand is how to complicate life. Who needs that?"

Stuart said, “You should change your nickname to Romeo.”

In the first week of September, as spiders emerged and spun webs everywhere, Tangle managed to rent the shotgun house. He placed an ad in the in the classified section of the Denton *Record-Chronicle* and within a week had an appointment with a man named Yeeter Lee.

Tangle arrived at seven in the evening to open up the shotgun house. He unlocked the door in the front, walked straight back through the narrow living room, bedroom, kitchen and mudroom, and unlocked the door in the back. He checked that the toilet was flushed and he turned on the lights in every room. Then Tangle stepped out to the front porch and smoked a cigarette or two while he waited.

At seven-thirty, Tangle was climbing into his Chevy to drive home when Yeeter finally pulled up in a hopeless brown Honda, accompanied by two women. Yeeter hopped out of his car and waved his arms, yelling, “Hold up! I’m here. You can relax, boss. We made it!”

Tangle introduced himself and they shook hands. As often happened he had to explain that “Tangle” was just a nickname he had earned because he often was “tangled up” in fistfights as a youth. Tangle did not offer Yeeter Lee his birth name, seeing no point in such intimacy.

Yeeter held his hands up, as if defending himself, and said, “I’m a lover, not a fighter.”

Tangle smiled politely.

The two women climbed out of the Honda and without a word wandered into the shotgun house. Yeeter was holding a newspaper and pointed to the ad Tangle had placed. “This here says two-fifty a month and two-fifty deposit.”

Tangle nodded. Yeeter smiled, showing off his two front teeth and wide open gaps on either side, so that he looked like a cartoon rabbit. Tangle could not help but wonder how such a thing could happen to a person’s mouth. He imagined Yeeter being punched on either side of the face at the same time so that the canines and premolars flew, but the front teeth remained steady. Yeeter was a slender man, bulging at the joints, and round in the belly. He shook Tangle’s hand, offering no strength in his grip, like handing over a thawed chicken breast.

“Me and my ma been by earlier and peeked into the windows,” Yeeter said. “If the wife likes her, we’d like to sign the lease tonight.”

When dealing with Stuart’s nicer properties, Tangle did not like to sign a lease without a background check, but the shotgun house was shit, the worst of Stuart’s slum properties. Tangle figured people willing to move in would have to be so down on their luck that a credit check was pointless. Tangle said cash up front would be sufficient.

He led Yeeter through the shotgun. They found the two women in the kitchen. The larger of the two, a silver-haired woman with a body shaped like a yam, nosed about inside the empty refrigerator. Tangle could hear her sniffing. She said, “The box smells like sour milk.”

The younger woman, her thinning red hair a rat’s nest of confusion, gripped Yeeter’s boney elbow. She whispered, “This can be *our* house. We can live here.” Tangle noticed a slur in the woman’s words, as if her tongue was too thick for her mouth.

Yeeter pulled out a black leather billfold. He said, “Today was payday at the shop.”

Within the next half hour, they filled out and signed a lease. Tangle handed over a pair of keys and accepted twenty-five twenty dollar bills.

As he drove home, Tangle called his brother and bragged that he had rented every property. Stuart said, “I knew you were the right man for the job. Keep it up!”

A couple of weeks later, Stuart called Tangle and said, “The city of Denton has issued me a notice of nuisance.” Stuart explained that Denton had mailed a formal letter allowing thirty days to mow the lawn at the shotgun property or the city would fine him five hundred dollars. “What’s going on, Tangle? I thought your renters took care of mowing their own lawns.”

“They’re supposed to,” Tangle said.

Stuart said, “This needs to be taken care of *today*. I can’t be as patient with you as I usually am. I need you to move on this one and get this situation fixed.”

Tangle promised he would handle everything. He went to his files and found Yeeter Lee’s lease and phone number. Tangle dialed the number, but a computer voice told him that at the subscriber’s request the phone number in question would not accept incoming calls.

Frustrated, Tangle drove to the property. The grass stood well over a foot high, a miniature jungle surrounding the shotgun house. He cursed himself for slacking on his duties; he hadn’t made a tour of the properties in a couple of weeks. The driveway was empty except for a small stack of empty cardboard beer cases – Miller High Life and PBR – and Tangle guessed that Yeeter was at work. He mounted the three concrete steps

leading to the front door and noticed a sticky black pool congealing on the left half of the porch like someone had poured a quart of oil underneath the front window. Tangle looked up just in time to wrap his face in a monster-sized spider web. He cursed and pawed at the webbing.

After peeling himself free of the spider silk, Tangle knocked on the front door. There was no answer. He tried to peek through the windows, but the blinds were pulled shut. He found a pen and a pad of paper in his truck and wrote a short note explaining that he had stopped by because the lawn needed to be mowed straight away. He wrote that Yeeter needed to clean the oil slick on the porch and added that as per the lease he required a working phone number. Tangle placed the note in Yeeter's mailbox and drove home.

That night Stuart called. He was disappointed with Tangle's lack of progress and made Tangle promise to mow the lawn himself the next day if need be. Stuart said, "I need you to fix this right away. You can't wait for these low-lives to solve your problems for you."

The next day Tangle threw his lawn mower into the bed of his pick-up and drove back over to the shotgun house. He knocked on the door and again nobody answered. Tangle poured gasoline into the mower, pulled the cord and tore into the tall grass. The sun was hot on Tangle's back. His hip ached and sweat rolled off his clean-shaven scalp.

On the side of the house, he discovered a plastic grocery bag hidden in a clump of grass. The bag had been tied shut. When Tangle picked up the sack he could tell something soft and wet was inside. Tangle shut down the lawn mower and worked at opening the bag. The stench of rotting meat assaulted his senses. Tangle dropped the sack

and coughed and spit. Holding his breath, Tangle again picked up the bag, glanced inside and saw what looked like five or six pounds of rotting bacon, like a stack of rancid animal tongues. He hurried around the house and dropped the sack into the oversized plastic bin the city provided. After slamming the lid down on the trash can, Tangle stood on the front lawn and smoked three cigarettes, hoping to destroy any hint of the awful smell that haunted his nostrils. He wondered why anyone would buy so much bacon and then let it spoil.

After he finished mowing the back lawn, Tangle wrote a note. The note said that Yeeter would have to pay an additional thirty dollars for the lawn mowing service Tangle had provided. The note reminded Yeeter that his lease had an upkeep clause that included mowing the lawn on a regular basis. As a postscript, Tangle again requested Yeeter call with a working phone number and insisted that the oil spill on the porch be sopped up “pronto.” Tangle did not mention the plastic sack full of bad bacon.

When he arrived home, Tangle found that the mailman had delivered an envelope containing four keys and no return address. He spent fifteen minutes comparing the keys with his spare sets and made a few calls before he determined that one of his renters had moved away without the courtesy of giving notice. That night he received calls from two other renters who announced they were moving out at the end of the week. In both cases Tangle pointed out that the terms of their lease required at least thirty days notice before they vacate or else their deposit was forfeit. One renter said she was sorry. The other said, “Oh well, bro.”

His weekend was spent cleaning up the three abandoned units. Tangle ran his vacuum cleaner over filthy carpets and scrubbed linoleum floors at each property. He

patched up nail holes in walls, emptied refrigerators of abandoned groceries, scrubbed stained toilet bowls and in one house Tangle replaced two broken windows. Using a rag and foaming carpet cleaner, he scrubbed red punch stains out of a carpet. He drained an entire bottle of 409 on kitchen cabinets and greasy oven tops. When he was finished, Tangle locked down the three houses, leaving For Rent signs in the windows.

On the last day of September, Stuart stopped by during Tangle's dinner. They sat on the couch and spread bank statements and receipts across Tangle's coffee table. They reviewed the work Tangle had done and the rent money collected. Stuart was distressed by the money Tangle had pulled out of the expense account to pay for repairs on the three recently vacated properties. "September was going to be a good month for you, but then this happened," Stuart said.

"The deposit money covered any expenses."

Stuart said, "I'm just saying that if you found higher quality renters, maybe they wouldn't trash the houses and we could make a few extra bucks. You have to screen these people."

Tangle said, "I screen them."

"Well, we have three empties going into October." Stuart made a *tsking* sound.

"Maybe you should run an ad in the paper."

Tangle resented Stuart's instructions. He knew how to find renters, had done the job dozens of times. He swallowed his retort and turned his attention to scratching at Woof's long ears. "I'll fill the vacants," Tangle said.

Stuart tore Tangle's monthly paycheck out of his checkbook and dropped it onto the table. He said, "If you ask me, eleven hundred's a pretty good wage for basically

opening envelopes and plunging a few toilets. Especially considering we have three houses vacant.”

Tangle scratched behind Woof’s ears. He knew Stuart was waiting for thanks. Tangle recalled how his kid brother would irritate him when they were teenagers. Stuart often stood in front of the television during Tangle’s favorite shows. One time Stuart threw potato chips at his face. Always little things, but irritating. Tangle would try to ignore Stuart, resist the urge to lash out for a minute, maybe two, but inevitably he hammered Stuart with his fists. He would lay into Stuart’s gut, pounding the soft center of his little brother, and finish with a warning: “Never stand in front of the TV again!” or “Toss anything else at me and I’ll beat your ass.” Stuart would retreat for a day or two, but soon he would return, this time poking Tangle repeatedly in the arm or maybe sneezing on the back of his head.

Stuart continued to irritate him, but now he provided for Tangle as well. Tangle knew with his limp he would struggle to find a payment plan as generous as what Stuart offered. But free rent and decent pay and the not so demanding workload made Tangle feel caged by his brother, submissive in the face of his wages. Tangle slid the check into his back pocket and said, “Thanks, Stuart.”

Before he left, Stuart chastised Tangle’s habit of smoking. He said, “Forget lung cancer. What about if you want to bring a girl home? This place smells like rotten cauliflower.”

Tangle said, “I smoke out on the front porch.”

Stuart said, “Well, the stink’s following you back in like a fart.”

After Stuart left and Tangle had smoked a couple of cigarettes on the front porch, his cell phone buzzed. The name “Renter Yeeter Lee” flashed on his phone’s display screen. Yeeter apologized for calling at such a late hour and explained that his number had been down for a bit because of payment issues, but that his phone was back in service. Yeeter explained that the toilet was broken and he insisted he needed Tangle to “fix the damned thing Ay-sap.”

Tangle asked Yeeter a few questions about the nature of the problem, but Yeeter was entirely unhelpful, repeating that the toilet wouldn’t flush. Tangle loaded his tools into his truck and made the twenty minute journey across town to the shotgun house.

He knocked on the front door, waited, and then knocked again. Finally, Yeeter slid open the dead bolt and let Tangle in. The living room was an unholy mess. Every inch of the floor was covered in discarded clothes, dirty blankets, stacks of newspaper, soggy cardboard boxes, crusty plates, half-eaten tacos, crushed beer cans, withered pizza slices, empty two-liter soda jugs, smears of cigarette ash, mud-splattered shoes and boots. Four sticky fly strips hung from the ceiling, the yellow tape of each freckled with dozens of dead flies. A gym-sock smell tainted the air. The air conditioner sat silent and the steamy Texas night oozed in through half-open windows. In a corner of the room, resting on an orange beanbag chair, sat Yeeter’s red-haired wife. Her Fred Flintstone legs and feet were bare, as were her shoulders, her skin damp with sweat. Spread over her midriff was only a threadbare beach towel. Tangle wondered if she was naked underneath the towel and the thought distressed him.

Tangle said, “Isn’t the air conditioner working?”

Yeeter said, “There’s mold in the machine and I’m allergic, so we can’t run it.”

Yeeter led Tangle through the bedroom, which was in a similar state of disrepair with the addition of a stained queen-sized mattress. The older, heavy-set woman, was stretched out on the mattress, snoring. Her right arm hugged an open box of Cheerios to her body.

“Sorry about this,” Yeeter said.

At first Tangle thought he was talking about the mess he had to step over walking through the house, but then he opened the door to the bathroom and the reek of shit smashed into him. Tangle entered the cramped bathroom and saw that the toilet bowl was filled with human waste. Flies crawled over the open bowl. The putrid reek of fecal matter rolled over him and Tangle fought down an urge to gag.

“How long’s the toilet been broken?” Tangle asked.

“A few days. I should have called sooner,” Yeeter said.

“It was broken and you kept using it?”

Yeeter shrugged. “Where else’d we go?”

“Jesus.” Tangle held his breath and stepped past Yeeter. He lifted the porcelain lid from the tank and looked inside. He saw that the lift arm was broken, so that when the handle was pressed, the tank would not flush. Tangle dunked his hand into the clean water of the tank and lifted the flapper. The toilet flushed and much of the bowl cleared. After waiting a minute for the tank to refill, Tangle reached into the tank again and lifted the flapper.

Once the bowl was emptied, Yeeter shook his head and said, “That’s all it was? I thought for sure she was stopped up.”

Tangle walked back out to his pick-up. He dug around his toolbox and found a new toilet handle with a metal lift arm. Breathing through his mouth, Tangle walked back into the muggy shotgun house and replaced the piece in less than two minutes. He set the tank lid back in place.

Tangle looked at the bathroom sink in hopes of washing off his hands, but saw the entire basin was drowned in wet blonde whiskers. He called Yeeter into the bathroom.

“Yeah, boss?”

Tangle did not like that Yeeter called him “boss.” Something about the word made him nervous. Tangle pointed to the sink and said, “This hair will clog the drain. You have to clean this out. Tonight.”

Yeeter promised he would, smiling his rabbit-toothed grin. Tangle instructed Yeeter to follow him out to the front porch. Once they were outside, Tangle closed the front door and pulled fresh air deep into his lungs. While Yeeter waited for him to speak, Tangle considered his position. The house was a calamity. Plenty of other renters left homes in bad shape, but nothing like what was happening inside the shotgun. Tangle realized he had to have Yeeter out immediately, before they did more than destroy the carpets and clog up the pipes.

“This won’t fly,” Tangle said. “I can’t allow it.” He ran the toe of his sneaker along the edge of the oil slick that remained on the front porch.

“I was gonna have that clean for you tomorrow, boss.”

Tangle held up a hand to quiet Yeeter. Tangle explained that the oil on the porch, the unmowed lawn, the issues with the phone not accepting his calls were all problems.

“And what was that bag of bacon I found around the side?”

Yeeter said, “Oh, shit, I near forgot about that.” He explained that a friend had given him a real bargain on some lean bacon. “Buck a pound. That whole bag for five bucks!” But when he came home, Yeeter discovered he was locked out without a key. He hid the bag on the side of the house in the shade and set off in search of his wife or mother. “They were at the Shell buying jerky. By the time we all got home, I dang forgot about that bacon. Shit, what a waste.”

Before Yeeter could say anything more, Tangle started in on the condition of the interior of the house. He apologized but given the sorry state of things, he was going to have to evict them. Yeeter clasped his hands together like he was praying to Tangle and begged for a second chance. In the end, Tangle promised Yeeter three days to either clean up the house or move out.

Tangle’s hip throbbed the entire drive home. When he walked into his own kitchen, Tangle noticed a black dot on the shin of his jeans. He lifted his leg and looked closer. A flea. He ordered Woof out of the room and inspected his legs. Tangle located and crushed five fleas. He stripped off his jeans and socks and threw them into the washing machine, running the water at hot. Boil the fuckers, Tangle thought. Then he cooked his own skin under a scalding shower.

The next day he dropped by the shotgun house with a small box containing three bug bombs. He knocked on the front door for a few minutes but there was no answer. Tangle reached into his pocket where he had put the keys for the shotgun in case he needed to get inside while Yeeter and his women were out.

The property had two keys, one for the front door and one for the back. To his surprise, neither worked on the front door. Tangle knelt down and examined the lock.

The steel was polished and new. Tangle realized Yeeter had changed the lock. He cursed as he walked around to the back of the shotgun house. The back door key worked. He slid the dead bolt, turned the knob and let himself into the mudroom.

“Hello?” Tangle called. The door between the mudroom and kitchen was shut. Tangle turned the knob and pushed, but the door refused to open, as if someone on the other side were leaning against the door. Tangle pounded on the door a number of times, pushing against it with his shoulder. There was a half inch space underneath the door and Tangle dropped to his knees, his bad leg stiff and his hip popping with the motion. Peeking under the door, Tangle saw that Yeeter had moved the refrigerator off the kitchen wall and parked it directly in front of the door. Tangle was barricaded out.

He circled the shotgun, pounding again on the front door, trying to open the windows along the side of the house. After ten minutes of frustration, he dialed Yeeter on his cell phone. The call went to voice mail and Tangle left a stern order that Yeeter move the fridge away from the kitchen/mudroom door. Tangle considered dropping by the police station and asking about his options regarding breaking down the front door, but his hip hurt and he felt a deep weariness weigh down on him. He decided to drive home. He kept the bug bombs, sure that one way or another in a few days, he would need them.

That night Tangle sat on the back steps dressed only in his boxer shorts and tossed a worn tennis ball across the yard. He watched Woof lope after the toy. After a while, Tangle limped inside and sprawled out on his couch. He flipped through stations looking for something of interest. The phone rang.

Stuart's voice was agitated. "Have you seen the shotgun house?" Tangle knew to keep silent, not offer more information than necessary and let Stuart say whatever he needed to say.

After a breath, Stuart explained that he had driven past the house earlier that night and seen great piles of trash strewn across the lot. Stuart said, "Some wife-beating ramrod and what looked like his two dogface girlfriends were piling all sorts of shit on the lawn like some kind of retarded yard sale. What's wrong with you renting my house to this kind of scum?"

"Shit," Tangle muttered. He felt something cruel stir inside.

Stuart added, "There was a shit-stained mattress leaning against the mailbox."

The thought that Stuart was checking up on him, driving by even after he said things were under control, infuriated Tangle. After taking a breath in hopes of controlling the slow burn of anger in his system, Tangle said, "Why'd you drive past the shotgun, Stuart?"

Stuart said, "Hey, I can check up on *my* properties any time I want. But if you must know, after that notice of nuisance, I was making sure the lawn was properly mowed."

Tangle concentrated on not throwing the phone across the room. He lifted his feet onto the couch and crossed his legs, tucking his body up into a ball, hoping to rein in the desire that was swelling inside to lash out at the nearest living person in the room. Primarily because in this case that person was Woof. Into the phone, Tangle said, "I'll call you back." He could hear Stuart's voice starting to form a word, perhaps "wait," but Tangle's thumb cut the connection.

After tossing the phone onto the coffee table, Tangle stepped out on the front porch, not caring that he wore only boxer shorts, and lit a cigarette. He dragged the life out of the cigarette, pulling the smoke deep into his lungs. Tangle was drained of patience with Stuart's demeaning tone. The fact that Stuart was checking up on him proved his little brother considered him to need looking after, like a child. Stuart did not see him as capable. As he snubbed out the butt, Tangle decided he was done eating shit. When Tangle went back inside, the phone was buzzing. Impatient Stuart.

Tangle lifted the phone to his ear, thumbed the receive button, and barked, "I told you the lawn was mowed. And I'm taking care of the shotgun situation. You need to back off!"

Stuart's voice was strident. "Don't you *ever* hang up on me."

"I'm working with the renter. Leave me to it."

"I'm not paying you to *work* with people, Tangle. You're not the good guy here. You're a goddam janitor. I want this mess cleaned." Silence for a moment, and then, "And I want an apology."

Tangle let his hand holding the phone drop to his side. He looked around the living room, at the worn couch and the second-hand coffee table. His thirty-two-inch television set and his particleboard bookshelf. Even Woof, lying on his side, his black eyes open and watching, seemed more a piece of furniture than a companion. These things, these items that populated Tangle's life, meant little to him, yet he felt bound by the items that he kept inside his brother's home, like they gripped him, glued him to his own life.

Stuart's voice reached Tangle as if from far away. "I mean it, Tangle. If you don't want to do the job, I'll replace you tomorrow."

Tangle knew he could be replaced, easily. He considered a life free from Stuart's help, working a nine-to-five gig, his hip always sore, and renting a shack like the hole he leased to Yeeter. Tangle thought about Yeeter calling him "boss" and pleading with him to allow him to stay. The thought of falling even further horrified Tangle.

Tangle lifted the cell up to his ear. "I'm sorry, Stuart." Filled with shame, Tangle knew he was a delicate man.

The next morning, Tangle peeled webs off his Chevy door and climbed into his truck. He drove across town. The shotgun was deserted. Yeeter had left a note on the kitchen counter. Using some rather creative spelling, Yeeter apologized for the mess he left Tangle to clean up. The note stated that he and his wife had decided to move down to Florida to live with her sister. Further, they could only take what would fit into the Honda. As such, Tangle was free to do what he pleased with the "goods" they left behind.

Of course, everything needed to go to the dump. After setting off two bug bombs, Tangle tossed Yeeter's junk into the bed of his pick-up. The Chevy made three trips. He tried to stuff the four fly strips into a trash bag, but they clung to the plastic in such a way that he finally balled the whole sticky mess up and shoved everything into a paper sack. Tangle scrubbed and painted. The carpets were shredded and had to come out. Stuart complained about the three hundred dollars Tangle pulled out of the expense account to pay for replacement flooring. Tangle handled everything himself and when the ache in his hip and thigh started to scream, Tangle sat down on the front porch of the shotgun and enjoyed a smoke while waiting for his tendons to cool.

The evening air was thick on Tangle's skin. The grind of automobile engines thundered from nearby streets. Despite the tobacco smoke in his nostrils, he could smell the sweat of his tired body. Tangle watched as a bleached spider the size of his thumbnail frolicked on eight frail legs between the metal rails of the front porch railing, weaving a net of fragile silk strands.

VITA

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Thesis: THE SHOTGUN SITUATION: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES AND
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Pages in Study: 191

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Major Field: English

Scope and Method of Study: Creative Writing

Findings and Conclusions: A better understanding of fictional rhetoric through a
collection of short stories.

The Shotgun Situation is a collection of short stories written over a period of five years. The stories all touch on themes that include an examination of faith, familial relationships, and sexual connections. This collection represents the student's effort to improve his technique in regards to the short story form.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Toni Graham
