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Santa Cruz

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of the Master of Fine Arts
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-To those whom I love.

You know who you are.

Wind Chimes

There's a difference between loneliness and feeling alone. When I go for walks I try and sort out which I'm feeling. This last jaunt in particular had me sway from one to the other.

I had told my past life I wasn't going anywhere near it. Bye old friends. Bye old family. Goodbye house, goodbye town, goodbye bad memories. I didn't need them anymore. I was on my own and it felt good. At least, I hoped it would. I just couldn't shake these feelings. Did I want to be alone, or could I just not find anyone?

Taking some random path from my one bedroom apartment, I was looking to strike out, let my feet guide me I guess. I wound this way and that, trying to avoid the larger streets, keeping to the zig zag of suburban back alleys and detours.

Whenever I bumped into a face on the sidewalk, a woman pushing her baby, kids running around with a football, a grounds crew unloading a truck of landscaping equipment, I'd lend a smiling face. They'd all smile back, but nothing came of it. I felt like a leper. They're only doing it to be polite.

My head would go limp after I passed them, my neck unwilling to support this depression. But on I kept, not knowing how far I needed to go before the answers came, whether I liked them or not. I wasn't even sure what answers I needed or was likely to hear from myself. An epiphany, realization, something to show that it's ok if you want to be alone, but if you're lonely let's fix that.

At a certain point, I came to a dead end road. I had been walking and walking, not really looking where I was going. When I was faced with no exit 'cept the way I came I thought it would be better to explore the new, rather than repeat the old. A small trail, maybe man-made, maybe animal, cut through the clovers, a dried muddy brown, pushing into the growth. That was

good enough for me, to leave civilization for a while

Soon I was deep in this forrest, the one that bordered the back of town. It was filled with redwoods, moss, ferns, pine trees. Like something out of a prehistoric picture. But there were no dinosaurs, giant insects, or indescribable creatures, simply the chirp of a few dull birds, and some skittering of squirrels and chipmunks.

The path grew considerably wider under these massive tree's. Their roots climbed out of the ground, tangled, enormous, creating berms and hollows where others had nestled, perhaps had a picnic under the great shade. It stretched on forever as there wasn't an end in sight, as if this forest had swallowed me. The feeling was oddly comfortable.

I stalled out for just a minute, met at a three way fork in the road. I deliberated over what I viewed was the best option. As if I could tell. One went right, and in the distance it looked like there was an old wooden fence post surrounding a large meadow. I could hear horse's whinnies, but felt no attraction to their future company. The center path went on for a quite while before losing itself in the trees. There was no light, and I saw no reason to pursue it.

The third however, to my left, a path that veered up over a hillside, a steep climb, yielded some comfort. A babbling brook, a small creek, the trickle of water, something lay beyond. My ears dragged my feet that way without consent, their curiosity leading us now.

I was astonished at how hilly the landscape had become. Sure there were small mountains nearby, and hills shouldn't be completely out of the ordinary, it just felt distant. I began to wonder, how far I had come. But before I could even answer myself, at the base of the next hill over there it was. I saw it, diving straight into the ground, no signs of traversing between the hills and out of sight, but simply burying itself in the dirt was the creek. I followed the wet rocky

chute up until it plateaued, no beginning in sight, the end right at my feet.

The water was slow enough, the ground muddy, but it was as if the creek died, just gave up and decided that place would be as good as any. I was told at some point that the land was dotted with caves here and there. Maybe there was one below me, this creek deciding to go exploring itself, rather than become rain water in the next life.

So I dillydallied, briskly hiking, tracking it back up to the plateau beyond. When things flattened out and I could take a deep breath, taking long pulls of air, I was surprised at what revealed itself. The creek continued up beyond what I could make out, but lying in front of me was a small, well rounded pool.

There were oranges placed here and there, small pebbles and smooth rocks grouped together, some stacked up high. The place glowed. There was an energy, a vibrancy to it all. It looked so peaceful. I decided to sit a while, close my eyes, take in the sounds and of my discovery. I dragged a stick through the pond and I could of sworn I saw a goldfish or two down near the murky green bottom. Maybe they were too afraid of this stranger putting foreign objects into their home. I decided to wait and watch. Maybe they would come out and greet me.

But as I stared past my reflection, down into the cool water, a rough, perverted, malfunctioning sound came about. A breeze through the trees swayed the branches, to and fro, and there was a metal clinking, that rung in the air, uncomfortable and disquieting. I looked about and found wind chimes.

I don't know why I decided to but I reached out, delicately removing them from the branch they had been suspended on and sat down with them in my lap. The metal tubes were all tied together, their strings twisted this way and that, knotted, looped. From some new found

patience I began to work it all free. Reversing what the wind had caused, cross-legged, with tied up wind chimes squealing in my lap I soothed them, handled them, undid the annoyances and hang ups the world had caused.

More than one occasion had me grow frustrated, watching frayed strings vibrate with displeasure as rough hands endangered them. But there was something calming, reassuring in this work. It felt like a very long time before any drastic progress was made. One by one the metal freed itself, dangling with joy, creating a soft and pleasurable stir. I took my work and held it up, the noise music to my ears.

I found a sturdy branch, overlooking the pool as before, and there it rested, drifting and cooing. There was a bright smile on my face, the area now picturesque and serene. What a spot to come to I wondered. And for whatever reason, this idea that it was magic came to my head. This is a place where, fairies, or genies, or special goldfish, mother nature lives and visits. My work had restored balance, put things right. This was how wishes were granted.

I knelt down surveying the scene and whispered quietly, "I wish I had a friend. Someone to talk to."

And there was a breeze through the trees, a great burst of wind, gusting all around. I was uplifted at this movement, the chimes now merrily cheering overhead. I was so satisfied, I began to walk back the direction I came. Down the hill, back to the base where the creek disappeared, all to the chimes happily applauding.

Another gust came rifling through, and with it there was a metal clank and crash. I spun around, peering up the hill, looking to the tree above the pool, only to find the wind chimes had fallen.

“Shit. So much for that.”

Crashing

It didn't matter where we were driving, he had asked, so I said yes. It had been a while since I could remember going outside and breathing. I don't breathe enough.

His convertible pulled up with a screech, left it running, but slammed on the parking brake. With a lurch Maddy popped out of the seat and yelled, "How's it goin'? Where are you off to?"

He had caught me, as he usually does, on the cusp of the front door, standing on my welcome home mat. "Hey stranger. I'm doin' good. I was just about to go do some laundry down the block. What are you up to?"

"Let's go for a ride," he replied without giving an answer.

Maddy always had great timing like that, stopping people from doing something they needed to do, had planned on doing, but knew hanging with him would be so much better. It's cost me a grade a few times, but usually it was worth it. The type of guy who could leave your life for weeks on end, and just as you began to think he had moved to Singapore, or began a solo backpacking trip across country, whatever his crazy world led him to do, there he'd be, at your door step, as if he'd never left, as if you had hung out every day for years.

"Alright," I grinned, shaking my head, "Hang on." I tossed my duffel bag behind the front door and gave it a slam. I fumbled with the lock and keys.

"Oh c'mon now." The engine was still running. "No one is going to come in and steal your dirty clothes."

“Hey you never know.” He was right, but that didn't stop the habit from happening.

I closed my eyes for a time, listening to the sounds of the world rush by in a heap of wind, moving with the turns as the car gained speed until I opened them and there we were moving down the scenic highway, escaping the dull foggy town, driving down the coast.

It was a drive south I had taken by myself plenty of times, but rarely could I sit back and enjoy the passing view of the rough ocean on shore, the bluffs and cliffs jutting into a smoother blue. This is where the world made sense, when I couldn't tell what was moving, me, or the world underneath me.

As I sat there, curled in the passenger seat, Maddy put his hand out the window and I watched as he made a playful sharks fin cutting through the wind, a dolphin jumping and diving, then a kite that caught and took his hand away. I smiled at this.

He brought his left hand back in the car, slack on the wheel, and exchanged it with the right, now resting on the shifter. The one that had just been outside the car, out in the world, had two words scribbled on the palm before the steering wheel blocked it. He was always writing things on his hand, notes, thoughts, words, stuff to remember, lists of books.

This time I wasn't too sure what was meant by the words, *Death*, and *Suicide* under it. I wasn't scared by these words. I knew how much he loved himself. I just wondered how, or why they had gotten there.

I looked out the car now closer to shore, driving along a manmade rocky shore meant to protect the highway. This thin stretch of rocks, kept the rough and choppy sea at bay. But

every so often an irritated wave or white foam would crest and explode into the wind, as if trying to reach the car and swallow us whole. I turned the words over in my mouth, *Death, Suicide, Death, Suicide*.

“What's on your hand this time,” I coolly and casually asked, cocking my head in the direction, but not making eye contact with the inky blurred letters, peeping between palm and steering wheel.

He turned to me, his whole torso, taking his eyes off the road. I wasn't alarmed, but his attention to the topic at hand proved to be more important than the road. He was acting cooler than me, acknowledging what he was doing, almost smiling. With an arrogance and recklessness that I was oddly ok with, he raised the wrong hand and said, “What, this hand?” before turning his attention back to the curved drive ahead.

We both hid our true thoughts behind smiles, an unspoken game. The hand now rested in his lap, palm up, almost tempting me, as if to warn me, *This could just be a nice drive. Do you want to have this conversation? Do you really want to talk about this?*

I wasn't worried. I didn't hesitate. “Oh c'mon man, don't play dumb. You know what I mean.”

He checked his hand, reading the words to himself, then said aloud, “Death or Suicide?”

“Both of them.”

Of course he knew what I wanted to hear and instead started with the less threatening idea of death. How comforting of him.

“Well,” he started slowly, methodically, “The other night I couldn't get to sleep. It wasn't

the regular tossing and turning in bed, something else. It was like I had too much coffee, energetic, I felt almost sick so wide awake. It was strange. I shifted in bed, turned on music, tried to read a little, but by the time I read 4 AM I thought it was time to give up. So you know what I did?”

I softly shook my head no.

“I took a walk,” he said, looking at the stretch of coastal highway with a sweet smile. I don't know why I had expected some brilliant answer, excited, enamored, with the thought of some unpredictable solution. But a walk seemed like the only answer.

“Ha, ok yeah,” I coaxed him on.

“Well I went down to the beach and there was this eerie feel to the night. It was so foggy out. There was this orange glow that hovered in the sky. All the lights in town were picked up and smeared throughout the haze. You expect the night to be dark, but I looked up and if it weren't so wet in the air I could have sworn the world was on fire.

“So I'm on the beach, going from the north side to the south and – oh,” he cut himself off, a mental lapse he seemed embarrassed to admit. “I forgot to mention this, now don't get mad.” His childish grin made the words seem harmless, but I expected a bigger reveal. “I brought a little thing of whisky with me.”

I laughed at him, “Why would I be mad at you? Nothing too wrong with that I guess.”

“I don't know,” Maddy gestured, “Out at night, four in the morning, walking along the beach with a thing of whisky, doesn't exactly project nice thoughts does it? The picture there isn't the prettiest. Romantic, edgy, dark, sure, but not positive. Anyways, I'm sipping on what I

have, just enough to keep me warm, listening to the waves crash like dynamite. Louder than I've ever heard before, one after the other, boom all the way down the beach.” He took one arm and raised it in the air, bringing it down on the wheel. “Another and another, boom! I followed them, the cracking of the waves all the way down to the jetty and lighthouse.

“I decided to walk out, find a nice spot to nestle in at the rocks and listen. I wanted to watch the waves come in and crash at me. I wanted to tease them, see them come and uselessly hit against the concrete before dispersing around the lighthouse. So I get to the thin strip of jetty, and I'm nearly at the end, walking along the little path, the lighthouse is just in front of me, when all of a sudden, it became a terrible idea.”

“Why? What happened?” I shifted my body towards his, a large gust of wind streaming into my face until I slouched down into the seat. He only paused, relishing the attention I was giving him, holding it over me.

“Well ...the only reason I hadn't figured it out sooner was because I was walking in between wave sets, so nothing had keyed me in. But the ocean had grown very quiet, and just as I'm near the end, another set hits. Big one.”

I could feel my eyes grow wide. “It was high tide. You idiot!” I wasn't so much angry, as just annoyed to hear him say this with a wide smile on his face. “You know how people get swept over. Oh, and you with your stupid whisky!”

Maddy was laughing, “I know, I know. I told you not to get mad. See how bleak it got. In any case, I'm out there on the end, now with an empty bottle of whisky zipped in my jacket, and that dynamite just kept crashing. One hit after the other, two, three, four. I was dazed after the

first one. Knocked me down to the ground immediately. It was like when you see war movies and a grenade has just gone off. Nothing made sense in that moment right after.

“I was soaked. I mean the wettest thing you ever saw. Shivering, icy cold water running down my body and clothes. But I got up, maybe a little dizzy from the alcohol, definitely from the waves hitting me, and started briskly walking back to the beach. The path was so slippery, if I took off running I was going to eat it. So there I am, getting pounded, water hitting the rocks, crashing over me, pushing me side to side, a drenched little rag doll, and I finally make it back to the beach. I escaped the concrete strip, and fell, tripping into the sand. Looking back I watched as the last wave swallowed the path up, and then the set ended. That was it. Back to normal.”

It was quiet for a few seconds in the car. I digested this harrowing tale, trying to figure how much Maddy had embellished. For the most part I believed it to be true, my blood pumping, his grin unwavering.

“So that was death then,” I reiterated.

“That was death. Near death anyways. It didn't come to pass.”

I slapped at his arm, “You are so lucky to be alive right now. If you had been swept in, and they found your body, if, if they found your body, with your damn whisky bottle, you'd be chalked up to just another poor idiot from town who drank his life away.”

“I know. I know.” Was all he said back, a contemplative look now on his face, the smile fading. I guess he knew the more serious repercussions of his story after all. “It was my first near death experience, and I can't stop thinking about it. All these things came into play, timing, decision-making, understanding, mood. I could be dead and there could be this big deal made

about it, on the news, in the papers, with friends and family, obsessing over my thoughts and actions, and yet it is one of those wrong time, wrong place scenario's. Except, nothing was wrong about it. It all made sense.”

We sat there in silence again, absorbing what was said, going back through the conversation. I didn't have anything to add. Neither did he. He sat there contemplating it all, satisfied with the thought until he turned and looked at me. There was a reassuring energy in his hazel brown eyes. It was just a story, that's all it was.

The sky was slanted gray in the distance. A dark, hard rain was visibly dumping, and I without a jacket, a duffel bag of dirty laundry in the hallway back home. Maddy noticed the storm too, gazing further in front of the road. Our eyes met again, and I was satisfied by that reassuring fire. *Don't worry.*

It was the same look I had seen him give on more than one occasion. And I had seen every single person who noticed it, find it comforting too. There was a wildness there yes, but the freedom of the world in those eyes, ready to take on anything, that was something that existed in too few. And with the storm up ahead, that fire burned. Oh did it burn.

If I didn't know better I would have thought Maddy knew about the rain, knew about the storm somewhere out there, and was itching, chasing, to get right in the middle of it. Maybe after his near death experience, he wanted to yell at a storm while cutting right through it. A taunt, a dare, another experience. But he wasn't the type of guy to plan, to look things up. The chance to

yell and scream, charge wild into a storm was one thing, spontaneity and curiosity, that was another. In my mind, that's what he lived for, that's what he wanted most.

It was moments like this, where you could see excitement churning, what made Maddy the friend we all clung to. Sure, people get caught in storms, but who in their right mind would chase down a storm, in there convertible, with the top down, a friend in the passenger seat? Who would hope for, imagine, dream of driving into a storm simply because it was an experience he had never had? He would. And that's why I loved him, and that's why he loved himself.

Putting the top up was never an option, I didn't suggest it either. Maddy didn't speed up, nor did he try and change course or direction. He took my silence as acceptance, the rain was coming, but you trust that fire in his eyes. It wasn't a feeling of right or wrong, simply a feeling you wanted to share.

Still coasting down the highway at 65mph or so, I searched out into the distance along the ocean, looking for an edge, the end to the massive clouds that hovered ominously. I didn't find one. The further out to sea I looked the more I saw the ocean ushering these dark billowing masses.

I interrupted our silence, “And Suicide?” Nervously I shifted, unsure what to expect from this topic. “What made you write that down on your hand? Don't tell me you don't love yourself anymore.”

I tried to smile as if it were a poor attempt at a joke, but the pause and silence between us lasted longer. Was he stuck, trying to formulate the best response to such a touchy topic? I wanted him to know that it was ok, but I remained patient.

He took a deep breath and began, “You know when you're driving down Highway 17, or even here along the coast, forty, fifty, sixty miles an hour on these windy roads.”

“Yeah,” Not so much a question, but an usher to continue.

“Well, there are cars whirring by in both directions, going fast, twisting and turning, with headlights growing until they are staring you down almost blind. There is an effect that takes place. I figure most people feel it, but choose to ignore it, or rather, don't want to talk about it. But more and more I find the feeling creep in the back of my head.”

I stared out his side of the car, noticing the blurs that passed by in the opposite direction, before turning back to the raging sea. I'm still listening. He knows.

“Well that same night, it must have been what 5:00, 5:30 in the morning by the time I got home. I was cold, wet, sandy, and I was so awake still, so alive, I didn't want to go back to my room. I wasn't ready to. So I hopped in the convertible, maybe you can see the sand still, and went for a drive.”

I peered down onto the seats and the floor, moving my shoes lightly, hearing the crunch and grumble of sand underneath them. “I guess I just figured you were never one to clean your car.”

“Ha, right you are.” He took his own hand and wiped the dashboard revealing dust. “Anyways, new light was just beginning to show, but the sun itself was still twenty minutes away. That orange haze of fog had disappeared, receded back out over the ocean. I came down this same stretch, the wind drying off my top half, the heater on full blast warming up my bottom, and, and, I thought . . . well a car had just driven by me in the other direction. And for

some reason I thought, the slightest movement of the wheel, just a touch to the left would calmly take this car into the other lane. One small motion could cause this destructive path. It would all be over. Just like that, in an instant. Dead.”

I didn't know what to say. I looked uncomfortably at the storm, unblinking.

“Don't get me wrong here,” he continued, “I'm not suicidal.”

I didn't think he was. But I guess you have to have that clarifying statement, or at least he felt it necessary.

“This isn't a matter of an unhappy life, looking for a way out. Nothing like that, far from it. You know me, I'm the happiest douche of all. I love myself. But to have that power and then simply use it without a second thought, just a tug at the wheel. The act and power of suicide.

“I'm not trying to harm anyone, I don't want to hurt anyone. If it was something that could only effect me, it would make it all the more tempting. It's the idea that causing so much carnage, pain, worry, distress, hatred, confusion, sadness, all of it. Such an array of powerful emotions, from one little tilt could create such a big reaction. Not even a reaction to death, but simply an unexpected question. I can imagine all the questions that would come up. Why would someone do this? How could this happen? How can we prevent it? Was he drunk? Texting? Was the car broken? Not paying attention? An accident? So many different excuses. All of them.”

Maddy was breathing a little heavier now. He was a little worked up but I wanted to hear what he had to say. I felt he was close to some break through, some idea of life I hadn't even considered. At least, not properly that is.

“No but it wouldn't be an accident. I'd mean for all of it to happen. My intentions would always be misunderstood. I make a decision and in an instant it's over already. What would possess any one to do such a thing so harmful to others? But that's it, that's the thing, it has nothing to do with harm. It's this almost beautiful and chilling fact that an action can happen whether we understand or agree with it.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” I whispered.

“Exactly!” he shouted, catching me off guard. “Curiosity. That's all it is. The thought, the process, the outcome. Haven't you ever had that little voice pop up in your head that says, sure, why not. Why not try it for once? No pain or pleasure, but possibility. Of course there are many reasons as to why we shouldn't do something, but why does that mean we can't? It's the experience. Where the only things stopping you are all the pain and hurt, the death of the situation. The finality. The ending. Morality and mortality have taken so much away from possibility.

I wasn't scared, and I knew he wasn't either, but I was surprised. His breathing was what had me wonder, was this just a thought, or something more that provoked him? Was he just testing the waters? Did those ocean waves that crashed upon him knock something loose?

“Mortality and morality,” he repeated in a soft tone. “That's the combination of life, that's what we're living by and for. And I don't think there is an escape from it.”

Maddy sat there and I could tell he was still fuming, processing. I didn't want to look at him, so my eyes burned into his hand, the letters I'm sure blurred with his sweat from gripping the steering wheel so hard. And ever so slightly, just a touch, the car drifted

a little to the left. I could feel the wheel running over the dividing lines, rumbling over the paint, another car fast approaching a few hundred yards away. I knew it wouldn't happen. He knew it too. Then the rain hit hard.

Stalking Stagnant

The night had ended like the last three before it, empty bottles off booze, smoldering now cold ashes of weed. Partygoers were asleep, passed out on the floor, couch, wherever they could find comfort, all intertwined and satisfied with empty dreams. But I lay alone, retreated to the solitude of my room, unable to rest. Sleepless for the third straight night.

The wall rested behind me as I leaned against it, perking my ears to any possible noises that came from beyond the door. A note of despair had entered as I exhausted the idea of why I couldn't fall asleep. Considering the mix of alcohol, marijuana, time of night, energy spent throughout the day, nothing yielded a reason. Was I stressed? Was I missing something? Nothing felt wrong, then again nothing felt right either I guess. *What was I doing with my life?* The thought persisted.

I made myself believe that I was thirsty, dehydrated, that's all. Satisfied that no one was stirring, I slinked into the hallway, wearing only my underwear. Creeping over bodies, steering clear of garbage on counter tops and tables I found myself at the sink where it was filled with broken glass and bottles.

“Just perfect,” I whispered into the night, almost hoping someone was awake to hear my grief. But of course, the room was quiet, and the sink became a chore for the morning in my mind. Cupping my hands I drank from them, wondering if I was only making the job harder, if glass was trickling down into the pipes.

The water was cool, cold, and as I took in large gulps that dripped from my chin and cheeks I felt refreshed, but not any more tired. The clock on the microwave ticked to the next

minute, now flashing 4:42AM. I flung cupped water, annoyed at what I now felt to be a waste.

Just as I turned off the faucet I looked out the kitchen window. There across the street a young woman stood under a streetlamp. The small glow kept the darkness at bay. She remained frozen. Was she on the phone? Was she waiting for a cab? A friend? Had she even been to the party, just now deciding to leave?

Some part of me was drawn to her. I wanted to step outside and ask if she was ok, if she needed some help perhaps. There was something familiar about her, but I couldn't place it. She wasn't making eye contact, or doing anything out of the ordinary, but simply standing there, looking at the sky from time to time, as if something were coming, or maybe leaving, watching it go. It was a weird moment, but finally I snapped back to the kitchen present, shaking my head and wandering back to bed. Sleep finally came, but it did not last for long.

“You're living in a fool's paradise.” Someone in my dream kept saying this, but there was no one around.

Back and forth I was out of my body watching myself, and at the same time within it, and everything felt wrong. Walking among the trees I was in the midst of a large redwood grove, not unlike the one just beyond my house. From time to time we'd hike there, smoke a joint, take in the smells of the soft loamy soil, but this forest although similar, produced an eerie feeling. There were no beautiful strands of sunlight, there were no stellar jays squawking. The place grew cold, desolate, as the tree's lost their detail, and the world became dark.

“Fool's paradise,” continued to echo, growing louder and louder. I was uncertain as to

whether or not I was chasing this sound, or trying to escape it. The whole world around me felt bleak, non-existent. Soon, my body slowed as if invisible hands were holding me back, rendering my actions inert. My muscles were tense, on the verge of spasming, but I could not move. My body began to harden, turn to stone, rigid and frozen. Time passed me by and moss grew over my limbs tingling, covering me. I yearned to scream, to run, but all I could do was blink from one view point to another, watching this happen to me, or experiencing it.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a shadowy figure came into view and pushed me over, my statuesque body, slowly, ever so delicately, falling to the earthy floor. I crashed, shattered. And with one last great yell of “FOOL'S PARADISE!” my eyes fluttered open, in the middle of long protracted breath, lying in bed.

My face had been buried into a pillow, aching with the pressure I was applying. I was in an odd twisted position where it felt as if all of me had fallen numb. I turned over so my body faced the ceiling, and I laid there in tight agony, moving my limbs until they regained feeling.

I had the distinct feeling that someone was in my room, but as my eyes darted around they did not respond to any of the shadows. There was no movement, my door was closed, the house remained silent and still. The dream was already disappearing in the back of my mind, but it had incapacitated me. The effects slowly dissipated as I made way to my mirror, trying to shake this stagnant sensation.

I looked at myself, the images and feeling of growing moss fading as I stared into my own dirty green eyes. My big broad nose was flaring its big nostrils, and I tried to pace my fear. A sigh fell out of my lungs, and I ran a hand through my auburn hair, lightly slapping at my

round face and big cheeks. My features seemed lost in the dark.

“That wasn't real. I'm awake now. I'm awake,” I muttered, reassuringly. But a scary thought occurred, *How could I know for sure.*

I was seized by the idea that this world was still not right, that I was still missing something. But the bed welcomed me back faster than I would have thought, the warmth of my presence in the sheets ready to take me.

Even so, the morning was not kind to me. Afraid I may fall back into that dream I tossed and turned, dozing and reawakening. It was too late, the sound of birds, the light creeping through the curtains, the warmth of the sun spreading, the world was trying to keep me awake, but all I wanted to do was sleep.

The next thing I heard was the sound of clinking bottles, and the clatter of broken glass. Immediately rising I was frustrated at the ruin of night. I spread the curtains next to my bed, wishing for the sun to erase the haunted sleepless look I could feel on my face.

The fear crept back in, and it dawned on me, “What was that dream?” I asked aloud. “What happened?”

I couldn't remember, shaking my head, trying to jar something loose. No images or ideas reappeared. What I did remember though was the woman from last night. I peered out my window again, into the waking world, at the very same streetlight. *Had she been real?*

The lines of last night blurred together, and I felt stupid. Even if she was real, of course she wouldn't still be under the streetlamp hours later.

The mess of noise continued from beyond my bedroom as I gathered some athletic shorts and popped them on. Slinking out to the living room I found everyone had left, and in their wake the remnants of party trash.

“Ugh,” I groaned.

“Hey buddy, happy Sunday morning.” Max, my friend, my roommate, the other guy I shared the house with had made all the noise. He was up and about with trash bags, and collections of bottles, cans, plates, and pizza boxes, carefully committing things into piles.

“Hey,” was all I uttered before slouching into a kitchen chair.

“Is someone tired?” Max teased.

“How are you even up this early? After a night like last night I thought you'd be done in by today.”

“You kidding, look how beautiful it is,” he flashed open the living room curtains letting in a flash of sun light that had me wince dejected. “I'm thinking about keeping the party going, doing some barbequing and day drinking. You in man?”

I sat there, adjusting to the light in the room. “More drinking, more partying? You never stop. You ain't tired of this yet?”

Max had a pension for partying, ready for the smallest of get togethers and trying to turn it into some type of long drawn out festival.

“Why should we stop? We're young, we cool, we're ready to go.” He slammed a can into a plastic bag as if he were dunking a basketball. “Besides, it's the summer after graduation, live it up! Stop being so lame.”

I shuttered at his energy and enthusiasm as if it was some foreign life force I disagreed with. I placed my head down on the kitchen table, another sigh making it's way out of me.

“Aww. What's wrong buddy. Go ahead and tell ole Maxy. Some girl break your heart last night?”

“What? No.” There was a bit more anger in my response than I had intended.

“Ha. Ok, yeesh. Just asking. You know you did take off pretty early. I don't think I even saw you after 11 o'clock or so. Where'd you go anyhow? I saw you talking with a girl, she take you home? Huh?” he ribbed at me with his words, carefully pushing things from the counter into a black plastic bag, checking the contents slowly as things fell.

I avoided the question initially. “There's glass in the sink, be careful.”

“Don't worry about me boo. I got it already, I got it,” he held up a small baggie and jangled it slightly to reveal the pieces inside. “But still, dude, give me the details. Where did you disappear to?”

“I didn't go anywhere, I stayed here.”

“Oh yeah, a little home action then. She fall in love with your big green eyes? Sneak away to your room.” He began to whisper, “She still in there?”

“Naw I just went to bed. That's all. I don't know, maybe I got sick or something. I didn't get much sleep last night.”

“Uh-uh, sure you didn't.” Max had a big stupid grin on his face.

“No really. I ended up having this weird dream and it kinda freaked me out.”

“Uh-uh,” he seemed disinterested. “What was it about?”

“I don't know. I can't remember.”

Staring at the kitchen table my face became contorted as I searched hard to remember something, anything from last night's dream. Max kept on stacking cups, and sniffing drinks to toss.

“Well maybe you just got partied out. It has been a few nights, and we've been raging all summer. Isn't the real world the best! After graduating, we can do this forever now. Why was college even a thing, we should have just started doing this man.”

“Ha yeah.” If only it was that simple. I didn't agree with him.

I started to tune Max out as he continued into the late morning spouting more about how crazy fun things were now that school was finally over. I helped him clean, dreading the idea of a backyard barbecue with more people and alcohol. I needed to get out of the house. I wanted to be alone.

Just as Max flipped on the TV, I returned from taking the last of the trash bags out front.

“I can't do this man. I need to go.”

“Can't do what?”

“I can't be here if you're throwing another party. No offense, you can still have one, but I need get away from here.”

“Wow, you must really be hung up. I don't think I've ever seen you this shaken.”

“I know. I'm sorry. I just, I just don't know what to do right now. I need to get outside, take a walk, read a book.”

“Read a book? What do you want to do that for?”

The look I gave Max told him I wasn't in the mood to joke.

“Ok, ok,” he chided. “Let's get you out of here then. Any ideas?”

“Ummm.” My brain was thick with sludge, unable to figure out the smallest of my desires or purpose. “Coffee,” I ended up blurting out.

“Coffee it is. Where you want to go?”

“How about that Zion Cafe downtown? You been there yet?”

“No not yet. Sounds good to me. I'll get the keys.”

“No!” I didn't mean to say it so loud, “I mean, no. I'd rather we walk if that's ok?”

“Yeah. Sure man, no worries. We'll get you some coffee, get your space. This is good, I can also grab some coals on the way back.”

Max threw together an outfit, as did I, picking up clothes from the floor giving them a sniff test before the two of us walked out the front door. We meandered from street to street, until we reached the riverfront, following the walkway towards downtown. It was a nice day, but I couldn't seem to find a smile on my face. Max on the other hand was strutting his stuff, saying hi to anyone we passed, whistling into the sunshine. I hated him for it. How could he be this happy? What purpose had he found? What was he doing with his life that made it more enjoyable than mine?

It wasn't until halfway through our walk, an odd chill ran down my spine. Small neck hairs pricked up as if a cold gust of wind had just blown by. I touched the back of my neck, feeling the goosebumps along the top of my back, turning round as if someone were whispering behind me, the word “Fool” blown into the wind.

The word came about and struck me. Blinking, squinting, turning into the sunlight at our backs I noticed a woman behind us. About a hundred yards back, she was alone, walking at a slow pace. She had no determination, no direction, and yet, she didn't seem to be concerned with just the weather.

I was still walking forward, but slowed a bit, coming to a stop finally, losing Max in the process. Suddenly it came to me, this was the girl, the same girl as last night. Was this a coincidence? She was wearing the same clothes, then again, so were Max and I. I waved at her, but she made no notice of me or my actions, stopping in her tracks just as I did. In fact, her eyes would not meet mine, actively ignoring my gaze. *Who was this girl?*

“Yo, dude, you comin' or what?” My neck jerked back front, finding Max a ways ahead hollering at me. “What's the hold up!?”

Casually jogging I made my way to him. Breathing lightly I apologized, “Sorry man. I uh, well – ”

He cut me off, and I took the opportunity to catch my breath. “You see something back there. Or maybe some point of clarity finally hit you in the face?” We continued forward.

“Don't freak her out but, there was... there was this girl.”

“Girl? Where?” and like a prairie dog Max's head popped up and he swiveled around in all directions, on the lookout. “Man there ain't no girl back there.”

“What?” I was shocked. I too swung my head around, but he was right. There might as well of been an empty scene of tumbleweeds. “But she was just there I swear.” I scratched my head. The only way she could have disappeared is if she jumped into the river, or scaled down

the hill onto a nearby street, in either case we would have seen something. This, this was not possible.

“You're seeing things. Maybe we just need to get you laid if you're fantasizing girls.”

“This isn't me fantasizing Max, really.” There was a bit of desperation in my voice. I figured I'd make the connection between the two instances and ask him, “Last night, do you remember this girl. I don't know she had straight long hair, uh, wearing jeans, had a jacket on.”

“That's it? That's all you got? That was like every girl last night.”

“Well I haven't seen her close up yet. Last night she was across the street. I was wondering if you remember anyone leaving really late, like after 4AM.

“Nah, the party died down before 3AM. I don't know who would be leaving like that. Wait, do you have a crush? Did you fall in love last night? Is this why you're tripping?”

“No, nothing like that. It's just I think the girl I saw behind us was the same girl from last night. I don't know.”

“Ha what are you getting at, like she's following us? You think you got a stalker? Ooohhh.”

“That's not what I'm saying. I just have a weird feeling. That's all.”

I didn't say anymore on the topic, but oddly enough the idea of a stalker did excite me. Someone taking an interest in me, made my life sound a heck of a whole lot more interesting. *Who knows maybe this stalker thing could be fun.* I let the idea rattle around in my brain, picturing myself as a spy, someone dangerous, not just another graduate ill-prepared for the greater world. It was a cute idea at the time.

The cafe was at the end of the street downtown. A good sized place, it was full of what made coffee shops what they are today. Tarnished wood, aged metal, a rag tag assortment of uncomfortable looking chairs, couches, stools, all to make the place look hip. Industrial cozy, that's what it should be called. Cavernous but inviting. I found a table at one end of the room, sitting against the wall, looking to the rest of the cafe patrons. The wall across from me held a large assortment of mirrors, I guess to open and brighten up the space even more, all oddly framed for a kitschy effect.

There were kids, teenagers, adults, and old people alike. Everyone going about their day, smiling, chatting, listening intently, sipping whatever they had in hand. I got caught up in trying to find out what they were all saying. Where were they in life?

“Bunch of hipsters,” Max said as he slid into the seat in front of me. He placed down my drip coffee, and dove nose first into his large mocha with whipped cream.

“Yeah,” I responded lightly, taking a sip of my own drink, burning my tongue. I could feel the sizzle, the emptiness as my taste buds disappeared. “Damn.” I tried biting on my tongue to usher in some feeling, but it was too late.

“You alright?” Max looked up, licking whipped cream from his upper lip.

I knew he was asking if I had burnt myself, but I decided to ignore him. Instead, I stared at the mirrors, dozens of them all crooked, of various sizes, showing different angles of the cafe. From one to the next I couldn't find myself in any of them, giving up prematurely, I slumped back into the chair.

“What are you doing with your life Max?”

He took a second or two to process the question. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what are going to do with your life? We just graduated. What do you have planned, what's next?” I realized it was a big question, and that any answer I got probably wouldn't satisfy me anyways.

“Why do I have to have something planned? I'm just going to relax and enjoy my Summer after.” He took another long pull from his mocha. I tilted my coffee to the brim of the mug playing with it.

“Summer is almost over though, you have to be thinking about the future right? I mean it's been fun, but this town ain't exactly big enough. It's a college spot with some coastal mountains, the beach, local family's, but not exactly a jumping off point for the next big thing.”

He sat there and gave the question what may have been the appropriate amount of time. I knew damn well what I asked him was too serious a thing for him ever to consider. He was enjoying life, and I was there corrupting it for him.

“I don't know, I don't see why it has to end. My parents are still paying my rent, my side jobs walking dogs, babysitting kids, is pretty awesome. The hours are great, whenever I need 'em. I don't really have to worry about anything.”

“Yeah but don't you want to worry about something? What happens if they stop paying, don't you want to get a real job, don't you want to use that new degree in business for something? Don't you want to start something new?”

“Hell no. Endless summer my brother. I don't ever want to worry about a thing again. I

like it here.” He smiled and drained the last of his mocha.” Alright dude, I’m going to head out, grab some coals, maybe another pack of beer. I don’t remember anything left in the fridge. This hipster coffee stuff ain’t really my thing anyways. You gonna be alright here by yourself?”

Max had stood up and was staring at me, but I didn’t want to make eye contact with him. Silent for too long, I almost wanted to say no, I wouldn’t be alright, but I glanced up and smiled, “Sure. I’ll be fine.”

“Ok. Call me if you need something. Love to see you at the barbecue man, but you do you.” He called this last bit over his shoulder already heading for the exit.

I watched him flip on his sunglasses, regain his strut, and walk by the front window, down the street and off into the distance. Timidly I blew on my coffee, underwhelmed by the idea that coffee, just like water during the night, was what I needed to come away from this funk. I hadn’t brought a book to read, so I sat there, with my thoughts, disillusioned.

Customers came and went, some deciding to stay, others choosing to leave. It wasn’t a matter of where they were going, or what they were doing, but the simple fact that they had something to do. My view on the world was defeating me. I wasn’t like Max, not even close. I didn’t have rich parents, a carefree attitude. Instead, my thoughts festered. *What was I meant for?* My summer was coming to an end, but I had no idea what I was going to start after it. I didn’t know where to start. But for whatever reason I got the feeling she did.

The young woman, the same one from before had come in. There she sat, across the room from me, at one of the small tables in front of the all the mirrors, her eyes shaded. One moment the table was empty, the next she was there. I hadn’t even noticed her come in, and I was certain

she hadn't ordered a drink.

“Well this is cute.” I chuckled to myself. Every other second or so I would glance up from my coffee and try to catch her spying on me, but still, not even a hint of interest. She avoided eye contact. I was growing frustrated by this. “Is she stalking me or not?”

The sick idea turned in my head. I could hear myself thinking, *Would you stop calling her a stalker. What's wrong with you? This could just be a coincidence. Leave her alone.* But I couldn't put her out of my mind. She made me feel off, as if I was forgetting, missing something.

I wanted to get up, go over to her, ask her about last night, exchange names, maybe even invite her to the barbecue. Yeah the last thought seemed a good as any. I'd say she looked familiar, ask if she knew Max, or if she was interested in going to the barbecue. Seemed harmless enough. Then again, would that make me a creep, would that make me the stalker? What if she hadn't noticed me at all? I decided against it, my inaction a form of action.

My head hung loose, looking up at the ceiling and the fans that were swirling and spinning. I didn't want my coffee. I didn't want to be here. This wasn't the answer either. *I guess I'll go back to my place and check out the barbecue. I wonder who Max got to show up.* I shifted and sat upright, cracking my neck.

Suddenly I felt dizzy, lightheaded. My eyes blinked open and close from the odd moment of discomfort. And for a second time, it sounded as if the word “Fool” had been whispered in my ear. I came to attention at my table, my eyes meeting those of the girls in front of me. There she sat, two dirty green eyes, piercing into my own. Her features suddenly became clear, as if she had been all along. With her reddish brown hair, broad nose, full cheeks, round face, I began to

notice everything about her. The way her image and actions mirrored my own. I sat frozen, unsure of how to proceed. Now, she would not break contact.

Condemnation swept over me and my eyes grew wide. Opposite the room our stare down was paused by the slow movement of her lips. She was repeating a phrase and I couldn't quite make it out. Tracing the movement of her lips, I read her mouth over and over again. She was speaking to me, saying something, what was it?

It all came back to me, ever so swiftly, painfully. "Fool's Paradise." I was sure of it now. The words repeated over and over again, came from her silent lips. My mind was racing, but my body slowed. I found myself sitting back in my chair, as if some other force had taken over, pushing me into a shallow satisfaction. I was shouting in my head, confused. The world was growing quiet and yet it looked as if this young woman was now screaming the words "FOOL'S PARADISE!" from her lips across the room. Everything grew cold, hazy.

But in one last moment of terror, shock, and force. I broke from whatever lull I had been put in, shooting out of my chair, and stumbling into the table I was at. My coffee mug tipped, and fell, shattering upon the floor, cold coffee spilling everywhere. In that small second the room grew quiet, everyone's eyes on me, until a flood of noise came back two fold.

I moved to the floor to pick up the pieces, dab at the liquid with some napkins. On the floor kneeling I quickly looked up and across the room to ...nothing. She was gone. Her chair was empty. I stood, bolt upright from the ground. Wheeling my head in all directions.

Finally what caught my eye were the mirrors. I had found my reflection, and we were staring at one another a look of fear and amazement on our face's. My eyes, shocked, I shook

loose from the same pair of eyes, regaining consciousness.

A barista had come around with a broom and a rag. "It's ok," she smirked. "It happens."

I brushed by her comments, mouth agape and asked, "Did you see her? My stalk – I mean a customer, a young woman with green eyes and auburn hair. Did you see?"

She smiled at me peculiarly. "Ummm no. Can't say I've seen anyone today with green eyes and auburn hair 'cept you."

There was a buzz in the room.

"But she was screaming. She was screaming."

Horizon

I had never been this close to heaven, and I was screaming. She was laughing. We were both looking straight up.

At the pinnacle of its ascent the roller coaster rocketed, plummeted down the old wooden track, roaring with adrenaline and nerves. Such a whip in motion slingshotted the cars up the next structured wooden mountain, but with a sickening screech and sudden lurch, it came to a halt, the dirty seatbelt restraints keeping us from spilling out, down to the stained ground below.

There was no more momentum, there was no more movement. The six linked cars were stuck there at the top, positioning the riders with a look above, an empty sky that faded white towards the sun.

As the air left my lungs, and my petrified screaming went hoarse, to a moan, to a whisper, to a whimper, my breathing became wildly short winded. I was hyperventilating, and my heart was erratic, pulsating through my brain. I was trembling all over, becoming light headed, tossing and turning, struggling to see what was the matter. Why had we stopped? What had broken? What had gone wrong? What was going to kill me?

I was certain I was going to die.

But there was no death. My heart didn't explode. My mind didn't melt. The car didn't drop off the track. I didn't fall out. None of my fears manifested. Instead, through the restraints, a hand softly, gently, grasped mine, giving it a small squeeze.

I remembered I wasn't alone, that there were four or so others on this roller coaster ride with me. No one else was screaming, no one else was panicking. People were talking excitedly, worriedly, but no one else seemed to believe death was near, least of all the girl next to me. In fact, as I looked at her hand under mine, I turned up and stared past the safety rubber and found two calm brown eyes, dirty blonde hair, and a grin with a solitary dimple. To my shock I then remembered, *That's right, she had been laughing, this random girl next to me, laughing.*

My hand recoiled from shock, terror, confusion, something. My lungs went into overdrive again as my breaths became quicker and quicker. I was fidgeting in my bucket seat, looking for fate, but her dimple caught me again, and she spoke, "Everything is going to be fine."

"What! How can you say that. Everything is not fine. Look at us, we're trapped at the top of a roller coaster. We have to get down, we have to get out of here. What if we're stuck? What if we need to get out of these cars immediately before they derail? And you were laughing! Laughing. What are you sick? How can you be laughing. This is not good. Not good. I can't –"

A man from one of the cars behind us yelled, "Hey mate give it a rest will ya! We're fine you freak. Just settle down."

His jovial approach to my situation did not help. In my desperate attempts to struggle, grab at something, to block him out, to block out everything, I had taken the hand still next to me. I was squeezing her now, clammy, sweaty.

I tried to let go, apologizing in one long dramatic breath. "I'm sorry, look, I've just, this isn't, I shouldn't, I'm sorry," my words tripping over themselves with nothing coming out that

made any sense.

But she held on, she didn't let go. Her eyes were honest, her voice calm and steadfast, “It's ok, these things happen.”

I let out a vicious and doubtful laugh, “Ha! No, no they don't. When does *this* happen? When was the last time you read about a roller coaster getting stuck? We're going to be trapped up here and something is going to break – ”

“No, I don't mean *this* specifically. I mean, people get stuck. Bad things happen. This is a part of life.

“Sure it is.” I was shaking my head in disbelief. This girl was nuts.

I looked over the side of the car down to the world below. A small crowd had gathered. I imagined them pointing, waving, taking photos with their phones. But I didn't see any movement. Again my thoughts took over, *Why weren't they doing anything. They know we're up here. Come on already! Is this just a show for them? They don't care. They don't know.*

As these thoughts began to muster what I imagine was a megaphone began to sparkle and crack below. Either a worker at the boardwalk or perhaps a fireman was down there attempting to communicate with us.

“Everyone remain ca – ” The man's voice died. More static jumped up at us, “Please – I need – if – anyone – ” Then silence again.

The megaphone isn't working. Of course it isn't working. This was just the first step. Thoughts were racing through my head. All I wanted to do was face a few fears. Follow what my therapist said. This was supposed to be a stepping stone, a stone towards flying one day. Not the

last one, not the last stone.

My leg was shaking so fast, bouncing up and down it could have jumped and hit the wooden beams, plummeting towards the concrete all mangled. The image only added to my panic. I closed my eyes, rocking my head back and forth up and down. At least I wasn't crying, but my eyes were tearing for how hard I had them shut.

She must have known what I was thinking, what I was worried about.

“Hey don't look at them. Don't worry about this. Here look to me, look out my side of the car.” I was still clutching her hand, or was she clutching mine? I had forgotten. I peeped one eye open and still there was such a sense of calmness, relaxation on her face. Serenity.

Almost in a whine I asked, “How can you act like this? You aren't scared at all.

“Just breathe, listen. Look past me now. Look at the ocean. Look how far it goes. Can you see the horizon all the way out there? Do you know where the ocean ends and the sky starts? Isn't this magical. Isn't this a view to remember? There are no tall buildings or skyscrapers around us, just imagine, this is a sight few have seen, and you are lucky enough to enjoy what most will never get the chance to witness. Look out, take in these two defiant blues, the sea and sky.

I was nodding, “Ok, mhmmm, yeah, two blues, sea and sky.”

“Meet them in the middle, go to that horizon, see how they get lost in one another, hazy. Our eyes can't pick between the two, they blur and run together, we can't decipher where one starts and one stops. It's lost on us, and yet isn't it beautiful? We don't need camera's, selfies, or anything to tell us that this moment is real. We have our eyes right here, right now, looking to

something we can cherish and hold between the two of us. Something no one else will know or feel.”

My eyes looked out to those blues, searching for an end that I couldn't find. Testing my focus, my vision, I scanned the scene for a sign of disparity between the two. But it was too far and whatever difference there may have been, it was lost on me. “Ok. You're right.” My breathing had steadied, my eyes weren't darting around. “You're right.”

“Now follow the sky, follow it up, up, up, until your head is resting back in the seat. Look straight up. Ignore the sun behind us. We're like astronauts, and the sky is holding us, sharing its beauty. Enjoy this moment. I get that you're scared, but now that we've recognized that fear, doesn't it leave you? Isn't that fear gone? You haven't died yet. You are living, more than anyone can say on the ground. Right?”

I had to give it to her. She was right. This was rare. This feeling. All my fears gone. I was lost, suspended in that calmness she created.

“Thanks,” I said in a whispered breath.

“Don't mention it.”

The two of us sat there, simply staring into the blue, cradled by it. I forgot where we were, I forgot there were people below watching me. I forgot that I didn't need control over this situation. To let go.

“I...I'm sorry.” I felt like I needed to apologize. “I'm sorry if I freaked you out. I just. My name is Isaac”

“You don't need to say you're sorry, it's ok. And I'm Raleigh.”

“Raleigh?”

“Yeah it's spelled R-a-l-e-i-g-h. Which most people pronounce *Ray-lee*, when they see it, but it's closer to *Raw-lee*.”

“Like the capital of North Carolina.”

“Hey yeah, no one ever gets that. It's where my parents were from before they left to come here.”

There was a distinct pause, as if something had just changed her mind. For only a moment Raleigh went somewhere I didn't know about and was too timid to ask.

“So what's your story then Isaac? If you're afraid of roller coasters, then what are doing on this one?”

“It's like I said, I freak out a lot. I'm afraid, and I don't mean like now, I mean all the time. I am a fearful person. I'm afraid of public restrooms, I'm afraid of not locking the front door, I'm afraid of getting on the wrong bus. I'm just so worried all the time about everything I try and plan it all out accordingly. I'm just such a calculative, analytical person I need to plan and do things in order to make sure it's all done right. When something like this happens, I tend to unravel.”

“Hey I get it. For a lot of people this moment could be scary.”

“Yeah, but, I wanted to explain myself.”

“So that's why you're on this roller coaster ride? You wanted to overcome that fear?”

“Yeah, exactly, It was something my therapist said I should do. I really want to travel and fly to Europe, but of course flying is something I have never been able to overcome. He said I

should start small, and said why not try a roller coaster.”

“I can understand that. And hey, with how things turned out, I would say this is a much better experience. There can be turbulence, taking off, landing, cramped spaces. But with every flight one of the best things is the fact you are sitting in the clouds, a rare view all around you.”

“If you say so. I just wanted to start small, and this got a little out of hand. I wanted to prove to myself I could do this, I could get on something as scary as a roller coaster and let it happen. Not think about all the problems.” A small laugh found its way out of me, “Hehe, you should have seen me in line, I stood there for a while without moving, letting people pass. My legs were glued to the floor.”

“Yeah,” she was smiling also, “I saw your eyes get big when you were finally ushered to the front car. But hey take it from me, this is the best spot. The front is where it's at.”

“Ha, glad to know that now. Planes are one thing, but I've been terrified of coasters ever since I was little.”

“Well what's it about them that scares you?”

“Everything really.” I took a gulp, “The speed, the heights, the jostling up and down, possibly puking, the rickety old wooden beams, or getting your head lopped off, or a seatbelt coming un-done, a car detaching.” I was wincing a bit, cringing. She wasn't looking at me but when I began to squeeze her hand she saw the fear rising and spreading.

“Hey, hey, remember the ocean, remember the sky, they're still here, you're still here remember. Breathe. I won't let go, don't worry, we'll get through this.”

I let out a long protracted breath, in through my nostrils out through my mouth. “We're

sill here.” I repeated. “See what I mean. I get so worked up. I tend to plan for the worst because I've imagined the worst. It's kind of pathetic. And I'm tired of it. It's stopped me from so many things. It's time I get over this fear or I'm always going to sit in a dark corner where nothing can hurt me. Really what I want to do is go out and see the world, but how can I if I can't even walk a different way to work. This was me making a start, trying to move on.”

“We can go out and look for our destiny, and sometimes our destiny will find us.”

“What?” I was unsure of what she meant by this little fortune cookie statement.

“Oh it's something my mom used to say to me. If we go looking for our destiny, sometimes it will come and find us. It means we make our own happiness in life, just as we do our own problems and fear. If you want to worry, go ahead and worry. Just know we can also break out, leave home, become that change. The world can help us unexpectedly, sometimes it's hard recognizing that. I know it sounds a little hokey, but it's something I'll never forget. And it sounds like that's what your trying to do right now. Your attempting to change your life, an improvement, making things better, chasing after your destiny.”

“Yeah I guess you could say that.”

“Well it seems to me that this stopped roller coaster ride, is life responding, the universe telling you maybe this is what you needed.”

“I hope so.”

“Look at it this way, after a roller coaster ride like this, do you think any will be as scary? Probably not.”

“Probably not.”

“I'd say this is a big step for you.”

“I...uhh. Thanks.” For the first time up there I smiled. She was right. This failed ride was just the beginning to a much bigger one. We both looked out to the view.

No one had found a working megaphone. The crowd had mostly dispersed out of boredom I guess, but there were more trucks below, an army of mechanics trying to work out a solution. I wasn't exactly sure how long we had been up there stuck, but one of the handful of people behind us on the ride yelled out down below.

“This is ridiculous! We've been stuck here for like 30 minutes! How much longer!?”

They piped down again, but I could hear the rumbling of two people as they discussed getting free food, or passes, or even suing the boardwalk for some trumped up reason about distress. I couldn't believe anyone would want free passes to a place that had caused them so much trouble. I tried tuning out the people behind and below me. Raleigh and that view were the only things I needed.

The sun was slowly changing course, coming down from the sky and heading towards the ocean. Originally I had been sweating from the fear, but now a steady beating sun was making me drip. The only respite was the breeze to keep us cool. I welcomed the sun finally beginning to set, our eyes both locked towards the distant horizon.

I glanced to see the look on her face, but all I could see was the dimple from her cheek. I knew she was smiling.

“Hey that reminds me,” I sputtered open a new conversation, “Why exactly were you

laughing when the ride stopped. Was it me screaming? I mean, I don't think the other people in the cars behind us were screaming or laughing. What was so funny?"

"Oh this whole situation. I, I just can't believe this happened. It's one of those life moments I was talking about."

"You couldn't believe this was happening to you, so instead of freaking you out you figured it was funny. Wish I had your perspective."

"Well sorta."

There was a lull in her voice, as if "sorta" had a whole lot more to it. I tried to make the situation feel less important, "It's not that big of a deal. I just freaked out even more. I thought you were a crazy person, and that I was going to be trapped with you."

"Ha, no, it's just. There's more to it than that."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

I could tell she was thinking fast, as if the next few words may prove to be in fact disturbing. For the life of me I couldn't imagine what it was going to be, but I found her dimple reassuring.

She opened up, "Ok this is going to sound odd, and try not too react too weirdly to this, but...It's my mom's funeral today."

My eyes bulged, I didn't know whether to laugh or say I was sorry. Moments passed where I tried to process this information as if it were a code or she had misspoken. There must have been a look of confusion on my face, "Wait, what do you mean it's your mom's funeral? Like the anniversary of her death? Or earlier today was her funeral? How can, wait, what?"

“Ha, see. I know, I know. No, like right now is her funeral and I'm missing it.”

“You've got to be kidding. This is terrible! And here I am freaking out, how are you not!

We need to get you out of here.”

“No, it's fine really. There's nothing we can do now.”

“No this can't be fine. Wait a minute why are you on a roller coaster in the first place!

This is nuts. I can't believe –” Stunned, silence was all I had to offer after all these questions popped into my head. I squinted at her, as if she wasn't making any sense, unsure of who she was. In a quiet unsuspecting voice I asked, “You aren't lying right now are you? Although I don't know why anyone would lie about this.”

“It's ok, I know it sounds pretty crazy. Here look.”

She squirmed a bit, but from her back pocket she pulled out a pamphlet, and there on it was the face of what I assumed to be her mother, a great big smile, that one dimple that must have been passed down through generations. The inside sure enough was an obituary, list of events, directions, and after plans.

Still shrouded in disbelief I spoke up, “Ok, so you're not lying. I'm sorry I didn't believe you, but then if you don't mind me asking, why or how is it you're on this roller coaster?”

“It's kind of a long story.” She turned from me and stared off into the dying sun. I figured that was the end of that. It wasn't really my place to pry. I was surprised when she turned back, “But I guess we're not going anywhere anytime soon, so.”

“Ok” was all I had to say, all ears.

“You see, my mom was my best friend. She was the only family I had growing up, no

brothers or sisters. My father though, he, he was a drunk, very abusive. He would yell, scream, knock things over, threaten us, dare us to ever call out or ask for help and see what he would do then. He was not a good man. He'd beat us about pretty badly. I don't think there was a month where she or I didn't have a bruise somewhere. We were always drying our eyes and hiding our tears for one another.

In a hushed tone, “Wow.” was all I could muster.

“I mean, there were stretches here and there where he wasn't around, away at work, and at times I even hoped he'd come back and be better, or never come back at all. But sure enough, maybe not right away, he'd get that way, and there was nothing we could do about it.”

She glanced down at the wrinkled pamphlet still in her hands, staring at the photo of her mother before continuing, “It was hard for my mom, there wasn't really anywhere else we could go or anyone else to turn to. They both moved out here for work, but my mom ended up becoming a stay at home. She said it was because she loved me too much to ever let go of me, but I think it was because she was afraid to ever leave me alone with him if he was drunk.

“But as I grew up, there was less and less of a reason for her to stay at home. At that point I think she was just down on herself that she couldn't leave, didn't know how. My mom wasn't a quiet woman, I think she just found herself in a bad situation with no way of getting out, stuck. I was too young to truly know who she was, or what they had before me, but I knew that for years she held onto him, as if she didn't know what to do or who she was herself if one of them were to leave.

I nodded at all she had to say, there was eye contact and that dimple would pop up as she

grinned. I was surprised at how much light there seemed to be in her, even when telling this story, a sort of wise happiness.

“And, one day it happened. All those fears, frustrations, sitting back and doing nothing, years of feeling stuck, and letting this continue. She finally had enough. I was in high school still, and I came back late one evening, and I could hear them going at it. I remember standing at the front door with my keys out, not wanting to go in, tears streaming down my face before I had even stepped foot inside. But finally I told myself I needed to be there for her.”

She paused, as if remembering the events were like something sweet to be tastefully held on to.

“I don't know what it was, maybe it was the look I had on my face when I walked in, but that was the day she changed our lives. He was just about to knock her down, when she moved so gracefully, and put him on his ass. There was way more booze in him than usual, it almost looked easy. She gave a few kicks, little bruises and blood, just enough to let out her aggression and emotions before asking me to call the cops. I remember them showing up hauling him away, and there was this release. My mother had the biggest smile on her face underneath the tears. She was so smart and courteous, even asking the police if she needed to be taken in for the harm she had caused to him.

“I'm still not sure why, but they never did anything to us. Somehow they knew the situation all too well. Maybe it was after they took statements from neighbors who had peeked from behind their doors. All I know was, life was different. There was this great release. We haven't seen him since that day, and we have never looked back.”

There was an edge of triumph at the last statement. I admired her for telling me this. I still couldn't get over the fact this person next to me had such a wildly different and hopeful outlook on life, even after all she had been through. It took a minute or two but the question came back to me, "So how does the roller coaster fit into all of this?"

"Ha that's right. Sorry I got carried away, I totally forgot. Maybe it's silly, but, whenever there was a bad night in the house, the next day my mom would make time to take me here to the boardwalk. She'd say, "Let's give these bruises a better story." We'd buy cotton candy, and big pretzels, stick our toes in the warm sand, and ride this coaster over and over, screaming out the pain and fear. We'd go home sore but smiling, our heads held high, chests puffed out. And I'm not sure why or how but whenever we got back home he was never there. It was as if it would wipe the slate clean. Life giving us another chance."

"So this was your release. A way for your mom and you to get away from him, forget and connect."

"Yeah, we had so many great memories here. She was so good at turning things around. Since then we have lived such better lives. I went away to college, she began going out and making friends, got a job.

There was a sudden pain in her eyes, "We grew so much closer. But it was only a few months ago she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. The doctor said she didn't have long. It all happened so fast. I just don't know what to do, I still don't. I figured one more ride before the funeral, in her memory, maybe it would help jar something loose in me. It'd be the perfect thing to do and scream out all my fears about the future without her. "

For the first time I could see sadness in her. She was frightened. Her dimple had disappeared. I grabbed her hand once more and gave it a squeeze.

“I’m sorry about your mom. She sounds like a great person.” My words didn’t feel like enough.

A tear rolled down her cheek, “Oh she was.”

I estimated it had been around an hour. The sun was just beginning to set. We were both quiet, staring off into the distance. The blues were gone. The ocean now a deep dark navy, almost a purple in color, the sky orange, red, a pink haze spreading towards the stars.

“You can really see it now, can’t you.” She motioned out just as the sun sank.

“The horizon, yeah you can. It’s become so clear now. But I still don’t know what’s out there. It’s too far. And with the darkness coming soon the horizon will disappear again.”

“Don’t worry,” She smiled at me, “We don’t need to know what’s out there. Life gets in the way of life. Like today. Sometimes we have to accept that.”

“Ha,” I was unsure of this new statement, “And that’s a good thing? Can’t we stop it?”

“Of course it’s a good thing. Why would you want to stop it? Look what happened. You conquered a fear of yours, that’s one more step closer to seeing the world. And I can’t think of a better way to remember my mom than being on this roller coaster. Besides, who else can see this sunset like us at the top of the world right now. It’s like heaven.”

“It is, isn’t it.”

We fell back down to Earth, with a giant mechanical heave. We both screamed and smiled the whole way, our eyes on the disappearing horizon.

Too Red

The stars were up front as I sat in the background. Cameras, lights, crewmen, equipment of all kind had put the spotlight upon the actors at the front of the hip coffee shop. The heavy lights would make me sweat, it only made them glisten.

Up near the counter instruments were taking quick measurements, and make up artists made mad dashes from bag to face ensuring a false perfection. In my rigid plastic chair I pretended to sip at a cup of now cold coffee – part of the greater scene to some capacity. Up and down, in and out, the other extra's and I made the hustle and bustle of this coffee shop more realistic, even if I knew it was all fake.

My image in the cup was murky, a blurry figure with indiscernible features. There was a someone who seemed to be drowning, but longingly staring back up at me with eyes half shut. It could have been any of these people around really.

Shifting uncomfortably I tried to hold my place, a repetitive loop of movement at this small wooden table, in the middle of the room. It made me wonder if people at home would notice the awkward guy in the back, trying to enjoy something that wasn't real.

Nothing was meant to change, at least, I don't think anything was supposed to change. No one told me, then again why would they? A woman sat directly across the table from me, occupying the other empty rigid plastic chair. She had red hair. Bouncy, vibrant, full of energy and life, a color that lit up her eyes like a match and complimented the collection of freckles across her face. She smiled with her ceramic cup of coffee and said, “Hi there.”

I looked around as if this change or difference would surely bring about some objection,

but no one of importance or power seemed to notice or care. Undisturbed by this new extra everyone continued to get the scene just right as I remained silent. I looked back into her brilliant spiraling hazel eyes, readying to introduce myself, when someone suddenly yelled, “Quiet on the set!”

I stammered and fell silent again. Attention was called to the front, as the cameras started rolling and a few more commands and orders were made. The scene unfolded up at the counter, the main characters going through their lines in turn, the cameras watching their every move. I remained still and looked down into the black coffee.

“Well, aren't you going to say something?”

Startled, I looked up at the woman with red hair. My sudden reaction had me begin to mouth words, smile, create a false conversation, go through the motions of a cafe patron.

“What are you doing?” She asked me.

I timidly whispered, “I don't think we are supposed to actually talk. Just look like we are having a conversation.”

“Oh no, that's just something they say. Come on, let's have a real conversation. We don't have to be loud, just a chat.”

“No, really, I think we are supposed--” She cut me off.

“Ok, I'll start then.”

Without turning my head, my eyes darted around trying to catch what the other extra's in the cafe were doing. Those paired up were all having wordless conversations, laughing without sound, talking without noise, but once more no one of importance seemed to notice. All and any

noise that could be heard came from the cameras, shuffling of feet, and lines of forced dialogue from the actors and crew near the front. I clumsily pulled the bitter cold drink to my lips, a pretend sip.

“How many people have you said, *I love you*, to?”

I nearly choked, trying to keep whatever cool I thought I had. “Umm, I'm sorry, excuse me?”

“How many?”

“Uh I don't know, I talked to my parents the other night.” Why was that the first thing that came to mind? I could feel my cheeks grow warm.

“No, that's not what I meant. I mean truly love. To say to someone with overwhelming emotion, devotion, and passion, that you *love* them. Not a family member, a pet, TV show, or burrito, but someone directly across from you, and as you stare into their eyes and have those three words spill out.”

I didn't know what to say. The shop had become quiet and I thought everyone was waiting to hear what my answer would be. But as I glanced out of the corner of my eyes the scene continued and no one was paying me any attention, except for the woman with the red hair. Frantically I began thinking and tripping through my life trying to come up with someone surely that I had said it to. In the few seconds that I sat there eyes darting through memories, the absoluteness of no one at all began to creep closer and closer. Without warning, the only answer that seemed sadly plausible was, “I guess I don't believe in that kind of love.” I winced a little. I didn't like hearing myself say that.

“What do you mean you don't believe in *that* kind of love?” It wasn't so much a question as it was a response to a dubious answer.

“I don't think I have ever experienced it. At least, I don't think I have ever even seen it.”

“Well what about your parents to one another, grandparents, friends who were in a relationship? None of those relationships counted for love?”

“Alright that's one.” The director called out and everyone relaxed, slumping in their seats, or stretching their legs. I on the other hand felt like a stick, looking at the hands that sat across from me, my eyebrows exaggerating a face of shame as I shook my head no.

The woman with red hair didn't seem surprised at my answer even though I was.

I started to defend my answer, “Even if it is real, there is all the pain, paranoia, anger, sadness, fighting. Is it necessary? Do we need it?” My voice rose a little out of frustration, “Why can't I just be happy with myself?”

I should of known this question was next.

“Well, are you happy with yourself?” She said with a daring smile.

“Yeah I think so. And anyways most people aren't in love. It's about ego, self, lust, desire, affection, reliance... and...and.”

I felt I had a winning argument even if it wasn't what I wanted to hear myself say. But her eyes only grew bigger, a spark that never wavered. She only leaned in closer, enthralled by my response as if it were a challenge, something which she relished and wanted to change. I wasn't sure if I was scared by what I had said and how depressing it was, or by the fact her eagerness was drawing energy upon it.

“Alright take two. 3...2..1...Action!” The director yelled. But as if it were her cue, the woman with red hair opened up.

“For someone who doesn't believe in love you seem to know a lot about what it is or isn't. You say you don't believe in love, you say you are happy by yourself, you say that love encapsulates all these other things, but for someone who has never been in love let me tell you it's not about compare and contrast. You don't take a definition of love and put it up to everyone else. Your thinking too much. It's about devotion, from one person to you, and you to them. A selfless act that does come with it's flaws, but where you try and create something that makes another person just as happy as you. You get the chance to create something new, something that endures.”

I was shaking my head, “What, are you talking about true love?”

“Yeah, but not in a cartoon fairy tale type of way. I mean true to yourself. Something that overtakes you, changes you, the way you think, all for a better connection and understanding. Yeah, there are things that hurt, but doesn't that happen with everything? And sure there may be those who are too eager and jump right in, but that's what a leap of faith like love is all about, having a person, a feeling that makes you feel in a way you could have never imagined.”

“Ok so maybe I can't imagine it, and that's my problem.” I almost sounded grumpy. “But there are so many things wrong with love, so many problems, that why would I want to take that leap if I'm happy with myself? Do I need to take that risk? I don't even know what I'm looking for.” I said the last bit a too forcefully and bit down on my lip.

“Maybe you don't need the risk. Maybe you don't need to take a leap. Maybe you are

happy with yourself, and you don't need love. But how are you going to ever find what you are looking for if you don't even know what it is?"

"I don't know what I want, but I know what I don't like...and that doesn't feel good enough."

She waited till I was looking at her again, my troubled stare matching her twinkling eyes.

"Well do you *not* like me?"

My cheeks flushed so warm and red I wondered if it matched the color of her hair.

"I...uh...well," was all I could get out. I couldn't believe she had asked that. "No – I mean yes! No, what I mean is, we only just met. How can I...I do, I do like you...yeah." The words kind of just fell out and hit the table. My mind was racing, but my heartbeat remained surprisingly cool.

"Well that's a start."

Could it be that easy? Was that all? She seemed to think so. But for some reason a part of me was still battling the conversation, without understanding what had just been said. There wasn't a feeling that gripped at my heart, pulled the strings, made my legs go wobbly, or my arms numb. I'm pretty sure my eyes hadn't become cartoon hearts, and for the most part my jaw was still attached. It was almost too simple. She was there, a person right across from me, and there was a certain amount of affection, where I just wanted to hear more, to see more, to be with her more. Was I supposed to just let this happen? I must have looked confused at the idea.

"Just because you don't know what you like, doesn't mean you still can't try. You're saving yourself from a fear of pain, but also denying the best parts of it all. Make up your mind after, not before."

“Mmm.” Was all I could say in this daze as she continued to smile back at me.

I sat there pondering what we had just gone over, the conclusions and questions brought up, when I unexpectedly fell back out of her eyes as someone yelled, “Ok cut, let's take a break. Back in 5 people.”

“I'm going to head to the bathroom,” she said brushing her hand over the top of mine. “See you in a sec.”

I wasn't sure what was happening, what I was feeling. I sat there trying to come up with ways around what she had said, or some form of definition to continue our conversation, or maybe I was just trying to come up with the courage to ask this girl out, even after she gave life to the idea of love. But as five minutes passed and people began to filter back into the cafe set and take their places. A woman sat down in front of me, a new woman, a different woman. I began to protest, searching with my eyes for the girl with the amazing red hair. An assistant passed by and I grabbed at his arm desperately.

“Excuse me, where is the girl with the red hair?”

He looked at me like I was crazy. “What?” He said.

“I was sitting here with a girl in red hair in the previous take what happened to her?”

It took him a while to figure out what I was going on about but the answer came to him. “Oh,” he began to realize, “Her hair was too red. Stood out in the background. The director asked for someone else.”

“What!” I couldn't believe it. “But where did she go then?”

“I don't know guy, she probably left.” And he briskly walked away.

I was left dumbstruck, at a loss for words.

Someone important ordered, “Just a quick one. Quiet on set. Rolling in 3 ...2 ...”

My mouth moved but I couldn't find the words to speak.

This new woman, with faded brown hair, sitting across from me, took this as her cue and started to wordlessly speak back to me, throwing in a smile, a laugh, a touch of the hand, and a sip on her never ending cup of coffee. She continued to babble on in silence in front of me, enjoying her fake life in the background.

I looked down into my own, still mostly full, definitely cold cup, and uttered breathlessly, “Too red?”

Norm Hughes

I've never hit rock bottom before, but one summer I sure did find it. I was a stranger. He was a stranger too. The only difference was he had something important to say, so I listened.

I woke up with a yawn and a stretch, a crick in my neck, as my wristwatch beeped. Light was just beginning to descend upon this sea breeze city, and I could tell there was a chill in the air. Sitting there I stared at myself in the rearview mirror, a drained and defeated look upon my face. I stayed in the back seat for the next five minutes, trying to collect myself.

Shedding my sleeping bag I opened the door, and a flood of cold air filled the car, my lungs, my life. The first few nights had me hopping around on the frigid pavement, but after more than a month of this I stood erect, my feet whining, but not willing to give in. I rummaged through the back seat, moving to the front, lifting up old items of clothing, and discarded food wrappers before finding my stale jeans, a shirt caked in dust, and an over worn work jacket. I laced up my boots and shut the door, walking away from my parking lot and home.

No matter what street, roadside, or lot the car would remain while I was at work, I couldn't help but wonder. *Would it get towed? Would there be a ticket on the window when I got back? Would someone break in and steal the remainder of my material life?* I almost wanted this to happen, at least then I'd know something had been valuable.

The time it took to walk to the bus depot, wait for a bus, and then take the drawn out stop and go process to work was never any fun for me. Most mornings threatened that I'd fall back asleep and possibly miss my stop, or I would sit there and stew in my month long predicament.

Missing my stop was the risk and option I found more favorable. In any case, I always left for work too early.

The sun began to shine through the mist, clearing the path in front of me. But I burrowed deeper into my jacket, waiting for the warmth to kick in. As I took up the usual path towards the bus station, there he was on the bridge over the shallow river, as if he never left it.

Sometimes he was sitting on the sidewalk, a few times leaning against the rail, or dangerously close to falling back off it. There were always various objects with him, a sack of what I assumed held a mixture of dirty clothes, maybe some cart with wheels, odd knick knacks and things he must have found while wandering around. I had guessed he lived under the bridge and that was where he kept most of what ever objects he needed to claim.

His garb was usually the same, big baggy jeans with random holes that only gave way to what looked like more pants underneath. He had an array of shirts but the smell and look to them had them run together as something only a washing machine would eventually distinguish. Apart from his thick, heavy jacket, and cap that pulled back most of his long, greasy, gray hair, his beard was the only thing that looked like he kept in a somewhat presentable fashion.

The first few times through the month he didn't take notice of me, a regular street shuffler, "Spare any change?" he'd gruffly say, never expecting much so early. I didn't have much to give. After a few days I guess he began to wise up, the troll to my crossing. He became suspicious, checking the clock tower silently, making a note that I crossed 5 days a week at 5:45AM. His silence and suspicion melted away eventually. Some days he gave way to smiles, friendly hello's, and remarks about the weather.

I never wanted to stop and talk. I was timid, shy, perhaps too scared at how close I was to becoming someone like him. But for some reason I never chose another path. He was a part of my routine as much as I was of his now.

But today was different, his stance showed it. He seemed to almost be blocking the sidewalk path, prepared to make some statement. Before I came to him, he had already opened his mouth, a small engine rattling away in his chest spewing words, perpetual cigarette smoke, and filth.

“Hey, naw woah there young fella. Where you always off to at this hour? Don't chu know the city still sleeps. How come you wake?”

I resisted the urge to ask, “Well how come you're awake at this hour?” It would have been rude.

“Well I've got work to get to. I have to catch the bus.”

Both of these statements were lies. Work didn't start until 8:00AM, but when you are living out of a car, sleeping-in doesn't exactly become a luxury any more. Getting up and occupying my mind with work was better than sitting in my Ford Disappointment, feeling sorry for myself. And I couldn't find the guts to drive up to campus every day, park and have co-workers or students stare at the filthy kid locking up his house-sedan. The bus was free with my student ID, and I was low on gas.

I don't think anyone at work knew how I was living. And I wanted to avoid all questions and keep it that way. It was hard enough to hear these young, yet-to-graduate kids talk about their classes, holding on to this purpose and energy. An exciting future awaited them, or so they

thought. I simply didn't want to damper their spirits as the guy who graduated but never left.

My boss was nice enough, but whenever he invited people out afterwards to grab a drink or head to his house, I declined. In the past I had said yes, but that was when I had a shower and change of clothes, ashamed to show up to a place still smelling like sweat, mud, fertilizer and whatever other muck I had under my finger nails.

“Ah you catchin' the bus ta work.” He opened his grayish dead eyes wide, lifting his slouching brows a bit to stare hard into me. “But what exactly is the work that you do?” he continued, glancing me up and down looking at the rags I was wearing.

Even to a complete stranger I was embarrassed at my appearance, and felt I had to explain myself. “I'm a groundskeeper up on campus.”

“Ha, keeper of the grounds hmm. Boy you can't keep no grounds.” He laughed a little more, as if it were a joke. I wasn't sure what to respond with, or why I was still even having this conversation.

“Yeah, I uhh, go around mowing lawns, pruning plants, raking leaves, you know outdoors stuff to keep the campus clean. Um pick up garbage, dig ditches...”

“You wanna learn a thing or two from me?” he said with a grin spreading to my surprise with a full mouth of teeth, even if they were all yellowish brown. He did not wait for me to reply, “There ain't no way you ever gonna keep nature clean. She's a dirty girl. Let'er have it, enjoy her, or y'll be digging another ditch sooner than ya want.”

I paused and made the connection he was getting at. “True, very true, I'll think about that on my bus ride. But I better be going.”

Apparently he didn't hear me, or simply he just wanted to keep the conversation going, because his next question caught me off guard. He flat out just said it. "How come you always leave so dirty?"

I repeated my answer, "Well working on campus as a groundskeeper, under the sun all day, down on the ground and such, you are bound to get dirty, ya know."

"No, naw, naw I know you get dirty, how come you *always* dirty though? I seen you up and down this street over this bridge for plenty a days now and every one of 'em you dirty. What, your machine washer broke or something?"

He was getting closer to a topic I would rather not have with him. Was it because I felt it would be awkward, or because it meant acknowledging it?

"Oh, you know, why put on clean clothes if you're gonna get 'em dirty again doing the same ole thing."

"I'd wear clean clothes." he replied, almost quieting the words as they came out, a frustrated but serene smile on his face.

I winced at what I had said, standing in the silence between us, unsure what to do next.

"Let me ask you something," he said, popping out of his trance.

"Yeah?" I felt obliged to answer him.

"What's one of your biggest regrets in life?"

"I don't know... I don't think I have any regrets," I quickly spat out, unwilling to venture down this territory. My brain was sputtering, blindsided, *Where did that come from? Was this man simply crazy?*

“No, look back, really, what's that one thing you feel terrible about? A do-over thought.”

I tried to prevent the thought from spilling over, but whatever I tried to think of in order to dam it quickly broke. My head was stuck on repeat, sloshing around the same thing that gave me hard cold nights in the back of my car.

As the thought broke through I grew angry at myself, angry that such a random question from such a random person could penetrate my defenses so easily. The one thing that consumed and defeated me was what he got to the heart of. I wanted to yell at him, “Turning into you! This is my biggest regret! Getting evicted the summer after graduation because I trusted someone with my rent checks who was using them for drugs and then skipped town leaving me with the bill, and now I am stuck in this town where all my friends have left to go on to bigger and better things, and I'm sleeping in a car that's technically not even mine, working a manual labor job at the place I left, trying to save up as much as I can so I can pay back what is owed and leave with my tail between my legs, too stubborn, stupid, embarrassed, and ashamed to ask for help, or tell my parents. That's what I regret, this hole in my life. This lie that I am living!”

But as this anger welled up, he knew, and softly barked, “Not now, think back.”

I stared up at the clock tower over downtown in the distance, and took a breath. It was 6:05 AM. I could spare some time and indulge this man. And for whatever reason, this memory popped into my head and I immediately fell into the story.

It wasn't a great memory, but still it brought a smile to my lips. He seemed pleased at the reaction, almost resting back a bit, an ease taking over the situation.

“I was thirteen, and my Dad wanted to take me on a backpacking trip.” I paused and took

a breath again. It was all coming back so strong now, regardless of how far I had buried it. “He was excited to be a dad, a good one. He didn't have one when growing up so he planned all these little day trips and games. I guess the summer after I turned thirteen he felt I was ready. It was like some test of manhood, or maturity, or simply some father son time. He planned this backpacking trip.”

I looked up at the homeless man to see if he was listening, to see if he was just crazy, to see if I had maybe brought up something in him when speaking about my own father.

“Go on nah,” was all he urged.

I nodded. “So, he showed me the map, told me how many miles, how many days, what we would pack, all these different things that needed to get done in time.” I chuckled, “We even began going on warmup hikes. After work and school going on hikes testing mileage and wearing our packs and boots to break them in and get used to the weight. We had such a great time prepping for this trip. My younger brothers were so jealous, but he promised them they'd get a trip too. My mom felt like it was too early for me, but he said I'd be fine. I was so excited.”

With these thoughts reoccurring, it struck me that I hadn't spoken to my family in a while. In the midst of this story, all of a sudden I was wondering how they were, or what they had been up to. The last month or so had me so ashamed I just couldn't bare lying to them. We may have talked every so often, but it's not like I ever gave them any new news, simply stating the same old stuff. I didn't want them to worry. This was my problem, even if I knew they could and would help. My stubbornness and pride wouldn't allow it. At this point my parents thought I was just a graduate soaking up some summer fun after college.

I had gone too deep in a different direction. The homeless man, shifted, providing a rumble, before asking further, “Ok, so you're getting' ready for the trip. What's the problem?”

“Oh sorry. I was just thinking about my Dad for a second. Umm yeah, everything was set, we drove out into the mountains, found the trail head, parked the car, and we never looked behind us. I remember the start of that first day and everything just felt so right, you know?”

I wasn't sure if my question was hypothetical or not, but he answered it all the same, “I getcha. Father son time starts like that, always a good time. I know it.”

“Yeah, so that first hike had us bouncing along the trail, pointing things out, making notes of what we saw, heard, smelled, felt, everything. There were moments where we shared this silence and let nature envelop us. But there were also moments where we talked openly and deeply about our lives. I of course was only thirteen but still I had my share of fears and joys in the world. I think what I was most surprised to hear was how my Dad opened up about his own fears and dreams. There was this new connection, and I think this was the first time I wasn't just his son, some kid, but almost an adult, someone who could listen, speak, approach a topic and understand, an equal of sorts.”

The homeless man had his brown grin on again, slapping his knee to the effect, as if saying, *Boy how is this a regret! Crazy kid.*

“Well, after a break or two, lunch, and something like ten miles later we checked the map and had made it to our night one campsite. The first day was a huge success. I remember my Dad had begun to set up the tent, and he had asked me to go collect fire wood. I can still see his

face when I returned, he was so proud, just beaming. He gave me a swig from his flask, a little celebratory scotch sip we were to share every night we advanced. The taste was leathery but sweeter than I expected, but maybe that's because we were both so happy. He had said he was going to unpack certain things, and double check some stuff, but asked if I wanted to start dinner. I couldn't believe he was giving me this job, there was no way I was going to let him down.”

Jumping in the story for a sec, he wanted details, “Alright now, yeah, tell me it was sometin' good. Gotta be after a first night like that huh.” He licked his lips.

“It was. I mean, food wise we had dried this and that, packages bought at a store, everything saved up. But for night one, to christen the start of our journey, my Dad had brought two steaks. The best food we were going to get for a week. I was surprised to find out we weren't going to have any vegetables with it. But as I made the fire all I wanted was that t-bone to sink my teeth into and gnaw.

The homeless man made a lip smacking sound, followed by a couple “mmm-mmmm's.” I realized it had probably been a while since he had eaten steak.

“So I was crouching next to the fire, and my Dad was still in the tent rolling out the sleeping bags, letting me carry on without interrupting. I tended to the meat, glowing at the satisfaction of my fire. Sitting there my head filled with the next day, and the next day, a continuing thought of fun, with watering holes, fishing lines, climbing up a little mountain on the way, like every day was a new Christmas morning. Like I said, we had planned it all and I just couldn't wait. But I dropped the steaks.”

The homeless man looked to the ground and crouched, as if understanding why I had begun this story now. His lips jutted out and he nodded with a look of disappointment on his face, or maybe it was sympathy.

“I dropped the steaks,” I repeated, letting the words hit me again. “I had cooked them perfectly and in my excitement and bliss I forgot the potholder and grabbed the cast iron pan with my hand. Immediately I dropped it into the flames, the pan turning face down, covering the steaks.

“The shock was so unreal. I didn't think anything like this could happen, but I just stared at what I had done, drained of any and all happiness. I didn't know I could go from one feeling to the next so drastically, it hurt, euphoria taken over by pain, then again it was probably because I burned my hand.”

I paused the story and looked at that hand, flexing the muscles and closing the fingers, seeing the light outline of scarring that served as a mental reminder of pain, rather than a physical one.

“So what'd you end up doing?” the homeless man earnestly asked before rising upright.

I flashed back to the pain. “Well I kicked the pan out of the fire, stirring up a cloud of ash, grit, dirt, and charcoal. The steaks were burning with flames dancing all over them. I took the grill fork and stabbed a steak and set it down in the pan on the ground, then the next one. I shook them, patted them down, tried to get off as much of the crap as I could, but the damage was done. They were smoldering, as if they had been trampled. I remember the gravity of the situation and what I had done, but still naively as a kid, I thought there had to be a way to turn

back the clock and right the situation. But after five minutes I lifted the tent flap.

“My Dad sat there, looking over the map with a flashlight and asked me if the steaks were done. He made a remark about how great it smelled. But all I could say was that there had been an accident. I felt like a kid who had peed the bed after a nightmare. I kept using the word accident as if that would make it better.”

“Was he angry?” the homeless man piped up.

“No, no, he was a good dad like I said. He wasn't mad. He made the most of it. But I remember sitting there staring at these pathetic steaks, cutting into mine and taking a bite as if to show him that it was ok, but immediately crunching into this black, acrid, bitter taste. I had given my Dad what I thought was the better of the two, but I knew it didn't matter now.

“I was so hungry after our hike, but I tried another bite and couldn't get it down, slowly chewing it over as if it were a punishment. And the whole time my Dad ate his as if it were any other steak. But I wasn't sure if he was doing this to show me everything was ok, or because he was truly hungry, or some combination of both. I put my plate down on the ground and went to bed hungry. As I zipped the tent flap up I saw my father reach for my plate and cut into it, getting rid of my evidence.”

My eyes were closed, and apparently a few minutes had gone by before they blinked open. The sun was hitting my face, and the homeless man still leaned against the bridge, intently waiting and listening. People were awake now, and more and more were walking the streets, going to work, or school. None of them who passed by paid us any attention, but I wondered if they thought anything of me talking to this man. Or maybe based on my appearance, nothing

about it was out of the ordinary.

From where I left off I continued, “There were no stories that night, no laughing, no singing around the fire, howling at the moon. No, I simply got into my sleeping bag, still wearing my sweaty, dirty, clothes, letting the pain of my hand take over my thoughts until exhaustion took over embarrassment.

The homeless man made a low whistling noise towards our feet.

“I wish that was the end of it. Some time in the middle of the night a great thunderstorm hit over head. It shook the ground, rattled the tent, drowned the whole world outside. I don't think either of us got any more sleep that night. When we rose to set out, all through our soggy breakfast, and packing of the tent there was no way to stay dry. I was miserable. My hand had swollen pretty bad but there was no way I was going to let my father see it. I was trying to stay strong, to buck up, and make the most of things, but maybe a mile into the hike, I just stopped. I told my dad I couldn't go on any longer. I didn't want to do this any more.

“I remember not being able to look at him, too afraid that I was hurting him. But all he said was, “If that's what you want. Let's go back.” ”

“Through most of our return it rained, and when it wasn't raining I was crying quietly. The steaks, my hand, the pain, the soreness, how tired I was, the rain, all of it was cycling through my head. It didn't help that when the rain let up a little bit I thought how selfish or weak I was. Foolishly, I hoped, maybe we could carry on now, maybe we could turn around and start over, but my Dad said we had come too far. I pleaded with him a bit, telling him if he wanted to continue he should do it, or force me. We can keep going now, I'll be fine. But he said it was too

late, we were too far, and that it was ok.

“We made it back to the car, piled everything in the back and silently drove into the night. I tried to fall asleep in the passenger seat but my eyes were wide, and my hand still stung with pain. I wanted to be more than his son, the man of yesterday again, not this stupid little boy. I didn't want him to think I couldn't do it, and that this was his wrong decision.”

“Ain't nothin' wrong about it. Sounds like your dad loves you.”

“I know. I know he does. And as it turned out, later on the news we saw that the thunderstorm had been following us, and that it would have hiked the whole trip with us. That still didn't make me feel any better. I felt like I had brought the clouds, and let my Dad down. He's never held it against me, but I've always held it against myself.”

“Yea-hea and?” The homeless man was now getting at something I was obviously missing.

“And, what? That's it I guess.”

“No, that's not it. Why don't you call him up, get another trip, go out and rectify things? If you feel so damn bad 'bout it, why don't you tell him, and then feel good?”

“It's not that easy. I have things to do here, he has work, he's not as young as he was. There are all these things in the way now. Believe me, no offense, but I have to figure stuff out here right now.”

“Sounds to me you're the only thing in your own damn way kid.”

I wanted to be insulted by this, and my mouth was open ready to fire back. But he was right, so I shut it.

Instead he extended a big grimy paw and said, “The name's Norm, Norm Hughes.”

“Grant,” I said wearily, not giving him my last name.

He didn't seem to mind. But thinking back on this I wish I had. Some part of me, even after this whole story felt awkward, apprehensive giving him my last name. I don't know why I held on to it, as if it was wrong for him to know.

“Naw if my daddy were still alive, I'd give him a call right this minute. I'd take whatever I have left in this pocket to get to him. But no change can change that. I'll tell ya though, and you listen good, ya know Grant, you know who you remind me of?”

I stared with a quizzical look on my face not ready for what he was about to say next.

“You remind me of me at your age.”

Motionless, I stood there, scared at his astute observation and possible condemnation.

But Norm just kept talking, “I seen you in your car, around 'n such. I know where you're headed, and I don't mean direction wise. Life wise son, life wise. Swallow your fears, take away that pride, don't be such a stubborn jackass. Boy you got one hell-of-a regret there, at least you can solve it. Don't make this regret you're living now become the next one. You remind me of me,” he repeated, and then that same brown-yellow, wide smile grew and he said exactly what I needed to hear, “It's ok, it's ok. You're not me yet.”