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Family Troubles

By Jordan Schauer

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of the Master of Fine
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Family Troubles

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A Story about an Ass Kicking

The couple drives north through the night on a one way street. Parked cars line the road. Street lamps glare. At the end of each block, they stop at traffic lights, wait for the red to change to green; heavy on the gas, they speed across road divots, potholes, speed bumps; squeeze around double-parked cars, then urgently stop at another red light. Roger smacks the steering wheel with his palm, curses. Anne mutters something about taking it easy.

Finally they cross over the parkway, circle the block, following the one-way traffic signs that make the drive slightly longer. On a busy day, it can take five minutes to drive around the block. On the main avenue, where pedestrians clog the crosswalks, and stores chain together from the river to the airport, Roger curses again. A few car lengths ahead, a car is driving towards them in reverse. It is a white Lexus SUV, and it rolls backwards and then halts; the brake lights flutter.

“What is he doing?” Anne asks.

“Being an idiot,” Roger says, “trying to park his *car*.” He flaps his head towards an opening, a space between the lines of cars that the driver had already sped past. The Lexus gives another spastic jab backwards, and Roger holds the horn down with the palm of his hand.

“Calm down,” says his wife.

The brake lights flash, and he hears his wife's fingernails snapping against themselves, an unconscious tick that drives him crazy. He looks to see if there is any oncoming traffic in the left lane, and pulls around the SUV. When the two cars are adjacent, Roger yells, "Drive around the block, asshole," and jams his palm on the horn. He feels wonderful, and holds the horn and looks to see the other driver. Through the slightly tinted glass, Roger can make out the face of a man, a certain type of man, with a buzzed haircut, a cinderblock for a face and eyes that somehow glint through the night like polished leather. As they lock eyes a sickness grips Roger's throat.

He hits the gas. Speeds the car onto 38th street and almost careens into a woman in the crosswalk. "Pinche idiota," the woman says.

"Take it easy," says Anne.

The street passes in a blur of orange street lights, hanging oak tree limbs and parked cars. All of it, the quiet of the road and the way the air sweeps into the windows, lulls Roger into feeling sheepish and stupid. He can't stop looking into the rearview mirror, waiting for the Lexus to turn the corner, waiting for the headlights to sweep around the turn. He stops at another traffic light—the final one before his apartment—and he sees them, the blue light of the fancy halogen headlights, spraying their color across the road. He hears the accelerating whir of a motor, audible over the Buick's hiccupping idle.

"Shit," Roger says.

"What?" says his wife.

The car moves remarkably fast. This is silly, Roger thinks. People do not do this. People threaten that they will do this. But they don't actually do this.

The Lexus stops before the traffic light changes, and the headlights—the high beams— strike the rearview mirror a shock white, a flat platinum reflection that imprints a burnt shadow on Roger's sight.

“Our lucky night,” his wife says. There's a parking spot directly in front of their apartment. His wife doesn't wait for him to park. She has to pee, and opens the car door and dashes up the concrete stoop.

“Wait,” he says, but she has left him. He looks over his shoulder where the Lexus has stopped, hazard lights clicked on, the red lights flashing across the street, off the cars, the brick houses, the green leaves of the maple trees that, every fifty feet or so, grow out of the sidewalk.

“Call the police,” He says. He says this out loud, but she's not there. She's already inside.

The man steps out of his car and leaves the door hanging open like a fat lip. Roger waits for the sound of the car door slamming shut. He holds the steering wheel and stares forward. The door doesn't shut. The door doesn't shut and Roger knows the man is walking now, over to Roger, who is now whistling the melody: *Just another Saturday night, and I ain't got nobody*, and then sings, “I've got some money 'cause I just got paid.”

“You got a loud horn,” the man says. Roger drums on his steering wheel, still staring forward, down the street.

“Oh how I wish I had someone to talk to—“ He is too tired to drive away. Whatever happens here, it will be better than running.

“You don’t listen?”

He turns and looks up. It is the same man, lumbering now, as if poured from some kind of pliant cement, towards Roger. He is shorter than Roger expects, and holds up an arm now, a strong stubby arm with a short, stubby finger pointing at Roger.

“You,” he says. “Get out of the car.”

“No,” Roger says.

“Get out of the car,” the man says again. His voice is higher than Roger expected.

“Really. No,” Roger says.

The man rushes the window and Roger dives towards the passenger seat; the edge of the seatbelt snags against his neck, saws into his flesh. Now Roger wants to run, and scrambles to unlock his seatbelt, to crawl across to the other side of his car, to open the door, get out, and run. This man is a fucking lunatic, Roger thinks. This tiny man, with his square head and short arms is going to try to kill me. The man crashes his fist down onto the side-view mirror and the plastic

cracks. Roger fumbles with the seatbelt lock, and the man reaches into the car and grabs Roger by the collar. Roger flares his hands against the man's arm.

“Stop it,” Roger squeaks. “Stop,” he repeats. “Get off. I'll get out.”

But Before that, it was a Story about Love

She is thirty minutes late. She told him to be ready at six, and now it's six thirty and he hears the door open. When it closes, the apartment shakes. That's how he knows that she's home, because the apartment shudders.

She doesn't say hello, but walks directly into the bathroom and he hears the shower. He is curious. When she comes home she usually says hello. She works a full hour longer than Roger, and she gets tired, but then she likes it when Roger goes to her. He knocks on the bathroom door.

“What is it?” she says.

“Nothing,” he says. “I thought you were going to be home at six.”

She doesn't respond. “How was your day?” he ask through the door.

“I will be out in a minute,” she says.

He returns to the television set. In the show, a blond woman has the ability to read people's minds. Roger has a reoccurring dream that occurs to him far too regularly: in it his wife knows everything that he thinks. Every time he hates her, she knows, and she uses this power to manipulate him. She makes him hate her more and more, until he snaps and pulls off her head. Then her head laughs at

him, victorious and clenched between his hands. In those final moments, before the laughing head wakes him, he regrets what he has done, loves her again, and feels terrible.

Twenty minutes later she comes out of the bathroom, make up done-up like a butterfly.

“Let’s go,” she says.

“How come,” Roger says, “when we’re doing something you want to do it’s always this rush to be on time to get out the door to be somewhere before the fucking gates of hell close?” He says this while bent over, fixing the knot in his loafers.

“What are you talking about?” she says.

“You know what I’m talking about,” he says.

“Look,” she says. She looks into her purse. It’s a black purse that Roger has never seen before. “No. You know. Let’s just go, okay? I don’t want to fight about it. I don’t want to fight about anything all night. Okay?”

“Fine,” Roger says.

When they get into the car Roger asks, “When did you get that purse?” but he says it in a way that *bothers* her.

“Christ. I don’t know. Last week? I got it when I got my shoes,” she says.

“*Those* shoes?” he says.

“Those shoes. These shoes.” she says and flutter kicks her feet into the bottom of the dashboard. “Christ, what does it matter?”

“I don’t know,” Roger says, but for some reason it feels very important to him.

They drive south on twenty-first street, a notoriously dangerous four lane road. Roger watches for delivery trucks stopped in the right lane, and turning vehicles stopped in the left lane; he swerves when he has to. They pass car washes and diners that are lit up like casinos, the housing projects that eclipse the murky blue sky. They cross the bridge and drive north. Neither person speaks, but in the silence Roger’s aggravation intensifies: each time she slumps her shoulders, exaggerates a sigh, looks at her cell phone or fiddles with the radio, he wants to scream at her. She flips opens the car’s sun visor mirror to examine her eye makeup.

“Can you not do that now?” he says. Roger’s aggravation is a physical part of him, shaped like a grapefruit and occupying a space somewhere between his esophagus, lungs and heart.

She looks at him, and although he cannot turn to face her he knows the way that she is looking. She taps her fingers, sighs, slaps the mirror shut, and the sun visor flops back into place. “It’s distracting,” he says.

As he drives, questions come to him that he could ask her, but he won’t. Who, again, are they going to have dinner with, and is he that same person whose name has been coming up in conversation lately? And why haven’t they been

having sex lately, anyway? And whose text messages does she keep checking her phone for? He won't break the silence, and he knows that she won't either.

They are lucky and find street parking, and walk on a sidewalk that sparkles as if embedded with diamonds. Then he can talk again. The air makes it okay to talk. Being away from Queens makes it okay to talk. He looks up at the green awning of the Manhattan Terraces, arched over the doorway, and at the lobby with the gold trim, and the doorman standing on the other side of the glass, in a two-tailed suit and a thick grey moustache. "It looks nice. Maybe we can move in." Roger says.

"Like if you happen to *hit the lottery*," she says.

"I'm sorry," Roger says. "I really didn't think we could move in."

"I'm sorry," she says. "If *we* happen to hit the lottery. I'm sorry." She kisses him on the cheek. Her eyes are tiny notes of apology, glazed and large as the moon. "Do you love me?" she says.

"Later," Roger says. "Ask me later."

She pouts ruby-puckered lips. "Fine," she says and walks into the building.

The host, William, greets them like a drunken carnival, "It's Anne and Roger!" He is short and has a geeky, sun-allergy look to him. Perhaps, one could say, if not careful he could accidentally be sucked into a vacuum cleaner. "Well come on in," he says and they follow him as his feet click across the wooden floor

and into a shadowy room lit by several candles and dimness. The people seem too many for the room, crammed into a space hardly large enough to open a Monopoly game board.

“I’m going to get a drink,” Anne says, and she disappears into what seems to Roger an impenetrable mass of clad-in-black women. In the dim he can see shoulder blades and neck lines, red lipstick, legs so plentiful that there may be four for every woman. Had he known insurance parties attracted such attractive crowds—wow. He feels a tap on his shoulder and turns to see that he has drawn himself so far against the wall that he has disturbed the space of a palm tree frond. “Ah, there you are,” Roger says to the tree, and pokes a spindly leaf. He is underdressed, but is used to being so. He doesn’t really have the money to dress appropriately.

He finds the bar and pours himself a glass of wine and parks himself in a rather comfortable chair. He’s tired, or he’s not drunk enough to enjoy the company of strangers. That’s something Anne says, that he needs at least three drinks before he’ll smile at anyone. Sitting on the couch, he can’t see anything except a wall of backs, facing one another, glimmering somehow, with such enthusiasm. They all seem so at ease, occupied, as if everything is exciting, and nothing is dull and repetitive. Then he catches a glimpse of his wife. She stands near the window, poking at something edible at the end of a toothpick. She laughs at something that the host, William says. Roger watches them, and how they laugh together. How awful would it be if they were *meant* to be together, and Roger was simply a step-stool in her growth and self-realization—whatever that

meant— a will-be former that Anne can be thankful she never had children with. Only her mother might bring his name up again, when she and her William and their children will be visiting for whatever holiday, and she'll say, "Ah, my darlings." And then to Anne, "You made the right choice before it was too late." Roger finishes his drink and heads back to the bar.

He squirms his way past a couple of people. He pours some vodka and swirls it a few times so the ice melts, and then he downs half of the glass. He feels better, more comfortable looking around at the room. "Take that," he says, grinning like he has conquered something; he clanks two more ice cubes into the drink and tops it off.

Then he decides to make at least a few women fall in love with him. This is something Roger can do if he's having a good night. He thinks of this as a back-up plan. He spots a blond girl swaying herself with the music, and not talking to anyone. Should Anne desert him for her own soul partner, he'll be ready. "Hey," Roger says. He wants to tap this woman on the shoulder but he has a glass of vodka in one hand and a glass of some cabernet in the other. "I don't *know* you!" he says.

"I don't know you either," she says, matching his enthusiasm. She is beautiful, prettier than Anne, and this makes him nervous. She reminds him of a third grade teacher he had twenty years ago. Mrs...

"Have you ever taught third grade?" he asks.

"No," she says. "I'm in insurance. Like everyone else."

“Ah insurance. How’s the weather there this time of year?” he asks her.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he says. “Bad joke.” And then, because he has nothing else to say, he asks, “Do you know Anne?”

“Anne Falkland? Of course, I do,” she says.

“Ah, nevermind,” he says. Without saying anything else, he turns and walks away from her. He taps someone on the shoulder and slides between a couple talking about their favorite types of dog breed. He heads back towards the bar and sees Anne by the window, with William, cupping wine glasses the way they might cradle the back of each other’s heads. Roger interrupts them. “What are you talking about?” he says.

“Work stuff,” Anne says.

“*Work* stuff,” Roger says. “I love work stuff.”

William excuses himself and Roger notices something very peculiar and amusing: William’s blond hair seems swept across his scalp to hide premature balding. “Justice,” Roger says aloud.

“What?” Anne asks.

“Your William has a *comb over*,” he says. He turns his head to follow William as the short man makes his way through the crowd. “Comb over,” he says again.

“Will you stop? I told you that you wouldn’t want to come,” she says.

“He looks like that boy from that Christmas movie with the BB gun. Or Truman Capote.”

“Seriously, stop. He’s probably my best friend from the office. Just try to enjoy yourself for a little while longer.” She smiles and kisses him on the cheek.

“I’m having a smashing ball,” he says.

“Good,” she says. She kisses him again on the cheek. “Look, you can see the empire state building,” she says. When he turns to look, she ducks away in the space between people.

“What a wife, what a wife, what a life.” Roger sighs and looks out the window. The windows fill the space from ceiling to floor, stretches from wall to wall. “You can’t even see the park,” he says. He looks to his left. There is another palm tree.

Roger takes his glass of wine to the couch and downs the glass and then fills it with a bottle that had been set on the coffee table. The sofa is fantastically plush.

“This really feels like a cloud,” he says. A woman is next to him. “Earlier,” he says to her, “I saw you two and thought you two may have had brain damage, but now I can see that it’s the couches. You really can’t do a thing except enjoy this.”

“I know,” the woman says. “I can sit here all night.”

He sips and sighs and looks around the room. He feels stupid now, for thinking about nailing his third grade teacher, but still, Anne didn't have to run off like that. He sighs.

Anne has not returned and Roger does what he always does when she acts in a way which is not immediately attuned to him: he imagines her partaking in any number of scandalous and secretive acts of infidelity. He wonders if she has done it on this very comfortable couch, if she has posed in a white fedora and those pearls that she likes to wear when she's wearing nothing else. He shudders and hears her say, "William, I'd love it if you could just—" Roger flings himself off the couch and slides around guests and into the kitchen. He finds her posed against a granite countertop, laughing in a way he only hears her laugh when she's on the phone. It is an authentic laugh, and annoying sometimes. In the lighting, everything seems too apparent, too visible and crisp. William peels back aluminum foil from the top of a chafing dish.

"Ah, a buffet," says Roger. "I'll have the eggplant rollatini! Olé!"

"William ordered linguine con vongole for me," she says. "Isn't that sweet?" This is her favorite food, and Roger detests the clear clam broth.

"Where's the bathroom?" Roger says. He turns to leave—he can find it himself, and then turns back to face his wife and this man. "William," he says, "I have a question for you. Do you want to sleep with my wife?" William looks at Anne.

"Roger," she says. "What the fuck are you doing?"

A Conclusion

A man is double parked ahead of them and flings open the car door. Roger slams on his breaks and stops the car a foot before hitting the opening door. “Fucking idiot,” he says. He waits for the man to close the door and prance around the car; and Roger pinches through and drives up to a red light.

“Are you having an affair?” Roger asks, because neither Anne nor William answered the question in the kitchen. She’d apologized. “I’m really sorry about this—that my husband is a child—and now we need to leave.” And she stormed off and he thought about maybe sticking around for another drink and finding Mrs. Decker—*that* had been his third grade teacher’s name. And what did William do? Nothing. He didn’t answer the question and instead of pursuing the matter with the little blond shit, Roger followed his wife out of the front door and down the elevator and into the lobby where she stormed past the doorman.

“Are you serious?” she says, and he honks the horn again. She has her hand flat against her chest. “Are you crazy?”

“What’s the answer?” he says.

“No,” she says.

“I saw you looking at him,” he says.

“Looking at him?”

“You know what I mean,” he says. “I saw *how* you looked at him, like you’d shared some moments.”

“Some *moments?*”

“Yes, like you fucked,” he says. “Like you’re fucking. Or want to be.” She doesn’t answer and the light turns green and he doesn’t move. The car behind squeaks its horn.

“No,” she says. “We’re not fucking.”

A man strolls into the crosswalk, and Roger has to stop. When he begins to drive again, he says, “And do you want to?”

“Want to what?”

“Fuck him?”

“Well, he is a very sweet and kind person.”

Waking Up

Roger’s eyes flutter and orange fills his vision, so bright and then darkened around the edges. At first he remembers all of it, and is afraid that somehow the punch severed some important optical something. He remembers how he got out of the car, and how he put out his hands in acceptance of whatever awaited him, hoping that this man would not hit someone so dejected, whose entire display was nothing but a pathetic refusal to fight. The man with the cement head had held his hands up like a boxer, leaned backwards and lunged forward, and even as the man came at Roger, he thought, *he is only taunting me, trying to scare me. He will stop his fist at the last moment.*

Now the orange light is everywhere, and Roger thinks that maybe he is in a hospital, and the impact, whether of the man's fist to his head, or Roger's head knocking onto the road, stole his vision. But gradually, as his fear becomes unbearable, he sees that the orange light emits from a single point, a street light extending above. The light is so bright, he closes his eyes. The back of his head aches and he doesn't want to move. He is still on the sidewalk. He knows this now. He feels the coldness of it, and the un-giving solidness of it. If he moves something will fall off. He wants darkness. Again he thinks of his wife being with William. The concrete cradles his head and the light tells him it's time to move. She's not with William. She's inside. He lifts an arm and touches his chest. He touches his arm. He tilts his head one way, then another. The concrete no longer cradles. It grates and incites pain. He rights himself and eventually stands. He feels okay, as if he had been sleeping for too long, wobbly, but okay.

She is on the couch with a book. She is in pajamas.

"Where have you been?" she says. She is sincerely concerned.

"I—some guy kicked my ass." He's never said that before. He steps into the light and by her reaction he can see that she believes him.

"Baby," she says. "Are you alright?" She's on her feet like a Red Cross volunteer, fetching an icepack and towel, warming tea and helping him by the arm to the bedroom. She pulls back the covers, pulls off his shoes and then gets him a pair of comfortable sweat pants. He lies against the pillows with an icepack over his face, the coldness numbing and painful.

He tells her how he lost his sight. How he saw orange and thought for a while that he would never see again. And how the man came to punish Roger for being impatient and jealous.

“Should we call the police?” she says.

“No,” Roger says. “I am okay. I am okay.”

“Poor baby,” she says. He buries his head against her chest, and feels the soft warmth as she cradles his head in her arms. It is safe there.

The Death and Loss of a Loved One

Martin folds the letter and slides it into an envelope. Softly, so he doesn't wake her, he creeps into the bedroom and stashes it in his own nightstand. In the morning, he will put the letter out on the dining room table, and when she comes home from work she will find it.

He lies in bed for a long time before sleeping. He is excited, terrified. He listens to his wife breathing; she coughs. What if she wakes? What if she already knows? He worries that his own apprehension will wake her. But she doesn't move and the soft wheezing of her breath starts up again. When he does sleep, he wakes often and is uncertain whether he slept at all. The night goes on like this, with him turning one way, and his brain flashing through fragments of old memories. Then he remembers a line from a song he hasn't heard in years. It repeats in his head. He is not willing any of this to happen, yet it won't stop. When he is almost asleep, a new thought surfaces in his mind; it is present and damning and inevitable and feels terribly near: his heart will one day stop. It happened to his own father, who died of a heart attack when he had been only a few years older than Martin is now.

He gets out of bed and slinks off to the bathroom. He cups water and drinks from his hands. He thinks that the letter is causing the problem, and for a moment he thinks he should open it again, to re-read it, because what way is that to leave a wife of twelve years? It is the only way; he knows this. If he talks to

her, she will only talk him out of it. She is wonderful at talking him out of things. It is probably what she is best at.

“Martin, I am going to work.” It is morning, and before he opens his eyes he smells the floral scented perfume. Her face hangs over him, those over-glossed lips. “Have a good day,” she says, and kisses him before he can turn his head.

“You too,” he says, and as his wife shuts the door, he thinks that *that* will be the last thing he says to her, that he will never see her again, and there is a pang of remorse. “Have a good day,” he says again, softly. Suddenly, he wants to tell her everything that he is planning to do. What if she might want to go with him? What if she is as miserable as he is? Then the bedroom door opens. He pretends to be sleeping. He hasn’t heard any footsteps on the carpet, so he assumes she is standing in the doorway, looking at him.

“Martin?” He looks up at her, acting drowsier than he is. “Remember to let Max in, honey.”

“Okay, I will.”

The front door slams shut and he remembers what he needs to do. He feels none of that heaviness that often weighs him to the bed until noon. Instead, he springs up, throws back the covers. In the closet, he heaves aside a row of dresses. He finds the hiking backpack that he’d bought when he had the idea to take on hiking as a hobby—to get away for a weekend—to get some exercise and fresh air. He had used it once, on a trip to visit her parents. When he showed up at the

front door with it slung on his back, her mother had said, *Look at Martin, the explorer.*

He packs everything that will fit. Underwear, socks, a couple of pairs of jeans, some t-shirts and sweat shirts. He leaves all of his collared things behind and before nine he's out the door and into the cold of it. There's a slight drizzle, a piercing sleet, and he's glad it isn't snowing. He hates shoveling snow. He hates cleaning out gutters. He hates all of it. This makes him wonder again what she will do, how she will handle things, but he knows she will be okay. She is much stronger than he is. He was strong once, okay being on his own, but with her he relies too much on her. He lets himself need her, like a child.

It is cold and wet, and the sky hangs over the neighborhood, motionless and eternal. It is a decent neighborhood. The people who live there take care of their houses, their yards, their children. He never had children—if he did he'd see himself sticking around at least until they graduate from college. Could he stay that long? He didn't know. He tried to do the math, to figure out how much longer that might be, but he gave up.

He stows the pack in the backseat of the car. He plans to drive south to escape the cold, and then west. It is now or never. He turns on the car, yanks down the parking break, and looks over his shoulder for that woman who walks the little rat of a Yorkie. He learned her name when he first moved into the neighborhood about seven years ago, but had never been able to remember it since. The woman is always out with her neon green jogger's vest, her arms

pumping through the air like machinery. And that Yorkie, *Romeo*, red bow in hair, that traipses along in front of her, high-kicking its paws like a Christmas time dancer at Radio City. He had almost run over her dog once, and she slammed her fist against the closed window. “You better look next time or else I’m going to punch your fucking cock in,” she told him, and since then he has looked.

He reverses to the bottom of the driveway and then slams the steering wheel because of his stupidity. He’d been so excited to leave that he forgot the note in the drawer. He wants to say screw it, to just leave. No. It would only be right to put the note out, because if he doesn’t then she will get home and wonder where he is, and then she will call his cell phone, and then she will call it again, and how long would it take for the realization to set in? Because what is worse is that she probably won’t think that he has left, but that he has gotten into some horrible accident—with the roads icing over later in the day— and the last thing he needs is for her to call the police and have eyes out looking for him. And for her to be worrying. It’s much better to be clean with this type of thing.

He unlocks the door. The house is quiet and unchanged. It feels the same as if he were coming home from work in the afternoon—back when he was working, and before the recession, and he actually had the will to leave the house in the morning. The will to go out every day and compete with those fuck heads.

Now it’s empty and quiet because it’s nine o’clock in the morning, and he gets the note, and as he drops the envelope on the table, he hears the barking. Max is in the yard, running and snarling along the stockade fence, doing his damndest

to scare whoever is walking along the other side. He'd forgotten to let the dog in, even after she told him. Max. Max is what little kinds want to see lions and tigers do at the zoo: he is wound energy and appetite, tirelessly unraveling at the speed of a mustang, a monster that devours shadows, that chokes down chicken carcasses.

Martin opens the back door and Max looks up, perplexed. The animal doesn't come greet the man, but looks and waits for the man to make an offering. The dog is God of the backyard, and the man is inconsequential unless he brings a slice of cheese, sandwich meat, or the leash. The leash is best. "Come here," the man says. The dog tilts its head. Martin slaps his thigh. "*Come here,*" he says. He whistles. The dog tilts its head further, but doesn't move. The man gets the leash, and he returns with the thick nylon rope dangling between his hands like a dead garden snake, and the dog, happy as a toddler, bounds over, tongue lolling. The man pats the dog, rubs his thick winter coat and wipes off the cold droplets of rain. Max paws at the man's pants and expels breath like furnace fumes into the cold air.

He plans to leave the dog—does he really want to travel with a sixty pound bag of dried dog food?—and this may be the last time they see each other. Because of this the man decides on one last walk, even though he knows when it comes right down to it, Max will be alright without him. Max will not miss the man, but he *will* miss the dog. The man feels differently besides the dog. When walking, the man and the dog have the same purpose, to roam, to explore. He likes to feel the animal pulling and yanking ahead of him, to be constantly

fighting and struggling as the dog stops to sniff and piss and sniff and piss, and then pulls again forward, always attentive, always bounding after something.

“You and me, buddy,” the man says, and they walk out of the front door.

As he steps off the porch, the man sees the woman with the green vest. He sees the top half of her, walking along the other side of the hedges, pumping her arms. Though neither the man nor Max can see the small dog walking with her, they both realize it at the same instant. The leash pulls, flies out of the man’s hand. The dog barrels across the yard, body low and unbelievably fast, like when he sprints for a Frisbee. The woman sees, but before she can let out a shriek, Max is there, slams into the tiny dog, flips the animal into the air and catches it.

Martin hasn’t run in twenty years, but he runs now.

“Max,” the woman shouts. Her voice is the loudest noise the man has ever heard, buzz-saw shrill. She hammers with the underside of her hand, screams for Max to stop. Max has Romeo in his mouth, and shakes his head and the tiny animal back and forth, which is probably meant—the man sees now—to snap its prey’s back or neck. Max growls from somewhere far back in his throat and the little dog shakes around like a towel. It is the sound of death in nature. Yelps. Growls. Screaming. Sounds from hell.

Martin reaches into the fray, grabs Max by the collar and yanks backwards. Max drops the Yorkie, snaps at Martin. Martin punches Max in the side of the head and the dog yelps, retreats back to the house. Romeo is limp and pasted to the black top, not anymore a dog, but a swath of fur, saliva and blood.

The woman stoops and lifts the dog, pulls it to her chest. She murmurs to the animal, as if her desperate whispers could somehow breathe life back into the dog. “Romeo, Romeo.”

“Oh my god,” the man says. “I’m so sorry. Are you alright?” He steps close to the woman and touches her arm. He wants to take the dog from her and put it somewhere, because he saw how the dog shook.

There is a change in her. He sees her desperation, her shock, instantly transform into anger. Her jaw clenches, lip sneers, eyes turn towards him. “Get off of me,” she says. Tears leak down her cheeks. He steps back, prepares himself to be assaulted. When she focuses again on her own dog, Max returns, still panting, eyeing the muff of fur, cradled to the woman’s chest, like a hyena waiting for a lion to finish with a kill. “Bad dog,” Martin mutters, and then he swats at the dog with the leash.

He tells the woman to wait and he jogs the dog back to the house. When he returns, because he told the woman that he would take her to the vet, the woman has taken another step towards desperation. She has wandered into the center of the street, standing now on the two yellow lines that divide Charles Avenue. She moves with the slow, addled steps of an Alzheimer patient. “Susan,” he says, because suddenly he remembers her name. “Susan,” he says again, because she doesn’t respond. “Let’s take Romeo to the vet,” he says.

“My dog is dead,” she says, and probably because of the obviousness of it, she spits as she says it, and with one hand cradling the dog to her chest, she

leans backwards and with all of her force, swings her arm forward and punches Martin's directly in the chest. He sucks at wind. He has not been punched in a long time. His first impulse is to hit her back, but he doesn't. He trots a few yards away from her, heaving and looking up at the sky, and then swinging down, leaning on his own knees.

He needs to stop and breathe. He looks across the street at the brown house on the corner, where the family lives that raises Dachshunds; they have a son, probably thirty, who is a transvestite, and may also be a prostitute. And then the mulberry tree that litters the road with those purple berries in the Summer, that stain your shoes, or Max's feet, a rich purple color. But it is cold out now, the tree is bare, and he has been meaning to clean out the gutters for almost a month now.

And then when he can talk again: "Jesus Christ, lady. I am sorry about your dog." But now he steps away from her, holding his chest, rubbing the spot on the left side, under his heart, where she slammed him. Then the woman begins to make strange sounds. She is all of a sudden sucking for air, as if from a long tube, and her face, splotched with red, seems to be turning purple.

"Come on," he says. "Come inside." And as he turns to walk back up the driveway and inside the house, he is surprised to see her following him. Her face is splotched with red and black streaks of mascara that carve down the sides of her face. She follows him slowly, almost hesitantly, and he has to wait for her. He can see from the way that it droops over her hand, that there is no doubt, but Max did destroy the creature.

In the glass window, looking out at them as they approach the door, Max stares out with the eyes of a sentry. He gives one gruff bark and the man feels terrible for what has happened. He knows that he probably needs to put the dog to sleep. “Wait a minute here,” the man says, and he goes inside to put Max back out into the yard. The dog doesn’t mind. The dog would stay out there all day, running along the fence and stopping eventually to rest under the back porch.

He doesn’t take off his shoes on the inside of the door, as he usually would if his feet were wet. Instead he takes Susan into the den and sits her down in the solitary chair by the window, with the large armrests that his wife had bought him a couple of Christmases ago. It will be a reading chair for you, she had said, and it made him incredibly happy to have it, because he never had a reading chair before.

“Can I take your coat?” he asks. She gives a dismissive shake of the head. He sits down across from her on the couch. It is an old ratty thing that they had put off replacing until more money would come in, when he found a job. Until then they were living off of his savings—which was quickly disappearing—and her income as an assistant in a bank.

He looks at her. He is not sure what to say. “I’m sorry, again. I am. I don’t know what I can do.”

“You can start by putting a bullet into that thing in the backyard,” she says. The man wants to laugh, but realizes that she’s serious. He had thought she

was attractive, and maybe she still is, but her desire for vengeance is off putting. She has twisted into something mad and pathetic.

He doesn't know why, but he offers her tea; she doesn't want it, so he offers her whisky, and she agrees to that. "None of the cheap stuff," she says. He wants to punch her in the mouth. "And no ice." When he gives her the glass, she slams it back. "One more should do it," she says, and sighs. He refills the glass. She keeps one hand on the dog this whole time, comforting it, he thinks, as it moves onto the next world. But perhaps it's already gone. Perhaps a moment is all it takes, or, he doesn't know.

He doesn't know why. Maybe it's the drink in him, but he tells her. "I was going to leave my wife today," he says. "I am going to," he corrects himself. "After I took the dog for a walk, I was going to drive to California."

"California," she says.

"Yes."

"Irresponsible bastard." she says. "I bet you have a pretty little mistress too. Your poor wife, marrying a bastard." In that moment he saw that the same thing had happened to her--maybe not the same thing. She seemed from a higher caste, with a large house, neat and cared for. She had been left before.

He didn't know what else to do. It was this or park the car in the garage with the engine running and the door shut. Wouldn't that be worse for her? He didn't know.

“You should probably kill yourself,” she says. The glass clinks as she sets it down on the end table. “You can’t leave now,” she says. “We’ve got a score to settle. Fucking animal,” she says. “Your dog is a filthy, disgusting, animal. And you’re a gutless pig.” She sobs again. “I don’t care about you, your wife—marital problems. Fuck. Your animal is going to be killed, and then I’m going to take you to court and take everything you have, and then your wife will probably divorce you anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” the man says, because suddenly this is more than he can handle. “I can pay for whatever needs to be paid for,” he says.

“Romeo,” she says. She looks down at the fur in her lap and lets out a long sigh. She finishes the drink, and thankfully the bottle is empty and he cannot offer her another. She seems like she wants one. He offers instead to drive her home, but she wants to walk. He gives her his number. He thinks about calling a lawyer.

“I’m sorry about your dog,” he says, one last time. “About Romeo.”

“Sorry doesn’t mean shit to me,” she says.

The man doesn’t know what to do, if he should take the dog and go, or if he should stay, unpack his clothes, re-set his wife’s closet dress rack so it looks as if not a thing was moved, and make sure—for God’s sake—that he throws the note in the trash—the one by the curb so she can’t read it, and he will tell her what happened today, and they will face this problem together, and together they will get rid of the dog, and then he will find—what?

He walks the woman to the door. She holds the dog in both of her hands, the way she did before, cradling its blood and lifeless body against her chest. He watches her slow funeral procession walk down the driveway. At the bottom she turns around and looks at him one last time before walking away.

The Night the Earth Ended

Darla gasped and then *hmm'd*. “*What is that?*” she said. She stood in the grass of the rugby field, pointing a slender arm, tan and moonlit, up at the night sky.

A pace behind her, Chris stared at where she pointed. He stood hunched, a little overweight, and was mostly uninterested in the world. “Huh,” he offered.

In the sky, about a hand’s distance from the moon, a great orb flickered and glowed. It looked like a planet, or a new moon that had fallen into the Earth’s gravitational pull. It was orange, or orange-ish, but dull, like the sun might look days before it finally burns itself out.

“Should I pack a bowl?” Chris asked. He loitered behind her.

“Did you,” Darla said, staring up at the sky. “Did you hear anything about this? On the news or...”

But Chris didn’t watch the news. He played Call of Duty and World of Warcraft and was anxiously looking forward to the release of Diablo III.

“That thing looks like a glowing basketball,” Darla said. She turned and looked at him. She was smurfish, not blue exactly, but she had a cartoon-ness about her. A red shine that never left her cheeks, an obsession with the Grateful Dead, and fairly regularly she could be found skipping around campus to and fro her sociology lectures. “Do you think it’s a meteor or comet or whatever and it’s about to hit the earth?”

“No,” he said. Then he gave a nervous laugh. “It’s not moving. If it was about to hit the earth, it would be moving. That thing is just chilling up there. Like the moon.”

“Maybe,” she said. She sat down in the grass, still looking up. He sat down next to her. They stretched their feet out in front of them, and waited for something to happen. When nothing did, he took out his bowl and stuffed a thumb-full of pot inside. He took a hit. “It’s bigger than the moon,” she said.

“Maybe the Mayans are right,” he said. “And that thing is incoming doom, death and the end of the world.”

“Don’t say that,” she said but he didn’t apologize. They both sat in silence, watching. Its surface seemed liquid, and it swirled like an orange and red oil spill. They passed the pot back and forth a few times and, in the silence, Chris became more afraid. Darla relaxed.

“Doom, doom, doom,” she said, playing with her voice. “Death, death, death.” She seemed to enjoy the oo’s and the th’s. “oo, oo, oo.” “Th, th, th.”

“Stop it,” he said, but he wasn’t sure that she heard him because she kept oooing. “Oo, oo, oo, Doom, Death, Doom.” Then she paused and took a deep breath. “Wooooooow,” she said, “Imagine if this is it. The beginning of the end of the world.”

“Stop it,” he said.

“What would you miss?” she asked. “If the Earth ends in, say, twenty minutes, what would you miss?”

The first thing that came to him was her. He would miss sitting here with her in the field and fantasizing about her when she wasn't around. He sighed because he couldn't be honest, and he told her that he would miss the ocean, because he was from Long Island and that was what he said, that he loved the ocean. He asked her the same question.

“I would miss my family! And my sister! I would miss playing the guitar!” Then laughed. “Hah. I would miss television. I would miss singing songs in the shower and annoying my roommate. I wonder what my Dad would say,” she said. “I wonder what they are saying... on the news.” She sort of nodded at the meteor, as if to say, *I'm not done with you yet.*

“I have to call my Dad,” she said. “I have to turn on the television.”

She stood up and didn't wait for Chris, but began marching back across the rugby field towards the dorms. He knew that more than anything, if this was the end of the world, he didn't want to be alone.

The Sun Chef

It was the fall and there was money to be made in the restaurant. The inexpensive sandwiches of the summer had been replaced with short ribs, slow cooked and tender. We served foie gras and pork belly; stuffed the sweet bodies of escargot into bones, chock-full of buttery marrow. It all begged for a thick glass of wine to wash it down.

To oversee the changes, Greg, the chef/owner/giant asshole had taken more of an active role in the daily operations. Recently, he'd been gone to oversee the opening of a new restaurant.

“When I walk in the door--.” Greg had his finger in my face— large, rough hands—I'd looked at them before to see how I might stack up in a fight— mine were small, agile, delicate, good for setting forks and knives, rearranging glassware to fit an extra dish of remoulade—his were seven pounds of flesh and bone, good for tearing engines apart, ripping phone books in half, scabbed and scarred from knife cuts and oven burns. “When I walk in this door,” he was saying, “It's yes chef, no chef.”

“Yes chef,” I replied. We were standing behind the bar, and, to not alert the customers, we whispered.

“It's like you're saying ‘fuck you to me’,” Greg said.

“I apologize,” I said, “There was a confusion.”

“Apology not accepted,” he said, and walked away.

The staff weren't supposed to order food off the menu during shifts. There was a slight confusion due to a recent change in this policy, and even the sous chef wasn't sure about the new rules.

I'd heard from other staff members to stay out of his way. In the five months I'd been working there, he hadn't come by very often, and on the rare occasions when he would stop by, when I greeted him with a "Hello, Greg," he would storm passed without a nod.

One night I asked the manager, "Why doesn't Greg like me?" The previous evening he had assigned me work that was normally assigned for the kitchen porter—the lowest job in the restaurant.

"I don't know, man. First thing is you don't have a big pair of tits." It was true that the two new employees he had hired—who I presumed would replace me—were females and did have big tits, and by now I was mostly certain I was going to be fired and the best explanation I could come up with was an Animal Planet territorial thing: the same way a buck will mark up every tree within five miles, and then butt antlers with any other male crisscrossing their path; this fuckwad considered me some kind of threat.

"Yes chef, no chef." But now I understood him better. He was a Four-Star General, Louie the Fourteenth, a high commander ordained by God, not to be addressed unless addressed. Not to be directly looked at. To be treated like the sun. "Yes, chef. Yes, chef. *Yes*, chef." To be obeyed, feared, respected, adored. To

be treated unfairly? Well, it would be an honor to have my ass whooped by you, chef.

After my shift I sat at the bar and had a drink with Rosie, an Irish waitress about forty who was going back to school to be a Vet tech. We were all trying to be something besides who we were, trying to leave the past and move on to something better. She'd owned bars in Berlin and now wanted to work with animals. Another coworker was a dancer. Another studied law. The manager, a guitar player from Alabama, had studied musical theater in college and now played bass in a reggae-rock band—think Sublime, he'd say. As for myself, in my off time I pursued various hobbies. I'd been into video games, had lately been learning the guitar. I considered the possibility of going back to school to become a doctor, lawyer, engineer, you know.

I drank my beer and told Rosie what had happened earlier that day. She made wide eyes because she would have done the same as me, and repeated something she'd said before, but I'd never understood until now: "He's an old school chef. I've worked for much worse. Chefs that would throw knives. I mean literally."

I finished my beer, resigned to keep my mouth shut. I felt better.

I walked outside to start the ten block walk back to my apartment. I'd recently moved and had been worried a lot about making rent. It was a beautiful day. Blue sky, a slight breeze ruffling through the trees. Children rolled around on skateboards and scooters. People jogged, dogs walked, strollers pushed towards

the park. Then I heard him. “Hold up a minute.” He shuffled over to me in hurried steps, his loose chef pants flapping, his white shirt crisp and ablaze in the fall sun. I looked up, stared him in the face. He was in his forties, had the dark rings under his eyes of a thug, and I knew what was coming. “I think it’s best that we end things,” he said.

I told him that was unfortunate, but couldn’t say anything else, and he shook my hand, which was the first time he had done that. I stood for a moment, as he walked back inside, and hoped that with this tiny bit of depravity, this shock of stress, that the world around me might look differently, that I might see in these children, these joggers, these young punks and people, some sense of peace and purpose. Red brick houses lined the road. At a glass-walled bus stop, people stood around and waited. I’d been fired.

I needed to get away, quickly. I didn’t think, but walked and hoped for the world to slow down around me, so that I could figure something out for a change. I thought of accident trauma, how in these heightened moments of stress the world slows down and each detail becomes vivid. I wanted this moment and all moments to slow to such a crawl. I thought that *yes*, this will be the moment that I transcend, hit that Buddhist ceiling of peace and understanding. I looked at the leaves in the trees, green and harrowed by the wind. They were just leaves. I watched a bus roll to a stop and people get off and start their walk home. A woman carrying laundry up her front porch. A kid kicking by on a scooter. Nothing was different. Only now I didn’t have a job.

I had put up with the shitty crowd all summer long, the low-prices, the weekend brunches where tips were halved but the work was double, where I'd show up on time and work my ass off, and suddenly this asshole returned and now because I did not kiss his feet I didn't have a job. If I were to quit I'd give them a two weeks notice to find a replacement.

I took out my phone and called the restaurant. This wasn't done.

"See if Greg will take my call," I told Rosie. I thought I'd be told he had left or was busy.

"Hold on," she said.

Then he answered. "Hello."

"I had a quick question, if I were to quit, I'd be *decent* enough to give you two weeks. Is there any way for me to work a bit longer while I look for another job?" Then I thought that they probably wouldn't go for it, because he and his wife would have to trust someone they fired to run the front of their restaurant—the liquor, the food, the cash, et cetera.

"That isn't going to work. No one here likes you. I've had complaints from every one of my staff."

"Oh, thank you."

I couldn't walk. I grabbed hold of a fence post that stuck out of the ground at an angle. I could not even keep a job at a restaurant where, up until a week ago, a nineteen year old who barely spoke English worked just fine. He had quit the

job a week earlier to move back to Mexico to help run his family's farm. I was college educated. I was white. I could deliver plates of food without smudging a finger print, serve martini's without spilling a drop, drop off condiments and utensils before the guest even knew they were going to use them. I could clear plates. God could I clear plates. I could clear a six top in one trip, my arms filled with silverware, bowls, saucers, name it.

And I said *thank you*, but I should have said, "Fuck you, you miserable piece of shit. I hope you die in a fire, you fucking scum bag." I pictured his face, floating like a balloon, skin dark like wet sand on the side of a road, and the hollow purple circles around his eyes that I hoped were signs of a miserable, god-awful life. I wanted to breathe smoke and scream.

I felt air against my cheeks, fire and adrenaline in my throat. If I had a weapon I might have used it, but without one I could not destroy this man. Even with the rage, with the blood, with the insult, I still knew it was not worth going to prison for.

I spent the next three days thinking of fantastically boring plots of revenge. In the shower I would take tabs of what I knew about the man and how I could use that information to get even, to return the disgrace, dishonor, humiliation. He had a new baby. I was certain he cheated on his wife. I'd heard him talk about being nominated to city council. He owned three homes, two restaurants.

I could barely sleep or eat. When I closed my eyes I imagined throwing bricks through his windows, slashing car tires, kidnapping his child, exposing his infidelity, calling in some sort of health code violation to the state, all of the while looking ahead, as if playing a game of chess, figuring where I would run, where I would hide, after I acted.

A Visit with an Old Friend

Sam drives her truck with the window open; it is dusk and her short hair, falling straight in a bowl below her ears, almost to the chin, whips about with the air. She sings along to the Dixie Chicks, follows the curve of county route 29, past the Larson's, past the O'Donnell's, past Mike and Katie's place, back to her parent's house, where she has lived again for the past six months. It's a small town; there's only one stop light, about six-hundred residents. Most of them work at Labrador, the ski resort, the others help with the county work, and a few drive the thirty-miles into Syracuse for whatever business they happen to be involved in; but most of them are sons and daughters of farmers. Some of them still raise crops on their properties, some lease the land out for whatever use they can find.

Twenty nine, she looks it more on some days than on others. That day she looked it, bags under the eyes, skin that felt less elastic than it had been, a strange metallic taste in her mouth.

She drives past a curve in the road where a bunch of sixteen year olds died a few years back; she stops singing when she thinks about that.

As she approaches the straightaway road that is the last run before her parents' house, there's a surprise in the gravel driveway; an orange truck, colors like a setting sun, and a man leaning against the hood, skinny and sleeveless, sunglasses atop his head. In this part of the world people are given to stop by sometimes without notice. It was like that when they were kids at least.

She slows earlier than she would, rolls into the driveway. Then she recognizes him, and she is excited. She is happier than she would have ever thought she would be to see him. She pulls to a stop, the gravel crunching under the tire, and the man, Ryan, shuffles around to open the car door for her. He looks different, a neatly trimmed beard, age on his face that hasn't so much sullied him, only changed him slightly.

“Well, look it here,” Sam says. “Is that you, Ryan?” He has the same smile and she throws herself into her arms. She has gained weight—not too much and she feels self-conscious as he pulls her in for a close hug.

When they pull away from each other, and it's a long hug that probably shouldn't be so long, he takes a moment to look her up and down. “You look good, Sammy.” He stretches out the word “good” like he's drawing on a cigarette.

“That ain't nothing new, Ryan,” she says, but she blushes, fingers her hair; does all of those unconscious moves that a girl can't help but doing when the moment feels good. “You look like you've been taking care of yourself. What a surprise this is.”

She takes him inside and he stops in the foyer to look at the same deer heads and probably some of the same winter boots and gloves that had been there ten years ago. “I remember that one,” he says, nodding to a young buck, a six-pointer who had not changed in those years, only collected dust, a cloud of it settling across the old glossy eyes.

She feels strange waiting for him to kick off his shoes, then walking him through the house. He's the first visitor that has come seen her since she came home.

"That's a nice car you got," she said. "Is it a 150?"

"Nah. It's a 350."

"Have a seat, Mr. Clarkson," she says, because despite the doubt, and despite it all being fucked up, she can greet him and play the pleasant host.

"Thank you, Mrs. Whitney." He gives a little curtsy before he sits.

She leans against the counter. "Look at you," she says. "All grown up." She watches him looking around the place, investigating the world like a bird does sometimes, turning its head this way and that, at the big glass window. Outside, the little duck pond bubbles and some flowers from her mother's garden are bright and colorful.

"I like what they've done with the backyard."

They summarize the previous ten years, both focusing on work and then relationships. She skirts around many of the details, avoiding them one might avoid road kill in the road. They are both twenty-nine years old. They both now live at home with their parents. They both have no skills but desire to be artists. She wants to be a landscape painter. He is a welder.

"That is a skill," she says.

“Not the way I do it,” he says and winks. Then he tells her that he wants to work with sculptures. Start with scraps and see what comes of it.

He tells her about Steamboat Colorado. She tells him about going away to college, three times to different schools but then never graduating. “It’s just stuff in books,” she says. “I never did like to read.”

Then they finish their tea and she looks at the clock and tells him that it is probably time she be shuffling off to bed and he stands up to go.

“You really look great,” she says, and he does. He has expensive clothes and jeans that aren’t all spotted with mud. He has clear skin, straight teeth. “You did good for yourself,” she says. Then she realizes she hasn’t asked why he came home. He stands underneath the arch way to the kitchen, about to lean in to kiss her on the cheek when it comes to her. Him all close to her, leaning forward and her hands about to go up and maybe hug him too and she stops and asks.

“You know,” he says. “I hoped you wouldn’t ask that!” He smiles when he says it, shakes his head as if something grave and terrible is about to come out, but it will only be a joke. “Good night,” he says. He doesn’t answer her. He doesn’t try to kiss her on the cheek again. Instead he just turns, takes his coat from the pole by the door, and she hears the screen door swing shut, the engine of his truck starting, and then the gravel under the tires and he is gone.

She had thought about him a lot, especially in the last six months. He had changed so much since she had dated him. She had gone away to college—her father’s decision-- and within a month he told her he didn’t want to do the long

distance thing. Fine, she cried for a weekend but knew it was going to happen anyway. And then what had happened to her? She had four major boyfriends in her life. Ryan was the first. She's not naïve, but it's hard to meet people in her town, and this boy just looked so—clean. He shows up with actual jeans and not those plastic Walmart types, and clean boots, nothing paint splattered or stubbed with concrete. Dimples like rays of sunshine, her mother used to say. Though *that* was mostly an act. He never smiled all that much when it was just the two of them. He was bitter and mopey and liked to preach about the problems of the world.

She hadn't been afraid at all while he was there, but with the house empty now— she went around and checked all of the door locks and didn't shut off the light in the back den because that was the one her father would usually leave on if they were away. It was a wide and quiet place, especially at night, and in her bedroom she could see the moon above the window shade, and she fell asleep thinking about its craters and how deep they must be to see them from so far away.

At work the next day she tells her friend Anise about what she called her unexpected visitor. Anise had gone to their high school also. "You guys dated?" she says.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sam asks, because she doesn't like the tone that Anise asks the question.

“Nothing. I’m just kidding,” she says. They went to school with fifty people. Everyone knew they had dated, including Anise who’d been Sam’s friend since they were seven. “What’s wrong with you?”

It is her understanding that, as he said, he only stopped by to say hello. People do that. They come back to town from wherever they go, usually college or the west coast or New York City, or something like Canada, and suddenly they are on the other end of a phone call or ringing your doorbell because sometimes it’s impolite to just enter your life in the same manner they did all through high school and middle school and a few years earlier.

*

Two nights ago, Sam and Brandon sat knee and knee shoulder and shoulder in the back of a new pick up. They were both drunk, high. She had the feeling in her mind that the world was a special place. It is good to have that feeling, and it doesn’t occur to her often enough. He reached his arm around her, his arm bent up around her neck and tickling her left tit, teasing her good.

“You can’t drive for shit,” Brandon said, because Carmine had just run over another pothole. It wasn’t his driving, but it was the shitty county roads that couldn’t be avoided this late. She wasn’t mad at him for a change. Yesterday she was mad at him. That morning she was mad at him, but right then she didn’t care *who* her friend said was fucking around on *who* because she had half a pill of E in her, about six shots of Jack and probably would have taken her panties off right

there if Carmine hadn't asked three times that night if it'd be okay if they both got a chance at her.

What had happened? Meth. Brandon suddenly had a whole shitload of it but when she asked where it came from and how he could afford it, he smiled and said, "I've got my supplies, baby," and then he laughed like a moron, offered to pack her a pipe, and that was enough for her. It wasn't her problem. It's not like they were married, and it's not like he was asking her to take any of it—she wished he would.

**

The next day he's waiting for her in the driveway again, the same leaning pose, the same blue jeans and plaid shirt open at the collar, white undershirt. "I'm sorry I showed up without calling," Ryan says, before she even opens her door. "I was in town and just driving around and the thought came to me—you see I've been doing a lot of thinking—and the thought came to me: look, where's Sam? I'd like to see that girl. Do some catching up." His words run out of his mouth as if his head were caught on fire. Something's wrong with him. He grabs his hair and pulls—hard too—some kind of nervous tick or he's tweaking on something.

"You alright, Ryan? Why don't we go inside and have a talk." Another tweaked out asshole.

Ryan looks down at the ground and then over his shoulder to his truck. He seems hesitant to follow her in, or that he doesn't understand the question. "You

see, the thing is, I wasn't hoping for anything romantic, but I'm just trying to see how you're *doing*?"

The word romantic makes her crack up. It's like it's the word of the day, and she could just crack apart every time she hears it. "Come on inside," she says. She doesn't lock the door although she probably should. Her father is a well respected man around those parts. So is Brandon, for the most part, to people who don't really know him.

She almost tells him how she remembers how they used to have sex down by the pond in that old train car that her father had built out of wood. It isn't there anymore because he had installed a waterfall that dumps its water in the lake. Saying this last part surprises her and she almost burst out laughing but she sees that Ryan didn't really follow all that she said. He has the open-mouthed face of a trout and seems to be looking through her, or just thinking really hard about a thought that might be sitting on the bridge of her nose.

"Do you know where I can get some meth?" she says.

He nods and his shiny nose points down at her tits.

"I had a feeling you might," she says.

"Only, I am almost dry," he says. "And I have no money to buy anymore."

This last part he says very quietly.

"Well, Ryan. I think the only way we're going to enjoy each other's company is if I get as high as you." This sets him into a hysteric laughing fit that

ends with him coughing and spitting a wad of something into her mother's garden.

"I need to go to my truck. I forgot my stuff," he says.

She follows him to the truck, and why not? She wants to keep an eye on him, but also, she's curious. Inside the truck, she sees soda cans scattered about, and peeling bumper stickers glued to various flat surfaces: *He that Must Perish* says one, but half of it has been torn off. On the flat center of the steering wheel a long-lashed cat looks bashfully upwards, with a thought bubble saying, "How about this pink pussy?"

They sit on the porch, he on the love seat where they actually had made love, and she in her mother's padded rocker, and he holds the pipe and talks until she motions for him to pass it to her. She smokes and listens as he discusses his life, the quality of the supply, his dealer's new baby girl born with Down's syndrome, how work is hard to come by these days, and hating the summertime because he can't ski. It is nice to listen to him. She examines this reclined skeletal-being, inhaling and exhaling, talking, talking, talking.

"What did you do last night? After you left me?" Though in her head, she thinks she knows. He'd scored some, then gotten high, and had probably been high ever since.

"Little of this. Little of that," he said.

"That's what I thought."

Then she tells him about a memory she has, about a trip they took to an amusement park. He tweaks his lips because he can't remember, but he laughs when she recounts the story. She watches how he carries himself away in his response; how he pauses after a tangent to recall something—and the way he smiles when he loses it. How strange it is, she thinks, about time and wounds. Here is a boy she very much had once been in love with and who had cracked her heart like the shattering of a light bulb. Because it hadn't been one weekend of sadness. It had been reoccurring, hadn't it? And it was probably a good year of doing fucked up things to herself before she'd gotten somewhere better. And now, she hasn't a hint of anger towards him.

She raises herself from the couch, her knees wobbly from standing all day. She sits down, too closely, and her thighs grate against his jeans. "Sorry," she says. He muddles a laugh and reaches an arm around her. She leans back her head, feels his bicep in the crook of her neck, his hand on her breast. He has touched her before and she doesn't stop him.

She closes her eyes and runs her fingers in his hair. It is wonderful and heavy. Weird thoughts come to her like *at last he's returned*. She shakes her head and laughs. She opens her eyes. Something tightens in her chest and she coughs.

"What is it," he asks?

"It's just funny," she says. Most Thursday nights she'd be twenty minutes deep into *Ugly Betty* right now, waiting for Brandon to swing by so they could drive off somewhere and get wrecked. This is a welcome change. They sit there

for a long time together. Finally she asks him, "What do you want out of life?"
She doesn't know why she asks.

"I want to be happy," he says.

"How are you going to be happy?" she asks.

"I'm happy right now," he says.

"How are you going to stay happy?" she asks.

"I'm going to marry you."

"Can you get some more meth?" she asks.

"Yeah, but I'm broke," he says.

She gives him four twenties and lets him go: off the porch and into the opaque night. The flimsy door slams shut. She worries if he will come back or not but then decides it doesn't matter if he does; she has spent too much time fretting.

She watches Ryan drive away, the headlights slicing into the darkness. She walks across the gravel driveway and onto the edge of the road. She sees a soggy newspaper that resembles an opossum, rabid and growling, and she lifts it from the ground. She shakes off the dirt. Then she finds a magazine, two Styrofoam cups and three empty Budweiser cans. She picks them up. She remembers a walk with her brother. He was a Marine in Desert Storm, and when he returned home (she was only twelve), he took her for a walk into the woods, only the two of them. He told her that there was one very important thing to

remember about marching at night: keep your eyes moving, he said, because if you stare in one spot for too long you begin to see things. And so her eyes searched from the shadows of the trees to the darkness below the bushes, and she shined her flashlight from one spot to the next, always expecting to find something.

On her walk back, the oak tree besides the driveway gives her an idea. It has wide branches that crawl into the sky, angled and black, and she wants to hang a swing. She needs rope, and a slab of wood for a seat: something she can sand and polish; and what is it called, that tool she can use to carve her name—a router? A grouter? It doesn't matter. A swing--there used to be a swing there, and the memory of it is wonderful. She imagines herself in third person, swinging, wind in her hair, legs pumping and the world below her.

She searches for rope along the basement walls, through boxes of Christmas ornaments. She finds a roll of twine, but it isn't thick enough. She remembers Rapunzal in the tower: she knows that if she simply wraps the twine around itself, it can become rope. Rope to hang a swing, rope to hang a person, rope to escape from a tower.

She unwinds the spool and cuts six lengths. She tacks them to the table and begins to fold one string and weave it between all of the others. When she completes a foot she re-tacks, pierces the brown rope and goes on with her weaving. When Ryan returns she has four feet of rope that she can pull taut in front of her.

“What you doing?” he asks.

“Making rope,” she says.

“What for?”

“Hang a swing,” she says.

“Oh,” he says.

They smoke and Ryan helps. He is thoughtful, although he works slowly because he talks too much. She compares her own rope to his. It has become a race.

After two hours, he leans back and drops his head onto the cushion. He looks at his finger tips. “Look at these blisters,” he says. He holds his fingers up for her to look at. She looks at her own fingers. “Yours are even worse,” he says. “What say we take a break, maybe put on some music?”

She remembers the line about music and she laughs. “Naw, I want to stay out here,” she says. He moves closer to her. He looks into her face. He kisses her again. She doesn’t reciprocate. His mouth tastes funny, dried up. He kisses her neck, and her cheek, and runs his hand along her side.

“What’s the problem?” he says.

“Nothing,” she says. “I have a boyfriend.” She feels bad though and doesn’t want to hurt his feelings.

“Ah shit,” Ryan says. He asks about him, and Ryan knows who he is, and curses again. “He’s a bad ass mother fucker. If he knew I was here—”

“He wouldn’t give a shit,” she says, but she doesn’t know if that’s true. It probably isn’t, because despite not calling for three days, he would show up at some point and look at her like she fucked up. She doesn’t care, not right now. She pulls him in—this other man— and he lies down with his head in her lap. His rhythmic breathing lulls her. She drops her head back on the cushion. His head feels greasy and deadened in her lap, and something smells terrible, as if death has begun to devour this part of the house. She leans herself forward, over him, and reaches for his hand. His hand is delicate and light. She feels his wrist for a pulse but feels only skin and the slim tendon that yanks his fingers. He smiles up at her, slightly; he seems uncertain.

Then she places her fingers against his throat. Just two, under his jaw, against stubble and an odd coldness. She feels it, the thin line of spurting blood, circulating and pumping. His eyes pop open.

“What was that like?” she asks. She stares at him. He looks confused and stupid, trying maybe to place her name, his location, how he arrived.

“Holy shit,” he says. “Sam?” Then he closes his eyes again, zonked into hypnosis. She wants to smoke more. The pipe is there, blackened and glistening in the porch light, but she doesn’t see the bag. The bag. The half a gram or whatever’s left. She removes herself from beneath him, checks his pockets. He is too gone now to notice or care. She feels the cellophane wrapper from a cigarette

pack, some grit and dirt, then decides to check his car. She tiptoes across the damp lawn in bare feet, to his car to rifle around in the glove compartment. Nothing. The center console. Nothing. She flips down the visors just to check. She checks herself in the mirror, does a double take at the purple saucers that circle her eyes. She needs sleep or food or something.

She thinks, who is this man? Him, all skeletal and shrink-wrapped, a wraith of the past returned to torment her. The little shit. She sits in the front seat of his truck and wonders what it would be like to steal this man's truck and drive it into a tree, a pond, off a cliff. She wants him to leave. But what has he done besides fallen asleep? The question bothers her. Him *being* there bothers her. He is just a man, and she is just a woman: call them friends, nothing more. And friends, friends can come and go from each other's lives without spite, without judgment; friends do not judge. He has done nothing and she has done nothing and they have done nothing together.

And then, because it is seven in the morning, she settles on an answer because it gleams. It is a silver doorway and it is so obvious and apparent. She wants to call the police. She wants to turn herself in. She wants to save herself and save Ryan. She does not want to go to work in two hours. *Take us in. Lock me up. Save me.* She uses her phone and dials the police, but she doesn't know what to say. When the operator answers saying "nine-one-one call center", all she can think to say is, "I am going to commit suicide." She doesn't know why she says it. No, she doesn't want to commit suicide; she has never seriously considered committing suicide.

“What’s your name?” the man says. “Who is this I’m speaking to?”

She hangs up the phone. *Save me from myself?* Those words aren’t her own. Is that Nickleback? Who sang that? She tries to hum a song but can’t remember how it starts.

Then she hears Ryan calling for her. “Sam,” he says. His voice is an echo in the night. She hears crickets and his voice, scared and out of breath. She sees him looking behind a bush like a child playing a game of hide and seek. And then she hears the retching sounds of a sick man vomiting.

“Are you alright?” she asks. He doesn’t answer with words, only gasping and gulping. He finishes and stands up and wipes his mouth with his sleeve. He walks over to her.

“You gotta go,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

“What? I thought we were going to watch *Who’s the Boss?*” He stumbles and leans forward into the truck.

“Please, leave,” she says. But he doesn’t understand. He is too stupid to move to his truck. Too dumb or high to turn the keys in the ignition and let her return to winding her rope.

“I called the cops,” she says.

“What for?”

“On you,” she says. “I told them that there’s a strange man on my porch and I’m afraid of what he might do.”

“You could have just asked me to leave,” he says.

She doesn’t answer him.

“We’ll just tell them that it was an accident. It was the wind,” he says. His red eyes seem to glow in the dark.

She still doesn’t answer him.

“You have to leave,” she says.

“Sam?”

She wants to run inside and hide in a closet, to be protected behind stone and wood and glass, cover herself in a pile of old clothes that smell like dust and dirt. She remembers the first time they had sex and she slept in his bed, lying awake the entire night being afraid that if she fell asleep she might snore. When she heard the footsteps of his father lumbering down the hallway, and Ryan holding the window open for her, a kiss of farewell, and her, joyous as all hell returning to her car that she’d parked down the block.

The sirens surprise her and the flashing lights in the driveway. The overweight county police officer, and Ryan—stupid Ryan dashes out into the field and down the road, and the officer and his partner giving chase—like German Sheperds bred only to pursue—until they catch him where the property ends and

all three of them roll around on the ground. Did they think he was the suicide call?

She goes inside the house. She locks the door and sits down in the kitchen. When they knock on the door she doesn't want to answer. She stands, holds the countertop. Her fingers look purple and thick against the swirled grain of her mother's marble.

How to Survive after Inadvertently Murdering someone with a Knife in a Public Location

Walk. No, run. Run as if people are following you. Someone is. Don't look over your shoulder. Don't turn around. Run as fast as you fucking can, and then turn right. Run like you're being chased by a bear. Turn right. Take off your hat. Put it in your pocket. Don't drop it. Don't stop. Don't drop a fucking thing. Don't look anyone in the face. Breathe. You are not the first person to kill a man. Not even the first person today. You don't even have blood on your shirt. Forget everything else but where you live and that you still breathing.

"Seventy-seven," you say. Say it again.

"What street?" The man looks at you as if he knows something. Don't stab this man.

"Forty-fourth street and seventy-seventh." You don't know what comes out of your mouth. Say it again. Say it again until the cabbie stops looking at you and turns his ass around. "Drive." That feels good, don't it? "Forty-fourth street and seventh avenue." Don't worry; he's talking to himself. He's on his blue tooth.

Forget the heat. Roll the window down and let the wind smack you in the face. When the cab driver stops at the intersection realize you fucked up.

"Seventy-seventh and thirty-seventh. Seventy-seventh street. Queens. Queens. Not Manhattan." But he doesn't drive when the light turns green.

"No more," he says. "You pay and you get out."

Your wallet weighs a ton, tugs at your pants like someone's angry Mother. It feels heavy like there's more in it than a few bills, credit cards that haven't worked for a year, and coupons for a new mattress. You hand him ten dollars and even though the bill is two-thirty-seven, you do not wait for the change. Money is not worth anything in hell. Slam the door while he rings the till. Choose, take the subway. Don't choose too fast. Don't call attention to yourself. You are a fugitive. It will feel much different to be around other people now. Everyone is looking for you. Do not look them in the face. Cops radioed in your general location. Your general appearance. Take off your hat and carry it. The hat is the most easily identifiable thing about you, other than your Puerto Rican, but you can't take that off.

You will never understand why it feels so differently. To kill a person now. You have sixteen confirmed kills in Iraq. That is a lot. You cannot even remember every single one of them. Sometimes you can. It's like the women you've slept with. Sometimes you can remember them all, how they looked from behind, on top of them, or them on top of you.

You look at your phone. You cannot call anyone and tell them what happened. But you don't have to tell them. You can say, "Hey, can I come visit? Right now?"

Your brother picks up the phone. He lives in Philadelphia and is married to a white girl. He works like a dog to keep things floating. He carts around the whole world on his back, while his family holds on for the ride. He doesn't have

health insurance. He doesn't have a retirement plan. He only has the hours he's awake during the week to make it happen. He is on the same track you were on up until you killed a civilian.

"I was going to take July to do some laundry," your brother always has excuses.

Say it. "I need help, okay? I need a place to crash for a few days." Say it like someone who has just robbed a bank, ripped off a drug-dealer, done something stupid and needs to be hid away. Fugitive. Look at your hands and think: these are the hands of a fugitive. Call yourself a prime suspect, even though you are wrong. Air streams up from the mouth of the subway and washes your cheeks with the grime of the city.

To get to your brother's house in middle of nowhere Jersey, it is a process that involves a train ride through urban, sub-urban and rural landscape. Jersey has it all and it passes in the blink of an eye. You went to a friend's house in Jersey one time and couldn't believe how large their house was. There's a lot of money in this part of the world, and you've no idea how to get any of it.

From the train station, your brother's house is a five minute walk through never-was-prosperous suburbia. It's like the entire neighborhood was just squatters. Every house needed a repainting. Every fence needed to be replaced. How many crooked fences did you pass? How many lines of laundry strung up between trees in someone's front yard? How many destitute old fuckers sitting on porches waiting to die?

At your brother's house you have calmed down. The long ride on the bus was a long ride on the bus and the woman next to you kept looking at you as if she had something in her head that wasn't right.

Your brother is older and doesn't care enough to look you in the eye and say you've lost weight or that you need a shave or that you have the blood shot eyes of a person who hasn't slept in twenty-four hours. He doesn't ask if you've heard occasional sounds that probably aren't real, voices shouting "freeze", or an engine rumbling from around the block, and a whirl of sirens that, subdued, fizzle into your memories.

"Would you like a beer?" Your brother cracks one open for himself. He is a tired mother fucker, has the hollows under his eyes of a crack head. You don't say it though, because you don't want to piss him off. If this was your house and he was the one who showed up, then you would say it, but this is his house. Despite the foolishness of it, you respect how hard he works to pay the rent for this shitty little place.

You had turned off your phone before, because what if your mother had called and asked what you've been up to all of these days lately, and could you say, "I felt a man's ribcage separate around the edge of a 6" steel blade. He did not scream, but he cursed when he hit the ground. He said 'What the fuck?' with the same Mexican voice as your buddy Fernando. Do you remember Fernando? From before I went away."

A man does not need to be drunk and reliving all of this. That memory hits you sporadically hitting you off and on all day. When it strikes, it's like a Peregrine falcon that has just slammed its fist into your skull. You watched those birds in Virginia, eating pigeons like that, dive bombing them. The poor fat little birds would explode into feathers, and mid-air the falcon would swoop and catch their lifeless bodies.

Your brother asks you what's new, and you say nothing. You sit at the kitchen table, drumming your fingers, mostly staring off. "What's new with you?" you ask him, and he tells you about how July—who is his first daughter—just got glasses, and how she is doing very well in school. "Hopefully she'll stick with it. The studies I mean."

"Yeah," you say, "Hopefully she will." Then he tells you about his fuck-head of a foreman, and how his wife has been nagging him to get HBO, and have you been watching the Yankees? He goes on like this for about twenty minutes. Unlike you, your brother was given the gift of gab and can go on like this for a long time. After a while he is just a head and face talking, and the circles under his eyes frighten you.

"Are you okay?" your brother asks.

"No," you say. There is something in your voice, blood mixed with whatever a man feels when his world has grown so narrow that to move forward would be to fit yourself through a pin hole, only to know that the next step is even smaller, more impossible.

“Drink your drink and tell me about it,” he says.

“I need to go to sleep. Can I go to sleep?” You start walking without your brother saying yes or no. Who would say no to a man who needs to go to sleep? He gives you a pillow from the couch and a blanket that smells familiar. You think it smells like one of the dogs you had growing up, and the fabric, the wool reminded you of the Afghans your mother knit.

You are not a good person. You know that more than anyone. You don't know how bad you are until you do something like murder someone. You know the cause was the rage, and you can still feel it, can still relive the anger you felt that entire day, perhaps your entire life, the satisfaction in acting on it, in taking the knife out and expelling that rage through the bladed tip of the knife. Certain people kill dozens, hundreds. You are no Hitler. What consolidation is that? You are no Hitler. You know nothing about Hitler. You do not know if it is rage that compels people to kill on that grandly political level, but it would not surprise you. What kind of rage would that be? One that stays with a person each morning and each night, that not even a good meal or a hot shower could soothe.

You wake up at some time in the middle of the night. You dreamt about your mother, and worry instantly about her health. You are convinced that she will die soon, because you heard her cough, and she has high blood pressure. You cannot see much, because the room is black and you think you see something looking at you. Not a person, but you think there's a fox head snarling at you, and you shake your head and look again and it's still there. You sit there, terrified,

afraid to move, until long enough time passes and nothing happens. Still, when you look, you see it, the two pointed ears, perked to attention, the slight glisten of a black eye, its white teeth, bared and ready to attack. You reach for the light above you and turn it on. Of course, it's not a fox head. The light evaporates away the darkness, and there's a coat—your coat—and you don't see how it could have been a fox head at all, but it was. You looked three times. Now it is gone. But it was there, living dead and watching you, waiting for you.

The room is a strange quiet yellow, and you are not sure if you should turn off the light or keep it on. You turn on the television. Just because you always turn on the television. It is what you do when you cannot sleep. You flip up, and then down, and then the news catches you. The news catches you by the ears and fucks your mouth. There is a picture of you with a hat on your head and a man with piercing blue eyes is telling some representative psychologist from the United States Army, that it is a combination of things that leads to a man “snapping” like this. The caption, "Murder in Broad Daylight".

“Where has he gone to?” The woman asks.

“In these times of turmoil the suspect will almost always return to a loved one or a good friend. Or he may be on the run. He may be in a hotel somewhere, but chances are he has gone to someone. It is incredibly difficult to bear the burden alone. This young man is very frightened right now.”

Your first impulse is to kill yourself. They talk of video footage that the police are refusing to release. They have had three callers help identify the

suspect. “The name of the suspect is—”, and then they say everything, how old you are, where you work, how you did two tours of duty in Iraq, and how this must be connected to PTSD, because it has only been eight months since you’ve been back. Instantly you know that you are an example. Another fuck up. Another failure of the system. “Tragic,” the woman is saying, “Truly tragic.” The other guy, you learn, had a daughter. “It’s so sad.”

You think about one of your last girlfriend who was supposed to have been pregnant, who was pregnant for a week before she found out that she wasn’t pregnant. How you pretended to be happy when you found out she was pregnant. How you pretended to be happy when you found out she wasn’t.

Your brother is awake and doing something in the kitchen. The room is bright and almost looks the way it looked when your grandma owned the house. He has the same end tables and the same lamps with the dusty yellow drapes. It is the same fish tank. You didn’t notice these things the night before.

You go into the kitchen and your brother is standing up at the counter.

“I watched the news,” your brother says. Then he sits down to say that you have got until three pm that day to get out. To go, he didn’t say where. You think of a hundred things to tell him, to try to change his mind. You know the police will arrive soon. They have already gone to your mother’s house. This would be the next stop. You were reminded of the time your father kicked you out of the house when you were a teenager, and you spent the week smoking pot in a friend’s basement.

Before he leaves, he doesn't shake your hand or even look at you, just laces up his too-shiny shoes and leaves as if you weren't even there. That is not surprising. Still, it is upsetting. What is important is that you're still alive. No, that is insignificant. What is important is that you killed a man.

When your brother leaves for work the only sound is of a child crying somewhere in the building. It's probably right above you. Above you a kid is miserable and his mother may be in the bathroom or taking a shower and the kid just wants some food. You could feed that kid. But then you forget about the kid. The news again shows you and this time it's a video camera phone held by a tourist whose name is not identified. What you would have done if you saw that tourist. He must have been sitting on the steps to the post office. Just hanging out having lunch. The video shows the man pushing you, and for an instant you think you might be able to get off on self defense, but then it shows an action that is unspeakable, that is unbearable and that the camera hardly catches. It only catches what looks like a body being sucked dry from the inside out, because the skin and everything solid about it seems to suck in on itself the way a super nova implodes, but the body has nowhere to go and just falls down and the person hits the ground like you've seen people fall sometimes when they get hit in the back of a head with a bullet. Like they're just walking and existing and then suddenly they're dead. But they say it's all different these days.

What is that all about soldiers?

The baby is still crying. You decide to go find the baby and to feed the baby because someone probably left baby food out in a jar. The hallway in the apartment complex is the color of dirty water, and on the wall near an unmarked door are two graffiti tags in black marker, but they're indecipherable. One could be the Latin kings. Fucking kids. You find the stairwell at the end of the stairs, and you don't think that if someone else has seen the news then they also will know what you look like, and might freak out. No doors open. Instead, you go to the room 203 which is directly above 103 and you put your ear against the door. You can hear the kid still crying. His voice is like a baby bird's.

You try the door and it's open. Who would leave the door open in this neighborhood? You think, and realize that you did not leave the door open downstairs, that there was no way to do that, save for finding something to jam in the doorway. You have no key and no way to return inside. Your things, all of them, even your wallet, are on the inside of that apartment. You cannot think about this now. The child is crying.

The person's apartment is a mess. There is a peanut butter container turned upside down on the rug. That is the first thing you see. There are boards over the windows, and only a crack of light breaks through in the corners. The crying is incessant now, but you don't see the baby. You follow the wail through a kitchen with dishes stacked in the sink, an old rusty color to everything, where the lights are off. You follow the wailing down a grey, dead hallway, and find the baby in a crib, and its on its back, wailing its eyes out. It is dressed in pink and smells miserable. You grab the baby beneath the armpits and hoist it up to your

chest. You have never held a baby before. How are you twenty-three years old and have never held a baby? The baby looks healthy. It has full brown cheeks, rich brown eyes, dark brown hair, a weight to it that is surprising. Like the first time you held a gun, it frightened you, but fascinated you too. The weight of power contained in this small dense package...

You hold the baby until the mother came. It would not stop crying because it needed to be changed. The entire time. It felt like an hour; it did not stop crying. You had no idea what to feed it and had searched in the fridge. Inside was a rotten tomato like a shrunken head, a rotten apple, open beer cans. When the mother came she apologized. The baby's name was Ricky. She took the baby from you; shocked you with how rough she handled it, told you, *thanks*, but who the fuck were you, coming into her apartment. Who were you?

Linda's Story

On a beautiful spring day, in 1968, in Levittown, Long Island, above the suburban roads, the identical houses laid out in plots like skin cells, a blueness filled the sky, regal and proud as a new father. Everything was peaceful and moved along at an easy Saturday pace. The houses sat on quarter acre lots, green sprinkler-soaked grass, and each house had two windows and a door front and center like a face has two eyes and a mouth, and so each residency seemed to be a giant person, still drowsy in the morning. Over the last twenty years, the lots had begun to take on their owners preferences. Some planted trees that now stood respectably green, rows of bushes lined driveways and separated neighbor from neighbor where used to be one giant, undivided plot of land; vegetable gardens sprung up in backyards along with sheds that housed lawn mowers and old cans of dried up paint.

In a red house on Baker Lane, trimmed white like a barn, in one of these upstairs bedrooms that one can find if they turn right instead of left at the top of the stairs, Linda stood—thin, pale, freckled and mostly naked— before an easel, paintbrush in her hand. She faced a window that looked out into the backyard. As some sort of simple way to deal with the Saturday noon-time heat, she stood in her underwear. The girl, with her curly red hair the color of a sunset on a lake, was no more than sixteen that day, as she stepped away from the canvas, bit the unpainted tip of the brush, and considered the painting in front of her. The hell with it, she thought, sometimes a painting is finished whether it's any good or not.

She stepped forward and, in the lower right hand corner, signed her name with the resignation of a painter whose work will be stuffed in a closet and forgotten.

She had talent but, on that day, no hope. On optimistic days she thought herself quite capable, believed her instructors, friends, admirers, who would look at the work and praise her for this or that quality. Her portrait of her youngest sister that she had painted two years previous had garnered the most praise, and even hung now in the town's library, in a wooden frame above the card catalogue. It was her father who took the painting down there, who convinced the library attendant to hang the painting of his burgeoning young artist; and did she ever receive compliments on it. Patti's mother wanted to buy the thing. Another lady in town that her father came across one day said it reminded her of one of the great portraitures that had been done during the Renaissance. "It displays great delicacy—or intricacy, yeah, something like that," her father had told her—recounting exactly what the woman had said.

The painting had to dry before she could stow it away. On that day she felt annoyed and hopeless, and when she went into the kitchen to find a snack, she found her father sprawled on the floor next to the table. Agony seemed to grip him by the chest or neck, and he could not utter a word. On his back, his bare toes pointing towards the ceiling, pale and white, and he wheezed for air; he seemed in such terrible pain that his entire face was contorted and strained. Then he stopped struggling and went limp. Linda watched all of this unfold, too shocked to move.

“Daddy,” she said, and ran over to his side. She knew immediately that he was having a heart attack. His thinning hair was swept back across his head, slick with sweat, a pale face, translucent like uncooked pork. If her father’s family was good at anything—and they were quite good at a few things—one of them happened to be having sad excuses for hearts. Only last year the family lost an Uncle, and both of her grandparents had died so long ago that she had never met them; the cause for both: heart attack. She knew she could do nothing but call an ambulance and wait.

The operator on the phone was quick and specific, polite in their questioning. After hanging up, she spoke to her father, even though he was unresponsive. “They will be here in ten minutes,” told said. “Don’t get up.” Since he was not conscious, he obeyed. She could not bear to see him lying on the floor, so she fetched him a pillow. When she touched his arm, the same strong arms he used to hug her, to hoist furniture up the stairs of apartments all over the tri-state area(he owned his own furniture delivery company); he felt cool and damp, and so she fetched him a blanket to try to warm him. He was probably in shock, and the extra warmth would help.

The certainty of her father’s imminent dying set itself in her mind like a dam in a river, and all of her worry and all of her concern, about herself, about her family, about his poor, rotten soul, flooded her consciousness. What was taking the ambulance so long? Why won’t he open his eyes? Is he already dead? She began to sob uncontrollably. She sat at the kitchen table, her elbows pressed against the unforgiving wood and cried into her hands, and then when nothing

relieved her, she fell to the floor, fell into the body of her father, her face flush against the fleshy mounds of his chest, and she sobbed. Underneath the white t-shirt, she could hear the thin trickle of a heart beat.

She rode with him in the ambulance, and at the hospital she waited for her family to arrive. Her mother had been at work, and had gotten there first. “Where is he? I’ll kill him,” she said. “What did he eat for breakfast? I bet he ate those eggs again.” Linda didn’t know.

“Eggs didn’t bring us here; his bad heart did, ma. Sit down. Come on.” The two of them sat and held each other’s hands and waited for the other siblings to arrive: Linda’s younger brother and her two younger sisters, so alike they could have been twins, but were a year apart. Maybe he had eaten the eggs. A nurse kept the family updated on the condition. Told the family that his condition was stable, and that he was sleeping; that there would probably be a need for a surgery in the next few weeks, something new called a by-pass where they sidestep a blocked artery by surgically installing another, that they could see him if they wanted, but that he was resting and they needed to let him rest.

At eight that night, with the sky dark, and the heat of the day still lingering in the air, the family went home. Linda was still in shock from the day and had a difficult time thinking. She watched the small houses, all identical, whizz past the window. No one in the car spoke. They had spoke a lot at the hospital, mostly about their father and what the doctor said and how he would be. Linda was the

oldest sister, of four children. In the car, her mother drove and Linda sat next to her, mostly staring out the window.

At home she showered and got dressed. She needed a drink. She went to a local place where the bartender was an older sister of a friend of her's, and since they turned sixteen, they had no problem getting into the old and dirty bar.

**

Over the wail of Jimmy Hendrix on the jukebox, Linda heard a grunt. It was guttural and suggestive. "Can a Navy man buy you a drink?" it said. It had a handsome face, carefully shaved and combed, a red and black flannel jacket, hung open to reveal a plain white t-shirt with a golden anchor settled between two pectoral mounds. "Name is Paul," it said. It had a funny voice. "Paul Williams." She liked that he had told her his last name. She liked the last name, Williams. It was simple and honest and healthy. She would learn that it was an old, old name, and his family had been in the United States since colonial times. Her family hadn't. She was part this, part that, and amalgamation of so much shit too tiring to begin considering.

"Navy, huh?" She was intrigued.

After two more drinks he asked if she was coming home, and so she chugged what was left in her beer and took his hand. In the parking lot he sang to her.

*La donna è mobile
Qual piuma al vento,*

“What,” she said, and she laughed, because no one ever sang to her before, and especially not in Italian. His voice soared, a powerful baritone. She could not stop laughing. He had a wonderful voice, but the song sounded silly, and she recognized it from somewhere, maybe a *Ragu* commercial. When she opened the car door it creaked and she watched him put the keys into the ignition. She watched him and waited for him to look at her, because when he looked at her she kissed him. It was not a tentative first kiss. It was drink-and-desire induced. She bent against the center console, the gear shift jammed into her ribs.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. Take it easy. I live right around the block. Two minutes.” He reversed the car and peeled out across the gravel. The tires skidded out onto Gardner’s Avenue. He rolled his window down, and so she rolled her’s down, and the wind threw up her hair and smacked her in the face.

He lived in an attic above an old lady, who he called his old woman but they weren’t related. She followed him up the stairs and he had to walk into the room to pull a chord attached to the light switch before she could see anything, and then it was only a low watt bulb, and the yellow light was not much more than a candle. She could only stand in the center of the room, and the bed was on the floor in the corner, just a single mattress that looked rescued from a street corner. An American flag was pinned to the slanted ceiling and billowed out in the center. “Welcome to the fort,” he said, and threw himself down on the bed. He flopped onto his stomach and reached over the edge of the bed and scooped up a tin box. He fished out a joint and motioned for her to sit. She didn’t mind getting

stoned, but sometimes she had a tendency to get paranoid and think about terrible things.

They kept their distance and passed the joint back and forth. “Do you know what’s fucked up?” she asked him. “My grand parents—my father’s parents—the one who had a heart attack today—did I tell you he had a heart attack today? Anyway, the reason for it, and I’m just seeing this now, you know, I’m just figuring it out, and—listen to this: are you ready? Are you listening to me?” Paul lay on his stomach, facing her attentively. He had blue eyes that she looked at now and forgot what she was going to say.

“What is it?” he asked her, after she had stopped talking for almost twenty seconds.

“Oh, never mind,” she said.

“No, what was it?”

“How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-two,” he said.

“Oh. My grandparents were first cousins. There I said it.”

“Oh,” Paul said. He rolled over onto his back and stared up at the pale white ceiling. Linda thought he thought she was a freak—which she was, and probably would have her own heart attack by the time she turned thirty.

“Everyone has issues,” he said, but the mood had changed. She felt shy and stupid

and sat up on the edge of the bed. She thought about leaving, just walking home. She knew where she was.

“How old are you?”

“I’m nineteen,” Linda said.

Then he asked her what kind of music she liked, and she said *The Beatles*, and then he got out a record. They listened to *Abby Road*, and half way through “Come Together” he’d moved to sit next to her. When she looked up, he kissed her. It was slow now, and they took their time.

Afterwards, he drove her back home, and told her to meet him out anytime. At her house she found her mother waiting for her in the arm chair. She must have fallen asleep because she looked like she had only just woken up. “Do you know what time it is? And with your father in the hospital. What the hell were you doing? Where were you? Who were you with?”

“Not now, Mom,” she was still drunk and high, and the entire situation seemed ridiculous. “I’m sorry, I just needed to blow off some steam,” she said, then she giggled.

“Do you think that’s funny? I’ve been waiting here for...”

Then she told her that she had gone over to a friend’s house and had fallen asleep there, and she was sorry that it was so late, and it wouldn’t happen again. But the next night, even though it was a Sunday, she went back to the bar and by the time she was on her third drink, Paul had found her and again she took him

home, and again she went home at three o'clock in the morning, and again she found her mother, sitting upright in the arm chair by the door, having fallen asleep, but with the door opening and shutting, had woken to find her daughter, drunk again, high again.

“Tomorrow night I lock the front door at ten o'clock, and if you're not here, you better find a warm ditch to sleep in.”

She went back the next night, and when she got home, sure enough, the front door was locked, and she had to climb up onto the roof, using a ladder from the shed, kick in the screen of her bedroom window, and climb in past the art supplies that she had set up on the windowsill.

“You think you're very clever, don't you?” She woke up with the scowling face of her mother looking down at her. Her hair was in pink curlers, and she wore the loose flower shirt, like a bib, that she wore around the house. “When your father comes home, you're going to be in so much trouble.” As was the case with many first born daughters, Linda got along much better with her father than she did with her mother, especially since she had become a teenager. Her father was an accomplice; her mother an enemy. Her mother told her to do things, her father laughed with her. Still, her father was also the disciplinarian, but he seemed to understand Linda much better than his mother did.

She didn't care. That night she went out again. Her mother tried to stop her by standing in her way, but Linda simply walked out the back door, through the fence from the backyard, and down the driveway.

That night, when they were lying in bed together, she asked him what was the worst thing he'd ever seen. About the war, she meant. She had her head against his chest, ran her fingers along the dark black hairs between his pecks. He didn't hesitate to tell her. He'd been patrolling on what he called "a little dingy"—and when she laughed and said, "A dinghy?" he said, "yeah, you know— PBR Mark II, 30 footer, five-men aboard, aquatic vehicle; with a .50 caliber mounted automatic on the bow and stern and a few extra grenade launchers in case things got hairy."

"Navy man," she said. She was enthralled.

"Anyway, you know, I was on patrol," he said. "Going up and down the river. A to B. Up and down, watching for dinks," Here he paused to see her reaction to that word. She had no reaction. "The enemy--it had been quiet. We were much further south then where the action was. I was on watch with this guy—Roger—while the other guys putzed around. You mostly had to stare into the jungle and rice patties. Then out of nowhere I heard Roger, 'Incoming,'" And Paul's voice boomed and she was bucked off of his chest and almost fell out of the bed. "The next thing I know," he sat up and a crazed look of memory is on his face, "it's like the hand of God lifts me up and drops me into the river. I look behind me and half of the hull is missing—all flames."

"What happened?"

"A dink hit the ship with a grenade launcher. Every single person died but me."

She was going to tell him the worst thing that she'd seen. It was her father having a heart attack, and how without him home she worried that her family was going to fall apart, but she was imagining what it would be like to find the body parts of your friends floating around in a river.

There were no curtains on the window, and the moon was particularly bright that night, and as he raised the bottle it shone like a twisted image. Afterwards he coughed and passed her the bottle, and she took a hit off of it and also coughed.

When he returned from the war he found a job running some deliveries for a friend; it was easy work, he said, and paid well.

“What do you deliver?” she asked. “My dad has his own furniture delivering company. He has five trucks.” Then he laughed and told her his product is smaller and fits in the back of a trunk of his Chevrolet, but he wouldn't say anything else.

This was the routine for that entire week. She fell asleep during all of her classes, chugged coffee the night before her History test so that she could stay up and read about Napoleon's demise. And somehow, by the time night came along, even she really hadn't slept for days, she went back to the bar and waited for Paul to arrive. Each night it was almost eleven by the time he came, but he always came in alone, and always sat right down next to her, the same smirk on his face, almost a look of surprise because, who knows, maybe he couldn't believe his dumb luck either.

On the day when her father came home from the hospital, was the first day she stayed home. Her mother had made it perfectly clear that if the seventeen years of marriage didn't kill him, or the war, then what would finally do it would be his daughter pushing his limits on the first night he returned home from the hospital. Her father smiled and walked with a cane, but other than a little lack of color in his face, he seemed his same old self. She needed to wait for the following weekend to arrive before she could go out again. It was a terribly long week, and she did not have his phone number, and he did not have her's, and so their relationship was doomed if she could not get to see him. Monday after school she went to Paul's place, but he wasn't there. She left her note with the old lady who lived on the first floor, and who he rented the room with; and she left her number, and an apology for not being out to meet him. The old lady promised her that Paul would get the note if she saw him, and she was going to be home. "You can be sure if he comes home he'll get the note," she said, giving Linda the impression that the old lady did little more than sit by her window and wait for Paul to return home, but that night he did not call her, and so she went back the next day, and again he wasn't there, and the old lady, who introduced herself as Ruth, said she hadn't seen him. "Let me give you some advice," the old woman said, "Don't let yourself get too caught up for one guy. You're young. Take care of yourself."

Then Friday finally came and she walked anxiously to the bar and anxiously drank three jack and cokes in the first thirty minutes while she waited, and looked up to the door each time it opened and slammed shut behind whoever

came in. When she went to the bathroom and then came out, sure enough, there was Paul, sitting at the bar; he was facing away from her, leaning against the bar, and she recognized his short brown hair, straggly looking from behind, and the green Vietnam jacket he wore wherever he went, and he was talking to another girl. Linda walked right up to them, her heels knocking on the wooden bar floor. “Excuse me,” Linda said. “Hey Paul,” and she reached her face in between them to kiss Paul on the mouth. Paul’s eyes about jumped out of his head.

“Whoa, come on; come with me;” he turned his head to avoid her kiss and took her hand and marched her out of the bar. As he walked, he said over his shoulder, “I’ll be right back.” He took her outside and told her how things had gotten too serious too fast; and maybe they needed to cool off a bit. Linda looked at him in the face, waited for him to change his mind, waited for him to say he was just kidding and that he loved her and wanted to be with her. When he turned around to walk away she could say nothing, and wandered over to his car and sat on the hood of it and cried.

After the tears, the promises, the anger, the hurt, the separation; after not eating for a week, she wrote the man off as if he might as well be dead.

**

It was seven or a little after, and Linda was composing a night-time painting. She returned to the canvass with such vigor, that in the last two weeks she had created five paintings. Her color choice reflected her mood, which had predominantly been dark and angry. Yet there was a piece inside of her that

understood the risk she had taken, and understood its outcome. She considered it temporary insanity, to sleep with this man, to get so mad for this man, to do nothing but think about him in her waking life, in her dreams. She had a life too. Where had the desperation come from? That was something she did not understand. She had always fallen in love too easily, too quickly.

Then her phone rang and she looked at the beige handset sitting still and making a ruckus on the bedside table, and she got a terrible feeling. She frowned. She picked up the receiver carefully, as her hands had been smeared with a good amount of paint.

“Hello,” she closed the magazine and sat up. “Can I help you?”

“Linda,” Paul said. “I’m sorry don’t hang up I need to see you what are you doing tonight?”

Linda flicked her nail with her finger. “I’m busy”

“Busy with what? What are you busy with?”

“I’m doing my nails,” she said. “You should see them, really gleaming tonight.”

“Doing your nails come on Linda what do I have to do?”

“Fuck off,” she said.

“No. Fuck you, Linda, because I am sick of this” and as he spoke his voice grew louder and angrier until he was yelling. “Because its not fair for you to do

this to me I said I am sorry and now what more can we do because you know fuck it forget it.” Then she heard two loud crashes and the phone went dead. She flipped the phone down and picked back up the magazine.

By two in the morning she had finished her painting and watched four hours of television, and a cold breeze sifted through the curtains. She looked at the clock, and wondered what Paul was doing. She brushed her teeth and washed her face, and then the phone rang. She grabbed it fast, hopefully before it woke her parents.

“Linda,” he said, and then he sang her name, long and mellow.

“Liiiiindaaaaa what are you doing?”

“I just fucked your brother.” Silence. She heard him breathing, like a grating. “Are you going to talk or should I hang up again?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he said. “I’m fucking drunk, Linda. I’m drunk and I’m so stupid. I’m sorry.” And then he shouted, “I feel fucking stupid. I feel so fucking stupid.”

She urged him to calm down. She told him to go to bed. “Where are you?” she asked, though she shouldn’t have said that.

“I think,” he said, breaking the silence. She heard him breathing. “I crashed my car.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” he said. “I’m drunk, Linda.”

“What the hell happened? Not your fault? Whose was it?”

“I need you to come get me.”

“Christ, Paul. Okay. Where are you?”

She hung up the phone and changed out of the dirty t-shirt that she had been wearing all day. Even though she was just a friend doing another friend a favor, she told herself, she spent half an hour getting ready, taking a shower, doing her hair, and putting on her nice jeans that hugged her hips.

**

It had been raining, and the streets were wet, so she drove slowly because she was a careful driver. Paul had only gotten about ten minutes away, in Hempstead, and she pulled into the parking lot where he said he'd be, and she saw a shape huddled over, head between the knees, sitting on the curb in the rain. She pulled the car straight towards him, and in the shadow from the headlights he looked like a boulder or a homeless man, with the brick wall of a convenience shop behind him. She turned off the car and got out. “Hey,” she said. He'd apparently fallen asleep. “Paul,” she said. She grabbed his shoulder and he fell over. She heard his head smack against the concrete. The shock jostled him, and his arms and legs shot out to find balance. “Come on, Paul. We got to go.”

“Linda,” he said. “I'm all wet.” He looked up at her, and in the light from the street lamp, she could see him smile. She also saw that he had a black eye.

“Jesus, Paul. What the fuck happened to your eye?”

“Eh,” he said, and threw his hand up. “I was in a car accident, Linda.”

“Come on, Paul. Let’s get you out of the rain.” She helped him up, and he kicked over a bottle that had been at his feet. When he got up he walked okay by himself, and he went right over to the driver-side door. He pulled at the handle and the door swung open with too much force and the hinges squealed.

“You’re not driving, Paul,” she said.

“Give me the keys,” he said to her.

“Paul if you don’t walk over to the other side of the car right now I’m leaving and I’m not taking you with me,” she said.

“Fine,” he said. He looked at the curb, and then he looked at Linda. He smiled with half of his mouth, and then he limped back over to the curb and sat down.

“Get into the fucking car,” she said and he helped himself to his feet and did as she said. As she drove, the word *ridiculous* kept repeating itself in her head. How it was *ridiculous* that she wasn’t yet asleep, and how this asshole had fallen asleep in the passenger seat and begun to snore.

Back at his place he wouldn’t wake up. She nudged his shoulder and then shook him, but he didn’t respond, and so she left him in the car. She let herself into the house and made her way upstairs to the attic, where his room was, and she climbed into bed. His room smelled musty, but the sheets were soft and smelled clean. She thought briefly about the other women who had been in the

bed since it had been her. She was too tired to care. In the dark she listened to a heater ticking out in the hall. She expected him to come inside at any moment, to bang into a few things on the way up the stairs, maybe curse, and then she would laugh. She fell asleep listening for the sound of the car door shutting, and the front door as he opened it, and then his slow, drunken steps up the stairwell. But they never came.

**

In the morning she woke up and at first didn't know where she was, and then she saw the yellow water stains on the sloped white ceiling of his attic bedroom, and the ancient dresser with the tin on it where he kept his live grenade, and the American flag that hung to the slanted ceiling, its stomach distended, and she remembered that she left Paul in the car. She heard someone in the bathroom, running the faucet, but then she heard the hair dryer and knew it was old Ruthie. Linda had slept in her clothes, and she knew her hair was a mess. She found her shoes and went down stairs. Outside, she saw Ruthie's boat of a Deville in the driveway, and the neighbor's Chevy Condor out in the street, but in the space where she had parked her car, where she had left Paul sleeping with his head pitched against the window, out near the hedge that divided Ruth's property from Joanie's next door, Linda's car was not there. Perhaps Paul had gone to get some bagels, or maybe even he had to get to work, but she had a suspicion, and it poked at the inside of her, around the rib cage, and it was a gross feeling, that Paul did come inside the previous night, and had gone through her coat pockets to get her car keys, and had stolen her father's car.

She went back into the house. “Ruthie,” she called, from the doorway. There was no answer. “Ruthie,” she called again. Then Ruthie came out of her bedroom.

“Yeah,” she said. “What is it?”

“Did you see Paul this morning?”

“He came inside,” she said. Ruthie lit a cigarette. “I saw him at about seven-thirty. He looked god-awful, like he had been through hell. He got into your car--I watched him from the kitchen, over the paper— and he drove off. I thought to myself, ‘that’s funny.’ Because he never leaves the house usually until noon. But what do I know about anything?”

“Yeah,” Linda said. “Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Ruthie said.

On the walk home she thought about what to tell her parents. She was never good at lying, and all of the spins she attempted to craft in her head quickly died away. It wouldn’t work to say the car broke down, because her dad would want to come fix it. Since he’d been home, her father had relaxed a lot in front of the television, and seemed pretty depressed, but Linda hadn’t spent much time trying to cheer him up. She left that to her mother and her other siblings, even though she had been his favorite. It wouldn’t work to say anything, except to tell the truth, and to tell them that this guy Linda had been obsessed with, and was

still in love with, had stolen the car because he crashed his own, and he needed his own to deliver drugs or weapons, or whatever he delivered.

Inside her house, she hesitated for a minute at the bottom of the steps, and was about to go up to her room to postpone the confession when her father said, “Hold on just a minute.” They had been sitting in the kitchen, reading the paper and listening to the radio. He sat wearing the same clothes he had on two weeks ago, when he had the heart attack. She hung by the edge of the kitchen, near the doorway to the dining room.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“Where were you last night?” She could walk away from her mother, but her father, she couldn’t, and so she started to cry.

Then her mother looked out the window towards the front lawn and the driveway. “Where’s the car?” She asked, and Linda broke down and told them everything. Where she had been spending the nights during the last week.

“I am in love,” she croaked, and it was in that admission to her parents that she realized she wasn’t in love, that she had been stupid, and her parents looked at her pityingly, and then her father called the police.

Attention

In the clearing, at dusk, the scouts and scout leaders met for the day's closing ceremonies. It was a warm summer evening, and the grass underfoot had been trampled and starved to a pale yellow. Boy Scouts, like any organization whose members do not need to qualify in any way to get in, was filled with all shapes. Though most students were white, there was an occasional face whose color did not match the others.

"Scouts," said the master of ceremony, "Salute. Bugler, sound on." He snapped his arm to his brow and the red-cheeked horn player sounded off taps. "Color guard, retire the colors." It was a somber and slow event, and old glory edged its way down the pole, limp as a wet wash cloth. "Scouts," said the master of ceremony, "Sound Taps." They sang Taps. "All is done, done with the sun."

Adam stood behind an obese boy. He knew the words, and could recite them just fine, but he thought it was hysterical to mimic the stuttering fat boy who stood in front of him (and was a higher rank, despite being two years younger, and only in the troop for half of a year). "Tr-tr-tr-ust-worthy," Adam said, and a few boys giggled. "Br-br-br-br-ave," he said. Again, more people giggled, but the obese boy did not respond, and so Adam, using the toe of his boot, raked a line down the back of the kid's calf.

The stuttering-obese-young-overachiever squealed and turned around. "What the—"

“Adam,” said Mr. Levy. The scout looked up and saw the old scout master stepping towards him. Mr. Levy was 82 and moved slowly towards Adam like a long limbed giant.

“Sorry,” Adam said. The scout master grabbed Adam by the arm and yanked him out of the line. Mr. Levy led the boy past the other troops, his hand like a shackle; the boys from the other troops looked and stared. They all seemed to be taller than he was, and so the world looked down at him as he passed, and he stumbled along as the old man’s arm dug deeper into his thin bicep. They moved, Adam more dragged than walking, towards the building with the wide porch that would turn out to be the mess hall. His toe hit against a rock and he stumbled, and he’d have fallen had the old man not pulled him to his feet by his arm. He thought for a moment that they would go into the building, that they would go up the stairs and then, he didn’t know, but Mr. Levy stopped before a picnic table and, with a suggestive shove, *put* Adam onto the bench.

“If you’re going to act like a child, you are going to be treated like a child. Sit here,” said Mr. Levy, and he turned and walked back to the opening ceremony. Adam sat there in a daze. In his head he saw again the boys he passed and the hand of the old scout master wrapped around his arm, and he felt his feet dragging through gravel and his toe kicking into a rock. He wondered if he broke his toe. That was child abuse. He held his arm where the old man had clamped. “You can’t touch me like that,” he thought. “He can’t touch me like that.” He needed a telephone. He imagined the police arriving at the campsite, sirens blazing, and Adam saying, “He did it,” and pointing at the old man who would probably be

bent over a frying pan at that point making his stupid late-night treats. “You can’t touch me like that you old pervert,” Adam would say, in front of the cops, even though he’d never been *touched* before, but it will add insult to injury. Then he realized the futility of it. He hadn’t been abused, and he felt sick in his stomach. He looked at the bench and he raked his fingers across the green paint and he felt the old wood crumble under his fingernails, in dust and termite chewed fragments.

Then he felt his chest mellow, and he was left to sit by himself and watch the backs of the scouts, and the evening summer sun shining through some trees. Probably an oak, he thought, or a maple. He’d been in nature programs his entire life, and could identify a handful of trees by the look of their leaf, and even some birds just by the shape of their wings against the blue sky. A falcon had pointed wings. A hawk’s were more spread out, like a hand.

Adam could not hear what was being said in the ceremony, but he could see them and watched them standing, not moving from their at-ease positions. He watched Mr. Levy, and the way his pants travelled far up onto his mid-section, and his bottom puffed out as if the old man wore a diaper, and he probably did. Adam suddenly thought this hysterical and laughed to himself. He laughed, and then he laughed a little louder to try to project his voice to where Mr. Levy was standing. One boy, who he did not know, turned around, but no one else.

When the ceremony ended, all of the boys and leaders up and turned around and walked towards Adam to get to the mess hall. Adam looked up and saw his cousin and a few other boys in his troop, but then he lost them in the

crowd, and as the boys walked closer he turned to look down, and he stared at the grain in the picnic table. He heard the boys talking and joking, and someone let out a girlish squeal, and then they were passing him and he waited for the scout leader to stop—for someone to stop—and he waited as this massive group of men and boys paraded past him, and he would not look up because he didn't want to see anyone, but he was sure Mr. Levy would stop and say—what? He didn't want to talk to the old man. And then he heard no more walking, and everyone had gone passed, and the thunder of steps going up the stairs to the mess hall had finished, and he looked up and the mess hall door had swung shut.

The night seemed already a darker shade, with the sun hidden behind the trees, and the air turning a blueish color, and Mr. Levy was not there. Mr. Vanesco was not there. Mr. Pool was not there. Adam was all alone, and so he stood up, as if to follow them in, but then he thought against it. He didn't really know what to do. He didn't know if the Scout master had wanted him to stay out there the entire time, and he thought about what the old man had said, and whether he intended for Adam to not have any dinner.

Was that the punishment? He sat down and the instant he did that his stomach began to grumble. At first he thought it would not be a terrible punishment, but then he felt his stomach begin to grumble, and he thought he had trail mix in his tent, so as long as he could go back to his tent then he would be okay, because he'd subsisted one time on hot chocolate mix on an overnight scout event, so this would be easy.

He sat there and while he sat there the night grew darker, and he sat just outside the reach of a yellow light that shone above the entrance to the mess hall, and behind him the world became more of dark shadow, and in front of him he heard the noises inside the mess hall. He had a watch and he took off the watch and set it on the table before him. He started the stop watch, and then stopped it. Then he started it again, and stopped it. And, to kill time, he tried to see if he could get the watch to stop exactly on the 10 millisecond, but he couldn't. The closest he got after five tries was .09, and then he grew bored and didn't want to ruin the watch battery from overusing the neon green light. He didn't grow more angry as he sat there, or more hungry. He was only bored, and he wanted to stand up and walk up the steps, but he dreaded being told no. "Outside," he imagined hearing the words of the scout master, and being utterly powerless, and having to obey them.

Adam saw the old man step out from the door and to the edge of the porch. "We forgot about you out here," said Mr. Levy. "Come on in and get some dinner." Adam sat there for a moment, and then he stood up and went with the old man into the big room to eat.

Man of the House

His father died in the war, and Brian became the man of the house at the age of fourteen. In addition to being given the medals which his mother encased in glass and hung on the dining room wall, and the gun salute and the flag which had been draped over the coffin but was then folded and given to Brian's mother, the small family of two also received five hundred thousand dollars, as gift, as tribute, to a life sacrificed so that others may live.

At fourteen Brian was as tall as any man, had a gruff voice and hair on his chin which stained his face like oil or gasoline. His mother had been working but, with the life insurance money, decided to quit her job at the bank to enroll at ASU and become a lawyer. She was thirty-two years old, young but responsible, and because she thought it the best to keep her son busy, she forced him to get an after school job. He didn't try to argue out of the responsibility, yet, as most boys are at that age, he was shy and the first task bothered him, that of actually approaching different businesses around the small Arizona town and asking for work.

"I don't want to," he argued, again, not because he didn't want to, but because he was shy. He did not like asking people for things, but his mother took care of that. "I told them you were coming," she said; a soft smile came to her pretty face, as if she were recalling a fond memory. "Ask for Tom. He's very nice and will take care of you." Brian didn't like how his Mom got all dreamy when she said this, and he wondered immediately who this Tom was, and how well he knew Brian's mother anyhow.

It had been six months on the dot since his father died, and another year and a half before that since they had seen him last in person—for they had Skyped almost every day and saw him quite often. In the six months, Brian had quit the soccer team, began smoking cigarettes, tried pot and alcohol for the first time, and had taken to inviting friends over for sleepovers, only to sneak out with them in the middle of the night, to run off to the school yard to drink booze and cause trouble. He wasn't too keen on working either, but he did feel bad for his mother. However hard he had taken the death of his father, she had taken it much worse. It seemed in a way that they began to share the same vices. Though she rarely drank in front of her boy, he would see the empty bottles in the recycling (if it was beer), but once when he had finished a bottle of Bacardi, and took the bottle out to the garbage can so she wouldn't find it, he found two bottles of Wild Turkey Bourbon stashed underneath a garbage bag. She had gotten there before he could. A couple of nights she hadn't come home. She didn't say anything to Brian either, and he woke up to the sound of the garage door shutting; it was five-thirty in the morning, and the sky outside of his window was a cold blue color, and he was not afraid, but felt something closer to desperation.

Then Tuesday came, the day he was supposed to head into the new Mobil on Jackson Ave., and after school, at about four in the afternoon Brian put on his father's camo hat and set out. As was always the case in Arizona, the air, even in March, was hot and dry. Brian walked on sidewalk, past the rich green golf course. There were houses too, and these had dirt lawns, or fake grass, and tiny cactus gardens with pink or yellow flowers. To keep himself occupied, as he

tended to do ever since his father had left, he imagined that he was alongside his father on the battlefield. From playing various video games and seeing *Black Hawk Dawn* he had a pretty good idea of what Baghdad looked like: the bazaar with the camel skin rugs, dyed bright and ancient, the sandy color to the buildings, and the dark sweaty faces of the people; as he walked along the road he imagined keeping step with a battalion, on a mission to disarm enemy IEDs; he'd look around and pick out objects that he could imagine men hiding behind, maybe crouched behind a Toyota corolla, thick black beards, Kalashnikovs and white turbans to reflect the Baghdad sun, ammunition belts draped from shoulder to hip. The saguaros though, tall and proud, their arms extender up to the sky, were on his side, and wherever there was a saguaro, he felt safe, as he knew they kept a safe eye on him.

He'd seen *Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Dawn*, *Full Metal Jacket*; these were movies he should not have seen, not as a child with a father away at war. Far before he learned of his father's death, he knew intimately the dangers his father faced; the power of an RPG, a suicide bomber with homemade pipe bombs belted across his chest, what an automatic weapon could do to a concrete wall, let alone a human skull.

"Take cover," he'd shout, and then dive behind an imagined giant cactus, or slam against the steel door of a minivan. He eyeballed the old people that looked out from their air-conditioned windows, or were healthy enough to be out in the heat sweeping dust from the cool shade of their porch. "Civilians," he'd sneer. He looked them in the face; he couldn't shoot unless fired upon. If they

smiled then they were not a threat. But if they looked at the ground, or pretended not to see him there staring them in the face, then they were a threat. He would shoot them before they could shoot his father.

At the gas station he didn't hesitate, emboldened by the fantastic war. If he had survived walking a mile in the hundred and four degree parching heat, with enemy IEDs and the threat of sniper fire, what harm could a gas station bring? Inside an old man stood behind the counter. He had a furrowed brow and retracting hair-line and may have been sitting in that same spot for maybe fifty years. In the cool air, under the fluorescent lights, he looked prehistoric.

"Hello there," the man said. He had a voice that shook and rattled like an old pane of glass.

"Hi," Brian said. He felt secure under the brim of that army camo hat. "I'm supposed to ask for Tom; he's supposed to give me a job. He owes my Mom a favor."

Then the man smiled, all cracked-lips and brown teeth. "Ah you must be Darlene's boy. Tom's not here now, but I'll get you set up, start to show you the run of the place. Will have you going in no time. Name's Charles."

The first thing Charles did was get him a royal blue t-shirt from a box in the back room. The medium was too large, and the sleeves fell below his elbows. "First thing we do is relieve the morning shift. I already did that, and Scotty was glad to get out of here." Then he showed him about counting in the drawer, and watched as Brian lifted handfuls of quarters, dimes, nickels and even pennies, and

counted them one at a time, dropping each into the till with an annoying ping. Then they wrote the numbers down on a special sheet and counted the bills. There was about a hundred and fifty dollars in all. “If you ever run out of quarters, there’s a safe in the back, so just tell me and I’ll get you some.”

He showed him how to ring in gas, how to ring in when someone bought something in the store, how to check an ID to see if someone was of age to buy cigarettes and beer. “Any questions?” The old man asked.

“Nope.”

That was pretty much the job, until nine pm, when the last thing of the night to do was to check the levels in the gas tanks. He did as he was told and took a monkey wrench from the back room, and a two meter stick, and walked with the old man out into the lot. Then the old man instructed him through the process of checking the oil left in the tanks. They pried open the six inch hole. The well was dark as a basement, with a well of gasoline inside. The smell was invigorating. Then he fed the two meter stick in, and when he couldn’t reach any further, he lowered down onto his stomach and reached his arm inside. His face against the grit of the concrete before he felt the bottom, and then he’d check the number where the stick had been stained shiny and dark. They did that four times, one for each type of unleaded gas, and once for the diesel tank.

Sometime in the middle of the shift, during a lull in action where Brian was standing around with Charles, the boy asked the old man who Tom was.

Charles rubbed the grey stubble on his chin and said Tom was the franchise owner, and Brian would meet him soon enough, but didn't say anything more.

That very evening, when Brian walked home in the dark Arizona desert, there was a royal blue pick-up truck, shiny in the street light, parked in his driveway. He let himself in through the front door and heard music playing. In the kitchen he found his mother standing leaning against the fridge, glass of red wine in her hand, and a man sitting at the kitchen table, wine in front of him too. They didn't stop talking when he came in; his Mom didn't even stop to say hello to him, and say who this man was. His mother had a dress on, and red make up on her cheeks; her hair was straightened, the golden strands falling to her shoulder. He heard her laugh a donkey laugh before Brian walked into the room.

"Hello," Brian said. He walked right into the middle of the room. The man was tall and lanky, with sandy hair, neatly trimmed, and a five-hundred thousand dollar smile. "Hello, Brian," the man said. "This is Brian, right? You don't have any other kids?" Then the man laughed and she laughed too. Brian thought about getting the shot gun from under his bed.

"Brian," his mother said, finally breaking off what she had been saying about a class she had been enrolled in.

"Hi Brian, I'm Tom. How was work?" The man stood up and held his hand out for Brian to shake, but Brian walked out of the room and decided he was not going to go back to work for that man.

In his bedroom he lay in bed and wondered if his Mom was going to come into the room. She didn't. He turned on his X-Box and played Call of Duty until two in the morning and then fell asleep. The next morning his Mom woke him. She was all ready to go to work, and sat in the old comfortable chair near the closet. "I'm sorry; I didn't realize he would still be here when you got home. I lost track of time, and, I had too many drinks. I should have talked to you last night. I'm sorry."

The boy imagined his father in heaven, his cheeks red with anger. "How could you do that to do? He's dead for six months and you're bringing men home?"

Then she tried to explain herself, how it had been much longer than six months, and how women had needs, and this infuriated the boy. He threw a pillow at his mother. "You fucking slut," he said.

She left the room. He saw by the look on her face how much he had hurt her, but at that moment he did not care, and he lay in bed and cried until finally he fell back asleep. He stayed home from school that day, and when he woke up he played X-Box. He played Call of Duty until three in the afternoon. Then when he was supposed to go into school, he went over to his friend's Mike's house and the two shot cans in his backyard with his BB gun.

When he went that home that night his mother told him that she heard from Charles at the gas station, that he had not shown up, and where did he go? "Nowhere, I was nowhere, which is as good of a place as here, isn't it?"

“It’s not a place, Brian, so it’s not as good as here. This is your home and I am your mother and I demand some respect.”

Then the boy made a furious, animalistic grunting roar, and threw his arms up into the sky in frustration. “And Dad. What about respecting Dad? Six months, Mom. Six months. Not even rotten in the ground. Six months, Mom.”

“How long then? A year? Two years? Ten years? Would you like me to wait until I am old and grey, until no one would want me?”

“That is not my worry.”

“You are too young to understand.”

“I don’t care.”

“Fine,” she said. “It is too soon. I am sorry. It is too soon. You win, okay? I will wait six months, and we will talk about this. I will not date for six months, and neither will you.”

“Fine.”

The two did not talk for the remainder of the day, but Brian felt a small victory, like one who survives a war mission; there is much to celebrate, but there is the inevitability of what tomorrow may bring. At some point his mother had gone out and gotten Brian some of his favorite ice cream, as a peace offering, and this helped.

Things were tense around the house. Brian did not go back to the house, and he spent his evenings playing X-Box. He became so obsessed with the video game that nothing else mattered. It became a daily struggle to get the boy to turn off the video game and do his home work. She didn't even realize it was a problem until she received a phone call from his math instructor saying he wasn't doing any of the work, and hadn't done the homework for a week straight. To which his mother responded by unplugging the X-Box from the wall and locking it in the safe in the closet of her room. "You can have it back at the end of the semester." Cold turkey. To which he responded by calling his mother a fucking bitch, and throwing a pillow across the room. It slammed into the glass chandelier that hung above the dining room table and though nothing was damaged, the noise it made from all of the hanging glass pieces wind-chiming into one another startled them both.

"I'm sorry," he said, then he went into his room and slammed the door.

These sort of actions escalated, where the boy had searched through all of his mother's drawers and files until he found a small piece of paper with a three digit code written on it. He tried the code and the safe opened, and he was free to play X-Box while she was not home.

Finally six months passed and Brian's mother sat Brian down and asked him if it was okay for her to go on some dates, to which Brian responded that he was not ready. "I still don't think Dad would appreciate it." To which his mother

responded, “I think he would understand,” then she wept uncontrollably. “You just don’t understand.”

“I know,” he said. “I don’t.” Brian’s birthday had come and gone and he was now fifteen years old, and though he masturbated like a chimp, he’d never made love to a woman, had never even hugged or kissed a girl, and despised physical affection of any sort.

Eventually his mother simply began sneaking around behind his back, and had gone on a few dates and gotten her jollies off, until she met a man one night at a local program for spouses of the deceased armed forces. It was a group run by the church, and she was told about it by a friend. Right after the first meeting a man introduced himself; his name was Kyle, and he had a daughter who had acted much the same as her son—during the meeting they had gone around in the circle to talk about their recent experiences, and she had shared about Brian’s obstinacy, and how she hated to lie to him but saw no other choice with how he reacted, how he had withdrawn into this world of video games and she had tried everything she could, but nothing seemed to get to him. Kyle too was a widower, and he too had a child who adamantly refused to give their blessing to their father to go out and date again, and he too had begun sneaking around and going on little dates every now and then. “What do you say, want to cheat on our children together?” he asked her. “Can I take you out for coffee sometime?”

None of this process was simple, and though Kyle and Darlene would eventually marry, it wasn't for a good ten years or so until either had developed any type of open, caring relationship with the other's child.

Family Troubles

We were driving north on the New York thruway, with snow falling against the windshield and the headlights of passing trucks blinding my vision. Every now and then I would place my hand on my girlfriend Kristen's thigh, and after a while, when I would begin to sweat against her jeans, I would put my hand back on the steering wheel. About an hour outside of Stockbridge, Mass, I told Kristen about my ex-step mother, whom we were on our way to visit. I hadn't spoken too much about her to Kristen, and I don't know why. Perhaps because she was from a time before Kristen and I were together, and so returning to her, even in contemplation, seemed a form of cheating, as she was a person I shared with an ex-girlfriend. Just as I couldn't watch the same television shows because I had to watch them with my ex, Lauren (ex-step mother) had been from a certain time in my life and it felt wrong in a way to bring her up. But now I had to prepare Kristen with some lessons in fucked-up family history.

"Lauren has been married four times: she gets into these ten year relationships and then moves onto someone else. The first guy was a high school and college boyfriend, from when she was sixteen to twenty-eight. The second guy, she married and they adopted two Korean children— they were together from when she was twenty-eight to about forty-one or so. Then she was married to my father for thirteen years, and now she's with Margaret. I think that's about it."

"Wow," Kristen responded. "That's intense."

"She is the most intense person I've ever known."

Kristen's parents had recently been divorced, and her father has only re-married one time—so far—and this all seemed shocking and interesting to her. Of course, we had spoken about divorces many times, as it was one of the things we had in common to talk about; I could get so excited discussing the topic, thinking back to being thirteen and my parents divorcing, that I could ignore the dangerous road conditions, as we drove North through New York, and relax: between the snowplows dropping sand and salt at sixty miles per hour, that slammed like hail into my car's hood and windshield, or the pale reddish hue of the sky during a night-time snowfall, I could think about how it felt for my step parents to sit me down on their porch and tell me they too, like my father and mother thirteen years previously, were splitting up. "Even in their wedding vows—Lauren's and my father's—they added a clause to make it not the usual, until death do them part, but until they didn't feel like it anymore." They got married on an island in the Caribbean—I don't remember which—it was on a white-sand beach cove, with blue waves and dolphins and stuff. "It was a little silly romantic."

"Has she married Margaret?"

"I don't know. It's possible; it's Massachusetts. But she was with my father ten years before they married, so maybe she's not in a hurry, but it's a novelty, and she seems to like being different." Then it occurred to me. "Probably not, a we're still friends on Facebook, and I would have seen some photos."

We'd decided to take the trip to see a part of the world we'd never seen before, because Lauren had mentioned the possibility of a visit a few times, and

we would get to stay for free, to get out of New York City because it was such a terrible place to be stuck sometimes, especially in the winter when there had been a lot of snow, and cars were buried for weeks on the sides of the road, and the walk to the subway was long and wet and cold, and to be stuck in the apartment meant being in love and dealing with roommates who always were in the way in one way or another.

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“Ninety-six,” Kristen said. In the passenger seat she nodded towards a tiny black mailbox on a white post. The house was small and brown, its windows lit a bright yellow, and it was neatly tucked away behind snow-dressed pine trees. I parked behind Lauren’s black Lexus SUV, surprised that she still had the same car, turned off the ignition; I was dizzy from the long ride; my mind muddled from staring at the same dark spot in the road for the last few hours, and lulled into stupidity by the comet-streaks of snow that kept a steady pace against the car’s speed.

As I reached into the backseat for my coat, Kristen bent towards the dash and pulled her boots on with uneasy jerks. “Whew,” she said, “we’re here.” It was difficult, I think, to love anyone when you’re stuck in traffic, as we had been for much of the ride, but the conversation about divorce and the fickle nature of some people made me feel an intense love and devotion towards her, and now that we stopped, and the world was so silent, it was much easier to feel this way. I bent towards her and kissed her on the mouth. She didn’t pay me much attention but

slid a hair tie from her thin wrist and flipped open the car's visor to inspect herself.

"Yeah," I said, "we're here." Then I looked at the house. Under the faint yellow porch light, behind a glass door, a woman stood, peering out at us, waiting. "Oh, that's Lauren." She was my former step-mother, peering out into the dark, probably a couple of wine glasses deep to ease her nerves, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. "Come on." It had been a long ride and as I stood my back and legs slightly ached.

We left the bags in the car, and crunched across the snowy driveway. The snow wasn't very deep, an inch or so, and our feet left satisfying prints in the clean snow. How bright the forest was around us, with the clear sky and the fresh dusting, the dark bushes along the path, and the spruce trees that swept up to the edges. Though I moved slowly, partially because I was stiff from the ride, but partially, too, a part of me would have preferred to not go inside, to get my jacket from the car, my winter gloves and hat, and to go for a long walk alone in the dark roads, to find a mound of snow to sit in for a while and watch my breath or listen for cougars. I loved this woman, and there had been a time soon after my dad's divorce to her that he told me not to be in contact with her. I did, once, hang out with Lauren and Margaret, and it hurt my Dad terribly. Now two years had passed and my Dad had said it was okay if I wanted to have a relationship with her. I didn't believe it was completely okay with him, but that was okay too.

"The air smells so clean," Kristen said.

“Yeah, it does,” I said.

“It’s beautiful here,” she said.

“Yes it is.”

Lauren came right out onto the small porch, into the cold, the old warm blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She stood tall and thin and slightly hunched forward and her hair was cut shorter than I had seen it: in the front it hung down to her chin, and tapered back behind her ears; it was dyed a lighter brown. The last I’d seen her (two years ago), it had been very dark, plum purple. I think she was about fifty-seven, but because she had enjoyed the sun, drinking and cigarettes, her skin looked older, dark Italian skin that loved the sun, and she could have passed for an energetic sixty-five year old. She would be prune-faced in another ten years.

“Hello,” she cooed, a wide smile on her face.

“Hello,” I said, and gave her a great hug. I felt her squeeze me tightly, pressing her whole body against my own. She smelled like some kind of lavender or rose—I don’t know.

“It’s so good to see you,” she said, holding the hug. “And this must be Kristen, hello.” And she did not hesitate to pull Kristen in for a hug, even though they had never met before.

Two steps behind, like an eager and jealous lapdog, was Margaret, her lover/partner/person. She looked the same: Bright golden locks, cherubic cheeks with a rosey glow, pink skinned, a tight, toothless smile. We politely hugged.

They asked us about the drive, and pulled us inside. We shook the snow from our shoes and left them to warm by the door. A fire crackled in the first room, a cozy den with a long couch, two blankets and some pillows. “This is lovely,” I said. It was lit only by the fire place and a small lamp glowing on a low end table.

“Yeah, it’s our place,” Lauren said. She looked at Margaret. “We like to keep things romantic,” then she cackled. They seemed dreadfully happy. “Can I get you two anything? A glass of wine? A beer? Something to eat? Come on inside!” She led us through the den into a dining room. It was all very cabin-in-the-woods, with wood-paneled walls, and lightly stained oak furniture. We passed a wall of photographs—mostly of Lauren’s daughter, some friends and other family, and some photos of Margaret’s two cats, dressed up in ridiculous Christmas hats. Kristen commented on the cats, how cute they were, and Margaret seemed to like that. “They’ll come out at some point; they’re shy,” she said. Then she told us where and how they like to hide—“They both have their own characters, that’s for sure.”

“And what characters they are,” Lauren added.

There was a photo of Lauren’s mother and her son together, by the side of a river; I had seen it at their old house; it hung at the top of the stairwell and even

though I hardly knew the two, knowing how much grief was inside of Lauren, or had been from their loss—one couldn't tell now from looking at her, as she danced around the house—if it was still there, or if in time it might come again to the surface like a tulip in Spring.

In the kitchen, over a center island, we delayed the tour so that Lauren could open a bottle of red wine. “Cheers,” Lauren said. “It’s so nice of you to come; and it’s great to meet you, Kristen.” I took a large gulp of the wine.

She showed us the master bedroom, then the office/spare bedroom/jewelry room (since quitting her practice as a grief councilor, she’d been making jewelry full time). She had an entire felt-topped table lined with necklaces, bracelets, earrings; “these would look nice on you, Kristen,” she said, and held a pair of earrings up to her ears. “Why don’t you take them?”

Kristen was taken aback. She didn’t have pierced ears. “Oh, thank you,” she said. She wasn’t the type to refuse, even if it meant not being able to use them. Then she told us about all of the craft fairs they had partaken in; how they scheduled their own jewelry parties and invited people to host, how they had a website and were on *Etsy*, a website for made-at-home craft products. “We try to get people drunk so that they buy something,” Margaret said, regarding the craft parties. I’d forgotten she was there; she didn’t talk much, but smiled and ambled amiably along like an old woodsman. (She also was wearing flannel.)

“We don’t make a killing, but we make enough,” Lauren said.

“That’s wonderful,” I said. It really was. I was surprised that she could make the money doing this, considering she would need to sell... I don’t know how many pieces per day to be able to afford rent. “What do you do, Margaret?” I asked, mostly to be nice.

“Help, mostly, but I also work down at the A&P,” she said. “Helping little old ladies with their groceries.” Then she made this crazy shake gesture with her head, which seemed to signify that it was often a frustrating job.

“Margaret takes beautiful photos and we make them into gift cards. Remember I gave you some for Christmas one time?”

“Oh, those were great. I hadn’t realized you made them.” I had suspicions. They were such stock photos that I hoped she hadn’t—a close-up of a seagull on a wet cement beach, an orange sunset—I think there was a weeping willow in a field: they were talentless and plain.

When we finally settled by the fire, Lauren told us about her plans for the next couple of days. “Would you be interested in...there’s a lot going on...” The next day there was a craft festival, lunch at a great place in town, and at night one of her friends was playing in a band. First she wanted to catch up. I told her all of the frivolous things about my life, how I was struggling to pay rent, how I didn’t make enough money teaching at colleges and had to face unemployment over the winter break, and the summer. It was difficult, and perhaps the worst thing about my life—being unemployed every three months. I asked about her father—who she hadn’t spoken to since she told him that she was a lesbian. I asked about her

daughter—who was doing pretty well. Her daughter, Marissa, was still living at home with her father and had re-enrolled at Hofstra where her Dad was a professor, and so tuition was free. “She’s studying criminal justice and really loves it.”

That night they put us in a guest bedroom. It was a cheery purple color, with black wood furniture that I had seen before. I imagined her pillaging the house where she used to live with my father, leaving half of the rooms empty. I recognized half of the furniture in the house. They would stay that way until her father would move or die.

We made love, Kristen and I, and as we did I couldn’t stop thinking about my ex step mother. I thought about a very strange day, when I had gone out to her house with my then-girlfriend, and Lauren and my father were still together. It was a Saturday and we had gone out to visit, spend the day, and go to the beach. They lived on a marvelous house overlooking the Long Island Sound, and had a private beach a short walk down the road, on a peninsula with the Huntington harbor on one side, and all day long the boats would cruise in and out. Lauren had been a little tipsy from drinking gin and tonic, “Come on,” she urged us. “I want to take you guys for a ride to show you my running route. The sunset will be fantastic tonight.” In the car, she ecstatically told us how if it weren’t for her daily runs, she would not be able to stay sane. She played Green Day, and told us how much she loved the new album. It was not a good album, but I didn’t get into it with her; I thought it was mass-produced pop-punk music for rebellious pre-teens. As she drove past the multi-million dollar homes, hidden up long driveways and

behind iron gates, she cranked the volume and banged her head along to the crashing cymbals, distorted guitar and whiny vocals. After dinner that night, where we would sit and barbeque on the back porch and watch sailboats over the grey waters, Lauren was going to hug me goodbye, and she kissed me. It was a full kiss, dead on the lips; it lasted only a moment before she pulled away, turned and walked inside; I was shocked in the moment, and never spoke of it to anyone.

The sex was not great. She asked me, afterwards, what I had been thinking about, because she could see me staring up at the ceiling. In truth I was thinking about love and all of its fucked up forms. I thought about a Kurt Vonnegutt book where, stranded on Galapagos, a twelve year old begins procreating with his cousin and aunt, because they are the only people left alive. They do not make note that it was for survival, though surely the aunt would know as much; but the cousin was just fucking because that's what he was programmed to do. Only I told her nothing. I'd tried to speak objectively with her before about this topic, about how men and women interact in social situations, about the sexual currents that weaves underneath most social situations, whenever alcohol is present, and it's funny to watch who flirts with who, regardless of who is married and who isn't. I could not breach the topic again. My mind was dumb and tired, and any attempt at a conversation would too quickly fall into fears of *what are you saying to me?* And the possibility that one of us were trying so carefully to sunder things.

With the lights off, a faint grey light filled the room, and the moon came in through the window and lay softly on Kristen's white cheek. I watched her, and

hoped that she was sleeping. If she knew what I was thinking, she would probably hop a bus back to New York.

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Lauren was probably bi-polar, but these labels were left between her and her therapist. Perhaps my father knew, but he never said. Her condition was clouded in obscurity and vagaries that led to too many assumptions. I remembered days when her mania came to the surface: dance arms flailing, spinning alone in the kitchen to Stevie Nixx and The Indigo Girls, the stereo volume too high. And then the bad days, sullen and quiet, an inner hell relayed to the outside world with vacant stares and an affinity for isolation. These normally occurred near the holidays, as I think they were the hardest times, when missing family members were as apparent as the empty chairs around a table. I certainly knew the feeling now that she had gone, and taken her daughter, her sister and their family from my own Christmas.

I didn't know much about her early life, only that she was a self-dubbed flower child, had spent time on the west coast, had married and adopted two children, and then when one of the children had a brain tumor, she met my father—a chiropractor/self-dubbed medicine man who tried and failed to help save the child's life. When her mother died, also around Christmas, she buried her son's ashes, the urn cradled like a football in her mother's arm and lowered into the ground. She finally felt okay to let him rest, she said. And then the erratic behavior began. She would skip holiday dinners. She would no longer float

around behind my father in the kitchen, wrapping her arms around him, alluding happily to their sex life. She began discreetly asking me for cigarettes, and eventually she'd ask outright, before my father, and my grandparents (who she'd been trying to hide the practice from.) "This is who I am," she told my father one time, after receiving a patronizing look. She began to buy her own, mentholated Newports, and left them butt-up in a white dish on the front porch.

She told us that the decision to split with my father and, unavoidably, his sons, had been solely hers. She did not dislike my father, or hate him, in fact she loved him. She didn't know who she *was*, but she'd been seeing a counselor again to find out. I could understand the behavior at twenty, when she could tour with *The Dead*, try LSD a couple of times, dabble in lesbianism, and then resign to a life similar to the one led by her parents. But at fifty-five, it seemed a bit ridiculous, and I felt mostly sorry for my father.

When Lauren first told me about Margaret, she joked, saying they sometimes call themselves Harold and Maude, despite the sex differences, because Margaret was only forty-two, fourteen years her junior. An interesting fact: when my father first told me about her, he called her a troll.

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We slept until nine-thirty and had sex again in the morning and took our time getting ready, so we didn't go upstairs until almost eleven. I had felt better than the previous night, more eager and loving and energetic. Upstairs we found Lauren and Margaret sitting together on the couch. They smiled and Lauren was

on her feet quickly, going through the kitchen for two more mugs, because coffee was brewed and waiting, and she had gone into town to get some pastries. Lauren had brought the mugs from her old house. They were floral design, and the handle curled like a vine, and the mug was shaped like an old Grecian water jug.

“Oh, it’s beautiful out,” Kristen said. She stood looking out a sliding glass window, where a snow-covered porch looked out onto the backyard. I went over to her and stood besides her, and looked out into the yard. The sky was blue and outside a cardinal and a chickadee landed on a bird feeder. We watched them with our coffee, and ate our pastries, and Lauren and Margaret went into the room we had been staying in—where they kept their jewelry—to get ready for the day’s sales. It was a short sale, only from noon until four. They told us about some that went all day, and others that went all weekend. They travelled all over the North East, going to different fairs sometimes. “The Fall was busier, because of the weather—everyone has a Fall crafts fair. The winter not so much, but it will pick up again in the Spring,” Margaret told us. She spoke comfortingly, half to us, and half directed her consolations to Lauren. “Oh, look at that one,” Kristen said. Outside on the feeder a red-headed woodpecker, almost the size of the feeder itself, hung upside down and pecked at the seed.

The drive to the fairgrounds was only about fifteen minutes, as it was right in town, and was being held in this indoor flea market. Apparently it only took place one weekend a month, and during the other weekends it traveled to nearby towns. “There’s not enough demand for a lot of this stuff, so it doesn’t make sense to have it all of the time,” Lauren said. She seemed to be down about the

entire process, but I didn't ask her about it. Kristen and I offered help setting up, and Kristen, who has an interest in design and fashion, took to arranging some of the necklaces on a darkly finished tree branch that the couple used to display the necklaces. The different gems gleaned under the fluorescent lights of the market. I recognized the gold and brown striations of a tiger's eye pendant, and the cloudy pink of a cornelian, and ran my finger along their glassy surface. After they had set up, Kristen and I went to look around, and we held hands as we walked around the market.

“The last flea market I'd been in,” I told her, “was in Texas. Maybe twenty miles from the boarder. It's a much different crowd here. I wonder if I can find any Pancho Villa paraphernalia.”

We browsed the wares. This wasn't your usual flea market with a people selling their old collections: old video games, comic books, civil war memorabilia, the required t-shirt guy, the pocket book lady. These were mostly little old ladies selling bird houses, semi-fancy looking clothes that they may have sequined themselves. We found winter-time artsy craft things, wooden clocks that had been jig-sawed and painted with any number of local bird species; ceramics too, lots of ceramics. We passed four or five other jewelry stands, with product very similar to the stuff Lauren and Margaret had set up. A few people browsed at each, but we didn't see any transactions made.

It wasn't until that night that I had a few drinks, and I was drunk enough to start asking some questions. While sitting by the fireplace, drinking more wine

and eating cheese and crackers, I tried to segue into the topic as lightly as possible. “I tell you, I’ve had such a hard time with relationships because of all of these divorces that have taken place in my life.” They had made some sales that day, and this put her in a good mood, and they had been joking about something before I interjected with the question, which wasn’t exactly the question I wanted to ask, but it was a question nonetheless that would set the minds of everyone in the direction I wanted the conversation to go.

Everyone agreed that it wasn’t easy, then Lauren said some new-age bullshitty response about no one really knowing who they are going to be ten years down the road. I wasn’t pleased with the response, but I looked at Margaret to see how she felt hearing this come from the current love of her life. “What do you make of true love? Now, do you believe in it now?” I looked at Margaret, and Lauren looked at Margaret.

“Look,” she said. “Of course I believe in true love. I just don’t believe in soul mates and I don’t think it lasts forever.” I thought of Heathcliff and Catherine. “I don’t know what will happen in ten years. Margaret knows about my past. I know about my past. You know about my past.”

“But isn’t that the thing? That love ebbs and flows, and refresher and reinvigorates if you give it the time and energy? Or is it best to abandon it, to see faults, in yourself, in other people—is that what it is?” I was drunk now, and really getting into this. “Maybe we can’t stand when another person makes us feel as miserable as we feel when we’re by ourselves? Or maybe we are happiest when

we're alone?" I looked at Kristen now, who was sitting by herself in a chair, and was looking at me with a tear in her eye.

Lauren held Margeret's hand. "People change. With your father, I realized something about myself. Besides, it wasn't just me. Your father had changed too and it was good for him too." Perhaps at some point it would be good for my father, but not yet it wasn't. Don't ever believe your parents when they say what's best for both of them. They don't see how the other person has responded to any of it. And I knew then that I would not get a flat answer—that honesty, that kernel deep within her, that she only shares with herself, would not be exposed, as it never gets exposed, because we are constantly doubting, constantly worrying that we're doing the wrong thing with our lives, with the wrong people, and all we can do is give it a shot until we decide to try something else. It would not be exposed until she told Margaret that she had changed, and had found someone else. I wanted her exposed; for her to come clean and say that her love was a fucking sham because it was fleeting.

I moved closer to hold Kristen's hand. I knew this would not be the last woman that I loved. I fell too easily. With a soft voice, short hair, long hair, short or tall; if a girl could make me laugh I would swoon for her. There were too many women in the world. But if Lauren could do it, I could do it too. For the time being, I could be with the woman that I was with, and I could love her.