

THEIR FACES OF CHILDREN:

A NOVEL

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Writing about one's own work objectively and critically is one of the most difficult tasks a writer will ever face, at least, it has always been for me. Although there are certainly many influences to all writers, and more accurately, each and every one of their creations, perhaps the best way to approach the task of analyzing my first novel, Their Faces of Children, is to consider the writers and works which have most influenced my own work, without forgetting, of course, the very human aspects of my own observances and experiences, the impact from which the novel's subject matter and style ultimately developed out of.

The specific literary influences upon the stylistic features of Their Faces of Children include the work of Melville, Joyce, and Barth. This novel can be viewed as a collage of the many various techniques, styles, and approaches to life and reality found in works such as Moby Dick, Ulysses, and Lost in the Funhouse. Alongside sections of the more traditional 3rd person omniscient narrative structuring, incorporated into Their Faces of Children are "Behavioral Healthcare" sections featuring the screen-play genre, and other sections separating the interiors, and point of views of each character, as well as highlighting techniques such as dialogue and stream of consciousness.

The collection of fragments from all these styles and genres will hopefully present readers with an accurate simulation of the fragmented realities of the central characters,

Maddy and Rolen. Such a representation is intended to highlight, distort and exaggerate how the fragmented childhoods of the characters have resulted in shattered adult realities. The adult conditions which have sprung from each of their childhoods, keep Maddy and Rolen from not only healing their own individual psychological scars, but also act as a hindrance to resolving the problems in their troubled relationship.

Above all, it is the devastating impact of childhood traumas upon our adult lives that form the cornerstone of Their Faces of Children. The many dysfunctional souls I have encountered, lives forever scarred and fragmented from the many horrific experiences of childhood, these lives that have touched my own are more significantly, the main impetus behind all the stylistic choices made during the creation of the novel.

Moby Dick, Nineteenth Century Realism and a Multiplicity of Forms

As literary works of any era ultimately tend to reflect the contemporary culture and cultural environments in which they were written, the influences at work within Their Faces of Children, as well as the lives of the central characters, Maddy and Rolen, are forged from our fragmented post-modern world. My own novel, in many ways, is an attempt to emulate works like Joyce's Ulysses and Barth's Lost in the Funhouse, two of the penultimate examples of how modern and post-modern writers display the fragmented nature of twentieth, and now twenty-first, century realities through the incorporation of multiple perspectives and genres into a single work. Yet, although Joyce, Barth and other twentieth century writers mastered the technique, they were

certainly not the first ones to attempt it. Among the most pronounced of these earlier attempts is Herman Melville's nineteenth century Moby Dick. In a very real sense, Moby Dick provides an amazingly accurate preview of what was to come in the literature of the twentieth and twenty first, although one not especially appreciated by Melville's contemporaries. Moby Dick most certainly became deeply etched into my own earliest impressions of the power and majesty of literature. Consequentially, Melville's technique to literally encircle Ahab's obsession with the white whale, and to catalogue it from multiple perspectives for his audience, greatly influenced my own attempts to present the damaged lives of Maddy and Rolen to readers.

In Moby Dick, Melville's own brand of realism takes is forged from a collage of formats, the collection of which, in essence, serve to walk the reader thoroughly around the subject and thematic matter. Interspersed within the more traditional narrative structure and plotlines of the novel are sections and whole chapters devoted to information about the whale trade of that time, including a brief documentation of whaling history, descriptions of various whaling techniques and traditions, as well as what essentially accumulates into a working glossary of whaling terms. When placed within the same package and context as Melville's account of Ahab's insatiable obsession with the white whale, these documentary-type sections serve to heighten the absurdity of Ahab's mad quest, while at the same time teaching the reader about aspects of the whaling trade discussed in the narration, as well as lending an air of reality and credibility to Ishmael's rather incredible account of the ill-fated Pequod and all the souls aboard.

Within the plot, Moby Dick features a multiplicity of character sets whose cumulative effect is to intimately portray and reflect the multi-layered social strata of

Melville's time. This "layering" technique provides readers multiple perspectives of the events in Moby Dick through the "knights and squires" within Ahab's crew. Starbuck, the first mate, is cast straight from the American upper middle-class of that time. He is an educated, disciplined, and logical God-fearing man, whose measured temper and level demeanor is representative of a cultivated background and upbringing from the upper-most echelons of middle-class society. Next in line is Stubb, the second mate, who, representative of the middle of the nineteenth century middle-class, lacks the refinement and education of Starbuck, and is much more likely to act upon his intuition and emotions, than to think a thing through. Finally, Flask, the third-mate is presented by Melville as a "happy-go-lucky" officer, a free-spirited soul along for the joy of the venture, happy with his station on the ship, a good sailor, but not one to go out of his way for advancement or beyond what he is told, apparently representative of the lowest rungs of the middle-class ladder.

In addition to the middle-class officers, readers are offered a hierarchal comparison and contrast between each officer's lower-class crew, including their own individual squires, the savage harpooners. These squires of Starbuck, Stubb and Flask, are each subtly different than one another, and representative of their separate societal castes upon the lowest rung of societal order: highest of the harpooners is Ishmael's bosom friend, the noble pagan Queequeg with his tattoos and shrunken Congo head, next, the hunter turned harpooner, Tashtego, a New England Indian, and lowest, Dagoo, a six foot-five, towering and powerful African Negro. Like their officers, the harpooners, along with their interactions with one another, are also each presented respectively,

allowing the reader an almost kaleidoscopic mural effectively documenting the inner machinations of nineteenth century American society.

To widen the societal portrayal even further, the same multi-layered approach is taken to exhibit how each of the many whale ships the Pequod meets in the course of its journey, impacts, or in some cases, fails to impact, upon the fate of her captain and crew. Whether the Albatross, Town-Ho, Bachelor, Delight, or Rachael (just to name but a few), each ship the ill-fated Pequod encounters, and meets in a “gam”, serves as a reflection, often like the wavy and distorted types found in funhouse mirrors, of it’s captain, crew, as well as their encounters with, and reactions to, nature and the white whale. Additionally, as many of these various whalers met by the Pequod are from all the corners of the known world of that time, they present readers with a comparison and contrast of societies and cultures from all over the globe with the American, or Nantucket variety. Whether it be the inexperienced Dutch and German Virgin, the fragrant French “Bouton de Rose”, or Rose-Bud, or the British Samuel Enderby, each ship from a different culture is utilized by Melville as an opportunity to further enhance the reader’s perception of the Pequod, and how she, her captain, and crew stack up against other whale ships, societies, and cultures of the time.

Perhaps the most poignant of the comparisons offered in the novel by Melville takes place through the “gam”, or meeting between the Samuel Enderby of London and the Pequod. The ships are, in essence, sisters to one another, in that both captains and crews were, and in the case of the Pequod, are fated to cross paths with the great white whale. As Ahab has lost a leg in a previous encounter with the white whale, the English Captain Boomer has lost an arm, and as Ahab’s own obsession for Moby Dick affects the

cultural and social structures aboard the Pequod, so did Boomer's passions for whaling potentially affect the lives of his own crew. The difference is that after one arm and tussle with the white whale, the English captain is not only able, but quite willing to let the great Moby Dick pass by, content not to seek him out, or even to cross his wake again for fear of losing another limb, or worse, endangering his crew once again. Ironically, considering the not so distant history between the two countries, where the English captain of the Samuel Enderby seems to have a handle on his own passions, and runs his ship by not only allowing, but apparently encouraging and even seeking the free-voiced opinions and advise of his officers, the American captain Ahab, has no such control and runs an more authoritarian regime upon the Pequod, where input from even the first mate Starbuck, is only barely tolerated, and certainly not heeded or encouraged. This type of intriguing comparison and contrast found with each passing ship's experiences and reactions to the white whale, when literally placed side by side against the Pequod, acts not only to reflect the rich variety so abundantly found within the individual realities of human nature in general, but also the cultural similarities and differences inherent between countries, and other large cultural constructs of Melville's contemporary nineteenth century world.

Through this multi-layered portrayal of the men aboard the Pequod, and the Pequod's reflection against the other vessels she meets in her journey, Melville's work captures a more holistic, and naturalistic view of nineteenth century societal structuring than could be achieved by forcing a simplified single-layered pictorial of social hierarchy centered upon only one of the officers, or just one of the whaling boat crews. In this sense, then, the cumulative effect of Melville's technique of providing readers multiple

vantage points from which to view the subject and thematic matter of Moby Dick, whether through the juxtapositioning of the various genres, officers, sailors, crews, ships, sectioning and topical shifts collected together in the work, is one which offers readers a holistic and realistic vantage from which to view not only the whaling industry, but also of the raw, awe-inspiring power of an impersonal nature, the nineteenth century hierarchal social strata at operation aboard the Pequod, as well as into the American industry, society, and the nineteenth century world beyond it.

Most significantly, perhaps, Melville's formatted collage and "layering" techniques provide readers with a multi-layered kaleidoscopic view from which to consider the novel's thematic center, Ahab's obsessive madness with the white whale, and ultimately, the impact of that madness upon the lives of all the souls aboard the Pequod under his command. Everything in the novel serves to compare and contrast Ahab's madness with humankind's fruitless struggle against the power and enormity of nature. It is also this layering technique which ultimately serves to heighten the drama and tragedy at the novel's close, when Ahab's mad obsession with the white whale ultimately dooms all the men under his command, save one of course, to the same fate as their commander-in-chief. As the ship disappears into the vast depths of the ocean, swallowed by the vortex which forms under her the third day of Ahab's unsuccessful chases after the white whale, it is hard, as a reader, not to consider the multitude of souls dragged to the bottom along with the ill-fated captain, from each the officers to the many hands aboard, persisting in our memories even beyond the last glimpses we get of the Pequod's savage harpooners, each as if gallantly perched upon the ship's top masts as the doomed vessel succumbs to the deep.

Although the impressive level of detail, variety of perspectives, techniques and multiple genres incorporated in Moby Dick all play a major role in why Melville's work has taken its place in the literary canon and is considered one the great American novels today, these same features made the book very unpopular during Melville's lifetime, so much so that it was almost forgotten until the twentieth century, many years after Melville's death. In fact, the same features often work to create a similarly negative reaction from many readers of Moby Dick in our own time. Melville is fastidious, indeed, in almost all regards about providing readers the most realistic and detailed depiction possible whether they want it or not. Like his Captain Ahab, he is, himself, an author obsessed with recording the minutia of the whaling industry. For better or for worse, I myself am guilty of the same passion in exhibiting my characters' dysfunctional lives, from root to manifestation, in painful detail through multiple genres and points of view. So, it is not all that surprising, or unexpected if the use of similar techniques in my own novel may well result in the same response by some, or even, many readers.

So why would any writer, especially a first time novelist as myself, knowingly follow such a path? In the case of Their Faces of Children, it seemed impossible for me to tell Maddy and Rolen's story in just one genre, and literally unrealistic to constrain a true representation of their internal realities within either one's individual perspective, and similarly limiting for readers to look at their whole story from only one external, internal, or even omniscient, vantage point. Wise, or unwise, the intent was to create a thoroughly detailed portrayal of how even years later, the characters, like so many people I know and care about, find themselves dealing with the traumas each experienced as children, traumas which neither they, nor the characters in my novel seem to be able to break away

from, even in adult life. In order to accomplish that end, I attempted to create a genre collage and to utilize multiple layering techniques similar to the ones Melville implemented in Moby Dick. By presenting readers with variations of four basic formatting genre types and a layering of Maddy and Rolen's experiences within those formats, a multifaceted perceptual commingling of just how severely the formulative years of Maddy and Rolen's childhood impacts everything else in their worlds, hopefully unravels to complete a fuller portrait of their realities.

The first, and most "traditional" type of formatting genre consists simply of prose sections styled in the vein of realism, detailing actions and events in the characters' lives unraveled for the reader in episodic installments from the vantage point of a third person omniscient narrator. Although, unlike many nineteenth century works of prose, they are not framed in any way other than from their section titles, these narrative sections do follow other basic conventions of the nineteenth century novel and short story genres, and weave intermittently throughout the novel as the action does incrementally through the chapters of Melville's Moby Dick. These narrative sections in Their Faces of Children appear in two distinct and separate series, periodic "mini-chapters" so to speak, one centered on Rolen, one on Maddy, and are intended to work in concert to showcase the couple's problematic relationship from its start to its present.

In Maddy's case, these episodic narrative installments travel incrementally backward through time throughout the novel and finally arrive at the beginning of her relationship with Rolen. These narrative sections centered upon Maddy act to slowly illuminate how drastically her childhood has impaired her ability to function in an adult relationship. Whether it is on an outing across the country, a trip to a carnival, or even a

date within her own apartment, it is clear that although Madison may desire the kind of intimate human companionship most of us do, the distrust of men she developed as a child, may be more than she can, in reality, overcome. Similarly, the narrative sections centered upon Rolen travel forward into the present, and act to showcase the manifestation of his own childhood traumas upon his dysfunctional adult life, and more specifically, upon his dysfunctional desire to be seen and appreciated for who he is, rather than what is, and perhaps, always has been, expected of him. His narrative sections follow him as he physically strips from his clothes and flees into town, leaving Madison in the apartment by herself, in a desperate attempt to break free from what he must view as Madison's rejection.

In the second type of formatting found in Their Faces of Children, both Maddy and Rolen are each featured in another two series of sections, consisting of what most resembles the "interior" technique pioneered by Gustave Flaubert, as well as its natural extension, the stream of consciousness technique more completely developed by the modernists Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. This second variety of section is neither purely comprised of either interior, or stream of consciousness segments, however; whether it is the installments which track Rolen, this time backwards in time, or the one which joins Maddy in her present and moves forward through her experiences in Rolen's apartment, both series also combine bits and pieces of other genres into their makeup, and like so many other aspects of the novel and its characters, are internally fragmented. With the exception of the final section, these sections most certainly hold the distinction of being the most concentrated areas of fragmentation in the novel, and also in the most direct fashion, offer intimate views into the mental processes of Maddy and Rolen.

As companions to the traditional narrative installments, these sections are intended to complete that exterior portrayal of Maddy and Rolen with a more interior one. Whereas the narrative sections focus upon Maddy and Rolen's relationship with one another, however, these sections open up the window to examine each character's entire life. More specifically, they are intended to depict the damaging formative events in Maddy and Rolen's individual lives through what I believed to be the most immediate, personal techniques and genres available to get directly inside each character's mind, emotions and mental states. By traveling backward in time, Rolen's childhood traumas are revealed through these sections. The glimpses of his father's funeral and the expectations placed upon him by his mother and grandmother hopefully help provide readers with a background to better understand the present portrayal of Rolen, his adult dysfunctions, and his somewhat unusual actions found in the narrative sections. Similarly, the damaged adult persona presented in the traditional narrative sections devoted to Maddy, becomes even more painfully apparent throughout the interior and stream of consciousness sections focused upon her. Although these sections center upon her present-day functions as she reacts to Rolen's disappearance from the apartment, they also serve to show first hand evidence of how her adult relations with men have been severely compromised as a result of her dysfunctional childhood.

The third type of section consists entirely of dialogue between the seemingly bodiless voices of Maddy and Rolen. These "bedtime stories" as Rolen refers them to, are the only place in the novel where the characters truly seem to be able to communicate openly, honestly and freely with one another. Because of each character's inability to function "normally" in the "real" world, the stories they create together at night serve as,

perhaps, the only venue to true intimacy Maddy and Rolen are able to share. It is simply the closest the two get to honestly voicing the thoughts and emotions they each feel inside. Without the encumbrance of their physical bodies, the pair does indeed seem to gain the ability to discuss intimate thoughts, opinions, fears, feelings as well as many of the other things regular coupling share with one another comparatively in many more venues than Maddy and Rolen are able to. Even here, however, the two sheath these things under the veil of a fairytale-like narrative with themselves as the main characters, in a venture much like the practice of role-playing sometimes utilized in psychiatric therapy.

These stories may very well offer readers the most direct vantage point upon the couple as a couple. More than in any other type of section found in the novel, Maddy and Rolen are shown as they communicate openly in a way most revealing about how each honestly views the relationship, as well as their individual roles within it. When strung together, the individual “bedtime story” sections form a larger continuous narrative, that arguably produces the most stable core, or handle, with which readers can hold onto, while sorting through the many fragments of reality from Maddy and Rolen’s lives. In the final analysis, however, although the couple most certainly is able to communicate more effectively through these stories, it remains doubtful that it will, or even could, ever offset or replace the deficiencies found so abundantly elsewhere in their relationship.

The final genre format found in Their Faces of Children is closely framed upon a hybrid of the play and screenplay genres. All titled from different acts, and scenes of the play “Behavioral Healthcare”, these sections are found consistently at the center of each of the first five main segments (“one”, “two”, “three”, “four” and “intermission”)

throughout the novel, and in more fragmented sections in the novel's closing segment ("somewhere between"). Because these sections are, in essence, not written to be performed, but rather read, they tend to depart from a strictly traditional mold by including meta-fictional, self-aware "stage" directions as well as occasionally taking liberty with minor alternative structural variations from the traditional genre formats. Although these sections do little, if anything to shed light upon the childhood traumas of either character, they do serve to highlight the dysfunctional manifestation of those traumas upon the relationship between Maddy and Rolen.

It becomes obvious in their therapy sessions with Dr. Labia, that even within a clinical setting, neither Maddy or Rolen seem able to get past their individual dysfunctions, let alone their problems as a couple. Designed to illustrate how frustrating it must be to be in such a relationship, these play-like sections are an attempt to recreate for the reader the repetitive nature of the roadblocks keeping Maddy and Rolen from healthy communication. To that end, the sessions all center on a recurrent argument between the two, over whether or not to open or close the office's window. The doctor, likewise, appears to be bound by concerns about his own sexuality, among other dysfunctions, and doesn't offer any substantial hope to Maddy, Rolen, or the reader, for that matter.

Unlike the conclusion of Melville's nineteenth century "collage" of the whaling industry, the final segment of Their Faces of Children, "somewhere between", features the four main types of sectioned genres found throughout the novel, stitched together into one large borderless collage of fragmented sections. Minus the types of formal sectional breaks and titling found up to this point in the novel, this final collection is most like a

larger version of the stream of consciousness sections, but in addition to including variations of all four genre, or section, types found earlier in the work, it is not focused solely on any one character, narrative voice, or point of view, but travels freely from one to another. In this sense, the jagged construction, or lack of construction, rather, functions in a final attempt to reflect the fragmented, yet joined condition of Maddy and Rolen's relationship, as well as the situational reality they find themselves in by the close of the novel.

In the spirit of Melville's great work, the act of collecting all of these techniques, styles, sectioning, and genres into one work is my own attempt to present readers with the most complete picture of how a traumatic childhood can, and does, continue to impact people into and throughout their adult lives. Where Moby Dick documents the whaling industry of Melville's own nineteenth century, Their Faces of Children focuses upon a phenomenon of our own time, though one certainly not new, or limited to it.

Unfortunately, like the crew of the Pequod caught hopelessly within the obsessive undercurrent of Ahab's madness, the reality is that like Maddy and Rolen, too many of their real life counterparts find, have found, or will find themselves caught in a tremendous struggle against the deeply-entrenched and ever-present problems which stem from damaged childhoods.

Joyce's Ulysses and a Relativistic Modern World

Alongside the rearrangement and reinvention of fictional genres by writers such as Melville, a breaking with traditional forms, as most evident in the poetic work of Walt

Whitman and Emily Dickinson in the nineteenth century, opened up a renewed re-evaluation of genres, and an increased willingness to break away from established formats in the twentieth century. Fueled by the many changes in societal, cultural, technological and scientific perceptions of the modernistic era, many early twentieth century writers experimented with genre, sometimes radically, in an attempt to reflect and simulate the fragmented realities perceived about themselves. The nineteenth century “naturalistic” shift from an ordered and somewhat predictable framing of human life to one based upon natural chance, became in the twentieth century transfigured into a fragmented and relativistic simulation of life in Modern literature. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in the work of James Joyce.

In my own perceptions of early twentieth century literature, Joyce’s Ulysses has come to represent and embody Modernism in a way that uniquely encapsulates all of the various traits, tendencies, techniques, advantages and limitations commonly associated with that movement. Certainly the incorporation and alteration of multiple genres and point of view shifts, its contributions to the development of interior and stream of consciousness techniques, as well as its treatment of time and focus upon the “everyday”, all work together to make Ulysses truly representative of Modernism and the efforts of early twentieth century writers to emulate the splintered micro and macrocosms they perceived around themselves. For me, Ulysses is the work, which, above any other single work in literature, has had the greatest impact. Joyce’s efforts most definitely inspired my own attempts to pair format, or form, and technique with function in Their Faces of Children. Beyond that, Ulysses opened wide the door of possibility with its rich diversity of genres, points of view, and experimental spirit.

The spirit of realism that fueled Melville's attempts to depict the reality of the whaling trade in the nineteenth century through the use of multiple genres, became transfigured early in the twentieth century into attempts to depict reality as made up of multiple and relative points of view, or perceptions. These changes were, in part, due to advances in science, technology and the impact of those advances upon society. The multiple point of views found in Ulysses, and later in the works of Faulkner, Barth and many others, would certainly not be possible without the growing discernment of a world made up of a multiplicity of relative perceptions, as voiced most profoundly in the scientific theoretical work of Albert Einstein. This inclusion of multiple and shifting points of view in literature also simulated, and became heightened by, the twentieth century's changing, and more rapidly changeable cultural environment. Although ironically not entirely acceptable to the relativistic culture in the early twentieth century, this inclusion of multiple and shifting points of view intended to better reflect societal realities in literature became made more common throughout the century, nonetheless, thanks to the work of Joyce and other modernist writers.

Joyce's modernist Ulysses creates its early twentieth century portrait of reality built upon a multiple genre collage and layering technique similar to that utilized by Melville in Moby Dick. Woven into the fabric of Ulysses alongside sections, or stretches, of omniscient third person prose narration are snippets of other traditional genres like plays, poetry, and letters, as well as the non-traditional inclusion of other types of writing such as newspaper articles, advertisements, chapters made up totally of dialogue, question and answer sections, and even an entire section at the end of the book utilizing the type of stream of consciousness technique such as found in the work of Joyce's

modernist contemporaries such as Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and many others to follow. Rather unlike the relatively formal sectioning of *Moby Dick*, however, Joyce's depiction of reality features sectioning and shifts between the multiple genres that are far more exaggerated and utilized to stitch together a much more fragmented and pronounced representation of real life, with multiple points of view and topical shifts much less rhythmic, more sporadic, and disjointed than any seen before.

The multiple points of view found in *Ulysses*, too, are also markedly less conventional, and the shifts between them much more sharply delineated than those found in Melville, and other texts from the nineteenth century era of realism. Shifts between Joyce's multiple omniscient narrators, Leopold Bloom, Stephen Dedalus, and Bloom's wife, Molly, all occur in both more traditional fashions such as those between chapters, or those slyly crafted inside chapters, yet properly foreshadowed, and accompanied by a smoothly construed transition. But additionally, these shifts also surprise even contemporary readers of *Ulysses* by also sometimes occurring rather unexpectedly, almost anywhere, at any moment, in any type of section, sectioning, or genre, creating sudden jerks, stops and pivots some with some frequency throughout the text. The most marked difference between the multiple perspectives portrayed in a work like *Moby Dick*, however, is that the vantages presented through the different genres, participants, characters, and narrators of *Ulysses* are more relativistic in nature. Where Melville presents multiple views of one reality, Joyce depicts multiple views of not only one, but rather multiple realities. By not just providing readers with a single reality through an external focus upon different characters and personas like Melville, that is, Joyce creates a relativistic reality composed of many individual ones. To accomplish this,

Ulysses exhibits the interior perspectives of the characters themselves, from their own points of view, resulting in multiple and competing realities. For example, Stephen's reality is much different than that of Bloom, whose perceptions of life are, in turn, much different than Molly's, and so on.

Within the ebb and flow of Ulysses' multiple genres with their points of view and perceptual shifts, Joyce produced these multiple modernistic and relative realities by building upon the methods of Gustave Flaubert and others, in order to display the interior realms of Stephen, Bloom, Molly and occasionally, even minor characters. The subconscious flashbacks and interior perspectives introduced in the nineteenth century works such as Madam Bovary became fully accepted, and utilized in the twentieth by Joyce and other modernist writers as narrative because of the ability to travel into a character's mind, thoughts, and memory. Additionally, the fragmented reality of the twentieth century also fostered the birth and evolution of the "stream of consciousness" technique, in which the simulation of internal dialogue arising from the nineteenth century birth of psychiatry became transformed into an even more pure representation of internal thought. While the pioneering modern work of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway is most often credited as the pivotal one in the establishment of the "interior" techniques that surfaced in the modern era, an impressive example of the stream of consciousness technique is also found at the end of Ulysses.

Chapter 18 of Ulysses, or what has become commonly known as "Molly's Soliloquy", most certainly provides a detailed examination and mimicry of how the "cogs" of the human mind work to associate memory, or the past, with current real-time experience, or present, by a frequent kind of erratic sub-conscious compare and contrast

mechanism. This modernist stream of consciousness technique, whether that found in Mrs. Dalloway or in Molly's Soliloquy, exemplifies how radically perceptual shifts in the emergent field of psychology focused attention onto the subconscious world and the working mechanisms of the human mind in the early twentieth century. Contributions to the development of interior and stream of consciousness depictions by writers such as Joyce and Woolf, eventually allowed later twentieth century writers, and now twenty first century writers, the freedom to present more direct and realistic experiences through even the raw sensory perceptions such as touch, taste and smell. Molly's Soliloquy certainly influenced my own efforts at utilizing stream of consciousness and representing other, even more raw sensory perceptions in Their Faces of Children.

With the stream of consciousness technique, modernistic writers such as Joyce and Woolf also helped to pioneer a new and less structured, more random, arguably more natural and freer representation of time in literature, which allowed future writers the option to shed the more artificial devices required of their earlier counterparts. Much as the "free-verse" poetry pioneered by Whitman ultimately relied upon the ability of poets to forge, create, and invent structures and structural patterns not only unique to a work, but more significantly necessitated the ability to hold it together, the apparent free flowing nature of the transient organizational shifts found in this new "stream of consciousness" technique was anything but random, and rather heightened the need for writers to form logical associations between the "how", "what", "why", "where" and "when" between every aspect and element of their work. For example, to be believable, any stream of consciousness section such as Molly's Soliloquy needed to facilitate the "grouping" associations that were increasingly accepted in the emerging field of

psychiatry, and eventually, in public perception, to be formed in the human mind between cause and effect. In other words, to enable readers to make sense of it all, then, Joyce needed to craft Molly's seemingly random thoughts in such a way to provide the necessary clues for readers to travel through time and space alongside her as she relives Poldy (Bloom) first proposing to her and she preoccupied with her past trysts, future indiscretions and girlish fantasies, all while laying next to him late that night, and she unable to sleep.

To accomplish such a thing, Joyce forges associations between the present action, rooted cause, or related event, and so on, like a trail of breadcrumbs for readers to follow. In essence, to better reflect the changing philosophical and scientific relativistic reality of human psychology and psychological motivations, Ulysses and other modernist works of prose required periodic and somewhat sporadic travels into the past while providing a point of view from the interior of a character's mind and thinking process. The move in point of view to the subconscious, in turn, enabled flashbacks the full freedom to jump backward in time completely independent of the old linear rules, and without any narrator intrusion or artificial framing device. Because of modernist sections such as Molly's Soliloquy, this method of association eventually became established and commonly used alongside, or in place of more mechanical prior devices such as narrative intrusions, chapter and section breaks, and other similar traditional methods utilized by earlier writers to propel readers through time. At first, this change in the depiction of time in the subconscious was limited to those narrative sections featuring a stream of consciousness point of view, but soon, even before the end of the modernistic period, this method of association was to spread to other, more global areas of narrative structuring of the types

later commonly found in post-modern fiction, and accepted within almost every fictional genre today.

Finally, as a result of the modernist depiction of a relativistic reality, and the subsequent need to portray the extremely private and personal interiors of its characters, Ulysses exemplifies one last twentieth century literary trend through its increased focus upon the “everyday”. Building on nineteenth century realism, Joyce’s work can be viewed as a contemporary simulation of the ancient work by Homer, transformed into the relativistic realities of everyday life in the “modern” twentieth century world. Unlike Homer’s epic tale, however, Joyce’s Ulysses features not a courageous mythic hero, his beautiful, almost unbelievably faithful wife and honorable son, but an aging, rather ordinary ad man, his average wife who has thoughts of other men, and a socially malcontented, self-inflated youth who is merely the son of an acquaintance. In place of the adventurous classic journey of Greek myth, Bloom makes his way around town from tavern to tavern, Molly reminisces and fantasizes about other men while lying next to her husband, and Stephen is so full of his own self, he sees himself more so in the role as mentor to Bloom and other lesser men such as his father, rather than a dutiful son. What becomes exaggerated and focused upon with literary force and analytical depth in Joyce’s Ulysses, are Bloom, Molly and Stephen’s realistic, “everyday” and somewhat questionable activities, which are elevated in stature and importance to the same level as the subject material of Homer’s epic poem. The everyday realities of the characters are heightened even further in Ulysses, as Joyce’s successful efforts to move back and forth more freely through time results in the central action of the novel taking place over an unprecedented, and extremely truncated length of time. Stephen’s arrival home, Bloom’s

journeys about town, their meeting and Molly's restlessness, all take place within span of a single day. Homer's epic tale, in contrast, takes place over years and the subject matter is far removed from the everyday reality of any time. Indeed, Homer's Ulysses would never have been accepted or embraced with the battle-weary warrior sitting down to read the morning paper atop a toilet.

Of the many modern techniques rooted in the revolutionary Ulysses, Joyce's skillful inclusion and inventive shifting between multiple points of view in Ulysses have had, perhaps, the most dramatic impact upon Their Faces of Children. The multiple points of view and shifts between Maddy, Rolen, Dr. Labia and the omniscient narrator in my own novel owe much to Joyce, and the many techniques he pioneered to accomplish such feats. In order to reduce the considerable confusion and disorientation inherent with the multitude of genres presented to readers in Their Faces of Children, however, the point of view shifts in the first four main sections are, for the most part, clearly discernable by mechanical titles and page breaks. With the exception of the characters' stream of consciousness segments, these sub-sections are limited to the presentation of one point of view, leaving almost every shift foreshadowed and marked distinctly with a title similar to those that ornament most traditional chapters.

The shifts start to blur, however, in the fifth section, "Intermission", which is intended to act as a transition between the first sections and the novel's last section "Somewhere Between . . .", where the novel moves freely from genre to genre, and between several points of view without any subtitles or page breaks. In "Somewhere Between . . .", readers are asked to recognize the sub-structural shifts as they navigate through the remainder of the novel. These shifts gradually break the patterned and

predictable overall structural sequencing of the first four sections, mimic the earlier transference between sub-sections, but without the formal structure, much like the shifts between voiced speakers in the “bedtime stories” segments, where readers are forced to recognize shifts in voices through the sub-structure shifting from standard to italicized font. Whether clearly marked or not, the many shifts between points of view in Their Faces of Children are integral to provide readers with multiple perspectives of the same occurrences, just as they are in Ulysses. The freedom to extend beyond and blend together the boundaries of multiple genres would certainly have not been possible, nor perhaps warranted, prior to the twentieth century with its modernist social perspectives as well as writers such as Joyce with the skill, vision and ability to capture a rich variety of relative perspectives in their work.

The post-modern worlds of Maddy and Rolen are very much relative ones, as are those of Joyce’s modernist characters Stephen, Leopold and Molly. To illustrate such realities, the modern stream of consciousness technique found in Ulysses is also utilized in Their Faces of Children to portray the characters’ relative lives. The stream of consciousness technique is found primarily in two series of sections, one devoted to Maddy and the other to Rolen, where it is combined alongside snippets of other genres, as the most immediate window into each of their individual and unique sensory perceptions. By traveling along in the present, Maddy’s stream of consciousness section centers primarily upon how her dysfunctional childhood has manifested itself into her adult reality in a debilitating manner. We follow her all the way from the airport with her mother and father to her destined arrival to Rolen, and then witness from her perspective the trauma that envelops Maddy after he leaves. Rolen’s sections, in contrast, travel

progressively back into his youth in order to directly illustrate some of the damage he incurred during his own traumatic childhood, which likewise, has scarred his adult life considerably. His mother's leaving, his father funeral, and his grandmother's expectations of the impressionable boy Rolen, are all brought to the reader through Rolen's first hand experiences. By utilizing a similar technique as that found in Molly's Soliloquy", then, the internal thoughts of Maddy and Rolen could be placed within my own novel in order to help portray the characters' psychological realities complete with some of their internal quirks, as well as the shards and pitfalls, at work within both of their adult realities. Without the use of stream of consciousness, other more mechanical methods would have been needed to access the private worlds of Maddy and Rolen. In turn, Their Faces of Children would inevitably be a very different novel.

Similarly, the story of Maddy and Rolen would be considerably different without the ability to travel freely back and forth in time, also owing much to Joyce's Ulysses, alongside the work of other modernist writers like Woolf, Faulkner, and in turn, their post-modern progeny, writers such as Pynchon and Barth. To modernists like Joyce, of course, jumps through time were possible but only accepted if created through association, like those created in the carefully crafted stream of consciousness technique found in "Molly's Soliloquy". Thanks to Joyce and Modernistic techniques, to post-modernist writers, a more random representation of time became possible, without the associations necessary for their progenitors to travel in such a fashion. Mimicking the transition from modern to post-modern handling of time, this second more random travel, or jumping, through time is limited in Their Faces of Children to only the stream of consciousness sections in the first four sections of the novel, and is not fully utilized until

the last main section, “Somewhere Between . . .”. Outside of Maddy and Rolen’s stream of consciousness sections, however, the reader is taken back and forth through time with regular frequency in the first four main sections, but these travels are aided with association.

For example, accompanying Maddy and Rolen’s stream of consciousness sections, there are also narrative sections throughout the novel found in two series, one centered upon Maddy and one on Rolen. Opposite to their stream of consciousness counterparts, Maddy’s sections move sequentially backward into her past, and Rolen’s sections travel forward in incremental installments through the novel’s present. The most common type of association presented to readers in Their Faces of Children is attempted through the simplistic, but somewhat difficult technique of grouping. To accomplish this, the titles of these sections initially indicate which character is featured in the section, and hopefully the consistent direction through time becomes imprinted upon the readers’ minds each time they encounter another installment of each individual series. Hopefully, the ability to identify and group which direction time should travel in each type of section emerges to readers fairly early in the novel, and the leap backward or forward in time becomes expected as soon as a reader encounters initially the titles, or later, which genre and character is involved. To further distinguish through association what to expect in terms of movement through time, more subtle connections, like those required to transport readers through time alongside the characters mental landscapes in stream of consciousness borrow more heavily upon Joyce, and his use of association in “Molly’s Soliloquy”. Following Joyce’s example, although certainly not reaching his level of proficiency, these associations are also utilized in Their Faces of Children whenever

possible through planting small clues for readers to situate themselves, techniques such as repetition, or even overlapping description, scenes, dialogue, events, or actions from one section into the next to produce the most direct type of association. Whether it is Rolen continuing down a sidewalk, street, or backyard, Maddy focusing in on the movement of her legs, drawing the lines around an object, or reliving the same sub-conscious thought, the wide variety of associative devices and techniques introduced into literature in order to hold together early stream of consciousness efforts like “Molly’s Soliloquy” and Mrs. Dalloway are sprinkled all about the pages of my own novel.

Likewise, throughout Their Faces of Children can be found a rather modernistic focus on everyday reality, a trend which also extends into the post-modern era and that can be found hard at work in Joyce’s Ulysses. In my own novel, Joyce’s influence is once more manifested through the amount of description and detail devoted to portray the everyday realities of Maddy and Rolen. Like Joyce’s detailed and descriptive inclusion of the everyday realities of Stephen, Bloom, and Molly throughout Ulysses, the “everyday” is projected in Their Faces of Children from both the internal perspectives of Maddy and Rolen in the stream of conscious sections, as well as from an external omniscient view which documents both characters’ everyday lives in the traditional narrative sections. Similar to Stephen’s need to distance himself from physical reality into art, or Bloom’s need to escape his own reality by drifting asleep and into his imagination, however, both Maddy and Rolen also feel the need to escape their own realities, too. Yet again, following Joyce’s example in Ulysses, the characters of Their Faces of Children are also granted means of escape from reality, albeit somewhat different ones.

Ironically, perhaps, the series of “bedtime stories” placed throughout the novel, reflect Maddy’s need to feel integrated into real life, or at least, with the world outside her own, while at the same time emphasizing her detachment from it. Indeed, in order to compensate for her real life as shown elsewhere in the novel, Maddy imagines a world outside everyday reality in these vocal stories she creates with Rolen. Her contributions to the stories typically act to project her into a more “grandiose” reality, an exaggerated and patently post-modern one in which she feels most comfortable within because of the problems she experiences in simply dealing with her everyday reality. Despite her medications and attempts at therapy, her everyday reality leaves much to be desired. These stories seem geared to reflect Maddy’s exaggerated need in order to compensate somehow for her everyday present, as well as her everyday past by exaggerating, by manipulating and distorting them into fairy tales she has at least partial control over. Although Rolen certainly plays a part in these fabricated stories, too, Rolen’s need to be open and communicate with Maddy manifests itself in a very different manner. He seeks for solace and control over his own everyday reality through his exaggerated, and yet disappointing, rather mundane and everyday, journey into town. Just as Maddy seems forced to find relief and control, of sorts, through the bedtime stories she shares with Rolen, Rolen’s own inability to fulfill his needs through everyday activities becomes exaggerated in his mind to the point where he must literally step outside of it in an attempt to become heroic, unusual, and grander than life, in his real reality.

Either way, of course, both characters seem desperate to find a way to deal with the mundane realities of their scarred lives. In the end, however, like many of their contemporary real life counterparts, it is debatable that either Maddy or Rolen ever really

do find a way to escape, or even deal with their recurrent and ever-present problems in reality, despite these attempts to “grandiose” their situations.

Lost in the Funhouse and the Post-Modern Blender of Form

Since the modernist period, literature’s focus upon the everyday, its use and fragmentation of multiple genres, its freer movement through time, and its portrayal of the inner mechanisms of the human mind through techniques such as stream of consciousness have become commonly utilized practices and components in works all across the wide range of contemporary prose genres. The fiction, in general, which arose in the aftermath of Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, and other modernist writers, is almost universally more often psychological in nature, often combines more than one genre into its construction in even the most ordinary prose narratives, and tends to exhibit a characteristic post-modern uncertainty, much more pronounced than that found in modernist works. Although they make use of similar constructs and techniques as those founded in the modernistic era, in post-modern literary works, fragmented sectioning, the use of psychology and the ability to move freely between multiple genres tend to be utilized much more commonly, and more significantly, tend to be much more exaggerated than that found in modernist texts. In this sense, mid-to-late twentieth century post-modern works do not necessarily exhibit many new techniques like the modernist texts did earlier in the century, but act like more like an extension and reinvention of modernism. In essence, post-modern writers work to combine and rearrange modernist components into new perspectives, much as poets do in poetic rounds that reuse the same

words, over and over, but create new impressions and meaning through rearrangement. The blending together of modernist fragments and genres, the addition of newer technologies and media into literary formats, to fuel the mix, so to speak, and the selective choosing, matching, and arranging compatible combinations into new literary collages, allow post-modern writers such as Barth and Pynchon to present their readers with a dimension of the uncertain realism unique to the mid-to-late twentieth century and now, the twenty-first.

John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse, is one of the more obvious examples of how writers can potentially combine these techniques and genres, offering a post-modern smorgasbord, a literal collage of fragmented genres and points of view, twisted together in the psychological analysis of a coming to age narrative. As the full title infers, Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for print, tape, live voice, Barth worked so diligently at blending his fiction into multiple genres that he even stepped outside the physical page, and attempted to include genres that could not be written into his creation. He must have experienced a "felt" need, or an implied desire to travel beyond the traditional bounds of the written genre at the time, perhaps in response to the concerns voiced in his essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion". To achieve such a thing, rumor has it that Barth traveled outside the realm afforded writers even through the modernist movement through the act of rearrangement. To accomplish his ends, Barth physically attempted to break outside the traditional boundaries of both the fiction genre and time through his "performance art" readings of excerpts from the novel, in which he actuality came up upon the stage, pressed a button on a tape player machine, and walked away as a previously taped recording of the novel was replayed to the surprised attendees.

On the page, too, Barth pulls out all the stops, adding in all the bells and whistles as he takes the reader on a ride through the protagonist's journey, shifting through genres and points of view, flaunting the post-modern ability to go into new territory by simulating new media, not traditionally utilized in works of prose, as he even imitates recorded audio tape, stretching the womb of his creation so far as to travel in and out of biological reality at the moment of the protagonist's conception. Right from the start of Lost in the Funhouse, with "Frame-Tale", a literal "cut-out and tape-together" mobius strip resembling the cyclically connected beginning and end of Joyce's last work, Finnegan's Wake, Barth's post-modern intent to combine outside media with literature becomes unmistakably clear. Whether it is the letter format of "Petition", the multi-languaged varied forms of historical prose to be found in "Glossolania", or the combination of first person narration and epic poetry in "Anonymiad", Barth utilizes literary genres and formats almost at will. As a result, Lost in the Funhouse achieves a disorientating effect upon readers, which parallels the journey of its protagonist. In essence, through his fragmentation and rearrangement of genres, Barth successfully utilizes form to mimic the function of perceptual reality, and has created a literal funhouse in which the reader enters as soon as the dust cover of the work is opened, complete with distorted mirrors, mechanical rides and bold, bodiless laughter.

Once within Barth's distorted and misshapen funhouse, the narration, too, skips as if randomly through time, virtually as free of linear time constraints as it is of any allegiance to the rules or consistency of any one genre type. Even though it is commonly classified as a coming of age novel, the protagonist's birth in Lost in the Funhouse occurs later than many of the adult sections, amidst the out-of-sequence toddler, teen and

adolescence portraits also included in the novel, each chapter anachronistically presented from a different point of view and shattered into multiple genres through the work. Similarly, each chapter is equally likely to also be divided up internally, the divisions similarly random, scrambled throughout the novel with disregard to any type of chronology or adherence to any one genre or format. In this fashion, Lost in the Funhouse successfully presents time, alongside genre, as a flexible variable to be reset with each new section, an accomplishment that trumps even Joyce's treatment of time in Ulysses, and with the possible exception of Faulkner, every other modern writer, as well. In doing so, Barth is able to present the reader with a richer and much more complex variety of comparisons, contrast, juxtapositions and correlations between events and experiences in the protagonist's life that would not be possible within the constraints of the linear "pre-modern" narrative rules. Barth's post-modern skill at rearrangement has taken modernistic genres and techniques, and reshaped them into new and different portrayals of later twentieth century reality.

Even the coming of age protagonist of Lost in the Funhouse, becomes transported into an ageless and debatably genderless disembodied voice in Barth's post-modern blender. Indeed, Barth's protagonist or, arguably, protagonists, share the distinction with many modernist and post-modern counterparts of being unnotable and ordinary to the point of being substantially boring, their anti-heroic character flaws drab and barely raising the readers' interests above the threshold of tolerable. But as seen through the fragmented and uncertain portal through which the reader is given, Barth's protagonist becomes fascinating through the perception of late twentieth century culture and society it provides, as well as the timeless look afforded of human nature.

In that way, the protagonist of Lost in the Funhouse can be set apart from those that have come before, and served as a memorable example to me as I worked on developing the characters of Their Faces of Children. Like building a protagonist to simulate one of Picasso's portraits, in Barth's creation, there is truly nothing new under the sun to be discovered in the actual details, just a different relevancy, framework, or in this case, lens of madness through which to re-examine, rearrange, recreate and pattern used fragments of matter into a mirror breathing of life, a somewhat familiar, yet, new entity. By design, the protagonist of Lost in the Funhouse is an entity, that many readers have a hard time grabbing hold of, as Barth has purposely erected a thin sheath between the reader and his protagonist. Like his arrangement of genres or ordering of time, Barth has carefully constructed a multifaceted portrayal of a protagonist from fragmented pieces in order to better depict another post-modern reality. In this case, Lost in the Funhouse features the kaleidoscopic make-up of human persona as exemplified through a twentieth century portal, a post-modern "coming to insanity" of sorts, virtually without justification, essentially madness as its own end and natural extension of twentieth century life.

The type of post-modern blending so effectively rendered in Barth's Lost in the Funhouse, is also utilized in Their Faces of Children in my own attempt to mirror the perceptual worlds found within Maddy and Rolen's realities. Following a fate similar to Barth's protagonist and many other post-modern characters, it would seem the worlds of Maddy and Rolen have by the end of the novel, in essence, become mere simulations of a perceived reality to be found layered somewhere beyond their own existences. Whereas Barth's arguably adolescent protagonist is predominately shocked by the realities found

in the distorted world around him, however, adult reality for Maddy and Rolen has become a dysfunctional extension of their damaged childhoods. The hopes, dreams, fears and insecurities they experienced as children have become permanently affixed to their adult lives, imprinted onto almost every aspect of their adult character, motivations and actions. Recreating both their adult and childhood worlds in print presented quite a challenge, but one which seemed necessary to display the impact childhood trauma can have upon our adult lives. Fortunately, whether it is through fragmentation and rearrangement of genres, multiple formats, point of view shifts or anachronistic movement through time, Barth's post-modern blending techniques offered the tools I needed to present readers with splintered insights into Maddy and Rolen's story in a manner truly representative of their shattered lives.

Barth's influence is, perhaps, most obvious toward the end of Their Faces of Children, where the multiple genres featured in the first four sections are stripped of their formal titles, their formal formatting and page breaks, and then begin to blend together as do the genres found throughout various sections of Lost in the Funhouse. This happens somewhat gradually, beginning in the "Intermission" section. First, this dissolving of formatting occurs with the occasional slip from one genre or point of view into another. But these slips are few and far between, and all of a temporary nature until the final section. Then, in the final section "Somewhere Between . . ." the formal titles, page and even format breaks begin to disappear, leaving seemingly random shards of sections, points of view, and genres alongside one another without any formal boundaries. Along with the disappearance of these formal boundaries toward the end of the novel, the titled, and later untitled shifts in "Intermission", the last section "Somewhere Between . . ."

eventually manage to break free of even the patterned and predictable overall structural sequencing of the first four sections. Dissolved any semblance of order or structure, “Somewhere Between . . .” is intended to mimic the disorder of Maddy and Rolen’s internal realities, both of whom are trapped in a random oscillation between adulthood and their traumatized lives as children. The freedom to extend beyond and blend together the boundaries of multiple genres to accomplish such an effect would certainly have not been possible, nor perhaps warranted, prior to the twentieth century with its modernist, and later, post-modern social perspectives as well as the writers such as Barth with the skill, vision and ability to capture a rich variety of relative perspectives in their work.

The movement of time is similarly progressively jumbled in Their Faces of Children in an effort to punctuate the trauma created because of characters’ inability to ever break fully away from their pasts. Both the “Maddy” and “Rolen” narrative sections are formatted in linear time much as they are in the stream of consciousness sections, but working opposite to those sections in terms of the general direction of time. Rolen’s narrative sections move forward into “real time”, while Maddy’s move backward into the past, traveling in directions exactly opposite to the predominate directions traveled in their stream of consciousness counterparts, which through flashbacks, follow a general and linear direction in time, but tend to skip internally into the past quite frequently. This is somewhat of a cross between the relative linearity of works up to the modernist period, and the seemingly random nature of time in post-modern works like Lost in the Funhouse. Behavioral Healthcare sections, on the other hand, seem to skip randomly around in time throughout the entire novel. As in “Intermission” and some of the internal flashbacks in the stream of consciousness sections, the past, present and perhaps, a real or

imagined future become progressively jumbled. Finally in the last section, time, alongside genre and point of view shifts, time ironically, becomes linear in many regards, and yet more jumbled. Like the realities of its characters, no matter how hard “Somewhere Between . . .” attempts to move forward through the present, it can never fully escape the past as the trooper drives Maddy and Rolen into an uncertain future.

CHAPTER II

THEIR FACES OF CHILDREN:

A NOVEL

One

Rolen Decides To Go Naked

It was all silent under the sheets next to Madison. Rolen could not hear her breathe beneath the thick sweater she wore. He listened carefully for the sound of his own pulse against his eardrum, but could only make out the faint rhythm of the watch strapped to his wrist. The wind surged against the windows, an invisible thief, stretching its fingers through the apartment door and sounding like the screams of women and children. Rolen's own screams sounded more like tornado sirens to him, twisting up inside him at those times when he found himself alone within his dress shirts and slacks, the heel of the wing-tips cutting into the neck of his feet, his toes crowded together-- his ankles noosed, his toenails unable to breathe within the dark sack of polyester socks. He closed his eyes, opened his mouth and tried to let the sirens out, but nothing ever came of it.

The alarm clock on the floor beside the bed flashed an intermittent noon. The storm had been over for quite some time, yet the smell of it lingered, shifted down upon Rolen's tongue through invisible openings in the dark. The pulses of florescent green dissolving into the fabric of the room sometimes tasted to Rolen like mouthwash, stinging

his tongue if he kept it in too long. Night. He had intended to talk to Madison about how the stories of night-time drizzles no longer did it for him: he was afraid of his fingers slipping away from her in the rain, of being carried away down a paved street toward a sewer drain, and left struggling for breath alone under the grating. The bedtime stories, too, had turned ridiculous-- he had just plain refused her the last few times she tried. *What would be the sense?* he figured. Now, Rolen felt the need to tell her that he had found a new sense of balance. It came to him before the shrubbery below the balcony had slowed his fall, the pavement stopping him fully, and then the hospital-- the phone therapy with Hank was working. He had even made a few friends here . . .

“My new friend,” he had slipped in on the phone and “*My friend!*” a point he fully had planned to make, **MY FRIEND** worked into the conversation the very first chance he had. She should be happy, he wanted to tell her, Maddy and all those stupid senseless sessions about co-dependency. But when he met her at the airport, her eyes circled everywhere, barely settling on the lace of his boot before flitting off into the blur of bodies-- her eyes briefly landing here and there, on the blue crested cap of a serviceman, the nose of a pig-tailed girl, the head of a woman sobbing hysterically, and then launched off again toward a concession stand. She completely avoided the cast on his left forearm and wrist, the naked fingers stretching out of it-- she ignored the fact he had shaved for her and, with the good hand, held out an offering of salted peanuts. “You and I are in different places” she had said almost immediately, pushing him away with her bag.

In different places, Rolen thought as he rolled over in the bed toward her. He stared at the shadow of her back. He stretched his fingers out to run them through her hair, but pulled them back-- she seemed to be shivering. Rolen tried desperately to picture the wings unfolding from the spot he had first felt them on his back, but could not reach past the constraints of his shirt. He turned toward her again, this time knocking the cast against the headboard-- the pain sharply racing up to his shoulder and all the way out

to the fingertips. Madison moved further away, barricaded herself behind a wall of pillows. He kicked his feet out of the bed, sat rocking himself on the edge of the mattress, and pulled the t-shirt up over his head. He ignored the throbbing fingers, began once again to form the wings in his mind-- the wings stretching out from his shoulders, the wings casting shadows as they flexed and twitched. He pictured the two women, their breasts swaying under the moonlight as they ran laughing, the ants invading the blanket and his grandmother calling after him as he ran away from her down the street. "You dirty, DIRTY boy!"

"You can't even look at me," he said, rising from the bed and turning to face her.

"Can you?"

As the wind died down, the pressure slowly retreated from the windows, the fingers receding from around the door, pulled back out into the night and Rolen could hear Madison turn on her back once again and breathe- her eyes wide open, staring not at him, but at where she might see her reflection on the ceiling. "How about a story?" he offered, but in response, Madison only turned herself away-- this time more tightly against the wall . . . Rolen's fingertips had swelled to the size of watermelons and when he brought them together, it seemed his tongue had gotten somehow between them, the taste of metal spreading from the fingernails to his stomach. The screws and plates with which the doctors set the bone, the wires which now held the skin, tendons, and muscle together in his right hand, lifted him from the sheets and Rolen stumbled to the bathroom, past the t-shirt crumpled on the floor. It was no wonder, he thought as he flipped on the bathroom light, she had fallen in love with the stars, had become infatuated with the invisible shapes within shapes. He remembered how he had fed her in the hospital, had lifted the spoon to her mouth. Madison had need of him then-- she had walked right out into the street and stepped in front of a car. She had told him about it from the hospital,

the loneliness and yet even then, the world closing in-- he had accepted it, no questions. He had traveled half way across the country just to see her-- but even then she could not look at him, really look at him. Rolen wondered whether she ever really had. From the bathroom, he could hear her pulling more of the comforter around her, burying herself beneath layer after layer as if repulsed by the very notion of him. Rolen kicked the door shut, turned on the bathroom fan-- the low hum for a time would cover the sound of her.

He turned on the shower, and with a little struggle, his jeans and boxers fell to the floor. He folded them neatly, and stacked them in the hamper. He paced between the sink and the shower, trying to reason everything out as the doctor had told him to do. But as he sat on the toilet, finally unraveling his socks and tossing them on top of the hamper, he could not bring himself to pull the garbage bag over the cast, could not stand the thought of stretching the rubber band, working it over the bag to seal off his arm within the cast. He looked at his reflection in the full-length mirror: the cast, the swollen fingers, the knob of his knees and the paunch of his stomach. His eyes were blood-shot and the skin of his face pale and dry. He appraised his hair sticking out in different directions, the crookedness of his ears-- one lower and the other higher. Rolen could almost visualize Madison standing beside him there, the locks of her hair swaying freely across the skin of her shoulder until the bathroom started to close in on him somehow, the medicine cabinet mirror within the vanity mirror within the round hand mirror-- all reflected within the full-length one over the sag of his freckled shoulder and Rolen stepped out of the bathroom door, completely naked, tossing the garbage bag to the side and standing free in the bedroom, the light from the doorway shouting out into the room from behind him, his skin bristling out in the open air.

Rolen stepped out to face Madison-- to take a stand before her, but it took quite some time for his eyes to adjust once again to the dark. Beyond the swirls-- the rings of yellow and blue, he could hardly even make out Madison's form beneath the pile of blankets and pillows she had stacked about her-- piled over and around herself on the bed. Rolen opened his mouth as if to speak-- carefully positioned the lips and tongue . . . He wanted to talk to her like a rational adult, to try once again-- to find some kind of balance between them . . . Instead he kept moving right past her, past where the dog had settled at the foot of his bed-- Rolen marching into the hallway and down the stairs. He lifted his keys from the dining room table, opened the door and stepped out into the night.

See-Saw

Once upon a time there was a man and a woman *a boy and a girl* Alright, a boy and a girl. *what were they wearing?* The girl was in a pink nightshirt and the boy *the boy was bare-chested, and in jeans-- no socks* Lucky boy! Was his chest rippling too? *of course not. he's a boy-- but it was pretty firm.*

The girl had pigtails, in a pink nightshirt and the jeaned boy with a firm, not yet rippling chest *that's right. . . wait a minute, where are they?* They've snuck out. *together?* No. One night, the boy, disgusted with the way his evil grandmother has forced him to wear the clothes of his dead father, executes his plan to steal away under the moonlight. He waits patiently under the sheets until his grandmother has gone to sleep-- he hears her footsteps in the hallway, the springs on her sagging bed, and later the light switching off. The boy listens carefully, and then, at last, when he hears her revolting snoring through the bedroom wall, he throws off the ancient and musty sheets-- the smothering bed clothes of his dead father, slips out of his father's pajamas and into a pair of boxers and jeans *wait. where did he get the jeans and boxers?* Is it important? *to me it is.* Alright. He had been planning his escape for some time. He had bought them secretly from the few dollars he made with his paper route and by saving up his lunch money. When he had saved enough, the boy had snuck into a department store and got them a few days before-- while he was in town on an errand for his grandmother to buy milk and eggs. Are you satisfied? *yes. I guess so-- go on.* Shirtless and barefooted he carefully and silently pries open his window, sneaks out upon the porch roof and steals into the night sky.

What about the girl?

you mean me?

yes. no. you know what I mean--

Night after night, there was a little girl who couldn't go to sleep because she wanted to touch the stars. Only her father was cruel and her mother was too nice. what do you mean by that? The father could see no future in a little girl's dreams of becoming an astronaut ballerina, of a woman traveling across the sky or pirouetting on distant planets, so he barred her windows shut at night with a padlock, for fear she would get ideas of her own and sneak away to astronaut camp. what about the mother? The mother felt sorry for her little girl. She, too, had her childhood dreams kicked and flattened until they were dead. So one day, while the little girl was away at school, she snuck into her room and pasted florescent stars and planets across all the walls and on the ceiling. She hung a mobile of the solar system above the little girl's bed. For once, she stood up to the little girl's father. so what's so bad about that? Night after night, the little girl would stare at the stars and the moons and the planets, and then at the barred window-- knowing full well that the stars for her were only a dream. It taught her that dreams are meant to be trampled and broken.

so how did she get away?

I don't know. I haven't got that far yet.

Can you try?

why don't you pick it up here-- you're good at figuring out how to escape.

Well, why doesn't she just steal her father's key?

he's hidden the key somewhere she doesn't know and her mother is too afraid to tell her.

But her mother slips up one day, and she sees it in her parent's bureau while she's helping her mother fold the laundry. He's put it in the underwear drawer, beneath his v-neck t-shirts and her mother's oversize panties. *a typical man-- you're all always thinking sex, aren't you?* C'mon, it's just a story. And besides, if he is a typical man as you're suggesting, it makes sense he'd put it there. *no, he'd put it out in the wood shed.* OK, so you're right. So he hides it in the wood shed, and one day . . . *and one day when her mother forces her to go out and take him a cold beer, she sees it.* That's right. She

sees the key when she walks up behind him and he opens up the top drawer of his tool box. *No, it's hanging where she would never think to look, right out in the open-- right where he always kept his keys, hanging on the key rack right alongside the ones to the tractor, the snowmobile, and his precious motorcycle.* So she waits for the right moment and she takes it. *That's right. His back is turned and he's too busy with his chain saw or something, so before she hands him the beer, she plucks it right off the wall and hurries back into the house, into her room and waits for the night.*

And when night comes?

It takes forever for the sun to go down, but when it does, the little girl slips into her pink nightgown and climbs into bed where she has hidden the key beneath her pillow. Her father comes into the room as he does every night. To tuck her in supposedly. She pretends to be asleep, and when it is all over and he leaves the room, she listens for the door to close and reaches under the pillow for the key. Is it still there? Well it takes her a while to find it, and her heart is about to leap right out of her nightshirt, but yes, at last finds it. The little girl curls her fingers around it, clutching onto it like she had never had anything before. She waits for the sound of her mother crying and her father, well, she waits like the boy for the sound of them snoring, the whole time staring out past the bars and into the bright stars. Is that when she escapes? Wait, I'm getting there-- the little girl springs from the bed, a little guilty at first about leaving her mother, but the stars are calling her-- so she puts the key in the lock, throws open the window, and climbs out to freedom! Will you be patient? You're ruining it. . . . She has some trouble with the lock at first, she is not used to keys, but when she finally does open the window, she pauses. She is afraid.

That's when she sees the little bare-chested boy coming down the sidewalk.

you're pushing you know. how the hell did he get there?

He climbed out onto the roof of the porch and down the tree in front of his house.

but why this little girl's house? why not some other little girl?

I think it was destiny-- that, and their houses were not that far from one another. You see, after the death of his father, the little boy and his sisters were forced to go live with his evil grandmother. She believed that little boys should be little men. Her idea of men. His mother too. They would never let him go outside and play. Play was DIRTY-- there were other things too. Anyway, so he was on his way to the town's playground, walking down the sidewalk thinking how free he finally is, how much fun he can finally have, when he hears the little girl opening her window. He had never seen a little girl so beautiful. As soon as he caught sight of her there, staring out and up at the stars he wanted . . . *Be careful, the little girl might just slam shut her window!* But she doesn't because the boy can see she's afraid. He promises he won't hurt her. *so how does he help her out the window?* He just asks her if she wants to come out and play . . . What do you think she might say to that? *that seems harmless enough . . . she might say yes. there seems to be something about the boy she can trust--* Really? Well, the little girl can trust him. He isn't like her father or the other little boys.

So, eventually the little girl decides to take a chance and trust the little boy. She says yes, and after-- and after the little boy gives her a hand climbing out the window, they make their escape together to the playground. They look up at the stars along the way. The little girl says she's never seen the stars so bright. The boy tells her how she'll be able to see them much better from the swings, from the top of the slide. *The little girl, though, reminds the little boy to take things slow.* What does she mean by that? *They need to start out with the stuff that's closer to the ground first. You know, like those springy horseys--* the ones with the coils underneath? Are they fun? I've always wanted to go on one of those. *Yes, or maybe those kiddy carrouseles, the ones that make you feel dizzy-- or even the see-saw.* That's OK, the boy says, they have all night and though he's dying for the slide or the swings, he'll settle for the horses.

Madison Refuses a Sponge

There are voices and then light-- the coughing, a dull throbbing and white spilling in half crescents from above and around her. There is pain, yes, but more a kind of hopeless-- a numb murmur and weightless before the fingers. She can feel the fingers now, turning her over and back down. Sponge.

Weight. Her head and she could not lift them. Strap. The smell of iodine and paper cup. Sweating. She can not lift nor turn her head. Breathing. She is on her back and metal. Needle.

She dreams the voices calling her name.

madison-- her mother . . . stars, the planets . . . was there a padlock? She is turning,

spinning . . . falling . . .

Maddy-- her father . . . hand . . . fingers . . . turning . . . YOU CAN NOT!

maddes-- rolen . . . you can not . . . I need to . . . Don't leave . . . I need to . . . I need to

Madison-- dr. labia, hank . . . “and how does that make you feel?”

Cold-- thin fabric before the thicker. Wet. The light getting brighter and dull forms. Her arm. The voices again and crying. Breathing. A flat echoing and then low moans.

A face . . . her mother. Her father in a chair, coughing.

“ . . . the car, Madison. Didn't you see the car?”

Her mother standing over her, beside the hospital bed, brushing the hair from her eyes with dry fingers. Her father up from the chair now. Madison can hear him pacing. He is coming closer.

“The driver said you looked directly at him, Maddy. He said you stepped right out in front . . .”

“Don't call me that!”

“Leave her alone,” her mother says, turning from Madison to face him. “She'll tell us when she's ready.”

Her father in full view now, standing beside her mother. Her mother smiling, a forced smile and her father, she can see his hands, his fingers-- already she has begun to form the charcoal lines around him. She looks past her mother to the empty chair behind her, a white spackled wall where outside a window it is snowing. A television is on above a plastic cart with water-- the volume down and there are two men tossing one another around. One man is climbing a post and a woman in a bra running to his side. She is screaming, screaming-- but her voice gets lost in the eyes and teeth of the crowd surrounding her. A voice pushes out and then in the hallway they are running. The figures blur and she could only see their coats for a moment-- flashes and then flowers, another table, this one wood-- a phone and the curtain while they shove in a needle.

Rolen's not here-- *he's left me.*

Madison hears her father's voice like a distant echo, by now the charcoal lines have surrounded his body-- charcoal boxes within boxes separating him from her, the lines forcing him smaller, pushing him further down the tunnel until he is nothing but a speck. The coats are all leaving and her mother has collapsed in the chair crying. Madison is

outside the window and down on the street. She steps from the curb. The car is green and it's coming and Madison steps again. She thinks of Rolen, eyes the driver and then the hood, the sky and glass-- the pavement over a sewer grate. Madison is wet and cold. She doesn't know why she steps, but her legs are still moving, pushing her forward and she cannot stop. There is no sun but sky and faces, there are voices again and teeth moving but her eyelids are heavy, and her mind fingers about the move and their last conversation:

“It's only for a year-- it won't be much longer.”

“It feels like you're running-- running to where I can't find you.”

“You can come down any time you wish-- you know that.”

Madison puts down the phone. She is curled on the floor under a blanket. The neighbors are at it again, she can hear their bed moving right through the wall. She reaches for the wine, stares at the candles, picks up the phone and breathes in.

“Tell me a story Rolen.”

rolen-- a bare-chested boy who comes to a little girl's window

Sir Rolen-- a shining knight who never takes off his armor

Rowlander-- the man in a pleated kilt who rescues Maid Madison

Rolen-- a teller of stories at bedtime and sweet

The phone is ringing. ring. ring. Her mother and speaking. Moving. She can not move them. Her father not there. Her mother and no, she is sleeping. Yes, dear, I'll tell her and yes, try to drive safely, and no, she can't move them-- too early to tell.

“Rolen,” she asks her mother, “where is he?”

He’s coming in a day or so, honey, but first a nurse, yes a nurse with a cart-- a basin and sponge. No, her father and no, they are leaving and yes, the curtain, yes, please the curtain--

-the fingers are cold and the water and no, you can not take that off and no, I don’t need you, and no, you done quite enough-- leave me alone.

Wait. Yes, the needle. Please wait-- yes, the needle. yes.

Breathing. Low moans and then flat echoing. Moving. Dull forms and thin fabric. She is on her back and metal. Strapped. The voices again and crying. . .

The nurse leaves and turns out the lights. There are no stars on the ceiling but outside the window it is snowing. The snow looks almost like the glimmer of stars, shooting stars, yes, and in them may be a moon. She closes her eyes and it is quiet. Madison closing her eyes and thinks of a story: Boxes and tunnels and Rolen is coming and rolen and rolen and rolen . . .

Behavioral Healthcare

Selected Private Conversations in Five Therapy Sessions and Various Acts and Scenes

THE PLAYERS

ROLEN HILT

MADISON (MADDY) PATTEN

DR. HANK LABIA

The action takes place in the office of Dr. Hank Labia, PsyD., a behavioral therapist in a small city on the east coast of the united states.

Act One: Therapy Session 7

Heavy construction equipment is heard-- the low throated grunts of diesel engines-- bulldozers and baccos and dump trucks. Then jackhammers and shovels-- they claw and scrape at the earth-- earth earth, sand, and soil removed-- a rock. The shrill notes of machinery backing and a loaded dump truck driving away and a foreman's whistle-- or maybe even a foghorn.

Voices emerge from behind the curtain:

VOICE 1: Scrape, Scrape, Scrape, Scrape . . .

VOICE 2: Claw, Claw, Claw, Claw, Claw . . .

VOICE 3: Grunt, Grunt . . .

The curtain opens.

Before us is a therapist's office. It is a dimly-lit room of three walls folding open toward the audience-- not unlike the yawning mouth of an angular tunnel. The walls are flat and plain, almost colorless except a trace hue of blue. The walls are tall, like roofless panes of smoke-blue glass extending far above the stage and its cold wooden floor. The two sides fold into the center, inner-most retracted wall, which appears as distant and thin-- hardly the width of a woman, or a man. Perspective folding into epicenter--like train tracks or buildings beneath a clear sky, dissolving into a single point. There is a window on the wall, the height and width in proportion to the players. Bright yellow sunshine pours into the pale blue room from the window which is open as the curtain rises.

Against the left wall, to the right of the audience, is placed a chair, stretched over with leather. Above the chair, suspended from the wall hangs several diplomas, all boasting the name of Hank Labia. On the side of the chair furthest from the audience is a tall lit floor lamp, the shade of which resembles a cone inverted toward the floor-- the lines of light are sharp and contrast their surroundings. They cut across the center of the chair and its occupant, Dr. Labia, who appears relaxed in the chair with clipboard and pen, a spit cup alongside a short squat cup of coffee steaming at his boots and spurs.

DR. LABIA: [somewhat subdued and murmuring under his breath] Yip! Yip . . .

[The good doctor stares at his board from beneath the brim of a Stetson cowboy hat and above a well-trimmed goatee. He bends to lift the spit cup, and spits tobacco out into it, then in one elongated moment, puts the cup down and lifts the coffee to his lips, blowing first and then setting it back down.]

DR. LABIA: Yip- Ye!

[He straightens himself in the chair. His hair is dark, long, and flowing, it stretches down past his stiff collar in springing, yet pointed locks-- as if to scratch an unreachable fold of spine upon his back. He is rugged and sensitive, a

womanly man in jeans, but a man sure in a moments notice, of wherever he happens to be at any particular time. A finely balanced and secure human being. His boots never leave the floor, the spurs his insurance policy.]

DR. LABIA: Yip, Yip . . .

[Dr. Labia looks up, startled, swings his pen above his head like a lasso, and points to the two occupants of the long, plush couch opposite him on the stage.]

Against the opposite wall (as mentioned above) is a soft plaid couch complete with end tables adorned with table lamps without shades. Only one lamp is on at any given time, but when one turns off, the other comes to life somehow, sometimes one fading and dissolving while the other flickers on, or visa versa. Often, though, on that note, the two lamps are sometimes almost in unison at times, frequently working as if one mind-- give and take, reciprocity and balance (words painted above and behind the occupants on the wall). The object of the session is for the occupants of the couch to figure out how to get the lamps to both stay lit simultaneously, reducing the contrasting fluctuations by adjusting the fade control devices they fumble in their hands (small metal boxes with oversized radio knobs). The occupants of the couch, Rolen Hilt and Maddy Patter are seated exactly twice the width of a human apart. They appear in the inconstant and fluctuating light scheme as a nose here, an ear there-- an eye. One in dress slacks and a tie, the other in sweats and running shoes-- they appear more as if in motion, blurred and fragmented, but sometimes in unison and balance nonetheless.

Perhaps accidentally-- or maybe not..

VOICE 3: Grunt. Grunt . . .

VOICE 2: Claw, Claw, Claw, Claw, Claw . . .

VOICE 1: Scrape, Scrape, Scrape . . .

The construction noise increases steadily, drowning out the words of the therapist, the audience can see his lips, his teeth, the shape of his goateed jaw moving, his mouth changing forms, but are unable to hear what he has to say over the whistles and diesels and scraping shovels. The occupants of the couch can not either, as is apparent when they both cup their ears and lean forward from their places on the couch. When there is a sudden lull in the construction noise, Dr. Labia's voice breaks clear in a shout:

DR. LABIA: [shouting at first, and then adjusting the volume of his voice] PERHAPS—perhaps it might be a good idea to . . . a notion, a hankerin that is-- to draw down that there glass.

[An uncomfortable silence follows. The lamps, both, stop their wild fluctuations, and simultaneously produce a low medium throbbing. The doctor rises from his chair, moving toward the open window, but stops.]

DR. LABIA: What do you say . . . Madison? Rolen? Do you think-- What's it in those there heads of yours?

[Both occupants ease back into the couch, placing their control devices down, one at a time, between them on the padding. Dr. Labia remains standing.]

MADISON: [Tentatively. She is the first to speak.] Well . . . I'm not sure. I mean I'm not entirely sure I feel very strongly either way.

ROLEN: [Raising himself slightly from the couch, inching his way toward Madison ever so slowly. As he speaks, however, he is still looking at the Doctor.] What I think Maddy is trying to say is that it's going to be okay either way.

MADISON: [Visibly recoiling at the mention of her name.] That's not what I'm trying to

say at all. You always do that. You're all the time putting things into my mouth.

ROLEN: [Somewhat flustered.] I . . . I hate it when you . . .

DR. LABIA: [breaking in] Rolen, remember what we yawned about last time. Calm and steady. Follow the pattern-- round it before roping. [Polka music is heard, the melody softly swinging at first. *Shouts of encouragement from the audience.*]

ROLEN: [Breathing in deeply. He pauses all movement for a moment before speaking again. The music flourishes and rises.] What I mean to say is that I support whatever it is you're trying to get across to Hank. I know it must feel to you as if I'm trying to put words in your mouth, like I'm trying to control you or something. . . Like I, myself, do not care whether or not the window is open or closed. [Another labored breath.] But the truth is that I . . .

MADISON: [Interrupting-- cutting him short, but calmly.] The truth is that you're putting words in my mouth! You really don't care about the window and that I shouldn't either.

DR. LABIA: Madison. I know you must be ready to rope him up right now, but let him finish a while.

ROLEN: The truth is that I only wanted to help. I figure if I help you, maybe, just maybe sometime you'll help me. Up or down, what does it matter-- it's only a window. [The audience responds with a heartfelt "Ahhhhhhh. . . ."]

DR. LABIA: [Pointing with the very tip of his pen.] Now, Madison. Your turn. Get along!

MADISON: [Breathing in deeply herself before speaking. The polka music is bouncing, cutting back and forth energetically.] I can understand your need to help me. It must feel that I shut you down and get angry every time you are just trying to be nice. But, you're not getting it-- I need to slow things down and decide for myself whether or not to close the window. After all, I'm in this room too and the window concerns me as much as it does you.

ROLEN: [Reservedly.] All right.

[The audience applauds enthusiastically.]

DR. LABIA: Alrighty then. YEA-HAAAAAAA! [Adjusts his hat. The polka music dies down and fades out.] Well now, what say about that window?

ROLEN: [inching forward and towards Madison on the couch.] Well, I suppose I'd like to keep it open.

MADISON: To me, it's just as well you close it. But if Rolen says he wants to keep it open—well, I'd go along with that too.

[The construction noise creeps in again from the window and the end table lamps begin to flicker once more.]

ROLEN: On second thought, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to close it. What do you think Doc?

DR. LABIA: Well, it may be that they'll start a-carrying-on again down there . . . [The doctor steps decisively towards the window, but is stopped by an outburst from Madison.]

MADISON: [Suddenly, with the doctor's actions, looking very anxious.] Wait-- I think it'll weird me out too much if you go and close the window.

ROLEN: [Noticeably disturbed. His voice raised above the construction.] So leave the DAMN window alone then! That's exactly what it was I was trying to say in the first place!

MADISON: Could've fooled me! It sure as HELL didn't sound that way to me!

The construction noise increases above the shouts of the players. Rolen and Madison are both standing up now and visibly exchanging harsh unpleasantries with one another. The lamps flash wildly. Dr. Labia repeatedly attempts to intercede, but is unsuccessful. He backs into his chair. The good doctor takes a seat and patiently removes his hat. The house lights dim and the construction noises fade, slowly replaced by the night sounds of

crickets and the African jungle-- the screech of a chimpanzee, the roar of a tiger, an elephant's high spouting snort, and then the echo of hooves and paws and nimble tendons moving, swiftly running through the deep foliage and tall grass-- a stampede.

The curtain closes. There is no applause.

Madison Alone

The shower is running-- the water pounding against the plastic walls and twisting down the sides. Madison can hear it even from under the comforter and pillows, the water collecting force at the bottom and turning into the drain. The fan is turning too, but faster-- then slower, its dull hum pushing into the bedroom with the caution of an invader.

Madison listens for the sound of him moving. She imagines him standing over the bed, like her father when she was a child. *maddy-- you asleep maddy?* Then she had the legs, strong legs, that could run away-- but they had failed her. She can hear him again-- the footsteps from the bathroom, his breathing at the side of the bed, and then the turning. Her fingers curl together, clamp down upon her palm in a fist. But now the feet are moving, the footsteps rounding the bottom of the bed. She waits. She listens-- follows the footsteps down the stairs. She lifts herself up from the comforter, hands still fisted, almost blinded at first by the light spilling through the bathroom doorway. When the front door slams, Madison strains to hear the deadbolt. She is alone.

Alone-- dr. labia, hank . . . “the time apart might be positive-- think of it as an opportunity to develop that inner strength-- a healing time for that little girl inside you.”

alone-- rolen . . . “when we’re together, you want to be alone-- when we’re apart you can’t get enough of me-- I just can’t figure you out.”

alone-- maddy . . . “stay with me mommy-- read me another story-- don’t turn out the light, please?”

Alone-- Madison . . . “It’s takes time Rolen-- you can’t expect me to work through what I need to in a couple months . . .”

The shower turns off easy enough, but Madison cannot stop the vision she has of Rolen climbing over the rails of his balcony and jumping off. Madison turns off the bathroom light, then the fan, pats the nose of Coppertone . . . Rolen's dog—fingers down the ears and tells him to lay down. She finds her way around the alarm clock in the dark, almost tripping on Rolen's shirt. As she rocks on the side of the bed, her knees to her chin, there is Rolen one leg at a time over the rails-- he pauses for a moment, his toes out over the edge of concrete, his eyes glaze over and his hands release from the rails. Maybe it's better he's left.

Curled up under the comforter, Madison wraps herself around a pillow. The comforter is warm, the pillow soft . . . *the stars, the planets, the moon* . . . her eyes are heavy and Madison, despite herself, slowly drifts into a fitful sleep.

She dreams . . . It is a familiar dream.

Madison dreams she is a little girl again. Her mother is there, in the rocker next to her bed-- her face young and vibrant once more-- *read me another, mommy, one more--* she reads and she reads, her voice soft of castles and fairies, but Maddy is fixed on the stars-- she closes her eyes and she's floating among them. She is older, weightless and safe in a suit. *The stars oh so beauteous, the stars oh so fine and Maddy, my maddy will grow up in time* . . . Rolen's beside her now holding a knife and a spoon. He's spreading marmalade, marmalade, dishing it out-- oh, she says, oh she screams, oh, not too soon!

. . . Hhhhhssssshhh . . .

The air is escaping and Madison struggles for breath. Rolen begins by scooping her, then slashing her, his eyes on his fingers as he knifes her to death. Fingers, there are more fingers-- fingers and hands slipping out from a moon. *Run away, run away, the end much too soon* . . . the air rushes out and Maddy shrinks in the suit to the size of a girl. She

closes her eyes. The stars are all floating and spinning about-- marmalade soft, marmalade sweet and Rolen is speaking, just finishing a tale-- his voice now like syrup, he rocks in the chair, and Madison dreams once again there is nothing to fear-- *one more story, rolen, please just one more . . .*

Madison wakes . . . She wakes up alone.

The comforter hot, the pillow is wet . . . *the fingers, the knife, and the spoon . . .* Kicking off the comforter, Madison tosses the pillow. She starts from the bed, where the alarm clock still flashes noon.

Drop . . . Drop . . . Drop . . . the shower is a constant painful reminder, and Madison finds it hard to fall back to sleep. She closes her eyes, but can see the water pooling into a ball, all the time gaining mass and weight in the mouth of the shower head. It sags heavy, heavier-- then slips past the chin. He is falling, falling, his eyes glazed over, falling down faster toward the drain. She follows each falling, anticipates the drop. She pulls the comforter up over her head, clings to the pillow more tightly, but still she can see him falling . . . drop

falling-- rolen . . . “I don’t know what to tell you . . . I just knew I had too . . . I thought that I could . . .”

Falling-- Madison . . . “balance and stability . . . you’re always spouting about balance and stability . . . I need . . . I need . . . how do you think this looks?”

Falling-- dr. labia, hank . . . “Rolen has his set of problems . . . he’ll need time to work through . . . he needs balance . . . you need to find stability in yourself . . .”

falling-- maddy . . . “don’t fall . . . please don’t fall . . . don’t turn off the lights . . .
. please don’t . . . don’t . . . I need . . . I need you not to fall . . .”

Madison forces the blinds apart, pushes open the door. Rolen is missing-- his truck is not there. She snaps shut the deadbolt. The trip down the stairs has tired her legs-- they are throbbing. She sits down on the living room chair. She listens. She waits-- imagines his footsteps returning, the way they sounded before. Strong and stable and secure, the weight balanced evenly. He has failed her. Her fingers slide down from the forehead, cup the back of her neck, then fan through the hair. Her feet are now moving, stepping back up the stairs. *A shower might help-- yes, a shower.* The fingers curl over the railing-- step by step, push, push, push-- she is almost there. She remembers him helping her, Rolen standing behind her, the old Rolen-- firm and steady. She wishes he were here.

The shower is running-- the water steaming. It whistles-- it pounding and twisting down the plastic walls. The air is cold and Madison naked. The fan turns slowly-- then faster. Madison can hear it humming even under the water. She steps fully in.

End Game

So there's this guy *and a girl?* Of course, there's always the girl . . . *always?* Well, for this particular guy. It seems he has always had one specific girl on his mind. *why a guy and a girl . . . why not a man and a woman?* Humor me-- we'll get there, but for this one they're still adolescent teenagers.

Who's telling this story anyway?

Anyway, this guy and the girl are in the girl's bedroom. *whoaa there soldier! this guy's moving pretty fast isn't he?* The girl's parents have gone away and she invited him over. *don't they even eat or anything before they wind up in bed?* Well, yeah, I guess they could-- I just wanted to skip ahead to the good stuff . . . *as far as I'm concerned, the stuff before is the good stuff!* Okay, okay . . . I can see that about this girl. Let's start this thing over again--

* * *

So, the girl's parents go away and she has the whole place to herself . . . *and she's thinking, "hmm . . . I wonder whether I could invite that guy over, he's pretty rough around the edges, but he seems the right type-- he surely wouldn't go straight to the bedroom or anything!"* Why, of course not! *certainly not . . .* This guy would absolutely never do anything like that! *never, but what kind of guy is this guy?* He's the kind to bring flowers and a box of chocolates? *oh, I wouldn't think he's that kind!* Then, he shouldn't be the kind to try too hard? *he should have some backbone but yet pliable . . .* You mean he should eventually bend to the girl's every whim! *Not necessarily, but he should be open-minded . . .* Shouldn't the girl be open minded too?

I'm sure she is, but there's limits to these things! Let me think of a good way to go about explaining this . . .

Okay, I think I have it-- why don't you tell me about this guy. What do you want to know? Let's see . . . is this guy the kind who would, say, go out with a girl just to take advantage of her? That really depends on the girl. What kind of girl is she? Why should it depend upon the girl? Is this guy the type who would take advantage of one girl and not another? I didn't mean that at all. I was just trying to have a little fun.

That's what all you guys say.

But with me it's true.

How do you think that sounds to a girl? If this guy can take advantage of any girl, sooner or later he'll do the same thing to her! What kind of guy is he anyway? How does a guy get to be that way?

Listen Maddy, I'm just trying to find out what you're looking for. There are a lot of jerks out there, but you shouldn't confuse me with the others.

But how can you expect me not to, if you sound exactly like all the others?

. . . you can't keep punishing me for stuff someone else did to you. I'm sorry, but I won't take the blame-- I just can't.

Maybe we should just drop this . . .

It's your game.

That's my point-- to you it's all a game!

Rolen Turns Back

Rolen stepped outside, stretched his fingers toward the stars visible every now and again through the overcast sky. The air was a little cooler than what he had expected-- the concrete landing cold and wet, the rain still dripping from the balcony, splashing in large drops upon the sidewalk and the wind rushing up against the skin. Rolen tumbled the keys in his right hand, swung the ring around a finger. His fingers clenched tightly around the jagged metal edges, and he curled his hand into a fist, striking it against his chest. He opened his mouth, stuck out his teeth, but the sirens had wound themselves dry somewhere inside him-- nothing except the dull thud of a hollow echo.

Rolen thought of Madison upstairs, barricaded beneath the comforter and behind pillows. He moved closer to the door and positioning his ear, listened for the sound of her coming down. Madison. Rolen thought of her in the hospital-- he in the chair and she restless in the bed. *Tell me a story Rolen*. She had needed him then-- scooping the marmalade out and spreading it on her bread. He wondered whether she'd remember that now, how he fed her with a spoon. Madison. As he fitted the key in the lock and turned it, the deadbolt slapping shut-- he pictured her as a little girl with pigtails and almost swung the key the other way. Maddy. Steadied in his resolve, Rolen yanked out the key, the teeth violently jerking out against the tumblers, and turned himself fully into the night air.

The wind swept down the street, invisible except for a swirling mist rushing sideways under the street lamps. Rolen could hear it scraping up against the buildings, the wind finding its way between and under the parked cars. He could feel it brush up against his skin like a thousand invisible fingers, each one a confirmation that he was for the first time, alive and well-- standing out in the world, no longer hiding behind shirt sleeves and a tie. The wings had returned to his back, the wings folding and unfolding freely. The wings, he knew, were casting shadows upon the landing behind him as he

stretched them out, one wing and then the other. Rolen looked past the bushes all planted in a row under the balcony-- ignoring the crooked one jutting out, the odd browning stiffly-branches into which he had fallen. His eyes traveled quickly beyond the cast on his left arm to where the fingers extended out freely now and pointed to the sidewalk-- the sidewalk curving along the street and under the darkened windows where his neighbors turned fitfully in their beds, suffocating under the weight of comforters and sheets.

Rolen followed the sidewalk up and around the block. The concrete was cold and gritty beneath his toes as he pushed himself forward, veering into the grass every now and again to wipe off his feet. He watched his shadow shift under the street lamps, the shadow pulled out and circling him slowly, always tied to his feet. He passed the first building unnoticed, then stopped where a cat peered out sleepily from behind a window-- the cat stretched its teeth, the sharp tongue in a yawn. Rolen eyed his own reflection, his chest blurred, distorted against the rain-streaked window pane and beyond it the thick-coated cat-- the diamond eyes retreating from view behind layers of folded skin, the tented ears collapsed back, the curved and polished teeth pushed forward. The tongue pointed up lazily to where he stood outside the glass frame, then jerked down below the sill. Rolen looked up to where the moon struggled out from behind the rushing clouds, then down to the green blades which stubbornly stood erect in the gaps between his toes. The storm had left the grass dewy above the soil damp beneath, and Rolen felt himself dirtied somehow as the cat lifted itself from the sill-- the cat arching its striped back, its tail curling lazily before jumping off the sill, out of vision, and into the dark. Shredded blades clung to his feet muddied with speckled earth and Rolen thought he might just try to find himself a heavy rock.

The cast on his left arm weighed it down, the fingers at the end hanging lifeless from the frayed plaster toward the hollow slope of his thigh and Rolen stood frozen, unable to move before the empty window sill. He tried to fill the window with Madison,

the delicate ball of her nose and crooked mouth peering out from behind slatted blinds-- her voice, a deep pool of eye reflecting beneath an arch of exquisitely feathered brow. Madison. Maddy, the pig-tailed girl. Madison, the woman who he had left upstairs and behind him, her eyes staring up at starless night. *Tell me a story Rolen.* "A bedtime story?" Madison's hair falling, dropping down from where she had tucked it behind an ear-- *she nods* . . . Once upon a time, Rolen began, the words whispered-- the words curling and springing from somewhere deep inside him until a sudden gust of wind lifted the hair from his arms and legs. The cold invisible fingers upon his skin and Rolen's feet stumbled into motion from the grass to the sidewalk-- the wet concrete pushing him forward past the shuttered blinds and shadowed balconies above apartment doors. His shadow leapt out from under the street lights, a flat elongated dark rushing out in one dimension and then shifting into another. The shadow chasing, then followed the apartment buildings neatly arranged into a semi-circle around his street-- the street lamps, he knew, would eventually come full circle. The sidewalk would surely take him back to where Madison had barricaded herself under the covers, and Rolen rushed forward through the wind, stepping briskly past the parked cars which paved the street.

Rolen's shadow spun about him as he traveled from lamp to light post-- from bush to telegraph pole, and telephone pole to tree. Tree. Rolen looked again to the moon, to the where the stars were hidden behind the rush of clouds. The stars were beyond the grasp of his fingers and Rolen's eyes fell back down. It was then that Rolen confirmed the shadow stretching out from under him was a shadow without wings. His pace slowed when he remembered the wings. He had felt them dissolving, melting under Madison's silence and again, against the emotionless eye of the cat: the weighty sockets retreating into his back-- the delicate cartilage and bone frame breaking apart and dropping from his shoulders, the elegant curving feathers freed and drifting upon the breeze toward a pillow of soil. It was always the same and Rolen stopped, crouched beside the neighborhood dumpster with his arms and cast around his knees. Opening his

right hand, he considered the stainless ring and toothed keys-- the slender hand of the wristwatch snapping around in a circle. As he shifted his weight, lifting his foot from where it rocked upon a shard of broken glass, Rolen wondered whether Madison had even noticed he had left. The foot was bleeding and Rolen almost lost his balance, forced to steady himself with the cast as he yanked out the glass.

Step. Walking. Faster. Struggling forward, Rolen ignored the wingless shadows circling about him as he lifted the knees-- marching sluggishly on. The air damp and stale, his breath labored and pulse sagging, Rolen's foot arched up against the wet concrete paving as he worked past the labyrinth of lightless windows. He had made his way around the block, his own apartment drawing near, and Rolen lifted his head-- searched for any glimmer of light spilling from the bedroom window where he had left her. Madison huddled behind a wall of pillows, fully clothed beneath a comforter. There was an opening in the sky above the building through which the moon momentarily broke completely free, the moon like a dull sun surrounded by a small gathering of stars, but all the lights were still darkened in Rolen's apartment. He looked carefully for any movement from behind the blinds, but could not make out any sign.

Rolen moved through the parked cars, past his truck, and out into the street-- careful not to place too much weight upon his foot. He stood directly in front of the apartment window, stretched out his arms beneath the streetlamps:

“Maddy?” he asked, almost in a whisper.

“Madison.” he voiced more firmly.

“MADDY!” A dog barked in the distance and a porch light flickered dimly across the street. The wind swirled and pushed against parked cars, but Madison did not appear in the window.

Dear Hank

Dr. Hank Labia, a prominent local psychiatrist and humanitarian, answers your questions about life, love, psychological dysfunction and automotive care.

Q.

Dear Dr. Labia,

I am having a hard time saying anything to my partner lately. It seems the only way we can really talk, or open up to one another seriously is through arguments or fights. By that time everything comes out distorted and hurtful-- Is there a way to talk out these things before they get to that point? What is natural? I simply don't know anymore--

Please help!

Frustrated

A.

Dear Frustrated,

Arguments and verbal fighting (vs. Physical) are ways that people sometimes resort to in order to communicate-- although discussions versus arguing would be my preferred mode-- argument is a natural and effective mode of communication with many couples—

Discussing the same issues rationally (and working them out before they come to a head), however, can often be much more fruitful and productive, the resolutions more mediated--sound and beneficial to everyone involved. Try talking with your mate in any way you can and building toward open discussion. Remember, true communication often takes much effort and time to develop-- in most cases, it just doesn't happen over night.

Start talking with your mate the way you know how and work toward more open and less heated modes over time.

Q.

Dear Dr. Labia,

I am suffering from recurrent dreams-- I am a boy in the wild, running naked with gazelles (llamas). The humans come and capture me-- but they speak in a strange unintelligible tongue. They give me granola bars and grass clippings-- show me their watering hole, but I can never master their language and I wake with a hopeless, sinking feeling that I'll never really be understood. Can you help me?

Troubled

A.

Dear Troubled,

Dreams often represent and symbolize issues which you are unable to either face or resolve in a conscious state. Dreaming, then, becomes a mechanism by which the unconscious mind tries to express the problem and perhaps, figure things out. One way to approach such a dream is to try to draw parallels between the characters, events, and themes within the dream and draw parallels with those same factors in your conscious life. Be careful-- it is easy to over-analyze dreams. Identifying, the real life issues which dreams expose and explore, however, can be the beginning of a healthy self-evaluation and can be useful to begin to deal with the real-life issues in your conscious-state.

Identifying such issues is the first step in the healing process.

Q.

Dear Dr. Hank,

I have a 1987 Mustang that is acting plum crazy-- It shuts itself off for no good reason, sometimes loses all power after running just fine, and it also is making some kind of strange ping-plat noise on the right (passenger) front side. Could somebody please tell me what the hell is going on? Baffled

A.

Dear Baffled,

Although I'm not quite sure about the noise without giving it a listen (you might want to take it to your local mechanic), My guess about the shutting off and random loss of power would most likely be the Electronic Control Box-- this is sort of like the brain of your electrical system. Like your own brain, these boxes are designed to take in all the information from the electronic sensors (located in all the vital systems of your engine), interpret that information, and make the appropriate adjustments to the engine's ignition (timing), fuel intake (injectors), exhaust, and temperature controls. After a while, from too much information or what-- these brains go bad. When they do, the engine starts to act crazy and eventually just shuts down.

I Hate You—Don't Leave

. . . Drop . . . Drop . . . and down he goes. Rolen is falling falling and Madison all alone. She hates that he left, yes, down the stairs and with the close of the door. Shut out. Not even bothering to turn off the shower, no . . .

. . . pushes the comforter down and the alarm clock flashing . . . Stop, Madison wanted to say. STOP-- Maddy wanted to scream . . . **STOP!** . . . stop . . . Instead, she pulled up the comforter and listened for the sound of him leaving. STEP, Step, step . . . Up and kicks the comforter down . . . legs over side-- stockinged feet on carpet. Light on. . . Stairs down. He is gone. She can see him leaving, traces where his feet down the stairs, the landing below and then past the kitchen table and out the door. No, don't leave she once wanted to say but couldn't . . . I'm afraid you couldn't tell if you had a good man even if he was staring you in the face, her mother once told her before Rolen's move. Don't, she had managed to say-- but by then it had been too late. Rolen in the rain with not even the light of the moon . . . Rolen's fingers rolling down her cheek. I'll take care of you Maddy, but no, and Madison pushing him away. *I hate you!* No, she was wrong when she thought she could help him too. Yes, she still wanted to, but no, she didn't think she could. There just wasn't enough left over-- with her own pain it was too much . . . pain . . . snapping and coiling up her leg as she balanced against the banister railing and toward the first step-- try to be calm . . . go after him-- yes, one step at a . . . and foot down . . . D d o w n . . . and Pain UP

“I tried the best I could Maddy,” her mother holding her but Madison pushing away-- “I tried, but something went wrong . . . something always wrong when it comes to you”

It is too much for Maddy and she pulls herself from her mother and curls into a ball.

“Stop it Madison!” Maddy kicking as her mother tries to put her arms around. “You’re the only one who can stop this . . .”

Madison finds her way into a corner, thinks of Rolen leaving after she had finally convinced herself of his fingers touching the stars.

“What went wrong?” her mother crowding into her ear again . . . “What did I do that was so terrible? Your father and . . .”

Another step, fist around banister and then down-- the sharp splintering up her leg. Her mother and father in the hospital after . . . Her father. Rolen a few days later, but only almost the Rolen that she had known at first-- he had seemed perfect then. Gentle and patient. A man willing to wait. To protect and serve. Wait, they had both agreed before Rolen grew tired of waiting. Rolen before . . . a rolen to share bedtime stories and secret glances-- caresses in the rain. Rolen willing to wait before she found out about his dark need to be naked. NAKED! Just like every other man she had known. Her father. Wait, Madison had said the first time he tried. Wait! Wait, they had agreed-- they could take things slow and make love in their dreams for now. In the stories. Stories at bedtime-- sweet dreams. But the look in his eye when she pushed him away. Eyebrows slanted and eyelids narrowed. The stare like her father. His hands. Rolen’s fingers never the same after. Sick, the way he needed everything in the open like that. SICK! Unhealthy for her to risk exposure with such a man-- stupid like stepping in front of a taxi. But still she took another step-- the fractures in the bone sliding . . . and

another-- she wanted to believe in him more than anything. She didn't want to be left alone.

Place weight on the banister, not on . . . Down-- focus away-- and down . . . Rolen at first reading at night from the big book of fairy tales. Her friends telling her it was hard to go back-- yet the Nightingale flew away and escaped the cage. It was odd, thought Madison, how Rolen could be so gentle and patient in one moment and then . . . Still, they had the bedtime stories and the tales of night-time drizzles. But Rolen was gone-- the door slamming shut behind and Madison focused upon the banister-- not the next step, her mind far in the distance turning the pages and the deep soft of Rolen's voice . . .

. . . And night after night before she went to sleep, Maid Madison would step out upon the tower balcony-- her eyes tracing the subtle slope of majestic mountains turning down slowly into green brushstrokes of soft forest and then falling to frolic playfully in the tumbling water beside which always stood the dependable and gentle Sir Rolen. Never a night went by without the Reliable Knight in full armor waiting beneath the tall tower if only for a sight of the Fair Maiden. Soft and tickle, too, would the sound of song reach up to her from the knight below-- songs of stars and moons, of planets rushing by and spinning under the spell of Maid Madison. Safe, yes, she felt safe-- never in danger with the Good Knight below, always just a breath away on his rounds around the castle, and yet never too bold to cast his eyes too long on her before the appointed time she would be ready. The Fair Madison never to be troubled with the dangers lurking outside the tower-- the Stable Knight honor-bound and completely trustworthy in his pledge to her. And yet, Sir Rolen was never pushy either, willing at a moments notice to disappear upon her request forever to the forest . . .

. . . how she hated him now. Rolen the fallen as she takes another step down. No, Rolen, you weren't supposed to . . . the pressure splitting the cracks in bone with the weight and Madison looking away. Maybe he's just outside the door . . . Yes, just on the other side and waiting to give me the space I needed. Maybe, yes, maybe he never really left at all. "Maybe the boy can learn to find the balance with the girl . . . maybe it will only take a little longer." Yes, down look away and almost there-- only another and another and then the landing. Another, and yes . . . there it is-- the door. Just the lock to turn and the other and . . . No, look out the window first. Yes, the window-- curtains to the side but no Rolen. Rolen not there.

Madison-- the woman left looking out window

Maid Madison-- a girl of purity abandoned in the cloister

maddy-- the little girl left alone without night-lite

Fair Maiden Madison-- a princess down from the tower-- searching the forest without hope

"Damn you Rolen-- Help me!" . . . opening the door to find no Rolen-- an empty space where his truck was parked. Shut door-- slide and click. She waits. She listens-- imagines the returning of his footsteps, the way he was before the fall from towering tree . . . Rolen, the kind and gentle. Rolen always saying the right thing-- making her laugh. Madison brushes by kitchen table. Her leg . . . the place he is not. No Rolen waiting in armor by kitchen table, no, not Rolen patiently smiling or drying the warm wet down her cheek-- the kitchen hollow and refrigerator echoes, the linoleum beneath her feet cold even through stockings . . .

Rolen Stands Naked

As the clouds moved once again to overtake the moon, Rolen stepped carefully from the street to the concrete landing before his door. Tumbling the keys through his fingers until he found the one to the apartment, he inserted it into the lock-- but pulled the key out slowly and sat down upon one of the lawn chairs on the landing instead. The plastic was cold, the air wet beneath the skin, and it took Rolen a while to ease his back into the chair's hold. Looking up to the balcony, Rolen could feel a dull pain start to throb once again through his arm. The cast was damp from the moist night air and the wires wet which now guided his fingers through pulleys. Rolen examined the cut on his foot from the dumpster; he had left a trail from the middle of the street to the sidewalk leading right to his door. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine Madison applying the iodine and antibiotic, Maddy wrapping the gauze on either side of the ankle. He thought of her upstairs above him, strained to hear her move. Instead, the memory of Maddy still in her sweater and jeans flooded into his mind-- Madison cowering beneath the sheets, piling the pillows about her and then, yanking the comforter on top of everything else. Rolen wondered whether it all had been worth it.

Headlights. Around the corner of the road which wound into the apartment complex swung the headlamps of a car. Rolen could see them stretching across the sky, spotlighting the corners of buildings and yards, bright eyes veering toward him from the distance. Searching. Rolen looked down from the paunch of his stomach to his kneecaps. He heard the thump of the stereo growing nearer, the tires pressing against the pavement, the low groan of an engine. Lifting himself to his feet, his fingers thumbing desperately through the keys, Rolen hobbled halfway to the door before slowing. Stop. The headlights were drawing closer, two artificial suns flaring dangerously out into the night sky, and yet Rolen could not bring himself to face her. He was not yet ready to slide again into his boxers and jeans-- not quite sure about lifting the crumpled t-shirt

from the carpet and stretching it back down over the head and neck-- not quite prepared to have Madison turn away from him again. Rolen found himself standing motionless before the headlamps as he had the cat-- the headlights fanning out to where he stood on the landing, the fiery eyes blinking over the first speed bump and Rolen with mouth agape as if dumbfounded by their brilliance.

As the headlamps reached the second speed bump, the probing lights slashing ever closer across the pavement, the stereo pounding deeper into the night, the whine of engine tightening and rising-- Rolen's arms began to tremble, his knees on the verge of giving way. Closer. Before he could stop himself, Rolen found himself hurdling in a limp toward his truck, fumbling with the keys, and swinging open the driver's door frantically . . . Rolen's hands pressed tightly around the door frame as the car passed by, the window rolled down and the silhouette of a face emerged from the interior-- a high-pitched rhythmic screaming joined with the thumping bass. The chin emerged slowly, a lip and the teeth-- the face jerking as if in a perpetual scream. His toes distorted and curled, burrowing into the asphalt beneath him, Rolen stood frozen until the face had dissolved into the dark interior. The music thumps and engine whining dissolved into the distance and the car sped away, not even slowing for the muffler to clear the speed bump in front of Rolen's truck. Rolen watched as the headlights rounded the circle of pavement-- the tail lights smeared out of the complex in elongated lines behind the fierce blazing eyes which made their way forward to search across the hedges and bushes and door frames of some other street.

It was not until all was quiet and the headlights out of view that Rolen's eyes adjusted and he once more began to really breathe. He sat onto the jagged contours of the separated seams-- the torn vinyl covering of the pick-up's bench seat, at first unsure what to think. When he checked his watch to find the minute hand only slightly beyond the six, Rolen began to notice how cold he had become-- the bumps on his skin surfacing slowly, yet sharply as with the realization that he had only been naked behind a door. If

only he had stood his ground on the landing, Rolen would have felt satisfied: the car slowing, a silhouetted jaw dropping out the window and Rolen fully content and ready to face Madison again, to stand before her-- no more secrets between them and nothing to hide. But as he looked back up to the darkened window, Rolen could only see himself bare-ankled and shouldered, the strange shadowed chin pressing forward into the night, and yet the eyes unable to truly perceive anything of Rolen beyond the flat colorless paneling of the pick-up's door.

When the wind started up again, carrying with it the rain from the street, Rolen pulled his legs inside the truck cab upon the plastic floor mat. He twisted the cast with its plates and pulleys and wires between the steering wheel and the bulge of stomach, reaching across with his good arm to close the door. Here too, within the cab, the fingers of wind reached in past the weather-stripping, the wind sounding this time much like the shrill whine of a playground warning: a short-haired teacher blowing her whistle from above ear muffs and a long plaid skirt-- the children running, thrashing frantically about to get in one last gasp before drowning. Madison. Rolen could see a short-haired Maddy. A nightmarish Madison shrieking from behind a chrome whistle for him to stop and dress-- Maddy squeezing shut her eyes and covering her ears for good measure. Madison spinning away from him until something began to turn deep within Rolen-- a spiral coiled until his back straightened against the truck seat, his chest convulsing and Rolen opened his mouth-- his tongue strained in a tremble . . .

When the wind died down, Rolen listened to himself breathe-- a moist rasp pushing from his lips and fogging up the truck's windows. He rummaged through the keys, slid the square one into the ignition-- turned the engine over until it caught high idle. After switching on the heater fan and sliding the controls to defrost, Rolen turned on the parking lamps and saw his own reflection distorted above the speedometer and temp gauge built into the dash:

SERVICE ENGINE SOON

The dash lights ventured out into the cab, flashing green and gold across his chest-- the red of warning projected upon his stomach and thighs. The low whine of the heater fan pressed openings in the windshield and Rolen began to look down the crease of the hood, down the crease of his own nose.

Rolen pulled the seatbelt across his chest. The floor mat felt gritty, the pedals awkward beneath his bare toes and Rolen pressed down the accelerator to speed up the defrosting. His fingers unhindered from their grasp of the steering wheel and Rolen tilted his head down to look out through the clearing of windshield: the yellowed parking lamps poured out a into a luminescent pool in front of the truck as he visualized the trip to the freshly paved interstate and then out into the open air-- Rolen running under the bright streetlamps through town, naked beneath the night sky. Free. With his good arm, Rolen wiped an arched blur across the door glass until he could see more clearly. Much to his surprise, a soft glow now pushed out from behind the blinds, the light projected onto the balcony and rails-- a slanted reflection reaching over the metal posts and down to where Rolen looked up from inside the cab of the truck. Maddy. Rolen traced the way again to the interstate, the steps to take him up the stairs to the bedroom and back to where the parking lamps beckoned toward the road. He looked from the lighted window to the road and back. Madison.

For a moment, Rolen sat mesmerized, unsure-- he took one last glimpse up toward the bedroom window . . .

Rolen began to map the journey in his mind:

>>>> the arrows narrowly penned through the intersecting streets and alleys <<<<

Releasing the parking brake, Rolan shoved the truck into first and let out the clutch beneath the pressure of his toes, flicking on the headlights only after the pickup lurched out of its space-- never slowing for the threatening speed bump which waited, the pavement jutting up and stretched in yellow stripes across the curve of street ahead.

Tree-Top

The little girl's alone this time? yes, alone okay, so the little girl waits until she can hear her parents snoring-- the stars, the moons, and even the planets seem to be calling for her from outside the bars of her bedroom window . . . and when, at last, she hears them snoring-- when at long last she hears them snoring, she springs from the bed, snatches up the key from beneath her pillow, and makes for the window and . . . she doesn't know it yet, but there's a surprise waiting for her outside the window!

Wait a minute, would you? She hasn't gotten there yet!

You're right-- you were saying?

I was saying that she had heard it might be cold outside, and since there's no telling what weather she might run into, she puts on a pair of sweats under her nightshirt and pulls on a light jacket she had stored under the bed in the event of just such an occasion.

You're right, I am sorry-- that was pushing.

I'll forgive you this time, but give the little girl some space-- She needs a chance to tell her own story . . .

Anyway, after preparing herself for the weather, the girl steals silently across the rug on the bedroom floor-- she fears the slightest noise might awaken her father and shoot the whole works down the drain. The girl can barely hold it all in, she's so excited about spinning about in the night air under a theater of stars . . . but she has to, right? yes, she must stay focused and quiet despite herself. The stars will be worth it. So she creeps quietly toward the window on her tippy-toes, clenching the key in her fingers. When she reaches the window, she pauses for a moment to look out into the sky where the stars, the moon, and the planets are waiting for her-- they seem more beautiful than she's ever seen them. Focus, the little girl tells herself as she slides the key carefully, silently into the padlock and with a twist, it snaps open with a loud clack! Her heart races, her

pulse quickens, and she freezes . . . and? well, what happens next? Needless to say, she waits for a few minutes before she makes any other move. That's the way with this little girl, you know-- she's easily frightened.

Does the little girl ever get past it, her fear?

It's a little hard to answer that this early in the story, but I can tell you that if she's given space and time, she can slow her heart down . . . and when she can hear herself breathing again, that's when she pulls back the bars and opens the window-- SLOWLY . . . careful not to startle herself with the sound of it sliding up. Good! well, what I mean is . . . that doesn't sound that bad, does it? Well, there's that . . . but she's still afraid of her father-- she's unsure of all men, for that matter-- she's not sure that will ever go away . . . Does she at least get out the window? The girl doesn't have as much experience climbing out of windows as the little boy does, so she has a little trouble at first-- she sticks one leg out and tries to jump, but can't get the other leg over the sill. She tries to sort of back herself out of the window next, but that doesn't work either. Finally, one leg at a time, she straddles the sill with one leg out and the other still inside, then swings the other leg out after a lot of effort until she finds herself sitting in the window frame, her legs swinging freely outside the house. It isn't that far to the ground, but the little girl has to wait a while until she gets up the nerve to make the leap to the yard.

Is this where the little boy comes into the story?

If he wants-- as long as he promises to take it slow . . .

Well, the little girl is out standing in her yard, her head tilted up toward the night sky. She is blown away by the stars that night-- how they twinkle, how they shine-- you know, that sort of thing. The girl is pretty much in awe when for the first time, she notices a tall tree spiraling up toward the moon. *It's funny, she thinks to herself, that she's never noticed it before-- especially . . .* Especially when she traces the turns of the trunk back down to the ground. The tree has risen up almost overnight, so to speak, its

thick trunk at the bottom finding root just on the other side of her parents' hedge. The little girl marvels at the tree, the strength and sheer size of it-- it isn't as spectacular as the stars, but comes damn close for something rooted in the earth. *Somehow, this doesn't sound like the same girl . . .* Doesn't it? She wonders how high it goes, and anxiously follows the twisting trunk higher and higher. From the ground it looks like it could almost touch the moon. It's then-- when she's gazing up at the top of the tree against the swell of the moon that she notices the leaves. *The leaves?* That's right! The leaves. There are leaves falling from the very top of the tree-- some leaves spinning down and diving, and others floating off somewhere out of sight on the breeze.

Wait. How's the boy fit into all of this?

Hold on-- I'm getting to that part. The little girl seems curious too. This particular girl wonders what could be making so many leaves come to the ground, so she looks back up to the top of the tree-- to where the tree-top is swaying back and forth across the moon. *Oh brother!* Yes-- you guessed it, it's the little boy! *I hope he has on a shirt-- it must be cold up there in the upper stratosphere.* OK, so he has on a shirt, but when the girl strains her eyes to get a better look, she can see that he sees her too. He is all the way up there waving to her-- he starts calling down to her. The boy calls out, "Come up and join me little girl." *I hate to be the one to tell him, but there's no way that boy can convince her to climb that tree from where he's at-- not without knowing him better and slowly over time, really, really getting to trust him. There's no way-- she hardly knows this boy.* But the boy didn't know that stuff about the girl yet-- at least not before he climbed the tree and all. At first, he thinks she just can't hear him and so he starts climbing down . . .

Wait just a minute , stop it there-- before you go on, this girl needs some information! In the first place, where did this tree come from and how in the world did that little boy get up there? And while you're at it, what exactly possessed him to think, even for a second, that the girl would just follow him up there without really getting to

know him-- let alone trust him? What gives him the right to assume anything about this particular girl?

ALTERNATIVE ENDING 1

Well, as he descends from the top of the spiraling tree, the little boy loses his step and bam! before he knows it, THUD! he falls down to ground-- right in front of the girl! He's hoping the girl's a pushover for fallen boys . . .

Not likely . . .

ALTERNATIVE ENDING 2

You see, the boy is running away from a bad home too-- his grandmother and family life wasn't like Mary Poppins either, if you know what I mean. Night after night, on his paper route, he'd pass by the little girl's house, and he fell in love with . . . sorry, grew to admire the way she stared out the window every night, gazing up to the stars and up at the moon. In fact, the girl inspired him and he began staring more and more up to the night sky himself. Much to his surprise and discomfort, he even found himself wanting to touch the planets and stars, the moon as well-- much as the boy imagined she did. So he devised a scheme: the boy planned to save every last penny from the paper route and his lunch money, in the hope of eventually buying a ladder tall enough to touch the moon-- he hoped, at least, that he could.

One morning, after he thought he had saved enough, the boy started off to the local hardware store fully intending to buy a ladder, but along the way . . . *let me guess, he runs into an old peddler who sells him three tree seeds and a magic watering can . . .* no, but you're not that far off-- the little boy runs into an old mystical tree trimmer-- a gypsy of sorts who talks him out of the ladder and sells him a magic sapling and a can of secret growth formula . . .

Maddy at Bedroom Window

Beyond the curtain, the balcony and rails waited perhaps the moon, the stars and planets-- maybe even rolen, but maddy could not bring herself to look out. No, not for even a moment. *wait* . . . Maybe just a peek-- yes, maybe rolen with flowers or Sir Rolen with shield, a serenade. Maybe just a finger to push aside the curtain and shades. *Wait* . . . No, probably shouldn't . . . no, it might just weird everything out . . . No, certainly not-- that's right, not after the jump. But Madison could see him on the rails already. Too late. Rolen on the rails now, his chest out and that she could not stop him, could not even fight it with the lines. Even with the crayon, the lines thick and hasty around the vision of Rolen jumping-- but rolen still falling, falling . . . Rolen yet dropping like a dead pigeon . . . down-- rolen plummeting with his arms tucked under and the ground rushing up.

Madison sat back down on the edge of the bed. Her legs were already starting to bother her and she thought she might just turn off the light, ease back into the comforter and sheets once more, then pull the pillows back about her like she did when she was a little girl. Coppertone lifted himself from the carpet, one ear peaked up-- his tongue gyrating wildly for a moment, then eased back down. "He's left us both," said Madison, to herself as much as to the dog, but in her mind she was already working her way down the stairs and out the door after him. Maybe, she thought, just maybe Rolen hadn't really left at all, but changed his mind at the door and waiting in the recliner downstairs. Maybe they weren't voices that she heard, or the slam of a truck door. After all, the sound of an engine starting, and rolen pulling away may have been only her imagination. "Rolen!" she cried out-- almost . . . rolen?

Madison sunk back onto the bed, her legs still bent over the edge. She stared at the ceiling and thought how much she missed her own-- *the stars, the moons, the planets* . . . maddy squinting, tried to make out the constellations. Soon he would be back, but by then the lines would surround him and she, herself would be long gone, to where his

fingers could not reach her-- among the stars, pirouetting between the planets-- across the moons . . . *tell me your deepest secret, said rolen, and I'll tell you mine.* "I think you already know," she had said. Yet still he wanted more. "It's the little things that get you," Madison had told Hank. "Those little things add up!" But now she had to lift herself from the bed and do something-- anything. Positive displacement. Don't let it get to you, maddy, as her feet touch the floor. Not for even a moment . . . no, good to work through . . . yes, one step at a time.

Madison was up and moving, rummaging through her bags for the toothbrush and toothpaste, her hands beginning to tremble, her fingers about the zippers and compartments and endless corners where she possibly could have tucked them. Slacks and tops and dresses, socks and hose-- her private things but Maddy could still taste the pretzels, the stale thin mayonnaise sandwich and peach snaaps from the plane. In the third bag she found the overnight valise in which she packed the eyeliner, lip gloss, and deodorant. Madison pushed aside the contact solution, the Q-tips, the shampoo and hair spray but still not the baggie with her toothbrush. She threw out the tampons, the face wash, the disposable shaver, and her medication upon the carpet-- Rolen's carpet. She dumped it all out onto the floor, her fingers frantically pushing and shoving the hair brush and tweezers out of the way until at last, she leaned back against the bed rails and with her two fore-fingers, pushed ever widening circles into the skin stretched taut across her temples.

Her eyes hung red and swollen in the bathroom mirror, and Madison tossed back a few of the pills before bending down and positioning her mouth to the side of the steady stream of water pushed out from the facet. She let the water run, and with an unsteady hand, unscrewed the top from the tube of Rolen's toothpaste, squeezing hastily a glob onto her finger, before raising her upper lip back to the mirror and rubbing the white and blue paste across her teeth. It had the taste of salted peanuts to her, and then . . . no, more like a minty amaretto to the tongue-- and still in the back of her mouth hung the foamy

reality that he had left her alone . . . *please don't leave-- don't leave me rolen* . . . and there as well, dripped a reminder of the friend he had mentioned at least three times on the phone and then again in the truck. "My friend . . ." he had said as they sped along through the endless flat night and probing sinister headlights. "I couldn't deal with that," said *my friend* and of course, there was the "If it hadn't been for '**MY FRIEND** . . ." just last week, the night she had told him she couldn't stand it any longer and had gone ahead and emptied her savings to buy the ticket.

Madison found herself unable to surround it all in her mind, so there she was with the lipstick, around the words scrawled across the mirror, **MY FRIEND!** smeared with the fingered toothpaste-- the red lines drawn around and around the letters, the words and exclamation thrice stated so matter-o-factly, the red lines more thicker and thickly pressed into the glass until she had run entirely out of room on the vanity and began to push beyond the mirror onto the wall and sink-- the cabinet. She wondered whether right now Rolen was on his way to meet her, his friend-- he hadn't said so, but she knew it had to be another woman. Why else, for what ever conceivable reason would he withhold the name of this so brilliantly wonderful person, this friend who he obviously consulted with about everything and anything and always before her. She just a second rate receiver-- second place always to his friend, Friend, FRIEND! Who was surely a woman or he would mention the name Frank, Joe-Bob, or Willie, and even the masculine pronoun HE if, in fact it wasn't a she. But no, she was sure of it, had to face the fact, the reality of the situation-- this friend, his precious Friend, was unquestionably, undoubtedly, irresolutely a female FRIEND-- most definitely a **SHE** . . .

As she knelt beside the toilet, the water swirling-- then gurgling down, Madison wiped her arm across her mouth and chin, finished the final line at the furthest edge of the bathroom floor with her last tube of lipstick, bringing the ends together just below the runners which rose up from the linoleum. As she thought about how she would need to smear and rub the toothpaste, Rolen's toothpaste across her teeth once more, she

noticed for the first time, it seemed, the hamper with Rolen's clothes-- the shorts and slacks of rolen . . . the discarded shirts and socks. Madison thought for a moment she might take them from the top of the hamper, tear the clothes out and even the towels from inside and draw them to her nose-- one by one, to check for the scent of perfume on the collars or worse . . . She envisioned her hands pushing up against the hamper lid, her fingernails digging through the fabric inside and lifting the clothing out one article at a time-- stretching the elastic, the collars and waistbands to he nose. No, she tried to convince herself, no use working yourself all up over nothing . . . Yes, nothing. That's right . . . Trust him-- *but I'm not like your father or the other little boys* . . .

Madison ran her fingers through her hair-- jerked the nails and knuckles through where the hair had matted together from the hours in the plane and the wind in the truck cab and from burrowing beneath the sheets and comforter-- the pillows on the bed. She wished rolen was there. She wanted to feel him there beside her on the cold floor. Rolen, telling her a bedtime story . . . rolen, coming back night after night to her window . . . Rolen the Knight Shining, Rolander covered by his kilt, or rolen, the innocent little boy . . . *rolen, where are you?* Maddy brought her arms around her knees and rocked herself gently upon the tile . . .

Stop and Turn

The seat sticky and smooth. The pedals slide a wet cold-- then gravel between toes as truck lurches forward over speed bump and out around bend of street. The hell with Madison, yes, don't think of light in window-- no, not Madison smiles or Madison laughing. Street lights. No. Sidewalk . . . not the slant of her lips, the curve under sundress, or exposed shoulder. No. Yellow lines to white to dumpster. Speed bump . . . not Maddy's eyelashed glances before turning away. Elm tree on corner-- Maddy under Christmas tree with bow around finger-- the smell of cucumber lotion and stockings.

¹**yes** \`yes, `yeu, `e(y)e *are three of many variants* \ *adv* [ME, fr. OE *gese*] **1** --- used as a function word to assent or agreement {are you ready? *Yes*, I am} **2** --- used as a function word usu. to introduce correction and contradiction of a negative assertion, direction, or request {don't say that! *Yes*, I will}

²**yes** \`yes\ *n* : an affirmative reply : YEA

The deep of her eyes before opening . . . “Help me Rolan.”

Rolan the Knight Shining-- an honorable nobleman who rescues fair maidens from behind armor

rolan-- a boy who comes to window and helps a little girl over hedge

Detective Rolan-- the man behind badge who takes away bad guys and makes streets safe for Maddy

Rolan-- “Tell me a story Rolan . . .”

The clutch is slipping. Third, no first-- second . . . Engine stalls. Red lights flicker on-- WARNING. Truck rocks back. Silent whine of heater and wind. Wind like light across pavement. Invisible fingers-- caresses. The key . . . the key to ignition-- the key under pillow. Maddy turns the key in lock. click click, but lock is jammed-- “How could you Rolen?” Leave . . . just leave-- abandon me. *Fine!* “Maybe the girl wants the boy to stay, to help lift her over the hedge . . . maybe she just can’t ask.” Maybe, yes, maybe turn back . . . Madison sits up in bed, rolen bare-chested with arms around. She holds him, yes, accepts him as he is-- no, wait . . . No, just a dream. Just another stupid story-- like rain-time drizzle and wet in night-time travels . . .

. . . from bush to telegraph pole-- from telephone pole to tree, the unarmored rolen steps over twig and stone as naked as he can be. The green-scaled dragon in yawning window does not bother him now, just a cat unlike the shaded blinds in bedroom window still drawn closed, not Madison peering out from behind to let hair down castle wall to where he stands waiting bare-chested below. No, not the knight at all but instead something more modern. It was then he noticed again the wind and rain and as he hurries to unlock the cruiser door, the spotlighting headlamps of the pizza man slashing across the pavement and parked cars to where Rolen stepped from the pavement, barefooted with nothing but a badge into the rush of stale air behind the cruiser door. He can still smell Madison, the night-singer inside the cab, can see maddy under the moon with full lips slanted and then through windshield, her mouth in an O as the sinister car pulls up, the dark window rolling down and the man behind, his face out into the light and rolen ducking for cover from the flash of steel and gunfire-- Rolen protected from behind the cruiser’s door . . .

But Madison was gone-- the light on in the window now but the night singer long gone-- disappeared, left behind, far in the distance and out of his mind. Rolen focused upon his

own well-being, his very life in question it seemed. . . The question was a question of direction. It was strange, thought Rolen, that the man was not bothered by his wings-- Rolen disappointed that the man was not shocked by his nakedness. The truck seat, the damp of the vinyl pores gumdeweyed up to leg and Rolen in shadow once again, then flickering in shade . . .

Key . . . Turn key. One step at a . . . engine spins to life and red withdraws back into dash. Shifter-- slide over and up. Left . . . First. Clutch and then tires-- up and over speed bump. Bounce and then, down. Bedroom light on still in rear-view. Maddy . . . Madison. Sick, she said, SICK. Unhealthy, the way the boy longs for exposure-- to be seen under light. Love like the stars-- friction in dark. Sliding and rubbing. Or moistened by rain-- easier that way. Easy, his grandmother had said about women who let men have their own way. To protect and serve-- a man in uniform would never look at a woman that way. A decent woman would make a man wait. Wait. The end of the street coming. Wait, Madison had said the first time he tried. Rolen had waited a year but the thought of the pale skin beneath her sweater had pushed him too far. Stopsign. Stop, she had said when he had taken off his shirt. STOP! Madison pushing him away and Rolen backing up from her shamefaced-- the look on her face like the time he had run past his mother, his sisters and grandmother out the front door and down the street.

¹run \ren\ *vb* **ran** \ran\ **run; run-ning** [ME *ronnen*, alter. of *rinnen*, v.i. (fr. OE *iernan*, *rinnan* & ON *rinna*) & of *rennan*, v.t., fr. ON *renna*; akin to OHG *rinnan*, v.i., to run, OE *risan* to rise] *vi* **1 a** : to go faster than a walk; specif : to go steadily by springing steps so that both feet leave the ground for an instant in each step **b** *of a horse* : to move at a fast gallop **c** : FLEE, RETREAT, ESCAPE {dropped his trousers and *ran* }

Rolen tearing off his father's clothes-- the shirt and shoes of his dead father, the pressed dead slacks and mothballed socks-- dead.

“What were you thinking?” his grandmother to Rolan, then to his mother--
“That's no way for a boy to behave-- running off naked out of the house!”

Shaking her head, his mother holding Rolan down as his grandmother slides up the slacks.

“Stop it!” as Rolan kicks, screaming. “Turn him over . . .”

Rolan's arms forced down by his mother and his grandmother buttoning the front of his shirt.

“What could've he been thinking?” his grandmother to mother, then to Rolan--
“Young man! You will stay in this house, fully clothed, until you learn to behave the way a gentleman should! Your father . . .”

Rolan hopping, trips-- then free of his shorts and down the street. Running. The front porch behind him and Rolan running faster, his mother and grandmother-- the clothes of his dead father behind him. The wind, the breeze through his hair. He does not hear them calling. Stop! Madison. The light-- the sign of Madison in the bedroom window. Ma . . . Maddy telling him she too was afraid that first time with her. A decent woman to make him wait. A woman like that the real thing, his grandmother used to say-- Real like the rain and tears sliding down the curve of Maddy's cheek. Rolan touching, wiping the hurt away with his fingers . . . It'll be okay, he had said to her, I'll take care of you-- maddy . . . Madison pushing away. Stop, she said, don't-- Don't make promises you can't keep. Love like the stars-- untouchable. The moon above and the bedroom light behind. STOP AHEAD-- yellow in warning then red. Six peaked tents stretching out from the word. RED. White letters and toe stretching from foot and down. Brake and clutch at same time as truck slows . . . Up into first-- clutch out . . . Engine whine and

lowers-- down and right . . . then brake again pushing harder friction slowing slowly
friction until finally . . . **STOP** . . . Yes, stop running and back to Madison waiting in
window. . . .

. . . no, turn. Turn. Fingers pulling down and then tick tick of green light flashing
upon thigh. Left. Ye s l l left and up and then clutch out as truck lurches forward and
away into night sky . . .

Behavioral Healthcare

Selected Semi-Private Conversations in Five Therapy Sessions and Various Acts and Scenes

THE PLAYERS

MADISON (MADDY) PATTEN

DR. HANK LABIA

ROLEN HILT

The action takes place in the office of Dr. Hank Labia, PsyD., a behavioral therapist in a small city on the east coast of the United States.

Act Two: Therapy Session 4

The curtain opens tentatively to reveal a darkened stage. There is complete silence except for the occasional slide of a chair across hardwood, a periodic cough and the tone of a direct hit upon the bell of an invisible spittoon. After a rather lengthy pause of approximately one minute and fifty three seconds, the sound of someone rising from a chair can be heard followed by the scuff and drag of boots stepping clumsily across the aging floor.

DR. LABIA: [his voice telescoping in and out and in between the other stage objects, unseen, as yet hidden from view upon the dark stage] Excuse me, excuse . . . Just a moment . . .

DR. LABIA: [clearing his throat before moving forward] Pardon . . . I say, excuse me

there Maddy and Rolen. I'm a thinkin' this here winder could be, shoulda been, that is-- What I mean is that I think we'd do good, better with a bit of fresh air about the place . . .

DR. LABIA: [after a pause in the scrape and shuffling of boot-- then, a most definite stop and positioning] With your permission, I'm just going to . . .

Before the good doctor finishes, indeed, before any response or objection can be presented, a rattle and downward yank is followed by the sudden upward spinning rattle (cylindrical in nature) of a flapping window shade.

Blinding light enters the room (pushing out even toward the audience) as the shade reveals the glass panes of a window at the center of the stage. The light pours out upon the stage in the form of an elongated box of sorts-- the photons refracted into the distorted mold of the window frame. To the left and to the right of the window, all three players are in the office, but remain draped in shadow-- a profile here, the silhouette of an arm there, a leg, notepad and finger (an ear) the only discernable things emerging every now and again into the parallelogramic trapezoid of three dimensional light slanting in from the small rectangular window--

SILENCE: [over the sound of occasional coughs and the impatient squirmings of audience members] 34 seconds.

SUDDENLY, from the relative darkness to the right of the window frame, quantum-mechanical energy (candescent light) now also is released from a floor lamp shade situated above and behind the Doctor's leather chair. The light follows the fold of forearm and elbow down to where below the faceless silhouette of a stetson, a human in the form of a shadow, or visa-versa, appears to be settling rather comfortably into the deep contours of the chair:

DR. LABIA: [whispering at first, and then adjusting the volume of his voice] that's—

THAT . . . THAT is-- that was . . . As I was saying, doesn't this seem much better? Nothing like a window to shed some light onto the issue at hand-- you know, bring things out in the open where we can get a good look at them.

[Two spotlights track across the darkened corners and edges of stage, crisscross, and momentarily settle on the occupants of the couch-- a quick flash of an ankle, a forearm, a toenail. The spotlights move away and return-- then, just as quickly as they appear, the spotlights swing away from the stage, recede into the seated rows of audience and disappear.]

ROLEN: [features hidden, but his voice jaggedly breaking out from the dark] Hmm . . .

Well, I was wondering whether now that the shade is up . . . I mean, I was thinking we could maybe-- just as well might . . .

MADISON: [her voice sharp, finger pointed, slashing in and out of the window light— cutting Rolen off] Don't you go there-- Don't you . . . Don't even think about it!

DR. LABIA: [aside to Madison-- he whispers] Try to tell me how you're feeling right now Madison--

MADISON: [tentative at first, no angry-- her voice fluctuating] What do you want me to say? How do I feel! I feel like crap-- like he's trying to expose me to the public-- like I'm some kind of public display for Rolen's own amusement or something-- like he wants to parade me in front of the window because of some sick misguided fantasy . . .

DR. LABIA: [still aside, leaning more fully now to left of his chair-- his voice at an almost regular volume] Good, Madison, well done . . . Now, I want you to turn to Rolen and tell him what you've just told me. [the doctor smiles and winks before reaching back up over his shoulder and turning off the lamp] Git along there litl' darlin!

MADISON: [the tip of her nose breaking momentarily into the light of window-- a pause]

I . . . I can't. [her voice broken, the nose recedes back into the dark] I just can't.

DR. LABIA: [aside to Madison, his face abruptly illuminated by a flashlight he turns on and holds up against buttons of pearl which line his chest-- the shadows cast, stretch up, out somewhat hideously from the chin and goatee] Why do you think that is Madison? Can you try to tell me? Madison?

MADISON: [after a considerable silence] I don't know . . .

DR. LABIA: [putting down the flashlight and shutting it off-- the beam of light retreating back into the recesses of mirrored lens] Can you try?

MADISON: [her voice in labored whisper as if gasping for air] No . . . not when he's sitting right here--

[The sound of tobacco hitting the spittoon can be heard through the intervening silence— Di-ing! Plunk.]

MADISON: [more quietly, to herself] no . . .

[The multiple spotlights rush back across the stage-- invading as it were, the occupants of the couch. The spotlights converge and pause for a moment upon Madison-- she has pushed herself all the way to the edge of the couch, cowering and visibly shaking against the padded arm behind a knit pillow. The spotlights dwell on Madison but a moment before bursting once again energetically away from the couch in a twisting haphazard sort of pirouetting dance out across the stage and into the audience-- the light flashing, casting shadows against dark corners of the theatre before being quickly extinguished.]

DR. LABIA: [once it is all dark again, holding the flashlight to his chin and sliding it on] What about you Rolen? What do you have to say about it all?

[The spotlights rush back upon the stage and stop, center and glaring brightly upon the figure of Rolen frozen on the couch-- the converging light is intense, blinding in fact, so much so that only a rough contrastive outline of Rolen's

features can be seen or discerned by the audience through the spotlightings'
extreme bluish-white brilliance]

ROLEN: [stretching his arms and moving about as if waking from a deep sleep as the spotlights fade before, with the echoing deep resonance of a large circuit box, the lights are turned off] What? The window? I'm sure I didn't . . . What? . . . Huh,? What was that you were saying?

DR. LABIA: [his flashlight visible once more-- the flashlight flickering on and off, however, swinging across the stage, out into the audience, on and then off as the Doctor shakes it and eventually taps the end of the casing like a catsup bottle] I was just discussing with Madison whether getting things out in the open might be a good way to go here?

ROLEN: [his voice stronger and collected] Definitely. I think getting things out in the open can be great-- I mean, really good!

DR. LABIA: Hmmm . . . [A few more taps and flickers and the fumbling with the flashlight stops, leaving the doctor completely submerged in the dark except for his hat] Yes, yes. Go on . . .

ROLEN: [the sound of springs, Rolen leaning forward on the couch--] Sometimes, I honestly think I could just . . . [the volume of his voice increases dramatically (forward) and then adjusts itself down a decibel (reclined back but remains sitting erect)] That is, if I could only . . . you know, take the window, for example . . .

DR. LABIA: Okay, good. But hold on-- [the stetson hat of the doctor can be seen arching up and down, back and forth as if the good doctor is fidgeting with something on the floor by his boot] If I just could interrupt for a moment before you go too far . . .

[The level of light rises slowly upon the stage, the level brightening then darker, finally adjusted to the luminescence of a small candle, just enough to reveal the players on the couch-- an eclipsed Madison burrowed into a corner against the

couch's padded arm and a dim shadowed Rolen leaning forward wringing his hands. The Doctor can be seen adjusting the intensity of light with a control attached to cord on the floor, his hat and goatee rising every now and again to check the level of light with the fumbling of his hands.]

DR. LABIA: [rising back up from the floor into the chair] Ahhh . . . Now, that's the— what say about that? Yes, sir, ma'am . . . much better!

[A placard illuminated by a cigarette lighter is held up from among the rows of audience seating. Across it, appear the words “clap, clap, clap” in black magic marker. The placard is rotated about so that the whole audience and the players on stage can view it before the lighter is extinguished and the placard recedes back into the dark.]

DR. LABIA: [leaning forward to spit into a cup] You were saying Rolen?

ROLEN: [with fingers raking down his elongated face and nose] You mean about the window?

DR. LABIA: No, not yet. Try to think Rolen-- back it up a little there. [The doctor looks up from where he is scribbling on his clipboard] What exactly could you just? [Now twirling a pen in the air before him] If you can, I'd like you to slow on down and finish an earlier statement.

ROLEN: [his head and shoulders bowed forward, his face disappears completely into the slope of his hands] You mean about the window?

DR. LABIA: No. A little further back there Rolen-- [a momentary pause before moving forward] In your own words, you could just . . .

ROLEN: [his head raised ever so slightly, looking tentatively out from between a gap in his fingers] I could just . . .

A squadron of quaker parrots are released from small wire cages off-stage-- the distinctive sound of indoor flight can be heard. One after another, quakers fly about and

land on the players, in pairs yet alone, the green and blue tipped wings invade and make strafing runs upon the stage props, perhaps, even the occasional peck upon an audience member's ear. The parrots make a horrible racket, their eyes equally dull and vibrant. The lights dim as one of the quakers makes a landing on the shoulder of Hank, Dr. Labia- - the bird opens its beak, but after a long pause, however, can still somehow not seem to speak.

There appears to be some sort of mechanical difficulty with the curtain.

Flight

His feet upon the railing, Rolen spreads the wings fully. High. Out from the base at the center of his shoulders, the cartilage and feathers rise stiffly-- fan back and forth the air. Up. Don't look down . . . No, close the eyes, yes, picture yourself gliding. Flight. Extend the arms to the side and then forward. Check . . . No doubts, don't worry-- stop thinking, put logic away. Believe. Yes, if you can picture yourself-- if you can just . . . Check. Focus on the wind-- the wings lifting up and then out past the rooftops and trees . . .

. . . toes push up and lean front. Balance. Rock back on heels. Down . . . arms and legs, the wings and the . . . FOCUS: Picture it-- push forward and let go-- Flying . . . one simple Step and you will be . . .

¹free \ `fre \ *adj* **fre-er; fre-est** [ME, *fr.* OE *freo*; akin to OHG *fri*: *free*] **1 a:** enjoying civil and political liberty {~citizens} **b:** not dependent upon others: SELF-RELIANT **2 a:** exempt, relieved, or released esp. From a burdensome, noxious, or deplorable condition or obligation {~from pain} **b:** not bound, confined, or detained by force {prisoner was now~} **3:** not subject to restriction or official control **4:** having no obligations (as to work, relationships, etc.) or commitments (as to duty or custom; emotion) {~man; ~love, ~physical indulgence, etc.}

wings-- arms-- knees bend-- forward . . . Rolen stops. Check. He is thinking again. Clear. No, not his father, mother, grandmother, or maddy . . . Madison. Focus. Rolen stretches his arms forward, bends at the knees and . . .

DR. LABIA: If you think something bad will happen it sometimes will because you

make it. It's what we call in the business self-fulfilled prophecy . . .

ROLEN: Can it work in reverse? I mean, if you think something positive will happen . . .

DR. LABIA: Now you're talking-- positive thinking and reinforcement. Whenever you have negative thoughts or feelings, like impending doom for instance, try to look at things in a positive light-- instead of remembering all the horrible things that have happened to you, reinforce that positive feeling with the memory of the good things that have happened in your life.

ROLEN: That's easy to say, but what if there are no good things?

For a moment he is rising up-- floating. Rolen stretches the wings fully and extends his body to the tips of his fingers. Jump. In his mind, he can feel himself push away from the railing, his toes spring from the cold steel railing into the air and . . .

. . . there is nothing beneath his feet-- the ground rushing up and Rolen helpless to stop. There is only the sound of the wind rustling against his trousers-- the jacket of his father weighing him down and making the fall faster. The sleeves of the shirt flap furiously in the wind, extend past his fingers and Rolen tries to unfasten the buttons and clasps through the yellowed fabric. He tumbles and rolls through the drop-- the collar riding up against his chin in almost a strangle before the last button snaps and the shirt tears away and up into the sky above him. Rolen struggles against the shoes as he spirals down-- the left and then the right, but still he tumbles in a

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through an endless . . . The pressure makes it hard to breathe and he gasps for air but the air is hollow. Dropping through the open sky, it feels like his head will . . . The wind ripping through the open cavity of mouth and Rolen can not even scream. He turns over and over, the water forced to the corner of his eyes, the vessels of blood exposed and the wind now like a thousand dull razors against the skin. He strips the trousers off, the socks-- tries to lighten the load but the dead clings to his back and the ground is rushing up much closer. The ground is nearer and . . .

. . . Rolen braces for impact. The wings are too heavy-- weighing him down and there is not enough time to . . . climb. Down like a dead weight and nothing to do to stop it. His stomach tightens. He is tumbling again-- over and over dropping faster. There is no sky-- only ground.

ROLEN: Maddy, if you always think something bad's going to happen, it probably will— you're all the time looking for what's wrong . . .

MADISON: Don't give me that crap! Everything has always gone that way for me— bad.

ROLEN: Why can't you just give it a chance-- give me a chance? Stop being so negative--so defensive . . .

MADISON: Defensive! You are so full of it-- you and Hank, my father-- all you men! Once you've been screwed over so many times you start to see things the way they really are . . . and it's not a pretty picture let me tell you. You think you can march right in and make everything right-- Well, you can't. I have to make myself numb-- brace for the inevitable. I'm just waiting for the time you'll screw me just like everyone else . . .

knees collapse-- arms flailing-- wings fold-- and down . . . Rolen loses his balance and stumb . . . Caution. No time to think but there are flashes-- Madison . . . maddy, his grandmother, mother and father. DANGER: He is spinning . . . out of control and Rolen is going to . . .

¹**fall** \fol\ *vb* **fell** \fel\ **fallen** \fo-len *or esp in poetry* 'foln\ **falling** [ME *fallen*, fr. OE *feallan*; akin to OHG *fallan* to fall and Lith *pulti*] **1 a** : to descend freely by the force of gravity **b** : to hang freely **c** : to drop oneself to a lower position **d** : to come as if by descending **2 a** : to leave an erect position suddenly and involuntarily or voluntarily **b** : STUMBLE, STRAY **c** : to drop down wounded or dead; *esp* : to die in battle

. . . drop. Like a dead weight down. Drop. Branches slash against the face. Down. Arm and palm-- fingers into hard ground. TUMBLE: rolling forward and slows-- momentum rocks against walk. Head. Bleeding and blurred, Rolen pushes against the grass to rise. Gravity. Feels it sharp and burning . . .

. . . and nothing seems real. His head pounds and Rolen rolls over onto his side and curls into a ball. thump . . . thump . . . He grabs his arm-- his fingers twisted and begin to swell. Throbbing. The breeze delicate like an eggshell-- fractured. Shattered. Broken, Rolen feels it-- closes his eyes under the daylight and rocks in the sun. QUESTION: But wasn't he . . . if just for a second? Rolling . . . Rolen helplessly tumbles forward-- the arms and legs helplessly sprawling, twisting, hitting and turning over again . . . again . . . and again.

Maddy Boards a Plane

Madison had just finished zipping up the last of her luggage when she heard the knock of her mother at the door. The lingerie she had bought the day before sat unpacked-- piled in a slippery and delicate tower upon the bed and in her rush to hide them under the pillows, the silk teddy slunk from atop the stack, the smooth gold sliding down into delicate folds upon the floor. The very best that she could manage was to position the rubbered foot of her walker beside the glitter of fabric and lift and scoot until the gold glimmer disappeared into the dark hollow beneath the skirt of the dust ruffle. "Hold on," she called out, "I'll be right there!" and Madison began to make her way slowly and carefully, each step measured, to where her mother was impatiently knocking in short bursts from the other side of the door. She hoped that her father had decided not to come along after all.

Her mother still knocking, Madison methodically eased the restraining chain back along its thin metal track, and balancing herself against the walker, turned the first of the three deadbolts she had installed by the landlord when she first had moved into the apartment. She took a deep breath before opening up-- her mother in the hallway stuffing her keys into the large brown purse hanging beneath a weighty strap twisting down from the shoulder. "Are you ready?" she asked, pushing into the apartment before Madison could back the walker away from where the door had slammed up against it. "I think so," said Maddy in a whisper, trying to regain her balance and swing the door back shut. "The bags are in the bedroom." But her mother was already in the closet, checking to see whether the water was turned off, and the breakers switched off. "Well then," she said.

“We better get your stuff and head out.” Her mother backing out of the closet and closing it up. “It takes at least an hour to get to the airport and your father’s waiting down in the car-- you know how he gets if things are behind schedule.” At that, Madison felt the air rush out of her sweater, her chest begin to cave in and her arms barely able to hold her upright against the pale aluminum bars of the walker.

Madison clung to the railing on her way down, her mother still arguing about leaving the walker in the apartment as she bumped past on the stairs, lugging one bag after another down the steps and out the glass doors to where Madison’s father was loading them into the open trunk. From the stairs, Madison could only make out the shoes of her father on the pavement outside but she could already begin to see his slanted frown and the harsh dry fingers curling abruptly, clamping down mercilessly around the handles of her luggage. She stopped to catch her breath, only to be prodded immediately by the dull thumping footsteps of her mother, the bag scraping crookedly down the thinly painted wall and the weight of her mother’s shoes forcing her down to where he was positioned outside. Madison tried to form the lines around the shoe of her father, tried to make the rubber heels smaller than what they seemed, but somehow the lines would not materialize-- the edges blurred and the lines not lines at all, the lines having no substance and dulled, her scribbles smeared into the pavement and useless against the dark impenetrable sheen of the car’s tires.

The eye of her father steadily bore down on her in the rearview-- he had tried to help her into the backseat, but Madison had pushed him away. Now, as her mother argued with him in the front seat, there was no avoiding him. She looked from the corner of her mother’s mouth-- the point where the lipstick ended and the lips opening and

closing across the dash and windshield where outside the sinister brow of a taillight threatened to burst apart at any moment-- to the jagged scowl pressed permanently above her father's leathered chin. The words themselves had long since lost their meaning but spread through the car nonetheless-- the letters breaking away from one another and the edges popping and beginning to split apart as they did when she was a child. Madison took shallow breaths to avoid the tearing within herself, the shards of letters pushing down from the congested air around her and Maddy growing smaller and smaller, shrinking to where no one could find her . . .

. . . the side of her head wet and expanding, swelling while her mother and father still snapping at each other up front and Madison tried to think of Rolen-- rolen speaking calmly and softly, the words brushing gently against her skin. She can see him now beside her, the shy little boy with his hands tucked beneath his trousers-- afraid at first to speak. His hands, tiny and soft, turn and open up before her- there is nothing hidden in the palms. She imagines herself boarding the plane, the bustle in the terminal, an armed robber in a ski jacket stepping calmly beside the short rapist tucking in his stomach, tightening the leather belt a notch right behind her on the escalator. Her parents are laughing-- the nose and teeth of her father and then her mother sobbing into her purse on either side as a terrorist, directly ahead of them in line, flings a lumpy duffle bag over his shoulder and strolls right between the metal detectors unnoticed by the security guards. Her stomach turning and weighty through the detector, she breathes a sigh of relief at the silence on the other side of the stainless doorway. Madison free until directly ahead she steps forward toward the narrowing corridors . . .

The car rounded a corner sharply, Madison's father yet yelling until suddenly her mother and then Madison's legs weak, her arms too slow-- barely able to slow her slide across the backseat, her shoulders slamming into the door glass and the fragments coming together-- the words forming in the space between the front and backseat. "Stop!" she says . . . "I can't . . . Turn ba . . ." But her voice is powerless to push the words past the thick letters suspended now in every single nook in the car's interior-- her father's eyes in the rearview and her mother turning around to face her yet still the words just dissolve upon release from Madison's lips. She pushes with her tongue . . . nothing. "Nothing," Madison says to her mother. "Nothing!" she shouts until her mother turned back around in the seat and staring out the windshield to where Maddy notices the cotton strings released from the back of a plane climbing higher into the air-- the plane breaking free and yet tied to the ground by a thick white thread twisting down past where the control tower now juts up against the blurred green and brown outside the door window. The tower stable somehow in the middle of it all with its tiny windows and thin fragile neck.

As the car came to a stop, Madison sunk down in the seat, the bodies swarming about outside the door window-- the jackets and baggage pushing upon the curb, the pantlegs and purses pressing together into a solid blur through the revolving doors into the airport until Maddy buried her face into cupped palms. It was too much to handle but there was her mother at the door, her fingernails scraping beneath the handle and then the opening. The air rushed out of the car, the noise outside penetrating past even the form of her mother and thumping against the upholstery, the shuffle of feet and scape of baggage invading past Maddy's cupped hands as her fingers slid out from the center of her forehead, the thumbs along the bone of cheek to press down upon ears. Even so,

Madison could hear the voice of her mother again, the tone and rub sharp against the skin-- the arm of her mother reaching in from the cold air outside, the fingers tugging upon her jacket and Maddy took a deep breath, her legs already collapsing beneath her before ever setting foot on the concrete beyond the door.

Woman and Man: The Park Bench

When the day finally arrived, the older couple each traveled to the place they had agreed upon . . .

a married couple?

no, but they've been in love for many years

why aren't they married then? Why aren't they together?

They were engaged to be, but . . . let me guess, they were separated somehow by a war or something-- an earthquake, nuclear winter or some other kind of equally implausible disaster. You have to open your mind to the possibility-- try to suspend your disbelief, so to speak-- try not to think of why such a thing couldn't be, but rather that it is-- think of how it could happen . . . and I suppose they're sitting on some park bench somewhere. So cynical today! As a matter of fact, they meet in a five star restaurant perched on a cliff in New England overlooking the Atlantic. That sounds pretty expensive-- they must have both had pretty successful lives, or is this just a special meeting? A little of both-- she's a successful investment banker and he's a well-known artist, a sculptor. Good with his hands, huh.

Why do you always have to ruin it all?

Why with you, it's always that the couple is either real old or real young? Why can't the couple be people our own age?

I seem to remember it was you who went for adolescents the last time!

It was called compromise.

Well, anyway, the two meet after years apart-- she had kept up with him through the "art mag" articles on his latest sculptures and he followed her career through the business section in the newspaper-- he would drop by Wall Street every now and then just in the hope of catching a glimpse of her . . . But if they were so into one another and all, why didn't they get together before they were too old to really do anything about it? First of all, they're not too old and second, sometimes it takes time for these things to work out. You know, they were crazy about each other, but both were passionate about their careers too. He needed to be on the west coast for his career and she needed to be in New York. Didn't they have airplanes then? Well, they were too poor at first, and flying freaked her out anyway. He was still struggling when she started to make it on wall street, and even though she offered to send him money for the tickets, he was too proud to take it. So what, they talked on the phone and sent letters? They did for a long time, but after a while they talked and wrote less and less until it was just too painful for either to really even think of the other.

I don't think I like the sound of this . . .

What about it?

Now it's starting to sound a little too familiar-- like it's going to end with some kind of stupid moral or something.

You can't have it both ways Rolen-- you can't have it both realistic and not real at the same time. It's just a story.

I thought we were doing this to have some fun-- but now it seems there's always some kind of hidden meaning behind them all. Can't we just tell a normal story?

you didn't seem to mind before . . .

Before what?

You know what I'm talking about.

Why can't you just come out and say it?

Say what?

Why do you always make me guess at what you mean?

never mind . . . Let's just drop the whole thing.

The Police

Above him, the unblinking red eye of traffic light stared down-- and across the street, in the west-bound lane, diagonally opposite to where Rolan waited behind a seatbelt, sat the state trooper. The truck began surging-- the engine idle rising and falling randomly like it did sometimes on its own-- and Rolan yanked down the sun visor and sunk back against the seat.

Rolan pushed his lips out into a whistle and positioned his head straight forward. Rolan rose again in the seat but eyed the trooper cautiously from the corner of his vision-- the trooper under hat with fingers casually drumming the steering wheel-- the trooper stretching his arms back and massaging the high back of his neatly pressed collar-- the trooper's gray-shadowed hat turning to the side now and leaning forward as if listening to a dispatch. Rolan wondered whether Madison had seen him from beneath the cover of the sheets and his left hand stretched forth from the casting-- clamped down tightly upon the wheel. His right arm thrust forward-- fingers positioned firmly about the shifter, and Rolan worked his forehead under the visor to check whether or not the light had yet changed. The light still red unblinking and yes, right there the trooper and wait, no, Rolan could no longer stop the thought of her calling it in . . . *yes sir, I think he's finally lost it . . . no, like I've been trying to tell you . . . just up and left me . . . no, sir, no--not any clothes on at all . . .* Rolan jerked back to see the trooper looking his way, speaking into the receiver, his lips hidden from view but the hat moving and suddenly the lights, the bright flashing followed by the high twists of siren-- Rolan could no longer breathe, his chest collapsing and shrinking inside, his skin a damp thick dead and the lights now

quite blinding-- red snapping like blue, no, white erupts into green, then yellow alongside the siren's high slash moving . . .

. . . and rolen still running with footsteps behind him-- the harsh rasp of breathing inside and rolen keeps moving-- run, rolen, run-- sprinting up Up on tip-toes then faster and faster, go much much more quickly until turn, trip and falling-- smack! slide down alley . . . SMACK! right on his nose and oh, shit, damn it's bleeding and knees skinned above elbow but still must go forward and lifting from pavement but still hears them coming, they're closer and. . .

Stop! Rolen rocks back against the seat. Light is still red and the trooper unblinking. Straight Ahead. The patrol car has not moved, the blue-yellowed lights not flashing-- not even the siren. Behind the windshield, the trooper s i p s coffee, then s t r e t c h e s an arm and lazily yawns across seat. The words are there on the side-- across the black and white the words blocked out in fine letters . . . ***TO PROTECT AND SERVE*** . . . and Rolen can't stop himself, can not help but think of her. Madison . . . maddy. The arch of Madison's eye clear and then fading . . . a frightened now aged . . . little girl maddy. The trooper is growing impatient-- Rolen can tell by the way he starts adjusting the hat. The trooper pushes the back up, palms from behind until the front tilts down-- then the other way balancing, under the front just slightly off-center as he rocks it from brim to brim, levels it out by tapping twice on the top. Rolen imagines the hat in pursuit-- the hat lifting then spinning back, the hat like a frisbee skipping across the hard ground. He leans carefully cautiously painstakingly forward, but already knows from the red reflection on hood. Rolen turns his wrist to take a look at his watch, the second hand moving, the thin arm swinging painfully s l o w b e t w e e n click. His toes tiring against the spring pressure of clutch, Rolen pulls the gearshift down into neutral, checks

once more the trooper and lifts his foot-- the engine rising then falls beneath the low steady hum of heater . . .

It is becoming unbearable, Rolen's mind spinning and heart pounding louder against ear-- running out of innocent-seeming natural looking don't pull me over, no not a single reason, just a regular driver yes, normal, sir, out for a 3 AM drive kind of and no, sir, not naked, no, never, not like you're thinking or heard or even suspect, sir, yes, Rolen running quite out of ideas of that sort and type or even classification of things he can now do. STRAIGHT AHEAD! Not, should he look at the trooper, no, try to hide his bare-chesting, maybe, but no-- too suspicious and how after-all, but yet how long before the trooper might realize and what if pulled over and not even license or wallet or any valid form of id. The trooper with flashlight and oh, my, step out of the . . . OUT into the light and then, what have we here sir, my this is a new one. I'd certainly advise against it and we'll have to go down to the station or "What the hell are you doing?" or WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING? not I can relate to that rolen, or I completely understand why you feel pressure, not Maddy soothing him with please forgive me, I'll join you you you, I wish I would have sooner and, no, it seems perfectly natural and, no, nothing wrong with you and yes, I really want to, why not? But then, was that a whistle?

. . . and rolen is running-- he's running past his mother, his grandmother. The police, yes are coming, he's rounding the corner, but still closing and faster upon toes into alley but then trip, stub, and falling . . . he's bleeding and screaming, kicking . . . rolen struggles in gravel and wriggle but caught firmly down pinned with hands forced behind-- tight, face against pavement shaking not slowing or stopping but jerking and then twitching, not again the twitching or stammering but rolen yanked up and dragged

off by blue-uniforms gun swinging loosely in holster and please not back to . . . But the policeman is not listening just dragging him back toward his house and rolen gone numb now like dead-warm skinned rabbits only rolen still shaking inside, yes, he trembles and inside he's jerking in perpetual twitch, twitching, twitch . . .

But now the cruiser's lights moving, the green off hood glaring and the cruiser surges forward, the trooper pulling away-- Rolen pushes up into first and out with the clutch and his truck lunges forward but Rolen scans the rearview for the patrolman and tail lights. He is careful not to give it too much gas in case of the bright flash of brake or the sometimes quick turning but no, Rolen looks straight into the distance and, yes, maybe he will keep going unless Maddy on phone. Madison. Madison listening for the dial tone and then punching the numbers, clearing her throat until the truck moves forward through stripes of paved yellow and street lights. Sinister red eyed cruiser growing smaller into a dark flat along the water-color night, like a painting strung into perspective by telephone lines the hum almost nothing-- shrinking, yes, maddy safe at window, perhaps, and not on the phone. No, of course Maddy wouldn't and Rolen slows down his breathing and considers pulling to the side. He points the truck straight ahead and clamps down on the wheel, leaves off the gas and closes his eyes-- Rolen allows the skin to slip down past the wet iris until even the hat is shrinking and finally, only a speck.

Steps

1:13AM Her legs are tired. Madison stumbles from the kitchen until the ankles give out-- the knees fold beneath her and grabbing frantically for the banister rail, she lowers herself to rest on the stairs. She wonders where he could be-- the dull vibration spreading up the length of her calves, piercing the thigh before sharpening into the hips and Maddy curled into a ball, braces herself against what she knows will come next.

1:15AM Madison begins to measure her breathing and tries to remember what the doctors have told her to do: stay calm, slow down your breathing--

breathe in . . . two, three, four . . . and out . . . four, three, two . . .

That's right, relax. Good. Take ownership of the situation-- control, yes . . . good maddy, in a while it will all be over and you will be . . . steady-- balance, focus . . . see through the pain and remember to . . .

Extend the leg fully, applying pressure at the knee until the cramping subsides.

She lets out a muffled scream before her teeth clamp down and Madison bites her lip.

Her knees pulled to her chin as she slides down, dropping to a lower step, slamming the back of her head against the wall-- frantically slapping her legs with tightly clenched fists to stop the pain. "Damn you Rolan!" She begins to form the lines around him, draw the . . . but she cannot complete the circle-- cannot bring herself to close it off entirely.

Madison leaves gaps in every layer, like a maze-- waiting, watching intensely, hoping he will find a way through.

Rolen doesn't shrink, but he will not move-- she reaches in and tries to nudge him but there is no response-- her fingers pass right through . . .

Fill your life with healthy rituals not centered or dependent on anyone but yourself-- some people exercise or meditate, others read or paint . . .

Humming the chorus of a childhood song to which she has long since forgotten the lyrics, Madison presses her nose and cheek into the knees and rocks . . . she almost can remember the color of the words-- the sound of her mother singing softly and in her mind the broad strokes of a roller and then the light dabs of a paint-brush. A thousand brightly faint stars . . .

The starry ceilinged walls once again vivid within her grasp, she remembers reaching out for the stars-- wanting to run her fingertips up and down, across the powdered craters of moon.

Take two tablets, every four hours or as needed: DO NOT EXCEED TWELVE TABLETS PER DAY.

Madison tries to rise on the staircase, make her way up to the medication she left in the bedroom-- positioned in his bathroom next to the sink. It is too much to straighten out the legs and she falls again-- her fingernails scraping down along the wall and dragging, Maddy tumbles-- settles back where she started at the bottom of the stairs.

Breathe deeply and focus:

You may never get all the motion back in your legs, but the more work you do with them the better your chances for a fuller recovery.

She closes her eyes and tries to block out the pain-- not the burning tearing open of the legs but imagines herself walking along the gentle creating waves of a lake . . .

Rolen is there beside her and then behind her-- enveloped in his arms she leans back into his chest. He whispers something, his words tickle in the ear and she draws his arms more tightly around her as her toes spring from the footpath. She leans back into his hold-- lets herself go but Rolen has disappeared and once again she is tripping-- stumbling for balance before the falling-- her head slamming down against a rock . . .

Speak your mind when you're angry or find alternate ways to release and work through it-- you won't be able to control how those feelings will come out if you keep it all bottled inside.

Slipping past the neck, distorted as she slides down the glass sides and to the bottom-- Madison tilts her head back and stares up toward a shrinking circle of light . . .

1:26AM Madison opens her mouth and forces out a dark rumbling-- a primal scream, but without sound. Nothing . . .

The stairwell is fully empty, hollow the thick dripping with silence and Maddy heaves again until her throat feels wet like bleeding. At first warm and then cold, coagulating blurs sticky and bright circles as she searches frantically again for breath . . .

1:31AM One at a time, she pushes her knees down and stretches the toes out-- extending the tendons and muscles. Pulling the ankles taut like propping a crutch in the center of a clothes line. Madison can not laugh or scream-- her medication is up the steps and lost somewhere on the bathroom counter far beyond the luggage stacked and scattered around Rolen's bed-- out of reach. She looks out toward the kitchen window, unsure whether to go up or stay down-- buries it all inside and takes the pain. Madison is not yet convinced she can go anywhere.

Three

Ask Hank

The following is a brief transcript from the award-winning radio talk show “Ask Hank™”:

Hank: What do y’all mean by that? Can you be more specific? Try to put some words to it--

Caller 6: It’s hard to figure everything out-- all of it keeps spinning around, slipping out of my fingers and changing on me. I just don’t know what’s real anymore . . .

Hank: That is a bunch ter swaller. Maybe think of it as learning as you go-- like saddling a horse the first time or plowing a field. You have a picture of what it might be like, but you never know `til you get it there or all together.

Hank: But we need to break it there before taking the next caller. Remember to direct your calls to 555-ASKHANK. We’ll be back . . .

{Advertisement Break-- one minute, twenty five seconds: a lively jingle from an investment banker, a short skit about the freshness of breath mints, followed by a somber station identification statement}

Hank: And we’re back! You’re on the air with Hank . . .

Caller 7: Hi Hank . . . (slowly at first, and then bursting forward-- the sentences running together and seeming to overlap) I’ve always been told not to get involved with anyone more messed up than me. But I really can’t tell who is in the relationship I’m in now-- we’re both screwed! I have so many problems myself, I don’t think I can handle both of

ours at the same time . . . It all seems so hopeless . . . I just feel overwhelmed and am thinking about getting out. Am I crazy?

Hank: Whoaa! That's a whole mess of different issues rolled all up in one. Let's start at the beginning-- with the first one, that is-- and see where it goes . . .

Caller 7: The beginning? What do you mean? When we were both kids-- our life stories?

Hank: Well, if we were in an actual therapy session that might be a good way to go-- Unfortunately, we don't have the time to do that here, so let's start with the assumption that you should never get involved with someone who has more problems than you have . . .

Caller 7: Uh, huh . . . What about that?

Hank: In any relationship, there will most likely be one person with more problems than the other-- It might be more a question of whether both partners accept one another and their respective problems than whether or not to get involved in the first place . . .

Caller 7: You mean you can't choose who you fall in love with?

Hank: Well, not really-- let's turn this rig around! That is, let's look at it from your own perspective-- What you might want to ask yourself is first, whether you can accept that your partner has the problems that he or she does, and second, are you prepared to deal with (versus take responsibility for) your partners problems alongside your own?

Caller 7: But I don't know-- I mean, that's the whole problem. Should I know?

Hank: What really counts is what you think. Do you think you need to?

Caller 7: Well, yes. I don't, but I think I should-- the whole thing drives me totally insane! Shouldn't I know?

Hank: Not necessarily . . . Those people who say you should know exactly how you feel and exactly what to do aren't exactly in your situation. Sometimes it takes a while to figure things out. My advise on this one would be to allow yourself the time you need to decide whether or not to stay within the relationship. I know it's easy for me to say, but trust yourself-- consciously, or subconsciously, you will most likely arrive at a decision about what to do.

Caller 7: But I'm afraid if I don't figure out things soon, the whole relationship will fall apart!

Hank: Well, that might be. But think about this-- if your partner doesn't hang in there while you decide, maybe they aren't the one you should be with. I'm afraid we'll have to leave it there for today.

Caller 7: (silence before speaking) hmmm . . . Well, thanks Hank.

Hank: Good luck with it-- The final words are this--try to give yourself the space you need. And for the rest of you, we'll be back after a short break to take your calls.

Remember, the number here at the studio is 555-ASKHANK. {The show's thematic jingle immediately follows-- }

Rolen Runs

. . . yes, the shoes and shoelace sliding out of knot and looping smaller as tongue juts out and then heel and toes and Y e s s ocks. Right. Fingers tugging then str e t c h I n g out until s n a p ~! and next the left . . .

ˈstop *\stap\ vb* **stopped; stop-ping** [ME *stoppen*, fr. OE *-stoppian*; akin to OHG *stopfon* to stop, stuff; fr. L *stuppa* tow, fr. Gk *styppe*] *vt* **1** : to hinder or prevent the passage of **2 a** : to close up or block off (an opening) : PLUG **b** : to make impassable : CHOKe, OBSTRUCT **3 a** : to cause to give up or change a course of action **b** : to hold back : RESTRAIN, PREVENT

syn CEASE, QUIT, DISCONTINUE, DESIST

. . . No, Maddy waiting in window and no, back, yes, stop running-- Madison. Yes . . . **STOP** . . . then brake again pushing harder slowly friction friction slowing until finally . . . NO! Engine whines and raises-- faster and fast, faster, get going . . . clutch in- - down into second . . . Engine low and then higheR . . . Up and right-- clutch out. Black letters against white. SPEED LIMIT --65-- Florescent box which orbed glows as truck rushes past with horn. FASTER-- - - - The moon above and the clouds rushing under night sky and Madison-- untouchables. Stop, she said, don't. Don't . . . said mother. DON'T! --screamed, as Rolen passes grandmother and into the street. The front porch behind him and Rolen running faster. He does not hear them calling. wait . . . Madison whispers and Rolen heading for the door. Wait . . . but Rolen running now. Running.

Running faster-- the clothes of his dead father far behind him-- free of his shorts and down the street past the light from Madison's bedroom window. But a woman like that the real thing, his grandmother used to say. A woman decent to make him wait. Madison . . . maddy pushing away-- telling him she was too afraid and Rolen behaving the way a gentleman should. It'll be alright, he tells her-- but Madison . . . maddy pushing away.

“What were you thinking?” Madison says to Rolen, then to his mother-- “That's no way for a boy to behave--” shakes her head, “running off naked out of the house!”

Shaking her head, his mother holding Rolen down as Madison slides up the slacks.

“Stop it!” as Rolen kicks, screaming. “Turn him over . . .”

Rolen's arms forced down by his grandmother and Madison buttoning the front of his shirt.

“What could've he been thinking?” his grandmother to mother to Madison, then to Rolen-- “Young man! Your father had never once . . . would never ever even consider . . . not for one second . . . Never!”

DEAD-- the dead buttoned sleeves are the first to let loose-- the arms free now to work on the neck and collar. Slip the clothe over the smooth edge of plastic dead button and then down, finding way along seam until slip . . . snap, release and next Down-- tug, pull, apart and fingers more free to go DOWN, Down, down . . . up, clutch, right uP into FIFTH. Clutch out, engine choking then rising as shirt slips past shoulders and elbows and down . . . wait, she had at first whispered quietly. Wait, she had said the first time he tried. Stop! after barechested, rolen stood without shirt. Love like the stars-- friction in dark. Rubbing and sliding or moistened by rain. Unhealthy, the way the boy longs for exposure-- such things not to be seen under light. Sick, she said, SICK! STOP!

Madison pushing away and Rolen backing shamefaced away-- the look on her face like the time he had run past his mother, his sisters and grandmother. The Look. Rolen tearing off the pressed dead slacks and the mothballed socks, the shirt and shoes of his long dead father-- dead . . . out the front door and down the street running.

¹**no** \(')no\ *adv* [ME, fr. OE *na*, fr. *ne* not + *a* always; akin to ON & OHG *ne* not, L *ne-*, Gk *ne-*] **1 a** chiefly Scot : NOT **b** : used as a function word to express the negative of an alternate choice or possibility **2** : in no respect or degree **3** : not so -- used to express negation, dissent, denial, or refusal

²**no** \no\ *n, pl noes or nos* \noz\ **1** : an act or instance of refusing or denying by the use of the word *no* : DENIAL **2 a** : a negative vote or decision **b pl** : persons deciding in the negative

The wind through his hair, the breeze . . . the truck cab, the rushing night air-- and he does not hear them, can not make out the words calling . . . LOOK!

The towering glow of tall buildings in the distance and the smell of chlorine-- another city coming to view. Madison gone-- disappeared. The light in bedroom window far, far behind him-- hidden behind the outline of skyscrapers and miles and miles ago. Rolen remains focused on his own well-being . . . on the bumps rising all across his arms and his legs. Spreading . . . the marmalade and jam across her toast. No. The wings stretching out from his back-- pushing against the seat, his chest forward, pointing the way toward where rolen must go . . .

WARNING: CONSTRUCTION-- REDUCED SPEED AHEAD!

. . . truck seat now dry, yet damp under skin, vinyl pores gumdeweyed up to leg and Rolen in shadow once again, then flickering in shade . . .

. . . from street light to street lamp runs rolen- ducking for cover from the flash of gunfire and steel to clear the name of night-singer. Her mouth in an O as the sinister car pulls up, the window dark rolls down and Rolen step out in front-- the man behind the window, his face out into the light and Madison shrieks. Her full lips underneath the moon and Rolen steps out, barefoot with nothing but a badge. He hurries to shelter her from the man, no, wait-- she might like it better if, yes, the green-scaled dragon-- Rolen the Knight Shining slashing with sword across the pavement, bare-chested-- no, a wide open field between the fair maiden and death. It was then he noticed the wind, the cool breeze rising from the late night tide, the waves cresting then crashing against the rocky shore at the edge of field and grass-- the grand plain glistening under night sky and discarded armor. He can still smell the fragrance of madison even over the flame of dragon, the saunter of maddy's braided hair and the heat rushing against his chest bare as he rides forward to save her. Help me Rolen! The young Knight with unsheathed sword charges the scaly green-- Madison calling his horse and the green scaly yellowed under the brilliance of moon . . .

REDUCED SPEED AHEAD!

. . . now blocked out by the glare of approaching streetlights and interstate signs-- just another stupid story, a dream . . . not so far no-- no, wait . . . Madison sits up in bed, rolen barechested with arms around. She holds him, yes, she accepts him as he is . . . Maybe. Yes, maybe turn back. "Maybe the girl wants the boy to stay, to help lift her over the hedge . . . maybe she just can't ask." Fine! Abandon me-- just leave . . . Leave! "How could you Rolen?" the look-- their faces and then the calling . . . rolen . . . rolen? . . . Rolen! DIRTY BOY!! But now, SUDDENLY, the paved lanes come sharp into focus-- merging and twisting about the city as if to strangle. Almost. Slow-- shift down. Down and left-- fourth. S l o w . . . Clutch and third. Engine rises sharply-- then dow n .

. . Too fast! Red lights flicker on-- W A R N I N G. Much too fast-- s l o w d o w n
. . .

Rolen-- “How could you Rolen?”

Detective Rolen-- the under-paid, over-worked criminologist who wants desperately to throw down his badge, forget about the night singer, and lounge around a suburban pool sipping salty margaritas naked

rolen-- a little boy who finds it hard to understand a particular little girl at all

Rolen the Knight Shining-- a horseless, homeless, discredited nobleman whose rusted armor and sword is no longer in any condition whatsoever to rescue anyone—not Maid Madison, not even himself . . .

“Can’t you help me Rolen?” The plush of her eyes before closing . . . lotion and stockings-- a candle. Unbuttoned. Maddy . . . around waist and then dropping. Trousers down, boxers past knees and still dropping. Almost-- almost through town. Madison? Heel before toes from elastic-- step free, and then . . . *madison* . . . the soft of her shoulder, the curve of her cheek . . . “Tell me a story Rolen.” yes, no . . . *maddy?* Wait . . . no, not again . . . passing under over-pass and off-ramps, not Madison smiles or Madison laughing-- not, no, nothing? *no*. Again? Not at all. Red light? Nothing . . . Shift down. Nothing. No, not at all. Eyes forward-- stop . . . not staring . . . Stop. That look. STOP. The hell with Madison, yes-- no thoughts of Maddy at window or second, not first. Clutch. Engine whines . . .

Madison Takes a Walk

As she made her way onto the sidewalk, Madison took the last bite of the éclair, curling her lips together, pushing her tongue forward to collect the excess chocolate and cream. Her toes springing beneath her, she looks out at the passer-bys from behind dark glasses. She eyes the man in front of her, wonders if he can hear her heels behind him, whether anyone will notice the name on the bag she carried. The weight in the bag bounces as she walks, and Madison's grip tightens. A woman coming toward her on the left, eyes turned down toward the bag and then up, a smile surfacing as she passes. Her pace quickened, Madison jerks the bag to the other side, then tucks it up tightly under her arm-- the man in front suddenly closer now and Madison stops.

The crowd bumping and shoving past, leather jackets and briefcases angled into her, the forms jagged and blurred, some brightly colored, others darkening but yet Maddy can not move-- her shoes glued to the sidewalk until an older woman and her grandson stopped for a moment to stare. The eyes of the woman searches from behind thick glasses-- the lenses brown and large, misshapen and the little boy pointing-- his finger stretching out toward Madison closer until Maddy jerked back. At first her steps awkward and stumbled, Maddy manages to turn through blurred faces and then the legs faster-- the weight pressed down toward the toes yet still the legs moving, the heels scraping and ankles beginning to turn. The faces all laughing and Maddy can see clearly the chin of her father, rough and unshaven drawing too near. She looks for cover in back of a parked car or, perhaps, behind the legs of an old chair. She stretches a hand out and

glides along the chrome rails of a diner until finally up the steps and in through the crowd at the door . . .

Madison finds her way to the restroom, her whole body shaking until at last, she locks herself safely secure in a stall. She checks once more the latch-- manages to slow down her breathing, but sits rocking with hand-cupped face until after the woman in the next stall had left. When the woman's footsteps had eventually disappeared from her ears, the steps hollow like a handful of stones tumbling down into a canyon, Madison sits staring straight ahead at the door of the stall-- at the thin patch of rolled paint over where someone had once scratched out a name. The gurgle of water is almost soothing, slippery soft until the bag slides from her grasp, drops to the floor and Madison considers the cursive letters strung together across the front of the now crumpled bag. Bending forward to lift it, she tilts her head and took one more quick scan along all the walls she could see tucked down to the floor. Madison yanks the bag to her lap, carefully lifting out the negligee before turning the paper inside out.

When she walked back out through the diner, Madison quickened her pace-- her head toward the floor and the bag carried at her side, clenched tightly. She looks to where her knuckles jutted up, whitened, the fingers curled about the hem of the now plain paper. The writing and patterns still lurking inside, she knew-- knows, waiting to spring forward at any moment like the little boy's finger-- the fingernail already hard and coarse atop the soft-ribbed underbelly of skin and tendon. She had almost made it outside, her steps taking her past the cash register, but Madison can feel the eyes brushing up against her clothes, pushing through the fabric to the skin. She thinks she might just sink to the diner's checkered floor when she envisions herself standing in front of Rolan in the gold

silk lingerie-- rolen's smile turning from warm to sharp and Rolen telling her to turn now, yes, spin-- the chill in the air much stiffer and Madison without even a sheet. She reaches out for a tablecloth as she passed the last table. She grabs the corner-- about to yank it away and cover herself, when beyond the tablecloth, her eyes fastened on a little girl seated in a corner-- the girl's hair held up in berets and the eyes wide and frightened in a way that forced Madison to straighten her back and keep walking forward. When she finally reaches the cash register and the fingers pointing to EXIT, a man at the door opens it up for her. He smiled in a way that made her feel guilty. Madison's face reddens. She looks quickly away, and rushed down the concrete stairwell to the sidewalk again.

Madison steps into the swell of expressionless faces outside the diner, adjusting her pace to match the flash of heel, the glint of polished shoe in front-- pushing forward between the scrape and echo of steps already taken behind. She walks in unison with the other elbows and ankles-- the flow of loose jackets shifting ahead but Madison comfortably anonymous in a soft rhythm. Hardly aware of her own skin, Madison thinks herself attractive even under the sun-- the shadows brushing through her as if she wasn't really there. The sun warm and Madison lifting her eyes from the sidewalk to a man approaching from the left. The man tall and strong-- the lines of his face firm, yet the skin soft under the delicate sun. Her eyes followed the shoulders through the sleeve to the hands, the hands past the contour of jeans and down. But when again her sight leveled, the eyes of the man stare across at her-- directly at Madison-- the eyes pushing through the weave of clothing and stopping to move along the surface of skin. Madison turns her sight downward, her face reddened and crossing her arms. She watches her legs shift under her-- the calves above the ankles-- the toes pushed forward through the small

opening at the front of the shoe. There was no way to hide them and she hurries past the man, clenching the sleeves of her jacket down past her arms as far as they would stretch.

As she approached the crosswalk, Madison thought of how Rolen had left her-- he had just announced he was leaving and packed up his truck. "Either you're with me or you're not, Maddy-- You can't have it both ways!" She remembers how before the move she had liked his voice on the phone-- when he was just twenty minutes away. It was distant, yes, but a comfortable distance not so far from her as in the grasslands where he was now. "Until something changes," he had said, "there's no reason to come back." She finally opened up to him and tried to explain how hard it was for her the night before, but the words would not come out. Just like that, he had said it and then Rolen's voice even running away from her-- softer somehow over the phone and getting harder to hear.

The traffic lights had changed again at the intersection and she found herself at the edge of the curb, staring past the blurred streaks of rushing cars at the crosswalk. The noise of the cars as they passed lingered for a moment alongside her and Madison spotted a green sedan racing closer, the driver eyeless behind sunglasses and accelerating-- the rise of the engine rising toward where the light had not yet turned yellow. The car was not slowing and she could not stop thinking of what Rolen had said-- the words rolling over and again in her head. With one last deep inhale, Madison filled her lungs thick with air, breathing out as she steps from the curb . . .

Man and Woman: Noir

. . . and fighting off the Green Authority, he worked his way to release her. *Let me guess . . . and together they made their way to freedom across the city?* That's right-- that was the plan alright, but first he had to find out which room they were holding her. As he forced open each door, he called out her name repeatedly, but when he didn't hear anything, he feared the worst . . .

I suppose they had her gagged or something—

or maybe in a padded room, he couldn't figure it out and he knew it would drive him crazy until he found her. So he went from room to room, fighting off the guards-- calling out her name. He went from floor to floor, fighting the enemy as he went, but there was no sight of her-- not a sound . . .

What if she didn't want him to find her?

What do you mean?

What if she heard him coming but didn't want him to save her-- what if she didn't need him to do it?

You mean that she was in "cahoots" with the Authority?

Not necessarily, maybe she is just acting in her own interest. Independent-- noir, you know . . .

Femme fatale-- I like it! *Do you? Or is it that you just like whatever you can get?*

Damn! That's pretty harsh-- where did that come from?

I was just wondering-- exactly what kind of hero is he?

Well, I think he's pretty open to the possibilities. He might like a challenge-- a woman with some fire, that kind of thing. *But don't you see, that still makes it seem that all he is after is what he can get from the woman-- how does that make him any better than the men who are holding her?* Well, he wouldn't hold her against her will and he surely wouldn't hurt her.

But, it's like he thinks of her as a prize or something-- an object to be won.

He wants to be with her, if that's what you mean-- I don't see why that's such a horrible thing.

It's as if everything in his life revolves around her. Doesn't he have a mind of his own?

I don't understand what's so bad about that. It's not like he doesn't have other things he's interested in-- He does! *But everything still revolves around the woman. It's like she has to hold his hand or something . . .*

that just makes me sick.

All I know is that it seems you're making a big deal out of nothing. One moment you're all into it, and the next you're going off on some tangent! *This isn't just some tangent, as you call it. What I'm talking about is at the center of it all-- the whole thing's screwed if this isn't taken care of.*

It's just a story . . . I just don't see what is the big deal.

That's the whole problem-- you just don't get it . . .

you really don't see what I'm talking about here.

Rolen Breaks Free

Rolen stopped the truck in the middle of the street a few blocks down from the interstate, pushed the shifter all the way to the right and up, then backed into perfect alignment with the curb. Parallel. He turned off the headlights and heater, waited for the last push from the defroster vent before curling his fingers around the door lever. Beyond the crease of hood there were no other cars on the street-- the moonlight only in competition with the streetlamps and porches, the other vehicles tucked safely into short squat driveways off the roadway and nestled into each house. The wind outside brushed up against the trees, leaning them toward where the rain water rushed down along the street into gutters and Rolan pulled the keys from the ignition, clenched them tightly in his good hand. When he pushed out upon the door, it swung open with the strong current, slamming loudly into the fender-- the brute force shearing off the pin where it held together the uppermost hinge. His feet upon the wet graveled pavement, Rolan struggled desperately to right the door, to align it again before closing-- his fingers sliding against the weight of metal until when he finally did, the door latched once again into place and Rolan found himself outside the truck window, trying to catch his breath against the rush of wind.

Rolan held out his palms-- the roadway grit coated his fingers, the soiled rain splattered down past the wrists, fanning out across on his good arm and slipping under the cast on the other, saturating the soft gauze and padding wrapped carefully in layers beneath the hard shell. Rolan winced at the shock of water against his back, the road water suddenly swept up from the street and carried forward in a spray of ten-thousand

pin-pricks before the driving wind. His spine jerked into an arch and with a gasp, Rolan drew back a foot to kick the tire-- the ankle a weighty pendulum swinging forward but interrupted-- stopped short at the sight of his toenails. The toes were soiled and Rolan surveyed the skin down to his bare knees, his awkward calves up to his chest beaded with water and pale without a shirt. He spun around to see if anyone had noticed the naked shoulders, the exposed hollow running down his back. He started to wipe his hands and elbows across his thighs, then thought better of it. Scanning down the street one last time for the trooper, Rolan pushed against the wind, hurrying off the roadway. He rounded the back of the truck and stepping over the sidewalk, bent down cautiously to wipe his hands clean in the grass.

The wind died down as quickly as it had begun, and Rolan found himself walking in a nervous laugh down the sidewalk, tumbling the keys in his hand and sticking carefully to the shadows. At first, Rolan could not look up from his focus upon the ground before his feet-- the sidewalk wet with rain, the water collecting in misshapen pools reflecting like deep hollows under the moon. Every section of sidewalk sloped and was horrifically scarred into a miniature, but vast concrete landscape, so much that Rolan began to form the lines of a relief map in his mind. He avoided each individual crack in the concrete, the water surging into small parallel rivers between the yards and the street, like man-made aqueducts separating plots of land, but with every step his legs jerked more confidently forward-- the ankles each like a steady weight planting his heels securely down before pivoting forward toward the stability of his toes. His vision slowly leveled and Rolan held out his arms on either side of himself, placing one foot in front of another and walking in a perfectly constructed straight line, balancing himself like a

performer in a high wire act. He looked down the street toward the horizon, marveled at the precision of the street lamps, imagined that he could walk down the line forever, never deviating from the straight and perfectly aligned path, his natural destiny to follow the beaded stitches of light to where the earth met the night sky and beyond into the predictable.

Rolen closed his eyes and tilted his head back. His feet securely beneath him, the steady rhythm of thighs and toes pushing him onward, he opened his eyes toward the freedom of the stars-- marveled at time frozen in a snapshot of creation until he fell forward at the end of the block. The sidewalk interrupted and Rolan tumbling out into space-- landing in a dull murmur against the hard-paved intersection . . .

. . .the water rushed by him in the street-- gurgled over his arms and up into his teeth until Rolan lifted himself in measured increments from the pavement, the water at first passing harshly over his hands and then welling against the knees-- surging in a violent detour around the calves and toes. Once to his feet, Rolan hurried across the street, remaining carefully within the bright lines of the crosswalk. He paused to stoop at the other side where the water swelled before dropping down a gutter. The water tumbled into the dark, echoing against the low thunderous rumble of a swift current hidden beneath the street, and Rolan bent down to cup the water in his palms, dipping down into the very center of where it swirled before dropping into the invisible.

The streetlights reflected against the tumbling water and Rolan washed himself as best as he could, scrubbed away at the grit from the street-- the grass clippings and pebbled soil which clung disgracefully to his elbows and chest, until at the sudden chatter of a squirrel, Rolan scrambled up onto the sidewalk and darted behind the nearest small

tree. His back arching tediously back against the trunk, Rolen tried to wipe the water away from where it clung to his skin dry-- the water forming and resurfacing in smears across his arms and chest but never seeming to leave him. Rolen followed the squirrel leaping between branches above him. He wondered whether it could be that simple, just to leap from one branch to the next. In his mind he pictured himself with the woman from work, the one with the delicate smile . . . maybe she would have a proper towel but then again, Rolen didn't know where she lived or even whether she was married or not-- the thought of looking for a ring had never crossed his mind. And then he thought of Madison-- *maddy at the window*. . . just for a moment, and then Rolen lifted himself up and stumbled forward down the street under the fading string of lights.

Another block further, and Rolen found himself crouched behind a Big Wheel, a giant plastic tricycle like the one he had dreamed of as a boy. A bright yellow beacon swung through the night in the distance, the light spinning lazily atop the roof of a garbage truck and stretching out in a widening angle across the yards and driveways. The garbage men in overhauls and light jackets maneuvered a dumpster behind the truck and when it was fastened, the hiss of airbrakes and then the whine of hydraulic pumps-- the tumble of loose objects falling and then a deep resonating bang like the retort of a gunshot, but only less defined. Rolen peered timidly over the red frame of the trike, beyond the bump of yellow handlebars to where the men were climbing back onto the back of the truck. The over-alled figures hoisted themselves up and clung to the truck like chimpanzees-- men screeching into laughter it seemed to him as the truck pulled away, leaving the dumpster spinning freely across the pavement. Abandoned. Rolen thought he might just rise from the ground and stand before them as they passed-- that

would show them! Perhaps, he would let out a low frenzied chatter in response to them all. But Rolen remained motionless behind the exaggerated slope of a child's seat-- looking down at the pouch of his stomach and the way the moon reflected upon his well-scrubbed knees.

Madison Draws Down

Her fingers curl around the long wooden handle. First, there is the ratchet sound-- the slow repetition of coiled, twisting metal released and echoes. The metallic clicks linger . . . each like the momentum of a tuning fork-- one after another shut out by the next and then l e n g t h e n e d slow the echoes like long slanting hands of a clock in extended tick and then snap! e long a t e d tock as Madison is jolted, and then *snap!* slips back . . .

Madison must have heard the recliner a hundred times over the phone-- had imagined Rolen in his socks upon it as he eased his feet out and down. Now she found herself curled up, then flattened out upon the recliner's dark green cushions, waiting for his return. The moonlight shifted into the room from outside the broad sliding glass doors and Madison thought it much like powder suspended between the planets and stars-- swirling endlessly in tiny circles through the void of soft black. She listened again for the footsteps of Rolen-- the steps firm and steady, rolen walking past the kitchen table and through the carpet until he stands beside her. Rolen's fingers through her hair, yes, rolen telling her he'll never leave or go away or even out of her sight but, no-- stop it . . . No! much too soon and then he says he'll wait-- for her he'll slow it down and just for her the cushions soft, yes, Madison nudging her ear dreamily into the deep fabric-- maddy not bothered by the night-time dark, the slashing edges of knife, marmalade, or the corners of the room ending into the sharp creases of a box.

Rolen?

2:27AM Her fingers slide down the forehead, cup the back of her neck . . . Madison's feet are still hurting, the toes extensions of leg, and then the throbbing from hip makes its way down. Wait . . . yes, wait for the throbbing to slow say the doctors. "Wait for the panic to settle," said Hank. wait . . . *please, rolen please* . . . Her fingers massaging the thigh, calve, and then down . . . Wait-- the toes between his fingers, the calve, back of the knee, and then up . . . stop! *wait* . . .

2:52AM Outside, the wind rushes against the wide glass doors but suddenly stopped. Madison is s t r e t c h e d o u t in the next room-- across the cold floor, pushing and curling her toes, rummaging through the vegetable tray and the lowest shelf of his refrigerator. His truck is still not back and she wonders where he could be and then trying, no, not about where he might in the middle of the night. There are red peppers and yellow squash-- snow peas, but no sign of rolen. She sits up and slides out the meat drawer, worries about him always not making his own sandwiches and slides it shut quickly. The cold air feels good on her legs and she thinks herself ready. Madison tries to raise herself from the floor, to put the weight on her legs but there again is the hurt-- the pain all up the one and pushing down through the other . . . she should keep them moving, swing them back and forth and pushing ahead to get back up the stairs but she is spent by the day-- all the traveling and airports and now worse for him leaving. Better now then before, she tells herself as Madison struggles to lift so she can sit in the chair by Rolen's kitchen table. The door is still locked and the deadbolt not moved. She can see the wet outside under yellow even through the blinds and wonders how long he's been . . .

2:59AM . . . gone now the armor fading and even the stars. Madison propped against the table and the room begins to spin. She feels it in her stomach-- imagines it ripples across a lake, the circles widening out from point of impact. He disappears beneath the surface-- a bubble. The ripples push out, smooth and then nothing . . . Madison can feel nothing inside but a deep hollow empty-- her head light and then bloated until her ears pop. One and then the other until she falters, slips down over the edge.

3:23AM The air thin and Madison cold, her head, a numb throbbing and the hollow. She tries to breath in, to fill herself through the nose. Rising-- her breasts push against the sweater but only shallow, a thousand tiny fractures weighing down the lungs. They clot and sting and snapple. Madison turns her head toward the hum, can feel the shake of refrigerator run. Rolen. Running, just as always. Typical-- her fingernails. She sees her own reflection trapped beneath the arch of pale cuticle, a little girl pinned underneath with palms pressed up against a thick translucent pink. She turns the hand under yellow light-- follows the swirling lines of fingerprint and imagines him there, an innocent boy with pick and hiking boots running again across a jagged landscape of trenched skin. In and out . . . Up and down. He climbs . . . Madison notices the sound of tires and engine outside-- the tires cutting through the wet pavement coming closer, the whine of engine growing louder and she rises from the floor again-- tilts her head with ear until the tires roll past and the engine coughs in the distance before . . . there rolen is once more, standing with a backpack overlooking the scaled walls of a deep canyon. He steps to the

edge and looks over to maddy where she waits on the opposite side. Rolan smiles before stepping and then down . . .

3:41AM “No,” she said to her mother, as Madison picks herself up and moves toward the blinds. “He just said a friend, nothing else.” Her legs feel better than before but stiff as she works them toward the kitchen window, Madison’s fingers reaching up now toward the plastic cone suspended by the knot at the end of the twisting rope. Between her fore-finger and thumb the plastic ridges encircling the cone take hold, and Madison pulls down . . .

The blinds drawn up and her view unobstructed, Madison eyes down the row of parked cars to where there is an empty slot. Rolan Vacant . . . *rolan not here* . . . Somewhere an alarm has begun springing, spranging-- its high pitched turns sliding up against the window until she can almost make out the glass distort, rattle, then buckle under the strain. The tones in waves push through to where they can reach her, unstoppable the sound right through her hair and toss, slap hard against her face. She wonders about Rolan, worries about where he might be out in the night . . . *rolan is falling* . . . fallen and outside, everything begins to-- lean, the shrubbery shudders . . . maddy trembling as water lifts from the pavement . . . the cars tilt tilted from under the clouds passing through moonlight-- tree limbs rock helpless in sway and she thinks the siding might lift from where it stubbornly clings, right off into the vacuum of night from where it hangs loose and nailed clumsily to buildings. Madison’s knees start to give way-- her feet right out

from under and grip on plastic cone slipping-- the ribbed plastic friction as cord snaps up past the fingers, the blinds coiled sprung twisting release and . . . drop down.

Silence. Madison feels sick-- thinks she might, yes, she just might and turns to go back up the stairs. Empty. She hurries the legs, tries not to think about pain, about Rolen.

Alone. No, stop! Not again, no, stop it-- not . . . *alone* . . . No. Don't think of legs, maddy no, not why have you left me no how could you rolen not what are you doing nor where are you running and certainly not who is this friend or why can't you love me but hands out toward wall, yes girl, then fingers round railing and then tighten-- l i f t foot good and don't, no this not hurting and . . .

Behavioral Healthcare

Selected Semi-Private Conversations in Five Therapy Sessions and Various Acts and Scenes

THE PLAYERS

DR. HANK LABIA

ROLEN HILT

MADISON (MADDY)

PATTER

The action takes place in or around the office of Dr. Hank Labia, a behavioral therapist in a small city on the east coast of the united states.

Act Three: Therapy Session 7

The curtain opens upon a curtain opening upon the set and audience of a syndicated network talk show. Four television cameras and crew are positioned immediately around the main central stage (on which is placed the folding walls, couch and chair of a psychiatrist's office). Beyond the cameras, is an audience gallery, which forms a semi-circle around the main central stage and slopes up at a 34 .7 degree angle. Actors audience the gallery, interspersed with three more cameras dispersed strategically around the outside layer of the gallery. The entire set is contained upon a second stage,

complete with its own exterior audience-- all of which is itself positioned on the stage whose curtain opens upon the scene.

TESTER 1: [over a loudspeaker-- after an initial amplified squeal from the PA system]

Testing . . . ONE, TWO Three, four . . . TEST . . . I ng . . .

DIRECTOR: [projecting authority through a megaphone from a control room somewhere off-set] Okay people, quiet down. Time to pull this thing together-- let's look alive audience . . .

ANNOUNCER 4: [calling out from behind cupped hands] Twenty seconds to air. . .

The audience members stir in their plastic cushioned seats, the noise level eventually dropping to mumblings. Audio-video checks are made upon the equipment on the stage and final make-up is applied to the players on the set . The host, Dr. Hank Labia, PsyD., pulls on his stetson after a last-minute goatee comb and face powder. He spits tobacco in a styrofoam cup and sets the cup down in a spittoon next to his leather chair. Dr. Labia winks and nods to the players on the couch, and taps three times upon the microphone clipped to the collar of his shirt.

DR. LABIA: [scooting forward in his chair and then back-- running a forefinger over his right eyebrow and then leaning toward the other two players on the couch opposite himself] Nothing to worry about here folks-- it'll all work itself out in the end. These things usually do.

DIRECTOR: [the megaphone cracks, full of static] Here we go people-- Let's look sharp out there!

ANNOUNCER 3: [the voice sharply rising and just as quickly falling . . .] and . . . IN

THRee, . . . Two, . . . One

ANNOUNCER 1: [says nothing but indicates with hand gestures that the show has begun] . . .

INTRO MUSIC: the show's theme melody-- a energetic tune featuring short quick rises of violins from one note range to the next underscored with an erratic beat from maracas and castanets.

CUT TO CAMERA ONE: pans from the announcer's fingers toward the stage and where they point toward Dr. Labia and the players.

FADE TO CAMERA TWO: moves in a circle, pans across the cheering, clapping audience and back to the central set.

DISSOLVE TO CAMERA THREE: focuses upon the doctor, who smiles as the theme music ends. He waits for the last of the applause before beginning the show's opening monologue.

DR. LABIA: [aside to camera-- the volume of his voice at a whisper] Howdy . . .

(coughs, clearing his throat) I mean hello there, America. My name is Dr. Hank Labia and welcome to another session of Behavioral Healthcare [the words Be-ha-vor-al Health-care re-echoed in enthusiastic shouts by the audience].

CUT TO CAMERA TWO: focused upon a young couple echoing the show title-- the words “health-care” formed on their lips as the woman laughs, pushing the hair from her eyes, and the man smiles, his hands rushing forward to clap once more.

FADE BACK TO CAMERA FOUR: wide pan from behind Dr. Labia (rear view)-- Hank is nodding his head (viewer can see the back of his hat over the chair, the stetson moving in a motion of acknowledgement-- front and back before the blurred faces of the audience and stage lights).

DISSOLVE TO CAMERA THREE: front view-- close-up of Dr. Labia as he begins to introduce the guests.

DR. LABIA: [remains aside to camera, whispering and leaning forward from his chair]

Did you ever feel your mate was running away from you? Or perhaps, you find yourself in a relationship in which you feel ignored, or something less than human because your mate is afraid to even look your way? Well, with us on “the couch” today is Rolen and Maddy, a couple who are experiencing problems such as these, but are finding it hard to talk about them.

CUT TO CAMERA TWO: zooms into focus upon the occupants of the couch-- panning between the players Maddy and Rolen-- moving from one to the other as Hank introduces them. Both occupants appear as if oblivious to the cameras and audience members or anything else outside the confines of the office set.

FADE BACK TO CAMERA THREE: now focused in a wide interior view of the set--
Dr, Labia reclined back into his chair and Rolan and Madison shifting uncomfortably on
the couch at the beginning of the session.

DR. LABIA: [nodding now to the occupants of the couch] Well now, Madison and
Rolan, what say you? What do you think we should talk about today?

[Both Rolan and Maddy remain silent, staring blankly toward the window
between their positions on the couch and the Doctor.]

CUT TO CAMERA TWO: pans slowly from the faces of Rolan and Madison to a tight
focus upon the shirt pocket of Dr. Labia.

DR. LABIA: Anything that comes to mind? Anything at all . . . [The doctor pauses,
places his clipboard on his lap and pulls a small can of chewing tobacco from his shirt
pocket. Camera Two follows the movement as he twists the lid open.]

FADE BACK TO CAMERA THREE: Moving erratically between the occupants of the
couch, from Madison to Rolan and back as they stir and position themselves to speak.

ROLAN: [Leaning forward] I'd have to say that, lately, I've been thinking about the
window.

DR. LABIA: [Nodding his head OFF CAMERA. Pinches a packet of tobacco from the

small plastic tub, raising the lump of tobacco from the can between forefinger and thumb. Draws it up toward the chin and lower lip.] Um hmmm . . .

MADISON: [Tentatively. CAMERA THREE swings abruptly from Rolen to a zoom on her chin-- the flesh moving, stretching over the bone and musculature only after some pause.] Me too. But I'm pretty sure what I've been thinking is something. . .

DR. LABIA: [interrupting her] Hmmm . . . What have you been thinking? Can you voice those thoughts of yours? How about it-- Rolen? Maddy?

CUT TO CAMERA TWO: Zooms out from a tight focus upon Dr. Labia as he draws the cup up from the spittoon and raises it to his chin. The wide view reveals the occupants of the couch, each appearing somewhat puzzled. Their eyes can be seen to dart from the window to the doctor and then off into thin air-- their gazes essentially fixed upon the window as if something were suspended before them outside the glass panes. Both open their mouths at the same time, the words voiced but unintelligible, each of the pair canceling the other out.

DR. LABIA: Whoaaa there . . . [the doctor's arms rise up, waving the point of the pen in a zig-zag through the air-- his body spasmodically jerked back between the arms of his chair] What say we try this in turns-- one and then the other in a civilized orderly fashion. How 'bout? [the arms and pen settling back down to a location somewhere in the region of the good doctor's lap] Let's see now . . . Why don't we begin with you Rolen—

CUT TO CAMERA THREE: zooms into a close-up of Rolen-- the eyes and then the bridge of the nose (blurred), the lens out of focus until the camera pans slightly to the right, zooms out into a full facial against a background of couch.

ROLEN: [leans forward, a puzzled look upon his face as he opens wide the teeth and out of his mouth comes forth the theme from “Star Trek” (the original 1960s series)] .

..

DR. LABIA: Good! And how ‘bout you Maddy? [the rise and fall of his voice only: the Doctor’s motions off camera as CAMERA THREE pans, following the erratic contours of the couch toward where Madison . . .]

FADE TO CAMERA TWO: focused tightly upon the material of sweater covering Madison’s upper arm and shoulder-- the camera zooms out and pans to adjust upon a blurred image of Maddy on the couch.

MADISON: [waiting patiently for Rolen to finish, opens her lips to release another theme song, this one from the 1970s television sitcom “Laverne and Shirley”] . . .

FADE OUT TO CAMERA FOUR: (wide view of players and CAMERAS TWO and THREE and the camera personnel repositioning the cameras, with hands upon earphones, listening for the unseen, unheard directions from the director and control room]

DR. LABIA: [when both occupants of the couch have finished, the doctor clears his throat with a healthy cough before alternating between the chorus from “The Love Boat” theme (featuring the original soundtrack from the official 1980’s television series) and the popular rock song “Someone Knocking on the Door” (Paul McCartney and the Wings, 1971)]

DISSOLVE TO CAMERA ONE: after the doctor finishes, a wide view of the set and audience gallery. The players on the couch are seen moving toward one another only to abruptly back away again after almost touching. Sounds of discord can be heard from both as they simultaneously open back open their mouths: Rolen breaking into a soliloquy of “Mama” (ELO 1979) and Madison echoing the Beatles' 1967 hit “Hello, Goodbye.” As the camera zooms further out, the two can be seen making erratic hand gestures toward one another and the window.

CUT BACK TO CAMERA TWO: zooms into focus upon Dr. Labia turning with a cupped hand toward the audience.

DR. LABIA: [looking down to his watch and then aside to audience, the volume of the players adjusted down to mere background noise] Well, it looks like that wraps up another session of Bee-havioral Healthcare. Signing off and wishing you good health and all . . . [a vigorous and apparently customary round of applause breaks out from the audience, in response to which, the Doctor nods in acknowledgement and turns back toward the occupants of the couch]

EXIT MUSIC: the show's theme music begins (this time with the violins' fall and rise accompanying castanets and maracas in an even faster, more frantic tempo) and gradually the volume is increased until it overwhelms the sound of applause . . .

CUT TO CAMERA FOUR: pans the audience from behind the chair of the doctor, the diamonds of stage lights seeming to overwhelm individual faces, characteristics and features.

FADE BACK OUT TO CAMERA ONE: wide view of audience, cameras, players, and set-- the camera zooms in, out, and around as the credits roll over the images now cast into a split screen-- the right side displaying replays of captured moments highlighting scenes selected by the director from the shows action: Madison pointing toward the window, Rolen opening his mouth, and the good doctor spitting in slow motion.

ANNOUNCER 3: [beginning a countdown with arms above head-- the teeth sharply elongated at first, forming silently the words. . . (and. . . IN three, . . . Two, . . . ONE) . . . the words complemented and enforced by an elongated hand, its digits and the subsequent, rather dramatically hasty withdrawal of the suddenly somewhat thick and chubby fingers, shrinking into a fold of palm as the show goes off the air]

ANNOUNCER 2: [breaking the silent countdown] . . . AND, we're out!

ANNOUNCER 1: [indicates with swirling circular hand gestures which subside into flat vertical slashes that the show has ended] . . .

DIRECTOR: [announcing through the megaphone cracks and static] That's a wrap folks!

The applause subsides and the audience members begin to rise from their seats, mulling about on their way off the central stage. The camera operators power down the machines and remove their headphones while the microphone handlers retract the hanging devices, collapsing the telescopic poles from their various positions around and over the set. On the set itself, Dr. Labia pulls off his clip-on microphone from around the collar and rises from his chair. The occupants of the couch remain seated, eyes fixed upon the window as if in a daze.

DR.LABIA: [leaning toward the other players as he prepares to vacate the set] Good progress today you two-- we've made quite some headway!

MADISON: [silent-- staring intently, somewhat apprehensively upon the window]

ROLEN: [glances up from the couch toward Dr. Labia, opens his mouth and then closes it, his gaze shifting from Hank to Maddy and back again to the window]

DR. LABIA: [removing the remaining tobacco from inside the cheek, and dropping it unceremoniously into the cup] Don't hassle yourself none-- I mean, try not to worry . . . We'll figure this thing all out next time.

As Dr. Labia moves away from the occupants on the couch, the set lights are silenced one by one-- the incremental darkness accompanied by a series of loud echoing claps as the breakers are levered down and electrical contact severed and lost. The inside curtain closes, followed closely by the outside one. All is silent except the sound of the exterior audience seats swinging up and the shoe scrapes of bodies walking through the dim floor-lighting toward exits.

Maddy Makes a Sandwich

. . . the linoleum cold beneath her feet even through her stockings and Madison pulls out the onion, rolls, and mayo-- the swiss sliced thin, chipped almost like the smoked turkey and tavern ham. The mustard, the deli mustard, in a small glass globe with the seeds just the way he likes it as she slides her leg toward the silverware drawer. She bites her lip, the teeth clamping down hard as Maddy once again across the floor to the cutting board. Crazy he had once said, a freak-- FREAK! But the clip comes off the plastic easy enough, and soon she reaches in and pulls out a misshapen roll of bread . . .

“Relax . . .” Maddy says to him, but Rolen positions himself behind her watching every move-- today she likes the feel of him around her. “It’s good for you to try something different . . .” she continues. “Be spontaneous for once-- take a chance.”

After pulling out just two slices, she tosses the ham back into the clear bag. Rolen reaches a hand out to grab more, but Madison playfully smacks it down and walks him over to the kitchen table. He looks up and opens his mouth to say something, but she reaches out lightly and brushes her fingers down across his lips.

“That’s no way to make a sandwich!” he finally blurts out. “It’s all bread.” But it is too late. Back at the counter, Madison blows him a kiss as she lowers the squared bread down to top the sandwich elegantly thin.

“Hush,” she whispers in his ear, rubbing his shoulders after setting the sandwich on the plate before him.

Madison looks toward the kitchen window, then back down to the cutting board and halves the crumbled roll. She reaches for the mayo, leans into the twist until the lid slides free . . . Starting with a slice of swiss, she piles on the ham. Madison reaches again into the open bag, just a little more, before moving to the turkey. The sandwich begins to totter under the weight of the meat. She sculpts it into a tower, before the onion and mustard-- a final slice of swiss. She lowers the top roll down, picks up the knife, and moving as Rolan had showed her, presses down diagonally and rocks the blade from one side of the sandwich to the other.

She sits across from him, watching his fingers along the edge and finally, beneath the sandwich. He lifts the sandwich from the plate, then stops, noticing the first time how she has propped herself up to watch him.

“Don’t stop . . .” she manages, suddenly conscious of the empty placemat before her. The hair on her arms barely conceals the pale skin beneath and Madison crosses them, hoping he’ll focus instead upon the green bracelets and delicate gold glittering chain as it hangs loosely from the thin blocked turns of her watch band.

Rolan looks back down to the sandwich, draws a corner up between the teeth.

“A man could grow to like this sort of thing,” he offers with eyebrow raised, “even if your sandwiches are a bit on the thin side.”

Rolan’s teeth sink into the bread, past the mayo-- tear through the thin sliced ham and Madison is up from the table, stumbling away trying to shake off the image.

“What?” he calls out after her. “What is with you?”

Rolan rising now to follow, his hand outstretched toward her shoulder-- but as he draws near she slaps down his fingers.

maybe a letter-- yes, writing it all down might just . . . easier, perhaps, that way and no chance of backing down or out once it's written but no, what if I change my mind-- it has happened before and then there would be no undoing it . . . everything down in black and white unmovable-- the flourish and swirl unchangeable once down and hard to say how he'll take it but something has to happen or else it can't go on like this, no, but maybe I'm over-reacting, it may all cool down when he gets back-- he might be just out to pick up eggs for breakfast or maybe milk, he must have known he was running low and thought he might just run right out and so we'd have some in the morning and then he'll be back and cooled down and a letter would be silly then, yes, stupid as he sits down to eat the sandwich before coming back upstairs to me and senseless, what with the sandwich and letter doing two different things like mixed signals or whatever Hank is always trying to say . . .

Dear Rolen,

I'm not sure how exactly to begin so I'm just going to-- here goes . . . well, what I'm trying to put down in words is that . . .

~~My Dearest~~ Dear Rolen,

For the longest time I thought that we could, that we would . . . eventually figure out some way to pull it all together-- but we haven't and I don't know if we can. I'm so very messed up! (don't tell me I'm not, I am and we both know it) But if you look at it objectively we are both screw

Rolen,

I need stability in my life-- because of my past and my parents and because of a lot of things. I thought for a long time that you could provide that for me, that you were the piece that has been missing ~~all the while who~~ that would magically fall into place and could make everything come together for me. You are a great person with so many good qualities, but Rolen, (and please try to take this in the very best sense) ~~you jump off balconies (you think you can fly) and have run away from~~ there are some things about you that worry me-- things I'm not sure we can get past.

~~Welcome home Rolen! I've made you a sandwich-- you must be starving after~~

Rolen,

I've ~~gone to~~ left for the airport to go back home. Please don't try to stop me. I have made my decision and for once in my life, fully plan on sticking to it and moving on.

~~Love,~~

Madison

Rolen,

I've decided it was the best for both of us if I just went back home. Madison

Madison picked up the sandwich and took a bite-- too much mustard but then the mayo . . . she pulls out the onions, positions the bread back on top . . . Madison lifts the letter from

the table and looks it over. rolen. She opens her mouth wide, but then tugs on the slice of swiss with her teeth-- the tower of ham and turkey begins to totter, the meat pulled out with the cheese. Half of the sandwich falls into pieces right in front of her on the kitchen table-- despite the steady pressure, the very best of effort from her fingers . . . *what has become of us, rolen?* Scattered across the floor are the crumpled drafts, before her the sandwich, and Madison wonders whether it all might be better as an email.

Trampoline

Rolen rose up and pushed himself forward, sprinting in quick bursts out across the wide open spaces. He ran as fast as he could from picket fence to mailbox, his legs and arms flailing wildly between the cover of the occasional magnolia tree and short manicured evergreens-- Resting. Rolan gathered up his strength by momentarily squatting in the shadows of a parked car to avoid the cones of yellowed light rushing down from the tall aluminum poles. He tapped the hard shell of the cast with two fingers-- tap, tap. Breathe. . . and then he was up again, with every footfall and each lunging tumble, Rolan nearing closer to the house on the corner of Duck and Third-- the green rancher with the trampoline in the yard.

Every morning on his way to work he had seen the broad back of canvass stretched taut over its chromed metal frame. Rolan had wondered what it would be like to pull over and jump freely upon the elastic surface-- what sound the springs would make and the feel of his toes pressing down into the fabric, the entire weight of him sinking into the center of the trampoline. Now he began to see its outline coming into focus-- the dull moonlight glimmer of the chrome from where he crouched behind an overflowing trash can on the opposite side of the street. Slowly he moved past the grit of three day coffee grinds and the smell of eggshells, around an old abandoned vacuum cleaner and the clean edges from the discarded box of a new-- cautiously stepping over a browning banana peel, the broken rinds of an orange, the discarded knob of a radio and across the street in a curve precisely calculated to avoid the bright incremental circles sloping down in the dark. $R + 1/\alpha = \bar{L}$. . . his toes right over broken glass so as not

to break into the arc of light. Lowered toward the side walk, Rolen's arms hung limply before him, the cast weighing heavily as he ambled forward-- his feet crossing into the cool grass of the yard after a tilting of the head and one last scan over the house for lights.

The trampoline canvass was coming more and more into focus from under the long yawn of shadow which colored his thoughts until Rolen, dropping down on all fours behind a well-groomed gladioli bush, heard a dog howling in the distance-- its low mourning breaking into a high-pitched moan and then a frenzied wild. Zig-zagging through the bushes and shrubbery in the yard, Rolen shimmied on elbows and knees forward through the dim light-- pictured himself a coyote stalking its prey, cautiously avoiding any fallen twigs and branches the storm had wrestled down into his path. The pouch of his stomach scraped and contorted across the blades of grass, yet still he pushed forward. Ahead waited the trampoline, nestled in the shadows on the side of the house, and with a sudden burst Rolen scrambled to the peat-mossed edging of the house-- his back against the siding, Rolen rose up tentatively from a bed of flags to have another look and gauge his progress. The trampoline was at last in full view, the moonlight spilling down gently upon its perfect symmetry and Rolen nervously rubbed his thumb into the fold of forefinger-- the finger held in place with the wires, the thin metal strands so wet with mud and peat that he grasped the long narrow shoot from a nearby flag, resisting the strong impulse to wipe down the steel, his fingers and palms, the elbows and his knees. Stop. When the moon finally disappeared behind a cloud rushing across the night sky, Rolen tossed the shoot away, checked along the wall one last time for any lights. Once more lowering himself to the damp earth, he carefully and slowly approached the trampoline in a straight line through the open dark of the yard.

As he made his way, the elbows, forearm, calve, toes, and knee rhythmically sliding, Rolan listened to the sound of night time traffic-- the tight whined spirals of a motorbike and the low murmurings of the occasional tractor trailer. He remembered the sound of the horse drawn buggies in the distant east, the Amish drivers in suspenders behind the reigns, the florescent triangles and the clip-clopping of the hooves. A few blocks away was the interstate, but closer he heard voices and the sudden shrill tones of a garbage truck backing up to a dumpster. Nearer yet was the sound of his own breathing, and he paused for a moment at the heightened rasp of an inhale-- the silence before release. Exhale. The moon emerged once again, the pale light spreading rapidly across the yard and reflecting off his shoulders. Rolan, for the first time it seemed, noticed the thick cropping of hair on his forearms-- imagined himself trapped within ball of dew atop a blade of grass, floating randomly within the sphere of bubble, bouncing haphazardly inside a shrinking orb of water, slowly drowning, violent with arms flailing and eyes wide open in shock at the enlarged image of himself looking back in. Exposed. Rolan quickened his pace, his elbows sliding forward and his knees pressing divots into the soft earth.

When he was close enough, Rolan scrambled with one last effort into the dark shadows beneath the massive trampoline. Here too, the powder of light dusted the knuckles and the tips of his fingers and Rolan marveled at the pale bump of intersecting veins pulsing-- rising in a tremble on the back of his hands. He even admired the wires extending out his cast and guiding the finger of his left hand. Venturing out from beneath the canvass, he stopped and listened to a car coming down the street. The sound of a police radio-- the slow turn of tires, the water pushing out from the tread, and Rolan

jerked back under the long jacket of shadow. As the cruiser passed, Rolan could see more clearly the brass buttoned coat, the gold twined epilet, the broad artificial stripes running down the slacks, the rows of stitched colored blocks and ribboned decorations. He moved his hands in and out under the moonlight, taunting the trooper with his sidearm and hat. The water pressed out and up into the fender well under the weight of the cruiser, the water mixed with gravel splattered against the spotless white door and a methodical laugh spreading out from deep within him until the bright flash of turn signal, the red throb of exhaust fading again into the night-- the water flowing back over the tracks, removing all evidence the trooper had been

Rolan placed his hands upon the canvassed metal frame, hoisted himself up onto the tight elastic surface and into the light of the moon. He made his way to the center, his knees and hands sliding on the rain water, the cast rubbing with a shrill grate across leaves deposited by the storm-- the water collected immediately about him, the droplets siphoned into shimmering impressions beneath him and shifting under his weight, vibrating in tight circles and following him as he crawled. Every push and lean dispersed and reforming the oddly shaped puddles until Rolan struggled to stand up quietly-- Rolan rising tentatively from his knees with arms held out in balance and the water rushing into a tight oval pocket around his feet. Rolan standing fully under the moon, turning his face toward the stars, his chin tilted and palms up before bending back down . . . and then Rolan began to jump. His toes lifted from the surface, the back of his thighs, the calves tightened and the water now tumbling through the air-- suspended for a moment like a thousand drops of rain rising from the earth. Rolan jumped higher and more freely in defiance of Newton then down again in a celebration of his law-- every part of him

swinging wildly, the muscles tense and then relaxed, the weight of the wet cast turning him about in the air . . .

. . . Rolen ran across the open yard, tripping and falling over the plastic pail and shovel of a child-- the smack of flood lights from the house blanketing everything in white as he neared the edge of the property, hopping forward on naked thigh. When he stopped, bent forward to lift a quarter from the grass, Rolen could hear clearly the door of the house swinging open, jerked when it slapped hard against the siding in a sharp echo. With the quarter safely palmed, Rolen disappeared into the shadows, the shrubbery-- running down the street in the direction of his truck, his fists in an open sprint before him, the cast growing heavy and Rolen wincing with every shard of loose gravel beneath his feet.

Secret Growth Formula #5

Tucking the sapling and the magic watering can under his arms, the little boy turns and hurries home . . . *with the can of Secret Growth Formula Number 5?* That's right, the stuff he got off that old mystical tree trimmer with the seeds. The boy had saved quite some stash up from the paper route and his lunch money, and when he finally had enough for the ladder, the little girl seemed closer than ever-- the moon, the stars, the planets soon to be within his reach. *So which was it? Was he really after a touch of the night sky or did he just want to reach the stars so he could get in good with the girl?* That's some question! *It's perfectly valid from where the girl sits-- a girl needs to know that kind of thing.* Is it that important? *yes* Well, if she has to know, it's both. If you remember, the boy was at first drawn to the girl every night on his paper route, you know, the way she'd be in the window staring out toward the stars. After a while he started looking up himself, admiring the light and powder of the moon-- the dark spots like fingerprints. It had kind of a hypnotic effect on him and before he knew it he was hooked himself. *So it WAS the little girl first.* Would you get over it Maddy! I mean, why does it really matter that the little boy fell in love with the girl before the stars?

Because the boy might only love the stars and the planets for the girl.

I already said he didn't-- but what would be the big deal anyway?

You see, the little girl has already had too many disappointments in her life.

What, with her mother and father and everything she needs something real. If not, it's the same as the glow-in-the-dark planets and stars her mother tried to bribe her with. I mean, there's the little girl dreaming every night about dancing up there somewhere

across the galaxy and all her mother does about it is to buy her a pack of cheap florescent stickers. But what's that have to do with the little boy? Everything-- it's not like the little girl's mother bought the stickers and spent all that time decorating the girl's room out of some genuine wish or support for the little girl's dreams. No, no way-- the mother was just trying to fool the girl into thinking her dreams really could happen knowing all the time the girl didn't have a shot in hell. But what's so wrong with that and how's the little boy fit in? Instead of doing something real for the girl, the mother just went ahead and let the little girl dream away foolishly. The whole thing a set-up, like a trap door waiting to drop out from under the girl's feet. the boy? He's just as bad if he doesn't really want the stars on his own without the girl. The boy might just be pulling a fast one on her, not really wanting to smear his fingers across the moon unless it means getting the girl out of her nightie.

You're wrong about the little boy-- he's the genuine thing.

But how is the little girl supposed to know that when everyone in her life . . .

She needs to trust in the little boy-- take a chance like he did with the old mystical tree trimmer. You see, the boy had a lot of trouble believing in people too. That's what he liked about the girl when he saw her night after night staring out her window-- she looked like someone he could really fall in . . . I mean trust completely. So . . . when he ran into the old trimmer on his way to buy the ladder in town . . . *But how could he do that? How could the little boy trust some old and grungy complete stranger? Sounds pretty foolish to the little girl.* Well, the trimmer appeared out of nowhere-- as if he had fallen from the sky and right in the path of the little boy that day. It was like destiny or something. Like the hand of God rolled out the old trimmer and his secret growth

formula like a pair of dice-- snake eyes! Right down in front of the little boy. The same way the little girl started appearing in her window every night at the exact moment the boy went by on his route *thin-- sounds pretty thin . . .* But the little boy had to believe in something because he couldn't trust in his mother or his dead father-- and certainly not his evil grandmother. So he took a chance and bought the sapling and magic watering can.

Just like that?

With one condition-- the old magical trimmer warned the little boy that the sapling would only grow if the boy really believed in the secret growth formula.

Secret Growth Formula Number 5?

That's right.

So , let me guess-- the little boy takes the stuff home, hides everything under his bed and the next morning, plants and waters the sapling right across the street from the little girl's window-- on the other side of her hedge . . . And then? . . . Then, the boy waits for nightfall and when he finally hears the snores of his evil grandmother through the thin walls of his locked bedroom, he crawls carefully and silently out the window . . .

Yes, but wearing nothing but shorts and some climbing boots! *You had to go there, didn't you?* Well, like I told you before, the night was hot and the little boy was sick and tired of wearing the dead clothes of his dead father-- the way his mother and grandmother made him parade around in them. Stop and turn . . . Stop and turn . . . *okay, but he's going to run into trouble about it when the little girl gets sight of him-- remember, she's funny that way. I remember. So let's see, the little boy sneaks off under the moonlight,*

right? and? and when he gets to where he planted the sapling he finds it has grown into a tall spiraling tree . . . winding all the way up to where it touches the moon.

I like this part of the story.

Me too, but you left out an important piece . . .

What's that?

The bit about the little boy having to believe about the tree and the magic of the formula . . . *Secret Growth Formula Number 5?*

Yup, with every step the little boy had to remind himself that he really did believe in the magic behind the watering can because if he didn't, as the old trimmer had warned him, the whole works would be off. *Didn't he ever doubt it?* Well, of course he did. He even had to go back and retrace his steps once or twice. *How's that?* He just kept the little girl, the stars, the moon, and the planets in his mind like a snapshot, a Polaroid or something-- kept the images in front of him like carrots dangling from a string.

No, I meant how did he go back over his steps when he stumbled?

Well, hmm . . . It's like this one time the neighbor's bull terrier came out after him as he was walking down the street. The moon had slipped behind a storm cloud and he heard low snarls from the dark yard-- the sound of the terrier's feet across the grass really freaked the little boy out . . .

the Brown's? That dog was harmless as a rabbit-- active, but not scary . . .

To the little boy it was! So much so that he started to doubt the whole thing . . . *So, what did he do?* The little boy realized the terrier could not really get at him if he imagined a fence in between them, and once he got the fence in place-- a big tall wooden one-- he stepped back to the place where he had forgotten about the little girl, the stars, and the

formula, and made himself remember them again before starting forward. He believed the tree could take him to everything he ever wanted-- he believed it so much that he couldn't hear the terrier's feet anymore, or the snarls coming from behind the fence. The little boy trusted in the magic and the vicious bull terrier disappeared, vanished along with the sharp fangs ready and set to tear him apart.

Sounds easy enough-- for the little boy, that is. That sort of thing doesn't work so well for the little girl anymore . . .

You don't need to make it harder than what it is.

Well, the little girl gets herself in panic attacks even thinking about climbing out her window. Truth be known, the little boy had some panic attacks too when he finally made it to the little girl's block and caught his first glimpse of the tree towering up into the sky on the other side of the little girl's hedge. *How so?* Well, the wind was blowing pretty hard that night and even though the tree had grown thick and sturdy close to the ground, the boy could see the thing swaying more wildly the farther the trunk reached up in the sky. The thing was really knocking around up there and toward the top, well . . . *I thought the little boy couldn't see the top yet.* He couldn't, from the ground it looked as though the tree might go on all the way up to the moon. The boy became almost nauseous just watching and to make matters worse, the little girl wasn't at her window. *See, that's my point. Why should it matter whether the little girl is there to watch or not?* She doesn't need to be. But the little boy thought it might be nice. *Why's that?* I guess he thought she might climb up with him, or at least give him some strength-- you know, like empathy or moral support to keep his boots steady and his grip firm around the twists of trunk.

Can you say CO-DEPENDENCY?

The little boy can't, but obviously the little girl can.

Damn right she can. The little girl can smell something that UNHEALTHY a mile away!

I don't think the little girl can tell the difference between co-dependency and love.

I think the little boy better get his little boy ass up that tree-- and NOT for the little girl but for himself.

Fine! If that's how it's going to be . . . with every foothold the little boy-- not thinking in the least, not even the tiniest bit about the little girl-- hoists himself higher up the thick tree trunk toward the night sky. His mind is completely off the little girl and those damn pigtails of hers as he makes his way higher up toward the night sky. The little boy has nothing on his little mind except the stars twinkling so fucking nice-- beautiful, just great up above him. More than anything else in the world, he wants his fingers to touch the shadows on the moon, all for himself and no one else-- not his mother, his dead father or his grandmother, certainly not for some kind of sick and twisted, rather, some demented and unhealthy idea of love that he might have for a certain pig-tailed little girl.

It sounds as if the little boy has some issues to resolve too.

Like I was saying, the little boy was climbing furiously, at record pace up the tree-- trying to resolve some very peculiar issues he had. The cold wind tossing the tree around like some giant snapping a horsewhip-- the wind freezing, leaves flying everywhere, and the boy struggling upward trying to figure out for himself why the hell

he had ever fallen in love with a stupid lifeless piece of powder and rock. The boy suddenly feeling very cold and alone . . .

See, I told you the little boy should have grabbed a shirt . . .

The Rock Garden

When Rolen arrived at the door, Madison remained in the living room pacing. She counted to one-hundred, whispering out the numbers, wringing her hands with every new series of knocks. She pulled the necklace until it fell just right against her blouse, straightened her skirt and pressed it down one last time before pausing at the door, easing back the deadlocks and slowly turning the knob. The door opened to Rolen in the hallway and Madison could not look at him, her eyes falling instead and to focus upon the odd bundle of black-eyed susans he passed nervously from one hand to the next.

The susans smelled faint to Madison, the yellowed petals waxy yet delicate and stretching up from the soft brown center. The susans drooping bulky, the stalks between her fingers and Rolen cautiously stepping from the hall behind her after she with quivering voice had asked him in. Madison searched for a vase, called out to him from the kitchen, reminded him to check again whether he had secured all of the locks, turned them solidly into the reinforced sockets and pulled the chains to their tracks, slid them to the place where the metal ends would hold against the likely weight of an intruder pushing in. “Did you remember the one on the floor?” Madison asked as she the tulips up against a tall empty pickle jar. She filled the jar with water and lowered the susans in, the long slender stalks sliding along the lip of the jar as she placed it in the center of the small kitchen table. “I thought we might go out to the patio.” she stated firmly when Rolen pulled out a chair and readied himself to take a seat.

Out on the patio, Madison scooted the lawn chair away from where it faced Rolen. Neither one had spoken for some time and she looked out past her potted rock garden to where the neighbor was moving out below. She watched as he and his friends carried the boxes out to the van where it was backed up onto the lawn. She thought of how she would miss the sound of the neighbor coming in late at night. There was something comforting and regular about the low rumble every night a little past midnight when Maddy found herself turning in the bed, trying to shut down the images in her mind. She would wait for the sound of the neighbor slamming the car door and stumbling up the steps on the other side of her bedroom wall. Now, the neighbor stopped in the middle of lifting the sofa up the ramp and into the back of the van. He smiled a broad smile at her and she smiled back until his girlfriend came out carrying a lamp and pillow. Beside her, Rolen had lifted himself to his feet. "I really don't know why I even came over," he said, "it's amazing how easy it is for you to stare at a perfect stranger and can't even stand to look at me for a single second." Rolen slid the glass door open forcefully, and stepped back inside.

Madison remained on the patio, rearranging the rocks in her garden, lifting the rocks one after another and turning them back down into the dark soil. When she uncovered a plant growing, the fragile pale green curling up tentatively from under the shadow of where a rock was once placed, Madison paused before twisting the rock back down. She began placing the rocks in a circle around the delicate twist of green, opening up a clearing about the shoot and down on her knees, loosening the soil with a small shovel-- building slowly a textured wall before the voice of her neighbor startled her. The thick skin of his nose pressed through the iron rails of the patio, the neighbor stood

atop a pair of stacked boxes until he could peer over the patio edge, the neighbor grinning under the nose and Madison stood up from the garden, dropping the shovel, backing away toward the sliding glass door-- the neighbor speaking to her, the mouth moving yet still stiffly grinning but Madison not responding, Madison sliding open the door without turning her back on the man clinging to the patio rails, his hands around the rails and the fingers and Madison closing the door behind her, latching it securely and drawing across the curtains.

Madison came up behind Rolen in the kitchen as he moved from where he dropped the chewing gum in the trash and began washing his hands under the rushing water in the sink. She walked up, raised her hand softly, her fingers almost coming to rest upon his shoulder and sliding down his back. "How long will it take you to get there?" she asked instead, patting out her palm, curling her fingers back and stepping away from him. "About two days. . ." Rolen said flatly as he lathered up the soap, rubbing his fingers together vigorously. Madison backed away from him, picking up the card from the kitchen table, lifted it carefully up and then tapping it into her palm. Rolen reached for the towel hanging from the stove and Madison found herself in the hallway rushing toward the closet. Backed against the door with her knees pulled up into her chin, Madison slowed her breathing. She heard Rolen moving in the hallway-- Rolen coming louder toward her now in the hallway and Madison buried her head into crossed arms, rocking until Rolen's voice came into the closet and brushed against her. "Hey there . . ." he began softly, and before Madison knew it, the door was open, the light from the hallway rushing in.

When later, they stood outside the front door, Madison pointed to the sky where the jets broke into view, dipping under the clouds sometimes. “I never really noticed them before--” she told Rolen, who began to start down the short walkway toward where his truck waited under a streetlamp. “Wait . . .” Madison found herself saying-- the word and the letters escaping out into the porch light before she had a chance to push them down inside her somewhere. “What?” asked Rolen, turning fully around. He stopped to face her, and moved toward her until Madison could see the full round of his eyes. “I forgot to give you something,” she said after a while. “Hold on.” She rushed back into the apartment, running up the stairs and into her bedroom. Madison opened up the bottom drawer of her bureau, pushed aside the letters, the ticket stubs carefully tucked inside envelopes. She pulled out the book of stories she had fallen asleep to as a child, opened it to where Cinderella leaned on a broom, looking longingly out in the distance past her soiled dress and tangled hair. On the way back down, Madison stopped and opened the closet door on her way out, rummaged through the coat pockets until she pulled out the sealed card from the one she had slipped it earlier before coming out from in the dark.

Rolen sat on the edge of the cement landing with his back to her as she quietly stepped outside the apartment once more. She made her way behind him, the book crossed tightly to her chest. “I wanted you to have this-- to take it with you.” Madison breathed out softly as she positioned herself down beside him. With one last look at it, she held it out to him. Rolen cleared his throat, looked down from where he had been staring down the street and off into the night. She watched as he lowered the book into his lap, ran his fingers lightly across the cover. “You know,” he said without looking up

at her, “if there was some reason for me not to go-- any reason at all-- I’d tell them I changed my mind and stay.” He turned toward her now, his hand reaching across to her. His fingers were soft against her own, his chest rising and Madison lowered her head into his shoulder.

Moonlight

“Tell me a story Rolen . . .” Madison is beside him on the blanket, gazing up from the meadow toward the stars. Her skin soft and silhouetted beneath the light of the moon. Rolen imagines her without the sweater and jeans. Maddy. Still, in his mind, he can not shake the memory . . .

QUESTION: *you're pretty quiet tonight . . . what are you thinking?*

ANSWER: nothing . . . not anything important at least . . .

Yet there they are . . . Unforgettable. The two running through the tall grass under the stars. Moonlight spilling down from their hair and onto bare shoulders and . . . Rolen stretch ed out-- relaxing. Reclining naked on a blanket, propped comfortably up on elbows and taking it all in.

Rolen rubs his hands across the blanket-- the palms are sweated and the fingers . . . unclean.

“At least it isn't raining this time . . .” Rolen shifts uncomfortably on the blanket-- unsure of whether or not to move closer to her.

“I almost wish it were,” Madison whispers. “There's something about the rain that makes you think it has the power to wash everything away.”

Rolen remains still-- trying to appear comfortable with his place on the blanket. The two gaze up at the stars above them in the night sky-- the moon.

“It would be nice,” he says, holding in his stomach from where it threatens to bulge over the belt. “I mean . . . you know, to start fresh again-- everything clean and new.”

“Yeah, the whole world and all the past just wiped away-- like it never happened or was all undone with one long downpour . . .” and Madison smiles.

Rolen closes his eyes and imagines himself and Madison the only two left. The flood waters subside and they walk hand in hand on the crest of a great mountain looking across the waves of a vast rain-water ocean. The moon is above them and everything forgotten-- the waves break against the rocky shore until Maddy smacks his hand away. She slaps him across the face. . . *stop it!* Rolan cannot shake it off, he opens his eyes and suddenly there they are again-- the two women rising from the water and running past him naked. Their breasts in the moonlight bouncing and Rolan can not help but look-- trace the soft contours of flesh, the long flowing hair and the toes pushing gently into the soft earth. Their silhouettes contorting and blurring until the sun rises up, spreads out across the water-- the stars a distant remnant and moon a dim pale ornament in the blue pasted sky.

¹**moon** \`mun\`n [ME *mone*, fr. OE *mona*; akin to OHG *mano* moon, L *mensis* month, Gk *men* month, *mene* moon] **1 a** : the earth’s only known natural satellite shining by the sun’s reflected light, revolving about the earth from west to east in about 29 1/2 days with reference to the sun or about 27 1/2 days with reference to the stars and having a diameter

of 2160 miles and a mean distance from the earth of about 238,857 miles, a mass about one eightieth that of the earth, and a volume about one forty-ninth **b** : one complete moon cycle consisting of four phases

²**moon** *vt* : to spend in idle reverie : DREAM --- used with *away* ~ *vi* : to behave abstractedly : DREAM

Smear. His palms against the fabric until the two women are pushed into the thought of Madison and himself-- Madison and maddy . . . blurred. Untouchable. His grandmother and mother-- his father transformed into the unmoving. Stable-- a perfect soldier. Madison inches closer but Rolen remains perfectly still-- frozen on the blanket.

He focuses upon a line in the fabric-- steadies himself against the checkered pattern.

“Didn’t you ever just want to reach up and touch it?” Madison rocks next to him on the blanket, her naked finger crossing over into his vision.

“What?” Rolen takes a chance-- he glances over toward her, tracing the bare flesh of her arm to where it disappears into the sleeve.

“The moon . . .” she is staring up toward the sky. “Didn’t you ever want to hold it in your hands and smell it-- breathe it all in?”

Madison’s eyebrows drop-- her eyes swerving dangerously close to looking his way.

“No.” Rolen is tentative at first, but when Maddy buries her face into her palms, he

changes direction. “Well . . . yes, but maybe not in the same exact way.”

Rolen pauses . . . unsure of whether he should go any further.

Chance. He reaches for her-- brushes gentle against her hand and then the shoulder.

Touches. She is still at first, but lets him brush his fingers across her cheek. Fireflies.

The moonlight reflecting off Madison’s hair as Rolen cradles her in his hands. Trust.

With chin, she nudges sleepy into his hold and rests.

light \ˈlit\ *n* [ME, fr. OE *leoht*: akin to OHG *lioht* light, L *luc-lux* light, *lucere* to shine, Gk *leukos* white] **1 a** : something that makes vision possible **b** : the sensation aroused by stimulation of the visual receptors : BRIGHTNESS **c** : an electromagnetic radiation in the wavelength range including infrared, visible, ultraviolet, and X rays and traveling in a vacuum with a speed of about 186,281 miles per second; *specif* : the part of this range that is visible to the human eye

Rolen watches as her chest rises and falls. Sleeping. The moon steady in the sky as her face brightens. Dreaming. Perhaps, he could run his fingers through her hair . . . but, no.

To Protect and Serve. He is afraid to wake her-- leans cautiously over to check the citronella candles instead.

Rolen eases back, elbows locked-- weight on palms. He closes his eyes, drifts asleep and dreams about the two women . . . “How long before you have to report back to the office, soldier?” The shorter one salutes him as the taller bends down, undoes the buttons on her

blouse . . . one by one. “I really need to be getting back,” he says, trying to remain perfectly still in the chair as they both stand before him, the taller sliding out of the silk skirt down the length of her legs and the shorter already stepping away from hers-- lifting a thigh to unclasp the thin strap of a high heel. “Now it’s your turn, soldier . . .” they say in unison as the moon dances overhead. Rolan pulls the tongue of his tie out from beneath his shirt and with a tug, loosens it-- he unclasps the first two buttons and stretches the collar away. But before he reaches the third . . .

“ . . . Madison?” She is twisting, pushing, turning in her sleep-- slapping frantically away the arms from where Rolan had just before held her softly.

“Maddy?” Rolan freezes, pulls his hands away and up in surrender-- unsure of what exactly to do.

“Stay away . . . Don’t . . . no . . .” Madison pushes and contorts-- her eyes still closed but even in the dim light he can see them racing under the eyelids.

Her palms curl tightly into fists and frantically swinging.

“madi . . . wake up . . .” Rolan sits up and nudges her gently. She opens her eyes for second, looks into the distance-- past him, then closes. The fists slowing . . . eventually d r o p p i n g silent.

He watches her chest rise and fall-- listens to her breathing.

Inhale. The sweater thickly up and then deflating. Unsure, he whispers her name and Madison pulls herself closer to him-- pushes her fingers into his. Exhale. Her breath

warm against his skin. He scans across the darkened meadow one last time. To protect and serve . . . Rolen admires the subtle curve of eyelash and cheek-- the light powder of light as it falls upon her ear. Delicate. She turns and with sleepy fingers, rubs across her nose-- breathes in. Steady. He rocks her in his lap . . . in and out from under the stars and the soft glow of moon.

Hank Help

The following is a brief excerpt from the online psychiatric discussion chat-room "Hank Help™":

the doc:

and how does that make you feel exactly?

depressed:

not good.

the doc:

can you be more specific?

the doc:

it's okay to let it out--

depressed:

it's like i've lost any hint of anything

depressed:

there's nothing

depressed:

nothing

the doc: are you still there depressed?

the doc: depressed?

depressed: yeah, i'm still around

depressed: i'm just having a bad life

the doc: anything you want to talk about?

depressed: not really

depressed: i'm tired of that too

the doc: talking?

depressed: i'm just tired

the doc: well now, what say we take a look at ways to try to get some of that energy back

depressed: to be honest, i don't even know whether i can go there right now

the doc: it's not easy, but you can do it

the doc: it might help if you could hear from someone who's been through it too

the doc: is there any one else out there who can throw their hat into the ring here?

the doc: anyone?

depressed2: hi doc

depressed2: hi depressed

the doc: yo, how-do

depressed2: i've been feeling on the down myself lately

depressed2: I've been fighting this for a long time

depressed2: up and down, that's sort of how it goes

depressed: what do you do about it?

depressed2: sometimes, i try thinking about all the good things that have happened

the doc: that's good

the doc: sometimes it helps to focus in on the positive

the doc: sometimes if you hold onto something good, it can put things in perspective and

can get you through those rough stretches when you're down

depressed2: the problem is that i'm having a hard time coming up with anything positive
right now

depressed: me too

depressed: what do you do if there's nothing good?

the doc: what do you mean?

the doc: can you describe it to clear things up some?

depressed: it's like the fire's gone out and everything is cold

depressed: real cold

depressed2: it's freezing over here too

the doc: maybe you can both think of ways to make something positive

the doc: I mean, is there anything that you do that always makes you feel good?

the doc: for instance, some people try reading, some walk or work out

the doc: others clean or write letters

the doc: it doesn't have to be anything major

the doc: just anything positive

the doc: anything to make you feel better

the doc: depressed?

lemoned: hey doc

the doc: hi

lemoned: sorry to bust in like this, but I think I just bought myself an eight thousand dollar lemon

lemoned: it's a 95 civic and it already's left me sit twice

the doc: hmmm . . . I hate to turn you away, but sorry lemoned, I don't offer that kind of advice anymore

the doc: from what you've said, though, it doesn't sound good

the doc: but there are still some options

lemoned: like what?

the doc: there's lots of stuff you can still do about it

the doc: try bob's auto care and maintenance at autoquestions.com

lemoned: thanks doc

the doc: what say you depressed and 2?

the doc: where were we?

the doc: are you two still there?

the doc: how did you make out?

the doc: anything positive?

the doc: depressed?

the doc: depressed2?

the doc: are you there?

Letters

The faucet is singing-- the water rushing down upon her hands. The soap and water destroying all the evidence-- the crumbs and mustard, the mayo swirling down into the sink. Still, there are the crumpled letters-- Madison can picture him rummaging through the trash . . .

. . . through all the drawers until she finds it-- the striking surface fairly worn but plenty of sticks in the box. Slowly the drawer slides carefully shut but maddy memorizes the placement of the matches before closing-- face up . . . to the left of the can opener, diagonal across the handle over the ovenmitts and slightly right of the shiska-bob spears-- maddy checks to make sure she hasn't broken a thin stretch of tape and then pauses to listen . . . no footsteps, he is not yet home but she must hurry, yes, the match box down next to the letter, the plate, and back to the trash can-- the crumpled letters still should be on top. Wait. The blinds apart, Madison pushes open the door. Rolan is definitely not there-- she snaps shut the deadbolt until click. Step. left quickly maddy, right, hurry . . .

hiding-- her Father . . . “you sneaky little . . . that diary better turn up, and quick . . . I won't have my own daughter turning . . . not in this house . . . what else have you been . . .”

Hiding-- dr. labia, hank . . . “men . . . not the same . . . rolan and your father different . . .

try to insert a mental reminder . . . with rolen you don't have to . . . just say what you think . . .”

Hiding-- her mother . . . “try to forget . . . put it down somewhere deep inside you . . .

Everyone makes mistakes . . . you need to forgive your . . . out of your mind, like I . . . No, don't!”

hiding-- Rolen . . . “don't hide from me maddy . . . please, don't . . . with me you will never . . . can't you see I'm not . . . please maddy . . . with me you can . . . please . . .”

Madison gathers up the crumpled letters-- lifts them one after the other out of the trash. Damp. Bacteria-- the smell of animal fat and onion. Stale. Unsteady in her arms, she carries jagged paper twisting to the kitchen table . . . must hurry, right and then the left-- step. Up, stacking into a pyramid on plate-- the letters compressed and balled into tiny ragged tangles. The match ticks jiggle within the box, tapping against the walls until maddy in livingroom on carpet across knees-- down on stone in front of fireplace, yes-- the box open and maddy striking match . . .

The flame leaps up-- small at first around the edges. Flickers a light blue, white then orange and growing . . . *burn, burning, burn* . . . she watches the words, the letters glowing-- red each letter brightens as the embers lift up into the room.

Madison listens to the small of crackle-- the paper darkens and curling . . . alone.

In the burn-barrel, the diary cover finally bubbles in flame. She is alone outside with the trash-- her eyebrows beginning to singe and maddy watching through the haze of fire, her nose and the words buckling under the heat-- *goodnight maddy* . . . her mother, pushing the blanket up to the chin-- *scoot over maddy* . . . later her father, strong with the smell of gin. Burn. The diary in flames and sizzle-- pop! “what are you afraid of maddy-- why aren’t you telling me?” rolen’s words harsh but the eyes soft, yes, different . . . but still left the letters, the diary caught in her throat drying and scratchy as she throws in more tissues and paper towels-- an egg carton.

. . . *burn, baby, burn* . . .

She adds some cellophane and the discarded envelopes from her mother’s sweepstakes. The plastic shrinks and curls-- the smoke heavy in dark swirls rising up but still the diary . . . “what are you writing about Madison-- what could you be putting down in that diary?” her father’s words soft, but the eyes harsh and unmistakable. Hidden. Later, the edges singed but the pages clinging stubbornly together in the flames, the words surfacing page after page and maddy running out of trash-- *don’t hide from me maddy* . . . rolen, on the floor beside her, but Madison afraid of what he might think-- *there are no secrets in this house, young lady* . . . her mother, but maddy is too ashamed. Her face dirtied by the smoke, her fingers darkened and burnt as she reaches into heat and lifts it out, tears the pages loose one by one-- maddy winces from the burns but clings tightly, crumples the paper into balls and throws them back in the barrel.

The paper crumpled and burns-- the letters and words disappearing . . .

Madison snaps out of it when the heater kicks in. The flames lean and stammer, the embers plume and burst . . . *burn, burning, burn* . . . a thousand glowing circles thrown spiraling across the room. Madison is up on her feet, stamping out the embers as they sift down to the carpet.

. . . up the last step, and Madison past-- avoids the sight of the balcony, pats Coppertone on the nose before noticing the dark smears of ash across her fingers. Her legs are tired from the trip upstairs and her arms from the railing, but her hands completely soiled and Madison feels dirty again. A shower, yes, the water warm to wash away . . . but, no, what if someone should see . . . what if Rolen back and she like that in the shower. Madison turns on the bathroom light, the fan chatters then slowly turning. turning. She pauses for a moment, eyes the lipstick across the mirror and walls-- the lines circling until the words snap into perspective.

Perspective-- Dr. Labia, hank . . . “if he’s said friend, you can trust him-- rolen is not your father-- slow your breathing . . . down it all slow and put things in perspective . . .”

perspective-- rolen . . . “need to get away for awhile-- gain a little perspective on things . . . it might not be that long, no . . . I don’t know-- the job is temporary but . . .”

perspective-- her mother . . . “yes, I guess so maddy-- from up there, everything here would seem pretty small . . . the earth a tiny dot and everyone and everything in it . . . a place for little girls to sleep, to dream . . .”

Perspective-- Madison . . . “That’s right maddy . . . breathe . . .”

The water pounds down around her, pressing divots in her skin, forging twisting streams which meander heavy to the toes-- but the letter keeps surfacing, even in the shower. She puts them in the trash, then pulls them back out-- *he could find them there* . . . maddy piles the crumpled drafts together on the living room carpet, rummages through the drawers, and strikes a match-- she watches the flames rise. Her arms and fingers are sore from scrubbing the walls and floor, she lathers the soap-- barely. She is still in her underwear, the thin saturated fabric clinging to her skin-- the soap stretched in long awkward bubbles but she could not, no, could not possibly take the chance, but the silk teddy . . . yes, the silk teddy quickly in the suitcase as her mother . . . is hanging on the door and maddy knows she must sometime . . . *relax* . . . Madison closes her eyes and leans back-- lets the water warm rush down across her face.

. . . turning the spigot cocks closed-- the suds circling before sliding down the drain, the rhythm of water cut short and through the steam Madison hears the high muffled pitch of alarm. Her hands still weak but sliding the towel across her back and around, Madison hurries out of the wet underwear and into the teddy under the security of terry-cloth. Breathe. She wraps the towel into a turban about her head and Madison places her fingers around the knob-- turning, the lock bolt snapping free, Madison opens the bathroom door . . .

Rolen Buys a Soda

Two blocks down on the right was the 24hr. corner grocery. The bright red and white sign towered out above the wet streets-- the letters in the sign the very same as the store Rolen would stop at in the morning on his way to work. The colors flickered after a lightning strike, almost disappearing in the rush of light, then surged back stronger in the light drizzle. From where he stood, Rolen followed a string of balloons tumbling in the night sky from where they were tied to the sign by an invisible string.

As he continued down the sidewalk, cautiously stepping over the cracks, Rolen looked up in ten-second intervals to the balloons suspended and how they rolled over each other, the brightly colored silhouettes spinning in circles under the rumble of distant thunder, its low murmur spreading, rippling, rising up and down and yet suspended in the night-- the balloons bouncing as if speaking to one another. Thirsty. Something in the sign made Rolen think about the rows of orange juice and soda which would always be waiting within the store-- iced tea, the hot chocolate, coffee and pre-packaged sandwiches. He thought of the discount soda machine in front of his own store, the one with the generic cola for 25 cents, and Rolen checked for the quarter in his hand-- found it still safely tucked into the palm beneath where his fingers curled tightly around the truck keys. His pace quickened down the sidewalk-- he could see the quarter sliding into the slot, the sound of it bumping down past the sensors, his fingers stretching out toward the broad plastic button and the soda dropping with a thud from somewhere inside. He was about to raise the cold wet dewy to his open mouth-- the lips dry and waiting when

up ahead he noticed the glare of brake lights, the dull white cascade of reverse and then the cruiser backing out of the grocery parking lot and onto the street.

From where he flung himself behind a bush, Rolen could see the trooper again. The trooper's lips curled in a snarl and the teeth clamped down, tearing through a muffin - the incisors greedily ripping away through the soft flaky flesh and then the canines tromping and smashing and twisting and grinding until the roadway was clear. Closer. Rolen tumbled the quarter over the ridges of his fingers, crept along the edge of the parking lot until the soda machine was in full view. Closer. In front of the wide yawning convenience windows sat a bread truck idling. The steam from the exhaust rose up into the night before dissipating and Rolen froze at the sight of the bread woman unloading the trays of plastic loaves and sliding them into the slots of a rack. Closer. From behind the flattened panels of the truck the Bread woman appeared suddenly-- her uniformed trousers stepping out through the exhaust steam and into the visible light, the leather work boots into puddle splashing, the gloved hands reaching to pull on the cradle of bread loaves individually wrapped and sealed with a twist-tie.

The Bread woman unloaded the shelves of bread under the lights, her back turned and Rolen stepped up onto the concrete walk in front of the store. Step. The soda machine was there, yes, larger than it had seemed before-- standing tall beside where the phones hung, unashamed against the store wall and Rolen positioned the quarter between two fingers. The slot was there and the broad plastic buttons took another step toward the machine, the bright lights from the store almost blinding now. Just One More step-- the quarter stretched out steadily before him until Rolen noticed the sign. The numbers were there, yes, the digits clear and unmistakable 3 5 until Rolen lowered the quarter from

before him. Thirty-Five yes and Rolen caught short, a 3 followed by a five and no, not nearly enough. His chest deflated and the quarter drooping smaller and cold against his thigh-- Rolen's head dropped down toward the concrete until the sound of the rack. The wheels squealing and the Bread woman pushing-- the rack rolling against the pavement with the shelves rattled, the trays bumping all in their place until the Bread woman looked up. The Bread woman looked toward him, directly over as Rolen stood deflated and limp-- dwarfed by the machine. The Bread woman looked through him like he wasn't there at all . . . Pops are 35 cents, she seemed to say without even a smirk.

Rolen crouched at the back of the store beside the hum of fans within the refrigeration units. Overhead, the night sky was broken by the formation of geese-- the florescent necks trekking forward in a V. The geese were speaking the only way they knew how, in a language all their own and Rolen thought of Madison's fingers gently gliding down her neck-- her fingers slipping cautiously into the soft hollow beneath chin. The sounds stretched out into the night in an sadly cheerful echo, the geese and fingers softened in the drizzle and dissolving together-- the rain water a tickling-painful dripping down from the sky and fanning across his own bare feet. Before the honking, Rolen had mistaken the florescent dots as a mystery-- like clandestine aircraft in secret flight paths over area 51. Roswell. New Mexico, he wondered, before the awkward cries-- the wallows congested and throaty at first, then stretching forward from the confusion into a recognizable elongated pitch. Painful. yes, Silent . . . still, Rolen pictured himself with Madison-- lost in the desert somewhere holding up signs toward the stars. Madison unfortunately in one of her sweaters and Rolen starting a fire with tumbleweed and dried bark. Thirsty. Rolen opened his mouth to speak and struck out the tongue, tried to wet it

in the light drizzle. The geese were calling to one another above him and Rolen pushed out the syllables of her name-- the sounds dry and harshly bumping together in his throat until at last a noise broke free-- a low mumbled grumbling until at last, the name of MadisonmaddyPatter was finally transformed into a long mournful rasp.

Again. Rolen's calls stretching up past the refrigerator until with a rattle the tumbling drone spun to a stop. Rolen listened to the splatter of rain against the metal casing, the dull drops upon his cast and those soaking into the skin. He smeared the water from the face of his watch until he heard the siren again-- the windings of a warning rising up in the night. The siren low at first and then climbing slowly into a twisting frenzy. Rolen listened to the siren's tone, like a voice crying out for help until a feeling welled within him-- a steady burning building steadily from the depths of his stomach. Madison . . . maddy at bedroom window. Alone. The wings had long since fallen from his back, the feathers disintegrated into nothing and Rolen looked up to the stars, to the heavens-- for the second time in his life, Rolen moved his lips in a silent prayer. Again. Above him, the moon emerged brightly shining, winking oddly it seemed from behind a cloud of silted cotton and when the wind shifted, Rolen watched a balloon drifting, spiraling across the sky-- freed somehow from the lettered sign and its invisible string. The balloon raced across the greyed yellow-blue, tumbling now frantically after the geese-- following the path arrowed to where the geese had disappeared one by one into a thickly painted horizon.

Beginnings

. . . This isn't that easy for him either. It's not like he can just change all the things the woman wants him to overnight.

She isn't asking him to.

Isn't she? It sure sounds that way to the man.

You see, the woman was only trying to let him know what she was feeling. She hasn't had that much experience with that sort of thing, and sometimes she's not quite sure how to go about it.

I guess the man can understand that, but he wonders why it always seems to be one-sided?

Why? What about this is one sided?

Well, to be completely honest, it's not like the woman doesn't have any problems of her own that the man could bring up.

Why doesn't he then?

He isn't like the woman. He doesn't need to pick her apart.

Maybe that's the man's problem. Did he ever think that maybe he should tell her about that kind of thing? The woman needs to know that sort of thing! Did he ever think that perhaps if he doesn't let it out, one day he'll just explode?

I guess the man is just too polite . . .

* * *

As I was saying, the woman bumps into this “polite” man quite accidentally while she’s browsing through the aisles of a book store. Does she begin to criticize him right away? Does she tell him how incredibly dull he is because of it? Not yet, the woman’s saving that for later. She’s actually quite taken with him at first-- the way he looks surprised and even somewhat embarrassed, the warm smile, and of course, that scent of Irish Spring!

Now that’s pushing it a bit too far, but the man has to say-- he’s pretty intrigued by the woman as well. He likes the bookish type!

The bookish type! What does he mean by that?

Well, she is in a book store . . .

The man is immediately drawn to her-- he tries to make eye contact to see whether she is interested too, but she keeps looking away. *The man has to understand that the way he looks, she can tell he wants to undress her . . .*

and?

it’s a bit too much for her-- she really doesn’t even know him yet.

and?

he can’t possibly expect the woman will just . . . jump him right there and then and the middle of all those books and shushes? Why not? Why can’t it be that easy?

Maybe some women are like that, but not this one-- the man will have to work harder than that to win her over.

Hmm, I see . . .

. . . so, tell me, what happens after the two bump into one another?

Madison Speaks

After the peach pie, Madison rushed to clear the dishes from the table. She rose from her chair even before Rolen placed the fork upside down at four o'clock on the plate.

Madison stacked the plates into a pyramid-- the larger plates beneath the smaller and then the silverware on top. When Rolen rose from his chair, moving to lift the bowl of limas and corn from the pot-holder beneath, Madison put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back down in his seat. "Why don't you let me help you?" he asked as she lifted the stack of dishes from the table. "I want to do this myself . . ." Madison answered, her voice hollowed in the hallway as she walked the dishes toward the kitchen, the stack bobbing before her, the plates growing heavy and the silverware sliding above where her feet carried her as quickly as she could manage.

As she rinsed the silverware in the sink, Rolen appeared from the hallway, the bowl of succotash in his hands. Rolen put the bowl on the counter, gently down with the pot-holder beside it and Madison dropped a spoon. He was coming closer to her again, Rolen behind her now, the sound of him breathing and Madison pushed herself tightly up against the counter. Rolen pressed into her, his hands on her shoulders then turning her around and kissing her. She closed her eyes as his lips pressed against hers-- her arms stiffly propped up against the sink, her hands clenched around the edge of the counter. When she turned back around toward the dishes, he took her hands back out from beneath the running water. "We can get them later . . ." he whispered, shutting down the faucet and drying her hands with a towel. Madison thought she might faint-- "I need more time

...” she managed to say, the words trembling and her fingers even after Rolen had agreed with soft words and stood at a safe distance beside her drying as she washed.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said after a long silence. Madison handed him a plate without looking up. “Madison?” Rolen pressed the towel around the ridges on the bottom of the plate. He moved the terry-cloth in broad circles around the face before lifting the plate up, sliding it carefully in place perfectly atop the others in the cabinet. “I’m listening,” whispered Madison, taking a deep breath before pushing the sponge back down into the neck of a tall slender glass. “I’ve been trying to decide whether or not to go.” Madison started to rinse the glass under the faucet. The water swirled up in the glass, the water clouded with soap until it rushed over the side. “You don’t need to go right away,” she said to him, the water spilling past her fingers and splattering down into the sink. “I’m just going through something right now-- I’ll be alright in a bit.” Rolen reached out and took from her the glass. “No, I mean about the job,” he said quietly. “I wanted to ask you what you thought.” She watched him slip the towel around the outside of the glass, followed it as he placed it upside down beside the others in the plastic wire rack.

Later in the living room, Madison turned down the lamps and Rolen lit up the candles. She had brought down the pillows from her bedroom as Rolen spread out the comforter and blankets on the floor. “I don’t know about this.” Madison said softly as she tried to ease herself back against the pillows tucked up against the couch. Rolen stopped the unlacing of his shoes at the edge of the comforter. “About what?” He straightened up from the carpet, the shoelaces slunking down across the tongue of his shoe. “I don’t think I’m ready.” Madison said. She looked away from Rolen to where

the candles flickered-- the thin glow shifted across the walls, the shadows growing and shrinking within the four corners of the room. "Maddy, I'm just taking off my shoes!" Rolen's hands rose up, the palms swiveling from the elbows on either side. When Madison started the crying, the hands lowered back down to his knees. "I didn't mean anything by it, Maddy. . . I don't want to . . ." the words fell, tumbling out of his mouth and across the comforter until the fingers came back into focus. The fingers pressed into his temple, circled around his eye and back down past the nose. "I know exactly what you want!" Madison stated, wiping away the mascara and pulling a blanket around herself, all the way up to her chin.

When Rolen rose to leave, Madison buried her face into the blanket. "Rolen," she said, looking out from the blanket. "It's just . . ." Rolen had already started the walk across the comforter, stopping in the middle of the living room floor and bending to tie his shoelaces back up. "I just thought you knew me better than that," he said, standing directly over her now. Madison looked up at him, out past the blanket-- his form entirely in shadow and the flames twisting up lazily behind. "It's not that easy," she said, pulling the blanket down, working herself up from the floor. "Intellectually-- logically I get it," she started, once she had made it up to the edge of the couch. "But the way I feel is something altogether different." Rolen stooped to help her with the blanket. He lifted it from the floor, stretching it out with his arms. After the folding, Madison stood face to face with him, then stared back down toward where he clung nervously to the tight folds of fabric-- to where his thumb rubbed up against the forefinger. She moved toward him, but he backed away, placing the blanket squarely on the left cushion of the couch. "I just go back there all over again . . ." Madison told him as she sat down on the couch--

cupping her forehead into her palm, her fingers pushing up through the length of her hair. “I’m back there again in the bedroom and something just goes crazy inside . . .”

Madison sat in the truck with him, as he waited for the engine to warm. She looked out the windshield and up to the stars. “Do you think if you were falling through space . . .” she asked him suddenly. “Did you ever wonder whether you would just keep falling faster and faster?” Rolen put his hands over the defrosters, moved them back and forth over where the warm air pushed out toward the glass. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’ve never really thought about it.” Madison put her finger to the glass, traced an arc down toward the center of the hood. “I think you would keep falling faster,” she said, curling the fingers of her hands together and blowing into the hollow between. “You would keep falling right on through the stars, faster past the planets and moons.” Rolen turned to her, placed his hands around hers. “You would just keep falling faster until you were falling so fast that you would burst into flames-- you would be burning like a comet and the flames would get hotter and hotter.” Madison continued, lowering her hands with Rolen’s down toward where the gear knob jutted up between them. “Wouldn’t you vaporize sooner or later?” he asked. “No,” she said, “that’s not the way it works.” Her eyes traveled up the breast of his jacket, all the way until she stared straight at the collar. “You would call out,” Madison said, her eyes circling the brim of the collar, the button and clasp without raising her eyes any higher, “you would scream louder and louder because you can’t stop yourself-- only there would be no one to help you because all the angels have gone-- ”

Rolen Meets Maddy

Different. Her hair and nose the same-- but the eyes. Somehow . . . her hair curving into the soft fine neck and down upon her shoulders. Eyebrows arching up toward him just the way . . . But the eyes-- her voice shifted down in a tone he doesn't recognize. Trembling. Her lips tart and tip of nose sweet but not the same and Rolen can't figure it out. The sound of her breathing . . . taking the air in. Tentative. His voice gentle as he runs his fingers down from the ear and brushes the hollow slope of cheek. Pause . . . and then exhale-- she is crying.

Rolen pulls her in to him, but she pushes away . . .

“I just need some space right now . . . This is too much for me--” she speaks softly, avoiding his eyes.

“Was it something I did? Is there anything I can do to help?” [what Hank later tells him he should have said, but instead Rolen says nothing and reaches for her hand.]

“No, I need you to leave . . . please, just for a little--” jerks her hand back, her voice rising and falling erratically. With open palm she shoves into his chest and points toward the open doorway.

“Fine!” Rolen marches through the doorway and slams the door behind him. He reaches for his coat-- then sits down instead.

Rolen waits for her in the kitchen. The wall clock ticks-- tocking, the second-hand snapping violently slow around in a circle. He sits . . . no, don't move from the chair.

Tick . . . try not to make any noise . . . toc . . . no, do not touch . . . tic . . . He is up, drawing a glass of water in the sink. Rolen pushes the faucet handle closed. He looks out the window and considers the knob on the front door. The voices of children filter in from outside-- he can not tell whether they are screaming or laughing. Rolen can see them sliding and swinging through the glass, spinning around and around . . . circling. He retraces his steps: her hair and his fingers down her cheek . . . the eyes and the crying. "Fine!" Rolen wants to leave-- to spring from the carousel and run, but forces himself to sit back down into the chair.

Water. Rolen lifts the glass and swallows. Warm. Perhaps, ice cubes but no . . . he spins the glass around on the table, lifts it up again and notices a ring of water on the flat surface. Broken. With his finger, Rolen finishes the circle.

¹**circle** \ser-keɪ\ *n*, *often attrib* [ME *cercle*, fr. OF, fr. L *circulus*, dim. of *circus* circle, *circus*, fr. or akin to Gk *krikos*, *kirkos* ring] **1 a** : RING **b** : a closed plane curve every point of which is equidistant from a fixed point within the curve **c** : the plane surface bounded by such a curve **2** : the repetitive orbit or period of revolution of a heavenly body

²**circle** *vb* **cir-cling** \k (e-) lin\ *vt* **1** : to enclose in or as if in a circle **2 a** : to move or revolve around ~ *vi* **b** : to circumnavigate and arrive at a point once arrived at before {*coll. vb. phr.* : to come full ~ }

She is behind him. Circling. Resurfacing out from the bedroom, the door opens and Maddy is still . . . Rolen reaches for the glass. Cooling. The ice cubes at work. Calming. His fingers are shaking and the ice against the sides. Swallow.

He listens for Madison-- she takes a deep breath and begins.

“There are some things about me that you should know-- stuff that happened when I was . . . but not now-- I’m not ready to tell you yet. . .”

Her face reddens full and puffy. She walks nervously around the kitchen table— revolving in and out of his vision.

“Do you want me to go?” Rolen eyes the front door, leans forward in the chair.

“Yes. It might be better . . .” she stops, stands beside him but her eyes fixed upon an invisible point on the wall-- shifting. “Wait, no, don’t--”

Rolen raises his hand to reach out to her, to touch the slope of her back-- then pulls his arm from the air, pushes the fingers to his lap himself.

He stares at the water glass-- imagines a fixed center and the points around the outside.

Wet. His fingers track across the surface. Sweating. The ice cubes almost gone as she sits down beside him. Helpless. The pendulum swings-- minutes and seconds and hours . . . Maddy clears her throat as if to speak . . . Silence. Rolen rises and walks toward the sink-- and then pulls open the freezer.

¹silence \`si-len (t) s\`n [ME, fr. L *silentium*, fr. *silent* - *silens*] **1** : forbearance from speech or noise : MUTENESS -- often used interjectionally **2** : absence of sound or noise : STILLNESS **3** : absence of mention : **a** : OBLIVION, OBSCURITY

Rolen reaches into the cabinet and pulls out a glass out for her-- fills it with ice and water. He carries both the glasses to the kitchen table, careful not to spill a drop. They both sit and stare at the glasses-- turn them slowly around across the surface of the table, listening for the ice to crack. The childrens' voices filter in from outside . . . there are screams, yes, and crying-- laughing . . . a song. Rolen clears his throat as if to say something-- he opens his mouth but the words . . . The clock ticks-- the movement now painfully slow. t o c k. He moves the chair back and begins to rise but Madison stops him. They sit and sit as the sun lowers in the sky until they hear the voices of mothers and fathers calling their children to come in and the world outside the kitchen window becomes dark.

“Well, I guess I really should be going” Rolen pushes back his chair, reaches for the empty water glass.

“No, stay.” she reaches out for his hand, but holds onto the glass instead. “I don’t want to be alone tonight . . . ”

Rolen leaves the glass in place on the table, but rises from the chair.

“First you want me to go and now you want me to stay the night-- I just don’t get it Maddy.”

She retracts back into the chair-- draws her feet from the floor and her knees to the chin. .

. . Maddy pulled tight into a ball.

“Don’t take it the wrong way. That’s not what I mean . . .” Maddy unfolds to a stand. “I only want you to stay with me Rolen-- nothing more.”

Without another word she pulls him up by the sleeve-- leads him into the living room

She carries them down from upstairs-- blankets and sheets and pillows. Rolen helps her with the candles and they huddle together beneath . . . Sleep. She cannot and moves closer to him-- but not too . . . Maddy is crying and Rolen moves to comfort her . . .

QUESTIONS: *what do you . . . why do you think . . . so how can . . . did you ever ?*

ANSWERS: I don’t know . . . *I never have . . . it’s easier than . . . no, yes.*

He can feel her closer now, the sound of her breathing and the warm scent of cucumbers.

She takes his hand between hers and Rolen pushes gently into her-- where she trembles upon his chest. “Tell me a story Rolen . . .”

Behavioral Healthcare

Selected Semi-Private Conversations in Five Therapy Sessions and Various Acts and Scenes

THE PLAYERS

MADISON (MADDY) PATTEN

DR. HANK LABIA

ROLEN HILT

The action takes place in or around the office of Dr. Hank Labia, a behavioral therapist in a small city on the east coast of the united states.

Act Four: Therapy Session 13

The curtain opens upon a stage well-lit by the light pouring in from a window at the center of three office walls. The light is blinding almost-- a white hot searing through and overpowering the faint outline of a chair on one side of the window and a couch on the other. Upon the furniture can barely be seen the slight movement of the players-- two indistinct human forms reclined upon the couch deciphered through the upturned corners of a mouth, an ear, the contours of a knee-cap angled opposite the softened silhouette of a stetson and goatee, rocking slightly from its position above the chair.

MADISON: [her voice breaking out in a metallic echo from the light] Is it just me or is that light really really bright?

ROLEN: I don't know-- I can't see a damn thing! [in an swirling muffle resonating out as if bodiless from the brightness] I was just wondering whether we should go ahead and pull down the shade.

MADISON: What? You have got to be kidding me! [her voice drawing out like distant thunder] I'm tired of being in the dark too-- but here's a way to do it without being some sicko!

The mirrored flash from a polished stainless tobacco lid, signals the movement of the Doctor from the chair positioned across from the occupants of the couch. A discerning eye momentarily flashes forward, the reddened eye narrowed from underneath an arched brow-- the eye's colorwashed iris and darkened pupil directed in a straight line toward the other players.

DR. LABIA: What say you two? [interrupting the conversation with a loud cough and clearing of the throat] Let's see if we can git to that ther bottom of this here winder thing-- [he coughs again, then spits out tobacco before going on further] What say-- Maddy? Rolen? Let's try to talk this one out.

MADISON: [the subtle contours of her form rising from the couch—the motion of her arms rising and falling can be detected (but only barely) as she paces in and out of the most intense light streaming in from the outside window] . . . [after a brief

pause] . . . that is, I'm not sure-- I mean, once you get used to it, it's kind of comfortable after a while.

ROLEN: Yeah, but you're only saying that because no one can make you out in the light.

It's as if you're still hiding-- only in a different way. [remains on the couch, his speaking slurred as if his mouth is covered by his palms and fingers-- the lips and oral cavity restrained from forming into the proper shapes] *Whaa goood iss iit f nooooo one caan reeelly see ouu? ?*

[Erupting out from the white intensity, the amplified scratching and clawing of a pen scribbling furiously is accompanied by a darkened rhythmic flash and glint-- the tempo erratic and the cadence constantly shifting. Through a series of crescendos, slashes and flourishes, the scribbling increases, raking unsteadily yet unmistakably rising in volume-- rising and falling as if randomly, but always building, yes, building up and higher, higher-- swelling . . . that is, until the scribbling subsides somewhat prematurely. The odd scribbles level, then in an almost saddened decline . . . no, not necessarily but certainly gradually further in volume down into a soft fingered murmur of elongating oval and circles.]

DR. LABIA: YEE-HEE! [his elated burst released only after the sound of a pen dropping— tapping, whirling, rocking, clacking-clicking, tocked and spinning to a stop] Doggie! [the rim of a stetson hat can be imagined swirling jubilantly up into the air, the shadowy lip every now and again twisting out from the intense light of the window] Now we're getting there, and I mean **THERE!**

MADISON: I don't know about you, but I don't think I'm there. [her voice eechoes through the bright with a turn of softened nose and curl of lip toward Rolen]

ROLEN: [the words watery-- hollow and dense] I don't even know where "there" is—

DISTANT VOICE: There . . . there . . . there . . .

MADISON: I don't think I'm THERE either-- at this point I'm not sure where I am.

[The distant voice can no longer be heard-- silent echoes, fading into incremental nothingness]

ROLEN: Could we just back up a second, there, Hank? What do you mean "there?"

Like, could you give us a definition or something?

[From the light emerges an outline of fingernails rhythmically pulling and drawing down the dark sketch of a goatee.]

DR. LABIA: [coughs, followed by the sound of the weight in his chair shifting, and then finally, after some hesitation] Hmm . . . Well, it could be a place, a state of mind, a direction, or perhaps, even the very letters which form together into the word itself . . . [the doctor pauses and spits] But what I think is not necessarily the important thing here-- What do each of you think it means?

[There is no response to Dr. Labia's question-- only the hum of an electric fan filters into and out from the light much as if a central air unit turning on and pumping air upon the stage through invisible ducts.]

DR. LABIA: [after a considerable time has elapsed] Hmm . . . Crickets! That is, there— [another pause followed by yet one more (e l o n g a t e d) spit] Maybe a better way to begin would be to take a close look at where you are right now-- that is, start with here and work your way to there.

ROLEN: Well, it seems to me that unless we pull down that shade, here is nothing.

DR.LABIA: Can you expand on that? But not to me-- [a bodiless arm (sleeved), elbow

and finger emerges abruptly out from the light-- pointing] . . . to Maddy.

ROLEN: [after a frustrated, unsettled laugh] I can't even figure out where she is! [the direction of his voice shifting erratically around the room] What, with all the light and not being able to see a damn thing-- I really think that unless I can see where you are, here is nowhere . . . there is somewhere else. [his voice slipping in and out, drifting between the audible and inaudible] Mad
ee?

ROLEN: Madison? [the words forming into coherence for a moment before breaking up again] At least there is *somewhere*-- something solid to grab hold of. Maddy?
I can't even see you . . . Where r ou Madison?

DR. LABIA: [coughs to clear his throat before speaking] Well then-- How do you feel about this all, there Madison?

MADISON: [her voice tempered at first, but gradually growing strong and steady] I don't know exactly-- This might sound strange but . . . I think . . . I mean, I am--
- I'm definitely starting to like it here.

DR. LABIA: Not toward me, Maddy-- I want you to talk to Rolen.

MADISON: [her words shifting direction now-- away from the audience and toward Rolen] I don't think I like the way you make "there" sound-- I mean, right now "here" feels kind of comfortable to me. It's like . . .

DR. LABIA: [Interrupting] Go on Maddy. . . what precisely do you mean by that? If you can, describe "comfortable" to Rolen-- muster on up a definition. Draw the man a picture!

MADISON: [somewhat tentative, but an outburst all the same] I guess, what I really like

is not having anyone pointing or prodding at me!

ROLEN: What? [his voice breaking through loud-- then more tempered, almost sad]

Why? What could you . . . what exactly do you mean by that?

MADISON: You can't hurt something you can't see, that's my motto! [an eyebrow emerges arched, and then falling . . .] With the shade up, it's kind of nice to be lost here in all this—

DR. LABIA: [the softened rim of a stetson nodding] How so little darlin'? If you can, try to let him know how that feels . . . I know it's almost worse than a-wraslin' a three horned bull, but let him in on as much of it as you can.

MADISON: [continues after breathing in-- and a short pause] It's sort of like taking a bath, but without the candlelight. Here, it's even better almost-- for once in my life, I can't even see myself.

ROLEN: But that's my point-- [his voice falters, beginning to waver] How cAN YoU BE ANYthing if there's no one can see you? Who are ou if you c n't even look at yourself?

MADISON: Beats me. I don't know how it works. I just know you are-- I am, at least. [taking another brief pause and deep inhale before continuing] Here, there's nothing else and everything is all right. It's all numb and it feels like there's nothing that can go wrong.

DR. LABIA: Hmm . . . Interesting [the soft contemplative edges of the words followed by the sound of a pen scribbling on a pad]

PEN SCRIBBLING: ch . . .ttch . . .scct . . .cht . . . tttt . . . cch . . .

[The light pouring from the window increases. Within the dramatically higher level of luminescence, the players recede deeper into the pool of brightness-- now and again a faint blurred movement, and sometimes only shadowy impressions, motionless smears swallowed into the brilliance.]

ROLEN: [his voice in a shiver] Is it t jus-st me, or-r is it starti-ng to get real cold d in he r re? [now aside in a whisper] “it’s like I can’t even feel my own fingers anymore . . .” [suddenly LOUD and abrupt] and I really *think* that maybe SOMEONE ought to put down that shade!

MADISON: But how can you say it’s cold? [after this initial outburst, her voice growing substantially softer] I don’t get it-- I mean, you’ve always wanted to keep the window open and the first thing you do when the shade is up is to want it down.

ROLEN: [his voice steadied, but fading] Well I’m not the only one . . . What about you? You always want the damn thing closed down. Why are you suddenly on the other side of me?

DR. LABIA: [calmly interrupting] What say you two get together on this one-- Could you just meet in the middle?

MADISON: [quietly reserved] I just don’t know-- maybe the whole thing is just totally hopeless.

A lengthy silence follows in which the light from the window brightens even more, intensifying and expanding until it totally eclipses any sign of the furniture, the players, the stage, audience or even the window itself-- there is only light and nothing else.

Presumably somewhere beyond the light, tan audience is, or is not applauding-- the curtain undoubtedly closed.

Night

. . . no, keep perfectly still and flinch not the fingers or even the feet but steady the breathing so as not to rustle the sheets under nO. Don't peek. Head back into pillow and straight up at ceiling until droopy the eyelids but with shallow breathing she is close beside him in light sleep and . . .

¹dream \drem\ *n* [ME *dreem*, fr. OE *dream* noise, joy] **1** : a series of thoughts, images, or emotions occurring during sleep **2 a** : a visionary creation of the imagination : DAYDREAM **b** : a state of mind marked by abstraction or release from reality : REVERIE **c** : an object seen in a dreamlike state : VISION **3** : a goal or purpose ardently desired : IDEAL --- **dream-ful** \-fel\ *adj* --- **dream-ful-ly** \-fe-le\ *adv* --- **dream-ful-ness** *n*

. . . against the sheets he can feel her breathe. Each rise and fall rippling out from under the covers-- sliding down her soft moans and Rolen wanting to move nearer. No. Madison . . . to hold so as to touch the flesh and rest against her skin. FOCUS: Eyes straight up at the ceiling-- the stuccoed spackled shadows like rocks upon the . . . yes, her arm draped lazily across his belly-- her nose brushes against his cheek until she nudges fully into him, drawing her thigh across his own . . . NO! She is shifting under the covers-- rolling toward him now in fitful sleep. Lie perfectly still so as not to wake or frighten . . . PROTECT. Eyes closed until suddenly she is kicking and jerking-- her back

arches from the mattress and Rolen can no longer stand it. He reaches over to wake her . . .

Silent. Silently marching down the stairs, behind her carrying the blankets-- the sheets sliding across and down each step. Madison . . . *a woman like that decent to make him wait.* . . . maddy pushing him away-- bending slightly to snap on the lamp. *snap!* She tosses the pillows upon the couch and slunks back into the deep cushions of chair.

Pushing . . . he arranges the comforter-- shoving in again the corners of sheets. Shadow into light, she rocks quietly across from him until Rolen sits down on the stack remaining of blankets. He leans forward into the cold glow of yellow-- the cave of his mouth dry . . .

“I’m sorry,” he says, looking up to where she cups her face in her hands. “It’s just that you were having some kind of nightmare or something-- must have been some really nasty dream.”

Madison’s fingers drop to her lap-- her eyes closed but she is crying.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay . . .” as softly as he can, Rolen moves over to her. He wants

to put his arms around her-- run his fingers through her hair but stops himself.

“Look, maybe we were rushing things-- Do you want maybe I should leave?”

Rolen is beside her on the arm of the chair-- then down on his knees before her. She

shake her head as he wipes dry her eyes . . .

“Sshhh . . .” he whispers as Maddy puts her arms around him and holds onto his shoulders. “It was only a dream . . .”

It is the first time Madison has invited him to spend the night and Rolen struggles to make sense of it all-- the stars, the moons, the planets . . . maddy's dream. It just seems so hopeless and he considers a break for the door. Rolen pictures himself rising from beside her and stumbling down the hallway. Her fingers into his shoulders and Rolen wonders whether his grandmother was right about him-- "If you keep it up, you never will amount to anything . . . You'll end up a poor old man with no one to care for you and nowhere to run-- nothing but a fool!"

dream-er \`dre-mer\ *n* **1** : one who dreams **2 a** : one who lives in a world of fancy and imagination **b** : one who has ideas or conceives projects considered as impractical :

VISIONARY

Maddy has gone back upstairs and Rolen settles into the couch. He lies on his back, then rolls to his side-- the cushioned blocks prodding into his ribs and his head at an awkward angle to the pillow. When he closes his eyes, he finds himself running again-- down the hallway, slamming against the walls, the pictures and photographs falling with their frames and . . . his hand shakes upon the doorknob before opening-- but outside there is nothing. No light but darkness. Shadows across the empty walls stretching from the corners of Madison's living room and Rolen jerks up from the couch, no longer sure he can really ever . . .

sleep \`slep\ *n* [ME *slepe*, fr. OE *slaep*; akin to OHG *slaf* sleep, L *labi* to slip, slide and perh. to Gk *lobos* pod, lobe] **1** : the natural periodic suspension of consciousness

during which the powers of the body are restored **2** : a state resembling sleep: as **a** : a state of torpid inactivity **b** : DEATH; *also* : TRANCE, COMA **c** : the closing of leaves and petals esp. at night **3 a** : NIGHT **b** : a night's journey --- **sleep-like** \`sle-plik\ *adj*

Yet there are the pictures again . . . frames crashing to the hardwood and the glass shattering-- his dead father yellowed and curled, a photo of his mother in a straightjacket. The stiff collared shirt almost all the way off and his grandmother screaming for rolen to . . . STOP!

Down the stairs, Maddy walks toward him with eyes open shut. . . she is fully clothed in pajama top swirled and slacks-- slippers. Wide the pupiled iris and the lashes emerging into light. Moonlight. The moon a pale blue danced against her skin and Madison surfacing from the dark like a memory yet to breathe . . . hidden still behind the flashes of triangles and figures, runes into geometric prisons-- the exact shape of which rolen finds impossible to break. Stop . . . slow, slowly CAUTION: slowing down . . . Was she soft the flesh or walking just in sleep?

sleep-er \`slep-per\ *n* **1** : one that sleeps **2** : something unpromising or unnoticed that suddenly attains prominence or value: as **a** : a racehorse that wins unexpectedly after performing poorly **b** : an article of merchandise having a value that goes unrecognized for a long time **c** : a mate or potential mate whose charms remain under the surface until suddenly . . .

a smile. Rolen at first abandoned to the couch downstairs and now she motions him to the floor beside her-- a pillow for sleep . . . to dreams . . . The eyes of fire now a cool blue lake-- inviting. The color of cheek swallowed into shadow but not the words-- with full pouting lips she whispers as he settles down within a breath from her . . . *Tell me a story rolen* . . . with unsteady fingers he reaches out to touch the moon-powdered sway of Madison maddy Patter's hair . . .

Once upon a time, there was a girl and a boy . . . *a little girl and boy, yes* . . .

The Rain Blanket

It had been a month since she had last seen him, and Madison waited nervously in his truck. The rain came down steadily outside, the drops splattering against the windshield and smearing to where the wipers remained perfectly stationary. Madison watched the blur of Rolen emerge from the store front-- his elbows and hair serrated edges spreading out in thin awkward lines as he walked back toward the truck. Rolen tugged up on the handle from outside. Madison looked out at him, the hair matted down in the rain and Rolen with a puzzled look about him until she remembered she had locked the door behind him. For a moment she thought she might leave him there-- safely beyond her outside in the rain. Madison stared down at where her fingers followed the contour of knee-cap through her slacks. When he knocked on the window, his fist wet and sliding down-- she pressed harder until her palms slid stubbornly down the slope, the fingernails the only hold from falling helplessly to the calves, the nails clinging in a desperate hanging from the seam. Madison practiced the breathing, stretched out across the seat to unlock the door. But when Rolen slid the brown bag on the seat, the door slamming behind him, Madison backed all the way against the passenger door.

As they passed into the long stretch of rolling fields, Madison clung to the image of the last house on the right-- the paint streaked yellow of the wooden siding slipping away to the side and the green fields widening before them-- the trees too distant to hide. "Did you ever look for God in a tail light--" Rolen asked her, his voice hardly audible over the smell of the chicken. "The answer to it all in a drumstick?" Madison could not handle the difference between the confines of the truck cab and the open outside. "We're

not really having a picnic out in the rain--” she asked, pulling upon the curl of hair at the place where her shoulder met her neck. “Why not?” Rolen said firmly. He was shifting again, pushing the gear knob toward the dash and Madison took in the air about her, drew it into her chest until its cold hollow filled the very tips of her fingernails. “Pull over,” she whispered at first and then louder when he shifted the knob down toward where her knees trembled. She closed them tightly together and pushed out the sounds again-- repeating the words until she was screaming. Madison could see the letters shattering against the glass, the letters breaking into shards of multi-colored confetti and her fists sliding against the door glass-- slashing the color and pounding it into a darkened smear. When the truck slowed and Rolen pulled to the side of the road, Madison searched frantically for the handle, opened up the door and tumbled out in the rain.

Madison curled her elbows to her knees, huddling in the ditch until Rolen touched her shoulder, tried to lift her from the rushing water. She pushed away from him at first-- his hands callous and burning. But when he withdrew his hands and stepped away-- the air rushing in where his fingers once were, Madison rose to her knees. She grabbed desperately for his fingers, and after a deep breath placed them back on her shoulder. “Hey you,” he said finally. “We can’t eat any of that chicken down there.” Madison pushed the hair from her eyes, his voice lavender and soft petalled as Rolen helped her to her feet and placed his coat over her head and shoulders. “Come on,” he said, pointing off toward where a lone tree sprung up against the hills in the distance. “I think there’s a spot perfect just over that ridge.” She watched him climb up from the ditch-- the top half of him disappeared into the dark of the cab to retrieve the bag of chicken and the basket she had prepared from the passenger door still swung open. After

he closed the truck door with a boot, he turned to face her-- his arms full. As he handed her the blanket and the plastic bag hanging transparent with the plates and silverware she had packed from her kitchen, Madison looked at Rolen's chest. She could see the colors rising-- the pink of flesh beginning to push out from the rain slashes and ovals soaking into his shirt.

The water formed delicate globes sliding down, moving across his hand as Rolen worked to place the chicken breast on her plate parallel to where he had scooped out a miniature mountain of mashed potatoes. "This is absolutely crazy!" Madison called out as he poured the gravy on the plate, down the potatoes to form a muddy river-- the potatoes a slippery bank like the one she had helped Rolen spread out the blanket upon. "Insane . . ." she said, holding her hands before her, catching the raindrops in cupped palms. "Not if you don't know it is." Rolen returned, his eyebrows jutting up in a way with which Madison could not argue. "Did you ever watch fish swim around in a tank? A cockatiel in a cage?" Rolen asked her as he filled his own plate, the tree jutting up behind him an intruder. "You would think they couldn't stand it, but they don't seem to mind at all." Madison was busy tilting her plate and draining the clouded water which collected around the potatoes and chicken. "Why not, they have everything they want-- plenty of food, protection from predators-- temperature control . . ." she said, raising a spoonful of potatoes to her mouth. "Even with all that," Rolen managed, holding a drumstick to his lips. "You would think they want their freedom to come as go as they want-- only they don't-- the fish are completely happy because they don't know about all of the rivers and oceans outside-- to the cockatiel too, the trees and sky beyond the wire box do not really exist at all." Madison leaned back against her elbows, her palm sliding off the blanket

into the wet grass. “Did you ever see a parakeet outside its cage?” she asked. “If you let it out, it doesn’t really get that it can fly wherever it wants-- it can’t handle it because it doesn’t know how and sooner or later wham! right into a wall-- and then thump! there it goes, right down to the floor with a broken wing . . .”

When the rain came down more steadily, Rolen cleared the blanket and draped it over the lowest branch of the tree, forming a tent of sorts. He helped Madison under the thin shelter of the blanket and together they looked out from under the wooded peak to where the rain fell heavier, filling the air empty with sound. Madison worked to keep her inhales steady as he moved closer and with his arm around her, his hands soft against her own and then his fingers gently down her cheek, pushing back her hair behind her ear and the kissing her there lightly. She moved into the strength of his hands, allowed the weight of herself to fall against his hold. Madison closed her eyes and listened to the rain and how relaxed and measured his breathing. “So natural . . .” she whispered as he moved closer, his hands so different-- soft against her face and tracing slowly the contours of her arms. She opened her eyes for a moment when he pulled off his jacket, but closed them again as it cascaded down from where he placed it down gently upon her shoulders. When he drew away from her and tugged his shirt up out of his trousers, though, Madison stopped him. “I can’t . . .” she said. “Not yet.” She looked up-- almost all the way to where she knew he was looking back at her. Madison reached back for his hand as he moved behind her. She pulled his arms around her-- Rolen pushing slowly into her and holding her so that they both could watch the drops of rain falling outside the blanket.

“It’s okay, Maddy. . .” he whispered in her ear until they both began to rock in unison.

Hedge

You see, the little girl has this problem with trusting anybody-- least of all handsome little boys who tell her things she wants to believe but is afraid too. She's been burnt too many times before. Night after night the girl noticed the boy just as much as he noticed her. Now you're just trying to make the boy feel better. No, seriously, the little girl wouldn't admit it to anyone-- sometimes not even to herself, but sometimes at night she went to the window not to see the stars, but just to catch a sight of the little boy with his bundle of papers he made his way down the street in front of her house. I guess the little boy can see that. But why is the little girl so frightened at the sight of him sometimes? I don't know. I mean, the little girl is all confused about the whole thing herself. It's like she wants so hard to believe the little boy outside the window is for real, but she starts to doubt her own senses sometimes, like the little boy will grow up someday to be just like her father-- that all little boys eventually end up that way. Or maybe worse, that he won't . . . the girl sometimes worries that what the little girl really wants is a little boy just like her father. That doesn't make any sense. Why would she want that? I don't know, maybe she needs to be accepted by her father for who she really is.

The little boy would accept her, does accept her for who she is.

I wish the little girl could believe that-- but she can't yet. She's not ready.

Is that why she acts so weird when she finally sees the boy at the top of the tree?

Pretty much. The night the little boy climbs up the tree, the girl keeps hearing her father with her mother in the next room. Her mother's crying and her father is yelling. It goes on and on and on . . . the girl is petrified. So much so that she can't seem to get out

of her bed and go to the window. She thinks maybe the little boy is in with her father-- like there's some great big secret order of men. You know that's not true. Intellectually I do, but try telling the little girl that. She's never really seen a good man, so she has no way of knowing what one would even look like. Can she take a chance? Well, she does that night. The little girl is so freaked out by her father that for the first time in her life she feels she might really make a break for it . . . the problem is getting herself out of bed, but finally she gathers enough courage to peer out from under the sheets.

So what happens next?

The little girl rolls down the covers ever so slowly . . . and she sees the tree out the window? No, not yet. She can't see the tree from her bed, but she makes out the starlight finding its way past the curtains. The florescent planets and stars on her walls seem so fake and false that the girl knows she has to get up and go to the window.

To get to see the boy?

No, not yet-- not really . . . the girl is just fed-up with the whole set-up.

What do you mean by that, "Not really?"

The little girl's fed-up at her father for being such an asshole. She's fed-up at her mother for not only putting up with him, but for filling her full of stupid dreams that the girl can never realize because of her screwed up life. Barely in grade school and already screwed-- her life swirling down the toilet. All that's before the little boy even comes into the picture . . .

I see . . . so basically, the girl's "fed-up?"
you're pretty sharp for a little boy . . .

The little boy says, "Good for her! Screw the world!"

“Screw the world” is right! The little girl gets up from her bed, pulls on a pair of sweats, sneakers, and a light jacket. She pulls the key she stole to the padlock on her window from under her pillow . . . and steals over to the window. She unlocks the thing as quietly as she can . . . and that’s when she sees the boy waving to her from the top of the tree? Would you just wait a minute? You always do that! Hold on-- would you?

I’m sorry. You were saying?

I was saying that after a little trouble with the sill, the little girl finds herself outside her window on the grass. She looks up to the stars and for the first time in her life she feels free of it all. The night sky seems more beautiful than she’s ever remembered and she twirls herself around under the moonlight . . . and that’s when she notices the tree? the leaves falling? the little boy waving to her from where it looks like he’s touching the moon?

That’s when she says what the hell is that tree doing there?

and finally, she asks herself, “why are all those leaves coming down?”

yes, okay . . . that’s when she looks up to find out and sees the little boy-- the little shirtless boy freezing his little boy ass off.

Is he waving to her?

She can’t tell at first. The whole situation’s so strange-- I mean the gigantic towering tree, the leaves coming down all over the place, and then the half naked boy . . . Is it? she wonders, and then yes, she can make him out, and then, I wonder? then, why yes, it’s the same odd little boy I see every night . . . odd little boy! Why yes, and what a strange queer little wave . . . Hey you! The little girl better watch it, or the little boy

might just might . . . *Lose his balance?* Shoot, I forgot about that part . . . you're right, the little boy sees her and gets so excited that he loses his hold on the massive swaying limb he has crawled out on. *But does he really have to fall this time?* What? Are you kidding? The little boy *always* falls for the little girl!

Does he have to so soon? It really makes the little girl pretty nervous.

Well, let's see . . . the little boy teeters up there for a long time, but with the help of a fortunate gust of wind, he regains his balance. He tries to yell down to the girl, but she just cups her hand to her ear. He is too far up, so he decides to climb down to where she can hear him.

That makes the little girl nervous too.

Well, what doesn't make the little girl nervous?

Can't the little boy just stay up there for a while?

The boy tries. He really does try to hold on . . . but it's like he can't help himself, waving to the girl and everything-- the wind gets to be too much for him, his hand slips and even the spikes on his boots lose hold. He falls. Down, down, and faster he goes, spinning around as he does-- the moon, the stars, the planets, and the sight of the little girl with her pigtailed below all blurring together until he can't separate them anymore. He calls and calls to the little girl as he drops, the gravity of the situation getting the best of him . . . *but the girl can't save him-- she can't catch him or even pull in a cushion to soften his fall-- there isn't the time and she just isn't ready yet.*

The boy knows it-- he doesn't like it, but maybe, just maybe he doesn't need her to save him as much as he needs her to hear him.

Would that really be enough?

I don't know, but the boy is willing to try if the girl is . . .

Wait . . . The little girl sees something she hasn't before.

What is it? The little boy would really like to know-- needs to know. He can't stop the fall.

It's a trampoline.

A trampoline?

yes, the magic watering can has just enough secret formula in it and out of nowhere, bam! there it is, the watering can turns-- just like that-- into a trampoline right under where the little boy is falling.

Does it work. I mean, does it really? Is it enough to break his fall?

Well, he bounces around a little bit, but yes, he makes it down safely-- the little boy up, the little boy down.

The boy's glad to hear it-- especially that the girl doesn't run away . . . can she watch the little boy through the whole thing?

It's hard, much more difficult than the little boy can even begin to imagine. But she does? She's trying, really trying, but once in a while she has to hide her face under her windbreaker . . .

. . . and when he stops bouncing, will she come over to him?

I don't know, that might be a little too fast for the little girl.

What if the boy takes the first steps-- you know, off the trampoline and over . . .

There's still the hedge, remember? The hedge around the little girl's house. . .

What if the little boy came right up to his side of the hedge, would the little girl meet him on her side, so they could look at each other? *I don't know, the hedge is pretty*

thorny on the little girl's side. It's full of sharp pointing pickers and the girl's really afraid. She doesn't want to get cut. She has so many scars already. It's just a hedge. If she tries hard enough, the little girl can make the hedge anything she wants.

What does the little boy mean by that one?

He means that if the girl wants to, and tries hard enough, she can make an opening in the hedge for the little boy to walk through. She can even turn the thorns into red and blue fireflies-- OR A STRING OF CHRISTMAS LIGHTS. It's just a story . . . the little girl has the power to do anything she wants-- she can make the hedge into something really beautiful rather than something dark and impassible.

That's mighty easy for the boy to say . . .

*Let me tell you something, little boy! The girl is already freaked out enough without some little snot-nosed punk coming along and telling her what kind of hedge has grown around her house. She ought to know. The little girl has been staring at it for a lot longer than the little boy has. That hedge is very real and from where the little girl is standing it is so dark she can't see through it. There's a thousand screaming voices coming from that hedge-- little girls and women who got caught in it forever because they listened to little boys who grew into big f**ing assholes and pulled them right through the thorns-- those sharp curving thorns that can draw blood just from a touch. Do you hear me little boy? Are you really listening to what it is I'm saying here? DON'T TELL ME ABOUT HEDGES! DON'T YOU DARE TELL ME HOW EASY IT IS TO GET PAST THOSE THORNS! FROM THIS SIDE OF THE FENCE IT'S NOT SO EASY!*

Rolen Lost

Rolen wandered openly in the streets now, block after block, not bothering any longer to hide behind the lamp-posts or bushes. He had been walking for sometime, the streets all beginning to look the same-- the short squat houses like carbon copies of one another erected upon the flat the earth precisely twenty-four feet from the sidewalk. The streets were constructed in endless straight lines, aligned in perfectly crafted rectangles with the occasional dead end. The house fronts, too, arranged like plastic motels on a monopoly board, their porch lights casting identical yellow-hued spheres into well-trimmed paper yards, the square plots all adorned with trees and sparse shrubbery forged from the same cheap and impure metal.

The damp night air had worked its way under the cast, and Rolen could feel his arm and fingers swelling, a slight sharp wobble where the surgeons had drilled and screwed the plate into the bone. With every step he began to reconstruct the line of the fracture again, chart the gap where the bone had finally snapped-- the incision through the muscles and tendons, the smell of peroxide swabs and sound of the rotary drills, the greedy pull and gurgle of a small relentless vacuum. As he passed by the houses, Rolen examined the x-rays snapped in place against their flat glass windows, the screws turned into the bone and the look of his fingers broken-- house after house, the bones suspended in brilliant white and almost floating, the fingers shattered and yet involuntarily curled as if they were clinging desperately to a deflated rubber ball. Rolen forced his legs forward, trying to gauge his progress by the stars-- the constellations still visibly burning above him and Rolen hoping to recognize the name of a street at the next corner. He was

nearing the same house again to the left, the place he had already passed three times, he knew, had set it apart from the others because of the erratic tone of laughter on the porch, the thick smell of cigarettes and stale beer, the low twang and bump of an acoustic guitar. Before he had kept to the shadows, the fence on the opposite side as he passed-- concealing himself behind a fire hydrant. But now he remained directly in the center of the street, walking openly, slowing to a halt in front of the porch and then, Rolan turned toward the voices.

“Excuse me . . .” Rolan said, clearing his throat, his own voice sucked into the vacuum of darkness about him. “Hey!” he called out, cupping his hands about his mouth, forming the fingers into something like a megaphone. “Excuse me.” He moved closer to the house, began to make out the silhouetted figures of men shifting on the porch, the distinct voices of women in the warmth of light, but no response. “Excuse me!” he said louder, stretching his arms out and turning fully toward the house-front. “Hey . . . YO!” Rolan shouted, pushing his chest out and jumping now, his feet lifting into the air and his arms swinging frantically over his head. Nothing. The laughter continued, the buzz of low voices and the red glow of cigarettes-- the figures moving in and out under the porch light undaunted. “Hey . . .” Rolan offered one last time, slowing to catch his breath-- his whole body sagging toward the wet pavement. He raised a forefinger before dropping his hands upon his knees, the air in his lungs collapsing and Rolan doubling over. Even his shadow slowly deflated beneath him, dissolving at his feet along with the pale glimmer of moon-- lost within the stones and debris washed up from the gutter. Rolan kicked at a large smooth pebble and stubbed his toe.

At the next intersection, Rolen stopped and tried to remember the way he had gone before-- the street lights in each direction were strung far into the distance, the lights arranged in perfectly straight lines all leading toward the exact point where they dropped into nothingness along the curve of the earth. He did not want to go down the same street he had before-- that way only took him in circles it seemed, down the squared links of a chain which needed to be pried apart, broken and mended together into a different order and formation. Rolen looked at his watch, tumbled the keys in his hand and wondered about Madison-- *maddy, maddy, maddy, maddy, maddy, maddy* . Soon the sun would rise and Rolen could no longer bear the faint melody of guitar, the painful vibration of the strings surfacing until Rolen covered his ears. He scanned down each street for something familiar, anything at all to help him avoid making the same choice again. If only he could make it back to Duck-- the rancher and the trampoline . . . if only he could erase all that had gone on before, reset the florescent digits of time and step forward into an altered past where things could be different. But from where he stood, the streets all looked the same-- all thickly scribbled lines drawn along a ruler, the houses blocks of clay and the moon a styrofoam ball hung by an invisible string, spinning from right to left but moving at random in a way he could not yet understand.

From the furthest corner Rolen heard the sound of a rocking chair, the weight shifting against wooden planks of a porch and then an old weathered cough-- he looked up from his feet to see a single chair occupied by a figure not yet discernable, huddled in a blanket and another chair empty and quite motionless beside it. A face slowly emerged from the folds of the blanket, the eyes distant and shadowed, but staring directly at him-- the eyebrows tracing the rise and fall of his chest, surveying the state of his knees and

cast, charting his pulse and again the breathing. Rolen's stomach turned within him, the muscles tightening to hold the throbbing mass inside him all in place and he pushed on into the night, unwilling to look toward the porch lights any longer. He turned right at the intersection, and after one street decided to cut diagonally across the driveways and yards. At the sound of a tire pushing down through a puddle, Rolen took to the bushes, avoiding any hint of police dispatches or the cruiser, crawling on all fours along plastic siding and stuccoed walls beneath the long stretches of light hinged out from kitchen windows into back yards. He wondered where the trooper might be, whether the trooper may have taken off on foot or if his truck had been discovered and promptly towed away.

From where he paused under windows, Rolen heard the sounds of faucets washing coffee pots and mugs, a young couple arguing and an elderly pair preparing to take their dog for a walk. He knew the joggers soon would be out, and hurried on his way. The sun had not yet begun to rise but Rolen could tell by his watch that his time was running short. It had started to drizzle again-- the drops appearing without warning from the dark sky, the water distorting the face of his watch, the movements of the second hand more quickly now it seemed, the long slender metal twisting as it snapped incrementally, jerking in circles as the wind picked up and Rolen began to shiver. A dense fog lowered from the sky, but the noise from the interstate grew clearer, leading Rolen on and he followed it through a maze of swing sets and assorted satellite dishes-- Rolen moving across the lawns, alleyways, and parked cars toward the sound of passing diesels and air brakes, stopping only to search down the length of the streets for the place where he had left the truck just a few hours before, tucked neatly into a curb.

Fire

... and rolen and rolen and rolen and Rolen is not coming. Through the smoke, the bedroom dark and Madison drops to her knees, coughing. She closes her eyes, yes, tries to block out the loud tone of alarm but still the smoke rolling across the ceiling-- a blanket fogged and curling. Opening. Madison searches for the stars-- a glimmer of the moon . . . a shooting star and then nothing . . .

Breathe. Tightly and yet maybe the balcony. Moving. She is on her stomach and crawling. Coughing. Alarm goes silent and heat rising. Flames. Fire and burning . . .

Wet. There are lights and white plumes of steam. Flashlights. Long tubes of light cutting through the dense haze. Jerking. The sound of a respirator and muffled voices-- a face.

From within a lit face mask, a man lowers to her-- it is not Rolen. Lowers to her. A mask. She struggles at first, slapping the mask away. Gloved hands.

“Miss, breathe in, miss . . . Breathe . . .”

Now clinging to the mask, the gloved fingers working their way beneath her-- bulky and rough, lifting her from the floor. Coppertone . . . Carried out the balcony into the dawning light. Eyes watering and the coughing. Where’s Rolen?

Rolen-- in the truck somewhere far from her . . . He’s gone.

rolen of midnight drizzle-- sweet patient Rolen in the rain . . . Please maddy?

Barechested Rolen-- now? now . . . now, now, nownownow now, Now . . . NOW!

rolen-- down the stairs and out the door . . . his footsteps running away . . .

“Tell me a story Rolen.”

But he doesn't. Rolen moves away from her under the sheets. He's refused.

After a deep breath, Madison closes her eyes and reaches out to him. Her fingers trembling as they touch upon his bare chest. He places his hand over hers, but she pulls away.

“You won't look at me and can't even touch me-- What kind of monster do you think I am?”

“I don't Rolen, you know that -- It's just . . .”

“You're pushing me away Maddy . . .”

The dawn is full of sirens-- the flash and glimmer of lights from the trucks. The smoke pours out from the balcony doors and the sun has begun to rise in the distance. A stretcher-- Strapped. Down, bumpy, handed over the shrubbery below and to the ground. The pavement wet with hoses and florescent helmets and coats. Fast and confused-- bustle, bump, and lean . . . Madison clings tightly to the oxygen mask, unable yet to breathe deeply-- she cannot stop the coughing. The air is cold but her skin tight and burning. The midwest sky ripped open above her. Exposed. There are people everywhere-- the whole neighborhood, it seems behind the fire lines-- women and men in

nightgowns, robes and boxers. They are all moving and talking and staring-- pointing. Closer, the police and the fire fighters and the ambulance crew-- their uniformed bodies shifting and rushing by. A blanket. The fabric rough against her skin.

try to relax, miss . . . everything . . . alright . . .

A voice calm above the din of radios and frenzied sirens-- the water rushing forth from the hoses and pressed against the scorched siding. Flattened. There are screams and crying. Madison tries to lift herself from the stretcher-- she can not. The ambulance lights flash silently above her-- yellow and red pulses as the stretcher slides into the back. Stainless steel and antiseptic swabs-- the smell of iodine. Her pulse and eyes, but no I.V. "You'll be alright" the woman is saying as she removes the cold stethoscope, deflates the pressure, and then the velcro ripped away. The woman unclasps the straps and Maddy sits up, stares blankly out the ambulance doors at the smoke billowing up into the hazy sky. The woman speaks into the microphone velcroed to her shoulder as she hands Madison an ice pack. "Use this on the arm for now--" the woman smiles mechanically, her eyes already anticipating the next stretcher. "The fire marshal is outside waiting to talk to you."

"Some coffee to warm you up miss."

Maddy nods and the marshal draws closer. There is coffee on his breath and a dark spot on his shirt just above the belt.

"Is there anyone else in the house, miss?"

“No, he’s left me . . .” Madison backing away from the man. “Wait, there’s Coppertone-- his dog. Well, he’s not really an actual . . . more like a statue-- a metal sculpture.”

“Do you know how it started, miss?” His shirt white-- the western kind with the fake pearl snaps.

“No, well maybe, probably, yes . . . the embers-- it was an accident . . . was most likely my fault. It was stupid, really . . . I just wish the whole thing had never happened.”

the look-- a stern cold-eyed stare.

Guilty. The marshal has her surrounded-- he hikes up his trousers and then the hand reaching out for her shoulder . . . Restrained. His fingers extending-- clamped tightly locked around her arm.

Madison-- dr. labia, hank . . . “transference . . . good-bad object split . . . hmmm . . . well let’s place it all in context-- we can start by separating those men who mean you harm from those who don’t . . .”

maddes-- rolen . . . you’re just being paranoid . . . there’s a big difference . . . I’m not . . .

Maddy-- her father . . . a padlock . . . she is turning, spinning . . . falling . . .

madison-- the marshal . . . “Turn around, miss . . . No, I’m afraid I’ll need to call the State Police . . . take you into custody . . .”

Haze. The fire alarm goes off, but she is in the shower washing. When she steps out, the bedroom in smoke-- Coppertone a metal sculpture. Dizzied. She considers jumping from the balcony, but cannot. Down on her knees, she makes her way back to the shower.

She can feel him behind her now, the cold hands positioning her arms. The handcuffs lock in place and he's frisking her. Down. There is the pain again, yes, a kind of desperate hopeless-- a dumb murmur and weight before the fingers. Searching . . . the coughing and voices-- the light and then the eyes and Madison slipping into . . .

Intermission

Lunar Eclipse

The phone was ringing as it had, like clockwork, every night at three after seven, since her date with Rolen. She had placed the stuffed moon on the top of her bureau next to the star and leftover tickets. She had even cautiously looked forward to his calls-- but for the last week she found it harder to breathe, began to feel smothered somehow, and could not bring herself to answer the ringing.

. . . in and out . . . slowly, that's right, let the air in naturally, a smooth swelling full . . . smoothly . . . yes, close your eyes . . . hold for a mo . . . and release . . .

Madison knew it was him by the ring-- four rings and done, the vibration after each ring until the last one, echoing, before the answering machine with its digital voice announcing her number. "Only seven and a half minutes until the eclipse . . ." the tone of Rolen's voice over the machine until Maddy could almost smell the cologne . . . hear him breathing. "If you go look out your bedroom window you'll be just in time to catch it." Madison moved to the phone, breathing slowly, ignoring the footsteps of her father, drawn by the reassuring sound of Rolen. She placed her hand on the receiver, her fingers curling about the smooth contours of the handset . . . breathe in . . . close your eyes, hold for a . . . hold it, maddy . . . breathe out . . . until the familiar click and distant tone of disconnect.

. . . the red of the hood, the handcuffs pressing into her wrists, and maddy's
breathing rapid and shallow

. . . in and . . . slower, that's and releeee eesssse . . .

“tell me a story, mommy, please . . .”

“ . . . if you could just, rolen, please . . .” . . . please . . .

. . . and maddy begins forming the lines, thicker now, around the p, and up, over the . . .

After playing back the message, listening again to the calm ebb and flow of his words,
Madison picked up the receiver. She made it half way through his number before placing
the handset back in its cradle.

. . . around the e, and under . . . around the curve, and up to where it meets the a . . .

When she drew back the curtains to gaze up at the moon tracking across the face of the
sun, the odd sounds of a carnival organ drew her attention to the street. Madison saw the
roof of his truck parked right out in front of her building, directly under her window and
Rolen standing up next to two chairs in the bed, tucking the cell phone in his trousers.

. . . beyond the nose of the hood-- a looping coil of hose capped off with a small
pointed nozzle, springing up, the firemen stretching it out, dragging the hose back and

forth in front of her, the firemen in their slickers and plastic trousers, the firemen sneaking stares from under their helmets . . .

When he saw her at the window, he smiled and bent slightly, never taking his eyes from the window, to pick up a bouquet lying on one of the chairs.

. . . and Maddy looks down to her night gown, reddens at the pale uncovered skin stretching out from under the fabric--she feels violated by their stares, more and more firemen beginning to notice her, the firemen yanking on their hoses, and all right in front of her, nothing between them, the firemen and her, and Maddy clearly exposed through the tempered glass of the windshield . . .

Rolen held up the flowers toward her with one hand, and the other resting on the slender tube of a telescope pointing toward the sky. He then sat down, motioning to the empty chair now fully in view beside him, a bottle of wine chilling on ice with two glasses on a small fold-out table between.

. . . a fireman throws down his helmet, the straps of his respirator and then, the oxygen tank-- his coat heavy as he struggles with the snaps, rips open the front and the plastic sleeves molting away, pushed back as he slithers up and away, pushes from the right sleeve, the left, and then out, the coat heavy as it falls to the pavement, the fireman standing dead center in front of her, the fabric of his t-shirt wet and clings under the suspenders . . .

Madison stepped back for a moment, ran her fingers through her hair and checked her blouse for lint before moving back into the window frame. Rolen now held up a placard, a yellow and red sun painted in one corner on a collision course with a powder blue moon-- between them were painted stars of the night sky and the question in florescent orange. “-Not-so-bad-” he lipped up toward her, lifting his shoulders, raising his eyebrows from the street.

. . . the fireman practically disrobed, his chest bare, heaving in and out, his breath labors beneath his plastic trousers held up only by the broad nylon straps, yet, the trousers stretched back over the shoulders, securely in place and Maddy exhales slowly, relieved he has stopped . . .

Madison slipped into a fresh pair of jeans and pulled a sweater over her blouse, pausing at the full-length mirror on her closet door to check her makeup and hair one last time. The woman in the mirror stared back and Madison forced a smile, considered the dark circles beneath the woman’s eyes, the slight sag of chin and the lines already beginning to spread out from the corner of the woman’s lips.

. . . breathe . . . one, two, three, breathe . . . one, two, three, breathe . . .one, two, three . . .

The tick-tocking on the clock wall she ignored, much as she, as a little girl, had learned to shut out the vision of her father’s watch-- the second hand snapping, jerked around by

invisible cogs and turnets in measured circles and above the eyes tracing the motion, each and every movement under the close scrutiny of tapping foot and poorly shaven chin.

. . . no, do not look—close your eyes, yes, tighter, it can't if you don't . . .

it can not . . .

tight, close, tighter . . .

it can't if you don't see it . . .

Working her arms into the sleeves of a long coat as she turned the last deadbolt on her door, Madison slid away the chain and then locked the door back up from the other side. “four, five, six . . .” she counted before turning, and hurrying down the stairs.

. . . seven, eight, nine . . . breathe . . . slower, your pace, maddy . . . seven, eight . . .

Madison slowed at the bottom of the stairwell to a casual walk. She could see him through the glass outside in the truck bed waiting-- Rolen leaning forward in the chair, adjusting the lens of the telescope and then with two fingers, tapping the face of his watch. Madison breathed in deeply. She placed her hands upon the push bar and stepped out through the apartment building doors to meet him.

“There you are--” Rolen said with a warm smile as she made her way to the truck.

“I was about to give up all hope!”

. . . and Maddy hides her face, closes her eyes, tries to dissolve the image of the fireman and before he comes into the room again, slips his hands under the covers, and Maddy squeezes her eyelids together until the skin wrinkling up tighter . . .

He hoisted her up over the edge of the truck, Madison's feet scrambling up the side of the tire and at last finding solid ground on the bed railing in front of Rolen, his hands now around her waist, lifted her up one last time and placed her feet gently down upon the bed's liner. "You have the most incredible eyes" he said, when Madison found herself seated beside him, looking up to the naked sky one of the two fold-out chairs. "What do you mean by that?" she asked, quickly cupping her hand over her forehead, her eyes safely behind the thumb and palm, staring up at where the earth's shadow was slowly moving into position in front of the moon.

. . . he is naked below the waist, standing beside the bed and Maddy can hardly breathe, no, the words forming on her lips, No, the letters in her mind, larger, NO, and she begins to draw the lines . . .

Rolen leaned toward her and poured the tall slender glass on her side of the small table separating them a third full with the wine. She could not look at him, only from the corner of her vision as he handed her the glass, the dark red of the wine swirling above her fingernails and Rolen busy swinging the telescope into position for her.

“I don’t know why,” Madison said in a quiet voice, then cautiously, “there’s something about the moon-- well, I mean, I guess I’ve just always identified with it somehow.” She pulled her knees together and tugged the collar of her coat until it pulled tightly around her neck.

“I’ve always suspected the moon was hiding something,” Rolen said, rocking back in his chair mechanically. “I think the moon has lots of secrets--” Rolen leaning dangerously forward and then reaching out for the table between them to lift up the glass of wine. “It hides them under pale rocks or tucks them away safely underground-- in the corners of craters, buried deep beneath the shadows.”

. . . the lines around the fireman now, up and over the shoulders, down around the chest and trousers, the lines around the fireman again and again until the fireman smaller, smaller . . .

When Madison looked up from the wine toward Rolen, tracing slowly above the soft edges of his jacket, his eyes moved down from where they were fixed on the moon and leveled with her own. Madison could almost see his mouth trying it all out ahead of time-- the lips working through every word before releasing them into the night air. “What I’m trying to say is that I know the moon’s been through hell, but it doesn’t have to be that way.” His eyes moved toward her, the corners of his mouth until Madison jerked away from him, her heart racing and the blood suddenly pulsing against the side of her temple.

. . . and Maddy slumps down in the seat, tries to sink below the dash, down toward the floor mats to where the firemen cannot see her, to where the cold naked fingers cannot reach . . .

The shadow of the earth was moving more quickly now across the face of the moon-- the giant scars and craters swallowed one by one into the obscurity of the dark. Madison leaned forward to put her eye to the telescope, closing the other eye and shutting out the instructions of Rolen. She swung the tube across the sky, considering the incredible distances between one star and the next. The image of the moon shook through the lens, the shadow spreading slow and steadily across the lunar surface.

. . . even lower, Maddy disappearing from view, safely from the reach of the firemen, the chief and the bare-chested fireman now out of view, no longer real and shrinking smaller, the lines thicker and the firemen smaller, the world outside the dash fading, dissolving, vanishing beyond the hood . . .

Madison could see the arc of the earth clearly-- the mass of the curve relentlessly overtaking the brilliance of moon. "It's all pretty horrible," she said almost inaudibly, backing away from the lens, not able to shake the image of the earth's shadow. "The moon does the same thing during a solar eclipse," stated Rolen, sounding somewhat defensive. Madison did not answer him. She thought instead of the all the photos she had seen of solar eclipses-- the footage of the earth growing dark, the moon rushing

across the face of the sun until nothing was left but a fiery ring-- the burning of the sun like a diamond ring blazing in the sky.

. . . in and out . . . slowly, let the air out softly, a quiet pushing out . . . smoothly . . .
. . . close your eyes . . . hold for a mo . . . and breathe . . .

Rolen's voice was calmer now, but Madison's hands were shaking and her feet starting to jerk—she imagined people running in a mad panic, chased by an overwhelming shadow spreading across the fields and mountains. She took a gulp of wine and looked away from the last remaining edge of moon still glowing as if in protest above them in the sky.

Nature Boy

. . . and again, Rolen can not help from going back. There is something of his grandmother in the voice of the waitress-- he can hear the muffled screams of his mother as the men carry her away. QUESTIONS: Why? Where are they taking . . . is she coming back? Gone-- taken away like his father. Nothing, Rolen tries not to feel it-- shuts out her voice when the waitress comes back with the coffee. Tin . . .ting . . . ti . . . as Madison stirs in the cream. He hears the wind chimes on the porch-- the slicing breeze as the truck takes her down the road and o u t o f s i g h t . . .

. . . around the next corner, it must be . . . the keys still clenched between fingers and palm, but open to see, check slowly under the next light . . . the worn chrome, the yellowed edges and steel stamp . . . yes, the ring and keys, now tighter, quickly, careful not to lose . . . the next corner, it must be somewhere . . .

. . . behind you. Forget. Her fingers lifting up the cup--she blows across the warm and smiles. DIFFERENT: a chance to move forward-- break free from the voices and smells and the shapes. Dead. Saucer against cup, his toes inside the socks and back down. Focus. Don't dwell in the

¹past \past\ *adj* [ME, fr. pp. of *passen* to pass] **1 a** : AGO {many years ~} **b** : just gone or elapsed {for the ~ few months} **2** : having existed or taken place in a period before the present : BYGONE

²**past** \past\prep **1 a** : beyond the age for or of **b** : AFTER {half ~ two} **2 a** : at the farther side of : BEYOND **b** : in a course or direction going close and then beyond

. . . behind Madison the waitress draws nearer and rolen tugs at his collar . . . braces himself against the back of the chair. WARNING: He covers his ears and closes the eyes-- blocks out the truck and the thought of his mother caged in a room . . . his grandmother's voice-- the needles and the straps and the screams . . . and then the silence.

GRANDMOTHER: Your mother is going away for a while-- you'll need to be a strong little man like your father.

ROLEN: How long before she comes back?

GRANDMOTHER: Come here and straighten up your collar-- you need to keep things up while she's gone . . . tuck in your shirt and be a good little soldier.

ROLEN: But . . .

GRANDMOTHER: Shhh . . . Just look at the mess you're making of yourself!

The dry fingers of his grandmother around his throat-- hoisting up his collar and grappling with the buttons. Rolen struggles from her hold-- slapping away her hands and pulling at his shirt . . . popping off the buttons and apart-- his skin free from the dank musk if only for a moment . . .

. . . up, the right from the pavement, and free . . . down, another, then down . . .
up, the left from the pavement, and free . . . down, another and then, down . . . up, the
right from the pavement, and . . .

. . . as the waitress moves away, Madison reaches over to calm him-- her touch
warm and fragrant. “Are you going to be okay?” Her voice splashes against him gently--
dissolves into his skin . . . “Say, that sure was some time getting kicked off the carnival
grounds-- my first time you know . . .” but Rolen is frozen in place-- caught beneath a
skim of froth as it swirls above the thick undulating coffee. “I guess I just wanted to
thank you.” He follows the steam twisting up from the cup and for the first time can see
directly into her eyes. Rolen finds himself

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into the cushion of dark-- sliding down against the perimeter of soft warm iris before she
looks away. He shifts uncomfortably on the chair, leans forward to tug out the wallet.
Eyeing the figures on the bill, he slides the decimal point over to the left and divides by
two . . . “What do you say we do something?” Rolen places a five, two quarters and a
penny on the table neatly under the sales slip. “I’m not sure, maybe go somewhere . . .”
after pushing a dime back into his front pocket and with one last gulp of coffee is off his
chair tugging at her arm. “C’mon . . .” Madison is slow at first to get up, but he waits
until she gathers her purse and follows her outside.

. . . corner, it must be around the next . . . his shadow nearing a streetlamp . . . and over the next crack, and then . . . down, the shadow now further . . . until quickly, and then . . . faster, the feet lifting still faster . . . until, slow, the shadow safely away . . .

Away from the street lamps, above them, the stars-- a comet. Rolen walks beside her, listening to the sound of their footsteps. Moonlight. His thoughts sketch a diagram-- a picture of Madison dabbing his forehead with a damp cloth. *sshhh* . . . she says, *I would never leave* . . .

ROLEN: Did you ever find someone you thought you could tell everything to? I mean, someone you could really talk to.

MADISON: I don't know . . . No, not really . . . To tell you the truth, I've always had a hard time opening up with anyone. I guess it just takes me a real long time. Why did you ask?

ROLEN: I've never had anyone really let me. They always stop me before I can, or if I go ahead anyway, they don't really listen at all.

MADISON: I know what you mean. My mother used to tell me stories to get me to sleep—but she was never there when I really needed . . . I guess that's about the closest I ever came.

ROLEN: I brought it up because it feels different with you, like I could maybe somehow tell you anything and it will be okay.

Madison steady beside him-- he stretches out his hand. *Tell me a story Rolen* . . . it is his turn with the clothe. He dips it into the cool water of the basin before wringing it out-- her temple damp, glistens under the stars. "Once upon a . . ." he says and she smiles.

CAUTION: Stay in the present. Stop. Don't jump ahead.

<<< Rewind. Be careful not to fast-forward to the >>>

¹**future** \`fyu-cher\ *n* [ME, fr. OF & L; OF *futur*, fr. L *futurus* about to be-- more at BE]

1 a : time that is to come **b** : what is going to happen **2** : an expectation

²**future** *adj* **1** : of, relating to, or constituting a verb tense formed with *will* and *shall* and expressive of something still not seen

In the sketch-- two stick figures: chalk against the green of blackboard. The two connected by a shared . . . the two walking, share a common line. Inseparable. FOCUS: Hands. Together walking along together. Direction. Just reach over, stretch out the fingers and touch . . .

. . . just around the . . . yes, no, not too much further . . . in the distance, might be . . . must be the truck . . . closer, could be, maybe . . . closer, the truck, yes . . . nearer, the headlights, the bumper . . . yes, nearer, the truck . . . closer, the grill, yes, the mark across the hood . . .

. . . closer, together after the carnival: they are sitting over coffee telling one another their dreams and disappointments-- "Did you ever just wNT TO tear it all away

and RUn thrgh the streets naked?” Later walking . . . “Nature Boy” rh, RH: dead, loss, time, past, present, future, abandon, strong-- definitions: only words. Nothing to grab on to . . . flat and empty. Chalk. Taking his mother away-- his grandmother telling him . . . QUESTIONS: She will or won’t come back? Is it really only a matter of time? Rolen exposes the need to run naked-- Maddy expresses her need for security and stability and how it takes her a while to talk-- hmmm . . . “My mother used to tell me stories”. . . Do I? Madison? *I will never leave you* . . . Can I hold you in my hand?

Behavioral Healthcare

Selected Private Conversations in Five Therapy Sessions and Various Acts and Scenes

THE PLAYERS*

ROLEN HILT
LABIA

MADISON (MADDY) PATTEN

DR. HANK

**with an appearance by Lyn Gratis:* THE RECEPTIONIST

The action takes place simultaneously in three separate locations: 1) the office of Dr. Hank Labia, PsyD., a behavioral therapist in a small city on the East Coast of the United States; 2) a small, closely monitored communication-cell located on the third floor of a sanatorium nearby; and 3) the second-floor visitation and designated conference area in a minimum-security prison somewhere halfway across the country.

Act Five: Therapy Session 21

Heavy construction equipment is heard- mixed with the static of a radio signal, a muted, yet shrill prison guard whistle, the chatter of apes, the screeches of squirrels, the crackle of a nurse's page for a doctor, any doctor, and finally, a distinct lift and flap of wings.

The curtain opens upon a darkened stage partitioned into three separate sets, each sharing two characteristics: a real or imagined window frame (either open, closed, barred, perforated, permanently sealed, or otherwise hastily drawn) and a telephone / receiver in a prominent position. From stage left to center to right, each set is illuminated in turn . . .

Stage-Left [the set to the left of the audience]-- *(the lighting first perceived in exaggerated columns brightening from outside the set, much like the simulation of sunlight) Placing his ear to the corded receiver of a pay phone secured to the wall, Rolan leans up and over, punches in a series of numbers despite the set of handcuffs chained together and fastened around his wrists. He then eases down into a hard plastic seat, leans back atop the chair's two rear metal legs, basking in the light which enters the room through a small barred window. Through the elongated shadows, he closely monitors a prominent digital read-out, already counting down his allotted twenty-five minutes. The sound of the receiver lifting from its cradle is amplified throughout the theater, followed by a dial tone and the various pitches corresponding with the pressing of each subsequent digit in the number.*

RECEPTIONIST: [an appropriate pause after the muffled sound of a second phone ringing and the receiver picked up] Good afternoon! Behavioral Healthcare Associates-- Can I help you?

ROLAN: [somewhat forceful, and then dramatically more quietly] Hi . . . Yes, I have a three o'clock phone conference with Dr. Labia-- an appointment . . . yes . . .

RECEPTIONIST: [professionally “chipper”] Hi, Rolen . . . Hold on, I’ll put you through as soon as he’s ready for you.

Stage-Right [the set to the right of the audience]—An overhead florescent light flickers to life, illuminating a small white room positioned on the stage opposite Rolen. Madison is escorted into the room by two attendants, one on each arm. After the attendants release their firm hold upon her, they exit quickly, cautiously backing away. An unseen door swings closed as the attendants disappear into the dark. The jingle of keys echo across the stage, followed by the loud clack of a deadbolt. Madison shudders visibly, and then, paces about the room dressed in sweats and thick slippers. She moves around a thickly padded chair to where a dim yellowed glow (very dim-- barely discernible against the bright white of the room) reaches tentatively into the room from behind the thin fabric of drapes. Madison pushes the drapes aside, runs her fingers across a stylish diamond shaped grid of iron welded in place upon the window sill. She checks for any openings large enough for a hand, and not finding any, pushes the drapes together again. Madison turns back toward the chair and accompanying slender, yet padded, telephone stand in the center of the small room. She pauses before the stand, takes a deep breath before lifting a white cordless handset, which rests, cradled and cushioned atop the stand.

MADISON: [continues pacing around the room-- her lips moving, her voice gradually becoming audible] Yes, I certainly hope so . . . yes. [nodding and re-checking the drapes] Maddy? What was that? . . . um huh, thanks . . . Madison Patter.

Yes, P – A – T – T – E – R. Yes . . . local, that's right, uh, huh. You should have it on . . . Yes, okay, I'll hold . . .

Center-Stage-- Dr. Labia, who crosses past a window and shade half open--half closed (the upper half of the consultation room bathed in light, the lower half draped in darkness and shadow), leans over and presses down a button on the face of a large and unseemly speaker phone. He sits back somewhat uncomfortably into the cushioned folds of the room's couch, only the tip of his goatee jabbing down into the light, and pulls out a can of tobacco, raises a pinch to his cheek and gum only to stop, raises himself up from the couch (again, with some difficulty), passes back by the window once more, and maneuvers into a negotiated position on the leather chair.

RECEPTIONIST: [her voice breaking into the office over the small conference phone speaker on the stand next to the doctor's leather chair] Both your three-o'clocks are on the line Dr. Labia. Do you want me to patch them in?

DR. LABIA: [primary pixels of light and shadow cutting the good doctor in half as he leans forward from the chair] Thank you Ms. Gratis-- Go ahead and put 'em all on through . . .

RECEPTIONIST: Yes Doctor, I'll patch them over right away—

[The distinct digital disconnect and echo-- the lines channeled into one after the pressing and another click-- there are different levels of digital noise from the external sources, yes, and yet here they all are refunneled together-- blended somehow through the wonder and awe of modern technology into a homogenized

background static-- the dull blah, blah, crackle-blah, snap-dribble, drat and fuzz in contrast to the voices of the players rising dramatically and spasmodically into the foreground-- the voices of the players flash and glitter, speaking in dialogue as if crisscrossing and leaping before tripping, falling or climbing across the grid of a line graph.]

BACKGROUND STATIC: Hmmsszzzzmmmmssmmzz . . .

MADISON: [standing awkwardly between the chair and phone stand-- the florescent lighting in the room begins to flicker, the glow from the window seeming to brighten as the artificial light falters—then, both light sources rising simultaneously in luminescence before surrendering completely to the darkness] Hello . . . Hello?

ROLEN: Madison? [propping himself upright in the plastic chair now, looking out longingly toward the bars of sunlight filtering into the room—with both hands, Rolen pulls on the spiraled phone cord as if measuring how far . . .] Hi there-- Is the Doc on the line too?

MADISON: [the lights in her room suddenly back on, most intensely bright, so bright the audience can hardly make out the form of Madison. Both lights adjust down in brilliance, almost to normal, and Maddy resumes pacing, circling in front of the chair and then between the padded stand and window drapes] I'm not sure—but, I thought I heard . . .

DR. LABIA: [interrupting] Well now! [pausing for a moment-- tilting his ear toward the conference phone -- the rim of the stetson dips down into the half-light but all is silent] . . . It's the Doc here! How y'all doing out there?

[From a wide stage view-- the players to the left and right of center-stage are now both up and moving: Maddy still pacing and Rolen up from his chair, the ankle shackles and hand-cuffs mimic the light, their polished finish reflects out across the audience in a pulsing, probing, and otherwise rather intrusive glare. To the right of Rolen, the center-stage lighting shifts up and down, down and up and in a moment, it strobos to a halt, focused upon the lower half of the Doctor— his boots rocking back, the chrome tips arching up, catching the light a moment before the doctor shifts in his leather chair. His arms extend down into the light, the hands searching, disappear into the folds of the left pants pocket and then the right. A hand emerges with a small short cylinder, both hands drawn together as the palms and fingers twist open a can of tobacco.]

MADISON: There it is again-- [stops for a moment and listens] . . . but maybe not.

Hold on . . . did you hear that?

ROLEN: I think I heard something, too . . . [balancing the receiver between his shoulder and ear, the metallic drag of chains as his form stands up from the recliner-- a darkened shadowy figure, almost solid, in stark contrast against the vertical bands of light poured in from outside] . . . I can't really tell . . . I'm just not . . .

DR. LABIA: [hand and fingers raised in a pinch-- lifting the tobacco up into the dark before scrambling for the correct button, perhaps . . . pushing randomly the buttons and then calling out, at first calmly and steadily more frantic] Hello? . . . Maddy? Rolen? . . . [The sound of another button depressed, and another . . .] Ms. Gratis? . . . Anyone?

RECEPTIONIST: [her voice breaking into the line] Dr. Labia? Sorry about the

interruption . . . Are you having any problems with the line? Is ther [The sound of another button depressed and then . . .]

PHONE LINE: [a click and disconnect] nmnn . . . Nnmmmmmm . . .

ROLEN: Wait-- there it goes again . . . [his figure rotated to a side view-- a profiled and barred silhouette, connected to the room by a long twisting cord] I think I definitely heard something that time!

MADISON: Me too, it sounded sort of like a woman's voice . . . [begins pacing once more— the florescent light begins again to flicker—th fli ker g of the fl es ent l ght incr s ng] A woman steady and self-assured. Confident, but . . . no, definitely not the Doctor-- the receptionist, maybe?

DR. LABIA: Hello? [his voice contrasted from the other players-- thin and hollow as if speaking from within a small tin and foiled can] I can hear you-- can you hear me?

[The background static momentarily increases in volume until it eclipses and drowns out the sound of the good doctor, the goateed chin moving in the half of light-- there are no words but still the moving of the chin and in the adjoining sets, the other players unsteady in motion also-- their arms bent and elbows hinged to the ear, the occasional flash of teeth and swell of full and thin lip in motion until the static dies down and in the clearing, their voices break forth from the ssssubsiding electrosnapping crackle-click and guttural hisss ss ssss . . .]

CLICK-CRACKLE AND GUTTURAL HISS: [subsiding] hisss ss ssss . . .

MADISON: Or maybe . . . [pauses . . . pacing . . . pauses. Pacing . . .] But then again, I never really-- Did you, ever?

ROLEN: No, but I . . . I mean . . . [standing up, now, directly in front of the small barred glass pane-- his form outlined by slashes of light] I wouldn't get yourself all worked up about it . . . [placing his palms up the glass, the fingers spread and the chain widened in an arc—Rolen examines the digits darkened and contrasted by the light] Probably just a bad connection—

BACKGROUND STATIC: [rising in volume to once again suffocate, stifle and eventually overwhelm the sound of the players]

zzzsshhhhZZZHsmmsszzzzmmmmssmmzz . . . [the lights on all three sets flash on and off randomly, the players one after another holding their hands up to cover their ears-- the static growing even louder and the random flashes of light revealing the players and sets changing places . . . now Maddy stage right and the Doctor stage left . . . Rolen in the leather chair and the Doctor pacing around the padded . . .]

HHHzzzhSMMMMMSSSzzzZZZMMMMmmmmsssssSSSSSSMMmmzZZZZ . . . [until suddenly, complete and utter silence. Random inaudible flashings continue, the light rising in intensity, shifting color and hue, shading: a glimpse of Maddy here—Dr. Labia there . . . and Rolen, all the players brightening and fading, changing places, the three sets themselves distorting until an all-encompassing brilliant flash overwhelms the entire stage, spreads out into the audience before total and utter darkness—a rumbling bang breaks through the silence, it rumbles and hovers throughout the theatre for an extended moment, a minute, an hour, or perhaps, a minor eternity, the echoes gradually lessen until all is quiet and dark once again.]

RECEPTIONIST: [As yet a disembodied voice, emanating from stage left] Hello? Is anyone . . . Hello?

[The stage lighting gradually increases, a translucence rising, a black light's glow, and revealing the players settled into new positions and slightly altered sets-- stage-left: Maddy in chains, center-stage: Rolen in the padded room—and stage-left: a disoriented Dr. Labia, visible trembling, lying extended upon the leather couch. A flashlight in hand, Ms. Gratis, Dr. Labia's receptionist, steadily makes her way across the stage from left to right-- her hair well groomed, but not overly, moving as if flowing, without pretensions—Ms. Gratis passing through the black light past Madison pacing-- the chains shackled around Maddy's ankles dragging verbally across the cell floor; the receptionist now enveloped in the purple glow past Rolen-- he rather abruptly ceases pacing, sits down cautiously, eases back into the padded chair-- the steps of Ms. Gratis sure and measured as she passes by the players, the flashlight revealing their mouths shifting in a dialogue not quite audible. Her movements are almost angelic-- she glides as if effortlessly across the stage and yet her feet are surely grounded. She is dressed in a smart business suit, apparently unaffected by the altered light-- a true professional in a jacket as she adjusts the hem of her slacks and slows her pace. Stepping forward on the moderate soles of sensible shoes, Ms. Gratis enters attentively, in a comfortably relaxed gait into the office of the doctor . . .]

RECEPTIONIST: Dr. Labia? [Her hands cupped into a palmed megaphone pointed toward where the doctor has crawled from the couch, now bent over the phone, pressing buttons] Doctor? Hello . . . How are you doing?

DR. LABIA: [unsettled at the voice of the receptionist at first, jumping up from over the conference phone and grabbing at the heart, his hand grasping the pocket where the can of tobacco bulges out] Lordy! Thank heavens it's you Ms. Gratis . . .

RECEPTIONIST: [her voice more quiet now, calm and nurturing--] Is everything okay? I noticed . . .

DR. LABIA: Just a moment . . . [pointing his finger in the air, then breathing in deeply to compose himself, turning away momentarily before turning back to face her] I'm just having quite some time trying to figure this contraption out again. I was hoping . . . [his voice falls-- dropping off in mid sentence . . .]

RECEPTIONIST: [speaking with warm assurance, authority and knowledge] Well, let's take a look at it and try to work things out.

[The receptionist moves appropriately toward Dr. Labia. He sits back into his leather chair and hands her the receiver. She reaches for the phone and after examining the matrix of flashing lights, places the handset to her ear and proceeds to systematically manage a process balanced between inquiry, logical hypothesis and deduction through the brightly lit panel.]

RECEPTIONIST: [depressing buttons and speaking into the receiver] Hello? . . . Hello? . . . [pausing for a moment before putting a finger to her lip-- lowering it contemplatively to the panel and continuing] Hmmm . . . Hello? . . .

[Although the receptionist continues speaking, the volume of her voice decreases-- increasingly displaced by the sharp electronic tones of the depressed digits and connections-- the dashed busy, the long disconnect, and the endless ringing of unanswered lines. The electronic tones succumb, surrendering in turn, to a

temporary rise in static-- seduction before the background rattle is overwhelmed itself-- interrupted randomly by various other non-descript conversations taking place at some considerable distance to a revolving transitional flux emerging in the foreground-- the chaotic rhythm of a juice-harp accompanied by cymbals, the lazy strumm pick-tweek-twang of a banjo and an mistuned piano-- the keys struck in random discord.]

CONVERSATIONALIST: {IN HEBREW AND GREEK} Lilith dialogue: Why should I not be on top?

THE CONVERSATIONALIST: {IN HEBREW} Behold, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king; let your word be like one of them and speak favorably. [The clash of iron swords against shields and rocks, the smell of fire-- footprints of sandals, nomadic peoples placed and displaced-- the noise of searching . . . searching . . .]

CONVERSATIONALIST 1: {IN GREEK} Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story . . .

CONVERSATIONALIST 2: HWÆT, WE GARD-Dena in geardagum, þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon, hu þa æþelingas ellen fremedon! Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum . . . Þæt wæs god cyning!

[The scape of a quill amidst outbursts of laughter, the loud swush of meade, and violent sobbing.]

CONVERSATIONALIST Z: Ywys, my deere herte trewe, we may wel stele away, as ye devyse, and fynden swich unthrifty weyes newe, but afterward ful soore it wol us rewe . . .

[The continued high arching tone of another connect and disconnect mark a transition to the conversation taking place *medias res* on the other two sets of the stage.]

MADISON: [twirling the phone cord around and between her fingers] No, haven't you heard anything I just said?

ROLEN: Whoaa . . . wait a minute-- What are you talking about?

MADISON: [disconcerted] I mean the whole thing about the window . . . [yanking down on a non-existent cord, only to notice the window has moved and her surroundings have changed-- her hand slips free, a disgruntled look crosses her face as she eyes the barred prison window, the links of chain draped between her outstretched palms] You're probably standing right in front of one now!
[The discord rising-- a series of beeps and rattles, the intermittent buzz of static until suddenly . . . the equilibrium of an ear popping followed by a calming sense of normalcy.]

RECEPTIONIST: [handing the receiver back to the doctor] There we are, sir-- I think you're ready to go now.

DR. LABIA: [answering with a half-lit, but genuinely human face] Thank you, again, Ms. Gratis— [the good doctor coughs, clearing his throat] I don't know what I'd do without your expertise.

RECEPTIONIST: [displaying a warm professional smile] You're welcome, Doctor . . .
[Ms. Gratis turns away from the doctor and exits the office, stage-right, in a relaxed gait-- her steps are calm and measured, her movements frictionless,

confidently appropriate and balanced-- even and without question, she dissolves from the stage as steady as she had entered.]

DR. LABIA: [the ebb and timbre his voice crackling over the phone line] Well now, hello there you two!

MADISON AND ROLEN: [reservedly cheerful together-- as if forcibly in unison] Hi there, Doctor Labia.

DR. LABIA: [laughing, and then more serious] Sorry about the delay—technical difficulties, you know . . . Just a little under the weather today . . . [the doctor coughs] Well, then! [he coughs again (this time more strenuously)-- his words already beginning to break up] What is it you think we could talk about today?

The curtain closes abruptly, sweeping across the stage without warning. Immediately, all sound swells to a stop-- words, followed by smells and light, motion . . . truthless, meaningless, void even of mumbling. Dark. All is still for a lengthy moment-- elongated nothing . . . Nothing . . . Wait. Yes, there is a shifting. A slow turning turns until the empty-eyed audience emerges once again, as if new-- responds in a low . . . wait . . . yes, a small and random, emotionless murmuring.

At First Sight

. . . fingers long and delicate. Her eyes-- beautiful. Thumbing through the magazine and closes-- tapping across exposed knee. Waiting. No, stop staring or she will notice. Nervous . . . yes, maybe she is too . . .

. . . afraid, yes, but he musters up the courage, approaches the casket slowly and rises to the edge. On tiptoes, rolen peers over the side to where his father lies in uniform-- sunk down into the padding and his head stiff upon a silk pillow. Unmoving . . . The jacket thick and the shirt pressed stiff-- the buttons fastened smartly all the way up-- the collar smeared with the wax of flesh. DEAD. The eyelids drawn down and hollow-- the face pale and expressionless, the fingers dry and rigid. Empty . . . the look. COLD. . .

. . . the pavement-- gravel beneath the feet, fingers and the keys . . . wait, no, not the driver's, must . . . yes, the passenger side . . . hurry, up, the toes, down against the sidewalk . . . pressing forward, the keys . . . in, the tumblers, the teeth-- turn, and lift . . . pull, and . . .

Rolen backs away. His mother is behind him, the weight of her fingers on rolen's shoulder and his grandmother waiting at the end of the casket-- solemn, watching every move . . . Rolen is up and walking past her, across the waiting room and toward the water cooler. In his hurry, his feet stumble-- he almost trips. His hands tremble around a paper cup and then the water bubbling down . . . She looks up-- if only for a moment and

smiles. Her eyes . . . “a woman like that who understands . . .” Rolen sits back down across from her and wants to ask her name, but in the distance he can still hear his mother crying-- rolen reaching out, trying to wipe away the . . .

. . . dew, on the inside, across the windshield, fogs his view . . . the dome light’s dull glow . . . careful, someone might . . . but rolen slides across the seat, wet and cold . . . next, the keys, yes, the square one, not the round, and . . . turn, turning, turns until finally . . . cold, let it . . . c’mon warm . . . warm, the defroster, yes, warm, the defroster just might . . .

“Madison . . .” he doesn’t quite know where to begin.

In the doorway Madison smiles the same smile-- her eyes down toward where, even after a year, his shoes are still outside-- unable to cross through to the carpet inside.

“Remember when . . .”

“I almost fell over and . . . *you mean you almost fell down right on top of me, and then you asked me, ‘Are you here to see the doctor too?’ like nothing had happened . . .*

. and you laughed, and said, ‘Who? Hank?’”

Rolen fumbles with his truck keys, then looks directly at her.

“Sometimes it still seems that way, and I don’t want it to.” Rolen reaches out to run his fingers through her hair. “Especially . . . Well, what I mean is . . .”

Madison backs away and says nothing-- refuses even to look at him. She closes the door and Rolen is left in the dark . . . Above, he can hear them shoveling in the dirt-- his arms crossed over his chest.

isolate \i-se-lat, `is-e-\ *vb* [back-formation fr. *isolated* set apart, fr. F *isole*, fr. It *isolato*, fr. *isola* island fr. L *insula*] *vt* **1** : to set apart from others; also : QUARANTINE **2** : to separate from another substance, person, group, or existence so as to obtain a more pure or free state **3** : INSULATE ~ *vi* : to cause something or someone to be isolated : to separate oneself

His mother's fingers pressed upon his shoulder and rolen watches as they lower the casket-- the cheap chrome handles disappearing into the earth. The fingers growing colder, his shoulder numbing to the touch and above a plane performing maneuvers-- twisting straight into the sky like a corkscrew and looping back down again. The whines of the engine lag a few moments behind-- reaching the spectators as if second hand to sight. The plane climbing perfectly vertical as the pastor begins to speak and then dropping back-- but the sound still rising and rolen unable yet to figure out the delay.

Rolen revs the engine, his hand over the defroster vent . . . the humm of the motor until, at last, a spot . . . a clearing, small, and yet he can almost see through . . . the wipers, and gradually the opening wider-- beyond the street lamps glow, wet and blur, the long shadow of buildings, a corner of sky.

The plane spinning over end-- swings down in a perfect arc through the backdrop of clouds before the climb up again. The plane a distant shining as it climbs, the throaty rumble and whines farther-- then further away as if an echo of nothing. His shoulder dulled to his mother's fingers-- distanced from her touch and his grandmother's stares. He backs up from the sight of the casket lowered-- maneuvered into the hole and the stiff clothes of his father within. The plane falling back from above the pastor's words and rolen follows it down-- the plane already dropping and lazily turning over into a dive before the silence.

. . . leaning over to peer through a hole in the windshield, Rolen passes under the last light-- green, and then yellow fingers, his toes bare against the accelerator, presses down, the wind whistling through the cab, much like his own screaming, until on the interstate, he catches the first sight of trouble . . . the flashing of lights, spinning . . . a column of smoke in the distance. The screams, he must open the door, somehow, extends his fingers out the cast and pulls up the handle . . . then pushing, the door drops, the wind rushing and he remembers, yanks back all he can until the arm in the cast, the bone hollowed, the pain shooting, travels up the arm . . .

After the door closes, the first bolt clacking, snaps into place, he waits. Rolen listens for each of the dead-bolts-- one by one sliding and then *snap!* until finally she swings across the chain. The look in her eyes-- DEAD. "Don't shut me out Maddy-- please, don't . . ." He can not stop with the pleading but they will not listen. Rolen recreates every word-- every gesture. Again. Her hand against his-- slapping it down.

His shoulder numb. The fingers cold-- pushing him away. STOP! The men have come for his mother-- he hears her screaming, Maddy crying and again, the scrape and drag of the shovels . . . Run, Rolen, run. He steps back just as the door slams. Silence. He waits . . .

. . . impatiently, rolen rides up and down the street outside her window. Out of papers, he circles around the block-- with a jerk of the arm, he pretends to throw the Morning Edition out all over again. As he passes by her house once more, he applies the brakes-- his feet circling slower but the window is darkened. The drapes swung shut-- the yard quiet with morning dew. Silent. He back-pedals. Over the buzz of the sprocket, rolen wants to tell the little pigtailed girl that with her it's different-- only it's not-- some days she is there but too often she is not. The little boy wants to tell her that he is afraid too. Sometimes she comes to the window, yes, but whenever the girl really gets a good look at him she slams it shut. He is afraid that she is the same as his grandmother-- that the little girl, too, will betray him to the policemen. He is afraid that she, too, will be wrapped in a white jacket-- that she will be led away by the uniformed men in the white truck with orange stripes or be lowered into the ground, sealed air-tight in a casket. The little boy is afraid that she will abandon him-- slam down the window again. He is afraid it is much too late. His feet swinging in reckless circles, ever-increasing wobbles-- rolen pedals faster and faster . . .

Rolen speeds up toward the apartment complex, but in the dawn, above the interstate, he begins to see more clearly the smoke, a dark lifeless column, the flash of

emergency lights still in the distance as if to warn him, it's not too late, and Rolen wants to run away. . . run, rolen, run. He puts on his turn signal and slows, begins to pull over, but what if Maddy . . . what if . . . and he pulls back onto the interstate, then no, couldn't possibly . . . slows, flips on the turn signal again, but no, slaps it off, drums his fingers against the steering wheel, running them back . . .

. . . and forth, Rolen paces on the sidewalk outside Madison's door. Maybe, yes, maybe he should go back and knock . . . yes-- no, wait . . . there is a light in the bedroom window . . . the shadow of Madison passing before him. Maybe he should call up to her-- maybe that is what she really wants him to do-- maybe it's the only way she won't . . . "The little girl needs some space-- some time away from the boy to get herself together." No, he will not be like the others-- not like little girl's father . . . TIME.
That's right Rolen, she just needs time to figure it all out for herself-- give her the time.
"The little boy shouldn't take it personally . . . it's just what the girl needs." But how can the little boy not? Rolen sits on the hood of his truck, his boots upon the bumper-- unsure of exactly what to do.

rolen-- a confused little boy traumatized by the death of his father, his mother's mental instability, and his grandmother's insistence that he wear his father's uniform
Rolen Do-Right-- a stupid, stupid mountie who constantly tries to rescue maddy, the commandant's daughter and local damsel in distress
Rolen Whiplash-- rolen do-right's shadowy arch-counterpart who logically deduces that "doing good" has its disadvantages

Rolen-- a very confused man still traumatized by the death of his father, his mother's mental instability, his grandmother's insistence that he wear his father's uniform, and the apparent insanity of the woman he loves

The deep of her eyes before closing . . .

¹abandon \e-`ban-den\ *vt* [ME *abandounen*, fr. MF *abandoner*, fr. *abandon*, n., surrender, fr. *a bandon* in one's power] **1** : to give up with the intent of never again claiming a right or interest in **2** : to withdraw from often in the face of danger or encroachment or emotional trauma **3** : to withdraw protection, support, or help from: DESERT **4** : to give (oneself) over to a feeling or emotion without check, restraint, or control **5 a** : to cease from maintaining, practicing, or using **b** : to cease intending or attempting to perform-- **aban-don-er** *n*--- **aban-don-ment** \-ment\ *n*

syn DESERT, FORSAKE, RELINQUISH

. . . and he can not, will not, do it, rolen can not just let her alone, does not want to . . . not to someone else, anyone else . . . especially not her, not like the others, never him, but his hands, the fingers tighten on the wheel, his toes against the stiff brake pedal, cold, until he sees her face, the deep of her eyes, and . . .

. . . the water, he can hear her moving. She is across from him in the chair--
Madison in the room waiting . . . the water clear laps against the paper side of cup and

Rolen feels the urge to speak. His fingers shaking but Rolan can no longer stop himself and the words come out-- the syllables forming in his mouth and released-- tumbling into the room between . . . Rolan breathing them forward. Pushing gently. Madison wiggles nervously in the chair-- shy and soft-spoken at first . . . her voice warm and elegant. Beautiful. He can not help but notice her thighs and knees-- her ankles. The full of her lips and sudden flash of eyelash-- color rises once more in her cheeks and again there is the smile . . . “a woman like that . . .” he feels he could tell her anything.

Exposure Therapy

All she had done was said yes to him, and Madison found herself overwhelmed by the bright colors, the flashes of light and many distorted faces of the carnival. Hank had tentatively agreed with her that Rolan had seemed innocent enough, different from the others but, of course, there was no way to really ever know. Now he stood up to the attendant behind the counter, arguing over the prize-- "I don't want another star!" he said, pointing at a brightly stuffed half-moon until, at last, the attendant gave in and pulled it down from the shelf.

Madison looked down to the profile of the yellow moon as they walked through the crowd of stares and curling fingers-- the fabric cut into a grin. She tucked it quickly under her arm, next to the padded star Rolan had won by throwing three rings onto the sloping necks of bottles and moved closer into the tall security of Rolan. He led her to where a Ferris wheel turned slowly into the night, spinning up through a fog of boiled grease and funnel cakes, the sky darkened and starless against wheel's brilliant rows of artificial light.

. . . maddy sinks in seat, her breathing heavy, beneath the dash, the cuffs under and down, lower . . . the lines thicker, the firemen smaller, breathing . . . in and out, in a n d o u t . . .

It was strange, Madison thought, how you could clearly make out the orange curve of moon but nothing else above the noise and flash of the carnival. “I wish we could see the real stars.” she commented almost inaudibly as they stopped at a stand to buy some soft pretzels. “Once we get to the top, you can see them all,” said Rolen, the wax paper crinkling as he paid for the pretzels and handed her one. When he left her to hold their place in line for the wheel so he could get some mustard for the pretzels, Madison’s pulse began to race, the confetti colored bulbs began to spin uncontrollably before her and blur. When he returned and offered to squeeze the mustard on her pretzel for her, she snatched the package from him. “I’m not some little girl,” she told him, tearing the mustard open with her teeth. “I can do it myself!”

Madison placed the moon between them on the small flat seat as the Ferris wheel jerked up into the sky. The carriage swiveled uncontrollably with every start and stop-- young couples and children climbing out of the carriages as new pairings took their places. Madison clung tightly to the padded aluminum bar the attendant had ratcheted down upon their legs. She laughed nervously at every jerk and twist of the carriage, the rotation of the wheel backing them higher into the air.

. . . her arms behinds her, she ducks fully under, the cuffs tighter, into the wrists, the hands flattened, fingers stretched and palms pressed down against the floor mat . . .

“Look,” said Rolen, still working on the last remnants of his pretzel. “You can start to make out the stars from here.” Madison followed the motion of his arm to where Rolen’s

finger pointed, the finger smeared with mustard, out the side of the fiberglass carriage. The wheel took them up in the air, above the dark shadows of the tall sloping hills, to where the bright glimmer of stars stretched out from the dark. But before her eyes could fully adjust to the view above the dazzle and glitter of the bright pulsing carnival lights, the carriage jerked down again toward the ground-- over and over until the stars were swallowed up again into the abyss of night.

. . .and tucking the knees beneath her chin, arms locked, pushing up the fingers, the palms arched, then flattened-- she rocks . . .

The jerk and swing of the carriages lifted them up faster into the sky now, only to turn them back down just as quickly toward the noise of the carnival below. The glare of the brightly lit stands and rides faded only at the very top of the revolutions, so Madison fixed her gaze at the stars until they disappeared-- she closed her eyes each time they began the descent in the hope when they reached the top she could focus more clearly into the night sky. Rolen reached out his hand, pushed through the space between them with his fingers as the wheel pulled them even faster in circles. "Hey, are you okay?" he asked her, another rotation tossing them forward against the bar, then forcing them back against the carriage seat. Madison clenched her eyes shut tightly. She was busy forming the lines-- Maddy drawing circles around the soft contours of the moon in her mind, her fingers tightening around Rolen's, but Madison not looking up to where he had turned to face her.

. . . her breath warm into the knees, the lines formed, encircling the open ashtray, now twisting down and around the cord of the radio, the mouthpiece . . .

After what seemed to her hours, the turning of the wheel slowed, and the unloading began. Madison opened her eyes, but the swinging heads and legs stretching out overhead from the other carriages became much too much for her to take in. On the way down, Madison managed to stare down at her own feet dangling above the tiny dotted colors beneath them-- the dots still distant and unfocused, each color not really representing another person blurred into the twist of bright lights and candied apples.

. . . the pedals, the keys still in the ignition, the lines . . . tighter, the eyes . . . open, refocus . . . the skin of the knees, the shadow along the knee-cap . . . lower, a stubble of hair, rising defiantly . . .

They had walked some way from the wheel before Madison realized she had lost the small padded moon somewhere. "It must have fallen sometime during the ride," she explained to him, the lights of the ride spinning in the distance as they hurried back through the slow moving crowd. She walked behind him at first, Rolan cutting and weaving skillfully through the rush of bodies until they reached an opening in the crowd. She quickened her pace to walk fully beside him as they passed by the pretzel stand, the lights on the wheel looming larger. When the lights, at last, rotated slowly above them, Rolan walked straight into an older couple moving slowly ahead of them, the woman pushing her wheel-chaired husband through the maze of shorts and t-shirts—the man

unsettled, shifted in the chair and Madison found herself suddenly leading Rolen, turned about in the swell of aftershave and purses-- pulling his hand through the lines and over to where they could see the grass roped off beneath the Ferris wheel.

. . . lower, the smell of gas, strange she hadn't noticed before . . . stings inside the nose, thick and sticky . . . cold along the floor mat . . . a puddle, a wet damp beneath the carpet . . . she sinks, falling into it . . . her toes and then the ankles . . .

The steady chug of a large diesel generator overwhelmed the sound of the crowd and even the high pitched turning of the wheel. Madison and Rolen worked their way toward the back of the wheel, away from the mass of carnival goers and laughing children. The two moved slowly along the perimeter rope-- Rolen with eyes squinting out into the dark and Madison's hand flattened in a roof over her forehead in order to shield her view from the glare of spinning lights. When Madison finally spotted the moon-- its yellow silhouette appearing florescent under the shadows passing overhead-- she tugged on Rolen's sleeve and pointed out to him where the moon slanted up in a curve, grinning against the diamond-plated base of the generator.

. . . up, from the floor mat, arms slide up . . . back against the seat . . . up, the handcuffs catch, dragging, dig far into the wrist. . . shouldn't . . . mustn't . . . higher, push higher . . . can't, don't . . . keep pushing . . . yes, that's it . . . now, up . . . toes push against the glove box . . . slide back on to the seat . . .

Madison watched his arms and legs-- his sloping shouldered back shifting almost like a suit of armor beneath the flash of light and shadow as he hurried across the grass toward the moon. It was from the corner of her eye that Madison first spotted the hatted men, their belts and radios hurrying along the perimeter. Rolen closed quickly on the moon, but the uniformed trousers lifting up, stretching out over the ropes, and Madison found herself scrambling to the other side of the perimeter, a flurry of motions and gestures, rushing between the clubbed men with their radios to the place where Rolen stretched out a hand toward the moon.

. . . knees tucked, toes up, Maddy alone, upon the seat . . . still, the smell of gas and she alone . . . *rolen?* . . . she rocks into her knees . . . the firemen beyond the red nose, but no . . . not Rolen, not . . . *no, not rolen* . . . Rolen too far now, much too . . .

As they were escorted out off the carnival grounds, the security guards on either side of the pair, Madison clung to the moon in her arms-- the stars in the sky growing clearer as the spinning lights and noise faded in the distance behind them. At the edge of the parking area, the guard on Madison's side released her, pushing her roughly forward and speaking into his radio while Rolen struggled free from the other guard-- pushing his way loose and straightening out his shirt sleeves.

Rolen tucked the padded star under one arm-- working his other around her as they walked through the maze of cars and plastic cones toward his truck. Madison moved away from his hold, her own arms more tightly around the moon.

“Once upon a time . . .” he began, tentatively, his voice still shaken, but somewhat more confidently as they passed by another row of parked cars.

“There was a certain couple on their way from a carnival,” he continued.

“No, not a carnival,” stated Madison, nervously. “The fair?”

Rolen stopped for a moment, turning towards her and whispering in her ear.

“It’s okay,” he said softly. “I’m right here.”

“How’s this—he said, pausing, and then, after some careful thought. “A very handsome couple found themselves together, walking under the moonlight on their way from the fair . . .”

Madison backed away from him briefly. She surprised herself by smacking him playfully with the moon.

“Handsome.” she said, somewhat louder now. “What kind of word is that to describe them?”

Madison felt herself nearly relax, if only slightly, without the pills. For one brief moment, she almost forgot about the bright lights of the carnival, the rough flash of security guards and the rows of parked cars-- practically didn’t even notice her own breathing at all.

Somewhere Between . . .

“It’s like waking up from a bad dream . . .” Rolen thought to himself and then repeated aloud, yawning, as if practicing-- rehearsing the entire scene on his way back toward the apartment complex-- the words solid and echoing throughout the truck cab before dissolved back into the skin. “How do you feel?” Maddy would then ask. “Sleepy,” Rolen answered quickly at first, and progressively slowing into a slur-- “sooo leeeope . . .”

She would then lead him up the stairs-- moving like she never had, even before the accident-- to where all his things were, every item arranged neatly in it’s rightful place: all categorized within fine and tidy lines and rows, each gathered and divided into sensible containers and packages . . . looking behind her, all full-lipped and smiles: her eyes taking him inside, inviting and leading him up, step after step in elongated sway, her waist and knees swivel with her fingers-- push-pull until up, her mouth warm and twisting, wetting with every step, her fingers curled as if drawing him in: and she watching closely, so close until finally . . . he would offer to put back on the socks-- tugging up the boxers and jeans, securing with a belt before over and down with the shirt, but no, she would nod, no, yes and then take him by the hand, yes, she would whisper and guide his fingers to lift up the sweater-- his hands sliding up the delicate bump of each and every rib before taking in the moist silk of breast, sloping to a gentle pinch between his teeth as the sweater falls behind her, dropping slowly, a cucumber smear to the floor and softly down her elegant arms thin and wristed gold bracelet until her waist

once again in his hands, his fingers around her bare and trembles, rises to meet the flesh of her eyes . . .

But he couldn't shake the sight from the interstate, that sinking feeling at a single column of smoke twisting up into the broken dawn, the smoke spiraling in a thin dark just to the right of the highway before unraveling at the very top into a dense, unsightly mass-- hanging darker still against the weight of fog and drizzle-- the smoke rising uncomfortably close to where Maddy waited in the apartment complex, the edges looking as if they might just drip back down to the surface.

DR. LABIA: No, it's good to speak with you again. [his voice crackles over the phone line] I was just wondering what it is that brings you back-- [pauses, as he switches from one ear to the other] I hope you didn't go and get yourself in too serious a fix.

ROLEN: It's just that lately, I've been getting these panic attacks-- like a sudden realization that there's nowhere to hide, no place to duck into, nothing around but sky and air-- like something could happen and there's nothing I could do . . .

DR. LABIA: Tell me, when did these attacks start going on?

ROLEN: I don't know, just in the last few weeks-- maybe it's the sky out here or something, maybe it has something to do with Maddy, I, I never was like this before . . .

DR. LABIA: Can you describe it? [the sound of a dip can opened]

ROLEN: It all sort of blends together, Doc. I don't really know where to start.

DR. LABIA: [his voice slurred as he begins to chew] Why not try to start by telling me

how these things begin . . .

ROLEN: Well, it's like all of a sudden, I just start worrying or something really freaks me out—it's like the air gets sucked out or something and my ears stop to pop-- you know, like they do on a plane, only this feels like it's right before an avalanche and you know its all just gonna come down and there ain't no way to stop it-- and then the stomach sinks and the pulse starts racing-- your heart pounding like its coming right out until it hurts, really sharp with every single beat and it pounding in your head until you can't breathe, can't even catch your breath . . .

DR. LABIA: Hmm . . . [chewing slowly, the press of tobacco juices and saliva] Well there Rolen, do you think you never experienced this sort of thing in the past, or just never really noticed before?

ROLEN: Maybe about myself, but now there's all the stuff about Maddy too. It all sort of piles on and starts to, like, gather together or something and . . .

. . . closer, the sway of search lights pulsing up above the rooftops. After the turn off the interstate, the flash of emergency lights diffused like fingers into the dusk of morning-- the sun, yet a dull globe against the night sky line, the lights stretching up toward the pale moon, revolving, snapping across the power lines and still, the smoke rising through it all until Rolen's eyes blurred, delayed in the adjustment >>DETOUR>> through narrowed eye, the mist and spray lifted to a glow stick, a lighted hollow welcoming from out of the dark-- upon widening . . . the florescent vest of fire police: shocking, a realization, an epiphany . . . or worse, to be led that way-- by callous and awkward hands, diverted through his own streets further away from where Madison,

perhaps, still waited. Beyond the vest, red was joined by blue, then yellow, orange and the shrill whistle of static and radio voices swell within a blend of pixels and shadow, colliding digits, the chatter of ones and zeros, matter until the uncertain bends and twist, random, broken, shattered into a sentence where even Maddy could be explained in a row of symbols no more beautiful than a string . . .

A local news brief opens upon the scene of an overnight fire. The reporter, an attractive woman in a seasonal turtleneck, light sports coat and boots, stands before her cameraman. She straightens the pleats of her skirt before standing erect and staring into the camera lens, awaiting the signal they are on the air, live. Three fingers are raised in the air, then two until the action resumes . . .

REPORTER: This is Lindsay Scott, live this morning from 402, West 32nd Street, the scene of a three alarm blaze. The fire started sometime earlier this morning in the apartment building directly behind us, called in by neighbors Sam and Mildred Boujaoude. [turns toward the couple beside her] Can you tell us what happened from your own eyewitness vantage point?

NEIGHBOR 1: [an elderly woman, greying, standing next to her husband] I usually don't get up so early, but with the storm last night and all, I just never could stay asleep. I figured I might as well get out of bed, you know, and had just finished making a pot of coffee when I happened to glance out the front window, and noticed the flames over there from across the street.

NEIGHBOR 2: [nodding] It darn near lit up the entire street!

NEIGHBOR 1: I went back upstairs and woke up Sam.

[the reporter works the microphone between the two, her hand the only visible part of her in the camera's eye]

NEIGHBOR 2: [nodding] You could see the glow even through Mildred's curtains.

NEIGHBOR 1: [more animated, like a young girl awaiting her turn to take in the communion wafer] I said to Sam, "Sam," I said, "We had better call it in, before it spreads over to this side of the street!"

NEIGHBOR 2: [still nodding] So that's what we did. I called it in and Mildred went down to pour out the coffee.

REPORTER: [the camera follows as she smoothly draws the microphone back to herself]

Fire crews arrived at the scene within approximately seven minutes of the call, and say they finally have the fire under control. As you can see, there are still flames behind us, but the Chief says it should not spread any farther. [turning to her right side, where opposite the couple, a rotund man with a receding hair-line awaits] What's going on now Chief? Can you give us an update?

CHIEF: Well, Lindsay, we are now actively keeping the adjoining rooftops wet to prevent any spreading until we have the fire completely out.

REPORTER: Any sign that anyone was trapped in there?

CHIEF: We don't think so, at least not at this time. [His face wrinkles to the one side, leans into the microphone] We rescued the woman and there seems to be the possibility of a pet destroyed, but no initial indication of anyone else or any other casualty.

REPORTER: [turning back to the camera] Although authorities have yet to verify the

exact cause of the fire, they took the woman, apparently not an occupant, but a guest of the apartment dwelling, into custody shortly after rescuing her.

REPORTER: [a pause before a sincere and closing smile] That's the latest from here.

For Eyewitness News, KUCW Channel 5, this is Lindsay Scott. We'll keep you posted with the latest updates.

When the trooper appeared outside the door window, Maddy felt oddly calm-- her breathing slower for a moment before the knuckles tapped against the glass, distorting the pattern of raindrops which had formed, the flesh of the knuckles whitened, wet and smeared, the water circles broken and trailing down the glass. She inhaled deeply as the trooper opened up the door, in and out, repeating to the count of four as he led her away from the fire police. They traveled between the red and yellow engines, stepping over hoses and florescent hoses, past where some of Rolan's neighbors had lined themselves up in lawn chairs, all except a younger woman standing off to the side blowing the steam from her coffee and her husband, pointing despite his dark-circled eyes, his arm and finger stretching from a terry-cloth robe barely tied around the bulge of his stomach. The handcuffs angled into the skin as she walked-- her arms drawn behind her, the stainless against her wrists chained, her thumb and fingers interlocked to help ease the bouncing.

From the corner of her eye she kept searching for him. Rolan behind the curly mane of a black Frisian stallion emerging forcefully from the fog-- the powerful hoofs echoing against the pavement, bursts of steam from the nostrils flare and Rolan above in armor and shining lance. Madison turned-- Maddy spinning around and searching around the trooper's shoulders to where she heard the watery gallop, only to face again the blur

of neighbors and fire trucks, the ratcheting chin of the woman interviewed mocking even from a distance. Perhaps she was mistaken, she thought, perhaps it was a white Arabian with a flowing mane, Rolen coming back to her on an even more elegant mount-- his own features more chiseled from behind the horse's small pretty face. But despite her struggles, the trooper had forced her back full circle where instead of Rolen, an overweight fireman struggling with a hose had stopped to watch as the trooper pushed her on-- the force of the trooper tripping her forward, almost directly into the dry eyes of the fireman until Maddy once again began to form the lines-- the edges roughed and chalky, irregular in a way unsettling to her and the eyes of the fireman still getting through, the red thread of vein until with invisible fingers she focused on reshaping the edges smooth, and after, pushing and pulling the spiral in place-- the edges without even bumps and the coil unwinding in perfect tension, a precisely calculated arc and sway . . .

MADISON: I think he's starting to rub off on me in a bad way. [repositioning herself uncomfortably on the couch] I mean, lately I've begun to get real crazy about things being in their place and stuff. The other day I even caught myself folding my dirty clothes before putting them in the hamper. [draws a pillow to her lap, kneads the stuffing, trying to work out the lumps] That's just sick.

DR. LABIA: That certainly does sound disturbing, but I wonder whether it might not be all that terrible. People in close relationships often do tend to take in, or mimic one another's traits and habits. [leans over to spit in cup]

MADISON: Wait, it gets worse. I think I'm starting to get claustrophobic or something.

I get edgy and nervous when I'm in a closed room. [discards the pillow and begins fidgeting, her thumbs and fingers] I used to be able to curl up inside myself when I got scared, in my own private shelter, sort of, locked away from everyone else. Sometimes it's like I'm not even safe there anymore.

DR. LABIA: Hmm . . . [wiping his chin, then with fingers to the tip of his goatee] It is important for everyone to have their own inner sanctuary, so to speak-- one's own personal safe house within one's own personal space. I'm curious, though, how so you think this all fits in with Rolen? [picks up the pen from his clipboard, lowers it over the paper as if to write] Can you try to tell me more about how your relationship with him has brought about these changes?

MADISON: It feels like our personalities are blurring together or something. I don't know where he ends and I begin anymore. [lets out a deeply drawn inhale] I'm worried I'm losing myself-- like my own identity is disappearing into some kind of mix with him.

DR. LABIA: While I agree that it is absolutely imperative to retain one's own identity in any relationship, I wonder whether it is just natural in a healthy relationship for the partners to find themselves complimenting one another even to the point of shared traits and habits. [pauses again before continuing] It seems to be part of growing more closely attuned with the person you love.

MADISON: That's fine and good, Doc, but what am I going to do when something major happens? [her voice rising sharply] When he's around I seem fine, but what happens when he's not there anymore? What happens when he let's me down?

Sooner or later it's the same story and there I'll be, completely alone. I learned real early not to count on anybody, and . . .

DR. LABIA: I know what you've been through in the past and I certainly wouldn't blame you for feeling the way you do, but there are people out there who you can rely on. [calmly lowers the pen to the clipboard] In any healthy relationship, sooner or later the issues of trust and the balance of dependency needs to be mutually resolved for the relationship to continue. [placing the clipboard to his lap] Trusting and relying on one another are two big hurdles in many relationships, though. I sense that with Rolan, at least, you are still hesitant to do really either. Can you try to describe for me how you feel about all of this? [lifts the clipboard up once again] Let's begin with what you feel is wrong with relying on another person-- particularly in this case, Rolan.

MADISON: [almost shouting again] What's wrong with it! I can't calm myself down anymore. The lines, not even the breathing helps for long anymore. [her voice lowers, the tone a profound saddened] The whole thing has left me way too vulnerable and defenseless.

. . . step, breathe, step, breathe . . . the pavement cold on her feet-- almost numbing . . . the legs hurting, the ankle and knee . . . his arms guiding her to the left, the gravel sharp beneath and now the fingers curling around and the pushing . . . wait, no . . . STOP! Her arms behind her, she jerks to the right, shoulders, knees and struggles to get away . . . Stop! Kicking, she screams . . . nothing . . . her lips move and even the tongue .

. . Silent, wet, cold and then the arms again-- the fingers, forcing down the top of her head . . . no, please, stop . . .

“It’s okay miss . . . but you’re gonna need to duck down and step into the vehicle, miss . . . Miss? Don’t, miss . . . You’re going one way or the other-- miss, don’t make me force you . . .”

. . . the knees bend, collapse, and down . . . elbows and arms prodding form behind, against a vinyl seat, the smell of this one different-- not of smoke but of plastic, like vaseline but colder . . . impersonal and the door slammed shut, locked, sealing her in . . . please don’t . . . please, no . . . stop . . .

DR. LABIA: So tell me Maddy, try to explain what you might do the next time you find yourself in a similar situation? Would you react differently?

. . . and Maddy found herself surrounded, a million thoughts swirling somewhere inside and she unsure what voice to listen to. Had she already heard the words to follow, formed within the frontal lobes of her mind or something deeper, hidden yet but destined to surface, knocked loose or broken free, emerging into the blur of words like fragments of dreams escaped from the darkest recesses of the mind, from somewhere the psychologists, even the scientists had not been able yet to identify and slowing, could she slow it all down somehow to judge the individual letters, the ones with serifs and others without and what even to do with any or where to begin . . .

maddy-- “tell me a story rolen . . .”

rolen-- “. . . but where should we start? Can we ever really?”

Rolen-- “I mean, is it even possible? I think we might be too far away.”

Madison-- “yes . . . no-- I just don’t know anymore . . .”

. . . and still, she wondered whether it was ever really that simple-- would all the jagged edges come falling back together if only the words would form again? *Once*, she began, the sounds swelling in the full of her lips before ending in silence-- she and Rolen hadn’t told the stories in such a long time.

Madison sat, timing her breathing with her back straight despite the seat. A woman jogged past, straining it seemed, to discern the features of Madison strapped into the front seat of the cruiser. Beyond Maddy’s own strangely distorted reflection inside the windshield, the woman outside running in a wind-proof suit, her hair flowing with the wind, pushed out breath from behind a modified stroller, inside of which bobbed the eyes and flattened nose of a baby girl. Behind the woman, faint curls of black smoke still billowed up into the air. Maddy thought again of Rolen-- remembered how impossible it seemed that he would one day be a good father and as for that, she unsure about what a good father might really look like, act like, or if any such man really existed at all. But then again, she thought, none of that even mattered anymore.

Her breathing slowed as Madison followed the smoke, watched it disappear into spirals-- dissolving as it traveled higher, the curls and twists elongated, spreading out and further away with every moment, a fading sketch of distant charcoal in the morning sky.

The sun would soon be fully out, and Maddy in a different place. *Closure*, she thought, that's what Hank would call it-- no chance of turning back.

¹closure \ˈklo-zher\ *n* [ME, fr. MF, fr. L *clausura*, fr. *clausus*, pp. of *claudere* to close - more at CLOSE] **1** *archaic* : means of enclosing : ENCLOSURE **2** : an act of closing : the condition of being closed **3** : something that closes once an for all

Rolen clenched his fist and extended his fingers, the wires and pulleys straining, the skin beneath his casted arm purpling-- with shouts and the calculated swing of his arm into gestures outside the window, Rolan had managed easily by the first two road blocks, but closer to the apartment, to where a heavy plume of smoke still spiraled in the air, the third orange vested fire-policeman stood next to the unmistakably tall silhouette of a hatted trooper. As Rolan slowed the truck and pulled to the side, he tried to calm himself and work through it all in his mind but the trooper, and not the fire police was soon framed outside the driver's door and Rolan leaning heavy into the arm rest, seatbelt and shadowed against the door with nowhere to hide. "Sorry sir, only residents from beyond this point. We can't let you any further unless some valid form of id . . . your driver's license . . . or anything with a picture, you know . . . the words of the trooper rushing toward him, a few knocked to his lap, to where he tried to desperately conceal himself with his arms and behind the cast-- the rest tumbling by in oblong orbits past the ears and out the sliding rear window.

. . . and in his mind, Rolen is already picking up speed, running past the hem of his grandmother's long pleated dress, the weight falling now just on the tips of his toes and picking up speed . . .

. . . slamming the trooper down with the force of the door and escaping down the street and around the bend, almost to where he can park in his slot and then, finally, the distant silhouette of Maddy in the bedroom window, the curtains opening until accelerating through the road block, he circles down his own street and into the swell of artificial light, the plastic coated bodies swarming back and forth over a patchwork of hoses and power lines, the jets of spray into a matrix of water above the fire trucks lit up and flashing, a ladder extending from the yellow one and the smoke billowing from a balcony-- his balcony, and Rolen jerks the wheel to the side, up over the curb, the sidewalk and jumps from the truck, his feet chopping through the grass until down against the pavement, faster, the scene jolting and already the siren behind him-- his breathing faster, drawing it in and pussshing it out . . .

DR. LABIA: [his fingers tugging, stretching through the hair of his goatee] So tell me Rolen, I'm curious about these delusions . . . [pausing to clear his throat] . . . I mean dreams. When you're running, do you most often find yourself running to, or running from . . .

. . . and the closer he becomes nearing, nearer, when suddenly an arm . . .

“Whoa, there partner!” The echo after the slam. Down against pavement and finding it harder to breathe. A dull steady ringringing as the boot on the head and again, a knee from above, distorted and shifting as arms out and behind the metal and wrist ringringing clicking down around even the cast and the stinging-- the distinct sharp back up the arm through the neck before reaching the brain. The thumps spread across his temple, broken nets, the edges frayed and curling, pulled back and thrown out again . . . dissolved and resurface . . . and Rolen lifted from the pavement, forced to stand on his own two feet.

ANCHOR: Pardon the interruption, but I’ve just been told there has been some breaking developments on the local we brought you live earlier this morning. As soon as we can, we will shift you to reporter Lindsay Scott, who is live on location. [turns toward the projected screen behind him] Lindsay . . . Can you hear me Lindsay?

REPORTER: [covering the tiny speaker in her ear with a cupped palm, the other hand holding the styrofoam ball of microphone to her waiting lips] It’s a little noisy here, but yes, Jon, I can.

ANCHOR: Lindsay, we understand that some additional and somewhat odd events have taken place there. [adjusting his tone from serious to concerned] Can you tell us what it is that has transpired since your last report?

REPORTER: Well, Jon, I’m here at the scene of that early morning blaze on West 32nd Street, where one might truly say that recently things have taken a rather strange turn of events . . .

[There is a disruption in the sound transmission. Static. The reporter's mouth opening and closing energetically, silently.]

REPORTER: [continuing, presumably unaware of the technical difficulty] Apparently, the unnamed man whose name is on the lease agreement to the fire-swept apartment behind me has been taken into custody with charges of resisting arrest and indecent exposure pending. This lessee, and current suspect, that is, arrived on the scene in this pickup truck, a 1987 S10, and reportedly was apprehended and restrained after trying to re-enter the dwelling. [suddenly, sound is restored, and the audio picks up the reporter's dialogue as clear as at first] . . . the twist of the story: he apparently entered into the vicinity completely in the nude.

[Cut to a clip of the arrest attempt, the camera unsteady and only able to capture a distorted picture of the man naked, running frantically, struggling between the blurred sharp images of red and yellow engines . . . DISSOLVE to the image of a balding middle aged man with round glasses and a thick mustache.]

NEIGHBOR 3: No, I didn't expect this kind of thing: he seemed nice enough, he was polite, kept to himself, that sort of thing-- [a pause and grimace] no, I wouldn't have expected it.

[A poorly executed cut to a couple in their early thirties-- the woman constantly attempting to fix her hair and the male in a baseball cap, rocking back and forth, in and out of the camera's view frame, nodding in profuse agreement.]

FEMALE NEIGHBOR 7: All I remember is that around the fire truck he comes, like out

of nowhere. “Would you look at that?” I said to my George. [Camera focuses on nodding husband beside neighbor 7] Well, we were both a little shocked that something like this could happen here.

THE HUSBAND (NEIGHBOR 8): [continues to nod, and then switching to swiveling his head in a southward arc, indicating the negative] Then again, I said, “Only in this neighborhood!”

[As the interview with the couple ends, the camera dissolves upon the image of the interviewer and couple sharing a light hearted chuckle.]

REPORTER: [tilting her head in a half serious smile] As you can imagine, the incident created quite an impression upon the neighbors and firefighters upon the scene here.

NEIGHBOR 5: [an elderly gentleman next to a silent wife] Well, it wasn't exactly what you would think it might be like-- he ain't no Johnny Atlas or anything. We just figured he must have been sleeping-- must have been woke up and in too much a hurry to stop and try to put on any clothes. The poor guy we figured. What, with all he's been through . . .

CUT TO INTERVIEW 12 (FIREFIGHTERS-- REEL 2c): two fire personnel (one male, one female) standing behind the chrome back panel of a pumper engine, each with a tall aluminum container of coffee.

FIREFIGHTER 1: Well, things happened so fast-- I was breaking down the hoses, rolling

them up and packing them away. [Pauses to take a gulp of coffee, steaming-- draws a plastic yellow sleeve across his mouth before continuing] The whole thing was kind of fuzzy, but I remember catching a glimpse of a flesh colored smear off to my right, near the pumper, but before I got a good view, the police already had him on the ground.

FIREFIGHTER 3: [adjusts her safety helmet back on her head, the shield raised in an upright position above the helmet, the helmet tilted slightly to the right] He did give them a good struggle, a struggle ensued alright-- [a scratchy inhale through the nose, her mouth turned downward before continuing] but they had him cuffed and blanketed soon enough . . .

FADE TO FOOTAGE FILE #3: the police pushing the camera crew back, the camera unsteadily following the action through the bodies and heads, arms and legs of the spectators as the trooper escorts the man from the scene-- zoom to a blurry shot of a blanketed leg, the man disappearing from view until re-emerging on the other side of the pumper and into the back of a patrol cruiser.

CUT TO REPORTER (LIVE): Lindsay pushing hair from her eyes, the fingers combing from temple to cheek to ear-- she gazes down toward her two-hundred dollar boots, at the water rushing against and the wake behind like half an eye (off camera), before nodding herself, and suddenly straightening and speaking again.

REPORTER: Although the police are hesitant to comment upon the man's identity,

reliable sources have indeed confirmed that he is the resident of the fire ravaged dwelling here at 402, West Thirty Second Street. [a warm smile] No further news has been released about the woman involved at this time, but we'll get back to you with an update the moment we learn of any further developments.

ANCHOR: [caught off-guard, coughs and straightens behind news desk, adjusts eyes to camera] Good work out there Lindsay. Keep us informed.

REPORTER: I will, Jon. [adjusting her earpiece after an uncomfortable pause, the smile resurfaces after a momentary frown] That's it from here, but before we leave, our producers would apologize if the graphic footage you have just witnessed from our own News Channel 5 camera caused any discomfort. Live, for News Channel 5, this is Lindsay Scott.

ANCHOR: Thanks Lindsay. [turning to the camera and viewing audience anticipating the dissolve]

FULL CUT TO ANCHOR DESK: split screen disappears to studio view of anchor placing two sheets of hastily typed script down on the desk's smooth and contoured surface.

ANCHOR: We'll keep you posted with "Live with Channel 5" updates, but for now, back to your regularly scheduled programming. [Smiles and nods before looking down]

EXIT MUSIC: Eyewitness News theme-- an upbeat rhythm with orchestral accompaniment, a cross between a typewriter, a 1970's action drama sound filler, and

the static of a microphone. The decibels rising, the audio fader levers skillfully slid up the control panel by practiced hands.

Step. Water cold through puddle as ankles dragged, pushed forward. Up, over fire hoses and past the spinning lights, dimmer with the first glimmers of sun and even the florescent night stripes fading. Push. From behind and jerked forward despite protests and the unanswered . . .

QUESTIONS: What about the woman in the apartment? Madison. Did you find her? How is she and where? *maddy* . . . No, no idea how all of it got started or why. Did you? Could you? Can anyone please tell me?

ANSWER: You have the right to remain . . .

Eyes forward and then the hum before . . . Silence. Pulse in eardrum and the thumpthuthp somewhere under the skin, deeper the valves overworked, pump and release-- clenched and sting, the throbs in unsteady spurts . . . thumththump . . . against the temple. Bleed. A hot cold until neARER the cruiser, he sees her.

ROLEN: Why can't it always be like when we first met? I mean, there has to be something better, something to hope for-- what's wrong with expecting things to go more smoothly over time? All I'm asking for is . . . [stops, looks over toward the window]

MADDY: What?

ROLEN: Nothing.

DR. LABIA: Hmmm . . . Let's step back there partner. Do you think it should, Rolen?

What do you mean when you say “get better?” Are you holding Maddy to some ideal that she can never be? That no one can be?

ROLEN: No . . . nevermind.

DR. LABIA: Do you think it’s healthy to put that kind of pressure on yourselves? On each other? What say you . . . Maddy? Rolen? Do you think it’s very realistic to hold one another to standards neither one of you can possibly meet?

MADISON: Well, there has to be some kind of standard.

DR. LABIA: What do you mean? Can you spell it out a little?

MADISON: I’m just worried that we’ll end up just like my parents and our children just like us. I mean, how do I know that underneath Rolen’s not just like my father?
[Turns toward Rolen, but her eyes join his in staring out toward the window] You can say all you want, but what guarantee can you give me? You can’t, can you?

the sound of him, of rolen-- a distant, a dull murmur. . . . but outside the door glass, the trooper behind a figure in a blanket. Closer. The hair the same, only windblown and yet matted down in places, but no, no, it couldn’t be-- better not to hope, to dream. Sleep. She closes her eyes, head against the glass, relax, tries to . . . until again, the voice-- his voice. CLOSER. Her name. He is calling her name, but no, she shouldn’t. Unhealthy, that kind of dream. She clenches her eyes tight, tries to block out the sound of the door. Breathe in. *Madison* . . . Rolen is calling to her, outside the castle walls he looks up and calls out her name . . . *maddy* . . . but no, she musn’t. Breathe out, yes, just a delusion, no, just some sick twisted dream

. . .the trooper coming back into view from where he had circled behind the cruiser, and inside, Maddy still ignoring all Rolen's questions.

"Maddy?" he asked again.

There was no response-- the silence broken only by the light swing of oiled hinges and a loud rush of air as the trooper pulled open the door.

"As far as I can see," said the trooper purposely as he slid into the front seat, slamming the door and pulling the seatbelt out over his chest, adjusting it until it snapped, locked into place, "you two are in this thing together-- the both of you criminals: the little missy here, an arsonist, and you a freak."

Rolen began to see the enormity of it then-- the putrid pale, a chapped and flaking, the thick dark hair jutting up from his skin until even he could no longer stand the sight. Outside the window, waited the dry faces of his neighbors, pointing and prodding, nodding all in unison as the cruiser nudged forward and slowly rolled away. A news van was there, the cameras and a reporter-- a paramedic being interviewed at the back of the ambulance. Beyond the ambulance and fire trucks the building was smoldering, the fire out, but the heat still rising the air, the steam a distorted mirage and a solitary firemen left hosing it all down. The others went about the business of rolling up the hoses, gathering the equipment, and stretching out endless lines of the yellow tape. They crossed back and forth and Rolen watched them, wondered whether the recliner had made it, his CDs, the computer or his tv. Coppertone. His entire life melted down or incinerated into unrecognizable stumps and blackened towers-- irretrievable mounds of debris.

As the cruiser passed his truck, abandoned, twisted and crooked where he had left it up on a curb, Rolen began to notice the cold pressing in from his forehead. He averted his eyes from the scene of a rabbit flattened on the road-- a single long ear, fleshed, fragile and bent, a delicate contortion flapping in the breeze at approximately sixty-two degrees from the pavement.

“once upon a time . . .” Maddy repeated, chanting as if silently, her voice barely audible over the police radio.

“What?” Rolen’s snapped, the tone exhausted and sarcastic. “What the hell are you saying?”

“Roger, this is unit thuur-tee four,” spoke the trooper into the handset. “over . . .”

“What?” Rolen asked, the tone of his voice shifting genuine, serious. “What was that you said?” his lips against the cage, much more calmly-- and then to the trooper: “Can’t you see she’s trying to say something?”

“. . . upon a . . .”

“ahhh unit thirty-four, we are still running those checks on said male and female suspects-- uhhmmm . . . be advised, this may take a while . . .”

Rolen slammed back into the seat, the handcuff working its way through the soggy cast-- the cast collapsing, disintegrating, the arm and wrist twisting-- the handcuffs sawing through the cast and slicing into the dry surfaced skin, the hollow shoot of pain again, this time all the way to the teeth until Rolen struggled forward but already, the arm and wrist shortened and stretched inside, the bones pushing against the skin, scraping past each other and the cruiser seeming to hit every dip and crater.

“Could you please turn that thing down?” Rolen was shouting again, even his words leaned forward, pushed through the cage and over the radio, but the trooper not listening-- the hat brim slightly forward and then tilting to the left-- the trooper stretching the muscles of his neck. “Can’t you see she has something to say?”

“MADISON” he pleaded with her. “Maddy, say something-- anything. I just want to talk. Can’t you at least just turn around and look at me?”

A few miles after, Rolen had reluctantly eased himself back from the cage and Maddy found her fingers traveling down the seatbelt’s nylon strap. Down toward the aluminum box, the stainless plated button and with a deep inhale, a push of her thumb-- the clasp released and Madison turned in the seat to where she might see him.

“Careful there, little miss . . .” warned the trooper. “Better turn around and get back in your seat.”

Maddy placed her fingers through the cage. Her eyes traced a path off the chrome reflection from the trooper’s glasses, passing through the blur of slowing alfalfa fields, to where Rolen sat handcuffed behind her-- the perfectly round brake lights, standard issue red, mounted on either side of the rear deck, snapping suddenly to life. The sky was beginning to clear through the rear window: the clouds thin and the sun breaking through-- above his head, the sky colored a watery hue, pale, but closer to the horizon, the brush strokes much deeper, purple . . . an orangey-yellowed-white lifted up into a lighter blue.

VITA

Rodney Jay Zink

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: THEIR FACES OF CHILDREN: A NOVEL

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Ephrata, Pennsylvania in 1968, the son of J. Melvin Zink and Mary M. Witman.

Education: Graduated from Twin Valley High School, Elverson, Pennsylvania in May 1986; received Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature from The Pennsylvania State University, Behrend Campus, Erie, Pennsylvania in May 1994; received Master of Arts degree in English from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July 1998. Completed the Requirements for Doctor of Philosophy degree in English at Oklahoma State University in July 2006.

Experience: In industry, worked full time for R.V. Industries, in metal fabrication, immediately after high school until entering college, 1996-1990; continued to work at R.V. part time and summers through undergraduate and graduate school; currently employed full time at R.V. in central processing department writing instructions for the fabricators. In academia, employed by Oklahoma State University, Department of English as a graduate teaching assistant and as a teaching associate, 1995-1998 and 1998-2002 respectively; employed by Harrisburg Community College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as an adjunct professor, 2002-2004.

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Name: Rodney Jay Zink

Date of Degree: July, 2006

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: THEIR FACES OF CHILDREN: A NOVEL

Pages in Study: 307

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: English

Scope and Method of Study: Their Faces of Children is a post-modern portrayal of a couple plagued by problems rooted in the traumas they both experienced as children. Readers are given a kaleidoscopic vantage into the fractured adult realities of the central characters, Maddy and Rolen, through a variety of genres and several points of view. Whether riding alongside Rolen as he drives into town naked, experiencing the cold fingers which violate Maddy's childhood, waiting with her for Rolen while she strikes a match to burn unfinished letters or visiting his father's funeral from Rolen's boyhood point of view, readers should expect a bumpy, disjointed journey through jagged-edged splinters of the characters' lives. Might therapy help? "Could be," their psychologist, Dr. Labia, interjects before spitting tobacco into a cup. "Yee-hah!" But, then again, from the couch there is always the matter about whether to open or close the window . . .

The novel is prefaced by a brief critical introduction detailing the influence of Melville's Moby Dick, Joyce's Ulysses, and Barth's Lost in the Funhouse upon the various techniques and construction utilized within it.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Elizabeth Grubgeld
