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Fulcrum, and Other Stories

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Fulcrum

“Give me a place to stand, and I will move the earth.”
-Archimedes

Chapter 1

The school stood quiet and forbidding, now mostly emptied of the kids and teachers who roamed its halls earlier that day. The wind swept the parking lot in front of the entrance, and whistled under the second floor windows left slightly ajar. Though it was September, and the rippling hot air of summer was fast on its way out of Levant, many had opened their classroom windows to allow the air to circulate and stay fresh. The tired teachers, having seen their students safely to their busses home, emptied their desks of paper and writing instruments and rubbed their eyes free of the school day's slow burn, the minor indignities and silent triumphs falling away like hair, slowly forgotten, and their thoughts already on their next class, the next opportunity for futile complaint, excuses, and the numbered days between pay checks. The janitor roamed the hall with his mop and yellow cart full of cleaning supplies and dirty water, headphones in his ears and deaf to the world. Outside the school, on the football field, the football kids smashed each other in the head and shoulders like rams, an impassioned "Fuck you, Fuck yeah, Yeah Bitch" popping up here and there alongside the crunch of plastic armor and their screaming coach. The cross country runners stretched their long, bare, hairless legs over the flat plain of grass in front of them, ducking in and out of the nearby forest as their path took them, elongating their thin, bird-like arms with each stride of their run. The field hockey girls tugged at the straps of their sports bras, shaking off the dull soreness in their breasts, and shouted heartfelt encouragement to one another, privately plotting their disgust and jealousies, the friends in whom they could secretly confide, whom they would be

forced to betray, and their machinations for shunning and shame. Girlfriends watched, some bored but patient, some knowledgeable, from the sideline, like spectators at the zoo.

The soccer coach blew his whistle, puncturing the air of the soccer field with its shrill tweet. All the kids but one, the captain of the team, lined up at the end of the field and stood in front of the white net slung across the mouth of the goal. The goal keeper stood in the middle, hands out in front, alert and prepared to dart in any direction to stop the shots about to come at him. The captain stood to the side of the goal, a little pile of soccer balls gathered at his feet. He picked one up.

The coach blew his whistle again, signaling the start of the exercise. The captain rolled the ball along the ground, like a bowling ball, parallel to the mouth of the goal, imitating a pass from the wing. The first boy in the line ran out, slammed the ball with his foot, and rocketed it into the upper corner of the goal post. The ball dinged the metal, loudly clanging the square, hollow pipe, and skipped over the netting into the dense brush of the forest behind the soccer field. The boy nervously scratched his head and walked to the back of the line.

“Where do you think you’re going, freshman?” asked the captain. The freshman froze in his tracks, almost tripping from the forward momentum. He tugged at the sleeve of his sweatshirt in confusion. The other freshman still in line looked at each other and paid close attention, glad that they weren’t the ones who’d done anything wrong, and that an example of what to avoid had come

along so soon. The sophomores and juniors shook their heads and smiled at one another. The seniors picked their noses and spat on the ground.

“Was there something else?” asked the freshman, innocently.

“Something else?” asked the captain, incredulous. “Take a wild guess. No really, tell me. What do you think?”

The freshman suddenly felt all eyes on him. The practice had stopped. Even the coach was looking at him, awaiting an answer. He didn’t know what to say, and he began to fidget, looking to the line of boys for help. They just watched him, and didn’t say anything.

The captain walked right up to him and looked down his nose. The captain was much taller than the freshman, with brown hair and narrow blue eyes that seemed on fire with disgust and disappointment that the freshman didn’t understand. “Um...” the freshman mumbled weakly.

“You shank it, you go get it,” said the captain. “You think your mother’s around to pick up after you or something? Did you expect one of us to clean up your crap?” he said, pointing at the spot on the cross bar where the soccer ball had hit and skipped over. The freshman, about to cry, quivered where he stood, and looked in panic between the captain, the coach, and the other boys.

“Come on, Josh!” said a voice from the line. Everyone in the line, and the coach from afar, turned to see who had said it. The captain, Josh, didn’t need to look. He recognized the voice.

“Was I talking to you, Steve?” said Josh.

Steve looked down at the ground. “Just let him get his ball. You’re holding up practice.” Josh went silent and glared at Steve. Josh turned to look at the coach, who started as though beckoned over, and approached the scene.

“Freshman, go into the woods and get your ball,” the coach said. The freshman, happy to be away, ran into the forest, swimming past the noisome bushes and bramble before disappearing into the canopy. “Marten, give me a lap around the field.”

“What!?! But coach-!” shouted Steve in disbelief.

“Now, Marten!” Steve ground his teeth, left the line, and began a slow jog around the field, the strings of his hooded sweatshirt swinging back and forth across his chest as he moved. “Some hustle, Marten! My grandmother runs faster, and she’s ninety two!” Steve ran faster, pulling further away. Josh thought he heard Steve mumble something, but he couldn’t quite catch what it was before the wind caught it and blew it away. He watched Steve grow smaller in the distance as he turned the corner of the soccer field and ran along the sideline. Past the sideline a hill rolled down into another stretch of forest, which opened up into a large apple orchard further in the distance. The September sky was bright, cloudless blue, though it was cold and windy on the field. Josh shook his head, pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head, and returned to the pile of soccer balls. He picked one of them up and awaited the coach’s whistle.

The drill continued on. At each sound of the whistle a kid ran forward from the line, each pounding the ground with their leather cleats to meet the ball as it rolled toward them. A loud, hollow whack sounded each time the leather

smashed the air filled rubber. Some flew straight into the goal keeper's hands. Some curled to the side and got past him into the net, except when he anticipated correctly and dove to block them in time. Some hit the crossbar and bounced right back to the person who shot it. Others missed the goal completely, and those who did immediately ran into the stinking, thorny brush to retrieve their ball, just as they had watched the unlucky freshman do before. When they came back their legs and faces were scratched by thorns and streaked with dirt. One had cobwebs all over his hair and mouth. Josh kept count in his head of how many times each kid missed or made their shots. When each kid in the line had gone five times, Josh multiplied their misses by ten. He went to the coach and told him what to do next.

The coach nodded and looked out over the students. "If you made all your shots, go to that half of the penalty box and play keep away with the captain. Ten pushups for each shot you missed. If you made one, that's forty pushups. If you made nil, fifty, and so on." Most of the freshmen and the several upperclassmen who'd missed their shots quietly groaned their disapproval, even as they dropped to the ground and started doing the pushups. Steve finished running his lap just as they started, and he wondered at them. He looked at Josh, then to the coach.

"Coach?" Steve asked.

The coach looked to Josh. "You designed the drill, Wakeman. What do you say?"

Josh flicked a ball from the pile up to his hands with his foot. "How many shots did he make again?"

The coach looked at Steve. “Fifty pushups, Marten.” Steve glared at Josh, clenched his fists, slowly dropped to the ground, and started doing the pushups. Josh walked away from them to the other end of the penalty box and joined the more skilled players who’d made all their shots. There were about five. They looked at him, and at the ball in his hands. He dropped it at his feet, and the swarm of them moved to try to take it from him. Immediately he flicked and moved the ball away from their charging feet, anticipating their blurred forms before they could get close, and turned his body, and the ball, away from them, like a matador fooling a bull again and again with his cape. He watched the group of them, dictated their direction, and controlled where they moved. They would watch the ball, and he would lead them one way while already leaning his body the other way, and snatch the ball at the moment where they seemed poised to poke it away. He did this with ease for about eight minutes, spinning and darting amongst the group, creating running lanes and avenues for himself.

No one could take it away from him, and their frustration mounted, until Josh got bored and he lightly passed the ball to the same freshman who had taken the first, unfortunate shot in the previous drill, now come over after finishing his pushups. He barely received the pass, almost missing it coming at him, so surprised that he almost bobbed it away. Josh jogged off toward the sideline, where the sports bags and water bottles lay strewn, but not before he turned to the freshman and muttered, “You’re turn.” The rest of the players charged at the freshman at top speed, eager to take out their frustrations on a weaker opponent, uncaring toward his panicked, fearful expression.

The coach joined Josh on the sideline. He tried to hide his nervousness, but it showed in the corners of his smile. “You trying to take my job, Wakeman?” he said with a laugh. Josh smiled but didn’t look at him. The coach was an amateur, a history teacher who had accepted the coaching job when no one else wanted it, despite the extra pay, and he and Josh both knew it. Josh had noticed it during the first few practices held during the summer, in the weeks before school started. The drills the coach had been running consisted of little more than simple running and basic field work like passing and heading, with little preparation or strategy for the game they would actually play on the large field in concert with one another. The strategies for offense and defense, for moving the ball up, down, and across the field were completely disregarded. They didn’t even establish first and second string players, or designate positions.

Josh remembered going up to the coach after those first couple of August practices. He’d waited patiently for the chance. “You know coach,” he said. “There are drills we can do that will help teach the basic stuff and advanced strategies at the same time.”

“Is that right? No kidding?” the coach had said at the time. Josh could tell he wasn’t being sarcastic.

“Yeah,” Josh said, biting his lip. “I know a lot of good formations. I watch a lot of pro matches with my Dad, and we can practice those while doing a lot of the same stuff we’ve been doing. They have a lot of passing involved, and you can fit running in anywhere.”

“Huh. Are these things that the freshman can do too?” asked the coach.

“They can learn it,” said Josh.

“Well, as long as they can have fun doing them. I just want to make sure everyone is having fun. It’s only a game, right?” said the coach.

“Right, but these formations will definitely give us an edge over most of the other schools. My Dad makes game tapes of them for me. We’ll have a chance to make the regional tournament if we get the right strategies down,” said Josh.

The coach wiped his brow of sweat and swatted a mosquito from the back of his neck. They’d been especially numerous that summer. “That would be cool. Making the regional would definitely be cool.” He said the word ‘regional’ delicately, as though it were some strange, glass ornament that could easily break if handled improperly. “I just don’t want anyone to stress out over making the tournament though, you know? I think if we all just go out there and give it our best shot then that’ll be good. Some of the freshmen are only playing for the first time. And you’re a senior, right? Don’t you want your last year in high school to be fun before you head off to college?”

“It’ll be fun to win a championship for once. That would make my last year fun,” Josh said.

“Yeah it...it would be,” said the coach.

“If we learn my formations, we’ll have a pretty good shot at it,” said Josh.

“We would, huh?” The coach gulped, tried to hide it, and failed.

“I’ll draw up some formations and send them to you. Then we can start mixing them into practice. We’ve wasted a lot of time already, and we’ll have to

build up from smaller formations, but it'll be worth it once the games start. None of the smaller teams will be able to stop us, and we'll even be able to give teams like Goshen and Arlington a run for their money.”

“Uh huh?” said the coach. He had moved to Levant from Maryland for work six months prior, and he didn't know where Goshen and Arlington were, or that they had soccer teams.

“We'll have to start with the moving triangle drill,” Josh continued. “This passing while standing in place stuff is no good. We need to get everyone's head on a swivel, no matter what position they play. That's the first thing. Without vision, we're dead in the water.” The coach just stood, nodding dumbly along as Josh counted off the necessities on each of his fingers. Since then, once the school year started, the practices had gone as Josh had wished. Josh would sit with the coach after his history class and look over the specialized soccer play book his Father had bought for him. Each page had a drawing of a full soccer field already inked into it, and Josh covered them in x's and circles and arrows to show the various shapes and designs that the players would move around in for each drill, and he would explain why they were important and relevant to the larger game strategy.

Far from being educational, these sit down sessions with Josh made the coach feel dumber than at any other time in his life, and he grew to resent both them and the one who insisted on them. Josh would mention the positions and what they did; sweeper being the last line of defense before the goal keeper, left and right backs vital for getting the ball out of the backfield, a cloud of

amorphous midfielders to read the opposing defense, or drop back in defensive support, strikers for quick scoring, but the coach could only grasp some of it and only got a vague idea from looking at the play book diagrams. He had grown up playing street hockey, and watching the occasional basketball game, or the Super Bowl, on TV. Josh would name to him players on European teams with strange sounding names, speaking of their talents without reverence or admiration, as though their strategies and individual skills were items on a grocery list that needed to be obtained, or could be done without, or would be a luxury to have but couldn't be expected for the talent level he had observed during practice.

It was during one of these sessions, after a full week of Josh's altered practices, that the coach tried to speak up.

"Say, Josh," said the coach.

Josh looked up from the play book on the desk between them. "What?"

The coach pulled at his collar. "Say, we've tried it your way for the past week or so, and I don't know if you've noticed, but the freshman have been having a hard time."

"That's to be expected. They're not going to be as skilled as the ones who've been on the team for a while," said Josh. "We'll get them to where we want them though."

"I've been getting complaints from their parents," said the coach.

Josh paused. "Oh?"

“They don’t like how you...how you yell at them. And the way you single some of them out. Some of them have threatened to quit,” the coach said. He looked at Josh straight in the eyes. Josh was unimpressed.

“If they can’t handle it then they should quit. We have pretty big goals after all. Don’t you think so?” asked Josh.

The coach couldn’t take it anymore. “No, as a matter of fact, I don’t!” he said, slamming a fist on the desk. Josh looked at him as though he hadn’t slammed his fist at all, as though he didn’t even have hands to make fists with, like some kind of pathetic circus freak. Josh didn’t blink. A moment of silence passed.

“The principal thinks so,” said Josh.

The anger dissipated from the coach’s face. His fist loosened into a palm flattened against the desk. “What’s that?”

“The principal and his family came over recently to have dinner with us, and I overheard them talking about the new direction the soccer team is heading in. We’ve done okay in the past, but he’s proud that we’re aiming to finally do what it takes to win a championship. All the other coaches just didn’t have the right mindset for it. He appreciates that someone with vision is finally running the show. He said he’s going to closely watch how we do this year. He said that a diverse, successful sports program can do wonders for any school, even a small high school like ours. Football still gets five times the budget right now, but a soccer championship would help grow the pie and balance it.”

“You’re family is friends with the principal?” asked the coach.

“My Dad is friends with everyone in town. We need to focus on this, though,” Josh said, tapping the play book impatiently.

“But what about the parents?” the coach asked.

Josh put down the book. “Winning solves a lot of problems. When we start winning games, those complaints you’re getting will stop soon enough.”

The coach was silent for a moment after Josh said this. The things he wanted to say in response were held in check in his mind by the supposed words of the principal, the image of the principal smiling and shaking his hand for a job well done, receiving priority among the other teachers and extra recognition, and an ambition he’d never known or thought about while getting his master’s degree in education lit up something in his brain, some dormant synapse, and the ambition, in that moment, overtook his rebuttal and the last vestiges of the low key, after-school fun he’d envisioned when he took the coaching position in the first place. In no time the vestiges died, squashed into silence. He let out a long sigh, as though tired. He brought up his fingers to cover his mouth, and turned to look out the open classroom window.

“You know for sure that these strategies of yours will help us win?” the coach asked with solemnity.

Triumph, and a serene smile. “Yes,” said Josh.

“Because I’m the one getting all these complaints, you know,” said the coach.

“Yes,” said Josh, knowing that they wouldn’t need to speak about it anymore. And what Josh said would happen happened. The team won their first

three games of the season, one at home and two on the road, and when those complaining parents of the freshmen saw how well their children played in the games, not noticing Josh's systems and strategies and his own creative ability at work behind the scenes of the quick striking, quick scoring offense on the field, the complaints, to the coach's relief, were quickly replaced with compliments and well wishes. Some even apologized to him. Most effusive were the compliments from the parents whose children had scored goals, but all of them eventually came up, either after wildly cheering during the games or when they came to pick up their kids after the practices, and offered him their sincerest regards, their invitations to dinner at their houses, the names of their young, single sisters and cousins.

There was only one exception to this effusive praise, and they were the exception because the coach had never actually met or even seen them. Josh's parents were an enigma. They never picked him up from practice; Josh drove himself everywhere. They never came to the games; Josh always set up two tripods with video cameras in the stands and took the game tape home with him. Josh never spoke about them since mentioning that his Father was friends with everyone in town, and whenever the coach tried to ask around about him, he didn't get very far, getting only variations of "Jason Wakeman is a corporate lawyer, and not one you want to mess with, or so I've heard." He found out they lived in Forsythia Grove, one of the cleanest, trimmest, most remote neighborhoods in all of Levant, in a giant house with a wrought iron fence and a brick driveway and a pool in the backyard, but no one in town had ever actually

been inside because the Wakeman's never invited anyone to dinner other than people like the school principal, the chief of police, the town judge, and the president of the county savings bank, none of whom would ever actually tell the coach what he wanted to know even if he got the chance to ask them. The coach was almost tempted to imagine that Josh didn't have any parents at all, that he lived in the giant house by himself, like some kind of teen prodigy, and maybe had an underground laboratory with thousands of TV screens for watching soccer matches, or had billions locked away somewhere and was simply going to high school and playing on the soccer team as a whim. This wasn't a hard thing for the coach to imagine.

The coach watched Josh finish his water break and reenter the fray of the keep away game. In short time Josh stole the ball back from the person who had it, and continued as he did before to flick the ball around and protect it from the chasing crowd. There were more of them now, having grown in number thanks to the arrival of the weaker players who'd only just finished doing their pushups, who'd done them quickly out of embarrassment and a feeling of exclusion, and were now ready to join in the game. A dark cloud rolled in, covering up the sun, and the light between everything turned wet gray, the complexion of the leaves and grass turned thick, dark green, and the bald patches of the soccer field, where no grass could grow for having been kicked and punctured by so many cleats, turned darker brown, the tiny of patches of dry, sandy dirt getting kicked up into the air.

Josh had more difficulty keeping track of the now larger crowd of pursuing players. They seemed to be everywhere, and he had far less time to pull the ball away than he did before. They were starting to understand the point of the drill. They ganged up on him in twos and threes, looked each other in the eyes to communicate without speaking, gave hand signals, attacked him from behind and in front simultaneously, and started to box him up. They weren't as frustrated now, because they knew they would get him eventually. Their numbers ensured it. Josh noticed this and decided that was enough of that drill. He pulled up his body, one foot on the ball, and raised a hand to signal a timeout.

"Time. That's enough of that," Josh yelled. As soon as he finished saying it, one of the players in the crowd ran up and kicked the ball away from under his foot, almost toppling him. It was Steve, and he ran after the stolen ball, laughing as he did so. He smashed the ball at the goal, and it deflected off the right side post and into the netting. Josh watched him do this. He thought he heard giggling coming from someone, or perhaps multiple people, in the still present crowd of those who'd been playing keep away. Steve turned and walked back to join the rest of the team.

Josh looked to everyone else. "We're doing one on one keep away now. One guy is offense, the other defense. Find a partner." The team members looked at each other and split into pairs. Josh immediately went to Steve.

"You're getting that ball, Steve. You kicked it." Josh said.

"There's plenty right here," Steve said, pointing to a pile of balls close by.

“You’re my partner though, and I want to use that ball you kicked,” said Josh.

“Yeah? What’s so special about that one, huh?” Steve asked.

“It has good air pressure,” Josh said. “Good friction.” He made this last one up.

Steve frowned, stared at him in disbelief, turned around and slowly jogged back to the goal, where he lifted away the netting like an in-the-way forest brush and reached low for the soccer ball. He dropped it on the ground in front of him and dribbled it towards Josh.

The other pairs started the drill. The hollow sound of their feet kicking the ball, and the sound of their heightened breathing whirled at various volumes into the air around Josh and Steve. Some playing offense got too excited, became overzealous to get their ball away from their defensive opponent, not remembering the ease with which Josh defended himself and the ball in the previous keep away game by simply flicking it around, often in a circle. They would forget their touch on the ball, sending it far away on accident, giving their defensive opponent a chance to run it down. It turned into a footrace between them when this happened.

Josh and Steve regarded this activity around them for a second before looking at one another. Steve had the ball under his foot, where he’d stopped it after bringing it back from the goal, and he brought his foot down next to the ball, ready to flick it away at a moment’s notice. Josh stood tall and straight, and this allowed them to see each other’s faces. Steve noticed that Josh wasn’t looking at

the ball at his feet, but at him. His blue eyes were narrowed in what looked like contemplation, as though he were examining a grocery list of ways to attack.

Finding a weakness, or designing one in his opponent from thin air.

Josh dropped his body low like a sprinter and charged straight at him in a bull rush, as though intending to body tackle him. Steve, not expecting this, instinctively turned his body away and dragged the ball along with him, but put too much force on it in the process. He immediately realized his mistake when he saw the ball move out of where he could reach. Josh was much faster, even though they were about the same size, and he quickly overtook the ball, seeming to appear over it as if by magic, leaving Steve to just stand and realize his humiliation at being beaten without the amateur's benefit of not knowing how it had happened. He knew because Josh had explained it to him many times before, as he did now.

"You did it again," said Josh. There was no disappointment in his voice, nor childish excitement at having triumphed. There was only the mere fact of his superiority, the incontrovertible expectation that the result couldn't have been any different. Steve knew what was coming next.

"You can't flinch like that, even if someone's charging you down," Josh continued. "Even if someone comes at you looking like they want to kill you, you can't flinch."

Steve was silent a moment, as though considering his words. "I know, Josh."

“No you don’t. You obviously don’t. If you did, then I wouldn’t have this ball right now.”

“I know, okay!?”

“Come on, then. Try and get it back. See if I flinch.” Steve felt the challenge less than the insult, the sharp and small revenge, openly disguised behind it. He felt the color rising to his face. He realized that he wasn’t going to be able to get the ball back, because the insult had wormed its way in, and was eating away at him, undermining him. Every charge he made, every attempt at the ball and showing Josh that he could play and win the fight, would seem impossible and futile, even though he knew somewhere deep down and presently unreachable that they weren’t, thus diminishing his chances even more. Even encouraging himself with an inner pep talk would suddenly seem like an excuse, hollow and weak against the absolute certainty of Josh’s talent, like a compensatory ribbon received for coming in last place at a kindergarten field day race. And yet, how impossible it was, how much worse it would have been to walk away, to throw his hands in the air and walk off the field in front of everyone else, to quit the team and drive home to deny Josh his satisfaction. The other players and the coach had stopped their games and were watching them now.

He tried. How he tried. He charged and ran as fast as he could. He spun and kicked at the air where the ball had been before Josh inevitably snatched it away. The two of them kicked up the dust. He looked like a dog chasing a toy being dangled by its master, a graceless, stupid amateur dancing with a

professional. Not once throughout did Josh show any sign that he was having fun. He looked bored. He barely even looked at Steve anymore. Steve grew tired, and then angry, and expended energy carelessly, until he was sweaty and panting and unable to catch his breath. Finally he slowed down, unable to go on, and put his hands on his knees, gasping for air. He looked up at Josh before his vision went hazy, then bent over, fell to his knees, and vomited.

He felt weak. His arms shook. He wretched up his breakfast, his lunch, and the water he'd had during practice. It made him delirious enough that for a moment he didn't care that everyone was looking at him, but that passed. The crowd watched him, then looked to each other. They looked at Josh. Josh stood over him and watched, and if anyone had been paying close enough attention, or had looked close enough at his face, they might have noticed the tiny, imperceptible smile that curled at the edge of Josh's lips.

"Freshman," Josh said to the one from earlier, the one he'd made run into the woods after his ball.

The freshman started. "Huh? Yes?"

"Go to the sidelines and get his water bottle. It has his name on it." The freshman did as told, and began running to the sideline. Josh knelt down next to Steve and started rubbing his back. "There, there. You're okay, man. That's it. That's it. Spit it all out. You're gonna' be okay."

The freshman returned with the water bottle. Josh held out his hand, and the freshman gave it to him. Josh shook the bottle and unscrewed the top off. He dumped half of it over Steve's head.

“Cool your head off, man. Look at me. Hey. Look at me. Go to the sideline and take five, okay? You’re hitting your limit right now. No, no, listen to me. Stop crying. Listen to me. This is a good thing. How you handle this right now is the most important thing. You need to hit your limit to go past. You understand? Where you are right now is the most important place you’ll ever be in your life. Think about that.” Josh turned to the rest of his teammates, and located the coach. The coach nodded.

“Alright, we’ll finish off with a scrimmage,” said the coach. “Try to avoid the mess, unless you want it on your cleats.” The other teammates moved away to take their positions on the field, some looking back over their shoulders at Steve’s prone form.

Josh stood up and looked down at him. “Now get up,” he said. Steve lifted his head up, still breathing heavily, water dripping down his face, a stripe of orange vomit dribbling down the sides of his mouth, and picked himself up. He kept his eyes on the ground, not looking at Josh, and started walking to the sideline. His leg shook at first, like a fawn taking its first steps, but he recovered.

Josh started walking alongside him. He held out his hand. It was holding Steve’s water bottle. “Don’t forget this. You need to rehydrate after puking.” Steve grabbed the bottle out of his hand and started drinking. “Dude, not too fast! Your stomach is sensitive right now. Slowly.” Josh followed him to the sideline, and they sat together on the bench. Steve gargled his water, spat, and wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve. Josh looked at the rest of the players on the field in

the middle of the scrimmage match, and the coach running up and down the field to keep up with the ball.

They stayed like that for a little while, just sitting there. The sun was back out from behind the clouds, which had moved out of sight, leaving the open sky before them. The sky stretched beyond the school, and made the world seem vast and big beyond the square of the soccer field, or the school grounds, or the forest and corn fields and apple orchards surrounding them. A wind swept along and quieted the sound of the players running on the field, muffled their calls for passes and shots. It swept through the trees, rustling them, and cooled their brows. Back and forth went the ball, changing possession, getting caught in scrums, until finally one of them managed to score a goal. The one who did it raised his hands in the air, did a fist pump, and slid over the grass on his knees in celebration.

“They’re useless out there without us,” Josh said to the air.

Steve looked at him. “What?”

“If either of us miss a game, we can mark that up as a loss. We can’t depend on them to know what to do on their own. I can control the offense or defense, but I can’t do both at once. The field’s too big for that. I need someone who can guide the defense when I’m in enemy territory with the offense. We need another me to run things back there, but you’ll have to do instead. You’re the second best we’ve got on defense. I’ve told the coach that I want you to start at sweeper.” Steve looked at him. “You need to get better though. No more losing your cool, and definitely no more puking. That’s just embarrassing, and the teams we’re playing against are going to see stuff like that and think you’re a

weak link, and we can't have a weak link for a sweeper. Or anywhere else, for that matter. The opponents have been small fry up to now, and it's only going to get tougher from here on out."

Steve was about to say something, but he caught someone approaching out of the corner of his eye. He turned to look. Josh noticed and looked as well. It was a girl in jeans with a headband in her long black hair, and a black jacket unzipped over her yellow shirt. She wore sandals, showing off her painted toes. She had walked around the field from the opposite sideline.

"Ashley?" Josh said, curious. She wore a concerned look. "What's wrong?" Josh asked her.

"Me and the other girls saw someone bent over on the field but we couldn't see who it was from where we were sitting. I just wanted to make sure whoever it was was okay," she said. She looked at Steve. "Are you okay, Steve?"

"I'm...I'm fine," Steve mumbled, shifting his water bottle from hand to hand.

"You sure? I've got some orange slices in my car. It's important to rehydrate after you puke, you know."

"I'm fine, Ashley, thanks."

Josh stood up from the bench and went to her. He was smiling. "You worry too much. Steve's tough. He can handle it. Right Steve?" He didn't wait for Steve to answer. "He's going to be our starting sweeper, you know," he said to Ashley.

Ashley's eyes brightened and her smile widened. She clapped her hands together. "Wow, Steve, that's awesome! Congratulations!" Steve smiled shyly.

"Thanks," he said.

Josh put a hand across Ashley's shoulder. "And hang on. What do you know about puking? You been puking in the bathroom behind my back?"

She screwed up her face, but let a smile through, and gave him a light smack on the chest with her small hand. "Ew, Josh, that's gross." Josh laughed. Steve looked away, focusing on the scrimmage shifting down the field.

"Of course you don't. Only depressed girls do that. You're not depressed, are you? I don't depress you, right?" asked Josh, shaking her lightly across the shoulders. "What do you think, Steve? She look depressed to you?"

Steve looked back to them. "Huh? What?" he said.

"You'll make me depressed if you keep saying bad things about me, mister," she said, poking Josh in the chest.

"Okay, from now on I'll only say good things about you. I'll say, 'Ashley White is the happiest, most well-adjusted girl in the world.' That sound okay?" Josh asked.

She smiled. "Don't call me 'well-adjusted' to people!" she laughed. Her phone rang. She pulled it out of her pocket, looked at the name on the display, and opened it. "Hi, Dad. No. No, I think they're almost done." She looked at Josh, who nodded his head. "Yup. Yeah, I'll be home for dinner. Probably forty minutes? Does Mom need me to pick up anything? Okay. Okay. Bye, Dad." She closed the phone. "So annoying," she muttered. Neither boy said anything.

She turned to Josh. “Call me later tonight, okay?” She spread her arms and stepped closer to him.

“Wait. I’m sweaty,” Josh said. She ignored him and reached around him, hugging him close to her. Steve saw where her chest squashed against his before looking away at the scrimmage match again. She let go and looked up at Josh.

“Call me,” she said, pointing her finger at his chin. She smiled and waved at Steve. “Bye Steve! Congratulations again!” Steve smiled and waved goodbye. They both watched her leave, navigating back around the circumference of the field to the other side.

Josh sat back down on the bench next to Steve. Out on the field the coach had blown the whistle to end the scrimmage. Practice was over for the day. The other players on the team stopped their game and began walking over to the bench. Josh looked over to Steve.

“Let’s go to Xtra Mart for Gatorade,” Josh said.

Steve brought his eyes away from where Ashley had disappeared into the parking lot. He looked at Josh. “Huh? What?”

“Huh? What?” Josh mimicked, laughing. “Drinks, man. Xtra Mart. I’ll drive.”

“Oh. Um, yeah man. Sure,” said Steve. They got up from the bench, moving to pick up their sports bags as the crowd of teammates approached, chattering away in the wind.

Chapter 2

Josh listened to the sound of the bottoms of Steve's cleats clacking together as they walked to the car. Steve had tied the laces so that the shoes hung close together from one of the straps of his bag, and each step swung them away, only to have gravity bring them back together and make that sound. It reminded Josh of a toy that his mother used to keep on a shelf in the living room, one he'd played with when he was younger. It consisted of two metal bars pegged into a block of wood, and between them hung five perfectly round, silver balls, so shiny that Josh could see himself in their reflection. Each ball was suspended in a row by an almost invisible piece of fishing line and they lightly touched against one another, motionless.

It wasn't a difficult toy to figure out. He remembered pulling a ball from one end of the line, suspending it in the air as far as the string would allow, and letting it go. The ball would travel the tiny length of its arc and slam into the ball in front of it. Each time, like magic, the three balls in the middle remained perfectly still, and the one at the other end fired away, shooting forward almost as far as Josh had raised the one he'd dropped. Then it would fall back, slam into the other side, and repeat the motion in reverse. Each time it would make that click-clack sound, first loud, then gradually quieter, as the energy was dispensed with each ball's thrust, until once again they came to rest.

At first it was fun to play with, but then it became boring. Tethered to its string, the ball could only fly so far, and Josh could provide only so much force from the other end. He tried to get something different to happen, something

more impressive. He tried throwing the ball harder. He tried taking a hammer from the garage and swinging it into the ball from the side. It didn't matter. The strings held the balls firm in their place, letting them travel only as far as they were designed to. It only took a few efforts of this nature to get the balls and their strings hopelessly tangled and knotted. This made the toy useless, and when his mother had seen what he'd done, she wasted no time in throwing it away. Where once its symmetry and interactivity had made a pleasant trinket for the living room, now its mangled and twisted form was garbage.

Eventually, Josh asked his mother for another one of his own. When she bought it and came home with it, he at first played with it as he had done with the previous one, and in short time this one too he'd damaged beyond repair. When his mother bought him a third one, he had a new idea. This time he'd taken a pair of scissors to the strings and cut each ball free from the bars. He knotted the strings so the balls couldn't escape, and tied the free ends to a tinker toy piece. When he twirled the tinker toy in the air, the balls whirled fiercely around in a circle over his head, sometimes clacking against one another. This was the joy he had been looking for from before, the extra force he could create, that he could hear and feel in his hand. He twirled and twirled, faster and faster, until the balls slipped loose, flew through the air of the playroom, and shattered a window.

Josh had looked at the pile of broken pieces on the ground, and he knew there was a chance it would get him in trouble, but in that moment he looked upon the work he'd made of the glass, and that was when, fear of punishment

momentarily subsumed, he trembled. He didn't notice it then, but he'd smiled too.

He smiled now as he came back to reality upon seeing his reflection in the window of his car. The click-clacking had stopped. He looked up and watched Steve swing around the other side, open the door, and sit down after depositing his bag on the car floor. Josh threw his bag into the back and got into the driver's seat.

Josh started the car and pulled out of the parking spot. At the stop sign before the sports field's parking lot exit, he saw Ashley again out of the corner of his eye. She stood in front of the entrance to the school with two of her friends, opposite the direction of the main exit that led to town. Josh watched her for a moment, then looked at Steve. Steve was looking out his passenger side window, lost in thought, and waiting for Josh to take the expected turn to leave the school. Josh had an idea. He turned the car in the opposite direction towards Ashley and her friends. Without looking he could tell that Steve had turned to him in confusion. Aren't we going to Xtra Mart?, was surely written on his face, an understandable and honest reaction. Josh wanted that reaction, and more than that, he wanted to see if, and how, it would change.

He turned to Steve. "Let's see if they need a ride."

Steve made a slight nod, and a barely audible, "Hm." A completely neutral sound, no positivity or negativity that Josh could detect. A wary sound. Was it practiced, he wondered? Josh slowly pulled up to the girls. Though the others wore similar sporty clothing, and had the same thin stomachs and decently

sized breasts, Ashley was the best looking among them by far, Josh thought. She had that particular face that beautiful women had, one that worked in tandem with the body instead of fighting against it, a problem you saw in so many girls their age. She didn't wear braces, thank God, had no freckles or blemishes on her face, and her nose was perfect in that it had nothing to say and drew no attention to itself. The whole thing, really, was perfectly made. That wasn't to say he wouldn't consider keeping one of the others around for fun, so long as they could be fun and knew to shut up when they were supposed to, but he didn't imagine that would be pleasant for very long.

Josh rolled down the window. "Hey we're going to Xtra Mart for drinks. You guys need a ride anywhere?" Neither of the other two girls spoke, and they looked to Ashley for a response. Josh noticed this deference, but more than that he noticed the effect it had on Ashley. The authority of that small moment, that she and only she should have the right to answer Josh's question, even though he'd addressed it to all of them, brought out a smile in her for him, and only him, that Josh understood was love. He'd seen it before, in his mother's eyes when she had her scrapbooking or knitting clubs with the other wives from town. It was one of the most beautiful and mysterious things he'd ever seen in his life.

"That's okay. We're going back to my house to study," she said, indicating the two girls behind her. Josh's eye darted to them, then back again, too quickly for even Ashley to have seen, and he thought he saw their lips purse, their eyes narrow.

“Alright, then. See you,” he said to Ashley. He looked to the other two girls. “Bye.” They smiled back at him, not genuine, because he could see the tiny breath they took to prepare for it, as though they were filling up a balloon which, when full, would reveal a smile on the surface where before there was nothing. Bye, they said, and waved in unison.

Josh closed the window and pulled away from the school entrance, leaving the girls behind. He made a turn towards the main parking lot exit. As he pulled up to the stop sign, he thought he heard Steve expel a small sigh. Of relief, or disappointment, Josh couldn't tell. He didn't look away from the stop sign, but he feigned surprise.

“Oh, forgot you were there for a second,” Josh said to him. Steve looked over at him, but didn't say anything, and quickly returned to looking out his window. As they left the parking lot of the school the scenery around them seemed to change. The sun had started its descent behind a tree line, casting shadows that resembled bony fingers reaching and clawing across the earth. Josh noticed small transformations in the environment through the windshield, even though cold weather was only just beginning to creep into the town. Heavy, purple clouds stretched like bruises across the sky, geese honked as they flew in their tri-point formation, and the dry air sucked away all moisture. The ground had turned to a hard-packed, gritty state, unpleasant, and the grass of the lawns they passed a thick, dark green that matched the pine trees.

They passed through the row of houses lined along the street immediately outside the school, and made their way towards the stoplight at the center of town.

As they got closer, the houses changed almost instantly to store fronts. B.B. Gourmet Deli, Tracy's Tacos, Merit Books, Levant Savings and Loans, Levant Real Estate Agency, Billy O's Bar and Grill; each passed as a blur. They slowed as they came to the end of a line of cars waiting for the light to change.

The engine made noise as it idled, and joined in stereo the same blank revving of the other car's engines outside. Josh glanced at Steve. He was looking out his window at a cardboard sign advertising twenty percent off in the front window of an antique store. Or was he looking past it, Josh wondered? Was he looking past the store, or transporting himself someplace completely different with his mind's eye? Into a girl's bed? Up a girl's skirt? Perhaps...perhaps...and with that word in his mind, that first, suggestive word, an old suspicion arose in Josh from what seemed to him was a very old place, but in truth was actually new and unfamiliar.

"Hey, do you have the game schedule with you by any chance?" asked Josh.

Steve turned from the window. "No, not on me," he said.

"Do you remember who we're playing next?" Josh asked. Josh already knew the answer. Their next game was at home against the Spackenkill Spartans.

Steve was silent while he thought. "Saugerties, maybe? Or was it Oneonta?"

"I hope it's not Oneonta. Or at least that it's a home game. That's a long trip to make. It would put us at a disadvantage," said Josh.

"It's far?" asked Steve.

“Yeah,” said Josh.

“Huh,” Steve said, thoughtful. Josh watched the car in front of them for a moment.

“Say, remind me. How long have you lived in Levant for, Steve?” said Josh.

“Huh? Why?” said Steve.

“Just curious. I feel like it’s actually a lot shorter than I’m thinking,” said Josh.

“I dunno. When I moved here I was like...twelve, or something. So five years, maybe?” said Steve. He rested his elbow against the window, and rested his head in his hand.

“So you would have gone to middle school in Levant, then?” said Josh.

“I finished middle school in Levant. But I started in Poughkeepsie,” said Steve.

“PMS?” said Josh. He smiled.

Steve let out a small laugh. “Yeah, PMS,” he said.

“And what’s it like at PMS?” said Josh.

“It’s a shithole,” said Steve.

“Yeah?” said Josh. The only times Josh had ever set foot on the grounds of another school was for away games. He’d been enrolled in the Levant school system his whole life.

“Fights pretty much everyday. Kids stealing computers. Drugs and guns in kid’s lockers. If you turn on the local evening news you’ll eventually see

something bad that's happened in Poughkeepsie. The school's no different," Steve said.

Josh laughed a little. It sounded like a TV show. "Guns?" Josh asked.

Steve was silent a moment. He seemed to study the laces of his shoes.

Then he nodded his head. "Yeah."

Josh's smile grew. "Did you guys have a metal detector?"

"They put one in eventually, and it kept going off from scissors and drawing compasses and stuff like that. It was pretty stupid. They eventually got a police officer to just check everyone's bags as they came in. That was right before Mom and I left though, so I don't know if it worked for them or not. It probably didn't. People always figured out how to get around that stuff," Steve said.

Josh could feel the smile on his face. He felt very warm and amused. He imagined a school hallway full of kids, and every kid had a gun, and they were all shooting each others brains out and blasting holes in the concrete and tearing apart lockers, the shredded books and backpacks contained within falling out like guts on the floor. Paper flying everywhere. Somewhere among the chaos he sat in a reclining chair, watching and eating popcorn. And then the police and the teachers joined in with their guns, and they died too. And everyone had this beautiful look of fear on their face as they did it, brilliant looks of fear as they pulled their triggers and blew apart. Everyone a victim and an assailant. Josh shivered against the driver's seat, too small for Steve to have noticed, but he waited a moment to compose himself anyway before he spoke again. He was

getting distracted from his original train of thought, and perhaps he'd allowed himself to do so. He liked hearing about where Steve had come from, but he had observations to make.

“Sounds like a fun time,” Josh said, making sure to sound just sarcastic enough to imply sympathy.

Steve let out a small laugh. “Yeah, I’m pretty happy I moved.”

The stoplight changed, and they started moving forward again. They weren’t far from the Xtra Mart now.

“Any cute girls at PMS?” Josh asked.

Steve looked at Josh for an extra second. Was it a suspicious question, Josh wondered? Did he give something away? He hoped not. There was no reason, Josh thought, for Steve to think of it as anything other than a simple question between young men, a perfectly natural and well intentioned question that any friend would ask in the name of friendliness, and not someone making a move to gain an advantage over a foe, to bar his girlfriend from a potential thief. Because foe and friend were never far apart, and often turned out to be the same person, so Josh’s father had said. Not that Steve should have noticed that angle of the situation. And to give Steve the benefit of the doubt (and Josh certainly did have his doubts), there was enough innocence to the question that even if Josh’s suspicions were unfounded it could then become completely innocent, transform into an episode of nothing bad happening at all. It all depended on Steve. It depended on Steve and what was in his mind, and in addition, how honest he wanted to be about it, or was forced to be about it, either by guilt or stupidity.

“Some. As hot as middle school girls can be, I guess. Only problem was all the really hot ones either got pregnant or had herpes,” Steve said.

Josh laughed at this. “Twelve year olds with herpes?”

“I’m not joking, dude,” said Steve, but he admitted to the nonsense of it by smiling too.

“How did you know what herpes looked like?”

“Word gets around a place like PMS. You hear things from people, who has something, who’s clean. Eventually you see for yourself.”

Josh laughed again. “Okay, I believe you. So how do they compare to the girls here?”

“I don’t know. I was young when I left there. And I wasn’t really into girls yet back then either. Maybe in Levant they go to church more, or something. Though I don’t know, even that’s probably not true,” Steve said.

“Did you have a girlfriend there?” said Josh.

A pause. “No,” said Steve.

“Do you have one here?” said Josh.

“If I did, you’d probably already know about it, wouldn’t you?” said Steve.

“Are you getting mad? I’m just curious,” said Josh.

“I’m not getting mad. It’s just kind of a weird question all of a sudden,” said Steve. Josh thought he might have seen him blushing.

“What’s so weird about it?” said Josh.

“Why do you want to know?” said Steve.

“I was thinking of going on a double date with Ashley sometime.” He’d planned or thought of no such thing, but it just occurred to him. No sign or response at the mention of her name. Was that good? How infuriating was that silent expression. “We could go to mini-golf or something. They have specials for groups of four or more. If she got one of her friends to come along, would you be her date?”

“Yeah, sure,” Steve said, a little too carefully for Josh’s liking. “Sounds fun.”

“Alright, cool. I’ll text you when we have something set up.” A pause. “Any particular friend of hers you’d like?” said Josh.

“What?” said Steve.

“I said, any particular friend of hers you’d like? She has a lot, you know. Lot of choices. We can bring any of them along. And I’ll make sure Ashley talks you up so it’ll be easier for you,” said Josh. He sneered to himself.

Steve blushed again, this time too much so to hide. Josh kept his eyes to the road, but even so he could still see it.

“I mean, just...whoever...it doesn’t really matter...” said Steve. He looked out the window again.

“How about this? I’ll pick the hottest one I can find and she’ll be your date. I’ll get Ashley to bring her along, and then, after you work your magic, you’ll have a girlfriend. As long as you don’t screw up, of course,” said Josh.

Steve paused. He spoke quietly and with force, as though the words were something disgusting he had to spit out of his mouth. “If that’s how you’ve

planned it out, then I guess that's how we'll do it." The bitterness was too obvious now to interest Josh anymore. All that was left was to let him know, once again, who had won. This and the double date, Josh felt, would be a sufficient reminder of who was where, of who the captain was, of who possessed Ashley, and the right to possess her in the first place.

Josh smiled. "And when the two of you get married you'll invite me to the wedding. Of course, I'll be your best man, since I got you together and all. I'll even give you a speech."

"I'd be honored," said Steve.

"Ashley will be there too, of course. She won't catch the bouquet, since she and I will have been married for a while, and she would never want to deny some other girl. But we'll be there, watching the whole thing." How wonderful it felt, Josh thought, to return her closer and closer to him, and to push Steve further and further away with mere words, with practically nothing at all. Just a word here to carve and shape the world, a word there paint the picture a certain way, and how easily, from these alone, was reality bent to one's will. And how thrilling the triumph, that peerless joy, of even the tiniest victories. Nothing less than this moment between them, and many more like it to come, he hoped, could have ever satisfied him.

Steve, of course, said nothing. He just kept his face turned away. What was he thinking about now, Josh wondered? Was he feeling it again? Josh had no idea. He had never known that feeling himself, that feeling of being overpowered, and only recognized it as a function of his victory. The opponent's

pain and shame served no purpose other than as affirmation of his own superiority.

But that wasn't something he needed to tell himself, he thought as he pulled into the parking lot of the Xtra Mart. It was just the truth, proven again and again, that he believed.

They got out of the car and walked across the parking lot to the store. When they reached the glass door, Steve paused, touched his back pocket, and turned back to the car.

"My wallet," he said. Josh watched him go. When he came back he had his whole backpack with him, cleats dangling underneath. Josh took a good look at the bag now, and the sight of it, clearly old and worn from use through many grades at a past school and past sports, and barely held together by pieces of duct tape, tickled him. It looked like some kind of sports themed army pack. A pair of yellow-green tennis balls stuffed into the bottle holders, a flat pressed catching mitt poking from one of the pockets, and a baseball bat slotted into a set of looping straps across the front.

"Can't find it?" Josh asked, amused. "I can spot you this time, if you want."

"I'll find it inside. Let's just hurry up. I need to get home. I have work to do," Steve said.

Josh turned and went inside, feeling pleased with himself. Steve followed after him. They walked to the coolers lined up along the back and looked at the selection for a few seconds. One of them reached up to open the door.

Josh didn't react right away when he heard the man shout. It came from the cash register, and shocked into silence the distant humming of fluorescent lights and trucker's boots tapping against linoleum tile. "Give me all the money in the drawer!" it said. The raised voice of the assailant was high pitched and irritating, like the whine of a mosquito floating next to the ear, and it ripped Josh's attention away from the Powerade. The following gunshot, aimed at the ceiling, made him jump, lose balance, and crumple against the wall of the cooler, his hands shaking and sweating even as they cooled against the foggy glass. A broken piece of the drop ceiling fell down slow, unnoticed, and cracked to pieces against the floor.

In the moment of processing the emotions that followed in reaction to the voice's demand, Josh found it strange that, in his fear of getting shot, his thoughts didn't turn to his family, friends, coaches, teammates, teachers, or any other significant member of the community in which he lived, and he found it strange that he was of the presence of mind to find it strange. Instead he thought of the things that dying would deprive him of, like the expensive foods he had yet to taste, or the sports cars he would never get the chance to own. He thought of the jet setting future he'd entertained in his classroom daydreams, the tropical islands left unvisited, and the famous people he'd have shaken hands with. He thought of the dream mansion, the one with its own private library, the Irish coffee he'd planned on drinking in that library, or the American soccer team he planned on leading to the World Cup final against France, and the lucky President who would have shaken his hand after the triumphant return home. These giant things came

to him in flashes, and vanished just as quickly. He thought of Ashley. He thought of the expensive dresses and shoes he'd planned on giving her money to buy for herself, the kind with the plunging neckline and the tall heels, respectively. He thought of necklaces scratching against her neck. He thought of the short-lived singing career she'd never have, and the reality show they would never share. He thought of the red carpet events she'd never get to go to, or the magazine covers she'd never be nude on, even though her body demanded them. Lastly, he thought of her and what she meant to him, the fact that if he died she would go to someone else, and he felt angry and hurt inside. He watched the man with the gun before him, until mere minutes ago a nothing, a less than nothing, and he watched his big, important dreams extinguished. This wasn't fair.

The sports drinks, cold and motionless in the cooler, despite their physical closeness to the boys, were now a distant, irretrievable memory. Steve's and Josh's short term memories had shrunk beneath the moment, to the point where their memories nearly ceased to exist by comparison. All things immaterial, their memories and thoughts of the future, were replaced with a hyper real and hyper present now, a fantasy illumination of the present world fueled by their heightened sensitivities. Even though Josh and Steve were pinned motionless to the glass, and other customers were frozen elsewhere in the store, the thief's movement and noisy behavior, his excited gesticulations, seemed to occur at unreal, animalistic speed for all of them. The unremarkable checkout counter, in front of which the thief now stood, commanded more simultaneous attention than ever before in its six year existence. The stained, dull, plaster walls of the

convenience store, and the flies buzzing around the sterile illumination of the florescent lighting gave way in their eyes to the brightly colored labels and wrappers in the candy rack, the cigarette packs and rainbow lottery tickets behind the counter and, most of all, the snarling black gun hovering over all of it.

“Get the money now!” the thief said. Josh’s breath started coming faster as the thief loudly repeated his demand, waving the gun at the shaking cashier. Josh grit his teeth together to try and slow down his breathing, but it slipped through the spaces and made a low, hissing sound. He happened to glance at Steve, whom he’d completely forgotten. Steve was close to crying, curled on the ground and holding his head in his hands, and Josh was struck by an immediate and near complete hatred for his companion. This hatred created a new reality unsubstantiated by memory or truth. It had been Steve’s idea to get drinks, Josh suddenly imagined, and because it was his idea to come here, it was also his fault that they were stuck in the middle of a situation where they might get killed. Josh’s adrenaline, which would normally find an outlet in his physical actions, now had nowhere to go, huddled as he was against the cooler, so instead it sped up his mind, and each second of this sped up thought process made Steve’s pathetic cowardice and craven disposition, his culpability, seem all the more vivid to Josh’s eyes.

Josh looked up and, for the first time, saw the thief. He was wearing black sweat pants, a gray hooded sweatshirt, brown stained white sneakers, and fuzzy black gloves. The hood was pulled over his head, and Josh couldn’t see his face from where he was sitting on the floor. Josh was so transfixed on the towering

image of the waving gun, and his hands were so chilled from being pressed against the freezer, that he almost didn't realize it when his hand slipped and rested on the handle of the wooden bat. He looked down at it, feeling the dusty length of wood that had smoothed from being gripped by so many hands, and, unable to remember immediately how it got there, thought it strange for such a thing to have suddenly appeared beside him.

The thief had grown angrier because the cashier, just a kid, was too afraid to hold the key for the register straight, and kept missing the lock. Finally the thief, his frustration boiling over, reached across the counter with his free hand.

“Give me that!” he shouted. Josh's hand closed around the handle of the bat. He pulled it out of the sports bag, pushed off the freezer door, and closed his other hand around it. Another customer shouted out something, not a command to stop or even a word, just an instinctual sound, but it was enough to alert the thief, who turned to look while keeping his gun trained on the cashier. Josh fell toward him, not seeing the bat as it flew along its circular track. All the thief saw was the turning of Josh's arms and shoulders before his vision went black.

Chapter 3

The back road that led from the school to Ashley White's house looped around the town and eventually crossed the Orange County line into Putnam County if one followed it all the way to the end. The back road was empty now, save for the occasional car that appeared for long enough that you noticed its shape and color before it passed into along into obscurity, eventually disappearing into the tree-lined mouth of an entrance to a neighborhood or housing community. The buildings changed shape, grew farther apart, and the grass between got longer and more wild as you travelled further from Levant down this road and approached the vast, undeveloped, unfarmed land in-between of fields and trees and lonely stop lights that enveloped the road side restaurants and motels and trailer parks. Ashley was about a third of the way to her house after leaving the school when she looked into her rear view mirror, for the second or third time. A black pickup truck took up her view in the reflection. She brought her eyes back to the road ahead of her, and frowned.

"Is this guy tailgating me?" she asked Brenna, the girl in the seat next to her.

Brenna turned to look back over her shoulder, past the girl sitting alone in the back seat, Hilary, and through the rear windshield.

"Brenna, oh my god, don't let him see you!" said Hilary, laughing.

"I think he is. Wow, what an asshole," said Brenna.

"Damn it," said Ashley. "Why doesn't he just pass if he's in such a hurry?"

“He’s probably retarded,” said Brenna.

“Brenna, come on. Seriously?” said Hilary. “You know they don’t let retarded people drive,” she said.

“Well, maybe this guy’s the first one ever. Maybe he’s like the pioneer of retarded drivers,” said Brenna. Hilary squealed a high pitched laugh.

“Seriously, what the fuck is this asshole doing?” Ashley said. She put her blinker on and slowly inched over to the right shoulder, lowering her speed while she did so. The pickup truck moved to pass on the left side.

“Finally,” said Ashley. “Jesus Christ. Took you long enough.” Instead of continuing past them, however, the pickup truck slowed down so that it rode along next to them at the same speed. The cabin of the truck was much higher than Ashley’s car, so they couldn’t see who was driving. Then he blasted his horn, and he didn’t let up. He must have been holding it down, because the sound went on without interruption, blaring at them. Ashley swore, and hit the gas, shooting ahead of the pickup truck. The honking stopped for a moment, as though Ashley’s sudden movement had startled the driver of the pickup, but he soon sped up and got close to them again, and when he got to them the horn resumed its blaring. Ashley increased her speed, and the pickup did likewise, staying in pursuit. When she hit eighty five she hit the brake, and the lurching screech of the tires burning into the asphalt below them combined with the sound of the pickup’s horn. The pickup slowly moved past them as they slowed down, then seemed to speed up until it was about two car lengths ahead. Ashley came to a full stop. The pickup appeared to slow down again, as though thinking about

reversing and coming back for them, but then it started moving again. It honked again, but they were intermittent and weak in volume until, finally, it pulled out of sight.

Ashley gripped the steering wheel, her mind silent. Then anger came. How dare he. How dare he! Did he know who she was? Did he know whose son she was dating?

“Did you get the license plate number?” Ashley asked. “Did either of you get the license number?” Brenna and Hilary just stared at her, silent. “What the hell, guys!?” Ashley said.

“How were we supposed to know to get his license plate?” said Brenna.

“Yeah, it’s not so easy to see when he’s going eighty five miles an hour,” said Hilary.

“Are you kidding me? After what he just did?” Ashley said. She brought a hand away from the steering wheel, then brought it back down. She looked out the window, away from Brenna and Hilary. Then she looked back at them. “In all that time you couldn’t get the license plate number?”

“We’re sorry, okay?” yelled Brenna. “There, you happy? We didn’t think to look for it.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t tried to race him back there...” murmured Hilary.

Ashley turned back to look at her. “Oh, so this is my fault?”

Hilary looked up. “I didn’t say that. Jeez, what is your problem?”

“I’m fucking pissed is my problem, and a little more sympathy would be nice!” They didn’t say anything in response. Ashley’s body was motionless,

stewing in the silence, before she turned around. “Hillary, get me my bag.”

Hillary reached over, picked up Ashley’s red handbag, the one Josh had gotten her for their one year anniversary, and handed it to her. Ashley reached in, pulled out her cell phone, and dialed.

“Who are you calling?” Brenna asked.

“The police,” Ashley said.

“What? Ashley, come on, that’s going overboard. The guy is gone. Can’t we just go home?” said Brenna.

Ashley ignored Brenna and brought the phone to her ear. It rang once before someone, a man, picked up.

“Levant Police Department. What is your emergency?”

“Yes, hello, I’d like to report a vehicle that just terrorized me while I was driving,” Ashley said. Brenna glanced at Hillary.

“Terrorized you, miss?”

“Yes. I was driving, on Cedar Hill Road, and he just started driving alongside me and honking his horn. He almost drove me off the road. I didn’t do anything to him and he just started honking his horn at me for no reason. Then he drove away.”

“Did you get the license plate number?”

Ashley shot a look at Brenna and Hillary. “No. No, we didn’t.”

“Miss, before we go any further, I just want to let you know that that’ll make this a little more difficult.”

“Yeah, I realize that,” Ashley said.

“Can you describe the vehicle?”

“It was a black pickup truck. A Ford, I think. Maybe.” She thought she heard a cough at the other end.

“A black Ford pickup,” the voice repeated. “And you said the driver was a male?”

“Well, no.”

“So female?”

“No, I didn’t get a good look at them. I don’t know what they were,” Ashley said.

Brenna tugged at Ashley’s shoulder. “Ashley, come on. You’re wasting your time.”

“Miss, are you or the passengers with you in any way injured, or has your vehicle sustained damage? Do you need medical or roadside assistance?”

Ashley exhaled a sigh of frustration. He was cutting her off. “No.”

“That’s good to hear. Now, do you have any other information you can tell us about the vehicle or the driver? Anything at all?” The other end sounded eager for the inevitable response, which would usher in the equally inevitable conclusion to the conversation.

“No,” said Ashley.

“Well, then Miss...”

“White. Ashley White.”

“Miss White. I’ve taken down your report, and we’ll have it on file in case anything turns up or you have some new information you can provide. Until

then I would suggest that you go home and get some rest. You've obviously been through a lot, and I think getting some rest will do you good."

"That's it? That's all you're going to do?" Ashley snapped.

"Well, Miss White, there's very little we can do right now without a license plate number or a detailed description of the vehicle or the driver. But we'll have your report on file in case anything turns up or you have some new information you can provide. Thank you and have a nice day."

The man on the other end hung up. Ashley brought down the phone and stared at it. "Lazy local cops," she said in a low voice. "A woman gets terrorized on the road and they don't even try to lift a finger to help."

"Can we please just go to your house now?" asked Hilary.

"I'm talking to Josh's dad about this," Ashley said.

"Fine, but later please?" said Hillary. Ashley stared at the phone for a second longer before putting it back in her bag. She tossed the bag behind her, looked out at the road and put the car in drive. Without blinking she watched the trees passing on both sides as she slowly picked up speed. She saw them, not in portions, but as one simultaneous, teeming mass. She could feel the length of her arms tingling all the way down to her fingertips wrapped around the steering wheel. Every movement down to the tiniest adjustment in her torso registered in her mind, and deluged her consciousness with awareness of her surroundings and self-possession of her body. She felt more completely awake than ever before in her life. She felt like she could run forever, like she could leap in the air and

bring down a beast, wrapping her legs around its neck and squeezing it to death without feeling tired.

Without any outlet for that energy, and eventually submitting to the hypnotic effect of the drive into and through her neighborhood, Ashley felt calm again, even a little exhausted, as she pulled into the driveway of her house. Without word she brought the car to a stop and put it in park, and when she did a wave of embarrassment and self-consciousness overcame her with the same intensity as her anger from before. She suddenly replayed and reflected on the angry tone she'd taken with Hillary and Brenna, the face she'd shown them. Thank God it was only them, with whom she could smooth things over and recover, who'd seen it.

“Hey, guys?” Ashley said just before the door of the house. They turned to look at her. “I’m sorry I blew up at you. I was just so angry at that guy.”

“We noticed,” said Brenna.

“I’m really sorry,” said Ashley.

Brenna and Hillary looked at each other. Was something strange to them, Ashley wondered? Did she sound dishonest to them?

Brenna looked at the ground. “I mean...it’s fine that you got mad. Anyone would...” Brenna began.

“But you completely lost it,” finished Hillary. “It’s like you were possessed or something.” Ashley couldn’t stop a hot blush from overtaking her face. She felt a lump in her throat. “You scared us, Ashley.”

“I was afraid you were going to try and chase after the guy and run him off the road if you didn’t get anywhere with the police,” Brenna said, laughing.

Ashley let out a small laugh that was also a cry. Then she started to cry. “I’m sorry...” she whispered. Brenna and Hillary stood frozen and watched her beautiful face dishevel, transfixed, before a sudden flume of warmth and sympathy overcame them, and they went to her and held her in their arms. They stayed like that for a while. Eventually her crying turned back into laughing, stuttering, guttural, followed by a mix of both.

“As if...” Ashley started, wiping her eyes and laughing. “As if I could run anything off the road with that stupid Mini.”

The other two laughed. “Maybe you should trade it in for a monster truck,” said Hillary.

“Then no one will mess with you,” said Brenna.

Ashley gave a small laugh. After she had dried her eyes, the three of them walked up the front steps into Ashley’s house. The entrance was empty, and there was no sound or sign of anyone else in the house. All the lights except the one in the living room were turned off.

“Where is everyone?” asked Brenna.

Ashley didn’t answer right away. She walked further inside and checked the living room. Empty. “I don’t know,” she said. A muffled voice came from under the floor.

“Ashley, hun, that you? We’re down here!” Ashley responded and walked through the kitchen to a door nearby, opened it and peered down the flight

of cushioned steps which led to the basement. The TV down there was on, muffled but audible. She leaned herself over the steps from the top, hooking her hand around the frame of the door and the doorknob for support. She rested her shoe on top of her other shoe, balancing herself on one foot. She swayed back and forth over the drop.

“Hi Mom. Hi Dad.”

“Come down and let us see your face. We haven’t seen you in forever,” her Dad said.

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Nah, Brenna and Hillary are here. We’re going to study.”

“Well, let us come up and say hi,” her Dad said.

“No, that’s fine, don’t get up. We’re going up to my room now anyway.”

“Oh, okay. How was school?” Dad asked.

“Fine,” Ashley said.

“How is Josh doing?” Mom asked.

Ashley smiled. “Oh, you know. He’s always doing great. I think the team’s going to win the state championship this year. They have a new starting sweeper who Josh says is supposed to be really good. That’s like the captain of the defense.”

“Oh, really? Who’s that?” asked Dad.

“His name’s Steve Marten. He’s in mine and Josh’s grade, but I don’t think you know him,” Ashley said.

Her parents started mumbling to each other. “Marten...do you know that name, honey?” said her Dad.

“No, I don’t think so,” Mom said.

“Well that’s great to hear, honey. So, what are you guys going to do now?” asked Dad.

“We’ll be upstairs studying,” said Ashley.

“We’ll call you when dinner’s ready. Should be another half hour or so,” said Mom.

“Okay,” said Ashley. She closed the basement door and rejoined her friends. They shouldered their bags and walked up the staircase, down a narrow hallway with hanging photos and a tall bookcase resting inert in the middle, past the door to her parent’s room, poked slightly open in suggestion, to the end of the hallway where her own room, the door to which was decorated in white paper shapes, glitter, and red and white streamers, the Levant school colors, remained closed, as she’d left it that morning. Inside the room there was a bay window which looked over the street outside the house, and if you stuck your head out you could see partway down the block to the other houses, all at least two stories, and the lawns, all an early September shade of green. The trees followed suit to the grass, standing in their yards, as trimmed and tame as children at communion, decorative and pleasant enough to the eye once their branches had been chopped and their wild bramble checked.

Ashley looked out her own window at the tree in her own yard for a moment, watching the softened, fading yellow light moving with the shadows on

the tree leaves, against the still blue sky, and the little wind blowing through and rustling them, listening to the sound, before taking her bag off and letting it fall to the carpet. Hillary and Brenna had already discarded theirs and thrown themselves onto her bed, stretching out and purring in content.

“Oh my god, that was crazy!” said Hillary. “Did you tell your Mom and Dad?”

Ashley brought her attention away from the window. She sat down on the window nook and lay herself down on top of it, folding her knees to bring her feet closer. She looked at Hillary.

“Nope,” she said.

Brenna and Hillary looked at her. “Why not?” said Brenna.

“Why?” Ashley returned. “Nothing happened.”

“Yeah, but maybe you should tell them. It’s your Mom and Dad.” said Brenna.

“Weren’t you the ones who told me to forget about it?” said Ashley.

“Why bother them with it?” She looked at them, and they looked back at her, both searching for answers. Ashley smiled and laughed. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“You want to tell Josh’s Dad, though?” said Hillary.

Ashley lay back down on the nook and looked at her ceiling. They hadn’t turned the lights on in the room, and the light coming in from outside turned a soft, imperceptible blue against the white paint.

“Of course I want to tell him. He would actually be able to do something about it.” Hillary and Brenna looked to each other. “What’s my Dad going to do? Call the police? You saw how well that worked.”

“What can Josh’s Dad do?” asked Brenna.

Ashley raised an eyebrow at the tone with which she asked the question. There was something else in Brenna’s voice that she didn’t recognize. She didn’t move from her position.

“I don’t know. Find the driver somehow, or talk to people he knows. He knows everyone. He has ways. And once he found them...boy, would they regret it,” Ashley said.

“You make it sound like he’s in the mafia,” said Brenna.

Ashley smiled at the ceiling. “Maybe he is.” She turned to look at Brenna and Hillary. They stared at her with confusion in their eyes, and a tiny hint of fear. Ashley started laughing. “Oh my god, really?” Ashley said. “Can you see yourselves right now? I was joking.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if he was though,” said Brenna.

“What does he even do?” asked Hillary. “How does he know so many people?”

“He’s a lawyer,” said Ashley.

“What kind of lawyer?” asked Brenna.

“I don’t know,” said Ashley.

“Josh never told you?” asked Hillary.

“I never asked. We don’t talk about his Dad when we’re together,” said Ashley. Brenna and Hillary looked at each other again. Ashley noticed it and thought to say something about it, to call it out and immediately sour the mood, tempting as a sort of indirect revenge for their logical antagonism from earlier, but she instead sat up from the nook and moved to sit in the desk chair in front of her computer. She turned it on and when it cleared the startup page, she proceeded to check her email.

“Can I check my email after you’re done?” asked Hillary.

Ashley logged out of her email account and started to log in to Hillary’s account. They knew each others emails and passwords by heart.

Hillary suddenly got up. “Wait, you don’t need to log in for me. I’ll do it.” She said it with a voice that sounded like a self-sacrificing offer of help on the surface, but barely hid a desperate motive calculating a move within.

Ashley’s fingers paused over the keyboard. She didn’t look away from the screen. “Why? It’ll only take a second.”

“No, wait, let me do it,” Hillary said, getting up from her spot on the bed with surprising speed, just as Ashley pressed the enter key to log in. Ashley saw a list of emails, opened and unopened, some with recognizable names and some not, but at the top of the list were six new emails from someone named Robby Streeter. The subject line of the latest of these emails read: “Miss you babe, can’t stop thinking of you, <3.”

“Oh,” Ashley said.

“What the hell, Ashley?” said Hillary, as she reached around Ashley’s shoulder, grabbed the mouse, and closed the browser.

Ashley turned around and smiled at her friend, who’d turned red in the face. “Well now. Who’s this Robby Streeter supposed to be, young lady?”

“Shut up,” said Hillary. She sat back down on the bed next to Brenna, who’d sat up from where she was lying down. Now both Brenna and Ashley stared at Hillary. “What?” she said to their silence. “What?”

“Oh come on,” Ashley said. “Who is he? Does he go to our school?”

Hillary crossed her arms across her chest and looked down at the floor. “No,” she muttered.

“When did you meet?” asked Brenna.

“I don’t know. Like, a couple of weeks ago,” again in a mutter.

“Where?” said Ashley. She got up from her chair, walked around the other side of the bed, and lay down near Brenna.

“At one of the away games,” said Hillary.

“Fraternizing with the enemy, huh,” said Ashley.

Hillary rolled her eyes. “Oh, shut up.”

“Sure seems further along than two weeks if he’s calling you babe in his emails,” said Brenna.

Hillary turned red again. “That’s just...he’s so stupid...I keep telling him not to call me that...”

Ashley smiled and showed teeth. “I don’t know. I think it’s kind of cute. You sure you don’t like it?”

Hillary didn't say anything. Ashley watched her, watched the tiny movements of her hands rubbing up and down her arms, as though warming herself up from being out in the cold, and how she seemed to shrink into herself, and Ashley's smile grew as she watched, until finally she popped up onto her knees, sinking the mattress down, shuffled over to Hillary, and wrapped her up in an embrace.

"Relax. I command you," Ashley said, gently shaking Hillary's torso in a languorous back and forth. Ashley rested her chin on Hillary's shoulder. "Want a cigarette?" Ashley asked.

Hillary stared at her knees. "Are you only asking me because you want to have one?"

Ashley laughed. "I was actually going to give you one of mine, but maybe I'll just forget about it." Even as she said this, however, she was already getting up from the bed and reaching for her bag. She leaned down and pulled out the little red and white pack of Marlboro lights from near the bottom, the flimsy cardboard bent slightly from repeated tapping and opening. Ashley pulled two from the box and handed one to Hillary, who reached up and took it. Ashley let her own dangle up and down between her lips.

"What about me?" asked Brenna.

"What do I look like, a charity? Get your own," said Ashley, mumbling through her cigarette. "This is my gift to Hillary for finding somebody."

"Ha! Some gift," said Brenna, who got up from the bed and walked over to the doorway. "You're so generous. Where's the towel?" she asked.

“It’s right next to you. Right there,” Ashley said, pointing. Brenna found it and plugged up the crack beneath the door. Ashley went to the window and opened it a crack, and then she took her miniature electric fan, turned it on, and pointed it out the opening she’d just made. After she did this she went to her desk, opened up one of the drawers, and pulled out a clay ashtray that she’d made in some art class years ago. At the time she made it she thought of it as just a bowl, despite its misshapen ugliness, but the fact that it was shaped like an ashtray without actually being an ashtray, and the gray clay matched the color of the ashes she would eventually tap into it, and that it avoided tipping off her parents by pretending to be a memento from an earlier time in school, proved too convenient a coincidence to avoid. Ashley set it down on the window sill, just beneath the crack, and beckoned the other two girls over to join her.

Brenna got out her own cigarettes and a lighter, which she brought over. Hillary was slower to join them, but still moved from her spot on the bed to join Ashley and Brenna by the window. Brenna clicked the tiny metal wheel, and they all watched the white spark ignite before turning into the familiar orange flame, always rising but unable to climb any higher than the last or any other time they watched it. Each of the girls leaned forward, holding their cigarettes tight between their lips and fingers, and set the tips of them smoking and burning, one at a time, until they were three orange dots glowing against the window’s dusk.

Ashley puffed and felt the sweet scratch at the back of her throat. She held it for a moment before pushing it from her lungs and out through her lips, kissing the air, and up towards the crack in the window, where the smoke

dissipated and became one with the shadows. She knocked the ashes into the ceramic bowl, and brought it up again. All the physical memories of the last two hours, her anger and humiliation before her friends, ascended from her, as though riding up with the smoke, and only a faint trace of their presence remained in her. Her body descended into a new calm, and she watched the sky turn orange.

Chapter 4

In a class three lever, a force is applied to the middle, turning it on a fulcrum and carrying a payload of energy into whatever it comes in contact with, either breaking it or being broken. In that transfer of energy, Josh had felt something come loose in the thief's head, like breaking off the tip of a rusted screw with a hammer. A certain amount of resistance, too little of it, was telegraphed from the thief straight into Josh's hands, up his arms, and into his mind. He could feel him dying.

Josh heard ringing as he stood over the thief on the floor. The bat had made a noise like thudding into wet clay when it struck, and though it had sounded only once from the actual wood, Josh's mind captured the noise and began to replay it. Each time the thudding noise sounded, a ringing would peal and echo over itself, as though somewhere in his head a log were repeatedly striking a bell.

People were talking around him. They were patting him on the shoulder, asking him if he was alright, telling him he did a good job. They didn't see what he saw, didn't see what held his gaze, frozen. This thief, a boy, was dead, and Josh knew it before anyone else did.

The boy had landed on his side and was still. It looked too different from sleep, without the tiny visible movements and breath rising in the chest, but he wasn't like a stone either, planted and cold on the ground. Josh couldn't explain what he saw in the crumpled body. For a moment his worldly senses didn't exist, the gas station and the chirping people around him didn't exist. He was just a pair

of eyes hanging between the motionless body and his own living one, looking at both, suspended between victim and assailant. In watching he felt a kind of serenity, an incongruent peacefulness alien to his experience, and it awoke a revulsion that hurled him back to reality. Something in those fleeting seconds felt beautiful, and it horrified him.

The head was twisted into the floor, and Josh had a sudden urge to see his face. He raised a shaking hand and leaned forward.

One of the men grabbed Josh by the shoulder. “Don’t look.” Josh looked at the man, and then looked back down at the body. A small red circle was slowly blooming from the hood, turgid and sharp against the dull green linoleum.

“The blood,” Josh whispered.

The man shook his head. “Don’t matter. Leave it where it is.”

Josh backed away from the body and the group of men filled the space, like water filling a sinking ship. He watched their backs. They formed a circle, their hands in their pockets or rubbing their chins, and their heads craned down to look. As Josh turned away, back to where he’d left Steve, he heard one of the men make a low whistle.

“God damn.”

Steve was still on the ground, but he had taken his hands off his head and pushed himself up to look at the group of men. Josh arrived in front of him, and once he’d reentered Steve’s field of vision he noticed that Steve was looking at the bat in his hands. Steve raised a hand and pointed at the bat. Josh looked at the bat for a moment, as if to begin forming a thought or a question, before

silently reaching his own arm out to Steve, pulling him up off the ground. The manager of the gas station walked over to them.

“I’m gonna need to take that from you, son,” he said, pointing at Josh’s hand. Josh, in a daze, looked down at the bat and dropped it, stepping away when he remembered what it was and what he had just used it for, as though it was on fire. Steve bit his lip. The manager reached down to pick it up, wrinkling his brow, and when he stood back up he looked between Josh and Steve. Silently, he stepped past them and opened the door of the cooler. He picked two sports drinks, one blue and the other purple, and he handed one to each of the boys. They fell to the side, an after thought.

“Here,” he said. “Stay right where you are.” The manager turned away from them and went behind the counter, then seemed to change his mind mid-stride, awkwardly turning around to face them again. “No, actually, come wait in the back.” He glanced at the men standing around the body, one of whom had produced a cell phone and was making a call, before turning to the boys and waving them over. “Come on,” he said, as though he were talking to a dog. The urgency in his voice made them follow this time.

Sports drinks in hand, the boys walked behind the counter and into the tiny, poorly lit back room of the Mobil Station, where the employees took their lunch and coffee breaks. Stacks of old newspapers with the title cards cut off the front page lay next to a tiny plastic card table, around which sat a collection of broken, taped together office chairs that the manager had salvaged from street corners and the local flea market. The manager waved at the chairs, beckoning the

boys to sit, which they did, uncomfortably. They looked up at him, expectant but too timid to ask what was going to happen to them. The manager looked at them for a second, and a note of something they couldn't recognize graced his features. Was it concern? Pity? The manager looked down and away from them before he spoke.

“You did well,” the manager said, looking at Josh. He sounded uncertain. He turned to go, and left the boys to sit alone in the now silent break room. Neither said a word. They didn't look at each other. Josh looked outside the break room window, at the chipped, gray cement wall, but he did not see the wall, or the glass, or anything around him. He was back in the front part of the store, a mere twenty feet away, and he was hitting the thief again. He kept hitting him again and again, repeating that wet clay thudding, and the ringing bell kept on with each blow, until it got so loud, peeling over itself, that Josh finally ripped his eyes away from the window and the cement wall. He looked down at the floor. The sounds quieted, receded as though beaten back, and he looked down at his hands, which were shaking, and he clasped them, forcing them to stop.

Steve did his best to stare straight at the mini-fridge in the corner, and tried to read the little handwritten notes and fridge magnets. DON'T TOUCH MY APPLEJUICE. DON'T LEAVE FOOD TOO LONG. FALL IN LOVE OR FALL IN HATE. MAKE BABIES OR MAKE ART. BETTER INGREDIENTS, BETTER PIZZA. SPEAK THE TRUTH OR LIE AND CHEAT. BREATHE. He tried, but every glance at the edge of his vision brought with it the risk that he would see Josh's face, or worse, that Josh might notice him looking.

He thought of the bat. There was no way he could get it back now. He was sorely tempted to believe that no one would be suspicious about it, about a soccer player having a bat with him, but the more he thought about it the stranger it seemed, to the point where it became unthinkable, a matter of sheer luck, that someone *wouldn't* question his reason for having a bat with him.

What if he said he was going to hit a few at the REC Park? On a school day? Right after a long soccer practice when it was getting dark? With no one to join him, and having never shown any recent interest in doing so before? He hadn't even brought a baseball with him, damn idiot. He wanted to swear in frustration right there, or slam his fist at his side. There was no lie he could tell that couldn't be unraveled and exposed under even casual scrutiny. He didn't know what would happen after that, nor did he want to think about the possibilities.

"He just fell," Josh said.

"What?" Steve nearly shouted. Josh paused at the tone, but spoke anyway.

"He didn't bounce or anything. He just fell and stayed flat," said Josh

"What?" said Steve.

"He didn't move. He just hit the ground and stayed there," said Josh.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Steve said. Josh stared at the floor.

"Like...he just stopped working and fell apart," Josh whispered. Steve clenched his fists. Was he fucking with him? Was he trying to be funny? Cocky son of a bitch thinking he was better than everyone else. He always did this,

always acted this way, to the point where it wasn't an act, where you'd have to be stupid to think it was an act, and not accept that that was the real Josh Wakeman. Steve wasn't stupid, no matter what Josh thought. Bastard. Bastard! Thought he was special because his parents had money, and Ashley was his girlfriend, and he was captain of the soccer team. And now he wanted to talk nonsense when Steve wanted nothing more than to go home and never hear another word from Josh ever again.

“He died,” said Josh.

God damn it, thought Steve. “You don't know that, now stop talking crazy. They'll probably take him to the...the hospital or something, I don't know.”

“I know he died.”

“Yeah, and how do you know that? You a doctor now?”

“He wasn't moving.” Josh sounded like the words were being pulled out of his mouth with pliers while a collar tightened around his neck. “There was blood coming out of him.” Josh looked at Steve, who refused to meet his gaze. “He had a gun.”

“Shut up.”

“I didn't want to die.”

“Dude, shut up. Could you please just shut up about it?” Steve almost immediately regretted his outburst, wondering if it made him seem suspicious. Josh mumbled something, and Steve was about to scold him again, but he felt

tired and didn't want to talk anymore, so he pretended he hadn't heard anything. He kept pretending as Josh quietly mumbled to himself.

"I know he is. I know he is. I know he is."

The door to the break room swung open, hitting the mini-fridge and surprising the two boys. A tall, mustached man in a police uniform walked in, followed by a younger looking man who also wore a uniform, probably a deputy, and the two of them were followed by the manager, who closed the door behind him. Josh knew the officer with the mustache. It was Officer Taylor, a divorced man who liked to hunt and whose son, Miles, played on the football team at school. Josh's father had represented Officer Taylor in court against his wife, and he'd become a friend of the family in the aftermath, stopping by for dinner on Sundays when he had time. Josh didn't know Mr. Taylor very well, and he never talked to Miles either. He didn't recognize the other officer.

Officer Taylor saw Josh sitting at the table, and for a moment he was confused. He had gotten a call about a halted robbery in progress, and that some young kid had taken out the robber by himself, and here was Jason Wakeman's boy sitting in a beat up chair looking like he'd seen the devil. Josh and the robbery didn't connect in his mind until he forced them to. The manager looked at the boys, his brow crinkling with sweat and worry.

"This is Officer Taylor from the local department. He wants to ask you boys some questions," the manager said.

Officer Taylor didn't take his eyes off of Josh as he spoke. "No need for that. Josh and I already know each other." The manager looked confused for a

second, then he looked at Josh, as if to reexamine him. Officer Taylor understood that what he had said came out wrong, and he continued, "I didn't mean it that way. He's a good kid. Jason's kid. You know Jason Wakeman, right? This kid's no trouble maker." Steve lowered his brow at this, but no one noticed. Taylor turned to his deputy.

"Go make sure forensics isn't screwing around out there. Make sure no one moves anything they're not supposed to. I'll take care of things here. And get statements from those truckers." The deputy nodded and left. "You go with him," he said to the store manager. "Make yourself useful and close this place up. I don't want anybody getting in the way of my men." The manager silently walked out of the break room and left Officer Taylor with Josh and Steve. Taylor pulled up a broken chair and sat down across from them on the other side of the card table. He looked between the two of them, and a big smile started growing across his face.

"Well, it seems you boys have had quite an afternoon," he said, chuckling. He turned to look at Steve, his eyes now alert and attentive. "I already know Josh here, but I don't think I've seen you before." Steve gulped. "That's probably a good thing," Taylor said, laughing from his belly. "Most people don't want to get to know me. Means they've got bigger problems coming." He stopped laughing, but kept the smile on his face. "I was kidding, you know." More silence.

"What's your name?" he asked Steve.

"S-Steve."

"Steve what?"

“Steve Marten.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“N-no, sir.”

“That’s your name? Steve Marten?” Steve nodded his head. “Ever think of living up to it?” After a moment of silence, Steve understood and laughed the tiniest, most hesitant laugh of his life. Officer Taylor smiled and laughed from his belly again. “There we go. I knew you had a sense of humor in there somewhere.” He looked to Josh. “How’s your Dad doing? Heard he pulled a muscle at work.”

Josh took a moment to answer. “He’s doing fine, sir.”

“I pulled a muscle myself chasing a guy once, so I know. Not fun. Didn’t know you could do it being a lawyer though.”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Maybe he had to chase after a guy to get him to pay his alimony. I bet that could get someone running pretty fast.” Josh knew he was expected to laugh, so he forced out a weak and unconvincing chuckle that sounded more like a hacking cry.

Officer Taylor smiled, looked at Steve, pointed a thumb at Josh and said, “Stick with him kid. You’ll learn a thing or two.” Steve no longer had the energy to keep up appearances.

“Excuse me, sir. I’m sorry but...can we go home please?” Steve asked.

Officer Taylor looked alarmed, as though Steve had reached across the card table

and smacked him in the face. He narrowed his eyes at Steve and sat back in his chair, and the weak light missed him in a way that covered his brow in darkness.

“Where do you live, son?” Taylor asked.

Steve perked up in hope. “Forest Hill.” Josh turned to look at him.

“Been there long?” Taylor asked.

Steve slowly frowned. “About five years.”

“How do you know Josh here?”

“I’m on the soccer team,” Steve said.

“And what brought you two here?”

“We came to get drinks after practice,” Steve said. He wanted to ask why he was the one getting all the questions, and Josh allowed to remain silent.

“Uh-huh,” Taylor said, slowly. He watched Steve carefully. Then he nodded to the corner behind them. “That yours?” he said to Steve.

Steve slowly turned around to look, and knowing right away what he was going to see didn’t prevent the sickening feeling from crawling into his stomach and thrashing around. There was the bat, leaned against the wall in the corner, where the manager had left it on his way out. Steve bit his lip as he looked at it. It seemed like an innocent toy right then, until he looked down and saw the wet, red stain at the rounded tip. He tried to look away from it, but could not. He couldn’t speak. He had to speak.

“Yes,” he said quietly, not looking at Officer Taylor. It was so close. Just a few steps, and the bat would be in his hands. All the foolish, impossible options attacked him in succession. Grab it and run away. You’re fast enough. Throw it

into the woods. Into the river. Throw yourself into the river. They'll never catch you. Disappear. Make them disappear. Both of them, and you'll be free.

"I admit I'm not as familiar with soccer as I am with football. My son Miles plays football, you see. Maybe they changed the rules, and they let you use baseball bats in soccer now? I'm guessing not. Otherwise it's a bit strange for you to have a baseball bat if you play soccer. Wouldn't you agree?" said Taylor. Josh had broken out of his stupor, and was watching Steve now.

"No," Steve said, while thinking, thinking, thinking fast.

"No?" Officer Taylor said.

"I like to have one with me. Sometimes. In case anyone wants to go to the Rec Park and hit a few." Make the story work. At all costs, make it work. Lead the story into the realm of reasonable possibility, away from their world, their understanding, and into the convincing mystery of his own reality, his rules, unexamined, neither provable nor disprovable.

"Your soccer teammates?" Taylor asked.

"No. Other friends. Friends from the neighborhood, and my old town." Steve said. Escape was close. The truth would be buried.

"After school?" Taylor asked.

"After soccer practice," Steve said, carefully avoiding the trap.

"They wait that long for you?" Taylor asked.

Steve squinted, pretending to be confused. "No...they meet me there."

Steve laughed. "We like sports."

Taylor waved a hand. “Sure, sure. That’s fine.” He leaned forward and smiled. “My job to ask, you know.”

Steve smiled back. He nodded his head. Taylor turned to Josh. “How you doing, Josh? Feel alright? Want anything?”

Josh stared at his hands. “I want to talk to my Dad.”

“Yeah, sure.” Officer Taylor quickly pulled out his own phone and pressed a few buttons. Within seconds it started quietly ringing, and Taylor handed the phone to Josh. Josh got up and turned away from them to go to the corner. When he saw that he was heading to the corner with the bat, he changed direction without interruption, as though magnetically repelled away, and went to the other corner next to the fridge. Steve and Taylor watched his back for a second before turning and awkwardly facing each other. Taylor smiled at Steve and pointed a thumb at Josh.

“Speed dial,” Taylor said with pride.

“What?” Steve asked.

“It’s a good family. Real good. Glad to know them.” Taylor looked up and saw that Josh was looking at him, annoyed. Taylor coughed and looked away. “Well, anyway, I’m just happy I got called in to take care of this. You kids got lucky. Far less messy when it’s someone who knows your story.” Josh turned back around to face the corner, phone to his ear. Finally, he dipped his head down. The other line had picked up.

“No, Dad, it’s not Officer Taylor. It’s me.” Silence. “It’s...no, I’m fine.” Silence. “Dad, something...something bad happened.” Josh’s voice broke.

Steve and Taylor watched him now, transfixed by the croaking sound of it. Had they ever heard him sound like that before? “I was at XtraMart with Steve and...and there was someone with a gun. Dad...I...I hurt him. I hit him, Dad.” Silence, again. “I don’t know. There was blood.” A pause. “No, I’m not hurt.” A giant sniffing sound. “Dad...I want to go home.” A silence. Josh turned around, and both Steve and Officer Taylor flinched at the sight of him. His face was a big teary mess, his blue eyes wet and dripping, and his teeth grinding together as though holding down something rotten. He walked to Officer Taylor and handed him the phone. “He...he wants to talk to you.”

Taylor took the phone and slowly brought it up to his ear, his eyes still held on Josh. It took him a moment to speak. “Jason, it’s Barry. No, no, it was in the middle of a robbery. Heat of the moment. Everything’s fine. Clearly self-defense, and saved the store, actually. He’s just upset, that’s all. Hell of a thing to go through for a kid, but he’s tough like his old man. He’ll be okay. Yeah. Yeah. Of course, right away.” He brought the phone down and put it in his pocket. He smiled at Steve and Josh. “What do you say we get you boys home?”

They all stood up from their chairs and walked out of the break room. Steve and Josh both walked with their heads down and followed Taylor out into the main floor of the store. The fluorescent light nearly blinded them. The white tiles and drop ceiling seemed even whiter than before, and they both rubbed their eyes. They both immediately stared at the body.

A group of men, different from the truckers, who were nowhere to be found, were huddled over the body, leaning over it with pads and taking notes,

making it hard to see. They wore police uniforms and latex gloves on their hands, and on one of their hands a bright red stain shimmered in the light. A stretcher lay near them, and an officer with a camera hovered around and took photographs. The store manager sat near the register and bit his fingernails. He didn't blink. Steve averted his eyes from the body as they walked past and out the front door, but Josh looked, and kept looking, turning his head as he walked to stay with the parts he could see. He suddenly wanted to stay. He wanted to push aside the police officers and look more, and satisfy a shapeless, sudden need that had appeared inside of him. But he kept walking, on out the door, and only turned his head to look where he was going when he could no longer see the laid out body. And still he wanted to turn back.

The sun was going down, and the sky turning orange. The day was almost over. An ambulance and two police cars were parked in the parking lot, near to Josh's car.

“Which of you drove here?” Taylor asked.

“Me,” said Josh.

“I'll escort you home safe, if that's okay. As for you...” Taylor said, looking at Steve. Taylor waved at one of the officers near the squad cars and the officer, a squat fellow with sleep eyes and a mustache, plodded over. “Take this kid here home,” Taylor said, nodding at Steve. “He lives in Forest Hill. He'll give you the address.” The squat officer nodded and walked back to his squad car. Steve made to follow after him, but turned to look at Josh one more time. Separating from him suddenly felt like the most bizarre thing he could do at that

moment. He watched Josh for moment, before turning away and going to the squad car.

When he got in, set his bag down, and closed the door of the squad car, Steve exhaled a great sigh. He felt tired, and his muscles heavy. The windshield looked out into a field overgrown with long grass and weeds, and tall, gnarled trees whose leaves turned black against the orange sky. The squad officer got into the driver's seat and looked at him.

“Address?”

Steve took a moment to answer. “516 Murry Street.” The officer wordlessly started the car, put it in reverse, and backed out of the lot. Steve looked back at the XtraMart one last time, trying to find Josh, but he saw no one. He faced the windshield and slouched into the seat, and watched the black trees smear against the sky as they picked up speed. Steve thought comfortably of the truth, buried far away, its savage revelation avoided. He relaxed nearly into sleep, and while he sank into thought, tinged with the safety of distance, the truth returned to him.

The truth of the bat was that Steve had carried with him in his sports bag for the first time in his life. It had found its way into the bag with a purpose that had a life span, born that morning in a fit of jealous, blinded rage. Steve had placed the bat, found in his backyard, into his bag, fueled by, not the intent, but the image of bludgeoning Josh Wakeman to a bloodied pulp. At his lowest point, Steve's imagination was possessed by the frightening and pleasurable image of

standing over Josh, caving his head in, and every meaty blow delivered by the wooden implement painting Steve's vision red. It sent shivers through his body.

The night before, Josh had lost his virginity. This in and of itself was not so much an issue, for Steve had long before made peace with the fact that Ashley seemed inexplicably devoted to Josh. It was the phone call that followed after the act. From the bathroom of *her house*, Josh had phoned Steve to excitedly, innocently, terribly tell him everything, every noise and face she'd made, in wondrous, horrific detail.

"Hey Steve, guess where I am." Josh had said. Steve could just about hear him grinning over the phone. This was when he admitted to himself, roaring inside, that he hadn't really made peace with anything, for no peace can be made over something that hasn't quite been lost, no matter how far away it might seem, and realizing it in the wake of that unexpected phone call (so quickly and easily had the emotions been summoned) only stirred him more inside. No matter how hard Steve tried to cut the conversation short, to maintain some sort of defensive façade, Josh would find some way to keep it going, breathlessly sneaking in word after word until finally, Steve did the last thing he ever would have done with a calmer demeanor, and hung up on Josh.

Long after he put the phone down, Josh's words reverberated against the walls of Steve's mind, trapped inside him like an animal in a cage. Occasionally he would deliver a punch to his pillow or his mattress. The thing that scared him most, and it angered him further to feel worry and uncertainty over this of all things, was how Josh would treat him the next day. He'd never called back, so

Steve couldn't be sure whether it was an intentionally harmful call or not, but the worst possibilities presented nightmare scenarios in which he lost one of the best and only friends he'd ever had the privilege of secretly hating. He was unsure of what the future held, and not knowing led to fear, which quickly circled back into the anger that had sparked it all. He did not sleep for very long.

The morning began with a momentary peace, a precious few seconds of erased knowledge and memory before the feeling resurfaced from the dark. Steve caught first notice of the bat while he was eating breakfast, noticing it beyond the sliding glass door to the backyard. Its skin tone tan seemed to beckon him from the green grass. Where before it had been formless, a floodgate now opened and the feeling took shape. The vision formed, and at once it vanished, repelled by uncertainty. Then it came back, flashed in Steve's mind. He walked outside to the back yard, quietly picked up the bat, and brought it inside where he threw it into his sports bag.

As the school day passed the emotion experienced a sort of half life, exposed as it was to the unchanged routine of the day and the growing acceptance of how stupidly impossible the act would have been. No one, most importantly Josh, seemed to notice the handle of the bat sticking out of his soccer bag.

But none of that mattered, buried far underground, and he'd escaped to live another day. All it had cost him was a beat up old bat. How lucky and smart to get out of it as he had. And to see that look on Josh's crying face. He watched the orange sky behind the trees in a happier state. Not happiness, but returning to the point where he could feel happy again. He felt warm, and an oncoming sleep.

The Sad Thing

Main Street. Between the glossy, sleek fronts of the chain stores and restaurants, with their giant signs colored and shaped like children's toys, and the dusty, concrete mom and pops that sprout from the blacktop alongside the weeds, the ramshackle and threadbare houses rented out by students of the university stand silent and empty in the evening dark. Everything is empty on Main Street at this hour. The small businesses have turned in hours ago, their owners and workers eager to hurry back across the river to whoever is waiting for them, a spouse or a lover, children, a family left behind, reachable by phone, on a distant heartland plain, the one you thought you escaped from but are bonded to stronger than ever. Some (a lie, actually many, perhaps) live alone, and no one waits for them. The fast food chains remain open, still burning their parched neon well into the cold, late hours, their workers exhausted and numb to interminable humanity and its careless hunger. Bleary eyed, the workers rub their unshaven, unmade faces with oily hands, infecting their skin. They peer out into the night made oily through the glass, and wish they were anywhere but there.

At this hour, unless you make the effort to bring your own company, a walk down Main Street will almost always be a walk in solitude. Under the glow of the street lamps, the cold sets in, and you realize that this is a place that no one wants to be. You try to remember how you got there, and you have no idea. You remember helping out the graduate English students at their reading because they asked you, their most available undergraduate intern, to read the author introductions when the normal presenter was sick with the flu, and they were out

buying wine, soda crackers, goat cheese, and other things that authors like eating for free. You were happy to read the introductions, filled with a sort of pride to be trusted with something by people older than you, even if all you were doing was reading off a sheet of paper and saying thank you to each reader. That was in the daytime. That was Main Street before you followed the graduate students to Cyber Cafe down the street for drinks, following like a little brother without even noticing or feeling embarrassed about your constant smile, or how they laughed and went silent at your interjections into the conversation.

Before you knew it the wonderful time was over, and you'd spent all your meager pocket money on drinks. Before all the graduate students went home, you asked someone for directions to the bus stop, and though they offered you rides to campus, you didn't want to appear dependant and inconvenient to these men and women with children and husbands and wives and early classes to teach, all of which had been complained about, in good humor and in love, over the drinks. You listened to all of them intently as they spoke, so enamored with the idea of living an independent life that even the complaints seemed wonderful and mythic. You didn't want to encroach on that important, demanding reality with your private feeling of weightless unreality, the incompleteness you sensed deep within yourself, and disturb their beautiful normality with the feeling, deep down, that you were not yet a real human being. So you politely declined their offers of a ride, and politely declined the "Are you sure?," and you walked away from them, hopeful that they saw you walking confidently away, a man, though young, who knew where he was going.

Soon after this you are hopelessly lost, with no idea which streets you've walked down or how they connect to each other. The twists and turns you undertook with difficulty to get to the reading in the first place are now obscured by darkness. Even the Bundy Museum where the reading was held, that embalmed mansion anachronistically dropped among the strange patchwork of that aborted industrial city, has disappeared to some unknown place in the maze. The long empty streets, peppered only by the chain stores and abandoned garages, the patches of unpaved hillside and vague, undeveloped forest, seem to stretch like runways into the distant darkness. In the same way a man lost in the woods might notice that the trees stay the same no matter for how long or in what direction he walks, so too does every street, and every turn you make, seem to spit you back onto Main Street. You are reading a street sign, for the third or fourth time, when a person approaches you from the opposite direction.

The rare encounter with another person on Main Street at night brings out strange and antisocial behavior in both. If the two people are travelling in the same direction on the sidewalk, then one will walk faster while the other slows down, the distance between them growing enough to make them feel safer, less afraid. If they are walking in opposite directions, then both will speed up, giving each other wide berth, even though the sidewalk is big enough to fit two motorcycles with sidecars. This is how it happens to you. The silence hangs between you, insisting you break it, but the tension keeps both your mouths shut, fearing the first word, in the form of a threat, might rip the air like a shot. He looks older, like the graduate students, but his expression is not theirs. His eyes

are shadowed over by the night, a death mask instead of a face. Why is he there? Is he lost, like you? Or does he know exactly where he's going, stalking the streets for students like you, lost and weak from confusion, to take from them what he will? Now you are afraid. You've heard too many warnings about strangers in the dark, even though you now consider yourself as an adult. It is different now that you are alone in the dark, and he knows where you are. You feel a strange, immutable anger. You burn embarrassment in your cheeks. You blame him for being there, and making you feel afraid. You seduce yourself to wondering what it might be like to be his victim. You wonder what it might be like to be an assailant, attacking before being attacked, enclosed and safe and mothered by your rage.

But he passes, and you pass him, and you both continue into the night. You breathe, and your lower lip quivers. It's gotten colder. You look at the signs, trying harder to remember them, desperate to get back to the campus.

At this hour the cars always speed down Main Street. Sometimes they run the red lights, those students riding within from lightly policed, night-empty towns finding themselves right at home in the deserted, unwatched street. They never stop. Movement is their fun, their night on the town. In that emptiness, the sound of a car reaches you before you can see it. You pause for a moment on the sidewalk and look down the road behind you, past the hill where the road and the street lamps dip out of sight, and watch it come along. You freeze to assure yourself that you won't miss it as it blurs by. You assure yourself that they aren't coming after you.

By chance you notice him before he ducks into the shadow of a building. The man from before has turned around, and is now slowly following you at a distance. His eyes are pointed down, but he seems to sense you anyway, tracking you, like a hound with its nose to the ground.

You immediately face forward. There is an Arby's up ahead. You duck inside its glass doors. The sleepy old manager at the register looks up at you from his crossword before standing up. You are glad to see another person. You are glad to be inside the well lighted restaurant, even though you don't like fast food. You take a good look at the manager. He's actually not that old, but the late hour and the fact that he's managed this Arby's for a third of his life has added years to his appearance.

"What'll it be?" he asks. You look up at the menu out of habit before you remember that you have no money.

"Um, actually," you stall, "Is it okay if I just hang out here for a while?"

The manager looks at you like it's the first time he's ever heard anyone articulately suggest that they wanted to hang out at Arby's. A spark of curiosity grazes his features, but that tired, wizened expression returns before it can give voice to the inquiry inside.

"S'fine by me, so long as you don't cause trouble. We're closing in an hour or so anyway. If you're a crack head I'll have to throw you out though."

Your cheeks turn red. "Oh, no. I'm not. Really."

“I’m serious. First sign of you acting crazy and I’ll kick your ass out onto the pavement faster than you can blink.” He says this in an oddly encouraging way, like he wouldn’t mind it so much if he was forced to do what he said.

“Yes sir,” you squeak, promptly sitting down at one of the beige, plastic tables. You turn to look outside the glass front door. There’s no sign of the man with the death mask, or anything at all but the yellowed street light illuminating the center of the road. A car speeds by, and then another, and a third one stops and pulls into the diner across the street. The engine stops and the lights turn off, and you wonder why they’ve stopped there when the diner is obviously closed. Five men, maybe your age, maybe a little older, get out of the car and start strutting around, scanning the empty parking spaces in front of the diner. It seems to meet their approval, and they open the trunk of the car, pulling out a large box. One of them tears it open and pulls something out, which he hands to another. Beer bottles. They clink the bottlenecks and stand around drinking for a while. Each time they finish a bottle they place it on the ground, which is strange because a trash can sits nearby. They repeat this, bottle after bottle, until they don’t pull anymore out of the box. A neat little gathering of empty bottles now stands at their feet. One of them goes to the car and pulls something out from the front seat. He shakes the thing and goes up to the front window of the diner. He holds up his arm, and a stream comes out. It’s a can of spray paint. He sprays a red target with three rings and a dot in the middle on the glass window. He returns it to the car. The other men watch and wait patiently while he does this. When he returns, each of them picks up a bottle in their hand. They ready their

arms, as if waiting for a countdown, and then, all at once, they release the empty bottles from their hands and smash them against the diner window. A spider web of cracks cripples over the wide glass. The target remains. The men are doubling over with laughter, pushing and punching each other's shoulders. They each pick up a second bottle, and throw. This time they break in the window. The same man gets the spray paint again and paints another target on the second window. They do it again, and again, until this window breaks too. There are still some bottles left over, and they throw these haphazardly at the front of the diner, some winding up and pitching them like baseballs. They throw until there are no more bottles left, and they mill around for a moment before moving back to their car. Just as they're about to get inside, one of them glances across the street in your direction. This repels you away from looking outside the Arby's window, and you pull yourself further into your seat, hoping they didn't see you.

“Uh, sir?” you ask the manager.

“You going crazy yet? Or did you want to order something?”

“No. No, I was just wondering how far the nearest bus stop was.”

“Where you trying to get to?”

“The campus.”

“Closest route that'll take you over the river this late is the Leroy Southside.”

You are elated that he seems to know what he's talking about. “Do you know where I can find it?” you ask, hopeful.

He spends a moment redrawing the route in his head, silently mouthing the unintelligible street names. “Closest stop on the Leroy from here is Webster Street. Though you’ll have to cross the river anyway to get there. I know cause I ride it for work every night.”

“Oh, so you’re a student?”

“Nope.”

“But you need a student ID to get on.”

“What’s your point?”

You think for a moment. “So...so how do I get to Webster Street?”

“Well, you’ll want to head in the direction of the river. If you came here from the college then you’re going in the wrong direction. You’re pretty far away, you know that?”

You don’t understand. “What do you mean?”

“Meaning you’ll want to walk back east along Court Street until you see the first bridge south across the river. That’s Tompkins Street. Webster Street is right after that.”

You have no idea what any of this means. “I’m sorry, but where is this Court Street?”

“It’s the street we’re on,” he says, looking at you like you’re the dumbest person in history to ever walk into an Arby’s.

“Isn’t this Main Street?” you ask.

“You’re confused because Main Street turns into Court Street. They’re the same street. The name just changes after a while,” says someone you don’t

see. The manager looks behind you and you turn around to face the source of this new voice. It is the man with the death mask. You go silent. He is a small man, round, with loose, pale white eyelids that seem to have trouble staying open. When he brings down the hood of his long, down jacket you see that he has no hair on his head, completely smooth. He has no eyebrows.

You back away from him, further along the counter. He smiles at you with shiny lips, a slick smile that squirms across his face, before looking up at the menu.

“I’d like the roast beef sandwich with a large soda and curly fries please.”

“Which roast beef sandwich do you want?” says the manager, pointing up at the image board, clearly annoyed about being put to work. “We’ve got plenty.”

“Oh yes, I apologize. I would like the one marked eleven please.” The manager stalks to the back of the kitchen to make the food, leaving you alone with the man. You try to avoid eye contact with him.

“If you want to catch the Leroy, you’ll have to move quick. It’s not too far away, if you know where you’re going, but the last one does leave soon.” He pauses for a second to watch the manager dump the basket of curly fries into the popping, crackling oil. “Can you find the way by yourself?”

You’re forced to look at him and respond now. That slick smile sits on his face looking like it won’t move for anything short of Jesus himself walking into the Arby’s and ordering a sandwich. You desperately want to leave.

“I-I think I got it.”

“You don’t sound so sure of yourself, friend. What will you do if you don’t make it? You’re awfully far out.” You don’t say anything because you don’t know what you will do, and the thought of missing the last bus and being left by yourself wandering the dark outskirts of Binghamton with nowhere to go, and nowhere you even know how to get to, seems too horrible to consider. You try not to make eye contact with the man as you think of this, try not to let him see your weakness, your indecision and worry, but he doesn’t look away from you for even a moment. The smile on his face curls up and down at the edges, squirming like a creature of its own, but his eyes. They don’t move, staying still, motionless as a snake’s.

“I know my way around. If you like, I can take you there. It’s not too far away.” The manager returns with the man’s food and an empty paper cup.

“Here you go,” he says. The man pays with exact change. As the man turns to fill his drink at the soda machine, bag in hand, the manager turns and looks at you. “You still here?” he asks you. “You better get moving if you’re going to make the last Leroy. You can’t sleep in the store if you miss it, you know. I’m locking up and going home.” You bite your lip. You wish the world would just stop for a second and let you think. You wish the bus service was twenty four hours. What kind of bus service doesn’t run twenty four hours? Why isn’t there a bus outside the Arby’s right now? Why isn’t there a sign to point you to Webster Street with big, glowing, can’t-miss arrows? You look at the man at the soda machine, topping off his drink. He smiles that squirming smile as he finishes, and then he turns to look at you, food in hand. He suddenly turns to go,

walking out of the store, and you know you can't do anything else, because you want to go home to your dorm room bed where it's warm and safe and the door has a lock and your roommate has a baseball bat, and you can phone your parents or surf the internet or play a game to forget about this whole night, and that safety is within your grasp, and for that safety, for that warmth and need, you run out after the man into the cold night air.

He is walking quickly, and it is so dark that if you slow down even a little his long, black, down jacket will hide him in the shadows. When you are both far away from the Arby's he slows down enough to let you walk along side him, and you walk this way together in silence for a while. He sips his soda, and occasionally opens the Arby's bag and reaches for a curly fry. He takes a bite of the roast beef sandwich, and he moans a sickening groan of pleasure.

"It's been a while since I've eaten anything tasty like this," he says. "My stomach can't handle it. But today's a special occasion, so I thought it would be nice to celebrate, even though it might hurt a little later."

How much farther, you wonder? Please come soon. "What's special about today?" you ask, trying to keep him in your sights.

"Oh, it's my birthday," he says.

"Oh," you say. "Happy birthday." You slowly say the next part. "You couldn't think of a better way to celebrate than going to Arby's?"

"Oh, well, it's not often that I get to eat food like that anymore. Not since the treatments anyway. It upsets my stomach. I like to get ice cream and things like that on my birthday. It's nice to treat yourself to things."

“Why don’t you celebrate with your family?”

“Oh, no. It isn’t convenient for them to come celebrate.”

“On your birthday?”

“They think I’m too expensive. A luxury item. They never said it to my face, but I could hear them. Around the corners and through the walls, when they thought I was asleep. So one day they dropped me off for my treatment, and they never came back to pick me up.” You don’t say anything, and he doesn’t say anything, and the both of you walk in silence. Then he speaks again. “The sad thing is how long it took me to figure it out. Like when our old neighbor left his puppy dog whimpering at the door of his empty house, thinking his master was still inside. He cried and cried and just wouldn’t leave the damn door alone, and everyone in the neighborhood just walked past and watched him make a fool of himself. But they didn’t see it when he finally got it, he finally understood, and he left that house and turned mean.” A pause. “That might have been the saddest thing of all,” he says.

You try not to look at him, but he is walking in front of you. You try to read the distant street signs through the darkness. There are no more street lamps to help you. You try to remember what the Arby’s manager said, the street name he gave, but you can’t remember. Everything is the squirming smile of the man, his bald head and frozen eyes.

“Do you want to know a secret of mine? Something I’ve never told anyone?” he asks you. You turn your head around to look behind you. Can you run back to the Arby’s? Will it be locked shut? You can’t tell in the darkness

what direction you would need to start running. “Yesterday was my birthday too,” he says. “And tomorrow is too, and the day after that. I’ve been lucky to have so many.” You look around, and have no idea where you are. Tall, white, picturesque, two story houses start to appear, crammed too close to each other for their size. There are no lights but the moon, and dark trees choking the sky surround you. There are no street signs. You are nowhere. “I’ve been treating myself to quite a lot these past few days,” the man says. “I feel a little spoiled, but I can’t help it. It’s nice to treat yourself to things on your birthday. It’s my special day after all.”

“Are we close to the bus stop?”

He seems irritated by the question. “Oh yes, very close.”

“Can you just point the way? Can I get there on my own from here?”

“Do you want to celebrate my birthday with me?” He pulls a tiny, silver gun out of his pocket. You stop walking, and he stops walking. He turns around to face you, keeping the gun at his side and holding it tight, as though it were an extension of his hand. Even in the dark you can see the tears streaming down his face. “I don’t have any cards, but I’m inviting you. Everyone forgets about my birthday, so don’t forget that I’m inviting you.”

You think of your mother and father safe at home with Louie, their golden retriever, and your brother who’s at college in Maryland, and your sister, still in elementary school. You think of your own flesh, and what a gun will do to it.

“Please don’t kill me,” you beg.

“My family left me on my birthday today, and the one yesterday too. They keep waiting until it’s my birthday to leave me. It’s awful of them to do that, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“People are fragile. They don’t understand that, but I do. It only takes a little bit. Even though I get weak and dizzy everyday, it only takes a little bit of strength to hurt someone really bad.”

“Yes.” You are shaking and crying now, and your voice comes out high pitched and weak. You look around for somewhere to run and hide, but everything is darkness. You no longer recognize where you are, and you realize that the two of you made a turn off Court Street a little while back and went down a dark, unlit road for some time until you were deep among trees and picturesque, two story, houses, away from the concrete sprawl and within the suburban heart of Binghamton. The houses stretch on forever in all directions, empty and for sale, empty drive ways and dark windows and locked doors you want to run up to and bang on while screaming for help. The only sound that comes to you in the dark is the distant sound of running water. The Arby’s manager’s words come back to you. ‘You’ll want to head in the direction of the river.’ The man is pointing the gun at you now.

You turn around and start running. Your body dips lower to the ground from the forward momentum. The first shot explodes in your ears, and it whizzes past somewhere over your head. You almost trip and fall, but you keep running. He missed. He didn’t hit you. You run faster, knowing this is your best chance to

get away and put some distance between you. You look back and he is far behind, unable to keep up, but he is aiming the gun again. You face forward and try to go faster, to where you have no idea. The second shot doesn't come close. Finally you see a tall cone of light from a street lamp. You see a sign that says Main Street, with a sign that says Court Street right under it. You stop and listen for the sound of running water, trying to quiet your rapid breathing, and you find it. You follow the streets as best you can, running and occasionally checking behind you for a sign of the man. You don't see him.

The sound leads you to a riverside. Further down the road you see an intersection, and one of the roads leads to a bridge that crosses over the river. You remember the street name, Tompkins, and see the sign. Just as you're about to cross the river, a thought occurs to you. He knows where you're going. Will he be there when you get there? Will he have given up? The thought makes you pause and stop running. You look across the bridge. On the other side is Webster Street and bus stop to campus. You don't even know if the bus is still coming, or if the last one already left, and you don't know what you'll do if this is the case.

You slowly walk across the bridge, gazing up at the tall street lamps girding it on either side. Each of them has a green basket of red flowers hanging from the middle. You remember a story your parents told you when you were a boy about a man who crossed a bridge to escape a monster, and when the monster tried to cross after him, it burst into flames. You picture now, as you did then, the monster burning, and take comfort from it.

You continue straight across the bridge, and follow the straight road past the three story houses and wide, trim lawns. Children's left-behind toys, big wheels and stuffed animals with their insides gored loose by dogs, white bird baths, trampolines, and basketball hoops adorn the yards and driveways. A dog barks somewhere. You walk quickly, seeing it all in passing. You are more concerned now about making the bus in time and getting away from there. Finally you see Webster Street. You look left and see nothing. You look right and see the bus stop, a small metal sign marked BCT. Broome County Transport. The man isn't there. No one is.

You walk up to the sign and look at the schedule. The next and final bus will come in ten minutes. You lie down on the grass of the lawn behind you and let out a deep breath. You feel exhausted, and crane your tired neck to look up at the stars. The small prayer you begin to mutter is the first you've muttered since you left your little home town hibernating back in the Hudson Valley. You behold the starlit pall above Webster Street, and wonder if it resembles the dark in which, thousands of years ago, a gathering of ancients, terrified, crafted their Gods.

You get on the bus and ride it to campus. The next day you tell your roommate about it, and he listens, even though he doesn't believe you. You don't tell your family about it, because you don't want to worry them. You don't tell the graduate English students when you see them again, but you tell them that next time you'll accept when they offer you a ride. A police bulletin goes out reporting the arrest of a lunatic who witnesses say had been firing a gun in a

residential neighborhood. It was a neighborhood where children lived and got the bus to school. Luckily no one was hurt. We can only thank God for that.

This is the future articulated and built by your desire as you lie there on the grass beneath the bus stop and stars. But it is not what happens. You turn your head and see through the dark the outline of the man standing on the grass next to you, his shoes silenced by the soft earth. The click of the gun is louder than anything you've ever heard in your life.

Vitreous Humor

Charles Dodson first noticed the hair in the mirror as he completed the final loop of his tie into the knot he had made around the scruff of his neck. It was the last step of preparation before he and his wife were to depart for the home of Charles' boss, a cigar smoking bank president named Fred Landis with a singular talent for throwing parties that no one who knew him particularly wanted to go to, least of all those on the short list of employees actually invited.

Everyone at the thing would pretend to have a good time, each man taking his turn listening to and laughing at whatever crude, rotten joke Fred had cooked up in his drunken excitement, each woman taking a half-smiling, half-grimacing turn getting her body examined by his hazy, whiskey eyes. In the following days at the office, in the silences of the men's room and the mirrored elevators, in passing each other on the way to the copier, the lunch room, the water cooler, each man invited to the party (and Fred only ever invited his male employees) would look to the other and give a grave nod of almost monkish solidarity. Their looks asked each other, simply, what did we do to deserve that?

It was a single hair, long, thick, and white, located just above the anterior cerebral artery on the left side of Charles' frontal lobe, and it shot erect before wilting downward into a curled wisp near the top of his brow. Until this discovery, Charles' had been lucky with his hair compared to most men at thirty seven. He'd yet to have the minor shock of waking up to find his pillow transformed, like a werewolf, into a hairier version of itself, or exit the shower

only to find the drain clogged by a clump the size of a ferret. He regarded the hair for a moment, before turning to Leanne.

“Honey, can you come take a look at this?”

Leanne looked up from the magazine she was reading on the bed and glanced at the clock on the nightstand. She got up and walked into the bathroom. He turned from the mirror to watch her. She was beautiful when she finished putting herself together, he thought, with an artful grace and glow, like a dancer in mid-season form. He thought right then that she might float away through the ceiling, like a sprite or a ghost, with that indifferent expression still on her face like nothing was happening. He felt like grabbing her hand, or putting an arm around her waist to keep her near, even as she arrived by his side, but his arms stayed put.

“What is it?” she asked. He pointed to the hair, but she didn’t see it. He turned to the mirror and located the hair, isolating it between his thumb and forefinger and separating it from the black. She looked at it for a few seconds before slowly reaching up and touching it with her finger. Automatically, as though he were a child being scolded, he lowered his head so that she could examine it. His eyes fell to her dress. It started black at her knees, interrupted at her waist by a white belt, wrapped her torso in black again, and bared the top of her breasts, and this intrigued him because he couldn’t recall ever seeing this dress before. Before he could ask her where she had bought it, a sharp pain stung the top of his head. He hissed and pulled back, realizing that she had yanked the hair.

“It won’t come out,” she said, before turning away. He watched her leave the bathroom, and he turned to look at the offending hair in the mirror once again before following her out of their bedroom into the living room. “Just cut it off when we get back,” she said.

“Don’t you know where scissors are?” he asked.

She pondered a moment, and he couldn’t tell if she was trying to remember which cavernous drawer or cupboard of their home held the tool he sought, or if she was trying to decide whether or not to answer his question. “Not offhand,” she said.

Charles’ massaged the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. “Don’t you know where anything is in this house when we need it?”

“I can spend twenty minutes looking if you like. Then *you* can tell Fred why we’re late.”

Charles paused, like a dog whose nose had been slapped. “Well, isn’t this just perfect timing?” he asked of the air in the house. “Really, this is just perfect.” She stopped at a mirror in the living room, checking her hair and earrings and fiddling with the top of her dress. That dress. It looked expensive, Charles thought. He frowned, and wondered if his memory was starting to go as well.

“Is it really that important?” she said to the mirror. “What’s the difference if it happens today, tomorrow, or ten years from now? You’re one of the elderly now. You should be happy. This should be a sweet release from one of life’s mysteries.”

Between the dress and her attitude his patience wasn't having it. "You're one to talk," he shot back. "I'm sure you're happy to still have all your hair looking the same as when you left it."

She turned to look at him. "I never leave my hair. I don't have the luxury," she said. His arms stiffened, and he opened and closed his mouth a few times, like a fish, but could produce no retaliation. Instead he turned away from her to fumble with an umbrella poking out of a nearby stand, twisting and spinning the plastic handle as though trying to drill a hole in the floor beneath his feet. Leanne watched him do this in silence before putting on her coat and turning to the front door. "Charles, I'm really not in the mood to do this right before the party. Let's save it for another time, yes?" She opened the door and walked into the damp night outside. It consumed her body where the coat and black dress covered, as though she'd walked into the invisible, gaping maw of some giant creature about to swallow. At that moment, Charles was nearly overcome by an urge to rush to the door and lock her outside. A sick feeling came into his stomach, lurching over empty space, and he stood transfixed by the sight of her standing in the night, barely visible in the light dimly reaching from the entrance to their house. She looked over her shoulder at him.

"The mosquitoes are getting inside, dear."

He took his hand off the umbrella handle. The cold air from outside took over the palms of his hands and circled around his wrists before reaching around his neck. He moved to join Leanne.

Charles couldn't feel his hands on the steering wheel as they pulled away from the driveway and onto the road leading out of Chappaqua. The heaters inside the car were slow to take effect, and the leather seats had frozen into cold rocks. The tiny yellow symbols in the dashboard were the only source of light in the vehicle's dark interior, like a swarm of fireflies held frozen in air. The road outside became a treadmill marked with yellow dashes, and Charles' vision sank into thought. He didn't feel any different, no less strong or quick minded than usual. Just that morning, in fact, he'd jogged two and a half miles on the treadmill at the gym, all while stealing glances at the shaking rears of the women in the Zumba class next door, and he'd even gotten a compliment on his progress from one of the female trainers. That he later overheard this same trainer give a similar compliment to a stooped geriatric struggling in the corner with a pair of five pound free weights was beside the point. The commanding view of the white hair, like a podium in the center of a stage, made all those memories of spandex squeezed asses and the furious masturbation session they brought on afterward meaningless.

It wasn't the hair, really, so much as the people who would see it. And of all nights for it to happen! He could already see Fred's red face leering in delight at the new and easy subject of ridicule brought before him. The inevitability of being the target of everyone else's forced laughter, its tenor revealing too easily their relief at the gift of having their boss's attention diverted from themselves, if only for a moment, made Charles anxious and bitter.

Leanne was silent in the seat next to him, staring out her window into the night. She appeared unaffected by the now working heaters. The white skin of her neck and the white belt around her waist took on the soft yellow glow of the small lights in the dashboard. Charles kept glancing at her, returning his eyes to the road only when he anticipated the car would begin to swerve.

“What did you do today?” Charles asked her. She turned her head away from her window, but only enough so that she now stared through the windshield at the road ahead. A green sign on the side of the road approached from the dark, reflecting the light of the car’s high beams back at them. They were six miles away from Fred’s house in Purchase.

“Oh, just the usual. I went to Trader Joe’s this morning, bought some things. I found a flank on sale,” she said with a hint of pride. “I think it should be enough for when Don and Lisa visit next weekend, though you never know with Don. He eats steak like there’s a world shortage.”

“You paid in cash?”

“Hm?”

“How did you pay? Cash or credit card?”

“I always pay in cash. It’s easier for me. All these stores have different machines for the card, and some want your driver’s license. I’d rather not worry about it. Why?”

“You should pay with the card next time.”

She was silent, then said, “Why?”

“I just think that it might be a good idea to keep everything we purchase on record. Just in case we need to go back and remember where or when we bought something. It makes things easier for the bank, and it’s sensible for us too. Don’t you think so?” The ability to examine these records from the computer in his branch office was another advantage that Charles neglected to mention, and this silent omission spilled into his imagination. A computer screen took up his vision, displaying his and Leanne’s joint account and a long list of purchases dating back years, even to before they’d gotten married. For some reason, however, his imagination failed to supply the abbreviated descriptions of each purchase, hiding the story they surely told. Even the real purchases that he knew for certain must be there, the insurance and mortgage payments, were obscured. His thoughts and memory instead weakened from the effort of conjuring, blurring the letters and numbers beyond sight, illegible, until finally he lost them, fully subsumed in a white, intensified glow.

She was silent as he spoke, leaving his question to hang in the air once he’d finished, and Charles worried that the words sounded strange. He tried to replay them, to reassure himself that he sounded natural and innocent, but all he could hear was his heart beating hot and hard in his chest. He remembered coming home from work one afternoon to see Leanne in her summer dress and cardigan, pushing a vacuum cleaner across the carpet. She said she’d forgotten to do it that morning. Another time he’d answered the phone, only for the person on the other end to hang up without a sound. He saw her emptying a trash bin, double knotting the plastic bag as she tied it shut. He saw her from his office,

sitting in a chair next to the phone, reading a book for twenty minutes without once turning the page. How many times, he now considered, had they made love and he avoided swimming that drunken, humming state of pleasure after, listening instead to the whispering objects of their darkened bedroom? What is she hiding? Where is it hidden? What will I do when I find it?

“Charles...Charles!” Leanne screamed, pointing at the road. Charles snapped out of it and slammed on the brakes, stopping the car with a loud screech. He gripped the steering wheel, pushing hard against it, and ground his teeth together as he looked through the windshield.

A deer stood about six feet in front of them. Charles had driven right up to it, staring ahead like it wasn't there, even as it sauntered onto the street. It watched them now with stupid curiosity, vacant black eyes frozen in the headlights.

“God damn it,” Charles hissed, slamming his palm against the horn. In one leap the deer was gone, disappeared into the woods. He stared out at the road, focusing on the spot where the deer had stood, until he realized that Leanne was looking at him.

“What's wrong, Charles?”

“Nothing's wrong.”

The engine hummed in front of them. Leanne spoke again, her hands gripping the purse resting on her bare legs. “Do you want me to drive?”

“I just said I was fine, Leanne.”

“Charles, maybe you should let me drive.”

“What part of ‘I’m fine’ don’t you understand? And besides, you’re wearing heels.”

“I thought you might not have been feeling well at the house, and now I think I was right.”

“I really don’t understand this condescension. I really don’t. All evening long, and frankly, I’m getting tired of it.” Charles took a hand off the steering wheel and ran it through his hair. “I hope you realize how immature it looks.”

“No jury will convict me,” said Leanne. She looked out her window, though at what, Charles couldn’t guess. They had stopped in the middle of a forested stretch of road, and dark, impenetrable trees crushed in from either side. The car’s headlights lit up the bushes ahead, illuminating their leaves a pale, blue glow. Charles watched their color, and something about it, maybe the softness of it, soothed him. He felt his grip on the steering wheel loosen. Finally, Leanne put a hand on his knee, which made him flinch.

“We’re ten minutes from Fred’s house,” she said. “Can you can make it?”

He felt too tired to answer the way he wanted. “Yes,” he said, reaching down to put the car back in drive.

They were five minutes late when they arrived. Human shadows ghosted across the orange lamp light in the windows of the house, descending the air and settling onto the wide lawn. They parked as close as they could manage before getting out of the car to walk the remaining stretch of wet road to the driveway. Leanne walked a few steps ahead of Charles, seeming at intervals to pull far enough away that she appeared on the verge of breaking away from him, but right

before it happened she seemed to sense his distance and fall back into a slower step that allowed him to catch up. Watching this oscillation in her speed suddenly made Charles want to laugh. He thought of stopping right there in the street to see whether she would walk into the party by herself, only noticing his absence when some confused party guest asked her where her husband was. Wouldn't that be funny?

He remembered playing another trick on her a long time ago, shortly after he'd received the promotion to branch manager. They were driving home, and he was telling her a story about a customer who lived in a barn and tried to open a savings account with a live chicken. When he finished telling it, Leanne told him, smiling and trying to catch her breath from laughing, to be careful and watch the road. This annoyed him, pricking and deflating the high of his laughter into a smaller chuckle. Was she even paying attention? He saw an oncoming car in the opposite lane. Still smiling and lightly chuckling, he darted the steering wheel to the left, lightly dipping the car into other one's path. Leanne gasped and screamed his name, right as he pulled the car back into their lane. He took one look at her face, her smile now erased, and he burst out into a round of fresh laughter. She said something that might have been angry, or maybe not, but he didn't really hear her, and he started laughing harder. He looked back to the road, looked into the opposite lane, saw there were no cars, and did it again. He looked at her, the smile still stretched across his face. Her lips were closed and tight, her eyes shimmering. She looked down at her hands, folded them in her lap, and turned away to look out the window, remaining silent for the rest of the car ride.

He couldn't remember how that trip had ended, or if she had said anything after that. In fact, he couldn't remember why they had taken that trip in the first place. Were they visiting her parents? Shopping for something? A sudden bite from the cold blocked him, and the memory disintegrated.

When they got to the front entrance of the house, it opened before them in anticipation of their approach, like a trick door in a carnival fun house. It was held by Fred's wife, Donna, a woman with one of those grand and fake party smiles that somehow tricked you into feeling welcome even though you suspected better.

"Charles! Leanne! So glad you both could come." She finished her sentence with a lilt, seeming to indicate that there was more to be said, but nothing came. She hugged Leanne and kissed her once on each cheek. Charles prepared himself to receive the unstoppable, friendly hug as though it were a battering ram. He had hugged this hug a thousand times, and he knew by heart the muscular configuration that would achieve that comfortable balance between intimacy and perversion. After the formality had been performed, they entered the house.

Charles winced upon seeing more people crowded together than the usual number. Most he recognized from the office, but there were others he'd never seen before. Perhaps he'd forgotten them in his desiccated senility, he thought as he hung his coat. His arm reflexively reached up to the white hair, as if to try and somehow put it away out of politeness, like a cigarette, but midway through the action he realized that this would more likely reveal it, and his arm fell back to his

side. No one had noticed them yet, too absorbed in their on-going conversations, and as Charles watched them he realized that once they'd finally come over to say hello and envelop him in whatever conversations they'd avalanched into, he would have no idea what to say. Everyone in the room seemed to be either too young, new kids out of business school getting invited for the first time, whose heads had more hair exploding out the top than they knew what to do with, or too old, with nothing but white, flossy wisps that looked weak enough to get blown away by a stray wind. He had never thought of any of them in these terms before, and he now placed himself squarely in the middle between them.

Leanne immediately went to work. She smiled, shook hands and gave out hugs like a politician at a rally, and Charles followed dutifully in her wake, his small, polite smiles and head-nod, hand-shake combination echoed back in each greeting. Whether out of politeness or luck, no one mentioned the hair. He watched the partier's dim eyes for errant, upward movements in the hair's direction, but none were made. Each exchange was a hurdle put behind him, a miniature escape from someone he could avoid for the rest of the evening. They got through the people they knew in the crowd in minutes, before Leanne said the words Charles had been dreading since they left the house.

"I'll join you in a minute, but let us say hello to Fred first. Do you know where he is?" Charles hoped the friend would regret to inform them that Fred had died in a plane crash or a fire, and that this party was actually a wake.

"He went to the kitchen to take a call a little while ago. He should still be back there," the friend said.

The kitchen was bright and pristine, with a chandelier hanging near the breakfast nook, and glass and metal furniture that reminded Charles of an airport lobby. Fred stood near the exit to the patio, his back turned to them. He heard them approach, and he parted from the receiver with a mumble before hanging up and facing them. He smiled wide, and gave a little laugh. Charles and Leanne smiled back, waiting for him to speak, but he didn't. The moment lingered past the point where something needed to be said. Charles wondered if Fred was already drunk. He was certainly red enough.

"Leanne!" he finally began. He stepped forward, put both arms on her shoulders, and kissed her on both cheeks. Charles watched her eyes, but saw nothing in the fleeting time over which the gesture elapsed. As soon as the greeting had begun it passed, and Fred was standing in front of him with an outstretched hand.

"Chuck! My man!" Charles took the hand and shook it. It was sweaty and cool, like a piece of raw meat, but Charles maintained his composure. "How have you been?"

They talked about nothing, forgetting their lines upon their being uttered, just as they always had at these parties. Leanne said some of the things she always said, and before she excused herself to join the other wives and girlfriends in the living room, Fred did something that Charles wasn't expecting. He held out his arms to Leanne for another embrace. And Leanne, instead of ignoring it with a quick smile and a retreat to the living room, stepped forward and let the second hug wrap around her body, letting Fred's sweaty hands fall on the spot of her

naked back where the unrecognized black dress stopped short of her shoulder blades.

Charles tried to watch everything, despite all the moving parts, despite knowing it would end too soon to know anything. He watched the moment of tightening, the arms constricting, and Fred's fingers pressing down into the flesh of his wife's back. He watched Leanne arch her back under the avalanching weight of Fred's mountainous fat, seeming to let it rest on top of her. He watched Fred's face as it tightened into contentment, squeezing the pig eyes shut and stretching his mouth into something like pain, only welcomed, perhaps cried for. Crying. That was it, despite the silence of it. They did it without words, but Charles still heard the shrilly whispered voices in the action. Don't wake the child, they said. Whatever you do, don't wake the child.

Leanne was gone, and Charles and Fred were alone. When had she gone? Charles didn't remember her leaving, and suddenly being left alone in the kitchen with Fred terrified him. He felt like escaping out in the car, or making a diving leap through the patio window, like an action movie hero. He'd pick up Leanne, letting her sit on one arm like a grocery bag, with her arms around his neck, and he'd stride out of the place with everyone watching in awe, a fresh bullet hole blossoming on the villain's forehead.

"Let's get you a drink, my man," Fred said. Charles followed him to the bar, passing by the circled groups of partygoers and catching the snippets of conversation floating in the air. A young man showed off a tablet computer to his friends, flicking through the colored lights on the screen like a pharmacist

perusing a drug cabinet. A woman talked to her circle about an article she'd read about something called getting food high, where people starve and fast in order to make delicious and expensive meals taste even better. The woman wanted to try it herself. An old man told how his Doctor had warned him of floaters invading his vitreous humor, and he could expect a future of nearsightedness, or blindness, if he didn't get them treated. They arrived at the bar, and the tender handed them glasses of red wine. Fred traded an already emptied glass for his.

"Fred," Charles said, looking down at the wine in his glass. Fred wasn't listening, or even looking at Charles, instead letting his eyes slowly scan the people in the crowd. Searching. "Fred!"

Fred turned his scratched, pink neck to look at him. Charles let pass the first thought that came into his head, and as a result he didn't say anything, lingering past the point where something needed to be said. Instead he stared into his boss' face. Fred's eyebrows lifted, and sweat beaded his brow. The noise around them diminished to a quieter lull, but the party continued as though nothing happened. Damning accusations whispered up to Charles from their silence, now more sure of themselves than ever before. That dress. Was Fred admiring his handiwork? Charles felt like finding Leanne right now and tearing that damn dress apart. He would wave the tattered remains in Fred's face. How do you like that? Thought you could fool me? I know what you've been up to. Both of you. You think no one ever notices, but everyone notices. We see every mean and petty thing you do. I'm just the first to shove it back in your face.

“Remind me where the bathroom is?” Charles asked. Fred seemed to not understand the question at first. Then the words broke through and he grinned, slowly nodding his head. He laughed.

“You’re something else, you know that? Really something else.” He poked a finger into Charles’ shoulder. “Promotable material, even. Let’s talk about it after you get back.”

When Charles had the directions, he set off into the vast belly of the house, wine in hand. When he had ascended the stairway to the second floor and was out of view of the rest of the party, he started walking in the opposite direction of the bathroom. The farther away he got from the music, the quieter it got, blocked by the hallway corners, until the party and its people were nothing more than musical hum in the back of his mind. He opened each door, and when he was met by a closet or an untouched guestroom, he quickly closed the door and continued further into the house. Finally he arrived at what must have been the farthest corner, far enough that he could barely hear the music downstairs. He stood in front of the door at the end of this hallway, and opened it.

When he switched on the light, he saw inside was a large double bed, more ornate and beautiful than the ones in the guest rooms. A dresser drawer stood across from it, and the entrance to a private bathroom opened up on the opposite wall. Across from it was a closet with a slatted door. Charles set down his wine on the dresser and started opening drawers. He rifled through the socks and underwear, then moved on to the sweaters and jeans. When he found nothing, he moved on to the closet without closing the drawers. He ripped the

doors open and pushed away the hanging shirts and pants like an explorer chopping down vines in the jungle, looking between them at the shoe rack further in. From here he went to the entrance of the bathroom, but before he could enter his eye caught something that stopped and turned him around. A wastebasket stood next to the night stand, hidden from sight. It was full of crumpled balls of paper.

He kneeled over this basket and started sifting through the contents. When he couldn't keep track and began seeing the same torn coupons and memo notes again and again, he over turned the basket, dumping the contents onto the bedroom floor. He spread them out, looking for the unique labels and logos that ink the tops of receipts from clothing stores. That was when he heard the footsteps.

They started quietly enough that he thought he imagined them, but soon the sound began to undulate in time, and the sound got louder. He looked around the room, senses heightened and confused. He stared at the mess on the floor for a moment before sweeping as much of the trash into his arms as he could, and dumping it back into the wastebasket. He ran to the dresser drawer and closed the ones he'd opened. He turned off the lights and ran to the closet, but before he jumped in, ready to slam the door behind him and pray to not be found, he remembered the glass of wine sitting on the dresser. Could he run to the bathroom and dump the liquid down the drain in time, leaving a bright red stain that had good odds of being noticed? It was too far away. The steps were too loud. Too close! He grabbed the glass of wine, half full, roiling and storming up

to the edge, and as quickly, as slowly as he could, bounded into the closet and shut the door behind him.

He couldn't hear the door to the bedroom opening because his heart beat was too loud, but he heard it slam shut. He could feel something wet on his hand. Some of the wine must have spilled over. Was he in a closet of white shirts? He couldn't see in the dark, nor could he remember from looking earlier.

He heard rustling. Light steps walked across the carpet outside. He tried to breathe slowly, but he could hear it coming fast. Outside it was silent. Then he heard a pucker, a sucking noise, and another. A loud slam moved the dresser, startling Charles, but he stayed still. His hand around the glass of wine felt hot. His breath was hot and sticky, and he could feel a sheen of slime settling on his face. His tie tightened around his collar.

The mattress heaving up and down. The breathing shrill and hissing. Angry. Desperate. Was it Fred's? Leanne's? His own? A headache and the smell of wine slaughtered his ability to think, to visualize, flaying each imagined picture before it could branch and grow, shuttering his sensual response down to nothing more than heightened hearing, the better to take in every note and decibel of this thing, this place he'd found entirely by accident.

They were the same sounds his parents' bedroom had made when, as a child, he'd walked the long, dark hallway to their door. Fear of the dark had driven him from his child's room of building blocks and toy money, even though both parents had told him he was never allowed in. He stopped in front of their door, his quiet pleas for their company having gone unheard, and the muffled

thumping of his heart was met by the muffled thumping he heard on the other side. He listened and thought of monsters stamping around in the dark, creatures whose hideousness he could feel and fear but not conceive in image or reason. The whimpering cries came and he opened the door, unable to stop himself doing it, and no one took a breath. When his mother and the man turned their scratched, pink necks to look at him, their milky, crescent eyes burning in the moonlit dark, the silence, the same silence of Leanne and Fred embracing in the kitchen, had strangled his parent's bedroom, his child's voice, and the swollen, frog expression on his mother's face swelling beneath its slime. In his mind, in the dark inside Fred's closet, the face swelled into unrecognizable shape, just as the sounds outside now swelled beyond recognition, grasp, or singular placement in time and moment, invading before and after, forever.

But it ended, and though it was quiet, he remained as still as his body would allow. A few minutes later there was rustling again. Then footsteps, and finally, the door to the bedroom slammed shut, just as it had before.

Charles stood and waited. After about three or four minutes of absolute silence, he slowly pushed open the closet door, peeked out of the crack, and exited back into the bedroom, breathing the cool, dry air and wiping his forehead. Feeling his arms again made him feel something strange about them. His wineglass wasn't in his hand anymore. He found the light switch and flipped it on.

The room was spotless, the sheets and pillows untouched, the drawer unmoved. It was identical to how it looked when he'd entered, and this shocked

him, but what shocked him more was the sight of his hand. It was soaked in red wine, and he could see and feel several cuts with tiny pieces of glass sticking out of them. He looked at his leg and saw a large red stain spreading down his tan pants to the toes of his shoes. He looked back to the closet and saw a small pool of wine and blood and glass joining their stains and stench together in the white carpet, beneath the white shirts in the closet.

He stared at this, and if someone had entered the room and seen him in the middle of all that mess, he still wouldn't have been able to rip his attention away from the red spreading out over the floor from the closet. After some time he walked over to the stain and bent down to pick up each of the tiny shards and specks of glass. He kneeled over them and, picking them up one by one, placed them in the wastebasket. He cut his fingertips on the edges of some that were stuck in the carpet, or ones too small to reach two fingertips around. Then he began to pull the glass from his palm, and his hand shook from the pain. Soon his whole body started shaking.

When he was done he wiped his eyes with his good hand and walked to the bathroom. He ran his hand under the water, wiping away the wine and blood. Droplets stained the cuff. The cutting pain returned, and he winced. He looked up from the sink into the mirror. The single white hair had now been joined by hundreds of others. His whole head, from top to eyebrows to mustache, had turned to snowy white.

Who was this person? Where had Charles gone? He was looking for something. What was it again? He had to think for a moment, but he finally

remembered, and he felt proud. It wasn't easy, after all, with everyone hiding things from him, but despite their best efforts, he had remembered. He left the bathroom, and then the bedroom, leaving the closet door open and the stain on the floor exposed.

He hadn't bothered to look for any bandages, and his hand started bleeding again, dripping onto the hallway floor as he walked towards the sound of the party. It slowly grew in volume, as though a dial were being slowly turned, until it finally took over the air, and Charles stood once more in front of the gathered.

At first no one noticed. Then the people who knew who Charles was stopped their conversations, their party smiles falling in succession. Following were the rest of the people at the party, the people who might have met Charles once in passing without introduction, and the young men and women who had no reason to know him.

Charles looked among them for Leanne. It would be easier now that everyone had stopped moving to stare at him. He could see their faces, no longer able to hide or pretend they didn't notice. This was good. Honesty was good right now. He didn't see her until he did, but even then she didn't notice the silence, nor did she turn to face him. He called to her, shouting as loud he could from across the living room. "Where are you hiding them, Leanne!?" The party-goers faces contorted into a series of confused and reproachful grimaces. The kids who'd been feigning experience all evening backed away, their bright eyes wide, entranced and disbelieving. Leanne was looking at him now, trying to

blend and hide among the crowd. If only they could see her with that tearful, pleading mask on her face, knowing, as he did, what lurked behind it! She was going to fess up. Right now, she was going to tell him and everyone here the truth. He lunged toward her, but was intercepted.

“Leanne!” Charles called as he was wrestled to the ground, the weight of six people falling on top of him. He thrashed and bit and tore at them to free himself, but it was no use. Someone told someone else to call an ambulance. Someone else suggested the police. Charles stopped his thrashing for what seemed to be a spell of exhaustion, but that wasn’t it. A month’s old memory had suddenly returned to him. It was an image of himself stopping at Leanne’s favorite clothing store after work, taking the dress she was wearing off the rack, paying for it with cash, and placing the wrapped up present with the others beneath the glowing boughs of the Christmas tree. For a moment he was able to hold inside the joyous, sickening feeling this memory brought, but it froze in the glow of the tiny white lights before floating away. He began to struggle again.

“Where are you hiding the scissors!?”

The Box

I remember the man behind the box was a derelict, and not the sort who knows how properly to attend to his shame. He was not the type that hides away in the shadows of heated, windy metro stations, or between the stoops of respectable homes, wrapped in a sleeping bag and turned away from the world passing by. No, this particular creature had taken just the opposite attitude, had seated himself like some ridiculous, unshaven Buddha near the middle of the sidewalk, and the box rested mere centimeters away from him, at once the advertising, accounting, and engineering branches of his prestigious enterprise.

I'd noticed the two as I was exiting out of St. Pancras, and like usual I was poised to check my curiosity at just that, but the sheer boldness of this social invalid, for him to set up shop in what was practically the middle of the damn sidewalk, flared something inside me that I now look back on as very unusual. I don't believe it was anger, nothing so intense for something so unimportant, but more a feeling of annoyance at the spirit of opportunity in the man. I am not one to give any great amount of thought to these people, but something about this fellow, who I recall was unusually young for a derelict, compelled me to grant him a moment more of my attention.

The box was a flimsy thing, like its owner, and it was covered in dirt and creases, dented around its perimeter by the wayward, unseeing kicks of passersby. Written in dusty ink across the top flap of the box was the man's advertisement for his situation, subtitled by a plea for aid. *Everything lost in a fire. Help a man down on his luck.*

I paused, possibly a little too close to the man, because that next moment he and I made eye contact. He looked up at me and smiled. Smiled, of all things! And here, begging on the street!

“Spare a quid, sir?” he said.

Having never given pause to such individuals before now, I must say I was quite at a loss about how to handle the situation. For a moment I entertained the notion of giving this man advice, of making an heroic speech on the worth of entering the working world, even at the lowest levels, how it would afford a means by which to scratch by, perhaps not feeling the sunbeams of success right away, but at least setting yourself going on the active road to achieving a decent life. I would denounce the practice of begging in the streets, how it was an errand of fools and laggards and, the gains of such humiliating labor being insignificant to satisfy any worthwhile dream, ultimately a waste of time. As I considered this, he spoke up again.

“Spare a quid, sir?”

I was struck dumb, flustered by this sudden badgering, and without thinking I fished ten cent from between the lint in my pocket. I dropped the coin into the cardboard receptacle, his first catch of the day apparently, much to the annoyance of the people around me. I imagine they were upset at what appeared a betrayal of capitalist ethics, though it could have also been the space we were clogging up in the middle of the sidewalk. I don't know why I resorted to merely giving the man what he wanted right then, but in any case it afforded me the opportunity to sever myself from him, indeed, replacing my uncharacteristic

fascination with a repulsion that compelled me away from the spot. The ‘thank you’ was so far behind me that I barely even heard it.

It was only afterward that I considered the implications of what I had done. The man had done no work and been rewarded. For the first time in my life I had given a handout, and I felt humiliated. Even those street musicians you see everywhere are more deserving. At least they provide something in exchange (not much, mind you). I am loathe to admit it, but it was downright communist of me, and the more I thought about it, the more agitated I became. I went to bed dejected, feeling I’d committed a failure, and when my wife asked me what was wrong, I told her what had occurred with all the sullenness of a schoolboy confessing a wrongdoing to his teacher.

My wife proposed it to resemble an investment, a thought she seemed to find humorous, given my profession, and she mentioned something about how marriages were like investments as well, but at that point I wasn’t listening. I realized then that I’d been looking at the matter in the wrong light. The man’s words made sense, not as a plea for aid, but for capital. No wonder I’d felt so compelled to hand over the coin. I hadn’t given ten cent for nothing, had not flushed perfectly good money into some Sisyphean charity. Once the derelict had accumulated enough initial investment, he would surely use it for something worthwhile, perhaps a haircut or a new suit after a bit. And once he’d re-entered working society, why, the very contribution an extra worker makes to the system alone is worth far more than ten cents. If I bothered to do the math, I bet I could make back double what I’d contributed, simply from the added spending of a new

wallet in the city. And being so young, he would find some forgiving girl to go with, raise a family, and thus exponentially multiply the profits. Well, I was floored by the idea, the sheer possibilities of my discovery compounded upon one another until I felt myself bursting with good cheer. I leaned over, kissed my wife goodnight, and lay down to sleep, as happy a man ever was.

The next time I saw the man was after returning from a business trip that had taken me to see a client in Cambridge, and like before he had set up camp right in the middle of the sidewalk. Recalling the conversation with my wife regarding the gentleman, I strode across the pavement to where the man sat, feeling quite contented in my contribution to the fellow's enterprise. Imagine my surprise and delight upon glancing down into the box to see other ten cent pieces alongside my own. I could even see some fifty cent pieces, and, incredibly, a whole pound, right there in dulled gold, sparkling amidst the tiny pile.

The fellow smiled up at me, and I returned the favor, now fully aware of the reason behind the happy countenance. What he said next was rather peculiar, however.

"Spare a quid, sir?" More money? Was this fellow having a joke with me? That must have been it. If the enterprise of self-actualization was not progressing as well as previously hoped, especially this early on and with so many investors already in the pot, surely he would not have such good cheer about the affair. I reasoned that to be the nature of the question he'd put to me, and now that I'd fully caught on, I had right there a great, bellowing laugh, still chuckling as I walked away from the man.

Like any good investor, I checked up on him whenever I happened to be around St. Pancras. I did so from a distance of course, not wishing to appear too intrusive, and as sure as rain the fellow gradually accumulated more and more funds. One day he even appeared wearing a new t-shirt, a cheap, tourist rag with a big red heart in the middle. I must say that I was rather proud of the man and his box right then, very almost like a son that I'd bred and raised into a guaranteed winner, and in a particularly affecting fit of this positive attitude, I decided to purchase a gift to celebrate the success of my prize investment. The gift was a wallet of fine leather, a large and floppy work with plenty of space for business cards, credit cards, coin pouches, and of course the notes which I knew would soon begin to appear. He seemed rather taken by surprise, as though unsure of what to make of the gift.

“Um, thanks?” he said. I understood completely. How often does an investor give surprise gifts during the development of an enterprise? I must admit to it being rather unorthodox practice, but to this I would argue that such speedy success is itself sort of unorthodox. As I walked away, I imagined the strengthened motivation the fellow must have felt, for how else could one feel, having such a confident investor behind your enterprise? It is indeed with the investor that the very psyche of the project rests, for if the man who allows it to continue isn't confident then how, I ask, can the worker be? It would certainly be the undoing of many a promising partnership. Miscommunication is truly the enemy in such a situation.

Indeed, miscommunication threatened to offset my home life as well as my work. My wife, for no apparent reason, felt compelled to pester me about matters which I, in light of the need to monitor my new venture, did not think entirely important or relevant. She would bring up a dinner party, or want to entertain her friends or go on holiday somewhere, and that was all well and fine, but the problem lay in her insistence on having me take part in these amusements. On each of these occasions I would try to explain to her as patiently as possible why I couldn't be bothered to distract myself from my work, considering the great opportunity this was for both of our futures. I tried to frame it for her in a more progressive light. Think of what it could do for us, I would say. If run properly, this venture could very well allow us to retire early. That skiing chalet in the mountains, the beach house, a horse or shooting range perhaps, all of that could finally be had with abandon, the time to enjoy them firmly within our grasp. I imagine my powers of persuasion were properly effective, for as the days passed she pestered me less and less, and with diminishing vigor. Finally, to my relief, she eventually stopped her nonsense altogether. I had convinced her.

Some weeks passed before my travels brought me to the station again. The man sat there as usual, with the box in its usual place, but upon seeing the state of the enterprise, I was struck by confusion. The box had accumulated even more money, this I was happy about, but it was the nature of that accumulation...

Well, it could only accurately be called a pile of money, as the box was so full of coins and notes that it was brimming very nearly over the top. Passersby were now pausing to take notice, and rightfully so, for if I had to guess just how

much money was in the box, I'd say it was getting close to about four hundred pounds. I didn't want to appear intrusive, but I believe the unorthodox nature of the sight justified an inquiry as to the reason behind it. The fellow seemed amused by my approach. He wiped a hand across the heart on his shirt.

"Spare a quid, sir?" he said. Was he trying to be evasive? Hiding something? It would not do.

"I see that's a bit of money you've come by," I said.

"You think so?" he said.

"Why don't you take all that and get yourself something nice? Maybe a new suit, or a room somewhere? I know it's difficult finding a place right now, but there must be something."

"You don't have to worry about me, sir. Everything will be alright." Was he serious? Were we viewing the same box? It was so exposed that any lunatic, no, any sane person with financial ambition could have simply run up, bludgeoned the boy, and carried it off.

"I dare say, yes, but still...aren't you just a bit worried having all this out here in the open? Isn't there a bit of a risk?" I said.

"Sir, it won't work if no one can see it happening." This bewildered me. Just what sort of business was this man running? How much money did the fellow need? I didn't care how guaranteed it seemed, the investment would have to return at some point, and this was starting to appear suspicious. I'd say I was partly justified in thinking so. I mean, for goodness sake it was four hundred pounds! That was surely more than enough to get things rolling.

But then I realized that I had once again assumed things too quickly, had too eagerly applied my orthodox knowledge of investments to the decidedly unorthodox situation at hand. I asked myself the question again. ‘How much money did the fellow need?’ And I realized just then, why stop now when he could go further? If the fellow had felt safe in the street with two hundred, and then three hundred, and now four hundred pounds, well, who was I to say that he wouldn’t be alright with even more? Why, if I’d bothered to do the math, I’d have bet that by the end of the month the young man would have accumulated enough money to eventually join my friends and I in our private smoking club. He and I would play cards over drinks, tell stories and jokes to one another, and later, when it was time to turn in, we would even share a private wink, we alone privy to the special bond between us.

As to his mystifying words, that it must remain out in the open, I should have seen the reason for that right away. How else was the enterprise to continue accumulating if, as I’d suggested, it was altered so drastically from its successful form? How right he had been to set me straight, and how patiently he had done so! I regarded the lad with pride, a man now in my slightly moist eyes.

“God speed my son. God speed.”

A long time passed before I heard any news of the enterprise. The previous encounter had left me so filled with confidence that I very nearly forgot about the whole thing. It was clear that the fellow was committed to some sort of big success, and I was quite sure that, left to his own devices, he would not displease for results. Upon my return home my wife questioned the source of my

positive cheer, and I told her about what the fellow had said to me. I must say that her reaction was quite endearing, for she very nearly voiced the same exact fears I had, although for some strange reason she expressed more concern for the young man than for the box. Unable to suppress a knowing smile, I sought to emulate the patience that the young man had taken with me, and explain to her exactly why it had to be done this way. It was rather strenuous trying to explain it to my wife, and she kept going on about how both my charge and I were mad, how he was liable to get killed by some thief and I was to be held accountable by the law for criminal negligence.

“Why did I marry you? Your heart is mud!” she said. Poor girl. It is hard to explain how the world works sometimes, especially to an emotional thing like her, and I told her as much. Well, to my great surprise and regret, she suddenly left right then and there, packed up half the house and was gone, like a puff of smoke. When I think now how quickly she worked, I’d say she’s the one to watch out for if we’re talking about thieves.

Thankfully she forgot the television. One must keep up to date with what’s going on in the world, because you never know when some war somewhere may have adverse effects upon your investments. Unlike my wonderful young man in the street, the other of my prospects caused me such stress that they nearly drove me mad on several occasions, and I dare say that my newest venture had spoiled my sensibilities for being so guaranteed a success. I obviously didn’t go *mad*, but it makes me exhausted even now to think of those terrifying occasions where a large investment appeared on the verge of taking me

down with it. With my wife out of the house, and having previously resolved to no longer interfere with the assured prospects of my genius entrepreneur, the television became a primary source of engagement for me, apart from visiting the offices on occasion. I filled my mornings with the latest trends, watched the commercials between popular afternoon dramas, wrote down clues, and sifted through the mixed messages to try and hear what the competition was up to.

One spring morning, several months after my wife's departure, I was eating breakfast when a news report appeared on the BBC. I had muted the television in order to write some notes down on the commercials which had run prior, and when I glanced at the screen to see if the advertisements had begun again, I was met by a bird's-eye view of a very odd looking hill amidst a row of buildings. It shone in the early morning light and towered over the surrounding structures, like a smoothed pile of scrap metal, and it seemed to spread out at its edges, filling and blocking the street. An excited looking crowd of people stood before it, making throwing motions at it. Strange as these things were, it was the headline ticker at the bottom of the news report that captured my full attention. It read, 'Money Mountain.'

At first I thought it to be some elaborate prank, or one of those digitally produced publicity stunts that seem to be so popular on television these days. I turned the sound back on and listened to the report. The stupefied news reporter related how this pile of money, valued by the experts to be several million pounds, had appeared overnight, and to the reporter's confusion, people continued

to throw money at it, making it grow larger and larger. There was even some university crustacean come out of his hole to comment on the phenomenon.

“It might come back to them, but I wouldn’t place too much trust in the stability of this thing. It just seems suspicious to me,” he said. I didn’t immediately connect the report with the enterprise of my young man, but two things caught my eye that confirmed it to be none other. The first was the building to the immediate right of the pile, the road to which had been blocked, and as I stared at it I realized it to be none other than St. Pancras. The box had not left its original location, a realization that astounded me. The second was when the camera scanned the crowd, revealing a mass of people in suits just emptying money onto the thing. They shoved and shouted at one another, drove fingers into ears so as to shout conversations into cell phones, all while hurling as much as their hands could hold onto the pile. Empty wheelbarrows and wagons, cookie jars, wallets and piggybanks, all sorts of receptacles lay strewn amidst the rabble. I took one look at these people and immediately realized what had happened. They were late buyers, the panicking uninformed, more prone to stress than even I could ever imagine.

I turned off the television and thought. It made sense that people would eventually try to latch on once it got big enough. I decided that now was the time to meet with the young man and provide sincere congratulations for our success. I would finally extend that long awaited invitation to the smoking club.

Driving to the scene, madhouse that it was, was an impossibility, and all tubes to St. Pancras had to be shut down because of mass overloading, so I was

forced to walk, though that was not without its benefits. I delighted in witnessing the chaos, the clamoring human traffic jam, knowing it belonged to me and my young man, to what we had built together.

It would be disingenuous of me, however, if I made it seem that I was all good cheer at the time. There was still the matter of what to do with the money now that the enterprise's success had been secured. There could be no argument at this point; the money would have to be moved to an account, perhaps two or three, and there would need to be discussions on how to spend it. I mulled over the possibilities as I approached the pile, walking down Euston Road. Perhaps he could start his own company, or better yet, perhaps he could join me in investing. I would merely suggest the idea, not wishing to compromise the image of moderation the boy had of me, and it would be perfectly understandable if he elected to go on his own from here on out. That's what I would have done at his age. But I did hope, beyond any moderation, that the boy might have left a special place in his heart for the investor who had believed in him and, more importantly, invested first.

I was finally able to get a good look at the money tower after working my way around the hysterical financial advisors and investment bankers. Impressed hardly describes the feeling that came over me. It was grander than the Tower of Pisa, the Eiffel, or Big Ben. It brought a tear to my eye, and made me love my young man even more.

I set out to find him. I tried questioning the investors but they didn't take notice, so absorbed were they in building the enterprise up to the sky. Their

shouts rose above each other, intermingling with the beeping music of their cell phones and clinking coins.

I eventually managed to corner an investor who had given out from exhaustion, forced to rest before throwing any more money at the tower. I described my young man to him, but he only started paying attention once I told him that he was the owner of the enterprise.

“How could you know what the owner looks like when none of us do?” he said dismissively. This gave me pause. Surely the young man had revealed himself to his investors by now? He was the owner, yet no one I spoke with seemed to recognize or recall any of the features I described. They hadn’t even spoken with him.

I stood confused between the ranks of men in suits, and my eyes drifted towards the fast growing pile of money, taking in its height. That’s when the truth hit and sank in me like a stone. The enterprise was going to bust. Why else would he abandon it when it seemed to be doing so well? He must have anticipated it and cut his losses. A sudden heaviness overtook me, compelling me to sit down. He was probably on a plane to the Caribbean right now, chuckling over whatever he’d managed to steal away in the night. After all this time, a thief! Belated warnings popped into my head. He was a derelict, a beggar, a youth, and yet I’d showered him in gifts and been with him since the very beginning. I felt like a complete fool, and I remained on the sidewalk, feeling that way for some time. Over and over I asked myself what went wrong, what I had missed. The shouts and beeping and clinking seemed far away as I remembered

how promising it all had seemed. How quickly it had grown. And now, how bittersweet the attention!

The money tower had doubled in size in the short time I'd been sitting on the sidewalk. I stepped back onto Euston Road and into the still present crowd of men in suits, still tossing money, now more slowly, clearly tired, and occasionally stopping, reluctantly, to rest their arms before starting up again. I walked up to a corner of the mountain, made sure no one was looking, stooped down, and picked up the first ten cent coin I saw.

As I walked away from the rabble, away from Euston and onto Marylebone Road, the sound of panicked shouting rose into the air. People around me, mouths agape, stopped and pointed down the road behind me, in the direction from which I'd come. When I turned to look, a rumbling had joined the shouts. There, in the distance, the giant tower of money was starting to fall through. It sank slowly into the invisible horizon line, like a ship struck upon a rocky shore, and notes blowing in the wind broke free, dancing around like tiny, graceless seagulls. A terrible sound in the distance, the despair of witnessing fortunes lost, grew louder with every inch of the tower's descent. Eventually I could see it no more, and for miles and miles and days and weeks the despair was the only sound to be heard. Grown men emptied their hearts in the pubs and streets, crawled into the spaces between respectable homes and the shadows of heated, windy metro stations, knowing full well how properly to attend to their shame. I saw no woman cry, but neither did any smile. The spring ended,

skipped past summer into fall, and tripped across gnarled spirits into winter. The children knew nothing, and built their snowmen alone in the park.

None of the money was ever recovered. Some speculate that it coagulated into giant balls of paper and metal in the sewers, rolling around with the filth beneath the city. The idealistic among us believe that it somehow sank to the center of the earth, incinerated in an old, angry blaze that had no idea of its value. Others think that it found its way to the ocean and now lies on the sea floor like sunken treasure. That is what I believe, and I came to believe it one summer after things had quieted down. I was out on the Channel with my new boat, fishing for cod, and I was about to settle into my chair when I felt a light pull on the line. I reeled it in slowly, thinking a small catch had taken hold. I readied my scissors close by, and sure enough the thing that broke the water's surface flashed white and slapped against the side of the boat. I brought it in, ready to cut the line at its mouth, when I saw that it wasn't a cod. A white t-shirt flapped in the wind before me, the faded image of a red heart still visible on its threads.

Gravity and Levity

It was shortly after taking the doctor's recommended dosage of Military Prototype GL#325, which was the codename appended to a Pentagon research file with the title: Test Serum for Human Eyesight as United States Military Observation Satellite, that Scott Norwood began to feel a strange dislocation from his present self. This was not, of course, what the doctor had called it when he gave it to Scott, electing instead to tell him it was cough medicine. When Scott looked into the mirror that morning, a mere eight hours after ingesting the syrup, what he saw was not the image of his bearded self looking back at him, but a profile of his half-naked self looking at the mirror. This dislocated viewpoint confused and frightened Scott, but at the exact moment these feelings were triggered, the drug activated its second side-effect and suppressed his emotions. The trajectory of realization and protest that was just about to guide him towards angry panic subsided instead into peaceful, obedient acceptance. A string of drool unspooled down his chin from the slackened corner of his mouth. The strange sight of his own sight was strange to him no longer.

Allow me to digress for a moment. You may be tempted to think that Scott, after becoming a third person spectator of his own life, is in fact the one narrating this story to you right now, but let me assure you that you couldn't be further from the truth. Though the two of us are disembodied, that is where our similarities end. I am the only one of us, currently, with enough skill to dictate the story from the universe we, Scott and I, inhabit, to the one you inhabit on the other side of the paper. It's a little sad that Scott can't have the honor of telling

you himself what happened after ‘making the jump,’ as we like to call it, but in the interest of your time and our patience, we decided it would be best to help him out as best we could. Hopefully he’ll learn something by watching me do it.

After the tranquilizing effect of the medicine kicked in, Scott started to examine what was left of his tattered emotional system. Gone were the feelings capable of intensification. The standard emotions, which when riled into their agitated states got things done in the tangible world, fought wars and made love, for better or worse, were no longer accessible by the usual means. Scott needed no external stimulation to prove this to himself, because he could sense from within, with the cool, inward gaze afforded by his newfound dispassion, that this was the case. The motivation to do the clearly sensible thing for that moment, like for example, angrily calling his doctor and demanding to know what crazy drug he’d been slipped under the pretence of professional, loving care, simply could not be summoned, no matter how logical or right it seemed. The same lack of desire extended to even the simple tasks with which he could busy himself at the sink basin, such as splashing cold water onto his face or brushing his teeth. The desire to take care of himself was the first casualty of the drug.

The first exception to this, Scott determined in short time, was the need to shit. His organs and bodily functions, minus the odd condition of his dislocated sight, didn’t seem to be affected in any way by the medicine. Thus did the kale and seafood platter served to him the night before march onward in the night through his digestive system, much like it would have any other night, arriving at the present moment to that special time when it must find release and make this

need known through Morse code fire signals of pain in the belly and colon. This bodily pain shocked Scott towards finding the toilet.

Now, at this point, it may have seemed like a simple matter of turning around, dropping his shorts, and releasing the kale and seafood fury into the toilet right next to him, experiencing only momentary pain before the welcome, sweet relief. Unfortunately, as we've already seen, Scott's perspective in the world had shifted drastically, and this new perspective, a mere drug induced curiosity just moments before, now turned into an obstacle of potentially horrifying consequence. When Scott's sight had been normal, maneuvering to the toilet from the sink was a simple matter of turning right about ninety degrees and taking a few steps backward. Now, however, with his sight removed from his eyes to an uncertain spot about three feet to the immediate left of his head, Scott's disoriented muscle memory forced a right turn that went too far. His foot caught against the base of the bathtub, toppling him to the bathroom floor. On the way down he grazed his head against basin of the sink, riveting pain into his forehead, and this pain distracted him from his bowels long enough to unleash the roiling kale and seafood excrement from its prison. By the time he could clench again, it was already too late.

Let's get away from Scott for a second so I can tell you a little bit about myself. I, like many of us on the other side, enjoy watching new converts suffer the growing pains. It's the only entertainment we really have anymore. Don't get the wrong idea, though. We never get tired of it. It never fails to make us laugh, because nothing is as pleasurable as watching a primordial version of yourself

stumble over its new and bewildering circumstances. We'd be lying if we said it didn't hurt a little too, being reminded of everything we once had. But who knows if what we remember isn't just some twisted version of the story Scott is telling us now. He's the newest one of us, so he remembers his old life best of all. He wants his story to reach earth, so hopefully this story finds its way to paper. Sending the words through the paper is the only chance for Scott, or any of us who want to send a message. Sometimes the words don't reach humans. We are more experienced than Scott, but it is difficult. Sometimes our messages reach people who can't use words. Sometimes they reach plants and animals, or miss the earth completely and go to different planets. Sometimes they arrive in garbled, mixed up pieces, with words missing and everything in a tangle. We have no idea what happens once we've sent out the words into space, or how they reach the planet. We can only see them once they've been put to paper, if we're lucky. We imagine it must be very rare, a matter of luck, for them to get to someone who can actually put them on paper in a way that human beings can understand. We don't really see a point in trying anymore. Scott is new though, so we've decided to humor him.

Anyway, by that point, once Scott had allowed the immediate problem of the pressure in his colon to solve itself, he started to feel pretty good, relatively speaking, about lying on the floor in his own shit. He felt no humiliation, no sense of shame. Now curiosity was his only motivation. He took that moment of immobility, lying prone on the floor, to simply look through and try to understand the new vantage point his sight had been forced into.

He was looking down at himself. His vision was raised above the ground high enough that he could see the full length of his body. He wondered if his eyeballs were no longer in their sockets, but this wasn't the case. Both his eyes were still there, he observed, and they both looked straight ahead. This was useful. Straight ahead, once a viewpoint that captured space and images immediately *in front* of Scott's upright body, was now a viewpoint that looked *at* the left side of his body in profile. This understanding probably should have made him upset, but then the drug kicked in again and anger and confusion became a theoretical concept.

So Scott experimented. He pointed his vision downward, taking in the growing lump of shit beginning to dribble on the floor down the backside of his underwear. He continued down the length of his body to his feet. Then he brought it back up to the left side of his face. As he made this north-south movement, he noticed his eyeballs moving in concert, rolling up and down within their sockets.

The shit smell started to waft under his nose, so that still worked properly. He stuck out his tongue. He wiggled his fingers. He watched himself make all of these little movements from the point above his body. Finally, he reached his arm out and tried to place a hand on top of the sink basin. At first he couldn't do it. He kept twisting his arm and hand at the last moment, jamming his fingers against the cupboard door beneath the sink. He felt the pain from doing this. He tried again, slowly this time. After some difficulty, he finally managed to grab the top of the sink. He lifted himself up, pushing himself up off the ground, slowly, to

avoid hitting his head against the sink basin. As he stood up, the shit sagged his underwear down.

He held onto the basin for support, and tried to look into the mirror. All he did was strain his eyes trying to turn them to look where the mirror was, and even then, it didn't show his reflection. He turned his body left about a quarter of a circle, and this revolved his sight around. He tried turning just his head, and his sight revolved again. He brought it back, and from there he could see the right half of his body in the mirror's reflection, to go along with the left side which was now permanently fixed in front of him.

"Huh," he said. He tried to raise his hand, but it shot up at a strange angle, slapping the bathroom mirror. He quickly let it fall back down to his side. He took a deep breath, exhaled, and shut his eyes. Did his eyelids close? He didn't know because he couldn't see them. He tried to raise his arm again, this time just letting his muscle memory remind him what it felt like to raise his arm straight in front. He brought it to the level of his head, and pointed out a finger. He opened his eyes, and there in front of him was Scott Norwood, pointing out his arm and finger straight ahead, looking like a half-naked, saluting Nazi in shit stained underwear.

Slowly, and still with difficulty (though I have to admit, at the risk of inflating his ego, that he figured things out a lot faster than the rest of us ever did), he went about the task of removing his underwear, throwing them in the trash, and getting into the shower. He had to turn his body again to see the knobs, and reaching his hands up to turn them presented its own difficulties, but he finally

managed it. He was beginning to get used to the notion of trusting the muscle movements he could still feel, and not the directions in which he saw his limbs moving. Walking was another matter. He had to take shuffling baby steps, sliding across the bathroom tile an inch at a time, in order to get in front of the tub, and he leaned heavily on the walls around him on the way there. He used the small length of the tub to practice moving backwards and forwards. He watched himself do this, smudged and fuzzy behind the steamed up shower curtain.

When he was finished washing, he stepped out of the shower a little faster, a little more relaxed. It was cold in the apartment, so he made his way to his room and put on clothes. He contemplated going to work. Work wasn't very fun. The people there were all old and were usually mean to him in one way or another. He wished he didn't have to go, but he figured he would need the money for food, and getting fired would lose him his girlfriend, Rachel, and she was the only person he could have sex with. He dimly calculated these things while watching himself take the cheerios out of the cupboard.

Yes, I must go to work, he thought, as he carefully poured the cereal into his bowl. Even though I'm like this now, the world isn't friendly to people who don't have jobs. I've got to fight through it. That's when he poked himself in the eye with a spoonful of milk and cheerios, scattering them to the floor, because he wasn't paying attention. He reached up to rub his eye, and almost poked it again. Should he call his girlfriend and tell her what happened? Would she believe him? Probably not, he thought, and that was all the consideration he needed to no longer think about it.

So he went to work. He opted not to drive his own car, being unsure of how a police officer or other drivers might react to him driving while his head was turned away from the road. I'll have to sell it, he thought, as he hailed a cab.

In the office it was difficult to get any work done. He could only look at his computer screen in the very short intervals that he could rotate his head to the left. He had to turn his head back to face the computer if anyone started staring. No one noticed that his fingers stopped typing when he did this.

"Is that some kind of new workout?" a co-worker asked when he passed him on the way to the break room.

"Um...yeah, kind of," Scott said. He immediately turned his head back to facing the computer, swinging his sight along with it. With each turn of his head he caught sight of the objects on his desk. Each of them recalled, for a moment, a piece of himself from the porridge of his mind, things more personal than the basic functions he'd been reduced to, before they were smothered over, aborted before they could stretch into the full memories they once were. There was the stress ball in the corner of the cubicle that he'd gotten from his orientation training. There was an old grocery list from five days ago that he'd never thrown away, longer than he usually wrote them because he'd considered buying more ingredients to start cooking instead of eating out so much. There was last season's Yankees schedule. There was a picture of him and Rachel at the base of the statue of Liberty, one of them smiling, one of them holding each other, and one of them kissing.

About a half hour before closing his boss called him into his office.

“Hey, Norwood,” the boss said in a hushed, urgent voice, beckoning him inside with his index finger. Scott went in and sat down. Normally, the voice his boss was using at that moment would have terrified Scott, especially when, like now, he couldn’t see or read the facial expression behind it, but the medicine suppressed his emotions just as strongly as it did that morning, and he felt no fear, no anticipation or worry as his boss retook his chair behind the desk, out of sight, and began to speak in that same urgent, but no longer hushed voice.

“I got a complaint about you today,” he said.

Scott determined, in the nick of time, that an answer of some kind was expected. Suddenly the prospect of participating in a conversation seemed daunting. “Oh?” was his reply.

“One of our female employees, I won’t say who, said that you were staring at her in a strange way all throughout the day, and that it made her uncomfortable. Is that true?”

Scott wasn’t sure what to say. He couldn’t truthfully answer yes, because he hadn’t paid attention to where he was turning his head to the right throughout the day, so intent was he on trying to look at his computer screen to get some work done that he never thought to notice just where his eyes were pointing. Neither could he truthfully answer no, for the same reason. What if he *had* been “staring” at a woman in the office? The present situation seemed to answer that well enough. Scott’s boss mistook his silent contemplation for internal shame and dread.

“Look, Scott, I like you. You’re a good worker, and I like having you in the office. But we’re all a team, and teammates have to stick together. We have to respect each other. Otherwise you end up in my office and we have to have a dumb conversation that neither of us wants to have. You get me?”

Scott did in fact get his boss. He nodded his head.

“That’s great to hear.” His boss sounded relieved and even exhaled a little sigh. Scott could almost hear the grin beaming across the desk. He continued, in the same hushed tone from before. “And honestly, between you and me, there really isn’t much to look at around here. It isn’t worth it, you know? Stick to your girlfriend. I know I would.” He started laughing, and after a few seconds Scott started laughing too, because imitating his boss’ laughter seemed like the best response. He wondered if he should shake his boss’ hand too, but before he could attempt it the sound of his boss standing up and getting out of from behind the desk reached his ears. Scott got up and, occasionally, quickly glancing to the side in order to swing his sight to where he could see what was in front of him, only just enough so that his boss wouldn’t notice, he followed his boss out of the office and onto the street.

There he hailed another cab, and he told the driver to take him to Rachel’s house. This was habitual. She lived closer to his work than he did, and because of this, ever since they’d started dating, he’d always gone to her place on the weekends. Once again, he felt no anticipation for what might happen there, obeying only the imposing, unstoppable force of the ritual.

I'm getting a little tired, so let me take a break. It's a little boring to recount all of this, knowing as well as I do, as we all do, just how similarly we clung, like Scott did, to our rituals and habits, despite our doing so unconsciously. None of us has any idea how our behavior survived the bland mush that our emotions became after taking the syrup. Perhaps it was instinct, some survival mechanism belonging to the body, not the mind, which preserved these things for us and preserved us, at least for a little while, in the old world. We don't know our rituals anymore. Most of us have forgotten them all, or the younger among us only remember a few. We don't need them here, though, because we don't have a use for them. They're impractical, overly difficult activities that we couldn't engage in even if we wanted to. We're used to it by now.

This made Scott's excursion to his girlfriend's house especially amusing. We knew before he even got there what was going to happen, and the thought of it tickled us to no end. We would have been disappointed, actually, if it didn't go exactly as we foresaw it.

When Scott got out of the cab, rang his girlfriend's apartment, and went up, all while keeping his head swiveled, he wondered, like he had earlier, whether he should tell his girlfriend about what happened to his sight. Her name was Rebecca. She was a middle school teacher, and they'd been dating for three years. At the best times under normal circumstances, she understood him better than anyone else in the world; a friend as well as a lover with the same bad taste in music, a bland, basic, and utterly sociable appreciation for modern art, and a love for reading novels about strapping English butlers and petite, mousy, but

pretty English maids working and falling in love in nineteenth century English mansions. Scott didn't share this last pursuit, and in the past he often teased her for it, but he had made an effort to understand it, not out of any sense of duty, but because she liked it, and he wanted to know about this thing that she liked. In turn, she made an effort to watch and understand baseball, which was Scott's one passion in life despite him not following a particular team or players. Scott was more interested in the statistical side of it, and he would go to great lengths to try and explain the different graphs and charts that would appear on the screen to Rebecca, who would pay more attention to the ball and the score, or would occasionally proclaim a player to be handsome when she wanted to make Scott prickle with jealousy.

All of this was gone for Scott now, erased along with his old perspective on life. Now the only concerns tumbling within his flattened, dispassionate mind were whether to tell Rebecca about his condition, and also to procure sex for the evening. Sexual pleasure was one of the bodily needs left over in him, like eating and shitting, that Scott still felt an impulse to do. He could attach no special feeling to it, no significance beyond a simple, physical desire to do it with this woman at the forefront of his memory. It occurred to him, suddenly, as he stood before the door of her apartment, that telling her about his sight and having sex were mutually exclusive prospects. He made a simple calculation, weighing in his mind his desire for sex against the option of telling her, and he made a decision.

The door to her apartment opened. He turned his head away, and pretended to be looking away from the door, looking at some random thing down the hallway while waiting, and this second of looking gave him a chance to see her. There she stood in the doorway, wearing her slippers and pajamas. Her hair was tied up in a frazzled pony tail, and she smiled at him.

“Hey, you,” she said sweetly. He stepped into the apartment, and it dawned on him that he would have to kiss her. The mechanics of this became apparent, and they seemed difficult. He would need to keep his eyes open, first of all, but even worse, he would have to fly in blind to make it look natural. He briefly considered turning his head and letting her kiss him on the cheek, pressing his bearded face against her lips, but this seemed like it would be just as awkward and even more questionable. He could sense her standing there, waiting for him to walk in and do this thing that he’d always done. Each elapsed second of indecision added to the image of hesitation he was projecting.

An idea occurred to him. He stepped forward, unable to see her, clapped her sides with both hands, pulled her towards him, and nearly gave her a concussion from smacking their faces together. This allowed him to find her lips from feeling them, and once he had a better approximation of where they were, he pressed his own against them. The angle was off, however, and he only got a corner of her mouth, so he quickly adjusted, slobbering across her face like a dog licking its master. Rebecca was taken aback by this show of force, but quickly gave as good as she got, wrapping her arms around him and pressing herself against his embrace.

“Wow,” she said when they separated to breathe. “Long day at work?” Her face was close enough to his now that he could see her profile as well as his, and the look on her face, from this angle, aroused his curiosity. There was something in it he couldn’t name, some excitement, some tiny speck of fear beneath her smile, like the smile on a person’s face after they’ve been scared by something silly like a horror movie or a prop in a haunted house, something expected and unexpected at the same time, fueling a strange, mysterious mix of inner, defensive strength and a desire for vulnerability. They went to her bedroom, her leading the way by hand so he trailed behind, leaving him free to turn his head and swivel his sight to face forward and watch her excitedly bounce across the apartment.

Scott’s telling me to skip over the next part now, so I’ll just say that the lights went off pretty quickly in that room. The cover of darkness allows for all kinds of strange, unorthodox movements, which is especially helpful when all you have is your muscle memory to help you achieve certain physical positions and conditions. Blindness fosters a wonderful, mutual sympathy when it is shared.

The next morning a tired, satisfied Scott got up from the bed and made his way, bleary eyed, to the bathroom. Rebecca was still asleep, so he turned his head to make the trip easier. As he walked to the bathroom he wondered whether he would be able to continue living like this, whether he could find a way to exist in profile when the world was designed for people who saw things directly in front of them. He was only just noticing it, but turning his neck around all the time was starting to make him very sore, and muscle strain was setting in. He

couldn't watch baseball games on TV, couldn't read magazines or work his job easily. He couldn't even have sex with his girlfriend with the lights on.

As he considered these things, equivocal about finding a solution to problems that seemed far enough away from his present satisfaction, he positioned himself in front of the bathroom mirror, and something seemed different. He didn't know what it was at first. It took him a moment to realize, as it did for all of us on the second day, but when he did, he reacted the same way we all did.

"Huh," Scott said. The three feet of distance that his sight had moved away from his head was now doubled to six. Even when he realized this he couldn't react in terror. The suppression of emotions had doubled in intensity as well, to the point where he couldn't even remember feeling desire. No longer could his mind communicate memories or images of need to his body. He couldn't react instinctually, unable even to summon the desire to move the four feet or so to urinate in the toilet. This proved itself when he looked down the side of his body and saw a giant yellow stain blooming on the front side of his underwear, pooling and seeping through the fabric and running down the inside of his leg. In the other room, Rebecca was stirring awake, just noticing that her boyfriend was missing and that the bathroom door was slightly ajar, and she wondered what she should make for breakfast.

A lot of time has passed since then, and Scott's here with us now. I could tell you about how with each passing day Scott's sight moved a little bit further from his body, how his life grew exponentially more difficult, and he cared less

and less about himself until he didn't have a self to care about anymore, and all he had were memories to be replayed for eternity against the empty, movie-screen black of wherever we are. I could tell you how his body wasted away in the grave they gave to him, and his sight remained fixed in line above it, constantly moving over the green hills and treetops into the sky above the earth, and then into space, past the planets of your galaxy, finally to rest here with us, but all of that would take too long, and isn't nearly as interesting as the memories of what he left behind. It's the same for all of us, and we hope, perhaps misguidedly so, that the stories we piece together will float through space back to your galaxy, past the planets to land on earth where, if such a thing as mercy exists, someone will sense them and find a way to give us material presence, reborn as word or song, and maybe, if we're especially lucky, those words or songs will get to those who knew us, in the middle of lives they lead without us, and somehow they'll think of us, remember us and feel sad, for reasons they can't quite explain.