

PLAINVIEW: STORIES AND A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

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Working Among Ideas: A Critical Introduction

The seventh grade was awful. I was one of the boys caught in the turbulent middle of the social ladder at my small school. I was like most non-outstanding youths, praying the cool kids wouldn't pick on me. I wasn't trying to climb the popularity ladder; I was just trying to hang on, but hanging on meant you had to play the offense. If you kept the group teasing some other poor kid, then you knew for sure they would not be finding something wrong with you. I would publicly humiliate anyone, best friends or even second best friends, and I was good at it because all my friends pretty much hated me. And they burned me, too. The only function school seemed to have at this time in my life was to make me feel inadequate.

I didn't start to write because I needed to express my seventh grade anguish; rather, I liked the room where my father kept the computer. During this period of my life, I needed a place to hide. I couldn't trust anybody. The computer room was my father's office and became my hideout. In every possible space in that quiet little room were books. He had so many books I couldn't see any of the wall. He had an ornate statue of the Buddha, and the room smelled like incense, which I found very mysterious. When I sat at the only desk in the room, the air vent breathed out just beneath my feet, which felt great during the winter. The only thing I could really do in the room was read or play on the computer, but reading was difficult as the chair was too uncomfortable to

stretch out in, and the computer games had terrible graphics. I didn't write because I had a strong desire to write; I started to write because I couldn't find anything better to do in my hiding spot. I titled my first real story the "Studs of Space."

The protagonist was me--only better. I gave him my name but also included a nickname I thought adequately distinguished him from the other characters:

Ryan *the Stud*. Ryan looked like I did, only more manly, spoke as I did, except more eloquently, and he was the strongest, most powerful person in the known universe. In this story, I pitted Ryan *the Stud* against cruel and horrific monsters who threatened the lives of every person on the planet. I based my monsters on all the kids I did not like at school. The "Studs of Space" had no real defined plot, as I had no plot restrictions. If a person upset me in school that day, he was going to be my enemy that night. My mood ultimately determined the plot. And I was always the hero.

When I think of the "Studs of Space" now, nearly fifteen years later, I am amazed by how healing that experience was for me. I gave myself the positive attention I craved from my peers. I wanted to be admired. I wanted to be somebody important. The "Studs of Space" allowed a space where I was the hero. I created my own male rites of passage. Being thirteen, I was too aware that I was no longer a child yet felt completely inadequate as an adult. In this story, however, I could allow myself to feel as if I mattered because the world I created desperately needed me. The story also created an emotional catharsis I could not experience anywhere else. I was able to bash in the heads of all the people who upset me, and when you were as much of a weakling as I was, that was the coolest gift in the world. Writing during this period of my life meant nothing less than wielding the power of a god. It was great.

Yet I experienced something else while writing the *Studs of Space* that stayed with me and ultimately inspired me to pursue writing in a more formal vein. While living abroad in England many years ago, I spent a lot of time writing. I found myself writing about a character who was alone in a desert and had no hope of ever meeting another person again. The only thing he really had was a journal. I would write about what he did all day, but I was not sure exactly what he would write in his journal. I wrote about this person because I was questioning the validity of my further pursuing fiction writing. I had written a lot during undergraduate school, and I had a desire to study fiction formally, but a part of me felt my desire was for vain reasons. I created a scenario, pondering what a person would write if he had no outside audience. Would this person write? And what would he write, knowing no one would ever read what he had to say? At first, I struggled with the possibility this person would never write anything. Then I saw him writing about something that had happened in his past, a memory of his family. The answer became so obvious to me: this character would probably never want to stop writing because his fiction provided a place to recreate a life he had once known and to create a life he would never know.

Writing fiction afforded the character the same opportunities it had afforded me while writing *Studs of Space*. Writing fiction, I realized, was a safe way of experimenting with ideas or feelings and with alternate perspectives that would be impossible in the real world. Writing fiction provided me intellectual freedom to go where I wanted, even if my ideas were false, implausible or plain ridiculous. After this semester of writing and living abroad, I decided I wanted to know more about the art beyond my own perspective and to study writing formally.

When I first entered the English graduate program at Oklahoma State University, I had a myopic notion of storytelling. I was not interested in characters or constructing intriguing plots or retelling past events; I was interested in creating thought experiments, and I wanted to use fiction as a way of exploring thought experiments. A “thought experiment” is a problem solving technique for matters that can be resolved only through the act of thinking (Sorensen 6). Einstein’s question about what a person would experience if he traveled at the speed of light is a famous example. Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” is one of the first philosophical examples of a thought experiment, as Plato metaphorically defines the process of education. The thought experiment is designed to provide insight to a problem that cannot be observed or measured. The act of thinking is the only access point in gaining knowledge from thought experiment problems.

My interests in thought experiments focus on creating hypothetical or unreal problems and then fictionalizing those problems in much the same way we might see in science fiction or postmodern literature. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* is a good example of what I mean. His novel supplies an answer to the question of what the psychological experience might be like were a person stuck in nonlinear time forever. We know of no person who has ever had Billy Pilgrim’s experience, and we do not know if Billy Pilgrim’s experience is even possible. Yet Vonnegut’s novel gives us an impression of what the psychological state might feel like. We know the experience is not realistic, but still we can feel the experience by reading the novel. While science and philosophy use thought experiments to solve problems that cannot be objectively studied, fiction has the power to make responses to thought experiments feel as real as possible.

The thought experiment for the first story I ever submitted to a workshop was based on postmodern ideas I had misunderstood. Many years ago, I was required to read John Barth's essay "Literature of Exhaustion" for an undergraduate course and did not really focus on any aspect of the essay other than the title. I missed Barth's argument as to how conventional features of fiction have eroded from overuse (64). I swear that I did not understand any of his commentary about Borge's story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," whose ideas I unwittingly, and might I add, ironically, used in the creation of my thought experiment. I had wrongly assumed Barth's thesis to be that all literature written in the future would be a repetition of something already achieved by past writers. Using this thesis as the problem of my thought experiment, my first story was about a writer whose best work was the exact replica of the work of a famous writer before him. When I wrote this story, I was not concerned with the basic elements of fiction such as plot, narration, conflict and so forth. I awkwardly told the story in third person with ambiguous plot moves and unnecessary characters, and I left most of my poor workshop readers unclear as to the goal of the fiction. I simply did not know how to tell a story. My ignorance of traditional elements in storytelling made many of my experiences in the graduate program unpleasant, as I was required to focus on elements in fiction I had never found particularly interesting before. I had a difficult time incorporating the necessary elements into my work, and I still do.

As the above example reveals, my greatest challenge in writing has been finding a way of integrating my thought experiments into readable fiction. As the following collection of stories represents my Master's Thesis, part of my job in this introduction is to explain how the stories work together holistically. In terms of writing craft, these

stories represent the best integration I have ever produced of thought experiments with fiction. The stories do fit together thematically, as one central motif runs through each story, which I will discuss later. These stories, however, are a success for me because in each work I discovered a method of fusing thought experiments into story.

For two important reasons, I am primarily focusing this critical introduction on the technical solutions I employed to integrate my thought experiments with fiction. First, I wanted to make this discussion as useful as possible, and as a beginning writer, I enjoy learning about other writers' methods, no matter their level of success. So I want to open up my methodology for other writers who might be interested in my approach. Secondly, I wanted to emphasize what I feel I have gained as a writer from attending this program. While studying creative writing for the past four years, I have had to change my mindset toward writing fiction. The creative writing program has emphasized the all-important writing basics: understanding craft, developing characters, employing effective narration, and so forth, which I felt in many ways interfered with my goal of exploring thought experiments in fiction. Throughout my struggle, I had to find solutions that would aid me in creating an acceptable balance. The following solutions are an important part of what made this thesis complete.

The first solution to integrating my thought experiments with fiction was finding a method of narration. I realized that no matter how interesting an idea might be, how exciting the plot appeared or how fascinating a character may have been in my mind, I could never make a story interesting without a strong narrative. I have tried writing narrative from all points of view but found success only in first-person. Because first-person narration merges with the characterization of the main character, I have more

limitations in using language and more direction as to tell the story. If I opted to write in third-person, I would have more options in telling the story but would also have to deal with more complexity in making the right narrative choices. First-person can reduce poor narrative choices as the writer is forced to tell the story through the voice of the main character. The writer then must use the boundaries of the main character's idiolect in order to make the narration interesting. Most of the narrators in the following collection of stories have a similar approach to language. This unity in approach exists because the stories were written in first-person from a male's perspective and because the narrators share my own speaking eccentricities.

I have never felt comfortable in how I express myself in writing. Most of my freshly composed sentences have a liquid aspect to them, meaning I can feel the purpose of the sentence in my head, but I cannot write the sentence out very well at first because it does not really take a firm shape until I see it on the page. I do not know how other writers work, whether they can clearly see the substance of what they are writing, or if they, too, must compress the liquid material into something firmer, but most of what I do is a process of compressing. I have found, however, no matter how much compressing I perform on a line, I can never create the feeling or meaning I am aiming for. As a result, most of my narrators compensate by becoming overly verbose. I compare this compensation to a person using nonverbal gestures to create more meaning while speaking. Since writers cannot use nonverbal gestures, I will narrate redundantly, generalize rampantly, and create rhythms with the language so the sentence at least reads well to me when spoken aloud.

I have concerns my overall narrative approach tends to create narrators who resemble Holden Caulfield. I loved *The Catcher in the Rye* when I was a teenager, as the novel presented a worldview I had not seen represented in fiction before. From that time on, however, I have found when I write in first-person my narration bears many similarities to the voice of Caulfield, especially in my early drafts before revision. I can easily hear his voice when I am composing. I think of Caulfield as a passive aggressive, inarticulate speaker who overgeneralizes much of his experience. When I create my narrators, I generally see them as passive aggressive, inarticulate speakers who overgeneralize much of their experience.

Yet Caulfield's narrative contains more than my oversimplification of it. I have found understanding more about the writers with whom I share similarities has helped me to know more about my own narrative approach and my own characters. In Michael Cowan's "Holden's Museum Pieces: Narrator and Nominal Audience," he describes the overly verbose quality of Caulfield's narrative.

[Caulfield] seems to derive considerable pleasure and energy-and a feeling of being truly "alive"-simply from the act of speaking. In fact, his talking seems at times to reflect less an interest in the *meaning* than in the *experience* of what he is saying. Holden seems to love the rhythms and cadences of his own voice, even so self-indulgently so. (38)

Caulfield uses language to seize emotions but as a result avoids having to understand exactly what he is saying. Cowan's description implies that Caulfield feels extreme pleasure from his use of language. The flipside, however, is that Caulfield does not understand his "madman stuff" (Salinger 3) because he is not forcing himself to articulate

what he is talking about in any clear manner. If he were to articulate more clearly, then much of the time, the use of more definite language would bring him closer to understanding his emotional problems.

My characters are like Caulfield in that they are not using language to understand their own emotional problems. Through the revision process, I eliminate most vernacular aspects I find too similar to Caulfield's speech, but in the drafting stage, when I am constructing my narrators, I tend to create characters who speak like Caulfield. Knowing I have a tendency toward this form of narration allows me to understand more about my narrator's emotional state. Knowing more about the narrator's emotional state greatly limits the type of thought experiments I can use in fiction. If a particular thought experiment cannot work for my narrator, then I have to start over.

Once I found a way to voice the stories, then I was ready to deal with my other major problem in creating fiction: integrating my thought experiments with story. Because thought experiments are designed to inspire thought, most of my thinking would occur before I sat down to write. As a result, I would have already created significant themes for the story. The work would immediately become what Rick DeMarinis predicted about theme-driven fiction in *The Art and Craft of the Short Story*: "stiff, predictable, and heavy-handed" (60), as I was using all plot and character action to emphasize my preconceived theme. The general rule of thumb, as Demarinis and other short story writers instruct, is to allow the theme to "emerge organically from the natural interaction of the characters" (60).

The solution to avoiding theme-driven fiction was a simple, painful sacrifice; I had to deemphasize the thought experiment and create a conflict specifically tailored for my narrator. The thought experiment would become an unimportant aspect in finishing the story, as I was now working within the limitations of the narrator. I had to create a scenario that would challenge the narrator, and I had to be willing to accept the reality that my thought experiment ideas would be too absurd to fit any character I could realistically create. So I became highly concerned with creating plotlines for the narrator. To show exactly what I am talking about, the following discussion exposes which thought experiments initiated three of my stories, and reveals the strategies I used in attempting to make these three stories work.

“Date Movie”

Two thought experiments inspired this story:

The first thought experiment asks how much I would change if I were castrated. I would like to know how different I would be if none of my thoughts or emotions was sexually driven. Although the above issue might appear absurd, it has a lengthy history. Gary Taylor discusses the importance of eunuchs in his work, *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood*. As Taylor explains, many men throughout history have viewed castration as a spiritual act increasing their spiritual purity and sanctifying their lives (43). While posing this thought experiment, I immediately thought of the anxiety castration would create for a highly sexual male. The threat is not simply anxiety in any physical sense but a threat on the level of psychological identity. If a young man loses his sex drive, then in many senses a sexually charged young man loses

his identity, as he spends much of his energy wooing potential mates. Even though this thought experiment could appear very humorous, I was interested in how important sexual pursuit is in forming male identity.

The second thought experiment focused on the issue of choice in modern dating. People often ignore each other as potential mates because of the strong desire to find some idealized, perfect mate. Because modern dating focuses so much on making the right choice, people are allowed to believe pursuing perfection is the only correct way to think about romantic love. I am not attacking choice necessarily, but I am interested in what kind of adjustments people would make if dating choices did not exist. If only two people were left on the planet, I would assume they would have a deeper appreciation for one another. The thought experiment I formed from the above discussion asks how choice affects our perception of prospective mates.

I was thinking about the above two thought experiments when I started to develop the story but was unsure about how to integrate the two thought experiments with the story. The scenario I wanted to use was a very simple date scenario: a couple sees a movie and goes to eat afterwards. In the first draft, I had the characters talking only about the ideas of the two thought experiments during their date, which created moments of interesting dialogue but created a very weak story, as I had no real conflict.

In order to implant the ideas of the two thought experiments into the story and create conflict, I needed to force the characters to feel insecure about the ideas of the thought experiments. I needed the man to think about castration, and I needed the woman to think she could not have a healthy relationship with a man because she was looking for perfection in her boyfriends. My solution was to use the questions of the two

thought experiments as the main content of the film the characters watched. The atmosphere of watching a film (dark theater, big screen, so forth) forces the characters to pay attention to the content of the film. Even though the characters are watching a film that makes them feel uncomfortable, the content of the film would remain in their minds after they left the theater. A great way for the characters to exorcise the content is to talk about how the film made them feel. Since the film deals with relationship problems, then purging the content of the film through discourse can easily create a discussion about problems the couple has been having with their own relationship, which can also create needed conflict for the story.

The two thought experiments gained access into “Date Movie” through the film, which created some auxiliary conflict I could use throughout the story, but the film did not facilitate a central conflict for the main character. Without a central conflict, I did not really have a story. My next major goal was discovering what appropriate central conflict would work for the main character and the story. Because I had the constraints of working with a couple on a date, I had to create a central conflict that would be appropriate for their situation. My final solution was to begin the story with the narrator believing his girlfriend wants to break up with him at the end of the night. Because he is certain about an action that has not actually taken place, I had room to develop characters, create new conflicts, and most important, have a direction on where the story should go. Once I focused on the central conflict, I no longer had any structural problems writing the story. I simply had to tell the story and let the events naturally happen.

“Ghost Story”

I have too many male friends who are defiantly virgins. They never had a girlfriend during high school or through college, and they have for some reason vowed never to attempt to have a sexually intimate relationship with another person. The response most of my other friends and I have had to this resistant attitude was to find some way to push the defiant male into a relationship. The more we pushed our friend, the more pathetic our relationship with that friend became, until something changed and the bonds of friendship weakened because either he hated us or we lost respect for him. I have often wondered why helping to get my friend deflowered was important to me and my other friends, and why we truly felt an obligation to enact sexual rites for our friends. The thought experiment for this story asks how one tricks a defiantly chaste man into intercourse.

The plot for “Ghost Story” was focused on creating a solution to the above thought experiment. My particular solution was creating a lustful ghost who tempted the chaste male every night in his room. When tried to use such an absurd plot, the story tended to be gimmicky, as the focus was exploring the thought experiment rather than developing characters. Not only did the first draft only weakly explore characterization, but the story felt like fiction from a pornographic magazine. After I finished my first draft, my main goal was finding a way to deemphasize the gimmicky quality of the work.

I gained an idea about how to deemphasize such a device from John Cheever’s short story “The Enormous Radio.” In Cheever’s story, he too uses a device some critics have referred to as a gimmick (Chesnick 127). In his story, he creates a voyeuristic radio that has the feature of receiving the conversations of other people. Cheever could have

focused his story on his odd radio. Cheever's story, however, is about the lives of the couple who own the radio. The real conflict of the story is the moral decision about whether to keep the voyeuristic appliance. By arguing about Cheever's gimmick, the couple initiate an interchange regarding deep emotional problems they had never resolved. The couple's interchange would never have occurred without the presence of the radio. Cheever's method of using the device provided me insight on how to solve similar problems when my main plot strategy verged on becoming gimmicky. The device, ultimately, should be used as a catalyst stimulating character interaction, rather than exist as the main enticement of a story.

If I wanted to employ Cheever's method when using a contrivance in fiction, I needed to create an interaction between characters that could exist only because of the ghost. I had to focus more on my main character and less on my ghost. Developing my main character forced me to go back to the issue of the defiant virgin. I needed to understand more about why a man would be so resistant to an intimate relationship. I knew a friend who loved only one girl his whole life, and when the relationship did not work out, he decided he would never love any other girl. His response to his failed relationship was so romantic that I felt that the only way he would ever open himself up to another woman would be if the new relationship somehow corresponded to his overly romantic notions about love. My narrator had a similar backstory, and I knew he would perceive intercourse with a ghost as a spiritual act. He would see his life resonating on a more spiritual level because some unreal force desired to bond with him. Once I had some understanding of the main character's anxieties, my ghost became less a gimmick,

as the ghost brought out emotions the narrator would never express to anyone else. The story grew from the interaction created between the ghost and the narrator.

“Plainview”

One of the more interesting nonfiction books I have read in the past five years is Kevin Kelly’s *Out of Control: The Rise of the Neo-Biological Civilization*. Kelly’s focus in his work is constructing new ways of interpreting our technological culture. One of the more important concepts he discusses is the rise of the superorganism, an “organism” that emerges out of the collective efforts of multiple organisms (11). One natural example of a superorganism is the beehive. Even though the beehive is assembled from individual bees, the community itself acts as a single organism in protection, organization and growth. The question naturally arises while studying a superorganism whether a consciousness exists, as some intelligence seems to be making decisions with regard to defense, growth and organization. The thought experiment I created is primarily a question of what literature about a superorganism would read like. If the main character were a superorganism, then how could I write a story?

The key to beginning “Plainview” was finding the right narrative made to fit the constraints of the thought experiment. Because the subject of the story is not really a human, I could not write the story in first-person. Before I could even write a single sentence in third-person, I needed to know what a sentence about a superorganism would look like. One answer came to me while I was studying for the comprehensive exams. While reading Jonathan Edwards’s, “Letter to Rev. Dr. Benjamin Colman,” I came upon the following passage:

And then a concern about the great things of religion began, about the latter end of December and the beginning of January, to prevail abundantly in the town, till in a very little time it became universal throughout the town, among the old and young, and from the highest to the lowest. All seemed to be seized with a deep concern about their eternal salvation; all the talk in all the companies, and upon occasions was upon this things of religion, and no other talk was anywhere relished; and scarcely a single person in the whole town was left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world. (312)

The phrasing of the passage felt like the kind of sentence one would read if the main character were a superorganism. I felt an emotional urgency in the passage, a sense something great was about to happen, but the passage was not focused on any one character. The description reflected the emotional state of a town, and I was left concerned about the town, not the individuals. I decided I could practice writing like Edwards, and I reapplied his approach in some drafts. I focused on a small town in Oklahoma as my subject. The rundown qualities of Oklahoma small towns have always created for me the impression of emotional depression, and so I knew of an emotional state from which to start.

The major challenge in integrating the thought experiment into fiction was finding an interesting story for my superorganism and maintaining a narrative that worked. In my first drafts, I wrote about the entire town in a very general way, similar to Edwards's passage. The problem I continually ran into was determining what to do with my superorganism. I could write a passage like Edwards's, but I had no idea what the real story was. I needed a main character who could create and react to real conflict, but I did

not want to focus the story on one real person in the town; otherwise, I would lose the whole purpose of the thought experiment. My final solution was to personify the town. By personifying the town, I could find a central conflict, which was the personified town's fight against depression. Also, by personifying the town, I could maintain a narrative about a superorganism similar to Edwards's passage. I could continually create parallels between the emotional state of the personified town and the emotional state of the townspeople. For example, if the personified town were happy, the football team started to win games. If the personified town were depressed, the townspeople gorged themselves on fatty foods. Once I started correlating the emotional state of the personified town with the behavior of the townspeople, the story naturally formed.

When I am writing a story, much of my attention is focused on how humorous I am attempting to make the piece. I am not trying to write purely comic fiction, but I feel most comfortable in my composing when I am pushing a work toward an eccentric outcome through the creation of humorous juxtapositions. Because my narrators are initially modeled after Holden Caulfield, the passive-aggressive, sardonic narrator is naturally built-in for most of my main characters. The pursuit to achieve humor in my work, however, does not rely solely on sarcastic commentary by a narrator. Instead, I attempt humor through creating bizarre circumstances that prevent the main characters from gaining much control over their own experience.

The humor I strive to create has been influenced more by the work of Kurt Vonnegut than Salinger. Vonnegut has claimed that one of his strengths in literature has been his ability to make jokes (McLaughlin 66). Vonnegut's jokes, however, have never

been incidental. Instead, his kind of humor is affective and can be interpreted on multiple levels. One of Vonnegut's most pervasive themes throughout much of his work is that we exist in a purposeless universe (Harris 131), and the aim of much of his humor demonstrates the futility of human pursuits. At the end of Chapter 3 of *Breakfast of Champions*, Kilgore Trout describes his ideal tombstone, which Vonnegut draws for us. The tombstone reads:

Somebody. Sometime - Sometime. He tried. (38)

The tombstone sarcastically underscores the inevitability of both death and satirizes the futility of human achievement. The joke mocks us as it presents two inevitabilities we cannot escape. Vonnegut's characters are stuck in circumstances beyond their control, and his humor points out the absurdity of those conditions. My fiction does not employ such all-engrossing themes as Vonnegut's work, but my fiction is similar in that my characters are also caught in bizarre circumstances, and I try, in these moments, to create humor.

One example of the form of humor that I attempt to create occurs in the opening scene from "The First Time I Left My Parents." The story begins with the narrator trying to have an intimate conversation with his teacher, Mrs. Broekhuysen. Because the conversation takes place on the phone, two kinds of confinement limit the narrator and Mrs. Broekhuysen. First, they are not in each other's presence, so they are able to communicate only orally, which limits the scope of the intimacy they can express. Second, they are subject to any person in the house listening in and joining their conversation, which the narrator's younger and far more immature brother takes advantage of by making crude noises and using obscene language. The narrator and Mrs.

Broekhuysen cannot do anything to stop the child, and instead of delivering their emotional messages to each other, they are forced to adjust to the given situation and both are unable to communicate exactly what they want. The humor, then, is hopefully created in the characters' struggle to express themselves.

Most of the main characters in these stories are in some sense stuck, but the manner in which these characters are stuck changes throughout this collection. By confining the narrators and limiting their ability to alter their experiences, I found that I could create situations with both heightened irony and conflict. In the end, I felt shackling my characters would increase my chances of making the stories both interesting and funny.

Beyond the technical solutions, the themes are also important in fashioning these stories into a holistic body of work. Throughout this collection, these stories are connected by issues of male rites of passage, cultish spirituality, demons, molestations, feeling stuck, male insecurities, and male sexual anxieties. None of the above motifs could be applied to all of the stories--not all of the stories are simply about male sexual anxieties or cultish spirituality.

In all of the stories in this collection, however, the main characters believe that an assumption is true. This assumption then becomes the lens through which they perceive reality, and all of their future actions are affected by this. I believe the main struggle in any of these stories would work as a good example, but just to show what I mean more clearly, I will use an example from "Bobby Jo." Sarah is a witness to a marvel. The painting that hangs over her television set bleeds. The question arises as to whether the

painting bleeds for some special reason. Sarah, because of her past and the influence of certain religious ideologies, interprets the painting as a clear sign of the Apocalypse. Sarah never questions her own assumptions about the meaning of the painting, and so her life changes as a result.

I found if I placed a character in a position where he/she could easily misinterpret something as true, then I always had a place to begin a story. I did not initially intend to make this central theme. I became aware while in the process of creating the works that my main characters were all accepting an assumption as truth. When I realized the theme was emerging in all of my stories, I allowed the theme to inform all of my work for this collection.

I have worked on finishing a collection of stories for almost three years. I have worked on at least fifteen stories. Even though I have come a long way from my writing experiments in England and even further away from the *Studs of Space*, I still feel as if I am at a beginning. I have come to a better realization of what I can do, a painful acceptance of what I cannot, and a further yearning to pursue new thought experiments. I am aware all of the creative theories I have used to finish this project will likely serve only as guidelines in future projects, but I am sure I will feel the influence of this experience as I undertake the rest of my experiments in fiction.

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Date Movie

“Stop touching yourself in public!” My girlfriend, Tyler, says to me as if I really were doing something lewd. The somber tone of all the men around me suggests the film affected them the same way. They all walk to their cars as if they have just attended the funeral of someone dear, except there is one important difference; they all have at least one hand covering their crotches. Tyler pulls on my pitching arm, probably communicating to me that I won’t get castrated. I don’t think she realizes that no matter what she might say to make me feel better, the damage is done.

As Tyler and I walk to my car, I go over again in my head what the reviews said. The critics said that this damn film is the best relationship movie ever, the *Citizen Kane* of relationship movies, a tour de force, outstanding, stupendous, top ten kind of film. What in the hell were they talking about? There was no story, really. I think if I had to describe the film to somebody, I’d call it about two hours of cameras whirling around the topic of castration. The movie made me feel guilty for having a penis. I mean, other things happened; there was this couple that was supposed to be the last couple on Earth,

and that was sort of interesting, but their story ended with them finding a fountain of milk and pouring buckets of stale liquid on each other. When critics say a film is a good relationship movie, do not expect it to be a good date film.

“If you protect your crotch all night,” Tyler says as we finally reach the car, “don’t expect to touch me later.” I open her door as she steps in. She doesn’t even attempt to kiss me.

I must admit, even though the film disturbed me at the deepest levels, I probably picked the best film for what most likely will end up being one of the worst nights of my life; I’m almost a hundred percent certain Tyler has decided to break up with me tonight.

The evidence is strong. The first and most important clue is that all her girlfriends have been telling me for weeks that Tyler is getting tired of me. I knew it was going to happen, because Tyler usually breaks up with her boyfriends in about two weeks; we’ve lasted almost two months. I assume the novelty of dating a mini-celebrity—me (great baseball player, now injured)--has finally worn off. The second clue is that she asked me to dinner. She never does this. I did plan the evening, but she was the one who initiated the date, indicating to me that she had a hidden motive. And finally, okay, a little less important, but important to me, I saw my unlucky number eight times today. I just know bad things are going to happen.

“Where do you want to go to eat?” I ask before starting the car. I’ve been hoping all night she will be nice enough to pick a place I don’t go all the time so I won’t feel so damn bad whenever I go there afterward.

“Where do you think?” She says. I was hoping she wouldn’t pick Chuck’s. It is my favorite restaurant. I have a feeling that after tonight I won’t be able to eat there for about month.

As soon as the car pulls away from the parking lot, I see we have a long drive because there is thick fog covering the town. I worry for a minute that we won’t have anything to talk about, but she surprises me when she starts to dissect the last scene of the film, which I thought completely stupid. The scene was composed of multiple images: one of a farmer tilling the ground and another image of two people in bed under sheets. Then there were subtitles listing statistics about how the daily recommended intake of vitamins increased by about two percent and at the same time, the American farmlands were losing their potency by two percent per year. The film ended by repeating over and over the phrase “lack of potency, lack of potency, lack of potency.” The scene was so obviously trying to make some point that it annoyed the hell out of me. I don’t like movies that try to mean something. I find such movies too contrived and you have to spend forever trying to figure them out, and by the time you do figure them out, the meaning is something like: don’t have sex until marriage or don’t pollute the environment.

But Tyler sounds like she actually enjoyed the film, and this bothers me a little. Well, it means that I haven’t really been able to stick it to her tonight like I had hoped. I made us the watch the film before we ate so that she’d have to wait until the end of the evening to part ways, which means she’d at least be uncomfortable with me for an extra two hours. She sounds like she wasn’t as uncomfortable as I had hoped. But I did have another way to stick it to her.

I cheated on Tyler two nights ago. Well, technically, I cheated on her in the act that I performed, but emotionally, I wasn't that committed, since I was drunk. This infidelity was the first and only time I ever cheated on her, and I was unfaithful because I was having a weak moment. I mean, I spent all week getting used to the idea Tyler and I were going to break up. I was in pain. I don't know if Tyler knows--she might because the girl I was with, Shannon Milckel, is Tyler's friend--but I cheated on Tyler at a party, and it was really quick, and I didn't do very much. But my little ploy kind of made things pretty tense.

Tyler talks all the way to Chuck's restaurant.

Chuck's restaurant looks beautiful when I pull into the parking lot. Most places look good in fog because fog makes all glowing objects feel like Christmas light, and usually the only objects glowing at night are billboards and steamy restaurants. Chuck's restaurant, if you can guess from its name, doesn't really offer much in the way of sophistication. It's pretty much a dive, and after you eat there, your clothes smell like chicken and grease for about a week. One of the reasons Tyler is different from any girl I have ever known is because Chuck's restaurant is her favorite place to eat. You just don't get that in most girls. Tyler's a smoking hot girl, and I guarantee the last thing you'd ever expect to hear from her mouth is that she loves Chuck's. But she says all the time that she loves Chuck's.

The waitress pushes us quickly to a booth near the entrance, carrying in her left hand a dirty rag, which she uses to "clean" the table in one long wipe. I can feel my own

clothing groan as the stench of grease imprints itself on my body. I realize as soon as we are seated and the menus are pressed in front of us, that I have a bit of a problem: I don't know what to order. I always order the same meal, chicken cheddar bites. I am known from my baseball days for eating this dish all the time. The problem is chicken cheddar bites make a huge meal, grossly huge. The dish consists of little squares of chicken covered in three cheeses over mashed potatoes with hash browns sprinkled on the top of the potatoes. You wouldn't just get one plate of food, but two plates smashed together as one. Cheddar bites are my favorite dish; I always order them, and I'm always talking about them with some of my friends. The problem is what I might feel like after Tyler breaks up with me. Chicken cheddar bites don't always sit well. You really have to be in a good emotional state to eat that kind of food; otherwise, bad things could happen. So, I have to do something I never ever do; I actually look at the menu.

“Changing your order, huh?” Tyler says, paying attention to me. “The movie really did affect you.”

“Uh-huh,” I say.

I figure maybe I should order an appetizer. Chuck's has only one real appetizer, Buffalo wings, but outside of an appetizer, I don't have much of an option. Everything else on the menu is a big meal because Chuck's is a big-meal place. I look through the menu and test out a few ideas, but I know if I order any big meal, I will likely get sick later. Finally, I tire of fighting with myself over what to order, and I pick a dessert and Buffalo wings, which I order as soon as the waitress arrives.

I watch Tyler scan the menu. I have always been scared of her history with guys. In the past couple of years, she probably dated about seventeen guys. Tyler will date a

guy awhile and then find about ten good reasons to dump him. Tyler loves to play hard to get. I am her longest relationship, but I'm not successful because she is in love with me; she never has said anything really affectionate. We are physically intimate, but I never got an impression from her she really feels strong emotions towards me. Instead, I think I've been successful because I have been more concerned about winning her over. I think success for me has something to do with the fact that I never wanted to give her a reason to break up with me. I know all her friends pretty well (most of them want to date me), and they have told me what they know Tyler wants in a boyfriend. I found out if she didn't like the way I dressed (she didn't, so I had to start buying clothes from J. Crew) or what her turn offs are (certain colognes, untrimmed nails, unnecessary body hair--actually a pretty long list) and what she looks for in a man (a future that promises travel but also security); I told her I wanted to go back to college and study international business, and I actually planned to do it, but I didn't really know a thing about the major, except that the title sounded cool. I really tried to learn everything I could about her that I knew she wouldn't tell me directly.

Tyler looks up from the menu and gives me a look that makes my chest ice up. I can tell what her look means; this is the breakup face. I feel this pressure to ask her if she is upset. My chest is icy and starts to hurt. She stretches out her arms and pulls my hands across the table, another classic breakup move. The move appears to be loving, but is just masking future pity and is very maternal. I've seen this breakup tactic before, technically referred to as the affectionate breakup.

"You have such nice looking hands," she says admiring my palms. "I've never really told you before."

This is the first time she has ever said anything like this. I probably smile.

“I would have to describe your hands as very manly,” she says, still affectionate.

“It must be because you hold your bat so tight.”

Yeah, right, I think, hurry up and get it over with. If she doesn’t give me a good enough reason why she wants to break up with me, I’ll drop the bomb—meaning she’ll find out about Shannon. If she gives me the “it’s not you, it’s me” speech, I’ll drop the bomb but include that Shannon was great in bed. If she *tells* me it *is* me, I don’t know what I’ll do.

Tyler keeps rubbing my hands very lightly. She is drawing some kind of circle with her finger on top of my hand. Then, surprisingly, she starts to tell me all these things about me she really likes. The stuff she says is nice at first, because I never have been told that I have a nice voice or that I am a funny driver (whatever that means), but I cannot listen to her with much enjoyment because I feel that at any moment she might interject something like, “I like the way you sleep with girls, which makes breaking up with you so much easier. You’re really good at screwing yourself.” But I don’t actually get to hear anything like that, because an old schoolmate of ours, Christa Stahl, interrupts Tyler by jumping into Tyler’s seat, practically strangling Tyler with a power hug.

“I saw the worst film tonight,” Christa says as slowly as possible, probably trying to emphasize that she really did see the worst film ever. Turns out, she saw the same film we did. Christa would have hated the film in the first place, and I would have liked to know who convinced her to go see the movie. I bet she read the reviews and confused the movie with a great date film--just like I did. I know Christa because she is one of those people where everyone in town just knows, but you rarely think much about.

Christa has a copy of every film ever made about marriage. She loves marriage, and I don't know how many times I have heard her talk about plans for her own wedding day. I personally hope it rains. She always has a boyfriend, but I don't think she has ever loved anybody, or at least none of those boyfriends ever really loved her. I was friends with one of her boyfriends, and before he'd ever make plans with Christa he'd always see what I was doing first. Anytime you saw one of her boyfriends, you saw her hanging around. I didn't really like her.

“Did you like the part about castration?” Christa asks me about the film, probably thinking she is funny. Trying to be nice, I huff and wiggle in my seat, imitating a high school teacher we always teased who would never laugh; he just rubbed his kneecaps with the palms of his hands.

“But did you get it?” Tyler asks Christa.

“I still got these,” I say, patting my crotch. Yeah, I am being stupid. Tyler touches her lips as if to stop herself from coughing, her subtle way of showing annoyance. Christa, on the other hand, acts as if I am the funniest guy in the world.

“You can focus on superficial things, like castration, if you want,” Tyler begins, “but I think it's a great movie. It deals with one of the biggest problems with people falling in love, which is having choices. We all look for the perfect person, and so when someone doesn't equate our perfect ideal, we just toss them aside and look for someone new. We learn never how to get close to anybody, and we treat everyone like types that we read out of magazines. The movie was trying to show us how to think differently about love.” Tyler is at her most baffling. I never know what to say when she speaks like this about life. So I just nod.

“I bet you guys have the best conversations,” Christa returns in a way that indicates she isn’t really listening. Christa isn’t even looking at us anymore. She is looking over at her boyfriend, who is slumped over in a booth. His name is Cal Whittle, and he is the only guy I know who dates girls he knows he can cheat on. He is completely open about his preferences, too. He wants to date only women who would be good mothers and gullible enough to trust him. Christa is an obvious choice. Cal is a weird-looking guy, too. I always study his face when I am around him. He doesn’t have any eyelashes, which makes his face even more interesting to look at. I guess most of the girls who hook up with Cal do so because they can never figure out if he is attractive or ugly, which I guess ultimately makes him attractive.

“I’m going to go find out what Cal thinks about castration,” Christa says as she walks toward her table.

When the food arrives, there are ten pieces of chicken, max. The waitress brings out a piece of chocolate cake as well, which I eat first. Tyler laughs and steals a bite. I can’t tell what she is thinking anymore. She is bouncing up and down, talking about how much she loves chocolate cake. I pretty quickly pass the plate over to her. Then she gives me a sympathy yawn about my ten little pieces of chicken. She isn’t upset or weird at all, which is really irritating. Maybe I am completely wrong about the whole situation, maybe Tyler isn’t going to break up with me.

“Look,” I say, realizing I am being abrupt and my tone sounds confused and frustrated and awkward, which I soon follow with an “I think,” and then stop myself, realizing I am the one who is attempting to initiate this breakup, which is not how this thing is supposed to work, but if she isn’t going to break up with me, she is going to find

out about Shannon the wrong way, stemming from my underlying guilt and also probably some anger toward girls who may have been lying to me so they can sleep with me. So, I quickly say something very lame, ask one of those questions that pathetic men ask because they need a safe way to start an awkward conversation. Tyler doesn't hear me at first because she is smacking (which I love) on her food, so I have to speak louder. "Do we need to talk?" I say much louder this time, but Tyler apparently doesn't hear me because of the scene happening across the room--Christa Stahl throwing water in Cal's face.

Cal stands up, says something I can't hear, and drops money on the table before walking out. Christa's face is red, and she yells something pretty mean about his lack of eyelashes. The funny thing is, few people pay attention at first. Chuck's usually has a lot of drunk customers who bark at each other all the time, so the yelling isn't unusual, but as soon as people realize this is a fight between lovers, the whole restaurant becomes so quiet, you can hear the death metal playing in the background. After Christa screams out a few more words, she jumps across the way and forcefully scoots her body into Tyler's booth, pushing my girlfriend against the window.

"Cal just broke up with me," Christa says. "He's been cheating."

I can't believe what I am hearing. I'm not shocked Cal is cheating; I'd be shocked if he was not cheating. What is shocking is his timing. I am having one of those moments when everything seems to fall together. I can easily interpret my coincidence as some kind of religious sign, not déjà vu, but something with a cool name. I watch Tyler's expressions: here is the moment of truth; she is going to crack. This is almost too

perfect a moment for her to expose her intentions. If she wants to break up with me, then I am going to find out.

Tyler doesn't look at me. All her energies are focused on Christa, calming and holding Christa; she doesn't appear to feel awkward at all.

"He said the movie made him feel guilty," Christa says. "That stupid movie!" She slams her fist against the table. I can't tell if she is mad at the movie or at Cal. She covers her face with her arms. Tyler takes a tissue and helps Christa dab at tears. "He said," Christa continues, "that he was afraid he loved me only because he was controlled by his sexual urges, and he didn't respect himself for that. I can't believe that. He wrote me poetry."

"Cal wrote poetry?" I say.

"I knew Cal had cheated on his past girlfriends," Christa says, "and we even talked about how he was going to be good to me, so I thought I was different. When I asked him what he'd do if he was castrated, he said the last thing he would ever do is sit at Chuck's café with me because he would be doing things that were actually meaningful. I know he was just trying to be honest, but that just seems so mean."

"Oh what an absolute asshole!" my girlfriend says. "It is so sick that people would do this to each other."

Christa and Cal's breakup seems tragic on the surface, but I know exactly what is going to happen. Even though everyone is mad at Cal, I feel this move is going to work out for him in the end. I'm sure after a few days Christa is going to call Cal and tell him how much she misses him, and he'll end up getting back with her. Cal will take her back

not because he loves her, but because two days will have gone by when he has not had sex with her and his body will revolt against his prior reasonable decision to end the relationship. Christa will then make apologies for him, and they will stay together as long as Cal is interested in her.

Christa sits at our table for a while and none of us eats. I am pretty sure there is no way that Christa is going to eat, which means dinner for me is pretty much over; food is the last thing that Christa can handle at this moment. But then Christa surprises the hell out of me when she grabs hold of Tyler's sandwich and wolfs a huge bite. She then starts to dig into my Buffalo wings until there is only one piece of chicken left. She takes the last piece and bites down hard until you can hear the bones pop. She speaks in the angriest voice I have ever heard from her, "Screw him." She spits out the meat, which flies across the table and sticks to my chair. Christa is so pissed off she isn't pathetic anymore. Christa stares me down, almost accusingly, and for a moment, I think she knows about Shannon. I shrink in my seat. My thought of confronting both Tyler and Christa about Shannon has me reaching for my car keys. But Christa doesn't attack me; she teases me. "Did I scare you?" she asks. I tell her she did, to which she laughs, but with a shrill sound that comes with a huge slap on the table. Tyler suggests to Christa that we give her a ride home, but Christa leaves before we can convince her. As soon as Christa is gone, Tyler places her hands on the table, stands up and stretches her body across the table until she can push her lips hard into mine. We then leave.

As soon as we enter her house, Tyler jumps me, kissing me hard all over. I stop thinking altogether. She is expressing a feeling she has never shown before.

Once I went to a church revival with an aunt from my dad's side, and a preacher was performing exorcisms. The preacher was all over the room; I thought he was on speed, running around with his microphone. He got right up in my face, his breath smelling like licorice, and then moved on to the next person.

When he spoke, he said one strange word, and I don't even think it was a real word; it sounded like "bite," but each syllable was drawn out. When he'd say the word, he'd probe the audience, waiting for people to moan. Helpers would esRoland each of those people moaning up to the front of the room. The preacher then announced they had a demonic presence. I couldn't have cared less about the whole event, which was some crazy plan by my aunt to improve my pitching, but I've never forgotten those people's expressions. They moved in a pure way that seemed to express some kind of joy.

Tyler has the same expression, moving over me, and I cannot help but reciprocate. I'm not pretending; something is coming out of me, and it is coming out of me because of her. The demon-possessed bodies in that church moved against the floor, crushing and rubbing. Their arms stretched out and then jerked inward at the same moment. The preacher yelled out "You writhe in your own sin; you gnash your own teeth, come out, come out." Tyler pushes herself so she is lying right on top of me and puts her hand right over my heart and holds it there while she kisses me. All I can feel is her hand, and her hand feels like it is burning into my skin. When it is over, she moves her hand to hold on to me, but I can still feel her hand on my heart.

Until I wake, I don't realize I have fallen asleep. I do not open my eyes right away. The bed sheet is over both our heads. I have only one lingering concern: I must

tell Tyler about Shannon. Before I can even speak, I imagine calling her name. “Tyler,” I’ll say, and the word will shatter our silence. In a moment, I’ll admit to her the truth, and this whole night will become one of Tyler’s worst memories; I will become that boyfriend she will speak about with venom, and this moment we just shared will be gone forever. She will remember it only with disgust. I just have to say her name.

I wrap my arms tightly around her body, shivering. She must think I am cold because she almost pulls off the sheet for a larger blanket. But I stop her. I am not cold.

Then she says she wants to talk more about the film. I don’t stop her.

“I’ve been wondering why I’ve dated guys for a couple weeks and then dumped them,” she begins. “I’ll be honest--I’ve been thinking of ending our relationship, but I don’t know why I feel this way when there’s nothing wrong with you; you’re cool. I tried to figure out all night why I’ve never had real relationships with men, and I realize when you are vulnerable to another person, then you have a real relationship--I’ve never allowed myself to be vulnerable.”

She stops for a moment. Her words are disturbing. They subtly confirm what I fear: Tyler has never been in love with me. She holds me sincerely, trying to convey her sensitivity, probably thinking she is really showing how much she cares for me. But she can’t stop what she is really communicating, that the film made her feel like her past view toward relationships is wrong and so she needs to change.

“I want you to listen to me,” she continues. “We have to talk to each other about our innermost experiences if we really want to have a real relationship. I need it. We need it. And when we have it, then I will feel more real when I tell you I truly love you.”

I hold my breath on her last words; they feel so good. If this were a week ago, I would have won. I would have actually caught Tyler. All I would have to do is tell her what she wants to hear, that I have been sad, that life is hard on me, and that I had a tough time. I could easily tell her some story about how I could still feel the thumps on my head from my father's encouragements to improve in the sport I played. Or, I could tell her about how I have no idea what the hell I am doing with my life, that the worst day of my life was when I tore my tendon in a practice and I couldn't pitch again, ever. Or, I could say something about how I can never really express myself and how I can never tell people how I really feel. She would caress me. We would have a tender moment and quietly whisper for the first time in each other's ears words of real love--all I would have to do is hold back what I have to say and just let our first real experience happen.

I lift the sheet. The clock reads "2:12" in bright red lettering. I move from the bed toward my clothes and begin to pull up my pants. Tyler sits up so the sheet covers half her naked body.

"I do have one thing I need to tell you," I say finally. I start from the beginning. I tell her I always wanted her. I tell her how once we started dating I did everything I possibly could to figure out a way to make her love me. I tell her I have spoken to her friends to find out her preferences in men so that I could be the man she always wanted. I tell her I wore shirts she likes and listened to music she likes and did everything I possibly could so she would never find a reason to break up with me. All I wanted to do was win. I tell her I knew she wanted to break up with me and that I had found out a week ago about her plans and was pretty upset. I don't waste any time describing the

pathetic scene between Shannon and me, where I reclined on a bed and Shannon spent probably two minutes trying to pull Levi's off my drunk body. But I do tell her I slept with Shannon.

When I finish my story, I lose contact with Tyler. I have no idea what she is thinking, and I can describe only what she does. She doesn't appear to be upset. She doesn't throw anything. She doesn't even get dressed or cover herself in any way. All she does is allow me to walk out.

"I just wish," I actually say; my head is throbbing a little, my stomach icy, as I predicted it would be--I guess I do know myself in small ways. "I just wish," I continue, "that I had seen that movie with you a long time ago."

The streets are no longer foggy when I start my car. The sky is clear, but the town doesn't look good. The town looked better in the fog.

Line Dancing

I shouldn't have been at the Corral Club. I had to work the next morning—in another state. I was in this terrible club for the best good reason. Justine was wearing her nametag and the final letter was almost scratched out and it looked like she was wearing my name near her heart. I took that as a good sign. All day long, and I didn't tell her, I had been connecting her first name with my last name. I know I may be overreacting, but it bothered me knowing her first name didn't feel great with my last name, Beers. “Justin and Justine” was perfect as far as first names go, maybe a little too perfect, almost sister and brotherish. Yet, there was something about the way the last syllable of her first name changed the intonation of my last name that didn't feel quite right. I half wanted to ask Justine to marry me tonight, but I just wasn't sure if it was the right moment.

“I don't know yet,” Justine finally answered. My question was about whether I should move where she lived or whether she should move closer to me. She was eating my food--well not really eating it, just tasting it and spitting the food back in a napkin as if she were a five-year-old. If I was watching any other girl, I'd have found her eating habits a little gross; her little eating habit must have been one of the ways she kept weight off over the past ten years. She was even more attractive now than in high school, still a

homecoming queen, and still so quiet. Before I could say what I wanted, which was I'd move there even if for no other reason than to show Justine how much I loved her, sirens alerted everyone in the giant warehouse that the country dancing had to stop. The big bulls were coming out.

The Corral Club had been an original Wal-Mart from the eighties. When Wal-Mart became a behemoth, the building was converted into a church. When that church did pretty well and became its own kind of behemoth, the next best incarnation was this place, painted all black, decorated with neon beer ads, and with a few projection television screens playing episodes of Dukes of Hazzard, nonstop. There were two main areas to the Corral Club, a dance floor surrounded by large iron bars and a rodeo pen the size of a small basketball court. The Corral Club was not my kind of place to party—I mean I had on a funny pink shirt underneath my clothes that read “looking for a good time,” if that tells you anything about me. For Justine's friends, on the other hand, the Corral Club was *the* place to party.

Tonight was the first night I had a chance to meet any of Justine's friends. I knew a couple of the girls from high school, and to be honest, they weren't my favorite people back then. They were twin sisters, Cara and Carol, and they had somehow failed to become two separate people because they always responded in the plural. The first thing they said to me was my hair was long and that I really needed to put highlights in my hair. They didn't say it in any affectionate manner; it was an order, which I had to brush off with a fake laugh. I could tell by the way most of Justine's friends dressed they went to clubs a lot. Her friends were fashionable and trendy and I knew they wouldn't understand my own fashion sense, which most people categorized as arty. The reality is I

didn't have any style; I just wore old clothes. I hadn't cut my hair in over two years, and I deplored the idea of styling my hair. I wasn't surprised at how they reacted to my appearance. The only person beside the twins who actually spoke to me was a guy named Tommy, who was far more drunk than he needed to be. He had lost all control of his personal volume and yelled out his opinion to me about why a college education is really just a waste of time. He said he went to school for one semester and failed because he wasn't much of a conformist. I didn't have anything nice to say to him, so I just nodded. Considering I had been in school for about ten years, I don't think he realized he was insulting me. I wasn't sure why Justine was still friends with these people. I guess because she had never really moved away.

When the bulls came out, everyone crowded around the pen. I had a hard time finding Justine in the crowd, mainly because Justine had actually squeezed about as close as you could get to the bull pen. By the time I got close enough to talk to her, the first bull rider was bumping up and down on the bull trying to hold on. A big clock that looked like it had been borrowed from a high school gym counted the number of seconds that the guy managed to hold on. He didn't last longer than a few seconds before being knocked off and thrown to the ground. The bull somehow knew the dance pretty well, because he immediately went to the exit gate. The whole experience was very violent and yet so normal there was just no way that I was going to feel any sort of excitement.

"If you want me to ride one of those bulls, I'll do it," I joked to Justine. She didn't hear me. Instead, she was clapping loudly and screaming the name of one of the bull riders. She wasn't the only one; most of the people around me were doing the same thing. I didn't have any idea who the guy was, but I clapped anyway and yelled out his

name as well. The bull set out of the stall, bucking Todd up and down. Todd did make the eight seconds; he held on, and then his arm looked as if it were stuck inside a harness for another few seconds. He quickly jumped off the bull and a clown immediately jumped in the bull's way to attract the animal to the exit, which the animal casually did. I found the complete change in the animal's behavior hilarious. One minute the bulls were ferocious, the next calm; they had the whole sport down. When I looked back toward Justine, I noticed she had gripped the fence tightly with both hands. Todd appeared hurt for a moment, before finally standing up and shaking it off.

“Do you know him?” I asked.

I don't know if it was the crowd or if she really was distraught over Todd, but she didn't seem to notice I was speaking or even that I was standing next to her. I had to tap lightly on her shoulder to get her attention, and when she finally looked at me, she didn't seem excited I was there.

Before I could say anything more, I felt a hard tapping on my shoulder. Tommy had found me. He kept pounding on my shoulder with his fingertips, even after I acknowledged him. Then he motioned me to come closer. I shook my head and told him there wasn't any room. He insisted, and instead of my coming to him, he forced his way closer to me, aggressively stepping on a few people to get his mouth near my ear.

“In places like this you've got to be careful what you say, because people are always looking to fight.”

Thanks, I thought. As if this guy who had spent most of the evening telling me how college was a waste of time was going to teach me some tricks about discretion.

“No, what I’m saying,” he continued, “is that before you even know it, someone will probably jump you.”

“Okay, so is there something I should do?”

“I’m just saying,” he said.

I didn’t have any idea really what he meant; if I accidentally befriended him in some way, I regretted it now. There was no way I was going to watch his back in a fight. I had half an inclination to join in against him. Before I could even figure out what Tommy was getting at, a big wad of cowshit flung up in my direction, and spread itself all over my shirt. Tommy, who was not hit, seemed to have forgotten our little conversation, because he screamed at the top of his lungs “You got shit on. You got shit on.” I looked around and noticed without surprise I was the only one who was hit. I didn’t laugh, but everyone else was laughing (except for Justine; she had her hands over her mouth). Then, the ritual was to pour beer on the victim, and so the people around me started to pour beer on me, yelling “Put out the fire.” The ritual continued: once you had beer poured on you, everyone passed you a cup, which you were supposed to down. I must have had eight cups pushed in front of my face before I made it to the bathroom. I had a sip from one of the cups.

The bathroom wasn’t going to win any cleanliness awards. You couldn’t step on the ground without getting muck on your shoes. Then there was the smell, a wave of steamed nastiness. There were six stalls and only three had doors and none was vacant. However, as lucky as I had been this night, I did see one sink available. I took off my shirt and noted the irony of the shirt I was wearing, a button-up cowboy shirt from the seventies with a great plaid pattern. The funny thing was that if I wore a cowboy hat and

boots, you couldn't tell the difference between me and anyone else. But because I wore sneakers, I was fashionable there in an entirely different and unappreciated sense. As soon as I took off my retro shirt, another annoyance became apparent. My undershirt was that pink shirt with the funny "looking for a good time" printed in red letters. I didn't know I was coming to this club in the first place, and I certainly didn't expect to be hit by cow manure. So, I had to make a decision, either the pink shirt or the cowboy shirt or no shirt at all, as if there really was a choice. I had to go pink. There was no way I was going to carry that retro shirt now it had been fouled up in the absolute worst way. I dropped my shirt on the ground (goodbye).

All the Corral Club provided was one of those uni-urinals where every guy has to pee in the same place. The place was super crowded, and there was a line. There was no order, so as soon as you saw a spot, you jumped in. I stood in line for about a minute before a spot opened up. I thought I heard somebody mutter something under his breath about my shirt. As I stood in front of the urinal, trying to relax, I started to clam up. I tried to pee, but I just couldn't relax. I have a tendency not to remember my urinal dysfunction until I'm actually at a urinal. Let me explain what I mean, too; I couldn't go to the bathroom if I felt like anybody was watching me. I don't know why the fear exists, maybe it has something to do with overly aggressive middle-school baseball coaches, but the pissing fear is a cultural problem most males deal with. I kept my eyes up and just prayed I could loosen up enough to get this over. I tried to count my breaths and started to feel some indication that I was going to be okay. Then some of the guys around me started to joke. They were drunk, and most of their jokes were about size. Then some

guy kidded about how he couldn't go when people watched him, and then some guy made a comment about my pink shirt.

He said, "If you're looking for a good time, don't look at me."

"Yeah," said another, "I'm not gay."

I guess the whole lot saw the shirt and felt they needed to defend their manhood. The homophobic grumbling started and I knew I had to speak louder than everyone else did if I was going to get out of this one.

"I'm not gay, man," I yelled. "The shirt is a joke."

The grumbling didn't stop. I continued talking in a louder voice. "I'm in love with a girl out there named Justine. I'm actually in a way obsessed with her. So don't worry about me, man." I knew I sounded really stupid and probably a big sell out by reacting that way to the homophobia, but being tough when you are literally exposed is not easy. "I had gone to high school with this girl, and we even dated for a while, but then you know it was a high school relationship. I think my motto at that time was something like: if the girl of your dreams is from the same town you're from, then you're probably only having wet dreams. I moved away. Ten years later I have a dream. In the dream I felt like God was telling me I needed to go back home and find her because she was my true love, if you believe in that sort of thing."

"Are you sure it wasn't a wet dream?" somebody asked.

"Is there a difference?" another voice replied.

By this time, I had finished, and nobody was pulling me down and beating me to a pulp. I felt good zipping up and walking out of this one. Now all I had to do was survive the rest of the night.

The club had a totally new vibe when I came out of the bathroom. Instead of a rodeo, the focus was the dance floor. And instead of country and western, two-step, line dance music, the DJ was grooving hip-hop. I didn't know who the artist was, but everyone else did, and everyone on the dance floor was humping each other and singing the lyrics? Well, I didn't want to dance; instead I went to the bar and got a drink. The bar didn't offer anything I wanted, so I got a Coke and moseyed back toward the dance floor.

While I scanned the crowd looking for my group, I caught sight of Justine, who was happily hip-hopping. I pushed my way into the crowd until I was next to her and started to hump her leg, and you know what, she didn't seem to care. I kept dancing, and finally had to rub her shoulder to get her to notice. She did look at me, but didn't give me any special attention, except kind of a half-assed bump in my direction. Everything she had been doing seemed as if she didn't like me; she was driving me crazy. I needed some attention.

“Am I bugging you?” I yelled.

“What?” she said back, still grooving.

“Am-I-bugg-ing-you?” I yelled again, pronouncing each syllable carefully.

She yelled back something I couldn't understand and so I figured I should just stop trying. All of the sudden, she lunged her body toward me and started to grind hard. She was very sexual, too. She put her ass up against my crotch and did the nasty grind that everyone was doing. I hated this kind of dancing. This kind of dancing was exactly what male culture had been wishing for all along. I bet this dancing originated out of frats: some guys just started humping some girl, and the next thing you know every

brother found a socially acceptable way to hump a sister. Hip-hop works so well here because you can't do this kind of dancing in country music. Step, step, step, step, count your step. I couldn't ever learn line dancing. Two steps, twist, two long steps, something, something. Country dancing isn't genetic. Hip-hop dancing, hump, hump, yep, pretty genetic. You might as well just take your clothes off and nail each other.

Justine wasn't thinking about the merging music subcultures. She was on me hard and we were twisting around and turning, and then we bumped into that Todd guy, who was dancing on the floor near us, and he was watching us. Todd moved up close to Justine and said something in her ear. Justine slowed down a little, but then she started to dance even more aggressively with me. It felt good, actually; I started to see the light, if you know what I mean. Basically, we were having sex on the floor. I tried to kiss her, but she was taunting me. Then I saw Todd's finger, from my side, motioning toward Justine. Justine immediately let go of me; she didn't say anything and she followed him. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it for a lot of reasons. But, yeah, I just couldn't believe she would leave that quickly.

Here's the story: Three weeks ago, I had a dream where I was walking in this mall with girls I had dated. I remember in the dream feeling really disinterested in my exes, but they, on the other hand, were trying to make me admit to them I really loved them. The next thing that happened was I ran into Justine. We started to talk and I felt this sensation of warmth. I don't want to go into the exact feeling, but I really felt like this was love. I then heard a voice telling me this was the girl I had been searching for. I know I sound crazy, but insanity seems to be a qualification for most religious experiences. Now, I've never really had a spiritual experience. I once had an experience

where a ouija board spelled the word “carrot” seemingly on its own accord. But that was as close as I ever got. I never knew what I believed about God. God just seemed an abstract thought that was really something you’d debate. But after the dream, I felt touched by a presence I had never experienced and I believed in my heart God truly was communicating to me. The next few days after the dream I was really shocked. I mean, I really had been disturbed; the dream really shook me up. I thought about Justine a lot. Every night after, I dreamt about her. I called her up just a few days later. I didn’t tell her on the phone I was living in a different state. I just told her I was around and would like to see her. We made plans and I flew down, after lying to all of my bosses and professors. Well to make the story short, I nervously met up with Justine and we really hit it off. The first night I kissed her, and the kiss was the best kiss I had ever had. The next night I told Justine about my dream, and I told her I lived in another state. I half expected her to flip out and think I was crazy. It would have been perfectly rational for her to respond that way. But she didn’t. She just kept kissing me. So for the past few days, I had no doubts about Justine and no doubts that this relationship was what God intended from my dream. So yeah, when Justine took off with Todd, I felt weird.

I didn’t follow after Justine, but I didn’t see any reason to hang around the dance floor anymore. Tommy was there by the bar, sitting by himself, and I ended up sitting next to him. He wasn’t aggressive or annoying. He acknowledged my existence by placing his hand on my shoulder, as if we were old buddies; at least he acknowledged me, which was more than what Justine seemed to be doing. He must have been a lonely guy; no one in the group I noticed ever seemed to want to talk to him, and when they did

talk to him, it was to get him to say something funny as if he was some clown. He didn't help himself much by being so obnoxious, but then again, we all want to be known for something.

"You haven't gotten jumped yet?" he asked.

"Was I supposed to?"

"Yeah," Tommy replied, waving his finger around the club, at first aimlessly, and then motioning to the bullpen, then to the dance floor, and finally landing on no one.

"Where is that asshole Todd?"

"Todd? Is there something I don't know?"

"It's stupid, man," he explained. "Justine and Todd have a messed up relationship. Every couple of months, some guy falls in love with her. She brings that guy to this bar, tempts Todd with him, and then Todd kicks the guy's ass."

"You've got to be fucking kidding."

"Nope, I don't kid about stuff like this; this is my life, see," Tommy continued. "Justine has been doing this with guys for years. She tries to make Todd jealous. Todd thinks he's going to be a great bull rider, so he says he won't commit to her. I think they've been going through life like this for almost four years. By the way, *she's crazy.*"

"Well, why hasn't Todd kicked my ass yet?" I asked. "I just saw him out on the dance floor."

"It usually happens during a slow song, but don't worry man. I've got your back."

Boy, what a comforting thought. In a place like this and wearing a pink shirt, it would take only a few seconds before every cowboy in the joint would be breaking my back.

I had to talk to Justine. My system felt like I had acid flowing in my veins; the feeling flooded my body. I just couldn't believe she would do this to me. This new Justine didn't fit. All day long, I had the image in my mind of her face when she told me she loved me last night. We were out in a farm field, and she was telling me that I was her first love and if she knew in high school how long she would have had to wait to have me, she would have gone crazy. She told me she loved me now, and we sat in a beautiful silence.

I kept searching, and I started to see most of the same people. By this time, the music had become mostly been upbeat, and then I heard the first few bars of a Whitney Houston song, and I knew this was going to be the indicator as to whether or not Tommy was telling the truth. I made myself obvious near the dance floor. I heard Justine before I saw her.

"I was looking for you," she said in her cute little voice. She tried to pull me to the center of the dance floor, but I tried to keep us near the sides. I kept complaining about the space and lied to her that I had a slight case of claustrophobia. She didn't know what the word meant, so I didn't stop her from swirling us romantically toward the center. I looked around, trying to see if Todd was lurking somewhere. I didn't see him, but I did notice a lot of people looking at me cautiously. You'd think during a cheesy song at this time of night when everyone was feeling the flow of alcohol, people would

focus only on their dance partner. But I could feel every other eye in the place watching me. I guess I got nervous, because I grabbed Justine's hand and headed for the door. She resisted slightly, glancing around the room as I pulled her out. We left the building entirely and stood out near the front exit. The security guards were all wearing yellow uniforms and cursing back and forth at each other. They handcuffed some poor kids who were claiming their IDs were legit.

I didn't want to be coy with Justine. I half thought of trying to make out with her just to see what would happen, just to see how far she would go under the pretense of the lie, but that would take all this in the wrong direction. I simply confronted her and told her everything Tommy told me.

"How did you hear that?" she said.

"It's all over the bar."

She seemed amused by my lie.

"Is it true?" I asked, trying not to believe what she was saying with her face.

She didn't reply, so I repeated the question.

Her face had the same expression as when we were sitting out by the farm field. Last night the expression was so beautiful I could see it when I closed my eyes during this day. Yet now, at this nasty dance club, the expression made me feel ill.

"But you have a degree in psychology," I said to her. Her schooling was one of the pleasant surprises I had found about her. But being psychologists doesn't mean people are free from bullshit behavior. Hell, most of the people I know who study psychology are in it for the self-medication. All around us were other couples. A few were making out, probably too much; they probably should have been in a room, or at

least in their cars. Others were arguing. You couldn't tell what they were saying, but you could hear the high-pitched whine, complaining about the lack of communication, complaining about other people, complaining about anything they could. They all looked pathetic. I guess I looked pathetic, too.

Justine and I had waited in silence long enough that something needed to happen: either she could say she was cold and wanted to go back inside, or I could say I was going to leave, which I was just about to do, or some asshole rodeo guy was going to spot me and then go tell Todd that Justine and I were making out outside. I guess we sat outside too long.

“What are you doing making out with my girl?” Todd yelled, rushing toward us.

Todd started to talk about something, some aggressive nonsense, and I couldn't follow along. He spoke so fast I couldn't pay attention to what he was saying, but I could pay attention to what he was doing, which was looking up at the sky, where the whites of his eyes were exposed as his pupils aimed upward. Justine disappeared somewhere around the time the crowd started to chant “fight.” Everyone was gathering for the local rite of passage, the opportunity for the males to authenticate their membership in the community. Todd kept talking some kind of nonsense, and he was obviously talking himself up because my reaction was not aggressive at all. His chest was puffed up and his arms were stretched out. All the guys around him were in the same puffed out posture, aggressive and pissed off. I loved how they had to talk it up before they were ready to do anything. They needed tough language to get motivated. It's funny how we use language.

Todd cursed a lot and spat before stepping closer. I said some things back, playing on the fact I was wearing a pink shirt.

“Why? You gay?” Todd asked.

“Normal men don’t know how to ride me.”

I was using language to distract him much like a bullfighter uses the cape to trick the bull, or something like that. Anyway, we didn’t talk for very much longer; the big first push came next. It felt like a high school fight. If it sounds like I wasn’t worried about getting into a fight, the truth is I was actually pretty excited. I wasn’t going to fight Todd because if I fight someone, I will try to kill them and it’s hard to hate someone that much. I’ve felt that mad once before, but I don’t like myself in that state. But I had to do something to Todd, and in this case, there was only one thing I’d actually do, which was kick him straight in the balls. I’m sure every guy Todd fought before was going to try to protect the honor of Justine or something silly like that, which I certainly would have done if her honor really needed to be protected. But I didn’t give a shit anymore.

But before I delivered the blow, I had to know Todd’s last name. I wanted to know the last name of the guy Justine was going to end up with, anyway. So I asked.

“Dodd,” said Todd.

“Your name is Todd Dodd?” I said.

“You got a problem?”

I then did what Bruce Lee always advised: do not aim for your target, aim past your target by at least a foot. I didn’t really try to kick his nuts; I tried to kick his chest, but through his crotch. I kicked. Todd fell. People screamed. I ran.

As I ran to my car, chased by screaming ex-wrestlers, football players and rodeo people, I really didn't know how the hell I was going to get out of this one alive. I heard a siren and the screams of a security guard gaining on me. My hand was in my pocket digging for my keys when miraculously a car pulled up to my rescue.

"Get in!" the driver roared.

The driver turned out to be an Icelandic model traveling these parts who needed real love. Well, actually, the driver turned out to be Tommy, my new best friend. He drove very fast and controlled the vehicle well, considering he seemed like he was the most drunk guy in the club. After we got away, we went and had dinner at an IHOP. Tommy confessed his sins and I confessed mine. Tommy's girlfriend had killed herself two years before, and Tommy could never shake the gloom of that experience.

"Now I just talk real loud when I'm drunk," Tommy confessed. "Maybe I'm just trying to get somebody to hear me." I felt pretty bad for the guy. He was the first person I told my whole story to, and I spent most of the time kicking myself in the telling. But Tommy stopped me from kicking myself by adding his own interpretation to the story,

"Blame God," he said. "He started it."

I liked how he said that, as if God and I were having a fistfight in the back of my mom's car.

The next day I was on a plane. I opened up my daily planner to look at what work I had to do next week. I had written a question mark next to every task I was supposed to do next week, just my small question about whether I would even need to bother with that work because I just might be moving in with Justine. I scratched out all the question marks. Nothing amazing was going to happen.

A Ghost Story

Part I

Grandma told me once never to be afraid of seeing a ghost. She said ghosts were just people who were stuck in their ways and too damn dumb to notice they were dead. I was thinking about her point about ghosts being dumb as hell when a pale woman in a white gown opened the door to my room--again. I had counted the number of hauntings since I inherited the nasty old house after my grandma's death a year ago. Tonight's ghost-woman sighting increased the official house tally to thirty-two.

A British parapsychologist, Fergus Sinclair, once made a documentary about my house, which you could still see on late night The Learning Channel occasionally. Sinclair used my house as a way to popularize his theory that ghosts could be seen on cameras as little floating orbs. I didn't know how I felt about the orb theory. Ghosts in Shakespeare weren't floating orbs; they were dead people. And all the ghosts I had ever seen in this house were dead people walking to and fro. The basement acquired a drunk colonel from the Civil War who played blackjack and spoke in a nasty way about peaches and cream tarts. The house was at one time an orphanage, and most of the ghosts who occupied the first and second floors were children. The nice thing about the children was

they never made any eerie sounds, because the orphanage housed deafs and mutes. On the top floor, which was where I had moved since my grandma's death, lived the only ghost we didn't know much about. Things moved from time-to-time, and loud noises came from unknown sources, but nobody had ever stayed on the fourth floor long enough to find out who or what they were. I was starting to think, without much doubt, that the ghost was a woman trapped in a love affair she believed had never ended. And she was driving me crazy.

The ghost woman stood silently by the window, as she had been doing every night for almost a week. I was really getting sick of her, too, as she was turning me into an insomniac. She was a gorgeous ghost: dark hair, pale skin, and the clean and wholesome face of an American beauty queen. This night, she was doing what she always did: mindlessly gazing out the window. I guess she was waiting for something. She looked like a romantic caricature from a 19th century British novel. I usually made jokes while she was in the room but nothing too lewd—probably she was a Victorian ghost. The only thing I said to her with any regularity was she needed to go to the light, but I figured she might have been one of the deaf orphans grown up because she didn't seem to notice me. I needed one of those kids who could talk to ghosts, a medium. I've met a couple of mediums, and they were intolerably sarcastic with no sense of humor. They had the same response to everything; if you told them someone you love died, they always responded in the obituary tone, "We don't live forever," which on some level was fitting. However, if you told them you just married the girl of your dreams, and that you'd spent six years trying to get her to love you, they'd still respond as if it was your death and say something like "You never really know anyone, anyway." I've always

believed that when people thought they knew everything was when they started to lose their humanity, and this problem seemed particularly true for people who saw ghosts all the time. The real issue for me was if I was willing to put up with a ghost woman or endure a night with a medium. It was not as easy a choice as you might think.

The ghost woman still stood by the window, but she was doing something I had never seen her do--scratching her ear. She then moved, while scratching her ear, out of my line of sight. I figured she was about to disappear, as she normally did. I usually watched her from under my blanket, so I was not sure if she had ever seen my face. When I pulled off the sheet, I sat up, thinking she was gone and now I would finally get some sleep. But as soon as I sat up, I nearly smashed my head into her body. She had somehow managed to stand on my bed and position herself right above me. I felt like I was having a night terror, one of those dreams where you are consciously awake, but your body can't move. For a moment, I thought maybe I was actually asleep and dreaming all this, even though I could still move my fingers. She stood above me for less than a second before she did something I never expected from the Victorian gal; she let her gown fall, revealing everything her ancient body offered. I didn't study her for long--not that I wasn't trying--but she jumped on top of me. There was a hand on my hip yanking on my pajama bottoms. There was another hand on my backside, pushing me up toward her hips. Then there was her mouth, stuck tightly on my mouth, sucking away on my lower lip. I pulled away. Her kiss did feel good, but I felt embarrassed and pulled away from her. She didn't disappear when I jumped out of the bed; she was still visible when I turned on the light; her arms were dramatically thrust out toward me as I closed the bathroom door and locked it behind me.

I was freaking out. My hands trembled. My heart pounded, rat-a-tat-ta-tat, right into my ears. I felt an icy puff of air in my chest; I couldn't exhale. "Breathe," I whispered to myself. "Breathe, breathe, breathe." As I spoke to myself to create a rhythm, I thought of a moment in my life I had been trying to block. I heard Shannon Milckel's orgasm above me, in a bed with that asshole baseball player. She said, "I – Love – You – Don't – Stop -- Breathe – Breathe – Breathe." Shannon didn't really say "breathe," but my mind at this moment mixed up the moments. I hunched over and fell on myself. I couldn't actually see Shannon, but I could hear her voice. She told me I was the only person in the world who really loved her voice. I was hiding under the bed; I was going to jump out and surprise her when I saw her shoes. Then I saw a pair of New Balances standing next to hers, and I could feel the bodies crashing onto the bed. The shoes were kicked off, and I could see her gorgeous little toes stretching outward, and I could hear her little voice first moaning and then screaming in a way I had never heard or even imagined. I watched the baseball player's feet as the two of them finished each other. I barely survived that week. I obviously didn't kill myself, but I came close.

Finally, I stopped thinking about the memory and thought about the word: breathe. I pronounced each of the syllables, and let the vowels flow through my mouth: Breathe. Breathe. Breeeeeeaaaaathethethe. Breeeaaatheeeee. Breeeeeeaaathethethethethe. Breathe.

I had enough control over myself to open the bathroom door. The Victorian love goddess had disappeared. I reached to turn on the light switch. "Click, click, click," the light switch said, but there was no light. I guess she took the light bulb. I rummaged through my room to see if anything else was missing. At first, everything seemed to be

fine, but then I saw a big problem. She had actually stolen something quite precious. I ran through the house. The house was empty: no ghost, no sounds, no moans. The ghost had in possession something very important to me, a small packet of sugar that I kept on the wall right above my pillow.

The next day was even more traumatic. Of all the people in the world I could possibly see, of all the people I could run into, it had to be Shannon. I had seen her a handful of times since that night under the bed, but all by accident. She never talked to me after that experience. Only three months earlier, she had confessed to me she thought I was the kind of guy she'd marry, but after her night with the baseball guy, we never talked again. We went from deeply romantically involved to absolutely nothing in one night. I tried to contact her, but she never called me back. The only times I saw her were when we ran into each other, and those experiences were always awkward—particularly for me.

I was at the grocery store, buying vanilla soymilk-protein drinks when I saw her with her husband, who was not the baseball player. I hid in another area of the grocery store, near the produce. I picked up an orange and pretended to examine it. I then walked near the registers to wait for her to leave.

“Hey!” a voice yelled. Shannon was calling me. She was rosy and plump. She looked like a pregnant Virgin Mary. I didn't know why she called out to me; I guessed she was just being polite. As soon as she saw me, she had that fake surprised look: you know—when the face contorts into a happy look, but the mind is emotionally reeling in some kind of fear.

“Hey,” I said. I started to back away quickly. “I’ve got to go. See you later.” I ran off. I didn’t even buy the milk. I just ran out of the store. Look, I’ve behaved this way for seven years. I’ve been awful. I tried to not feel this way, but I can’t control my reaction. It’s as if when I see her I get possessed by some kind of spirit that forces me to run off like a total moron. I hate it. I really hate it. I really, really hate it. And probably the worst outcome of the whole affair is that after seven years of nothing, I’m still in love with her. I go to bed at night and feel her presence in the bed with me. I started thinking about her sleeping next to me during that safe time of our relationship. For three years, we were inseparable friends, and I knew I wanted to marry her. So every night as I went to sleep, I would think about us sleeping in bed. When the relationship officially ended, my fantasy grew.

When I got home, I hid in my bed for a while. I worked out some of my breathing techniques. I got myself to stop thinking about Shannon. I calmed down. And then I started to think about Ghost Woman.

I ended up dialing a number. Cal, my best friend, answered. I told him the whole story of the ghost. I told him about her waiting by the window every night. I told him about her coming on to me, kissing me; I said “sucking my tongue,” and then I told him about her stealing my light bulb and my only present from Shannon.

“The sugar packet from Shannon?” he asked. He was referring to the note Shannon had written on the packet. “Don’t you see it, you stupid idiot!” he yelled. “This is a sign from God. God is doing something to get you past this experience. Has anything else happened?”

“I saw Shannon today.”

“God, it’s obvious,” Cal said. “What’d you do?”

“What do you think?”

“You stupid bastard—“

From then on, he offered caring advice, which I didn’t expect. He said if the ghost took the most valuable possession of mine, my possession of unrequited love, then I should prepare for some kind of absolution. He also reinforced an idea I was also tossing around: the possibility that this woman was actually some kind of goddess. I didn’t want to admit this thought because it sounded a little stupid. However, when you looked at the literature, which Cal and I discussed, then it didn’t sound that dumb. How many stories in the Western canon dealt with gods having sexual intercourse with humans? Tons. Well, how many of those humans were virgins? Most. And even if this was still a little too absurd for most people to accept, I did live in a house full of ghosts. Once you saw a ghost, you’d believe.

I liked his advice; of course, he spoke with a snicker, which annoyed me. On one level, I accepted the sarcasm because a ghost in the bedroom was simply absurd in any normal human vocabulary, but I expected a little more from Cal, since he had seen plenty of ghosts in my house. The only thing he wasn’t saying, which I was sure he was thinking, was that the ghost was really only in my head.

As soon as I hung up, maybe twenty minutes later, actually, I got another phone call. My friend started to moan, telling me that I should hook up with this girl whether she was real or not. I’d never kissed a girl in my life, which he said was pathetic, but he warned me to wear a condom. He thought if you could physically touch her, then you

could expect that STD's probably still exist. I hung up the phone. Fucking Cal. As soon as he got off the phone with me, he had to tell someone. And here we go, the phone started to ring. The phone rang five minutes later and I answered. As soon as I heard the heaving breathing from a different friend, I realized the circle jerk phone annoyance was on. I ignored the phone the rest of the day, but that didn't stop every guy I knew from calling. They left messages, fifteen in total, all trying to tell me how to behave in bed.

When I went to bed that night, I lay there, but I didn't close my eyes for a minute. Part of me was worried the ghost woman would know I had spoken about her to Cal, and that she would find me unworthy and not return. I had pretty high anxiety. I kept going over things in my head: how things might happen, how I should react, what her lips tasted like. She didn't show up until two in the morning and when she did show up, she didn't do anything abnormal. She just stood in front of the window and did her romantic ghost thing again, waving and looking melancholy, all Edgar Poe and not as Greek-goddess as I fantasized. I watched her wave to the person she was stuck fantasizing about and then walk away from the window toward the door. I quickly followed, hoping that maybe she was haunting some other room. I checked the house to see if she was anywhere else. I went to all the rooms: the bathrooms, the basement, the kitchen, both living rooms, the den, the library, I checked the doors. Nothing. She was gone.

But when I came back to bed, I saw that all was not lost. In the center of my bed, was a lump--a figure under my covers, and on the floor a discarded white gown. I tried not to think. I wanted to act. In moments of action, thought is not helpful, and this was certainly one of those moments when thinking too much would slow me down. I wanted

to get in that bed--I really did--but I was thinking about how different I was from most guys. In this situation, most guys' blood would fill with sexual rage; I was freaking nervous. Suppose this girl really was some famous nymph; was she just going to want to cuddle? I wasn't sure I wanted to go all the way.

I did finally take a step forward. I felt like I was the ghost, moving quietly and creeping toward the bed. I reached the side of the bed furthest away from her body. I came a little closer, lifted the blanket, and really was about to commit, when a prick friend called. I just shouldn't have answered the phone. I answered it in the bathroom, locking the door behind me. I knew I blew it. Helen of Troy wanted a real man. A real man didn't answer the phone.

"Wear those lambskins!" a voice I recognized yelled in the receiver. It was one of my fucking friends. He advised I use lambskin condoms because they would be more natural for a Victorian than latex.

"You just blew it for me," I said.

"Put it on. Is it on?"

I hung up the phone. It rang again. I shouldn't have answered, but I wasn't ready to walk back into my room and after the phone rang four times, I got annoyed.

"Think Civil War," a different voice said. The caller disguised his voice but I was sure who it was. "All I'm saying is that everyone had something back then. There was no sex education. Why do you think the girls died so young?" I could hear everyone in the background laughing.

I slammed the receiver down and pulled the plug from the wall. I should have done that in the first place. I stood two inches from the wood of the door. Screw those

guys. I was going to do this. I disrobed. I mentally tried on the lambskin, but just from the unnatural shape of the packages, there was no way I'd even open them. If the ghost had a disease, as my asshole friends jested, then I was simply going to get it, too. If the disease left a mark, then let it leave a mark.

The second kiss was much easier on me. I felt her mouth better this time. I forced myself to stay open minded. I didn't have a flashback. Then more things happened between us, and at some point I liked what was happening. Then at some point I became completely aware of what was happening, and I had to pay attention to every tactile move, every touch, just like I did when I wrestled. I was never a good wrestler. Whenever I competed with someone, I would be too self-consciously aware of what was actually happening to just get my head in the game and win. A voice in my head liked to narrate everything, and at this moment, the voice spoke loud and clear. The voice distinctly noticed that I had my hand on the ghost's hips, pushing them toward me or that my mouth was touching her cheeks or then it narrated itself talking. The voice said, "And now I wonder why I am talking and paying attention to myself when I should be focusing on her mouth. Her mouth is wet. And I'm aware of myself kissing her mouth. Now I am aware that I am aware of myself kissing her mouth. Does that mean I am still kissing her mouth? Where am I really? Am I really kissing her mouth? Or, am I where I am most aware? Maybe the problem is that I am not really kissing her at all, but kissing a figment of my imagination."

Then my narrator noticed something more disturbing. The ghost had eyebrows that I seemed to recognize, familial, like my dead grandmother's. More than in her

eyebrows, I started to see other familiar patterns, in the lines of her face and the curving of her eyes. Was there a resemblance to my grandmother, I wondered? It could have been the light, but I was grossed out enough to back off. “Grandma,” I asked. But when I saw her better, I realized she didn’t look like my grandma at all. What in the hell was my mind doing to me? There I was, about to have intercourse, and my mind erroneously created some incestuous anxiety. I didn’t know how any time in a psychologist chair could cure my head, and now I had to deal with the fact that I just called this gorgeous ghost goddess my grandma. Thankfully, the ghost was deaf. She must have seen my lips move because she put her index finger over her mouth. Then I felt the touch of paper against my arm, and looking down I saw the packet of sugar in her hand.

The woman touched her tongue to the edge of the packet and then bit off the corner. She poured the contents of the package into the palm of her hand and placed her hand near my mouth. I dipped my tongue in the pure sugar. The refined sugar was so strangely potent, so rich, that the muscles in my mouth seized slightly at the taste. I had often wondered where the sugar had been processed. I sometimes thought it came from some beautiful field in Hawaii. The ghost woman copied my movements, dipping her tongue into the powder. She threw the empty packet in the trash, and I let her. I was allowing myself to let go of the past. I was electric; everything in my body seemed to be moving in an extraordinary sense, in a way I had never experienced before. I guessed this was the sensation of moving forward. The woman was connecting her body to mine, as if her spirit were entering and using my body. I deserved this, I thought. I had been cheated because I chose to remain pure to my true love. I never cheated on the memory

or recreated a new love to replace Shannon. The purity of my love only truly could be acknowledged by the spirit world, not by the crass real world.

The haunted fourth floor room in my house began to speak. First, there was a small clatter, as things in the room began to rumble, but then there were louder commotions. The shelves began to open and close on their own. The clothes scattered around the room started to fly around. The window shutters slammed themselves against the wall. I had seen a room react this way before in the past, and it had scared me. I wasn't scared this time. I took off my clothes.

She, on the other hand, didn't react as I expected. She wasn't eager to touch me; she wasn't floating or glowing. She just disappeared. She wasn't anywhere in the room. When I realized she had actually disappeared, I hunched over on my bed. I sat in the silence for many moments before I even noticed an odd whirring sound repeating itself over and over. The sound was constant and loud enough to get me to stand up and investigate. I looked out the window and noticed quite far away a parked yellow Geo Metro with its lights flickering on and off under one of the lampposts. From this distance, I could detect a few features of the driver. The driver was a woman. She had dark hair, and she was wearing a white gown.

That's when I sprinted as fast as I could.

I didn't make it out to the driveway in time. I stood at the doorway and the yellow Metro sped off--well, as fast as a Metro could go. The ghost woman didn't drive very well. She ignored the first stop sign, almost killing herself and another driver who was turning onto my road. The other car had a Domino's Pizza sign on the hood. It

pulled into my driveway, and the driver awkwardly pulled out a dozen pizzas or so, and requested \$75.71. I had an empty shotgun near the front door. I ended up not paying.

Even though I had been tricked, all I could think about was the sugar packet; it was now nothing more than a torn piece of paper. Shannon's words were cut in half. The grains of sugar were all over the floor. Any special meaning the packet may have contained was lost. Her words on the packet were the only words of love she had ever communicated to me. She had told me many times she thought I was the perfect person to marry, but the packet was the only tangible object that represented her thoughts. She gave me the packet from Chuck's restaurant on the last night I saw her before going to college. We were on a date, and I was young and scared, and I knew I had to kiss her. We went to a movie. We talked about our relationship. The night was so great. We went to a farm field out in the middle of nowhere. I held her for a while, and I knew she was waiting for me to kiss her. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. My narrator kept talking, and I talked myself out of it. I totally blew it. Finally, she said she had to go home. I drove her and hugged her in front of her house. I kicked myself all the way home but kept telling myself that the kiss would come; it would come: she and I meant too much to each other for the kiss never to come. I resolved I would kiss her the next time I saw her, which turned out to be the same day she slept with the baseball player at the party.

The next day, Cal showed up at my house during his lunch break. He said, "I was thinking about your house, and I think there's something special in the fact that it's

haunted. Because you have ghosts, and because I know that there are ghosts here, I'm not as depressed about the trite suburban world I'm forced to work in. I'm simply not afraid of the desperate life waiting for me because I know that there is something more we aren't aware of."

Cal was really only a 90% psychopath. He didn't have that extra ten percent necessary to dump bodies in lakes or use human skin to decorate furniture, or torture neighborhood pets with ice picks. But all those personality traits of narcissism, lack of empathy for fellow humans, delusions of grandeur and so forth, he had all those traits. I didn't have to think too hard to figure out who set me up.

I punched him in the face, which really hurt my hand. I think halfway through my punch he realized why I was pissed off and he started to laugh; it was an aggressive sort of egomaniacal laugh, a real loud staccato yelp. Once you exposed him in a lie, he couldn't keep a straight face. Instead of punching me back, Cal took off his shoe and started to swat me pretty intensely, forcing me to find something harder. The closest object was the answering machine. I'm glad I used the answering machine. I was pretty mad at the answering machine, anyway. Every time I hit him, the answering machine would report there was no one home to answer the phone. I heard the message more than ten times. I finally hit Cal so hard that I really hurt him. I took another swing and missed intentionally; that was when he started to threaten me.

He yelled, "You have to stop now, or I'll call the police. You've had your chance to get back at me. I don't give you permission to hit me anymore. I'll call the police; this is manslaughter. You invited me into your home, and you cannot attack me as an

intruder.” He actually said more than this, but only a tenth of what he said was worth hearing.

He defended himself. “You’ve been hung up on Shannon for almost seven years now. I had to do something. Seven years is a big number. Seven years is a scary number. Seven years is a drastic number. So I did something drastic. I had to do something if I’m going to call myself your friend. And in the name of friendship, I’m not sorry.”

Then Cal was cheesy. He reached out his hand as if we had officially reconciled, and I guess he thought we would hug and then later tonight I would go have a pizza party with him. I didn’t move. I didn’t respond to his outstretched hand. I kept my hands crossed and shrugged him off.

“You know this is kind of like rape,” I said.

His justification for his actions, incredibly enough, was Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave.” Cal argued, “In order for a person to see the truth, a person must be physically pulled out of the cave of ignorance. A person is incapable of leaving ignorance on his own accord. He needs a friend to help him.”

“And a prostitute,” I replied.

He didn’t laugh.

I could tell Cal that I never slept with the girl, whose name he had yet to tell me. So, in a sense, I had never really left the cave of ignorance, but I resisted my temptation to argue. I had too much anger to argue. I had to stop this argument because there was no point; he wasn’t going to change or even feel sorry for me. I ended the

argument the only way I knew how; I hugged him. And then I said with as much fake sincerity as I could that he had changed me.

“Really!” he said.

I shook my head. And in that very moment I ended one of the main purposes of his life.

I later went to my room in the attic and sat on the bed, covering my head. I lay in bed and started to drift, and then an answer suddenly popped into my head. The answer was to two important questions. I had always wanted to know why Shannon never spoke to me and why the ghost interrupted my experience with the false ghost woman. I could see a reason. I was supposed to be with only Shannon because we were true loves. Shannon knew this fact, and when she cheated on me, she was ashamed of her action. Instead of talking to me, she tried to avoid me, so she didn't feel the guilt of what she had done. Shannon was my other self, my true love, my better half, and I lost her because I was too much of a coward to kiss her. When I found her with someone else, I was too much of a wimp to fight for her. I just let it end between us. And what did she do? She did what any woman who had given up on real love would do—she chose comfort. She married a man who made her feel good materialistically. I was at fault for allowing her to make this choice because I didn't fight. We were both sinners in the eyes of true love. We chose the easiest options.

I stood up from my bed--no, I actually jumped off my bed in an excessive panic of paranoia--I had to find the little bits of the sugar packet. There were a few ants, obviously stealing the minute pieces of sugar that had slipped through my hand last night. The pieces landed mostly around the trash bin, and I carefully placed each piece in my

cupped hand. The dust on the floor had mixed with some of the pieces, so some parts had changed color. I tried to clean them off, but there was no real way to fully remove the grime.

Plainview

“Clarence, may I put my hand in your pocket?” the town of Plainview did ask, though without waiting for an answer. Already his hand was inside the front, left pocket of the ghost town’s pants. Clarence (officially, Clarence, TX) had on his little woolen gloves, which were wrapped around a fishing pole trying to catch fish in a pond that didn’t have any fish (a little fact Plainview never told anyone). Plainview wasn’t wearing any gloves, and, even though his hands weren’t cold, he pretended they were, so he could get closer to Clarence. But there was a dilemma in Plainview’s ruse. If he kissed Clarence and Clarence wanted more, it was possible that Plainview would have to take off his shirt--exposing his swollen, bulbous white mass. On the other hand, Clarence could reject Plainview. They had been hanging out for years, and Plainview was very concerned he had never made it fully clear to Clarence he felt more than just friendship for the little ghost town. The only way Plainview would ever know was if he tried something.

Plainview tried to consider his problem rationally, but standing so close to Clarence made it very difficult not to get caught up in the moment. The moon was as large, bright and full, the outside air was fresh and romantic, and the smell of Clarence’s

hair was inviting Plainview to move closer. He let his inhibitions go; his face drifted toward Clarence's neck. The kiss was soft and wet. Clarence did not immediately recoil, which allowed Plainview to let his lips linger on Clarence's skin for a moment.

Plainview closed his eyes and waited for Clarence's response.

Plainview was taking a big emotional risk with this kiss. Life had not been going well for him. He had a list of problems: He hadn't ever had a relationship, or even a date for that matter; he lived miles from any city, so life consisted of always the same, dreary small town nothing-to-do lifestyle. Plainview was fighting neighborhood towns that wanted to use him as a stop point for crystal meth distribution and production. The football team hadn't won a game in years. The last winning season was more than fifty years ago during World War II, but that was only because the team consisted of women. The head coach was an alcoholic and had a problem with touching the players in an inappropriate manner. The growth rate of the town was not increasing or shrinking. The number of people moving into the town was the same as the number of people leaving each year, but those that moved into the town did so because of financial problems, whereas those who were leaving did so under the pretense of forging a better life. Plainview personally would have been happy if everyone left or if the economy went to piss, because then eventually the town could become a ghost town like Clarence. Then Plainview could do what he wanted and walk anywhere he pleased. As for now, he was stuck, sad and overweight. If Clarence were not attracted to him, Plainview wouldn't have anyone left.

Clarence didn't move at first. Plainview could feel the whole town's body freeze. Finally, he spoke, "I thought we were just friends, I don't want to ruin our friendship."

“But Clarence!” Plainview replied. He tried to think of something to say but was stuck on the words. He wanted to tell Clarence he loved him. He wanted to tell Clarence he thought about him all the time. He wanted to tell Clarence he wanted to walk around with him for the rest of eternity, but he just didn’t know how.

Clarence put down his fishing pole, said goodbye, and headed off into the moonlight. Plainview waited until Clarence was across the state border before he berated himself. “Stupid,” he yelled smacking his body until it welted. “Stupid, Stupid, Stupid, Stupid!”

When the doors of the only fast food restaurant in town opened at the early six o’clock hour, the Dairy Cream’s manager didn’t look surprised to see the hungry town waiting impatiently to make an order. It was common for Plainview to hang around the second rate fast-food restaurant and snack all day. Plainview’s morning order consisted of eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes, potato cakes; the town pleaded for some items from the lunch menu, but the manager had to refuse due to a store policy that allowed the sale of lunch items only after 10:30 a.m. With each bite, Plainview consumed himself with new worries of what could happen to his relationship with Clarence. Clarence might never return. Clarence might have left for good, leaving Plainview stuck alone in this place. Clarence could always find someone new. Mexican towns were always interested in dating American towns and Clarence wasn’t really worried about the language barrier.

The worries began to subside when the triglyceride levels in his blood forced the body to shut down certain mental operations and concentrate on digesting the food material in his stomach. The lull of sleep beckoned Plainview to rest. Plainview soon

left the restaurant and fell down on the vacant parking lot. His last thought before sleep focused on how nice it would be for him to have cardiac arrest; he could wake up dead and finally be free.

Everything else in the town was normal. The slow moving inhabitants of Plainview headed to their required places of business at the same time they did on any other morning, give or take five minutes. The farmers were tending the land. The insurance people started to make their calls. The teachers were checking attendance, although antsy for summer break.

Everything that day was the same as it had been for months, except for one slight difference. State Highway 32 was under construction, so drivers on their way to the interstate were detoured through Plainview. Along the detoured route came a yellow bus. The bus bore no names of a school or of a church or of anything to indicate who owned the vehicle. The bus did belong to someone important, though, at least depending on your religious point of view. Her name was Meenakshi Suprananiyan, and many Indians proclaimed her as the daughter of God. Her bus stopped at the Dairy Cream drive thru and everyone on the bus gazed at the sleeping Plainview. The overweight town breathed heavily, snored, and suffered from sleep apnea. He'd take in long breaths, hold the air for a disturbing amount of time, and then, finally, exhale, creating a horrible death-rattle like sound, which was very distracting and woke up the napping Indian avatar. Meenakshi Suprananiyan's disciples were obviously perplexed, mumbling amongst themselves, and did not know how to react to the situation, for they had not seen very many small American towns, since the busy tour concentrated on American cities. Plainview was

obviously suffering, but no one knew what the right action was, and dealing with an entire town's emotional problems was never mentioned in any handbooks. Meenakshi Suprananiyan read their thoughts. "Do not fear," she said quietly as she stepped off the bus.

Meenakshi Suprananiyan was careful when she woke him, lightly touching his body until his eyes opened. She dabbed some herbal ointments on the nasty red shingles growing on his exposed body. She then handed the town one of her pamphlets.

The town glanced over the main heading: "Do you know where you will go when you die?" The thought of that particular question twisted his guts.

"Clarence, Texas."

Meenakshi Suprananiyan understood many things in her life but had no idea what the town was talking about. Meenakshi Suprananiyan had been one of the few religious people to predict the Y2K computer millennial switch would have a minimal effect on the world at large. Meenakshi Suprananiyan was born from a father who had no testicles. It wasn't a virgin birth but still a miracle of fertility. Her fame as the dualistic counterpart to Christ spread throughout the land, and she was foretold to be the daughter of God. As the new Christ incarnate, Meenakshi Suprananiyan was known for her special healing powers, which came in the form of a spiritual hug. She had been known to raise the dead, cure diseases, and make good wine. She hugged thousands of people each month, but she had never met an American town before.

"You are suffering now," the divine woman said, twisting her hands in a circular fashion while she spoke. "You will not be happier after you're dead, just in a different place. Clarence, Texas will not make you happier."

“You don’t know anything about me and Clarence,” the town replied. Just saying the name “Clarence” burned red in Plainview’s heart. He looked up at the deep blue sky, shading his eyes from the boiling sun, and pondering the small cotton balls flying through the air. He mouthed a poem he had intended to recite the first night of their honeymoon:

Dust and ashes don’t make us.

Only the thoughts of all people and what they say in their hearts create us.

You and I join of our own accord and free ourselves from our lot together.

We free ourselves.

Plainview knew he was being absurd to think of such a thing as marriage with Clarence, but he couldn’t stop his fantasies. Plainview imagined himself gallantly wearing the white gown as a gesture to indicate he would accept the feminine role just so the smaller Clarence could feel more masculine. He knew Clarence was self-conscious because he was so short. Plainview loved to try on Clarence’s surname as his own. “Hello,” Plainview would say to himself, “My name is Plainview. Plainview, Texas.”

“We spent a lot of time together,” Plainview admitted to Meenakshi Suprananiyan, interrupting his own thoughts. “Clarence would actually choose to hang out with me over other towns. His eagerness to spend time with me made his intentions seem obvious. Every other town knows that Clarence never kissed another town. I never kissed another town, either. I figured there would be an attraction; it just would take a long time for us to get together. I die thinking I’ve scared him off completely.”

Plainview turned his body away from Meenakshi Suprananiyan. He curled his body up into a ball, as much as the shape of his body would allow; he then screamed. It was a silent scream, a soul scream--the cry of the hopeless.

Meenakshi Suprananiyan looked at her watch. She knew what the town's problem was, but she was due in the city by evening. If she chose to help the town, she'd likely be late for her evening religious meeting in the city. Her disciples began to pour out of her bus and roam around the parking lot like ants foraging for food. Their voices quietly chanted her name and, reciting prayers, and she heard them all. The disciple who was most concerned with business issues wrote her name on the bus in black Magic Marker.

As far as avatars go, Meenakshi Suprananiyan hadn't made much of a name for herself. In business terms, she had marketing problems. Her first problem was her name. It was too long, and there was concern amongst her camp she was going to be nicknamed "Super Mean," because of the length of her name. Her second problem was there actually was another Indian hugging guru with whom Meenakshi Suprananiyan was continuously confused. Finally, Meenakshi Suprananiyan's divine birth was authenticated by a supposed sterile man—he had no testicles—but her miraculous birth didn't ring with the spiritual resonance that something like a virgin birth created. The conversation on her bus last night was not angry, but it certainly was heated. The disciples were becoming more aware of the business problem. Meenakshi Suprananiyan needed to be a brand in America if she were in any way going to be effective and memorable. But a solution became apparent on this day. The disciple who was most concerned with business suggested that she should be known as the messiah who could save not just people, but entire towns. Meenakshi Suprananiyan was so excited by the idea, she wept with joy. She called to her disciples. It was time to set up the tent.

To Meenakshi Suprananiyan's group things like appearance and presentation seemed superficial, and the tent showed signs of wear. The poles were battered and didn't fit together easily; the ends had lost their circular shape. The tent color had become off-white after exposure to so much dust; it had not been cleaned since it was purchased. Inside the tent, the subtle stench of body odor became overwhelming, even when the tent was mostly empty.

Before anyone was invited in, the disciples gathered to chant. One of the devotees spoke to Plainview, telling him he could come enter the tent soon, and specifically indicated that the ceremony was only for him. Plainview was disinterested in this news. He had a package of chocolate raisins, which he chewed slowly, carefully tasting the outer layer of the candies. He didn't like the raisin part, but he swallowed it anyway. The candy helped him to not think about Clarence.

Finally, Plainview was invited into the tent. The town agreed to enter, mostly out of a slight interest in seeing something different, and stood slowly, raising his large mass with both arms until he could walk to the closed tent. When Plainview lifted the veil of the tent, the welcome from the disciples galvanized his body. For a moment, he choked on a raisin and brought his hand to his chest to force it through. By the time his body recovered from the candy, his knees started to go out from the anxiety of thirty people staring at him with this much excitement. He actually crawled forward on his hands and knees. The power in his legs was simply gone. The disciples placed a wreath around his neck, fed him rice, and gave him hugs, all the while moving him closer and closer to Meenakshi Suprananiyan, who sat in the center of the room in a very fine looking chair.

Meenakshi Suprananiyan looked like a queen, missing only a scepter, crown, or fine looking clothing (she was wearing a plain tan frock). Yet she had grace, and Plainview was surprised that the cute Indian woman with whom he had spoken only moments ago now emanated such power as to merit the term “royalty.”

The hug didn't happen at once: first there were prayers and services and chants and speeches, but the ceremony was not boring, as were most church services Plainview attended. People were laughing and crying and appeared to have a real excitement for life. And all the while, Plainview was entranced by the Meenakshi Suprananiyan's face. He looked at her and couldn't tell if she was looking at him, too, but he really liked looking at her face. Then, the voice of a disciple finally told him it was his time. Plainview wasn't fully aware if he had walked up to the steps near Meenakshi Suprananiyan or if someone had helped him, but he felt a sense of euphoria as he stood directly in front of her. A follower whispered into his ear, “You may ask her any question. Would you like for me to write it on paper?” Plainview didn't think very long about what he wanted to ask. He wanted to know about Clarence.

Meenakshi Suprananiyan opened her arms. As Plainview's body lunged toward hers, Meenakshi Suprananiyan whispered into his ear, “God did not intend for you to love just one town. God needs more from you than for you to love only one town. God wants you to love all so that God may love all through you.” Plainview, meanwhile, was concentrating on her touch. Her arms slid back and forth on his back, reassuring and calming. The tears welled up, drowning him before he knew he was crying. He pulled his body back and looked into her eyes once more. He felt himself swimming in bliss.

There were no thoughts, only compassion. The divine mother had revealed herself to Plainview, and Plainview adored her. His body began to shut down.

Plainview's experience didn't end when his body collapsed. He envisioned himself stepping into the small pond where Clarence and he usually fished, and then allowed his body to disappear into the water. Plainview was not a strong swimmer, but he felt very natural in the water and began to move his arms. He could feel his body moving forward. He was swimming and it was wonderful. He kept moving and everything in front of him was at first dark, but then he saw a small pocket of light in the distance. Plainview felt he was swimming in a cave. He moved toward the light, the most beautiful light he had ever seen. By the time Plainview was completely surrounded by the light, he felt more at peace with himself than he ever had felt. Plainview stayed in this place for a long time but finally was wakened by the voice of a disciple.

“I thought this was a Dairy Cream. They don't even have ice cream.”

Plainview looked around and saw that all that had happened was real. He studied the bus for the first time. He saw Meenakshi Suprananiyan's name scribbled faintly in black marker on the side. “I love you, bus!” Plainview yelled out. A disciple walked by smiling. “I love you, disciple!” he yelled. “I love you, smile!”

When Meenakshi Suprananiyan heard Plainview's happy voice, she came to him.

“I feel—” the town said, trying to find the words to speak but too overcome by emotion to do so. The thoughts of his life, his weight, his sadness, and his place in the world all had suddenly been completely reverted, inverted, shaken up and left somewhere he had never been. “I feel so good,” he said. “Can I have another hug?”

Meenakshi Suprananiyan held the town for a while and then whispered in his ear, “There will be many more hugs on the bus. Come follow me.”

Plainview held her hand so tightly it became white, but he started to loosen his grip as the important question surfaced. “But how can I do that? I’m a town. I can’t leave. It’s just not possible.”

“What do you mean?” Meenakshi Suprananiyan asked.

“I’m just a town,” Plainview explained. “I exist here because this is where people know who I am. I can’t leave where I have a name because that’s just how it works. I don’t make the rules, but I know I can’t walk past the highway. I don’t understand the rules, but those are the rules.”

“You can’t leave at all?”

Plainview shook his head “No.”

Meenakshi Suprananiyan’s pleasant expression left her. Technically, she had made a significant mistake. Her hand became clammy, and she withdrew just as Plainview noticed the moisture. Her problem was this: she had changed the spirituality of a town who had been emotionally hurt and now needed deep spiritual guidance. The town had to be with her to receive the right guidance so he ultimately would become well. Any time she threw a ceremony for any person, he immediately became her disciple by choice, but she had never worked with an entire town before. She didn’t know about the rule that towns were stuck. She kissed Plainview’s face and then went to the bus to find some solution.

The option she was forced to choose was one she had never fully supported philosophically. The idea behind creating a work booklet appeared good in writing, with

meditation exercises and prayers and daily advices to help new devotees lead a spiritual life with Meenakshi Suprananiyan when they could not follow her. But Meenakshi Suprananiyan knew the kind of spirituality she provided could not be artificially reproduced. Pamphlets were only acceptable as advertisement, but a workbook, she thought, could be harmful to a soul if used incorrectly. She reviewed the booklet once more, thumbing through the easy-to-read pages.

When she returned to the town, she placed her hand on her heart and handed the book to Plainview. “I am here,” she said. “To find me, visit this book daily.”

She hugged him once more and pointed at her watch. “I’m already late!”

The town didn’t say anything. He pretended to act strong. He sat up as straight as he could and attempted to cross his legs to fit into a lotus position.

“In six months,” she said as she climbed on the bus, “I will return.” Meenakshi Suprananiyan’s eyes were wet as she left Plainview. She mouthed a small prayer as she drove away.

Communications between Meenakshi Suprananiyan and Plainview were quite limited from that point on. Over the course of six months, Meenakshi Suprananiyan knew of what was happening with Plainview only from news stories about the town or from the three handwritten letters Plainview mailed to her, which indirectly found their way to her, though months late.

The first news she received had been incredibly positive: the town was winning at football. The first article followed the heartwarming tale of the head coach who proclaimed he had a vision during a church service that his team was going to win the

state tournament. So inspired was he by the dream, that he kicked alcohol out of his life “like a good punter kicks the ball between the big T.” The coach also encouraged the town to change the team name. Plainview went from the fervent *Puritans* to the unusual *Gold*.

There was more news. Plainview wasn't just winning games; they were dominating the sport. In those first games of the season, the scores were very uneven: 35-10, 47-11, 53-23, and 67-03. Then there was the match against their rival, Fairmont, a team they hadn't beaten for twenty years. Everyone expected Fairmont to stop Plainview's momentum. Instead, Plainview destroyed Fairmont's defense. The score was unbelievable, 112-3. The sports feature joked Plainview had gone from “the baddest” team in the state to the “the *Baddest*.”

The next news article was buried in the state paper, primarily because the story was not about sports. But Meenakshi Suprananiyan was aware the story was more important because it showed Plainview was trying to learn new things and expand his mind. The school board unanimously voted to update the textbooks to 1987--pretty good for a rural school. Although the textbooks were still out-of-date by twenty years, it was a major cultural shift if you considered when the old textbooks were written. The English books were written in the fifties but didn't discuss authors past the 1850's. The math books had application questions that asked the number of Japs who could be killed based on the amount of rubber American factories could produce. And none of the old biology books had the “e” word in them anywhere (but neither did the 80's books, so this didn't change things much); however, they did have some chapters about comparative physiology.

The last news story to come out of Plainview was about the drastic change in the school's nutrition. The school of Plainview refused to buy from the food distributors who provided the reheated processed food most of the schools in the state chewed on. Plainview demanded fresh food that actually had to be cooked, not simply reheated. The school said nutrition had a lot to do with the improvement of the football team and was also one of the causes for the increase in test scores. Though the response from the town was quite legitimate, Meenakshi Suprananiyan knew why Plainview felt this way. He had simply changed his diet because that is what her booklet demanded.

The other form of communication that Meenakshi Suprananiyan received about Plainview came from the letters Plainview wrote. The first letter was written the same day Meenakshi Suprananiyan left but didn't actually get into her hands until a month and a half later. In the letter, Plainview appeared untaught: there were many misspellings (he even misspelled his own name) and there was little attention paid to mechanics, but the language expressed sheer joy. The town repeated over and over how happy he was to be alive and how he wanted to change his life so God might live through him. He said he felt freer in being an instrument for God than he ever felt in just being a town isolated and feeling no connection to the world. The rest of the letter made Meenakshi Suprananiyan blush. The language became romantic, or at least appeared that way. Plainview talked about how much he loved every part of her. He detailed all the parts of her body, and described the different ways he loved them. Meenakshi Suprananiyan blushed only slightly, and that was probably because she was used to this kind of language, which her followers used a lot when talking to her.

The second letter was written a month later, but arrived in Meenakshi Suprananiyan's hands three months after that. In this letter, Plainview's language was much more sedate. The passion, Plainview wrote, was as strong as ever, but the new challenge, he indicated, was finding a rhythm to maintain the passion without over exhausting his soul. Plainview said he wrote a lot in his journals and found this to be an effective way to express his feelings for Meenakshi Suprananiyan and also to contain those passions.

"I lost a lot of weight," he wrote. "The Dairy Cream is changing its menu. I've found that I like the taste of an apple more than hot dogs." Plainview had taken up running. He meditated and was finding out many important things about his life but could never remember the distant past. He said his heart had not ached for Clarence since the hug. However, his heart did ache for Meenakshi Suprananiyan. Plainview wrote he was happy his life was best used for God. He praised the booklet. He praised Meenakshi Suprananiyan, even sent her a little love poem. And told her he couldn't wait to see her again.

The third and final letter had been written only a month and a half ago, but Meenakshi Suprananiyan read it a week before she finally visited the town. The tone was more muted than that of the previous letters but still enthusiastic. Plainview discussed his successes, of which he was proud, but he felt the best of himself was still in front of him. Plainview had used meditation to find himself and come to know his past better. "I always thought I was a town that just existed," he wrote. "I wondered if I came from somewhere, but there was never a town history, so I always wondered if I had just floated in space forever, always existing and never having a real beginning. But, then, during

one meditation, I saw the face, a ruffled European face, staring at me gruffly, and I was in a crib; I realized I had a founder.” The meditations continued, Plainview wrote, and he learned about his past and his history with his founder. Plainview explained that he learned he was not actually born in Plainview, but in a land out east and then traveled to Plainview in a crib with his founder. The founder had a firm belief in the ideas of the early Calvinists, but many of their ideas were too conservative for his tastes. The founder believed humans were so depraved humanity was going to go to hell no matter what they did and God was simply not going to save them. The founder was known for his skills with a Smith and Wesson and was a notorious Indian killer. “I still haven’t figured out why I had forgotten my founder,” Plainview wrote. “I’ll keep meditating.” The end of the note consisted of more praise and excitement about hearing the news Meenakshi Suprananiyan soon would be coming to see him.

Finally, after six months, thirteen days, two hours, and twelve minutes, Meenakshi Suprananiyan stepped into the pep assembly of the Plainview auditorium. The roar of the crowd prepping for the night’s football game blew her away. Meenakshi Suprananiyan had not yet seen the town, although she and her disciples excitedly looked for him all day. She pictured a lean, slick, and happy person, probably completely unrecognizable. He would probably find her before she found him, which would also be a good sign. So far, the pep assembly was like one of her revivals. She rarely found this type of enthusiasm in Americans unless they had been touched by the fiery spirit of God, or at a sporting event. The cheerleaders’ chants were overcome by the crowd, who yelled out the words before they did. After the cheerleaders did a routine, Meenakshi

Suprananiyan's disciples wanted Meenakshi Suprananiyan to stand in front of the stadium to perform some miracles. They felt this would be a perfect moment to express her power, but Meenakshi Suprananiyan rebuked her disciples. She informed them this was Plainview's day to shine.

Meenakshi Suprananiyan seated herself toward the back, near a man who was obviously a school administrator. He seemed to applaud louder than anyone, but he did so at the wrong times. When everyone was clapping, he was silent, but when everyone else was silent, he clapped. Meenakshi Suprananiyan enjoyed his enthusiasm. She tapped the man slightly and whispered to him he had the power of God in him.

His face went blank; all the enthusiasm in his face disappeared, leaving a zombie-like expression. He wedged his body in between hers and one of her disciples, and then put his hand on her leg and whispered his secret, "It's the crack!" Meenakshi Suprananiyan didn't quite hear his words because of the crowd, but that didn't matter because she was shocked at what he was doing with his hands, which were on her thigh and slowly moving toward a more intimate spot.

"Do you want some?" he asked.

Meenakshi Suprananiyan wasn't sure.

"Because I can get you whatever you want. The principal over there has the coke. Let's see, the guidance counselor has all the slow stuff: pot, sedatives, and any of those students can get you some Dr. Love."

While he spoke, his hand was moving at a slow, unnerving pace toward her crotch. Meenakshi Suprananiyan didn't stop his hand, neither did a disciple, although a few were watching intensely for a direction from their master when the loudspeaker

announced that the football coach needed to come speak. The man immediately leaped out of the stands and pushed his way through to the front of the pep rally. The crowd applauded as the man, who turned out to be the high school football coach, screamed into the microphone.

The coach at first spoke in an incoherent babble before Meenakshi Suprananiyan could understand what he was saying. “Give me your money. Give me all of your money,” the coach yelled. “It’s for the football team. Football brings in the funds that educate the children. Bring out the team.”

The football players stampeded out. Although they screamed like you would have expected, they were in a rage. They ran to the center floor but kept running, charging the stands. Within moments, the players and the fans were tearing at each other. Meenakshi Suprananiyan’s disciples pulled her out of the assembly before anyone else could get near her.

Meenakshi Suprananiyan went to the game later that night and found the events equally disturbing. One sober person from another team noted that Plainview’s players had gone from the “baddest” team to the “baldest.” Plainview’s team seemed coherent and controlled enough to make it to the field, but they weren’t really playing the game. Instead, they had two types of players: those who stood really far away from the ball and ran in some kind of incoherent pattern away from the other players, and the steroid-PCP-type players who never really played the game but viciously attacked anyone who came near them. Finally, the game was cancelled when one of the opposing team’s players had his arm ripped off.

After the game ended, the town was in shambles; people walked off the field like zombies, harassing each other and then screaming babble. It seemed to Meenakshi Suprananiyan the entire town was on drugs. Meenakshi Suprananiyan had to find Plainview. She rushed off looking for him in the streets. In her haste, she isolated herself from her followers.

Plainview was actually still around, but not in any way recognizable by Meenakshi Suprananiyan. These days Plainview came out only at night, which was the only time the town felt comfortable with the way he dressed—as a woman. He chose sensual clothes that accentuated his anorexic figure.

“Anything for a hit,” Plainview said seductively to Meenakshi Suprananiyan as she passed by.

Everything about the town had changed: the hair was longer; the body was fit, and even the tone of his voice was more seductive and feminine. Only one noticeable characteristic demonstrated to Meenakshi Suprananiyan that the woman she was now talking to was actually the overweight male for whom she had been searching. Meenakshi Suprananiyan could see patches of a nasty red rash all over the sides of the woman’s exposed tummy. The woman had shingles.

“Plainview?” Meenakshi Suprananiyan asked, carefully approaching the town.

When Plainview saw Meenakshi Suprananiyan, the town’s eyes welled up with anxiety. Then Plainview ran. Meenakshi Suprananiyan followed closely, but Plainview was very quick. At first Plainview seemed to be running aimlessly through the streets, which had become cluttered with drugged out citizens, but once Plainview jumped a

chain-link fence, Meenakshi Suprananiyan could see the town was running for a little pond. It was the small pond in which Clarence went fishing.

“Under normal conditions, I could run further,” the town explained, stopping and falling to the ground, “but I’m in heels.”

Meenakshi Suprananiyan was not a therapist or a priestess. She healed through touch, and so when the town was responsive enough, she wrapped her arms around Plainview. She could feel the dark trauma, a trauma she had not detected before, which was torturing the town. She used her healing powers to calm the town and to coax him into revealing what exactly the trauma was.

“It’s in my meditation notebook,” the town said, revealing a notebook hidden under a rock nearby. The town pointed to the last page, Meenakshi Suprananiyan read: “I was wandering out in the new land near the pond that I was named after. I decided to bathe in the pond there, which was full of all sorts of wildlife. There were many fish: carp, perch, and some bass. There were all types of fowl, turtles, and some snakes, which you had to watch out for. While I was bathing, I felt a pair of eyes watching me. When I looked to see who was there, I saw the founder waiting at the edge of the water. He wasn’t looking at me in a way I found comfortable. He was looking at me in a way that made me want to put on my clothes. But when I reached for my clothes, he put his hands out to stop me. He started to yell at me. He started to scream and then threw me naked out further into the pond. Then he took off his clothes. He finally did touch me— He never touched me when I was a child, and so I wanted his love. I just wanted to be held. But he finally touched me. He put his hands in a place they didn’t belong--I was actually born – not a boy—the founder had touched me, but not in the right place.”

Plainview cried as Meenakshi Suprananiyan read the last line. Even Meenakshi Suprananiyan wept--something she had not done her entire life because she had always felt suffering would meet its good end in God. But for her, this story seemed beyond even her power.

“And that’s why,” Meenakshi Suprananiyan said slowly coming to terms, “you allowed crystal meth to be produced in the town as a way to self medicate. You really needed me now, and I was a week late. So you turned to drugs.”

Before the town answered, a screaming voice was heard approaching. “I’ll choke it,” the approaching voice yelled. “I will kill the sickness.” It was the football coach. Meenakshi Suprananiyan threw the notebook into the pond. Meenakshi Suprananiyan was not helpless. She did know of a way to cure the town and to save what was left of his/her shattered being. All was not lost, but she had to save the town.

The coach was running toward Plainview in a PCP rage. “I do not want to be an extension of you anymore. I’ll kill you and then free myself,” the coach yelled.

The coach’s anger was soon pounding and pushing Plainview to the ground, rubbing the town’s face in the dirt. Plainview didn’t fight back as the head coach squeezed his fingers around the town’s neck. Plainview wanted to die. However, Meenakshi Suprananiyan was not ready for the town’s end. She wrapped her motherly arms around the coach’s body. Normally, the arms would have had a pleasing effect and calmed the savage mind and brought a centeredness that straightened and cleared the soul. However, the power in her arms mixed with the dying effects of speed and the potent aggression of PCP created a reaction Meenakshi Suprananiyan did not expect. For

the first time in her life, someone she hugged wanted to kill her. The hands of the coach were now around her neck, squeezing the breath out of her.

“Even New Age shit can’t save me,” the coach retorted.

Meenakshi Suprananiyan died very quickly, within less than a minute. Her body did not simply fall but floated toward the ground as if it were on the moon. Her body did not thud in the place where the parts fell but curled itself as if naturally into the position of a sleeping child free from the burdens of the adult world. At first, there was a silence, even from the rabid coach, but a morose and peaceless silence. Soon the silence was shattered by the sound of a disciple who was so connected to Meenakshi Suprananiyan that he could feel a part of his own conscious self die slightly when her spirit fled. His scream was followed by more screams, first those of other disciples, and then those of the townsfolk, who found the screaming a cathartic way to work out some of the more harmful drugs in their systems. When the police from another town arrived, they found the coach, the town, and the dead avatar curled up in balls next to one another.

Many months later, Plainview cast his line outward into the little pond. The moon was the size of a quarter, and Plainview had hoped that the moonlight would bring to the surface something from the pond’s depths. Or maybe even Clarence would pass through on such a night. So much time had passed. Plainview had gained all the weight back. All the drug therapy the town had undergone had suppressed one addiction only to reveal another. The Dairy Cream started to specialize in high saturate fats again. The football team was losing consistently, as it had done in the past. The school ended up having to sell the new textbooks to pay for all the drug rehab. Now the school didn’t even have

books for the students, well, except the Bible. After everything Plainview had been through, not much had changed. The population was still the same. The same number of people came and went. The only difference now was that Plainview wrote more.

The town reeled in the line. There hadn't been a single bite the whole night. But that didn't bother Plainview; the town was thinking out loud a new version of an old poem, titled "Song of Myself:"

I'm like a dead carcass in a place where it can't decompose, as if I'm drifting alone in space, not where I should be so that the right kind of bacteria could feed. I'm waiting for something to move me back to the natural processes, where things that live can also die.

Plainview didn't really like the poem because it didn't rhyme enough. The town's arm started to seize up but not because of biting fish. Plainview finally stopped reeling in line but could still feel the sensation of the movement, the circular movement repeating itself. Plainview felt that there was something important in the movements of fishing that many people often overlooked. The town's entire arm was numb. Of course there was a good reason why the town had been reeling in the line for too long. The pole actually had no line. Plainview stepped further into the water, enjoying the cool sensation of the mud, which always felt nice at this time of night. Plainview cast the pole out again.

The First Time I Left My Parents

Just as my chemistry teacher, Mrs. Broekhuysen, made it clear she needed me, my little brother, William, again mouthed a lippy, little, fart sound into the receiver, interrupting our phone conversation. I was desperate to stop the five-year-old monster, but I didn't have any effective options. William was at the age where he had to participate in every phone conversation in the house. I couldn't stop him, because my dad was at the obsessed-with-safety-age, which meant my dad placed a phone in every room of our big house. So far, no one could teach my baby brother it was simply rude to make disgusting noises on the phone, especially while two mature adults were trying to have a conversation. And for five tiring minutes, I had been having two conversations: one with my brother, pleading with him to hang up and let me be, and the other with my school superior, who was making an intimate appeal I leave suburban life with her.

"I'll be in room 212 at the Stay Inn in Fairmont," she said. "Will you come tonight?"

I held the phone cord and had been twirling it in knots. I couldn't get the cord to fit back to a normal position without unplugging the phone, so I accidentally left the

conversation briefly, leaving Mrs. Broekhuysen and William alone together. But when I finally was ready to respond, my littler brother told us something important.

“I like to eat my own shit!” my little brother yelled. We had heard this statement eight or nine times already. I knew my other brother, Joe, had taught William to speak that phrase, amongst others. Joe found the best way to relate to my baby brother was to treat him like he was a dog, and so Joe continuously taught William grotesque, new tricks.

“You shouldn’t talk like that!” Mrs. Broekhuysen replied forcefully to William, “It’s not nice. People will think you’re a bad little boy.” Her voice was suddenly authoritative, like the woman I first met, who griped me out for playing with chemicals in her lab.

“Yes ma’am,” my little brother said, but he didn’t change his behavior. He immediately started to make more disgusting noises.

I couldn’t stop the sudden sexual images flooding my mind. I almost didn’t want to believe Mrs. Broekhuysen had invited me to her hotel room. I envisioned her in bed. I wondered if she was in love with me.

“I should get off now,” she said. “You know where to find me.”

And in a small window of time, I tried to reply with an adequate response, but before I could say something poetic, like, “Nothing will stop me from being there,” or “I yearn for you,” the pain of my life, my other brother, Joe (who is younger than me, but by no means little), started to dial a number. Joe was the worst, and I knew I had to get off the phone as quickly as possible before he egged me into a fistfight, which he was now

strong enough to win. I tried to hang up, but before I could even say goodbye, Joe was already screaming to me to get off the phone.

I hung up the phone without formally saying goodbye. Even though I didn't officially inform Mrs. Broekhuysen I was coming, that didn't change the fact I was going to be with her tonight. I closed the door to my room. I had to think. I had a lot to do, and I had to think clearly. The first thing I needed to do was raise some money. I needed to sell everything I had that was worth anything—which wasn't much. I could have sold all of my CDs for a few hundred bucks. I could have sold my guitar and my amp: maybe another fifty bucks. I could even have sold my piece-of-shit truck: possibly worth a thousand bucks, but not much more. I might have enough money to fly to India, but that'd be it. We'd be homeless as soon as we got off the plane. I still couldn't believe we were actually leaving the country. It's one thing to talk about leaving society, but doing so is an entirely different issue.

I started to collect some items, and then found a picture of my parents. I wondered if I should take the photo with me. I didn't know how long it would be before I saw them again. I wasn't even sure if I should leave without telling them. I wanted to leave, because I wanted to prove to Mrs. Broekhuysen I was committed, but I felt wrong to just leave my parents without telling them anything. Then I found a photo of my grandpa, and I immediately placed it in the keep pile. I had been thinking of my grandpa a lot lately, mainly because he was the only man in the family who understood the importance of proving one's worth. When I was growing up, my grandpa continually humiliated me. He often compared his life experiences to my own. He told me many times of a test he had to participate in when he was on the wrestling team. His coach had

an insane way of doing things, but he told the team if they wanted to be good at wrestling they had to know how to kill things with their own hands. Grandpa would kill fish and fowl with his own hands, and squeeze the animals until they died. The team actually had to go noodle, catching huge catfish with their bare hands. And the final requirement for the team, which would never fly nowadays, was to have sex with a girl. I don't know how the coach orchestrated his test, but the sex requirement was the most important to join the team. My grandpa would say to me, "Whether it was right or wrong, at least you knew it was a real test of manhood. Those boys who made the team you respected because you knew they had it in them go out and prove their worth. But today, there ain't nothing you can do to test your manhood, except play video games." He thought my generation needed a good war.

When I walked down the hall, I had a hard time figuring out what exactly I would say to my parents. I would tell them I was going to leave, but I was hesitant about what else I should say. Should I mention Mrs. Broekhuysen? Should I mention India? The problem was they would want to know everything. And my relationship with my teacher looked pretty bad as it was. When I reached their door, I studied the same cheap, plastic wood fiber used for every other door in the house. I wanted something smart to say. I needed something smart to be convincing. I opened the door, still unsure.

My parents were lying on the bed watching TV. They had blankets pulled over them, and I could see only the shape of their large round figures silhouetting through. They had everything suburban culture offered, but I always wondered what else there was for them in life. I didn't know what they lived for besides just taking care of us. I never

wanted to grow up to be like them. I just didn't see the point in staying alive for that. Mrs. Broekhuysen and I always spoke about our fear of joining the sleeping middle class and having no real purpose in life.

I didn't want to tell my parents from their bedroom doorway with the television blasting that this would be the last conversation I would have with them for a while. I wanted to have a real conversation, during which we were all looking at each other sitting around the dinner table and speaking to each other with dignity. But I didn't know how to begin. I just stood in front of their open door like a dumb idiot.

"Why are you holding on to that damn novel all the time?" my mom asked, finally noticing my presence in the doorway. She sounded annoyed, normal for her.

I wasn't holding on to a novel. I was holding on to one of the greatest books of all time, a spiritual book, a book that explained man's meaning in the great chaos of nothingness we exist in, a book that calls out and connects humanity to the unreal force we call God, a book that challenges humanity to step forward courageously into a more pure relationship with each other. A damn good book.

"I see you holding that book all the time," Mom said, "like I see those idiot Church of Life kids walking around with their Bibles."

"It's a great novel," I said.

"A Stephen King book is a great novel?" my mom laughed.

"Not all of his books are bad," I said, thinking about some of the books. "Well, this book isn't bad."

"There's nothing wrong with Stephen King," my dad said. "He's won awards."

“If you read those books,” Mom said to me, “then you’ll probably end up like your dad.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” he said.

“Which means you’ll probably end up marrying someone like me,” my mom said. She thought she was being funny, but she was exactly right. I was afraid of following my parents’ footsteps.

I knew I needed to get on with what I had to say.

I started to speak, even though they were still sarcastically biting into each other. When I started to talk, I felt the strange sensation of asking for permission, as if I were asking them if I could go on a school field trip or if it were possible for a friend to stay the night. I said I had something important I needed to tell them. My mom was the first to respond. I could see she understood immediately I had something urgent to say. She simultaneously hit my dad’s leg, yelling at his resting body--“Our son has something to tell us!” The light of the room was still dim; the atmosphere was all wrong, but that didn’t stop me from talking.

“Everyone has always described me as the bored kid,” I said, which was true, not just of my family, but even of the community. In just about all of my classes, I was voted the most bored kid, but there were good reasons: I had grown up in the terribly boring small town of Plainview. There was nothing to do. In my vocal class, the only thing I liked to do was sit and look out the window at planes flying off in the distance. When I was thirteen years old, I used to ride my bike to intersections just to watch cars drive by.

“But I’m not bored because I want to be bored,” I continued. “I’m bored because I’ve never found my calling. I’ve never found my way into the world. I didn’t know what I was living for, but what I want to tell you is I’ve found my calling. I know what I’m living for.”

My mom’s expression changed. Her face went from neurotically concerned to overly excited. Her excitement distracted me slightly from my task, and I basked in her enthusiasm. I finally relaxed enough to continue. But I realized no matter how much I tried to tell them, there was absolutely no way they would ever understand that Mrs. Broekhuysen and I were leaving society to become monks. First, my dad wouldn’t understand why I couldn’t just be a priest, and they really wouldn’t understand why Mrs. Broekhuysen would leave with me. And as I stood there, in front of my parents, in their doorway, in a highly unsophisticated manner attempting to inform them I was going to leave for good like so many famous Indian gurus had done before me, I suddenly felt the strong need of finding a great lie. I tried to think.

The moment lasted longer than I could bear. I couldn’t come up with a good idea. I felt like I was watching a movie in which the camera would stay way too long on a person’s face before cutting.

“Go on,” my mom said, prodding me along.

“It is--” I said, trying to act like I was having a hard time expressing my thoughts.

“Marriage--” I said, formulating the first thoughts that came to my head, “counselor.”

“Marriage counselor,” I said, figuring it out myself. “I want to become a marriage counselor.”

“Really?” my mom replied. “Why?”

I didn’t have any idea why. I looked to my book for guidance.

“It’s here,” I said, tapping on the cover.

“In the Stephen King book?” my mom asked.

“Yeah, in the novel, there’s a cool character who’s a marriage counselor,” I explained. “I decided that might be a good profession to have.”

“Really?” my mom asked.

“Yeah and--” I said, stepping away from the door, “Joe is having problems with his girlfriend and I think I know how to help him.”

I had suddenly made a very good move. My dad’s eyes lit up. If there is anything my dad likes to discuss, it’s his sons’ relationship problems with girls. My dad immediately forgot my concerns and was screaming at the top of his lungs for Joe. Anytime any of us ever had issues with girls, my dad wanted to know everything. Once you tell him one aspect of your problem, he sucked you in and starts to give you every bit of shared wisdom he’d ever received on the subject.

When Joe arrived, I stuck around a minute to make sure Joe had to answer some direct questions from my dad.

“You got a girlfriend?” Dad asked.

Joe spoke in this low pissed off voice all the time. And even though I knew he was saying “yes,” he made the exact same sound as if he were saying “no.” Everything with Joe was a fight.

“They are about to break up,” I said. “She thinks Joe is too much of a nice guy.”

“What!” my dad replied. I backed away.

“I’ll get you back,” Joe said to me.

I started to go through the things in my room. This time I was serious. I made two piles: things I had to keep and things that would stay. I started with my shirts and felt a serious concern I’d never see some of my shirts again. I figured I could pack only so many shirts, and so I limited myself to ten, but I soon found I had five extra shirts I didn’t want to part from. So I packed them all. Then I moved on to other items: knives, toiletries, pictures, etc. I had more things than I could possibly have room for. I had to make a sacrifice. I separated my stuff into things I needed and things I wanted. I wanted everything, but when I made the sort, I had to close my eyes on certain things I knew were a part of who I was but were not necessary. This method kind of helped. The next thing I knew, I was sorting things based on what I sort of wanted, what I really wanted, what would have been wrong for me not to take, and the stuff I needed to bring.

When my parents slammed open my bedroom door, my room was an absolute mess. They stood rigidly in front of me with their arms crossed, unaware they appeared to me as mythical statues, metaphorically protecting the bounty of a city from robbers, murderers, and generals. I knew exactly why they were there. Joe smirked as he walked by the room, that bastard.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m going to leave tonight for India,” I said.

Even before they reacted, before they told me what they thought, I suddenly felt the deep touch of failure. I thought of what I had actually told them—“I’m going to leave for India.” I hadn’t given enough context. I had left too many questions unanswered. I

was stupid even to consider the possibility of leaving this house. If I were going to leave, I had to just leave. I wasn't going to get their blessing. I tried to keep packing, but felt the futility in the task.

They had a singular reaction—

“THE HELL YOU ARE!”

The force of their words blew my confidence. I felt the concrete that had barely been supporting me thus far flow from my joints, and I suddenly went from a man to a boy falling on the ground. I think I fainted, because I soon woke with my dad lightly tapping my cheeks. As soon as I could feel some strength, I lightly banged my hands on the ground. “Yes, I am!” I said.

“Is there someone else involved?” my mom asked.

“Mrs. Broekhuysen!” my brother Joe yelled from the hallway.

“No she's not!” I yelled.

“Then why was she on the phone just a second ago?” he said.

“Haven't you been snooping on me enough for one night?” I yelled back at him.

My mom's demeanor changed. She was delicate. She asked if Mrs. Broekhuysen were involved. Her tone made me feel as if I would not get in trouble if I told the truth. The confidence in her eyes made me feel okay to nod my head. I expected her to say something like, “Your dad and I are going to have to discuss this,” or something parents on sitcoms do. Instead, my mom transformed from a concerned parent to a monstrous demon. “That biiiiiiiiitttchch!”

And so for a second time, I felt the painful realization of what an idiot I was to think of having this conversation in the first place. I should be on the road right now. I

should be driving to the motel. I was a moron to think my parents would be willing to give me up just because I hated suburban life. My parents weren't going to listen to the real reason I wanted to leave the country. They would remain fixated only on the fact my chemistry teacher wanted to leave the country with me.

"I want you to be honest," my dad said. "Did anything happen between you and the teacher?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, as if I didn't know what he was asking.

"Were you ever *with* her?"

"Mostly in class," I replied.

"Stop being a smartass," my mom yelled. "Did you ever sleep with her?"

"Never," I said.

"Not once?" my dad asked.

"I don't think I'd forget."

"What about kissing? Did you ever kiss her?"

"No. I've never touched her. Nothing like that has ever happened and that is not what our relationship is about. We connect spiritually." I wasn't completely honest. I had never kissed her, but we had one moment where briefly held hands. I was skipping one of my classes and hanging out with her during her planning period.

"Is she married?"

I nodded.

"Jesus Christ!" My dad yelled at me. "Don't you see how lucky you are to be alive? Her husband isn't going to fight you for something like this; he's going to kill you. Does he know?"

“I told you,” I replied, “There’s nothing to know.”

“His wife wants to leave the country with you,” Mom yelled. “What do you mean there’s nothing to know?”

Dad immediately left my room. He yelled for the phonebook. You couldn’t ever find the phonebook in our house because Joe usually had it hidden for himself. I was starting to get the sense I was about to have my chance. As soon as they left the room, I was going to make a run for it.

“What in the hell are you doing?” Mom asked Dad.

Dad didn’t respond. “Yes, is this the police?” he yelled.

I had to leave now. As soon as my mom left, probably to listen to Dad on the phone, I ran to the window. By the time I turned on the engine and was plowing away at fast speeds, I knew I had escaped cleanly. The police in this town were pretty dull, and all I had to do was take a lot of dirt roads. The motel was about two hours away. I was confident no one would find me. I wasn’t sure if my brother Joe had heard where the motel was, and I could only hope he didn’t hear all the conversation.

I did it. I couldn’t believe I had it in me, but I actually did it. I left my house and was about to begin a new life. Even though my grandfather wouldn’t approve of why I was leaving, I think he would have respected my strength. I thought it funny how I left my parents the same way the lead character in the Stephen King novel I’d been studying left his parents. The lead character, Roland, who is not a marriage counselor in any way, is living in a world crumbling apart. The only way for him to save his world is to search for the dark Tower, the supposed housing place of God. The main theme of the book is if a person wants to find the house of God, one must be willing to sacrifice anything for

God to prove one's worth. In the novel, the first sacrifice is when Roland has to leave his parents in search of the Tower. He left in a similar fashion, fleeing out a window before escaping the destruction of his entire city. The main difference was Roland escaped a city on fire. I was fleeing a much different world, a world that is probably more difficult to flee because it is so much more comfortable, but still on fire.

The first time Mrs. Broekhuysen and I ever spoke to each other on a real human level, not just as teacher/student, was after a girl I cared a lot about had died in a car crash. I was in Mrs. Broekhuysen's class, and she allowed the class to talk about our experiences with the girl. I told the class about a dream I had the night before, and later after class Mrs. Broekhuysen confided she had the exact same dream. Our friendship grew as we both felt some kind of unspoken bond. We started to hang out outside of class. We had the same anxieties; she felt her dreams had been swallowed up because she was forced to live a domestic life. We both held the same belief that people pretended to be religious but never truly believed in their hearts. Around that time I found the Stephen King novel. The simple truth of its main theme changed my life: if you really believe in God, you must devote yourself wholeheartedly; you must choose God over everything else in your life. I told Mrs. Broekhuysen about the book, and soon after, we started to receive signs from something we couldn't see.

The first sign happened while we were watching a movie. During the picture, very abruptly, a dark Tower flashed on the screen, and we heard what sounded like a voice saying "Roland, Roland." The film was set in a small Midwestern town, and the image didn't fit at all. We looked at each other immediately in stunned amazement. We didn't know what to make of the flash at that moment, but over time, we realized what

we had seen wasn't a coincidence. Subtle signs continued speaking to us. People would mistakenly call me or her "Roland." We'd see Christian crosses missing the top part, so they appeared to be a large T for "Tower." We'd randomly hear people talking about loving God more than anything else in the world. We just could not believe there was not a force speaking to us, beckoning us to recognize there was more to life than what we immediately see. Even though what we were doing seemed crazy, I felt confident what we were doing was right.

As I neared the hotel, I thought of what my grandpa had told me about the first time he had sex to get on the wrestling team. He never described the act; he just smacked his palms together. Something about his palms reminded me of the buttocks. But the way he smacked his hands together had always been the first image I had in my mind when I thought of sex. Of course Grandpa wasn't a romantic; he did what he had to do to make the team.

I was thinking of sex. I was thinking of the bed. I could almost feel the sheets. But I couldn't imagine her naked. I couldn't imagine what sex would be like. Partly because I had never had sex, but also because I didn't want to admit to myself this encounter was about sex. I tried to stop myself. Whenever I would have a sexual thought, I would force myself to think about the spiritual quest in front of us. My method sort of worked.

I walked up the steps to the second floor of the hotel. The steps were made out of a tinny metal, and so each step felt wobbly and chimed loudly, destroying any chance I had of being discreet. I looked around. I did the best I could to watch my back. I figured either the police would be there, or my parents, assuming Joe had overheard Mrs.

Broekhuysen mention the motel room. I couldn't see anyone. The parking lot was empty, except for Mrs. Broekhuysen's car. Her room light was off, so I assumed she was asleep.

I knocked lightly.

I felt the rush of cool air slipping out of the room as soon as the door opened. Mrs. Broekhuysen answered. She was dressed casually, wearing nothing but a T-shirt and jeans. The lights were off, but her blonde hair seemed to reflect the lights of the parking lot. She grabbed my arm and pulled me in quickly. She then closed the door behind me. She stretched her arms around me, squeezing me tightly. She rested her head near my head and held me for many moments.

"I'm so glad you came," she said, finally letting go.

She had been making tea and offered me a cup. I asked why the lights were off.

"Just in case anyone comes looking."

"Like my parents," I said. I then explained to her everything I had gone through since our phone conversation. "Your husband is looking for you. He called the school this morning. As a matter of fact, all of the school is looking for you. The principal asked me where you were. I didn't tell him."

"This is just the beginning," she said morosely. "It gets harder from here."

"I'm ready for anything," I said.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, and she sat at the other end. I couldn't help but think of my grandfather's palms smacking together. He said he was in a hotel room for his wrestling trial. I wondered how he went from standing at the door to getting his

clothes off. The woman must have made the first move. But I tried not to think of him; I opened the copy of my Stephen King novel.

“You’re not going to believe what I saw today,” Mrs. Broekhuysen said, reaching over across the bed and placing her hand on my book. “A man died while I was driving here. I was at a rest stop, and I saw a man fall out of his car and die. He had a heart attack. If that isn’t a sign, then I don’t know what is.”

“You’re at the beginning of a long journey,” I explained. I don’t know why, but I felt like a moron while I spoke. “Death marks the beginning of your transformation.”

“Our transformation,” she said, squeezing my shoulder. “You know this is real and this is going to be hard. Are you ready?”

As her hand rested on my shoulder, I could think only about her being married. I could think only that what we were about to do was wrong. But I could not turn away from her. I nodded.

“Here’s what we should do,” she explained and began a long list of things we were to do the next day and the upcoming week. Tomorrow, we would drive both cars west until we were out of the state. Then we would sell one of the cars. We’d drive to California, where we would sell the other vehicle and use that money for plane tickets. We would then fly to India and find our way to the hugging guru, Meenakshi Suprananiyan. The guru had advertised on the Internet she was accepting disciples, so we should be able to find a place to stay.

“And from there,” she finished, “we’ll just wait for the Tower to call us. We should probably go to bed because we have to get up tomorrow, but is there anything we should do before we do that?”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I wasn’t sure if she was being bold.

“Shouldn’t we say a prayer or something?”

“Yeah—“ I mumbled, trying to think of something.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know.” I thought for a moment, and then I suddenly thought of a prayer my grandpa always recited. He made up the prayer himself, but he claimed he had heard it in a dream and would always recite it before a match.

“God is great,” I said. She reached for my hand while I recited the prayer. “I love God with my heart. I love God with my fists. I love God with my feet. I love God with my ears. I love God with my eyes. I love God with my spleen. Amen.”

“Spleen?” she said.

Grandpa had always been insistent on the spleen part when he recited his prayer.

She went into the bathroom. She kept the light off and then told me to get ready for bed. All the blood in my system could have been pouring out of me. The numbness I had been enjoying all day seemed to climax, and I really couldn’t feel my body. I did what she asked and started to pull off my clothes. I needed to tell her I didn’t have any other clothes. I wondered if I should try to sneak back, but that would have been really risky. I pulled off my shirt and my pants and quickly ducked under the cool sheets. I turned my head away from the door, pretending to feel casual. I waited for her body to enter the bed.

I didn't wait long. Her weight was soon filling up the other side of the bed, and I consciously paid attention to every movement she made. I felt some desire to move toward her. I changed positions. I was so nervous I could hear my own heart beating insanely fast. She changed positions; her feet lightly touched mine and she apologized. I told her she was fine. Then I didn't move. I felt an intense pressure to make a move. I felt like I should just put my hand across the way and touch her back. Then she moved, and her body was closer to me; her leg touched my leg again, only this time, she didn't apologize or move it. I applied my own pressure with my leg toward her. Then I slid closer toward her. Then abruptly she got up.

"Let me turn this air up more," she said, walking to the thermostat.

When she returned, she climbed into the bed so our bodies were close together. My right arm immediately reached over her body, and she sort of absorbed it, relaxing her body, now enclosed in my protection.

"I like it cold," she said and turned her face toward me. I felt her stare, though I tried not to look back. She had such large, beautiful eyes, easily her most alluring feature. I was also paralyzed because I couldn't believe I was lying in bed with my chemistry teacher. I really couldn't believe I was about to kiss her.

Our lips locked for a moment. She held my face and kissed different parts of it. As soon as I felt the liquid of her mouth and understood the reality of what I was doing, I started to feel very ill. I could hear the Old Testament ringing in my head—thou shall not commit adultery, thou shall not covet thy neighbor's wife. No matter what I thought, she was cheating on her husband with me. Each time she kissed a different part of my face, I felt as if I were getting colder and colder. And I don't know if the knock on the front

door was a manifestation of my fears or a real coincidence, but the next thing I knew, there was a loud pounding, a ferocious pounding, so loud and violent that I quickly shrank off the bed and very, very quickly dressed in a dark corner.

“Open the door!” the voice yelled.

Mrs. Broekhuysen was quick to open the door but did so while turning on the bathroom light, making the part of the room I was in very dark. When she opened the door, my absolute worst nightmare had become a reality; her husband stood waiting. He was screaming bloody murder when she opened it. All I could think of was my dad’s warning. I needed a gun. Not that I’d kill him, but at least it could get me out of the room safely. Mr. Broekhuysen pushed his way in and forced Mrs. Broekhuysen all the way against the wall towards the furthest part of the room. He hadn’t seen me yet.

I don’t know if it was the shadows of the room, but Mr. Broekhuysen had become the most ferocious entity I had ever seen. His physical shape and foreboding manner reinforced my own private fear that Satan was shaped like a blue-collar worker. He was large, bulbous, and manly in a car mechanic kind of way. He seemed three times larger than I was, and I suddenly didn’t understand why Mrs. Broekhuysen would ever be attracted to me. I was physically in another category from Mr. Broekhuysen. I was like a boy, and Mr. Broekhuysen was a man. I felt like a little house dog, and Mr. Broekhuysen was a freaking Great Dane. I just didn’t understand.

“I can’t believe you’d do this,” he screamed. “Why did you marry me? Why did you marry me? I thought you thought we were supposed to be together because God brought us together. But now you’re leaving me, and you talk to some kid instead of

talking to your husband. Now the whole town is looking for you, and everyone knows our business.”

Mrs. Broekhuysen was quiet.

“You’re evil,” he yelled, slamming his hand against the wall.

My fear had paralyzed me. My nervous system must have been completely fried. I was having too many excessive life experiences in one day. I was encountering my first sexual experience with a teacher; I was leaving my parents, lying to authority, and now I was about to fight a raging husband. I couldn’t move. If I would ever be in war, I’d be a dead duck. Grandpa wouldn’t be surprised. He never encouraged me to go out for wrestling.

Here was my test. If I truly believed in the Tower, and really believed in the signs, here was the moment where I could prove my worth. I just had to stand up and be ready to fight. Feeling some level of resolve, I nervously stood up--but then immediately sat down. I could easily see Mr. Broekhuysen destroying me. I had no chance at all. I had only one clear thought; I wanted to be in my parents’ house. I wanted to be safe. I didn’t want to die. And Mr. Broekhuysen would surely kill me.

I forced myself to move. I could escape. He hadn’t seen me yet. All I had to do was move. I hid my head and tried to make my body as small as possible. I was close enough to the door that I might actually escape. I started for the door. I neared the doorway. The door was still open; I tiptoed out. I tried to be as quiet as I possibly could on the stairs, but when I was half down, I made a huge leap.

When I arrived home, all the lights were on. My dad assaulted me first. He knocked the Stephen King book out of my hand. I didn't really notice I was carrying it, but I was. He ripped the image into large vertical shreds, and then thrust a Bible into my other hand. My baby brother threw candies at me. My mother started to yell. My other brother started to laugh. My father spoke to me as if he were preaching a sermon. I looked down. I stared at the ground. My eyes were fixated on the ripped images; I could see that I had finally lost. The message was so clear. I wanted to cry, but I didn't allow myself. I kept my eyes fixed on the one vertical shred that contained the picture of the tower. With my brother's round candies lying just on either side of the giant gray printed sculpture, the image had a distinct shape, which I tried to ignore at first. I had always liked the cover of the book, which was simply the image of a man staring at a giant gray tower--what the Gunslinger saw as the house of God. But when I looked at the image now, reduced to only the tower standing there, with two circles on either side, I couldn't deny what I saw. I tried to deny the thought. I almost listened to what my father was preaching just to think about something else. But I couldn't deny what I saw. I didn't want to admit to myself that the front cover looked exactly like an erect penis.

Bobby Jo

My first thought when I saw my wife's body wedged between the entertainment center and the wall was the Satanists finally had had their way with her. I tried not to imagine what kinds of rites were performed, especially if those rites required bleeding to death an obese woman. Sarah's warnings about the local Satanists had always been bizarre: fish mutilations, children abducted and returned with missing teeth, poison in dog food, stolen cable; not necessarily what I expected from local Satanists, and so I generally figured she was confusing Satanists with poor people. But I couldn't stop her from talking about them all the time. She claimed their strange behavior was really a secret code and the Satanists were planning something horrible. As I stared at her body, I worried she had known too much. I wanted to reach for her hand, but she was wedged too far between the wall and the TV. I could touch only her toes.

I called the police.

I was coughing a lot. I always coughed a lot, because my sinuses always dripped. My dead friend Abe called it the eternal cough. He particularly hated my dysfunction because whenever we wrestled, I'd drip snot all over him. I hated the cough and wished I'd be free of it, but no medicine had been able to cure me. Once I cleared the crap out of

my throat enough to speak clearly, I explained to the police the bad news: “My wife, I think, is dead.”

I put the phone down because I knew they’d come whether you spoke to them or not and I didn’t feel like talking, so I sat next to her body. She was covered in blood. I reached for her bare foot. She had stopped shaving her legs years ago--she had more hair on her foot than I did.

I thought I was wiggling her foot, but when I moved my hand, I realized I wasn’t moving her foot; the foot was moving itself. She was still alive.

My wife seemed to come back to life as soon as I explained her resurrection to the dispatcher. My wife gasped out, cussing at me every nasty word the Bible never intended us to speak. She was so foul mouthed I had to remind her of her predicament. I said to her, “You look like you’re about to die, and you go on talking like that. You think God wants to hear that when he first meets you?” But there was something else in her words beside obscenities.

“Hide it!” my wife yelled. I thought it strange she said “it.” I dove behind our couch.

“Where are they?” I asked, looking for any sign of where the Satanists might be. They were probably somewhere upstairs having sex.

“No, idiot!” she said. Her voice was raspy as hell. “Hide *Bobby Jo!*”

Oh, I thought, she was talking about Abe’s painting titled: *Bobby Jo*. And though I was hesitant to make any noise, knowing there might be Satanists upstairs, I did eventually take a closer look into what she was saying. The painting hung right above my wife’s body, and I did notice something bizarre.

“Is that your blood?” I asked. I was asking a stupid question. How in the hell could her blood get all the way up there? The painting was a gray abstract with a large orange splat in the middle. Some people said it was actually an orange painting with a big gray splat, but, regardless, the picture was now dull red and leaking ferociously down the wall.

“It’s *Bobby Jo*’s!” she said. “God surely works in mysterious ways. He’s finally brought the sign. I wish I could bring my hands together to praise Jesus, but I haven’t been able to move an inch for two hours. I saw the blood on the ground and then fell in investigating it. That miracle has been bleeding on me for two hours.”

I walked towards the canvas and brought the liquid to my nose. The sample smelled like blood. Then I tasted the liquid, and as soon as I did, I felt slightly animalistic as the metallic taste hit my tongue.

“The miracle is just like in India or South America, only it’s here in our house,” Sarah said. She was very excited. She explained to me everything she had thought might happen. Normally, when she talked this way, I’d ignore her because I didn’t necessarily believe her. But I couldn’t doubt my own eyes. *Bobby Jo* was bleeding something that smelled and tasted like blood. Sarah explained how important the painting was going to be for America.

“*Bobby Jo* will bring Americans back to their Christian roots!” she said. She was practically singing. She was so excited, she didn’t seem to care she was still stuck in the wall. But I did. I did hide *Bobby Jo* and then tried to move my wife’s body from behind the TV. I couldn’t move her by myself, and when the police arrived they gave me a hand.

The next night, I was at a Wednesday night church service. Sarah had shown her pastor, Farmer, *Bobby Jo* earlier in the day, and apparently he was going to devote the entire night's sermon to the miracle. Farmer had displayed Abe's painting in front of all the members, covered only by a dark cloth. I didn't go to church except on Sundays, and that was primarily because my wife forced me. I wasn't as much into church as she was. I didn't hate church, but my wife's preacher was probably the most intense man I'd ever met. I sometimes thought he was on drugs. Most people read the Bible and think the point is to be good to people. Farmer fixated on all the weird stuff, which was probably why my wife liked him so much. He specialized in exorcisms, prophecy, miracle cures. He had church programs on television. He preached damnation to college students (because he thought universities were too liberal), and he worked with local political parties to muster the religious vote. He pretty much did *everything*--except weddings.

I felt wrong bringing *Bobby Jo* to this church. I had a bad feeling. I kind of wished we had brought the painting to a Catholic church, but Sarah said because *Bobby Jo* didn't have an image of Mary on it, the Catholics wouldn't know what to do with it. Sarah argued we had to go nondenominational. I wasn't just worried about the church. Abe's paintings were so timid. They were like little children. As a matter of fact, he named all his paintings after boys because he felt all his paintings were his children; I think this was because he never had children. Plus, Abe wasn't a big Christian. He claimed he didn't need religion because he had art. He argued people who didn't have art needed to cope with life somehow, so they went to church. He didn't knock church, because it had its uses, but a church like Farmer's had no intention of appreciating Abe's work for any artistic reason. Hell, Abe's work was hard to get, anyway. Abe wanted to

make ugly paintings--he said it himself. So even though I was transfixed by the miracle, I was worried Farmer would use *Bobby Jo* for the wrong reasons.

The services started with everyone singing. Most of the people at this service also probably attended the local AA meetings right afterwards, and they weren't attending those meetings to preach Jesus to those in spiritual need. The rest were either recovering drug addicts, people looking for some magical cure for their afflictions, or people like my wife who really believed in Farmer. Wednesday nights were supposed to be pretty crazy ones. First there was the singing, and then Farmer would start to bring people up to the stage, and there he would do exorcisms. I was always confused because the exorcisms seemed more like cures than exorcisms. His exorcisms cured people with bad feet or gout, and the demons seemed more like casual physical discomforts than like evil spirits attempting to devour souls.

This night, though, Farmer didn't do much of anything for a while. I figured he would have shown the painting within the first hour. But he hung back. Finally after about two hours of us singing, he stepped in front of his congregation.

"Why do bad things happen?" asked Farmer. He walked around aggressively. He tried to be everywhere at once. "9/11, the Holocaust, child molestation, pornography, rape, drug addiction, alcoholism, Satanism, liberalism, these are the evils that poison our lives and poison our love with Jesus. But Why? When Jesus knows these things are bad, why would he let it all happen?"

His pauses were always dramatic, and he let about a minute of silence pass before he spoke again. When finally he spoke, he hunched down and whispered his question

over and over again. Then he ran up to the pulpit facing a giant picture of Jesus on the cross and yelled out loudly, “Why, Lord?”

“Jesus,” he yelled, “I need you. I need you to answer me. I need you now more than ever. I need to know!”

Then he did something I had been getting really tired of. He started to pretend he was Jesus, talking like he was Jesus. He’d first talk in a pathetic voice, pretending to be a normal person, and then he would talk in a calm, but stern voice representing Jesus Christ.

“Why Lord, why Lord, why is there evil in the world?” Farmer said, pretending to be a normal person, “When you could just take it all away? When you could stop it with your own hands? Why is there evil?”

Then Farmer ran up to my wife, looked her squarely in the face and said “There are evils in the world if you do not believe in me.”

He took about five minutes to explain what that meant--God had a plan for everything. Amazing, I thought. He preached so damn slow. I had been in church for nearly two and half hours, and I was dying to leave.

“But Father,” Farmer said, pretending to be himself, “Can you show us a sign? Can you show us a sign? Show us you aren’t making it up. Show what you say is true so we might believe with our whole heart.”

Farmer slowly pulled the dark sheet from *Bobby Jo*.

The audience didn’t immediately understand. The silence in the auditorium lasted for many seconds before Farmer had to make the miracle clear.

“The painting is bleeding.”

As soon as he spoke, the energy level spiked. Hands flew into the air. Screams of praise came from all over the room. My wife was the loudest.

“But how is that a sign?” Farmer said. “How does this painting, which bleeds of its own accord, fit into your master plan, Lord?” I had a hard time understanding Farmer because of the loudness of the audience, but he explained how the painting fit into God’s plan. Farmer spoke about the several tribes discussed in *Revelation* and how those tribes were separated and scattered throughout the Earth. The tribes, he explained, had become so separated they had forgotten whether they even belonged to a tribe at all. Their confusion didn’t matter because God would reform the tribes, some in China, some in Europe, and one in America. The American sign, which Farmer understood through his studies of theological prophecy, would be a sign about the secret sin of that culture.

“This sign came to us because of a secret sin that affects all of America,” he finally said, looking at my wife. My wife nodded back to him. Then Farmer glanced at me. “Folks, you are participating in the coming of Christ. We are the first tribe reformed. Do you realize how important we will be in history? We are the first authentic American church!”

The crowd erupted in exultation. They were screaming. I wasn’t sure what I thought. I looked at my wife. She was crying. All I could think was no one seemed to care this was Abe’s painting. They just cared *Bobby Jo* was a miracle from God.

Then Farmer explained God’s master plan. God’s master plan wasn’t very mysterious. First you get the locals behind you. You build the following into something on the state level. Then you get the whole country behind you. Farmer’s explanation was longwinded. Maybe his tempo pissed me off, but overall I was really annoyed I had

brought the painting to the church at all. *Bobby Joe* didn't belong to Farmer, although he now acted like it did. So I said something.

"Excuse me Jesus," I yelled to Farmer.

Farmer stopped and looked at me. I wondered if he ever had anyone speak out in church.

"I know all things belong to You in Your infinite wisdom," I said. "But I made a promise to the artist, Abe Helm, whom I'm sure You now know, that I will make sure *Bobby Jo* will be in tomorrow's art show. Is that going to be a problem?"

I wasn't lying. I promised Abe on his deathbed I would always show his paintings at the local art show, which happened to be tomorrow.

I didn't know exactly what Farmer was thinking, but I was fairly certain he thought I was a son-of-a-bitch for messing with him on his turf. He was giving me this kind of coy look, and he stared at me for a while before giving me a bit of a wink.

"I know Abe. He's in heaven," Farmer said, pretending to be like Jesus. "Abe says he wants the painting to stay here in this church for now."

"Hmm," I said, "I'm surprised Abe is in Heaven, considering he never really believed in You. I guess You'll accept anybody these days. Can you do me a favor and ask Abe where he left his tax documents? I can't seem to find them, and the IRS has been driving me crazy."

Farmer seemed pissed as hell. He made a false start by speaking to me in an angry voice, but then he stopped himself and changed his voice to a more serene tone.

“Abe just said in protection of your soul it would be acceptable for you to take the painting to the art show. I will allow it because the art show is primarily run by homosexuals and this will be a good opportunity to share the word with them.”

I was about to laugh, but my cough saved me from losing my poker face. I looked at my wife. She wasn't crying anymore, but I could tell she was mad at me.

The next day at the art show, I tried to count all the homosexuals, but the old women running around made calculating a good number difficult. The local art show had become a place for crafts. Years ago, when Abe was around, the show had some clout as a place to see some serious local art. This year's show was more like a fair. The air smelled like indian tacos and funnel cake. I was eating one of each.

I had set up a display that had all of Abe's works. I took care of most of his paintings after he died. My greatest hope was I could sell them so other people could enjoy them. His paintings were hard to sell, so I had to lower the prices. I felt bad about trying to sell one of his paintings for thirty dollars. I had hoped I would actually sell all his paintings. Some locals had called about his art before the show, but so far no one seemed interested in looking.

I kept wiping off the blood from *Bobby Jo*. I felt stupid. I didn't even know why I brought it. I couldn't sell *Bobby Jo* to someone. I could see the absurd conversation I would have: “The painting bleeds continually because it is a miracle from God. Please keep it somewhere where it won't stain the carpet.” I just shouldn't have brought it.

When Farmer arrived, I heard him before I saw him.

“So you hide the miracle of God by simply using a rag?” he asked. I didn’t say anything back. I just acknowledged his presence.

“Let me buy it,” he said. “I’ll take care of it and I’ll show Abe’s art to the world. I’ll show his art to the world in a way that will make him more appreciated than he had ever been. Think of it, all of these other paintings will increase in value once people realize his work has miracle powers. Even if these paintings don’t possess the ability to bleed, just the fact one of his paintings could bleed would reinforce the idea his other works were somehow involved in the miracle.”

I was listening to him. He had a tendency to look you in the eye so you could not do anything but listen. If he didn’t preach, he probably would have owned the best-selling truck dealership in the state. I glanced at Abe’s work. People don’t understand artists who try to make ugly art. I didn’t understand it at first, but after Abe explained that art isn’t just pretty pictures, but an expression of life, beautiful and ugly, I understood what he was getting at, but that didn’t mean anyone else was going to have any idea what he was talking about. And so when most people, like Sarah, said his paintings were ugly as hell, they meant it in the most unappreciative sense. I always thought Abe just couldn’t tell the difference between true art criticism and a nasty little insult. For as much as I disliked Farmer, maybe Farmer’s invitation would help *Bobby Ray, Tommy, Dylan*, and the others.

“So, how much?” he asked.

I started coughing, as usual. I thought of a sum, something not cheap. The more expensive, the more valuable his other works would be.

“Two Hundred Twelve Dollars,” I said, realizing I had actually just low-balled Abe.

Farmer smiled and reached out his hand. I shook it.

“How long you had that cough?” he asked, still holding on to my hand. “Do you believe in demons?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“But do you believe it is possible for a demon to exist? Even if you don’t believe?” he asked.

I nodded, although I don’t know what person could not nod to that question.

“Demons aren’t always what you see on TV,” he explained. “They are spiritual parasites that eat at your soul in any way they can. Some use alcohol, others use drugs, others create pains you cannot see, like your cough. If you’ve coughed like that your whole life, then I would say a demon has found a way to live in your heart, and that cough is its calling card. But unlike science, I have the cure for the common cold.”

“Well,” I said, stammering away from him.

“It won’t hurt,” he said, and before I knew it, I was being pushed toward the back to a small vacant section behind my booth. His followers were immediate and silent in what they had to do. They gripped me like bouncers from a club. If I were a little younger, I could have easily pulled out, because I had been wrestling with Abe, but my technique was now pretty weak.

Farmer started to read from his Bible, and then he placed his hands on my head, and he started to speak aggressively.

“Come out,” he yelled.

As he held my head, I did start to feel something. The sensation is hard to describe. I remember when an Indian guru came through town giving people hugs that seemed to affect them spiritually. Farmer had a fit. He hated other religions. I enjoyed the exorcism until Farmer started to squeeze a little too hard. He was squeezing my head so tight, I started to see things swirl around. The images were like what happens when you push your hands tightly against your eyelids, creating those strange hypnotic images. The only difference was my eyes were open.

“We know about your secret sin,” I heard him say.

I wanted to ask him what he meant, but I couldn't move my mouth.

I woke up coughing. I'd like to say I fainted, but because of the physical duress, I have a feeling he knocked me out. They may have thought the demon left me, but that guy had the strongest grip I've ever felt. I think he almost killed me. His grip was like a vise.

I don't know how long I was out, but when I returned to Abe's booth, the whole atmosphere had been transformed. Instead of a nice, little booth advertising a local artist, the new Abe Helm booth was a religious convention; there were even picket signs. Farmer had changed the vibe; he was making converts. When I saw Farmer, I intentionally coughed. He excused his failure by saying I was at fault because I didn't admit my secret sin. I tried to tell him that, first, I didn't know what he was talking about, and second, I couldn't move my mouth, but he didn't give me the chance. His attention was on the crowd growing around Abe's painting.

“Look at the miracle,” he screamed like a ringmaster. I didn’t like how Farmer was trying to turn the whole affair into a spectacle. I felt a sudden urge to protect my friend’s reputation. I watched Farmer closely. Whenever people would walk into the booth, Farmer showed them *Bobby Jo* and explained that the painting was going to be a historical landmark. But after watching his ploy a few times, I decided I needed to interrupt.

“It’s actually modern art,” I’d say.

“It’s Christian, modern art,” he’d say. “And it’s a miracle.”

I noticed the other paintings started to sell. Whatever Farmer had intended, he seemed to be getting the right effect. Some people were going down on their knees. His followers were claiming it was time to exorcise demons. I coughed.

As Farmer stood up to start preaching, I had an idea. I proclaimed the bleeding was actually a trick so Farmer could steal their money.

Farmer clapped his hands loudly. “This is not a hoax. There are no strings,” he said, showing the painting’s front and back. “If there is a hoax here, if there is a lie, then it is with this man. He suffers from a secret sin, and he won’t admit it.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Farmer didn’t reply. He pointed to my wife. Sarah, who had been quietly siding with Farmer, came up to me. She grabbed my hand. Is this where she tells me she’s been sleeping with Farmer? I wondered. I could understand her sleeping with him, but I couldn’t understand why he’d want to sleep with my wife.

She was smiling at me as she pulled me away from the group but in the same manner she did in church when her hand was held up high.

“I know your secret sin,” she said. “I’ve known all along. All you have to do is just admit it to me, and I will forgive you.”

“Okay, but I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She put her arms around me. She didn’t put her arms around me like she was my wife; she put her arms around me like I was her Christian brother.

“I know about you and Abe,” she said. As she spoke she placed her head near my chest. “I know about how you feel about him. I know he was more to you than just your best friend.”

I pushed her body away from me so I could see her face. She was not kidding. All her body language indicated she was expressing something she had been hiding for a long time.

“You think Abe and I were lovers?” I asked.

“I saw you with him. And you were without clothes.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “And why can’t you just say we were naked?”

“Three years ago I saw you *naked*, and you can’t deny it. You had your arms all over each other.”

“We were wrestling!” I said. “I ripped the singlet I was wearing. I had coughed snot all over his—we were in the middle of the match, you don’t stop when you’re in the middle of a match.”

“You have to say that,” she said, “because you conceal the secret sin. The painting bleeds because of the secret sin.”

“Secret sin?” I said. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the lack of morality in our culture. People are turning away from God, and he will destroy the world for our ignorance. You suffer from the secret sin of homosexuality. You just have to admit it, and you will be forgiven.”

“Is this the reason you’re so religious? You think Abe and I were lovers?”

Sarah had started to attend Farmer’s church before Abe and I wrestled naked. We wrestled naked only one time. Anyway, Farmer could have suggested to her our culture was partaking in this secret sin, which was really homosexuality. Then she saw me with Abe, which could have confirmed her new anxiety.

“You spent all your time with him,” she said.

I tried to convince her. I pulled her toward me and told her not believe it. She kept repeating she knew what she saw and we weren’t wrestling. My assumed affair with Abe had become not an assumption for her, but a reality.

“Abe never married because he loved men,” she said.

Abe and I had been friends for life, and that’s it. Abe liked eighteen- year-old-girls, which I never approved of. But he was straight. We were just pals.

“All you have to do is admit your secret sin and all will be forgiven,” she continued. “If you love me, you’ll admit the secret sin.”

“I’ll admit nothing happened,” I said. “And that’s all you’ll hear from me.”

“Then you’ve made your choice.”

My wife walked away. I followed behind her to the edge of the crowd until she joined Farmer’s side. I sensed she belonged to him now, as if she were his wife. She had certainly acted that way. I just assumed she was obsessed with religion because she could never get pregnant. We married so late in life. I’m not the most beautiful of men,

and by the time we married, I was just happy to find a partner. When she started to follow Farmer, I thought his ideas would help her focus on problems other than our own.

Farmer looked through me. He was at the same intensity level he had been during church. He was ready to do damage with a sermon. For the first time, the arts fair became a revival. Old women who had crafts were surrounding us; they didn't have the power to do anything. I felt sorry for the people who seemed to be touched by Farmer's miracle; they didn't realize the religious impulse they were now high on was fueled by a homophobic liar.

I suddenly had the impulse to do violence. I had to make a hard choice, and the truth was I had to save *Bobby Jo*.

I think as I smashed my friend's painting with my boot, Farmer realized he had made a mistake. He wasn't really a smart man. His face was bright red, as if he had swallowed too much niacin. I noticed *Bobby Jo* immediately stopped bleeding as I broke the canvas into pieces. I guess I had hoped when the painting was broken the spell cast on everyone would end. I had hoped maybe even my wife would see she had been buying into a big lie. But the crowd didn't see my violent act as the Christian thing to do.

The crowd started to chant the words *secret sin* over and over. They moved toward me, arms outstretched. As I moved away, I felt the vise-grip hands of Farmer.

Those hands were soon wrapped around my head. Farmer must have wrestled when he was younger.

"Make him admit his secret sin," Sarah yelled.

Farmer's hands squeezed more tightly. I think he was confused between committing murder and performing an exorcism because he started to command the demons to leave my body as he squeezed my head violently.

"Make him admit," Sarah yelled again.

His hands squeezed tighter. I started to see the glowing inner visuals. The voices surrounding me became distant. My breath becoming labored. I thought of the victims of the Satanists. I assumed Satanists attacked this way, only they would steal your teeth.

"Satan, I command thee to leave this vessel," Farmer yelled. "If you don't, you're going to wish you were never born."

"Make him tell the truth about Abe," Sarah said.

I had to make a choice. It was a matter of life or death, and chance had me aimed toward death. I could lie for two seconds and live, or I could stand my ground and die. I'd like to claim I stood my ground. But all living things possess the instinct for survival, the preservation of self, the fight to live at all costs. I did what I had to do.

"I loved Abe," I said, which wasn't really a lie. I loved him the way I loved an uncle.

I looked to my wife, hoping to see compassion, hoping to see she would fulfill her promise and forgive me, but her eyes expressed a quiet rage that grew into a violent expression of sheer hate.

"Kill Him! Kill him! Kill him!"

I never had the choice I thought I'd have. The possibility of Farmer killing me was now very real. Farmer was going to exorcise a spirit, but I was confident the spirit wasn't going to be as sophisticated as a demon. I shook my body as hard as I possibly

could, but the more I shook, the tighter his python-like grip became. The other hands holding me up were now punching my abdomen, my head, my face. I tried to fall down so I could at least cover my head, but someone was still keeping me up. The blows falling on my person prevented me having a single coherent thought. My mind was reacting in a disorganized fashion, and I believe I was calling out Abe's name, which only made the fury worse. The voices I could hear were calling me an agent of the devil. I guess they had finally found the Satanists in town.

The next time I saw my wife, I was still in the hospital. Every good bone in my body had been busted in a bad way, including my jaw, which had been shattered in multiple places. I hadn't said a word to anyone for about a month. I was terribly mad about this, actually crazy mad. I wanted blood. I dreamed of putting Farmer's face behind bars. I didn't care about Sarah. I didn't necessarily think she needed to go to jail, but I didn't want to see her any more.

I would have gone crazy if the medication I was on didn't put me to sleep every ten minutes. I didn't really have any visitors. Since I couldn't talk, those few acquaintances who happened by didn't have much to say to me. The only person I saw with much frequency, beside the staff, was the unlucky body occupying the other bed in the room. I had had about three roommates so far. My latest roommate was a guy named Paul, who was there because of drugs. In a PCP rage, he'd shattered most of his bones when he crashed through a wall diving off a three-story building. The guy also never stopped watching TV. He slept with the damn thing on. I certainly wasn't in any capacity to tell him to turn it off. Most of my dreams tended to be weird manifestations

of whatever the guy watched. I don't know how many times I dreamt I was on Montel Williams waiting to find out the results of a paternity test.

Paul talked all the time, even when he was watching TV. I don't know if he was talking to me or talking to himself, but I couldn't get him to shut up. He told me a lot of things I didn't want to know. He claimed that as a child he had been molested by demons. Sarah had once informed me of a poor girl she knew claiming the same thing, which I think Farmer cured. Paul's father had been a follower of Aleister Crowley. One night during a hedonistic ritual designed to entice fornication with the devil, a demon had slipped into Paul's room.

Paul claimed his life became consumed with anger. His favorite superhero was Hulk, and he desired his whole life to be like Hulk. He became a wrestler. He wrestled in college. But when school ended, he didn't know what to do. He said he then tried to be a superhero and would wander the streets at night trying to stop crime. But in small towns there never really was much crime, and so he took to what was more readily available. Once he tried PCP, he felt more comfortable acting out his hidden fantasy of being Hulk. He dressed up in Hulk's clothing, painted his body green and screamed incoherently when he destroyed public property. Eventually, all of this behavior landed him in this hospital.

When he looked at me, I could see the same vacancy of spirit I had witnessed before, but only in the people who followed Farmer. He wasn't as disabled as me; he could move all of his limbs, even though his limbs were in casts. I was worried his anger would turn into violence, especially towards me.

In the moments just before I saw Sarah again, I was having a horrible dream. I dreamt I had died in a car accident. I was walking alone, in a place that had no light; there was no one around. I saw the faint image of a light up ahead of me, like a spotlight, aiming directly toward the ground, forming a perfect circle. I stepped into the light and stood in the center. I didn't see anything at first, but then I saw a neon green light, from what seemed far away. But as I analyzed it, I realized the green light was neither far away, nor a neon green light; I was looking at neon green eyes and they were just outside the circle of light. Suddenly, green eyes were opening all around, above me, on every side, but whatever they were, they weren't moving into my circle. I was scared and I cowered down. As soon as most of my body had curled up, I felt the presence of the light above me vanish. I suddenly felt horror as hundreds of attacking claws scraped at my body, yanking me and pulling me flat. My fingers were being pulled from my hand. My hands were being pulled from my arms. My arms were being pulled from their sockets and I couldn't move at all.

That's when I woke up.

The TV was on the religious channel.

“And I cried out,” the voice on the TV said. “I cried, ‘in Jesus’ name I pray,’ and immediately the demon hands left me and I was suddenly in the most beautiful light I had ever seen. It was the most beautiful experience I had ever known.”

Paul had the volume up much louder than normal. He was standing up on his bed. There was a look in his eyes he never had before; he wasn't angry. The demonic dream shook me too, but of course for me, I knew I was just dreaming the TV. But he looked

genuinely afraid. He went to the TV and turned up the volume even more. He was a small man, but he was almost excessively muscular.

“Now it’s time to show what we have all heard about,” the announcer said. “Here is the painting that had been found bleeding.”

I then saw on the TV one of Abe’s children. *Bobby Jo* probably looked as bad as I did. The orange and gray painting was held together by duct tape. Dull red lines of blood had marred the painting. The ungrammatical caption in glowing neon green lettering indicated to us *Bobby Jo*’s significance: “An Real Miracle of God.” A clock on the top of the screen was counting down.

“This painting bled the blood of Christ,” I heard another voice speak. I recognized the voice well. The son of a bitch Farmer didn’t even flee the country; he just went to Santa Ana, California. “His holy, dried blood still remains? Do you see the cracks in this painting? A Satanist had attempted to destroy it. If you do not believe in your heart, you have exactly twenty one days, two hours and thirty-seven minutes to repent before the sun will turn black and the moon blood red.”

When the camera finally showed the speaker, I saw a Farmer I didn’t recognize. He had a beard; his hair was longer, and you could tell he had attempted to dye his hair, which had turned orange. He did look a different person, and if I saw him on the street, I wouldn’t have noticed, but there was no mistaking that voice.

A surge of excitement rushed through me. I had that son of a bitch now. I didn’t even have to get out of bed. I already knew where the guy was located. Of course I couldn’t move, and that certainly didn’t help anything, but at least I knew where to start.

“Take heed of the warnings of the prophet,” Farmer said. “Beware the wrath of God. Beware the earthquakes. Beware the hurricanes. Beware the pestilence. Beware the war to overtake the holy lands. Beware the antichrist. It will be like nothing you had ever seen before. The countdown for Armageddon hath begun. This is your last chance.”

Sitting behind him, almost out of view, was something covered in black. I stared at it a while to realize I was actually looking at a person. Whoever it was had been nodding to every word Farmer said. I thought for a moment that this person was actually the baby carriage at the end of *Rosemary's Baby*. As soon as Farmer paused, the person came to stand near him. The camera moved in closer. I detected a pale face hiding behind the black veil. I wasn't completely sure who it was, but I could certainly guess. I don't think I had ever seen anything more evil in my life. She was a wall of blackness with only a ghostly pale outline. She clashed with the religious channel's fake gold backdrops held up by the cheap Roman columns. She had trained me long ago to respond a certain way to people who wear only black. “If they wear all black,” she said, “then be wary of a Satanist.”

My body didn't feel good. Mucus was burning upward toward my throat. I had to hold down the bile; I could already taste it.

When she finally spoke, I lost all doubt I was staring at Sarah.

“Sinner--prepare for your soul to be devoured by demons!” she yelled.

I couldn't believe it. The disguise Sarah was using made her look evil, and I got the impression Farmer was using her disguise as a prop.

“This woman wears this veil over her face,” Farmer explained, “because she fears for the world. She fears what will soon happen to all of us. Prepare your souls, those in

sloth. Prepare your souls, those of pride, those of envy, those who choose not to bow. Prepare your souls, you refuse of men. You drug-addicts. You underlings of humanity. The demons are waiting and you will hear wailing; you will hear the gnashing of teeth. You must give it up. The clock ticks. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.”

I was witnessing the most dramatic display I had ever seen on TV, and Paul, poor Paul, who didn't know any better, was scared out of his mind. Just the mention of demons probably sent him into an uncontrolled state of anxiety. This flighty man, who normally just couldn't shut up, was now hunched over, weeping his eyes out. His body shook with great convulsions. I feared that Paul might flip out, maybe dive out the window, or worse, attack me. Despite his cumbersome cast, he had somehow dropped on his knees, and raised his hands up in the air. He was mumbling what sounded like a prayer. I would have laughed if I could. What I saw as an excessive form of religious decadence, Paul had found cathartic.

“You can give up at any time,” Farmer said. “It doesn't matter what you had done in life, or what had been done to you; the saving power of Jesus is waiting for you. Give yourself up now before the clock reaches zero. When the clock reaches zero, you will have no other chance.”

I felt a lump in my throat. Farmer deserved to go to jail, but if I sent him there, I was sending him to the desperate people who needed him the most. It just didn't matter. I never liked Farmer, and I was right not to, but I couldn't deny that Farmer was speaking directly to Paul. Farmer was necessary for a certain kind of person. He spoke to people who were hurt too much. Farmer was only really dangerous when you disrupted his apocalyptic timeline.

Paul looked so happy. The people on the television looked happy. And for that moment, I wanted Farmer to be right about the end of the world. I wished I knew it wasn't just a lie. So many people needed what Farmer was selling. I didn't want to know what would happen to these people when they found out the end of the world wasn't going to happen in a month, just like it didn't happen two thousand years ago when Jesus was actually here, or in 1666 or 1777 or 1914 or 1939 or at the dawning of the new millennium. Maybe the best reason for Jesus to return is just so all these people who are hurt so badly can be right about at least one thing in their lives.

But one thing felt certain. As I watched Sarah, I could sense that she was happy. Even though she looked like Satan's daughter, she was happier with Farmer than she had ever been with me. There was no reason for me to start a fight.

I watched the television awhile before my medicine kicked back in, before the warmth of sleep pulled me inward. I dreamt again that I was walking in total darkness, just like I had dreamed moments before. Again, I saw that spotlight, and again I felt the desire to walk into it. As I neared the beautiful light, I felt the warming sensation urging me to step into the perfect circle cast on the ground. Everywhere else was darkness. I could have walked into that light and basked in its beauty and hoped that it would continue shining just for me. But I didn't go there. I stayed in the darkness. I didn't need to go into the light that blinds.

Another Night in My House: Ghost Story Part II

I watched Cal pretend to be me in my bed as I held a microphone boom. If you remember, I am the guy who a couple of months ago was tricked into thinking that a ghost goddess desired to sleep with me. Only she wasn't a ghost or a goddess but a girl named Madiel. The only reason Cal was even in my bed was that we, along with Madiel and the famous British parapsychologist Fergus Sinclair, were reenacting that previous fateful evening in an attempt to elicit the return of spirits to my room. I had to continually remind myself that the end result of our activity was for scientific purposes, because every time I looked around the room--with all the making out, the booms, the cameras--I had this sinking suspicion that we were making some kind of creepy porno.

I did my job, which was to hold the sound device high in the center of the room. Madiel was scantily dressed, though Victorian-like in her white gown. Her job was to walk around the room as she had two months ago. She stood at the window, pretended to have some deep yearning, and then dropped her clothes and jumped into bed. Observing in the bathroom was Fergus Sinclair. He carefully calculated the heart rate, the humidity, the temperature, and the number of little orbs floating in the room. Cal's job was to pretend to be me, only he ignored what he was supposed to do. He was naked under

those covers. I always wore pajamas. Plus, he lunged for Madiel and kissed her all over when she climbed into bed. He did way too much for the role. I never kissed her that much, and Madiel certainly didn't need to be kissed that much. I would have done my job fine, if Cal stuck to his role. But as I watched him abuse his position, I did all I could to interfere. I pushed the end of the fourteen-foot boom in between their bodies to act as a buffer. The boom didn't appear to bother Madiel, but Cal motioned for me to get it out of his way. I moved the boom further between them, and Cal reacted by thrusting the device toward me, pushing me backwards and knocking over one of the infrared detectors.

Fergus Sinclair was pissed off.

“Why don't you just set fire to five thousand pounds!” he yelled. I really enjoyed the charm of his accent, and so I was more amused at the sound of his anger than at the message of what he actually was saying.

“It's our boom operator,” Cal yelled. “Not me.”

“You guys have to stop messing around or nothing will happen,” Madiel yelled. Her husky voice had a deeper pitch than anyone else's in the room. Her voice was awkwardly deep, almost as if she were pretending to sound like a man. I was shocked the first time I spoke to her months ago. I had assumed someone with such a petite body would speak with a much more feminine tone.

The silver-haired old Brit stumbled out of the control room; he wore some kind of laser device goggle on his head, which he pulled off and shook angrily towards us. First he pointed the device toward me, appearing to have something to say, but then he turned and pointed the goggle at someone else.

“It’s time,” he finally said, “to check the pizzas, Madiel.”

Madiel obeyed Fergus’s every word. She dropped her white gown to her ankles; she was completely naked. She then stepped into some workout clothes and left the room. I think I had seen her naked body at least five times that night--an uncommon sight for me but not an awkward situation for her. She stripped for a living.

Cal was still naked when he tugged on my arm. “I told you that this one is mine,” he whispered. He pressed his mouth close to my ear. “You’re fucking it up. How can I touch her if you’re shoving that boom in my face?”

Cal’s version of finding ghosts was more like making a porno. I had heard over and over the past couple of days that this was his perfect opportunity to hook up with Madiel. The real reason I held onto a microphone was not for the progress of science; it was so Cal could maneuver a way to sleep with Madiel. Cal figured the more he touched her, the more comfortable she would be with him and then, pop--she’d want to sleep with him. He had met her at the strip club where she worked, the Sports Barn. He fell in lust, but like most men in the club, he struck out the entire night. Cal said he tried and tried to find ways to get Madiel interested in him, but nothing seemed to work. Then, for no real reason, he started talking about ghosts. Cal described how he could see a light going on in Madiel’s head. He used me as bait: first discussing my haunted house, then my problems with women. The next thing Cal knew, he had Madiel’s phone number. Cal used his powers of persuasion to convince her to be my ghost, and then to reenact that experience in my house: all so he could find some way to molest her. His plan was working pretty well so far.

After Cal felt he had chastised me enough, we went to my kitchen to meet with Madiel and Fergus. Fergus had ordered far too many pizzas, and they were all cold. There were only two pizza places in town, and my address was blackballed by the closest one because of an unloaded shotgun I had pulled out the last time Madiel was here. I didn't care about the pizza, anyway. I liked only cheese pizza. Liking cheese pizza is like being left-handed. Everyone just assumes you are right-handed, and Fergus just assumed we'd all love pepperoni.

We sat at the table covered in pizza boxes and cans of Coke. Usually, my kitchen was full of food that had been left out, used plates, cups and utensils: it was according to my friends, the most disgusting kitchen in the world. Cal cleaned the entire house in order to impress Madiel, so now I didn't know where anything was in my own house.

Cal sat next to Madiel and behaved as if he were the sweetest, most honest person in the world. Anytime Madiel said anything emotional, Cal would squeeze her arm. He was so full of shit. Fergus spent a lot of time discussing American culture. I had a hard time disagreeing with anything he said because of the distinction that came with his finely tuned accent. He sounded like the villain in nearly every cartoon I watched as a child.

“British pizza is more about the bread,” Fergus said about the food he ordered.
“American pizza is about the grease.”

“Yeah, you're right.” I agreed. “American pizza sucks.”

“It doesn't suck,” Fergus corrected. “But it is different.”

“Yeah, you're right,” I said.

Fergus Sinclair authenticated the entire enterprise. He made famous documentaries about ghosts. He had authored important theories in the field of parapsychology. He was an Oxford man and a world renowned expert on ghosts and spirits. Anything he said we all accepted as true. But Fergus did not come to my house simply to investigate the matter of ghosts in my house. He was so important in the field he actually had peons do most of his ghost research. The reason he came here was Madiel.

Madiel claimed to have been sexually violated by a demon when she was a young girl. As a result, she was vulnerable to attacks by demons, especially if she came into a house that was haunted, like my house. The ghost that interfered with Madiel and me a month ago was apparently after Madiel, not me. After Madiel explained what happened to Cal, Cal informed Fergus. Fergus was upset about the girl's problem, but he said that he knew of a secret ritual that would cure her. The ritual was specifically designed to release demonic marks.

So we were not actually making a documentary at all. Fergus brought all his equipment for observation, but he didn't intend to use it for any future films. Fergus was cryptic in his explanation on how the ritual worked. We were told only that there were two parts. First we must entice spirits into the room, which explained why we were reenacting my encounter with Madiel. The reenactment took place ten minutes before every hour, an important time for ghosts. Fergus claims ghosts have a tendency to appear just before every hour. The second part of the ritual was not explained. Fergus said that Cal and I would have to leave the room, and that was all we knew. I couldn't believe we were going to conduct an exorcism in my bedroom.

“I’m surprised you believe in demons,” I said to Fergus. “I would think that to be objective in your field you can’t have any firm beliefs.”

I expected Fergus to respond objectively and explain the concept of the demons as some subconscious metaphor for human fear, but he responded much more simply.

“I believe in demons,” Fergus responded.

“Are these demons out of the Bible or just monsters?” I asked. I had always thought it strange that most media discussions of demons referred simply to the Christian notion of demons and Satan, even though there were demons in all cultures.

“The only real demons in the world are the spawn of Lucifer,” Fergus replied. He spoke as if he had no doubt. I didn’t believe in demons. I believed in ghosts, and none of those ghosts was particularly religious. Madiel thought the ghosts in my room were demons. I just thought they were those obnoxious ghosts that liked to throw clothes out of your drawers, but then again what did I know? I never studied at Oxford.

“I wish I was lucky enough to doubt the existence of demons,” Madiel said. “For Halloween, my mother would always dress up as the scarlet woman from *Revelation*. Then, when neighbors would open their doors, she’d yell she was the greatest whore in the world. I always wanted to dress up as an atheist, but Mom wouldn’t let me.”

“An atheist?” Cal laughed.

“Yeah, I wanted to dress up as someone who didn’t believe in anything. That’s always been my fantasy.” Madiel hunched her body over the table. Whether she really was attacked by a demon or not, she had certainly been traumatized by something in a dark way. She told us very freely about parts of her life, and whether you believed her or not didn’t change the sadness of what she claimed to have experienced. She said her

mother was a witch who used sexuality as a way to practice her craft. Her mother slept with lots of people, and Madiel never knew who her father was. The demon mark came when somebody practiced black magic in the house and accidentally left a demon in Madiel's room. Madiel said after that one night in that room, she had never been free from harassment from other demonic spirits. She always had these presences groping at her and attacking her. So when Fergus proposed the ritual to Madiel, claiming the ritual could free her, Madiel became a robot of obedience. She did everything he said to ensure the mark would be wiped off cleanly.

I looked at my watch: twenty minutes before the next experiment. Cal whispered something in Madiel's ear, and they walked out toward my den. I wanted to walk into the den to make sure Cal wasn't kissing Madiel, but then again, I didn't want to piss her off. I waited in the kitchen and watched Fergus eat pizza. He ate food very slowly. I think he chewed each bite twenty or thirty times. I only chewed like six times before I swallowed. He was a careful person.

After watching Fergus chew for a few minutes, I decided to go find the couple. Cal sat near my computer, which was good for me because it gave me an excuse to interrupt them. When I entered the room, I saw that Cal had his body over Madiel's, but he wasn't kissing her. He just had his arm over her.

"Sorry, if I interrupted anything," I said as I entered.

"Interrupt what?" Madiel questioned.

I went to the computer and watched them in the reflection of the monitor. I turned on the computer and waited for the e-mail to open. Cal whispered in his sweet almost babyish tone about something that concerned him. I could hear her replies, which

were all either an unromantic “yes” or “no.” She didn’t seem to be interested in him. I had one message, but it was returned mail. I opened it anyway; it was the last message I had ever sent to Shannon.

“Look what we went through to get my best friend away from Shannon,” Cal said. “And what does he spend his time doing? He gets a fake e-mail address and starts sending her love notes.” He must have been watching the computer screen.

“Leave him alone,” Madiel said.

Cal was almost correct. A month ago, he would have been completely correct, but he was less correct now. A month ago, I spent all my time trying to find a way to interact with Shannon, so that she would see she could have a pure love with me. I guess I watched too many bad romance films. I thought that if I pretended I was a secret lover, that I would somehow find a better way into her heart. I opened an e-mail account named “truelovewaits69” and started to send Shannon secret e-mail. Of course, she had never actually read any of the e-mails I composed because I had been unable to find her e-mail address. Even though I was passionate about what I had been doing, the more I learned about Madiel, the more I stopped thinking about Shannon. It was not that I didn’t care about Shannon anymore, but I felt a desire to protect Madiel. I felt a kinship with her. Two months ago she was in my house trying to cure me, and there we were trying to help her. I had dreamed about her. I must confess I fantasized about my experience with Madiel as a ghost. Cal just wanted to use her so he could get off. I wanted to protect her.

I wasn’t sure how Madiel felt about me. I always got the impression from the way she looked at me she felt some connection to me. We were both traumatized by ghosts. We both had relationship problems. We were both playing a special part in

solving each other's past issues. But she never said anything about how she felt towards me, and I just didn't know if she really felt the same way as I did.

Cal and Madiel talked a little bit before leaving the room. I didn't pay attention because I was typing. Then I noticed the time and realized I was almost late for the next ritual. I immediately jolted up and headed for the door. I felt a slight chill and reached for my coat lying on the couch. As I yanked my coat toward me, I saw something fall to the ground. It was a note. I opened up the note and read the message: "I didn't want to say this out loud, but I have feelings for you. If you feel the same way, meet me in the bed after this next ritual." The handwriting didn't look like Cal's at all, and Cal certainly wouldn't have left this on my coat. This was not his style. He'd just tell Madiel how he felt. Either this note was from Fergus, which was not likely, or the note was from Madiel. But why would she write a note? She left it on my coat. If she wanted to say this to Cal, she'd have plenty of opportunities, so was this note to *me*? I didn't have much time to think about it as I was late.

The next ceremony didn't go as Fergus intended. This time Madiel started laughing uncontrollably.

"You can't touch me like that if you want this to be serious," she said to Cal.

Cal wasn't laughing, and I wondered if he tried something too bold. Fergus was again furious. He was cursing and yelling about how we were wasting his time and his night. Then he yelled at me, saying I couldn't hold a boom worth a shit. Then he yelled there were no ghosts in the house. Then he yelled Cal was overplaying his part. Then he stomped and spat. He really was just a mad old man. Finally, he calmed himself down

enough to announce it was time for us to have another meeting, which we did immediately in the kitchen area.

“You two,” he said, pointing to me and Cal. “Are going to stay outside from now on. There will be no boom operators! There will be no funny business in the bed. This isn’t American pornography. I didn’t fly here from England to stay up all night long so you could play around like idiots. Got it?”

We agreed.

“God, you’ve got me so mad at myself, I can hardly speak!”

I looked toward Madiel. She was staring at me with the same kind of eyes I had seen months ago when she was pretending to be a ghost. I couldn’t believe it. The note was real. I just couldn’t believe she would have such feelings on this night. She was so bizarre. Madiel wandered off, toward the stairs, toward my room. How did Madiel think I would have read her note? I wasn’t sure of anything. Cal followed her, but then he turned in a different direction. That meant Madiel was alone. This was my chance. I waited about two minutes, enjoying the angry stares of Fergus. He didn’t say anything, just watched TV. He looked at me as if the poor television shows were somehow my fault. “Not even funny,” he said. “I want to laugh. I really want to laugh. But there’s nothing funny.”

I slipped out of the room and headed up the stairs. I looked at my watch; there would be forty minutes before the final ceremony began. When I opened the door, I immediately felt the strange sensation of déjà vu. There I was again, standing before my bed, before Madiel. It was a strange and nervous sensation to know you were about to be with a woman, especially if you were a virgin, and maybe even more strange when

you've had the same nervous feeling twice, in the same room with the same girl. Madiel and I had an interesting relationship, indeed. If we married, we would have much explaining to do for our children.

I couldn't see her face, partially because of the light and partially because she lay on her side where her face was away from me. She must have heard me come in, because she told me in her low voice to undress. As I thought of undressing, I started to have the same nervous sensations I had before, but I could ignore them more easily this time.

Before, Madiel had no name; she was simply a phantom, and at the time, I saw her as a goddess or a spirit who wanted to be with me because of my purity. My insecurities were louder then; I had never had sex before and I was fully considering being with a woman who was a ghost. But now, I knew how I felt toward Madiel, and those feelings were not only sexual but protective. I cared about her as a person, a person who had been hurt by the world in a terrible way. The purity of the relationship I had with Shannon was false. It was false because I was seeking some kind of human perfection.

With Shannon, I wanted love in the selfish way. I wanted a love that satisfied me completely, which didn't consider the other person. But here was a woman who was in pain, and I had to step outside of myself in order to cross the empty chasm between us.

I climbed into bed, but I did not touch her at first. She kept herself covered and held her face pointing the opposite direction. I could see the symbolism: she was covered and hidden and she needed me to bridge the gap between us. Strange how we understood each other. I pulled myself under the covers and slowly slid toward her. I reached across toward her back and felt her skin, which felt much rougher than I remembered. I closed

my eyes as I pulled her toward me; she gave way quickly, and I soon felt the rush of warmth as our lips touched. The kiss was beautiful. I could feel the texture of her lips, and though this was one of many kisses I had shared with her, the familiarity of the old experiences had been lost. I felt very much as if I were touching new lips. Her mouth moved below mine to suck on my lower lip, but then I noticed something peculiar. There was a roughness under her lips, almost like a rough scab, but more like thick hair. I brought up my hand to investigate and felt the shape of a masculine brow, the distinct touch of facial hair, and the skin of the face that badly needed moisturizer. I jumped out of the bed, and rushed to put on my clothes. Cal screamed bloody murder.

“What the fuck!” he yelled.

“What the fuck me? What the fuck you?” I yelled back.

“Are you really gay?” he said. His voice was shaking.

“NO!”

“Then what in the hell are you doing?”

“I didn’t know it was you.”

“You didn’t know,” he pleaded. “How in the hell could you not know?”

“The room is dark.”

“The room is dark. Well why are you climbing in bed with me?”

“I thought you were Madiel.”

“Madiel?” he said. He rushed at me with his fist in the air. He grabbed me by the neck. By this time, I had the light switch and could see his look, the look of a rabid animal.

“I almost had her, and you keep ruining it for me,” he said. His voice had changed, and he spoke in an aggressive whisper. My reflexes blocked my body in case he attacked me.

“I read a note,” I explained.

“You read a note,” Cal returned. “I wrote that fucking note. Can’t you tell it’s my handwriting?”

“Why would you write a note? You’ve been attached to her hip all night long.”

“I couldn’t find a way to break the ice,” he explained. “All she does is talk about her mom.”

“Well why was the note on my coat?” I asked.

“I gave it to her. She must have crumpled it up and thrown it on your coat by mistake.”

Cal stomped out of the room. I went into the control room and brushed my teeth. My whole being felt tainted. I took soap and cleaned every part of my face, and then I felt the impulse to jump into the shower. I brushed my teeth three times as I washed the rest of my body. When I finished bathing, I felt physically clean, but I couldn’t shake the sensation of touching Cal’s lips.

When I made it down to the kitchen, Madiel commented on how clean Cal and I looked. Cal and I didn’t talk at all and sat at the farthest ends of the room from each other. We stayed that way until the time arrived for Madiel and Fergus to disappear upstairs. Cal then moved in front of the television. There was a TLC show on about famous haunted houses in America.

We sat and we waited. Then I started to complain.

“None of this would have happened if you weren’t such a randy bastard.”

Cal was silent.

“You piss me off, man,” I continued. “That girl is messed up and you’re trying to take advantage of her. How can you look at yourself in the mirror?”

“Oh,” Cal returned, “Yeah it’s my fault. You know you’re just as interested in the girl as I am.”

“But I’m not trying to force her to like me.”

“None of this would ever have happened if you weren’t obsessed with Shannon. If you would have gotten over her like any normal person, then I wouldn’t have come up with this stupid idea.”

“Genius how you manage to make this my fault,” I said.

“I don’t care what you say. So we kissed. That’s gross and all, but the most important thing is what is happening upstairs right now. That poor girl is finding a way to become normal. So, I’m not going to apologize about this. I’m just not.”

“Do you think Fergus will let us watch the tapes?” I asked, and as I asked, the most terrible realization occurred to me. Why in the hell did we kiss in my room? Why in the hell did I not even think about it? Fergus taped every minute of the evening in that room. He had the most disgusting kiss in the world recorded for his viewing pleasure. He would see me pull off my clothes and then climb into bed with Cal. Fergus would see it. Madiel would see it. And if Fergus’s tape gets on TV, the whole world was going to see it.

“Cal,” I said, trembling, “we’ve got a big problem.”

We agreed that the only way to fix this problem was for us to sabotage the equipment and ruin Fergus's tape. The current ceremony had gone on long enough that Fergus had to be performing the ceremonial rites in my room. The control room should be empty. Now, there was no way to get into the control room from inside the house without disturbing what they were doing, but, there was another way.

Cal justified his plan by saying I should be the one who risked death because I was the one who misread the note. He also claimed since it was my house, then I in some way knew the terrain of the roof better than he. I let Cal win simply because of the time factor. I didn't have all day to squabble. Cal was in a stubborn enough mood to force me to fight with him for a half hour before he would be willing to sneak outside of the house. Then he probably wouldn't even do a good job.

I climbed out the same window that Madiel used to climb into my house two months ago. There was an irony here. I just knew it. I found the ledge to be quite stable, at first. Then I stepped onto a weak spot. I could actually see the boards bending downward as my foot hit the surface. I had to get the roof fixed--as if I had any money. I skipped over the weak spot and then found another weak spot, quickly giving way as soon as I barely touched it. The roof was highly unstable. There was no way for me to actually get across without climbing all the way to the top of my house and going around. I didn't like the idea; I was not particularly fond of heights. I climbed upward until I reached the very top of my house. I could see people in the distance, doing late night things in the town. If only they knew what I was doing. No matter how normal I might like to be, this night officially inducted me into the land of weird.

I climbed down, maneuvering around the weak spot, and found the window. I felt relief flowing in my veins. There was something about that roof that freaked me out. I hoped to God the window was unlocked, so I wouldn't have to cross it again. I sometimes locked the window and I sometimes left it unlocked. I liked to keep it open to help the ventilation because the house has a mold problem. I quietly pushed up on the window pane. At first the window didn't budge, and I was sure it was locked. But then I pushed harder; there was a shrieking tone and the window slid up about an inch. I started to feel a little happier and pushed the window all the way open. I hoped Madiel and Fergus would think that this was only the sound of some demon fleeing. I entered the control room/bathroom. All the monitors were off. It was strange. I expected all the power to be on. I thought I would see what Fergus and Madiel were up to. Then I suddenly stopped in fear. What if Fergus had not turned off the monitors, but some sinister spirit was actually in the room? I mean, anytime you see a movie about demons, the monsters always have the ability to turn off the power. I stayed frozen in the window. For a moment, I debated about whether I should enter. An outside gust helped me decide, and I jumped inside the room. I made a loud thump, which I'm sure Fergus heard. I hid behind the toilet, assuming he would check, but when nothing happened for several moments, I figured I was safe.

I could hear him. Fergus was speaking in a monotonous drone. He must have been chanting. I didn't understand the words exactly; most of what he said was muffled by the thick bathroom door. I knew where the audio monitor was, so I flicked it on. Suddenly the muffled voice of Fergus became quite clear.

“This is the way it’s supposed to be. Be calm. This is the way it’s supposed to be. Be calm--“ He kept repeating this statement.

From there, I didn’t really know my way around the control room. And since there was minimal light, I wasn’t sure which switch was which. So I dug further around until I found one of his digital recording devices. I knew he was recording his tapes on this one particular digital device, so I turned on the power. When I did, one of the video monitors turned on. In the monitor, I couldn’t see Madiel, but I could see Fergus and what looked like ten or fifteen glowing orbs floating around the room. According to Fergus’s theories on supernatural entities, there were about fifteen ghosts in my room. When I saw Fergus, though, I was shocked. The old British guy was in his underwear, walking around the room. He opened and closed my dresser drawers. He then pulled the clothes out and threw them on the floor. Then he took the blankets off my bed and threw them on the floor. It looked like he was robbing the place, but instead of stealing anything, he was making my room untidy.

I watched for a moment before I started to mess with his machines. I went to the recorder and tried to figure out how to get it to rewind. The kiss had taken place about thirty or forty minutes ago. I figured if I could just get the machine to rewind at least an hour and start recording, then that would erase the kiss. I found the display and hit the backward arrow. The monitor went blank as the machine rewound. When the counter reached negative sixty minutes, I hit play. The screen displayed a room with me holding the boom microphone, standing near Cal and Madiel. I figured that was the spot and hit record.

The display went back to Fergus's bizarre ceremony. He was still doing the same thing, messing up the room, but then I noticed something strangely familiar. He was treating the room the exact way that ghost had treated the room when it had interrupted Madiel and me two months ago. Fergus imitated the ghost's actions by opening and closing the drawers. He moved near my bed and pulled out the sheets, the pillows; then he reached further, pressed his hand against the wall and dropped something in the middle of the floor. He then went to the center of the room and started to jump up and down on the small object. I wondered what it was he was jumping on, but I couldn't tell from the monitor in my room.

I watched for a moment before I found another recorder. Fergus was anal retentive about his recording. He had six recorders in the room, so I had to do this six times. I turned on the monitor and saw that the camera focused only on the ceiling of the room. I didn't know if it was that important to tape over this particular camera angle, but then I thought, he would probably hear us on the audio, so I went ahead and rewound the tape. The screen went blue, and then I waited until it was negative sixty before hitting record.

I found a third recorder and turned it on. When I saw the monitor, I really thought I had in the wrong tape. The image looked like some kind of snuff film. But it wasn't a snuff film. What I saw was a close-up of a bound Madiel, naked, with some kind of satanic star drawn in red on her abdomen. She had her legs and arms outstretched. Madiel didn't move, but I wasn't sure how she was reacting or even if I should be trying to stop the ritual. Fergus said it was a bizarre ritual, and Madiel went along with

everything he had told her about it. So I figured even though this looked really weird, maybe I shouldn't do anything. So I didn't. But I did not rewind the tape. I hit record and watched.

“This is the way it's supposed to be. Be calm,” Fergus continued. “This is the way it's supposed to be. Be calm.” I listened for a while and felt the narcotic effect of the words. I felt it would be improper to look at Madiel, so I kept my eyes on the old man. I worried watching this was going to screw up the ritual, but then again, how could I not watch?

And then something happened that maybe I should have expected, or maybe I did expect, but when I actually saw it, I couldn't believe it. Fergus took off his underpants. The naked Brit walked toward the bedroom door, checked the lock, and then stood over Madiel. Then in the camera that showed the naked girl, her image was suddenly blocked by his white back.

I turned off the monitor. I wasn't supposed to be seeing this. I could hear them, and Madiel was quiet. She would be saying “no” if she was against this. I couldn't believe what was happening. An hour ago, both Cal and I attempted to do the same thing, and here was this old man having his way with her. I was slightly worried that Madiel was hypnotized or something because she was silent. Fergus, on the other hand, had changed his chant. The chant was creepy, some kind of vowel regurgitation. I couldn't make out the words, but it was scary, like *Rosemary's Baby* scary. Then he did speak words. It took me a moment to make out the words. But then the words started to trickle into meaning. “Anti-Christ-Aleister-Crowley-Beast-666-Hear-My-Prayers-I-Am-With-The-Scarlet-Woman.”

“Antichrist, Aleister Crowley Beast 666?” I said aloud. “Hear my fucking prayers?”

That was enough. I didn’t care if Madiel was into it; I was not into it. I rushed out of the bathroom. The old man was so involved in the ceremony that when I pulled him off, he was still humping. I yelled for Cal. The door was locked, and Cal could not get in. I rushed to the door, hit the light, and then opened the lock. Fergus’s chant changed into a vicious insect-like “snick” sound he repeated. Then he boomed, “Beast 666, help me to defeat my foes.”

“Foes?” Cal questioned. “Why is Fergus naked?”

“He’s a pervert,” I yelled.

“You must let me finish. It’s what Madiel needs. If I don’t do it this way, she will never be free.”

“What do you want, Madiel?” Cal asked.

Madiel didn’t say anything.

“The Antichrist,” Fergus yelled. The old man seemed to be a completely different person. The Oxford intellectual was gone, and now he was just crazy and naked. Fergus grabbed a chair and charged me. I easily knocked the chair down and attacked him. Fergus managed to make it into the bathroom, where he locked the door. I called the police. Cal untied Madiel. She immediately made the same exit I had witnessed two months before. She put on her clothes and disappeared out the window she had once used as a ghost. I tried to follow her, but she was very quick. Then I saw her white figure run to the parked yellow Geo Metro. The little car took its time, but eventually it got the hell away.

Cal stood guard by the bathroom door.

“Those videotapes have that thing on them,” Cal said. He sounded like he was about to cry.

Fergus was making crashing sounds inside the bathroom. I knew what he was doing, destroying the equipment, the tapes, the evidence. I tried to open the door, but it was locked. I pounded on the door for a moment, mindlessly. There was just no way to open that horrible piece of wood. The door was made out of three inches of the strongest oak. The only way to stop Fergus was to climb over the roof and then jump through the bathroom window.

I knew that if I crawled on the roof, it would take me almost ten minutes to make it across. My strategy, then, was to try to make it across the roof in three bounds, maybe not the safest approach, but surely the quickest. I climbed out the window a second time that night. My first jump went fine, although I wobbled when I landed, and the boards underneath me seemed to groan, but I definitely made it. I tried not to think. The next jump was the most dangerous because I wasn't going to see where I would land. I would have to jump over where the roof humped. In situations like this one, I knew that if I stopped to think at all, my internal narrator would talk me out of acting. So before even making any mental calculations, I was already in the air. I freaked as soon as the ground changed angles. I would say that this landing didn't go so well. I crash landed and felt the rotten boards snapping as soon as my weight hit them, which was soon followed by a sharp pain cutting into the muscle of my calf. I landed on my chin. I didn't want to look at the damage. I didn't want to see a ten-inch wooden stake jutting through my leg, but instinct pushed my neck to twist towards the pain. The wooden stake sticking through

my calf was at least five inches long. I didn't even entertain the idea of moving further. I was stuck.

All around was rot. I could feel the roof; it was barely holding itself together. My body didn't feel like it was lying on a hard surface. The possibility that the rotting wood would succumb to my weight was very real, and I shuddered at the idea of being swallowed inside the blackness of the attic, unable to move. There was an irony here. I just knew it. The beautiful town was shining in front of me. I could see people in the distance, walking around, doing normal late-night things; they seemed a trillion galaxies away.

I stand in front of Club 212 at 11:12 on 2/11. The numbers are almost in line. In less than an hour, the date will be 2/12. In three hours, the time will be 2:12. My girlfriend tells me that I'm about to begin my important life—of course she refers to my job (or career, which she forces me to call it), which starts tomorrow. She is correct in saying that my important life will start soon, but what she doesn't know is that my important life doesn't begin tomorrow; it begins tonight when the numbers all overlap. In less than three hours something I have been waiting for, for years, is finally supposed to happen, and happen in this club.

Club 212 sits in the middle of five clubs, on a street officially known as Club Row. On one side is the Cowboy Club, and on the opposite is the Sports Barn. The design of Club Row is insulting: pick the club that fits your boring personality and get drunk. Most of the people in the town meet their unfortunate spouses here. This town has one of the highest divorce rates in the state.

The line is long and stretches well past the front edge of the building. I follow the line, seeing no distinct faces. I pass along the rows of people dressed in slick, dark club clothing. This is not my kind of attire. I prefer clothing that isn't fashionable. I want

clothing that leaves no impression on other people. The only time I wear all black is when I attend funerals. The last time I wore this black, button-up, short-sleeve Polo shirt was after my great aunt's death.

Club 212 is a pretend, jet-set, electro-dance hall. Music booms through the open doors and pulsates the tired cliché of techno, with its dull constant thump that never seems to bore listeners. I have been through that phase of music already. Although I understand the primordial quality of the beats, I am unimpressed with contemporary artists who can never seem to add anything to the genre. Techno was destroyed in the same instant it was created. Techno produced ten years ago sounds the same as techno today. Nobody can do anything with the art form because once you change one aspect of the form, you can no longer call it techno. I would like to call techno a dead form, but due to its popularity, it should now be relegated to those genres that never seem to die, like accordion music or country and western, all very popular in this town.

The security guard seems to give me a queer look when I say that I am a party of one. He asks if I am in the Army, but I don't understand his reference and so I feel slightly insecure as I'm not sure if I should respond to his question or not. But he says nothing more, and the moment passes. If I had the resources and the energy, I would build a club that allowed only singles. Already there would be a whole list of problems solved for people who attend clubs. Nobody has to worry if anyone has a date. Patrons know they are on their own, so the fear of meeting new people is excised. Of course, if I could really have my way, I would force everyone to be silent, so that people would concentrate solely on listening to the music. But I'm sure most people would find that to be too extreme and my club would most likely go out of business.

I soon pass the guard. When I actually enter the club, I go into a slight case of shock as the club looks exactly as I had imagined. The arrangement, the lighting, the DJ booth, the ads, the music, and even the clothing of the staff, all fit my preconceived notion of what the club would look like. I've imagined what places might look like many times before, but this is the first time that I've ever been exactly right. For a moment, I was thinking this was because of the importance of this evening, but most of these clubs embrace the same clichés. Even the name was a bad cliché, albeit important to me privately. I bet the owners spent a long time try to decide whether they should call the club "212" or something like "Eclipse" or "Exit."

I walk through the club, noting the different spaces, the different nooks, and pass by dimly lit faces. I walk through the lights and bounce lightly to the thump of the techno beat, until I find an empty spot near the front of the bar area. I order a drink to give myself something to do. I don't want alcohol, so I order an energy drink. I hand the bartender a bill, and he gives me back my change. I count the change and soon realize I have two dollars and twelve cents in my hand. I quickly open my pocket notebook and record the sign.

The amount of my change makes the eighth sign in a single day, a new record. I have been noting every sign today in my pocket notebook. So far the list reads: 1) The new release, released today, from my favorite band Reckloch--a song called "212," (which I have yet to hear, but the disc is waiting for me in the front seat of my car). 2) I looked at a clock at exactly 2:12 p.m. 3) I heard people talking about the 212 kids who ran in a charity race. 4) There was an Army ad about 212 reasons to be a soldier. 5) I had received a phone call from New York and noted the area code on my caller ID. 6) I

happened to look at the trip mileage of my car at the exact moment I had driven 212 miles since filling it up with gas. 7) I heard on the news that 212 people were left stranded on an island after a cruise liner sank into the sea. 8) Change from my energy drink.

After I see the number, I feel jubilant. I look around for other signs in the room. There are no numbers, just ads for drinks. After I see a sign, the sensation that follows is always a deeper sense of connection to the world. The best way I could really describe it is that it's like that moment in films where the main action of the film is playing out and all you can hear is music, and the music works with the visuals in such a way that everything comes together in a deep and poetic way. Suddenly the entertainment becomes meaningful, residing on a deeper level other than just to get the viewer off. And so as I see this sign, I feel alive because I sense that there is some presence communicating with me.

I scan the room, feeling good, and soon see a very blond man looking directly at me from the other side of the bar. I look the other way as soon as our eyes meet, but glance back momentarily to see if he is still staring at me. He isn't looking at me anymore but is scanning the people around me. His eyes aren't passively glancing at people; he is directly observing people, rotating his head as if he is looking for something. He must be a cop. His eyes return to me. He smiles and motions with his beer bottle that he is coming over. I'm unclear why. If he is a cop, I really have nothing to worry about, but then again being checked out by a cop is still an unsettling sensation. When he nears me, he reaches his arm over the bar, squeezes in next to me, and asks me if I was in his English class.

I look back and see a pale featureless face with very clear blue eyes. He is almost an albino but has enough color in his face and hair to technically remove him from that category.

I finally answer in the negative. Why would a cop know me from a college class?

“Wait, wait, wait,” he says. He is yelling. It is hard to note how he really speaks because of the din and acoustical layout of the room. “I know where I’ve seen you—you got pulled over for a speeding ticket the other day on L Street.”

“Sorry, I’ve never even heard of L Street,” I reply. I go through the list of my previous tickets in my head.

“I know I’ve seen you before,” he says. He pushes on his chin with his index finger, “Alright, I’ve got it! You once were at a restaurant and were deeply offended by a racist joke made by a man sitting at a table next to you. You threw your water in his face, and the man immediately apologized. You accepted his apology, and you ended up finishing your meal in his company. I always wondered if you guys became good friends after that.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, trying to be polite. I sense the faint possibility of being thrown in prison because I can’t agree with him. “I’ve never seen you before, sir.”

“You just called me sir,” he laughs. “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

The way he laughs suggests that he is not a cop but a homosexual. I wait for some kind of sexual advance.

“I just saw you were alone and thought I’d mess with you,” he says. My stomach turns at the idea of him “messing with me.” I try to think of a good way to indicate that I have a girlfriend. This moment is probably the first time in my life I regret not asking my girlfriend to be my wife because a simple flash of my ring finger would quickly end this flirt.

“But there’s a real reason behind this,” he continues. “I’ve got this girl over there who’s into my thing, and she’s got this friend with her who needs a companion. Why don’t you pretend to be my buddy, and we’ll go look after them together. I can see you’re here by yourself. You’re drinking only an energy drink and making notes in your little pad. You really don’t have anything else to do, do you?”

The way he questions me appears on some level to suggest that he knows something about me. So I ask him if he knows why I am here.

He pauses in his response, and then his face contorts into this exaggerated smile—“Of course I know,” he says, and then he tugs on my jacket. “You’re here to do what we are all here to do--get laid!” He then points in the direction of two extremely blonde girls, who are both looking in our direction. I’m so taken aback by their looks that I ask the Aryan if he is talking about the two girls staring back at us. He nods and tells me his name is Paul.

“Let’s try to keep this as interesting as possible,” he says. “Your name is actually Jerry, and you’re an ad guy. But don’t tell me anything more. Let’s see how it all plays out.”

I agree. It is funny he picked both my father’s name and his profession. Is this important to what will happen tonight? I don’t have time to do any analysis because we

are moving quickly through the mass of people. I think out every bad outcome: he might be a psychopath, I could be leading him on, the girls could be crazy--I just don't know. I figure as long as I keep some distance I'll be fine.

Paul soon introduces me to the two girls, who had been given the ugly names of Lee and Lynn. Paul introduces me as Jerry and then tells us to follow him to the secret room. Lee follows Paul. Lynn follows Lee. I follow everybody.

Paul leads us away from the dance floor to a dark empty spot in the back corner. When we arrive, Paul pulls out a set of keys, then proceeds to search the wall. He appears to find a small groove and then inserts the keys. The door has no handle, only a lock, so the key acts like a handle. I want to ask Paul why he has a key, but I realize any questions might violate our fake friendship, so I remain quiet.

The door reveals a dimly lit stairway, which we climb.

“Not everyone knows about these rooms yet,” Paul says. Paul's comment becomes immediately obvious as our lungs fill with dust. The dimly lit space looks like a storage room. Cardboard boxes are stacked in most places in the room. But despite the functional use of the room, it has a strange ambience, with the stereo pumping through the walls and a very small window allowing a small view into what is happening in the club. The room easily could be converted into a clichéd chill room, which I'm sure the owners of the club are probably considering. We all sit down on crusty couches. I have a vision of the countless numbers of couples who have had unsafe sex here, and I keep my hands on my lap.

The couches are very comfortable, and I sit next to the very blonde Lynn. She, of course, is dressed in black, with her tight black shirt exposing her tan cleavage. When we sit down, we chat briefly, and she is tipsy enough to feel comfortable touching my leg. My girlfriend would certainly freak at this, but she reacts badly to everything and is terribly jealous. I had to lie to her just so I could come to this club alone. Lynn chats with me: What do I do, Who do I know, Where am I from? When I lie about what I do (advertising), we end up having a few things in common (as she once studied journalism in college), but we don't talk for very long before Paul interrupts everyone, stamping the floor to announce he has a story to tell.

"You know this room is haunted," he says. He walks around the room, placing his hand on the walls and knocking solidly on the walls.

"There's a decapitated head buried somewhere in this club," Paul continues, raising his hand to indicate scout's honor. "Well, not only a head, but an entire body is hiding somewhere in the walls. I bet if we spent all day tapping on the walls we probably could find the location." He knocks on the walls again. I can't really hear anything--only the bass drum coming through the room, but Paul keeps knocking until Lee finally asks Paul what he means.

"This used to be a church," Paul explains. "Every club on this street used to be a church at one time. This place was a nondenominational church called Church of Life. The preacher of this church claimed he could exorcise anything: demons, depression, scoliosis, anything. The preacher, named Farmer, was very successful and boasted he could heal anyone through Christ, no matter how desperate they appeared."

Paul's story continued. He explained that there was once a woman named Madiel who was tortured by demons. Farmer tried to free the woman. He did everything he could, but the woman never got better. Every time she returned, she was much worse. Then, other members of Farmer's community started to have the same problems that Madiel had. Farmer feared the problems Madiel had were spreading to other people in the church. The church attendance started to drop because people didn't think Farmer was a medium for the power of God. One day Madiel disappeared. People said she went to Mexico. Some people thought the devil finally took her. Farmer claimed she got better and went to live with her family somewhere up North. But nobody really knew what happened to her. Farmer's slump suddenly ended, and he prospered. He became so successful he sold his church and moved to California, and now he works for the Trinity Broadcasting Network.

"Before Farmer left," Paul says, "there was this story going around about this woman, dressed all in white, like a Victorian, who walked to this window right here and looked down, like she was watching her lost lover. People weren't sure, but there was talk she looked like Madiel, only her feet were all twisted backward."

"So Farmer killed Madiel?" Lee asks.

"We can't be sure, but the legend says he probably buried her body somewhere in the club."

"How do you know?" Lynn asks.

"Everyone knows."

"And Madiel haunts this club?" I ask.

“I don’t know,” Paul says. He walks behind the girls before pouncing on Lee. She lets out a shrill laugh that embarrasses me because of how obnoxious it sounds. Lee remarks there is no such thing as ghosts, while Paul sticks his tongue down her throat.

I glance toward Lynn and feel a little heat. She sticks out her tongue, showing me a move she had probably seen from *Girls Gone Wild*. We start to kiss. At first, it feels nice, but then I quickly become irritated with the taste in her mouth. I don’t like gin. Had I been partaking in liquor, I might have been okay, but she is slobbering all over my mouth, and it just feels too animalistic. I am also a little paranoid there is something sinister about to happen. I keep kissing her but slowly taper off my response. Lynn doesn’t miss a beat. Once I move away, she goes to Paul and Lee, revealing another move she has learned from *Girls Gone Wild*. They are all kissing. Paul starts to take off his clothes. As I exit the room, I hear him say, “You do know why they call this club, 212, don’t you? Ménage a trois: 2 – 1 – 2.”

I close the door and enter the screaming fury of the club. It is past one in the morning now, and the crowd is certainly drunk. The club is steaming hot, and the pressure of the crowd in conjunction with the energy drink makes me feel neurotic. I hide near a wall and try to think about Paul’s joke. For him, 212 is simply a sexual metaphor for a threesome.

I’m sure not many people see the significance of the number. I’m surprised that I even recognize it myself. I first noticed the number when I started to listen to Reckloch. They are a band I discovered at a music shop. I just picked up one CD at random and bought it. The music was intense. There were no vocals. Just hard driving beats done in a way I had never heard before. I realized that music didn’t have to be generic. Music

could expose different ways of thinking about the world. I really got into the music, partially because I liked the feeling of the music, but also because I knew no one else was listening to it.

Then I noticed something strange about the band. Every song had something to do with 212. Some songs were two minutes twelve seconds long; other songs were four minutes twenty-four or six minutes thirty-six. I bought more albums, and found the numbers were all the same. Every song was based around the number 212. I searched the Internet to find out why, but I never could find an answer.

Then one night, I had a dream in which I saw the number, but not in the linear form in which I normally saw it. It's hard to describe, but in the dream, I saw that the number was actually a symbol of opposition and unity. The two twos represent the duality, the pairing of opposites, and the one represents the unity of all things. Visually, the number is centered with a one, but one step out the number is dualistic. Out of one, creates two. So the number wasn't a tabulation of two hundred twelve items, but a symbol of the universe. It was for me the closest symbol of God that I could see.

After the dream, I started to see the number appear in places I didn't quite expect, but that made sense if you believed the number to be a symbol of God. After the death of my aunt, I remember my younger relatives wondering why God allowed people to die. I didn't feel much when my aunt died, I was never that close to her, but I was intrigued at how the adults explained death to the children. I listened to the adults attempt to answer the tough big questions, answering the questions pretty typically: first saying that death was natural and that people ended up in a better place. While they spoke, I remember seeing the number on the back of every car license plate. There must have been ten or

eleven cars, but each had the number 212 somewhere in the tag. After 9/11, I saw the number continuously, just in random places floating by on the news. During this time, when everyone was wondering why something so tragic would happen, the number comforted me. It made me feel like there was something hiding underneath the madness. Then, after I tried to break up with my girlfriend the first time, and she flipped out and attempted suicide, she was incoherent for a moment and kept saying the number 212. The clock even read that time. And I just suddenly felt the presence of something watching me, making itself known and making it clear to me that I was doing the right thing.

Over the past thirty or so days, I had seen the number countless times. I had often wondered why I see the number all the time. Then the answer became quite clear. On the 12th of February, tomorrow, I would start work with my dad. The whole family feels I have been fluffing off with my life; of course, they never knew me that well and demanded that I start to work for him or they would cut me off. I did not really want to do it, but I did not really have any other options. But the number kept showing up, and I started to realize that there was actually something out there communicating with me. Every time the presence spoke, it showed me the number. Normally I would have been having an anxiety attack knowing that I had to go work for my father, but I realized that the number indicated that there was more in this world than just sterile lives.

I look at my watch and see that the sign is to occur within the hour; it is now 1:18. I have nothing to do, so I watch people. I recognize someone dancing. My first reaction is to duck away, and I pull back to avoid whoever it is from seeing me. I have a piece of

his face in my mind, but it is not a complete picture, so I twist my head again to figure out exactly who it is I see. The dark headed student council president from my high school is dancing like an absolute asshole in middle of the floor. His name is Ryan Hendrix, and he annoys the hell out of me. He is one of those guys you know only by his whole name. He is never called just Ryan: he is Ryan Hendrix.

I can see he is probably at his highest level of intoxication, and he probably does this sort of thing every weekend after some board meeting. I'm sure he is well-to-do these days. Ever since high school, he was Mr. All-American. Under his yearbook photo was a list of his activities that went on and on and on. I think they had to make an extra space just for him. I didn't talk to him much when he went to college, but I know he had a full ride to everywhere. I saw him from time-to-time, and when I asked, I found out he was doing the same thing in college, always participating in everything, always involved, always becoming every mother's and father's wet dream.

I haven't seen the guy in years, and I do feel slightly compelled to say hello. I push my way through the crowd, trying not to knock anyone over too hard. When I finally near him, his expressions would make you think I am his lost love. He grabs me and pulls me into his chest, then pushes me out from him and starts to call out to his friends, saying "Hey, you see this guy; you guys see this guy! I love this guy! I love this guy!" He then wraps his hands around my head and marches me off toward the bar. He is so fake you have to love it. This is exactly how he was all the time in school. He is one of those guys you can never have a good reason to hate because he is too nice. He is never a bad guy to anybody, and he always remembers your name. He is probably going

to be president. And that is the first thing I ask him after he finally stops sucking my dick about how nice it is to see me.

“Ohhhh!” he laughs, as if he is shaking off that idea, but I can tell that becoming president is one of the dirty thoughts he never admits.

“I could never do that!” he explains. “But I was working on a campaign for the Republican candidate, Burdick’s campaign.”

I end up asking him what that was like, and he goes on and on and on. Hendrix was involved in the PR responsibilities for Burdick, whom I had never heard of, but he must have been the biggest prick. Hendrix explains the cornerstone of the campaign was to project religious hatred toward the liberals as a way to motivate voters. They actually said Jesus thought that Democrats were the party for Satan. I almost get down on my own knees to pray for the Apocalypse--he is that annoying. Hendrix said there were times he was irritated by this form of political persuasion, but he thinks Burdick actually was a very good person and doesn’t exactly share the sentiments he used to get votes. I wonder how you can respect someone who does something like that. It actually pisses me off completely--I don’t say anything, but it really pisses me off.

“Are you married to your girlfriend yet?” he asks, changing the topic.

I pretend to laugh but really grimace at the thought of marrying my girlfriend.

“Not really.”

“Not really,” he laughs. His nostrils flare at my answer, which isn’t intended to be funny.

“Why don’t you just break up with her?” he asks.

“My parents wouldn’t allow it,” I say, which is an almost true response. My parents love her more than I love her, and I think they might even love her more than they love me. Of course, something like that is hard to measure, but I’ve sensed it at times. There is also the problem that every time I ever mention to my girlfriend that I want to separate, she tries to kill herself. So it’s kind of hard to end things.

“Yeah, I have the same problem with my girlfriend.” His reply is quiet, but I detect some pain. I have heard he is dating a very rich girl from a prominent family. His face has aged; it’s strange to see someone from high school practically ten years down the line. It’s around this age where you can see the transition between the young man and the old man. I have looked in the mirror so many times to try to predict what I will look like as an old man. I’ve tried seeing what age will do to my own friends. I could never see the change, but I can detect the change in him now.

We chat for a few more moments before he goes back to his drunken crew. The clock reads 1:32. Almost thirty minutes.

I see Paul’s outstretched hand before I see him. “I know that bastard over there,” he says. “His name is Ryan Hendrix, and he works for that evil Burdick. I saw him at a campaign meeting. I hate Burdick, and I really really hate anyone who helps him destroy this state.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I went to school with that guy.”

“You went to school? I’m starting to get a bad idea about you. Why didn’t you stick around upstairs?”

“It’s club 2-1-2, not 2-2-2.”

“Yeah, right,” he replies. His eyes are telling me he isn’t really listening to me. He is fixated on Ryan. Every time Ryan calls out and laughs, Paul mutters something nasty under his breath. Every time Ryan smiles and claps amongst his friends, Paul nudges me and says something such as, “Look at that.” Finally, Paul smashes his beer down on the bar, making a loud thud, and pops his knuckles.

“I hate ignorant people,” he says. “I really do. But I really hate people who take advantage of ignorant people.” He turns his head toward me. “You’re not doing anything. Give me a hand.”

“What for?” I ask.

“Just do it.”

I don’t have a chance to argue; he is already pulling on my arms, moving us aggressively toward Hendrix. When Paul reaches Ryan, he grabs Ryan’s arms, and then pulls him into such a position that Ryan’s hands are locked behind his head.

“Hit him in the face!” Paul yells at me.

Ryan is so drunk, he is laughing.

Paul repeats himself. He is jumping up and down. “Hit him in the face! Hit him!”

I look around for Security. This is not a good idea at all for me. If Security see this action they will immediately kick me out, which is not the kind of thing I want to happen. I shake my head and walk off. Paul doesn’t quit; I hear the scuffle as I flee in the other direction. People are cursing as loud as they can scream. The house lights come up. Security rushes past me, but I don’t turn to look at the fight. I try to get as far as away as possible. I reach the farthest end of the bar before turning around. There is a

large crowd. I finally see Ryan Hendrix, or I see the crowd of Security that is beating him. He in no way deserves that treatment, and my instinctive reaction has me rushing in his direction. As I close in on the guards, I realize that if I do anything, there is about a one hundred percent chance that I will be kicked out of the club. My anxiety wins over my desire to protect him, and I turn away from him once more. I head back to my corner and wait for the lights to turn off again.

I expect to see Paul dragged out by security, but when I catch sight of him, he has his arms around the security guards. He scans the crowd in the same manner he had done when I first saw him tonight. I wonder if he is looking for me. When he sees me, he says something to a guard, moving and pointing in my direction.

When Paul nears me, he screams, “Who do you think I am? I own this place. You do what I say. Now get the hell out!”

The strong arms of the security guards are soon on my back and pushing me in different directions. They squeeze my hand so hard I scream out in pain. I suddenly realize my folly. I think of Ryan and expect to be beaten, but they only grip me painfully as they push toward the outside. Everyone watches as I am kicked out into the parking lot. I stand there in front of the club for a minute, looking for some kind of option. The bouncers hold their bodies in a rigid way to indicate to me that there is no way I will be able to get back in.

I will get the shit kicked out of me if I try to reenter the club. If I want to see the sign, I will have to accept real physical pain. I sit in my car for a while trying to decide if I want to do this or not. My hand burns.

My new CD for Reckloch sits waiting for me to listen to it. They know it. I can feel it. The song's length is 2:12 seconds. The title is "212." If anyone knows the secret of 212, they do. I hold the CD in my hand and sniff the packaging. The cover is a blank image of the number in bold lettering, not very attractive, but probably effective in a marketing sense.

I really don't want to open the CD until later, so I exit my car to avoid temptation. I look around to find some other possibility in getting back inside. If I want to reenter, I'll have to change my clothes. I'd have to get into disguise, which more than likely will help me to not get hurt trying to reenter, but then again I have less than half an hour and I don't have any clothes, and I don't really know of any shops that would let me get a disguise this late. Plus, the disguise wouldn't help that much—everyone is wearing dark clothes. I could try to hide myself between people, but that most likely would get me thrown out, and Security checks everyone who walks into the club.

The third option is to find some other entrance.

I scan the building, and then follow the wall toward the back. I find a service entrance. I check the door, which turns out to be locked. I walk around to the other side and find no other way in. I go back to the service entrance and knock. A short Mexican man opens the door.

"I left something in there," I say.

"No entrance—use front," he says as he pulls on the door.

"No, no, no," I plead, holding onto the door.

"No entrance—use front," he says again.

He slams the door shut. I knock again, but he doesn't answer. I look at my watch. I have fewer than fifteen minutes. It is 2:00. I have twelve minutes to get into that club. I start to panic. I walk around the front--desperate, thinking maybe I can dash in or try to squeeze by somebody. I've seen it done before. You just stand really close to somebody, and when the security guard is watching that person, you quickly dash by, but you have to make sure neither the security guy nor the person getting checked sees you. It's a one shot deal. If I fail, I'll never get in again.

While I consider my options, chance offers me a real opportunity. Across the street a fight breaks out at the Cowboy Club. I immediately think of Paul and his fight and get an idea.

"Hey," I yell toward Security. "Paul is getting his ass kicked over at Club Rodeo."

I look over toward the fight and see the action has almost broken up, but that doesn't stop the security guards at the front. They rush toward the small crowd, flashlights in hand. I take the momentary diversion as my opportunity and slip inside Club 212 for the second time that night. I have to find a position that is as inconspicuous as possible, not a difficult a task--most of the club is dark. I find a central spot and sit low in a chair, partially covering my face with my hands. I have a pretty good view of the entire club. I look at my watch. I have five minutes.

Paul said Madiel's feet are twisted backward. I have heard of those kinds of ghosts in India but not here in the US. But what would she do? Stand at that window? I can see the window from where I am, so I keep the dark glass in my scan.

As the minutes turn into seconds, my eyes desperately search for anything. I don't know for sure what the sign will be. There is a couple kissing near me. The crowd is gyrating aggressively. A staff member passes through with half-full glasses of liquor.

Then the music stops. The time is almost here. The crowd stops dancing, and look at each other with confusion. It feels so strange for the music to end. I have never really seen a club stop playing music, except when it was time to close. The whole place seems to pause for a moment. I look at my watch. Fifteen seconds. I stand up in my chair. I see Paul. I duck back down, hoping he didn't see me. I look at my watch, five seconds, four, three, two,--

The music begins again: an odd intro, a strange voice, then a song, and the lyrics begin. The lyrics are repeating the numbers "two" and "one" and "two." The song must have been especially written for the club. Then the word "Threesome" is repeated over and over. "Let's do it again," the song sings. This is the worst song I have heard in a while, full of clichéd rhythms, true techno trash. But around me, I don't see anything. I don't see any floating women. I don't see any glowing lights. I don't see anything out of the ordinary. Just the same thing I saw at 2:11 or 2:10 or 2:09, only now the club is gyrating to really terrible music. 2:12 passes. Then it is 2:13, and nothing happens. The song continues. Then it is 2:14, and I wait until it is 2:30 before I stand up.

Then I feel a hand on my shoulder. I don't have to look to know that Paul's pale face is behind me. Paul punches me in the stomach as Security grips me to throw me out once again.

The security guard slaps me outside, dropping me in front for the second time. There is more vulgarity and more anger from them. I don't listen. I head to my car. I

lock myself inside and turn on the engine. A light is flashing near me; it is my cell phone, which I rarely use, but which my girlfriend insisted I bring with me. I pick up the phone and see that I have a message; the message was recorded at 2:12. Here it is; here is the big moment, here is the communication from the presence. I hit the button and listen to the message.

“Honey bear,” a voice says, and I immediately recognize my girlfriend speaking. “Don’t stay out too late because you need to be refreshed for work tomorrow . . .”

I throw the phone on the floor of the car as hard as I can. Where in the hell was Madiel? Why didn’t she at least flash in the window? Where in the hell was the sign? Why in the hell did I even come out here? Is the song about a threesome the sign? Is the sign making fun of me, trying to tell me that I need to go to work? Bullshit. I grip the wheel of my car and twist the rubber steering wheel in different directions.

I sit like this for many moments, and then I feel chest pains because I’m not breathing. I exhale for a long moment, slightly relaxing. As I exhale, I see my number on the cover of the Reckloch CD. A feeling of exultation washes over me as I note that all is not lost. I still have my favorite band. If anyone understands what I’m searching for, my band does. They started this. If they didn’t make every song two minutes twelve seconds long, then I would have never noticed it in the first place. I haven’t heard that much about the CD in the press; there have been no reviews. They are a band that always makes their own kind of music. Their songs are never on commercials. Their songs are never in the charts. I look at the title of the Reckloch track: “212,” and insert the CD in my player. I hit the green button.

As I hear the first notes, I feel a wave of sheer paranoia overtake me. My chest freezes up. This feeling, I know, is a heart attack. This has to be a heart attack. Even my elbow throbs. My body starts to gyrate as if I'm having a seizure. I can feel vomit entering my esophagus. The pain is immense. I start to hope that I'm about to die. I hope that I die while listening to this CD. I feel my spirit leaving my body. I see myself shaking in the car, and I am now completely detached from my body, moving into the heavens. The darkness suddenly turns light; I feel myself moving down a tunnel. I think of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and I ask myself if I am ready for the great liberation upon hearing? But my answer is yes. As my soul traverses, I feel myself leaving behind my boring existence, my boring reality, my uninteresting life, and a feeling of true satisfaction begins to awaken.

But then I am interrupted. My sudden death is interrupted. I realize quickly that the pain was not as intense as I wanted and I am simply dreaming of dying. I realize the phone is ringing. I see the light flashing, and I know it's my girlfriend. I wonder for a second if the ringing disrupted my death, and if my girlfriend's obsession with me is more powerful than my own ability to kill myself.

"You ruined it," I say into the receiver.

"Are you still out? I've been calling all night," she says angrily. "You've got to work in the morning!"

"I almost died just now, but you ruined it," I say.

"I noticed that you don't have any clean razors. You're going to have to shave before you go to work," she says. "What's that playing in the background, sounds like it's about a threesome?"

I don't say anything else. I put my car in reverse.

VITA

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Pages in Study: 181

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This collection includes in the following stories: "Date Movie," "Line Dancing," "Ghost Story," "Plainview," "The First Time I Left My Parents," "Bobby Jo," "Another Night in My House: Ghost Story Part II," and "212."

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